

Two Women in Hangzhou: Another History of Abstract Art in China

Orianna Cacchione



Saloua Raouda Choucair, *Fractional Module*, 1947-1951, 49,5 x 59 cm, Courtesy Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation

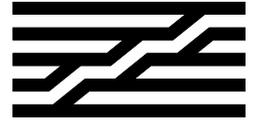
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By and large, the '85 Art New Wave ('85 *meishu xinchao*, also known as the '85 Art Movement or '85 *meishu yundong*) has come to define the first avant-garde art movement in China after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The movement was radical, experimental, and ground-breaking – the artists were known for breaking the rules, pushing representation to its limits, inventing new styles and types of art, and incorporating new and unconventional materials into their works. Yet, despite this revolutionary mandate, discussions of the participation of women and the contributions of abstract art are largely absent from histories of the movement. This paper begins to ask what caused these absences by re-evaluating the history of abstract art in China and its use by two women – Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi – who were trained and taught at the pioneering Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (*Zhejiang meishu xueyuan*, now known as the China Art Academy, *Zhongguo meishu xueyuan*) in Hangzhou in the 1980s.

The Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts was a hotbed of '85 Art New Wave activity, and many of the movement's most celebrated artists graduated from the academy in the 1980s.¹ However few of those students were women – there were so few female students that the women's dorm was only a single hall rather than its own building. Yet, Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi in many ways played an overlooked but immensely important role as many of the women trained at the Academy stayed on as professors after graduation, unlike their male peers and colleagues, who often returned to their hometowns to take up posts in regional art schools or art high schools. They also innovated new forms of abstract art in China in the 1980s and early 1990s – at a time when representational painting, conceptual or "idea" art (*guannian yishu*), installation art, and emergent forms of performance art and happening-style interventions dominated the Chinese art scene. Furthermore, they were two of the first Chinese artists to go abroad and exhibit their work internationally, yet the history of Chinese art in the 1980s is told through a story that is predominantly domestic.

In order to reassess the position of Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi's abstract art in relation to the '85 Art New Wave, I will first discuss the development and theorisation of abstract art in China in the 1980s. This will be

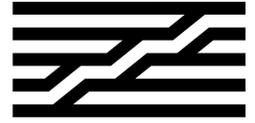


followed by an introduction to the artistic practices of Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi that focuses specifically on the contributions each made through their innovative use of abstraction. Within this discussion, I will recontextualise their artwork in relation to their male peers, attempting to retrace the connections these women had to their now-canonical classmates and students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in order to identify new or overlooked histories of the '85 Art New Wave. Ultimately, I will argue that the artistic trajectories of Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi suggest an alternative history of the nascent internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art and reclaim the importance of abstraction in its development.

The Development of Abstract Art in China

Despite largescale domestic awareness of abstract art in the early 20th century, it was not fully embraced as a meaningful artistic language until the latter part of the century. The foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the large-scale transformation of art to serve political ideology made explorations of abstract art nearly impossible for artists working in the middle of the century. However, following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the reopening of the country's art academies in 1978, abstraction re-emerged as an artistic style that was both synonymous with modern art and had the potential to incite a new artistic language after socialist realism. Yet, abstraction is rarely discussed at any length in canonical histories of contemporary Chinese art, except for passing mention of early debates about the subject.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Chinese artists and critics quickly attempted to reconcile so-called "Western" modern art with premodern Chinese art and Maoist aesthetic theory in order to create a new art for a new era. Abstraction played heavily in these early theorisations and debates, although less so in actual practice. In order to advocate the use of abstract art, artists and critics rhetorically connected "abstraction" to "ancient" and classical Chinese art, to calligraphy, and to the principles of Chinese painting. Conversely, others sought to locate abstraction in Maoist and Marxist theory in order to defend the experimental style. Perhaps best known – and most provocative – in these discussions is the Paris-trained ink painter, Wu Guanzhong's controversial theorisation of "abstract beauty".² He insisted on the primacy of form over content in painting, which directly opposed the Maoist era dictate that "content determines form" and the realist art forms that dominated artistic output at the time.³ Wu Guanzhong's writing and painting provoked animated responses that led to widespread debates about abstraction at conferences throughout the country and on the pages of major art magazines. Yet Wu Guanzhong's own painting never veered fully into pure abstraction. His paintings in the late 1970s and early 1980s almost always maintained a reference to nature, as seen in the ink painting *Old Tree Forest* [Conglin laoshu] of 1982. Sinuous, curling lines of black ink cover almost the entire composition. These lines are punctuated with areas of heavy saturation when he left his brush to linger on the surface of the paper, and are interspersed with coloured dots. In the background, light grey lines suggest trees grounding the abstract lines of the foreground within a forest and rendering them to suggest the gnarled trunks and branches of old trees.



