

Fragments to Arouse Us from Our Dreams

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The present exhibition celebrates several generations of twentieth-century Chinese artists, compares their artistic strategies with those of the first Modernists in the 1920s and 1930s, and examines their attitude towards traditional art and culture in China. Of the internationally renowned artists in the exhibition, some have lived as expatriates in Europe and America such as Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957), Xu Bing (b. 1955) and Zao Wou-ki (b. 1921), while other practitioners such as Chen Chieh-jen (b. 1960), Li Shan (b. 1942), Ye Yongqing (b. 1958) and Zhan Wang (b. 1962) have remained in the country of their birth.

The strategies and concerns of the artists in the exhibition are as diverse as their life histories. Qiu Shihua (b. 1940) and Pan Gongkai (b. 1947) seek respectively to draw on Daoist philosophy and to preserve traditional *Literati* painting within the framework of Modernism. Others, such as Hou Chun-ming (b. 1963), Lu Shengzhong (b.1952) and J. C. Kuo (b. 1949) place an emphasis on the social function of art, and on popular and folk culture. Those forms of twentieth-century oil painting practice in China operating between abstraction and figuration, object and subject, literary references and conceptual practice, are explored in the work of different generations of artists represented by Chu Teh-chun (b.1920), Chuang Che (b. 1934), Wang Huaiqing (b. 1944) and Huang Gang (b. 1961).

Finally, the exhibition explores large-scale sculpture ranging from the utopian visions of Yuyu Yang (1926-1997) to those works by Ju Ming (b. 1938) and Li Chen (b. 1963) which integrate traditional Chinese religious sculpture with Modernist concerns related to the figurative and the abstract.

Although it is not uncommon to consider Modernism in China to have assumed its unique and mature form in the last decades of the twentieth century, the first wave of Chinese Modernists, among them intellectuals and writers such as Cai Yuanpei and Lu Xun, and artist-theoreticians such as Huang Binhong, Lin Fengmian, Pan Tianshou, Liu Haisu, Pan Xunqin and Qui Ti, were engaged as early as the 1920s and 1930s in a profound analysis of both Chinese and Western culture, and of the various, possible forms of engagement between the two. Their debates and writings form a basis for the present exhibition and publication, and provide a framework with which we can consider contemporary practice in China today.

The First Wave of Modernism in China

It is nearly eighty-five years ago, on a spring day in May 1924, that modern Chinese art was presented in Europe for the first time. In the *Palais du Rhin* in Strasbourg, a grand, representative building with a dramatic history of political change,¹ an *Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Chinese Art* surveyed both the traditional fine and applied arts of China as well as the most recent Modernist experiments by Chinese artists living in Europe.

Among the twenty-six participating artists was the exhibition's organizer, Lin Fengmian (1900-1991). Honorary Chairman was Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940). One of the leaders of the New Cultural Movement, Cai had been appointed the first Minister of Education of the newly formed Republic of China in 1912.² The same year he established the Social Education Office and appointed the renowned writer and revolutionary Lu Xun (1881-1936) as Head of the Section for Art, Culture and Science.³

The Strasbourg exhibition, which presented more than 485 works, was accompanied by a catalogue. In his preface, Cai Yuanpei noted that the exhibition was divided into three sections: traditional fine and applied art from private collections belonging to Chinese expatriates living in Europe; Western-style paintings (*l'art imité de l'Occident*), and New Art (*l'art nouveau*) created by Chinese artists living and studying in Europe at that time. "These fragments," he concluded, "nevertheless permit one to judge whether Chinese contemporary artists are capable of assimilating European civilization and creating a synthesis of ancient and modern arts."⁴ Above all, Cai stressed the mutual and long-standing cultural exchange between the West and China:

" [...] Ever since the Renaissance and particularly in our day, Chinese style has inspired European art. This proves that interpenetration of the two styles of art, Western and Eastern, is necessary. "⁵

This very first exhibition in Europe to include modern Chinese art established parameters in the discourse between China and the West which remain as relevant, and as controversial, today:

- Modern Chinese art was understood as being inseparable from the five-thousand-year-old tradition of the fine and applied arts in China

- The interpenetration of Western and Eastern culture since the time of the European Renaissance in the sixteenth-century AD was portrayed as being mutual, and necessary, for the enrichment of both cultural traditions

- A synthesis of the ancient and modern arts of China was seen as being dependent on the degree to which artists in China could assimilate impulses from Europe

"New Art" referred at this time primarily to experiments within the national painting tradition (*guohua*) including the introduction of Western-style perspective and subject matter. However, at the same time, some artists transposed the subject matter and techniques of Chinese painting to horizontal, rectangular, Western-style formats and media such as the picture and photographic frame.

