

# Lv Peng and his Chinese art history in operation, since 1986

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Contemporary Chinese art has gained significant attention both internationally and domestically. Its burgeoning market is supported by not only capital investments but also through academic involvement.

Lv Peng (吕澎, 1956–) - the curator of the first *Guangzhou Biennale* - started publishing articles on art as early as the 1980s. He enthusiastically wrote many contemporary art history books, such as *A History of Chinese Modern Art, 1979-1989* (co-authored with Yi Dan, 1992), *Nineties Art China: 1990-1999* (2000), *Fragmented Reality: Contemporary Art in 21st-Century China* (2010). However, his strategy of brisk documenting, categorising and theorising recent art history casts a shadow of doubt on the seriousness and insightfulness of his accounts: could such a personal and immediate response to the contemporary art world be trusted? One might even go as far as to ask whether personal judgment is quintessential to Chinese art historiography, or if it is merely the reflection of unseen forces, like politics and economics, that operate behind the scenes of visual culture?

To read, understand, evaluate and criticise Lv Peng's scholarship, it is necessary to know the role he has played in operating and promoting Chinese art and its history. In the West, since Vasari, many art historians proposed various ways of interpreting art. Their methods could be classified according to their ground-breaking approaches, be it formal analysis, iconography, semiotics, or biography. However, relatively less attention has been paid to understanding the social conditions in which art historians themselves operated. Biographical analysis could be of vital significance with regards to how art researchers formulate systems of dealing with specific case studies.

This article will examine Lv Peng's art history methods and approaches chronologically, from the 1980s to the present, and will explore three facets of his career. Firstly, it will look at how Lv Peng started his career in the 1980s as an art historian and made efforts to break away from the previously established totalitarian system, especially in writing the history of the '85 *New Wave*; secondly, in the 1990s, it will touch on how Lv Peng transferred art marketing into academia and formulated a method of curating art as a crucial way of writing its history; thirdly, this paper will also examine the criticisms made against Lv Peng's art historical approach, and discuss the idiosyncrasy of his writing by interpreting it from another angle.

## **The rupture and recapture of art historiography**

China is most proud of its 4,000 year of uninterrupted history. Modern history since the First Opium War (1839-42) in China is commonly accepted as its most tragic,

unbearable and unforgettable period. It could be suggested that the Chinese intelligentsia followed the arch of global imperial social progress that had been dominated by the West, and art historiography (as part of this superstructure) had inevitably fallen into the 'East Transition of Western Culture' (西风东渐).<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, with globalisation, the conventional (indigenous) Chinese art history encountered challenges and opportunities simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, both traditional and highly westernised art historiographical developments<sup>3</sup> were severely interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when art functioned merely as a tool for propaganda, and art history was reduced to sloganeering. Official art journals, magazines and newspapers were suspended, and harsh censorship eventually suppressed any critical ideas.

Chinese who were born between the 1950s and 1960s received extremely poor elementary education, and today, the most influential contemporary Chinese artists (*zhong guo dang dai yi shu jia*) as well as art historians belong to that 'lost generation'. Under these circumstances, the question of how Chinese art was studied and how it became a significant part of world art history is often mythologised. Their tragic past is partially the ornament to their glory. Politics is just one of the aspects through which contemporary Chinese art was examined. In the 1980s, Lv Peng on the other hand, regarded aesthetics to be essential. In order to break the shackles of the social and gain freedom for the aesthetic, contemporary Chinese artists found that the primary solution was to understand what the Western avant-garde artists such as Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, De Chirico, and even Andy Warhol, had already achieved in the past hundred years. Issues that were raised by Western modern and postmodern art were thus of primary concern to Chinese art historians.

To understand Western modern art, observing reproductions of the works was far from sufficient - most Chinese artists learned about modern art through low quality prints in the 1980s. Thus it became necessary to examine the avant-garde concepts that were theorised by Western artists and art historians. In this case, translating theories became a starting point. Lv Peng's first art publication is a translation work entitled *Selected Letters of Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh* (*Selected Letter* for short), based on Herschel B. Chipp's *Theories of Modern Art*.<sup>4</sup> Lv Peng's translation was published in 1986, 10 years after the start of the Cultural Revolution. In the mid 1980s, Chinese art publications mainly focused on art criticism rather than on primary sources such as letters between artists<sup>5</sup>, whereas Lv Peng was interested in biographical approaches by that time that related to his educational

<sup>1</sup> Hu Guanghua, 'Chinese oversea art students and modern art education in China', *20 Century Chinese Art Education*, Pan Yaochang, ed, Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Press, 1999, 258. [胡光华: 《美术留学生与中国近代美术教育的发展》, 《20世纪中国美术教育》]

