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A History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art: Being a History of Language and Time

Changping Zha

Abstract

Begun with discussing the value of history, this article points out the subjective value judgements in the study of history and their significance for human free existence. Then, it suggests the reasons why the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art should be a kind of history of language and a kind of history of time, and what are their features. When we talk about the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a history of language we mean to draw attention to the processes in which pioneering artists use materials, we also do so to expose how the art world as a whole advances the diversification of available artistic media. When we talk about the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a history of time we try to make clear the concept of time in works of pioneering Chinese art.

Key Words

Language, time, history of ideas, pioneering contemporary Chinese Art

The value of history, modestly speaking, deals with three areas of human existence: our memories of the past, the conditions of our contemporary reality and what we may imagine the future to hold. As Cicero orated, “History... bears witness to the passing of the ages, sheds light upon reality, gives life to recollection and guidance to human existence.”¹ These functions of history, however, can only come to serve us through the writing of historical records.

The difference between a person’s historical existence and social existence is to be found essentially in the shape of their individual life (personal faith, beliefs, thoughts, ideas, consciousness, actions, personality, destiny, etc.) as it is recorded in historical documents, and in whether the impact of their lives on the society of the time can translate into a cultural legacy. Not only that but it also depends on whether this cultural legacy resonates with humanity’s universal values and whether such a legacy can be of use for ongoing human existence.

To put it another way, this difference lies in whether one who lives in any particular time and society can recall the events of the past and can invoke the thoughts,

ideas, emotions and struggles of those who now belong to history. Furthermore, in recalling these persons of the past can they attain some form of epistemological, aesthetic, ethical or spiritual value? Can they gain insight into the meaning of their individual existence and grasp the logical connection of their personal history to overarching history as a whole?

The *Liang Han Ji*, a historical account of the Han dynasty, insists there is value in recording history, stating “there are 5 goals in writing historical records: 1) to discover the true nature (or *dao*) of the world, 2) to reveal its workings, 3) to connect the past to the present, 4) to record the achievements of certain people, and 5) to praise the wisdom and talents of certain people.”² Others attempt to write off or discredit the value of history altogether. To do so, though, they are ignoring the difference between history and nature as they serve as the forming factors of the world. These forming factors, or you could say the “key structural components”, include things such as language, time, the individual person, the natural world, society, history and even God (or a manifestation of “ultimate concern”). The interconnection

of these diverse factors is what makes up the “world”; and human-linguistic relationships, human-temporal relationships, human-self relationships, human-thing relationships, human-human relationships, human-history relationships and human-divine relationships converge to form a logical world-picture.³

At its root, the object of historical research is the relationship between people and history that exists in the world in which these people live. From this relationship, four questions arise: What is history? What is a person? What is the history of persons? What is this “person” in history?

“The study of history in examining humans and human activity in the world inevitably entails subjective judgements of value. This is because historians themselves are human, meaning as well as being flesh and blood organisms they have also mental lives, interpersonal lives, and cultural lives which inform their perceptions and subjective ideas about the world. ‘The invocation to historians to suppress even that minimal degree of moral or psychological evaluation which is necessarily involved in viewing human beings as creatures with purposes and motives (and not merely as causal factors in the procession of events) seems to me to rest upon a confusion of the aims and methods of the humane studies with those of natural science. It is one of the greatest and most destructive fallacies of the last hundred years.’”⁴

Historical research as a human endeavour, objectively speaking, cannot avoid the subjective value judgements that come with human involvement, just as it cannot be completely rid of the subjectivity of those people in history they research, nor the subjective nature of human history as a whole. On another level, the goal of historical research is actually to encourage people to live a freer existence through their understanding of history. As Gao Ertai declared, “Freedom is the state of human existence.”⁵ “Through free and conscious activity a person creates not only the world but also himself, a person is a living entity that is constantly in the process of creating and creating himself. This is the fundamental characteristic that separates persons from all other entities in existence.”⁶ As a result of this kind of liberating creativity, a person can give meaning to the world in which they live and to themselves, and in doing so, as the subject of this creative activity, enjoys a feeling of purpose and meaning. Through this interaction with the self, a person develops a mental life, while through interactions with others, a person cultivates an interpersonal life, and through learning about others in history a person enriches their cultural life.