One of the prime exponents of this strategy was the *Literati* photographer Lang Jingshan (Long Chin-san, 1892-1995) whose "composite photographs" combined photomontage with the principles of the Six Canons of Chinese painting. Just as the art of the East had fundamentally transformed painting in Europe and encouraged a move towards abstraction and increased expressiveness in the early twentieth century, the "interpenetration" of Chinese and European formats, subject matter, techniques and media was transforming early Chinese Modern art.

The Interpenetration of Chinese and European Art

The ink paintings and Western-style oils in the 1924 *Exhibition of Ancient and Modern Chinese Art* in Strasbourg reflected experiments by Chinese artists living in Europe at this time. They also mirrored profound changes in educational policies in China which had been initiated more than a decade earlier when the study of Western art had been introduced into the curriculum by Cai Yuanpei. Four years after the exhibition in Strasbourg, in 1928, Lin Fengmian and Cai Yuanpei co-founded the National Academy of Art in Hangzhou (today the China Academy of Art)⁶. Lin Fengmian took the radical step of merging the departments of national painting (*guohua*) and Western-style painting (*xihua*) which meant that all students acquired training in both disciplines. He also established the Art Research Institute and appointed Pan Tianshou (1897-1971) as professor of national painting. The appointment of this brilliant, young artist guaranteed a confident and fearless exchange between Eastern and Western traditions at the new Academy.

Another key figure in the Modernist debate in China in the first half of the twentieth century was the artist Liu Haisu who – at the behest of Cai Yuanpei - organized comprehensive

exhibitions of modern Chinese national painting which toured throughout Europe.⁷ In European journals, and in the catalogues to these exhibitions, various authors sought to define Chinese national painting in the first half of the twentieth century, and to describe the transformation it was undergoing. Among the four categories of national painting which Liu Haisu described at this time was the *School of the Middle Way (Approaching Naturalism)* which strove to unite Chinese and European styles and "appropriated European perspective and the interplay of light and shade".⁸ Although Lin Fengmian had included works of art utilizing Western media and formats in the Strasbourg exhibition in 1924, Liu Haisu – himself a talented painter in oils – chose seven years later to exhibit only ink paintings, or what he termed "the plain, natural and unembellished Chinese style" for his surveys of Chinese Modern art in Europe.⁹

These various, and at times contradictory, expressions of the Modern in China – Western-style paintings, "New Art" and composite photomontages in both Western and national formats – were accompanied by passionate debates about artistic practice in China and in the diaspora. Although international military conflict and civil war would make art production at times dangerous, or even impossible, Chinese artists in the first half of the twentieth century collectively established the key parameters for our understanding of the nature and role of art in China until today, and mapped out paths that successive generations of artists would also take.

New Art in the twentieth and twenty-first Centuries

In the Strasbourg exhibition of 1924, Lin Fengmian provided an overview of artistic practice in China at that time, and contextualized the work of twenty-six contemporary artists by including historical fine and applied arts of China. The present exhibition, *Accumulations: The Spirit of the East*, consciously avoids the panoramic and seeks instead to focus on single works by a number of artists whose practice may be considered exemplary for the development of the Modern in China during the second half of the twentieth century and today.

This strategy of severe reduction naturally brings with it the danger of singular readings and the burden of over-interpretation. On the other hand, the close examination of single works, and single artists, through a microscope as it were, and in dialogue with one another, can offer new perspectives. As in traditional *guohua* painting, far and near coexist in a state of languorous contradiction.

In the present exhibition we are confronted by the work of artists whose biographies reflect the dramatic political and ideological changes which have swept China during the past hundred years. **Chu Teh-chun** (b. 1920), and **Zao Wou-ki** (b. 1921) were born only a decade after the

founding of the Republic of China, during a brief utopian moment when Chinese artists of differing persuasions were joining forces at home, and abroad, to debate, and define, their shared cultural identity.

By the 1940s, when Zao and Chu had completed their studies at the China Academy of Art,¹⁰ which was still under the direction of Lin Fengmian, China was occupied by foreign troops and ravaged by civil war. Shortly afterwards Zao moved to Paris; Chu and his family moved to France in 1955. Both artists have enjoyed extraordinary success and international recognition, and have rightly received many honours during their long careers. Their paintings are, as Cai Yuanpei would express it, perfect examples of the interpenetration of Western and Eastern culture, and a synthesis of the ancient and modern arts of China.

