

## INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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### ZHENG SHENGTIAN

Interviewer: Jane DeBevoise

Date: 31 Oct 2009

Duration: about 1 hr 30 mins

Location: New York

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**Jane DeBevoise (JD):** What I would love for you to talk about a little bit, are your experiences with books; with materials from China and the West, of traditional or revolutionary content during the Cultural Revolution. Did you have access to them, how did you access them, and what were your feelings about them at the time? We understand that many books were banned, and people were criticized for having books...did you have those kinds of experiences? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Zheng Shengtian (ZS):** Yes. I can start from the 1950s, when I first went to Hangzhou as a freshman at the Academy. That time, Hangzhou Academy was already considered one of the top institutions in China; the school was called Zhongyang meishu xueyuan: huadong yenyuan, and it was an Eastern-China branch of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. We did have a very good library, from Lin Fengmian. Actually, many of the books were purchased by Lin Fengmian, and other professors as well. It wasn't a big collection and many of the books were very old; 1930s and 1940s books from foreign countries. But after '49, when China was completely cut off from the West, China didn't get any more new books. All the books we had were thus twenty-some years old. When I got into the Academy, I could see some art catalogues and magazines of the 1930s in the library. We could still read it, but we just didn't have current information. So throughout all my school years, we lived with these books. I remember one set of world art collections published by a Japanese publisher, and a few modern painters works, but most of the information was about work from the 19th century, the Renaissance and whatnot.

But at Hangzhou Academy, we had an interesting publication that started from the early 1950s. I entered the school in 1953, and we already had a translation of materials from foreign countries. It was called 'Yishu cankao ziliao', a reference material of sorts. In the school there were a small group of teachers who were good at English, French or Russian so they worked as a team, and with selected texts in hand, published this small booklet, periodically. It was published once a month or ten times a year. Most material of that time was from Russia, because of the required ideology. Only originals we had were from Russia. But the texts weren't necessarily on Russian art. It could be that a Russian writer wrote about Western art history, or something like that, so we could get a little bit of information from them on the West. Their publications were all in black and white, sometimes with small illustrations or images of works (also in black and white), but at least this was a small window for the students to learn about things happening outside of China. To me, that was very important because I was always interested in books and always curious about what was going on, so I probably bought every issue of that collection, up until 1957, 58, when I graduated. They probably had 60 to 70 issues, some heavy, some small, and those were the things we read outside of class. In class, we were taught art history according to 'the ideology'; typically Russian, Socialist Realism. From those publications we received more information. This continued throughout the years; they changed the format several times.

A few years ago, when Claire [Hsu] invited me to a workshop in HK, I gave a presentation on those publications...let's see...in 1950, they called it Yishu Yi Lun Zi Liao – and in 1960 they called it Wai Guo Yishu Can Kao Zi Liao, or something like that. They changed the name. But it continued to have the same format until after the Cultural Revolution, when they made it a regular magazine – with magazine format, with a cover

and back and color plates inside – it was called Yishu Yicong – ‘The collection of translations’. So up until now, they are still doing this. So in Hangzhou, they had this tradition of introducing information from outside, and I think it was a good tradition. It meant a lot to schoolmates, my colleagues and me at the time. When the Revolution finished, China began re-opening its doors and there was an opportunity to get information and publications from the outside world.

**(JD):** This magazine was published through the Cultural Revolution?

**(ZS):** Not during the Cultural Revolution, because from ‘66 to ‘76, there was no way to get anything.

**(JD):** So the publications stopped.

**(ZS):** Yes, and some of the translators and teachers were punished and tortured for it. I think two of them passed away during the Revolution at a labor camp. They had anti-revolutionary history; one had worked for the Chiang Kai Shek government, and another had studied in Japan or something like that. Back then, they were treated like Chinese enemies. But the crime they apparently committed had to do with translating foreign materials to students! After the Revolution, when the government raised the ban and let books and magazines come to China, it was an opportunity for the Academy to start again, but it was not easy to get a hold of information, because the government had to first screen books at the international bookstore in Beijing. This wasn’t the most helpful for us– at that time I was a young teacher at the Academy and we wanted to know things about modernism or post-modernism...we wanted to know about contemporary art, but we couldn’t get those books from the international bookstore. They picked what they thought was ‘safe’. Then after a couple years, we were offered the opportunity from the international bookstore to organize a book show on the subject of Art. I think they made money by introducing science and medical books to the community. They had a special book show and book fair for this particular profession, and they eventually sold the books to universities. There was a pattern for making money.

