

中國空間與跨國主義中歷險：  
中國境外的華人藝術家



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Adventures in Chinaspace and Transnationalism:

The Chinese Artist outside China



The phenomenon is recurrent, probably unavoidable. After leaving the Chinese-speaking geographic zone, the artist becomes aware of his/her Chineseness as a mark of difference. Having always been Chinese, the artist now becomes Chinese in a different way. An abyss opens up between the artist and his/her previous work. For the self-displaced artist, no number of return visits will alter the fact that the artist's basic imaginative and communicative coordinates have changed radically.<sup>1</sup> It is not a simple matter of new experiences, though over time this certainly has its effect as well. More important, at least initially, is the fact that the unspoken contract between artist and public – the set of shared assumptions that gave the work its original relevance in the Chinese-speaking world – has become null and void for all subsequent work that the artist produces. The old work has proven to have a second use, as a passport to a new world. But in the new circumstances there is no new unspoken contract waiting to be found; if the artist is to survive, he or she has to take the initiative and write a contract with a new public.

If there are as many contracts with the public as artists who write them, in the non-Chinese world the contracts currently fall into two basic categories. One has currency in the transnational art world of what used to be called the avant-garde (of which the biennial is one important institutional embodiment), and in the first instance requires the artist to demonstrate a mastery of one of the sanctioned modes of transnational expression. This culturally rarified space of operation is on the whole more hospitable to work that marks some sort of cognitive advance – a fresh way of rationally knowing the world, be it the natural or the social world. Problematization and critique are currently particularly popular modes. At the same time, it does not reject explorations of pleasure and the senses, but likes them to be alibied in cognitive terms. In the case of artists hailing from what was once known comfortably as the Third World, the transnational art world tends to have more particular expectations. It requires the artist to

demonstrate both an understanding of the productive value of cross-cultural misunderstanding and an ability to present his/her work, at least rhetorically, as a contribution to cross-cultural understanding. This is only apparently paradoxical, for the misunderstandings, intended or accidental, are a necessary creative irritant, while the rhetoric of understanding serves as a kind of institutional glue for an international art world where curators inevitably lack linguistic access to most of the cultures they deal with. The critics Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru – perhaps a little complacently – have dubbed this space of operation a “third space,” between China and the West.<sup>2</sup> (The echo of “Third World” appears to be an unintended irony.) To my mind, the finest work being done today within a context of transnational displacement feeds off the tension between the different cultural frameworks in which the artist is variously implicated, and is more dynamic and fluid than a term like “third space” would suggest. However, the term is certainly an apt self-referential description of the institutional context within which the particular kind of contract I have described has currency.

The other kind of contract between the artist and his or her public holds good for what might less reverently be called “Chinaspac.” The word comes to mind as a way of naming that discontinuous, geographically unanchored realm at the interface of the Chinese-speaking and Chinese-loving worlds that not only exists within non-Chinese cultures – for example, in Chinese restaurants or at showings of Chinese films – but also has a presence in China itself. Constantly fluctuating and highly differentiated in social and cultural, and even ethnic, terms, Chinaspac is not so much an extension as a distorted double of China. Although technically speaking just as transnational as any “third space,” it needs to be distinguished here both as a social phenomenon and as an aesthetic climate. Commercially powered, Chinaspac is by and large less interested in advances in the structure of knowledge; it is in those transnationalist terms more “conservative,”



