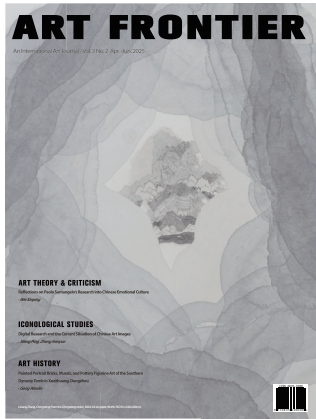




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The Eastern Echo of the Thinking of Being: A Study of Zao Wou-Ki's Painting from the Perspectives of Heidegger and Taoism

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Bottom-up Nationality: The Development of Contemporary Japanese Art

Gao Ling

Abstract

This article employs various research methods, including cross-cultural horizontal comparison and longitudinal analysis of art history, to explore the prominent characteristics of Japanese modern and contemporary art development that inspire and serve as a reference for Chinese and even global contemporary art. It highlights the spontaneous, conscious, and independent search for nationality in artistic creation and theoretical research by artists. The article conducts in-depth analysis and comparison on the understanding, description, and exploration of nationality and its artistic value, especially by presenting novel insights into the influential post-war Japanese Mono-ha art movement. It emphasizes the unity of artistic nationality and humanity.

Key Words: National identity; freedom; bottom-up ; contemporary

Invited by the Japan Foundation, Japan's sole national cultural foundation, the author conducted a visiting scholar study in Japan from February 1st to May 31st, 2025. During this period, the author engaged in extensive and diverse exchanges and discussions with experts and scholars in the Japanese art world, art institutions, and higher education institutions. This allowed for a comprehensive examination of contemporary Japanese art and a comparative analysis of its ideological and theoretical understanding with the current state of contemporary Chinese art. Articles written from seven perspectives were published in the "Japanese Art Investigation" column on Artron Art Net, China's largest professional art website. This paper delves deeper into prominent issues, specifically the nationality of contemporary art and the search for and promotion of the value attributes of contemporary art, hoping to stimulate further discussion in the academic community.

1. The Historical Origins of Geoculture and National Identity

Since both Japan and China are situated within the Asian and East Asian tectonic plates, every Chinese scholar who visits Japan is inevitably compelled to reflect on the similarities and differences between Japanese and Chinese art. In modern times, China came into contact with other civilizations and cultures outside Asia nearly 30 years earlier than Japan; China was passively forced to open its doors to the outside world through the Opium War in 1840, whereas Japan's formal engagement with Western nations began in 1868. The processes of opening their national doors by China and Japan differed in terms of being passive or proactive—a fact that warrants careful consideration and study. Despite both being compelled by the presence of Western vessels, why did Japan choose to open its doors, while China was forced to do so through war? China's proactive opening-up did not truly commence until 1978, and it was pursued in its own distinctive manner—adopting a selective approach to reform and opening-up tailored to its national conditions. Japan and China differ significantly in this regard: Japan's top-down opening-up began in 1868, whereas China's top-down opening-up started in 1978; thus, in terms of the timing of proactive opening-up, China lagged behind Japan by 110 years. Of course, during this over-century-long period, China also underwent the Self-Strengthening Movement and experienced a brief period of Reform Movement. However, the Westernization Movement merely involved learning from the West in the fields of industry and science and technology—referred to as “leveraging the strengths of the West to counteract it” —by sending students to industrialized nations in Europe and America to study their industries, technologies, and shipbuilding practices. In contrast, the Qing government actively and systematically pursued the study and observation of Western institutions and culture at the governmental level; that is to say, China's sporadic efforts to learn from the West over the past century actually constituted part of the Qing dynasty's economic and technological reforms, rather than institutional reforms. In contrast, Japan's Meiji Restoration represented a genuine top-down reform initiative. Just consider how Emperor Meiji, Mikoto, led the way by cutting off his traditional long hair, wearing a Western tailcoat, and drinking foreign liquor—such

actions inevitably generated a powerful momentum of emulation from above down to below.

