

Spring 2021

## From the traditional national style to the artistic development of contemporary traditional art

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### Recommended Citation

Li, Mengshen, "From the traditional national style to the artistic development of contemporary traditional art" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 228.

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From the traditional national style  
to the artistic development of contemporary traditional art

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Arts

of Bard College

by Mengshen Li

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York May 2021



### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my great appreciation to my senior project advisor, Professor Patricia Karetzky. This project would not have been possible without your help.

My grateful thanks are also to Professor Kou Lu, for his help in giving valuable and constructive suggestions.

Thank you, Professor Li-hua Ying, for introducing me to the subject of Asian studies, I really enjoyed our talks during the office hours.

Thank you, mom and dad, and sister for always supporting me in my lifetime.

Special thanks to An-chi Lin for making my years at Bard special and for always supporting me. Thank you, Julie Chu and Hong-Yu Lin, for always supporting me.

Thank you to all my professors in my music career for enriching my knowledge of music.



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## Introduction

In today's globalized and diversified world, the development of culture cannot be separated from the inheritance of ancient classics, the exchange and combination of different cultures, and the innovation of today and of the future. So, the best way to know what a great contemporary artist is doing today is to go back to the source of his work, although the relationship to past styles may not be readily apparent. Most of the works today still have broad distinctive cultural characteristics that range from black and white landscape paintings in the east to perspective color paintings in the west. In this case, therefore, the origin of most of the works of the artists discussed in this paper can be found in the traditional national style, that is *Guohua* traditional national painting style. It also explains the importance of inheriting tradition in China, especially recently. To more fully understand those works, we have to go back and understand what *Guohua* is. Of course, there may be other influences and if we find elements in those works that are not entirely traditional in style, we understand the influence of western art, especially western oil painting which played such an important role in college curriculum for many decades. The new interest in traditional art is in part instigated by the great losses of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when traditional art was condemned in favor of revolutionary values. In these contemporary works we see the resurrection of what was destroyed, brought back to life and invigorated with contemporary elements, making it meaningful once more, after learning about different styles of art, people will explore what would be the combination of two styles of art? Who introduced the different styles at first? Who promoted the artistic style of another region? Who combined the two styles? So, Li Shutong and Wu Guanzhong are very important figures to talk about how the two artistic styles were originally integrated and how they were traditional at the same time.



After learning about different styles of art, people will explore what would be the combination of two styles of art? Who introduced the different styles at first? Who promoted the artistic style of another region? Who combined the two styles? So, Li Shutong and Wu Guanzhong are very important figures to talk about how the two artistic styles were originally integrated and how they were traditional at the same time.

Back to the present, the achievements of today's traditional artists are not without the efforts of predecessors like Li Shutong and Wu Guanzhong. It is their exploration that enables later artists to have a deeper exploration. Gu Wenda and Peng Wei, for example, find more inspiration in traditional elements. In their transformations of the traditional, we can interpret and think of modern people. Although some artists do not live in China now, such as Gu Wenda, who now lives in New York, the elements he carries are always inseparable from the roots of the traditional national style. Whether Peng Wei or Gu Wenda, no matter how international and innovative their expression. The inheritance of the ancients is constant. So, the development of contemporary traditional art is also the same. They are constantly looking for their roots in today's pluralism, and they are also developing pluralism in their roots.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Guohua* and western Oil painting

#### **The Origin of *Guohua***

A traditional style of painting art originated in the Han Dynasty ((202 BC – 220 AD). Later known as *Guohua*, this *art* comprises traditional Chinese style subjects, formats and painting techniques. As for formats, these mainly refer to scroll paintings on silk or rice paper mounted on paper <sup>1</sup> Common to native technique is the use of a brush dipped in water, ink, or traditional pigments. Techniques can be divided into “specific drawing” and freehand. In terms of content, subjects can be figures, landscapes, flowers, and birds, and many other themes. Chinese painting reflects the ancient people's appreciation of nature as well as its society, politics, philosophy, religion, morality, and literature.

*Guohua* is a modern term to distinguish Chinese style painting from western inspired art which began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century. *Guohua*, which literally means national style painting, is distinct from western style, which relies on such techniques as drawing in perspective, modeling three-dimensional illusions by use of highlight and shading, a brightly colored palette, and using such material as oils and canvas. Realism is one primary mode of representation for western art: to portray as actually as possible what the eye sees. In contrast, traditional art mainly uses tools and materials such as Chinese brush, tobacco ink, inkstone tile and pigment on rice paper or silk, with which they depict the shape, charm and texture of the object through a set of unique techniques based on lines. Also, painters write

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<sup>1</sup> Whitfield, Roderick. Fascination of nature: *Plants and insects in Chinese painting and ceramics of the Yuan dynasty* (1279-1368) ( Yekyong Publications, 1993): page 78

poetry, calligraphy, and apply seal prints on the surface of the work. China's unique decorative mounting technique adds another level of design to the aesthetics of the painting. A prominent national style can be detected in these distinctive artistic techniques applied and integrated. In all, there are several types of national painting: school painting, literati painting, craftsman painting, and so on. According to techniques, there is fine brushwork, freehand brushwork, half-work writing, heavy color, light color, no color and so on. As for subject matter, there are mainly figure, landscape, flower-and-bird, boundary (architectural) painting, and more. The picture formats of Chinese painting include murals, screens, hand scrolls, vertical horizontal scrolls, album leaves, and fan shaped compositions.

Traditional painting emphasizes capturing "nature ", "to write god, both the form and the spirit". <sup>2</sup> Thus, Guohua sometimes has a deep spiritual component which distinguishes it from the frankly realistic western technique; the brush is an expressive instrument, reflecting the heart of the practitioner. Guohua's painters often paint their state of mind. For example, black and white landscape paintings look monotonous at first, but slowly, you will find the hazy beauty near and far, which also reflects the painter's spiritual world. Its "intention is to brush first, painting in all", <sup>3</sup> rather than the realistic pursuit of the image; its focus is on the performance of artistic conception. Chinese modern artists inherited the tradition of brush and ink, but in the 20th century they also borrowed and absorbed the methods of western painting, and its technical ability to represent forms in space was transformed.

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<sup>2</sup>Richard Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002) 93.

<sup>3</sup>Patricia Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002) 162.

## Guohua Technique

### 1. Fine brushwork and freehand brushwork

As for “Fine brushwork”, this technique is used in Guohua painting to depict objects neatly, meticulously. In Fine brushwork, only ink lines depict the object, and the artist does not lay down any color. Also, there is fine brushwork with heavy color: not only is the line drawing fine, but there is also heavy, gorgeous color. For example, in the early period of Chinese painting in the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD), fine brushwork dominated. But these tomb murals and folk New Year paintings are mostly meticulously colored. This technique is still popular among painters and viewers today.

“Freehand brushwork” is also called "thick pen". It refers to a technique used in Guohua painting to express the artistic conception by depicting the forms and verve of the images with extensive and concise brush strokes. Legend has it that in the Tang Dynasty, the eighth-century Wu Daozi once painted more than 300 li of Jialing landscape in one day, for which he may have used freehand brushwork.<sup>4</sup> After the Yuan Dynasty, freehand brushwork, with vivid use of the brush alone, flourished. From then on, the two schools of fine brushwork and of colored works, which followed tradition, formed different styles.

### 2. Brush method

Guohua painting with brush method comprises four categories of strokes, roughly divided into “hook”, “texture strokes”, “point”, and “dyeing. The hook which is an “outline”, also known as "trace", is the main stroke of traditional Chinese

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<sup>4</sup>Yuan Yougen. *Wu Daozi yanjiu* (City: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2002), p.75.

painting technique, used not only to draw the outline but also to show texture, light, and shade. For hook lines there are a lot of methods seen in ancient paintings of figures and their drapery. In ancient times, there are 11- 16 kinds of texture strokes, and other forms. There also is the stroke known as point, or "dot moss", which is used to make a straight, horizontal, round, pointed, or the "hemp stroke" with a broken ragged pen (the brush hairs are loose and have no definite shape) to represent the mossy weeds of rocks, slopes, branches or roots, and distant trees of mountains. Dye, also known as "render," gradually darkens so that traces cannot be seen. In addition, from the strength and speed of the brush, there are variations such as "lift", "pause", "press", "down", as well as "light", "heavy", "fast", "slow" kinds of applications and other differences.

### **3. Ink method**

Guohua is very particular about the use of ink. There is a saying that "ink is divided into five colors", which refers to the use of water to adjust the ink color: multi-level thick, light, dry, wet, burnt (dark). In general, the lines of Guohua paintings are characterized by thick ink, light ink, dry ink strokes, wet ink dizzy, burnt ink refreshing (with black and white layers of the picture), plus "white", collectively known as "six colors". The "seven methods of using ink", described by Guo Xi in his *Lofty Aspiration at a Spring of the Forest (Linquan gaozhi 林泉高致)* in the Northern Song Dynasty refers to accumulated ink, breaking ink, and splash-ink. The ink accumulation method is used with light and thick ink, gradually stained, thick, and moist ink. The method of breaking ink is to draw light ink first, and then break it with thick ink; or paint thick ink first, and then break it with light ink. This will make the shades of ink permeate each other, there is a moist fresh effect. The splashed ink

method uses a large amount of ink spilled on paper, ink, magnificent and unrestrained. Great freehand painting is usually done in this way.

