CHAPTER I

New Elements of Chinese Painting In the Twentieth Century

Like the other long and continuous cultural traditions of China, the heritage of Chinese painting was great and strong. Chinese artists were carrying on a tradition of more than one thousand years of ink painting. The ideal traditional artist was a scholar, poet, calligrapher and painter. Even today, artists are always looked upon as intellectuals who have both social and spiritual responsibility. The highest manifestations of traditional painting may have been enhanced by the conditions and conventions of their production, achieved through intimate engagement with philosophical and spiritual concepts. As members of a cultural elite, they never took seriously the trickle of foreign art penetrating China until this century. As Michael Sullivan has said: 'We have seen how before modern times western art was no more than a light wind blowing over the ocean of Chinese painting'. This was because they were in a cultural system that could not conceive of competition or alternatives.

The first attempt to revitalise traditional artistic presentations occurred in Chinese art during the early 20th century, after the establishment of the Republic in 1911, within an environment where there existed a strong and widespread consciousness of national crisis. The internal and external turmoil affecting China, awakened some progressive Chinese intellectuals. They confronted the humiliation and sense of impotence affecting the Chinese national spirit, and summed up traditional Chinese culture as 'passive' in its nature. They could be regarded as the spiritual ancestor who broke with

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12Quoted in Michel Sullivan, The meeting of Eastern and Western Art, London 1973, P165
traditional ideas of Chinese superiority and self-sufficiency as well as with existing patterns of political authority. Calling for a revolution in Chinese culture in order to remake its value and life, they launched a movement against traditional culture and feudal society. This was the May Fourth movement which planned to utilise the Western 'active' culture to save Chinese culture.

The 'Aesthetic revolution' was a part of that revolutionary movement. Modern thinkers like Kang Youwei, Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun, pointed out that the demise of Chinese literati painting was inevitable.\textsuperscript{13} The 'charm of the ink and brush' became more and more devoid of originality and vitality of meaning at that time. Meanwhile, Western art offered a strong contrast to the traditional literal aesthetic system. They saw that, borrowing and adapting the realist spirit of Western art would revitalize the lifeless Chinese art formulas and produce a new kind of Chinese art which could reflect social realities.

The modern artistic movement in Chinese art was first launched in 1916 in Guang Dong-- the centre of revolutionary activity. Gao Jianfu, together with his brother Gao Qifeng and friend Chen Shuren, who had studied in Japan, set up an art school for the purpose of reviving Chinese painting by introducing Western techniques including perspective, proportion and scheme of colour to depict subject matter. They were the founders of 'the New Lingnan school'. Inspired by the new painting style of the Meiji period of Japan, they lead the 'New National Painting' movement which attempted to achieve a revitalized mode of Chinese expression as a new national identity by synthesizing the best features of Chinese and Western art. Since these leaders in the Lingnan school

\textsuperscript{13} Shen Peng, Chen Lasheng(eds.) (1986). \textit{Meishu lun ji} (Collected essays on Fine Arts) pp293-295
had strong ties with the revolution in 1911\textsuperscript{14}, their desires for the new art were closely connected with the revolutionary spirit of that time.

This was the first generation of Chinese artists who demanded that traditional painting face social reality and concerned itself with problems and images of the surrounding world. They made an effort to bring new life to the tradition. However, their efforts were only partially successful. The weakness of this school, as seen by Michael Sullivan was that 'it was too conscious and deliberate a synthesis, it came from the head, not from the heart.'\textsuperscript{15} It is true this was not a profound synthesis. They seemed to be short of deep comprehension of both Western art and Chinese art. But in any case, it widened the scope of traditional painting's subjects, as a way of seeing in the realistic expression, and it was something new and modern to China at that time.

An examination of the development of modern art in the pattern of the world shows Chinese art has gone against the trends of Western art. When traditional European realism began its transformation into Modernism, a transformation moving from a concern with objective form to the free expression of a subjective world, the innovation of Chinese art moved from reinstating nature as the source of artistic inspiration. Western-derived scientific realistic art was being developed in China at the expense of the literati traditional of subjective expression.

The major influence in Chinese painting from the West was the technique of realism. With that concept, the revitalization of Chinese art, it was argued, must

\textsuperscript{14} Croizier, Ralph(1988), Art and Revolution in Modern China, p84 University of California Press.  
come from nature and the real world became the source of artistic inspiration. Chinese art reformists were particularly impressed by western realist expression which depicted objects directly from nature. They believed this scientific method was the possible means to remedy their ailing tradition.

There were some different voices introducing Western realist techniques. Traditional artists such as Chen Shizeng, Zheng Wuchang, Pan Tianshou wrote articles to expound the unique characteristic and value of literati painting and argued that not emphasizing representational form was the artistic advance. In their opinion, what needed to be changed, was not the sublime technique of literal ink painting, but rather the attitude by which literati art had become too disengaged with real life. They were actively opposed to using Western realistic technique to reform Chinese painting and imagined that the development of modern Chinese art was a process which would change attitudes to literati art and bring its language up to date. But under the impact of Western influence, the idea that the traditional subjective language could only be transformed from inside had lost its importance for most modern Chinese artists. It is the artists whose advocacy of Western influence played the more effective part in the development of modern Chinese art.

As a result of the May Fourth movement, a number of artists studied oil painting in Europe and Japan during the early twentieth century. Upon their return in the 1920s and 1930s, these artists took up teaching positions within art schools and played a central role in the establishment and development of formal art education in China. They introduced to China not only new techniques for painting, but a new concept of a national and public role for art

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with new institutions, such as art schools, public exhibition and government sponsorship of the arts.

The foremost artists in this period who pursued these innovation were Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) and Liu Haisu (1896-1993). Born in the nineteenth century, these artists all experienced the hardships of Chinese society in the first half of this century. They acquired extensive experience in western art in Japan or Europe and their achievements in Chinese painting media are also widely recognised.

It is interesting to note almost all of the artists returning from abroad took up the Chinese brush again to experiment in a Chinese manner. The most dramatic quest for reforming Chinese traditional art was demonstrated by those artists who were skilled in a Western style. What motivated them to take on the heavy responsibility initially was a deep-rooted concern for the future of Chinese art and its continuation in modern times. To these artists, the ultimate aim was to draw from Western art to nourish Chinese art, making Western art a keystone to establish a new art, both modern and Chinese. Their parallel usage of both Chinese and western materials and techniques developed a kind of dual artistic personality that is one of the most unusual features of twentieth-century Chinese art. In Nanjing, Xu promoted realism based on the French academic style, and advocated 'changes in Chinese painting'. Lin championed self-expression by incorporating aspects of impressionism and Post-Impressionist art techniques. In Hang Zhou, he wanted 'reform in Chinese painting'. In Shanghai, Liu's style combined post-impressionist art techniques, he used the slogan 'revolution in Chinese painting'.

For all of these revolutionaries, the early attachment to Chinese painting in the traditional medium revealed the influence of the Lingnan School. Certainly, they were much more advanced in synthesising the two art worlds. Believing in the validity of tradition, they still took up the brush but attempted to turn away from the imitative and anaemic tendencies of Chinese painting in their work, and to develop direct observation, genuine feeling and formal theory as a means to discover aesthetic truth\textsuperscript{18}. They insisted that an equal understanding of both Western and Eastern style and medium was essential to the creation of a new national style, which could express new feelings and experience, and succeed at home as well as internationally\textsuperscript{19}. But how to achieve this goal was a ceaseless debate. Their mastery in different western art styles from nineteenth century to twentieth century trends was reflected in their oil painting as well as in some of their Chinese painting. Each of them had an individual contribution to make to modern Chinese art. Even today, their influence has not diminished, and young Chinese artists still feel the effect of these masters.

Xu Beihong can be considered as the most important figure in the introduction of Western ideas. He was the major founder of realism in Chinese art. Believing art should play an important role in social change and revolution, he aggressively promoted realism instead of ‘disengaged’ literati aestheticism so that art could be understood by many rather than the select few.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid. p40.
Influenced by the idea of Kang Youwei and Cai Yuanpei, Xu Beihong had already formulated his ideas on the reform of Chinese painting before he went to Europe. In his famous work, 'Views on the Reform of Chinese Painting', he wrote: 'As far as the ancient method are concerned, maintain the good ones, revive the interrupted ones, transform those that are not good, strengthen the weak ones, and assimilate appropriate elements from Western painting."

Xu Beihong was firmly committed to the cause of realism, and the direct study of nature as a remedy for the ills of Chinese literati painting. He knew what he wanted from both Western and Chinese art tradition, and tried to harmonise them with a strong single-mindedness. In accordance with the view of realism, he highly praised what he believed to be the more creative traditional artists on the one hand, and detested the strict literati theories and Western formalism on the other. For the deep interest in academic painting in Western art, he spent eight years in Europe, studying mainly in the academies of Paris and Berlin. Thereafter, he mastered the very demanding skills of realistic representation.

In his ink painting, Western realist depiction was at the service of the Chinese approach. Many of his painting definitely served national artistic purposes in which he tried to depict something of national and cultural significance. Meanwhile, his form of brushwork of Chinese painting broke the restrictions of realism to achieve a symbolic overtone and a sense of freedom seldom seen in Western academic painting. In fact, Xu's painting in both media and style are closely related to literati painting and broaden the scope of that tradition.

20 Xu Beihong (1920), op.cit., p40
21 Ibid.p40.
After Xu Beihong returned from Europe in 1927, he held a series of key teaching positions to pursue his ideas and acquired a systematic and scientific approach to art education. Undoubtedly, he played a leading role in shaping the development of Chinese painting.

Of course, Xu Beihong's ideas were not the only route of modernity of Chinese art. His equally famous contemporaries, Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu, has different ideas. They carried out a revolution by a succession of incidents to promote modernism.

Lin Fengmian broke fresh ground continually through merging the methods of Western modernism with Chinese traditional ink painting. During the seven years in Paris, he studied all the Western modernist art movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, especially Fauvism and Expressionism. After his return in 1925, he assumed the Directorship of the National Art Academy in Beijing, then in Hang Zhou. Firmly believing in art as the expression of feelings and sentiments, Lin stressed the form is most important in art expression. Personally, he felt, while Chinese art explored the expression of ideas, it is more imaginative, but deficient in form, and while Western art emphasises representation of nature, it tends to be realistic but deficient in expression. The two approaches needed to be harmonised. Therefore, he believed the Chinese should learn from the West's strong point on art to offset its weakness. In this sense he embarked on his own road to achieving a spiritual synthesis of Chinese and Western art (pl. 1).

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23 Ibid. p6.
Plate 1

Chinese Opera

Lin Fengmian

1933

ink and colour on paper

49.4×40.8 cm
In Hangzhou, Lin and his pupils were beginning to create a style of painting that was both Chinese and Contemporary. Most importantly, he found something similar between Western modernism and Chinese traditional art, that is a quest for the lyric sense of Eastern aestheticism (pl. 2). So he was attracted to not only Matisse and Vlaminick, but also the rich heritage of Chinese art tradition, particularly those of folk art, including paintings, ceramics, stone reliefs (pl.3), as he tried to make use of all these element in his art practise and education. Many young artists were inspired by him and followed his path.

Only at a young age, in 1911, Liu Haisu became one of the founder of the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, which was the first modern art academy in China. In order to practice the idea of reviving Chinese painting by direct observation from nature, he and his colleagues bravely used nude models in China for the first of time as an attack on traditional restrictions and morality. However, the literati tradition was never totally rejected by the artist. Liu Haisu admired the masters of Song and Yuan dynasty and the creative individual artists in the seventeenth century, such as Shitao, whom he even compare which Post-Impressionists. The dramatic appearance of his Chinese painting was attributable to the strong expressive line and bold contrasting colour, such as in his painting Lotus in the Summer Palace (pl. 4). It is undoubtedly derived from the artist’s unique creation in collaborating Post-Impressionist colouration and the Expressionist brush stroke of his Chinese traditional techniques. As the most effective art leader in Shanghai, Liu Haisu commanded a large following during the 1930s and 1940s.

\[24\text{Liu Haisu(1935), Shitao yu houqi yinxiang pai(Shitao and Post-impressionism), Shanghai.}\]
Plate 2
Fishing Boat

Lin Fengmian
1932
*ink and colour on paper*
35×35 cm
Plate 3
The Naked

Lin Fengmian

1931
ink and colour on paper
68×68.8 cm
Plate 4
Lotus in Summer Palace

Liu Haisu
1989
ink and colour on paper
101×48 cm
There were some other artists who were exposed to a wide range of western modernist art trends from Impressionism to Surrealism, creating a small scale modern art movement. The artistic horizon had expanded beyond its own indigence to embrace many new ideas and diverse currents from the West. Groups such as the 'stormy society' in Shanghai and the Chinese Independent Artists Association in Guangdong were established to promote the modernist trends. Artists in these groups esteemed modern art above all else and emphasised the subjective expression and creativity of the individual.

Into the 1930s, the cultural atmosphere began to change. As the menace of Japanese aggression increased, there came a rise of opposition to the goals of art as personal expression or 'art for art's sake', artists with a social conscience had come to feel that Modernism in itself had no value for China.

The whole approach of the modernist movement had much in common with literati painting in the emphasis on individual expression. It seemed unrelated to life and the crisis of that time. When the challenge was to produce art of even more contemporary relevance and keeping painting alive with the new revolutionary spirit, they began to insist that artists should come down out of their ivory towers and make the arts reflect social realities. In this situation, artists and writers became involved in great cultural debates about their responsibility to society. Since the influence of these practitioners of Western modernism was largely limited to a stylistic one, compared to their Realist opponents, they obviously took the inferior position.
This became clear in the disputation between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo\(^\text{25}\) concerning the appraisal of modern art,\(^\text{26}\) which ended in a victory for realism. Since then, realism as a major trend has dominated modern Chinese art.

Given the social conditions of the time, Xu's arguments were quite convincing. Social consciousness in realism was a new force introduced into Chinese traditional art, which came with the impact of socialism and swept over the country during an intellectual ferment in China. The common goal of artists and intellectuals living in the turmoil, pain and humiliation of years of war in China was to find a way to save China from the troubles plaguing it. With a sense of responsibility in putting the social revolution first, they advocated the spirit of 'engagement with the world' which was the opposite to the literal ideal of 'transcendence of the world', as their ideological manifestation. Even the painter trained in the literati style felt the need to make their work more relevant to social change. In this case, the Realist movement was both an aesthetic revolution and a social revolution which aimed at harnessing art to promote revolutionary ideas. During the Anti-Japanese war and the following years of civil war, the realist movement helped with the object of popularising the art to arouse the people.

It is worth noting that the 'New Woodcut Movement' proposed by Lu Xun in the 1930s, which had realism as its mainstay, did not exclude modernism. Apart from realist Western woodcut and book illustrations, there were an extensive number of artists of the Expressionist, Symbolist and other schools who were introduced to the younger Chinese artists, especially the works of German

\(^{25}\) Xu Zhimo(1896-1953) studied in Europe and America and was a member of the New Moon school of poetry which was primarily concerned with aesthetics and poetic form. He was a particularly influential figure.

\(^{26}\) Xu Zhimo(ed)(1929), Mei zha hui kan(Art Exhibition Report).
Expressionist Carl Meffert, and Käethe Kollwitz, and Belgium’s Frans Masereel. These artists vividly depicted themes of social injustice and human suffering. Unlike the former modernist movement, the woodcut movement was full of social consciousness and revolutionary spirit. It was characterised by a strong fighting spirit, a populist approach and a liberal enthusiasm which was totally alien to Chinese traditional literati art. Both the new media of woodcut and the new style of Expressionist sensibility, posed a great threat to the idealistic literati approach. Nevertheless, the demand of social consciousness and national identity gained a strong appeal.

In essence, the woodcut movement had direct ideological connections with the Communist movement. The establishment of the Lu Xun Art Academy in Yan’an in 1938 gave this idea a base from which to develop. The theories of socialist realism, which insist that art serve the people, fill society’s need and depict the heroic action of workers and peasant developed there in Yan’an, where a considerable number of young artists were quite dedicated to this new proletarian art. The work of Gu Yuan, Li Hua and many other members of this school is obviously intended to be appreciated by the illiterate peasants, for whom it carries a simple social message: co-operate with the army, learn to take part in local elections and so on. These woodcuts usually please by the unselfconscious presentation of the idea. On the whole, it was a strong trend to reinforce the ideological direction of the new Chinese art.

A general opinion about Social Realist art was that it did not need to be discussed seriously, principally because to some extent it was used for propaganda weapon. But not all of them are propaganda works. Many artists, especially the revolutionaries-turned artists who pursued the social realist ideal
felt that they were engaged in personal expression. There are some distinguished art productions in that style, and as a part of history, it cannot be overlooked.

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese mainland has enjoyed a period of comparative peace and stability. Enthusiasm and patriotic feeling was shared by the Chinese people. Artists had better conditions for working than ever before, but artistic freedom was severely curtailed. Chairmen Mao in his famous ‘Talks on Art and Literature in the Yan’an Form’ (1942) had laid down two principles that art should serve political policies and entertainment and the edification of the masses.27 While Socialism became the new state ideology, Social Realism was sanctified as a mandate that all artists must follow. In the general wave of popular enthusiasm for the revolution there was little dissent.

Social realist art strongly manifested and developed striking characteristics that uniquely defined contemporary Chinese ink painting. Its characteristics are utilitarian social concerns on a thematic level, and an absorption of a combination of Chinese folk art, Western realistic and traditional representational method on a stylistic level. This is considered an authentic Chinese creation and legitimised as a new tradition in Chinese painting which changed a lot from the dominant one of literati painting. However, Socialist Realism’s creative approach produced a very positive effect in the midst of the revolutionary fervour of that period. That they appear to be so is evident in the work of Li Keran, Fu Baoshi, Li Kuchan. The feeling that a new era had dawned is symbolised in a great many paintings of the early 1950s. Most of the

artists sincerely expressed their feeling of security, confidence and optimism within the language of realism.\textsuperscript{28}

Out of the inherent wishes of most artists and the need for the development of art, it was necessary to give adequate attention to both the development of national artistic tradition and make use of the art of other nations. The critical problem has been the adoption of the traditional language of art to modern needs. Chairman Mao made it clear that traditional forms need not be abandoned. What must change was the attitude of social and intellectual exclusiveness that was characteristic of literati painting. He wrote in ‘Talk on Art and Literature’:

"we do not by any means refuse to use the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands these old forms of the past, remodelled and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of people."\textsuperscript{29}

Chairman Mao also exhorted artists to make foreign things serve China.\textsuperscript{30} This means any Western art form could be adopted, but only adopted to meet China’s needs. Its positive result can be seen in the novel combination of traditional and western technology. To Chinese artists and theorists, realism represented a trend in finding and capturing nature, not the outward visible form of a particular thing, but its essence. Only a direct experience from nature and real life can be revised and brought up to date in the formal literati painting vocabulary.

\textsuperscript{28}Shao Dazhen (1991), Chinese Art in the 1950s: An Avant-Garde Undercurrent Beneath the Mainstream of Realism. In John Clark (ed.) Modernity in Asian Art, p76. Published by Wild peony, 1993


\textsuperscript{30}Ibid. p69.
Artists from traditional backgrounds went through a period of adjustment to incorporate the predominant trend. With government encouragement and support, they were able to travel to many famous mountains and rivers from the interior to the border area of China, such as Xin Jiang, Tibet, Yun Nan, Guang Xi, Inner Mongolia and Manchuria, where they depicted the actual sites and images. For the first time, they were close to the heart of real China, face to face with the beauty of the outer provinces. Their work was full of discovery, not only of their own land, but of their own people. Many works depicted changes in the country, the unity of nationalities, and the spiritual world of contemporary personality.  

The result of these direct experiences plus social realist demands was a new traditional painting embodying the spirit of realism in traditional painting and a turning away from the tired practice of the imitation of past masters. Many artists departed from the idealism of literati painting, and rather, concentrated on the realism of actual sites and contemporary themes. Those traditional elements, such as landscape, flowers and plants in calligraphic style, managed to symbolise the feeling of nationalism.

While traditional painting was developed as a force for a new regime it gathered the strength of nationalism. Feudalistic tradition was still under a series of attacks during the reforming movement. Literati painting likewise was under more and more criticism, especially in the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, the tradition of literati painting was only established in the late Song dynasty. Massive archaeology increased the knowledge of the Chinese painting tradition, so that modern artists can change their attitude by looking at their large artistic

32 Chang, Arnold 1980. op.cit. p76
heritage which includes paintings in Neolithic pottery, wall paintings from tombs and religious sanctuaries, folk paintings, and woodcut prints.

The reaction against the literati tradition but in favour of the older and subordinate one, manifested itself most clearly in the tendency to shift the emphasis from landscape to figures. Figure painting has its roots in the wall-paintings of the palaces as early as the Han dynasty (about the first century BC.). Subordinated to the orthodox Confucian tradition, it was created to serve a social didactic role. However, as a socially oriented art, it was neglected for the most part by the literati painter. This weak area of traditional painting was pronounced most worthy of development and revitalised in the twentieth century. For ideological reasons, figure painting regained the dominant position once more in the new China. After all, the human figure could be a good vehicle to convey ethical messages that no landscape could express so directly.

Xu Beihong successfully created a formula, combining realism and Chinese brushwork, which was able to be adapted to the demands of socialist-realist subject matter. After 1950, he was given the highest art position to promote his artistic ideas on a national scale. As chairman of the National Artists Association and the head of the Central Art Academy in Beijing, he played a key role in convincing the government to set up modern style art academies, where the teaching methods of the literati system were completely changed. The most important aspect of the training program was that Western drawings and paintings became a compulsory subject for all art students. A number of artists were gathered in the national painting faculty, including the younger artists who were accomplished in both Western and Chinese style, such as Wu Zuoren, Li Keran, Ye Qianyu and Jiang Zhaohe. They worked together to establish a new
national painting style which could integrate socialist realism with traditional ink technique. The possible solutions can be seen from their art works and many others active in the 1950s and 60s. Xu Beihong’s administrative ability and resultant influences on the educational policy meant that the ‘Xu school’ gained dominance over all other reform movements. Before his death in 1953, his influence extended all over China. The Central Art Academy became the highest centre of training in China.

