

Negotiations of Identity: The Life and Art of Gu Xiong

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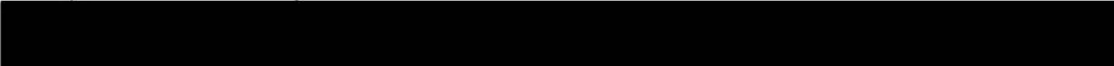
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## ABSTRACT


Gu Xiong is a multi-media artist who immigrated from the People's Republic of China to Canada in 1989. For more than a decade, Gu Xiong has drawn upon his experiences of immigration and adapting to the social and cultural context of Vancouver to produce a body of art work that addresses issues of culture and identity. This thesis presents the study of multiple aspects of Gu Xiong's work and career as an artist. Chapter one explores certain social, political and cultural factors and circumstances that shaped the formative period of his upbringing and training as an artist in the People's Republic of China. Chapter two traces the evolution of Gu Xiong's work and considers the development of his career in Vancouver in relation to cultural politics of Chinese-Canadian cultural identity and the multicultural practices of regional art institutions. Chapter three examines Gu Xiong's work in light of certain issues and strategies that are associated with the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art. So, I situate Gu Xiong's body of work, his exhibition practices, and the course of his professional career within three cultural contexts: the People's Republic of China, Vancouver, and the international art world. The study explores how the representation and the understanding of cultures and identities are based upon associations of race, ethnicity, culture, and location that are constructed and mediated by the artist, institutions, and current discourses on international art.

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## NOTES ON ROMANIZATION

Where translations from Chinese to English have occurred, the pinyin system for romanizing Chinese has been used in this study. Pinyin is the official romanization system in the People's Republic of China. It has been adopted by the United Nations, among other world agencies, and has become the system commonly used in scholarship and journalism.

## INTRODUCTION

Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but at the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.<sup>1</sup>

In the present historical moment, fixing particular characteristics to distinct cultural groups has become an unfeasible and even undesirable enterprise. Over the past few decades, we have become aware of how the processes of globalization are transforming our understanding of culture(s). The boundaries between nations have become increasingly permeable; systems of economic exchange operate transnationally; and people are moving between nations and cultures in unprecedented numbers. While most artistic practices are still defined within the context of distinct cultural traditions, some of the most challenging and innovative contemporary art is being produced by artists who have lived in two or more cultures, those who fashion their identities and draw influences for their artwork, as Homi K. Bhabha has written, "...from the experience of social displacement."<sup>2</sup> Their ways of seeing and understanding the world, and hence their ways of making art, have been shaped by various cultural experiences which allow them to produce artwork that communicates to audiences of diverse racial or cultural backgrounds.<sup>3</sup>

Gu Xiong is one such artist. He was born in the People's Republic of China, where he lived until he emigrated to Canada in 1989. For over a decade, Gu Xiong's art has addressed the challenging and often painful processes of cultural transition that have been part of his family's experiences of immigration. His life is intricately interwoven with the

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<sup>1</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation," Kunst & Museumjournaal, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1994, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale," 16.

evolution of his work. The themes and issues he chooses to address are inspired by his experiences and observations of daily life. A prolific artist, he has worked in a wide range of media, including drawing, painting, printmaking, installation and performance art, photography, and video. He has also written extensively about his art and the life experiences that have informed his work, producing texts which he has incorporated into his art. In 1997, Gu Xiong assembled his writing and a series of drawings he had produced for the publication of his first book, The Yellow Pear, a collection of drawings and highly personal narratives documenting his experiences of adapting to Canadian culture.<sup>4</sup> In 1999, he illustrated a children's book, The Boy in the Attic, by the Chinese-Canadian writer and historian Paul Yee. He has exhibited in several local public and private galleries and art centres and has further contributed to the cultural life of Vancouver as a speaker and an art educator. Gu Xiong has taught courses at several local art institutions, including the School of Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University; the Department of Fine Arts, Kwantlen University College; Vancouver Institute for the Visual Arts; and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. In 1998, he became an instructor of drawing, multimedia, and installation in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia, and in the fall of 2000 was made an Associate Professor.

The production of art is a cultural practice which is influenced by numerous social, economic and ideological practices and factors. It is the task of the art historian to sort out the determinations, pressures, and limitations that these factors impose and to study how individual artists, art movements, and/or works of art may conform to or challenge the contexts in which they operate. This study is meant to illuminate the particular

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<sup>3</sup> Gavin Jantjes, "Preface," A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism, (London: The Institute of International Visual Arts, 1998), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Gu Xiong, The Yellow Pear, (Burnaby: Arsenal Pulp Press and the Burnaby Art Gallery, 1997).

circumstances in which Gu Xiong's work and career as an artist have evolved. It is an attempt to analyse the conditions for his *practice* as artist as well as the conditions for the exhibition and reception for his work. As well, it endeavours to examine how he has operated within three conceptually distinct social and cultural spaces: the People's Republic of China, the city of Vancouver and the international art world. In order to illustrate this point, the thesis is divided into sections that situate his artistic practices in these three contexts. This format also allows us to examine Gu Xiong's career and work in a chronological rather than thematic way; this permits me to trace the evolution of his work as well as changes in his perceptions of his experiences over time.

A central objective of this study is to examine the relationships between Gu Xiong's experiences and the social, political, and cultural factors that have informed the style and subject matter of his art. Since his personal history has been a continual point of reference in the art he has produced over the past two decades, chapter one will present the biographical information and historical background that facilitates the search for constitutive meanings in Gu Xiong's work. An account of his childhood and early adulthood in the People's Republic of China provides a foundation for the interpretation and analysis of his work that occur in subsequent chapters of the thesis. To situate his formal training in its proper art-historical context, chapter one introduces key artistic movements, events and theoretical debates that took place between the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and his emigration to Canada in 1989. I argue that specific influences for his work can be identified by examining certain ideological debates, aesthetic issues, and stylistic tendencies that prevailed as Gu Xiong received his education and initiated his career as an artist in the P.R.C.

Chapter two examines how Gu Xiong's artistic practice has been shaped and transformed by the particular cultural climate of Vancouver. This chapter explores how he has represented his experiences of adapting personally and professionally to an existing cultural environment. At the core of chapter two is the study of how he has addressed issues of cultural conflict and personal identity in his work.<sup>5</sup> Chapter two also considers what his work, the evolution of his career, and his exhibition practices indicate about the wider scope of Chinese-Canadian visual arts practices and multiculturalism in Vancouver's art institutions. His art and his exhibition history of the past decade raise many issues of representation and Chinese-Canadian cultural identity such as: How are Chinese-Canadian artists and writers representing Chinese-Canadian cultural identity(ies)? How is Chinese-Canadian culture represented in public and private art institutions? Chapter two argues that Gu Xiong's art relates to dialogues about cultural identity in the Chinese-Canadian visual arts of the past three decades. These dialogues intersect with the multicultural interests of local art galleries and cultural centres and the increased representation of minority cultures.

Chapter three addresses Gu Xiong's career and work as they relate to the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art. The chapter begins with an examination of some historical factors that have contributed to the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, hundreds of artists left the People's Republic of China to pursue careers abroad, a phenomenon that has led Wu Hung, a historian of Chinese art, to refer to the years between 1989 and 1993 as the period of the internationalization of Chinese art.<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon has prompted scholars of

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<sup>5</sup> Gu Xiong, *The Yellow Pear*, 65.

<sup>6</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999), 16.

contemporary Chinese art to consider the cultural production of Chinese artists living overseas as a critical component in the development of contemporary Chinese cultural practices. For a country like China, which is quickly becoming a global economic leader, the implications of globalization are particularly pertinent. The artists who are part of the Chinese Diaspora are implicated in the transformation of Chinese culture. This chapter considers some of the strategies of cultural identification that Chinese artists employ in their work.

The final section of chapter three is devoted to a comparative analysis of Gu Xiong's work in relation to the practices of other Chinese artists who are producing art in a transnational context. His personal and professional experiences in the West share points of commonality with relevant experiences of other Chinese artists living overseas. It is therefore worthwhile to compare Gu Xiong with other Chinese artists living in Diaspora to juxtapose and contrast his experiences with parallel or divergent experiences of Chinese artists living elsewhere. I contend that the extent to which Gu Xiong has responded to the social and cultural conditions of his second home differentiates his work from that of most overseas Chinese artists.

A common theme focuses on the questions: what constitutes an individual's identity? To what extent are individuals conditioned by their involvement in groups that may be defined by class, gender, nationality, race, ethnicity or culture? Identity is a means by which a person interprets and negotiates reality. While it is necessary to examine how cultural norms and characteristics shape any individual's claim to identity, we must also acknowledge that cultural and individual identities are rarely static and are subject to change. Wing Chung Ng wrote:

The existence of communicable cultural traits and inheritable biological elements is perhaps undeniable, but all these 'primordial' items acquire

significance and become part of an identity only in specific contexts. Rather than fixed and stable, ethnic and cultural identities are contingent and malleable. Hence, the most meaningful inquiry does not compose a list of 'heritage items'- such as language, religion, social customs, dietary habits, and so on- in order to see if an identity is present, but, rather, it discerns the historical process within which an identity takes shape and explores how it evolves over time.

This view of identity as a negotiable cultural construct can be applied to the study of individual and collective identities, to the relationship between these two levels of identities, and to their interplay with variables in different arenas of social, economic and political life.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Gu Xiong, the issues of personal and cultural identity that his work raises are made altogether more complex by his own awareness of identity "as a negotiable cultural construct." His work demonstrates his continuing interest in exploring the interplay of various aspects of his two cultures and how they influence his sense of personal and cultural identity. Viewers of his work are made aware of his ability to fashion or construct his identity. Therefore, this study is an attempt to determine the particular cultural traits, personal experiences, and the aesthetic and stylistic strategies he uses to articulate his shifting perceptions of identity and to demonstrate *how* he utilizes these elements. Finally, this thesis considers how issues of cultural identity influences how artists of colour are represented within mainstream art institutions in Canada.

### **The Methodological Orientation of the Study**

I initiated my research for this project with the intention of producing a study of Chinese-Canadian artists living in Vancouver. At the time, I was particularly interested in what I interpreted as a preoccupation with issues of cultural identity in the work of several Chinese-Canadian artists. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Chinese-Canadian artists

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<sup>7</sup> Wing Chung Ng, The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-1980: The Pursuit of Identity and Power, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 5.

produced a proliferation of work addressing issues of race, ethnicity, culture, community, and representation. My task was to produce a thorough study of these issues and ascertain how they were addressed in the work of contemporary Chinese-Canadian visual artists. I soon came to the conclusion that such a project was beyond the scope of a master's thesis and modified my approach. When I directed my attention to the work of individual Chinese-Canadian artists, Gu Xiong stood out due to the strength of his work, the high profile he had developed within Vancouver's art scene, the amount of written documentation of his exhibitions and work, and his particular interest in the issues of personal and cultural identity that I was pursuing in my research.

Throughout the nineties there has been a growing interest in contemporary Chinese art among European and North American audiences. The proliferation of exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art outside the People's Republic, the emigration of many Chinese artists, critics and scholars, and a growing body of scholarship in the field of modern and contemporary Chinese art history have proved the significance that current developments in Chinese art have for international audiences.<sup>8</sup> This study has been informed by many issues, trends, and strategies being addressed by contemporary Chinese artists and the curators, critics and scholars who exhibit and interpret their work. My research into Gu Xiong's career became a point of departure for me to study contemporary Chinese art. This area of art history is still in the very initial stages of development. Chinese art is continually branching in new directions, and exhibitions are occurring constantly, making it both an exciting and challenging field of study.

During the period I was researching and writing this study -- largely between 1997 and 2001 -- Vancouver became a centre for the exhibition and development of

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<sup>8</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience*, 178.

contemporary Chinese art. In 1997, Art Beatus, a gallery devoted to contemporary Chinese art, was established in Vancouver by the Annie Wong Foundation. The Annie Wong Foundation chose Vancouver as the site for a North American branch of its Hong Kong-based art gallery, also called Art Beatus. Under the directorship of Zheng Shengtian, a prominent figure in the development of avant-garde art in the People's Republic of China in the 1980s, many key figures in contemporary Chinese art joined the roster of artists Art Beatus represents. As a result, Vancouver art audiences have had access to some of the finest work of contemporary Chinese art being produced. In 1998, the city hosted *Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River*, a large-scale project that consisted of a series of twelve exhibitions and an international symposium organized by Hank Bull, a Vancouver artist and cultural organizer, and Art Beatus gallery. The Jiangnan Project involved several of Vancouver's most prominent art and cultural institutions working in conjunction to exhibit work by some of the most prominent Chinese artists.<sup>9</sup> Hank Bull went on to establish Centre A, the Vancouver Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, in 1999. In May of 2000, artists, scholars, and critics from all over the world came together in Vancouver to attend an international symposium on contemporary Asian art organized by Centre A. I have been able to participate in these events, to meet artists, critics and scholars from all over the world, and to attend exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art in Vancouver; all this has been invaluable for broadening my perspectives on this project and on the development contemporary Chinese art.

The primary sources of research for this project are the interviews and conversations I have had with Gu Xiong. Because of the personal nature of his work, I

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<sup>9</sup> See, Hank Bull, ed. *Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River*,

have tried to highlight his perspective. I incorporate his own words about his art and life into my writing and have tried diligently to avoid misinterpreting or altering his voice. This being said, art historians and students of art history employ skills of interpretation and analysis that have the potential of uncovering different ideological material within works of art than those intended by the artist. To contextualize his work, I have drawn on a variety of sources, including historical texts, journal articles, exhibition catalogues, exhibition reviews, magazine articles, literary sources, newspaper articles, radio interviews, and my own firsthand experiences of exhibitions of Gu Xiong's work and those of other contemporary Chinese artists.

The study of art history is being continuously enriched by the theoretical tools developed in other academic disciplines. Raymond Williams wrote:

The fatally wrong approach, to any such study [of art], is that from the assumption of separate orders, as when we ordinarily assume that political institutions and conventions are of a different and separate order from artistic institutions and conventions. Politics and art, together with science, religion, family life and the other categories we speak of as absolutes, belong in a whole world of active and interactive relationships.... If we begin from the whole texture, we can go on to study particular activities and their bearings on other kinds. Yet, we normally begin from the categories themselves, and this has led again and again to a very damaging suppression of relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Crossing the boundaries between art and its social, political or cultural 'background' demands different tools of interpretation. This is particularly the case when one is examining the sort of complex issues of culture, identity, ethnicity, and race that Gu Xiong's work has prompted me to investigate. I have taken cues from how these issues are being treated by scholars in other fields. In places in this study, I have attempted to merge

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(Vancouver: Western Front Society and the Annie Wong Foundation, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Griselda Pollock quotes Raymond Williams in her essay "Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art," Eric Fernie, ed. *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 302.

art-historical practices with perspectives and modes of inquiry derived from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and other fields of inquiry that are concerned with the study of cultures.

One of the challenges of this study has been to find ways of writing about issues of race, culture, and identity without placing reductive overemphasis on cultural and racial differences. Sociologist Peter Li has documented the history of the Chinese living in Canada. His studies focus on the institutionalization of racist attitudes and how these have affected the development of Chinese-Canadian culture. In his book, The Chinese in Canada, Li states emphatically that notions of race and “Chinese race” are socially constructed:

Race takes on a social meaning when physical and cultural traits are paired with social attributes, such as intellectual, moral, or behavioural characteristics. Whether such associations are alleged or real is often irrelevant. Attaching a social meaning to the physical or cultural characteristics of a group implies that rewards and resources in society are, to some extent at least, divided along racial lines, and that the dominant group can use the physical and cultural features of people as a basis for stratification.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than using assumptions about either Chinese or Canadian culture as a basis for understanding Gu Xiong’s experiences, my approach has been to try to analyse his experiences in the contexts of Chinese and Canadian society. I have attempted to show specific ways he has operated within the cultural communities and the social fabric of these two societies. In doing so, I acknowledge that concepts of race and racial identity are circumscribed by social power relations existing in the local and international art spheres as they exist on all levels of society.

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Li, The Chinese in Canada, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127.

There are theoretical problems that are unavoidable in cross-cultural studies of this kind. I am continually aware that employing phraseology such as “the East” and “the West” is highly problematic, particularly when these terms are used to establish comparisons of cultural, social or political differences. Edward Said pointed out in the introduction to his highly influential book Orientalism, that both the Orient and the Occident are geographical, historical and cultural entities that are man-made and which support and reflect the other.<sup>12</sup> More often than not, the use of such terms sets up an oppositional discourse that reduces the complexities surrounding the uneven balance of power between Asian and non-Asian cultures. When the term “Western” is used descriptively or when references are made to “the West” within this thesis, I am alluding to modern European societies and cultures that have emerged from the intellectual and philosophical traditions of the Enlightenment period.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, I use the term to refer to the non-indigenous cultures that have developed in North America, Australia, New Zealand and other countries which are based upon these same intellectual and philosophical traditions.

Through the course of researching and writing this study, I have remained conscious that my perspective is shaped by experiences very different from those of my subject. My arguments and the conclusions I have reached may be open to criticism owing to the fact that I am neither Chinese nor Chinese-Canadian. My substantial research into the politics of difference within the Chinese-Canadian cultural community have made me aware of the unequal relationships of power that exist between mainstream and minority cultures in any society. I take my lead from scholars who, like myself, come from racial

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Said, Orientalism, (New York: Random House, 1979), 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Here I am following the example of Lydia H Liu. See Lydia H. Liu, “Translingual Practice: The Discourse of Individualism between China and the West,” Wimal Dissanayake, ed. Narratives of Agency: Self-Making in China, India and Japan, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 2.

and cultural backgrounds that differ from those they claim to represent. Gillian Bottomley, an anglophone sociologist who has studied aspects of migration in Australia, suggests that *both* dominance and understanding take many forms and that they must *both* be subject to investigation and critique.<sup>14</sup> Finally, as a person raised on the west coast of Canada who possesses an interest in contemporary visual culture, and Chinese visual culture in particular, I find myself directly involved in the kinds of transnational and transcultural networks that artists like Gu Xiong create. I know from my own research that Chinese and Asian-Canadian critics, artists, and scholars are presenting their perspectives on the very same issues that I address and hope that this study will be received as one more perspective on Chinese cultural identities as they are formulated in global and local contexts.

The movement of people from one culture and place of origin to another brings about many stories, experiences, and cross-cultural engagements. This study brings to light some of the complexities of writing histories in which various cultural traditions and historical moments intersect. How will contemporary art be served by art history? How will art historians respond to the internationalization of contemporary art practices? Through this study of Gu Xiong's life and his work, I have endeavoured to show that art history, as a means of studying of culture(s), must be transnational as well as historical.

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<sup>14</sup> Gillian Bottomley, *From Another Place*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.

## CHAPTER 1

### **A Point of Departure: Gu Xiong's Formative Experiences in the People's Republic**

Over the course of the twentieth century, China underwent enormous political changes that transformed the foundations of Chinese culture and society. As a result, generations of artists were guided by ideals and values that differed significantly from those of their predecessors and the generations that followed. Moreover, the institutions and social systems that provided the framework for artistic production were being continually transformed to respond to changing social and political conditions. Artists of Gu Xiong's generation — the first generation born after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) — occupy a unique position in the history of modern Chinese art. They were raised in a society that was being reconstructed to meet the aims of Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party and came into adulthood during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution. Gu Xiong and the majority of his contemporaries began their formal artistic training shortly after the Cultural Revolution came to an end, as the People's Republic emerged from relative isolation and opened its doors to the world. A more liberal cultural atmosphere and an influx of foreign literature and culture in the late seventies and eighties were stimuli for the birth and fast-paced development of Chinese avant-garde art.<sup>1</sup>

### **Gu Xiong's Early Experiences in the People's Republic of China**

Gu Xiong was born in 1953, in Chongqing, Sichuan Province. The Chinese Communist Party defeated the Nationalist (*Guomindang*) Party in the war for the liberation

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the term “avant-garde” to describe the development of unofficial or experimental art has been a subject of debate among scholars of contemporary Chinese art. I outline the arguments for and against its use and explain my own use of the term “avant-garde” below, on pages 34-35 of this chapter.

of China, and the People's Republic of China was established by its new leader, Mao Zedong, in 1949.<sup>2</sup> The early fifties was an optimistic time for the newly-formed government and the people. The Party set about restoring order, establishing an effective national government, and implementing policies for economic, cultural, and social reform. The year of Gu Xiong's birth coincided with the launching of the first of the Party's five-year plans. To implement these massive programs for economic reform and to relieve the dire financial predicament the Republic faced after years of war, the CCP adopted the Soviet model to restructure the industrial and agricultural sectors.<sup>3</sup> The first five-year plan met with initial success and by the middle of the 1950s there was a substantial increase in the standard of living in rural and urban areas of the country.<sup>4</sup>

Not all members of society fared well in the newly-formed Republic. China's intellectuals and artists found themselves in a precarious position under the leadership of the Party. They had acquired their skills and knowledge through the Confucian system of education that the CCP denounced as bourgeois and feudal. The intellectuals struggled to identify a role for themselves in the new political and social structure of the country and lost confidence that their concerns would be heard. The leaders of the CCP recognized the position of influence that intellectuals maintained in Chinese society and sought ways to utilize the knowledge they possessed to the benefit of the revolutionary cause.<sup>5</sup> In an attempt to gain the support of China's educated elite, in May of 1956 Mao Zedong launched what was intended to be a period of relaxation of the strict ideological controls of the Party. In a speech at the Supreme State Conference, Mao ushered in this new era of

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter I will also refer to Chinese Communist Party as the CCP or the Party.

<sup>3</sup> The Soviet model for industrialization emphasized a high rate of growth with a focus on development of heavy industry and transformations in the agricultural sector. Jonathan Spence, The Search for Modern China, second edition, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 517.

<sup>4</sup> Spence, 520, 523.

tolerance with the famous statement “Let a hundred flowers bloom, and a hundred schools of thought contend.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the repressive line the Party had taken towards China’s intellectuals, Mao promoted a new era of freedom of thought and expression.<sup>7</sup>

After several months of being encouraged to speak out, intellectuals did begin to voice their concerns about the state of Chinese society in forums, at rallies, and in the media.<sup>8</sup> During a five-week period in May and June of 1957, protests against the Communist Party erupted in cities across the country. When the criticisms levelled against the Party turned decidedly anti-Communist, the government launched a rectification campaign to single out the “poisonous weeds” of the One Hundred Flowers campaign. The Party called upon the masses to expose the counterrevolutionaries in their midst.<sup>9</sup> Those who criticized the Party were accused of deviating from Socialist thinking and were labelled “Rightists.” Over 300,000 people were persecuted in the Anti-rightist campaign of 1957.<sup>10</sup>

Gu Xiong’s father, Yang Kaixun, was among those individuals who raised concerns about the activities and aims of the Communist Party during the One Hundred Flowers campaign. Yang had been a highschool teacher in Chongqing before he was labelled a “Rightist” for the criticisms he voiced against the government. He was beaten and forced to renounce his ideas. Yang was then sent-down for labour reform in the countryside, where he worked for several years on railroad construction crews before he was reassigned to work in a coal factory. He was allowed to return home once after six

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<sup>5</sup> Spence, 537.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund O. Clubb, *Twentieth Century China*, third edition (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1978), 349.

<sup>7</sup> Naranarayan Das, *China’s Hundred Weeds: A Study of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in China (1957-58)*, (Calcutta: K P Bagchi and Company, 1979), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Spence, 541.

<sup>9</sup> Das, 82.

years of being separated from his family. Yang remained separated from his family for thirty years before he was finally permitted to return home permanently in the late 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

The disruption of normal family life was an unfortunate outcome of many of the more radical policies put into effect by the Communist Party. Gu Xiong's mother, Gu Yongxian, was forced to divorce Yang Kaixun. In her husband's absence, Gu Yongxian raised Gu Xiong, his older sister, and his younger brother.<sup>12</sup> To be on the outside of the revolutionary community put an individual or family at risk of ostracism, and Yang Kaixun's label as a "Rightist" was detrimental to his family's position in society. Gu Yongxian changed the family name to her maiden name in the hopes that it would improve her children's social standing and future prospects, but when this did not work she remarried Yang. Gu Xiong described the stigmatization his family endured as he grew up:

They talk[ed] about "red family" which is growing up in the working class and "black family" like myself, which is my father had political problems with the government in the 1950s, so those people, they called us "black family," and "black children." At that time we lose our rights in society. We are [were] the under average. So during the Cultural Revolution, especially those people who are from "black families," the society cannot let them join the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

The individual whose beliefs or actions were deemed to be out of line with the interests of the Party was given a bad class label. A class label was assigned to the patriarch of the family and determined the social status of the whole family.<sup>14</sup> These labels were formally recorded in registration books and files that could be investigated and assessed by Party

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<sup>10</sup> Spence, 543.

<sup>11</sup> Gu Xiong, *The Yellow Pear*, 50.

<sup>12</sup> Gu Xiong, *The Yellow Pear*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, September 1999, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Lynn T. White III, *Policies of Chaos: The Organizational Causes of Violence in China's Cultural Revolution*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 89.

officials.<sup>15</sup> The class label of an individual or family determined the official allocation of jobs, services, housing and placements in schools.<sup>16</sup> Yang's persecution affected how his family was viewed and treated in society. During the Cultural Revolution, Gu Xiong and his siblings were sent out into the countryside to be re-educated in Socialist principles. Over the course of the four years Gu Xiong spent labouring on rice farms in rural Sichuan Province, he was overlooked for reassignment to factory jobs in the city four or five times because of his family's class label.<sup>17</sup> Tragically, Yang's persecution and the hardships the family endured as a result were common experiences. The CCP implemented numerous policies intended to indoctrinate and socialize a new generation in revolutionary values. These policies ruined many lives.

The transformation of Chinese society depended upon the Communist Party's ability to change individuals' consciousness. To this end, the Party used all means to transmit and promote Socialist principles. The policies that determined the development of all forms of literary, visual and performing arts in the first three decades of the PRC had been formulated during the Yan'an Period (1937-47).<sup>18</sup> The vision for Chinese art and culture introduced at Yan'an had a profound influence on the development of art and literature in subsequent decades.

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<sup>15</sup> White, 12.

<sup>16</sup> White, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 2. "At that time, after a year or so [of being in the countryside], they needed people from the countryside to return to the city, but they also looked at your family background. So, with my family background there was no chance for me to go. When those people from the city see me they want me but when they see the document of my father they can't take me. So, there was four or five times that I was hopeful and then became hopeless."

<sup>18</sup> David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 15. Yan'an is located in Shaanxi Province in the Northern interior region of the PRC. Yan'an was a main base and centre of activities for the Communist Party. The CCP encouraged intellectuals, workers and artists from around China to come to live in Yan'an and participate in revolutionary activities. Yan'an became a centre of cultural and intellectual debate. Schools were established to educate youth and provide intellectuals with a place where they could come together to formulate the Marxist principles upon which the Republic's ideological foundation would be built.

## **The Foundations for Artistic Production in the People's Republic**

The definitive statements on the literary and artistic policies of the Chinese Communist Party were presented in Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" in May, 1942.<sup>19</sup> In two separate speeches, Mao defined a position for the production of literature and art within the Party's revolutionary work. Art and literature were to be instruments to inspire and educate the masses. Mao referred repeatedly to artists and writers as "workers in literature and art" and asserted that their primary responsibility was to gain intimate knowledge of the correct audience for their work.<sup>20</sup> Mao declared that art and literature were to be "for the masses," a phrase which Bonnie S. McDougall interprets as combining the two concepts of art being in the interests of the masses and taking the masses as the intended audience.<sup>21</sup>

The task of the revolutionary cultural worker was to take the means of the production and distribution of art and culture out of the domain of the ruling class and to put them into the hands of the proletariat. Skilled and educated artists were supposed to raise the standards of art by integrating the raw materials of revolutionary theory and everyday existence with the processes of artistic production. Mao promoted the development of popular artistic forms, such as wall newspapers, wall paintings, popular speech, folk tales, and folk songs to encourage peasants, workers, and soldiers to become producers of art. Being an artist or cultural worker involved the study of revolutionary theory, the study of the everyday existence of the masses and the refinement of the

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<sup>19</sup> Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3. Mao gave an introductory address on the correct development of revolutionary literature and art on May 2, 1942 and made his concluding remarks on the subject three weeks later on May 23, 1942.

<sup>20</sup> Mao Zedong "Introduction," in Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1980), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Bonnie S. McDougall, 16.

technical means of artistic creation.<sup>22</sup> Quoting Lenin, Mao stated that literature and art were “a screw in the whole machine.”<sup>23</sup>

Mao’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” became the basis for the development of cultural policies in the People’s Republic of China and continued to circulate in subsequent decades. New editions of the speeches at Yan’an were published in 1943 and 1953. The talks were republished in 1972, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Mao’s speeches at Yan’an.<sup>24</sup>

After the CCP took control of cultural and artistic affairs in 1949, cultural policies oscillated between strict and relaxed control according to the political and social climate at the given time.<sup>25</sup> The forms and styles of art promoted by the two governing systems followed Mao’s edict by educating and entertaining the masses. Rustic New Year’s prints (*Nianhua*) were an ideal form. The bright colours and simple aesthetic of *Nianhua* made it an excellent artistic vehicle for Communist propaganda.<sup>26</sup> When the Communist Party began to restructure its administrative system based upon the Soviet system, the style of Socialist Realist oil painting became a model for Chinese painters. Socialist Realism was another form of art that fulfilled Mao’s prescription of both entertaining and edifying the masses.<sup>27</sup> Between the 1950s and the 1970s, Socialist Realism and folk art were the forms that were promoted by the State. *Guohua*, the venerated tradition of Chinese ink painting on paper or silk, was accorded a relatively unstable position alongside Socialist Realism and folk art. Attempts were made to reform *guohua* painters to bring their work in line

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<sup>22</sup> Mao Zedong in Bonnie S. McDougall, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Mao Zedong in Bonnie S. McDougall, 75.

<sup>24</sup> Bonnie S. McDougall, 105-112.

<sup>25</sup> Wu Hung, “Major Traditions in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Century*, (Chicago: The Smart Gallery, 1999), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), xiii.

with Party interests.<sup>28</sup> At times when more radical policies towards the arts were being enacted, *guohua* was deemed to be a symbol of China's bourgeois past. However, for brief periods in the mid-1950s and the early 1960s, the government took a more moderate approach towards its cultural policies and promoted *guohua* as a way of preserving and celebrating the nation's cultural heritage.<sup>29</sup>

1949 to 1966 was a period of great uncertainty for artists, who were forced to subordinate their own artistic interests to the shifting policies of the state. By the middle of the sixties, Mao Zedong and his allies in the CCP were convinced that, despite the efforts that had been made to promote Marxist principles, Chinese culture was permeated with anti-Communist sentiment. They mounted a rectification campaign to purge the political and cultural sphere of the reactionary and bourgeois elements, calling for an attack on the "four old" elements of society - old habits, old customs, old culture, and old thinking.<sup>30</sup> As the name implies, the Cultural Revolution began as a series of reforms in the cultural sphere; however, the CCP's increasingly radical policies influenced all aspects of Chinese society.

During the Cultural Revolution the Party took unprecedented control of the literary, visual, and performing arts. Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing and her associates Yao Wenyuan, Wang Hongwen, and Zhang Chunqiao, known collectively as the Gang of Four, took charge of the Ministry of Culture. They launched a series of reforms and campaigns with strictly defined policies that had a profound effect on the production and exhibition of

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<sup>28</sup> Ellen Johnston Laing, 83.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Chang, *Painting in the People's Republic of China: The Politics of Style*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1980), 38.

<sup>30</sup> Spence, 575.

art, as well as the lives of artists.<sup>31</sup> In accordance with Jiang Qing's views, all forms of art and literature were required to express an explicit political message. Jiang Qing revived the Party objectives for the development of arts and literature that had been outlined in Mao's talks at Yan'an.

Under Jiang Qing, glorifying the revolutionary spirit became the primary function of artistic production. She initiated a series of reforms of Beijing opera that resulted in the creation of new operas based upon the stories of proletarian heroes and heroines and the history of the Communist Party.<sup>32</sup> The model operas served as ideal examples for revolutionary art: they preserved and promoted aspects of Communist history, conveyed the correct ideological message, and inspired loyalty to the Party and the nation. Encouraged to follow the example of the model operas, visual artists produced oil paintings that transmitted the heroic ideals of Socialism. Artists also played an important role in the development of the personality cult around Mao Zedong. Mao's chief supporters in the Communist Party set a sophisticated propaganda campaign in motion to stir up frenzied loyalty and reverence for Chairman Mao.<sup>33</sup>

In the early 1970s, Jiang Qing began to promote the work of amateur artists. The exhibition and promotion of peasant and worker paintings led to an unprecedented rise in the amount and quality of the amateur art.<sup>34</sup> Professional artists fulfilled their prescribed role of serving the people and raising the standards of revolutionary art by training amateur

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<sup>31</sup> Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1998), 143. See Ellen Johnston Laing, "Art Under Jiang Qing, 1970-1976," in *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*, 81-89.

<sup>32</sup> Galikowski, 165.

<sup>33</sup> Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, (Honolulu: School of Hawaiian, Asian, and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii, 1996), 277. Military Commission Head Lin Biao took control of the Red Army's cultural affairs at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Lin Biao engineered the cult of personality that developed around Mao in the late sixties before his fall from grace and suspicious death in 1971.

<sup>34</sup> Arnold Chang, 43.

artists in composition and the technical aspects of painting.<sup>35</sup> Professional artists produced copybooks demonstrating the drawing techniques and compositions that amateur painters used as the basis of their own work.<sup>36</sup> *Guohua* painting, on the other hand, did not readily meet Jiang Qing's artistic criteria. Although attempts were made to bring the painting tradition in line with Jiang Qing's ideals, *guohua* painters fell into disfavour.

Jiang Qing and the Group of Four dismantled the academic system and disbanded the artists' associations and other art groups. Artists and culture workers were sent out into the countryside to labour alongside the peasants. Formal art education almost came to a halt for a decade.<sup>37</sup> Artists, cultural workers, and faculty members from prominent art schools were sent into the countryside for ideological re-education through labour in the fields of rural China.<sup>38</sup> The natural development of the visual arts was inhibited by the Ministry of Culture's demands that art be aligned with prescribed themes, forms, and styles. While the clear political message and the bright and heroic characteristics of Cultural Revolution art made it accessible to the masses, it stultified the atmosphere for creativity and all but removed the possibility of stylistic innovation for a decade.

### **Gu Xiong's Early Artistic Pursuits**

When Gu Xiong finished high school at the age of eighteen in 1972, he was sent away to a small village called Qingping in the mountains of Sichuan Province. As early as the 1950s, the CCP sent youths from urban centres to the countryside as part of a transfer program called *Shangshan xia xiang*, "up to the mountains and down to the villages."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ellen Johnston Laing, 84.

<sup>36</sup> Ellen Johnston Laing, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Joan Lebold Cohen, "Learning to Paint in China," *Art News*, Vol. 79, (Summer 1980), 72.

<sup>38</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, 343.

<sup>39</sup> The major historical documents that address the transfer programs of urban youth to rural areas of China have been compiled and a summary of the history of these programs is given in Peter J. Seybolt, ed., *The Rustification of Urban Youth in China: A Social Experiment*, (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1977) and

During the late spring and summer of 1966, a series of political protests and growing unrest within the university system caused the CCP to shut down the normal course of studies at universities across the country.<sup>40</sup> To cope with the impending unemployment crisis in the urban centres, the Party implemented relocation programs on a massive scale. Students emerging from high schools were moved out to the country and settled on state farms and communes.<sup>41</sup> The Rustification Programs constituted a new approach to education and indoctrination. The purpose of the programs was to re-educate youth in the theory and practical application of revolutionary thought in rural China. The programs were intended to instill in young people a deeper understanding of socialist principles through the combination of agricultural labour and study of Mao's writings. Sending the youth out of China's cities into the countryside also served the purposes of quelling the possibility of student uprisings and increasing the rate of rural development.<sup>42</sup>

The transition from urban to rural life was difficult for the young people who were sent down. The physical labour was demanding, and the living conditions were extreme. There was little spare time and few opportunities for young people to expend their creative energies. Nonetheless, at this time in his life Gu Xiong took up drawing as a serious pursuit. In retrospect, Gu Xiong has said that he found it enormously difficult to remain optimistic during his time in the country and that art took on a great deal of personal significance as a means of coping with his feelings of disillusionment:

At that time, I was eighteen years old and I started to understand the society and people because the countryside was real. In school we had all those propaganda sayings, we were too idealistic for the revolution, but in the countryside everything is real. You have to deal with the environment, the

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Thomas P. Bernstein, Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Spence, 573.

<sup>41</sup> Peter J. Seybolt, ed., xiii.

<sup>42</sup> Yan and Gao, 281.

people, but most importantly, you have to deal with yourself... I really suffered at that time, I remember. The only thing that could hold me was art. I started to record my everyday thoughts, my feelings.<sup>43</sup>

Gu Xiong spent his spare time drawing, and over the course of four years he filled twenty-five notebooks with images of the daily activities of party cadres and peasants that he sketched from life and memory. These drawings formed a visual record of his life in the countryside. In one self-portrait from the notebook, Gu Xiong depicted himself sitting on a rock at the top of a hill in the foreground of the drawing (fig.1). A mountainous landscape stretches into the distance in the background. He holds a branch from a pine tree in his right hand and gazes out over the landscape in a contemplative manner. On the ground next to him is an open box containing paint brushes and a canteen. A second male figure is drawn in profile behind the figure of Gu Xiong. The pose, the clothing, and the shape of the figure seem to suggest that this figure, poised to take a determined step into the landscape, represents Mao Zedong. The juxtaposition of the young artist caught in a moment of introspection and the iconic figure of Mao seems intended to be a visual representation of Gu Xiong's struggles to understand his position in relation to the Communist principles that governed his life.

The contributions made by worker and peasant artists were considered an integral component of Socialist reconstruction during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>44</sup> Amateur artists were lauded for their outstanding efforts to promote Socialist principles among the masses. Arnold Chang, author of Painting in the People's Republic of China: The Politics of Style, noted "Paintings by spare-time worker, soldier, and peasant artists once again received the most lavish praise and the greatest exposure in exhibitions and publications."<sup>45</sup> The CCP

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Maria Galikowski, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Arnold Chang, 46.

wanted their work to represent the cultural and artistic endeavours of the nation, so they exhibited paintings by amateurs internationally. The widespread attention amateur art received during the Cultural Revolution sustained Gu Xiong's hopes that he would be able to elevate his station in life through his artistic abilities. Although it was difficult to have the label of "rightist" removed, those who were recognized as model workers could receive a reprieve.<sup>46</sup> In her book Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China,

Julia F. Andrews wrote:

For many of those who had sufficient skill to render the ubiquitous portraits of Chairman Mao, it was clear painting was less strenuous than farm labour. When the Cultural Revolution authorities announced in 1971 the forthcoming exhibition to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Yan'an Talks, some amateurs began avidly painting in their spare time. Apparently, when word was sent out that all units should gather submissions from workers, peasants and soldiers, it was stressed that works glorifying the patriotic contributions of rusticated urban youth were particularly welcome.<sup>47</sup>

Gu Xiong was familiar with the political propaganda that lauded proletarians who demonstrated their revolutionary spirit through exemplary actions:

...at that time [during the Cultural Revolution] if you can do something, like you can perform or you can play music, play basketball or painting, [exhibit] some talent, then people will say that there are five percent of those people from black families that can be re-educated. So, at that time, I tried to hold that tiny hope through my talent. That was the reason I liked to do those things, I liked drawing, I liked art.<sup>48</sup>

Gu Xiong made efforts to distinguish himself through his contributions to his community. He used his height as an advantage and played on a basketball team; he applied his artistic skills by painting banners and big character posters with socialist slogans; and he taught school in his local village for several months. His efforts brought few rewards. When

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<sup>46</sup> Lynn T. White, 166.

<sup>47</sup> Julia F. Andrews, Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 353

recruiters came from the factories in the cities to find workers they had to reject Gu Xiong on the basis of his class status. After four long years in the country, Gu Xiong asked an uncle who was a local official in Sichuan Province to intervene on his behalf. He was finally re-assigned to a garment factory in Chongqing, where he worked until 1978.

The earliest examples of Gu Xiong's artistic endeavours display some of the conventions of amateur paintings produced during the Cultural Revolution. Mao advocated that cultural workers study society and undertake research into social classes and capture the outward appearance of these classes in their work.<sup>49</sup> Gu Xiong used the objects, people, buildings, and scenic features in his immediate environment as the subjects of his studies. His notebook sketches depict robust figures rendered with a uniformity of body type and facial expression. Figures were typically engaged in leisure activities and work such as hoeing the fields (figs. 2-3). The sketches are studies in which he tackles various compositional challenges. In one sketch Gu Xiong portrays the cadre playing cards as his subject matter to produce a study of figures in a composition. He also produced studies of the natural forms of the landscape and the shapes of the buildings around him to develop his skills in the use of perspective (fig. 4). In terms of their subject matter, Gu Xiong's sketches are unique examples of artistic expression during the Cultural Revolution because he depicted real people rather than the heroes of the revolution and presented an honest expression of his experiences. In self-portraits, he depicted himself working in the fields with rain falling from the sky and beads of sweat dripping from his brow. The figures that populate the pages of his notebooks engage in real activities rather than appearing as actors

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Mao Zedong, in Bonnie S. McDougall, 62.

on a stage, as they do in most Socialist Realist art works.<sup>50</sup> This gives them a vitality rarely seen in Cultural Revolution art.

Through his practice of recording aspects of his daily life in his drawing, Gu Xiong had also begun to explore the relationships between artistic expression and personal experience that would form a conceptual basis for his future artwork. In the final years of the Cultural Revolution, the climate for artistic production did not readily permit artists to express their own feelings, thoughts, and emotions in their work. In a few short years, however, dramatic changes in the political life of the country would transform the development of Chinese art and open up greater possibilities for self-expression.

### **Gu Xiong's Art Education in the Post-Cultural Revolution Era**

Mao Zedong's death in 1976 brought the Cultural Revolution to an end and marked the beginning of new stage in the modern history of China. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the CCP implemented new programs for economic reform that involved increased economic exchange with Western nations and the development of a market economy.<sup>51</sup> The Party attempted to distance itself from the rhetoric and practices of the Cultural Revolution. The government was forced to acknowledge the suffering that intellectuals had endured and to allow the public to express its anger at the policies that brought suffering and turmoil. To direct public outrage away from itself, the Party singled out its most radical elements, the members of the Gang of Four, who were brought to trial for their role in persecuting hundreds of thousands of people during the Cultural Revolution.

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<sup>50</sup> Gu Xiong visited China in the summer 2001 and brought back twenty of his journals. In March 2002, Gu Xiong gave a slide presentation at the conference "Cultural Production and the Cultural Revolution" at Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver. Many prominent scholars found Gu Xiong's sketches quite remarkable in their expressiveness. As one scholar suggested, the sketches showed a humanity that is largely absent from most art from the period of the Cultural Revolution.

The post-Mao leadership took a pragmatic approach towards the arts and culture. As long as writers, intellectuals, and artists didn't challenge the Party's authority, they were permitted greater freedoms.<sup>52</sup> Artists remained relatively conservative for the first few years after Mao's death. They hesitated to venture outside the Socialist Realist style, perhaps doubting that the Party's new liberal approach towards the arts was in earnest. In the late 1970s, some older artists who had been blacklisted for working in the traditional style of ink brush painting began to re-establish their popularity.<sup>53</sup> Other painters who had been around when Western modernism was introduced into China in the 1920s and 30s cautiously resumed their experimentations with Western styles.<sup>54</sup>

Reacting against the extreme controls placed upon the visual arts during the Cultural Revolution, younger artists began to demand the freedom to choose the style and subject matter of their work. They organized informal art groups to exchange ideas and exhibit their work. The ideas and intentions that united each individual group varied, but they shared the common goal of freedom of artistic expression. What was significant about these art groups was that they represented an alternative to the official organizing structures that had governed art since 1949.<sup>55</sup> Their attempts to circumvent the organizational control of the authorities were tolerated as a demonstration of goodwill by

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<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Spence, 590.

<sup>52</sup> Maria Galikowski, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Arnold Chang, 47.

<sup>54</sup> Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," xv. Li Xianting noted that artists like Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), Pang Xunqin (1906-1985), and Liu Haisu (1896-) had studied in France in the 1920s and were key figures in the introduction of Western formalism into China in the 1930s and early 1940s. Li Xianting maintains that these artists pursued their formalist experimentation covertly from the 1940s until after the Cultural Revolution. The increasingly tolerant attitude towards art in the late 1970s allowed them to resume working with Western modernist styles in a more public manner, albeit with caution.

<sup>55</sup> "The most high-profile groups included Beijing's Oil Painting Research Association, the Sturdy Grass Woodcut Research Association, and the Stars, Shandong's Oil and Mural Painting Research Association, Kunming's Monkey Year Society and Chongqing's Grass Grass Painting Association." Maria Galikowski, 181, 183. Galikowski's source of this information was Zhang Shaoxia and Li Xiaoshan, *Zhongguo xiandai huihuashi*, pp. 322-323

the new government. However, artists and groups still required approval from the Ministry of Culture, the heads of the art institutions, or the Artists' Association to exhibit their work publicly; so the majority of the art exhibited in public was officially sanctioned art.<sup>56</sup>

In 1977, the art academies were reconstituted, and the following year the college entrance examination system was reinstated.<sup>57</sup> Amateur artists like Gu Xiong, who had spent the years of the Cultural Revolution pursuing their interest in art in their spare time and developing the skills on their own, flocked to the academies for formal training. Admission to the art academies was highly competitive; often only one out of every hundred candidates was accepted.<sup>58</sup> In 1978, Gu Xiong submitted a portfolio of his drawings and paintings to the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, a well-known and highly-regarded art academy in the city of Chongqing, Sichuan Province. He was accepted and enrolled in the first class to resume studies after the Academy's closure during the Cultural Revolution. The Sichuan Academy had separate departments for painting and printmaking. To deal with the overwhelming number of applicants, the school decided each student's program for them. Successful applicants were placed in either the painting or the printmaking department. Gu Xiong was directed into the printmaking department, where he spent four years studying as an undergraduate student and another two years as a graduate student before completing his master's degree in 1985. The first two years of his education consisted of a foundation program in which students learned basic techniques in various media and traditions of art. Gu Xiong was trained in the traditions of Chinese art, including ink painting and elements of folk art and Socialist Realism based upon the Soviet model. He also learned about various European styles and forms, such as

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<sup>56</sup> Maria Galikowski, 183.

<sup>57</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, 387.

<sup>58</sup> Joan Lebold Cohen, "Learning to Paint in China," 72.

