

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

GAO MINGLU

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise, Anthony Yung

Date: 17 Mar 2009

Duration: about 1 hr 56 mins

Location: Gao Minglu's Studio, Beijing

Gao Minglu (GM): There were philosophy series, like the ones published and translated by – including *Caixiang Yu Fanbu* [猜想与反驳, *Conjectures and Refutations*] – and a series published by *Shanghai Yiwu Chubanshe* [上海译文出版社]; it's a series of translations of *Western Xueshen Zhizuo* [西方学术著作]. That series was very popular during that period.

And of course, *Zouxiang Weilai* [走向未来, *Towards the Future* series], and *Wenhua Zhongguo Yu Shijie* [文化中国与世界, *Culture: China and the World* series], which came a little bit later. Then, there was another series, including Ge Zhaoguang's *Chanzhong Yu Zhongguo Wenhua* [葛兆光: 禅宗与中国文化, *Chan Buddhism and Chinese Culture*], and also a book by a professor from *Zhongyang Gongyi Meishu Xueyuan* [中央工艺美术学院, *Central Academy of Arts and Crafts*] about *Zhongguo Caitao Yishu* [中国彩陶艺术]. This series published more than twenty books. Ancient culture serials were also very popular. For philosophy, *Yiwu Chubanshe* [译文出版社] as mentioned earlier was the most influential.

There was also *Meixue Congshu*, [美学丛书, 李泽厚主编; *Aesthetic series*] published in 1980, translating aesthetic and psychology – like *Arnheim*. I saw a lot of *Arnheim's* books in used-bookstores when I went to the States so I think he wasn't that popular in the West. And also books written by Susan Langer, one of the psychologists whose work was translated and published by one of Li Zehou's students who went to America to get training for two years, like other visiting scholars. When they returned they brought some lists and gave them to the *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe* [中国社会科学出版社; *China Social Science Publishing House*], and they published this series of ten books. At that time *Arnheim's* book was very influential on formalism and composition. At that time in the art world, there were two different types of art-making – critical realism, like rustic realism, and academic painting, which is very interested in form, more modern, like impressionism. That's why a lot of artists were interested in the combination of art and psychology.

Li Zehou's *Meide Licheng* [美的历程] was published in 1982. It became one of the most influential books – it didn't just speak of art and aesthetics, but also culture and philosophy. It wasn't a typical scholarly book; it illustrated a lot of Li Zehou's personal feelings about his appreciation of art, like *Dunhuang*, but it still greatly inspired younger students and artists. That book perhaps should be considered the 'number one most influential book' of the '80s, because it involved *Rujia*, *Daojia*, Buddhism and a lot of issues, even though it's a small book.

In the early '80s, everyone had to read Marxist books, like *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. This book was influential because in 1978, there was the *Shiyijie Sanzhong Quanhui* [十一届三中全会], for old Marxist theory and reformation. Deng Xiaoping raises the slogans of *Rendao Zhuyi* [人道主义], and *Shijian Shi Jianyan Zhenli de Weiyi Biaozhun* [实践是检验真理的唯一标准]. They initiated this cultural and philosophical *Rendao Zhuyi* [人道主义] debates, but at the beginning, Marxist writing was still the foundation given to younger students for these debates.

I remember in 1982, when I studied in graduate school, a professor from Beijing University opened a course called 'Modern Philosophy', and what interested me was he used the first few classes to talk about *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

He used it to start starting about Marxist theories, before we moved on to modern philosophy, including existentialism and writers like Kafka and Sartre; Sartre was incredibly influential.

I also watched some theater and drama directed by Chinese graduate students; it was amazing because they were basing things off of their imagination; they had never experienced modern theatre before. I saw this at the *Haidian Juchang* [海淀剧场; Beijing Haidian Theatre], and they performed *Waiting for Godot* – and it was interesting to see the younger Chinese students perform plays inspired by novels and readings, and existentialism. Also, there is a book called *Huangdan Pai Xijuxuan* [荒诞派戏剧选; Selected plays of theatre of the absurd] published in the early 1980s. It was very influential too.