More than 150 years ago, reflecting on why Japan transitioned from a policy of isolation to opening its doors to the outside world, one must consider the warning that China's earlier Opium Wars had sent to Japan. The Opium War of 1840, which began with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing—entailing war reparations, the cession of Hong Kong Island to Britain, the opening of treaty ports, and other measures—was a situation of national humiliation that the Japanese understood all too well. The Black Ship Incident of 1853, when Matthew Perry, commander of the U.S. Navy's East India Squadron, led four warships into Tokyo Bay with the intention of landing, sparked intense internal debate within late-Shogunate Japan: whether to allow the Americans to land or not. At the time, like China, Japan was also adhering to a policy of isolation; however, the conclusion reached in these discussions was that since even the vast empire of the Qing Dynasty could not defeat the West, Japan certainly could not; therefore, it might as well engage in contact with them. From this, two points deserve particular attention: first, the Japanese demonstrated a stronger capacity for adaptability than the Chinese did. This was due to various factors—geographically, Japan is an island nation with limited land, scarce resources, and frequent earthquakes, all of which fostered a strong sense of crisis among the Japanese people, and behind this sense of crisis lay their ability to adapt; second, the Japanese exhibited greater perseverance and endurance—namely, a stronger ability to remain steadfast in their beliefs and actions—than the Chinese did. Ruth Benedict's book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*¹ was the earliest work that helped Chinese people understand the Japanese way of life and mindset after China's reform and opening-up policy was implemented.

As we all know, Japan's cultural history primarily stems from the Chinese mainland, a fact widely acknowledged by the vast majority of Japanese scholars. However, the Japanese demonstrate a greater capacity for adaptability than we do—does this mean that the Japanese do not bear the same heavy burden of thought, values, or historical culture as we do? Is this burden beneficial or detrimental? If

Japanese culture was historically a long-term derivative of Chinese culture, then it has since evolved into something derived, extended, and transformed. From today's perspective, if Chinese culture serves as the main stem and Japanese culture as its branches, is it necessary for the development of the main stem to draw further inspiration from the branches? In reality, Chinese history itself is a history of interaction among multiple ethnic groups. For example, the Mongol Yuan and the Qing dynasties were both foreign cultural influences; in other words, Chinese history has always been one of interaction, exchange, and integration among various ethnic groups—along with periods of warfare—constituting a continuous history of blending and fusion. Yet, to this day, we tend to view ourselves and the world around us within the rigid framework of a static historical and ethnic paradigm. Certainly, it is necessary to posit and consistently emphasize such a presupposition regarding the ideological legitimacy of ethnicity. However, should this need evolve and adapt over time? As an island nation, while Japan acknowledges the long-term and significant cultural influence exerted by the Chinese mainland, the Japanese do not recognize Chinese culture as their sole or primary cultural origin. According to historical research, the ancestors of the Japanese may not have been a single ethnic group but rather a blend of Mongolians, Eskimos, Polynesians from the southern Pacific, Melanesians, and Micronesians. Unlike Chinese clans or ethnic groups, which originated in the Central Plains region—specifically the Yellow River basin—and were initially composed of a single ethnic group, the ethnic characteristics of Japanese culture stem from multiple sources. It is precisely for this reason that, during Japan's comprehensive opening-up following the Meiji Restoration, driven by expansionist ambitions, the country deployed various propaganda mechanisms to promote the unity and superiority of the Yamato nation.

2. The Cultural Logic of Contemporary Japanese Art Production

The Japanese have their own distinct logic for engaging with culture and history; this logic is so fundamentally different from that of China that almost all the senior Japanese intellectuals, scholars, and artists we encounter have never pandered to Western influences in their discourse—they have consistently emphasized the pursuit

of their own unique artistic expression. But what, then, constitutes the authentic Japanese art? In his renowned monograph *Japanese Art Is Not Yet Created*², the most celebrated contemporary art critic, Mr. Chiba Shigeo, does not provide a definitive answer; however, he repeatedly and clearly emphasizes that modern and contemporary Japanese art cannot simply replicate the creative paths of Western artists, but must strive diligently to forge an artistic tradition that embodies Japan's own national character. Although he specifically discusses internationally acclaimed contemporary artists such as Tadashi Kawamata, Yayoi Kusama, and Atsuko Tanaka in his book, he still maintains that Japanese art has not yet truly attained its own distinctive character and identity. This reflects a strong sense of self-criticism. In reality, the artists and theorists born in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in Japan fundamentally believe that Japan must forge its own path and pursue the distinctive artistic features and cultural values inherent to its own art.

