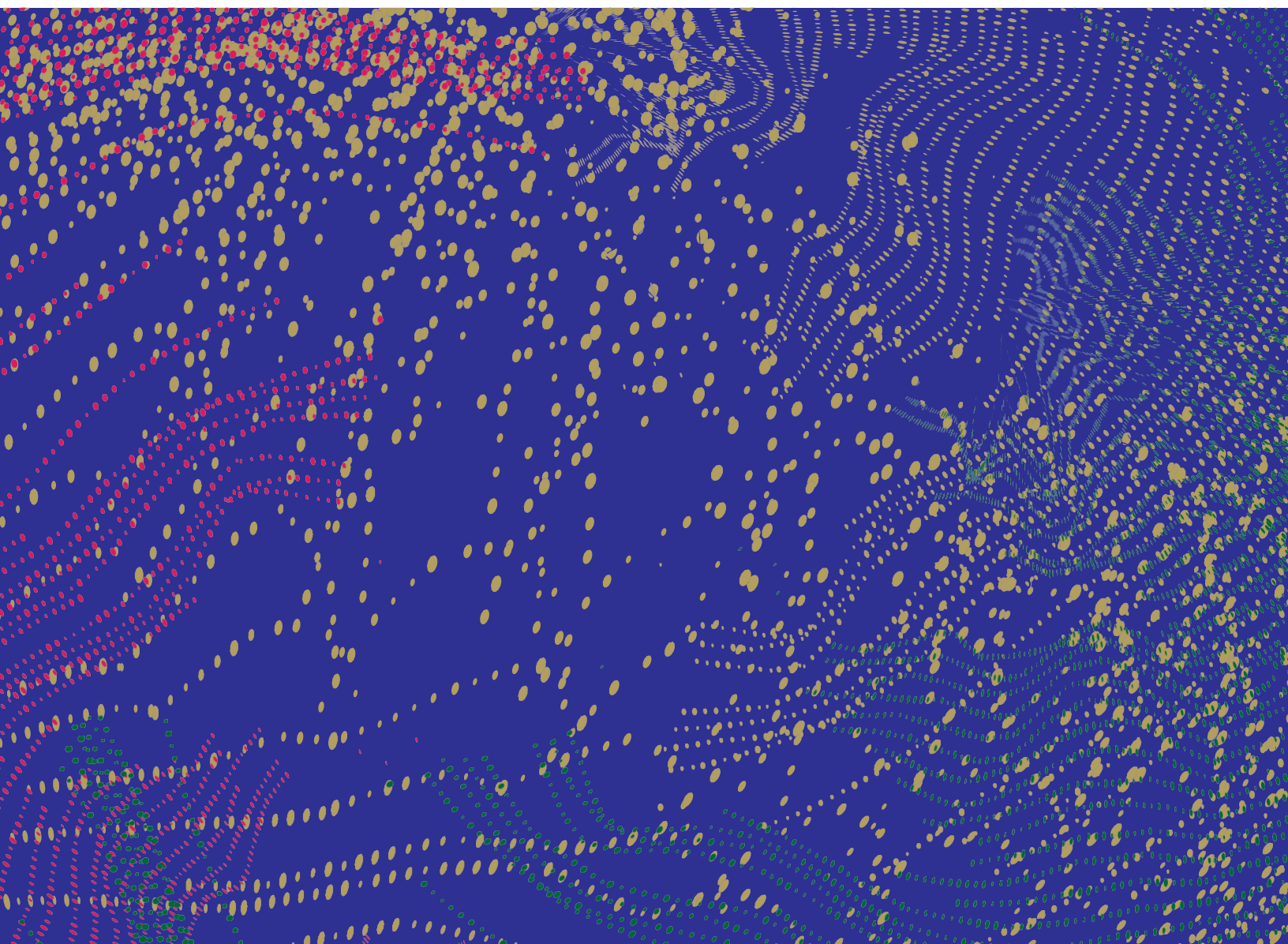


The World Humanities Report

Art and Art History in Contemporary China

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Art and Art History in Contemporary China