Impressionism, Cubism, and Expressionism.<sup>59</sup> The first year of study was relatively standardized for all art students, consisting of basic courses like drawing and composition. Joan Lebold Cohen, an art historian who visited the Zhejiang Art Academy in 1980, noted that the emphasis in Chinese art education was on the mastery of media rather than exploration and innovation. She noted that the art academies incorporated the foundations of both traditional Chinese art and European art into their curricula by having students copy Chinese and Western masterworks to develop their skills.<sup>60</sup>

Gu Xiong's student work demonstrates the variety of forms and styles with which he experimented. An early woodblock print titled *Wind* is modelled after Vincent van Gogh (fig. 5). He depicts his rural subject matter of sheep being put out to pasture in a colourful palette, using a distinct style that emulates the brushwork of the post-impressionist master. Other examples of Gu Xiong's student work are consistent with Chinese traditions of printmaking and painting. A charming woodblock print of a little girl picking up leaves is a student work entitled *Autumn* (fig. 6). The print has a simplified aesthetic and composition one associates with Chinese peasant paintings. Another of his student works, a woodblock print of farmers harvesting and grinding grain titled *Harvest*, is obviously influenced by traditions of revolutionary woodblock prints that artists like Jiang Feng produced in the 1930s and 1940s (fig. 7).<sup>61</sup> The subject of this woodblock, however, is likely based on his own experiences during the Cultural Revolution. This image of peasants working in the fields links their activities to the actions of the natural world. Gu Xiong depicted the sun, the moon, and the rain falling from above the farmers. He used his chosen medium to produce an entirely different aesthetic effect in his

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Joan Lebold Cohen, 72. During her visit to the Zhejiang Academy in 1980, Cohen saw students producing copies of Classical and Renaissance sculptures.

woodblock of factory workers entitled *Sewing* (fig. 8). The bright colours and geometric pattern give the print a very modern look. We can assume that he drew the subject matter from his experience of working in a garment factory. Interestingly, Gu Xiong chose to pair the modern style with highly conservative subject matter by focusing his observations on the efforts of the proletariat.

One of the first major trends of post-Cultural Revolution art, so-called “Scar Art”, developed at the Sichuan Academy. Many of the students who entered the art academies had experienced the poverty and harsh conditions of rural China. They were disillusioned with the Socialist principles that had dictated the ways that Chinese society and culture were represented in art. The heroic ideals portrayed in Socialist Realism presented a vision of the people that was at odds with their experiences of life in the People’s Republic, and they sought ways to express their feelings of sorrow and anger. Gu Xiong describes their sentiments:

That was our time in 1978, when we got into the universities. Suddenly, the whole country started to criticize the Cultural Revolution. As an art student in art school, at that time ninety percent of the students came from the countryside, from factories, from the society, not from school to school. So everyone had their experiences during that period and our generation was very special. We wanted to create artworks to reflect our experience of society and the suffering, whatever we had been through.<sup>62</sup>

The art they produced was called “Scar Art”, and its main proponents were students who studied at the Sichuan Academy in the late 1970s, including Gao Xiaohua and Cheng Conglin, who produced a well-known example of Scar Art entitled *1968 x Month x Day Snow* (1979).<sup>63</sup> The name “Scar Art” (*Shanghen*), was derived from a genre of literature

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<sup>61</sup> Julia F. Andrews, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong. August, 1998, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Julia F. Andrews, 393.

known as “Scar Literature” that emerged in 1977.<sup>64</sup> Writers of “Scar Literature” developed fictional accounts of the travails individuals had endured in the Cultural Revolution. The short stories described a range of social problems and tragedies inflicted upon young people, in particular. “Scar Literature” developed as a cathartic expression of the anger, disillusionment, and sense of injustice young people were experiencing in the years immediately following the end of the Cultural Revolution. “Scar Art” expressed similar sentiments in a visual form. Young art students used the techniques of realist oil painting they were learning in the academic system to produce work that countered the idealized vision of society presented in Socialist Realist paintings. They portrayed the downtrodden, the poor peasants, and the victims of the Cultural Revolution to present what they felt was a truthful image of society.

A second mode of realist painting called Native Soil painting, also known as “Rustic Realism” (*Xiangtu xieshi*) and “Stream of Life” painting (*Shenghuoliu*), was closely related to Scar Art but developed slightly later.<sup>65</sup> Like Scar artists, Native Soil artists employed realist techniques, often portraying ethnic minorities. Native Soil paintings differed from Scar Art in that they tended to present a more idealized and nostalgic image of peasants in their native settings. The most famous example of Native Soil painting is a monumental portrait of an old Sichuan peasant painted in the photo-

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<sup>64</sup> Hans van Dijk (with Andreas Schmid), “The Fine Arts after the Cultural Revolution: Stylistic Development and Cultural Debate.” In Jochen Noth et al eds., *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>65</sup> I have taken the term “Rustic Realism” from Gao Minglu’s essay “From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-garde in Mainland China,” Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 150. Li Xianting uses the term “Native Soil” to describe the same movement in his essay “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” *China’s New Art, Post 1989*, (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), x. The same tendency is termed “Stream of Life” painting in Maria Galikowski’s book, *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1984*, 199.

realist style of American artist Chuck Close. The piece, entitled *Father* (1978), was painted by Luo Zhongli, who studied and then later taught at the Sichuan Academy.<sup>66</sup>

Julia F. Andrews wrote that the most important conceptual change to occur in the years following the Cultural Revolution was that “the artist was now viewed as an individual rather than a cog in the bureaucratic machine.”<sup>67</sup> To counteract the ideological conformity of Communist art policies, artists made calls for greater freedom of artistic expression. They attempted to negotiate a new relationship between the artist and the state by speaking out against the controls the government placed upon the form and content of modern Chinese art. As a result of Deng Xiaopeng’s “open door” policy, foreign literature and art began to circulate. Artists were exposed to a range of Western philosophical ideas, aesthetic theories, and artistic styles, and they began integrating these new influences into their work. They became aware of the differences in the role of the artist in Chinese and Western societies. One of the hallmarks of Western Modernism is the romanticized notion of the avant-garde artist as an individual who stands at a distance from society and, through her/his unique creativity, produces art that reveals the true nature of society, or benefits it in some way.<sup>68</sup>

It was artists working outside the academic system who took these new ideas to heart and defined a position for unofficial art. The members of Stars Group (*Xingxing*) were mostly self-taught artists who explored styles and forms derived from western modernism. The Stars Group took a deliberately oppositional stance to the authorities and the academic system. Their work was often openly critical of contemporary social and

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<sup>66</sup> Maria Galikowski, 202.

<sup>67</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic*, 384.

<sup>68</sup> Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 110-111.

political conditions in China.<sup>69</sup> They defied the art establishment and the government with their calls for “artistic democracy” and became famous for their unofficial public exhibitions.<sup>70</sup> The Stars were highly influential and are considered to have set the development of Chinese avant-garde art into motion.

For over thirty years, Chinese artists had served the politics of the state. In order for Chinese art to thrive and serve society, artists felt that they had to be able to work on their own terms and determine their own subject matter and styles. The desire for self-expression was apparent in many tendencies in post-Cultural Revolution art, such as formalist experimentation and the trends of “new realism,” like Scar Art and Native Soil painting. Communicating one’s own experiences and emotions became a primary impetus for producing art.<sup>71</sup> I draw attention to this aspect of early avant-garde art because of its significance in Gu Xiong’s approach to his art. The ideas and values that transformed Chinese art in the early 1980s had a profound influence on Gu Xiong. Beginning with his avant-garde installations of the late 1980s, every work he has produced has reaffirmed his commitment to self-expression. His concerns about the social function of art and the role of the artist in society are also deeply rooted in the early development of Chinese avant-garde art.

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<sup>69</sup> The famous example is a wooden sculpture entitled *Idol* by Wang Keping. The artist combined the image of Mao with that of a Buddha-figure in an obviously contemptuous manner.

<sup>70</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience*, 18.

<sup>71</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic*, 394.

## The New Art Tide Movement (*Xin Meishu Chao*)<sup>72</sup>

By the mid-1980s, stylistic pluralism was the prevailing tendency in unofficial Chinese art. Styles and theories that had long been relegated to the annals of Western art history became models for Chinese artists and were regarded as “contemporary.”<sup>73</sup> The government launched the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign in 1983 to curb the growing influence of Western culture, targeting theories and works of art that reflected the “bourgeois ideas of freedom, humanism and individualism”.<sup>74</sup> The campaign was short and largely ineffective compared to political campaigns of the past, and, when it ended in 1985, a series of liberal reforms was initiated.<sup>75</sup> This period of liberalization and the wave of cultural activity that ensued was given the name “New Art Tide” movement. The “New Art Tide” movement encompassed philosophical, intellectual, and political aims and activities as well as aesthetic development in the visual arts. Gao Minglu, a leading art critic and historian of contemporary Chinese art, has suggested that progressive artists in the 1980s saw themselves as contributing to a program of cultural enlightenment; they attempted to define an oppositional position within Chinese society from which they could challenge official culture and fight for social reform.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Various related terms are used to describe the new unofficial art being produced in the mid -1980s. Initially it was referred to as the “‘85 Movement,” a term to which art critic Gao Minglu has adhered. However, this term was prohibited by the authorities because of its political undertones. The movement came to be referred to by the phrase “*Xin Meishu Chao*.” Julia F. Andrews, *Framged Memory: The Chinese Avant-garde in Exile*, (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1993), 6. The most accurate translation for the phrase *Xin Meishu Chao* is “New Art Tide,” Ralph Croizier, “The Avant-garde and the Democracy Movement: Reflections on Late Communism in the USSR and China,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3, (1999), 501. Michael Sullivan uses “New Wave” in his book *Art and Artists in Twentieth Century China*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 255. Li Xianting and Wu Hung have used the term “‘85 New Wave Art.” Li Xianting, “Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art,” x., Wu Hung, *Transience*, 20. Following Dr. Croizier, I have chosen to use “New Art Tide”, for as he pointed out, this translation is closest to the Chinese meaning.

<sup>73</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience*, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Maria Galikowski, 235.

<sup>75</sup> Gao Minglu, “Chronology,” 198.

<sup>76</sup> Gao Minglu, “Towards a Transnational Modernity: An Overview of Inside Out: New Chinese Art,” 20.

The social and political orientation of unofficial Chinese art has led both Western and Chinese scholars to use the term “avant-garde” (*xianfeng*) to describe its development from the Stars group onwards.<sup>77</sup> There is some disagreement, however, regarding whether the term is appropriate because of its particular association to the history of Western modern art. The term avant-garde first became associated with modern art movements of the 19th century, when it was adopted by artists and intellectuals who opposed the bourgeois principles of Western capitalist society; for this reason it becomes problematic to define an oppositional art movement within a Socialist country using this same term. A second concern that has been raised is that implicit in the use of “avant-garde” is the suggestion that Chinese avant-garde art is a pastiche of Western styles and concepts. It is important, however, to distinguish between mere imitation, as the word “pastiche” implies, and the ways in which many Chinese artists were employing the styles and concepts they derived from Western modernist tendencies. Using Western forms was a social process as well as an aesthetic process; Chinese artists were self-consciously manipulating concepts and forms of Western modernist art to create works relevant in the social and cultural climate of the PRC.<sup>78</sup> Certainly, parallels can be drawn between the alienated and oppositional position that avant-garde artists in the West occupied in relation to mainstream society and the position that unofficial Chinese art maintained in the Socialist state.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Norman Bryson, “Post-Ideological Avant-garde,” Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 51. The term *xianfeng* is taken from Norman Bryson’s article.

<sup>78</sup> Yi Ying, “Choice and Opportunity: The Fate of Western Contemporary Art in China,” in *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), XLI.

<sup>79</sup> Ralph Crozier outlines the origins of the concept of the avant-garde and argues for how it may be applied to the relationship between art and politics in China in the 1980s and 1990s in his article, “The Avant-garde and the Democracy Movement: Reflections on Late Communism in the USSR and China,” 483-513.

To varying degrees, artists were adopting the cultural values implicit in the modes of representation they chose to explore. As Norman Bryson suggested in his article, “The Post-Ideological Avant-garde,” by adopting Western avant-gardism as a model, artists established a position from which the individual could innovate and intervene on her/his own terms: “The art of the avant-garde becomes a model of the ways in which subjects - however great the historical pressures acting upon them - may organize and lead their own lives.”<sup>80</sup> Wu Hung, a prominent historian of Chinese art, has suggested that while the work of some Chinese artists demonstrated an orientation towards society that could be defined as “avant-garde,” this concept could not be applied uniformly to all the art and artists whose work contained formal and thematic aspects that ran counter to official art. Wu Hung therefore employs the term “experimental” to describe the development of unofficial art from the late 1970s through the 1990s.<sup>81</sup> Still, I would contend the artists and works of art that are discussed in regards to this cultural movement meet the criteria “avant-garde”. The spirit of the “New Art Tide” movement was as progressive and unorthodox as avant-garde movements in the West. Those who participated in the “New Art Tide” movement were attempting to reform cultural and social life in the PRC from a position that confronted and opposed officialdom.<sup>82</sup>

The art academies were the fertile ground that produced many of the artists who became key figures in the “New Art Tide” movement. They provided the structured setting where Gu Xiong and his contemporaries gained their formal training while also exploring

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<sup>80</sup> Norman Bryson, 57-58.

<sup>81</sup> Wu Hung, “Major Trends in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 15

<sup>82</sup> Shih Shou-chien, “The Orthodox and the Avant-garde: An Historical Examination,” *China’s New Art, Post-1989*, (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), XXVII.

new artistic forms and ideas. Zheng Shengtian, a former director of the Zhejiang Academy of Art in Hangzhou, elaborates this point:

On the surface, authoritarian powers successfully forced the academies to conform to the official line and pushed them into the role of representatives of the orthodox art establishment. The teachers and administration belonged to the elite of mainstream artists who obediently followed Communist Party guidelines. However, academies offered their members special privileges, such as limited information about the West, because they were placed at the top of the pyramid of Chinese art hierarchy. Within the stiff, closed society, such privileges were unreachable luxuries for those outside the circles of official art. Young talents therefore accepted that they were able to study and work artistically only within the ivory towers of the academies. That is why so many of the radical Chinese artists of the eighties had an academic background.<sup>83</sup>

Michael Sullivan contends that it was graduating students from the two most prominent art academies in the People's Republic of China, the Central Academy of Art in Beijing and the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou, as well as those from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art, who expanded the knowledge of western modernist stylistic idioms.<sup>84</sup> Gu Xiong's early exposure to Western art occurred in the academic environment and increased as it became more acceptable. At the end of the 1970s, the library at the Sichuan Academy carried some Western art periodicals, but students were not permitted to view them. After 1980, the students gained free access to this material.<sup>85</sup> Gu Xiong learned techniques and styles of early modernism in the classroom, but information about more current developments in European and American art had to come from other sources. He learned about postmodernist tendencies in Western art by reading periodicals such as *Art in America* and through his interactions with friends and fellow students.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Zheng Shengtian, "Modern Chinese art and the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou," In Jochen Noth et al eds., *China Avant-Garde: Counter-Currents in Art and Culture*. (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), 54.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists in China in the Twentieth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 256.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August, 1998, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August, 1998, 5.

Certain Western stylistic idioms held great appeal among young artists. Surrealism, Pop Art and Dada, in particular, were favoured because they constituted a radical departure from the forms and themes promoted in official art. These styles were widely imitated.<sup>87</sup> Gu Xiong was influenced by the style and formal characteristics of Pop Art and, in particular, the silk-screen techniques and aesthetic characteristics of the work of American Pop artist Andy Warhol. This influence becomes increasingly apparent in works Gu Xiong produced after relocating to Canada.<sup>88</sup> When a major retrospective of the work of American artist Robert Rauschenberg came to the National Gallery in Beijing in 1985, Pop Art became wildly popular as a source of stylistic influence.<sup>89</sup> This exhibition was one of the few opportunities Chinese artists had had to see original work by a contemporary Western artist. They traveled from all over the country to see the show. Rauschenberg actually paid a visit to Beijing. He gave a lecture at the Central Academy and participated in discussions with Chinese artists and art students. Pop Art's roots in the popular culture of the urban cultures of Britain and America, along with its wit, popularity, gimmickry, and glamour, made it an attractive alternative to the styles and forms promoted by the state.<sup>90</sup> Art critic Li Xianting noted that, although young artists had a narrow understanding of the forms and significance of Pop Art, it inspired them to develop new ways of working "off the easel" and to experiment with non-traditional materials.<sup>91</sup>

China's new stage of modernization, which involved greater interaction with the outside world, caused a resurgence of nationalism. The Party attempted to counter the

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<sup>87</sup> Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," vii.

<sup>88</sup> Further explanation and specific examples of the influence of Pop Art in Gu Xiong's body of work will appear in chapter two of this study.

<sup>89</sup> Gao Minglu, "Chronology," 198.

<sup>90</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art Since 1900: Issues and Concepts*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 129.

<sup>91</sup> Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," xxi.

influence of global capitalism on Chinese culture by promoting nationalism and traditional cultural values. Artists and other cultural producers had a responsibility to assert the legitimacy of Chinese culture and assure its continuity. The question of how to integrate aspects of traditional Chinese culture into contemporary art became the subject of much discussion and debate among artists and intellectuals.<sup>92</sup> There was an obvious tension between the need for innovation and the necessity of preserving traditional cultural forms. In the early 1980s, Gu Xiong devoted his attention to this endeavour.<sup>93</sup> He studied a variety of folk art traditions and, in particular, the history, styles and technical aspects of Chinese woodblock printing during the final two years of his undergraduate degree. This area of research became the focus of his graduate work at the Sichuan Academy between 1983 and 1985. Woodblock printing has a long history in Chinese visual culture and was considered a viable tradition to maintain because it connected contemporary art to visual art practices that predated the People's Republic. Woodblock printing was also an ideologically sound medium because it functioned as a popular rather than elite form of art, so it was a suitable medium for students. Examples of the woodblock prints and drawings Gu Xiong produced while he studied at the Sichuan Academy indicate his interest in compositional structure, perspective and line, and a continued interest in representing his observations of life in rural China. His print entitled *A Distant Place* from 1985 is a good example of his later student works (fig. 9).

In light of the developments in avant-garde art that were taking place in the middle of the 1980s, and given the interest Gu Xiong had in Western forms and contemporary developments in Chinese art, his work from this period seems conservative. It is obviously

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<sup>92</sup> Liu Kang, "Is There an Alternative to (Capitalist) Globalization? The Debate about Modernity in China," Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., The Cultures of Globalization, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 173.

lacking in any outward characteristics of “avant-garde” art. In conversation, Gu Xiong has said that, as a student, he positioned himself between the artists who pursued contemporary forms and ideas and those concerned with traditional forms of Chinese art. While he favoured the expressive potential of contemporary art, he felt that the preservation of traditional aspects of Chinese art was a critical endeavour for visual artists:

From 1982 to 1985, after all the excitement from the West, there was also another movement to recognize our own culture. So the question was put out by those in the arts and cultural society: ‘How do we absorb the good things from both sides?’ So, there were two groups of people: one who tried to learn from traditions, one who goes to the contemporary sense, but some were in-between. I think I was more towards the contemporary way because, for me, I like to express whatever I feel. I want to say the truth. So, in that way, from the contemporary way, I would have more freedom. But, I also paid attention to tradition because I found traditional Chinese culture is very vital for our contemporary life. So, in that way I was also doing some research there, especially during my master’s degree, I was [re]searching Chinese folk woodcut printing in its history and style.<sup>94</sup>

Gu Xiong’s conservative, even cautious, approach to his work seems to stem from the fact that he was still a student. Given the history of his father’s persecution, we might assume that Gu Xiong would think it prudent to maintain a low profile. He had not had the opportunity to pursue his interests as an independent artist. There was still a large discrepancy between what was permitted in the art academies and the kind of experimentation that could be undertaken by artists working outside the academy. The organizational structures and ideological framework for the production of art were still being shaped and maintained by the Party. As Joan Lebold Cohen wrote:

Chinese art education is dedicated to teaching the visual expression of the government’s policies. Discipline and technique in the approved styles and subjects are emphasized, invention discouraged. For the sake of upward

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<sup>93</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 4.

mobility, the Chinese art student must sacrifice individualism. Only after leaving school and attaining a job can the artist create an individual style.<sup>95</sup>

There were serious professional drawbacks to working in avant-garde styles and modes. Avant-garde artists were often pressured to abandon their radical pursuits, putting their livelihoods at risk.<sup>96</sup> Gu Xiong's work was not radical, but he also didn't shy away from political content. In 1986, he produced a woodblock print entitled *Six Scholars* that can appear to allude to the political situation of the time. The print memorializes an historic incident from earlier in the twentieth century (fig. 10). The six figures in Gu Xiong's print were educated men who had tried to institute reforms during the last dynastic reign. Gu Xiong depicts these historic figures as martyrs who are calm and strong in their resolve as they face a death penalty for their political activities. Another woodblock print from the same period, *Li Kui Fights Four Tigers* (fig. 11), shows the influence of folk woodcut printing from Sichuan Province.<sup>97</sup> The subject of the woodblock comes from a traditional form of popular culture, Beijing opera, although the story was originally taken from the famous novel Outlaws of the Marsh (*Shui hu Zhuan*) written by Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The protagonist of this story slays four tigers that have taken the life of his mother as they are travelling through the mountains.<sup>98</sup> Although the tigers are menacing adversaries, the fierce fighter Li Kui avenges the death of his mother who, I believe, could be a symbol of Chinese traditions and culture that were suppressed under Communism.<sup>99</sup> It is clear that Gu Xiong spent his student years exploring a conservative range of forms and styles and honing his technical and compositional skills as a printmaker and painter. It was while he was spending a year studying abroad in Canada

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<sup>95</sup> Joan Lebold Cohen, "Learning to Paint in China," 75.

<sup>96</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience*, 176.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, April, 2001.

<sup>98</sup> Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong, translated by Sidney Shapiro, *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shui Hu Zhuan)*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1980), 681-701.

that Gu Xiong decided to change the course of his own development as an artist and experiment with contemporary forms and ideas in his work.<sup>100</sup>

### **Gu Xiong's Sojourn at the Banff Centre for the Arts**

After Gu Xiong completed his master's degree in 1985, the Sichuan Academy hired him as an instructor in the printmaking department. In spring 1986, he put together a portfolio and submitted an application to the Visiting Artists' Program at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Alberta, Canada. The program was designed to give artists from different cultural backgrounds the opportunity to interact and exchange ideas. Gu Xiong was one of several students from the Sichuan Academy who applied to the Banff Centre. A selection committee singled out his application because of his obvious skills and talents. Gu Xiong was chosen to be first artist from the PRC to be accepted into the program. In September 1986, Gu Xiong made his first trip to Canada. At the Banff Centre, he joined a group of forty-five artists from all over the world.<sup>101</sup>

When Gu Xiong arrived at the Banff Centre his new surroundings made him feel isolated and uncertain. His limited language skills made it difficult to communicate with the other artists, so he spent long hours working alone in his studio. He continued to work as he had at the Sichuan Academy, producing small-scale woodcut prints and drawings of village street scenes that were reminiscent of the rural communities in China, like his drawing, *From a Distant Place*, 1985, (fig. 9).<sup>102</sup> Finally, the director of the Banff Centre, Alvin Balkind, encouraged him to get out of his studio and meet the other artists.<sup>103</sup> Gu Xiong began interacting with them and was surprised to see the range of styles and

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<sup>99</sup> My interpretation is based upon my conversations with Gu Xiong. Interview with Gu Xiong, April 2001.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 7.

<sup>101</sup> Alvin Balkind, "Pain Between Two Cultures," *Front Magazine*, (March/April 1991), 9.

<sup>102</sup> Alvin Balkind, 9.

concepts. The creative freedom these artists exercised startled him because it was such a contrast to the uniformity of style from his own training.<sup>104</sup> A trip to New York City that the Banff Centre organized brought Gu Xiong to a turning point. In New York he visited many public and private galleries and was exposed to a wide range of ideas, forms, and styles of art. Seeing the ways in which visual arts practices flourished in an environment of creative freedom was a revelation to Gu Xiong, who returned to the Banff Centre resolved to find a unique and personal direction for his art.<sup>105</sup>

Gu Xiong began working on a series of drawings and paintings of the corrals of farms and ranches that stretched across the landscape around Banff. He found the structure of the corrals visually and aesthetically interesting, and his studies allowed him to explore various aspects of line and composition. As he formulated ideas about the work he was producing, he began to think of these corrals as symbols of culture. Individual cultures, he surmised, were like the corrals in that they were man-made structures that enclosed humans and separated one culture from another:

I suddenly found inspiration in those corrals because I felt that they were enclosures for humans. We create cultures, but we also create enclosures for ourselves. Like myself; I came from China where I was in another culture and then suddenly I was totally lost there. So then I started to use this idea and concept to see how as people we could break through those enclosures to reach a true sense of freedom.<sup>106</sup>

Gu Xiong was clearly drawing upon his own recent experiences of coming to Canada, where he had faced linguistic and cultural barriers that prevented him from fitting into a new social situation. The linearity of the subject matter presented Gu Xiong with a way to create a visual representation of the obstacles he faced communicating and feeling at ease

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<sup>103</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 7.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 7.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 7.

in his new cultural and social environment (fig.12). Drawings and paintings from the corral series were exhibited in a group exhibition at the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre in the summer of 1987.<sup>107</sup>

After completing his residency at the Banff Centre, Gu Xiong travelled to Toronto for a one-month term as artist-in-residence at York University. He received a grant for foreign artists from the Canada Council for the Arts to do research in art education.<sup>108</sup> He spent the month at York University gathering materials he planned to use to teach his students at the Sichuan Academy about contemporary art practices in North America and Europe. At that time, Gu Xiong might have stayed in Canada and continued to develop his career in the West, as many of his contemporaries were choosing to do. However, he made the decision to return to the People's Republic because he felt that he could use the knowledge he had gained from his year abroad to contribute to the development of contemporary Chinese art, both as an artist and as a teacher.<sup>109</sup>

### **Culminating Events: China/Avant-garde and June 4th, 1989**

When he returned to the Sichuan Academy in the fall of 1987, Gu Xiong expanded his curricula to include more instruction in contemporary art practices. His students began the semester developing their technical skills through the conventional methods, such as life drawing and producing copies of Western and Chinese masterpieces. By the end of the course, Gu Xiong would have his students producing installation art. More than once, he was called upon to defend his teaching practices to the administration of the Sichuan Academy, who felt that installation and performance art were unsuitable forms for students

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 6.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 7.

<sup>108</sup> Gu Xiong, "Resume," unpublished document, 3.

<sup>109</sup> I discuss Gu Xiong's motivations for returning to China in greater detail in chapter three of this thesis.

to be learning within the academic system. However, Gu Xiong stuck to his convictions that such media should be integrated into the academic curriculum.

Performance and installation art had begun to appear in the PRC in the early part of the decade, but by the late eighties many artists were working in these modes, particularly those who were interested in addressing the socio-political situation in the PRC through their art.<sup>110</sup> Like the first forays into most Western forms, Chinese artists' initial experimentation in performance and installation were intentionally provocative; however, the meanings of such interventions tended to be obscure and difficult for Chinese audiences to interpret.<sup>111</sup> Still, the authorities viewed these activities with disdain, particularly in the late eighties, as performance artists created works which addressed societal ills in the public sphere.<sup>112</sup>

In his own work, Gu Xiong continued to develop the idea of physical enclosures as symbols of cultural and social barriers. He looked to his immediate environment around the city of Chongqing for a symbol comparable to the farm corrals and began producing drawings and paintings of the chain link fencing found in abundance in the urban environment. In the summer of 1987, Gu Xiong produced a public mural on a long stretch of plywood sheeting erected around a construction site in downtown Chongqing. With the help of some local artists, Gu Xiong produced a painting of chain link fencing eighty meters long and three meters high.<sup>113</sup> The chain link fencing became Gu Xiong's new symbol for representing the barriers that he felt existed between the individual and the values and ideologies that structured of contemporary Chinese society.

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<sup>110</sup> Gao Minglu, "From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-garde in Mainland China," *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 162.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Sullivan, 262.

<sup>112</sup> Gao Minglu, "From Elite to Small Man," 163.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 8.

From 1986 onwards, avant-garde artists collaborated, building a nation-wide communication network of communication among individual artists and art groups.<sup>114</sup> They focused their attention on creating exhibition opportunities. Art critics for the Beijing-based newspaper *Chinese Fine Art Weekly* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*), a leading source of information on unofficial art and culture, organized a conference to address issues relating to avant-garde art in August 1986.<sup>115</sup> A national exhibition of avant-garde art was first proposed at this conference, and after two and a half years of planning the exhibition was finally realized. Artists, critics, and writers mobilized to create a forum for the exchange of ideas about contemporary Chinese art and culture. Gu Xiong participated in such forums, acting as an artist-speaker in a panel discussion at the “China Avant-garde Research Conference” in Huang Shan, Anhui Province, in 1988.<sup>116</sup>

The *China/Avant-garde* exhibition took place at the National Gallery in Beijing in February 1989. *China/Avant-garde* featured the work of 186 artists from around the country and included some of the most prominent figures in contemporary Chinese art.<sup>117</sup> Gu Xiong produced an installation and performance piece entitled *Enclosures* (figs. 13a and 13b) for the *China/Avant-Garde* exhibition. Viewers confronted 3 ft. by 8 ft. acrylic paintings that Gu Xiong handpainted in the pattern of chain link fencing. These were mounted to the walls and installed on the floor of the gallery. Standing at the centre of the installation, viewers were surrounded on three sides and stood over the paintings, which nearly enclosed them in the chain link pattern. At the centre of the paintings the pattern of the chain link fencing was broken. It appeared as though someone had forced their way

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<sup>114</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience*, 19.

<sup>115</sup> Hans van Dijk, 19.

<sup>116</sup> Gu Xiong, “Resume,” 2 (see appendix I).

<sup>117</sup> Gao Minglu, “From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China,” 152.

through the barricade. In his performance, Gu Xiong and a number of his artist friends wore white shirts and pants printed with a pattern of chainlink fencing. Their faces were painted white, and their eyes were blackened to make them appear ghostlike (fig13c). The performers enacted breaking through the barrier of the chain link fencing, a symbol for the constraints placed upon individual freedom within Chinese society, only to realize that the constraints also came from within themselves, as suggested by the imprint of the chainlink pattern on their clothing. In this performance he wanted to explore the interplay of both internal and external limitations on individuality and freedom.<sup>118</sup> The *Enclosures* performance highlighted the significance of self-reflection in Gu Xiong's creative process. This installation and performance piece, like the majority of the work he would produce in subsequent years, acknowledged Gu Xiong's awareness that any claim to individualism was constructed and mediated by social and cultural conditions that were largely beyond his control. By enacting the process of breaking through these barriers Gu Xiong also acknowledged the possibility, even necessity, of resisting the ideological, cultural and/or social control that obstructed an individual's claim to freedom. Many artists who participated in the "New Art Tide" movement used their work to confront the traumas of the individual and reveal the 'illnesses' affecting the individual life force as a consequence of social and cultural conditions in China.<sup>119</sup> Adopting a philosophical outlook that placed the concerns of the individual over those of the group or the whole of society constituted a challenge to the very nature of Socialism, which subordinated the needs of the individual citizen to the greater good of the whole of society.

By 1989, Chinese society had reached an unprecedented level of liberalization. The fact that artists associated with the avant-garde art movement were permitted to exhibit

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<sup>118</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 6.

their work in the National Gallery attested to how far they had come in gaining public and political acceptance. Yet, the events that surrounded the exhibition would prove their acceptance was contingent and official support could be withdrawn at any time.

*China/Avant-garde* was cut short when Xiao Lu, an artist participating in the exhibition, fired a gun at an installation she had produced in collaboration with the artist Tang Song. The authorities closed the exhibition down just three hours after it opened. Following an investigation into the incident, the exhibition reopened, but it remained up for only one week before it was closed permanently. The closing of the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition was, on its own, a minor setback for the development of avant-garde art. The brief period of liberalization of which artists had taken advantage in the latter half of the 1980s was brought to an end a mere two months later with the suppression of the pro-democracy movements in Tiananmen Square in May and June of 1989.

The specific nature of the political orientation of avant-garde artists is difficult to determine. Many artists and art groups were involved in political activities throughout the 1980s, and scholars have suggested that those involved in the avant-garde art movements saw themselves as leaders in the fight for social reform.<sup>120</sup> When the demonstration in Tiananmen Square began in early May, there was palpable excitement among intellectuals, students, and artists. People travelled to Beijing from all over the PRC to take part in the demonstrations. By the middle of May more than a million people were occupying Tiananmen Square.<sup>121</sup> Students from the Central Academy showed their support for the student demonstrations by producing banners and posters, and one of the most recognizable symbols of the demonstrations -- the ten-meter-high sculpture of the Goddess

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<sup>119</sup> Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," xvii.

<sup>120</sup> Gao Minglu, "Toward a Transnational Modernity:" 20.

<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Spence, 700.

of Democracy that stood at the centre of Tiananmen when the demonstrations were suppressed.<sup>122</sup>

Gu Xiong followed the events of the demonstrations from Chongqing. Like many of his friends and colleagues, he had been involved in the student movement.<sup>123</sup> When events began to unfold, Gu Xiong and his students organized an installation and performance based upon Gu Xiong's concept of enclosures and performed at the academy (figs.14a, 14b, 14c). Television coverage of the demonstrations ended on May 20th, when Premier Li Peng and the president of China, Yang Shangkun, declared martial law and closed down all news services within the country. For the next two weeks, soldiers attempted to clear Tiananmen Square, but their efforts were countered at each turn by student protesters and Beijing citizens who joined in and erected barricades to slow the soldiers' advance. Gu Xiong followed the news of the escalating demonstrations in Tiananmen by listening to foreign reports on the BBC and Voice of America. At the beginning of June, he boarded a train to Beijing to join the demonstrations and to find out firsthand what was happening in the capital city. By the time he arrived in Beijing, PLA troops had already blocked off all approaches to the square. He was met at the train station by his friends, and they attempted to make it into Tiananmen Square. They made it as far as the final barricade blocking the entrance to Tiananmen, a vantage point from which Gu Xiong could see the army tanks positioned in the square.<sup>124</sup> Rumours of the massacre spread quickly throughout Beijing in the hours and days following the crackdown. No one was permitted entry into the square to assess the extent of the loss of human life, but there

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Sullivan, 277.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 8.

<sup>124</sup> "I tried to get into Tiananmen Square but I couldn't because I had a friend who came to the train station to pick me up and I asked him to take me there and we break [broke] through two circles but the last circle we couldn't. I saw the tank 100 meters ahead, but we couldn't get any closer." Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 8.

was enough physical evidence in the streets to indicate the violence that had taken place. The government was quick to launch a counter-attack on the demonstrators. An official interpretation of the events of June 4th was disseminated through the media. There are no firm figures on the number of lives lost that day. The Chinese government maintains that close to 300 people died and eight thousand were wounded.<sup>125</sup> The Chinese Red Cross estimated that the death toll was as high as 2,600.<sup>126</sup>

The atrocities in Tiananmen Square forced Gu Xiong to make the difficult decision to leave the People's Republic. He had been in contact with the Banff Centre for the Arts, and when the tensions had begun mounting in April, he was offered a second residency at the Banff Centre to protect him from harm. Gu Xiong declined the offer because he felt that Chinese society was on the brink of momentous change, and he wanted to be there as a witness and participant. After June 4th, however, Gu Xiong telephoned the Banff Centre to make arrangements to return to Canada. Alvin Balkind and his associates at the Banff Centre were able to facilitate his departure from the PRC and by August 1989, just two months after the Tiananmen massacre, he was back in Canada for a second term as a visiting artist at the Banff Centre. On his decision to leave the PRC, Gu Xiong said:

Until this point, Chinese people had dreamed to have a good leader to lead us forward to a better life. I saw the Communist Party's army kill people and then this kind of dream couldn't exist anymore. I found that they couldn't represent us. So, that's when I decided to leave.<sup>127</sup>

Gu Xiong spent the next twelve months back at the Banff Centre for the Arts. During this time he produced artwork addressing the Tiananmen Square massacre. He created drawings and paintings of barricades of bicycles like those that had been erected by the protestors in Tiananmen to keep the army from entering the square. In this period

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<sup>125</sup> Timothy Brook, Quelling the People: the Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy Movement, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 152.

<sup>126</sup> Timothy Brook, 155.

Gu Xiong produced his drawing in acrylic on paper entitled *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989* (fig. 15). This line composition portrays the subject matter of the barricade of bicycles as a chaotic pattern of intersecting lines. The visual effect of the composition is strong, accentuated by the fact that the subject is rendered in black and white. The pattern of the lines and wheels of the bicycles is distorted by the tracks of a tank, which has apparently rolled over the top of the barricade of bicycles. The bicycles are empty, which poignantly suggests the loss of life. This drawing was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada for the permanent collection. Gu Xiong also continued working on the *Enclosures Series*. He collaborated with two British artists who were staying at the Banff Centre at the time to produce a performance art piece, which he called *Enclosure*, that they performed at the Ground Round Theatre at the Banff Centre in 1990 (see appendix I). This performance incorporated music that was written for *Enclosures* by a composer staying at the Banff Centre. For this version of the performance series, Gu Xiong used real chain link fencing to separate the performers and the audience. The *Enclosures* performance was intended to critique the oppressive nature of the social and political life in China as Gu Xiong experienced, but it was also meant to address a more universal desire for freedom.<sup>127</sup> On the back wall of the theatre Gu Xiong mounted an image of the earth as it appears from space surrounded by drawings of chain link fencing. Gu Xiong and another artist enacted the process of trying to break through the physical, social, and cultural barriers surrounding them.

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, September 1999, 5.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, October 2000, 5.

## Conclusion

Through the end of 1989 and 1990 in the People's Republic, the government rounded up pro-democracy protesters and those in the media and the bureaucracy who had supported the democracy movement.<sup>129</sup> The Party imposed a ban on unauthorized public gatherings, including art exhibitions, and blocked the publication of periodicals that published information about avant-garde art.<sup>130</sup> The avant-garde movement faced an uncertain future. The crackdown on unofficial art and culture prompted many artists to seek opportunities to pursue their careers abroad. Those who remained in China were forced once again to the margins of Chinese society as the CCP tightened its cultural controls. The retreat from the very public profile the Chinese avant-garde had developed in the latter half of the 1980s was also self-imposed. The idealism and utopian vision shared by so many individual artists and art groups had been a guiding force of avant-garde movements. In the wake of Tiananmen, artists' beliefs in their ability to effect change in Chinese society faltered. With the disillusionment, the avant-garde art movement began to break apart.

Throughout the 1980s, artists and intellectuals seized upon the liberal policies of the CCP to push forward new visions of Chinese society. The avant-garde art movements that arose were the result of artists' defiant endeavours to stake out a creative space for self-expression within society. Wu Hung wrote:

The defining factor of contemporary Chinese experimental art, therefore, is neither stylistic nor political, but the artist's own self-positioning and repositioning in a changing society. Experimental artists place themselves at the *border* of contemporary Chinese society and the art world. On the other hand, by taking up the mission to enlarge frontiers and open new territories they also constantly challenge their own marginality and must

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<sup>129</sup> Jonathan Spence, 707.

<sup>130</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience*, 20.

thus constantly reposition themselves on the *border* to be continuously “experimental.”<sup>131</sup>

This preoccupation with self-positioning has remained a central element in the work of many Chinese artists who have moved to the West. In fact, self-positioning has become more significant for Chinese artists living abroad, as they attempt to establish their personal and professional lives outside the People’s Republic. As we will see in Chapter two, Gu Xiong’s life in Canada provided the starting point for a body of work that addresses the complex negotiations of culture and identity he experienced as he adapted to a new culture.

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<sup>131</sup> Wu Hung, Transience, 16.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Locating Cultural Transition: Gu Xiong's Art and Artistic Practice in Vancouver**

Exploring Gu Xiong's work in relation to Vancouver's socio/cultural environment allows us to consider how art emerges from and responds to its context. Located on the southwestern coast of the country, Vancouver is called Canada's gateway to the Asia Pacific region. Due to geographic location, the city has a long history of economic and cultural ties with Asian countries. From the late-nineteenth century onwards, patterns of Chinese immigration have played a significant role in shaping the racial and cultural consciousness of the city. Asian culture is a defining feature of Vancouver's civic identity. However, the history of Chinese presence in British Columbia is also marred by the devastating effects of anti-Chinese sentiments. In adverse social conditions and amidst racial tensions, Chinese-Canadian communities were established, were sustained, and eventually thrived in British Columbia. Yet, despite the fact that Chinese-Canadians have been living in British Columbia's urban and rural areas for well over a century, racist and exclusionary attitudes towards the Chinese-Canadian community remain a part of contemporary Chinese-Canadian culture. As Peter Li noted in his book The Chinese in Canada:

Stereotypes of the Chinese race have been deeply ingrained in the popular culture of Canada; Chinese-Canadians are still frequently seen as foreigners whose values and customs are incompatible with those of Canadians of European origin; and urban Chinatowns retain a certain Oriental mystique and novelty.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, the perception that Chinese-Canadians are a foreign race living among a white Canadian majority persists to this day. Chinese-Canadian culture is often seen as more closely linked to the traditions and culture of China than to Canada. At the same time, the Chinese-Canadian communities in Vancouver and across the country have changed dramatically in the past thirty years as a result of the restructuring of Canada's

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Li, The Chinese in Canada, 153.

immigration policies in the 1960s and the increased social mobility of Chinese-Canadians in the post-war period.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will elaborate how, concurrent with these changes and arising from them, Chinese-Canadian visual and literary arts have flourished.

Gu Xiong's work of the past decade illustrates how cultural identity can be variously defined as a relationship with place, language, history or time, and artistic or cultural climate.<sup>3</sup> He has developed his career through his sustained efforts to forge a space for himself and his work within his second culture. On his own initiative, Gu Xiong has developed the themes and ideas relating to cultural identity. However, Gu Xiong's artistic practice must also be understood as a continuation of developments in Chinese-Canadian cultural practices dating back three decades.<sup>4</sup> The rise of Chinese-Canadian cultural consciousness in the 1970s brought questions about cultural identity to public attention. Since then, Chinese-Canadian cultural identity has been explored, celebrated, and critiqued by writers, artists, and members of the Chinese-Canadian cultural community. In the 1990s, issues of race, ethnicity, and the politics of identity have been at the forefront of intellectual, political and cultural debate. Chinese-Canadian artists who have engaged with these issues have revealed the operations of power involved in the representation of Chinese-Canadian contemporary culture both within their cultural community and mainstream art institutions.

Chinese-Canadian writers and artists have fostered awareness of their cultural heritage by reclaiming and representing the histories of the Chinese in Canada. In this chapter, I present a brief introduction to the history of the Chinese in British Columbia because it is crucial to understanding the present social, political, and cultural contexts of

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> David Bennett, "Introduction," *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony B. Chan, *Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World*, (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1983), 188; Karin Lee, "Chinese-Chinese-Canadian-Canadian," *Self Not Whole*, (Vancouver: The Chinese Cultural Centre, 1991), 25. Chan and Lee emphasize changing cultural and economic circumstances of Chinese-Canadians in the late 1960s and early 1970s and a surge of interest in Asian Canadian culture prompted by the "Asian Consciousness movement" in San Francisco, which fostered the development of Chinese-Canadian literary and visual arts. Asian Canadian artists and writers were active prior to this period; however, as I argue below, it was during this period that the institutional and community support structures were put into place which facilitated the development of Chinese-Canadian cultural awareness.

Chinese-Canadians and interpreting how these histories are addressed by contemporary Chinese-Canadian artists, including Gu Xiong. The efforts that artists and writers have made to confront the marginalization of Chinese-Canadian culture and to encourage awareness of Chinese-Canadian histories have paved the way for an artist like Gu Xiong, a relatively recent contributor to the Vancouver's visual arts community, to determine for himself what constitutes a Chinese-Canadian identity.

I have attempted to address the multifaceted nature of Chinese-Canadian culture within the larger cultural community of Vancouver. While it is not possible to represent conclusively the divergent characteristics of an art community in a major urban center like Vancouver, we can consider some aspects of city's visual arts community that relate to the evolution of contemporary Chinese-Canadian culture. Chapter two also considers how mainstream cultural institutions have responded to calls for greater representation of Asian-Canadian contemporary art and how this has contributed to Gu Xiong's artistic practice.

### **A Brief Introduction to the History of Chinese Immigration to British Columbia**

Homi K. Bhabha has stated that the reconstruction by minorities of their histories has the potential to challenge the institutionalization of the acceptance and promotion of cultural difference. According to Bhabha, the past can become a tool for re-inscribing the politics of cultural difference in the present. He has suggested that by actively reconstructing their own histories, minorities groups, communities, or individuals might avoid repeating past mistakes:

Narratives of historical reconstruction may reject such myths of social transformation: communal memory may seek its meaning through a sense of causality, shared with psychoanalysis, that negotiates the recurrence of the image of the past while keeping open the question of the future. The importance of such retroaction lies in its ability to reinscribe the past, reactivate it, relocate it, *resignify* it. More significant, it commits our understanding of the past, and our reinterpretation of the future, to an ethics

of 'survival' that allows us *to work through the present*.<sup>5</sup>

An ahistorical treatment of the development of contemporary Chinese-Canadian visual arts cannot give appropriate weight to the importance of history in the construction of contemporary Chinese-Canadian identities, nor does it acknowledge the significance of these histories as powerful sites of negotiation and assertion of minority identities within mainstream cultures.<sup>6</sup> In line with Bhabha's argument, Chinese-Canadian cultural producers return to earlier historical moments to create impressions and re-enactments of the past. With the emergence of a Chinese-Canadian cultural consciousness in the 1970s, members of the Chinese-Canadian cultural community undertook projects focused upon documenting and reconstructing Chinese-Canadian histories.<sup>7</sup> These projects served multiple functions: they celebrated this cultural heritage, paid homage to efforts of Chinese pioneers, provided younger generations with a knowledge of their histories, and affirmed the power of the Chinese-Canadian community to be narrators of their own stories.<sup>8</sup> In the early 1990s, when issues of Chinese-Canadian cultural identity came to the foreground, artists and writers re-contextualized the histories of their families and the pioneers of their communities to displace the authority of the dominant narratives of national history. Projects which address the history of Chinese-Canadians have been undertaken by artists such as Paul Wong, J.J. Lee, Kiki Yee, Ana Chang, Sharyn Yuen, Henry Tsang and, as will be seen, Gu Xiong. The following portion of the study provides some of the historical context that is necessary for understanding contemporary Chinese-Canadian culture and the visual arts practices of Chinese-Canadians.

In the case of both European and Chinese settlement in North America it was

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<sup>5</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Culture's In Between," *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, David Bennett, ed., (London: Routledge, 1998), 35.

<sup>6</sup> Wing Chung Ng, *The Chinese in Vancouver: The Pursuit of Identity and Power*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that a Chinese-Canadian cultural consciousness did not exist prior to the 1970s. It is possible that that this kind of cultural consciousness did exist in different, less discernible forms. In the 1970s, however, the promotion of Chinese-Canadian culture took very public forms. Scholarship on the subject has led me to consider this decade as a period of emergence for Chinese-Canadian cultural identity.