22 • 23 welcoming artists who work in familiar modes. Moreover, it affords an important place to pleasure and sensation, without disdaining entertainment. For the Chinese artist who enters this world, the need is for a contract that demonstrates the artist's ability to wed his or her own nostalgia to the foreigner's exoticization of China. At its most interesting, the self-consciousness involved leads to something personal and resonant: most often, an aching, self-aware longing, or a sensitivity to the rhythms of public life in an increasingly globalized environment. Necessary to the contract is the artist's deployment of up-to-date foreign techniques, without which the work would lack the cosmopolitan urbanity demanded by both the self-displaced Chinese artist and the non-Chinese public. Chinaspace and the space of the transnational are, by and large, separate worlds that manage not to collide. In one world, the

general climate tends to be one of affirmative exploration (of present experience and the cultural past); in the other, of deliberate disturbance. The rare collisions such as the present exhibition, however, reveal that some artists hold dual citizenship, and that the climate in both worlds is changeable. It is a limitation of this essay that I am unable to explore the ways in which these terms of reference are relevant not only to Chinese artists outside China, but also to other kinds of artist represented in the exhibition, including artists working in China or Taiwan, and artists of Chinese descent born in other countries who may or may not speak Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

**In the mood for love** The starting point for Chinaspace is the picturesque, not only in representational art in which nature as







#### Above

Chow Yun Fat as Li Mu Bai (left) and Michelle Yeoh as Yu Shu Lien (right), leave many things unspoken in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a Sony Pictures Classics release.

#### Opposite

Maggie Cheung stars as Mrs. Chan and Tony Leung stars as Mr. Chow in the Wong Kar-wai film *In the Mood for Love*, a USA Films release.

macrocosm and microcosm holds a privileged place, but also in pictures that turn culture itself (the calligraphic gesture, for example) into spectacle. The fall of the picturesque into kitsch – symbolized unjustly by the Chinatown restaurant – is a danger, too, for the painters, filmmakers, and designers who enter Chinaspace. In order to avoid the danger and transcend the picturesque, many artists have chosen the path of a sensuous elegance at once Chinese, cosmopolitan, and modern. Two films currently playing in New York theaters and attracting wide media attention – Taiwan-born Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai's crossover success, *In the Mood for Love* – are redefining that elegance and extending its civilizing influence. (To the extent that Hong Kong represents self-displacement at the level of an entire city, Hong Kong artists like Wong Kar-wai have a place in this essay.<sup>4</sup>) The hidden dragon of desire (Ang Lee's term), unable to twist free, transgressively disturbs the surface waters of life with its alluring play, the sensual displaced into the visually sensuous.<sup>5</sup>



24 • 25 In painting, the earlier, pre-1980 history of this particular aesthetic direction can be economically evoked with three names: Sanyu (Chang Yu, 1901–66), Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji, b. 1921), and Tseng Yuho (b. 1925). In the late 1920s, the by-then Paris-based oil painter Sanyu began to explore this territory in depictions of flowers, animals, and above all female nudes. Working in the non-Chinese medium of oil painting, Sanyu reinvented it on the Chinese model of the hanging scroll; this functions as a sensuous double of the wall, inviting inscription rather than window-like penetration and moving the eye laterally over the surface. Chinese signs are scattered over Sanyu's clean but indeterminate surfaces, creating an intercultural ambience for languorously ideographic nudes.<sup>6</sup> It is no insult to another Paris-based (from 1948) artist, Zao Wou-ki, to note that his signature abstractions from the later 1950s onward, with their lushly intense surfaces, similarly inject a specifically Chinese sensibility into European modernism.<sup>7</sup> Evolved in the course of the 1950s from initially Klee-like ideographic landscapes, the abstractions quickly zeroed in on a concentrated embodiment of atmosphere that is freed from geography and given over to the kinaesthetic memory of sensation. Working along different lines, the semi-abstract *dsui hua* paintings by Tseng Yuho (a United States resident since 1949) from the early 1960s onward, although superficially similar to other 1950s and 1960s attempts in the United States to combine abstraction with writing and with calligraphic gesture, in fact refuse spectacle in favor of intellectual engagement and a disciplined pursuit of rapture.<sup>8</sup> Forty years later, Tseng remains one of the most powerful exponents of sensuous elegance in painting, unmatched in her ability to engage profoundly with the art of the Chinese past – both painting and calligraphy – through what one might think to be the inhibiting mediation of the decorative in which, in her case, many non-Chinese connections can be traced. Unlike so many other painters who have followed in her footsteps, Tseng brings to the image an analytic edge that ensures the power of the underlying structure; it is by allowing that structure to surface within the decorative

ambience that she avoids the trap of sweetness, and introduces the darker moods that so often shadow the lyricism. Any history of monumentality – always a hard-won quality – in modern Chinese art must necessarily afford her a significant place.

