

Zhang Hongtu / Hongtu Zhang:  
*An Interview*<sup>1</sup>

Zhang Hongtu was born in Gansu province, in northwest China, in 1943, but grew up in Beijing. After studies at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in Beijing, he was later assigned to work as a design supervisor in a jewellery company. In 1982, he left China to pursue a career as a painter in New York. Since that time he has participated in numerous group exhibitions, and was a member of the collective Epoxy in the late 1980s. He was extremely active in art world protests following the Tiananmen massacre of 4 June 1989. At the time of this interview with Jonathan Hay (1991), he was the recipient of a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation.

JH: *Like other East Asian artists in the West you encounter the particular problem that in the West the surname comes at the end instead of the beginning: are you Zhang Hongtu or Hongtu Zhang?*

ZHT: I'm Zhang Hongtu now. Actually, I changed my name to Hongtu Zhang right after I came to the United States. Then one day a friend said to me Hongtu Zhang sounds like *hong tuzhang*, 'a red official seal'. I hated this misunderstanding, so I changed my name back to Zhang Hongtu.

JH: *You have Chinese citizenship but have lived and worked in the United States for almost nine years. In fact, you have made your home here. How has your long absence from China affected your ability to think of yourself as Chinese?*

ZHT: For me being Chinese does not only mean someone who was born in China or still keeps Chinese citizenship, but also means someone whose mind or spiritual life is tightly related with Chinese culture, what people call their roots. When I left China I was thirty-seven years old, and

the roots – Chinese culture – had already become part of my life just as a tail is a part of a dog's body. I'm like a dog: the tail will be with me for ever, no matter where I go. Sure, after nine years away from China, I forget many things, like I forget that when you buy lunch you have to pay ration coupons with the money, and how much political pressure there was in my everyday life. But because I still keep reading Chinese books and thinking about Chinese culture, and especially because I have the opportunity to see the differences between Chinese culture and the Western culture which I learned about after I left China, my image of Chinese culture has become more clear. Su Dongpo (the poet, 1036–1101) said: *Bu shi Lushan zhen mianmu / Zhi yuan shen zai si shan zhong*. Which means, one can't see the image of Mt. Lu because one is inside the mountain. Now that I'm outside of the mountain, I can see what the image of the mountain is, so from this point of view I would say that I understand Chinese culture better than nine years ago. I have also come to understand myself as a Chinese person better than nine years ago because I think that, as an artist, to understand oneself is crucial, and that's part of one's identity. One's identity is not just a matter of having citizenship or not.

JH: *You do two kinds of painting concurrently, one that is explicitly political and another that on the surface avoids politics. How do you separate them in your mind, or do you?*

ZHT: I don't really separate the two kinds of work in my mind. No matter which one I do, it's always related to my cultural background, my life experience. The political issue is part of my personal history, so this is why, although my political work is all about Mao, even my normal work which you mentioned avoids politics, also deals with social or cultural issues. That's why I say they are not clearly separated.

JH: *Your explicitly political work is perhaps better understood here than your studio painting . . .*

ZHT: I think that in my political work the basic approach is a contemporary Western one. The styles are familiar to Western people. For example, I use ready-mades, collage, the technique of laser xerox copy, Marcel Duchamp's way to change Mao's face, Picasso's ways to change Mao's face . . . the Western audience is familiar with these styles. Also the content is related to current events: the democracy movement is



Zhang Hongtu, *Chairmen Mao*, 1989, mixed media.

found all over the world and especially in Eastern Europe. So these paintings are easier to understand. My studio work is more experimental in style. I want to make something unique, with my own language, and the content is more personal. This also creates a problem for the audience, to understand directly something from my personal experience. If somebody has something in common with me, some shared background, it's easier, but most people have a different life experience. So sometimes my studio work has less of an audience than my political work.