Then someone, I’m not entirely sure who, suggested to work with our Academy, so they contacted us. This was in 1978, or ‘79, I can’t exactly remember. The school had a discussion about this. ‘Should we do this or not?’. At the time, we had a really good Vice President to the Academy, Wang Dewei, and he was very open. He used to be a hard-line administrator and Communist, and came from a background of ‘little red army soldiers’ so he was always on the left of the leadership. After the Revolution, he changed. When Deng Xiaoping started this notion of ‘open-policy’, Wang Dewei was really for it. He played an important role in opening up Hangzhou Academy. I worked under him. He asked me about this book proposal, and I said of course, ‘We should get more books because our library is quite poor, and contains only old materials.’ We really needed more new materials. So after a couple of meetings, the school agreed to partake, and the Beijing international bookstore said to send someone or a few people to help pick and choose books from their numerous catalogues for importing and buying. The Academy sent three teachers to Beijing; myself, another teacher Yin Guangyu [殷光宇], who taught perspective and also read English well. The third was not from the Academy, but was from a publishing house. He also graduated from Hangzhou Academy but he worked as an editor for the local publishing house. His name is Situ Hong [司徒虹]. Maybe that’s wrong...I’ll have to check my notebook. I called him Si Tu. So the three of us went to Beijing together and stayed in a small hotel, and the international bookstore provided us with tons of catalogues that they received from abroad. We worked day and night to pick titles for our library – there was pressure on the number of days we had to work through these catalogues. In a week, we picked about a thousand titles altogether.

**(JD):** Did you have a budget?

**(ZS):** I don’t remember, but we tried to cover different periods of time, and different countries...I think we mainly got books from Japan and Europe, some from the US but not too many. Eventually, the bookstore would make a final selection from our lists. If we asked for too much, they would probably reduce the number of titles. I

can't find the list we provided for them, but the school just found the list of the books we purchased and I have a copy I can share with you. So, we worked really hard all week to select titles, and when we got back, Si Tu got sick – he had a heart issue we didn't know about in Beijing – he worked so hard with us, and it made him more sick, but he didn't tell us. Soon after, he passed away. I always remember this, because he was the one who helped contribute to this change. He was the one who joined us to contribute to this event, to bring books of new and foreign art, which influenced many young artists. It is our duty to remember him. He was a painter himself too.

So, when the books came, and after they were scanned and shown in Beijing – they may have shown in a book fair in Shanghai too, I can't remember - all the books came to Hangzhou Academy. Suddenly, our school had a new library – all the newly published books, magazines and posters... all at Hangzhou Academy. Coincidentally, the school was also planning to build a new library and I was asked to create a mural for the new library. I was working hard because I was very interested in mural paintings. I made a design using calligraphy – long before Gu Wenda and Xu Bing! – and used Seal Script as well as different styles for the library wall. Unfortunately, the school had a budget cut so the mural wasn't realized. If they made it for the library, I think it would've been quite beautiful. Large characters on the building facade – you wouldn't have seen something like that before. Anyway, the books came to our school – there were rumors saying that the school sold a car to have enough money to buy these books, which I found out later was partially true...it became a myth at the Academy and throughout China, because it's a good story to tell. 'Look at Hangzhou, they sold a car to buy books for its students!' But the truth was the school sold an old truck – the truck was overdue anyway (Laughter) and should have been in a junkyard by then, but I guess it came in handy in the end. The school got more money from the sale of the truck to buy these books; it wasn't that expensive, probably twenty or thirty thousand dollars, or something like that. It was the first time the Academy received a large collection of books, and after a few years, we did a similar book fair to get even more.

**(JD):** So you did one in 1979, and then one in 1980?

**(ZS):** Yes, but for the second time round, I was not there anymore, I was in the United States. Through those years, the library in our Academy became what I believe to be the best place for young students to come read, find information, and get in touch with contemporary art. That's why a lot of young artists applied to Hangzhou to study, because of the library and resources available to them. They didn't come for the teachers, but truly came for the library. The library was not only open to Hangzhou Academy students and teachers but also open to students from other Academies. At that time, you had to have a letter of recommendation, some sort of an introduction. With that letter you were able to come peruse the library. Many other campus students came to read. In Xu Jiang's memoir, he said that at the beginning, they were not allowed to borrow the books or take the books to read [in the library] on their own. A teacher had to be present with you. For example, if my student wanted to read a book, I had to be there to take the book off the shelf and turn the pages. I don't remember this myself but if Xu Jiang wrote it in his book then it must be true. Gradually, the library became more open to the students, but on the first day, the only accessible materials were in the reading room and they could only be borrowed one at a time...

**(JD):** From your perspective as an artist and as a teacher, do you remember any books that were particularly meaningful to you, personally?

