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The voice of the 'superfluous people'

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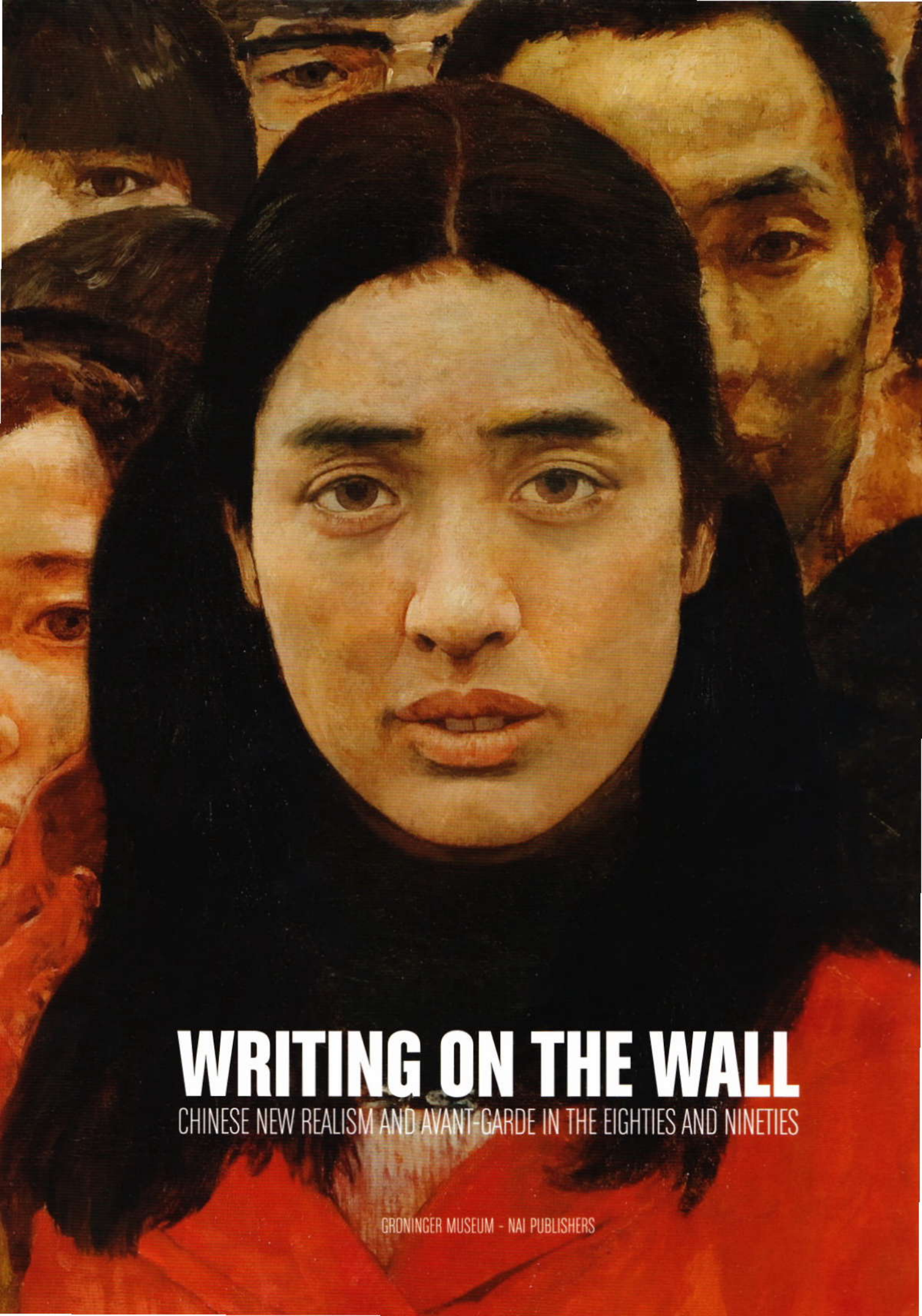
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WRITING ON THE WALL

CHINESE NEW REALISM AND AVANT-GARDE IN THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES

GRONINGER MUSEUM - NAI PUBLISHERS



The Voice of the 'Superfluous People'

Painting in China in the Late 1980s and Early 1990s

Francesca Dal Lago

... Maybe I am just a loser. It's possible.

It's just that I can't work out what else I should want from life besides what I've already got. Who the hell am I, anyway? I have no expectations.

Maybe everyone else is sitting around waiting in this incredible way, waiting for something to happen that'll change their whole life. But what that something will be, well, they don't have a clue.

Xu Xing, 1985.¹

Three young men are holding onto a vertical pole, two of them pulling themselves up and the third hanging from it loosely with his arms stretched upward. They are not resting, but they are waiting. They look intently at us: the first on the left seemingly absorbed in his relaxed position; the second staring more self-consciously, somehow defiantly; the third on the far right seeming in some measure oblivious to the concentrated effort that is lifting him, the shortest of the group, to the same height as the one next to him. Three friends, caught in a carefree moment on a spring or summer evening, working on their physiques in a makeshift outdoor gym on the outskirts of Beijing.

