

## Notch the Boat to Find the Sword:<sup>1</sup> Fei Dawei on Archiving the '85 New Wave Movement and Beyond

**Yuan Fuca:** In conjunction with the retrospective exhibition at the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art (UCCA) in 2007, *'85 New Wave: The Birth of Chinese Contemporary Art*, you led a team of researchers in compiling the archive on the '85 New Wave Movement. The result was the publication of a two-volume edition titled *The '85 New Wave Archive* the same year. It includes many important and previously unseen archival materials and significantly advances our understanding of the '85 New Wave Movement. Could you please tell us what rekindled your decision to continue the publication project today? How is today's project different from your earlier publication and from other existing sources on the '85 New Wave Movement?

**Fei Dawei:** The archive publication project I am currently working on is not limited to the '85 New Wave Movement. It is also related to my work over the past thirty years. I have been collecting and categorizing archival materials from the very beginning of my curatorial career. While curating the exhibition at UCCA, I planned to publish these materials as a multi-volume book project and supplement it with extra material gathered from various artists. At that time, I published only two volumes—1,412 pages altogether. However, the project was suspended, and around 2010, I gave the materials to Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong for scanning and archiving, and this eventually made them available to professional researchers. As far as I know, many researchers have used the material for their research. Although the publication project has been suspended for ten years, I have never stopped archiving. New materials are constantly being discovered and added. Recently I managed to get some private funding, and right away I restarted the publication project.

**Yuan Fuca:** Could you talk about the scale and content of this project? Also, what specific artist and exhibition case studies do you plan to include?

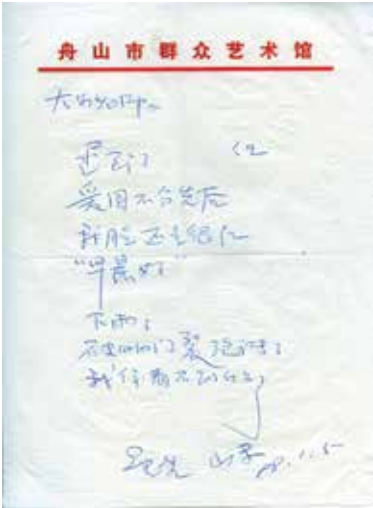
**Fei Dawei:** The project will be expanded to ten volumes in total, with approximately six hundred pages each. The editing and publishing work will be finished around 2020. The earlier published archive spans from 1985 to 1995, with two main themes: the flourishing of contemporary art in China and contemporary Chinese art's encounter with its Western counterparts. Both parts are closely related to my own work and will be discussed thoroughly. Many letters, memos, manuscripts, and unofficial unpublished texts will be seen for the first time. Artist case studies include Huang

Yongping, Zhang Peili, and Wu Shanzhuan, among others. The project also includes key artist collectives such as the New Measurement Group and Xiamen Dada. In terms of exhibitions, it will include the important events I participated in and curated such as *Magiciens de la Terre*, *Chine Demain pour Hier*, *Exceptional Passage*, and so on. Every case is accompanied with in-depth interviews and introductory essays.

**Yuan Fuca:** How are you building the structure and weaving together the narrative threads in this forthcoming publication? Are there any standards or rules for selecting materials?

A Letter from Wu Shanzhuan to Fei Dawei, January 5, 1988. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.

**Fei Dawei:** As I said, I will adopt the structure of the first two volumes using case studies as a general framework and bringing together comprehensive materials from key individual artists and important exhibitions. I don't have an across-the-board standard and do not want the materials to be circumscribed by a particular theory or concept. My selection of materials is inherently related to my long-term practice of art criticism and curatorial work. My judgments are also not always coherent; sometimes they even contradict each other. However, I do believe that this period of history is worthy of renewed attention.



**Yuan Fuca:** In the publication, all the documents, the slides, images, letters, and manuscripts will be reproduced as plain text and images. Do you think that the lack of materiality of the originals will to a certain degree remove some of the historical information attached to them?

Fei Dawei and Huang Yong Ping in 1990. Unknown photographer. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.