In 1926, Lin Fengmian had written in an article on "The Futures of the Oriental and Western Arts" that Chinese landscape painters enjoy more freedom of expression and are not – like Western artists – mechanically "representing the surface of nature".¹¹ Neither Chu Teh-chun nor Zao Wou-ki has ever resorted to a mechanical representation of nature. Their masterly exploration of the techniques of Western and traditional Chinese painting, their deep understanding of Western Abstraction and Expressionism, and their insertion of the unique viewing perspective of Chinese painting onto the Western canvas, have contributed to a revitalization of both Chinese and Western painting traditions.

Similarly, the Beijing native **Chuang Che** (b. 1934) has lived the greater part of his life as an expatriate artist. The son of the master calligrapher, Chuang Yan, who held a senior position at the National Palace Museum in Beijing, Chuang Che moved to Taiwan, China with his family in 1948. Here he actively promoted the integration of the *Literati* tradition and Western Abstract Expressionism. In 1966, the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation award, Chuang moved to the United States where he has lived ever since.

Jonathan Hay, Associate Professor of Art History at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, has pointed out that "Zao [Wou-ki's] cypher-like signature, to which he has remained faithful for over fifty years, gives his first name in Chinese characters and his last in a Western orthography. " Surprisingly Hay sees this as being "emblematic of a stranded cultural identity".¹² This notion of Chinese artists being "stranded" between cultures, because they choose to draw on both Western and Oriental traditions, is problematic.

Experimentation with both foreign and indigenous traditions in the search for inspiration, and new formal languages, is not only common in Western art, it has been its lifeblood. Lu Xun termed it "grabbism". In *Upon seeing a Mirror* written in 1925, he defined "grabbism" as borrowing from other countries with confidence, like a master who chooses freely according to his needs and not like a neurotic who fears the loss of indigenous tradition or enslavement by what is borrowed.¹³

For the next generation of artists in the present exhibition, those born in the 1940s, fearless, "grabbist" interpenetration of Western and Oriental traditions was not an option for many years. Li Shan, Pan Gongkai, Qiu Shihua and Wang Huaiqing were in their twenties and at the beginning of their careers when Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution on 16 May 1966. **Wang Huaiqing** (b. 1944) was assigned to the countryside for rehabilitation through labour, as was his teacher Wu Guanzhong (b. 1919). Wu had studied both national and Western painting at the Academy of Art in Hangzhou under Lin Fengmian and Pan Tianshou, the father of Pan Gongkai. As mentioned earlier, Lin Fengmian had appointed Pan Tianshou professor of national painting or *guohua* at the Hangzhou academy in 1928:

[Pan Tianshou delineates] forms that could evoke feelings of being in danger, of going to extremes, of being surprised, of having power, and of thrilling at the sight of something marvellous or even grotesque.¹⁴

In the paintings and large-scale sculptural works of Wang Huaiqing there is also a feeling of going to extremes, of being surprised, and of having power. This was especially evident in Wang's ambitious retrospective at the Shanghai Art Museum in 2007. Nevertheless, in an interview with the author, conducted in preparation for the present exhibition, Wang Huaiqing points out that his education was not in the area of *Literati* painting but rather in Russian-style revolutionary oil painting. It was only after the end of the Cultural Revolution that Wang Huaiqing was able to engage in an intense study of *Literati* painting, and to create bridges between China's national painting tradition, the vocabulary of European revolutionary painting, and Western conceptual practices.

Pan Gongkai (b. 1947) is the only contemporary artist in the present exhibition whose work has remained within the *Literati* tradition. In this sense, he can be seen to be preserving the legacy of his father, Pan Tianshou. It is important to note, however, that Pan Gongkai's endeavours have moved far beyond the simple preservation of the past, something which was recognized in 1991 when he was named "Literati with a Special Contribution". The extent of this contribution

was evident in the first major retrospective of his work titled *Still Water Runs Deep: Pan Gongkai* at the Guangdong Museum of Art in the spring of 2007.

