

Surrealism and the People's Republic of China

From Mao to Now

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Chapter 4

Chinese Surrealism in the 1980s

An overview

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An overview

Introduction

In 1989, the Chicago-based journal *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion* published a short article by a writer named Chen Kexiao which affirms ‘Surrealism is hardly known at all in the People’s Republic of China’, advocating that ‘there has never been, in China, any organised Surrealist activity, or a single book devoted to Surrealism, or an exhibition of Surrealist painting’.¹ Chen asserts ‘foreign-language books on the topic are impossible to find’, relegated to the ‘closed section’ of university libraries, concluding that the backlash against socialist realism in China has begun with a ‘very generalised modernism’.² In fact, I hope to prove that the 1980s was Surrealism’s most buoyant era in China. At this juncture, a group who identified themselves as Surrealist emerged in Jiangsu province.³ Zhao Shou’s Chinese Independent Art Association, of course, mounted a Surrealist exhibition as early as 1935. As for a ‘single book dedicated to Surrealism’, there was of course the *Yifeng* (Art Winds) special edition of 1935 which included Zhao Shou’s translation of Breton’s manifesto, whilst during the 1980s, articles pertaining to Surrealism appeared in many Chinese periodicals. Moreover, a Chinese translation of Roland Penrose’s monograph on Miró was published in 1987,⁴ Dawn Ades book on Dalí was translated into Chinese in 1988,⁵ and the Chinese version of ‘Surrealism’ by Duplessis also appeared in 1988,⁶ originally published in French a decade earlier. Moreover, the Chinese artist Xu Lei edited a 76-page book on Surrealism in 1988 with the Jiangsu art publishing house.⁷ Despite several factual inaccuracies, Chen’s article reveals that beyond China itself (and Chinese studies scholars), the phenomenon of Chinese Surrealism during the 1980s has not been granted the recognition it rightly deserves, nor has it been fully understood.

The heyday of Surrealism in China emerges in the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening Up of 1978, prompting China’s transition to a post-socialist economy, ushering forth both foreign and private investment. Concurrently, restrictions on freedom of speech, provided the government was not directly criticised, were eased to a significant extent. This policy was enacted following the short-lived chairmanship of Hua Guafeng (1976–1978), memorialised by many as simply endorsing the continuation of Mao’s regime. The political dynamics of the Reform and Opening Up were clearly conducive to the plurality of western modernism that would rapidly spread throughout China in the 1980s, but Surrealism in particular has been acknowledged by copious Chinese studies scholars (see Gao Minglu, Paul Gladston, Yan Zhou, Shao Dazhen, Lu Peng, Maria Galikowski, Eduardo Welsh, Zhu Xicheng⁸) as one of the most influential currents in Chinese contemporary art at this critical, transitional moment in the nation’s history.

Surrealist-inflected works peaked during what became known as the '85 New Wave where over 100 art collectives sprang up throughout China over a two-year period between 1985 and 1986. Indeed, Chinese art historian Lu Peng has gone as far as to say: 'During the '85 New Wave Surrealism was a universal style'.⁹ Whilst testament to Surrealism's range and reach, as expressed in the introduction, this chapter will prove Chinese Surrealism during this decade went far beyond stylistic concerns. Counter to the musings of Chen Kexiao, there is a tangible consensus amongst several Chinese studies scholars about Surrealism's widespread impact at this juncture. As such, this chapter hopes to explore the complex and multifarious reasons as to why and how this was so.

Surrealism re-emerges almost immediately upon Deng's easing of restrictions. Access to Republican-era books introducing western modernist movements became available in art school libraries, these institutions re-opening their doors in 1978. A highly important journal that re-introduced Surrealism to China in 1979 was *Shijie Meishu* (World Art), under the auspices of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing (CAFA). In a comprehensive article by CAFA art historian Shao Dazhen entitled 'An Introduction to Western Modern Art Currents',¹⁰ the trajectory of Surrealism's founder, André Breton, before and during World War Two is elucidated, including the advent of key Surrealist magazines such as *La Révolution Surréaliste* (1924–1929), *Minotaure* (1933–1939) and *VVV* (1942–1944). Shao explains, unlike its predecessor Dada, Surrealism is not a nihilistic movement, instead, it utilises psychoanalysis as a method of artistic expression by delving into the subconscious. Shao cites antecedents to Surrealism such as Bosch and Goya and quotes Breton's invocation of the 'supreme point': the resolution of contradictions from the Second Manifesto (1929). Dalí's painting *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* 1936 is reproduced, granting the reader a sense of how the psyche can be brought to bear on political issues, something, I venture, made Surrealism popular in a Chinese context after the traumatic debacle of the Cultural Revolution. Surrealism's revolutionary aspect is briefly mentioned but Shao erroneously states that this activity died down around 1930 whereas there were numerous revolutionary events during this decade such as the anti-colonial exhibition of 1931 (in conjunction with the French Communist Party). Many artists also expressed opposition to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and fascism. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Breton met in Mexico with Diego Riviera and Trotsky in 1938, to draw up a manifesto for an 'International Revolutionary Art'. Naturally, if Shao considered Surrealism's divagation from the French Communist Party in 1935 to Trotskyism as counter-revolutionary, he may have deliberately omitted this aspect of the movement. More generally, if Shao was aware of Surrealism's complex relationship with communism, including its detestation of socialist realism, he likely thought it wise not to enter these murky waters in his contemporaneous social context.

In Shao's article, the following painters are listed as Surrealist: Paul Klee, Hans Arp, André Masson, Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Paul Delvaux, René Magritte, Max Ernst, Archile Gorky and Pablo Picasso, revealing the knowledge base of Chinese artists who drew from Surrealism before the start of the 1980s. Notably, all of these artists are male whilst Surrealism had a substantial, and still understudied, female contingent. In the latter half of the 1980s, an interest in the works of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo would emerge, yet I have not been able to locate reproductions of her work in Chinese art journals of this decade.

Shao ends the article's section on Surrealism in a somewhat pejorative manner, stating:

Some surrealist literary and artistic works reflect capitalist social life and atypical psychology, they experiment with form and should also be viewed as objects for critique.¹¹

In spite of this ideologically motivated statement, Shao's criticism clearly did little to dissuade artists drawing from the movement. In 1980, he published an article entitled 'Surrealism in Fine Art', in *Wenyi yanjiu* (Arts and Literature Research).¹² Shao opines that whilst many western modernist movements had a short shelf-life, the Surrealists were still putting on exhibits in the 1960s. Most interestingly, he notes that Robert Rauschenberg, who would mount a monumental exhibition in Beijing (1985), theoretically drew from Surrealism. Here, Shao also mentioned that during the 1950s, Dalí's work became religious in nature. This development would be extremely important to a sizeable group of '85 New Wave artists who combined Surrealism with spirituality in their artistic practice. Yet, this article also ends on a note of critique, stating that Surrealism: 'negatively reflects the world, and rarely gives people the power to transform the world and promote social progress ... surrealist literature and art can only gain new life if they are combined with realist literature and art to express social reality and the lives of the masses'.¹³ Whilst this statement appeals to a specifically Chinese social context, Surrealism's relationship with the proletariat was indeed a constant tension in its Euro-American iteration. The group was accused of moving from the 'street to the salon' during the 1930s,¹⁴ increasingly appealing more to the bourgeoisie and wealthy collectors despite their revolutionary streak.

This call for a combination of 'real and surreal' is further elucidated by Shao in the official government arts journal *Meishu* (Fine Art), which he edited from 1983 onwards. *Meishu* re-introduces Surrealism in 1980 through Shao Dazhen's text entitled 'Realist Spirit and Modern Art'.¹⁵ Here, Shao argues that modern artists have not abandoned realism, they have simply combined it with other tendencies. Shao focusses on Surrealism in this respect: 'The entity we regard as reality is a physical reality whilst subconscious fantasy can be framed as a metaphysical reality. They [These artists] ignore physical reality and are intoxicated by metaphysical reality. Hence, reality become surreality'.¹⁶ This article is less critical owing to the dialectical thesis Shao adopts. He states: 'We can learn some aspects of modernists formal exploration to serve the development of new socialist literature and art. Some of their works do have the spirit of realism, and we should also affirm this'.¹⁷ Shao attempts to bridge the communist necessity of art for the masses with experimentation in terms of form but as I argue, the use of Surrealism in China goes far beyond this. Notwithstanding clear ideological differences between Shao and the artists who used Surrealism, his detailed analysis of the movement went much further than the body of knowledge surrounding Surrealism disseminated during the Republican era. For example, in the edited collection of his CAFA teaching materials (1982), Shao also mentions Surrealism's anti-colonial stance.¹⁸ His essays form a testament to the relatively large wealth of knowledge about Surrealism available to artists at the beginning of the 1980s.

Shao, although probably the most prolific writer on Surrealism in the immediate aftermath of the Reform and Opening up, was by no means the only scholar to discuss Surrealism during the 1980s in China as its popularity gradually rose throughout the decade. In fact, a CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) full text search reveals that between 1979 and 1989 the term Surrealism 超现实主义 (*chaoxianshizhuyi*)

appears in 375 fine art articles, the content of which would be impossible to summarise in detail here. Admittedly, several mentions were made of Surrealism as part of general introductions to modernism. Nevertheless, there are copious specific articles on Surrealism including Paul Nash and English Surrealism, Surrealism and Freud, Surrealism's rebellion against capitalism, Belgian Surrealism, forerunners of Surrealism, Bosch's fifteenth century Surrealism, Miró, Dalí, Picasso, French Surrealism, Luis Buñuel, Henry Moore, Surrealism's dialectic between the conscious and unconscious, Magical Realism and Surrealism and many more, providing Chinese artists with a rounded knowledge of both western and Latin American Surrealism.

Exhibitions of Picasso in Beijing and Shanghai (1983) and Rauschenberg in Beijing and Lhasa (1985) were equally fundamental to Chinese artist's understanding of Surrealism. An exhibition of Picasso's works took place at the National Art Museum of China, with all the works being loaned from the Picasso Museum in France. The official *Meishu* (Fine Arts) journal reported that the then prime minister of France, François Mitterand was in attendance.¹⁹

The exhibition was also shown in Shanghai. Much like the *Meishu* article on Picasso published in 1961 (Chapter 1), the works *Massacre in Korea* (1951) and *Guernica* (1937) are also singled out owing to their anti-war message and these are specifically couched as Surrealist rather than cubist.²⁰ The article explicitly questions the reception of Picasso as cubist and states that cubism was only limited to formal issues in art. Instead, the author Bu Ji notes that Picasso expresses inner emotions.²¹ Indeed, I advocate that most Chinese artists during the 1980s draw from Picasso in a Surrealistic fashion.

The American artist Robert Rauschenberg held a landmark exhibition in China in 1985. He also exhibited at the EROS Surrealist exhibition in 1959 in Paris. Parkinson rightly notes that Rauschenberg denied engaging with the Freudian subconscious; however, he also identifies that there are still important parallels between this artist and the Surrealist movement, which have undoubtedly furthered the impact of Surrealism in China. Indeed, in *Zhongguo meishubao*, Marxist critic Gu Shangfei details the importance that Rauschenberg places on everyday objects as art and how this emphasises artistic creation is open to all.²² This was also a core concern of the Surrealists, who wanted to 'democratise' artistic production in their treatise on the 'Surrealist object' in 1935.²³ Such concerns appear to have fed through to Chinese artists.

In terms of extant explanations to date as to Surrealism's popularity, Lu Peng believes that Surrealism became a widespread phenomenon owing to young Chinese artists' 'bewildered psychological state' 茫然心态 (*mangran xintai*) as to the uncertainty this new era would bring.²⁴ He also advocates that Chinese artists wanted to find a way to tackle the problems this new era presented to them without parting with material reality.²⁵ This is certainly part of the reason why Surrealism became popular in China during the 1980s, but perhaps not the full story. More schematically, Zhu Xichen notes that Surrealism in 1980s China was characterised by 'individual expression' 自我表现 (*ziwo biao xian*) 'soberness' 冷静 (*lengjing*), 'modernity' 现代 (*xiandai*) 'the West' 西方 (*xifang*), 'religion' 宗教 (*zongjiao*) and 'freedom of expression' 思想解放 (*sikao jiefang*).²⁶ Some of these categories are undoubtedly sound, yet others are more contentious. Rather than borrowing from the West, I hope to show Surrealism in a Chinese context during the 1980s was hybrid in trajectory, drawing from concepts and iconography relating to both Chinese and western culture. Whilst the category of soberness countered the bright red palette of the Cultural Revolution, there are more impassioned, often erotic, Surrealist works that belie such a framework. As such, I posit that it is the Surrealist notion of

desire, in all its guises – political, physical and metaphysical – repressed during the Cultural Revolution, whose outpouring underpins a broad range of Surrealist activity of the 1980s.

