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A History of Ideas in Pioneering Contemporary Chinese Art as a History of Devotion

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Abstract: After being the history of language, the history of time, the history of self, the history of the natural world, the history of society, the history of culture, this paper discusses the reason why the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art should also be treated as a sort of devotion and its characteristics. The origin of the naming of the history of devotion, its difference from the history of spirit, art being what kind of psychic mode of being, its representative works, all of these problems will become the field of questions which the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a sort of devotion try to treat with.

Key Words: the history of ideas; the history of devotion; devotional art

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The perspective of history of devotion is tied in with the forming factors of the world-picture logic and named according the same pattern as the previous histories——the history of language, the history of time, the history of self, the history of the natural world, the history of society. In this paper the author observes that the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art should also be treated as a sort of 'history of God'.

To state such a thing however, may lead to some colossal misunderstandings. From a theistic perspective, the term 'history of God' implies the history of God's revelation of Himself or the history of the faith of persons in God. From an atheistic standpoint, a 'history of God' may refer to the history of how persons made themselves God, or how people invoked the concept and name of God in order to insist on the absolute and unlimited primacy of their ideas and viewpoints. Clearly, in none of these respects is the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art a kind of 'history of God', rather, if we interpret the term 'God' as a form of 'ultimate being', we are completely justified in exploring such an angle. Our history of ideas as a 'history of God' will explore the process by which 'ultimate being' emerges through pioneering contemporary Chinese art.

This process in and of itself is an effort taken on as, what is referred to in theology as, an

ultimate concern. Theological discussions posit that God has a principle of hiddenness, and this God reveals Himself through 'God's Spirit' or 'the Holy Spirit', or through connection with a person's 'devotional' existence. This 'devotional' existence has been understood in Sinophone philosophical circles as a kind of 'psychic' mode of being. This has parallels with thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Husserl or Heidegger from Modern Western Philosophical tradition. In the work of these thinkers can be found a shared subconscious grounding in the Christian doctrine of creation, where the devotional existence of persons is sooner or later interpreted in connection with psychic existence.

According to the Christian tradition, when humans were created they were endowed with a devotional existence by God. This original devotional existence, proceeding the fall and excommunication of humans from God, became humanity's psychic existence. What this psychic existence refers to is not the Holy Spirit of God above them but the material world at their feet, which explains the emergence of the mental-physical dualism in modern philosophy. In spite of this, that original spirituality in humanity persists today in a vestigial form under the name of psychic activities, such as art, metaphysics and religion.

Only in this way can we discuss the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a kind of 'history of psyche'. It is first and foremost a 'history of devotion'. The implication of this then is that we must examine in this history of ideas how, as an object of ultimate concern, God acts upon a person's spirituality. Put another way we can ask how does a person's spirituality interact with God's spirit and, consequently, how does this interaction come to surface in works of contemporary art.

According to the world-picture logic, in their social interactions and connections with others, persons come to form their psychic lives. The foundation of this psychic life, however, lies in having a cultural life informed by their readings of history, and a devotional life cultivated through their interactions with God, who transcends history. If this is not the case, then the person's psychic life may well degenerate to the level of an animalistic flesh and blood organism.

Only once they have activated this devotional self through faith experiences, can persons in society have an authentic psychic life to speak of. So too in history, they will have cultural lives oriented towards the pursuit of truth, and above and beyond the texts of history they will have great works of art and writings to speak of. Of course, we are not suggesting that all an artist needs to create great work is a devotional life. The effective expression of this devotional life requires the artist's patient and persistent experimentation with artistic language and a tireless consolidation of their technical ability.

All great works of art come from the activation of the artist's personal devotional life. This primarily involves the artist's continued efforts to convert his psychic life into a devotional life, and then unrelentingly converting this devotional life into an ultimately concerned life. Through this conversion the artist resolutely testifies to the richness of the devotional life.

Such works establish the project of art as something that transcends the many dimensions of the artist, their personal mental life, their interpersonal psychic life and even their cultural life, endowing art with its 'trans-historical' quality and classic works of art with eternal value. This is the standard with which we will delineate truly great works of art and excellent works of art. Great works of art must have the ability to transcend the historical context of their production, they have the potential

to be repeatedly reinterpreted and reappraised throughout the history of humanity.

