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中国极多主义

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CHINESE MAXIMALISM
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CHINESE
MAXIMALISM:
AN ALTERNATIVE
"METAPHYSICAL
ART"
GAO MINGLU

中国“极多主义”

——一种另类“形而上”艺术

高名潞

An Introduction: The Definition of Maximalism and its Artistic Context

Abstract : An Inopportune Concept in Contemporary Chinese Art

In the contemporary post-conceptualist Western art world, the opposing notions of "abstract" and "realistic" have lost their competence to define artistic trends or genres. Especially since the appearance of photography and multi-media art, some "realistic" images can be treated in an "abstract" way. As a result, terms like "abstract" and "realistic" are no longer used in contemporary semiotic criticism. Instead, all the components of an artwork are called "signs." For instance, a human figure and a line are equal in "significance"; the key is how the viewer sees them in concert with other images. Therefore, if we want to use the word "abstract" in generalizing about Chinese contemporary art, we must first think about whether the word is still appropriate.

Actually, in contemporary Chinese art, "abstract art" (*chouxixiang yishu*) in the sense of Twentieth century Western art does not exist at all. Paintings by Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Newman, which make the utopian world and spirit abstract and present them in pure two-dimensional, geometrical form, can hardly be found in Chinese "abstract art." The Western abstract painting theory advocated by Greenberg states that, compared

with three-dimensional form, the two-dimensional form is more real and advanced in presenting reality. The three-dimensional form remains illusory. This point seems a repetition of Plato: according to the Plato, visible reality is but a shadow of the Idea, thus making three-dimensional art the shadow of a shadow.¹ Therefore, the two-dimensional (abstract) form is an innovation and progression over the three-dimensional (realistic) form, or even a summary of the entire world, as illustrated in Malevich's red and black squares and Mondrian's grids. In these abstract forms, an entire utopian world takes shape. Only two-dimensional form can transcend visual illusion, and thus directly manifest ideas.

But this kind of abstract practice cannot be found in China, even in ancient times. Concept is alluded to in visual images; there is never a dichotomy between concept and visual image. The guiding aesthetic principle of Chinese traditional art is "balancing likeness and unlikeness" (*si yu busi zhijian*). This aesthetic is still influential in China's contemporary art—not only in the so-called "new" art, but in "avant-garde" or "experimental" art, and even in the revolutionary art of the Cultural Revolution. We can find this aesthetic tradition in the poetry and political writings of Mao Zedong. Although some contemporary Chinese artists today use color fields and lines to compose, thus calling their works "abstract," their two-dimensional forms are nothing but decorative works, a

two-dimensional composition and beauty without any philosophical or spiritual significance being "abstracted." Chinese artists have a hard time grasping the "cold" abstraction of Malevich and others, but a rather easy time understanding the "hot" abstraction of the German Expressionists. Now it is all too easy to cross directly into the field of "new media art," without knowing which of the old questions we have not yet answered. Accordingly, my goal in introducing "Maximalism" to this debate is also to reconsider some of the old questions about abstract art in China.

Chinese "Metaphysics": From "Rationalistic Painting" to "Maximalism"

In China there exist, however, paintings, installations, and photographic works that appeal to Chinese sensibilities and conceptions, and which contain elements that might be labeled "abstract." But their abstraction is different from abstraction in the Western sense.

A number of these art works appeared in China in the 80s, and at the time I wrote an essay on "Rationalistic Painting" (*lixing huihua*) to analyze the phenomenon.² At that moment, Ding Fang, Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun and others used the styles of "Surrealism" and "Symbolism" to allude to some kind of religious manifestations. For example, "clean and pure northern land" is used to allude to sublimity (Wang Guangyi, [Fig. 1]); "loess

plateau" to imply national aspirations (Ding Fang, [Fig. 2]). "Surrealist" forms were quite consistent with the "surreal" ideas and ideals of artists and intellectuals in the 1980s. They introduced the idea of the surreal to overcome the tension between real and metaphysical, a tension which reflected the incompleteness and insufficiency of their idealism. This surrealism also revealed the contradiction they felt between pragmatism and idealism. But their paintings were still the first of the post-Cultural Revolution era to transcend the old dictates of "realism" by containing definite abstract elements.

Other painters used more abstract forms to refer to ancient Eastern philosophy, for example, Shanghai painters Li Shan, Yu Youhan, Chen Zhen, Zhang Jianjun, etc. [Figs. 3-6] These painters shared a common desire to integrate the forms of Western geometric abstraction (cold abstraction) with those of abstract expressionism (so-called hot abstraction), creating a "warm" Eastern abstract form. Ren Jian's *Yuanhua*, on the other hand, was an exuberant, highly ambitious "metaphysical" painting in which the artist combined traditional symbols of Chinese culture (Buddhist, Daoist) with Surrealist form in order to "reproduce" the origins of the universe and the evolution of mankind. [Fig. 7] Likewise, Shu Qun used a reticulated order and traditional religious symbols to represent the rational structures of the world that are basic to his thought. [Fig. 8] This sort of grandiose material

looks almost too utopian, too unrealistic when viewed through the lens of current reality. But this is not to say that his methodological explorations are meaningless. It is important to note that some of the key characteristics of "Chinese Maximalism," e.g. reduplication, serialization, and number already appear in this earlier "rationalistic painting." These "metaphysical" Chinese paintings of the 1980s never fully developed. By the mid- and late 1980s, when a system to support such work was finally taking shape, the style disappeared, due first to commercial pressures and second to the disillusionment of political idealism.

However, in the early 1990s a new form of "metaphysical" took shape silently and beyond the eyes of the media. A group of artists began to employ methods unlike those of the "metaphysical" painters of the 1980s, more in line with "abstraction" and Western-style "formalism" or "minimalism." They created a group of paintings, installations and video works that I group as the first fruits of "Chinese Maximalism."

This "Maximalism" should not be considered an intellectual movement or a rigid style; The artists involved were not intimately connected, and there was never a collective declaration of artistic principles. Perhaps it is even wrong to group all the artists discussed in this essay as practitioners of "Chinese Maximalism." Still, "Maximalism" is very obviously a way of thinking and a creative praxis that has been adopted by many

contemporary artists. This categorization has to do not only with the artists' positions vis-a-vis contemporary criticism, their interest in certain forms of visual language, or their usual approach to political discourse; it may also have to do with the subtle influence of traditional Chinese or Asian ways of thinking or attitudes toward art on the artists. We can find similar phenomena in the contemporary art of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. There is an obvious commonality here. And it represents certain modalities of Chinese artistic praxis, realized either consciously or unconsciously. For example, artists such as Zhu Xiaohe, Ding Yi, Li Huasheng, Shen Fan and others very clearly and persistently clung to conventions I shall call "Maximalist" for over a decade. Other artists stumble upon these conventions of serialization and process in their creation, such as Qiu Zhijie writing the same passage repeatedly in his work *Homework Assignment No. 1: Writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" 1000 Times* [Figs. 9-10] and Lin Tianmiao wrapping several hundred items in string for her installation *Bound and Unbound*. [Fig. 12] In drawing these connections, I am not looking to prove the existence of a new "school." I merely wish, by analyzing and debating these artists and their works, to establish similarities of method and value. And by inserting this concept into an artistic background, I hope to establish its critical meaning.

I spent a relatively long period of time thinking about the

phenomenon of the "maximal" in Chinese contemporary art. I want very much to establish the fundamental differences between it and similar phenomena in Western art.

