

**CHANGING CULTURES:  
IMMIGRANT ARTISTS FROM CHINA**

ORGANIZED FOR BARUCH COLLEGE/CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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**BARUCH COLLEGE GALLERY**

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I wish to thank Dean Norman Fainstein of the Baruch College School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. His commitment to cultural diversity in the College and the City inspired me to plan this exhibition. I am grateful to those who helped me locate the artists, especially Janet Baker, Joan Lebold Cohen, Barbara Ford, and Elizabeth Rogers. Joan Cohen has given exceptional service to the cause of making contemporary Chinese art better known in America. Professor Baker, my colleague in the Department of Art at Baruch, served as consultant for this project, generously sharing both her expertise on Chinese art and culture and her contacts within the Chinese community. She has also facilitated the organization of the exhibition by serving as translator. The technical skill of Wang Chi Wong and John Van Sickle facilitated production of this catalogue. Sandra Kraskin, Director of the Baruch College Gallery, and William Salzillo, Director of the Emerson Gallery at Hamilton College, also helped to make this project possible. Finally I wish to recognize the generosity of the participating artists who welcomed me into their homes and studios and recommended their colleagues to me.

Gail Levin

Professor of Art

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## CHANGING CULTURES: IMMIGRANT ARTISTS FROM CHINA

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In the last decade, the opening up of China has made it possible for many artists born and trained there to come to the United States. Initially, they gained permission for travel to study in American art schools. Many elected to remain in this country for reasons of artistic or political freedom, like the earlier generations of immigrant artists who fled from political persecution and controls on freedom of expression in Nazi Germany and elsewhere.

Twelve artists who have come from China since 1982 are featured in the present show. Some left China as recently as 1987. Although most came to America and enrolled in art schools, all had previously studied art in China. Many had already achieved professional reputations, exhibiting in important shows and teaching in major art academies. All possess a remarkable spirit of adventure that has enabled them to find the courage to come to an unfamiliar land and begin anew in a culture very different from their own.

The show contains two works by each of the twelve, one produced in China and one made after arriving in the United States. In at least one case, the artist, Bing Hu, was not able to bring any art with her, and is showing the work that she submitted from China to gain admission to art school here. Some of the youngest participants, such as Xing Fei or Chunli Wang-Gurt, show their graduation projects from Chinese art academies. Others, such as Kong Bai-ji or Han-Mei Li, exhibit work they made in China as seasoned professionals. Thus, the show lets us examine each individual's choice of materials, subject matter, and style and to see how the work has changed since arriving in this country.

All of the artists in this show have felt the impact on their lives and work of the Cultural Revolution, when artistic freedom was relentlessly squelched in the name of "revolutionary culture." From 1966 to 1976, during the last decade of Mao Zedong's leadership, artists were often sent to work in urban labor camps, to toil in the countryside among peasants in agricultural settlements, or forced to produce propaganda art in officially sanctioned Social Realist styles. As a result, some taught

themselves to draw and paint before they were allowed to obtain any formal art education. All have endured separation from family members, culture shock, and economic struggle in order to remain artists and make a new life in America. After Mao's death in 1976, the Chinese began testing how far they would be allowed to go in breaching the previously imposed restrictions on freedom. Restlessness was apparent to me during my first visit to China in 1978, just two years after Mao's death. The most ambitious Chinese were busy learning English and eager to practice it with anyone who was willing. A few people had begun to discard the standard drab Maoist garb and to sport vivid colors and patterned fabrics.

It was in 1978 that Gao Xiao-hua, as a student at the Sichuan Institute of Fine Arts in Chongqing, which had just re-opened after the Cultural Revolution, produced an oil painting entitled *Why?*. This was one of the earliest works of art to depict and criticize the Cultural Revolution and it was featured in China's first national art competition following that period of turmoil. From 1971-1977, Gao Xiao-hua, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, had been in the army where he worked producing propaganda pictures.

On my own subsequent visit to China in 1980, I found that cultural change had gained momentum. While sketching the great sculpted figures of Buddha at the Yungang caves in Datong, I encountered a class from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. They enthusiastically tried to communicate with me in English. One artist, asking if I would pose for him, sketched me in traditional brush and ink. I traded my sketch of him for his of me, but not before he wrote on his "draw bad," in a characteristically Chinese gesture of self-criticism. When I visited art schools, I met teachers and students who were eager to learn more about Western art. Art books and magazines from Europe and America were being acquired to replace those that had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Although students' access to these libraries was still limited, the circumstances were in place that inevitably drew so many Chinese artists to explore other cultures.

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The Cultural Revolution, by suppressing all things Western, insured that they would be sought out by intellectuals and artists. Perhaps a comparable curiosity about the forbidden explains my own eagerness to visit China as soon as political developments made it possible.