Exercise, by Liu Xiaodong (1990, p.20,109) depicts a moment of carefree recreation, of relaxed oblivion: yet these young men are represented in the act of working out, strengthening their muscles for some future challenge. The image combines

a carefree activity (suggested by the casual clothes and the mundane quality of the scene) with the tension implied by the hanging state of the bodies. A lingering moment of literal and metaphorical suspension, captured as in a snapshot, the same feeling found in the painting *The Third Generation* by He Duoling en Ai Xuan (1984, p.53), featured on the cover of this book. As in the quotation above, these men and women seem to be waiting for something – 'but what that something might be, well, they don't have a clue'.

The pause described in this image suggests preparation for some kind of action, a quiet energy at work: in so doing, it works as an appropriate metaphor for the social and intellectual atmosphere of artistic creation in China during the early 1990s, when many of the paintings on show, including this one, were executed. An energetic quietness, an action without movement, a bottled-up creativity ready to explode without noise.

A DECADE OF EXHILARATION:

THE ART OF 'CHINA/AVANT-GARDE'

During the twentieth century, artistic production in China was continuously marked by the reform of traditional idioms and the search for a state of 'cultural modernity'. During the first decades of the twentieth century this effort was largely focused on mastering European painting styles (fig.1). Academic Realism in particular was an expressive format



1. Xu Beihong, *Female Nude*, 1924, charcoal on paper, 50 x 32 cm



3. Sun Zou, *In Front of Tian Anmen*, 1954, oil on canvas, 165 x 265, China Art Gallery, Beijing



2. Dong Xiwen, *Founding of the Nation*, 1952, oil on canvas, 210 x 400 cm, The National Museum of Chinese Revolution, Beijing

previously unknown to the Chinese visual tradition which came to be considered as the correct way to represent reality with scientific accuracy. After the war against Japan (which broke out in 1937) and the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, efforts shifted towards the mandatory adoption of Soviet-style Socialist Realism, a trend that reached its peak during the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). (figs.2,3,4) With Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the economic and political reforms initiated by the leadership of Deng Xiaoping brought about a time of political relaxation which allowed Chinese artists to access more than 50 years of Western artistic trends all at once. Ideological liberalization ushered in a period of euphoric experimentation with foreign modes of expression, normally adopted for their formal, not contextual, reference to artistic modernity.

The artistic production of the 1980s was historically sanctioned by a landmark exhibition which opened in February 1989 at the China Art Gallery in Beijing. 'China Avant-Garde' was the first experimental, non-official art show to take place in this prominent institution (and was to remain the only one for several years). Opening exactly four months before the ruthless suppression of the Student Movement on Tian'anmen Square in June of the same year, it marked an unprecedented moment in the country's history of cultural and economic opening to the world. It did so by

showcasing a vast range of experimental tendencies that had emerged in artistic production during the previous decade, which in many cases functioned in open defiance of any formal or aesthetic considerations. The exposure to half a century of Western artistic styles gained from consulting the newly subscribed-to international art magazines in the libraries of the art academies allowed artists to pick and choose from expressive forms that had heretofore been banned or inaccessible. It was an intoxicating time of infinite possibilities, as attested to by the range of styles, artistic groups and manifestos that emerged during that period, making it one of the most complex and under-studied in the development of contemporary Chinese art.

