

# The Collapsing World Landscape: A Conversation with Artist Shang Yang<sup>i</sup>

Yang Jing<sup>1</sup>

*Taking landscape as the source of his work; Chinese artist Shang Yang's real interest is to express his concern about the relationship between humans and the environment. Shang Yang has anchored his art to China's environmental problems since the early 1990s. He has depicted the collapse of the landscape, and the pathology of the declining environments in contemporary China. As a leading artist in the country, his art plays an important role in Chinese contemporary art history. In 2013, he won the Lifetime Achievement Award of AAC (Award of Art China).*

Yang Jing: Many critics have noticed that your basic theme in the past decades was the relation between human and environment. Personally, I believe that if we discuss Chinese contemporary art from an ecocritical perspective or write a Chinese ecological art history, you are the first significant artist who comes to mind, so I'm pleased to have this opportunity to interview you. First, when and how did environmental issues enter your view?

Shang Yang: First, many thanks for this interview! The issue you mentioned here is what I have been always exploring in my work. During the transitional era of Chinese art from "modern" to "contemporary", I started to anchor my work to environmental issues, especially the relationship between human beings and the environment. This began, to be exact, at the beginning of the 1990s. The political disturbance in 1989 marked an end of the political enthusiasm of the 1980s; at the same time, an economic enthusiasm started to grow quickly, starting from southern China and spreading to northern China. Among Chinese artists, I probably felt rather early the ongoing changes in Chinese society. To be more specific, with the retreat of political enthusiasm and the growing economic enthusiasm, the power of capital started to go deep into every field and the invisible hand of the market grasped every aspect of society, encouraged by the government. After 1989, Deng Xiaoping called for a bigger step of economic reform, which led to a new peak in construction and many development zones mushroomed. I felt that a destructive power was growing — that is, our environment was being destroyed by the soaring economic enthusiasm. The government, driven by the pursuit of GDP growth, was the advocate of the environmental destruction.

