
Revolutions in vision: Chinese art and the experience of modernity

Since the mid-1990s, contemporary Chinese art has been increasingly visible in European, North American and Australian venues.¹ While the same period has also seen an equally unprecedented interest in the art of many other non-Western countries, indicating a more general waning of Western-centred conceptions of artistic contemporaneity, the sheer abundance of recent Chinese art is particularly striking. While it has long been acknowledged in the West that China has its own highly distinctive visual culture, this has often been presented as a largely monolithic and timeless tradition, distinct from the concerns of Western art. European art has generally been seen as having developed over time, whether the focus has been on the emergence of coherent perspectival space during the Italian Renaissance or on the apparent movement towards abstraction and formal purity in the modern era. Chinese art, at least from the point of view of the non-specialist Western observer, has by contrast seemed relatively static in terms of both its subject matter and its technique. With the irruption of recent Chinese art into Western exhibition venues, both the sense of Chinese art as occurring in some other cultural space and the sense of it as somehow not really having a historical development are no longer tenable. Chinese art now clearly exists in the present tense, rather than offering some unchanging timeless tradition that provides an exotic backdrop against which the historical evolution of Western art can be viewed, and it is perceived as taking place within the same globalized arena for art as that occupied by its Western counterpart.

This chapter will offer a characterization of recent Chinese art as one part of an introduction to twentieth-century Chinese art as a whole. Despite the interest in contemporary Chinese art there has been relatively

little exhibition of earlier twentieth-century art outside China itself and also little non-specialist Western critical attention; yet without some consideration of such art any general account of artistic modernism that was written from the present globalized moment would surely remain only parochial.² In presenting the distinctive Chinese artistic response to the modern experience, I will adopt a simple tripartite periodization, and the three successive periods will be defined in sociopolitical terms, rather than by reference to any intrinsic art historical logic such as stylistic development. In part this is a recognition that there is no easy counterpart in China to the ‘-isms’ of modern European art history – its succession of style or movement labels – but it is also a recognition that, for China in particular, any consideration of art in isolation from its changing sociopolitical or cultural context would only lead to misunderstanding. The first phase considered here coincides with the period of the Republic of China (1912–49), the second with the era of the People’s Republic from its founding until the end of the Cultural Revolution (1949–76), and the third with the period of economic liberalization and cultural opening that followed. If it is only during the first period – following the New Culture Movement (1917–23), with its emphasis on cultural solutions to the problem of national regeneration – that art might potentially have had a role on centre stage, in the latter two phases (where political and then economic solutions to China’s ills came, successively, to dominate) it was equally entwined with the events of national life as a whole.

China’s artistic trajectory in the twentieth century was marked by the extraordinary degree of social change the country witnessed, with two revolutions – one Republican and one Communist – within less than forty years of each other, and the arguably even more radical effects of the accelerated economic transformation of the past twenty years. Although this has led to many interruptions and historical discontinuities in China’s artistic life, justifying the periodization proposed here, there are nevertheless several overarching themes that are relevant to this period as a whole, and that are most usefully specified in advance of the more chronologically organized discussion that follows. While not exactly constituting straightforward continuities, these themes – which to a certain extent interweave – do offer us some way of specifying the particular nature of China’s artistic experience over the last hundred years.

Perhaps the most persistent theme in twentieth-century Chinese art was its response to non-Chinese art, and more particularly to Western art. While knowledge of Western art had been brought directly to the

Chinese court or had permeated southern trading cities such as Canton and Macau much earlier, it was only with the twentieth century that Western ways of image making came to be widely seen in China as viable alternative modes for making high art. This moment of cultural or epistemological relativity (one way of defining the experience of modernity in general) also led to an awareness of Japanese art, and the century saw both travel by artists in search of alternative training or artistic sources and a reform of Chinese art education to accommodate the lessons of Western models. From the early Republican period onwards ambitious artists in China began to produce work that made use of media, styles and themes gleaned from Western art. This responsiveness to the West cannot be adequately described as passive influence or abject mimicry, but was at its best an active and selective appropriation guided by concerns specific to the time and place in which a particular Chinese artist was working. Most evident in art that used oil paint, this accommodation to the lessons of Western art can also be seen in ink painting, and even those ink painters whose work seems determinedly native in its sources are in some sense also a product of a modern world in which foreign modes need to be acknowledged, if only as something one consciously chooses to resist or reject.

If the relationship to Western modes of art was problematic, this was no different from the relation of Chinese artists of the modern period to their inherited native tradition. The rich heritage of ink painting and calligraphy in particular was something a great many artists felt a need to accommodate, and since this process is still occurring today it can be considered as the second major theme of twentieth-century Chinese art. Although certain art historical accounts have presented Western and Chinese modes of art-making as opposed to each other, and certain Chinese artists have indeed felt this to be the case, at other times there has been a sense that bridges can productively be built across the divide. The seeming unavoidability of the inherited visual tradition in China, and the difficulty of simply denying or discarding it to achieve modernity without risking some kind of felt deracination (and yet the difficulty of simply continuing to produce the kind of art that had been made in quite different premodern cultural circumstances), marks the Chinese experience of the modern as different from that of most European artists. Whereas for Maurice Vlaminck or Umberto Boccioni, say, artistic modernity consisted quite straightforwardly in a disavowal of the past, such an option rarely seemed adequate in the Chinese context.