### **Western Oil painting**

Western art technique began with water-based tempera, the precursor to oil painting, which was popular in Europe before the 15th century. Later, a painter named Jan Van Eyck (1385-1441) improved the painting materials and made continuous changes in oil painting technique. Because of his special contribution to oil painting, he is known as the father of oil painting. In modern oil paintings, linseed oil was used to blend pigments: it did not change color when dried and allowed painters to paint more vivid works with the modeling of forms with a three-dimensional sense and bright colors. Oil painting gradually became the main painting medium in western painting, and most of the existing works are oil paintings. The most famous work is Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* in the late 15th century. After the 19th century, due to the rapid development of science and technology, oil painting materials developed more new materials.<sup>5</sup>

The main materials and tools of oil painting are pigment, turpentine, brush, knife, canvas, gloss, frame, etc. Oil painting is used along with techniques for drawing objects in perspective, and with modeling and shading to convey the feeling of three-dimensional space. In oil painting the painter's color palette and techniques can produce the resonance of people's thoughts and feelings. Oil painting can convey the spirit of the picture to the viewer's heart. The general techniques of oil painting include patting, rubbing, line, sweep, stamping, pulling, suppression. Among them,

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<sup>5</sup>Oil painting at the *Encyclopedia Britannica* vol 18 P 5 Publisher: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. Published:1768 Editor: Hugh Chisholm.

there are three kinds of common, is a kind of transparent painting, and the method of thickness and direct application.<sup>6</sup>

### **1. Western style transparent painting**

Transparency was the basic technique in European oil painting until the 19th century. This technique has many steps. It is necessary to make a sketch and texture effects in accordance with one's own idea with the base material, and then dye it with thinly textured paints applied one layer of color on top of another. The effect is luminous, and the colors below are like a piece of stained glass. Rather than using two colors to harmonize directly to produce a third color, the third color is the result of visual harmony achieved with layers of paint, not a direct physical application. This technique is more troublesome, takes a long time for the layers to dry for only in this way could they apply more layers of transparent color with a cotton cloth or the fingers to rub, the color (hue). Therefore, few modern painters completely adopt this multilevel transparent painting method.

### **2. Thick nostalgia method**

Another name for “thick nostalgia method” is “luxury painting” or impasto. This method requires laying thick layers of paint on top of each other, which is extremely paint-consuming. Thick painting is more luxurious than transparent painting. This can be done when the paint is still wet, or by overlaying a thicker color on top of an already painted color. The purpose of thick coating is to highlight the point and shape the texture. Stacked three-dimensional entities give oil paintings a chunky look. It requires a strong medium, to support the thick layers of paint. Also,

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<sup>6</sup>Wang xi. On Oil Painting Technique and Emotion Expression (论油画技法与情感表现) [J] Literary Circle (Theoretical Edition) 2012 (01)

most painting is done with a paintbrush or scraper, like a small, thin brush, which is difficult to control. Rembrandt was the first artist to use the method of "thick painting". In his paintings, the bright colors of the face were so thick that some people in Amsterdam mocked his portrait and said that it could be hung by the nose.

### **3. Direct illustration**

Direct painting is now the most common technique in oil painting, and it is also called direct coloring. It means that after making the rough outline of the object on the canvas, it is completed at one time by virtue of the color feeling of the object or the conception of the color of the picture. After the work is finished, if there are defects, you can use a painting knife to scrape away and continue to adjust the color. Similar to the thick painting method, the pigments used in the painting process are relatively thick, with high color saturation and clear brush strokes, so that people can easily resonate with the content of the picture. This painting method generally does not consider the color produced by overlapping, does not make use of the background color plan, but sometimes dry painting can be added. Most beginners use this method of painting to create and sketch on the spot. Others collect images of people or environments. Its advantages are strong feeling, bright color, vivid pen, good cohesion, no oil absorption, passion expression, full of feelings. Direct painting generally requires artists to be very confident, because each stroke will affect the final picture.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ding rui. On the Artistic Characteristics of Western Oil Painting Color(论西方油画色彩的艺术特点) [J]. Grand Stage9(大舞台). 2014(08)



## CHAPTER TWO

### **Early Modern *Guohua* Master Li Shutong and Wu Guanzhong and the contemporary transformation of *Guohua* style**

#### **Li Shutong**

Li Shutong (1880-1942) was also a musician and poet. His ancient-style poems are widely read, and he also brought piano and drama to China: he was a pioneer in spreading western music to China. For example, *The Farewell Song* he wrote with lyrics is from the western 19th century traditional repertoire and has since been widely sung for more than 100 years. In his later years, he converted to Buddhism and became an eminent monk. He was regarded as the 11th hereditary ancestor of the Nanshan Sect of Zhongxing by the disciples of Buddhism.

Most of what I've described above are the basic forms of traditional art before the 1880s. But I believe traditional national style should go beyond the 1880s. In my opinion traditional national style and its different transformations extend to the present and then future. I don't have to talk much about it until 1880. Before 1880, most art was defined as traditional style; but after the 1880s, our definition of traditional national style is worth exploring. We can begin our discussion of traditional national style with Li Shutong who was certainly one of the main promoters who brought Western oil painting to China after 1880 and opened up new possibilities for the future of traditional national style. In 1905 he went to Japan to study western oil painting at Tokyo Art University, which taught a combination of blended eastern and western cultures in several disciplines and he promoted the foreign medium of oil painting in mainland China. Li Shutong not only brought western medium and style to China in his paintings, but also brought back the fusion and transformation of culture. So, the arrival of oil painting laid the foundation for the new definition of traditional national style. He was also the first person in China to

pioneer nude sketching. So, let's start with Li Shutong because his era was very special, exemplifying the cultural changes from the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China (1911).

Outside the farewell Pavilion meanders an ancient road, Into the horizon  
 lush grass has sowed. amidst the even breeze and fading flutes dance the  
 willows, while the setting sun drops below the sea of hills. In the far corners  
 of the earth and remote places, withered and fell half of my soul mates,  
 ultimately recalled to our friendship until the last bottle, for dreams will be  
 cold after tonight 's farewell.<sup>8</sup>

This poem appears on a work painted in 1915, during the early years of the Republic of China. Every time I read this poem; I am moved to tears deep in my heart. Its original author Li Shutong was born in Tianjin into a wealthy family. He has lived with his young mother since his father died when he was five. Li Shutong was a precocious genius. At the age of ten, he was already familiar with poetry and calligraphy and could write decent calligraphy. He successively learned seal cutting, poetry and drama from famous scholars. At a young age, he became quite famous in Tianjin, Yilin. In order to escape the political turmoil, Li Shutong emigrated to the French concession in Shanghai. He went out on his own too early, but he got the chance to show his talents. He was a student at the Economics Department of Nanyang Public School, but in order to support the student movement, he dropped out of school and founded a new student organization, the Shanghai Society, offering lectures, workshops and new student dramas. He set the *Classic of Songs* and other ancient lyrics to western music and they became widely admired. Proficient in calligraphy and seal cutting, he set up a calligraphy and painting association with

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<sup>8</sup> Translator: Peter, Jingcheng Xu

Shanghai famous calligraphers and painters to jointly organize the *Calligraphy and Painting Newspaper*. He liked to listen to the opera, so he boldly made for the stage in such plays as *Huang Tianba* in Beijing Opera. His mother died when he was 26. Because he went to choose the coffin, he did not see his mother for the last time, which became a lifelong regret. After the funeral of his mother in Tianjin, he was so regretful about his own weakness that he did not return to Shanghai. Instead, he chose to study in Japan alone. In Japan, he was admitted to the Tokyo Art School and studied musical instruments and arrangement at the music school. While practicing painting and music, he developed a passion for drama. Under the influence of Japan's "new school of drama", he and his friend Zeng Xiaogu formed a drama club called "Chun Liu Club", which premiered *La Traviata* and created a sensation.

When Li Shutong returned to the motherland, he was already 30 years old. He went to work as a teacher in the First Normal School of Zhejiang province. Instead of wearing a formal suit, he changed into grey coarse cloth robes, black mandarin jacket, and cloth shoes. Students felt that he was solemn and almost wooden, colleagues recall his strict schedule. Although he had a thin physique, his spirit was concise, even the sound of his walking was very solid. Li Shutong was the first to offer nude painting courses in China. Drawing and music, which had been neglected, became the focus of the school after he came. He had his students paint plasterwork and mannequins, and it became a social novelty to go out on holidays and sketch from life. As every normal university student had to study music, the music and songs were played on campus at 4 pm every day. Many songs written by Li, such as *Spring Outing*, *Early Autumn* and *Moonlight Night*, including the most popular *Farewell*, were completed during this period. The seven years he spent in Hangzhou were

transformative in his life. His enthusiasm for western art seemed to have waned, and he wrote verse and lyrics.

