

二 REBUILDING ELITE ART: RECONSIDERING CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINESE ART (1989)

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REBIRTH AND DILEMMA

History cannot be controlled by the will of man. When China entered into the post-Mao era, those popular art and literary forms that were tied to politics [and geared toward the masses] faded and fell apart. Concurrent to the appearance of the "opening and reform" [movement], there was an awakening of the individual consciousness, accompanied by the cry to "exit the Middle Ages," a search for human values, and critical reflections on traditions and culture. An increasing number of people acknowledged free thought, creative freedom, and pluralistic trends. All of this was quite similar to the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Wave after wave — the *Stars Art Exhibition* (*Xingxing meizhan*), the Misty Poets, Scar literature, experimental film, New Wave art, and various other art forms labeled "experimental" or "avant-garde" — inundated the people with more than they could even handle as they stared dumbfounded at one another. The middle-aged generation hovered in self-reflection and transformation while the younger generation whizzed about them trying to ride the "waves," reexamining and observing everything around them.

Doubt, criticism, challenges, shouldering the burden of history and experiences with life's tragedies coalesce into a new elite power.¹ It's imperative that elite forms of art are recovered and reconstructed.

A dynamic interaction exists between the creators of elite art and those who embrace it. Elite art has been searching for its bosom companions — philosophers, students of cultural studies and sociology, graduate and college students, other artists, even some scientists, engineers, technicians, businesspeople, and the new category of social managers. This is the background and atmosphere in which elite art is produced. Reconstructing elite art is inevitably an arduous task. Naïveté, coarseness, imitation, bilateralism, scars, pathologies, sacrifice — all of these will overlap in the initial phases, even throughout its distillation process. It is difficult to avoid the berating, curses, and ridicule looming at its edges; loneliness and desolation seem to forever be its companion.

However, from the outset, the concept of "elite art" has been profoundly different from formerly mass-oriented art. First is the pursuit of the spiritual in art. Second is its creative exploration of innovative linguistic symbols, and third is artistic autonomy (not merely of form) and its independent consciousness. These three areas endow it with a bursting vitality: after undergoing metamorphosis, self-reflection, and various tribulations, it will mature. A group of outstanding artists, theoreticians, and superior artworks will emerge; styles and schools will independently develop amid the strife, and elite art's leading position within the entire art structure will be acknowledged. Perhaps a difficult road remains ahead, but it will eventually come into view, because its appearance is not merely a possibility for contemporary Chinese culture, it is an urgent need.

Aside from its own crudeness and vulnerability, the greatest challenge to contemporary elite art is a new kind of popular art. Since the ban on the commodity economy was lifted, art production and consumption have hastily courted commercialism and money. Sales, publications, exhibitions, and even the social status of artists themselves cannot avoid the ruthless scrutiny of the market.

Adapting to buyers and even catering to their tastes immediately has become a necessary way to develop one's life. Primary consumers are the urban midlevel cultural

masses and gradually urbanizing farmers caught up in waves of commodities, as well as overseas travelers and art dealers (most of whom were not collectors). Their needs are primarily for artworks that are manufactured based on aesthetic principles of joy and stimulation, or for something that can function as a Chinese "local product" or a "tourist souvenir." Thus, along with the rage for blue jeans and disco, popular music, calendar girls, decorative calendars, entertainment films, romance novels, violent literature and art, sugary-sweet oil paintings, mechanically reproduced traditional Chinese paintings and various knickknacks . . . sexually provocative visual arts and erotic novels have also begun to appear. If we call the popular art of ten years ago rigid vulgarization (reliant on political enforcement), then today's popular literature and art could be called soft vulgarization (reliant on the charm of money).

In order to pander to customers, large numbers of artists have lowered their standards in order to make a sale; they have abandoned their artistic and spiritual explorations as profits and sales have turned into guidelines for publication and exhibition. Most art forms have converted into a mode of reproduction, while pure creation has become even more isolated. We can say that even though such "soft vulgarization" has made both the artist and consumer comfortable and happy, it is a marked departure from elite art. It not only contradicts elite art but is even hostile to it. Developed countries and regions are likewise swamped with this kind of popular art, but they also have the means to remedy this, namely separating elite art from popular art, separating profit-driven or purely entertainment-oriented shows from art collections, and distinguishing coffee-shop art from concert-hall and museum-quality pieces. China lacks cultured middle-class consumers of art, and it hasn't established a management system or regular channels for the consumption of art objects. Elite art is forced to pour into the market the same as popular merchandise.

Artists are facing a difficult choice and the threat of a breakdown in character. Chinese intellectuals are poorly remunerated for their work. Today they rely on popular art to earn some cash and improve their lifestyle, and can they be blamed? Furthermore, without economic independence, there are no means to maintain production and sustain an independent intellectual character.

But, isn't lowering one's standards and castrating one's talent and creativity ruining the nature of elite art? Isn't this even sadder? On one side are the wealth and riches that accompany popular art, and on the other is the poverty and solitude of the inquisitive fine artist; one is suckling joy, the other is savoring pain. How can we overcome this dilemma and these divisive circumstances?

I believe that we can begin with at least the following four suggestions: first, to purify and strengthen elite art. This requires efforts of the artists themselves and those from the strata of the cultural elite, including support by the national Ministry of Culture. Dignity, self-respect, maintaining the seriousness of elite art — overcoming the artistic motivations of hippies and yuppies who are "dabbling in art" — and tirelessly persisting in exploration are the fundamental conditions for elite art to progress toward maturity. The second suggestion is to improve the standards of popular art. In order to build an intellectual civilization we cannot be satisfied with popularization. We must "transform the people" and use intellectual products that have integrity and purity in order to improve the quality of the public character. In modern China, allowing the rules of the commercial market to completely dominate the production and consumption of culture and art is dangerous. The third suggestion entails artists pursuing two different lines of work, where the same artist creates both fine and popular art, distinguishing as much as possible between earning money and artistic pursuits. There are no absolute boundaries between fine art and popular art, and fine artists

creating popular art are beneficial to its improvement. The problem is that elite artists shouldn't blindly degrade themselves catering to its needs. The fourth suggestion is to advocate an integration of fine and popular art; satisfying exploration, adaptability, spirituality, and entertainment in one entity, and creating artwork that meets requirements of both types. The film *Red Sorghum* is a successful model of this kind of integration, from which fine art could take inspiration.

Note

1. Refer to Lang Shaojun "Lun Xinchao meishu" ["Discussing New Wave Art"] in *Wenyi yanjiu* [Research in Literature and Art] no. 6 (1987).

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