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For more than a century, the study of Chinese art history and theory has been closely entwined with the transformation of Chinese society. Throughout the twentieth century, politicians, thinkers, and educators were concerned with the development of art at unprecedented levels, and art history was closely linked to such controversial topics as “salvation,” “enlightenment,” “reform,” “revolution,” “science,” and “democracy.” For example, Kang Youwei’s (1858–1927) reflections on social reform shaped his understanding of the history and future of Chinese art. He believed that most theories of painting after the Northern Song had disparaged likeness of form [*xingsi*] and celebrated the expression of inner sentiment [*xieyi*, lit. “drawing meaning”], which pushed literati painting, a style of painting made by men of letters and emphasizing the influence of calligraphy on painting, to the height of its popularity and led to the gradual decline of Chinese painting. He advocated improving Chinese painting by absorbing the spirit and techniques of Western realism, as well as reviving Southern Song court painting, along with the Tang and Song painting that inspired it. Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) criticized literati painting from the late Yuan dynasty onward, from the perspective of his fierce anti-traditionalist ideology. He wanted to replace literati painting with Western realist painting to achieve an “art revolution.” Painters led by Chen Shizeng (1876–1923) put forth a different view and opposed wholesale Westernization. They believed that impressionism in Western painting had in fact stopped pursuing likeness of form and that literati painting was ahead of its time in terms of knowledge and practice. According to this view, the development of literati painting should be grounded in traditional painting but could also selectively borrow from the West—to not be content with the status quo while also preserving one’s own heritage by learning from elsewhere.

Concepts, theories, and methods from Western art history have exerted substantial influence on China’s art historical research for the past century. Art

history scholarship from Europe, America, Japan, and Russia has been translated into Chinese, and no Chinese researchers of art history are immune to the influence of Western scholarship. However, the depth of influence varies—from selective reception to yearning embrace, from careful imitation to rigid application, as well as resistance and condemnation—and what emerges is the comingling of diverse and opposing viewpoints.

The first general history of Chinese painting in the modern sense was *Zhongguo huihua shi* [The history of Chinese painting], coauthored by Japanese scholars Nakamura Fusetsu and Oga Seiun. Originally published in Japanese in 1913, it had a big impact in China before being translated into Chinese in 1937. In accordance with modern art historical methods from the West, Chinese scholars began publishing specialized works of the general history of Chinese art around 1917. After the abolition of the imperial examination, the establishment of new higher educational institutions and art colleges required instruction in the history of art and painting. In the academic system established by Peking University in 1912, courses in art history were offered in the Department of History for majors in Chinese history, East Asian history, and Western history. In 1927 the arts department of Nanjing National Central University was established, and its curriculum included courses on Chinese art history and Western art history. In 1928 the National Academy of Art was founded in Hangzhou, offering an art history curriculum and degree program. National sentiment and educational needs inspired such Chinese scholars and painters as Chen Shizeng, Pan Tianshou, Teng Gu, Zheng Wuchang, and Fu Baoshi to write the history of Chinese painting. From 1917 to 1948, more than thirty works on the history of Chinese art and Chinese painting were published. Several art academies during this period employed teachers who studied Western and Chinese art history, but the specialized programs were limited in scale and not many people participated.

In the 1930s the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression seriously hampered the development of formal art education and research in art history. Due to the demand for propaganda, realism advanced significantly during this period. Printmaking also received special attention as a medium well suited for reaching the masses with its ease of production and dissemination. At the same time, “national style” became an important arena of debate. Lu Xun (1881–1936) advocated the creation of art that could be easily accepted by the public, which should be carried out by assimilating existing styles into new ones.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, art theory and historical research followed the Soviet example comprehensively, employing a framework based on the Soviet Union's system of art education, research methods, and theories. Marxist class analysis became an important criterion, folk customs, the folk, and the masses continued to be emphasized, and the image of working people became a primary object of artistic representation. From 1952 until the crisis of Sino-Soviet relations in 1956, China sent more than twenty people to the Soviet Union to study oil painting, sculpture, and art history. Among them, five students assigned to study art history returned to China and took up teaching and research positions at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts, the Fine Arts Research Institute of the Chinese National Academy of Arts, and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. In 1955 the Central Academy of Fine Arts held training courses taught by Konstantin Maksimov in oil painting and Nikolai Klindukhov in sculpture. After two and a half years of professional training, the students gradually replaced the older generation, who went abroad to study oil painting, and became the backbone of oil painting and its instruction at elite art institutions. Within modern higher education, the very first art history department was established at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1957, which not only trained domestic students but also admitted international students. Even before the 1960s, international students from Eastern Europe, Sweden, and Vietnam studied alongside undergraduates there, and its current Department of Art History continues to host international students from all over the world.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, a wave of "intellectual emancipation" emerged in China's literary and artistic circles, the basic feature of which was to reconnect with the intellectual trends of the first half of the twentieth century and to rediscover the various new achievements of the West in art history and art theory. The most important characteristic of the 1980s was the study of Western art historical achievements, the introduction and importation of Western research methodology, and the strengthening of the autonomy of art theory and art history as disciplines. In the 1980s scholars of art history had few opportunities to visit museums in Europe and the United States, but by the 1990s such opportunities increased. In the 1980s and 1990s the academic community began to translate a large number of Western publications, books, and picture books on aesthetics and art. The works of Heinrich Wölfflin, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Erwin Panofsky, Jacob Burckhardt, Roger Fry, Rudolf Arnheim, Susanne Langer, and others were translated into Chinese

