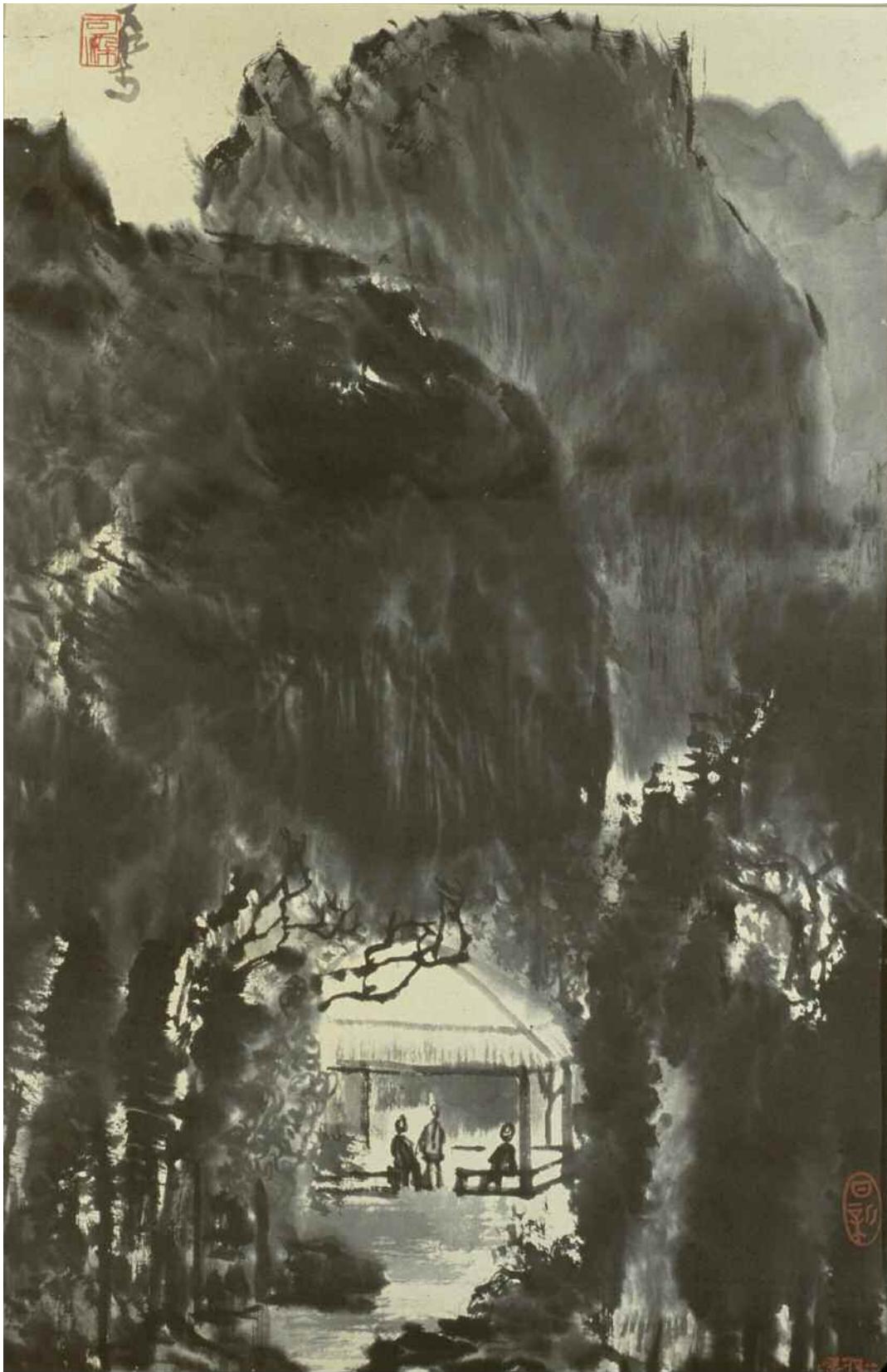


Topography in Translation

Navigating Modern Chinese Landscapes



Published on the occasion of the exhibition
Topography in Translation: Navigating Modern Chinese Landscapes
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Front cover:
Li Keran
Chinese, 1907–1989
Landscape
Ink on paper
George and Mary Rockwell Collection

Back cover:
Cao Fei
Chinese, born 1978
Deep Breathing, from the series *COSplayers*, 2004
Digital C-print
Acquired through the generosity of Jody and Peter Robbins

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This exhibition was curated by the Cornell students who were enrolled in Professor An-yi Pan's Fall 2009 History of Art 4818 seminar: Katherine Finerty, Grace-Yvette Gemmell, Rebecca Hazell, Maureen Kelly, Claudia Mattos, and Meris Sanzotta. They were supervised by Professor Pan and Ellen Avril, Chief Curator and Curator of Asian Art at the Johnson Museum.

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Topography and Translation

Writing Place in Modern Chinese Landscapes

Grace-Yvette Gemmell

Topography, Tradition, Modernity

In its unique capacity to pose ideas pertaining to both orientation and disorientation, topography appeals as a particularly cogent vantage point from which to approach modernity in China. Often positioned as a phenomenon in a state of perpetual flux or turmoil, Chinese modernity is seen as continually negotiating between tradition and innovation, the private and public or political spheres, the Occident and the Orient.¹ While Chinese modernity is not necessarily unique in this position, modern Chinese visual arts do overtly engage in the rhetoric of this idea of a carefully calculated, nuanced, and ongoing evolution.

Topography itself implies an inherent quality of evolution or an act of translation; it is something that is cultivated, manipulated, or transformed by description, essentially written over and over again in a perpetual act of relocation. In “writing place,” the act of translation, or “changing location,” occurs by means of an act of graphic re-presentation. The language, visual and verbal, with which we approach landscapes is fraught with this act of trans-lation. In travelling across space it is written anew, extending ideas about one particular location to another, and in the process it transforms itself and its destination, respectively.

The idea of the word “landscape” gained circulation in English via Dutch derivation. With the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, this word entered the English language through the concept-word *landschap*. The word “landscape” signals a certain element of cultivation and in its earliest usage denoted a specific form of depicting natural scenery and vistas manipulated by human activity. We find a very different vantage in the Chinese word for landscape or topography, *shan shui*, denoting the compound of “mountain-water.” Very distinct perspectives underlie these two words. Western landscapes may often imply a bird’s-eye perspective, the practical application of which intends to demonstrate the physical features and parameters of a given location. Although these representations may be commissioned to laud a particular space or place in its capacity as a reflection of national dominion (as is the case with early modern European *vedute*), these are

not explicitly intended as conceptual perspectives of the mind.

The word “topography” overtly indicates an act of visual consumption and interpretation; it signals human interaction with landscape through intuition. It is perhaps closer to what is habitually considered a traditional Chinese notion of the natural world where it is more conceptual and manipulated in order to convey an idea rather than an actual re-presentation of its physicality. Chinese landscape painting is freely manipulative of traditions, bearing no particular allegiances to any form of objectivity and imposing certain spatial conventions so as to convey abstract or metaphorical meanings.

Traditional Chinese landscape painting is broadly executed in close connection with a view of the natural and physical world in its capacity to serve the purpose of symbolizing or revealing unique, personal, and ultimately very human concepts or characteristics. Aspects of the natural, physical world point to meanings beyond surface representation. Landscape or topography in this instance extends the inner world of the artist, itself embedded within the landscape. Even where the human figure is absent in traditional Chinese landscape paintings, these are very much cultivated topographies with the human element ever present since these landscapes reflect the inner emotions of artists. Such a view of the natural world is mutually inherent to each of the so-called “Three Perfections” of poetry, calligraphy, and painting. These three share aesthetic conventions so that a distinct fluidity exists, for instance, between calligraphy and a form of painting that deploys calligraphic brushstrokes to convey new forms of expression. Moreover, paintings often explicitly display verbal annotations through the inclusion of actual inscriptions and poems within a painting’s composition.

Site-specific paintings are quite common in traditional Chinese paintings. For example, paintings created during the Yuan and Ming dynasties documented private retreats and local attractions. However, here, too, “reality is implied, not necessarily rendered with scrupulous accuracy.”² The “reality” of these representations is often purposed as an object for the viewer’s mind. These landscapes are already infused, overpopulated with meaning; they are heavily invested with the various symbolical or metaphorical meanings implicitly

associated with them. Indeed we can assume that the physical world is saturated with meaning, inviting additional interpretation. Moreover, the composition of these paintings is such that they draw attention to their own artifice; they do not attempt to detract attention from the surface of the composition or the media (ink, brushstrokes, paper, etc.) used in creating the piece. Rather, this is kept calculatedly in plain view, underscoring conscious efforts to convey meaning beyond the mere physical representation of space or place.

Practices of topographical citation drawing on traditional symbols and forms might also be identified as kinds of repetitions. The modern act of citation, however, begins to shift from artifact (possessing inherent, traditional meanings) to anecdote (a subversion of traditional and contemporaneous themes). The theme of repetition or the impasse sets the stage for successive works, in particular those pertaining to the postmodern period; the resources of language (visual and graphic, verbal and visual) become strained, inviting a different form of visual quotation and supplementation in a world increasingly too complex to reduce to repetitive or strictly traditional discourses.

Topographical representation in both traditional and more modern Chinese art broadly reflects Gaston Bachelard's contention that space which has been "seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination."³ We can understand both traditional and modern Chinese topographical art in light of the concept of *xieyi*, or "sketching the idea." This form of representation instructs the viewer to look beyond the image to something else. Moreover, the concept of *xieyi* gestures to the respects in which Chinese modernity is so often characterized; that is, in terms of a particular caliber of "turmoil" or productive "crises" resulting from the persistent engagement with fluid notions of representation and meaning:

The truth is that landscape imagery in China, from beginning to end, is an open signifier into which a diversity of meanings can be fitted, with appropriate alterations and additions, often including inscriptions that clarify the particular purpose to which the nature imagery is being put on this particular occasion.⁴

Where modern Chinese landscapes do not depart from their predecessors in this particular respect, they do, however, significantly take an innovative direction in their conception of space. In traditional Chinese topographies there is a clear concern with locations grounded in the traversal of space rather than place. This is equally true of modern

Chinese topographical representations, but the place itself comes more frequently to the fore, especially where academic and revolutionary realism exert their influence. Images of topography often convey convictions in response to the shifting demands of the political climate, as we find in Pei Jing's *Bared at Tiananmen*. Notwithstanding these shifts, place in modern Chinese topographical compositions reveals a penchant for engagement with a deliberate form of ambiguity; this is accordingly reflected in its imaginary landscapes made physical and, conversely, its real landscapes made less tangible and more abstract.

These later works significantly depart from the kind of representational practices in earlier compositions where topographies are framed in terms of more traditional narratives. Yehuda Amichai's conviction that "people travel a long distance to be able to say: this reminds me of some other place"⁵ crumbles upon itself here as representative strategies drawing from older, familiar traditions are no longer sufficient for the description of new experiences and objects. Shifting perspectives on the representation of topography pose consequences for the promotion of commercial and national interests as well as for visual and rhetorical devices. In modern Chinese approaches to topography, a negotiation of sites traditional, contemporary, or symbolic gains prominence working within the reappropriation of traditional elements in Chinese art. It is also a distinctly formal aspect of modern compositions, especially in the case of collage compositions. Adopting idioms and techniques that are foreign, traditional, or contemporary, these works can simultaneously betray politically charged convictions even while working within the restraints of these. Here, we find works that subvert temporality. For example, the pieces in the exhibition which work through the medium of collage (the pair of *bapo*, *Wildflower (Orchid)*) as well as via a manipulated traditional form (*Mythos of Lost Dynasties, Double-Spout Branch T-pot*) produce a form of disorientation which operates within traditional elements without clinging to the past. Their status is often such that they function as external supplements to projects of domestication and politically charged pursuits, cultivating instead distinct personal styles within traditions.

Topography in Translation: Navigating Modern Chinese Landscapes

While each of the works included in this exhibition bears witness, on multiple levels, to very specific and diverse events or ideas, they all engage in a rhetoric of topography that shapes matter or discourse. Each of these works has been chosen in their capacity to illuminate an aspect of

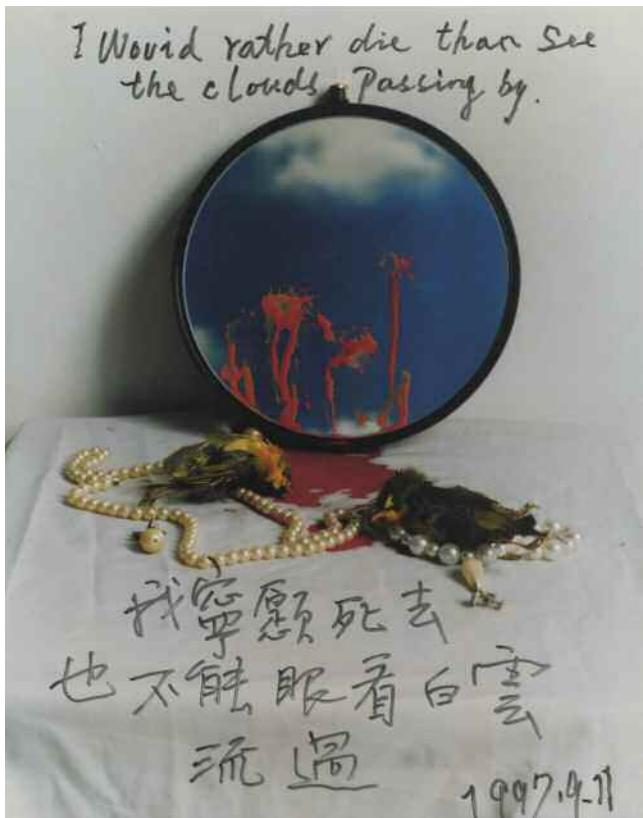


fig. 1 Hong Lei, *Clouds in the Mirror Passing By*

topographical revisioning and representation. The exhibition closely considers partial and exaggerative spaces. The geographical and chronological parameters of the exhibition encompass “modern” China; however, a broader perspective is also maintained since the exhibition considers both traditional and later material. Since many of these works belong to a common market, they frequently refer to each other across genre and even temporal boundaries. Thus, the exhibition treats topography primarily locally and specifically, but also asks the viewer to consider the former as linked to broader discourses.

The exhibition locates common discursive tendencies in a cluster of Chinese works where topographical representation, as either collection (assemblage, montage) or generation (fabrication, framing), is the thought that subtends the articulation within their general economy. Wenda Gu’s splash-ink calligraphic *Mythos of Lost Dynasties* series, for example, illustrates a notion of language vis-à-vis topography as an estrangement or dis-placement through the act of translation. Wenda Gu’s work calls into question the authority of ancient scripts through the inclusion of pseudo-Chinese characters that subvert ancient Chinese practices and symbols to explore concepts of identity and culture. *Mythos of Lost Dynasties* explores the fragmented character of knowledge. Working within the tenor of ancient seal scripts, it is both familiar and incomprehensible. The piece

inhibits viewers’ attempts at conventional understanding, instead challenging viewers to create an understanding of the script on their own terms. Kang Youwei’s *General Kang Visits Washington (Calligraphy in running script)* also draws on the idea of the translation of an experience with topography into a visual-verbal medium and asks the viewer to consider the consequences of such a translation. As discussed previously, collages can overtly display the process of performance involved in acts that signal a kind of topographical dismantling.