There were also art history books like, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* and H. Arnason's *History of Modern Art*, which was not that important in the West, but very clear and thus influential for us – I remember the first version sold out very quickly. Then we also had Chinese art history, ancient Western art history but at the time there were few good translations. Chinese art historians wrote some books. I think even now, there are few art history books that are good in translation. A Boston University professor told me recently that Gardner's 'Art through the Ages' is going to be printed in Chinese soon – but I haven't seen it yet. For Chinese art history reading at that time, I think the most influential was Wang Bomin's *Zhongguo Huihua Shi* [王伯敏：中国绘画史; A History of Chinese Painting].

(Q): What years were you in graduate school?

(GM): I went *Zhongguo Yishu Yanjiuyuan* [中国艺术研究院; China National Academy of Arts] from late 1981 to 1984.

(Q): And you stayed there after you graduated or immediately went to *Meishu Magazine*?

(GM): I went straight to *Meishu*.

(Q): And you said you learned a lot about Western and Eastern philosophy. Did you have a curriculum guide? A list of books or articles to read?

(GM): Yes, we had a list of articles and books, but I don't think I still have it with me. I remember we worked very hard and read everyday so that we could write papers and take exams. I remember I wrote a lot in my notebook; that course was very useful. I'm not sure if I have that notebook anymore.

(Q): Who was your teacher?

(GM): The teacher wasn't famous, I forget his name now. But he was very clear. Another professor, also from Beijing University who retired, taught us about ancient Chinese aesthetics from two volumes called *Zhongguo Meixueshi Ziliao Quanji Shangxiazhuan* [中国美学史资料选集上下卷] – I have those books. They were important for Chinese ancient aesthetics. At that time, Li Zehou and Liu Gangji started to write *Zhongguo Meixue Shi* [中国美学史]. Before that, the collection previously mentioned was most influential to students because every important figure had a short introductory paragraph. There were major trends to follow them during that period.

(Q): And when these books came out, were they reprinted after 1978? Or did all these books suddenly come out in '78 to '80? Are they new books or reprinted versions from an earlier period?

(GM): New books. Most were new, because before '78, even before the 1970s, there was no such thing around. You would only find books from the 1930s.

(Q): Even in the '50s?

(GM): Yes, most of the books of that time were Mao-related or Marxist-based. So suddenly, in particular after 1980, many, many books were being circulated.

(Q): I always wondered how in such a short period, all these books would just appear. Were people studying and writing? It takes a long while to write a book. People must have been doing this work throughout the Cultural Revolution. How did all these people suddenly publish all these books in one to two years?

(GM): I think you are right, perhaps the circulation started in 1978 or '79. It lasted two or three years. But at that time, people were eager to publish, and publishers were eager to get translations and lists from scholars. Somehow, in that time period, a lot of intense publishing was taking place. Printing quality was not good, but still, it was a very interesting time and the translations were very good; serious and accurate. Even compared to translations done today. The training and background of these translators – made up of an older generation of scholars– were strong, in Chinese language as well as in specialty subjects. Even foreign language training was strong as they continued through the Cultural Revolution – they studied at foreign language universities and this training never stopped. After the Cultural Revolution, they realized how important these skills were, and publishers pulled the experts out to translate works.

(Q): In some of our other interviews, we've heard this as well; that translations of early late '70s early '80s works are some of the best translations, even compared to translations made today. And a lot of people say it's because they had more and better classical Chinese training, more rigorous training.

(GM): Yes, also, at that time, they were 40 or 50, middle-aged. Some received training before the Cultural Revolution, but many were sent to the countryside at the start of their university training. And after the Cultural Revolution, they came back to the university as graduate students, so they continued to learn and study, and simultaneously were translating and writing. There were some professors, like Shao Dazhen, who did their training in Russian, but during the Cultural Revolution realized English would be useful, and switched to learn English instead. And also, just after the Cultural Revolution, well, actually, even before the end of the Cultural Revolution, Shao Dazhen found some Western modern art sources and translated a few articles, compiling the translations into a small book called *Xifang Xiandai pai* [西方现代派; Western Modernist Art]. I think that was published in the late '70s, '78 or '79. It was very influential. It's not filled with many articles, but there are a few on Matisse and Picasso. Scholars at the time were very serious, so the quality of translated materials was very high.