<sup>8</sup> Karin Lee, 27.

economic and social conditions that prompted large-scale migration.<sup>9</sup> The second half of the 19th century was a period of great hardship in China. The population suffered the effects of massive population growth, famine and natural disasters, intense poverty and an unstable political climate caused by increased foreign domination and a disintegrating economy. These conditions prompted large-scale Chinese emigration to Australia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, and North America in the middle of the 19th century.<sup>10</sup> Early immigrants who came to North America in pursuit of the riches to be found in ‘Gold Mountain’ or *gum san*, as North America was known back in southern China, worked in the gold fields in California.<sup>11</sup> Canada’s first Chinese immigrants came to British Columbia by way of California, making their way northwards after the discovery of gold in the Fraser River valley in 1858. The point of entry into British Columbia was Victoria, where the first Chinatown in Canada was established in 1858.<sup>12</sup>

Initially the presence of the Chinese workers was welcomed, but after the exhaustion of gold deposits in 1866 and a period of economic hardship, agitation against the Chinese grew.<sup>13</sup> The marginal position of Chinese in Canadian society, the social isolation, the vice activities, and poor living conditions associated with British Columbia’s Chinatowns --conditions that resulted from racial oppression and societal isolation -- fueled anti-Chinese sentiments. The racist attitude leveled against Chinese immigrants provoked the government to pass the Act to Restrict and Regulate Chinese Immigration in 1885. The Act limited the number of Chinese who could enter Canada aboard a single ship and initiated the collection of a head tax of fifty dollars from each immigrant as they

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett Lee, “Early Casualties, or How to Lose Out to the History Books: The Chinese in British Columbia,” *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology*, (Vancouver: Powell Street Revue and The Chinese Canadian Writer’s Workshop, 1979), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony B. Chan, 32. Chan uses the word *gumshan* as the Chinese translation for “Gold Mountain”. He traces this name for North America to tales circulating in Southern China of the wealth acquired in North America. He cites an account which credits a prospector named Zhang Deming for creating the myth of Gold Mountain (see footnote number 33, p. 201). Chan does not present the etymology of the word. Later in this chapter I discuss an exhibition entitled *Gum San*. *Gum San* (*kam-shaan* in Cantonese or *jinshan* in Mandarin) seems to be Toisanese, a dialect of Cantonese spoken in China’s southern province of Guangdong, from whence a majority of early settlers emigrated.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony B. Chan, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett Lee, 4; Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 25.

disembarked.<sup>14</sup>

Peter Li has studied how the mainstream perception of the sojourner orientation of early immigrants contributed to the assumption that the Chinese did not possess the ability to assimilate into Canadian society.<sup>15</sup> Li noted that unlike European settlers in Canada, the Chinese were not considered permanent members of Canadian society and were perceived as a temporary and cheap labour source that could fill the shortage of white workers in British Columbia. Many Chinese immigrated with the intentions to pay back their debts of passage and make enough money to be able to return to China wealthy and retire comfortably in their home villages. But, as Li points out, the majority of Chinese who left China settled in the country to which they traveled.<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of public perceptions of the temporary and marginal presence of Chinese immigrants in Canadian society, Chinese labour played a significant role in building British Columbia's economy and industries. Railroad construction, the building of roads, mining, fisheries, and domestic services all depended heavily upon the work of Chinese immigrants.<sup>17</sup> The western expansion of the CPR, in particular, was a project that exploited the labour of Chinese immigrants. After the CPR was completed in 1885, Chinese workers traveled across Canada in search of employment, and new Chinese communities grew up in the prairie provinces, Ontario, and Quebec. Many returned to the coast of British Columbia, causing tremendous population growth in Victoria and Vancouver's Chinatowns in the late 1880s.

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<sup>14</sup> Edgar Wickberg et al., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, (Ottawa: McClelland and Stewart Ltd. in association with the Multiculturalism Directorate, Department of the Secretary of State and the Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Supply and Services Canada, 1982), 55.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 25. Li wrote that it was thought that the Chinese possessed a "transient mentality" which, sociologists have suggested, prevented their ability to assimilate.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony B. Chan, 67. When Andrew Onderdonk acquired the contract for the westernmost expansion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, labour for the massive project was in short supply and Onderdonk utilized recruiters to have Chinese workers brought into British Columbia to work on the railway expansion. The reputation of Chinese immigrants as industrious, honest and inexpensive made them a valuable resource for the building of the CPR. As many as 6,500 Chinese labourers participated in the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway and were often paid one-half to two-thirds the wage of white labourers for equivalent work. The Chinese workers were assigned the most strenuous and dangerous work of the CPR project, and as many 600 Chinese workers lost their lives in the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway between 1879 and 1884.

The demographic distribution in Chinatown reflected the social realities of Chinese immigration and the limits it posed to normal family life. The majority living in these neighbourhoods were men of working age. There were few families. The men who came to Canada often had wives and children back in China whom they supported through their labour in Canada and intended to return to after making their fortune. The unbalanced sex ratios were exacerbated by the Chinese Immigration Acts passed in 1900 and 1903, that raised the tax first to \$100 per person and then finally to \$500 per person.<sup>18</sup>

In the first decade of the 1900s, tensions arising from a complex web of economic, cultural, and moral issues affected relations between the Caucasian and Chinese populations of British Columbia and resulted in the passing of the Exclusion Act in 1923.<sup>19</sup> The Exclusion Act had devastating effects on Chinese immigration and on the vitality of Chinese communities across the country. Between 1923 and 1947, Chinese were not permitted to enter the country. Members of the predominantly-male Chinese population were denied any opportunity to bring their wives or children to Canada, which had devastating effects on familial structures both in Canada and back in China.<sup>20</sup> People of Chinese origin already living in Canada were denied the right to vote, to obtain a public education, to move in and out of the country freely, and to work in occupations of their own choosing. Many immigrants returned to China during the Depression era, and this exodus, coupled with an imbalance of the sex ratio, caused a significant decline in the population of Chinese in Canada.<sup>21</sup>

In 1947, Chinese-Canadians gained the right to vote, and the Exclusion Act was repealed. Between 1947 and 1962, the spouses and children of Chinese living in Canada

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Edgar Wickberg et al., 141.

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Yuen-fong Woon bases a fictional account of one excluded wife's experiences on her extensive research into the oral history of Chinese-Canadian history. Her book, *The Excluded Wife*, (Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 1997), illuminates the social history of Chinese women who were able to make the journey from China to Canada.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 86. Li notes that by 1937-8 nearly 95 percent of the Chinese in Victoria were male and half of that number were over 50 years of age. These statistics give some indication of the effect that the Exclusion Act had on the demographic distribution in British Columbia's Chinatowns.

were permitted entry into the country, and Chinese immigration increased.<sup>22</sup> Yet, discrimination remained embedded in immigration law until 1967, when the universal point system was implemented, which eliminated race as a significant factor for immigration.<sup>23</sup> Through most of the 20th century, the Chinese occupied a marginal position in Canadian society and were afforded limited opportunities for economic and social mobility. Peter Li has examined how the changes in the occupational structure of Canadian society in the second half of the twentieth century created opportunities in professional and skilled occupations that allowed Chinese-Canadians greater social mobility. By the mid-1960s, this generation of Canadian-born Chinese-Canadians had come into adulthood. Unlike earlier generations of Chinese-Canadians who worked primarily in the service sector or as labourers, many Canadian-educated Chinese-Canadians worked in technical or professional occupations.<sup>24</sup>

In 1962, Canada broadened its immigration policies to allow independent immigrants who possessed educational and professional skills to enter.<sup>25</sup> After 1967, Chinese immigration increased substantially when the universal point system was implemented and Chinese persons were finally admitted into Canada under the same criteria as other immigrants. This policy placed emphasis on educational qualifications and professional expertise rather than race or ethnicity.<sup>26</sup> As a result of political factors in the PRC and Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong became the main point of departure for Chinese immigrants coming to Canada after 1967.<sup>27</sup> The diverse educational and occupational backgrounds of immigrants from Hong Kong also contributed to the changes in the social structure of Canada's Chinese-Canadian communities.<sup>28</sup> In the 1980s, the Canadian government expanded the Business Immigration Program targeted at

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<sup>22</sup> Dr. Yuen-fong Woon points out that it was the usual practice for Chinese immigrants to sponsor sons, thus prejudice against female immigration persisted even in the late 1940s. See Dr. Yuen-fong Woon, "The Voluntary Sojourner Among the Overseas Chinese," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 56, no. 4 (Winter 1983-84), 679.

<sup>23</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 120.

<sup>25</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 94.

<sup>26</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 99. Hong Kong immigrants have accounted for over two-thirds of the total Chinese immigration to Canada since 1967.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 99.

entrepreneurs, investors and self-employed persons that was designed to attract Hong Kong's business elite.<sup>29</sup> The program stimulated immigration among Hong Kong Chinese, which led to a significant growth in the Chinese-Canadian population and to an increase in their social status in the following decade.

The professional mobility of both second generation Chinese-Canadians and foreign-born Chinese and the investment capital new Chinese immigrants brought into the country have contributed to the emergence of a Chinese middle class in Canada. Chinese-Canadians have moved into upper and middle-class neighbourhoods where previously a mostly Caucasian population had resided. As a result, Chinese-Canadian social, economic and cultural life is no longer confined geographically to Canada's urban Chinatowns. While the prosperity and social mobility of Chinese-Canadians would seem to indicate that they are no longer economically or socially impeded by the perceptions of racial and/or cultural difference, racial discrimination, and cultural stereotypes persist in Canadian society:

[A]s the economic and social status of Chinese-Canadians has risen with the arrival of new immigrants with human and investment capital and the growth of the Chinese middle class, old stereotypes about the Chinese have sometimes been revived to depict them as undesirable foreigners undermining the cultural and economic security of traditional Canada.<sup>30</sup>

Within the Chinese-Canadian population a high percentage of individuals remains foreign-born, and characteristics such as the retention of native language mark the Chinese-Canadian community as a newer presence in the larger cultural context of the city, belying the long history of Chinese people living in Canada.<sup>31</sup> Immigration remains the most

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<sup>29</sup> The program required a \$ 250,000 business investment. Of the 13,931 applicants admitted into Canada as investors between 1986 and 1996, 36 percent came from Taiwan and 47 percent from Hong Kong. Between 1985-1994, more than 355, 200 Chinese immigrants arrived from Hong Kong alone, accounting for 69% of all Chinese who immigrated to Canada. Peter Li, 1999, 95. Katharyne Mitchell noted that in 1991 immigrants were required to invest \$350,000 into Canada's business sector. Katharyne Mitchell, "In Whose Interest? Transnational Capital and the Production of Multiculturalism in Canada," in Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 224.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 141.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 110.

important factor in the growth of the Chinese-Canadian population, particularly in Vancouver, the largest city on Canada's west coast. Thus, the outline of the historical development of Chinese-Canadian communities I have described above is only one dimension of the historical narratives of the Chinese-Canadian communities. Chinese immigrants arrive in Canada with their own histories and perspectives that continually shape and transform Chinese-Canadian communities and the larger cultural contexts of the cities in which they exist.

### **The Development of a Chinese-Canadian Cultural Consciousness**

Widespread public interest in Chinese-Canadian cultural identity emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period when the community underwent a period of transition resulting from the increased immigration, the higher standard of living, and the educational and occupational accomplishments of Canadian-born Chinese-Canadians.<sup>32</sup> The diversification of the community prompted Chinese-Canadians to consider the question of cultural identity. For many Chinese-Canadians, their identities were mediated and defined by ties to native homelands, traditional cultural sentiments and political affiliations and also by experiences of adaptation, alienation, acceptance and rejection as immigrants in Canadian society.<sup>33</sup> But by the 1970s, there were third and fourth generation Chinese-Canadians descended from the earliest Chinese immigrants to Canada while a large percentage of the Chinese-Canadian population remained foreign-born.

The American civil rights movement prompted the "Asian Consciousness" movement along the west coast which influenced Vancouver's Chinese-Canadian community. The community strived for greater social consciousness and the renewal in Vancouver's Chinatown.<sup>34</sup> A community group was formed to lobby local and national governments for greater recognition of the contributions of Chinese-Canadians to

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 123-31.

<sup>33</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony B. Chan, 188.

Canadian society.<sup>35</sup> Chinese festivals, Chinese language and art classes, and conferences were organized to foster a greater sense of community and pride in Chinese-Canadian culture.

The Chinese-Canadian cultural revival came about in part thanks to the economic support made available through the federal government's multicultural programs. The funding the government provided gave minorities the opportunity to organize themselves to preserve and promote ethnic cultural heritage.<sup>36</sup> An official policy of multiculturalism was adopted by the government in 1971, under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, cementing the acceptance of racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic difference as part of Canadian national ideology. Multiculturalism was meant to counter discriminatory attitudes and to contribute to the creation of a fair and equal society. Ethnic groups would share a common sense of identification with Canadian culture while retaining unique cultural aspects such as ethnic communities, cultural activities, language, and religion.<sup>37</sup>

When the idea of creating the Chinese Cultural Centre began circulating in Vancouver's Chinatown in the early seventies, it had already ceased to be the physical center of the Chinese-Canadian daily life. When the centre was built at the heart of Vancouver's Chinatown, it became the symbolic center of community sentiment and ethnic identity.<sup>38</sup> The Chinese Cultural Centre existed for the preservation and celebration of the cultural heritage of ethnic Chinese in Canada and the interpretation of that heritage to fellow Canadians.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese Cultural Centre was built in 1973. It became the key site of cultural activity for the Chinese-Canadian community at a time when the visual, written and performing arts became an important outlet for expressing Asian Canadian identity.

Chinese-Canadian visual and literary arts flourished due to the increased support and attention Asian-Canadian culture received. An Asian Canadian writers' workshop was

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<sup>35</sup> Karin Lee, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 4; Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 131; Karen Lee, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 109.

<sup>39</sup> Wing Chung Ng, 110.

established in the late 1970s, and an anthology of Asian-Canadian writing titled Inalienable Rice was published.<sup>40</sup> Asian-Canadian artists asserted their right to be the creators of their own culture and its histories and even their own stereotypes.<sup>41</sup> Many Chinese-Canadian artists and writers sought to counter the effects of a history marred by racial prejudice with a positive and vital presentation of cultural difference for the community itself and for non-Chinese communities. Conferences addressing racism, gender, community, and cultural identity were organized, prompting the development of numerous cultural projects. The Chinese Cultural Centre began organizing public events both inside and outside the Chinese-Canadian community.<sup>42</sup> In retrospect, we can consider the first decade of Chinese-Canadian cultural revival as a time when the community sought to put in place structures to develop and sustain Chinese-Canadian traditions, history, and sense of cultural and community identity.

### **The Exhibition and Promotion of Chinese-Canadian Visual Arts**

From the time the Chinese Cultural Centre was built, annual exhibitions of the work of Chinese-Canadian artists were organized at the centre to coincide with Chinese New Year's and autumn festival activities. The annual exhibitions featured works by artists working in the ink and brush painting who handled traditional subject matter such as landscape and bird and flower paintings and by those who worked in other media such as oil painting, sculpture, and installation art. The range of styles and aesthetic sensibilities presented in these exhibitions demonstrated the diversity of Chinese-Canadian artistic practices.<sup>43</sup>

In the mid-1980s two historical exhibitions of the history of the Chinese in British

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<sup>40</sup> Writers who have gone on to public and critical acclaim in the mainstream media, such as Paul Yee, Wayson Choy, Sky Lee and Denise Chong were involved in the initial development of the Asian Canadian Writer's workshop. See Bennett Lee, Inalienable Rice.

<sup>41</sup> Anthony B. Chan, 195.

<sup>42</sup> Karin Lee, 26.

Columbia were organized that contested the negative representation of Chinese-Canadians in the mainstream media throughout their history in Canada. *Gum San: Images of Gold Mountain, 1886-1947*, an exhibition of historical photographs of Chinese-Canadians and historical Chinatown, was installed at the Vancouver Art Gallery and produced in collaboration with the Chinese Cultural Centre in 1985. *Saltwater City*, a multimedia exhibition, was organized by Paul Yee and held at the Chinese Cultural Centre in 1986. The exhibition traced one hundred years of Vancouver's Chinese-Canadian community, from 1867 to 1967. The show was produced as the Chinese Cultural Centre's contribution to the city's centennial celebrations. *Saltwater City* paid homage to the earliest inhabitants of Vancouver's Chinatown and the later generations who made Chinatown their home, despite the hardships they experienced.<sup>44</sup>

The Chinese Cultural Centre organized two large exhibitions in the late 1980s, which highlighted a cross-section of artists working in both traditional and contemporary styles. Both of the exhibitions, *Art Ensemble '86* and *In Transition: Chinese Canadian Artists in Vancouver*, had carefully defined mandates. The organizers of *Art Ensemble '86* wanted to introduce to both Chinese-Canadian and non-Chinese audiences the diversity of the Chinese-Canadian art community in terms of content, style, and media.<sup>45</sup> When *In Transition: Chinese Canadian Artists in Vancouver* was held at the Chinese Cultural Centre in 1989, the organizers suggested that the intention of the show was to explore the importance of the Canadian environment in the development of Chinese-Canadian art and the role of traditions of Chinese art as established in the People's Republic, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Vancouver.<sup>46</sup> In his catalogue essay, Dr. James Caswell suggested that among

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<sup>43</sup> Karin Lee, 26.

<sup>44</sup> The research Paul Yee gathered for the exhibition was published in his book, *Saltwater City*, which won civic and national book awards. It is one of several books about Chinese-Canadian culture written by Yee.

<sup>45</sup> Saintfield Wong, "Foreword," *Self Not Whole*, (Vancouver: The Chinese Cultural Centre, 1991), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Saintfield Wong, "Foreword," *In Transition: Chinese Canadian Artists in Vancouver*, (Vancouver: The

the diverse styles represented in the exhibition a strong undercurrent running through the works exhibited was pride in one's heritage.<sup>47</sup>

By the beginning of the 1990s, Asian-Canadian culture and heritage had been fostered by members of Asian-Canadian communities and multicultural initiatives for two decades. However, the celebratory atmosphere and the promotion of Asian-Canadian and Chinese-Canadian cultural consciousness did not respond to the needs of all members of the community. Some artists suggested that the focus on cultural differences between Asian and non-Asian communities needed to shift to an acknowledgement of the diversity *within* Asian-Canadian communities. Young Asian-Canadian artists began presenting critical views of their own cultural identities and of how Chinese-Canadian cultures were interpreted by the non-Chinese public and media.<sup>48</sup> Issues surrounding Asian-Canadian cultural identity became the focal point of two important exhibitions, *Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* and *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*.<sup>49</sup> Previous group shows dedicated to the work of Asian-Canadian artists had highlighted the talents of Asian-Canadian artists and acknowledged their contributions to the development of contemporary art in Vancouver. *Self Not Whole* and *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* evolved out of these previous exhibitions, albeit with altogether different agendas. Both exhibitions presented work by Asian-Canadian artists that problematized issues of race, culture, and community in the Asian-Canadian context. The strong curatorial direction of the two exhibitions highlighted the critical approaches to these issues through "nontraditional" art forms and styles.

*Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* opened in Vancouver at the Video In artist-run centre

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Chinese Cultural Centre, 1989), 2.

<sup>47</sup> James Caswell, "In Transition," *In Transition: Chinese Canadian Artists in Vancouver*, (Vancouver: The Chinese Cultural Centre, 1989) 2.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Wong, "Yellow Peril: Reconsidered," *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, (Vancouver: Video In, 1990), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Hereafter I will refer to *Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* as

in the fall of 1990 and traveled to artist-run centres across Canada through the summer of 1991. It was an exhibition of multimedia and video art by Asian-Canadian artists that contributed to the dialogue on Asian-Canadian identity by addressing specific issues about race and representation. The artists who participated used popular communication and information mediums like film and video as an interventionist strategy to challenge the negative and stereotypical representations of Asian Canadians in the mainstream media.<sup>50</sup> The exhibition was curated by Paul Wong, a well-known multimedia artist. In the process of organizing *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, Wong became an outspoken critic of the failure of mainstream art institutions to recognize the particular needs of Asian Canadian artists or to address the hegemonic structures limiting the development of Asian Canadian visual culture.

In his essay, “Self Not Whole: In Search of a Cultural Centre”, Henry Tsang suggested the aim of *Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* was to push the exhibition of contemporary art at the Chinese Cultural Centre in new directions.<sup>51</sup> By focusing exclusively on contemporary art, rather than including the traditional art forms, *Self Not Whole* posed a challenge to the Chinese Cultural Centre by suggesting the necessity for the Centre to re-evaluate the communities that the institution served.<sup>52</sup> The curatorial framework for *Self Not Whole* centered on issues of identity, ethnicity, community, and representation. Sixteen artists, writers and cultural

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*Self Not Whole*.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Wong, 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Self Not Whole: Cultural Identity and Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver*, took place at the Chinese Cultural Centre from November 2-30, 1991. The artists selected for the exhibition were Ana Chang, Diana Li, Mary Sui-Yee Wong, Paul Wong, Kiki Yee, Sharyn Yuen. As well, there was a section of the installation which looked back at the work of the Chinese-Canadian public radio broadcasts by the Pender Guy Collective. Literary readings, performances, an artist’s tour, a panel discussion and an arts educator’s workshop were all organized in conjunction with the exhibition.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Tsang, “Self Not Whole: In Search of a Cultural Centre,” *Self Not Whole*, (Vancouver: The Chinese Cultural Centre, 1991), 10.

collectives were selected to participate in *Self Not Whole*.<sup>53</sup> The artists as well as the writers who contributed to the exhibition catalogue challenged the idea of a presupposed community based upon group affiliations or cultural identity.

The cultural politics of identity framed the dialogues and debates within the Asian Canadian cultural community in the early 1990s. Such labours produced the fruits of broader understanding and acceptance of different views and experiences of Chinese-Canadian ethnicity. If what was sacrificed in projects like *Self Not Whole* and *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* was the idea of a harmonious and unified Chinese-Canadian culture, what was gained were opportunities for artists like Gu Xiong to explore the complex terrain of personal and communal identifications within a pluralistic field of Asian Canadian culture.

### **Shock Culture: Surviving Cultural Transition and Establishing an Artistic Practice**

When Gu Xiong arrived in Vancouver in 1990, he recognized that he would need to establish personal and professional connections so that he and his family would be able to survive. The financial security Gu Xiong had had in China as an instructor at the Sichuan Academy and during his first year in Canada at the Banff Centre for the Arts were no longer available, and he had to contend with many practical concerns. His wife, Ge Ni, and his daughter, Gu Yu, immigrated to Vancouver to join him in 1990. With a family to support and language barriers to overcome, the challenges that faced Gu Xiong in establishing himself professionally were substantial. Alvin Balkind, Gu Xiong's friend and mentor, assisted Gu Xiong and his family in their initial period of adjusting to life in Vancouver. Balkind was a well-respected member of the local visual arts community. He had been the Director of the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of British Columbia from 1962 to 1973 and had held curatorial and administrative posts at the Art Gallery of

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<sup>53</sup> Henry Tsang, "Racy Sexy: In Search of Cultural Space," *Parallelogramme*, vol. 20 no. 1, (1994). 26.

Ontario, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Banff Centre for the Arts,<sup>54</sup> where Gu Xiong and Balkind had met and begun their friendship in 1986. When Gu Xiong moved to Vancouver, Balkind encouraged him to work hard to develop his career while pursuing other means of employment. Balkind helped Gu Xiong learn English and encouraged him to get involved in the arts community.<sup>55</sup>

Shortly after Gu Xiong arrived, Balkind introduced him to Diane Farris, the owner of Diane Farris Gallery.<sup>56</sup> Gu Xiong secured representation at the prominent commercial gallery, which was and has continued to be dedicated to the promotion of local and international contemporary artists. The Diane Farris Gallery is particularly well-known for representing young local artists who appeal to American and European audiences, with up to sixty percent of the gallery's sales coming from collectors outside the country.<sup>57</sup> Given the attention contemporary Chinese art was receiving in international art markets in the early 1990s, Gu Xiong, as an artist who had exhibited at the infamous *China/Avant-Garde* art exhibition, was an appealing addition to the gallery's roster of artists. But, even with commercial representation, he was not in a position to rely upon sales of his work to support himself and his family, and it was necessary for him to seek employment opportunities unrelated to the arts. Gu Xiong held a number of low-paying jobs, working at a laundry service, a car wash, and making pizzas, until he was able to secure steady and well-paying employment as a unionized employee in the cafeteria at the University of British Columbia.<sup>58</sup>

In his study of how Mainland Chinese refugees identify themselves and adapt to living in Canada, Chinese-Canadians, Canadian-Chinese, Coping and Adapting in North America, Guang Tian writes that most individuals who immigrated to Canada confronted

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<sup>54</sup> Alvin Balkind, "On Exhibiting," You are Now in the Middle of an N.E. Thing Co. Production, (Vancouver: Fine Arts Gallery, 1993) 45.

<sup>55</sup> Gu Xiong, The Yellow Pear, (Burnaby: Arsenal Pulp Press and the Burnaby Art Gallery, 1997), 42.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, April 18, 2001, 1

<sup>57</sup> Patricia Failing, "Sex, Landscape, and Videotapes," ARTnews, (December, 1991), 91.

<sup>58</sup> As a unionized employee of the food services staff at the U.B.C Gu Xiong had more job security and a higher wage than he had had in his previous minimum wage jobs. In an interview, Gu Xiong suggested that this was an improvement in his employment situation and that he considered his work in the cafeteria a well-paying job.

physical and social environments differing dramatically from those in China. As a result, Chinese refugees commonly experienced stressful culture shock.<sup>59</sup> For the immigrant, life is marked by the sense of the struggle for survival. Even the most basic operations of daily life become significant challenges when one is impeded by language barriers and experiencing the stresses of sustaining oneself emotionally and financially in an unfamiliar culture. What is often at stake is basic survival. Guang Tian noted that many individuals who left China were motivated to come to Canada because here they perceived greater opportunities, yet many actually experienced loss of social status and difficulty in finding employment. For the refugees who had good jobs or high social positions in the PRC, this devalued their sense of self-worth and compounded the stress of cultural transition.<sup>60</sup>

Gu Xiong has acknowledged the disillusionment he felt as he attempted to establish himself in his new cultural context: “When I lived in China, I always dreamed romantically about ‘Western’ culture and thought there was a limitless amount of freedom in North America...My dreams of this culture were broken by [my] strange new found reality.”<sup>61</sup> Gu Xiong felt that immigrating to Canada had dropped him to the bottom of society, where the challenge he faced was trying to understand the differences between Chinese and Canadian cultures. He had to find his own way to build a life for himself and his family, as well as providing himself with opportunities to work in his chosen field.

During his first year in Vancouver, Gu Xiong continued to develop the *Barricade Series* of paintings and drawings he had initiated during his stay at the Banff Centre. Although he was struggling with many adjustments in his personal life and professional life in Canada, Gu Xiong continued to produce work that addressed the social and political situation in the PRC. He was still affected by what he had witnessed at Tiananmen, and being in Canada afforded him a freedom to portray the incident in ways that would not

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<sup>59</sup> Guang Tian, *Chinese-Canadians, Canadian-Chinese: Coping and Adapting in North America*, (Lewiston: The Edward Mellon Press, 1999), 153.

<sup>60</sup> Guang Tian, 244.

<sup>61</sup> John O’Brian quotes Gu Xiong in his essay: “Long-Distance Swimming,” *Gu Xiong: The River*, (Victoria: The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1999), 5. John O’Brian also printed these comments made by Gu Xiong in “A Conversation with Gu Xiong,” *Gu Xiong: The Mirror: A Return to China*, unpublished interview, (Whitehorse: Yukon Arts Centre, 1999).

have been permitted in the PRC. As well, during Gu Xiong's first few years in Canada he likely felt more comfortable addressing the ills of Chinese society than his new circumstances in Canadian society. In May 1991, he exhibited the largest realization of the series in a multimedia installation, *Barricade of Bicycles - June 4, 1989* (figs. 16a & 16b), at Open Space Gallery in Victoria, B.C. Using over 300 bicycles donated by the local community, Gu Xiong installed a massive barricade of bicycles in the center of the gallery and incorporated western media footage of the Tiananmen Massacre. The installation was intended to commemorate the second anniversary of the suppression of the pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. Gu Xiong considered the barricade of bicycles a symbol that represented both the human lives lost and the united efforts of the protesters who built similar structures in Tiananmen. The physical presence of the large number of crumpled bicycles created an impressive visual effect and a moving monument to the lives lost in Tiananmen Square. The *Barricade Series* was a continuation of the concept of enclosures Gu Xiong had developed in the installation and performance art pieces he had produced in the late 1980s in China. Gu Xiong accompanied the installation with a written text in English and Chinese titled "Enclosure- A Statement" that explained his ideas behind the theme of the work (Appendix II).

Concurrent with his continued work on the *Barricade Series*, in the spring of 1991 Gu Xiong worked with the Vancouver artist Henry Tsang on a collaborative performance-art piece. Gu Xiong was drawing upon his observations and experiences as a new immigrant as new subject matter for his art. In March, Gu Xiong and Henry Tsang performed *Shock Culture* at the Western Front, an artist-run centre in Vancouver (figs. 17a and 17b). Henry Tsang and Gu Xiong had met prior to Gu Xiong's immigration, when both artists were residents at the Banff Centre in 1986.<sup>62</sup> Tsang had also visited him while traveling in China in the late 1980s. Later, when Gu Xiong's family arrived in Vancouver, Tsang assisted them in their initial processes of adapting to their new environment.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, March 2001, 4.

<sup>63</sup> Henry Tsang, "Shock Culture: A Performance by Gu Xiong and Henry Tsang," *Front*, (March/April, 1991), 9.

*Shock Culture* chronicled Gu Xiong's experience accustoming himself to life in Vancouver. He expressed his emotional reaction to his experiences through physical movements. A television played a video element, flashing words and images that expressed the isolation and confusion he experienced. A small article in *Front* magazine described the performance: "Taking on the roles of ones within and without a comprehensible cultural context, they will explore such themes as cultural isolation, trans-class inequities, communication barriers, and the myth of common sense."<sup>64</sup>

Through his professional and personal contact with Henry Tsang, Gu Xiong became aware of current developments in Chinese-Canadian visual art with respect to the issues of Chinese-Canadian cultural identity and representation. Tsang's own practices as a performance and installation artist, as he described them, focused on validating Chinese-Canadian subjectivities and contextualizing their "transcultural" experiences.<sup>65</sup> At the time that Tsang and Gu Xiong were collaborating, Tsang was curating *Self Not Whole*, one of two landmark exhibitions of Chinese-Canadian contemporary art to take place in Vancouver in the early 1990s. As previously noted, *Self Not Whole* was intended to scrutinize the notion of a common Chinese-Canadian culture and to create a space to explore of multiple experiences of Chinese ethnicity within Chinese-Canadian culture. Gu Xiong was made aware of issues addressed in the *Self Not Whole* exhibition through his personal involvement with it. The Chinese character for the word "search" that appears on the front of the cover of the *Self Not Whole* catalogue is Gu Xiong's calligraphic work.<sup>66</sup>

Although it is difficult to determine the precise extent to which dialogues about Asian Canadian cultural identity influenced Gu Xiong's work at that time and later, it is clear that he made personal and professional associations with other artists and curators who were discussing such issues. His interest in constructing and expressing an identity

<sup>64</sup> Henry Tsang, "Shock Culture", 8.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Tsang, "Artist's Statement," Keith Wallace, ed., *Whispered Art Histories: Twenty-five Years at the Western Front*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993), 141.

<sup>66</sup> In spite of Gu Xiong's collaboration with Tsang at the time, his work did not appear in the *Self Not Whole* exhibition, however, only six visual artists were selected by curators Tsang and Lorraine Chang. It was a very limited representation of Chinese-Canadian contemporary art, but this, I feel, was due to the strong curatorial direction of the exhibition. See Henry Tsang, ed., *Self Not Whole*, (Vancouver: The Chinese Cultural Centre, 1991).

that is between “Chinese” and “Canadian” arose not only from his own experiences, but also from the ideas in Vancouver about Chinese-Canadian identity and community. While his approach to such ideas is unique to his own aesthetic, stylistic and thematic interests, his practice of exploring issues of race, ethnicity and identity is in keeping with dialogues regarding Chinese-Canadian cultural identities that have been part of the development of Chinese-Canadian visual culture for the past three decades.<sup>67</sup>

### Gu Xiong as “The Crusher”: Shifting Terrain of Cultural Identification

In the essay she contributed to the *Self Not Whole* catalogue, Rose Ho wrote: “It is in the process of overcoming hurdles, and compensating for what is missing that one is most aware of one’s self-identity.”<sup>68</sup> Such awareness of identity also involves positioning oneself in relation to one’s immediate reality. For his first solo exhibition at the Diane Farris Gallery in fall 1991, Gu Xiong produced a mixed media installation which he titled *Gu’s World* (figs. 18a and 18b). The central element of the installation was a series of painting and prints he called his *Cafeteria series*. His subject matter was the discarded pop cans, plastic utensils, cafeteria trays, and refuse he encountered each day as he worked in the cafeteria at U.B.C. His main interest in these works was exploring the ways that individuals leave their mark on the common objects they use and discard.<sup>69</sup> Gu Xiong’s stylistic treatment for the monochrome paintings in the series incorporated the linear patterned character of his previous paintings like *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4th*. A Pop art aesthetic inflected Gu Xiong’s linear handling. In some of the works, Gu Xiong enhanced the bright, flat colours and logos of the consumer products he reproduced. He

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<sup>67</sup> Rosa Ho discusses the problematic nature of the hyphenated Chinese-Canadian identity in her essay “Saltwater City Then, Wan Koh Wa Now: Another Chinese View in Vancouver,” in *Self Not Whole*, 22. Ho wrote: “A hyphenated culture and identity such as Chinese-Canadian encompasses two spheres of thought which are simultaneously, mutually enhancing and oppositional. Does this hyphenation imply an ideal for cultural functionalism within more than one culture or is it a bureaucratic figure of speech to window-dress racial and cultural differences by means of the simple semantic formula of annexing two cultural entities? Each hyphen group is then left to evolve and define its own social, cultural and political agenda.”

<sup>68</sup> Rosa Ho, 21.

<sup>69</sup> The Diane Farris Gallery, “Press Release: Gu Xiong: *Gu’s World*,” unpublished.

used bright high-keyed colours to enhance the visual impact of some of the paintings. The *Cafeteria Series* included a number of ‘portraits’ of individual crushed pop cans (fig. 18b). Gu Xiong exhibited these paintings of the cans with an intermittent text. This text read: “Common/ Objects/ Made/ Alike/ Come/ to/ Life/ When/ They/ are/ Killed.” In the crushed and discarded waste that surrounded him as he worked in the cafeteria, Gu Xiong found what he felt was a symbol for his immigration experience. Discussing the exhibition, he said:

The first show was at the Diane Farris Gallery entitled “Gu’s World” and I dealt with my experience in the cafeteria -- dirty trays, forks, knives and crushed cans -- those kinds of things because that’s what made sense to me. I remember one time seeing the people crush the cans after the drink in the cafeteria. I suddenly found that the can was myself. It was painful to go through this kind of crushing. Like my life in China, my dreams had been crushed like those bicycles. My life in Canada in Canadian culture was crushed just like these crushed cans. I found that was interesting because those cans, when you look at them in the shops, every one looks the same, but [they] only become unique after they are crushed. So then I found, well, my life has to be reborn after this kind of crushing.<sup>70</sup>

The *Cafeteria Series* of paintings is noticeably devoid of specific references to Chinese culture in form, content, and style. The materiality of western consumer culture and the visual interest of the forms of crushed waste provided the basis for these paintings. One of the paintings shown in the *Gu’s World* depicts the waste and debris from McDonald’s restaurants (fig. 18a). The formal elements of the paintings of the *Cafeteria Series*, the strong sense of line, and Gu Xiong’s interest in simplifying patterns and shape overshadowed the less obvious references to the artist’s early experiences in Canada. Rather, they transmitted Gu Xiong’s critique of the consumerism of North American culture. I believe Gu Xiong originally intended the theme of crushing to address social rather than personal issues. In a review of the exhibition in the December 1991 issue of *Fine Art* magazine, Alvin Balkind suggested the artist “may or may not have been conscious” of using the crushed cafeteria waste as a symbol of change and the clashing of

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August, 1998, 11.

cultures that reflected his experiences in Canada. As Gu Xiong's close friend, Balkind was inclined to see this connection. He wrote:

Although he may not often speak of it, he must also feel occasionally crushed by the burden of enduring as an artist while trying to survive economically, socially and linguistically in a country remote from cultural China, where he was born.<sup>71</sup>

In my conversations with Gu Xiong, it was clear that Balkind's interpretation resonated with him and that, in retrospect, he had come to interpret the *Cafeteria Series* in more personal terms.<sup>72</sup> At the time these works were produced, however, his intentions were to create an artistic representation of the commonplace objects that surrounded him and to use this representation to comment upon and critique the consumer waste in North American society.

Gu Xiong employed the same stylistic treatment in a series of paintings he produced for his next solo exhibition, *Heads of State* (fig.19), which was shown at the Diane Farris Gallery in November 1992. The *Heads of State* exhibition featured a series of portraits, painted in acrylic on canvas, of prominent political leaders, including Margaret Thatcher, George Bush, Saddam Hussein, Yassar Arafat, Brian Mulroney, Corazon Aquino, and Manuel Noriega. Gu Xiong rendered his subjects with a linear Pop art technique similar to that used for the *Cafeteria Series*, but for these portraits he manipulated the appearance of the crushing so that they resembled crumpled newspaper articles, complete with excerpts about the political events which thrust these leaders into the media spotlight. In *Heads of State*, Gu Xiong shifted from exploring personal circumstances to scrutinizing global political realities.

In an article about the *Outsider/Insider - Contemporary Chinese Art* exhibition in which Gu Xiong exhibited paintings from the *Cafeteria Series*, Xiaoping Li described the "plurality of vision" Chinese artists living outside of China experienced. Chinese artists living in Diaspora, she wrote, were able to see "the entire world as a foreign land."<sup>73</sup> This

<sup>71</sup> Alvin Balkind, "Gu-Xiong, 1991: The Crusher," *Fine Art*, (December, 1991), n.p.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August, 1998, 12.

<sup>73</sup> Xiaoping Li, "New Chinese in Exile," *Border/Lines*, vol. 29, no. 30, (1993), 44.

ability gave these artists a critical awareness of their new cultural context from being positioned both inside and outside the culture. Gu Xiong's move to North America and his exposure to Western media prompted him to question the political and social values these heads of state supposedly embodied. The exhibition conveyed a sense of the artist's disillusionment with political power and presented a cynical view of the disposability of political rhetoric. At the entrance of the exhibition, Gu Xiong painted a large recycling logo with a text that read "We Recycle- Heads of State". His recycling logo was a symbolic question mark; he intended to provoke viewers to think about their own actions and interests in relation to global systems of political power.<sup>74</sup> Gu Xiong attached the portraits of political leaders to flat panels upon which he painted McDonald's golden arches. Below the portraits, Gu Xiong ran a frieze of paintings of corporate logos for major capitalist institutions: the Bank of Montreal, Time Life, Coca-Cola, and Visa, among others, suggesting the interconnectedness and interchangeability of the political and corporate powers that operate on a global scale.

Two years of diligent work resulted in new opportunities for Gu Xiong. In 1992, he began working as the technician in the printmaking studio in U.B.C.'s Department of Fine Arts. He also established his teaching career in Vancouver by working as an instructor in the Department of Printmaking and Part-Time Studies at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design. The exhibitions of his work at the Diane Farris Gallery received media attention in The Vancouver Sun, and he was interviewed about his experiences of immigrating to Canada and making art on CBC radio.<sup>75</sup> Gu Xiong's art was also gaining recognition farther afield through his participation in travelling group exhibitions. His painting, *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4th, 1989* was part of the *Goya to Beijing* exhibition organized by the Windsor Art Gallery in 1991 that traveled to the

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 12; Bruce Parsons, "Insiders and Outsiders: Contemporary Chinese Art," SUB Rosa, vol. 3, (1993), 7.

<sup>75</sup> One article in The Vancouver Sun, presented a narrative of Gu Xiong's experiences in China and Canada: Jamie Lamb, "Artist Overcomes Lifetime of Obstacles," The Vancouver Sun, (Sept. 28, 1991). The second article reviewed *Heads of State*: Ann Rosenberg. "Of Power, Folly and Fantasy," The Vancouver Sun, (Nov. 14, 1992). Gu Xiong was interviewed on CBC radio three times: May 16, 1990; June 24, 1990; November 19, 1992.

Vancouver Art Gallery and then went overseas. Paintings from the *Cafeteria Series* and the *Heads of State Series* were exhibited in Artspace gallery in Peterborough, Ontario, and Saw Gallery in Ottawa as part of the *Outsider/Insider- Contemporary Chinese Art* exhibition. His portraits of the crushed cans were exhibited at the Brenda Wallace Gallery in Montréal, Quebec, in 1992.

In 1993, Gu Xiong had his third solo exhibition at the Diane Farris Gallery, entitled *Distant Memories-New Horizons*. The exhibition of prints and drawings formed a mini-retrospective of Gu Xiong's work from the early 1980s through 1993. Early woodblock prints of city and rural scenes of Sichuan province, the politically charged drawings of the barricades of bicycles, and the silk-screen prints from the *Cafeteria Series* were exhibited together. Robin Laurence, an art critic for The Vancouver Sun, noted that work exhibited in *Distant Memories-New Horizons* provided not only an eloquent chronicle of Gu Xiong's experiences, but also demonstrated the artist's strong sense of design, his assured composition and line, and his preoccupation with simplifying and amplifying patterns in his work.<sup>76</sup> The exhibition's title, *Distant Memories-New Horizons*, revealed Gu Xiong's perspective on his position in relation to China and Canada. China was represented as a geographically distant place that existed in memory or as a nostalgic vision of his past. By contrast, Canada was the place of the present, with the word "horizons" functioning as an indicator of a visible geographic point of reference and a metaphor for the artist's hopes for his future.

Professional gains made by Gu Xiong in his first two years established his career and reputation in the local community; however, Gu Xiong and his family were still adapting to and coping with their changed environment. After attaining economic stability, adjusting socially to a new culture is the biggest challenge faced by new immigrants. Gu Xiong constantly questioned the decision he had made to move to Canada because of its effects on his family. They were living in a basement suite, and both Gu Xiong and his wife, Ge Ni, were working very hard to meet the family's needs. For the first three years,

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<sup>76</sup> Robin Laurence, "Memories of the Past, Faces from the Present," The Vancouver Sun, (Sept. 11, 1993).

Ge Ni was unhappy and wanted to return to China. In an interview, Gu Xiong spoke of an episode that expressed how his family's hardships influenced his perspective on their life in Canada:

I remember one day I asked her [Ge Ni], 'What do you think of Vancouver because it is a very beautiful city.' And she looked around and said, 'Vancouver is a basement.' I was really surprised, but it was true because for someone like her, to come here, it doesn't matter how beautiful the place is, it is not real to her. The real place, the real landscape is the basement. She spent her time there. So that's why, in 1994, I made the installation entitled "The Basement".<sup>77</sup>

Coping with the stress caused by immigration involves making efforts to change one's outward situation or environment. However, coping efforts may also be directed inwards, to change the meaning of certain events or the ways circumstances are understood.<sup>78</sup> Gu Xiong produced *The Basement* (figs.20a and 20b), a mixed-media installation exhibited at the Richmond Art Gallery in 1994, to address the challenges he and his family had experienced. He hung red cloth banners on the walls of the circular gallery space. Upon the banners he had printed a text in Chinese characters that explained the personal symbolism of the basement and his feelings about living in Canada. This was not the first time Gu Xiong had used Chinese characters in his installations. He made a practice of accompanying his installations with explanatory texts, often written in both English and Chinese, to enrich the thematic focus of his work. I would suggest, however, that the prominence of the Chinese text in *The Basement* indicates a specific effort to tailor the installation to its site: the city of Richmond has the highest concentration of Chinese immigrants of municipalities in Greater Vancouver, with commercial and residential Chinese enclaves that are highly developed.<sup>79</sup> The Richmond Art Gallery is a civic institution located in the downtown core of this community. One can assume that a much larger proportion of the local audience for Gu Xiong's installation would have been able to read these texts in Chinese: this explains why they were exhibited without English

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August, 1998, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Guang Tian, 261.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 112.

translations.

Gu Xiong incorporated pieces from the *Cafeteria Series* into the installation. Four of his paintings of cafeteria debris and consumer refuse were fashioned into a cube-shaped box that was placed in the center of the installation. Gu Xiong also exhibited a series of charcoal drawings, executed in a highly realistic style, depicting the views from the windows and door of the basement suite in which his family lived. The central element of the installation was a charcoal drawing of the view out the door of the suite, looking outwards and upwards through the tunnel-like stairway towards the sunlight and trees in the yard. The open door and the stairwell evoked a sense of passage. It represented Gu Xiong's vision of his family's transition, moving out of the darkness and isolation into the light of a hopeful future in their new culture.<sup>80</sup> He transformed the basement into a symbol of hope and renewal by suggesting that it offered him and his family the opportunity to put their roots deep into the earth of their new land. By turning the experience of living in a dark basement suite into a symbol of growth, he provided an alternative view of their experience that was hopeful.

In *The Basement*, Gu Xiong turned his personal experiences of cultural transition into a narrative with social relevance by representing them symbolically in an installation created for a public space, this suggesting the artist's growing awareness of the pertinence of his family's experiences within the local society. Those observing his work also noted the social and cultural pertinence of his art. In the reviews and articles about Gu Xiong that appeared in the mainstream media from 1993 to 1995, he is portrayed consistently as an artist who represents the immigrant experience.<sup>81</sup> Earlier exhibitions like *Gu's World* and *Heads of State*, evoked a sense of distance, even alienation, from mainstream commercial and political culture; Gu Xiong utilized the perspective of being outside the

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<sup>80</sup> This is the idea expressed by Gu Xiong in the text that accompanies the image of the basement in his book, *The Yellow Pear*, "Living in the basement, I realized that when someone moves and becomes part of another culture, he or she must establish new roots in order to begin growing again. For me, the basement come to symbolize this transition, these new roots." Gu Xiong, *The Yellow Pear*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> This public identification as an immigrant artist is indicated in the headlines of the articles by Anita Fung, "Artist's Dream and Practice," *Ming Pao*, (Oct. 16, 1993); Bill Lam, "Culture Shock" *The Richmond News*, (Jan. 16, 1994); Jamie Lamb, "An Artful Glimpse into the Chinese Immigrant Experience" *The Vancouver Sun*, April 21, 1995; Peter Wilson, "Immigrant Images", *The Vancouver Sun*, (April 24, 1995).

dominant culture to explore visual symbols and cultural meaning. In *The Basement* and in the media attention his work received at the time, his identification as an immigrant artist became more clearly defined. His image and role as a chronicler of immigration culture were both self-determined and publicly fostered; but how did Gu Xiong feel about representing the collective experiences of a social group? While he has emphasized the individuality of his artistic practice and his identity, he has also recognized his role a representative of Chinese immigrant experiences:

Since I came here I've found, as an immigrant artist, it's important to record my life, because my life can be an example for this kind of cultural diversity of Canadian culture. Because I am an artist I am lucky, I am able to do this kind of recording. But the other people who don't have this kind of choice, they are working hard, they have given up themselves, their hopes. Because that situation, you can see if you look at immigrant people, the first generation, when they come from different cultures and places the first thing is just working hard, doing low-paying jobs and hope their children can do better, but for me, at that time, I also said 'Of course, we have to try our best because we are valuable for this culture. Because we bring another culture to add to this culture, the good parts into this culture if we do our individual cultural practice.' I also was thinking about what kinds of things I should do with my art. Always questioning myself. But I found my life, my experiences here provided a rich cultural background for me to use in my art.<sup>82</sup>

In many cultural contexts, the social positioning of an immigrant would necessarily place an individual outside the dominant culture; however, in the early 1990s Chinese made up 22% of the population of the city of Vancouver, a percentage that has continued to grow.<sup>83</sup> The influence of Chinese and other Asian cultures permeates urban life in Vancouver; inhabitants of the city have access to a wide variety of Chinese goods, services, and cultural activities. Speakers of Cantonese, Mandarin, and other Chinese dialects have occasion to use their language in many communities within the region.<sup>84</sup> By identifying with Chinese immigrant culture and representing aspects of the experiences of this community, Gu Xiong was positioning himself and his artistic practice in relation to a

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 12.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 112.

