UTSA's East Asia Institute welcomed Dr. Jinli He, Professor of Chinese art history, philosophy and society at Trinity University, who gave a lecture on January 28th on contemporary Chinese art and its context. Many students, professors, and others outside of UTSA were present to hear Professor He speak. She spoke mainly about the four periods of contemporary Chinese art and how the political, societal and international art markets have affected it. Contemporary Chinese art starts from 1976 and ends around the post cultural revolution. It is generally divided into four periods: Post Cultural Revolution, New Art Waves, Multiple Developed Period, and the Museum Era.
Phase I, the Post Cultural Revolution Period (1976-1984) focuses on the reflection and reevaluation of almost all the values Chinese society had held before. During this period there were many publications of western humanistic ideas into China. There were many publications of western culture, from translations of masterpieces of western philosophy, aesthetics, and literature to introducing western impressionist art. This trend also influenced the art world as a whole. Many western art exhibitions opened the eyes of Chinese artists because they saw that political or propaganda art was totally abandoned and the “aesthetic” value of art was advocated. Some of the popular artists and art groups of this phase are Wu Guanzhong, the Star Group and “No Name” Group.

Phase II, the New Art Waves (1985-1989) was viewed as the flagship year for Chinese avant-garde art. New Art Waves was a revolutionary event not only in the art world, but in the whole of society as most art activities were not taking place in art galleries or museums, but rather in the countryside, factories or on the streets. This emphasized the idea of freedom of expression, and that art should be found in ordinary life. New Wave artists, such as Song Yongping, had a strong passion to be preachers to enlighten ordinary people, workers, and farmers through their artwork. They even thought of themselves as cultural renovators and had the tragic feeling to devote their lives for the great project of revolting against tradition and authority. Some of the major pieces of art during this time are Wang Aiyi’s Post Classical: Death of Marat, Zhang Xiaogang’s Ceaseless Love and Mountains.

Phase III, the Multiple Developed Period (1990-1999) was a time faced by the confused rapid changing societal structure, therefore some of the artists changed into political pop. Artists of this time, such as Xu Bing and Gu Wenda, used philosophical ideas to destroy authorities’ ideas and values. Wu used the images of propaganda paintings combined with pop (advertise language and daily life dialogue). His big character paper not only destroyed the Cultural Revolution’s political language, but also deconstructed all the arbitrary rules and principles in contemporary life and ordinary life. Avant-garde art lost its official place for exhibition and was abandoned by the mass culture and was forced underground. This led to Art Village and Apartment Art, which consisted of artists discussing art together and creating art projects on paper which would never have a chance to be published.

And last but not least Phase IIII, the Museum Era. As a result of these past three movements, contemporary Chinese art entered into its museum era. Chinese contemporary art with the help of western institutions, art dealers, curators and collectors, has continued to exhibit in Europe and the U.S. They are described as experimental art by critics to show the “art world’s representative voice in China” Cynical realism and political pop were the most popular art styles in the West. One of the art pieces she showed from this era was Mao Goes Pop which was first exhibited in Sydney, Australia. As people are enjoying the art more, the artists now enjoy more opportunities to get fame and fortune, and more and more artists try to take advantage of this which leaves the real meaning art in question.

Professor He finished off on a high note by saying that art is being promoted in the market, media and education all over China. “Art tell more truth than reality. We expect good stories from Chinese contemporary art.”