

Gao Minglu put cutting-edge Chinese art on the map in 1989. Now, while the world's critics rave at mainland creativity, the Buffalo-based authority says art is in crisis. Clare Tyrrell reports

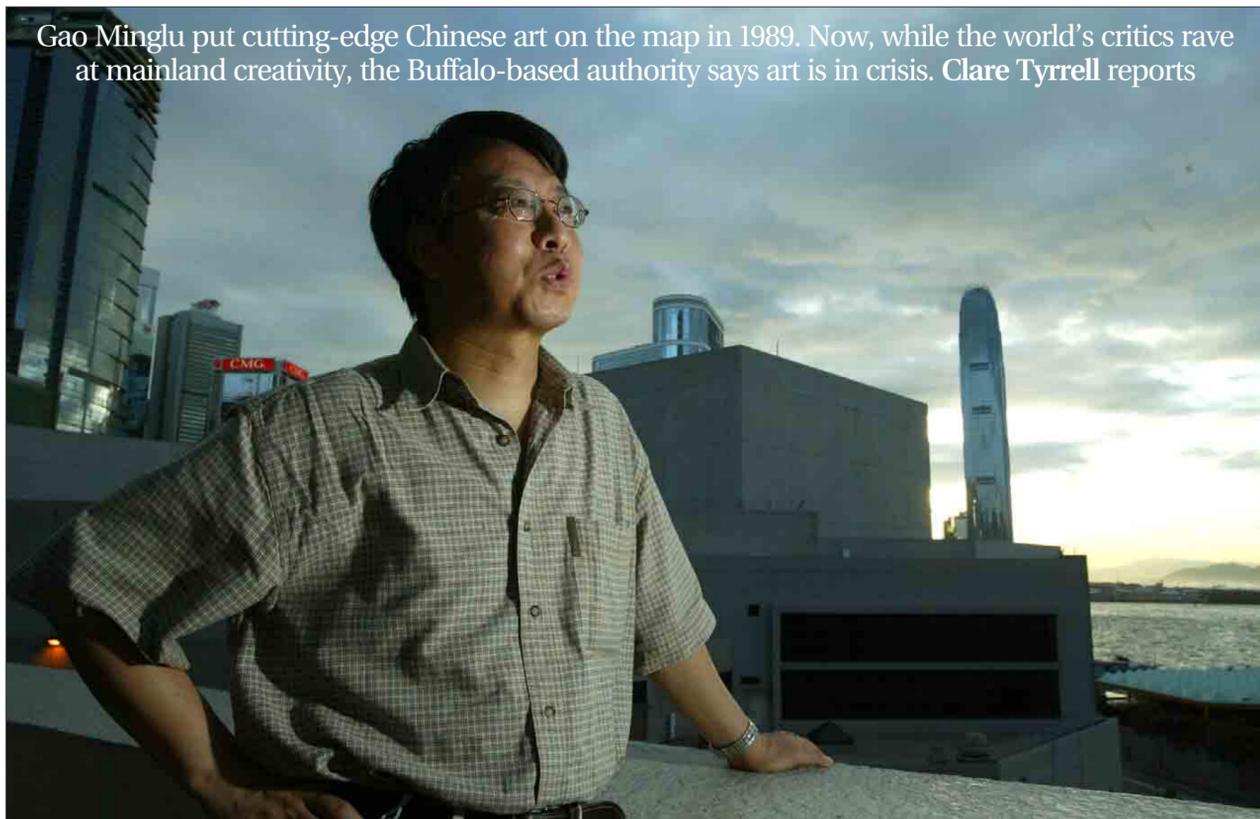


Photo: Dustin Shum

## SHADES OF CHANGE

ONE OF THE most influential figures of modern Chinese art settles into his seat at the Hong Kong Arts Centre's Open Kitchen in Wan Chai.

"I like to define myself as a critic," says Gao Minglu, as his eyes rove around the bustling café. "I also curate exhibitions, but in the 1980s I didn't think of myself as a curator. I was an editor and a critic ... and perhaps also an art historian."