Also, there was one book called *Wusi Shiqi de Wenhua Lunzhan* [五四時期的文化論戰; cultural debates during the May 4th Movement]; in the mid-1980s, the third cultural debate was held. The second was right after the May 4th Movement, and began 1921 to 1924. At that time, it was called *Kexuan Dalunzhan* [科选大論戰; big debate about examination system] and was a debate set up between those in favor of scientific thought and those in favor of Chinese traditional methodology. The question debated was: how should we respond to Western modernization? You were either for tradition, or for Western science. A lot of articles were published on these debates and conferences, and in the '80s, the publishers collected all these articles and compiled them in a book called *Wusi Shiqi de Wenhua Lunzhan*, which was very useful. I think I still have this book. It was published in the mid-1980s.

(Q): That's interesting because I've always wondered how the debates in the 1980s resonated in some ways with the debates of the '20s and '30s, and I was wondering what the bridge was, because you obviously weren't alive then. I've always been interested about how tradition, or how those issues and concerns discussed suddenly became important again –

(GM): I still remember; I went to the conference and Liang Shuming [梁漱溟] was standing on the stage – standing! And he wouldn't sit down. He was 90 years old! He wrote many books, and they were all placed on the table, and one by one he introduced each book; why he wrote each book, how he finished each book – and he just went through all of them for about two hours. Having a conference like this at that time was amazing. I learned some very interesting information there; the first stage was called *Zhongxi Yitong* [中西異同] where the differences and similarities between the East and West were discussed. The second stage

was called *Zhongxi Youlie* [中西优劣], which questioned whether the East was better or the West was better. Then *Zhongxi Weilai* [中西未来], a stage to discuss the cultural future of the East and West. It was all very interesting. The 1980s debates reflected upon these three different sections well. That's why several decades later, the cultural debates repeated. Perhaps modernity would have continued from the '20s onwards if we didn't have to pause for war, or Mao's Revolution. So, a repetition of these debates in the 1980s was held along the same structure to that of the '20s, with more publications made.

I bought some books from a used bookstore that were published and printed in the '30s and '40s. At that time there were also some series published, like Gu Yanwu's[?] edition on Chinese culture. Each book was thick, made up of 50 volumes bound together. I bought it from the Beijing *Zhongguo Shudian* [北京中国书店]. The paper was already yellowing, and very easy to handle and read. There were consistencies to the way books were published too; it's very interesting. Now, it's quite difficult to find all these old series published in 1930, 1940. I'm glad I was able to find a few of them at that time.

(Q): Do you think you felt this way because you are an intellectual of a certain type? Or, do you think everyone was as interested in traditions as well as the Modern like you were? Maybe I'm coming from a Western perspective; But when I read about the '80s written by Westerners, they tend to be about the time Westerners came to China or about the time Western thought entered China. But in fact, when you interview someone, like you, it sounds like the interest in the West was equivalent to the interest in Chinese tradition and philosophy.

(GM): I think that is a very interesting question. This phenomenon has never been emphasized and paid attention to and you make a good point...

It's an interesting question because in the 1980s, there were a lot of self-organized groups; that's how I met a lot of artists, including Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun from Northern Art Group, Ding Fang from Nanjing, Zhang Peili, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Wu Shanzhuan... I have found that there are different kinds of artists –those interested in Chinese tradition and those interested in conceptual art. Those who were only interested in Western philosophy were interested in painting, in particular. The major painting movements at the time were based on Rationalist painting [理性绘画], as well as the so-called *Shengming Zhiliu* [生命之流], 'The Flow of Life'. They were more interested in Western philosophies, like Nietzsche's theories, and Existentialism. From these they would find themes and images to make their paintings.

Interestingly, I have a feeling that artists who are not interested in combining traditional Chinese culture and Western philosophy, they would not be able to establish something and to finish these culture tasks. There was *Zouxiang Weilai* [走向未来, Towards the Future series] magazine that had its first issue published in 1985. Its first issue published my long article and I called it *Zhongguo Hua de Lishi yu Weilai* [中国画的历史与未来]. I only wrote for the first half but never finished the second half. The first half is about 25,000 characters. I wrote about the ancient period, like about how Cang Jie [倉頡] created characters, to the modern period, like the works of Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmin and Liu Haisu. My perspective was based on Western philosophy but because I studied Chinese art history in graduate school, I discussed the issue of how to use Western perspective to investigate Chinese traditional painting. My conclusion was that old Marxist methodology should not be the foundation for art making. The old Marxist method placed content onto object. Instead, it should be about structure as separate from object. So I tried to think about how painting itself was a cultural production, that academia, life, and many other concepts are all part of painting, calligraphy or any art. I had to draw my attention to the philosophical and cultural environments of the time, including tastes and social change, not just political events. It's about how political events were changing the positions of scholars, including artists.