**(ZS):** I don't remember particular books, but I was very interested in bringing in magazines of all kinds, because I always believed magazines would provide more current information, more updated information. So we tried to get more, like Art News from the United States, Apollo from the UK, and one magazine from France, and several from Japan. Magazines were references I went to check often whilst in the library. Many of these magazines we later subscribed to, so we didn't have to get them from the international bookstore. The books always came six months late, so the information we read wasn't always the most current, but it was still good

and much better than before. I recently browsed the list to see what kinds of art books we purchased... there were not too many about contemporary art, but there was a good collection of 20th century art books about post-impressionists, expressionists, cubists...we had a quite good collection of these periods and of their artists. The school didn't have any books from these periods before.

**(JD):** In the 70's, China started to take in students again. Can you explain how Hangzhou Academy began taking students in, and what the requirements were for these students? What would your personal involvement have been in that process?

**(ZS):** The first year, in 1977, all the academies in China had been closed for ten years. If you think about this huge country; for example, zoom in on one city, one student; a talented, young artist wanting to go to school...and multiply that. Imagine the whole of China, hundreds and thousands of students wanting to go to school. When the school announced they were going to reopen, that students could enroll, we got so many applications and portfolios sent to the school that the post office had to send the applications to us by truck; the truck was filled to the brim with packages. There was no way you could select in a careful meticulous way; everything happened so fast and we had to screen all these portfolios in the short time we had; a few days. We didn't have time to interview everyone either, so we first selected a couple hundred, and then looked again to select fifty. Then we interviewed fifty and chose ten for enrollment. I remember – I even took pictures of the first screening. We used so many rooms at the Academy and put all the portfolios on the floor.

**Chen Aikang (CA):** There were mountains of portfolios!

**(ZS):** (Laughter) Yes, and we sat around these mountains to review the works. No-no-no-yes-no...I believe a lot of talent was lost in that selection process because the selection process had to be so quick. Of course, those artists who clearly had their head on their shoulders were the artists we picked up, like Zhang Peili, Huang Yongping...those artists had mature portfolios and so they did very well in the process. In most cases in China, there are two academic fields one must achieve – one, your ability to paint and draw, and two, the standard of your liberal arts education; humanities, literature, etc. So if your overall scores were good, then you would have the opportunity to take the exam for acceptance into the Academy.

**(JD):** So they took an exam after the selection process?

**(ZS):** For the oil painting department, we chose about eight students the first time around.

**(JD):** How many applications in total came in?

**(ZS):** Thousands, thousands. I don't have the exact number in mind.

**(JD):** So you invited everybody, or only the people who got on the shortlist, to head to the Hangzhou Academy for the exam?

**(ZS):** Not necessarily to Hangzhou – we also had an examination center in Beijing at the Central Academy. Later on, we had five locations, Guangzhou, Beijing, Xi'an and another...and as a teacher you had to be confident about the people you chose. We missed one or two, but the group was well chosen, for their intellect and creativity.

**(JD):** Did these students apply specifically to Hangzhou or Guangzhou, or to all these schools?

**(ZS):** The policy was changed recently, and I can't remember exactly how things went. At the start, one applied to a specific Academy, but later, I think it was a national examination, so you would fill in form and provide first and second preferences. According to that form, if you achieved a certain exam score, you would get to go to your first choice school – if not, then maybe your second choice school.

**(CA):** Like Chen Danqing.

**(JD):** What happened to Chen Danqing?

**(ZS):** I invited him to Hangzhou [Academy] because I really liked his work, but then Beijing [Central Academy] also wanted him to attend their school. I offered him our undergraduate program, and after hearing this, Beijing offered him their graduate program, so of course he went to Beijing. (Laughter)

**(JD):** The art that came out of Hangzhou was very different from the artwork that came out of Sichuan or Beijing. Do you think you chose students you thought were potentially more conceptually minded or modern in their ideas, or do you think Hangzhou was the great influence on their lives? Perhaps it was a combination?

**(ZS):** I don't think we were that clear at the time, whether these young students would become more this or that. They were picked in a relatively general standard way – they had to be smart, talented, hard working... what you call 'direction of students', I think they gradually built whilst in the school. The school had its traditions too – when Lin Fengmian set into the school in 1930, he chose professors by a similar standard. If you compared Hangzhou and Beijing at that time, you could say Hangzhou was more liberal and diversified in study than Beijing; in Hangzhou you had Fang Ganmin [方干民], Lin Fengmian or Pan Tianshou, and Beijing was more dominated by professors of Realism. Shanghai and Hangzhou were also more open and liberal than Beijing, with greater opportunity to connect with the outside world – I think that also influenced the students.

**(JD):** You went overseas very early on in your career and brought back a lot of information to China. Can you talk a little bit about how you got interested in Western art, and how that interest developed within the context of Hangzhou Academy?