**Fei Dawei:** I am certainly willing to lend the documents to readers who love the originals, letting them hold these manuscripts as they fall asleep, although this will hardly guarantee their returning to the '80s in their dreams. When dealing with manuscripts, I think that an intelligent reader should learn to decode and reimagine the reality through the handwriting, the paper folds, the stains, and the worn edges on the documents. He or she should read any information shown on the material carrier just like a phonograph reads a vinyl record. Without this ability, even when holding the originals in their hands, readers cannot make good use of them. Reading images is an essential skill related to a historian's imagination and professional training. In the final publication, all the handwritten documents will be high-resolution images of the originals. I will also attach their typed text. This way, both the written information and the information hidden in the materiality of the documents will be accessible simultaneously.

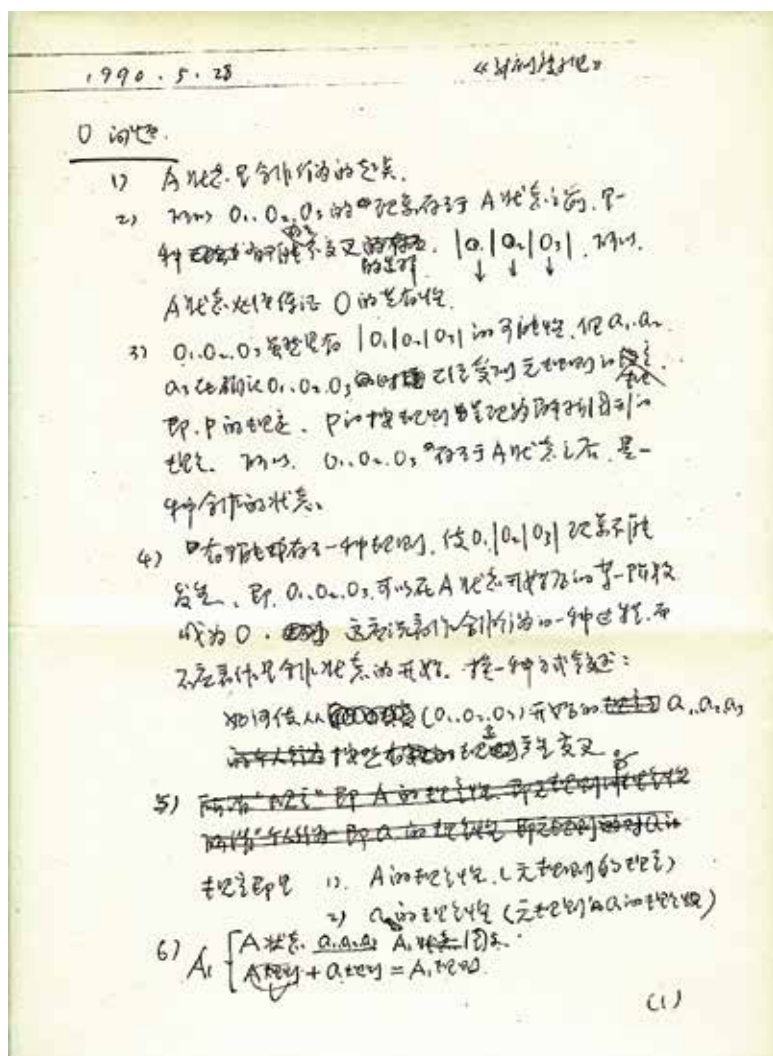
However, even if we have all the original material, we can't guarantee we will be retelling the original story. Just like the ancient story "notch the boat to find the sword" tells us, we can only preserve traces of the past, not the past itself. A sword has been left behind in the distant river, and we can never retrieve it as it is. Owning the documents doesn't mean owning a bygone past. The materiality of the original documents does not necessarily bless us with the ability to reconstruct history. It just provides a virtual image; "objectivity" is like a cicada shedding its shell and disappearing without a trace.

