Questions

2

2.1 Questions and Debate

Can Chinese ink-wash artists use their traditional materials to make contemporary contributions to world art at this historical moment? This is to ask whether Chinese ink painters can address the present needs of people in the current period of global growth. Chinese ink painting is often described as a medium most expressive of Chinese cultural heritage. So, by inquiring about Chinese ink paintings and their relevance to the present, we are also asking about the role of traditional Chinese culture as a guide for Chinese artists who seek to make art that is authentically Chinese and of benefit to global audiences. Throughout the past 100 years, Chinese artists and critics have debated and returned to both questions. The task here is to sort through differences of opinion and to affirm a contemporary role for both Chinese ink-wash painting and Chinese philosophical thought about the union of self with nature, other persons, and a larger universe. Our path leads us to consider the meaning of "contemporary," plans for the reform of traditional Chinese painting, the search for what is called "Chineseness", and the adequacy of Chinese aesthetics compared with Arthur Danto's Euro-American philosophy of art. We can proceed by examining the thoughts, practices, and ink-wash paintings of Jizi who lives now in Beijing. His reliance on traditional Chinese aesthetics and success as a synthesizer and interrogator offer a promising approach. We can gather his claims about the contemporary value of traditional Chinese aesthetics for ink-wash painting and test them against the compositions that he has created in recent decades. These pages advance the thesis that some contemporary Chinese ink-wash painters use traditional materials successfully to express philosophies of the unification of self, nature, and universe that characterize Chinese culture. The ultimate aim is to produce a wider appreciation for the way that ink painting expressive of Chinese thinking about existence with nature can contribute to a contemporary global culture that is vibrant, complex, diverse, and affirming of the present.

These initial questions concerning the value of ink-wash painting and Chinese cultural heritage take us into a creative and productive tangle of ideas and opinions. Even the capacity of Chinese ink painting to qualify as contemporary art is questioned today. Opinions may vary on whether Chinese ink wash is contemporary, because current usage of the term "contemporary" is changing. The term has been regarded as synonymous with being in a common period of time and progressing towards some future utopia envisioned by modernists. But some art historians and curators are now redefining it in relation to "contemporaneity", a word that they use to denote an awareness of *presentness* or a thickening of the present that occurs without subordination to expectations of the future. As Terry Smith puts it, contemporaneity involves giving priority to immediacy over epoch, the presence of one person to another in the present, and direct experience of complexity: It is "the constant experience of radical disjunctures of perception, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world…all thrown together."[1] At least for Smith, "contemporaneity" is not a new term for the old modern; it expresses living with experience of complexities and mismatchings by means of a novel awareness of the present as an immediate thickness or place.

What the terms "contemporary" and "contemporaneity" imply today for the making and interpretation of the diverse styles of Chinese ink art is still in dispute. For example, the curator Wu Hung suggests that the expression of contemporaneity requires the rejection of traditional painting mediums such as Chinese ink on paper and also oil on canvas: "contemporaneity in contemporary Chinese art entails a wide-ranging effort to challenge the traditional dominance of painting in visual art and even to dismiss painting as an independent art form."[2] In a reply to Wu Hung, Jerome Silbergeld objects that this is ceding "contemporaneity" to one group of artists and denying it to "traditional arts, whose role

[1] Smith (2006, p. 701, 703).

[2] For Wu Hong's text and commentary, see Silbergeld (2009, p. 128).

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is to creatively extend and preserve the past."[3] Nor is there agreement on whether a culture of contemporaneity offers a presentness that stabilizes, even after Terry Smith's claim that the experience of complexity ultimately involves "valuing the same world." Questions continue, since Smith also claims that the phenomena of contemporaneity results in an art of "multeity" and "inequity" and no deeper stability.[4] Wang Chunchen foresees instead a more positive outcome for those who negotiate the complexity of contemporaneity: he considers experience "with countless alien elements" as a means for breaking though "the containment of language" and entering into a root reality "to read the new self."[5] The question here is whether cultural styles of contemporaneity point to stabile roots of moral significance by emphasizing the thickness of the present. Finally, Maxwell K. Hearn writes in his role as a curator that his definition of "contemporary" excludes "works that hew closely to the cannons of *guohua* (traditional Chinese-style painting)…."[6] Hearn explains his aim for a more inclusive definition that does limit formal solutions available to artists. Yet, he still seeks to define the complexity of contemporary Chinese ink art by appealing to "aesthetic choices or stylistic references that are indelibly linked to China's cultural past."[7] Thus, after some reflection, we are led to consider again whether at least *some* cannons of style indelibly associated with traditional aesthetic choices of Chinese ink-wash painters may contribute now to the making of images that express unification with a thickness of the present or contemporaneity. In short, if we are to assess the full capacity of Chinese ink-wash painting to serve as contemporary art, we must consider opposing opinions carefully and seek to avoid presuppositions that slow appreciation.

