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Narrative identity of the possible author: a tertiary narrativization of Chinese realist art of the 1950s–1990s

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Abstract: From a narratological perspective, this essay reinterprets the development of Chinese realist art under Western influence in the second half of the twentieth century and explores the narrative issue of the possible author that is transformed from the integral reader. As a crucial response to Western influence, realist art in China developed from imitating to appropriating Western art and continued from taking inspiration from Western art to participating in the international arena of conceptual art with certain renovations. In this essay, the narratological notion of "possible author" is proposed to discuss the issue of narrative identity. While some scholars declared the death of the reader, this essay introduces a new reader to art historical narrative. This is a tertiary reader that transforms into a possible author who re-narrates the story of art history in the possible space between the secondary narration and tertiary narrativization. In this space, the three layers of the first-hand fabula, secondary narration, and tertiary narrativization work together in defining the possible author's narrative identity as re-interpretive and critical.

Keywords: death of the reader; reinterpretation; third generation; Western art

1 Introduction

Art history is a study of art in a broad sense and a narrative of the development of art in a narrow sense. Since art history is a narrative, this essay applies narratology to explore the transformation from a reader to an author and the narrative identity of the new author.

Nonetheless, the topic of this essay is the development of Chinese realist art in the second half of the twentieth century. Considering the historical pre-text and the continuity of individual practice, I will also mention the art before 1949 and the art after the turn of the new century. In this essay, the lower case "realism," as well as

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"realist," is a general term that refers to representational figurative art, whereas the capitalized "Realism," as well as "Realist," is a specialized term that refers to a specific art movement in the West, as are "Socialist Realism" in the former Soviet Union and "Modernism" in the West.

The thesis of this essay is that the development of Chinese art in the twentieth century is shaped by the interaction of Western influence and Chinese response to the influence and that a process of four steps specifies the development of Chinese realist art in the second half of the twentieth century. Although this is not an absolute procedure, the four steps go from imitating to appropriating Western art, aiming at modernizing Chinese art due to the Chinese fear of backwardness and the anxiety of losing cultural identity. Then, as a remedy to the fear and anxiety, this process is continued by taking inspiration from Western art to participating in the international arena of conceptual art, with a potential, though limited, renovation that helps to regain Chinese cultural identity. At this point, I must stress that renovation is different from innovation. The former defines the place of Chinese art in this historical period, whereas the latter is for its possible place in the future.

Relevantly, the approach in this essay is extrinsic and border-crossing, bringing in the notion of "possible author." In this essay, the literary term "author" refers not only to the writer of a literary work but also to the author of art history (art historian) and the artist who makes artworks. Likewise, the literary term "reader" refers not only to the person who reads literary works but also to those who read art history and view artworks (viewer or spectator). Correspondingly, the term "text" refers not only to a piece of literary work but also to artworks and art historical writings. The three terms will be further discussed in a narratological sense.

In this essay, the main narratological issue is the narrative identity of the art history narrator. This issue can be reframed as a crucial question: Who is the narrator of art history, the artist/image-maker who provides the first-hand fabula, the author/art historian who writes the secondary story of art, or the reader of art and art history who creates a tertiary narrativization and thus transforms him- or herself into a possible author?

Historically, the notion of "implied author" was first proposed by American literary critic Wayne Booth (1921–2005) in the 1960s, before the establishment of modern narratology by French literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov (1939–2017). Therefore, I consider the implied author as "pre-narratological." Then, German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007) proposed a pairing notion of "implied reader" in the 1970s, after Todorov, and so I consider the implied reader as temporally "modern narratological." In the postmodern time of the 1980s, the binary notion of the implied author and implied reader was deconstructed by Umberto Eco (1932–2016) in his double-binary narrative notions of "empirical author and empirical reader" versus "model author and model reader." The two

binary notions constitute a chiasmus, with more than one way to connect author and reader, and thus the status of the two can be transformed. Although Eco did not discuss the author–reader transformation, I offer a discussion in this essay.

This is to say that since Eco left an authorial space, or gap, in this issue, I have an opportunity to fill it by proposing a non-binary notion of "possible author" that is transformed from the reader, thus gaining a unique narrative identity. Beyond Eco's chiastic relationship of authors and readers, this possible author is interpretive with regard to the first-hand fabula and re-interpretive with regard to the secondary narration. In other words, this author writes back to the secondary narration and the first-hand fabula in the possible space between author and reader, and thus assumes the narrative identity of reinterpreting both the secondary narration and the first-hand fabula, thereby becoming an "integral" possible author of tertiary narrativization.

In contemporary critical theory, some art historians have declared the death of the reader in favor of the text and image, while some others have declared the same in favor of redefining art with a new life of conceptuality (Harrison 2001: 174–178). Whichever is the case, in my opinion, this declaration is not only about the right to interpretation but is also about the right to narrativization. The tertiary reader is born out of the ashes of the demised old conventional reader. Although I do not deny the importance of text/image, I will defend the tertiary reader's right to interpretation and narrativization throughout this essay.

2 Theorizing the "author–text–reader" relationship

Before discussing the possible author's narrative identity, I must ask three preconditional questions: What is an author? What is a text? What is a reader?

First, what is an author? One has no problem answering this question without thinking because the author is the creator of artworks, the writer of art history, and the critic who writes on art. However, is this question so simple and easy to answer in such a broad and general way? Before the rise of French narratology in the mid-twentieth century, scholars in literary studies proposed that an author is not necessarily the individual who created his or her work. Instead, it is the reader of the work, who, in collaboration with the author, created the author. Hence, from a reader's point of view, we have acquired a pre-narratological notion of "implied author" (Booth 1961: 71).

The forerunner of the Chicago School of literary criticism, Wayne C. Booth developed the notion of "implied author" in his acclaimed 1961 book *The rhetoric of fiction*. According to Booth, when an author writes, "he creates not simply an ideal,

impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works" (Booth 1961: 70). This is to say that each author creates his or her own individual implied persona. However, it is the reader who realizes the implied author through reading. On this topic, Booth observes, "it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author's most important efforts. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner […]" (Booth 1961: 71). Therefore, there is no doubt that Booth noticed the importance of the reader to his notion of "implied author."

What is the relevance of "implied author" to my discussion? Since my narrative approach involves the perspectives of author and reader, the relevance lies in Booth's emphasis on the interaction between author and reader, especially the implied author's distance to his or her reader and characters. According to Booth, the distance is intellectual, moral, and aesthetic (Booth 1961: 157).

To modernist and pre-narratological scholars and critics like Booth, the distance does not deny the connection between the author and reader: The reader responds to the author intellectually, morally, and aesthetically. Nonetheless, in the postmodern era, scholars and critics stressed the importance of the reader and even declared the death of the author. This declaration signifies the historical and theoretical change from the modernist view of the author to the postmodern view. In this respect, Roland Barthes placed the author opposite the reader, and pronounced at the very end of his essay *The death of the author* that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes 1977: 148). Barthes's essay reads like an American New Critic's formalist doctrine at the superficial level or literal level, playing down the importance of authorial intention in writing and interpretation while also emphasizing the importance of the text. Although I believe that is true, Barthes implicitly emphasized the importance of the reader's reading of the text, willingly or not. Meanwhile, mentioning the denial of the author by French poet Stephane Mallarme (1842–1898), Barthes saw the other side of this matter, which is "to restore the place of the reader" (Barthes 1977: 143).

Thus, Barthes's denial of the author's function and emphasis on the text provide me with a point of departure to explore the reader's function through text. Reading Barthes's text, I find that the death of the author does not make the text definite to the reader. On the contrary, speaking from a reader's point of view, the text is liquid and open for more possible interpretations.

Before discussing the reader, I must explore the answers to the second question: What is a text?

In the critical discourse of the mid- and late twentieth century, the notion of "text" emphasizes its textuality in comparison to the notion of "work." In other words, a text inclines more to being a signifier, whereas a "work" inclines more to being the signified. However, for the topic of this essay, the term "text" refers to the integration of signifier and signified. In my discussion, this integration makes the notion of text as literally textual but also extends it to being visual, referring to the images in works of art, as well as the writings about art by art historians, art critics, and other scholars. Moreover, a reader's tertiary narrativization is also a text, whether in writing or in other forms. Directly related to the notion of text, both narratives of art history and interpretations of the development of art are realized by the reader through his or her re-interpretive reading.

Like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault (1926–1984) emphasized the importance of the text and the reader in his 1969 talk on the issue of "author-function" *What is an author*. Foucault considered text as a vehicle of discourse for reading, and for him the modes of a text's existence involved the modes of its circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation (Harrison and Wood 1993: 926–927). In my understanding, this existential process of a text leads to the "reader-function." In other words, a text is not a closed autonomous entity. Rather, it is an entity for discourse, open to readers' interpretations. Similarly, the modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation are all reader-oriented.

In his later years, Roland Barthes was no longer a formalist structuralist but an open-minded poststructuralist. In a way, his well-received 1971 essay *From work to text* responds to Foucault's *What is an author?*. In it, Barthes stressed the significance of discourse, which is not limited to a specific work. In this sense, Barthes is similar to Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), because they both deconstructed the textual centrality and the fixed bond between the signifier and signified. The relevance of Barthes's notion of the text to my topic is found in the direct connection between a text and its reader through the pleasure of reading.

In my reading of Barthes, the most crucial point of pleasure is the idea to "re-write" a text. Although Barthes is seemingly negative to the reader's rewriting in the reading process (Barthes 1977: 163), his somewhat sarcastic negativity provides me with a starting point for a deconstructive rewriting. Interestingly, two years after the essay *From work to text*, Roland Barthes published a small collection of discourses on the same topic, simply entitled *The pleasure of the text* (1973). After reading the essays in this collection, I cannot help but re-write the title of the collection to *The pleasure of reading* due to my reinterpretation of what Barthes referred to about text and reading.

Then, what is the pleasure of reading? This question is directly related to the third question that I must answer: What is a reader?

Seemingly, in this essay, the reader I am referring to is the reader of artworks and writings on art and art history, including the writings of art theory and art criticism. This answer seems right, but it should not be that simplistic. For instance, Roland Barthes did not answer this question in such a plain fashion. Instead, he identified two types of readers in relation to the "reported pleasure" and "second-degree reader":

> How can we take pleasure in a reported pleasure (boredom of all narratives of dreams, of parties)? How can we read criticism? Only one way: since I am here a second-degree reader, I must shift my position: instead of agreeing to be the confidant of this critical pleasure – a sure way to miss it – I can make myself its voyeur: I observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion; the commentary then becomes in my eyes a text, a fiction, a fissured envelope. The writer's perversity (his pleasure in writing is without junction), the doubled, the trebled, the infinite perversity of the critic and of his reader. (Barthes 1975: 17)

The two types of readers identified by Barthes are the first-degree reader and the second-degree reader. In my opinion, the first is a regular reader, whereas the second is the reader of the first reader – in Barthes's word, a perverse voyeur. Yet, Barthes's "perversity" in describing the second-degree reader might be a figure of speech, which designates the voyeur who enjoys the pleasure of making a "report" about his or her reading of the first-degree reader. In this sense, the voyeur's reading is the tertiary narrativization, and this reading, to Barthes, provides the true pleasure of reading, and thus "the commentary then becomes in my eyes a text" (Barthes 1975:17).

In the meantime, some postmodern critics proposed a relevant notion of "implied reader" from a phenomenological and hermeneutic point of view, which echoes the notion of "implied author." Among these postmodern scholars, German literary critic Wolfgang Iser was most influential in elaborating this notion in the 1970s and after. Iser's implied reader is a phenomenological construction with authorial intention, created by an author and existing in the author's written text. According to Iser, there is an interaction between author and reader: In accordance with the author's purpose, the implied reader does not have to be an actual reader but can be a conceptual one who is conceived by the author in the process of writing. Since the implied reader interacts with the author in the writing process, then the text in between is shaped by the author and reader, not the author alone. Moreover, since the implied reader is perceived from the author's point of view, and pertains to the text, then the author can manipulate the reader via text in the reader's reading process:

> Such interventions are meant to indicate how the author wants his text to be understood, and also to make the reader more deeply aware of those events for the judgement of which his own imagination has to be mobilized. With the author manipulating the reader's attitude, the narrator becomes his own commentator and is not afraid to break into the world he is describing in order to provide his own explanations. (Iser 1974: 101–102)

In the above, Iser's implied reader somehow looks passive due to the author's manipulation, though this is actually not the case. Iser discusses the reader's "quest," which demonstrates the effort a reader makes in the process of reading for meaning-making. In the textual space, the reader acquires "more than enough scope to piece together his own picture" (Iser 1974: 231). The reader's "own picture" is not necessarily manipulated by the author but perceived by the reader in his or her reinterpretation in the process of reading.