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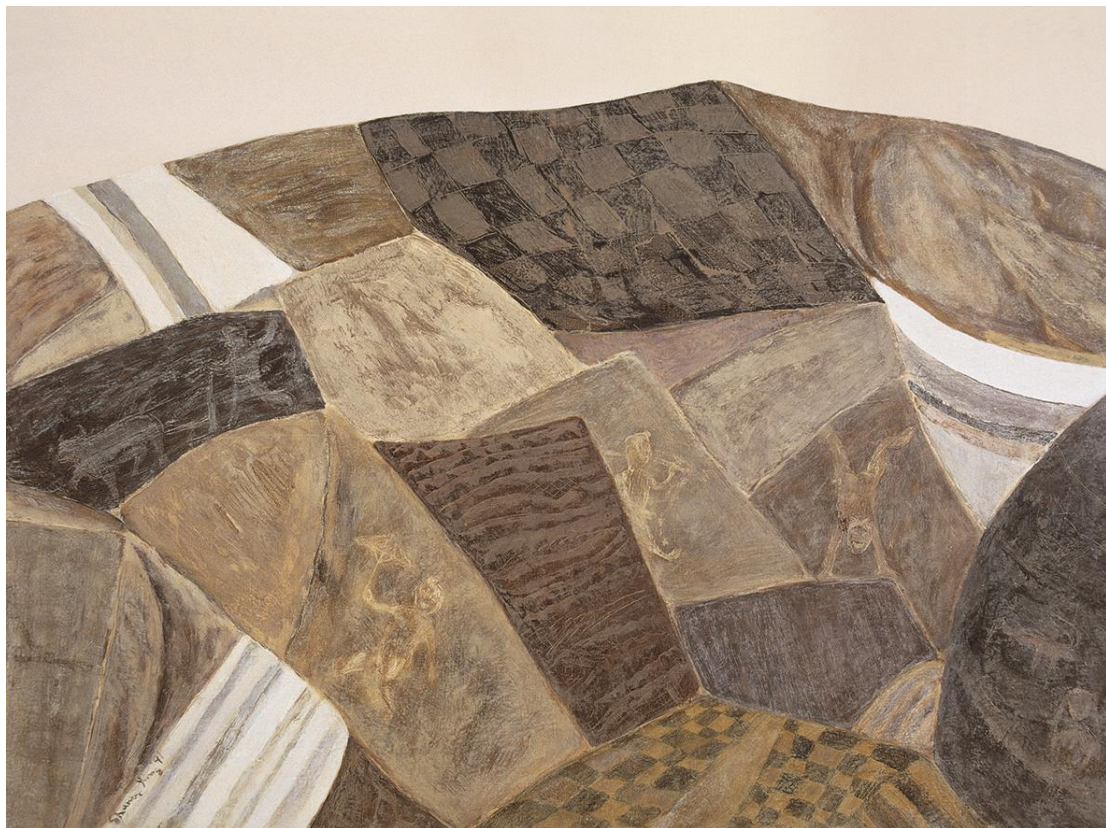
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I was aware of the limits of art and artists in the sense of social functions. But art helps us to better understand an era; as I articulated in an early essay, art can be an ECG image of an era. The cave paintings at Lascaux and rock paintings in the Helan Mountain documented the hunting activities of our ancient ancestors; we can still hear their heartbeat. Today, we need to document what is happening in our time. I have been searching my own unique visual expression. In the 1990s, more and more clearly, I felt an inexplicable passion running, expanding restlessly and upsetting people's daily life. I was observing and thinking how I could express such a restless and fragmental situation? In the summer of 1991, I was still living in Wuhan. My father was sick then. Every morning, I crossed the Yangtze River from Wuchang to Hankou, accompanying him to have an IV drip in the hospital. When I was waiting for my father at the outpatient department of the best hospital in Wuhan, I saw a chaotic scene of people coming and going. I suddenly obtained a visual impression from the rushing crowds of a landscape that had been whole being torn into pieces and then stitched together — the social, psychological and cultural landscapes all torn into pieces and stitched together. With this impression that came to my mind, I worked hard in my studio every afternoon and soon the first *Great Landscape* came out. *Great Landscape* provided me with an appropriate and perceivable concept and a symbolic flat image style for expressing my critical thinking about society, which was drawing a line from the direct expression of my previous paintings. So this work made in 1991 marked my personal transformation towards the contemporary.

The year 1990 witnessed a silent period in the Chinese art circle. The artists ceased to work in groups and retreated to their own studios; therefore art experiment became more individual. Zhang Xiaogang found a unique language to express the Chinese family tree and the unbreakable bloodline. The glassy eyes of the figures in his series *Big Family* is so thought provoking. Wang Guangyi mixed the propaganda images of the Cultural Revolution with commercial logos, such as Coca Cola and McDonald. Fang Lijun chose to depict the little people's confusion and weakness based on a cynical attitude to Chinese society. These image styles emerging in individual artists' studio meant that the Chinese art of that time was like a land made ready; the sowed seeds sprouted simultaneously. This was different from the earlier '85 New Wave Art Movement which was defined as a group-movement. For me, *Great Landscape* represented my own thinking at that time and a direction ahead. Since then, I have known that I have found a developable topic and form.

Almost at the same time, I started my work, *Big Portrait*. I picked a lot of plastic shopping bags from free markets and posters from the walls along the streets. From the early 1990s, plastic bags came to free markets and shops in Chinese cities; these bags were printed in colourful AD images and slogans. I chose the most known cultural figure, Mona Lisa, and covered her body with pieces of the shopping bags, making them look like a wedding gown. This work, titled *Mona Lisa*, is about the relationship between culture and the market: the market has become engaged with culture. Another piece is *Mona Monroe*. Marilyn Monroe was a well-known figure in

commercial and popular culture. I integrated Marilyn Monroe and Mona Lisa, symbolizing the integration of commercial and high culture. I completed the two works at the end of 1990. At that time, we knew very little about the development of POP art due to the limited amount of information we had had about it. Many people praised my work. But afterwards, staying alone and reflecting on these two works in my studio, I realized that this kind of rather westernized image style was not what I wanted. I wish to express my familiar cultural characteristics transformed to contemporaneity. So, I stopped. I started to seek other image pattern. The next *Great Portrait* was a figure of the Buddha. Buddha's Kasaya robe was somehow similar to the fragmented pieces of *Great Landscape*, dotted with a teapot, animals and statues of Buddha. *Great Portrait* and *Great Landscape* were completed almost at the same time. These two works decided my later direction.