Although freedom of expression was key to the utilisation of Surrealism during the 1980s, artists were not operating in an era of untrammelled liberty. Artistic practice was affected by two core events, the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign (1983) and the Anti-Bourgeois Liberalisation campaign (1987). The former was an attempt by Deng Xiaoping to harmonise China's socialist heritage with economic reform by advocating that western-inspired liberal ideas were polluting the Chinese mindset. The latter spoke out against 'complete westernisation'. Campaigns were short-lived, lasting a matter of months. Notwithstanding, artistic activities were cancelled or postponed accounting for the backdrop of increased censorship at these junctures. Surrealism, as an indirect, excursive form of expression, was nevertheless able to strategically persist through the 1980s peaks and troughs of censorship. It is not until the 1990s that we see more direct interventions into Chinese society and a hybridised Surrealist pop movement come to the fore.

This chapter explores the engagement of various art collectives and individual artists with Surrealism across the 1980s, throughout different geographical regions of China. Chapter 5 will subsequently provide an in-depth case study of two groups which emerged during the '85 New Wave, the Red Travels Group based in Jiangxi province and the Northern Art Group based in Heilongjiang province whose localised engagement with Surrealism was particularly significant and spiritual in nature. As the 1980s forms the peak of Surrealist activity in China, this account is by no means exhaustive but rather a comprehensive overview of a heretofore scarcely acknowledged artistic movement. In particular, I hope to highlight not only the amount of Surrealist artwork produced during the 1980s but the plethora of artists and critics writings apropos Surrealism across this decade which form a cohesive body of work ripe for analysis.

Surrealism and the Stars

Beijing is nevertheless our starting point for Surrealism's re-emergence. One of the most important collectives in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution were the 'Stars' 星星 (*xingxing*) art group who collaborated with avant-garde poets on the periodical *Jintian* (Today) (1978–1981), capturing the fervour of the democracy wall in Beijing. Here, big Character posters 大字报 (*dazibao*) were mounted on walls around the city to highlight human rights and other social issues in China as a form of protest. Huang Rui served as art editor to *Jintian* whilst Ma Dasheng and Qu Leilei in particular contributed sketches, many of which were Surrealist-inflected. Huang contributed sketches to another literary magazine *Waiguo wenxue* (foreign literature), which he affirmed was very open before the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign.²⁷ Many of his works on paper during this period were Surrealist in nature, bearing hallmarks of Picasso's influence. During the Cultural Revolution, Huang Rui revealed he attended a poetry salon with the writer Bei Dao in 1972, but this was soon brought to an end by the writer's father.²⁸ At this juncture, some Latin American and Russian writings were available but limited in quantity. Huang noted that it was not until the latter part of the Cultural Revolution c. 1974–1975 that he learnt of western Modernism as a concept.²⁹ Huang recalled that the first painting album of this genre he encountered at that juncture was none other than that of Picasso. He was able to look at the works thanks to a Yan'an official but unable to hold on to the book.³⁰ The two facets of Picasso's work that attracted him were the

elements of spontaneity and freedom.³¹ Owing to a paucity of western art theory at this juncture, Huang's affirmed that his initial contact with western modernism was largely a visual one.³² Extrapolating from this statement and publication data, for art groups operating at the outset of the 1980s, initial aesthetic encounters were steadily supplemented by written materials published throughout the decade, incrementally increasing artists' understanding of Surrealism.

The Stars were renowned for hanging their works on the railings outside of the city's China Art Gallery in September 1979, cementing their outsider, unofficial status. This pivotal moment is widely considered to be the first avant-garde show in China during the Reform and Opening Up period. Since the show was unauthorised, it was taken down by police after just two days, although c. 7000 people were able to see the artworks within this short timeframe. In total, 23 artists participated and 150 works were displayed.³³ Huang Rui, the principal organiser of the exhibition, mounted a manifesto onto the gallery's railings which stated:

We have used our own eyes to know the world, and our own brushes and awls to participate in it. Our paintings contain all sorts of expressions, and these expressions speak to our own individual ideals.³⁴

Many Surrealist-inflected works hung upon the railings, with Huang Rui affirming Surrealism played a role in this exhibition.³⁵ Art critic Li Xianting singles out that:

Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Li Shuang began with symbolist and Surrealist works, which were full of a humanist intimacy and reality which differed from western surrealism's individual anxiety which gives rise to a language of distortion and nausea.³⁶

Li Xianting is certainly correct in advocating that the Stars approach differs somewhat from that of the western Surrealists, particularly in terms of humanistic endeavour. That said, many affinities with western Surrealism persisted. In fact, distorted nudes and erotic visions sat alongside notions of rebirth, democracy and individual worth in a conceptual expression of unexpurgated freedom, in terms of both individual desire and collective aspiration. Indeed, Huang Rui noted to me that he saw no contradiction between these two elements of his work.³⁷

Interrogating these three artists selected by Li Xianting, Ma Dasheng transformed the woodblock print genre, traditionally associated with revolutionary propaganda and proletarian collective consciousness into a Surrealist medium for his *Fantasy Lands* (1980–1981) series. His works were populated by oneiric agglomerations of individual consciousness, including distorted nudes, forests with eyes and lips sprouting from tree branches and floating objects, all gesturing towards the satiation of individual desire. These works, however, were offset by more didactic pieces such as *Solidarity* (1979), in which the hands of individuals rise up from houses in a collective clarion call against the status quo. As such, the work of Ma Desheng commingles individual and collective, humanistic and sensual desire. Perhaps manifestations of the individual psyche were intended in a humanistic vein, designed to progress the acceptability of publicly displaying such internal forms of expression.

Huang Rui's Picasso-esque sketches contort the female shape in flagrante delicto of Li Xianting's humanistic tendency through the quest for individual desire. Nevertheless, such works equally undermine the historical taboo of the nude form or *luoti* (裸体) in Chinese society, which remains controversial today. Huang believes that the female body

is a 'spatial composition' and cited the genesis of this trajectory from classical Greek sculpture, through Cezanne and Matisse to Picasso.³⁸ Presumably, the malleability of form gradually becomes heightened as ideals of beauty changed from classical to the Surrealist notion of convulsive. Again, Huang Rui's corpus equally contains more humanistic pieces such as *Yuanmingyuan: Rebirth* (Figure 4.1), which envisioned the revitalisation of the Old Summer Palace in Beijing, which was ransacked by western forces during the Second Opium War (1856–1860). The stone ruins are transmogrified into human forms. Huang Rui noted that this work was inspired by Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*.³⁹ As such, Huang repurposes the geometricised shapes of Picasso's prostitutes, with seductively raised arms above the head of one ruin, into something much more positive, appearing to resemble a couple's embrace in the centre of the canvas. Hence, in this instance, Surrealisms' erotic sensuality has indeed been metamorphosed into humanistic yearning for political revitalisation. Huang imparted that Yuanmingyuan is not an anti-colonial commentary but rather a reckoning with Chinese history and the legacy of Maoism in particular, emphasising a temporal disconnect between the past and present-day reality. Huang described the work as a 'natural bodily reaction' 身体的自然反应 (*shenti de ziran fanying*) to Mao's rule, aligning the corporeal and political elements of the work, demonstrating affinities with Surrealist automatism.⁴⁰

Ostensibly, Li Shuang was the earliest female artist to engage with Surrealism following the Reform and Opening Up. In 1979, her work *Red Kid under the Holy Altar* (Figure 4.2) appears to express the bedazzlement of children born during the Mao era being suddenly confronted with kaleidoscopic forms of freedom swirling around as an ethereal figure reaches out to grasp a love heart. The 'altar' naturally invokes a religious setting, violently repressed during the Cultural Revolution. In *Hopeful Heart* (1979), a woman stands tall amidst a greyish undulating backdrop; her face is anonymised but rather than portend to a fetishisation of the female form, depriving the woman of agency as would be a common trope in male western Surrealism, Li indicates that this woman represents all women. Four eyes linger in the background to signify solidarity, whilst a winding string that entangles the woman's body may represent the obstacles she must overcome. Hence, Li Shuang utilises Surrealism as a method for projecting future possibilities of gender equality whilst acknowledging misogynistic vestiges of the past.



Figure 4.1 Huang Rui, 1979, *Yuanmingyuan: Rebirth*, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4.2 Li Shuang, 1980, *Red Children Under the Altar*, oil on canvas 100 × 90 cm, photograph. Courtesy of Helmut Opletal

Where Li Xianting is correct, however, is that, after the Stars exhibitions of 1979 and 1980, each of these artists followed his or her own direction away from Surrealism. These artists were utilising Surrealism as a form of experimentation in a quest to find their own individual artistic voice. This phenomenon is important in and of itself and should not be viewed as a slight to the movement. Whilst pragmatically utilised, Surrealism provided a 'toolkit' to these early 1980s artists who had lived through decades of artistic constraint, to express both a sense of individual and collective desire, founded on the principles of commingling the thought of Freud and Marx. One of Surrealism's core tenets was, after all, that of freedom. At the beginning of the First Surrealist Manifesto (1924), André Breton wrote:

The mere word 'freedom' is the only one that still excites me. I deem it capable of indefinitely sustaining the old human fanaticism. It doubtless satisfies my only legitimate aspiration. Among all the many misfortunes to which we are heir, it is only fair to admit that we are allowed the greatest degree of freedom of thought. It is up to us not to misuse it. To reduce the imagination to a state of slavery, even though it would mean the elimination of what is commonly called happiness is to betray all sense of absolute justice within oneself.⁴¹

To me this paragraph, although written in a different social context, has a particular acuteness in the immediate wake of Mao's rule. Whilst I question Li Xianting's somewhat ascetic interpretation of the Stars in comparison with the visceral desires of western Surrealists, both groups cornerstone was undoubtedly that of freedom. For the Stars, I venture that Breton's

freedom of the imagination was just as important as humanistic endeavour, indeed Huang affirmed to me the Stars were the first to bring 'enlightenment' after the Cultural Revolution, dubbing them a 'spiritual avant-garde' as well as a painterly one.⁴² To me, the Stars commingled the desires of the individual and the collective. Unlike western Surrealists, their Chinese counterparts had to navigate a new political atmosphere where censorship was diluted but still present. Red lines were difficult to intuit and overcoming such difficulties should be thoroughly commended. Li Shuang was a prime example of this. She was imprisoned for two years for marrying a French diplomat before the countries negotiated her release. The group disbanded in 1983 amidst intense political pressure.

Surrealism and the Beijing Oil Painting Research Association

The Beijing Oil Painting Research Association (OPRA) was established in April 1979. Many of its painters had been involved in the New Spring Art Exhibition which opened in Zhongshan Park and received the endorsement of Jiang Feng, who was president of the official Chinese Artists Association at the time. At this exhibition, only still life and oil paintings were allowed, hence it was not considered avant-garde unlike the aforementioned Stars exhibition.⁴³ However, in October 1979, this restriction was lifted for the association's second exhibition.⁴⁴ Artists were able to paint in a variety of avant-garde styles, including Surrealism, whose proponents were Feng Guodong and Cao Dali. An artist called Lu Xun wrote OPRA's manifesto, accompanying the October exhibition, entitled 'Flag of Beauty' 美的旗帜 (*mei de qizhi*). Lu relates the elaboration of individual art styles to ushering in a new Hundred Flowers movement.⁴⁵ Equally, he notes 'As Marx used his theoretical talent to envision great beauty, then art uses simple and unadorned colour to reify beauty'.⁴⁶ Either the preface was trying to either downplay the avant-garde aspects of the works displayed in this exhibition, or, in a more surrealistic way, align the subconscious with socialism.

In 1979, Feng Guodong created *Self-Portrait* (Figure 4.3), which Cohen described as 'the most adventurous work in the October 1979 OPRA'⁴⁷ show. This work combines traditional



Figure 4.3 Feng Guodong, *Self-Portrait*, 1979, oil on canvas, Joan Lebold Cohen Archive. Courtesy of Joan Lebold Cohen, Feng Guodong and Asia Art Archive

Chinese symbolism with western Surrealist concepts. Feng had worked for over a decade as a factory cleaner and could only paint in rare moments of spare time⁴⁸, jobs being assigned in China during the Cultural Revolution. He never had the opportunity to receive any formal training as an artist granted the closure of schools and higher education institutions. *Self-portrait* presents a nightmarish vision of flying brooms whilst Feng's hair is coloured red. Cohen notes that this aligns with 'the traditional Asian image of a demon'.⁴⁹ In a communist country where an individual's principal contribution to the collective was determined by their workplace efficacy, this was a highly subversive gesture.

Counter to communist orthodoxy, Susik has demonstrated that the Surrealists were well known for their 'War on Work'. Breton had famously urged the French proletariat 'to abandon their devotion to the valorisation of the work ethic and finally take up arms against the employing class in a revolutionary overthrow'.⁵⁰ The only form of work acceptable to the Surrealists was that of creation, where the imagination was able to roam free rather than succumb to 'the conscription of wage labour'.⁵¹ Ultimately, art was Feng's route out of subsistence wage labour and after the exhibition he was able to forge a career as a painter outside of the 'work unit' 单位 (*danwei*) system.⁵² It is important to note that many artists during the 1980s took a huge risk by choosing to leave their jobs and the access to social security that came with it to pursue careers as independent artists. Another of Feng's Surrealist works entitled *The Unrestrained* came under attack after it was published in the journal *Meishu* (Fine Art) in 1980. Feng stated that the work was directly painted from a dream which reconciled past, present and future. He notes that after the persecution of the Gang of Four he chose to depict people who were enjoying 'absolute freedom' 绝对自由 (*juedui ziyou*), the likes of which have never been seen before.⁵³ The painting comprises multicoloured languid, fluid, cursive and eroticised bodies sojourning amidst geometric shapes. Cohen compares Feng's work to the Surrealist world of Salvador Dalí, with the caveat that Feng had only seen reproductions of his Surrealist paintings.⁵⁴ After Feng wrote his article in *Meishu* about *The Unrestrained*, art critic Du Zhesen responded by stating, 'You are calling out, but you do not face up to people, you look instead to a "dreamland" and "nihilism", you are excavating, but not into the depth of the national psyche, only into your pure self'.⁵⁵ It seems here that Du is only reading Feng's work through the prism of the individual psyche rather than both a psychological and political commentary pertaining to an era of newfound freedom as strongly indicated by the title.

