ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.2, No.3 Jul.-Sep., 2024

The History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Nature and a History of Society

Zha Changping

To cite this article: Zha Changping, "The History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Nature and a History of Society," *Art Frontier* 2, no.3 (September 2024): 1-9, https://doi.org/10.64212/CJQI5050.

DOI: 10.64212/CJQI5050

ISSN: 2835-5490
EISSN: 2836-841X

© 2024 Frontier Press.
This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: www.artfrontier.org
Email: artfrontier2023@outlook.com
Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)

The History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Nature and a History of Society

Zha Changping

Abstract

After having discussed other forming factors of the world-picture logic as histories – the history of language, the history of time, the history of self, this article points out the fourth and fifth ways of exploring the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art are as a history of nature and a history of society. It suggests the reasons why the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art might be a kind of history of nature and a history of society, and what are their features. When we talk about the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a history of nature and society, we mean to draw attention to the processes in which pioneering artists represent their body, natural world and contemporary society in China, we also do so to research what kind of classical images of the nature and society that pioneering contemporary Chinese art makes in the past.

Key Words

Nature, society, history of ideas, pioneering contemporary Chinese Art

1. The History of Art as a History of Nature

In addition to the three previous angles to approach the history of art,1 we can also look at it as a history of nature. Of the seven forming factors that compose the world-picture logic, the natural world comes fourth in importance. Our previous section discussed how the individual as a self-manifests in pioneering contemporary art. We also touched on how the individual as a self is at the same time an individual body. It is because we are flesh and blood organisms that we get to become ourselves in the first place.

The body is the medium through which a person's self can exist, it is the flesh and blood organism that spawns the "self". Of course, if a person stops there, being a "self" that is solely the product of the continued activity of the survival-motivated flesh and blood body, then they are nothing but an instinctual survivor, a person without "self". When viewed as mere flesh and blood organis-ms interested in nothing beyond self-preservation, humans are indistinguishable from animals.

In context of humanity, nature can be divided into two categories: nature within a person, namely the body, and nature outside of the person, which encompasses the physical world of inorganic matter, and the organic worlds of flora (vegetation) and fauna (other flesh and blood organisms). The respective essential qualities of matter, flora, fauna and humans lie in how they manifest in time and space: physical matter "is present", flora "grow", fauna "survive" and humans "exist". Humans and fauna represent two different worlds, but they are connected by a shared condition of being flesh and blood organisms. In the natural world humans possess and exhibit animality, but this does not equate them with animals.

In video art, works such as Zhang Peili's *Uncertain Joy* (1996) and Xu Zhen's *Rainbow* (1998), and in sculpture, Yang Jianping's *Man with a Tail* (2007) and Zhang Huan's *Knowing Fate* (2013) are all examples of how the existential fact of man as a flesh and blood organism is dealt with as a thematic concern in contemporary art.

With this view of nature in mind, we see that the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese Art when viewed as a history of nature deals with two types of work. The first type encompasses works that deal with the body, which is the natural within the person, as the

DOI: 10.64212/CJQI5050

object of the work (this is particularly represented by the work of Feng Feng, as well as some but not all works of performance art. It is worth noting while performance art uses the body as a medium it does not necessarily deal thematically with the body in and of itself). The second type is comprised of art concerned with the natural outside of the person – ecology. The central theme of such works is the revealing of connections between humanity and the natural world – matter, flora and fauna. This can be seen in natural landscape painting (represented by Shi Wei, Liu Yan and Ding Fang), historical landscape painting (represented by Shang Yang), works of art from the around the millennium that involved the show of "humans and animals", and the work of the "719 Artist Studio Union" in Chengdu in the late 90s, which explored themes of ecology.