**Yuan Fuca:** An archive conjures up a sense of objectivity in that the selection and composition of the materials often affect the ways in which history is written. There are two threads in your archive: one includes the



taste. I do not attempt to control them. Although this archival project includes in its content my own work, for me it is key to maintain a “non-self” attitude. I notice that in some historical approaches to the ’85 New Wave Movement, certain people have tried to exaggerate their own contributions in the movement. This not only undermines their scholarship but also is ethically inappropriate. That being said, I think that being a historical witness myself is a special blessing. A historian who personally experienced the war and a historian who writes about the war from research in a library will produce different works. My personal experience in the ’85 New Wave Movement might be a beneficial avenue through which to delve into the core of history.

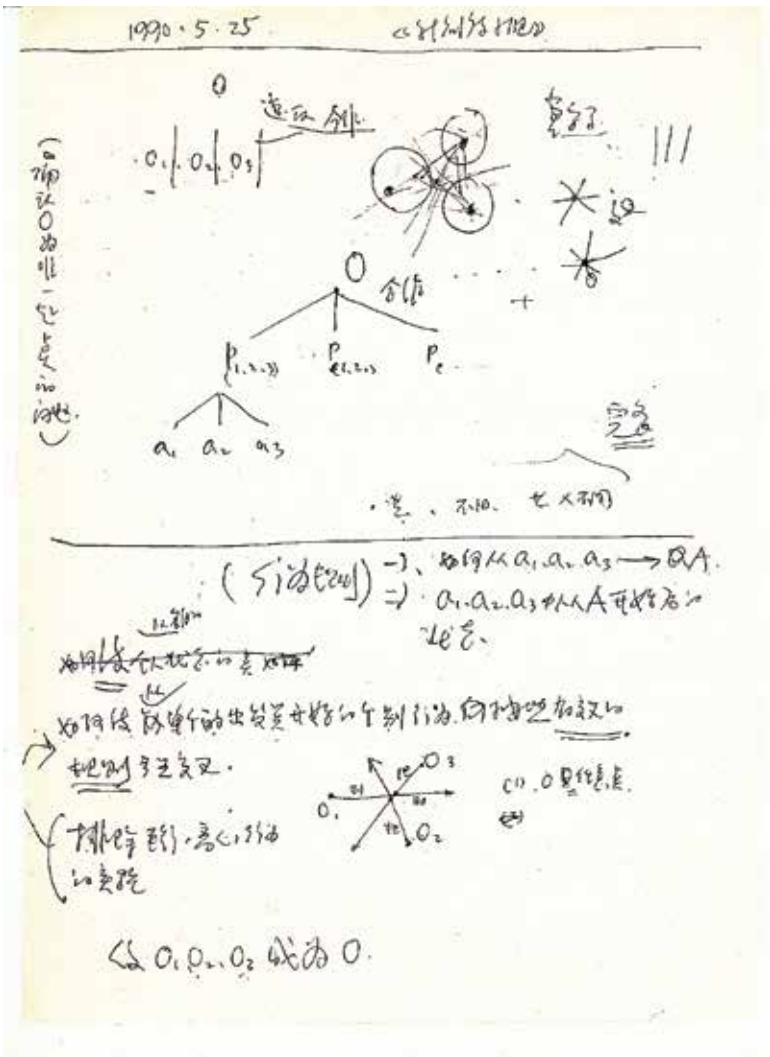
**Yuan Fuca:** You said that *The '85 New Wave Archive* would eventually become an open source. Do you have plans to put it online? And how is a multi-volume publication different from an online resource?



Manuscript explaining the rules of New Measurement Group, May 25, 1990. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.

**Fei Dawei:** I do want to make the archive available to the public. This is the reason why I am spending time categorizing the materials. And as I have given most of the materials to Asia Art Archive for scanning, it should be available in the future to researchers. An online database requires a team of professional technicians to design and maintain it. One main issue is how to