during this period. Among several major art academies, history departments gradually developed, and in 1987 the Central Academy of Fine Arts established the first doctoral program in art history in China and enrolled the first two doctoral students. Western art history and modern art history had limited faculty resources in the 1980s but made great strides in the 1990s, when, for example, Fan Jingzhong of the China Academy of Art translated Ernst Gombrich's complete works, and Yi Ying of the Central Academy of Fine Arts established the curriculum for Western modernist art and introduced methods of iconology studies. Courses in Western classical art and modernist art sprang up and gained a foothold in various art schools, enabling students to gain a comprehensive and general understanding of Western classical art and Western modernist art, thus contributing to an unprecedented level of knowledge about Western art. Although the enthusiasm for translating and introducing foreign art theories surged in the 1980s and 1990s, knowledge about the contemporary state of Western art history research was limited. Researchers and translators still had few opportunities to travel abroad, to see original works in European and American museums, to conduct in-depth research on Western art history, or to be in dialogue with the methodologies of Western art history. Confronted with the tremendous achievements of centuries of modern transformation in the West, researchers and translators were drawn to the professionalism of Western scholarship and wished to embrace the universality of the West rather than attempt to establish a view outside of that universality.

The translation and introduction of Western avant-garde art and conceptual art were done not for the most part by scholars but by the commercial operations of international galleries and curators, resulting in the so-called Beipiao [lit. Beijing floater] painters (based in the 1980s and 1990s Yuanmingyuan Artists' Village, 798 Art Zone, Songzhuang, etc.). This group of young Chinese artists had a deeper understanding of Western avant-garde art and actively participated in it. Yet, in the close commercial relationships shaped by buying, selling, collecting, and exhibiting, a few theorists also promoted the dissemination of, and engagement with, Euro-American contemporary art. The representative figure, Li Xianting, pushed many young Beipiao artists to experiment with contemporary art and participated in promoting such artists as Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, Zhang Xiaogang, and Wang Guangyi in the Western art market.

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw more systematic translations and introductions of foreign art historical scholarship, as well as more complete

knowledge of the West than in the 1990s. However, a foundation for in-depth research and dialogue remained undeveloped. The works of Western Sinologists James Cahill and Michael Sullivan were translated into Chinese during this period. By the 2010s, comprehensive translations and introductions of Western art, especially the achievements of Western modern art and historical research, were preliminarily completed. Translations and introductions of Western aesthetics, philosophy, and art history were published in large series, and Chinese scholars' work of periodization, parsing of various styles, and thematic research were also published in large quantities in essays and books. In 2007 the Central Academy of Fine Arts hosted the first annual conference on art history. Young students of art history could now gain a fairly comprehensive view of Western art history and theory, including its state of the field and achievements. Almost every student at the art academies can name dozens of Euro-American artists and their representative works. Along with the rethinking of the orthodox Marxist doctrine, various new theories (such as philosopher Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, the theory of knowledge production, etc.) were adopted and applied in the Chinese context. Questions such as the relationship between artworks and aesthetic judgments and aesthetic theories, and the applicability of iconology to the study of classical art in China, also became subjects of active reflection in the fields of art history and art theory.

