

Expanding Chinese Ink Painting in the 2014 Exhibition

Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art

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Abstract

Expanding Chinese Ink Painting in the 2014 Exhibition *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*

Tianmo Zhang

This thesis examines installation works by three Chinese artists included in the group exhibition *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, November 15, 2014 to April 6, 2015: Xu Bing's *Background Story* (2014), Jennifer Wen Ma's *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (2014), and Sun Xun's *Shan Shui – Cosmos* (2014). These works reconfigured the traditions and conventions of Chinese landscape ink painting using new media and techniques such as video, animation, and installation, and in so doing, defied stereotypical interpretations of Chinese art. This was achieved through three main artistic strategies: imitation, materiality, and the juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary art media. The first strategy, as seen in Xu's work, demonstrates the unconventional use of materials to simulate the appearance of a traditional Chinese landscape painting, thereby leading viewers to misrecognize the installation as an ink painting. The second strategy, as adopted by Ma, involves a display of materiality and physicality through exploration of ink aesthetics. Finally, Sun's installation environment combines traditional ink painting with new media to reimagine new possibilities for the Chinese landscape genre. By focusing on these artists and discussing their practices in relation to the rest of the exhibition, this thesis concludes that the works subvert essentialist views of Chineseness and challenge cultural assumptions of the viewer in order to reflect on contemporary social and urban realities in modern-day China.

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INTRODUCTION

On November 15, 2014, the Vancouver Art Gallery unveiled a new exhibition of contemporary Chinese art titled *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, which showcased the works of ten contemporary Chinese artists based in Beijing, Shanghai, and New York (fig. 1). Co-organized by the Gallery's associate curator of Asian art, Diana Freundl,¹ and Beijing-based independent art critic and curator, Carol Yinghua Lu, *Unscrolled* displayed a variety of traditional Chinese art practices—brush-and-ink painting, landscape scrolls, and porcelain, for example—recreated through new techniques and media, such as video, sculpture, and site-specific installations. According to the curators, the exhibition aimed to reflect the growing tendency in China's contemporary art practices to “revitalize tradition” by examining the aesthetic interventions and strategies used by Chinese artists today.² Of the ten participating artists, seven addressed the subject of Chinese landscape painting or its related ink aesthetics; each presented classical Chinese art in a new light and repurposed traditional media to achieve new forms of representation. This thesis will focus on three works in the exhibition, Xu Bing's *Background Story* (2014), Jennifer Wen Ma's *Black Beauty* (2014), and Sun Xun's *Shan Shui – Cosmos* (2014).³ I am particularly interested in the works of these artists as my thesis examines Chinese ink painting as a signifier of Chinese art and cultural identity that is regularly questioned in contemporary contexts. Each embodies a unique artistic strategy for reinventing tradition that is representative of the main tendencies in the rest of the exhibition. For example, Xu's work uses a deceptive approach to engender misrecognition and provoke an element of surprise in the viewer; Ma's sculpture exemplifies materiality and physicality through magnification and scale, and Sun's installation addresses the combination of old and new media to counter essentialist Chineseness.

¹ Diana Freundl is the first appointed curator of Asian art at the Vancouver Art Gallery. This position came into effect with the unveiling of the Gallery's new Institute of Asian Art in 2014; *Unscrolled* was one of its inaugural exhibitions. Prior to joining the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2013, Freundl was based in Asia, where she served as a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in Shanghai. Carol Yinghua Lu is an influential figure in the contemporary Chinese art scene. From 2012 to 2015 she was the artistic director and chief curator of OCAT Shenzhen, a contemporary art museum in Shenzhen specializing in Chinese art. She also served as co-artistic director of the 2012 Gwangju Biennale and co-curator of the 7th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale in 2012.

² Diana Freundl, “Reframing Tradition: Unloading the Lexicon of China's Cultural Past in Chinese Contemporary Art,” in *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Diana Freundl and Carol Yinghua Lu (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2015), 22.

³ The other four artists who evoke ink painting traditions in their work are Qiu Shihua, Liu Jianhua, Chen Shaoxiong, and Ji Yun-Fei.

This thesis has three objectives: To discuss the ways in which these works reframe tradition; to explain how the artists' strategies subvert discourses of Chineseness in contemporary Chinese art; and to demonstrate how these artists use Wu Hung's concept of recontextualization to express their contemporaneity. Based on these main objectives, this thesis will also contextualize *Unscrolled* within other contemporary Chinese art and ink painting exhibitions in the last two decades and explore how these artists address the phenomenon of urbanization through the subject of landscape painting. The unveiling of *Unscrolled* at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2014 occurred at a key moment in the history of contemporary Chinese art exhibitions worldwide, particularly as it relates to the movement of "new ink" art. Major exhibitions include *The Weight of Lightness: Ink Art at M+*, M+ Pavilion, West Kowloon Cultural District (2017), *Ink Remix: Contemporary Art from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong*, Canberra Museum and Gallery (2015), *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013), *Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition*, Museum of Fine Arts Boston (2011), and *A Tradition Redefined: Modern and Contemporary Chinese Ink Paintings from the Chu-tsing Li Collection, 1950–2000*, Harvard Art Museums (2007–2009), just to name a few. These exhibitions not only demonstrated a common interest in the revival of traditional ink art in contemporary practices, both inside and outside of China, but also included many of the same artists. This kind of phenomenon signals a return to tradition in contemporary Chinese art discourse, akin to what aesthetics scholar Liu Yuedi calls an instance of "re-Chineseness" whereby "Chinese art, with its revived self-consciousness, is now trying hard to return to its original context, which had long been disfranchised by the Western art world."⁴

The resurgence of contemporary Chinese ink art has thus become an important subject of discussion in recent discourse among art historians, curators, and scholars working in the field. Chinese art historian Eugene Wang argues that many artists and critics in China today feel ambivalent towards the adoption of so-called Western values and forms in the 1980s as part of the modernization process, wishing instead to focus on an art narrative specific to China.⁵

⁴ Liu Yuedi, "Chinese Contemporary Art: From De-Chineseness to Re-Chineseness," in *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*, ed. Mary Wiseman and Liu Yuedi (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 59. Despite still being in common usage today, the adoption of the East-West binary in the discussion of Chinese art is problematic, as it presupposes an underlying Eastern inferiority while serving European imperialist interests. See Alexander Maxwell, introduction to *The East-West Discourse: Symbolic Geography and its Consequences* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2011), 1–32.

⁵ Eugene Wang, "All in the Name of Tradition: Ink Medium in Contemporary Chinese Art," in *Ink Remix: Contemporary Art from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong*, curated by Sophie McIntyre, July 3–October 8,

Identifying the changing dynamics between Chinese art and an increasingly globalizing art world as a leading cause for the return to ink, Wang argues that “outside of China, international curators and critics, either out of the inertia of 1990s’ identity politics or fearful of the blitz of sweeping globalization, are eager to look for something authentically ‘Chinese’.”⁶ In her review of the 2013 exhibition *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China*, art historian Claire Roberts attributes the recent global interest in contemporary Chinese ink art to a “reinvigorated cultural nationalism.”⁷ In sum, the revival of contemporary Chinese ink art in recent years can be closely associated with the discourse on Chineseness in a Euro-American-dominated art world.

Chineseness in Contemporary Chinese Art Discourse

To unpack the implications of Chineseness in art historical discourse, I will first present an overview of major theories emerging from the field of cultural studies. According to scholar Rey Chow, there is a certain “insistence on Chineseness as the distinguishing trait in what otherwise purport to be mobile, international practices.”⁸ This perception of Chineseness is directly related to so-called non-Western cultures that are continually stigmatized in white-dominated societies through ethno-national labels.⁹ Often, the Chinese population as a whole is perceived as having the same ethnic attributes, such as ancestry, cultural practices, or governmental affiliation, which limits their ability to embody new cultural and social identities.¹⁰ Reduced to a social construct, Chineseness entails a certain essentialism, whereby the underlying attributes of the ethnic group are considered fixed and conclusive of the entire group membership, and ranked according to a racial hierarchy.¹¹ The ethnic association created further perpetuates homogenous interpretations of Chineseness, reinforcing perceptions and judgments of a single Chinese essence.

As Chinese diasporic communities continually redefine the meaning of “being Chinese,” the homogeneity of Chineseness has long been challenged by scholars, historians, and activists in

2015 (Canberra City: Canberra Museum and Gallery, 2015), 14.

⁶ Wang, “All in the Name of Tradition,” 14.

⁷ Claire Roberts, “Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China, by Maxwell K. Hearn,” *The China Journal* 73 (2015): 254.

⁸ Rey Chow, “Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem,” *boundary 2* 25, no. 3 (1998): 3.

⁹ See Ien Ang, “To Be or Not to Be Chinese: Diaspora, Culture and Postmodern Ethnicity,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 21, no. 1 (1993): 1–17.

¹⁰ Jennifer L. Eberhardt, Nilanjana Dasgupta and Tracy L. Banaszynski, “Believing is Seeing: The Effects of Racial Labels and Implicit Beliefs on Face Perception,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29, no. 3 (2003): 361.

¹¹ Melody M. Chao and Franki Y. H. Kung, “An Essentialism Perspective On Intercultural Processes,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 18, no. 2 (2015): 91.

the field of diasporic and transnational studies. According to anthropology scholar Andrea Louie, Chineseness becomes a “dynamic formation,” particularly in transnational contexts, where it is continuously negotiated by the production of new Chinese identities.¹² Similarly, anthropologist Yao Souchou uses the expression “flexible citizenship” to describe the new identities formed and embodied by the ethnic population to pursue different opportunities, without necessarily complying with the nation-state.¹³ While historical ties to mainland China and traditional culture helped diasporic communities define themselves in relation to the surrounding cultural context,¹⁴ new identities have since been forged through different social encounters and experiences. Consequently, Chineseness has evolved from a social construct to a constantly changing entity, as Ang explains:

Central to the diasporic paradigm is the theoretical axiom that Chineseness is not a category with a fixed content – be it racial, cultural, or geographical – but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and re-articulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora.¹⁵

Following the emergence of contemporary Chinese artists on the international art scene in the 1990s, curators acknowledged the challenges of presenting work that pointed to the fluidity and complexity of Chineseness as a concept that defies strict classification. As influential curator Gao Minglu¹⁶ argues, “Artists who moved to the West to work within the ‘mainstream’ of Western contemporary art no longer saw themselves as simply Chinese artists but as independent, individual artists.”¹⁷ This tendency demonstrated a shift in the social awareness and cultural identities of artists, as each appropriated the meaning of “being Chinese” within individual contexts.¹⁸ In a 2009 essay, Chinese art scholar and curator Jerome Silbergeld used the term “fleeting Chineseness” to describe the nature of contemporary Chinese art that is unbound by

¹² Andrea Louie, introduction to *Chineseness Across Borders: Renegotiating Chinese Identities in China and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 20.