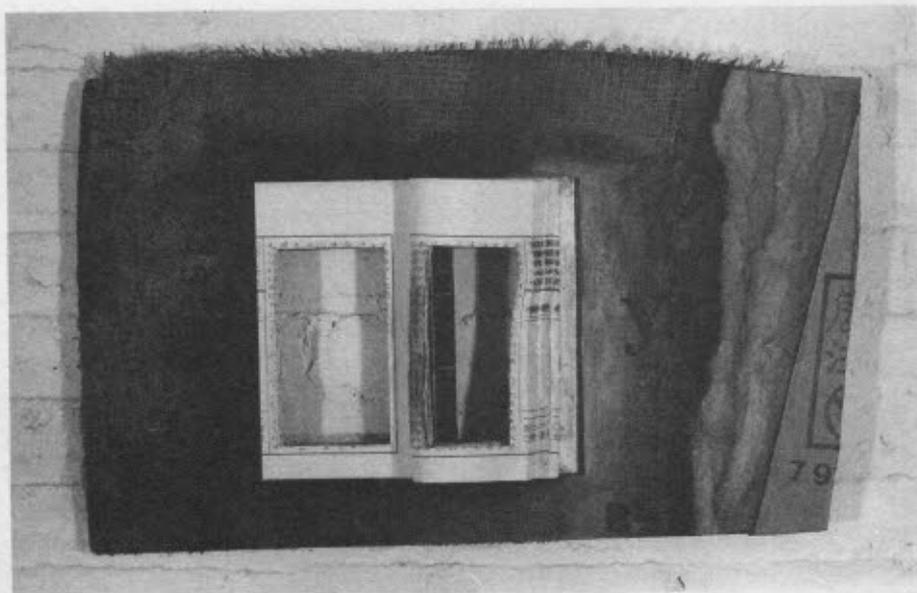
JH: *Staying with your studio work for a moment, it's a general problem, isn't it, for Chinese artists working in a contemporary mode in the West, that they have difficulty finding a Western audience. It occurs to me that along with other artists such as Gu Wenda, Zhang Jianjun or Hou Wenyi who work with iconic imagery and abstraction, you are in an awkward position in relation to the Western public. One might say that your*

*reference points on the Chinese side are too obscure to Western viewers, while your Western reference points are in a sense too familiar.*

ZHT: Especially for artists who came from China when they were older, over thirty, thirty-five or forty, the influence of Chinese culture, especially ancient philosophy, is very, very strong. Somebody can say, 'No, I don't like the old stuff, I'm going to break with the tradition', but nobody can avoid its influence. That's why you find so many Chinese artists who in the content of their paintings still keep the influence of Chinese culture. But here, because one is living in this modern society, in New York, one sees contemporary art every day, so this influence is also very strong. Especially in New York, art is in step with everyday life. Modern civilization, new techniques, new ideas about art, about culture, even about science, all influence art. So one cannot take away from this kind of influence as well. That's why in the results, visually, one can see the references, or the influences, from Western culture. And these are very familiar to people here. For me this is a challenge. Familiar is OK, but the challenge is that I have to make something of my own, unique, not only from my earlier life experience but also from my own knowledge of Western contemporary culture. As for the content or the concept, from Chinese history or culture, I don't have any reason to avoid that, because it is part of my life. But I think that since the world is getting smaller and smaller, and more Western people are studying Eastern culture, understanding each other may be easier in the future.

JH: *Most readers will not be familiar with your work. You tend to work by series. Until recently, your series were characterized by a strong image to which you returned again and again: it might be a dark lumpish form representing the sun, or the back of a head, or stencilled messages in Chinese and English, or – in your explicitly political work – the image of Mao Zedong. But your most recent series is rather different, since it is characterized above all by a technique: you cut out the central motif and leave it as a void. Also, the imagery is much more wide-ranging: you draw on the imagery of various earlier series, but you have also added many new images which I think of as emblems of cultural identity – for example, the Great Wall, a Western-style book, a Doric column . . . What significance does this shift in your work have for you?*

ZHT: First of all, I would like to say something about the history of this shift. A long time ago I had a very clear aim in my painting: it was to



Zhang Hongtu, *A Chinese Book 2*, 1991, book, burlap, acrylic, cardboard on plywood.

combine modern Western art and Chinese traditional style. Already in 1962, 1963, when I was still at Middle School, I had this aim. I wasn't the only one; many, many artists then were talking about how to give a national [Chinese] character to oil painting . . .

JH: *Were you aware of what was going on in Taiwan and Hong Kong at that time, painters like Liu Guosong and the Fifth Moon group (Wuyue huahui) who were also pursuing an East-West synthesis?*

ZHT: No, not at all. At any rate, the result of that kind of aim on my part was two different styles. One was oil painting – figure and landscape paintings – with line . . .