Another artist who exhibited at the October 1979 OPRA exhibition was Cao Dali, a Han Indonesian who emigrated to the mainland and graduated from the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing in 1955. In the work *Small Boat* (Figure 4.4), a women's image is projected onto an enchanting island replete with exotic flowers and an agglomeration of stairs whilst a small fishing boat anchors at the dreamscape. Imagery of floating and liminality could well reference Cao Dali's fluctuating identity as a migrant, longing for his homeland. In 1985, the critic Shui Tianzhong quotes Cao apropos the work: 'When people leave the motherland, they will miss their hometown, returning to their hometown in their dreams is something wanderers love'.⁵⁶ Moreover, Shui states the work utilises Surrealist techniques 超现实主义的艺术手法 (*chaoxianshizhuyi de yishu shoufa*), noting that because of this decision, Cao lost the opportunity for many of his works to be exhibited. Indeed, Cohen highlights the positive reception of the October OPRA exhibition amongst the public (it toured around the country), yet was still met with hostility from certain officials.⁵⁷ Whilst Surrealism obviously had a shock factor in the West, with remarkably diverse ranges of exhibition reviews ranging from the extremely flattering to



Figure 4.4 Cao Dali, *Small Boat*, 1980, 88 × 132 cm, Joan Lebold Cohen Archive. Courtesy of Joan Lebold Cohen, Chang Changtsun, Cao Dali, Feng Guodong, Fu Yuan, Ji Qing, Huang Li and Asia Art Archive

the utterly derogatory, it was operating in a pluralistic society where diverging viewpoints could be subsumed. Amidst the murky restrictions of a liberalising one-party state, Surrealism actually attained its revolutionary capabilities as an indirect method of both self-expression and societal critique, contributing towards the gradual easing of artistic restrictions over the 1980s, culminating in the movement's eventual acceptance by authorities.

Surrealist photography in 1980s China

The role of photography in 1980s China has been side-lined somewhat by the omnipresence of artist collectives focussed on oil painting. Indeed, Shanghainese photographer Gu Zheng noted to me that the '85 Wave was predominantly focussed on 'fine art' 美术 (*meishu*)⁵⁸ underscoring that photography did not enjoy such a status during the 1980s. Elsewhere, he has observed that photography was not taught in Chinese art schools as part of the curriculum at the time but to him, it constituted a 'personal expression' 个人表达 (*geren biaoda*).⁵⁹ In 1986, Gu Zheng became part of a short-lived photography collective called the North River Alliance 北河盟 (*Beihemeng*). The pictures he contributed to this exhibition were not shot in Shanghai but rather Beijing, with a particular focus on the historicity of China's capital. However, one image amongst these was censored as it 'showed the silhouettes of a mother and a child next to the silhouette of Chairman Mao's statue at the entrance of the Beijing Military Museum'⁶⁰ and was thought to harbour malicious intentions. The photograph was not only banned from being shown but Gu Zheng informed me that it was seized by authorities and as such no reproduction can be found.⁶¹ Clearly, Chinese fine art photography struggled with its indexical relationship to the real during the 1980s in a country going through political transition and a reckoning with the past in a way that oil painting did not.

Notwithstanding, Chinese street photography exuded potent resonances with Surrealism. The tendency sprang up during the mid-1980s.⁶² Surrealist street photography can be traced back to Paris in the 1920s and 1930s with torchbearers such as Brassai, Jacques André Boiffard, Ilse Bing, Henri-Cartier Bresson and Man Ray. Walker describes Surrealist street photography as something that 'largely takes place in the city where the banal and the marvelous co-exist on a daily basis', noting that it refers to images that 'are both expressions of desire and fragments of the real world'.⁶³ The most vivid explanation of Surrealist street photography perhaps comes from French photographic theorist André Bazin, who argues that the genre describes 'a hallucination that is also a fact'.⁶⁴ As such, the sheer volume of tangible reality within Surrealist fine art photography could have been perceived of as more subversive than its painterly counterparts.

In tandem with the Reform and Opening Up (1978), Gu Zheng affirms that street photography flourished owing to the bustle brought about by businesses operating in the public space with people more likely to express their individuality owing to a consumerist mindset.⁶⁵ Gu advocated that street photography enabled the expression of individual personality and spontaneity.⁶⁶ Gu Zheng's *Shanghai Sketch* series (1986–1988) best embodies these precepts of street photography. Gu revealed to me that this series does indeed have a Surrealist 'flavour' 味道 (*weidao*); however, he only began to study Surrealism in depth during the 1990s when he read for his doctorate in Japan.⁶⁷ Here, through seminars led by his director of studies, he encountered Surrealist journals such as *Minotaure*.⁶⁸ One of the most important things Gu notes that Surrealism has brought to his photography is a sense of looking forward to accidental and unexpected moments.⁶⁹ Gu firmly relates the notion of the accident to desire and that to not act spontaneously is to 'ruin the moment' 对不起当下 (*duibuqi dangxia*).⁷⁰ Moreover, Gu supports Benjamin's reading of the *flâneur*, the act of strolling around the city to find the unfamiliar in a familiar environment.⁷¹ Of the *Shanghai Sketch* series in particular, Gu notes that he wanted to portray a sense of loneliness in modern life in a non-lyrical, non-narrative way, tinged with a hardness but also a sense of individuality and desire that was repressed during the Maoist era.⁷² In the tenth photograph of the *Shanghai Sketch* series (Figure 4.5), two headless mannequins sporting fashionable dresses appear to float in the sky scintillating through a saturation of shadow. The mannequins are not the focus of attention for the city-dwellers, who are indifferent, preparing to ride away on their bikes and go about their business. Hence, Gu's scopic decision making is an manifests his own desire and perception which is distinguished from those around him in a bold statement of individual agency. Ultimately, Gu's desire is ineffectual owing to the inanimate nature of the mannequin, which is used to sell goods, perhaps a surreptitious commentary on a burgeoning sense of commodity fetishism and the lure of materiality ushered in by post-socialism. The Parisian Surrealists famously admired Eugene Atget's photographs of mannequins in shop windows and the ambiguities such a composition produced. Both Atget and Gu Zheng's photographs produce a Freudian sense of the uncanny, something at once strange yet familiar. As Raymond notes, Atget's photographs gesture towards the human form but are also 'fragmentary'.⁷³ In Gu's photograph, the mannequins represent an almost ghostly sense of stillness as a counterpoint to the hustle and bustle of Shanghai's streets. Hence, the inanimate materiality of the commodity fetish is hypostasised by the rapid displacement of workers, whose economic efficacy competes with the satiation of desire.

Zhang Hai'er is another street photographer who also drew from Surrealism. Photography curator and critic Shi Hantao has related his work to the Surrealist concept of 'convulsive



Figure 4.5 Gu Zheng, *Shanghai Sketch No.10*, photograph, 1980s. Courtesy of the artist

beauty'⁷⁴ which envisages desire as spontaneous, violent and irrepressible. Zhang Hai'er is best known for his photography of Guangzhou's prostitutes, something Wu Hung has referred to as 'a sub-genre of urban representation', alongside his street photography of the city.⁷⁵ In 1987, Zhang portrays a seductive woman next to a decapitated male torso, subverting gendered power relations (Figure 4.6). Unlike Gu's spontaneity, this work is subtended by staging, but the female protagonist is in control of the scene as much as the photographer. She does not directly gesture her gaze towards the lens in a performative manner but is rather photographed *in medias res* of movement, disinclined to pose for the camera. The same year, Zhang's self-portrait positions himself screaming next to a large lorry. Through the prism of a wide-angle lens, Zhang's body appears anamorphically flattened whilst the rounded lorry dominates the composition, perhaps signifying the individual being overwhelmed by the flurry of infrastructure sprouting up around them at lightning speed. In 1988, Zhang was selected to travel to France and take part in the world-renowned Arles Photography festival, which further propelled his career. Overall, Surrealist photography in 1980s China, despite its marginalisation, still depicted the emancipation of repressed desire, the cityscape incarnating a photographer's muse. The camera of course was propitious to Surrealist automatism and the instantaneous capture of the uncanny at arm's length.

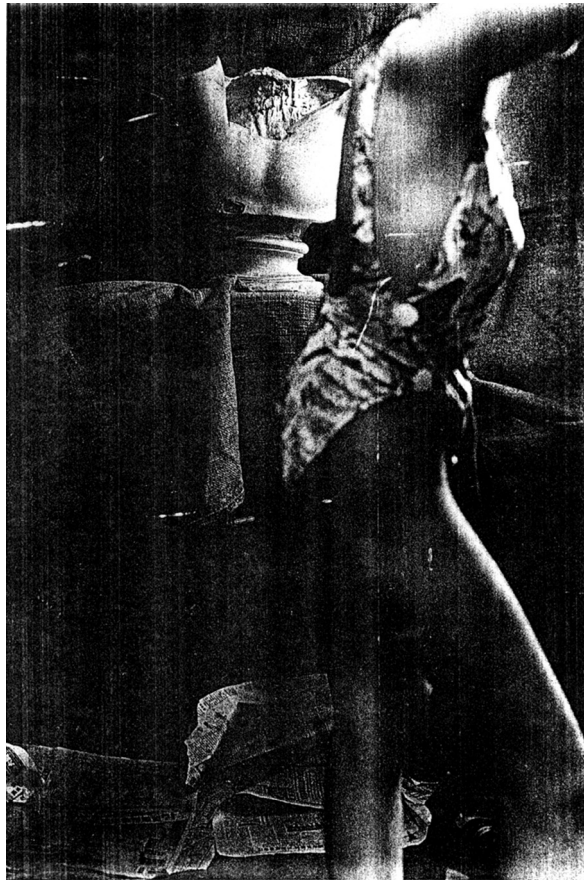


Figure 4.6 Zhang Hai'er, *Untitled*, Guangzhou, 1987, photograph. Hans van Dijk Archive. Courtesy of Hans van Dijk, Zhang Hai'er and Asia Art Archive

Surrealism at CAFA: '85 New Wave at the Art Academy

During the 1980s, many art school students produced work that incorporated Surrealism as part of their studies. Granted the aforementioned art-historical contributions of Professor Shao Dazhen, it is unsurprising Surrealist outputs during the 1980s emanated from CAFA students. As previously mentioned, the journal *Shijie meishu* was also established at the academy from 1979, forming a vital window into western art including Surrealism. In the same year, Joan Lebold Cohen gave a lecture entitled 'Beyond Illusion' at the academy, where she introduced students to works of western art, including avant-garde pieces such as those by Niki de Saint Phalle and Marcel Duchamp, who were both associated with Surrealist movement.⁷⁶

In the New Era: Revelation of Adam and Eve (1985), by then CAFA students Meng Luding and Zhang Qun, has already received substantial critical commentary over the years, often dubbed the work that marked the beginning of the '85 New Wave, the ushering in of a new era being its very premise (Figure 4.7). Therefore, it seems appropriate to go back to the original article dedicated to the work, written by its painters themselves, which was published in *Meishu* (1985). The artists begin by quoting the Bible's representation of original



Figure 4.7 Meng Luding and Zhang Qun, *In the New Age: The Enlightenment of Adam and Eve*, 1985, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Meng Luding.

sin, Adam and Eve eating the forbidden apple and subsequently being expelled from paradise. However, for Meng and Zhang, eating the apple catalyses revolution, transforming youth from ‘ignorance to civilisation’.⁷⁷ This unorthodox interpretation of Christian theology is accompanied by a syncretic addition of a Taoist yin-yang symbol, forming a plate upon which a Chinese man with a casual western style sweater is poised to dine. This is offset by a Buddhist rock carving of the Mogao caves whilst an ancient ‘feudal door’⁷⁸ handle to the left is countered by a billowing factory to the right in a telescoping of temporality. Welsh notes that these doors were added to circumvent censorship, so that the piece would be interpreted as an awakening from feudalism as opposed to Maoism.⁷⁹ A nude man and woman each hold an apple in a gesture towards European classicism, transgressing Chinese taboos surrounding this genre, whilst in the centre of the painting a woman breaks through multiple frame (works of reference), shards of shattered glass populating the canvas. The artists don’t refer to Surrealism per se; however, they do note that ‘Our thoughts are also a reality, an implicit reality’.⁸⁰ Indeed, they go on to espouse ‘subjective reality’ 主观现实 (*zhuguan xianshi*) and challenge the limitations of highly realist Scar Art, which portrayed the suffering of the Cultural Revolution in a realist manner, hence unleashing creativity in the wake of the Reform and Opening up.⁸¹

Whilst other commentators have described the work as Surrealistic and Welsh astutely notes Dalí’s influence,⁸² I believe that Meng and Zhang drew inspiration from a particular work of Dalí, his *Madonna of Port Lligat* (1949) (Figure 4.8). As we know, Shao Dazhen had already mentioned Dalí’s post-war turn to Christianity back in 1980. Moreover, there are potent aesthetic resonances between both works, particularly through the shattering of frames. In Dalí’s painting the bodies of both the Virgin Mary and the Baby Jesus transcend the golden frame, representing a divine rather than maternal connection.