<sup>84</sup> Rosa Ho, 21.

large segment of Vancouver's demographic profile. This interest in turning personal experiences into an artistic representation of the cultural diversity of the local region became increasingly apparent in his work of the mid-1990s.

### **Locating Culture and Identity in the Everyday**

A variety of commonplace objects from Gu Xiong's daily life became the raw materials for a series of charcoal drawings on canvas that he produced between 1994 and 1996. In twenty-nine highly detailed and technically skillful drawings, Gu Xiong rendered his friends, members of his family, and certain objects that surrounded him during his first five years in Canada. Gu Xiong imbued the objects he selected with highly personal symbolic value. He produced written texts that accompanied each drawing, explaining how the object represented certain similarities and differences between Chinese and Canadian culture. His drawing of a drinking fountain was paired with a text that explained that, back in China, people didn't drink cold water because of pollution. In China, drinking water has to be boiled and is therefore usually served hot, whereas in Canada water is processed to make it drinkable (fig. 22d). Gu Xiong wrote that it took him and his family a long time to become accustomed to drinking cold water and, in the end, still preferred to drink boiled water.<sup>85</sup> Such an example illustrates how the differences between cultures become apparent in actions as seemingly mundane as drinking water from a fountain, using a telephone, or drinking milk.

The drawings and their accompanying texts revealed Gu Xiong's interest in exploring how an identity is formulated through various interactions within an individual's environment. Discussing of the changing concept of self in contemporary China, Godwin C. Chu suggests that the self develops from the interactions of three entities within an

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<sup>85</sup> Gu Xiong, *The Yellow Pear*, 14.

individual's environment: materials and objects; beliefs, ideas and values; significant others.<sup>86</sup> A related formulation of identity is apparent in Gu Xiong's work. In this series of drawings, Gu Xiong defined a sense of self through his interactions with material objects, his friends and family, and his beliefs and values. This process of self-identification was then represented in multiple canvases and texts, each addressing a specific object, person, or event. Together, these drawings formed a representation of Gu Xiong's processes of self-formation in visual and textual forms.

In spring 1995, The Vancouver Art Gallery mounted the major exhibition, *New Art in China, 1989-1994*. The exhibition was organized for the Hanart T Z gallery in Hong Kong by Li Xianting and Chang Tsong-zong.<sup>87</sup> This traveling exhibition presented a selection of paintings and installations by well-known contemporary Chinese artists. Many of these artists, such as Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Fang Lijun, and Liu Wei, were already well-known outside of China. The local curator of the exhibition, Grant Arnold, organized a companion exhibition called, *Here Not There* featuring the work of five Chinese-born artists who lived in Vancouver.<sup>88</sup> Arnold intended *Here Not There* to function as an intermediary between *New Art in China, 1989-1994* and the local viewing audience. *Here Not There* was meant to give audiences an enriched context for the participating local artists by relating their work to developments in contemporary Chinese art.<sup>89</sup>

Gu Xiong created the multi-media installation entitled *Here, There, Everywhere* for *Here Not There*. His installation occupied a large rectangular room in the art gallery.

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<sup>86</sup> Godwin C. Chu, "The Changing Concept of Self in Contemporary China," in *Culture and Self*, Marsella et al, eds., (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985), 252.

<sup>87</sup> Li Xianting is one of the most important curators and critics of contemporary Chinese art. His writing on contemporary art was highly influential in the 1980s and 1990s. He was the founding editor of *Fine Art in China* magazine and one of the curators of the first exhibition of avant-garde art in Beijing in 1989. Chang Tsong-zong is the director of Hanart T Z Gallery, one of the first galleries to begin representing and exhibiting contemporary artists from the People's Republic of China.

<sup>88</sup> These artists were Shi Guoliang, Sam Lam, Huang Yali, Zhang Qun and Gu Xiong. *Here Not There*, (Vancouver: The Vancouver Art Gallery, 1995).

<sup>89</sup> Grant Arnold quoted in Peter Wilson, "The New Art of China," *The Vancouver Sun*, (April 24, 1995).

He positioned a television monitor with its screen facing up towards the center of this space (fig 21a). Images of a campfire and a flashing text of English words appeared on the television. Sounds of the ocean and a campfire came from four speakers in the corners of the room. The television monitor was surrounded by a circle of eight benches painted to resemble the trigrams of the *Yi Jing*. Viewers could sit on these benches while watching the video as though they were sitting on logs around a campfire. A couch covered by the work clothes of Gu Xiong and his wife was placed on one side of the campfire arrangement. The clothes on the couch symbolized the work Gu Xiong's family undertook to sustain themselves financially.<sup>90</sup> Gu Xiong erected a tent directly opposite the couch as a symbol of his family's aspirations to have the leisure time to enjoy the natural beauty of the Canadian landscape and family life.<sup>91</sup>

On the front wall of the installation, three large drawings, measuring 5 ft. by 8 ft. were grouped together. The central drawing was a portrait of Gu Xiong's daughter, Gu Yu, depicted as a six-year old, the age she was when they first arrived in Vancouver. Below the portrait Gu Xiong placed a replica of a letter Gu Yu had written to Santa Claus. On either side of the portrait, Gu Xiong hung two paintings, each measuring 3 ft. x 8 ft. that resembled banners and each with a quotation from the writings of Chairman Mao Zedong. The quotation read: "In times of difficulty we must not lose sight of our achievements, must see the bright future and must pluck up our courage." In both paintings, this quotation was written in white lettering against a red background. In the painting to the viewer's left of the portrait, the quotation was written in Chinese, to the right it was translated into English. The quotation was certainly chosen by the artist for its idealistic and inspirational message. Within the context of Gu Xiong's installation, a

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<sup>90</sup> Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere: A description*. Artist's proposal, unpublished 1995, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere: A description*, 1.

message intended to bolster the spirits of the proletariat takes on a very specific and personal meaning for the artist.

Gu Xiong and his wife experienced a great deal of hardship living in China under Mao's leadership; it is my interpretation that it was with irony that Gu Xiong implied that he could seek guidance in Mao's words for challenges they faced in Canada. However, the quotation also resonates with Gu Xiong's perseverance, and creates a link between his family's past and their present lives. The artist made another reference to the connection between the past and present in the two self-portraits that flanked the quotes from Mao. In the self-portrait on the left-hand side, Gu Xiong depicted himself as he had appeared for his performance piece, *Enclosure*, at the 1989 *China Avant-garde* exhibition, wearing clothing with the pattern of chain link fencing (fig.21b). Underneath the self-portrait Gu Xiong hung a representation of his exhibition name tag with the 'No U-turn' logo. He accompanied the self-portrait with a text that explained the show's closure and the events at Tiananmen a few months later. The second self-portrait on the right showed Gu Xiong in an identical pose. In this self-portrait, Gu Xiong depicted himself standing on the picket lines outside the cafeteria at U.B.C., participating in a strike that occurred in 1992 (fig.21c). In the drawing Gu Xiong stands in the foreground with the U.B.C. campus forming the background. Gu Xiong wears warm clothing and a picket sign that reads "WE'RE OUT FOR FAIRNESS". Below the painting, Gu Xiong placed a representation of his food services name tag. The consistency of the scale of the two self-portraits and the fact that the poses are identical, along with the nametags positioned below them, suggested the artist's double identification with his past and present selves. It is significant to note that Gu Xiong chose to include a detailed and local background for his self-portrait while leaving the other image of himself devoid of any reference to time or space. This perhaps suggests that the way Gu Xiong identified himself in China as a prominent Chinese avant-garde artist no longer exists in a concrete context. Portraying this displaced or unplaced sense of self affirmed its existence in the present as a memory or as one of the elements that constitute his present sense of self.

Another portrait of Gu Yu standing atop a mountain precipice in Banff, Alberta, was placed on the opposite wall (fig.21d). The portrait was the largest drawing in the installation, measuring 15 ft. by 8 ft. Comparing the two portraits, one notes the physical difference between Gu Yu as a child and as a teen, but there is also a significant change in her demeanour. Gu Yu is portrayed as a happy confident young woman standing before a magnificent vista of Canada's natural beauty, and the painting evokes a sense of Gu Yu inhabiting this landscape. The portrait was flanked by two paintings that resemble banners with English and Chinese versions of a poem, "Stable, it is like a mountain peak; Rest, it is like a deep abyss." The poem was meant to convey, once more, the permanence and stability of Gu Yu's and the family's relationship to Canada's natural environment.

Images of Gu Yu figure prominently in Gu Xiong's work. In *Here, There, Everywhere*, Gu Yu is the most significant symbol within an installation that contains many. She is represented as a symbol of the family's successful cultural adaptation. Because she came to Canada when young, Gu Yu's adaptation to Canadian culture was much easier for her than it was for her parents. Gu Xiong has explained what Gu Yu represents to her family: "She is the symbol of our adaptation. She grew up here, and she is able to speak English, French, and Chinese. She belongs to this place."<sup>92</sup> Gu Xiong sees his daughter as having had the opportunity to be integrated into Canadian culture to an extent that he and his wife will never experience and thus has become a symbol of the family's future in Canada.

Along the two side walls of the installation Gu Xiong hung six large drawings of the landscape of British Columbia as well as a portrait of Ge Ni (fig. 21e). Interspersed between the six larger drawings, Gu Xiong exhibited sixteen smaller drawings, each accompanied by the texts that recorded the various stories, meditations and emotions that inspired them. In *Here, There, Everywhere*, Gu Xiong indicated his awareness of the performative nature of identity. I use the term "performative" here to suggest that it is through the processes of negotiation and, importantly, *articulation and action* that

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<sup>92</sup> Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere: A Description*, 2.

identities come into being.<sup>93</sup> Gu Xiong's sense of his own identity was revealed to the viewer through the multiple social, cultural and personal interactions that occurred in the artist's everyday life. What is apparent in *Here, There, Everywhere* is that he determined the meanings of these interactions by referring to past and present observations and experiences. The structure of the installation underscored Gu Xiong's sense of his identity as an intersection of his past and present which he understands through a variety of experiences and associations. The installation seems to reflect his awareness of identity as an act of exploration and interpretation. Homi K. Bhabha has written: "The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy- it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image."<sup>94</sup> When viewers entered *Here, There, Everywhere* they walked into yet another representation of 'Gu's World', in which the artist interpreted his environment as a kind of tableau of symbols which he could draw upon to produce an image of his own identity. Yet, the fragmented nature of the work and the artist's interest in the subjective interpretation of meanings stimulated by these objects also turned the installation space into an arena for cultural translation. Viewers would have come to the installation with their own associations with the objects Gu Xiong rendered.<sup>95</sup> His stories and observations were intended to provoke the viewer into probing the meaning of their associations. Viewers would have been challenged to think beyond their own frame of reference and to consider how the associations one might have with an object are at once culturally specific and subject to change.

Landscape is often conceived as emblematic of Canada. *Here, There, Everywhere* was the first installation where Gu Xiong articulated a sense of connection to his new physical environment. In subsequent installations described below, he examines his sense of connection to the natural environment to a more significant degree. In *Here, There,*

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<sup>93</sup> My concept of the "performative nature of identity" is influenced by the theoretical writings of Homi K. Bhabha, "Locations of Culture," *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 9.

<sup>94</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "Interrogating Identity: Franz Fanon and the Postcolonial Perogative," *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 45.

<sup>95</sup> My interpretation is based upon the written and visual documentation of the exhibition. I did not see the installation.

*Everywhere*, Gu Xiong depicted himself and his family situated in the landscape of British Columbia and Alberta. However, when representing their relationships to the geographic environment, he also made a point of acknowledging that they came to the land bearing their own stories and experiences. In the proposal for the installation, Gu Xiong suggested that the tent was meant to symbolize his family's immigration.<sup>96</sup> The tent, as a mobile form of shelter, was evocative of the journey the family had made, but it also suggested the permanence of the ties they had made to the Canadian landscape through their leisure activities in the outdoors. The representation of the trigrams of the *Yi Jing* indicated Gu Xiong's continuing interest in Chinese philosophy. When Gu Xiong was going through his difficult periods of adjusting to life in Canada, ideas and concepts from Chinese philosophical system informed how he related to his new environment. Of his interest in Chinese philosophy, he has said:

Taoism, Confucianism or Zen [Chan Buddhism] from China, they always talk about finding yourself, to hold yourself in your everyday life, to do whatever you have to do and how to make yourself a better person. Because in that way I found it very important since I came to Canada. The Chinese philosophy has really helped me to go through difficulties in the west. Because at that time, when I came here, I totally lost myself. Everything. Then, to hold myself, I had to confront myself. I had to confront this society and the culture to stand up again in that way. So the Chinese philosophy: Zen, Confucianism, and Taoism was extremely helpful to help me confront myself.<sup>97</sup>

The eight trigrams come from the *Yi Jing*, or Book of Changes, a book of wisdom and divination that has been a foundation of Chinese thought since the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E- 220 C.E.).<sup>98</sup> The *Yi Jing* is a metaphysical text that explains the relationships between humans, the natural world, and the universe. The sixty-four hexagrams of the various trigram combinations are the cosmic archetypes that represent the power of the *Tao*, or Way in nature and in human situations. One way the *Yi Jing* is used is in the ancient practice of *Feng Shui*, a system of geomancy, where auspicious and unfavourable

<sup>96</sup> Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere: A Description*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August, 1998, 6.

<sup>98</sup> Henri Maspero, Taoism and Chinese Religion, (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 59.

physical orientations are determined by their relationship to the cardinal directions and the trigrams. The trigrams in the installation were oriented to the cardinal directions. They represented the spiritual and philosophical connection of the individual and the natural world. By including the trigrams in his installation as a symbol of Chinese philosophies, Gu Xiong acknowledged the role they continued to play in shaping his perceptions and interpretations of his experiences.

Grant Arnold, the curator of *Self Not Whole*, suggested Gu Xiong's drawings and texts from *Here, There, Everywhere* would work well in the format of a book. The Vancouver Art Gallery was unable to provide the finances for the project so Gu Xiong began to look elsewhere for resources. 1997 was designated Canada's Year of Asia Pacific, and the federal government made funds available for projects that promoted, celebrated, or articulated Asian and Asian Canadian cultural forms. Gu Xiong applied successfully for funding. His book, The Yellow Pear, was published by the Arsenal Pulp Press in association with the Burnaby Art Gallery in Vancouver in 1997 (fig 22a). The format of the book paired reproductions of the twenty-nine charcoal drawings from *Here, There, Everywhere* with their accompanying texts in English and Chinese on the facing pages. In his introduction to The Yellow Pear, Gu Xiong gave a preliminary explanation of the personal nature of the book and his own interest in documenting his family's experiences:

I came to Canada from China in 1989. One year later, my wife and my daughter joined me in Vancouver. After several years struggling with culture shock, we finally settled down and started a new life here. But our experiences in Canada are always linked to our past in China. We continually weave the old and the new together through our bodies and souls, destroyed and reborn in the clash of two cultures.

As a contemporary artist, my family's experience has been the source of inspiration for my work. I draw those objects which surround us in our daily life; which have accompanied us through our cultural transition and our search for an identity in our new homeland.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Gu Xiong, The Yellow Pear, 1.

Gu Xiong took the title of the book from a quote from Mao Zedong (fig 22b). Mao's quote became a metaphor for linking the past and present experiences of Gu Xiong's family:

Chairman Mao said, "If you want to know the taste of the pear, you have to bite into it." We tasted the pear of the Cultural Revolution through our sufferings in China. When we moved to Canada we tasted another pear – culture shock. But we planted the seeds of the pear deeply into this new land, so that it may blossom and bear the fruits of our new life.<sup>100</sup>

As in the *Here, There, and Everywhere* installation, in The Yellow Pear Gu Xiong acknowledged how memories continue to influence his engagement with the present. The yellow pear from Mao's quote became a personal symbol with various meanings relating to his experiences. Gu Xiong transforms the meaning of the symbolic yellow pear into a symbol of renewal and growth. The yellow pear, like the symbol of the basement, also forms a link between experiences in the past and hopes for the future.

His drawing of a rice cooker is paired with a text explaining how rice becomes one of many symbols of cultural difference (figs 22c). Rice is a symbol with multiple meanings for the artist, serving as marker of cultural identification and a means of differentiation between cultures. To him, rice also symbolizes the connection between nature and man:

We have changed a lot since we came here, but one thing we could not change is how much rice we eat. A kernel of rice has its own experience in nature. I can still smell the soil of the fields in China. I can still remember the difficulty cultivating it. Rice is a symbol of nature, and my energy comes from it. It is also a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, in which everything is related to nature. We are all part of nature, and we have to keep in touch with it.

Readers of The Yellow Pear may or may not have given consideration to the symbolic potential of rice, a telephone, milk, or a public water fountain (fig. 22d), or to how these objects and substances might garner a sense of familiarity or alienation that differs from their own associations. It has become common to discuss the migrant, the exile, or the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 3.

individual living in Diaspora as existing between cultures and/or inhabiting interstitial spaces. This mode of description has been adopted because it suggests movement and flexibility. The significance of occupying a position between cultures is that it keeps both the cultures of homeland and host country from being rigidly defined. In The Yellow Pear and in his installation pieces of the mid-1990s, Gu Xiong emphasized the role his native culture plays in shaping his understanding and interpretation of all customs, attitudes and ways of living.

Gu Xiong realized that his practice of integrating the symbols and experiences of his two cultures into visual and textual representations of a culture “in-between” was extremely relevant in the cultural and social climate of Vancouver. In The Yellow Pear, Gu Xiong expressed his desire to put multiculturalism’s ideals into practice:

An appreciation of multiculturalism comes through practice. Here in Canada, people from other lands often experience culture shock. They develop new ideas and make different choices based on their own experiences living here. This determines the true multicultural character of Canada.<sup>101</sup>

We can assume Gu Xiong’s own experiences are the basis for these insights. He sees himself as an active participant who helps determine the multicultural character of the nation. I would argue that the publication of The Yellow Pear is evidence of Gu Xiong’s willingness to adopt the idealistic aims of Canada’s ideology of multiculturalism in his work. By publishing his work in the format of a book, Gu Xiong indicated his interest in presenting his personal narrative to a broad spectrum of the population. His book is available at local art galleries and bookstores, making it accessible to audiences of literature who may not be seeing his work in galleries. The bilingual format suggests the book was intended for a linguistically diverse audience. The publication of The Yellow Pear also indicated the interests of civic and federal institutions in supporting Gu Xiong’s project. A project executed by a Chinese-Canadian artist addressing experiences of immigration and Chinese-Canadian identity was obviously well-suited to the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 59.

government's multicultural mandates.

In Canada, visual and performing arts rely to a large extent upon the financial support made available through state-funded programs and organizations, most notably the Canada Council for the Arts. Since Canada adopted multiculturalism as an official cultural policy, cultural diversity and its implications for the arts have been on the agenda of art institutions and the funding bodies that support their operations.<sup>102</sup> Initiatives to promote cultural diversity have created opportunities for minority artists. Multicultural policies enacted at the national level of the government and the local level of public galleries, theatres, performing and visual arts centres and artist-run centres have made the artistic communities increasingly sensitive to racial and ethnic diversity, gender, sexual, and religious differences. Public art institutions strive to mirror the racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of cities. After addressing the work Gu Xiong produced in the late 1990s, I will give further consideration to the intersections of Gu Xiong's exhibition practices and the representation of minority cultures in Vancouver's mainstream art institutions further along in this chapter. I argue that the changing mandates of art institutions and funding agencies like the Canada Council for the Arts and the B.C. Arts Council have enabled Gu Xiong to produce his work and exhibit extensively. Below I will consider how Gu Xiong's access to resources is one factor which has the potential to shape and influence the themes and subject matter Gu Xiong chooses to represent in his work.

### **Rivers and Mountains: The Physical and Spiritual Geographies of Home**

In 1997, Gu Xiong had a solo exhibition entitled *Red Lands* at the artist-run gallery A Space in Toronto. A theme of the show was the role museums play in the representation of cultures. In his proposal for *Red Lands*, Gu Xiong explained his view of the museum as a site for the translation of cultural symbols by relating a personal anecdote about a series of Chinese sculptures on permanent exhibition in the main staircase of the

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<sup>102</sup> Peter Li, "A World Apart: The Multicultural World of Visible Minorities and the Art World of Canada," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 4. (1994), 371.

Seattle Art Museum:

In China these sculptures stood at either side of the entrance to an emperor's tomb. They were used as a symbol of his power and might, they didn't have an identity of their own. They were created and destroyed over and over again. But brought to North America, these sculpture were allocated to the museums and became symbols of Chinese culture, thus receiving a new identity as cultural symbols. This blurring of cultural aesthetics makes their identity difficult to decipher.

Every time I have seen these sculptures at various museums, I have felt that I have seen myself. I have seen the past and the present. It is related to my immigrant experience. We (sculptures and family) were both displaced to North America, reborn here, and a new identity was bestowed upon us by the new culture and by our own experiences.<sup>103</sup>

Gu Xiong described a resonance he felt when he saw these sculptures because they too had come from China and acquired new meaning in their new culture context. The title of the exhibition, *Red Lands* alluded to the symbolism of the colour red, which is traditionally associated with happiness in Chinese culture. Red was also used extensively in the political propaganda in China during the Cultural Revolution. The colour is another recurring symbol in his work. It represents his suffering in the past and his hopes for happiness in the future.<sup>104</sup> The *Red Lands* exhibition was assembled from elements of previous installations as well as new work. Paintings, drawings, and prints from the *Cafeteria*, *Heads of State*, and *Here, There, and Everywhere* were incorporated into the multi-media installations he created for *Red Lands*. The exhibition was developed around several thematic elements. The personal narrative that is the central element in much of Gu Xiong's work was interwoven with an exploration of iconic images of western and Chinese cultures.

Gu Xiong and A Space borrowed Andy Warhol's original silkscreen portraits of Mao Zedong from the National Gallery of Canada for the exhibition (fig. 23a). Pop culture references to Chinese and western culture, such as ping pong paddles, toy panda bears, Coca Cola cans and McDonald's refuse were placed on the floor in the center of the

<sup>103</sup> Quotes from Gu Xiong's proposal which appeared in Andrew Hunter, "Into the Red Lands: The Museum of Gu Xiong," *Red Lands*, (Toronto: A Space Gallery, 1997), 21.

<sup>104</sup> Gu Xiong, "Artist's Statement," *Tracing Cultures*, (Vancouver: The Burnaby Art Gallery, 1997), 28.

installation. The artist juxtaposed the disposability of these materials of popular culture with the status of cultural icon that was represented by Warhol's Mao portraits. Through this juxtaposition, Gu Xiong also intended to reveal the threat of the suppression of individuality that he believes is at the root of both Maoist thought and North American consumer culture. He excerpted a quote from Mao Zedong that read: "Everyone should be a cogwheel and be screwed on the revolution machine – we must have the same ideas, taking the same steps and same actions."<sup>105</sup> He paired Mao's quote with a quote from Andy Warhol: "I think everybody should be a machine – everybody looks alike and acts alike." Gu Xiong buried each quote under a pile of flattened Coca Cola cans, thereby diminishing the political and cultural power of these icon figures under the power of the corporate logo in global consumer culture.

Gu Xiong explained his reasons for using Warhol's Mao portraits in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue:

I chose to use Andy Warhol's Mao for two reasons: Mao is a mass icon in China, Andy Warhol is an icon of Pop culture in the West. In this way, Warhol's Mao becomes a symbol for the popular cultures of both my worlds.<sup>106</sup>

His statement suggested that his intention was to relate his ideas about creating a new and complex identity from his experiences in Canada and China to the Warhol images of Mao that brought the east and west into a syncretic representation of the power of the icon.<sup>107</sup>

Warhol was not an icon of popular culture, as Gu Xiong suggests, but he did become famous for using icons of popular culture in his work. *Red Lands* is influenced by Warhol's aesthetic sensibility and his preoccupation with cultural icons and their meaning;

<sup>105</sup> This is Gu Xiong's interpretation/translation of Mao's statement from his talks at the Yan'an Forum, "Revolutionary literature and art are part of the whole revolutionary cause, they are cogs and wheels in it, and though in comparison with certain other and more important parts they may be less significant and less urgent and occupy a secondary position, nevertheless, they are indispensable cogs and wheels in the whole machine, an indispensable part of the entire revolutionary cause." Mao Zedong, Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung. Vol 3, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1975), 86.

<sup>106</sup> Gu Xiong, "Red Lands: A Multi-media Installation with Andy Warhol's Mao," Gu Xiong - Red Lands, (Toronto: A Space Gallery, 1997), 11.

<sup>107</sup> Gu Xiong, "Red Lands: A Multimedia Installation with Andy Warhol's Mao," 12.

however, Gu Xiong does not explore the ideas that form the theoretical basis for Pop art. Rather, he imbues Warhol's Mao with personal symbolism.

Along with Warhol's Mao, three sets of portraits by Gu Xiong were incorporated into the *Red Lands* exhibition. Two sets of 'funny face' portraits of the members of Gu Xiong's family were hung on the wall opposite Warhol's Mao (fig. 23b). In one set, Gu Xiong painted himself wearing false glasses with a false nose and moustache. In the portrait of his wife, he depicted her wearing a red clown's nose. Between these two portraits, is a portrait of Gu Yu without costume. The portraits represent how the traditional roles of the family became inverted when they immigrated. As I have noted above, Gu Yu has been a symbol of the family's cultural transition, but her relative ease in adapting to life in Canada was not without tensions. Gu Yu's ability to learn English quickly and the ease with which she adapted to Canadian culture meant that, in their new context, Gu Yu became the wise one in the family.<sup>108</sup>

In the second set of portraits, Gu Xiong depicted his family with blond hair and blue eyes, along with the false red noses, funny glasses, and clown face paints (fig.23b). The bright colours of these oil-on-canvas portraits united them with the Pop art aesthetic of the whole exhibition. The funny props Gu Xiong used in his portraits suggest an element of humour in his exploration of the relationship between certain physical characteristics of race and notions of identity. Within the humour there is an obvious tension between the reality of Gu Xiong and his family's racial origins and the representation of them with blonde hair and blue eyes. In another self-portrait in the exhibition, Gu Xiong portrayed himself wearing the traditional uniform of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police; however, his physical characteristics of race cannot be erased. Maintaining affiliations with one's racial, ethnic, and culture background can instill pride and confidence. On the other hand, these affiliations can also spawn insecurity and awkwardness. In *Red Lands*, Gu Xiong seemed to ask the question: are non-Caucasian

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<sup>108</sup> Andrew Hunter, "Into the Red Lands: The Museum of Gu Xiong," *Gu Xiong - Red Lands*, (Toronto: A Space Gallery, 1997), 24.

physical characteristics at odds with an authentic “Canadian” identity? It was clear that Gu Xiong was not expressing a desire to change his race or ethnic identity, for he acknowledged through his humorous portrayal the absurdity and even impossibility of fulfilling such a desire. Gu Xiong acknowledged that racial minorities are conscious of appearing different from the mainstream.

Gu Xiong exhibited a set of five portraits of Gu Yu in *Red Lands* (fig. 23c). The charcoal drawings represented Gu Yu at various ages from childhood to early adulthood. Gu Xiong and Gu Yu also collaborated in a performance piece entitled *A Girl From China* during the *Red Lands* exhibition.<sup>109</sup> In the performance, Gu Yu chronicled her family’s history and her own struggles to call Vancouver her home. Like her father, Gu Yu articulated her sense of cultural identity through symbolic elements. The panda bear, she explained, was the national symbol of China and native to the area of China where Gu Yu was born. She likened her own experience of immigrating to that of the pandas being taken out of China and brought to zoos overseas:

Like the panda bear, I came overseas to Canada to lead a new life. I am happy here with my family. I am Canadian. But part of me is Chinese. Part of me will always be. Part of me will always belong to the place where the bamboo forests grow.<sup>110</sup>

Earlier, when examining the *Here, There and Everywhere* installation, I discussed Gu Xiong’s representations of Gu Yu as a symbol of successful cultural adaptation. *A Girl From China* came out of Gu Yu’s own relationship with the issues of personal and cultural identity. The impetus for Gu Yu to express her own story certainly came from her familiarity with her father’s work as well as her own interests in writing and the visual arts. For Gu Xiong’s part, his role in the collaboration was largely curatorial. Like her father, Gu Yu suggested that her link to her cultural heritage comes through her own memories of China as well as the efforts her parents have made to teach her about culture.

<sup>109</sup> *A Girl from China* has been performed at Western Front Gallery, A Space Gallery in Toronto, the Burnaby Art Gallery, the Richmond Art Gallery, the Kamloops Art Gallery, Diane Farris Gallery and Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. These performances took place between 1997 and 1999.

<sup>110</sup> Gu Yu, *A Girl From China*, unpublished. Excerpted in Andrew Hunter, “Into The Red Lands: The Museum of Gu Xiong,” 27.

As Gu Yu enters adulthood, she has come to embody Gu Xiong's ideals for his family's future. It is a role in which Gu Yu feels comfortable; she identifies herself as "Canadian-Chinese" and has stated that she is confident and proud of this identity.<sup>111</sup>

Beginning in 1997, Gu Xiong and his family believed they had met and overcome the greatest obstacles in adapting to their new environment. The art Gu Xiong produced in the late 1990s began to indicate a new tendency to see his experiences of cultural transition as a small part within the larger scope of his life. In 1997, the Burnaby Art Gallery mounted the exhibition *Tracing Cultures IV: Cultural Migration and Difference*. The installation that Gu Xiong created for the exhibition entitled *Walk on Water* (fig. 24) signaled a subtle shift towards a more philosophical perspective on his experiences. There was also a shift in the aesthetic and stylistic elements he employed. The visual elements of the installation were reduced and simplified. The symbols he chose to express the theme of the work were pared down to their most basic forms. The walls of the exhibition space were painted bright red, the colour Gu Xiong used for its symbolic association with Chinese culture and the personal meaning it had for representing his suffering in China. Three large bathtubs were set in a row at the centre of the installation, and the rest of the floor space was filled with smaller white wash basins. The tubs and the basins were filled with water, white socks, and photo negatives of personal photographs mounted on rectangular mirrors. Throughout the installation the viewer heard a Chinese folk melody that was filtered into the space using speakers.

Each element of the installation had specific meanings that Gu Xiong explained in his artist's statement in the exhibition catalogue (See Appendix III). The title of the installation, he wrote, came from the expression 'You walk on water', meaning to have good luck.<sup>112</sup> The symbols of the bathtub and the socks are related to his family's early experiences in Canada. The suite where they lived when they first arrived in Vancouver had a washing machine that was very small, and the family would rinse their clothes in the

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<sup>111</sup> Gu Yu, *Who Am I?* Unpublished. Excerpted in Andrew Hunter, "Into the Red Lands: The Museum of Gu Xiong," 29.

<sup>112</sup> Gu Xiong, "Artist's Statement," *Tracing Cultures*, 28.

bath tub. Gu Xiong once saw a tub full of socks rinsing, and he was inspired to consider it a vision of his family's settlement in Canada. Socks, Gu Xiong suggested, are a much-neglected necessity of life that help us undertake actions like migration and hard work. To develop his theme, he drew on the symbolism of water in Chinese philosophy:

Water is a very meaningful entity in Chinese philosophy. Water can be a small stream, a river, an ocean, a cloud, rain, hail, snow, or fog. Water is tranquil and soft, but it can move anything. In spite of its many forms, soft or powerful, water is still water.<sup>113</sup>

Water's strength comes from its ability to change into various forms while remaining composed of the same essential elements. Water moves around the obstacles standing in its way. It can erode the hardest rock over a long period of time. It is a fitting symbol for the immigrant because it embodies the characteristics one needs to survive: fluidity, flexibility, and an adherence to one's true nature.

The folk music heard throughout the exhibition space was an old boat song that he knew from his hometown in China. It was sung by men who pulled the boats along the Yangzi River. Gu Xiong called such folk songs "inner calls of human existence."<sup>114</sup> The conceptual basis for this installation came from Gu Xiong's ideas about cultivating his "original" self. He wrote: "Our identity is only the surface – it is constantly lost and regained, but through this process, our original self is born. To hold and own this "original" is my lifelong aspiration."<sup>115</sup> Here Gu Xiong made a distinction between an outward or surface identity and an inner, essential self. This marked a dramatic shift from works such as *Red Lands*, where issues of race and representation were the paramount concern. *Walk on Water* constituted the artist's attempt to present a more intimate and spiritual expression of self-identification.

Gu Xiong's ideas of cultivating his "original self" are derived from principles of Chinese philosophy, particularly a Confucian ideal of self-realization. The noted Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming states that a personality is not a human condition, but

<sup>113</sup> Gu Xiong, "Artist's Statement," *Tracing Cultures* 28.

<sup>114</sup> Gu Xiong, "Artist's Statement," *Tracing Cultures* 28.

<sup>115</sup> Gu Xiong, "Artist's Statement," *Tracing Cultures* 28.

rather an achieved state of moral cultivation.<sup>116</sup> As humans, we are composed of a series of interconnected systems; the body, the mind, the soul, and the spirit are engaged in dynamic processes of interaction. The co-existing physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of the self are the raw materials for self-realization. The individual who strives towards self-realization is committed to continually improving their mental, spiritual, and physical being and cultivating the interconnection between these aspects of the self. However, they must also be committed to cultivating social relationships. The cosmos, like the self, is conceived as an open system of interaction.<sup>117</sup> Self-realization thus comes about by harmonizing the relationships between the body and the spirit, between the individual and his family, his community, the state, the natural world, and, ultimately, the universe. Part of self-realization, as explained by Tu Wei-ming, involves integrating oneself into society or, as Gu Xiong suggested in his installation *Walk on Water*, to be like water and move with the ebb and flow of societal norms. Tu Wei-ming wrote:

Nevertheless, the Confucians believe that if we make a conscientious effort to actively incorporate the societal norms and values in our own conduct, we will be able to transcend the linguistic and cultural constraints of our society by transforming them into instruments of self-realization.<sup>118</sup>

Self-realization is an important endeavour for all individuals because it is through communal self-effort that the human condition is transformed and ultimately perfected.<sup>119</sup> By constantly improving oneself, the individual acts for the greater good of society. Gu Xiong has articulated this idea through his art in numerous ways. The performances Gu Xiong undertook in his *Enclosures* Series focussed on the actions of the individual. Gu Xiong stressed that the individual had to overcome the enclosures engrained into her/his

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<sup>116</sup> Tu Wei-ming, "Embodying the Universe: A Note on Confucian Self-Realization," Roger Ames, Wimal Dissanayake and Thomas P. Kasulis, eds. *Self as Person in Asian Theory and Practice*. (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1994), 177.

<sup>117</sup> Tu Wei-ming, "A Confucian Perspective on Learning to be Human," *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 57. Tu Wei-ming describes self-cultivation as "...the broadening of the self to embody an ever-expanding circle of human relatedness." He describes family, community, nation and universe as concentric circles that extend from the self. By cultivating the self, the individual also stimulates change within these spheres.

<sup>118</sup> Tu Wei-ming, "Embodying the Universe: A Note on Confucian Self-Realization," 178.

<sup>119</sup> Tu Wei-ming, "Embodying the Universe: A Note on Confucian Self-Realization," 179.

person as well as those created by society. In his artist's statement that accompanied his 1991 installation, *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989* at Open Space Gallery Gu made reference to various systems of human engagement:

Confront the Great Wall, the Paris Bastille, The Berlin Wall:  
We understand the isolation between humanity + nature,  
one people + another people, the person + the self.

To Gu Xiong these structures, erected to gain or preserve political and military power, are symbols not only of the isolation of different nations and cultures, but also of the isolation that exists between the individual and society, the natural world, and between the individual and his true nature. Gu Xiong cautions his audiences that if we tolerate repression in our society we become alienated not only to one another, but also to ourselves.

As Gu Xiong put his energies towards adapting to Canadian society, he recognized his need to work and foster relationships *within* Canadian society rather than retreating from the challenges he faced. Thus, he felt it necessary to understand his adopted home and the implications of living within two distinct cultures. Gu Xiong has suggested that he considered the process of integrating into Canadian society as opportunity for self-cultivation and encouraged his family to do the same so that they might contribute meaningfully to their new culture:

...you can see if you look at the immigrant people, the first generation. When they come from different cultures and places the first thing is just working hard, do the low-paying jobs and hope their children can do better. But for me, at that time I also said 'Of course we have to take care of the next generation to be a better person, but at the same time, we have to do our best because we are valuable for this culture if we do our individual cultural practice. We bring another culture to add to this culture, the good parts of this culture, if we do our individual cultural practice... I believe if everyone could change themselves this world will become a better world.'<sup>120</sup>

Gu Xiong's earnest efforts to improve himself in the face of adversity most certainly

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 11.

suggest a Confucian faith in human's perfectibility. Gu Xiong's use of the term "original self" further supports an interpretation of Confucian self-realization. In his artist's statement for *Walk on Water*, Gu Xiong emphasizes that it is through cultivating the self that he attempts to reach an understanding of the essential nature of his being:

Our identity is changing continuously, but we are still who we are. All of that which we have gone through is a path toward our own original being. Our identity is only the surface – it is constantly lost and regained, but through this process, our original self is born. To hold and own this "original" is my lifelong aspiration.

Tu Wei-ming also emphasizes that to strive to perfect one's self does not mean that humans undertake to change from their true nature. It is the individual's true nature that is the source of his or her inexhaustible potential for growth.<sup>121</sup>

In the spring of 1998, Hank Bull, director of the Western Front artist-run gallery, collaborated with Xia Wei, a graduate student at the University of British Columbia, and the Annie Wong Foundation to organize *Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River*. The project featured a series of exhibitions of modern and contemporary Chinese art, a two-day international symposium and a series of public lectures. Twelve of Vancouver's art museums and galleries participated in the *Jiangnan* project. Gu Xiong was invited to contribute as a local representative. His installation *You and I*, was exhibited at Artspeak gallery in May, 1998 (fig. 25).

In *You and I* Gu Xiong continued his practice of reducing the visual and symbolic elements in his work. He simplified the installation to three aesthetic and symbolic elements. The four walls of the gallery were painted red. A trail of white socks ran the length of the gallery floor, and one hundred and fifty plaster-cast salmon were suspended from the ceiling of the gallery. The salmon were positioned to appear as though they were swimming over the river of socks. The combination of the red walls and the white socks and salmon was visually effective and emotionally evocative. The simple and direct visual presentation of *You and I* countered the multiple cultural allusions and philosophical

<sup>121</sup> Tu Wei-ming, "The Neo-Confucian Concept of Man," 71.

framework of the work. The installation was inspired by Gu Xiong's experience of seeing salmon swimming up the Fraser River to their spawning grounds in the interior of B.C.. Gu Xiong felt a sense of connection between the salmon's experience of migration and his own immigration to Canada. He used the symbol of the river to create associations between two geographic spaces, by linking the Yangzi River and the Fraser River. The red of the walls once again alluded to Chinese culture as a traditional symbol of happiness and as a symbol of the authority and power of the Communists to those like Gu Xiong, who grew up learning the song "East is Red", joining the Red Army, and reading the Little Red Book.<sup>122</sup> It is also the colour of salmon when they return to the Fraser River to spawn and die.

Gu Xiong merely alluded to the cultures of Sichuan province and British Columbia. In *You and I* the relationships he emphasized were those between humans and nature. His belief in the interconnectedness between the individual and the natural world is at the root of all his actions. For Gu Xiong, this installation expressed his spiritual rebirth.<sup>123</sup> The connection he felt with his subject was made explicit by the poem called "You and I" that accompanied the installation:

You and I

You are born in a small stream  
 You grow up in a river  
 And you gather strength

When you return  
 You become red  
 And you give birth to your children

Finally, you lay on the bottom of the stream  
 Until the next spring comes  
 You watch as those red eggs  
 Turn into baby salmon

A smile appears on your face

<sup>122</sup> Wu Hung, "Rotten Red," *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1999), 83.

<sup>123</sup> Gu Xiong, "A River of Art and Life: My art between 1989 and 1999," unpublished, artist's statement.

The tide takes your newborn salmon  
To the river and then the ocean

I see you in the small stream  
I see you in the river  
I see you in the ocean

I see you everywhere  
I follow you  
I become you<sup>124</sup>

In a wall text that accompanied *You and I*, Li Xiaoping associated the simplified aesthetic of the installation with the reduced aesthetics of Zen Buddhist art, which celebrates simplicity.<sup>125</sup> Gu Xiong's emphasis on the connection between the individual and the natural world also bears some familiarity with basic principles of Taoist philosophy. This connection between the individual and the natural world is one of the aspects in which we see an overlapping of the Taoist and Confucian philosophies; as I noted above, the individual's ability to act in harmony with the natural world is also an aspect of Confucian self-realization. The artistic representation of this spiritual communion with nature is drawn from the legacy of Chinese art history. The famous example of this connection is Wen Tong's painting of bamboo. Su Shih's poem about the artist and his subject matter goes:

When [Wen Tong] painted bamboo,  
He saw bamboo and not himself.  
Not simply unconscious of himself,  
Trance-like, he left his body behind.  
His body was transformed into bamboo,<sup>126</sup>

In his poem, Gu Xiong describes a similar spiritual communion with nature. He leaves the constraints of culture and human behaviour behind and finds himself taking on the behaviours of nature. One is reminded that in the traditions of Chinese painting spanning back many centuries, the success and merit of a work took into account the artist's ability

<sup>124</sup> See Appendix IV.

<sup>125</sup> Xiaoping Li, "Lifeblood," a short essay printed on a text board in the exhibition.

<sup>126</sup> Susan Bush and Shih-hsiao Yen, *Early Texts on Chinese Painting*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 212.

to know their subject within themselves. Wen Tong's sincere expression of the characteristics of bamboo emerged because the artist became one with his subject. In *You and I*, the simplified aesthetic and the great reduction of Gu Xiong's usual abundance of symbols provoked the viewer to consider the spiritual nature of Gu Xiong's affiliation with the salmon. Those viewers who possessed knowledge of the historical development of Chinese art may have seen Gu Xiong's work as firmly rooted in such traditions in Chinese art.

Gu Xiong used the plaster salmon, the socks, and the red walls of the *You and I* installation as the basis for his mixed-media installation *The River* at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria in August of 1998 (fig. 26). In its second incarnation, the installation included a number of objects from the AGGV's extensive collection of Chinese art. These historical artifacts and art works, some dating back as far as the Han Dynasty, were incorporated into the river of white socks on the gallery floor. A cast iron temple bell from the Ming Dynasty stood in the center of the installation. Family photographs, as well as the plastic toys from McDonald's he had painted in his *Cafeteria Series*, and pop culture artifacts from the Cultural Revolution were also incorporated into the river of socks. The mixture of personal objects and images and objects and images from the institution's collection blended the public histories of Chinese culture and art and the private histories of Gu Xiong's life.

In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, John O'Brian called *The River* a "narrative of movement." O'Brian noted that basic elements of the installation like the river and salmon connoted movement. This in turn reflected the situation of individuals like Gu Xiong, who move to live in new cultural environments, or the objects and artifacts in the collection of the art gallery which have traveled to Canada from China.<sup>127</sup> O'Brian's essay situates Gu Xiong's installation in terms of the material history of the local geographic reference in the work, the Fraser River. By taking the approach of writing

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<sup>127</sup> John O'Brian, "Long Distance Swimming," *Gu Xiong: The River*, (Victoria: The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1999), 5.

about Gu Xiong's installation in relation to the history of the Fraser River, O'Brian presented an interpretation of the work that deliberately contrasted other readings of Gu Xiong's work. He also contrasted the artist's own interpretation, which based the interpretation of the work on what O'Brian calls "transcendental individualism."<sup>128</sup> Instead, O'Brian chronicles the history of the navigation of the river by Simon Fraser to suggest a history of the region that is also fragmentary and which involves the intermeshing of cultures. He emphasizes that the histories of the First Nations people of the region, as well as the histories of the Chinese workers who came to the area during the Fraser River gold rush in the late 1850s, are histories that have been suppressed by the act of naming the river after the American explorer Simon Fraser.<sup>129</sup> O'Brian's essay enriches our understanding of the installation and Gu Xiong's work by contextualizing them in relation to the social and economic histories of the region.

Gu Xiong extended his practice of drawing symbolic and metaphoric bridges between the culture and geography of China and Canada in *The Mountains* (fig. 27a). This multi-media installation was exhibited at the Chinese Cultural Centre Museum and Archives in May and June of 1999 as part of the Centre's Asian Heritage Month events. *The Mountains* contained images of both a historical and autobiographical nature. The exhibition was an assemblage of personal photographs that once again created a visual narrative of the family's journey from past to present and from China to Canada. While Gu Xiong had included photographs in previous installations like *Walk on Water* and *The River*, this was the first time that photography was the primary medium of a work. Gu Xiong used computer programs to manipulate his family photographs by increasing the scale of the images and incorporating texts. His poems and meditations on his experiences in China and Canada were laid over these images. Some of the photographs showed Gu Xiong as a young man standing amidst a landscape of mountains in Sichuan or in the

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<sup>128</sup> John O'Brian, 8. O'Brian explains that he chooses to discuss Gu's work in relation to the history of the Fraser River and not the Yangzi River due to own lack of knowledge about the latter. He does not, however, explain why he chose an approach to interpreting Gu Xiong's work that contrasts the "transcendental individualism" he notes in essays and articles about Gu Xiong's work.

<sup>129</sup> John O'Brian, 7.

streets of the city of Chongqing. Snap shots taken in Canada showed Gu Xiong and his family at their home in Vancouver, scenic views of the mountains around Banff, and portraits of Ge Ni, and Gu Yu. He used the visual and symbolic element of the mountains to develop his link between the various geographic spaces and periods of his life. The photographs created a visual narrative that connected his home in the mountainous region in Sichuan province, his first home in Canada at the Banff Centre for the Arts, and his permanent home in Vancouver. He also incorporated a photograph of New York City, which is, he suggests, a man-made mountain and the pinnacle of Western society.<sup>130</sup>

In *The Mountains*, Gu Xiong added a new dimension to his work by including references to the historical circumstances of early Chinese settlers in Canada. In doing so, he positioned his family's experiences into a continuum of the histories of Chinese immigration to British Columbia. He exhibited a large reproduction of an archival image of a group of Chinese railway workers on a wall at one end of the rectangular exhibition space (fig. 27b). On the floor, below the image of the CPR workers, a video monitor played slow motion footage of Gu Xiong, Ge Ni, and Gu Yu walking along railway tracks. The video presentation reinforced Gu Xiong's desire to present his family's experiences as part of a historical lineage of Chinese immigration to the region. A sculptural element at the center of the installation space reiterated the connection between the history of Chinese immigration to Canada and the Gu family's history. A length of railway ties approximately twenty feet long was set down on a bed of sand in the center of the gallery. A shovel, a gold pan and a cooking pot, actual artifacts that had been used by Chinese railway workers, were placed at one end of the sculpture. At the other end, Gu Xiong built a brick wall approximately three feet high. The wall was meant to symbolize the labour of the early Chinese settlers who built the first Chinatowns in B.C. Unable to return home after building the railroad, these men had no choice but to physically construct their homes and businesses. These structures, in turn, became the foundations for Chinese communities in B.C. The bricks formed the shape of a mountain, a visual association with the

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<sup>130</sup> Gu Xiong, "The Mountains," unpublished artist's statement, 1.

installation's theme.

