Chinese Avant-Garde Art: Body and Spirit Struggle for a New Cultural Identity

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To understand the relationship between avant-garde art and cultural identity in China, a basic understanding of the historical and cultural contexts is essential. The Cultural Revolution in China did not begin after Mao took power in 1949—it began with the May 4th movement of 1919. After suffering a series of deep national humiliations by the West, the revolution to break down the old culture began. The movement, led by students and intellectuals, proclaimed that if China was to survive in the 20th century with any integrity as a country, the Confucian traditional values had to be rejected. China must openly adopt Western political, economic, and social values in order to modernize and bring about a new China. This was the beginning of the quest for a new cultural and political identity.

Some forty some years later, Mao's Cultural Revolution, which began in the 1960s, took the May 4th movement to its extreme. The Red Guards, most of them teenagers, were unleashed onto the populace and carried out the central propaganda edict of "smashing the Four Olds": old habits, old customs, old culture and old ideas. Mao's Cultural Revolution was catastrophic in the indiscriminate destruction of lives, property, and all manifestations of art and culture. When it ended in the early 1970s, the repressive atmosphere began to lift. I believe that, to this day, the deep wound that was inflicted on the collective psyche from this phase of China's Cultural Revolution was repressed and still remains unacknowledged and therefore unhealed and untransformed.

In the art world of the late 1970s and 1980s, a vast pool of underground creative energy began to surface in China. Art schools were again popular and

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drew artistically gifted students. A significant source of inspiration for the art students was that for the first time in almost thirty years of isolation from Western culture, art institutes were allowed to subscribe to some Western art magazines and books. Any and all information was hungrily consumed. One artist said, “After a famine, you eat anything” (Kelley, 2008, p.15). The impact was huge and in the following years the art scene would experience bursts of subversive and exuberant creative energy.

In February of 1989, a few months before the student protest at Tien An Men Square and the subsequent brutal crackdown, Chinese artists exploded onto the art world with the first major survey of modern Chinese art in an exhibition named “China/Avant-Garde.” The artwork that was selected departed radically from traditional and acceptable Chinese aesthetics and artistic expressions. Combined with the student protests that erupted in June of 1989, it greatly alarmed the authorities, and a heavy lid was again closed down on artistic expression. Many Chinese artists and intellectuals found themselves navigating on very thin ice between their individual visions and the prevailing sociopolitical values. A number of them left China and emigrated to the United States, Japan, Europe, and Australia.

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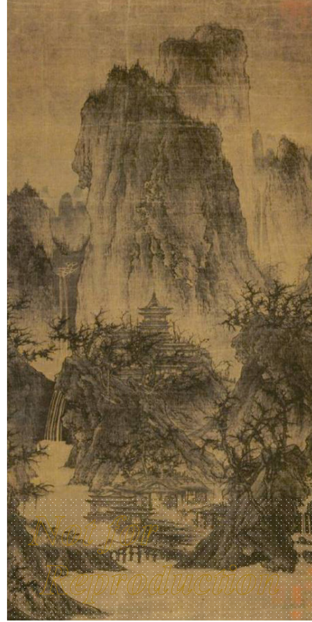

Figure 1: Chinese Landscape Painting

Figure 2: Revolutionary and Propaganda Art

In the early 20th century, Chinese art was dominated by landscape painting. During Mao's era, revolutionary and propaganda art were the sanctioned form of artistic expression. I propose that Chinese avant-garde art is

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the third phase of a cultural revolution that began during the May 4th movement of 1919. This third phase of the revolution continues to disrupt and agitate the status quo, insisting on asking the question of what it means to be “Chinese” in the 21st century, and keeps pushing against the iron bar the Chinese government places on the individual’s freedom of expression.

Two Chinese artists, among many, whose body of work affects me in a deep and often indescribable way, as well as illustrating this struggle for a new cultural identity, are Xu Bing and Zhang Huan. Their background and their art are very different, yet I find that both succeed in expressing an exquisite tension of the opposites between past and present, tradition and modernity, and body and spirit. Both artists immigrated to the United States in the 1990s. Xu Bing still lives in New York City, but Zhang Huan returned to China in 2006.

A very important point I want to make is that my approach to these artists’ works is an exploration of my personal understanding and experience of their art but not as an art critic. Their struggle for individual identity and meaning within the cultural context of East and West has illuminated aspects of my own struggle since my arrival in the United States from China forty-one years ago.

