

MODERNITY THROUGH SYNCRETISM AND ECLECTICISM:
WU GUANZHONG'S ARTISTIC PRACTICE
IN THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE PRC
(1949 -1989)

BY

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Abstract

This thesis examines Wu Guanzhong's 吴冠中 (1919-2010) art and art theory in the context of socialist and post-socialist China. Wu's art came to maturation through a sophisticated syncretism of Chinese and Western painting styles and techniques. Aesthetic considerations notwithstanding, each of Wu's artistic breakthroughs was also a direct response to the cultural policies of the Chinese Communist Party or to the larger cultural and political currents at important junctures of twentieth-century China. Mirroring the syncretistic style and political nature of his artwork, Wu's art theory is characterised by an eclecticism that mediates between Chinese and Western artistic concepts and walks a thin line between creative agency and political correctness. By identifying the particular qualities of Wu's art practice that captured the spirit of the 1980s and contributed to his phenomenal success during the 'Culture Fever' at the time, this thesis seeks to demonstrate how Wu's unique blend of syncretism may exemplify an alternative path of Chinese artistic modernity, one that is forged by 'official artists' working within the system and shaped by the artists' strategies of cultural politics as much as their aesthetic choices.

Key Words

syncretism, eclecticism, *xiesheng*, multiple perspectives, self-expression, literati painting, *yijing*, formal aesthetics, the aesthetics of abstraction

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INTRODUCTION

Research Question

I was not familiar with Wu Guanzhong's 吴冠中 (1919-2010) work until I was commissioned to write an article upon his death in 2010 for *Art and Design Magazine* in Beijing. During my research to acquire information to better understand his art style, I began to feel refreshed by the ethereal colouring and modern-style composition of his ink landscape paintings. For me, Wu's ink style was fundamentally different from any other style that I had seen in classical Chinese ink paintings. His paintings looked modern, yet not overtly abstract, to the extent that sometimes audiences had difficulty recognizing the artwork's connection with reality. It seemed that Wu's art was leading me to a bridge, that he had subtly built, with his own vocabulary, between Chinese ink painting and Western modernist art. It was just an inkling that I had, while browsing Wu's exhibition catalogues. This planted the seed of my doctoral research.

While I was rethinking modern Chinese art history from this perspective, the subtle tonality of Wu's ink paintings came to mind. Then, during my exploration of the literature about him, I started to realize the challenges in choosing him as a research subject. At a first glance, Wu was not an artist who had the most dramatic life and career. He never experienced the seismic career ups and downs of someone like Shi Lu 石鲁 (1919-1982). Wu never had extensive connections with art theorists and did not leave behind intriguing records for scholars to study, in the manner of Huang Binhong 黄宾虹 (1865-1955) and his friendship with Fu Lei 傅雷 (1908-1966). In terms of reputation, Wu did not in his lifetime gain the same heights of critical accolade or official endorsement as those gained by Lin Fengmian 林风眠 (1900-1991), Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 (1895-1953) or Pan Tianshou 潘天寿 (1897-1971). And yet, Wu appeared to be one of those Chinese artists who experienced almost every political turbulence of the 20th century and happened to survive. He seemed to be one of those artists who failed to show any individualism strong enough to gain the

interest of art historians and critics, and this prevented his artistic journey from passionate critical appraisal or rigorous scholarly investigation.

As I began to think about Chinese art more from the perspective of its subtlety, I sensed that a mine like Wu may not look bountiful at first sight, but still could be worthy of some digging. During the process of literature review, a fuller image of the artist gradually began to emerge. My preliminary research revealed a few interesting prospects. First, Wu's art style came into fruition after a long gestation period. He began with a singular passion for art but with a stronger interest in Western modernist-style figure painting in oils. As his career developed, however, what gained him considerable reputation were his landscapes in ink and colour. What kept him from pursuing the path of the Western modernist style, which could have helped to enhance his fame in the mid-twentieth-century? What led to his artistic transformation to landscapes and ink, which in the post-Maoist era might not have seemed modern enough? These questions I asked myself.

Second, although Wu had never been able to network with art theorists, he had endeavoured to construct his own art theory and left considerable publications in this field. In fact, the intellectual storm provoked by his art theory contributed to his fame as a modern artist, becoming as important as his artwork. Wu conducted investigations on both Western modernist art and traditional Chinese art, and furthermore, made insightful connections between the two. What was the connection that he made between these two different arts? And why did his argument lead to heated debate in the mid 1980s? Did the specific era, when Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 (1904-1997) took the lead of the country and called for a comprehensive reform – for China's "modernisation" – determine the significance of Wu's art theory?

Third, there was quite an explicitly critical tone in Wu's art theory, since he argued against the politics of the then-dominant socialist realist art. One simple explanation of this may have been that Wu was encouraged by the relative intellectual freedom after the Cultural Revolution, when critical opinion became more tolerated in China. However, anyone familiar with the 1980s political environment would know that the political winds changed no less dramatically in Deng's era than in Mao's, with the tragedy of Tiananmen in 1989 being the most chilling reminder. Any rational individual, who had experienced such tosses and turns,

would not choose to risk their career, especially if the success they eventually had come only after decades of hardship and unfair treatment. Therefore, how should we understand Wu's critical rhetoric under those capricious political circumstances? From a broader perspective, how should we study his criticism in the relatively conservative system of socialist China? Again, did the specific times make any difference?

This thesis aims to enrich the study of modern Chinese art history through an in-depth investigation of Wu Guanzhong's artistic practice and its reception in the People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国 (PRC hereafter), especially in the period of the 1980s. By contextualizing Wu's paintings and writings, and analysing his art practice as a creative responses to the cultural policies of socialist and post-socialist China, I seek to better understand the aesthetic choices and political strategies of the so-called official artists, that is, those artists who not only survived the system and but even succeeded within it. How did these official artists shape "official art" in China, and in what sense might this "official art" constitute a different Chinese modernity? Through the examination of Wu's phenomenal success in the 1980s, this study also seeks to shed new light on the cultural history of 1980s China, one that differs from the commonly accepted view of the 1980s as a decade that started from democracy and ended in tyranny.

In summary, my research question is, how should we understand the "success" of the Chinese artist Wu Guanzhong in the specific context of Chinese art history and cultural politics in the period from 1949 to 1989.

Literature Review

The history of modern art in China is believed to have begun with artists who fled to Shanghai after the middle of the nineteenth-century: they ushered in the modern era of Chinese art. In *The Art of Modern China* (2012), Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen show how the Shanghai school artists created paintings influenced by the international market that flourished in Shanghai. They identify two factors that contributed to the formation of the Shanghai School. The first one is Shanghai's status as a treaty port, which allowed merchants worldwide to conduct a variety of business. The second is the influence of the Taiping

Rebellion (1850-1864), that caused artists and art patrons to escape from their hometowns to Shanghai. It is their argument that the fusion of local Jiangnan aesthetics with Western tastes shaped the style of the Shanghai school.¹

Geremie Barmé's study of Feng Zikai 丰子恺 (1898-1975) enriched readers' perceptions of how social and political circumstances impacted individual artists' journeys. In *An Artistic Exile: A Life of Feng Zikai (1898-1975)*, Barmé depicts Feng as an artist and intellectual who created art when his mother country and mother culture experienced drastic turbulence in the 1920s-1930s. Having compassion for the poverty of the average man, Feng retained his romanticism, personal aesthetic and emotional pursuits. Barmé illustrates Feng's ambivalence in the specific political and cultural context which has mystified his image as an artist.² One realises from the book that the larger environment did not only cast an influence on an individual artist's career, but also shaped the trajectory of modern Chinese art, towards the direction that it is recognised today. Meanwhile, other scholars have paid attention to the networks that Chinese artists built outside of their initial circles, to gain institutional authority and larger influence. An example can be seen in Claire Roberts's book *Friendship in Art: Fou Lei and Huang Binhong* (2010), Aida Wong's *Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China* (2006), Kuo-Sheng Lai's dissertation "Learning New Painting from Japan and Maintaining National Pride in early Twentieth Century China, with Focus on Chen Shizeng (1876-1923)" (2006), and Zhijian Qian's dissertation "Toward a Sinicized Modernism: The Artistic Practice of Lin Fengmian in Wartime China, 1937-1949". These studies have focused on the trajectories that the careers of modern Chinese artists followed, with only temporary success, due to the short periods of cultural prosperity before the outburst of the second Sino-Japanese war. They ended up being marginalized from the time that the Chinese Communist Party 中国共产党 (CCP hereafter) conquered China and established socialist realism as the new reigning ideology of art. By and large, the art history of modern China has been written as one of a short-term prosperity before the founding of the PRC.

¹ Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, pp. 3-25.

² See Geremie Randall Barmé, *An Artistic Exile: A Life of Feng Zikai (1898-1975)*, University of California, 2002; Zhijian Qian, PhD diss., "Toward a Sinicized Modernism: The Artistic Practice of Lin Fengmian in Wartime China, 1937-1949", New York University, 2014.

One of the reasons that scholars used to concentrate more on what happened before the founding of the PRC is that there have been practical obstacles to conducting in-depth investigations on artists who were active in socialist China. For example, these artists usually had few connections with English-speaking art critics and international gallerists, so that their art paths were almost covered in mist. Also, as Ralph Croizier noted, “the political sensitivity of the recent past has inhibited serious research.”³ However, more and more research published in recent years has contributed to filling this gap. For instance, Julia Andrews’ book, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (1995), unfolds the process of how socialist realist art had been established and enhanced in China against the perceived threats from other art genres, for example, traditional Chinese painting and Western avant-garde. Andrews’ thorough investigation functions to enlighten readers of a clear picture of Chinese socialist art, as well as artists’ endeavours to respond to the changeable political circumstances in their artistic practices. For example, in Andrews’ argument, one can see the artist Shi Lu’s path from his early training in traditional Chinese painting to actively practicing the ideology of the Maoist times, and finally to developing his own artistic individualism. It is widely known that Shi Lu was treated unfairly in the Cultural Revolution and was severely traumatized. Andrews’ research supplemented that familiar story with detailed discussion on the artist’s active participation in the process of shaping Chinese socialist realist art.⁴

The exhibition of Fu Baoshi 傅抱石 (1904-1965), which toured the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2011 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012, also contributed to enriching public perception of Chinese art from the PRC. Fu was an artist who gained inspiration from both his early training in classical Chinese painting and his study experience in Japan in the 1930s. Moreover, he adjusted his art style, which reflected the dominant influence of Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976) during the early period of the PRC. This collection, along with scholars’ contributions in the catalogue *Chinese Art in an Age of Revolution: Fu Baoshi (1904–1965)* provided a clear insight into a Chinese ink artist who

³ Ralph Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906-1951*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 2.

⁴ See Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

was active in both the Republican and Maoist eras, demonstrating the artistic transitions the artist made amidst constant political changes, whilst retaining his artistic individuality.⁵

In her thesis “‘Painting by Candlelight’ During the Cultural Revolution: Defending Autonomy and Expertise under Maoist Rule (1949-76)”, Shelley Drake Hawks perceptively drew attention to the ink artists’ “autonomy and expertise” during the constant political turbulence in the Maoist times. Taking departure from the generally accepted view that the ink artists who were persecuted during this period were passive and innocent, Hawks argued that a “resistance” was present in their artwork, which retained their artistic expertise while exposing them to greater risks.⁶ Hawks’ study is invaluable as an alternative perspective on twentieth-century Chinese ink artists who had been perceived as “innocent victims” and whose practice had been taken for granted for being completely harmless and politically irrelevant. I believe it brings a new vitality to the study of modern Chinese art, especially during the period when the art field was under the strict control of the CCP.