I call this "Chinese Maximalism" because many of the artists use the visual forms of Western Minimalism (parallel series, neat duplication, etc.). Many artists like these forms a great deal, [Figs. 13-16] because the role of Western Minimalism as a starting point for postmodern art is incredibly important. In the West, more and more critics are beginning to recognize the importance of Minimalism. But what was the meaning of these forms as they resurfaced in the art of China in the 1990s? Was it pure imitation? Through research and comparison, I have found that Minimalist forms in 1990s China are fundamentally different from those of the West in the 1960s and 70s. Although both are similarly disinterested in depicting "utopia," Western Minimalism's power stems from its opposition to early Western abstraction that treats painting as a representational vehicle to present a utopian world by embodying it in different abstract patterns. As Yves-Alain Bois claims, they sought a "material utopia," or as Judd claims, "an illusion of what the world's like."³ Chinese Maximalism also appeared against a background of "deluge of meaning." But Chinese Maximalism opposes Minimalism's extreme dismissal of the painted image as a vehicle for conveying meaning. Many Minimalist artists completely shut out spiritual meaning and

treated painted forms as objects in their own right, or as Stella said, "what you see is what you see."⁴ Chinese Maximalism does not reject the elements of subject and spirituality. On the contrary, it emphasizes the spiritual experience of the artist in the process of the creation as a self-contemplation outside and beyond the artwork itself. The material existence of the work is perhaps best understood as a record of this spiritual experience, for example, Gu Dexin's *1997.6.16-1998.6.13*, Li Huasheng's *Diary*, etc. These works are neither manifestations nor representations of the corresponding experiences, but rather their unintentional forms. In other words, we cannot interpret the "spiritual meaning" of these works as physical manifestations, symbols or metaphors simply from their external form. Furthermore, in terms of Chinese Maximalism, form, as an insignificant record of daily life, does not seek a certain primary and secondary comparison as "complete structure" of form, because they are all restructured by many fragments. This reproduction has no limits, a non-visual "completeness." Maximalism recognizes that unlimitability comes only at the price of completeness. Accordingly, its idea of form is precisely opposed to that of Minimalism; opposed to completeness, opposed to "theatrical" effects. Minimalism, on the other hand, looks for "theatrical" results. At the same time it also has a very strongly structured and complete consciousness of spatial form.⁵ Minimalism uses complete material "space" to express its

materiality, its meaning. Maximalism on the other hand indeterminately long "time" to experience "meaning" and at the same time through seemingly "meaningless" behavior and labor tries to "record" time itself.

Another difference between Maximalism's and Minimalism's conception of form: Maximalism's form is not intended to entertain the viewer, but rather takes responsibility for the life or artistic "logic" of the artist himself. Many artists' works are extremely repetitive, even uninteresting. In these terms, they are the erosion or deconstruction of the form of the work itself. For this reason, "Chinese Maximalism" not only refuses to see works as projections of the artist's spirit or materialized forms of universal ideas (like early abstract artists in the West or the Rationalistic Painting group of the 1980s), but also doesn't see the artwork as a pure material object. It is rather a natural, fragmented, daily constructed "account-book of streaming water" (*liushui zhang*), which means an everyday record of something that is extremely unimportant, micro-trivial and fragmented from daily life. This is a "selfless" perspective, but the self has still not disappeared. Therefore, the idea that "you are in me, and I am in you" (*wo zhong you ni, ni zhong you wo*) is the real connection between the artist and the work as "*liushui zhang*."

So what is the real critical significance of "Maximalism" when set against the background of Chinese contemporary art? Is

it simply a private phenomenon, having nothing at all to do with the world around it? Any artistic language or concept, if it cannot make people feel a common interest in its tents, is purely an individual private discourse, without cultural significance. Considering Maximalism from this perspective, we discover that "Maximalist" art with a very strong sense of form is actually quite dismissive of form, such as the work of the artists discussed in this article. Attitude toward form is certainly not the most important criterion of Maximalism. They do not raise doubts about the power of any certain form, nor do they seek to create new forms in its stead. Many doubt the independent "meaning" of a work, sick of excessive attention to the social and cultural meaning of a given work. Actually, this sort of Maximalist style critique was already vividly present in Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky*, though this did not become the climate of the 1980s.

In the Chinese context, however, the primary objective of Maximalism is to question and overthrow assumptions about the meaning of artwork: that the meaning is contained and expressed by the object, that the object is a unique and privileged product of human culture that contains commonly held values of virtue and creativity. The practice of the Maximalism inquires: who confers meaning on an artwork? How is the meaning presented and interpreted?

Those of us from the 1980s, whether it was the Rationalist

Westerners."⁷ For him, this "simple linguistic narrative looks at the social meaning of art in the context of the artist's "individual struggle for survival," or attempts to understand his creation in terms of traditional Eastern aesthetics. This fad was only concerned with how to discover a symbolic image representing "Chinese people," so as to satisfy some simple-minded Westerners' preoccupation with and ability to recognize the "other."

I propose that the artistic outlook and praxis of "Maximalism" mainly takes the following forms:

1. Almost everyone involved in Maximalism is opposed to self-expression or representation of reality, and denies that an artist can confer meaning on an artwork.

2. There is no way to interpret the meaning of an artwork (text), as interpretation per se is another code (text). For example, Zhu Xiaohu interprets an ancient piece of art known to everyone by repeatedly using short lines as "words" which result in a different painting. Wu Yiming, in similar method, used traditional Chinese painting form to interpret paintings of beauties in ancient costumes. Instead of imitations, their works are another kind of text, or what Zhu Xiaohu called "metaphysical execution" (*xingersheng yunzuo*).

3. As "meaning" consists in process and change, subject to changes of individual experience, the artists pay attention to process by completing an experienced process through different "labor" or "handicraft" forms, whereas works are only incomplete

fragments.

4. The unfolding of "meaning" is limitless, the extremity of which is nothingness (*wu*). Nothingness cannot be represented by any form, for "gigantic form is intangible" (*da xiang wu xing*). Nonetheless, Maximalism intimates infinity and endlessness of "numbers" by repetition of quantities. So "many" is not something substantial or quantitative, but insubstantial and hollow, in spite of their orderly, reasonable and neat appearance. It is the accumulation of many similar contingencies, including Chinese tradition and the discourse of the Cultural Revolution.

5. This inevitably leads Maximalism to modern Zen—a sort of Chinese Dadaism and deconstruction. Therefore many of their pursuits appear similar to Zen and Nihilism.

From here, I will concretely examine these artists' works and artistic methodologies.

Critique on the Methodology of Chinese Maximalism

Against Expression and Presentation: The First Critique of Maximalism

Almost all the artists mentioned here deny that the meaning in a work is given by the artist. They think that a work has nothing to do with them once it is finished. This point was stated pointedly by Wu Shanzhuan in the mid-80s. He argued that a work is like a plant,

Painting group or the expressionists of the "Excited Soul" (*linghun chongdong*) group,⁶ all believed that the spiritual meaning of the work was given by the artist. They also believed that the work, once given full meaning by the artist, would be viewed and accepted by the audience (the enlightened masses) unquestionably and on the artist's terms. This elite philosophy is rather similar to that of Western Modernism in the early 20th century. The Political Pop (*zhengzhi bopu*) painters and novelist Wang Shuo's "rascal literature" (*pizi wenxue*) in the early 90s negated, to a certain extent, the past utopian ideal during the Cultural Revolution and the elite utopian ideology of "anti-utopia utopia" sought by the avant-garde of the 1980s. Nonetheless, this "negation of essential meaning" or "meaninglessness" was mostly manifested in their attitude towards the artist's life philosophy, not in their methodology and approach for the "expressive meaning" inherent in the works. In other words, they really believed that they could confer, or had conferred works with "meaningless" content, which showed they did not differ much from the artists of the 1980s. The difference only lies in the fact that the latter demonstrated idealism, the former disillusionment. The discourse of the critique and interpretation of the "cynical" art of the early 1990s resulted in an overemphasis on the ideological concept of "cynicism." Although interpretations of "ridicule," "hollowness," "ennui" and "disillusionment" had some practical significance at

the beginning, it soon became dogmatic and vulgarized. Furthermore, the works of "cynicism" as products at the market were neglected by only arbitrarily confining "meaning" to the canvas. As the art circle was full of the discourse on "overinterpretation," the real crisis in Chinese contemporary art was concealed: a lack of methodology, imitation becoming fashionable, and the fact that artists and their products had increasingly been commercialized and institutionalized, so that the narration of "meaning" had become a lie.

It was under these circumstances that Chinese Maximalism, an alternative "metaphysical" art form, started to challenge the "meaning" of an artwork from various and extremely personal perspectives, thus rebelling against the prevailing "overflow of meaning" (*yiyi fanlan*) fad.

