

## Modernist Literati: Abstract Art of Contemporary Chinese Poets

*Paul Manfredi*

Since roughly the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been an increasing number of Chinese poets turning their attention, and their creative powers, to the realm of visual art. These include not only well-established poet-artists such as Lo Ch'ing 羅青 (Luo Qingzhe 羅青哲, b. 1948), Yan Li 严力 (b. 1954), Sun Lei 孙磊 (b. 1971), Che Qianzi 车前子 (b. 1963), and Wang Ai 王艾 (b. 1971), but also veteran poets who have picked up visual art as a new mode of creative expression, including Mang Ke 芒克 (b. 1950), Duo Duo 多多 (b. 1951), Dao Zi 岛子 (b. 1956), and Song Lin 宋琳 (b. 1959). Collectively, which is to say in the numerous joint exhibitions that they have launched in cities throughout China, they are often referred to as the “Shipai” 诗派 (Poet’s group).<sup>1</sup> Since roughly 2007, when the first relatively major exhibition of their work took place in Beijing, they have expanded in membership, and scale of venue, exhibiting with increasing frequency and broadening geographical reach with each passing year.<sup>2</sup>

My focus in this chapter will be on one modernist subset of the visual artwork produced by these multimedia contemporary Chinese artists: abstract art. Such a focus is in part an effort to disrupt some persistent but ever unproductive binaries of modern Chinese cultural studies. These include the overly

1 “Shipai” is one among many ways of referring to this loosely affiliated group. Another organization, built around Lo Ch'ing, is the “Contingent school” (Miaowu shufa 妙悟书法) which specializes in calligraphy and other ink art. Often, however, the members of “different” groups are actually the same people.

2 The 2007 exhibition was titled *Poem Insert: An Exhibition of Painting by Poets* (插诗: 诗人画展), held in Beijing and curated by Zhu Qi 朱其 and Liu Guopeng 刘国鹏. Other major exhibitions include *Rhetoric* (修辞, 2010), held in Beijing and curated by Jiang Nan 姜楠 and Sun Lei 孙磊; *Forum on Chinese Poetry Calligraphy* (中国诗书画高峰论坛, 2010), held in Beijing and curated by Feng Yi'er 冯一二; *Echoes of the Sea* (呼应的海, 2012), held in Ji'nan and curated by Wang Jiabin 王家新 and Sun Lei; *Poets Group: Contemporary Chinese Poets' Paintings* (诗派中国当代诗人绘画, 2012), held in Beijing and curated by Li Anshu 李安树; *The First Qinhuandao Ocean Poem Festival* (大海: 首届秦皇岛诗歌节, 2014), held in Qingdao and curated by Xu Jialing 徐家玲; and *The Poetic Survivors* (诗意的幸存者, 2015), held first in Shanghai and curated by Gao Hui 高晖.

familiar tradition/modernity, local/foreign, modernist/realist, “pure art” didactic or functional art, as well as a host of issues relating to audience reception both in local Chinese and in global contexts. On the one hand, abstract artistic expression seems to be situated securely in one place: namely, a modern, foreign, pure-art form with no discernable social function. But, on the other, that art-historical assessment can be easily dismantled; even Anglo-American abstract art (Abstract Expressionism) has clear roots in ancient cultures, one of which being China, and was in the 1940s and 1950s often drawn into global political “left-right” discourses as either symbol of a decadent West or champion of pure art uncorrupted by political expediencies or authoritarian influence.<sup>3</sup> Following, even a strictly modern exploration of abstract art in the Western context will reveal considerable spiritual dimension, something that encompasses clear social function.<sup>4</sup> In short, abstract expression does not conform to facile configurations of time and place, requiring more subtle treatment altogether.

My approach to the subject of abstract expression in a contemporary Chinese context stems also in part from work done by Gao Minglu 高名潞 (b. 1949), developing what he calls “maximalism.” Though seemingly a counterpart to “minimalism,” Gao’s term is actually farther reaching:

I coined this term not to characterize an art style or school, but to illuminate a particular artistic phenomenon, a kind of “Chinese abstract art” that a number of artists have created since the late 1980s. Since these artists are not interested in either producing Chinese exoticism or representing the appearance of the ongoing globalization of China, their works have been underrepresented both in China and abroad.... What they wish to do is to unify the process of making art with daily life, in the manner of traditional Chan meditation. This is an effective response to

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3 Neolithic Yangshao pottery is the frequently cited example in the Chinese case, but there are of course common examples from all over the globe. The cultural function of such early artifacts most probably related to rituals of burial, though on the most basic level creative design was no doubt abstract before it was representational. For a description of Yangshao, see Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, 15–28. Of course, the politics of Abstract Expressionism is a complicated question. See, for instance, David Craven’s discussion in *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent during the McCarthy Period*.

4 Wassily Kandinsky’s (1866–1944) first theoretical work on the subject of abstract art, titled “Concerning the Spiritual in Art,” took color as the essential mechanism for a universal “grammar” of visual expression (Anna Moszynska, *Abstract Art*, 27). The essay actually preceded Kandinsky’s own important picture, “First Abstract Watercolor.” The essay, though, was not published until two years later, 1912 (Dietmar Elger, *Abstract Art*, 28).