My thesis focused on Zhao Mengfu during the Yuan dynasty. I spent a lot of time doing research on the Yuan society, what happened when Mongolian scholars came to China, and the sort. I specifically chose this topic

because I'm from Inner Mongolia and stayed with Mongolians for five years. If you talk about ancient Chinese painting, the most attention needs to be paid to landscape painting. Landscape painting is more sophisticated, and provides greater access to painting's connection to Chinese philosophy. The history of landscape painting has a beginning, an end, and many different training groups throughout the dynasties. If you look at landscape painting the way I just mentioned, you have to find out the relation between the landscape and the scholar's life in society.

I like the paintings of Northern Song. I didn't know there was a term called 'monumental landscape' until I went to the States. But somehow, we were using a similar term, '*chonggao*' [崇高; Sublime]. It's interesting to see how Northern Song painting shifted to Southern Song, and how it then shifted to early Yuan.. I divide Yuan into early Yuan and late Yuan because *Yuan Sijia* was considered later Yuan and early Yuan consisted of Zhao Mengfu, Qian Xuan, Gao Kegong, and Ren Renfa. I think early Yuan was a very crucial period as it was a transitional period, from early landscape to late landscape painting. But I liked Northern Song at that time, and harshly criticized later Ming and Qing landscape painting. I also harshly criticized Chán Buddhism – and this was also an early 20th century criticism too. In early 20th century, scholars really disliked Yuan-Ming-Qing, because it wasn't useful for social reform. Being a recluse can be good, but being a recluse isn't usually useful! – so I criticized.

Anyway, back to your question. I think that even today, I am still trying to find a way to mix the West, modern, contemporary and post-modern with some traditional to find something that fits into the future, into the 21st century – I think it's important for artists to have a very broad knowledge and view about our cultural history, but unfortunately, in the 1980s, I found that some artists who disregard the traditional. For example, Wang Guangyi is a great artist, but he never thought about tradition, and I think his later period works are affected by it. His Pop works are great, but after that I think he has gradually lost his direction. It's the same for Shu Qun too, who was very interested in Western philosophy. He was very familiar with all the important philosophers and he even teaches philosophy today, but...well, I think it affects the ability an artist has when creating and figuring out an individual methodology. They may be familiar with what they read in books, but sometimes it's a kind of copying, of they just used some kind of philosophy as a theme and inspiration in painting. For certain periods it's okay to do this, but for the long-term it's hard to sustain.

Different artists include Cai Guoqiang and Xu Bing; in some ways, Cai Guoqiang is not a typical scholarly artist in many ways, but he's interested in many different things, which gives him an energy and open-mindedness. Not all the artists were like him in those days. Interestingly, you'll find that several of the most important renowned artists were interested in both Western and traditional culture, after they moved to the West. For example, Gu Wenda, Cai Guoqiang, Xu Bing, Huang Yongping... In the '80s, they began to explore Zen Buddhism, Chinese language, Chinese landscape painting. Wu Shanzhuan too. Major figures of this group (of artists who were more interested in Chinese traditions) moved to the West. Many of those who were not interested in tradition stayed in China, and produced Pop and whatnot.

(Q): Maybe it has to do with a certain type of openness?

(GM): I think that it relates to the question: what is art? How do you understand art? I think those who moved to the West were exposed to a certain kind of enlightenment, and were able to transcend it. They think that there is no big wall that divide East and West, But there are others who are only interested in the West, they would use philosophies in pragmatic, functional way –

(Q): Utilitarianism –

(AS): Yes, to serve society and serve themselves. It's Marxism!

(Q): Can we go back to the books really quickly? During the surge for books in the early '90s, did you see minds and attitudes evolving at the same time? What about the influence of the publishing industry on the development

of China?

(GM): Yes, there was a circulation -

(Q): And did you see this progress? You've written a lot on the history of the '80s - the art was developing over the '80s. You started with the Star Group...

(GM): I think in the 1970s, right after the Cultural Revolution, everyone was responding to the Cultural Revolution - it was the target of criticism and of painting. But there were no publications that 'gave' artists something new - the books were still about old. Artists tried to rediscover the early modernists in the 1930s, or maybe there were some Japanese publications circulating, through private schools and artists from the No Name Group, for example. Resources were very limited though.