Wu Hua’s pair of *bapo* (“Eight Brokens”) paintings, Hung Liu’s *Wildflower (Orchid)*, and Hong Lei’s *Clouds in the Mirror Passing By* (fig. 1) all work within the constraints of the composite collage or bricolage medium. Each of these works draw attention to their own artifice and essentially illustrate the process whereby topographies are dismantled and reassembled to new ends. For example, Wu Hua’s trompe l’oeil collage composition is constituted by a variety of commercial and cultural fragments. *Bapo* draw on the debris of culture, rearranging remnants of sundry ephemera such as advertisements, literature, and commercial packaging. The deteriorated nature of the cluttered papers points to a certain nostalgia in response to the decline of Chinese cultural traditions in the face of modernization. The scattered disarray of everyday ephemera achieves an allusion to the grief associated with the loss of tradition. However, it can also equally effect a gesture of celebration in response to the modernity and progress achieved as a result of commercial expansion. In similar fashion, Hung Liu’s *Wildflower (Orchid)* works within the collage medium in order to subvert the rigid one-dimensionality of historical documentation such as photographs, extending their capacity for a broader narrative. Liu has written of these archival media, “I want to both preserve and destroy the image.” In works such as *Wildflower (Orchid)* she addresses the captured, fixed moment in historical documents via a form of improvisation, superimposing additional narrative facets in painting and collage. In this manner she expands the parameters of the more personal element embedded in the photographic instant of a prostitute’s portrait. As such, her work distances itself from the constraints of Socialist Realism; instead, it invites a view of history as ever in flux and in need of perpetual reconsideration and revision. The artist herself has noted: “History is not a static image or a frozen story. It is not a noun. Even if its images and stories are very old, it is always flowing forward. History is a verb.” This idea is illustrated in Liu’s deployment of layering techniques which blur rigid interpretations of given historical narratives.

The three teapots in the exhibition—He Tingchu’s *Crab and Bamboo Basket Teapot* (fig. 2), Pan Jun-ren’s *Shu dan hu*



He Tingchu, *Crab and Bamboo Basket Teapot*

Pan Jun-ren, *Shu dan hu* (tree trunk teapot)

Ah Leon, *Double-Spout Branch T-pot*

(tree trunk teapot) (fig. 3), and Ah Leon's *Double-Spout Branch T-pot* (fig. 4)—appropriate in three dimensions topographies of the natural world and conflate these with more contrived, human practices. The former two teapots closely follow the tradition of Yixing ceramic techniques practiced since the late Ming Dynasty in China's Jiangsu Province. Both are fully functional and aesthetically demanding; they inventively deploy imitative natural forms while also serving a more utilitarian purpose. Ah Leon's *Double-Spout Branch T-pot* also draws closely on these techniques; his clay sculptures reflect traditional Yixing practices of mimicking nature. However, as Ah Leon once remarked, "clay can be anything." Translating trompe l'oeil idioms into traditional Yixing techniques, the artist's objects extend the parameters of the latter, achieving a disorienting and deceptive effect. Capturing the essence of wood in a rotted and weathered state, Ah Leon's *Double-Spout Branch T-Pot* is also a fully functional teapot. His clay sculptures closely mimic topographies of the natural world, illuminating the artifice inherent to them while at the same time amplifying their close connection to human customs.

Topography in Translation asks the viewer to explore many questions: How does visual culture shape our experience of a place? To what extent are our experiences of space/topography determined by disparate literary and visual sources? In what respects do our encounters with the foreign shape our perception of more familiar space? Does our knowledge of maps spill out into other areas of representation? How do travel and transmission of knowledge contribute to the formation of spatial sensitivities? To what extent are our experiences of space determined by familiar literary and visual sources? Is there a discernable impact of spatial literacy upon extra-spatial areas of representation? Where does topography speak in discourse on travel, spatial imagining, collecting, memory, politics, and identity? Where does topography figure in the emergence of an encompassing worldview that seeks as well to understand the isolated instance, the particular?

The exhibition considers topography as it appears in different contexts and locations, across a broad chronological period. It illustrates the various respects in which the representation of space shapes a range of differing sensibilities that are themselves supplements to topography or landscape: travel and exploration, the natural world, calligraphy, narrative, "tradition," and the sustained scrutiny of specific events. *Topography in Translation* examines particular topographical anecdotes and artifacts, revealing a range of anxieties pertaining to the shape of knowledge, experience, national character, tradition, and representation.

NOTES

- 1 See, for instance, Julia Frances Andrews, Kuiyi Shen, and Jonathan D. Spence, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-century China* (Guggenheim and University of Michigan, 2007).
- 2 Yang Xin, "Approaches to Chinese Painting: Part I" in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, edited by Richard M. Barnhart et al. (Yale University, 1997): 2.
- 3 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by M. Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).
- 4 James Cahill, "Approaches to Chinese Painting: Part II" in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, edited by Richard M. Barnhart et al. (Yale University, 1997): 8.
- 5 Yehuda Amichai, "A Letter," 29 in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. Translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell (University of California Press, 1996): 111.

Historical Timeline and Works in the Exhibition

Maureen Kelly

1860 The Opium Wars end with foreign victory. As a result, China agrees to decrease trade restrictions on foreign countries and allows trading ports with concession areas for settlements of foreign communities. This increases the exposure to and influence of Western culture in China, which is manifested in formal and conceptual innovations by Chinese artists. The Shanghai School, including artists such as Ren Yi, shows artistic developments reflecting the port's growth into a pluralistic city.



Chinese
Gu Yun, 1835–1896
Ren Yi, 1840–1896
Hu Yuan, 1823–1886
Lu Hui, 1851–1920
Landscape, 1883
Handscroll: ink and colors on paper
11.5 x 36.75 inches
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Baekeland
75.021

1877 Chinese students start to look to foreign countries for study-abroad experience. This reflects an ideological shift where sources of inspiration are sought outside of China. Chinese artists start to practice from abroad and embrace elements of other contemporaneous art movements.

1894 The failing Qing dynasty attempts to revitalize itself with a project of Reconstruction. The First Sino-Japanese War begins.

1895 The need for major national reform becomes evident in multiple arenas. The government reconsiders the education and civil service systems as emigrations increases. In art, the emigrant artists starting to incorporate new forms are contrasted with a move for *guohua*, or “national painting.” This movement looks to traditional native painting to recall a national identity.



Wu Hua
Chinese, active 19th century
Pair of *bapo* (“Eight Brokens”) paintings,
1885 or later
Hanging scrolls: ink and colors on paper
58 x 15.5 inches (each)
Membership Purchase Fund
84.077a,b

1900 The Boxer Rebellion calls for a revitalization of Chinese culture by decreasing foreign influence in China.

1904 War breaks out between Russia and Japan.

1911 The Qing dynasty collapses and a period of political instability ensues. No new dynasty is established, but a republic. Competing political ideologies develop into political parties. Art becomes politicized as competing parties adopt visual propaganda methods. Though this fosters two new art movements, the traditional painting traditions as well as the emigrant artists continue in less politically turbulent areas.

1914–18 Political tension in Europe erupts into warfare. Alliances cause much of the Western world to become involved in this, World War I.



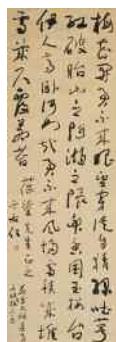
Kang Youwei
Chinese, 1858–1927
General Kang Visits Washington
Calligraphy in running script (*xing shu*)
Hanging scroll: ink on paper
43 x 13.25 inches
Gift of Sheila Dai and Michael Messitt
2002.035

1919 The May Fourth Movement in China was the move toward progressive Western-influenced ideas. When land was granted to Japan in the Versailles Peace Conference at the end of WWI, students protested and tensions with Japan started to take shape.

1921 Communist Party holds the first congress. The party adopted a foreign political structure of Communism, but proposed that Chinese nationality should be found from native inspiration. The party supported a radical new, forceful art movement. The woodblock print was effectively used to potently and widely convey the messages of the party to laypeople, literate or not.

1923 The Nationalist Party's Sun Yatsen declares the manifesto of the party. The Nationalist Party establishes power and holds the political ideology that reform for China should adopt foreign structures of modern politics. They adopt *guohua* painting with a Japanese influence. The Lingnan School of painters champions the Nationalist Party ideology.

1928 The Nationalist Party establishes power.



Yu Youren
Chinese, 1879–1964
Calligraphy in grass-style script (cao shu)
Hanging scroll: ink on paper
56.75 x 18.25 inches
Gift of Sheila Dai and Michael Messitt
2003.041.003



Xu Beihong
Chinese, 1895–1953
Couplet in running script (xing shu)
Pair of hanging scrolls: ink on paper
93 x 17 inches (each)
Collection of H K R Lau



Ye Gongchao
Chinese, 1904–1981
Plum, Bamboo, and Rock
Hanging scroll: ink on paper
39.75 x 19 inches
Gift of Sheila Dai and Michael Messitt
2003.041.002

1934 The Communist Long March begins in the southeast of China and reaches Shaanxi in the northwest in 1935.

1935 Mao Zedong is appointed the leader of the Communist Party.

1937–45 Japanese imperialism culminates in the successful occupation of China. The Nationalist and its competing Chinese Communist Party both resist Japan's political domination.

1939 World War II begins in Europe.

1941 The Pacific War breaks out.

1942 Mao delivers the speech "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art." This speech enumerates his ideas on the correct use of visual mediums, which he stresses as potent political materials.



Huang BinHong
Chinese, 1864–1955
Landscape, 1943
Hanging scroll: ink on paper
28.5 x 16 inches
Gift Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Baekeland
2000.136.004

1945 Japan surrenders with the end of WWII.

1948 The Nationalist Party under the leadership of Chiang Kaishek tries to regain control after the end of Japanese occupation. Many artists leave mainland China to settle abroad.

1949 Political leaders and members of the Nationalist Party flee the country and establish the Republic of China in exile on the island of Taiwan. The Chinese Communist Party establishes the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. The use of art for political propaganda is rigorously continued, and embellished with the adoption of Soviet Socialist Realism methods. The Socialist Realism movement was adopted as the state-sponsored art movement.

1950 Reforms of the Communist Party include amending laws on marriage and agriculture. An alliance with the USSR is established, and attention is given to the national railway system.

1953 Mao announces the first five-year plan for the country. Newspapers refer to the goal of the plan as “national construction.” The plans center on communist ideology.



Zhang Daqian
Chinese, 1899–1983
The Peach Blossom Spring
Hanging scroll: ink and colors on paper
43 x 16.25 inches
Acquired through the Ernest I. White, Class of 1893,
Endowment Fund
75.061



Zao Wou-ki
French, born China, 1921
Femme dans la Forêt, 1950
Etching
13 x 15.5 inches
Gift of Roslyn Bakst Goldman,
Class of 1959, and
John L. Goldman
87.087.002

1956–57 The Hundred Flowers Campaign government project invites criticism and relaxes cultural control, allowing more freedom of expression. It is quickly revoked and the Anti-Rightist Campaign seeks out and attacks intellectuals.

1958–62 The Great Leap Forward was the second of Mao’s five-year plans to put communist ideas into tangible social practice. Attempting to establish a commune system and solve agricultural and industrial problems, its impracticality results in the death of an estimated twenty million citizens.

1959 The Vietnam War breaks out.



Zao Wou-ki
French, born China, 1921
Untitled, 1963
Color lithograph
19.75 x 25.5 inches
Gift of Roslyn Bakst Goldman
(Class of 1959) and
John L. Goldman
87.087.013



Xie Zhiguang
Chinese, 1899–1977
Picking Prunus
Handscroll: ink and
light colors on paper
13.25 x 26.75 inches
Membership Purchase Fund
81.032

1965 China opposes the escalation of the Vietnam War.



Li Keran
Chinese, 1907–1989
Landscape
Ink on paper
26.5 x 17 inches
George and Mary Rockwell Collection
77.045



Pan Tianshou
Chinese, 1886–1971
Flying Sails, 1963
Hanging scroll: ink and colors on paper
31 x 24 inches
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Frederick Baekeland
2002.020

1966–76 The Cultural Revolution was launched to rid the Chinese government and society of bourgeois elements through communist class struggle. Widespread destruction of traditional Chinese culture, artifacts, and historic sites ensued in an effort to rid the nation of the “Four Olds.” Millions of people were persecuted, including artists whose works were considered subversive. Among those criticized and punished were Li Keran and Pan Tianshou.

1970 China establishes diplomatic relations with Japan and Italy.

1972 President Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka visit the People’s Republic of China. Shanghai Communiqué leads to normalization of relations between the PRC and U.S.



C. C. Wang (Wang Jiqian)
Chinese, 1907–2003
*The Spring of the Immortals
(Landscape No. 240)*, 1973
Hanging scroll: ink and colors
on paper
25 x 35 inches
Gift of Kenneth and Yien-koo King
86.125

1976 Chairman Mao dies at age eighty-two. After a brief period of instability, Deng Xiaoping becomes the next chairman of the Communist Party in a lineage that continues to today. Another leader of the Communist Party, Zhou Enlai, also died this year. His mourning at Tiananmen Square became a massive event that the government eventually tried to control, but which erupted into riots and violence. At the end of Mao Zedong's rule, there was a split between political leaders who wished to continue Mao's policies and those who sought reform. The latter group won out, and although freedoms were still limited, they were far greater than those under Mao. As the possibility for freedom of expression grew, the art produced diversified. Some artists revived the traditional ink painting techniques and classical literati themes.

1978 The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee begins the cultural opening of China after the isolation of the Mao years. The Chinese legal, economic, and education systems are reformed, and the United States is recognized by the Chinese government. Diplomatic relations with Japan are established in the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Peace and Friendship. The Democracy Wall becomes a focus for political dissent.



Fu Yizhun
Chinese, born 1934
Portrait of Li Taibo, 1978
Hanging scroll: ink and colors on paper
26.5 x 18 inches
Membership Purchase Fund
80.067.001

1980s Liberal reforms allow for greater freedom of expression among artists in the PRC; some artists reject traditional Chinese art and socialist realism and begin experimenting with avant-garde ideas and postmodernism. Numerous exhibitions considered too controversial by the government authorities are quickly shut down.

1987 Lifting of Martial Law in Taiwan.

1989 Tiananmen Square is the site of Chinese citizens demanding more freedoms in protest of the policies of the Communist government. The government's violent crackdown was widely publicized and became a politically significant event on a global scale. Members of the Communist Party who had sided with the protesters were purged.

1990s Following the Tiananmen crackdown, avant-garde activity wanes, and many Chinese artists emigrate to the U.S. Artists trained in socialist realism, such as Cao Liwei, who remain in China, expand their subject matter to be more commercially viable. Three groups of the post-Mao years revived the ideology of nationalist painting from the turn of the century. The Literati-Expressionists, Neo-Traditionalists, and Post-Traditionalists all shared a conceptual approach even as their formal elements spanned a wide range. Avant-garde artists working in photography publish the underground journal *New Photo*.



Cao Liwei
Chinese, born 1956
Herding in the Meadow, 1990
Oil on canvas
24 x 32 inches
Gift of Wan and Andrew Kim
2004.038.009



Hong Lei
Chinese, born 1960
Clouds in the Mirror Passing By (*yunceng jingzi li liu guo*), 1997
Color inkjet/Iris print
13.75 x 9.75 inches
Lee C. Lee Fund
2008.009.004



He Tingchu
Chinese, born 1940
Crab and Bamboo Basket Teapot,
Yixing ware, ca. 1990
Zisha stoneware
4.25 x 5.875 x 4.75 inches
Lee C. Lee Fund
2008.093.001



Pei Jing
Chinese, born 1962
Bared at Tiananmen, 1993
Acrylic on canvas
21.25 x 25 inches
Private collection



Qiu Zhijie
Chinese, born 1969
Untitled [April], from the
series *Calendar 1998*, 1998
Color ink jet/Iris print
6.6 x 10 inches
Lee C. Lee Fund
2008.009.009



Jiang Zhi
Chinese, born 1971
On a Terrace Gazing into the Distance (*wang fu tai*), from the series *Mu Mu*, 1997
Gelatin silver print
12 x 10 inches
Lee C. Lee Fund
2009.009.005



Zheng Guogu
Chinese, born 1970
Tokyo Sky Story 4, 1998
Color ink jet/Iris print
13.75 x 9.75 inches
Lee C. Lee Fund
2008.009.015

1999 to present Contemporary Chinese art gains increasing international recognition. Some Chinese émigré artists return to China to set up studios and/or teach in China's art schools. New museums and galleries promote contemporary Chinese art in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and around the world.