Throughout the twentieth century in China, advocates of movements for innovation and tradition have debated a set of perennial questions about the merits and defects of traditional Chinese ink painting. Should Chinese art be reformed? If so, then *how? How much* can it be changed if it is to express continuity with Chinese cultural heritage? With the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), and the Revolution of 1911, three different policies for the revitalization of Chinese painting emerged: continuation of traditional Chinese ink painting (*guohua*), absorption of modern "scientific modeling" or realism, and synthesis with modern abstraction observed in Euro-American avant-gardes. The advocates of realism and abstraction both favored acceptance of influences from abroad. Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) asserted that the improvement of life required implementation of the scientific attitude evident in Europe. He became an advocate of realism, despite his observation of the latest experiments in Cubism during a visit to Picasso's studio in 1915.[8] Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) advocated reform of traditional arts and literature. His declaration of 1917 calls upon writers to replace the literature of the recluse with "a plain-speaking and popular literature of a living society."[9] In painting, he regarded the realism of some European styles as an antidote to traditional Chinese painting and its Confucian foundations that he deemed incompatible with modern ideas of social equality. Xu Beihong (1895–1953) favored a synthesis of Chinese painting with a realism devoted to scientific truth; his results are evident in *The Foolish Man Removing the Mountain* (1940) and a series of ink-wash paintings of horses for which he is now well known. While Xu Beihong argued against the influence of abstraction from Europe, other Chinese artists such as Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) sought renewal by synthesis with the work of modern artists such as Cézanne and Matisse. Lin called for the merging of Chinese emotion with techniques from Europe.[10] Yet, he was not a proponent of art for art's sake, and he initiated the slogan "art for people's life" (*yishu wei rensheng*), a phrase meant to express compassion for those suffering.[11] Working in Shanghai alongside Lin Fengmian, Pang Xunqin (1906–1985) and Ni Yide (1901–1970) started the Storm Society (1931–1935), where members exhibited and developed modern styles inspired by Cubists, Fauves, and Léger.[12]

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, a polarization of opinions with regard to the reform of traditional Chinese painting emerged once again. With his Yan'an Talks of 1942, Mao Zedong expressed some general guidelines: tradition was to be modified to serve the needs of the present, and some traditions needed to be pushed out to advance a new form and content.[13] However, after 1949, the need to augment these guidelines with specific policies regarding traditional Chinese painting became acute, as authorities faced large numbers of traditional ink painters in big cities and at established art colleges. Could Chinese ink painting be modernized by the merger with "scientific" modeling absorbed from Europe, without sacrificing Chinese painting heritage? How could classics of *guohua* be upheld as a source of pride, when the old was to be pushed out in favor of a new form and

[3] Silbergeld (2009, p. 128).

[4] Smith (2006, p. 704).

[5] Chunchen (2010, pp. 3–4).

[6] Hearn (2013, p. 8).

[7] *Ibid*. (p. 14).

[8] Sullivan (2012, p. 32).

[9] *Ibid*. (p. 33).

[10] For accounts of Chen Duxiu, Xu Beihong, and Lin Fengmian, see Croizier (1993, pp. 137, 135–143).

[11] Minglu (2011, p. 37).

[12] Croizier (1993, pp. 135–143, 151–152).

[13] Galikowski (1998, pp. 18, 30).

new content? The Yan'an Talks did not differentiate those aspects of traditional Chinese painting that could serve from those to be discarded. As a result, even within the official institutions such as the Artists' Association, deep divisions of opinion arose when reformers sought to inject "scientific modeling" and a new social content into the practice of traditional Chinese painting.[14]

The poet Ai Qing's (1910–1996) speech of 1953 to the Shanghai Art Workers Political Study Group still crystallizes the challenge for anyone who aims to describe how contemporary Chinese ink-wash painting meets the needs of those living in the present. His remarks remain fresh with implications for those who seek to explain how Chinese ink-wash painters can absorb Euro-American artistic traditions and still make contributions to global art that are specifically Chinese. The speech offers a foothold for resolving the disagreements over the value and usefulness of *guohua*. It expresses the opinion of reformers who insist on adding realistic forms that reference real social conditions, and it expresses at least briefly the opinion of traditionalists who point to a unique aesthetic of spirit and observable form. Ai Qing argues as follows: Since times and lives have changed, *guohua* needs to change also in content and form. For the most part, he articulates forcefully the standards for creating the new *quohua* that exhibits a new realist form and a content of real social relations. The new form is based on observation of nature, and the new content springs from new feelings toward working people in the present. Landscape painters can satisfy both standards, as long as they pursue "feelings toward nature" that are in "close relationships to people and society."[15] The emphasis on real working people by means of realism of representation is clear: "The excellence or poorness of a painting must be seen first in whether it accords with social reality and natural reality."[16] This advocacy of direct observation of people and landscapes as a method for revitalizing *guohua* is repeated by Cai Ruohong (1910–2002) during the same period: Artists should be trained in sketching and painting on the spot.[17] To summarize, Ai Qing holds that the Chinese ink-wash painting is new because it uses principles of verisimilitude or resemblance to depict physical forms and real conditions of social life.