For example, Chieo Senzaki (1953–), an important artist of the Hōbutsu School, is currently 72 years old. He studied abroad and resided there for an extended period before returning to Japan to teach and create art. These Japanese artists differ from many contemporary Chinese artists; many Chinese contemporary artists do not emphasize the pursuit of a distinctively Chinese art form in public settings, during their artistic explorations, or in their writing. The underlying reasons for this difference between the artistic traditions of the Chinese and Japanese peoples are fascinating and warrant further investigation. Post-war Japanese art education was no longer rooted in the militarist educational system of the past; although the Ministry of Education existed, Japan being a capitalist nation operated according to capitalist and market-oriented principles. Beyond respecting national symbols, Japan did not implement extensive mandatory policies or guidelines regarding art education and culture. In terms of cultural and artistic education, Japan was, in fact, similar to the United States in its liberal orientation; aside from adhering to the baseline of social order and good morals, no one advocated what should or should not be taught. As a result, post-war Japanese art appears remarkably open. What, then, is the distinctive artistic characteristic emphasized by the Japanese art community? To answer this

highly complex question, let us first examine the situation in China—such a comparison may help facilitate understanding. Around the year 2000, more than two decades after China’s launch of its reform and opening-up policy, Chinese scholars—inspired by their Western counterparts—introduced the concept of “Chineseness” or “Chineseness in indigenous Mode,” which sparked considerable attention and discussion within China’s academic and intellectual circles. The Japanese cultural and intellectual spheres have never deliberately proposed a concept known as “Japaneseness”; however, nearly all Japanese artists advocate pursuing a form of contemporary art or modern fine arts that embodies the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese nation. Although Japan—having initiated the creation of new contemporary artistic contexts hundreds of years earlier than China—did not share the same urgency among scholars over the past two decades, during the decades following World War II, we observed that Japanese art exerted and contributed significantly more influence and impact worldwide than Chinese art did, and it also provided valuable inspiration for China’s artistic community. For instance, the Mono-Ha and Post-Mono-Ha movements have now become primary subjects for reference and contemplation among many Chinese artists. While Japan did not coin the term “Japaneseness” itself, in recent years, at major international exhibitions and other events, they have adopted a term coined by the 19th-century French collector and critic Philippe Burty—one imbued with a strong sense of curiosity—to describe the phenomenon they are now pursuing: Japonisme, which refers to the Japanese style, Japaneseism, Japanese flavor, or Japanese aesthetics. Rather than creating new words, one can repurpose existing ones to give them new meaning within the context of a contemporary era—this approach, in my view, carries a distinctly postmodern flavor. This phenomenon of Japonisme has been familiar to Western audiences for over a century; therefore, there is no need to invent a new term. Repurposing is itself a process of transformation and regeneration—it allows the familiar to be made unfamiliar in the present moment; when those who understand recognize it, that is true wisdom. This is akin to “putting new wine in old bottles” —a method that is certainly worth emulating.

After World War II, the top-down system that once compelled the Japanese people to pursue a distinct cultural identity was largely dismantled and weakened. In today's highly commercialized and market-driven environment, over the past eighty years Japan's intellectual, artistic, and cultural circles have increasingly emphasized the importance of their native culture—but this time, from the bottom up, expressed more through individual and spontaneous initiatives rather than state mandate. It is worth recalling that Japan's ethnic origins and cultural nourishment have always been pluralistic. Historically, national unity was maintained through the indigenous Shinto belief in Amaterasu—the sun goddess—and the assertion that the emperor is her descendant.

3. Characteristics of Contemporary Japanese Art and Culture

Nowadays, some Chinese people also wear Tang suits or Hanfu, but there are no clearly defined, standardized styles, as the tradition of Chinese attire has been constantly interrupted and transformed throughout the dynastic changes, resulting in an unclear lineage—making the genealogy of Chinese clothing somewhat perplexing. Today, period-dressing garments created by various merchants for profit often appear patchwork-like, and their promotion and dissemination involve multiple, conflicting approaches, leaving consumers bewildered and lacking a clear internal cultural imagery. The fourth characteristic of contemporary Japanese culture is its absorptive nature. Why do we observe that some of China's lost, fragmented, or scattered traditional patterns, styles, and symbolic motifs have been well preserved—or even further promoted—in Japan? This is because Japan has long and diligently studied China, dispatching numerous delegations known as “Kanjō-shiki” (Envoys to Tang China). This approach was highly systematic, organized, and in-depth. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, the diverse origins of the Japanese people also endow Japanese culture with a strong capacity for absorption—not merely absorbing from China; in fact, after the Meiji Restoration, Japan began not only to learn from Europe and America but also to study, explore, and engage in trade with India and Southeast Asia. In fact, over a century ago, Japanese people traveled across vast oceans to various parts of the world. Although we are a major power with our own

self-contained system and a longer cultural heritage and history, it is precisely for this reason that we resemble an overconfident elderly person—burdened by heavy weights and lacking a vibrant, innovative, and adaptive mechanism for absorbing new influences; as a result, we lack vitality, innovative capacity, and transformative capability.