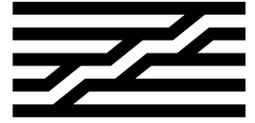
Despite this critical interest in abstraction, the term “abstract” (*chouxiang*) was deemed “bourgeois” in the midst of the government’s Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign launched at the end of 1983.⁴ According to art historian Gao Minglu, this resulted in a generalised fear of abstraction by artists throughout the country.⁵ As such representational art dominated art school curricula, even at the pioneering Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, whose teachers were perhaps some of the most progressive and supportive of new art forms, styles and practices in China. This is perhaps no better demonstrated than in a master class with the Paris-based, Chinese artist Zao Wou-ki that was organised at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1985. Despite being recognised internationally for his abstract paintings, Zao Wou-ki taught classes in figure painting for students in Hangzhou. Furthermore, this impacted the canonisation of the ‘85 Art New Wave – which has been largely historicised through the ways in which artists innovated new styles of representational art and pioneered new art forms, including conceptual art, installation, and performance art. Gao Minglu has similarly observed that the younger artists who would come to make up the ‘85 Art New Wave adopted and championed “more radical artistic forms, such as performance art” instead of abstraction.⁶

Yet throughout China, artists were indeed working in or experimenting with abstraction. Following Wu Guanzhong, some artists employed abstraction as a “pure” (*chun*) art language, whereas others connected abstraction to conceptual and performative art practices – for example, Huang Yong Ping’s use of chance systems to dictate abstract compositions in *Four Paintings Created According to Random Instructions and Wheel* (1985) and Gu Wenda’s conceptual ink paintings like *Mythos of Lost Dynasties Series – Negative and Positive Characters* (1984-1985), and others experimented with non-traditional and unconventional materials to make abstract forms and sculptures, including the *Untitled* works Gu Dexin made throughout the 1980s by melting and manipulating scrap plastic into varied forms and piles.

Within this context, two women – Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi – who were some of the first students to enter the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and to secure postgraduate professorships – turned to abstraction as their predominate style in the mid-1980s.

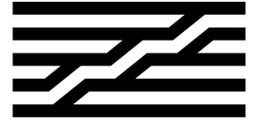
Shi Hui

Shi Hui was one of the first students to enrol at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, graduating in 1982 from the Department of Crafts. As a student of weaving, Shi Hui is perhaps one of the few artists whose practice was abstract from the start. She joined the newly formed Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov (*Wanman yishu bigua yanjiusuo*), which would become one of the most international and experimental departments at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. Founded by the Bulgarian artist, Maryn Varbanov, in 1986, the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov was the only academic department in a Chinese art school run by a foreign citizen.⁷ Importantly, it built on the long history of silk weaving in China and *kesi*, the earliest weaving art developed in Hangzhou in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) and connected that history to international tapestry movements and artists. At the institute, Shi Hui created tapestries and soft sculptures (*ruan diaosu*) alongside Varbanov and Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts faculty and students – most notably her male colleagues, Gu Wenda and Liang Shaoji.