It should be noted that this rebellion was not only targeted at the art circle in China, but also at the "Orientalist" and "post-colonial" assumptions that underlay the place of contemporary Chinese art in the context of globalization. For instance, Zhu Xiaohe remarked that his paintings were of an abstruse language. Endorsing the concept of Maximalism, he has stated that "Maximalism amounts to an inroad to the territory of the white people. Using abstruse language is a rebellion. Our nationalism is not of the simple linguistic narrative form believed by them (white people). It is an unfamiliar nationalism, not the one in the eyes of

and the artist is soil. The essential nature of the plant will not affect the fertility of the soil, just as artists' motivation will not change the meaning of artwork. Sharing this view, Gu Dexin has consistently refused to explain the meaning of his work. There is no evidence to show that Chinese artists were influenced by post-structuralism, as the writings of Roland Barthes were barely known in the Chinese art world of the 1980s. However, the ideas of Wu Shanzhuan, Gu Dexin, Ding Yi, Zhu Xiaohe and others on the meaning of text were very similar to those of Barthes. However the ideas of the Chinese artists were not born out of philosophical logic, but from the reality of the contemporary Chinese art scene at that time—a criticism of the "overinterpretation" or "overflow of meaning" tendency. Decades of socialism in China have conditioned artists to the realism of "preconceived motif" (*zhuti xian xing*) thought patterns, which were manifested in different ways in different periods. Audiences were also trained to be the passive receivers of "given meaning." Under this condition, the Maximalist artists have committed themselves in freezing their expressive desire and eliminating their intention, compelling themselves to be "fools," not using their brains, but their hands only. Their work is mere handicraft, not the alchemy of the creative genius.

Ding Yi's "Cross"

Ding Yi's *Cross Series* and his theory are good examples. Counting the first *Cross* works created in 1988, Ding has been

producing this kind of painting for 14 years. Although different ideas may have occurred to him during this period, the basic method and its clear-cut cross form have remained. [Pl. 48,49]

Ding Yi's formalist pattern is, however, based on anti-formalist concept. He is "skeptical about treating the pure art language as the ultimate goal," believing that "the purpose of making paintings is not to justify the real world mirrored on the canvas." In other words, he thinks painting is neither a display of pure visual form, nor a presentation of reality or nature. It is what it is, a work undertaken "within the deep logic of language structure and its denoting concept." Namely, it is the product of the methodology of the artist.⁸

Ding's idea was anti-mainstream in the Chinese avant-garde art at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, for he belonged neither to the "pure language" (*chunhua yuyan*) Neo-Academic school, nor to the "deep soul" (*da linghun*) Expressionism of the late 80s, nor to the Political Pop and Cynical Realism of the early 90s. Instead, he regarded art as a "precise" manipulation, which was expressed by his "cross" shapes, because the "cross" in printing is a simple sign for measurement that everyone can recognize. As this pure, clear expressive method is close to science, it is far removed from humanistic connotation, suggesting no cultural themes. Most importantly, its simple form provides Ding with the possibility of continuous and monotonous

manipulation. He could calmly and merely draw "crosses" on the canvas, making them as precise as possible without harboring any attempt to "reconstruct" or "destroy" culture. What he had was only the feeling of making contact with something substantial such as brush, chalk or canvas. This "sense of substantiation" forced the artist to abandon and escape from any desire to spin illusions.

This concept was also the basis of his automatic color selection principle, which was "a distrust of Cezanne and Matisse's coloring theory."⁹ There is no composition principle at all, for he can start drawing crosses from one side and end up on the other, or vice versa. Technique is viewed by him as a mediocre handicraft skill. His is one that is without any preconceived concepts, a mere manipulation similar to a woman farmer weaving denim. [Pl. 50-54]

Nevertheless, the meaning of manipulation does not aim at itself, but at the norm achieved by the manipulation. The artist has no right to go beyond this norm to "express" himself, and he is not able to do this at all if the norm is not available.

It is only under this process that artists can get some spiritual release and inspirational experience, or as Ding puts it, "creative inspiration comes from the experience of continuous work; an endless, deeply engaged and open working condition makes the creativity of an artist separate from the limitation set by his ideology."¹⁰ This reminds me of the work done by the "New

Analysts Group" composed of Wang Luyan, Chen Shaoping and Gu Dexin at the beginning of the 1990s. By laying down strict collective rules, they worked in turns, making their paintings like geometric diagrams. Personal irrationality and desire for expression were eliminated by strict ground rules. It would be impossible to detect any trace of emotion or meaning except a sense of freedom rendered to them by abiding to the rules and obtained by escaping the constraints of "meaning." [Fig. 17]

"Metaphysical Operation": The Second Critique of Maximalism

Words and artistic images are two different language systems, even in the case of icons and illustrations, such as those that accompany biblical narratives. For example, the ancient Chinese painter Gu Kaizhi's *Admonitions of The Instructress to The Court Ladies* was meant to accompany moralist Zhang Hua's treatise on the evil nature of the beauty-seeking female. Gu's painting, which depicts beautiful women, subverts Zhang's narrative even as it illustrates it. Any interpretation, whether using image to illustrate words or vice versa, constitutes another text. This has been discussed by Gadamer's hermeneutics, Roland Barthes's semiotics and Derrida's deconstruction. But Chinese do not like to push the relation between interpretation and text, word and image to the extreme, so they discovered the nature of "the mingling of 'you'

and 'I' (*nizhong youwu, wozhong youni*), and put forward the interpretive approach of "there is painting in poetry just as there is poetry in painting" (*shizhong youhua, huazhong youshi*), and "viewing poetry vs. reading painting" (*guanshi duhua*). As a result, the gap between image and word, imagination and concept is bridged.

Zhu Xiaohu's "Complex Writing"

Zhu Xiaohu uses a "viewing poetry/reading painting" approach, i.e. employing color and lines on canvas, instead of words on a page, to interpret and read a painting, such as the ancient painting "Three Court Ladies"; [Figs. 18-19, Pl. 55] engraving works "Mother and Son," "Education of the Son" etc., [Figs. 20-21, Pl. 56] and some well-known German woodcut painters' works. Another "text," i.e. a new painting was thus created by the traces formed by the crowded colored lines on the canvas. This painting lives off others in terms of "meaning" and "form," without its own "theme" and narrative content. It neither has the ordinary painting elements of expression out of stroke and color field, nor any semiotic functions of "signifier vs. signified." Just as Zhu says, "the broken layers generated by overdrawn lines are another form of thinking, the thought of seeing. It only allows us to see, not understand. It is not the expression of inner consciousness, feelings and beliefs, but the new feelings and

experience of seeing."¹¹ The "seeing," however, does not lead to any directions of aesthetic, philosophy or narrative. It is just seeing itself.

Zhu was one of the participants in the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition held in Beijing in 1989. Since the 90s, Zhu started to select more "abstract" short lines as his "word" elements to "interpret" painting and to make his "hermeneutic painting." His paintings of short lines are not specific, very much like the "impressionistic" paintings of Seurat or Cezanne, but without any direct images in reference to it. But his works have nothing to do with "light shadows" and "spectacle." The paintings interpreted have already modified "reality," so his painting is a modification of the original modification of reality. [Pl. 57-60] As Zhu himself says, "my writing [painting] is not one that is measured, expressive and has a purpose, but goes beyond writing, an overlapping writing, writing that generates another writing, which gives rise to complex and abstruse layers of small lines, making recognition and easy representation impossible. It transcends the clear, dull and simplified subject matter. The outer images became layers of confused lines, obscuring images, and the writing keeps overlapping and dismantling without being able to stop and coming to any conclusion."¹² Thus, he called his paintings "interpretive and complex writing" (*jieshixing fuza shuxie*), or "metaphysical operation" (*xingershang yunzuo*).

The "metaphysical" here does not refer to the one used by Kant, because Zhu is opposed to any preconceived "meaning" and the universal "ultimate idea." His "metaphysics" is only an automatic writing without presupposition; writing itself is noumenon, the meaning, and language. In Zhu's eyes, the language is nothing more than "labor."¹³ Because it presents the status of the "writer," excludes the presupposition of all "meanings," exhibiting oneself in an open way and declaring one not to be any accessory of imposed "truth." "Truth" should not be understood as "correct," but as the language itself "being interpreted." Language precedes man, as language is the space where man exists. "I don't know what reality is when I am not writing... writing is like instruments, which I always look at, not the scene outside the window. It's like a pilot in a cockpit, where he seeks direction through instruments, not his naked eyes."¹⁴

Therefore, Zhu's lines are "neutral," without "revolution or counter-revolution," emotion, tendency, local, center and overall conceptions. Only this neutrality in operation can lead to "de-ideologization," and make any categorized "Chineseness" and "correctness" superficial. Take for example the so called "Oriental beauty" (linear, decorative) that might be demonstrated in the ancient painting *Three Court Ladies*: in Zhu's interpretive version, these "nationalistic aesthetic features" are obscured. This is a strategic "overwriting" (*guodu shuxie*) aimed at opposing cultural

hegemony.¹⁵ Or, in order to make his interpretive process more neutral, he formulated rules, namely that "interpretative" levels are preserved on the canvas, so the initial and last lines are demonstrated in the crowded canvas without any differentiation. Line-drawing (writing) is only production, without any fanciful notions, discarding any elements of "representation" or "expressiveness."