**(ZS):** I think my attitude to contemporary and modern art started from the time I was a teenager, studying at a very good school in Shanghai. Actually, now that I look back, this school was quite unique – it was called Yu Cai Xue Xiao – and was set up by a famous educator named Tao Xingzhi, who studied at Columbia and was one of John Dewey's students. He brought philosophy to China. He became a very special educator in China because he was against all traditional values and 'for' a liberal, modern approach to the education. Yu Cai Xue Xiao was actually a special school designed for gifted children in the Arts – visual arts, dance, music and literature. It was founded in the 1940s, and I attended the school in 1949. The school moved from Chongqing to Shanghai – but during the four years I studied there, the system was totally different from that of other schools. Most other schools followed a strict Communist system, which consisted of a politicized environment - obey what the government says, always! Our campus was like a free, special zone. (Laughter)

**(JD):** A special educational zone.

**(ZS):** Yes, we didn't study a lot of politics, and we read a lot of Western literature. Our schoolmates were very good musicians and played Beethoven, Bach, Rachmaninoff...so it was a great environment for me to observe and grow alongside international and Western art, and liberal philosophy. When I went to Hangzhou, I kept that attitude, that as an artist you should be free and open to new things and new ideas. When I graduated to become a professor at Hangzhou, I always believed that the job of a teacher [professor] was like that of a gardener; you don't really give something up for the plant, but you create an environment for it – you let it have more sun and water, you foster it, and it grows on its own. You can't push the plant to grow at the rate you want it to, because all plants are individual and have their own notion of growth.

When my wife and I were teachers in the late 1970s and '80s, we let students do what they wanted to do, and encouraged them to build up creative confidence. I think Wang Guanyi made a good statement about his time at Hangzhou Academy; he valued Aikang's teaching so much because she encouraged him to keep working hard, to keep doing what he was doing and make what was on his mind– I really believe this to be so important for the art student. At the time, we, not only Aikang and myself, shared the same view. We hated that the school administration placed so many regulations on the program. They wanted students to only 'paint exactly what you see. If a scarf is gray, you have to paint it gray...' The restrictions and requests upon the students killed a lot of new ideas.

When the school reopened in the 1970s, we had such good students, like Huang Yongping, Zhang Peili, Cha Yi...and we felt there was nothing we could teach them because they were smarter than we were – they read more books than we did! I think we tried to encourage them to keep doing what they were doing, and never tried to overly criticize them or their work. We could have a difference in opinion, but we never said ‘You can’t do it’ and we definitely never punished them. I think that in this stage of art education, punishment is wrong. The teacher has no right to punish any student, especially if no crime was committed and no one was hurt. So, because of our mode of teaching, a lot of students liked to be with us, and could feel comfortable and relaxed.

Later, I received a scholarship to go to the United States, and because I was the first one in the Arts to take this government grant to North America, I had to gather as much information as I could get. During my two years abroad, I visited all the different museums in Canada, Mexico, and 13 countries in Europe, and brought with me two cameras, one for slides and one for negatives, so that I could take thousands of pictures. I couldn’t bring too much back with me to China because it was heavy and expensive, but the slides I kept with me forever. When I went back in 1983, I had the largest collection of international art and I was invited to almost every school to give a talk about Western art – not necessarily contemporary but of the works I had seen all over the States and Europe. The students didn’t want to leave the lectures. I remember one of the longer lectures I gave was six hours. At the Central Academy, it was four hours long. No one left midway, and no one wanted to leave at the end. People were really anxious to know more; they had little chance to go out on their own to see artwork with their own eyes. I showed them the slides I took because slides provided clear, colored images and could be projected on a larger scale. I remember I took pictures from New York, Chicago, Mexico City...and the slides came out beautiful. I think the students were very impressed. For some museums, like the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, I took a slide of every object and painting in the museum. I basically made a catalogue of the museum’s collection.

When I was in Vienna, I was taking photos of works by Klimt and Egon Schiele, when a guard came up and said ‘No, no, you can’t do this’ and I said ‘Why?’ and he said ‘All museums in the world don’t allow you to take pictures like this’, and I said ‘But other museums, like the British Museum in London, the Met Museum in New York... they all let you take pictures, why not here? Can I speak to your supervisor?’ I was taken to the office of a higher-level museum official. I said ‘I am from Mainland China and our students have no way of seeing any of these works. This is my job; if I can take pictures for our students who don’t have any access to these works, to share with them the beauty of Austrian art, this would be wonderful. It is so important to us.’ He was deeply moved by my speech and gave me special permission. So I took really good slides of all the Klimt’s and Schiele’s. In 1983, ‘84, things were better in China. I was free to give lectures and show my slides. I didn’t really emphasize what style was important because I just wanted to provide the students with new and exciting information. I remember I wrote the first text on post-modernism in 1984; to introduce this notion and explain briefly why it was important and what artists were crucial to this period. I also wrote about the Western museum and covered many other fields about the Western education system, art philanthropy, and the art market.