After thirty years of developments in art history education, young students have been more enthusiastic about studying Western historical theory than traditional Chinese historical theory. An increasing number of art history students have gone to Europe and the United States to pursue advanced studies after completing their undergraduate degrees, and a significant portion of these students have returned to China to engage in research and teaching. This trend indicates that the teaching and research of art history in China have been built on a global intellectual platform, which has a global perspective and adopts a fairly specialized research attitude.

At the same time, research on the Chinese tradition is looking for new directions. Chinese art history in the 1950s and 1960s was written from the perspective of class analysis, and this began to change in the 1990s. Republishing art historical writings from the 1920s and 1930s, hosting international symposia in China in the field of art history, frequent visits by Euro-American Sinologists, especially researchers of Chinese art history such as James Cahill, who introduced Western art historical methodologies—all have contributed to the study of Chinese art history and theory, as well as to the exhibition of Chinese

art overseas. In the early twentieth century, the spectrum of intellectuals from Wang Guowei, Kang Youwei, Chen Duxiu, and Lu Xun to Zheng Changwu and Teng Ku criticized Ming and Qing literati painting as an overly stylized imitation of their predecessors' works and viewed it as a decline in Chinese painting. The reevaluation of Ming and Qing literati painting in the 1990s marked an important change in the study of Chinese art history. In September 1989 the Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House and the editorial department of *Duoyun*, a quarterly journal of Chinese painting studies, hosted the Dong Qichang International Symposium, with about sixty scholars from China and abroad. Following this conference, in 1992, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, with assistance from China's National Palace Museum and the Shanghai Museum, organized a major exhibition and convened an international symposium in honor of Dong Qichang (*The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, 1555–1636*). The exhibition later went on tour in the United States to such venues as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This scholarly reevaluation of Dong Qichang, who had been criticized since the May Fourth movement in 1919, affirmed his artistic thought and his practice of literati painting. Discussions of other Ming and Qing literati painting, such as the seventeenth-century landscape painters known as the Four Wangs and other painters, emerged emphasized its achievements in terms of expressiveness and brushwork.

For the study of Chinese art history and theory, Euro-American scholarly methodologies have been gradually introduced since the 1990s and have become an important inspiration and catalyst to the field. However, because the evolution of Chinese art history and theory has its own unique cultural structure and historical process, these methodologies from the West are not entirely applicable, and so far, a methodology more suitable to Chinese art history is still to be realized. At present, in the field of Chinese art history and theory, traditional research methods and concepts are still widely used, and there is a lack of original methods and perspectives that could be more encompassing and instructive for the history of the evolution of Chinese art over the past two thousand years. The greatest challenge facing the study of Chinese art history today is how to produce a discourse that adheres to the specificity of these unique, long-standing, and fruitful cultural heritage and cultural structures.

The Landscape of Chinese Artistic Creation and Art Historical Research

The landscape of contemporary Chinese art and art history and theory differs from that of Europe and the United States. First, the China Artists Association, an official state organization, has twenty-seven professional committees, incorporating artistic creation, art historical research, curatorial exhibitions, awards, and art education, among which the Committee on Fine Arts Theory is a historiographical research organization. Secondly, the specialized art academies each has a department of history and theory, and the core art academies such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts have established humanities faculties, which include the departments of art history and theory, archaeology, cultural heritage studies, fine arts, and so forth. In addition, important comprehensive universities across the country such as Peking University and Tsinghua University have established art schools, some of which include departments or majors in art history and theory and enroll undergraduate and graduate students in related disciplines.

China's art schools are among the largest in the world in terms of size and array of disciplines. The Hangzhou-based China Academy of Art, for example, has a total enrollment of more than 10,000 students, far exceeding the size of art schools in Europe and the United States. The School of Humanities of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, which includes Departments of Cultural Heritage, Art History, and Arts Management, had 234 undergraduate students in 2018. In 2020 there were approximately 1,700 higher education schools nationwide with students enrolled in the fine arts category—the three first-level disciplines of fine arts, design, and art theory—and the total number of undergraduate students could reach as many as 500,000. Among the 568 source journals in the 2019–20 edition of the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI), more than ten include publication of articles related to art history and art theory, but no specialized journal of art history has yet entered the ranks of the core journals. In terms of period- and country-specific fields, the number of researchers in premodern Chinese art history is not large, and the study of premodern Chinese painting and calligraphy (as represented by Xue Yongnian of the Central Academy of Fine Arts) is relatively lacking in attention, while the study of Western art history and theory and Western contemporary art has attracted many students and scholars of the younger generation.