Then, what is the process of reading? Iser did not answer this question directly but implied that it is an action involved in responding to the text, and thus to the author as well (Iser 1974: 274). Once again, echoing the topic of this essay, the reader's response is to reinterpret the text in his or her tertiary narrativization. This response is expected by the author, since the author intentionally creates such a responsive reader in the process of writing. This relationship of author–text–reader is also found in art in the form of "the imagined spectator" proposed by Charles Harrison:

> This is an imagined spectator, one who plays a kind of part in the content of the picture, someone who is not represented in it but whose point of view is represented *by* it. The presence of such an imagined spectator may often be suggested, as in Carl Blechen's painting, when a pictured figure gazes out through the picture plane in a manner clearly designed to suggest an answering regard […]. In such cases we may find ourselves slipping involuntarily into the suggested role and, as it were, entering into the content of the picture. (Harrison 2009: 92)

Inspired by the above modern and postmodern theories about the author–text–reader relationship, contemporary narratologists developed new concepts. Among them, I am in favor of Umberto Eco's notions of the 1990s through to the 2010s, namely, his notions about the empirical author and empirical reader, as well as the model author and model reader. These notions can be re-paired as empirical author versus model author, and empirical reader versus model reader. Eco's theory is not an invention but a new development of his semiotic study of the narrative role of the reader in the 1970s and 1980s. The reason I give my preference to Eco is due to the relevance of his theory to my proposed critical notion of "narrative identity," which is relevant to my notions of the "tertiary reader" and "possible author." In other words, I propose the two narrative notions in relation to and beyond Eco's theory.

How is the "possible author" possible? This is due to the death of the reader. According to Charles Harrison, a British art historian and critic, the main reason for the death of the reader is that the reader cannot do his or her share of the "required interpretive work" (Harrison 2001: 177). However, in my narratology for art history, the interpretive work is precisely the reader's task, which turns the reader into the

possible author. This is to say that the demise of the old conventional reader gives birth to the new tertiary reader. Borrowing and revising Roland Barthes's words, I would say that the birth of the new reader and the possible author is at the cost of the death of the old reader. Due to the new reader's tertiary narrativization, the identity of the possible author is defined as not only interpretive but more critically re-interpretive.

3 An art historian, from an empirical author to a model author

In his 1994 book of narrative study about reading literature, *Six walks in the fictional woods*, which is based on a series of lectures given at Harvard University in 1993, Umberto Eco discussed two pairs of narrative notions. As aforementioned, one is "empirical author" and the other "model author," in contrast to "empirical reader" and "model reader."

Reading this book, I am convinced that Eco is experimental in writing it: He did not follow the usual way of academic writing, but practiced a new way of narrative – making this book a sample of the empirical and model text by assuming his proposed identities of the empirical author and model author in his practical writing. Although Eco discussed the two notions in the 1970s from the reader's point of view (Eco 1984: 7), he discussed them again twenty years later, not scholastically, but in the manner of an empirical and model authors' experiment.

Broadly speaking, according to Eco, the empirical author is an actual individual who writes literary or non-fictional works. Eco referred to the empirical author as the one "who writes the story and decides which model reader he or she should construct, for reasons that perhaps cannot be confessed […]" (Eco 1994: 11). A good example of this is nineteenth-century English woman author, Mary Ann Evans (1819–1880), who wrote novels and became well known in the literary world by the pen name George Eliot. In this case, Lady Evans is the empirical author while George Eliot is the model author who assumed a male name as a disguise "for reasons that perhaps cannot be confessed."

In his experimental writing, Eco did not offer scholarly definitions for the two types of authors. By not doing so, he gives me the flexibility and option to explore my own narrative identity in writing this essay. Am I an empirical author in my narrative writing of art history? With this flexibility, I can explore possible answers. Meanwhile, this exploration is the precise reason why I discussed the theories about the implied author and implied reader beforehand: I am rewriting the development of Chinese art in modern times.

To get there, I need to discuss some other art historians, i.e. the secondary narrators and their narrative writings on modern Chinese art. The first one is Joan Lebold Cohen (1932–), an independent art historian with expertise in modern and contemporary Chinese art, and her 1987 book *The new Chinese painting: 1949–1986*. My choice of Cohen comes from two considerations. Firstly, Cohen is probably the first Western scholar of Chinese art in the second half of the twentieth century who directly reached out to Chinese artists as early as the 1970s. Secondly, her book is arguably the first one of its kind published in the West in the second half of the twentieth century. Due to these two reasons, Cohen's writing is groundbreaking and foundational in the West to the study and historical narrative of modern and contemporary Chinese art.

This brief information, according to Eco's loose definition, describes an empirical author. Furthermore, in accordance with Eco's description of his own empirical reading experience, Cohen's empirical identity as an author is further defined by her fieldwork, which she describes in the *Prologue* of her book. As one of the early art historians working on contemporary Chinese art in the 1970s and 1980s, Cohen traveled to China four times, viewed almost all available art exhibitions in Beijing and other places, visited Chinese artists and art educators across the country, interviewed many artists that interested her, and took as many photographs of artwork, artists, and art-related scenes (Cohen 1987: 6–7). In a word, Cohen worked like an anthropologist collecting first-hand fabula, i.e. the research data and materials.

In my opinion, this is the more definitive definition of an empirical author. In the terminology of narratology, the collection of data and materials functions as the first-hand fabula for Cohen to write her book, and the book is the secondary narration that she authored.

However, regarding the issue of narrative identity, it is all relative. When I read Cohen's book, I realized that it was more of a collection of primary data and information about Chinese art in the historical period from 1949 to 1986 rather than an analytical or interpretive narration of the development of contemporary Chinese art. As another American scholar of Chinese art, Julia Andrews, said, Cohen's book "documents particularly well the art of the years immediately following China's opening to the West" (Andrews 1994: xii), i.e. from 1978 to 1986. To a certain extent, Julia's word "documents" can be used to describe the nature of Cohen's book. Of course, Cohen's archive could be considered genuine first-hand fabula, which is now online under the title "Joan Lebold Cohen Archive." There is a selection process in Cohen's preparation for writing the book, and the book is her secondary narration. Nonetheless, to a reader like me, this book, with all the selected materials, functions like the first-hand fabula. Thus, the issue of relativity of narrative identity brings up a relevant issue of the reader's identity, which I will soon discuss.

Julia Andrews herself is also one of the early scholars who, like Cohen, traveled to China and interviewed Chinese artists directly for research data and primary materials. However, Andrews's research is not a documentary compared to Cohen's. On this topic, Andrews acknowledged that her writing "is, in part, a response to the writings and research of other scholars" (Andrews 1994: xii). The "other scholars" certainly include Cohen. In this regard, comparatively, Andrews's writing is more secondary and less first-hand in the narratological sense.

In the circle of Western scholars working on modern and contemporary Chinese art, there are still some "other scholars" before and after Cohen and Andrews, such as Arnold Chang and Michael Sullivan. Chang's writing is more secondary, whereas Sullivan's is more first-hand, relatively and comparatively.

In the circle of Chinese scholars working in the same field, the situation of narrative identity is similar yet different. The similarity is found in the authors' more direct and personal involvement with the artists, whereas the difference is that their writings are more secondary. Gao Minglu and Peng Lu are good cases since they both collected primary materials as the first-hand fabula and, based on the materials, wrote interpretive books as secondary narration. At this point, I have an anecdote below, which is relevant to the issue of narrative identity.

On a spring day in 1994, I traveled to Boston from Montreal and met Gao Minglu in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At that time, Gao was working on his PhD in art history at Harvard University. When we met in a small restaurant, I somehow brought up the topic of an art history book by Lu Peng and Yi Dan, entitled *A history of China modern art: 1979–1989*, which was published in 1992 by Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House in Changsha, China. Gao responded that, writing that book, the two authors "should have talked to me for direct information, and, without interviewing me, how could their narrative of art history be reliable?" As I know, Gao is one of the two mastermind advocators of contemporary Chinese art from 1979 to 1989 (the other one is Li Xianting). Gao was directly involved with the Avant-Garde movement of Chinese art during that period and organized the controversial exhibition "China Avant-Garde" in the National Art Gallery of China in Beijing in the spring of 1989, which was immensely important to legitimatizing contemporary Chinese art. Based on his involvement and leadership experience, Gao wrote a similar book with other authors at a similar time, *A history of contemporary Chinese art: 1985–1986*, published in 1991 by Shanghai People's Publishing House in China. With this anecdote, I can say that, as a secondary narrator of art history, Gao Minglu is more empirical than Lu Peng, simply because Gao was the godfather-like leader of the art movement, whereas Lu Peng was a participant in or observer of the movement, although he also collected first-hand materials directly from artists and exhibitions for his secondary narration.

Comparing to Joan Lebold Cohen and Gao Minglu, in this regard, Julia Andrews and Lu Peng are relatively further away from being empirical authors and closer to being model authors. Then, what is a model author, and why is it important to the topic of this essay? Although Umberto Eco did not define model author, he offered the case of Mary Ann Evans versus George Eliot, the empirical author who wrote novels like *Middlemarch* in the early 1870s and the model author who is known as the author of this very novel in English literature. Nonetheless, Eco actually discussed a certain type of author that is in pair with the model reader and is the opposite of the empirical author. In his *The role of the reader*, Eco designated three characteristics to that type of author: (1) a recognizable style or textual idiolect, (2) a mere actantial role, and (3) an illocutionary signal. Among these characteristics, the first one is applicable and legitimate to the case of George Eliot, the model author of *Middlemarch*. According to Eco, the narrative style or idiolect is distinguishable as "a genre, a social group, a historical period" (Eco 1984: 10), and the like. To my knowledge of English literature (I must confess at this point that I have a master's degree in Western literature, with a concentration on nineteenth-century English fiction), I observe that, firstly, the novels of Eliot represent to a certain degree the realist genre of late nineteenth-century English fiction in the Victorian style. Secondly, the author George Eliot belonged to the social group of the male literary elite, at least in the early years of Eliot (not Mary Ann Evans). Thirdly, George Eliot, with the male mask of a female author, tells stories of the historical period during the glorious Victorian age, when a distinguished woman had difficulty being accepted as she was – no one could deny the discrimination toward women at that time.

Then, in his 1994 *Six walks in the fictional woods*, Eco elaborated his opinion about the model author: "it is the voice, or the strategy, which confounds the various presumed empirical authors, so that the model reader can't help becoming enmeshed in such a catoptric trick" (Eco 1994: 20). In literature, such a model author is the one morphing from Mary Ann Evans into George Eliot, and the trick is to create narrative illusions in his or her fictional writings which aim to attract the readers. In this sense, Eco's model author is a figural one, meaning a disguised person who plays narrative tricks to lure and influence the readers. In this regard, an art historian who writes on art is a model author, not merely an empirical author.

Yet, art history is not fictional, and an art historian does not need to trick readers. Instead, an art historian should tell the story of art as factually and truthfully as possible and should offer a historical interpretation of the development of art from a relevant theoretical and methodological perspective. Thus, referring to Eco, I have two considerations. Firstly, an art historian as a model

author should theorize a historical philosophy about the development of art which underlines this author's narrative writing coherently from the beginning to the end. Secondly, with that philosophical theorization, the model author should be able to outline a methodological framework for a historical narrative about art.

4 The possible author transformed from a reader

After reading art historical narratives written by Western and Chinese scholars, I am now writing my own art historical narrative. On the one hand, my writing is based on my reading of these scholars' writings, and on the other, it is also based on my reading of the artworks of the second half of the twentieth century. The works of Chinese art play the role of the first-hand fabula, while the writings of the other scholars fill the role of secondary narration. In this sense, my writing is a tertiary narrativization from a reader's point of view. Then, I must ask some questions again about my own narrative identity: Who am I? What specific topics am I going to write about, and how am I going to write about them?

Linda Hutcheon defined metafiction as a "fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity." With this definition, Hutcheon emphasized the narcissistic self-awareness of the text but not the author of metafiction. Although Hutcheon's definition is still valid and inspiring to me today, I must point out that Hutcheon's stance is postmodern and her point of view is text-centered, which is different from that of mine, where the reader/author is centered. Due to this stance, I emphasize that the text of art historical narrative is not only a product of the author but mainly the tertiary product of the meta-reader. In order to explore this type of narrative identity for a tertiary narrativization, I must reiterate that I am primarily a reader of both the first-hand works of Chinese art and the secondary art historical writings about Chinese art.

Eco discussed the status of the author and the reader. According to him, "[t]he empirical reader is you, me, anyone, when we read a text. Empirical readers can read in many ways, and there is no law that tells them how to read, because they often use the text as a container for their own passions […]" (Eco 1994: 8). Broadly speaking, an empirical reader is not a professionally trained analytical, interpretive, and critical reader, but a spontaneous naïve reader. In contrast, a model reader is similar to Iser's implied reader, though not limited to Iser's definition. Eco takes the model reader as "a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create" (Eco 1994: 9). As a reader, I consider myself as

a mixture of both empirical and model, while created by the text. With a mixed identity, I can transform myself from a reader into an author and further transcend the two types of empirical and model author, becoming a possible author in my own right.

