INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

ZHANG HONGTU

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise **Date:** 14 Oct 2009 **Duration:** about 2 hrs 27mins **Location:** Zhang Hongtu's Studio, New York

Jane DeBevoise (JD): Suddenly there were no longer constraints on books and information, so lots of books were coming into China, and publishing houses as well as translators were working together to publish books on Western theory. Here we have behind us a wonderful example of books, but they have been mutilated and emptied of their contents...

(Looking at a work by Zhang Hongtu in back left corner of the room)

I would like to know, in the late '70s to early '80s, what kind of books were you reading, what kind of magazines were you looking at, what kind of art influenced you, impressed you or inspired you at the time?

Zhang Hongtu (ZH): I think that's a good question because there were all kinds of books. Before the Cultural Revolution, we could read more books than we could during the Cultural Revolution. Before the 1960s, we read more books. I wasn't focused on any specific philosophy or history -my interests really are mixed – but I did read about European history, Middle Eastern history -because of my Islamic family background – Chinese traditional history...many different things. One thing that was interesting about that time was that there were public books that we could purchase at libraries and bookstores, and then there were Neibu duwu (classified) books –

(JD): Interior, Insider's books.

(ZH): Yes, but actually it was only for officials of level 13 or higher.

(JD): Like classified information – secrets only known by a certain 'level' of people.

(ZH): Like *Cankao Xiaoxi* – the version for the officers had larger characters because the people reading them were getting older and older. (Laughter) But if you could find something from Neibu duwu, you would become quite popular, because friends would want to make an exchange and borrow the book from you. Through this exchange, I read some things I could never have found in the library. For example, I knew someone whose father was a high level person – he had a book called 'The History of Impressionism'. This wasn't in libraries and bookstores at the time, but when I saw it – my friend was an artist too, I was so excited and even though I didn't totally understand what was written in the book. The pictures were so inspiring and new, with things I had never seen before. This was right before the Cultural Revolution. Sometimes, the library also collected good books. For example, when I was in high school, the library had one set of The World's History of Art; students were not allowed to borrow it because it was only for teachers. We had to pai ma pi, to suck up to the teachers in order to visit their homes to browse through the book. That's the first time I saw some images of Picasso's cubist works. I knew his name when I was quite young because he painted images for an Asia Pacific conference once. I saw a poster in the mid-'50s that caught my eye.

During the Cultural Revolution, things changed a lot. I saw people bring their books together to burn – like in the Indiana Jones movie, when I saw the movie series, they made me recall what happened during the Cultural Revolution. In college, a friend of mine and I wanted to stop the burning of the books, but we couldn't. Small children from elementary school, high school...burning old paintings, books...they had fun doing this. Fun!

Burn! I was an eyewitness to this terrible period. Many from my generation thought this was terrible too. 'We can't just read Mao's book, it's not enough!' Just because Mao is thinking doesn't mean we don't have to think – we have our own brains. Of course some people thought about this issue later, but it was too late. Nonetheless, during the Cultural Revolution, if we could find banned books, we would still read it behind closed doors.

(JD): Where did you find these banned books?

(ZH): There was one guy, my older brother's friend, who showed me Jin Ping Mei [The Plum in the Golden Vase]. I read it, my wife read it, and we both really enjoyed it. It was stone printed...on rice paper...you had to be really careful about turning each page...that was during the Cultural Revolution. Even if you tried hard to look for books, books were hard to come by.

In 1968-69, I saw a lot of people fight each other, kill each other, and struggle with weaponry...even the military supported students and other groups at times. I went to Xinjiang, Yunnan, Fujian...and that trip changed me a lot. This didn't seem like a Cultural Revolution but a destruction of culture. We were called xiao you pai (peripatetic). We didn't want to actively participate, but it was hard to just sit at home.

(Q): What made you go traveling?

(ZH): First of all, Da Chun Lian started in late 1966, when Chairman Mao said all students should leave the big city and go to the countryside to spread the seed of the Cultural Revolution, and that the big city should welcome those from the country into the city to learn more about the Cultural Revolution experience. The good thing about this exchange was that everything was free – the train was free, but many young kids died. Many didn't know how to travel, and it was a time of cultural chaos. People sat on the top of the train, even whilst it was moving. I squished into a cargo compartment with a lot of students. Later, I found it hard not to partake in the Revolution in some way – you had to do something to show that you weren't the enemy, just to stay alive. So a group of us decided to record our nation's history. Mao was the Communist party leader, but someone said he wasn't real and that he was unreal. This was interesting. So we went to many places that related to his history and story. Sometimes we had no food and had to walk very long distances, but I really enjoyed this.

This journey is a long story to tell, and doesn't actually have too much to do with this interview... I went to Xinjiang twice, and I went to Yunnan, and Guangxi...as well as many other places. When I came back, I started making some drawings and watercolors of things not really related to the Cultural Revolution.

(JD): Did you have access to art books at that period of time? Were some of your family members artists?

(ZH): Almost no reading, and no family in art. I collected a few books myself, from the Soviet Union – the only source you could buy from the bookstore – but really nothing else. Because I already graduated from art school (High School Attached to the Central Academy of Fine Art), I had basic knowledge about art history, which enabled me to continue making work.

(Q): Where did you go to school?

(ZH): The high school attached to the Central Academy of Fine Arts. I was there from 1960-64. The story I mentioned earlier about reading books at teachers' homes was during my school years. Another story: there was an exhibition called the 'Negative Exhibition', in 1962. None of the work on show was original, but there were posters of works by old masters...someone had gone to Europe and Japan during the '20s and '30s and brought posters back with them. From the early '60s, people were already criticizing those works as 'bourgeois, decadent art', so the exhibition was put together to show students what you 'Cannot do and should not do'.