In the area of Chinese artistic production, a remarkable situation has emerged. Between the 2000s and 2010s all the inheritable elements in the

techniques and styles of each historical period in the Chinese and East Asian traditions have been combed over. In terms of formal attributes, premodern Chinese or premodern East Asian artistic styles have been thoroughly excavated by various art schools within the last ten to twenty years. Primitive painting, line drawing, Tang and Song realistic brushwork, Song court painting, Ming literati painting styles, the Four Masters of the twentieth century, and so on, have all become resources from which young artists freely choose their stylistic tendencies and linguistic forms, including Japanese painting, which also has a large following in China, mainly heavy color painting and rock color painting. At the same time, all the major schools and visual languages in the West since the emergence of modernism have been imitated and reinterpreted. In particular, contemporary conceptual art and performance art, which are popular in the West, have emerged in Chinese art schools and among young artists as colorful imitations and derivatives. With respect to these two trajectories—the inheritance and interpretive adaption of the Chinese tradition along with the dissemination and interpretive adaption of Western modernism—the number of artists involved, the high level of skills, and the completeness of stylistic categories are all unprecedented and unmatched in the world.

Before the 1990s China had no modern design programs, just the subject of arts and crafts. By the early 1990s international students returning from Japan and Europe began to teach industrial product design and environmental art design within China's art academies. Later, in prominent art colleges, formal preparations were made to establish modern design programs, which included four major areas: visual communication design, industrial product design, garment dyeing and weaving design, and digital media. By the end of the 1990s a systematic structure for teaching modern design was implemented at schools such as the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou and the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, and the number of students enrolled grew rapidly. This change completely altered the landscape of art education in China.

In the 2000s the leading institution, the Central Academy of Fine Arts, began to implement an instructional system different from that of Europe and the United States, subdividing disciplines on the one hand, while allowing for a broad range of electives on the other. The current systems of art education in Europe and the United States are the results of the evolution of European and American art over time. Take the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and the Art Institute of Chicago as examples. Their instructional reforms in the late twentieth century removed the barriers between different types of painting and

different styles, weakened the basic coursework in drawing instruction and realist painting, merged specialties, emphasized creativity, and adopted heuristic and discussion-based teaching methods. These reforms encouraged students to cultivate and enhance their creative thinking to the greatest extent possible, preparing them to become young artists with a wide range of skills and adaptability. The Chinese art school system, represented by the Central Academy of Fine Arts, not only retains the more traditional, finely parsed subdivisions in its instructional structure, but also adds more emergent and unusual majors, so that students spend three-quarters of their four undergraduate years mastering a practical skill; the remaining quarter is for electives in completely unrelated subjects. This approach enables students to graduate with both the skills to create highly finished works of art and a broad perspective on the possible directions of their future careers.

Such an educational system, after nearly twenty years of experimentation, has proven to be very effective, producing students of generally good quality with satisfactory employment. Such an academy-based educational system over the past twenty years has made it possible for young Chinese artists to be highly competitive within their specializations. And the young artists who had chosen a completely different direction could select from more specialized scholarship and materials on art history and theory to read and fill in gaps of historiographical training and cultural knowledge according to their needs. It is precisely this unique approach to training in art schools over the past thirty years that has resulted in a strong cohort of young Chinese artists. Enrolling in art schools has become a very popular professional direction, and the young students graduating from art schools and art majors not only outnumber the rest of the world (because of China's large population) but also sit, quite probably, at the forefront of professional knowledge and expertise in the world. This is the greatest resource and treasure for the future development of the visual arts in China.

Local Chinese art historians, especially critics of contemporary art, have an inherent anxiety in the face of such effervescence, as it can be very difficult to find a system with universal explanatory meaning to confront the specific realities of the situation. After the 1980s the disciplinary infrastructure of art history began to improve. In the early 1980s undergraduate and graduate students in art history and theory began to be recruited, with few students and limited faculty resources, and the recruitment of doctoral students in art history and theory began very late. It was only in the early 1990s that doctoral programs opened at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and the China Academy of Art