Transforming myself from reader to author and situating my writing in a historical pre-text, I shall go back to an early twentieth-century Chinese artwork, a little girl's portrait by Guan Zilan (1903–1986). Reading that portrait as an art historical pre-text, I can examine the commonality and difference between the Chinese responses to Western influence before and after 1949. Then, I will be able to conceptualize a reinterpretation of the development of Chinese art in the second half of the twentieth century.

Guan studied Fauvist painting in Japan in the 1920s under the guidance of her Japanese mentor, who was a disciple of Matisse. No doubt, the art of Matisse had a strong influence on Guan, and her response is found at four levels: the formal, aesthetic, spiritual, and conceptual. Among the four, the first is most striking; it is demonstrated by the use of bright colors and the effect of forceful brushwork.

In the early twentieth century, the Chinese response to Western influence was mostly to embrace it, namely, study it and learn from it. In the case of Guan, the artist studied how Matisse observed and perceived the surrounding world and how he then depicted the world in his art with a Fauvist brush. Based on her study, Guan tried to look at the world in a similar way and paint portraiture with a similar method. That is how a first-generation artist in the early twentieth century contributed to the modernization of Chinese art.

For art in the second half of the twentieth century, the early response to it plays the role of historical pre-text. To a certain extent, this response is continued by most second-generation artists in the mid-twentieth century.

An illustrative example is Li Hu (1919–1975), who belongs to the mainstream of traditional-style art in the mid-twentieth century from 1949 to 1966. Although his art demonstrates traditional style, Li Hu is not an old-fashioned traditionalist but an open-minded new traditional-style artist. He embraced Western influence and enjoyed new media, new forms, and new ideas in studio practice. Like his mentor Xu Beihong, Li studied the Western art of chiaroscuro by learning from Western old masters, such as the French neo-classical artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), and even earned the nickname of "Ingres in China," as well as the similar nickname of "Raphael in China," from his artist colleagues and friends. Later, Li Hu was hired by Xu and became a studio professor of Western academic drawing at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing in the 1950s and 1960s, where Xu was the president.

Li Hu was very popular among his students, partially due to his excellence in mastering the skills and techniques of Western classical drawing and especially

because of his drawings of human figures from life. When I was a teenager learning Western chiaroscuro drawing, I became familiar with Li Hu's drawings of figures and portraits, since I took his works as samples for copying. Due to this personal experience, I was shocked one day in the early 1990s when I saw a postcard with a printed image of a female profile portrait by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901). That was *"A Montrouge" – Rosa La Rouge* (1886–1887, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia) in the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, where the Barnes collection exhibition was held. The shock came from the similarity I found between the Lautrec image and the image of a Li Hu portrait in my memory, *A Female Worker* (date unknown, Gallery of Beijing Art Institute, Beijing). The two female profile portraits hold a striking resemblance to each other with only two differences: The Lautrec female face looks European while the Li Hu's looks less European and a bit more Chinese, and the media of Lautrec is oil on canvas, while that of Li Hu is ink on paper.

More than twenty years later, on an early spring day in 2018, I found myself standing in front of the same Lautrec painting in the art gallery of the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. Looking at the Lautrec portrait, I asked myself a question: Why did Li Hu copy Lautrec? This question is crucial to my topic in this essay, and I am now trying to speculate an answer, as there is no documentation available about Li Hu's authorial intention associated with the two portraits.

Firstly, as what Guan Zilan did with Matisse, Li Hu studied the art of Lautrec's figure painting, attempting to figure out how a late Impressionist artist painted portraiture, and then he would paint in a similar way, which is different from the methods of the neo-classical and academic artists. Secondly, his study was not to learn how to paint like Lautrec but to express himself in a way similar to this Parisian artist. Li Hu did not use Lautrec's materials but used the traditional Chinese ones. As mentioned, Li Hu received premodern Western art training, learned classical techniques, and acquired academic painting skills. Compared to premodern Western art, as I observed elsewhere, modern Western art has something in common with traditional Chinese literati art. They share a similar expressionist nature, such as directness, spontaneity, intimacy, and immediacy in expressing personal sentiment and presenting inner spirit with passionate colors and emotional brushwork.

If this is why Li Hu copied Lautrec, why did he change the half-hidden profile face of the woman from a European look to a Chinese look? Was he trying to hide something? Or, looking at the Li Hu portrait again closely, he might not have changed the face at all.

Although the date of this Li Hu painting is unknown, examining its technique, style, and subject matter in relation to his other portraits and figure paintings in ink on paper, I trust that this portrait should be dated between the 1950s and early

1960s. At that time, Li was already a successful artist, a professor of studio art, and director of the figure painting program in the Department of Traditional-Style Painting at CAFA. Therefore, he did not need to learn how to paint. However, he needed to study how Western Modernist artists painted, possibly for his teaching. If this is the case, I would say that this painting of Li Hu with traditional Chinese materials, media, and techniques is a study note. Although it is an imitation, it functions as a visual text for his teaching preparation.

In the above direct experience with reading the paintings of Guan Zilan and Li Hu, I take their works as the first-hand fabula. Handling these pre-narrated raw materials, I could make a secondary narration and could also make a tertiary narrativization based on my reading of other art historians' secondary stories about them. Whichever is the case, I am really concerned with the difference between Guan Zilan and Li Hu, between their different responses to Western influence. Is there a historical significance in the difference since they respectively belong to the first- and second-generation artists? I think so, and I consider the significance is found in the ways of how Chinese art developed under Western influence before and after 1949. However, at the first stage of dealing with the raw materials of the first-hand fabula, although I can sense their difference, I cannot discern it clearly at this moment. I need to make better sense of their difference by reading other art historians' secondary stories about them and their art.

Before doing so, I need more raw materials of the first-hand fabula. If the cases of Guan Zilan and Li Hu are individual, and they cannot represent the majority of their respective generations, they are not representative of art historical narrative. If so, more individual cases may help tell the story of Chinese art under Western influence and support the proposed thesis of this essay.

For this purpose, I continue to recollect my personal experience with a highly acclaimed third-generation artist, Shang Yang (1942–). Shang is one of the most representative artists of his generation and typical in late twentieth-century Chinese art. Why is he representative and typical? The commonplace of the third-generation artists is that they studied realist art under the guidance of the second-generation realist artists, and they all practiced realist art before some of them turned to modernist and postmodern practice. Relevant to the thesis of this essay on Chinese imitation and appropriation of Western art, I wish to offer an observation on their artistic practice that the third-generation artists mostly studied the art of Western realist masters first and then developed their own language of realist or modernist art.

In the early 1980s, Shang Yang first made himself known to the art world in China as he was audaciously direct in imitating European realist masters. The directness in imitation marked his graduation work for his MFA degree, which was completed in 1981, entitled *Boatmen of Yellow River* (1981, Haocangzhi Art

Museum, Singapore). In this painting, the artist realistically captured the image of a group of boatmen leaning against a heavy wooden boat, hauling it to shore from the river (purposefully or not, there is a visual ambiguity of what these boatmen are doing – they may be pushing the boat to the river from the shore). This painting is a grandiose glorification of the national spirit of China, which is embodied in the hard labor of the boatmen, who represent the grassroots social foundation of the Chinese Communist Party.

The thematic and political inspiration came from a similar painting, *Volga Boatmen* (1873, National Museum of Russia, Saint Petersburg), by the late nineteenth-century Russian realist artist Ilya Repin (1844–1930). However, Repin's painting is a lament of the poor barge haulers, whereas Shang Yang's painting is the opposite. In the socio-historical context of the early 1980s, it is clearly a salutation to the power of, in Marxist terminology, the working class. When I first saw this painting, I was overwhelmed by its sublime grandeur – the same overwhelming feeling of awe I experienced many years later when I stood in front of the German Romantic landscape paintings by Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), although Shang Yang's subject matter is not landscape but human figures. To me, Shang's realist figure painting is full of visual and spiritual power, and this begets the question: In addition to Ilya Repin, did the artist gain inspiration from other sources?

In 2008, I interviewed Shang Yang in his massive studio in Beijing. He first answered my questions about his recent work, then he spoke about his personal development in his artistic career from figurative to abstract and then to conceptual art, namely, from premodern realist to modernist and then to postmodern art. In his talk about the influence of Western realist art, he named some old masters. However, those names are too big and too well known, such as Rembrandt, and so they did not really resonate with me.

Then, in the early winter of 2012, I was stunned in the state museum of art in Munich when I saw the painting *Medea* (1870, Neue Pinakothek, Munich) by German artist Anselm Feuerbach (1829–1880), which is a depiction of the Greek tragedy of Medea's murderous revenge. In the painting, a group of sailors form a part of the background scene, pushing a heavy wooden boat to water from the seashore. One of the sailors is leaning against the boat, pushing the boat with his back. I immediately recognized the resemblance of this figure and other figures to the boatmen in the painting of Shang Yang. I was astounded by the similarity between these figures and convinced myself that this Feuerbach painting was the direct source of Shang Yang's main inspiration.

In the case of the three boatmen paintings, the inspiration of Shang is largely a visual conceptualization. Namely, he was inspired in conceptualizing the gesture of figures and compositional layout, just like the inspiration Edouard Manet (1832–1883) received from Sanzio Raphael (1483–1520) for his *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* (1862–1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) (King 2006: 40). Inspiration is different from imitation – because the former is mainly conceptual, whereas the latter is visual. While the Feuerbach painting depicts an ancient Greek story, the Shang Yang painting depicts Chinese revolutionary history. The first one is mythological, whereas the second is realistic. The similarity of the two is visual, while the difference is conceptual. Perhaps that is why Shang Yang did not experience any difficulty while waving farewell to the imitation of Western art, consequently turning to the exploration of his own abstract and conceptual art soon after his success in realist figure painting.

Regarding the topic of imitation, there is an issue of originality, intertextuality, and plagiarism involved. Is Shang's imitation original or simply plagiaristic? To support my stance on the side of the artist, I would like to quote an American literary critic about visual patterns in art and literary works:

> [I]f you read enough and give what you read enough thought, you begin to see patterns, archetypes, recurrences. […] [I]t's a matter of learning to look. Not just to look but where to look, and how to look. Literature, as the great Canadian critic Northrop Frye observed, grows out of other literature; we should not be surprised to find, then, that it also looks like other literature. As you read, it may pay to remember this: **there is no such thing as a wholly original work of literature**. (Foster 2013: 24, bold in original)

The above recollection of my personal experience finding visual patterns, archetypes, and recurrences in reading Chinese artworks by artists of the three generations is a narrative, an art historical, comparative, and intertextual narrative. Writing down this very narrative, I am surely an author, no longer a reader, although this narrative is about my reading of the first-hand fabula. When and how did I transform from a reader into the author? In my case, I do not believe that there is an absolute borderline between the reader and the author, and that is why I thought of myself as a mixture of the two, someone writing art history in the narrative space between the author and reader. Moreover, in the above narrative, I am not necessarily empirical or model, rather I am transformative between them. So, what kind of author am I? Once again, this is a question about narrative identity, and I would rather identify myself as a "possible author" of art historical narrative and narrative theory as well.

5 The possible author rewriting on the art of 1949–1966

As an author of art history and narrative theory, I am now writing from the reader's perspective, discussing narrative identity alongside my tertiary narrativization of the development of realist art in the period from 1949 to 1966, or the development of Red Art under Soviet influence. In this writing, the historical issue of the Soviet influence involves authorial interpretation and the reader's reinterpretation, while the theoretical issue of narrative identity involves the transition and transformation from a reader into an author. Concerning the author's interpretive status and the reader's re-interpretative status, I propose a notion of "possible author" from the reader's point of view.

Before the discussion, I must answer a tricky question: Why is the Soviet influence a part or an aspect of Western influence? In the West, Russia or the former Soviet Union has hardly been considered a part of the West. However, in the Chinese eye, it indeed belongs to the West because of the following considerations.

Geographically and historically, the nation of Russia started from the far Northeast of Europe, and the early Slavic people of Russia are from Scandinavia with a Viking origin. Religiously, the Russian Eastern Orthodox church originated from the Christian tradition and shared the same Scriptures with the Catholic and Protestant churches. Culturally, the writing system of the Russian Cyrillic script is associated to a certain extent with the Greek uncial script. Ideologically and politically, Soviet Marxism originated from the West. It was imported to Russia from Germany, France, and the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, becoming the dominant political doctrine after the October Revolution in 1917. As for art, although Russian art has its native origin, modern Russian art, including Soviet art, is under the heavy influence of Italian, French, and German art. It is safe to say that Russian art is an offspring of European art. In this sense, the Russian and Soviet influence on modern Chinese art is an indirect West influence, just like the Japanese influence on modern Chinese art.

In the 1970s, due to a territorial dispute along the northeastern border with the former Soviet Union, the Chinese government propaganda machine kept telling Chinese people that the Soviet Union was not an Asian country but a European country. Therefore, it should return the massive land of Outer Manchuria in far eastern Siberia, which the Tsar had seized in the mid-nineteenth century, to China.