I think before 1979, 1980, I only based my writing on some of the more important exhibitions that were exhibiting in Beijing and Shanghai, but most of the shows were of classical art, like *Shijiu Faguo Shiji Nongcun Huihua Zhalan* [十九世紀法國農村繪畫展覽; *19th Century French Country Paintings Exhibition*]...I remember *Zhongguo Meishu Guan* [中國美術館; China National Museum of Art] becoming very crowded. Then the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston also brought some work in, but the modern art segment was weak. Also Italian Renaissance too. Along with exhibitions, there were publications and catalogues, which influenced many Chinese artists. Sometimes, strangely, like Andrew Wyeth, who influenced rustic painting very much.

(Q): Where did that come from?

(GM): I don't know. In the late 1970s, some artists went to the States, and brought copies of the book back, but the majority of the artists who went to the West began leaving in 1980, because of political reasons - it wasn't really possible to leave before then. Wu Hung was the first.

Perhaps some catalogues came from foreigners coming into China - they started coming during the Cultural Revolution. But for publications about Western modern art, like Read's *The Concise History of Modern Painting*, was very crucial at that time. When Huang Yongping began to publish his early conceptual artworks in the early 1980s, I think his basic knowledge came from Read's book. What interests him were not paintings but figures like John Cage and Duchamp. But influence and inspiration in China doesn't always come from reading a whole book; sometimes one sentence will do.

Also, at the time, *Shijie Meishu* [世界美術; World Art] magazine played a very important role and contained a lot of concentrated material. There are so many magazines around today, but sometimes it's hard to know which ones are useful. Back then, you knew which ones were useful because there were only a few. For good magazines, you had *Meishu*, which was published from 1952 - 1985, the only magazine in China that really introduced contemporary art. There were also *Shijie Meishu*, *Meishu Yicong* and *Shanghai Meishu Congkan*.

Before *Meishu Yicong* [美術譯叢; Art in Translations] there was *Guowai Meishu Ziliao* [國外美術資料; Foreign Art Information], from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. That played an important role in learning. *Ziliao* [資料; Information, data] was very important, because there were no art history survey-type books, but *Zi Liao* was compiled chronologically, and you had philosophical *Ziliao*, art *Ziliao*, Chinese traditional and aesthetics or Buddhist *Ziliao*...there were several volumes. *Ziliao* was made up of original translations about art from the West. In the late 1970s, for the generation of artists like Luo Zhongli, and Chen Danqing, the red guard generation, *Ziliao* was incredibly important because people were not able to read much during the Cultural Revolution; classics, like novels and books about modern philosophy and modern literature were difficult to find.

When education was re-established in 1977, it was still hard to find books; it wasn't until 1980, 1981, when books were made more accessible. So, in many ways, this generation made more realistic, old-type painting. They didn't know what "Modern" means. After this generation, Wang Guangyi, Wu Shanzhuan, and others were able to read new books. Xiao Feng (director of Zafa then) bought many foreign art and art history books

from an exhibition. The books were on display in the history museum in the early '80s. They bought all the books and they put them in the academy's library.

So, this generation was able to read more conceptual history, philosophy and art history. The '85 Movement started in the early '80s, but matured in '85. Some artists like Zhang Peili, graduated in 1984, and others one year earlier, or one to two years later. But this generation was broader than the older generation. Their approach was broader, because the knowledge was totally new, with old knowledge like Marxism being swept away. Also, their sentiment towards the Cultural Revolution was no longer about portraying some tragic stories, but they transcended local social 'logic' and reached a higher cultural state of mind. That doesn't mean the artist of this time wasn't interested in socio-political issues or political-historical confrontation, but that through the creation of art and culture, the issue of modernity was raised and the work being created could enter a direct dialogue to Western modern art. So, the reason why the '85 Movement is considered the first contemporary art movement is because it was a time when people entered a dialogue with Western contemporary art. Before '85, [Chinese artists] only response to their own problems.

I always disagree with those who say 'It wasn't until the 1990s when artists began exploring internationalism...' It is true that in the 1990s there were more international exhibitions of works, but to me - because I was very much a part of the '80s - I believe international communication began during the 1980s. On the philosophical front, communication was very abstract, but it didn't mean international dialogue had not begun. All the publications at that time reached China's corners very quickly. Even remote areas, like Inner Mongolia, Gansu or Chongqing, were having incredibly effective circulations of material.