<sup>2</sup> An example of a conventional biographical approach to objects of art is *Dynastic Masterpieces* by Zhang Yanyuan (《历代名画记》张彦远) from the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Art history textbooks published in the period of the Republic of China (1911-1949), such as *History of Fine Art* by Jiang Danshu (《美术史》姜丹书)

<sup>4</sup> Herschel B. Chipp, ed, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, with contributions by Peter Selz & Joshua C. Taylor, Berkley: University of California Press, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> *Mei Shu Yi Cong* (《美术译丛》) by China Academy of Art (中国美院) was the earliest art magazine for translated art criticisms, first issued in 1980. Its predecessor 《国外美术资料》 *Archive of Foreign Fine Art* was circulated from 1978 within a limited art circle.

background. Lv Peng has been passionate about art since his childhood, but he did not qualify to enter Sichuan Art Academy where contemporary Chinese art masters like He Duoling (何多苓), Luo Zhongli (罗中立), Zhou Chunya (周春芽), Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚), Ye Yongqing (叶永青) studied.<sup>6</sup> Lv Peng studied politics and philosophy instead, and after obtaining his first degree he became an editor, writer and translator.<sup>7</sup>

Van Gogh was one of the first Western modern masters who contemporary Chinese artists and writers (Lv Peng included) worshipped. The vehicle for this phenomenon was the initial issue of *Shi Jie Mei Shu* (《世界美术》) in 1979 by Central Art Academy of China, which used *Vase with Twelve sunflowers* (1888) as its cover illustration. Irving Stone's *Lust for Life* (1934) a biographic novel of Van Gogh, was widely read in the 1980s and inspired many Chinese artists who craved a utopian, modernist artistic environment. Yet this popular literary work by Stone is of dubious accuracy, due to Stone's narrative presentation of Van Gogh's life as being similar to that of Guillaume Apollinaire, an extremely talented poet among the painters (Cubist) who coined the term *Surrealism*.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Lv Peng's choice of translation was much more accurate, as letters were the primary source that were relied upon. With the tragic experience of the Cultural Revolution, when original sources were generally censored and distorted to propagandize and glorify the communist regime, the Chinese intelligentsia could not afford another system that neglected true historical sources. Consequentially, authenticity was closely linked to the reliability of sources rather than the instructed socialist ideology.

In the early 1990s, Lv Peng summarised the principle that 1980s art movements shared: the pursuit of the Truth. Such arguments were still detectable between two distinct academic groups: *The Traditionalists* (传统) and *The Avant-Garde* (创新).<sup>9</sup> Even though the '85 *New Wave* saw different ideas and trends that were provoked by artists, art critics, historians, and philosophers alike from different regions and backgrounds, they shared a common purpose: tearing down the false utilitarian value system (Art for Politics' sake) that was instituted by the government. Inevitably, in order to achieve this apolitical ideal, art had to be anti-political, and the first stage was to enter the territory of 'pure aesthetics'. Many artists advocated the return of art to formalist concerns<sup>10</sup>, and Lv Peng's translation informed Chinese artists in the 1980s what the Western avant-garde masters were like, as well as what kind of aesthetic issues they had been concerned with. For example, Paul Cézanne's influential theory of 'the cylinder, the sphere, the cone...' was less concerned with social issues in art, and inspired Chinese artists to consider 'pure artistic' compositional approaches beyond metaphysics.

It is no coincidence that Lv Peng's other two major translated books focused on a more formalist point of view: *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910) by Wassily

<sup>6</sup> Personal correspondence with Lv Peng.

<sup>7</sup> Lv Peng's personal art theories translation agenda could be dated back to as early as 1982, by which time, he translated a book on Modern Art Theories edited by Peter Selz.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Steegmuller, *Apollinaire: Poet among the Painters*, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Lv Peng, 'From "Is Me" — Reflections about Chinese Art in the the 90s', *Jiangsu Pictorial Magazine*, 178: 10, 1995, 55. [吕澎: 《从"Is Me"说开去——关于90年代中国艺术的零散看法》, 《江苏画刊》]

<sup>10</sup> Lv Peng, *A History of Chinese Art Year by Year from 1900 to 2010*, Beijing: China Youth Press, 2012, 920-23.