*Great Landscape, Oil on Canvas, 97 × 130cm, 1991, courtesy of the artist.*

Then, I attended the 1992 Guangzhou Biennale. Just before that, my father died and I was not in the right mood to attend the Biennale. My young artist friends prepared the canvas and frame for me. I painted *Great Landscape - Hurry on the Journey* that continued the image pattern of *Great Landscape*. The Guangzhou Biennale was a huge success, in the most advanced area in China, where art and the market were combined. *Great Landscape* became my basic theme during the whole 1990s, based on the concern about human beings and the environment. In China, the economic development in the past three decades caused an unprecedented destruction of the environment. Although there were other political movements after 1949, many old

things remained still, but the huge scale of destruction of the past three decades is a really painful experience for me, I had to witness our ancient heritage disappearing right in front of us.

Yang Jing: Do you mean the cultural heritage from past dynasties?

Shang Yang: Not only the cultural heritage, but also the natural heritage. The natural heritage includes natural resources. The over-exploitation of natural resources caused a rapid exhaustion. These resources that are the accumulation of millions of years or even hundreds of millions of years, many of which are non-renewable, are rapidly being exhausted for the growth of GDP.

Yang Jing: After 1992, how did you continue and develop the theme, the concern for environmental issues?

Shang Yang: From 1993 to 1997, I was in southern China, the most active area of the economy. I had a deep feeling for this issue. I made a lot of paintings of volcanoes. I made *Deep Breath*, *94 Great Landscape* and *95 Great Landscape*, revealing the pathological situation of humanity and society and the alienation of humans in this environment. I was sick, too, at that time. I felt strongly that the relation between the environment and humanity has become so depressing, and I asked why economic and social development must be at the expense of the destruction of environment. This was an emergent issue. People's ignorance was even more terrible than the problem itself. In all social contexts, breathing has lost its natural status; this completely materialized society has made all spaces (physical and psychological) so oppressive. Breath, being manipulated and deprived, was a common experience in the living space and life process of everybody, which was a sharp and imminent problem. I was then working on *Deep Breath*, I once wrote: "Have you recognized that you are breathing? Of course no. Breathing is the normal status of being alive, it's so normal that you won't even notice it because it is your being. Only when you catch cold, climb high or walk with weights, when you are short of breath, you realize its existence. Society has made us feel it is difficult to breathe. I'm sick and so is the society." In the middle 1990s, *Deep Breath*, *Great Landscape* and *Diagnosis* formed my main themes.

After I left Guangzhou, I was more focused on natural landscape and the destruction of landscape by capital and political power; in this sense, my works afterwards were still the continuation of *Great Landscape*. After coming to Beijing, I painted *E Land Landscape*. I saw the collapse and destruction of nature going on day after day, so these works were somehow like diaries, telling about a heavy topic in a low-key style. I also made works under the themes of *Introduction to Landscape Painting* and *Travelling in Mountains and Dabbling*. Later I made *H Land Landscape*. In 2002, after the completion of *Introduction to Landscape Painting*, I wrote the following sentence: "Even the examples of landscape paintings have become unrecognizable, how could

new learners get started?" The work *Travelling in Mountains and Dabbling* was based on my own experience. Long time ago, natural landscape was sublime and great, connecting with the heaven and earth. Later, when nature was stuffed with human-made architecture, landscape became small. Many years ago, the Yangtze River was broad, the Turtle Mount and Snake Mount standing on each side and facing each other, mists and waves stretching far into the distance. Since the 1980s, people have built the Yellow Crane Tower up on the top of Snake Hill and a TV tower on top of Turtle Hill. The Yangtze River became smaller. More buildings, less landscape, bigger people, smaller landscape. Ambitious people dwarfed the landscape.

