

The Transformation of China's Contemporary Oil Painting

— with Zeng Hao as an example

By Wu Hung

Throughout the history of China's contemporary art, the early 1990s was a critical period for the formation of style of China's contemporary oil painting. Even before that, young painters had already ventured into non-academicism since mid-1970s; moreover, in the 1980s, they came to embrace the strong influence of Modern Western Art, with a number of inventive works coming into being after 1985 such as Post-Classic Series of Wang Guangyi, The Second Condition of Geng Jianyi, and X? of Zhang Peili. However, such inventive works were rare as to Chinese art at the time on the whole, with most explorations falling into the stereotype of Western art history. This situation changed radically after the early 1990s. As the "China/Avant Garde" exhibition of 1989 drew to a close, the 1985 New Wave movement became history; however, the temporary silence after 1989 was actually brewing a new revolution of greater significance including marketization, globalization, and the shake-off of avant-gardism. Riding such revolution, oil painting regained the foreground and became the wave rider of China's modern art. The New-Generation Show in 1991 marked the transcendence over the binary opposition between Academism and New Wave, and the following several years witnessed a great number of talented young painters hitting shows of both home and abroad. With academic background, these painters were professional in skills and understanding in medium materials; however, they stood on a new position, exploring on their own painting language. When the two factors met each other, together with the trend that artists looked for inspiration from Chinese experience rather than Western art, there came to form the foundation of China's contemporary oil painting. As to me, even today, technicality, conceptuality, and aboriginality are still the three basic components of China's contemporary oil painting.

As one of the Chinese painters who emerged in the early-1990s, the career course of Zeng Hao could well reflect the inner historic logic of China's contemporary oil painting. What's more, during the past twenty years, Zeng has been an introspective artist throughout the ups and downs of Chinese art. He was once commented as "simple-minded and slow witted" by critic Feng Boyi I. With such personality, the variation of Zeng's style appeared to be more coherent - not zero relationship with the outside, but a relationship achieved through the development of personal style. This is why I chose Zeng Hao as the cut-in point to reflect over the transformation of China's contemporary oil painting. Another reason is that the current exhibition shows a great change of Zeng's style in recent years. Not a sudden one, such change was based on Zeng's personal style, especially his explorations during the past five

or six years, which finally brought a fundamental change. Is such style of variation the by-product of the overall development of Chinese painting? Given a positive answer, in what sense do they relate to each other? And, how to define personality along the development of China's oil painting? These are questions to be put forward by this article. Lately, in a workshop on Zeng Hao, some participants said about a pervasive problem of the criticism and research on China's contemporary painting, that is, lack of formal analysis and applicable arguing method, which brings about mere formality on "significance". It is expected that this article may touch the solution to such problems by capturing the subtle variation of Zeng's personal style.

§

When discussing about Zeng, or perhaps about any other contemporary artists, we are confronted with the division between "history" and "prehistory". "History" refers to the representation jointly established by artists, critics, and exhibition organizers, which is presented in exhibition catalogs, review articles, and reproduced images - they have become part of public knowledge. "Prehistory", however, can only be found in fragmentary reminiscences, and it seems the under-water part of a floating iceberg, looming in the distance. It is the growth path of an artist before being named as an artist, and therefore only belongs to his personal memory. However, a mature artist would constantly re-visit his old memory and come to know that this is the real muse along the way.

To Zeng Hao, there is a definite demarcation between "history" and "prehistory": 1992. We say so because in 1992, he published his earliest works like Balloon Series, How Is It Bro?, Trade, and 1992 Summer; still in 1992, for the first time he went for the Guangzhou Art Biennale of Works of 1990s, a show of great historic meaning. During the show, his Balloon Series (Fig. 1) earned nominations and became a widely commented work afterwards, marking the starting point of Zeng Hao study of later times. When Beijing's Today Art Museum was compiling Zeng Hao, a comprehensive introduction to this work, Balloon Series naturally defines the starting point. 2

These works and words exposed to the public have naturally formed the basic materials for studying an artist. However, when talking with me, Zeng keeps leading me into the non-knowledge part which is hidden from the public. Then I realize that Zeng as an artist (note: this is a construct) also has a prehistoric period and memory space rarely known by the outside, and that he must have painted innumerable pictures unknown to us 3. Guided by his father, Zeng began to paint when he was little. And in 1979, he was admitted to Middle School Affiliated to Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, where he spent his time until 1983, so to speak, as a member of the reserve force for professional painters.