(JD): What kind of work was in this exhibition? Do you remember any specific examples?

(ZH): Mainly Impressionism and post-impressionist work. I fell in love with Georges Rouault and loved the work so much. But I couldn't tell anyone because it was considered wrong to appreciate work like his. When I came to

the US, I went to the National Gallery in D.C. I took pictures of myself with those paintings. They were a huge influence on my work. Even though I didn't really understand the style, I knew this was something spiritually and personally strong, and not produced to follow a leader's point of view, like Mao's for example. That was in 1962. I didn't understand much but I wanted to try something different. This proved to be problematic in China – I was the best student in my class when I started school, but when I was graduating, my teacher said I wasn't good anymore because I didn't follow instructions. (Laughter)

(JD): Where were you at that time?

(ZH): Beijing. While working at a jewelry company, I was sent by the government to make jewelry designs – I ended up learning nothing, and it was frustrating because no one was wearing jewelry at that time. Typical bourgeois lifestyle. I also had to be an advisor to the designer. Everything was100% exported to Hong Kong, Europe...even to the States.

(JD): So how did you find out about jewelry?

(ZH): We had some magazines that the company had access to from Italy and Hong Kong. Hong Kong was a big source of all kinds of magazines.

(JD): Did you read any art magazines coming from Hong Kong at that time?

(ZH): The good magazines were still from the socialist countries, like East Germany and Yugoslavia, but countries like that weren't considered 100% Communist because they were open to different ideas. We also had good Russian magazines. But yes, you were right, Hong Kong was a good source for knowledge about the outside world.

(Q): This was after 1976?

(ZH): No, this is before the Cultural Revolution.

(Q): Maybe we should go chronologically.

(ZH): (Laughter) Oh, okay, okay. You can edit this conversation later. After the Cultural Revolution, magazines from Eastern Europe, Russia or Hong Kong were no longer allowed.

(JD): So when were they allowed again?

(ZH): After Mao's death. Neibu duwu was still the best source for good books. The one thing that reminded me about life in China was George Orwell's '1984'. That was also in Neibu duwu. Another one, the Third Reich, about Hitler's history – I felt there were many similarities between the Chinese government and Nazi Germany. This was all after the Cultural Revolution.

People's minds were really active. We would borrow books from each other, and share books and thoughts with each other. We'd get together to discuss the content of books we all read. I was in my mid-30s; I remember one day a young guy, about 18 or 19 years old, asked me, 'Do you know who is more important, Picasso or Cezanne?' I had no idea! I thought maybe the younger generation read more than I did.

(JD): You thought there was a right or wrong answer to that question?

(ZH): Yes, I said something that wasn't relevant, but after he left, I went to read up on Picasso and Cezanne, to compare and contrast. I thought, 'I should know that!' because I was the one who introduced them into conversation, but I didn't know who was considered more important. It wasn't just art history that was interesting, but philosophy and current events too. Real history you can recall today, but your reality will soon become history too. At some point, I became somewhat cynical about history, and thought history books were fictitious. All historians write different history books about a shared history... In the late '70s, not only could you read history books from Neibu duwu, but one began to fine more books at the library and at the

bookstore. Like Sartre, for example, was widely read...to tell you the truth, no one really understood what he was saying, but they were reading it because it was the opposite of Chairman Mao's preaching. There were prefaces in translated editions of Sartre that explained how to read his books, but no one really believed in the prefaces, so it was quite interesting to see how many variations people had on his writing.

(Q): At this point you were still working at the jewelry factory?

(ZH): Yes. Also one thing that shocked me, not from books, but from Xidan minzhu qiang [Democracy Wall, Beijing], were the number of new ideas out in the open. I enjoyed learning about what other people thought, and asked myself, 'What am I going to do? What do I think about this?'

(JD): Why did you start thinking in that direction?

(ZH): I just wanted to leave China, no matter where to. I stayed in China for more than 30 years. It's too long to stay in one place. Also, in China, I felt really isolated. Without any books, magazines, movies, you really didn't feel like that it was the 'center of the world', *Zhongguo* [China]. And then you had chance to read some books and magazines, and even to see some movies --- through some relationships, you could see internal, interesting movies, including movies from Hollywood and Soviet Union. And you felt that the world is big. The world is not just the things surrounding you.

But I didn't have any idea as to how to get out; I hated my job at the jewelry factor and would have preferred to stay home, but quitting was not allowed. If you quit, you'd have no salary and no food coupons. So you had to be working somewhere in order to eat. I couldn't quit my job. Many of us tried to change our jobs. After the 1980s show at the National Gallery, I received several offers to work in schools, which at the time was my dream job. Central Academy of Fine Arts offered me a job in the Oil Painting Department, and Tsinghua University offered me a position as drawing teacher in the Architecture Department. Also my own school, Central Academy of Arts and Crafts offered me a position to teach. Teachers have summer and winter vacations, and have access to free material, which would've been so nice. Unfortunately, I couldn't take it. My company said, 'If the government sent you here, you cannot leave.' I said 'Sometimes I don't have anything to do, I just sit in the office to read the paper all day long!' and they said 'Yes, that's fine, you can wait then until we have something for you to do'. For the company you were really just a tool. 'If I need it, I'll take it, if I don't need it, it stays locked in the drawer.' I was treated like personal property. I had a big fight with my company. After that, if there really was no way to leave the company, I told myself that I would seek help from my wife. My wife is from a traditional huaqiao family. She has many family members in the US. In 1981, some of her relatives were visiting China – I talked to them about my idea to leave the company and move to the US, and they supported me all the way. They helped me get a visa and enroll into the Art Students League in New York.