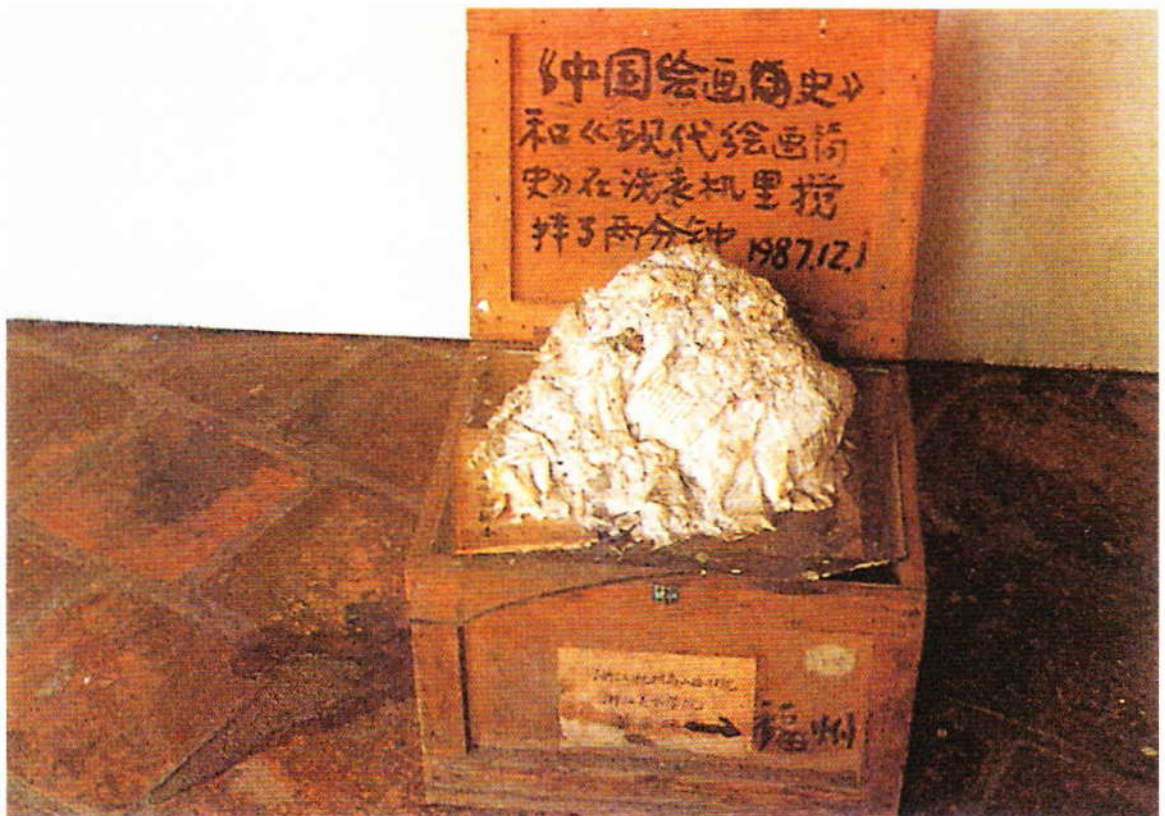
Many Western figurative and non figurative styles such as Surrealism, Expressionism, Photorealism and even Impressionism and Post-impressionism were chosen for their formal value, in ways which disassociated the style from the aesthetic and social relevance in which they originally emerged. (See for examples the works by Huang Rui, Ma Desheng and Huang Keping in this publication). And even if such appropriations might look clumsy to our eyes, ruled by the dogma of Euro-American modernism, it was precisely the neutrality retained by such motifs in the Chinese context that allowed Chinese artists to select from styles and subject matters and to use them as they pleased. The degree of



3. Revolutionary Committee of the Sichuan Art Academy. *Educated youth must go to the countryside to receive re-education from the Poor and Lower-Middle peasants!* Sichuan renmin chubanshe, April 1968, print no. 69C32, rotary press lithographic print. IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection Amsterdam

experimentation with Western forms displayed in 'China Avant-Garde' was unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic of China. A dominant feature in the works exhibited in this exhibition was the often radical character of the expression, which could be seen as a reference to the political, and to a certain extent even visual, chaos of the Cultural Revolution. The resolve of the artists to dispose of traditional culture was realized by replicating a process of violence which had been a feature of cultural mobilization during the 'Ten Years of Chaos'. Gu Wenda (or Wenda Gu as he begun to call himself after moving to the USA),² one of the few artists of the 'Avant-Garde' generation trained in traditional brush-and-ink painting, created monumental compositions in ink on paper with incorrectly written Chinese characters, producing a clashing contrast between the sophistication of the painting technique and the illiterate words that were created by dismantling the arrangement and stroke order of characters. It was as if someone painting with the skills of Van Gogh had decided to deface his or her work with street graffiti. The use of red, black and white colours is derived from the aesthetics of *dazibao* (big character posters) that were used to stir up social unrest in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Gu Wenda's *Mythos of Last Dynasties – Modern Meaning of Totem and Taboo* (1986,

p.70) is a large triptych that directly references *dazibao* visuality. In the central panel, red crosses over a mouth and a brush directly mimic the violent signs posted along every street to denounce yet another political clique that was to be annihilated in the relentless waves of ideological frenzy. The crossing out of a name often marked the political – and possibly also physical – obliteration of a given person. Considering how individuals were beaten, persecuted and often killed during that period as a result of political disgrace, it is easy to imagine what kind of associations this type of visuality might bring to a Chinese viewer who had lived through those times. Significantly, it is a mouth and a brush (two powerful tools of expression) that are crossed out in this picture, while an arrow pointing to a container that recalls a spittoon apparently suggests that whatever the mouth might discharge would be trash (as hinted by some of the characters in the inscription on the right). In this and other paintings of the period, traditionally sacrosanct realms such as the written language (which had always occupied a hallowed and central position in the Chinese cultural system) are subjected to radical distortions. Xu Bing, for example, produced a deep and subversive critique of the Chinese cultural system with his monumental *Book from the Sky* (1987-1991, p.67) for which he invented (and carved) more than 4000 characters which



B. Huang Yongping, 'A History of Chinese Painting' and 'A Concise History of Modern Painting' Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes, 1987, mixed media installation, oil on wood

were then assembled in a book that was reminiscent of classical wisdom but completely unreadable and therefore meaningless.