At the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov, Shi Hui went beyond weaving, developing a keen interest in the ways in which a wall hanging could be integrated into space to become a sculpture in its own right. In *Longevity* [Shou] (1986), made with Zhu Wei, the tapestry expands into space as it hangs from the ceiling, floating along the wall and measuring 5 metres tall. The bulbous forms on the left are an abstracted rendering of the character *shou* (longevity) which provides the work's title. Yet from an image documenting the making of the work, a small sketch laid on the top edge of an outline of the tapestry shows the moody, tonally modulating abstract painting from which the tapestry was inspired. *Yun* (1987), made only a year later, integrates gradient colour and moves away from any linguistic referent, while maintaining the same bulbous relief forms that characterised *Longevity*. At the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov, Shi Hui also learned broadly about the histories of international modern art and experimental textile practices, particularly the work of Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz; she powerfully realised that unlike art history the majority of the artists she learned about in the history of tapestry art were actually women. More importantly, she began to understand tapestry and soft sculpture as forms of contemporary art – even though these practices were largely marginalised in discussions of the nascent '85 Art New Wave. She recounted in an interview with the Asia Art Archive: "I felt that with this material and this form, one could also enter the field of contemporary art".⁸

Shi Hui excelled at the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov, eventually showing her work alongside Gu Wenda and Liang Shaoji at the 1986 Lausanne Tapestry Biennial, marking the first time contemporary Chinese artists participated in an international biennial after the Cultural Revolution. Shi Hui and Liang Shaoji travelled with Varbanov to Lausanne for the opening of the exhibition. The rising importance of both the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov and the role of tapestry in art circles led also to the organisation of the *China Tapestry Art Exhibition 1987* [Zhongguo bigua yishuzhan 1987] at the Shanghai Exhibition Centre. Despite this early integration into domestic and international circles, the foundational contributions that Shi Hui and the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov made to the development of the '85 Art New Wave have been largely overshadowed by the "fine arts" disciplines, for example ink or oil painting. Gu Wenda and Liang Shaoji's works – including those made at the Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov – are now considered seminal to the history of contemporary Chinese art. Yet despite the formative collective experiences she shared with her colleagues, Shi Hui's work remains apart from the canonization of the '85 Art New Wave. After Varbanov's death in 1989, Shi Hui began to experiment with other fibrous materials, from bamboo to *xuan* (rice) paper traditionally used in ink painting and calligraphy, and was inspired by the vitality of the natural world. Yet, as her practice developed, it maintained an allegiance to her training in non-traditional weaving and abstract art.



Wang Gongyi

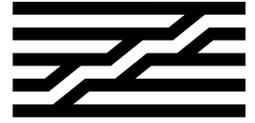
Wang Gongyi graduated as one of the first MFA students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in 1980. Because of her background in publishing, Wang Gongyi studied print-making at the Academy. Her skill was first recognised in 1980 when she won first prize at the 2nd China Youth Fine Art Competition for the woodcut *Qiu Jin, No. 2, Devotee* (1979-1980). This work is part of a series of prints Wang Gongyi made that depict the story of Qiu Jin, a revolutionary woman from the late Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) who was executed after a failed uprising. Despite being honoured with this important award, her early work has been overshadowed by Luo Zhongli's *Father* (1980) – a massive canvas depicting an old farmer in excruciating detail – that also received first prize at the same exhibition. After graduation, Wang joined the department of printmaking as a faculty member, teaching a new generation of students – many of whom would come to define the '85 Art New Wave.⁹

Wang Gongyi continued to make prints in the representational style of the *Qiu Jin* series until 1986 when she received a fellowship from the French Ministry of Culture to study at L'École d'Art de Marseille Luminy and L'École supérieure d'Art, Aix-en-Provence.¹⁰ In France, she was inspired to abandon representational printmaking in favour of abstract ink painting after realising that “everything can be art” during her first trip to the Centre Pompidou. In an interview with the Asia Art Archive, Wang recounted seeing that “a large cobblestone and a neon red light is an artwork, and a big cloth bag is also a work, and [thus] anything can be an artwork”.¹¹ From this realisation, she began to consider what other materials she could use and was immediately inspired to use *xuan* paper, which incidentally she had packed in her luggage for her stay in France.