In 1995, Zeng applied for China Central Academy of Fine Arts. Though spending only less than a month in making up general subjects, he passed the exam and entered the No.3 Studio of Oil Painting Department which was known for its modern style. Upon graduation, Zeng returned to Yunnan, “setting out for works of expressionism.” Though once moving around between Sichuan, Guangzhou, and Yunnan, and encountering a number of opportunities of diverting to other professions, he never dropped painting.

Then, why is 1992 so important? Why does the year mark the start of Zeng’s career as a public artist? The pity is that I can just raise such questions without ready answers. To give a satisfactory answer, I must have a careful study on his pre-1992 works and probe into his inner world, so as to know more about the pre-1992 Zeng Hao. Prior to such rigorous study, there are another two breakthrough points available for us: put Zeng into the overall development of China’s oil painting in 1990s, and study the inner trend of his near-1992 works as well as the relationship between such trend and the works of later days. And, the following discussion will go with the two points.

§

As critics have often pointed out, we can draw a parallel between Balloon Series and Cynical Realism of that time. Both indicate that young painters had shaken off idealism and ideological content prevailing in the 1980s and had put daily insipidity into the central position; moreover, they even share a common root - New Generation Painting of slightly earlier time. For Zeng Hao, Fang Lijun, Liu Wei, and the New Generation painters like Liu Xiaodong, Wang Jinsong, and Song Yonghong, they have a lot in common in personal experience. They all studied in well-known art schools and shared a similar painting style. The difference between them lies in the degree of alienation from the society. To be more specific, the “bad paintings” devoted by painters like Zeng Hao, Fang Lijun, and Liu Wei further polarized the general trend of New Generation, that is, they not only superficialized the significance of painting, but also pushed a face to sneer at the authority and society. Take Balloon Series as example, it was commented by critic Yan Shanchun as “disrespect towards modern life by rugged brushwork and innocent structure 4 - the same keynote compared with the Ploppy Paintings composed by painters like Fang Lijun.”

Whereas it is now a shared opinion that such trends played a dominant role in China’s oil painting during the early 1990s, what deserve further study are the finer differences between the individual artists. Such analysis is vital for understanding China’s contemporary art of that time, because contemporary Chinese art was then undergoing a transition from collective social movements to

creating individual styles and images. Although generalization on certain trend can tell macroscopic phenomena, it tends to conceal the microscopic development of personal style, which in turn goes against our studying the diversity and complexity of such transitional period. In other words, though artists may compose works similar in social significance, they pursue not abstract social criticism but visual language of their own. Then, to interpret the establishment of personal visual language is the task lying before art historians.

It seems to me that compared with those works of New Generation and Cynical Realism, Zeng's works of 1992 and 1993 are full of personal features. One is a more radical abandonment of technical and visual value - deviation from the prevailing style and normal pictorial scale, depth of field and color; rugged brushwork and unsophisticated structure; human figures in the profile of full face. At first sight, nobody would view the creator of these works an academic painter who once studied in the art school for eight years. Critic Lü Peng caught this and commented such works as willful "clumsy paintings". In Lü's opinion, Zeng has, by such style, established certain commonness between picture and subject (mainly homely commodities for daily use) 5. Such comment is insightful. Zeng also talked about such commonness during our recent conversations, which well supports Lü's comment. However, Zeng doesn't view such commonness as willful clumsiness or deviation from academism. On the contrary, artists can rediscover the observed by such commonness:

Actually, I threw away my previous knowledge not because of its academic origin. It was simply some habit to me. For a period of time I used to be moved by some outdoor poster boards, which were poorly drawn and appeared pale after long-time exposure to the weather. But I saw a kind of clumsiness in them - an effort to achieve perfect pictures. The result (painting) might not be great, but you felt its effort. When I mention about throwing away what I've studied, I mean drawing would be much too smooth once you have got used to it. Too smooth a way may distract you and deprive you of the strength in conveying yourself. 6

Apart from such "clumsiness" which is non-professional but not non-artistic, there are still more features differentiating Zeng from New Generation and Cynical Realism. These features were, by then, under a process of formation, which finally went obvious after 1995. However, we can clearly see three interrelated inclinations in his works during 1992 to 1993: image fragmentation, denial of coherent pictorial space, and lack of visual focus. "Fragmentation" refers to the relationship between images - human figures and objects become isolated and obscure in their relationship, a greater deviation from narration or symbolism. "Space" refers to pictorial logic which becomes in these works targets of deconstruction and thus goes beyond conformability and logic. And, "lack of visual focus" is the result of image fragmentation and disordered space - viewers find no position to focus and feel

confused by the disordered images and space. What deserves our attention is that such features were given little emphasis in New Generation and Cynical Realism, but they came to play a greater role in Zeng's works. By comparison between Balloon Series and Be a Vendor (Fig. 2), both works of 1992, we can see that such features underwent a fast development within a short period.