Figure 4.8 Salvador Dalí, *Madonna of Port Lligat*, 1949, oil on canvas, 19 1/2 × 15 1/16 in 59.9. Gift of Mr and Mrs Ira Haupt. Collection of the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University © Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, DACS, 2024

The baby Jesus' frame contains a loaf of bread, symbolising Holy Communion and his rapport with man. The rocky outcrops and seascape of both works hold much in common, as does the depth of perspective and central vanishing point. The columns in Dalí's work are replaced by feudal doors in Meng and Zhang's re-envisioning. Meng and Zhang affirm that their work differs from Freud's stream of consciousness, and by proxy, Surrealist automatism, admitting the 'time-space is deliberately arranged' in their composition.⁸³ Indeed, I would go as far as to say that both artists carefully studied Dalí's *Madonna* and adapted it to a Chinese context.

Despite some tangible borrowings, Meng and Zhang do nevertheless make this work their own. First, whilst adopting a metaphysical time-space, their work equally holds a direct connection to Chinese contemporaneous society of the 1980s. Dalí's work, on the other hand, is a modernist vision of Jesus and Mary and pertains to transcendence of the flesh rather than the transgression of societal norms. Conversely, the frames in Meng and Zhang's work are very much imbricated in the milieu of present-day society. Societal intrusions such as the factory and sweater clearly delineate the era of this piece. Dalí's work is an impassioned expression of transcendence of the flesh whereas Meng and Zhang instrumentalise different religions in a syncretic manner to challenge the political status quo and herald a resurgence of spirituality after its suppression during the Cultural Revolution; hence religion is weaponised as a form of individual freedom. Adam and Eve are chosen as opposed to Dalí's portrayals of the immaculate conception to convey the society-specific taboo of the nude in China. In short, Meng and Zhang carefully position premeditated symbols to denote the spiritual re-awakening of Chinese society whilst engaging in a meta-commentary surrounding artistic creation. Indeed, the artists leave the

viewer with a *mise-en-abyme* of their own work in the bottom left-hand corner suggesting their core subject is creation itself, and, above all, the freedom to do so without stylistic restrictions.

Yearning for Peace (1985) is also a collective work by two CAFA artists, Wang Xiangming and Jin Lili. Here, a young girl is positioned aside a framed painting commingling canonical western artist's works that represent opposition to war and a longing for peace. Cacchicone notes: 'The painting is a mishmash of iconic Western masterpieces, including Picasso's *Guernica*, Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* and Édouard Manet's *Execution of Emperor Maximilian*'.⁸⁴ Picasso's *Guernica* is the dominant work at the top of the canvas,⁸⁵ whilst in terms of composition both Wang and Jin are refreshingly frank in revealing: 'Some people say that there are many elements of Dalí, the Surrealist painter, in our work. We must admit that we are influenced by him to a certain extent'.⁸⁶ Gao Minglu has instructively classed this painting's depictions of war as a 'deconstruction of reality, an apparent influence from Surrealist master Dalí'.⁸⁷ The girl in the painting is also standing next to a newly sprouting tree, indicating the resilience of life and rebirth amidst conflict.⁸⁸ Combined with a collapsing of the space-time continuum, we can certainly argue that the work is Surrealist in composition. Notwithstanding, the artists deny the influence of the unconscious as well as the intermixing of reality and dream, arguing that 'this cannot be fully supported by our society at this time'.⁸⁹ Clearly, both painters were acutely aware of contemporaneous creative limitations. Notwithstanding, the painting transcends artistic movements, interweaving realist (Courbet), impressionist (Manet) and Surrealist (Picasso) imagery of conflict, a surreptitious sidestep from the sanctioned aesthetics of socialist realism, revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism during the Maoist era which in turn mitigates art's rapport with ideology and emphasises pluralism.

As explored in Chapter 1, Picasso had become a 'politically correct' artist during the Mao era before the Cultural Revolution owing his adherence to the French Communist Party in 1944. Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) was reproduced in *Meishu* in 1961 whilst his peace dove (1950) still held a prominent position in the public imaginary during the 1980s. Hence the choice of Picasso's visions of the Spanish Civil War as opposed to Salvador Dalí's, whose ideology was unstable in the extreme, seems to be a highly lucid political choice. He was instead instrumentalised in a less overt way. Similarly to *In The New Era*, *Yearning for Peace*, pays particular attention to the act of artistic creation itself; again we have a frame within a frame in a meta-artistic gesture. Cacchicone notes that this was to delineate boundaries between western art and Chinese art,⁹⁰ yet for me, the work is more redolent of Lu Xun's (1934) theory of grabbism 拿来主义 (*nalaizhuyi*). Lu Xun cites the fact that several Chinese antiquities have made their way to French museums; therefore China should reciprocate by selectively extrapolating ideas from the West,⁹¹ Lu Xun believes that if ideas from the West are not 'grabbed', then Chinese culture will remain in a state of stagnation rather than becoming 'modern'.⁹² Indeed, Wang and Jin are both very unapologetic in tone about borrowing from western art. Whilst the frame gestures towards western influence, it is something contained, regulated and managed by Chinese artists. They are in control of their borrowings. Set in an art gallery, positioning this work as a form of dialogue and accumulation of art historical knowledge apropos western art history, the work forms a visual essay, in contrast to the constant accusations of copying and misinterpretations.

Interestingly, both of these Surrealist works were part of 'The Advancing Chinese Youth Fine Art Exhibition' mounted in the context of the UN Year of Peace. As the title

suggests, this was an official government sponsored event. Zhang and Qun's *In the New Era* provoked controversy but was still allowed to be exhibited⁹³ whilst *Yearning for Peace* won the grand prize.⁹⁴ Both artworks appear on the front page of prominent art journal *Zhongguo meishu bao* (Fine Arts in China) (1985–1989) edited by Li Xianting.⁹⁵ Whilst *Yearning for Peace* won first prize, it is reproduced in black and white. *In the New Era* is reproduced in a much bigger size and in colour, alongside further commentary on the work by Meng and Zhang, disrupting somewhat the official result. Importantly, two competing tendencies emerge here, a state-sanctioned version of Surrealism versus a more strident variety. Nevertheless, as Adorno notes 'Peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other'⁹⁶ and to me this statement best resumes the intention of both works representing Chinese art for the UN year for peace. Differentiated participation between China and the West through artistic exchange triumphed as opposed to the re-inscription of western cultural hegemony due to economic opening up.

Surrealism on the front page: Meishu

Meishu was ostensibly the most important art magazine during the '85 New Wave through its intermediary position between the avant-garde art and officialdom. This was a tricky relationship to navigate and whilst supporting the avant-garde, it also included articles that disagreed with the '85 New Wave for balance.⁹⁷ During the 1980s, knowing when one had 'crossed the line' was a difficult balancing act. In 1983, Li Xianting was ousted owing to his introduction to abstract art at the onset of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign. *Meishu* was subsequently edited by the Shao Dazhen and Gao Minglu. The latter was 'suspended in 1989 due to his organisation of the China Avant-garde exhibition'.⁹⁸ A certain cachet can be accorded to works that made it onto the front cover of *Meishu* in that they both were perceived as having been accepted by the censors as well as being suitably attention-grabbing. Surrealist works would often feature on the front cover of *Meishu*. In Cheng Xiaoyu's *East*, a crowd of faceless beings ride an interstellar road on their bikes against the backdrop of a setting sun, ostensibly a subtle critique of collectivism (Figure 4.9).

The title *East*, however, jars with the interplanetary exposition of this work. There is clearly a cultural dichotomy between universality and cultural specificity at play here as per the cosmopolitan divide explicated in the introduction. This work was published on the front cover of *Meishu* in 1985 and Gao Minglu notes that he personally selected it, postulating that the work advocated for people coexisting in a universal space.⁹⁹ However, he also comments that the decision to publish the work on the front cover was subsequently critiqued by the authorities, believing that it depicted Chinese people as 'drifting migrants' 盲流 (*mangliu*).¹⁰⁰ Cheng Xiaoyu commented that at university he was particularly interested in Surrealism but he maintained his own cultural background alongside this interest.¹⁰¹

Although the work is initially published without commentary on the front cover, Cheng Xiaoyu later authored an article entitled 'Coexistence, Understanding, Tolerance: An Average Person's World', also in *Meishu* (1986), which appears to explicate the artist's trajectory in *East* and in his wider oeuvre. The article particularly praises cross-cultural infiltration, utilising Picasso's absorption of African art to prompt the plea: 'Let artists think wildly and do what they want'.¹⁰² Cheng believes that restrictions upon artistic practice stem from feudalism whilst affirming apropos artistic innovation: 'In this world of symbiotic coexistence, everything happens naturally. Artists constantly absorb



Figure 4.9 Cheng Xiaoyu, *East*, 1985, Joan Lebold Cohen Archive. Courtesy of Joan Lebold Cohen, Cheng Xiaoyu and Asia Art Archive

useful elements from other domains, constantly discover new meanings of the traditional and constantly innovate new forms of art'.¹⁰³ He also believes that older generations of artists should support the innovations of the younger generation, noting 'God knows if Picasso had seen a space shuttle, he would have made a jaw dropping work of art, but he never got the chance, this is a task for the youth'.¹⁰⁴ This could well be the inspiration behind *East*, a Surrealist rendering of society in the space age, which now had China's participation.

As such, Cheng is not only critiquing anti-'85 New Wave nationalism but also refutes criticism that Chinese artists were copying from the West at this juncture. From a conventional eyeline, the figures in *East* are placed on the western side of the tableau whilst the eastern side remains in darkness. As such, the work could equally form a subtle critique of a 'feudalistic' Chinese society, hinting that a phase of 'enlightenment' should be undertaken.

Another Surrealist work to feature on the front cover of *Meishu* was Zhang Jianjun's *Human Beings and their Clock* (1986) (Figure 4.10). The work chimes with Surrealism's reconciliation of the 'past and future'.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Gao Minglu explains that 'different races, different ages and different eras of people are placed in the same non-realistic space'¹⁰⁶ in an appeal to both cosmopolitanism and universality. Naturally, Dalí's (1931) *Persistence of Memory* is conjured in terms of its temporal relativity and motif of melting clocks, but such an affinity resides at a conceptual level rather than aesthetic borrowing. An ethereal quality emerges from a predominance of grey and white, suggesting a lunar landscape punctuated by an earthly, rusty patina of brown. The seriousness of the scene is humorously interrupted in the background by what Wu Hung describes as 'a strange form that is the only non-human entity in the composition. Situated on the distant location, this mushroom-like creature seems to come from outer space and evokes the dreamscapes of Surrealist paintings'.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, both Cheng Xiaoyu and Zhang Jianjun's take on Surrealism invokes the cosmos. Whilst western Surrealism readily dialogued with



Figure 4.10 Zhang Jianjun, *Human Beings and their Clock*, 1986, oil on linen, 220 × 340 cm. Fei Dawei Archive. Courtesy of Fei Dawei, Zhang Jianjun and Asia Art Archive

different forms of spirituality, such works are scarcely set beyond the boundaries of our human world. Conversely, Cheng Xiaoyu and Zhang Jianjun utilise celestial bodies to convey a sense of futurity but also a sense of relativity as to issues of nationalism and cultural difference. Cheng and Zhang's approach to racial difference is diametrically opposed; Cheng removes any cipher of race from his composition whilst Zhang celebrates the difference, but both resolutely form anti-nationalist statements at a time when Chinese artists were criticised for borrowing from the West. Such parochialism was thwarted by appealing to grander narratives of life beyond Earth through Surrealistic manipulations of time and space. Whilst most works of Surrealism during the 1980s did not directly dialogue with the Four Modernisations, it could be argued that the projections of space signify China's scientific advancement repurposed to advocate cosmopolitan as opposed to nationalist discourse.