JH: *Why was that? Why with line?*

ZHT: Because at that time it was very easy to think of Western painting as being without line, since line – brushwork – is the most important thing in traditional Chinese painting. But I found out that the Post-Impressionists, especially Matisse, had already done much the same thing long ago. The other result of my thinking in that period was a kind of abstract ink painting on rice paper, which so many oriental artists have

done, a thousand times over. I didn't find anything new. But even when I arrived in the United States in 1982 I still had the idea underlying those two styles – I wanted to combine, or mix, Western and Chinese things. But one day I changed my ideas. At the end of 1982 I saw a show of Scandinavian contemporary painting at the Guggenheim Museum, and there were two sentences in the catalogue: 'All national art is bad. All good art is national.' This really shocked me, and it made me rethink my idea of combining two styles. The second sentence, 'All good art is national', was a really strong influence on me: to be a Chinese artist is not important, to be a good artist is important. So this was the next step: I could learn more and more from the new art world, from my reality in the United States. From that time on, I tried many styles. I was influenced by the mainstream, Neo-expressionists, people like Anselm Kiefer, but my works were too similar. Then later, I went back to reading Chinese books – history and philosophy – and by going back to myself, I found my way to the sunrise paintings and the back of the head paintings. The next stage was my political paintings after June 4, 1989, the Tiananmen massacre. At the beginning, I thought of it just as an immediate response. But later, after I had done two or three paintings of Mao, the paintings themselves taught me that this came from my life experience so it was not to be ignored, and I went on to do a series of political paintings all about Mao. So to get back to your question, changing my work had been very important to me for several years. At the end of the period when I was painting the backs of heads I found that my work had too much of a personal feeling, and that the message was always exchanged between the work and myself. Once I started cutting out images I found more freedom and more opportunity to express my ideas about reality. Now I can use many different images to make artworks, and since the images are always related to culture, to popular icons, it's easier to exchange the message with the audience. Asking myself about the significance of these images has made me rethink the relationship between art and culture, the relationship between art and society.

*JH: There you mention that these images you're using are popular icons, and have to do with culture and art. What does it mean to use, say, a Doric column?*

*ZHT: This kind of idea comes partly from art history, but partly from my personal life. Nowadays the whole world is full of images – people speak of an image world – so any abstract form reminds people of something.*

There is no absolute abstract form. If it's a square, people think about the modern city, a triangle, they think about a pyramid . . . This is different from Malevich's time, when you could say you were doing work that was pure, close to spirituality, nothing to do with reality. Nowadays every image will remind you of something. People use images to do many different things, in the same way that high art styles are also used for commercial work – this is reasonable, it's part of the historical process. In my case, if I had led a different life, if I hadn't lived in China, hadn't lived through the Cultural Revolution [1966–76], if I had had a different family background, if I had moved to Taiwan before 1949, then I would have been a very different artist. Maybe I would have become an absolute formalist – maybe, I don't know. But my life as a Chinese person, especially after the 1989 Democracy Movement, has influenced me strongly to think about history, about authority, about culture, and to doubt the authority of the image.

JH: *So this new kind of work you are doing has an indirect connection with the events of June 4.*

ZHT: Yes, an indirect connection.

JH: *These recent cut-out paintings bring to mind a standard phrase of traditional Chinese art criticism: you wu zhi jian, 'between presence and absence'.*

ZHT: Yes, *you wu zhi jian* is good, but somehow I think *you wu xiang sheng*. It's from [the Daoist philosopher] Laozi: it means that presence and absence generate each other. In my understanding of it, life is in between presence and absence, or in between existence and non-existence, or in between reality and dream. In my new works, the image – I still believe in the power of the image – is still there but it's empty. Then there are nonsense words present, visible, on the burlap. Both are significant images. The burlap is a part of the work, alongside the cut-out, like the *yin-yang* symbol. Since the hole is a significant image, it is in between presence and absence as you said, but it is related to reality.

JH: *You mentioned the messages which you include on burlap, either that were already on it, or which you stencilled onto it in the same style. Some of the messages are in Chinese, others in English. You described them as nonsense words, but they are not wholly nonsense words, are*



Zhang Hongtu, *Danger: Extremely Flammable 6230*, 1990, acrylic on burlap mounted on canvas.