For our own investigation here, Ai Qing's lecture has value because he refers at least briefly to the positive role of *guohua*, as a site for continuing the most precious part of Chinese cultural heritage. In three sentences, Ai Qing opens the question that is repeated often now today: How far can Chinese painting be modified in form and content, before it no longer continues the cultural heritage that is Chinese? His question is whether there is anything remaining in an ink painting with an entirely new content and new form that would save it from being merely "a Western painting." Ai Qing opens the question in the following way:

> Where is the new in new *guohua*? I think we need (1) new contents and (2) new forms. If contents are new but forms are not new, then [the work] is only half new; if forms are new but contents are not new, [similarly, the work] is only half new. But if the contents and forms are both new, then won't it become a Western painting? This raises the question of how to continue our heritage. Only if we continue the most precious part of our national painting heritage and then create things with new contents and new forms can we call this completely new Chinese painting.[18]

In effect, Ai Qing grants that his forceful advocacy of realistic forms and a socialist content—two features also found in culture—gives pause for thought: Where is the *guohua* in paintings with the new form and content? What is Chinese in the new Chinese ink painting that Ai Qing proposes to his audience? Ai Qing volunteers the answer that a painting is specifically Chinese because it is characterized by some third feature that is independent of form and content. The authentically Chinese painting is one in which "the most precious part" of Chinese heritage is to be *continued*. Thus, Ai Qing is calling on Chinese ink painters to continue this most precious part *in addition* to imposing the new form and content. Once Ai Qing refers to this third component of preciousness, it seems clear that he is committed implicitly to two more premises. The painter must have some aesthetic principle for deciding whether a work continues the most precious part, and this aesthetic principle must be independent of the standards used to evaluate the new form and the new content. It follows that there must be a distinctly different content for the third standard that is to be used for assessing whether a painting continues the most precious part and is not merely "a Western painting."

How is Ai Qing's speech relevant to our concerns today? He asks artists to work from a direct and profound observation of nature and to address the needs of the living. Such requests surely resonate. However, it is his opening of the question of what makes the new *guohua* Chinese that is most relevant for our study. Given his purpose of introducing the new standards for form and content, Ai Qing does not stop to give his opinion about the medium needed to continue the most precious part, when both form and content are entirely new. He offers no descriptions for what the most precious part of Chinese painting heritage might be. The speech is valuable for raising questions of interest even if it does not answer them. *Where* in the composition or the image of a painting does one observe the continuance of the most precious part

[14] *Ibid*. (p. 30).

[15] *Ibid*. (p. 117).

[16] *Ibid*. (p. 118).

[17] *Ibid*. (pp. 31–32).

[18] For the text of Qing Ai's remarks, see Andrews (1994, p. 115). See also Ai (1953, pp. 7–9).

of Chinese painting heritage? What needs to be added to a painting besides the new realistic forms and the new content of socialist cooperation, so that it will continue to express what the ink painter within Chinese culture regards as most precious? Ai Qing does not say, but his speech does authorize such questions. The speech suggests that *guohua* may be defined by its materials: "so-called guohua, are paintings painted with Chinese brush, Chinese ink, and Chinese pigments on Chinese paper or silk."[19] But, surely, the Chinese artists must assemble these materials in a distinctive way and in accordance with some intended principle of Chinese aesthetics in order to continue what is regarded as most precious. Ultimately, Ai Qing's speech makes two points that give us a clear direction: There is a most precious part of Chinese heritage continued in traditional Chinese ink painting, and this precious part is not continued if the painter merely creates an image that resembles the forms of real physical conditions.

Although Ai Qing does not mention it in his speech, traditional Chinese aesthetics has articulated for centuries a defining principle of authentic ink-wash paintings that does not depend on resemblance or a realistic style. This is the principle called "rhythmic vitality" or "spirit resonance" (*qiyun* 氣 韻) that we shall soon examine. Briefly put, if a painting is to be an authentic expression of the vitality and liveliness of the individual person's unique existence within nature in the present, then it must be made according to two aesthetic principles: The first is vitality or spirit (*qi*) and the second is rhythm or resonance (*yun*). Throughout the 1950s, no consensus developed among leading cadres on the value of *qiyun* as a guide for painters. As Maria Galikowski describes in her vivid account of opposing attitudes at the time, the aesthetic principle of *qiyun* became a cultural site of polarization and uncertainty. [20] In the text below, written in 1950, Li Hua (1907–1994) argues as a reformer that artists must de-emphasize the traditional literati principle of *qiyun* associated with the making of traditional Chinese landscape paintings. It is not entirely clear whether Li calls for its complete abandonment. In presenting this passage to us, Galikowski writes that Li Hua regarded "the expunging of the 'literati ideas and concepts'" as a precondition for reform; however, she also describes him as making the more moderate claim that "breath resonance" and the principles of *qi* and *yun* "should not be pursued as ends in themselves."[21] With regard to the subject matter, Li's remarks clearly suggest that flowers, birds, and poetic landscapes are to be replaced by images depicting the reality of social cooperation:

> Breath resonance [*qiyun*], brush and ink and other manifestations of formalism are no longer the directions pursued by artists. Painting should express collective life and the thoughts and feelings of "the people," so it must be realistic. Expressing the truthful, the ideological and the educational aspects of reality constitutes the highest realm of art. Thus, landscapes, flowers-and-birds and the "Four Gentlemen" have no scope for development.[22]

Those who shared Li Hua's thinking regarded Shi Lu (1919–1979) and Jiang Zhaohe (1904–1986) as artists who excelled at organizing ink-wash painting according to the new form of scientific modeling and the new social content. However, as Galikowski informs us, Fu Baoshi (1904–1965), Mo Pu (1915–1996), and Pan Tianshou (1897–1971) defended traditional landscape painting, its aesthetic basis, and its capacity for conveying space and genuine color without need for reliance on realistic techniques absorbed from Europe. In a 1954 issue of *Fine Art,* Mo Pu cited Qi Baishi's (1864–1957) prawns and all paintings by Shitao (1642–1707) in support of the conclusion that traditional Chinese painting depicts people and landscapes in an unparalleled way that reveals the spirit accompanying an object.[23] Pan Tianshou, a foremost flower-and-bird painter, warned that any use of European techniques to insert shading and "scientific modeling" would obscure the role of line in Chinese painting and weaken its unique capacity to convey form in unification with soul.[24] Zhang Ding (1917–2010), at that time deputy head at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, saw that debates on how and whether traditional Chinese painting should be modified merely caused an increase in polarization. He found that most people eventually advocated no reform or complete denial of tradition. But he had no solution to offer.[25] Since no consensus was ever reached, official policy toward *guohua* fluctuated from tolerance to suppression according to the attitudes that prevailed at any given moment.