Once the devotional life has come to constitute a person's very way of life, we can also refer to it as an ultimately concerned organism, even if at its root their life might not necessarily possess an absolute ultimate concern. In fact, only in the lives of those who truly have faith in the process of faith itself, can one see the object of their faith bestowed with ultimacy in their lives. This object of ultimacy then illuminates their lives and serves as an inexhaustible source of ultimacy for their work. Before the Financial Crisis of 2008, there was a whole wave of people involved in the art world of Mainland China, who had started out studying art, then had gone into interior design and then finally moved into production of contemporary art.

Today, most of these people are nowhere to be seen. Back then their faith in contemporary art was actually faith in the financial returns that art was capable of bringing in. They had no belief in the ultimate value that art alone could bring to their individual lives, at most they dabbled briefly in expressing the emotional or mental dimensions of their lives. Their work was absent of any devotional dimension.

After all it was not art but financial gain which constituted the object of their longings. Aside from this, another portion of those involved in the art world hold positions in art academies, which stipulate they must regularly produce work. This art production by demand is why the art works of the academies are always unremarkable, inadequate and superficial, failing to be effective on a devotional and psychic level. Such people are oriented not by art but by success in the mundane world.

As a matter of fact, in a country that denies authentic faith and an art world such as that in contemporary China where the rejection of authentic faith is also widespread, artists can only allude to humanity's original devotional existence under the aegis of the fallen psychic dimension of human existence. No, actually the artist doesn't even have the means to articulate humanity's essential authentic devotional state, unless they have received such a state through grace, that is, unless they believe in the theological premise that the object of their faith determines their ability to believe as a person of faith.

In light of this, we can only examine the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art from the perspective of a psychic history, not a devotional history, and scrutinize the emergence of contemporary art phenomena from the transcendental concept of art[1]. What we refer to as a 'history of devotion' is a discussion of the way in which the personal devotional nature of artists interacts and communicates with God's spirit above through their artwork. As for our history of psyche, in that we will explore how in their work the artist's psyche transcends their conscious self to have dealings with others in society and others in history. Sometimes the artist is full of yearning for some divine presence. When these dealings inevitable touch on or are even completely transformed by the root of the devotional life of persons, that eternal ultimately concerned life, the psychic history which is expressed through their work becomes a devotional history.

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〔1〕 Zha Changping 查常平: Renwenxue de wenhua luoji——xingshang yishu zongjiao meixue zhi bijiao 人文学的文化逻辑——形上、艺术、宗教、美学之比较 [The Cultural Logic of the Humanitology——A Comparative Among Metaphysics, Art, Religion and Aesthetics] [The Cultural Logic of the Humanities——A Comparison of Metaphysics, Art, Religion and Aesthetics], (Chengdu: Bashu Press, 2007), 139-186.

The transcendental concept of art denotes: to deny the existence or validity of the human psyche, is to deny the possibility of artists' creating any authentic emotional work, rendering any reference to truth made by art critics completely invalid and any exhibition centred around academic appraisal of art completely pointless. Not only that, to deny the psyche removes the capacity for collectors to view works of art from a historical perspective, and results in it being highly unlikely that those working in the art world do so for any other purpose beside personal gain.

In our eyes, art is a venue for a person to access a psychic mode of being, on a par with metaphysics and religion. What we mean is that art serves as the symbolic form of our idealised emotional experience of living, while metaphysics is the conceptualised system with which we access our idealised intellectual experience of living, and religion is the guiding faith of our idealised intentional experience of living. These three operate between our self consciousness and super-self consciousness, active at the crossover of the devotional life and the ultimately concerned life, implicit in the human-divine relationship .

In relation to the mental life of a person, this idealisation suggests that the emotional, intellectual and intentional experiences of living that constitute our psychological structure are not some sort of ready made objects but are fostered in our mental life through formative education. In the course of such education persons seek ways to express themselves through symbolic form, conceptual thought patterns and guiding faith. This allows them to emerge from the restrictions of self consciousness and develop a super-self consciousness, forming a psychic life and allowing them to access a cultural life as part of humanity's universal self. They may even receive inspiration from a higher, ultimate existence, which will turn their previous conditioning on its head, compelling them to reconstruct anew their idea of self with this ultimate existence as the root of their life.