Coming back to the topic of Red Art, I will first ask and then answer a narrative question: Why did Li Hu create a painting depicting a working woman, and why did Shang Yang make a painting depicting a group of boatmen? The people in the two paintings belong to the working class. In accordance with Soviet Marxist

ideology, those from the working class constitute the Communist revolutionary force. Since 1949, the Communist Party and Marxist ideology have officially ruled China, and this rule extends to art as well. Accordingly, since then, Chinese art has been required to glorify the greatness of the working class and reflect their hardship in old times, justifying the cause of the revolution. Undoubtedly, glorification and reflection became two crucial aspects of the Communist art theory labeled as "Socialist Realism" borrowed from the former Soviet Union and established as the principle for Chinese art in this period and after.

In general, realism is defined in two respects: What to depict and how to depict. A realist artist is supposed to depict what actually exists, namely, reality, and depict it in a figurative manner, namely, being representational. In the terminology of present-day critical theory, the two respects are ideological and stylistic. However, compared to the art historical term "Realism," the more general term "realism" is not easy to define. Contemporary scholars would provide a minimum elaboration rather than a precise definition, such as the following:

> In relation to art, realism has the great advantage of ubiquitous subject matter. Anything that actually happens or exists is seen as worthy material. However, it is at the level of interpretation of those events and things that the interesting difficulties in defining realism appear. (Malpas 1997: 7)

With certain basic principles in common, Soviet Socialist Realism is still different from the nineteenth-century French Realism since the Soviet Marxist ideology requires revolutionary "events and things" as the subject matter to be depicted (represented or reflected) in art. Adopting Soviet Socialist Realism with a revision for Chinese practice, the Chinese cultural authority implemented the Maoist principle of "Unity of the Two" (*Liang Jiehe* in Chinese) as the fundamental rule for art: "The Unity of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism" (Xia 2011: 671).

The origin of the "Unity of the Two" for Chinese Red Art stretches back to the early 1940s. In 1942, Mao Zedong (1893–1976), the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, delivered his bible-like speech in Yan'an about Communist ideology for literature and art and laid the foundation for the dominant theory of realism (Lang and Williams 1972: 108). The main idea of this theory came from Soviet Socialist Realism. Firstly, as Lenin put it, art should serve the Communist goal as an essential part of the revolutionary machine, glorifying the revolution. Secondly, art should function as a mirror, reflecting Socialist reality and telling the stories of revolutionary history (Lang and Williams 1972: 55).

With the above historical context, as a reader of the first-hand works of Red Art, I do not have difficulty in understanding how strong Soviet influence was on Chinese art. Furthermore, from a reader's perspective, I can see the commonality in

art historians' secondary narration of Red Art, which is mostly a plain description with few interpretive and critical insights. An example of this kind is found in a young scholar's narrative writing, a comparative study of Chinese and Japanese reception of Western influence.

The reason I chose to briefly discuss this piece of writing is that a comparative study is supposed to go beyond simple description and that the young scholar's subject is similar to mine, namely, influence and response. In addition, in discussing his writing, my purpose is not to criticize the author but rather to tell the difference between secondary narration and tertiary narrativization, demonstrating the importance and difference of secondary interpretation and tertiary reinterpretation in relation to the first-hand reading.

Regarding the authorial interpretation, the descriptive nature in the young scholar's secondary narration is comparable with that of most other art historians in China who offer plain written presentations of historical information in their narratives, with limited interpretation. In his narrative, the young scholar recounts that from 1949 to 1966, Chinese realist painting was at its initial stage of learning from Soviet art in two ways: Soviet artists taught art in China and Chinese artists studied art in the former Soviet Union. The primary information the scholar offered consists of two lists. The first is a list of Chinese artists in art classes taught by a guest professor from the former Soviet Union, the invited artist K. M. Maximov (1913–1993) at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. The second is a list of Chinese artists who studied in the former Soviet Union in the 1950s (Song 2017: 182).

Although plain and descriptive, the yang author indeed made some points alongside his descriptive narration. For instance, discussing Luo Gongliu (1916–2004), one of the Chinese artists on the second list who studied art at the Repin Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg from 1955 to 1958, the author offered some remarks. According to the author, upon his return to China, Luo explored how to localize Soviet-style realist painting in three ways: by reducing the pictorial effect of lighting and shading, by adopting traditional-style brushwork for oil painting, and by weakening the visual sense of spatial depth and three dimensions (Song 2017: 189). Nonetheless, these remarks are not based on an analytical reading of Luo's paintings, and are not based on a stylistic examination, though I avoid using the word "baseless" to comment at this point.

Why do I consider this author's narration a plain description? As a secondary author, he did not make effective use of the first-hand information for historical interpretation. In fact, due to their political stance and their standing in an institutional system, many of the artists on the two lists were leaders or officials in art institutions in China. Meanwhile, they were also master professors of art in almost all the art institutions in China at that time, and therefore they passed their

Soviet Socialist Realist legacy on to the students of the next generation. Because of this fact, it is doubtless that the Soviet influence on the development of Chinese art in the period of 1949–1966 was strong. Unfortunately, this author stops one step short in his description providing no analytical interpretation of the first-hand data.

There is also a lack of sufficient stylistic analysis of artworks. In his book, the young author offers first-hand information on the 1957 special exhibition of the graduation works by Chinese artists under the guidance of Maximov, which demonstrated the fruit of Soviet Realist influence on the Chinese art of the 1950s. The author lists a few well-received works by the artists on the first list, such as He Kongde (1925–2003) and his renowned painting depicting Chinese soldiers in the Korean War, *Before Attack* (1957–1963, National Art Gallery of China, Beijing).

Hence, along comes the next issue of reader's reinterpretation and, again, the theoretical issue of narrative identity involves the transformation of status from reader to author. In this regard, He Kongde's painting offers a good case for my secondary and tertiary discussion of Soviet influence on Chinese art from an integral point of view of the reader and author since I have a certain personal experience in direct contact with this specific painting.

As a reader of this painting (first-hand fabula) and certain historical writings about this painting (secondary narrations), I first heard of this painting in the early 1970s when I was a teenager just starting to learn how to draw and paint. At an evening gathering with my art teacher and other pupils, the teacher told us how expressive He Kongde's technique was when he dripped oil and colors on canvas for the visual effect of texture on the machinegun shield. My teacher's praise of the specific technique of dripping raised my curiosity to see the original painting in person. Then, a few years later, in 1977, I went to Beijing for a national art exhibition in the National Art Gallery of China. The grand exhibition displayed hundreds of thousands of artworks made during 1949 and 1977, including He Kongde's *Before Attack*.

I was thrilled when I saw that painting with my very own eyes for the first time. Also, I saw a young man making a copy of this painting in front of the original work of He Kongde. The young man was the only person making a copy on the spot in the entire National Art Gallery, and therefore, he drew a considerably big crowd. In the middle of the crowd, I stared at the center of He's picture where the machinegun shield was painted. I tried to verify what my teacher said about this painting with what I saw – the artist's special dripping technique. Yes, my teacher was right. I saw the clear traces of dripping and washing on the canvas. Then, to my surprise, I saw the copy artist use his brush to apply plenty of oil to the shield – dripping oil with colors on the canvas to create the sense of textural roughness on the surface of the shield. Again, to my surprise, I saw that the dripping and washing technique was not unruly freehand, but instead, it was very carefully handled, with an oily brush, by the copy artist.

The second time I saw this painting was twenty years later, in 1998, in the Guggenheim Museum, Lower Manhattan gallery, in New York City, where the modern section of the grand exhibition of "China: 5000 Years" was held. It was the second day of the grand opening, the crowd in the Guggenheim gallery was not as big as the opening day, and I got the chance to look at this painting more closely. He Kongde's Soviet-style brushwork was and is apparent. The unique geo-cultural location of the Guggenheim exhibition provided me with the possibility of reading the Sovietness of this painting in a non-Soviet cultural environment in New York City, which made the Sovietness more noticeable. Meanwhile, the other Chinese paintings under Soviet influence in the exhibition echoed He's Sovietness.

The Sovietness of Chinese painting showcases the Soviet influence in two main aspects, the thematic narrativity of Socialist Realism and the stylistic realism in figurative depiction. To a certain degree, the two aspects have something to do with European academic art and Impressionist art. Regarding He Kongde's painting, the Communist theme is obvious: glorifying the Chinese soldiers fighting the American invading force in Korea. This theme is framed in a picture that presents the beginning stage of a narrative procession. A small group of soldiers pushes a Soviet-made machinegun out of a trench tunnel, preparing a counter-attack. This kind of narrative theme is typical of Propaganda Art, serving the party line as an essential part of the revolutionary machine, with no difference from the academic art in Europe – the religious and royal themes serving the church and the monarch.

Stylistically, the Sovietness of this painting is seen in the solid depiction of the images of the soldiers with relatively loose brushwork. The solidness refers to the excellence and sophistication in depicting human figures and capturing the accuracy of facial features. This excellence is acquired from Soviet realist tradition, which is in fact a European Neo-Classical and academic heritage. This heritage was continued by late-nineteenth-century Russian artists, such as those from the Traveling Exhibition group, who learned the realist art techniques and skills from the Italian and French masters. In the meantime, this excellence is also shown in He's loose brushwork using pigments and palette, demonstrating the artist's skillful control of his media, especially his control of the fluid brush. Clearly, the artist learned the loose brushwork from his Soviet teachers, which was adapted from French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists.

The above two key traits of the Sovietness were showcased not only by He Kongde's painting, but also by the other paintings in the same exhibition in Guggenheim. Unfortunately, the two traits made almost all the Soviet-style Chinese paintings look the same, without the artist's personal differences, exposing a vital problem of authoritarian Red Art.

At the time of that exhibition in New York City, He Kongde had already retired from a very important post in the Chinese art world – he was the vice-chairman of the Oil Painting Society under the umbrella of the Chinese Artist Association. Due to his artistic excellence, political importance (he was a senior army officer of the Chinese Revolutionary Military Museum in Beijing), and professional position, He cast an immense influence on contemporaneous and later artists with his Sovietness. As a result of knowing about He and his art in my early years, and since the artist was from my home province, I became interested in knowing more about him. In 2000, He Kongde's Korean War diary was published, which is illustrated with his own life sketches (He 2000). His diary helped me greatly in understanding his works about his military experience in Korea. The compiler and editor of He's diary is Xu Xiangqun. On a summer day during the early 2010s, I was happily surprised when I found that Xu went to my talk on contemporary Western art theory in Beijing. I told him about my reading of the diary, and he told me about his interviews with He Kongde for publishing the diary.

Fortunately, I have had more chances to see this Korean War painting by He Kongde in exhibitions and displays in the National Art Gallery of China and elsewhere since that time. Whenever I stood in front of this painting, I gained a further understanding of the Sovietness and its influence on Chinese realist art.

In terms of Western influence and the influence of Russian-Soviet art, He Kongde is somehow different from the first-generation artists, such as Guan Zilan, and also different from other artists of his own generation, such as Li Hu or Luo Gongliu. Historically, the difference partially demonstrates how Chinese art has developed under Western influence. While Guan Zilan's and Li Hu's portrait paintings remind me of Matisse and Lautrec respectively, He Kongde's painting does not remind me of any specific Soviet artist. Instead, it reminds me of the Sovietness in the works of many Russian and Soviet artists. In other words, He Kongde is more diegetic and assimilating, thus synthesizing the Sovietness and turning it into his own artistic language. In this sense, he is beyond the early artists' simple imitation of Western art.

The above readings of the secondary narration and first-hand fabula provide me with the possibility of making a tertiary narrativization, which is exemplified in my elaboration of the two aspects of the Sovietness. In the process of making this tertiary narrativization, my narrative identity transformed, possibly, from the status of a reader to that of an author, who offers reinterpretation from a reader's perspective. In other words, my narrative identity is defined by the reader's re-reading of the first-hand fabula and secondary narration, and the two enable my tertiary narrativization of reinterpretation. In this case, the two justify my narrative identity as a possible author who transformed from a reader.

6 Reinterpreting the art of 1966–1976

An art historian's secondary narration is supposed to be interpretive and critical, demonstrating scholarly professionalism in working with the first-hand fabula. Along this line, I propose two narratological notions. The first is that the "author as an interpretive reader" who reads the first-hand fabula and then writes secondary narration with interpretation. Unfortunately, not every art historian as an author is interpretive, but rather they tend to be more descriptive. The second notion is that "the reader as a re-interpretive author" who reads the secondary narration, as well as the first-hand fabula, and then writes reinterpretation, i.e. the tertiary narrativization. I use the two notions to differentiate the reader from the author, while also relating them to each other. In doing so, I hope to grasp the transformative relationship between the two.

