
Genesis of the Issue of Culture: The Cultural Fever and Avant-Garde of the 1980s

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It is reasonable to say that we may read cultural meaning from most art works directly or indirectly, since art is always a product of a specific cultural context. It is different, however, to have cultural meaning in an artwork and to concentrate cultural issues in his/her art intentionally by the artist. When the former may focus on any issues beyond cultural concern, the latter may consider cultural issues pivotal and critical and comment on the issue one way or another. In other words, cultural meaning or message might or might not be read from the art in the first case, since the artist might or might not be interested in such issues; while in the second case, the artist knowingly injects his cultural concern into his art or comments on a cultural issue in his works, so that the reading of a cultural meaning from such works would be “natural.”

For most Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s, the centrality of cultural issue in their speech, writing, art works, and other presentations was not their choice but a “natural” reaction to the contemporary cultural circumstances. It might or might not be comprehended for a Western reader. The reason could be complicated. What is critical, I believe, is the contrast of power between mainstream and marginal cultures in the international scenario of modern times. While America has a short history, thus tradition has never become a burden, European civilization has a long history of tradition but for centuries has stayed in the mainstream of world development, thus her tradition is always part of a proud, continuously developing culture. For most Asian cultures, however, tradition has been challenged and even shocked repeatedly when Euro-American culture takes a critical step in the fields of science, technology, political systems, management, and the arts. How an Asian culture reacts to these challenges and shocks from platforms based on their profound traditions has become a frequent question raised by intellectuals. When a Western intellectual faces challenges to traditional cultural tendencies, such as civil rights versus racism, feminism versus masculine-centered ideology, and environmentalism versus traditional industrialism, the Western culture’s place in the international mainstream would have never been challenged in modern times. Though all eastern

cultures have their internal problems, the primary challenges come from outside. The consciousness of weakness and backwardness of their native culture, as well as its marginal position in the international arena encourage Asian thinkers to focus on cultural crisis. This was particularly true for Chinese intellectuals of the 1980s.

Basically, Gu’s focus on cultural issues started in his native country where the diagnosis of cultural “diseases” became a crucial task for many Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s. This focus has remained and deepened since he left for Canada and eventually settled down in the USA. To comprehend his focus on the issue of culture, we need to examine two important and interactive movements that occurred in China in the 1980s—Cultural Fever and the Avant-Garde Movement. The former was the cultural context in which Gu’s interest in the issue of culture emerged and developed, and the latter was the movement that Gu joined to incarnate his concepts of cultural reconstruction and in which he became one of the most radical advocates of the subversion of traditional Chinese culture.

2.1 Cultural Fever and Hermeneutics School

One of the most amazing and somehow magic-realistic phenomena in China of the 1980s was the “Great Cultural Discussion,” simply called the “Cultural Fever” (文化热, “wen hua re” in Pinyin¹) by most critics. Without consideration of this context, investigation of a subject from a new literary school to an individual writer’s short story, from a reform of the press to a new layout of a newspaper of this period might not be complete or comprehensive. It is, however, the most contextual factor for China’s avant-garde art of the 1980s, Wenda Gu’s art in particular.

¹ For all Chinese characters in the text, I will provide Pinyin, modern Chinese phonetic system, with quotation marks, to assist pronunciation for readers.

This intense debate lasted about four years, from the beginning of 1985 to the middle of 1989. One of its most unique features was an elite and grassroots combined campaign that shared ideas about the reform of China's culture. Participants ranged from well-known university professors to college and even high school students, from government officials to workers and soldiers. They joined this national discussion by expressing their opinions through all kinds of channels. Seminars and research groups appeared in metropolitan cities and small towns. New books, periodicals, lectures, and exhibitions concerned with the issue of culture attracted huge audiences. Hundreds of Western works, particularly twentieth-century monographs on philosophy, social sciences, and humanities, were translated, published, and made available to hungry readers from urban areas to remote countryside and the frontier. Thanks to this large volume of translation and the introduction of Western works, jargons such as 信息 ("xin xi," information), 系统 ("xi tong," system), 结构 ("jie gou," structure), 建构 ("jian gou," construction) and 解构 ("jie gou," deconstruction), etc., entered the vocabulary of the everyday life of educated people. Subsequently, it changed the structure of everyday Chinese language. For the first time in thirty five years, both intellectuals and ordinary Chinese could free themselves, to a high degree, from hegemonic ideology, absorb thoughts from various resources, and express as individuals their concerns and opinions on culture's *status quo*, and even offer their own prescriptions for the cultural "disease." It also had its long-term impact on almost every aspect of Chinese cultural life, including art. Theoretically, the prodemocracy movement of 1989 could be seen as the most powerful by-product of the "Great Cultural Discussion."

The Chinese word 文化 ("wen hua") seems to have appeared when China faced its cultural crisis one and a half centuries ago. The character 文 ("wen") means script, writing, language, civilian, civil, gentle, refined, etc. and is used mostly as a noun, while the character 化 ("hua") refers to transformation, conversion, digestion, and is usually used as a verb close to English suffixes -ize, -ify, etc. such as 工业化 ("gong ye hua," industrialize, industrialization), 现代化 ("xian dai hua," modernize, modernization), 政治化 ("zheng zhi hua," politicize, politicization), and 简化 ("jian hua," simplify, simplification). It was approximately in the second half of the nineteenth century that these two characters were combined into a single word 文化 to convey the meaning of the "civilized," the "educated" to refer to an entity that has been alienated from nature through human's cause.