Li Shutong converted to Buddhism at the age of 39 and went to the Buddhist student Feng Zikai's house. He would shake the wooden rattan chair every time he was about to sit on it, explaining that "this wooden rattan chair may have insects, so after shaking these little lives run away, and I can sit down without killing them."<sup>9</sup> A few weeks later, his Japanese wife, who had been deeply in love with him, took her young son all the way from Shanghai to Hangzhou Lingyin Temple, hoping to persuade her husband not to abandon her as a monk. This was the 11th year of their relationship. However, he had made up his mind and he would not let his wife or child through the temple gate. The wife had no choice but to leave, turned to the closed door and asked sadly, "You are merciful to the world. Why do you hurt me?" His wife wanted to see her husband one last time, knowing that she could not make him come back. Early in the morning, two boats faced each other on the misty West Lake, and she said, "Li Shutong," but he replied. "Please call me Hongyi, (my monk's name)." His wife said, "Master Hongyi, please tell me what is love?" Li Shutong said, "Love is compassion." Therefore, I learned there is a kind of love called great love: the love of men and women is also contained in great love, and the love of all beings is love. We don't know the pain of living beings until we have suffered. Having worried, I can no longer worry."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Fangyuan. Study Notes(学习指要): Beijing People's Publishing House(北京人民出版社),2001 P 34-38

<sup>10</sup> Jingmei, The Revised Biography of Master Hongyi(悲欣交集弘一法师传增订本), Fujian Education Press(福建教育出版社), 2012.08.

### Li Shutong's work



Figure 1 Li Shutong, *Portrait of a Semi-Naked Woman*, 1909 with oil 91cm×116.5cm Art Collection of Central Academy of Fine Arts

Li Shutong painted a half-naked woman wrapped in cloth in about 1909 for the Central Academy of Fine Arts Collection. (Figure 1) The figure has long been considered to be his second wife, a Japanese who he married when he went to study abroad. Here he has accepted the western style of drawing a nude, a subject foreign to Guohua tradition, also unlike the traditional style, he makes a brightly colored composition with a contrast between the nude and her colorful surroundings. This is a challenge from the technique point of view in that it is a completely western style oil painting. On the whole, the model is obviously the leading role in the painting. She is reclining naked on a chair, holding a fan in her hand. There is a faint sadness and shyness in the expression of the model, with her eyes closed, and the corners of her mouth not smiling. The long red dress that she wears is in sharp contrast to the green quilt on which she sits. The left side of the table is covered with the fabric, and on it is a vase with a blooming flower. The vase is clearly an object favored by western still

life painting, as Chinese do not show cut flowers. In contrast we can look at his Chinese traditional style after he converted to Buddhism in his later years.

We will look at the transformation of traditional national style in Li Shutong's life--he has gone to black and white in this second phase of traditional national style's transition, this transformation is: His paintings not only do not lose tradition, but he also retains its spirit. The metamorphosis of the traditional national style has come to light in Li Shutong's Zen paintings. Like this work, *Shi Chan*: (Figure 2)



Figure 2 Li Shutong, 1880-1942 *Shichan* undated ink and color on paper (89cm×110.4cm) Art collection of Central Academy of Fine Arts

is a work of traditional style on the whole, but a closer look shows his Zen painting style after he converted to Buddhism. The painting contains several lotus leaves, lotus seed pods, white lotus flowers in the lotus pond and a fish under the lotus flowers. The lotus leaves are treated with a special black and white gradient use of ink. He uses a lighter shade of ink with fewer lines. Scattered around are many ink spots in the classical style of the famous Song Dynasty 11th century artist calligrapher Mi Fu.

The lotus leaves and branches are simple. Interestingly, the method of painting the fish is in the style of classical Chinese painting, which focuses on nature. It feels like the fish is not in the water, it's coming out of the picture. He uses color cleverly, somewhere between hazy and white, and a bit of red is natural. One of the sources for this Buddhist image is the Zen artist of the early 18th century Bada Shanren who also painted lotus and fish. <sup>5</sup> Bada Shanren's paintings are simple in strokes, but they are rich in artistic conception.

Li Shutong's *Shichan* (Figure 2) has gone beyond abstraction and returned to concrete images. This painting has the ancient brushwork style, comprising a few strokes that reflect the author's state of mind. But looking at the painting's plain and not rigidly conventional style, there is a kind of evocation of Zen. The technique itself is not necessarily the first thing that makes a good work. From the first, we are moved by the spirit expressed in the work. This spirit is the feeling of his life experience, he not only applied the technique to the painting, but he also applied the feeling to the painting and expressed it, so that his painting could not only stay on the technical level. Just like the painting of him after he converted to Buddhism (Figure 2), people can see a kind of Buddhist conception behind the technology. That's his spirit. A really good work must be done with the heart, this is beyond the ink itself, his creative intention is not only the display of technique. The higher the state of the artist, the longer the space and time the work penetrates; today people are still moved by it. Therefore, if the painter only stays in the exploration and pursuit of techniques and forms, instead of working on the realm of mind, the so-called "brush and ink" may become your eternal bondage. We should observe this rule of formal constraint, but not be limited by the rule itself. And the traditional

national style is supposed to be like this. Therefore, the combination of the traditional national style spirit of the ancients like Li Shutong and the use of western techniques can be turned into one's own style and then the pursuit of the realm of traditional national style will enable the traditional national style to enter a higher realm.

Nowadays, most base their art on imitation of the masters, and there is a huge gap between the understanding of the universe, the cognition of life, the idea of all things in the world and the master of theistic belief. It is hard for us to realize the true meaning of life in all things, and it is impossible to respect heaven, earth, mountains and rivers from the heart and learn the spirit of nature from nature like Li Shutong, so we cannot learn the essence of the master. The point is not to pursue the form of the master's brush and ink, but to learn the master's understanding of things. Only in this way can we truly convey the spirit, in this way you will understand what the higher state is because what he paints is the understanding of nature and life, and brush and ink is only a tool of expression. In other words, the state of the traditional national style's mind determines the state of the traditional national style. So, in Li Shutong's works, we can see that after he converted to Buddhism, he added more spiritual understanding besides his techniques. Only in this way can we see more depth in the work.

From the two styles of these two works, we can see the whole life of Li Shutong. We can see that he received the traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy education in the late Qing Dynasty when he was young, and we can also see the western oil painting color when he studied in Japan and then the Zen painting style when he converted to Buddhism in his later years. So, you can see a subtle change in the context of the whole Li Shutong era, because a lot of artists in that era had similar



experiences to Li Shutong. So, the original national traditional style has also undergone some changes. As the experience of Li Shutong, from the strong impact of western colors to the kind of return to the original nature of the real themselves. Before there is an obvious change in the traditional national style, let's take a brief look at the basic style of western oil painting.

### **Wu Guanzhong**

A second Guohua artist is Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) another one of the great artists who combined the western and the national style. In terms of cultural connection, what I admire most is Wu Guanzhong's artistic spirit, especially in his private confession, he said:

I have two audiences, one is the western master, and the other is the Chinese common people. The gap between the two is too big, how to adapt? It's a human connection. My painting is to seek beauty, and the second is to seek artistic conception, with these two I began to paint. I didn't care about looks and beauty. At that time in the countryside, I sometimes painted sorghum, corn, wildflowers and so on for a day. The landlady's sister-in-law said it was very similar, but I felt that I cheated her by not expressing my feelings and not painting well. I've seen so many pictures that I don't like them if they don't touch my feelings. Art to the peak is the same, east and West, just like mountain climbing, east and west scenery is different, meet at the top of the mountain. But there is a problem: Picasso could appreciate Qi Baishi, but not the other way around. Why? For example, western musicians can understand the Erhu and play it on the piano. Our erhu players do not understand the piano, nor can they make the sound of the piano, why? Because our vision is narrow. Consanguineous marriage in Chinese painting is becoming more and

more degenerate and even obscene from generation to generation. I was lucky: Before I went abroad, I studied Chinese painting with Pan Tianshou. He was completely traditional, and he painted well. Then I studied in Paris for three years. I saw all the galleries in Europe and knew what was good about western art. After coming back, combine the national conditions, try to show. I understand that the traditional things have passed away and it is no use to emphasize them. Lu Xun has already pointed them out. It's impossible to go back to tradition. It's a dead end. However, there are a large number of Chinese painters who do not understand western art and cannot accept it. Some even scold Matisse for rejecting and attacking western art, which actually, shackles them. As a result, they will only follow the tradition of the ancients and will not innovate. Any Chinese painter who is a little creative has learned western painting. The great critics of the West do not reject eastern art, they appreciate it.<sup>11</sup>

In the mid-1990s, a modern China exhibition was held in Hong Kong, with the media highlighting two key themes: Huang Binhong for tradition and Wu Guanzhong for innovation. Wu Guangzhong said:

