Anxiety of Glocalization: Contemporary Chinese Art Responding to Western Influence

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中文摘要：本文是一项研究计划的导论，旨在说明：决定中国当代艺术发展的关键因素，是西方的影响以及中国对这一影响的回应。同时，本文也阐述了研究中国当代艺术的几个问题，尤其是内在研究与外在研究相贯通的问题。在此前提下，本文提出“全球化与本土化的焦虑”一说，并用此说来阐释影响与回应的关系，进而提出作者的“阐释世界的符号结构观”。换言之，本文作者通过研究中国当代艺术而提出独到的学术观点，又反过来用这一观点来表述作者对当代艺术的研究。

I. Problem of Interpretation

Initially, the writing of this book was to be based on my lectures on Chinese art history, given at Concordia University in Montreal over the last 10 years, under the course name “Introduction to Chinese Visual Culture”. Then, I decided to concentrate on 20th-century Chinese art, and eventually, due to my personal research interest, I narrowed my focus to contemporary Chinese art. Thus, a question arises:

Would a study of contemporary art be an historical one, or, would contemporary art be a part of art history? In the past five years or so, some art historians and art critics in China have argued about this problem, and so far there has been no conclusion to this debate. In this regard, I emphasize the difference between art history and art criticism: the former is concerned with what has happened to art whereas the latter is concerned with what is currently going on in art. In the West, scholars usually do not use the word “history” for the study of contemporary art. However, since I stress the difference between art history and art criticism, and since I intend to give an historical interpretation to the development of contemporary Chinese art, I use “history” to delineate my study.
In this historical study, I offer two interpretive ideas. First, the development of contemporary Chinese art is shaped by the influence of modern and contemporary Western art and art theory, and determined by the Chinese response to the influence. Second, such an interpretation of the development comes from and also gives birth to my own interpretive theory, “Semiotic Structure in the Hermeneutic World”.

Dealing with the two main ideas, and particularly, dealing with the possible contradiction in the second idea, I face a practical problem which is crucial to the logic and structure in my writing of this book: are the two ideas drawn from my study of contemporary Chinese art, or is the first idea framed in the second idea which is a pre-conceptualized theory? To tell the truth, I have studied and written on contemporary Chinese art since I came to the West and became immersed in contemporary Western art and art theory in 1990. That being said, the theory of “Semiotic Structure in the Hermeneutic World” emerged gradually, little by little and step by step, from my long-term exploration of contemporary art over the last 25 years.

Thus, the logic of presenting my study in writing and the structure of organizing the writing are somewhat unusual: I do have a pre-conceptualized framework of interpretive theory for my current study, and I do draw a conclusion from this study to reinforce the two main ideas. This circular-like statement means to say that there are two interwoven topics in this book, i.e., the interpretation of the development of contemporary Chinese art, and the interpretation of my interpretive theory. Elaborating the two discloses my double anxieties in writing this book.

II. Anxiety of Influence

Suppose a book on contemporary Chinese art, and on art history in general, is narrative and descriptive, relating the story of how art has developed. However, the purpose of a narrative is not just to tell a story, but also to examine some key issues behind the story, offering interpretive opinions. An art historian is not only a storyteller, but an explorer with an analytical eye and critical pen. Keeping this in mind, I wish to examine the complexities behind contemporary Chinese art rather than a mere surface overview. In order to do so, I focus on some key issues hidden behind, and explore the Chinese anxiety towards Western dominance in the world of art and in the narrative of art history. It is in this regard I make a point that the development of contemporary Chinese art is largely a history of the Chinese response to Western influence. In other words, this study unravels the inextricable links between the two.
Scholars have offered various interpretations to the development of modern and contemporary Chinese art, and offered different theories about what has defined its progress through history. Art historians using a sociological approach regard the development of art as a part of social history, whereas those using a formalist approach regard it as a stylistic and generic development. Interestingly, an art historian from Taiwan proposed a socio-political interpretation, claiming that it was Mao Zedong Thought that determined the development of Chinese art in the second half of the 20th century. Although I do not completely oppose that interpretation, I suggest a different one: that it is the Western influence and Chinese response to the influence that has determined the development of contemporary Chinese art. The influence and response are primarily found in two respects, form and concept of art, or so to speak, aesthetics and ideology.

In this study, the term “contemporary Chinese art” is firstly temporal, referring to Chinese art in the Post-Mao era, i.e., from the late 1970’s to the present day. Nevertheless, in order to focus on the key issue of the cultural conflict issuing from the Chinese-Western encounter, I take modern Chinese art in the 20th century as the temporal context, or historical pretext, to my discussion of contemporary Chinese art. Regarding the temporal sense of contemporaneity, scholars in the West and China have defined it differently. In the West, scholars tend to refer to it as the last 20 or 25 years, while scholars in China tend to define it from a political point of view, and refer to it as either the period starting from 1949 when the People’s Republic was established, or the period starting from 1979 when the Chinese government announced its “open policy” to the West, and the underground avant-garde group “Stars” first exhibited their art in Beijing. I do not intend to argue about the temporal difference of what “contemporary art” means in the West and China. Rather, I aim at discussing the important changes in Chinese art under Western influence in recent decades. That is to say, in addition to its temporal aspect, the term “contemporary art” is also conceptual, referring to the aesthetic and ideological challenges that Western influence has posed to and imposed on Chinese art.