For ordinary Chinese who had lived for decades in Mao's discourse, the word 文化 was not new but colored by mainstream ideology. There were 文化整风 ("wen hua zheng feng," rectification of the incorrect style of work, a campaign launched by Communists in Yan'an during the 1940s), 文化学习 ("wen hua xue xi," acquire literacy), 文化工作者 ("wen hua gong zuo zhe," a cultural worker or cultural

workers), etc. in the vocabulary of the Communist Party's ideology since the 1940s. 文化 (culture) here refers to spirit, literacy, or literature and arts, in different cases, but always contains connotations of Communist ideology. Geremie Barme observed, "Since 1949, culture in Mainland China has shared the fate of virtually every other field of endeavor, prospering and suffering in turn according to the dictates of political leaders."² For archaeologists and anthropologists, 文化 is a special term with the meaning of civilization, such as 仰韶文化 ("yang shao wen hua," Yangshao culture), 龙山文化 ("long shan wen hua," Longshan culture).

The most impressive and ironical use of the term, no doubt, took place during the so-called Cultural Revolution (the short form of "the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution"), an event that made most Chinese aware of culture but also confused. During this ten-year period, "culture" roughly refers to almost any nonnatural, nonphysical, nonmaterial phenomenon, such as ideas, thoughts, and spirits, and their products, including philosophy, religion, literature, arts, and so on. Ideologically, all cultures were divided into two opposites: the old and the new. One of the officially claimed goals of the revolution was to destroy the old culture—the feudal, capitalist, and revisionist one in order to build the new culture—a proletarian or socialist one. In the ideological hierarchy, however, even the new culture here is nothing but a weapon in the arsenal of class struggle.

In the 1980s, the term 文化 in the connotation of culture and civilization seemed to be rediscovered, thanks to the "Cultural Fever." Saying "rediscovery" here means that after decades of the expansion and distortion of the meaning of the term, people went back to the starting point of the May-Fourth Movement of sixty years ago when the Chinese had launched the first campaign of modern culture.

With a more popular name, the "New Culture Movement," the May-Fourth Movement began with demonstrations against imperialism and alleged traitorous government officials. Supported mainly by college students with patriotic enthusiasm in Peking (now Beijing), it burst out at the Tiananmen, the gateway to the Forbidden City, on May 4, 1919. The Chinese had sided with the Allies against Germany in the World War I and after the war requested the Allies end their occupation of Chinese territory and grant concessions to China. Despite China's support for the Allies against Germany, her requests were ignored. On May 4, 1919 about five thousand university students were joined by workers and merchants in Peking to protest the Versailles Conference (April 28, 1919) awarding Japan the former German leasehold of Jiaozhou, Shandong Province. Demonstrators burned the house of a pro-Japanese cabinet minister. Demonstrations and strikes spread to big cities including Tianjing, Shanghai,

² Geremie R. Barme, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 1.

Nanjing, Wuhan, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, and elsewhere, and a nationwide boycott of Japanese goods followed.

At the ideological level, however, this movement continued in the following decade. Sparked by this political movement, a campaign of reinterpretation and critique of Chinese culture had been launched. China's weakness in international diplomacy stimulated the consciousness in intellectuals and students. These Chinese realized that China was at an intellectual and political crossroad. The epicenter of the May-Fourth Movement happened to be Peking University, ranked in China's higher education equivalent to Harvard University in the USA. This university always plays a leading role on China's academic stage as well as in the political arena. Several of the brightest scholars who came back from abroad—Japan, Europe, and the USA—taught or administrated at Peking University. What they, along with their contemporaries, brought into China were socialism, liberalism, anarchism, and even social Darwinism. Also, many internationally well-known philosophers, including John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, visited Peking University and introduced their thoughts and ideologies to their Chinese counterparts during this time. This enriched Chinese intellectuals and college students with a new world perspective and provided them with ideological weapons for the first-ever debate on issues such as tradition and modernity, the West and the East, the issues that have never lost their significance to Chinese intellectuals for the remainder of the twentieth century.

The New Culture Movement, inspired by street protests, identified itself as a campaign of "Democracy and Science." Tired of thousands of years of Confucianist domination, the participants of radical groups in the movement believed that China needed to destroy Confucianist culture by introducing democratic practices, scientific theories, and management techniques into her sociopolitical structure. The slogan 打倒孔家店 ("da dao kong jia dian," down with Confucianism and its disciples) expressed this group's radical attitude to traditional culture. 西学 ("xi xue," western learning, referring to the natural sciences and the democratic institution particularly at this period), rather than only 船坚炮利 ("chuan jian pao li," powerful battleships and canons, generally referring to Western technology in the middle of nineteenth century) should be introduced in order to catch up with the industrialized nations. Intellectuals blamed the political establishment for China's failure in the modern era. Later the movement split into leftist and liberal wings. The latter advocated gradual cultural reform as exemplified by Hu Shi (1891–1962) who interpreted the pragmatism of John Dewey, while leftists like Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) and Li Dazhao (1889–1927) introduced Marxism into China and advocated political action. The movement also popularized vernacular literature, promoted political participation by women, and educational reforms.