This capacity of painting to define a cultural style for Chinaspace is exemplified by several artists of later generations represented in the present exhibition. Sharing the engagement with the decorative seen in Tseng Yuho's work are the luminously synaesthetic lotus paintings of Yang Yanping (b. Nanjing 1934, resident in the United States since 1986). The saturated colors bleeding into the paper attain an almost carnal intensity that has its own gendered meaning. At the opposite extreme, the dandyishly ascetic rocks and flowers of Liu Dan – their abstemious commitment to the brush trace contrasting with Yang's profligate generosity of color – might be said to embody a particular kind of masculine allure. Liu (b. 1953, resident in the United States since 1981), has cannily but not cynically identified himself with the recent fascination for so-called Chinese scholar's taste as a concentrated essence of Chineseness. A more specifically urban, big-city allure characterizes the calligraphy-based pictures of Fung Ming Chip, who was born in Guangdong in 1951, moved to New York in 1977, and since 1986 has lived between New York and Taiwan. Although the pictorial impulse in calligraphy has its own long history in China as an anti-tradition within the history of calligraphy – one in which painters have not surprisingly played a large role – Fung gives that impulse a primacy that is ultimately incompatible with calligraphy proper as a practice. This has freed him to create subliminal links between the writing in his paintings and contemporary urban experience, even where the content of the transcribed texts comes from the past. There springs to mind not only the visual experience of newspapers, signage, and advertising, but also the aural experience of overheard conversations, crowd noise, and cell phones. The contribution that painting by these various artists makes to the







知可老老易派派海太了孤萍爲一首詩無以速成  
又明明在刺三句形知止點自而影進走整  
容後對子禮儀在下互知三句之相回充默不知  
鹽乘歡興爲乎故筆筆筆穎之晨  
早早良陸  
況整個黃黃混沌如雲云  
明秋乙巳年  
台北



definition of an (inter)cultural style is to some degree bound up with the ephemerality of taste – an argument that can obviously be extended to a designer such as Vivienne Tam.<sup>9</sup> It is not, however, an argument for slightness; rather, I mean it to point to a particular kind of significance. With the concentrated resonance of a popular tune or a movie star's glance, such paintings (and fashions) have the capacity to float beyond the boundaries of Chinaspace and contribute to the contemporary atmosphere at large, enriching our visual environment.<sup>10</sup>

**The transnational as its own subject** From its tiny, provincial beginnings in the late 1970s, the ostensibly non-official art world of transgression and critique in the People's Republic of China has in little more than two decades mushroomed into a significant – soon, it would appear, to be major – locus of transnational art making in the contemporary world.<sup>11</sup> After long being dominated by Beijing artists who had defected from sanctioned styles learnt within an institutional system, it is only now beginning to mutate toward a polycentric form independent of the hierarchical architecture of art education with its centralizing effect on the flow of artistic talent. "Non-official" Chinese artists have increasingly adopted as their own point of reference the conceptual turn taken in European and American art in the 1960s, initially embodied by the conjunction of Pop, Minimalism, and performance art. The Chinese artists have correspondingly embraced the current displacement of painting by installation, performance, and video, as well as the conceptualist transformation of painting itself.<sup>12</sup> Over the last twenty years, numerous artists have gone further, displacing themselves out of this Chinese art world toward Japan, Europe, and the United States. Some have returned, to be sure, subsequently mounting campaigns for international recognition from a Chinese base. For those who have not, however, the difficulty has been to adjust to the loss of their original contract with a PRC public attuned to the subtleties of reading politically between the lines. The subtle ambiguities of Xu Bing's *Book from*