Yang Jing: *Travelling in Mountains and Dabbling* and *Book of Leaning Landscape* are both painted in a sketchy style. Do you have certain idea by doing that?

Shang Yang: Yes, I like to use minimum brushwork and visual elements to express my idea. The two series, also some other works, were made in a sketchy style – a deep feeling of grief and resignation through simple and light image style.

Yang Jing: In the 1990s, you created *Great Landscape*, *Deep Breath* and *Diagnosis*. Is *Dong Qichang Project* the most significant series since 2000?

Shang Yang: Yes, since I came to Beijing, *Dong Qichang Project* gradually became my most significant series. Most works of this series are in large format. In fact, I once told the media that all my works since the 1990s, including *Dong Qichang Project*, *Remnant Mountains*, *Remnant Waters* and others, can be seen as an emotional continuation of *Great Landscape* because these themes are inherently of a piece with *Great Landscape*. I was once asked why I have been always focusing on this subject. My answer was: is there anything more important than this? The relation between humanity and the environment is not only a personal issue – it involves with everybody on this planet. This is much more important than a regional conflict, a political action or social thinking. Although it is a universal issue, it is the most significant one and it worth the concern of my whole life.

It is especially severe in China. The lesson of the past three decades exposes the fallacy of short-term economic growth at long-term environmental expense. The landscape we face today is only a virtual scene. The real landscape doesn't exist anymore; it has been destroyed by power and capital. What I paint is not the natural landscape, but the social, cultural and psychological landscapes which have changed a lot. Today, we all have realized this. When I started to pay attention to the environmental issue, however, most people hadn't taken it seriously. Look at us today, drinking water, we have to think if it's contaminated; eating fruits, we have to worry about the remain of pesticides; walking out, we have to think of the air pollution and wear a mask. Even when we sleep, we fear if the quilt contains excessive formaldehyde. This is the feeling of hundreds of millions people. In China, when these problems started to emerge, the government wouldn't let us know, so most people

never saw these problems. Then, when these problems became worse and worse and the government couldn't hide any more, the people had no choice but accept the reality. Taking another example, the scandal of melamine was just the sign of our collapsing society. The capital and political power have been eroding the life of the people. More severely, we are overexploiting the resources that belong to the future generations. China was a backward country and we wanted to develop our economy. But there was no good policy to balance the relation between development and preservation.

Yang Jing: The theme from *Great Landscape to Dong Qichang Project* is about how the landscape was eroded by political and capital power, a deep concern about the destruction of nature at the expense of economic development. But under such a continuous general theme, did you express concerns about certain specific ecological and environmental issues?

Shang Yang: When I was working in my studio, I often felt suffering from this kind of irretrievable damage. I am currently working on *Remnant Waters*; it started last year, after *Remnant Mountains*. I think today's natural landscape is just some remnants. In today's China, the Three Gorges Project has become a huge ecological and environmental disaster. At the planning stage of the Three Gorges Project, some experts pointed out the possible ecological and environmental consequences, but their voices, limited to a small circle of professionals, were not heard. Later when the problem became more obvious, it was too late. Nowadays, a series of ecological disasters, such as the drying-up problem in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, relate to this project. Another, the mud and sand deposits will have bad consequences for generations to come. Why did the government ignore these warning messages by many scientists? The Yangtze River is a super-mega ecosystem designed by nature. The construction of this project brought a negative impact on the ecological system and finally caused the crisis.

Despite the destruction of nature, it also caused damage to many people. As far as I know, at least 2 to 3 million people had to leave their hometown. I have a very painful feeling. My hometown, Kai County in Chongqing, was submerged beneath water. Some of my relatives were forced to leave their home where they had lived for generations. I decided to make *Remnant Waters*; rather than generally talking about the destruction of nature, it points to the destiny of people. I collected shoulder poles used by those displaced people. The shoulder poles imply the former existence of those displaced villagers. I put the poles and rusted pump components there as part of this work. Besides, this multimedia work has a sound effect. I recorded the boat trackers' chant in the Yangtze River, the rushing sound of those displaced villagers at their farewell dinner, and the students' recitation of Li Bai's poet "*early in the morning I departed from Baidi town surrounded by colourful clouds.*" I also switched on the recorder, and dialled the number left on this pole. Then there was a reply: the subscriber you dialled doesn't exist, doesn't exist. Of course, the owner of this mobile

phone number was gone and the number was ceased to use. This is an unspeakable emotion. This work was a step forward from my previous works.