As President of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou from 1996 to 2001, and of the China Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing from 2001 to the present, Pan Gongkai was able to apply his own "two-end" theory on the relationship between Chinese and Western art, which he formulated in the mid-1980s: "Chinese and Western paintings should complement each other by creating a vast oval-shaped blended zone, with Chinese traditions at one end and Western modernity at the other."¹⁵

Pan Tianshou believed that "the materials and the modes of representation in Western painting [possess] unique characteristics making it meaningful to experiment".¹⁶ Nevertheless he too was convinced that Chinese and Western art have different values, and that their individual traditions should not be combined or replace one another.¹⁷

Although **Qiu Shihua** (b. 1940) graduated from the Xi'an Academy of Art in 1962, the Cultural Revolution meant that his career as an artist would not begin until much later. If Qiu's earlier paintings can be considered as occupying a *Middle Way (Approaching Naturalism)* as Liu Haisu formulated it, his more recent, highly experimental and meditative works combine the grand subject of *Literati* painting (the landscape) with rarefied excursions into pure colour and Daoist thought. The artist himself regards the inevitable comparison the Western viewer makes with the monochrome experiments of the European and American Modern as misleading.

As other observers have noted, Qiu's paintings elude categorization as they oscillate between form and non-form. From a distance they appear to be void. It is only with time, a central element in Qiu's work, and proximity, that the careful observer can detect shapes. Each viewer then translates the barely visible forms into a highly personal landscape. The notion of shared perception is placed in question.

If at the end of the Cultural Revolution Wang Huaiqing, Pan Gongkai and Qiu Shihua sought to revitalize and reinterpret, national artistic and cultural traditions in their work (albeit in a very individual manner), the artist **Li Shan** (b. 1942) continued to explore – and subvert – the techniques of Socialist Realism as applied for propaganda purposes. This was especially evident in his *Rouge* series of androgynous, and highly theatrical, portraits of Mao Zedong in the 1990s. The present exhibition presents a more recent series of computer-generated images of mutated insects, partially composed of human body parts. In the same manner in which traditional

Literati representations of nature may be interpreted as a form of self-portrait, or a depiction of a state of being, Li Shan's disturbing images may be considered a portrait of the mutated self, or mutated society.

The next generation of artists to be considered in the present exhibition were born in the 1950s and established their careers, either in China or as expatriates in America and Europe, during a period of extreme change. While they personally experienced the Cultural Revolution, they reached maturity in an era distinguished by a new openness, and an intense thirst for knowledge. Their adult life has been marked by the benefits, and the negative aspects, of globalization, and by an almost insatiable appetite in the West for Chinese art.

The brilliance of this generation of artists – which includes Xu Bing, Cai Guo-Qiang, Ye Yongqing and Lu Shengzhong – is not to be denied. They are the classic "grabbists", as Lu Xun termed it in 1925, borrowing, however, not only from other countries with confidence, but also from their own culture, like a master who chooses freely according to his needs.

One of the most articulate theorists of this generation, **Xu Bing** (b. 1955), observed that the challenge for Chinese artists working in this period was to establish their own individual understanding of culture, and to avoid disorientation in the "cultural fever" which swept China in the post-Cultural Revolution period. Xu describes the co-existence of the traditional with contemporary conceptualism in his own work: " You could say that the traditional exterior is a kind of costume, æ in the written characters I invented, whose exterior form and interior substance are completely different[...] The traditional and the modern /contemporary exist within a state of constant and mutual transformation."¹⁸

For the present exhibition, Xu Bing has created a new work titled *New English Calligraphy - And death shall have no dominion (by Dylan Thomas)* with Square Word Calligraphy which fuses two different cultures and language systems. Ostensibly Chinese characters, his calligraphy actually represents English words, in this case the poem "And Death shall have no Dominion" by the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, first published in 1936 in the volume *Twenty-Five Poems*¹⁹:

Though they be mad and dead as nails,
 Heads of the characters hammer through
 daisies;
 Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,

And death shall have no dominion.

Xu Bing's *Death* is probably dedicated to the victims of the Sichuan earthquake which occurred on 12 May 2008.