This ambivalence between inherited and imported modes has led to a high degree of heterogeneity or pluralism in modern Chinese art, and (another related sub-theme) to much art that can be described as 'hybrid' in nature, even before the more widespread appearance of such art in the West during the era of post-modernism. One reason that the clash of cultures was felt particularly strongly in China was that its context was not merely trade, intellectual exchange and migration in a more neutral sense, but rather foreign invasion and occupation of Chinese soil. Although the impact of imperialism is also found in many other parts of the globe, the particular form it took in China's foreign concessions (where key areas of territory came under foreign jurisdiction but without being altogether cut off from the life of the rest of the country, for example in the French concession in Shanghai) is perhaps worth noting, being a causal factor of two further interrelated themes considered here: the importance of the city in modern Chinese art and the importance of China's margins in its artistic development. To a very large extent, the story of modern art in Republican China was a story of Shanghai. The development of Chinese visual culture during that time occurred primarily in the unprecedented crucible offered by this modern city, connected to the rest of the world through a vibrant port and containing foreign-run areas in which its Chinese citizens could encounter other cultures on home soil. In the present era of openness the major Chinese cities are again the primary sites of artistic experiment, often in response to the challenge of the new forms of urban existence emerging there, but, even in the earlier PRC era, cities can be said to have played a central role. This is because the flame of Chinese modernity was kept alive during this extended period of cultural closure by the cities of Taipei and Hong Kong.

These two cities, existing outside the People's Republic and both in their own ways markedly open to global economic, cultural and information flows, are also good examples of how Chinese artistic modernity grew from the margins rather than from the centre. Although Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taipei can each be thought of as at the edge of China, this theme of the margins only partly overlaps that of the city. Another significant part of China's cultural margin has been its diaspora. If most of the important Chinese artists of the Republican era only sojourned in Japan or the West, the period after the establishment of the People's Republic saw many major artists settling overseas, where the encounter with new developments in Western modernism was intense. In the decade following 4 June 1989, when artistic contemporaneity was newly

emergent in the PRC but lacked native opportunities for open exhibition, a further wave of ambitious artists joined the diaspora, finding opportunities for display and sale not otherwise available to them.

A further key theme for twentieth-century Chinese art, as for other areas of Chinese cultural life, is nationalism. Artists of the Republican era began to introduce nationalist themes in their art, and in the PRC era such engagement with national content became a requirement for art that was strictly policed. While this embrace of national content was often found in the work of artists whose choice of medium and style was indebted to Western precedent, it had a particular consequence for ink painting, because that medium itself came during the twentieth century to have national connotations in a way it would never have done in earlier eras. This burden of being a national medium (now that it was thought of in contrast to oil, say) is reflected in the new term ‘*Guohua*’ (‘Chinese painting’ or ‘national painting’) that emerged as a common label for ink painting in the twentieth century.

The Republican era (1912–1949)

Many of the most significant artists of the Republican era were those who had gained first-hand exposure to non-Chinese artistic traditions.³ France was a particularly attractive destination for artists, with painter Lin Fengmian (1900–91), for instance, arriving in 1920 to study in both Dijon and Paris, while Xu Beihong (1895–1953) had arrived there a year earlier, basing himself in the French capital. Japan, which had travelled further down the road of modernization by that time than China, offered an appealing alternative base for study and exposure to cultural otherness in the early part of the century, and one that was rather closer at hand. Gao Jianfu (1879–1951), for instance, spent time there during his formative years as an artist (as well as being involved with the revolutionary movement of Sun Yat-sen), while Fu Baoshi (1904–65) was among those Chinese cultural figures who spent time in Japan during the early 1930s.

For each of these artists, overseas exposure was to influence the style of their art, although resources acquired overseas could not be applied unproblematically in the Chinese context, and some modification was always needed before foreign idioms could become viable in the home environment. For Xu, an oil painter who had developed an academic realist style, the main adaptation lay in applying this manner to Chinese subjects in a way that expressed appropriate national meanings, as in works



1 Xu Beihong, 'Tian Heng and his 500 Retainers', 1928–30

such as *Tian Heng and his 500 Retainers* (1928–30) (see figure 1). In this painting Xu depicts Tian Heng, a heroic figure who chose to commit suicide rather than capitulate to the first emperor of the Han dynasty, as he takes leave of his followers for the last time. Even Xu, however, chose to also produce works in a more stylistically hybrid idiom by creating ink paintings that retained a Western-influenced sense of volume (for example, in his many images of horses). Gao Jianfu's output is less heterogeneous at the level of medium than Xu's, and his ink paintings allowed him to incorporate Western understandings of volumetric form without producing works that looked too obviously non-Chinese. Even Gao was to find difficulties in balancing the desire to retain a sense of relation to the ink-painting heritage (important even for a non-traditionalist painter such as Gao because of its national connotations) and a desire to incorporate modern-life subject matter of a kind not previously seen in Chinese art. In *Flying in the Rain* (1932), for instance (see figure 2), he depicts a group of biplanes (thus introducing connotations that are both explicitly modern and linked to political nationalism due to the fact that Sun Yat-sen had emphasized the importance of aviation for the country's strength), but places them towards the rear of the painting's space lest they disrupt too violently the compositional format expected of a Chinese landscape painting.