**(Q):** Can we just go back really quickly to the beginning of this study abroad; can you tell us how this opportunity arose? About the grant and how you were able to visit all these different places?

**(ZS):** It was a very interesting opportunity. China was re-opened after Mao’s death, and in the second year, 1977, Deng Xiaoping was back in power and helped to re-open China. We were closed off for so many years, and so far behind the world. Deng Xiaoping wanted to send the young scientists, teachers, and doctors of China to other countries to see what we missed and to learn from them. So the government set aside grants to qualified young individuals – mainly in the science and technology realms – and many of whom are now leaders of China; for example, members of political bureaus, university chairmans...all those people received a grant in the ‘80s... There was a very small amount of money given to the Arts. China is a very centralized country – if you give money to science and technology, you have to give money to the arts. If we send a hundred scientists to the West, we will send two artists to the West. (Laughter)

At that time, I was teaching in Hangzhou and my boss Wang Dewei, said 'Sheng, I heard you studied a little English before, do you think you could take a test for this grant?' I was very hesitant because I said 'I studied English on my own after-school, because we studied Russian in school; but that was before the Revolution and for ten years I didn't touch an English book'. He said 'Well, why don't you try? We don't have anyone else who can take hold of this opportunity'. So they gave me this chance to take a test, and any of us who were interested in applying went to Beijing for the exam. I had one month to prepare. I thought my English was really poor. I didn't believe I could pass the test, but I set up a smart strategy – I knew I wasn't going to be able to pass with only one month of study – it was a bit like a TOEFL test, but a lower-level version, with a similar formula. There was an interview, an oral test of sorts that was optional. I expressed my interest in giving it a go, because I knew I could learn the spoken language quickly, but writing and reading would take a little more time. I got in touch with a family friend, a diplomat who graduated from Harvard and who was now back in China; he used to be an Ambassador in Washington D.C., and later became Vice Minister.

**(JD):** This is...

**(ZS):** Ji Chaozhu. He was my sister-in-law's good friend. So I went to Ji Chaozhu, and said 'Can you help me?' and I told him I wanted to pass this test. 'Let's see how your English is'. After some questions he said 'Your English is not good enough'. I said 'This is why I need your help – I need to borrow your cassette tape player. Can I borrow it for a month, and put together a conversation from which to rehearse?' So he said 'Okay' I don't think he really trusted me, but he did it for me anyway. I wrote a list of questions and answers, for example 'What's your name, why do you want to go the United States'...simple questions like that and gave it to Chaozhu to polish up and record – he was very good, and had a nice American accent...then with the recording I went home and listened to the conversation, repeated it, listened and repeated. In the end, I was right about the importance of the oral test – I was the only one who passed for the Art grant. My reading and written test score was something like a minus three [fail], but my oral was by far the best. I was offered the grant and opportunity to study in the West.

When I was asked 'Where would you like to study?' I said 'I want to go to the United States', and they immediately rejected me. They said 'There is no art in the United States.' The Cultural Ministry said 'You have to go to Europe and you have to choose between France and Italy. Those are the only places where one can study art'. So I thought, 'France? I don't want to go to France – all my teachers of the older generation went to France!' and I thought this was a bit of a cliché (Laughter). I wanted to go to a new place, so I said 'Okay, how about Italy then?' They said 'Okay, Italy is good, but if you go to Italy you have to study Italian' and I said 'Where can I study Italian?' I tried to find out where I could take Italian classes but no school at that time offered Italian. Eventually I found one lady who was working for an international radio station in Beijing. She was an anchorwoman for the Italian program and I said I asked her for her help.

**(JD):** Was she Chinese or Italian?

**(ZS):** Chinese. She said 'I don't think you can learn the language in such a short time' but she said she was happy to help me. I gave her some money, and she gave me two lessons per week. I was in Beijing, and stayed with my mother-in-law. I studied for two months, and my Italian improved very fast – she even said 'Your pronunciation is better than that of some of my colleagues!' So after a while, whilst I was learning my Italian and waiting for a reply to my application, I began to worry. I went to the Cultural Ministry again and said 'Did Italy accept my application?' He went looking for my application or any note about it and said a while later 'I'm sorry, the Italians lost your application and they feel sorry too'. (Laughter) So, I had been studying Italian ever since the first meeting with the Cultural Ministry and now the option to go wasn't possible. The Minister said 'Well, you said you wanted to go to the United States right? Okay, we'll let you go'. So that's what happened.