Besides the realist mainstream, there were artists who continued to be concerned with Western modernism, although their knowledge about modernism was limited. Owning to the complicated international situation and China’s complete isolation from the West, artists in China knew nothing of post-war Western art, eg. Abstract Expressionism, then on the rise in post-war Western art. Lin Fengmian is the most representative artist who maintained his artistic view and objected to the rejection of Western Modernism. In 1952, he retired from his teaching position, and then devoted all his time to his own creative art pursuits. However, dominant opinion at that time regarded Western modernism as synonymous with absurd and decadent bourgeois art. Since his stance was not in accordance with the party line, he was forced to leave the Hang Zhou Art academy he had founded, and settled in a subordinate position.

The most significant change in the artistic realm since the founding of the People’s Republic is the fact that art is no longer the exclusive property of the scholar-elite class. On the contrary to the old hierarchy of social values which was advantageous to the elite, communist China wanted to bring about a classless society and remove all traces of elitism in arts. Such a popular

\[33\text{Ibid. pp75-83}\]
\[34\text{Ibid. p75}\]
revolution did affect profoundly the evolution of art, particularly in Chinese traditional painting, which has become more accessible to the broad masses through the various attempts at popularisation.\textsuperscript{35} Countless workers, peasants and soldiers were trained as amateurs to develop new styles and techniques. Much of this new folk art was bright in colour, daring in composition, positive in tone, even contemporary in spirit but had a totally irreverent style and concept compared to the essential philosophical and literary tradition of personal expression that was characteristic of the Chinese painting tradition. The style could be simplified to be interpreted as meaning more colour and dynamic action. If not overtly propagandist, it had very wide appeal. Their romantic festive emotion made a strong impression on art. Many traditional painters were inspired to make lavish use of red and other bright colours which were rarely used in literati painting, to manifest an almost revolutionary zeal.

The basic elements of traditional Chinese painting in confronting the challenge from Western influence, social change and the new ideology, still maintain their important role in China, such as emphasis on brush work and the importance of spiritual expression. The best example of this new development can be seen in the works of Li Keran, Fu Baoshi, Cheng Shifa, Shi Lu(pl.5). In the 1950s and 60s, they succeeded in establishing a new painting style and their influence on younger artists has been considerable. Their lyrical pictures do not carry obvious messages but express the idea of a peaceful abundance with great charm and originality. In fact, new realism in Chinese ink painting is more likely a return to the natural Chinese way of painting than an influence of the West.

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid. p75
Plate 5

Red Cliff and the Green Stream

Shi Lu

1961

ink and colour on paper

100×50 cm
As essential philosophical and literati traditions in painting were subordinated to political demands, politically-oriented propaganda works were done in the service of current political policies and objectives. Many were merely exhortations of stereotypes for certain political ideas. Vulgarising and oversimplifying Marxism manifested as a doctrine in art which put fetters and constrains on artists and critics by laying down all sorts of rigid taboos and commandments for creative work. An extreme example was produced during the Cultural Revolution. Artist were cut off from all foreign contacts and the attempt was made to purge every trace of non-Chinese, especially western influence from the arts and culture except Soviet-inspired Social Realism. Thus every manifestation of what could be termed modern art was forbidden, from Impressionism to Pop. Abstract art was likewise taboo, and even the painting of nude figures. The humanistic, universal, creative qualities of Chinese culture, one of the oldest and greatest in the world, were under deadly assault. At that time, realism lost its original impact, having become the tool of political propaganda. Meanwhile, traditional art forms suffered devastating attacks for their 'bourgeois', 'elitist', or 'decadent' content.

With the absolutist ideology and pragmatic sensibility, the ossified social realism model blocked the natural and autonomous development of art, and rejected other possibilities of art forms developing in China. New realism in Chinese ink painting also showed the crystallisation of a new set of conventions, a new orthodoxy the same as literati painting had previously in the last century, which suppressed the individualism and vitality of Chinese artists. In doing so, the demise of this absolute model was inevitable. The party line on art, which had been based almost exclusively on Soviet Socialist Realism, French

academic painting, and post-Song dynasty brush painting, must be opened to other possibilities.

It was not until the beginning of the 1980s, that the Chinese art world experienced a significant and fundamental conceptual shift. The official repudiation of the Cultural Revolution by the Communist Party in 1981 stimulated the beginning of a social, economic and cultural thaw, and created an environment in which artists reacted and could cast off the constrains imposed on their activity. This general cultural thaw brought about a resurgence of traditional art forms. Meanwhile, the new open door economic policy brought a variety of foreign art into China, providing Chinese artists with access to contemporary overseas developments. Breaking away from the yoke of the monotonous value structure of the Cultural Revolution, artists felt the necessity to look for a new set of values to support their development.

There was a flurry of art experimentation with philosophy and aesthetic ideas, giving rise to new values to support their development. With a strong desire to reconstruct Chinese culture and ideology, they welcomed the flux of art and the philosophy from both traditional and Western sources, and held the key of choice during the social transformation. The scene of Chinese ink painting which exemplified innovation was one of diversification in terms of style. Artists undertook various experiment to seek freedom of creative expression. Their explorations were largely based on the confusion of Chinese and Western arts. Rare indeed were the artists who sought to revive ancient practice and those who copied Western models indiscriminately. Only the difference in method employed and the degree of fusion achieved by each individual painter displayed the different trends in artistic style. In general, their efforts were a
process of a re-evaluation and rediscovery of national cultural identity, while seeking a dialogue with Western contemporary art.
CHAPTER II

Calling For Stylistic Freedom and a Return to Humanism — Reformism In the Academy

Following the founding of the New China, the classical academic style teaching system was established, based on the Soviet Union's art education system. Combining European Classicism and Soviet Socialist Realism, realist technique has been taught as a main technique at the Chinese art academies. The most noticeable element to contribute to Chinese traditional painting was the adoption of Western drawing and painting into the curriculum of the Chinese painting department. This had a pervasive influence and a period of rapid growth. Students could learn from the different techniques and approaches, allowing them the possibility of synthesising these sources and developing in new directions.\(^{37}\)

The Central Academy of Fine Arts founded by Xu Beihong was the centre of art training. For the first time, Chinese artists and students in the academy could study European painting in a systematic and scholarly way while making a comprehensive survey of their own inheritance of Chinese master pieces of painting from the former Imperial Collection in Beijing. Xu Beihong championed the idea that both oil and traditional painting could be practised compatibly, side by side. A large quantity of educational time was spent on learning chiaroscuro pencil drawing, even in the traditional Chinese art department. The basic elements which he introduced were close observation, the capturing of lively movement, research to assure historical accuracy, and academic studies in anatomy, perspective, foreshortening, and composition,

\(^{37}\)Hua Xinruo(1949), Shenmo shi guo hua de xin tujing(What is the new road for Chinese Painting). Yi Lang, Vol. 4, 1.
particularly for figure painting. Realism in the figures was achieved after thorough training in Western drawing techniques based on the direct observation of live models.

Xu Beihong's well-known ink paintings of the 1930s *Jiu Fanggao (The connoisseur of horses)* and *Yu Gong Yishan (The Old Fool Moving the Mountain)*, in mural format, best exemplified his program of reform which was intent on bringing about the revival of the monumental figure paintings of the Han and Tang periods. In *Jiu Fanggao* (pl.6), the artist depicted the horse as the symbol of those people of undaunted spirit who worked hard and suffered much in order to take revenge. Through years of academic study in realist technique, he was able to capture the expression of horses in various poses, expressions and movements. The Chinese brushwork is now at the service of the Western realistic depiction of a running horse in, but unlike that in academic painting, it is used extremely simply and effectively, without attempting to go into elaborate details and extensive background. By using the Chinese approach with brush and ink, he captured a sense of freedom and movement seldom seen in Western academic painting. The large narrative scenes in *Yu Gong Yishan* (pl.7) also showed Xu's great craft in realistic style. Bare backed Atlas-like mountain movers reveal their muscle-bound anatomies in a huge narrative of a dozen people, demonstrating how a knowledge of the nude acquired in Europe can be combined with medium and scroll format. A style which evolved from his study in France did not just provide fresh visual experience, but also brought with it a powerful potential for expressing the artist's social concerns, which was lacking in traditional Chinese painting.

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38This can be seen in a poem Xu composed and inscribed on a similar composition in 1936. From Artist(1979), 4, Taibai.
Plate 6
The connoisseur of Horses
Xu Beihong
1931
ink and colour on paper
138×351 cm
Plate 7

The Old Fool Moving the Mountain

Xu Beihong

1940

*ink and colour on paper*

143×424 cm
The new direction for Chinese ink painting was taken up by some activist artists who were also concerned with social reality and had compassion for the suffering of people and the deprived members of society. The finest example was seen in the *refugees* - portrayed in the hand scroll of 1942-1943 by Jiang Zhaohe (pl.8). The large life-size portraits, though very consciously based on the Chinese technique of drawing with a brush, made use of European method of shading. Those refugees who were suffering from Japanese aggression were movingly and convincingly portrayed with an accuracy of ink line, showing a potent humanist spirit. The hand scroll is a remarkably successful illustration of how the modern Chinese painter assimilated European academic realism into a natural style in Chinese ink painting and depicted themes of injustice and human suffering.

For the same purpose of expressing the aspirations of the people, Xu Beihong insisted upon heroic subjects with a moral overtone. He drew epic-heroic subjects from Chinese history and folktale to serve national needs, such as in the 'Yu Gong Yishan'. The features of his painting can be identified as hardy labour heroes, who have been called 'foolish' in trying to achieve the awesome task of moving a mountain generation by generation. The painting does not portray the harmonious communion of the Confucian scholar or the Taoist adept with his surroundings, instead this work emphasises man's ability to change the face of nature. The underlying moral message that people's determination could overcome any difficulty was used by Mao Zedong as an example of how generations of Chinese Communists could over power imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and feudalism. The formula, combining French academic realism and Chinese brushwork, with the message 'achieve the impossible' satisfied the
Plate 8
Refugee
Jiang Zhouhe
1943
ink and colour on paper
Detail
People's Republic requirements, and Xu crowned a successful career by his appointment as director of the Century Academy of Fine Arts.

Xu Beihong stands out as a master in promoting realist art, but at the same time, his work, which is historically significant, is believed to have less aesthetic value, especially in Chinese ink painting. It clearly reflects the intensity of the conflict between Western academic realism and intrinsic traditional Chinese artistic value. The fact that realism demands an analytical approach to the subject gets in the way both of free calligraphic expression and of intuitive generalisation of experience in the Chinese painting. An early precise response to Western realistic art is recorded by a Qing Dynasty court artist Zou Yigui in the 19th century:

'Westerners are skilled in geometry, and consequently there is not the slightest mistake in their way of rendering light and shade and distance. In their paintings all the figures, buildings, and trees cast shadows, and their brush and colours are entirely different from those of Chinese painters. Their views stretch out from broad (in the foreground) to narrow (in the background) and are defined (mathematically measured). When they paint houses on a wall people are tempted to walk into them. A student of painting may well take over one or two points from them to make their own paintings more attractive to the eye. But these painters have no brush-manner whatsoever; although they possess skill, they are simply artisans and cannot consequently be classified as painters.'

The renderings of real space which the West so seriously studied and took as the fundamental language of art during the Renaissance was scorned by the

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Chinese as unimportant, compared with the nobility of thought and gesture captured by the fine calligraphic strokes of their own artists in search of the spiritual essence of the subject.\textsuperscript{41}

The traditional dichotomy lay between Chinese art as the expression of the inner mind versus Western art as imitation of the external world of nature. 'Painting in the West has been rooted to the concept of fidelity to subject, whereas, it could be said, painting in China is equally founded in the concept of fidelity to the spirit.'\textsuperscript{42} From these foundations Western artistic traditions concerned themselves with the problem of representation of form, volume, light and colour in their quest for verismilitude. In China, the quest was to capture the spirit or essence of the subject and from this emerged an art composed around the exploitation of expressive line.\textsuperscript{43} Thus the ideal of literati painting emphasises the capture of the essential and expressive form of the subject matter as opposed to merely capturing formal likeness or verismilitude. Aesthetician Zong Baihua paid attention to the metaphysical depth of traditional painting while maintaining that Chinese scholars despised the literal representation of things. With Chinese perspective and sense of space, artists can communicate with nature more freely and unrestrainedly than they can through Western realism.\textsuperscript{44} It was the general feeling among Chinese artists that traditional painting represented a great achievement in form, style, and expression which could not be replaced by the West, prevented them from imitating Western art.

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid. p165.
\textsuperscript{42}Capon, Edmund(1981), \textit{Chinese Paintings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, 14th-20th Centuries}. p6. International Cultural Corporation of Australia limited.
\textsuperscript{43}Ibid. p6
\textsuperscript{44}Zong Baihua(1934), \textit{Lun Zhongxi huafa zhi yuangyuan yu jichu}.(On the origin and foundation of Chinese and Western painting methods), Wen yi congkan,(Journal of literature and art). 10.
The Chinese intellectual heritage was not suppressed by foreign imperialism, but vitiated by a social system that divorced art from the life of the people, and made it the monopoly of a scholarly elite—a small lettered aristocracy. Since the social revolution, with the widening basis of education and attack upon classicism, the monopoly of learning undermined the position of literati artists. In this sense, traditional literati painting has changed with the changes of modern society.

Modern Chinese artists also have to face the aesthetic challenge which derives from the fact that traditional literati painting utilises a language of highly refined pictorial conventions distilled over many centuries. It is not easy to open a new path for Chinese painting when it has already reached its highest point. So Chinese art must welcome new ideas from abroad. The materials and modes of Western painting offered new possibilities for experimentation.\(^4\)

It is widely believed in Eastern Countries that the superiority of the West lies in the materiality of its culture; Western skill is associated with science and technology. What distinguished the culture of the West was its sciences, its technology.\(^5\) China had not insisted on developing a scientific method. In place of the objective analysis of phenomena which in the West is taken for granted, the Chinese have evolved a body of abstract symbols which are cryptic in their formulation and general in their application, that they are able to represent any event in nature in symbolic terms.\(^6\) The most remarkable and complex of these systems was set forth in the Book of Changes three thousand years ago. Based on a metaphysical rather than a scientific process of thought, this formula could

\(^4\) Pan Tianshou (1936), Zhongguo huaxia shi (History of Chinese painting) p245. Shanghai.
neither be checked nor refuted, and thus rendered unnecessary the kind of objective, logical knowledge of events which characterises Western thinking. It seems for this reason that Chinese art essentially has a symbolic character. When the crisis of the twentieth century penetrated into the deeper levels of the Chinese mind, artists were inclined to incorporate into their own pictures Western technical forms such as single perspective and naturalistic shading. Therefore, the whole process of borrowing of Western techniques as such is encouraged with the emphasis upon technology and scientific development. Chinese traditional painters had a different way of seeing and painting after experimenting with Western 'scientific' realism.

In fact, the approach of 'Socialist Realism' in Chinese painting is not analytic, or 'scientific', but synthetic, with little concern in any objective sense. Even Mao Zedong disliked the naturalist element in Soviet socialist Realism, as he said: "life as reflected in works of literature can and must be a higher plane, more intense more concentrated, more nearer the idea and therefore more universal than everyday life." He therefore set a high value on romanticism which was different from the rigid and static style of the Soviet Socialist Realist model.

A particularly Chinese version of Romantic Realism was combined with Illustrator Realism and Xu Beihong's more academic vision of Socialist Realism. The style commanded an impressive following among young Chinese artists including Wu Zuoren, Ye Qianyu and Jiang Zhaohua. Their work illustrated the further development of this realistic trend in traditional painting.

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Illustrator Realism was a significant component in synthesising Socialist Realism for its utilitarian social aim of popularity. Ye Qianyu (1907–1995) pioneered this painting style which combined Socialist Realism with popular illustration technique. He had no formal art training and developed his natural ability through making quick sketches from life. His talent was first reflected in his famous cartoon serials of the 1930s. When he devoted all his time to ink painting after 1949, his rich knowledge of popular graphic art helped him develop an energetic naive art style. As Ye refined his style, he incorporated aspects of fashion illustration. The most popular theme in his work is dancers. His beautiful specimens include posturing Indian dancers (pl. 9), gesturing Chinese dancers and Tibetan scarf-dancers with flying sleeves (pl. 10). Each were gracefully elongated with generalised features. The vivid movements are frozen in his final paintings through the naturalness and immediacy of his quick sketches. As chairmen of the traditional Chinese painting department, he had his own idea about reforming the teaching of traditional painting. Ye Qianyu felt that too much emphasis on Learning chiaroscuro pencil drawing could inhibit the development of Chinese-style painting\(^9\). In his own practice and principle of teaching, he paid more attention to sketching and its close relationship with the picture book, and traditional folk art, such as Nian-hua (New Year painting)\(^9\), adopting their popularity, drawing style and linear plastic technique.

Wu Zuoren (b.1908) was the most effective disciple of Xu Beihong in Chinese painting. He studied under Xu in Shanghai in 1927, and then underwent


\(^{9}\)The term Nian-hua was originally applied to a type of painting done by folk artists in rural areas to celebrate the New Year and to symbolise the farmer’s hopes for a bountiful harvest. Fruit-bearing vines and red-cheeked children were the most popular subjects, and these were depicted in bright, cheerful colours. Artists of the new China borrowed the conventions and forms of the New Year painting tradition, and used them to portray new themes.
Plate 9
Indian Dancer
Ye Qian Yu
1962
ink and colour on paper
97×57 cm
Plate 10

Tibetan Dancer

Ye Qian Yu
1962
ink and colour on paper
97×57 cm
five years academic training in Paris and Brussels. As his mentor Xu Beihong, Wu also rejected the Western modernist movement and devoted himself entirely to the realistic academic tradition in Chinese painting. He was president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts intermittently from 1958 until 1979. The turning point in his artistic career came after his two years wandering from the high plateau of Tibet to the Gobi desert in Turkestan. Far from the world of oil painting, he used brush and ink to paint the yaks, camels and eagles that became the mainstay of his repertoire throughout his later years(pl.11). His experiment in Chinese painting showed his urge to grasp the essentials of national tradition and fulfilled his obligation to this heritage.\footnote{Wan Qingli(1980), Fendou de sheng ya- ji Wu Zuoren( Life of struggle- On Wu Zuoren). Duoyun, 5} Since then, his equally proficient style in both Chinese and Western media continued in parallel development. Only in the 1980s has his main output been in the traditional medium.

In tracing Wu's return to traditional Chinese Painting, his work, like the scroll of The Great Xing’an Mountain(pl.12), should be mentioned. Apparently, at this time, he had no formal training in Chinese painting and no conventional idioms of brush work or type-forms to fall back upon, instead, his art showed a predominantly Western appearance, incorporating the principles of western perspective, with evidence of many techniques associated with European watercolour painting.

The originality of Wu's desert subjects, the freshness of his techniques, and his close observation of nature gave a new life to his traditional painting. It is noteworthy that he seldom used lines, and reduced his subject to simple patches of colour wash, highlighted by the most sparing details to help render the form effectively, as seen in his luminously brushed washes depicting goldfish. In
Plate 11
Desert Memory
Wu Zoren
1964
*ink and paper*
32×35 cm
Plate 12

Great Xing 'an Moutain

Wu Zoren

1956

ink on paper

54.5x28 cm
contrast to Western modes of representation, the background of his painting is always left neutral to suggest the wide expanse of space. His art is based on years of direct study of nature, but relies on the unique aesthetic effects of the simplicity of traditional Xie yi (idea painting) style. This rather cryptic phrase expresses that the painter has to go through a process of observing and recreating the forms of natural objects before he can express the inner meaning or idea of his subject. Wu wrote in *Contemporary Chinese Paintings*:

‘all works of art originate in life but they should never become mere passive copies of life, art should exceed the work of nature.’

Li Keran, the leading exponent of traditional painting, achieved an epic-like monumental mural style in landscape. He was one of the coterie of promising artists who helped Xu establish the new art program to pave the way for a government policy of Socialist Realism. In response to the new challenge, Li carried out a reform which aimed to make traditional painting’s subject matter return to the everyday life of the people and thus synthesise elements of traditional Chinese painting style with those from abroad. Considered in the whole context, it can be found that in the major theoretical and ideological debates concerning art in China during the last several decades, Li has always stood for preserving part of Chinese tradition in order to oppose the criticism of total rejection of the past. His whole life was spent studying both Chinese and Western art to enable him to adapt to the changing times whilst not rejecting his country’s past. For this reason, he never totally accepted Russian realism. He criticised the meticulous art of Soviet Socialist Realism, as he wrote in *Chinese Literature*:

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"It is idiotic to imitate the object slavishly for those who tend toward naturalism. It should be noted that the artist paints not only what he sees but also what he knows, that is the sum total of his experience, including the indirect experience gained from tradition. In painting the artist relies not only on his senses, sound or touch, but what is more important, on thought. The extension or deepening of vision into knowledge and ideas means to discern universal characteristics in individual phenomena."

His syntheses of traditional Chinese idealism and modern Western realism have met with considerable success.

Xu and his following registrars led the new school in a struggle to follow the Government line for art. They developed a system of brush technique training that was both calligraphic and realistic. However, the generation of professional artists who have been educated in art academies since 1949 has not come into the limelight until the end of 1970s, since the art academies and other cultural universities were closed during the period of the Cultural Revolution. Thousands of artists and intellectuals were sentenced to years of hard physical labour, for their efforts in promoting artistic activity among the masses. Painting was encouraged among workers, peasants, and soldiers who were largely uneducated in the Arts. In any case, the Party took an unprecedented amount of control over artistic production. Almost all forms of art became a model for the symbol and standard of political idealism.