In addition to artists such as Xu and Gao, who in their very different ways found the realism of Western art a resource for revitalizing Chinese painting, bringing it back in touch with the real world to a greater



2 Gao Jianfu, 'Flying in the Rain', 1932

degree than they considered it to be, there were Chinese artists of the Republican era who looked to Western modernist developments. In their case the resources of the West were often of interest more for what they had in common with the inherited language of ink painting than as an antidote to its failings. The visible brushwork of European Expressionism seemed equivalent for them to the *xieyi* tradition that had been present in Chinese ink painting from at least the Yuan dynasty, and which treated brushwork as a tool for the spontaneous display of character rather than the meticulous description of things (*xiesheng*). This interest in expression can be found in the painting of Lin Fengmian, for instance, and although his use of bright colour, inspired by Europeans such as Matisse, was without precedent in Chinese art (as was his Impressionism-influenced interest in reflections on the surface of water), overall his works have a more 'Chinese' feel than the oils of Xu. His characteristic favouring of a water-based medium helped produce this effect.

Certain of the possibilities and problems associated with the introduction of Western modes into the Chinese context can be illustrated most clearly through a discussion of the theme of the nude. Lin made use of nudes, so commonly found in Western art, in *Suffering* (1929), completed just three years after his return to China. Although the exact meaning of this now-destroyed work remains unclear, it does seem that Lin was using the naked body to express his response to events in contemporary China, and to carry meanings that are national and public in nature. Xu attempted something similar in *Yu Gong Removes the Mountain* (1940), in which semi-clothed figures, which draw on an understanding of the human body gained in studies from life done in Paris, add vividness to the representation of a well-known Chinese story about an old man who succeeds in the seemingly impossible task of moving a mountain when the heavens reward his determination. Direct depiction of the unclothed body frequently provoked opposition in the China of that time, however, and the use of nude models in art education was a source of conflict on more than one occasion. Liu Haisu (1896–1994) employed nude models at the Shanghai Art Academy (a private art school in Shanghai at which he was the director) as an integral part of European-style life-class training, but this led him into conflict with the warlord Sun Chuanfang in the mid-1920s.

Liu did not travel to Europe until slightly later than Lin and Xu, but like them he played a significant role in the reform of the Chinese art education system. Following their return to China from Europe in the

mid-1920s, both Lin and Xu were to serve in turn as President of the Beijing Academy of Fine Arts, and Lin was also to become the founding head of the Hangzhou Academy of Art in 1927. This introduction of Western methods of art education, more important in the long run than the direct experience of Western art through overseas travel, was part of a broader project of educational renewal being undertaken in the Republican period. The arts were seen as playing a particularly important part in this project of national revitalization, and Lin's efforts in this area were inspired in part by the educational philosophy of Cai Yuanpei (who served for a time as Minister of Education following the establishment of the Republic, and who became Chancellor of Peking University in 1916). Cai believed that art could take over the role formerly played by religion in the spiritual life of the population, and Lin (who became personally acquainted with him) displays an analogous understanding of the significance of art in his own writings.

The development of institutions devoted to art education was a significant achievement of the Republican period, offering an alternative to the master-and-pupil training pattern that had been the dominant paradigm. It had the potential to enable people from a broader range of social backgrounds to engage with art, transforming its social basis, and provided a great many of the more interesting artists of this period with a living, thus enabling them to continue in their chosen vocation. These years also saw the development of various other aspects of an emerging public sphere for art, such as the practice of displaying art in exhibitions. The government itself was to arrange a National Art Exhibition in Shanghai in 1929, for instance, with a second exhibition taking place in Nanjing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in 1937. Clearly such arenas in which art could address a nationally conceived public were essential if it was to play a role in the life of the nation, and museums were equally significant tools for propagating national ideology. When the imperial art collection became a museum in 1925, for instance, the art of China's past was being mobilized in a radically novel way – even the old was becoming modern.

In addition to art schools, museums and public exhibitions, an important infrastructural role was played by art publishing. Albums of illustrations and translations of foreign books about art helped the process of understanding Western art and its possible usefulness as a source, while specialist art magazines provided the vehicle for the evolution of a distinctive Chinese art-critical discourse. One important art magazine



3 Lin Fengmian, 'Exercise', c. 1934

of the Republican period was *Yi Feng*, which featured both Western and Chinese art of a variety of styles. Much modernist art was reproduced and discussed in its pages: it published a translation of André Breton's Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, for instance, as well as a colour illustration of Lin Fengmian's *Exercise* (c. 1934), in which the artist shows awareness of the heightened and non-naturalistic colour schemes of European modernism, and adopts an angular stylization of forms that is reminiscent in particular of Cubism (see figure 3).