In a sense, the Great Cultural Discussion of the 1980s could be seen as continuation of the liberal wing's interpretation of the May-Fourth Movement, although the issues

were later dealt with on a larger scale and deeper level.³ The old questions had been asked again. The similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages of Chinese culture versus western culture, subversion or transformation of Chinese tradition, keeping the native cultural spirit while introducing western system and management or "wholesale Westernization," were debated among the intelligentsia as well as ordinary Chinese. By the 1980s, six decades had passed since these topics were first debated. Many problems have not been resolved. Rather, they became more complicated. For example, the debate about tradition and modernity in the 1920s dealt mostly with typical native cultural tradition—a tradition based on Confucianist ideology, political system, and management—and a European mode of modernization and industrialization. In the 1980s, the tradition was already a mixture of Marxist and Soviet-type ideology, plus Chinese conventions of politics and cultural heritage. Even the May-Fourth discourse itself became part of the tradition. As another side of this pair of debated issues, the concept of modernity had been modified or integrated into the notion of postmodernism, not to mention post-Colonialism. Therefore, the continuation of the spirit of the May-Fourth Movement was not repetition, instead, it suggested that China stood and faced a new cultural scenario, and no previous experience or ready-made prescription could be simply applied.

After three decades of isolation from the outside world from 1949 to the end of 1970s, many Chinese, who suffered during the ten-year long Cultural Revolution, discovered a painful fact. China had fallen behind other countries, especially those in the West—a reality that had existed for centuries and became worse in modern times but had not been realized by people living in a closed society. In almost every field, the country lagged behind, including the economy, industrial technology, law, medicine, psychology, computer science, and so forth. The phrase 危机意识 ("wei ji yi shi," awareness or consciousness of crisis) appeared in newspapers, magazines, and on radio and TV broadcasts. What is wrong with the nation? Can it be "healed" or saved? The cultural discussion focused on a challenge common to most developing countries or preindustrialization societies: fusing tradition and modernity. A more fundamental factor was Chinese culture itself, namely China's long history of civilization and its conventions.

Generally speaking, three approaches or opinion groups dominated the discussion: the Futurologist School, the Chinese Culturalist School (including a new Marxist approach), and the School of Political Hermeneutics.⁴

³ Ben Xu called these two campaigns "the two most exciting and memorable moments of proenlightenment and prodemocracy cultural discussion" in twentieth-century China. Ben Xu, *Disenchanted Democracy: Chinese Cultural Criticism after 1989*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 1.

⁴ See Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema*,

Chronologically, the Futurologist School was the first influential opinion group in the debate. It focused on the “value-free” domain of scientific “knowledge” and “methods.” Through a series of publications under the title, “Toward the Future,” this group attracted many followers in high schools and colleges, as well as the educated public. It attempted to convince readers that while China’s culture lacked “scientific methodology” and “logic thinking,” modern science and technology, mostly imported from the West, could reduce the distance between China and the West, the backward present and the modern future. Spiritually, this group seemed to be the direct successor of the May-Fourth Movement in its respect for modern science and scientific principles. In fact, there were slogans and strategies from the 1920s to 1940s that reflected these concepts: 科学救国 (“ke xue jiu guo,” save the nation through science) and 实业救国 (“shi ye jiu guo,” save the nation through industry and commerce). The difference was that while the early advocates of science concentrated on introducing various scientific disciplines, the Futurologist School of the 1980s also sought to introduce and utilize what they called “scientific methodology” and “logic thinking.” This was critical because science was considered not only at a practical and instrumental level, but also at a spiritual and philosophic level. In an article, Jin Guantao, a chemist and a leading figure of the Futurologist School, the chief editor of the series “Toward the Future,” pointed out that the Chinese culture had internal restraints on logical thinking.⁵ For him, traditional Chinese philosophy and other theories, such as those of painting, literature, and music, were based on empirical facts, rather than inference. In other words, Chinese scholars usually drew their theory directly from their visual observation, personal feeling, and emotional reaction to objects. By contrast, Western theorists formulated their abstract structure through induction and deduction of empirical facts. This representative statement of the Futurologist School clearly treated science and the logic method as criteria to judge the legitimacy and rationality of Chinese culture.

The Chinese Culturalist School (including a new Marxist wing) seemed to be a countermove to the Futurologist School. With members who were mostly well-known professors and/or researchers of humanities and social sciences, this school believed that China’s culture could step forward to its own modern stage. Supporters held two basic assumptions. First, Chinese civilization had the internal capability of assimilating foreign factors while keeping its own primary values and

features (the best example is the cultural prosperity of the Tang dynasty from the seventh century to tenth century). Secondly, as a temporal-spatial entity, Chinese culture with its five thousand-year history could be a rival force against Euro-American-central narratives, thus its modernity could become an alternative to Euro-America’s modernity. While the media labeled this group “New Confucianism,” some “new Marxists,” who tried to legitimate the experience of Chinese indigenous modernity based on its native culture by means of Marxist philosophy and anthropology, joined it. This group, obviously, tended to hold a positive view of China’s own cultural tradition. Unlike the Futurologist School, which considered China’s culture—the present culture was nothing but the extension of the past—an obstacle of modernization because of its nonscientific and nonlogic characteristics, the Culturalist School attempted to dig out what they considered the essence of traditional Chinese culture and assumed that it was not the opposite of modernity, rather, it could become the core of Chinese modernity, on which an alternative of existing modes of modernization could be established. Confucianism, the hegemonic ideology that had ruled this central empire most of time for the last twenty centuries, was naturally the essential core of this Chinese modernity. After modification, the “New Confucianism” could lead China toward modern society, not unlike South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or even Japan, countries and regions that had more or less based their contemporary development on Confucianism as well as on Western management and technologies. Among its various dogmas, the concept of 天人合一 (“tian ren he yi,” the harmony of heaven/nature and man) in Confucianism was the most important principle guiding modernization. And, modernization of human life style, a way of thinking and spiritual status, instead of science and technology, should be the priority.

