Tradition and Modernity in Chinese Painting and Printmaking

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Review

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

Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting offers a useful general introduction to the aesthetics and types of Chinese painting, an overview of painting from the Paleolithic Period to the Tang dynasty, and individual chapters on painting in the Five dynasties and the Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing, as well as painting in the Twentieth century. Profusely illustrated and offering artistic analyses of representative works, the individual chapters situate the study of artistic influences and innovations within an historical context. The student of Chinese paintings and artistic trends, or familiar with the personality of some of the artists, will find the work both unobtrusive and informative. The book provides a useful starting point for further reading.

One of the few exceptions to the otherwise excellent and well-organized overview of painting in the immediate frame of the last chapter, Life, is the treatment of works by artists who have recently died or safely dead. The exceptions do include other excellent discussions of trends in Chinese painting and three safely famous artists experimenting with traditional guo hua li - the painter Yan Han. The Twentieth century, and to blandly understand established artistic trends is an integral part of the book, especially the period of artistic creation through the Cultural Revolution, almost twenty years of artistic creation from the 1960s to the 1980s.

These reservations aside, the chapter is a backward glance at the condition of Chinese painting in the 1980s, for artists who find their way to a new age while working to redefine artistic practice.
Review: *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*

...mony in modern Chinese art history. The art of the Twenty-first century has seen great changes, with a shift towards contemporary and avant-garde art. This has led to a reevaluation of traditional Guo Hua, which now includes new artistic expressions.

The scholar Richard M. Barnhart has taken it upon himself to provide an overview of Chinese painting from its earliest origins to the present day. His book, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, offers a comprehensive study of the art form, including its historical development, artistic styles, and cultural influences.

The book is divided into individual chapters, each written by an expert in Chinese painting. The writers integrate their discussions, enriching the historical context with insightful analyses of specific artists and their works. The result is a rich tapestry that highlights the diverse and vibrant tradition of Chinese painting.

One of the most significant aspects of this volume is its coverage of the Twenty-first century. Lang Shao Jun, in particular, provides detailed analyses of contemporary artists and their works. However, the book does not extensively cover the political repression that characterized much of modern Chinese art history, especially during the Cultural Revolution. This omission is a notable drawback, as it limits the book's scope.

Despite this reservation, the book is an invaluable resource for students and scholars of Chinese art. It provides a detailed and accessible overview of the art form, making it a valuable tool for anyone interested in the history and aesthetics of Chinese painting.

All in all, this volume is aimed at the general reader interested in an overview of Chinese painting, and it offers a great deal of useful information. However, there is still a need for more sustained studies of the individual painters and movements represented.

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

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

All of these scholarly achievements highlight the rich artistic achievements of China’s artists, painters, and printmakers. To begin with this study of Chinese painting, one is able to understand what one sees, going beyond the formal depiction and outward style of the work to understand the character and spirit of the work and artist. To study historical styles and paintings is also to restore the works of art.
to human history (Fu, Studies in Connoisseurship, 19), in other words, to make them useful in our own attempts to understand what it means to be human and to try to understand the minds of others who asked similar questions. Noted for his rich variations in shades of ink, the Qing dynasty monk painter Shi Tao (1642-1718) wrote in a colophon on a painting: "There is a vast universe in the dark, dark clusters of ink."

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

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

With the support of printmakers such as Shi Tao, facing China as it moved into the Twentieth Century, struggled with social and political change, the needs of the social and political reformation efforts, trials and tribulations, the origins of this movement were in its infancy through the 1920s and 1940s, lay with young Chinese intellectuals. Both for its potential because it helped with the political issues that faced the May 4th reform that followed in the footsteps of Western printmakers who had inordinately appreciated printmaking was a medium that while at the same time was equally Chinese—woodcuts had been invented in China during the Tang dynasty. In addition, production, and a traditional Chinese printmaking movement a traditional Chinese printmaking consciousness and educational, reform-minded.

That woodcut was used to analyze the reform movement's impact; that it was in part due to the official corruption that made it more than art for artists, and hence an aid to educate, persuade, and to have artistic relevance to the traditional painting, cause the Chinese art forms of interest in Western artists studying in Europe. The return with the printmaking experiments taking the demands of their own tradition and desire for Lu Xun's advocacy of Western style printmaking.
With the support of Lu Xun, the early printmakers gave a human face to the struggles facing China as it emerged into the Twentieth Century, struggles characterized by technological change, the necessity of modernization, and the social and political transformation. The scattered efforts, trials, and experimentation of the origins of this movement, still very much in its infancy throughout the 1930s and into the early 1940s, lay with young students and progressive intellectuals. Both groups turned to printmaking because it helped to precipitate artistic, social and political issues that concerned them, growing out of the May 4th movement, and the proposals for reform that followed. Lu Xun's introduction of Western printmaking artists as "models" was inordinately appealing because creative printmaking was both "modern" and Western, while at the same time the technique was familiarly Chinese—woodblock printmaking having been invented in China and practiced widely since the Tang dynasty as a means of illustration, book production, and as a means of reproducing traditional Chinese paintings. The synthesis of the modern/Western creative print movement with a traditional Chinese craft appealed to the national consciousness of a new generation of educated, reform-minded Chinese.