Artists and art groups active since the late 1970s prevailed in the existing scholarship on modern and contemporary Chinese art. For instance, Wu Hung’s *Contemporary Chinese Art* provides a comprehensive narrative on the development of modern and contemporary Chinese art from the 1970s to the 2000s.⁷ Paul Gladston’s *‘Avant-Garde’ Art Groups in China, 1979-1989* gives a critical account of four phenomenal art groups (the Stars, the Northern Art Group, the Pond Society, and Xiamen Dada) to provide an overview of their art principles and artistic characteristics in the post-Maoist context.⁸ Minglu Gao’s dissertation “The ’85 Movement: Avant-garde Art in the Post-Mao Era”, published in 2000, sketched an overview of the avant-garde movement that occurred in China after the mid 1980s. Gao adopted the term “total modernity” to refer to the new trends characteristic of the new-generation artists driving the avant-garde movements at the time.⁹

⁵ Anita Chung, ed., *Chinese Art in an Age of Revolution: Fu Baoshi (1904–1965)*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011.

⁶ Shelley Drake Hawks, “‘Painting by Candlelight’ During the Cultural Revolution: Defending Autonomy and Expertise under Maoist Rule (1949-76)”, PhD diss., Brown University, 2003, pp. 1-2.

⁷ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2014.

⁸ Paul Gladston, *‘Avant-Garde’ Art Groups in China, 1979-1989*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2013.

⁹ Minglu Gao, “The ’85 Movement: Avant-garde Art in the Post -Mao Era”, Harvard University, 2000, abstract.

There are also theses on the contemporary artists, whose artistic practices spawned extensive theoretical analyses. For instance, Nancy Ten-Jung Tewksbury's dissertation "Sinographics: Becoming Chinese Art" (2009) conducted an in-depth analysis of how artists Xu Bing 徐冰, Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰, and Song Dong 宋冬 worked against the discursive hegemony dominating Western modernist art theory. By reading the conundrum in these artists' work, Tewksbury argued that their deformation, deconstruction, and re-inscription of Chinese writing challenged such a hegemony and functioned as a "ruin or oblivion of a certain form of thinking art as representation".¹⁰ Another example is Bo Zheng's dissertation "The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects" (2012). Through demonstrating four artists' (Xiong Wenyun 熊文韵, Wu Wenguang 吴文光, Zheng Bo 郑波, and Ai Weiwei 艾未未) work, Zheng argued that Chinese artists' struggle of publicness against the totalitarianism conducted by the party-state "contributed to larger social movements striving for freedom and justice".¹¹

A common ground for this group of artists was the complete transformation in terms of art medium, form, and genre that had been showcased in their work, in comparison with the "paintings" that had long been accepted and appreciated as the dominant genre in the Chinese art world. However, it is problematic to categorise the aforementioned artists as "independent", "underground" or "unofficial", considering that Xu Bing worked as professor in the Central Academy of Fine Arts 中央美术学院 (CAFA hereafter) in Beijing, the most authoritative official art institute in China. It seems that the presence of "individualism" is almost a given in the practices of avant-garde artists. But, in what ways can we talk about "individualism" in paintings created by artists who remained in the official art institutes, such as Wu Guanzhong? This is a question that I would like to explore further in this thesis.

There has been some new research concentrating on the artists' affinities with state patronage. For instance, Shao Yiyang's thesis "Chinese Modern Art and the Academy: 1980-1990" (2003) focuses on the complicated relationship between the so-called "unofficial" artists and "official" institutes. Shao's study begins with the familiar dichotomy of

¹⁰ Nancy Ten-Jung Tewksbury, "Sinographics: Becoming Chinese Art", PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009, p. 12.

¹¹ Bo Zheng, "The Pursuit of Publicness: A Study of Four Chinese Contemporary Art Projects", PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2012, abstract, p. vi.

official/unofficial. For example, “official art was traditional, and unofficial art was modern; official art was uncreative and unofficial art was creative; official art was orthodox, and unofficial art was dissident.”¹² From there, Shao argues against the problematic dichotomy of official/unofficial to demonstrate a more elastic relationship between the two parties. Her research shows that even in the 1980s, when there were “specific political situations” that forced artists to “defend their art in an ‘underground’ or ‘half-underground’ position”, there was evidence that proved the “avant-garde” quality of “official” art. Shao also makes the observation that, since “China’s reform has completely shifted from issues of ideological revolution to economic activities”, the boundary between “official” and “unofficial” has become more blurred, and art which is patronized by the Chinese state and art that is supported by international institutes have both contributed to the progress of Chinese modern art.¹³

Similarly, Yao-Hsing Kao’s dissertation “Artists under Reform: An Analysis of Professional Guohua Painters’ Relations to the Party-State in the Post-Mao Era” (2012) portrays the ink artists who were employed by the Party-controlled institutes as unlikely or unwilling to cross the “aesthetic and ideological boundary” that the official institutes had set. As a study informed by political science, Kao’s thesis inquiries into the attitudes and the relations of the official artists in contemporary times to the party-state. Inspired by the individualism of the Chinese artists who were active outside of the Party-controlled system, Kao conducts research to examine if the artists who were incorporated in the system were willing to step outside the “boundary”, due to the declining scale of the “ideological movements and cultural control” of the Party. Kao’s conclusion is that the “official” artists shifted their attitude toward the party-state from “organised dependency” to “conformity”, and that they were “likely to stay within the ideological and aesthetic boundaries”.¹⁴

Ting lin Li’s thesis “The Quest for Modernity in Art in Late twentieth Century China: An Examination of the Discussion on Modern Art in *Meishu zazhi* (Art Magazine) from 1979 to 1989” (2013) has also contributed to more nuanced understanding of the image of “official

¹² Shao Yiyang, “Chinese Modern Art and the Academy: 1980-1990”, PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2003, p. 7.

¹³ Ibid, p. 232.

¹⁴ Yao-Hsing Kao, “Artists under Reform: An Analysis of professional Guohua Painters’ Relations to the Party-State in the Post-Mao Era”, PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2010, p. iii.

art”. By investigating the coverage of *Meishu*, the most authoritative art periodical in the PRC, Li examines the process of how the variety of Chinese artistic modernity has been filtered out and taken the form that is recognizable and iconic today. The modernity that was presented in *Meishu* in the 1980s, in Li’s argument, has to be studied in China’s sociocultural context.¹⁵

It was during the process of reading the literature that made me realise the possibility of an alternative direction in the study of modern Chinese art: to focus on the complicated political and cultural undertakings of the ruling party or government and to analyse how they impacted the artists, shaped their artistic styles, triggered their responses, and conditioned the ways in which “modern Chinese art” is perceived in contemporary times. Following this line of thinking, I became more and more intrigued by the so-called “official artists, such as Wu Guanzhong, who seemingly gained their reputation within the CCP-controlled art establishment, and whose “individualism” seemed not as strong as that of those working outside the system. Yet, I submit that an artist’s individualism is more clearly revealed in his or her independence from the party-state, as the outsider status does imply a relative ease for an artist to express such an individual attitude, if one is physically or institutionally remote from the ideological control of the party-state. On the other hand, I also have my reservations about studying the artists who were severely persecuted during the political struggles, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution. It is not because of my lack of compassion for their tragedies, but I do not fully embrace the ways in which the careers of such persecuted artists have been legitimized or restored by art historians. Indeed, modern art in Western art history has been written by the logic of “rebellion”. It seems that an attitude of challenging political authority had shaped the trajectory of modern art, not only in the West but also in China. This logic, however, has inadvertently favoured Chinese artists who had been severely persecuted under the CCP’s ideology, as their artistic practice by default projected an attitude of “rebellion”. Again, I am not arguing against the legitimacy of any individual artist’s practice or life experience. I am, as a scholar of art history, questioning the sphere that the studies of Chinese modern art history could expand to. There is a good amount of scholarship on the “individualistic” Chinese artists, but a lack of research on the “individualism” of the artists who succeeded in the official system, such as Wu Guanzhong.

¹⁵ Ting lin Li, “The Quest for Modernity in art in Late twentieth Century China: An Examination of the Discussion on Modern Art in *Meishu zazhi* (Art Magazine) from 1979 to 1989”, PhD diss., The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2013.

Does it mean these artists by default never had artistic individualism? The research abovementioned has already provided a prevailingly negative answer. I would like to probe the question further, and this became the path I intend to walk in this study.

There have been more exhibition catalogues than monographs and treatises related to Wu Guanzhong, considering his reputation as a modern ink artist was first gained in overseas museums, rather than in academia. The earliest discussion of Wu's artwork is seen in the exhibition catalogue, *Contemporary Chinese Painting: An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China* published in 1983.¹⁶ More exhibitions followed, for example, *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, that toured from San Francisco in 1989, and *Wu Guanzhong, A Twenty-century Chinese Painter*, in the British Museum in 1992.¹⁷ The earliest scholarship on Wu is Michael Sullivan's monograph, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, published in 1996. The popularity of Wu Guanzhong in museums and galleries over academia is partly due to Wu's exposure in the West as a representative of modern Chinese ink art, in affiliation with official Chinese art institutes such as the Chinese Artists' Association 中国美术家协会 (CAA hereafter), rather than as an individual artist. And it partly reflects the relative lack of background information and resources for Western scholars to conduct thorough examinations of Wu's art practice in the 1980s, when art and artists from the PRC had been estranged from the international art world for almost three decades.

The most detailed discussions of Wu Guanzhong and his art in the 1980s are seen in the catalogue for the exhibition, *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, which toured from San Francisco in 1989. In the catalogue, Michael Sullivan's contribution "Wu Guanzhong: Reflections on His Life, Thought, and Art" made a concise and yet thorough introduction to the artist's life journey, as well as his artistic achievements. Far more than simply an "introduction", Sullivan's piece covered the most important aspects of Wu's artistic practice. For instance, Sullivan referred to Wu's artistic transition from his initial passion for figure painting to landscapes. Sullivan explained the reason as Wu's Western-style figure painting being criticised by the Party cadres as "bourgeois formalist" hence

¹⁶ Lucy Lim, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Painting: An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China*, San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1983.

¹⁷ Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1989; Anne Farrer, et al., eds., *Wu Guanzhong, A Twenty-century Chinese Painter*, London: British Museum Press, 1992.