Although artists in other parts of China were also to benefit from this growth of a hospitable niche for art as a part of public culture, it was in Shanghai that this new form of art found the most fertile environment. The foreign concessions made for a particularly rich and culturally plural environment in this metropolis, which like other port cities of the world was particularly open to imported culture. Even ink painting without any overt foreign element had thrived in response to the patronage of the city's merchant class. The Shanghai School artists

of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century such as Ren Bonian (1840–95) and Wu Changshuo (1844–1927) were among the first to revitalize inherited painting modes as the dynastic era came to an end. The city also played a leading role in the broader field of visual culture, with the Shanghai cinema, graphic design and advertising art of the Republican era all proving distinct, and the tall, Western-style buildings that gathered along the Bund were quite unlike anything else in Asia. Even in architecture Western modes had their limits when transplanted in China, though, and the American architect Henry K. Murphy (1877–1954), who designed a number of buildings in China during the Republican era and also produced a plan for Nanjing as a Nationalist capital, felt the need to introduce Chinese architectural elements into his buildings, taking inspiration in particular from Beijing's Forbidden City.

Despite the promising start towards a culturally distinctive brand of modernity in China during the 1920s and 1930s, no period of full flowering was to follow. Due to the war that followed in the wake of Japanese invasion and the subsequent period of civil strife that only ended with the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the project of establishing a Chinese cultural modernity that gained momentum after the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s and early 1920s remained incomplete. Shanghai's position near the coast, the very factor on which its economic growth had depended, made it particularly vulnerable, and artists from the city were to join many others displaced inland as the conflict spread. Fu Baoshi was among several artists to spend time in the Nationalist wartime capital, Chongqing, where he started to develop a subjective and frequently pessimistic style that sprang from the particular political conditions of that time of national crisis. Zhang Daqian (1899–1983) travelled even further inland, finding resources for the development of his own art by making copies of the ancient Buddhist wall-paintings at Dunhuang (evidence that the past as well as the foreign could be a source of the new). Other artists joined the Communists in exile elsewhere in China's interior, helping to forge a new visual culture that before long would return to the coastal cities in triumph. When Mao Zedong gave his 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' in 1942, he was effectively announcing the end of the post-May Fourth era of artistic modernism and pluralism. From that time onwards, art was to be required to take the point of view of the masses, and to be subservient to political goals.

From the founding of the People's Republic to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1949–1976)

Although the Republican period saw Chinese artists responding to both realist and modernist tendencies in Western art, only the former remained of interest after the founding of the People's Republic.⁴ In the hands of Xu Beihong, who had trained in an academic tradition, 'realism' in art was already at some remove from the socially critical role it had played in the work of the French painter Gustave Courbet (1819–77), and after 1949 an even greater distance was to open up. Courbet deliberately challenged the visual clichés that were found in the academic art of his time, representing the nude or the subject of rural labour in uncomfortably demystifying ways. The socialist realism that came to predominate in Mao's China, however, was a pliant tool for relaying approved ideological positions, and nothing more.

With political solutions to China's problems in ascendancy, the state assumed a far greater role in the cultural sphere than it had in the preceding period. It became the major actor, exerting control through cultural organizations even as it provided artists with assurances of a livelihood and a social role. In a strange way art was to achieve the ambition it had been sketching out for itself in the 1920s and 1930s, finding at last a national audience and national meanings to convey to that audience.

The politicization of life in the People's Republic meant that art was frequently called upon to directly represent political events, albeit in the most carefully sanitized way. *The Founding of the Nation* (1952–3) by Dong Xiwen (1914–73), for instance, depicts the founding ceremony of the new state, with Mao given full prominence, but revisions to the work later proved necessary as certain figures in the painting subsequently fell from political favour. Mao's centrality was repeatedly affirmed in other works too. A well-known example from the Cultural Revolution era, *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan* (1967) by Liu Chunhua (b. 1944), features the early political life of the leader. Apart from promoting the cult of Mao himself, painters also produced a great many upbeat and idealized representations of agricultural labour, industrial production and infrastructure development. Such works tend to emphasize the productivity of collective labour, but individuals can also make an appearance in order to serve as positive role models, often shown heroically triumphing over adverse weather conditions for the common good. One such example is *I am Seagull* (c.1972) by Pan Jiajun (b. 1947), which features a female

linesman calling in her code name after having successfully carried out a repair. Brimming with youthful energy, she appears completely undaunted by the heavy rain in which she has been working.

Oil paint proved to be the most effective technical means for art of this kind, but photography also played a role in this propaganda imaging because of the medium's inherent sense of veracity. The images of Mao by Hou Bo (b. 1924) are among the most well-known Chinese photographs of this period, but the medium of photography can sometimes prove too truthful, too replete with detail, providing an excess of information that enables images to be read against their grain in more recent historical moments as documents of barbarism. This is the case with certain of the images of Li Zhensheng (b. 1940), who worked as a photojournalist for the *Heilongjiang Daily* during the Cultural Revolution years, and who stored a large number of his more sensitive negatives under the floorboards until they could be brought out for exhibition and publication from the late 1980s onwards. Perhaps an awareness of the potential all images retain to some extent to be read against their grain lies behind the coupling of political slogans with the images of mass-reproduced propaganda posters of the Maoist era. In this way the meaning of the images was pinned down and made specific, divesting them of much of their residual ambiguity.