Cai Guo-Qiang (b. 1957) whose work is described in detail elsewhere in this volume, believes that the West's "objective culture" generates questions that are not those of his own "subjective culture".²⁰ This comment is reminiscent of the remarks of Lin Fengmian in 1926 referred to earlier, that Chinese landscape painters do not, like their Western counterparts, mechanically (objectively) represent the surface of nature.²¹ It is also reminiscent of (Long Chin-san observation in 1942, that what differentiates Chinese artists of the traditional schools from Western artists is "that they paint what they *have seen* instead of what they *are seeing*".²²

Cai's work draws, like that of other artists in the present exhibition such as Qiu Shihua, on mysticism, Daoism, oriental cosmology and chan (Zen) thought. It also integrates time and memory. "I dare to be ambitious, to assert myself and oppose the marvellous myths of the West," he remarked in an interview with Fei Dawei in 1999.²³ Cai Guo-Qiang's position is not one based on ignorance of the West (as he points out, he studied Western art and Soviet style stage design). It is, instead, a call for a truly pluralist society which will only "exist when artists from the third world will no longer imitate Western contemporary art".²⁴

In a recent interview fellow artist **Ye Yongqing** (b. 1958) explained that in the 1990s, while he was living in Europe, he began to work in a graffiti style, a "jotting-down of my feelings, kind of like blogs these days".²⁵ His dissatisfaction, however, with this approach, which he termed "monkey painting", led him to seek ways beyond logic, on the flipside of logic as he puts it, which would enable him to bring together painting from the Song Dynasty as well as contemporary life and culture. In his most recent work he recuperates the elegance of traditional Chinese painting, bringing it into the contemporary world by scanning his pencil drawings into the computer and then copying them in oil after projecting the image onto a canvas. "I envy artists like Huang Binhong and Lin Fengmian", he remarked, "to whom forty years is as a day.

²⁶

Although they each live on the other side of the Strait, **J. C. Kuo** (b. 1949) and **Lu Shengzhong** (b. 1952), have both sought to integrate Chinese folk culture into their art. For Lu, it has been the technique of paper cutting which he has transformed with profound respect and apparently unlimited inventiveness into spectacular objects which float between the traditional and the

contemporary. J. C. Kuo, on the other hand, according to Nancy T. Lu, has consistently highlighted in his "congested" confluences of Chinese subject matter and Western popular culture "the garishness, the vulgarity and the raucousness of Taiwanese mass culture".²⁷

The final generation of artists in the present exhibition, born in the 1960s, came to maturity in a period in which China has displayed exceptional economic strength, and enjoyed extraordinary global influence. If in the 1920s Chinese intellectuals in Europe fought for recognition and understanding of Modern Chinese culture and tried to free it from the fetters of exoticism, today it is the West which pays court to the East. Indeed nowadays, as Cai Guo-Qing remarked, it is Western artists who "provide us with an image of exoticism as well".²⁸

One of the key artists of this generation is **Zhan Wang** (b. 1962). His projects in the mid-1990s included excavating, hanging, burying, cleaning and mending the sky as well as suspending *Zhongshan Zhuang* (Sun Yat-sen or Mao suits) like vacated bodies. The over three-metre high work in the present exhibition, *Artificial Rock 125*, belongs to a series of stainless steel *jiashanshi* (known in the West as Scholar's Rocks), one of the seventeen essential elements of the classical Chinese Garden. Most favoured are Taihu rocks from Lake Tai, near Suzhou, which symbolize wisdom and immortality. As Britta Erickson has pointed out, Zhan's *Artificial Rocks* stand "as a metaphor for many aspects of contemporary life, with a modern external guise but essentially rooted in traditional life [complementing] the new style of building much better than genuine *jiashanshi*".²⁹ In an ambitious exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in May 2008, titled *Garden Utopia*, Zhan Wang reminded us of the "poetic garden", a spiritual utopia which allows us to connect with nature, come back to our inner heart, and return to ancient idealism.

The loss of language and ancient culture in globalized contemporary society is also a key issue in the work of the Beijing artist **Huang Gang** (b. 1961). Huang takes as his subject matter the traditional culture of Tibet, especially the language of its sutras, which he superimposes on his paintings without being able to read or interpret them. The resulting large-scale paintings gravitate between a portrayal of the ruins of an undefined, but intimated, cultural landscape and of the remnants of an archaeological-style dig with treasures barely visible under an overlay of debris.

Chen Chieh-jen (b. 1960) similarly investigates ruins, this time of the industrial state. One of his best-known works is *Factory* from 2003 in which he invited seamstresses from a closed textile factory to return to their former workplace. The present exhibition will include *The Route*

which was commissioned by the Tate Liverpool, in which Chen re-staged union protests and demonstrations in ports across the world. The artist has described Taiwan as "a fast-forgetting consumer society that has abandoned its right to 'self-narration' . [...] I resist the state of amnesia in consumer society. "³⁰ Chen will also re-create the performance *I Pirate My Own Work* (2007) in which the artist set up a stand and sold self-"pirated" copies of his own videos. The income from the sales was then donated to a charity.