Violence directed at linguistic forms is accompanied by a destructive assault on traditional artistic culture, as in Huang Yongping's 1987 conceptual piece titled 'A History of Chinese Painting' and 'A Concise History of Modern Painting' Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes', which displayed the pulp resulting from such a process (fig.5). Like the logo of the 'China Avant-Garde' exhibition, a 'U-turn' sign emphatically crossed-out with a diagonal line, Huang's message was a refusal to return to past cultural paradigms.

If – as Eduardo Welsh writes in his essay – the aesthetic of the Cultural Revolution was focused on the creation of a beautiful world, the 1980s were marked by another kind of utopian idealism sustained by the perception of the tangible potential for change. In fact, this time was often defined by an aesthetic of ugliness, as a direct rebellion to the forced beautification of reality that had characterized the previous three decades. The post-1989 period, by contrast – as defined by an important exhibition with the same title held in Hong Kong in February 1993 – can be seen as a time of sobering up, a kind of intellectual hangover after nearly a decade of cultural intoxication.³

SOBERING UP: CHINESE ART POST-89

In the light of the tragic events that took place in June of the same year, 'China Avant-Garde' can be considered as a watershed between two phases in the development of Chinese contemporary art: the period of slow but steady relaxation of political ideology of the 1980s, which was marked by wide-ranging experimentalism with Western artistic idioms; and the process of sobering up that followed the violent suppression of the Student Democratic movement on 4 June. The soaring expectations of a decade of progressive social and cultural opening came to an abrupt and violent end, producing an atmosphere of disillusionment, depression, boredom and indifference. In fact, the suppression of the Democratic Movement did not just put an end to the social and political expectations of two generations of Chinese people; it also created a very different kind of intellectual, defined by the absence of the utopian and idealistic goals that had marked the period of the 1980s.

The spiritual atmosphere that permeates the artistic production of the early 1990s can be summarized in an article that the party-approved literary theorist He Xing wrote as a direct critique of the short novel by Xu Xing quoted at the opening of this essay. He Xing discusses the emergence, both in literature and in society, of a type of person that he defines as 'superfluous':



B. Luo Zhongli: *Father*, 1980, oil on canvas, 222 x 165 cm, China Art Gallery, Beijing

'Superfluous people' is an old expression, it's also foreign so we can't just take it at face value. Some people translate the concept as 'outsiders'. But whatever you call it, like so many philosophical or aesthetic terms, it's difficult to define precisely. It seems to encompass the following approach to life: indifference, passivity, even a philosophical sense of non-involvement, an attitude of cynicism, superiority, one that finds everything risible and therefore takes life as just one big game. To put it simply, superfluous people are those who feel they don't have a place in life.⁴

Although He was writing to criticize a newly emergent literary trend, he also notes that "the advent of "superfluous people" is a social as well as a cultural phenomenon".⁵ While artists in the second half of the 1980s could be defined as 'superfluous people' from the standpoint of Party-sponsored ideology, their actions at that time were still defined by a kind of utopian idealism that trusted in the possibility that art could transform society. As noted, this idealism was replaced by profound disillusionment in the early 1990s after the crashing of the Democratic Movement and the hopes of more than an entire generation. Therefore the art of the early 1990s, mostly painting as displayed in the exhibition 'Writing on the Wall', can be defined as art created *by, for and about* 'superfluous people'.

THE CYNICAL REALISTS: PAINTING SUPERFLUOUS PEOPLE

Nothing can make visible this particular ethical stance – shared by large groups of youths who reached their late twenties or early thirties during the first half of the 1990s – better than Fang Lijun's iconic 1991-1992 *Series 2 No. 2* (p.91 and fig.7).⁶ A young man bearing an autobiographical resemblance to the artist – who in those years defined himself by sporting a completely bald head – features gigantically in the foreground. The monumentality of the image recalls the famous 1980 painting *Father* by Luo Zhongli, which created controversy in the art world with its stark, unforgiving representation of a peasant's face, devastated by decades of fatigue and malnutrition (fig.6). At the time of its publication on the cover of the official art magazine *Fine Arts (Meishu)*, *Father* caused a stir by depicting in photorealistic terms the *real* conditions of life in the countryside, previously celebrated as a kind of idyllic heaven where the authentic social and political spirit was to be found.⁷ Fang quotes the monumental scale of *Father* but produces a much less heroic image. While the peasant is elevated to the level of an icon representing the universal suffering of all China's destitute people who did *not* experience the prosperity promised by Communism, the hooligan with the big bald head just yawns in apathy against a blue background while a series of older clones look on. This painting is sometimes discussed as representing a shout.