(JD): What year was that?

(ZH): 1982. So basically, my mental wanting to leave China was my reason for getting out, and it also made my future possible. In reality, what pushed me to leave China was my wanting to get out of the jewelry company situation. Of course, I don't have to say too much about books; I tried to read as much English as I could.

(JD): Tell us a little bit about the Contemporary Group, about how it was formed, and about the exhibition at the National Gallery. At the time, Tong Dai Ren –

(ZH): Yes, right, Tong Dai Ren (The Contemporaries) -it was the first time the National Gallery accepted an unofficial group, and the second time was with the Star Group. We were accepted because of houmen [backdoor relationships].

(JD): Who was it at the time?

(ZH): His mother was a famous actress; he knew Hua Junwu, head of the Artists Association, who was a powerful

man at that time. Through him, we got a space at the National Gallery.

(JD): And how did you guys create a group? Had you seen each other before, or spent time with each other before?

(ZH): All of us graduated from the same school, from the high school attached to the Central Academy. We were all of different age groups. I was not that close to them, because a group of them worked together, and painted models together on Sundays. Sometimes I painted with them. At one point, one of the members, Wang Huaiqing called me and said 'We want to have a group show together'. We didn't have a name for the group at the time, but we wanted to show our work together because we felt it was quite different from Cultural Revolution-style work. The Star Group started earlier, and had a splash of influence. Sometimes there was group rivalry, but I didn't really care about it, because I really like the Star Group too, and sometimes felt I didn't fit in either group at all. I was educated, but I wasn't that wild about changing my style. We were all friends, and were good at working together. We didn't have a curator, so we just talked to each other to decide which paintings should go in the gallery. The show was a success, because it was the first time people experienced non-Chairman Mao non-political imagery. Someone even wrote a poem for my painting – and this also led to other job opportunities. After that point, many people knew my name and work and tried to hire me. We didn't have the word 'hire' at the time. It was an opportunity to 'transfer' me from old job to new. I was happy about these other opportunities.

(JD): How many works did you have in the show?

(ZH): I'm not sure exactly, but about six or seven paintings.

(JD): And one was collected by the National Gallery?

(ZH): Yes, it was called 'Eternal Life', based on a sculpture from Han Wudi Ling (The Mausoleum of Emperor Wudi of Han Dynasty). I went to see the sculpture two years before I painted it. It was huge, and a little bit abstract. For a thousand years it was outside, but now it has been moved indoors. I thought it represented immortality.

(JD): How big was this painting?

(ZH): Around five to six feet long.

(JD): And did you paint this in your room?

(ZH): Yes, at home. I didn't make this a statement about political ideas, but really had it be a reflection on my ideas about art and life. It's a long story.

(JD): So since that exhibition – were there other opportunities to exhibit elsewhere?

(ZH): The same exhibition traveled a lot; it traveled to Hangzhou, Xuzhou, Tangshan and other different cities. At that time, I was busy changing jobs, and preparing to come to the US, so other exhibitions were not my priority. I made a painting about Si Wu (April 5th), after Zhou Enlai died. To pay respect to him, people were also writing lots of poetry and notes to criticize Chairman Mao. But I didn't show my frustration through painting because no one would accept it otherwise. Si Wu was reviewed after a few years.

At the Tong Dai Ren (The Contemporaries) Exhibition, you could say some of the paintings were influenced by Klimt, Cassatt...artists like them. Definitely not like Cultural Revolution-style painting. Our group was less liberal than Star Group. I made one painting that was rejected by one of our friends – he said it didn't 'suit' the exhibition. This painting was about my conception of China, and it was a little political but not that political – it was based on an old story about a bird beating on a tree to make light in the darkness. I showed it in the US instead.

(JD): Shall we enter the time you were in New York?

(Q): So you went to the US from high school, but you never went to the Mei Yuan.

(ZH): No. It's a hard story to explain. I was supposed to go to Zhongyang Mei Yuan, but it was closed for two

years because – I later learned -Zhongyang Meiyuan was the first to start the Cultural Revolution, in 1964. Our teachers said Zhongyang Meiyuan was not accepting new students because there were no jobs for new graduates. The government was supposed to give everyone a job after graduating from school. Perhaps it was true, I don't really know, but it was true that there was no such thing as being a freelance artist. You were either a teacher, or you were an illustrator, or you worked in a factory designing something. There were few opportunities to choose from. So, Zhongyang Meiyuan was closed. I went to Gongyi Meiyuan, but I didn't want to be there. I was so self-confident. 'I don't want to go that school, it's all about Applied Arts and Crafts' and I didn't like it. Instead, I wanted to get a job and decided this was the best option for me.

I have an autobiography and mention this story in my book. Anyway, the Principal of the art high school had a talk with three of us who didn't want to attend the school. He said 'Cao bu cao Gongyi meiyuan shi Geming he bu Geming de wen ti (Whether applying to Gongyi Meiyuan or not was a question of our intentions of being revolutionary or counter- revolutionary)'. I found out later from teachers that the examination for Gongyi meiyuan was fake too, and that those accepted were accepted long before the exams were taken – based on their displayed works in the classroom. So I said 'Okay, fine'. I didn't really care about the exam, and I guess it wouldn't have mattered anyway. A slight digression –I just read somewhere that for our national sport, diving, the gold medalist for the national games is pre-determined. But, you know, this kind of news coming out of China doesn't shock me anymore. That's the way things are there.

(JD): Did you bring your artwork with you? Did you set up a studio? What was your feeling, what was your reaction about the United States?

(ZH): First of all, how much time do we have here today? That's a 27-year discussion!

(Q): Well, for the '80s in particular.