Some younger-generation scholars (most born after 1949), under an organization named “the Editorial Committee for Twentieth-Century Western Scholarly Classics” founded in Beijing at the end of 1985,⁶ formed the School of Political Hermeneutics, the third opinion group in the debate. These scholars developed a different discursive space and cultural strategy while addressing the motifs of modernization and modernity. More theoretical than the previous schools, they tended to transform Chinese tradition through their hermeneutic effort based on Western modern philosophy and human sciences, so-called 西学 (“xi xue,” Western learning or scholarship). While the Futurologist School was obsessed with “scientific methodology” and “logic thinking,” the Hermeneutics School focused on the introduction of Western theoretical discourses, which it believed was pivotal for China’s cultural transformation. Its radical stance toward tradition made this school a significant rival to the

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, pp. 37–71.

⁵ Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng, “为什么中国古代哲学家没有发明三段论?—亚里斯多德与中国古代哲学家比较” (Why didn’t the ancient Chinese philosophers discover the syllogism?—a comparison between Aristotle and the ancient Chinese philosophers), in 传统中国文化再研究 (traditional Chinese culture reexamined), Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1987, pp. 208–215.

⁶ The name of the committee was changed into “The Editorial Committee: Culture—China and the World” in 1987.

Culturalist School. Its statements such as 悬置传统 (“xuan zhi chuan tong,” suspending tradition) and 重新诠释传统 (“chong xin quan shi chuan tong,” reinterpreting tradition) were, in effect, tactical slogans for the strategic goal of the critique and subversion of tradition.

These three schools dominated the debate on culture and had immense impact on Chinese artists, who in turn were active participants in the debate. The fact that a debate, which for most outsiders sounds like a merely theoretical discussion within the academic sphere, eventually went beyond the “ivory tower” and became a nationwide culture-mania that was a phenomenon requiring exploration and analysis.

As Xudong Zhang said, “For the first time in the history of the People’s Republic, political intellectual discussion was allowed discursive room outside the state apparatus of ideology.”⁷ Chinese citizens had the chance to express their own opinion with little misgivings for the first time since 1949. Thanks to the “Reform and Opening” campaign launched by Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) in the late 1970s, they could express their concerns and criticisms not only about cultural issues but also about other topics such as economics, education, foreign affairs, or even government efficiency as long as they did not challenge the authority directly. At this particular period of history of the People’s Republic, any issue could attract public attention if it touched the lives, work, or future of the people. But why did the public believe this cultural issue had something critical to do with their lives?

From a historical point of view there was a profound reason for this phenomenon. In China’s tradition, the public’s interest in political and social issues was considered an ethical imperative. First in the era of Confucius, a teacher and a local official like Confucius would travel to various dukedoms to promote his thoughts of governance. Then 正心, 诚意, 修身, 齐家, 治国, 平天下 (“zheng xin, cheng yi, xiu shen, qi jia, zhi guo, ping tian xia,” make one’s mind upright, keep one’s honesty and sincerity, cultivate one’s moral character, manage one’s family, run the country, and put great order across the land) became a pivotal principle for the scholar-gentry (“shi da fu”). And three goals of a sage—立德, 立言, 立功 (“li de, li yan, li gong,” establish role model by ethical behavior, achieve glory by writing, and render a deed of merit)—encouraged a high standard for literati and even knights. Up to the Song dynasty (tenth to thirteenth centuries), Fan Zhongyan (969–1052), a statesman and a writer, claimed that 天下兴亡, 匹夫有责 (“tian xia xin wang, pi fu you ze,” every ordinary man has a share of responsibility for the fate of his country), which has encouraged generations and generations to devote themselves to the nation. Such a collective-oriented attitude and ethics is an integral part of

the Chinese tradition. No matter how humble a person’s position is in society, his/her moral imperative will call him/her whenever the nation needs him/her. This might explain why the public became involved so deeply in the “Great Cultural Discussion” when they had the opportunity to address their concerns and to offer solutions.

We should ask, why the issue of culture, rather than issues of economy, law, technology, or management, etc.; became the focus of the debate? A pertinent and fundamental question is, what was the meaning of “culture” in the vocabulary of China’s “Cultural Fever” of the 1980s?

The decade of 1980s was a crucial period for China. In this period, there was a reenactment of the history of the past century. After the Opium Wars in the middle of nineteenth century, China had tried various means to strengthen its national power. This central empire realized for the first time that China was no longer a superpower or even the center of the world, but an aged nation that had been displaced by the fast-paced industrialization of the Western nations. The empire learned this lesson mainly from its defeat in the Opium War. From the wars on, China began to import advanced technology and to introduce modern science and a democratic political system. She had tried to revive the nation’s culture at three levels: scientific technology, political system, and cultural values.

The reader may notice that this three-level division of culture is a creative concept. C. P. Snow, a British physicist, novelist, and government minister, posed his “two cultures” theory in his well-known book *The Two Cultures*, first published in 1959. The author posited that there were two polar groups of intellectuals: literary intellectuals and scientists. These two groups of intellectuals were distinct from each other, and they formed two different cultures, sometimes indifferent to each other: literary culture versus scientific culture.⁸ This dualism of culture was based on the concept that civilization could be considered as two opposites, spirit versus material, or humanity versus technology, or, more abstractly, subject versus object, an issue that had dominated philosophical thinking for centuries. Snow found a huge gap between the two cultures, especially in his native country, Great Britain, and tried to offer a solution—reform of the educational system—to bridge it.

Chinese intellectuals had developed their trichotomy of culture in the process of learning from the West. First they found that modern science and technology, embodied in the Western military arsenal, were strong, challenging significantly the confidence of this nation’s subjects who were proud of their long history of developed technologies. As a nation that was the cradle of gunpowder, paper, movable type printing, and the compass, China had its own history of science and technology. The problem was that all those inventions, practical skills, and theory were simply considered

⁷ Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 4.