A demand for stylistic freedom and a growing rejection of the political utilitarianism of art emerged in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. The accelerated progress of China in its efforts at modernisation during the 1980s

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53 Li Keran (1959), On Landscape painting. Chinese Literature 8 pp139-146.
has yielded noticeable results. This began a period of high hopes in which artists would experiment and look for fresh inspiration from national and international resources. The government was still the artistic patron, consumer and dictator; the public was still hostile to all art that was not academic in either the Western or Chinese sense; there was still little room for private institutions to develop outside of government control; outright political protest was still banned, but stylistic restriction had largely been eliminated. The opportunity for artists to create work with greater freedom led to the possibility of art forms being liberated from conventional formula. In a non-political environment, artists began to define aesthetic concerns in their own terms rather than the party's, and went in search of their own identity.

In the area of Chinese ink painting, the early and dramatic change took place among the artists in the academy. This group included the painters who studied under the Soviet education system in the Fifties and Sixties. Art-academy students at that time actually underwent a rigorous training in realist technique.

Since Xu Beihong, Jiang Zhaohe and Ye Qianyu, realistic form in Chinese painting had meant a particular likeness, based on drawing and sketching, and with structural proportion, which had been regarded as more 'scientific expression'. The use of brush work was merely a means of creating form, the variations of the brush and ink which was only equated with those of blackness and whiteness, had been the practice and the basis of the teaching style, insisted on by these radical reformers. This approach stimulated the struggle to restrain the tendency of artists to place brushwork above all else. Certainly, brushwork cannot be considered as the only means to approach ink painting, but to lightly
give up brushwork would be as good as abandoning traditional Chinese painting altogether.

It is wrong to take brush and ink as the entirety of Chinese painting, or to deny its role completely. Actually, brushwork is one of the most important elements in Chinese painting. As early as the Tang (618-907) and Song Dynasties (960-1279), the advantages and defects of painting were evaluated by the brushwork. The combination of Chinese ink and brush has the capability of creating form, and is itself a part of that form. This is the main source of its artistic appeal—including its creative and visual appeal—a general realisation of brush painting as reflecting national cultural character. The creation of brushwork involves a synthesis of substance of form—the substance provided by the calligraphy, which is itself infused with a historical and cultural essence, and the form created with materials such as water, ink, paper, silk and brush. Imitators since Ming and Qing had separated brushwork from its corresponding object, and ossified it; in trying to remedy this, the reformist artists of the 20th century went too far by dismissing or even abandoning the training and the art of creating with the brush, reducing the sophisticated, refined and highly precise brush painting to something common and crude. In the new Chinese painting, brushwork became the weakest point. Most of the Chinese ink painting artists who came of age between the Thirties and the Fifties belonged to the realist school of Xu Beihong. For their particular background and education, those artists in the academy were more skillful in life drawing than in creating forms, and they were relatively weaker in their knowledge of traditional brushwork and cultural training.

Through a new exploration of the beauty of form for its own sake, artists who had experienced the confines of the Cultural Revolution released themselves from the constrains and dictates of the Revolutionary Realistic model and expressed their interest in non-political and non-social subjects. At the beginning, some of these artists showed a strong expressionist element while at the same time relying on realist technique in their execution. In the course of their development as distinct styles, artists in the Academy transcended the Socialist Realist model and oriented their artistic model toward Chinese tradition.

A dynamic change in the style of painting took place generally in the following direction: firstly, switching from the representation of typical character to the depiction of ordinary life, breaking free from the influence of the ideology of the Cultural Revolution; secondly, moving from life painting to creative pictorial forms—leading to distortion and appropriate stylisation; thirdly, stressing brushwork and strengthening individual technique.

The new stylistic experimentation in Chinese painting was a sign that more serious questions about human issues were beginning to be raised. Some artists also showed grave critical reflection concerning the Cultural Revolution and the Revolutionary realistic model, and focused their concern on two major themes; 'human nature' and 'truth'. Contrary to heroic subjects and idealised figures, they were concerned for the common people, and praised the pure and the simple.

This transformation reflected a relaxation in the mind-set of artists from the rigid absolutist mentality of the Cultural Revolution and demonstrated their insistence on freedom and a strong resurgence of humanism in art, and the new open-door reformism of the '80s.

From the 1980s, Li Keran was generally considered as China's greatest living artist in both theory and practice. He continued to play a leading role in traditional painting and had a great number of followers. His accomplishments in landscape painting were regarded as a bridge that caused Chinese landscape painting to step from the past to the modern.

The most significant feature of Li Keran's painting is that he was fond of portraying from life and technically his paintings are noted for the full composition of 'black ink tone and archaic resonance'. His paintings depicted the mountains, rivers and the land of contemporary period, which people observe in their daily life, that is different from the imaginative landscape of his past, his mastery of brush work and ink was also imbued with a contemporary sense.

Li painted a number of works in the Chinese literati style which represented the theme of peasant life. His knowledge in both traditional and Western painting resulted from his early training both at the Shanghai Art Academy under Liu Haisu in the late 1920s and at the Hang Zhou National Academy under Lin Fengmian in the early 1930s. The curriculum in such colleges at that time included both Chinese and Western painting technique. At first, his preference leaned toward Western painting. As an academic student he remained as an assistant of the college to teach both drawing and oil painting. At
the time of intensive study his interest in Chinese painting grew, then brush and ink became his chief means of expression. After Li was invited by Xu Beihong to join the National Academy of Arts in the late 1940s, he made acquaintance with Qi Baishi (1864-1957), the well-known master of traditional painting. Qi Baishi’s ability to absorb contemporary life and thought into his art and his creative approach became an important lesson for Li Keran, developing his creative attitude and great ability in handling ink and brush. 

In On Landscape Painting (1959), Li formulated the principle of Yijing (concretized idea or expressive scenery), which denoted a synthesis of both objective depiction of a scene and an artist’s feeling for it. The attainment of this goal results when an artist practices selection, exaggeration and organisation. In this revealing document, Li showed a clear attitude of rejecting pure naturalism in a re-examination of Chinese tradition.

Traditional literati landscape painting, as the vehicle for expression of philosophical or poetic ideas was the art of the gentry. What mattered to a Chinese painter was that he should not render accurately what was before his eye at any given moment, but capture the essential aspect of his subject. By the fourteenth century, landscape at the upper level of Chinese society had became very generalised, even abstract. It was sometimes as personal in expression as the scholar’s own hand writing which focused on artistic expression from the

artist's mind and detested naturalistic representation. For these artists, the purpose of painting was no longer to represent nature but to express themselves.

Since painters abandoned mere realism in Chinese painting, they began to use the method of copying masterpieces of ancient masters as another alternative and common practice. For hundreds of years, copying has been considered the most important precept of painting to the extent that copying and imitation took the place of creativity. Most painters were satisfied with brush and ink in minute scenes. The lack of spiritual content that was characteristic of the great landscapes of the Chinese nation, and the absence of great momentum and spirit of the times, were signs of the decline in landscape painting. Li Keran strongly criticised the imitative aspect of traditional practice and urged a return to nature and personal creativity. He was one of the most illustrative representatives who restored and enchanted that grand momentum in landscape painting that Chinese art originally possessed, and endowed it with a new period style. He turned towards reality and nature and also borrowed the old to initiate the new in a manner that was most distinct from national conservatism and national nihilism.

Life painting is an effective means to get rid of the defects of copying as practiced in the past. Through life portrayal, painters could develop their self consciousness and acquire inspiration from nature, like a breath of fresh air to stimulate the painter’s mind and consciousness. Li Keran was one of the forerunners who paid much attention to life portrayal, his life portrayals are in Chinese style, which is different from naturalistic portrayals without any modifications. This is because he observed the world from a creative viewpoint and acquired the source of life from nature instead of restricting himself to nature, so he said, 'we should not advocate mere naturalism in making life
portrayals and make ourselves the slave of nature without any innovations and creations.\textsuperscript{58} In putting the creative spirit into his life portrayals, Li’s works were imbued with a strong lively force.

In the 1960s, Li Keran developed his own personal style by integrating the study of nature with tradition. His art works are filled with a distinctive temperament and originality, showing the exceptional characteristics of his time and his nation. He travelled across the country to search for marvellous sceneries, and to draft from nature, then he managed to struggle his way out from the old form with immense courage. His keen interest in structure and arrangement showed itself in his organisation of detail, the s-curved river, repetition and variation of triangular and rectangular shapes, and interplay between individual brush strokes and broad washes as they occurred in his landscape paintings in the 1950s, such as his landscape in colours Yangzi Gorges series, in which the contrast of dark mountains and the villages with the white river and the white house walls is sharpened by exaggeration. Rock faces are powerfully etched in black ink, a rich image that washes to grey in the distance. He further tilted the ground plane upwards to heighten the effect. His characteristic selection of detail, exaggeration of main elements of mountain peaks, and his surprising organisation again provide a fine illustration of his theory of landscape painting.

The intensely inked surface is a distinctive feature of Li Keran’s painting. It was because he had a strong feeling for this great age that no colour other than black could fully express the sincerity and profundity of the spirit of the landscape. The extremely crowded composition and the very dense style is

\textsuperscript{58} Li Keran (1959), p140.
similar to paintings by one of Li's teachers, Huang Binhong. Yet Li's personal touch is also evident, his forms have a greater sense of mass and solidity than Huang Binhong's and he is more concerned with effects of light and dark. The traditional landscape painting is used to paint mountains in a positive light. In Li Keran's landscape paintings, there are fresh artistic images, the mountain scenery is in reversed light, such as his later work *Noisy Waterfall in the Quiet Mountain* (pl.13). For the first time, the mountain of traditional painting is given such a strong sense of size and heaviness.

Li Keran captured the sombre mood and quiet pulse of the village and made of these his 'concretized idea' or *yijing*. In traditional Chinese painting, much attention had been paid to temperamental atmosphere which requires good painting techniques as well as the artist's sensitivity. The use of ink techniques was believed to represent the spirits of the mind. In the 8th century, Zhang Yanyuan put forward his theory that ink could replace colour. his famous statement is 'When you achieve five colours in ink, the spirit can be achieved.'

The reason is that the colours were applied according to the objects depicted. Ink has more versatile transformations than colour, though it is confined to the colour of black and white, however, after the adding of water, ink will diffuse into different tonal graduations. Thus it is not restricted to pure black or pure white and as a result ink can give a dark and archaic resonance and at the same time, it can also generate a vivid charm. In other words, ink could be used like full colour. By using ink, form can be achieved, not merely by depending on natural form, but in the mind. Based on this, ink actually represents a link of art concepts. The characteristics of ink facilitate painters to create different atmospheric feelings of light, dark, 'purity' and vigour. In the agricultural

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59 Zhang Yanyuan(847), *Lidai Minghua Ji* (Records of Famous Painting Through the Ages.)
Plate 13
Noisy Waterfall in the Quiet Mountain

Li Keran
1988
ink and colour on paper
105×82 cm
society of the Song and Yuan dynasty in which Zen was in vogue, literati men tried to escape from real life by taking retreats in the mountains. A 'pure' world was created from their mind as a kind of balance with their real life. As times had changed, in the socialist or the industrial and commercial society of China, the sense of a painter pursuing ink painting is quite different from ancient times. It is necessary to create the sense of vigour by the use of dark ink and painting in a free and archaic manner instead of a delicate and charming manner. Li Keran had painted slowly in an archaic manner with dark ink tone in his work, which might in turn show his objective to mundane beauty and charm. His distinctive full composition landscapes maintained a stable foundation for the new Chinese painting. Actually this was his greatest achievement in the transitional period of Chinese painting.

After the late 1970s, Li Keran refined his feelings which had been accumulated from exhausting searches of nature and turned their crystallisation into new conceptions and huge pieces. His work during this period represents the highest achievement of his contemporary landscapes. It retains the essence of traditional Chinese painting, including the concept of 'spirit resonance' and the use of calligraphic brushwork, but he has enriched the tradition with elements borrowed form Western painting, chiaroscuro, geometric distortion as found in the works of Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse's expressive line work, the hermetic composition of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso's cubism. Among the reformist artists in the academy, Li Keran best achieved a balance between traditional requirements and modern demands, between his theoretical ideas and artistic practices in his work. His success has encouraged younger artists such as Jia Youfu, Zhou Sicong and Lu Chen to follow in the same direction.

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50 See Wan Qingli (1992), 'The Formation of Li Keran's Painting Style', Han Mo, vol.25, pp4-14, and 40-51. Hong Kong.
Jia Youfu, the disciple of Li Keran, is a distinct painter who proceeded along the path of innovation and made his own contribution to the present form of Chinese landscape painting. The new look of painting innovated by him is a further breakthrough following Li, and could have great significance for the present and future of Chinese landscape painting.\textsuperscript{61}

Like Li Keran, Jia Youfu was born in a common peasant household. Neither of his parents was a literati. He specialised in landscape painting after he entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts. At that time, the teachers in the landscape painting department formed an illustrious line up of artists: Li Keran, Ye Qianyu, Li Kuchan, Zong Qixiang and He Haixia. Li Keran had the greatest influence over Jia Youfu. Following Li’s instruction, he rigorously mastered artistic techniques and honed in on basic skills. From the beginning, he systematically delved into the traditions of Chinese landscape painting and studied the history of painting. He copied the works of various masters and schools. Among those painters from the eve of the modern age, he especially admired Huang Binhong, Pan Tianshou and Shi Lu\textsuperscript{62}. The ancient masters, those he studied included the four masters: Fan Kuan, Li Tang, Gong Xian and Shi Tao. All of these artists were famous for strong creative ability and individual character. With a solid foundation in traditional training, life drawing and creative spirit, repeatedly emphasised by Li Keran, Jia Youfu gradually gained a deep understanding of the inner spirit and practical techniques of Chinese painting. During his period as a student, his painting style was greatly influenced by Li Keran.

\textsuperscript{61}Shao Dazhen(1993), Monuments of Nature Paintings of Jia Youfu. p19. Hong Kong.
The important turning point for Jia Youfu’s art was when he painted from life at Taihang Mountains. In September 1964, he made his first trip to the Taihang Mountains to prepare his graduation works. He was exhilarated by the majesty of the mountains and out of that experience he was inspired to produce many sketches. From then on, he developed a deep interest in the Taihang Mountains. After graduating in 1965, he successively served as a teacher in the Department of Stage Art at the Central Institute of Drama, and then the Chinese painting department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He visited the Taihang Mountains at least twenty times during this period and each time he had fresh experiences and new gains. His annual sojourns in Taihang supplied him with deep insights into both natural phenomena and human existence, allowing him to move in his paintings between overpowering monumental pictures and small intimate ones portraying, with great sensitivity the daily lives of ordinary people.63

Jia Youfu’s work may be divided into three stages. Before 1981, most of his works were small scenes of mountain villages based on his foundations in life drawing that depicted the realm of the countryside. Some representative works are Sarking Dreams and Rain Passing and Clouds Parting. After 1982, inspired by the powerful landscapes of the Taihang Mountains, his paintings had an intensity that captured the Taihang Mountains’ all pervading momentum. At the same time the works showed the peculiarity and grandeur of nature. Paintings like Taihang Autumn(pl.14), Taihang Monument(pl.15) and The Iron Cliffs of Taihang are apt examples. Around 1986 he developed a more abstract content that transcended space and time within nature. The Taihang Mountains had

Plate 14
Tai Hang Monument

Jia Youfu
1984
ink and colour on paper
340×180 cm
Plate 15

Autumn at Taihang Mountains

Jia Youfu

1987

*ink and colour on paper*

290 × 90 cm
become for him the spiritual carrier of the past, the present, and the future, the universe, the nation and the self.

'I was in the wild of the Taihang Mountains, upon wide flats and great slopes, and I saw a huge-rocked mountain lofty and steep, with red rock like blood. It resembled brave warriors’ utter devotion to one another wrestling with the wind and howling. It was like hearing the states of Yan and Zhao chanting in heroic but mournful tone'. 64

Within the sublime nature of Taihang Mountains, Jia Youfu was raising his own levels of thought and of art to sublimity. From this time on, rather than saying that he was painting Taihang one may say that he was painting the universe and the self, rather than saying that he was using techniques to paint one may say that he was using his own thoughts and the experiences in his heart. The visual manifestation under his brush of his impression of the Taihang Mountains is the crystallisation that is taken from his mind's eye. Strong Gale in the Great Wilderness, Great Mountain's Mighty Wind, Great Mountain Rising steeply, Great Mountain’s Startling Thunder, Soundless Mountain Wave and so on, one after another, works with momentum appeared. Evident in these works is the aesthetic pursuit through which the artist understands the virtue of the gods and identifies with the sentiments of all living things.

The most unique qualities of Jia Youfu and of his artistic creations as an outstanding artist are: creative persistence and sincerity, creative spirit and his creation of a new pictorial language.65 Towards his art Jia Youfu has the sacrificial spirit of a religious follower. He throws his entire body and soul into his art, treating art as a noble cause. In his artistic practice, he cultivates his own

65 Shao Dazhen(1993), Op cit. 15. Hong Kong.
character and the quality of his paintings, working hard to show in his works feelings that are good and beautiful, walking ahead of his time to give others noble spiritual enlightenment. He is always strict with himself, advancing step by step. Li Keran calls himself 'the bitter-study school', while Jia Youfu mocks himself as 'the dull-witted school,' meaning that he feels no consideration to anything outside of art. Jia Youfu is very conscious toward his art. He went to the Taihang mountains as many as thirty times to observe, to put into practice, and to model himself after nature, fulfilling the ancients' advocacy of the need to 'travel a road of ten-thousand mile' in order to bring to ripeness the conception for a creative work, and to observe the subject matter that a painter requires for his art. Through the long-term painstaking effort of 'suffering what others cannot suffer, practising what others cannot practice' 66, he saw this supplementary, in order to scale the high peaks of arts. He takes the most truthful feelings and makes them into the primary host of his creative process.

The creativity is most precious in artistic works but is something which is most lacking in Chinese ink painting in the last few decades. In the wake of great masters, it is easy to be satisfied with borrowing the great masters' techniques and experiences to seek a place in that school. Jia Youfu was Li Keran's favourite pupil and he is an important member of the school of Li Keran's landscape style. In his early period he took Li Keran's landscapes as a model and pursued his master's style. However, this period was short, being largely confined to his student years. The principle element that Jia Youfu inherited from Li Keran was his teacher's creative spirit. His techniques and style naturally fused with his own creations but did not replicate the look of Li Keran's work. Within Li Keran's school of landscape painting, Jia Youfu was

66 Jia Fang zhou. op.cit., p77.
the earliest to escape its confines and to establish his own school. He had enough courage and breadth of spirit to charge out of the confines of Chinese and Western masters of the past and present. Accurately selecting the Taihang Mountains as a point of breakthrough, he found a new visual manifestation for his ideas and created an artistic conception where the great atmosphere is pervasive and the feelings are vivid. His method of expression, first took realistic painting as its starting point and then gradually developed in a manner that embodied meaning and was in keeping with his time. What he created is a kind of personified nature.

Jia Youfu showed the ability to understand and wisdom to create a new and unique pictorial language which could link up the characteristics of inheriting, extending and existing between the past, the present and the future. The peculiarity of the new pictorial language can be seen obviously. Substance is the foundation of the language with which Jia Youfu’s paintings are constructed. It is shown in the depiction of mountains which are like warrior-guardians forged in iron. Simultaneously, he pursues the beauty of peculiarity, grandeur and dynamism. It can be said that Li Keran’s landscapes are also of extreme substance, grandeur, and majesty. But Jia Youfu further develops these aesthetic qualities and adds to them the elements of peculiarity and synergism, thereby creating new aesthetic standards.

In concept and technique, Jia Youfu has made a breakthrough on the foundations he has inherited. Ink landscape is chiefly embodied in ink arrangements and in painting, Jia Youfu wields his brush in a calligraphic manner, at the same time, he assimilates elements of composition in Western painting and combines them with the beauty of the brush and ink to produce
extraordinary splendour. Possessed of the beauty of brush line, lifelike in appearance, and adept with tonal handling, Jia Youfu’s landscape paintings have achieved sculptural and three-dimensional effect. They have the charm of national paintings, and posses might and momentum. Needless to say, Jia Youfu has absorbed the expressiveness and abstraction of contemporary Western painting. In handling the painting surface he consciously enhances its composition; in the application of ink he uses the splashed-ink techniques in seeking to express his state of mind, his concepts of appreciating beauty, and the beauty of substance, grandeur, peculiarity and dynamism.

In the early 1980s, there were many artists who sought great momentum in Chinese landscape painting. Among them, Jia had the best aesthetic vision or technique with artistic language. This is because of his deep concern for the nation’s history, culture and destiny.⁶⁷ He has maintained the spirit and essence of the brush and ink of Chinese painting and the basic pattern of traditional landscape painting. In fact, his paintings have strong roots in tradition, recalling the monumental landscape of the northern Song and evocative small-scale scenes of the southern Song masters. Nevertheless, they are entirely of our time, and seem to be the outcome of an artist’s direct confrontation with nature. Two types of painting interpenetrate: massive compositions that strike the viewer at first as made up of abstract, geometricized forms reveal, on closer looking, genre details that alter the scale and the viewer’s perceptions; the smaller pictures, with their lowering skies and transient effects of light, atmosphere, and time of day, take on dramatic power that gives them a kind of monumentality. His evening scenes with returning wood gatherers, or ox herds with oxen, strike a note of deep nostalgia scarcely seen in Chinese painting since the southern

⁶⁷Ibid. pp72-77.
Song period. With innovative techniques of Chinese and Western paintings and his sensitivity toward beauty, he causes his painting to arrive at a unification of natural and spiritual beauty. In unifying the macrocosm and microcosm, in blending with emotion, in describing the total momentum and the minute parts, Jia Youfu can orchestrate them most naturally, fittingly, and most splendidly. His landscapes are monuments erected to Tai Hang mountain, the great spirit of China which fosters China’s history and culture, and by which China may soar in modern times and ascend into contemporary cultural circles of the world, the eternal spirit of the universe, and also to mankind’s rim, and indomitable spirit of investigation and creation.\(^6\)

Jia Youfu’s artistic attainment is profound and broad. As one of the most watched artists in contemporary Chinese painting, he has already developed a school of his own, his landscape painting represents one of the most original directions that traditional painting is taking in China today.

