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## Tradition and Modernity in Chinese Painting and Printmaking

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*Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Richard Barnhart et.al. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997, ISBN 0-300-07013-6 (cloth). Co-published with the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing.

## Review

# Tradition and Modernity in Chinese Painting and Printmaking

### **The Judgment of History**

The impressionist Ming dynasty painter Xu Wei (1521-1593), resentful of the injustices of life and indignant over the corruption of high officials, warned his colleagues, "do not take painting too lightly. There is the judgment of history written in the silent poems." In an excellent first volume of a new series that will explore Chinese literature, art, and culture, three Chinese scholars (Yang Xin, Nie Chong Zheng, Lang Shao Jun) and three Western scholars (Richard M. Barnhart, James Cahill, Wu Hung) have created an introductory overview of Chinese painting from its earliest origins to the present. Brought together by editor Richard Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* is the result of a fruitful partnership between Chinese and Western scholars, and a beautifully illustrated and gracefully integrated work of art history.

*Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* offers a useful general introduction to the aesthetics and types of Chinese painting, an overview of painting from the Paleolithic Period to the Tang dynasty, and individual chapters on painting in the Five dynasties and the Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing, as well as painting in the Twentieth century. Profusely illustrated and offering artistic analyses of representative works, the individual chapters situate the study of artistic influences and inno-

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vations within an historical context that helps the student of Chinese art begin to differentiate styles and artistic trends, and to glimpse the artistic personality of some of China's greatest painters.

Each of the individual chapters is written by an expert in Chinese painting and is well integrated, with the occasional overlapping discussion of an artist serving to add another layer to our understanding without seeming repetitious or familiar. The scholarly apparatus is useful and unobtrusive, and includes a list of artists by period in English and Chinese, a glossary, and helpful notes almost as fun to browse as the suggestions for further reading.

One of the few criticisms to be made of an otherwise excellent work is the rather limited coverage of painting in the Twentieth century. In the last chapter, Lang Shao Jun does not take many risks, confining himself to an assessment of works by artists who are either safely famous or safely dead. The works and artists that he does include are of unquestionable importance, but his exploration of the century does not extend far beyond mid-century, with only a few exceptions, and does not consider more recent trends in Chinese painting either by younger, less safely famous artists, or by older artists who are experimenting with bold re-interpretations of traditional *guo hua* like the Beijing printmaker-painter Yan Han. In his artistic assessment of the Twentieth century Lang Shao Jun also tends to blandly understate the political repression that is an integral part of modern Chinese art history, especially the period from the anti-Rightist movement through the Cultural Revolution, a space of almost twenty years that meant an interruption of artistic creation for many artists.

These reservations aside, the focus of the last chapter is a backwards-looking one—on the tradition of Chinese painting and traditional *guo hua* artists who find their inspiration in the past even while working to artistically re-create that tradition. It is hoped that some future volume in the series will explore in detail more recent trends in Chinese painting and contemporary efforts to redefine artistic practice and expression.

All in all this volume is aimed at the general reader interested in an overview of Chinese painting, but there still remains a great need for more sustained studies of the individual painters and movements represented here.

This first volume, and the Yale series, will supplement other major publishing projects devoted to China's artistic traditions. The seventy-five volumes in the *Yale Culture and Civilization of China* series follows the equally monumental Chinese art series *Chinese Fine Art Collection* (*Zhong guo mei shu quan ji*).

*Chinese Fine Art Collection* covers traditional Chinese arts including volumes on painting, sculpture, traditional Chinese arts and crafts, architecture, and calligraphy. This sixty volume set is published in Chinese, Japanese, and English by People's Fine Arts publishing house in cooperation with Shanghai People's Fine Arts publishing house, the Cultural Relic publishing house, and China Architecture publishing house.

All of these scholarly achievements highlight the rich artistic achievements of China's artists, painters and printmakers. To begin with this study of Chinese painting one is able to "understand what one sees," going beyond the formal depiction and outward style of the work to understand the character and spirit of the work and artist. To study historical styles and paintings is also to restore the works of art

to human history (Fu, *Studies in Connoisseurship*, 19), in other words, to make them useful in our own attempts to understand what it means to be human and to try to understand the minds of others who asked similar questions. Noted for his rich variations in shades of ink, the Qing dynasty monk painter Shi Tao (1642-1718) wrote in a colophon on a painting: "There is a vast universe in the dark, dark clusters of ink."