Human creativity “is the transcendence of the real

world, the going beyond of what is already known and accepted, when we tear ourselves away from all that is familiar, it is the vitality to go forth into realms previously unknown, to explore realms that may have been rejected and/or deemed unknowable.”⁷ Contrary to this viewpoint though, one could also say, “man, bound and determined by the reality of life, is set free not only by art—as has often been argued – but also by the understanding of history. And this effect of history, which its most modern detractors have not seen, is broadened and deepened in the further stages of historical consciousness.”⁸

At its most basic level, different persons’ motivation for researching historical records is to free themselves of the enslaving narrative of their concrete historical facts. At the highest level, persons in all their engagements with the history of ideas work to emancipate themselves from the hegemony of the dominant historical view of the real world and the overarching historical concepts implied in mainstream ideological discourses. The history of ideas in art is in particular the exploration and assessment of how through manifesting artistic ideas people have gained some sense of freedom, which makes it a deeper expression of art’s historical consciousness.

The writing of the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art, involves organising and accounting for the progression of the movement over the last twenty years of development. Such a task, if nothing else, will function to prevent artists from falling into the oppressive trap of repetition, acting to deter artists consciously or unconsciously displacing the artist as the central subject of free creativity and instead cloning the artistic culture of others.⁹ It will also help us to remove the constantly recurring and derivative cloning tendencies of artistic creation, opening up for lovers of art greater space for free creativity and a larger field of expressive possibility. The clone culture prevalent in contemporary art is particularly noticeable in the work of some painters over the last ten years. Who, by consistently copying themselves, reduce the medium of oil painting to something more like printmaking.

1.The history of art as a history of language

First, it would be valuable to discuss the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a kind of history of language. Previously we already touched upon 7 factors that make up a person’s world, of them language has an obvious precedence. As Walter Benjamin said, “Everything that man heard in the beginning, saw with his eyes, and felt with his hands was

the living word; for God was the word. With this word in his mouth and his heart, the origin of language was as natural, as close, and as easy as a child's game..."¹⁰

When lovers of art come upon a work, be it an oil painting, an installation, a photograph, or a video, they first interface with the artistic language (or signifier) of this particular medium. They inquire how this language conveys or can potentially convey the artist's particular artistic ideas (or signifié), and the deeper and more difficult question of judging how successful the artist has been in getting across this intended message. The first thing the audience may see is the basics of artistic language, which for oil painting would be the colours and structure, for installation art the setup and layout, for photography the angle and exposure and video art the shot and editing of the recording. Here, we have already hit on two central concepts in the language of art, namely, materials and media. While, acrylics, oils and canvas all count as materials, oil paint also serves as a medium, and a very ancient medium at that. The divide between materials and media is often blurred, as is demonstrated in some of Liang Shaoji's works, which include what we would consider the materials, such as silk cocoons, iron filings, and the human body, however, silk is a material it can also serve as a relatively new medium for artistic creation.

When we talk about the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a history of language we mean to draw attention to the processes in which pioneer-

ing artists use materials, we also do so to expose how the art world as a whole collectively advances the diversification of available artistic media. The former intention implies that we need to map out the original schema of the artist as an individual, while the latter goal encourages us to view the current state-of-the-art world as a knowledge-producing collective that establishes new forms of media.