*they? In the context of the artwork, they seem to me more ambiguous or mysterious: DANGER, EXTREMELY FLAMMABLE, KEEP OUT OF THE REACH OF CHILDREN. Could we say that some sort of boundary is defined by language, or in your work is defined by this particular use of language which promises understanding but does not fully deliver.*

ZHT: Language promises understanding, any new language defines a new boundary. In ordinary life, when people exchange messages with each other, they have to use the same language. The problem is that artists are always trying to break boundaries and find a new language. But the significant thing is not just to break with the old but to create something new as well. When a new language is created, a new audience is created, so along with the creation of a new language the message of my work will be more clear. If my artistic language is complete and strong enough, the message in my work will be more clear. Even so, I still can't make a message as clear as crystal. I don't like to teach the audience, instead I want to give the audience more space to re-create.

JH: *The messages you stencilled on burlap could be interpreted to have political meaning.*

ZHT: The words I used at that time were important, they had a message, but it wasn't really political, it was more for psychological effect: phrases like DANGER, KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN, NO CHEMICALS, to make people think about the environment, the reality of the society, but only psychologically.

JH: *It's not a commentary on the paintings themselves . . . ?*

ZHT: . . . No.

JH: . . . *because from the point of view of the Chinese government – I'm thinking of the recent Campaign against Spiritual Pollution – it could be said that your works are dangerous, and flammable, and should be kept out of the reach of children.*

ZHT: To tell you the truth, with those paintings, I did not think too much about the relationship with the Chinese government. But you are right that if I showed the paintings with these messages in Chinese in China, the government, even the people, would definitely think this way, because people there are always ready to find some special meaning in any single word.

JH: *Then let's imagine that the political situation changes and you have an opportunity to exhibit in Beijing, do you think that your studio work could be understood in Beijing?*

ZHT: I think so, though maybe in a different way. But misunderstanding is acceptable. For example, I cut out the image, make a hole in my painting, and over here many people think this is a way of denying or being against something. But some of my Chinese friends think about Daoism, about nothingness, about something between nothingness and something, between *xu* (void) and *shi* (solid). To me it doesn't matter, you can think this way or that way, I just give you a chance to think, feel a different way with this image.

JH: *You said earlier that you want to give the audience space to re-create. That space must have a lot to do with the ground you give your images.*

ZHT: In my head paintings, there is a space which is the background for the head, an abstract space. And in my new paintings there is a real space

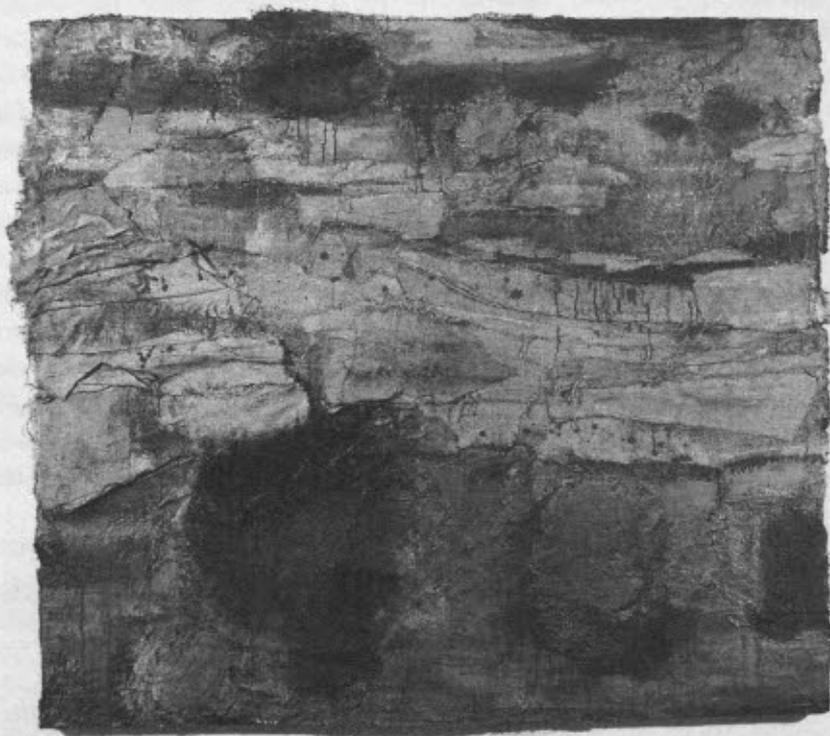
cut from wood, plywood, canvas, burlap, a physical space. But when I talk about leaving a space for the audience, for the viewer, to recreate, it's psychological, it has to do with the message. In my painting I'm not going to explain everything exactly and very, very clearly and completely. The space is exact – I cut it out – it's a real space, it's not an illusion. Maybe you want to see spiritual emptiness, maybe somebody wants to say because I cut the image out I negate something, I am against something. But for my own part, I just want to give you the chance to see the thing in a different way, not just see it in a surface way; for example, with the image of the Mona Lisa, not just see it as the smile, colour, artistic technique, but see all sorts of other things as well. But it's not unlimited. The image is still there, limiting you to think something, though not only something from the original painting such as her smile, or how great da Vinci is. So that's what I mean by space – the opportunity to think and feel about the image.