Now, when I discuss the Chinese art of the period from 1966 to 1976, I elaborate on the interpretive status of the author and the re-interpretive status of the reader. Compared to the first period, this period results in much more hardship for Chinese artists. The ten years between 1966 and 1976 is a politically, socially, morally, and economically catastrophic period in modern Chinese history. Regarding the art of that time, on the one hand, artists were generally categorized as a part of the educated bourgeoisie class, which is the opposite of the proletarian class, namely, the non-educated revolutionary working class. Due to this categorization, artists were sent to the countryside as manual labor for ideological re-correction and thus lost their right and opportunity to make works of art. On the other hand, some other artists were called by the Communist Party to make propaganda art for political campaigns. Therefore, I refer to this kind of art as Political Propaganda Art.

In this period, the called-on artists were mostly second-generation artists who were trained with the principles of the Soviet Socialist Realist art, and some third-generation artists who learned art from their Soviet-trained predecessors. Due to the conflict of ideology and national interest, China broke up with the former Soviet Union in the mid-1960s. However, the Soviet influence continued in China and Sovietness can be discerned from the works of the called-on artists.

Studying propaganda art with a sufficient first-hand materials, Julia Andrews observed the development of Chinese art in her well-recognized monograph, which I consider to be both descriptive and interpretive, *Painters and politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*:

> Most […] art was in fact directly descended from academic painting of the 1950s and early 1960s, and, as we shall see, the best of it was painted by academically trained artists. These pictures, for better or worse, must be seen as part of the continuous development of painting in the PRC. (Andrews 1994: 316–317)

This observation is partially exemplified by the author's interpretation of a peculiar painting, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (ca. 1967, Chinese National Museum of History[?]). With nine hundred million copies printed and distributed nationwide, this painting was the most important propaganda picture at that time. It also served as a model piece, even a masterpiece, for making Propaganda Art. This painting depicts Mao in his early revolutionary career of the 1920s, standing tall on top of a hill on his way to the Anyuan coal mine to lead the workers' strike. Nonetheless, as a matter of historical fact, it was another Communist leader, Liu Shaoqi, who did the job.

Following her historical account of why and how this painting was made, Andrews offered a description of this painting with an integrated political and generic interpretation, serving as her secondary narration:

> The practical business of revising the standard historical account by replacing Liu Shaoqi with Mao Zedong as the mastermind of the famous strike might present difficulties even if the young artist believed, as he did, in the ideological accuracy of the newly simplified history. This work avoids concrete problems concerning who did what when by severing the genre of history painting from its mundane ties to an identifiable physical setting. It doesn't matter where Mao is or what he is doing, for the transcendent nobility of his cause and character are clear. (Andrews 1994: 339)

According to Andrews' interpretation, politically, in order to glorify Mao and his cause, the artist had to deny the actual leader of the workers' strike in Anyuan in the early history of the Chinese Communist revolution and depict Mao as the leader. Generically, such distortion of historical fact for a political purpose is not in line with the narrative tradition of history painting, which, in the West, only allows small changes to insignificant details. Alas, the late eighteenth-century French artist Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) is an exception to his painting *The Coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte* (1806).

From a narratological point of view, Andrews' above integrated interpretation comes from her interpretive description of this painting, or thick description – let me use the terminology of cultural studies (Geertz 1973: 3), which is not as simplistic as a plain description. In addition, Andrews also offers a stylistic interpretation by pointing out the Soviet influence on this seemingly realistic painting (Andrews 1994: 339).

Reading Andrews' thick description and integrated interpretation from the perspective of a tertiary reader, especially her stylistic interpretation of Soviet

influence on this painting, I recall my first experience of reading a teaching book on art in the late 1960s before my teenage years. The book uses this painting as a sample to teach how to paint with coloring. Although I read that book more than half a century ago, since it was the first one of its kind, I still remember how it teaches the color theory and its application. Even if the close tie between China and the former Soviet Union broke down in the mid-1960s, the influence of the "Soviet manner" (Andrews' term) remained and still lingered for a long time, which is not only shown in this painting, but also shown in using this painting as a sample for teaching.

Indeed, the Soviet manner still influenced the development of Chinese art throughout the 1960s and 1970s and even in the early 1980s. Julia Andrews discusses a few noteworthy artists of the period. Among them, I have personal contact with two, Tang Muli (1947–) and Shen Jiawei (1948–). Their works demonstrate the political impact on art, either as distortion or disguise, during the period of 1966–1976.

Collecting first-hand data for the writing of her book, Andrews interviewed Tang Muli in the 1980s. Based on the first-hand materials, she devoted six pages to the discussion of Tang's artwork in her book, narrating the artist's early experience of making art in the early 1970s. With thick description, Andrews focuses on Tang's renowned painting, *Acupuncture Anesthesia* (1972, National Art Gallery of China, Beijing), depicting a scene of surgery in a hospital and glorifying the revolutionary achievement of acupuncture anesthesia in medical technology. Andrews first tells an interesting story of why the Shanghai municipal health authority commissioned this painting for a political purpose and how this painting was made as a collective creation. Since Andrews acquired first-hand materials from the actual artist directly, her authorial interpretation in secondary narration is quite minutely immediate about a serious anecdote:

> Surgical regulations contradicted the standards expected in […] art and made other decisions more difficult. One problem was how to depict the carefully selected model nurse. Artistic conventions required that she smile to show her enjoyment of her work, but hospital regulations decreed that she must wear a surgical mask. It was decided to omit the mask – thus weighting political concerns more heavily than professional ones. (Andrews 1994: 358)

According to this anecdote, revolutionary politics is above medical professionalism and the realist principle for art. Such political weight came from the Soviet ideology for Socialist Realist art. Then, Andrews tells another anecdote concerning the same painting: For political correctness in artmaking, some revolutionary slogans were expected to be hung in the surgery room and Mao buttons were to be attached to the doctors' and nurses' surgical scrub suits. However, eventually, the authority decided not to add the slogans and buttons. Andrews calls this a "victory for professionalism over politics […]" (Andrews 1994: 358).

The artist of this painting, Tang Muli, and I live in the same city, Montreal, Canada, and we have known each other since the early 1990s, when Tang moved to Montreal from Ithaca, New York, where he taught studio art at Cornel University. In 1998, I wrote a review article about the Guggenheim Exhibition of Chinese art, curated by Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen. Since Tang's painting *Acupuncture Anesthesia* was included in the exhibition, for the purpose of writing the review, I spoke to the artist. He told me the same anecdotal stories of the mask, the slogans, and the buttons. In my review, I developed an interpretation of irony regarding the smiles on the faces of the nurse and the patient, which were contradictory to the glorified anesthesia. Writing that review more than 20 years ago, I was a secondary reader of Tang's painting and a secondary listener to the artist's story. In that case, my interpretation of the irony was secondary too, which was based on the first-hand fabula I gained from the artist directly.

Two decades later, in the afternoon of October 9, 2019, I spoke to the artist again in Montreal over the phone about the same topic and confirmed that what Andrews said in her book about his painting was directly acquired from him. When I collect the first-hand research materials from Tang, and when I write this passage in this essay about his painting, my narrative position is no different from that of Andrews. Based on my work on the first-hand materials and my reading of Andrews' secondary narration, I can now offer a reinterpretation of Tang's painting alongside my tertiary narrativization. In other words, as a reader of both the first-hand fabula and secondary narration, I now try to re-decode the irony in Tang's work for my rewriting of the development of Chinese art in that period.

Due to the influence of Soviet Socialist Realism, politics played the primary role in the process of artmaking, and the artist had to remove the mask from the nurse's face. Reading this anecdotal detail from today's perspective, I see a historical irony, because Chinese Political Propaganda Art is comparably "post-modern," though there was not yet Modernism in China at that time, not to mention Postmodernism. Nevertheless, there is a certain similarity between Chinese revolution art and Western Postmodern art as they both take the opposite position to Modernism. In the meantime, there is also a difference: Chinese art is premodern and Western art is postmodern. If I chose to use a postmodern term to talk about this irony, the notion of "political correctness" is most proper in describing the political preference in Chinese revolution art. Even more interestingly, in the West, so-called Postmodernity is indeed a kind of cultural revolution based on the Marxist critique of Capitalism, and so is Chinese Revolutionary Propaganda Art.

The similar historical and political irony is also true of Shen Jiawei's painting entitled *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland* (1974, National Art Gallery of China, Beijing), which was discussed in Andrews' book and exhibited in the 1998 Guggenheim exhibition. In my review of this exhibition, I discussed the thematic

issue in Shen's painting, which is the anti-Soviet sentiment. I sent Shen a copy of my review right after it was published, and the artist sent me a letter from Australia, along with many first-hand materials relating to his painting. In the letter, Shen explained that although his painting was made for an anti-Soviet political purpose, he actually loved Soviet art and learned a great deal, artistically, from reading Soviet Socialist Realist paintings. As I know, Soviet artworks were forbidden in China during that time for political reasons. However, Shen said that he did his best to look for Soviet paintings previously published in art journals. His purpose was not only to enjoy the great art, but rather it was to mainly learn how to paint, such as how to conceptualize a narrative theme and compose the picture, and how to use colors and execute the painting with brushwork and a pallet knife.

Shen Jiawei's story sounds like a love–hate contradiction, but it is not. To a reader like me, it is a political and artistic irony. Reading the ironies in the stories of Tang Muli and Shen Jiawei, I wish to make a point about the issue of narrative identity: The tertiary narrativization is not only a reader's re-interpretive response to the secondary narration, but also a response to the first-hand fabula. In other words, the tertiary narrativization offers a reinterpretation of the first-hand fabula through a critical reading of the secondary interpretation.

Thus, the narrative identity of the possible author relies heavily on the tertiary nature of the critical reader with reinterpretation, in essence, one who plays the role of "the reader as a reinterpretive author."

7 Narrative identity and continuous propaganda art

Regarding the role change from reader to author, I stress the importance of tertiary narrativization. There is a crucial difference between the reader and the author, making the reader's tertiary narrativization significant. Generally, regarding the study of Chinese art of the same period, most secondary narration about the first-hand fabula is more descriptive and less interpretive than Andrews'. In contrast, tertiary narrativization goes one step further; it is even more interpretive and re-interpretative. Why is this so? The significance of the narrative writing by "the reader as a reinterpretive author" is found in the fact that not only is the tertiary narrativization a response to the secondary narration, but it eventually responds to the first-hand fabula.

Taking the above into consideration, then, what is the notion of "narrative identity" about exactly? It is about the difference between the reader's tertiary narrativization and the author's secondary narration. Speaking from a reader's point of view, I observe that a tertiary narrativization is more conscious about two re-interpretive questions: Does the secondary narrator have a point in his or her

narration? Does the narrator have a clear sense of his or her methodological approach? The emphasis on the two questions differentiates the tertiary narrativization from the secondary narration.

In this way, my elaboration of "narrative identity" is different from the very same notion of the French philosopher and narratologist Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), though relevant to it in the meantime. In the 1980s, Ricoeur discussed this notion extensively. Although this philosopher-narratologist indeed stressed the issue of reader versus text as central to this notion (Ricoeur 1990: 157), his focus is on subjectivity concerning the issue of sameness and selfhood (Ricoeur 1994: 113 and 140). To Paul Ricoeur, there is no such issue of secondary narration versus tertiary narrativization because his actual concern is constructing the identity of the subjective narrator with the interaction of collective dependence and individual independence. Nevertheless, Ricoeur pointed out the importance of reinterpretation to the construction of subjectivity, though this is not the same as what I addressed. On his topic, Ricoeur writes, "we never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture […]. It is in this way that we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero *of our story* […]" (Ricoeur 1991: 32). In other words, Ricoeur stresses reinterpretation that works for constructing the narrator's subjectivity between sameness and selfhood.

After discussing narrative identity in *Time and narrative* and *Oneself as another*, Ricoeur concluded this issue in his summative essay "Narrative identity." Reading this essay, I see that, although my notion of "narrative identity" and that of Ricoeur's are not the same, there is a connection, which is primarily the narrative function of reinterpretation in storytelling:

> We have an intuitive precomprehension of this state of affairs: do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them? And do not these "life stories" themselves become more intelligible when what one applies to them are narrative models – plot – borrowed from history or fiction (a play or a novel)? (Ricoeur 1991: 188)

In my case, I would use "art history" to replace "history or fiction" at the end of the questions and then offer answers to the two questions. Firstly, yes, art history is a story about human lives, both collective and individual lives, which make the development of human civilization more readily intelligible. Secondly, yes, the story of art is about how the human world is built and developed, and this story is told in a specific narrative model called art history. In the terminology of narratology, this model is specified with tertiary narrativization.

Ricoeur finalized his summative essay with an ultimate phenomenological question: "[W]ho am I?" (Ricoeur 1991: 199). This question comes from his

exploration of narrative identity via the narrator's subjectivity. In the way of being much less ultimately phenomenological, I would answer this question such that although my concern is not precisely the same as Ricoeur's, the nature of reinterpretation is constructive to my subjectivity, and I am the "hero" and "narrator" of my tertiary narrativization. In contrast to the secondary narration, the tertiary narrativization demonstrates a clear sense of having an opinion and employing a certain method in telling and retelling the story of art. In other words, the tertiary reinterpretation means to make a point from a certain perspective with a certain critical method, which, to a certain extent, is somehow neglected in most secondary narrations.