Yang Jing: Does the earlier work *Dong Qichang Project* also relate to the Three Gorges Project?

Shang Yang: Yes, somehow related, but it not as explicit as *Remnant Waters*. The *Dong Qichang Project* still follows the theme of *Great Landscape*, the general relation between humanity and nature. Of course compared to earlier works, *Dong Qichang Project* shows more clearly the juxtaposition of traditional painting style with new digital media. It is an important part of my work to transform the medium and material to the content of my work. For example, the left part of this work was the vivid image taken from the original appearance of natural landscapes through photographing and inkjet painting, while the right part shows erosion, cracking and even destruction. When the two parts are juxtaposed side by side, you may find the part being destroyed appears more real and powerful, which is actually the reality we are facing today and the feeling I wanted to express. I think contemporary art should let the audience think why the artist chose to do it in this way; this is how contemporary art interacts with audience and how it functions. Anyway, the subject of *Dong Qichang Project* is more general, while *Remnant Waters* more focused on a specific issue. It is a development and continuation of *Dong Qichang Project*.

Yang Jing: *Remnant Mountains* was made after *Dong Qichang Project*. Can you say something about the transition?

Shang Yang: *Remnant Mountains* started in 2013, when *Dong Qichang Project* was still going on. In fact, all these themes, such as *Great Landscape*, *Dong Qichang Project* and *Remnant Mountains* can be seen as unfinished. I have made five to six works under the title of *Remnant Mountains*. The beginning of *Remnant Mountains* followed many years' working on *Dong Qichang Project* and a need for a new turn. Between 2009 and 2011, I finished *Dong Qichang Project 33*, and this work was exhibited at an exhibition curated by Lu Peng and Yu Ke in Shanghai. After the exhibition, the Chinese art circle appreciated this work and an art gallery wanted to collect it. I refused because I was not so satisfied with this work. In 2013, when I was preparing my solo exhibition in Suzhou, I took out this 11 m long work and reflected on it, I found why I was not satisfied: this work looked too reasonable, which means the works under this theme were already too skilful, not bringing me any sense of unfamiliarity and surprise. Later, I reworked on this piece, so a new work emerged and that was the first of *Remnant Mountains*. The previous *Dong Qichang Project 33* didn't exist anymore. *Remnant Mountains* broke the image pattern of *Dong Qichang Project* and the material application was also different from previous works.

Yang Jing: Can you say something about your solo exhibitions in recent years?

Shang Yang: I have been cautious with my solo exhibitions. I have had three solo exhibitions. The first one, *Dong Qichang Project*, was in 2000. The second one, *Diaries and Scripts*, was in 2012 at VA Center Academy of Art and Design, Tsinghua University. I was asked to write a pre for the exhibition, I wrote only one sentence: "over the years, I have recorded the weathered and collapsing scenery of our time through diaries and manuscripts." The third solo exhibition, *Shang Yang's Art in Suzhou*, was in 2013 at Suzhou Museum. I asked myself why I chose to have this exhibition in Suzhou. Suzhou was once a paradise in ancient China, the history of this city and the remaining relics remind people that it was a heavenly place. What has been left there? Today, Suzhou is an industrial city, regarded as an economic miracle: as a medium-sized city, its GDP has surpassed many big provinces in Western China. I asked my friends in Suzhou to collect soil from different sites in Suzhou, such as Hanshan Temple, Tiger Hill, Suzhou Industrial Park, and other construction sites in Suzhou. First I planned to go to Suzhou and make my work there. But being restricted by my health, I made my work in Beijing. For example, in *Screen White*, I collected waste steel and wrapped the abandoned iron window frame with silk that is a special local product of Suzhou. That's the way my work was connected with Suzhou.