On the whole, most pioneering contemporary Chinese artists continue new experimentation with different materials within the umbrella of one or several already-established forms of artistic media. Examples of this can be seen in installation art with the Gao Brothers working with artefacts from the Great Cultural Revolution such as the ashes of historical records, red guard armbands and so on, (*Crisis: the Big Crucifix*, 1994-96), Mao Tongqiang's use of paper land contracts and wooden spectacle frames (*Land Contract*, 2009); in land art, we have Dai Guangyu, rather than paint on the xuan paper of traditional Chinese painting, instead painted inks on snow (*Feng Shui-Ink-Frozen Water* series, 2004.12 – 2005.02), while in the medium of oil painting, Wang Bo once incorporated the colour of thread bound book paper as the primer for his works (*Reappearing Landscape* series, 2008 – now). The appeal of these works is in the new possibilities for using materials that they offer. There are also examples of this in performance art, like Liu Chengying and Zeng Xun's adaptation of elements of installation (*Snail Mail*, 1997; *Magic Frame* series, 1997),

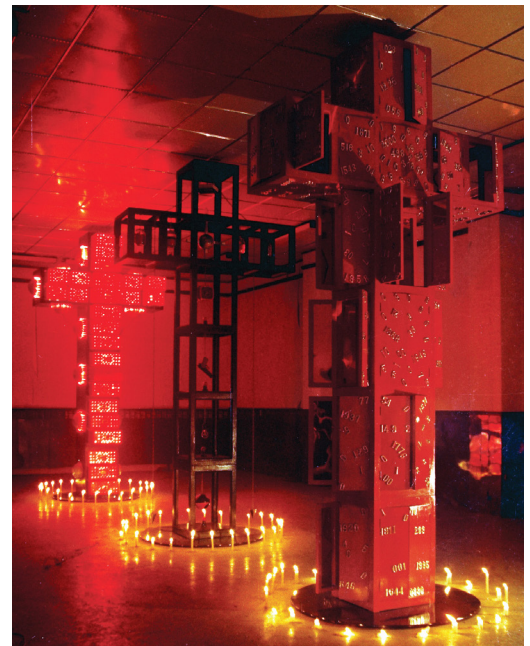


Figure 1. Gao Brothers. *Crisis: the Big Crucifix*. Installation, H300cm, 1994-96.

Figure 2. Gao Brothers. *Crisis: the Big Crucifix*. Installation, exhibition site, 1995.



Figure 3. Mao Tongqiang. *Land Contract*. Installation, paper Land Contract, wooden sketch with mirror, 2009.

and in video, where artists such as Ma Liang used still photographic images (*White on White*, 2010), and Isaac Julien employed multi-screen video installations (*Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010).

The last three are examples of multimedia or transmedia works that employ or span several different media. With this in mind when we look back over some of the art from the last few years, we see experiments such as oil painters using oils as a medium to paint traditional Chinese bird and flower paintings, or using images in oil paintings to form some kind of sculpture, or even traditional Chinese painters using video to make their work. In truth, however, these efforts don't have much to do with the language of transmedia art. They haven't even contributed to the further enrichment of the artistic language of oils, sculpture or video as individual media, let alone explored and experimented with the language of multimedia and transmedia art. Real transmedia work requires artists to have a high level of proficiency not only in the individual media he is using, but also a grasp of using different media together, to

enable these media to blend organically. In other words, although the contemporary Chinese art world eschews a language that acknowledges the primacy of media, what Chinese artists lack more than anything else is the ability to innovate in any single individual medium, and the ability to synthesise from several different media effectively. The main cause of this problem may lie in the poverty of humanities education available to these artists.

As for evaluating the "cross-over" phenomenon in the world of art, such as painters shooting films or film directors making video art, or artists incorporating knowledge from different academic disciplines into their work, at the end of the day we have to go back to the artist's grasp of individual and multimedia. Speaking from my personal experience, from what I have seen so far, Chinese pioneering art has yet to produce work worthy of discussing from the perspective of the history of ideas. Some artists departing from their familiar medium and entering into another field or medium immediately appear, from the standpoint of artistic



Figure 4. Dai Guangyu. *Feng Shui-Ink-Frozen Water* series. Landscape installation, 2004.12-2005.02, Beijing Houhai.

expression, incredibly immature. They may well believe there is common ground between different artistic media, but if they have not recognised the historical development that has brought about the idiosyncrasies of the unfamiliar medium the artist wishes to explore, nor researched and investigated the classic works within the medium, nor gained deep insight into the subtle differences between certain works, it is impossible for them to fully comprehend the depth of the similarities between two media. This is why when we attend some exhibitions of oil painters we only hear about the artists' forays into sculpture or video or installation.