¹³ Yao Souchou, “Being Essentially Chinese,” *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 3 (2009): 254.

¹⁴ Louie, *Chineseness Across Borders*, 21.

¹⁵ Ien Ang, “On Not Speaking Chinese: Diasporic Identifications and Postmodern Ethnicity,” *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 38.

¹⁶ *Inside Out: New Chinese Art* (1998) and *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (2005), both curated by Gao Minglu, were among the earliest and most significant exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art that took place outside of mainland China.

¹⁷ Hanru Hou and Minglu Gao, “Strategies of Survival in the Third Space: A Conversation on the Situation of Overseas Chinese Artists in the 1990s,” in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, edited by Gao Minglu (New York: Asia Society, 1998), 183.

¹⁸ Hou and Gao, 183.

geography, style, or subject matter alone, but rather consists of a totality of references that engage with China's culture and history.¹⁹ He rejects the idea of an unchanging Chinese essence to categorize the works of the artists.

The notion of Chineseness in contemporary art discourse has been highlighted in conferences and symposia, which discuss this notion in the context of evolving Chinese art practices that continually defy the homogeneity of Chinese art as a genre. These notably included “Negotiating histories: Traditions in Modern and Contemporary Asia-Pacific Art” at the Tate Modern (2013), “Representation and Practices of Chineseness in Contemporary Art” at the Hong Kong Visual Arts Center (2014), and more recently, “(In)Direct Speech: ‘Chineseness’ in Contemporary Art Discourse and Practice: Art Market, Curatorial Practices and Creative Processes” at the University of Lisbon (2015). As art historian Franziska Koch, co-organizer of the last conference, states, “Scholars no longer look at Chinese art as a visual expression of ‘Chineseness’, conceived as a long-standing, homogeneous geographic and cultural entity. They consider instead how and by whom cultural identity is constructed and how its boundaries are continuously claimed, contested and propagated.”²⁰ Indeed, contemporary Chinese art has come a long way since its first appearance on the international art scene in the 1980s.

Contemporary Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century: A Brief Summary

In mainland China, with the advent of the New Wave Art Movement in 1985—an artistic movement that advocated for the modernization of Chinese art principles based on Western models—new approaches and techniques were introduced to young Chinese art practitioners, leading to a fundamental questioning of Chinese painting styles and related traditions. Following the Chinese Cultural Revolution²¹ (1967–1976) and the Open Door Policy (1978), contemporary art in China underwent a rapid and unprecedented transformation as access to European and American art books increased. According to influential Chinese art scholar Li Xianting, “Artists

¹⁹ Jerome Silbergeld, “Chinese Art, Made-in-America: An Encounter with Geography, Ethnicity, Contemporaneity, and Cultural Chineseness,” in *Outside In: Chinese x American x Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 133.

²⁰ Franziska Koch, “‘Chineseness’ in Contemporary Art Discourse and Practice: Negotiating Multiple Agencies, Localities and Vocalities,” *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 3, nos. 1–2 (2016): 4.

²¹ As a decade-long political campaign condemning traditional culture and individual artistic expression in the name of political control, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had a defining impact on China's artistic and social systems. This was followed by the establishment of the Open Door Policy in 1978, which opened the country to foreign businesses and cultural resources.

of the 1990s were keen to apply Western aesthetics and philosophy to their own work in order to revitalize Chinese culture.”²² Many avant-garde Chinese artists adopted experimental forms like installation, performance, site-specific, and multimedia art in order to “defy a rigid cultural identity” and make their work explicitly “contemporary.”²³

Following the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, the international art world took a keen interest in Chinese avant-garde art. According to curator Hou Hanru, “The event itself exposed the reality of a political violence and a totalitarian ideology in the country, which awakened the humanist conscience of Westerners.”²⁴ This led to a growth in the presence of contemporary Chinese artists in international exhibitions, as well as an increasing number of ground-breaking Chinese art exhibitions outside the mainland.²⁵ One such project was the 1993 blockbuster *China's New Art, Post-1989*, organized by Hanart TZ Gallery in Hong Kong and co-curated by art critics and curators Chang Tsong-Zong and Li Xianting. The exhibition, which took place at the Hong Kong Arts Centre and Hong Kong City Hall, officially introduced China's experimental art scene to the world and cemented its place in global contemporary art by subsequently travelling to Australia and the United States. In the same year, fourteen Chinese artists participated in *Passaggio a Oriente*, a special section of the 45th Venice Biennale curated by Italian art critic Achille Bonito Oliva in consultation with Chinese art historian Francesca Dal Lago. This was followed in 1999 by a selection of twenty Chinese artists at the 49th Venice Biennale, which was more than the American and Italian participants combined. Other notable exhibitions which featured Chinese artists include *Cities on the Move* (1997) curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, *Partage d'Exotismes: The Fifth Lyon Biennial of Contemporary Art* (2000) curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, and *Z.O.U. - Zone of Urgency* (2003) curated by Hou Hanru at the 50th Venice Biennale.²⁶

²² Wu Hung, “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary’: Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Terry Smith and Okwui Enwezor (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 292.

²³ Wu, “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary,’” 292.

²⁴ Hanru Hou, “Entropy, Chinese Artists, Western Art Institutions: A New Internationalism,” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press, 1994), 79–88.

²⁵ Britta Erickson, “The Reception in the West of Experimental Mainland Chinese Art of the 1990s,” in *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art, 1990–2000*, ed. Wu Hung (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 105–112.

²⁶ China participated for the first time as a national pavilion during the 51st Venice Biennale. See Meiqin Wang, “Officializing the Unofficial: Presenting New Chinese Art to the World,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, no. 1 (2009): 102–140.

Contemporary Asian Art in Vancouver

Concurrently with the contemporary Chinese art boom, Vancouver witnessed an increased number of art exhibitions featuring artists of Asian descent, many of whom were born in Canada.²⁷ In 1993, Vancouver-born Chinese Canadian video artist Paul Wong curated the exhibition *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered*, which included new media works by twenty-five Canadian artists of Asian descent, including Anthony Chan, Richard Fung, and Jin-me Yoon. As the first major exhibition of Asian Canadian art to tour across the country—including six major cities such as Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa—*Yellow Peril* challenged cultural barriers by presenting the works at the center of attention, away from the position of marginality.²⁸ The late 1990s saw the emergence of the Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art (Centre A). Founded in 1999 by Vancouver-based curators and artists, Hank Bull and Zheng Shengtian, Centre A aimed to cultivate a better understanding of the Asian-Canadian relationship by reflecting Asian diasporic experiences through contemporary art.²⁹ The gallery initially drew criticism from local Asian Canadian art communities for mainly presenting contemporary Asian art by international artists despite a strong population of Asian artists in Vancouver.³⁰ Subsequent development of curatorial programming by the mid-2000s, however, provided a more balanced representation of both international and Asian Canadian art.³¹

Of particular importance in the history of contemporary Asian art exhibitions in Vancouver was the city-wide project *Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the*

²⁷ See Monika Kin Gagnon's *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture, and Canadian Art* (Vancouver: Arsenal Press, 2000) and Li Xiaoping's *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

²⁸ "Yellow Peril: Reconsidered," <http://artspeak.ca/yellow-peril-reconsidered/> (accessed February 8, 2017).

²⁹ "About Centre A," *Centre A: Vancouver International Centre for Contemporary Asian Art*, <http://centrea.org/about/> (accessed February 8, 2017). Zheng is an esteemed scholar and curator who has been extremely influential in developing an audience for contemporary Chinese art in Vancouver (and North America in general). He has curated numerous exhibitions, including *Jiangnan* (1998), the Shanghai Biennale (2004), *Art and China's Revolution* (2008), and recently, *Yellow Signal* (2012). He is currently the managing editor of *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* and senior curator for the Vancouver Biennale. Hank Bull is a scholar, curator, and artist who has worked closely with Zheng on many projects, including *Jiangnan*. He is the founding director of Centre A and he also played an active role at the Vancouver-based artist-run centre Western Front Society since 1973. New York-based patron of Centre A, Stephanie Holmquist, was also closely involved in the initial years of the gallery's development, particularly as an active board member.

³⁰ See Rustom Bharucha, "Beyond the Box: Problematizing the 'New Asian Museum'," *Third Text* 14, no. 52 (2000): 11–19.

³¹ See Alice Ming Wai Jim, "Asian Canadian Art Matters," Diaaologue Perspectives column, *Asia Art Archive Newsletter* (2010), <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/asian-canadian-art-matters-334> (accessed March 30, 2018). Jim was Centre A's first staff curator (2003–2006).

Yangzi River (1998).³² Organized by Zheng and Bull, *Jiangnan* was presented across dozens of art organizations in Vancouver, including commercial galleries, university art centers and art museums. The project showcased a variety of two- and three-dimensional works by twenty-five contemporary Chinese artists based in mainland China, Vancouver, New York, Paris, and elsewhere. As its title suggests (“Jiangnan” means “South of the Yangtze River”), the exhibition emphasizes artistic practices from the southern region of mainland China which includes the major cities of Suzhou, Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Nanjing. This region is known as the birthplace of Chinese modernism in art and culture in the twentieth century and is closely associated with masters of literati painting, such as Zhao Mengfu (1252–1322) and Ni Zan (1301–1374).³³ The majority of works in *Jiangnan* focused on contemporary issues, such as cultural identity, displacement, and the impact of technology on modern-day life.³⁴ These themes reflected the social experiences of artists who emerged in China during the 1980s and underwent the post-1980s avant-garde movement that provided opportunities to pursue artistic practices overseas.³⁵ Today, many of these artists—such as Huang Yong Ping, Gu Wenda, and Xu Bing—have achieved international reputations since relocating from China, manifesting a consistent presence in exhibitions worldwide. By including Chinese artists from diverse geographical locations and showcasing an array of media, *Jiangnan* exemplified a wide spectrum of contemporary art practices from both inside and outside China,³⁶ challenging the essentialist view of Chineseness as a social construction. Accompanied by a series of lectures and a two-day symposium featuring world-renowned Chinese art scholars from China, Canada, and the United States, *Jiangnan* keenly reflected the region’s artistic heritage while manifesting its recent development in contemporary art practices.³⁷ Fourteen years after *Jiangnan*, Zheng curated another city-wide exhibition series, *Yellow Signal* (2012). The project showcased the trajectory of contemporary Chinese art over the past decade, with a particular emphasis on media arts, given Vancouver’s role in the development of this field in Canada.³⁸

³² The exhibition took place from March 7, 1998 to June 14, 1998, and was a catalyst for the organizers to found Centre A.

³³ Xia Wei, “Jiangnan: The Cultural Front of China,” *Front Magazine* 9, no. 4 (1998): 16–17.

³⁴ Paula Gustafson, “Jiangnan: South of the Yangtze in Vancouver,” *ArtAsiaPacific* 20 (1998): 39.