From this we can see that art, metaphysics and religion are the outcome and representations of the transcending of the self. Furthermore many connections become apparent: between art and the psychological structure which constitutes a person, between art and the psyche of an individual person, between art and the universal self of humanity, between art and ultimate existence itself. What mediates these connections is the unique artistic language of every single work of art. This implies that the history of art is really the history of how the human psyche discloses itself through form. As any art form must adhere to materials of physical matter, the history of art is then also a history of how physical matter has been deployed as material for the purposes of art, in other words, a history of how designated physical matter has come to be imbued with the psyche.

If one were to compare the psychic mode of being with the academic categories used to organise human culture (such as aesthetics, ethics, science), we could describe it in this way[2]:

Aesthetics is an academic discipline. It is concerned with the intentional experience of living. It employs intuitive persuasive language to articulate the worldly self, allowing humanity to realise an original transcendence.

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〔2〕 Zha Changping 查常平: Renwenxue de wenhua luoji——xingshang yishu zongjiao meixue zhi bijiao 人文学的文化逻辑——形上、艺术、宗教、美学之比较 [The Cultural Logic of the Humanitology——A Comparative Among Metaphysics, Art, Religion and Aesthetics], (Chengdu: Bashu Press, 2007), 41.

Religion is a psychic mode of being. It is concerned with the intentional experience of living. It employs spontaneous or sudden, persuasive language to articulate an ideal or other world, giving rise in human life to an original faith.

Ethics is an academic discipline. It is concerned with the emotional experience of living. It employs a symbolic language of sensations to articulate worldly society, constructing for humanity an original set of principles.

Art is a psychic mode of being. It is concerned with the emotional experience of living. It uses a sensory symbolic language to articulate an ideal or other world, presenting to human life the original forms.

Science is an academic discipline. It is concerned with the intellectual experience of living. It uses perceptual sign-based language to articulate the natural world, uncovering for humanity the original concepts of the natural world.

Metaphysics is a psychic mode of being. It is concerned with the intellectual experience of living. It uses perceptual sign-based language to articulate an ideal or other world, eliciting from human life original concepts of existence.

The emotional experience of living in our cultural psychological structure takes a sensory symbolic form. The uniqueness of art as a psychic mode of being (as compared to religion and metaphysics) lies in how it alone can read this sensory symbolic form. The way we go about evaluating the intellectual dimension of a work of art involves investigating whether the work has recognisable traces of the creator's psychic condition and whether its content expresses universal human emotional experiences of living. We may also consider how unique the sensory and symbolic aspects of the art form actually are. In pioneering contemporary Chinese art, it is genuinely rare to come across a piece that manages to successfully combine and include all of these elements.

Any work that does accomplish this while also attending to expressing the devotional life on which the psychic and cultural dimensions of human life are interdependent, belongs among the ranks of the great masterpieces. As a conclusion we can say that in these first thirty years of contemporary Chinese art there have really only been very talented artists. Truly great artists, we are yet to see. As for the blossoming of artistic languages, the differences in individual artists' personal emotional experiences of living drive them to look for unique ways of expressing themselves technically in their work, it is only with such diversity of expressive technique that there can be works of a distinct nature produced. As a result of the influences of the soviet-style realist art education model and the trend of technologism from 1960s onward, art academies have placed excessive emphasis on the importance of technical ability. This is why such a large proportion of works being produced in contemporary Chinese art are so similar and repetitive. It signifies the widespread poverty of the cultural lives of Chinese citizens.

When we see the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art as a psychic history, we will also give our attention to works that use a negating or critical approach to explore both the progress of the human psyche and the devotional life that brings personal renewal. In such works we see that through art the artists resist, doubt or even denounce the fleshism, materialism and technologism (as it is deployed in art) in the Chinese intellectual tradition and the current cultural environment.

Chinese civilization has undergone a cultural shift. It has moved from prizing the psyche to stressing the primacy of the flesh body and the material, from harbouring yearnings for transcending the world it has shifted on to intervening in the world and has now ended up seeing the created world as the actual world itself. This process overall represents a downward spiral of worldliness (the term 'worldliness' used here differs somewhat from the term 'secularisation' which is commonly discussed in reference to the sacred) and is aptly epitomised in history of the art of Dunhuang's Mogao caves.