Southwestern Art Research Group

We now turn to the vital role of regional art collectives outside the two art metropolises of Beijing and Shanghai. The Southwestern Art Research Group's core members were Zhang Xiaogang, Mao Xuhui, Pan Dehai and Ye Yongqing. Based in Kunming, they collaborated on several artistic activities together during the height of the '85 New Wave and remained in close collaboration afterwards.¹⁰⁸ The group's aims are aptly elucidated by Yan Zhou as 'digging into man's natural level – the sub-conscious, desire, and intuition'.¹⁰⁹ Further to this, Mao Xuhui wrote the group's own manifesto which particularly chimes with the Second Manifesto of Surrealism's resolution of opposing forces as well as the Daoist philosophy of yin-yang:

Only in the chaos of everything interacting, and one single entity of heaven and earth, only in the mutual infiltration and combination of vision and insight, physical images and virtual ones, fantasy and reality and the rational, ego and superego, can we be inspired and intuit the boundless, limitless precinct.¹¹⁰

Yet, this universalist remit is offset by local idiosyncrasies. Gao Minglu describes Yunnan as 'still home to a traditional agricultural lifestyle and most of the minorities in China'.¹¹¹ Mao Xuhui forged parallels between Yunnan province and Mexico, revealing to Cohen that between 1984 and 1987 he was influenced by Diego Riviera's artwork and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's Magical Realist Novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967).¹¹² Spindler defines a specific branch of: 'Anthropological magic realism' as 'the depiction of events from a rational point of view (the "realist" component) and sometimes from that of a believer in magic (the "magical" element). This antinomy is resolved by the author adopting or referring to the myths and cultural background (the "collective unconscious") of a social or ethnic group.'¹¹³ As such, one of the core characteristics of the Southwest group was the commingling of both Latin American Magical Realism and western Surrealism as a hybrid gesture. Indeed, there was much crossover and networking between western Surrealism and counterparts in Latin America both pre- and post-World War Two as previously discussed.

Notwithstanding, Western Surrealism's penchant for the exotic was undeniably known and even celebrated in China at this juncture. William Rubins' controversial 'Primitivism' exhibition (1984–1985) was held at MoMa in the United States and this event was reported in *Zhongguo meishubao* (1986) (Fine Arts in China) through an article relating primitivism to modern art.¹¹⁴ Here, the author notes complex formalism was 'psychologically tiring' 厌倦心理 (*yanjuan xinli*) and supported a return to a 'hidden childhood' 人类童年的心里潜藏 (*renlei tongnian de xinli qianchang*).¹¹⁵ Such views in China did exist and are clearly very problematic. A republished, translated review of the 'Primitivism' exhibition itself by a US author argued that Picasso borrowed from African art to not be tied down by reality, mentioning the Surrealist's penchant for Oceanic art's frightening yet ingenious nature.¹¹⁶ Rubin's primitivism exhibition itself juxtaposed anonymous African and Oceanic objects with works of modern art, incorporating a particular focus on Dada and Surrealism. Alongside the advert for the 'Primitivism' exhibition, *Zhongguo meishubao* published a picture of Picasso and his collection of African objects. 'Primitivism' was lambasted for the de-contextualisation of African and oceanic objects in a western context, eschewing the original use value to their indigenous cultures,¹¹⁷ but can we indict 1980s Chinese avant-garde groups with the same charge? In 1989, the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* overturned art-historical Eurocentricity with 50 per cent emanating from Europe and 50 per cent from the rest of the world. Three Chinese artists featured.¹¹⁸ Whilst this exhibition was also subject to numerous critiques,¹¹⁹ hybridity as opposed to exoticism was the guiding curatorial methodology.

Instead of primitivism, in their theoretical tracts, most members of the Southwestern Art Research Group, working in between these two historical pivot points of 'Primitivism' (1984) and 'Magiciens de la Terre' (1989), also postulated for hybridity as their guiding notion before the idea was seminally curated in the West at a global level.

In a text entitled 'The Effort We Put in is the Same as the Great Masters' (1986),¹²⁰ Pan Dehai argues that hybridity can initially be perceived of as a tragedy, invoking contradictions between nature and society, art and life, individual and collective. However, he also notes that hybridity has the power to traverse these conventional borders in order to unleash 'crazy vortexes' 疯狂的漩涡 (*fengkuang de xuanwo*) that promote creation. He ends on a nuanced note by stating that 'it is not a case of returning to our point of origin,

rather it is about a sense of constantly reflecting on the original'¹²¹ thus positioning hybridity as a phenomenon that blends new and old in order to engender originality.

In his article 'Striving towards a new space for art and the spirit', Mao Xuhui believes that progress emanates from the creation of a new space, which may stem from the traditional Chinese view of the void as a realm of possibilities.¹²² He argues that without hybridity, there would be no room for thought or discovery in the world, advocating that 'Great people should always reconcile opposites, organically unifying together the sensory and the rational, past and future, material and spiritual, fantasy and reality through a chemical reaction'¹²³.

This resonates with what has been termed the 'supreme point' of Surrealism. As such the Surrealist basis of reconciling opposing forces becomes a method towards fashioning hybridity.

The western Surrealist elements of Mao Xuhui's work revolve around desire, but these traits are augmented by Magical Realism's focus on an indigenous spiritual world view. In 1986, Mao Xuhui paints *Call of Mother of Red Earth* (Figure 4.11). The area of Dongchuan, situated 150 kilometres from Kunming, is famous for its red soil, coloured by copious deposits of iron and copper. Amidst this unique environment, which in and of itself challenges one's realist frame of reference, a multi-limbed, multi-bosomed tree goddess emerges in a bodily distortion reminiscent of western Surrealist André Masson. The goddess is represented as part of the natural environment, ensconced limbs doubling as tree branches, harking back to a Yunnane animist belief system, commingling the Surrealist tenets of desire and spirituality.



Figure 4.11 Mao Xuhui, *The Call of Mother of Red Earth*, 1986, oil on Bristol board, 73.5 × 54 cm. Mao Xuhui Archive. Courtesy of Mao Xuhui and Asia Art Archive

To escape the practice of drawing workers, peasants and soldiers, artists often turned to ethnic minorities and landscapes during the Maoist era.¹²⁴ Despite such a continuity, the Southwestern Art Research Group's practice formed a marked departure from realism. For example, Mao Xuhui felt renowned realist Chen Danqing's representations of ethnic minorities and landscapes were 'disdainful' 不屑一顾 (*buxie yigu*), lacking 'spiritual subjectivity' 精神的主观性 (*jingshen de zhuguanxing*).¹²⁵ As such, visual portrayals of animism enabled parity and crossover between the supernatural, humans and nature. Imbuing animism with avant-garde elements enabled this view to go beyond the notion of a lost paradise and into a legitimatised, contemporary mode of existence. Drawing from Magical Realism, landscapes at were at once a place of everyday existence and sustenance but also fantastical.

Granted his closeness to Mao Xuhui, it is likely that the work of Zhang Xiaogang was also inspired by Latin American Magical Realism as well as western Surrealism. Zhang readily admits the influence of Magritte upon his works, lauding him as his soul-mate,¹²⁶ but also reveals that his motif of the bloodline in his world-renowned series in the 1990s was borrowed from Mexican Surrealist/Magical Realist Frida Kahlo.¹²⁷ Moreover, Fineburg, in a visual analysis of Zhang's *Eternal Love* (1988), asserts that the piece was inspired by 'the "magical realist" paintings of Frida Kahlo, which Zhang discovered at the time'.¹²⁸ One of the key commonalities between Zhang and Kahlo's work beyond formalistic resonances was the commingling of life and death. Owing to alcohol poisoning, Zhang was admitted to hospital in 1984. Here, Zhang began hallucinating that the ubiquitous white sheets were in fact ghosts, perhaps a subliminal reminder of how close to death he had come. Subsequently, Zhang became fascinated by the Yi People of Daliang mountain in Yunnan province. In a 1986 article entitled 'Towards a different form of existence', Zhang praises the Yi people, also animists, commenting:

When the forefathers of indigenous peoples understood the role of the sun and moon, they lit a fire and began to dance wildly, they hung ox heads on wooden pegs, they carved images on rock walls behind mountains, on tree bark, on containers, even on their own bodies. They no longer felt lonely, no longer feared death, no longer worried about life's problems, life became a boat ride to the 'other shore'.¹²⁹

The commingling of life and death as part of daily existence could also be intuited in the syncretic Mexican 'Day of the Dead' ceremony, which combines indigenous beliefs with Catholicism. Hence, Latin American Magical Realism connected with the spirituality of Yunnan's indigenous people whilst Surrealism enabled a psychological interrogation of opposing forces and the dreamscape as an aspirational form of daily existence. Ostensibly, the series of Zhang's works that most readily combines western Surrealism and Latin American Magical Realism is his *Lost Dream* series. Like Mao Xuhui, Zhang also depicts animist beliefs in the work the *Golden September* (Figure 4.12), which contrasts a decapitated goat and human head with a semi-nude indigenous woman standing next to luscious cleaves of corn ready for harvesting; lurking in the background is a tree-spirit whose facial features are distorted in a Picasso-esque manner, hence life and death, spirit and body harmoniously coexist in the same frame. Indeed, anthropological research has also shown that the Yi people believed in 'land spirits' commonly represented by trees,¹³⁰ demonstrating a certain grounding in empirical practices as opposed to an exoticist fantastical



Figure 4.12 Zhang Xiaogang, *The Golden September*, 1988, oil on paper, 42 × 32cm. Zhang Xiaogang Archive. Courtesy of Zhang Xiaogang and Asia Art Archive

imaginary. Indeed, portrayals of spirituality portend towards the fantastical but can often become entangled with exoticism. Yet, the Southwest Art Research Group drew from the global network of Surrealism as opposed to its canonical western masters often cited in periodicals during the '85 New Wave and hence a unique form of distinctly Yunnanese Surrealism emerges in dialogue with the syncretic approach of Mexican Surrealism.

Surrealism in Hubei: Tribe Tribe

The 'Tribe Tribe' collective was formed of members from the Hubei Art Academy who held an exhibition of the same name in December 1986. The group's exhibition preface consisted of the *Parable of the Sower* from the gospel of Mark in the Christian New Testament. The original intention of the parable was to demonstrate how Satan can ruin the spouting of a seed of faith (plants being scorched, birds eating seeds). Good soil (i.e. strong faith) is needed for seeds to multiply. However, in the 'Tribe Tribe' exhibition, the author of the introduction, art critic Peng De, believes that the Parable is inadequate granted because it neglects the quality of the seed itself.¹³¹ Peng states that he does indeed believe that the idea of fertile soil is what is needed for artistic development as opposed to an exclusive artistic movement, granting the exhibition and group a wide remit.¹³² As such, the parable is more a catalyst for thought rather than embodying the ideological stance of the group.

Beyond the parable, Peng De's introduction concentrates on Freudian psychoanalysis, closely entwined with Surrealism, and particularly evident in the paintings exhibited in

'Tribe Tribe'. Freud's three personalities, the ID, the ego and the superego are elaborated. For Freud, 'The id is the realm of appetites, wants and passions that do not take "no" for an answer. The superego is connected to morality and social norms, built out of identifications with one's parents, and can be extremely cruel. The ego faces the task of finding a balance between the demands of the id and the super-ego'.¹³³ Freud's ID is henceforth enlisted against:

the ancient sages who determine the life of every individual completely ignore the ID. Confucius tirelessly warned people to restrain their selfish desires, while Mencius specifically introduced the ascetic proposition of 'suffering one's mind. Starving one's bones, starving one's body and skin'.¹³⁴

Unlike the Confucian tradition (whose collectivism was somewhat co-opted by the Chinese Communist Party after the Cultural Revolution), Surrealism argued for the emancipation of the ID from the superego similarly to Peng De who notes that 'every society in social turmoil expresses a revolt against the superego, this is the ID's national catharsis'.¹³⁵ Naturally, Peng De frames the repression of desire and the ID against a backdrop of Confucianism and its feudal thinking rather than the much more recent repression of the Cultural Revolution, ostensibly in order to avert censorship as we have seen previously. Peng De notes:

'Tribe Tribe' art collective has profoundly experienced the harmful effects of vacuous feudalistic morality upon the Chinese people, it realises that this type of morality, particularly towards modern society has harmful side effects, therefore, it would rather return to a primitive tribal society and mould the human personality from scratch.¹³⁶

After a long exposition, this is where the title's meaning is finally evoked. Without being directly mentioned, such sentiments clearly resonate with those of Surrealism. For example, Breton defines 'primitives' as 'being governed by elementary forces more elementary than our own',¹³⁷ explicating that for the Surrealists the 'primitive' had a potent spiritual dimension.