“poisonous”. The incompatibility therefore caused the change to landscapes.¹⁸ Wu admitted in his autobiography that the transition indeed was necessary due to his failure to accommodate his art pursuit to the then-dominant socialist realism.¹⁹ However, I wonder why it was “landscape painting” that he shifted to. Sullivan mentioned the artistic environment at that moment was that artists were encouraged to go out and “learn from the people”.²⁰ Also, in another essay in the same exhibition catalogue, “The Odyssey of Wu Guanzhong”, Richard Barnhart mentioned the reason for Wu’s shift to landscapes during the 1950s as him being “sent off by the government to sketch the people and landscape of new China”.²¹ Was Wu’s change to landscapes the result of a prevailing trend in Chinese art circles, which influenced most of the artists? If so, how exactly had Wu been influenced by this trend? Did he paint the same subjects as his peers, or did he manage to discover new spheres? Did he apply Western painting styles, or was there some creative fusion of Chinese and Western painting techniques and styles? Considering that it was the landscape painting that brought Wu the considerable reputation in the years to come, I do believe there should be a series of further questions to ask specifically about Wu’s artistic transition.

Sullivan also referred to Wu’s second artistic transition, which was equally important for his success – from oils to ink. In Sullivan’s argument, Wu’s change to ink was, at least to an extent, due to two purely “practical” reasons. First, Chinese ink was relatively economical in comparison with oil paints. Second, rice paper never took up space as much as canvas, which was important, because Wu’s studio was small. Sullivan also referred to the “Chineseness” that had been instilled in the artist’s upbringing, which eventually led to Wu’s transition to ink: “it is therefore natural for him to paint with the Chinese brush, for it is only through the Chinese medium and technique that the essential qualities...(of Chinese aesthetics)...can be expressed with complete freedom, as the artist feels life flow down his

¹⁸ Michael Sullivan, “Wu Guanzhong; Reflections on His Life, Thought, and Art”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1989, pp. 2-3.

¹⁹ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing* 我负丹青 (The autobiography of Wu Guanzhong), Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2004, p. 27.

²⁰ Michael Sullivan, “Wu Guanzhong; Reflections on His Life, Thought, and Art”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, p. 3.

²¹ Richard Barnhart, “The Odyssey of Wu Guanzhong”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, p. 14.

arm, through his brush and onto the paper.”²² In my view, the practical reasons leading to Wu’s change to ink seem more convincing than the effectiveness of the artist’s “Chineseness”. It is indeed debatable whether one can attribute a Chinese artist’s return to traditional painting mediums to the reason that he had finally found his “Chineseness” inside him. But what intrigues me is why the artistic transition happened at that moment. What inspired Wu to change from oils to Chinese ink?

Other scholarly discussions on Wu’s change to ink shed light on the issues I am concerned about in the present study. In the paper “Divergent Prophecies for the Nation: Wu Guanzhong, History, and the Global in early 1980s China”, Ethan Prizant seeks to explain what inspired Wu’s passion for ink: “upon returning to Beijing in 1972, Wu discovered that almost all the other artists were working in Chinese ink on paper and not with oils, and so he too began to work in the traditional style as well.”²³ Prizant therefore points out a very critical factor that might have strongly influenced Wu’s change from oil to ink. However, I have a few questions to follow. For instance, what exactly happened in 1972 that inspired Wu’s medium change? Was it, similar to the artist’s change to landscapes, a result of a broader phenomenon that prevailed in the Chinese art world? More specifically, why did it have to be the Chinese medium? I believe Wu’s medium change deserves in-depth study in its particular sociocultural context.

In his article, Sullivan also discussed “abstraction”, Wu’s most influential art theory that provoked an intellectual storm, when he expounded it in an article published in 1980. As for how to understand Wu’s abstraction theory, Sullivan states: “to Wu Guanzhong, abstraction means abstracting the ‘essence’ of the form”. According to Sullivan, Wu was never interested in “pure abstract art”, since pure abstract art in Wu’s understanding cut off any connection with the people, and the real world. Sullivan’s argument on Wu’s semi-abstraction was echoed by Chen Xiao, a researcher on Wu’s landscape practice. In her paper “China’s Countryside in Formal Abstraction: Wu Guanzhong’s Landscape Paintings of the late 1980s”, Chen stated that, “for Wu Guanzhong, ‘abstraction’ is a means to heighten the

²² Michael Sullivan, “Wu Guanzhong: Reflections on His Life, Thought, and Art”, in Lucy Lim, ed. *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, p. 7.

²³ Ethan Prizant, “Divergent Prophecies for the Nation: Wu Guanzhong, History, and the Global in early 1980s China”, senior honours thesis, University of California Berkeley, 2012, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/38t2b2j3>, last access on 27 October 2018.

expressive power of the formal elements of dots, lines, planes and colour.”²⁴ She therefore summarised Wu’s abstraction theory as “formal abstraction”.²⁵ Wu illustrated his abstraction theory mostly in his article on abstraction, in which he exemplified the rockery in a garden in Suzhou.²⁶ As Sullivan notes, Wu argued that the “hollowed-out rocks” represented the beauty of abstraction. Therefore, Sullivan concludes that Wu’s abstraction theory indicated his intention of extracting the form out of painting objects.

However, it remains to be ascertained on which level Wu’s abstraction theory differed from the Western theory of abstract art, and what stopped Wu from pursuing pure abstract art. Sullivan and Chen Xiao provide an explanation on a certain level by pointing out the difference between the two resting on Wu’s lasting connection with reality. However, this explanation is based on the assumption that pure abstract art is disconnected from the real world, simply because of its distilled form from the painting objects. This is a rather arbitrary claim that was also made by Wu himself. I would like to probe further behind Wu’s claim and his decision to stick to his semi-abstraction. Wu adopted a term, “a kite on a string”, to describe his abstraction in differentiation from that of pure abstract art, arguing that his abstraction was still deeply rooted in the lives of “the people”, whereas in pure abstract art that connection was entirely cut off. To me, Wu’s rhetoric of “the people” embodied a desire to distinguish certain Chinese socialist characteristics in his art from Western abstract art, either out of cultural pride or political necessity. What particular cultural and political context would have favoured such a rhetoric and made Wu’s art theory acceptable? While both Sullivan and Chen discuss Wu’s theory of abstraction as an aesthetic theory, I would like to find out in what sense Wu’s theory was a response to the political appeal of the times.

Apart from the theory of abstraction, Wu’s theory of formal aesthetics was equally influential in Chinese art circles at the time. Wu was the first to publicly call for an emphasis on formal aesthetics in art creation and art criticism after the Cultural Revolution. Considering the prevailing ideology up to the end of the Cultural Revolution, when formalism had been considered “Capitalist”, hence harmful and hostile, claiming the

²⁴ Chen Xiao, “China’s Countryside in Formal Abstraction: Wu Guanzhong’s Landscape paintings of the late 1980s”, *Columbia East Asia Review*, vol. 7 (Spring 2014), p. 25.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 26.

²⁶ Wu Guanzhong, “Guanyu chouxiangmei” 关于抽象美 (On the aesthetics of abstraction), *Meishu* 美术 (Art), no.10 (1980): 37-39.

importance and independence of the “form” in painting enabled Wu to gain a reputation as being “brave” and “pioneering”. As Mayching Kao has stated in an article, “(Wu) espoused the rich formal expressions and creative freedom of the Modernist movements, challenging the authority of Socialist Realism and its dogmatic constraints”.²⁷ One can see from Wu’s artwork that it had indeed strong emphasis on lines, dots and the overall compositional form.

While the art “form” that Wu had spent his lifetime exploring played a critical role in Wu’s artistic success, his success was also attributable to the subjects he chose to paint, for instance, Suzhou gardens, classical poetry, Jiangnan, cypress, and the mountains of Xinjiang. Ethan Prizant has noted the importance of the subject selection in Wu’s painting. In his study, Prizant observed that Wu adopted “old trees” as a subject, which was “firmly situated in China’s past, but possessing meaning for the future”.²⁸ Prizant pointed out that “old trees” had been a traditional subject that ancient ink painters had favoured. For instance, Wu’s ink painting, *Chinese Cypress* 汉柏 (Hanbai, 1983), the subject of which, in Prizant’s argument, had been selected before by renowned ink masters, such as Shenzhou 沈周 (1427-1509) and Wen Zhengming 文征明 (1470-1559). Prizant, therefore, argues that Wu intended to maintain a lineage, which connected him with the famous classical painters, by selecting the same subject. However, Prizant’s interpretation is based on the misrecognition of the cypress. Wu’s cypress is located in Situ Temple 司徒庙 (Situ miao), which still exists at present. Yet the pines shown in Shen and Wen’s paintings are named *Seven Stars* 七星桧 (Qixing gui), which used to exist in a temple called Zhidao Temple 致道观 (Zhidao guan), now gone for years.²⁹ Therefore, Wu’s *Chinese Cypress* is not the most convincing example to demonstrate the thematic lineage that Wu sought to establish between his painting and those of the ancient masters. However, I still believe there is a thematic importance of the cypress as the subject. As Prizant noted, the cypress represented an unyielding spirit, considering it was “struck by lightning”, “reborn again”, and “stronger than before”.³⁰

²⁷ Mayching Kao, “The Art of Wu Guanzhong”, in Anne Farrer et al., eds., *Wu Guanzhong, A Twenty-century Chinese Painter*, London: British Museum Press, 1992, p. 25.

²⁸ Ethan Prizant, “Divergent Prophecies for the Nation: Wu Guanzhong, History, and the Global in early 1980s China”, 2012, p. 11.

²⁹ More information, see Chapter 3 of the thesis.

³⁰ Ethan Prizant, “Divergent Prophecies for the Nation: Wu Guanzhong, History, and the Global in early 1980s China”, 2012, p. 12.

Even though Wu's cypress was not the same tree painted by the early masters, we could still place his painting in a lineage with traditional Chinese culture, perhaps not exactly the literati lineage as Prizant suggested. Persistence and resilience are indeed the merits that always have been highly praised in traditional Chinese culture, although Wu applied these qualities to a different historical context. Most importantly, one may argue that such a connection with China's past and future may have been strengthened through Wu's modern painting style, which indeed highlighted the formal beauty of the trees. Wu's theory of formal aesthetics, in my hypothesis, would not have been so influential if it had not been applied to the subjects that had always occupied important places in Chinese culture.

There are already articles focusing on analyzing Wu's artistic style, which synthesized Western modernist vocabulary with some Chinese aesthetics, for instance, James Cahill and Tsao Hsingyuan's article "Styles and Methods in the Painting of Wu Guanzhong" (1989) and Kwok Kian Chow's article "The Art of Wu Guanzhong: A Decussation of Cultures" (2009).³¹ Also in Sullivan's article, an indication appears to dominate his whole discussion of Wu's art journey: the artist's life-long search for his artistic identity through practices in various cultural and political environments, with the search ending by finding his Chineseness, which was presented through Western modernist styles. However, such an argument is not convincing enough to be applied generally to any Chinese artist who used both Western and Chinese art vocabularies. It would be rare to find a Chinese artist who was studying in the West who did not present any Western influences in his paintings. So the question remains: what are the specific qualities of Wu Guanzhong's artwork and art theory? Or I should ask this: what Chinese aesthetic was implemented in Wu's art that caught the pulse of the times.