Another example. Take a look at 1992 Summer (Fig. 3) and Ice Lolly (Fig. 4), one of 1992 and the other of 1993, the two works one year apart from each other show another inclination of that time, that is, conceptualization and symbolization of "things". Both paintings describe the picture of a store and adopted similar human figures, either looking around aimlessly or laughing without purpose; however, the difference is the definition on things, which is hard to detect yet of great importance. In 1992 Summer, rows of woman underwears and swimsuits hang over human figures, and, due to the omission of clothesline and clear-away of depth of field, the distinction between real objects and images become obscure, which is reinforced by a picture hanging nearby. Whereas in Ice Lolly, behind the human figure, there are rows of canned food and cracker boxes in isolation, and, though being of the same pictorial value compared with the objects in 1992 Summer, they are more like advertisement design because of their features of formularization and conceptualization - or, perhaps they are just real advertisements. During the following years, such symbolization came to the foreground and played a dominant role in Zeng's works.

§

1995 was a year when Zeng eventually formed his personal style. After 1995, he composed a great number of works known as the "little man" paintings, by which he made himself an artist standing out of others (see Fig. 5-7). Viewing from the development course of China's contemporary painting, such inclination of "personal image" was a significant phenomenon after mid-1990s which was often achieved by a fixed type of images or schemas. And, entering the age of commercialization, such personalized images of China's oil painting played a meaningful role in worldwide shows and in market, and they became the "name card" of China's oil painting. However, such commercial value was still something remote in 1995 - Zeng hadn't sold any oil painting until 1997. As to Zeng and other painters of that time, the pursuit for personalized image and schema are closely related to two non-commercial factors: one is further individualization of China's contemporary art; the other is the influence of conceptualism of global contemporary art - fixed types of personal image and schema helped realize individual "concepts" of artists.

Zeng's works of that time mainly depicted isolated figures - often neatly dressed men and women -

among daily articles: leather sofa, floor lamp, double bed, night table, wall clock, coat stand, toilet paper, cup, telephone, wine bottle, ashtray, electric fan, fish tank, and potted flower. All these things belong to a special space – of a private residence or modern flat. However, such special space is implied rather than being illustrated. There is no concrete architecture – with no walls and windows. Human figures and other things are like being hung over a plain picture, and the painter greatly distorts the size of figures and other things – to achieve the visual effect of micromation by leaving vast blank space around images.

Zeng's works of that period attracted lot of critics ⁷. With acute vision, these critics point out that Zeng's works reveal some common phenomena prevailing in the 1990s China, including the change of family structure, rapid development of commercial economy, emergence of new private space, materialism over personality, and isolation of individuals in the society and family. However, they also point out that Zeng is neither sociologist nor painter with the vision of a social critic. Or rather, we should say that the dominant factors in these paintings are his acute vision and loneliness. His special technique – erasure of linear time and the boundary between human and things – represents the conceptualization of a society of “aimlessness, meaninglessness, and boredom” (words by Zeng). Based on such understanding, some critics view Zeng's works of that period as the example of China's conceptualistic painting in 1990s.

Like the reviews about Zeng's works of early days, these critical articles are also insightful ones among the many works of China's contemporary art criticism. Should we try to pick out any defect, we have to say that they should have developed finer observation of pictorial form and a more complex understand of meaning. Micromation is undoubtedly one of the key features of Zeng's works, but what is micromation after all? There may be two answers complementary to each other. The commonest opinion is that micromation is a pictorial style. Such opinion is correct, but it neglects the aspect of “micromationizing”. The other opinion, which is rarely noticed, focuses exactly on “micromationizing” and views it as a process of deepening and creating, and goes on to discover the inner logic of this process. For example, compared to his works of 1992 and 1993 (see Fig. 1-4), Zeng's works after 1995 contain lots of similar human figures and objects; however, they have been greatly reduced in size, becoming fragmented and isolated. To have a further study on Zeng's 1995-to-1997 works, we find such distortion growing stronger in time: images become smaller and the distance between them becomes greater on an empty background. Based on such comparison, Thursday Afternoon, 1995 (Fig. 5) of 1995 can be viewed as the forerunner of July 8th, 1996 (Fig. 6). Though similar in images, the human figures of the former appear larger and more particular, and the