Zhou Sicong (1939-1996) is another noticeable reformer of the academic style. She has occupied a prominent position in Chinese ink painting since the 1980s. As a reformer in the academy, she had great influence on new trends in Chinese painting.

Drawing upon Socialist Realist roots, Zhou Sicong inherited her taste for academic anatomical rendering from Xu Beihong. When she entered the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1958, the Chinese painting department was headed by Jiang Zhaohe. Eminent professors included Li Keran, Ye Qianyu, Liu Lingcang, Li Kuchan, Guo WeiQu. These painters comprised the best teaching staff in

Chinese painting. She was strongly influenced by Jiang Zhaohe 69 whose everyday life subjects were well known, especially those portraying human characters and emotions. She emerged as a public artist in the mid-1970s, with drawings and paintings of figures, the popular subject of children, peasants, workers, and soldiers -- pictures in which could be found more strength and differentiation than was usual. Where most pictures of this kind were vapid and conventional, her figure seemed less posed. She treated them as more than representatives of types, and invested them with a kind of dignity.

In 1979 she produced a notable work The People and The Prime Minister, a picture of Premier Zhou Enlai visiting people who have just suffered an earthquake, and The Prime Minister and The cleaner (a collaboration with her husband Lu Chen) depicting Zhou shaking the hand of a worker, and other pictures that similarly transcended the simply ideological. The subject was often reproduced at that time, as it was recognised that Zhou Enlai was the most admirable Chinese top leader, without heavy qualification. Zhou Sicong’s portrayals of him, and of the responses of the people around him, showed his human sympathy for ordinary people. 1977 and ’78 were years of catharsis and of healing, this subject suggested a general feeling to the public, after natural and man-made calamities (Such as the Cultural Revolution which was imputed to the policies of The gung of Four) people still hoped an admirable and strong leader, as well as an older generation revolutionist like Zhou Enlai could think for them and change their lives. Zhou Sicong is always at her best in finding and capturing the sensibility of her time and basic honesty in her own work and herself. The manner seen in the Zhou Enlai pictures and others of that period showed her great representational skills and humanist achievement, which

followed the realism found in the works of Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohe, and represents a realist ink painting stage in which she achieved the standard required of figure painting in ink with solid and mature techniques.

By the late 1970s, artists in China had been largely liberated from the pressures to produce work with ideological content. Zhou Sicong began to realise that depicting nature itself would set a limit to creativity. So she sought to change from a representative mode to a more expressive one. In this way, she stressed brushwork and strengthened individual technique. Particularly, she highlights two points: first, the subtle change in the form and second, condensed and polished brushwork and its appeal. Ever since her mural-size figure compositions Miners, she has been exploring these two aspects of her work. This is a kind of gradual change which searches for purity of style and precision of expression.

The subtle change of plastic form first began with the research of distortion. Miners was the result of this research. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou Sicong undertook this large project that had been impossible during the Cultural Revolution years when only positive, upbear portrayals of lower-class people were permitted. At that time, she still could not free herself from the temptation to use art as a means to express social consciousness, and work wholeheartedly with the paintings she yearned to do for a long time.

In 1957, while she was still a student in middle school, she had seen an exhibition of Beijing of the ‘Hiroshima Murals’ of Maruki Iri and his wife Toshi depicting the ravages inflicted on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the

atomic explosions of 1945.\textsuperscript{11} These harrowing paintings which were against harshness and violence, as she wrote afterwards, 'shook her soul'—she had not realised that painting could be such a force for peace and humanism\textsuperscript{12}. She visited Japan in 1980 and met with the Marukis, who came to China in the following year. Out of this interchange came Zhou Sicong's still unfinished series of mural-size figure compositions\textsuperscript{13}, painted in ink on large surfaces of fibrous paper, collectively titled *Miners* and painted over the period 1980-83, Four have been completed to date, 'Land of Joy'(pl.16), 'Hell On Earth'(pl.17), 'Orphan' and 'Compatriots, Traitor and Dog'. The subject is the suffering of coal miners and their families under the Japanese occupation in Manchuria; she went there to talk with the survivors and get some first-hand sense of their agonising experiences, and to view the setting where the tragic events took place\textsuperscript{14}. The inky darkness of the paintings gives them a heavy power, conveying on the one hand the blackness of the mines and the miners, and on the other creating a kind of cold, fireless hell out of their conditions.

The paintings of the Miners Series is a massive group of historical paintings. This strong humanistic power could only be found in her teacher—Jiang Zhaohé's mural sized work 'Refugees'. Her tortured distortion of the figures draws on, but intensifies, her earlier practice of portraying ordinary people in an expressionist mode adopted in part from German artists, especially her favourite model, Käthe Kollwitz. Such an expressionist poignancy and power is not seen in the work of earlier traditional painters. The intense Patriotism, Humanism and Expressionism reflected in her work as a whole embody the exalted and

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid. p20.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid. p21.
Plate 16
Land of Joy

Zhou Sicong

1981
ink on paper
Detail
Plate 17.

**Hell on Earth**

Zhou Sicong

1982

*ink on paper*

Detail
melancholic state of mind of the people of China caught in the midst of social transformation and historical reflection.

That the series remains unfinished is in part because of an illness that has sapped much of Zhou Sicong’s strength in recent years, but it must also be because the psychological energy required to produce them was more than she could continue to expend. She tried to create her paintings as a means of dealing with both cultural issues and aesthetic ones.75 In doing so, she attempted to shoulder a burden far too heavy for her.76

Zhou Sicong’s figure paintings went through a transformation from themes of strong social consciousness to those of ordinary life during the 80s. Underlying this subtle change, perhaps, are the extraordinary drawings of the nude that she made in 1985-86, drawings that portray a massive, fleshy figure with the same volumetric rendering of form and similar quality of monumentality. In these drawings done with a ballpoint, she turned from seeking the accuracy of proportion and structure to seeking a special stylisation. Exaggerating the breadth, thickness and weight of the model’s physique without caricaturing; adding to the work an aesthetic sensibility in the crude and unrefined while avoiding the elegant and sweetly appealing, and preferring clumsiness to cuteness, innocence to vulgarity, plainness to prettiness.77 These examples exhibit also an added three-dimensionality, achieved through strongly volumetric drawing, which gives them a kind of monumentality.

75Ibid. p248
76Lang Shaojun(1992), Xin Yujing You Weixie( The heart wants peace but has not ceased to grieve); The painting of Zhou Sicong Tianjin People’s Art publishing. p5
77Ibid. p6.
Her paintings from the mid-1980s for the most part have been smaller, nearer to her inner life. This reflects a change of concern from the serious and lofty to the normal and flat, as well as from the heavy and substantial to the elegantly slight and subtle. 'The spiritual orientation of the artist also shifts from directly experiencing and commenting on life to contemplating and savouring it.' For Zhou Sicong, such a change is a stylistic turn in art as well as a turn in the spiritual journey that returned her firmly to herself and artistic maturity. Most of her painting in this period, however, has been devoted to two themes: the lives of women of the Yi ethnic group, continuing the project that began with her visit to Sichuan in 1981 and lotuses, especially lotuses in fog and rain.

The image of Yi woman Series (1980-1992) expressed the artist’s experience in life with fine and sensitive strokes, which depict the tranquil, low-key lifestyle of the Yi minority of Liang Shan. The fresh and subtle painting style was in complete harmony with the state of mind of the artist. Her sketches from the Yi region depend on capturing the spirit, which resulted in weaker stylisation—'tranquillity'. Differing from the heavy and crude effects of her figure paintings of social subjects, they tended towards the naive, such as seen in 'Back in the Moon' (pl.18). Broad-shouldered and thick-waisted women, with small feet but fine features and slender necks, possess grace and charm in their clumsiness. The solid Yi women in their colourful costumes are typically depicted carrying heavy loads, or setting them down to rest, as illustrated by 'working with sunrise and resting with sunset' (pl. 19), a few paintings portray them in their rare moments of relaxation.

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18Ibid. p6.
Plate 18

Back in the Moon

Zhou Sicong

1983

ink and colour on paper

132×66 cm
Plate 19

Working with Sunrise and Resting with Sunset

Zhou Sicong

1983

ink and colour on paper

98×85 cm
Zhou paints them to express a kind of human burden through their posture. She explored the enormous burden people may bear both physically and psychologically.79 As a contemporary Chinese person, she had to face a dilemma between the glamour of Socialist ideology and the tough living conditions of reality. As a working woman, she had to confront the problem of a responsible administrative job—as deputy chairman of the Chinese National Arts Association and the family obligations that kept her from painting. As a Chinese ink painter, she bears the burden of several thousand years of tradition on her back and it is really difficult to break out of the restriction of the finest formulas. The more she experienced, the more outwardly tranquil and inwardly intense she became.

From the *Yi women* Series of the 1980s to the figure painting recently, she turned out a general style of melancholy tranquillity80. The tranquillity in her painting is usually tinged with a feeling of melancholy and bitterness, which comes after hard struggle in life.81 Such an aesthetic choice is the accumulation of life's experience.

Movement in her painting is turned into stillness—rendering exaggerated and sharp gestures and expressions into calm, relatively relaxed ones. The characters show neither agitation nor forceful movement; they either gaze at each other silently or sit together seemingly unconnected. The facial expressions are impassive, the dress and the surroundings are also tranquil, as is the artist's lyricism, even in the style of her brushwork. The scene shows much empty space in which everything is speechless and soundless, calm but not lifeless, insipid but not senseless. Thus 'tranquillity' can be interpretive of content.

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80 Lang Shaojun (1991), *Ji Zhiwei Yu Danbo* (To lodge the finest taste in tranquillity), *Meishuji* (Artist), No. 79, June. Hong Kong.
81 Ibid.
Firstly, it is a kind of calmness of human relationships that is not very close but intimate. According to Zhou Sicong, Yi people is sometimes more genuine than the sophisticated people who live in big cities. Secondly, it is indicative of the artist's longing for a life that is serene and pure. The conflicts, intrigues, falsehoods, dirty dealings, treachery and deceit in modern society has driven Zhou Sicong to yearn for simplicity, peace and friendship between people--even if the relationship should be as placid as water. In the pictures of Yi women, Zhou Sicong is expressing concerns and feelings of her own, the feelings that she recognises as held in common with the Yi women. The formation of her 'tranquil' style showed an expression of the simple and the spontaneous, without trying to be profound. The stillness she captures is therefore a natural posture, which is the extension of inner tranquillity and stillness to an outward tranquility and still plastic form that is harmonious and beautiful, with form and essence in unity.

The strength of Zhou Sicong's brushwork lies mainly in her lines--not in the way they serve the structure and shape as with Xu Beihong, nor straight but precise, swift but sharp as with Ye Qianyu, nor like Lin Fengmian's ladies. Her lines are gradual but often rough, fluffy and light, hiding a grace in their clumsiness. That is the classic Chinese line--the line of infinite possibility, variety and expression. Sometimes, she draws on a surface treated with alum, with lines that are continuous yet appear broken, variegated and confused. She does not execute her strokes with 'style', yet they are quite natural. She varies the technique in applying the lines according to the age and gender of the character, but these variations are minute, especially in the work after *Miners*. Her lines are closely bound with structure, but with a subtle flavour of their own. Compared with the figure painting of her teacher's generation, her pursuit
of the charms of brushwork is much more intense. Also, the language in her brush and ink are highly concise. The economy of lines and disciplined use of light and dark masses contribute to the overall strength of the work. This is particularly evident in her works since Miners. The brushwork in her painting forms part of the subject, not being apart from it yet having its own expression and tone. And this is consistent with the tranquil, natural, plain and unadorned character that she seeks to express. Some of her recent examples exhibit a new concern with colour and with ink values used more for nuance than for strong impact.

In the last few years Zhou Sicong’s works have been predominantly of lotuses. Known more for her figure paintings, she began painting lotuses when recovering from her illness in the late 1980s. During the years when she was suffering from arthritis, Zhou Sicong was confined to the house, severing her close links with nature. How she yearned to be back with nature. She moved her twisted fingers to manipulate the brush to paint lotuses, little houses in the storm, landscapes and small pieces of scenery. It was difficult to execute the lines so she restarted with dots, smudges and splashes and let them form naturally, stopping only when she felt satisfied. Painting lotuses in her illness was primarily a necessity to keep her life and state of mind in peace. She hoped, through artistic sensibility, to turn the pain and loneliness she had to endure in poor health into joy, giving her soul a sense of balance. ④

Blooms and pods are few in her paintings, most of which are old rather than new, getting more rain than sunshine. Soft leaves which occupied most space in her painting are unbounded and amorphous, nearly as watery as the ponds they

grow from. Floating duckweeds look faint like tear stains and dead leaves resemble jumbled clouds. There are blotches of mottled ink, slight in tone, now fleeting and now stagnant; blossoming one moment and recoiling the next, mottled ink mixed with some alum water, then with broken ink. In the dripping wet yet light fogginess, stalks and stems crisscross, some leaves are broken, others fallen and quite uneven. Everything is in obscurity in traces of smoke. The life which the Yi Women Series seeks to savour quietly continues in her lotuses, gaining yet a headier flavour while shrouded in a tinge of lyrical melancholy. Deterioration and vitality, loneliness and passion, sorrow and joy are all interwoven into a blend of ink, colours and images. It is a beauty that is simple yet rich, directly lyrically and yet untainted.

The lotus is a plant which the Chinese are fond of, and has a special place in Chinese culture. They can be interpreted in several ways. Traditional Chinese associations of the lotus, including the Buddhist, of course come into play, as they must in any representation of the subject: it stands for purity, spiritual transcendence, beauty rising out of muddy ponds. Literal painters through the ages have always loved the lotus, precisely because of this universally accepted symbolism. On the other hand, for a painter in the traditional Chinese media it permits explorations of ink effects: the suffusion of soft washes, the display of distinct brushstrokes or the suppression of them, compositions free of the constrains that other subjects impose. Therefore, the ever increasing number of lotus painters since the Song Dynasty have not used it to create an allegory but for the different aesthetic values manifested in the various expressions of the lotus created by the artists.
Zhou Sicoong aptly applies the technique of the modern ink masters to create form, nevertheless, references to the forms of the plants are in fact often minimal. As in some of her paler and quieter figure paintings, Zhou Sicoong seems in these works to be drawing inward, no longer obliged to produce a public work of art, she creates a very private one. The images of the nebulous and still lotus in the rain and mist symbolises the contrasts between death and life, solitude and passion, sorrow and joy. It is the artist’s major breakthrough in a reinterpretation of a traditional subject treated with a modern style and visual language. What she is concerned with in the lotus is not its constitution and appearance but its state of being—the lotus scene, which is what its leaves and blooms look like in the air, fog, breeze and rain. It is without the company of mandarin ducks, the Kingfisher, the dragonfly or butterfly, appearing near yet far, a shadow or illusion, so indistinct that it seems not the actual flower, leaves, buds or stalk but merely a particular poetic mood. The artist is particularly fond of the lotus in the rain and has titled many works with reference to the rain, such as *Lotus Pond in Cool Rain*, *light clouds coming with a Drizzle*, *bliss in just listening to the Thunder and Flowers in the Old Garden Washes by the Rain*. She seeks to capture in the lotus a certain feeling, mood, atmosphere or illusion(pl.20). There in lies, perhaps, peace, purity, simplicity, harmony, being far from the madding crowd, of oneness with Heaven. But such a search is predetermined by the threat of suffering, illness and disquietude. This is why one still detects traces of melancholy and sadness in those spacious, calm pictures, in the images of people with tranquil expressions, and behind the subtle changes in all that deliberately clumsy and childlike brushwork. Just as a good life cannot be but accompanied by bitterness, Zhou Sicoong’s lotuses and people, are abstracted and vague, tranquil and fascinating, tinged with a nebulous touch of sadness, plain and yet beautiful.
Plate 20
Lotus

Zhou Sicong
1992
ink and colour on paper
69×66 cm
Simplicity is the most outstanding quality in Zhou Sicong’s lotus as well as human figures. They are simple in their overall structure and general colour scheme, displaying a strong integration. Simplicity without being monotonous or empty is an artistic virtue. Being integrated is unity, and a painting is simple when it has unity. Since the early 80s, Zhou Sicong has sought effects that are simple and visually enduring--this is not to say that she thinks in simple terms, nor that the subject lacks complexities but that she has edited out the confusions, purified the imageries, unified and simplified the structure, images, rhythm and brushstrokes. The image of simplicity is a cohesive force that has been purified through a process of condensation. The lotus paintings, coming after her achievements as a figure artist, seem to be the expressions of someone relieving her heart at last, like one of her Yi women, of a heavy weight carried for a long time. In creating the form of the lotus, Zhou seeks spontaneity and terseness, together with richness in the ink tone and brushstroke. She uses ink, acrylic and black poster colour, exploiting the differences in their grain, transparency and permeative properties to depict the subtle change of the lotus leaves under different conditions. Whether the picture is strong or slight in tone, it is never completed in one breath or a single stroke. She brushed out the shadow of the lotus as thin and slight as the faint fog. Simple and natural in outer form, interesting and intriguing in the use of ink and brush, that is the great quality of Chinese art, which finds resonance in Zhou Sicong’s personality.

Looking over the paintings that Zhou Sicong has produced over the two decades of her active artistic career, people must wonder about and admire her disparity in subjects and style. The transformation of her art has undergone a
great shift, reflecting the political situation in China, the radical changes in the conditions under which artists there have worked and the expectations placed upon them. She remains apart from any movement, and from the conventionalisation that besets artists who imitate each other or conform to popular trends. All her output has, in different ways, the ring of authenticity, and of a personal voice. Her work, even at its most amorphous and withdrawn, has more spiritual depth, more conviction, than most Chinese painting done today. For a total recovery and a long career, Zhou Sicong takes a role as China’s leading woman artist, and one of the most influential painters active in China today.

In the course of their development as distinct styles, the reformism in the academy, represented by Li Keran, Jia Youfu and Zhou Sicong demonstrated a major change from the regulating of painting styles to serve the socialist state ideology, to the maintenance of their link with the older traditions of painting. Their synthesis of compositional elements sketched form nature and their use of both Western and Chinese technique is of great significance for the present and future of Chinese landscape painting.

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CHAPTER III

Merging the East and the West - Advocates Modernism

As China opened its door to foreign ideas, the speed of Western influence on Chinese culture increased drastically during the 1980s. The influx of works of Western philosophy, literature and art pouring into China, particularly the works of Heidegger, Sartre, Nietzsche, Freud, Camus and Eliot, supported the individualism and confirmed validity of new values. Meanwhile, the introduction of Western contemporary art opened new frontiers especially for young artists. What began as only a few independent efforts had grown by the late 1970s into an attentive current which affected mainstream art in China. Individuals and units have been given greater freedom from government control, even the formation of private groups and associations of artists were permitted. Art students and professional painters were permitted, even encouraged, to experiment freely.

Western theories of Modernist and Post-modernist literature and philosophy were translated and read voraciously. Not until the 1980s, would the names and styles of European modernism, Matisse, Picasso, Cubism, Fauvism and other 'ism's re-enter the Chinese art world. Then it was with a different meaning from the period earlier Many artists embraced the language of 'international' art as part of a process of 'correcting' the perceived marginal position of Chinese art. The desire to create modern art at this period can be seen as a time when 'real' art was produced solely for aesthetic satisfaction. Western artistic styles were imitated as if it was simply a matter of technique, and artists liked to move from one style to another working their way through twentieth-century modernist art history with impressive rapidity. The earlier pioneers of modernist art in China,
such as the members of the 'Stormy Society' did not really act as a bridge between the two periods from decades of neglect, although some survived into the 1980s. After a break of almost fifty years, China had to face and cope with the complexities of so-called Post modern discourse as well as the classic turn of the century modernism.

Since the early 1980s, young artists who adopted contemporary concepts experienced new cultural perspectives and a new aesthetic language. They took Western surrealism, Dada and Pop as the main models in their artistic activities. Groups of young artists of similar sensibility were merging in every area of China, eventually becoming part of a large-scale modern art movement in the mid-1980s, which has come to be known as the '85 New Wave movement. Compared to the former Modernist Movement, the artists of the '85 New Wave had a broader cultural perspective. They gained an understanding of metaphysics from Western philosophy and applied it to their observation of Chinese culture. Yet the ‘85 New Wave derived its main source and nutrition from Western modern art and thought, taking as its point of departure the cultural environment of China. Basically, the major concern of the movement was an emphasis on the conceptual transformation of art, through a strong cultural criticism and reconstructionist ideal.

As a result, the state of Chinese ink painting was strongly challenged again. In fact, in the sense that these media were threatened with extinction, the individual practitioner also feared a similar fate, and this anxiety forced a

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85 Shao Dazhen(1985), Cong Xiandaizhuyi dao houxianzai zhu yi (From modernism to Post-modernism), originally published in Wai guo mei xue( Foreign aesthetics) 1 ,abstract in Zhongguo meishubao(Chinese News of Fine arts) 1986. 11. p4
transformation of practice. In 1985, at the beginning of the 'New Wave' art movement, a young critic named Li Xiaoshan made a provocative pronouncement: 'The tradition of Chinese ink painting is in its final Death throes' ⁸⁷.