*Remnant Water 1, Composite Material on Canvas, Ready-Made and Multimedia Installation, 253×852cm, 2015, courtesy of the artist.*

Yang Jing: Is your favouring of composite materials somehow related to your early experiences? When did you start to pay attention to composite materials?

Shang Yang: Yes, it is. My interest in materials was rooted in my early experience. When I was young, the country as well as my family were poor and I suffered severe privation; I even didn't have enough painting materials when I was studying art. My experience left me with a good hobby: throughout these years, I had become so familiar with composite materials; in fact, when I didn't use composite materials, I felt it was difficult to make art. I started to use composite material since the mid-1980s. Then, throughout the 1990s until nowadays, I made a lot of works in composite material. I always hoped that materials can become one part of the content. Materials



tell a lot. If you choose the right materials, they help you to better express your meaning. For example, the juxtaposition and contrast of different materials in *Dong Qichang Project* said that the part being destroyed appears more real and powerful. I also made a lot of works under the title of *Painting Album*, I used glue on canvas and then tore down the glue, but some remained. This immediately expressed my feeling. I wanted to express a smothering feeling because society is suffocating people! So, I think these materials are the best presentation of my content. I mostly chose industrial materials and some painting materials as well. Gluing these materials and then tearing them down were like the broken culture and social environment we live in today. Generally, when using composite materials, I was quite critical. I never use materials in a wasteful and showy way, because that doesn't suit my cultural preferences. I choose rather implicit and meaningful expression — let the power emerging from a peaceful and silent background. This is a very Chinese way to make art. Isn't it the pursuit of Chinese traditional landscape painting?

Yang Jing: And I've found that you use materials very sparingly, which fits well with the ecological concern.

Shang Yang: Haha, yes, if an artist uses materials wastefully, people might ask him: is this work environmental friendly? Aren't you wasting resources? When I was studying art at school, I was sparing with painting materials. This experience taught me to not waste material. My materials were often picked up from everywhere. Even my young assistant has noticed that; he once said that there was almost nothing left as waste in my studio. All recycled materials finally went back to my work, even a piece of trimmed metal sheet or cloth. Everything has its proper use here. I'm very glad of that. I didn't meaningfully do it, but it was very natural for me to do that.

Yang Jing: The use of materials in your work is often simple and sparing, but I felt that you didn't intentionally pursue the minimum effect, everything was natural. You often prefer industrial wastes. Is there any special consideration going on here?

Shang Yang: Yes, many of my materials are industrial wastes. It is interesting. For example, in one of my recent works, *Washing Bamboo 3*, I put bamboos in a steel container, the natural material (bamboos) was put together with the industrial product (steel). Then I poured the hot melted resin into the container; the bamboo was immediately submerged in resin. When the resin cooled down, they became integrated a whole. The bamboo as a symbol of Chinese traditional culture was brutally blended with resin through such a brutal process. The nature of the materials and the process of using them expressed a conflict. The earlier *Washing Bamboo 1* and *Washing Bamboo 2*, both in large formats, were made of tar, felt and bamboo on canvas. They look like Chinese ancient screens. They are elegant. But when we were making these works, the hot tar smelt so badly. My assistant and I could smell it even wearing masks and the smell is bad for the health. I poured the hot tar and burnt it using a blowtorch. So the tar and bamboo finally blended together. Bamboo, an

elegant symbol in Chinese culture, combined with tar and resin, through such a violent and unhealthy process, became an elegant work. When you stand in front of these works, if you think of the characteristics of different materials and the making process, and you can feel the brutal intervention.

Yang Jing: You highly value visual language. You said that aesthetic appreciation is not your concern, that you are mainly concerned with how to visually express your thinking. As an artist who takes landscape as the main resource, when did you begin to turn aside from the emphasis of aesthetics, while still focusing on the visual effect?

