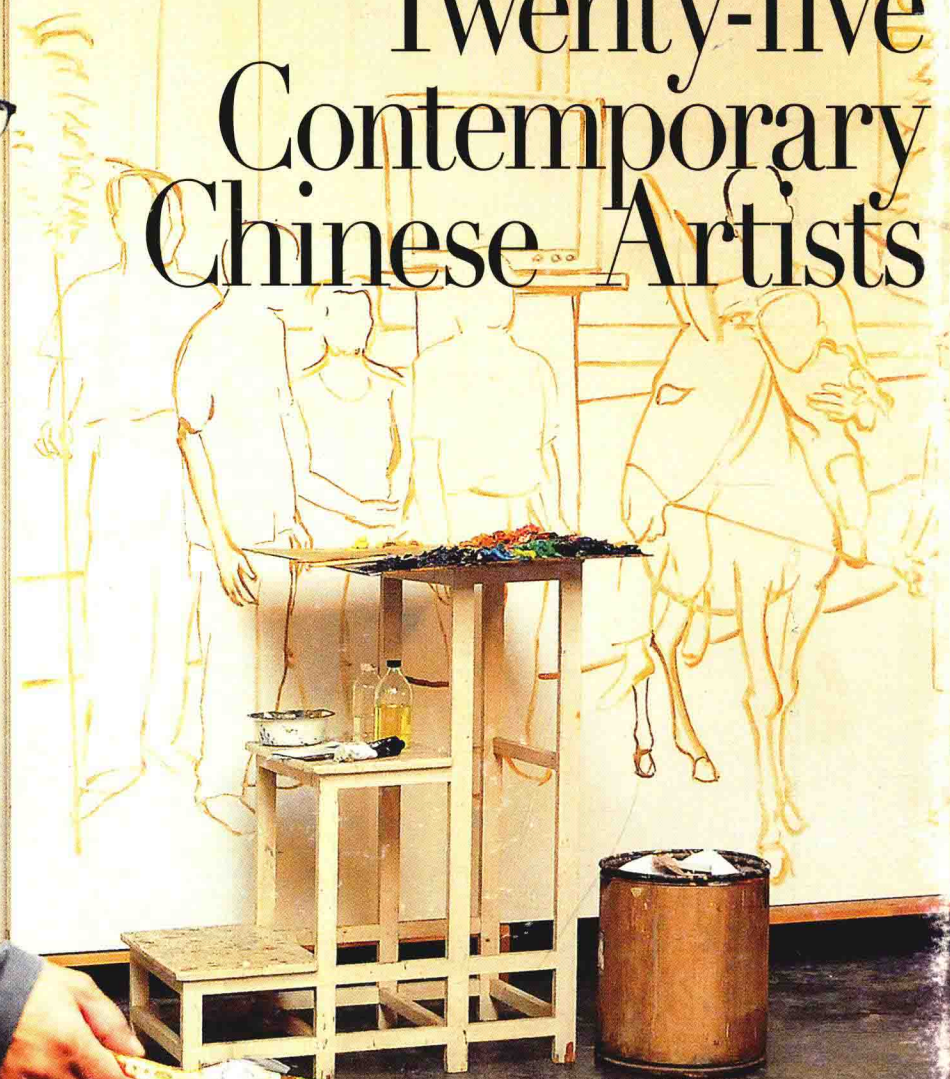


AT WORK

Twenty-five Contemporary Chinese Artists



Jon Burris



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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Introduction

“The journey is the reward.”