Another artist from Taiwan, China in the present exhibition is the controversial commentator on the sexual and cultural mores of his society **Hou Chun-ming** (b. 1963). His "pleasure tableaux", performances, installations and large-scale woodblocks have always challenged social taboos. More recently, in 2000, he began working on a series of 402 mandalas which reflect his study of temple festivals and folk art. This fascination with both contemporary and indigenous culture is also evident in the work of the artists Ju Ming and Li Chen from Taiwan, China. Together with Yuyu Yang, renowned for his Modernist, utopian sculptures, these artists have sought to create a link between the past and the present through their monumental work. The notion of sculpture as fine art, as opposed to craft, dates in China from the early twentieth-century when Chinese artists returned from their studies in Europe and Japan. As Michael Sullivan has observed, this first generation tended to be competent, if conventional, "salon" sculptors.³¹ One of the first artists to break with these conventions, and to create monumental, experimental works, was **Yuyu Yang** (Yang Yingfeng, 1926-1997). Together with Zao Wou-ki and Chu Teh-chun mentioned earlier, Yang produced works which are perfect examples of the interpenetration of Western and Eastern culture. He attained international recognition with a masterpiece in steel, *Advent of the Phoenix*, created for the Taiwan pavilion at the Osaka *Expo* in 1970.

With its theme of "Progress and Harmony for Mankind", and its architectural design by Kenzo Tange, *Expo '70* was extraordinarily successful with an attendance of over 64 million visitors. A large moon rock in the US Pavilion brought back by the Apollo 11 crew, the first IMAX film, and demonstrations of both mobile phones and maglev train technology were among the highlights of the exposition. The choice of the phoenix, a mythical bird with a tail of gold and red plumage and a thousand year life-cycle, rising out of the ashes was a compelling metaphor for the exposition, and for the rebirth of both Japan and China after the tragedy of World War II. Yang's phoenix was also a symbol for immortality, and invincibility. The present exhibition includes one of a series of ten multiples on this theme from 1970, also titled *Advent of the Phoenix*.

As an environmental designer and town planner with projects in Beirut, New York, and Saudi Arabia, Yuyu Yang moved away from figural "lifescapes", as he preferred to call his sculpture, his work becoming more and more abstract. On the mainland, however, from the mid century until the 1980s, Socialist Realism would displace academic realism in sculpture.³² As Craig Clunas has noted, those artists working on Tawian, China, during this period, "faced fewer stylistic or political constraints than those on the mainland, and a vigorous pluralism has existed there for the past forty years".³³ It is precisely this pluralism which provided fertile ground for a former student of Yuyu Yang, **Ju Ming** (Zhu Ming, b. 1938) who, like his compatriot Chuang Che, sought to integrate the traditional culture of China with forms of Western modernity.

In the 1970s Ju experimented with styles which fluctuated between the figural and the abstract. The present exhibition includes one of his finest works, an 800 kilo, monumental bronze titled *Arch* from the *T'ai Chi Series* of sculptures depicting shadow boxing.

In 1976, only six years after Yuyu Yang had impressed the international art community with *Advent of the Phoenix*, Ju Ming's first one-man exhibition at the National Museum of History in Taipei showcased his *taiji* figures, hacked out of wood with an axe or chisel or (reputedly) with his bare hands, often cast in bronze. The roughness, purposeful lack of elegance, and, at times, unashamed representational will is the antithesis of Yuyu Yang's elegant, abstract forms. Another distinguishing feature of Ju Ming's *taiji* series is that the artist sought to capture *transitional* movement between forms.³⁴ Interestingly, this highly successful body of work initially met with a mixed response in his home country. Having been associated with nativism, a celebration of local Taiwan identity, Ju Ming was, at first, seen as promoting the martial arts of China, and Chinese culture, with the series of *taiji* sculptures.