JH: *It's almost as if you are trying to give fresh life to symbols that have become clichéd and hackneyed . . .*

ZHT: Yes, everybody knows these are clichés, but I use them because they are something I have in common with people – they are public images, which I try to let people see from a new angle.

JH: *What I was trying to get at before was the way that the psychological space that you create for the viewer is also influenced by the physical way that you create it. I'm sure that your cut-out paintings would have a quite different effect if they were cut out of formica, for example, instead of burlap. So why do you choose rough physical surroundings for your images? You must have some sort of psychological effect in mind.*

ZHT: Yes, psychologically I would like to keep a distance from modern civilization, in other words, from my surrounding reality. Perhaps this is a traditional Chinese intellectual attitude. I am making a contrast with the machine-made or man-made world, both in everyday life and in the art world. If you go to see contemporary art in galleries or museums, you can see that many of the things look artificial. There's a sleek surface. Maybe this is the right direction – it's closer to high tech, to science – but personally I like to make a contrast with sleek surfaces and artificial materials, both in everyday life and in the art world.



Zhang Hongtu, *Landscape No. 5*, 1989, mixed media on canvas.

JH: *So this would be why, although your paintings are basically rectangular, the edges are always uneven.*

ZHT: But the shape of my paintings is still basically rectangular. You know why? Because I found that some artists – of course they're good artists, like Frank Stella, Elizabeth Murray – make the paintings totally non-rectangular. They can be any kind of shape. To me this is great, but it is merely different from reality. I make paintings that still look right-angled, look rectangular, yet none of the details are even. So it's different from, but at the same time related to, reality.

JH: *There's a kind of ambiguity. That's also true of the way your paintings mix painting and sculpture.*

ZHT: Yes, the materials, the surface and the edges all come from the same point of view.

JH: *So when you speak of making a contrast with modern civilization, with the machine aesthetic, you don't mean a complete contrast . . .*

ZHT: No. I don't want my work to look as if it comes from another planet.

JH: *In the past you have spoken to me in Daoist terms about the lumpish motif in your 'Sunrise' series of paintings. You have related it, for example, to concepts of unity. But you also once told me that you thought of your 'Sunrise' paintings as 'soft' political works.*

ZHT: Even the title has a political meaning in China, because 'Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts'. I'm sure that anyone of my age had to sing this slogan during the Cultural Revolution, not only chant it, even sing it. So the sunrise series I did after leaving China – including black suns, square suns, irregular-shaped suns – like other paintings I did at that time, was an attempt to extricate myself from the past. But I didn't want to do something that looked exactly like a political painting, like a political statement in my painting . . .

JH: . . . *Why not?*

ZHT: I did the sunrise paintings before 1989. I still thought art was art, I didn't want to use painting as a tool, as political propaganda. When I was in China, teachers, the government, everybody told you art is a tool of the government, of the party. You have to do something useful for the Communist Party. So when I left China I hated this idea; I thought art is art, art is not a tool, I am not a tool. As Lenin said, literature and art are 'cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine'.<sup>2</sup> I knew when I painted the 'Sunrise' paintings that there was a kind of relationship with Mao's images and my life experience in China, but I deliberately avoided this kind of feeling. So I named them 'Impression: Sunrise, 114 years after Monet'. I preferred an art-historical reference, but of course I could not make the political meaning disappear.

JH: *I want to ask you a related question about your training as an oil painter and the way that it relates to your work today. Many of the artists of your generation, who trained as oil painters in China and studied socialist realist painting, after coming to the West have continued to work in a realist style. Even though they changed their subjects and the*