2.The history of art as a history of time

As well as a history of language the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art is a history of time. What is normally meant by "history of time", is the history of how people perceive time, and naturally, how people use this concept of time. The history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art follows the same logic. To understand its history of time we need to analyse how artists express and communicate their ideas and awareness of the past, present and future.

That said, in our discussion of the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art readers may ask why have we relegated the history of time to merely something second in importance to the history of language. Objectively speaking, all works of pioneering art take place in physical time, which is why when we discuss works of art alongside the title, creator, medium/media, materials, and dimensions of a work, we list the time at which the work was produced. Critics refer to this time of creation not only to retrospectively understand the particular characteristics of the time at which the artist was living and working, but also to examine the conditions of an artist's life at a specific period. The latter relates to the subjective nature of time, the psychological time in the mind of an individual artist. After all, for periods of romantic activity, periods of bad health, periods of grief and so on, there are probably works of a corresponding and nuanced nature appearing. Feng Zhengjie's work *Life Like a Flower No.2* (2006-07) and his individual exhibition *Imagery of Death and Life* (2008), both produced following the death of the artist's parents, are examples of this. Another example would be Mao Xuhui's *Two Chairs Lying Down in Summer Day* produced following the death of the artist's mother in July 2012. Or, conversely, these works contain some ideas of the artist's views on life and death and his concept of psychological time. In this case, the artist couldn't possibly have avoided

dealing with his experiences of temporality. While producing this work he would have had the task of organising his limited supply of both objective physical time and subjective psychological time, furthermore, the creative process in itself occurs as a temporal process.

The difference between the art's history of ideas and the history of art documentation (a word we use here to encompass not only works of art but also drafts and notes by the artist) manifests in the division between the diachronic and synchronic aspects of time. As a historical narrative, the history of ideas in art is very much concerned with the question of what particular time a work of art was produced, otherwise it would not be considered a history, after all the passage of physical time is what makes up history. However, the history of ideas in art is also largely preoccupied with exploring the ideas contained within works of art. The ability of ideas to extend beyond their time of inception lends the art's history of ideas its transcendence of the temporal.



Figure 5. Wang Bo. *Reappearing Landscape No.10*. Oil painting, 250x150cm, 2008.

Figure 6. Liu Chengying. *Snail Mail*. Performance, 1997.

When compared with the history of art documentation, we see that the history of ideas in art is more prominently of a diachronic nature than of a synchronic one. The diachronic nature of time can be explained as a kind of temporality, time within a period. As well as discussing the ideas within a single, individual work of art, the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art also discusses many different artists that are working within the same period and dealing with a similar theme. When writing such a history, there will undoubtedly be reference to the backgrounds and art documentation of individual artists, the goal of such an inclusion would be to better highlight the connective logic of artistic ideas over related

periods of ten or twenty years in the artists' careers.

I will endeavour in this book,¹¹ as a history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art, to inquire into the roots of artistic ideas in the minds of the artists as individuals. I will also make efforts to underline the special value of such ideas within the overall milieu of contemporary culture. The scope of this investigation will look at the twenty years between 1993 and 2016. Readers may ask why I choose to restrict myself to these years of Chinese contemporary art. I have stated in previous publications, "Contemporary art, in the west is a term used to describe the postmodern current in art since the 1960s, often epitomised in media such as installation art, performance art, video art, land art,



Figure 7. Zeng Xun. *Magic Frame* series. Performance, 1997.