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Xu Bing

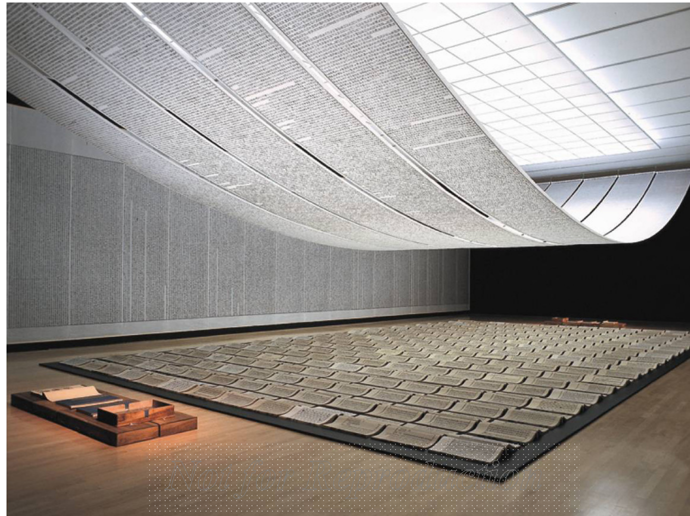

Figure 3: *Book from the Sky*

This installation piece, *Tian Shu*, or *Book from the Sky*, put Xu Bing on the map as an important artist nationally and internationally. However, both government officials and art critics in China greeted the installation, first exhibited in 1988, with widespread denunciation. They closed down the show after two days.

Imagine yourself as a literate Chinese walking into this large room, draped on all four walls, from ceiling to floor, with long scrolls covered in classic Chinese characters. At the front, displayed in a very traditional way, are volumes of classically bound books. All of these were hand-printed by woodblocks, which

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had been conceived and carved by the artist, who had worked on them meticulously for a period of over three years. The atmosphere of the installation was serene, elegant, and even comforting. But as one drew closer, everything changed. These printed characters were unreadable and meaningless. NOBODY could read them.

Figure 4: *Book from the Sky*

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Figure 5: Pseudo Chinese Characters

One needs to know about four thousand Chinese characters in order to read the newspaper. The amount of devotion and work that went into the carving of these wood blocks and inventing four thousand meaningless Chinese characters that were different from the ten thousand existing Chinese characters was monumental!

The emotions experienced and expressed by Chinese viewers at the exhibition of *Book from the Sky*, both in China and abroad, went from the initial comfort of recognition ("These words look so familiar") to confusion ("Maybe I don't know these words"), then frustration ("I'm not getting it"), and finally to shock and anger ("I feel insulted, humiliated, and threatened").

Xu Bing was born in 1955, the youngest of three children. Xu's parents were intellectuals who met in Shanghai and assisted in the overthrow of the nationalist government in 1949. After the revolution, they were employed by Beijing University, the equivalent in China of Harvard University. Xu's father

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was a history professor and his mother worked in the library. At a very young age, Xu was passionate about reading, calligraphy, and books. One could characterize him as the ideal offspring of the elite literati/intellectual class of Chinese society, a class that had been respected for thousands of years. But during Mao's Cultural Revolution, this intellectual class was proclaimed to be the "enemy of the people," and Xu's parents were cruelly and repeatedly persecuted. Along with thousands of students, he was sent to the countryside where the so-called "privileged youths" from the big cities were sent to live with and learn from the peasants. Despite the tremendous physical hardship, Xu felt no bitterness and, upon reflection, even appreciated the experience. He said: "The countryside brought me in touch with nature and allowed me to understand what China was really about: the struggle to survive on the land" (Smith, 2005, p. 323).

My father was sent to a labor camp when I was ten months old. I never saw him again, and he died alone in 1977, a broken man. The memory of my father makes me both sad and angry, but mostly I accept that my father's story was similar to those of millions of Chinese in the 20th century. This attitude, one I feel I share with both Xu Bing and Zhang Huan, is quintessentially Chinese. We learned early that to survive and to stay alive, one has to "eat bitterness," to persevere and go on with the business of living.