The Cultural Revolution period saw an intensification of the political control of art that had been in place for some time, and resulted in a serious narrowing of Chinese visual culture. Certain images of Mao (such as the portrait found in the front of the 'little red book' of his collected thoughts, but also Liu Chunhua's *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan*) were reproduced and circulated in enormous quantities during this time, playing a role not altogether dissimilar to that of religious icons in other cultural contexts. In addition to appearing in public places, images of Mao also found their way into homes, sometimes even occupying the place that would previously have been reserved for the family shrine.

But this image of a homogeneous culture needs to be qualified to some extent. The foreign influences that had played such a role in the Republican era did not disappear entirely, for instance, but took new forms. In the early years of the PRC, before a political breach developed, influences from Russian art were to replace contact with Western European models. Exhibitions of Soviet art were held in China, and Chinese students were able to study with Russian teachers both in Russia and in China itself. For more established artists too there were opportunities for travel

within the Communist bloc: Li Keran (1907–89), for instance, travelled to East Germany in 1957.

Although lacking the heterogeneity of style found in the previous period, painting of the PRC era did retain pluralism in one respect, in that ink-based works that drew on the native brushwork heritage continued to be produced alongside works in oil. Valued because of its potential for signifying national uniqueness even in an era so often given to eradicating all that was old, this inherited medium did of course need to bow to the political agenda of the times, and realistic representation tended to take the place of ink play. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that ink painting retained more possibilities for artistic expression than oil had, and certain works of genuine artistic merit were created during this time, belying reductive images of Maoist China as devoid of interesting or complex art.

The realist tendency in ink painting exemplified during the Republican era by Gao Jianfu was to prove a useful resource for the state's goal of producing a modern socialist art. Although in certain respects Gao's Japanese-influenced style proved problematic as a basis for a national idiom after that country developed imperial ambitions against China, Guan Shanyue (1912–2000) was able to employ it to produce a landscape painting that celebrated the new China as optimistically as many oil painters. Li Keran also attempted to develop a realist mode of ink painting during the early PRC era, although from the late 1950s on he was tempering the more narrowly descriptive tendency of his work up to that time to produce paintings that on occasion have a richer poetic strength. These works were not exactly a 'return to tradition' since their inky blackness and use of shading can sometimes betray a debt to Western artists such as Rembrandt, and their scale and monumentality address them to a public audience unknown to literati painting.

Painters such as Li were able to produce works that at first appear to be pure landscapes, far removed from the servitude to propaganda found in most oil paintings, but such apparent freedom was frequently gained by making topographical reference to locations of revolutionary or national significance. This is the case with *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* (1959) by Shi Lu (1919–82), which contains the small but recognizable figure of Mao himself, gazing out from the edge of a cliff at the landscape beyond, as if during a pause in the revolutionary battle (see figure 4). Room for manoeuvre was also created by inscribing images with poetry by Mao, or taking a painting's theme from his poems. Both of these strategies

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4 Shi Lu, 'Fighting in Northern Shaanxi', 1959

are found in the work of Fu Baoshi, who produced many paintings of great poetic richness that illustrate Mao's words, such as *Heavy Rain falls on Youyan* (1961) (see figure 5), an earlier version of which had lines from Mao's poem 'Beidaihe' inscribed upon it. Li also uses this tactic of referencing Mao's poetry in *Ten Thousand Crimson Hills* (1964), which introduces Communist signification through extensive use of red paint in the depiction of autumnal trees. Compared to this work, Fu's *Heavy Rain falls on Youyan* seems a much less straightforward embodiment of Maoist ideology. A rather pessimistic image of rain falling on the sea executed in free and expressive brushwork, it corresponds to the earlier part of Mao's poem. However, it fails to provide any counterpart to the revolutionary optimism that suddenly appears at the poem's end to trump



5 Fu Baoshi, 'Heavy Rain Falls on Youyan', 1961

the apparent negativity of the first stanza, or clarify it as a reference to a now-surpassed historical era.

Even painting that failed to make the partial (and maybe deliberately self-protective) accommodation to Communist ideology found in the works of Li and Fu was able to be produced in the Maoist era, as the case of Lin Fengmian attests. This veteran modernist could not continue to produce the kind of ambitious public images he had undertaken in the Republican era, but rather than pliantly adapting his manner to the needs of the new political order he was largely to retreat into a more private mode of image making, creating powerfully expressive and atmospheric landscapes. While successfully retaining or creating a space for the artistic assertion of subjectivity in this way, Lin was not, however, able to escape criticism. In 1964 his works were attacked by Shi Chongming in an article in the art magazine *Meishu* for being mournful and desolate, and lacking a healthy socialistic spirit. In the ensuing Cultural Revolution period, when criticism of such supposedly 'black' painting as counter-revolutionary reached a new pitch, Lin was left with no option but to destroy his own work.