Working in concert with this idea, the '85 New Wave artists borrowed on a large scale from Western avant-grade art in order to create an anti-tradition art. They were influenced by Marcel Duchamp, Beuys, Dada and Pop Art, and took found objects in their work. Working in this style they became recognised as 'avant-garde artists' and declared war on traditional Chinese aesthetics and adopted the quest of Western modern art to constantly seek new forms of expression. The most controversial artists, Gu Wenda, Huang Yongping sought breakthroughs from Duchamp on the question of the nature of art itself. They made an art of no form, no beauty and no significance. Huang confined Taoist and Zen theories of Chance and constant change to create an art form which he called 'Neo-Expressionist', making his own roulette wheel and device to determine his painting method, turning his power of decision-making in terms of what or how to paint, completely over to chance. On several occasions, he burned all his works at exhibitions, seeking the most thorough way to 'abandon art'. In 1987, he created a work The History of Chinese art and a Short History of Modern Art after Two Minutes In a Washing Machine, washing the two volumes of books together in a washing machine, using the machine to represent people's cultural behaviour.

Gu Wenda, consistently used Western avant-garde art concepts as a reference in his attempt to destroy and reconstruct Chinese cultural language symbols. He studied in the traditional Chinese painting department of Zhejiang Academy, but had developed a fresh approach to old materials: brush, ink and ‘xuan’ paper, used for painting and calligraphy. He treated the elements of landscape painting and Chinese Characters as signs or symbols, and combined them in a challenging way (pl. 21). In Gu’s progress of ‘reconstruction’, he carried Chinese language symbols into the realm of the mysterious. In some of his major works, Gu turned Chinese ideographs into Abstract symbols, putting them through a process of dissection, displacement and reordering, and presenting the result in a combined installation/performance art format that created a powerful atmosphere of ritual and worship, as in a Taoist temple. The ritual atmosphere has become the special feature of Gu’s unique aesthetic language. Works such as Right and Wrong Words and Toiem and Taboo are composed of Chinese words and word compounds that he deliberately transposed or wrote incorrectly to analyse and attempt to reconstruct traditional Chinese culture. As he once declared, he intended to demolish Eastern ‘classicism’ and Western modernism single-handedly. His intense adherence to Chinese philosophy and meditation such as Taoism Buddhism and Zen also suggested he consciously tried to strike a ‘competitive balance’ with the Western avant-garde.

It was believed by avant-garde artists, that traditional Chinese painting, which built itself on the literati tradition established a group of technical practices and visual conventions. In the case of literati painting, which provided a restricted set of interpretations that linked possible technique, possible conventions and possible subject matter, it could be regarded as a closed discourse as it has little

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85 Fei Dawei (1986), Xiang xian da yishu tiao zhan - fangh huajia Gu Wenda. (Challenge to Modernism - Interview with Artist Gu Wenda), Mei Shu 7.
Plate 21

Door God

Gu Wenda

1986

*ink and colour on paper*

$485 \times 180 \text{ cm}$
possibility of accepting any new ideas. In this respect, the discourse of literati painting resembles that of classic art in Europe. Its whole development paralleled the feudal society and it could have come to a dead end unless it went through a process of modernisation.

Thus the inception of China's avant-garde art occurred at the time when artists began looking for a way-out for their own art. The artists intended to break down the traditional forms of art and conventional aesthetic sensibility by using Dada and Pop aesthetic vocabularies. Although they started out dealing with questions of art and aesthetics, in the end, their rather emotional attempts at borrowing and copying instead of developing a unique creative language was due in part to lack of theoretical sophistication. The majority of young artists view Western contemporary art as the guide and means to liberating their thought. To this end, their creations are significant beyond the purely artistic context because they also represent the artists' rebellion against cultural autocracy. If the creation of a new aesthetic vocabulary defines the essential quality of creating a new art form, then the '85 New Wave was not so much an art movement as a cultural movement.

Art, nonetheless, has its own set of rules and requirements. Although the borrowing and adaptation of western contemporary art may suggest to some a veiled identification with the culture imported along with the art, China's own cultural heritage and practical needs have resulted in a paradoxical treatment of this foreign art, namely, one of simultaneous rejection and tolerance.

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The New Wave Art movement reached its peak between 1985 and 1986, its achievement was documented in the notable exhibition of China/Avant-garde ’89. By that time, it came to be believed that Chinese avant-garde art could never join the mainstream of international contemporary art if China did not acquire an integral unity based on its own culture. It should be realised New Wave Art at the end maintained a strong link with the past, many works carried a strong social or political message as art had done during the Cultural Revolution⁹⁰. Words and symbols featured prominently and, in some cases, became the subject of art. Then there came a new trend calling for a purification of language, which paid more attention to visual language and native art, especially Chinese ink painting.

The high requirements of Chinese ink painting and the technical conventions of the academy might have been one reason for the limitations in the evolution of traditional style. However, modern Chinese ink painting, like modern-Chinese history, has undergone a drastic transformation. From the late-nineteenth century and the beginning of this century it has shown a fusion of different styles, materials techniques and subject matter. Works from these formative years have come to signify a long-term investigation and contemplation of the aesthetic values of the people.

The problem of the new modernist movement is that many people take the concept of ‘Modern’ and ‘international’ to mean the West and identification with the West, and with galleries, museums and critics of the West. For this reason, a great number of art works have been produced to cater to the taste of Westerners, while at the same time some artists regard praise by Westerners as a

successful step ‘to the world’ and as a mark of modernity in their work. Because of the political and economic strengths of Western countries, the Western-oriented philosophy advocated by Westerners has found its way into the minds of many people, who inevitably view matters of Orientals (including culture) from a Western perspective. Of course Chinese artists should feel free to borrow whatever elements from the West that may benefit them, but that does not mean they have to do it with a contempt for Chinese cultural tradition and artistic ability.

It should be mentioned that modernism is not the exclusive property of the West. Cultural emancipation means something different to the East and West. The concept of Modernity in China, which has the longest history of civilisation should be defined differently. On the other hand, progress, and the speed of industrial modernisation in China did not develop simultaneously with Western culture. Therefore, it is not possible to apply the Western fine-art tradition to art practices in the non-Western World. In the confrontation that results from the difference in spiritual needs with the West, Chinese cultural tradition should be redeemed. The essential mission of Chinese art today is certainly not to be immediately arranged by the West, but rather to struggle out of its own limitations itself and find its unique identity. As some Chinese critics realised and pointed out: Chinese art must choose its own path by seeking survival and development by blending the best Chinese national tradition with the result of foreign creativity.

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After the constraints of long rigidified cultural patterns, many artists became acutely aware of the right of art for art's sake and began to take an alternative path in artistic expression. The New Formalist movement which began in the late 1970s, marked the stage for modern art in China. The formalist style of painting showed increasingly abstract tendencies at first. Throughout the decade there were artists who showed a strong interest in and experimented with the possibilities of abstract art.

Wu Guanzhong (b.1919) began a campaign to push Chinese art towards modernism and win acceptance and revaluation for formalist art in China. Born in Jiang Su province, Wu Guanzhong entered the Hang Zhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1937. Under the instruction of the old generation modernists, Lin Fengmian, Pan Tianshou and Wu Dayu, he studied both Western oil and traditional Chinese painting. Then he won a scholarship to further his training in Paris at the École des Beaux--Arts from 1947 until 1950. His exposure to the work of Matisse, Utrillo, Modigliani, Picasso and Braque during his sojourn in Paris enabled him to understand their development toward abstraction. He later reflected on his experiences abroad:

'I went to Paris to learn about ancient and modern Western art and compared the view of the Western masters on life and the universe with those of the Chinese masters. Western and Chinese paintings seem to be different, but in reality the masterpieces of Eastern and Western art shared the same characteristics.'

Wu adopts something of the Chinese master's style and combines it with his own mastery of oil technique, which makes his work appealing both in China and abroad. On his return to China, he came to the Central Academy of Fine

Arts for a period. Agreeing with Xu Beihong, he also advocated that oil and ink techniques should be interchangeable. But following the route of Lin Fiengmian, Wu Guanzhong held it necessary to introduce European and American modern art since Impressionism into China, instead of sticking to out of date European Classicism as a model. He once hinted that some artists who did Chinese ink painting with classical Western drawing technique were like that of advanced ‘Lang Shining’\(^{95}\), whom it was believed employed only inferior sketching method and lacked real creativity. In his own painting, Wu Guanzhong prefers Degas’ line, Monet’s obscure colours, Van Gogh’s sincere language and strong expression.

Since he was out of keeping with the doctrine of realism and the academics teaching at the Central Academy represented by Xu Beihong, he was forced to leave. He finally went to the Central Academy of Craft Arts and Design. He disseminated his ideas among his students through teaching, but in the 1950s, Wu was criticized as a representative of ‘Bourgeois Formalism’. Not until the end of 70s, could he regain the opportunity to reveal publicly his ‘underground’ exploration in realism. Nevertheless, after the Cultural Revolution, he was the first to bravely propose the study of artistic form and language in realism.

‘Art for art’s sake’ could not be tolerated by government policy before the 1980s. Wu Guanzhong is one of those artists who mostly emphasised form, paying much attention to technique, which he treated as the means or medium for expression, and took painting to a higher level of expression. He is not only particular about the implicit refinement and expression of the form but is

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\(^{95}\) Lang Shining (1688-1768) was the Chinese name for the Italian Jesuit painter Castiglione, who combined aspects of Chinese landscape convention with European brushstroke, modeling and notions of objective space.
opposed to the Subject Determinism of rigid Socialist Realism that had impeded the development of Chinese art.\textsuperscript{96} Wu has been a courageous and eloquent spokesman for the liberation of Chinese attitudes about the essence of beauty and the possibility of abstraction. He attempted to broaden Chinese understanding of foreign ideas and images. For instance, when the party line condemned abstraction as decadent and something that the masses cannot understand, Wu Guanzhong argued that for thousands of years the Chinese have delighted in abstract art, as seen in the marble patterns used to decorate palaces and mansions. Moreover, the Chinese use of garden stones, calligraphy and the splashed-ink technique are all traditional abstract elements.\textsuperscript{97} He advocated broader possibilities for artistic expression. In his theory, form in art does not exist alone but with contents.\textsuperscript{98} This broke the stubborn idea of Subject Determinism that meant 'art for art’s sake' should not be tolerated. At that time, both his name and work represented an emblem of innovation and great influence.

There is originality in the meeting of East and West in Wu Guanzhong’s painting. As he said: ‘at my home, Piccaso, P.Klee and Shi Tao, Ba Da frequently meet with one another, and I am willing to translate for them.’\textsuperscript{99} He made a play of dot, line and surface, especially those from the late Seventies and early Eighties(pl.22), he explored the potential of purity, in terms of wash line, ink, and eventually abstraction.

\textsuperscript{96} Wu Guanzhong (1981), Does the Subject Determine the form?, \textit{Meishu} 1981, 2.
\textsuperscript{97} Lim, lucy(ed), 1991. Opct, p35.
\textsuperscript{98} Wu Guanzhong (1979), Hui hua zhong de xing shi mei.(Beauty of Form in Painting), \textit{Meishu}, 9.
\textsuperscript{99} Quoted in Shao Dazhen (1990), Merging of East and West, Pioneer a New Route, In the \textit{Collection of Wu Guanzhong’s Painting}, p7. Hong Kong.
Plate 22

Fishing Hamlet

Wu Guanzhong

1979

ink and colour on paper

140×70 cm
Wu Guanzhong formed his new style in the early 1980s. It is a kind of language combining both concrete and abstract images, having both rigid and free order for points and lines. His pursuit of abstraction was evident in his 'Lotus' (pl. 23). To Wu Guanzhong, abstraction means abstracting the 'essence' of the form. He never intended to produce non-representational art, which the West considers 'abstract', as embodied in the art of Newman, Pollock or Rothko. 'Kite with thread' embodies his principle of creation, which means the convention of painting should not be totally dropped. Frequently, he combines traditional ink techniques with the gestures and drips of Abstract Expressionism. This kind of painting naturally reminds the viewer of Western abstraction and the successful Chinese artists in Paris, his classmate Zhao Wuji and Zhu Dequn, but Wu never intended to follow pure abstraction. Usually the subject of his works are not completely unidentified, and even when his work appears most abstract, it is never entirely divorced from the natural world. What he did strive for was not an Eastern-style or Western-style painting, but modernism with personal character, national traits and features relevant to his epoch and his creative work and theory enriched the tradition of Chinese painting.

Since 1979, individual artists in China have continuously carried out experiments with abstract art, but few gained success. The more liberated 1980s opened ominously when in 1981, an exhibition of art from the Boston Museum of Art, included works such as Jackson Pollock's 'Number10', Morris Louis 'Breaking Hue', Franz Kline's Probst 1' and works by Helen Frankenthaler. It was reported that the abstract painting did not attract big crowds of Chinese people.100 There are many reasons for this response. First of all, Abstract and Pop Art had been seen as a form of internationalism which was propounded by

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100 China gets First look at U.S. Abstract Art, Eugene, Register -Guard Eugene, Oregon. 1981.Sep.3 15D.
Plate 23

Lotus

Wu Guanzhong

1990

ink and colour on paper

Detail
the United States in order to increase the worldwide penetration of Western ideals, and expressed the idea of anti-communism during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{101} The abstract tendency was ideologically rejected by Communist China, and certainly frowned upon by the art academy. Additionally, in the field of aesthetics there was the lack of an effective point of entry to Chinese art. In the history of Western art, the evolution from the enactment of realism to abstract art was a historical process. Clement Greenburg, champion of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, dubbed 'flatness' as the symbol of Western avant-garde art. He cited the process of deconstructing traditional classicism's three-dimensional structure, then building up a purely aesthetic language and system of form based on the visual relationships inherent in modern industrial society.\textsuperscript{102}

Conversely, China does not possess a classical formalist tradition in art which evolved from and is driven by a humanist foundation. Chinese ink painting has always been a more abstracted philosophical expression. The theory of traditional Chinese literati painting emphasises the free play of brush and ink. Its appearance has always been subjected to the honesty and the expression embodied in the work and, above all, that emotional and philosophical expression in the brush line, the abstract line. The idea of advocating a more spontaneous and interpretive style of painting was similar to the belief of the Abstract Expressionists. Chinese artists also have savoured abstraction in painting and their counterpoint of black and white in calligraphy. However, this aesthetic analogous to modern art had been obstructed by the Confucian Doctrine which required a balanced harmonisation of the subject and the object. Although individualism in Chinese landscape had been promoted by the


connoisseur of literati painting, they only encouraged the manifestation of the purified and transcendental aspects of humanity—that is, of metaphysical and morally idealistic personalities.\textsuperscript{103} It is a painting which, using natural and realistic elements, is the very embodiment of intense, personal expression and in the evolvement of that expression verges on abstraction stylisation, symbolism and metaphysics. As Michael Sullivan explained:

The West finds a pure visual harmony in the lines, colours and masses of artist's visual experience, through which, rarely, a deeper harmony may be discovered. The Chinese artist seeks to attune himself with that deeper harmony. Trees, mountains, human beings are divested of their identity as separate objects, and through a technique that gives all forms unity of texture, become visual symbols of ultimate cosmic unity.\textsuperscript{104}

In the sense of Western abstract theory, the landscapes of Ba Da Shan Ren (1625-1705) and Shi Tao (1641-1717) painted in the late 17th Century are far more modern than most of contemporary Chinese painting. It is a painting which can compare to any of the great Abstract Expressionist paintings, such as those of Jackson Pollock or Franz Kline.\textsuperscript{105} They employed bold, free and expressive brush strokes to create paintings that were distinctive in style. Their work was imbued with a rebellious spirit and keen individualism that presaged a new phase in the development of Chinese painting two hundred years ago.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{103} Guo Yin\textsuperscript{ }(1987), \textit{Yuan Ming Huihua Meishu} (Aesthetic of Painting in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties). Taibei.


\textsuperscript{105} Capon, Edmund (1988), A sense of Unreality. In Mayching Kao(ed). \textit{Twentieth Century Chinese Painting}. Hong Kong, Oxford University. P167

\textsuperscript{106} See Du Zhesen\textsuperscript{ }(1990), \textit{Paintings of Four Monk artists}. Tianjin People's Art Press.
Consequently, the new breakthroughs based on purely visual communication are not meaningful and did not carry the same potency and subversive power in China as they did in the West. In addition, if the value of abstract art only existed in its purely aesthetic exterior, the deceptively simple executional style could easily reach the limitation of the original work, leaving very little room for exploration and breakthrough.

The fate of abstract art in China demonstrates a point that the acceptance or rejection of a style is not decided by the will of individual artists, but determined by cultural heritage and existing social conditions. Since Western Modernism and China’s modern art have been created under a completely different historical background, their artistic value should be evaluated by different standards. Basically, the Chinese avant-garde lacked the tradition and discipline that European art had gained over centuries. Artists hastily followed the latest foreign trends without paying due consideration to theoretical principles nor to their own distinctive cultural identity. In this case, although China’s avant-garde art is inspired and driven by the desire to issue cultural criticism, it does not expect its own evaluation to be based on the actual effectiveness of the critique. An imitation of Western contemporary art can be said to be a cultural commentary, but would not necessarily hold any value as art.

Following the way of merging East and West pioneered by Lin Fengmian, Liu Haisu and Wu Guangzhong, many artists represent a more expressive style of Chinese ink painting in the new era. Among the middle-aged ink and brushwork


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artists, Shi Hu (b.1942) is one of the most outstanding artists in drawing a lesson from Western modern art.

Shi Hu had various experience in his life, having learned technical design, joined the Institute of Fine Arts and served as a soldier, a teacher and an art editor. Now he has become a professional artist. His paintings have also been changing from one form to another. He started using ink and brush in a realistic style. His style in the 70s was known for human characters, almost in normal proportions, taking either the form of line sketching or light and shade. His exploration of expressive ink and brush started in the early '80s. Since then, his paintings have undergone two major changes, first in form and expression and second, in colour. A feature of Shi Hu’s paintings is that he is always pursuing new style, not being satisfied with set patterns. He uses Chinese traditional material and tools, but with a modern idea. He is looking forward to a revival of Chinese culture, but without giving up the idea of drawing a lesson from Western art. His changes in vision, symbols and language are but a reflection of what is found in an individual mind.

The subjects of Shi Hu’s paintings had been confined to remote mountains and villages for a long time. His brush and paper were preoccupied with villages, local customs, bamboo jungle, farmer’s daughters and even folklore, animals and pets. In his freehand brushwork, he emphasises lingering charm in which both outlining and ink splash are applied, with colour as a supplement. The language he adopted was mainly ink and brush in a light and elegant style. Although his strokes were not traditional, his paintings were lightly overshadowed by something like scholarly paintings. Deviating from the

108Biographical information is based on Ordained Shi Hu. Sino Arts & Assoc. 1992, Singapore.
realistic style and freehand brush work, he changed to the configured ink painting style which is based on the two characteristics of Analytical Cubism and Abstraction, with colours still playing the supplementary role. This is one of the main feature of Shi Hu’s art, which reached its maturity in the late 1980s. After his arrival in Macau, he resorted to urban life and injected some warmth into his painting. Most of the urban scenes fall into this category, with colour taking up the most important space with lines and ink patches. The carefree lifestyle of literati people was over, to be followed by activities that provided sensual excitement. There is a stronger demand for design and greater momentum, with complete description of details. New targets and new views were mixed up with memories and signs of the past.

Traditional literati ink and brush has always been based on the natural scene of ‘heaven sky and man combined.’ It is a generalisation and distillation of accumulated experience. The ideal is to make a statement that is eternally true rather than to record what is transient or accidental. The artist's attitude is one of reflectiveness, of detachment from objects, hinting through the beauty and harmony of nature that lies behind the visible forms. This traditional art was lyrical, elite, unfailingly good-mannered, the worst crime was vulgarity. Of course, not all the spiritual and material aristocrats are ‘noble’ and ‘detached’. Privately they kept pornographic paintings to satisfy their sensual desire. Many of the literati and officials of the Ming and Qing dynasties enjoyed this kind of dual-cultural life. In modern society, sensual desire is considered natural and the circulation of vulgar literature is allowed, Chinese painting as a spiritual product still regarded spirit as its foundation but began to set unification of the spirit and the flesh as its highest target. Long before going to Macau, Shi Hu had already

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got out of this 'prohibited area' in Chinese painting. After his arrival in Macau, life in this modern cosmopolitan city state stimulated his inspiration, so that he could produce such works as *Endowing Purity, the Wearing of Red*, *2, Triangle, In Pursuit of Life, Autumn* and *Violet Rose*. Excitement, lingering memory, direct vision and profound thinking about life were all gathered in these paintings.

For the sake of a new form of art, Shi Hu left his home town and travelled widely, but could not help thinking of his home town. Many of his works produced after he had settled down in Macau, such as *Shanxi Style, Of Lotus and Pride, Hebei Native*, and *Harvesting our labour* (pl.24) are full of sad feelings for his home town. The memory of his childhood, the little village where men planted and women weaved the cloth, the familiar faces of relatives and neighbours and even the flowers and the insects are expressed, sometime like jigsaw puzzles. At times there was even an element of playfulness. Some of his works in Macau followed the same line, but the pattern and connotation of most of them were changed. They showed greater attention for design and overview, representing a rich and mysterious inner world. His *Justice and Chivalry* (pl.25) portrays two sacred characters, Guan Yu and The Monkey God, from the old Chinese novels, one being the incarnation of 'loyalty and righteousness' and the other, a rebellious mythological figure. Around them are either mortal beings or devils. In the form of a dream, the artist expresses his idol and the contrast between good and evil, seemingly to show the social circumstances and the feelings of the spirits. His *Baptism* is like a religious mural, where nude men and women stand solemn, serious and obedient, hoping to gain a new life from the holy bath. There was every sign of blind fanaticism in the silence in the painting. *The Philosopher* is full of masculinity, with the
Plate 24

**Harvesting Our Labour**

Sh Hu

1990

*ink and colour on paper.*

69×137 cm
Plate 25(A, B)

**Justice and Chivalry**

Shi Hu

1992

*ink and colour on paper*

*Detail.*
face of the human characters looking somewhat fearful. In Autumn and Faltering Beauty, bright colours and soft lines are used to depict women figures which are, however, distorted. The scene is gloomy and even miserable. All this and many other scenes which cannot be interpreted are inseparable from the profound consciousness, the indescribable life and the feelings of the artist.