I am reminded of Liu Xiaobo, who was awarded the Nobel peace prize of 2010 and who is serving an eleven-year jail sentence, and still believes that no authority can block the natural human impulse to freedom. Xu Bing, like Liu, seemed to have a deep sense of how the individual's life and fate interconnect

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with history and the culture of his or her time. Xu said: “The culture we inherited was Mao’s adulteration of tradition. Whether it was good or bad is another question, but it was neither traditional nor Western…this is what our generation was presented with. We can’t forget it or we would have nothing. We have had to identify ways in which to rethink it and use it” (Smith, 2005, p.331). Book from the Sky was Xu’s “obliteration” and his “rethinking” of the foundation of Chinese culture and identity, the Chinese written word.

Tian Shu, with its “pseudo-words,” challenged this cultural foundation of the “Chinese identity.” From the time of Emperor Chin of the Great Wall, the written Chinese word was unified and standardized. Chinese people may not be able to talk to each other because of the hundreds of different dialects that are as different as Italian and French, but literate Chinese could always communicate and understand each other through the written word. The Chinese written language has literally held the people and the culture together since the time of the oracle bones some 4,000 years ago.

In attacking and making the Chinese written word meaningless, Xu Bing went further than even Mao’s Cultural Revolution did with smashing the “Four Olds.” Xu was smashing the traditional definition of “Chineseness” and opening the door to a new imagination of Chinese identity. Each of his “fake characters” is an autonomous entity that is not like any other character. It is unique, beyond correct and incorrect, and the autonomy embodied by each new pseudo-character is a burst of freedom that puts one beyond the control of the rules imposed on the individual, whether from the ancestors or the government.

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My own experience of disorientation around Chinese written words occurred during the 1950s when the Chinese government abolished the traditional characters and switched to a simplified form of writing. It was initially very confusing to the Chinese people living in China, and the change enraged all the overseas Chinese. I lived in China until I was seven. Because I was considered to be from the privileged class, I was put on a wait list for primary school. It was not until I left China and was enrolled in a Catholic school in Macau that I first learned to read and write Chinese and was taught only the traditional characters. To this day, I struggle with reading the simplified form of mainland Chinese writing and prefer the aesthetics of the traditional style. I continue to feel a sense of loss whenever I look at the "new" writing because in my struggle to read it, I am reminded that Chinese is now my second language. *Tien Shu* opened a door and encouraged me to enter the "in-between" space of my identity. I am both a "legal immigrant" in America and an "overseas Chinese" in China—an outsider in both cultures.

The culturally radical idea embodied by *Tien Shu* also speaks to the tension between the individual and the Chinese collective and how one contemplates and tolerates this in-between space that holds the potential for transformation. In his commentary on the 2008 exhibition in San Francisco titled "Half Life of a Dream: Chinese contemporary Art," the art critic Jeff Kelley said about Xu Bing: "By carving his invented and meaningless characters, Xu invited paradox: speaking on a public scale with private utterances, practicing precision in the service of ambiguity, learning a language that could not be

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spoken, undertaking scholarship in reverse, starting with the knowledge of a language and ending with the experience of no language" (Kelley, 2008, p.32).

Zhang Huan

The body, often his own naked body, was Zhang Huan's medium in his early performance art.

Figure 6: *To Raise the Water Level in the Fish Pond*

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Figure 7: *To Raise the Water Level in the Fish Pond*

The first time I saw Zhang's work was at the 1999 exhibition of Chinese modern art in San Francisco titled "Inside Out—New Chinese Art." It was a photographic image of a pond with forty men, half submerged in water, looking at me directly (or so it seemed). Their mood was quiet and dignified. The artist was in the middle, carrying a small boy on his shoulder. The work was titled *To Raise the Water Level in the Fish Pond*. This image moved me and stayed with me, especially when I found out that the men with the artist were migrant workers who all came from poor rural areas of China to work in Beijing. These men were the neglected and invisible populace, yet they were also the greatly needed work force that built the turbo-charged economy of post Cultural Revolution China. Zhang said: "It is about changing the natural state of things, about the idea of possibilities" (Goldberg, 2009, p.19). I wondered: "Could the

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mass of their bodies really impact the water level? Do any of them, or me, matter as an individual? Could any individual Chinese make a difference in the midst of one billion plus people?"