Certainly, the influence of Western art, in particular, the 20th-century Western theories about artistic forms and concepts, has defined and shaped contemporary Chinese art. However, as stated, behind this seemingly simple fact, there are some critical twists and complications, for instance, the ways in which the Chinese have responded to the influence. The influence and response are significant for Western students and scholars to gain insights into contemporary Chinese art. It is also
important for Western policy makers to think about how to interact with the cultural soft power of China in the globalized economy and politics of today and the near future.

Therefore, in exploring the key issues in this study, I address the ways in which Chinese artists and art scholars have responded to Western influence. In order to elaborate my opinion, I refer to the Western critical concept of “purposeful misreading”, or “intentional misreading”. Why has such a misreading occurred? Based on my study, I offer a possible answer of “anxiety of glocalization”. Namely, the Chinese purposeful misreading is a crucial way to localize Western art forms and concepts in today’s globalized cultural setting. In other words, the purpose of the Chinese misreading is to construct its own contemporary art, which is also a way to search for and construct its own national identity in the Western-dominated art world, and then spread its influence worldwide. To be more specific, this is to convert Western artistic forms and concepts to Chinese and serve the purpose of advancing contemporary Chinese art and culture. On the other hand, this is also to internationalize Chinese art and culture as a political agenda to strengthen China’s cultural presence in the international arena and to cast a global influence.

In terms of theoretical sources, this thesis of “anxiety of glocalization” is inspired by some great scholars from the 20th century. Among them, two are most prominent, Arnold J. Toynbee (1889 - 1975) and Harold Bloom (1930 - ). Toynbee is a British historian; his notion of “challenge and response” [2] inspired me in interpreting the Chinese response to Western influence. I will discuss this notion in the final chapter “Towards a Conclusion” since it could bring my thesis to a deeper level of cultural politics. Bloom is an American literary historian and critic; his poetic theory of “anxiety of influence” [3] also proved greatly helpful to my study.

As one of the most influential “Yale School” deconstructionist critics in the 1980s and 1990s, Harold Bloom is still a leading literary scholar today. Since the early 1970s he has developed a theory about poetic influence in his study of the development of English poetry. According to Bloom, poets from younger generations realized that they were the newcomers in the poetic world, and due to the shadow of the old masters, there was no sufficient space left for them to demonstrate their talents, and the shadow made them anxious. However, some of the young poets were “strong poets”, because they were creative and rebellious. They intended to challenge the old masters by purposefully misreading and revising them. In Bloom’s opinion, the anxiety of William Shakespeare was to fight the shadow of another poet-
dramatist of his time, Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593). Although Marlowe had a decisive influence on Shakespeare, as a strong poet, Shakespeare eventually developed his own style through his purposeful misreading and revising of Marlowe’s work, and eventually surpassed him. Interestingly, Bloom’s theory of influence was further influenced by the Freudian theory of the Oedipus Complex, which came from Freud’s study of Western literature, especially Shakespeare, and also from Freud’s battle against the Shakespearean shadow. In my opinion, the Freudian Oedipus Complex inspired and shadowed Bloom, just like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* inspired and shadowed Sigmund Freud.

While Freud developed his psychoanalytic theory about literature in the shadow of Shakespeare and Bloom developed his poetic theory in the shadow of Freud, I intend to link Bloom’s theory of influence to my study through examining the way in which the Western influence creates a similar kind of pressurizing anxiety on the Chinese, who then struggle towards establishing an independent identity and place in the world.

### III. Anxiety of Glocalization

The notion of “anxiety of glocalization” is my interpretation of the Western influence on contemporary Chinese art and the Chinese response to the influence. How have I reached this point of interpretation? I approached the subject of my study from four perspectives at four levels. They are the authorial, contextual, textual, and readers’ perspectives, at the formal, rhetorical, aesthetic, and conceptual levels. Integrating these perspectives and levels in the practice of interpretation, I term my theory “Semiotic Structure in the Hermeneutic World.”

It has taken me two decades to develop this theory. As mentioned, I started my study of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990’s when I immersed myself in 20th-century Western art and art theory. Throughout the first half of the 1990’s I wrote on both postmodern art and art theory in the West, as well as contemporary Chinese art. Based on those writings, I conceptualized a book on the same subject, which was completed and then published in 1998, titled *Rethinking Art at the Turn of the Century: A Cultural Inquiry into Postmodernism in the West and Contemporary Chinese Art*. In that book, I presented my study of art language, and interpreted the language at three levels: the formal, the rhetorical, and the aesthetic levels.