(Q): And we've noticed that, first of all, for the edition number to volumes was huge! Publishing companies were publishing a lot of material. Secondly, the distribution was very efficient. Maybe it has to do with the fact that there was a central unit, like *Xinhua Shudian* or something, but they were distributed to, as you stated, everywhere corner in China. Suddenly, these books were readily accessible.

(GM): At that time, *Xinhua Shudian* [新华书店] was very functional, unlike today; it's almost dead now. At the time, I think there were official stores as well as through 'minjian' [unofficial, 民間], where books were circulated amongst students non-officially. People in remote areas would also ask 'Can you buy this book to me?' and someone would send them the book. People traveled too, so distribution really wasn't an issue. So, there was an official-distribution as well as a minjian distribution.

Students, universities and the younger generation of that time prioritized learning about Western modern culture and civilization – ask Xiao Feng what he considered to be the first and most important priority of his Academy at that time.

I also remember that whilst in graduate school, the libraries were always crowded – we had a very good library. I studied in *Zhongguo Yishu Yanjiuyuan Meishu Yanjiusuo* [中国艺术研究院美术研究院], and our library was originally from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. It was from an institute in CAFA, called *Minju Yishu Yanjiusuo* [民族艺术研究所]. Somehow, I'm not entirely sure why, but at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, they removed this institute. And they moved this kind of *Yanjiusuo* [研究所] of different academies, including Theatre Academy and Music Academy, to China National Academy of Arts because we followed the Soviet system. In Soviet system, there is science academy, social-science academy, and art and literature academy...Jiang Qing wanted to follow this model so that apart from science and social-science information, we had had art and literature to read too. Everything was moved to our Academy. Not only the library, they only moved the old professors to this Academy. The library was really wonderful, with a lot of ancient materials. The Academy also had a lot of money to buy books.

Not only books. Twice or three times a week, I could watch films, ballets and symphonies, because in our academy there were students who major in different types of arts. The Academy would give us tickets and we could watch films or listen to music whenever we wanted; many students didn't take advantage of this option

because they thought time was limited and spent most of it in the classroom. But I often went to explore these other art dimensions. 1980s was a period of opening, not only through publications, but also through the international exchange. London ballet and Russian ballet and Boston symphony and other world-class performances were all invited to Beijing at that time.

Also, there was a rebirth of Chinese traditional *Kunqu* [Kun Opera] and *Jingju* [Beijing opera]; For *Kunqu* at that time, the [opera] troupe was complete, because right after the Cultural Revolution they were all still alive and brought *Mudan Ting* [牡丹庭] as well as *Cha Guan* [Teahouse] to Beijing. It truly benefited us. So, we didn't just have publications, but also had this exchange of experience, of seeing things in person. There is a film archive [*Dianying Ziliao Guan*; 电影资料馆] in Xiaoxitian which was open to scholars and graduate students, and though tickets were hard to come by, we were lucky because our Academy was under the Ministry of Culture [*Wenhuabu*, 文化部] so we had access. We had a list of important films available to us, both important Western films, as well as Chinese films from the 1920s. It was wonderful, and we could go every week. Knowledge like this was booming in those days. In the last few years, everyone was talking about the art market; but then, everyone was talking about 'what book and article you read, what film you watched,...' It was amazing.

(Q): If you were to choose one or two books that influenced you most, what would they be?

(GM): Okay. That's a hard question. Let me think.

I would say... *Being and Nothingness* by Sartre and *Being and Time* by Heidegger. It's hard for me to pick only one traditional text, because that was my field of study and well, there are too many to choose from. But for Western philosophy, those would be my two choices. Conjectures and refutations was also great introductions to Western modern philosophy. I would say the more influential books were within the subject of philosophy, not art. And the cultural...

(Q): In terms of the exhibitions you went to see in the '80s, which ones gave you the most shock or opened your eyes to new perspectives?

(GM): The first important show was *19th Century French Country Painting Exhibition*. Actually from a Westerners point of view, this show wasn't special, but it was for us a chance to see real Western realist painting. And the Boston MFA show – it was my first time seeing original Impressionist works, as well as modern works. I remember Picasso's paintings didn't impact me because we had been exposed to images in publications and the original work just wasn't very different. But I remember Impressionism, the layers, the colors...and the different kinds of painting that came out of that period. It was fascinating. Both exhibitions took place in the early '80s.