With the above discussion in mind, I now circle back to Chinese art and discuss realist art in the transitional period from 1976 to 1978. Referring to the periodization of Chinese art in the second half of the twentieth century, the development of realist art in China from 1976 to the end of the century is somewhat complex, which can be further divided into three sub-periods. The first is the continuous realist art of 1976–1978, then the lingering realist art from 1979 to 1989, and finally the realist art as a disguise of avant-garde art from 1989 to the end of the twentieth century. The artworks of the three sub-periods form a chain of the historical narrative, telling the story of a transition, not only an artistic but also a social, cultural, economic, and political one. It is a transition from Socialist Realism and the "Unity of Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism" to a de-capitalized realism and postmodernism, characterized by the figurative and representational depiction of reality. In the meantime, this transitional realism paved the way for the parallel development of modernist art in China – the figurative and non-figurative art in the next period.

In the beginning period of this historical process, the art of 1976–1978 is a continuation and further development of Political Propaganda Art due to its nature of glorification and its purpose of serving the party line. As for the difference, while revolution art glorified Mao and the Socialist achievements of the Chinese Communist Party in all respects, the continuous realist art of 1976–1978 glorified Mao's decision to have Hua Guofeng (1921–2008) be his successor, who overthrew Mao's widow Jiang Qing (1914–1991) and her followers in a court coup and assumed power.

The ten-year-long revolution caused a national catastrophe economically, culturally, morally, and politically, and caused personal turmoil to almost every individual in China. Therefore, the Chinese people overwhelmingly hailed the bringing down of Jiang, who was the leading practitioner of Mao's revolutionary theory, and the rise of Hua. To legitimatize his new regime, Hua had the media show the public a piece of scratch paper with Mao's crumbling handwriting on it. It was said that Mao wrote it to Hua in his final days, saying: "With you in charge,

I put my heart at ease." According to the official media, this was the ultimate will of Mao to give Hua political power.

Within less than a month after Mao's death, Hua arrested Jiang and seized power in early October of 1976. Subsequently, in the following year, 1977, promoted by the Chinese official propaganda machine, there was a frenzy of making paintings with the same subject and title, "With You in Charge, I am at Ease" (Andrews 1994: 379). Almost all these paintings depict the same scene: Mao meets Hua in a book-filled meeting room, patting his hand and saying something, while Hua holds a piece of note. Of course, in all these paintings, the paper-note in Hua's hand is changed from a scratch paper to an official letter-head paper.

In the terminology of art history and the realist principle of the two revolutionary "-isms," this seemingly unrealistic change, although romantic, is for a very politically realistic purpose. The seemingly trivial change of scratch paper reminds me of another painting by Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat* (1793, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels). In this painting, the artist changed the color of the handle of the murder weapon from black to white due to a visual consideration – the blood-tainted knife had to be seen in the dark shadow. David's change is not directly for a political purpose, though the painting is indeed a piece of political art.

What is the relevance of the changes to the notion of narrative identity? The complexity of this notion is multilayered. In relation to the tertiary re-interpretive identity of the reader, the narrative identity of the author with a secondary narration is a lack of sufficient interpretation, with no sobering point of view and method. Moreover, compared to the tertiary narrativization and the secondary narration, the narrative identity of the first-hand fabula needs special attention. When I used the word "chain" to bring up the topic of the three sub-periods, I stressed the narrative nature, or narrativity, of the first-hand fabula. While both the tertiary reader and the secondary author are storytellers, the inanimate fabula also tells a story, though in an impersonal way. In the above, the paintings about Mao and Hua, as well as David's painting of Marat, play the role of the first-hand fabula in telling the story of "change" of seemingly unimportant details. However, the "change" in the Chinese story is politically charged, while in the French one, it is visually driven.

Served as the first-hand fabula, the two different changes in the Chinese and French paintings tell a further story: History painting does not have to be historically faithful to actual events. This sounds unrealistic, but it is true to realism, especially political realism. At this point, speaking of the narrative identity of the first-hand fabula, I would say that the fabula is "narrative," and it is an "open narrative" that is open to changes. Not only is the first-hand fabula open to the

secondary author's descriptive change, but it is also open to the tertiary reader's re-interpretative change.

On the other hand, these changes showcase the continuity of the nature of propaganda art in the transitional time from 1976 to 1978, during which the second-generation artists dominated the Chinese art world. On the topic of realist continuity, I offer the case of Hou Yimin (1930–), a prominent second-generation artist of the time. Hou studied Western art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in the early 1950s. Later, as a student of Xu Beihong, he became a studio professor of oil painting at CAFA. In the 1950s, as a professor, Hou further studied Russian-Soviet Socialist Realist art in the Maximov program. Then, in the 1980s, he was appointed vice-president of CAFA.

In the early 1960s, Hou Yimin painted one of his most well-known paintings, *Liu Shaoqi and the Anyuan Coal Miners* (1961, National Museum of China, Beijing). The painting depicts the revolutionary leader, Liu Shaoqi, leading a group of ragged miners walking out of a dark mine tunnel and going on strike. On the faces of the miners, we can see their unhappiness, anger, and fighting spirit. Meanwhile, on the face of the leader, we see his determination and fighting spirit as well. Thinking about the 1967 painting, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* by Liu Chunhua, we have little difficulty imagining what trouble Hou experienced during the revolutionary period of 1966–1976 with his painting glorifying Liu Shaoqi. In the summers of 2009 and 2010, I visited Hou two times and interviewed him in his lavish villa in the Westmount area (Xishan) outside of Beijing. Hou told me that because Liu Shaoqi was the primary enemy of Mao and his painting hailed Liu as a hero, Mao's Red Guards considered him Liu's follower and labeled him anti-Mao. This accusation put him in political and professional limbo, depriving him of the right to teach and make art.

Expected or not, before October 1976, Hou was allowed to make another painting on a similar subject, *Chairman Mao and the Anyuan Coal Miners* (1976, National Museum of China, Beijing). This painting depicts Mao inside a dark coal mine tunnel, talking to and inspiring a group of miners with, in my speculation and common sense, Communist ideals and fighting strategy. In the dark, three oil lamps light up the main characters. We can see the smiles on their faces, showing that they understand and agree with Mao.

In the National Museum of China in Beijing, the two paintings of 1961 and 1976 by Hou are hung side by side on the left wall of the grand central hall on the ground floor, which is a prominent place to display artworks, matching the artist's prominence in the Chinese art world. Interestingly, looking at the two paintings in the museum, I noticed something unusual: The small label beside the 1961 painting is full of information about it, such as the motivation behind making this painting, the historical background of the subject, and the political significance of

this work, etc., while the label beside the 1976 painting is almost empty with a minimum of information, only indicating the name of the artist, the title of the painting, and the date of its creation. Why is the information lacking? Is there anything that should not be told and must be concealed from the public?

The prominent display of the two paintings with different labels reminds me of Francisco Goya's (1746–1828) two portraits of a society lady, the *Nude Maja* (1797–1800, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) and the *Clothed Maja* (1800–1805, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), hanging side by side on a prominent wall in the Prado Museum in Madrid. Suppose the difference between the two Goya paintings is somehow humorous, satirical, cynical, and even sarcastic. In contrast, the difference between the two Hou paintings is the opposite – it is political. In my speculation, the two paintings of Hou, as the first-hand fabula, together tell the story of how political accusation and prosecution have forced an artist to change his political and artistic position toward a historical fact.

Writing on Hou Yimin since my first visit with him in 2009, I have talked a great deal about him with my artist friend Songnan Zhang in Montreal, where we both live. Zhang is a former student and friend of Hou's. When Hou was the vice-president of CAFA in the 1980s, Zhang was his assistant and a painting professor at CAFA. Without a doubt, Zhang knows Hou very well. Writing on Hou now in this essay, I asked Zhang over the phone whether Hou's 1976 painting was made before or after October of 1976, because the precise date is crucial to the issue of historical truthfulness and narrative identity.

Zhang answered me right away, saying that he believed it was painted before October 1976. Then, soon after our phone conversation, he e-mailed me three photos of an old newspaper, showing an article by Hou, written in 1976, titled "About the painting *Chairman Mao and the Anyuan Coal Miners*" (Hou 2006: 5–7).

According to the article, the artist conceptualized the two paintings simultaneously in the late 1950s but completed only the first one in 1961. Nonetheless, he researched for the second painting in the first half of the 1960s, such as reading historical archives about the Anyuan strike, going to the coal mine to draw figures and portraits of the miners, and sketching the sceneries and landscapes on the location. However, he stopped working on the second painting until 1974 when he was finally allowed to take up his brush again. Then, he completed the second painting before October 1976.

This is a much-needed exact sampler for my topic on the continuation of propaganda art from the revolutionary period of 1966–1976 to the transitional period of 1976–1978. Although Hou's painting was made right before October 1976, it was officially shown to the public thereafter. Therefore, this work is generally regarded as a piece of post-Mao art. In this case, history plays the hand of God, who wrote the mysterious words on the wall in the biblical story of Belshazzar's feast.

On the one hand, since the 1961 painting caused the artist's suffering from political accusation, Hou intended to make the 1976 painting a remedy and rescue for a counterbalance, both psychologically and politically. Concerning the narrative issue of historical fact, on the other hand, according to Hou's article, both paintings are truthful to actual events. More importantly, speaking from the perspective of art history, the continuation of propaganda art is well demonstrated by the two paired paintings.

Artistically, then, in terms of depicting facial features and expressions, and depicting human characters and personality, the use of lighting and shading with contrasting colors in the 1976 painting created a warm atmosphere. According to the artist, the warmth shortened the distance between Mao and the miners, enclosing them in the same environment. In my opinion, this purpose is beyond artistic consideration, and is more a political one. The effective use of lighting and shading in this painting is after the fashion of Georges de La Tour (1593–1652). It is interesting to compare the warm atmosphere created in the pictures of La Tour and Hou, both embodying a particular significance: The former is about the philosophical meaning of life and death, and the latter is about the pragmatic meaning of the struggle for survival of the miners and the artist as well.

Hou Yimin is one of the second-generation artists and teachers of the third-generation artists who carried on the forerunners' realist legacy. To a certain extent, this is why propaganda art continued. However, in the transitional period of 1976–1978, the continuation is not only to glorify certain individual leaders of the Chinese Communist Party but also to glorify the ordinary people in the revolutionary force. A highly acclaimed historical painting of this kind is *The Fall of the Jiang Regime* (1977, Chinese Revolutionary Military Museum, Beijing) by Chen Yifei (1946–2005) and Wei Jingshan (1943–). It depicts the massive scene of the Communist soldiers flooding into the presidential palace in Nanjing in 1949 over the regime change and dignifies the lower-level soldiers who constitute the grassroots foundation of the Communist revolutionary force.

While realist propaganda art continued, something new emerged in 1978, which is no longer a glorification, but rather a rethinking and critique of what happened in the 1960s and 1970s. One of the most acclaimed works of this kind is a series of 32 narrative paintings, *The Maple* (1978–1979, National Art Gallery of China, Beijing), telling a Shakespeare-like tragic love story of factional fighting during the revolutionary period. This is the collective work of three artists, Chen Yiming (1950–), Liu Yulian (1948–1997), and Li Bin (1949–). This work, and this type of new works, caused a sensation with its critical inspiration and started a new trend of critical realism in Chinese art thereafter.

8 Realism since 1978 and the transformation of narrative identity

The year of 1978 is crucial for the development of Chinese art in the rest of the twentieth century. As Mao's chosen successor, Hua Guofeng was a loyal, faithful, and die-hard Maoist. He was remembered for his declaration of two famous yet infamous "whatevers": "Whatever policy chairman Mao decided on, we shall resolutely defend; whatever directives chairman Mao issued, we shall steadfastly obey" (Evans 1997: 220). Regarding art, the two "whatevers" can be taken as a footnote for the continuation of realism from 1976 to 1978 and after. However, toward the end of 1978, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) returned to the political arena and replaced Hua as the actual leader of China. In December 1978, Deng presided over one of the most important meetings in the history of the Chinese Communist Party and pronounced, representing the politburo of the party, the "Open Door Policy" (Marti 2002: 9, 15). This policy opened the door of China to the rest of the world, officially starting the process of Westernization, which is different from Hua's Socialist modernization.

Benefiting from the new policy, the Chinese art world is open to the West as well. As part of the new wave of Western influence, Western art exhibitions went to China. Of course, the openness did not happen overnight. Instead, it took a gradual process, starting even before that policy. One of the early Western art exhibitions was "Nineteenth-Century French Country Landscape Painting," exhibiting eighty-eight Barbizon School paintings in the National Art Gallery of China in Beijing in March and April 1978, and then in Shanghai. That was a sensational exhibition held in China. It was the first time that Chinese artists and laypeople had had an opportunity to see original Western art in person in the second half of the twentieth century. The political disguise of this exhibition is evident – "country landscape" is apolitical *vis a vis* the previous Political Propaganda Art, while also political, being affiliated with the working class.