Zhang Huan was born in 1965 in Henan province in central China, just when the Cultural Revolution was beginning. He spent his early childhood in the countryside of Henan province with his grandmother because his parents had to work in the city. Zhang felt that his childhood experiences of running around playing, mostly without clothes, and his love of nature, influenced his temperament and contributed to his choice to become a performance artist. He said: "I had discovered that my body could become my language, it was the closest thing to who I was and it allowed me to become known to others. I had been struggling with how to move from the two-dimensional to the three-dimensional, and then I discovered this new vehicle, my body. It was never for any political or social or cultural commentary. Rather, it was a kind of personal necessity. It allowed me to express some very deep emotions coming from many different places" (Goldberg, 2009, p. 19). His body became his social, mental, and spiritual contact with the outer world.

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Figure 8: ***12 Square Meters***

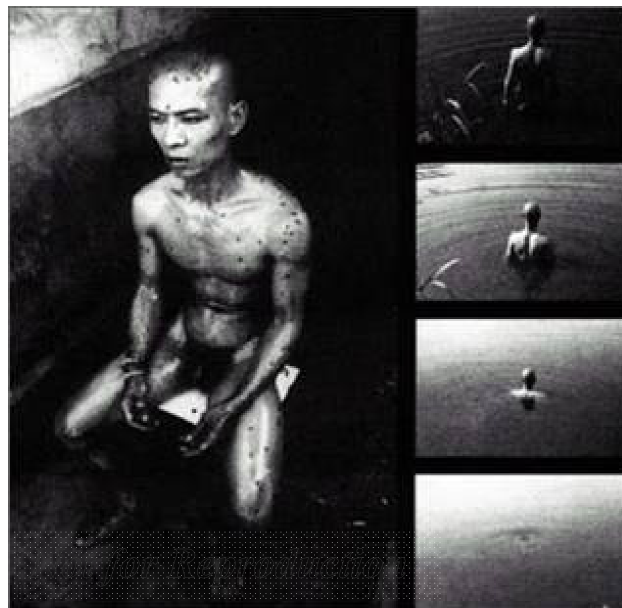

Figure 9: ***12 Square Meters***

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Zhang Huan's early performance piece that attracted attention from the international art world was *12 Square Meters*, created in 1994. At that time, he and a group of artists lived in utter poverty on a fringe of Beijing they named East Village. In making a point about the atrocious condition of the public toilets in his neighborhood, as well as to experience and challenge the limitation of his body's endurance, Zhang sat naked in a public latrine for one hour, his body covered with fish oil and honey. Hundreds of black flies feasted on him. He sat motionless, eyes closed. At the end of the hour, Zhang walked to a nearby pond of dirty water and ritualistically submerged himself. He then emerged as if he had been cleansed and renewed.

The images affronted my senses as I imagined the unbearable stench, the feeling of the sticky honey-fish oil, and the hundreds of feasting flies. I still have vivid memories of many latrines in China during our travels there in the 1980s. Each time when I went into one of the public latrines, I would light up cigarettes and puff away the whole time. The cigarette smell was much more preferable than the stench of the latrine. In Zhang's performance piece, the act of enduring and being witnessed speaks to the possibility of human dignity in the midst of neglect and abuse, as well the deeply ingrained Chinese attitude of perseverance.

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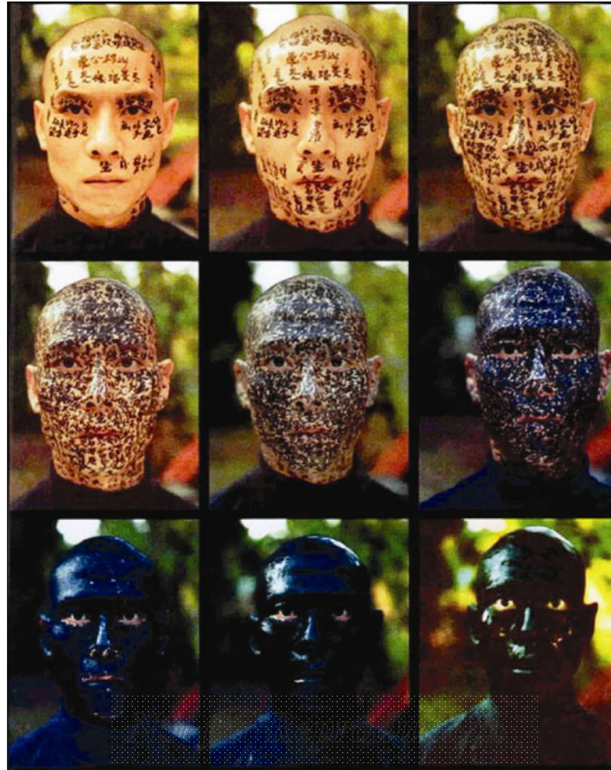
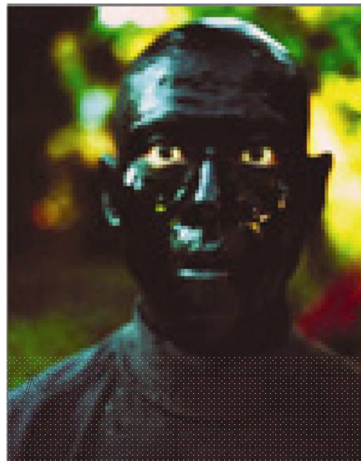