*the Sky* – to take a now-famous example – have almost no resonance in a transnational context, where it is largely appreciated on a spectacular and therefore impoverished level.<sup>13</sup> Small wonder, then, that the themes of Xu Bing and others have shifted toward the problematic of intercultural communication and (mis)understanding. In effect, the transnational becomes its own subject in these new projects, including some particularly ambitious ones that have been developed by the now New York-based Xu Bing, Zhang Hongtu, and others.<sup>14</sup>

Xu Bing's widely exhibited *New English Calligraphy* (1996–present) presents his public with a system of imagistic writing modeled on Chinese characters that can be used to phonetically transcribe English-language words (see pages 90–91). The title is somewhat misleading, to the extent that the transcriptive system works for other languages as well, as exhibitions in various countries have demonstrated. The installations parody the prescriptive logic of educational institutions in China: they are set up like classrooms, with both computer terminals and – more challengingly – Chinese-style calligraphy manuals that the viewing public is encouraged to use. The experience of using the sharp-tipped Chinese brush to apply ink to absorbent paper is a sobering one for the neophyte calligrapher. One discovers that whereas it is easy to transcribe, say, one's own name in this new writing system, it is almost impossible to approximate the model without long practice. The artist here succeeds in realizing his self-proclaimed Maoist aspiration to democratize contemporary art-making: the installations have been extremely popular with the public, and



have regularly attracted the involvement of non-art world viewers such as groups of schoolchildren.<sup>15</sup> Yet at the same time the project also manages to problematize the role of language within the very context that is bringing him into contact with a non-Chinese public – i.e. a transnational space. The intercultural logic of *New English Calligraphy* characterizes several earlier projects as well, in which the artist also focussed on writing systems. However, those projects, which go back to within a year of the artist's arrival in the United States (in 1990), are markedly different in one respect: in their various ways they all lead the viewer into a dystopian realm of nonsense and unintelligibility.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, *New English Calligraphy* represents a shift toward a more positive, utopian critique of the transnational.<sup>17</sup>