This "production is a resistance against the immediacy, subjectivity, conceptual representation, simple imitation and formalism in contemporary art. Maximalism is bound to be obscure and go beyond nomenclature, forms and images."¹⁶ "Production is obscure and ambiguous, opposed to information and fashion, as well as commonly stereotyped notion and slogans."¹⁷

We can see the anti-mainstream attitude and the criticism of institution power system in the critical motivation of Zhu Xiaohu.

Wu Yiming is from Shanghai. As a traditional Chinese painter, he has produced a series of ink paintings of beauties in ancient costumes. For example, he has drawn ten ink paintings which are "exactly the same" as the ancient beauties paintings unearthed in Hetian in the Xinjiang autonomous region. [Pl. 61-64] He would make a draft, then a contour to copy the original Hetian painting. Then he used traditional ink washing technique operated in multiple layers to blur the contour and colors of the female figure. The final result is an ancient beauty without facial

features and detailed clothes patterns. What he strives for through complicated "labor" is a kind of "uncertainty" and "undecidability," which is similar to Zhu's "overwriting." He wants to obtain an experience in his "reading" and "writing," an impossibility of imitating an "artwork" of the past, and a sense of distance from the mysterious past. That is why he can take great pains to draw "the same painting" ten times. In visual effect, his paintings have a simple, succinct, and pure beauty which is traditional, experienced, non-visual. He repeatedly re-experiences the feelings of the "ages" being unearthed by his brushes. On the other hand, when the same ten paintings are juxtaposed together, they give the impression of looking like "Minimalist" works. [Fig. 22] But this is not what Wu wants to achieve, rather he strives to dig out some thing experienced, not visualized, that is beyond the ancient visual form itself. In order to achieve it, he continues to make his brush stroke and ink washing overlap layer by layer until the original clear appearance of the ancient painting disappeared. The "original experience" he gains through his repetition is at the expense of the disappearance of the "origin."

Meaning Only Lies in the Process: The Third Critique of "Maximalism"

Chinese Maximalism is opposed to logocentrism, a Euro-

pean and American tradition. It seeks essence, oneness, truth and clear-cut consciousness. On the contrary, Chinese tradition puts more emphasis on the change and contextualization of meaning. Taking the ancient Literati Painting as example, the narrative meaning of an artwork is not important. Meaning is related with one's accomplishment in every aspect of his lifetime, temperament and the tastes of a circle, or circumstances. Chinese Maximalist artists pay more attention to the process of creation and the uncertainty of meaning and instability in a work. Meaning is not reflected directly in a work, because they believe that what is in the artist's mind at the moment may not necessarily appear in his work. Rather, it is often absent.

Therefore, many artists repeat the same movement or form in order to make the absent self "stay put," or in another perspective, to eliminate any desire for self-expression through certain physical repetition (repeated form) and a continuous "meaningless" laboring operation so as to reach the distillation of meditation and pure spirituality. [Fig. 23] Continuousness, repetition, and monotonous "labor" often constitute the characteristics of Maximalism. Although their works also have physical forms, they always fail to convey an idea. Because the real meaning remains in every moment, which is always developing, changing and merging with the ones before and after it, in an endless "environment." [Fig. 24] It is like a monk chanting Buddhist

scripture. Each time he chants Amitabha, the meaning changes corresponding to the time and space in which he chants it. Each of his chantings is a product of the moment, related to the extent of his understanding by meditation (his dialogue with his surroundings and his inner world.)

As a result, meaning can never stay put in a materialistic form, which only implies the process, but can never embrace and substitute the real meaning experienced.

Gu Dexin started conceptual art activity as early as the beginning of the 1980s. The media he used ranged widely: two-dimensional, installation, digital, etc. Even so, he always thinks that the meaning of the work has nothing to do with him, because it can never be reached. He was more concerned with the relation between himself and the materials, or with how to make his works more "materialistic" and "formalistic." The materials used were often found in nature and animals such as meat, apples, flowers, or industrial materials such as plastics, glass, etc. [Pl. 65] In terms of form, he often used repetitive forms, not for the sake of the beauty of arrangement, but for the intensified contrast between the "look" of others and the "experience" (touching, for instance) by himself. A case in point is the work *1997.6.16-1998.6.13* created from 1997 to 1998. For a period of time, he would pinch a piece of pork every day until he had pinched it dry. The kind of unique and strange feelings involved in this action have been shared by

all of us, though we might not express them as clearly. Each time he pinched the pork, Gu would take a photo (and not a video recording) of the event. A photo could only take in a transient moment, not unlike the "*Amitabha*." [Fig. 25, Pl. 66]

So the photo cannot cover the whole process of Gu's action. We can imagine Gu, a man full of life, sitting there pinching the "water" and "blood" out of a dead life, experiencing the constant contact between life and death. No meaning-boredom, catharsis, nausea, sexuality-can ever be revealed to us. What the viewers get from his exhibition of "pinching flesh" is only the elegance of false pretences and the ritual scene in a temple-like space. The photos of hands pinching the pork are neatly arranged, like a series of "abstract paintings." The pieces of pork dried by pinching are laid on a table in the middle wrapped in red cloth, like the remains of the deceased waiting for others to pay their last respects. [Pl. 67] Gu seemed to deliberately create a distance between what the viewers had "seen" and the real "meaning" obtained by himself in creating the work, so as to conceal in the unknown world what only he had experienced alone. Or in other words, what he had created was only an inflammatory scene, only to lend force to veil the "meaning."

It is only because Maximalist artists are concerned with labor process and experience that they often give their works the title *Diary*, as in the case of Li Huasheng, Lei Hong, and others.

Li Huasheng's "Line - Diary"

In recent years, Li has produced a good deal of "abstract paintings" in ink and wash. As a Chinese painter well versed in traditional Literati painting, it is indeed a surprise to many that his later works are similar to the Minimalist style of the West. On the surface, the paintings done by Li are grids made of ink lines, not much different from the "abstract paintings" of the West. [Pl. 68-75] But there is a distinction both in spiritual connotation and creative process.

Drawn along hidden lines on the rice paper, Li painted his lines short sometimes, but most of the time, the lines pass through from left to right or from top to bottom. Instead of light touches, or without any control, the lines are "written" out with considerable force focused on the tip of the brush. We cannot understand the lines by Li without first comprehending why Buddhist priest Hong Yi would spend six minutes writing only one Chinese character. The process of brush movement is very slow because the artist concentrates on his spiritual motion leading the brush, rather than on a stylized appearance of a character or a line itself. Sometimes, Li would work on the same line many times, so that the ink would soak into the small squares formed by the intersection of different lines and generate an unexpected effect. He also would write down thickly dotted "seals" or the Chinese characters similar to seals in shape on the hidden squares of the rice paper.

The content is a diary.

These lines, seals and characters were written down in a slow, concentrated and scrupulous way, which is like meditation, the everyday homework of Buddhist monks.

On the other hand, these monotonous and "boring" lines replaced the variety and volatility of the traditional lines. A line must be drawn straight, and the dot neat, which runs counter to the traditional approaches of "the eighteen types of ink lines" (*shiba miao*) and various types of ink strokes. Traditional lines, especially those since the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, are mostly for expressing temperament and tastes, but Li's are arranged in an orderly manner. They show rationality and order. Some of the spirituality has been solidified in them: strict control of temperament and dispelling of one's expressiveness and personality. Nor do these lines try to express any elements of representation. Any inflammatory words are avoided such as adjectives like graceful, desolate, elegant, flavorful and tonal.