Just as Ju Ming began his career as an apprentice to a carver of wooden images for Buddhist temples at the age of fifteen, his younger compatriot, **Li Chen** (b. 1963) also began with a traditional apprenticeship, producing Buddhist sculptures in the 1980s. Since the 1990s, however, Li Chen has moved beyond perpetuating existing traditions. Instead he has sought to reconcile contradictory tendencies within historical Buddhist sculpture. Like the artists of the Jin and Liu Song dynasties, Li Chen's artistic style combines "spirit" (a sense of life) with "bones" (an elegant refinement of physiognomy).³⁵

Recently, his figures have increasingly taken on the "weighty reality" of substantial, even plump, figures from the sculpture of the Tang dynasty.³⁶ Li Chen's abundant figures, resting on dragon balls, lotus flowers, or auspicious clouds, are firmly situated within both the figural and

narrative practices of traditional sculpture and can be understood, according to the critic and editor, Ian Findlay-Brown, as "a modern version of Buddhist iconography that speaks directly and simply to the world today without sacrificing the spirituality of it".³⁷

The work in the present exhibition, *Landscape in Heaven*, 2001, a bronze sculpture with black lacquer in an edition of six, implies, through its title, a conflation of figure and landscape. It is this refusal to be bound by systems of categorization, and this insistence on exploiting and fusing distinctions in new composite meanings, which makes Li Chen's sculptural work so elusive for a Western audience.

In Thomas McEvilley's influential book from 1999, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, the author writes of a rising scepticism in the West. This scepticism is not universally shared in the East, and is certainly not to be found in the work of Yuyu Yang, Ju Ming or Li Chen. For audiences in a secular West, Modern has implied not only scepticism but also a tendency towards anti-description and anti-narrative. This thesis was brilliantly explored in an exhibition on Modern sculpture in 1986 titled *Qu'est-ce que la Sculpture Moderne?* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The curator, Margit Rowell, argued that [Western] Modern sculpture does not tell a story, is not based on visual perception, and is marked by a shift from perceptual to conceptual. She also stated that [Western] Modern sculpture is based on rupture rather than continuity.³⁸ Over twenty years later, we are able to re-consider another tradition of the Modern – in China – which celebrates continuity rather than rupture, and which embraces narrative.

Conclusion

In 1912 one of the Founding figures of Chinese Modernism, the artist Liu Haisu, and his colleagues, published a Manifesto which declared their intent:

"Firstly, we must develop the indigenous art of the East and study the mysteries of Western art; Secondly, we want to fulfil our responsibility of promoting art in a society that is callous, apathetic, desiccated, and decaying. We shall work for the rejuvenation of Chinese art, because we believe art can save present-day Chinese society from confusion and arouse the general public from their dreams."³⁹

Nearly a century later, similar sentiments are being expressed by the artists in the present exhibition. There is a shared desire to celebrate and protect indigenous traditions, philosophies

and understandings. Contemporary society is seen as callous, Western culture as exotic and strange.

For Xu Bing, China possesses "so many intricate cultural phenomena and factors, so many complex cultural elements and social forms; it is an entirely unprecedented, completely new situation. [...] It is neither traditionally Western nor traditionally Eastern, nor does it belong to the previous socialist period, but it is a state that came into being because of all these factors, which can only exist in our country in this specific period [...] Even specific methodologies are new, and they all possess Chinese characteristics."⁴⁰

Born in the turmoil of the twentieth century, these artists seek to save present-day society from its confusion, and to arouse us – in the East and in the West – from our dreams.

Munich July 2008

¹ The *Palais du Rhin* was the former Kaiser's Palace in Strasbourg. The exhibition took place only six years after France had reclaimed Alsace-Lorraine from Germany at the end of World War I.

² In the preface to the catalogue of the exhibition, Cai Yuanpei is described as the Former Minister of Education and Fine Arts, Rector of the National University of Peking, Commander of the Legion of Honour and Honorary Doctor, University of New York. Cai had studied from 1907 to 1911 at the University of Leipzig in Germany.

³ Mayching Kao, "Reforms in Education and the Beginning of the Western-Style Painting Movement in China" in Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 154.

⁴ Exhibition Catalogue, 9.

⁵ Exhibition Catalogue, 8.

⁶ The Academy subsequently changes its name in 1929 to the Hangzhou National College of Art, in 1950 to the East-China Campus of Central Academy of Fine Arts, in 1958 to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and in 1993 to its present name: the China Academy of Art.

⁷ For detailed information on these exhibitions, see: Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, Zheng Shengtian (eds.), *Shanghai Modern* (Munich: Museum Villa Stuck, 2004), 21-56.

⁸ Liu Haisu, "Die Richtungen in der modernen chinesischen Malerei", *Sinica* 6, no. 2. (1931):52.

⁹ *Shanghai Modern*, op.cit., 378.

¹⁰ The Academy was then known as the Hangzhou National College of Art.