A prominent characteristic is that the contemporary national identity of Japanese culture is not so much about national character as it is about culture itself—namely, the human dimension of culture—or, put another way, the national character of culture is first and foremost rooted in the shared human nature of culture. As is well known, Japan has historically possessed a strong collective consciousness; however, this very concept of collective consciousness underwent significant transformation in the post-war era—namely, that collective consciousness and cultural identity do not necessarily belong exclusively or solely to a particular nation; this is a particularly striking phenomenon. I interviewed Masayuki Ito, the director of the Art Museum in Nerima-ku, Tokyo. He previously worked for a long time at the Japan Foundation and was also responsible for the evaluation, selection, and operation of the Japan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, as well as participating in the organization and curating of the Yokohama Triennale. Mr. Ito noted that many accomplished Japanese artists strive to express Japan's unique temperament and distinctive cultural values. However, such artists are not necessarily Japanese nationals—a perspective that is quite challenging and reflects a key difference between the Japanese and the Chinese. For example, Chiharu Shiota, who is currently highly regarded in the international art scene, has spent over two decades living in Berlin, Germany, rather than in Japan, yet in recent years she has represented Japan at the Japan Pavilion of the Venice Biennale.

I pressed Mr. Ito further: what would happen if Chiharu Taneda were not Japanese—given that she had been in Germany for so long? Would we still choose her to represent Japan? This thought brought to mind Huang Yongping, who is French by nationality and of Asian descent with Chinese ancestry, yet he represented France at the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It is unknown whether Huang Yongping could have represented France at the exhibition had he not been French at the time. I

then asked Mr. Ito Masanori: if Chiharu Taneda did not hold Japanese citizenship, could she still represent Japan? Mr. Ito replied that we did not place much importance on citizenship; he explained that if we believed an artist's work could convey certain characteristics of Japanese culture, we could still invite them to serve as the artist representing the Japanese Pavilion. This response—emphasizing culture over nationality—really impressed me. In contrast, in the realms of culture and sports, there seems to be a widespread sentiment in China—namely, narrow nationalism—where, for example, the issue of nationality surrounding the winter sports athlete Gu Ailing is constantly debated. Nevertheless, China won a gold medal in a blank event at the Winter Olympics thanks to her. In short, Japan's contemporary cultural values and characteristics are not tied to nationality; indeed, they may not even be linked to ethnicity. This open cultural attitude is closely linked to Japan's 150-year history of openness and high degree of internationalization. This explains why nearly all figures in the Japanese artistic community consciously or emotionally identify with their homeland—because only those whose presence and absence are seamless truly cherish their homeland; after all, their homeland, like those of their peers across the world, is engaged in the pursuit of cultural humanity. If everyone is freely, autonomously, and consciously engaged in the same endeavor, then where they may be physically located does not matter. Indeed, this perhaps best illustrates the phenomenon of being physically abroad yet keeping one's heart anchored to one's homeland. Cultural subjectivity is not defined by geographical boundaries but is bounded by the concept of humanity.

4. Schools and International Contributions of Contemporary Japanese Art

It is precisely due to Japan's long-standing cultural openness that it has been able to contribute internationally recognized art movements to the contemporary global art scene since the post-war period, such as Gutai, Mono-ha, and Post-Mono-ha. As an art critic active since the late 1980s, I have witnessed the emergence of Chinese contemporary art phenomena like Political Pop and Cynical Realism in the 1990s. However, these are better described as trends or artistic currents rather than coherent art movements. When it comes to the international influence or reception of

contemporary Chinese culture and art, it has yet to be academically recognized as a distinct artistic school with a methodological framework. A review of foreign-language publications reveals almost no methodological study of Chinese contemporary art over the past forty years by non-Chinese scholars. The work written by Julia Andrews of Ohio State University covers only the modern Chinese art history, spanning the period from the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China to the end of 1970.

As a result, scholars in other countries have a very limited understanding of China's art scene over the past 40 years; they view Political Pop as a phenomenon-specific ideological movement of its time, as well as Worldly Realism—because, in their view, this artistic language is Western or American in nature, falling within the linguistic framework of Western Pop Art, and both represent forms of appropriation and parody, which are also prevalent abroad. Consequently, China has not produced anything original or methodological over these 40 years. However, Japan has; the Mono-ha movement is a typical example of this.