Hung Liu
Chinese, born 1948
Wildflower (Orchid), 1999
Five-color lithograph on paper with aluminum gold leaf and collaged color copies of old photographs
22.63 x 15.75 inches
Acquired through the generosity of Truman W. Eustis, Class of 1951
99.118.001



Ah Leon
Taiwanese, born 1953
Double-Spout Branch T-Pot, 1999
Stoneware
H. 15 x L. 39.375 inches
Acquired through the generosity of Daphne Farago
2003.020



Charles (Chang-Han) Liu
American, born China, 1947
Melody of Nature—Source, 2001
Four panels: ink and watercolor on paper
106 x 154 inches
George and Mary Rockwell Fund
2008.027



Pan Jun-ren
Taiwanese, born 1958
Shu dan hu (tree trunk teapot), 2003
Stoneware
4.75 x 8.8 x 3.8 inches
Gift of the artist
2003.056.001



Cao Fei
Chinese, born 1978
Deep Breathing, from the series *COSplayers*, 2004
Digital C-print
29 x 39 inches
Acquired through the generosity of Jody and Peter Robbins
2006.088



Wenda Gu
Chinese, born 1955
Mythos of Lost Dynasties, series i, no. 3, 2005
Splash-ink calligraphic painting
36 x 72 inches
George and Mary Rockwell Fund
2008.031



fig. 1 Gu Yun, Ren Yi, Hu Yuan, and Lu Hui, *Landscape*

Nationalism and Iconic Landscape

The Art of Tradition in the Twentieth Century

Meris Sanzotta

Traditional Chinese landscapes are iconic images of Chinese art and are easily recognizable by the public as well as scholars. Although the style may be perceived as static and unchanging over many centuries, in fact artists have executed works that respond in varying ways, both subtle and overt, to the changes China has experienced over its long history. This is particularly evident in the practice of landscape painting in the twentieth century. The twentieth century was one marked by radical cultural and political change, including occupation by the Japanese and the rise of Communism, and artists reacted in multiple and varied ways. With the massive influx of new styles and techniques coming from outside China, many artists consciously continued to work in the traditional ink-painting medium and style. The traditional painters absorbed ideas from the outside and looked within to create modern Chinese artwork that both embraced the past and reflected China's present.

A Brief History of Landscape Painting

The practice of representing landscape has a long tradition in Chinese history. Although there is evidence of geological and natural elements depicted during the Neolithic period, the first true landscapes are generally attributed to Gu Kaizhi, a fourth-century master of the Southern Dynasty,¹ and the works attributed to him are the first to show a con-

tinuous landscape as opposed to isolated natural elements. Although the art of landscape painting continued to develop after the works of Gu Kaizhi, landscape elements most often served as just the background for figurative or religious art during the early Tang dynasty. During the High Tang (first half of the eighth century), a group of scholarly men emerged that became known for their reclusiveness and unconventional landscape paintings.² These gentlemen are often considered to be precursors to the literati painters that emerged in the Southern Song dynasty. Unfortunately, none of the original paintings produced by this group of eccentric scholars remain, but later copies of their works and the sophistication of works surviving from the Five Dynasties and Northern Song period indicate that the High and Late Tang period was a crucial moment in the development of landscape painting.

It was during the Northern Song dynasty that landscape painting developed its preeminence as one of the most popular and admired subjects in Chinese painting. The entire discipline of painting flourished as never before, mostly due to imperial interest in art. During the Late Northern Song period, a prominent essay by the artist Guo Xi, *Linquan gaozhi* ("The Lofty Power of Forests and Streams"), argued that the purpose of landscape painting was to re-create the moods and appearance of the natural world and to glorify the power of the emperor, whose rule is mandated by heav-

en.³ The essay argues that the importance of landscape lies in its ability to allow the viewer access to the natural world, which is essential to the human spirit.⁴ It was at this time that the iconic monumental Chinese landscape was conceived. The style of landscape painted known as the Li-Guo school became the classical, imperially approved style of landscape painting that constitutes the official canon of landscape in Chinese art history.⁵ The Northern Song tradition of painting was closely linked with the imperial court and the ordered landscapes reflect the order and rationality of the new dynasty.

The most typical feature of the Northern Song paintings is the dominating presence of a rocky cliff or mountain. Although artists did not use single point perspective like Western painters, they did portray distance in their works by varying the way they painted the same object at different distances. In the foreground, rocks, trees, and even people are painted in great detail, and these elements are meant to be the closest to the viewer. As objects were painted farther back in distance, the number of elements painted increased, but the detail within each object decreased. Elements farthest away were often not more than a slight blur or several ink dots, and these appear in the upper register of the painting. This compositional technique of stacking natural elements vertically from large to small created a sense of distance within the paintings. Human figures appear dwarfed by the sheer size of the mountains and other natural elements within the picture; such landscape paintings testify to the majesty of nature, in which humans play a relatively small role.

At the end of the Northern Song period, the government official, poet, and calligrapher Su Shi (1036–1101) was the first to record the ideal of literati painting,⁶ fostering a new movement toward self-expression. Practiced by the scholar elites that often held government positions, the literati artists distinguished themselves by promoting the notion that painting be done for pleasure rather than for monetary gain. Separated from worldly concerns while painting, literati painters expressed themselves through their art. Often executed as monochrome paintings in just black ink or with pale washes of color, the works are typically described as tranquil and could only be appreciated by “a person of refined sensibilities and mature intellect.”⁷ The goal of literati painting was to capture the essence of the subject being painted, as opposed to representing nature in realistic detail. The results were often impressionistic and seemingly simple, but to be successful required sensitivity and skill. As amateurs, scholar-artists’ work reflected the playful nature of painting and relied upon skill in the art of calligraphy, translated into deft and beautiful brushwork. Literati painting continued to be prac-

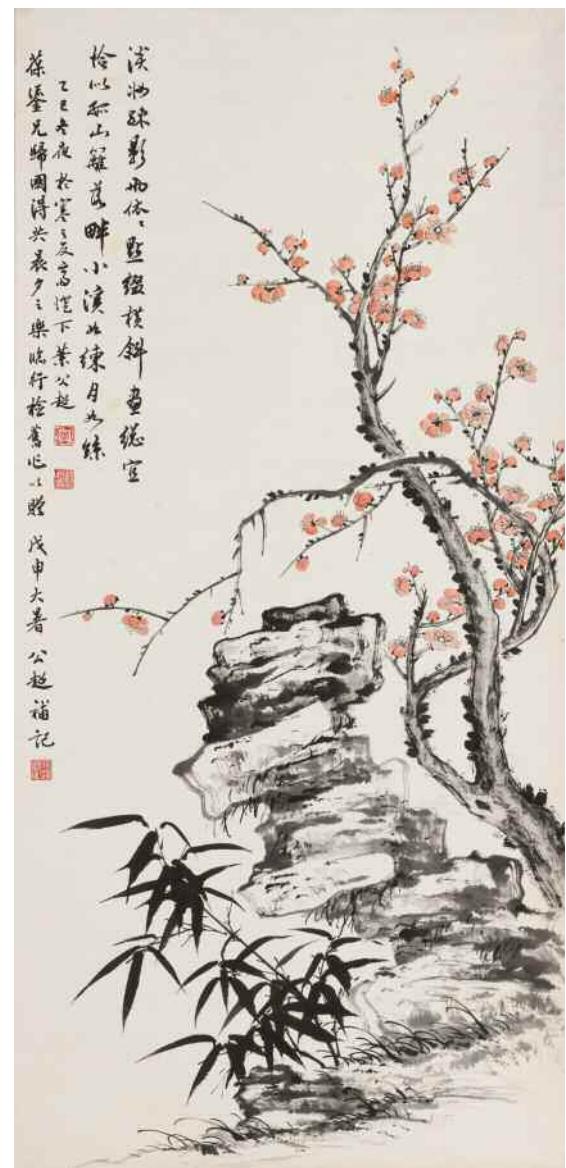


fig. 2 Ye Gongchao, *Plum, Bamboo, and Rock*

ticed in subsequent dynasties and gained great popularity during periods of foreign occupation when trained scholars refused to work for foreign governments. By the later Qing dynasty, the literati style actually became absorbed into the imperial painting styles of the court.⁸

For centuries, this orthodox approach was so revered that, even in the modern period, a landscape handscroll by Gu Yun, Ren Yi, Hu Yuan, and Lu Hui (fig. 1) continues to capture the reclusive nature of the ultimate literati scholars. In addition to landscapes, literati artists promoted the ideal of the scholar-amateur by depicting certain plants and other details of nature that symbolized the traits of a refined gentleman. Two of the most popular of these recurring symbols are bamboo and plum blossom, which can be seen in Ye Gongchao’s painting simply titled *Plum, Bamboo, and Rock* (fig. 2). The physical properties of the plants were likened to certain human character traits. The bamboo stalk with its hollow core

represented moral uprightness, resilience, and humility.⁹ It also reflected the scholar's ability to bend but not break in the face of hardship; bamboo's hardness and usefulness were further identified with human virtues. The plum blossom gained its symbolic significance because of its ability to blossom during the harsh cold of winter, when everything else in nature remains dormant, a characteristic considered auspicious, and predictive of returning warmth and growth.¹⁰ Endurance and flowering in adversity are associated with the long-lived tree itself, while transience of beauty and pleasure is seen in the delicate blossoms. The use of these symbols reflects the painter's status as a scholar and the ideals he was expected to uphold.

Landscape Painting in the Twentieth Century

The year 1911 marked a turning point in Chinese history: the Qing dynasty came to an end after two thousand years of imperial rule. This was not only the dawn of a new republic, but the beginning of a revolution in Chinese art as well. After China's borders were forcibly opened to the West with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, signaling the end of the Opium War, foreign ideas came into the country on a large scale, and the influx of new techniques and media inspired Chinese artists to experiment with new artistic styles. The debate between traditionalists and those that wished to adopt Western techniques would continue throughout the twentieth century. Traditionalists were forced to confront the question: what role, if any, does traditional art play in this new society?¹¹ Should it be preserved, reformed, or completely eradicated? This debate mirrored the discussions being held in reference to Chinese culture as a whole. As the new Chinese government questioned how drastically they should turn to modernization and Westernization, artists grappled with the same question in the execution of their artwork.

The twentieth century saw the introduction of a new term into the common Chinese painting vernacular: *guohua*. In its broadest definition, the term applies to any artwork painted in ink on Chinese paper or silk.¹² It can be translated as "national painting," which imbues it with a sense of cultural significance. Although the term is generally applied to works of art done in the traditional Chinese style of painting, it is not consistently used in this way, but came to distinguish Chinese paintings executed in the traditional Chinese media from the works done using Western methods and materials such as oil on canvas. Specific traditional themes such as bird-and-flower, figurative, and landscape painting all became subcategories within *guohua*. The necessity of finding a word to identify Chinese painting is indicative of

the major changes artists were facing, since prior to the twentieth century there was no need for such a defining term. The decision to paint in the traditional style was not only a stylistic one, but was often entwined with political and personal beliefs.

One of the greatest influences in the development of the term *guohua* can be found in Japan, a country that had successfully begun modernization during the Meiji period (1868–1912). After Japan's success over China in the First Sino-Japanese War and their later success over Russia, the Chinese government instituted a scholarship program that sent Chinese students to Japan to learn from the newly powerful nation.¹³ As students traveled abroad, they developed an appreciation for the aesthetics and style of traditional Japanese painting. This is most evident in the development of the Lingnan School in Guangdong province. Seen as a middle path, artists adopted elements from Japanese painting, Western painting, and traditional Chinese painting to create a new style suited for the new Chinese republic. Wong argues that Chinese artists felt as if they were reclaiming Chinese art by appropriating Japanese elements that referenced Chinese traditional painting.¹⁴ This new style became known as *xin guohua*, or New National Painting, which presented a new style that both honored tradition and looked ahead toward China's future. It was a new modern style to reflect the new attitudes of the modern Chinese public.

Not all Chinese artists responded positively to the introduction of the Japanese aesthetic into Chinese painting, however, and many spoke out against the integration of the two countries' styles. Some artists claimed that the Japanese had looted their cultural property, while others simply found the overall style lacking or uninspired.¹⁵ Despite the criticisms, traditional artists were receptive to the concept of a national painting style. The decision between Western and Eastern, however, was not only a simple matter of aesthetics but reflected deeper ideological questions. Traditional-style painters became tightly bound with nationalist ideals and Chinese identity, while those in support of Western styles and media believed in the necessity of art to reflect China's need to modernize. In the face of political and societal change, traditional painting, such as landscape, would serve as a reassuring icon of China's cultural heritage throughout the early stages of the republic.

Huang BinHong was most closely aligned with the beliefs of those who wished to preserve a sense of national essence through tradition. He strongly believed in the ability of traditional Chinese painting to innovate from within, and even wrote a poem, "On the Art of Painting," that explained the tradition of Chinese art as an expression of national character and national essence.¹⁶ Frank and honest in his belief that this



fig. 3 Huang Binhong, *Landscape*

essence not be compromised, he emphasized that Chinese painting should remain untouched by Western techniques. He was quite open in his criticism of artists that believed the adoption of Western art styles was the way to progress, saying, "Abandoning the consummate learning in Chinese painting and seeking resemblance to other's looks is childish behavior that betrays one's lack of reliable knowledge."¹⁷ A scholar and dedicated landscape painter, Huang respected the work of previous masters and learned from their skill, but did not advocate a mindless copying of those who had come before him. Instead, he believed in a transformation of the past, and repeatedly expressed that while forms might change, the spirit of the work should remain the same.

One of the most profound influences on Huang's personal transformation of tradition was the art of calligraphy. He respected the intimate connection between painting and calligraphy in the manipulation of brushwork. A profound knowledge and mastery of calligraphy, the highest form of art in ancient China, was necessary to become a masterful painter. Since the Yuan dynasty, it has been understood that

calligraphy has been a fundamental aspect in the development of the character of Chinese painting.¹⁸ Reflecting this, Huang was a skilled calligrapher, and also a student of brushwork and ink application, even identifying and recording "Five Methods of Brushwork and Seven Methods of Ink."¹⁹ His own brushwork was innovative and revolutionary in the way that he could break up the traditional strokes to create wholly new forms. By reinventing from within, he proved that there was enough history and wealth to be mined from traditional Chinese painting that Western styles and media did not need to be adopted in order to promote change.

Huang Binhong's 1943 landscape (fig. 3) was painted at a time when the artist was evolving toward his mature style and experimenting with the effects of layered ink, seen on the central mountain, where brushstrokes and dots are layered over ink wash. This became a signature feature of Huang's style in the last years of his life. Despite the intricacy and complexity of the brushwork, the overall effect is fluid and graceful. Also evident is the incorporation of void space in his compositions to enhance the overall composition and effect of the painting. Counterbalancing the thrust of the central mountain against the rock formation with the scholar's retreat, he creates a rhythmic feel to the composition. By leaving the void space, there is a sense of dynamic energy within the composition. The most innovative artist that worked strictly from tradition, Huang Binhong was truly a master of the brush.

Zhang Daqian worked during roughly the same time period as Huang Binhong, and like the previous artists, he did not originate his most well-known style until late in his life. Before the evolution of his personal style, he was trained in traditional Chinese painting. Zhang's great talent for perfectly mimicking past masters' work bolstered his reputation as perhaps the best and most prolific modern forger of ancient Chinese painting. Zhang Daqian, according to the artist Xie Zhiliu, could "imitate any school of painting except the Four Wangs to such a degree that you would take the spurious for the genuine."²⁰ While this has caused problems with authenticity in museums and galleries that hold forgeries by Zhang Daqian, it also speaks to the artist's immense talent. One of the most common ways that students learned to paint in a traditional style was through the copying of past masters' works. In *The Peach Blossom Spring* (fig. 4), Zhang's meticulous attention to detail, and fluid, elegant style, speak to his expressive talent as an artist well beyond his capabilities as a forger. The title of the work refers to an ancient Chinese poem of the same name that relates the tale of a fisherman who discovers a spring surrounded by flowering peach blossoms and a cave that leads to a hidden utopian paradise. Despite the request of the people living there to



fig. 4 Zhang Daqian, *The Peach Blossom Spring*

keep their home a secret, the fisherman decides he must tell the outside world about his discovery. He marks the riverbank so he can find his way back, but after returning with officials to show them what he had found, the marks were gone and no one was able to find the spring or cave ever again.²¹ In Zhang's painting, he has painted the opening to the cave in the foreground and the utopian paradise in the background, just like the story describes. The use of classic texts as subject matter has a long history within the literati painting tradition. In addition to these traditional literati paintings, Zhang later gained renown for his large-scale paintings that transform splashes of brightly colored ink into landscape formations. Adding detailed trees and other landscape elements, he was able to create a completely new style while honoring the traditional Chinese painting style.