⁸ C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And, A Second Look*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

craftsmanship, convincing Chinese literati that they were inferior to the importance of literature, history, strategy, and philosophy. After the Opium Wars of the 1840s, the Chinese started to rethink the role of “craftsmanship” in the development of their country, as well as its place in scholarship. Therefore, for the first time, science and technology were fused and integrated into a larger category, which the Chinese later called 文化 (culture). Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly during the May-Fourth Movement, the Chinese realized that there must be something more important behind the Western science and technology, because China was still too weak despite importing modern warships, cannons, and pertinent technologies. Instead of searching immediately at the spiritual level, they went to the instrumental or operational level because they needed to determine how these technologies worked under human’s operation. This level of “system” and “management” was difficult to classify as a distinct unit in a dualism. Or, in other words, Chinese intellectuals of this period thought the “system” and “management” belonged to the spiritual level, the opposite of the material level, namely technologies, but the instrumentality of “system” and “management” refers essentially to material level. Up to the 1980s, the discussants of the “Cultural Fever” dug deeper and found that there was “value” at the top of this pyramid of culture. The democratic system and modern management were established on the basis of such value, which Chinese intellectuals believed was the core of culture. The “value” referred to value of human life, spirit, and rights. A system or management established on it must serve human beings and improve their material and spiritual lives.

This epistemological process was a perfect unity of history and dialectics: from technology and science, to political system and management, finally, to the concept of value in three time periods. Chronologically, the second half of the nineteenth century could be seen as the first stage—the stage of importing advanced technologies. In the period of the May-Fourth Movement, around the early twentieth century, China attempted to study and apply a democratic system to politics, as well as to scientific management in industry, business, and administration. Started from the May-Fourth Movement of the 1920s and continued in the 1980s, the Chinese, particularly the intellectuals, realized that the value system of culture was pivotal for the revival of Chinese culture, although the resolutions could be different depending on the perspective and strategy of various opinion-groups in the Cultural Fever.

The phases of learning from the West can be tracked from the generations of Chinese who studied overseas. Liang Congjie (1932–), a distinguished scholar in cultural studies, son of Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), a famous architect, who studied overseas in the early twentieth century, and grandson of Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a scholar, journalist, philosopher, and reformist, one of the most influential figures in

the Chinese history of modern times, recalled when talking about the generations of his father and grandfather:

There were several generations of Chinese overseas students. The late-nineteenth-century generation represented by Zhan Tianyou (1861–1919) studied mainly in the fields of railroad and ship construction. Yan Fu (1854–1921) and Lin Changmin (1876–1925) were the representatives of the second generation (the end of nineteenth century and early twentieth century) who went abroad to study democracy and political science. In the third generation, including Xu Zhimo (1897–1931) and Jin Yuelin (1895–1984), the focus shifted from the technology of ships and cannons, and political systems such as parliament, to the study of human sciences....⁹

In the 1980s, China reopened its doors after three decades of closure to the outside world. The first two stages had been repeated in different ways and at a more intensive level. Eventually, the leaders of the cultural discussion realized that without a pertinent management system and political framework, any advanced technology would not work properly and efficiently. Most important, without renewal or revival at the discursive level, that is, in a system of values, the application and operation of modern management and a political system would still face insurmountable obstacles.

Therefore, in the 1980s, the meaning of the term “culture” used by discussants of “Cultural Fever” was close to the Greek *nomos* which can be contrasted with *physis* (nature). It is what humans produced and was thus subject to voluntary human intervention.¹⁰ Although one might not find a consensual definition for all discussants, there was a general concept. Historically and conceptually, most discussants believed that “culture” could be subdivided into three categories: technology, system, and values. Culture was an integral entity, not unlike a personal computer. Technology could be seen as hardware, while the system and values function as the system software and the application software, respectively. Technology was the physical base for the entity, but it would only work in a system that could operate the physical apparatus. Value, however, was located at the core of the entity, and worked like an application software, which consists of a series of instructions. It was the commander and played the pivotal role in the cultural entity.

All three opinion-groups offered answers for the revival or reconstruction of the value system. The Futurologist School

⁹ Quoted from 吴非 (Wu Fei), “‘人间四月天’歪曲了历史” (“ren jian si yue tian” wai qu le li shi,” the TV series “April in life” provided a distorted picture), 世界日報 (world journal), Sunday, May 14, 2000, supplement weekly, p. 1.

¹⁰ See Jere Paul Surber, *Culture and Critique: An Introduction to the Discourse of Cultural Studies*, Colorado: Westview Press, a Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1998, p. 4. After describing this general concept of culture, Surber pointed out, “The operative definition of culture is inseparable from the type of critique being pursued, as the two constantly interact and influence one another.” (p. 4) Considering the “Great Discussion of Culture” as a critique of culture, the notion of “culture” used was accordingly defined in a given context.

believed that new technology embodied modern methods and scientific logic, and represented a new view of world and value, which was just what Chinese culture lacked. Two commercially successful books, *The Third Wave* by Alvin Toffler (1980) and *Megatrend* by John Naisbitt (1982), were translated into Chinese and became the bibles of the Futurologist School afterwards. The postmodern and postindustrial landscape the authors described captivated Chinese readers. The Futurologists and their followers seemed to have found something in common between the agriculture-dominant nation and the postmodern nations—a more personal, nonmechanical, and less homogeneous society—a myth that fascinated many readers, although some clearheaded scholars pointed out the absurdity of this illusion. As one of the followers of this school, I was in fact amazed by Toffler's *The Third Wave* after I read its Chinese version in 1984, when I was an art history graduate student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Because of the paucity of translated copies, the book had been passed around by schoolmates. The Futurologist School and its followers believed that those post-modernist concepts and life styles could be the savior of Chinese culture if introduced into China. Compared to the other two schools, the Futurologist School was more effective in combining mass consumption and intellectual activities, and in the coordination of public interests and the concerns of the elite.