One significant factor that contributed to Wu's considerable reputation in the 1980s Chinese art world, is his fairly explicit criticism against the socialist ideology of art. As art historian, Wu Hung stated: "this French-trained art professor (Wu Guanzhong) challenged the official doctrine of 'content determining form' and encouraged artists to discover abstract

³¹ James Cahill and Tsao Hsingyuan, "Styles and Methods in the Painting of Wu Guanzhong", in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, pp. 18-23; Kwok Kian Chow, "The Art of Wu Guanzhong: A Decussation of Cultures", *Passage* (May/June 2009): 16-19.

beauty in nature and real life”.³² Mayching Kao expressed a similar viewpoint as Wu Hung by commenting that Wu Guanzhong was “a dedicated advocate and eloquent spokesman for the independence of formal beauty and abstraction”.³³ In *The Complete Work of Wu Guanzhong*, Wang Lin also pointed out Wu’s opposition to the “ossified socialist realism”, and his advocacy of modernist art.³⁴ The scholarship aforementioned works to shape Wu’s image as a pioneering spokesman, who was courageous enough to directly confront the socialist doctrine of art that restricted artists’ creativity. In other words, “pioneer” became Wu’s label which was not only represented in his paintings, but also in his writings. Moreover, the scholarship constructed Wu’s pioneering image in order to take Wu as the vanguard to build a freer environment in modern Chinese art. As Kao noted, “his essays...were instrumental in releasing the creative energy of Chinese artists from a doctrinaire policy of art”.³⁵ Similarly, Wu Hung acknowledged the importance of Wu Guanzhong’s call for formal aesthetics and abstraction in light of the intellectual storm that it subsequently provoked, and the inspiration for more artists and art critics to “associate artistic creativity with individual originality” as opposed to the “collective ideology” of the party-state.³⁶

Methodology

Firstly, this study examines Wu Guanzhong’s artistic practice and the considerable reputation he gained in the 1980s by combining aesthetic analysis with cultural-political investigation. The Party’s art policies, which more often than not contradicted each other, played a decisive role in forming and completing Wu’s art style. Without the sociocultural and political contextualization, one can neither understand Wu’s particular artistic

³² Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010, p.14.

³³ Mayching Kao, “The Art of Wu Guanzhong”, in Anne Farrer et al. eds., *Wu Guanzhong, A Twenty-century Chinese Painter*, 1992, p. 26.

³⁴ Wang Lin 王林, “Zhishifenzi de tianzhi shi tuifan chengjian: Wu Guanzhong xiezuozuo shengya yu yishu lunzheng” 知识分子的天职是推翻成见——吴冠中写作生涯与艺术论争 (The Vocation of an Intellectual is to Overthrow Prejudices – the Writing Career and Artistic Controversy of Wu Guanzhong), in Shui Tianzhong and Wang Hua, eds., *Wu Guanzhong quanji* 吴冠中全集 (The complete work of Wu Guanzhong), vol. 9, Changsha: Hunan meishu chubanshe, 2007, p. 14.

³⁵ Mayching Kao, “The Art of Wu Guanzhong”, in Anne Farrer et al. eds., *Wu Guanzhong, A Twenty-century Chinese Painter*, 1992, p. 26.

³⁶ Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 2010, p. 14.

syncretism, nor the characteristic of eclecticism that precisely captured the zeitgeist of 1980s China.

In this way, this study of Wu Guanzhong offers a new perspective to examine Chinese art history. John Clark has a comprehensive set of theoretical frames for this evaluation. As he discussed in the essay “Modernity in Chinese Painting” (1986), there were three “stages” of modernity of Chinese art. These were: (1) a technical and thematic “dialogue with tradition”; (2) “a far more conscious awareness by the artist and the audience of the constraints of the expression or formal exploration”; (3) “establishing what the picture and its image signs are as a way to picturing, to make the process of picturing itself part of the subject of the painting”. Clark believed these three stages could be used “as a model of historical generation and a prescriptive norm for it in the ability to predict the future”. And he clarified that a painting should be judged modern or not “if it actually has this possibility”.³⁷ In my understanding of Clark’s theoretical framework, these three stages are not parallel but indicative of a progress from a kind of “preliminary” modernity to one where the painting vocabulary is mastered not as a “dialogue with tradition”, but as an organic part of the subject of the painting presented to the audience. It is also my understanding that Clark believed the modernity of a piece of Chinese artwork rested in its coordinate in the graph he illustrated. In fact, Clark in another essay considered Wu as one “who seemed to work in a ‘Chinese’ manner but from a ‘Western’ technical position”.³⁸ It appears to me that in Clark’s theoretical framework, Wu’s art practice stays in the phase of having “a technical and thematic dialogue with tradition”.

Wu Hung in his book, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, also discussed the various approaches to conversations with Chinese artistic tradition. In the section “Internalizing Tradition”, Wu Hung summarized five categories of artists’ internalisation of Chinese artistic heritage: analytical transformation, distilling materiality, translating visuality, refiguration and image appropriation.³⁹ Wu Hung’s framework of five categories privileges contemporary artists who became active after the 1990s, and whose work is characterised by its liberation from two-dimensional visual formats and its embracing of multi-dimensional and multi-

³⁷ John Clark, “Modernities in Chinese painting”, in *Modernities of Chinese art*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010, pp. 33-37.

³⁸ John Clark, “Modern Art in China: An Art Historical Review”, in *Modernities of Chinese art*, 2010, p. 9.

³⁹ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2014, pp. 331-350.

media spheres of creativity. Wu Hung was aware of the long history of artistic conversation with tradition, citing examples from as early as the Qing Dynasty, and more obvious ones after the early twentieth century. However, Wu Hung pointed out the difference: “these early efforts were mainly concerned with stylistic fusion based on a dichotomy between East and West.” In comparison, contemporary Chinese artists who are “internalizing tradition” paid more attention to erasing “this dichotomy altogether”.⁴⁰

How might a professional ink painter such as Wu Guanzhong fare in Wu Hung’s categories? Central to Wu Hung’s examination of Chinese artists’ interaction with their artistic tradition is the criterion of whether the artist’s creation aims to “erase the dichotomy of East and West”. As such, I believe Wu Guanzhong falls into Wu Hung’s category of the older generation of artists who were still concerned with “stylistic fusion” between East and West, far from the vanguard of erasing the dichotomy. Like Clark, Wu Hung outlines the development of modern Chinese art from a linear, diachronic perspective, suggesting that the artists “before” somehow stuck to the dichotomy of East and West, whereas the artists who are active after the 1990s are characterised by their endeavor of demolishing the boundary between Eastern and Western art.

Art historians such as John Clark and Wu Hung provided their categorisations for phasing modern (and contemporary) Chinese art into different stages. They, at the same time, provide the criteria for placing individual artists into different categories. As discussed above, Wu Guanzhong’s art therefore falls into Clark’s category as having “a technical and thematic dialogue with tradition”, and into Wu Hung’s category as making “stylistic fusion” with Chinese traditional elements. But my study will explore how Wu Guanzhong’s response to the cultural and political environment enriches our understanding of Wu as an artist making dialogue with tradition. This emphasis on cultural and political context provides a new perspective on the transitions of modern Chinese art.

Secondly, this study seeks to elucidate a set of terms (derived from both Chinese and Western artistic traditions) that has often been applied to modern Chinese art history. For example, the term “self-expression” in Western art is sometimes used interchangeably with the term “expressiveness” in Chinese literati painting. Wu Guanzhong was one who believed

⁴⁰ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2014, p. 331.

in the interchangeability of the two terms. By examining the connotations of the two terms, this study discloses an implication behind the intention of equating the two terms: the modern quality inherent in ancient Chinese painting. Similarly, this study parts the mists of Wu's suggestions of formal aesthetics and abstraction. By examining and contextualizing Wu's writings about his art theory, this study discloses the fundamental difference between Wu's formal theory and abstraction, and formalism and abstract art in Western art theory. Through the examination of the connotations and implications of the terms aforementioned, this study reveals the particular purpose for which these terms were used. Their usage reflected the rhetoric of the "Culture Fever" of the 1980s, characterised by eclectic borrowings from the West and the increasing need to assert Chinese cultural pride, when the country was re-emerging as a rising economic power.

Chapter Outlines

This thesis consists of two parts. Part I, consisting of Chapter 1, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, concentrates on Wu Guanzhong's artistic contribution in aesthetic terms. Chapter 1 depicts a trajectory of the efforts Wu made towards his artistic syncretism. It includes two sections discussing Wu's study experiences in two different cultures: China and France. Section 1 points out Wu's inspiration of the artistic syncretism from the larger environment of the Hangzhou Academy of Art, and from his teachers – Lin Fengmian and Pan Tianshou. By making comparison of Lin and Wu's paintings, this study demonstrates that Wu's idea of the artistic syncretism of the Western painting vocabulary with Chinese aesthetics came from Lin's art advocacy. This section also elucidates that what Wu acquired from Pan was not the techniques and practice methods of traditional Chinese ink painting, but an understanding of the importance of the expressiveness revealed by some of the eccentric ink masters, whose works were favoured by Pan. Section 2 traces Wu's study experience in Paris and his passion for French modernist art. It depicts the tortuous journey Wu undertook to find the style he desired to study and pursue. Under the guidance of Professor Jean Souverbie (1891-1981), Wu learned to appreciate and practice the most effective art forms to serve the purpose of aesthetic and emotional expression. Souverbie's influence was reflected on both Wu's art advocacy and his art theory. Apart from the academy, Wu also gained inspiration from many modernist artists, especially from Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955). This section demonstrates Wu's learning experience from Utrillo's cityscapes, from which Wu came to understand the

artist's emotional expression through particular perspective, colour application and pictorial composition.

Chapter 2 discusses Wu's art syncretism in the context of socialist China, in which Wu's art style achieved maturity. This chapter examines Wu's artistic maturity through contextualizing it as a response to the CCP's changed art policies, or to the cultural and political environments. It is necessary to provide background information about the construction of Chinese socialist realism and its exclusion of Western modernist art genres, which is the content of Section 1. Section 2 focuses on a relative relaxation of the socialist art policy in the 1950s and a trend prevailing in Chinese art circles called *xiesheng* (drawing from life), which cast great influence on many artists, including Wu. Section 3 concentrates on Wu's own practice of *xiesheng*, in which process he successfully syncretised Western painting techniques and classical Chinese painting perspectives to create his own landscape painting style. Section 4 discusses the final step in the maturity of Wu's artistic syncretism – the change from oils to ink. By demonstrating the larger environment in which Chinese-style painting became popular in the early 1970s, this section points out its decisive influence on Wu's medium transition, which enabled him to eventually achieve his art style – syncretism. Chapter 2 at the end provides a comparative study of Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki, another artist of Chinese-origin, who was also acclaimed for his syncretist style. Through comparing the similarities and differences in these two artists' careers, this section is intended to deepen the argument of this study, that Wu's art syncretism was generated in the particular cultural and political environment in the early times of socialist China, and as a response to the changeability of the Party's art policies.