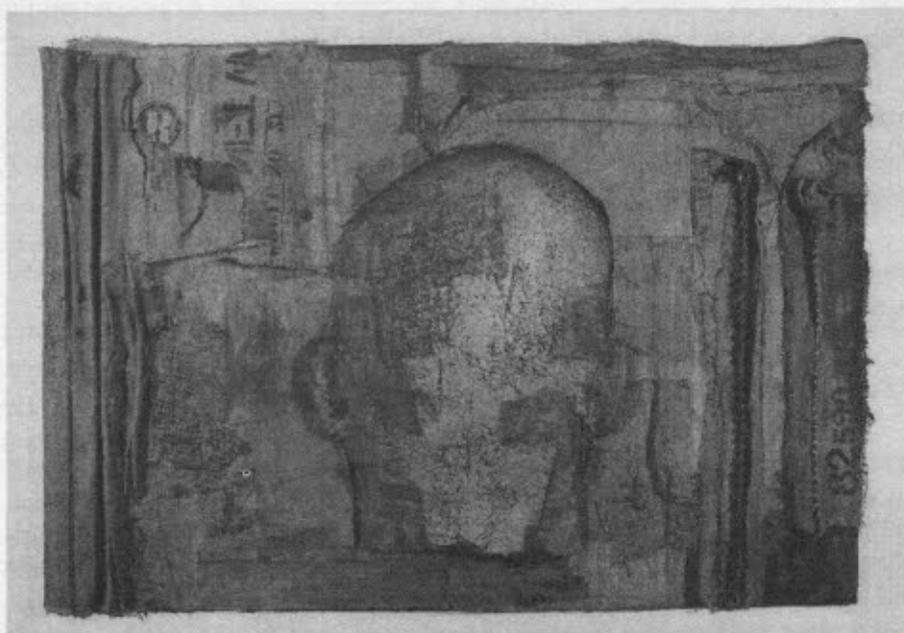
*content of their work and their themes, nonetheless the style that they work in today is still very close to the style they trained in in China. But your style has changed enormously. Your studio work – the images of the backs of heads for example – on the surface has very little to do with socialist realism. However, I wonder if there is not some connection at a deeper level – I'm thinking of the socialist realist icons of smiling workers, for example, or other smiling figures.*

ZHT: Socialist realism was the only artistic style permitted by the government in China when I was there. Also it was the only 'ism' taught in the art schools when I was a student. In fact, socialist realism dealt neither with the social, nor with reality. What people had to see in their everyday life, everywhere, was Mao's face, with its huge size and hypocritical smile – especially during the Cultural Revolution. That is part of my life experience. When I made the back of the head paintings I had not consciously connected the idea with this part of my memory but I am sure it was connected subconsciously. For example, the colours black and grey instead of yellow and red, the back of the head instead of the smiling face. But personally I like to put the question in this way: in my painting I show the back of the head to the audience, so the front of the head is actually facing empty space. That was my attitude during that time in China, to keep a distance from my reality. Maybe this is one way to relate the back of the head paintings and socialist realism.

JH: *Without suggesting that it was a conscious decision on your part, I was wondering too whether the very large scale of your head paintings might not owe something to the huge size of public icons in China?*

ZHT: If people try to make somebody look like a god through the huge size of the portrait, as in the pictures of Mao, the size can make the image funny and make it lose its power. But if somebody enlarges the size of an object from everyday life, it can transform a common feeling about the same object, like you see in Claes Oldenburg's work. I would prefer to say that I was influenced by Claes Oldenburg's work than by Socialist Realist icons.

JH: *When you speak of the image of the back of the head in terms of keeping a distance from your reality, it brings to mind some lines by the woman poet, Shu Ting, written in the late 1980s: 'Who is it remains silent*



Zhang Hongtu, *Portrait - The Back*, 1990, burlap and mixed media on canvas.

*in all this hubbub? / Don't turn your head; / at your back is only the leaden universe.*<sup>3</sup> Is there a shared experience?

ZHT: I like this poem: I had never read it before. I think we share some feelings about life and reality, though in my painting visually I turn the head toward 'the leaden universe', and leave the 'hubbub' at the back. But the main thing is that the person is between the 'hubbub' and the 'leaden universe', so I would say we share a similar feeling.

JH: *What struck me in the poem was the intense sense of the individual person, alone and trapped, but in public. It's not the individual at home in some quiet corner and alone, but alone surrounded by all these people and on an almost cosmic scale. And that's what brought your head paintings to mind, because they often remind me of crowds, partly because in some paintings you have more than one image of a head which makes one think of a crowd, and partly because the viewer's closeness to the back of this person's head is similar to the experience we have in a crowd. Standing in a crowd, or riding a bicycle in Beijing, much of the time you're seeing the backs of people's heads.*

ZHT: That's true. In fact, in China I did some paintings of people riding bicycles, and they were all seen from the back.