Meanwhile, the word "apolitical" does not mean meaningless or insignificant. In addition to the much-beloved paintings depicting nineteenth-century French country life by Jean-Francois Millet (1814–1875) and the paintings capturing dream-like landscape images by Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796–1875), the most compelling works in the exhibition were the figure paintings by Lhermitte Leon-Augustin (1844–1925) and Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848–1884). Their realist art poses less difficulty for Chinese artists to comprehend. Although the artists were labeled as naturalist painters in the West, the Chinese, both artists and authority, regarded them as artists of Critical Realism, which the Chinese government promoted up to that time, and that is why I also consider the exhibition "political"

for its affiliation with the working class. In the exhibition, two large paintings by the two artists drew crowds. One is Bastien-Lepage's painting, *Les Foins*, or *Hay Making* (1877, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), depicting a tired couple taking a break beside a haystack. The other one is Lhermitte's painting, *Paying the Harvesters* (1882, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), depicting a couple of peasants receiving payments for their farm work. The most touching point of the two paintings is the same: the empty look in the eyes of the peasant woman in the first painting and a similar empty look in the eyes of the man in the second painting.

The term Critical Realism is borrowed from Soviet critical theory, indicating the critical nature of nineteenth-century Western and Russian Realist art and literature. The paintings of Millet and Ilya Repin, the literary works of Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), and Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) represent this critical nature in two aspects: the author's sympathy toward the poor and the critique of the rich. In the terminology of Marxism, they are the sympathy toward the people of the ruled class and the critique of the ruling class. This sentiment extends to a subversive criticism of the social system of Capitalism, which is reflected and represented in the two French paintings.

While Lepage and Lhermitte encoded their sentiments in the empty looks and tired body postures of the poor peasants, Millet encoded his religious mood and hopelessness in the figures of the peasants. Millet himself was also a poor peasant living in the village of Barbizon, outside of Paris. This spiritual feeling was inspiring to Chinese artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially to the third-generation artists of that time.

To the third-generation artists, Western influence is mostly from Realism. Although I discussed some artists of this generation earlier, I now offer further and deeper discussions about the thematic issue of Western influence and Chinese response. Collectively, the term "third-generation artists" refers to those born in the 1940s and 1950s, learned art in the next decade from the second-generation artists, or were simply self-taught, and then received realist art education at art academies in China from the late 1970s to the early 1980s.

In the introductory passage at the very beginning of this essay, I outlined the process of the Chinese response to Western influence. It is a process from imitating and appropriating Western art to taking inspiration from it and participating in the international art world with renovation or possible innovations. The artists of the third generation best exemplify this process.

One of the most prominent third-generation artists is Chen Danqing (1953–), who learned art by copying political posters, mainly portraits of Mao, and made his name in the artist circle in Shanghai in the 1970s. Chen became known nationwide in 1976 due to two paintings. The first is *Writing a Letter to Chairman Mao* (1976, collection unknown). In terms of composition, coloring, and brushwork, this

painting is an imitation, to a certain degree, of a well-known Russian Realist painting by Ilya Repin, *Reply of the Zaporizhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire*, or *Cossacks of Saporog Are Drafting a Manifesto* (1880–1881, Russian State Museum, Saint Petersburg). Nevertheless, Chen's second painting of 1976, *Tears Shed in the Harvest Land* (1976, artist's collection), is no longer an imitation. This painting depicts a group of Tibetan farmers listening to the radio news of Mao's death in a wheat field, predicting his most important work, a series of Tibetan paintings, a few years later.

Due to his artistic excellence, Chen was accepted by CAFA in 1978 as one of the first MFA graduate students, majoring in Western-style oil painting. Toward the end of his graduate studies, Chen spent half a year in Tibet painting Tibetans in their routine for his final project. Then, he selected seven paintings from these works for his MFA degree, which earned him a great reputation as a top artist of his generation.

In terms of subject, these Tibetan paintings are not thematic or dramatic, they do not tell heroic stories, and they are not narrative sagas with glorification. In terms of brushwork, the pigments are heavy, and the coloring is dark, echoing the brutal coldness and roughness in the wild Tibetan plateau. Meanwhile, each of the seven paintings depicts one aspect of the daily life of ordinary people. When these paintings were first shown to the public in 1980, the viewers were puzzled by seemingly strange questions: What is the theme of these paintings? What does the artist want to say? Why does the artist not depict the people as great heroes but rustic laypeople? According to the artistic principle of Soviet Socialist Realism, a work of art should have a theme, subject, and purpose, such as political propaganda or glorification. Unfortunately, none of Chen's paintings seems thematic. On the contrary, these paintings are simply representations of common people living a common life in common places in a common moment.

Since the depictions are common, these paintings convey some common truth of life and true feelings of the artist toward the common people. In the following year, Chen published a short essay, "The seven paintings of mine," about this painting series (Chen 1981: 49–53). In his essay, firstly, the artist acknowledges the influences from Rembrandt, Corot, Millet, and other realist artists from the West and emphasizes the true feelings of these artists conveyed in their works. Secondly, referring to a specific one of the seven paintings, Chen stressed the "tiring looks" on the faces of the ordinary Tibetans rather than the hypercritical smiles for propaganda.

Art historians and critics are very interested in this short essay for its interpretive insight. As an artist, Chen is the image-maker who provides the first-hand fabula to art historians and critics. However, regarding his essay, he is also a secondary narrator who provides interpretations of his own works. Thus, in the

secondary narrations of some art historians and critics about his Tibetan paintings, they simply paraphrase what the artist has said in his essay with elaborative extensions. In this regard, an art historian made a clever remark on the artist's essay: The artist is very smart in talking about his art; he said almost everything about the seven paintings, leaving no space for other interpretations, but by the same token, the artist has said nothing about his paintings (Zhang and Li 1986: 334). This paradoxical remark tells the truth. The secondary narrations of art historians and critics can do nothing in interpreting Chen's paintings, and thus, allow an opportunity for readers' tertiary narrativization.

Chen Danqing found his inspiration from Millet in the subject of common life, which characterizes Chen's sentiment in his Tibetan paintings. If I must use a colossal word to describe the connection between Chen and Millet, and describe the affinity of Chen with Millet, I would consider "humanism" or "humanity." These words indicate what Chen learned from Western art, in addition to techniques, skills, and other visual considerations.

As stated, imitation is the starting point of modernization in Chinese art, and the topic of imitation is also the beginning of the grand narrative in my tertiary reinterpretation. The case of Chen Danqing is typical in telling the story of the Chinese response to Western influence in the transitional period from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. That is, as I have outlined, from imitation to appropriation, and from taking inspiration to participation with latent renovations.

Appropriation is a rhetorical device that takes a certain motif from elsewhere for a certain purpose. Therefore, it is similar yet different from imitation. The similarity could be compositional, figural, or technical, including coloring, brushwork, and other formal aspects. The difference could be found in the aspect of conceptual purposes, such as the purpose of irony. In terms of contextuality and archetype, appropriation is largely a parodic response to the original with an ironic twist.

Chen Danqing left China for the United States in 1981 and lived in New York City for more than 18 years. In the early 1990s, he made copies of some masterpieces in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and elsewhere, then conceptualized a series of parodic works. One of these series is an appropriative parodic triptych entitled *To Be Named #1* (1994, artist's collection). In the middle of this triptych, the artist places a copy of Millet's *The Gleaners* (1857, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), which is flanked by two paintings based on photographs of a lady who, wearing a leisure dress, picks up shells on a beach. To a realist and Socialist Realist, at a superficial level, the juxtaposition of the three images is politically critical, contrasting the lower-class peasant life in Millet's painting with the higher-class or middle-class bourgeoisie life in the photographs. However, to a critic and art historian, at the rhetorical level of art language, the juxtaposition is historically and theoretically

about the original Millet painting, about Realist art, and about the interactions of premodern, modern, and postmodern cultural theories, political or not. In this case, appropriation is far from imitation. Instead, it is a result of inspiration by an old master, and it is one step closer to the stage of participation with renovation.

Alongside the above reinterpretation comes the issue of the reader's narrative identity, which highlights my tertiary narrativization, telling the story of my reading of Chen's realist art after the 1980s. This narrativization is particularly about his paintings from life, i.e. still life paintings, which Chen started in the mid-1990s and has continued ever since.

I first saw Chen's still life in his 42nd Street studio in Manhattan, New York City, in the spring of 1996. The subject matter of those paintings are books, mostly open, placed on a table with drapery fabric underneath. Those open books show printed reproductions of artwork, including portrait paintings by old masters of the West and landscape paintings by old masters in Chinese art history, as well as masterpieces of Chinese calligraphy. Literally, these are works of paintings within paintings. At that time, I was attracted by his large-size figure paintings appropriating Millet and other Western artists, so I did not pay sufficient attention to the small still life paintings. Without close reading, I thought that those works were just a demonstration of the artist's good taste, a sort of old-fashioned literati play of art.

Then, a few years later, Chen had an exhibition in Beijing after nearly two decades of his self-imposed exile. Expected or not, viewers, both artists and art lovers, were confused and even stupefied upon seeing his still life works of paintings within paintings. According to the media and press, some viewers simply did not know how to appreciate these works. They either murmured on why this famous artist would have done such incomprehensible still lifes or speculated that the artist must have lost his talent, doubting his creativity, originality, and authorial intention.

What is the point of making these works of paintings within paintings? Chen is a close friend of Mark Tansey (1946–), a New York-based conceptual artist making monochrome figurative paintings investigating historical and theoretical issues of art, such as the issue of representation in his *Action Painting II* (1984, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal). On this issue, Arthur Danto (1924–2013), a New York philosopher and art critic, said in his catalogue book, *Mark Tansey: Visions and Revisions*: "The painting in the painting makes a comment, even a deep comment, about the painting which contains it. It raises, one might say, to a philosophical reflection on styles of representation" (Danto 1992: 9). In my opinion, Tansey's practice and Danto's theory jointly played a role in Chen's conceptualization of the still life paintings of picture books. In fact, it is Mark Tansey who introduced me to Chen Danqing, so I know that this conceptual artist directly influenced Chen.

Nonetheless, Chen not only reflects the Platonic "thrice removed" relationships (Plato 2000: 255) between the abstract idea, the reality, and the representation, but also questions the ontological or metaphysical issue about what is represented, who is representing it, and how it is represented.

These works of paintings within paintings demonstrate Chen Danqing's conceptual renovation inspired by Mark Tansey and Arthur Danto. Relevantly, my tertiary narrativization is a reinterpretation of these works, which comes from a two-stage reading process: digging into what the artist is painting about and what I am looking at.

The first stage is interpretive. At this stage, I play the role of an art historian or critic, reading the first-hand fabula and offering secondary narration. This reading can be illustrated by a Platonic dialogue of questions and answers that I give the artist: What are you doing? I am painting. What are you painting? I am painting a painting. In his second answer, the second "painting" can be a painting made by an old master, but more likely a painting of Chen himself. In one of his still life paintings, the artist paints an open picture book, showing a page with a Chinese landscape image painted by the seventeenth-century old master, Bada Shanren (c. 1626–1705). However, the landscape image in the still life is a printed reproduction of a photograph of the old master's painting. Thus, this still life painting could be read as a realistic representation of the life sketch of the scenery in the old master's eye and could also be a "thrice removed" rendered mental image in the old master's mind. In a Platonic sense, the landscape painting is an imitation of nature, and nature is an imitation of the creator's abstract idea about the natural landscape. In this painting by Chen, the landscape image could also be the idea about landscape in Bada Shanren's mind. Then, what about the photograph of the painting, the printed reproduction of the photograph, and Chen's painting of it in the picture book? In short, the Platonic question could be revised as the following: Is the artist painting a book, a printed image, a photograph of a painting, a painting of the old master, the landscape image in the old master's eye and mind, or the landscape in Chen's very own mind? In the end, what is the exact issue the artist is investigating in this still life painting with the philosophical issue of representation? Moreover, is such a representation realist, and how far is the realist representation from the Platonic truth?

No doubt, in the terminology of Author Danto, Chen's still life is a meta-painting, i.e. the painting about painting, particularly about the representational aspect of painting and artmaking.

Thus, the exploration of the answers to the above questions leads me to the second stage of my reading of Chen's still life painting, which is a reinterpretation from a reader's perspective. In late 2019, Chen had a retrospective exhibition in Beijing, showing his still life paintings again. This time, viewers were no longer

perplexed, but looked at the picture books in his paintings with open eyes and open minds. Some art critics interpreted these paintings from philosophical points of view. As for myself, however, I turn away from the first stage, from investigating the artist's intellectual intention, and turn to look back at myself as a tertiary reader, focusing on how I look at his art. At the second stage, the important matter to me is no longer what the artist is up to, but what I am up to in reading these still life paintings and in reading art in general.