They described me as a rebellious mentor who "represented a tremendous force of innovation beyond tradition and transformed traditional Chinese painting." I am too strict in art. Considering the future of Chinese painting after a hundred years, I only suffer from... Few artists are artists, but most of them are painters, and they can publish their works. In order to achieve fame and wealth, they are busy with survival, and they have given up learning. The whole society is impetuous, publications, newspapers, books,

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<sup>11</sup> Andrews, Julia (2012). *The Art of Modern China*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press): 159.

open to see, face is impetuous; The art galleries and exhibitions are so dense that it is not so much a cultural boom as a race for the rice bowl, a grandstanding that is no match for the simple soul of inspired art creation. Art from the heart and inspiration, the soul and inspiration cannot be bought and sold, artists have no career. The most important thing is the thought -- the feeling. Feelings are true or false, Quality can be good or bad some people have feelings but cannot express the thought. I now pay more attention to ideas, take technology more seriously, technology is nothing, nothing. Thought leading, subject matter, content, realm brand-new, ink is equal to zero.<sup>12</sup>

Wu Guanzhong's discussion above mainly expresses the combination and innovation of traditional national style and western style. Similarly, Wu Guanzhong like Li Shutong is also a spiritual thinker. It's not just technology. In a discussion on the development of Chinese modern artists, such as the integration of Guohua and western modern art, Wu Guanzhong suggested that future Chinese artists should have their own thinking and use different ways of expression. This is also the reason why he combines tradition style with the west style to become a great artist.<sup>13</sup>

### **Wu Guanzhong's Artistic Training**

Wu Guanzhong is one of the representative painters of modern Chinese painting in the 20th century. For a long time, he has been unremittingly exploring the different aesthetic concepts of the two artistic languages of eastern and western

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<sup>12</sup> Andrews, Julia (2012). *The Art of Modern China*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press): 159

<sup>13</sup> "Master of Chinese painting dies". *Shanghai Daily*. Xinhua News Agency. 27 June 2010. Retrieved 27 June 2010.

painting, and perseveringly creating concepts of "nationalization of oil painting" and "modernization of Chinese painting", which has formed two distinct artistic characteristics. He keeps a watchful eye on the true feelings "in the motherland, in the hometown, in the homeland, in his own heart", and expresses the aesthetic needs of the nation and the public. Wu Guanzhong's works have a high cultural character. Since the 1980s, his artistic concept and painting creation have been adapted to the needs of the historical development and the times, which has promoted the evolution and development of the concept of modern Chinese painting. Wu Guanzhong has made great achievements in art creation and art education. He is committed to the exploration of nationalization of oil painting and modernization of Chinese painting and enjoys a high reputation at home and abroad. Many times, he has exhibited in the National Art Museum of China; and in more than 10 major cities in China he has had a one-man show, and successively in Singapore's National Museum, the Hong Kong Arts Centre, the Chinese Cultural Center in San Francisco, Birmingham, the University of Kansas Art Museum, the Museum of Detroit, the British Museum, Paris City Museum and more.

Wu Guanzhong was born in 1919 in Yixing County, Jiangsu Province, China. After graduating from the middle School of Wuxi Normal School, Wu Guanzhong was admitted to the Provincial Senior Industrial Vocational School of Zhejiang University, and then transferred to Hangzhou Art Academy, where he studied Chinese and western painting from such masters as Li Chaishi, Chang Shuhong and Pan Tianshou. In 1942, he graduated from Hangzhou National Art Academy and became an assistant professor at National Chongqing University. He taught in the Department of Architecture, National Chongqing University. In 1946, he won the first prize in painting, and at public expense, he studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des

Beaux Arts in Paris. With Professor Souferpi he studied oil painting in the studio. At the same time, he studied art history at The Ruffe Art History School, with outstanding achievements. In 1950, he returned to China after studying abroad and taught in The Central Academy of Fine Arts, in the Architecture Department of Tsinghua University, Beijing Academy of Arts, and Central Academy of Arts and Crafts. In 1970, during the Cultural Revolution, he was sent to rural Hebei province to work for three years and then returned to Beijing to work on paintings. In 1991, the French Ministry of Culture awarded him the Highest honor of French literature. In 1992, the British Museum broke the convention of displaying ancient cultural relics only, and held "Wu Guanzhong -- A Chinese Painter in the 20th century", an exhibition that was for the first time concerned with a living painter and collected Wu Guanzhong's huge new painting of color ink *Bird's Paradise*. In 1993, The Seneuch Museum in Paris, France, held the exhibition of Wu Guanzhong's Oil paintings and Ink Sketches and awarded him the "Gold Medal of The City of Paris". He is also a corresponding member of the Academie des Arts Francaise, the first Chinese artist to receive this honor, and the first Asian to hold this position in the nearly 200 years since the establishment of the Academie Francaise.

### **Wu Guanzhong's Artistic Production**

Wu tried to combine the intuitive vividness and rich and delicate colors of European oil paintings with the traditional Chinese artistic spirit and aesthetic ideal. He is good at presenting the scenery of the water town in the South of The Yangtze River, in the new green of early spring, the thin mist, a waterside cottage with black tiles and white walls, using harmonious and fresh colors, tranquil and pale beauty of the scene, which produces a lyric poetic appeal. Since the 1970s, Wu Guanzhong has

become a part-time artist of Chinese painting. He tried to use traditional Chinese materials and tools to express the modern spirit and to explore the innovation of Chinese painting. His ink and wash painting is novel in conception and unique in style. He is good at expressing poetic and painterly ideas by interweaving points, lines and surfaces. He liked to summarize objects and to show the musical rhythm and corresponding psychological feelings of nature in a semi-abstract form. It is not only full of Chinese tradition and interesting, but also has the characteristics of the times, which makes the viewer refreshing. As an art educator, Wu Guanzhong paid attention to the cultivation of students' artistic personality. As a good thinking artist, he is also diligent in writing, unique arguments, and vivid and fluent writing.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 3, Wu Guanzhong, *Tiger Running in Hangzhou*, 1980s ink and color on paper (69×45.5cm)

<sup>14</sup> Wangchenhao. *The Root of Tradition -- On the Chinese Art Spirit of Zhao Wuji, Zhu Dequn and Wu Guanzhong.*(传统之根 ——试论赵无极、朱德群、吴冠中的中国艺术精神). (China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House): 100-102

One of his five paintings I like is the *Tiger Running in Hangzhou*, painted in color ink paper in 1980. (Figure 3) It looks simple and abstract, but you can clearly see the scene--the pine trees, temples, bamboo forests, distant mountains. These images are characteristic of classical Chinese landscape painting. At the bottom of the painting, we see that the roots of the old tree are much larger. So, you can see that the artist's view is coming from a distance so that the roots of the tree are bigger. Looking at the branches and bamboo branches at the top, we can see the painter's traditional national painting skills, especially the details of the branches and bamboo leaves. The large white space in the middle shows the spatial sense of the composition of this work, and the proportion of white in the middle just highlights the contrast of colors behind., structure and traditional landscape painting is very similar. Using grey ink, he presents the pine tree with simple lines that describe the texture of the bark, the way the old pine tree bends, its dry branches extended outward. The green pigment and perspective of bamboo leaves use the techniques of western oil painting. The vitality and density of the bamboo leaves are more clearly displayed on a sharp diagonal line, reflecting the perspective of western style painting. Also at the center of the picture is a large white space, a modern technique, that contrasts with the drawing of bamboo forests in the background. Showing the poetic scenery of Jiangnan water town.

Another of his works I also like is *Spring Snow* : (Figure 4)



Figure 4 Wu Guanzhong, *Spring Snow* 1983 paper ink color, (69 x 137 cm )

This painting of mountains in southwest China, the *Jade Dragon Snow Mountains*, is a nearly pure abstract composition. Using the boneless technique, Wu created broad areas of grey wash on the empty paper, placing the mass of the mountain at center. Random dark black dots may indicate trees, and grey brush strokes detail the crest of the mountain form. Below a few dots suggest the presence of a little cottage. The appearance of the landscape is very modern in its large size, close up view, and nearly abstract presentation, but the subject, materials and technique are traditional. The combination is very atmospheric.

There is another one of his works that I like very much, and it is also his favorite subject.