**(JD):** Where in the United States did you apply?

**(ZS):** I need to hurry at this point. At the time, there was a professor from the University of Minnesota, a Chinese

teaching in the United States, who happened to be on a trip to Beijing – she was somewhat related to my family, a very remote relative. She said ‘Why don’t you come to Minneapolis? I know the Chairman of our Art Department who I’m sure would happily take you in.’ At that time, I think it wasn’t important which school you went to. I really just needed to get out of China. I also applied to a school in New York, even though I didn’t have too much information about it. I think I applied to the Art Students League, or Parsons or something, but Minneapolis responded very quickly and said ‘We would love to have you as a visiting scholar and honorary fellow’. That’s how it happened.

**(JD):** How long were you there?

**(ZS):** I first went to New York in September of ‘91, stayed for a few days, and then went to Minneapolis. The grant term was for two years, and the government gave me a stipend of 400 dollars a month for two years. The university didn’t ask for any money and they provide me with a studio. I paid for my apartment, but when I first arrived, I stayed with a professor for a couple months, to orient myself around the neighborhood. I was asked to join other professors to teach in their classes, give a few lectures, but the most interesting thing that happened during my time there was when one local gallery sought my paintings. The gallery approached me and said ‘We want to show your work’. I said, ‘That’s great!’ So they gave me some time to prepare some works. I worked with the gallery and made works for the show, but then a problem arose: I remembered that the Chinese government noted that anyone on this government grant could not have an income. If money were made, the money would have to go to the Chinese government. I wanted to travel, but didn’t have the money to do so and was looking forward to using the money I made from selling paintings as my travel stipend. I talked to the Chairman of the Art Department, who said ‘Sheng [Shengtian], I have a great idea. Write a letter to the Art Department stating that you are going to donate twenty paintings to the department. We will sell the works to the gallery. We will create an account for you so that you can access the money for art supplies, travel, or anything else.’ That’s how I got money to travel to Europe.

**(JD):** What a great idea!

**(ZS):** Yes, I always had a few hundred dollars left in my account, so I could go to Mexico, Canada, 13 European countries, and I bought my camera too...I was very fortunate. All paid for by the cost of my paintings. When I got back to China at the end of 1983, China just passed another political campaign called Anti –

**(JD):** Anti-Spiritual Pollution.

**(ZS):** (Laughter) Yes, you’re very familiar with our Chinese history. So my colleague said ‘Sheng, you are very lucky. If you came six months earlier, everything you brought back from Europe and the US would have been confiscated and banned and you would have been heavily criticized. Now, we’re all relaxed again, but you’re lucky. Feel free to use and share what you think is important from abroad.’ That’s how I was invited to every school to give talks about my travels and about what I saw in the West. The school appointed me as Chairman of the Oil Painting Department, and also Director of International Affairs. So I had a kind of authority to make some changes, very limited changes, but changes indeed. For example, I asked the school to rearrange the curriculum so that students were not limited to one discipline. At the time, students of oil painting could only paint in oil, and could not even experiment with brushes other than oil brushes! It was ridiculous. So I put some new programs together – giving each student one month of interdisciplinary study. It could be in calligraphy, sculpture, whatever the students wished to study. That was the first change we made in the school’s program. Later on, we added a photography program to the Academy because we never had one – the Ministry of Education and Culture didn’t consider photography as an art form.

**(JD):** You [Hangzhou Academy] must have been the first school with a photography department.

**(ZS):** Yes, we were the first to provide this program, but we also had trouble with it. We didn’t have the facilities,



like dark rooms. So I got in touch with the School of Visual Arts in New York and we made an agreement – a really nice agreement actually – where they would send a group of photography students to Hangzhou for a summer workshop, and provide them with room and board, and in return, they would bring us dark room equipment and provide the basics to photography. We didn't have money to buy equipment, and we weren't entirely sure where to begin.