Kandinsky and *Landscape into Art* (1949) by Kenneth Clark. The former could be seen as an extension of the *Selected Letters*, whereas the latter served as a hallmark work that represented a shift from theories that were formulated by artists to those formulated by art historians. Such a shift reflected an independence from the system and rise of Chinese art historians. It was not until the late 1980s that the distinctive roles played by theoretical art historians and practical artists were separated. Like Vasari's foundational art history, one of the earliest art theories in China was postulated by Gu Kaizhi (344 - 406 AD), who was a scholar himself and was thought to be the first artist who stood out from 'mere craftsmen'. For nearly two thousand years since Gu, scholarly art dominated the Chinese value system. A Chinese grand master was expected to be a great theorist and painter, capable of composing a work of art combining the three great arts, which are painting, calligraphy and literature. This tradition was disrupted by the adoption of Western historiography, and the traditional view that art historians should also practice art was abandoned. The re-established art history departments in Chinese art academies in the 1980s educated a group of new art theorists, who were able to focus on literary approaches to art. Lv Peng, Li Xiaoshan (李小山), Wang Lin (王林) and Cao Yiqiang (曹意强) are representative of this group of art critics and historians, who became independent from making artworks. Kenneth Clark's model of art history was the paradigm that Lv Peng eagerly wished to follow in the late 1980s, and it was not surprising that Lv Peng's ambition was stimulated by Kenneth Clark's work, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (1969). This influence is seen in Lv's later writing of a 'grandiose' art history.

There are two types of contemporary Chinese art historians of Lv Peng's generation: those with international and national educational backgrounds. Wu Hung and Cao Yiqiang were two influential contemporary Chinese art theorists educated in top Western art institutions.<sup>11</sup> Lv Peng, after two decades of writing and organising contemporary Chinese art, only completed his PhD at Art Academy of China as late as in 2004. His contribution to contemporary Chinese art however is no less significant when compared to Wu and Cao's. Although Lv Peng has been participating in and, to some extent, promoting the development of the contemporary art market in China through social practices, he by no means lacks theoretical depth. On the contrary, Lv Peng has been chronicling the trajectories of Chinese avant-garde movements, such as the '85 *New Wave*, since the 1980s.

The '85 *New Wave* is conventionally understood by most scholars as the birth of Chinese contemporary art or as a period of 'Enlightenment' for the Chinese avant-garde'<sup>12</sup>. While this characterisation is controversial and frequently criticised, the significance of '85 *New Wave* is generally seen as self evident in the history of contemporary Chinese art today. Chinese art writers have since become attuned to the advantage of recording history in order to articulate the seriousness of the

<sup>11</sup> Wu graduated in 1987 at Harvard University, Art History and Archaeology (PhD). In 1995, Cao obtained his PhD in Art History from Oxford University, supervised by Francis Haskell, E. H. Gombrich, Michael Baxandall.

<sup>12</sup> Fei Dawei, ed, *'85 New Wave: the Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art*, Shanghai: Shiji Publishing Corp., Shanghai Renmin Press, 2007, 3. [《'85 新潮：中国第一次当代艺术运动》，费大为主编，世纪出版集团，上海人民出版社]; Gao Minglu, ed, *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of Chinese Avant-Garde*, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008, 4. [《'85 美术运动：80年代的人文前卫》，高明潞编著，广西师范大学出版社]

movements, in the hope of granting some degree of authenticity to Chinese avant-garde practices.

Gao Minglu has devoted almost his entire career to writing about the 1980s, and began to do so as early as 1987. Lv Peng, on the other hand, began writing *A History of Modern Chinese Art from 1979 to 1989* at the beginning of 1989, and he took another path, different from the approach of Gao, by writing the history of art sequentially without focusing on a particular period. He published *A History of Contemporary Chinese Art from 1990 to 1999* in 2000, and *Fragmented Reality* in 2009, which constituted an uninterrupted history of Chinese art since 1979. In addition to *A History of Art in Twentieth-Century China*, which was available to the public in 2006, he extended the timespan of his oeuvre back to the beginning of the twentieth century. One might ask why Lv Peng made the decision to write the history of Chinese art like E. H. Gombrich, Hugh Honour or Arnold Hauser.<sup>13</sup> The socio-economic shifts in the 1990s and in the twentieth-first century made the publishing task clearer for Lv Peng. Meanwhile, in dealing with the dynamic contemporary world under the trends of globalisation and localisation, his role as an art historian had changed. The major reason for his tactic of publishing a series of popular art history books - is, as Pierre Bourdieu postulated in 1983, that 'all Critics declare not only their judgment of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it and judge it.'<sup>14</sup>

Beginning at the end of the 1980s, Lv Peng started writing art history in the form of *Duan Dai Shi*.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, he did not stop writing criticism or translating foreign articles. Another equally significant publication by him in the 1980s was *Escape and Responsibility: Twentieth Century Art and Culture*.<sup>16</sup> The purpose of which was to reflect upon and criticise the issues that arose during the '85 *New Wave*. Lv Peng argued that the movements had roots in the negative aspects of the peasantry - that it was too imitative rather than innovative, too fragmentary and too experimental, rather than profound and mature. He further contended that it involved too many slogans, and was deeply influenced by 'the degenerate side of Western modernist art'.<sup>17</sup> Only two years after this book was published, Lv Peng confessed he was influenced by the old ontological moralist value system, which was far from sufficient to address the new conundrums in the specific case of Chinese art in the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> This enabled him to acknowledge the limitations of staying confined in metaphysics. Thereafter, the methodologies that he employed

<sup>13</sup> Admittedly the methods employed by Gombrich, Honour and Hauser are very different, but the three historians shared one thing in common: the writing of Grand Narratives (Metanarrative). Lv Peng's scheme focuses on a comprehensive history of art, which was inspired by the above three historians.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Randal Johnson, ed, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993, 36.