Chapter 3 analyses Wu's artistic syncretism, by demonstrating his reinterpretation of certain key terms in Chinese literati painting, such as “expressiveness” and *yijing*. Section 1 discusses the connotation of literati painting, focusing on the interchangeability of its essence: “expressiveness” in scholarship with the term “self-expression”, which entails a strong modernist character. Wu was one of the people who believed in the interchangeability of the two terms. Section 2, 3 and 4 discuss Wu's modern interpretation of *yijing*, which is another key phrase in the appreciation of classical Chinese painting. By reading Wu's articles and analysing his paintings, Section 2 elaborates Wu's emphasis on *yijing* and his practice of it through applying Western modernist techniques. Section 3 deepens the argument of this chapter on Wu's modern interpretation of *yijing*. Through displaying the heavy influence of

Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881-1936) novel *Guxiang* on Chinese readers, especially under the domain of the CCP, this section discovers that the success of Wu's ink paintings of Jiangnan is attributed to his visualisation of Lu Xun's *Guxiang* in a modern and positive tone. Section 4 also supports the argument on Wu's modern interpretation of *yijing* by exemplifying his treescape painting. This section clarifies the character of syncretism in Wu's artistic advocacy: his emphasis on the independence of art form was based on the subject selection which had "politically correct" implications.

Part II of this thesis, consisting of Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, discusses Wu's art theory characterised by eclecticism. Differing from the time span of Part I, which covers the decades before and after the founding of the PRC, Part II exclusively focuses on Wu's art theory in the sociocultural context of the 1980s. Chapter 4 discusses one of Wu's renowned theories – formal aesthetics. The generally accepted rhetoric is that Wu's formal theory is pioneering and courageous, indicating an opposition to the dominance of the "political" over art in a socialist system, and hence his advocacy of individualism in art creation. But this study discovers the same political tone embedded in Wu's own formal theory, which Wu utilised to call for the promotion of formal aesthetics. By discussing the political nature inherent in the Western avant-garde art, this section points out the political risk with which Wu's opposition and call to individualism was taken. Section 2 begins with an overview of the considerable danger for artists in embedding political and critical rhetoric in their artwork in the sensitive environment of socialist China. This section provides the cultural and political context to demonstrate a balanced political rhetoric in Wu's call for formal aesthetics. The façade of his formal theory is against political control in art creation. But Wu expressed his reservations about the pure Western formalism to keep himself from the criticisms that he was attacking socialism as an ideology. In Section 3, the ink painting, *Ruins of Gaochang*, is studied as an example of Wu's balanced political tone. It comprehensively reveals Wu's overall conformity with the ideology of the Party, meanwhile showing Wu's gentle criticism of the trauma that the Party caused during the Cultural Revolution to the country and the Chinese people. Wu's formal theory might have worked to plant the seed of the artistic individuality that prevailed in China in the following years, but his art advocacy kept a distance from the real avant-garde and demonstrated its support to the Party's ideology in general.

Chapter 5 focuses on another theory for which Wu was renowned – the aesthetics of abstraction. Section 1 discusses the connotation of Wu’s aesthetics of abstraction. This study discovers, just like Wu’s claim on formal aesthetics, his reservations about pure abstract art in Western art theory and his interest in only using abstraction as an approach to convey the *yijing*. This section also shows, by arguing there was abstraction in Chinese ink painting, that Wu actually argued that a modern quality was already inherent in classical Chinese art. Section 2 concentrates on the responses to Wu’s abstraction theory in *Meishu* magazine during the 1980s. It finds there was agreement on the modern and progressive quality inherent in classical Chinese art, in contrast to some controversy about Wu’s definition of the aesthetics of abstraction *per se*. Pride in Chinese traditional culture had been evoked among the intellectuals through the discussions about the modernity inherent in classical Chinese art. Section 3 uncovers an eclectic quality, which is embedded in these responding articles, as well as Wu’s own art theory on the progressiveness of classical Chinese art. This eclecticism enabled Wu and many other intellectuals, such as Li Zehou 李泽厚 (b. 1930), to make conclusions out of fairly limited academic resources, and to take a leap of faith on the modernity and progressiveness of Chinese artistic tradition.

CHAPTER 1

TOWARDS A SYNCRETISM OF WESTERN AND CHINESE PAINTING (1936-1950)

The Hangzhou Academy of Art was the cradle of Wu Guanzhong's artistic development. The school nurtured the art enthusiast with the fundamental knowledge of both Western modernist painting and classical Chinese painting. Like many Chinese art students who had the good fortune to study Western painting in the 1930s, Wu's mind was preoccupied with the question of how to rejuvenate Chinese painting. Wu's initial passion about art leaned more toward oil painting in the modernist style. Thanks to his teacher Pan Tianshou's influence, however, Wu became deeply attracted to some Chinese ink masters' work, in which Wu believed the painters expressed their emotions. It was during Wu's study in the Hangzhou Academy of Art that he came across the idea of syncretizing Chinese painting with Western modernist art styles, due to his great appreciation for Lin Fengmian's art philosophy.

Further education at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Paris, the centre of aspiring cosmopolitan artists, provided Wu with the opportunity to closely study the modernist art vocabulary. During this process he absorbed Jean Souverbie's art theory of "beauty" and "prettiness", which prioritized formal consideration over detailed delineation. Wu was also deeply influenced by Maurice Utrillo's cityscape paintings, for his dark and sorrowful emotions expressed through specific perspective and colour application. However, all these experiences did not keep Wu in Paris, but only confirmed his thought that art had to be rooted in one's own culture. In 1950, the aspiring young artist decided to return to the newly founded socialist China, holding the hope that he could devote his knowledge of Western modernist art to his new career under the rule of socialist ideology.

1.1 In Hangzhou: Exposure to Western and Chinese Painting

Wu Guanzhong, a son to two peasants, was never expected to be an artist. Born in 1919, in an impoverished village in Yixing 宜兴, Jiangsu Province, Wu's first aspiration was to be a teacher. In his father's understanding, this was the profession that did not require much financial support to pursue yet promised economic self-sufficiency and a respected social status. But Wu soon changed his career aspiration to engineering, the knowledge and skills of which he hoped to devote to the construction of his mother country. He was therefore enrolled in the Industrial School of Zhejiang University 浙江大学附设工业学校 (Zhejiang daxue fushe gongye xuexiao) in 1934. However, after the first year of study, Wu's encounter with an art student Zhu Dequn 朱德群 (1920-2014) completely changed his job anticipation. Zhu was studying at the National Hangzhou School of Art 国立杭州艺术专科学校 (Guoli Hangzhou yishu zhuanke xuexiao, a.k.a. the Hangzhou Academy of Art), where Wu was invited to visit. Wu was immediately captivated by the artworks on display in Zhu's school, although he had little prior exposure to art:

“I have never seen anything as beautiful as this. It feels like the beauty of the whole world is unfolded when an infant first opens his eyes! I fell for art at first sight and could not forget about it ever since. Zhu Dequn said, ‘You have to study art then.’...I didn't think it was possible at first. But I fell for art so deeply that one can say I was blinded. In the end I changed my profession. I just had to study art regardless.”

我在杭州从来没有接触过这么美的东西，好像孩子诞生以后，一睁开眼睛，这个世界是那么美丽！一见钟情，很快就入迷了，后来念念不忘。朱德群看我这样，就说：“你以后要学美术。”...我认为不可能，但还是爱，可以说是一种盲目的爱。后来还是改了，不顾一切，一定要学美术。⁴¹

Wu then quit the Industrial School of Zhejiang University and transferred to the Hangzhou Academy of Art. Despite his family's strong objections, Wu began to aspire to

⁴¹ Li Huaiyu 李怀宇, “Wu Guanzhong: dongxi yishu gaochu xiangfeng” 吴冠中: 东西艺术高处相逢 (Wu Guanzhong: encounter of Eastern and Western art), in Li Huaiyu, *Fangwen lishi: sanshiwei zhongguo zhishiren de xiaosheng leiying* 访问历史: 三十位中国知识人的笑声泪影 (Interviews with thirty modern Chinese intellectuals), Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2007, p. 167.

become an artist.

Wu's love for art at first sight would not have happened if he had visited another art school. The Hangzhou Academy of Art, initially named the National Academy of Art 国立艺术学院 (Guoli yishuyuan,) was founded on 28th March 1928 by Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), who was the head of Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of China 中华民国大学院 (Zhonghua minguo daxueyuan) at the time. Cai and his followers aimed to establish an art institute that was able to provide aesthetic education on a comprehensive level.⁴² Lin Fengmian was invited by Cai to be the first president of the school to implement this principle. As one who used to study Western modernist art in France, Lin considered that the decline of Chinese painting lay in the artists' blind conformity to the painting tradition and lack of creativity. In Lin's view, art should be created to express the artist's emotion, which was exactly what Chinese painters lacked.⁴³ Therefore, Lin believed that the bright future of Chinese art lay in seeking to syncretize Chinese painting with the art forms of the Western avant-garde. Under Lin's leadership, departments of Chinese painting, Western painting, sculpture and design were established in the Hangzhou Academy of Art. The embracing of both Western and Chinese art provided an atmosphere that nourished Wu's enthusiasm for art:

“The Hangzhou Academy was more open-minded, mostly because of Lin Fengmian... People in the Hangzhou Academy were so proud of their school that they held a low opinion of all other art academies... When I look back, I realise that it was the Hangzhou Academy that changed the trajectory of my whole life. If I had not been invited to visit there, if I had visited Xu Beihong's 徐悲鸿 (1895-1953) exhibition or one from the Soviet Union, I don't think I would have changed profession at all. I don't think I would have liked any of those.”

更开放的是在杭州的国立艺专，林风眠起到主要作用...杭州艺专很傲，瞧不起其它的东西...现在我回想起来，我是去看了杭州艺专，觉得很美，就改变了人生。如果我不

⁴² Zheng Gong 郑工, *Yanjin yu yundong: zhongguo meishu de xiandaihua* (1875-1976) 演进与运动: 中国美术的现代化 (1875-1976) (Evolutions and movements: the modernisation of Chinese art), Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 2002, p. 129.

⁴³ Lin Fengmian, “Women suo xiwang de guohua qiantu” 我们所希望的国画前途 (Our wish for the future of the national painting), initially published in *Qiantu* 前途 (The future), Shanghai: 1933, Issue 1, see in Wan Yuyun 万玉云, ed., *Lin Fengmian tan yi lu* 林风眠谈艺录 (Lin Fengmian on art), Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2014, pp. 82-83.

是去参观杭州艺专，而是参观徐悲鸿的展览，或者是苏联的展览的话，我不会改行，我觉得我不喜欢这个东西。⁴⁴

The Hangzhou Academy was founded at a time when Chinese intellectuals were seeking a path to rejuvenate Chinese culture since the beginning of the twentieth-century. Cai advocated the theory of “inclusivity” 兼容并包 (*jianrong bingbao*), believing that “the best in each culture should be selected and synthesized so as to formulate and experiment new theories in the light of China’s specific conditions”.⁴⁵ Lin held a similar theory derived from his own efforts to reform Chinese art. What dissatisfied Lin was the limited variety of art forms in Chinese painting, which in his opinion was the key reason for its decline. In comparison, Lin believed the advantage of Western art lay in its full development of art forms. He therefore suggested a way to revive Chinese art by injecting Western art forms into it.⁴⁶ The similarity between Cai and Lin was that they shared an inclusive and tolerant approach to reforming Chinese art. Such a consensus became the educational principle of the Hangzhou Academy.