The star guest of the Hong Kong art community this summer, Gao is on a six-week visit from the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he normally teaches art history, to lead workshops and lectures alongside New York-based artist Xu Bing in a summer-residency project at the centre. Gao has been mind-bogglingly busy since he returned to Hong Kong for

ing's National Gallery and was so controversial it was shut down almost immediately after it opened in 1989, when he was the editor of *Meishu (Art Monthly)*, the country's leading specialist journal. This was a notable achievement for someone who at 17 was separated from his family during the Cultural Revolution and sent to the distant prairies of Inner Mongolia to learn how to herd cattle. Gao was able to persuade the authorities to allow him to study art history, however, first at the Tianjin Academy of Art and then at Beijing's Academy of Fine Arts.

Gao was the first to spot the emergence of China's avant-garde art movement in the mid-1980s, and he played a large part in shaping it. He travelled extensively after he graduated in 1984, "con-

necting artists" and collecting material from around the nation. "In 1985, about 100 different, self-organised artist groups suddenly emerged in 29 provinces, as if it happened overnight," he recounts. "When we travelled and collected all this information for the magazine and journals, I thought it was necessary to bring exposure to these artists in a real exhibition space."

Two months later, the tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square and Gao, on Beijing's streets with his students, was caught in a gas attack and thrown to the floor "unable to breathe". He was rescued by a taxi driver who drove him to a nearby hospital. That week he was fired from *Meishu* and ordered to stay at home for a year to study Marxism. "I already knew Marxism, so I didn't need to study anything," he says with a dismissive wave of his hand.

But Gao was in an uncomfortable position. His writings and teachings had always followed a purely aesthetic, philosophical and cultural aspect of art criticism, but now he had become a political figure. "You just follow a path and eventually you reach a political end," he says. "It's not the way I wanted to go. This is why, when I got to the United States in 1991, I spent a lot of time learning the language and researching modern art history, to get closer to the Western context. Then I could look back to what we had done, and make judgments not only about the past, but to find a future vision of contemporary Chinese art."

In 1991, Gao left China to be a visiting scholar at Ohio State University, and ended up with a PhD in art history from Harvard, where he also taught. In September 1998, Gao pushed Chinese avant-garde art to a new level in the West with the mas-

sive exhibition, "Insideout: New Chinese Art". Organised in conjunction with the Asia Society and the San Francisco Museum of Art, it was a decade's-worth of works from the mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong. "It was an example through which I tried to find the difference between the idea of modernity in the West and Chinese modernity. I felt we needed some theory."

The show toured the US, Mexico and Australia, and came to Hong Kong in 2000. Since then, Gao has researched and profiled emerging Chinese art in Buffalo. But while his work has profiled Chinese art to the West as critics hail its explosion in international festivals, Gao has been increasingly concerned. "It is a cultural crisis," he says, suddenly. "What you're seeing at the Venice Biennale and Documenta is superficial. It appears to be very active. But what is going to destroy Chinese contemporary art is a lack of methodology." Gao says the commercial market is warping artists' ingenuity. "It's become a fashion, like a trampoline; everyone wants to get on it. But when you do, you cannot stop," he says. "You lose your personality and individuality, and move at the same speed as everyone else. We need someone who can be alone, who can really focus on their own thinking, their own logic. It is not something you can do, but something you must do."

Gao has another show up his sleeve, appropriately dubbed *The Wall*. "I want to use *The Wall* as an abstract notion rather than a physical object," he says, adding: "Is there abstract art in China? Where is the boundary? I am finding a few artists," he adds with a smile. But the world will just have to wait and see; *The Wall* opens in Beijing's Millennium Museum in 2005. [clare.tyrrell@scmp.com](mailto:clare.tyrrell@scmp.com)

Gao Minglu presents a public lecture, *Chinese Avant-Garde And "Abstract" Art, in Putonghua. Today, 7.30pm-9.30pm. Lim Por Yen Film Theatre, Hong Kong Arts Centre, 2 Harbour Rd, Wan Chai. Reservations and inquiries, call 2922 2822*