The most significant academic gain from this four-month academic visit to Japan was the firsthand discovery and understanding of the creative origins of the Watsu-ka school. From which artistic tradition did the Japanese and Koreans—specifically Lee U-hwan, the theoretical cornerstone of Watsu-ka—discover and establish this artistic philosophy? The emergence of Watsu-ka could hardly have arisen out of nowhere; however, there seem to be no detailed accounts or descriptions of this in existing literature. While wandering through the Tōfuku-ji Temple in Kyoto and appreciating the Japanese aesthetic essence embodied within this renowned temple, I inadvertently noticed a particular corner of the temple featuring a cluster of vertical stone pillars—similar in shape and size to the “Ushimazaki” pillars—half of which stood on the ground and half beneath it, their bases arranged in a yin-yang pattern using crushed stones. This observation led me to recall that many Japanese temples also feature similar stone pillars. It occurred to me that Kurenda Shinsuke's work *Phase—Mother Earth* might share some underlying connection with these ancient temple pillars.

For example, at first glance, most people would likely consider Duchamp's urinal to be mere *Fountain*, but if you are an artist, you cannot simply dismiss Duchamp's seemingly straightforward appropriation as mere *Fountain*. If you still regard Duchamp's work as *Fountain*, you may well not be considered part of the mainstream artistic community—rather, you would be classified as a traditional artist rather than a contemporary artist. Why are Shigeo Kurenao and Lee Ufan considered great? Because, after drawing inspiration from pillars resembling those of the Dōfuku-ji Temple, they directly adapted and immediately transformed these elements; this idea and action may have occurred in an instant, but the underlying scholarly foundation and long-term cultivation were intangible and profound. To make their ideas and actions convincing, artists continuously seek theoretical underpinnings—just as Li Yuhuan did, by constantly speaking, writing, and presenting their work to others in various settings. The more an artist reflects, the more accurate and clear their understanding becomes; this very process constitutes their methodology. Once their conceptual framework is complete, they proceed to the actual creation; after the work is finished, they continue to discuss it with others, and gradually, these listeners also experience a sudden epiphany. In fact, this approach bears a strong resemblance to the study of theoretical issues: sometimes, a lengthy period of inquiry may lead to an abrupt moment of clarity, followed by an increasing fascination with the subject and a growing conviction that the logic and conclusions are sound.

Instead, during the 27 years following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the “Three Emphases” creative paradigm was systematically promoted across the artistic sphere from the top down, giving rise to the aesthetic categories and standards of “Red Light Brightness” and “High, Comprehensive, and Exemplary”—although these were imbued with strong temporal and political connotations. The model operas best exemplify these concepts of “Red Light Brightness” and “High, Comprehensive, and Exemplary.” For China, these concepts are analogous to the Japanese notions of Mono no Aware, Wabi-Sabi, and Yūgen—they serve as categories or standards that define an entire era. However, whether as categories or standards,

they are hierarchical in nature. Concepts such as Yūgen, Wabi-Sabi, and Mono no Aware directly engage with psychology and human nature, thereby embodying the humanistic dimension of art and enjoying significant global influence—spanning fields from architectural design to courtyard design and interior design, among others. The concepts of “Red Light” and “High, Comprehensive, and Perfect” are merely visual representations of political agendas—representing an extreme form of politicized language that has nothing to do with human nature; as a result, they can only be effective within a specific historical context in China and cannot be universally accepted as a general artistic category by countries around the world.

Another important factor behind the emergence and growth of the Wutai School as a world-class artistic movement lies in the external social environment and conditions that fostered its development. The emergence and evolution of the Wutai School were the outcome of voluntary choice—more precisely, the result of spontaneous, self-driven selection within a market economy and a free society. Japanese culture and Japanese art, situated within a highly market-oriented social environment, possess dedicated professional domains, specialized markets or genuine public welfare mechanisms, and professional individuals who fund preliminary artistic explorations, enabling such explorers to sustain their practice. Foundations, art institutions, and charitable organizations favor and support this movement; furthermore, expenses incurred for organizing exhibitions for it can be tax-exempt. Thus, supporters, who can obtain compensatory support in other fields, are willing to provide long-term support for purely artistic explorations that may not yield immediate financial returns, thereby allowing exploratory artists to continue creating over the long term. This is the artistic creation environment in Japan, which bears resemblance to that in Europe and America. Artistic creation is, at its core, a personal endeavor—and ultimately, remains a personal matter. When external, top-down government administrative guidance and intervention are combined with selective funding and support allocation, this inevitably gives rise to an artificial direction over time. In such a context, art created under these conditions—due to the diminished purposefulness and functionality inherent in its creation—loses its spontaneity and

autonomy, deviates from the human dimension of art, and consequently cannot give rise to artistic movements or works that truly exert a global influence.

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