In his study of Lin Fengmian, Zhijian Qian captures the essence of Lin’s artistic theory as “sinicized modernism”, in which Western modernist techniques and styles are applied while Chinese aesthetics are embodied.⁴⁷ Perhaps some ink paintings he completed during his presidency of the Hangzhou Academy help to illustrate his theory. In the ink paintings, *Spring Rain* (mid-1930s, Fig. 1.1) and *Bamboo Grove* (1936, Fig. 1.2), instead of depicting the bamboos and stones in great detail, light ink was gently applied to sketch the silhouette of the subjects. This expressive style presented in these two paintings reflects the artist’s acquisition of Impressionism. Meanwhile, these two ink paintings were themed as “spring rain” and “bamboo grove”, which revealed the artist’s appreciation of the aesthetics

⁴⁴ Li Huaiyu, “Wu Guanzhong: dongxi yishu gaochu xiangfeng”, in Li Huaiyu, *Fangwen lishi*, 2007, pp. 168-169. Xu Beihong is a modern Chinese artist whose style is academic. See more discussion on Xu in Chapter 2.

⁴⁵ Lizhong Zhang, “Cai Yuanpei,” *Prospects: The Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*, vol. XXIII, no. 1/2, 1993, p. 149.

⁴⁶ Lin Fengmian, “Dongxifang yishu zhi qiantu” 东西方艺术之前途 (The future of eastern and western art), first published in *Dongfang zazhi* 东方杂志 (Orientals), vol. 23, Issue 10, 1926, pp. 15-22; see in *Lin Fengmian tan yi lu*, pp. 40-49.

⁴⁷ Zhijian Qian, “Toward a Sinicized Modernism: The Artistic Practice of Lin Fengmian in Wartime China, 1937-1949,” PhD diss., New York University. 2014, p. 3.

of traditional Chinese painting, where seasonal and natural imagery were imbued with poetic allusions. Wu Guanzhong in an article published in 1979 analysed how Lin deeply understood the essence of Impressionism and utilised Western modernist style to depict subjects embodying Chinese aesthetics. Wu summarised it as an extraordinary new path to syncretize Chinese painting with Western modernism:

“Artist Lin Fengmian paved a brand-new path to combine Western painting and Chinese painting. It was neither the reform of Chinese painting, nor the importation of Western one. It was not merely a combination of the two. It was syncretism.”

老画家林风眠在中西绘画的结合方面开辟了一条独特的新路，那不是国画的改良，也不是西画的引进，不是二者简单的结合，是化合。⁴⁸

Lin’s “syncretist” theory, along with the “inclusive” principle of the Hangzhou Academy, cast a heavy influence on Wu’s artistic pursuits. Although it may not have become apparent until decades later, Lin’s impact on Wu’s art is clear. Take, for example, Wu’s ink painting *Cascade and Rocks* 飞白 (Feibai, Fig. 1.3) created in 1983.⁴⁹ Without the English title, the viewer would find it difficult to recognize the subject matters as “cascade and rocks”. The Chinese title does not give any hint of waterfall or rocks. Instead, the Chinese title 飞白 (literally the flying white) is a calligraphic term, which refers to the blank line left within the black ink, due to the calligrapher’s swift and forceful brushwork. One can see that such a title bears the aesthetics of traditional Chinese visual rhetoric, both in evoking calligraphic idiom and traditional landscape poetics. As for art form, Wu painted the rocks and the cascade in a highly expressive way. Instead of zooming into each curve of the boulders, the artist fully dipped the brush with ink to make effortless swipes. One can recognise the rocks from the overlapping of the different shades of colour, not because of any realistic representations of the stones. Such an expressive style on paper, instead of representing any likeness of the natural scenery, sings out the emotional outburst of the artist through the splash of black and pastel droplets. *Cascade and Rocks* echoed Lin’s syncretist approach to Chinese ink painting with Western modernist style, just as Lin’s own paintings of

⁴⁸ Wu Guanzhong, “Jimo gengyun liushinian, huainian Lin Fengmian laoshi” 寂寞耕耘六十年, 怀念林风眠老师 (In memory of my teacher Lin Fengmian), *Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺研究 (Literature and art studies), no. 4 (1979): 71.

⁴⁹ *Cascade and Rocks* is used as the title of Wu’s painting *Feibai* (1983) in the exhibition catalogue *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, Lucy Lim, ed., 1989, p. 49.

Spring Rain and *Bamboo Grove*, in which the traditional landscape of “mountain and water” absorbs impressionistic and expressive techniques.

When enrolled in the Hangzhou Academy in 1936, Wu was equally passionate about Western modernism and classical Chinese painting, although most of the students at the time paid more attention to Western oil painting, reflecting the geopolitical dominance of Western culture in the period of East Asian modernisation. Wu recalled this experience in an article in 1985:

“My art is hybrid. I used to strongly desire to learn both Western and Chinese art. There were departments of both Western and Chinese painting in the Hangzhou Academy. Western painting was dominant, whereas Chinese painting was almost considered as a minor subject. But I was one of the few students who loved Chinese painting and took the subject seriously. I usually practiced Western painting in the day and Chinese painting at night.”

在艺术中，我是一个混血儿。我青年时期被强烈的求知欲驱使着，学西画，学国画，又学西画。早期国立杭州艺术专科学校的绘画系兼学中西画，但主要是西画，国画课时少，近乎副科，同时喜爱国画而又认真学的学生是少数，我属少数派。白天画西画，夜晚画国画。⁵⁰

Wu studied Western painting from Wu Dayu 吴大羽 (1903-1984) and Chinese painting from Pan Tianshou 潘天寿 (1897-1971). In contrast to his reticence about his Western painting teacher, Wu acknowledged Pan Tianshou’s influence on him on many occasions throughout his life. Pan, who devoted his whole life to Chinese ink painting, enriched the library of the Hangzhou Academy with books of ancient ink masterpieces, especially those which embodied distinctive artistic styles.⁵¹ Wu hence learned to appreciate the ink works from Hong Ren 弘仁 (1610-1664), Bada shanren 八大山人 (approx. 1626-1705), Shitao 石涛 (1642-1708), and Zheng Xie 郑燮 (also known as Zheng Banqiao 郑板桥 1693-1766). Like Pan, Wu was particularly drawn to the eccentric styles of Bada and Shitao.

⁵⁰ Wu Guanzhong, “Shuimo xingcheng shinian” 水墨行程十年 (Ten years of ink painting), *Meishu* 美术 (Arts), no. 5 (1985): p. 4.

⁵¹ More information on Pan Tianshou, see Claire Roberts, “Tradition and Modernity: the Life and Art of Pan Tianshou (1897-1971),” *East Asian History*, no. 15/16, (June/December) 1998: 67-96; Mina Kim, “Pan Tianshou (1897-1971): Rediscovering Traditional Chinese Painting in the Twentieth Century,” PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2016.

Wu credited Pan for enlightening him in the understanding of classical Chinese painting:

“My love for Chinese painting to a large extent is attributed to my teacher Pan’s nurture. I have always admired his art style.”

我之爱上国画，是与潘天寿老师的熏陶分不开的，我一向崇敬他的艺术风格。⁵²

Pan, as a traditionalist, emphasised the importance of *linmo* 临摹 (imitation) practice as the authentic way to study Chinese ink painting; as Wu recalled:

“Pan was creative in his own painting. But as teacher, he suggested we began with imitation. Hence, we spent a lot of time imitating the ink work of Shitao, Hongren, Bada, Banqiao and the Four Masters in Yuan. We even imitated the Four Wangs’ work.”

潘师个人重独创性，但他教学中主张临摹入手。我们大量临摹石涛，弘仁，八大，板桥及元四家的作品，就是四王的东西，也经常要临临。⁵³

In spite of his high regard for the distinctive style of earlier ink masters, Wu himself was never passionate about the imitation practice, which had been generally accepted by traditional ink artists as the authentic way to study traditional Chinese painting. In her study of the imitation practice in Chinese painting, Ginger Cheng-chi Hsu notes: “In China...imitation was the standard method by which artists and calligraphers learned their art.”⁵⁴ However, Wu was openly disaffected with the traditional style of studying Chinese painting, which he elucidated in an article published in 1988:

“I used to imitate plenty of ancient Chinese landscape paintings. I was required to imitate the painters’ skills and to appreciate the forcefulness embodied in their brushwork. The art effect was only achieved by the painting norms, for example, *cun* (hemp-fiber texture), *ca* (rub), *dian* (dot), *ran* (wash)... I listened to my teacher even imitate the Four Wangs’ landscapes too. However, if it had not been for the work of Shitao and Bada, in which their genuine emotions were expressed, I would not have wanted to study Chinese landscape painting at all.”

⁵² Wu Guanzhong, “Shuimo xingcheng shinian”, 1985, p. 4.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 4.

⁵⁴ More information on the imitation practice in Chinese painting, see Ginger Cheng-chi Hsu, “Imitation and Originality, Theory and Practice”, in *A Comparison to Chinese Art*, Martin J. Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang, eds., John Wiley & Sons, 2016: pp. 293-311.

我临摹过大量中国山水画，临摹其程式，讲究所谓笔墨，画面效果永远局限于皴，擦，点，染的规范之内。听老师的话，也硬着头皮临四王山水，如果没有石涛，八大等表露真性情的作品，我就不愿意学中国山水画了。⁵⁵

Wu hereby admitted his unhappy experience of conducting the imitation practice as required by his teacher. Although not explicitly mentioning Pan's name, it is fair to state that Wu was dissatisfied with Pan's teaching method for Chinese painting. Wu was never a good student of imitating the traditional Chinese painting skills, such as *cun* 皴 (hemp-fiber texture), *ca* 擦 (rub), *dian* 点 (dot), and *ran* 染 (wash). In his opinion, the artistic effect of the painting should be achieved more than through these techniques, and should go beyond "the forcefulness embodied in their brushwork". Therefore, Pan Tianshou's influence on Wu's ink work lay more in exposing Wu to the world of literati painting, rather than in teaching him the traditional methods of ink painting. Whereas Pan's reputation as an ink artist lies in his ability to embody the forcefulness through brushwork in the traditional style, Wu's accomplishment in ink painting should not be considered in the same light. Wu's ink painting should not be read as a continuation or revival of the literati ink painting tradition. Although Wu had amply acknowledged his indebtedness to traditional Chinese painting, he was, as will be discussed in following chapters, a rebel rather than a follower of tradition.