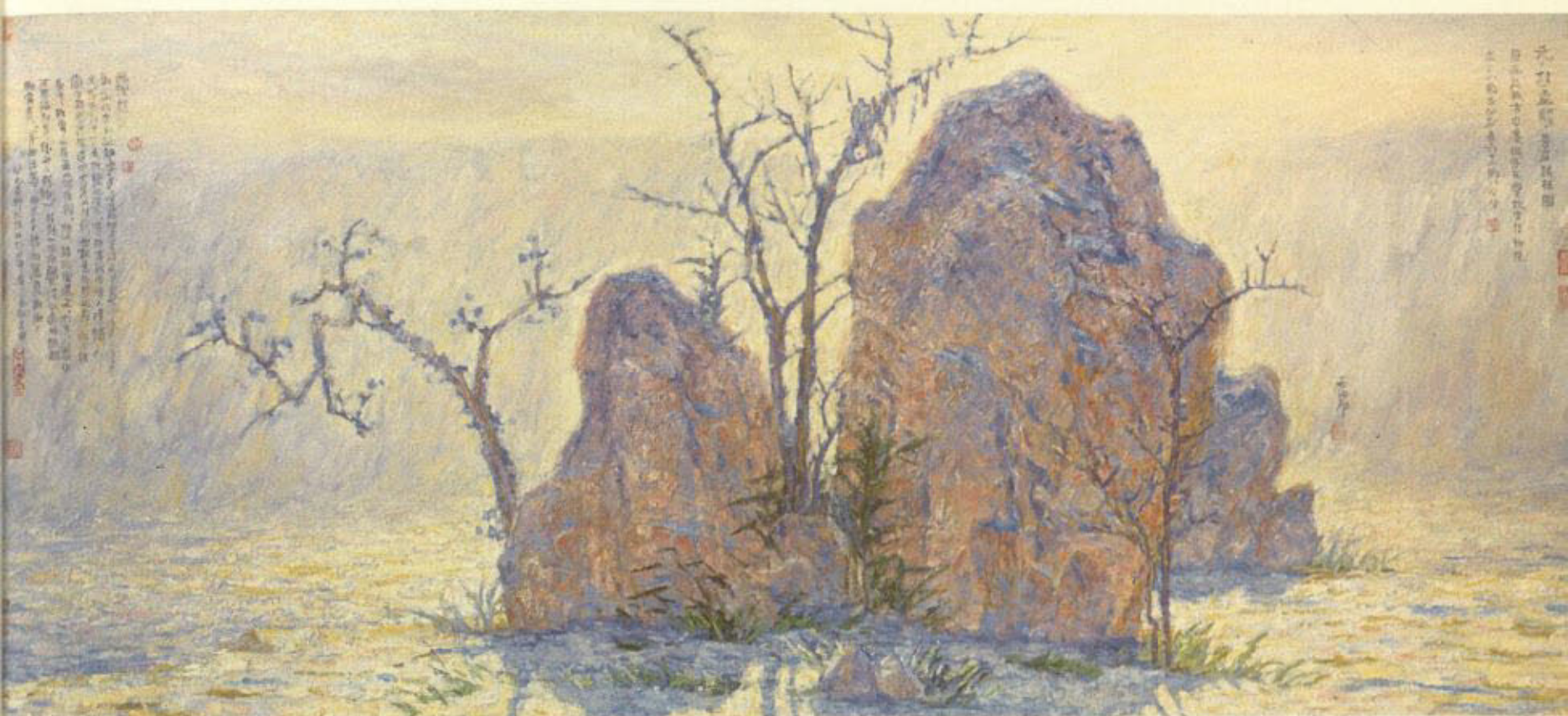
Since 1998, Zhang Hongtu has been exploring a similar terrain, using markedly different means. In an ongoing and extensive series of oil paintings, Zhang has reinterpreted canonical Chinese paintings or painting styles using Western modernist painting styles.<sup>18</sup> The original seals and inscriptions are often reproduced as well, though in some cases the artist takes advantage of the inscriptional convention to make statements in Chinese about his own painting. These statements are very much in the manner of the alternately poetic and teasing declarations associated with individualist masters of the 17th century, whose works he often uses as a starting point, though the tone of his own texts has a contemporary bluntness. The pictorial results are visually arresting, inducing a sort of intercultural short-circuit. The artist's inscriptions up the ante, as in the following example, written on *Zhao Mengfu – Monet, Noon*, a reinterpretation of an early 14th-century Chinese painting which substitutes the modern European painter's fascination with optical experience for the Chinese painter's emphasis on the somatic experience of the calligraphic event:

*Thank you for coming so close in order to read this calligraphy. You must be able to understand Chinese, right? However, have you noticed something truly unfortunate has happened? When you come close enough to read these words, which is to say just at this moment, you lose the possibility of enjoying the painting as a whole. So, please step back five or six steps (but be careful not to bump into anyone or anything behind you!) Find what you feel to be an appropriate distance and angle, and shift your attention from these words to the painting. Thank you for your attention.*<sup>19</sup>

The practice of switching styles at will is itself an established Chinese one, which Zhang Hongtu further highlights in several cases by doing something that a Chinese artist working in the tradition would not have felt free to do – in these paintings, Zhang keeps exactly the same composition, introducing into the play of stylistic possibilities a new element of the arbitrary that evokes the apparent ease of self-(re)invention in a transnational context. Like Xu Bing, Zhang Hongtu has been exploring such intercultural territory ever since his arrival in the United States, in 1982. However, these explorations were, for many years, a somewhat subterranean current within work that more obviously demonstrated an obsession with authority and its lack of legitimacy, in a delayed and geographically displaced reaction to the Cultural Revolution.<sup>20</sup> In the new work, authority remains an issue in terms of cultural canons, but the emphasis has now shifted toward the problem of communication in a transnational context of generalized translation.



