

## Introduction

But if the little fox,  
After nearly completing the crossing,  
Gets his tail in the water,  
There is nothing that would further.  
Hexagram 64, “Before completion,” *Yijing*

In 1994, I published a book in French on new Chinese cultural phenomena entitled *A Small Cultural Revolution*.<sup>1</sup> I believed that a revolution in the cultural sphere had occurred and so attempted to present the radically manifest changes that I had tracked in the different cultural spheres (literature, music, theater, television, arts) and in the new words that were being used all over China — while ordering them into an organic whole. To my mind, the year 1993 marks the end of that cultural revolution, which lasted some ten years.

Since then, there have been further changes, sequential ones, smaller ones. That is, evolution and continuation. Nothing is ever absolutely at rest; nonchange is also a form of change, or so claims the *Book of Changes* or *Yijing*.<sup>2</sup> Now that more than ten years have gone by, it is possible to reassess the transformations, to reorder them into generations, successions that were not visible while they were in process.

This present work attempts to be a handbook of the changes that Chinese culture has undergone in the past decade. The index will allow the

reader to locate (discussions of) specific events and their agents, and the glossary of main Chinese terms will contribute to its usefulness as a reference book. At the same time, this book aims to interpret (or “reveal,” to use a *Yijing* term) the meaning of events. These last few years have allowed me a certain perspective on the process, and I now detect more connections among the various phenomena and between them and the real world, in China and outside of China. Nothing is self-contained. I have read between the lines and brought to the fore some configurations discernable in China’s cultural scene. There are many more to be explored by anyone who is willing to look otherwise.

Unlike the *Book of Changes*, this present work, needless to say, is not a book of wisdom nor a fortune telling handbook. The outcome of these various changes cannot yet be assessed. Upon completing this book, I fear that I may have acted rather like the incautious young fox running rashly over the ice: I have perhaps gotten my tail wet.

### *The chapters’ words*

It is difficult to write about change. How can one write a book that will be a correct yet fluid rendition of phenomena that emerge, recombine, and crisscross nonstop? My anchorage has been words. Indeed, I believe that words are still at the root of all the changes.

Fortunately, my scrutiny of Chinese words, as used today, by women and men, has helped me realize that there is no such thing as the terrifying “not just,” ‘zheng ming’ (‘correct designation’). Words are on the move, all the time. Every single work I have examined is an attempt at “saying” things otherwise, from within and without Chinese culture. Language is the most vital common denominator of all the works discussed in this book: literature, television, film, art, music, theater, and performing arts.

I have divided the book into two parts, both starting from the most organized form of word ordering, literature. Chapter 1 is dedicated to literature, while the next two gradually open up the written word, speak it out, act it out. Chapters 4 to 6 also deal with literature but as condensed images, as sounds, and end up with telling portraits and the yelled-out lyrics of rock.

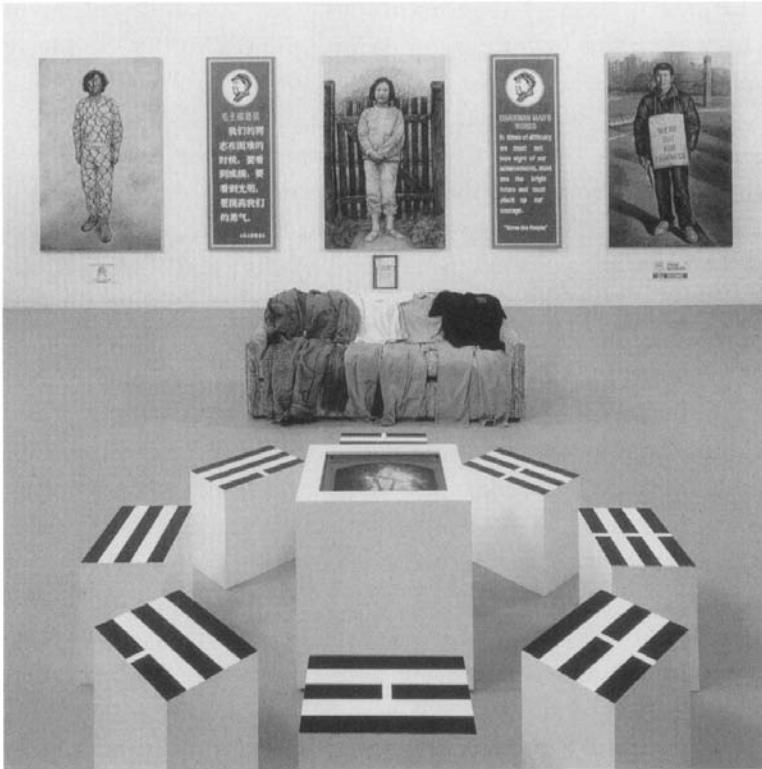
## 2 China’s New Cultural Scene

Chapter 1, “Literary Experiments: Six Files,” is a close reading of narratives written by three men (Ma Yuan, Ge Fei, Yu Hua) and three women (Can Xue, Chen Ran, Xu Kun). I show the particular agenda of each one, by examining their respective narrative techniques and idiosyncratic effects. These writers provide a sampling of most of the problematics and themes to be discussed in the rest of the book: commentaries on other cultures (non-Han Chinese, European, American) and on their own culture; revisions of Chinese history and of Maoist politics; positions on the private and the public and on sexual difference, as well as on consumerism and Americanization.