7. Fang Lijun in his studio, in front of *Series 2, No. 1, 1991-1992*, Yueshanyuan, Beijing, c. 1992, photograph by Andrea Cavazzuti

An article published in a 1993 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* where the painting was featured on the front cover was titled 'Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China'.⁸ This suggests that the young man is staging a defiant complaint against social conditions, thus initiating an act of resistance which could save his country from succumbing to the 'dark forces of absolutism'. But this painting is *not* about political dissent or heroic subversion of the status quo. Rather, it is a painting giving 'superfluous people' a voice. The rogue with the bald head is the epitome of the antihero: he is young and somehow cool, his spotless white polo shirt contrasting with the tattered Mao jackets worn by the older clones. And he is bored. As a typical superfluous person he does not really know what he wants, what to expect, where to go. He does not have ideals or lofty aspirations. He just lets life go by, waiting for another day to end.

The faces and the expressions of the characters in Fang Lijun's early paintings are always more or less identical. There might be several people in his compositions – as in *Series 1, No. 1* of the same year, where four bald-heads stare at a bookish girl in the foreground but there is a feeling of a chronic distance existing between them. The crystal-clear, photographic incisiveness of Fang's style stems from a meticulous observation of reality that anchors the representations, particularly those in the black-and-white

series of this period, to the humdrum of the everyday. However, these characters, repeated obsessively, become surreal and take on new meanings. The lack of any eye contact among them and the way in which they all seem to be staring in the same direction produce the effect of a great loneliness, an inexorable inability to communicate even when standing in a crowd.

Artists of this generation (such as Liu Wei (fig.8), Yue Minjun (fig.9), Yang Shaobin, and Liu Xiaodong (fig.10) were born in the early 1960s and were thus too young to have been ideologically affected by the chaotic and turbulent atmosphere of the Cultural Revolution, which broke out in 1966.⁹ They set themselves apart from their slightly older peers who were the protagonists of the previous decade (artists such as Gu Wenda, Zhang Peili, Wang Guangyi and Geng Jinyi). While many took active part in the student demonstrations of 1989, the bitterness and disillusionment that ensued turned them into an ideal-less generation. In a statement made to Karen Smith, author of *Nine Lives: The Birth Of Avant-Garde Art in New China*, Xiao Yu (a friend of Fang Lijun) commented: 'As academy students we knew little of politics. We went to the square for the fun of it, for the excitement of something new happening, the spectacle. There was little intellectual engagement or common ground.'¹⁰ The artists had been systematically trained in the art academies that reopened in



8. Liu Wei in his studio, Beijing, c. 1991, photograph by Andrea Cavazzuti



9. Yue Minjun, Beijing, c. 1991, photograph by Andrea Cavazzuti

China at the end of the 1970s. Most had practiced academic realism and drawing for at least four years, as this was (and still is) the backbone of Chinese artistic education. For this reason their mastery of the medium, which is apparent even from a cursory observation of their work, is extraordinary. Painting was the only serious endeavour of their lives. But still there is fun, mockery and derision in their art. In their hands, realism becomes a weapon directed against the false formality and conformity with which they were confronted every day. The mimetic enterprise is strong, but in their painting Realism is used critically to reproduce the formal likeness of objects and people around them. Because reality was often contradictory, absurd, and definitely hypocritical, their works often show a surrealist vein and a nihilist, disenchanted view of the world. After four decades of artistic expression geared to the representation of models of political and spiritual practice, this generation wholeheartedly rejected all heroic connotations in describing the real. Yet representing reality was the only thing they had ever been trained to do, and so they chose to focus on the description of people and situations that were hyper-ordinary, on antiheroes who could not fit in any grand narrative: 'superfluous people', indeed. This limited concentration of subjects and themes even seems narcissistic to some extent. What underlines this apparently restricted choice is the refusal to judge or to make any

statement about current social and political issues. Most of the characters featured in their works are actual people: friends, schoolmates, relatives, and even themselves. The subjects of Liu Wei's paintings, for example, are the members of his family: his father and mother in uniform, his sister's marriage, his father swimming in the sea or watching Peking opera on TV, or his grandparents (fig. 11). They are real people portrayed in daily situations. The representation is plausible and accurate, but the style of the brushstrokes, the violent colours, the cartoon-like backgrounds of blue skies and green hills, the distortions and the grimaces suggest a sarcastic comment on reality. By means of a falsely ingenuous feature, Liu Wei describes a narrow world that annoys him with its complexity and dullness: in contrast to the smooth quality of the skin on the faces of Fang Lijun's characters, the people represented by Liu Wei appear to be consumed by some kind of skin disease which explodes in later paintings, such as *You Like Me No. 3* of 1996, into pure disintegration of form. Represented during blissful moments of family life, Liu's characters seem often devoured by some kind of interior malaise, a corruption of the body that seems to reflect a discomfort of the spirit. In *The New Generation* (1990, p.95) Liu paints a portrait of himself and his brother as babies in front of an official poster of Mao Zedong. The Chairman is confined to the position