<sup>15</sup> 断代史. Dynastic history, a unique format of traditional Chinese historiography. Lv Peng's grand art history books are derived from this model.

<sup>16</sup> 《逃避与责任：20世纪艺术文化》，1990, co-authored with Yi Dan, initiated writing in 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Lv Peng, *Criticisms on Modern Art and Culture*, Chengdu: Sichuan Art Press, 1992, 11. [《现代艺术与文化批判》四川美术出版社]

<sup>18</sup> Lv, *Criticisms on Modern Art and Culture*.

were diverse and constantly updated to deal with different issues that occurred in social practice.

### **A new art history for commercialising art**

At the end of 1980s, with the Cold-War ending, Communism started to become a legacy of historical experience across societies under the influence of globalisation. While the Chinese Communist Party successfully reinforced its organisational power against liberal rebels, it began to realise that reform was inevitable. Within the party, heated debates on capitalism in the economic sphere were rife, and during the Southern Tour in 1992, Deng Xiaoping determined that the policy of 'Reform and Opening' was the only way to survive. As such, the whole of Chinese society shifted towards commercialisation. As a result, at the end of 1992, Lv Peng was able to legally curate the first commercial art fair in China, the *Guangzhou Biennial*.<sup>19</sup> Because of this exhibition, Lv Peng could be regarded as the first art curator following the Western commercial model. From that event on, Lv Peng has been deeply involved with the art business, which was a more practical approach that changed his academic writing and embraced a new era.

In the 1980s, Lv Peng acted as a friend to the artists and a chronicler of their work, while from the 1990s, he took on a more active organisational role and sought to not only address issues in academic art history, but also surmount obstacles in art marketing.

In 1991, Lv Peng founded the magazine *Art•Market*, one of the first of its kind in Mainland China. It was designed as a space for avant-garde promotion and an ideal platform for supporting contemporary experimental artists whose talents were held back by financial troubles.<sup>20</sup>

Due to the open-door policy implemented by the Chinese government, Western art museums, galleries, collectors, agents and publishers had gathered in China, seeking new sensation and profits.<sup>21</sup> Lv Peng aimed at utilising *Art•Market* to educate Chinese artists and patrons so that a localised business model could be formed, to some extent by simulating the dominant Western ones, in the hope of it resulting in an ecologically healthy environment for artistic creativity in China.

To realise such an ambition, the targeted patrons would have to be convinced by financial statistics as well as by academia. This urgently required a set of value systems that were different from those in the 1980s.

Chinese artists with international experience were aware of the difficulties in gaining financial success in the West.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Lv Peng and his artist friends

<sup>19</sup> Biennials are generally regard as art fairs, differed from exhibitions in which artworks are not for sale, however the concepts of art fairs and general art exhibitions were vague for Chinese artists and critics by that time. The *Guangzhou Biennial 1992* was a hybrid of the two models. Thirteen freelance critics acted as judges, and around 350 artists and 600 works of art were engaged.

<sup>20</sup> Lv Peng, 'Editor's Note', *Art•Market*, 1, 1991, 1. [艺术•市场]

<sup>21</sup> By the end of the 1980s, Belgian Baron and Baroness Guy and Myriam Ullens visited China and have become major patrons for contemporary Chinese art. In 2007, they opened the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art, one of the most influential avant-garde institutions in China.

<sup>22</sup> He Duoling, 'Letter of He Duoling from USA', *Art•Market*, 4, 1991, 3.

came to the conclusion that only Chinese patrons would be able to fully support Chinese art and 'the criteria of art must be made by the Chinese ourselves'.<sup>23</sup> These consensus fundamentally changed the landscape of contemporary Chinese art and its historiography. Nationalist/localist standpoints have blended with internationalism and globalisation, while debates between the lust for art and pursuits for profits have been intensified during the process of art's commercialisation. Shortly after the *Guangzhou Biennale*, Lv Peng and his compatriots realised that issues with regards to criteria were perpetually problematic, and it was these issues that could push the profundity of academia.<sup>24</sup> To keep academic discourse true and pure, Lv Peng has chosen to keep publishing and revising his work. In 2005, during an interview, Lv Peng explained what he believed to be contemporary art history:

The ones who have no sense of history will never know what is history. For those who only utilised words such as History or Contemporary History to write texts, History is just an occupation... Pure Belief in History (历史信仰的纯正性)<sup>25</sup> can overcome Power and Profits, because the purpose and existence of legitimising Power and Profits is ontologically based on such a cult of history, while legitimacy is merely a stage representation of the purity [sic]. What I mean is [that] criticism of history writing must be discussed within the domain of writing history.<sup>26</sup>

This revealed Lv Peng's ideal of being an art historian. This is the writing of art history, even though he has been deeply involved in other cultural fields, such as economics, 'in an age when history becomes poetry of relativism'.<sup>27</sup> In this case, the question of how to confront and value power and networks is the real challenge. Admitting and presenting past errors is one of the characteristic methods of Lv Peng's art historiography, which by no means jeopardises the integrity of his oeuvre: his dialectic of proposal and counter-proposal in the study of contemporary Chinese art insists on a concrete unity of testifying to the academic value of art through experience and practice.

Many articles of Lv Peng are often presented in a dialectical mode of question-answer/rhetorical question/back-question, derived from the Socratic method. In the first decade of twenty-first century, Lv Peng took the contemporary transformations of culture and society around him and put them into a model of formulating history for the sake of academia. In doing so, he emphasised the pivotal

<sup>23</sup> Huang Zhuan and Lv Peng, 'Criteria must be determined by Chinese ourselves', *Art•Market*, 7, 1992, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Lv Peng, *China Contemporary Art in the Historical Process and Market Trends*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, 328.

<sup>25</sup> The original Chinese phrase could be interpreted as 'subjectively staying true to objective history.' For Lv Peng, power and profits are tools for 'operating' history in action, while he was dismayed by those critics who remained speculative of history in writing and not taking curatorial actions.

<sup>26</sup> Lv Peng, 'What is Contemporary History?', *Artistic Contemporary*, 4: 1, 2005, 33. [《什么是当代史》, 《艺术当代》]; here 纯正性 is translated as Purity, however it also refers to the meaning of Honesty.

<sup>27</sup> Lv, 'What is Contemporary History?', 33.

function of commercialisation which was changing the environment of Chinese art in the 1990s.

The 1990s for Chinese art was the age when 'authentic' political judgment from the state-backed Artists' Association began to fall apart, and financial investment appeared to replace the previous order. Around 1992, Chinese art critics were in a state of anguish over the question of what the essential premise for the development of contemporary Chinese art was. Lv Peng proclaimed it was money, without which there would be no environment conducive to creativity. By the early 1990s, the art market in China had just started. Investment, risk, and profits were still relatively unfamiliar to artists, art historians and investors. However, according to Lv Peng, investing in art is historically inevitable for forming healthy strategies and trajectories for art practice.<sup>28</sup> Throughout his fervent articles about art marketing, Lv Peng tackled this new territory of paramount significance in contemporary Chinese art with concrete statistics. For example, the funds for *Guangzhou Biennale* were approximately 1.5 million China Yuan and they were allocated in three areas: organising exhibitions, publications and advertisements, and the purchase of outstanding exhibited paintings to support their artists.<sup>29</sup>

His texts embodied the urgency and actuality of the role of finance in art, a view that should not be neglected in the historiography of Chinese art. Marketing - demonstrating new means of categorising and promoting art - made the outline of Chinese art much clearer. Lv Peng asserted that the more marketing is debated, the more attention will be paid to ethics and morality, and thus the boundary between business and moral sense would be clearer.<sup>30</sup> Due to this belief, he has spent more time and effort on studying marketing for the sake of academia.

In exploring the potential of the art market, Lv Peng was aware of homologies between cultural fields. He articulated that communication between different facets in the field of art could have an enormous advantage in enhancing the value of art, even though the market could not determine the value itself. Marketing is the means that cannot justify the ends; rather, it offers a way of discovering problems and can reinforce the legitimacy of art under the 'bucket effect.'<sup>31</sup>

### **Alternative art historiography: history in operation**

In the 1980s, art in China had no market in the capitalist sense. Production and consumption were normally a one-time exchange without forward planning. The '85 *New Wave* was the result of imitating and transplanting various Western modern philosophical concepts into the void space that was opened due to a crisis of belief at the end of the Cultural Revolution. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Mao Zedong could no longer be certified as the only ideological symbols, therefore Plato, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friederich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul

<sup>28</sup> Lv Peng, 'Are We still Passionate about Art?', *Jiangsu Illustrated Magazine*, 7, 1993, 52. [《我们仍然热爱艺术吗?》, 《江苏画刊》]

<sup>29</sup> Huang Zhuan and Lv Peng, 'Criteria must be determined by Chinese ourselves', 2.