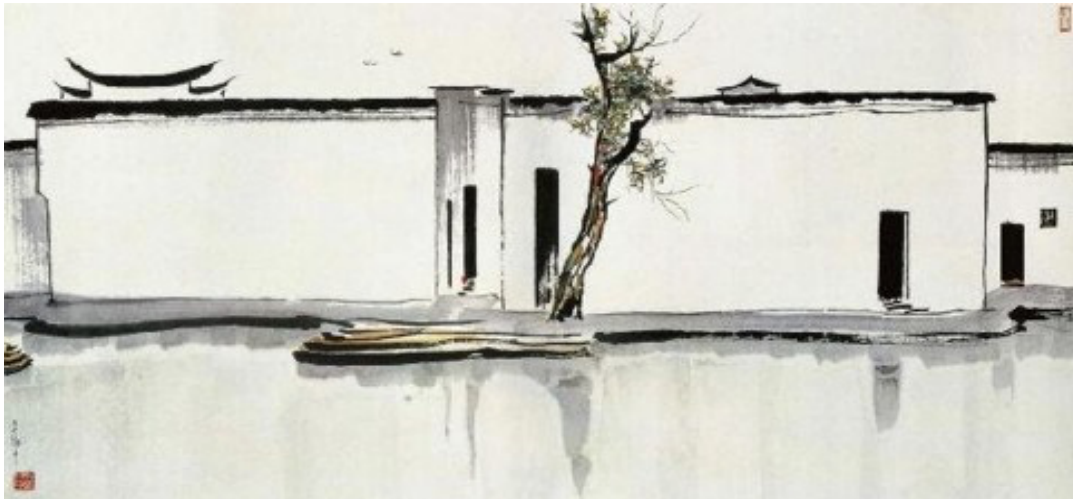


Figure 5 Wu Guanzhong, *Double Swallows*, color and ink painting, (69x137cm)

which is called *Double Swallows*, made with ink and colors on paper. (Figure 5) The image of the picture is treated as a geometric composition of horizontals and verticals to form a contrast. In the middle of the painting is an old tree, which has a very simple feeling done in traditional national style. The ratio of the size of this tree is also a golden ratio in the painting and the details of the trees are painted in fine western colors. The upturned eaves on the left show the drawing in the traditional national brush style. The black eaves, white walls, and black trim are complemented by the light gray river. This is a nearly monochrome composition but for the middle of the small pile of steps which is faint yellow and the delicate green tree. In Wu Guanzhong's opinion, purism and supremacy in the West "pursue the beauty of simplicity, but their emotional expression is too vague", like a broken kite, which will eventually make the emotion of artists helpless or even equal to zero. "The kite of continuous string" is the convergence point and theoretical creation Wu Guanzhong found in the collision of Chinese and western arts, and it is this important balance point that he seeks between representativeness and abstraction, artistic conception and tacit understanding.



Figure 6 Wu Guanzhong, *The Mirror Heart of Jiaohe City*, 1981 colors and ink on paper

*The Mirror Heart of Jiaohe City* (Figure 6) uses a very brief method to show the natural landforms and urban customs of the old city, which is a dignified, quiet view executed without haste. The overall composition is an abstract rendering of the city's buildings done in loose strokes of grey and black. In the use of color, Wu Guanzhong also achieves both simplicity and accuracy, with few light colors in the painting. However, a seal at the bottom left of the picture cleverly balances the whole picture perfectly, while the light blue of the sky unifies the composition of the whole city, making the picture full of life. Occasionally a bit of yellow wash covers a few of the buildings. At the top, small gray dots hang over the city like birds, giving the whole city a sense of repression. (Figure 6) Wu Guanzhong has a wonderful comprehensive

vision and great courage and childlike innocence; we never can't find any unnecessary details, he always presents the objects in a simplified manner: the structure of Jiaohe City is so tight, we cannot imagine he can further add a wall or a blade of grass. The ancient city of Jiaohe is recognized as the milestone of Wu's Guanzhong's artistic attainment. This work shines and has a far-reaching influence in the history of Modern Chinese art. He explained,

Jiaohe is an ancient city of Loulan that disappeared along the Silk Road of China. It was a major archaeological discovery in the 20th century. Jiaohe city, five kilometers northwest of Turpan, Xinjiang. From the western Han to the later Wei, the former kingdom of Che Shi had its capital here. The boundless space between heaven and earth above the ruined wall depicts hundreds of flying crows and reveals the desolation of the old castle and the vicissitudes of history more profoundly. So that the viewer standing in front of the painting will be shocked and attracted.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> More than 40 masterpieces of Wu Guanzhong's 100th birthday collection exhibition will be displayed on Chinanews.com(吴冠中百年诞辰收藏大展举行40余件佳作亮相中新网)[ 201903-17 ]

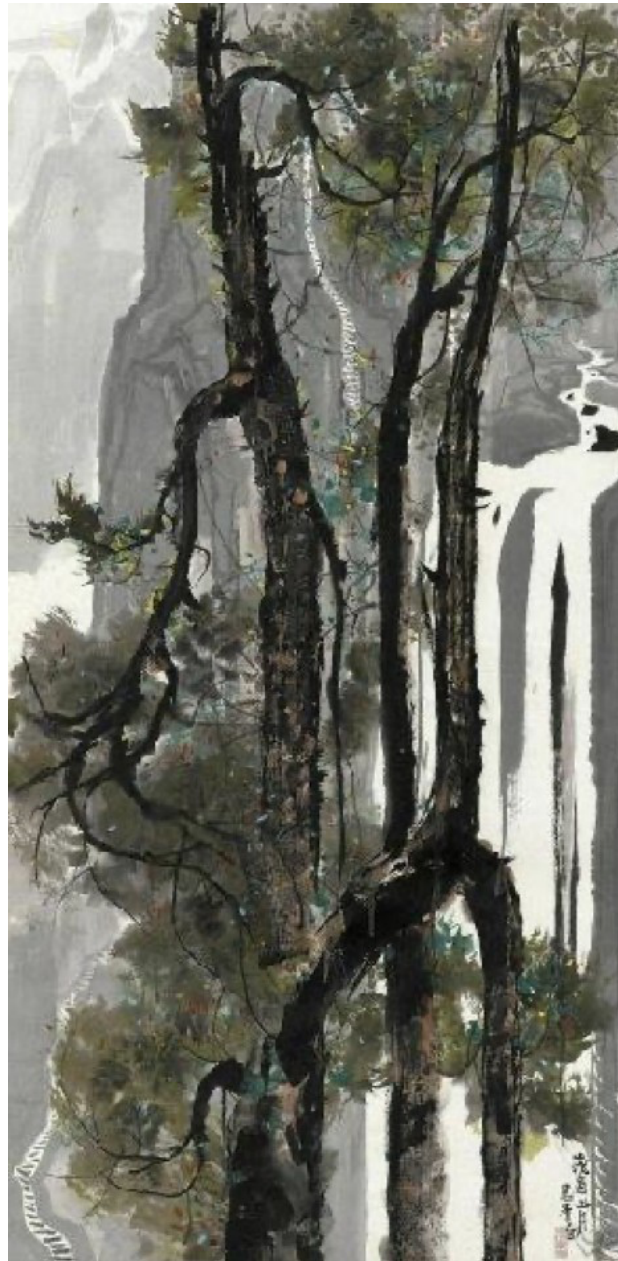


Figure 7, Wu Guanzhong, *Mount Emei* 1978 colors and ink on paper

A picture of Mount *Emei* (Figure 7) is from the autumn of 1978, when he went to Sichuan province to sketch from life. On it, he wrote the Tang dynasty 8th century Li Bai's poem *The Moon on Mount Emei*: "In the half-autumn of Mount Emei, its shadow flows into the Pingqiang River. Night Qingxi to the three Gorges, think you cannot see Yuzhou." The poem is the work of Li Bai when he fled Shu (Sichuan) in his youth, seen from the perspective of the poet who starts from Qingxi at night and looks back at the half moon hanging on the top of the mountain. It expresses a kind of

yearning. In this picture, the artist is instilling the idea of love.

The main body of the painting is the towering ancient tree. The trunk is written with heavy strokes in ink and ochre, which are uneven in wet and dry. He applies the ochre first, and then the dry ink is applied to show its old and vigorous state and the rough texture of bark. He paints the leaves with ink and color randomly, the irregular shapes give the sense of a rich layer of leaves in autumn, already turning slightly yellow. The thin brush is soft and elastic, which seems to be dancing in the wind, increasing the rhythmic sense of the picture. There are red, green in the trunk and branches that contrast with the solid color heavy grey ink both of the mountains in the background. There have always been various methods of painting trees, but in this picture, the artist has taken a different approach, combining the formal structure in western painting with traditional Chinese brush and ink, and presenting the unique posture of the ancient Emei trees by means of interweaving points, lines and surfaces. Looking through the gap between the branches, I could see the majestic mountains, deep gullies, waterfalls like curtains, clouds, winding mountain paths, all written in light grey ink, but clearly layered, presenting an infinitely vast space. In the upper left corner, on the distant peaks of the mountains, the artist paints a half-moon reflecting on the limpid Pingqiang River, but it is small and far away, a glimpse of Li Bai's state of mind as he sailed away. The whole painting is novel in conception and unique in style. Its modeling is based on the balance of realism and abstraction, and its style is free and smooth, which is in line with Li Bai's poetry. Those color elements are missing from traditional National style, so Wu's style gives this painting a different artistic conception after the combination of Chinese and western.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Contemporary *Guohua* Artists Gu Wenda and Peng Wei