To put it another way, viewing the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese Art as a history of nature serves to open greater possibilities for interpretation. Lovers of art can be exposed to ideas and evaluations of matter, flora, fauna and the human body in works of pioneering contemporary Chinese art. For

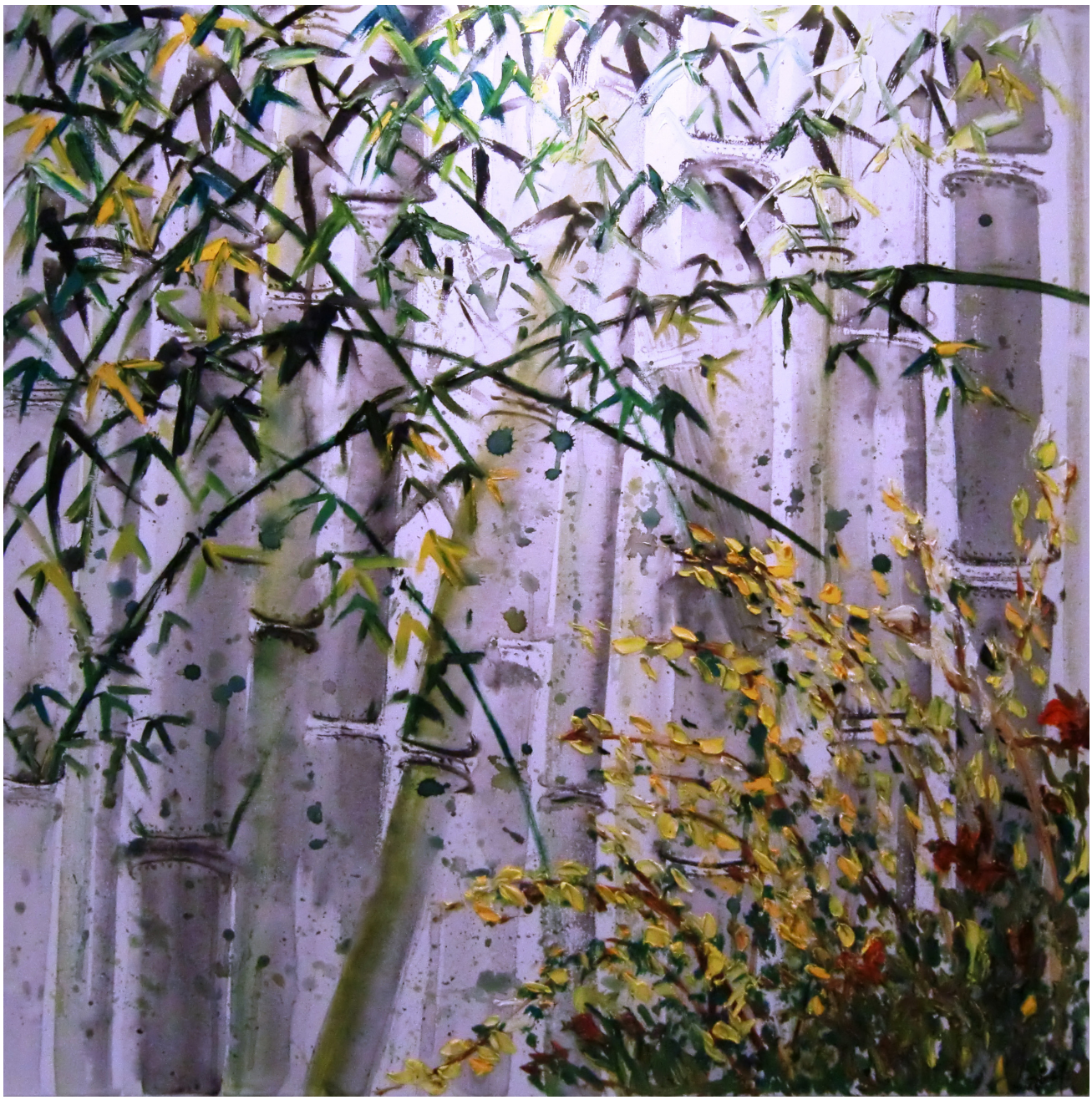

Figure 1. Shi Wei. *Bamboo's Heart in the Spring*. Oil painting on canvas, 92×92cm, 2010, Los Angeles.

Figure 2. Liu Yan. *School on the Outskirts*. Acrylic on canvas, 160×260cm, 2009.

example, Feng Feng's work not only highlights the similarities between natural landscape scenery and the scenery within the body, but also elicits the miraculousness of the duality of human existence, on the one hand there is the survival-motivated flesh and blood organism and on the other the created being. This results in an overall emphasis on the demarcation between humanity and the natural world.

At the root of the view of nature in works of pioneering contemporary Chinese art is a concept of ecology centred on an idea of co-existence, stressing how in nature matter, flora, fauna and humanity exist alongside each other. In this respect, Chinese artists have reached an unprecedented consensus. Perhaps this is because whoever doesn't utterly despise their body will do their best to take care of it, just as nobody wants to see the external natural environment in which they subsist being damaged or destroyed.