Despite his travels abroad and influence from the West, Zhang Daqian was always quick to point out precedents within Chinese art history, indicating his loyalty to his cultural heritage and Chinese identity.²²

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 signaled a drastic change, as Mao Zedong and the leading members of the Communist party advocated the need for a new art to serve the new nation. Reflecting the social and political economy of Communist ideals, such as the classless society free of oppression, Mao advocated art that should be accessible, instructive, and should appeal to the masses. It was, as Melissa Chiu describes, "art in the service of a cause."²³ Socialist realism was adopted as the official style of the Communist party, based on Soviet style depictions of subjects, heroic optimism, and an uncritical glorification of the state and political leaders. Despite the push toward a new style, during the 1950s and the early '60s artists retained a relative degree of freedom. Traditional ink painting was still practiced, and *guohua* was still taught in many of the art colleges. A handful of respected traditional artists, such as Qi Baishi, were allowed to continue to work without changing their style, while younger *guohua* artists made subtle changes in their landscape paintings to appease the Communist government. This included discreetly inserting elements such as a red flag within the landscape, an inscription dedicated to Mao, or signs of state-sponsored industrialization and modernization.

One of the most prominent *guohua* painters during this time period was Pan Tianshou. Before the establishment of the People's Republic, he was an influential figure in the argument for the separation of Chinese and Western painting styles. He maintained that because the underlying values of Chinese and Western art were so different, the two should not be combined and one style certainly should not completely replace the other. He actively advocated for the importance of traditional painting style and the study of old masters. This was exemplified in his own personal artwork as well as his decisions as the head of the Chinese painting department of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts.²⁴ His paintings are immediately recognizable for their strong, forceful brushwork and aggressive, rocky cliffs. *Flying Sails* (fig. 5), painted in 1963, is a wonderful exemplar of this. His steady and powerful brushstrokes clearly delineate the mountain cliff, while the dense black dots and spiky foliage emphasize his simple, yet powerful execution. Although a distinct departure from the balanced harmony of literati paintings, his work clearly refers to the strength and forcefulness exemplified by the painters of the Zhe School during the Ming dynasty.²⁵ The seamless integration of calligraphy within the painting is also in keeping with literati tradition.



fig. 5 Pan Tianshou, *Flying Sails*

The squarish characters of his running script are beautifully executed and harmonious in style with the rest of the painting. During the beginning years of the People's Republic, Pan used the *guohua* style in monumental size paintings that were meant to show that traditional painting could serve the same public function as Socialist Realist oil painting. He executed many large-scale commissions for hotels and airports, which all retained his distinct, yet traditional painting style found in *Flying Sails*. He never wavered in his dedication to evolving the literati style. Even during severe prosecution during the Cultural Revolution, where his paintings were publicly denigrated and he was imprisoned, he never ceased to believe in the importance of remaining true to China's cultural heritage.

The Cultural Revolution, which lasted from 1966 to 1976, was initiated by Mao to remove any liberal bourgeois threat to the Communist state. A major aim of the program included the abolishment of the "four olds": old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits.²⁶ Traditional landscape painting fell under the category of old culture and was perceived to be part of the threat because of its historical connections to the elite scholarly class. *Guohua* painters came under attack, and their work was included in public

exhibitions meant to humiliate the artists and hold their work up as degenerate and unacceptable art. Mao's Red Guards destroyed traditional paintings in raids of homes and private art collections, and many artists, including Pan Tianshou, were even imprisoned or sent to the countryside to perform hard labor.²⁷ In an environment of such hostility, it seems a miracle that any painters continued to believe in the merit of traditional Chinese painting. Although the production of *guohua* significantly slowed during the Cultural Revolution, the fact that any work at all was completed is a testament to the artists' strong beliefs in tradition.

After the death of Mao and the fall of Gang of Four, China began to reopen its doors to the West and regain economic and political stability. During the 1980s, a resurgence in the traditional ink and Chinese paper medium occurred. Not all contemporary artists working in this medium adhered to the traditional literati style of painting, but many continued to look for ways to evolve the style. Named the literati-expressionist movement, their approach represents a reinterpretation of literati painting, particularly *xieyi*, which translates as "idea writing."²⁸ Key to achieving personal expression in the literati painting style is the emphasis on the expressive formal qualities of painting such as texture, line, and brushwork.

Li Keran is one of the most lauded painters of the literati-expressionist movement. After surviving condemnation during the Cultural Revolution, he returned to prominence at the end of the 1970s. Although trained in both traditional Chinese ink painting and Western oil painting, he chose to work in the traditional Chinese style, only selectively incorporating techniques learned during his study of Western art. Typical of Li Keran's aesthetic, his *Landscape* (cover) is saturated with dark black ink that looks as if it is still wet. Most of his landscapes feature tonal gradations of black ink with only a subtle use of color, if any color is used at all. The sole use of black ink, however, resulted in his castigation as a "black painter" during the years of the Cultural Revolution. Using a technique known as *ji mo*, Li creates the modeled appearance of the mountains by painting layer over layer of ink. Although influenced in this approach by Huang BinHong, who became one of Li Keran's mentors later in life, the style he developed remains uniquely his own. In looking toward tradition, the subject of the piece is a clear reference to the monumental rock and mountain formations that dominate the composition of so many landscape paintings. Li's love for the rivers and mountains of southern China was likely a significant influence in his use of tonal gradations and the wet appearance of his brushwork, which mimic the moist and misty climate typical of the area.²⁹ He was also, however, a master of chiaroscuro, which uses the contrast of



fig. 6 C. C. Wang (Wang Jiqian), *The Spring of the Immortals* (Landscape No. 240)

light and dark to create a sense of volume and three-dimensionality, a technique perfected by Rembrandt, whose work greatly inspired Li. The stark white of the scholar's hut against the dense black mountains surrounding it give the hut a luminous presence and the sense of being firmly situated within the landscape.

One of the most innovative artists included in this discussion of traditional landscape painting is Wang Jiqian, also known as C. C. Wang. Despite the nontraditional appearance of his paintings, the work still falls under the umbrella of *guohua*. Using black ink on Chinese paper, C. C. Wang used nontraditional techniques to create his own personal examples of landscapes. Born and raised in China, his early work was quite traditional. The political turmoil of China in the mid-twentieth century, however, drove him to emigrate to the United States in 1949.³⁰ His signature style did not actually emerge, however, until the 1960s. His landscapes are filled with, as James Cahill described them, "semi-random configurations and textures" that he constructs into mountains, caves, and other natural formations.³¹ This effect was achieved by using crumpled and inked paper to create

impressions on the painting surface or by actually folding the painting to create new textures.

Although his style may seem radical, it is not without precedent in Chinese art history. In the eighth century and later, several Chinese artists were known to experiment with accidental effects and nontraditional tools, such as paint spattering, smearing ink with cloth, and even spitting ink onto the pictorial surface.³² Although there are a handful of notable artists working in such nontraditional ways, the practices were still quite rare and considered to be eccentricities. Their techniques did not enter into mainstream practice. Interestingly, however, C. C. Wang claims that he was not inspired by these painters' work; nor was he inspired by the work of the Western abstract expressionists, whose art is very similar in aesthetic to his.³³ Instead, he has said that his inspiration comes from his chance encounters using watercolor paper and his interest in texture and brushwork.³⁴

The similarities between works by traditional ink painters and C. C. Wang, however, are not restricted to just the use of the Chinese paper and ink medium. Much like traditional literati painters, Wang's paintings reflect personal

expression, rather than the meticulous depiction of an actual place. Wang used the ancient Chinese term “mind landscape” to describe his paintings, which the Chinese art history scholar Jerome Silbergeld explains:

Refers to a state of mind that is completely natural, though difficult to obtain: a mind that is spontaneous and creative, as carried and inexhaustible in its generation of ideas and images as nature is in generating landscapes. Great Chinese artists . . . possessed in their minds the living spirit of the landscape itself and thus were able to convey this spirit in their art.³⁵

Also indicative of literati painting is his use of restraint. Unlike Western action painters such as Jackson Pollock whose paint drippings are wild and unruly, the literati aesthetic is evident in Wang’s ability to construct landscapes from these accidental effects. Although the execution of his paintings may be modern or akin to some Western approaches, the spirit of his work is still traditional Chinese.

In Wang’s painting *Spring of the Immortals* (fig. 6), he combines his abstract accidental effects with his training in traditional landscape painting. Using his crumpled-paper technique, he establishes a massive rock formation that covers the entire pictorial surface. Within the small spatial pockets and openings, he has painted small separate landscape scenes that would look perfectly appropriate in a traditional landscape painting. The title refers to the Taoist belief in the paradise of the immortals, *dong tian*, which is translated as “heaven within a cave.”³⁶ Each of the grottoes represents a small space of paradise. Seamlessly blending the past and the present, Wang’s work is a beautiful example of the new possibilities that can be realized when working with traditional landscape painting.

* * *

In a century marked by change, the artists practicing this traditional painting style were neither clinging to the past, nor completely abandoning their heritage and replacing it with completely foreign traditions. In the modern era, as many debated what defined a work of art as “Chinese,” these artists made the argument that painting should reference the past. While there were varying degrees to which artists would deviate from tradition and incorporate foreign or modern approaches, traditional Chinese elements and style remained relevant. Both Huang BinHong’s innovation from within and C. C. Wang’s movement toward abstraction are both new interpretations of the past, but completely different in appearance. Such work demonstrates that the centuries-old styles need not be restrictive, but can be tapped to create beautiful and modern artwork. Sometimes this approach helped the Chinese republic retain a sense of nationalism

and express a Chinese national identity—even in the face of persecution of artists and attempts to completely eradicate the practice during periods of turmoil, such as the Cultural Revolution. Despite such attacks, and perhaps even because of them, the traditional styles became even more visible and relevant. In our exhibition we hope to challenge the notion of what a Chinese landscape is or can be, but to also honor the strong and beautiful artwork that has not only continued in the traditional style, but also built upon it and fostered its continual growth.

NOTES

- 1 Richard M. Barnhart, Yang Xin, Nie Chongzheng, James Cahill, Lang Shaojun, and Wu Hung, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 47.
- 2 Ibid., 79.
- 3 Ibid., 119.
- 4 Ibid., 119.
- 5 Ibid., 119.
- 6 Jessica Rawson et al., “China,” in *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T016513>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Julia F. Andrews, “Traditional Painting in New China: Guohua and the Anti-Rightist Campaign,” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49.3 (1990): 559.
- 12 Ibid., 556.
- 13 Aida Youen Wong, *Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 8.
- 14 Ibid., 4.
- 15 Barnhart et al., 306.
- 16 Jason C. Kuo, *Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Pin-hung’s Late Work* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2004), 10.
- 17 Quoted in ibid., 56.
- 18 Ibid., 22.
- 19 Ibid., 96.
- 20 Barnhart et al., 350.
- 21 Metropolitan Museum of Art, March 31, 2008, “Episode for Families: Peach Blossom Spring,” podcast audio program, <http://www.metmuseum.org/podcast/detail.asp?eid=epNum024>.
- 22 Arnold Chang, “Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-Chien),” in *Encyclopedia of Modern China* vol. 4, edited by David Pong (Detroit: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2009): 144.
- 23 Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian, *Art and China’s Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4.
- 24 Barnhart et al., 332.
- 25 Ibid., 332.
- 26 Chiu and Shengtian, 149.
- 27 Ibid., 6.
- 28 Rawson et al.
- 29 Barnhart et al., 341.
- 30 Jerome Silbergeld, *Mind Landscapes: The Paintings of C. C. Wang* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987), 23.
- 31 Quoted in ibid., 47.
- 32 Silbergeld, 48.
- 33 Ibid., 48.
- 34 Ibid., 48.
- 35 Ibid., 9.
- 36 Ibid., 80.

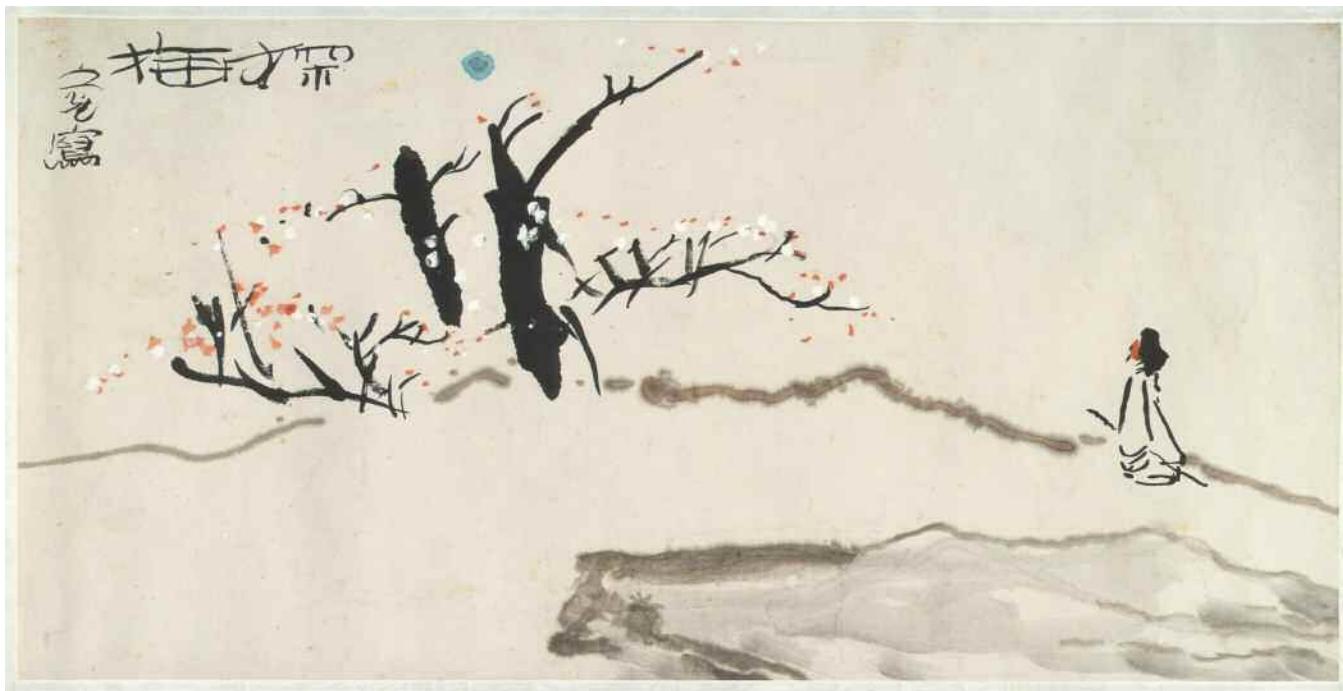


fig. 1 Xie Zhiguang, *Picking Prunus*

Expressions of the Self and a Nation's Identity

The Figure and the Landscape in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Painting

Rebecca Hazell

Many people think of China, and specifically of Chinese art, as ageless and unchanging. However, the history of China is filled with times of stability abruptly interrupted by violent revolts. Inevitably, these resulted in cultural changes that are reflected in the arts. From the nineteenth century on, Chinese painting evolved as the status of the artist within society changed, and as artists' attitudes toward and beliefs about the established foundations of Chinese art all underwent transformation.

For centuries, Chinese artists painted landscapes that presented a general statement about nature, arranging natural elements in a way that created a conceptual place, and creating what art historian Michael Sullivan describes as "pictorial abstraction." Pictorial abstraction, in essence, features archetypal images of nature and assembles them in a way that expresses the artist's own ideas as well as more formal ideas with regards to social, political, and religious matters. This is most apparent in the landscape paintings of the literati, artists who were typically scholars and/or highly cultured individuals who believed that painting should go

beyond an attempt at perfection of realism and pure observation. They believed that the purpose of painting was not representation, but rather expression, "to express as much as possible by using the simplest means."¹

By the late nineteenth century, Chinese artists were looking for ways to reinvent and redefine Chinese art. In attempting to do so, they borrowed ideas and techniques from Western art but also continued to draw inspiration from the works of past Chinese masters, including many of the most commonly represented subjects of Chinese literati painting, such as mountains, rocks, trees (particularly the plum tree), and bamboo.