## The Judgment of History, part 2

### Contemporary Chinese Printmaking and the Revision of Tradition

*"Those who study the ancients and cannot transform them may just as well be considered trash."*

Dong Qi Chang painter (1555-1636)

*"In order to inherit the Tradition, one must continually seek to reinvent the Tradition."*

Li Hua printmaker (1907-1994)

The artistic tradition celebrated by the *Chinese Fine Art Collection* series and *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* are studies in the dynastic history of China that stop short of an assessment of art in the Twentieth century. As important as these series are there is another history that needs to be told that both inherits and radically revises the Chinese artistic tradition(s) they explore. Of all the arts, the Chinese modern printmaking movement is most closely allied to the experiences, ideas, and events that have defined modern Chinese artistic and cultural history following in the wake of the May 4th movement.

The modern Chinese printmaking movement was initiated in the late 1920s by the Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) as a medium of artistic expression uniquely suited to modern China. Using creative printmaking techniques, combined with China's rich tradition, Lu Xun hoped to "open up a new road" of expression and articulation, much as his own short stories and essays had done. Beginning in 1929, Lu Xun published a series of picture collections that served to introduce Western and Soviet printmakers to a Chinese audience, and worked to introduce printmaking as a creative art form rather than an art of reproduction as had been the case in China since the Tang dynasty. In 1931 Lu Xun organized the first woodcut class in Shanghai, and for the remainder of his life wrote, criticized, and otherwise supported the fledgling printmaking movement in China.

With the support of Lu Xun, the early printmakers gave a human face to the struggles facing China as it emerged into the Twentieth Century, struggles characterized by technological change, the necessity of modernization, and the social and political transformation. The scattered efforts, trials, and experimentation of the origins of this movement, still very much in its infancy throughout the 1930s and into the early 1940s, lay with young students and progressive intellectuals. Both groups turned to printmaking because it helped to precipitate artistic, social and political issues that concerned them, growing out of the May 4th movement, and the proposals for reform that followed. Lu Xun's introduction of Western printmaking artists as "models" was inordinately appealing because creative printmaking was both "modern" and Western, while at the same time the technique was familiarly Chinese—woodblock printmaking having been invented in China and practiced widely since the Tang dynasty as a means of illustration, book production, and as a means of reproducing traditional Chinese paintings. The synthesis of the modern/Western creative print movement with a traditional Chinese craft appealed to the national consciousness of a new generation of educated, reform-minded Chinese.

That woodcut was an effective means to catalyze the reform movement made it politically significant; that it was a powerful way of confronting official corruption and political programs made it more than slightly dangerous to the artists, and hence attractive; that it had the power to educate, persuade, and illuminate gave it an artistic relevance and contemporaneity that national painting, calligraphy, and other traditional Chinese art forms lacked. There was great interest in Western oil painting but the young artists studying in Europe were faced upon their return with the problem of reconciling the experiments taking place in Europe with the demands of their own Chinese culture with its tradition and desire for a national identity. In Lu Xun's advocacy of the creative print movement Western style prints were "sinicized," combined

with historical Chinese art forms and traditions, thus creating a new art with a modern and uniquely Chinese National character capable of expressing the artistic energy of a "New Arising" generation of artists.

The new printmaking movement did not spring fully developed following Lu Xun's introduction of Western printmakers in the late 1920s and early 1930's. Throughout the 1930s printmakers worked to refine their artistic technique and define the style of the early woodcuts. The early Chinese printmakers were frequently criticized by Lu Xun for their carelessness, their slavish adoption of elements that were inauthentic and alien to their own experience, and their lack of dedication to their art. From these origins, however, an exciting, rich artistic movement emerged, one that has continued to the present, and which has played an important role in articulating modern Chinese art practice, while offering a fascinating window onto modern Chinese cultural history.

### Contemporary Artistic Practice

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, political policies have shaped artistic practice and expression. A period of increasing liberalization in the 1980s as China opened to the West was interrupted by the convulsion of the Tiananmen square massacre of June 4, 1989, which also served to catalyze the artistic, political, and generational differences among Chinese artists.

The Chinese printmaking field as a movement has experienced the change from the early period which focused on history—on the changes faced by Chinese people in society—to an expression of individual subjectivity which particularizes history. While it is hard to assign a precise date to this change, by the 60th anniversary of Lu Xun's woodcut class in 1991 the tensions were already apparent: tensions between old and young printmakers, between an emphasis on tradition vs. individual expression, between politics and innovation in art. The woodcut movement as a movement with shared concerns was giving rise to the emergence of the artist as individual, able to function outside of the structures of work unit and national exhibition jury structures, finding independent sources of income through the sale of art works, liberated from the formal structures that had influenced artistic creation for so long. The effect on artistic creation is both positive and uncertain.