Traditional Chinese paintings were full of imagination before the Wei and Jin dynasties (by the end of 7th century A.D.). Such imagination was expressed in humanised nature and spirits. After those two dynasties, the Buddhist art depicted only image which was made sacred, with a decline in the free imagination. For generations, literati paintings had been generally confined to the decoration of life and used to express feelings, with only a little trace of imagination.¹¹⁰ In recent generations, people tended to become more practical and demanded more from nature. After a general decline in literati art, there had been an attempt to find a way out for Chinese ink and brush through Western realistic painting. However, with the compulsory interference of politics, the artistic imagination was over-looked even more. After the Cultural Revolution, Western modern arts were widely introduced and the fire of imagination was rekindled again, which became popular by dint of the theory of spiritual analysis, as well as primitive and religious art. The exploration of modern art has thoroughly shaken the rational foundation of classical art and changed the condition and function of art, thereby causing a worldwide visual revolution. Following the powerful movement of ‘new trend art’ in the mid-80s, Chinese ink painting was represented in many trends. The trend represented by Shi Hu has just been unfolding.

The style of symbols and colours marks a new phase of Shi Hu’s art. It is a major breakthrough in his own as well as contemporary Chinese painting. In this kind of painting, Shi Hu extensively uses and reforms the formative symbols of Chinese and Western arts, including Chinese folk art (lunar New Year paintings and embroidery), elaborated colours, the murals of the medieval age and the early Renaissance, Children’s paintings and the arts of such great Western masters as Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Gustav Klimt, Joan Miro and Paul Klee. Far more important than that, Shi Hu’s works are complete and unified, without any conflict of symbols. This is an indication of Shi Hu’s strong power of synthesis.

Shi Hu’s sensitive and creative mastery of colour is fully evident in his new work. Varied styles, strong impact and psychological effect are their characteristics. Some works have a common tone, however, there is a rich variety. In the giant *Justice and Chivalry*, most of the human characters and objects are expressed in the form of bas-relief or semi-relief in a bid to seek unification of traditional perspective and analytical cubism. The two sacred figures are brightly coloured to form a contrast, in form and in tone, with all the mortal beings and the overlapping images of the devils in the background, so that viewers will experience a nightmare while having a taste of real life. The painting looks old and spotted, like an old mural. It is a bold attempt by Shi Hu in the synthesis of colour and symbols, as well as a rare and perfect contribution in his recent artistic creation.

Heavy colours are used in many of Shi Hu's paintings. The kind of bold and effective colour contrast which is seldom used in Chinese ink painting can be regarded as a typical example of Shi Hu’s success in colour synthesis. The style
in the use of striking colour contrast is full of stimulation, brightness and superficiality. Typical examples include *Dream of Red Mansion, Hunters Sanctum*. The dominant colours of those paintings are red, yellow, purple and green. Highly contrasting, all of them represent the style of Chinese folk art, which is very challenging. In a further development, the artist applies intensive and smooth lines to the highly contrasting or monochromatic patches, sometimes sturdy and sometimes light and soft. On the one hand he resorts to his brush for outlining, while on the other he transforms modern Western composition and appearance.

As far as Chinese painting is concerned, which comprises mainly ink and brush, a breakthrough in colour is a strategy as well as a target which many artists have been trying to achieve since the turn of the century. From Lin Fengmian to Wu Guanzhong, each has made some contribution to the breakthrough. Shi Hu does not follow them. For he has created a new style and gone his own way, Shi Hu is distinctive for his city landscape painting in the history of modern Chinese ink painting.

An important element of the New Modernist movement of the early 1980s lies in the fact that just as Western Modernism in its movement against traditional Western representational art turned to Eastern and African folk art for inspiration in the exploration of form, the painters in the New Modernism turned their signs to a re-exploration of art in the native Chinese idiom, including the local primitive art and religious art.\textsuperscript{111} Primitive imagination spiritualised the great nature and certain elements of mankind\textsuperscript{112}, while religious imagination spiritualised the saviour. The dreamland of modern art opened the

\textsuperscript{111} Lang Shaojun (1987). *op.cit. pp314-315
\textsuperscript{112} Emil Nolde(1934) *Years of Struggle*. Berlin, Renbrandt. pp172-5.
gate of the suppressed consciousness. While the former expresses the illusion of those who are unable to master their own destiny and their expectation of the supernatural power, the latter is a kind of liberation of personal ideology and consciousness. Again the former is peculiar and romantic, full of religious teaching and appeal\textsuperscript{113}, while the latter is mysterious and incredible, without standard and crisscrossed with human desires, suppressed feeling and consciousness, in addition to the shadows of various social restrictions.

In the '80s, some extraordinary art was found in the minority nationality regions which are far from the centre of Chinese culture, such as sculptures in Guizhou, wood-painting in Yun Nan.\textsuperscript{114} The art showed a strong wild vitality which seemed lacking in the sophisticated mainstream culture in the long history of China. The painting of young artist Hairhan(b.1959), from the big prairie of Mongolia, absorbing primitive and religious imagination also attracted people's attention.

Hairhan was born in an intellectual family in Mongolia. His ancestors were the nobility in late Qing Dynasty. In the beginning of the reform policy of the late Seventies, he studied Chinese ink painting in the arts department of the National Minorities Institute in Beijing.\textsuperscript{115} At that time, he always stayed in the surroundings of a fusing Chinese and Western culture searching for freedom. After graduation, he returned to inner Mongolia. However, he did not close himself out of the new arts style which influenced China.

\textsuperscript{112}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{113}Lang Shaojun.(1987). op.cit. p314.
\textsuperscript{114}Biographical information is based on Cao yuan shang de qiji (Miracle on the prairie: Hairhan) Chang Jiang Art Center. 1992
Hairhan broke through the style on both figure and animal paintings. His strongly characterised figure consisted of the heavy colour, abundant and relaxed drawing, naive looking style of the wild north field. He emphasised the feeling of unity of forms and shapes and the whole relationship between them and environment, and weakened the independence of the technical factors, such as drawing lines, the evenness of ink which is different from either the popular traditional style or the realistic style. People and animals in Hairhan’s painting were a combination of the great colour lumps. The outline was visionary and vague, but the shape and deportment were very clear.

Hairhan’s works were based on colour. The colour was not dyed but painted one by one\(^\text{116}\). The black ink existed as one of the colours, unlike the traditional Chinese painting in which the black always existed to build the construction. His technology of combining colour and ink was a great breakthrough which had been a hard course for the new Chinese ink painting.

Brush line was a most important element in traditional painting. Contemporary people lacked the foundation of calligraphy, therefore they had troubles in catching up with ancient people. Some painters explored the new way for the brush line. Lin Fengmian took the speeding line instead of the slow line. Ye Qianyu used the straight drawing line. No matter which kind of style is involved in the writing procedure, it required skill, the research and a system for technique. Hairhan painted slowly and carefully. He used the small brush to draw lines which were thin and with strength. Those lines with many layers painted in ink sometimes were outline, sometimes were the texture of materials.

In the whole body, it was a shape and it was a function to express emotions and atmosphere.

Although Hairhan was not a shepherd, he belonged to a Mongolian tribe and had the memory of living in the prairie. His inspiration came from the impressions of the world of prairie and shepherd men. Prairie scenery always remained in his mind: mounds up and down in endless succession, the wild grass, the endless desolation, and the simple and wild life - shepherd man and animals. However, the unusualness in Hairhan’s painting is not that of the grasslands but comes from his own experience.

There is little exotic Mongolian scenery in his painting, such as trapping the horse, wrestling or drinking milk-tea. Most often shepherds appear. But shepherds of oxen or horses were either tired or staring just like ghosts. The shepherd man was neither relaxed nor anxious, but like the lonely wandering ghost. On the grass, a monk with a red prop dress was coming, or a woman in a red skirt who was naked. Sometimes it showed the beautiful scenery as quiet as gardens, but most of the scenery was empty and barbarous. Obviously, those sceneries were not to record or search and disclose something in the nature, Hairhan subtly revised the physical space with his imaginary space in art, the grassland has become the psychological background for him. The impulse of life and illusion to religion were interwoven with the memories of childhood. There was no burdensome life, it was full of colorful imagination and the quiver of the spirit. The social background was ordinary and far away but the natural background was heavy and near. The personal description was

Plate 26

The Red Plateau

Hairhan

1992

ink and colour on paper

105×117 cm
Plate 27

Mother and Children
Hairhan
1992
_ink and colour on paper_
_70×70 cm_
light and mental presentation was deep which showed the pure temperament of the painter.

Hairhan involved himself in imagination and he was interested in religion. To him, painting was nothing but the needs of his life. He continuously asked questions about the mystery of life and explained them in his painting. Art became a method to freely exhibit the emotional world and direct experience of life. The artist paid attention to the exploration of the individual mind and showed a highly expressive personal style, using fine, sharp lines of black and white, variegated colours and free-flowing ink to give vent to the stirring of the mind.

Take Mother and Child for example (pl.27). The protagonists in this painting are the artists black-haired wife, red-haired girl friend, his cherubic daughter, his deceased mother, his uncle and younger brother. Add to these an oxen with rich expressions. These are allegorical images of his own life and death, truth and fantasy, suppressed desires and burning hopes - all blend into a unique, throbbing picture of the grassland. Hairhan uses the traditional ink medium but has a different style from that of the Scholar painter. His paintings are frantic, wild and weird in which people could feel a strong wave of emotion, a raw vitality, a solemn and mystical religious ambience. The influence of the Western expressionists is evident. However, his expressive tendency also carries an obvious element of Eastern mediation, which obstructs extremist expression. In his painting the wildness and strangeness were making fun of the gentleness and gracefulness of the nobility. Such an approach defies the conventional principle of harmony and gives new vitality to Chinese painting.

118 Ibid.
Obviously, the call by some for destruction of tradition was only partly successful, but as the representative artists who advocated modernism indicated, in the field of Chinese painting, most artists still sought a new way to combine the best features of both East and West in their work. Their dream is to draw upon their heritage, and create art that communicates outward to the global sphere. However, they found themselves in a deep valley, trapped by the rejection of the great artistic achievements of both the ancient East and the modern West from the reformation in the late-Qing Dynasty and social pressure in the 20th Century. The conflict between two extremes is difficult to reconcile. Yet, in fact the past few years have seen a number of artists, like Wu Guanzhong, Shihu, Hairhan, integrating different influences and producing outstanding results in their works. They are diligently study aspects of Western art and at the same time continue and strengthen their knowledge of Chinese art. Their works are regarded as some of the more successful experiments in contemporary Chinese art.
CHAPTER IV
Using the Past to Initiate the future - New Literati Painting

It is important to recognise that the artistic consciousness of New Wave art during the mid-1980s had a distinct avant-garde ideology, an ideology influenced mainly by the concepts and techniques of modern and avant-garde Western art. Many artists believed that there should be a universal modern art that could be appreciated by all classes and nationalities. However, avant-gardism as a state of mind is a historical fact in the West and the language of the avant-garde is regarded as orthodoxy. There was widespread intimation that the principal energies of modernism were either waning or had already been spent, and that some significant shift was discernible in art. In short, modernism, as Habermas (1981) wrote, seemed ‘dominant but dead.’ Further breakthroughs have resulted in the emergence of post-modernism, and have often been treated in the context of a search for tradition.

Since a more passive attitude to avant-garde movements in the West seemed to be evident in the late Eighties, the political realities of the Chinese government had also stimulated its people to turn inward. Unlike the blind rush to the international art world of New Wave art, many artists followed in the footsteps of the Native Soil movement in the literary world to search for the roots of their art tradition and re-assess the literati tradition of painting. The Native Soil movement was characterised by a renewed interest in Eastern philosophy and in a consciousness of the unique cultural characteristic of the motherland; it became a full-scale cultural movement in 1987 in a sense against the heavy

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influence of Western Modernism in the mid of Eighties. Simultaneously, another parallel movement known as the ‘purified language’ movement sprang up in the art world. It was a reaction which sought a purer visual language for art to counter the New Wave art’s heavy philosophical and intellectual bent.

The new form of Chinese painting emerging from these movements, which involved the absorption of traditional Chinese literati ink-play into what became known as ‘New literati painting’, has made a strong impact in response to the New Wave movement’s emphasis on Western art and philosophy, and to the excessively serious tone of its art. ‘New literati’ painting emphasised spontaneity, and a carefree spirit of traditional literati painting. It registered a certain mood which can be characterized as ‘inward’, ‘relaxed’, ‘sentimental’ and ‘nostalgic’. This mood had not been so obviously represented in Chinese painting since traditional painting was criticised and challenged again and again in this revolutionary century, especially between 1949 and the Cultural Revolution.

Many artists looked to ‘the good old days’ for inspiration to revitalise contemporary culture. They feel that Chinese art of the past contains a wealth of artistic expression that can be utilised by contemporary artists. The rediscovery of the aesthetic language of traditional literati painting was seen as a means of countering the ’85 New Wave’s heavy cultural reflection and criticism, and reflected rather an extreme opposition to Western culture in favour of a traditional Chinese spirit. In this sense, New Literati artists have a strong connection with the traditional painting masters who attempted to use the past to initiate the future.

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121 Lang Shaojun (1988), op.cit. p137.
122 Jiang Xun (1988), Shui mo xin renjian Ink Painting (Exhibition of New Artist.)
It is notable that the historical awareness of past achievements is one of the most salient features of Chinese civilization. Unlike much of Western thought, which focuses on individual creativity and deviations from the past, and in which 'a historical figure is usually a function of the degree to which that figure reflects discontinuity with what has gone before', Chinese thought is generally committed to continuity.\textsuperscript{123} While the Roman grammarian Aelius Donatus (4th century) had said, 'Damn those who said our good things before us,' Confucius proudly proclaimed himself as 'a transmitter and not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients.'\textsuperscript{124} As a result, the defining criteria for value in China were inescapably governed by past models.\textsuperscript{125} The inexorable past, as Frederick Mote put it, has thus become one of the most important issues in Chinese art history.\textsuperscript{126}

In this way, the evolution of artistic expression in China has been characterised by gradual change, rather than by a period of radical change prompted by reaction to established notions which are familiar to the West.\textsuperscript{127} When literati painting was in crisis early this century, there were still a number of traditionalist artists continuing to work in the literati spirit and they represented an excellent example of the persistence of appreciation of antiquities in Chinese art history. They never put forward radical reformatory ideas, however, as they were sensitive and knowledgeable, they also felt the crisis and revealed their

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Ames, Roger (1983), T. The Art of Rulership: A study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press. xii.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Legge, James, The Four Books: The Great Learning, The Doctrine of Mean, Confucian Analects and the Works of Mencius. p200. Wen Hua Tushu. Taipei.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Mote, F.(1976). Op cit. p6
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Capon, Edmund.(1981), Chinese Painting of Ming and Qing Dynasty. p6. International Cultural Cooperation of Austuralia Limited.
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individual characters and styles in their painting. These paintings also showed
the distinctive national features and these painters were also pioneers in
reforming Chinese painting although there is not even a hint of Western
influence in the works of these leading masters. Huang Binhong (1854-1955)
and Qi Baishi (1864-1957) are the main representatives of those artists who
attempted to use the ancient to transform the modern.\textsuperscript{128} They clung to the
orthodox tradition of literati painting, yet in terms of stylistic achievements and
metaphysical profundity, they are unmatched this century.

Among the Chinese painters in the twentieth century, Huang Binhong was the
great master who best represents the continuity of the literati tradition. During
his long life time, he experienced all the major political and social changes of
modern China, yet he never lost confidence in the future of traditional Chinese
painting. He was one of the very few in modern China to understand fully the
meaning of literati painting, and in his long life, he expanded the potential of
this type of art. He firmly maintained his goal of transforming the traditional
subjective language of literati art from a classic language into a modern one. As
a scholar, poet, calligrapher, painter and connoisseur who was dedicated to all
of his literary and artistic pursuits, he was regarded as the embodiment of the
literati ideal in modern China, and won the greatest respect.

Huang Binhong, more than any other painter or scholar of the modern period
spent long years studying the theories, techniques and history of Chinese
painting until he understood the essence of literati ideals. For him, tradition was
a source of innovation for the twentieth century artist. He maintained:

In their pictorial theories, the Ancients spoke often of notions such as ‘the method which consists in the absence of all methods’, the ‘order within chaos’, ‘the regularity of irregularity’, ‘the resemblance of non-resemblance.’ They said, ‘One must both reach the center of all rules and establish oneself beyond all rules.’ All these constitute the highest principles of the art of painting, and must be thoroughly assimilated.\textsuperscript{129}

Huang Binhong was born into a family in An Hui province, which had a strong literati tradition\textsuperscript{130}. The connections of his family enabled him to study the paintings and calligraphic pieces of great masters in his hometown. In his youth, he went to Yangzhou and Nanjing, which were the center for artistic training during that period. There he met many prominent scholars and painters and saw numerous ancient masters’ paintings in private collections. For several decades, Huang Binhong concentrated on copying the work of former masters to learn the essence of painting as well as absorbing the theories and ideas of Chinese painting.

In 1907, he was invited to Shanghai to assist in the editing of several monumental publications, including Series of Chinese Studies and Journal of the Chinese Tradition. Then Shen Zhou Guohua ji and Mei shu cong shu. Shen Zhou Guohua ji was the first major publication in China to regularly publish reproductions of Chinese paintings and calligraphy for the general public, mostly from private collections in Shanghai. For the majority of people without access to private collections, this was an epoch-making event which broadened


\textsuperscript{130} Biographical information based on Chen Shutong, A chronicle of Huang Binhong.
the knowledge of traditional art in the country, as museums were still unknown at the time. *Mei shu cong shu* (Art Treatise Series), which first appeared in 1911, attempted to reprint all the known treatise on the various arts which they culled from Chinese traditional sources. The result proved to be the most complete set of material on art in China. Both of these publications opened up great opportunities for scholars and students of art in the early-twentieth century. In working over these materials, Huang Binhong learned a great deal himself, and became perhaps one of the most knowledgeable people in the field of Chinese painting.

During the next several decades in Shanghai, Huang Binhong engaged in the publication of periodicals, newspapers, articles and books, and he taught in a number of institutions, including the Shanghai Art Academy, the Chang Ming Art Academy and Qinang University. His own research on art resulted in his publication of *Gu hua hui* in 1925, a history of Chinese painting, and of *Huang shan hua yu lun* in the same year, a study of the artists connected with the Mountain Huang of his home district, Xixian. These activities brought him acclaim and a considerable following.

In 1937, Huang was invited to examine the painting collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing. This gave him an opportunity to see many of the best Chinese paintings from the previous several thousand years and thus enriched his experiences providing a solid foundation for the great achievements he made in his old age. As the old master’s works were available in Beijing, the majority of traditionalist artists studied and followed rather closely their models of the Song, Yuan, Ming and early Qing period. Huang Binhong was much more innovative than most of the traditional artists, and he turned away from the
orthodox models (the Four Wang), seeking his inspiration from the bold technique and creative spirit of the late Ming loyalist (yi-min) artists.\footnote{Ming Loyalist artists were those who left from Ming Dynasty, resentful of the Manchu rulers of Qing Dynasty, avoided public life and spent their time studying poetry, seal carving, calligraphy and painting.} As a result of their efforts, many modern painters in China found their liberation in the Four Wang tradition.\footnote{Li Chujin (1989). op.cit. pp225-232.}

It should be noted the yi-min painting tradition was related to the idea of ju-gu\footnote{Ibid. p226}. Fu-gu, or recovering the past, could be self-deceiving and slavish in many minds, but in other minds it could be a revolutionary archaism that spawned competing repudiation of the present, and that bolstered creative approaches to all of the people’s activities.\footnote{Mote, F. W.(1976). Op cit. pp3-8.} At the time during the late Ming and early Qing dynasty, the Tang and Song manner revived as a ideology of real national tradition against the Manchu controlled Qing government. While the motive was primarily a reassertion of the Chinese against foreign art, it was also a rejection of an immediate, decadent cosmopolitan past and a return to a remoter, purer Chinese tradition -- a declaration that Chinese painting had recovered its essence and was back on the track once more. After the establishment of the Republic, with the Manchus no longer in power, a new interest in those yi-min painters arose with the promotion of nationalism.\footnote{Chu TsingLi (1989), Op cit. p89.} Huang Binhong’s inclination to the yi-min tradition reflected his national consciousness and revolutionary ideas to overturn the rule of Qing.\footnote{Zhu Jinlou. Jianrong bingxue, tan yi gou miaox (Take everything and make a thorough enquires) Xin Meishu. 1982.4}
The appeal that late Ming artists held for modern painters was not accidental. Although the literati painting tradition has its roots in developments prior to the Tang dynasty, and particularly in the enrichment of the tradition by the Song and Yuan Dynasties, it was during the late Ming dynasty that the literati Painting became an integrated system and established itself firmly as the mainstream. Huang Binhong’s painting derives its spirit of sophisticated literati painting tradition from the late Ming period. His supremacy in brush work continued the practice of the late Ming masters such as Cheng Sui, who preferred dry-brush techniques. It reflects Huang’s attachment to the late-Ming literati ideal which called for the use of dry brushwork as a symbol of moral integrity.