When the painters Gu Yun, Ren Yi, Hu Yuan, and Lu Hui collaborated in 1883 to produce their landscape painting (see page 14), they followed in the classic tradition of literati painting that dominated artistic production during the latter nineteenth century.² This handscroll depicts three figures in a boat paddling upriver toward a pavilion, located on the upper right side. The journey of the three scholars represents a traditional theme of seeking retreat from the stresses of

worldly affairs. In the painting, pathways draw the viewer in to identify with the painted figures and experience this “retreat” through them.

The calligraphy specifies that this painting was made as a gift and explains which part of the painting was produced by Ren Yi, who is the most distinguished artist to work on this collaboration. Ren was one of the most creative painters in the Shanghai School from the 1860s through the 1900s, best known for his figurative drawings but also his innovative ways of adopting Western techniques while still preserving the unique beauty of traditional Chinese art.³ Ren Yi is a prime example that even prior to the twentieth century, Chinese artists were beginning to look to external influences for inspiration in an attempt to reform traditional Chinese art.

The year that *Picking Prunus* (fig. 1) was created is unknown, but based on the life span of the artist, Xie Zhiguang (1899–1977), it was likely produced in the mid-twentieth century. Xie has painted a plum tree and a figure in the simplest of forms, but literati characteristics still infuse this painting. Literati painters commonly used minimalist methods to create a form distinguishable enough to identify the subject but that omit details that would otherwise distract from the underlying meaning. The ink plum tree is a favorite subject depicted over the centuries, and artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued this tradition, finding new ways to transform the plum tree into a modern and contemporary art subject.

The light-colored blossoms of the plum tree contrast with its monochrome branches, and this is a signature feature of more modern-day literati-styled paintings.⁴ Xie’s plum tree is rather abstract: the dry, angular branches with spiky twigs create a raw image of a wild plum tree that has yet to be tamed or pruned by a human. Furthermore, the full-bodied brushstrokes used to create the branches are comparable to calligraphy. The image of this plum tree, accompanied by the wandering figure, creates a feeling of freedom but also a sense of loneliness and alienation. During turbulent times throughout Chinese history, several painters (notably during the Ming and early Qing period) expressed their sorrows and feelings of dislocation through sparse trees depicted in brushstrokes similar to those seen in *Picking Prunus*.⁵

* * *

In the 1930s and '40s, as the Communist Party was struggling to gain power in China, Mao Zedong began to adopt Marxist theories that outlined the social and ideological function of the artist and promoted the use of popular art forms as propaganda.⁶ With the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Communist Party established new political conditions, initiatives, and policies that artists were forced to work within, so that art would serve the new

political agenda. Artwork in China was expected to fall under one of three categories: art that honored Communist Party leaders and the history of the party; art that endorsed and encouraged the Party’s political policies and ideologies; and art that depicted the “socialist heroes” such as peasants, workers, and soldiers.⁷

Implemented in this framework were the ideologies and subjects that artists could and could not paint, as well as the limitations within which techniques and styles must be expressed. Traditional Chinese art was regarded by Communists as the elitist art form of literati and scholars, the polar opposite of the folk art that was easily understood by the masses, and therefore accessible.⁸ Artists painting in this traditional form primarily painted landscapes, flower-and-bird, or figurative paintings—not “the struggle of the workers, peasants and soldiers”⁹ that the Communist ideologues sought to depict in art.

Not all traditional Chinese painters were forced to alter their work in an attempt to politicize or idealize it. Some famous traditional painters were unaffected by Mao’s political program; those truly gifted in the traditional painting genre were tolerated because their works were seen as part of China’s artistic heritage.¹⁰ These traditional pieces were “a symbol of the sophisticated brilliance of Chinese culture and, therefore, a matter of national pride.”¹¹ Nonetheless, those who were forced to incorporate the ideals of the Communists while attempting to maintain a traditional form were often criticized and shunned. Many of these artists who tried to reform traditional Chinese art by incorporating Western painting methods were condemned by art authorities. As a result, traditional artists were denied space to exhibit their traditional works, so as to discourage them from continuing to paint in a traditional technique.¹² Many artists tried to find a happy medium; however, there were also a handful of artists who were labeled as anti-rightists and were denounced in the art world because critics thought their art represented a backlash against Mao’s reforms.

Li Keran excelled in art at an early age and underwent many years of study at various art schools. In his postgraduate studies he was taught by the French modernist André Claudot, with whom Li studied drawing and oil painting.¹³ Li advocated that artists should carry on Chinese heritage by painting in traditional forms, but he encouraged artists to draw on external sources (like the West) for inspiration and ways to improve their art. Despite his training in oil, around the 1940s Li Keran returned to traditional Chinese ink and brush to produce his artwork.¹⁴ Li’s painting (cover) depicts a grand-scale landscape of mountains and trees with light casting down on a hut situated in the lower half of the painting. The hut shelters three human figures who are likely rep-

representative of scholars or literati; all of this is done in black ink on paper. To the untrained eye, Li seems to have created a rather typical traditional Chinese painting. However, to Mao and other Communist party members, Li's painting would have been received as distasteful, rebellious, and indicative of a radical backlash. Li's mountains and trees are nearly abstract and painted in an untamed manner that mimics Western watercolor painting. Because Li simply used black ink, this painting is dark and almost ominous. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao's wife Jiang Qing criticized Li's work. She labeled Li, and a handful of artists who painted in a similar fashion, the "black painters" and declared that this group provided evidence

that a "restoration of the black line" was taking place in China during the late 1960s and '70s.¹⁵ Mao believed that black was the universal symbol for darkness and desolation, so Li's use of black was interpreted as a sign of his doubts about China's future and his resistance against those in power.¹⁶ It has also been suggested that Li was largely inspired by the Dutch artist and master of chiaroscuro, Rembrandt. Reminiscent in Li's black "Westernized" paintings is the emergence of a new artistic language; Li held views in opposition to those in authority, and he challenged tradition to create his own expression, despite the changing political and artistic sphere.

Throughout the twentieth century, there was much debate regarding the incorporation of Western art in the revitalization of Chinese art.¹⁷ Similarly, there was debate surrounding the use of traditional art; artists were trying to figure out which aspects were worth embracing. Mao, for example, was in favor of the utilization of Western art if it helped to advance the Communist program.¹⁸ Some artists, in their personal attempts to reform Chinese art, looked at Western art to emulate. A number of Chinese artists moved to France to study not only the classics but also more modern approaches such as impressionism and abstract expressionism, and in these they found a new pictorial language to adopt. Zao Wou-ki is one of the best examples of an artist who left China in the 1940s and settled in France in search of a new pictorial language. It is apparent in his work, and has also been confirmed by the artist, that he was influenced

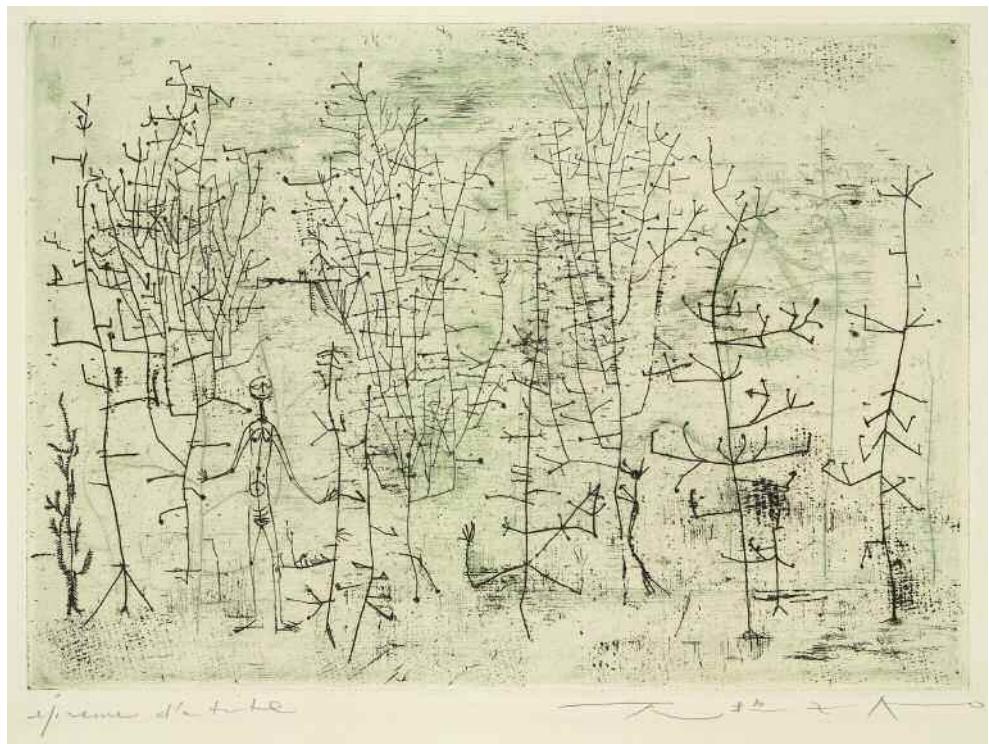


fig. 2 Zao Wou-ki, *Femme dans la Forêt*

by Paul Klee. Zao and other art admirers knew that Klee studied Chinese poetry and philosophy. Zao said that the first time he had the opportunity to look at Klee's paintings in person, he was lost in its details and "signs" for hours. Zao said that after being so absorbed by Klee's painting, "How . . . could I have ignored this painter in whom the knowledge and love of Chinese painting is so evident?"¹⁹ Upon discovering Klee and his "signs," Zao Wou-ki began to develop and expand on this "sign" technique for the next three years, and began to realize that Klee's artistic method was drawing him back to the roots of his own culture's art.²⁰

To Zao Wou-ki and other Chinese artists outside China during this time, abstract expressionism was an ideal genre for Chinese contemporaries to adopt.²¹ Zao's abstract pictures were, in fact, landscapes, but typically they lacked the trees, hills, and mountains of traditional Chinese landscape painting, as in his work *Femme dans la Forêt* (fig. 2). Nonetheless, what is evident in Zao's brushstrokes and techniques are references to traditional Chinese calligraphy, specifically that of oracle bones carved with China's most ancient script. Furthermore, the notion of an "image beyond an image" that traditional Chinese artists sought to capture in their paintings resonates in Zao's abstract pictures.²² Despite Zao's direct references to and awareness of his cultural heritage, he has remained in Paris since 1948 (with the exception of brief visits to China as a lecturer or to exhibit art) and had no desire to return to China. He explains that he moved to Paris with no intention of assimilating East and



fig. 3 Cao Liwei, *Herding in the Meadow*

West through his art, but rather formed this style in an attempt to find himself.²³ Yet, through his innovative imagination and skills as an artist, he created a style that clearly brings the East and West together, while still being very much his own expression.

Mao believed that art should serve the masses, but also that the masses should be participating in the art process as well, because art was "for the people."²⁴ Mao insisted that artists portray the lives of ordinary people, a rejection of what was perceived as the elitism of traditional literati painting. Because Mao believed that something foreign was worth adopting if it would reform Chinese art in a manner that would benefit his political agenda, the Communists adopted Soviet Socialist Realism in the 1950s, and this style was promoted in all of China's art schools.²⁵ Artists painting in this style produced images of peasants, workers, factories, and the countryside in an idealized, dramatic way, creating emphasis with bright colors. Such pictures could easily be used for propaganda purposes.²⁶ It was also essential to this art form that the subject matter was readily apparent to the viewer. Through these images, Mao wanted to emphasize the importance of workers and peasants' participation in a Communist Utopia.²⁷

By the 1990s, Mao Zedong had been dead for more than ten years, yet very little had changed in this "politically useful [art] style" known as Socialist Realism.²⁸ The age-old debate of past versus present and Chinese versus the West was also still unresolved, but artists had begun to involve themselves in more complex and adventurous art projects;

many artists again looked to China's past, the West, Japan, and their own experiences for inspiration.²⁹ This is evident in Cao Liwei's landscape painting *Herding in the Meadow* (fig. 3), which was painted in 1990 in a distinctly realist technique. Cao was born in 1956 and began his art studies at the Beijing Central Academy two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, at a time when the academy was still training in the styles that the Communist Party had deemed mandatory. Socialist realism was, without a doubt, one of the compulsory styles.³⁰

Upon completing his studies, Cao traveled extensively to the outer regions of China and to Tibet to immerse himself in and study the landscapes of these areas.³¹ The landscape portrayed in Cao's painting provides no distinct Chinese

landmarks or distinguishing characteristics of style; if one were to remove the human figure from the painting, a viewer would have no idea if Cao was depicting America or China. The landscape, and therefore the painting, takes on a more universal appeal. It is merely the herder's Tibetan-style apparel that establishes the setting of this painting. By the 1990s, artists like Cao were using Socialist Realist techniques for purely aesthetic reasons, working with greater artistic freedom, and exploring subject matter beyond that of typical Communist propaganda.

In 1997 Jiang Zhi produced his photograph *On a Terrace Gazing into the Distance* (fig. 4), which was one of a series of photographs published in the low-budget, underground magazine *New Photo*. Jiang's photograph consists of a small angel figurine, sitting on the ledge of a "terrace" which overlooks water. Jiang has focused the camera on the edge where the toy angel is situated, and allowed the water to be blurred so that the "landscape" of the photo appears abstract and unclear. The subject matter that Jiang chooses to portray parallels that which is often depicted in traditional landscape ink paintings and suggests that Jiang may have been turning to the past for inspiration. The terrace the angel stands on is reminiscent of the mountains that had been painted by Chinese artists for centuries. In traditional art, figures within a landscape were typically small and nonintrusive, often to emphasize the power of nature over the human being and to further convey the magnitude of the landscape depicted. Jiang's photograph is in black and white, further emphasizing his reference to traditional Chinese paintings which were



fig. 4 Jiang Zhi, *On a Terrace Gazing into the Distance*

typically produced with black ink and brush, as in Li Keran's landscape painting.

Cao Fei's *Deep Breathing* (back cover) comes from a series of photographs that Cao produced called *COSplayers*. Cao is member of a group of young artists who have grown up in China and have had the opportunity to develop individual art styles, unaffected by the reforms of Mao and the Communist Party. Cao's photograph depicts two cosplayers (young people dressed in costumes) standing in combat-like stances, set in an urban Chinese landscape. This modern landscape is disoriented by the placement of two lifelike sculptures of a cow and zebra on the left and right side of the photo. This unlikely combination creates a surreal, fantasy-like ambiance.

Cosplayers, as described by Cao herself, spend most of their days lost in a virtual world of video games.³² According to Cao, cosplayers growing up in China "have been confronted by both the traditional values of the Chinese education system and subject to the pull of invading foreign cultures in the new century."³³ On the basis of this statement, the experience of cosplayers parallels the experience of Chinese artists during the mid-twentieth century. Today, cosplayers feel the weight of the "traditional Chinese education system" on their shoulders, as where many mid-century artists felt pressure to preserve their heritage through traditional Chinese forms and techniques in their art. However, this was made difficult for many artists because critics were also emphasizing the need to draw from external sources and other cultures in order to reform Chinese art, just as cosplay-

ers are being confronted with foreign influences and traditions which are beginning to inhabit China.

This parallel between cosplayers and Chinese artists throughout the twentieth century appears more evident when comparing cosplayers to early literati painters. Literati painters were an elite group of people coming from a scholarly class. Their paintings were expressions of their thoughts and themselves. Cosplayers are not a group of scholars, however, they are a group of individuals who have isolated themselves from the rest of society. For those who do not participate in the virtual and cyber world of video games, cosplayers seem incomprehensible, unrealistic, and hard to find. Furthermore, Literati artists often ventured on scholarly retreats to isolated areas (as represented in the painting by Xie Zhiguang and Ren Yi, et al.), as cosplayers isolate themselves when they engage in video games, which today are commonly played reclusively in the home.³⁴ But also, cosplayers use their costumes to escape into a world of fantasy and magic in an attempt to discern themselves from reality. Thus, cosplayers both mentally and physically isolate themselves from the real world and society. Cao Fei uses a modern-day theme within her landscape painting to expose the lives and struggles of over a century of Chinese artists who sought to find an artistic identity as well as a nation's.

