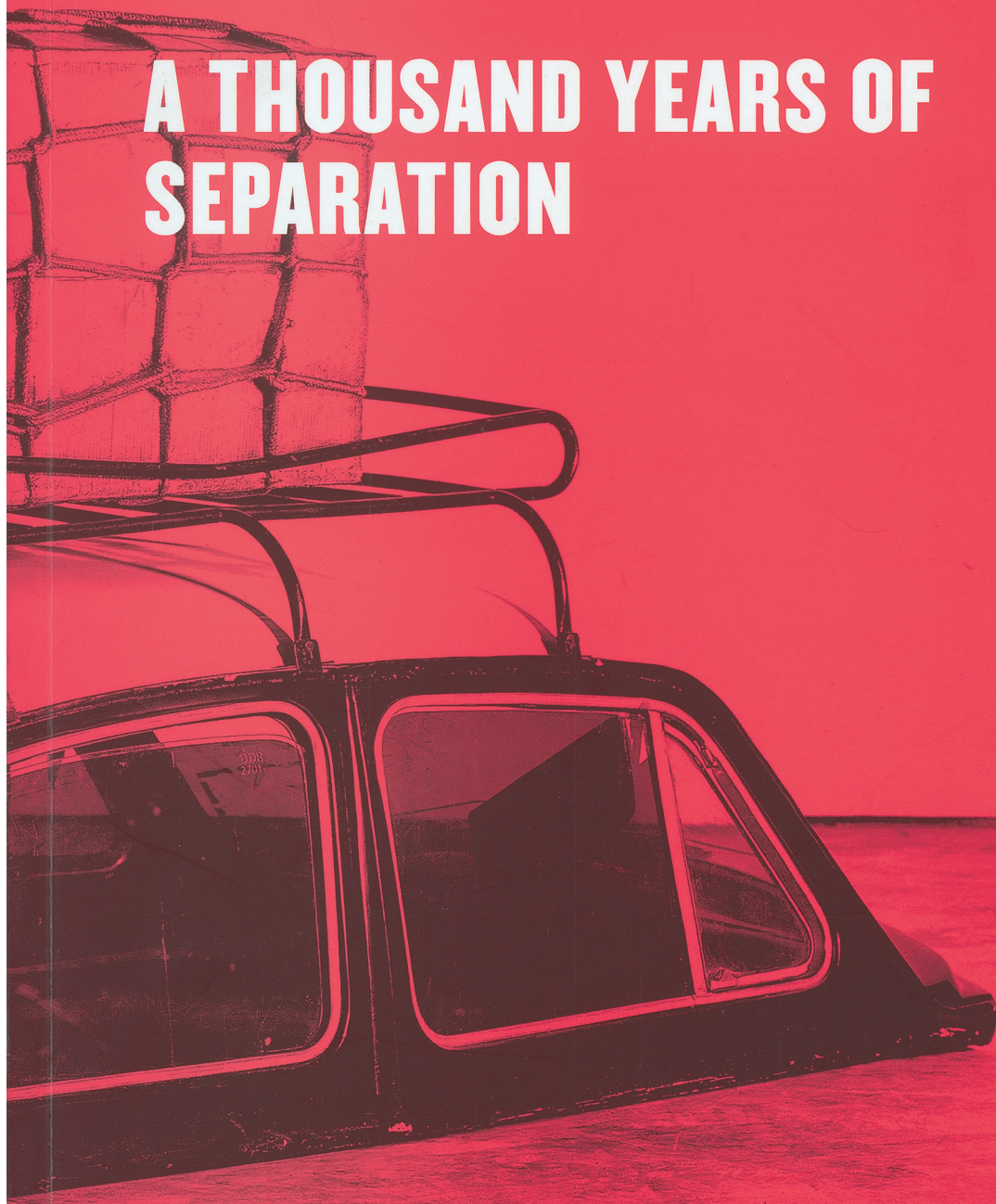


RE-IMAGINING ASIA

A THOUSAND YEARS OF SEPARATION



EDITED BY SHAHEEN MERALI

ZHANG DALI

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SM: What do you think the word “contemporary” means when it is used in the context of Asia, and especially in the context of art that comes out of Asia or China?

ZD: Well, for the Chinese, “contemporary” means from the eighties on. Before the eighties the word was not used, and of course before that period China was closed and there was not much communication, so you didn’t get information about what was going on outside. When I was at school even the Impressionists were criticized and were not accepted, but from the mid-eighties on, thoughts started to be more lively. I think “contemporary” as related to China and to art is related to a change in life that comes through the people, not through the instructor. In Europe “contemporary” is related to things like architecture, but in China it’s related to the life of the people and it refers to the period when the people began to have a more open and free way of thinking. So from that time, people’s lives started to change. This is the main reason for the protests of Tian’anmen in 1989: the people wanted to change, and not to be controlled any more. But it was also from that time on that the government came to understand that they could not keep people inside a cage and deny them the right to speak.

SM: So a term like “contemporary” is heavily intertwined with a very specific political agenda and reality.

ZD: It is related to the free thinking of the people, and to the fact that it is possible to think when you are not under the control of something. It seems that when we talk about “contemporary” in China and when we talk about “contemporary” in Europe, there is something that cannot be matched. We’re using the same word – *jhan-di* and its translation “contemporary” – but they have different meanings.

SM: How is the artistic community affected at this point, when it becomes contemporary? What does this free thinking mean in terms of artistic language?

ZD: It has had an impact on the work of the artists. Before the contemporary period artists were all reflecting or expressing something related to the war, the revolution, politics, but nothing individual or personal. And afterwards, not only did artists dare to express their own individual thinking, they also dared to criticize accepted ideologies and political thought. Then from that,

EXHIBITION: DOUBTS WITHIN THE SYSTEM: ZHANG DALI

each artist developed his own specific focus from a single problem, and developed many ways to express that problem. This all happened in those twenty years. If you look at the art of twenty years before, it's very clear what happened. I think many people have already forgotten what it was like at that time. If the artists we have today had produced the same kinds of works twenty years ago, they would have been in jail. Even the fact that I have my studio and I can work here, do what I want, paint what I want — even that says something. At that time it was just not possible, they would have said "Who are you?"

SM: Artists are expected to be critics and to have a sort of criticality. So when Chinese artists are taken into different cultures, and especially into the West, are they taken there on the basis that they are the critics of China?

ZD: I think there are several reasons for which Europe has accepted Chinese artists. One is because it was something new that could not be seen before. The form they were seeing, and the way it attracted them, had something Asian about it. Any work of art taken from one context and put into another will have certain features that are picked up on by the audience in the new context.

SM: How do you feel when this kind of international audience uses visual arts to map the history of China in its own way, for instance by picking up on very specific contexts that might fit their own idea of China as, let's say, a demonic, oppressive or oppressed country?

ZD: By doing this they create a mapping that locates China in a certain place according to what they have picked up. Each artist would like the public to understand what is inside their work, and the real or most original reasons behind it. But it is something you cannot control. You cannot control what other people will think when they see your work.

Excerpted from an interview conducted by Shaheen Merali in Beijing, September 2007.