As the human body and the natural world are so connected, to harm the latter is to harm the former. Even those works that on the surface seem mainly concerned with the masochistic harm of the human body, or the sadistic abuse of animals, are subjectively aiming to emphasize the significance of co-existence, be it the co-existence of the body and soul in a person, of persons in society, or of humans and animals in the natural world. This is the broad definition of what we call "ecological art".

Ecological art is different from environmental art, and even more different from landscape design. Its focus is to incorporate nature into the overall world that humans depend on for existence and in this context, examine it. This means it sometimes connects to themes of society, history and the humanities. In engaging and developing this form of art the "719 Artist Studio Union" has made a unique contribution to contemporary art.

"There are four respects in which the pioneering contemporary art in Chengdu which incorporates installation and performance as materials stands out in the overall ecological landscape of contemporary Chinese art: Ecological concern, reference to the humanities, *mise-en-scène*[2] and somatic Aesthetics. The artists innovatively expanded and elaborated ecological art from the perspectives of the natural world, society and the humanities. They were also the first in mainland China to channel the thematic concerns of pioneering contemporary art towards addressing the problem of cultural cloning, and very consciously explored the intr-

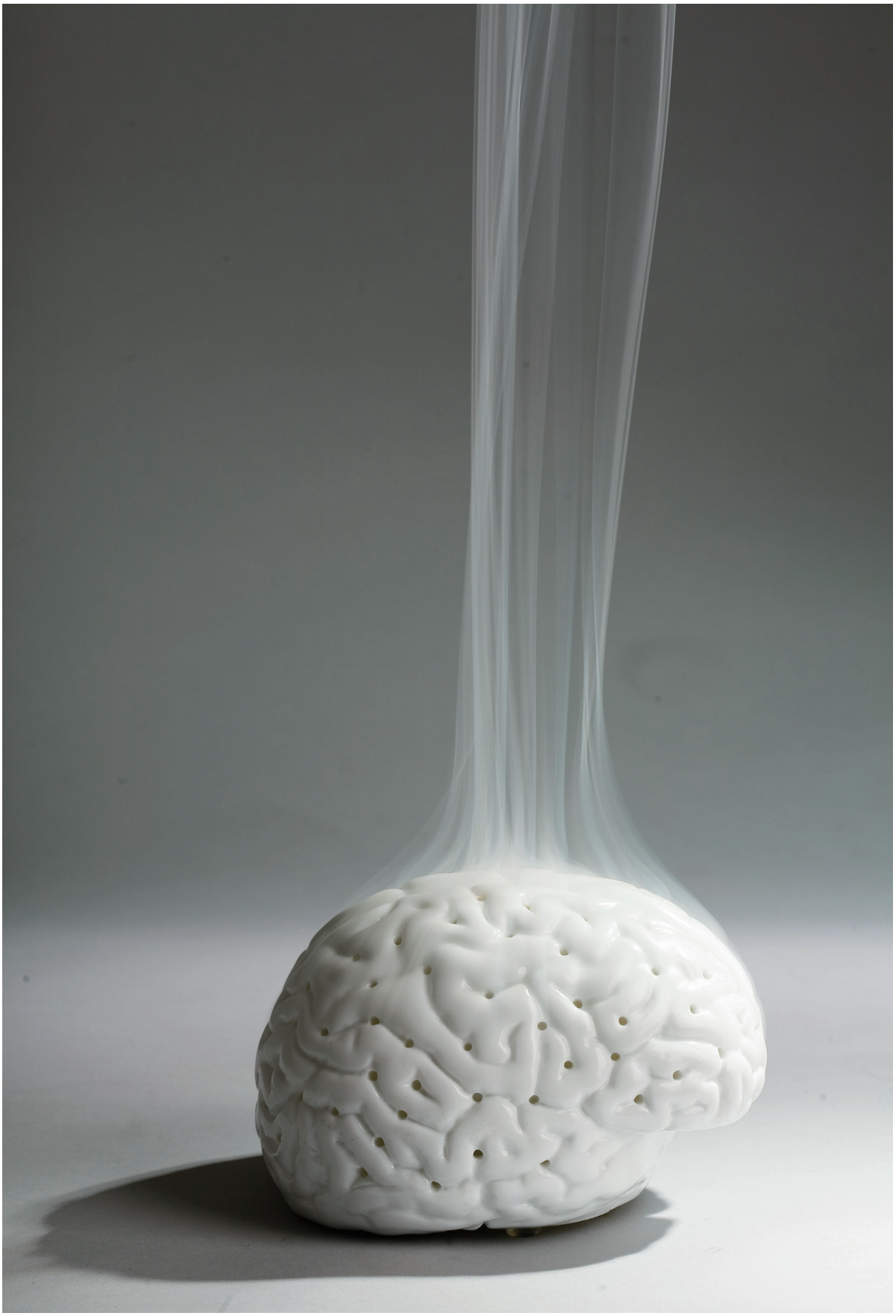

Figure 3. Feng Feng. *Out-of-Body* No.2. Installation, porcelain, smoke, 2009.

insic significance of the scenario or location to the successful execution of an installation or performance piece. In a large area of culture that had been continuously rejected by mainstream art they had the passion and hope to attempt to impart to the public an understanding of art. This is perhaps why the media has had the internal impulse to continually report on and discuss their activities."[3]

These artists expanded the horizons of ecological art. This current is exemplified in works of 1997 such as Liu Chengying's *Questions for Heaven*, Zeng Xun's *Magic Frame*, Dai Guangyu's *Making an Impression*, Yu Ji's *Playing a Zither Before Water*, Yin Xiaofeng's *Night and Day Differ*, Zhu Gang's *Reading*, Zhang Hua's *Congeal*, etc.

2. The History of Art as a History of Society

We now propose a fifth dimension to the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese Art, a history of society. Persons interact with the natural world through their bodies, while they interface with other persons through their minds. The connections persons make on a more mental level go towards forming social groups. The mental capacities of a person include their faith and beliefs, their thoughts and opinions, their awareness and actions, their personality and habits, as well as their interests and destiny.