It is necessary to discuss the Four Wangs here, due to Wu's implicitly negative attitude when he stated that he had to "even imitate the Four Wangs' landscapes too." The Four Wangs (also known as *siwang* 四王, Wang Shimin 王时敏, Wang Jian 王鉴, Wang Hui 王翬, Wang Yuanqi 王原祁) are four prominent ink painters active in the Qing Dynasty. In contrast to their considerable fame in the art circles of the Qing Dynasty, their reputation had seen a sharp decline in the years that followed. Art theorists questioned the Four Wangs' artistic achievement in order to present a trajectory of the eclipse of Chinese painting as a whole, to its nadir in the Qing Dynasty. Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927) expressed this sentiment in his *Wanmucaotang canghuamu* 万木草堂藏画目 (Catalogue of collected

⁵⁵ Wu Guanzhong, "Xiehou jianghu: youhua fengjinghua yu zhongguo shanshuihua heyings" 邂逅江湖: 油画风景与中国山水画合影 (The comparison between oil landscapes and Chinese landscapes), first published in 1988, also in Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing* 我负丹青 (The autobiography of Wu Guanzhong), Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2004, pp. 286-287.

paintings from the Thatched Hall of Ten-Thousand Trees, *Wanmucaotang Catalogue* hereafter, 1917):

“Those active two or three all imitate the dross of the four Wangs and the Two Shis (Shitao and Shixi)...The so-called ‘untrammelled brush’ of the Yuan that was barely evident in the Four Wangs and the Two Shis, had already departed from Tang and Song orthodoxy. Compared to the Song people, none of them is worth mentioning.”⁵⁶

Kang’s viewpoint that Chinese painting reached its nadir in Qing, which was represented by the Four Wangs, was echoed by other revolutionists, who were dissatisfied with the progress of Chinese painting and endeavored to make reforms. For instance, Teng Gu 腾固 (1901-1941) in *Zhongguo meishu xiaoshi* 中国美术小史 (A short history of Chinese art, 1926) also referred to the downward trajectory of Chinese ink painting. Differing from Kang, Teng directed his critical thrust to the fractionalization by artists of different styles, which he thought had a negative impact on the development of Chinese painting.⁵⁷

Wu’s negative view of the Four Wangs’ artistic achievement was apparent when he stated that “We even imitated the Four Wangs’ work”, and “I even followed my teacher’s instructions to imitate the Four Wangs’ landscapes too.” Wu’s reluctance to study the Four Wangs presented his low opinion on the excessive emphasis on technical acquisition and the lack of creativity and individualism associated with the Four Wangs’ work. What distinguished Wu’s opinion from Kang’s was that Kang believed that realism was the solution to revive Chinese painting, whereas Wu advocated his teacher Lin Fengmian’s view that the future of Chinese painting lay in the emphasis on the artists’ emotional expression through painting. Whereas Kang groups the Four Wangs and the Two Shis together, Wu

⁵⁶ Kang Youwei, *Wanmucaotang canghuamu* 万木草堂藏画目 (Catalogue of collected paintings from the Thatched Hall of Ten-Thousand Trees), translated by Aida Yuen Wong, in Aida Yuen Wong, *The Other Kang Youwei: Calligrapher, Art Activist, and Aesthetic Reformer in Modern China (Modern Asian Art and Visual Culture)*, Brill, 2015, p. 105. Shixi 石溪 (1612-1692), an ink painter who was active in early Qing times.

⁵⁷ Teng Gu, “Zhongguo meishu xiaoshi” 中国美术小史 (A short history of Chinese art), first published in 1926, see in Shen Ning 沈宁 ed., *Teng Gu yishu wenji* 腾固艺术文集 (Anthology of Teng Gu), Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe. 2003: pp. 92-93. In contrast, some art historians hold different opinions on the role that the Four Wangs played in the history of Chinese ink painting, see more information in Wen C. Fong, “Wang Hui and Repossessing the Past”, in Maxwell K. Hearn ed., *Landscapes Clear and Radiant, the Art of Wang Hui (1632-1717)*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, pp. 3-48.

emphasises his perceived contrast between traditional painting and Shitao's expressiveness.

The period of Wu's study in the Hangzhou Academy from 1936-1942 was a time of transition in the history of Chinese art. On one hand, studying Western painting overseas was considered by art students as a path to reform Chinese art. On the other hand, the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937 changed the climate for Chinese art. The art genres that were considered more applicable to political propaganda became increasingly favoured. Chinese artists at that moment all felt the need to choose sides and find their niches in the drastically changing socio-political environment. Under the circumstances, Lin Fengmian's "syncretic modernism" proved to be unpopular. It was the art genres which could serve political propaganda and stimulate patriotism that prevailed, such as Xu Beihong's academic realism.⁵⁸ For the new generation of artists who just graduated from school, the choice appeared to be either going abroad for further study, or situating themselves in some Chinese art institutions. For example, Zao Wou-ki 赵无极 (1921-2013), who studied at the Hangzhou Academy in 1935-1941, rejected a teaching position at his *alma mater* in order to pursue his artistic dream in France. In contrast, Dong Xiwen 董希文 (1914-1973), another fellow student at the Hangzhou Academy, chose to research ancient Chinese mural paintings in the Dunhuang Art Institute 敦煌艺术研究所 (Dunhuang yishu yanjiusuo) after graduation. As for Wu, he found a job as instructor in the Architecture Department of Chongqing University. Although he had received training in both Western and Chinese painting at school, such knowledge was far from enough to help him stand out in Chinese art circles. Going abroad appeared to be the only path for the aspiring young artist to make a name for himself in the art world.

⁵⁸ Zhijian Qian, "Toward a Sinicized Modernism", 2014, pp. 2-3.

1.2 In Paris: the Absorption of Modernist Vocabulary

“I used to think about giving up Western painting for Chinese painting. But in my youth I was too untamed to be able to settle down in the practice of the restrained ink painting. I hungered for colours. In the end I quit Chinese painting to study Western painting in Paris!”

我曾经短期尝试过放弃西画专搞国画，但感情似野马的青年时期，终于未能安居于水墨淡雅之乡，我狂热地追求色彩，后来反而是抛弃了国画到巴黎留学，专攻洋人的洋画去了！

--Wu Guanzhong⁵⁹

Wu was able to go to France due to his successful application for a scholarship awarded by the Nationalist Party after the end of the Sino-Japanese war. It is understandable that the aspiring young man had high expectations for his prospective study at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts. Therefore, the disappointment of his first year of study brought him considerable pain. Like most of the Chinese art students at the time, he believed in the idea that one should start from learning “basic” painting skills. He studied under Jean Théodore Dupas (1882-1964), who was a leading figure in the Art Deco movement prevailing in 1920s Europe and had a strong predilection for classicism.

Alastair Duncan asserts that Art Deco artists were by no means “the vanguard of the painting world”, and that their artworks were decorative by nature.⁶⁰ This statement accurately characterises the work of Dupas. Most of his achievements were commissions for art exhibitions, store displays and posters, instead of independent artistic creations. Dupas was famous for his affinity for classicism. The classical style in which he loved to delineate women’s bodies appears to have been already outdated when compared with the modern fashion style, which had already become popular in France at the time. Dupas’ style is fully revealed in one of his most famous works *Les Perruches* (Fig. 1.4, 1922). The painting shows Dupas’ enthusiasm for classicism. The contours of the women’s faces are depicted in great detail. Their bodies are outlined delicately, to present their elegance and voluptuousness. A

⁵⁹ Wu Guanzhong, “Shuimo xingcheng shinian,” 1985, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Alastair Duncan, *Art Deco*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, p. 142.

clear decorative atmosphere also permeates the painting to entertain the guests, who were invited to the Grand Salon of Ruhlmann's Hotel at the art exposition in Paris in 1925.⁶¹ However, Wu could not hide his dissatisfaction with Dupas:

“I started from basic painting skills in Paris. But I don't think I had learned anything after a year. It was the same in France (as in China) that the old-fashioned professors taught little.”

于是到了巴黎先学学院派的东西，学了一年后，我觉得什么都没学到。法国也是这样，老的教授都不太行。⁶²

Dupas' style was actually modern in terms of its highly decorative quality and is generally considered Art Deco, but it was not “modern” for Wu. In Wu's eyes, Dupas put too much emphasis on the detailed delineation of figures. The acquisition of “basic painting skills” never lit Wu's enthusiasm, just as the techniques of classical Chinese painting had failed to attract Wu's interest at the Hangzhou Academy. He knew in his heart that Dupas' style was not what he desired to learn.

Hence, Wu turned to another professor Jean Souverbie (1891-1981) in the following year, whose style Wu highly appreciated. Influenced by Nabis and Cubism, Souverbie was noted for the pictorial composition and colour application in his still lifes and nudes. He also showed great respect for the perfect equilibrium of the human body in classical painting. As one can see in the painting *La Provence* (Fig. 1.5, 1948), Souverbie put the female body in a dominant position in the foreground of the picture. The exaggeration of the woman's body ratio, as seen in her small head in comparison with her wide hips, reveals the artist's conception of the perfect body ratio in painting. And the heavy brown colour enhances the elemental voluptuousness of her figure. Meanwhile, the shading technique speaks for the painter's modernist propensity, which distinguishes it from classical figure painting. Wu appreciated the characteristics presented in Souverbie's art in his 2004 autobiography:

“He (Souverbie) inspired me to have a profound understanding of Western painting, for example, how to use colours, how to organise the structure and arrange pictorial composition... I would have returned from the treasure mountain with my hands

⁶¹ Alastair Duncan, *Art Deco*, 1988, p. 144.

⁶² Li Huaiyu, “Wu Guanzhong: dongxi yishu gaochu xiangfeng”, 2007, p. 171.

empty, if I had not been enlightened by Professor Souverbie.”

是他启发了我对西方艺术品味，造型结构，色彩的力度等等学艺途中最基本的认识...若无苏弗尔皮教授的关键性启蒙，我恐自己深入宝山空手回。⁶³

It is worth noticing that Souverbie’s emphasis on the equilibrium of the human figures was actually influenced by the French painter, Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665), who showed in his artwork a strong classical style.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, what inspired Souverbie’s use of colour was Nabis and Cubism, which are renowned for flat patches of colour application. It is also worth noticing that Souverbie in his early career was drawn to the Roman ruins when he visited Provence.⁶⁵ These three sources of inspirations perhaps explain Souverbie’s artistic vocabulary for figure depiction: Souverbie’s figure painting emphasised both the golden ratio and certain artistic exaggeration. The bulkiness of the body can be seen as the visualisation of the shockingly large volume of the ruins. The solemnness is best enhanced through applying a large quantity of the heavy colour of brown. In the painting of *La Provence*, one sees an organic combination of all the influences on Souverbie’s figure painting.

It is hard to tell whether Dupas or Souverbie is more “modern”. Both of them absorbed inspiration from classicism and modernism to forge their own art styles. Dupas was in fact not an artist who merely focused on delineating details. He, on the contrary, paid a lot of attention to the overall composition of the painting. Dupas explained his emphasis on composition:

“...To create a rhythm on a given surface, to build up a composition with lines, with lights and darks, with warm and cold tones, the composition absolutely determines the way in which the picture is finished...I subordinate the elements of nature to the rhythm I have fixed on...why are there so many voluminous robes in my picture?...not because I have a special predilection for them, but merely because they are useful to me.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 14.

⁶⁴ See more information of the artist in Richard Verdi, *Nicolas Poussin*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995.

⁶⁵ “Jean Souverbie”, *Oxford Art Online*:

<https://www.oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00172811>, published on 31 October 2011. Last access on 15 August 2019.

⁶⁶ Jared Goss, *French Art Deco*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 2014, p. 90.

One can even argue about who leaned more towards classicism, given Souverbie's specific predilection for equilibrium in figure painting. Hence, it was less of the artistic distinction between the two professors that led to Wu's high praise for Souverbie, and more of Wu's own understanding of what "modern" really meant in his own mind that made him turn to the new professor.