The bricks also alluded to the construction of cities like New York, Gu Xiong's man-made mountain. A large reproduction of a photograph of Gu Xiong and his family standing at the top of the World Trade Center was mounted on the wall opposite the image of the railway workers (fig. 27c). The photograph, showing Gu Xiong and his family in the foreground with the buildings of New York City forming the backdrop, evoked the idea of the Gu family having come through their challenges to stand at a pinnacle of North American culture. In a text board accompanying the photograph Gu Xiong described how the image of his family in New York represents the realization of the artist's dream to achieve success in North America (see Appendix V). Another video monitor which played footage of a subway passing by in slow motion was placed below this image. This video footage evoked a sense of continuous travel and the unceasing movement of people coming to and from their work and homes in the subway system underneath the teeming city.

Gu Xiong's interest in addressing the social and cultural history of early Chinese-Canadians and his own history coincided with the role and functions of the Chinese Cultural Centre as a repository for the material history of early Chinese settlers. In fact, a gallery right next to the one in which *The Mountains* was exhibited contained a display of photographs and artifacts of the Chinese immigrants who worked on the railroad. Gu Xiong began to address Chinese-Canadian social and cultural history in his work a few years prior to this exhibition at the Chinese Cultural Centre. He felt a resonance with the experiences of these early settlers, who worked hard to try to make their lives in Canada, and in an interview he stated his interest in exploring his sense of connection to the histories of the first Chinese settlers in Canada in future installations.<sup>131</sup> Having examined the scope of Gu Xiong's career, I consider Gu Xiong's interest in establishing his family's connection to Chinese-Canadian history to be a logical step. By 1999, Gu Xiong had explored his own personal history extensively through his work. He became aware that his

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<sup>131</sup>Interview with Gu Xiong, October 1999, 9.

story and his experiences of immigration fit into this local historical context.

In earlier work Gu Xiong expressed a clear desire to root himself in Canadian society and in the geography of the region. Connecting himself to the history of Chinese-Canadians would seem to be appropriate. But I believe that there is a difference between drawing a connection to Chinese-Canadian history and co-opting it. One of the interesting questions that *The Mountains* raises is whether the history of early Chinese immigrants is actually his to represent? I believe an uncomfortable tension results from the fact that this installation centers on Gu Xiong's personal history. By incorporating the photograph of early Chinese railroad workers into a gallery filled with photographs of his family, he implied that the history of early Chinese immigrants was part of his history as well. Gu Xiong is indeed part of the historical continuum of Chinese immigration to Canada. However, it is my belief that this installation blurred the lines between his history and that of third and fourth generation Chinese-Canadians whose ancestors may have appeared in the photograph he exhibited or who may have used the artifacts he incorporated into his installation. The histories of the early immigrants are not a birthright for Gu Xiong, as they are for their descendants. I would argue that by not defining his relationship to their histories more clearly, Gu Xiong risked the possibility of offending third and fourth generation Chinese-Canadians by adopting their legacy. As I stressed earlier in this chapter, the experiences, values and histories of Chinese-Canadians are varied. One of the challenges that Chinese-Canadian artists have faced is overcoming the idea there is a single history or cultural identity for all Chinese-Canadians, and it is my opinion that *The Mountains* did not support such an endeavour.

### **Why Chinese-Canadian? Cultural Identity and the Institutionalization of Multiculturalism**

Due to his determination and prolific art practices, Gu Xiong's work has been exhibited in the commercial gallery setting, artist-run centers, and public art galleries in the region as well as in other parts of Canada. In this section of the chapter, I examine the relationships between Gu Xiong's work and certain developments in the systems of artistic

production and exhibition which have enabled Gu Xiong to forge his personal identification with Chinese-Canadian culture.

Since his first year at the Banff Centre, Gu Xiong has focused on the practices of installation and performance art, incorporating film, photography, printmaking, drawing, and painting into his work. Artists who choose to produce installation work do so because it provides them with the ability to mediate complex interactions between the viewers and the art. However, installation also poses challenges to the artist in terms of producing works for an art market. Installation work is not marketable unless artists assemble their installations from multiple elements that can be sold individually, like the drawings Gu Xiong produced for the *Here Not There*. In many cases, however, installation work is largely unmarketable, laborious to produce, and costly in terms of materials and technology.

Gu Xiong has been able to produce installation art because the majority of his works are funded and exhibited by public institutions. He operates in many different spheres of Vancouver's art world. His commercial representation through the Diane Farris Gallery, where he has shown his work in annual solo exhibitions, provides the opportunity for the sale of his work. Gu Xiong's paintings and drawings have been purchased for the permanent collections of major institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada, Vancouver Art Gallery, the Banff Centre for the Arts, the Surrey Art Gallery, and the Richmond Art Gallery.<sup>132</sup> Gu Xiong's extensive professional experience in local post-secondary institutions as an instructor of multi-media, drawing, installation and printmaking at the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, Kwantlan University College in Surrey, and Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design has meant that he has not relied solely upon the sales of his work for his livelihood. Yet, Gu Xiong's ability to produce the installation pieces he has exhibited in solo and group exhibitions in public galleries, cultural centers, and artist-run centres has largely depended upon the grants and awards he has received. Since 1990, Gu Xiong has received five grants from the Canada

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<sup>132</sup> Gu Xiong, Resume, unpublished document, 9.

Council and five Individual Awards from the British Columbia Arts Council. As well, Gu Xiong received funding for projects like the publication of *The Yellow Pear* through the Department of Culture and Heritage for Year of the Asian Pacific.

When asked whether funding from the Canada Council and the British Columbia Arts Council provided a reliable means of support for his projects, he acknowledged how important public funding is to his practice as an artist:

I think that is a big help to support my family. To survive and also make art is impossible. With their help, it helps me to do better things, whatever I want to do, I am able to buy what I need.<sup>133</sup>

Gu Xiong's professional experiences have extended beyond exhibiting and teaching. As his profile in the local art community developed throughout the 1990s, he has been increasingly called upon to speak about his life, his experiences, and his artwork as a guest speaker and visiting artist at high schools, universities, colleges, galleries and conferences. In terms of his ability to secure funds through the grant writing process, his own professional experience as a juror on a peer selection committee for the Canada Council helped him to understand the mandate that civic, provincial and federal funding bodies have to support art that represent cultural diversity. Gu Xiong said:

Also, I was on the jury for the B.C. Council [ He lists it as the "B" Grant and Travel Grant Jury for the Canada Council in his curriculum vitae, see Appendix I ] in 1995. That also helped me to understand their system, how it works. I found, especially, towards their policy for multiculturalism and the support for immigrant artists, whatever their cultural background to make the Canadian culture interesting.<sup>134</sup>

Gu Xiong's statements about acquiring funding do not reveal how he has applied the knowledge he gained from being a juror for the Canada Council. What is clear, however, is Gu Xiong's awareness of the cultural currency of race and ethnic diversity. Gu Xiong's narrative of his personal experiences is both captivating and inspirational. His work presents an image of an ideal immigrant: the individual who has dealt effectively with

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, October 1999, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, October 1999, 10.

cultural difference and has integrated into the social fabric of the community. Through hard work and perseverance, this new Canadian not only achieves success in his new culture, but also seeks to contribute his story through his art to the multicultural makeup of the country.

In his essay entitled “A World Apart: The Multicultural World of Visible Minorities and the Art World of Canada,” Peter Li wrote: “In short, by setting public policies towards art works and artists, and by funding major art programmes and institutions, the state sets the parameters within which the infrastructures of art are to operate.”<sup>135</sup> Li suggests that the mandates of the funding organizations dictate the artwork that is exhibited and promoted within the gallery space. The Canada Council released a document in 1995 in which the organization stated that addressing culturally diverse communities was one of the priority areas to be developed.<sup>136</sup> At a time when the Canada Council was reducing the number and diversity of programmes due to budgetary constraints, the organization was also making commitments to assist artists of culturally diverse backgrounds to achieve recognition and excellence.<sup>137</sup>

Over the past two decades, and particularly in the 1990s, the exhibition programmes of public art institutions have become more inclusive. In order to be more representative of the demographic profile of the region, local art institutions have made efforts to exhibit art by members of visible minorities and to organize exhibitions that address issues of race, ethnicity and gender, thereby reflecting these constitutive elements of society. The federal policy of multiculturalism and the support for the arts and cultures of visible minorities provided by the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council have sustained and reinforced the public and institutional interest in Chinese-Canadian culture.

As this chapter has indicated, the time when Gu Xiong was making his initial efforts to define his position in Vancouver’s art community coincided with the increased

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<sup>135</sup> Peter Li, “A World Apart: The Multicultural World of Visible Minorities and the Art World of Canada,” 368.

<sup>136</sup> Canada Council, *A Design for the Future*, (Ottawa: Canada Council for the Arts, 1995), 3.

<sup>137</sup> Canada Council, *A Design for the Future*, (Ottawa: Canada Council for the Arts, 1995), 9.

attention mainstream art institutions were giving to multiculturalism and the works of artists operating at the periphery of mainstream culture. This increase of attention came about for numerous reasons, including the proliferation of scholarship addressing identity politics and the increasing awareness on the part of art institutions that they needed represent the diversity of multiethnic communities. However, another reason for the increased attention visible-minority artists received in the 1990s may have been that these institutions were responding to funding bodies such as the Canada Council for the Arts and the British Columbia Arts Council.<sup>138</sup> The vast majority of public art institutions and artist-run centres rely upon funding from the Canada Council for the operational cost of running the institutions as well as the financing of exhibitions. The changing mandate of the Canada Council, one can surmise, would cause similar changes to the mandates of the institutions that seek access to Canada Council Funds. During the 1990s there was a proliferation of exhibitions addressing cultural diversity, including: *Goya to Beijing* (1993); *Art in British Columbia* (1994); *Here Not There* (1995); and *Topographies: Aspects of Recent B.C. Art* (1997) – all at the Vancouver Art Gallery; *Tracing Cultures* (1998) and *Culture and Identity* (1994) at the Burnaby Art Gallery; *Art Matters* (1994) at the Surrey Art Gallery; and *Transpositions* (1992) which was organized by the Community Arts Council of Vancouver.

In her essay “Asian American Exhibitions: Reconsidered,” Alice Yang wrote on the problematic nature of exhibitions which uses race and cultural difference as a point of departure. In Yang’s words these exhibitions revealed “a tendency toward rigid classification along racial lines that can contribute to an ossification of concepts of

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<sup>138</sup> William Wood, “Is this Free Money? Western Front as Facility, Institution and Image,” Keith Wallace, ed. *Whispered Art Histories: Twenty-Five Years at the Western Front*, (Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993), 186. In his analysis of the Western Front’s methods and strategies towards the acquisition of funds, Wood noted the impact of identity politics on the changing mandates at the Front. A planning document of the Western Front artist-run centre from 1991 provides an example of the changing focus of one cultural centre: “The programming focus of the Western Front in the next five years will include: Pacific Rim (International and local); Life on the Water (South America/North America); Cultural Diversity (International and local); Community resource in the field of cultural diversity.” Western Front, “Board Planning and Development Report, 1991,” Keith Wallace, ed. *Whispered Art Histories: Twenty-Five Years at the Western Front*, (Vancouver, Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993) 186.

identity.”<sup>139</sup> The complex terrain of identity and issues that are a part of it, such as nationality, sexuality, religion, and class, are subordinated to the primary concern of race. Another problem many scholars who are critical of multiculturalism have noted is that multiculturalism works against the critical power of difference.<sup>140</sup> There is the persisting problem that racial assumptions still have the potential to inform attitudes and funding strategies that are guided by a policy of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, as Peter Li argued, can and perhaps should be criticized for its tendency to downplay problems of racial and ethnic inequality within Canadian society. Further, multiculturalism’s emphasis is placed on transplanted cultures from the “old country” and often fails to acknowledge the dynamic and diversely modern cultural identities that exist in Canada.<sup>141</sup> Li suggests multiculturalism has only promoted a superficial appreciation of minority cultures, and has not expanded the cultural framework in which non-white immigrants are understood by white Canadians.<sup>142</sup> If minority artists still feel that they are marginalized within the greater context of contemporary Canadian art, the idealistic aims of multiculturalism are not achieved and need to be re-addressed.

In the 1990s, a generation of young Asian-Canadian artists took up the challenge of addressing Chinese-Canadian cultural identity. Henry Tsang, Laiwan and writer and curator Larissa Lai organized exhibitions in which the issues of cultural identity played an intricate role in a balance of other interests such as sexuality and memory as a site of social experience. In exhibitions like *Earthy Pleasures* at the Grunt Gallery in 1994, *Racy Sexy* at the Chinese Cultural Centre and eight other cultural centres in Vancouver in 1993, and *Racing Through Space* at Artspeak Gallery in 1994, race was considered as one of

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<sup>139</sup> Alice Yang, “Asian American Exhibitions Reconsidered,” *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 95.

<sup>140</sup> See the essays included in David Bennett, ed. *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1998); Peter Li, “A World Apart: The Multicultural Art World of Visible Minorities and the Art World of Canada,”; Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 66-68, 150-152.

<sup>141</sup> Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 131.

<sup>142</sup> Peter Li, “A World Apart: The Multicultural World of Visible Minorities and the Art World of Canada,” 143.

many components that shape Asian-Canadian artists' work.<sup>143</sup> Asian-Canadian artists no longer want to bear the burden of representation as ethnic artists.

Looking critically at Gu Xiong's work in relation to the issues of cultural identity as they have been addressed and articulated by other Asian Canadian artists in the 1990s, it could be said that his work is perhaps too overtly aligned with the type of representation of multiculturalism that funding agencies wish to promote to mainstream audiences. Given the need for resources to produce the work and access to exhibition spaces, a sensible and responsible position is to see multiculturalism as having both shortcomings and benefits, and to use the systems which have been set in place while not being co-opted by them. It is my belief that for Gu Xiong, overcoming the obstacles created by cultural difference involved learning how to operate within established systems upon which the ability to produce and exhibit art depends. Gu Xiong has undertaken conscious, goal-oriented activities to understand Canadian culture and to work within it. If we extend this idea to his artistic practice, we see an artist who quickly learned to work within a number of systems which enable him to produce his art work, develop his second major focus as an artist, which is to educate young artists, and to support his family. While it is my assertion that Gu Xiong has worked within systems that promote a concept of multiculturalism that falls short of creating a truly level playing field for artists who are members of visible minorities, I do believe that the perspective he presents regarding multiculturalism in his work is sincere and in keeping with Gu Xiong's own goal of individual cultural practice. He sees Canada's policy of multiculturalism as a positive aspect of Canadian culture and he utilizes, even celebrates, his own position in relation to the ideology of multiculturalism. His work promotes an idealistic view of multiculturalism as a dialogue between cultures by suggesting that issues of cultural and racial identity are not merely the problems of immigrants and minorities, but are the concern of everyone.

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<sup>143</sup> Second and third generation Asian-Canadians made up the majority of the Asian-Canadian artists who participated in these exhibitions.

## Conclusion

When Gu Xiong discusses his work, he emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge and relationships to place. These installations are various manifestations of the relationship of self-knowledge to the social, cultural, and physical environment. Exploring similar relationships was the basis for the works Gu Xiong produced in China when he suggested the imprisoned individual breaking through cultural barriers in Chinese social and political culture. However, Gu Xiong has also made significant changes to the manner in which he presents his ideas. After a decade, Gu Xiong's practices of drawing upon his autobiographical experiences have shifted from representing the conflict of cultural transition in the *Cafeteria Series*, to attempting to position his family into a historical continuum of Chinese-Canadian immigration, as in *The Mountains*.

In our conversations, Gu Xiong has spoken at length about decisions he has made and the attitude he adopted to face adversity. He asserted that in order to operate within this culture, he chose to take the twofold approach of working within his new cultural context while also remaining dedicated to his own interests, ambitions, and sense of self. Following his example, I have considered a variety of factors that have shaped the particular climate of artistic production in Vancouver for a contemporary artist and newly arrived immigrant from China. I have examined Gu Xiong's work and his exhibitions in relation to the histories of Chinese immigration and Chinese-Canadian cultural production, contemporary Chinese-Canadian visual culture, and the representation of Chinese-Canadian cultures in public art institutions. I have attempted to show how Gu Xiong has worked in relation to these various aspects of the local art community while remaining dedicated to formulating his own thematic and aesthetic interests in his art.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **The Internationalization of Contemporary Chinese Art: Gu Xiong and the Artists of the Chinese Diaspora**

Gu Xiong was just one of hundreds of artists who emigrated from the People's Republic of China in the late 1980s. In the early 1980s artists had begun leaving China to stake their claim in the international art world. This trend of emigration grew steadily throughout the decade, and following the events in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, many more artists and intellectuals went into self-imposed exile in the West. A few landmark group exhibitions in the United States, Europe, and Australia introduced international audiences to work by artists from the People's Republic of China in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Over the next decade the international art world witnessed a spectacular rise in the popularity of contemporary Chinese art. As many more Chinese artists established their careers in such international cultural centers as New York, Paris, Berlin, Sydney and Tokyo, it became clear to observers that development of Chinese art would span international borders, becoming multi-locational. The mass migration of artists from the People's Republic of China and the subsequent success of Chinese art on the international art scene coincided with expanding global communications, the increasing interconnectedness of cultures, and the reconfiguring of concepts of race and ethnicity in the global sphere. As a result, Chinese art produced outside the People's Republic has been seen as both an example and reflection of the increasingly international orientation of Chinese culture.

Chapter two focused on one aspect of the internationalization of Chinese art by looking at how Vancouver's unique cultural climate gave Gu Xiong opportunities to

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<sup>1</sup> These exhibitions will be named and discussed below, on pages 131-132.

explore his Chinese heritage in relation to the local history, culture and geography. The current chapter presents a broader perspective on the internationalization of Chinese art. Going back to its roots in the avant-garde movements of the 1980s, chapter three examines the course of Gu Xiong's whole career in relation to this complex phenomenon and considers Gu Xiong's work in relation to that of other artists who emigrated from the PRC around the same time. Some of the strategies of cultural identification they employ demonstrate how overseas Chinese artists present alternative perspectives to Western or Eurocentric modernity(ies). Finally, I contend that Gu Xiong's method and the extent to which he responds to the social and cultural conditions of his second culture differentiates his work from his fellow expatriate artists.

### **“GOING TO THE WORLD (*zou xiang shijie*)”<sup>2</sup>: The International Interests of Chinese Artists**

Wu Hung and other noted scholars identify 1989-1993 as the period of the internationalization of Chinese art.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the conditions and concerns that prompted Gu Xiong and other artists to leave China at that time extend back to the early 1980s. As I explained briefly in chapter one, Deng Xiaopeng's “Open Door” policies had tremendous impact on the political, intellectual, and cultural development of Chinese society,

<sup>2</sup> There are various translations of this phrase that have slightly different meanings. In my use of *zou xiang shijie*, I follow Ralph Croizier's translation, which appears in the titles of two of his published articles: “‘Going to the World’: Art and Culture on the Cosmopolitan Tide,” in *China Briefing 1989*, ed. Anthony J. Kane (Boulder, San Francisco, and London: Westview Press, 1989), 67-79; and “‘Going to the World’: The Life and of Billy Harlem,” in the *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*, vol. 29 (1997), 22-49. Dr. Croizier's translation is highly literal. In the opening paragraphs of the former article, Croizier acknowledges that the phrase has various implications for Chinese society in the 1980s, signaling both a pre-occupation with Western culture and Chinese artists' desire to create something worthy of the international art market. Nicholas Jose also uses a different translation of the phrase in the title of his essay, “Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989-93,” in *China's New Art, Post 1989*, ed. Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993) XXXVII. Jose also notes that the phrase “*zou xiang shijie*” has been translated elsewhere as “going international.” I feel the phrase represents the interests Chinese artists had not only in absorbing Western influences, but also in making connections with the international art market. I argue that these interests are important factors contributing to the emigration of Chinese artists. By emigrating, they literally ‘go to the world’, which is why I chose to use Dr. Croizier's translation of *zou xiang shijie*..

<sup>3</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 16; Nicholas Jose, “Towards the World: China's New Art, 1989-93,” XXXVII.

particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Gu Xiong's generation had grown up under the isolationist cultural policies of the Chinese Communist Party. Before the end of the Cultural Revolution, the little information young artists had about foreign culture and art came from criticisms by Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four. As they became disillusioned with an ideological framework dictating the styles and forms of revolutionary art, many artists looked beyond China's borders for new modes of expression.

A longstanding tradition of integrating Chinese and Western art practices already existed. In the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists seeking ways to innovate and modernize Chinese art began experimenting with Western styles and techniques. In 1905, Li Shutong (1882-1942) became one of the first artists to study art outside China when he enrolled at the Tokyo School of Fine Art to learn Western drawing and painting techniques.<sup>4</sup> Upon returning to China, Li taught these techniques at the Zhejiang academy in Hangzhou. Li became an influential model for many of the country's leading modern artists, including Pan Tianshou (1897-1971) and Xu Beihong (1895-1953), who later studied in France.<sup>5</sup> This became the pattern of activity that brought Western art into China; artists went abroad to absorb the influences of foreign art and spread their knowledge through teaching when they returned to China. Their influence and instruction led to breakthroughs in the use of colour, the rendering of figures, spatial conception, and general compositional structure in Chinese painting.<sup>6</sup> A dynamic period of stylistic pluralism that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> c. lasted through the tumultuous early decades of the twentieth century before coming to an end in the late 1940s. After 1949, the Communist Party based their new art curriculum and cultural mandate to meet the needs of China's new political leadership on another European tradition, Russian Socialist Realism.

When the Cultural Revolution ended and artists were able to resume their experimentation with Western modern art, their motivations were similar to those of their

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists in Twentieth Century China*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Julia F. Andrews, "A Century in Crisis: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Twentieth-Century China," *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1998), 3.

predecessors. Li Xianting notes that in the 1920s and 1930s many artists adopted Western modernism and realism in particular, as they sought ways to bring China out of the turmoil caused by war and foreign occupation.<sup>7</sup> Combining Western techniques and styles with their own traditions was a way to foster innovation and to bring Chinese culture into a dialogue with the rest of the world. In the early 1980s, after several decades of relative isolation, artists faced similar challenges and felt it necessary to educate themselves about the artistic developments from the past and present that occurred beyond China's borders. For older painters who had been active during the 1930s and 1940s, like Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), Liu Haisu (1896-1994), and Pang Xunqin (1906-1985), it was a return to their old engagement with Western modernism.<sup>8</sup> Artists of Gu Xiong's generation, however, knew very little about foreign art, and they eagerly absorbed all new influences. Their enthusiasm translated into widespread experimentation with styles derived from Western modernism. After an initial period of indiscriminant experimentation, artists became concerned with finding a suitable balance of Chinese and Western elements, marrying Western and Chinese theoretical issues in Chinese art.<sup>9</sup> Initially, artists employed foreign techniques and styles to disassociate their activities from the official art establishment. As artists called for the re-evaluation of the social function of art, they used Western aesthetic modes to communicate emotions and individual values. This allowed them to break with the strict stylistic tendencies, the formulated rules, and the ideological framework of Socialist Realism.

In the early 1980s the influence of Western art extended into the official domain. As the Ministry of Culture relaxed its policies, artistic experimentation was tolerated on condition that the resulting works were deemed ideologically sound. However, what was considered ideologically sound fluctuated. When the CCP reversed the liberal policies, as they did in the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign in 1983, Western trends in art and

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<sup>7</sup> Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Chang Tzong-zung and Li Xianting (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), XII.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV.

<sup>9</sup> Richard E. Strassberg, "'I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne' and Other Works," in *I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cezanne*, ed. Richard E. Strassberg (Los Angeles: Pacific Asia Museum, 1991), 27.

culture were denounced, along with ideas about individual freedom and Western-style democracy.<sup>10</sup> By the mid-1980s more liberal attitudes prevailed, and students and intellectuals in the universities read translations of a wide array of Western literature and philosophy. Outside the art academies, young artists learned about Western art from reproductions in books and magazines as well as from the exhibitions of foreign art that had begun to occur with frequency in the major cities.<sup>11</sup> Young artists saw themselves at the vanguard of cultural and political change. They began using what they learned from Western literature, philosophy, and art to fight for social reform, and to assert their long-suppressed individuality.<sup>12</sup>

Gu Xiong's ideas about his own work and contemporary Chinese art were shaped by the idealism and social awareness that propelled the avant-garde movement. He believed the future of Chinese art depended upon artists having freedom of individual expression. He also believed there was value in combining the best elements of Western modernism and postmodernist art with the traditions and aesthetic sensibility of Chinese art. Most of all, he believed that artistic expression would help stimulate social and political change. His responsibility as an artist was to contribute to his society's development. When he left China in 1986 to take part in the residency program at the Banff Centre, his goal was to learn more about contemporary art practices in the West. He dreamed of returning home and teaching his students at the Sichuan Academy about performance and installation art, for example, which were just beginning to develop in China. While in Canada, he was routinely asked if he was going to stay in the West. He didn't consider it a possibility at that time, as he felt a sense of responsibility to his country and culture. As he explained, "I decided to go back because I was still idealistic in that way. I thought that my culture and my country were more important than the individual."<sup>13</sup> The energy and enthusiasm of the avant-garde artists movement inspired

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<sup>10</sup> Ralph Croizier, " 'Going to the World': Art and Culture on the Cosmopolitan Tide," 73.

<sup>11</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999), 14

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, p. 7.

Gu Xiong. He felt his place was among them and not abroad.

Gu Xiong's desire to return to China is remarkable in some respects, given the prevailing attitude among most of his peers. After decades of isolation, many Chinese thought their country was poised to emerge on the world stage. This view was expressed in a phrase that was popular among artists, "Going to the World" (*zou xiang shijie*). The phrase described one of the goals of the avant-garde movement – to contribute to greater recognition and admiration for contemporary Chinese art around the world. Inspired by their increased exposure to Western popular culture and art, many artists extended their aspirations beyond China's borders. Art critic Fei Dawei notes that the act of emigrating to the West was considered an exercise of personal liberation from the constraints experienced within Chinese society and a common goal for the younger generation of artists.<sup>14</sup>

Artists had pragmatic reasons for wanting to leave China. The economic reforms and the "Open Door" policies spurred their entrepreneurial energies, yet there were few opportunities for the exhibition and sale of art, particularly works by avant-garde artists. When a market for avant-garde art emerged in the latter part of the decade, the majority of buyers were tourists or foreign businessmen and diplomats living in Beijing. Foreign buyers relied upon networking to make connections with artists to view and purchase their art. The artists, in turn, relied upon private studio visits to generate sales and interest in their work. Some foreigners residing in Beijing assisted their artist friends by organizing private events that were both parties and exhibitions, which demonstrates the extent of foreign involvement in avant-garde art in the late 1980s.<sup>15</sup> However, only the artists living

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<sup>14</sup> Fei Dawei, "The Problems of Chinese Artists Working Overseas," *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993) XXXV. Fei Dawei writes that at the time of the article over one thousand Chinese artists had emigrated, including more than half the principle figures of the 1985 "New Wave" Movement.

<sup>15</sup> This point was made by Professor Zheng Shengtian in a lecture about China's place in the global art scene and global art market which he presented at the University of Victoria in the spring of 2001. Mr. Zheng cited the example of Francesca Dal Lago, a young Italian woman who studied at the Central Academy. Dal Lago organized and attended several art exhibitions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She describes the circumstances and conditions for these exhibitions in an essay, "Locating Creative Space," in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), XII-XIII.

in Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing – the cities foreigners visited – benefited from this attention.

Selling to foreign buyers remained an important way for artists to make professional connections and gain exposure abroad. One of the first international exhibitions of contemporary Chinese oil paintings took place in 1987 at the commercial gallery in New York City of the prominent American collector Robert Hefner.<sup>16</sup> As artists set their sights on the international market, they quickly developed savvy marketing techniques to attract foreigner buyers. This was particularly true for those trying to make a living without state patronage. Their activities met with disapproval from the art establishment. In a 1991 article condemning Chinese avant-garde art in *Wenyi bao* (People's Art and Literature Newspaper) author Yang Chengyin, an art critic and agent of the Ministry of Culture, criticized the atmosphere of "capitalism and personal freedom" that pervaded Chinese visual culture in the late 1980s.<sup>17</sup> It was apparent that the exchange between Chinese artists and the West was no longer just theories and styles of art but also hard currency. In the spirit of China's developing markets, artists were quick to learn a principle of capitalism: to generate income one needed access to potential buyers.

Depending on the individual artist, the growing foreign market for avant-garde Chinese art was more or less a motivating factor for going abroad. Independent artists who worked outside the academic system and without state patronage had more freedom to create the work that they wanted, but their livelihood depended upon sales of their work. Their desires to emigrate grew with the interest of the international market. For other artists, the foreign market was less of a motivating factor. Gu Xiong has never suggested that economic factors contributed to his decision to leave China. His teaching position provided him with job security and income, albeit a very modest amount. By his account, he had an idealized vision of the Western art world. He dreamed of having the freedom to express himself artistically unhindered by the protocols and expectations of the art

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<sup>16</sup> Zheng Shengtian, unpublished lecture, spring, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Britta Erickson, "Process and Meaning in the Art of Xu Bing." In *Three Installations by Xu Bing*. (Madison, Wisconsin: Elvehjem Museum of Art, 1991), p. 2-32.

establishment. He wanted to live in a dynamic cultural environment, like Paris or New York City, where he could absorb the influences of contemporary art from all over the world and experiment with new forms and styles. Yet, it was only when he saw his hopes for his country crushed in Tiananmen that he made the decision to move to the West.

The first wave of avant-garde artists began leaving China in the early 1980s. Among them were former members of the Stars group. After a few years of notoriety, the Stars' popularity waned, and their work lost its impact for Chinese audiences, while other avant-garde trends gained public attention. Core members of the group left China and settled in various cities in Europe, the United States, and Japan.<sup>18</sup> Members of the Stars group organized several small exhibitions in France and Japan, but these drew little attention from the international art world.<sup>19</sup> A second wave of emigration began in the mid-1980s and included some of the artists who went on to become prominent figures in the international development of contemporary Chinese art. Such artists as Huang Yongping, Wenda Gu, Cai Guoqiang, and Chen Zhen had received academic training in the early 1980s and had been leading figures in the avant-garde movements. These artists already possessed an understanding of Western forms and theories of art when they arrived at their various destinations.<sup>20</sup> Their artistic skill and their apparent understanding of postmodern visual language made their work desirable to the international art world. Being part of the avant-garde movements undoubtedly facilitated their entry to the global art scene. Their work attracted the interest of foreigner buyers, and they made useful professional contacts outside the country, through which they secured the invitations and

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<sup>18</sup> Wang Keping and Li Shuang settled in Paris. Ma Dasheng went to Lausanne, Switzerland; Huang Rui went to Tokyo, and Ai Weiwei moved to New York City in 1981. Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 267.

<sup>19</sup> Chang Tsong-zung, "Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An Insider's View," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 69.

<sup>20</sup> Huang Yong Ping, a young artist who had attended the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, achieved recognition in China for pioneering Chinese conceptual art and as the founder of the influential art group Xiamen Dada. Huang moved to Paris in 1988 and became one of the first Chinese artists to participate in a high-profile international exhibition. Another artist from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and leading figure in the avant-garde movements, Wenda Gu, received a Canada Council Grant for Foreign Visiting Artists in 1987. Gu had his first international solo exhibition at York University in Toronto before relocating to New York City in 1988, (Michael Sullivan, 270). Two more artists who became internationally renowned were Cai Guo-qiang and Chen Zhen who emigrated in 1986, with Cai going to Japan and Chen to Paris, (Germaine Koh, "Cai Guo-qiang," *Crossings*, (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1998), 92.

institutional connections that allowed them to travel outside the PRC.<sup>21</sup> If artists met the requirements for student or travel visas, the government permitted them to go. Perhaps the Party found it politically expedient to allow the provocateurs of the art movement to leave China rather than trying to suppress their activities at home.<sup>22</sup>

The third and largest wave, a *tsunami* of sorts, occurred in the wake of Tiananmen. With the violent suppression of the democracy movement, the idealism that fueled the contemporary art movements of the 1980s gave way to cynicism and disillusionment. After June 4th the intellectual, cultural, and social activities of avant-garde artists were brought to a standstill for several months.<sup>23</sup> Fearing retaliation by the government and feeling creatively stifled in the restrictive environment, hundreds of artists and intellectuals emigrated. Many artists and intellectuals, including Gu Xiong, contacted their overseas connections to obtain the letters of invitation they required to secure their visas. Art and educational institutions in North America and Europe facilitated the exodus of artists and intellectuals by inviting them to participate in artist residencies or as visiting scholars and by accepting them as international students.<sup>24</sup>

Reflecting back on more than a decade of international activity by Chinese artists from the People's Republic, it is clear that one of the aspirations expressed by the phrase "Going to the world" has been achieved. Artists living overseas have succeeded in demonstrating the complexity and richness of contemporary Chinese culture to the rest of the world. Did the realities of living abroad live up to the artists' expectations and dreams? Between 1989 and 1993 there were more opportunities for artists in Europe, North

<sup>21</sup> A very talented and rebellious young artist named Lin Lin came to know an American businessman named David Moskin while still in China. Moskin acted as Lin Lin's financial guarantor for a student visa to the United States in 1985. Croizier, "Going to the World: The Life and Death of Billy Harlem (Lin Lin)," 32. Lin Lin is an example of the kind of assistance Chinese artists required from foreign individuals and institutions to secure the proper paperwork they needed to get their visas to leave China.

<sup>22</sup> Ralph Croizier, "'Going to the World': Art and Culture on the Cosmopolitan Tide," 74.

<sup>23</sup> Geremie Barmé, "Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing From China, 1989-93," in *China's New Art, Post 1989*, ed. Chang Tsong-zung (Hong Kong: Hanart T Z Gallery, 1993), XLVIII; Jochen Noth, "Beijing 1979-1992: Frequent Changes of Scene," *China Avant-garde: Counter-currents in Art and Culture*, ed. Jochen Noth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 12; Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, "Global POSTmodernIZATION: The Intellectual, the Artist, and China's Condition," *boundary 2*, vol. 24, no. 3, (1997), 68.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Strassberg, "Preface," in *"I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne" and Other Works*, ed. Richard E. Strassberg (Los Angeles: Pacific Asia Museum, 1990), xi.

America, Australia, and Japan than in the People's Republic. Yet, over the past decade China's cultural climate has changed somewhat, and there are now many more galleries and venues for the exhibition and sale of art. Very few artists who left China actually realized their dream of becoming internationally famous. Many more have made a modest living by exhibiting and selling their work, teaching, doing street portraiture, or taking jobs unrelated to art.

Of course, success is relative to the individual artist, but in no case did it come without effort. Gu Xiong went from being a stranger in a strange land to being a prominent educator and prolific contributor to contemporary Canadian art. At times he was daunted by the challenges he faced, but when Gu Xiong looks back on the portion of his career spent in Canada he can be satisfied with his achievements. I believe his expectations about the opportunities for artists in the West have been largely fulfilled. What he and others who emigrated likely did not anticipate was how the experience of moving abroad would change their perspectives and prompt them to reflect on their cultural heritage.

### **CHINESE ART OVERSEAS: Early Exhibitions and the Reception of Chinese Art**

As Gu Xiong began building his career in Vancouver in the early 1990s, art institutions all over the world were focusing more attention on Asian art, Chinese art in particular. The first major exhibition of avant-garde Chinese art outside the People's Republic took place in Hong Kong in 1989. The exhibition was a 10-year retrospective of work by members of the Stars group organized by Chang Tsong-zung, the director of Hanart T Z Gallery in Hong Kong.<sup>25</sup> More international exhibitions followed soon after. In 1990, the art critic Fei Dawei curated *Chine: Demain pour hier (China: Tomorrow for Yesterday)*, an exhibition sponsored by the French Ministry of Culture.<sup>26</sup> North American

<sup>25</sup> Chang Tsong-zung, "Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An Insider's View," 69.

<sup>26</sup> Gao Minglu, "Chronology," *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, Gao Minglu, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 200.

audiences were introduced to works from the Chinese avant-garde movement through the exhibition "*I Don't Want to Play Cards with Cézanne*" and *Other Works: Selections from the Chinese "New Wave" and "Avant-garde" Art of the Eighties*, shown at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California, in 1991. That same year, the Fukuoka Museum in Fukuoka, Japan, held an exhibition of avant-garde Chinese art, *The Exceptional Passage*.<sup>27</sup> This spate of exhibitions dedicated solely to avant-garde Chinese art introduced the international art world to a handful of Chinese artists – Chen Zhen, Wenda Gu, Huang Yongping, Cai Guoqiang, Xu Bing, Zhang Peili, Wang Guanyi, and Zhang Xiaogang to name a few – who have become famous international artists. The increased international exposure influenced smaller cultural centers like Vancouver. Gu Xiong benefited from being a part of the mass migration of the Chinese avant-garde artists. It put his work into a context that had unique cultural and political relevance.

These early exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art were part of a general trend towards internationalism in the art world. The cultural and intellectual currents of the time brought forth new concerns for art institutions, and Eurocentric and Western-oriented attitudes about art and culture fell under scrutiny. Museums and galleries turned their attention to ideas about race, ethnicity and culture and mounted a succession of shows that challenged the exhibition practices in Western art institutions. The most controversial exhibition of this type was *Magiciens de la Terre*, a large show at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989. *Magiciens de la Terre* was one of the first art events that attempted to address issues of race and ethnicity by surveying work by artists from around the world. The curatorial plan brought together works by artists from the developing world and paintings and sculptures of leading Western artists. In doing so, the curators attempted to correct the Eurocentrism perpetuated by major art institutions. *Magiciens de la Terre*

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

was roundly criticized for reaffirming rather than correcting the uneven balance of power between the East and the West and the first and third worlds.<sup>28</sup> It was argued that the curators had failed to address the issue that non-Western art included in the exhibition was still being viewed and interpreted from a Eurocentric position.

There were laudable intentions behind the organization of exhibitions like *Magiciens de la Terre* that took cultural difference and identity as a point of departure. While the press was highly critical of the curatorial direction of the show, artists's careers were benefiting from the attention that their work received.<sup>29</sup> Three Chinese artists - Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin and Yang Jiechang – who participated in *Magiciens de la Terre* gained a great deal of exposure in this major international show. For non-Caucasian artists from areas of the world other than Europe and North America, these identity-specific exhibitions, although sometimes contradictory and even problematic, were a way of gaining visibility.

As more curators, exhibition organizers, critics and collectors began to take notice of artists from diverse cultural and ethnic origins, the contemporary Asian arts, including Japanese, Korean, South and Southeast Asian and Chinese, all gained increased visibility. It has been suggested by Dr. Stanley Abe that the interest in Asian art and culture was “an institutional response to the shifting global demographics of money.”<sup>30</sup> Dr. Abe and other scholars have noted that the transnational interactions of the new globalized economy require a particular sensitivity to issues of cultural difference. As a result of the growing economic relationships between the developed and developing world – between Asia,

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<sup>28</sup> See Thomas McEvelley, *Art and Otherness*, (New York: McPherson Publishers, 1992), 19-21; and Eleanor Hartley, “An Adieu to Cultural Purity,” *Art in America*, (October 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Hou Hanru “Departure Lounge Art: Chinese Artists Abroad,” 40. This exhibition is regarded as the first international exposure received by contemporary Chinese artists; Chang Tsong-zung, “Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An Insider’s View,” 69.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley Abe, “Why Asia Now? Contemporary Asian Art and the Politics of Multiculturalism,” forthcoming publication, 2002.

Europe and North America – cultures are more integrated than ever before.

The growing interest in China's contemporary avant-garde art can also be attributed to its sudden development. The observers in the art world had very little exposure to the work of contemporary Chinese artists after 1949. The newness of the work, its political and social engagement, and the rich historical traditions of Chinese visual culture made Chinese avant-garde art very appealing. Artists became adroit at handling the postmodernist visual language that attracted the major art institutions and buyers in Europe and North America. To say that there was foreign interest in Chinese art is slightly misleading. During this rise in popularity, "Chinese art" came to mean artwork by artists from mainland China. Taiwanese contemporary art remained largely ignored until the end of the 1990s and still does not receive the same attention. To date, very little attention has been given to contemporary art by any of China's many minority groups, or by Chinese living throughout Southeast Asia. As well, we find that artists working in the traditional modes of ink painting have attracted less attention internationally, although several did achieve commercial success selling their work to collectors in Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>31</sup>

Ironically, the political events that halted the development of avant-garde art in China stimulated foreign interest in Chinese culture. The eyes of the world had focused on the People's Republic as a result of the media coverage of the Tiananmen Square incident. Geremie Barmé wrote that the interest in Chinese avant-garde art in the western art markets is, in part, a response to the exotic appeal of China's dissident underground artists.<sup>32</sup> In the journalistic coverage of the pro-democracy demonstrations, international audiences found a human drama with dimensions that transcended cultural difference. As Barmé noted, it was "...the young against the old, the people against the powerholders[sic],

dissidents against ideologues, free spirits against an ossified status quo.”<sup>33</sup> The foreign collectors who purchased avant-garde art in the late 1980s and early 1990s expressed obvious interest in art that had “unofficial” characteristics. Well-intentioned curators, critics, and journalists writing about early exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art for European and North American publications tended to focus on the political content and the “dissident” identification of avant-garde artists. In an essay published in 1994, Hou Hanru critiqued the emphasis placed on the relationship between art and ideology and how it shaped Western reception of the Chinese art:

The western professional art press has not been able to avoid this propaganda cliché. The writers of most articles on Chinese contemporary art, instead of discussing the artists’ creative efforts and the cultural-intellectual values of the work, concentrate their energy and interests on revealing how the ‘unofficial’ artists suffer from political pressure in the country, as if the significance of both artists and work can only be found in ideological struggles.<sup>34</sup>

There are similarities between Hou’s comments and my own observations of the local and national media coverage that Gu Xiong’s work received in the early 1990s. Articles and reviews about Gu Xiong’s work tended to emphasize the role that the political and social climate played in his eventual immigration. As stated previously in this thesis, Gu Xiong’s personal experiences have often overshadowed discussion of the stylistic and thematic elements of his work in articles and reviews of his work. As a result, the media coverage of Gu Xiong’s art has at times been one-dimensional, failing to address the actual nature of the work or to provide any analysis of the creative and intellectual merits of the work. His art is interpreted and its value established on the basis of Gu’s identification as an immigrant of Chinese origin and as a Chinese-Canadian. His role as an

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<sup>31</sup> Chang Tsong-zung, “Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An Insider’s View,” 69.

<sup>32</sup> Geremie Barmé, “Exploit, Export, Expropriate,” XLVIII.

<sup>33</sup> Geremie Barmé, “Exploit, Export, Expropriate,” XLVIII.

<sup>34</sup> Hou Hanru, “Entropy: Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions,” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Arts*, ed. Angelika Bammer (London: Kala Press, 1994), 82.

artist representing this one aspect of Canadian society precluded any other meaningful discussion of his art work until very recently.<sup>35</sup>

Far from being daunted by it, many artists chose to incorporate the “dissident” identity into the subject matter of their work. This label was useful for creating a marketable context for past works and as a source of content for their newer work. Moreover, as Chinese art was introduced to the international art world, exhibition organizers used the “dissident” identification as a thematic basis for shows of avant-garde art precisely because of the interest it generated among western audiences. Chang Tsong-zung and Li Xianting emphasized how Chinese artists responded to social and political situations as a curatorial focus for their exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989*. The exhibition traveled from Hong Kong to the United States, Canada, and Australia. Chang noted that when it opened at the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Art, the show's title was changed to the catchier title *Mao Goes Pop*. It referred to Political Pop, one of the major art movements in Chinese art in the early 1990s and a hot commodity on the international market. Political Pop combined images from Chinese Communist propaganda with symbols from various sources such as Western commercial trademarks, textile patterns and computer images. By blending the icons of Chinese communism and western consumerism, Political Pop artists produced works with instant visual appeal and an ironic edge that drew Western audiences. Chang contends that the exhibition's new title emphasized the “dissident” aspect of avant-garde Chinese art that peaked the interest of local audiences. As a result the exhibition broke attendance records.<sup>36</sup>

*China's New Art, Post-1989* was a significant event for two major reasons: its scope -one hundred and fifty works were included in the show- and the exposure that it gave to Chinese contemporary art. The exhibition attracted the attention of Western scholars and art institutions and set a precedent for the collaboration between art critics from the People's Republic and foreign institutions.<sup>37</sup> When it traveled to the Vancouver

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<sup>35</sup> John O'Brian, “Long Distance Swimming,” in *Gu Xiong: The River*. (Victoria: Victoria Art Gallery, 1999). O'Brian's essay is a recent example of a much more thorough analysis of Gu Xiong's work.

<sup>36</sup> Chang Tsong-zung, “Beyond the Middle Kingdom,” 70.

<sup>37</sup> Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 178.

Art Gallery in 1995, associate curator Grant Arnold organized the companion exhibition *Here Not There* to highlight the work of five contemporary artists who had immigrated from the People's Republic to Vancouver. Arnold took the opportunity to pair these two exhibitions in order to expose gallery visitors to the creative activities of Chinese artists working in both local and global contexts. Gu Xiong exhibited his installation *Here, There, Everywhere* in this show. Earlier, in China, at the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition, Gu Xiong had exhibited alongside many of the artists who were now participating in *China's New Art, Post-1989*. His work was not included in *China's New Art, Post-1989*. Instead, Gu Xiong gained exposure in a show that contextualized his work as "Chinese-Canadian" instead of Chinese. The *Here Not There* exhibition was a milestone in Gu Xiong's career in Vancouver. *Here, There, Everywhere* was one of his largest installations to date, and it was being shown in Vancouver's most prominent art institution. His participation in this show signified his position in the local arts community. Gu Xiong and the other participants in *Here Not There* were brought forth as the local representatives of this global art movement.