Throughout the twentieth century, political leaders and artists alike were searching for China's national identity, and Chinese political and art leaders drew on external influences to help reform it. However, as time progressed, China's identity became increasingly complex and, as a result, easily altered. Because of this, the art produced in China between the late nineteenth and twenty-first centuries varies dramatically in both subject and style. Despite vivid difference in aesthetics, through the landscape and the human figure, many modern and contemporary Chinese painters found an aesthetically pleasing away to express both social and political views as well as their experiences and the experiences of Chinese artists who came before them. By examining Chinese landscape paintings within and outside of *Topography in Translation*, it is apparent that through "pictorial abstraction" centuries of Chinese landscape painters have expressed a country's desire for an identity and for a renewed art style that they can proudly call their own.

NOTES

- 1 Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber, 1959), 32.
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- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Maggie Bickford, *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice: The Flowering Plum in Chinese Art* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985), 108.
- 5 Ibid., 116.
- 6 Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998), 3.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 30.
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- 13 Claire Roberts, "A Century of Li Keran: Commemorating the Centenary of a *guohua* Artist," in *China Heritage Quarterly* no. 12, December 2007, http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/scholarship.php?searchterm=012_CenturyliKeran.inc&issue=012.
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- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 35.
- 18 Ibid., 36.
- 19 Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 206.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 207.
- 23 Ibid., 206.
- 24 Ibid., 147.
- 25 Galikowski, 36.
- 26 Ibid., 152.
- 27 Ibid., 152–53.
- 28 Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, 206.
- 29 Ibid., 214.
- 30 Walsh Library Gallery, Seton Hall University Libraries, "About the Artists," online exhibition material for *Politics in Art: Asian Style in the Face of Tradition and Change. Selections from the Collection of Andrew B. Kim and Wan Kyun Rha Kim* (November 3, 2000–January 7, 2001), cocurated by Scott Hankins and Nina Pierro, <http://academic.shu.edu/libraries/gallery/politics-artists.htm>.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Cao Fei, "Cosplayers/2004," <http://www.caofei.com/works/photography/>.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ibid.

Writing a Culture

Exploring the Recent History of Chinese Calligraphy

Claudia Mattos



"I write painting." This is how the phrase *wō xie huà*, meaning "I paint," literally translates from Chinese into English. This way of describing the act of painting reveals the aesthetic importance of the written word and the power of the Chinese writing system to abstract the world into ideas and concepts that supersede the visual focus of interpreted experience. This cultural notion concerning the power of language raises calligraphy, within the scope of Chinese culture, to an art form superior to that of painting.

Calligraphy, as a tradition, anchors the Chinese people to one another, and acts as a link spanning distances in time and place. Written Chinese has become a cultural authority, an identifying marker of the culture within which it was devised and of the people to which it belongs. Calligraphy stands a symbol of the classical tradition of literati scholars and their concerns with pursuits of the mind and the natural landscape—the mountain, river, and plum blossom that speak through poetry of a man's noble character. Calligraphy can be used as a means of empowering the masses, of aiding in literacy efforts in Mao's China, or as a means of propagandist control. Chinese calligraphy harkens back to the very beginnings of writing, to pictograms etched on oracle bones that bore answers in divination. And it can even serve as a means of subverting itself, stripping itself of its own meaning, power, and history, as in the works of postmodern artists.

Despite continuous evolution over three millennia, the art of Chinese writing has seen its most rapid and radical changes in the last hundred years. By considering how it has been used as a social, political, and artistic



fig. 1 Wu Hua, Pair of *bapo* ("Eight Brokens") paintings

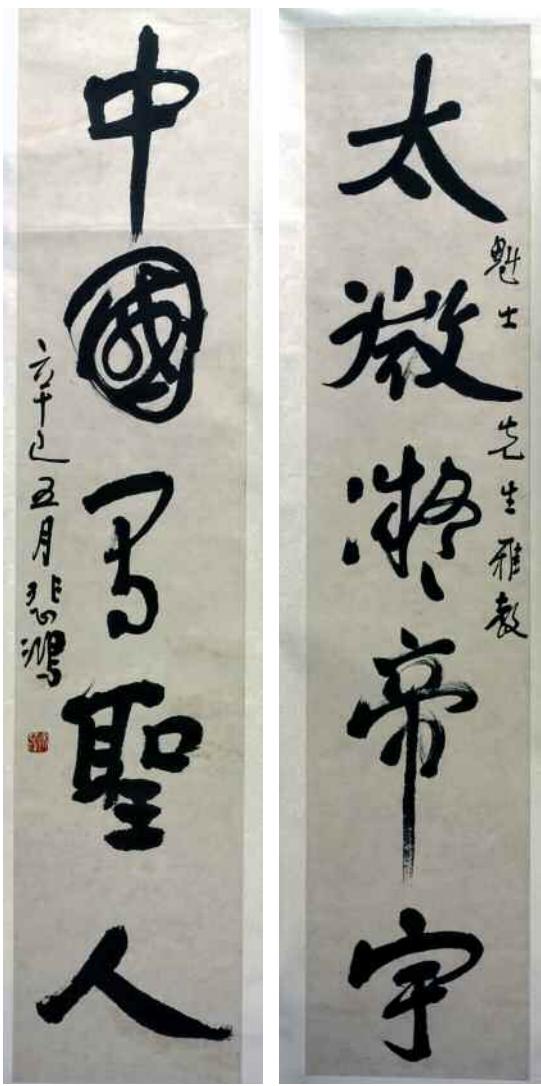


fig. 2 Xu Beihong, *Couplet in running script (xing shu)*

tool in the last century, we can map the modern transformation of calligraphy's roles, themes, and aesthetics.

* * *

Those who can read and understand written Chinese, and know the cultural significance of calligraphy as an art form, can accept and appreciate these works in a way the uninformed viewer cannot. Apart from an ability to read the literal meaning of the work, the informed viewer understands just how the ink was put to paper, as there is a notion of ritual that comes with the writing of Chinese characters, a stroke order that dictates the underlying structure. But to viewers without that background, who might be more familiar with a visual culture where painting has been the preeminent artistic medium and where no comparable tradition in calligraphy exists, this path to appreciating calligraphy becomes a challenging one.

On the other hand, this barrier to reading a work can afford the viewer a purely visual and formal understanding of calligraphic artworks. Approaching a piece of calligraphy as one would a piece of abstract art, a Pollock or a Mondrian, for

example, offers the opportunity for a viewer to appreciate the beauty of the line on paper, the rhythm of the strokes, or the movement of the brush without the interruption of meaning.

While the inability to read a work can seem to leave the viewer with an incomplete understanding of the piece at hand, some contemporary artists, including one featured in this exhibition, have seized upon this issue of the meaning of language to call attention to the authoritative power written language can have on society. Wenda Gu's *Mythos of Lost Dynasties, series i, no. 3* features what appear to be ancient Chinese characters that are actually invented symbols created to mimic that script. In contrast to a traditional piece of calligraphy, here the characters are meaningless. Thus it is the viewer who expects to understand the written characters that is left alienated, while the uninformed viewer can continue a more formal appreciation of the work unfazed. It also offers a conceptual meaning that the uninformed audience can understand and appreciate without a need to read Chinese.

Allowing for a more conceptual understanding of the calligraphic works in this exhibition is something that was taken into account when organizing the placement of pieces within the gallery. Works were grouped to emphasize their ability to animate meanings within their associations to one another: Kang Youwei's *General Kang Visits Washington (Calligraphy in running script)*, a piece about Washington, D.C., is placed with two landscape paintings that conjure visual associations to the American West; Wu Hua's pair of *bapo* ("Eight Brokens") paintings, and Hong Lei's *Clouds in the Mirror Passing By*, two works characterized by the layering of visual elements, are grouped with other works that share the same characteristics; Xu Beihong's cosmological calligraphy, and Wenda Gu's *Mythos of Lost Dynasties, series i, no. 3*, with their grandiose statements concerning Chinese nationalism that recall the propagandistic large-character posters of Mao's China, are paired with an image of a two female nudes at Tiananmen Square; and Yu Youren's very traditional *Calligraphy in grass-style script* is grouped with pieces that mirror the aspects of literati culture mentioned within the piece.

* * *

The earliest Chinese scripts, and the basis for the Chinese written language, are found in the inscriptions on oracle bones and bronze vessels dating from the thirteenth to fourth centuries BC. These oldest scripts, carved or incised on the surfaces of divination bones or ritual bronzes, are the foundations of the Chinese written language, but had little influence on stylistic developments of calligraphy until the eighteenth century, when an interest in antiquity promoted a resurgence of the aesthetic influence of these most ancient scripts.

The first calligraphic script to become a long-lasting form was Seal script, developed in the eighth century BC during the Zhou Dynasty. This variant is now referred to as Great or Large Seal Script, and a later variant, Small Seal Script, was developed in the Qin state during the third century BC. This archaic script was used primarily for decorative engravings, particularly seals.

Clerical script, developed during the second century, was the first systematic script to be written with a brush. Its highly regularized form and aesthetics make it very legible, even to contemporary readers of Chinese, and was favored as the script for official state writings.

Standard script, Semi-cursive script, and Cursive script all emerged at around the same time during the fourth century. Standard script, the basis for most later calligraphy, was first fully developed during the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) periods. It is clearly legible, and is used in modern writing and publications. Semi-cursive script, also known as running script, a more fluid script than Standard, began with innovations in Clerical script for writing drafts more efficiently, and is often used in combination with Standard and Cursive scripts. Cursive, or Grass, script is a simplified script that reduces the characters drastically and connects many elements of each in a single continuous stroke of the brush; because of the simplification of characters, reading this script requires special study. Despite this, however, Simplified Chinese was derived from the simplified forms found in Cursive script, aiding in literacy efforts during the mid-twentieth century.

All of these basic scripts were developed by the fourth century, from the Shang to the Six Dynasties. While the history of writing in China spans vast distances in time, it took until the first century for calligraphy to be recognized for its expressive capacity, becoming widely established as a form of art between the third and sixth centuries with the rise of literati culture.

Classical calligraphy finds its visual vocabularies in the culture of the Chinese literati, scholars who developed their skills in poetry, painting, and calligraphy to communicate their cultivation as gentlemen. Painting, within this tradition, has its basis in calligraphy, and the literati scholars practiced both. The preeminence of calligraphy among the educated elite placed ink painting in a subordinate position since its forms derive from the brushwork of calligraphy.

The gentleman-scholar of literati culture was expected to be a poet and painter, and these pursuits dealt primarily with reflections of the natural world—mountains, rivers, and plants—that stand as metaphors for characteristics of the human world. The plum blossom, for example, a common visual and literary motif in the arts of the literati, stands as a symbol of perseverance as they bloom during the winter when most plants have shed their leaves.

* * *

Artists working at the end of the nineteenth century maintained the classical foundation with which, for many centuries, calligraphy has been identified and associated. But, as periods of unprecedented social, political, and cultural transformation occurred toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, artists reacted in various ways and their works speak to the history of a changing China. Calligraphy practices shifted stylistically, thematically and conceptually to incorporate Western influences and to embrace or reject modernization.

Wu Hua's pair of *bapo* ("Eight Brokens") paintings (fig. 1) from about 1885, is comprised of a pair of hanging scrolls, painted with ink and color washes on paper. Wu mimics a collage effect, creating an illusion of layered fans and cultural ephemera on paper. Because of this collage effect and the layering of writing, the tradition of calligraphy becomes an historical artifact in and of itself, standing for the visual culture of China. Among these cultural fragments are pieces of everyday life, featuring writing in different calligraphic scripts such as Seal script, Semi-cursive script, and Standard script. There is a sense of loss within the work, as the torn bits of cultural material portend the arrival of a new time when longstanding traditions could be permanently damaged or disappear altogether.

Xu Beihong (1895–1953), a Chinese painter and educator born in Yixing, was best known for his ink and oil paintings of traditional Chinese subject matter. He was classically trained in both traditional ink painting and calligraphy in China, and in Western oil painting in Paris during the early twentieth century. He sought to create a new art for China, using the Western influences he had learned during his travels to bring China into modernism through a reformation of its visual language by imbuing it with Western stylistic technique.

Xu's pair of calligraphy scrolls (fig. 2) presents a tradition of Chinese cosmology that posits that the arrangements of the stars and constellations come to echo what happens within human society. The couplet refers to the great universe and how it gathers above the Chinese people and all people, and how China, in the midst of chaos, maintains order. During the early twentieth century, amidst the turmoil of European colonialism, the message embedded within this work, lauding the strength of the Chinese people, is very nationalistic and serves to foster a sense of pride in being Chinese. The piece, an example of traditional literati calligraphy, reacts to the complexities of change, both wanted and unwanted, as China struggles to maintain an identity while pushing forward toward modernity.

Yu Youren (1879–1964), born in Shanxi, was a Chinese educator and politician, and is considered one of the greatest modern masters of calligraphy, best known for his work

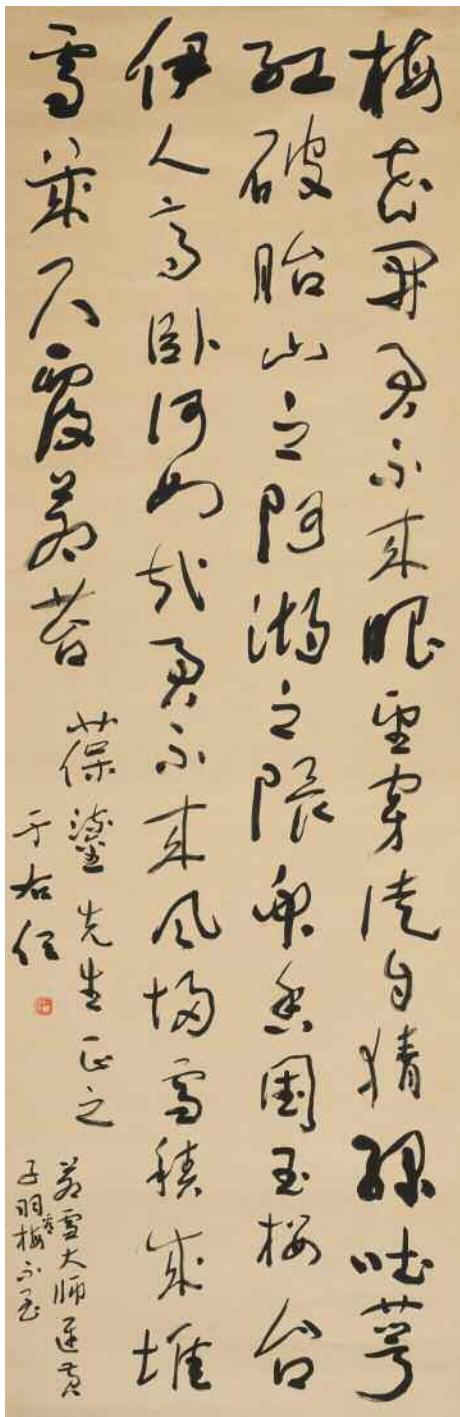


fig. 3 Yu Youren, *Calligraphy in grass-style script (cao shu)*

in Cursive and Semi-cursive script. The exhibition features a cursive piece by Yu, *Calligraphy in grass-style script* (fig. 3), a hanging scroll that puts to paper a literati poem concerning the beauty of a plum blossom set within a landscape of mountains and rivers. The text comments on the artist's distanced friendship with a fellow literati scholar, and how the moss has begun to accumulate on the landscape in his absence. This is another example of a very traditional calligraphy, that contrasts with the innovative techniques in calligraphy by more contemporary artists.

Kang Youwei (1858–1927) was a noted Chinese scholar, calligrapher, and political thinker and reformist active during the end of Imperial China and the early years of the Republic. After taking part in efforts to reform the country, Kang was forced to flee China when the coup he was associated with did not succeed and members of the revolting party were captured and executed, among them Kang's brother. During his exile, Kang traveled extensively, finding himself, at one point, in the United States' capital, Washington, D.C.