The Culturalist School went back to traditional Chinese philosophy and ethics in order to revive a Confucianism-based system of value, which this school believed had been abandoned since the May-Fourth Movement in the early twentieth century and was totally destroyed in the Cultural Revolution during the 1960s and 1970s. They stressed that China needed reconstruction, rather than construction, of its culture. The tradition was not the part that could and should be rejected in modernization, instead, it was the core on which Chinese culture could be reconstructed, or creatively transformed, through integrating modernity into this core. Or thinking about it from another perspective, the active involvement of the traditional elements with contemporary social conditions may not be significant only to the construction of a modern Chinese culture, but would also enable China to transcend Euro-American modernism through its alternative approach to modernization. The rise of Asia's "Four Dragons"—Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan—in the 1970s and 1980s was, for scholars of the Culturalist School, the best example of this Asian-type modernity. All of these nations/territories, especially their mainstream ideologies, had been marked profoundly by the Confucianist heritage. And at the same time, they had applied Western management and technologies to their economic systems successfully.

The champions of Hermeneutics School called for a "new enlightenment" which aimed at the renewal of the value system by means of subverting the existing discourse, a combination of Maoism and Marxism, plus some elements of modified Confucianism. If we could say that the two previ-

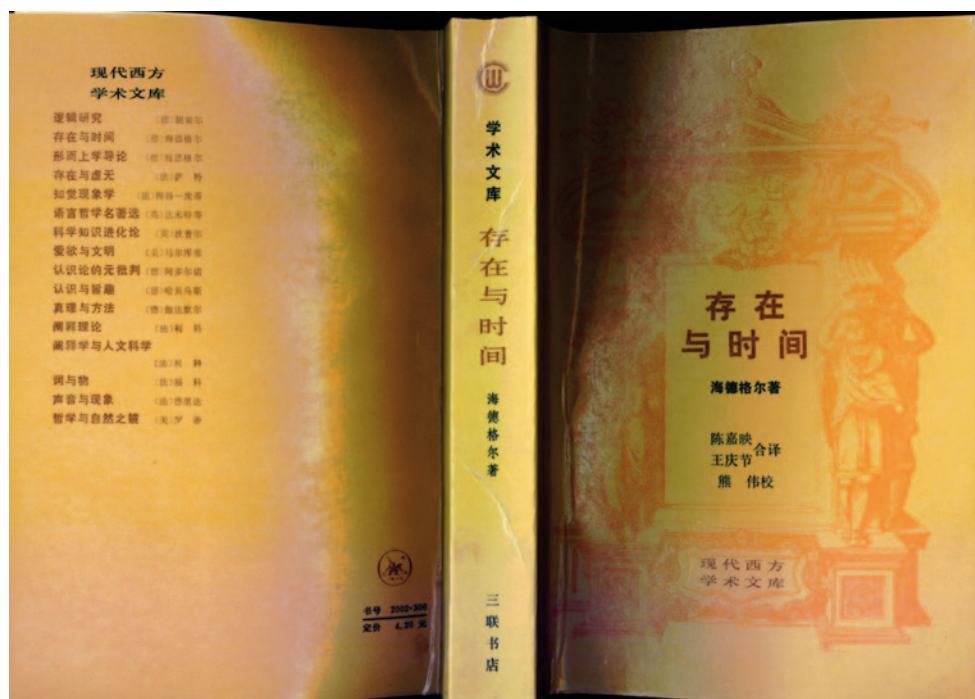
ous schools tried to write out a prescription for China's diseased culture, this group attempted to perform an operation on the cultural body. Their radical stance was reflected in a large-scale project of translation of modernist and postmodernist theory. This was carried out by the Editorial Committee for Twentieth-Century Western Scholarly Classics. This project covered approximately one hundred works, ranging from Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Jung, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Popper, Marcuse, Adorno, Habermas, Ricoeur, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Lacan to Derrida. A list of translated and to-be-translated monographs appeared on the back cover of the Chinese version of *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) by Martin Heidegger, published in 1987 (Fig. 2.1).¹¹

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Von Edmund Husserl | <i>Logische Untersuchungen</i> (Logical Investigations, 1900) |
| Martin Heidegger | <i>Sein und Zeit</i> (Being and Time, 1926) |
| Martin Heidegger | <i>Einführung in die Metaphysik</i> (Introduction to Metaphysics, 1953) |
| Jean Paul Sartre | <i>L'être et le néant</i> (Being and Nothingness, 1943) |
| Maurice Merleau-Ponty | <i>Phénoménologie de la Perception</i> (Phenomenology of Perception, 1945) |
| Karl R. Popper | <i>Objective Knowledge: an Evolutionary Approach</i> (1972) |
| Herbert Marcuse | <i>Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud</i> (1955) |
| Theodor Adorno | <i>Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie</i> (Against Epistemology, a Meta-critique, 1956) |
| Jurgen Habermas | <i>Erkenntnis und Interesse</i> (Knowledge and Interest, 1969) |
| Hans Georg Gadamer | <i>Wahrheit und Methode</i> (Truth and Method, 1960) |
| Paul Ricoeur | <i>Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning</i> (1976) |
| Paul Ricoeur | <i>Hermeneutics and Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, an Interpretation</i> (1981) |
| Michel Foucault | <i>Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines</i> (Word and Thing: Archeology as Human Science, 1966) |
| Jacques Derrida | <i>Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs</i> (translated from the English version, 1973) ^a |

^a As I will discuss in Section 2.2, a large-scale translation in art occurred simultaneously. This was not a coincidence; instead, it indicated that there was something common to both spheres.