**"The first time I came to Hong Kong, I tried to find art. It's not easy to find. Perhaps art in Hong Kong is more formalist than [in] mainland China"**

Gao Minglu  
Art curator, historian and critic

the first time in seven years, earlier this month. "The first time I came to Hong Kong, I tried to find art," he begins, sipping an ice-cold drink, having dashed over from judging the winning works of the Hong Kong Art Biennale exhibition. "It's not easy to find. Perhaps art in Hong Kong is more formalist than [in] mainland China. People have always said that the mainland is more political, more ideological, more avant-garde. But it has changed. It is now more commercial than before, more superficial."

For 20 years, Gao, 53, has been orchestrating some of the most trail-blazing exhibitions and art movements. He was responsible for China's Avant-Garde, the notorious exhibition that swept into Bei-

## Bars, booze, brawls, and having a ball

English footballers aren't always on their best behaviour when visiting our shores. Neil Western reviews their antics

WHEN LIVERPOOL'S millionaire footballers step on to the turf at Happy Valley on Sunday to play a Hong Kong XI they will be on familiar ground for British soccer players. Several teams have played there in the past few seasons. The bigger question is whether they will follow an equally well-trodden route into the city's bars and on to the pages of Britain's tabloids.

It could be the heat, the 24-hour temptation or the fact players view foreign jaunts as a holiday and fail to pack their brain cells, but a trip to Hong Kong has stars pressing the self-destruct button like nowhere else. The city has witnessed enough footballing fracas to compile a tacky TV show called *When Good Players Turn Bad*. Stars from Arsenal, Chelsea and Manchester United among others have all had their fair share of scrapes in the city.

Most notoriously, Paul Gascoigne and members of the English national team went on a drinking spree on the eve of the 1996 European Championships and were pictured having neat spirits poured down their throats in the infamous dentist's chair at the China Jump bar in Causeway Bay. Gazza later went berserk on the flight back to London while his team-mates smashed TV screens in an orgy of violence.

A year earlier, Arsenal midfielder Ray Parlour punched an elderly taxi driver at 8am in Wan Chai after downing at least 12 pints in an all-night drinking session. He was fined \$2,000 and ordered to pay \$2,000 compensation. But the damage to the reputation of English footballers was beyond repair, despite his public apology.

"When it's off season players would rather relax and enjoy themselves," says Dr Louie Lobo, an assistant professor at the Baptist University's department of physical education which studies sports psychology. "They're here to demonstrate and practise so it's a kind of vacation for them. I think they will drink and go out while they can."

The problem is not just restricted to football. Participants in the Rugby Sevens and Cricket Sixes have attracted headlines for the wrong reasons: ranging from vomiting on the pitch after a big night to molesting a woman in a club. Lobo says a drinking culture is common to the preserve of team sports. "Social drinking happens in sports such as rugby, basketball and American football. They will hang out with their team-mates to become friends. Many players will get drunk, especially the English. It doesn't happen so much with individual sports such as cycling and tennis."

The upside for Asian sports fans is that meeting your heroes is easier than it would be back home. The squad goes out together and player's guards tend to be down when thousands of miles from home. They will also mingle more freely when out of zoom-lens range of tabloid photographers.

During Liverpool's last Asia tour in 2001, fan Steve Forsythe managed to book a hotel room in Bangkok on the same floor as his idols - and ended up in a lift with star striker Robbie Fowler and the three cups the Reds had won that season.

"It was the experience of a lifetime," says Forsythe. "I managed to touch the trophies and shake hands with the players."

But meeting your heroes does not always pan out the way you think. As a Manchester United fan (hold the hate mail) who watched them play here in 1997, I headed off to the bars in the hope of meeting the team, which had just won the Premier League. They had just signed Teddy Sheringham - a key figure in Gazzagate - who unsurprisingly returned to the scene of the crime with his new pals.