JH: *You have related the 'Sunrise' and head paintings, produced in the United States over several years, to your earlier life in China. Were they an attempt to come to terms with the past?*

ZHT: They were an attempt to come to terms with the past, but in the sense of an attempt to extricate myself from the past.

JH: *Is it your own head, then?*

ZHT: No, it's just a head. I did a few small paintings based on my own head, which was interesting for me, but I didn't need people to recognize it as my head. There was one show that asked for self-portraits, and there I gave my social security number to identify it.

JH: *To me that would suggest that these paintings also have something to do with the anonymity of life in New York.*

ZHT: Traditionally Chinese intellectuals and artists have kept a kind of distance from their reality. I mean that they haven't dealt directly with social and political problems in their art. But coming here allowed me to have a different approach. I feel isolated from my new reality here, perhaps because of the language problems, the difference of lifestyle, the culture shock. I can fit in but I still feel different. When I show the head surrounded by empty space, it shows that isolation.

JH: *Earlier you spoke of the psychological space that you try to create for the viewer with your studio paintings. But the explicitly political works also create a psychological space, and one which to my eyes is very disturbing, because they draw on the power of the Mao icon at the same time as they oppose it. However, I wonder how sensitive to this a Western viewer can be, unless he or she has lived under a Communist regime.*

ZHT: I agree with you. If one has never lived under a Communist government, Mao's portrait means nothing: it's just a popular image such as Warhol did, like Marilyn Monroe. But the first time I cut Mao's portrait with a knife and put it back together to make a new Mao image, I

felt guilty, sinful. Can you imagine? Mao died fifteen years ago, and I left China nine years ago, but I still felt guilty doing that artwork.

JH: *That reminds me of the incident at Tiananmen Square, before the crack-down, when three men threw paint on the portrait of Mao above the Tiananmen Gate, and were pursued by the demonstrators and handed over to the police.*

ZHT: Yes, one was sentenced to life imprisonment, one to twenty years, and the third to sixteen years. I heard that news just as I was doing the first group of Mao images, and it encouraged me to continue, because it was so unjust.

JH: *What you've just been saying raises the question of taboos, which are one very obvious way of establishing boundaries. From what you say one can easily see the way that a certain kind of art helped to keep things in place, and the way that your own art explores taboos that have been important in your life.*

ZHT: This may be a difference of cultural values between this country and China. In China, even before the Communist period, people always had to follow a standard, not only the intellectuals, everybody. The standard might come from history, from the government's ideas, but people accepted it. If something deviated from the standard, then even before the government said it was wrong, one censored oneself. I think this is the most terrible thing in China, self-censorship. One always follows the official standard. Sometimes it is not official, but social, and not only the government will say you're wrong but your classmates, your teachers, your friends will say you were wrong. In this country people have more opportunity to choose for themselves. But when I was in China, images and icons, not only Mao's but historical ones as well, were a very powerful influence on my everyday life.

JH: *In a widely reported incident in 1990, your version of The Last Supper, The Last Banquet, was banned from a federally-funded exhibition in Washington. Those who banned it thought, or believed that others would think, that by replacing Jesus and the Apostles with figures of Mao you were attacking Christianity, whereas you intended to attack*



Zhang Hongtu, *Last Banquet* (*Selected Works of Mao, No. 5*), 1989, laser photo prints, collage, acrylic on canvas.

*Mao and socialist realism. How do you feel about that misunderstanding?*

ZHT: The whole of history is full of misunderstandings. What I am concerned with is less misunderstanding for myself, so that I can see the world from my own perspective. I used Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* just as Marcel Duchamp used a bicycle wheel. *The Last Supper* for me is a ready-made image, so I replaced all thirteen faces, including both Jesus and Judas's, with Mao's face. The story is that after Jesus says 'One of you will betray me', all the twelve apostles have different reactions. In my painting the story is still there but the content is changed — Mao was betrayed by Mao. Perhaps some people who have stronger religious emotions are affected by that, so that even if they understand the story they don't understand my intention.

Something else to mention is that after that painting was first exhibited in a show protesting against the Tiananmen massacre, but before the Washington exhibition, one Chinese painter whose name unfortunately is similar to mine went back to China from New York. At Beijing airport, in the customs office, he was held by a Chinese official. He asked him: 'Are you Zhang Hongtu?' He was only released after he showed all his ID cards.