**(JD):** What year was that?

**(ZS):** I think that was in 1987...the first time we had a long-term program instituted at Hangzhou. For the first group of visiting students, we built six rooms for dark room facilities – they were really nice - and the visiting students gave a few lectures to our students and teachers about photography. They not only practiced in the classroom, but also went out on the street, which made our students really happy and excited – American students from New York in Hangzhou going on school trips! It changed the lives of many students and students gave me really good feedback. The visiting students went back to New York at the end of the summer and had small exhibitions in New York about their time in China. After a few days, I received a phone call, and my boss was asking me to go to his office immediately. He brought me to the Zhejiang Foreign Affairs Office. The officials said 'We have a serious problem'. They got a letter from the Chinese consulate in New York. Apparently, the cultural attaché visited the School of Visual Arts exhibition opening. Mr. Levy was very excited about this exhibition, and had invited the cultural attaché to the opening. He thought this would be a great chance to bridge cultural ties, but the Chinese official looked at the show and got so angry. 'This is not socialist China', how can you have images of houses in poor condition, and old men sitting on chairs topless!' He was furious and felt it was anti-revolutionary propaganda. He called Hangzhou Academy and said criticized the school for letting this photography program and international exchange take place. 'You have to stop the program, or change it drastically'. He had all sorts of accusations. That's why I was called in. I was totally shocked, I mean, this was such a good thing for the school, how could they not understand it? At that time, China was already open to the West; even in China, its audience would have understood art and photography of this kind. The official [cultural attaché] was a well-educated official from New York and even he couldn't understand it. Eventually, the local provincial government gave us a strict order and said 'You have to change this or end the program.' After several negotiations, the government agreed to let us continue the program under one condition – every piece that comes out of Hangzhou has to be screened by the government before external use of any kind – any anti-socialist elements present and I would be responsible. I got so angry and frustrated that I withdrew from the program, and the program ended. Anyway, in general, the late 1980s, were a great time as a lot of new things were happening. In the school, Geng Jianyi, Liu Dahong and others were already doing their graduation work, and I was the teacher of that class. We encouraged them to do more experimental work, instead of falling along the lines of historical painting.

**(JD):** And that was Geng Jianyi, Liu Dahong and –

**(ZS):** Wei Guanqing and Wang Lihua. I taught that class with another teacher, Jin Yide [金一德]. We taught together, and both of us agreed that students have to have a creative idea about what they want to do. We didn't really ask them to follow the Socialist Realism style, or make use of political content. That turned out to diversify content – it was quite interesting, because it had never happened before. When the work was almost finished that time, you always had faculty members and administrators see how the graduation theses were fairing. When they came, they were shocked. 'How can you allow students to do this kind of stuff!' Geng Jianyi made this painting with one man and one woman sitting doing nothing – no expressions, quite emotionless. For some teachers this was highly unacceptable. 'You have to smile!' they would say. So a meeting was called for the Oil Painting and Sculpture departments. In these two departments, students had 'new ideas'. All the other departments were fine, according to the administrators. So, the meeting was held for all department chairs and other critics, and for three days meetings were held to discuss the matters of content.

(JD): Were you at the meeting?

(ZS): Yes, I was there too. I was there to defend the motion of course – Mr. Jing and I were there to defend the motion and everyone else was there to accuse.

(JD): Do you remember what they said?

(ZS): Other people said ‘This is not acceptable, this is not appropriate, it’s a waste of time, and a waste of governmental money!’ All sorts of things like that; complete clichés! An editor from the Party’s newspaper, who also happened to be an artist, was at the meeting. He was invited as a ‘critic’ on behalf of the local party’s media and authority. I really didn’t understand why he was there. He was crying at the meeting. He said ‘I can’t believe that in a Socialist Academy this kind of work would be on show. This shouldn’t be allowed, and it’s totally against our discipline and national goals!’ I was so amazed that he was reacting like this. The students didn’t do anything wrong. If someone didn’t like the work, that’s fine, no one needs to like it. But it shouldn’t be hated. We tried very hard to protect our students, and even submitted texts to the Hangzhou Journal about this matter. Mine noted that this form of criticism was not about art, and more about a lack of trust to the younger generation. I stated that we should trust the younger generation and discuss things within the context of art, and in the context of post-Cultural Revolution China. There is so much to learn. Maybe they won’t turn out to be first-class artists, but at least they are trying, right? There’s no reason to cry or to get angry.

(Q): And no reason to cry.

(ZS): Exactly, no reason to cry. At that time, there was a reporter from Beijing who went to Hangzhou and interviewed the teachers and students...he was a young reporter and worked with Li Xianting, Gao Minglu – for Meishu magazine. His father was a more liberal Communist leader, and head of the Propaganda Ministry, but he was a more opened-minded communist leader. He wrote a report about this in Meishu, with illustrations of Geng Jianyi and Qin Ming’s works. Suddenly it became big news, and was great promotion material for the artists. For the first time, they were in the national magazine, and getting their work published.....He believed that those motionless faces were very important to him, and wanted to paint these frozen faces for the 1989 show. It was based on a schoolmate. Now he is studying in Seattle at the University of Washington I believe. Yue Minjun was influenced by Geng Jianyi’s work. I held an influential workshop given by a professor and old friend of mine from Minneapolis, Roman Verostko. He was teaching at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and he’s still teaching there I think. He is an art historian. I invited him to Hangzhou to give a one-month lecture on 20th century Western modern art. In China, we had art history courses, but they were primarily all on Impressionism. So that was the first art history course ever that focused on 20th century art. He brought with him many slides, and we even built a slide projector from the ceiling – something I first experienced when I went to the US earlier on. It was a well-participated program...