³⁵ Xia, “Jiangnan,” 18.

³⁶ Annie Wong, preface to *Jiangnan: Modern and Contemporary Art from South of the Yangzi River* (Vancouver: Annie Wong Art Foundation, 1998), 3.

³⁷ Gustafson, “Jiangnan,” 41.

³⁸ See *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years at the Western Front*, ed. Keith Wallace (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2002).

Vancouver Art Gallery and Ink Painting

Since its opening in 1931, the Vancouver Art Gallery has regularly presented Asian art exhibitions, a choice informed by the geographical proximity of Vancouver to the Asia-Pacific region as well as its current demographics.³⁹ The first exhibition of Chinese art took place in 1933, titled *Dr. Kiang Kang-Hu—Chinese Paintings*.⁴⁰ However, it was not until the 1980s that Asian art programming was presented more regularly. The other exhibitions of Chinese ink painting at the Vancouver Art Gallery include: *The Single Brushstroke: 600 Years of Chinese Painting from the Chung Yuan Chai Collection* (1985), *The Water, Pine and Stone Retreat Collection: Contemporary Chinese Paintings* (1987), *Li Kuchan, 1899–1983* (1987), *Masterpieces of 20th-Century Chinese Painting* (1997), and *Chang Dai-chien: Master of the Three Perfections* (2001).⁴¹ *Unscrolled* in 2014 also took place after a number of exhibitions on contemporary Chinese art at the Gallery, such as: *Ken Lum* (1990), *New Art in China, 1989–1994* (1995), *Here Not There* (1995), *Zhu Jinshi: Tao of Rice Paper* (1998), *Paul Wong: from the collection* (2002), *Wang Du: Parade* (2005), *House of Oracles: A Huang Yong Ping Retrospective* (2007), *Zhang Huan: Altered States* (2008), *Song Dong: Waste Not* (2011), *Yang Fudong: Fifth Night* (2012), and *MadeIn Company* (2013), among others.⁴²

As part of *Jiangnan*, the Vancouver Art Gallery presented the first North American exhibition of Hangzhou-based artist Pan Tianshou (1897–1971), curated by Daina Augaitis, Chief Curator at the Vancouver Art Gallery. A renowned painter of the Jiangnan region in China, Pan was a significant figure of modern ink painting in the twentieth century (fig. 2). His exhibition provided a historical foundation for the project as a whole by forming a bridge between past and contemporary artistic practices. Using innovative methods—such as painting on the floor with his work flat on the ground and infusing the brush with excess ink to create an imbued quality of ink washes—Pan played with solid forms and voids to create a strong contrast within his compositions, which represents a departure from traditional Chinese painting (fig. 3).

³⁹ According to the 2011 Census, Chinese Canadians constitute 19 percent of the population of Vancouver, the highest representation of this ethnic group in the country. See Statistics Canada, “2011 National Household Survey: Data Tables,” February 14, 2017, <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=0&PID=105396&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=0&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=95&VID=0&VNAME=&VNAMEF> (accessed March 10, 2018).

⁴⁰ Dr. Kiang Kang-Hu was Chairman of the Department of Chinese Studies at McGill University in 1930.

⁴¹ “Institute of Asian Art, Exhibitions 1985–2017,” *Vancouver Art Gallery*, http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/about-us/institute_of_asian_art_exhibitions.html (accessed March 31, 2018).

⁴² “Institute of Asian Art, Exhibitions 1985–2017,” *Vancouver Art Gallery* (accessed March 31, 2018).

For the exhibition, twenty-one ink paintings made between 1960 and 1969 were on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery. This production period exemplified the artist's signature style of addressing the duality of opposites in the pictorial plane to achieve harmony within his compositions. As such, Pan explored the traditions of Chinese-style painting in order to reflect the changing social circumstances of his time. By pushing the boundaries of brush-and-ink painting, Pan managed to “adapt traditional theory and practice to the modern Chinese world and produce art that gained strength from the past and provided a clear pathway to the future.”⁴³ His efforts to modernize centuries-old traditions of ink painting through innovative techniques hints at “new ink painting,” a genre explored by the artists in *Unscrolled* sixteen years after Pan's solo exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

By showcasing contemporary ink through *Unscrolled*, the Vancouver Art Gallery takes part in the changing discourse on contemporary Chinese art alongside other international art institutions.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the five-month run of the *Unscrolled* exhibition coincided with an extensive display of historical Chinese artifacts from the Forbidden City (1416–1911) in the fall blockbuster exhibition *Inside the Court of China's Emperors* (fig. 4).⁴⁵ Featuring close to 200 cultural objects from the National Palace Museum in Beijing—dating from as early as 500 CE to the early twentieth century⁴⁶—the rarely-seen collections of emperors included ceramics, paintings, textiles, and bronzes demonstrating China's rich cultural history. The simultaneous presentation of *Unscrolled* and *Forbidden City* at the Vancouver Art Gallery is a strategic one, as they complement one another in offering a holistic picture of Chinese art by addressing different historical periods and artistic tendencies. While the historical exhibition educates the audience about the cultural history of Chinese art, the contemporary iteration reimagines classical techniques of art-making using modern-day technologies, and in so doing, demonstrates the continuation of tradition. As inaugural exhibitions of the Vancouver Art Gallery's recently unveiled Institute of Asian Art in the fall of 2014, both shows mark a new transition for the institution, which has placed emphasis on Asian art programming in the last decades. Focusing

⁴³ Claire Roberts, “Tradition and Modernity: The Life and Art of Pan Tianshou (1897–1971),” *East Asian History* 15–16 (1998): 69.

⁴⁴ See page 2.

⁴⁵ *Forbidden City: Inside the Court of China's Emperors* took place at the Vancouver Art Gallery from October 18, 2014 to January 11, 2015 and was jointly organized by the Palace Museum in Beijing and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.

⁴⁶ Vancouver Art Gallery, *Forbidden City: Inside the Court of China's Emperors*, https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/the_exhibitions/exhibit_forbiddencity.html (accessed March 10, 2018).

on the “advancement of scholarship and public appreciation of art from Asia through exhibitions, public programs and collection acquisition,”⁴⁷ the Institute’s adjunct director is none other than curator Zheng Shengtian, with oversight from an international Asian Art Council consisting of notable scholars, artists, and collectors.⁴⁸ The presentation of *Unscrolled* thus not only marked this critical moment in the history of the Gallery but also its continued attention to contemporary Asian art in Canada, and particularly in Vancouver.⁴⁹

“Decontextualization and Recontextualization” as a Conceptual Framework

As contemporary Chinese art emerged on the global scene in the 1990s, it underwent a separation from China’s domestic sociopolitical sphere, a phenomenon that Chinese art scholar Wu Hung describes as the “twofold process of decontextualization and recontextualization.”⁵⁰ He explains that “we cannot simply expand the domestic context of contemporary Chinese art into a global one, because different forces and problems govern these two spheres.”⁵¹ As a result, recontextualization entails a reconstruction of its definition and identity,⁵² which I argue is exemplified through the practice of artists in *Unscrolled* and the ways in which they reinterpret traditional art forms through new means and techniques. Unlike oil and ink paintings, for instance, installation, performance, and multimedia artworks challenge fixed cultural identities and allow Chinese artists to adopt an international language.⁵³ Such a strategy provides them with a certain contemporaneity to “simultaneously construct their local identity and serve a global audience.”⁵⁴

Drawing from Wu’s concepts of decontextualization and recontextualization, this thesis will explore the artistic strategies used by artists in *Unscrolled* to enact their contemporaneity by merging traditional art forms and materials with modern art-making media. Specifically, I will focus on the works of Xu Bing, Jennifer Wen Ma, and Sun Xun to argue that they subvert

⁴⁷ Vancouver Art Gallery, press release,

https://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/media_room/pdf/IAA_announcement_FINAL.pdf (accessed March 20, 2018).

⁴⁸ The impressive list of members includes artist Xu Bing, scholar Vishakha Desai, and curator Fumio Nanjo, among others.

⁴⁹ See Miro Cernetig, “Chinese Vancouver: A Decade of Change,” *Vancouver Sun*, June 30, 2007, <http://www.canada.com/vancouver/sun/story.html?id=011b7438-172c-4126-ba42-2c85828bd6ce&k=44011> (accessed March 29, 2018).

⁵⁰ Wu, “A Case of Being ‘Contemporary’,” 298.

⁵¹ Wu, 298.

⁵² Wu, 299.

⁵³ Wu, 299.

⁵⁴ Wu, 299.

essentialist interpretations of Chineseness by evoking the social and urban realities of twentieth-century China. As Wu Hung explains, it is often difficult for artists to renounce “the audience’s expectation to find Chineseness in exotic, self-orientalizing forms.”⁵⁵ By positioning the exhibition as an attempt to defy the cultural expectations of the viewer, I argue that its curatorial framing and choice of artworks fulfill the challenge set forth by Chinese art curator Hou Hanru to “reorient Western expectations of the oriental toward the unexpected.”⁵⁶ Moreover, this thesis borrows from Wu’s categorization of artists’ engagement with tradition in order to analyze their recreations of Chinese landscape painting in *Unscrolled*. According to the scholar, contemporary Chinese artists negotiate with tradition by “distilling materiality” or “translating visuality”:⁵⁷ the first involves deconstructing classical Chinese painting to its essential elements of ink and paper to explore their aesthetic qualities, while the second entails converting an image or object into a different medium that substitutes the original constituents with heterogeneous ones from a different time and place, in order to create “an ironic conflation of divergent temporalities.”⁵⁸ Based on this interpretation, I argue that the works of all three artists subscribe to the second strategy of recreating Chinese landscape painting through new media to engender a new relationship with the viewer, while Ma’s installation also exhibits characteristics of the first tendency by highlighting the physicality of ink.

This thesis consists of three sections. Each section examines the ways in which a particular work of art highlights the artist’s reinterpretation of traditional Chinese aesthetics through new means and techniques, from playing with conventions of landscape painting to animating 360-degree video installations. Section One focuses on the work of Xu Bing and his strategy of imitation to recreate Chinese landscape painting using everyday materials. By leading viewers to misrecognize his installation as classical landscape painting, Xu challenges the cultural expectations of the viewer towards Chinese art and further evokes modern transformations of China’s urban landscape. Section Two examines Jennifer Wen Ma’s live sculpture that reimagines the classical painting as a three-dimensional installation. Her work

⁵⁵ Wu, 300.

⁵⁶ Hou and Gao, “Strategies of Survival,” 185.

⁵⁷ Wu lists a third strategy of “refiguration” that involves the restructuring of a traditional object to achieve new cultural functions. I have omitted this last strategy in my discussions, as the chosen works in my study are not subjected to a physical reconfiguration of shapes.