Beginning with the 1980s, ink artists interested in a synthesis with modern Euro-American art and aesthetics reestablished momentum. One early event in this movement toward modern avant-garde styles was Wu Guanzhong's (1919–2010) essay "Formalist Aesthetics in Painting" published in 1979. Wu had studied with Lin Fengmian in Paris, so the challenge to the aesthetic of traditional Chinese ink painting came on this occasion from an advocate of modern abstraction. In the essay, Wu asserts that the ability to sketch objects directly from life is necessary but that artistic creation also requires more than "objective pictorialization" and the making of images by means of visual measurements and principles of proportion and perspective. He asserts that the problem is "how to represent" the object; and for this, the

[19] Galikowski (1988, p. 122).

[20] *Ibid*. (pp. 30–33).

[21] *Ibid*. (p. 31).

[22] *Ibid*. (p. 31). See also Li (1950, p. 39), "Gaizao Zhongguohuade jiben wenti", *People's Art,* 1950, No. 1, p. 39.

[23] *Ibid*. (p. 32). See also Mo (1954, p. 13).

[24] *Ibid*. (p. 33).

[25] *Ibid*. (p. 33).

artist needs to follow feeling and attend to formal qualities of composition and rhythm even to the point of "misconception" or exceeding the proportions observed in the object. The aim is subjective intervention and aesthetic feeling, so that the emotion results in the expression of the object's beauty.[26] In his own artistic practice, Wu abandoned a number of technical requirements associated with traditional Chinese brushwork, so that he could represent in painting the formal or semiabstract beauty that he observed directly on the spot in nature.[27] Wu Guanzhong sparked a lively debate in 1992 over the value of traditional Chinese painting, when he advanced the polarizing remark that "brushwork and ink equals zero!"[28] At issue was the traditional aesthetic of *bimo* (brush and ink) and more specifically the necessity of brushwork in ink-wash painting. Replying in defense of brushwork and the aesthetic associated with *guohua,* Wan Qingli (b. 1945) stated that without *bimo* there would be nothing left![29] Wu's point in the debate was that brush and ink are only tools for expressing the artist's emotion, a thesis resisted by advocates of traditional Chinese ink-wash painting. His provocative slogan was meant to gain attention for his long-standing aim of synthesizing traditional Chinese painting with a practice of modern abstraction that remained grounded in the observation of nature. According to Gao Ming Lu, Wu Guanzhong "believed that abstract beauty had existed in China since ancient times, in the elaborate literati landscape garden culture, calligraphy, the pursuit of pine tree form, and Qi Baishi's paintings."[30] The debate over the necessity of brushwork continued later that same year: Liu Guosong (b. 1932) asserted that modern ink painting has no need for brushwork, while Lang Shaojun argued that brushwork was essential for every kind of ink painting that remained Chinese in style.[31] Today, Wu Guanzhong and Liu Guosong are credited as influential figures who helped to transform *guohua* from within into what many Chinese art critics now call "experimental ink painting" (*shiyan shuima*)[32].

Ultimately, at least one lesson is suggested by disagreements over Chinese ink-wash painting that have at times led to a polarization, between arch traditionalists who resist all modifications and reformers who would abandon tradition entirely. One way to dissolve the polarization is to develop a new interpretation for rhythmic vitality (*qiyun*) that conveys how Chinese ink-wash painting provides authentic representations of nature without falling into mere abstract formalism or into realistic modeling and verisimilitude to physical things. The challenge for artists and critics today is to explain how the traditional idea of the authentic image may guide synthesizers and even experimental ink-wash painters to create art that is authentically Chinese. It is now the globalization of Chinese art that is guiding this long-standing debate and polarization over ink art toward innovative and constructive answers.

2.2 Globalization and Success: The Search for Chineseness

While debate continues among artists, critics, and curators on whether ink-wash painting remains at the core of Chinese art today, the globalization of contemporary Chinese art is changing the terms and direction of debate dramatically. As Liu Yuedi notes, the difference now is that the contemporary Chinese art world has passed through a "new context of globalization" during the years 1999–2008[33]. Many Chinese artists and especially those making conceptual, performance, and installation pieces are successful internationally with art buyers and curators. However, at the same time, the buyers' market sometimes hinders artists from making their own local assessments of what they themselves want to do. Some Chinese artists are pushed by these circumstances of success to ask *themselves* what is needed to make authentic contributions to world culture. Thus, as Liu puts it, the globalization of Chinese art is now accompanied by a search for what is called "Chineseness" or "re-Chineseness." The need for creative integrity motivates Chinese artists—including those who have entered the art market—to think about what constitutes authentic and indigenous Chinese cultural participation in the network of global art institutions. As a by-product of the search, we can expect new interpretations for the principles of traditional Chinese aesthetics that have guided Chinese ink-wash painters for a 1000 years. Thus, the link between global participation and re-Chineseness is important for our inquiry, because it puts Chinese artists and aestheticians on track to create balanced compositions that resolve the polarization—denial of reform or rejection of tradition—that has made the evaluation of Chinese ink-wash painting such a contentious issue.