From art faculty members, I heard horrific tales of persecution during the Cultural Revolution. This was especially true for painters working in Western styles, particularly if they had been born abroad (such as overseas Chinese who chose to return in 1949 when Mao came to power) or had relatives abroad. Some of these artists lost their faculty appointments and suffered enormously, also losing their health. However, by 1980, when I heard these accounts, the government had only recently restored some of these displaced art professors to minimal positions.

I did not imagine then that China would liberalize so rapidly and allow its artists to travel abroad. Some of the art students that I met there may be among those who have since arrived here. In 1982, when I met several Chinese artists in New York who were showing their work here, I realized how rapidly things were continuing to change in China. One of the artists, Chen Dan-Qing, who was then studying at the Art Students League, learned of my interest in the American painter Edward Hopper. He came to the Whitney Museum where I was working, bringing me a Chinese journal with an article on Hopper. When he translated it, I was amazed to discover that its writer knew a book I had published on Hopper only two years earlier.

At the same time, the recent curtailment of freedom does not surprise me. What I witnessed in 1978 and 1980 was a very controlled society. I saw the giant billboards extolling Mao's programs and huge public sculptures of the recently deceased leader. Many artists were laboring in state-appointed jobs designing jewelry or other crafts for a work squad in a factory. The transitions from work under such conditions to life in a free society have not been easy for immigrant artists. Yet each of the twelve artists in the present show has

demonstrated adaptability and determination. Many have had to shift directions at least temporarily: painters now work as printmakers or textile designers or are constrained to produce portrait commissions; a sculptor works in restoration in order to earn a living while continuing to create art. Ironically, they have escaped ideological coercion in China, only to discover the demands of the free-market economy. Though still often forced to compromise, these artists have found new vehicles for personal expression.

The styles in the exhibition are quite diverse, ranging from realism to abstraction. In China, some of these artists were trained in traditional Chinese ink painting. Xing Fei abandoned tradition for mixed media and installations while Xiao Bai Li continues to use this technique, which he first learned from his artist father, Chang Bai (Li). Others, such as Gao Xiao-Hua, studied and still practice a meticulously realist style of oil painting that was inspired by Soviet Socialist Realism, first imported by the Chinese Communist art establishment during the 1950's, in the first decade of the People's Republic.

On the other hand, Kong Bai-Ji chose to spurn Soviet Realism only to adopt other Western styles such as Expressionism, which were unacceptable to the Maoist establishment. Before the Cultural Revolution, he depicted the hardships of peasant life in an Expressionist style that he likens to the work of the German artist, Kathe Kollwitz (1867-1945), whom he admired. As a result of these works, which were burned in the Cultural Revolution, Kong Bai-Ji was sent out of Shanghai to work in a factory and in agricultural labor.

Some of the artists make political statements, such as protesting the recent massacre of student protesters in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, while others express more personal concerns. Using Delacroix's famous *Liberty Leading the People* of 1830, Chen Dan-Qing painted *Les Miserables* in July 1989, just after the events in Tiananmen Square. He superimposed Delacroix's figures upon the architecture of the square and the intruding army tanks. Zhang Hong tu was

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trained in Soviet Realism which he rejected with an ironical wit that manifests itself in personal and political commentary. His response to Tiananmen Square was to take the Western icon of Leonardo's *Last Supper* and replace the beneficent Christ and disciples with a menacing Mao and his gang. He also seized on a resemblance between the Quaker trademark of Quaker Oats and Chairman Mao to produce a further satire on the Chinese leader. When asked to supply a self-portrait for an exhibition, he depicted the back of his head.

Still other artists make reference to the history, folk art, or landscape of China or are fascinated by that nation's distinct minority peoples. Folk art, including traditional Chinese New Year painting, influenced the emphatic linearity, colorful detail, and mythic subject matter of Huang Su-ning. She worked for four years in Tibet. Her *Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden* uses an ancient folk tale to symbolize the separation imposed when her husband went to study in America, leaving her behind with their daughter. Her most recent work depicts their reunion in New York. Her husband, Chen Dan-Qing, once made paintings depicting the Tibetans. Another minority, the colorful Yi people who live in the remote Liangshan mountains of Sichuan province, continues to hold the attention of Gao Xiao-Hua.

The traditional arts of China, which were discouraged during the Cultural Revolution in favor of Soviet Realism, have inspired a number of artists. A celebrated painting on silk, discovered in the recent excavation of a royal tomb from the second century B.C.E., inspired Xu Jian-guo in his *East & West* of 1978. Its "T" shape derives from this Daoist painting, which depicted the journey of the spirit of the deceased through the realm of the underworld, earthly mortals, and the heavens. The traditional *literati* form of calligraphy, dating from the eleventh century, influenced Shi Ji-hong in his choice of subject for the copper plates that he has recently produced here. When he represents the character for *Silence*, even those who cannot read Chinese can appreciate the abstract expressiveness of the calligraphic line and form.