"The art of Dunhuang was at its peak in the Tang dynasty. After the Tang fell, the splendour and atmosphere of yester year diminished and, as time went on, more and more was lost with each successive generation. The wall paintings of the Song are noticeably cruder and sloppier than their Tang predecessors. Not only has the structure of the images become less rigorous, but the brushwork too lacks competence and fluency. The images have grown formulaic and conceptualised, the faces are all the same. When you walk in there you can't help but feel empty. Although to their credit, the big swathes of single colours are well laid-out, you can't deny they have their own distinct style. As for the Yuan period, with the exception of the third cave, none of them have even a semblance of style. Depictions of skin flaying and tendon pulling (tantric elements) have made it into the imagery, it's all pretty nasty. There are hardly any wall paintings from the Qing dynasty, just a small collection of gaudy colored works with nothing much to say about aesthetically. Looking at the entire one thousand six hundred years of history of Dunhuang art it is like some long river in a foreign land, flowing placidly and silently through all manner of magnificent scenery. This river flows backward though, all the way to the city well (which is our secularized world), while that desert spring has not sunk into the ground.[3]" To continue Gao Ertai's metaphor, this river has also flowed into the current art world that has since the 1990s been chiefly occupied by a gaudy aesthetic, busy and burning with restlessness, creating a cultural landscape dominated by the pursuit of stylized sensual pleasures of the flesh.

"This is comparable to the health fads that have circulated around the Chinese public over the years, in the 1960s there was drinking water on an empty stomach, in the 70s there was injecting chicken blood, in the 80s people were consuming river spirulina, while the 90s witnessed a rise in the popularity of qigong. All of these fads came and went, people couldn't stand them for long without getting tired and moving on to something else.[4]" What remained consistent throughout however was the desire to prolong the life of the flesh and blood body and the sensual, hedonistic set of values it entailed.

Logically speaking, this tendency of Chinese civilization to be repeatedly mired infleshism, materialism and worldliness which shows up in its art, originates in the denial or rejection of the psyche in the mindset of the Chinese intellectual tradition. The psyche of a person as an individual life is explained away as essential qualities such as qi/chi 气, li 理 or dao 道, as if it is an emergent property of the flesh and blood organism and not something brought about by an acceptance of an

〔3〕 Gao Ertai 高尔泰, Xunzhao jiayuan 寻找家园 [In Search of my Homeland] (Taipei, Imprint Literature Life Magazine Publishing Company Ltd, 2009), 187.

〔4〕 Peng De: Living History——Observations of Contemporary Art (1) Lu Fusheng Ed. Art Chiina, 10(2012), 34.

ultimately concerned life directed toward higher matters beyond this worldly plane.

As a matter of fact, if one rejects the notion that human existence has a dual nature of body and mind, if you do not hold that a person has such a thing as a mind or soul at all, then whatever is emergent of the flesh and blood body is mere flesh and blood, there is no spirit to discuss, let alone the thirst for a devotional or ultimately concerned life that is implied by the existence of such a psyche.

Another reason for such a mindset is that Chinese civilization has not undergone the same intellectual baptism of the age of Christianity as other places elsewhere have. In other words, if we were to say from the perspective of a history of humanity, our civilization is being restructured from an age of power politics to one of capital-based economy as a result of the psychic awakening of the populace, or if we were to say from the perspective of a history of society that our society is being restructured, transforming from a pre-modern state into a modern state, through this 'mixed-modern aeon', then psychologically speaking the Chinese civilization is undergoing a restructuring from a pre-Christian era to a Christian era.

This is greatest psychological event of all——the transformation of the human heart-mind[5]. There are some obstacles to this occurring however. While the experiences of transformations of civilizations and societies can be transmitted through tradition, the transformation of the human heart-mind requires persons to start all over again acting as individuals. Without such a restructuring, Chinese civilization at the end of the day constitutes nothing more than a secular culture in the world and of the world, nothing more than a culture in which persons interact with six of the seven forming factors (thus it is has human-linguistic relationships, human-temporal relationships, human-self relationships, human-thing relationships, human-human relationships and human-history relationships) with no relationship to bridge humans and the divine, it is no more than a culture within these relationships with the six forming factors and bound to the rules of the flesh and blood body, and thus restricted to the lowest levels of such relationships, no more than a walled-off culture that has lost its most fundamental drive to rise above and transcend, a culture caught up in idolatory doomed to play out a vicious cycle of a repetitive historical narrative.