(ZH): A lot has happened in the last two, three years. Okay, I'll see if I can make the history shorter. I came to the US in 1982. Bastille Day, that's how I remember it. I was at the Art Students League, which gave students an I-20, and the opportunity to pay a tuition fee of less than 200 dollars a month. No examination results were necessary either to enroll. Half of the students in the school had a job as well. Another artist, Qian Peisen from Shanghai had been at the school there before me. He was in a group called the '12 Artists'. Chen Danqing came in January and I arrived in July. At the same time, I had a job to make a living. My wife's family supported me a lot, but I didn't want to bother them too much. I went to the Art Students League everyday.

(JD): What kind of job did you have?

(ZH): I painted walls. That was my first job. To answer your previous question, I brought a lot of my paintings here. In my late '30s, I thought I was a professional artist, so I saved a lot of my work and tried to bring as much work as I could to the US. Someone I knew who came from Shanghai a few years ahead of me; his father had a big textile business with the Rockefellers, so he made a lot of money. They owned a building on 23rd street near Madison Square Park. This man knew Chen Danqing and Qian Peisen, and all those from Shanghai. We were introduced to each other. He said, 'Let's have an exhibition in this building before our renovations start'. He was giving me the opportunity to sell some work, but more importantly, this was the first show in which I participated in New York City.

(JD): Who else was in the show with you?

(ZH): Chen Danqing, Qian Peisen, who you should interview too. He was part of one of the earliest, unofficial groups in Shanghai.

(JD): Is he still here?

(ZH): I'll try to find it. Now he does commercial work to make a living. He came here one or two years earlier than I did. And Chen Yifei, Yuan Yunsheng…they came closer to when I came. I didn't know everyone from China, but I knew Chen Danqing, Chen Yifei, Yuan Yunsheng, and Bai Jingzhou, who was the student sent by the

government to Illinois; he received his Masters degree in Illinois and then ended up moving to New York. If you need a list of names, I can find my list for you.

(JD): Thank you. So you had this exhibition in this un-renovated space. Who came and who advertised it?

(ZH): He said he did, but I don't know where or how. For the opening, I thought the audience was a rather unknown crowd, because I didn't know anyone except the artists. This was only a few months after I arrived so I didn't know anyone to begin with. There were a few Taiwanese artists I knew who had big names and were living in huge fancy Soho lofts. They came to the show and also offered to help some of us get used to living in the US. Some American audiences were there, but I didn't know anyone except Joan Lebold Cohen.

(JD): So you didn't sell anything from that show?

(ZH): No.

(JD): Did that disappoint you? How did you feel?

(ZH): Yes, it disappointed me a little, but I didn't really care that much.

When I was applying for the visa for my stay in the US, the American consulate in China was asking some questions. One question they asked was 'How long are you going to stay there? You can't work with this visa, you know...' I said 'Of course, I'm not going to work.' 'After four years you have to come back' and I said 'Yes, of course', but I knew I wasn't going to come back unless my wife was unable to come. Fortunately she joined me after two and a half years.

I showed at another group show in Springfield, Massachusetts at a place called the International College. This took place through an American friend I knew from China. His father taught at this International College and his colleagues organized a show in collaboration with Zhongyang meishu xueyuan. I was the only one who was not in Zhongyang meishu xueyuan. They sold works, and they enjoyed the exhibition.

(JD): Do you remember the name of the student?

(ZH): His name was Rick Belsky. He got his PhD in East Asian Studies at Harvard, and now he teaches in the history department at Hunter College – he's very nice. I met him when he was 18 or 19 years old. He studied Chinese and taught English at Normal University near my home in *Xiaoxitian* [in Beijing]. After the show on 23rd street, since I didn't sell anything, I thought 'I have to find a job, because I can't make money from painting'. Fortunately for me, I met two people at the show who gave me a hand. One person was Ross Lewis. He introduced my work to a commercial gallery called the Hammerquist Gallery, which showed artwork and made frames. They gave me my first one-person show of works I mainly produced in New York. That was in 1983, I think. I sold two paintings. I was very proud of that.

(JD): Who did you sell it to?

(ZH): It was one of the paintings I made after visiting the Dunhuang Caves. It was a work of ink and brush on rice paper, of people riding bicycles. Backs of cyclist bodies, with a lot of empty space around it. That painting actually influenced my later computer work, which was shown at Princeton University – do you have that catalogue?

(JD): Yes.

(ZH): So this piece that sold was the first version of my bikers series. The gallery taught me something. The gallerist wanted me to make another piece like the piece that sold, but I couldn't because the repeated version just wouldn't be as good. 'No More', I remember saying. I felt really bad about that but I just couldn't do it again and again. The first was filled with feeling, but the second was just a piece of paper with marks on it. The second one sold too, but I told the gallerist 'no more'.

(JD): Do you remember how much it sold for?

(ZH): $1900, which was big money at that time, but the curator had taken some commission off of that. Another lady who was part of a small art organization introduced the second painting to the World Bank in D.C. – The World Bank had an art collection. I felt so strange giving a painting to a bank; I didn't realize banks collected art. Another person who helped me a lot in New York was Robert Lee – do you know him?

(JD): Yes.

(ZH): I think he went to the Hammerquist show because he and Ross were close. He saw my work and visited my home, my apartment in Soho – can you believe it? I lived on Sullivan Street for free! That's another funny story for another time. Anyway, Robert went to my Soho apartment; he did a lot of work to help artists at that time.

(JD): He has a great archive going too; he's asked AAA to collaborate on an event and we really should.

(ZH): Speaking of archiving, AAA asked me to update my file but I haven't yet. It still has my old slides, I'm sorry.