Although Shanghai had been the most exciting crucible for cultural experiment in the Republican era, Beijing was to become the undisputed centre of the new state – indeed, from its first moment, with the establishment of the People's Republic being announced from Tiananmen, the gate at the front of the Forbidden City. This political logic of

appropriating the locus of power of the imperial age for the new society was to have strong architectural consequences for the city. Although the Imperial Palace itself remained intact, the area in front of the gate, Tiananmen Square, was to be transformed into a massive gathering space focused on Tiananmen itself, on which Mao's portrait was displayed. Major buildings of national significance, the Great Hall of the People and the Museum of Chinese History (both completed in 1959), were constructed on either side of the Square, which functioned as a symbolic focus of the national topography. Mao himself, on his death, was to be interred within the Square in a Memorial Hall (completed in 1977), and with a Monument to the People's Heroes having already been placed in the Square in 1958, this further served to saturate the site with socialistic national meaning. Sculpture and painting also played their part in this process, whether in the form of paintings installed inside the Great Hall of the People, such as Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue's massive landscape based on a poem by Mao, *This Land so Rich in Beauty* (1959), or in the form of the sculptural reliefs around the base of the Monument to the People's Heroes that depicts canonical moments from Revolutionary history, created by a team of artists under the direction of Liu Kaiqu (1904–93), who had studied in France during the Republican era. Although an alternative plan for post-revolutionary Beijing supported by architect and architectural historian Liang Sicheng (1901–72) had envisaged preservation of the old city and construction of a new centre of power outside the historic city walls, this failed to find favour, and the walls, along with much else of historic Beijing, largely disappeared.

China after Mao

Although China became relatively culturally homogeneous under Mao, as has been argued here with certain qualifications (particularly with regard to ink painting), it should be remembered that in one respect the creation of the People's Republic saw an institutionalizing of cultural pluralism in the country. This is because Nationalist China did not disappear altogether, but retreated to the island of Taiwan, which became the Republic of China. The Nationalists took with them the Imperial art collection, which they used to bolster their claims to legitimacy, deploying it in the service of a distinctly non-Communist national cultural discourse in which continuity with tradition was emphasized. In the British colony of Hong Kong, equally excluded from the PRC but (unlike Taiwan)

not constituted politically or culturally as a national space, further non-Communist expressions of Chineseness were to be found in art.

Cultural as well as economic openness to the West in both these marginal locations led to a renewal of the dialogue with Western art that had been such a prominent part of artistic life in the Republican era. Indeed, certain significant Chinese artists were to migrate to the West in the face of the state of turmoil that prevailed for so long in China or because of the triumph of Communism. Zhao Wuji (b. 1921), for instance, was to base himself in Paris from 1948, while Zhang Daqian was to live in South and later North America, migrating to Taiwan only in the last years of his life. Such extended stays or permanent migration were a completely different phenomenon from the brief and usually educationally related visits made to the West by earlier artists such as Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian. As a consequence, different artistic results were to come from these later encounters, with Zhao (whose name is often romanized in the West as Zao Wou-ki) playing a significant role in the cultural life of his adopted homeland.

The renewal of Chinese art from its margins in the post-World War II era was not simply a matter of easier access to Western art, however. Perhaps even more important was the fact that Western modernist art – and particularly painting – had itself changed in significant ways. New York had replaced Paris as its centre of gravity, and the brushy, linear abstractions of the American Abstract Expressionists seemed much closer in spirit to the inherited language of Chinese painting and calligraphy – and thus more available – than the geometric abstraction of an artist such as Piet Mondrian had been. Dialogue now seemed possible on more equal terms, especially since certain Western artists of this era had consciously borrowed from Asian art and culture themselves. An engagement with Western modernism no longer necessarily entailed cultural deracination, and Zhao Wuji, for instance, was able to incorporate an influence from Chinese calligraphy in developing his painting style towards greater abstraction, as in the case of *Wind* (1954).

The new proximity between Chinese tradition and Western modernity still left gaps to be bridged, however, and cultural hybridity was a common characteristic of the new Chinese painting that emerged, such as that of Lu Shoukun (Lui Shou-kwan, 1915–76), Han Zhixun (Hon Chi-fun, b. 1922) and Wang Wuxie (Wucius Wong, b. 1936) in Hong Kong, or that of Liu Guosong (Liu Kuo-sung, b. 1932) in Taiwan. Lu combined prominent calligraphic ink strokes that self-consciously invoke the

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6 Zhu Ming, 'Taichi Single Whip', 1985