Although that book was well received in the late 1990s by young artists and art history students in China, I was not satisfied with my interpretation of art language,
since I missed the conceptual level which is more important to contemporary art. I continued my writing and paid more attention to conceptual art in the West and China. Based on those writings and focusing on contemporary critical theory, I completed another book entitled *Cross-Cultural Art Criticism*, published in 2004. In that book, I added a study of conceptual language at the fourth level. However, I was not happy with this book either, since I should have had sufficient exploration of the relationship and interaction between the four levels.

I did not stop writing on contemporary art, and published a third book in 2009, titled *Form and Conceptuality: Exploring Art in the Context of Contemporary Critical Theory*. In that book I explored art at four levels and examined the relations between the four. Due to their interactive relationship, I considered that the four levels of art language form an internal structure, which is conditioned by external context. I regard the three books as a trilogy demonstrating my long-term study of contemporary art and art theory. Regrettably, I did not come up with a term at that time to name the internal structure.

While writing the second and the third books of the trilogy, I was also working on my study of classical Chinese poetry and poetic theory. Certainly, my study of literature was complimentary with my study of art. Although I did not name the internal structure in the trilogy and did not explain how I came up with the idea of the four levels, I was able to do so in the literary study, which was published in 2009. With the title of the book I named the internal structure, *The Significant Structure of Poetics: A Cross-Cultural Study of Southern Song Lyric Theory*. Furthermore, in a modernist New Critical fashion of close reading and structuralist fashion of textual analysis, in that book I demonstrated in painstaking detail not only how the four levels were discerned from the text, but also how the idea of the four levels is supported by both modern Western critical theory and traditional Chinese aesthetic theory.

Although I value the importance of intrinsic study, I am not a formalist. Rather, I have tried my best to bring together intrinsic study and extrinsic study, and textual analysis and contextual interpretation. Such a border-crossing conception is shown by the “pictorial turn” in my study of visual culture, particularly shown in two books. One is a collection of my essays on the study of the image, titled *Visual Pleasure and Challenge: Communication with the Image in Art*, published in 2010. The other one is a collection of translated articles on visual culture, entitled *Introduction to the Key Texts on Visual Culture*, published in 2012. As the compiler, editor, and co
translator, I wrote an introductory article to this book and wrote more than 20 shorter essays on each of the translated articles, all dealing with the issue of, in various degrees, context and its interaction with textuality.

Following the *Visual Pleasure and Challenge*, I wrote two more books to form another trilogy on visual cultural study. In the second book of this trilogy, *Semiotics for Visual Art and Visual Culture*, published in 2014, I explored the intrinsic and extrinsic interactions from four perspectives: authorial (artist), contextual, textual (artwork), and reader’s perspectives. Due to their interactions, the four form an interpretive whole, which I named “Hermeneutic World of Semiosis”. In the third book of this trilogy, *Introduction to Visual Cultural Study*, soon to be published, I incorporated the “Hermeneutic World of Semiosis” with the “Significant Structure” by exploring how this internal structure supports the external world, and vice versa. In other words, while the significant structure is constructed upon the internal text, or visuality of the image, it correlates the four perspectives and is also framed within the hermeneutic world. It is thus important to study the dynamics of artistic language as well as cultural and social context in order to gain a fuller understanding of contemporary Chinese art.

All the above-mentioned books were written in Chinese. Now, writing this current book in English, I make use of my explorations in the previous Chinese books and further explore in this book how the internal “Semiotic Structure” and the external “Hermeneutic World” are integrated. In my interpretive theory as such, the semiotics structure is in fact the core of the hermeneutic world, and the world possesses both the internal textuality/visuality and external contextuality. To be more precise, it is the semiotic structure that brings together the four perspectives of the artist, the artwork, the context, and the reader in the practice of interpreting art. Thus far, I have conceptualized and constructed my own interpretive theory “Semiotic Structure in the Hermeneutic World”. This theory will be further elaborated in a logical process throughout this current book, along with my elaboration of the thesis “anxiety of glocalization”.

Finally, corresponding to the double anxieties mentioned before, I now lay out how to present my current study in writing. In this book, I will employ my interpretive theory to the study, and, conversely, I will also utilize the study to elaborate the theory. This is to integrate the two and not to juxtapose them, since the main subject of this book remains my study of contemporary Chinese art. In sum, the elaboration of the theory explains how I have reached the point of interpreting the
development of contemporary Chinese art, which is shaped by Western influence and determined by the Chinese response to the influence. Needless to say, while the response comes from the anxiety of glocalization, my writing of this book comes from my own scholarly anxiety.

Notes:
[1] Lin Xingyu, History of One-Hundred-Year Chinese Oil Paintings: The Great Epic of Art in 20th Century (Chinese edition, Zhongguo Youhua Bainian Shi). (Taipei: Artists Publishing House, 2002), 20.
[2] Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History (abridgement of volumes I–VI by D. C. Somervell). (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 60.
[3] For the brief discussion of Harold Bloom's theory, see his books The Anxiety of Influence; A Theory of Poetry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), A Map of Misreading (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), and The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994.)

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