Wang Gongyi's exuberance is embodied in the first ink works she made while in Aix-en-Provence. She described her experience making her first abstract ink work:

“I will just use rice paper! But how to do it? I went to Marseille to buy ink, first blacked out a piece of paper and hung it on the wall, and another painted half black and hung on the wall. I didn't know what to do next, I was just very excited. The next day, I looked at Yan Zhenqing's¹² regular script copybook, and filled a small piece of paper with the dots in the calligraphy, and then filled another small piece of paper with a horizontal line... and nailed them on top of those from the first day...I didn't know what it meant, and there was no clear idea. I remember very clearly that when I came back for lunch at noon, I saw it from a distance, and I thought it was so good! That's it!”¹³

The resulting works themselves are characterised by Wang Gongyi's use of individual sheets of paper, which she pieces together in both continuous and discontinuous compositions that often exaggerate white and black space. This is demonstrated in *Rectangular Earth Circular Sky* [Tian fang di yuan] (1986), an ink and *xuan* paper installation that descends from the wall onto the ground. Another work, *Landscape* [Fengjing] (1987) more clearly demonstrates her geometric repetition of horizontal lines and calligraphic dots. Here, two dotted pieces and sections of thin vertical lines punctuate the abstract formation. The pieced-together, linearly organised style of her ink paintings even crossed over into a collaboration with the



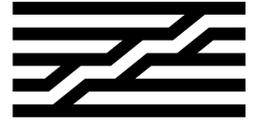
Institute of Art Tapestry Varbanov documented in the Chinese art journal, *The Wall: Art Exchange Journal* [Qiang: meishu jiaoliu bao]—the first art journal dedicated explicitly to international exchange. Her wall-hanging tapestry, *Forbidden City* [Gugong] (1987) is composed of sections of long lines and other sections of short calligraphic-inspired markings made by varying the depth of the weaving.

Despite the international origin of these abstract works, Wang Gongyi's paintings have most often come to be compared to the work of Gu Wenda, her male colleague at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. Striking in their stylistic resemblance and use of the same materials, this repeated comparison negates significant divergences in their practices. First, Gu Wenda was trained in ink painting and his use of abstraction attempted to infuse the practice with conceptual art. Furthermore, Gu Wenda travelled abroad after Wang Gongyi – yet when he did, he shifted away from ink, initially favouring bodily materials, including blood and human hair. Instead, I propose a potentially more apt comparison to the self-trained artist Zhu Jinshi, who similarly travelled to Europe in the late 1980s. While in Berlin, he began to innovate an almost fully abstract sculpture and installation practice that relied on *xuan* paper, one which was also abstract. In Germany, Zhu Jinshi first used raw canvas and then pieces of blank *xuan* paper to compose temporary installations. By connecting Wang Gongyi to Zhu Jinshi, an alternative narrative about the transformation of art in the 1980s develops, particularly the ways in which going abroad led both artists to return to the conventional materials used in Chinese art for centuries as the support for their *abstract* practices. Abstraction and specifically Chinese materials catalysed advances in each artist's practice that occurred beyond the domestic developments of the '85 Art New Wave – closely paralleling the trajectory of Shi Hui's practice and the early European presentation of her work.

Conclusion

Analysing the abstract work of Wang Gongyi and Shi Hui provides an important counter-discourse to the predominately male canonical history of the '85 Art New Wave and contemporary Chinese art in the 1980s in general. First, material explorations activated the abstract practices of both artists. This is distinct from the ways in which abstraction was first theorised in the early 1980s as an artistic style capable of reconciling modern art with classical Chinese art and Maoist aesthetic theory. However, abstraction in both Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi's practices emerged through the materials they used. As Jane Debevoise has observed, the non-painting disciplines, especially tapestry, seemingly had more leeway for experimentation.¹⁴ As such, non-traditional and unconventional materials provided fertile ground for abstraction to develop as an alternative visual and artistic language.