Society is a catch-all phrase for the many different subgroups that persons come to arrange through their interactions in their various mental capacities, it subsists in the space between the individual and the government. The stability of any nation is dependent on the existence and operation of such social groups in society. Any modern government must honour the boundary between government and society and mustn't adopt a distrusting or suppressing attitude. After all a political party is no more than just another member of a large collection of social groups, their particular interests should never override those of other groups in society. The deification of any one particular group in society demotes all other groups in society to a lower position. Such an occurrence projects on to the world a value system based on inequality which threatens to drag the whole of society into a system of injustice.

This way of examining the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a history of society is informed by our particular views about what society is. The subsequent sorting through and accounting of the history of contemporary art phenomena is done so with this idea of society in mind. The emergence of pioneering contemporary Chinese art occurs against the macro-historical backdrop of the social restructuring of China's five-thousand-year-old civilisation. This restructuring of society, seen in general socio-historical terms implies the shift from a pre-modern society to a modern one. While seen from the perspective of the particular *courte* durée of history we are examining, it is an ongoing "mixed-modern" baptism for the people involved, a struggle as they confront an epoch where pre-modern, modern, postmodern and alter-modern currents converge into a "mixed-modernity".

It is precisely for this reason that we can see why the overall picture of pioneering contemporary Chinese art has witnessed such hitherto unseen richness and diversity, though in a negative light this could be described as cluttered and chaotic. We can also understand why even incredibly talented artists often fail to apprehend the pulse of history and the value-orientation within their creations, unfortunately resulting in many artists sometimes creating with the mindset of curators. Furthermore, we can ga in an insight into why "conceptualized art" has taken off so strongly in the contemporary Chinese art world. It reveals the problematic fashion for creating with a theme already in mind preordained by an outside authority. What also become clearer to us is why the various artistic identities within the contemporary Chinese art world—such as artists,

Figure 4. Zhang Xiaotao. *Untitled*. Oil painting on canvas, 150×120cm, 2010.

Figure 5. Gao Brothers. *The Forever Unfinished Building No.4*. Digital photograph, 295×100cm, 2008.

critics, curators, collectors, art editors, gallery agents, art event managers, museum curators—are even today not clearly defined and demarcated, producing certain people who are so-called "generalists".