10. Liu Xiaodong in his studio and Donatello, Beijing, c. 1991, photograph by Andrea Crivazzoli



12. Wang Guangyi in his studio in Fang Zhong, Beijing, c. 1988, photograph by Olivo Toscani

of backdrop for the ritual photographic portrait of the new generation. Mao's blank, passive expression that looks out but does not see is contrasted with the lively faces of the two boys, who are restlessly looking at the photographer taking the picture. The tension produced by juxtaposing the expressionless look on Mao's face with the liveliness of the children illustrates the huge generational gap. Mao is just a memory, a flat poster on the wall, while a new generation strives in the foreground, taking up centre stage. Yet the babies are a little bit too lively, verging on the agitated; the one on the right (which is a portrait of the artist) appears almost distressed. The pastel colours, the clouds rendered in animation-style and the orange skin of the Chairman's face do not mask a kind of disturbing energy that emanates from the figures, which could be seen as signalling the uneasiness of living in that specific present.

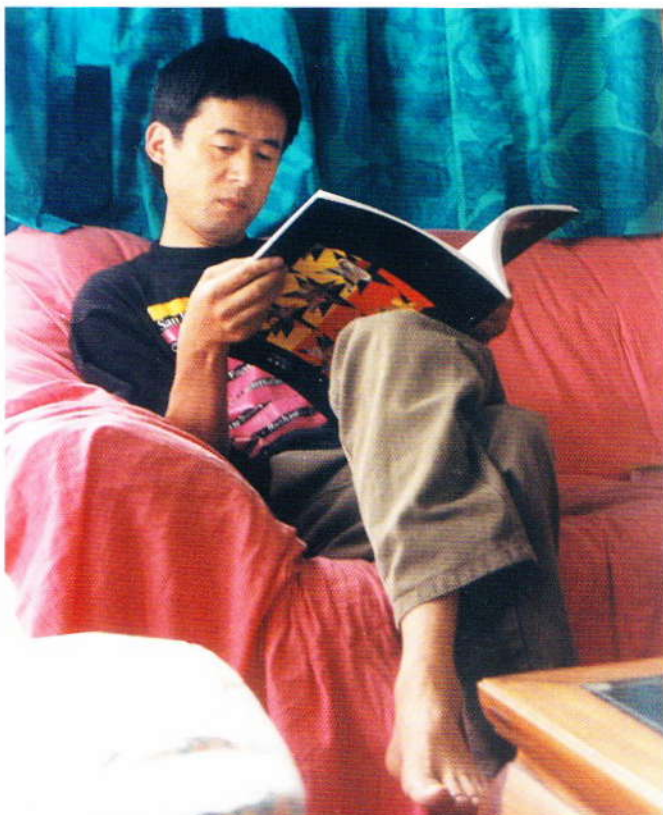
These artists are cynical and uninterested in conveying any possible message to their audiences. They paint for fun, to express themselves, simply for the sake of it. They do not care about any potential role of art in society. Life in the present time has deprived them of all beliefs. They lack the idealism of the previous generation who were educated in their formative years to strive for clear-cut values. On the contrary: nothing is really serious for them, except perhaps their work.

SUPERFLUOUS GOALS: THE 1990S PRODUCTION OF THE 'CHINA /AVANT-GARDE' GENERATION

Another group of artists whose work features prominently in the exhibition 'Writing on the Wall', and whose artistic intentions vary from those of the group described above, were their immediate elders. Only a few years older than the Cynical Realists, they were the protagonists of the so called '85 Movement (or New Art Movement) who had conceived and organized the 'China/Avant-Garde' exhibition in 1989. Unlike their younger peers, this generation of idealists, who thrived in the experimentalism of the 1980s, turned inward after 1989, choosing a pictorial language that had more of an immediate bearing on the Chinese social context.

The strengthening of central authority along with the will to reaffirm the uniqueness of the Chinese political experience without criticism or interference from the outside world brought about the isolation of China in the early 1990s and underlined the uselessness of adopting 'external models' to solve internal problems. Chinese artists likewise convinced themselves of the necessity to find an independent way, a path that was neither completely 'traditional' (that is, not linked to their historical culture) nor 'Western' (borrowed from external sources).

Along with this focus on ideas closer to the Chinese historical experience, there still remains the earlier creative framework



17. Zhang Pei *Qiyuan Diplomatic Amusements*, Beijing, 1993; photograph by Andrea Cavazzuti

in which the artist's role was to enlighten the viewer about the problems of contemporary society. This didacticism demonstrates some of the enduring influence of Socialist Realism, despite the very different aim of the endeavour. On the other hand, one could refer this sense of mission to traditional Confucian values, where a true intellectual was meant to use his culture and knowledge to serve the greater good of his society.