Chapter 2, “Away from Literature I: Words Turned On,” studies literary works in transition. The focus is on one writer, Wang Shuo, simply because Wang’s signature is manifest all over China, in all cultural forms: literature, television, music, film, art, theater, and most important of all, in people’s mouths. I examine how Wang Shuo with his partners, notably Feng Xiaogang, but also Jiang Wen, have literally turned on words, put them “on the box.” The key to Wang’s popularity and financial success is his invented lingo, a combination of subverted political formulae with streetwise slang, always adapted for a light-hearted effect. The rest of the chapter stays light and cheerful, notably with women’s works in film, music, and literature (Ning Ying, Liu Sola, Xiaoyen Wang).

Chapter 3, “Away from Literature II: Words Acted Out,” focuses on theater experiments. In the first section, I distinguish between what is called or marketed in China as experimental and what is to my mind experimental, namely Mou Sen’s work. Mou works with collaborators from different cultural spheres, notably Yu Jian (a poet), Wu Wenguang, Jiang Yue (both video producers), and Wen Hui and Jin Xing (dancers). The second section covers more experimental, independent, and underground productions, from Zhang Yuan’s to Jia Zhangke’s, which struggle like the theater performances to make, in China, the invisible (quodidians actions, politically sensitive sites, marginals such as migrant workers or those stricken by AIDS) visible.

With chapter 4, “Colorful Folk in the Landscape: Fifth-Generation Filmmakers and Roots Searchers,” there is a return to literature, but of yet another kind, linked to a certain kind of cinema. Novels of the “roots-searching” school (including those by A Cheng, Mo Yan, Liu



1. Detail of *Here, There, Anywhere*. Installation by Gu Xiong, 1995.  
*Photograph by Vancouver Art Gallery.*

Heng, Han Shaogong, and Jia Pingwa) have much in common with the films of the famous “Fifth Generation” (with Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou as main representatives), whether they have been adapted for film or not. One common trait is their use of basic images of China: its land, its peasants, its written system, its mode of naming, and its taboos. These writers and filmmakers invent from enduring indigenous conventions, and I investigate their works from one of their pet paradigms, the animal. The 1980s ox evolves into a butterfly in the 1990s.

Chapter 5, “China’s Avant-Garde Art: Differences in the Family,” is an attempt to make sense of the paradoxical condition of Chinese avant-garde art, which is virtually invisible in China. With Hal Foster’s authoritative critical work on American art as a background, I draw a pic-

ture of the complexities specific to an art that is not American, does not want to be American, yet does not care to be labeled Chinese, either. These are the main differences with the big “family” of avant-garde art, which is shedding its ethnic, sexual, cultural features and moving more and more toward what I call an immanent anthropology.

Chapter 6, “Rock Music from Mao to Nirvana: The West Is the Best,” focuses on the West, as in North America and Europe but also as in China’s western frontier, specifically Yan’an, Mao Zedong’s revolutionary base. I show how China’s rock spans both registers, with Cui Jian at one end of the spectrum and the No group at the other, with a full range of popular styles, by both male and female performers, in the middle.

The conclusion, “A World Wide Web of Words,” reiterates the importance of language in my scrutiny of contemporary Chinese culture. I replay some words as they are used today by women and men, in gangs and cliques, and in the advertising world. Spoken Chinese is richer than ever, written Chinese is spotted with letters from the Roman alphabet. My concluding words are for poetry, which not only participates in the linguistic dynamic but also undertakes what I call an ongoing vivisection of language, allowing for a full manifestation of the temporal-spatial relations within words—lest we forget.

## *References*

Although there are innumerable links among the various expressions of Chinese cultural production and although most of it is language-specific, it is not a closed circuit. It is moved by concerns traceable throughout the planet. In fact, the emphasis on language, the critical examination of its instrumentalization, is one such global preoccupation. Other endeavors are linked to language: for example, the desire to deny human beings a special status as *Homo sapiens*. This deanthropomorphizing of human beings is at work in Chinese cultural productions as it is elsewhere. There is also no humanistic notion of creativity in the current work of many Chinese artists. The authority of the author, or the confidence of a unified subjectivity asserting truths about a self or about China, is virtually nonexistent.

The ways in which Chinese cultural producers deal with representa-

tion (of self, nation, others) are also not exclusively “Chinese.” I show how they position themselves in various ways: from inside and outside, with new and old referents, and with references from other cultures, which are already part of today’s Chinese culture. Thus this book holds many heterogeneous references. It is good to be in culture shock.