(JD): At the time, was it a required lecture or an open lecture for students and others interested in learning about modern art?

(ZS): Oh, required. It was a class at Hangzhou. China has had a long tradition of having foreign instructors come to teach, and the government or the school will select those qualified to take the course. You couldn’t just be an auditor. In 1950, ‘60, there was a political requirement one had to pass in order to be nominated; you had to be a good Communist, or so to speak. When I was a student and young teacher, there was an artist from Romania who came to teach a workshop. I was not selected because I wasn’t a Communist member. You had to be a good Communist member because you had to be seen as strong to –

(JD): To resist influence?

(ZS): Yes, any influence from the outside. So, for the art history workshop, we invited young teachers from all over China – each school could send one or two – to attend the workshop. There were about forty to fifty people in

the class altogether.

**(JD):** So they were from other universities?

**(ZS):** Yes, and they were all teachers of art history- and of course, because of the location of the workshop, we had more teachers from our school attend. We had one or two lectures open to the students, but the workshop contained only a few students. Zhao Wuji, who came to Hangzhou for one month to give a painting seminar, gave the second influential workshop I organized. It was interesting; we had about twenty teachers, some very old and some young, all selected to attend the class. They asked me to manage the class, so when I talked to Zhao Wuji, I said 'You will be teaching the students' teachers.' He responded with shock. 'I thought I came to teach students, I don't want to teach teachers.' So he rejected the offer. 'I'm not going to do this.' He continued to say. The government was involved in his invitation, so his decline was going to be a problem – it was a diplomatic engagement too, so I needed to find a way to have him accept the opportunity. I mean, I fully understood his perspective; if I were in his position, I wouldn't want to teach teachers either – they already have their own mindset, and results would unlikely be as positive as those coming from students.

So I talked to my boss, and said 'I have an idea, I'm teaching a class right now in the oil painting department. How about I add my class to this group, so that there is a combination of teachers and students?' Xiao Feng, the Academy's President said 'That might be a good idea', and it wasn't going to bother the cultural administration. I talked with Zhao Wuji and he agreed. He had almost thirty students, which consisted of teachers from other academies including Beijing, Guangzhou, Tianjin, Luyi, Wuhan, Hangzhou...many places... as well as the students from Liu Dazhong's class.

**(JD):** Interesting. Now in terms of Zhao Wuji's impact, what was their reaction? What was the interaction?

**(ZS):** The last time I was visiting Hangzhou, people told me that they are going to have a 10th Anniversary event to celebrate the class. I think the impact was very visible at that time, not necessarily in style, but in the approaches and process of making art. I think that was what Zhao Wuji gave to his students. At the Academy, even until the early '80s, students were mainly taught how to imitate reality; what you see is what you make; very strict realism. But Zhao Wuji said 'This is wrong, you have to use your heart, and you have to create a space in the canvas, which does not necessarily sit in front of you.' So he engaged the teachers and students with a different way of creating, of making a painting. If anyone else tried to do what he did, they would be heavily criticized. He set up a model, and did a few demonstrations, and when the students saw what he was drawing, they realized he was drawing himself, not the model before him! The idea of using the model as a point of reference instead of as subject matter was an important one and new to many of the students. You really needed someone to show you the way at that time. When I sit in front of a canvas today, I still quickly fall back to the 'usual, traditional way of looking'. The new way of thinking, seeing, and painting was a huge realization to most. I read some memoirs by Xu Jiang and other artists; I think they learned a lot from this. And in the end, no one copied Wuji's style.

**(JD):** Were there other visiting artists at the time?

**(ZS):** There were quite a few visitors, but mostly only to visit – the students didn't have a chance to get in touch with them, so there weren't that influenced by them. I remember the Canadian artist, Bruce Parsons, visiting Hangzhou; he was a professor at York University and he visited Hangzhou on his own – he applied to Hangzhou Academy and stayed in one of our dormitories – he stayed there for a few months and got along well with students like Gu Wenda, and even helped them organize performance art events, which was very new at that time.

**(JD):** What year was this?

**(ZS):** '87 I believe.

**(JD):** And he was a young guy at the time?

**(ZS):** Not that young, maybe mid-30s. And he came again a second time, and then went back to Toronto and invited Gu Wenda to have a show in Toronto in 1988, or earlier, I'm unclear.

**(JD):** Right, right. '87 or '88. He actually interacted with the students? I think the Hangzhou students of that time remember him – they didn't remember his name, but they remember him being there and speaking to them often.

**(ZS):** It was interesting.