

Acknowledgments

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Gao Minglu

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Introduction

For people from the West, it is very difficult to imagine that the meaning of modernity has been important for the Chinese, yet Chinese intellectuals have debated it, intensely, for more than a hundred years. Even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, amid rapid globalization, “modern” (*xiandai*) is still the preferred term, as is evident in phrases like “modern fashion” (*xiandai shishang*), “modern metropolis” (*xiandai dushi*), “modern style” (*xiandai fengmao*), and “modern design” (*xiandai sheji*). Of course, these designations all refer to the present moment of their utterance, and not to the modern era of Europe and the United States since the late eighteenth century, or to the time and taste of Western artistic modernism.

Meanwhile, contemporary Chinese also very frequently use the term “contemporaneity” (*dangdaixing*) as a synonym for “modernity.” When we speak about Chinese contemporary art, the word “contemporary” refers to the past three decades of new artistic production, the years since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. When we speak of the “contemporaneity” of Chinese contemporary art, however, we are referring to the special markers that tie this art to the particular social and cultural environment of a specific period, or what modern Chinese call *shidai jingshen*, or “spirit of an epoch.” In the indigenous Chinese context, this “spirit of an epoch” has often been regarded as the equivalent of “modernity” (*xiandaixing*) in the narrative of modern Chinese history.

This “modernity” should not be confused with “modernity” in the Euro-American sense of a marker of temporal logic (as part of a sequence from premodern to modern and then postmodern). Rather, it refers particularly to a specific time and a concrete space, and to the value choices of society

at that time. This sense of the word had already emerged in the beginning of Chinese modern history, at the turn of the twentieth century. Since then, the consciousness of Chinese modernity has been determined by the condition of the nation. In my 1998 essay “Toward a Transnational Modernity,” I put it this way: “For the Chinese, *modern* has meant a new nation rather than a new epoch. Thus, Chinese modernity is a consciousness of both transcendent time and reconstructed space with a clear national, cultural and political territorial boundary.”¹

In this introduction, I will first distinguish Chinese modernity from its Western referential origin, and argue that the fundamental characteristic of Chinese modernity can be interpreted as a permanent condition of contemporaneity, driven by a kind of empiricism, throughout modern Chinese history. In the second part, I will discuss how Chinese modernity has shaped the horizon of contemporary Chinese avant-garde art, locating it within a particular spatial perspective and experience. Throughout the discussion I will show that recognition of dislocation and displacement—in the sense of a merging of art and society by complex negotiations between various spaces—can be seen as an embodiment of the mixture of consciousness with imagination and cognition, as well as specific and concrete experiences of the avant-garde artists. This notion of “space” is essential for an understanding of Chinese modernity and the avant-garde in contemporary art.

Total Modernity in the Form of a Trinity

How can we distinguish Chinese modernity from Western modernity, which has influenced Chinese art since the early twentieth century? The difficulty, in