The success brought to some artists through the globalization of contemporary Chinese art is evident. Many contemporary Chinese artists are now full participants in global art markets and institutions. It is impossible to regard the vibrant art scene in China as a mere reiteration of avant-garde

[26] Guanzhong (2010). For the original text see Guanzhong (1979a, pp. 33–35).

[27] Lu (2007).

[28] Shaofeng (2012, p. 35).

[29] Hearn (2013, p. 23).

[30] Gao (2011, pp. 80–81).

[31] Hearn (2013, p. 23).

[32] Wu Hung (2013, pp. 19–20).

[33] Liu (2011, p. 63).

phenomena initiated earlier in Europe.[34] This ascendency is marked by landmark shows, starting with *Inside Out: the New Chinese Art* (1998), and by signs such as the opening of the Chinese pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2003. The vibrancy of contemporary Chinese art is now firmly established. Artworks from China include oil painting and sculpture, installations and performance pieces, conceptual photography, and 3D digital video. The success is commercial, as marked by a much-publicized auction at Sotheby's in New York, during 2006, where final sales doubled some presale estimates.[35] Commercial recognition has come to experimental artists, such as Gu Wenda (b. 1955) and Xu Bing (b. 1955), who interrogate conventions of subject matter in traditional Chinese ink painting by creating intentionally illegible pseudo-characters in ink. Success has also come to painters associated with avant-garde styles in China: political pop and cynical realism. Two painters of the latter group, Fang Lijun (b. 1963) and Zhang Xiaogang (b. 1958), are well known now for the styles that they initiated in the 1990s. Although they continued a realist style, their emphasis on personal mood and portraits of family and friends was avant-garde and oppositional relative to the ideological content and grand political narratives of the official art of two decades ago.[36] Gao Minglu has described Zhang Xiaogang's series entitled *Bloodline: Big Family* (Fig. 2.1) as showing "inner emptiness in the face of the pursuit of individualism," within a late twentieth-century society turning toward consumerism.[37] Many foreign buyers accepted and supported these oppositional styles, because of the familiar pop theme of alienation amid material consumption, easily understood figures, and simple symbols that could be "granted political significance by westerners in accord with their understanding of Chinese politics." [38]

So, since the year 2000, many contemporary Chinese artists have entered a new phase of success in global markets. In general, this success has not yet reached Chinese ink-wash painters, who have remained, until recently, at the margins in Asian and Euro-American art markets. They have been positioned at the margins, partly because some art buyers have not thought of ink-wash paintings as representative of what is contemporary in Chinese art.[39]



Fig. 2.1 Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: Big Family,* 1993

Some curators and critics point to the positive effects of independence and diversity that arise from full participation by contemporary Chinese artists in global art institutions. Liu Yeudi notes that the globalization of contemporary Chinese art has resulted in a new diversity and independence. Artists in China are no longer wholly reliant on support obtained by employment in the conventional academic system or from artists' associations funded by government offices.[40] Curtis Carter judges the inclusion of Chinese artists to be a sign of a much-needed "universal" visual language of icons and abbreviations. It initiates a period in which artists "develop new ideas for art incorporating their cultural histories and that of others."[41] His thought is that the wider range of artistic contributors will result in a pluralism that will enable curators of contemporary art to resist the sort of uniformity that characterized the International Style of the twentieth century.

Yet, there is general agreement that the globalization of Chinese art is a double-edged phenomenon that also produces new difficulties. There are concerns about autonomy, diversity, and the survival of local traditions, as buyers and curators together exert their influence on Chinese artists. First, there is concern over the influence of foreign buyers. In China, the styles of political pop and cynical realism belonging to the 1990s are still regarded as important success stories and a turning point in Chinese oil painting. Yet, today, they are also cited as examples of the way in which the interests of foreign buyers can easily shape the direction of contemporary Chinese art. Yi Ying asserts that the pop styles that some Chinese artists developed by 1992 were

[34] For a discussion of the ways that "Euramerican discourse" has at times devalued the authentic interface of Asian cultural energy with modernity, see Clark (1993, pp. 1–2, 5–6).

[35] Silbergeld (2009, p. 122).

[36] Wang (2010, pp. 12–13).

[37] Minglu, Wu. *Total modernity and the avant-garde in twentieth-century Chinese art,* p. 266.

[38] Ying, Yi. Political pop art and the crisis of originality. In *Subversive strategies in contemporary Chinese art,* p. 27.

[39] Silbergeld (2009, p. 125).

[40] Liu (2011, p. 66).

[41] Carter (2008, p. 84).