Song Tao's "Transmigration"

As members of the "new new generation" born in the late 1970s, Song Tao and Liang Yue have created works that reflect different characteristics from those of the previous generation. These new artists are much more concerned with the "play" aspect of language in a work rather than its "social meaning." Therefore,

their repetition is similar to the rhythm of the electronic games, focusing on the even and mechanical aspects of the rhythm like the sound of shooting. As it is not dramatic and expressive, but monotonous and indifferent, it appears more prosaic and innocent. Not that it is the prosaic and innocent style of the ancients trying to express a desolate and bleak feeling, but that of the modern "cold blood." Or this cold innocence stems from the total indifference towards "prosaic and innocent." Song Tao, in his video work titled *It Is a Fine Day; That Explains Why It Does Not Rain*, records a very insignificant and even nonsensical matter: he finds a pulling ring from a pop-top can, takes it back home, puts it in a wooden box, seals the box with aluminum cut from a Pepsi can, and then puts it back in the street where he found it. Although it is not dramatic at all, and too prosaic to have any themes, I smell in it a sense of "transmigration" and "fatalism" of the old Buddhism and Taoism. Perhaps this group of artists born at the end of the 1970s was too familiar with the media and leads a simple and dull life. Liang Yue's works give me a similar feeling. She practices replication and repetition with ease. Their "care-nothing-attitude" naturally reveals a sense of fatalism. [Pl. 76-77]

What I refer to as the "social meaning" is not what Song and Liang strive for, because their works are the products of "language." Language precedes taste. Another of Song's works, *49368 Square Millimeters*, shows the process of "the moment something is

created, something is lost as well." It seems to be a process of "transmigration" too. On blueprints for projects with elaborate squares, he uses pen to cross out some squares while leaving others untouched, so that the black squares (painted) and remaining white squares begin to form patterns. It is similar to the mode of drawing "cold abstract" paintings. When he has finished his "abstract paintings" on a blueprint, he starts to smear over the blank squares on the "painting" till they all become black. It is a self-negating process, for each daubing of a square corrects and revises the previous aesthetic judgment. Each daubing is Song's aesthetic judgment or the demonstration of his design consciousness, which is gradually negated, becoming the "nothingness" of "blackness." [Pl. 78-82] As Song puts it, "the continuous aesthetic aspirations toward the surface composition results in the disappearance of the carriers of these aesthetic principles."¹⁸ It is a cycle of "from nothingness to something" and "from something to nothingness," and also a dialectical relation of "positive" and "negative." Recording this process by copying, Song made it into a book form for others to appreciate. In the meantime, he enlarged his copies and framed them as 60 separate "abstract paintings" for exhibition. [Fig. 26]

Like *1997.6.16-1998.6.13* by Gu Dexin, recordings were made into works of art to satisfy the "looking" desire of the viewers, but they have been divorced from the process and

became empty shells of "meaninglessness," in spite of their "abstract painting" appearance. Therefore, Song Tao's works are a manifestation and satire of Chinese interpretations of the meaning of Western abstract painting.

Many contemporary Chinese artists may have unconsciously been influenced by the philosophy of transmigration. Another good example would be Xu Bing's very earthy work, in his graduation project of 1986, *Five Series of Repetitions*. This work clearly demonstrates his significant concern with the process of dematerialization. In *Five Series of Repetitions*, each series employs the image of a very mundane scene in a farming village. For example, a view of a fishpond, a field of crops, a vegetable patch, etc. These images were each carved onto a single woodblock. In each series, after carving an image onto a woodblock, Xu Bing would print each newly finished carving onto the same long scroll. [Fig. 27] The final effect was of a single composition forged from an intricate interlinking of discrete images. The work was executed in monochrome, with the tonalities graduating from dark to light, and then from light to dark. The first and the last images in fact look like the negative and the positive images of a photograph.¹⁹ *Five Series of Repetitions* subverts the traditional concept of printmaking, because the original woodblock no longer exists. All that is left is a cycle: it is the first thing and also the last thing. The function of the woodblock as a means of

reproducing an image in printing is erased, and the concept of originality is itself is also erased. It demonstrates the concept of transmigration similar to Song Tao's work.

But all of these artists processes, cycles, and destruction of their own works cannot be called thorough, because they always leave a material trace that can circulate on the art market. During the summer of 2002, in Shenyang, an industrial city in northeast China (Manchuria), I saw many retired elders and laid-off workers writing calligraphy on the smooth ground surface of the sidewalks and plazas using their self-produced big "brushes." The characters they wrote in a fluent and elegant manner soon vanished, as the "ink" they used was water. [Fig. 28] This is not unlike Song Dong's *Water Diary*, [Fig. 29] but Song at least has photographs to document his work. The workers in the square however, were concerned only with meditation and self-enjoyment in the writing process, with no motivation of making materialized artwork at all.

Fixed Quantity and Infinity: The Fourth Critique of "Maximalism"

Quantity and limitlessness, finite and infinite are mutually transformable and not fixed. In Buddhism, there are concepts of limitlessness that symbolize the Buddha's power, such as the ten thousand Buddhas, one thousand Buddhas and the Buddha with one thousand hands and eyes. Perhaps it is that when limit has

reached a certain point, it can no longer move forward, thus being close to limitless, like the Chinese laudatory phrases of "long live" (*wan sui*, literally "live ten thousand years"), or "longevity" (*wan shou wu jiang*, literally "live forever"). It is the unique creation of the Chinese to link worldly practice and metaphysics, which can be summed up as "Maximalism." The methods and discourse of Chinese Maximalism have been developed to an extremity in the visual form of the so called "Red Ocean" (*hong haiyang*) during the Cultural Revolution. As a part of his revolutionary discourse, Mao employed Maximalist methods repeatedly in his poems and political slogans. The vision of Mao's political space must have inevitably influenced contemporary Chinese artists. The gigantic size of artwork, repetitive form and maximal quantity are frequently used by Chinese artists, though their thought and form are not red anymore, for instance Zhu Jinshi's rice-paper installation [Fig. 30, Pl. 106-107] and Lu Qing's long scroll painting. [Fig. 31] Lu Qing uses one year, everyday painting small squares on a long roll of silk, experiencing a process in which handicraft and spiritual uplift proceed apace. In the end, this seemingly Minimalist form reveals the mental work of more than 300 days—a work that is incomparably Maximalist. In looking at this massive work, the viewer is moved by its greatness. [Pl. 84-85]

The traditional resources of Maximalism have also been employed by contemporary Chinese artists either consciously or

unconsciously. Repetition and fixed quantity are frequently found in art. For example, Qiu Zhijie's copying the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" 1,000 times. Whether it is exactly 1,000 times is as unimportant as whether there are really 1,000 Buddha sculptures in the "One-Thousand Buddha Grotto" in Dunhuang. What counts is advertisement and "maximality." Although "maximal" denotes a specific point of great quantity, it actually treats specific quantity with indifference. It strives for "maximal" and implies infinity. This phenomenon can also be found in daily life, such as the "Itinerant Peddler" done by the Southern Song Dynasty artist Li Song. In the painting, the peddler's load is marked with the words "one hundred commodities" to show the great quantity of his wares. In *A Dream Chronicle of Dong Jing* (*dongjing menghua lu*) written by Meng Yuanlao of the Song Dynasty, more than 1,000 kinds of commodities seen by the author at various shops were recorded in a flat and monotonous way—no descriptions, but only "presented."²⁰ No wonder monumental documentary works of art were born at the same era, such as *Going up the River on the Qingming Festival* and *Landscape of Daunting Dimension*.

Artist Hong Hao created a modern version of *A Dream Chronicle of Dong Jing* by using digital technology in the second year of the 21st century. Using a scanner, he scanned into his computer all the articles that he uses every day: toothpaste, Coca-Cola cans, bread, oil colors, cigarettes, pencils, computer mouse,

etc. Then he arranged these articles into a series of "abstract paintings" through computer design technology. From a distance, the "paintings" are obscure with only arranged patterns remaining. Approached closely, they look like thickly dotted and surrealistically "painted" articles that number more than a hundred or a thousand. Hong called them *My Things*. [Pl. 86-89] He is divorced from the feeling of using them when he scanned, stored, retrieved and arranged these pieces. These "useful things" have become "aesthetic objects," the elements, "color fields and lines" of artistic works. Breaking away from their utilitarian nature (names, materials, functions, credit, values), they have become one of the undifferentiated members of hundreds of thousands of pieces of "things," or the "victims" of Maximalism. But to Chinese, the process of copying, manipulating, describing and counting these "things" is a kind of pleasure in and of itself, an enlightenment of the way of truth, or *wudao*. [Fig. 32]

This great relish for "quantity" and "numbers" can also be regarded as an expression of making a fetish of "things." Chinese are known for their "fetishism." For example, Mi Fu addressed the Taihu stone as "brother rock," and people in the Ming and Qing had a great fondness for "teapot things." Some of the contemporary artists also take great pleasure in "counting numbers." A case in point is Yang Zhenzhong's video work *922 Grains of Rice*. The "plot" is extremely simple: a hen and a cock are pecking the rice

with the voiceover of a man and a woman counting for the chickens, "one, two, three..." until the grains of rice are completely eaten. [Pl. 90-91] The mechanical counting and the movements of the chickens provide the audience with some expectation of the ultimate numbers. As a chance number, 922, implies the extension of numbers, not the choice of the artist. Along with the happy rhythm of the pecking of the chickens, the artist also shares the pleasure of the "counting."