Beside political considerations, the art of Ming Loyalists seemed to have greater artistic value. Seen against the background of a predominantly orthodox Qing style with its imitation and repetitions, these works appeared more creative. This is *fu-gu* in its most literal sense, and on a much higher level, it is the imaginative recapturing of the past, through the paintings of the late-Ming period, tracing back to the Tang and Sung manner which were done by Huang Binhong during the early part of this century. Scholarly sensitive, and profoundly original, they represent not merely *fu-gu*, but *Gu-yi*, ‘Archaism’, living in the present. *Fu-gu*, the mode of using the past, had little to do with the history of perseverance of styles.

In art history, ‘archaism’ has a specific meaning vis-à-vis stylistic features. It also has the general meaning of relating expression to one’s consciousness of

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137 Hugh Moss (1983), *The Experience of Art: Twentieth Century Chinese Painting*, Hong Kong.
138 Li Song (1992), Similarities and Differences between Wu Changshuo and Huang Binhong’s Art. p48. In *Four Leading Masters of Literati Painting in Twentieth Century China*. 

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past models. These two must not be confused. The success of a creative does not signify a departure from the past. Rather it is a new realisation of which has long been intended by the seminal minds of those artists who responsible for the fulfilment of a historical mission and the vivification of accumulative tradition. For an artist like Huang Binhong, the pursuit archaism therefore means to dig and drill into that historicity which symbol the most significant landmarks of human achievement in the past. Fu recovering the past, exists on another level of truth from such literal concept ‘style’, provided the means of relating the artist to his work, to his audience, to the history of Chinese painting.

Huang Binhong was not limited to any school or region, he sper considerable amount of time in Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou and travel extensively all over China to visit famous mountains and rivers. He was deeply involved in the study of the late-Ming masters. Deriving his approach from them, he created a new personal style, combining elements of Dong Qichang, Liufang, Ba Da Shanren, Shi Tao and Cheng Sui among others, but he did follow any of his models very closely. He created his own style with the use of dry ink, and free brush work that developed the purer display of brush and than his predecessors.

Remaining in Beijing until 1948, Huang Binhong accepted an invitation to the Hangzhou Art Academy to teach there. For the rest of his life, he paint a large body of work and continued his own research on painting and seal car

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139 W.Mote. op.cit. pp3-8.
140 Wei Mingtu. Inner Experience: The Basis of Creativity in Neo-Confucian Thinking. in F. Murch(ed). Arts and Tradition. pp 9-15
His profound knowledge of calligraphy and seal carving became an important factor relating to his achievement in painting.

Huang Binhong put his profound knowledge of Chinese classic literature, philosophy and history to full use in the creation of his paintings. His works done after he was 70 years old are more representative of his unique style. At this stage, he was concerned with the solidity of his mountains and rocks. In them, he has shown awareness of light and dark contrasts, the interplay of line and dot, sharply angular and strange rock formations, curving movements and modelled shapes. In the later mature one, he focussed primarily on ink tones and brushwork and handled them in an individual manner. As ‘Pine Trees in Deep Gully’, and ‘Clouds over Yibo Peak’, his paintings appear at first glance to be a jungle of casual and messy ink strokes. However, a sense of order soon emerges from the seeming disorder punctuated by space and light, distinct shades and layers, roads and paths, and streams flowing are revealed; the peaks rise high, grass and trees are flourishing and villages are full of life. They give the pleasant feeling of a lyrical country setting.

At an advanced age, Huang Binhong was even more creative. He became increasingly more involved with pure brushwork and following this path, in the typical style of the last period of his life, the sheer power of his brushwork with dark, blunt and willful qualities, conveys his artistic expression. While appearing clumsy or chaotic, it really shows the essence of his art, in its untrammelled abandon. His brush follows what he feels, without any effort or artifice, and flows directly and naturally from his heart. During his later years,

141 Wang Bomin(1982). Hei Motuan Zhong Tiandi Kuan. Wide Space In the Dark Brushwork. Xin Meishu (New Art), 4
Huang Bin hong created the free and spontaneous hand scrolls, as 'village' (pl.28), 'Country Cottage in Rain,' 'Mountain Dwelling on Qi Xia Mountain', his complex brush technique and layers of ink dots in blue and tan colors, achieve a very subtle depiction of the landscape elements. Rocks and mountains are solid and strong, yet they also provide the painting with rhythmic pattern and movement. Just as in the painting of Wang Meng, the great master of Yuan Dynasty, they give not only an impression of rich vegetation but also a feeling of nervous energy moving across the picture, to make it bustle with life and activity. Further more, the hanging scroll is characterised by the contrast of dry and Wet brushwork, which gives the work a sense of tension and restlessness. This combination of the representation of nature with a display of formal excellence and beautiful brushwork is typical of Huang's mature work.

Dark ink is Huang Binhong's foremost means of expression. His landscape painting, characterized by a dominance of black ink colour, is of tremendous magnitude. Many of his paintings would surprise the beholder for the supreme dominance of black colour, a style never seen in the history of Chinese traditional painting. The skill of overlapping ink strokes needed not only a spirit of daring to break new paths, but also a long period of self-cultivation. Huang Binhong had pursued this particular style all his life.

Brushwork is the important attachment which unites landscape painting and real scenery. Huang Binhong often applied a dozen layers of ink on a painting. *Mountains in Autumn Rain* (pl.29), for example, has parts with very thick ink that fully demonstrate his superb expertise. He applied more ink over the spot that had already been heavily painted to find a dead end. His painting, though
Plate 28

Village in Rain

Huang Binhong

1953

ink and colour on paper

87.5 x 48.5 cm
Plate 29

Mountain in Autumn Rain
Huang Binhong
1934
*ink and colour on paper*
*145 × 45.5 cm*
heavy with black colour, give the feeling of brightness\textsuperscript{143}, this characteristic was a unique expression of his painting. Huang thought highly of those paintings which used dark ink properly. He said, ‘Black was the most important colour in the landscape Paintings from the Song Dynasty. Looking at the black mountain in the painting, one feels as if one is walking up a mountain at night.’\textsuperscript{144} In his own extensive travels to famous mountains and rivers, Huang observed carefully and came to the conclusion that the colours of all mountains were dark, especially in the early morning or at dusk\textsuperscript{145}. Thus he believed dark colour was the best colour to describe their magnificence.

As a superior form of expression, Huang Binhong’s work is not easy to appreciated. Like many great artists, he endured loneliness in his lifetime, however, three decades have passed since his death, and more and more people have come to appreciate the great value of his landscape paintings which were dominated by heavy black colour.\textsuperscript{146}

When Huang Binhong was growing up toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, modern arts in the West had just come into being and were flourishing at a very fast pace. But the art of Chinese traditional painting had become stagnant. Huang’s style, to a great degree, played an important role in revitalising this ancient art and marked a new era for it. At the time many famous scholars\textsuperscript{147} were advocating reform in Chinese traditional painting from borrowing Western art. Although there were wide differences between the Chinese painting and that

\textsuperscript{143} Huang Binhong once said in his ‘Random Chat at he Age of 90’, ‘Ink is black. Properly used, the ink appears bright.’

\textsuperscript{144} Huang Binhong. Hua xue pian (Writing on Studies of Painting).

\textsuperscript{145} See Huang Binhong’s poem wrote in the painting ‘Mountain at Night’.


\textsuperscript{147} The scholars including Kang Youwei, leader of the 1881 Reform, and Chen Duxiu, leader of the New Culture Movement in the 1900s, who were mentioned in Chapter 1.
of the West, Huang believed, however, that the influence on each other was mutual, especially between the modern forms. He urged Chinese painters to be creative in their adherence to conventional skills, as he realised only those who knew how to change could survive. In his view, to be creative required the painter to see the real rivers and mountains, and turned back to the real and vitalised tradition. But this does not mean that Huang refused to acknowledge the good aspects of the Western art of painting. When Western art first came to China, he seriously studied its unique quality, but never imitated the style. So his work met the West's modern art at a higher level.  

The free and unpolished brushwork which Huang Binhong developed in his paintings which progressed into near abstract arrangements, forcing the viewer to consider brushwork for its own sake. It is notable how close his ideal came to that of modern Western formalism, or more specifically, to Abstract Expressionism, as he made use of the symbolic abstract approach to depict the scenes of the four seasons and through the objective approach and the use of a fourth dimension to unite the differences of time and space. However, he was a true adherent of ancient Chinese traditional art. While Western artists sought to purge away all literature and historical associations in order to achieve pure abstract forms, Huang Binhong attempted to embrace all the Chinese traditions of the past into his art. The greatness of Huang Binhong lies in his ability to attain the literati ideal by combining profound scholarship, and creative art.

Unlike Huang Binhong, the background of Qi Baishi was far from that of literate society. In his own way, Qi Baishi transcended his provincial and non-

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literati background to absorb folk elements into a new type of painting, which became acceptable to an enlarging circle of literati painting. He grew up in the country with a limited education, and began his career as a carpenter, through acquaintances in his native Xiang Tan, Hu Nan province, and later on in Beijing, he gradually acquired a knowledge of the classics and poetry.

Qi Baishi stands firmly in the innovative tradition of Literati art. He took the best from the yi-min artists such as Shi Tao, Ba Da Shan Ren, and the reformist of the Yangzhou School and Shanghai school, then he created his own style. As a traditional artist, Qi was all-rounded, possessing all the requisites of literati art, including calligraphy, seal-carving and poetry writing. The relatedness between poetry, painting, calligraphy, and seal-carving has been a very unique aspect of the Chinese art tradition. Even though the four-in-one art is less meaningful in modern Chinese painting, those continuing in traditional brush painting have maintained the pattern of inscribing poetry and affixing seals on their works, as a very unique aspect of Chinese art tradition.

Qi Baishi’s major accomplishment in Beijing took place in 1927, when he was appointed to the faculty of the National Art Academy in Beijing, where he maintained a close friendship with Xu Beihong. Their respective treatment of Chinese art was different, but they still shared some common characteristics in painting such as learning from nature and an amiable approach to make their art appreciated by masses. Qi Baishi’s impoverished peasant family background was constantly brought up as though it had a crucial force on the quality of his art. He painted a far broader range of subjects than any other literati painter.

151 Jiang Xun. Qi Baishi.
with a fine sense of design and a sense of humour as well. By means of his mastery of brush, through painting and calligraphy, and original approach to seal-carving, he focused upon the familiar objects around his native home, such as shrimps, crabs, fish, insects, and birds. His subjects included such mundane themes as a rat falling into a weighing scale, an old man cleaning his ears, and children playing, all accompanied by his humorous poetry, filled with great sympathy and folk wisdom. They are the most directly expressed joys of life. This trend of secularisation coincides with the pattern of general development in twentieth century Chinese painting in an attempt to bring art to the common people and to popularise aesthetic education.

It is well-known that Qi Baishi’s expressionistic calligraphic paintings done after the age of sixty are among the artist’s greatest achievement. The secret of Qi Baishi’s success was something he liked to repeat when he explained what he was really after in his artistic endeavour. ‘In painting, it is best to arrive at the midpoint between the representational and non descriptive. Something that is too representational only caters to the uncultivated, the totally non descriptive verges on deception.’ In his traditional vocabulary, he explained this principle as necessary because only the outward form of an object is visible, observable, while the essence of the object, has to be approached through one’s mind or intuition. Qi Baishi went on to say that what he sought to capture with his brush on paper was not just the semblance of outward form, not just what looks like the real object, but rather its inner spirit. However, the inner spirit, which is most important in Chinese painting has to be captured beyond the outward appearance of a thing without completely ignoring its outward appearance.

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152Ibid. p121.
154Catherine Yi-yu Cho Woo (1986), Chinese Aesthetics & Qi Baishi. p96, Hong Kong.
The Shrimps (pl. 30), his favourite theme, showed his dexterity and aesthetic taste. The long sectioned bodies, round eyes, bifurcated pincers and spindly and curving feelers, constructed an intricate pattern. In the upper left corner, a line of calligraphy served to balance the composition of shrimps. In these paintings, Qi Baishi could always capture the significant, interesting and unique character of his object. The more freedom and abstraction of brushwork in Qi Baishi’s late years best revealed his personality, the naivety, which he preserved throughout his career. Among the artists in the modern period, Qi Baishi achieved the best balance between the literati tradition and modern demands, between artistic ideals and self expression. His painting was appreciated by most people and gained a huge popularity.

The most valued among Qi Baishi’s works are those which combine poetry and painting155. He painted pictures which were inspired by some immortal lines from classical poetry, he also wrote poems of his own. With this, his verse brought his art into the exalted halls of the intellectual elite. The Chinese art tradition that yoked painting and poetry together has found eloquent expression in Qi Baishi’s career.

In keeping with the Chinese painting tradition, Qi Baishi left much blank space in nearly every one of his work. The blank space in Chinese landscape often suggests sky, cloud, mist, or water. But more importantly, blank space is necessary to show space unoccupied in contrast to space occupied, without which, neither could exist. The principle is in accord with the Chinese thought pattern of yin-yang duality, mutually complementary, not mutually exclusive.

155 Wang Fangyu, Xu Jieli. Paintings of Qi Baishi.
Plate 30

Shrimps
Qi Baishi
1935
*ink and colour on paper
145×51 cm
On that intellectual basis the notion of ‘void’ in Taoism is not emptiness, but rather it is the fore-runner or prerequisite of everything.\textsuperscript{156}

Qi Baishi is an artist of extraordinary inventiveness. He absorbed folk art and has retained much of its intrinsic aesthetic appeal although he was seen as a literati artist. He mastered elite art theories but in applying them to his practice he has been able to translate most of them into a rather folksy, plain, readily understandable language of his own. He incorporated the bright colour and exaggerated structures of the folk art into the high taste of literati brush work(pl.31). He skilfully juxtaposed the finely and delicately drawn insects, crabs or shrimps over the roughly and freely splashed background of leaves or landscape to create a world of harmony and liveliness. Through his long life, spanning almost a century, Qi Baishi bridged the gap between Chinese classic art and folk art, and even the transition between traditional and modern Chinese art with his paintings.

In all these artists one can detect, a greater adherence to the traditional basis of painting in China, but all seemed in the beginning to open new vistas within old formats. Apparently, it was a handful of traditional artists who understood the message of modern Western art and particularly the stress upon the inner necessity and spontaneity of expression, although it is hard to discern any direct influence of Western Expressionism in the works of these traditional masters. There is no doubt that literati painting in the twentieth century could not survive intact without major changes. However, the techniques and philosophy of Chinese painting still has values to offer contemporary art.

\textsuperscript{156} Ye Lang (1985) Zhongguo meixue shi dagang (Chinese Aesthetics), p28. Shanghai People’s Art Press
Plate 34

Lotus and Dragonfly
Qi Baishi
1941
ink and colour on paper
67 x 34
The literati tradition has been blamed for the repression of any alternative modes of expression and for drastically limiting artists in a culture which, it is felt, should otherwise have produced them in large numbers. But what has been lost in quantity has been gained in quality. There is considerable merit in traditional literati artistic ideals, particularly in the importance of self expression. Although its cloistered world of exquisite good taste and high ideals has been largely shattered by political circumstances in this century, its legacy in modern Chinese painting is powerful and once again positive. There are some possible courses in literati painting which may offer the possibility of continuing the traditions and style to evolve. In particular, it is those styles which might lead toward a more individual expression.

While the whole generation of artists are pondering over the future direction of Chinese art, there are some artists still painting in a self-contented way. They have a strong focus on the rediscovery of native landscape, and have became both an influence on and a symbol of growing nostalgia for the charms of peasant society in the face of modernisation.

Ink painting has always been intimately related to oriental poetic sensitivity. Unadorned simplicity and an exalted quality do not only find expression in the pictorial realm which flows from the brush and heart of literati-artists, its essence also resides in the Chinese aesthetic perception. When modern civilisation comes upon them along with science, technology, and material wealth, people discover that the grace and harmony communicated in ink painting can become a strength in rectifying the upset psychological imbalance. Just like Buddhism, Confucianism can, in a certain sense, balance the excesses of Western rational civilisation.
The development of New Literati painting is based on the fact that many artists naturally tend toward traditional culture, especially as they are not at all convinced that constant study of and experimentation with Western styles will in any degree save Chinese culture, they have adopted the attitude of ‘Why forsake the near to chase after the far’. New literati artists largely borrow from the uniqueness and distinctiveness of classical art as a means of fulfilling a psychological craving, and address their current reality as well. At the same time, they are also willing to learn whatever they can from Western art, but only in their own manner.

Chen Ping is a prominent artist of the New Literati painting. At the age of only thirty, he loves and is skilled at all kinds of traditional art forms including poetry, lyrical verses, painting, calligraphy and seal-carving. He even yearns for the artistic life style of the ancient literati.\(^{157}\) However, he did not mean to reminisce in his painting, but sought to discover and transform the fundamental symbols of traditional art and culture.

Although Chen Ping was born in Beijing, due to the impoverishment of his family and early death of his mother, he was brought up by his grandmother in Feiwa, a poor countryside area in Hebei province. In this place where his mother was buried, he experienced the fear and loneliness derived from the early loss of maternal care, he enjoyed the pleasure of living in the seemingly infertile but, in fact, most vigorous wilderness. He had felt the serenity and harmony of the countryside, even during the nightmare period of the Cultural Revolution. Chen Ping has been back in Beijing for a long time but he still

travels very often to Faiwa, his memories of his boyhood linger in his works. Even now, with more experience, his own painting style, still cannot leave his dream of Feiwa behind. Such characteristics of sentimentality and bitterness make his paintings very touching.\textsuperscript{158}

Chen Ping studied painting and calligraphy when he was very young. It was the Chinese Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine arts which provided him with a very solid fundamental training and the landscapes of Li Keran were especially influential for him\textsuperscript{159}. He learned about the in-accumulation technique, the basic literati brushwork technique, which were summarised by Huang Binhong and developed by Li Keran. At this time, most students were able to free themselves from the bondage of realism, choosing to reveal their individuality right from the start through the exploration of both the ancient and the modern, and the East and the West.

By the time Chen Ping graduated from the Academy the New Wave art was emerging. Numerous art groups were formed by young artists to join the current from the West. However, their consciousness in social participation was unable to move Chen Ping's devotion to tradition. He responded, rather, to native root-searching, by travelling westward to discover the reality of the land. With the earthy tone of his life-drawing, he echoes with cultural introspection the Native Soil movements, reviving a new insight and new mood in the ancient village, narrow paths and every simple aspect of the landscape. As Social Realism once held so high by the artist, was now facing severe opposition in the eighties, depictions of this kind of real suffering involved in a life of hardship and


\textsuperscript{159} Lang Shaqun. (1991), op. cit. P6
poverty showed a liberal spirit in response to Revolutionary Realism's principles of 'sublime, outstanding, perfect'. Chen Ping's life-drawings of the North west are permeated with creative hues and the expression of images are quite liberal\textsuperscript{160}.

As a Post-Cultural-Revolution young artist, Chen Ping was not interested at ethical and political themes. While some of his contemporaries are expressing their grief over the change of culture through constant depiction of distorted forms, Chen Ping remains transcendental to such expressions. He captures intimate images and seeks for equilibrium and complacency in the constant changes of nature, and his paintings also vibrate with tremendous momentum.\textsuperscript{161}

Chen Ping's landscapes are the result of his observation of nature and intimacy with the countryside, but do not contain the concept of glorifying the grandness of the nation. Famous landscapes never appear in his work. He depicts neither lofty peaks nor vigorous waterfalls which is typical in Chinese painting, neither grand mountains nor dazzling sceneries. His subject-matter includes villages, farmlands and slopes with messy growth on the undulating plains and they are permeated with wild delight and incur little sophistication. In recent years, he created dozens of square pictures grouped under the title of 'A dream in the land of Faiwa' (pl.32), in reminiscence of the place where he spent his boyhood. This is the artist's dreamland,\textsuperscript{162} which is neither ancient nor modern, neither of the south, nor of the north. Like a sleepwalker, the artist imagines himself to be a literati, a cowboy or a farmer strolling about his dreamland. The chaotic world has been transformed into a quiet Shangri-La, deprived of industrial civilisation

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid. p6
\textsuperscript{162} As an inscription of Chen Ping's work is 'A dream in the land of Feiwa.'
Plate 32

A Dream in the land of Feiwa

Chen Ping

1990

ink and colour on paper

118×118 cm
and yet unrelated to the idle and remote spiritual dwelling place created by the ancient mind. Here nature is displaying its brilliance and vitality, the air is filled with mundane humidity. There is a solitary feeling, as on the whole everything is quite substantial. All these represent Chen Ping’s inner world, a world made up of memories and illusions.

The impulsive modern art towards the end of the 1980s did not seem have any influence on Chen Ping. He remained silently dedicated to the quiet and searching dreamland of his own. As an artist who only came to prominence in the 1980s, Chen Ping has not only chosen the traditional way of expressing the artist’s passion through eulogising his homeland, but he has also picked up traditional techniques in his painting. His techniques are very traditional but not outmoded nor copies of others. The traditional landscape painting technique can be found in his series of pictures about Feiwa. Every piece of his work is a prolific exhibition of brushwork, which is unlike the school of Xu Beihong who treated brushwork only as a means of creation, or Li Keran who aimed at unifying perfectly the delight of brushwork and realisation of images. In other words, he demands an independence of brushwork as well as an intimacy in his subject-matter. In the series of pictures about Feiwa, different painting and ink application techniques were harmoniously unified, with a synthesis of dots, short lines and hook strokes of varied densities, they look traditional as well as innovative, which marks a stage of maturity in the achievements of the artist.