Regardless of whether this culture is produced in a local folk shrine or in the palaces of the officials it is unable to shake off the absolute shackles of the world itself, the flesh and blood body and the material. This is because they have neglected to establish a sacred dimension, an axis to which the sublime and the mundane, the above and below are hinged. They have only the two paths from which to choose: withdrawal from or participation in the world. These two paths function horizontally, as 'skillful means' or convenient ways of understanding interactions between persons in a secular world. It is a so-called ethical worldview, lacking a moral foundation.

Conversely, Western society has already successfully undergone the transition from a Christian era to a post-Christian era. This is evident in many facets of contemporary Western society and culture such as the presence of ethical frameworks in emotional interpersonal relationships, politics and economics, all of these were developed from the ethical foundations of Christian theology. The

[5] In Chinese 心 xin refers to both heart and mind together, we translate it as 'heart-mind' here to avoid over emphasizing the 'emotional' (heart) or 'cognitive' (mind) aspects of xin

so-called secularization of Western culture actually describes the expansion of the originally marked out sacred dimension to encompass the secular dimension, namely having recognized the creator and the domain of creation, the space in which created beings can subsist is expanded.

Naturally, since the enlightenment there have been many intellectual movements that have genuinely sought to distance themselves from or even outright deny the existence of the sacred. This form of secularized thinking is very different from the intellectual trend of worldliness currently being experienced by the majority of persons in China. If we look at it in terms of the human-divine relationship, secularization is the process of distancing humanity and the world in which we live from the holiness of God, 'worldliness', on the other hand, is the worldview that rejects the existence of the divine and the sacred. If we flip the relationship around, now looking at it from a divine-human relationship, we can see that secularization represents the concealment of the divine, the divine hides from humanity and the world, whereas worldliness denotes that the divine has forsaken humanity and the world.

The holiness of God and the humanity of persons are promised to us in the Christian belief in the trinity (one God in three persons), this predisposed Western culture to move towards secularization rather than worldliness, allowing the individual person to be bestowed with a sacred dignity throughout. Within this doctrine is the confirmation of the function of the Holy Spirit. In the doctrine of creation, humans are imparted with the condition of psychic existence; this is the spiritual source of artistic creation. The psychic sensations that audiences receive from contact with art work are all founded on this. This is our rationale for examining the history of ideas in pioneering contemporary Chinese art from the angle of ultimate concern. Of course, we will not apply this kind of terminology in a contrived and forced manner, rather we shall penetrate into the depths of the complicated phenomenon that pioneering contemporary Chinese art presents itself as and rigorously examine, evaluate, reflect on, speculate, summarise, appeal and even raise supposed criticisms of the superficiality of the works of a handful of Christian artists who see it as their mission to express through their work this search for spirituality.

In that case, among the works of pioneering contemporary Chinese art, exactly which pieces could be seen as representative of devotional art? WangWangwang's "Search for God" series (2008), Meng Yan's huge oil paintings, "The Last Supper" and "The Divine Comedy" (2013), Daozi's "saintism ink-water", Qian Zhusheng's woodcuts, Duofu's images composed of cross shaped brushstrokes (the "Genesis" and "the 12th lunar month" series, 2013), The Gao Brothers' installation "Crisis—A Big Cross" (1994—96), the blood red imagery of Wang Lu's work, Zhu Jiuyang's wave themed pictures, all of these works appeal to the devotional dimension of existence from four angles: denial, affirmation in denial, affirmation and denial in affirmation, they call for the sacredness of the contemporary to arise, they call forth a devotional outlook characterised by an eternal hope (Translation by Lance Pursey, checked by Zha Changping).

中文题目：
中国先锋艺术思想史——作为灵性史

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提要：在继艺术语言史、时间史、自我史、自然史、社会史与文化史后，本文回答中国先锋艺术思想史为什么是灵性史及其特征。灵性史命名的由来、灵性史与精神史的区别、艺术是人的一种什么样的精神样式、哪些作品可以作为灵性艺术的代表，这就是中国先锋艺术思想史作为灵性史讨论的问题域。

关键词：思想史；灵性史；灵性艺术