Chinese brush heritage with allusions to the work of contemporary Western artists such as Adolph Gottlieb and Pierre Soulages, while Han, Wang and Liu have all on occasion deliberately juxtaposed calligraphic or ink painting references with geometric elements that recall aspects of Western modernism such as American hard-edged abstraction. While the historical trajectories of Taiwan and Hong Kong were in certain respects similar in the postwar period, the sense of living in a place where 'East meets West' seems to have been particularly strong in late colonial-era Hong Kong, and the paintings of Lu, Han and Wang appear at times to be grappling with both the possibilities and difficulties of such perceived cultural hybridity.⁵ Something similar seemed to be happening in sculpture. Whereas on the Mainland this medium produced such pliant vehicles of propaganda as *The Rent Collection Courtyard* (1965), a 'realist' presentation of the iniquities of pre-Revolutionary landlords produced by a team of artists from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, in Taiwan we find Zhu Ming (Ju Ming, b. 1938) creating abstracted images of figures in Tai Chi poses that are dynamic equivalents to those of Henry Moore (see figure 6), while Hong Kong's Wen Lou (Van Lau, b. 1933) treated the very 'Chinese' subject of bamboo in a geometric vocabulary of forms indebted to European constructivism.

The recreation of a culturally open or pluralistic art environment on the Mainland only became possible following the economic opening



7 Xu Bing, 'Book from the Sky' (detail), 1988

that occurred in the 1980s. Before the end of that decade a great deal of artistic experimentation had taken place, such as that in the supportive environment offered by the Hangzhou Academy of Art, and in 1989, shortly before the crackdown in the wake of the student protests of that year, there was a large-scale breakthrough exhibition of avant-garde work at the China Art Gallery in Beijing.⁶ Xu Bing (b. 1955) had by this time already created his *Book from the Sky* (1988), a conceptual installation in which thousands of well-formed but meaningless Chinese characters are printed from hand-carved wooden blocks onto the surface of paper (see figure 7). Following the Tiananmen massacre this head-on Dada-like confrontation with tradition was imbued with further, more explicitly political, layers of connotation, and a cynical mood was often to be found in the art that was produced in the early to middle 1990s, a fertile time for art production, even if display of such experimental work within China itself was all but impossible until much later. The paintings of Fang Lijun (b. 1963) were peopled with aimless, clone-like figures, completely at odds with the new official mood of optimism over economic growth (e.g. *Series II, No. 2*, 1992; see figure 8), while Wang Guangyi (b. 1956) produced a series of canvases that directly addressed the newly emerging consumer society. Juxtaposing the now-obsolete visual

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8 Fang Lijun, 'Series II, No. 2', 1992

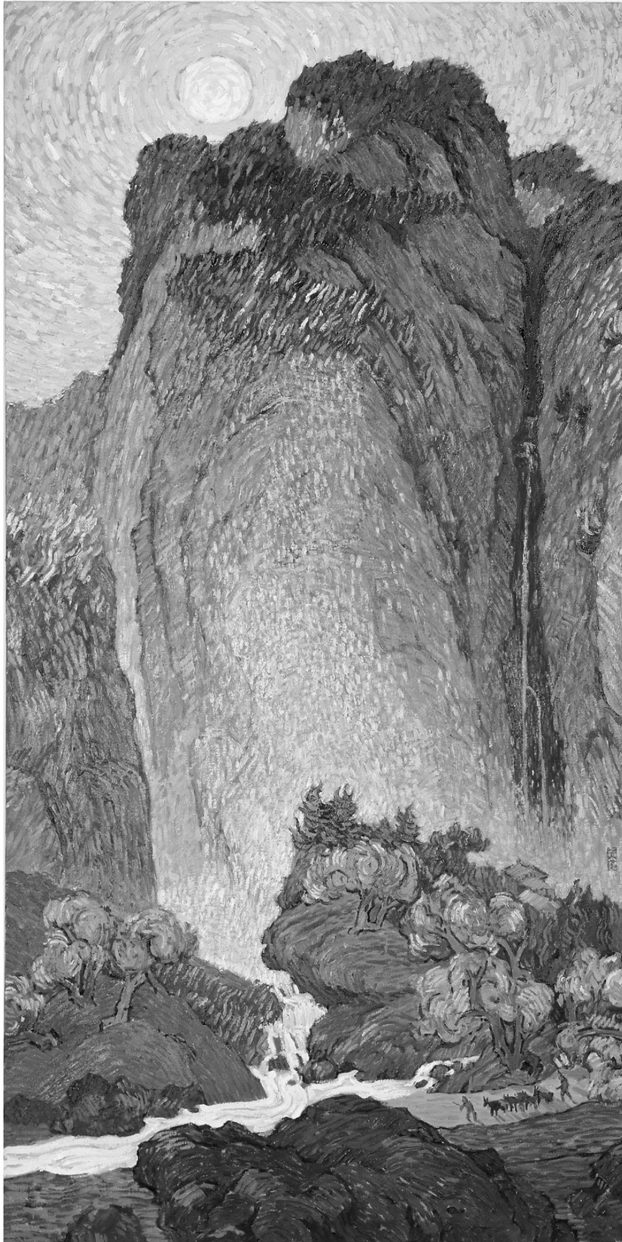
imagery of Maoism with that discovered in the equally rhetoric-loaded vocabulary used to advertise imported brand names, Wang's consciously hybrid images (e.g. *Great Criticism Series: Pepsi*, 1992) echoed and helped to specify the curiously heterogeneous urban environments rapidly coming into being in China at the time.