¹¹ Kuiyi Shen, "Landscape as Cultural Consciousness in Contemporary Chinese Art", *Yishu* 2, no. 4 (December 2003):35.

¹² Jonathan Hay, *Recent Work by Zao Wou-ki*, Marlborough New York, April 30, 2003.
<http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/zao/essay.html>.

¹³ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 86.

¹⁴ Lang Shaojun, "Traditional Chinese Painting in the Twentieth Century" in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 331.

¹⁵ For further information, see:

http://www.gdmoa.org/en_zhanting/en_zhengzaizhanchu/9112.jsp

¹⁶ Pan Tianshou, *History of Chinese Painting*, 1926, cited by Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 25.

¹⁷ ? ? ? , op.cit.,332.

¹⁸ Glenn Harper, "Substance: A Conversation with Xu Bing".
http://www.xubing.com/index.php/site/texts/a_conversation_with_xu_bing1/. ©2008 Xu Bing Studio.

¹⁹ Excerpt from Dylan Thomas, *And death shall have no dominion*, 1936. ©The Trustees for the Copyrights of Dylan Thomas.

²⁰ "To Dare to Accomplish Nothing. Fei Dawei Interviews Cai Guo-Qiang" in Fei Dawei (ed.), *Cai Guo-Qiang* (London: Thames & Hudson and Paris: Fondation Cartier pour l' art contemporain, 2000): 177-135. ©Fei Dawei and Cai Guo-Qiang.

²¹ Kuiyi Shen, op.cit., 35.

²² Lang Jingshan, "Composite Pictures and Chinese Art", *The Photographic Journal*, February 1942. Reprinted in Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, Zheng Shengtian, *Shanghai Modern*, op.cit.,154.

²³? ? ? , op.cit.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Nonexistent Reality: A Discussion between Li Xianting and Ye Yongqing", *Yishu Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 7, no. 3 (May 2008): 36.

²⁶ Ibid, 40.

²⁷ "J.C.Kuo' s art tries to define Taiwanese cultural identity", *Taiwan News*, July 10, 2008, 3.

²⁸ Cai Guo-Qiang in conversation with Fei Dawei, op.cit.

²⁹ Britta Erickson, "Material Illusion: Adrift with the Conceptual Sculptor Zhan Wang", *Art Journal*, Summer 2001.

³⁰ *Condensation: Five video works by Chen Chieh-jen*, Asia Society New York, June – August 2007. http://www.asiasociety.org/arts/07_chen_chieh_jen.html.

³¹ Michael Sullivan, op.cit (see note 16), 159-161.

³² See Britta Erickson, op.cit.

³³ Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 219.

³⁴ Meng-Yu Yang, *Carving for Humanity. A Biography of Ju Ming* (Taipei: Commonwealth Publishing Co., 1997), 337 ff., translated by Eugenia Yun for the *Taiwan Review*, January 7, 1998.

³⁵ Su Bei, "Origins and Trends in the Depiction of Human Figures in China of the Fifth and Sixth Centuries", *China 5000 years: Innovation and Transformation in the Arts* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Art Exhibitions China, Beijing, 1998), 135.

³⁶ Helmut Brinker, "Transfiguring Divinities: Buddhist Sculpture in China", *China 5000 years: Innovation and Transformation in the Arts*, ibid., 157.

³⁷ Ian Findlay, "In Search of Spiritual Space", *World Sculpture News* 11, no.4 (Autumn 2005): 26-32.

³⁸ Michael Brenson, "Art View: A Show in Paris Asks What Makes Modern Sculpture Distinct", *The New York Times*, 20 July 1986. ©The New York Times. It is interesting in this regard to compare the work of Li Chen with the artists of the same generation in the present exhibition. The sculptural works of Zhan Wang clearly belong to the "shift from perceptual to conceptual". Zhan himself refers to his works as "Conceptual Sculpture" (see Britta Erickson, note 30). Similarly the works of Chen Chieh-jen and Hou Chun-ming are close to conceptual art practices.

³⁹ Mayching Kao, op.cit., 158. At the age of 14, Liu Haisu studied Western painting before, in 1912, founding the Shanghai Art Academy. The Manifesto describes the intent of Liu and his colleagues in founding the Academy.

⁴⁰ "Chinese artists today have an easier path to success", Xu Bing in conversation with Jason Edward Kaufman, *The Art Newspaper*, No. 189, 13 March 2008. ©2008 Xu Bing Studio.