<sup>30</sup> Lv Peng, 'Suggestions on Art Market', *Academic Journal of Railway Normal College*, 27: 2, 1993, 27. [《漫谈艺术市场》, 《铁道师院学报》]

<sup>31</sup> The 'bucket effect' consists of innovative artistic expression, convincing academic interpretation, successful market reaction, etc.

Sartre as well as ancient Chinese thinkers Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi were widely studied by Chinese intelligentsia.

However, the superfluity of knowledge caused more blind spots. Artists superficially borrowed ideas, and only a few maintained the integrity of ideals of their own.<sup>32</sup> The art market changed the regulation and the landscape of Chinese art. Alongside the patronage of governmental exhibitions, the alternative way of displaying art - private investment aided exhibitions - gained a vitality that overshadowed the former. Contemporary Chinese art history writing is no longer controlled by a few political oligarchs; rather it is deeply mingled with other players in different fields of cultural production.

The fortuitous occurrence in history was no longer written as preconfigured or as summarised (which is the traditional mode of Chinese art historiography). For Lv Peng, history is not only written but it speaks in the process of making. He comprehended that curating, investing, and writing about art are all part of art historiography.<sup>33</sup> The task for contemporary Chinese art writing in the 1990s for Lv Peng was less textual and more to do with action and operation, because there is no a-social axiom in art history that historians and critics could apply; and without participating and experiencing social changes and exchanges in practice (curating, selling and buying as agent, publishing art journals), insightful histories of art could not be produced.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, serious Kantian meditations<sup>35</sup> were to be postponed until the twenty-first century.<sup>36</sup>

Lv Peng postulated that the efficacy of being an artist is the result of the operation of art based on communication between different cultural fields. More specifically, the rising role of art critics (for example Charles Baudelaire, Guillaume Apollinaire) in Western history was concurrent with the success of contemporary artists [for example Édouard Manet, Pablo Picasso].<sup>37</sup> Additionally, in a market economy, social participants are varied and to some extent decentralised. Therefore, Lv Peng believed there are multiple structures in evaluating art, which could stimulate trends of art becoming phenomenal.<sup>38</sup>

With regard to writing history in operation, Lv Peng modified the philosophical statement asserted by Rene Descartes: *Cogito, Ergo Sum* (I think before I am) as: 'I think' referring to communicating through different connections, namely sorting out a set of systems. Whilst 'I am' refers to self-assertion on the given system, namely writing. But Descartes did not extend his concept to analysis based on empirical materials, which Lv Peng was hoping to extract through analysing the

<sup>32</sup> Admittedly there were a few highly original and experimental artists, however the analyses of their work made after the 1980s are problematic in understanding their original intentions.

<sup>33</sup> Lv Peng, 'Art Critics' State of Mind in Market', *Jiangsu Illustrated Magazine*, 4, April 1993, 59. [《批评家在市场中的心态》]

<sup>34</sup> Lv, 'Art Critics' State of Mind in Market', 59.

<sup>35</sup> Not elaborated from Lv's original texts, but could be understood as Kant's three grand philosophical enquires: what could be known, what should we do, and what should we believe in? Lv Peng thought without concrete facts, it is impossible to address to those three fundamental questions.

<sup>36</sup> Lv Peng, 'Art Critics' State of Mind in Market'.

<sup>37</sup> Lv Peng, *Operation of Art*, Chengdu: Chengdu Press, 1994, 53. [《艺术操作》, 成都出版社]

<sup>38</sup> Lv, *Operation of Art*, 53.

operation of art.<sup>39</sup> He reinstated that communication and solidification of words through intellectual exchange has the power of pushing history, even though structuralist ideas, such as 'language is a form not a substance' and 'language is not written but speaks'<sup>40</sup>, were not explicitly used in his texts.

<sup>39</sup> Lv, *Operation of Art*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 240-51.

## Criticisms and idiosyncrasy

Producing and consuming art history are equally important in creating an environment for art for Lv Peng. The purpose of curating art is for writing the history of art with much more concrete factors, whilst publishing a grand history of art could popularise and historicise contemporary events (commercial or non-profitable exhibitions), and as such educate the laypeople. However, his method has been strongly criticised by other art historians and critics in the field.

Following the planned dialectical method (curating and historicising), Lv Peng published a series of books for pedagogic purposes. *A History of Art in Twentieth Century China, Fragmented Reality, Thirty Years of Adventures* are included in this scheme. In order to reach a wider readership, these books were also published in English. The new edition of *A History of Art in Twentieth Century China* is also available in French, and due to the massive length of this book, an abridged pocket edition was also published.