Although Chen Ping is called a new literati painter, his works are in fact, much more than literati. He has picked up the merits of tradition, including the

‘boneless’ landscape of Dunhuang\textsuperscript{164} and the highly decorative paper cutting of folk art. Unlike some other artists, traditional elements only play a secondary part in his painting while initiative ideas of his own dominate(pl.33). For instance, the striking contrast between black and white, colour and ink, the vigour of a dramatic composition, the use of ink dabs and ink wash rather than linear strokes, the innovative employment of black poster colour in place of ink, the gorgeous blue and blood-like red, are elements rarely found in traditional literati painting. He has merged the primitive delight of folk art, with the scholastic quality of literati paintings and fused naturally into his works the concept of modern Western art. His works look traditional and Chinese but in fact they are the eminent product of the synthesis of the East and the West, the traditional and the modern.

In recent years, Chen Ping has developed an enthusiasm for studying and enhancing traditional culture. He is one of the very few young artists who are well versed in composing classical poems. Particularly, he is fond of inscribing his painting with lyrical verses(pl.34). The literati paintings were created by a blending of the visual painted image and in scripting of poem, a dedication, or an explanation of the painting and the artist’s mood and circumstances in creating it. After the May Fourth Movement, vernacular writings and free verse became very popular. Old artists like Huang Binhong, Qi Baishi were still competent as well as interested in composing classical poetry, but very few of their successors were found to have such ability or interest. After the fifties, artists of such accomplishment became an extreme rarity. Since classical poetry is beyond the appreciation of the public and is not promoted by modern education, it is quite natural that few people study it. However, it is after all, an

\textsuperscript{164}The Buddhism cave Painting, from the fourth to the thirteenth century at Dunhuang in Gan Su Province. The Dunhuang narrative and decorative style is entirely different from literati painting.
Plate 33

Stream and Mountain in My Dream
Chen Ping
1989
ink and colour on paper
103×67 cm
Plate 34

Landscape Inspired by Xin Tianyou, a Folk Rhyme

Chen Ping
1984
ink and colour on paper
178×94 cm
invaluable Chinese cultural heritage and is intimately related to painting and calligraphy. In New Literati painting artists accept Western elements and classical poetry simultaneously, and they pursue a unification of literature and painting. Chen Ping is representative of this. Most of his poems are composed as inscriptions for his paintings, they are colloquial, natural and rich in image.

Another uniqueness of Chen Ping is his inscription of his works with lyrical verses, which were originally folk rhymes of the Jin dynasty and later transformed by the literati writers and poets to become a sophisticated form of literature enjoying the same status as other poetic forms in the Yuan dynasty.\(^{165}\) Since they stemmed from folk language, their style was very localised and colloquial right from the start. The liberal and domestic nature of folk rhymes has been combined with the elegant form of poetry to give the lyrical verses more possibilities, with the unique feature of embodying in it both literary and folk elements. The operatic literature during and after the Yuan dynasty was very closely related to these verses and it occupied a significant position in the popular literature and art of the Ming and Qing dynasties.\(^{166}\) However, literati painters rarely inscribed their work with lyrical verses because they insisted that poetry had a better resonance with painting. Chen Ping put immense effort into learning the composition of lyrical verses. He placed them in or on the edge of his paintings to create a unique inscription style. Described as ‘an ancient being living in the modern world’\(^{167}\), Chen Ping is an artist with noble character, and an utmost devotion to Chinese ink painting. His lyrical verses show the influence of the Taoist view of nature, which is believed to account for the

\(^{166}\) Ibid. p422.
\(^{167}\) Xue Yongnian (1991), op.cit. p215.
tranquillity of the painting. The existence of such an inner world and relevant artistic characteristic is perhaps an unique phenomenon of contemporary China.

Chen Ping has also achieved distinction in calligraphy and seal carving. It is typical of Chen Ping’s style that literary elements are planted in and expressed through this paintings. The implications and prospects of such an ancient-restoration practice and its cultural value are uncertain. What can be seen in Chen Ping’s literature and painting are, in fact, unlike that of the ancient people and his transcendence is different from that of Taoism, and it has created a major direction in contemporary art. Chen Ping has never followed the trends but created it. His restoration of the ancient literati style is more valuable than the once so-called influential art which had been stiffened and fermented by a vulgar sociology. In brief, Chen Ping is very successful in using the past to initiate the future and transforming it into something of his own.

Generally speaking, ‘New literati painting’ represented by Chen Ping and many young artists emerged in response to the influx of Western-influenced Chinese art in the late 1980s. The great tradition of Chinese painting, once rejected by the radical reformer has continued to inspire the best contemporary Chinese painters. As the philosopher of science Stephen Toulmin has eloquently put it, to discard tradition in order to achieve innovation is to be blinded by the clean slate.168 And as the humanist Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out in his study of the history of Christianity, tradition has been able to contain ‘beauty ever ancient ever new.’169 It is believed that the artists of this school are genuinely continuing and developing traditional Chinese literati consciousness, however, they are also propagating an empty playfulness, something that was never an

element of literati culture. Therefore, these artist are recognised as both traditionalists and reformers.
CONCLUSION

The scene of contemporary Chinese ink painting is one of diversification in terms of style. In order to explore the vitality of ancient Chinese art and take it to the world, artists have undertaken various experiments in artistic style. Nevertheless, their explorations are largely based on a mutable Chinese tradition. Rare indeed are artists who seek to revive ancient practices and those who copy Western models indiscriminately. Everybody is working toward a fusion of Chinese and Western art, the only difference being the method employed and the degree of fusion achieved by each individual artist. Thus the categories of the three trends in contemporary Chinese painting—reformism in the academy, advocating of modernism and new literati painting—have been established to facilitate discussion and to indicate that no definitive barriers exist between various schools.

In examining the development of Chinese culture in the twentieth century, the dramatic changes in Chinese painting can be seen quite clearly. Chinese ink painting, in a contemporary context, can no longer be accurately summarised by the term 'traditional painting'. Since the late-nineteenth century it has begun to demonstrate a fusion of different styles, techniques and subject matters. It is in a state of flux, of searching, of seeing and of change. A variety of traditional approaches coexist, based on a number of stylistic and theoretical modes, and the boundaries of traditional painting have been extended in many directions.

At times, the results look awkward and unrefined by traditional standards, and reflect tension in an intermarriage of native and Western styles. Works from those formative years of Modern Chinese Art demonstrate an incorporation of
traditions to suit the Social Realist style. As the Cultural Revolution between the 1960s and 1970s was replaced by a decade of great emphasis upon technology and scientific development in China, many artists became disenchanted by society and politics and functioned under the opposing principle of 'art for art's sake'. Their tendency toward an expressive formalistic approach was incorporated within the mainstream of contemporary Chinese art.

The 1980s was a period of learning about modernism. Modern philosophy, literature and art were studied and introduced into China. As Western culture began to be accepted, the people of China naturally looked to Western modernism to accomplish the dream of building a new modernised country. In art, the introduction of Impressionism was followed by a simultaneous deluge of all the movements of the twentieth century, including Dada, and universal themes like the human race and the universe, which are common to modernism, had a broad appeal. However, although it is helpful for Chinese art to learn from the West, the Western modernist model does not fit Chinese art. While the question of post-modernism has raised much confusion in intellectual debates about contemporary art in the West, the discussion of post-modernism has also caused many Chinese artists to reevaluate and redefine the condition of the art scene in their own nation. Consequently, Chinese artists looked to the past as a way of resisting submergence in the new imported styles, drawing on the philosophical, aesthetic and spiritual links with traditional culture. Contrary to some people's expectation that Chinese ink painting would become virtually extinct by the end of the century, not only has this not happened, but there has been a revival of interest in it.
As more and more Chinese artists take up the brush, Cultural life in China has become richer and more complex. The range and sheer quantity of works of art being produced in China today is so immense that no observer can overlook it. For the depth, subtlety and discipline, the poetic and philosophical undertone, traditional Chinese painting preserves something infinitely precious and irreplaceable in Chinese culture. All its aspects—study of the past, impeccable brush technique, purely formal value of brush work, Confucian attitude, blending of poetry, calligraphy and painting going beyond superficial resemblance’s to achieve pure artistic excellence—should continue to serve as a well spring of inspiration to future generations of Chinese artists. However, this does not mean that in rediscovering their traditional art that the artists can reject what the modern world and the West have to offer. For all its vitality, its subtlety, its rich history, traditional painting has limitations that are produced of its own strength, and there are visual experiences that until in contemporary Chinese painting have never attempted to convey.

Preservation of civilisation is a noble task that means indicating more creativity, but not a loyalty to preservation of historical relics. If something is open and done freely it contains possibilities, it can grow. If not, it turns rigid, predictable and dull. In fact, traditional concepts of Chinese painting may now have no place in the modern world. Contemporary Chinese ink painting is full of imaginative energies, stimulated by a rich and complex background and stemming from its own traditions as well as selective borrowing from abroad.

China is forging ahead with economic development, in the process of trying to achieve material fulfilment with the system of production created by modernism. At the same time, tensions between internationalism and
nationalism as well as globalism and sino-centralism are never far from the surface. The problem is how to reconcile modernism with the seemingly unrelated Chinese traditional values, and how the vision of culture can be obtained still perplexes Chinese artists.

Tradition is a burden, but an inspiration as well. How it is expressed depends on an artist's attitudes. It could therefore be said that the greatest problem or crisis facing Chinese ink painting is not the confrontation with Western art, but Chinese artists themselves. The truly comprehensive and representative artistic efforts of twentieth century Chinese art will devote as much space to modern, Westernised and experimental trends as to art in the more traditional style.

The evolution of modern Chinese art has its own genesis and turning-point. Its course since the mid-nineteenth century, has followed a network of divergent paths, rather than a single road. The urge to synthesise elements from the past and the present as well as from native and Western sources characterises the eclecticism which remains the trademark of contemporary art in China. This synthesis has freed the modern artist from both slavish imitation of the ancients and indiscriminate borrowing from the West.

It is more than likely that the pluralism in contemporary Chinese art discussed above will continue, although the forms which it takes will to some extent be determined by political and economic factors. It is, however, unlikely that Chinese artists will become simply part of an 'international' art movement. The traditions of Chinese culture remain strong, and it appears much more probable that an internal 're-shaping' of both indigenous and imported elements will result in an artistic tradition that remains distinctively 'Chinese'.
This thesis represents an aspect of how much can be achieved by and expressed by the Chinese artist today, who still responds with feeling and imagination to the touch of a Chinese brush. It concludes with an examination of the state of Contemporary Chinese ink painting which looks vivid and promising. Chinese artists have been able to find creative ways to use past styles. As discussed in this thesis, many of the representative artists have a clear idea of the concept of modernity, yet they are firmly rooted in their artistic traditions; their work exudes distinctive individual traits yet emanates a national flavour at the same time. They take the ink painting medium seriously, and are equally strong about exploring their inner spirit through their work. In the contemporary art field of China, these artists are the outstanding ones who have initiated major trends with strength and potential. In light of the tremendous variety of artistic impulse and stylistic approaches that exist in twentieth-century Chinese painting, especially in the latest decade, and the rapidity with which change occurs in the modern world, it is quite remarkable that China’s artistic tradition has not only been able to sustain itself, but continues to evolve in new and exciting directions.
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Twentieth Century Chinese Ink Painting Series- Paintings by Chen Ping. Hong Kong. 1991.
MAJOR TRENDS
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PAINTING

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Submitted in fulfillment of the Degree of Master of Arts (Honours)

Department of Art History and Criticism
Faculty of Visual and Performing Arts

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Nepean
1996
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
DECLARATION

I, Shao Yiyang, declare that the following thesis Major Trends of Contemporary Chinese Painting has neither in whole nor part been submitted for a higher degree to any other institution.
ABSTRACT

As the twentieth century enters its last decade, three major trends in Chinese ink painting--academic reformism, modernism, and neo-traditionalism are becoming increasingly discernible. While reformists in the academy, who are calling for stylistic freedom and a return to humanism after the Cultural Revolution, the modernists, who are trying to merge the East and West, seek the adoption of Western modes of thought and practice to develop and reform Chinese tradition. Neo-traditionalism, on the other hand, is distinguished by the new literati painting which has seen a resurgence of innovative theory and technique of an indigenous Chinese painting tradition.

Chinese ink painting in a contemporary context can no longer be accurately summarised by the term 'literati painting', which in the past hundred years has undergone dramatic changes. Many scholars, both Western and Chinese, believe that the developments of Chinese painting after the nineteenth century represent a decline in the history of Chinese art, and even a dead end. But this point of view is debatable. In this author's opinion, this has been a period of transformation in aesthetic conception and expression rather than a time of debasement of China's artistic heritage. Chinese ink painting, which is still the dominant stream in twentieth century Chinese art and a continuation of its development, can be seen in the work of many contemporary artists.

It is more than likely that the pluralism in contemporary Chinese art discussed in this thesis will continue although the forms which it takes will to some extent be determined by political and economic factors. It is, however, unlikely that contemporary Chinese art will totally reject the established cultural and aesthetic system and establish a new one, based on the modern Western system. The traditions of Chinese culture remain strong, and it appears much more probable that an internal 're-shaping' of both indigenous and imported elements will result in an artistic tradition that remains distinctively 'Chinese' as well as contemporary.
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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Chinese painting during the last decade is at a crossroads. The developing work reflects conflict, an interweaving and mutual transformation of effects from the Chinese literati tradition, social realism and modern Western culture. The synthesis of the old and new, the impact of socialist-realism on Chinese painting, the infiltration of Western influence, the traditional and the innovative are among the issues worthy of discussion.

One of the most long standing and emotive artistic issues in China, that has been debated through the twentieth century, is the relevance of traditional ink painting to contemporary Chinese society. However, there has been very little scholarly work done in the field of contemporary Chinese painting. As many scholars, both Western and Chinese believed that Chinese painting in the modern era represents a decline in the history of Chinese art, most general histories of Chinese art end with the eighteenth century. In recent years, more and more studies of contemporary Chinese painting have been done, but they have tended to emphasise very Westernised trends in contemporary Chinese art. There are a great number of significant Chinese painters, working in purely Chinese style and medium active in the modern era—who have been largely ignored.

This thesis aims to analyse the revival of traditional painting in China today—the artistic links with the past that are evident in contemporary Chinese painting, as well as the new directions and innovations that have occurred so rapidly in

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1 The scheme of Chinese Phonetic Alphabet (pin yin) has been used in this essay. All Chinese names will be given surname first. All translation from the Chinese are mine unless otherwise noted.
2 When talking about Chinese painting I am referring to that which uses brush, ink and Xuan Paper or silk as the primary media to express the individual’s relationship to the natural world and the cosmos.
the past few years. The art of contemporary Chinese ink painting, particularly the work from the years 1980-1990 is the subject of this thesis, as this period represents a culmination in the process of the development of new Chinese painting. Chinese society was then involved in an intense and profound reformation. To draw parallels with the arts of fifty years ago, this was another period of dynastic change and cultural crisis. Therefore, I will explore the problems of the continuation and transformation in Chinese ink painting -- a Chinese art tradition in the modern period.

For more than a century, there have been many intellectual debates in China about whether to cling to tradition or turn to the West as a direction for the future. Artists’ responses to Western art were equally complex, ranging from total rejection to complete acceptance. Almost all the artists have had to go through a period of spiritual struggle with the arrival of Western art in the intense debates between ‘Westernness’ and ‘Chineseness’ in painting. The strongest reaction to take place was in Chinese ink painting. Essentially, these artists can be divided into two disparate camps: the traditionalists who sought to preserve Chinese techniques and values, and the modernists, who looked to the West for the new art.

For the first camp, the past is a source of inspiration which has to be preserved and defended, they are waiting for the triumph of traditional painting. For the latter, tradition is seen as an obstacle between the artist and true creativity, and a conscious effort has been made by these artists to rid themselves of the burden of the past. They have even made the declaration ‘Chinese painting has come to

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3These two camps are extreme and precisely defined in Zhang Baoqi(ed). (1991), The Challenge which Contemporary Chinese Painting Faces --A Summary of the Chinese Painting Symposium Held by the Young and Middle-aged Artists in Pictura Sinica. No. 5.
a dead end⁴. Why would the term 'Chinese painting' arouse such diverse sentiments? The main reason lies in the fact, whether people like it or not, that they always bear in mind that Chinese painting is traditional and conventional within national identification. People who like Chinese painting would easily accept that Chinese painting should be traditional and conventional in its nature, however, people who dislike it would says that Chinese painting has in fact fallen behind the spirit of the present period. In either case it has to be accepted that tradition is always expanding, so both sides are equally disconnected from reality.

The fact is Chinese painting certainly has never died, but will never have another triumph, for the reason that it has never been defeated. Those who resist outside influences are people who do not want to adjust to any new changes in the name of protecting their national heritage. As an integral part of China’s cultural heritage, the traditions of painting could not be denied, but could be and have been revitalised in the modern period. Although it is believed that Chinese painting is not equipped to deal with the problem of the acute transformation in modern life, on the other hand, it can be said that the contemporary art world has not solved the problem of traditional Chinese painting.

That Chinese painting is based on a set of conventions does not mean it is limited. In fact, it is amazing how malleable and resilient it is. It is in a constant state of flux and Chinese art tradition is always absorbing new stylistic influences and evolving to accommodate shifts in taste. The impetus for revitalisation is built into the tradition itself. With the considerable spiritual struggle for the transition, succeeding generations of twentieth century artists

have been defining their own idea of what constitutes 'Modernity'. Their reaction to tradition and to the role of tradition, to a large extent, constitute the diversity of approaches for the transformation of traditional painting in the twentieth century. New Chinese painting exhibits tremendous variety in terms of subject, forms, technique, media and styles. Revitalising tradition is crucial to all Chinese art in the modern era, not just painting.

Modernity within Chinese art takes place in an environment of cultural crisis and social change, for while Western economies advanced since the industrial revolution, Chinese culture seemed to stand still. From the initial acceptance of western art styles and forms in China, art was used as a means to serve the nation in its development toward a modern nation. The obvious distinction between a revolutionary and conservative approach, to some extent, was seen as a struggle between Westernisation and Chineseness, although it is much more complicated than that. In the process of modernisation, nearly all aspects of Chinese tradition have been challenged by the West and the modern world. Chinese painting of the last hundred years presents perhaps the most vivid illustration of the tensions between old ideas and new, native styles and foreign, that are shaping modern China. It has been subject to periods of adulation followed by periods of attack.

Since the early part of this century, China has undergone a great cultural and aesthetic transformation. When the May Fourth movement which raised the flag of revolt against feudalism and advocated the use of Western ideas as a means of building a new culture for China, traditional painting likewise began to suffer strong criticism. In this revolutionary period, a number of artists began to work

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with oil painting and take the lead in remaking traditional painting with Western technology and ideas. By adoption of the Western style they could both express their feelings and discover a new range of subjects that were previously unacceptable. Until the 1930s, almost all the current artistic models of Western art had been introduced into China, but with the national crisis at that time and the special needs of Chinese art, further exploration along these artistic routes came to a deadlock. The rejection of the traditional literati culture paved the way for the eventual adoption of realism as the main model for Chinese social concerns.

With the establishment of the Republic of China in 1949, a new ideological foundation and subsequent development of a new model for art was established. After the 1960s, especially through the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Chinese art was isolated from the West. Artists in socialist China were aggressively insulated and isolated from cultural development in the capitalistic West. In this vigorous nationalist atmosphere, 'Chineseness' became the primary principle for any course of socially oriented action. However, the essential philosophical and literary tradition in painting was subordinated to political demands. Traditional Literati painting was viewed as elite -- a vestige of feudal China at that time. It was labelled 'art for art's sake' to be criticised. New Chinese painting must be consistent with the role defined for art, that is to serve the revolution. Socialist efforts and elements of Chinese non literati traditions, such as folk art, were put into the new Chinese painting tradition and left their indelible mark.

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7Shao Dazhen (1993) Xieshi zhu yi he zhung guo hua. (Realism and Chinese Painting), Meishu shi lun, (Art History and Critics), 3, pp 4 -10.
The 1980s saw another period of radical change. China once again opened its door to the West and came in contact with contemporary Western culture. A strong desire to reconstruct Chinese culture and ideology was followed by a swing in the opposite direction: self-recognition and confirmation of the validity of new values. Some artists went back to traditional literati painting to rediscover their native cultural identity; others continued to revitalise the methods of traditional painting and sought a dialogue with contemporary western art⁸. These new requests became the fundamental characteristic of modern Chinese art in this period of broadening the mental and aesthetic horizon, which engendered three major trends: a call for stylistic freedom and a return to humanism⁹(reformism in the academy); the merging of East and West(advocates of modernism); using the past to initiate the future(new literati painting)¹⁰.

It is clear that traditions are still important to Chinese artists, and traditional painting, in its many guises, remains an important aspect of Chinese art today. Although the impact of Western culture can be seen as the most important source of change, China has never totally accepted nor rejected foreign culture. Even the most radical revolutionaries felt that traditional culture and regional characteristics should not fade away when confronting the imperative of modernisation. The essential spirit and practice of tradition always withstood and inspired Chinese artists in the changing times and cultural crisis of the modern period. Chinese ink painting, which was very much alive in the 1980s,

⁹Gao Minglu (et al.)(1991), Du an Zan de hui gu (Brief review)-Xin shiqi meishu gaiguan( An outline of art in the new period), Zhongguo dangdai meishushi(Contemporary Chinese art history). Shanghai, People's press.
¹⁰He Shouwu(ed). Opcit. pp102-105.
remains one of the most popular visual styles in China. The examples used for this thesis all represent the interfacing of traditional techniques with contemporary sensibility.

The major trends in contemporary Chinese painting are not an imitation of Western art trends which rehash modern Western culture, nor a conservative trend which searched for a revival of ancient practices. Rather, they are about significant transformations of Chinese art traditions which can be seen to be a part of China's effort to establish a new national cultural and artistic identity. I would like to focus on the changing image in the last decade through a selected number of artists who attempted to expand and enrich the tradition within the three categories, without betraying Chinese values, for these artists perspective and cultural sensibility in contemporary China was closely tied to the whole development of Chinese painting in the past decades. Further, the major trends that were current in twentieth-century art and culture will be briefly outlined.