(JD): No worries. So, Bob Lee gave you a one-man show?

(ZH): Yes, and he also helped me apply to NYSCA [New York State Council for the Arts]. I could get a $9000 grant, but if I got it, I would have to help him out. That was the first grant I got.

(JD): Did your show with Bob Lee get publicity in the paper? Did people outside a small group of close friends find out about it?

(ZH): Not really. I got some publicity from Bob Lee's wife, who was a dancer. She asked me to do a backdrop for one of her dances– and the next day there was a review in the New York Times. At the time, I didn't think it was important, but in retrospect, being on the New York Times in less than a year was a treat!

(JD): And the New York Times reviewed your show or the backdrop?

(ZH): The dance and my backdrop. Actually, I just met the lady who wrote the review through the Taiwanese artist behind Cloud Gate. She interviewed the leader of that group, and so the program had her name on it. 26 years later and she's still writing New York Times dance reviews. It was amazing; I met her last year. The review talked about the color and tone of my backdrop. Her dances were Dunhuang-like, very minimal, soft, with slow movement...so the backdrop had these subtle changes in color...with my slide projections on top. Bob Lee was the first person to introduce me to the concept of a nonprofit organization.

Learning about nonprofits was exciting for me. They represented different cultures, different ideas, and different missions. In the early '80s, there were many young Japanese artists in New York, as well as from South Korea.

(JD): Do you remember the names of these organizations?

(ZH): Art-in-General, Artists Space, the Alternative Museum, Exit Art, the New Museum, which at the time was on par with all the other smaller organizations...and there were more. I can give you a list.

(JD): And did you approach them or did they approach you?

(ZH): Most of the time, I sent slides out, and the organizations would review works each year or half year to decide which artists to put in show. After my show at Artists Space, another similar organization to Artists Space in New Jersey invited me to show my work. I had a one man show at a place called 4-5-6-Gallery. The official name was Huamei Chinese American Institute or something like that. My first show with 4-5-6-Gallery was in the early '90s. After that show, I participated in a four-person show, at Art In General. The Bronx Museum too was a part of this group of art spaces; I had a friend participating in their summer program, in a group show in the early '90s. 1992 maybe. I was also in the Decade Show, which took place in 1990. It took place at the New

Museum on Broadway. Before that, in the '80s, I showed at Artists Space.

(JD): Was that a group show? What kinds of artists were in it?

(ZH): They have an exhibition each year and a guest curator who curates the show. They would visit artist studios and pick and choose artists they liked. I got a big review on Village Voice after that show. They had a special section called 'The Untold Artist' or something like that. Artists they considered good, but often not talked about, would be written about. I had pictures of my artwork and me in the article.

(JD): In the '80s, what did these nonprofit organizations enjoy about your art? How did they read it? Was there a single voice, or were their many readings of the work?

(ZH): In retrospect, I think they found my work quite different from the mainstream. That was their main purpose; they didn't want to just follow the Whitney Museum or MoMA's programming. They wanted to do something a little bit more unique, perhaps exotic, with a focus on different cultures. Yes, one thing they really considered was the issue of identity – how artists from different cultures identify themselves. The work I showed at Artists Space had nothing to do with what you saw in major galleries and museums at that time. Women's rights were important too. Homosexuality was another issue, but the artist's identity of him/herself was prime. I think my work fit well into this section. How does my work relate to my life experiences in China, even though I now live in New York? I think that's what they were looking for and what attracted them to my art.

(JD): Did you understand that at the time?

(ZH): No, not really, I didn't even know what 'identity' really meant. I checked the dictionary and learned a little bit about it, but we never considered it interesting to art in China. It had nothing to do with art in China. But it stems from the subconscious. For example, my paintings about 'the back of the head' show the artist in a new reality. An attitude against reality is what they saw in my work. For me, the back of the head was really just about facing an unknown place. At the City Gallery near Columbus Circle, I showed this piece. Later, in the early '90s, people were concerned with my Chairman Mao work, which was shown more and more.

(JD): Just to go back to this issue of nonprofit spaces in the US, or about scholars, curators projecting issues of identity onto your paintings -I read a paper recently that there was a Korean group called the Minju Group that also showed at Artists Space in 1988. They thought it was interesting because the Minju Group had to do with finding democracy in Korea. But when the group came to the US, they became a third world, radical, identity group.

(ZH): That's true, yes. That's a very difficult issue, especially if you talk about it with any curator or critic. If you recall, there was an exhibition called Exhibitionism, and it was about African Art. The African art on view didn't have the intention to promote itself, but when placed in the New Museum, with light and people and many perspectives...the analysis makes the term exhibitionism relevant. But what are you going to do? It's all quite interesting.

(JD): So you showed at these various spaces. At that time, were you also selling art?

(ZH): No. After I sold the second piece to the World Bank, up until 1994, I didn't sell anything.

(Q): What did you do to support yourself during that time?

(ZH): I started with wall painting, as mentioned earlier, and then got a major job in stonecutting. The outside walls of Brooklyn Borough Hall have my fingerprints all over – we made it look like the original building. It was a really hard job; I wore a mask, earphones and was hanging off building walls for a while...that was my main job to support myself.

(JD): Where did you learn to do that?

(ZH): Sculpture in China. Also, I had to lie a little. 'Do you have experience in stone cutting?' I said 'Yes, of course'. I

didn't really, but after one day, I felt experienced. I didn't feel too bad about lying to get the job. Also, at the Art Students League, the basement was used for sculpture, and many sculpture students did this kind of job with me. One of my friends from Shanghai did stonecutting for a long time and he was the one who introduced me to my boss. I started with $15/hour, and then ended up with $20/hour.