Shang Yang: You distinguished between “aesthetic” and “visual” and I think it’s very good. I once told the media that since the early 1990s, I have expressed my concern about the human and environmental issues in my works. As time goes on, I deeply felt from life experience that I have been unable to put aside thinking about this issue. Being a visual artist, I have been trying to give a unique expression to what I thought. The expression I have pursued contains only three simple elements: the contemporary, the national and the personal perspective. This sounds quite easy; however it has been the most important consideration in my mind. A visual artist must show his unique existence. I believed that aesthetic appreciation was for better conveying your idea. However, afterwards I realized that aesthetic taste sometimes became an obstacle for better expression. That is to say, if an artist thinks too much of aesthetic taste, if he takes aesthetic taste as a priority, possibly he is unable to express his idea appropriately. From my point, in the 1980s, I already faced this problem. Then in the 1990s, this contradiction of aesthetics and visuality became clearer. My work is visual, but it may not be aesthetic. My expression may have been at some distance from aesthetic appreciation, and even be anti-aesthetic. As an artist, the visuality is more important than any aesthetic purpose. If an artist doesn’t make the effort to explore visuality, his work will fall into an unconscious inertia, either sliding into the trap of aesthetic taste, or becoming a follower of Western art.

Yang Jing: In this sense, your art is connected to the past and the present. As a Chinese contemporary artist, how do you think of the influence from both Chinese and Western culture and art?

Shang Yang: At my age, I might have received more influence from Chinese traditional culture and art. It shouldn’t become a burden on me; instead, it is my treasure and it should be expressed from my work. I can proudly say that everyone standing in front of my work can see the unique language and recognize the Chinese characteristics. I’ve been trying to form my own language based on a deep understanding and assimilation of Western art, which distinguished my work from merely following Western contemporary art. Many international media, curators and art historians understand deeply and appreciate my work, because from my work, they see a gesture of not following, instead, the profoundness of thinking and expression.

We shouldn't superficially borrow and consume our traditional culture; instead we should grasp the inherent spirit and integrate it into our work. The way must be in keeping with this era and the global thinking; meanwhile, it should embody the Eastern spirit and characteristics. But I don't want to over-emphasize the differences and contradictions between East and West in culture and art; I think they can coexist in harmony.

On the last day of 1993, I had a conversation with my friend, Yu Hong, looking back at the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is very clear that all progress human beings achieved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were from Western countries. The modernization initiated from the West brought great changes to human beings and we were benefiting from their achievements. Similarly, Western art greatly influenced the development of world art. Writing art history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can skip Wu Changshuo, Qi Baishi and Huang Binhong, but we can never skip Duchamp, Picasso, Beuys and Pollock. Without them, it is impossible to write the art history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Those Chinese masters I mentioned above did make great contributions to the development of Chinese art; but looking globally, their influence was not essential and decisive on the course of the history of art and the history of human civilization.

But shall we go along this same way at the opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It would not be right to do so. The art of the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be based on an interaction of different cultures that experienced the baptism of modern civilization. There are not any more pristine cultural communities that have not experienced the process of modernization. It is not correct to stick to the pristine cultures which lack modern characteristics; however, it is also wrong if after the baptism of modernity all cultures become homogeneous. We talked about this issue in 1993 when the discussion of globalization had not yet started in China. Today, I still think it is a practical issue. The culture should not be dominated by Western culture; instead, it should be co-directed by all human beings. The co-direction doesn't mean we simply put some Maori petroglyphs, Beijing opera masks and African wood carvings together. After the transformation of modernity, these pristine cultures interact and integrate with each other and form a new culture. The Western centrism in culture and art is not right. I'd like to say, a lot of Chinese artists are endeavouring to find spiritual elements from our traditional culture and integrate them into the contemporary concern. In my artistic career, on one hand, I am concerned with the issue of modernization facing today's China; on the other hand, I've been endeavouring to let the Eastern cultural root naturally grow in contemporary art that is basically built within a Western system, to distinguish my art from those trendy contemporary art works that merely follow the Western standard.

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<sup>i</sup> This interview with Shang Yang was conducted on 5 March, 2016. The interview was originally in Chinese and translated into English by the author. The Chinese transcript was reviewed and approved by artist Shang Yang and kept in the possession of the author.