The third one was the exhibition of foreign language publications on art and art history – there were so many people that they sat on the floor. People would just hold a book and read for one hour or two. It was in the History Museum and it was very big. The hall was very open. The books were just put on the table. I had never seen this kind of exhibition. It wasn't a fair, because you couldn't buy the books, but you were allowed to read.

(Q): In the 1980s, in terms of non-Western non-ancient writers or books, who do you think were the most influential writers in the contemporary aesthetics/art field, yourself excluded? Who do you think, and was there any one article? Yours aside.

(GM): I think for the late 1970s, in contemporary art, philosophy, art history or aesthetics, Li Zehou was very influential.

I have forgotten to mention, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* was also very important at that time. The

translation was so difficult to understand though; it wasn't until I went to the States that I found an English version to compare the translation to. The Chinese version was translated by a very influential scholar, Zhong Baihua [宗白华]. Zhong Baihua's writing in Chinese is beautiful, and his strong ancient Chinese training is very present, but the translation he wrote was horrible. He translated the book from German, and it's horrible in comparison to the English version. At the time, I was able to make sense of the Chinese translation, but after comparing it to the English version, I didn't understand the Chinese version anymore... [Laughter]

There were only a few good philosophers, for example, Zhou Guoping [周国平], who introduced Nietzsche's theories, and Chen Jiaying [陈嘉映] who translated Heidegger's books. Gan Yang's [甘阳] team of *Wenhua Zhongguo Yu Shijie*, really gathered the most important scholars of that time. They were between thirty-five to forty years old and graduated from graduate school in the early '80s or mid-'80s, having already translated some books... Amongst experts in cultural studies, philosophy, aesthetics and psychology, Gan Yang and Jing Guantao [金观涛] played an important role. All the young scholars knew of them. Their writings were important, but also their ability to organization information; they were the leaders for art and art history.

In the field of ancient art history, Wang Bomin was important. There were scholars who just graduated from graduate school, but they were already forty and fifty, like Xue Yongnian [薛永年], Jing Weinuo [金维诺] in Central Academy of Fine Arts. There were also some senior scholars in various academies – from my Academy there were many old scholars originally professors at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

I spent two years in Tianjin learning from the scholar Yan Lichuan [阎丽川], who wrote the first book of Chinese art history. It was published in the Republic of China, before Wang Bomin. Of course, there were still Marxist theories present, but in the early period this book was a very comprehensive book. And the earliest Western Art History book was by a scholar from Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts. The earliest Chinese Art History was by Yan Lichuan. Wang Bomin published it in the 1980s, which was later than Yan Lichuan.

For Western Art History, Shao Dazhen played a very important role in early period. He introduced the *Western Modernist Art* [西方现代派]. Interestingly, when Shao Dazhen wrote the book *Western Modernist Art*, he introduced some very radical ideas, but when he made his own viewpoints, it was very conservative, very Marxist.

In particular when he published articles on Luo Zhongli's 'Father' [Father, 1980]. I remember Shao Yangde criticized Father heavily, and there were critics who supported Luo Zhongli, but Shao Dazhuan was in-between.

The debate about Father was the 'first round', and the 'second round' was about abstract art. The first round was still about Realism, but the second round has already departed from Realism. In the second round, Wu Guanzhong was the leading figure, he published along with other writers and issue on abstract modernism in 1983. There were several articles. I like Wu Guanzhong's writing, but it's not very theoretical. It's like an artist's writing, and though not heavily theoretical, I find it to be t very charming.

(Q): Engaging.

(GM): Yes, engaging, with strong points, and very sharp. In terms of artists' writings, I like Huang Yongping's writing. Huang Yongping's article *Xiamen Dada: Yizhong Hou Xiandai* [厦门达达：一种后现代] is still a very important piece. In 1985, there were a lot critiques and writings published in different magazines. I also like writing by Shui Tianzhong [水天中], which I find interesting because Tianzhong was trained in traditional Chinese art history, and didn't receive a lot of philosophical education, but he writes as though coming from nature. On the one hand, he is able to capture certain intrinsic, inherent things about object, and he captures it well, and he never departs too far into abstract, imaginative discussion. He describes social structure and environment well, and focuses on the discussion of object. His article called 'Rustic painting', published sometime between 1982-84 was wonderful.