In order to write the book, *Fragmented Reality*, Lv Peng organised the most grandiose art exhibition in the first decade of the twenty-first century: *Reshaping History: Chinese art from 2000-2009* (in China National Convention Center, Beijing). Lv Peng's curatorial representation of Chinese art history was strongly criticised by many Chinese art critics. There were 291 artists, and more than 1000 works of art involved in this event, and 18 million Chinese Yuan was invested. This great manoeuvre is thought to be highly controversial. This type of curating and writing of art history, as it turned out, has already been in practiced by Western art historians. Take Werner Haftmann for example; whose series of exhibitions, *documenta* and his *Painting in the Twentieth Century* (1954), was thought to be the only art history of modernity written by a single author whose strong academic approach advocating German art was resented by many critics of his time.<sup>41</sup> Lv Peng's method was based on Haftmann's model. One explicit indication of this was that *Reshaping History* had an exhibition theme called *Special Documenta* that celebrated contemporary Chinese artists. Zhan Wang, whose artwork was staged in the *Special Documenta* section, made a jest by saying that the special arrangement implied that the successful artists are already too old and have become history.<sup>42</sup> A Western collector who witnessed the growth of Fang Lijun's art jokingly told the artist that Fang has become a master due to his inclusion in *Special Documenta*.<sup>43</sup>

The opening date of *Reshaping History* - 4 May 2010- is culturally significant in China, being an homage to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century May Fourth Movement, a period of liberation for the Chinese intelligentsia, and also the time in which the Chinese communism was born. Lv Peng's ambition was to embark on a panoramic survey of contemporary Chinese art of the past decade. However, this ambition was strongly criticised by the media. The state-sponsored *Xinhua* news agency commented that

<sup>41</sup> Walter Grasskamp, 'For Example, Documenta, or, How is Art History Produced?', *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds, London: Routledge, 1996, 73.

<sup>42</sup> Sheng Wen, 'Lv Peng Curating 'the biggest art expo' in China: 18 million China Yuan was not enough for reshaping history', *The New Weekly*, 324.

<<http://www.newweekly.com.cn/newsview.php?id=2518>>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013].

<sup>43</sup> Sheng Wen, 'Lv Peng Curating 'the biggest art expo' in China: 18 million China Yuan was not enough for reshaping history'.

this exhibition demonstrated the insecurity of contemporary Chinese art in positioning itself in world art history.<sup>44</sup> Some scholars argued about the validity of inserting an event in progress into history. Namely, they did not wish to see history become a self-involved, socio-artistic banquet that was directed by a leading art historian and his friends.<sup>45</sup> Lv Peng's aggressive method of historicisation in progress was thought to be against everything he had been fighting for: the utilitarian power behind art. Through his historicisation, he himself, according to some scholars, had become such a power. And to some scholars, this does not benefit the wider development of contemporary Chinese art. Sheng Wen argued that Lv Peng did not represent what was innovative in recent Chinese art world in *Reshaping History*, as for example, new works by Gu Wenda and Cheng Danqing remained stylistically similar to their works in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>46</sup>

The critic Wang Lin, Lv Peng's rival, condemned the narrowness of exhibiting art in such a manner. To Wang Lin, it was against the very ethos of contemporary Chinese art, which for Wang is chiefly concerned with decentralisation and against capitalist values. In Wang's view, Lv Peng's approach was representative of hegemonic discourses of power that inhibited artistic innovation, and was thus limiting, discriminatory and far from panoramic.<sup>47</sup>

According to Lv Peng, art criteria should be based on historical processes. Such an assertion was criticised by fellow critic Li Xianting (栗宪庭), who warned of the dangers of manipulating history ('operation' in Lv Peng's term). Li advocated the individualisation of art (decentralising authority) as a response to Lv Peng's historicisation of art (forming and reforming orders and authorities).<sup>48</sup>

In 2011, Lv Peng curated *Collecting History: China New Art* as the opening exhibition for Museum of Contemporary Art Chengdu, a further action in favour of promoting a cult of history, through which he tried to canonise contemporary Chinese art in conjunction with a non-profit cultural organizations following international public exhibition standards.

After the 1980s, Lv Peng's historiographical methods became more social and less formal. It could be seen as determined by specific milieus and his personal ambition for making the art environment effective. Nevertheless, he was aware of such a flaw in his art history publications. He took a PhD course under Professor Fan Jingzhong at Art Academy of China, and researched Chinese landscape painting in the Song dynasties (960-1279 AD). His thesis became a cue for returning

<sup>44</sup> 'Reshaping History, Contemporary Chinese Art is still lack of Security', *Xinhuanet*, 21 May 2010. <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/shuhua/2010-05/21/content\\_13531989.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/shuhua/2010-05/21/content_13531989.htm)>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013].

