

Collision Domain between Intellectual Subjectivity and National Sovereignty: The Historical Trauma Experience and Political Resistance in Chinese Contemporary Art

Yiliang Sun
Art History, School of Art



Abstract

Along with the establishment and development of the Chinese communist dictatorship, severe humanitarian catastrophes generated uncountable historical traumas from generation to generation after 1949. Like other totalitarian states of the 20th century, the communist regime of the People's Republic of China also concentrated on ideological control and political propaganda in order to maintain the legitimacy of the regime and to rebuild historical reality. In this process, the communist regime enticed, manipulated, and forced artists to serve its political propaganda and in its construction of ideological discipline. This project peaked in the Cultural Revolution period through the regime's reconstruction of ancient Chinese history. Such political operations correspond perfectly to Michel Foucault's notion of discipline, which differentiates and punishes the public through the reconstructing of historical reality.

As Mao Zedong's communist revolutionary experiment failed and the era of reform and opening-up started, many artists began to express their own feelings or thoughts about politics and history. They did so in creating artworks using a new language of traumatic memory and humanistic introspection. The artists of "Scar Art(傷痕美術)," who I discuss in this program, are representative of this period.

The final part of my program will discuss the Chinese communist regime's disciplining of ideology through visual works. In response to this situation, Chinese contemporary artists urgently felt the need to build their intellectual subjectivity through much positive dedication to public political issues and to the contesting of the historical narratives promoted by the Communist regime. In this part, through the investigation of Ai Weiwei's(艾未未) series of artworks and He Gong's(何工) installations and performance, I argue for the visual/semantic function of their vanguard artistic paradigm within the expression of political resistance.

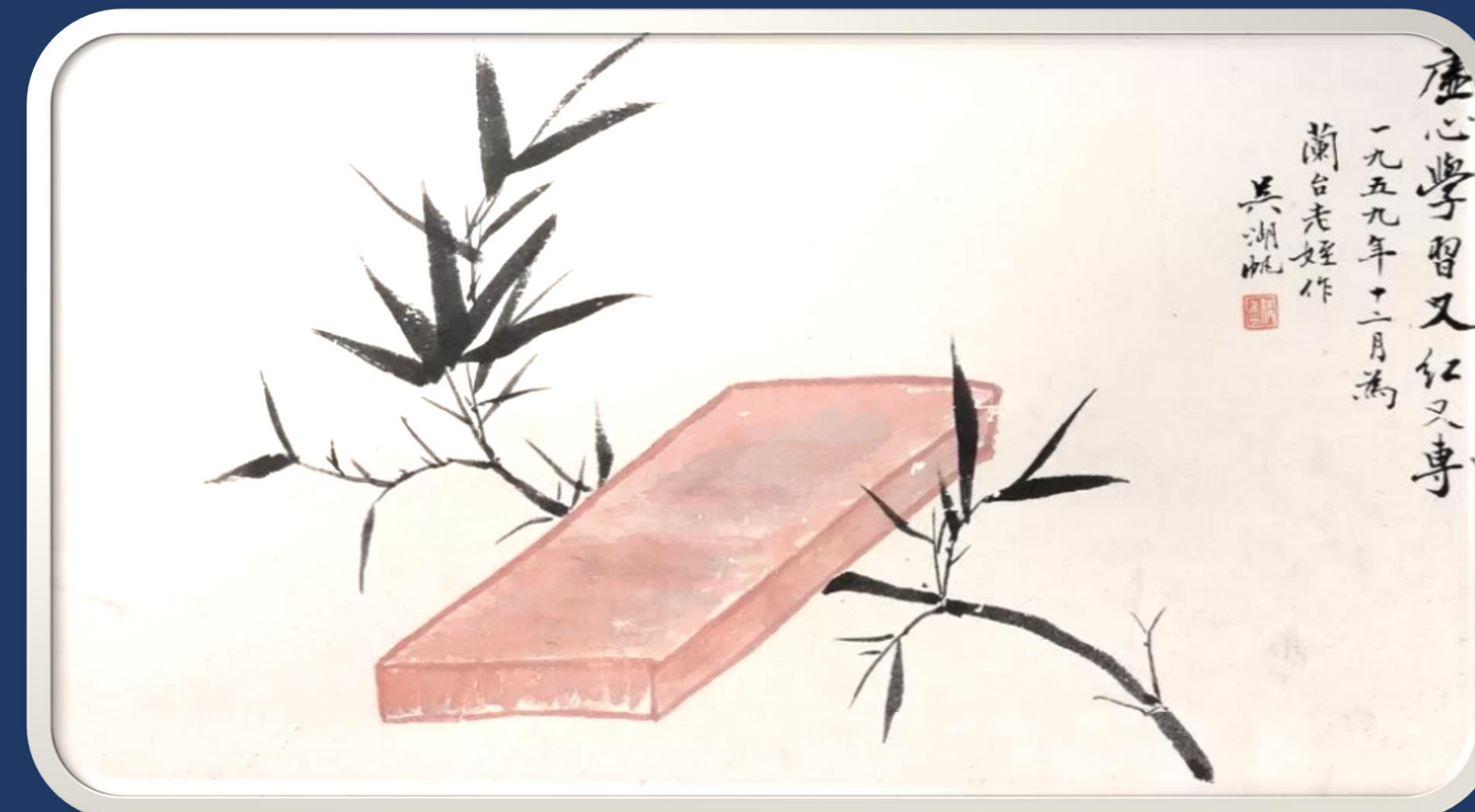
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The destruction of the old world

