# Caocaoshe (草草社,The Grass Society)

The Grass Society or Caocaoshe, was a formal group of ink painters founded in Shanghai in 1979. Qiu Deshu (仇德樹, 1948-) founded the group and was its youngest member. Chen Jialing (陳家泠, 1937-), once a teacher of Qiu’s, was the group’s co-founder. From the 1950s to 1990s it was possible to practice art outside the Socialist system. The underground art movement included senior artists condemned by the Cultural Revolution and unofficial artists who had given up state employment. After Mao’s death in 1976, local arts administrators began exploring problematic exhibition themes with no political focus, in mediums such as watercolours, considered unsuitable for Socialist Realist art. Caocaoshe emerged within this environment. Originally called ‘Independent Artists Team’ they were advised to change the name as it suggested the ideals of USA’s Declaration of Independence. Nevertheless artistic independence and individualism were overriding principles of their practice. Their manifesto described their aspirations; ‘grass – symbol of the strongest life force in nature… so widespread, so ordinary and resilient, yet it brings to the world year after year, luxuriance and hope’. Members were committed to innovation within the medium of ink. Their use of painting as a vehicle of self-expression, in opposition to official art, connected with ideology of the Chinese literati. Moving beyond imitation of both Chinese and Euramerican art, their experiments severed form from content and led to abstraction.

Qiu Deshu learnt to paint at Luwan District Children’s Palace. During the Cultural Revolution he shoveled coal at factories and was an accomplished Red Guard painter with work shown regularly in Shanghai exhibitions. In 1977 he transferred to the Luwan District Cultural Centre to manage exhibition planning and implementation. His own work employed vivid colour with a tangible sense of movement to convey a sense of vibrancy and harmony.

Chen Jialing trained at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, he taught at Shanghai Art School, with his academic background adding legitimacy to Caocao. The subject of his work was the lotus, a Buddhist symbol of purity, formed with puddled washes and skillfully controlled dry ink.

Other members included unofficial artists Chen Juyuan (1939-) who wrote Caocaoshe’s manifesto, Jiang Depu (1937-), a group of former students from Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts: Pan Feilun (1937-), Zhu Yinling (1939-), Xu Yinghuai (1937-) and Zeng Mi (1935-), and artists Guo Runlin (1940-), Dai Dunbang (1938-) and Yuan Songmin (1927-).

Their first, and only exhibition was scheduled to run from 16th February to 9th March 1980 at the Luwan District Cultural Centre. Titled *The Grass Society: Painting Exhibition for the 1980s* it was targeted by censors before it opened. The event was shut down prematurely in the Movement Against Bourgeois Liberalism being criticised for ‘abstract tendencies’, which were equated with political subversion. Qiu Deshu was subsequently removed from his position at the Cultural centre, the group disbanded and core artists continued practice as individuals. Nevertheless the objectives of the group influenced art students at official academies in the late 1980s.

**References and further reading:**

Andrews, Julia F and Shen, Kuiyi, (2013) *Light Before Dawn: Unofficial Chinese Art 1974-1985*. Hong Kong: Asia Society. (Catalogue of exhibition of post Cultural Revolution art movements contains detailed essay on Caocaoshe, background on key artists and images of work.)

## Andrews, Julia F, (1995) *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* Berkeley: University of California Press. (Political background leading to emergence of avant garde art movements nationally. While no specific mention of Grass Society provides information on post Cultural Revolution art practice and exhibition.)

## Qiu Deshu and DeBevoise, Jane, (September 16-17, 2011) *Conversation with Qiu Deshu*, New York; Asia Art Archive in America and China Institute. Transcribed and revised by Xiaofei Mo. (Transcript of dialogue reflects on artist’s early influences and work, political environment and Caocaoshe’s 1980.) <http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/conversation-with-qiu-deshu/>



Qiu Deshu (仇德樹), *Rhythm of Stream*, 1979. Ink and colour on paper. 77.5 x 77.5 cm. Collection of Carolyn Hsu-Balcer and Rene Balcer.