### **CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND CHINESENESS: The Art of the Chinese Diaspora**

Most artists continued to explore the themes and styles that had preoccupied them while in China after they immigrated. For more than a year after he left China, Gu Xiong created paintings, installations and performance art pieces that addressed the Tiananmen Square massacre. The ideological foundation of "democracy" and "freedom" the student demonstrations had been built upon had been violently suppressed. The loss of life had wounded people's trust in the political leadership, making them fearful. The social and political magnitude of Tiananmen was felt around the world. Like many young artists and university students, Gu Xiong supported the student democracy movement. As an artist with a keen sensitivity to human experience and a concern for personal expression, Gu

Xiong was compelled to comment on the tragedy of Tiananmen through his art. The immediacy of his experience made his artistic response in the form of the *Barricade Series* personally as well as politically relevant. Other Chinese artists living abroad addressed the events of Tiananmen in their work. Chen Danqing and Zhang Hongtu, for example, had been living in New York City since the early 1980s. Although they were physically removed from what happened, the political magnitude of the event and the loss of life affected the artists and inspired works that responded to Tiananmen. Both Chen and Zhang addressed how their experiences and observations of the crackdown had been mediated by the fact that they witnessed events unfolding in the square through Western news coverage.<sup>38</sup>

The Tiananmen Square massacre politicized the reception of contemporary Chinese art. Chinese artists living at home and abroad sought to express their outrage, protest the political crackdown, and memorialize the victims. Exhibitions devoted to Tiananmen protest art took place in Europe and North America. Western audiences had a new albeit limited understanding of the repressive political power of the Chinese government which framed the critical reception of the art work. This is the crux of Hou Hanru's argument: The political ideologies represented in the art dominated how Western audiences and the art establishment understood and interpreted the work. The political content overshadowed any discussion of the skill of the individual artist. Gu Xiong benefited from the fact that the works he did in reaction to Tiananmen were some of his best. They were visually compelling, thematically profound, sensitive, and emotionally evocative. They are also some of the most aesthetically and conceptually unified examples of his work.

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<sup>38</sup> After Tiananmen, Chen Danqing produced a series of paintings called the "Body Language Series" that explored violence and social relationships. See Jochen Noth, ed. *China Avant-garde: Counter-currents in Art and Culture*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 210-215.

Although he had made the decision to leave the People's Republic, Gu Xiong's experiences and observations of China's social and political climate continued to dominate his work. He had not yet settled into his life in Canada. His wife and daughter remained in China and his future in the West was uncertain. The social and political realities of Chinese culture must have seemed so much more immediate to Gu Xiong, even as he began learning about Canadian culture. After he arrived in Banff, Gu Xiong feared that the Chinese government would seek him out and punish him because he had produced art that exposed the brutality of the government's actions in Tiananmen.<sup>39</sup> At the Banff Centre, however, Gu Xiong was able to concentrate on his art undisturbed and give his thoughts and feelings about Tiananmen a range of expression in installations, performances, and paintings. When his residency came to an end and he moved to Vancouver, Gu Xiong suddenly had to integrate himself into the social and cultural life of the city. In these beginning stages of cultural transition, he likely compared and contrasted every aspect of Canadian and Chinese society. He continued to exhibit his works related to the Tiananmen Square massacre, but in his new work Gu Xiong's shifted his attention away from the social and political conditions in China to his immediate experiences of cultural transition in Canada.

Similar changes in subject matter have been noted in the work of other Chinese artists living overseas. This is not to suggest that Chinese artists abandoned the aesthetic, social, or political issues that they explored while living in the PRC. However, most Chinese artists who moved overseas have indicated they felt a heightened consciousness to issues of race and ethnicity and cross-cultural communication brought about by their immigration. Each artist faced challenges as they worked to establish themselves personally and professionally in the West; the ways in which they have responded to these

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<sup>39</sup>Interview with Gu Xiong, October 25, 1999.

challenges have been unique in each case, like the styles of their art. Even those artists who did not have to worry about their livelihood encountered language barriers and the difficulties of functioning in an unfamiliar environment. These experiences have given them a cultural perspective that many have incorporated into their work.

The Chinese artists who moved overseas experience what James Clifford has called “Diaspora consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> It evolves out an individual’s identification with a culture of origin within a new cultural context. The culture of origin becomes a marker of difference in the new culture, both for the immigrant and to those that she/he encounters in the new culture. This creates a sense of cultural difference for an immigrant, of being part of a “people” with historical roots outside the society into which they have entered.

The last two decades have seen a pronounced increase of emigration from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 2000, a conservative estimate placed the number of ethnic Chinese living outside China as high as 34.5 million, with the vast majority concentrated in the Pacific Rim region.<sup>41</sup> This number has increased steadily in the past decade, rising at an annual rate of 2.3 percent. Even before these relatively recent trends of migration, Chinese culture was a diverse culture composed of many ethnic minority cultures. This diversity was compounded by the social, political, and historical differences between the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The global distribution of ethnic Chinese further complicates our ability to conceive of the Chinese as a unified cultural group. As Leo Ou-fan Lee, a distinguished scholar of Chinese literature, stated “...contemporary Chinese culture is becoming increasingly ‘multicultural’ and ‘trans-Chinese’. The task facing a scholar or critic in this field is curiously similar to that

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<sup>40</sup> James Clifford, “Diaspora,” *Cultural Anthropology*, IX, 3 (1993), 310. James Clifford defines a “diaspora” as a multi-locale culture that maintains connections to a homeland or dispersed community located somewhere else. Clifford has written that diasporas: “...mediate, in lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place.” (p.307).

<sup>41</sup> This figure is publicized by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission of Taiwan. [www.info-china.com](http://www.info-china.com)

of studying racial and ethnic minorities in the United States: how can one negotiate one's way across this increasingly diverse trans-Chinese landscape?"<sup>42</sup>

Today, immigrants develop activities, social and professional networks, and patterns of living that span their home and the second culture they have entered. They develop new social relationships based upon their engagement with many cultures in various contexts.<sup>43</sup> Throughout the Asia-Pacific region in particular, the range of transitional practices among diaspora Chinese take on different characteristics in each locale. Ong and Nonini write, "The proliferation of different ways of being Chinese - through accumulation strategies, mobility, and modern mass media - has engendered complex, shifting and fragmented subjectivities that are at once specific, yet global."<sup>44</sup>

Similar ideas are put forth in writings about the global development of Chinese art. Hou Hanru has stated that Chinese artists view cultural identity as an open process. Hou described the explorations of cultural identity presented in the works of overseas Chinese artists as "...a kinetic shifting between identification, de-identification and re-identification."<sup>45</sup> Hou suggests that artists became interested in the aspects of their own cultural heritage that defined them as individuals and contrasted what they observed and experienced within other cultures. However, most overseas artists do not address cultural identity in the direct and personal manner of Gu Xiong. References to identity, whether personal or cultural, tend to be more ambiguous. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that since they emigrated the concept of cultural identity has framed their approach to their work and how it is interpreted.

Wenda Gu wrote about how his interest in such issues evolved out of the

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<sup>42</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Across Trans-Chinese Landscapes: Reflections on Contemporary Chinese Cultures," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41.

<sup>43</sup> Basch, Glick Schiller and Stanton Blanc, 4-5.

<sup>44</sup> Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Hou Hanru, "Entropy: Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions," 84.

challenges he faced as a Chinese artist working in the West:

I've been involved with issues of cultural identity and cultural difference since

coming out of China in 1988. Chinese artists were totally into western art, and I wrote an article at that time about my feelings about the West. It is about the reality of who I am, not about the philosophy, but about dissatisfaction, which is in part about loosing [sic] your own identity. There is a strong sense because of always being perceived as an "outsider" in the mainstream, yet you are always wanting to achieve within it. But that in and of itself is always changing according to global, political issues.<sup>46</sup>

A sense of being an outsider provoked Wenda Gu's interest in cultural identity. For Wenda Gu and other artists, exploring their cultural identity and drawing upon aspects of Chinese culture is a way of opening up a space for creative dialogue about cross-cultural interaction. As Wenda Gu suggests, addressing issues of cultural identity is a way for him to act effectively between his two cultures. He aims to preserve and assert his identity while integrating or achieving, as he puts it, "within a mainstream culture", meaning Western European and North American culture.

Many Chinese artists now live and work in communities where many cultures co-exist. In large cosmopolitan cities like New York, Paris, and Vancouver, they belong to one of several minority cultures within a multicultural environment. While there has been a tendency in overseas Chinese art for artists to react very strongly to the dominance of the European-American ideals and values, many have examined their own cultural heritage in relation to not one, but many cultures.

For Hou Hanru, the exploration of cultural identity was a defining feature of work by overseas Chinese artists in the 1990s. Hou suggested that Chinese artists addressed the matter of cultural identity by developing "cultural strategies" in their art.<sup>47</sup> In Hou's view, immigrant artists who are seeking to establish themselves in a new culture develop their

<sup>46</sup> Gu Wenda in Pamela Kemper, "An 'Other' Point of View." In *Chinese-Type Magazine*. <http://www.chinese-art.com/volume2issue3/image100/Other/Other2.html>. (September/October), Oct. 7, 1999. The article was first published in *Asian Art News*. (September/October, 1997).

<sup>47</sup> Hou Hanru and Gao Minglu, "Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: A conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 185.

own unique strategy of survival.<sup>48</sup> The word ‘strategy’ like ‘avant-garde’ has origins in military history. A strategy is a careful plan that one employs through various tactics to create advantageous conditions for meeting one’s adversary. Hou’s use of the word suggests that he saw overseas artists using aspects of their heritage to attract the attention of Western audiences while at the same time calling pre-conceived notions about Chinese culture into question. Visible markers of ‘Chineseness’ like calligraphy, Chinese religion and philosophy, and ink painting have an exotic appeal for non-Chinese audiences. Many artists who have achieved international recognition, for example, Huang Yongping, Xu Bing, Cai Guoqiang and Wenda Gu, have used symbols from their native culture to explore how their meaning shifts in a new cultural context. Employing visual elements from their cultural heritage is a way for these artists to assert a position for Chinese art and challenge the prevailing attitude that Europe is the center of all important artistic endeavours. They provide an alternative to the rationalism and worldview based on European religion, philosophy, culture and politics.

At the 1999 Venice Biennale, Huang Yongping was one of two artists to represent France. His site-specific installation *Nine Animals, One Man* consisted of nine roughly hewn wood pillars mounted into the floor of the French pavilion. Huang juxtaposed the classical modeling of the architecture and the natural aesthetic of wooden pillars like those used in traditional Chinese architecture.<sup>49</sup> Huang’s pillars pierced through the roof of the building, disrupting the exhibition space of the pavilion in an overt manner. Each pillar was topped with a metal cast sculpture of one of nine mythical beasts from the *Shanhai jing* (Book of Mountains and Seas), a book of geography and mythology written between 475 and 221 BCE.<sup>50</sup> These mythical beasts come from distant lands, each delivering a different prediction for the fate of the world. In front of the pavilion a lone sculptural figure stood in a compass chariot pointing back at the stampede. The compass chariot is a traditional Chinese tool for measuring time and distance. *Nine Animals, One Man*

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>49</sup> Mathieu Borysevicz, “The ‘Other’ Point of View: HYP in Venice,” *Chinese-Type Magazine*. <http://chinese-art.com/Contemporary/volume2issue4/Other/other1.html>. (Sept. 15, 1999), 3.

<sup>50</sup> “New Reading of Ancient Classic,” [www.chinainformed.com/Archive/x9709/970910.html](http://www.chinainformed.com/Archive/x9709/970910.html).

represented Huang's view for the new millennium. Huang counters Western post-enlightenment rationalism with ancient Chinese mythology. Instead of trying to harmonize radically different cultural positions, Huang lets them stand in disharmony, letting myth and unpredictability intercede.

At the same time, there are other artists such as Gu Xiong, Chen Zhen, Zhang Hongtu, and Frank Tam who have employed aspects of Chinese culture to integrate or create an interesting balance of Eastern and Western cultures. Vancouver-based artist Frank Tam combined his considerable skill as an ink painter trained in the Lingnan School with his interest in abstract expressionism to produce works that express profound concepts rooted in Chinese philosophy. For the past several years, Zhang Hongtu has worked on a series of reproductions of Chinese masterpieces in the landscape tradition (*Shan Shui Hua*).<sup>51</sup> Zhang pairs these works by Chinese master with the styles of modern European masters. The resulting works, like his reproduction of the Northern Song Dynasty masterpiece *Early Spring* (1072) by Guo Xi (ca. 1020-1090) in the style of post-impressionist master Van Gogh, blend formal attributes of Eastern and Western painting traditions. Looking back through art history, Zhang brings these artists, styles and famous works into a contemporary cultural dialogue. Zhang's paintings do challenge the expectations of his audiences, but the project's vitality and the artist's sincere appreciation for both Chinese and European traditions transmit a feeling of optimism about cross-cultural interaction.

Both Chinese and Western critics have suggested that overseas Chinese artists who highlight their heritage and cultural identity capitalize on a non-Chinese audience's appetite for otherness.<sup>52</sup> Many artists who remained in the PRC believe that overseas artists are producing work of dubious artistic merit for indiscriminating foreign audiences. They fear the whims of the international art market will have a negative effect on the

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<sup>51</sup> Zhang Hongtu, *Zhang Hongtu: An On-going Painting Project*, (Shenzhen: China Shenzhen Eastern Apple Art Co. Ltd., 2000), 3-8.

<sup>52</sup> See Ai Weiwei's interview with Robert Bernell at [www.chinese-type.com](http://www.chinese-type.com) (January 1999, volume 2, issue 1); Geremie Barmé "Export, Exploit, Expropriate: Artful Marketing from the People's Republic of China," XLIX; Hou Hanru, "Entropy; Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions, A New Internationalism," 81.

overall development of Chinese art. This has stimulated “market awareness” in China and spurred the efforts of critics like Lü Peng to keep important examples of contemporary Chinese art in China.<sup>53</sup> Critics and artists who have remained in the People’s Republic also suggest that overseas artists have lost touch with contemporary Chinese society and are unable to address the rapid changes occurring in China’s social, political, and cultural spheres. This forces them to fall back on cultural clichés and leads to the supposed misrepresentation of Chinese culture.

When artists must anticipate and educate an audience with limited knowledge about Chinese history and artistic heritage, it is not surprising they assume the role of purveyors of cultural values rather than creative works. Unfortunately, this can mean that an artist’s sincere attempt to educate non-Chinese audiences about his or her culture is seen as catering to their desires for an exotic cultural experience. Exoticization may be unavoidable, but it need not preclude the meaningful appreciation of other cultures. Europe, North America, and Australia all have diverse cultural and ethnic communities that include Chinese immigrants. There are many second and third generation Chinese-Canadians and Chinese-Americans who do not speak or read Chinese and yet possess a great deal of knowledge about their cultural heritage. There are also many scholars and individuals in all societies who have learned about Chinese culture whether through personal experiences or by studying Chinese history, language and culture. Those who criticize overseas Chinese artists for presenting a simplified or self-exoticizing version of Chinese culture often underestimate the complexity of the responses of international audiences.

It is not just the artists themselves, but the whole art system of museums, galleries, curators, and critics that perpetuate the exoticization of contemporary Chinese art. Artists who participate in large international exhibitions are individual players in a complex drama of competing interests. Decisions about the themes and issues guiding an exhibition are often made in the spirit of collaboration. Sometimes every aspect of the creation of a

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<sup>53</sup> Geremie Barmé, “Exploit, Export, Expropriate: Artful Marketing from China, 1989-93,” XLIX.

piece of art, including the materials used, the dimensions, the colour, shape, and form of the work is subject to negotiation with curators, exhibition coordinators, and manufacturers as well as the artist.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, to suggest that the artist bears sole responsibility to avoid exoticization and maintain the integrity of Chinese art and culture is shortsighted.

We can consider the case of Xu Bing, a rising star of the avant-garde art movement who was thrust into the international art world with the success of his monumental installation *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* (1987-1991). While still living in the People's Republic, Xu Bing spent four years in his studio hand-carving woodblock printing blocks with non-sense characters that he invented using standard components of Chinese characters. After carving more than 4,000 false characters, Xu Bing printed and bound books of text using traditional Chinese book-making techniques. The books were exhibited with huge scrolls and wall panels printed with the non-sense characters by creating an architectural setting almost resembling a temple to the written language. The irony of *Book from the Sky* is that written language, painstakingly created to look authentic in every respect, is completely devoid of meaning. The cultural implications of rendering the Chinese language devoid of meaning made *Book from the Sky* highly controversial when it was exhibited for the first time in China in 1988. It was widely criticized for what were interpreted as bourgeois Western artistic and conceptual tendencies.<sup>55</sup> However, *Book from the Sky* is considered one of the most important works of art of the avant-garde movements of the 1980s, and has become well known both inside and outside the People's Republic. By Xu Bing's own admission, the favourable reception his work received internationally facilitated the development of his international career.<sup>56</sup>

Since Xu Bing moved to the United States in 1990, *Book from the Sky* has been exhibited all over the world. To non-Chinese audiences, however, the work conveys

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<sup>54</sup> These observations are based on my experiences working as Xu Bing's studio assistant as he prepared for a major retrospective at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution that ran from October, 2001 to May, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Christina Davidson, "Words From Heaven: Installation Artist Xu Bing Catalogues the Southern Skies," *Art and Asia Pacific*, vol 1 no. 2 (1994), 49.

<sup>56</sup> Christina Davidson, 49.

significantly different meanings than it conveys to Chinese viewers. Most non-Chinese audiences do not expect to be able to read Xu's characters, so the language does not lead to the same kind of tensions between meaning and non-meaning as they do for Chinese readers. Instead, international audiences find the magnitude of the artistic endeavour impressive. In Western art institutions and in the media the political context of the work has been emphasized, and it is seen as a profound act of protest.<sup>57</sup> Western audiences also tend to be impressed by the aesthetic effect of the monumentality of the installation. Western critics and scholars enjoyed the intellectual challenge of the work's ambiguity. To this day, more has been written about *Book from the Sky* than any of Xu Bing's other projects.

Seeking to replicate the experience of linguistic confusion that *Book from the Sky* provoked in Chinese viewers, Xu Bing continued to explore language-based concepts in his work. In the mid-1990s, Xu Bing developed a new kind of writing that he termed "Square Word Calligraphy" by combining the structures and forms of Chinese calligraphy with the romanized alphabet.<sup>58</sup> He created an installation based on the Square Word Calligraphy writing style that takes the form of a classroom with desks, chairs, instructional and practice books where gallery visitors learn Xu Bing's new system of writing. Square Word Calligraphy has been criticized on the grounds explored earlier: Chinese critics have suggested that it is no more than an art strategy employed by an overseas artist in an attempt to gain recognition in the West.<sup>59</sup> Yet, Xu Bing's original intentions for the project belie this analysis. Square Word Calligraphy was created as an ironic statement on cross-cultural communication. The artist set about creating an elaborate new written language and a system for teaching it with the intention of suggesting the futility of such an enterprise. In the spirit of *Book from the Sky*, Xu Bing's Square Word Calligraphy was intended to throw conventional modes of thought about

<sup>57</sup> Britta Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*, (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2001) 15.

<sup>58</sup> An reproduction of Square Word Calligraphy is included in Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, plate no. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Wang Nanming, "Why We Should Criticize Xu Bing's 'New English Calligraphy' and Acknowledge Liu Chao's 'Machine Calligraphy'," in <http://www.Chinese-art.com>, volume 4, Issue 2 (2001).

language into disarray so that viewers might have some sort of original experience of language and meaning.<sup>60</sup> Xu Bing did not use the forms and style of Chinese writing to create a packaged form of Chinese culture for his audiences. In fact, his intention was the opposite: he meant to complicate the process of cross-cultural communication. However, when Xu Bing began exhibiting the *Square Word Calligraphy Classroom* in 1996, the installation was a favourite of audiences. The museums and galleries where the classroom was shown and, in particular, the educational departments of these institutions saw the installation as a way to demystify Chinese calligraphy for their non-Chinese audiences. It thus became an interactive, educational tool for cross-cultural issues as well as a piece of contemporary art. In this context I would suggest that although criticisms stating that Square Word Calligraphy misrepresents Chinese culture and does so to appeal to a non-Chinese audience may accurately interpret the way the installation is received, they do not reflect the artist's original aims for the installation.

Whether they are using material aspects or the philosophical, historic or metaphorical roots of Chinese culture, the artists will invariably combine these elements with those taken from the other cultures they encounter. Wenda Gu's global art project *United Nations* is an example. For almost ten years he has been constructing monumental installations out of panels made from human hair that have been shown in various cities around the world. In each installment of the project, Wenda Gu incorporates ideas and influences from the local history and culture into the installation, while also using the hair donated from the community.<sup>61</sup> Wenda Gu emphasizes his own position outside the local society, both observing and intervening through the creation of his work.

Gu Xiong draws from both traditional and modern Chinese culture. The concepts, images, stories, and songs that he uses are invariably chosen for their personal significance. His ongoing exploration of cultural identity focuses on drawing connections between the material, spiritual and historical aspects of Chinese and Canadian culture. He

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<sup>60</sup> This information comes from my personal conversations with Xu Bing in 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Gu Wenda, "The Divine Comedy of Our Times: A Thesis on United Nations Art Project and its Time and Environment," unpublished essay (1995), 7.

has a deep understanding and appreciation of both cultures, but he states that his Chinese cultural heritage will always form the basis of his identity as a Chinese-Canadian and the way he views the world. As an immigrant, Gu Xiong has felt that his purpose is to learn about his second culture through his experiences. As an immigrant artist, Gu Xiong is committed to documenting this process of learning in an artistic form. He writes:

All cultures are complex. The culture into which you are born is the one you come to understand most profoundly. It is that which finds its way into the art of the artist, and it is expressed instinctively. If that artist should move to another culture, he or she must move just as instinctively to begin to understand the strange new world in which he or she finds him or herself. It is this dynamic, this sudden generation of artistic electricity that fuels change on both art and life.<sup>62</sup>

Interestingly, a distinction can be made between the reception of Gu Xiong's work and that of other overseas artists I have discussed in terms of the reception of visual markers of "Chineseness". There is a greater chance than elsewhere that Vancouver audiences have been exposed to Chinese art and culture, given the city's particular mix of cultures and history of Chinese immigration. Seeing elements of Chinese culture in the visual arts may not necessarily signal "foreign". The city has benefited from the efforts of the Asian communities to preserve and promote their heritage. The public is more aware of Asian art and culture in Vancouver than in most cities in North America. As a result, Vancouver audiences can bring a different level of understanding to Gu Xiong's art than those in other cities. They may associate the symbols of Chinese culture with their own experiences as Chinese-Canadians, or, for non-Chinese audiences, with the experiences of friends or members of their community that are first, second or third generation Chinese-Canadians.

Public funding for the arts and culture through the Canada Council, provincial, and municipal initiatives also influences the way Canadians respond to work by artists of colour and aboriginal artists. Ideally, audiences interpret the cultural symbols as a

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<sup>62</sup> Gu Xiong, "A River of Art and Life: My art between 1989 and 1999," unpublished statement (1999).

representation of Canada's diversity. We are encouraged to think of our country as a mosaic of cultures, each retaining its unique character as it contributes the whole. It is a useful metaphor for those like Gu Xiong, who values the principles of multiculturalism and transmit them through their work. As I have stated previously, even within the framework of multiculturalism public Chinese-Canadian art is often interpreted as a product of the exotic "Other". However, audiences from diverse cultural communities like Vancouver may be less inclined than others to consider art by a local immigrant artist as foreign.

Gu Xiong has not shied away from using stereotypical elements of Chinese culture. Powerful symbols like the colour red, quotations from Chairman Mao, calligraphy, poetic colophons, and aspects of Chinese philosophy figure prominently in his installation. Yet, he manages to avoid reinforcing stereotypes about his cultural heritage, and I believe it is because the art is overtly autobiographical. He guides the interpretation of the Chinese themes and symbols by explaining them for his viewers. Often he qualifies a symbol by explaining both how it functions in Chinese culture as well as the personal meaning he has attached to it. As a result, symbolic elements take on various meanings, some of which cannot be anticipated without direction from the artist. Gu Xiong is careful to balance viewers' expectations with an element of the unexpected.

On a trip back to his hometown of Chongqing, Szechuan Province, in 1998, Gu became aware of how the influence of Western culture had affected Chinese society during his ten-year absence. He documented the changes to the city through photographs, focusing on the ubiquitous presence of American corporate franchises like McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Baskin Robbins, and advertisements for Marlboro cigarettes and the Hollywood movie *Titanic*. The resulting images are a combination of holiday tourist snaps and documentary photography. He and his daughter pose in front of exhibits at an amusement park that recreate the great monuments of the Western world like the Eiffel Tower and Mount Rushmore on a miniaturized scale. They are tourists in their former home, a city of 30 million transformed by an influx of Western consumer goods and

services (fig. 28a).

The photographs were shown in a solo exhibition called *Drowning* at the Richmond Art Gallery in the fall of 2000. The theme for the show developed out of a boating accident that occurred on their trip. Gu Xiong had wanted to take his daughter to see Qingping, the rural village where he stayed during the Cultural Revolution. To reach the village they took a boat across a river. A near-tragedy occurred when their small vessel collided with a fishing boat and started sinking. Gu Xiong escaped with ease, but his daughter had trouble getting out of the boat and nearly drowned. Thankfully, Gu Xiong and his brother were able to pull Gu Yu free from the boat. Three large charcoal-on-paper drawings in the exhibition addressed the accident (28b). One drawing depicts the overturned boat amidst the dark and churning waters of the river. The second drawing is a portrait of Gu Yu in a moment of distress as she is caught under the water. Her face is obscured by turbulent water (fig. 28c). In the final drawing, the figure of Gu Yu struggles to the surface of the water, assisted by Gu Xiong. The drawings are dark, and the waters distort the images, obliterating facial features and suggesting the furious currents of the river. Gu Xiong accompanied the drawings with his poem entitled *A Moment*, which describes the accident and the sense of survival and rebirth he gained from the experience (Appendix VI).

Juxtaposing the emotional event of the boating accident with the photographic images documenting the transformation of Chongqing, Gu Xiong developed a thematic connection to his daughter's near-drowning, suggest his hometown and Chinese culture are drowning in the influence of American consumer culture.<sup>63</sup> It is a troubling and pessimistic view of the influences of globalization that stands in contrast with so much of his work addressing themes of personal and cultural identity. The trip back to Chongqing obviously brought back many memories of his former life. He was clearly startled by the changes that had taken place in his absence. *Drowning* poses the same kind of critique of multinational corporations we saw in his earlier installation work of the early 1990s, such

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Hunter, "Gu Xiong: A Sort of Homecoming," in *Drowning*, exhibition catalogue (Richmond: Richmond Art Gallery, 2000), 16.

as the chaotic consumption he portrayed in *Gu's World*.

Gu Xiong states that his work has an important function that extends beyond self-expression. One of his motivations for creating art is to be engaged in what he calls "individual cultural practice". Individual cultural practice takes many forms in Gu Xiong's work, ranging from representing the mundane elements of everyday life to spiritual meditations on human experience. He also discusses his concept of individual cultural practice in terms of using art as a way of addressing personal experiences. Gu Xiong wants to motivate people to explore their own experiences and ideas about culture. He believes society is enriched by people's efforts to define themselves as unique. Individual cultural practice is, in Gu Xiong's view, a preventative measure against the homogenizing effects of globalization:

for our future cultures, because right now, if you see the whole world, what's going on, more and more the corporate companies control the world. More and more the richer become richer and the poor more poor. You lose your individuality, your voice in society. So that is why I found individual cultural practice is very important.<sup>64</sup>

Gu Xiong's artist's statement for *Drowning* suggests his intention to reveal the dark side of globalization (Appendix vii). He describes how the Chongqing he remembers has disappeared. His photographs, he suggests, are proof of cultural homogenization that results from American-style consumerism. True to his optimistic nature, he suggests that his concept of individual cultural practice is a counterbalance to these negative effects of globalization. He concludes that only the conscious actions of individuals can stimulate the intercultural communication that will create a rich and successful global culture. Although he defines his identity through his experiences in China and Canada, he feels nationalism and the expression of nationalistic sentiment confine the individual:

My ethnicity does not matter to me. Being Chinese or Canadian is irrelevant. I only know that I am one individual living in this world. As an artist, I do not believe in nationality. I strive to be an international person in an international, multicultural world. Artists must break through national

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August, 1998.

barriers. Those who are unable to accept different ideas often restrict themselves within their own culture...If you, as an artist, should relocate, and experience life in a different culture, you must move just as instinctively to begin to understand the strange new world in which you find yourself. It is this dynamic, this sudden generation of artistic electricity that fuels change in both art and life.<sup>65</sup>

Gu Xiong's comments on individual cultural practice reintroduce some of the ideas he expressed in his earliest performance and installation works, when he represented the individual "enclosed" within Chinese society. He constantly asserts the right of individuals to create their cultural identities, and he presents his own art a model for such endeavours.

### **At Home Abroad: Gu Xiong's Work and International Chinese Art**

The number of Chinese artists living overseas continues to grow; their geographic distribution widens; and their thematic interests continue to diversify. In spite of these changes, many of the critics and scholars who write about Chinese artists living overseas base their observations and assessments on the work and exhibition practices of a limited number of artists, a core of jet-set transnationals. The description "international Chinese artist" appears to be a designation for a small minority who achieved success in the global circuit of biennales and international exhibitions. In short, the dialogue about contemporary Chinese art's past, present and future is based upon the work of a few.

Many of the themes and issues addressed in this chapter were culled from essays and reviews of well-known international artists and exhibitions. However, there are more aspects to international Chinese art than are represented in mainstream sources. There are other Chinese artists living overseas who, like Gu Xiong, have integrated their lives and work into new communities. For example, Guan Wei left China to accept a residency in Tasmania in 1989 before relocating to Sydney, Australia, in 1990. He is a painter who

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<sup>65</sup> Gu Xiong, *The Yellow Pear*, 60-61.

creates intriguing works that resemble cosmological diagrams which he populates with imaginary creatures. He is influenced by *Feng Shui*, the Chinese system of geomancy. His approach to composition appears firmly rooted in Chinese traditions; the flat areas of his paintings create a field upon which an assortment of imaginative creatures and symbols come alive.<sup>66</sup>

John Clark, an art historian from the University of Sydney, suggests that attempts to contextualize Guan Wei's work with the work of other overseas Chinese artists have failed to explain the artist's position in the Australian art communities. Guan Wei finds he identifies with other Australian artists rather than with overseas Chinese artists. He feels comfortable using his cultural heritage to create a unique identity as an Australian artist of Chinese descent.<sup>67</sup> Clark states that the development of Guan Wei's career reveals how multiculturalism influences Australian contemporary art, noting that the artist received funding from the Australian government through the Australia Council for the Arts. According to Clark, Guan Wei's career follows "... a social trajectory from 'Chinese working in Australia' through to 'Australian artist of Chinese origin'".<sup>68</sup> While the style of Guan Wei's art is different from that of Gu Xiong, both artists have garnered acceptance from local audiences. Clark notes that Guan Wei represented Australia rather than China in the 1999 Asia-Pacific Triennale at the Queensland Art Gallery in Australia.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in an exhibition of East Asian artists in Seoul, South Korea, that included three overseas Chinese artists, Gu Xiong specified that he wanted to be identified as a "Chinese-Canadian" artist instead of "Chinese" in the show's documentation. Both these artists have found support for their work on the basis that they exemplify the diversity of the

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<sup>66</sup> John Clark, "Playing with the Stars: Guan Wei's Styles," in *Guan Wei: Looking for Home*, (Singapore: Earl Lu Gallery and Lasalle College of the Arts, 2000), 7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

multicultural countries into which they entered. Moreover, they *identify* with their second cultures and are comfortable acting as representatives of their adopted countries.

Are there specific reasons why some artists have achieved such a prominent global profile, while others, like Gu Xiong and Guan Wei, have developed successful careers within a local community? To begin, many of the famous artists living overseas had already established their reputations and had attracted the attention of Western critics, collectors, museums, and galleries before they left the People's Republic. The most prominent Chinese artists who left China attended one of two prestigious art academies: the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. These were also the cities where the avant-garde movements flourished. Chengdu; Gu Xiong's hometown, Chongqing; Kunming; Wuhan; Nanjing; and Changsha had smaller and less-exposed art scenes.<sup>70</sup> In Beijing, Hangzhou, and Shanghai, artists came into contact with the foreign art market and had an easier time establishing the professional connections that facilitated their entry into the international art world. It is clear that being close to the center of cultural activities helped young artists establish their careers abroad.

Several prominent curators, scholars, and critics involved in the avant-garde movement also immigrated to Europe, North America, and Australia. They have played an integral role in the internationalization of Chinese art. As these individuals established their careers in their respective fields, many artists gained exposure through their publications and the exhibitions that they organized. Hou Hanru, Wu Hung, Fei Dawei, and Gao Minglu, for example, have exerted considerable influence over the development of Chinese art in the international art world. In their writing and exhibitions, they single out and promote a small number of Chinese artists living overseas. As John Clark has

suggested, Chinese critics, curators, and scholars played the privileged role as the gatekeepers of contemporary Chinese art.<sup>71</sup> They are able to stimulate interest in the work of particular artists and ensure their selection for various group exhibitions of Chinese and international art.

The artists, critics, and curators who make up the upper echelon of Chinese art are indeed a small, tight-knit community. When I worked as an assistant for Xu Bing, I observed how this circle of artists and critics maintained close social as well as professional relationships. They share resources, information, and professional connections. They also exchange ideas and influences as they participate in a dialogue about contemporary Chinese art. Beyond this small community, there are hundreds of artists living overseas who are simply unknown or overlooked. As a result, exhibitions and articles focussing on contemporary Chinese art expose the public to a very small segment of the work being produced by overseas Chinese artists. An artist like Gu Xiong, who has attracted the attention of Vancouver's critics and curators but has received little attention from the "gatekeepers" of Chinese art, will face more challenges reaching international audiences. On the other hand, perhaps he has more freedom to pursue his own artistic vision than he would, vying for the attention of an influential elite.

During his time at the Banff Center for the Arts, Gu Xiong developed personal and professional relationships that led to his return to Canada. Gu Xiong was able to leave the PRC because of an invitation extended by colleagues at the Banff Centre. It was Alvin Balkind, his friend and mentor at the Banff Centre, who encouraged him to move to Vancouver when his second residency ended. Vancouver sustains and supports a modest number of public and private galleries, but it is really on the margins of the international

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<sup>70</sup> Richard E. Strassberg, "Preface," xi.

art scene. The Chinese artists who have achieved the most recognition are those who moved to global cultural centers. Often they divide their time between metropolitan centers in the West and the homes they maintain in Beijing. Living in New York, Paris, Berlin or Tokyo allows them to take advantage of opportunities they would miss if they lived back in China full-time.<sup>72</sup> They have access to the resources they may require to create elaborate installations and performance art pieces. The production and exhibition of large-scale installation works and the cost of moving them around the world requires significant investment from galleries. The financial dimension prohibits all but the very elite from being able to create the ambitious projects that the international art world appears to favour.

Achieving international fame may actually prevent some of the artists I have discussed from identifying with local arts communities to the extent of Gu Xiong has. These artists may spend up to six months of the year travelling between exhibitions and artist residencies. The international demand for their work makes it unnecessary for them to tune into the artistic and cultural currents of their local communities, nor do they have to rely on local opportunities to exhibit their work.

Gu Xiong's interest in issues of migration and culture as well as the way he addresses this subject matter have more in common with Asian-Canadian art than they do with the work of the limited circle of overseas Chinese artists. *Ding Ho/Group of Seven* (fig. 29a) is an installation piece Gu Xiong exhibited at A Space Gallery in 2000. The work consisted of postcards of Socialist Realist images from the model operas of the

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<sup>71</sup> John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, (Sydney: Craftsman House Publishing, 1998) 270. Clark suggests that more art-historical attention should be given to non-art-producing individuals who assign value to the work of various artists and generate interest and a market for their work.

<sup>72</sup> In a private conversation, Xu Bing stressed how it was important for his career to be in New York. He said that he would prefer to live in Beijing but it would be harder for him to produce and exhibit his work. He stated that he would have far fewer opportunities if he moved back. Xu Bing, like many artists, divides his time between New York and Beijing, where he maintains a residence. This information comes from my conversations with Xu Bing between June 2001 and February 2002.

Cultural Revolution exhibited with paintings by the Group of Seven. His title paired the name of a Chinese restaurant with that of Canada's most famous group of painters. He juxtaposed the restaurant's name with the art group to imply that both are part of our cultural heritage but that, in terms of defining national culture, the latter far outweighs the former. His intention was to overlap a "cultural landscape" represented by the postcards and the natural landscape represented in the Group of Seven paintings (fig. 29b).<sup>73</sup> *Ding Ho/Group of Seven* calls into question our implicit assumption that contemporary Canadian art is built on the foundations of the *Group of Seven*. Gu Xiong's artistic roots go back to the Socialist Realist conventions he was exposed to in his childhood and youth. Before he received his training, Gu Xiong copied these images to teach himself to draw. He makes the point that contemporary Canadian artists may not be the inheritors of the Group of Seven's legacy. Gu Xiong seeks to position his own knowledge or art and his artistic methods in relation to the history of Canadian art.

When the two oil painting traditions of Maoist Socialist Realism and Group of Seven are brought into a visual dialogue, we are compelled to consider their differences. A tradition of figurative painting is paired against a tradition of landscape painting; the former is based upon idealized representation while the latter is expressive; one is foreign to Canada and the other supposedly developed in Canada. One is also made to consider similarities; both Maoist Socialist Realism and the landscape paintings of the Group of Seven were promoted as art that generated nationalistic sentiments. Both artistic traditions are intended to foster a sense of identification, whether it is to the nation or to a social class. To this end, Socialist Realism and the works by the Group of Seven present an idealized view of their subject matter. Interestingly, Gu Xiong told me that the Group of Seven was one of the first foreign art movements that he and fellow students at the

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<sup>73</sup> In conversation with Gu Xiong in June, 2001.

Sichuan Academy learned about. The work of the Group of Seven was deemed ideologically safe because for Chinese audiences it lacked a discernible “political” message.<sup>74</sup>

*Ding Ho/Group of Seven* bears a resemblance to a well-known and highly engaging installation art piece by an Asian-Canadian artist of Korean descent. In 1996, Vancouver artist Jin-me Yoon produced her work, *A Group of Sixty-Seven* for the *Topographies: Aspects of Recent B.C. Art* exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery. This photographic installation examined the disjunction between Canadian national identity and the identities of immigrant cultures. Yoon had sixty-seven members of Vancouver’s Korean community, including herself, photographed in solo portraits in front of two paintings: Lawren Harris’s *Malign Lake, Jasper Park* (1924) and Emily Carr’s *Old Time Coast Village* (c. 1929-1930). The sitters faced forward when posed in front of the Lawren Harris painting and were turned with their backs to the camera when posed in front of the Emily Carr. For the exhibition, the photographs were arranged into two grids of the front and back views. The title of the work refers to the Group of Seven and to 1967, the year that marked both the one hundredth anniversary of the confederation of Canada and the reformation of the Immigration Act which ended the policy of exclusion against immigrants of Asian descent.

Jin-me Yoon based *A Group of Sixty-Seven* on her personal experiences as an immigrant and first generation Asian-Canadian. Like Gu Xiong, themes of identity and culture are prevalent in much of Yoon’s work. Both Gu Xiong and Jin-me Yoon used hallmarks of Canadian art history to draw attention to the question of ethnicity and national identity. The strength of Yoon’s work, in particular, lies in the visual and thematic impact of the work. *A Group of Sixty-Seven* combines an elegantly simple aesthetic

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Gu Xiong, August 1998, 10.

dimension with sophisticated conceptual underpinnings. The installation lends itself to multiple interpretations while maintaining visual and intellectual coherence. Gu Xiong's *Ding Ho/Group of Seven* is too heavily encoded with personal associations to function as a critique, like Yoon's work. He resists posing any sort of definitive viewpoint about the dominance of Anglo-Canadian culture in Canadian art history. Instead, Gu Xiong emphasizes his personal association with his subject matter by suggesting that both the Group of Seven and the Socialist Realism of the Revolutionary operas are his artistic legacies.

Gu Xiong, Jin-me Yoon, and other Asian-Canadian artists like Paul Wong, Sharyn Yuen, Kiki Yee, and Henry Tsang explore their interest in theoretical questions about race and culture by drawing on subjective experiences. They use their own voices and histories to illustrate the complexities of Asian-Canadian identities. While many internationally famous Chinese artists address similar issues of race and culture, they tend to approach them in a more conceptual manner. The subjective voice of the artist is generally obscured or absent from the work while the method of delivering a theme or idea is emphasized. Gao Minglu notes that Chinese artists living overseas have become increasingly concerned with aesthetic communication.<sup>75</sup> The images, materials and objects they employ are intended to lead audiences to a work's meaning, which is often multileveled. In fact, Gao Minglu notes that the aesthetic effects they achieve are meant to have an initial irrational impact on the viewer.<sup>76</sup> Huang Yongping, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Cai Guo-qiang all communicate in ways that are meant to transcend rational thought and challenge the limitations of communication. Their installations are visually impressive and often intellectually stimulating, but the ambiguity of meaning can leave the viewers feeling

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<sup>75</sup> Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru, p. 188

<sup>76</sup> Gao Minglu and Hou Hanru, p. 188

somewhat isolated from the artwork.

While these artists use a postmodern artistic language as a strategy for cultural engagement, Gu Xiong remains interested in representing his cultural experiences with clarity. He considers art a personal exploration of meaning and remains dedicated to his ideal of art as an individual cultural practice. For Gu Xiong, communicating to the world through art remains a process that extends from the self.

## **Conclusion**

One of Gu Xiong's chief goals is to have his work reach international audiences. Until now, his subject matter and his artistic practices have, for the most part, remained localized. Although his work has occasionally traveled eastwards across Canada for exhibitions in Montréal, Toronto, Ottawa, and Windsor, the majority of his shows have taken place in the art galleries and museums in the greater Vancouver area. Over the past three years, his work has begun to attract interest from audiences south of the border in Washington State and Oregon. Gu Xiong has also participated in international exhibitions in Kwangju in 1995 and Seoul, South Korea, in 1998. In the fall of 2002, he will exhibit his work in Latin America for the first time when he participates in a biennale in Panama City, Panama.

Gu Xiong thinks it is necessary for artists to establish their reputations both at home and abroad so that they may have various opportunities and contexts to show and sell their work. He has put this into practice in his own career, first gaining attention in Vancouver and gradually moving further afield. He has not been on the fast-track to international fame, but very few artists achieve overnight success. He has had a prolific and noteworthy career as an artist and educator and is now beginning to attract international attention. This may signal a new phase in his career, and it will be interesting

to see how it influences the themes and style of his work.

After little more than a decade, the international development of Chinese art is still in its initial stages. The success and prominence of experimental Chinese art in the art world continues to grow every year. As time passes, critics and historians gain historical perspective and we are all able to discuss the art in less general terms. We have reached a point where the particular histories of individual artists may be explored. Instead of merely proclaiming the diversity of contemporary Chinese art, we are able to explain how and why it is so.

Migration is a paradigmatic condition of the contemporary world. Contrary to the belief that globalization leads to cultural homogenization, in many cases it actually reinforces people's notions of cultural diversity. Migration stimulates the development of new cultural forms and social arrangements that are no longer place-bound or dependent upon nationalistic affiliations.<sup>77</sup> Gu Xiong's work shows us how new interpretations of cultures can arise from the global conditions of migration and transnationalism.<sup>78</sup> He has shown us how cultural identity can be variously defined as a relationship with place, language, history or time as well as with an artistic or cultural climate. His work illustrates that it is the prerogative of each immigrant artist to negotiate their own positions and identities within the influences of two or more cultures.

The "global" and the "local" aspects of culture do not necessarily exist in opposition to one another. In this era of cultural pluralism and heterogeneity, it serves us well to think of individuals in terms of their specific contexts as well as the more general global conditions that affect their lives. For people like Gu Xiong, who experience the

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Featherstone, "Globalism, Localism and Cultural Identity," in Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 60.

<sup>78</sup> Dana Polan, "Globalism's Localisms," in Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) 259.

complexities of cross-cultural engagements, exploring one's identification with a local culture is a way of understanding how globalization becomes a lived experience.

## CONCLUSION

This examination of Gu Xiong's life and work was guided by a basic idea that identities are not static; they are constantly changing in response to social and cultural influences. Moreover, individuals are actively engaged in creating and representing their identities for the world. The meaningful inquiry into identity considers how it takes shape and evolves within unique historical contexts. This thesis is a study of the circumstances in which Gu Xiong's work and his focus on cultural identity have emerged.

As stated in chapter one, specific influences for Gu Xiong's work can be found in the stylistic, aesthetic, and ideological issues that prevailed as he received his education and initiated his career in China. His concerns for the social function of art and the role of the artist in society are the *leitmotiv* of his career. Gu Xiong, in some of his works, has shown an ability to produce powerful and eloquent social commentary. In all his work we see his commitment to self-expression and philosophical reflection.

Chinese immigration to Vancouver and the rest of Canada is part of the global movement of the Chinese population outside China. Writing the histories in which various cultural traditions and historical moments intersect can be a complex undertaking; however, it is necessary if we are to understand the artistic and cultural practices that are developing transnationally. By considering Gu Xiong's art in relation to overseas Chinese artists and Vancouver's Chinese-Canadian artistic community, I have shown how Chinese artists living abroad may choose to address the local realities and integrate their artistic practice into their local cultural context. More often, however, the tendency among the most prominent artists living outside China has been to identify themselves as international rather than artists, while still drawing on their cultural heritage to explore issues of globalization and cultural hybridity. Chinese artists living overseas are producing

work that challenges existing paradigms of their native culture.

It has now been more than a decade since Gu Xiong left the People's Republic of China. In the time that has passed since his departure, the fast-paced development of a market economy has changed the social, economic, cultural, and ideological foundations of Chinese society. These transformations are particularly apparent in China's major cities, where increased consumer activity and the growing influence of North American popular culture are changing the physical environment as well as their culture. Many Chinese artists are exploring how these changes are manifest in the society and in the lives of individuals in the People's Republic.<sup>1</sup> By presenting their observations and critiques of the social issues that are relevant to contemporary Chinese society, Chinese artists give non-Chinese international audiences greater insight into the realities of life in Mainland China. Artists like Gu Xiong who have left the People's Republic of China are now removed from these realities. Although they may frequently travel back to the People's Republic, their perceptions of Chinese society and culture are influenced and altered by their experiences living abroad. The position that they occupy in relation to Mainland Chinese society is similar to their positions in the countries into which they immigrated – they are at once “inside” and “outside” the mainstream.

In chapters two and three of this study, I suggested that the themes of migration and cultural identity Gu Xiong addresses in his art are particularly relevant in the context of contemporary Canadian society. I contend that Gu Xiong's art must be considered in relation to dialogues pertaining to Chinese-Canadian cultural identity that have developed within the Chinese-Canadian visual arts community over the past three decades. These dialogues, in turn, intersect with the multicultural interests of local art galleries and

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<sup>1</sup> Wu Hung presented in-depth examinations of the themes and concerns of experimental Chinese artists in the People's Republic in the essays he wrote for his exhibition catalogue, Transcience: Chinese

cultural centres and the increased representation of minority cultures in Vancouver's mainstream cultural institutions. Immigration has always been a central component of Canadian history. Gu Xiong has consistently represented himself and been represented within the continuum of Canada's immigration history. In spring 2001, a 30-minute documentary on Gu Xiong's life and career aired on Canadian public television. The documentary entitled The Yellow Pear was part of a series called *A Scattering of Seeds* that explored the history of immigration in Canada. The main narration for documentary was provided by Gu Yu and included interviews with Gu Xiong, members of his family, and some of his friends and professional acquaintances. Gu Yu's involvement in the documentary was substantial and significant. From her point of view, the story of Gu Xiong's immigration to Canada is a story of how she has come to be a young Canadian woman of Chinese descent. The documentary emphasized the connection between Gu Xiong's past and the future of his family in Canada. Gu Xiong was the most contemporary subject of the *A Scattering of Seeds* series. His family's experiences were thus represented as the newest chapter of Canada's long history of immigration.