Second, charting the practices of these women problematises the historicisation of the globalisation of contemporary Chinese art. The mobility of Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi remaps our understandings of the geographies of the globalisation of contemporary Chinese art; importantly, the travels of these women propose an alternative narrative to those that temporalise the internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art in the early 1990s after the male-dominated presentations at *Magiciens de la Terre* in 1989



and the 1993 Venice Biennale. Using these two exhibitions as critical frameworks for internationalisation disregards Chinese participation in the 1987 Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial and the early artistic exchanges of artists who have not been canonised as part of the '85 Art New Wave. Instead, the work of Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi suggests the importance of female artists and abstract art in the early internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art, an observation that contrasts the overwhelmingly representational or conceptual art that was exhibited internationally almost exclusively by male artists in the 1990s. In fact, most of the Chinese art that was exhibited in Europe in the 1980s was abstract and emphasised material exploration; this includes not only the work of Shi Hui and Wang Gongyi, but also Gu Wenda and Liang Shaoji at the Lausanne International Tapestry Biennial, Zhu Jinshi's work in Berlin, and the three Chinese artists included in *Magiciens de la Terre*.¹⁵ This finding challenges canonical histories and points to important new lines of inquiry about the role of both abstraction and female artists in the internationalisation of contemporary Chinese art.

Notes

1. These artists include Huang Yong Ping, Wang Guangyi, Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Gu Wenda and Wu Shanzhuan, to name a few.
2. See Wu Guanzhong, "Guanyu chouxiangmei" [About Abstract Aesthetic] in *Meishu* [Fine Arts], no. 10 (October 1980), 37-39.
3. For longer discussions of Wu Guanzhong's theorisations of abstraction, see Jennifer Lee, "Ideology of the Image: Wu Guanzhong's Abstract Expression in Early Post-Mao China", a lecture given at the workshop Visual and Material Perspectives on East Asia, University of Chicago, 22 November 2019; Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 80-81; and Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 47-49.
4. Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity*, 81.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Maryn Varbanov was a foreign-exchange student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing where he met and eventually married Song Hai-Kuei (later known as Madame Song) in the 1950s. After leaving China shortly after they were married, they returned to Beijing in the early 1980s. While in Beijing, Varbanov began making a new series of works that were eventually shown at the National Art Museum of China in 1985 leading to the invitation to establish a tapestry institute at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in collaboration with the Zhejiang Art Carpet Factory.
8. "Interview with Shi Hui," part of "Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990" organized by the Asia Art Archive, http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/shftfinal_201105231531358765.pdf
9. Her students included Zhang Peili, Chen Haiyan, Yan Lei and Qiu Zhijie.
10. Wang Gongyi was competitively selected for the fellowship in France from a group of professors and students at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, including Gu Wenda and Chen Haiyan. In the end, three artists, Wang Gongyi, Guang Jun, Chen Conglin and the art historian and critic, Fei Dawei were selected to go to France.
11. "Interview with Wang Gongyi", part of "Materials of the Future: Documenting Contemporary Chinese Art from 1980-1990", organised by the Asia Art Archive, http://www.china1980s.org/files/interview/wgyft_201105231531358765.pdf
12. Yan Zhenqing (709-785) was a master calligrapher and politician during the Tang Dynasty (618–690, 705–907).
13. "Interview with Wang Gongyi", op. cit.
14. Jane DeBevoise, *Between State and Market: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Post-Mao Era* (Leiden and Boston; Brill, 2014), 183.
15. These artists include: Huang Yong Ping, who exhibited a work made from pulped books; Yang Jiechang, who exhibited a series of paintings made with hundreds of layers of ink; and Gu Dexin, who created an installation with melted and burned plastic.