This diversity of subject finds its counterpart in diverse media, which range from traditional scroll painting on rice paper with Chinese ink and watercolor, through monotypes, woodblock prints, and wood carving, to Western oil painting, mixed media on copper and zinc plates, and fiberglass sculpture. Living in the United States will continue to affect the lives and work of each of these artists. It is more difficult, however, to foresee what impact they and other Chinese immigrants may have on the development of American art. Breaking in to the New York gallery scene is difficult for most artists. Both the galleries and museums have tended to focus on art by White males. The new immigrants are beginning to be recognized, however. Some have shown in galleries, a few of which have featured Asian artists, others at New York's alternative spaces like P.S. 1 or The Drawing Center.

Immigrant artists have played a crucial role in the development of twentieth-century American art. We need only to think of Willem De Kooning who arrived from Holland in 1926, I.M. Pei who arrived from China in 1935, or Hans Hofmann who arrived from Germany in 1934, to recognize that the art of our time has been dramatically changed as a result of immigrants to our shores. We are pleased to call attention to these new arrivals from China and to wish them well in their new home. We are interested both in what they will learn from America and what they can teach us about their culture and about ourselves.

Gail Levin

c 1991

GAO XIAO-HUA

*Vagabond*, 1983

Oil on masonite, 33 x 25"



CHUNLI WANG-GURT

*Mountain Village*, 1982

Woodcut on rice paper, 25 x 26"

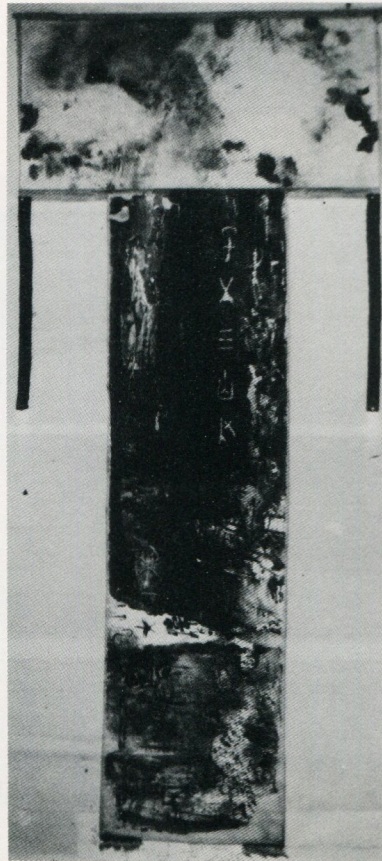




**XING FEI**

*The Market, 1984*

Watercolor & ink on paper, 51 x 68"



**XU JIAN-GUO**

*East & West, 1978*

Ink & Mixed color on rice paper, 101 x 54"



**HAN-MEI LI**

*Young Girl, 1983*

Wood, 24 x 6 x 6"



**HUANG SU-NING**

*The Cowherd & the Weaving Maiden, 1985*  
Chinese Watercolor on rice paper, 29 x 39"

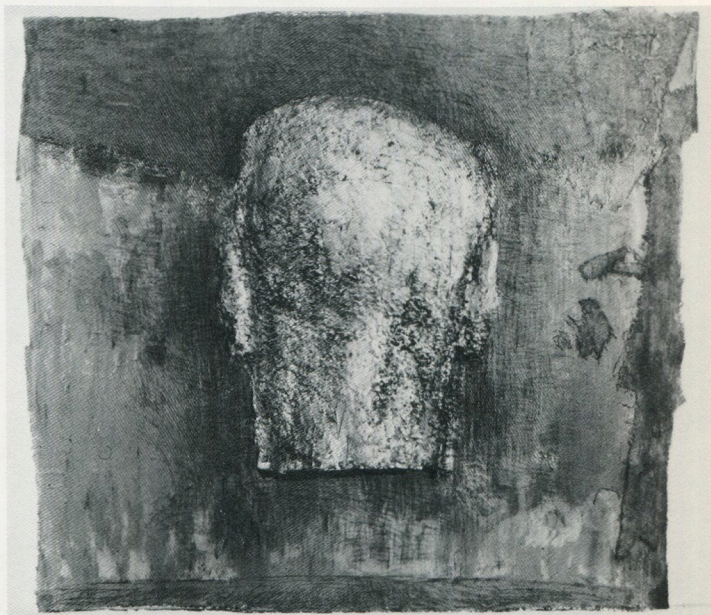




**CHEN DAN-QING**

*Les Miserables*, 1989

Oil on canvas, 44 x 58"