#### Gu Wenda

A contemporary art who draws upon the rich foundation of *Guohua* painting is Gu Wenda. Gu, who now lives in New York, spent his youth in China before coming to the United States. His artistic style is influenced by both Chinese and western styles from the *Guohua* style to the modern style. Gu Wenda was born in Shanghai in 1955 and was originally from Zhejiang province. In 1973, he graduated from Shanghai Arts and Crafts School. In 1979, Gu Wenda was admitted as one of Mr. Lu Yanshao's first five graduate students. In 1981, he graduated in Chinese painting at the China Academy of Art under the tutelage of Lu Yanshao and later taught in the school. At the age of 24, Gu Wenda officially began his professional Chinese painting career. At this time, Gu Wenda thought that he was "not only painting, because the theory should have a breakthrough!"<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Gu Wenda spent much more time on reading, drawing from ancient to modern philosophy, literature, religion, science and art history. A calligraphy piece by teacher Lu Yanshao hangs on the stairway wall of Gu Wenda's Brooklyn Heights Historic Preservation in New York. This work is not an ordinary piece of calligraphy and painting, but a letter of recommendation written by Teacher Lu in 1987 when Gu Wenda applied for the San Francisco Art Institute. For years, Gu Wenda looked on it affectionately when he went up and downstairs and in and out of the house every day; it became a part of Gu Wenda's daily life. After graduation, Gu Wenda was retained to teach at the school. Beginning in 1981 Gu Wenda created a number of large-scale ink calligraphy paintings, ink performance art and ink installation while he taught in the Chinese painting department of Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts until 1987. <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.wendagu.com/Hom>

During his teaching and professional life at the university, Gu Wenda's contemporary concept of ink painting was supported by Pan Gongkai, an art historian of the Chinese Painting Department at that time, then the president of Zhemei and now the president of CMA. In 1987, Gu Wenda received many honors, among them the Canadian National Visiting Foreign Artist Award and held his first solo exhibition abroad at York University in Toronto. He moved to New York in the same year and has been a professional artist ever since. Art historians considered Gu Wenda's works as the origin of Chinese conceptual ink art. As early as 1984 he participated in the Wuhan National Invitational Exhibition of Chinese Painting and in 1986 in the Chinese Academy of Arts and Shaanxi Artists Association jointly held in Xi 'an as the "Chinese Painting History Seminar" personal exhibition. His large-scale use of his pseudo calligraphy series in ink painting and installations set a precedent. Peter Selz, a world-renowned art historian and professor at the University of Berkeley, described Gu Wenda as "the most controversial and original Chinese artist since the Cultural Revolution".<sup>17</sup> In his book *History of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Gao Minglu wrote: "Only Gu Wenda, as an individual artist, could compete with many groups during the Eighth Five-Year Movement."<sup>17</sup> After arriving in the United States, Gu Wenda's biggest artistic change was in the use of material form. He gradually gave up ink painting and turned to the installation art that he had started in earlier years. Since the early 1990s, a series of Gu Wenda's works have taken the human body as the starting point. Since 1993, his creation of cross-ethnic, cross-cultural and cross-national art project *United Nations*, has been completed and shown in 20 countries and regions of the monument. More than four million people have donated their hair to the art project which was collected by art museums around the world.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.wendagu.com/Hom>

## Gu Wenda's Works

Gu's large-scale ink paintings (Figure 5) with macro, surreal and symbolic significance are far from the official debate on the so-called "abstract beauty" of Wu Guanzhong at that time. Gu Wenda's ink art is far from such discussions. At that time, Gu Wenda felt that such "abstract beauty" was not only related to the recognition on the official level, but also related to the Soviet realism and socialist realistic oil painting, which were dominant in the art circle at that time. But after the Current '85 Avant-garde Art Movement it was meaningless; it seems it was not a problem at all. The problem of abstract beauty had been solved in Kandinsky's time. Gu Wenda recalls that at that time he felt that the discussion of "abstract beauty" was hardly a real artistic issue, but a category of craft and decorative paintings.<sup>18</sup>

Gu Wenda wrote that since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the new internationalism, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, has taken all the existing cultures of the world and brought them into the order of the new internationalism. Under such a premise, it has led to a crisis, contradiction, transformation and serious challenge to the identity of various existing cultures in the world, as well as the reconstruction under the new internationalist order, which is manifested as the disputes among various regional and interstate cultures in the world. "My experimental art works in this period with human genes and human body materials as the themes and subjects are a counter-challenge to it, and a response from the social and cultural levels, as well as from the concepts and strategies. The United Nations series, which I have been working on for more than ten years, represents the crisis of contemporary utopian cultural identity and a terminal point of identity."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Introduction of Wenda Gu (谷文达简介) NetEase (网易) 2012-06-01

<sup>19</sup> What is experimental ink painting (实验水墨是什么水墨) Sina finance and economics (新浪财经) 2011-10-28



Two of his works impressed me deeply. Among them, his *Myth, The Lost Emperor* (Figure 8) done in 1985, is particularly special. It comprises several large-scale paintings made with ink and brush in monochromatic compositions that have an abstract landscape painting with huge characters written in Gu's original deconstructed Chinese. Gu Wenda, a pioneer of Chinese contemporary art, explored new ways of expression of Chinese calligraphy in the period of the art trend in 1985. He first disassembled Chinese characters and transformed the recombined calligraphy into a series of expressionist paintings. The ancient Chinese hieroglyphs themselves are abstract and linear representations of objects. After thousands of years of changes, Chinese characters have been constantly simplified. Chinese calligraphy reproduces the words through the expression of the subjective lines of the calligrapher, therefore, Chinese calligraphy has a strong abstract form and expressionism, but also representative of Chinese culture. Gu Wenda shuttling between ancient and modern times, created a unique artistic language. At the same time, he retains the emotional quality of calligraphy and the beauty of ink painting, which touches the core of traditional Chinese ink painting. In addition, he revived the tradition of ideographic writing, which had been forgotten for more than fifty years.



Figure 8 1983-1987: *Myth. The Lost Imperial Form C 1983-7* by Gu Wenda (four pieces in total) Ink on paper (65×95.3cm)

Gu Wenda's influential *Mythology of the Lost Dynasty* series (Lot 1627), created in the mid-1980s, shows the core elements of the artist's exploration of tradition and modernity. As a child, Gu Wenda was asked to create "large figure" posters for Mao's Red Guards. Wenda Gu sublimated his personal experience in the conceptual and philosophical essence of his artistic approach. Gu's first solo exhibition in 1986 featured a series of signature large-scale ink paintings with deliberately misspelled, unrecognizable characters that some critics said were a reaction to the abuse of language through simplification of the writing system in Mao years. China's Central Propaganda Department, suspicious of political damage and unable to read Gu's fictional script, did not allow the exhibition to open. In this series, created in 1983, Gu draws inspiration from his study of the ancient seal script to create works that are both aesthetically impressive and unreadable. It is this metaphor

that makes Gu's work feel so radical: China's long history of writing and language, a vehicle for cultural inheritance, is made worthless and meaningless. While this may seem like a nod to tradition, Gu thoroughly separates content, language and meaning, revealing the complex message behind with an unexpected image.

Another of his works is also very meaningful, *Forest of Steles – Poems of the later Tang Dynasty* : (Figure 9)

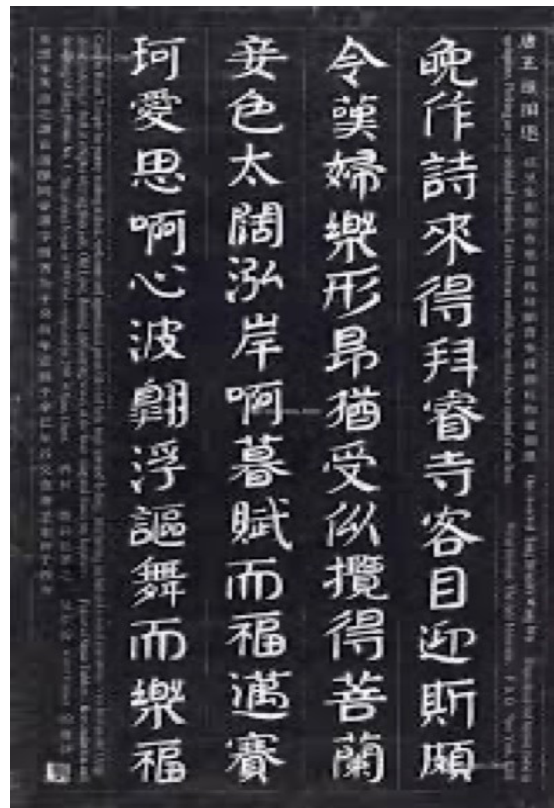


Figure 9 *Forest of Steles -- Poems of the Later Tang Dynasty*) 2004 Each tablet is 110cm x 190cm x 20cm, weighing 1.3 tons)

The large-scale installation *Forest of Steles – Poems of the Tang Dynasty*, completed by Gu Wenda in mainland China in 2004, took 12 years to complete due to various dilemmas and problems of contemporary culture in the process of globalization. With 50 traditional Chinese steles as the material and 50 Chinese-

English translations of Tang poems as the contents of its inscriptions, it aims to demonstrate the untranslatability of cultures through the imprecision of language translation.