JH: *So did the Chinese authorities understand your painting better than the American authorities?*

ZHT: At least they understood my purpose. They didn't know the story, perhaps, but they got the point.

JH: *Your use of a Christian story for The Last Banquet brings to mind the role that religion played in your early life. You grew up in Beijing, which is still the centre of China in a symbolic sense, but in a Moslem family, that's to say, outside the ethnic centre of the Chinese population. In fact, yours is an unusual Moslem family, since your father is a prominent Moslem scholar who has been working for many years on a Chinese translation of the Koran. How were the boundaries marked between the culture of your community and Han Chinese culture?*

ZHT: Han chauvinism is everywhere in China. It doesn't only come from the government, it comes from the psychology, from everybody. It's a terrible thing. The government has spent almost forty years destroying the boundary between Han and other peoples in China, both culturally and psychologically, so I am not very clear about the boundary, even though I live in a Moslem family. To give an example, idolatry is banned by Islam, but every Moslem family had Mao's portrait during a certain period. And not only did they have a portrait, but they had to put it on the wall at the centre of the room up above everything else. There were also small sculptures, because you could buy them anywhere. This was really idolatry but all Moslem families had Mao's portrait, both a picture and a sculpture.

JH: *Isn't it true that in the past, before 1949, Han families but not Moslem families would have put up another kind of image, of a domestic god? So there is actually a religious background for the placement of the Mao icon.*

ZHT: Yes, that's true. Not every family, but most families, though not Moslem ones. For example, people might have had a Guanyin (*Bodhisattva*) in the living-room, and almost everyone had a stove god in the kitchen.

But I can still talk about a difference between the two cultures, without talking about boundaries. In a Moslem family through religious influence I reached Western culture much earlier than others in my generation. When I was young my parents and all my relatives called each other by Islamic names. Even I have my Islamic name, Mohammed. Also, if my father had the chance we talked about Islam – if he had the chance, but not during the Cultural Revolution, of course. So I became more open-minded; my interest and knowledge were not glued by Confucianism and Daoism. Through the religious influence I had more knowledge about the

West. I know many stories from the Old Testament, which is also a part of Western culture: if you study Western art history you have to understand the Bible. In this way I think I had a chance to reach Western culture earlier than my generation. So that's one difference. But I don't think that I can use the word boundary, because it's very hard to see a boundary. If you ask someone else from a Moslem family, they would say that there's almost no difference, just the lifestyle, not eating pork, that's maybe the only thing.

*JH: How conscious were you of belonging to a different community?*

*ZHT:* There's no community. Even in the Niujie area where I grew up. It was a Moslem community in Beijing before 1949, but after that people were all mixed together. But spiritually I still have a relationship with the Middle East, with Western culture, especially since my father studied Arabic in Egypt when he was eighteen years old, and travelled to Mecca, to Pakistan, to many countries. He talked with us about that, about his experience, so this was an influence on our consciousness. We had a kind of relationship with the world outside China.

*JH: Has any of this found its way into your painting?*

*ZHT:* Not directly, but it certainly influenced my attitude toward my everyday life.

*JH: Including your attitude toward the practice of painting?*

*ZHT:* Yes. I can give you an example. I started to study painting at a very early age. The purpose wasn't to learn painting, I was just interested. But later my father told me many times: if you study something, you have to do it with a pure purpose. For example, art is art. You cannot use art as a tool to do something, for a name, for money, to make a living. Art is just like religion. In his thinking you have to put all your mind and body into religion. So this was the most important influence on my commitment to my career, to art. Also, the paintings about Mao, and then the cut-image paintings – these are connected with icons. Maybe there is an influence from the Moslem family here, because Islam is against idolatry. I believe in the power of the image, but I don't believe in the authority of the image.

- Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 292–306.
- 54 See Anagnost, 'Politicized Body', for a discussion of how the inclusion of these voices constitute the party as a subject writ large.
- 10 *Zhang Hongtu/Hongtu Zhang: an Interview*
- 1 Although the present text is based on several hours of interviews, it is not a verbatim transcript but has been edited and amended by both interviewer and interviewee (JH, ZHT).
- 2 'In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine'. Mao Zedong, 'Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art' (May 1942), excerpted in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing, 1966). (JH)
- 3 From the poem 'Resurrection', included in 'Smoking People: Encountering the New Chinese Poetry', ed. John Rosenwald, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, xxxix/2 (Winter 1988–9), pp. 26–7. Translation slightly modified. (JH)