The entire squad was jostling for position by the bar and along with a few other crafty fans I managed to secure a few handshakes and photographs of all except the notoriously feisty Roy Keane - who told most fans to f\*\*\* off. As I set off to stagger home I bumped into the Danish goalkeeping giant Peter Schmeichel climbing into a taxi with a mystery blonde. I snapped him with my camera and all hell

**"When it's off season, players would rather relax and enjoy themselves"**

Dr Louie Lobo  
Baptist University sports psychologist



Paul Gascoigne enjoys a drink in Wan Chai. His 1996 Hong Kong visit is still remembered by some

broke loose. The big Dane stormed over, extended one of his large mitts and demanded I hand over the film. A tussle ensued which only ended when he accepted my plea that I was a fan and not a sleazy hack looking to make a quick buck.

His fear was understandable in an age where British tabloids expect sports stars to behave like saints. Liverpool's millionaire stars may be so paranoid that they may not venture out of the five-star Grand Hyatt hotel Wan Chai. But they have every right to let their hair down in the city's nightspots this weekend and hopefully some fans may get lucky and buy their hero a drink. Owengate seems unlikely, but as a litany of other stars have proved, anything is possible in Hong Kong. [neil.western@scmp.com](mailto:neil.western@scmp.com)

## PEOPLE

### Jacko against jail for music pirates

Singer Michael Jackson says Congress should not introduce laws that send music fans to jail for downloading songs illegally over the Internet.

"I am speechless about the idea of putting music fans in jail for downloading music. It is wrong to download, but the answer is not jail," Jackson (right) said. The pop star was referring to a bill before the US Congress that would make it a federal felony to obtain copyright works over the Internet without permission. "Here in America we create opportunities out of adversity, not



punitive. Fans drive the success of the music business."

The recording industry is preparing to file hundreds of lawsuits against people it suspects of piracy. AP

Photos: AP/AFP

### Jackass star acts up

One of the stars of MTV's *Jackass*, Stephen Glover, is in trouble with the law after he allegedly urinated in front of dozens of autograph seekers as part of a public stunt at a rock festival.

Glover, also known as Steve-O in the series that celebrates stupid behaviour, was arrested after police said he urinated in front of autograph-seekers at the festival in western Pennsylvania over the weekend. Glover, 29, was charged on Monday with disorderly conduct and faces a US\$300 fine. His publicist said he was unaware of the incident and would not comment.

In May, Glover was arrested in Sweden after claiming to have swallowed a condom filled with marijuana.

The Swedish charges were dropped after he admitted he had an Ecstasy pill in his bag and had smoked marijuana in his hotel room, but he denied smuggling the drugs into the country and said the condom stunt was a joke. He paid a US\$5,800 fine.

Glover also was charged with obscenity for dropping his trousers in a tavern in Louisiana last July, but prosecutors dropped the charge when he agreed never to perform in the parish again. AP

### Classical role for Jolie

Movie star Angelina Jolie will play the unlikely role of heart-throb Colin Farrell's mother in a screen version of the life of Macedonian hero Alexander the Great.

Jolie, 28, has signed on to take the role of the classical conqueror's mother, Olympias, in Oliver Stone's epic production *Alexander*, one of two competing movies on the same subject, *Daily Variety* said.

Jolie (right), who is poised to hit US screens with her reprise of her *Lara Croft* action-adventure role, will play Alexander's mum from his childhood until he becomes king and will shoot her scenes in Morocco and London.

Her film goes head-to-head with another about Alexander, which was being filmed in Morocco until the terrorist bomb



attacks there in May. The rival picture is to be directed by Australian Baz Luhrmann and will star Nicole Kidman and Leonardo DiCaprio. AFP

### X-Files star hurt in fall

The star of the *X-Files* television series, Gillian Anderson, has been injured in a fall at her home.

She suffered suspected back and hip injuries in the accident at her home in Notting Hill, west London, *Ananova* com reported.

A spokesman for the private Cromwell Hospital in Earl's Court said Anderson was admitted by ambulance in the early hours of Monday.

Her fiancé Julian Ozanne is believed to have been in the house at the time, but the circumstances of the fall are not known.