⁵⁸ Wu Hung, “Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art: Three Strategies,” paper presented at the public symposium on Ink Art in the Framework of Contemporary Museum organized by M+ (Hong Kong, December 13–15, 2012), 4.

illustrates the impact of urbanization on nature while exemplifying the recent art movement of Experimental Ink Painting. Section Three discusses Sun Xun's site-specific video and painting installation and his use of new media to cast an image of idealized landscapes and utopia in New China, to reflect its recent urban and social transformations.

SECTION ONE

Subversive Imitation: Xu Bing's *Background Story* (2014)

This section discusses Beijing-based artist Xu Bing's lightbox installation *Background Story: Ten Thousand Li of Mountains and Rivers* (2014). In this work, the artist recreates a classical Chinese scroll painting through a collage of natural debris and litter behind a frosted glass panel, to evoke a silhouette of the landscape painting (fig. 5). Revealing natural scenery on one side and discarded materials on the other, the installation simultaneously conforms to and defies the cultural expectations of the viewer, which leads to a misrecognition of the work. I argue that the artist's use of imitation as an artistic strategy serves to reflect the environmental changes in modern-day China, more specifically the phenomenon of landfills, while defying essentialist views of Chineseness.

Background Story evokes a traditional Chinese landscape painting of the Southern Song era (1127–1279) by Chinese artist Zhao Fu (1131–1162) (fig. 6).⁵⁹ Characterized by a mimetic representational style, Southern Song paintings are known for their grandiose and realistic depictions of nature.⁶⁰ Measuring ten meters in length, the ambitious landscape conveys a strong sense of perspective through its multiple layers of mountains and panoramic views. Every detail in the landscape is depicted with utmost precision, from the rolling waves and sailing boats in the foreground to the natural flora far in the distance. As viewers contemplate the scenery up close, they might feel as though they are travelling inside the scenery, thanks to the magnified view of the landscape. To the left of the lightbox installation is an integrated digital reproduction of the original masterpiece by Zhao, presented in an open scroll format.⁶¹ Displayed behind glass in an upright position—akin to the manner in which cultural artifacts are presented in history museums—the replica painting provides the viewer with a complete view of the original artwork in its entirety.

⁵⁹ Zhao was highly regarded as an artist of the Southern Song era for developing a painterly approach that captured the essence of Song styles. His inventive techniques were often compared to those of Western Renaissance artists. See James Elkins, "The Argument," in *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 77.

⁶⁰ Wen C. Fong, "Deconstructing Founding Paradigms: Landscape Painting after Mastering Representation," in *Art as History: Calligraphy and Painting as One* (Princeton: P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University Press, 2014), 280.

⁶¹ The original scroll painting by Zhao Fu is in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Beijing.

In comparison to the classical masterpiece, Xu's recreated landscape reveals a particular emphasis on the visual impact of the scenery. This is demonstrated in various ways, such as the enhancement of scale, the lighting contrast between the depicted subjects and the illuminated background, and the deliberate exclusion of calligraphic inscriptions and seal marks that were featured in the original painting. Xu's landscape is nearly four times the length of Zhao's scroll and twice its height; with such augmented dimensions, the landscape conveys an impressive scale and overall presence that brings the viewer in closer proximity to it. His choice of backlighting provides the subjects set against the white background with stronger silhouettes and sharper contours. In this way, the main shapes take on a three-dimensional effect that is further contrasted against the surrounding details. Finally, Xu's reiteration of Zhao's classical painting is filtered down to its figurative elements, omitting the narrative texts and other details found in the original work. By doing so, the artist strips bare the painting's history by focusing solely on the iconography of Chinese landscape painting.

As visitors make their way to the rear of the installation, attracted by the glow of neon backlighting, what they discover is far removed from what they had anticipated: crumpled newspaper and rice paper, empty water bottles, plastic bags, tree branches, and various natural debris (fig. 7). Instead of using the traditional medium of ink on paper to paint the landscape, Xu employs a range of consumer litter and everyday objects behind the lightbox to recreate the scenery through collage and assemblage. A mixture of tree branches, leaves, and paper are glued meticulously onto the screen to evoke the shape of mountains and natural flora. Hanging from the top horizontal frame of the lightbox are torn pieces of newspaper, cut in repeating zigzag patterns to depict distant mountains and clouds in the background. It is interesting to note the level of precision in the assemblage, as each object is specifically placed to exude a particular shadow. For instance, materials positioned closer to the glass panel result in a sharper silhouette in the reflected landscape, while the contours of materials farther from the glass appear softer. In this way, Xu's composition is akin to that of Zhao's landscape painting in terms of the detail of execution and overall organization, despite the "messy" appearance of the assembled three-dimensional objects.

By closely reproducing Zhao's scroll painting on the outside, Xu's use of imitation serves to provide an authentic construction of Chinese landscape painting. In fact, this practice is highly regarded in the fundamental apprenticeship of Chinese painting, as it forms the basis of learning

about classical techniques of execution, composition, and brushstroke. In traditional Chinese art curricula, imitation represents a means of mastering complex skills and attaining the artistic ideal of historical painters, who are regarded as the bearers of traditional customs refined over centuries.⁶² By adopting this long-held technique to replicate Zhao's scroll painting, Xu engages with China's classical art practices and thereby confers an element of authenticity upon himself. Yet Xu's particular use of imitation reveals an element of deception, as it leads viewers to misrecognize the assemblage as an ink painting. I argue that Xu's intention is to subvert and unsettle an essentialist identity of Chineseness, as well as the expectations of the viewer.

Specifically, this is achieved through the artist's use of contrast between the front and the back of the installation. From the accumulation of tree leaves and folded cardboard boxes on the floor to the dangling plastic bags and water bottles, the rear view of the installation exudes an overall sense of chaos. Some objects are glued onto the reverse side of the frosted glass panel, while others float in mid-air or lean directly against the edge of the wall. This effect is amplified by the fact that many objects do not seem to contribute directly to the shadowy silhouette of the landscape painting—the presence a stepladder and plastic wrap strewn behind the wall, for example, evoke a state of incompleteness. Including these objects in the assemblage accentuates the aesthetic of disorder, a further departure from the idyllic scenery on the other side of the installation. To subvert the expectations of the viewer, this strategy of contrast proves very efficient, as it charges the installation with opposing qualities in order to be equally awe-inspiring and unsettling. As Chinese art historian Robert E. Harrist explains, Xu “complicates and calls our attention to the relationship between image and medium by once again showing the viewer things that are not what they first appear.”⁶³ While the front view draws the viewer in with magnified beauty and order, the rear view immediately reverses these sentiments through the surprise of apparent disorder.

A paradox emerges between the careful arrangement of materials inside the lightbox and its chaotic appearance when viewed from the rear, which is also reminiscent of natural landscapes in China subjected to the environmental impacts of urbanization. For example, Beijing witnessed an unprecedented phase of urban transformation in the 1990s during which large-scale demolition

⁶² Roberts, “Tradition and Modernity,” 68.

⁶³ Robert E. Harrist, Jr., “Background Stories: Xu Bing's Art of Transformation,” in *Xu Bing*, ed. Reiko Tomii (London: Albion, 2011), 35.

replaced old houses with shopping malls, business centers, and glittering hotels.⁶⁴ The results of such architectural interventions are what Chinese art scholar Wu Hung calls “urban ruins,”⁶⁵ which became the subject of many photographic works by contemporary Chinese artists exploring conditions of ruination and fragmentation. This can be seen in the works of Zhang Peili and Rong Rong, for instance, whose photographs capture demolition sites in Beijing and their ensuing contradictory conditions (fig. 8). With Xu’s installation, not only are the discarded materials used by the artist displayed in a disorderly manner, they also reveal commercial brands such as Gatorade, Eska, and Home Depot, evoking the consumer-driven culture of the twentieth-century as well as its impact on the environment. Coupled with scraps of English-language newspapers revealing topics such as sports, real estate, and geopolitics, Xu’s choice of objects also traces a portrait of North American contemporary society. The work thus not only reflects on New China, but also Vancouver—where the work is presented—as a place undergoing major real estate development.⁶⁶ With regards to the global undertones of his work, Xu explains:

A bigger motivation is to explore how to use and activate our own culture for future development. It is now that human civilization is clashing most intensely with the natural world. I hope that when people view the work, they can reflect on the state of affairs of humankind today.⁶⁷

The use of collage techniques, specifically assemblage, brings forth a consideration of the theme of consumption. For the artist, the choice of this medium is particularly fitting since collage reflects the realities of consumer culture in the postwar years.⁶⁸ American art historian David Banash writes, “Through collage, artists find ways to evade, negotiate, reflect, or sometimes undo the reification of commodity culture.”⁶⁹ The singularity of this technique resides in the use of ready-made materials, which Banash understands as objects that “other human hands have worked over, shaped, formed, completed, and most always at some point sold as a commodity.”⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Wu Hung, “Between Past and Future: Transience as a Contemporary Aesthetic of Ruins,” in *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 203.

⁶⁵ Wu, 203.

⁶⁶ See Alice Ming Wai Jim, “Thoughts on the Meaning of Return: HKG><YVR,” in *Journal of Visual Culture* 6, no. 3 (2007): 333–341.

⁶⁷ Yin Yijun, “The Artist Rejecting East-West and Old-New Dichotomies,” *Sixth Tone*, March 7, 2017, <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/2012/artist-rejecting-east-west-old-new-dichotomies#> (accessed March 23, 2018).

⁶⁸ David Banash, introduction to *Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 14.

⁶⁹ Banash, 15.

⁷⁰ Banash, 19.

Given this definition, Xu's use of found materials evokes the concept of the ready-made, as he assimilates existing objects from different contexts to create his own arrangement. In particular, the artist's use of newspaper as a ready-made object carries a meaning of its own, considering the history of this form of media as a tool of mass production and distribution. Banash further explains that "the world of mass production radically altered the meaning of objects in an unprecedented and profound reification that reached into every sphere of life."⁷¹ By alluding to mass production through the use of newspapers and other mundane materials, I suggest that Xu's work also points to how the recurring use of traditional aesthetics in contemporary art practices has become hackneyed through over-exploitation. Overall, the medium of assemblage allows the artist to deconstruct and reconstruct Chinese landscape painting while evoking the age of consumption characterizing modern-day society.

The rear view of Xu's installation questions visitors' construction of reality, and by extension, their preconceived understandings of Chineseness. By taking apart the landscape painting imagery, Xu asks: How do we visualize things? How does the mind work?⁷² This artistic approach suggests new ways of seeing beyond the viewer's cultural expectations of Chinese art. The work shatters the homogeneity of Chineseness by removing the historical status and cultural symbolism inherent in Chinese painting traditions. For instance, the traditional medium of rice paper is torn into small pieces to evoke the shape of mountains. Xu thus subverts the history of this material and manipulates it like the discarded objects. Furthermore, *Background Story* addresses the artist's own relationship to culture and tradition. As the curators of *Unscrolled* write, Xu's work "persuades viewers to look beyond the superficial application of tradition in contemporary Chinese art and question whether there is a deeper connection between artists and their historical culture."⁷³ In light of this, I argue that Xu's subversive aesthetic strategy, as well as the work in general, not only challenges the continued widespread fixation on essentialist qualities of Chineseness, but also comments on stereotypical representations of Chinese art traditions perpetuated in contemporary art practices today. With *Unscrolled*, this statement can be

⁷¹ Banash, 11.