(Q): What stands out for writers in the '85 period? Like Huang Yongping, are there other scholars, artists, critics

you would recommend? If you were doing a curriculum for students, if you were going to bring together primary articles other than your writings on the movement, who and what would you choose?

(GM): For artists, I would pick the writings of Shu Qun, Huang Yongping, Wang Guangyi, Ding Fang...Ye Yongqing's writing is quite good too. Mao Xuhui was good writer. Zhang Xiaogang didn't write that much at that time. In Zhejiang, Gu Wenda and Wu Shanzhuan's, of course. I like Wu Shanzhuan and Huang Yongping's writings very much.

For critics, I would say, Shui Tianzhong. Liu Xiaochun didn't write much but we had very interesting debates that were published in *Meishu Sichiao* [美术思潮, *Art Currents*]. Li Xianting wrote an article greatly impressed me, called *Zhongyao de Bushi Yishu* [重要的不是艺术, *The Significance Does Not Lie in Art*]. The article wasn't long, but it was published a few weeks after I made my '85 Movement lecture, in *Meishu Bao*. His first sentence was: 'The '85 Movement is not an art movement'. It was very interesting. At the time, I didn't write something to directly respond to his article, but I think he had a point, regardless of whether I agreed with him or not. It made certain sense. In general I disagree with the statement because I think it's hard to make judgments on what is and what isn't art. There isn't a universal criterion for understanding art, but I understood his point of view on art for art's sake. His point is more perhaps that the '85 Movement isn't art because it is a *Sixiang Jiefang Yundong* [思想解放运动, thought liberation movement]. I guess, if translated, that would come to refer to liberalism or freedom after the Cultural Revolution against the Revolution. Because it can be viewed as a thought-movement, a philosophical movement, it is not an art movement. I think this was his main point.

But to me, I ask, if it's not art, what is it? My point at the time was very clear; I thought that in comparison to rustic painting and scar art, the '85 Movement was not only an art movement but a contemporary cultural movement. It was a movement that intended to depart from the earlier focuses people had on local, socio-political issues. I also think that this didn't become crystal clear to me until I visited the States. It is still a political movement but in a very different way. There is always a relation to methodology. I suppose this is somewhat Marxist as well. Marx always want to have art to serve politics and society. I thought Li Xianting's basic idea came from this dichotomy. But are art and society are separate? To me, they are one.

Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was a very important book at the time. Structuralism was important in the 1980s. Saussure and Levi-Strauss. If I had to specify my methodology, I would say I was influenced by structuralism. I was very influenced by Saussure.

Though Li Xianting's article was against my point of view, it made sense. Now, I regret that I didn't write something to immediately respond to Li Xianting. Some of those thoughts were placed in a book about contemporary art history. We also had discussions in Zhuhai. But I didn't write something to respond directly to Li's essay.

In 1985, when I gave the presentation of '85 movement, Li Xianting's role was not that strong. His essay *The Significance Does Not Lie in Art* didn't really attract a lot of attention.

I think that 1986, '87 was a productive period, not only in studio but also in writing, from different artists and groups. In 1988 suddenly the situation changed. The most important phenomenon [in 1988] was the growing sentiment of 'Shoujie' [deconstruction], before the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition. Wang Guangyi raised the idea of 'to liquidate the enthusiasm of humanism' [清理人文热情]. And you have Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*.

At that time finding interesting articles was hard, because *Meishu Sichiao* were closed in 1987. In 1987, the closing issue of *Meishu Sichiao* published writings about all the important groups, and writings by the leading figures of different groups. That issue is very impressive.

For the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition, most of the articles written were in newspapers; perhaps people didn't have time to publish long articles. *Meishu Bao* had several articles about the exhibition; among them were

writings by Li Xianting. Meishu magazine has an issue that introduces the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition too – I'm no longer the editor because chief editor Shao Dazhen was a little bit sensitive about my situation. He asked one of his wife's students who graduated at the time, who is now the dean of Tsinghua School of Fine Arts, to edit this special issue. Overall, there was no interesting writing about the exhibition. Most of the writings were general introduction to the show only. In terms of introductions, the most important one was by Yang Zhilin and Xu Lei; they wrote an article and published it in *Hainan Jishi* [海南纪实], even though it wasn't historically in tune - they are artists not curators - they wrote about the whole process and about their experience. It captured a lot of things.