The purpose is no longer to celebrate socialist victories through an idealistic description of reality, but to denounce its contradictions and fallacies with the very same language that in the previous period had been used to reinforce that reality. These artists suggest a critical reflection on the actual political situation, using formulas that are extremely familiar to the Chinese public. Through common and ubiquitous signifiers they suggest a denunciation of a great moral and spiritual impoverishment. In this way, they achieved the aim of creating something quite modern (by using a style that could be easily linked to Western Pop Art) while remaining at the same time faithful to their desire for original creative expression. What is remarkable is that despite the change of direction in their art after the Tian'anmen incident, the sense of social mission remained. Cosmopolitan awareness is still accompanied by the belief that art can have both a role in society and the potential to initiate social debate. In this way the experience

of socialist education remains central to this generation. Their unique experiences give these artists both a personal sense of mission and, at the same time, a desire to deconstruct and ridicule traditional forms of culture that had betrayed the possibility for individual expression. What is original and identifiably Chinese in this framework is the particular didactic role of art and the choice of images and colours derived from the iconography of propaganda posters. In this way the experience of the Cultural Revolution offers a 'traditional' or indigenous foundation that allows the production of an art that is both modern *and* Chinese.

Wang Guangyi (fig.12) utilizes the most stereotypical figurative language of socialist propaganda, borrowed from the iconography of the posters of the Cultural Revolution, and pairs it with explicit symbols of Western consumerism to denounce the untenable contradictions of a political system that accepts the practice of capitalism while criticizing it at the same time (p.81 and fig.13).

Yu Youhan ridicules some very familiar imagery of the Cultural Revolution to the point where its 'popular' characteristics become comical. In *Mao Talking With the Peasants in Shaoshan* (1991, p.85), Yu appropriates a famous 1959 official photograph of Mao taken with a family of cheerfully smiling peasants in his home village of Shaoshan and manipulates it with coloured motifs that



11. Liu Wei, *Grandparents*, 1991, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, private collection

recall the decorative style of folk art (fig.14). This simulated naiveté produces a parody of the Socialist Realist policies whose basic tenet was to promote an art created from the standpoint of the masses. Yu mocks the canon of conforming to peasant taste by decorating the surface with a repetitive pattern of flowers, which, together with the flatness of the representation, completely deflates the authority of the original image. The folk language hailed by Mao as the necessary choice for new Socialist art is exaggerated to a grotesque level, where the figures turn into patterns arranged in a fabric-like composition.¹¹ Additionally, the flattening of the facial features highlights the absence of their individual characters and erases any possibility of psychological introspection.

Yu Youhan equates the relentless annihilation of individual expression characteristic of the Mao years with a process of home decoration in which people are selected for their formal matching qualities: the process thus becomes a metaphor suggesting the ways in which visual propaganda assimilated most individuals into an irrelevant background propped against the representation of Mao, the only protagonist left on the political scene. Shining on the red faces, the white blots created by the empty smiles lay bare the fallacy of the joyful bliss artificially imposed on the subjects of Cultural Revolution's art and society.

In *Rays* of 1992 by Geng Jianyi, Mao is not portrayed directly but is metonymically suggested by the quotation of attributes immediately associated with his former official representations. In this image the presence of Mao is unmistakably indicated by the shining rays that would often surround his icon in the official portraiture of the Cultural Revolution period (fig.16). Geng Jianyi replaces the central icon of the radiant halo with nonsensical figures, such as pandas or images of workers, peasants and national minorities like those printed on Chinese banknotes (p.73). The unique quality of Mao's god-like image is thus conceptually undermined by the substitution of one of the most common symbols of contemporary Chinese visual and mass culture. In the case of the panda, a nationalist chord is ironically struck by equating the most formidable advocate of a unique Chinese national character with another universal symbol of Chinese 'cuteness', the supposedly fluffy and friendly panda bear.¹²

Since the time of the Confucian 'Rectification of Names', one of the central concerns of Chinese cultural expression has been the appropriate use of names and the importance of matching the original meaning of a word with the human behaviour corresponding to that meaning. Philosophically, the problem of names losing their real meaning in practice and becoming empty receptacles was considered a moral



13. The 30 July and the 24 July Proclamations are Chairman Mao's Great Strategic Plan! Unite with forces that can be united with to strike surely, accurately and ruthlessly at the handful of class enemies. 1969, IISH Stefan R. Lindsholmer Collection, Amsterdam



14. Chairman Mao heartily talks with the four commune members at his home in Shaoshan in 1959, colour photograph, reproduced in *Zhongguo shidai* 1972

danger. In artistic terms, what matters to the artists is the problem of the misuse of language, of stereotypical behaviour, of the uselessness of symbols created when form loses its original purpose. Unthinking behaviour of this kind, represented sometimes through empty outlines – as in the work of Wang Jingsong *Chorus Line* (1991, p.89) – causes an inability to communicate, an intolerance and a selfishness that undermines the whole social structure and leads to a crisis of its values. Actions, similarly constrained into formality, become void and useless and maintaining them generates alienation.