Older artists criticize much of Chinese modern art for not following the Socialist Realism of the 1930s and 1940s and for losing touch with the life of the people, creating art that cannot be understood. "Nowadays prints don't tell a story, they are far away from life," says revolutionary printmaker Li Qun (b.1912). "In the early history of Chinese printmaking the art walked outside the ivory tower and went to the crossroads of the street [real life]. Art depicted the life of the streets and the people. Now people have left the crossroads of the street and returned to the ivory tower. This situation may have something to do with the [effects of the] Cultural Revolution. People don't listen to the Communist party anymore and try to find life in the European expressionist art (post-Picasso). Now if you look at modern Chinese art you can't find [the feeling of] the life in China anymore. We old artists have no power to change this."

Diversity, experimentation, and increasing individual artistic freedom are recognized by many other artists as the most exciting developments in recent Chinese printmaking: "Today the sense of being [part of] a group is less and less attractive" says Kunming artist, Professor Li Zhong Xiang. Since the time of Lu Xun, printmakers were united as a group who tried to transform society, and groups played a particularly important part in the development of printmaking in the Northeast from 1959, in the Southwest, and Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces. Part of the reason for the decline of the groups in Chinese printmaking today is due to the retirement of a generation of old revolutionary printmaker leaders that began in the early 1990s. Many artists felt the revolutionary burden on them was too heavy and chose greater artistic autonomy as they worked to become better artists. Also, many revolutionary artists tried to push their revolutionary ideas on younger artists, causing dissatisfaction on the part of younger artists. Since the 1980s to the 1990s Chinese artists have been exposed to increasingly international influences which have offered a greater range of artistic styles and traditions to draw from; as a result, many artists felt constrained

by the emphasis on group creation which they felt limited their artistic expression, and they wished the group gone. Lastly, with China's more capitalist economy artists are seeking economic rewards that cannot be achieved through the group. Replacing the groups today is the "apartment art" or "salon" style of private, informal association with like-minded artists.

The decline of groups has had a positive affect on Chinese printmaking with artists having more freedom to create what and how they want: "Artistic individualism deepens the prosperity of Chinese printmaking and this is a genuine prosperity rather than a superficial prosperity" says Li Zhong Xiang. Ultimately no political system can create a Yan Han, a Li Hua, or a Li Qun. Art is created by individual artists who must be able to withstand poverty and loneliness—poverty when their art does not sell and loneliness when others don't understand them; artists create art because of their own spiritual need to create "a paradise for their own soul"(Li Zhong Xiang, Holland, June 1998). The uncertainty in the art field today lies in whether printmaking artists will be able to redefine themselves as artists in a China rapidly approaching the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and whether they will be able to create a significance for their art that truly reinvents the Tradition, making them worthy inheritors of that tradition. Three years before his death, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese modern printmaking movement, one of the most important Chinese woodcut printmakers Li Hua reminded artists that printmaking could not slavishly follow old forms and earlier formulas but must continually work to reinvent itself in order to be relevant. A movement that quotes earlier accomplishments and duplicates earlier successes and styles leads to artistic failure and superficiality.

Conflicts in modern Chinese artistic practice have occurred for a number of reasons, not least of which is the imposition of political or aesthetic ideology on art. Old artistic and political values that served in the 1930's have had to be redefined to make them useful in the present—or re-

jected: "Part of the problem in the Chinese art field is that the leaders always want to be united under one art theory, but there is no one type of art. Lu Xun's writing on printmaking should have no effect on contemporary printmaking. Society has changed so much that what was once true in the past is no longer true today" (Li Zhong Xiang).

China's artistic tradition is both a field of struggle and source of inspiration and reinvention. The painter Gao Jian Fu (1879-1951) wrote, "I love both the pen and the sword, both the old and the new, both traditional and Western painting. I often tell myself that life is full of contradictions." Taken together, traditional painting and contemporary artistic practice, painting

and printmaking, old and new, construct an intellectual and aesthetic tradition that expands our understanding and participation in the world, while offering themselves as works that document a richly changing cultural history. In Chinese painting and printmaking every act of representation is a construction of meaning: pictures do indeed “write” the judgment of history. ♦



#### Suggestions for Further Reading

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