His piece, *General Kang Visits Washington (Calligraphy in running script)* (fig. 4), is an example of Chinese Semi-cursive script and of traditional calligraphy. The piece was created during this stay in Washington, and features a poem by Kang himself, lauding the greatness of the landscape within which he now finds himself and the good people who call this place their home. The poem opens with mention of the Potomac River and its green waters, and continues with the Arlington National Cemetery and the beauty and fragrance of its landscape, the beauty of Washington as the nation's capital, and the noble people he has encountered during this stay. Finishing, the poem goes back to speak of the Arlington National Cemetery, the tombs of the soldiers buried there and the democracy on the nation was built.

While exemplifying very traditional notions of what calligraphy is and should be, this work embodies the capacity for mutability; as an example of a tradition in translation, a new form of an old art, it instigates a dialogue between East and West. The poem, about America and its capital, while written in Chinese and drawing on a tradition of landscape in its mention of the natural beauty of Washington, D.C., it nonetheless relays an underlying political message written in light of the turmoil in China; despite its focus on America, the piece conveys Kang's longing for a politically reformed China.

During the rise of Communism and with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, traditions stemming from literati culture were deemed elitist and anti-proletarian, and the emerging nation under Mao Zedong saw none of itself in the idealized representations of imperial China. Calligraphy as practiced by the literati was demoted from its elevated position. The government promoted Socialist Realist oil painting to convey messages to a largely illiterate people. Heroic images of proud Chinese peasants and workers, in their idealized yet candid representations of daily life, spoke to the masses—it was an art without pretense, that did not need an educated audience to derive deeper meaning from its symbolism.

Calligraphy was employed, however, during this period as both a tool to empower the Chinese people and at once strip them of that power. In an effort to battle illiteracy, the

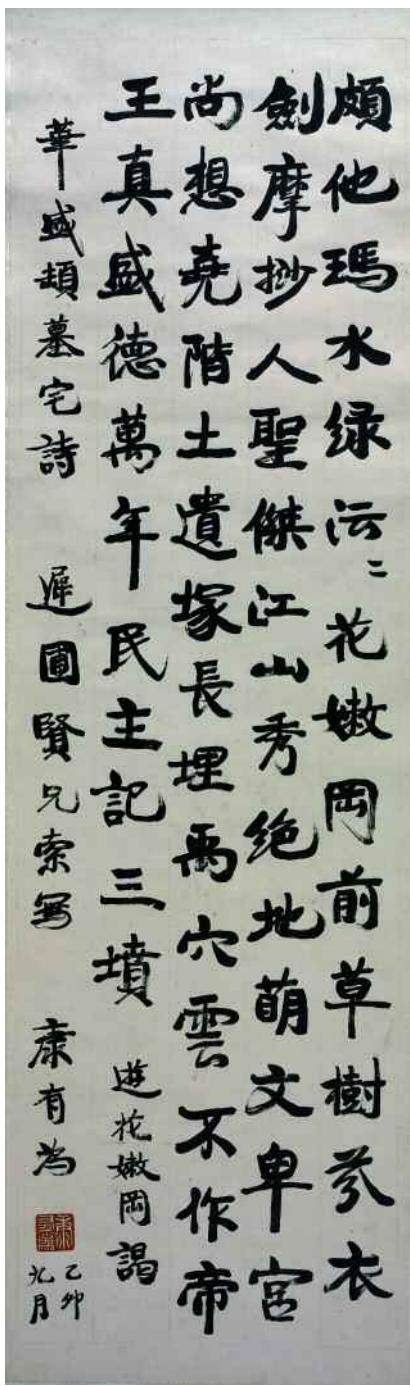


fig. 4 Kang Youwei, *General Kang Visits Washington Calligraphy in running script (xing shu)*

government developed a new writing system of Simplified Chinese: abbreviated characters based on Cursive script were invented to make the language easier to learn, read and write. Promoted as an empowerment of the common worker through written language, this initiative served the purposes of the Communist Party by aiding in the transmission of propagandist messages through simple pictures and writings. Thus, the proletarians were only empowered so their government could manipulate them, politically and socially, essentially granting the government more power over them.

The big-character poster became a critical means for the government to relay cultural and political messages to the public, and for the public, conversely, to express itself; the right to create these posters, to engage the public in this format, became one of the four great rights under the constitution.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, four distinctive trends have emerged within Chinese calligraphy, creating a modern practice that on the one hand seeks to guard the tradition from global influence, and on the other endeavors to mold a heavily pluralistic art.

The first of these trends was the rehabilitation of the grand tradition of classical calligraphy by older artists, preserving this art form into the latter half of the twentieth century. Following this, in the mid-1980s, the modernist movement emerged and forged a new genre that merged Western artistic styles, such as Abstract Expressionism, with calligraphy. Later, in the mid-1990s, with the decline in number of classically trained calligraphers, rose the Neo-Classical calligraphers, younger artists who looked back on the classical tradition of calligraphy and sought to continue its practice. And most recently has been the rise of avant-garde calligraphy, engaging postmodern theory, forms, and practices with the classical tradition.

Within this concept of the postmodern, calligraphy becomes a polemic statement—literally, conceptually, and aesthetically—that instigates a discourse concerning the very notion of a national Chinese identity and the power of written language as a marker of that identity.

A piece like Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, a mixed-media installation of printed books and scrolls composed of four thousand invented characters that mimic the look of written Chinese, works directly with this idea of language as a cultural institution that cannot be accepted as an authority because it constantly changes depending on the context. The piece and its conceptual foundations sought to strip writing of its meaning and thereby strip calligraphy of its power in characterizing the Chinese people, within a Western framework, as one mass, static through time within an ahistorical past.

Another work that engages similar dialogues is Wenda Gu's 1993–2005 piece, *Poem by Wang Wei, no. 34* from the series *Forest of Stone Steles: Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry*. It is a large piece that communicates the inconsistencies and inaccuracies inherent in the act of translation—translating these steles, literally, from Chinese to English, then phonetically from English to Chinese, and then again, literally, from Chinese to English to create an altogether new and nonsensical post-Tang poem. Wenda Gu, born in Shanghai in 1955 and now practicing in the United States, is an avant-garde Chinese artist and educator whose work takes obvious influence from Xu Bing's *Book from the*



fig. 5 Wenda Gu, *Mythos of Lost Dynasties, series i, no. 3*

Sky in that it attempts to dismantle the power of language as a defining component of a Chinese national identity.

Wenda's 2005 piece, *Mythos of Lost Dynasties, series i, no. 3*, a large splash-ink calligraphic painting, features false Chinese characters (fig. 5)—an invented and meaningless non-language. The large and invented character forms take influence from Seal script, harkening back to the very foundations of Chinese calligraphy itself; it forgoes entirely the sorts of works it most directly references, large-character posters, to subvert this notion of history and language, particularly Chinese script, as an accurate marker of time, place, and the general cultural identity of its people. The piece also critiques Seal script itself, a largely decorative script, by making it wholly decorative in this piece—it becomes absolute form in that the characters carry no meaning.

Coming from a generation of artists who grew up within the People's Republic of China, and who came of age during the Cultural Revolution, the large-character poster becomes a loaded format for transmitting this message of dissent. The piece sets itself up as a poster for mass reading, for communicating a message to large numbers of people as large-character posters relayed social and political messages to the masses. But in this instance, the piece that appears to make a grandiose statement is itself meaningless, and in this meaningless message makes a grandiose statement about the power of language in shaping thought and controlling individuals. This heightens the sense of alienation to the Chinese

language audience, and puts every viewer of this work on the same incomprehensible ground.

Hong Lei, a Chinese-born contemporary artist and photographer, articulates the union and dialogue between East and West that Kang Youwei touched upon in the calligraphy he created during his exile in Washington, D.C. Her photographic piece, titled *Clouds in the Mirror Passing By*, part of a series of photographs created in 1997, appropriates the imagery of traditional Chinese painting and gives this visual vocabulary a distinctly Western feel. The image of two dead birds that flew into a mirror upon seeing the sky's reflection in it, provides a visual for a narrative concerning feelings of being stifled. The two birds lie over a string of pearls and their own blood, which is also spattered across the mirror and the blue sky reflected therein. This piece deals with issues of Chinese femininity, as the symbols that represent the female in the Chinese visual vocabulary—jewelry, the mirror, and the delicate birds—build a conceptual foundation for this piece. Working with the notions of Chinese femininity and feminism, the work communicates a notion of paternalism that the feminine seeks to escape within society, at any cost. The piece also deals with Baudrillardian issues of reality, as the false sky comes to mimic its true self and represents a stifling social reality. Those engaging with this reflected world, the birds, believe it to be real and suffer death in an attempted escape. At play are very obvious references to Western ideological developments that have moti-

vated art and thought in the last half-century, bridging the visual language of Chinese art with the conceptual language of the West.

Although this is not a traditional calligraphic piece, writing is a very integral part of both the visual and conceptual logic of the composition, giving it its meaning. Over the mirror is a message written in English: "I would rather die than see the clouds passing by" and below the two birds is written the same message in Chinese; they would rather risk death than live within the confines of their current reality, the world of the reflected sky rather than the real one. The visual union of both Chinese and English writing systems mirrors the union of both the Chinese visual vocabulary and the Western conceptual and ideological vocabulary. The presence of this message written in both languages speaks of the dialogue between East and West that is very present in the contemporary arts of China.

* * *

The works in this exhibition provide a glimpse of the changing landscape of Chinese calligraphy in the modern age, as China itself has faced changes in its social, political and cultural fabrics through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Calligraphy, as more than an aesthetic practice, remains a powerful tool that continues to evolve and adapt to ever-changing contexts; despite its long history, calligraphy is in a constant state of translation.

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fig. 1 Zao Wou-ki, *Untitled*

The Postmodern Chinese Landscape

Katherine Finerty

"Postmodernism" is a dynamic and complicated condition and philosophy that serves distinct functions in a variety of places and contexts. Central to its conception are the ideas of a period following a distinct "modernist" movement involving cultural and intellectual response and reevaluation. Our understanding of postmodernism can aptly be informed by theorist Fredric Jameson, who defines postmodernity as the "culture in dominance,"¹ primarily in reaction to political and social modernity as well as artistic and philosophical modernism. According to historian Arif Dirlik and professor Zhang Xudong, the postmodern experience is defined by "decentralization, transnational mobility, economic and cultural diversity, consumerism and some emerging or renewed sense of locality, individuality, and diversity."² China, however, did not experience the modern world in the same way that the West did. Modernity in China was constructed upon socialism and revolution, and thus its postmodernity can subsequently be conceived as postrevolutionary and postsocialist. Furthermore, it was the exposure to the defining cultural self-consciousness and expressiveness alongside with the

democracy and social capitalism of the West that initiated postmodernity in China during the 1980s.

Up until that point, Communist China remained a closed and restricted society. The process of adapting Western philosophies began after President Richard Nixon's visit in 1972 and, following Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, gained momentum as the market reforms of Deng Xiaoping took effect in the early 1980s. The realization of postmodernism in China became apparent in the late 1980s, a defining historical moment in which broad exposure to Western concepts led to an ideological infiltration of China's "modern" status and subsequent cultural opening. Chinese intellectuals were introduced to the philosophy of Fredric Jameson, who traveled to and taught in China, causing the postrevolutionary dimension of Chinese culture to transform into an aesthetic complex that can be interpreted as "the surest sign, indeed a conspicuous stage, of the changing economic, social, political, and cultural relations in post-Mao China."³ Transitioning from discourse and into reality, postmodernism in China embodies a collective experience of



fig. 2 Charles (Chang-Han) Liu, *Melody of Nature—Source*

rebelling against authority and modernity. Professor Chi Zhang offers an “epochal cultural-pragmatic dissonance”⁴ paradigm in an attempt to define the transition into a postmodern context. Within this framework, artists formed groups outside the academic system and experimented with a variety of mediums, including photography, installation, and performance, in order to create art with strong conceptual drives to complement their innovative and radical ideas.

Another essential component to a postmodern China is the development of a self-consciously dynamic and hybrid identity. Indian philosopher Madan Sarup’s perception of identity within a postmodern culture is a helpful framework to situate the postmodern Chinese artist. Sarup believed that the contemporary identity is both “traditional” (a fixed or labeled identity, e.g. gender or race) and “constructed” (an identity reached through the process of personal experience and interaction with others).⁵ Despite the inherent paradoxes of these two models, identity is concretely established in a given place and time, and considers both the subject and the object. Sarup’s main point is that identity is a complex combination of the objective social and subjective individual, and that identity is a constantly changing, and often ambiguous, process.

A Postmodern Identity

Contemporary Chinese identity is framed by a juxtaposition

of national sentimentality and displacement, in addition to a newfound self-consciousness and expression. While renowned abstract painter Zao Wou-ki would typically be categorized as a modern artist, his biography as a multicultural artist embodies the dynamic and hybrid identity of a postmodern Chinese artist. It is within this framework that the modern artworks by Zao Wou-ki featured in this exhibition can be interpreted with a postmodern spin. Zao Wou-ki was born in China and traveled to Paris and throughout the U.S. in order to inform his personal style and aesthetic. He is thus a pertinent example of the sense of in-betweenness that many diasporic Chinese artists experienced, in which traversing distinct countries and cultures resulted in a dual cultural heritage. The reconciliation between Western and Chinese ideologies and aesthetics can be perceived in a rich intercultural dialogue.⁶ For example, in Zao Wou-ki’s work Chinese ink technique influenced his Western-style oil paintings and his graphic works.

In *Untitled* (fig. 1), a landscape style composition is presented, setting the context for which nature and abstraction confront each other in a distinct yet integral manner. The Chinese landscape schema is referenced through the use of black, reminiscent of traditional ink painting, that mediates and punctuates the deep red color of the painting.⁷ Formally, this work projects internal luminosity, pulsing movement, and a sprawling composition in which unity is challenged by the edges—a Chinese approach in which we see a fragment of



fig. 3 Pei Jing, *Bared at Tiananmen*

an integral whole.⁸ Finally, Zao's works function to embody the identity of a "postmodern" Chinese painter by their subtle essence of personal experience and self-reference. This contemplation of identity and art historical context empowers the self-displacement defining the experience of the diaspora artist, whose work can provisionally reconcile a sense of being simultaneously stranded yet grounded, lost and found.

We can perceive this strong postmodern drive in the work and identity of contemporary artist Charles (Chang-Han) Liu as well. The nature of the artist's name itself aptly exemplifies the artist's paradigmatic postmodern identity. Born in Shanghai and raised in Taiwan, Charles Liu studied in Spain and is currently a U.S. citizen. His work embodies the manner in which contemporary Chinese diaspora artists engage in a rich dialogue of traditional, Western, and post-modern techniques and concepts. *Melody of Nature—Source* (fig. 2) incorporates traditional ink techniques and brushwork in order to render a North American landscape. Charles Liu's work draws parallels between Eastern and Western landscapes, blurring both their geographical and cultural boundaries. He successfully "confront[s] issues of displacement, alienation, and assimilation inherent in a life that straddles different cultures."⁹

Pei Jing's *Bared at Tiananmen* (fig. 3) illustrates a dynamic postmodern quality through his mixture of iconic ideas and imagery, including two nude figures standing in historic Tiananmen Square, wearing Red Army caps, surrounded by sunflowers, a potent symbol of loyalty to Mao, and other suggestive symbols such as butterflies. This work would be prohibited from display in China today, causing us to question contemporary cultural standards and the ways in which artists may challenge authority and history. While Chinese society has become increasingly open in the post-Mao era,

Communist Party censorship has maintained oppressive cultural restriction. The site featured in this work is especially significant in a postmodern context given the experimental installations and performances that took place during student demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in 1989, and which ended in a government crackdown and massacre. One such example is the 33-foot tall *Goddess of Democracy* statue that was built by students in the Central Academy of Fine Arts during the 1989 protests.¹⁰ Intended as a symbol of unity and equality, the statue was purposefully very large so that the government couldn't dismantle it. *Bared at Tiananmen* successfully portrays the tension between desiring freedom of expression versus remaining loyal to the Communist state. The stances and outward stares of the two figures expose the vulnerability of freedom and are emblematic of the limits facing modern China. While the two women cover up their bodies, they invite us to look and contemplate the complicated and dynamic nature of their essence. As the women stare into our eyes, they powerfully return the gaze of repressive hierarchical authority.