趙孟頫——莫奈·正午



Zhang Hongtu, Zhao Mengfu – *Monet, Noon*, 1999.

Oil on canvas, 34" x 78" (86.5 x 198 cm).



**Coda: History's place** Since my concern in this essay has been to distinguish Chinaspace from the transnational, I have passed over any points of intersection between these two otherwise parallel zones of transit and unbelonging, except in so far as this intersection is embodied in the geopolitical and geocultural "fact" of Hong Kong. But other, more disembodied intersections do of course exist, chief among them the fact that for self-displaced artists, because history is also place, the geographic disruption that determines their cultural circumstances is accompanied by a disruption of their relation to history. Consequently, there is often an attempt on their part to recover history and to re-establish contact with the past, as a way of coming to terms with the biographical fact of displacement. The attempts are not always successful; more than one artist has fallen into vacuous theatricality (and commercial success). Among the works discussed above, however, one can see widely varying attempts to recover history, in Zao Wou-ki's concealed invocation of Chinese landscape painting, Tseng Yuho's explicit invocations of the same, Yang Yanping's choice of a pictorial theme – the lotus – that has evoked raw sensuality for several centuries, Ang Lee's return to the fictional Qing dynasty past, Fung Ming Chip's transcriptions of Buddhist sutras and classical expressions, Zhang Hongtu's trickster explorations of the art historical canon, and – bringing into play more recent history – Xu Bing's attempts to recover something of value from the Maoist experiment.

It is appropriate, however, to end with *Couple Stele*, a 1996 work on paper and fabric by Hou Wenyi (b. Shanghai, 1957), where place and history take form as the unattainable objects of desire that they so often are for the displaced individual. The artist's model in this piece is the commemorative stone stele, or rather the ink rubbings, peeled off from the inscribed stone surface, that preserved and circulated the writing carved into it. Such steles were monuments that physically embodied history and place. They are always dated, and record an event of some kind. Having been erected at great expense in a material meant to endure, and in a form meant to be immovable, they are also part of the history of a specific place, which is usually identified in the inscribed text. Hou Wenyi is not the first self-displaced artist to turn to the theme of the stele. Four decades earlier, in 1956, Zao Wou-ki explicitly invoked the stele in an unusual and important painting that commemorated the death of a former art school colleague in China, *Stèle pour un ami*.<sup>21</sup> Hou's more recent pair of mute steles – devoid of the expected writing – was inspired by a pair of Han dynasty steles commemorating the lives of a husband and wife, deceased.<sup>22</sup> Whatever meaning this connection with a deceased couple may hold for this artist, who came to the United States in 1986, Hou Wenyi's steles also evoke through their eloquent silence the private unbelonging of the self-displaced artist, against which, one suspects, so much of the other work discussed here was secretly created.

Jonathan Hay



夫妻碑



Hou Wenyi, *Couple Stele*, 1996. Ink and blood on paper and fabric, each panel 56" x 36" (142 x 91.5 cm).