As I researched Gu Xiong's exhibitions, I was able to assess the success he has had integrating into Vancouver's social and cultural life based upon several measures. His extensive exhibition history in local public art galleries and cultural institutions and the local media coverage he has received certainly attest to the success. Another significant measure is how his work has been received by local audiences. This study did not dwell on this aspect of his work, and I would like to end with a few short comments on it. Gu Xiong has always rooted his artistic practice in the communities in which he has worked. In our conversations, Gu Xiong repeatedly emphasized that he feels compelled to share his story

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Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century. (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Gallery and the University of Chicago, 1999).

with audiences so that people from different racial or cultural backgrounds might develop a better understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants. I would evaluate his efforts as successful to this end. In my observation, Gu Xiong's audiences identify and empathize with his personal narratives. Those who visit his installations or have an opportunity to hear him speak about his life and his art are invariably moved by his story and his earnest expressiveness. His work thus serves one of its intended purposes of promoting tolerance and understanding between cultures. Quite clearly there are still gaps between theory and practice of multiculturalism in Canadian cultural institutions, as many Asian-Canadian and non-anglophone Canadian artists have articulated in the past several years.<sup>2</sup> If we are to fulfill Canada's critical cultural agenda of moving multiculturalism beyond its museum-oriented function of conserving and documenting the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities, the values of non-anglophone Canadian cultures need to be integrated into all aspects of Canadian society.

In closing, I would like to point out some areas of this thesis that merit further attention and inquiry. To begin, this study would have been greatly enriched by my having the language skills to research Chinese texts. The fact that I was not able refer to primary texts in Chinese to develop a context for Gu Xiong's work and academic career in the People's Republic is a shortcoming of this study. Furthermore, I might have been able to add another perspective by addressing how critics, writers, and artists who have remained in the People's Republic are discussing the internationalization of contemporary Chinese art. I certainly recognize those who are striving to participate in dialogues pertaining to the development of Chinese culture both inside and outside of China have a responsibility to develop the language skills that facilitate communication between cultures. Furthering my

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<sup>2</sup> See Monika Kin Gagnon, *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture and Canadian Art*. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, Artspeak Gallery, Kamloops Art Gallery, 2000).

Chinese language abilities will be the next step in my education. I look forward to a time when I will be able to revisit this study and develop new ideas from this material through an ability to conduct research in Chinese.

The observations about the internationalization of Chinese art presented in this study are far from conclusive. Comprehensive studies on this have yet to be written. There are always new exhibitions to be documented and evaluated, new issues to be explored, and new observations to be made. Because the development of contemporary Chinese art has been fast-paced and multi-faceted, I believe that new dimensions will be revealed as time passes and critics and art historians are able to gain greater historical perspective. In the intervening time, there is much work to be done. The scope of contemporary Chinese art accounts for a diverse range of artistic practices. Each artist's work arises from their own subject matter, aesthetic concerns, thematic and theoretical issues, and influences. More research is needed on how the experiences of overseas Chinese artists are shaped by economic factors, such as the markets for art that exist in the cities and countries where the artists are living. Further research should also address how overseas Chinese artists are influenced by the policies and cultural practices of the cultural institutions that exhibit their work.

Studies of individual artists will provide the kind of focused analysis that will give us a broader understanding of contemporary Chinese art and culture. Chinese artists have highlighted the relationship of migration and cultural identity within the broader history of Chinese migration overseas. However, the developing discourse on Chinese transnationalism runs the risk of breeding generalizations that would further confound the issues surrounding Chinese global cultural identity. A potential problem noted by sociologist Ng Wing Chung is the danger that our understanding of Chinese transnationalism will lead to a kind of cultural essentialism that will erase the historical

specificity and the complexity of identity formation in various locations.<sup>3</sup> As chapter three of this study suggests, Chinese immigrants all have unique experiences of transnationalism. As a result, we do not see a universal Chinese culture prevailing internationally in the visual arts or in any other cultural practices.

Many of the questions, ideas and themes that have been addressed in this study of Gu Xiong's work and career will continue to be pertinent for many years to come. How will ethnic Chinese artists respond to changing global and local environments? What Chinese traditions and values will be carried into the future? How will the ongoing discourse of "Chineseness" evolve as time passes? How will Chinese artists contribute to the changing ideas regarding internationalism and transnationalism in the visual arts? The research that is being done by the artists and the curators, art critics and historians who address the complexities of contemporary Chinese art will no doubt answer these questions and challenge basic assumptions about Chinese culture that are held in Asia and other parts of the world.

For my part, I have attempted to present a study of the career and work of Gu Xiong that would address how art is created in the multiple social and cultural contexts in which one artist has lived and worked. What is particularly pertinent about Gu Xiong's art, and hopefully about this thesis, is that they address both the rewards that are gained and the challenges that are faced when different cultures are brought into contact, when they intermingle, and even merge. We live in communities that are constructed through a variety of practices. They can be global or local in their orientation; politically, commercially or intellectually motivated; social or artistic; or racially or culturally specific. Our identities constitute ways of belonging within these communities that structure our everyday lives. What emerges in Gu Xiong's work is a complex and changing identity well worth the efforts he has made to define it.

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<sup>3</sup> Ng Wing Chung, *The Chinese in Vancouver*. 139.

## Illustrations



Figure 1. Gu Xiong, *Title unknown*. Sketch from Gu Xiong's notebook. 1970s. Ink on paper. 4 x 6 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Gu Xiong, Title unknown. Sketch from artist's notebook. 1970s. Ink on paper. 4 x 6 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Gu Xiong, *Title unknown*. Sketch from Gu Xiong's notebook. Ink on paper. 4 x 6 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

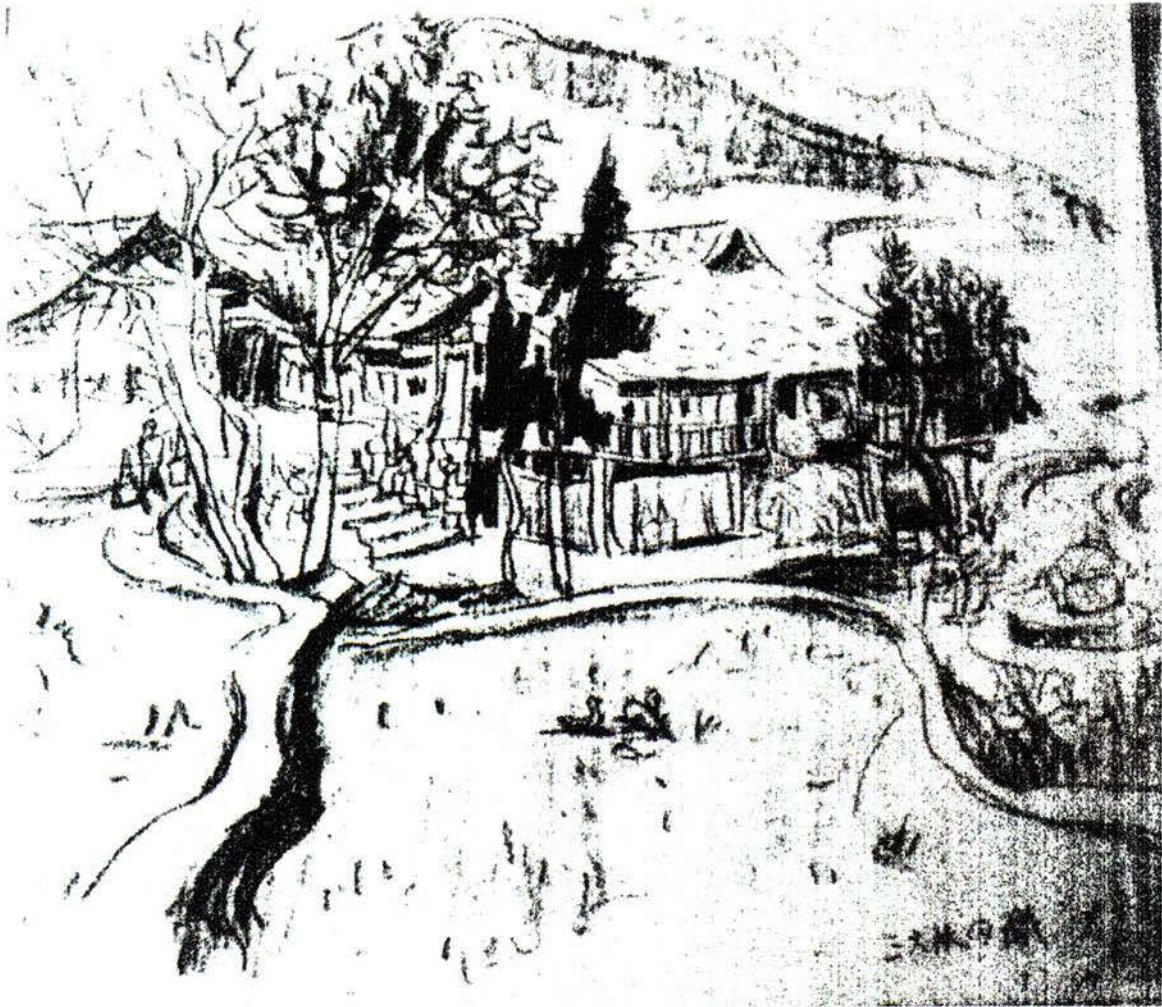


Figure 4. Gu Xiong, *Title unknown*. Sketch from Gu Xiong's notebook. Ink on paper. 4 x 6 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5. Gu Xiong, *Title Unknown*. 1980s. Woodblock print. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Gu Xiong, *Title unknown*. 1980s. Woodblock print. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

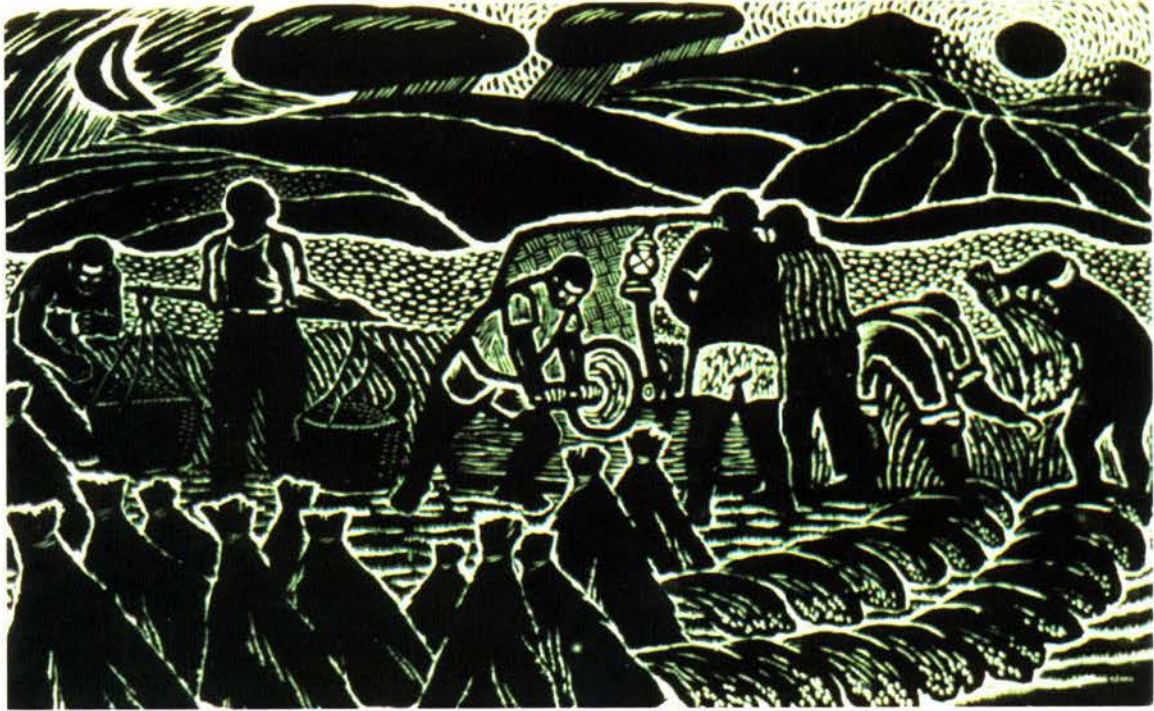


Figure 7. Gu Xiong. *Title unknown*. 1980s. Woodblock print. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

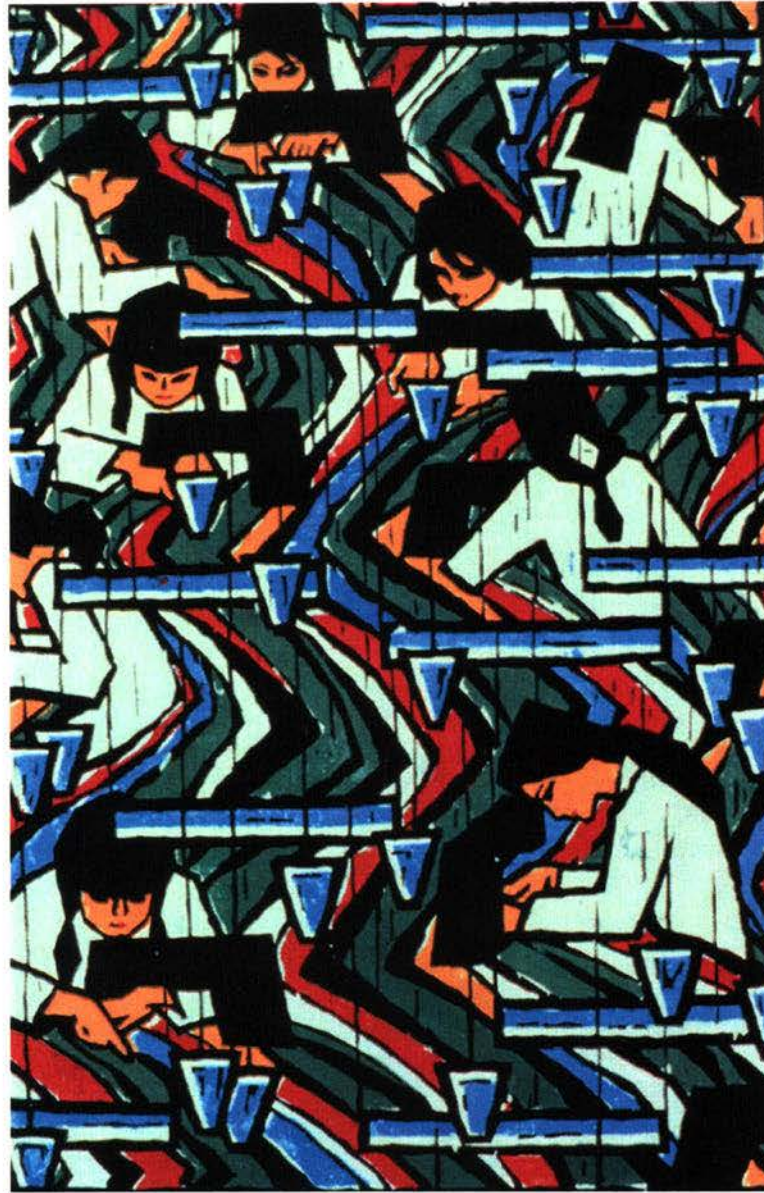


Figure 8. Gu Xiong, *Title unknown*. 1980s. Woodblock print. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

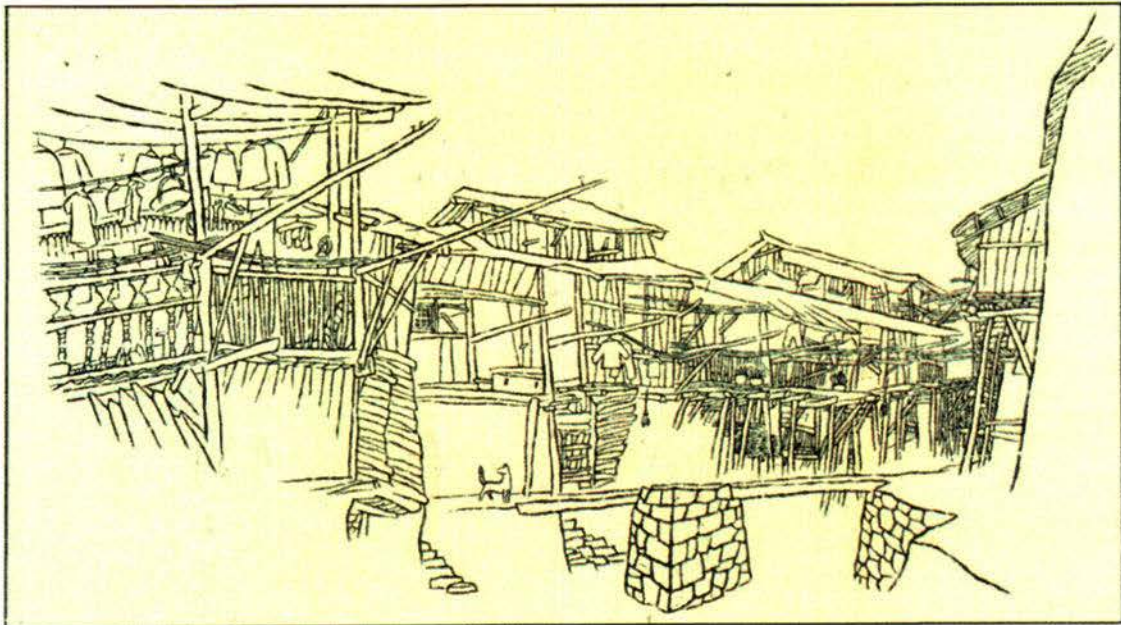


Figure 9. Gu Xiong, *A Distant Place*. 1985. Ink on paper. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. Gu Xiong, *#4 Six Scholars*. 1986. Oil on canvas. 49 x 78 cm. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 11. Gu Xiong, *Li Kui Fights Four Tigers*. 1986. Woodblock print. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

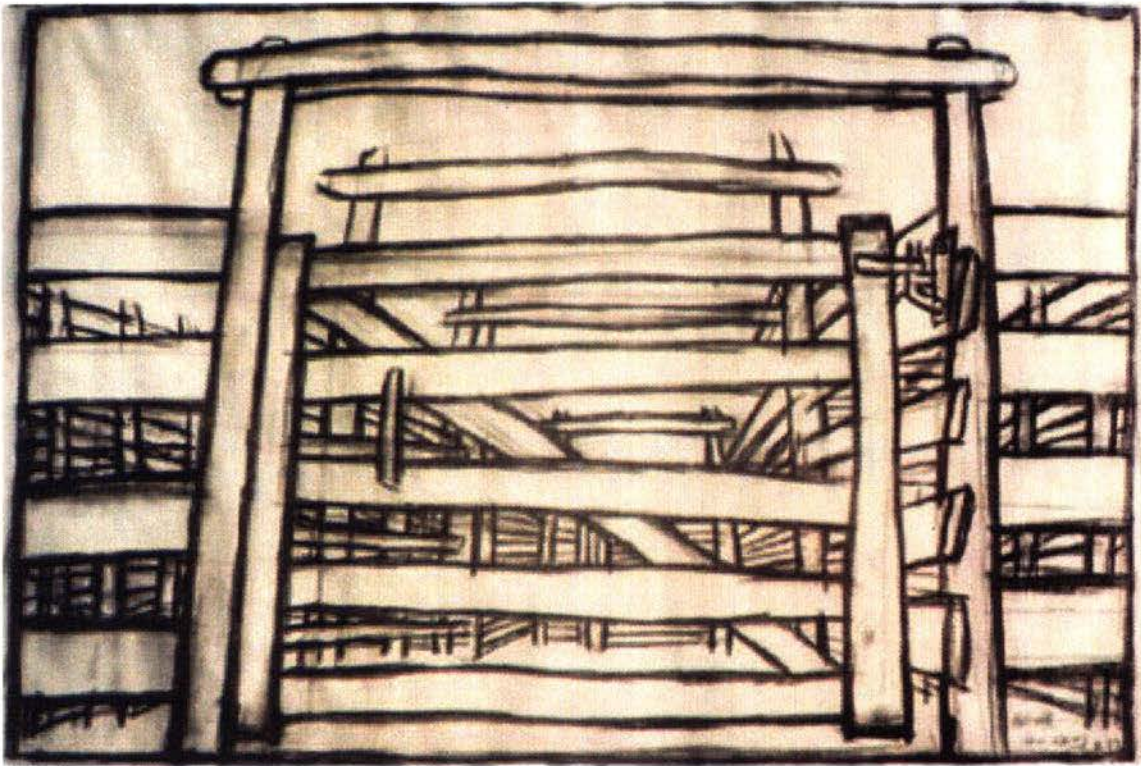


Fig. 12. Gu Xiong, *Corral*, 1986. Charcoal on paper. Collection of Mrs. and Mr. Art Wright. Photograph by Mary Lucas.



Figure 13a. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure*. 1989. Performance and installation at the National Gallery in Beijing, PRC (February, 1989). Multimedia installation. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

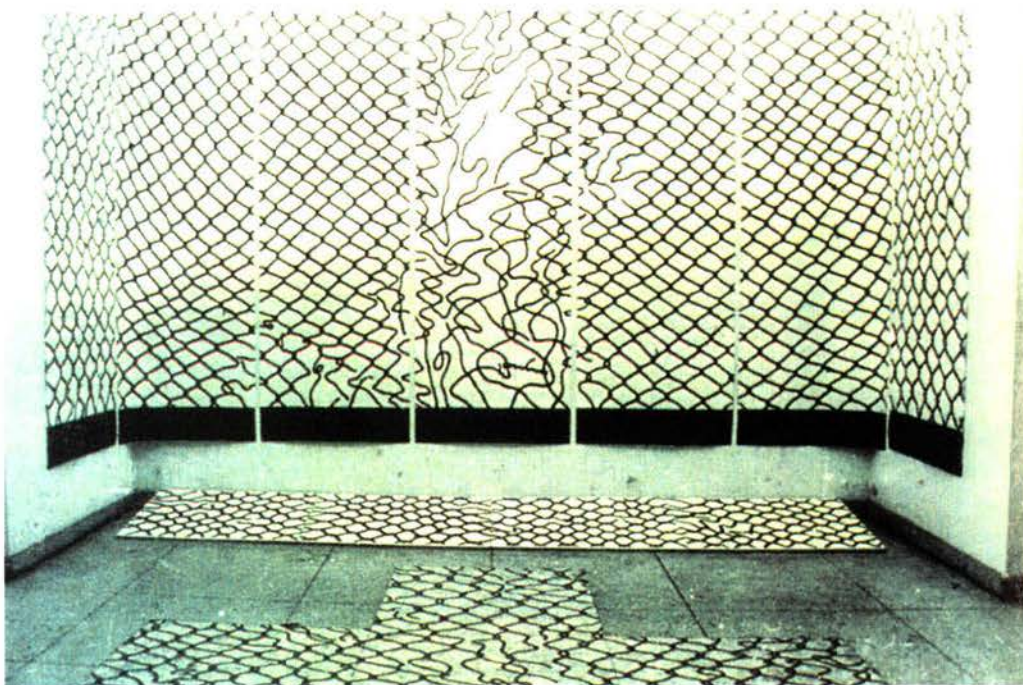


Figure 13b. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure*. 1989. Performance and installation at the National Gallery in Beijing, PRC (February, 1989). Multimedia installation. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 13a. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure*. 1989. Performance and installation at the National Gallery in Beijing, PRC (February, 1989). Multimedia installation. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

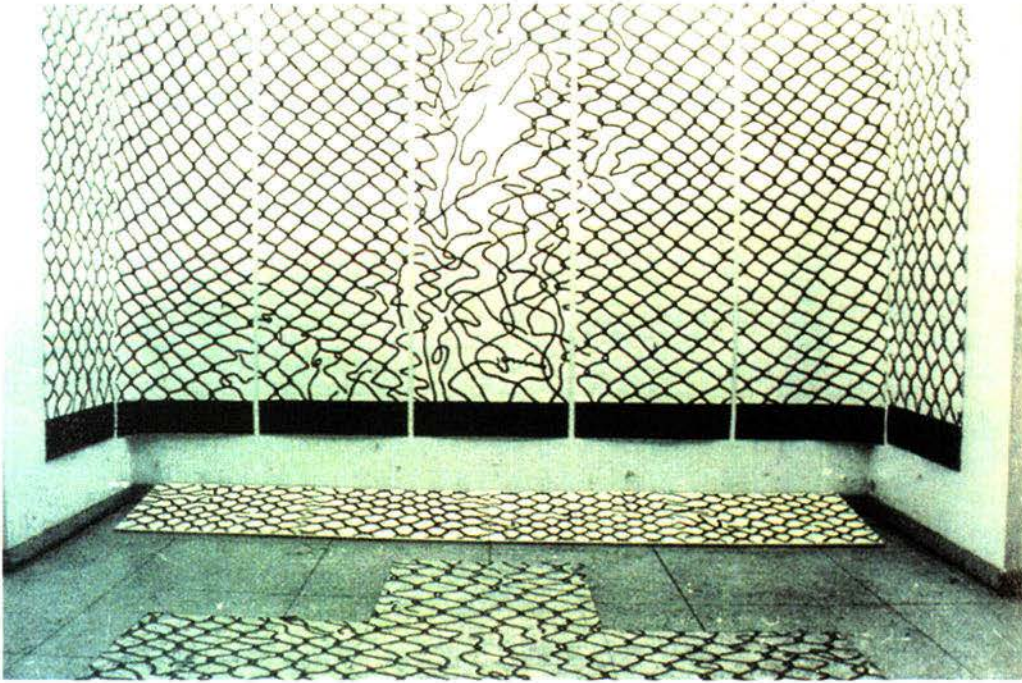


Figure 13b. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure*. 1989. Performance and installation at the National Gallery in Beijing, PRC (February, 1989). Multimedia installation. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

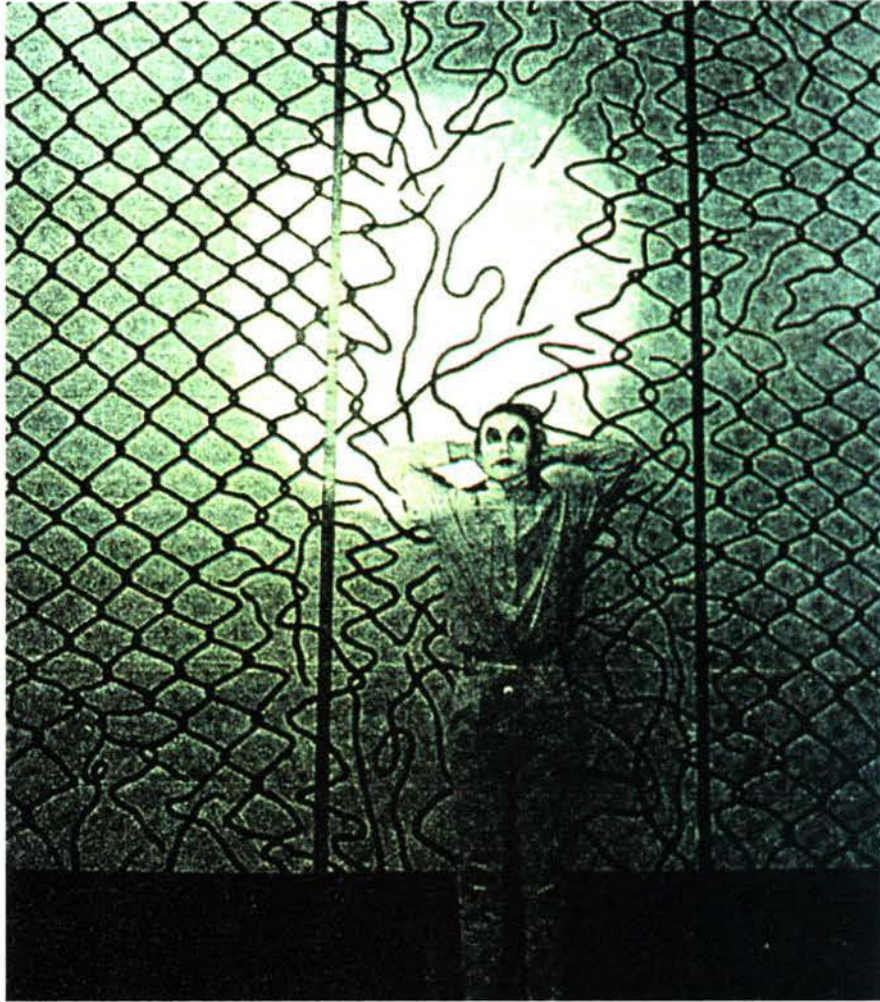


Figure 13c. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure*. 1989. Performance and installation at the National Gallery in Beijing, PRC (February, 1989). Multimedia installation. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

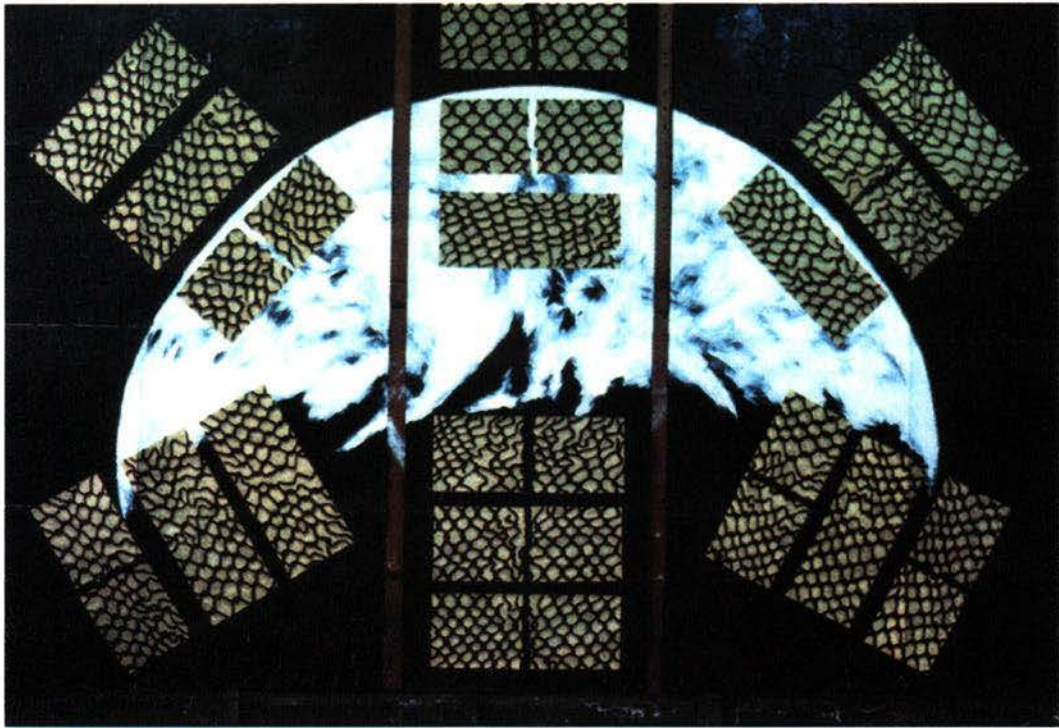


Figure 14a. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure #2*. Performance and installation. Collaboration with students at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, Sichuan Province, PRC (May, 1989). Multimedia. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 14b. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure #2*. Performance and installation. Collaboration with students at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, Sichuan Province, PRC (May, 1989). Multimedia. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 14c. Gu Xiong, *Enclosure #2*. Performance and installation. Collaboration with students at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, Sichuan Province, PRC (May, 1989). Multimedia. Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

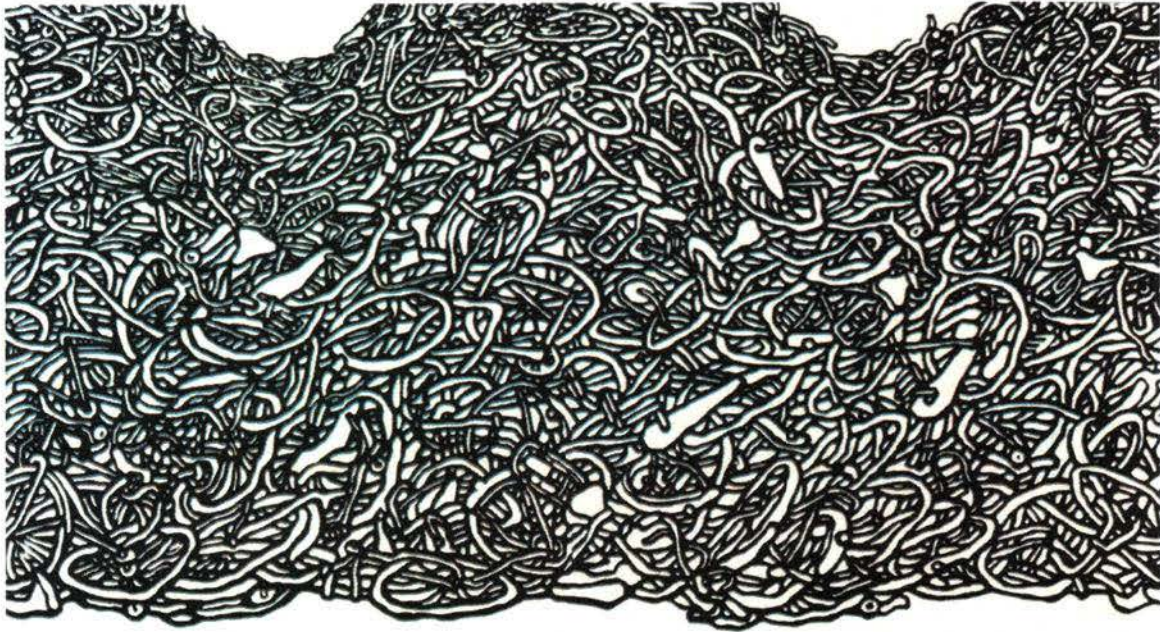


Fig. 15. Gu Xiong, *Barricade of Bicycles – June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989*, 1989 Acrylic on paper. The permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 16a Gu Xiong, *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989. 1992.* Multimedia installation. Open Space Artist-run Centre, Victoria, B.C. (Spring, 1992). Variable dimensions. Courtesy of Open Space.



Figure 16b Gu Xiong, *Barricade of Bicycles, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989*. 1992. Multimedia installation. Open Space Artist-run Centre, Victoria, B.C. (Spring, 1992). Variable dimensions. Courtesy of Open Space.

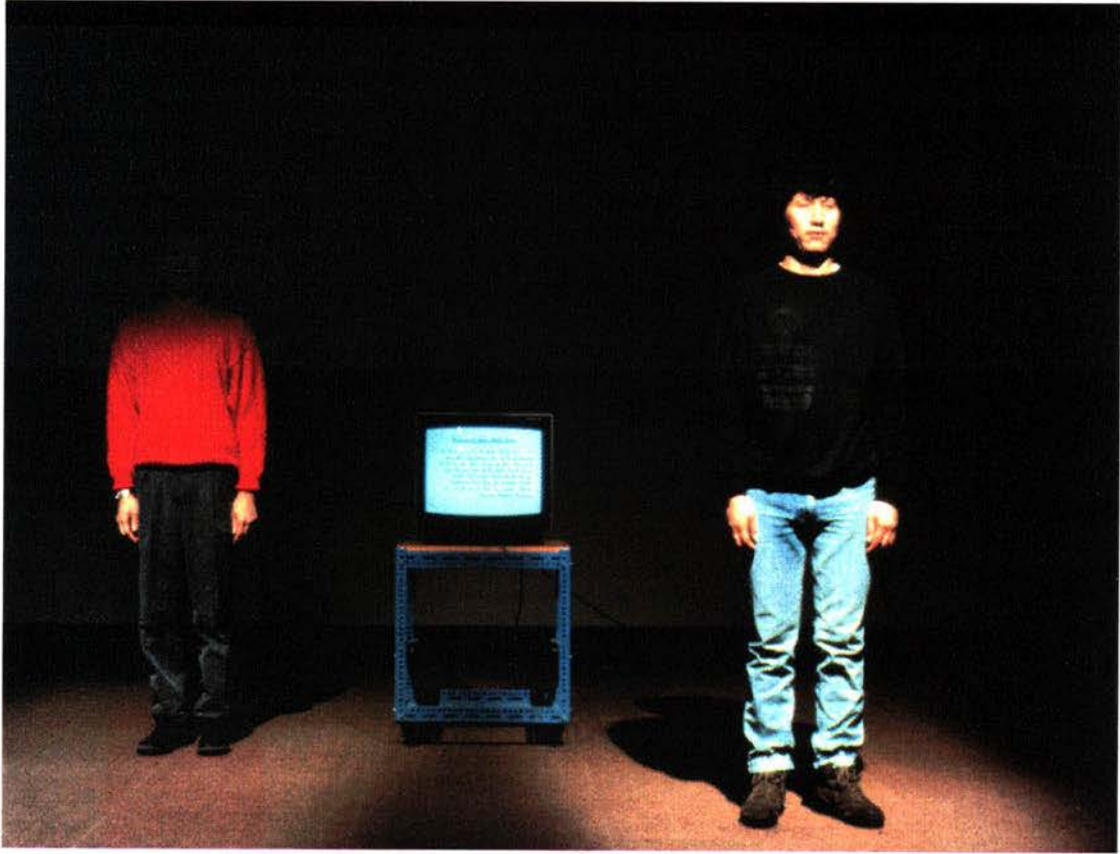


Figure 17a Gu Xiong and Henry Tsang. *Shock Culture*. Collaborative multimedia performance. Western Front Artist-run Centre (Spring, 1991). Courtesy of the artist.

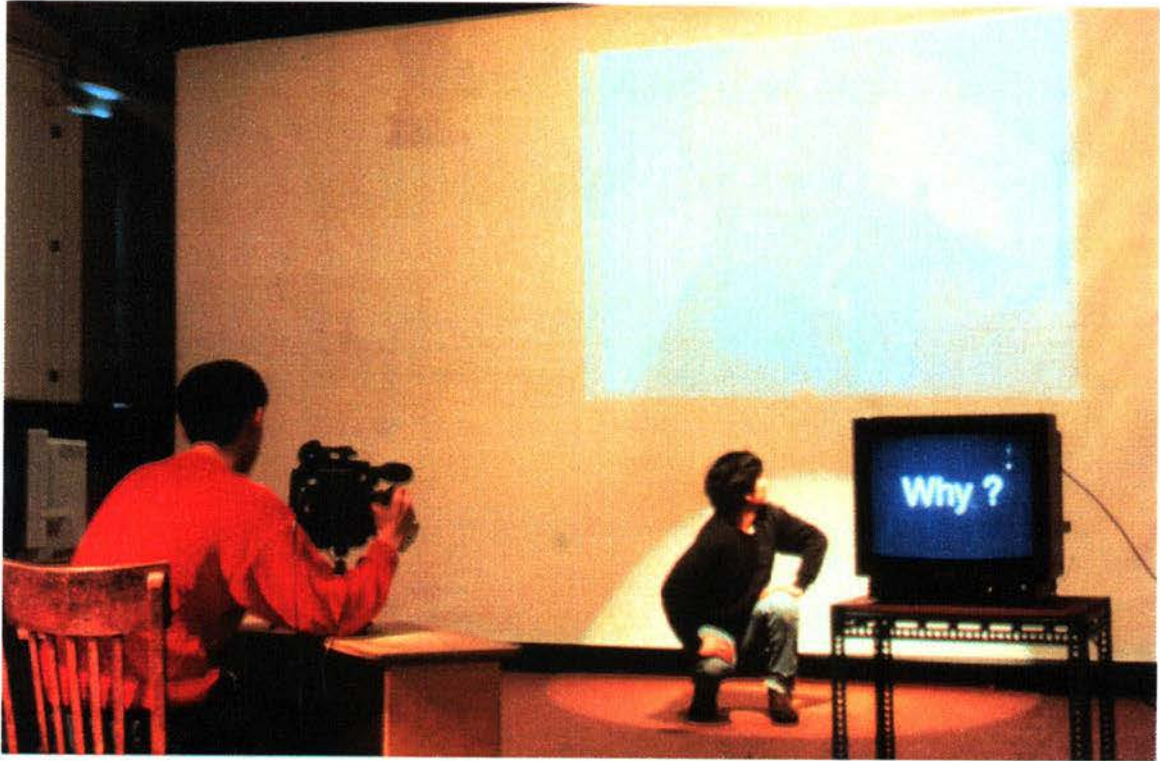


Figure 17b Gu Xiong and Henry Tsang. *Shock Culture*. Collaborative multimedia performance. Western Front Artist-run Centre (Spring, 1991). Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 18a Gu Xiong, detail from *Gu's World*. 1990. Multimedia installation. Diane Farris Gallery, Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 18b Gu Xiong, detail from *Gu's World*. 1990. Multimedia installation. Diane Farris Gallery, Variable dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.