In June 2006, on the evening before one of their important sales of contemporary Chinese art in Hong Kong, the auction house Christie's hosted a dinner party for the well-known contemporary Chinese art collector, Uli Sigg. It was attended by numerous art world luminaries: artists, dealers, seasoned collectors, new collectors, and of course, Christie's department heads and officials. Sitting at my table was a relatively new collector who turned to a retiring Christie's vice president and said, "It really is quite amazing what has happened in the field of contemporary Chinese art over the past twenty years; given your experience, what would you compare it to?" Without a moment's hesitation, the gentleman from Christie's replied, "Absolutely nothing, it is without compare. There is no model like it anywhere in the world because there is nothing quite like China, is there?" I can think of no more appropriate words with which to begin this introduction to a book on contemporary Chinese artists. In a relatively short time frame (in terms of art history), what has occurred in the Chinese art world over the last two decades is phenomenal. As an independent art curator, I consider myself lucky to have been witness to what has transpired during this period. So much has been written about artists in contemporary China that in thinking about how I might interpret my particular experiences, I decided that I should revisit the artists I originally

met beginning in the mid-1990s to gain some perspective on where they have arrived today. I wanted to see them at work in their studios that are so different from those I first discovered them in; to hear in their own words how they describe their art now, and to get some idea of what they believe the future holds for them.

Since I first began going to China, I have made numerous photographs of artists and I have conducted countless hours of interviews with them, but I have watched the lives of these individuals change so dramatically over time. Thus, it was important to me that this book be about where things stand today. It is not a history book on the development of contemporary Chinese art; there are plenty of those. It is not a critical survey because I am not a critic (there are plenty of those too). As a curator, I act as an observer and advisor and I have been a photographer all my life so I have joined these pursuits together to offer a personal look at a select group of Chinese artists. The twenty-five I chose to profile share much in common, but there was no exact criteria for my selection: not all are graduates of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing; they are not members of any one movement (they are representative of many); and they are not literally the top-selling artists (although most are recognized as such). I ultimately

decided on these artists given the diversity of their work and what I believe to be their unique contributions to Chinese art over a period when so much experimentation has taken place and so much change has occurred.

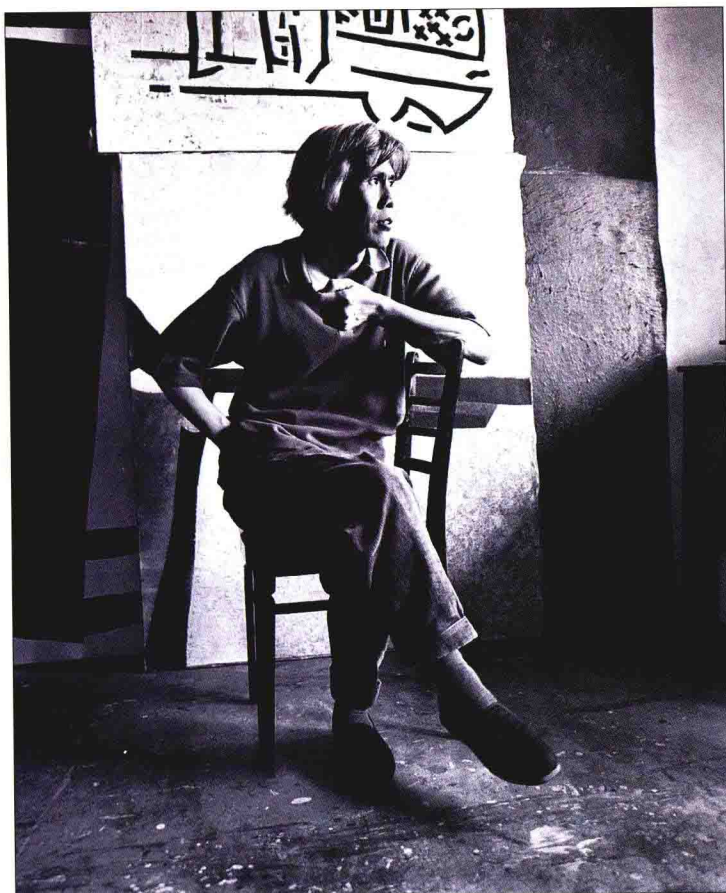
My first association with Chinese artists dates back to the mid-1980s. The introduction to their art came through the American collector Robert A. Hefner III, one of the first Westerners to become interested in what he described as a Renaissance in art taking place following the cultural revolution and he was beginning to collect paintings during business trips to China. Many factors guide private collectors. In Robert's case, he was drawn primarily to representational art and the high level of skill reflected in the works of New Realist painters like Luo Zhongli who came to prominence in the eighties. Other collectors for whom I have worked were interested in the Avant-garde, the so-called Cynical Realists, or Political Pop artists, so my assignments have run the gamut. During the earliest trips I made to China for Hefner, it was also a privilege for me to meet and interview pioneers of modern Chinese art like Wu Zuoren and Wu Guanzhong who first began introducing new techniques and ideas about painting in the Chinese academies in which they taught prior to the "cultural revolution". It was their dedication to the modernization of teaching practices and their forward thinking that laid the groundwork for the art reproduced in this book. I have no doubt that the artists I have profiled here will be just as revered by future curators.

