CONCLUSION

The four decades from the 1970s to 2000s were a very special period in Chinese art history—indeed, it is rare even in world history to see the notions of art and the artist, art systems and institutions, and the nature and function of art works change so dramatically in such intense fashion. The most profound change among all of these was the emergence and consolidation of contemporary art, alternatively called avant-garde, unofficial, and experimental art at different moments and in specific contexts. When this art first appeared in the early and mid-1970s as scattered, secret initiatives, the Cultural Revolution was still raging, demanding a "proletarian dictatorship" in all spheres of literature and the arts. No public channels circulated information about Western art. Any contact with the outside world was heavily policed. "Revolutionary art workers"—the only kind of artists allowed to exist—were state employees producing politically correct works for the people. Any effort to challenge the Party's absolute control over art would be quickly silenced and severely punished.

Nearly forty years have passed since the end of the Cultural Revolution; contemporary art is now flourishing in China with endorsement from all directions. The strongest support comes from the market, which keeps this sector of Chinese art particularly lucrative. The two engines of the market are auction houses and commercial galleries; the latter's rapid proliferation most clearly indicates contemporary art's reliance on commerce. Take Beijing as an example. Before 1990, the city had no commercial outlets specializing in contemporary art; by 2000, five contemporary art galleries had appeared; by 2008, the number had jumped to three hundred; by 2012, the 798 art district alone had 207 galleries, mostly selling contemporary works. These numbers indicate the vast increase in financial transactions involving contemporary art as well as collectors and collecting agencies, other important supporters of this art. No significant collection of contemporary Chinese art existed before 1990; by 2010, however, some ambitious collectors had already moved to the next stage to build museums to showcase their holdings. Various kinds of foreign involvement constitute the third support of this art; examples include not-for-profit art institutions such as the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, honors such as the Chinese Contemporary Art Award and the Martell Artists of the Year, and invitations from many foreign museums and exhibitions. Then there is the endorsement from government-run institutions, as trendy biennials and triennials have been mounted in more and more public museums, and as art academies are establishing new contemporary art programs. In the introduction to this book, I proposed that after its emergence in the 1970s, contemporary art in China defined its identity through interacting and negotiating with other art systems, chiefly official, academic, and commercial art. Forty years later, this negotiation has reached a point where contemporary art has willingly merged into these other systems.

These two seemingly incompatible historical conditions of contemporary art in China frame this book, represented by the elusive No Name painters of the early 1970s in the first chapter, and by the flashy biennials and art fairs of the late 2000s in the last chapter. The chapters in between narrate how these two moments came to bookend a historical process constituted of and influenced by multiple internal and contextual factors. We have seen how contemporary art surfaced from the underground into the public space after the Cultural Revolution, how young artists and critics mobilized a nationwide avant-garde movement in the mid-1980s, how individual creativity reemerged in the late 1980s to foster abundant artistic innovation, how a heightened spirit of experimentation carried this art to a new level in the 1990s, and how Chinese artists have re-identified themselves as global citizens since the 1990s, creating works for an international audience beyond China's borders. None of this could have happened if China had not adopted a set of reform policies to develop a market economy and to engage with the world at large. Indeed, from a sociological point of view, the tale of contemporary Chinese art over the past four decades is but part of a larger story about the country's remarkable transformation. From an art-historical point of view, however, the point is not so much how this art reflects and benefits from the new socioeconomic conditions as how it has transformed such conditions to create distinct artistic languages and voices. From this perspective, if contemporary Chinese art has anything to do with social change, such change cannot remain simply an external frame, but must be internalized as intrinsic features and qualities of this art.

The numerous examples discussed in this book demonstrate two basic levels of interaction between contemporary art and its political, social, and economic contexts. The first level is centered on artistic creativity; the second level concerns institutional engagement. Interaction on the first level is responsible for the rapid

opening up of new intellectual and visual vistas in contemporary Chinese art through the artists' exploration of previously unknown forms and spaces. These artists have immersed themselves in a general atmosphere of experimentation: to them, China is a big laboratory and her transformation offers them endless possibilities to reimagine the world. They travel far and wide within China and beyond, creating not just works of art but also new lives for themselves. They are explorers in a fundamental sense, seizing all available opportunities, from better working conditions to intellectual stimuli, artistic information, social exposure, and financial resources. They embrace changes around them and absorb energy, speed, and excitement from these changes. As a result, the most interesting contemporary Chinese art created during these years often combines visual spontaneity and intensity with boundless ambition, as if the artists were indeed creating a new world. On the other hand, without firmly established critical standards and historical perspectives, such ambition can easily degenerate into a superficial display of theatricality or Chineseness.