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

The new printmaking movement did not spring fully developed following Lu Xun's introduction of Western printmakers in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Throughout the 1930s printmakers worked to refine their artistic technique and define the style of the early woodcuts. The early Chinese printmakers were frequently criticized by Lu Xun for their carelessness, their slavish adoption of elements that were inauthentic and alien to their own experience, and their lack of dedication to their art. From these origins, however, an exciting, rich artistic movement emerged, one that has continued to the present, and which has played an important role in articulating modern Chinese art practice, while offering a fascinating window onto modern Chinese cultural history.
Since 1949, political policies have interrupted by the convulsion of the Tiananmen square massacre of June 4, 1989, which also served to catalyze the artistic, political, and generational differences among Chinese artists. The Chinese printmaking field as a movement has experienced changes from the early period which focused on history—on the changes faced by Chinese people in society— to an expression of individual subjectivity which particularizes history. While it is hard to assign a precise date to this change, by the 60th anniversary of Lu Xun's woodcut class in 1991 the tensions were already apparent: tensions between old and young printmakers, between an emphasis on tradition vs. individual expression, between politics and innovation in art. The woodcut movement as a movement with shared concerns was giving rise to the emergence of the artist as individual, able to function outside of the structures of work unit and national exhibition jury structures, finding independent sources of income through the sale of art works, liberated from the formal structures that had influenced artistic creation for so long. The effect on artistic creation is both positive and uncertain.

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

Diversity, experimentation, and increasing individual artistic freedom are recognized by many other artists as the most exciting developments in recent Chinese printmaking: "Today the sense of being [part of] a group is less and less attractive" says Kunming artist, Professor Li Zhong Xiang. Since the time of Lu Xun, printmakers were united as a group who tried to transform society, and groups played a particularly important part in the development of printmaking in the Northeast from 1959, in the Southwest, and Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces. Part of the reason for the decline of the groups in Chinese printmaking today is due to the retirement of a generation of old revolutionary printmaker leaders that began in the early 1990s. Many artists felt the revolutionary burden on them was too heavy and chose greater artistic autonomy as they worked to become better artists. Also, many revolutionary artists tried to push their revolutionary ideas on younger artists, causing dissatisfaction on the part of younger artists. Since the 1980s to the 1990s Chinese artists have been exposed to increasingly international influences which have offered a greater range of artistic styles and traditions to draw from; as a result, many artists felt constrained by the emphasis on tradition, felt limited their ability to push their revolutionary ideas on younger artists. "Artistic individualism is directly connected to prosperity of Chinese printmaking. The prosperity of Chinese printmaking was not due to the revolution of Marx and Lenin, but is due to the retirement of a generation of old revolutionary printmaker leaders," says Li Qun. Art is created for the people and should be able to withstand criticism from the people when they find art to be bad. Otherwise, artists will not be able to create art because the system can create "artistic paradise". Many artists wish the group to be a "paradise" of the art field today: "Artistic individualism will create a paradise when others can't do it, otherwise, artists will be able to create art because the system can create "artistic paradise"."

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

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Chinese Painting and Printmaking

Aspects of Chinese modern art are losing touch with political ideology. Art that cannot be tied to the group doesn't tell a story, says revolutionary artist Li Zhong Xiang. "In the early history, the art walked out of the group to the crossroads and depicted the life of society. Now people have lost and returned to the group, which may have something to do with the Cultural Revolution and life in the Euro-American world (Picasso). Now if you can't find [the group] you can't find [the art] anymore. We old people can't change this."

A key factor is the economic development of China and increasing individualism. Artistic individualism is recognized by many as "less deep and less attractive" (Li Zhong Xiang). Artists were united to transform society, and printmaking played an important part in the modernization of art in the Northeast and Zhejiang and the reason for the decline. In printmaking today we see a new generation of old revolutionary artists that began in the 1960s. But the revolutionary artists felt constrained by the emphasis on group creation which they felt limited their artistic expression, and they wished the group gone. Lastly, with China's more capitalist economy artists are seeking economic rewards that cannot be achieved through the group. Replacing the groups today is the "apartment art" or "salon" style of private, informal association with like-minded artists.

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

Conflicts in modern Chinese artistic practice have occurred for a number of reasons, not least of which is the imposition of political or aesthetic ideology on art. Old artistic and political values that served in the 1930's have had to be redefined to make them useful in the present—or re-
and printmaking, old and new, construct an intellectual and aesthetic tradition that expands our understanding and participation in the world, while offering themselves as works that document a richly changing cultural history. In Chinese painting and printmaking every act of representation is a construction of meaning: pictures do indeed “write” the judgment of history.

Suggestions for Further Reading
Lu Xun Memorial Museum, Shanghai, and Jiangsu Ancient Books Publishing House. Lu Xun’s Collection of Modern Chinese Woodcuts (Lu Xun cang zhong guo xian dai mu ke quan ji), and The Chronology of Printmaking (Ban hua ji chen), published in 5 volumes.