<sup>45</sup> Cheng Xiaofeng, 'The disquiet Contemporary Art - discourse with Lv Peng', *Artnow*, 24 Feb 2010, <<http://www.artnow.com.cn/Discuss/DiscussDetail.aspx?ChannelID=746&ArticleID=24195>>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013].

<sup>46</sup> Sheng Wen, 'Lv Peng Curating 'the biggest art expo' in China: 18 million China Yuan was not enough for reshaping history'.

<sup>47</sup> Wang Lin, 'Changeling Beijing Narrative - regarding historiography of Contemporary Chinese Art', *Artintern*, 15 May 2010.

<<http://blog.artintern.net/blogs/articleinfo/wanglin/105789>>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013]

<sup>48</sup> Li Xianting, 'Filtering first', *Art Bank*, 31 Mar 2011. <<http://zx.findart.com.cn/10708893-zx.html>>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013].

to formalism and traditional Chinese painting. The curatorial action based on his PhD thesis, was taken in 2010 with the support of the Louise Blouin Foundation. Entitled *Pure Views: New Painting From China*, the exhibition primarily presented the formalist value in contemporary Chinese art. It was an international exhibition that was seen in London (2010), San Francisco (2011), Chengdu (2011), Fukuka (2013) and Barcelona (2013). The exhibition showed the world a major trend of contemporary Chinese art, in which artists focused on the formal again by revising traditional Chinese painting as well as refining the influence of modern Western art on contemporary Chinese art.

Lv Peng thought, during the current world economic crisis that started in 2008, that the Chinese taste of art had the possibility to retreat to the formal, and used *Xi Shan Qing Yuan* (《溪山清远图》) a landscape by Xia Gui, c. 1180-1230 AD) as a model for operating the future history of art in China.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, the inaugural exhibition that will be held by Lv Peng in summer 2014 at Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, could be seen as another step towards extending his writing territory back to the late Qing dynasty. The works that will be on display are not contemporary art, but Chinese export paintings and early photographs in China. Lv Peng apparently is not satisfied by dedicating himself to contemporary art; and his historiography is of a grand style that covers wide time spans like that of Hauser, Gombrich, Kenneth Clark and Meyer Schapiro. Such approaches were also condemned by certain critics. For instance, Yue Lupeng insisted that contemporary societies need the swift and succinct spread of information on the Internet (Twitter or Weibo), while Lv Peng's history books are long-winded and too quaint for the study of contemporary art.<sup>50</sup> As for Lv Peng, constantly writing and revising history is a means of historical operation.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

Lv Peng started his art history-writing project in the early 1980s. In the past three decades, his historiographical approach has varied, dealing with different issues that occurred in specific periods. He formulated a dialectical scheme of writing and operating art history, and has constantly rectified his theories according to social changes.

Translating original Western art sources and employing formalist approaches prevailed in the early career of Lv Peng, on which Kenneth Clark's influence was obvious. However, he soon shifted his major concern with the social aspect in art and took action in chronicling, operating, curating and historicising art through means of commercialisation, imitating Werner Haftmann.

In the twenty-first century, he embarked on a series of pedagogical art history publications. Arnold Hauser's *Social History of Art* had a great impact on

<sup>49</sup> Lv Peng, 'Xi Shan Qing Yuan - the transformation of Contemporary Chinese Art - traditional tastes and new methods', *99ys*, 7 Sept 2013.  
<[http://news.99ys.com/20130709/article--130709--134909\\_1.shtml](http://news.99ys.com/20130709/article--130709--134909_1.shtml)>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013].

<sup>50</sup> Yue Luping, 'Lv Peng and an era has been out', *ArtChina*, 23 Sept 2010.  
<[http://big5.china.cn/gate/big5/art.china.cn/Blog/2010-09/23/content\\_3738513.htm](http://big5.china.cn/gate/big5/art.china.cn/Blog/2010-09/23/content_3738513.htm)>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013].

<sup>51</sup> Lv Peng, 'Constantly rewrite art history', *Artintern*, 4 Sept 2012,  
<<http://review.artintern.net/index/html/html.php?id=4815&page=0>>, [accessed 12 Dec 2013].

those books, which distinguished him from other contemporary Chinese curators who focused on individual cases and who remained cautious in summarising the zeitgeist of the trajectory of recent art.

Meanwhile Lv Peng did not stop using curating as a method of operating history, and returned to the formalist approaches that were applied to interpreting traditional Chinese art. Later on, formalist approaches served in presenting a new trend in contemporary Chinese art through which the authenticity of historicising and juxtaposing ancient and present art was reinforced.

Although Lv Peng borrowed many methods both from the West and China, from ancient and modern, it is hard to categorise his historiography under one solid school of philosophy. Nevertheless, one thing is clear – he believed in constantly operating and historicising art and saw this path as the right one for pushing academic research further and making it better.

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