combination of furniture still implies a three-dimensional structure. And, by image narrowing-down and background expansion, micromation is achieved, which is further brought into September 12nd, 1997 (Fig. 7) - not only greater narrowing-down of figures and objects, but also greater isolation and fragmentation. The artist set all images on a planar and non-transparent background, thus preventing any perceptible inter-image coherence.

Now let's turn to the problem of "conceptualization". Conceptualization is undoubtedly an important character of Zeng's works of that period and is also the basic inclination of 1990s' contemporary Chinese art. But if we define Zeng's works as conceptual art without specification, we might ignore some other important characters. For example, though figures, objects, and furniture appear with smaller size and the viewer can barely see the details in reproductions, the images never grow into sheer symbols. Also, representation never dies out; instead, it always holds the attention of the artist. Looking at the pictures carefully, we can see that figures and objects are not simply painted flat, but images of delicate brushwork. Though of small size, figures are never of a fixed type, but are bestowed with specific character trait and even features of portraiture on their face. Speaking of these images with Zeng, he would tell that lots of subjects in his paintings are born from his personal memory rather than our commodity society. So are human figures - their gestures and expressions are always of secret significance or signs of times. He said:

As a matter of fact, I am quite particular in selecting figures and objects, and things of an elapsed time of over 5 or 10 years would be qualified. So during the 1990s, I mostly painted furniture and sofas of the 1980s. So was human image, with figures of time of "cultural revolution" and figures during the 1970s as the commonest targets. At that time, Chinese people adopted a "perfect" gesture when being photographed, meaning to write off all status or gender influences. They were afraid of cameras. They would dress themselves well with clothes of little directive property and put on the "perfect" gesture for a standard picture. Everybody would do the same for a "certificate photo", being it a college professor or workman. I also chose such a gesture for my paintings. Television was not seen in my works of that time, because television was a cultural sign of strong symbolism to Chinese of those days. At that time, China practices information control; so television was a sign of communication and authority. Simple enough, my works also avoided things of strong symbolism and directive property. Since then, more and more items came into my works and they began to reflect real social changes. Under such changes, I began to choose some daily items rather than things of 5 or 10 years ago. I believe, at different times, people have different attitudes towards things. Why did I narrow down the size of things in my works? To strip away the original functionality - by enlargement or narrowing down. Then I began the study on attitudes towards things at different times. For example, people of the time of "cultural revolution"

and people of nowadays would have totally different attitudes towards an enamel cup - authority for the former and aesthetics for the latter. Sometime I would imagine: how could it be like should functionality be stripped away? That's why at first I shunned cultural sings but came to embrace more modern and humanistic elements afterwards.

Admittedly, critics and art historians will never think by following the confession of an artist himself. However, upon hearing Zeng's words, it is necessary for us to consider the conceptual elements in the "little man" works in terms of a historical process rather than the flat externalization of concepts. Or, at least, we should notice that one of an artist's objectives is to "strip away the original functionality... and spot out the different feelings towards things in different stages."

§

In a sense, Zeng's "little man" works are certain types of "theoretical painting" - works of the artist fit in well with critics and greatly stimulate the production of criticism. One of the causes of such phenomenon is the strong interaction between the conceptualization inclination of these works and the dominant academic interests of the theoretical circles. These academic interests include Post-Modernism, Deconstructionism, skepticism and negation towards grand narrative, recalibration of the concepts of space and time of Classicism, crumbling of the independent "self", etc. All these trends are reflected in Zeng's works, which, too, find their audience and interpreter among the interested theoreticians. The most conscious comment on such "correspondence" was put forward by critic Huang Zhuan, who, in one article composed in 1998, directly pointed out:

In the strict sense, Zeng Hao is not a "problem painter". Compared with Zhang Xiaogang, strong historic sense and effective cultural expression are seldom found in his works; and, compared with Shi Chong, he has little inclination of question setting and seldom go extreme in techniques. However, with distinctive introspection and psychology, he felicitously expresses the Post-Cynic and Post-Nihilistic spiritual actuality; besides, his contradictory narration and pictorial form fit close with such a none-certainty age. It is with such reasons that I've been viewing Zeng as a representative of the trend of China's Conceptual Painting in mid 1990s. 8

By such correspondence, Zeng became a representative of the trend of China's Conceptual Painting in mid 1990s in the eyes of critics. As Huang Zhuan put it, this is not because he is a "problem painter" (i. e. a conceptualistic painter) or he adopts obvious question setting, but that "his contradictory narration and pictorial form fit close with such a none-certainty age". Such definition is, to some extent, beyond reproach; but on the other hand, theoreticians and critics would unavoidably interpret his works on the basis of certain theory or concept rather than on paintings themselves because they (including me), when commenting on Zeng's works, are themselves under the influence of certain

academic interest. As I said above, such viewpoint has a limitation, that is, the “close fit” between painting and theory may end the process of picture observation and analysis too early, and neglect other important factors and the diachronic development. Another limitation is that such criticism may “specimen-ize” the artist – the artist is equated to a particular image or frame and thus is denied the possibility of transformation – because such development is likely to obscure the harmony between the artist himself and theoretical interpretation.

After 1990s, Zeng did encounter such danger: since 1999, different tones were found in his works 9. The change might be subtle, but such information revealed the essentiality. Let’s take *Xiao Li and Others Went Out on March 4th, 2001* (Fig. 8) for example. Being 2 meters wide, 2.4 meters high, it a painting of considerable size. Similar with the previous “little man” works, all images in the painting were miniature scattering in a sea of light blue. However, unlike the “little man” works, these images, as well as the painting’s title, show intention and capability of narrating. Look at the bottom half by the midline, a young man in beige trousers is walking inwards – he must be Xiao Li as told by the title. His inward gesture helps extend the vision of viewers, which, by visual analysis, can be called focalization. Following his direction, we see other figures in the picture: three neatly dressed women are waiting to cross the street. The straight connection between Xiao Li and the three women seems to imply that the former is the person to be met for the latter or one of them. Among the three women, the one in skirt is concentrating on the traffic light, waiting to rush across the street upon the green light. Though omitted by the painter, the street is undoubtedly there: the interaction between Xiao Li and the women, cars on the street, streetlights, and trees by either side are all evidences of such an implicit setting. Still, the plane flying over the picture gives the meaning of sky to the blue background.

Therefore, though retaining the basic pictorial conventions of his earlier works, *Xiao Li guys went out on 4th March 2001* goes against with the previous “little man” works in three aspects: 1) implicit three-dimensional space (as opposed to the negation of such space); 2) internal connection between images (as opposed to isolation and fragmentation between images); 3) representational significance of the background (as opposed to immaterial background). Moreover, the painting reveals something more about Zeng of that period: he shifted his attention into the outdoor. Though he continued to produce indoor “little man” works, he came to embrace more and more new outdoor elements – street, cars, buildings, and trees growing between streetlights and traffic signs. Such indoor-to-outdoor transition had a lot to do with Zeng’s change of the living environment at that time. In 1998, Zeng was dismissed from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, upon which he went to Beijing

and, together with Zhang Xiaogang, rented a house in Huajiadi of Chaoyang District, Beijing, becoming member the larger and larger group of Beijing migrant artists. Then, Chaoyang District was undergoing rapid urbanization, with countless buildings emerging from the open land. The road met its end by the cropland abruptly, as if meeting the end of the world. These outdoor images flowed into Zeng's head, the meaning of which lay in not only the establishment of a new graphic program, but that it initiated wider exploration on pictorial structure.