The assemblage piece *Wildflower (Orchid)* (fig. 4) by Hung Liu also references controversial elements of Chinese history in a modern context, revealing untold stories and exploring the development of Chinese identity in coordination with her experimentation of art practice and medium. Hung Liu's personal identity was shaped by her experiences growing up during Communism and transitioning from believing first in a socialist utopia and then in modern humanism. While she critiques certain elements of Chinese society and tradition, she perceives herself as a strong female hero and soldier.¹¹ *Wildflower (Orchid)* addresses the idea of a woman as a commodity by featuring a traditional oval portrait of a female prostitute and entertainer surrounded by commercial cards contemporary to her image.

Her presence and framing thus engage in a dialogue with old and new identities and functions, playing with how we conceive ourselves in distinct consumer societies: classical and postmodern. The assemblage of materials and styles further illustrates the postmodern theme. Finally, Hung Liu juxtaposes the restrictive contexts of traditional and modern commoditization of femininity with a new and empowering one: a bird rendered in ink breaks through the literal and figurative boundaries of the portrait frame, symbolizing freedom. The traditional symbol of the bird as a signification for happiness and freedom is thus transposed into a postmodern feminist context. Hung Liu unleashes the bounds of time, history, and art itself by contrasting the still, potentially static portrait with symbols of mobility, ultimately achieving a provisional and conceptual drive manifested through physical realization.



fig. 4 Hung Liu, *Wildflower (Orchid)*

A Postmodern Strategy

The driving force and distinction of postmodern Chinese art after the Cultural Revolution is a new focus on underlying conceptual meaning accompanied by a keen sense of self. Subsequently, the display and experience of postmodern Chinese art is often informed and empowered by the conceptual essence of the works themselves. Concentration and exaltation on the concept and meaning allows for contemporary Chinese artists to constantly challenge and explore the definitions previously placed on their creative practices, cultural identities, and relevant functions. Wenda Gu is a pertinent example of a diaspora artist who breaks the limits of Chinese forms and concepts.

By questioning the form and function of Chinese characters, Wenda Gu challenges both traditional and modern authority. Wenda distinctly criticizes the restrictive development and decline in art practice and conception throughout Chinese history, while providing a new and more empowered landscape for contemporary artists to inhabit. In his early conceptual ink art, Wenda Gu challenged the traditional context of Chinese literati culture by confronting and complicating the Chinese urge to read. *Mythos of Lost Dynasties*, series

i, no. 3 (see page 33) depicts an invented language of fake Chinese characters, whose meaninglessness creatively challenges the authority of artistic orthodox doctrine.¹² Ultimately, his subversive and playful use of calligraphy explores the manners in which we can communicate with each other and the simultaneous potential for familiarity and alienation.

In keeping with the artistic postmodern elements of appropriation, representation via imitation, and a "schizophrenic" treatment of time,¹³ photography has proven to be an especially fitting conceptual medium in which contemporary Chinese artists express themselves. While photography is traditionally viewed as a modern medium in art historical contexts, its relevance and influence came later in Chinese history—gaining popular appeal and acceptance at the onset of the postmodern era. Four of the photographs featured in the exhibition come from a portfolio entitled *New Photo – Ten Years*, that commemorates an underground journal published by Rong Rong and Liu Zheng in very limited circulation from 1996–98. The works published in *New Photo* represented the early experimental works of artists who today are at the core of a burgeoning field of Chinese photography and serves to convey the speed in which Chinese culture and art has moved and transformed in the last decade. The following works depict the hybrid identity and dynamic means of expression that contemporary Chinese artists have adapted for themselves.

Tokyo Sky Story 4 (fig. 5) by Zheng Guogu furthers the exploration of the commoditized postmodern Chinese identity with a tilted urban landscape populated by haunting Barbie dolls. At once floating and falling, they depict the insecurity of defining oneself in a postmodern city—for even when looking from above, one's perspective is challenged and distorted. *Untitled [April]* (fig. 6) is a work from Qiu Zhijie's *Calendar 1998* series that addresses objects related to everyday life. It features an urban construction site photographed part-by-part every day during the month of April that year. The neighboring images are subsequently inserted chronologically into a calendar format—at once fragmenting and integrating the images into a united and ordered space.¹⁴ Not only is the image fragmented, but the temporality in which they are suggested to exist within is both transcended and dismantled. This work encourages us to question the identity of a space and how the theories of gestalt influence the way in which we perceive a space's appearance and function. Is the urban landscape made more or less accessible given its separation of parts or looming whole? The "everyday" is re-presented as a cultural site in which one's experience of modernity can be conceived in a temporally experimental Postmodernity.¹⁵ Language is explored as a means by which to temporarily order what we see—yet it

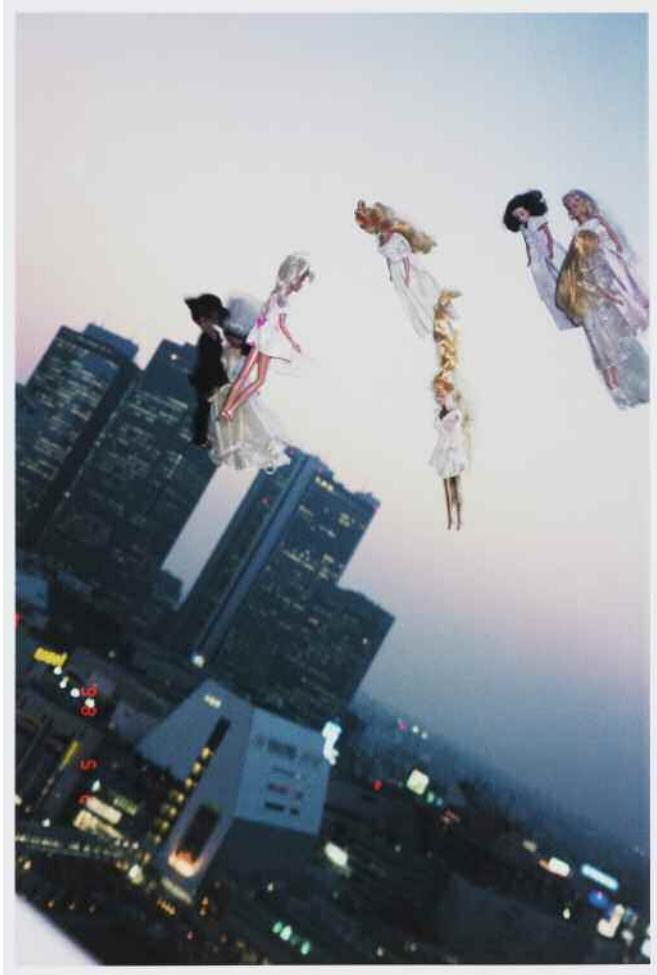


fig. 5 Zheng Guogu, *Tokyo Sky Story 4*

also serves as an arbitrary construction of how words can transcend the coherence of images.

Hong Lei's works provide an existential perspective of modern China, in which a beautiful "classical" world is confronted by modern anxiety and subsequently falls into decay.¹⁶ The tension and conflicts between tradition and contemporary reality are explored by postmodern experimentation with ideas and forms. In *Clouds in the Mirror Passing By* (see page 6), Hong Lei rearranges classical references, aesthetics, and symbols in a modern context, thereby confronting the traditional with subversive modernity in order to create a hybrid world of questions. The dead bird serves as a conceptual symbol in which the classical world is threatened by imminent misrepresentation and death. Hong Lei directly references the traditional work "Returning Home" by poet Tao Yuanming (365–427), in which the third stanza offers the image of "The clouds aimlessly rise from the peaks / The birds, when weary of flying, know it is time to come home."¹⁷ Clouds and birds are set up as detached and separated from each other, establishing distinct directions and movements. The solitary and disinterested nature of the clouds and birds¹⁸ in this poem allude to the same disaffection with society

exhibited in Hong Lei's photograph, in which the birds and the clouds exist in different realms of reality, possibility, and hope. The dead animals also serve to represent the artist himself,¹⁹ thus the free bird taking flight in Hung Liu's *Wildflower (Orchid)* now illustrates a more threatening existence.

Reality in Hong Lei's photograph is only achieved through a resonating portrait-like frame of a mirror-reality: a *trompe l'oeil* that taunts us with a future that cannot be penetrated. The mirror also offers a deep cultural dialogue with the Western postmodern theory of Jacques Lacan, who holds that unitary rationality is merely an illusion that is sometimes perceived during the mirror phase of life in which the subject recognizes that his or her body is separate from the outer world.²⁰ He explains that people may also believe their identity to be whole through the emulation of ideals and myths that culture creates—however this, too, is only an illusion. We can perceive the image of a bird, heading toward the mirror in hopes of flying "high in clouds,"²¹ only to find that any chance for escape and opportunity is also, merely, an illusion.

Yet as the saying suggests, death is a more compelling option than letting life pass you by, or not trying to break free from oppressive social bounds. The use of both English and Chinese characters to communicate with the viewer further exemplifies Hong Lei's interest in confronting the traditional and modern, as well as the postmodern context of intercultural dialogue. Behind something beautiful, he sees depth, death, and decay. Yet rather than fearing or hiding from these ominous images, he confronts and even embraces them—acknowledging that the desperation driving one's modern experience, especially as a female Chinese artist, is an experience catalyzing very substantial and nuanced expression. Hong Lei turns toward photography as a means to replicate and reframe loaded symbols and their arrangements. Here we can see how the medium of photography serves the conceptual desire of a postmodern Chinese artist: the very essence of picture-taking and image-making engages his themes of myth versus reality, incongruent temporality and spatiality, and a distinctly present sense of originality.

Reality is challenged once again in Jiang Zhi's *On a Terrace Gazing into the Distance* (see page 26) in which a small toy angel replaces the individual in an overwhelming contrast of scale and tone. The figure seems to be contemplating her purpose of self and environment, yet the nature of her thoughts remains less clear. Is she savoring the painterly landscape below her, or is she about to jump into the ominous depths? Or will she fly? The ambiguity and power of the inanimate and passive toy eerily illustrates profound isolation and self-reflection emblematic of the postmodern experience.

Jiang Zhi's work often focuses on themes concerning the repetition of everyday life, and the inevitable desire for

change. In a new series called *Things Would Turn Simpler Once They Happened*, Jiang Zhi uses the light of a spotlight to signify our desire for simple and endurable beauty in opposition to dreary representation.²² The opposition to repetition recalls the quiet yet powerful contrast of this photograph, which sets its figure in a landscape composed of a familiar tilted and obscured reflection. The chiaroscuro effect functions in a dialogue with Li Keran's *Landscape*—an untraditionally dark piece inspired by Rembrandt's rich sense of physical shadowing and emotional sensitivity. Both works encourage us to contemplate the individual's role within their distinct landscapes—unique in both their social contexts and expressive formal renderings. While Jiang Zhi's photograph calls upon the ambiguity of postmodern identity and space through a softly distorted and monochromatic landscape, Li Keran's painting explores traditional Chinese tea culture with unexpectedly bold and powerful contrast and rendering.

Cao Fei's *Deep Breathing* (back cover), from the series *COSplayers*, offers a distinct contemplation of the individual's complicated role in the cultural landscape through her photography series of cosplayers—youth who engage in the "costume play" of hyperreal alter egos based on East Asian characters in a variety of media.²³ Cosplayers temporarily inhabit a character, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality and turning toward transformation in order to traverse physical and imaginary landscapes. Cao Fei's series explores contemporary manifestations of Asian identity, and the dangers that come with a self unreconciled in its landscape. Many Asian youths who grow up spending more time in the virtual world than reality find themselves as outcasts, reprimanded by older generations and their traditional ideologies. Thus to assuage the pain of social isolation and rejection, they further escape into their own powerful and heroic avatars.

Driving the transient satisfaction of fantasy is their desire to be acknowledged, to feel a sense of belonging, and gain self-representation. Ironically, these perspectives can lead to a commoditization of the "self": similar to how the role of female entertainers was transformed to serve a consumer-driven society, so too are these cosplayers manipulated as entertainment and promotional commodities.²⁴ A sense of identity dissonance is thus created, in which what earns cosplayers confidence and honor is paradoxically the very social manifestation that further enhances their despondency in the real world. Ultimately, as we see in *Deep Breathing*, the cosplayers represent a split personality in which the potential for their natural and fantasy identities to be reconciled resides in a liminal space. The liminal nature of the landscape in this photograph is acutely suggested by its fragmented boundaries and thresholds. The steady horizontal landscape is dismantled: rotated to a dynamic, multileveled slant that both opens

toward us and veers ominously away.

Given the nature of photography as a method through which images are replicated and re-presented, as Hong Lei addresses, there appears to be deliberate and inevitable dismantling of the spaces featured in the photographs in the exhibition. We can distinctly perceive the reorientation in the sharp slants of Jiang Zhi, Zeng Guogu, and Cao Fei's works, in which the classical horizontal Western and vertical Chinese landscapes are replaced by a new, postmodern slope. Disorienting perspectives abound: Jiang Zhi presents us with a blurry, hyperreal reflection while Hong Lei's reality is at once a mirror and abyss, Zeng Guogu's cityscape looms ominously as it slides below and we question our role within Cao Fei's fantasyland, at level with the fighting cosplayers. Qiu Zhijie's work is literally fragmented into thirty rectangles symbolizing a construction of time while Hong Lei's circle of reality presents a liminal and both physically and symbolically impenetrable space. Finally, Cao Fei's stepped incline cuts the landscape into a hierarchy of power engaging in the tension between fantasy and reality: inviting us into a postmodern landscape that is challenging, yet not impossible, to traverse.

* * *

The depictions and corresponding ideologies of Chinese landscapes are especially relevant in terms of how they have functioned in different sociopolitical contexts, ranging from the literati tradition in which nature was associated with the leisuretime activities of intellectuals, to the Cultural Revolution in which Mao encouraged artists to immerse themselves in the life and work of peasants in the countryside. Contemporary art, however, conveys that the dynamic social and artistic history of the Chinese landscape embodies a rich dialogue with both the traditional and modern. The constant yet evolving engagement of these cultural contexts and ideologies have given way to a distinct experimentation and conscious exploration that can be defined as postmodern art and identity. It is under this evolving postmodern framework that we can view Chinese landscape and perceive that "Chinese depictions of nature are seldom mere representations of the external world. Rather, they are expressions of the mind and heart of the individual artists—cultivated landscapes that embody the culture and cultivation of their masters."²⁵

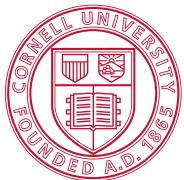
Given many of these artists' unique diasporic identities and confrontation of both the traditional and postmodern conceptual, they engage in a dialogue of difference. The tension between a sense of otherness versus regionalism is comprised in a self-aware and expressive division in which cultural boundaries are transcended. Furthermore, by referencing the traditional and modern in distinctly postmodern

contexts with contemporary agency and conceptual drive, a new, yet historically rooted and inspired, landscape can be explored. A landscape in which Hung Liu's female entertainer can symbolically break free from her oval boundary, and where young cosplayers seek to hide from, recreate, and transcend reality. This new hybrid and hyper reality is deconstructed by Hong Lei's mirror in which traditional beauty is demystified by contemporary oppression and identity dissonance. Further, it is both convoluted and opened by Gu Wenda's exploration of how to communicate ideas in a context where instinct and comfort is challenged by subversive redefinitions of authority, tradition, and the self. Ultimately, the reality of this new landscape is dynamic and unrestrained: it is a boundless space conceived within the framework of evolving and questions and expressions.

As a final point, the unique and innovative manner in which Charles (Chang-Han) Liu's large, four-paneled piece *Melody of Nature—Source* is displayed in this exhibition reflects our own conceptual drive as curators in reconceiving the presentation and experience of a Chinese landscape in a contemporary space of display. Charles Liu's massive, already separated painting is further fragmented into two halves straddling the furthest corner of the exhibition room. Serving as a symbolic hinge, or a dismantled confrontation, this space serves to draw viewers in and subsequently transcend the boundaries of both the Chinese landscape and exhibitionary space. We encourage spectators to question the integral space and conception of what they see, as well as their own dynamic and evolving position within this liminal and conceptual site.

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