"commodities originally produced for export".[42] Second, there is the concern over loss of diversity within the monoculture of global art. Richard Vine warns that equal participation by Chinese artists in global art institutions since 2000 does not change the fact that this is still a merger with an "international monoculture" of museums, publications, galleries, and auction houses. Vine states that a common visual language used by this institutional monoculture makes contemporary Chinese art accessible to "[a]ny viewer familiar with today's visual lingua franca, derived primarily from Western avant-gardism of the turn of the last century…."[43] In effect, Vine agrees with Carter that there is a shared language of icons and abbreviations. But Vine's warning is that in practice, artists, critics, curators, and publishers still seem to restrict the criteria for today's common artistic language to a "Western avant-gardism" that stems from early twentieth-century modernism. This raises the question of whether those who uphold the so-called monoculture of global art continue to define "contemporary" in modern terms that no longer encompass the diversity of art in the present. The third concern is that of indigenous traditions. Liu Yuedi alerts us to some possible dangers for Chinese artists today, by noting cases where local artistic traditions have been lost. He cites the example of Bali, where local painters in Butuan ceased the production of indigenous art, after a different style was encouraged by visiting anthropologists. He also points to Brazilian artists who abandoned traditional styles to create marginally successful imitations of European art that were then misidentified as authentic and local. In his opinion, a possible danger for Chinese artists would be a situation similar to that of Brazil.[44] To underline the double-edged atmosphere that surrounds art production now, Liu Yeudi compares the situation in China during the decade 2000–2009 with that of the Western art world described by Arthur Danto in his *Encounter and Reflections* of 1989: "…while the engines of the art world turn furiously, the output has been aesthetically stalled for two decades, and if there is any direction to speak of, it is that of bad aesthetics…"[45]

Given these concerns about the loss of diversity, Chinese artists and critics have responded with heightened interest in what is now referred to as "Chineseness." Participation in global markets and a new international profile lead Chinese artists, as a matter of artistic integrity, to a question of actual practice: "what, if anything, makes contemporary Chinese art uniquely Chinese?" To make a genuine contribution to global art, it is necessary to search sincerely for what is authentically Chinese within indigenous cultural traditions. Thus, the call now is for a reconsideration of what constitutes a specifically Chinese contribution to global art that meets present needs of audiences inside China and without. As Liu Yuedi explains, a continuation of realist styles from 1978 to 1984 was followed by a movement toward de-Chineseness and the absorption of cultural influences from abroad—especially from America and Europe—between 1985 and the early 1990s. But after the loss of ethnic and cultural identities during the 1990s and the period of international success (1999–2008), "the idea of producing real 'Chinese' artworks has become fundamental to contemporary artists." [46] He adds that this quest for an ultimate neo-Chineseness takes place in the context of full acceptance of Chinese artists in the global art community.

This quest for Chineseness is a cause for caution according to some art observers. Is this search associated with a new nationalism opposed to the globalizing notions of pluralism, mutual participation, and sharing? Consider, for example, the conversation between the art critic Richard Vine and Wang Chunchen, curator of the Chinese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2013. Vine grants that use of the term "Chineseness" arises now from a genuine sense of dislocation and "a whole people questioning themselves, saying 'who are we really'"; however, he also worries about a possible "subtext of old-fashioned nationalism."[47] Although he grants that conservatives do sometimes call "to have our own 'Chineseness,'" Wang Chunchen responds to Vine by emphasizing again the genuine indigenous need to investigate what portion of "Chineseness" remains after a century of development: "We can't find our past anymore. So when we seek this 'Chineseness,' we're asking really 'where is China?' The word 'Chineseness' doesn't just mean classic books, intellectuals, artists. We cannot say who or where the 'real' Chinese are."[48]

Some Chinese curators answer this concern by pointing out that the search for interpretations of "Chineseness" is not connected in any essential way to cultural exclusion or hierarchy. Liu Yuedi and Lu Hong insist that the clarification of the term "Chineseness," for the purpose of improving Chinese contributions to global culture, is consistent with pluralism and the ideas of tolerance and equality.[49] The new interest in Chineseness follows quite logically from the need of Chinese artists to contribute globally what *they themselves* regard as authentic artistic representations of Chinese life. There is no intention to privilege a point of origin (now China) and to

[42] Yi (2011, pp. 26–27).

[43] Vine (2011, p. 9).

[44] Liu (2011, pp. 64–66).

[45] *Ibid*. (p. 65).

[46] *Ibid*. (pp. 59–62).

[47] Wang (2013, p. 37).

[48] *Ibid*. (p. 37).

[49] Liu (2011, p. 74, 2012, p. 22).

de-privilege other societies and sites of reception (now Euro-America) as secondary. The thesis of compatibility—that cultivation of cultural difference and distinctness *coheres* with participation and contribution in a pluralistic global community—is well expressed by Wang Chunchen: "in the reality of confronting global cultural dialogue, it is necessary to emphasize our own cultural innovation and transformation more than ever before."[50] This is not a mere reversal of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Euro-American art discourses about Asia, where Asia was de-privileged and regarded as a secondary site of reception. In short, the working assumption of many contemporary Chinese artists and curators is that affirmation of Chineseness need not involve the formation of an identity that depends on a denial of diversity and reaction against some external cultural "other." On the contrary, many work from the premise that cultural or ethnic differences can be a resource for spreading and sharing moral and aesthetic principles of common appeal. Liu Yuedi puts it this way: "Take a building for example, the more national flavor it reflects, the more attractive it will be to the world."[51] (However, this leaves a manageable puzzle of interest to be addressed later on. If a Chinese artwork expresses thinking about self, nature, and moral harmony that is noticeably Chinese, then how can such thinking be absorbed, received, and appreciated by unique individuals abroad who are habituated to practicing other cultural traditions?)