From 1999 to 2005, Zeng had been following his "little man" style in his outdoor description. However, as illustrated in *Xiao Li guys went out on 4th March 2001*, he began to introduce a new structure of representation and narration, indicating rebellion against the previous conceptualization. In 2004, Zeng began another sort of experiment which indicated similar inclination of pictorialization: miniature figures and furniture with a hazy background of cityscape or landscape (Fig. 10). Pi Li, when commenting on these works, said: "those trees in backlight, jumping sunshine and silhouette are reminiscent of the dignity and sentimentality of German Romantic Painting. And the vast woods and grassland imply danger and uncertainty. In these works, we feel some unspeakable anxiety originating from daily life coming to us." 10 Actually, such crisis awareness is well reflected in his disharmonious painting language: two types of style, degree, and concept, between which each greatly repel the other, are seen in each painting, and such conflict brings the tension between the two. Then we would feel the split self of the artist, probably because of which such experiment soon gave place to the next: in 2006, Zeng eventually abandoned miniature figure and landscape which he had worked on for over ten years (Fig. 11). Here, the roaring plane still refers to a transient time point; however, neither the plane nor the woods below are images of isolation and fragmentation, but part of a larger and uniform space. Arguers may, based on this, think that Zeng has gone back to the perceptual world. But I view such idea is wrong, because the foundation of such painting is still the spirit of deconstruction. The point is that his targets are no longer the society or the self, but his self-created pictorial frame. Therefore, we can say he has started a kind of deconstruction of deconstruction, the result of which is not the negation of previous deconstruction, but the possibility of rediscovering feeling and memory.

§

Then we are led to the works shown in the current exhibition called *Full Summer*. These works generally fall into two categories. Category I are works produced during 2007 to 2009, including *Morning of 15th June 2008*, *3 p. m. 1st August 2008*, *21st May 2009*, *22nd July 2009*, *31st July 2009*, etc II. As to category 2, they are works from 2007 till now. What ties the two categories together is "tree", and the difference lies in the status of trees. In category I, trees appear as the background

and echo with the figures on the foreground; whereas in category 2, trees become the only concrete visual elements, and what they echo with is the picture ground in white or black.

We can have a better understanding on the characters of these paintings and their relationship with Zeng's works of earlier time through analyzing some particular works. *Morning of 15th June 2008* (Fig. 12) is an early work in the exhibition. It is not only quite different from the previous "little man" works (it shows two enormous human figures in a uniform yet jumbled space), but also remote from his "landscape" works produced during 2004 to 2005 (see Fig. 10-11). The artist seems to have had a sudden zoom-in, leaving human feet and the under-part of trees off the picture, which is rarely found in Zeng's works. The two young men in the picture, one Chinese and one foreigner, are standing formally with their faces towards the audience. With simple brushwork, their faces are plain but vivid, having a strong sense of portraiture. But this is an unfinished portrait – the artist leaves much underdrawing lines uncared for, which is most obvious on the foreigner. His near-transparent body therefore achieves sharp contrast with the big tree behind: the painter not only dedicates on the deep leafage, but also devotes into the subtle relation between leaves and the pale sky.

The special caring for trees can also be found in other paintings. In 22nd July 2009 (Fig. 13), we see a row of large willows, its twigs full of leaves dancing in the wind; however, in 22nd July 2009 (Fig. 14), there are two young poplars, one's trunk in white and the other in black, seeming to be whispering to each other. Compared with *Morning of 15th June 2008*, though the two works contain completed human figures, the description on trees shows greater emotional investment and instinctive influence. Comparatively speaking, those formal figures on the obverse side are always reminiscent of photograph rather than men in reality, which is also admitted by the painter himself. During one conversation, Zeng told me that though some figures are of strong personality, they are not "portraits" in general terms, because they are not persons with real names. In these works, these figures seem to be interchangeable, which further intensify the independent significance and aesthetic value of trees.

So, we won't be surprised when seeing the works of category 2 in the show: Zeng strips away the figures in the picture, making trees the only subject (Fig. 15, 16). Such change during his creative process might have been concrete and even violent: in his studio, there is a big painting, within which a figure next to a tree has been completely covered and erased. Some critics who viewed the original picture feel this a pity, but what deserves our consideration is why he did so and retained only the tree. To this, the words of Zeng himself may offer some hints:

The style of those works consisted of two driving factors. First, to provide the self with more opportunities for design-space, that is, break a new way for my previous ideas. Second, my feeling

towards trees – the weirdness on man-made trees inside me over the years. I have never stopped looking into trees, which to me is a bigger fun than looking into a painting. Such mindset, I think, can be attributed to my personal experience and the outside environment. During the time, great changes took place in China's art market, and to hold an exhibition became much easier. Still, lots of things, including the ways of thinking, have changed a lot, such as the coming of World Cup. To these changes, you feel nothing but boredom. In an exhibition in the past, no matter it was held by a master or an unnameable artist, we would feel being moved by some works. It might not be a masterpiece, but there were something touching your soul; and, you never needed to know about the “great” cultural significance behind the work. True emotion can never be explained. For many nowadays artistic works, they are all praised as talented and culturally meaningful; however, you can never tell what it is and what it is for without explanations from others. They appear full of power, but you are not to be moved. After the first sight, it forever goes out of our mind, leaving you an impression of “seems to have seen”. There are fewer works that can touch the soul, and exhibitions are more like fashion shows, incorporating various marketing elements. They have become about-the-same. I might have become indifferent to such an about-the-same method; and comparatively, I am more interested in trees themselves. I think such an emotional transition is easy to understand: it's a free study on the inter-relation between things, which is harder than the study within the scope of certain concept. As to me, those works of my early career were associated with the development of China and my career. So it is natural to be how it is like now.

The passage above offers three breakthrough points for understanding Zeng's “tree” works. Firstly, he hopes to slow down to find some “alternative” in his self-built pictorial world, so as to deepen his exploration; secondly, such exploration is under the influence of certain emotional factor – what he looks for is not a concept in a deeper sense, but a moment of “being moved” – it is therefore a more profound psychological state; and lastly, to set “tree” as the breakthrough point is not a decision out of rationality, but out of some interest that keeps haunting around.

As Zeng goes along, such interest, which has developed in his childhood, also keeps growing. In our conversation, he constantly thought back to his childhood. Then, Kunming was small and full of trees and gardens in the suburbs; whereas on the campus of Yunnan University, the place where he lived was full of pruned trees. He could hardly accept such pruned trees and know nothing about how to paint them. But as he grew older and knew more about the developing China, he turned to doubt about the concept of trees: does there really exist trees in purity and naturality? The reality always seems to be the intersection between nature and manpower: “new species were developed; southern species brought to the north, and vice versa; trees might be planted in strange places; and under the

trees might be a garage. In Guangdong, you could see artificial flowers in stores, and I felt they were even more “true” than real ones. Finally I found people grew with weaker resolving ability: feel true when seeing artificial trees, and vice versa. When put before a photograph of well-protected primitive woods, people would only shrug off, saying it an artificial picture, such as the so-called Switzerland Scenery. Instead, put before a man-made tree, all would feel it true and natural. 12”

When in 1999 he moved to Wangjing in suburban Beijing – by then Wangjing was only a newly developed area – Zeng saw a strange scene as he looked down from the balcony. They were planting trees there. There were both southern and northern species, and those that failed to adapt to the environment would be replaced with new trees during the night. Such ridiculous yet common phenomenon became part of the cityscape in his paintings (Fig. 8,9). As we talked above, the works of that period follow the “little man” concept of previous time, taking out urban scenes (including trees) from the original setting and making them “one little thing and another”: “public buildings are not viewed as public buildings, but something little. Like those flat pictures of my early career, I want shortcut-made things of plasticization and industrialization.” 13

Such “stripping-away” and the incorporated inclination of urban objectification and distancing is the main feature of Zeng’s works during 1999 to 2005. But when looking at his trees produced during 2008 to 2010, especially those latest ones, we can find they have to a great degree deviated from the mode of “stripping-away”. In conversation, he also no longer committed to the dialectic between reality and nihilism, the duality of ontology, but spent more in talking about his memory about trees as well as the possible creative opportunities:

This may be hard to tell. My opinion is: people will change their perspectives under certain circumstances. What impressed me most was the courtyard of my childhood, where I used to play about and where I knew everything well; however, when you lay on the grass, looking into the sky, you just felt it so strange to you, and trees also became strange beyond the grass. You would be moved by such scene, though you know nothing about what it really is. I am just looking for such a feeling in my paintings, that is, something that can change your perspective. For most of the time, we make judgments from a fixed perspective, or a force of habit. Free the self from such force, you would have a totally different perspective and find something moving. Why those boring photos become interesting as time goes by? Because the context of that time has been stripped away. You have come to see a new picture. You expect to see what you want to see; however, someone may see something against the will. His words remind me of Roland Barthes, who in his *La Chambre Claire* proposes two different psychological responses upon a picture: *studium* and *punctum*. In Latin, the former means the

concentration on one thing, which is borrowed by Barthes to indicate the general functions of pictures, including information transmission, scene reconstruction, significance generation, etc. - extension between pictures, viewers, and cultures. But such habitual and conceptual pictorial comprehension may be disturbed by punctum under certain circumstances. In Latin, punctum contains the meanings of sting, little wound, and small hole, which in Barthes' theory refers to the stimulus on viewers by occasional and unconventional methods and the astonishment thus achieved. Studium reflects the conventional semantic structure - intersection between images and general cultural signs; whereas punctum breaks such self-evident shared logic and thus brings temporary confusion and indisposition to viewers. In another words, it offers us temporary disengagement from the conventional cultural structure and experience in a non-literary and non-conceptual dimension.