Indeed, the work *The Psychiatrist and his Patients* (Figure 4.13) by Fan Hancheng combines the Freudian, the spiritual and the 'primitive'. Amidst a Magritte-like cloudscape the psychiatrist is depicted as translucent quasi-deity whilst his patients are hollowed in, bound to mortal forms. Nevertheless, this jars somewhat with the Western Surrealist view of mental illness. As I have noted: 'Whilst Breton was partial to Freudian psychoanalysis, he launches a tirade against the corruption of psychiatry and views psychiatric hospitals as places where 'the mad are made'.¹³⁸ As we saw in the case of Sha Qi in Chapter 1, the Surrealists viewed schizophrenia as a sign of genius. Here, we have no insight into the individual personalities of the patients owing to their facelessness. This seems to chime with Peng De's appeal for 'primitive' regression to mould the Chinese personality from scratch. Another work in the Tribe Tribe exhibition was Xie Yue's *Picasso Talks to a Woman*. Owing to the lack of geometric design as per cubist predilections, this is clearly a Surrealist homage to the master. The head of a dog replaces that of a male, undermining the organ of rationality associated with anthropocentrism, creating a hybrid being as the product of imagination. The man-dog and woman are engaged in conversation amidst a simplified mountain and water backdrop

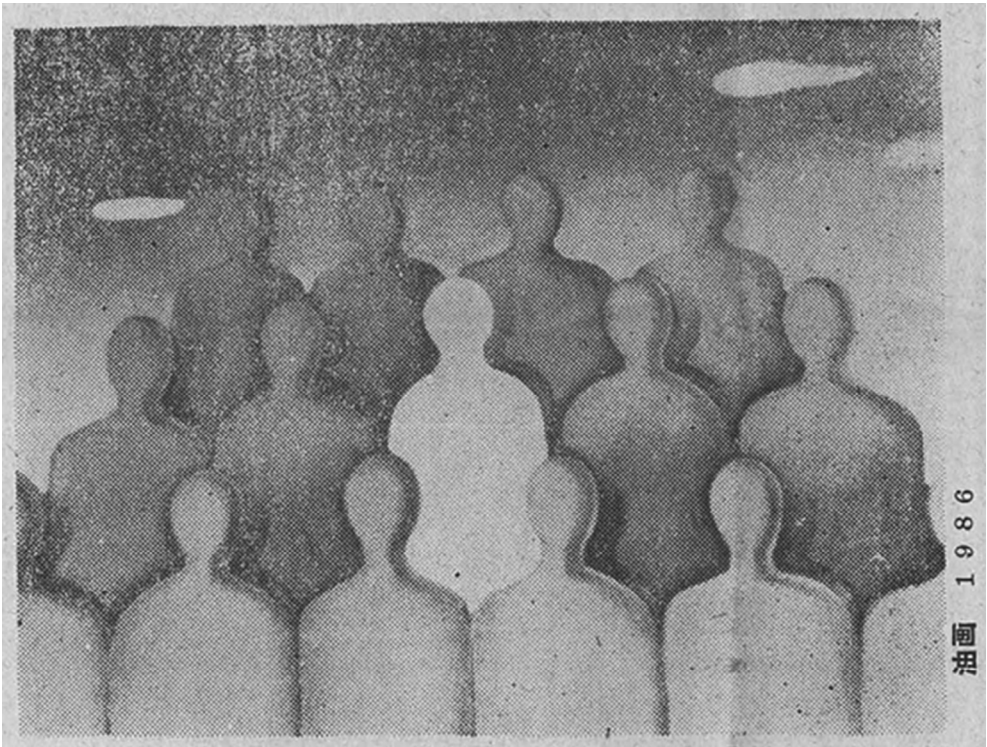


Figure 4.13 Fan Hancheng, *Group Photograph of the Psychiatrist and his Patients*, 1986, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Asia Art Archive

of the traditional *shanshui* genre, again aligning with Peng De's premise of a regression to a more elementary, mythical state of being. Hence, the Tribe Tribe exhibition can be seen as a metaphor for Surrealism's revolution of the mind subsequently engendering a revolution in society.

Surrealism in Lanzhou

The principal leader of avant-garde activities in the Lanzhou area of Gansu province was Cao Yong (b. 1954). He is best known for his organisation of 'Research, Discovery, Expression: a Five Person Exhibition' in December 1984 at the Lanzhou workers cultural palace. The exhibition title clearly alludes to the reception of innovative ideas and experimentation in form. The exhibition was highly controversial in Lanzhou and has been compared with the Stars exhibition in this respect.¹³⁹ Cao subsequently organised the 85.8 exhibition in Lanzhou in 1985. Cao Yong's own magnum opus would be made a year later in 1986 entitled *The Schema of Modern Tragedy* (Figure 4.14). The work is a collage comprising:

A huge monster, with the body of a cat, a pair of ox horns, an evil mouth, a pair of glasses, and smoke coming from its nose and anus, flies in the sky. To its tail is tied a slogan, 'In the daytime, under the moonlight, I start my journey from Freud's house',



Figure 4.14 Cao Yong, *The Schema of Modern Tragedy 1*, 1986, oil on canvas, 11 × 81cm. Joan Lebold Cohen Archive. Courtesy of Joan Lebold Cohen, Cao Yong and Asia Art Archive

below which there are many classical and modern buildings mixed in disorder to symbolise a 'global village'.¹⁴⁰

This grotesque work clearly differs from dialectically positivist visions of modernity as an escape from the Cultural Revolution such as *In the New Era* (1985). Nor can the work be viewed as a distinct critique of Chinese society; a universal sense of tragedy is more than implicit here. Indeed, the skewed cornucopia of buildings are predominantly western, for example the Parisian Arc du Triomphe is foregrounded. As China began to make room for the individual, the cornerstone of modernity, this nevertheless paved the way for tragedy in a Freudian sense. For Freud 'the cause of the human tragedy was not merely

the fall from Nature, but the inexorable knowledge that Man's denial of his biological heritage was the very basis for being human'.¹⁴¹ As such, the unconscious, 'primitive' elements that humans suppress are rendered visible in Cao Yong's monster. In Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) he explores the causes of human unhappiness, the most well known of which is the 'death drive' which claims that human beings are intrinsically aggressive and destructive, and civilisation merely represses these impulses.¹⁴² Whilst the Reform and Opening Up may have emancipated the individual to a certain extent, civilisation universally entails the repression of desire for collective betterment, otherwise mankind descends into the rampaging bull that Cao Yong envisions. Indeed, Surrealism intended to unleash repressed desires and was more militant than Freud in this respect, who advocated for an equilibrium between societal needs and the desires of the individual. Interestingly, Cao Yong's work subsumes Reform and Opening Up China into a global modernity where the same fundamental social contract curtailing individual sovereignty exists in both democratic and illiberal regimes but to vastly different extents and manifestations.

A year later in 1987, Cao Yong created *The Schema of Modern Tragedy Two*, which is a more culturally specific work. Amidst a disconcerting pile of Chinese nudes ready for consumption as fodder, a ravenous monster appears amongst the jaws of which the Mona Lisa, Marilyn Monroe and several Chinese women can be found. This work is a sexually charged vision of unabated erotic desire which is granted a historical lineage in the western canon. Indeed, the nude form was still controversial in Chinese society during the '85 New Wave amidst more conservative quarters. In short, Cao Yong highlights the instinctual drives of the human being but particularly appends them to the modern society that China has now entered after the repression of these urges during the Maoist era, this is after all, a modern tragedy. Atop the composition, a solitary, ethereal figure in monastic attire is positioned above the human fracas below, gesturing towards the potential for spiritual redemption.

Surrealism and the 1989 China Avant-Garde exhibition

The 1989 China Avant-Garde exhibition held at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing is widely viewed as the culmination of China's '85 New Wave. In preparation for the exhibition, two symposia were held. The first was the Zhuhai conference in Beijing during 1986 when slides of artworks from avant-garde individuals and groups around the country were displayed with representatives from several collectives in attendance. Gao Minglu notes that over 1200 slides were received.¹⁴³ The idea for the China/Avant-Garde Exhibition was borne out of the Zhuhai conference. The exhibition was delayed because of the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign of 1987 but in 1988 the Huangshan conference saw 'one hundred artists gathered to prepare for the China/Avant Garde Exhibition'.¹⁴⁴ Eventually, 297 artworks were on display at the exhibition in 1989 after political tensions died down.¹⁴⁵ Curator of the China Avant-Garde exhibition, Gao Minglu, was forced to compromise with government officials and accept that live performance art could not be present in the exhibition.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, seven artists rebelled against this directive, including Xiao Lu, who famously shot a gun into her installation, which closed the exhibition down.

Understandably, most of the research surrounding *China/Avant-Garde* revolves around the performance art on display granted its unofficial presence. Notwithstanding, there were several artworks representative of Chinese Surrealism on display at the China

Avant-Garde exhibition which canonised Surrealism's role in the '85 New Wave. Indeed, the work of artists analysed in this chapter – Zhang Xiaogang, Mao Xuhui, Cao Yong, Cheng Xiaoyu, Zhang Jianjiun, Meng Luding and Zhang Qun and Feng Guodong – all featured. This is compounded by the presence of Surrealist-inspired artists who will be analysed in Chapter 5, including Wang Guangyi, Shu Qun and Liu Yan (Northern Art Group) and Shen Qin, Ding Fang, Xu Lei, Cao Xiaodong and Guan Ce (Red Travels).

Xu Lei of the Red Travels group (1986–1988), who will be explored further in the following chapter, gave me some interesting insights into the exhibition. He noted that there was an atmosphere of one-upmanship with an unspoken competition of who could be 'more avant-garde' than the other.¹⁴⁷ He revealed that Wang Guangyi, who had made a work parodying Mao Zedong's image, was upstaged by performance art and unhappy about this.¹⁴⁸ Conversely, artworks perceived to be 'calm' were consigned to the third floor, including that of Xu Bing, who would of course become one of the most financially successful contemporary Chinese artists,¹⁴⁹ as would Xu Lei. Xu Lei affirmed to me that he was not jealous of the attention received by performance artists but admitted the notion of 'surprise' is a very important avant-garde tactic, which played a role in the legacy of the exhibition.¹⁵⁰

The China Avant-Garde exhibition was widely reviewed in many specialist art publications as well as mass market outfits including *Time* magazine. Several reviews mentioned Surrealism in the exhibition in both a positive and a negative fashion. Tania Hansen termed the show a 'surrealist exhibition in Beijing', opining that the display produced 'Clichéd copies of western art' whilst the artists were 'at a loss to produce anything particularly Chinese', dubbing the pieces on display as 'vague amorphous sculptures, inflated plastic private parts and Picassoesque nudes'.¹⁵¹ Conversely, a review by Liu Xiaochun, founder of *Fine Arts in China*, is less reactionary and more nuanced. He states that the exhibition was influenced by Surrealism because the movement had a more direct link with the human body in comparison with its forerunners.¹⁵² In this regard, a heretofore unmentioned aspect of Surrealism during the '85 New Wave is undoubtedly its sculptural output.

In 1932, Salvador Dalí defined the Surrealist object as: 'an object which lends itself to a minimum of mechanical functions and is based on phantoms and representations liable to be provoked by the realization of unconscious acts'.¹⁵³ Wu Shaoxiang's *Shoe* (Figure 4.15), which appeared in the 1989 Avant Garde exhibition, certainly conforms to such a definition. The work resonates with Freud's notion of fetishism and eroticises the female body by creating a fishing line and hook protruding from a breast into the sole of a shoe. Indeed, Wu Shaoxiang cites Freud and the subconscious as a core element of his artistic process. He comments 'Freud believed that human sexual behaviour as a kind of instinct (existential instinct), was produced as early as infancy'.¹⁵⁴ He subsequently relates instinctual sexual desire to touch and the tactility of sculpture. To contrast with his own work, he cites the oeuvre of Swiss Surrealist sculptor Giacometti and his 'Standing Man', which, he believes, 'makes people feel frightened, trembling, and avoid contact, because it evokes some unpleasant or terrible tactile experience through the sense of sight, such as sick old people, mummies, and burnt tree trunks'.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, Giacometti's coarse lines differ greatly from the smooth corporality of Wu Shaoxiang but both intend to evoke subconscious feeling. Moreover, Wu is against planned sculptural processes and like Dalí favours 'impromptu modelling' 即兴塑造 (*jinxing suzao*).¹⁵⁶

In Chinese culture, of course, the shoe conjures a subconscious allusion to foot binding which was not outlawed until the Nationalist Xinhai revolution of 1911. The symbol of the shoe connotes the historic repression of women in Chinese society. In his treatise on



Figure 4.15 Wu Shaoxiang, *Shoe*, 1986, wood, bamboo and rope, 92cm. China Avant-garde Exhibition Archive. Courtesy of Andreas Schmid, Wu Shaoxiang and Asia Art Archive

fetishism, Freud himself commented on ‘the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated. It seems as though the Chinese male wants to thank the woman for having submitted to being castrated.’¹⁵⁷ Whilst Wu Shaoxiang’s work is undoubtedly erotic and fetishist, it also undermines China’s feudal history; the shoe is deliberately open and wide. Salvador Dalí also created a shoe which was much more shocking than that of Wu Shaoxiang. Dalí suspended a red high-heeled shoe from a rope accompanied by the erotic synecdoche of milk (breast) and sugar lumps (pleasure) alongside actual pubic hair. Freud famously described the fetish as: ‘organs or objects chosen as substitutes for the absent female phallus’.¹⁵⁸ Both Wu and Dalí’s artworks conform to such a definition, but Dalí’s work is made in an unrestrained political environment where the exploration of individual desire is a given, conversely, through *Shoe*. Wu Shaoxiang highlights issues of both erotic and political repression granted the lineage of Chinese feudal history.