In the first chapter of my thesis, I will examine the relationship between communist totalitarian ideology and the modern artists who served for the communist ideological/cultural work in visual art, including Wu Hufan (吳湖帆) and Ling Fengmian (林風眠). In artworks such as *Open-minded learning & red and professional* and *Celebrate the success of the atomic bomb in our country*, their ambivalence and veiled traumatic expression unfolds as they are confronted a dictatorship that never existed before.



Wu Hufan, Open-minded learning & red and professional, 1959.

These old-school art masters or Western admirers with "bad family background (landowner or bourgeoisie)," were destined to face adversity, even if they might still want to contribute to the socialist society. Artists such as Wu, swallowed a tragic life's bitter pills until his distressing death in the Cultural Revolution. Ling Fengmian(林風眠), once studying in France and as an ingenious painter of Chinese literati painting and cubism, was forced to destroy all of his artworks in order to evade the disasters before he was put in jail in the Cultural Revolution.

Scar Art

In the period after the cultural revolution from 1977 to 1982, the introspection/boredom for the Cultural Revolution and Maoist became the mainstream of thinking public and the consensus of the whole society. In the literary and art circles of this period, Scar literature or literature of the wounded was the most famous and important mainstream. This literary current focuses on the query of the rationality of throwing themselves into communism, especially questioning the justification of violent clashes occurred in all of China's cities from 1967 to 1968, and also, (the Scar literature) highlights the grieving of the dead young souls in these absurd violent struggles.

In From all the artworks utilizing this new subject(Scar Art), Cheng Conglin's(程叢林) *One Day of 1968, Snowy* exactly is one of those famous representatives. This work exhibits a common phenomenon/scene of violent clashes during the most maniac period of the cultural revolution: the years of 1967 and 1968, with the oil painting methods/genre borrowed from revolutionary realism coming from the Soviet Union (like the genre of Vasily Ivanovich Surikov, and his famous painting: *The Morning of the Streltsy Execution*).



Cheng Conglin, One Day of 1968, Snowy, 1979

In this time, students' rebels organizations emerged from almost every high school and university. Because of the different opinions and understanding about Mao's ideology and provocative by Mao and his trusted followers, the different organizations fought with each other. After the army also took part in their fighting, cold weapon fighting upgraded to gunpowder violent clash.

Expression for political protest

After the night of June Fourth, 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (in that night, almost two thousand people killed by the troops with heavy weapons in Beijing), the whole country of China was caught in grief, indignation, and fear of political arrest. Once the subjects of political protest, also had an expressional requirement for the trauma experience and intellectual thoughts about the political situation of that time. He Gong's(何工) installation and performance art: the series of *Trap Designed for Future Archaeology* was exactly this kind of artwork.

He Gong, The series of Trap Designed for Future Archaeology, installations and performance. dimensions variable. 1989



In the part of the performance of this work, the artist covers himself with white cloth and sits in an iron cage. The whole space of the exhibition is just illuminated by the red lights. Behind the artist, the shape of a cross constituted by the red tape exhibited on the wall. Beyond all doubt, this work conveys a clear critical and negative attitude to the whole communist political system, which is an antihuman jail with the blood of innocent people. Based on this clear expression, it shows that whatever who controls the power, if the whole country and political system are unjust and antihuman, anyone with a conscience is the prisoner, victim, and even decedent of murder.