The image of Xin Zhibin (China's most famous newscaster for China Central Television, and one of the official voices of authority during the summer of 1989) is used by Zhang Peili (fig.17) in the triptych *Standard Pronunciation 1989* (1990, p.79) as an immediately recognizable symbol of unimpeachable officialdom. Her image scrolls relentlessly on the painted screen, alluding to the chronic impossibility of fixing into a precise definition the real meaning of officialdom, authority and political power. The official image cannot be quantified and contained into in a precise meaning; it avoids definition and erases itself in a continuous overlap. Links with reality become looser. Strong images are successively erased. This reflects a chronic incertitude, an unresolved confusion of values. We cannot know the correct image of things, or their

exact significance. There are no fixed points and no more truths, either formal or substantial.

Television in China symbolizes the Voice of Authority: it provides the most powerful medium of political propaganda, strictly monitored to present only an edited version of reality. Creating a story that may subvert the normally sanctioned reading of everyday life maintains an irresistible appeal. This painting – one of the last in the career of China's most prominent video-maker – is paired with a later video titled *Water: Standard Version from the Dictionary Ci Hai* (1992, p.78), where the same anchorwoman is asked to recite a text. Absurdity in this case may become a form of pointed political commentary: with her trademark official intonation, Xin Zhibin reads the entry for the word for 'water' from the best-known Chinese dictionary. Her formal reading and the authoritative associations created by the official orthodoxy of her persona, enhanced by the rhetorical character of the presentation, clash with the nonsensical implications of the text to create a striking contradiction that subverts the authoritative iconography of the speaker. Zhang appropriates a highly symbolic image that is normally used for validating a specific political discourse in order to deconstruct that very discourse. Yet the deconstruction is achieved mostly through the means of verbalization, by juxtaposing the 'right' image and sound with the 'wrong' set of words. While these works



10. 'Respectfully wish Chairman Mao eternal life', 1965, Beijing, 52 x 71 cm, ISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection Amsterdam

present undeniable references to a political counter discourse, they do this indirectly by addressing the way in which authority functions via its media representation.

While these paintings present a deeper engagement with the political conditions of their time of production than those of the Cynical Realists, they also speak with the voice of – and for – the 'superfluous people' by demystifying a reality and a political practice that had too often deceived, misinformed and frustrated its subjects. They bring idols down to the ground with irony and parody. Their slightly older authors were more directly concerned with the political future of their country, yet they, too, communicate a similar scepticism and mistrust in the potential of *that* political power to produce transformations that would grant space to individual expression.

In the artistic production of the early 1990s, these two 'generations' of artists, either 'with' or 'without' a mission, feed on each other in capturing a moment when superfluous people *simply* claimed their right to exist.

The photographs of the artists were taken in Beijing at the time which is the focus of this essay. The author, Andrea Cavazzuti, is a photographer and a videomaker originally from Carpi (Modena), Italy, who has lived in Beijing since 1990. Cavazzuti and Dal Lago met at the Department of Chinese Studies, University of Venice. These photos are from a series unpublished before and they are the result of Cavazzuti's and Dal Lago's close interactions and friendship with the individuals portrayed in them. They provide a unique vision on the life and world of these artists during their formative, and arguably, most creative, years.

- 1 Xu Xing, 'Variations Without a Theme' (1985), in: Geremie Barmé and Linda Javin (eds.), *New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 256.
- 2 In Chinese all people's names (of two, but predominantly three syllables) are composed of the family name first and then the person's name, unlike in the West. (White Mary instead of Mary White). Gu's decision to reverse the order of the elements in his name is quite unique, a change that happened after his relocation to New York.
- 3 See Valerie C. Doran (ed.), *China's New Art, Post-1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart T.Z. Gallery, 1993).
- 4 He Xing, 'On Superfluous People' originally published in *Dushu* (Reading), November 1985. Translated in: Barmé and Javin, *New Ghosts, Old Dreams*, op. cit. (note 1), 260.
- 5 Ibid., 261.
- 6 This group was given the definition of 'cynical realism' by art critic Li Xianting in his article, 'Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art', in Doran, *China's New Art*, op. cit. (note 3).
- 7 This is why the Red Guard generation (to which Luo Zhongli belonged) was sent to the countryside for a number of years starting in 1969 to be 'reeducated' by peasants. This experience was formative and long-lasting for a whole generation of Chinese youths who were teenagers in the 1960s.
- 8 Andrew Solomon, 'Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China', *The New York Times Magazine*, 19 December 1993, 45-51.
- 9 In this essay, and in the context of the history of the PRC, given the turbulent political and social changes taking place between the 1950s and 1980s, generations are defined by a much shorter span of time that what is normally implied the expression in Western terms.
- 10 Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: The Birth of Avant-Garde Art in New China* (Zurich: Scalo, 2004), 141.
- 11 For a similar argument see Li Xianting, 'Major Trends', op. cit. (note 6), xxi.
- 12 The discussion of Liu Wei's *New Generation*, Geng Jiantai's *Rays* and Yu Youhan's *Mao Talking With the Peasants in Shaoshan* is partially taken from my article 'Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art', *The Art Journal*, Summer 1999.