Gu Wenda's *Forest of Steles* series consists of 50 elaborately carved rectangular steles, each measuring 190x110x20 cm, weighing 1.3 tons and horizontally laid 1. Each side of the monument is decorated with a scaly pattern reminiscent of the body of a dragon. This pattern is Gu Wenda's own invention. The surface of each stone tablet is inscribed with Chinese and English texts. At the time of the exhibition, there are framed rubbings hanging on the wall that are copied from the surface of the stele in ink. Each tablet is inscribed with a famous Tang poem, using the original Chinese text and an English translation of the poem, Gu's translates the English poem into Chinese according to its pronunciation rather than meaning, and the translation of the new Chinese poem into English according to changes the meaning of the word, rendering it as meaningless.

Gu Wenda emphasizes the absurdity caused by the "inaccuracy" in the "export" and "import" of language between different cultural regions by promoting the mutation of characters (including sound images and visual images). Once there is a word, no matter considering its sound image or visual image, it will inevitably involve the plural. In this work, the principle of plurality is first embodied in the carrier of the stone tablet. From the point of view of function, stone tablets are always associated with the classic, eternal and commemorative, and the main symbol of them is of course the text (earlier there were also graphic words, such as the Maya stone tablets). From the characters written on bamboo slips or paper to the characters on

stone tablets, itself has experienced the copying process of "transfer facsimile". And in theory, the copying process can go on indefinitely. And the words engraved on the stone tablet can be copied into rubbings without limit, of course, its form and meaning also produce variation. In addition, *Forest of Steles -- Poems of the Later Tang Dynasty* integrates a large number of deliberately "pseudo characters", free translation of poetry, mistranslated as it is based on sound units not words. We see, in this confused and wonderful combination, the original aesthetic meaning of the words in the image prevail. However, it should be noted that this aesthetic sense has become an element to express the artist's concept and is no longer an artistic purpose. In terms of concept, we can see that Gu Wenda, like Xu Bing <sup>20</sup>, also reflects on writing, questioning the concept of knowledge. Gu writes:

Because a kind of writing is a definition of knowledge, it can lock people, such as a table is a table. When I do not know the characters, I feel the infinite charm behind the characters, if the words can explain the problem, then it naturally has its own interpretation and limitations." The basic standpoint of the creation of plural calligraphy forms is to reflect on the cultural problems behind the characters by leaving the calligraphy itself. <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A contemporary artist born in China in 1955, see <http://www.xubing.com/>

<sup>21</sup> Wenda Gu and his *Forest of Steles -- Poems of the Later Tang* (谷文达和他的“碑林-唐诗后著”) kwangmyong (光明网) 2006-06-14

After looking at these two more special works of his, then we go back to his landscape paintings: (Figure 10)



Figure 10 Wenda Gu Liszt Piano Concerto – Sun, 1980-1981, ink painting, ink & pastel on rice paper, silk boarder mounting, (380cm wide x 150cm high) Zhejiang Academy of Arts, Hangzhou, China

The picture he painted was surrealistic and expressionist, and he made it based on what he heard from Liszt's piano concerto. This is the second painting in his Liszt series, which he called the *Sun*. Although he didn't say which concerto it was based. Personally, I think it's like the second movement of *Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Major*. The painting is extremely lyrical, full of poetic colors and the sun combined with rhythms like Liszt's second movement. Wenda uses specially streamlined lines to outline the edge of the mountain and the sun, just like a dreamy melody full of beauty in Liszt's music. This theme appears in all kinds of transformations, like the transition from the color of the mountain to the color of the sun in Wenda's painting, which inspires people's subconscious with its strong contrasts. The transition between light and dark is fantastic, accompanied by the strong contrast of colors. The most important thing is that his whole color and outline are color innovations on the landscape painting of Guohua style. If you remove the color, you will find that this is a traditional Guohua style. Therefore, he could not paint such expressionist works

without his early Guohua skills <sup>22</sup>

It is obvious that Gu's art is based on ancient traditions. For example, the two works listed above use traditional black and white ink style and calligraphic brush to create a new artistic vision to inform the audience's thinking, like during the Cultural Revolution. In addition, the traditional stele carving art is used to carve new “pseudo” characters with stone rubbings to show the communication and subtlety of Chinese and western translations. The last one is the result of Gu Wenda's personal influence from both eastern and western cultures--oriental landscape painting and Liszt's concerto, the contrasting colors and the subtle Oriental patterns of Liszt's melodies. These constitute the inspirational bridge of Gu Wenda's creations.

### **Peng Wei**

In addition to male artists employing the Guohuan technique and style of painting in the 21st century, there is also an amazing female artist Pengwei, who is one of the new stars of traditional and innovative female artists today. Peng Wei's engagement with traditional art focuses on the narrative figural art of the sixteenth century Ming dynasty, an exact and demanding decorative style. In either large or small scale, her compositions are dominated by figures in a landscape done in the ancient blue and green style for the landscape and colorful but subtle local coloring for the figures and detail.

Peng Wei was born in Chengdu, China in 1974, and earned a Master of Philosophy, at Nankai University; she now lives in Beijing. Her works combine the

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<sup>22</sup><http://www.wendagu.com/Home>

classical aesthetics of Chinese literati paintings with the expression of contemporary life forms. Her early paintings rendered ancient Han silk gowns or embroidered shoes to tiny “bound” feet. In recent years, Peng Wei has extended her pen and ink games to three-dimensional space and created a series of painting installations. Peng Wei's works broke out of the traditional material paradigm in one stroke. In the three-dimensional installation game, Chinese painting is completely transformed, it appears different and unfamiliar and yet the charm of Chinese painting is never lost. In today's world of numerous artistic styles and increasingly diversified painting circles, this kind of breakthrough is actually rare, combining traditional symbols and personal styles. She not only retains the essence of traditional Chinese ink painting, but also takes the form of ink painting out of the two-dimensional plane and into multi-dimensional space. At the same time, she completely retains the traditional skills, and walks out from the ink painting and finally returns to the ink painting.

Peng Wei is very successful: she has had solo exhibitions in Taipei, Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong and other places. Her latest exhibition is *It Reminds of You* held at the Suzhou Museum in 2017. In 2016, she participated in the joint exhibition *Utopia · Utopia -- Wuzhen International Contemporary Art Invitational Exhibition*; and had a solo exhibition *Perfect Journey* at Taipei History Museum in 2015. Her works are also collected by the Cleveland Museum of Art, Boston Museum of Art, Asian Art Museum, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Hong Kong M+ Museum, National Art Museum of China, Sigg Collection and so on. Peng Wei began to learn the brush at the age of two, won the prize at the age of three, and was considered a “young” genius painter. The Eastern and classical temperament of her works is the highlight of her works.



## Peng Wei's Art

Her latest work deals with ancient stories of women in books and uses them to tell modern stories. This is in sharp contrast to the gentle female artist who held *"It Reminds Me of You"* in the Suzhou Museum. However, Peng Wei does not deny that she is a "female artist", because she is "a woman". But she also asked, "Why don't people emphasize that a man who is an artist is a 'male artist'?" In the 50-meter-long *New Tales*, Peng Wei takes a group of ancient women out of their original context and recreates them in an almost freehand way. Hence the exhibition's title, *"New Tales"* in honor of the year of Lu Xun's death in 1936, when a collection of his 故事新编: Old Stories Retold was published as, *New Tales*. Although it was written about ancient myths, you could always read a kind of absurd criticism, a sense of reality that was almost magical. This is a story collection that Peng Wei read as a child, and in her eyes, it is very similar to what her current work is about. In the opinion of curator Wang Min 'an, Peng Wei just painted their portraits, and resolutely eliminated all their backgrounds. They stood alone on white paper, but there was a shocking story hidden behind each one. "Here we still see a female artist's eternal concern for herself, or a long-standing female question raised again in a new way: What kind of behavior pattern should women practice?" <sup>23</sup>

Peng Wei's artwork *New Tales* was also inspired by stories from Lu Xinwu's *"Guifan"*, and many more similar stories in *"Guifan"* and *24 Exemplars of Filial Piety*, which also inspired Peng Wei to write her new artwork, *New Tales*.

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<sup>23</sup> "The Art of Wei Peng". Juxtapoz.com. *The Spectrum of Juxtapoz*. April 2015. (Juxtapoz.com) P1



Figure 11 Peng Wei *New Tales* 2019 ink painting on paper, (160×5000 cm)

The artwork is based on the stories recorded in the “*24 Stories of Filial Piety*”, which is known in ancient China as the “treasure of the boudoir”. These martyrs and role models are real figures in history, and there is a shocking story behind each one.

《闺范》 *guifan* and “24 Filial Pieties” are about the rules that women should follow

between their elders and their younger generations in ancient China. Today, however, people seem to have different understandings of them as anti-tradition and thinking about women's rights and filial piety. In Peng Wei's version, all the women are very angry, with ferocious faces, exaggerated expressions, and some holding knives. People are attracted by these images. These images are very new. You don't see women like this in art history images. They are completely different from the traditional paintings. Some with long knives, some with axes, yet she painted them in the old style black and white delicate brush painting style and although she used the ancient form of the scroll, she worked in huge scale, making it a modern installation piece.