(JD): And you had insurance?

(ZH): Yes, I did. I helped build Brooklyn's Borough Hall, as well as the Central Park outer wall...I was a part of the union, which provided me with good health benefits.

(JD): Do you think it influenced your art?

(ZH): I learned to control tools well. Personally I like using my hands.

(JD): These works are beautiful works. (Flipping through a catalogue)

(ZH): Those I showed in the '80s.

(JD): What were the materials you worked with? ZH: Plaster, burlap canvas and tar and cement on the surface. For this one, I put plaster on first, and then made impressions in the plaster to form reliefs. I would then work on the dried plaster to add a few final touches.

(JD): Did you show these?

(ZH): I showed "The Hand", and it's still in my studio. I think I showed this one two or three times, in the '80s and early '90s.

(JD): When you showed them at Artists Space.

(ZH): No. The work that showed at Artists Space was already destroyed, because it was so huge and the relief was just too heavy for my small studio space. Had to destroy it but I have slides.

(JD): Your palette is quite interesting too. It's quite thick and dark. There is a consistency to these pieces.

(ZH): Kiefer was one of my biggest influences during that time. You can read the article by Jerome Silbergeld, about the fish works. The museum collected this fish piece – I have a poster of this one too, I think. The posters are on sale at the museum. Princeton collected that one.

(JD): There is something dark, fearful and scary...

(ZH): And a little bit ugly too.

(JD): And then your work changed quite dramatically in the early '90s.

(ZH): It changed drastically when the Tiananmen Massacre occurred in 1989. It really changed me a lot. When I came here to the US, I thought I would forget everything that happened in China; that I would start my new life here, from day one, and have nothing more to do with China. Unconsciously my art made my past in China resurface, but I still never painted directly about China or my past in China. Strangely, after I came here, not only did I try to forget what happened in China, I had a strong attitude against what I learned in my socialist realist education. When people ask who my teacher was, or who influenced my practice, I just don't feel that comfortable saying who – I knew lots of famous artists from China, like Wu Guanzhong, Dong Xiwen, Li Keran, whose son was my classmate...so when I came here I thought, 'No more socialist realism, no artwork about politics, make art for art's sake.' I experimented with styles like that of deKooning and Pollock, using bold brushwork and bold color.

But after Tiananmen, I found myself becoming very Chinese again. I taped all the CNN programs during that time – I have six tapes in total. It was a really emotional time for me. We donated paintings, artworks for fundraisers, and did a demonstration...we did a lot. I reacted heavily against the event. At the time, I didn't

think that it had anything to do with my art. Right after June 4th, things grew rather quiet...so I went back to my studio and started doing work, but really just couldn't do the 'back of the head', or anything I was doing before. That's when I began making my Chairman Mao works. I used slide images and printed them out with a laser printer, then made 12 Mao Zedongs...and the Last Banquet. I didn't understand people's reactions to the new paintings because it was, to me, a temporary emotion about my needing to support the Chinese democracy movement, but the reaction was very strong, much stronger than I expected.

(JD): And the reaction was from who?

(ZH): American society, not just from within the art circle. Another thing about Bob Lee was, he called two to three hundred artists together, all kinds of artists, lots of American artists too who supported democracy in China. We showed together with Vito Acconci, Nam Jun Paik and others, and with our art spoke all on the matters of China. The show traveled, and even went to PS1, which at the time was an independent nonprofit space, unassociated to MoMA. I'll show you some images.

There was an article written – Actually the 12 Chairman Mao piece was first shown at Lincoln Center at Cork Gallery near the parking lot. The next day, people called me and found the images on Newsweek magazine. People talked about it, and I received many phone calls from people saying they loved it, and others, who hated it. Some more leftist people asked me what happened in China, and some thought it was a bad idea to play with Mao's image. Then the Bronx Museum gave me a one-person show.

(JD): Is this on canvas?

(ZH): It's on paper. It's one of the 12 Maos, the first cut out of Mao's image. I had Wu'er Kaixi, one of the student leaders, cut out inside. That was my work relating to the student movement. Sometimes they act like Chairman Mao's children, and sometimes they react against Mao.

(JD): So it sounds like the reaction to your work changed quite dramatically after Tiananmen.

(ZH): Yes, but one thing that didn't satisfy me was the fact that the works were about political things and about China. Not so many art magazines and art papers talked about it. Mainly Harpers, Newsweek, Village Voice...

(JD): What was the show that Bob Lee did at PS1 and at other locations? Was there a catalogue?

(ZH): For the show in D.C., yes, but not the one in New York with Bob. But Bob had a newspaper called Spiral, with whole page images and articles about the PS1 show. I think I have a copy.

(JD): He probably has slides or something.

(ZH): I think I have a copy of his newspaper, if you need it I can try to find it.

(JD): Was there a community of other artists whom you spent time with? Did you talk to other artists often? How was your relationship with other artists?

(ZH): I had a close relationship with a group called Overseas Chinese Artists Association, including almost all of the Chinese artists from New York City, and some from Australia and Canada. We met pretty often, before 1989. Yuan Yunsheng, Chen Danqing, Chen Yifei all left early. Can I say something a little bit "negative" about them?

(JD): You can say whatever you want to say.