¹¹ The translators of the book *Sein und Zeit*, Chen Jiaying and Wang Qingjie, were members of the Editorial Committee for Twentieth-Century Western Scholarly Classics. This list does not include all translated and to-be-translated monographs published by the Editorial Committee for Twentieth-Century Western Scholarly Classics because the plan kept changing and more books were added. Therefore, different lists could be found from the back covers of different translated books during this period.

Fig. 2.1 Front and back covers of the Chinese version of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time), translated by Chen Jiaying and Wang Qingjie and published by Joint Publishing Company, Beijing, 1987.



From this incomplete list, we can see the Editorial Committee of the Hermeneutics School was very ambitious and tried to introduce modern Western scholarship from phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, philosophy of science, New Marxism, poststructuralism to postmodernism. Because of the limited availability of original publications in China of the 1980s, the selected books from specific thinkers might not be the most representative one. Some modern classics by thinkers like Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Freud, and Saussure had already been translated and published by other publishers after the Cultural Revolution, in addition to the classics from Aristotle to Kant published in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this ambitious campaign of translation launched by the Hermeneutics School scholars was the first systematic and large-scale project focusing on modern and contemporary Western scholarship.

This systematic introduction was considered an essential project through which totally heterogeneous discourses were introduced and circulated. This Western scholarship on philosophy, history, economics, linguistics, and literature became the arsenal of the Hermeneutics School for the critique and subversion of Chinese culture and tradition; no wonder members of this school were labeled the “Wholesale Westernizers.”

The position of the third opinion group was important because the Chinese avant-garde of the 1980s shared more ideas and strategies with this group than with the other two. According to Xudong Zhang, there was a major difference between the Futurologist School and the Hermeneutics School. When the former “drew their inspiration from modern science and technology,” the latter “focused on the sphere of *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) and pur-

sued an interpretation, not an explanation, of the cultural conditions of contemporary China.”¹² It “indicates the end of an ideological holy alliance within the Party-led mass movement for modernization, the intellectual passion for ‘rationalization,’ and the cultural-critical effort to come to terms with the New Era.”¹³ The separation from science and technology was so significant that it suggested an essential shift in the Hermeneutics School from the concern for issues at the first level, technology, to the third level, value, the core of the culture. It was significant also because the official ideology of past decades had claimed its “scientific basis”—the socialism in Marx was called “scientific socialism,” for instance—so that science itself became a shield for inhuman or nonhumanitarian ideology and policies. If the Futurologists believed that a scientific-critique or logic-critique would be the center of the discussion, then the hermeneutics group called for a critique of value or cultural critique for the new enlightenment. To a high degree, it accorded with the thoughts of most avant-garde artists, Wenda Gu in particular, as I will demonstrate later.

Among the three opinion groups, the Hermeneutics School showed its distinctive independence from the official ideology and hegemonic discourse, and argued a radical intellectual attitude toward tradition. The Futurologist School shared its “scientific basis,” to a degree, with “scientific Marxism and scientific socialism”—another ex-

¹² Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 54.

¹³ Ibid. p. 55.

pression of official ideology. The Culturalist School sought its theoretical basis in either fundamentalist or modified Confucianism, a stance close to Mao's strategy of 古为今用 ("gu wei jin yong," the ancient serves the present, or using the classics for today's task). The Hermeneutics School, however, used an "opportunistic" strategy—悬置传统 ("xuan zhi chuan tong," suspending tradition)—to de-emphasize the current mainstream as well as classical ideologies. This strategy enabled them to fulfill their mission—the subversion of existing traditions and the transformation of them into a modern type of culture. Born in the 1950s and 1960s, most of the Hermeneutics School members were in the first group of M.A. and Ph.D. recipients in philosophy, history, sociology, literature, or economics after the Cultural Revolution, sharing a background with those avant-garde artists of the 1980s. Trained and often intellectually immersed in Western texts, their inclination to Westernization seemed to be inherent. To any ideological group in current Chinese society, the hermeneutic faction was viewed as definitely innovative or even heretical. Spiritually, Chinese avant-gardists were natural allies of the Hermeneutics School. As a part of China's avant-garde movement, Wenda Gu shared the ideas of the Hermeneutics School and used them in forming his own understanding of the issue of culture.

2.2 The Natural Ally of Hermeneutics School: China's Avant-Garde in the 1980s

When exploring the background of Wenda Gu's interest in cultural issues, we need to examine another movement—China's avant-garde, which emerged nearly simultaneously with the Cultural Fever during 1985 and 1986. Because of their frequent and intense interactions and similarities of spirit, we may consider the avant-garde an integral part of the "Cultural Fever," or more accurately, the natural ally of the Hermeneutics School of the "Great Cultural Discussion." Deeply involved with the avant-garde campaign, Wenda Gu shared interests and ideas with most of the vanguard artists.

It is by no means a coincidence that from the beginning of 1985, when the "Great Cultural Discussion" began, about eighty new and unofficial art groups mushroomed nationwide—a distinctive signal of the wave of China's avant-garde, or 八五美术运动 ("ba wu mei shu yun dong," '85 Art Movement), as coined by Gao Minglu, a well-known critic and one of the key figures of the movement.