in Hangzhou. In terms of disciplinary infrastructure and faculty resource, it was only in the last thirty years that we have seen gradual maturation. And it was also only in the 1990s that various textbooks on art history began to be written and published more comprehensively. Preparation of the twenty-four-volume *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu* [Illustrated catalogue of selected works of premodern Chinese painting and Calligraphy] began in the 1950s and 1960s, and the appraisal work was completed between 1983 and 1990. Four volumes were published in the 1980s, while the remaining twenty volumes as well as other collections, such as *Zhongguo meishu fenlei quanji* [Complete collection of Chinese art classifications], were only finally published in the 1990s. Thus, the study of Chinese art history has been at a relatively young stage. In the twenty-first century, the number of students enrolled in art history majors has expanded rapidly, and the training of graduate and doctoral students has received increasing attention. There has also been a relatively rapid increase in the number of full professors among teachers of art history and theory. In the past twenty years, some of the larger seminars on art history and theory have invited overseas scholars to participate, creating a healthy and lively research atmosphere. The rapidly increasing number of students and faculty is a source of hope for the future of the field.

The art market in the twenty-first century has also contributed to the unique context for the study of Chinese art history and theory. Since 2004–5, the importance of Chinese artworks in market has risen rapidly, and after two decades the Chinese art market is now between one-quarter and one-third of the world market. The explosion of the art market has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has promoted the development and prosperity of the art market and driven more and more people to participate in collecting. Western-driven trends have had a profound impact on collection activity. Some European and American galleries have taken root and flourished in places such as the 798 Art Zone in Beijing, and their operations have propelled the rapid development of Chinese avant-garde art. That model has also attracted and encouraged local Chinese galleries to deal in Chinese painting and calligraphy and classical Chinese realistic oil painting.

On the one hand, the Chinese art market in the twenty-first century has seen a strong push for avant-garde art by Western collectors and support for the work of local Chinese exploratory painters, including neo-literati painting, experimental ink and abstract painting, and other genres. Traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy have also become vibrant and multifaceted through

the explorations of young and middle-aged Chinese artists. The Chinese art market has prospered like never before, accounting for an increasingly high share of the total global art market.

At the same time, the vicissitudes of different artistic genres in the art market are likely to influence the research focus and evaluative criteria of the academic community. While the art market is booming, there is no theoretical structure behind it; it has not yet formed an order, and the circulation of artworks in the marketplace is not regulated, giving rise to irrational phenomena. For example, most of the contemporary Chinese artworks circulating in the market are by contemporary Chinese artists. Overseas galleries acquire them in early and mid-career speculation and then resell them in the Chinese art market for profit. In another example, some painters who enter the official artists' association, especially those who enter as officers, have benefitted from corrupt practices in the art market. Artists in universities and art academies, however, are not as closely integrated with the market and still take the depth of academic research, the cultural content of artworks, and the effectiveness of teaching as the basic considerations for survival. This group is more capable of maintaining academic standards and has made considerable contributions to the development of art history, but, on the whole, it has not yet mastered the traditions and frontiers of global art historical research, nor has it been able to engage in sufficient dialogue with studies of art history in other regions of the world. This is particularly true with respect to making theoretical contributions to the study of art history or to an understanding of contemporary global artistic creation from the perspective of China or East Asia. As for traditional Chinese art historical research, it also suffers from the problems of following the conventions of traditional painting theories, failing to break through traditional narratives, and needing to make more forceful explorations of methodology.

Technology and Art

Currently, art history and theory are starting to face the changes brought about by an increasingly technologized society. Regardless of whether it is Eastern, Western, premodern, or modern, past artistic creation has always relied upon skilled manual work. However, alongside ongoing digital revolution and other technological developments, artistic creation has integrated modern technological achievements in a variety of ways. Although technological art in China started relatively late, preliminary partnerships have been established with some large tech companies and research institutions, both at the individual and

organizational levels. Within the context of conceptual art and installation art in particular, Chinese artists are already making extensive use of the technological resources of acousto-opto-electronics and digital media. They are also beginning to explore the integration of disciplines such as biotechnology, materials science, and ecology and to reflect on the ethics and philosophy of technology. Precisely for these reasons, the study of art history and theory must also confront this rapidly emerging new trend and not be content with simple juxtaposition or appropriation. Rather, it requires understanding the differences between art and technology and the possible ways in which art can complement technology, providing a methodological approach for thinking about new types of artistic creation.

Translated from the Chinese

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