(ZH): No. Okay. Well, those artists, especially those three, were already very big names in China. In Chen Danqing's words: "fame and money fell from the ceiling when I was in China" - that's what he said to me personally. Yuan Yunsheng got a big name from his airport painting. I respect him because at the time, he was a young artist breaking from tradition. Even in the early '60s, he had opportunities to see reproductions of Impressionist paintings. Chen Yifei was the first to invite me to his apartment but we didn't associate with each other too much. He showed me his portrait he made of Robert Hammer's wife. He said 'If you paint someone younger with a smile, you'll definitely hit success'. I really hated that comment! There should be some truth in the

process! But we had a very good meeting that one time. Chen Danqing and I knew each other in China, and even though we didn't see each other too often, I knew he still wanted to learn. Even though it was difficult for him to get away from what he learned in China, he still tried. But those guys never learned English – if you come to the US you have to learn English, that's one of the ways you can open new windows for yourself. Otherwise you're always looking at things through a curtain or through the same lenses. Chen Danqing didn't care what I did with nonprofit organizations. I didn't sell anything, and he had good commercial galleries, like Wally Findlay...by the time I had a deeper relationship with nonprofits and with Asian artists here, from Japan and Korea...I grew distant from them. I was invited to a group called Godzilla, and I was the only Chinese artist. We didn't have a similar artistic idea at Godzilla but we could share something in common, and relate to the way we felt about experiencing New York. People were very nice to me. I think I was relatively easy-going, and talked to people in a friendly way. I still talked to Chinese artists and we recalled things that happened in China, about common friends, about food, but after Tiananmen, it just wasn't that interesting. I remember there was a gathering at Xia Yang's home – people respected him because he had experience from Paris as well as from New York. Yuan Yunsheng was there too. He was kind of ...well, he spoke to me very impolitely and used very strong words. He thought Deng Xiaoping was great because without him the country wouldn't be open. I said 'No, we had the right to leave the country. If he didn't open the country to the West, that would've been wrong. If he did open the country, well, that's his job.' I didn't appreciate his comment. He went ahead to say that students destroyed open policy and economic growth; that students destroyed development in China. We had this fight in Xia Yang's home. People were shocked. Everyone at the gathering was either from Hong Kong or Taiwan. The two of us were the only Mainland Chinese there and I just had to leave. I couldn't continue this kind of conversation. Everyone was friendly with me, but everyone respected Yuan Yunsheng's age. The next day, I wrote Yuan Yunsheng a letter saying that I was going to quit being a part of the Overseas Chinese Artists Association. And actually, after June this organization no longer existed. Yuan Yunsheng's nephew Yuan Zuo, was also in the States, in upstate NY or something. His school gallery really supported the student movement in China, and wanted to provide a space for artists who were affected by Tiananmen. Yuan Yunsheng rejected this idea without asking anyone for feedback.

(JD): Because he disagreed with the political stance?

(ZH): Yes. Political, not personal. I was easy going, and I tried to help people, to make people happy. But a lot of people had very political takes on China.

(JD): Was Yuan Yunsheng alone in his point of view? Or did other people also think that students ruined things? Because that is a point of view that some people take, that things would have been better without them. Were there others in the Chinese art community who agreed with him too?

(ZH): When we talked about this point of view, Yuan Yunsheng was very expressive about his political stance. Other artists mainly shared my ideas – we could talk to each other about them without getting into fierce arguments. Some others were in-between. But Yuan Yunsheng really spoke out. Because of this, I could argue that he was the only one.

(JD): So when you say that Tiananmen was a break point for you, was it just for you, or for the entire community here in NY?

(ZH): I think for me, primarily. I didn't see that much change in the work by other artists, before and after Tiananmen.

[...]

(ZH): (Perusing catalogue) That's Shen Kuiyi's show. It was a group show in 2003 or 2004. And Xing Fei...

(JD): Where was she from?

(ZH): The Central Academy of Fine Arts. She has three kids now, so it's been difficult for her to continue her work. She's working on some design job too. I met her at the Queens Museum, at Yue Mingjun's show.

(JD): Do you know Hu Bing?

(ZH): Yes I know her very well. She teaches in New Jersey to make a living. Currently making glassworks.

(JD): I saw a piece of hers at the Brooklyn Museum.

(ZH): We are good friends, I know her very well.

(Q): Did she go to Yale?

(ZH): No, she went to Purchase, in upstate New York. Another woman artist active in the '80s was Liu Hong.

(JD): Right from San Francisco. She showed here in NY too?

(ZH): Yes, at a gallery in Soho, which later moved to Miami. Now she's showing with a gallery on West Broadway...Nancy Hoffman Gallery I believe. Her first New York show had a big review in Village Voice; a whole page article, because she was the earliest one who dealt with Chinese women's issues. Her style isn't that aggressive, still quite realistic, but her idea -her subject matter is important and good. Now she's also showing in China.

(JD): Gu Wenda's ex-wife, Guo Zhen, she wasn't showing here was she?

(ZH): She was Gu Wenda's wife, at that time. She spent a lot of time taking care of the family.

(Q): You mentioned that a lot of the artists get integrated into society to learn English and things like that. Was it somewhat clique-ish, living and working in the same environment?

(ZH): Yes, if you didn't put an effort, your lifestyle in New York wouldn't have been that different had you been in China. I'll give you another example. When Yuan Yunsheng came here, he was invited by Zhou Wenzhong to Columbia University. Zhou Wenzhong had a party at his apartment and even invited the American writer Arthur Miller to attend, along with his wife. Yuan Yunsheng had the most opportunities, and the most important opportunities too. One of my friends Carry, who studied Chinese in China, was continuing her studies at Columbia and became his translator. Zhou Wenzhong introduced Yuan Yunsheng to deKooning, for a studio visit. He said 'deKooning was just sitting there on the chair, as though he were asleep and didn't care about my presence. But then I opened to a page with one of my drawings, and his eyes got really big.' deKooning introduced his dealer to Yuan Yunsheng – the dealer told Yuan Yunsheng he wanted to represent him and his work and in response, Yunsheng said 'I'd rather go back to China and be controlled by the Communist party than be controlled by a dealer!' Really strange. He didn't know about the art world and the relationship between artist and dealer, and he wasn't open to learning either. He had a two-person show with George Segal in Boston. He thought he was the bigger of the two artists. I had a relationship with a nonprofit, so I introduced Yunsheng to the possibility of designing a public mural. I think this was 25 years ago, and it was for a public building in Chinatown. I introduced Yuan Yunsheng because he had experience doing murals. 'Was I the only invited artist?' I said 'Probably not. I'm sure other artists nominated other artists too'. He said 'No then, I only want to do what I want to do.' So he didn't apply. It wasn't just a language problem – it was an attitude problem. So in the end he went back to China, which I think was good for him – if he stayed here he wouldn't have been happy. Also, he had very strong national ideas about American art. He thought that Chinese art was the greatest. It is great, but so is a lot of art.