Interactions on the second level are responsible for institutional reforms, expansions, and innovations to accommodate the development of contemporary art. Contrary to a popular perception that contemporary Chinese art has developed as an isolated counter-culture, its history has actually been intertwined with many kinds of establishments, including China's state-run institutions, international art systems, and transnational commercial networks. As early as the late 1970s, the emerging contemporary art had already begun to enter into complex negotiation with government institutions. These institutions include art academies, national and provincial artists' associations, departments of cultural affairs and of propaganda, public museums and other exhibition spaces, and licensed journals and newspapers. The negotiation was complex because these institutions were themselves undergoing transformations in the post-Cultural Revolution era. Over the following years, to use a term provided by the political scientist X. L. Ding, many of these institutions became "amphibious" due to their growing economic independence, the weakening of Party control, and the different demands on them from coexisting systems. As a result, these government institutions have engaged in a variety of programs with divergent and even conflicting purposes,[1] and such engagement has in turn led to the appearance of heterogeneous voices and spaces within art establishments. This book has discussed plenty of such cases: we have seen how reform-minded officials reached out to support alternative artists and groups, how adventurous teachers and students in academies were allowed to deviate from the traditional curriculum to teach or study non-socialist art, and how public museums introduced new exhibition models and even semi-independent branches for contemporary art. Some of the most powerful art institutions in China are now led by artists and critics who are themselves advocates of contemporary art: Fan Di'an as director of the National Art Gallery, Xu Jiang and Luo Zhongli as the presidents of the China Art Academy and Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, and Xu Bing as vice-president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. From their point of view, the best way to advance Chinese art, including contemporary art, is to transform these state-owned institutions into Western-style exhibition and education venues, not to develop alternative spaces outside institutional support and protection. This change in strategy—from opposition to engagement—had already started in the 1990s or even earlier, when an increasing number of pro-contemporary art critics and curators sought support from cultural officials, public institutions, and private entrepreneurs to develop a broader socioeconomic foundation for contemporary art. Their goal became reality after 2000, when the market for contemporary Chinese art finally matured and when the government signaled its acceptance of this art through the Third Shanghai Biennale and the China Pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Such institutional support and protection comes with a cost, however. Whereas the ongoing process of economic and educational reform has opened up valuable spaces for contemporary art within existing systems, to join these systems means to recognize their rules, even if the purpose of joining is to revise them. This is because reforms within individual institutions do not necessarily transform the larger systems to which they belong. Commercial galleries may occasionally sponsor not-for-profit exhibitions, but these events eventually help strengthen their position in the art business. The leading art schools such as the Central Academy of Fine Arts have established "experimental art" programs, but controversial political issues are definitely not considered the right subject for experimentation there. Public museums now routinely hold exhibitions of contemporary art, but still need permission from the political authorities before opening the shows. For independent artists and curators

who join these institutions, the danger is that they have to internalize the institutional boundaries as their own values. Even while manipulating and exploiting "whatever possibilities exist within the prevailing system to achieve their ends,"[2] they still have to play by the rules and exercise a measure of self-censorship.

Broadly speaking, contemporary Chinese art has rapidly entered a general state of "amphibiousness" since 2000, characterized by the absence of clear-cut self-positioning and the incessant interpenetration of multiple systems. The term "contemporary Chinese art" has lost its original social and political meaning. If there were times when this term evoked ideas of avant-gardism and alternative identities, it now signifies the non-confrontational coexistence of governmental, academic, commercial, and independent undertakings, all claiming ownership for the contemporary as a marker of progressiveness, cosmopolitanism, globalism, fashion, and a general sense of experimentation. Unlike 1990s experimental art, which took place mainly outside government venues, contemporary Chinese art of the 2000s became increasingly pervasive organizationally, blurring the line between official and non-official, government and market, public and private, institutional and individual. Contemporary Chinese art has, in fact, become a common social objective, drawing support from various social sectors and hence erasing boundaries between them. Some recent contemporary art projects, such as Xu Zhen's MadeIn Company and Lu Jie's Long March Space, are self-consciously "amphibious," combining business and experimentation in their self-definition. On the one hand, these projects prove the continuing efficacy of social change in stimulating artistic imagination. On the other, they are a far cry from the 1980s and 1990s, when "avant-garde" and "experimental" artists never wore a suit or mingled with cultural officials, real estate tycoons, and supermodels at fancy receptions. Future historians of Chinese art may frame the four decades from the 1970s to 2000s as a transformative phase between two more systematized periods, one governed by political dictatorship and the other by the market. For now, however, the duration and intrinsic complexity of this transformative phase still dominates our outlook; the rich body of art works and information it provides makes it one of the most turbulent and creative moments in Chinese art history.