Alexandra Munroe reassures us about the benefits of the search for Chineseness by showing her practical need as a curator for answers to the following questions: "What makes Chinese art Chinese, and who gets to decide?"[52] She clarifies the issue, by presenting two different works by Xu Bing: *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)* (Fig. 2.2) and some of his subsequent experiments in computer-generated imagery. She asks: Do both of these examples of Xu Bing's works qualify as Chinese? If we follow the conventional practice of using medium (ink, brush, and paper) and subject matter to make art historical classifications, then we find that *A Book from the Sky* contains ink, sheets of paper, and woodblock printed books that reference calligraphic forms. Thus, this installation by Xu Bing seems to qualify for placement in museum spaces that also contain classic paintings from the Northern Song (960–1127) or Qing periods. But Xu Bing's computer-generated images would fail to qualify if assessed on the medium-based definition. Hence, the computer-made prints would be artificially separated and exhibited as contemporary art, despite our awareness that Xu Bing's interest in questioning the reliability of language links the two.[53]



Fig. 2.2 Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky,* 1987–1991. Installation

Moreover, the differentiation of Chinese art on the basis of materials of composition does little to explain Xu Bing's interest in the indeterminacy of signifiers and his implicit criticism of relying too much on human knowledge and the sciences for finding one's way. Given these failures of the materials-based approach, Munroe calls for an aesthetics-based definition for "Chineseness" that can be applied to ink-wash paintings, computer art, and other mediums. Munroe holds that the aesthetics of Chinese ink painting can be the starting point for a creative interpretation that avoids any hierarchy of forms, genres or materials:

> As a curator working in a modern and contemporary art museum, I propose *an approach that focuses on the aesthetic principles of ink painting—not just the form*—and so to liberate "ink painting" from its particular borders to move more freely as an alternative platform of expression and mentality within the wider world of international contemporary art and thought. I am excited to see more and more Chinese artists moving freely between ink and other media, finding new worlds of expressive potential.[54]

Munroe does not offer a candidate for the content of this wider and more general aesthetic principle that is supposed to encompass artistic cases of Chineseness. Nonetheless, she gives us direction by suggesting that a closer analysis of the

[50] Wang (2013, p. 13).

[51] Liu (2011, p. 74).

[52] See Wang (2014, p. 17).

[53] *Ibid*. (p. 17).

[54] Munroe, Alexandra. *Reflections on CAFAM future*, p. 17. Italics mine.



Fig. 2.3 Jizi, *Between Sky and Earth*, 2009. Ink on paper, 184×145 cm

aesthetics of Chinese ink art may provide artists and aestheticians with some practical advice for crafting compositions or spaces that address the question "What is Chineseness?" Her remarks are enlivening because they predict that the aesthetics of Chinese ink painting can be a resource for generating a flexible principle for classifying a variety of contemporary art works and genres as authentically Chinese or expressive of Chinese thinking about what is most precious. Since the *aesthetic principles* that Munroe seeks are, by hypothesis, defined without limitation to particular forms, materials, or physical mediums, we may expect them to succeed as criteria for judging the Chineseness of oil paintings, videos, installations, performances, architectural spaces, and designs. An inclusive aesthetic-based principle of this sort, that points to what is authentically Chinese in a contemporary artwork, would also liberate ink-wash painters as well. For Chinese ink-wash painters could appeal to such a principle to ensure the Chineseness of their compositions, even as they experiment with form, formlessness, intentional illegibility, brushwork, or anti-brush techniques.

The point here is that the search for Chineseness provides a climate for creating new interpretations for the aesthetic principles of Chinese ink painting. This search also encourages careful study of *traditional* aesthetic principles that have been a guide for Chinese ink-wash landscapes. The investigation seeks to speed the development of the general aesthetic principle for Chineseness that Munroe anticipates by turning first to examine *traditional* Chinese aesthetics and the principle of rhythmic vitality. In effect, we shall examine present-day ink-wash paintings for signs of artistic choices made according to aesthetic principles linked to China's cultural past. This will provide evidence for an account of features that a contemporary artwork needs to exhibit in order to be indelibly Chinese. More specifically, the aim is to find new and accessible interpretations for the term "rhythmic vitality" that can be used with success to determine whether particular ink-wash paintings, pseudo-scripts, or other works of art are authentically Chinese. The interest in Chineseness suggests that confidence arising from the globalization of contemporary Chinese art is motivating a search for authenticity that brings Chinese artists full circle from the days of the May 4th movement of 1919, when revitalization of Chinese art was thought by some to require outright rejection of traditional Chinese thinking as a resource. Today, contemporary Chinese artists call upon aestheticians to catch up with the needs of the living by articulating some notion of Chineseness that can guide art making. The interrogation of traditional Chinese aesthetics is a means for assisting in this search for a contemporary Chineseness in design. New and creative interpretations for the principles of traditional Chinese aesthetics may enable us to transfigure ink-wash paintings—including those of the distant past—and to notice them anew.