⁷² This observation is made by Jan Stuart, Keeper of Asia at the British Museum, in the promotional video "An Installation by Xu Bing at the British Museum: Background Story 7," *The British Museum*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ID7BH15W86Q> (accessed March 14, 2017).

⁷³ Freundl and Lu (eds), *Unscrolled*, 129.

further elaborated, since the majority of works in the exhibition allude to the artistic and cultural traditions of China.

Due to its massive scale, Xu's installation could easily be mistaken for an original ink painting when contemplated at a distance, as the assemblage materials cannot be seen; yet when viewed from the other side the work resembles an unfinished product hiding behind a surface image of a beautiful landscape painting. Through the image he creates using found materials, the artist casts an illusion of landscape painting and blurs the distinction between the original artwork and its replica, as well as between the media of ink painting and assemblage. The next section will discuss Jennifer Wen Ma's live sculpture, *Black Beauty: A Living Totem (2014)*, the artist's three-dimensional representation of Chinese landscape painting. As a new rendition of this traditional art genre, Ma's installation presents a closer analysis of the medium of ink itself, while engaging with the current environmental issues of pollution and deforestation.

SECTION TWO

Jennifer Wen Ma's *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (2014)

Beijing-born New York based artist Jennifer Wen Ma's large-scale live sculpture *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (2014) defies classical representations of Chinese landscape painting by repurposing the traditional medium of ink. Instead of applying it on paper, Ma explores its inner materiality and formal aesthetics as a sculptural object. Through the manipulation of ink and use of scale, the work challenges the cultural expectations of the viewer by offering new experiences of Chinese landscape painting. I argue that Ma, like Xu, revisits traditional art practices to shed light on the larger issue of modern urbanization and its environmental impact.

Located in the gallery rotunda, Ma's large-scale sculpture *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (2014) consists of 720 leafy plants sourced from western Canada. Arranged in consecutive layers following the cylindrical shape of a pine tree, the plants dominate the rotunda like a massive water fountain (fig. 9). Surrounded by a double curved staircase that leads to the main floor of the exhibition, the work is placed strategically to allow viewers to contemplate it from all sides as they walk up the stairs. Instead of the usual foliage, each leaf is painted with a coat of ink, which transforms the vibrant greenery into a disquieting black mass. As a result, one could easily mistake the live plants for artificial materials, but closer examination reveals new green buds discreetly yet resolutely emerging from the shadows of the tree, due to the artist's use of hydroponics system which creates the conditions necessary for the plants to thrive during the course of the exhibition. As they grow, the budding leaves gradually shed their inked coating and are restored to their original splendour.

As the first artwork in the exhibition, *Black Beauty* adequately embodies the curatorial premise of *Unscrolled* with regards to the theme of "reinvented traditions." Rather than using ink to paint, the artist pours the material directly onto the plants as a way of depicting the natural landscape. A different experience of Chinese painting ensues for the viewer, whereby the scenery is not represented simply through painted forms on paper, but also through a physical presence in the exhibition space. Measuring sixteen feet tall and extending up to the second floor of the gallery, the larger-than-life sculpture commands an impressive scale and physicality, which generates a unique relationship with the viewer by contributing to the overall shock value of the work. According to art historian Joan Kee, "scale directs attention toward the capacity of an

artwork to respond to a specific location and place, while simultaneously calling into question the role of the viewer.”⁷⁴ In addition to the sheer size of the sculpture, its physicality is also transmitted through the smell of ink which permeates the air, suggesting that a significant amount of this material was used during the making of the work. According to Ma, this method of depicting nature in a three-dimensional format allows the subject to “become the depicted form of itself,”⁷⁵ as real plants are gathered inside the exhibition. With the thorough application of ink, Ma highlights the materiality of this medium in such a way that “ink alone has become the subject of visual appreciation.”⁷⁶ By singularizing landscape painting into its basic constituents of medium (i.e. ink) and content (i.e. nature), and representing it in a literal sense, Ma offers a more visceral experience of the subject matter to the viewer.

Ma’s innovative use of ink is largely indebted to the history of Experimental Ink Painting that first emerged in China in the late 1980s. During this time, a group of artists, scholars, and curators—including Zhang Yu, Huang Zhuan, and Wang Huangsheng—advocated for a modern style of ink painting through critical writing, conferences, and social networks. While the term “experimental” was largely applied to both figurative and non-figurative art in the early stages of this emerging field, some abstract painters felt it best exemplified their own efforts to “reinvent the language of ink painting,” and in so doing, excluded non-abstract works altogether from this category.⁷⁷ Adopting this revised definition, many curators and critics went on to organize the first overseas exhibitions of experimental ink painting, which later contributed significantly to its global establishment by the end of the 1990s.

Today, experimental ink painting is expressed through divergent forms and styles. Some artists use it to pursue their mastery of figurative subjects, while others are devoted to abstract representations, installations, and performances. As Wu points out, the ink art movement is not a specific art genre per se, but a diverse range of experimental projects employing ink in different ways.⁷⁸ With the goal of showcasing “the newest state of an ancient art tradition,” this tendency expresses the sentiments shared by the local artistic community to become part of a “globalized

⁷⁴ Joan Kee, “Joan Kee,” in *Art Bulletin* 94, no. 4 (December 2012): 499.

⁷⁵ David Elliott, “Reformed in Translation: Reflections on the Early Work of Jennifer Wen Ma,” in *Jennifer Wen Ma* (Milan: Charta, 2012), 17.

⁷⁶ Wu, “Negotiating with Tradition,” 2.

⁷⁷ Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 312.

⁷⁸ Wu, 312.

contemporary art world.”⁷⁹ Some of the early practitioners of this trend—such as Gu Wenda, Wang Tiande, Yang Jiechang, and Qiu Zhijie—have illustrated through their abstract ink drawings and installations the growing tendency to transform ink painting by challenging “its traditional reliance on brushwork” and incorporating a variety of painting methods together, such as ink, colour, and collage.⁸⁰ For Gu Wenda—one of the most prominent experimental ink painters of the 1980s—the latter pushed for further abstract representations of ink painting with various new painting methods, like “splashing” and “spraying.”⁸¹ In his well-known series *The Lost Dynasty – Contemplation of the World* (1985), the artist fused traditional calligraphy and brushwork with abstract ink washes in an overall cosmic representation of landscape (fig. 10). Others, like Yang Jiechang, further distilled the materiality of ink in abstract and temporal pieces which explored the sculptural dimension of the medium. In his *100 Layers of Ink* series (1992–1996), Yang repeatedly applied layers of ink on a single piece of paper, as if in an act of performance, resulting in the physical transformation of the paper into an unrecognizable material (fig. 11). Thirty years after the emergence of the Experimental Ink Painting movement, these divergent practices undoubtedly paved the way for Jennifer Wen Ma’s explorations of ink in *Black Beauty*. Furthermore, as the studio director of Cai Guo-Qiang Studio in New York for eight years, where she helped implement several large-scale projects, Ma was closely exposed to Cai’s dramatic use of gunpowder explosions and other monumental installations early in her solo artistic career (fig. 12).⁸²

A nod to the Indigenous peoples in the region, *Black Beauty: Living Totem* builds on the history of experimental ink painting to reflect the reality of natural landscapes throughout China (and elsewhere) in the age of post-industrialization. Specifically, it exemplifies the dichotomy between urban expansion and the disappearance of natural environments in the last three decades. Several urban development initiatives have been implemented by the Chinese government since the turn of the century, which has led to an unprecedented increase in urban sprawl.⁸³ As art

⁷⁹ Wu, 312.

⁸⁰ Wu, 312.

⁸¹ Wu, 314.

⁸² As one of China’s most prolific contemporary artists, Cai Guo-Qiang is known for his singular use of gunpowder to create his compositions. Although he was not part of the Experimental Ink Painting movement per se, Cai experimented profusely with new painting techniques in the 1980s, such as by blowing wet paint on canvases using an electric fan. See Wu, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 303.

⁸³ Meiqin Wang, “The Art for the City: Zhong Biao,” in *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 12–13.

historian Wang argues, “In 2001, urbanization became a conscious policy choice by the Chinese government and was promoted as the strategy for China to further its economic development, strengthen its national power, complete Chinese modernization, and solve social problems brought up by the adoption of market economy.”⁸⁴ Bearing witness to these initiatives, the surrounding environments underwent drastic transformations with detrimental consequences, from water and soil pollution to deforestation.⁸⁵ Many of China’s quintessential natural landscapes today are quickly becoming polluted terrains, and according to Wang, these interventions have “stripped the countryside of its idyllic beauty formerly adored by ancient Chinese intelligentsia,” rather treating nature and the countryside as the “place where resources can be fetched and commoditized for the making of a few world-class Chinese cities.”⁸⁶ By forever changing China’s landscapes, recent urban development has deeply impacted local relationships to nature and tradition.

By disrupting the tranquility of the countryside and the prosperity of overall land use, recent urbanization projects have marked a disintegration with nature, and by extension, debunked the symbolic status and relevance of environmental traditions in Chinese culture. As far back as the sixth century BCE, when Daoism was first introduced, nature has always been regarded as a fundamental aspect of human life. With such a pivotal role in Chinese philosophy, this concept has become synonymous with tradition, as well as ancestral and cultural roots. Similarly, landscape painting fulfills an equally crucial position in Chinese art, often considered one of its “most exemplary forms” of visual representation.⁸⁷ Wang adds, “Known in Chinese as the painting of mountains and water (*shan shui hua*), landscape painting was the most practiced and most reviewed category in Chinese art history.”⁸⁸ A decline in the country’s natural environments corresponds to a change in one’s connection to the philosophical, cultural, and artistic traditions, if our unity with nature is broken. Wang explains that “the downfall of the countryside is accompanied by the decline of characteristic traditional culture and ways of thinking that had their foundation in the deep tie with nature.”⁸⁹ This phenomenon calls for abandoning ancient practices in favour of creating “new” traditions which accurately reflect

⁸⁴ Wang, “The Art for the City,” 12–13.

⁸⁵ Wang, *Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*, 42.

⁸⁶ Wang, 42.

⁸⁷ Wang, 31.

⁸⁸ Wang, 31.