At this point, I am thinking about the issue of the artist's identity as a visual storyteller in secondary narration, not only as a first-hand image-maker, and thinking about my own identity as a re-interpreter in tertiary narrativization. Looking at Chen's still life paintings, I ask myself: What do I intend to look at? Firstly, I look at myself looking at the picture surface of these paintings. The picture surface is marked with the artist's brushwork that testifies to the very existential status of the artist's works and the existence of the artist himself as being-in-the-world with art. Secondly, I look at myself looking at the images printed on the pages of the open books in Chen's paintings. In this case, I ask a further question: What exactly do I intend by looking/reading? In other words, whose image do I intend to look at, the photographer's, the old master's, Chen Danqing's, or the landscape image in my own mind?

To me, these questions are about identity. They are about the artist's identity as the first-hand image-maker and the identity of the secondary and tertiary image readers and storytellers. Needless to say, the exploration of the possible answers to the above questions leads me back to the first stage. However, this is not a simple return. The reading process of going back and forth between the two stages enables the fusion of the artist's subjectivity with the reader's. This is not merely a fusion of a subjective object, which is intended by the artist, and not merely an objective subject, which I may intend, or the fusion of subjectivity and objectivity. The fusion of the subjectivities of the artist and mine reminds me of the relationship between the issue of narrative identity and the notion of intersubjectivity. What is the relationship? Inference. From my own subjective experience of image reading, I infer the artist's subjective experience of image-making.

Thus, a possible author emerges in the possible space between the reader and the author. Regarding the issue of intersubjectivity, if the still life paintings play the role of the first-hand fabula, and the process of Chen's artmaking and talking about these paintings plays the role of the secondary narration, then, my inferential reinterpretation can go with the phenomenological notion of empathy and play the role of tertiary narrativization. At this point of a seemingly hermeneutic circle, I am empathizing and assuming the identity of the artist, who acts in place of both the first-hand image-maker and the secondary art critic, and I am reinterpreting his art in place of the tertiary re-interpreter, who is transformed from a reader into the author.

This is the double identity of the possible author which I have assumed. With this identity, I can offer a narrative of Chen Danqing's art and present a grand narrative about the development of Chinese realist art since 1978. In this line, my tertiary narrativization goes in accordance with the proposed thesis in the introductory passage at the beginning of this essay: The Western influence on Chinese realist art in this period and the Chinese responses to it is specified with the process from imitation to appropriation, and from taking inspiration to participating in international art with renovations.

In Chen's still life painting, the renovation pertains mainly to the intellectual or philosophical aspect and less to a stylistic one. His artwork remains figurative, representational, and realistic. At the same time, other third-generation artists did their best to be stylistically innovative as well. In the early 1980s, He Duoling (1948–) and Luo Zhongli (1948–) were among the most important third-generation artists. The two are from the same institute, Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in Chongqing, and from the same MFA program at the same time.

He Duoling became known nationwide for his MFA graduation project of an oil painting, *Spring Breeze* (1982, National Art Gallery of China, Beijing), which depicts a little country girl taking a break on the grass beside a water buffalo and a shepherd dog. Stylistically, this painting is fascinating for the artist's painstakingly fine depiction of the details of the blades of grass, the dog's coat, and the rough skin of the buffalo, not to mention the subtleness in describing the human figure and clothes. These kinds of fine details are rare in the realist works of the older generation artists; the fine descriptive brushwork is influenced by American Realist painter Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009).

As said, the Socialist Realist doctrine still dominated the Chinese art world in the early 1980s. Therefore, it was easier for Western realist art to reach China and to be comprehended and embraced, though with considerable misunderstanding. He Duoling visited the United States in 1984, saw the original of Wyeth's painting, *Christina's World* (1948, MoMA, New York City), and then admitted to his previous misreading of Wyeth. According to the artist, he studied the small and low-quality printed reproductions of Wyeth's paintings, but could not see the multiplicity of the thin and almost transparent tempera layers. Thus, as a result of guesswork, he applied regular pigments of oil paints with thick brushwork (He 2006). Fortunately, this misreading made his imitation of Wyeth not so imitative.

In the figure painting *Youth* (1984, National Art Gallery of China, Beijing), a young female student in an army uniform takes a break from her labor work in a barren farm field; behind her is a big bird in shining white, flying by in the background. The drastically strong sunshine and dark shadow on the face and body of the female figure make the painting somehow somewhat spooky and surreal.

The girl's resting posture, especially the relaxed gesture of her right hand, is similar to the left hand of the peasant woman in the above-mentioned Barbizon artist Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Hay Making*.

Nonetheless, the artist's rhetorical approach is different. *Youth* is an appropriation of Edvard Munch's (1863–1944) *Puberty* (1894–1895, National Gallery, Oslo) with a rhetorical twist. Interestingly, the title of the printed reproduction of this very Munch painting in China is not "Puberty" but "Youth." He Duoling's twisted appropriation is dyadic: from interior to outdoor, from nighttime to daytime, from artificial front lighting to natural backlighting, from undressed to dressed up, from hands between legs to hands beside legs, from expressionist coloring and brushwork to realist coloring and brushwork, etc. What is the connection between "puberty" and "youth" and the purpose of adopting the twisted appropriation? According to the artist, the answer has to do with the sublimation of the eternal subject of youth (Lu and Yi 1992: 43). In my reading of his appropriation, the sublimation is approached from the same yet different angle. The difference is found at the superficial level of the twisted rhetorical approach, whereas the sameness is found at a deeper level of the human psyche, namely, the two paintings touch the dark side of youth, such as the brutality in life that a young girl may experience.

Although He Duoling soon abandoned imitation, the strong influence of Western art has remained, which no longer pertains to its formal and stylistic aspects, but instead to its aesthetic and psychological aspects. Wyeth's nostalgic sadness and Munch's poetic melancholia have been the overtone in almost all his paintings since then.

Similarly, yet differently, Western influence on the art of Luo Zhongli is firstly stylistic. The artist started his art with imitation. The work that brought him a great reputation is a painting for his MFA graduation project, *Father* (1979–1980, National Art Gallery of China, Beijing), a monumental portrait depicting a close-up image of a poor peasant. This portrait shocked the Chinese art world and the public in two respects: the enormous size and the photographic realist depiction of facial details. In terms of the size, before 1980 in China, monumentality in portrait painting was exclusively reserved for images of the Communist leader Chairman Mao, not for a poor peasant or a commoner. One of such gigantic portraits hangs high above Tian'anmen, the gate of the Imperial Forbidden City in the center of Beijing. In terms of the photographic realist depiction, although realism was the artistic doctrine in China at that time, Chinese artists and common people had never seen this type of detailed, close-up depiction of the human face in any artwork before. It was the first time that museumgoers had seen such precision in depicting wrinkles and sweat drops on a human face, the hidden branches of the veins underneath the rough skin of the peasant's rustic hand, and the dirt

underneath his fingernails, as well as the worn-out bandage on the peasant's finger and the texture of his head turban.

According to the artist, while conceptualizing his graduation project, he became fascinated with printed reproductions of the photorealist paintings by American artist Chuck Close (1940–), which feature both large-scale portraiture and superfine depiction of facial details. However, to Luo, the influence of Chuck Close is not restricted to the detailed depiction alone. Instead, it inspired him to make a statement in the art of his thoughts and feelings about his personal life experience in the countryside from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s (Lu 2006: 706).

There is an interesting behind-the-scene story with political implications about the ballpen pinched on the peasant's ear which is not directly relevant to the topic of this essay, so I will not discuss it at this moment. What I am concerned with is not the political conception, but rather the stylistic imitation of photorealist art. The photorealism of Chuck Close is part of late modern art developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Temporally speaking, Luo Zhongli is more than ten years behind the development of American photorealism. However, his art is not photorealist, but realist, different from Western Modernism, both conceptually and stylistically (this is why I use "photographic realist" for his art hereafter). Due to the great success of *Father*, Luo continued his photographic realist painting in the early 1980s, making portraits of old peasant women with wrinkles on their faces and hands, or with white hair on their heads. Then, in the mid and late 1980s, he tried Millet-like and Wyeth-like rural life paintings. Once again, despite their photographic characteristics, these paintings are realist.

Luo Zhongli turned to a Modernist experiment in the 1990s, with Expressionist coloring and Primitivistic atmosphere. Later, in the first two decades of the new century, he became even closer to Modernism, making paintings with Picassoesque wild sceneries and strong brush strokes.

Eventually, Luo Zhongli turned to Modernism, whereas He Duoling and Chen Danqing continued with Realism. In terms of Western influence, however, they have two things in common. First, they started their artist careers with imitation and then developed their careers with non-imitative art. Second, willingly or not, their art is always under Western influence, no matter how native and local their subject matters.

9 Conclusion

Although the above realist cases support my theme of Western influence and Chinese response, to conclude this essay, I must now turn to the problem of plagiarism, which testifies to how imitation could go astray.

In early 2019, a huge art bombshell exploded on the internet in China (Pengbai News 2019), which shocked almost the entire Chinese art world and shattered contemporary Chinese art. This bomb was ignited by a Belgian artist Christian Silvain (1950–), who claimed that Ye Yongqing (1958–), a famous Chinese artist, had plagiarized his art for 30 years. Surprised, excited, and angered, scholars and art critics in China did comparative studies of the two artists' works right away, with visual analyses and formal examinations. They juxtaposed images of their paintings, proving that Silvain's allegation was legitimate.

Ye Yongqing is an artist from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. Although he is not as important as the above-discussed artists, he became successful toward the end of the 1990s, eventually becoming a very prolific multi-millionaire in the early twenty-first-century art market. In this case, plagiarism is not merely a problem of continued imitation, it is a knock-off beyond art, being a monetary, legal, and moral issue. At its worst, plagiarism can derail the process of the development of Chinese art in the new millennium.

I will not further develop the discussion of plagiarism since it is not the topic of this essay. However, against the potential plagiarist derailment, first, I wish to support my tertiary reinterpretation of the development of Chinese realist art in the second half of the twentieth century, which is summarized as the process of "imitation, appropriation, inspiration, participation." This reinterpretation is mainly based on my discussions of realist artists and their responses to the influence of Soviet Socialist Realism and Western Realism, demonstrating more imitation and appropriation, and less inspiration and participation.

Second, I wish to support the thesis of this essay about the narrative identity of the possible author that is transformed from being the tertiary reader at the cost of the death of the old conventional reader. As said, the new tertiary reader re-tells art stories in the possible space between author and reader, thus becoming the possible author. Why is this transformation possible? Identity is conditioned and shaped by group belongings and the nature of the groups. The identity of the possible author is conditioned by the narrative natures of at least three groups, respectively and integrally. Primarily, a tertiary reader belongs to the group of readers that consists of general readers and professional critical readers. Additionally, the tertiary reader also belongs to a bigger group of readers that further includes authors who read the first-hand fabula. Ultimately, the tertiary reader belongs to the group of all kinds of storytellers, which includes the secondary author and the first-hand image-maker who tells stories of art with artworks. In this sense, I consider that the narrative identity of the possible author is defined at three levels: that of first-hand fabula, of secondary narration, and of tertiary narrativization.

Then again, some key questions arise: Who and/or what is the author of art history? What should be written about in art historical narrative, and how should it

be written? The process of exploring the answers has helped me construct the narrative identity of the possible author.

Regarding the transformation from reader to author, I call attention to the death of the old conventional reader, which gives birth to the new tertiary reader. The new reader's tertiary narrativization tells the crucial difference between the tertiary reader and the secondary author. Namely, the tertiary reader reinterprets and re-writes art history. In return, this difference makes the new reader's tertiary narrativization meaningful. On the one hand, the secondary narration about the first-hand fabula is more descriptive, whereas the tertiary narrativization is about the secondary narration and the first-hand fabula. It is not only descriptive but more interpretive and re-interpretive, both analytically and critically. In other words, the new reader's tertiary narrativization is a response to the secondary narration and a re-response to the first-hand fabula. Thus, speaking of the possible author's narrative identity, it is integral to the three layers of the first-hand fabula, the secondary narration, and the tertiary narrativization. At the same time, the three layers help define the possible author's narrative identity as critically re-interpretive.

On the other hand, referring to "tertiary narrativization," I must stress that the significance of this notion is imbued in the power-relation and power struggle between the secondary author and tertiary reader. In a Foucauldian sense, the former is seemingly authoritative, but is authoritarian as it happens, exercising the ruling power and repressing the ruled readers. Rising to resist the rule and repression, a tertiary reader reinterprets the first-hand fabula and revises the secondary narration, hence, the tertiary narrativization. This power struggle is comparable to Martin Luther's fight against the Vatican for the interpretive power over the holy scriptures, thus empowering the reader.

Earlier in this essay, I discussed Umberto Eco's chiastic notions about the empirical and model authors versus the empirical and model readers. Although chiastic, there is no transformation between the reader and author in Eco's theory. Nonetheless, in my discussion throughout this essay, the demise of the old conventional reader gives birth to the new reader. Due to the right to and power of interpretation and reinterpretation, the new reader becomes a possible author. In return, the interpretive and re-interpretive nature of the tertiary narrativization defines the narrative identity of the possible author at the three levels already discerned in the above.

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