While writing this introduction, I was saddened by the news that Wu Guanzhong had died at the age of 90. My first meeting with Mr. Wu in 1996



Artist Wu Guanzhong in his apartment studio in Beijing, 1996

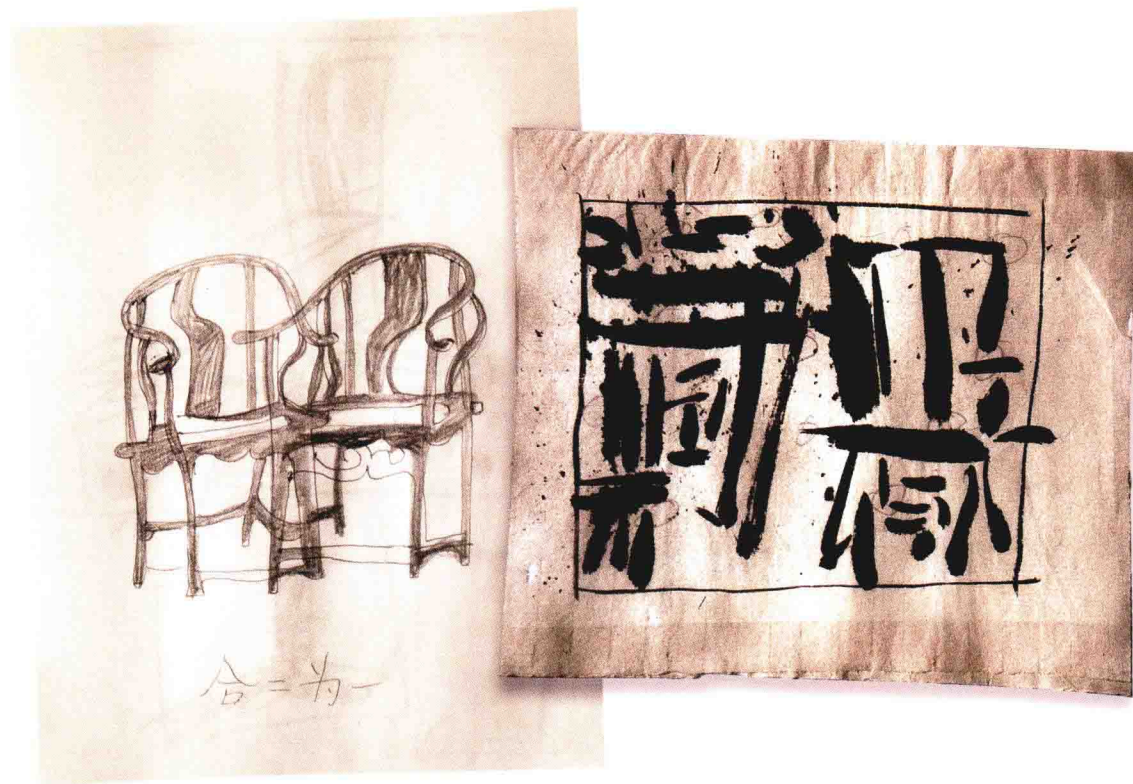
was memorable for many reasons. For me, he represented the link between the beginning of modern Chinese oil painting in the 20th century and its future in the 21st century. He was one of the first Chinese artists to go abroad and study in Paris in the 1940s, returning home to courageously introduce ideas about modern art through his work. One of Wu Guanzhong's students was Wang Huaqing, profiled in this book who embraced Guanzhong's theories on abstraction and the blending of Western techniques with Eastern sensibilities in a fusion that I believe first identified the "new" Chinese art. I was surprised in 1996 to find Mr. Wu still functioning in his small apartment studio in Beijing given all the success he had achieved; by that time, he could have chosen to live and work anywhere. He was frequently referred to as the "Picasso of China" not only for his modern