Due to the post-1989 crackdown, several of the most interesting of the emerging contemporary artists in Mainland China chose to relocate to more hospitable climes. Xu Bing was among this wave of émigrés, settling in New York, which was also home to Gu Wenda (b. 1955) and Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), who had left China in 1982. Art that could not be widely exhibited at home became increasingly valorized overseas, and each of these artists responded to their new residential and display environments by producing works that dealt with the meeting of cultures. Xu Bing, for instance, developed his 'New English Calligraphy', a way of writing the words of Western languages in the strokes of Chinese calligraphy that he used in various artworks, while Zhang Hongtu began his 'Repaint Chinese Shan Shui Painting' project in which a series of well-known Chinese ink paintings are repainted using oil in the style of

European modernists. In *Fan Kuan – Van Gogh* (1998), for example, a well-known Song dynasty landscape by Fan Kuan is redone in the style of Vincent Van Gogh (see figure 9).

Such works by Xu and Zhang, like those of certain other Western-based Mainland artists, choose to deal with well-established symbols of Chineseness, and take a binary approach to cross-cultural issues that is not dissimilar except in its degree of self-consciousness or irony from that of Wang Wuxie or Liu Guosong. In the art of Hong Kong during the corresponding mid-to-late 1990s period, however, an increasing concern for issues of local cultural identity is found, transcending the binary East–West language of earlier Hong Kong ink painting. Specifically a response to the approach of the city’s 1997 handover to Chinese rule, this politicized evocation of the local was often effected by means of references to the Cantonese dialect or to specifically Hong Kong symbols borrowed from the city’s popular culture. Such emphasis on local expression had a counterpart in Taiwanese art following the end of martial law in 1987 and the process of political liberalization that saw the first non-GMD president elected in 2000. In both cities non-traditional art media became increasingly the means of choice for ambitious work, with photography and installation art – neither tainted by association with national discourse – gaining new prominence.

Only in the new millennium did the kind of open artistic arena enjoyed by artists in Hong Kong and Taiwan or in the diaspora show signs of reappearing on the Mainland. The Shanghai Biennales held at the Shanghai Museum of Art (with the first involving international curators and artists being held in 2000) and the Guangzhou Triennials held at the Guangdong Museum of Art from 2002 played a key role in this change.⁷ With the now well-established penetration of Mainland Chinese cities by global capitalism and consumer culture, and the massive transformation of the built environment of Beijing, Shanghai and other cities in progress, new sites for art have opened up in the increasingly heterotopic fabric of the major urban centres. One particular concentration of art spaces occurred in the former factory district of Dashanzi in Beijing, for instance, while Shanghai has seen something similar in the Suzhou Creek area. Artists from all parts of China have moved to its urban centres, with Beijing as the capital city proving particularly attractive, even in some cases for cultural workers who had spent a decade or more outside China. All kinds of media and styles, from ink to video, are now actively employed by Chinese artists, and – more importantly – there is



9 Zhang Hongtu, 'Fan Kuan - Van Gogh', 1998

also a great heterogeneity in terms of content. Consequently, art offers one of the most prominent sites in China today in which refusal of the meanings promoted by the state or the marketplace is to be found, even if pressure towards normalization will undoubtedly be felt as such new art finds an increasingly visible place in both publicly funded and for-profit venues.

Notes

1. One important American exhibition was *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, which had its first showing in New York at the Asia Society galleries and at P. S. 1 in 1998. For the catalogue of this show, see Gao Minglu (ed.), *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, University of California Press, 1998.
2. For recent Western exhibits of modern Chinese art see Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth Century China*, New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1998; and Jo-Anne Birnie-Danzker, Ken Lum and Zheng Shengtian (eds.), *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945*, Ostfildern-Ruit, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004. Previous studies of Chinese artistic modernity as a whole include David Clarke, *Modern Chinese Art*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000; Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith, *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001; Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China*, University of California Press, 1996. A study that considers China as part of the broader story of Asian artistic modernity is John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Sydney, Craftsman House, 1998.
3. On art of the Republican era, see Birnie-Danzker *et al.* (eds.), *Shanghai Modern, 1919–1945*; and Ralph Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906–1951*, University of California Press, 1988.
4. On art during the PRC era, see Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*, University of California Press, 1994; and Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*, University of California Press, 1988.
5. For a study of Hong Kong art see David Clarke, *Hong Kong Art: Culture and Decolonization*, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2002.
6. Concerning avant-garde art in Mainland China see Valerie Doran (ed.), *China's New Art, Post-1989*, Hong Kong, Hanart TZ Gallery, 1993; Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979–1989, A Semiotic Analysis*, Hong Kong, Timezone 8, 2003; Gao, *Inside Out*; and Wu Hung, *Transience*, Chicago, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 1999.
7. For the catalogue of the First Guangzhou Triennial, see Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng and Feng Boyi (eds.), *The First Guangzhou Triennial. Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art*, Guangzhou, Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002.

Guide to further reading

Andrews, Julia F., *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*, University of California Press, 1994.

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