⁸⁹ Wang, 42.

current realities. Referring to artists who still paint old-style landscapes, art critic Jia Fangzhou argues that “it is unnatural to hold onto this tradition; we have to make a new choice.”⁹⁰ In this sense, Ma’s work can be seen to pay homage to Chinese landscape painting while simultaneously recontextualizing it in the sociopolitical context of twenty-first-century China.

Specifically, *Black Beauty* both visually and metaphorically embodies the disharmonious relationship between rapid urban expansion and natural landscapes. This is exemplified in Ma’s work through a conflation of opposites: decay and rebirth. On the one hand, the inked leaves evoke somber themes of destruction, death, and agony,⁹¹ as they appear suffocated beneath the abrasive layer of caustic ink (fig. 13). By extension, this can serve as an analogy to ecological concerns and the harmful effects of urbanization on natural landscapes. As art historian David Elliott describes, Ma’s sculpture illustrates a “petrified forest landscape in a suspended state of development.”⁹² On the other hand, the emergence of young buds suggests a continuation of life, as if hinting at a positive outlook despite the current urbanization crisis. The artist explains, “While the black coverage slows the plant’s growth, it does not terminate life. During the exhibition plants continue to grow and tender green shoots break out from the black, giving evidence of the perseverance and resilience of life.”⁹³ Thus, apart from delaying the plants’ maturation process, the ink acts mainly as a visual threat to the foliage rather than damaging its viability. Ma adds, “When I apply the ink onto the plants they stay alive but they are under a lot of stress because the ink stops the photosynthesis process. Every plant has a decision to make—to either thrive or succumb to the stress.”⁹⁴ Through this process of push-and-pull, *Black Beauty* acts as a metaphor for the cycle of life from degeneration to rebirth.

Similar to Xu’s choice of tree branches and other natural materials, Ma’s use of living plants presents the work with a unique ephemerality. As the ink dries on the surface of the leaves, they appear glossy and crisp, as if frozen in time and space. The contrast set forth by the juxtaposition of budding greenery and ink-coated leaves reveals the notion of time as one of the work’s central themes. In fact, time plays a pivotal role in the installation by becoming “a healing

⁹⁰ Jia Fangzhou, quoted in Wang, 42.

⁹¹ Elliott, *Jennifer Wen Ma*, 17.

⁹² Elliott, 17.

⁹³ Elliott, 17.

⁹⁴ Hester Street Collective, “Making of Paths to Pier 42: An interview with Jennifer Wen Ma,” in *Paths to Pier 42*, January 3, 2014, http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/49ee54_0c9a9aceff574fcc934766896cfbe8a4.pdf (accessed March 20, 2018).

force that mitigates darkness through growth,”⁹⁵ allowing the latter to evolve and transform. Its presence and impact in this work is drastically different than its role in classical landscape painting, where it appears motionless. As Elliott writes,

In classical painting the artist suggests time through the speed, heaviness, and lightness of his brush, or depicts it more literally by showing different seasons or times of the year. Ma, however, incorporates time into these works as slowly each plant breaks through its dark cover to reveal green shoots as it again begins to grow.⁹⁶

By taking the notion of time as an integral element of the work itself, Ma allows the installation to become fluid and take on new meanings over the course of its mutation. Seeing this majestic sculpture for the first time might be an overwhelming experience for many viewers, as most visitors may have never witnessed such an excessive and unconventional use of ink in Chinese art. Ma explains, “What drew me to the medium were its historical richness, the temporal quality of landscape ink painting, the physical strength of the black ink and its generosity and nurturing possibilities with live plants.”⁹⁷ Such an innovative application of ink onto plants not only challenges cultural expectations of Chinese art, but further yields a new relationship between the medium of ink and the subject of nature. In comparison to traditional landscape painting where nature represents the passive subject of representation, the plants in this installation take on a more active role by resisting the impact of their inky coating. The result is a captivating sculpture in which ink and nature coexist by exerting opposing forces to generate unexpected beauty. As Elliott further explains, “By bringing together and showing realms of experience that are either not usually associated with each other or open to public scrutiny, she makes a new kind of sense out of them.”⁹⁸ Moreover, *Black Beauty* adequately encapsulates the tension underlying the current trend of rampant urbanization that continues to disrupt the ecosystem. By assimilating environmental casualties into a beautiful sculpture, Ma’s installation points towards a hopeful outcome amid this post-industrial crisis.

The next section will examine Beijing-based artist Sun Xun’s installation *Shan Shui – Cosmos* (2014), specifically how it recontextualizes Chinese art traditions using video animations

⁹⁵ Hester Street Collective, “Making of Paths to Pier 42.”

⁹⁶ Hester Street Collective, “Making of Paths to Pier 42.”

⁹⁷ “New Uses for Chinese Ink: Jennifer Wen Ma Paints Hanging Garden in Beijing,” *Art Radar Journal*, May 30, 2012, <http://artradarjournal.com/2012/05/30/new-uses-for-chinese-ink-jennifer-wen-ma-paints-hanging-garden-in-beijing/> (accessed on March 20, 2018).

⁹⁸ “New Uses for Chinese Ink.”

and new media. By reimagining Chinese landscape painting using global, contemporary forms of art-making, this site-specific installation hints to recent technological advancement while reflecting the current socio-political climate in Post Cultural Revolution China. Moreover, through the juxtaposition of traditional imagery and new media technologies, the work defies essentialist views of Chineseness in contemporary Chinese art.

SECTION THREE

Sun Xun's *Shan Shui – Cosmos* (2014)

Created in situ on four walls of the gallery, Sun Xun's *Shan Shui – Cosmos* presents a universe in which Chinese landscape painting has been reimagined through a myriad of forms. Consisting of hanging scrolls, video animations, wall drawings, and a sound piece, the different components of the installation are woven together as one unifying whole, enveloping the viewer at its center. On the main wall of the room, a large-scale video installation is projected, taking up the entire surface area from floor to ceiling. The video illustrates a traditional Chinese landscape painting scene, reanimated through digital sequences. In this lively rendition of the classical mountainous scenery, birds fly in and out of the picture and tree branches shift gently with the wind, following the panoramic movement of the gliding camera, which pauses to momentarily zoom in on certain areas of the painting. Across from the central video projection are two flickering animations projected on adjacent walls, featuring intertwining fantastical creatures and rolling waves. Underneath the projected images is a series of eight ink scroll paintings, hung rather sparsely throughout the gallery. These handscrolls depict a range of Chinese landscape subjects, such as pine trees and ocean waves. As the projected animations overlap with the scrolls, the images often blend together, yielding a superposition of moving and still sequences. Finally, faintly cosmic sound effects—reminiscent of old science fiction movies—tie the different components of the work together.

By merging traditional and new media, such as video and installation art, *Shan Shui – Cosmos* successfully reframes Chinese artistic traditions (fig. 14). Historically depicted on handscrolls, Chinese landscape painting takes on a refreshing new form through the artist's use of ink animations.⁹⁹ Combining ancient techniques of printmaking and calligraphy with contemporary filmmaking, this medium has become established as Sun's signature style over the years. A prolific painter, Sun draws each scene by hand before transposing it into a digital format. His subjects vary from natural and human figures to fantastical and mythological creatures inspired by the artist's frequent visits to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. By using a diverse range of characters, both realistic and fictional, Sun allows his painted

⁹⁹ Following his training in printmaking at university, Sun transitioned to his now signature style of animation, founding his own studio – Pi Animation Studio – in 2006.

subjects to “acquire a rich metaphorical significance by becoming symbols that engender new connections and meanings through interactions with imaginary beings and scenes.”¹⁰⁰ Next to the projections and hanging scrolls are a series of ink drawings painted directly onto the walls of the gallery. Gestural in application, the abstract strokes depict the mountainous silhouettes of Chinese landscape painting in consecutive layers. Each row is defined by a unique style and shape: as the edges of the mural suggest the broad contours of mountains and a freer hand movement, the central areas reveal smaller, quicker strokes. Overall, the drawings are reminiscent of gestural Chinese calligraphy, while the heavy dripping of ink reveals influences of abstract expressionism, suggesting a departure from Chinese painting traditions. Comparable in size to the floor-length video projections, the paintings command a strong presence through both scale and movement. While most of the drawings are concentrated on the right wall of the gallery, Sun continues his abstract strokes faintly along the other walls, giving the impression that the installation has no clear beginning or end. Through the juxtaposition of classical art forms and film-based experimentations, Sun’s installation reframes landscape painting traditions while engendering a conflation of visual metaphors.

On a fundamental level, Sun’s reframing of tradition in the installation exemplifies the strategy of “translating visuality” that Wu Hung elaborated, as discussed earlier. According to the art historian, this artistic method involves “converting an image or object into a different material or medium” in such a way that the “traditional materials are replaced by heterogeneous ones from a different time and place,” thereby yielding “an ironic conflation of divergent temporalities.”¹⁰¹ Such is the case in Sun’s installation, where a two-dimensional landscape painting is completely reimagined through the digital platform. In fact, the classical scenery is not only recreated in a virtual space, but also physically with the artist’s own ink murals, generating a “double translation” of the original subject. Through the multiple transmutations, parts of the traditional scenery remain intact, such as the landscape backdrop in the video sequence and the visible display of handscrolls in the exhibition. I would argue that this pairing of “old” and “new” allows viewers to reconsider Chinese art practices and traditional aesthetics in the context of today’s evolving realities. In this light, Sun’s use of new media to achieve this purpose is a logical one, as these tools accurately reflect the technological advancements of modern-day society. Gao

¹⁰⁰ Hou Hanru and Xiaoyu Weng, “Sun Xun,” in *Tales of Our Time*, ed. Xiaoyu Weng and Hou Hanru (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2017), 104.

¹⁰¹ Wu, “Negotiating with Tradition,” 3–4.

explains, “The digital or ‘virtual’ has become the soul of contemporary visual art [...]. This sort of ‘virtual’ language leads artists to believe that they can provide a more genuine reflection of society and a more comprehensive documentation of current realities.”¹⁰² By reimagining landscape painting through new media and putting them in parallel with classical forms of Chinese art, *Shan Shui – Cosmos* recontextualizes tradition in a contemporary setting to engage with the pressing issues of our time.

Although the installation appears at first to be an in-depth exploration of ink painting traditions, I argue that it subverts fixed notions of Chineseness by challenging the historical status of landscape painting and reflecting contemporary social realities. Like Xu and Ma, Sun’s work reimagines classical landscape painting using global art forms; in doing so, the subject matter is removed from its cultural and historical context, thereby attaining new dimensions for interpretation. Once again, the work partially showcases an idealized depiction of nature that is contradicted by the reality of landscapes today. As art historian Kuiyi Shen explains, landscape as a symbol of Chinese culture often exemplifies a fictionalized world of idealized scenery that it presents as a natural occurrence.¹⁰³ By rearranging the conventions of landscape painting, Sun’s installation distorts the symbolic foundation of this classical subject in order to examine its wider cultural significance in the face of the current urbanization crisis. These recreations challenge the essentialist identity of Chineseness, as new meanings emerge from the reconfigured landscapes. From the passive objects of contemplation that they used to be, Chinese landscape paintings in this context demand active engagement from the viewer. Shen adds, “Today we think of landscape, *shanshui*, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed. What concerns us is not just what landscape is or means, but what it does, how it works as a cultural practice.”¹⁰⁴ Shown alongside its digital and abstract derivatives, traditional landscape painting as illustrated in Sun’s installation further serves as a reminder of contemporary urban and social realities in twenty-first-century China.