The Fixed Quantity in Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili's "Gray Humor"

Fixed quantity and "counting," however, can turn out to be an extremely boring matter, particularly when applied to making art. Its extremity leads neither to the "maximal," nor to infinity. On the contrary, it may lead to cynicism and nihilism. [Figs. 33-34] Even since the mid-80s, Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, two leaders of the 80s avant-garde art group called "The Pool Society" of Hangzhou, have already started applying the fixed-quantity method in their creation of "Gray Humor" art. I use the term "Gray Humor" to define Zhang and Geng's art because they both commonly choose gray or white-black color schemes to make something look mutual, insensitive, and at the same time, cynical. Regardless of the specific significance of using different media, the general idea of the group artists led by Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi can be

described into two major points.

First, they oppose the idea that art is a form to bring happiness and pleasure to the public, instead, they have tried to find any possibility, such as painting style, material and rule to make unhappiness for the audience. As Geng Jianyi said, "Basically, we are opposed to the simple American style of happiness which seems to be a beautiful state, a state changing from life to death, thus a state of escapism."²¹ Second, they recognize that most people, accustomed being emotionless, prefer a life without vitality and fresh air, categorizing all existing art forms into a set pattern of knowledge. Therefore, the Pool Society has made some traps imitating the insensitive reality with certain numb images and boring rules in a long-listed number to stimulate the people.

In that period, Zhang Peili painted a series of oil paintings called *X? Series*. The major images of the paintings are clinic chairs and gloves. He wrote down the steps and orders he would strictly follow before he started to paint. He duplicated the photography of the clinic chairs and surgical gloves into about 100 works. The *X? Series* paintings are large oils in which many numbers marked on the canvas point to different parts of the glove, relating to a set of paint-by-numbers instructions. [Fig. 33] Zhang published these instructions in an article which also laid down strict conditions for the display and viewing of the *X? Series*. For instance, only visitors taller than 4'3" or shorter than 5'8" were to

be admitted to the exhibition. Among the audience, those wearing red and yellow clothes, as well as lovers and couples are refused entry to the exhibition. They had to follow a set route through the exhibition, and discussion was prohibited.²² Giving even more harsh and extremely rigid rules governing the exhibition and viewing of artworks, Zhang created a project called *Art Plan #2* (*Yishujihua erhao*) in 1987. The plan is a twenty-eight page list of instructions with eight parts describing different rules, in total 270 items. In each part of the plan, Zhang specified in minute and tedious detail the conditions under which people should be admitted to an art exhibition. Again visitors must be taller than 4'3" or shorter than 5'8," refrain from speaking, and follow a route marked with mathematical precision. Unsurprisingly, the plan has never become a reality.

In this period, Geng Jianyi also made several series of paintings including *The Second Situation* to imply his painting theory which consists of four principles including "thriftiness in using color," "repetitive function," "indirectness" and "without comment."²³ [Pl. 92]

Zhang and Geng have continued making Gray Humor in the 1990s. Their basic attention, however, has been changed from an elite perspective of splashing people to a "hermit" sentiment isolated from the outside world, from criticizing (or enlightening) the multitude's lack of emotion in the 1980s to mocking an

inflammatory excitement promoted by the institutionalized market system of the contemporary art world. An even more cynical approach to Geng Jianyi might be indicated in a statement he wrote in 1993. He said, "I used to think that a completed artwork was like the completed act of taking a piss: when it's finished it's finished - you don't go carrying the contents of the chamber pot around with you. But now things are different, you can't just take a piss whenever you like anymore and be done with it. There are special bathrooms, like museums and art galleries that want to expose you in your most basic acts. And doesn't everybody now accept this situation as normal? The people going in for a look are all very interested, comparing who is big and who is small. How is it that I was born in this age of the institution? And how is it that I want to be proclaimed the champ? It's really a shame."²⁴

The new extreme direction can be found in his recent works. In his photographic work *The Bright Side and the Dark Side*, he measured the areas of the lighted and dark sides of the faces of several people, and then used corresponding squares to identify the areas he calculated. Numbers, although not used in the works, served as the foundation of the artwork. This kind of "measurement" materialized the life form of "human portrait," just as we measure the area of a rock or weigh a piece of butter. In the same vein, the white and black faces are deprived of the gray part which can best express the subtle feelings of a person, so that the

audience is not reminded of anything by looking at the face, as though they are presented with a picture of anatomy. This approach of obstruction has been used by Geng since the 1980s. He likes to create an image to stop the expectation of meaning or the visual satisfaction of the viewers. For Geng, the most important thing is not meaning, but what kind of pitfall to set up, which needs specific language in a different artistic backdrop. For example, the *Bright Side and Dark Side of the Face* uses area as language to oppose the vogue of "emotional overflow." [Pl. 93-94] The same principle is used by Geng in another of his works *How could a "Character be Enough?* This title will at once remind us of certain mood, such as the mood expressed in Li Qingzhao's poem "The Word 'Worry' Is Not Enough." But what Geng did is extremely boring, because except the word "of," he crossed out by ink all the words in a book. Afterwards, he made a new book with pieces of white paper based on the size of the first one, where he put the word "of" in the new book in its original places, except that the words have been changed into squares. [Pl. 95] This silly, repetitive and meaningless "labor" is a satirical attack on the inflammatory writing and reading which use a great number of the word "of" or *de* to artificialize "feelings" and overinterpret "meanings" confined only within the scale of art objects themselves without truly judging the reality and social context he criticized in the above statement.

Destination of "Maximalism"-Zen Buddhism? The Fifth Critique of "Maximalism"

From what we have illustrated above, we know that Maximalism has a close affinity with Buddhism, because the principle of the separation of work and its meaning is very similar to "not writing words" doctrine of the *Chan* (Zen) sect. Maximalism stipulates that meaning lies only in the personal experience, which is the same as the intuitive mysticism of the "meditation." It also believes that truth is nihilistic and meaning is groundless. This is exactly the ontological nihilism of Southern Buddhism that says "bodhi trees have no substantial bodies, and dressing table is immaterial." Maximalism believes that meaning of truth is always changeable, which is not grandiose but negligible, similar to personal daily life. [Figs. 34-35] Therefore, Maximalists regard their creation as repetitious "labor" and "production," which embrace the real meaning. It is very much like the idea of the Confucian school of idealist philosophy of the Southern Song Dynasty put forward by Zhu Xi after he absorbed the theory of Buddhism: "sweeping and cleaning the courtyard all contain truth" (*sasao yingdui jieshi ge li*). Often, the theory of Maximalism is in agreement with the life principle of the artist. It advocates a peaceful frame of mind, lack of desire, and aspiring to an almost "trivial" life and tranquil nature. It urges people to avoid boastful and inflammatory tendencies and extravagance, in order to lead a

simple life. It is true that many artists of this school keep themselves away from the mainstream and what is in vogue, and are quietly engaged in their own "labor." For example, Geng Jianyi, Gu Dexin and Zhu Xiaohe of the old generation do not hanker after fame and fortune, and lead an ascetic and self-exiled life.

One paradoxical vision is the giant size and endless repetitive forms of Maximalist artists' works. This seems to be in opposition to both their artistic and life philosophy, and quite similar to the concept of "eternal space" and "infinite time" produced by Mao's ideology. It may be true that Chinese Maximalism is inevitably influenced by the revolutionary discourse of the Cultural Revolution. All the visual forms employed by Maximalism, except the elegant color usually present in black and white, are related to the visual forms of the Cultural Revolution, such as the endless repetition of a political slogan, the infinite extension of a spectacular physical environment sometimes called "Red Ocean" (*hong haiyang*), and the use of fixed quantities such as "thousand," "ten thousand," and millions to allude to eternity and infinity. Maximalism uses these forms, however, as a method of deconstruction to undermine not only the previous Maoist ideology, but also any contemporary avant-garde ideology, be it idealism or anti-idealism.

Maximalism may also present a kind of reaction of contemporary Chinese intellectuals and artists to the rapid change in

urban environment and social life, in the peculiar material form that also relatively fits their life manner. Nanjing artist Cao Kai's digital video work *Summer of 1969* is an example. [Figs. 36-38, Pl. 83] Here, the artist is not intentionally "Looking for Zen and Dao." On the contrary, it may be the reaction of contemporary artists and intellectuals to the urban environment, and rapid social change. One can find this reaction very easily in the so-called Shanghai "abstract art" community.