Wang Huaqing in his Beijing studio, 1995

approach to painting, but because of his prolific output. It was hard for me to believe that so many great works that I had seen over the years originated in such a compact space where Guanzhong lived and painted until his death.

When I think of my first studio visit with an artist in China, I think of the painter Wang Huaqing and the tiny apartment he shared with his wife Qinghui and their daughter Tiantian. It was located in the center of Beijing in a four-story walk-up. Often, a “studio” was nothing more than a corner



Wang Huaqing sketches for Old Furniture series, 1995

of one room in an apartment that was typically 300 to 400 square feet; however, for Wang Huaqing, one small room functioned as the studio alone to accommodate his work and that of his daughter who was a student at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. My first thought about the space was that neither of these artists could conceive of creating a painting bigger than the size of the wall where they stretched out their canvases - a space barely eight feet wide. The room had a fairly large multi-paned window with southern exposure for good light during the day, but it still seemed uncomfortably small for two artists. Sketchbooks and canvases filled every

available space. It was like so many studios I would see in the mid-1990s. where artists lived and worked.

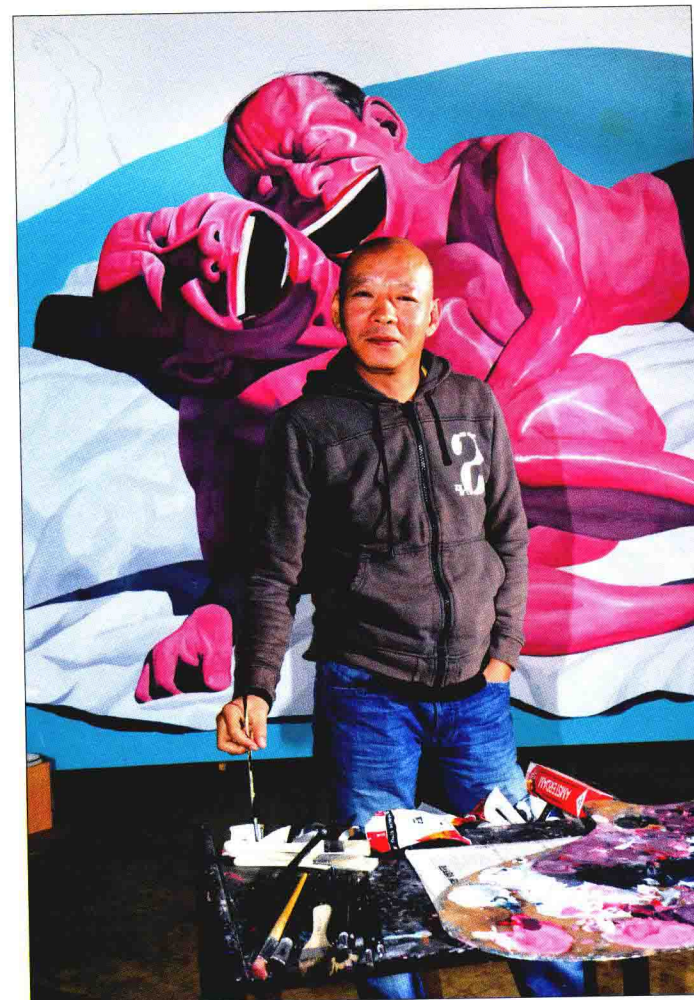
Wang Huaqing and I had first met in 1987 in New York when he went there for the opening of a large group exhibition of contemporary Chinese art that I worked on for Robert Hefner. He remained in the U.S. for a year under the sponsorship of Hefner and we became friends. By the time I visited him in Beijing in 1995, he was already gaining recognition for his brilliant series of abstract paintings of Ming Dynasty furniture, a series that by now, he has explored and expanded and for which he has become quite well known. My respect for Huaqing and his daughter Tiantian's work and our long-time friendship has brought me back to meet with them over most of my trips to Beijing, and I have watched the number of studios they maintain grow as their careers have grown in importance. The apartment he now shares with his wife is comprised of four levels with a studio on the top floor that is bigger than their entire apartment in which we first met. In addition, he and his daughter each have studios in another building across town where I last photographed them in October, 2009. In these studios they certainly have room enough for the large canvases they produce today. This can be said of virtually all of the artists who have moved from similar apartment studios or the make-shift quarters of the post-1980 artist villages to the much larger dedicated work spaces you will see in the photographs here. Zhang Huan has even turned a former Japanese textile mill just outside Shanghai into 75,000 square feet of studio space and employs over 150 workers to assist him. I was amused recently by a sign I saw in a redeveloping section of Beijing that read,