That said, this history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art will not stop at merely supplying a descriptive account of such diversity in the contemporary Chinese art world. Rather it will enthusiastically proceed to disclose the underlying logic of the intellectual system of values at play and their social basis: In this "mixed-modern" era the Chinese people's current concern is still the difficult questions of both how to go from pre-modernity to modernity, and how to find the traces of modernity in the postmodern and alter-modern culture coming out of the contemporary West. The West's cultural trajectory is the opposite. Western society already underwent the transition from modernity to post-modernity in the 1960s, this is evident in its cultural liberalization, economical marketization (signalling the end of industrialisation) and political democratisation. With the advent of the twenty-first century there is now a departure from post-modernity, epitomised in urbanisation, consumerization and informationization, and movements towards alter-modernity, which prizes pan-humanism, individualization and spiritualization.

This is the reason why, in the words of Wang Duanting, "Contemporary art in the globalized age is art that rejects political, ideological and ethnocentric overtones." In fact, such overtones are in the most part residual cultural characteristics of pre-modern society. Pre-modern society is recognisable for its totalitarian politics, planned economy, and cultural sectarianism[4] (the revival of traditional culture we are currently witnessing in Chinese academia is nothing more than a manifestation of an implicit culture of sectarianism).

In this "mixed modern" era, China's shift from pre-modernity to modernity, is the greatest cultural event of this current time. Works like Zhang Dali's appropriation of the crumbling and soon-to-be-demolished walls of Beijing streets to serve as a canvas for his graffiti portraits (*Dialogue*, 1992-2000), Wang Jinsong's *Picture of a Hundred Chai's* (1999), Liang Shuo's *City Bumpkins* (2000), Cang Xin's *Social Identity Exchange* series (2000-4), Xue Song's *Flying Higher* (2013) and Yu Cun's series of social history, are all examples of art whose thematic concern is the portrayal of the individual and collective experience of living in this transitional era, as well as the anxiety over changing identities and the fluidity of society at large.

There is not a single pioneering contemporary Chinese artist who can escape being branded with the

Figure 6. Zhang Dali. *Demolished*. Graffiti, variation size, December 5, 1998.

mark of "mixed modernity". Sometimes this is evident in individual works of art, and at other times in the works of a whole group of artists, or even in the artwork coming out of an entire region. Recently the exhibition "Portrait of an Era: 30 Years of Contemporary Art", curated by Li Xu, is a perfect snapshot of a society in a mixed-modern era.

Pioneering contemporary art features a prominently "co-existent" view of society. The first hurdle in the transition of Chinese society from pre-modernity to modernity is the question of what to do with the traditions of the past. Though, this is in fact the same quandary any nation must address on the path to modernization. Both the vacillations in Japanese Society in the period following the Meiji Restoration and preceding the First Sino-Japanese War, and the social experiments of the Former Soviet Union are classic cases of the difficulties of such social restructuring.

Chinese society, however, owing to both the prevailing kind of revolutionary logic of its traditional political thinking and postmodern society's drive to urbanize, is a special case. On the material level, especially in the last twenty years, it has adopted a destructive attitude to the old streets and buildings that remain as artefacts of pre-modernity, and yet, on the conceptual level, it has leaned towards reconstructing traditional notions. This is our brief summary of Chinese society in the 100 years since the Revolution of 1911. Chinese civilisation has always been trapped in this iconoclastic mentality where "there can be no construction without destruction", unable to find a way to create without destroying first what came before, or allow for a model of social reality and civilisation based on progressive sustained accumulation.

It is exactly for this reason that pioneering contemporary Chinese artists need to emphasize in their work a view of society that is based on social co-existence. Gu Wenda's 1993 installation series "United Nations" is the best illustration of this view of society. The task of artists then is to use art as a medium to critique the residual traces of pre-modernity in the politics, economy and culture of this transitional society,

Figure 7. Liang Shuo. *City Bumpkins*. Copper sculpture, variation size, 2000.