I went to South Africa for one month, and I can say the art there is great too – it's not about who is high or low. Something happens there, something happens here. So, their attitude was something I couldn't really share. I feel bad sometimes because I'd hear 'You're not really friendly to other Chinese artists' some people would say. But that's not true. I invited many people to my home. But if we spoke politics or art...it just wasn't a good idea to be in the same room.

(JD): (Laughter) Do they share that same feeling about America and China; about what is good and what is bad? Is it continuing or is it gone?

(ZH): Everything about China is complicated, so yes and no. One positive was, for the '30s and '40s, these artists had more information about American art, even before they left China. They had many opportunities to show their work all over the world too. They had a more open mind about American art. In the recent years, people in China have much stronger nationalism. This is a negative in my opinion. Everyone wants to make China and Beijing the centers of the art world.

Another Chinese big name artist also came here to visit. We showed together, and had dinner together. When he saw Jackson Pollock's work, he said 'That's not great'. That's okay for him to say, because he doesn't know the history, but if you don't know the history, you really don't have an idea about context. It's still happening with many younger artists. They don't understand the context of the work, so the decisions come out wrong and silly things are stated.

(JD): Do you think that your experience with the Chinese artists who came here had a different perspective and expectation than you?

(ZH): Yes, different I think. Some shared the same attitude. They thought that if they were famous in China, they should also be famous in America. New York is very cool; everyone comes here from all over the world so it's quite a competitive environment. For Japanese artists, I met many of my age or older, and they understood the situation. Even if they were unhappy, they understood that one had to work hard, learn, have people understand you, and get to know your work. None of them accepted 'immediate fame' as the New York entering criteria.

In the '70s and '80s, even with a strong nationalist attitude, many Chinese artists wanted to stay here, because they didn't like the Communist attitudes in China. No one enjoyed the Cultural Revolution. But there were (and are) frustrations to living here too.

(JD): That's interesting. But you didn't get that same feeling. So they were coming to the US for opportunity, but weren't really running away from something, from a political situation. They didn't have a particular painful experience to escape from.

(ZH): Yes that's true. Also, before they came here, they had some knowledge about the Western world. So it was a continued journey of sorts. But for Chinese people, there was always culture shock, sometimes good for artists, sometimes bad. The shock made some feel uncomfortable, and made New York difficult to enter. But if you really had the right attitude, the shock was a good thing, and encouraged a new form of learning to start a new life. I went back in '87, because that was my mother's 70 birthday. The first time I went back. After 1989, after the Last Banquet was rejected I couldn't go back to China. Another artist, Zhang Hongnian , went back to China in 1990 and was stopped by customs officials...he was waiting for his luggage, and the officer called him 'Zhang Hongtu' instead of Zhang Hongnian. His daughter knew me because we knew each other in China. He came back and showed his passport and ID at which point he was released.

(JD): So you were obviously on a list or something, because Zhang Hongnian's work wouldn't bring controversy like that.

(ZH): He recently made some beautiful illustrations for National Geographic.

(JD): He was taken up by James Cox Gallery.

(ZH): At that time, I didn't go back until 1997. My mother said 'You don't have to worry about us, stay in America.' My friends were also saying. 'Don't rush back to China.' They were looking out for me.

(Q): What about the Chinese art world?

(ZH): I cared at the beginning because I came from China and my subject matter still had to do with China, so I was still interested in the response of Chinese people, but after a few years, say, the mid-90s, I gave up on going back. They wouldn't show my work anyway.

(JD): Nothing about your work?

(ZH): Nope. You know Zhang Jianjun – he knew an editor in Shanghai, and introduced him to my works in the form of small black and white images. When he came back, he said that the published magazine received strong criticism by the high level officers. 'One editor got fired for having your work in it,' he said.

(JD): You're still that controversial in China?

(ZH): That was in the mid-90s. It didn't even have anything to do with my Mao works either. I still have the magazine. When this kind of thing happens once, or twice, it makes you feel hopeless, you know. Tsinghua University asked me to give talk – it was an invitation from the Vice President, who at the time was a friend of mine. But he told me 'No Mao images, just talk about your shanshui painting'. No Chairman Mao. The Chengdu Biennial two years ago said the same thing. The curator said 'You can be on the panel for ten minutes, but don't say anything about your Mao works.'

(JD): I remember because I was there.

(ZH): Yes, yes. One of the audience said, 'You lose face for the Chinese people!' or something like that.

(JD): Right he said, 'You're losing the face of Chinese people because you're creating Chinatown art!'

(ZH): Yes. (Laughter) It's a little bit understandable because for that panel, everyone except Zhang Hong (Arnold Chang) and me were critics and art historians.

(JD): Oh, so the only people who were speaking were art historians and critics. And there were only two artists?

(ZH): Yes, two of us, the only two artists coming from America.