# Gu Xiong

## Heads of State



Figure 19. Gu Xiong, details from *Heads of State*. 1992. Multimedia installation . Diane Farris Gallery. "Margaret Thatcher," "Saddam Hussein," "Manuel Noriega," "Yasser Arafat." Acrylic on canvas. 32 x 26 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 20a. Gu Xiong, *The Basement*. 1994. Multimedia installation. Richmond Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

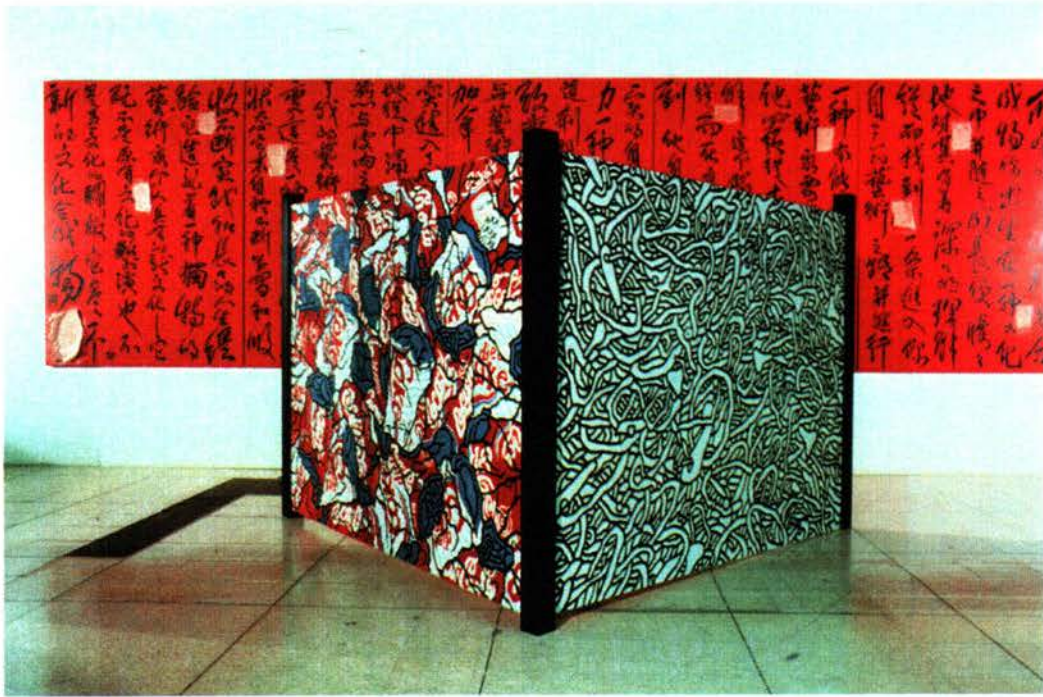


Figure 20b. Gu Xiong, *The Basement*. 1994. Multimedia installation. Richmond Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 21a. Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere*. 1995. Multimedia installation. Vancouver Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

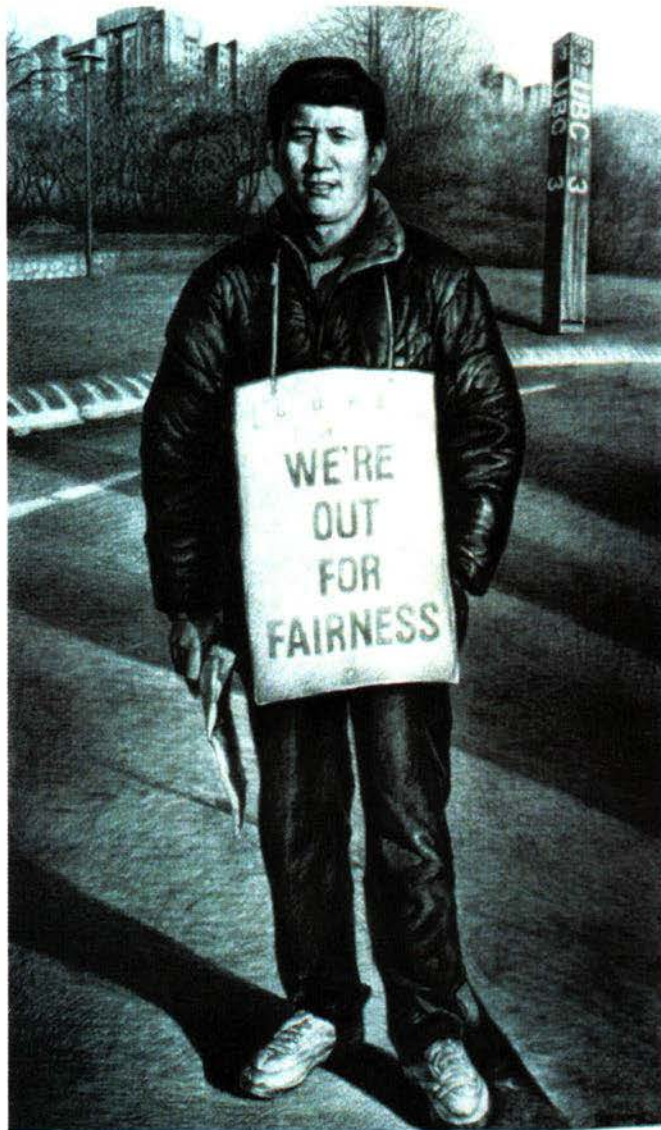


Figure 21b. Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere*. 1995. Multimedia installation. Vancouver Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

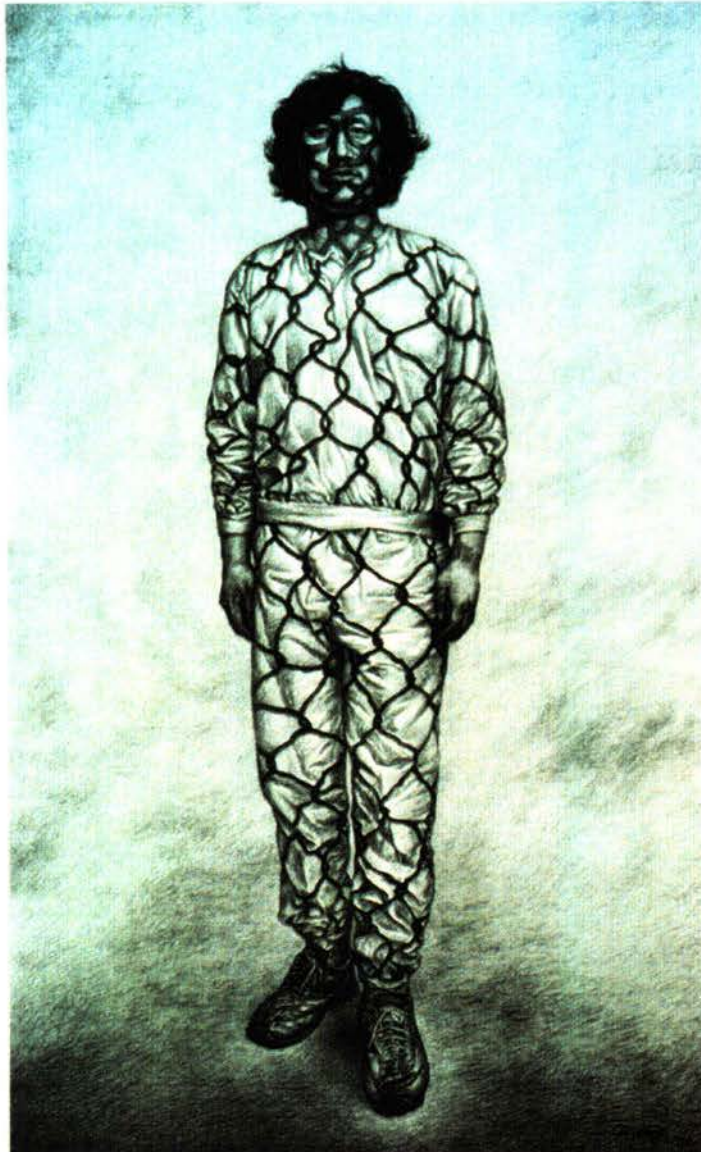


Figure 21c. Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere*. 1995. Multimedia installation. Vancouver Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

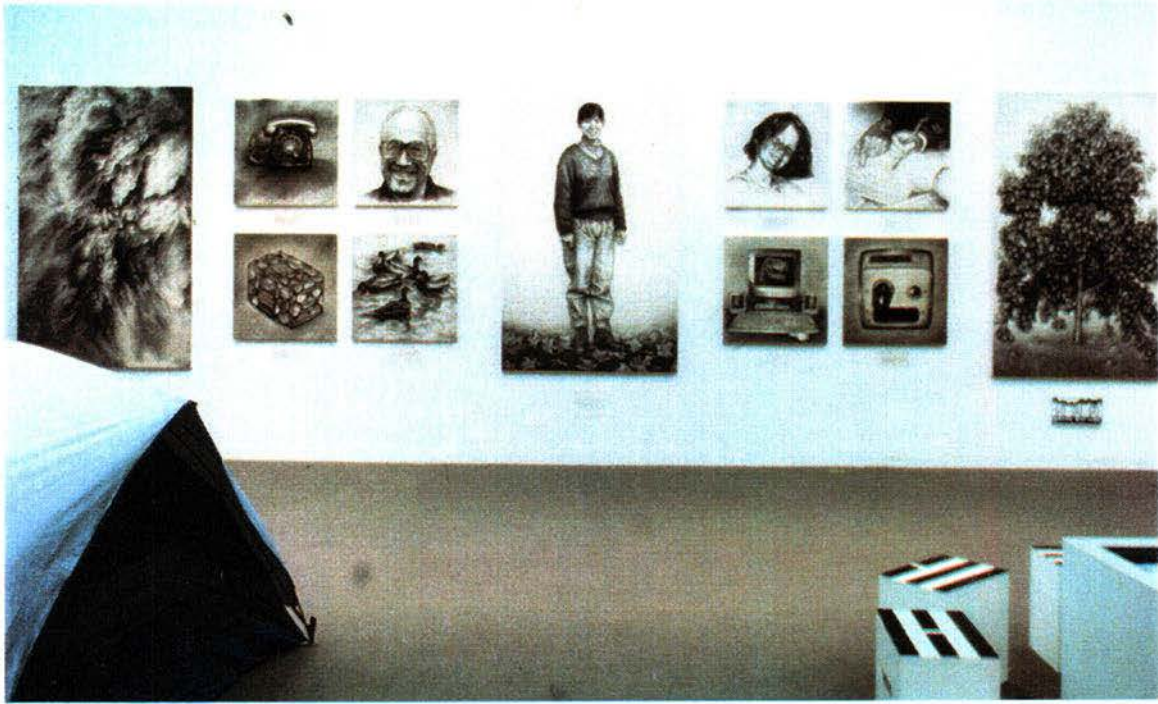


Figure 21d. Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere*. 1995. Multimedia installation. Vancouver Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 21e. Gu Xiong, *Here, There, Everywhere*. 1995. Multimedia installation. Vancouver Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

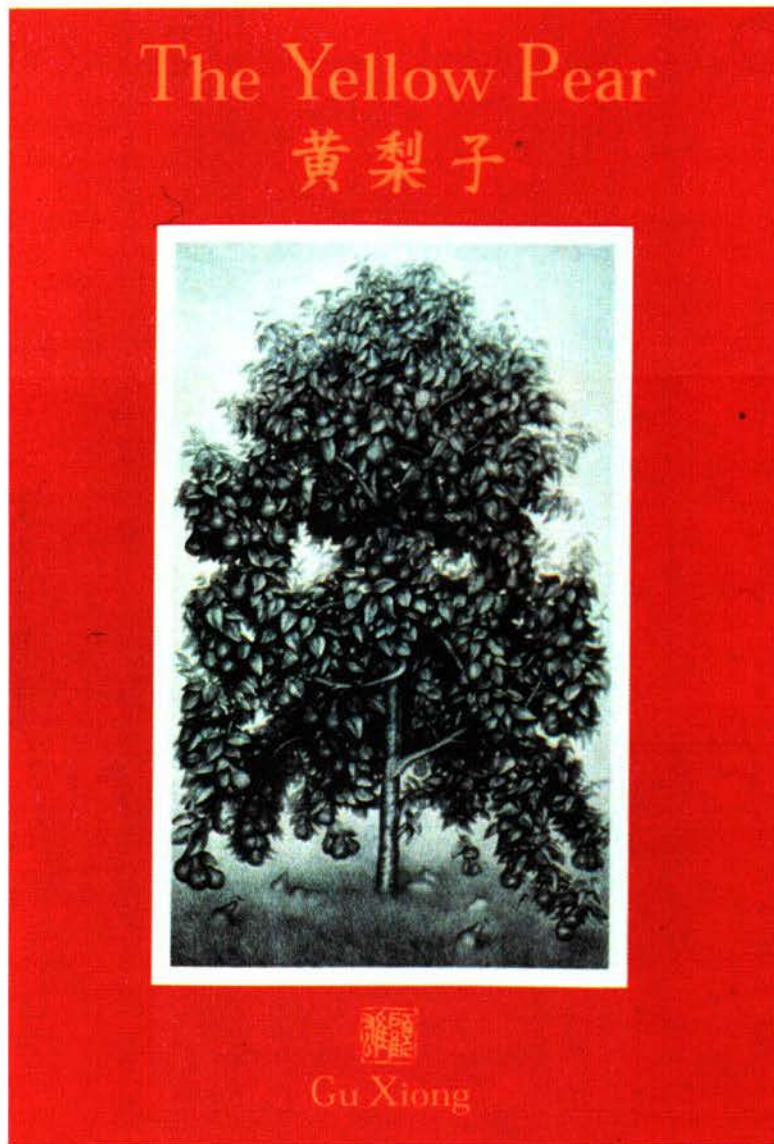


Figure 22a. Gu Xiong, cover illustration, The Yellow Pear. (Burnaby: Arsenal Pulp Press and Burnaby Art Gallery, 1997).

## THE YELLOW PEAR TREE

Chairman Mao said, "If you want to know the taste of the pear, you have to bite into it." We tasted the pear of the Cultural Revolution through our sufferings in China. When we moved to Canada, we tasted another pear – culture shock. But we planted the seeds of the pear deeply into this new land, so that it may blossom and bear the fruits of our new life.

### 黃梨子

毛主席說：“如果你要知道梨子的滋味，你就得親口嚐一嚐”。在中國，我們曾飽嚐“文化大革命”的“梨子”的滋味。自從我們來到加拿大，也飽嚐“文化沖擊”的“梨子”的味道。我們把黃梨的種子埋在這塊新土地上，讓它開花結果。它是我們生活在兩種文化之中的一個象征。



Fig. 22b. Gu Xiong, detail, *The Yellow Pear*, 1997. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press and the Burnaby Art Gallery, p. 4-5.

## RICE COOKER

We have changed a lot since we came here, but one thing we could not change is how much rice we eat. A kernel of rice has its own experience in nature. I can still smell the soil of the fields in China. I can still remember the difficulty cultivating it. Rice is a symbol of nature, and my energy comes from it. It is also a symbol of traditional Chinese culture, in which everything is related to nature. We are all part of nature, and we have to keep in touch with it.

### 電飯煲

自從來到這裡，我們改變了許多，但有一件事情仍舊保持，那就是吃米飯。稻米與大自然有著天然的聯繫。不管誰我聞到土地的氣息。一粒米是多麼的來之不易，它是大自然和傳統中國文化的象徵，也是我力量的源泉。我們是自然之子，應該永遠保持與自然的聯繫。



Fig. 22c. Gu Xiong, detail. *The Yellow Pear*; 1997. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press and the Burnaby Art Gallery, p. 10-11.

## WATER FOUNTAIN

In China, we never drank cold water in the cities because it was very polluted. We only drank it after it was boiled. It took us a long time to get used to drinking cold water here. In the beginning, we always tried to find places where we could have hot water to drink. We still prefer to drink boiled water.

### 飲水器

在中國，我們從來不喝冷水，因為它不乾淨。所以我們只喝開水。初來這裡，總想找開水喝。經過長時間的適應，才終於可以喝冷水了。但我們仍然喜歡喝開水。

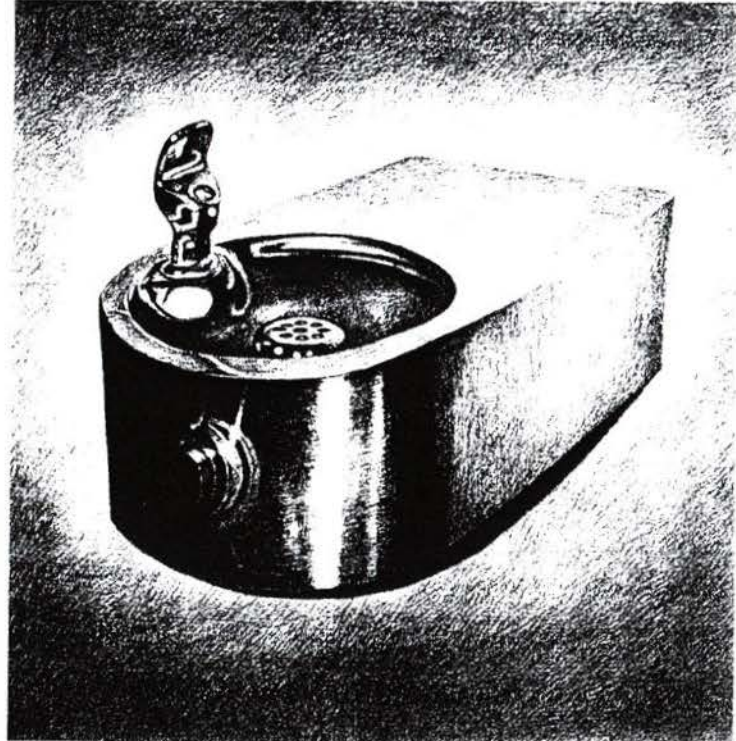


Fig. 22d. Gu Xiong, detail, *The Yellow Pear*, 1997. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press and the Burnaby Art Gallery, p. 14-15



Fig. 23a. Gu Xiong, *Red Lands*, 1997. Multi-media installation at A Space  
Variable dimensions. Image published in *Gu Xiong - Red Lands*.  
Exhibition catalogue. Toronto: A Space Gallery, 1997. Collection  
of the artist. Courtesy of the artist

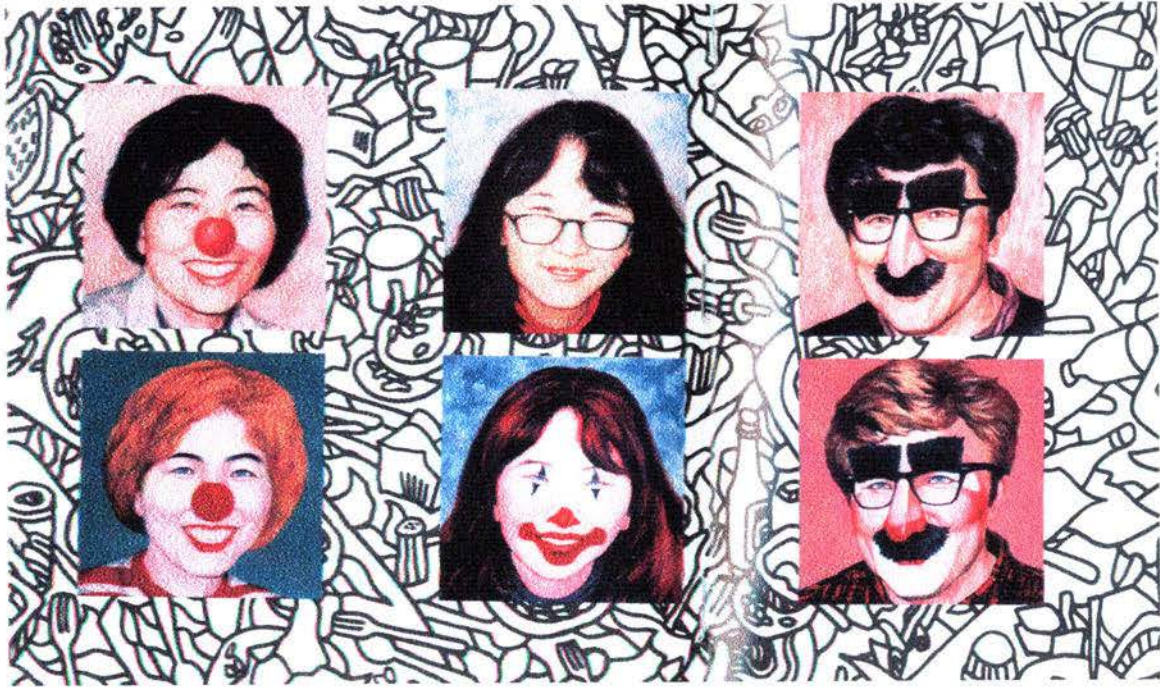


Fig 23b. Gu Xiong, *Red Lands*. 1997. Multi-media installation at A Space Gallery. Variable dimensions. Image published in Gu Xiong, *Gu Xiong - Red Lands*. Exhibition catalogue Toronto: A Space Gallery, 1997. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

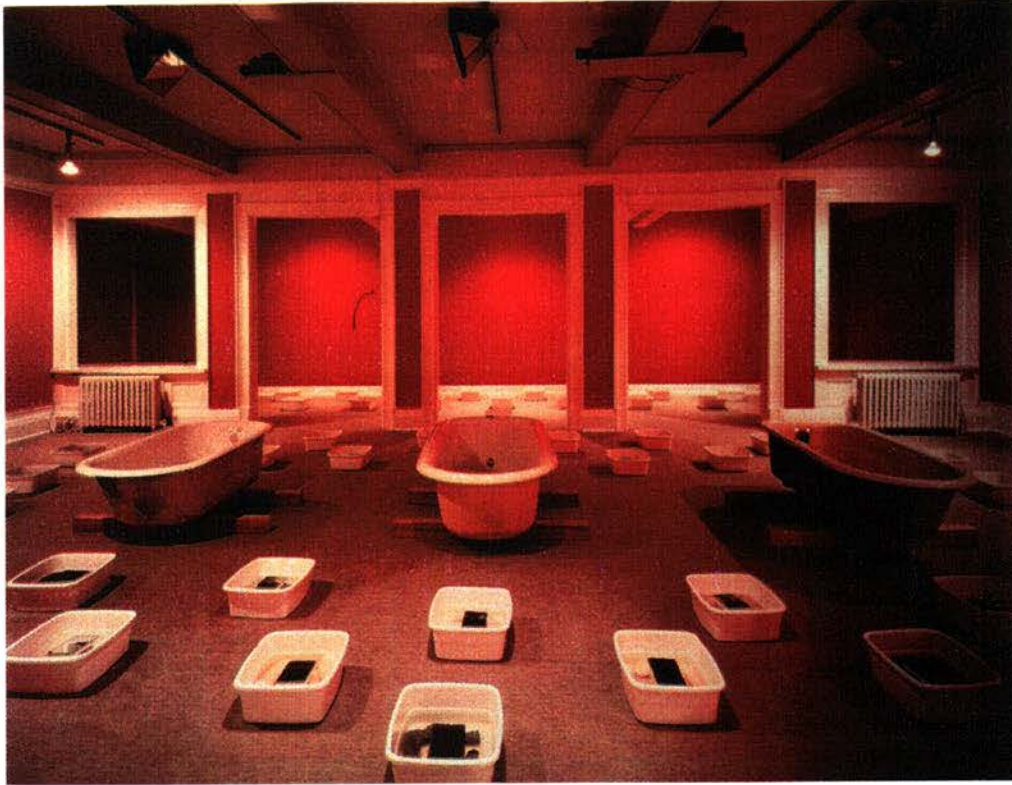


Figure 24. Gu Xiong, *Walk on Water*. 1997. Multimedia installation. Burnaby Art Gallery. Variable dimensions. Image published in Tracing Cultures IV. Vancouver: Burnaby Art Gallery, 1997. P, 29

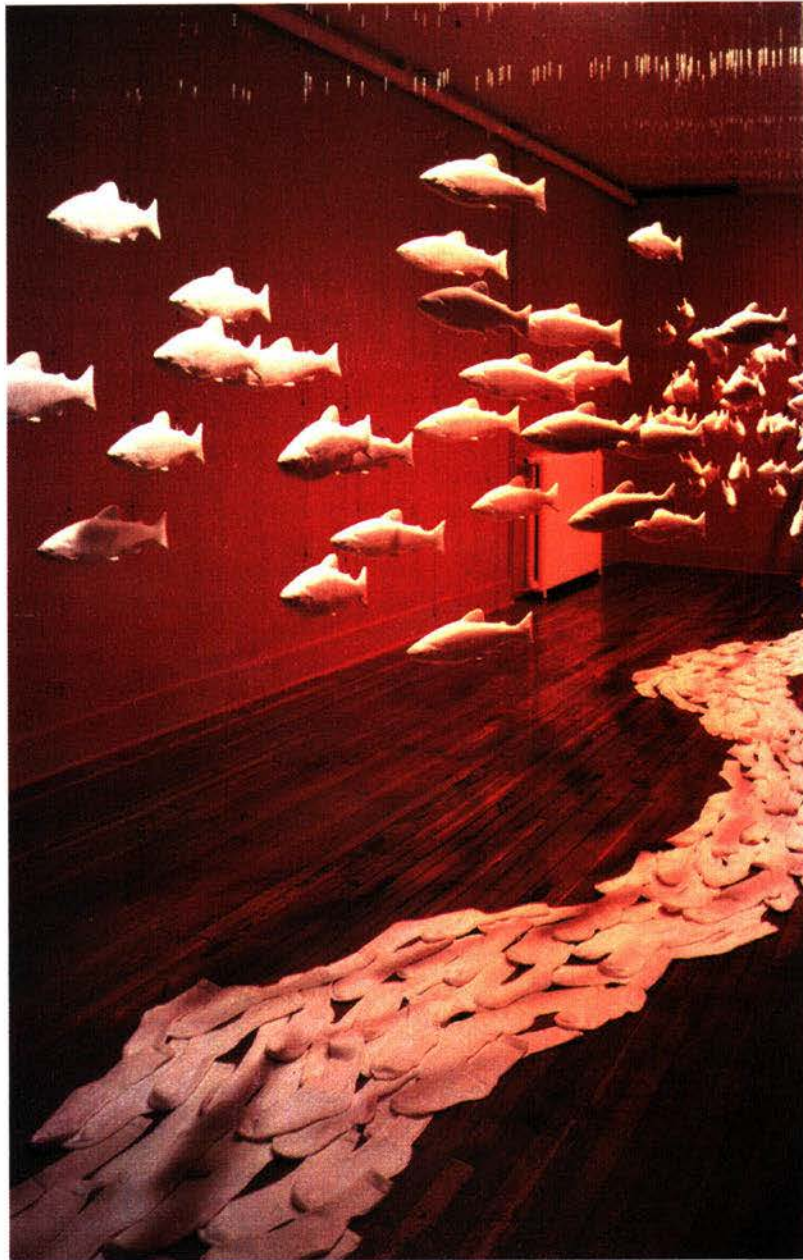


Figure 25. Gu Xiong, *You and I*. 1998. Multimedia installation. Artspeak Gallery. Variable dimensions. Image published in Hank Bull, ed. Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangze River. (Vancouver: Art Beatus Gallery and the Western Front Society, 1999) p. 77



Figure 26. Gu Xiong, *The River*. 1998. Multimedia installation. The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Variable dimensions. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.



Fig. 27a. Gu Xiong, *The Mountains*, 1999. Multi-media installation at the Chinese Cultural Centre, May, 1999. Variable dimensions. Photograph by Mary Lucas. Courtesy of the artist and the Chinese Cultural Centre.

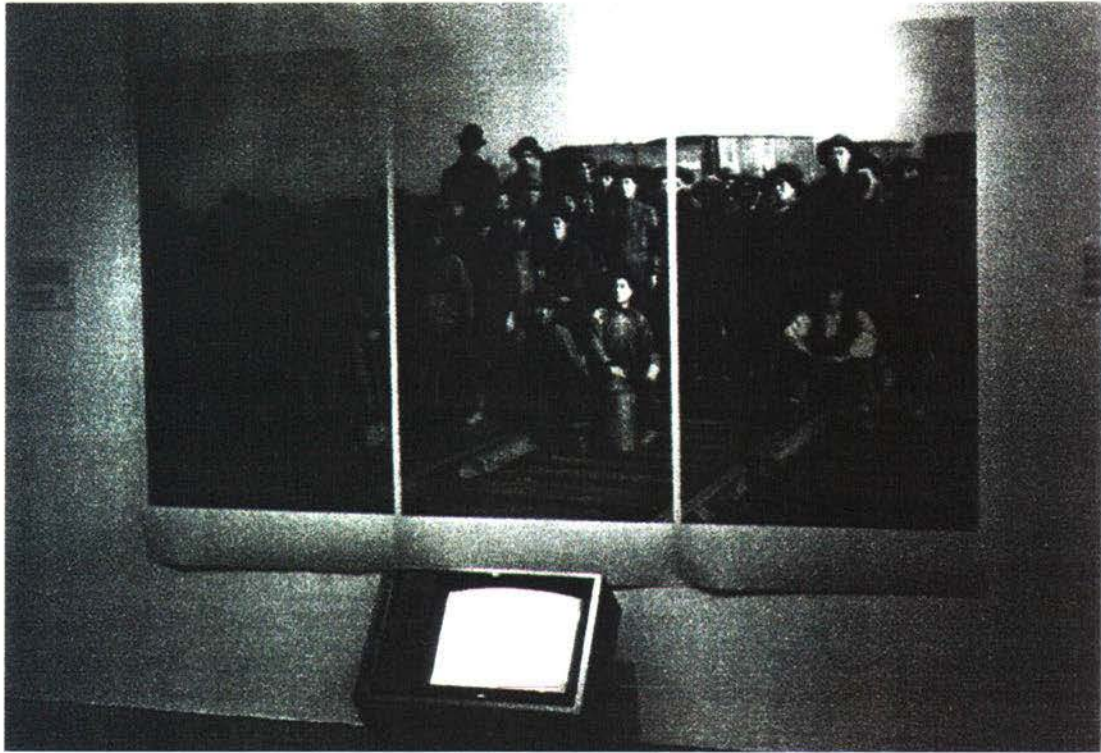


Fig. 27b. Gu Xiong, *The Mountains*, 1999. Multi-media installation at the Chinese Cultural Centre, May, 1999. Variable dimensions. Photograph by Mary Lucas. Courtesy of the artist and the Chinese Cultural Centre.



Fig. 23a Gu Xiong, *The Drowning*, 2000. Multimedia installation at the Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond. Variable dimensions. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and the Richmond Art Gallery.



Fig. 285. Gu Xiong, *The Drowning*, 2000. Multimedia installation at the Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond. Variable dimensions. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and the Richmond Art Gallery.

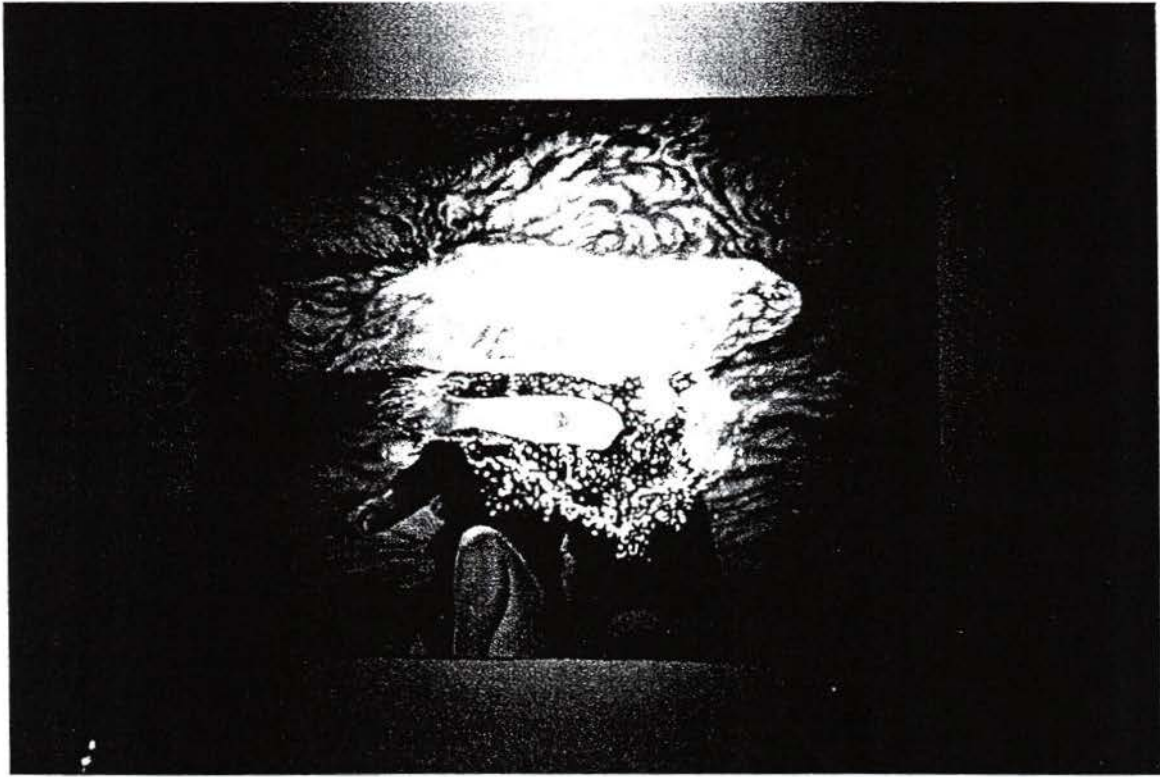


Fig. 28c. Gu Xiong, *The Drowning*, 2000. Multimedia installation at the Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond. Variable dimensions. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the artist and the Richmond Art Gallery.



Figure 29a. Gu Xiong, *Ding Ho/Group of 7*. 2000. Multimedia installation. Aspace Gallery, Toronto, Ontario. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 29b. Gu Xiong, detail, *Ding Ho/Group of 7*. 2000. Multimedia installation. Aspace Gallery, Toronto, Ontario. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

## APPENDIX I

### Resume

Gu Xiong, M.F.A

#### Education

- 1989-1990 Winter Art Studio Program, Resident Artist, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta, Canada.
- 1986-1987 Winter and Summer Art Studio Program, Participant Artist, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta, Canada.
- 1982-1985 M.F.A Dept. of Printmaking, Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts, Chongqing, Sichuan, China.
- 1972-1982 B.F.A Dept. of Printmaking, Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts, Chongqing, Sichuan, China.

#### Professional Experience

- 2000-present Associate Professor, Dept. of Fine Arts, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. Canada.
- 1998-99 Instructor (multi-media, drawing, installation) Dept. of Fine Arts, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. Canada.
- 1992-98 Instructor (printmaking, drawing, studio seminar) Dept. of printmaking and part-time studies, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver.
- 1998 Juror, The eleventh annual VIVA awards jury. Vancouver Institute for the Visual Arts.
- 1998 Instructor (painting) Dept. of Fine Arts, Kwantlen University College, Surrey, B.C.
- 1996 Instructor (drawing) School of Contemporary Arts, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada
- 1995 Juror, Canada Council, "B" Grant and Travel Grant Jury, Ottawa, Ont., Canada.
- 1985-89 Instructor, Dept. of printmaking, Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts, Chongqing, China.

#### Other Professional Involvement

- 1998 Speaker, "Discovering the Originality" *Immigration Artists in America: Their Identity, Bicultural Contexts, and Art Making*, College Art Association 86 Annual Conference, Toronto, Ont. Canada.
- 1997 Visiting Artist, Dept. of Fine Arts, Western Ontario University, London, Ont. Canada.
- 1997 Visiting Artist, Camosun College, Victoria, B.C., Canada.
- 1997 Visiting Artist, Salina Art Centre, Salina, KS, U.S.A.
- 1997 Keynote Speaker, "Life is Art" *Art for Life: Young Artist's Symposium*, Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, B.C.
- 1997 Keynote Speaker, "To Be An Original" *British Columbia Teacher's "Imagineering" Conference*, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1996 Visiting Artist, Museum of Art, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, U.S.A.
- 1996 Visiting Artist, School of Contemporary Art, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada.
- 1997 Keynote "Individual Cultural Practice" *Artist's Conference*, Assembly of B.C. Arts Council, Penticton, B.C.
- 1996 Artist Speaker, "Panel Discussion: A Critical Beauty" Open Space Gallery, Victoria, B.C.
- 1995 Artist Speaker, "Panel Discussion: China/Avant-garde Exhibition" Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1995 Artist Speaker, "Panel Discussion: Out of Canada/Displaced" Latitude 53 Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
- 1995 Visiting Artist, Camosun College, Victoria, Canada.

- 1995 Visual Arts Trainer, *Awakening '95 International High School Conference*, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1994 Visiting Artist, Dept. of Fine Arts, University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
- 1993 Artist Speaker, Panel discussion, *Conference on "China's New Art: The Rise of A Cosmopolitan Avant-garde"*, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C.
- 1992 Visiting Artist, Dept. of Fine Arts, Red Deer College, Red Deer, Alberta
- 1990 Visiting Artist, Great Falls Public School, Great Falls, Montana, U.S.A
- 1988 Artist Speaker, Panel discussion at the *China Avant-garde Research Conference*, Huang Shan, Anhui, China.
- 1987 Visiting Artist, Dept. of Visual Arts, York University, Toronto, Ont. Canada.

#### Awards and Grants

- 1999 "B" Grant, Canada Council, Ottawa, Ont. Canada.
- 1999 Individual Award, British Columbia Arts Council, Victoria, B.C.
- 1998 Travel Grant, Canada Council, Ottawa, Ont. Canada.
- 1997 "B" Grant, Canada Council, Ottawa, Ont. Canada.
- 1997 Individual Award, British Columbia Arts Council, Victoria, B.C.
- 1995 Short-term Grant, Canada Council, Ottawa, Ont. Canada.
- 1995 Individual Award, British Columbia Arts Council, Victoria, B.C.
- 1995 International Touring Award, British Columbia Arts Council, Victoria, B.C.
- 1992 Travel Grant, Canada Council, Ottawa, Ont. Canada.
- 1990 Montana Arts Council, Visual Arts Program, Great Falls, Montana, U.S.A.
- 1989, 1986-87 Full Scholarship, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta, Canada.
- 1989, 1986-87 Canadian Airlines International Travel Scholarship.
- 1987 Canada Council Grant for Foreign Artists, York University, Toronto, Ont. Canada.

#### Exhibitions

##### Solo Exhibitions

- 1999 "The Mountains" Chinese Cultural Centre, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1998 "Alvin Balkind – A Friend Forever" Performance Works, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1998 "The River" Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
- 1998 "Smile" Article, Montreal, P.Q.
- 1998 "The Yellow Pear" Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1997 "Red Lands" A Space, Toronto, Ont.
- 1997-98 "A Girl from China" Western Front, Vancouver, B.C.; A Space Gallery, Toronto, Ont; Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.; Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, B.C.; Kamloops Art Gallery, Kamloops, B.C.; Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.; Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
- 1996 "Behold the Silence" Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1994 "The Basement" Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, B.C.
- 1993 "Distant Memories-New Horizons" Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1992-93 "Crushed Cans" Brenda Wallace Gallery, Montreal, P.Q.
- 1992 "Heads of State" Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1991 "Gu's World" Diane Farris Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
- 1991 "Barricade of Bicycles-June 4, 1989" Open Space Gallery, Victoria, B.C.
- 1990 "Enclosure" Ground Round Theatre, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta.
- 1987 "A Distant Place" Yangtze Art Gallery, Toronto, Ont.
- 1986 "Solo Show" The Other Gallery, The Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, Banff, Alberta.

Group Exhibitions

- 1998 "Permanent Collection Show" The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ont.  
 1998 "Home Base" Kamloops Art Gallery, Kamloops, B.C.  
 1998 "The Dynamic Landscapes" Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey B.C.  
 1997 "China Turns" Glendon Art Gallery, North York, Ont.  
 1997 "Tracing Cultures IV: Migrations and Cultural Identity" Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.  
 1997 "Browser" Artropolis '97, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1996 "Mount Analogue" Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1996 "A Critical Beauty" Open Space Gallery, Victoria, B.C.  
 1995 "INFO-ART" Kwangju International Biennale '97, Kwangju, Korea.  
 1995 "Out of Canada/Displaced" Latitude 53 Art Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta.  
 1995 "Here Not There" Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1994 "Art Matters" Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.  
 1994 "Art in British Columbia" Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1993 "Artropolis 93" The Woodward Building, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1993 "Outsider/Insider – Contemporary Chinese Art" Artspace Gallery, Peterborough, Ont.  
 1992 "Outsider/Insider – Contemporary Chinese Art" Saw Gallery, Ottawa, Ont.  
 1992 "Transpositions" The Community Arts Council Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1991 "Goya to Beijing" Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1991 "Shock Culture" Western Front, Vancouver, B.C.  
 1990 "Leben In Sichuan" Volshochschule IM, Weiterbildungszentrum, Bertha-Von-Suttner-Platz 1, Dusseldorf, Germany.  
 1990 "Please Do Not Disturb, Maid, Please Make Up Room" Margaret Greenham Theatre, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta.  
 1989 "18<sup>th</sup> International Biennial of Graphic Arts" Modern Galerjia, Ljubljana, Yugoslavia.  
 1989 "China/Avant-garde Art Show" The National Fine Arts Gallery of China, Beijing, China.  
 1988 "Chinese Art" Kulturwerkstatt, Dusseldorf, Germany  
 1988 "Southwest Art Show" Sichuan Fine Art Gallery, Chengdu, Sichuan, China.  
 1987 "Thickness of Matter" Walter Philips Gallery, Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta.  
 1987 "Chinese Woodcut Exhibition" Pompidu Centre, Paris, France.  
 1987 "Banff Centre Visual Arts" Gulf Canada Gallery, Calgary, Albert  
 1986 "National Exhibition of Fine Arts" The National Fine Arts Gallery of China, Beijing.  
 1986 "Exhibition of Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts" Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. U.S.A.  
 1985 "Printmaking Exhibition of Sichuan" Montpellier, France.  
 1984 "Sichuan Woodcuts Exhibition" Tokyo, Japan.

Works in Permanent Collections

The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ont.  
The National Fine Arts Gallery of China, Beijing, China  
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.  
The Museum of Modern Art, Ljubiana, Yugoslavia  
York University, Toronto, Ont.  
The Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta.  
Washington State Arts Commission, Olympia, WA. U.S.A  
Simon Fraser University Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.  
British Columbia Art Collection, Vancouver, B.C.  
Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey, B.C.  
Richmond Art Gallery, Richmond, B.C.  
Kamloops Art Gallery, Kamloops, B.C.  
Camosun College, Victoria, B.C.  
Seymour Collection, Vancouver, B.C.  
Dr. Hans Joachim Wolf, Rimpf, Germany.

Commissions

“The Crowd” Porcelain enamel mural 7’ x 24’

## APPENDIX II

Barricade of Bicycles, June 4, 1989

Multi-media installation

Open Space Gallery, Victoria, B.C., 1991

### From the text board:

Because disturbance exists for humans,  
they make many enclosures for themselves.  
It becomes an emblem of their culture  
and an emblem of isolation and oppression.

Confront the Great Wall, the Paris Bastille, the Berlin Wall:  
We understand the isolation between humanity + nature,  
one people + another people, the person + the self.

Confront the Tiananmen Square;  
We are amazed at the tragedy:  
Humanity trying to break down the 'Enclosure.'

We see some of these enclosures but we can't see most of them;  
they are so common, they become invisible.  
Even if we can break through the enclosures that we see,  
We are still not altogether free,  
because many enclosures are within ourselves.  
This puzzle belongs to the human mind and body.

I hope that one day people can discard these 'Enclosures'  
- the ones that are inside and outside-  
to better comprehend and awaken the link between  
humanity and nature, one person and another person,  
the person and his or her self

## APPENDIX III

### Walk on Water

Exhibited in the *Tracing Cultures IV: Migrations and Cultural Difference*  
Exhibition at the Burnaby Art Gallery, 1997

#### Artist's Statement:

Here we have the expression: You are walking on water. It refers to one's luck. After eight years of hardship, we have finally settled down. We are lucky, but behind our luck, there lies many unknown sufferings.

#### Red

Red is a traditional Chinese colour. It is a symbol of happiness, but for me it also represents my suffering, and my striving.

#### Bathtub

When we first lived in Vancouver, we only had a very small washing machine. It could only be attached to the kitchen tap. It couldn't rinse very well. We had to rinse our clothes in the bathtub. One day, I saw the tub full of socks. Suddenly, I was inspired. This tub, socks, and water are a vision of our family's settlement.

#### Socks

Since humans wear socks, it has become a very necessary commodity. They accompany us in our daily life to the end. There is a link between our socks, our hard work, and migration. Without a sound, they undertake human pressures. We take them for granted.

#### Water

Water is a very meaningful entity in Chinese philosophy. Water can be a small stream, a river, an ocean, a cloud, rain, hail, snow or fog. Water is tranquil and soft, but it can move everything. In spite of its many forms, soft or powerful, water is still water.

#### Old Boat Song

In our hometown, by the Yangzhi River, there were many people pulling boats along the river. This hard life lets them create songs that talk of their lives, emotions, and hopes. These songs are not ordinary melodies, but are inner calls of human existence. We bring our original experience and culture on the boat of life, from the East to the West.

#### The Original

After experiencing two different cultures, we try to make our life in a different

atmosphere. Our identity is changing continuously, but we are still who we are. All of that which we have gone through is a path toward our own original being. Our identity is only the surface – it is constantly lost and regained, but through this process, our original self is born. To hold and own this “original” is my lifelong aspiration.

APPENDIX IVYou and I

Multi-media installation

Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver B.C., 1998

Poem Accompanying the exhibition:

## You and I

You are born in a small stream

You grow up in a river

And you gather strength

When you return

You become red

And you give birth to your children

Finally, you lay on the bottom of the stream

Until the next spring comes

You watch as those red eggs

Turn into baby salmon

A smile appears on your face

The tide takes your newborn salmon

To the river and then the ocean

I see you in the small stream

I see you in the river

I see you in the ocean

I see you everywhere

I follow you

I become you

Gu Xiong, 1998

## APPENDIX V

### The Mountains

Multi-media installation

The Chinese Cultural Centre, May 1999

#### Excerpts from the text boards:

I was 18 years old in 1972. At the height of China's Cultural Revolution, I was sent to the rural village of Qingping, in the mountains of northwestern farming communities to be "re-educated" by "peasants", who were viewed as the backbone of Mao's revolution. I spent four years in the mountains and during this time I kept many journals. I filled them with notes and sketches, documenting my first immigrant experience. The journals detailed my psychological transition from youthful optimism to depression and isolation. Over time, my ideological landscapes and skyward view receded, During this time, art saved me and gave me hope for the future.

In 1989 after the Tiananmen Square Massacre, I spent a year's residence in the Visual Arts program at the Banff Centre for the Arts, and then settled in Vancouver with my family. It was my first time moving from one culture to another. I was in culture shock and lived in the mountains again, with the excitement of the unknown, I felt alone. I started to learn another totally different culture. Positioned at the bottom of society, I had to relearn how to stand up. Art saved me again. Through my journal keeping in the west, a continuum was formed. I draw extensively, as I sift through a lifetime of images and experiences. My work both explores and attempts to define the hybrid my family and I now occupy, between the cultures of China and North America, as we move toward the formation of a new complex culture.

For me, New York is basically a man-made mountain, and it is a sample of contemporary human culture. It was my dream to visit New York and in 1986 I was there for the first time. I was very excited. One evening, I got lost after I came out of the subway. I tried to ask people for directions but nobody could understand what I said to them. I was very scared. Suddenly, I saw my friend Clancy Dennehy on the street corner. I ran to him, shook him and said "Take me home! Take me home!" Twelve years later when I visited New York again, this time accompanied by my family, I felt just like any New Yorker. We took the subway to go everywhere in the city. Now, we are on top of New York. This is a place where I had dreamed to be. We stood there and enjoyed our leisure, leaving all our struggles and suffering behind. Suddenly, I felt all the mountains became so small.

My family

Under the clouds

Moves from one land to another

Struggling between cultures

Not knowing to which we belong.

Even though the flowers are falling  
The fruits will appear later  
When the maple leaves rest  
On the ground  
My family finally settles down

We are like seeds  
In the depths of this land  
Absorbing fresh water and light  
Straining to put down roots  
But blossoming will soon follow  
And then at last bearing fruit.

A flower  
A leaf  
A cloud  
A deep breath  
Bringing with it  
A new beginning

APPENDIX VIThe River

Multi-media installation  
Richmond Art Gallery, 2000

Poem accompanying the installation

## A Moment

In our life  
Time is counted by seconds  
Minutes, hours, days  
Months, years, centuries;  
Past, present, future  
Time is long, yet it is short.

A place- a river,  
Hold myriad memories  
Of times gone by.

Qingping is a small village.  
It sits beside a small, green river  
In the mountains of Southwest China.

When the Cultural Revolution was roused,  
I was sent to these when I was eighteen.  
I was sent, along with millions of youths  
From the urban centers to these isolated villages  
To be "re-educated" by peasants.

Four years went by as a labourer,  
Four years of suffering and isolation,  
Four years of creation and revelation  
I started to draw my daily life,  
I gave my love to art and in return,  
Art guided me through the darkness.

This is how it came to be,  
That Qingping owns a part of me.

My dream-  
To show Qingping to my daughter.

A moment in time:  
In a small motor boat

We were travelling on the Qingping river,  
The heavy rain beat down,

Until the water was swollen.  
What emotions! To see this place again.

In an instant,  
Our boat collided with a Cargo boat,  
It immediately capsized and flipped over.  
My family and I  
Were trapped inside he boat as it began to sink.

I escaped through a hole inside the boat;  
I opened my eyes but I couldn't see anything,  
Except the swollen water.  
At last, I was breaking the surface of the river,  
I saw my family around the sinking boat,  
And my daughter's hair beside the boat;  
Unmoving, dying.

I was screaming!  
I felt a kind of pain I never felt before.  
My cousin and I pulled my daughter out of the boat.  
Her head was down and she had no breath.  
I shook her body,  
Finally she spewed water from her chest.  
Returning to life.

We were fortunate to be pulled from the water  
By an old local fisherman.  
We survived.

I felt when I neared death  
Time was still.  
It was like a long scroll painting;  
In this painting,  
I saw the past, the present, and the future,  
All at once.  
People of the world were in the river  
Trying to survive.  
There was no beginning and no end;  
There was only a moment.

A place  
A dream  
A river

A boat  
A moment  
A breath  
A new life

## APPENDIX VII

### Artist's Statement:

#### A RIVER OF ART AND LIFE: My art between 1989 and 1999

The Yangzi River flows out of the mountains of my hometown, Chongqing, China; rushing through valleys, coalescing with the vast Pacific Ocean. I came to Canada in 1989 after “Tiananmen Square” happened. During my flight to Vancouver, I saw the Yangzi River merging into the ocean. I felt like I was being carried by the current and I didn't know where I would end up and start again.

In China, my dreams were crushed by tanks, it's like my drawing “Crushed Bicycles”. In Canada, my dreams, the likes of my painting “Crushed Coca Cola Cans”. But my new life was born after my old life was crushed. It was like sinking to the bottom of the ocean and resurfacing. I had no choice but to face my situation and strive to become a better person through my struggling between my two cultures. As an artist I don't believe in nationality. I must break through all national barriers and strive to be a real person in an international and multicultural world.

The[This] slides lecture deals with issues of identity and place, specifically my struggles to understand my new adopted homeland, and, in a broader sense, the implications of dual cultures, of past and present, on individual identity. I look to tangible evidence of the culture-car keys, water fountains, bathroom hand dryers as a starting point to understanding my new situation in between global and local cultural currents.. My mixed-media installation “The River” focuses on the rich symbolism embodied in socks and salmon, expressing my spiritual rebirth.

To me, the meeting of the Yangzi River and the Fraser River bridged by the Pacific Ocean, symbolizes the merging of two cultural geologies and the opening of new personal possibilities. All cultures are complex. The culture into which you are born is the one you come to understand most profoundly. It is that which finds it's way into the art of the artist, and it is expressed instinctively. If that artist should move to another culture, he or she, must move just as instinctively to begin to understand the strange new world in which he or she finds him or herself. It is this dynamic, this sudden generation of artistic electricity, that fuels change on both art and life.

It is this conflict of cultures which has entered my work since coming to Canada, and it is in a state of constant evolution. In the process of evolution my ideas are born. None of this, however can be expressed artistically unless the artist has developed techniques. This must come from study and practice, and from long experience. It creates a new individual culture – it is not an evolution of the original culture, nor is it a copy from another culture, it is a new complex.

Gu Xiong

1999

APPENDIX VIII

Vox Populi: Les Mois de la Photos à Montréal  
 An installation of banners in Montréal's Chinatown  
 Vox Gallery, Montréal, PQ, September 6 – October 7, 2001

Poem to accompany Gu Xiong's work

I Am Who I Am

I built the railway.  
 I opened laundromats and restaurants.  
 I raised a family.  
 I built Chinatown.

I paid the head tax.  
 I couldn't be with my family.  
 I couldn't vote.  
 I fought in the Second World War.

I had nothing.  
 I was homesick.  
 I struggled.  
 Here is my home.

I am no longer excluded.  
 I work hard and try to fit in  
 I am becoming a part of society.  
 I became elected.

I see myself.  
 Who am I?  
 Your face is not you.  
 I search for certainty.

I speak Chinese.  
 I speak French.  
 I speak English.  
 This is who I am.

I am Chinese.  
 I am a Quebecer.  
 I am Canadian.  
 I am who I am.

Gu Xiong, May 26, 2001

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