Petty Urbanite Mentality and the Metropolitan Zen

Needless to say, Shanghai is a center of Chinese Maximalism, though I consider most Shanghai "abstract artworks" as they are usually called as nothing more than formalist art, inasmuch as they lack a core of abstraction as I mentioned in the beginning of this paper. Among the artists discussed in this paper, quite a few are from Shanghai, such as Shen Fan, Ding Yi, Wu Yiming, Song Tao and Liang Yue. One may also easily list a number of contemporary Suzhou River-based "abstract artists." But why do Shanghai artists particularly favor "abstract form"? It may not be a sophisticated answer if one simply concludes that because Shanghai is an international metropolis, Shanghai artists thus favor the "international style" of "abstract form." Nonetheless, the recent rapid changes of Shanghai seem to render this conclusion logical. Accordingly, the favorite of the "abstract" resembles Shanghai

artists' awareness of their "international metropolitan" identity.²⁵ Instead of focusing on the issue of identity, I rather, prefer to discuss the "formalist phenomenon" of Shanghai contemporary art from a historical perspective by gazing at Shanghai people's lifestyle and life philosophy.

After the Cultural Revolution, it was in Shanghai that the first Western modern-style exhibition in China, called "The Twelve Man Show" (*shier ren huazhan*) emerged in 1979. It was a pioneering art event, because the concepts of most artists at that period were still restricted by the previous ideological subject matter. When the '85 Art Movement flourished in the middle of the 80s, major leading Shanghai avant-garde artists, such as Li Shan, Zhang Jianjun, Chen Zhen and Yu Youhan carried out the unique Shanghai type of "Rationalistic Painting" by using "abstract" form that differed so dramatically from those of the non-Shanghai "Rationalistic Painters." The paintings by Li, Zhang, Chen and Yu neither attempt to feature a kind of "humanitarian impulse" (*renwen reqing*) as those created by the artists from the north, such as the "North Art Group" (*beifang yishu qunti*), nor intend to highlight the extremity of the Zen-Dada type of conceptual art as was espoused by artists from Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, such as the Xiamen Dada Group. On the contrary, they used peaceful, simple and geometric form as their basic vocabularies. It seems that repetition, systematization and dot-

curvilinear form has been a common language shared by the different generations of Shanghai contemporary artists since the end of the Cultural Revolution, including the artists discussed in this paper. In fact, Yu Youhan and Li Shan are of the same generation as Shen Fan and Ding Yi, and they share a similar sentiment with an apparent shifting direction from the "rationalistic painting" to "Maximalism" in the late 80s and early 90s. For instance, Yu Youhan abandoned his White and Black Sphere series which implies Oriental cultural and philosophical meaning, and turned to meaningless Color Spheres by randomly making repetitive dots and short lines on canvas. The later color dot opposes the former white black dot in allegorical way to undermine the previous metaphysical thought.²⁶ One may also think this contemporary Shanghai "abstract phenomenon" can be traced back to the legacy of the Storm Society of the 1930s.

The inter-influence and continued development of Shanghai artists' interest in form and style has created a myth of the so-called Shanghai "abstract art" phenomenon. The interpretation of the cause of the Shanghai "abstract art" phenomenon, may also rely on further examination of the peculiar characteristic of Shanghai's modern history and its related Shanghai people's life philosophy. For a long time, many Chinese have used the term "petty urbanite mentality" (*xiao shimin yishi*) to define Shanghai commoners' mentality, but from a very negative perspective.

For family reasons, I often went to visit my father-in-law in Shanghai in the late 1970s and 1980s. I have curiously found in common Shanghai families and work units, as well as in stores on streets, a kind of extreme regularization of Shanghai people's daily life. It seems to me that most Shanghai people are capable of carrying out various micro-trivial tasks in a well-trained administrative manner. This administrative ability perhaps is out of the colonial legacy of the early 20th century, and is rarely found in the daily life of Beijing and other cities, particularly in those from the north. These administrative characteristics have profoundly affected and cultivated Shanghai people's life philosophy and mentality: success is made out of day-to-day indifference and repetitive labor, and ambition grows from a lack of heroism and the accumulation of endless trivial rounds of daily life. It also seems to me that only Shanghai people are truly to be able to understand Zhu Xi's phrase: "sweeping and cleaning the courtyard all contain truth." For Shanghai people, the philosophy of "Zen" never lies in a romantic environment and imaginative world; rather it exists in the realities of daily life. Under this circumstance, the "petty metropolitan mentality" can transform itself into a sort of "modern metropolitan Zen."

Shen Fan's artworks and his lifestyle can be a good example for the "metropolitan Zen." Since the late 1980s, Shen Fan has repeatedly produced his "abstract" paintings without integrating

any abstractive frame thinking in them at all. His method employed in making those paintings has been the same: either impressed canvas onto half-dried pigment that had been "cultivated" on a wooden panel for few days, or using a tube as a brush in a way of directly squeezing pigment on to canvas. He somewhat turns oil painting into "printmaking" and makes his "strokes" insensitive. Wu Liang, a Shanghai critic, once offered his intelligent comments on Shen Fan's paintings in his article titled "Shen Fan's Space" (*Shen Fan de kongjian*). Wu points out that "On one hand, Shen Fan's 'painting world' has nothing to do with representing the vision of daily life. On the other hand, the paintings surprisingly feature the philosophical nature of the daily life in this real world: repetition, labor, overlapping, propagation, meaninglessness, Sisyphus' helplessness, being reclusive, anti-heroic, and unexpressive."²⁷ All the "nature of the daily life" described by Wu Liang here, it seems to me, resembles Zhu Xi's phrase, "sweeping and cleaning the courtyard all contain truth" and traditional Zen philosophy. Shen Fan sees himself as "a mediocre man," "a member of petty-bourgeoisie" with an anti-heroic characteristic unwilling and unable to save people. What he can confidently do is to carry out his oil-print making to "bore" people.²⁸ [Pl. 96-101] In order to reach the level of Zen realm, one must keep doing the boring thing not for a few days, but for many years even his entire life. Consequently, the narrow-mindedness

of "petty urbanite mentality" has been naturally converted to the openness of Zen philosophies.

Representation of Zen Thinking in Lei Hong's Drawing

Still, the artists of Maximalism are seriously concerned with the integrity of artistic creativity and human daily life. Art is not a vehicle to express something, but rather a part of your life. It is not that they deliberately try to reach into the realm of truth by making their art like meditation, but the "truth" or "Zen Buddhist significance" (*chanyì*) is reflected in their works in a natural way as the works are bounded with their daily life. This is especially shown in Lei Hong's works.

Lei is a graduate student of the Sculpture Department of the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, so painting is only his "sideline." But I think his paintings really manifest his religious aspirations. He has drawn more than 300 pencil sketches, which, composed of dots, lines and squares, have the characteristics of the abstract paintings of the West. However, it is very hard to identify any rational structural elements of the Western abstract paintings in his works. Instead they reveal a sense of life and spirit of humanism, for those signs of dots and lines are not created out of concept, but of imagery, like Chinese traditional ink painting, which never carries abstraction to extreme conceptuality. [Pl. 102-105] One can be reminded of a "line of flying wild geese,"

"chanting on a returning fishing boat at dusk," and the "lonely smoke in the great desert" from Lei Hong's drawings. The interrelation, moving direction and the intensity of the signs in Lei's works seem to suggest a narrative, telling the process of the imagination and feelings of a person at a certain moment. Lei's perseverance is also closely related with his personal experiences. He was mistakenly diagnosed with cancer in 1993, which dealt him a heavy blow, pushing him into nihilism and determination to explore the extreme consciousness. In the dead of night each day, he would devote himself to working on a sketch that is extremely simple and orderly, but filled with too much of his energy and excitement. We can see in his works how his impulse and passion are controlled and regulated through rational forms. This passion stems from his sudden grasp of a "momentary eternity," and "it is a completeness, a transcendence and the entering into a religious state to have been able to express it."²⁹ Thus, he was often compelled to sleep during the day by extreme fatigue. This reminds me of Malevich's Suprematism, through which he imbued his black and red squares with all his contemplation on the universe and mankind. However, Lei's simple and "metaphysical" paintings are more like personal "writing" in a deep meditation, a different "metaphysical operation" from that of Zhu Xiaohu. Unlike Malevich, who transforms an ultimate ideal in a stable and single abstract form, Lei seeks an ever-changing momentary

eternity. This eternity is a personal experience, not any given ready-made principle or theory. [Figs. 39-44] That is why he likes the repetitive approach of traditional art, because repetition can enable him to endlessly catch a fleeting eternity. As a result, Lei's spiritual representation is separated, fragmentary, chain-like and repetitive. One cannot appreciate his "constantly presented" but never "fixed" spirit unless one has gone over the complete set of his works.