¹⁰² Gao Minglu, “Displacement and Transmutation: Reality and the Spectacle of Urban Life,” in *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art* (Buffalo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, University at Buffalo Art Galleries, 2005), 212.

¹⁰³ Kuiyi Shen, “Landscape Painting as Cultural Consciousness in Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *ARTiculations: Undefined Chinese Contemporary Art*, ed. Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 133.

¹⁰⁴ Shen, *ARTiculations*, 132.

With the pairing of drawings, video sequences, and the resulting superposition of moving and motionless images, a certain discontinuity is made evident throughout the gallery, which exposes the audience to a fragmented view of landscape painting. Since the various media are shown simultaneously, the appreciation of each individual medium independently of the others becomes obscure and difficult (fig. 15). For instance, the traditional subjects depicted on handscrolls and part of the video projections are distinguishable at first through their cultural traits, yet they are soon overshadowed by the flickering animations of fantastical creatures and other characters that come to dominate the scenery, thereby disrupting the integrity of the landscape. While Xu Bing's sculpture marks a departure from traditional sceneries through his assemblage of discarded materials, Sun's multimedia installation evokes a similar level of distraction through the overlap of video, ink murals, and hanging scrolls. Specifically, Sun's projections are shown on alternating surfaces of the gallery, and his brushstrokes travel beyond the confines of each wall to linger on top of other compositions. Under such mutual interference, viewers are presented with a partial and nonlinear narrative of Chinese landscape painting, which defies their own expectations of the classical scenery.

Sun's combinative use of traditional subjects—landscape painting, ink, and handscrolls—with contemporary art forms—installation, video, and abstract drawings—indicates the artist's unique approach to contemporaneity. This strategy reaffirms Wu Hung's theory of recontextualization by which local specificity and global tendencies are served equally.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, the space is dominated by classical Chinese art materials bearing strong historical references due to their inherent cultural symbolism; on the other hand, non-culturally-specific media like abstract drawings and video projections are visible throughout the space, hindering essentialist interpretations of the subject. While Sun's use of animation offers a newer interpretation of landscape painting, his integration of media technologies with symbolic imagery is not uncommon in Chinese visual culture. From the founding of the historical Shanghai Animation Film Studio in 1957 to the vast presence of moving-image screens throughout Chinese urban centers, these breakthroughs accurately reflect the technological advancements of modern-day society while securing China's position as a leader in the field. Art historian Alice Ming Wai Jim further notes:

¹⁰⁵ See Wu's theory of recontextualization as discussed in the Introduction.

The phenomenon [of 3D-animated scrolls] can be tied to the scale and speed of the country's expansion in the areas of architecture and computer technologies but is also inarguably the result of China having no shortage of treasured scroll paintings that constitute an important part of its national cultural heritage.¹⁰⁶

The resulting fusion of traditional and contemporary media in *Shan Shui – Cosmos* confirms the modern identity of New China through centuries-old artistic traditions and cultural practices alike.

Although Sun's work makes a sound attempt to defy homogenous readings of Chinese art, his choice of culturally specific materials further complicates the position of global contemporaneity that he seeks to project. In particular, his use of ink inevitably suggests an inherent essentialism that is strongly tied to Chinese cultural identity. According to Chinese art curator Chang Tsong-Zung, "The strategy of engagement and exotic appeal has been most effective for Chinese artists currently living abroad, such as Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, and Cai Guo-Qiang, many of which resort to exotic elements in traditional customs."¹⁰⁷ Such an association can be difficult to renounce when artists like Sun wish to have their work regarded independently of their cultural backgrounds. As art critic Robin Peckham once revealed about Sun's artistic stance, "He uses ink and brush in the work, but he is not thinking very much about ink as a culture."¹⁰⁸ By extension, this statement suggests the artist's inattention to ethnic views of Chineseness. Despite the obvious comparisons that can be drawn between his use of Chinese art materials and nationalistic interpretations of his work, Sun's work successfully achieves a reconstruction of identity in its newly imagined forms.

By reinterpreting Chinese landscape painting through a variety of media, Sun challenges the potential of landscape as a static subject to act as a dynamic medium that can reflect the realities of its time. One such pressing phenomena has certainly been the recent urbanization throughout China, which Gao describes as "a spectacle in contemporary Chinese visual culture, and a classic expression of modernity in visual culture."¹⁰⁹ Through a continuous loop of images

¹⁰⁶ Jim, "When Worlds Meet: Howie Tsui's *Retainers of Anarchy*," in *Howie Tsui: Retainers of Anarchy*, edited by Diana Freundl, Michelle S. Gewurtz, and Michelle Jacques (Burnaby: Hemlock Printers Ltd., 2017), 22.

¹⁰⁷ Chang Tsong-Zung, "Beyond the Middle Kingdom: An Insider's View," in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. Gao Minglu (New York: Asia Society, 1998), 72–73.

¹⁰⁸ Robin Peckham, "Sun Xun," *Ocula*, May 13, 2014, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/sun-xun/> (accessed July 10, 2016).

¹⁰⁹ Gao, *The Wall*, 212.

spanning across four walls, the sense of movement and progression engendered in the exhibition can be overbearing or yield confusion, as viewers find themselves bombarded by a whirlwind of images and sounds. Within this captivating yet disorienting environment, the audience feels as though they have been transported to a foreign location—one that is both unknown and familiar. In the context of recent urban developments, similar sentiments are echoed by local residents in rural China following their relocation.¹¹⁰ Gao adds that artists often use “dislocation and displacement as tropes to represent the dislocation of urban space and memory.”¹¹¹ Therefore, Sun’s strategy of superimposition could also reference the social and political implications of urbanization.

By reimagining traditional Chinese landscape painting using new media, *Shan Shui – Cosmos* negotiates between the viewer’s conception of Chineseness and cultural traditions. Following the artist’s quest against linearity, the audience experiences different components of the installation simultaneously, as new meanings emerge through the juxtaposition of moving and still images. In doing so, Sun’s cosmos links the past and the present to envision a future of alternative realities. Similarly, the artist expands on the discourse of modern identity in order to rethink the question of cultural belonging and suggest a changing role of tradition in contemporary Chinese culture.

¹¹⁰ See Brooke Wilmsen, Michael Webber, and Duan Yuefang, “Development for Whom? Rural to Urban Resettlement at the Three Gorges Dam, China,” *Asian Studies Review* 35.1 (2011): 21-42.

¹¹¹ Gao, 214.

CONCLUSION

The installation works of Xu Bing, Jennifer Wen Ma, and Sun Xun represent three provocative and engaging attempts to destabilize essentialist conceptions of Chineseness. By using strategies of imitation to mislead the viewer, showcasing a state of abundance through materiality, or merging traditional and contemporary forms of art-making, I argue that all three works aim to unsettle the expectations of viewers and elevate their level of engagement. These works do more than simply retrace the iconography of Chinese landscape painting as an act of tribute or remembrance; they offer new ways of experiencing and perceiving Chinese art traditions by reinventing the classical art genre. Furthermore, these works look beyond superficial displays of traditional aesthetics to consider pressing issues facing China today: environmental degradation, pollution, and changing natural landscapes in an era of post-industrialization.

The element of surprise is one of the foremost commonalities between the three artworks and is strongly conveyed throughout the exhibition. Xu's *Background Story* overwhelms the viewer with breathtaking landscape scenery, yet subsequently confronts their expectations with the exposed rear view of the installation. The audience's contemplation of Ma's inked trees in Ma's *Black Beauty* is met with a certain sense of curiosity and wonder as they try to understand the nature of the object in front of them; once they discover the artist's use of real plants and large amounts of ink, their appreciation is heightened upon realizing the time and labour invested into painting each individual leaf. Finally, the immersive yet secluded video installation of Sun's *Shan Shui – Cosmos* offers a uniquely mesmerizing experience, where one is simply lost in a new world of entangled visual metaphors and Chinese cultural signifiers.

The viewer's sensations of shock and surprise are certainly facilitated by the artists' use of scale. In fact, these often go hand in hand in the creation of engaging and breathtaking artworks. For instance, the ten-foot-long scenery in Xu's *Background Story* gives the viewer the impression of travelling to another dimension, with its exaggerated representation of a scroll painting, and painstaking depiction of each tree branch and ocean wave. As such, the painting captivates the audience in all of its grandiosity and serenity. Ma's *Black Beauty* is equally impressive in height and scale, and her exploration of abundance is manifested on many levels: the number of plants gathered for the sculpture, the amount of ink used to paint its outer surfaces, its overall size, and the fact that it was situated at the entrance of the exhibition. As for Sun's

Shan Shui – Cosmos, it is difficult to disregard the important role that scale plays in the work when it fills an entire room with superimposed drawings, paintings, and video sequences travelling across four walls. If *Background Story* invites the viewer to travel into the depicted scenery, *Shan Shui – Cosmos* propels one into a completely new world that could be challenging to characterize.

In addition to incorporating elements of surprise and scale, these three works share a fundamental goal to direct the viewer's attention away from the mere display of traditional aesthetics, encouraging consideration of the pressing issues of environmental degradation and New China. This is achieved in particular through a conflation of opposites in each work to challenge the viewer's expectations of traditional Chinese art. In fact, the stark contrast between the front and back views of *Background Story* incites one to reconsider the beautiful scenery they just witnessed, upon discovery of its coarse constituents accumulated behind the work. Ma's sculpture also hints at environmental destruction despite its apparent beauty, as its title suggests. Moreover, the juxtaposition of traditional landscape imagery and futuristic animation in *Shanshui – Cosmos* elevates the viewer's experience of landscape painting, encouraging them to reevaluate the role of cultural traditions in contemporary society.

Beyond the practice of these three artists, the aforementioned common traits are shared by other works in the exhibition. In *Traces* (2011), Shanghai-based artist Liu Jianhua uses porcelain to simulate enlarged ink drops sliding down the walls (fig. 16). His massive site-specific installation takes over three walls from floor to ceiling, evoking large raindrops suspended mid-air. The same monumentality is evoked in Beijing-based artist Ai Weiwei's installation *Bang* (2013), in which over 800 antique wooden stools from the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) are attached by way of restructuring, forming a large rhizomatic structure (fig. 17). Once again, viewers find themselves physically immersed in the setting, attempting to make sense of the meaning behind the piece and the way it is made. As the exhibition title *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art* reveals, I argue that these artworks encourage viewers to consider tradition in a new light; more specifically, the traditional aesthetics and cultural signifiers featured in the exhibition serve to bring attention to current social, political, and environmental issues facing China today. As curator Diana Freundl asks: "How can an artist's engagement with tradition be relevant to their present-day experiences and concerns?"¹¹²

¹¹² Diana Freundl, "Reframing Tradition," 24.