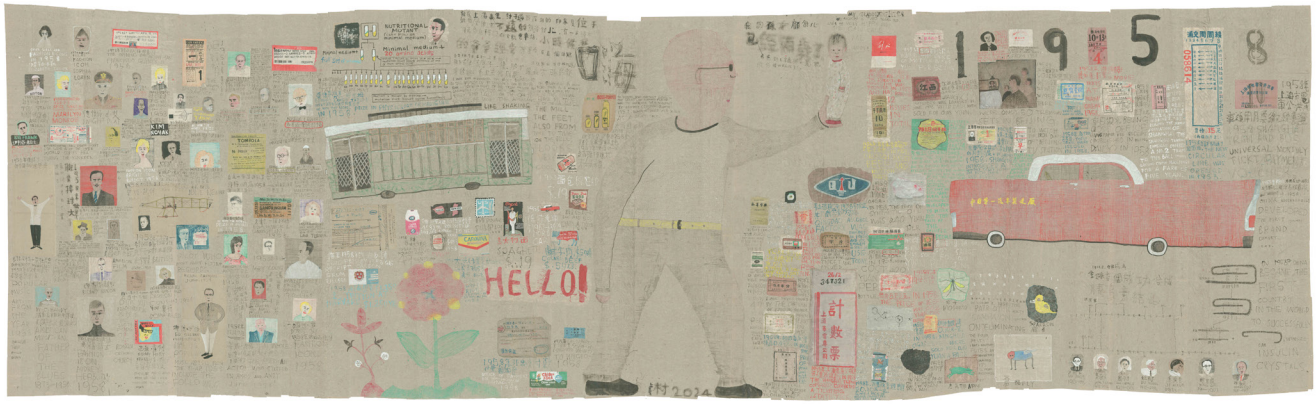

Figure 8. Yu Cun. *Hello, 1958*. Wash-ink on paper, 380×1350cm, 2024.

and contribute to the steering of society towards modernity. They must also reject the totalitarian and cultural sectarian mindset of pre-modernity and avoid at all costs resorting to simply appropriating Chinese cultural motifs with the aim of producing sectarian-natured traditional reconstruction.

(Translation by Lance Pursey, Translation Proof by Zha Changping).

Sichuan University

Dr. Zha Changping (1966-) is a Critic, Chief Editor of *Journal for Humanities and Art* 《*RENWEN YISHU*》, Professor of New Testament studies, contemporary Chinese art, philosophy at Institute of Daoism and Religious Culture's Center for Christianity Studies of Sichuan University in Chengdu, PRC. His research areas are the biblical studies, art criticism, and world-picture-logic. He is the author of *The Logic of Japanese History* (1995), *History and Logic*, *The Cultural Logic of Humanitology* (2007), *The Humane Thinking of Contemporary Arts* (2 vols, 2008), *Introduction to the Logic of World-picture of the New Testament* (2011), *A History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art* (2 vols, 2017), *Humanist Criticism of Contemporary Art* (2019), *Ecological Art in Humanist Criticism* (2021).

Editor: Wang Jing

ENDNOTES

1. Zha Changping, A History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Language and Time, *ART FRONTIER* /Vol. 01, No.3 & No.4 Jul.-Sep., Oct.-Dec. 2023, 1-10; The History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Self, *ART FRONTIER* / Vol. 02, No.2 Apr.-Jun. 2024, 48-55.

2. In the original translation of this quoted passage this term was called "scene-connection". Here we borrow the term "mise-en-scène" to describe this phenomenon. Mise-en-scène is a term most at home in cinema, originally referring to theatrical set-up both temporal and spatial, though it has come to refer to a broad all-encompassing feel to the film. Here we apply it to refer the significance of the venue and setting of works of performance art, how the body, actions and intention are connected to the space in which the piece takes place.

3. Zha Changping, ed., *UP-ON Somatic Aesthetics and Scene Connection 1995-2012*, (Chengdu: The 3rd Avenue Culture and Art Communication Co. Ltd., 2013), 32.

4. Here the word "sectarianism" is used to refer to the promotion of a single, purportedly unifying ideology, while simultaneously rejecting and attempting to eradicate competing worldviews or pluralism. This may be active and explicit leading to iconoclastic behaviour, or implicit as a form of cultural hegemony prevalent in the official or mainstream mindset of a society.

中國先鋒藝術思想史——作為自然史与社会史

查常平

摘　要：在繼藝術語言史、藝術時間史與藝術自我史後，本文回答中國先鋒藝術思想史為什麼是自然史、社會史及其特徵。藝術家如何表現自己的身體、自然世界、當代中國社會、中國先鋒藝術中塑造了哪些經典的自然與社會形象，這構成了作為自然史與社會史的中國先鋒藝術思想史的引論性內容。

關鍵詞：自然；社會；思想史；先鋒藝術