The difference between stadium and punctum, as Barthes put it, is quite like the transition from trees becoming acquainted by daily habits to trees found moving by chance as Zeng talked above. If we say Zeng miniaturized his trees into "little things" same as other images prior to 2005, his recent trees have come to reflect personal exploration. By such exploration, he hopes to break the conventional perspective and acquire the momentary experience that is unfamiliar but inspiring.

Such perception allows us for further understanding of the characters of Zeng's works - characters which are beyond the traditional transition from "conceptuality" into "pictorialism" as often quoted by critics, but close to personal elements and expression of "pictoriality". In my view, the most important character of these works is the considerable "unfamiliarity" - not superficial unfamiliarity towards new images, but sudden confusion towards the significance and objective of the painting itself. Having taking part in observation parties for a number of times, I find that viewers who are familiar with Zeng feel at a loss at the first sight of these paintings, being unable to give a comment. I think such response is normal, because, as said above, these works pursue nothing but the displacement from "speech" to "speechlessness". Such speechlessness might bring new perspectives, so as to achieve a clearer perception of the familiar image "tree".

Another important character of these works is their persistence in "looking-for": the artist seems persistently looking for something beyond his grasp. Minute after minute, with caution and fear, he works on the leaves and sky. The trees and leaves belong to no specific time and location - they are images of influence emerging from memory, and to draw them out is like an archaeologist working on a historic site. What we feel are evaporating space, rich tree crown, and a pale world under the killing sun in summer time. These paintings seem never to be finished, and they keep asking "really

finished?” when shown to the public. By such doubt, I feel the sting as told by Barthes - it might indicate the momentary feeling of Zeng, both the pleasure and limitation brought by memory. Neither such pictoriality nor the memory it conveys is to be conceptualized. Therefore, I shall end this article by quoting Zeng’s words: as to things uninterpretable by criticism, critics are responsible for retaining them in picture:

It took a process in completing those works. At first, trees appeared to be abrupt and isolated. Afterwards, I tried to achieve a moving picture by way of something simple, such as by drawing a leaf by careful control on the leaves and by background relationship. But this was not like those brush playing literati paintings. I wanted a new way, by which life attitudes could be directly told. For example, the attitude I mentioned just now is to feel in a simple way. What matters is the feeling of being moved or being enlightened.

1. Feng Boyi, “Objects Remain While Men Change-On details of Zeng Hao’s painting”, in Zeng Hao, in Chinese Artists Today Series, [Lanzhou: Gansu Fine Art Publisher, 2008], p.120.

2. Ibid., pp. 32-33.

3. Paintings created before 1992 may be found occasionally. For example in Zeng Hao: A power of silence by Wang Daojie, p. 17, there is a photo of Zeng Hao posing in front of two paintings created in college.

4. See Lü Peng, “A Record of Microhistory of Daily Life-Art by Zeng Hao” [ibid., p. 8]..

5. Ibid.

6. Quotations here and the following are from “Seeking after the Touching Elements: Dialogue between Wu Hong and Zeng Hao” in this catalogue.

7. Most critiques are included in Zeng Hao, in Chinese Artists Today Series, [Lanzhou: Gansu Fine Art Publisher, 2008]

8. See Huang Zhuan, “The Spiritual Portrait of the Consumption Era” [ibid., p. 68].

9. An earlier example is one entitled 5 a.m. 3rd April 2010, see [ibid., p. 68].

10. See Pi Li, “From Furnishings to Landscape: A Review of Zeng Hao’s paintings”, in Zeng Hao, [Changsha: Hunan Fine Art Publisher, 2009], p. 6.

11. An even earlier painting 28th August 2007, see Zeng Hao, in Chinese Artists Today Series, [Lanzhou: Gansu Fine Art Publisher, 2008], p. 220.

12. See note 6.

13. See note 6.