Conclusion

Whilst it is impossible to give an exhaustive account of Surrealism during the 1980s here, this chapter nonetheless demonstrates the multifarious nature of Surrealism in China, which resonates with a plethora of Surrealist concepts beyond mere aesthetic borrowings. The manifold reception of Surrealism in China witnessed art collectives and individuals drawing from different aspects of Euro-American and Latin American Surrealism as well

as the movement's interest in African and Oceanic Art. Surrealist concepts of freedom, Revolution, spirituality, psychoanalysis, eroticism, primitivism, Magical Realism, the grotesque, the time-space continuum and fetishism were all envisioned by Chinese artists during the 1980s. These Surrealist tenets are combined with idiosyncratically Chinese elements of syncretism, folk culture, feudal history and socialist legacies in a symbiotic relationship which tried to make sense of 30 years of artistic repression through the awakening of human desires. Indeed, André Breton famously described desire as 'the only motive of the world, ... the only rigor humans must be acquainted with'.¹⁵⁹ In short, Chinese Surrealism responds to the repression of desire in all its manifestations (political, physical, spiritual) during the Cultural Revolution.

There were of course other concerns directly contingent upon the historical circumstances of the 1980s in an atmosphere where unspoken red lines were regularly crossed. Surrealism was unique in its ability to negotiate the delicate politics of the 1980s compared with other modernisms and this is something aptly noted by Joan Lebold Cohen:

Surrealism became the accepted 'modern' form of art because the establishment said it was okay. But abstract art wasn't okay, because you couldn't tell whether the abstraction had some kind of hidden message within it, whereas with Surrealism you could recognize the lips and strawberries, and so on. They were recognizable, so they couldn't be bad. That's how the establishment decided. So, that seemed to be the style that many young people were experimenting with work inspired by Freud and encouraged by the establishment.¹⁶⁰

It would have been impossible to convey any form of surreptitious socio-political message through a realist medium whilst abstract art worried government officials about hidden messages. Realism was too tangible whilst abstraction was too intangible, so the hazy musings of unconscious desire engendered freedom of artistic expression.

Notes

- 1 Chen Kexiao. 1989. 'Surrealism in China', *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion*, Volume 4. Chicago: Black Swan Press, p.137.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The Jiangsu Surrealist Group, later Red Travels Group, will be analysed in Chapter 5.
- 4 Ades, D. 1987. *Dalí*. Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe.
- 5 Penrose, R. 1987. *Miluo* (Miró). Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe.
- 6 Duplessis, Y. 1988. *Chaoxianshizhuyi* (Surrealism) Beijing: Shenghuo dushu xinzhì sanlian shudian.
- 7 Xu Lei. 1988. *Menghuan de bian: chaoxianshizhuyi mingren mingzuo* (The Other Shore of Fantasy: Works by Famous Surrealist Artists). Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe.
- 8 See Gao, Minglu. 2011. *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Gao, Minglu. 1991. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1985–1986* (Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986). Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe; Gladston Paul. 2016. *Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art: Selected Critical Writings and Conversations 2007–2014*. Heidelberg: Springer; Zhou Yan. 2020. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art: 1949 to Present*. Singapore: Springer; Shao Dazhen. 1980. 'Surrealism in Fine Art' (Meishu zhong de chaoxianshizhuyi). *Wenyi yanjiu* (literature and art studies) 6, pp.108–117; Lu Peng. 1993. *A History of China: Modern Art* (Zhongguo xiandai yishushi). Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe; Galikowski, Maria. 1990. 'Art and Politics in China 1949–1986'. PhD thesis, University of Leeds; Welsh, Eduardo. 1999. *Negotiating Culture: The Discourse of Art and the Position of the Artist in 1980s China*. PhD thesis, SOAS

- University of London; Joo, Mijung. 2012. 'Comparing the Use of Surrealist Language in Chinese and Korean Artistic Practice During the 1980s 'Ershi shiji bashi niandai zhonghan meishu yundong de chaoxianshi yishu yuyan bijiao yanjiu'. Master's dissertation, Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. It should be noted that for most of these writers (except Shao Dazhen and Mijung Joo) Surrealism was not the focus of their work.
- 9 Lu Peng. 1993. *Zhongguo xiandai yishushi 1979–1989* (A History of China: Modern Art 1979–1989). Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, p.193. Original Chinese: 超现实主义在85时期是一个具有普遍性的风格.
 - 10 Shao Dazhen. 1979. 'An Introduction to Western Modern Art Currents' (Xifang xiandai meishu liupai jianjie) *Shijie Meishu* (World Art) 2, pp.60–68.
 - 11 Ibid. p.63. Original Chinese: 某些超现实主义文艺作品在一定程度上反映了资本主义社会生活的反常心里, 在艺术形式上有所探索, 我们也可以批判地参考借鉴.
 - 12 Shao Dazhen. 1980. 'Surrealism in Fine Art' (Meishu zhong de chaoxianshizhuyi). *Wenyi yanjiu* (Literature and Fine Art Research), 6, pp.108–117.
 - 13 Ibid. p.117. Original Chinese: 它只是消极地反映这个世界, 很少给予人们改造世界 和推动社会前进的力量 ... 超现实主义文艺的某些探索只有和现实主义文艺结合, 用来表现社会现实, 表现人民大众的 生活, 才有可能获得新的生命。
 - 14 See Suleiman, Susan. 1991. 'Between the Street and the Salon: The Dilemma of Surrealist Politics during the 1930s'. *Visual Anthropology Review* 7, no. 1, pp.39–50.
 - 15 Shao Dazhen. 1980. 'Modern Spirit and Modern Art' (Xiandaizhuyi jingshen yu xiandaipai yishu). *Meishu* (Fine Art) no. 11, pp.1–6.
 - 16 Ibid., p.4. Original Chinese: 我们视为现实的这个实体称之为“形而下”的现实, 而把另一个幻想中的、潜意识中的世界称之为“形而上”的现实。他们漠视“形而下”的现实, 醉心于“形而上”的现实即超现实.
 - 17 Ibid., p.6. Original Chinese: 现代派的一些艺术家在这方面的探索对我们不无启发, 他们可以借鉴他们形式探索的某些方面为发展新的社会主义文艺服务他们当中的某些作品确有现实义精神的, 我们也应该予以肯定。
 - 18 Shao Dazhen. 1982. *Xiandaipai meishu qianyi* (Discussions on Modern Art Movements). Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Publishing House, p.50.
 - 19 Bu Ji. 1983. 'Bijiasuo huihua yuanzuozhan zai jing juxing' (Exhibition of Picasso's Original Works Takes Place in Beijing). *Meishu* (Fine Arts) no. 6, pp.51–53.
 - 20 Ibid.
 - 21 Ibid.
 - 22 'Beijing bufen lilunjia dui laoshengbao zuopin de fanying' (Beijing Art Critics React to Rauschenberg's Work), *Zhongguo Meishu Bao* (Fine Arts in China) 1985, 22, p.2.
 - 23 Breton, André. 1972. 'Surrealist Situation of the Object (1935)' in Breton, André. Trans. Seaver, Richard and Helen R. Lane *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, pp.255–279.
 - 24 Lu Peng. 1992. *Zhongguo xiandai yishushi 1979–1989* (A History of China Modern Art). Changsha: Hunan Meishu Chubanshe, p.194.
 - 25 Ibid, p.194.
 - 26 Joo, Mijung. 2012. 'Comparing the Use of Surrealist Language in Chinese and Korean Artistic practice during the 1980s', p.35.
 - 27 Huang Rui, in-person interview with the author at the artist's Beijing Residence 23 January 2024.
 - 28 Ibid.
 - 29 Ibid.
 - 30 Ibid.
 - 31 Ibid.
 - 32 Ibid.
 - 33 Li Xianting and Huang Rui (eds). 2019 *Stars* 79–80. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, p.270.
 - 34 Hung Wu and Peggy Wang (eds). 2010. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p.7.
 - 35 Huang Rui, in-person interview with the author.
 - 36 Li Xianting. 2007. 'The Stars: Rebels of Modern Chinese Art' in Huang Rui. *Huang Rui: The Stars Times 1979–1984*. Beijing: Thinking Hands/Guanyi Contemporary Art Archive, p.272.

- 37 Huang Rui, in-person interview with the author.
- 38 Huang Rui, in-person interview with the author.
- 39 Huang Rui. 2007. *The Stars Times: 1977–1984*. Beijing: Thinking Hands/Guanyi Contemporary Art Archive, n.p.
- 40 Huang Rui, in-person interview with the author.
- 41 Breton, André, Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. 1972. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, p.4.
- 42 Huang Rui, in-person interview with the author.
- 43 Yan Bo. 2019. 'Beijing Oil Painting Research Association: A Concise History' in Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu. *Salon Fine Art Practices from 1972 to 1982 in Profile – A Beijing Perspective*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, p. 313.
- 44 Ibid., p.314.
- 45 Ibid., p.308 The Hundred Flowers Movement (1956–1957) refers to a movement instigated by Mao Zedong whereby he encouraged intellectuals to voice their opinions including critiques of the Chinese Communist Party. Unfortunately, many of those that did so were subsequently targeted. There is critical debate over whether this was Mao's original intention or whether the range and reach of the criticism proved too much for the Chinese Communist Party to subsume.
- 46 Ibid., p.308. Original Chinese: 马克思用自己天才理论指出了这伟大的美, 而艺术是用质朴的色彩描绘着美.
- 47 Cohen, Joan Lebold. 1987. *The New Chinese Painting 1949–1986*. New York: H.N. Abrams, p.58.
- 48 Feng Guodong. 1981. 'Yige saodigong de meng zizaizhe' (A Cleaner's Dream: People at Ease). *Meishu* (Fine Arts) 2, p.9.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Susik, Abigail. 2021. *Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.26.
- 51 Ibid., p.25.
- 52 The word 'danwei' is often translated as 'work unit.' Under a socialist planned economy, most individuals in an urban area lived under the auspices of a work unit which was responsible for the provision of employment, housing, healthcare and other societal needs. The *danwei* also regulated political activity. During the 1990s, the powers of the *danwei* were gradually curbed.
- 53 Feng Guodong. 1981. 'Yige saodigong de meng zizaizhe' (A Cleaner's Dream: People at Ease). *Meishu* (Fine Arts) 2, p.9.
- 54 Cohen, Joan Lebold. 1987. *The New Chinese Painting 1949–1986*, p.57.
- 55 Du Zhesen 1981 'Yishu bu neng likai renmin de turang' (Art Cannot depart from the soil of the People). *Meishu* (Fine Arts) 5, p.15. Original Chinese: 你在呼唤, 但不是面向人民, 而是面向 '梦境' 和 '虚无' 你在挖掘, 但不是向民族精神的深处, 而是向纯粹的自我。
- 56 Shui Tianzhong. 1985. 'Huiyi he huanxiang de xiaozhuo' (A Boat of Memory and Fantasy). *Zhongguo meishu bao* (Fine Arts in China) 7, p.1.
- 57 Cohen, Joan Lebold. 1987. *The New Chinese Painting 1949–1986*, p.53.
- 58 Gu Zheng, In-person interview with the author, Blacksheep Espresso Shanghai, 8 January 2024.
- 59 Weng Zijian 2011 'Gu Zheng fangwen' (Interview with Gu Zheng). Asia Art Archive. Available online at: https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/gz-ft.pdf.
- 60 Asia Art Archive. 'Beihemeng Photography Salon Exhibition'. Event database entry available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/event-database/bei-he-meng-photography-salon-exhibition>.
- 61 Gu Zheng, In-person interview with the author, Blacksheep Espresso Shanghai, 8 January 2024.
- 62 Gu Zheng. 2012. *Gu zheng sheying wenlunji* (Gu Zheng: Essays on Photographic Theory). Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, p.103.
- 63 Walker, Ian. 2002. *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p.5.
- 64 Ibid., p.11.
- 65 Gu Zheng. 2012. *Gu zheng sheying wenlunji* (Gu Zheng: Essays on Photographic Theory). Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, p.103.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Gu Zheng, In-person interview with the author.
- 68 Gu Zheng, In-person interview with the author.

- 69 Gu Zheng, In-person interview with the author.
- 70 Gu Zheng, In-person interview with the author.
- 71 Gu Zheng, In-person interview with the author.
- 72 Gu Zheng. 2011 'Wo pai de Shanghai suxie' (Shooting Shanghai Sketch). *Shaying shijie* (Photoworld).
- 73 Raymond, Claire. 2020. *The Photographic Uncanny: Photography, Homelessness, and Homesickness*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, p.46.
- 74 Shi Hantao. 2017. 'Guangzhou, Bali: Zhang Haier de chengshi he nuxing' (From Guangzhou to Paris: Zhang Haier's Cityscapes and Women). *Yishu dangdai* (Art China) 9.
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- 76 Cohen's lecture slides are available at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/joan-lebold-cohen-archive-1979-beyond-illusion-slides-lecture-at-cafa/object/lecture-slides-duchamp-to-niki-de-saint-phalle-set-of-20-photographs>.
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- 78 Welsh, Eduardo. 1999. *Negotiating Culture: The Discourse of Art and the Position of the Artist in 1980s China*. PhD thesis. SOAS/University of London, p.90. doi:10.25501/SOAS.00033683.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Ibid. Original Chinese: 大脑的思维也是一种现实是一种隐性的现实
- 81 Meng Luding and Zhang Qun. 'Xin shidai de qishi: zai xinshi dai chuanguo tan' (Enlightenment of a New Era: Discussing the Creation of 'In the New Era').
- 82 Welsh, Eduardo. 1999. *Negotiating Culture: The Discourse of Art and the Position of the Artist in 1980s China*, p.90.
- 83 Meng Luding and Zhang Qun. 'Xin shidai de qishi: zai xinshi dai chuanguo tan' (Enlightenment of a New Era: Discussing the Creation of 'In the New Era'). Original Chinese: 它的时空是蓄意安排的
- 84 Cacchione, Orianna. 2014. 'To Enter Art History – Reading and Writing Art History in China during the Reform Era'. *The Journal of Art Historiography* 10, pp.8–9.
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- 87 Gao Minglu. 1991. *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi 1985–1986* p.72. Original Chinese: 这种分解现实的手法显然是受超现实主义画家达利的影响。
- 88 Cacchione, Orianna. 2014. 'To Enter Art History – Reading and Writing Art History in China during the Reform Era', p.9.
- 89 Wang Xiangming and Jin Lili. 'Women yu kewang heping' (Yearning for Peace and Us) Original Chinese: 把现实与梦境结合起来的创作意念, 在我们这个时代是得不到社会和人们充分支持和共鸣的。
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- 92 Ibid.
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- 95 Ibid.
- 96 Adorno, Theodor W., and Henry W. Pickford. 2005. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. New York: Columbia University Press, p.247.