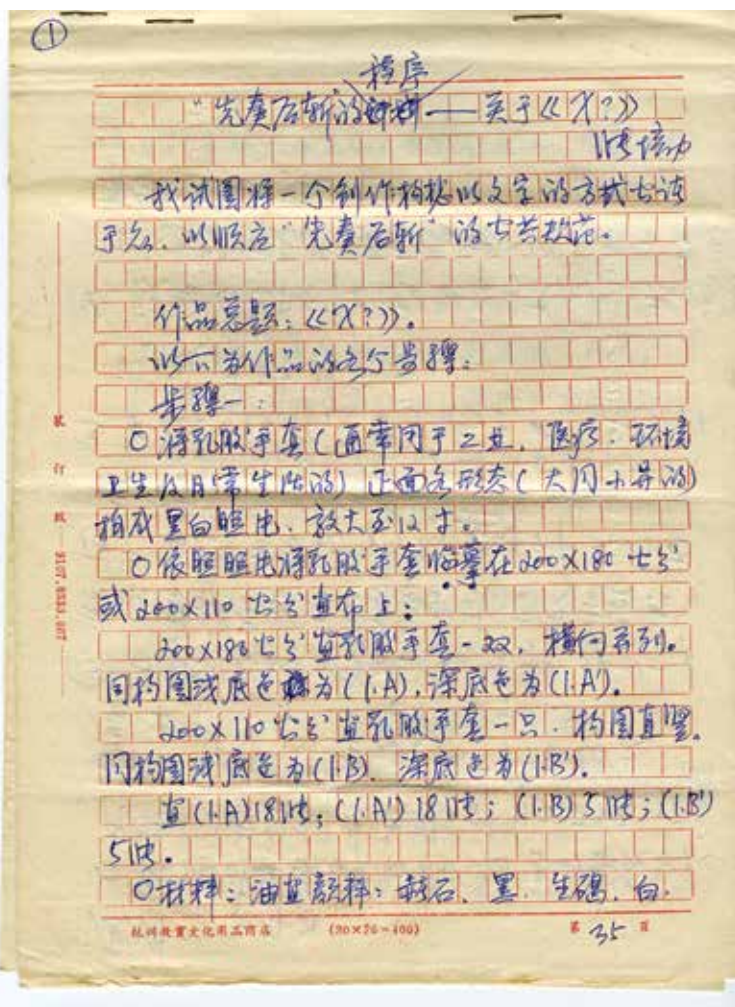
design the database in order to facilitate browsing and searching. Right now, I don't know enough about the field to address this question.

**Yuan Fuca:** Do you plan to curate an exhibition based on this archive? Do you have any specific ideas about presenting this archive in the form of an exhibition?

**Fei Dawei:** The project will still take another three or four years to complete. It is too early to talk about an exhibition without a museum contract. An exhibition depends on the space, its spatial arrangement, the lighting equipment, and the budget. Without relevant information, it is too early to talk about how to display this archive right now.

**Yuan Fuca:** What's your advice for people who might use this archive?

**Fei Dawei:** Future researchers will be the people who have never experienced the '85 New Wave Movement. I hope that they will be able to compare different archives and conduct research that is led by their own questions. Different archives paint very different pictures of history. Only by comparing various sources can researchers formulate their own perspectives. In my opinion, we should be skeptical of the so-called



Zhang Peili's manuscript for "A Program for Reporting Before Killing—about 'X?'," August 1987. Courtesy of Fei Dawei.

“authoritative archive.” There is no such thing as an “authoritative archive.” It is deceptive. An archive establishes its meaning only in the course of being used and being interpreted by different people. Compiling an archive, like writing history, is a social practice in which discourse formation is contingent upon specific social and cultural histories. An archive is always partial and incomplete. We will never fully understand the historical significance of the materials we don’t have, just like we will never know the historical significance of the materials we do have. No matter how comprehensive the archive seems to be, it is only a small part of the history it represents.

#### Notes

1. Original Chinese of the idiom: 刻舟求剑. During the Warring States Period, a man was crossing a river on a boat. When the boat reached the middle of the river, this man dropped his sword into the water, where it sunk out of sight. The man pulled out a knife and carved a mark into the side of the boat. He told himself, “This is where my sword fell in the river.” When the boat reached the opposite river bank, this man jumped into the water to look for his sword in the same place where he had marked the boat. The boat had moved, but the sword itself had not.
2. “HST287: 16-Sept-2004 Reading Notes Collingwood, *Idea of History*, Epilegomena,” <http://www.uvm.edu/~hag/personal/portfolio/hst287/notes-9-16.html/>.