"Space for Rent, Artists Preferred". A few short years ago, artists were forced to move their studios from one derelict suburb to another; now they are developing upscale enclaves like Songzhuang Village, an hour outside Beijing.

When I began my search for art in China in the 1990s I was primarily dealing with oil painters, given the interests of the collectors I worked for. I saw sculpture and other mediums represented at the auctions, but the fact is painting was the predominant media for students entering the academies in the 1980s, so there have always been more painters. I would say interest in sculpture came second, then mixed media and installations, and finally photography and video. Printmaking was practically nonexistent except for examples I came across of woodblock printing, a recognized Asian form of printmaking. I believe China's gap in communication with the Western world created a void whereby certain mediums like photography suffered. One artist I have profiled discusses the conditions that resulted in a jump of thirty years from a concentration on photojournalism prior to the "cultural revolution", to the art academy agenda today that focuses on computer-generated imagery with practically no recognition of "fine art" photography in-between. For the interviews and photographs I have made over the past year, I have selected a range of artists representing all mediums because today there is a much better blending of what is exhibited than ever before. I believe museums, both private and government-sponsored, are attempting to show a broader view and an increasing number of Chinese galleries are specializing in different forms of art. The success of art districts such as Dashanzi (798)

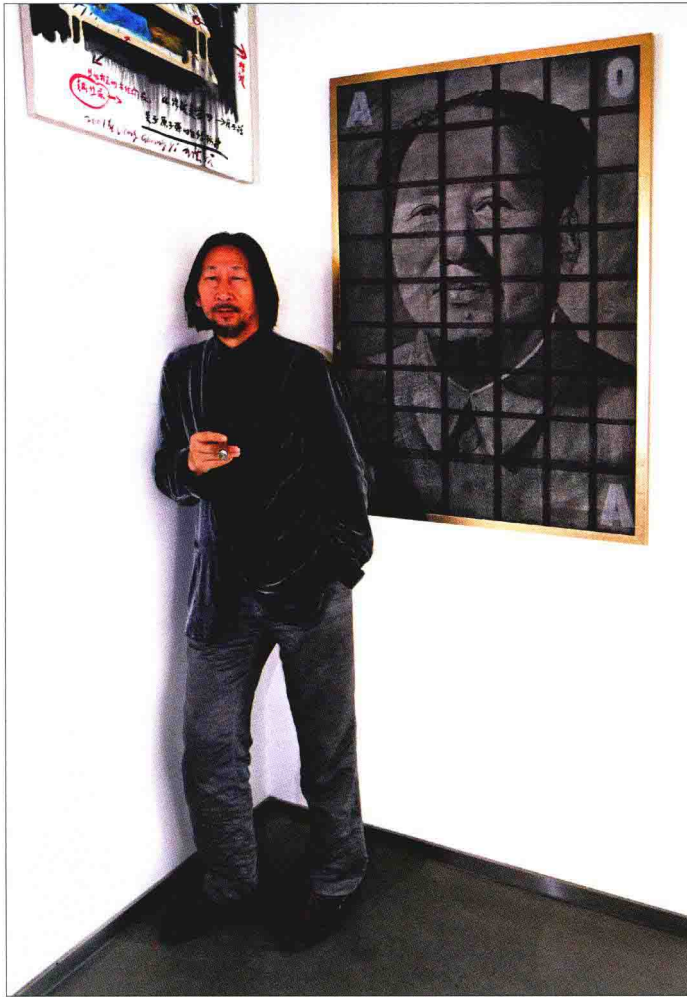
and Caochangdi in Beijing, and Moganshan Road (M50) in Shanghai have broadened the availability of contemporary art to larger audiences. Such areas have become a huge attraction to Western visitors.