2.3 "Chineseness" and Chinese Philosophy: Embodiment and Meanings

The task of describing what is specifically Chinese about contemporary Chinese art requires the development of new interpretations. Liu Yuedi describes the situation: "What is a good Chinese contemporary artwork? How to evaluate Chinese contemporary artworks? Chinese aesthetics and art theory must try to answer such questions."[55] This raises a key question of immediate relevance to our investigation of Chinese ink-wash paintings. Can Chinese aestheticians go straight to Euro-American or analytic-style philosophies of art to obtain frameworks that explain what is called the "Chineseness" of a give artwork? Liu Yuedi suggests they cannot. He holds that Chinese art must be about cultural expression indigenous to China, and he asserts that Chinese aestheticians must take differences with Western culture into account in order to describe what art is about in a traditional Asian context.[56] In one sense, Liu's conclusion is uncontro-

[55] Liu (2011, p. 71).

[56] *Ibid*. (pp. 71, 73).

versial: Chinese aestheticians who interpret contemporary Chinese art need to benefit from the thinking that is specific to Chinese philosophies already within the heritage of world literature. But Liu Yuedi clearly favors making the additional assertion that Arthur Danto's analytic philosophy of art cannot explain what is unique to Chinese art and how it is about practices indigenous to Chinese culture. Thus, the globalization of Chinese art and the search for Chineseness leads us to ask whether or not analytic philosophies of art are able to describe the way in which some Chinese artworks articulate their meanings. Mary Bittner Wiseman recognizes the question and asks whether "Western conceptions of art, supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, can be adequate to China at the turn of the new century."[57] This important issue requires special initial attention.

Chinese aestheticians who aim to interpret "Chineseness" face a challenge not unlike the one that confronts contemporary Chinese artists. When does synthesis with features from Euro-American philosophies advance to the point that Chinese aestheticians lose their ability to refer to a uniqueness of sensuous existence that is precious to Chinese philosophical heritage? The absorption of influences from abroad is on some occasions useful and on others an obstacle. Some Euro-American philosophies may be useful for creating new interpretations for Chinese aesthetics. For example, Arthur Danto's definition of art is widely influential and has remained relatively stable for three decades: "something is a work of art when it has meaning—is about something—and when that meaning is embodied in the work—which usually means: is embodied in the object in which the work of art materially consists."[58] As an aesthetician in China, Liu Yuedi accepts and uses Danto's two necessary conditions for art: "Once Chinese contemporary art adopts these two criteria, it must be about something."[59] To give another example of a benefit, some modern philosophies from Europe express the idea that there is a realm beyond direct observation by means of sense experience and, therefore, beyond human knowledge. For example, Immanuel Kant asserts: "what necessarily forces us to transcend the limits of experience and all its appearances is the *unconditioned,* which reason, by necessity and by right, demands in things in themselves."[60] With his notion of "a thing which is not to be thought of as object of the senses but as a thing in itself," Immanuel Kant defines a *noumenon*.[61] Even speculative thinking such as this may stimulate instructive comparisons with Chinese references to "the realm" of Dao, despite many differences between these two cultural spirits. The idea of a realm beyond direct human acquaintance may help us later, when we evaluate Jizi's claim that the purpose of his ink art is to convey a greater universe that is beyond the dimension of appearances and physical phenomena. Yet, the live question raised by Liu is whether exclusive reliance on analytic philosophy and Danto's definition of art results in a disregard for language that is needed to describe the way in which Chinese ink paintings are about what is present and precious. The question is this: do analytic philosophies of art have limitations that prevent them from providing Chinese artists with instructions for making artworks that express Chinese cultural thinking about self and nature? Liu expresses strong reservations about the adequacy of Danto's definition of art.

What bothers Liu Yuedi about Danto's philosophy of art is Danto's denial that there are any differences between Asian and Euro-American works of art that might lead to the conclusion that his definition of art is somehow too narrow. For Liu, it is plain that there are some distinguishing differences specific to any Asian artworks that express an aesthetics indigenous to Asian art worlds; he suggests that these features are overlooked in analytic philosophies of art. By contrast, Danto discounts the importance of Asian art and aesthetics, in the sense that he denies that they point to any difference that would reveal some failure in the definition he provides. Li Yuedi offers the following quote from conversations with Danto as evidence of his denial:

> The definition of art as embodied meaning was meant to be true of every work of art, wherever and whenever it was made. If there are differences between eastern and western works of art, they cannot be part of art's essence. The difference between western and non-western does not apply. What we have learned since 1981 is not part of the theory."[62]

Danto's purpose with this passage is to assert that contemporary Chinese philosophy offers no interpretation, as yet, that shows his definition of art as "embodied meaning" to be exclusive or too narrow. He grants that different world cultures produce artworks that differ in meaning and material composition. What he denies is that the expression of different meanings challenges his contention that all artworks do embody one meaning or another. Liu accepts Danto's two-part definition, but he continues to insist that a problem still arises because Danto's theory "turns a blind eye to the differences between Eastern and Western cultures."[63] What then is the exact source or cause of Liu's discontentment? The problem may be clarified by interpreting his objection as follows: Asian art and Chinese artworks provide meanings about an embodiment that Danto cannot describe. To put this another way, Asian artworks convey meanings about

[57] Wiseman (2007, p. 109).

[58] Danto (2013, p. 149).

[59] Liu (2011, p. 71).

[60] Kant (1929, p. 24).

[61] *Ibid*. (p. 271).

[62] Liu (2011, p. 73).

[63] *Ibid*. (p. 73).

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