Spread over twenty-three provinces, autonomous regions, and central jurisdictional cities,¹⁴ these groups consisted of

mainly graduates or current students in art colleges.¹⁵ They were mostly born before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and grew up during and after the revolution, the generation close to those Hermeneutics School members.

In the book *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art: 1985–1986*,¹⁶ the authors pointed out the connection between the "Great Cultural Discussion" and the formation of new thinking about culture on which China's avant-garde was based. Chinese intellectuals (including all three scholarly groups of the "Cultural Fever") had realized that in order to move toward a modern society China needed to establish a system of new cultural values. According to the authors, there were four basic opinions about new culture:

- We should reestablish the Chinese culture based on the core of the new value system, therefore the old culture, the barrier of modernization, should be criticized and destroyed because of its closed status, exclusiveness, and super-stability.
- Based on the new culture, we may revise and develop Confucianism.
- We need to establish enlightened culture in which man, instead of gods, is the center, since contemporary China is still in a pre-industrial stage, comparable to that of the Enlightenment in Europe.
- We can establish modern Chinese culture based on the ethical principles of Confucianism, in addition to capitalist management.

As radical as the Hermeneutics School, Chinese avant-garde artists were essentially anti-tradition warriors. Most of them advocated the first premise: art as a part of culture or incarnation of cultural discourse needed to be renewed under a new value system; thus, those art traditions from past to present had to be rejected in order to pave way for new art. Here we see a dilemma. In contemporary intellectual communities, artists and philosophers (or social activists) often affiliated with different social groups, but artists tended to have their own ideology, even independence from other groups. However, Chinese avant-garde artists still considered themselves part of the intelligentsia as a whole, not unlike their ancestors of a century ago, when European (French particularly) vanguard artists, poets, novelists, thinkers, and social activists shared their concepts in taverns, salons, and

¹⁴ There were twenty nine province-level administrative units—twenty one provinces, five autonomous regions, and three central jurisdictional cities—in China in the 1980s.

¹⁵ Unlike the West, there were still few universities that had art departments in the 1980s. Fine arts academies were mostly responsible for educating/training art professionals with exceptions of art departments in teachers universities or colleges.

¹⁶ 高名潞、周彦、王小箭、舒群、王明贤、童滇 (Gao Minglu, Zhou Yan, Wang Xiaojian, Shu Qun, Wang Mingxian, Tong Dian) 中国当代美术史:1985–1986 ("zhong guo dang dai mei shu shi: 1985–1986," A history of contemporary Chinese art: 1985–1986), Shanghai People's Publisher, 1991.

Fig. 2.2 Book jacket of the Chinese version of Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 1960, translated by Zhou Yan, published by Hunan People's Press 1987.



academic forums. In the period when China's culture was in a critical stage, the artists claimed that they belonged to the camp where the most radical Hermeneutics School members resided. In this sense, China's avant-garde artists were similar to the modernists in the West. Also, they shared antagonist attitude with their Western pioneers, though the latter tried to attack the culture of bourgeoisie, while the object of former's battle was a mixture of official ideology and literati tradition.

One of the best indicators of this allied relationship between avant-garde and the Hermeneutics School was that both groups published many translated books of modern and contemporary Western scholarship. The Editorial Committee for Twentieth-Century Western Scholarly Classics, the actual "headquarters" of the Hermeneutics School, organized this large-scale project of translation and publication of Western philosophy and human sciences. At the same time, the young art critics and scholars, most of whom belonged to the avant-garde circle, also translated and published books of modern Western art history and theory, including Read, Janson, Arnason, L. Venturi, Wolfllin, Panofsky, Gombrich, Santayana, Langer, Collingwood, and Arnheim. Clement Greenberg also became popular for many young critics and artists. However, there was no counterpart of the Editorial Committee of Hermeneutics School in art circles, so the translations were made at various institutions and published by different publishers. A complete list of such imported scholarship was seldom seen, but my bookshelf provides us with a segment of it:

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Herbert Read | <i>A Concise History of Modern Painting</i> (1959) |
| H. W. Janson | <i>History of Art: A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day</i> (1962) |
| H. Harvard Arnason | <i>History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture</i> (1968) |
| Lionello Venturi | <i>History of Art Criticism</i> (translated from English version, 1936) |
| Robert Venturi | <i>Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form</i> (1972) |
| Heinrich Wolfllin | <i>Principles of Art History, the Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art</i> (translated from English version, 1929) |
| Erwin Panofsky | <i>Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance</i> (1939) |
| Ernst Gombrich | <i>The Story of Art</i> (1950) |
| Ernst Gombrich | <i>Art and Illusion: a Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation</i> (1960, Fig.2.2) ^a |
| George Santayana | <i>The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory</i> (1936) |
| Susanne Langer | <i>Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures</i> (1957) |
| Robin Collingwood | <i>The Principles of Art</i> (1955) |
| Rudolf Arnheim | <i>Film als Kunst</i> (Film as Art, 1931) |
| Rudolf Arnheim | <i>Art and Visual Perception: a Psychology of the Creative Eye</i> (1954) |
| Rudolf Arnheim | <i>Visual Thinking</i> (1969) |
| Rudolf Arnheim | <i>The Power of the Center: a Study of Composition in the Visual Arts</i> (1982) ^b |

^a There were two versions of the translation of *Art and Illusion*, translated by Fan Jinzhong and Zhou Yan, respectively

^b *The Power of the Center* was translated by Zhou Yan and Zhang Weibo

Odyssey of Culture

Wenda Gu and His Art

Zhou, Y.

2015, XVII, 164 p. 89 illus., 40 illus. in color., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-662-45410-7