In the contemporary art world, I have seen how easy it is for artists to become identified early in their careers by a recognizable style or subject. Ultimately, they may be unable to escape that initial identity no matter how far their work evolves. I think this has resulted in a call for a re-evaluation of terms among the Chinese artists. The problem is, so many of the definitions created for contemporary Chinese art have had political origins. For example, the term Cynical Realism was invented by a Chinese critic in the early 1990s to distinguish a new ideological approach from the formerly prevalent style of Socialist Realism. It was applied to artists who were interpreting the complex changes they were witnessing in the revitalized atmosphere in China after 1989. In truth, their goal was to move *beyond* politics, yet the idea that these artists were making cynical or political statements about their society in difficult times generated interest on the part of Western audiences. In recent interviews, I found that many artists wanted to challenge their identities as Cynical Realists or Political Pop artists, suggesting that their intentions have been misinterpreted and their work promoted in the West for the wrong reasons. Known for his iconic smiling man series, Yue Minjun is regularly described as a “founder of Cynical Realism” but he recently told me, “I don’t know why that is; there’s nothing cynical about my work!” Wang Guangyi, a leader in the early days of the New Art Movement, has always been straightforward about his motives. In particular, his Great Criticism series begun in the early 1990s



Yue Minjun, Beijing, 2009

made a strong statement about China’s accelerated rush to consumerism, gaining him what will likely be a lifelong identification as a Political Pop artist, although, given a broader view of his career, I personally think of him as a conceptual artist. Guangyi himself says he doesn’t care how anyone chooses to identify him and that he would call his work “indeterminate”. In my estimation, the artists would prefer to avoid categorization and the labels assigned to them.



Wang Guangyi, Beijing, 2009

A common tendency that has emerged in the last couple of years is the desire for the artists to connect to their past, more specifically, to their ancient cultural history. The painter He Sen told me, "Contemporary Chinese art has become too much about contemporary Chinese life." Perhaps they have realized that becoming too closely identified with their contemporary history is limiting. Perhaps they are realizing that they are

only just beginning to discover their identity. I should point out that the artists I selected to profile represent no more than two generations, so perhaps they are simply maturing; seeking their history for inspiration or acknowledging *spiritual* needs – another term that has been repeated. Zhang Huan said, "We have witnessed a rebirth in the past twenty years, but we are now in need of another one, a spiritual one." These are, I believe, admirable goals not shared by many in the succeeding generation who appear to be more interested in immediate needs. Experience accounts for a lot though.

One question I posed to every artist seemed unusually difficult for them to answer. It was, "What do you believe the future holds for Chinese art?" I found their hesitancy to respond curious until one of my interpreters told me, "They will not answer this question because they have lived through years of not knowing what tomorrow will bring. They are not used to thinking too far into the future." This is probably why so many of these successful artists appear surprised by their success. They didn't anticipate it; they just did their work. Now they are being asked to consider what that success means.