Figure 10: ***Family Tree***



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Zhang did many series of concept photographs. The one that impressed me most was *Family Tree*, consisting of nine shots. He commissioned three calligraphers to write a succession of Chinese characters on his face over the course of one day. The words that were written over and over again on his face were names of family and friends, common proverbs, random words, and an old fable about the triumph of perseverance. Zhang sat without moving and without any expression for hours. By the end of the day, when it became dark, Zhang's face and head was completely black, and he blended into the night.

The experience as an immigrant was difficult and challenging for Zhang, as it had been for me in my circumstance. Looking at this series of photographs, it seemed that Zhang's identity was being defined from the outside, on his skin and face, and not from the inside. Or perhaps he needed to remind himself that he was still Chinese. I was deeply struck by the last photo where he looked as if he was in a state of panic, staring out into the dark, invisible except for his eyes. A memory was evoked in me: I arrived alone at Honolulu airport. It was my first vacation after being on the U.S. mainland for six years. I looked around at all the Asian faces and felt my whole being just relax. The tension and the anxiety of living in the marginal realm dissolved.

Even in his early performance pieces, one could feel the central thread of Zhang's art: the honoring of the human spirit and the sacredness of the body. Zhang's work moves me still as I struggle to describe my experience with words. He stares at me blankly and I feel "touched." I can enter his art, for there is space for me to feel, and I am in awe of his courage as an artist. His nakedness and

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vulnerability evoke my own terror of being seen without the protection of the proper persona.

In 2006, Zhang moved back to Shanghai. In contrast to the earlier time, when he worked alone and claimed that his studio was in his head, at this point he built a 7,000-square-foot studio and now works with many assistants skilled in different fields. They execute his ideas and his vision. He no longer uses his actual body as the medium, but his art is still expressed through bodies or body parts, created through a variety of media.

Figure 11: *Ash Head*

I will close with one image from the period, titled *Ash Head*. Zhang was inspired to use ash as part of his medium when he was visiting Longhua Temple in Shanghai, shortly after his return from United States. An intense feeling overcame him while watching and participating in the ceremonial burning of

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incense sticks. Memories of going to temple with his grandmother when he was young were evoked. These incense ashes, for Zhang, embodied the spiritual longing and the remembrances of ancestors, as well as everyday human cares, prayers, wishes, and hopes. Zhang experienced the ashes from the temple as "message-carriers," saying "incense burning touches and awakens the spiritual impulses embedded deeply in our subconscious. Therefore the ashes already possess a great deal of potential for connecting the human with the spiritual" (Goldberg, 2009, p.84).

My memory of incense and ashes also connects me to grandmother and ancestors. Every Chinese New Year's Eve when I was growing up, my grandmother set the table with food for the ancestors and lit the incense. When the incense sticks turned to ashes, it was a sign that the ancestors had eaten and left. Then we, the living, gathered together and enjoyed the feast. *Ash Head* spoke to me of the relationship between the living and the dead, a reminder of the transience of life. Zhang's art has moved from body, to culture, to spirit; from personal to transpersonal. In the medium of incense ashes, he brought all these levels together.

Sometimes I am puzzled by why I have been compelled to explore and revisit the landscape of my ancestors each time I've written about my personal experiences, returning to Chinese myth, movies, and art. I had an epiphany recently when I read an interview with I. M. Pei, the famous Chinese architect. He was 92 and when asked whether he still, after 75 years in America, felt at all Chinese. He said: "I've never left China" (*Financial Times*, 2-7-10). Like I. M. Pei,

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I also have not left China because I cannot leave China. I am compelled to "return" again and again so I will not forget that the Chinese character is not written outside on my skin. It is inside.

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