Conclusion: Maximalism is a Methodology to be Shared

All in all, from the above discussion, we can say that Maximalism is another "metaphysical" artistic phenomenon in the wake of the "Rationalistic Painting" of the 1980s. We might say that they all belong to the category of "metaphysics" because they all advocate going beyond reality, putting emphasis on conception and methodology, opposing self-expression, and fighting against simple and inflammatory self-expression. They are all elite art. Nonetheless, unlike the "Rationalistic Painting" which aims at enlightening the masses, and thus elevating such spirit as "sublimity," "transcendence" and "edification," Maximalism tries to separate from, avoid, and even cut itself off from the external world in order to gain their meditative personal truth. Thereby it is the art of an ivory tower, a newly developing phenomenon in the

contemporary Chinese art world. You can say that it is a silent attack on the corruption of the avant-garde and the vulgar numbness of the masses, or an attitude of non-collaboration with authority. No matter how we try to define its "social significance," Maximalism has never attempted to jump into the discursive system of "social critique." Its main concern is about the artists themselves living in a rapidly changing society. Its discourse is an alternative that does not aim for either any "decidability of meaning," nor for a formalist object itself, but rather its own method and language. It does not aim at any metaphysical thinking itself, rather it is an allegory for the illusion of "metaphysical presence."

At the same time, "Chinese Maximalism" is also the most important methodological foundation of contemporary Chinese "abstract" art. We say it is a mature methodology because it squares with the creative foundations of many different artists, and can be used to interpret works by a relatively large number of artists. This concept is the artists' conscious or unconscious rethinking of tradition, for example the Chinese tradition of thinking about natural change. At the same time it is the artists' direct experience and transcendence of contemporary life. Most importantly, this sort of change and transcendence does not stop on the level of thought and language, but finds suitable visual manifestations in art. The formal process of creation is decided by

the content which underlies it, and artists have a special understanding of form as subservient to substance, quite unlike Western abstract art. From the perspective of pure visual language, "Maximalism" has developed the conventions of "process," "replication," "continuation," "movement," "dispersion," and "arbitrariness" present in Chinese traditional art, just as it has preserved and developed the harmonious relationship between the artist's mentality and the work's mentality that is a hallmark of Eastern aesthetic thinking. All in all, as analyzed in this essay, "Maximalism" as a methodology, whether seen in its traditional elements, or in its contemporary critical insight, has an obvious "Chineseness" as its essence.

NOTES

1. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *Art and Literature*, No. 4 Spring, 1965 pp.193-201.
2. Gao Minglu, "Guanyu Lixing Huihua (On Rationalistic Painting)," *Art Monthly*, 1986, No. 8.
3. Yve-Alain Bois, "Material Utopia," in *Art in America*, (April 1988), 161-180; *Chinese Art*, April 1988. Bois is an expert in contemporary abstract art of the West, and a professor at Harvard. He analyzed in his work how the early abstract painters of the West regarded the two-dimensional paintings as a mode of utopia or spiritual revolution. As Judd said: "all that art (European modern art) is based on systems built beforehand, a priori systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the

world's like." Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968) p. 151.

4. As Stella said: "My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he's doing. He is making a thing... All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion... what you see is what you see." Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd," in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, p. 158.

5. Michael Fried analyzed the difference between the modern painting of the 20s and 30s and Minimalism, and summarized the nature of Minimalism (or Literalist Art as he called it) very well as he discussed in the following sentences:

"Modernist painting has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to painting. It must be pictorial, not, or not merely, literal. Whereas literalist art stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects, if not indeed, as a kind of object in its own right. It aspires, not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such." Fried, Michael, "Art and Objecthood" in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), p. 120.

Michael Fried also indicates that Literalist (Minimalist) sensibility is theatrical, "because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. Morris

makes this explicit. Whereas in previous [modernist] art 'what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]' The experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation - one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder. And the concern of Minimalist artists is the scale within which the beholder and the object are related in a comparative distance. The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object. The subject (beholder) and the object is implied in such a comparison." pp.125-26.

6. I discussed this opposite groups of the '85 Avant-Garde Movement in *Dangdai Meishu Shi 1985-1986*, (A History of Contemporary Chinese Art) Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1991.

7. Zhu Xiaohe, "Letter to Gao Minglu," September 4, 2002.

8. Ding Yi, "Random Thoughts on Art," in *Jiangsu Huakan*, Nontrend Paintings: A Special Edition of Jiangsu Art Monthly, 1993.

9. *ibid.*

10. Ding Yi, "Notes On Creating," not published, December, 1995.

11. Zhu Xiaohe, Notes on Art, "Overwriting and Obscurity," entry 21, October, 2002, not published.

12. Zhu Xiaohe, Notes on Art, "Overwriting and Obscurity," entry 1, October, 2002.

13. Zhu Xiaohe, Notes on Art, "Overwriting and Obscurity," entry 22, October, 2002. "Thoughts are some outside quantity of labor, some over-accumulation of labor, and a paranoia of certain labor. I am a thinker when I am engaged in overwriting."

14. Zhu Xiaohe, Notes on Art, "Writing is an Assumption," entry 2, October, 2002.

15. Zhu Xiaohe, Notes on Art, "Overwriting and Obscurity," entries

15, 16, 17, 18. Entry 15: "Overwriting re-presents the old image, makes it hard to understand, so that no one can interpret and respond to it. This suggests a break away from some cultural form, a cultural strategy of rebellion." Entry 16: "To re-write the traditional Chinese old images, making them hard to comprehend, mixed up and undifferentiated is a Chinese-styled break away defined by Chinese and Western cultures. It also makes an inroad into and shares the abstruseness and complexity of the Western culture, and not stays in the primitive, simple and pure mode." Entry 17: "Overwriting as a cultural strategy against cultural hegemony is necessary." Entry 18: "Abstruseness and mingling is an understanding of the liberation of nationalism. In so doing the lost territory we take back from the Western culture is a kind reminiscence of the old wisdom. Obscurity and mingling have become the resources, cultural areas and features shared by us and the West."

16. Zhu Xiaohu, "A Letter to Gao Minglu," September 4, 2002, not published.

17. Zhu Xiaohu, Notes on Art, "Overwriting and Obscurity," entry 27, October, 2002.

18. Song Tao, "The Explanation of 49368mm²," not published.

19. For some ideas of Xu Bing, see his article "Dui fushuxing huihua de xin tansuo yu zai renshi" ("A Re-exploration and Re-assessment of Repetitive Painting," *Meishu* (Fine Arts Monthly), Oct. 1987, pp. 50-51. The images of his entire series are also published in the same issue.

20. Meng Yuanlao, *Dongjing Menghua Lu* (A Dream of Chronicle of Dongjing), Vol. 2. The book was written in the 13th century, and newly edited and published by The Art and Culture Publishing House (wenhua yishu chubanshe) in Beijing in 1998. Dongjing, or Bianliang, was the

capital of the Northern Song Dynasty.

21. Geng Jianyi, "Chishe de jinqi huihua (The recent painting by the Pool Society)," 1987, unpublished.

22. Zhang Peili, "Guanyu X? xilie de chuangzuo yu zhanlian zhengxu" (The process and rules of the creation and display of the X? Series), *Fine Art in China*, No.120. November 9, 1987, p. 2

23. Johnson Chang, ed. *China's New Art, Post 1989* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993) p. 28.

24. Geng Jianyi, "Chishe de jinqi huihua (The recent paintings by the Pool Society)," August 20, 1987, unpublished.

25. On this topic, please see Amy Pederson's very fine paper, "Contemporary Art with Chinese Characteristics: Shen Fan, Ding Yi, and Xu Zhen" in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol.1, No. 3, Fall/November 2002, pp. 27-43. She discusses Shen Fan, Ding Yi and Xu Zhen's works in terms of the identity issue of what is "Chineseness."

26. See Bo Xiaopo, "The Black-White Sphere and the Color Sphere," in *Wenhui Bao*, August 2, 1991.

27. Wu Liang, "Shen Fan's Space," in *Shen Fan*, a catalogue published by the artist himself in 1996.

28. Interview with Shen Fan in his Shanghai Suzhou River studio, June 8, 2002.

29. Interview with Lei Hong, May 20, 2002.