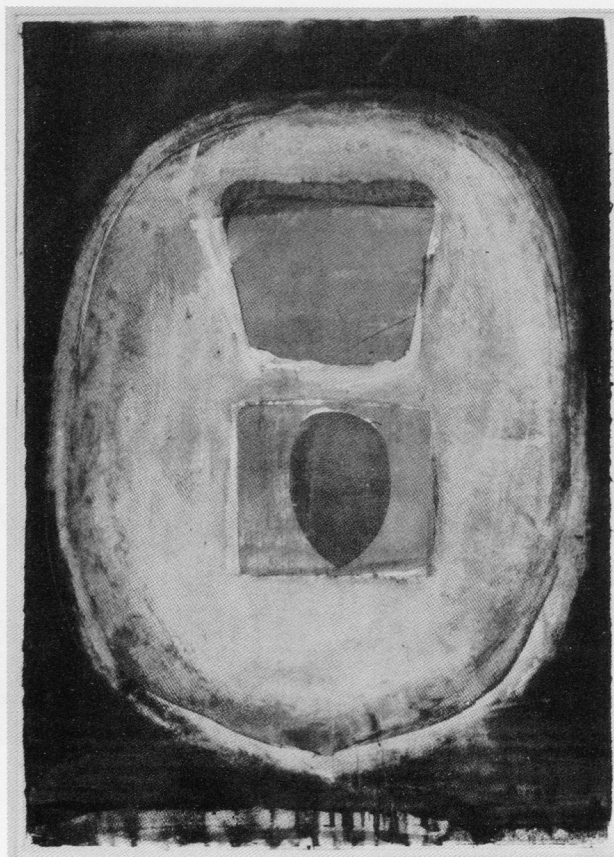
**ZHANG HONG TU**

*The Back of the Head*, 1987

Mixed media on canvas, 73 x 81"

**BING HU**

*Two Cameras*, 1989  
Monotype on paper, 31 x 21"



**KONG BAI-JI**

*Greenwich Village Bar*, 1989  
Oil on canvas, 42 x 42

## CHECKLIST

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All works are in the collection of the artist unless otherwise noted.

**BING HU** (b. 1957, to U.S. 1986)

*Drawing*, 1983  
Charcoal on paper, 14 x 12"  
*Two Cameras*, 1989  
Monotype on paper, 31 x 21"

**CHEN DAN-QING** (b. 1953, to U.S. 1982)

*Shepherd*, 1980  
Oil on paper on masonite, 31 x 21"  
*Les Miserables*, 1989  
Oil on canvas, 44 x 58"  
Collection of Lawrence Wu

**CHUNLI WANG-GURT** (b. 1957, to Sweden 1985, U.S. 1988)

*Mountain Village*, 1982  
Woodcut on rice paper, 25 x 26"  
*Comb*, 1990  
Photograph on zinc, 42 x 18"

**GAO XIAO-HUA** (b. 1955, to U.S. 1985)

*Vagabond*, 1983  
Oil on masonite, 33 x 25"  
*Sisters*, 1988  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30"

**HAN-MEI LI** (b. 1939, to U.S. 1987)

*Young Girl*, 1983  
Wood, 24 x 6 x 6"  
*Dancers*, 1989  
Fiberglass, 24 x 24 x 7"

**HUANG SU-NING** (b. 1950, to U.S. 1988)

*The Cowherd & the Weaving Maiden*, 1985  
Chinese Watercolor on rice paper, 29 x 39"  
*Posing for my Husband*, 1989  
Oil on canvas, 18 x 24"

**KONG BAI-JI** (b. 1939, to U.S. 1986)

*Guilin Landscape*, 1981  
Oil on rice paper, 24 x 24"  
*Greenwich Village Bar*, 1989  
Oil on canvas, 42 x 42

**SHI JI-HONG** (b. 1953, to U.S. 1987)

*Bridge*, 1982  
Woodblock print, 24 x 31"  
*Silence*, 1990  
Mixed Media on copper, 32 x 45"

**XIAO BAI LI** (b. 1949, to U.S. 1987)

*Cypress Tree in Moonlight*, 1985  
Watercolor & ink on rice paper, 38 x 26"  
*Moon Reflections & Lotus Flowers*, 1990  
Watercolor on rice paper, 51 x 26"

**XING FEI** (b. 1958, to U.S. 1984)

*The Market*, 1984  
Watercolor & ink on paper, 51 x 68"  
*Study in Red*, 1988  
Mixed media on canvas, 48 x 76"

**XU JIAN-GUO** (b. 1951, to U.S. 1984)

*East & West*, 1978  
Ink & Mixed color on rice paper, 101 x 70"  
*Lights & Line*, 1990  
Mixed media on canvas, 56 x 70"

**ZHANG HONG TU** (b. 1943, to U.S. 1982)

*Myth of Fire*, 1979  
Oil on paper, 34 x 31"  
*The Back of the Head*, 1987  
Mixed media on canvas, 73 x 81"