which seek to express human life in its entirety... In China, the '85 New Wave (with the 'China/Avant-Garde Exhibition of 1989 as the ending point, and the oil painting exhibition at the 1990s Guangzhou Biennale as an echo), could be seen as similar to the period of art history in the West that was initiated by the Impressionists and stretched from the second half of the 19th century through to the modernist period of the 1960s; while the period starting in 1993 which saw 13 Chinese artists took part in 45th Venice Biennale's 'A Journey East' exhibition and the 'Chinese Art of the 90s: China Experience' exhibition to now, is more like the contemporary period of Western art. I say the two are similar, because China's contemporary art has synthesised both the modern and postmodern cultural ideas of the West, however in the sense of system and structure, the art world remains today in a pre-modern state."¹² For now, I will refer to such a phenomenon as "mixed modern". The '85 New Wave, about its artistic language, was at its root an imitation of Western modern and postmodern art. Conceptually however, some works were relevant and linked to the China's society at that time. Nevertheless, the significance and meaning of this mixing of pre-modern, modern, postmodern and alter-modern ideas in Chinese contemporary art can be traced

back to several individual pieces of work that came out of the 1980s.

As for the concept of time in works of pioneering art, the present is mostly emphasised, and the past and future are overlooked. There are several potential concepts of time. You may have a concept of time focused on the past, where time starts in the past, progresses through the present and moves toward the future. The problem with maintaining this concept is that the past is always disappearing slipping away from the present and unable to truly act as the starting point of time. On the other hand, the concept of time that gives precedence to the future, and sees time starting in the future and passing through the present on its way to the past, is equally problematic. The future has not yet arrived and thus cannot legitimately act as a starting point of time going on to arrive at the present. Any work that contains either of these concepts, probably has a sort of vague or uncertain element to its image, because any work that posits the future or the past as starting points of time for an artist are object of the imagination. If one attempts to envision an idea of time where the past loses that which makes it the past and the future loses that which makes it the future, the resultant imagery can be very obscure and perplexing. Though the past can only become the past



Figure 8. Feng Zhengjie. *Life Like a Flower No.2*. Oil painting, 300×400cm, 300×500cm, 300×400cm, 2006-07.

by way of the present, the future has to be reached before the present can become the future. Because of this, as far as the real existence of time is concerned, the present is the true origin and centre of time. In the assorted writings and conversations of artists, many use the ephemeral-feeling word “now” (*dang xia* – which translates as the

moment we are in) to express this “present” that is the starting point of time, although this “now” while describing an instant of time implies a relatively long passage of time (Translation by Lance Pursey, Translation Proof by Changping Zha).

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Editor: Li Yang

ENDNOTES

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2. Xun, Yue and Yuan, Hong, *Lianghan Ji, Records of the Two Han Dynasties*, ed. Zhang Lie (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2002), Gaozu Huangdi Ji Juandiyi, 1.

3. For a more detailed discussion of this see *The History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art—Art History Writing and Relational Aesthetics*, *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Volume 47, 4 (2016), 286-294.

4. Zha, Changping, “Lishi Yanjiu Zhong de Xinyang Wenti –Issues of Faith in the Study of History - Using Colin Brown’s *History and Faith: A Personal Exploration* as an Example

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6. Ibid., 47.

7. Ibid., 48.

8. Dilthey, W. “*Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner, 1927), 215.

9. For example recently the final graduation exhibitions of several art institutions have pieces that ape the works of the ’85 New Wave era.

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11. Zha Changping, *Zhongguo xianfeng yishu sixiang shi diyi juan: Shijie guanxi meixue* [A history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art, Volume 1: World relational aesthetics] (Shanghai: Shanghai Joint Publishing Co., 2017).

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Figure 9. Mao Xuhui. *Two Chairs Lying Down in Summer Day*. Acrylic on canvas, 130×300cm, 2012.

中國先鋒藝術思想史——作為語言史與時間史

查常平

摘要：本文從討論歷史的價值開始，指出歷史學研究的主觀性以及對於人的自由生存之意義，進而提出中國先鋒藝術思想史為什麼是藝術語言史、藝術時間史及它們的特徵。作為語言史的中國先鋒藝術思想史，旨在闡明中國先鋒藝術作品中個別藝術家如何使用媒材的過程，闡明整體的藝術界如何推進媒介的演變歷程。作為時間史的中國先鋒藝術思想史，旨在揭示先鋒藝術作品中的時間觀念。

關鍵詞：語言；時間；思想史；先鋒藝術