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- 97 Zhou Yan. 2020. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art: 1949 to Present*. Singapore: Springer, p.258.
- 98 Ibid.
- 99 Dr Gao Minglu Lecture Series 2017 'A Dialogue about "Rationalist Painting" between Gao Minglu and Cheng Xiaoyu'. University of Pittsburgh Digital Collections. <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A666980061/viewer>.
- 100 Ibid.
- 101 Ibid.
- 102 Cheng Xiaoyu. 1985. 'Gongcun Lijie Kuangrong yi ge putongren de shijie' (Co-existence, tolerance and understanding: an average person's world). *Meishu* (Fine Arts) Issue 6, pp.48–49. Original Chinese: 让艺术家胡思乱想吧.
- 103 Ibid. Original Chinese: 这个共生共存的世界上,一切都是自然而然地发生的。艺术家不断吸取其他领域中的有利因素,不断发现传统的新含义,不断创造新的艺术.
- 104 Ibid. Original Chinese: 如果毕加索看到了航天飞机,天知道他会用它来做成什么令人瞠目结舌的艺术品,可是他没能得到这个机会。这事也留给年轻人去干吧.
- 105 Breton André, Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. 1972. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p.123.
- 106 Gao Minglu. 2008. 85 meishu yundong: 80 niandai de renwen qianwei ('85 Movement: The Enlightenment of the Chinese Avant-Garde) Guangxi Normal University, p.219. Original Chinese: 在人类和他们的钟中,不同人种,不同年龄,不同时代的人被置于一个共同的非现实空间中.
- 107 Wu Hung. 2021. *Zhang Jianjun: Human Traces* Hong Kong: K11 Art Foundation, p.28.
- 108 A list of all the group's activities can be found in Gao Minglu. 1991. *Zhongguo dangdai meishushi: 1985–1986*, p.242.
- 109 Zhou Yan. 2020. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art: 1949 to Present*, p.337.
- 110 Ibid., p.338.
- 111 Gao Minglu. 2011. *Total Modernity*, p.106.
- 112 Cohen, Andrew 2011 'Portraits of Power: Mao Xuhui'. *ArtAsiaPacific* 72. Available online at: https://www.acfilmsinc.com/_files/ugd/e38a25_a307760507a246c8b1e829cfb3038277.pdf.
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- 114 Deng Fuxing. 1986. 'Yuanshi yishu de xiandai meili' (The Modern Charm of Primitive Art) *Zhongguo meishubao* (Fine Arts in China) 48, p.4. Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/library/fine-arts-in-china-1986/object/fine-arts-in-china-1986-no-48-198648>.
- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Mark Stevens. 1986. Trans. Wang Gang and Li Hong 'Dui yuanshi yishu de zanmei' (Paying tribute to the primitive). *Zhongguo meishubao* (Fine Arts in China) 48 p.4 Available online at: https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/digital_collection/fedora_extracted/37956.pdf.
- 117 See McEvilley, Thomas. 1984. "'Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief": Primitivism in 20th Century Art at the museum of modern art in 1984.' *Artforum* 23 no. 3 November 1 Available online at: <https://www.artforum.com/features/primitivism-in-20th-century-art-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-in-1984-207620/>.
- 118 Huang Yong Ping, Gu Dexin and Yang Jiechang.
- 119 Chinese curator Hou Hanru summarises the positives and negatives cogently 'The first blamed the loss of quality or artistic criteria – those criteria dominated by the canons of Western art history – and the latter criticised the exhibition as a continuation of colonialism and the exotic representation of the Other. Eventually, however, one could sense the end of something important. The show marked the end of the hegemony of Western modernity and its entire ideological positions, aesthetic canons, and institutional systems.' Hou Hanru 'In Defence of Difference: Notes on Magiciens de la Terre, Twenty-five Years Later'. *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 13, no. 3.
- 120 Pan Dehai. 1986. 'Women fuchu de nuli yu dashi xiangtong' (The Effort we put in is the same as the great masters). *Yunnan Yishu Tongxun* (Yunnan Fine Arts Bulletin). Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/tc/collections/search/archive/mao-xuhui-archive-retrospective-articles-clippings/object/essays-by-participants-of-new-concrete-image-published-in-yunnan-yi-shu-tong-xun>.
- 121 Original Chinese: 不是返回原初而是不断地从原初反射回来
- 122 Mao Xuhui. 1986. 'Zhengqu: yishu yu xinling de xin kongjian' (Striving towards a new space for art and the spirit). *Yunnan Yishu Tongxun* (Yunnan Fine Arts Bulletin). Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/tc/collections/search/archive/mao-xuhui-archive-retrospective-articles-clippings/object/essays-by-participants-of-new-concrete-image-published-in-yunnan-yi-shu-tong-xun>.

- org.hk/tc/collections/search/archive/mao-xuhui-archive-retrospective-articles-clippings/object/essays-by-participants-of-new-concrete-image-published-in-yunnan-yi-shu-tong-xun
- 123 Original Chinese: 伟大人物都是在综合两极的东西把世界有机地统一;感官和理 过去和末来物质和精神神话和现实恰到好处地化合在一起。
- 124 Asia Art Archive. 2008. 'Interview with Ye Yongqing' (transcript, Simplified Chinese). Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-ye-yongqing/object/interview-with-ye-yongqing-transcript-simplified-chinese>
- 125 Asia Art Archive. 2009. 'Interview with Mao Xuhui' (transcript, Simplified Chinese). Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/materials-of-the-future-documenting-contemporary-chinese-art-from-1980-1990-1980-1990-mao-xuhui/object/interview-with-mao-xuhui-transcript-simplified-chinese>
- 126 See Zhang Xiaogang. 2001. 'My Soul Mate Magritte' (Wode Zhiyin Magelite). *Yishu Shijie* (Art World) 5, pp.72–73.
- 127 M+ Stories. 2021. 'Zhang Xiaogang Interview', 10 July. Available online at: <https://stories.mp.org.hk/en/transcript-zhang-xiaogang-interview/>.
- 128 Fineberg, Jonathan David, Gary G. Xu, and Zhang Xiaogang. 2015. *Zhang Xiaogang – Disquieting memories*. London: Phaidon, p.50.
- 129 Original Chinese: 原始部落里的先祖们,他们有一天终得了太阳,终得了月亮,于是燃起火堆,开始疯狂滴跳舞,开始把牛头挂在了木桩上,开始在山后石壁上, 在树皮上,在各种器皿,甚至在自己的肉身上刻画了一个个的形象。从此他们不再感到孤独,不再为生活苦恼,生活于他们已成为某种过渡至彼岸的彩船。
- 130 Swancutt, Katherine. 2023. 'Of Cosmological Visions and Creativity: Shaping Animism, Indigenous Science, and Forestry in Southwest China'. *Religions* 14, no. 4, p.449. doi:10.3390/rel14040449.
- 131 Peng De. 1986. 'Dangdai huatan di si pi zhongzi de longqi' (The uplift of the fourth batch of seeds in the Contemporary Art World). Buluo Buluo Di yi Hui zhan (The First Tribe Tribe Exhibition Catalogue). Li Xianting Archive, Asia Art Archive. Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/tc/collections/search/archive/li-xianting-archive-1986-tribe-tribe-first-exhibition-wuhan/object/tribe-tribe-first-exhibition-brochure>
- 132 Peng De. 1986. 'Dangdai huatan di si pi zhongzi de longqi' (The uplift of the fourth batch of seeds in the Contemporary Art World).
- 133 Freud Museum. 2019 'What is Psychoanalysis?' Available online at: <https://www.freud.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/What-is-Psychoanalysis.pdf>.
- 134 Peng De. 1986. 'Dangdai huatan di si pi zhongzi de longqi' (The uplift of the fourth batch of seeds in the Contemporary Art World). Original Chinese: 一个个体生存方式的古代圣贤们的说教,是完全无视本我的愿望的。孔子不厌其烦地告诫人们要克制私欲,孟子侧具体地推出了“苦其心智,劳其筋骨,饿其体肤,空泛其身。”
- 135 Ibid. Original Chinese: 每一次社会动乱都是民众对超我的总体的越轨,是本我的全民性的大发泄。
- 136 Ibid. Original Chinese: 部落 部落美术群体正是深切地感受到了虚伪的封建道德对中华民族整体人格的损害。意识到了这种道德对社会,特别是对现代社会的巨大副作用。因此,他们宁可回到原始的部落社会中去,在人格的建构上从零开始。
- 137 Kupka, Karel. 1965. *Dawn of Art: Painting and Sculpture of Australian Aborigines ... Preface* '(Main première)' by André Breton. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.
- 138 Walden, Lauren. 2017. 'Transmediality in Symbolist and Surrealist Photo-Literature'. *Open Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1, pp.214–231 at p.229. doi:10.1515/culture-2017-0020.
- 139 Gao Minglu. 2011. *Total Modernity*, p.132.
- 140 Ibid., p.132.
- 141 Holmes, K.R. 1983. 'Freud, Evolution and the Tragedy of Man'. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 31, no. 1, p.187.
- 142 See Freud, Sigmund. 2004. *Civilisation and its Discontents*. London: Penguin. Available online at: https://archive.org/details/civilizationitsd0000freu_h0m8.
- 143 Gao Minglu. 2011. *Total Modernity*, p.144.
- 144 Ibid., p.127.
- 145 Gao Minglu reports that 297 works were displayed. Ibid., p.156. There is no reason to doubt him, but the official catalogue only lists 177 works. The Asia Art archive notes that not all the

- participants are mentioned in the catalogue and has photographic evidence of artworks on display beyond those mentioned in the catalogue. The catalogue is available online at: https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/digital_collection/fedora_extracted/37561.pdf.
- 146 Gao Minglu. 2011. *Total Modernity*, p.148.
- 147 Xu Lei, In-person interview with the author at the artist's Beijing Studio, 1 February 2024.
- 148 Ibid.
- 149 Ibid.
- 150 Ibid.
- 151 Hansen, Tania. 1989. 'Open Door Shuts on Modern Art' *China Now* 130. Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/tc/collections/search/archive/china-avantgarde-exhibition-archive-references/object/open-door-shuts-on-modern-art>.
- 152 Liu Xiaochun. 1989. 'Xiagu yu jiyu: zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan guan hou' (Canyon and Opportunity: Reflection on the China/Avant Garde Exhibition) *Shanghai meishuguan teji* (Shanghai Museum Newsletter) April. Lu Peng archive Asia Art Archive. Available online at: <https://aaa.org.hk/tc/collections/search/archive/lv-peng-archive-1989-china-avantgarde-exhibition-on-beijing/object/canyon-and-opportunity-reflection-on-chinaavant-grade-exhibition>
- 153 Breton, André. 1972. 'The Surrealist Situation of the Object' in Breton, A. Trans. Seaver, Richard and Helen R. Lane *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p.276.
- 154 Wu Shaoxiang 1986 'Diaosu yuyan tan' (Discussing the Language of Sculpture). *Meishu Sichao* (The Trend of Art Thought) 2, pp.18–22.
- 155 Ibid. Original Chinese: 杰克梅蒂的《站立的人》看后令人 心怵、战栗、避免接触, 则是因为通过视感 唤起了人的某种不愉快或可怕的触觉经验, 象病死的老人、木乃伊、烧残的树干等
- 156 Ibid.
- 157 Freud, Sigmund. 1953–1974. Fetishism. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey (ed. and trans., in collaboration with Anna Freud; assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson). London: Hogarth Press, vol. XXI, p.157.
- 158 Ibid., p.155.
- 159 Breton, André 1987 (1937). *Mad Love*. Trans. Mary Ann Caws. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press: p.88.
- 160 DeBevoise, Jane. 2009 'Interview with Joan Lebold Cohen'. Asia Art Archive. Available online at: https://cdn.aaa.org.hk/_source/jlc-ft-finalised.pdf.