Perhaps, as the exhibition's subtitle (*Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*) suggests, the traditional Chinese aesthetics featured in *Unscrolled* have been reworked to bring attention to the current social, political, and environmental issues facing China today—in the very place where these cultural traditions first emerged.

Since *Unscrolled* concluded in 2015, exhibitions with related themes and topics continue to take place at the Vancouver Art Gallery, such as *Howie Tsui: Retainers of Anarchy* (2017–2019), *Pacific Crossings: Hong Kong Artists in Vancouver* (2017), and *Emptiness: Emily Carr and Lui Shou Kwan* (2017–2018). While the former investigates the subject of animated scrolls (fig. 18), the latter two explore the ink painting traditions of Hong Kong artists.¹¹³ All of these exhibitions highlight the work of curators and artists as they continue to rethink the foundations of Chinese art traditions and examine how these practices project the new realities of today.

¹¹³ It should be noted that these exhibitions took place during the twentieth anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. See Chad Pawson, "Vancouver Still Shaped by Hong Kong Handover 2 Decades Later," *CBC News*, July 1, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/hong-kong-handover-20-year-anniversary-vancouver-1.4186864> (accessed March 31, 2018).

Figures



Fig. 1: Entrance to the exhibition *Unscrolled: Reframing Tradition in Chinese Contemporary Art*, Vancouver Art Gallery, November 15, 2014 to April 6, 2015. Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Fig. 2: Pan Tianshou, *A Pine Tree in Huangshan*, 1960, ink on paper. Image: Pan Tianshou Art Museum, Hangzhou.



Fig. 3: Pan Tianshou painting at Hangzhou Hotel, 1964. Image: Pan Tianshou Art Museum, Hangzhou.



Fig. 4: Entrance to the exhibition *Forbidden City: Inside the Court of China's Emperors*, Vancouver Art Gallery, October 18, 2014 to January 11, 2015. Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Fig. 5: Xu Bing, *Background Story: Ten Thousand Li of Mountains and Rivers*, 2014, natural debris, plastic, frosted glass panel, 92 x 932 x 70 cm. Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Fig. 6: Zhao Fu, *Ten Thousand Li of Mountains and Rivers*, 1127–1279, hand scroll, rice paper, digital reproduction, 45 x 250 cm. Image: Xu Bing Studio.



Fig. 7: Xu Bing, *Background Story: Ten Thousand Li of Mountains and Rivers* (detail), 2014, natural debris, plastic, frosted glass panel, 92 x 932 x 70 cm. Image: Tianmo Zhang.

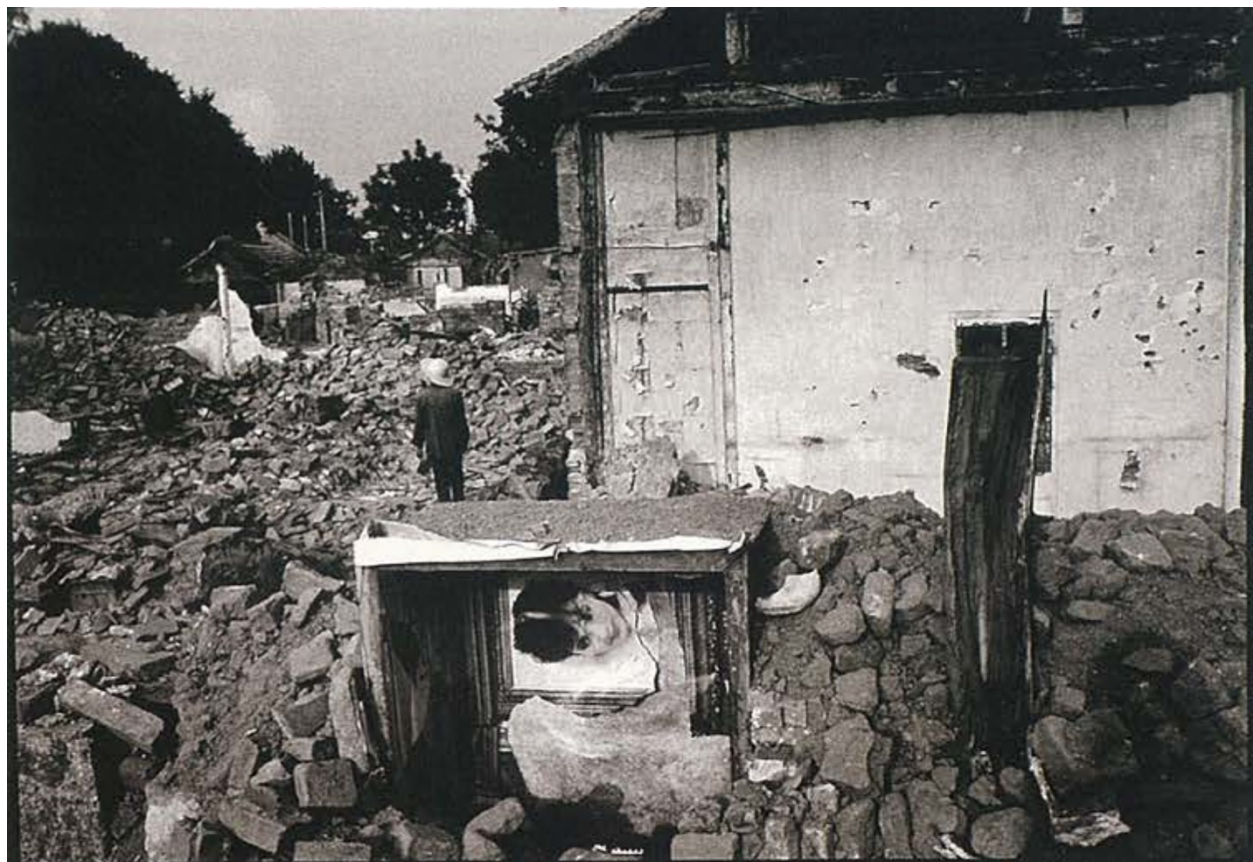


Fig. 8: Rong Rong, *No. 1(1) Beijing*, 1997, 100 x 150cm. Image: Smart Museum of Art.



Fig. 9: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Black Beauty: A Living Totem*, 2014, 720 live plants, Chinese ink, aluminum structure, hydroponic system, 500 x 485 x 485 cm. Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Fig. 10: Gu Wenda, *The Lost Dynasty – Contemplation of the World: Synthesis of Words*, 1985, Ink on paper, 280 x 178 cm. Image: Gu Wenda Studio.



Fig. 11: Yang Jiechang, *100 Layers of Ink: Ladder to Heaven*, 1992-96, Ink on paper, 280 x 130 cm. Image: Yang Jiechang Studio.



Fig. 12: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Drawing for Transient Rainbow*, 2003, Gunpowder on two sheets of paper, 179 x 159 cm. Image: Museum of Modern Art.



Fig. 13: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Black Beauty: A Living Totem* (detail), 2014, 720 live plants, Chinese ink, aluminum structure, hydroponic system, 500 x 485 x 485 cm.
Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Fig. 14: Sun Xun, *Shan Shui – Cosmos*, 2014, film projections, audio, mural installation, hanging scrolls, site-specific arrangement, dimensions variable. Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Fig. 15: Sun Xun, *Shan Shui – Cosmos*, 2014, film projections, audio, mural installation, hanging scrolls, site-specific arrangement, dimensions variable. Image: Tianmo Zhang.

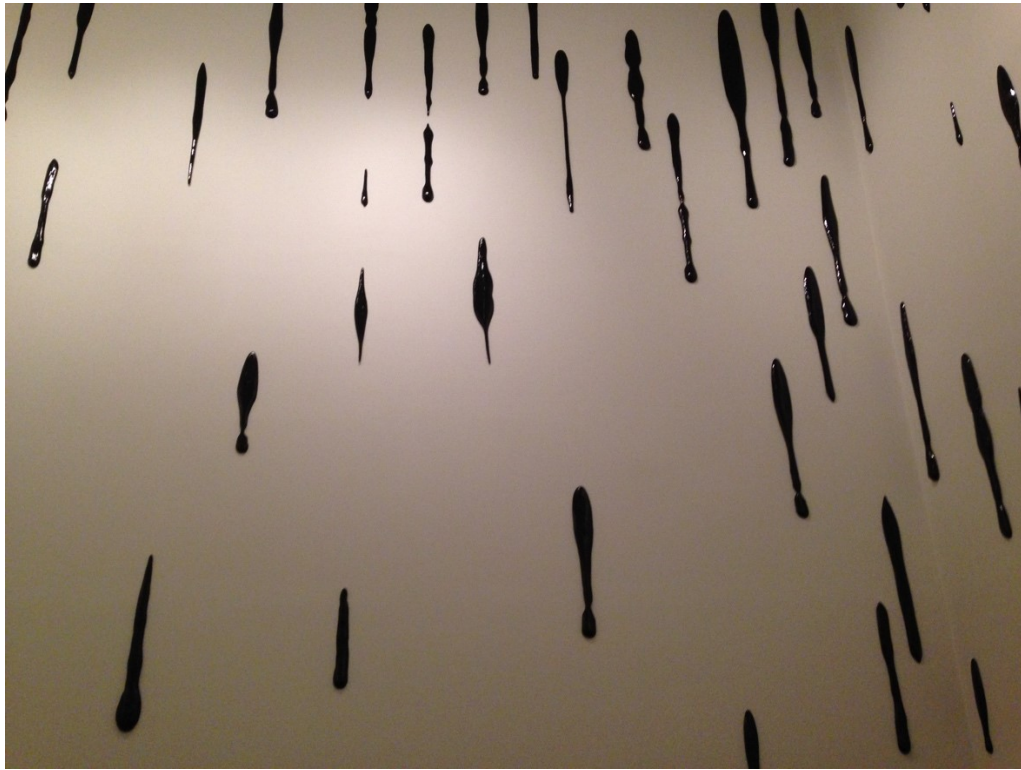


Fig. 16: Liu Jianhua, *Traces*, 2011, 108 porcelain pieces, dimensions variable.
Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Figure 17: Ai Weiwei, *Bang*, 2010–14, 886 antique stools from the Qing dynasty, dimensions variable. Image: Tianmo Zhang.



Fig. 18: Howie Tsui, *Retainers of Anarchy*, 2017, 5-channel video projection, 6-channel audio. Image: Vancouver Art Gallery.

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