Looking at the story again, I was shocked! Through suffering, humiliation, face destruction, body destruction, and even sacrifice themselves, they became female moral models or role models, and were inscribed and recorded in ancient books like 《闺范》 *guifan*. It's even more hilarious when you look closely, and you see them being praised as models and heroes, and they deserve to be put back in a contemporary context, and it's an interesting topic. *New Tales* is where she imaginatively draws these characters from these stories. Peng Wei peeled the characters from the background and painted them as individuals in a freehand style. She painted their portraits, including more than 20 martyred women and "role models", magnified to the scale of real people into a 50-meter giant scroll. In the picture, the women are also in a passionate moment - some holding knives and preparing to kill themselves. These dramatic actions make the image of such women heroic, they appear fierce and brave. Virtues such as filial piety, chastity and loyalty are accomplished through strong will and passion, as critic Wang Min 'an says.

"These gestures and movements are at the heart of the story, the climax of every short

narrative text." Peng Wei captures the movements and postures of her characters and solidifies them, which has a strong dramatic effect, it is such extraordinary passion and gesture that people have to stare at them closely, people have to focus their curiosity and research on them."<sup>24</sup>

Look them straight in the eye, take them out of their ancient environment, present them in their modern environment, and let's see how it feels. *New Tales* is the first time that Peng Wei shows her works completed by "freehand brushwork". Unlike other works, which requires restraint. The most direct reason for its name is Lu Xun's *New Tales* which was Pengwei's favorite book when she was a child. It impressed her deeply. The content is very magical, like a magical realism novel. "The whole novel feels very much like what I'm trying to do," Peng said. "The paintings also have a sense of introspection and interrogation."<sup>24</sup> Although Lu Xun picked up materials such as ancient legends, he told them in a completely new way in the context of that time, rewriting ancient stories in an ironic language, but making people feel completely present. Peng Wei forcibly pulls history to the present and makes it collide violently with the present. Peng Wei rewrote these stories and repainted these women, of course, with a strong sense of female criticism. She eradicates all their backgrounds, and depicts them directly and nakedly, just in order to more unhesitatingly, more thoroughly, more directly and expose this artificial female mythology.<sup>25</sup>

Compared with the freehand brushwork that is different from the meticulous brushwork in *New Tales*, the meticulous brushwork in *Seven Nights* ( Figure12 )

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.pengweiart.cn/en/>

<sup>25</sup> Utopia - Heterotopia, Wuzhen International Contemporary Art Invitation Exhibition 乌托邦-异托邦”乌镇国际当代艺术邀请展 . 2018-03-05 P2

seems to be more common in Peng Wei's works. Peng Wei said these were the stories of several nights she had seen in her dreams. With very fine brushes, she weaves the roofs, doors, windows, guardrails and interior life of people in the seven courtyards. They sleep on a couch, or they stand by a rail, or they talk together, or they hide their faces alone. To some extent, these two groups of works, which are completely different in content and technique of expression, are interlinked and intertextual. In Peng Wei's opinion, "Why did I paint the courtyard of "Seven Nights" with fine black and white lines? Because I needed it to weave those stories. Why did I use the freehand method to paint the characters in New Tales? Because I think there's an emotion that needs to be vented." <sup>26</sup> For Peng Wei, meticulous brushwork has always been a tool of expression. Sometimes, it's not even limited to meticulous brushwork. In 2011, Peng Wei once made a video work. She spent 81 days drawing a watch on her hand every day. In the latest solo exhibition of this year, there is also an installation work that has nothing to do with painting, *The World of Pots*. She took a group of bergamots that had been drying for nearly 3 years and gave it to a master to paste gold foil on the Buddha statue. In order to record this process, Peng Wei chose photos, because there was no other way to achieve it. Peng does not seem to mind that she is not a pure meticulous brushwork artist, because she always feels that she is not, and that all methods, including meticulous brushwork, serve the purpose of the message.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.pengweiart.cn/en/>



Figure12, Pengwei *Seven Nights* 2017 seven plane paintings of ink on rice paper (175x170cm)

Completely different from the style of *New Tales*, Peng Wei completed the narrative group painting *Seven Nights*, which has seven different courtyards and different stories happening simultaneously in one night. Clues describe her own stories or fictional stories that appeared in her dreams. "It's actually seven stories that take place in one night, and a lot of things change overnight. *Seven Nights* is not a personal story, but a reflection, with irony or introspection, inspired by one's own experience."<sup>27</sup> The story unfolds not in the continuum of time, but in the juxtaposition of space. From an overlooking point of view, the paintings are full of ancient interest, the scene of tirelessly playing with the crowd is displayed. The story of each courtyard happening simultaneously, there is the juxtaposition and folding of space and time. The courtyards in *Seven Nights* are scattered private Spaces. Peng Wei uses fine lines and lines to outline the ancient buildings with heavy eaves and columns, as well as the characters, stories, scenes and accessories in the buildings. In fact, *Seven*

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.pengweiart.cn/en/>

*Nights* is also a kind of magical reality. There are a lot of unreasonable things in the painting, some details are illogical, and there are a lot of strange details and story lines, which are different from the behavior of the characters in ancient paintings. The picture seems to have an ancient meaning, but it does not conform to the logic of the time.

Looking closely at the picture, everyone is sad and has a miserable expression and mood, the picture has a kind of resentful, fluctuating feeling. The *New Tales* is all a little sinister, and *Seven Nights* is pathetic. Just to form an overall atmosphere. In addition to the numerous characters, Peng Wei also paints a large number of trees in these paces, and instead of being wrapped in these dense spaces of branches and leaves, one haunts, permeates, and appears among them, and reveals one's own face through their shadows. The figures in Peng Wei's paintings are closely intertwined not only with other people, but also with space.<sup>28</sup>

In conclusion the utterly modern artist Peng Wei who art is celebrated widely for her skill in representing the ancient styles of traditional figural art, introduces modern sentiments into the works by means of changing the emotional expressions of the subjects. Chinese art traditionally never showed people unhappy, so this is also a very new aspect to her art. On first glance her works may seem old fashioned, but on close observation they are quite modern in sentiment. In addition, Peng Wei has explored other media such as video and photography.

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<sup>28</sup> Asia Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature Art Prize 2014 | Singapore Art Museum (SAM) | Artsy ". [www.artsy.net](http://www.artsy.net). Retrieved 23 March 2019.

## Conclusion

From the early traditional national style to the change of contemporary traditional art, we saw the formulation of the characteristics of the traditional national painting style. But, at the same time we saw how contemporary art adopted traditional elements in combination with the western oil painting. Adopting these two styles, great artists are bound to seek and explore a number of possibilities that the combination of two artistic styles can create.

The great achievements of contemporary traditional artists cannot be separated from the enlightenment and innovation of some older artists. For example, Li Shutong and Wu Guanzhong. Li Shutong was one of the pioneers who brought western elements to the east. The introduction and dissemination of Li Shutong undoubtedly sowed the seeds of union for later generations. Wu Guanzhong, on the other hand, created a superb integration of traditional elements and western painting techniques, communicating the beauty of western colors with the emotional conception of the east and combining them artfully, no one style dominates, it is a true fusion. Finally, it shows the high-level of beauty and rich meaning of his art. The consideration of materials remains Chinese, but the monochrome palette has given way to gentle colors that accent the brush work, and the drawing style achieves a greater sense of space by adapting the drawing technique of perspectival studies. But the identity of the cultures in which these works were produced is not in question, it is more a case of updating the style.

In the development of contemporary traditional art, we can see that those artists, whether they are male artists Gu Wenda or female artists Peng Wei, have one thing in common, that is, their works are indebted to traditional elements. In other words, traditional elements are their roots and the source of their creation. And to the



source they add their own understanding and imagination and elements of the world. But they are not stuck in a place of traditional elements without innovation. Instead, they extend the meaning from the traditional inspiration point, such as Gu Wenda's artistic works' understanding of the change of times. He takes the calligraphic styles of the past and monochrome ink landscapes and brings them up to date including large scale formats and new materials. The pseudo- language he created has many critical interpretations-- from the destruction of the formal writing of Chinese to the simplified as well as the doctrines for which it was employed. Yet his heartfelt inscription and abstract landscapes achingly refer to the past, which was nearly destroyed. Today's interpretation will be different from that of the past. And the integration of China and the west can be seen in painting as in the combination of western and Chinese music, exposing the gap between the translation of Chinese characters and the understanding of western thinking. Another example is Peng Wei's work, which uses traditional elements as a tool to express contemporary thinking. But though the appearance of her meticulous paintings refers to Ming dynasty figural art, she invests them with subtle new meanings and deep emotions and creates them in new large modern formats. In short, these works are inseparable from traditional elements. Eastern and western artistic traditions are quite different from each other. yet these artists have shown how they can be combined. *Guohua* has its own distinctive black and white artistic conception, while western oil painting also has its own unique color flashes, geometric angles and perspectival drawing. However, the collision and development of art and culture between the east and the west have brought about the integration and progress of contemporary people in the combination of the ancient and the modern, the east and the west and the world.

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