If what I discuss occasionally touches on the marketing of art, that is because the acquisition of it is what first brought me in contact with the artists. I can remember a time even in 1995, when I would visit a studio, decide on something that I wanted to purchase or recommend to a client, and then have the artist tell me he or she didn't know how much their work should cost. Before private collectors and international

auction houses discovered contemporary Chinese art, (followed by literally hundreds of Chinese auction companies), there was no precedent for establishing prices and the artists themselves hadn't given much thought to selling their work. There were practically no galleries in all of China that dealt with "contemporary" art and very few museums that had enough funding to even consider acquiring it. Most artists were eager and willing to meet with me, but their basic purpose seemed to be to get a foreigner's viewpoint and more often than not, they just wanted to talk about what was going on in the West and how our system worked. They asked, "How many places are there in America where artists can exhibit their work? How do you get a museum show?" In those days, it was still about the freedom and exhilaration of exploring whatever they felt like creating, not about how much they were going to sell their art for. So much has changed in fifteen years! If one were to average the value of the works created by the artists profiled here, that figure would be around US\$1.8 million per painting and a top sales figure would be US\$9.7 million. Interestingly, a collective viewpoint that has come out of my interviews is that the artists have welcomed a downturn in the seemingly unstoppable Chinese art market as a result of the international economic crisis of the

past year, saying they are glad to finally have an opportunity to catch their breath and assess where they are without the pressure of supplying the market at the level of demand of the last five years. This is not to imply that these artists felt compelled to produce for the market at the risk of compromising their personal goals. I don't believe that is true at all. As Zhang Xiaogang, one of the top selling artists, has said, "It all came so fast, I wasn't prepared for it." To their credit, I believe the Chinese artists have dealt quite effectively with an art market that has developed at a phenomenally fast pace. It is unfortunate I think that their achievements have, to a degree, been judged by their market success but that's the way of our world today. The demand for their art first came from museums and institutions worldwide as the proverbial "door" opened and they were eager to interact with the outside world. Of course, market interest soon followed both at home and abroad and that was simply another aspect of progress they had to handle.

It would be impossible to define the value of my assistants in China who helped me reach the numerous artists I have met and interviewed. I would like to thank Xiao Xiao, Yam Chan, and Sydnee Wang. They translated for

me during my most recent interviews for this book, and guided me through the complexities of daily life as it has become increasingly hectic in centers like Beijing and Shanghai. In particular, I have worked for many years with Yang Jie, an intelligent and infinitely competent associate who was first recommended to me as a translator, but became so much more than that, namely a good friend, not to mention a collector in her own right. Jie has been with me on the majority of my trips throughout China and it was she who asked me a couple of years ago, "What are you going to do with all of these photographs and interviews?" She then introduced me to *Foreign Languages Press* in Beijing and we discussed potential projects, three of which were turned into books. I am grateful to my editor, Liu Fangnian and to the directors of *Foreign Languages Press* for their support of my work. I also want to thank my U.S. text editor, Janet Brewer, for her expertise. There are also dealers, galleries, auction specialists, and assistants to the artists who were of invaluable help to me, but are unfortunately too numerous to mention.

Finally, I want to thank the artists. They have been most generous of their time and willingness to help me learn as much as possible about their lives regardless of whether or not I was acquiring their art. I am respectful

of their determination to adapt an artistic life in the midst of an ever changing socio-political environment. It is difficult at best to survive and prosper as an artist anyplace, but as I have said many times, I believe it is nearly impossible for anyone who has not been through their exact experiences to understand what it has been like for the Chinese artists who endured the "cultural revolution" or for those who grew up in the strenuous period of reform that followed. I admire their accomplishments on so many levels and the vitality of the art they produced in the process. They have effected an immense amount of change within their society and they will forever be recognized for that. Their art and our time together remains in my mind; my photographs and their words now exist in this book as a document of their achievements.

I have referred often in my writing to the "development" of contemporary Chinese art because I can look back on my experiences with the artists and make certain observations about what has changed over time. However, I have a strong desire to find out what happens next, to consider how contemporary Chinese art will "evolve" and what it will become. Given the rewards of my journey so far I can only imagine what the future holds!

Jon Burris