## Notes

- 1 For an earlier discussion of this issue, focussing on the artist's engagement from afar with Chinese cultural themes, see Jonathan Hay, "Ambivalent Icons: Five Chinese Painters in the United States," *Orientalism* 23.7 (July 1992), pp. 37–43. I take this opportunity to distance myself from an imprudent use of the term "exile" in that essay to describe artists who are better described as self-displaced.
- 2 Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space," in Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 183–9.
- 3 The Taiwanese case is, of course, complicated by the difficult question of Taiwanese identity. See Alice Yang and Jonathan Hay, *Tracing Taiwan: Contemporary Works on Paper* (New York: The Drawing Center, 1997). On contemporary Chinese American art, see Alice Yang, *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, edited by Mimi Young and Jonathan Hay (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
- 4 On Hong Kong art, see David Clarke, *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996).
- 5 See Rick Lyman, "Crouching Memory, Hidden Heart: Watching Movies with Ang Lee," *New York Times*, March 9, 2001.
- 6 For a discussion of the intercultural issues in Sanyu's painting, see Leslie Jones, "Sanyu: Chinese Painter of Montparnasse," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 35, special issue: "Intercultural China," pp. 224–39.
- 7 Jean Leymarie, *Zao Wou-Ki* (Paris: Éditions Hier et Demain, 1978).
- 8 On Tseng's *dsui hua* work, see Melissa Thompson, "Gathering Together the Pieces of Dsui Hua," *Kaikodo Journal* 16 (May 2000), pp. 21–27. The entire issue is devoted to Tseng Yuho. Among many other discussions of her work, see in particular those in Jeffrey Weschler, ed., *Asian Traditions, Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945–1970* (New York: Abrams, 1997).
- 9 See Vivienne Tam, with Martha Huang, *China Chic* (New York: Regan Books, 2000).
- 10 I might also mention in this regard the stripped-down yet lushly spacious ink paintings of Gao Xingjian, whose contract is first and foremost with a French public that defines sophistication somewhat differently, finding a place within it for philosophic (or, more accurately, literary) considerations. Its expectations are met where the economy of the ink monochrome image turns awareness of the solitude of existence into an attitude, thought – rightly or wrongly – to be Chinese. As (Nobel-Prize-winning) novelist, however, Gao operates equally in the transnational realm of problematization and critique.
- 11 For a very interesting critique of the use of the term "non-official," see Julia F. Andrews, "Black Cat White Cat: Chinese Art and the Politics of Deng Xiaoping, 1979–1997," in *Word and Meaning: Six Chinese Contemporary Chinese Artists* (Buffalo: University at Buffalo Art Gallery, 2000), pp. 19–29. On the beginnings of this art world, see Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting, 1949–1986* (New York: Abrams, 1986).
- 12 For a crash course on recent developments, see the following: Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*; Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999); Hua Tianxue, Ai Weiwei, Feng Boyi, eds., *Fuck Off* (China: publisher unknown, 2000); John Clark, ed., *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium* (Beijing: Chineseart.com, 2001).
- 13 For a sensitive reconstruction of its Chinese context, see Britta Erickson, "Process and Meaning in the Art of Xu Bing," in *Three Installations by Xu Bing* (Madison: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 2–23.
- 14 See Simon Leung and Janet Kaplan, "Pseudo-languages: Talking with Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay," *Art Journal* 58.3 (Fall 1999), pp. 86–99.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 See the discussion of these projects in Kuiyi Shen's essay, "Playing the Game of Word, Icon and Meaning," in *Word and Meaning: Six Chinese Contemporary Chinese Artists*, pp. 1–12.
- 17 Xu Bing is not alone in this utopian critique. The recent work of Gu Wenda especially his ongoing United Nations project, is closely related. See Simon Leung and Janet Kaplan, "Pseudo-languages: Talking with Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay."
- 18 See Jerome Silbergeld, "Zhang Hongtu's Alternative History of Painting," in *Zhang Hongtu: An On-going Painting Project* (New York: On-going Publications, 2000), pp. 3–8.
- 19 Uncredited translation from *Zhang Hongtu: An On-going Painting Project*, p. 35.
- 20 See "Zhang Hongtu/Hongtu Zhang: An Interview," in *Boundaries in China*, ed. John Hay (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 280–98; Wu Hung, *Transience*, pp. 42–7.
- 21 Illustrated and discussed in Jean Leymarie, *Zao Wou-Ki*, pl. 47 and p. 33.
- 22 See Kuiyi Shen, "Playing the Game of Word, Icon and Meaning," p. 5.



Detail from Gao Xingjian, *Hermitage*, 1997.

See pages 68–69.

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