Apart from artistic style and technique, Souverbie's artistic theory of "beauty (*beau*) vs. prettiness (*joli*)" also cast a strong influence on Wu's own understanding of art. According to Wu, Souverbie categorised art into two types, one of 'prettiness' and the other of 'beauty'. In Souverbie's opinion, the art of 'prettiness' pleased people, whereas the art of 'beauty' touched them deeply inside. Wu recalled that Souverbie applied this distinction in his evaluation of students' work: "If he said one's work was 'pretty', it was a negative comment. The student should be concerned." 如果他说学生的作品“漂亮呵！”便是贬辞，是警惕。⁶⁷

Wu applied the theory of "beauty vs. prettiness" throughout his career as a criterion for judging artistic value. He quoted Souverbie frequently, the best example being his article "Huihua de xingshi mei" 绘画的形式美 (Formal aesthetics in painting) published in *Meishu* 美术 (Arts) in 1979. The article begins with an explication of the theory of "beauty" vs "prettiness":

"Prettiness and beauty are two completely different concepts in the art field. "Prettiness" usually relates to the delicate, soft gradations, or the materials' preciousness and high values such as gold, jade and ivory. "Beauty", on the contrary, is an artistic effect, which mostly refers to the disposition of colours or the arrangement of pictorial composition."

美与漂亮在造型艺术领域里确是两个完全不同的概念。漂亮一般是缘于渲染得细腻、柔和、光挺，或质地材料的贵重如金银、珠宝、翡翠、象牙等等；而美感之产生多半缘于形象结构或色彩组织的艺术效果。⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 13.

⁶⁸ Wu Guanzhong, "Huihua de xingshimei" 绘画的形式美 (Formal aesthetics in painting), *Meishu*, no.5 (1979), pp. 33-35, 44.

Wu's interpretation of "prettiness" indicated his disdain for the superficial value of any lustrous, fine-looking material. In comparison, his interpretation of "beauty" signified a respect for "genuine" artistic value, which he believed to be the result of the "disposition of colours or the arrangement of pictorial composition". Wu's interpretation of the difference between "beauty" and "prettiness" is more than the definition of the two terms. It reveals Wu's judgment of the different artistic value of the two categories. By correlating "prettiness" with the eye-pleasing value of jewels, Wu implied its aesthetic inferiority. In contrast, the aesthetic superiority lay in art objects that produced "artistic effect", which he summarized, in short, as "beauty." By linking "artistic effect" with the "disposition of colours or the arrangement of pictorial composition", Wu prioritized good pictorial composition and colour application as the embodiment of "beauty."

What was more controversial in Wu's application of the theory of "beauty vs. prettiness" was Wu's association of "prettiness" with socialist realist art that dominated the Peoples Republic of China (henceforth 'PRC') since its founding in 1949. But Wu did not make this association explicit in the 1979 article. His argument against socialist realism was not fully articulated until an interview in 2007, in which Wu directly criticised Xu Beihong's realist art as having nothing to do with "beauty":

"Xu could be titled 'painting artisan', 'painting teacher' or even 'painting master', but he was ignorant of artistic 'beauty'. His paintings indicated that he knew nothing about 'beauty' at all...Xu was very much opposed to Western modernist art. He wanted realism, and completely despised any other kinds of non-realist art, especially modernism."

徐悲鸿可以称为画匠，画师，画圣，但是他是‘美盲’，因为从他的作品上看，他对美完全不理解...徐悲鸿是完全反对西方现代绘画的，他的观点要写实的，不写实的東西他就看不惯，公开反对现代的绘画。⁶⁹

By pointing out Xu's ignorance of beauty, Wu, thirty years after publishing the article addressing the issue of prettiness and beauty, eventually revealed that the "prettiness" he despised was in fact socialist realism, which dominated the Chinese art world for decades. Wu's theory of "beauty vs. prettiness" indicated his contempt for socialist realist art, due to

⁶⁹Li Huaiyu, "Wu Guanzhong: dongxi yishu gaochu xiangfeng", 2007, pp. 168-169.

its exclusive emphasis on “realist” techniques and, in Wu’s opinion, its low regard for colour and composition.

Besides the art theory that he acquired at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, Wu spent a great deal of time visiting museums and galleries in Paris. He was intoxicated by the avant-garde artworks of Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), Paul Gauguin (1848-1904), and Paul Cezanne (1839-1906), and was equally attracted to the Renaissance masters such as Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445-1510). There was one French modernist artist’s work from which Wu gained special inspiration – Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955). Utrillo was renowned for his depictions of Parisian streets, squares and churches. He was particularly famous for rendering the brooding and depressing atmosphere in his Parisian cityscapes. In *Le Bal Musette* (1911, Fig. 1.6), for example, the old architecture is situated in a quiet environment to convey a desolate atmosphere. And it was painted in zinc white to enhance such an effect.⁷⁰ The strong emotion expressed by the cold compositional tonality on Utrillo’s canvas attracted Wu the most, as he wrote:

“Utrillo depicted the melancholic beauty of Paris with a unique juxtaposition of sweeping strokes and exquisite detail, creating a plaintive and wistful atmosphere reminiscent of classical Chinese poetry.”

尤特利罗利用疏密相见的手法表现哀艳的巴黎，冷冷清清凄凄惨惨戚戚，具有东方诗词的情调。⁷¹

From the melancholy expressed in Utrillo’s cityscapes, Wu learned to use certain painting skills to express emotions, which also related to his evocation of the emotionality of Eastern poetry. One example is the ink painting *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown* 水乡周庄 (Shuixiang Zhouzhuang, Fig. 1.7), one of Wu’s most famous ink works created in 1986. The artist took the view of the river-town as if he stood at the junction of the complex on the other side of the river. Two vanishing points were applied to depict the row houses on both the left and right sides of the bridge. This perspective shows Wu’s acquisition of Western painting techniques; as one can see in Utrillo’s painting *Le Bal Musette* (1911), the same perspective was adopted. The two-vanishing-point technique provided an overview of the scenery to the

⁷⁰ Alfred Werner, *Utrillo*, New York: H. N. Abrams, 1953, pp. 22, 88.

⁷¹ Wu Guanzhong, “Xiehou jianghu”, first published in 1988, also see in Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, pp. 287-288.

viewers, as if they saw the view in person, or as if they recalled the image in their minds. One point of departure was that Wu chose to express a more positive emotion than Utrillo. As seen in *Zhou Villa in the River-town*, a gentle and sweet, rather than the melancholic sentiment permeates the painting. The compact row houses, presented in a sweeping overview rather than in detailed depiction, tell a centuries-old story of the traditional architecture in the Jiangnan area. The feeling that the image evokes is bittersweet nostalgia for Chinese audiences, especially for those who come from this area. The homesickness of a foreign student was expressed in a painting of a Chinese river-town conveying nostalgia for bygone days, rather than a mournful façade of a Paris café. The joining of Chinese and Western art became a part of Wu's quest for artistic self-identity.

In 1950, at the end of his three-year-study in Paris, Wu was loath to leave Europe. He conveyed his dissatisfaction with the Chinese art world at the time: "There is no future to choose art as a profession in China. People in power there are so closed-minded that they consider Western modern art as a scourge." 国内搞美术没有出路，美术界的当权人物观点又极保守，视西方现代艺术为毒蛇猛兽。⁷² Wu considered the option of pursuing his artistic dream in Paris: "The environment in Paris was so conducive to studying, and it was the art centre of the world. I had only been there three years, and I harboured greater ambitions that were yet to be fulfilled. Would I not feel a loss in returning now?"⁷³

At the same time, he was also tempted to leave Europe, due to his feeling of being "increasingly cut off from his roots".⁷⁴ He felt estranged from his native culture and Chinese tradition when staying in Paris, in spite of his great appreciation for Western modernist art. In Wu's mind, what he was doing in Paris was creating art which merely entertained Western audiences. It was superficial since it was remote from his own people and his own culture. He had a strong desire to create art that could touch people deeply, which in Souverbie's theory had to be one of "beauty", rather than one of "prettiness". In a letter Wu wrote to his teacher Wu Dayu, he stated:

⁷² Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 18.

⁷³ Wu Guanzhong, "My Artistic Career," translated by Lucy Lim, In Lucy Lim ed., *Contemporary Chinese Painting: An Exhibition from the People's Republic China*, Chinese Cultural Foundation of San Francisco, 1989: 39.

⁷⁴ Michael Sullivan, "Wu Guanzhong obituary", *The Guardian*, in the Art & Design, July 7 2010. See the source online: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jul/07/wu-guanzhong-obituary>, last access on 3 September 2018.

“If painting is merely for visual amusement, then what is its greatness?...Art should be the force that is powerful enough to be engraved in people’s hearts...I know that this (Parisian) society and people here have nothing to do with me...my heart is somewhere else...I don’t want my art to be irrelevant... I won’t keep my art practice in some master’s studio in Europe. My art should be generated from my mother country and my hometown out of my full-hearted emotions...No matter where I shall be in China, I will do my job humbly and sincerely, and not yearn for the Parisian art world anymore.”

如果绘画再只是仅求一点视觉的清快...它有什么伟大崇高的地方? ...它应该能够真真切切, 一针一滴血, 一鞭一道痕地深印当时当地人们的心底...我知道这个(巴黎)社会, 这个人群与我不相干...我的心, 生活在真空中...我不愿意自己的工作与共同生活的人们漠不相关...艺术的学习不在欧洲, 不在巴黎, 不在大师们的画室里, 在祖国, 在故乡, 在家园, 在自己的心底...无论被驱在祖国的哪一角落, 我将爱惜那卑微的一份, 步步真诚地做, 不会再憧憬于巴黎的画坛了。⁷⁵

It was the time when Wu found a great resonance in Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin’s art pursuits in different cultures away from Paris. He related to Gauguin’s departure from the western world in search of his artistic ideal.⁷⁶ He also felt like Van Gogh’s wheat, needing the earth of his native fields, despite the uncertainty of how he would develop there.⁷⁷ At that moment, Wu became aware of the cultural ground which played a significant role in nurturing an artist’s inspiration. In the end, Wu decided to return to China and gave up the dream of being a famous artist in the Parisian art circles.

Wu made the decision to go back China because he aspired to devote what he had learned to the newly founded PRC. There was indeed patriotism permeating the young Chinese artist’s mind, as Richard Barnhart has pointed out.⁷⁸ But I believe it was more related to Wu’s aspirations to become a successful and respected artist in his own native culture. Considering the knowledge that he had acquired in Paris, it was understandable that Wu developed a desire to impart what he had learned to Chinese students, most of whom would never have the chance to study in the West. Also considering the syncretist approach that Wu inherited

⁷⁵ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, pp. 19-20.

⁷⁶ Wu Guanzhong, “My Artistic Career,” 1989, p. 39.

⁷⁷ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 18.

⁷⁸ Richard Barnhart commented on Wu’s decision as the act of “a patriot”, see Richard Barnhart, “The Odyssey of Wu Guanzhong”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, p. 10.

from Lin Fengmian in the Hangzhou Academy, it was understandable that Wu imagined a rich ground in China for his art to grow, where he would always feel rooted in the ground of Chinese artistic tradition. In other words, Wu's return to China was driven mainly by artistic and practical reasons, as opposed to patriotism.

Going back to China or staying abroad was a critical question for Chinese overseas students at the time. It was a big gamble, considering that they might not be able to afford to go abroad ever again. In fact, some of Wu's friends indeed chose to stay in the West. Zhu Dequn chose to live in France. Zao Wou-ki did not go back to China until the 1970s. For artists who decided to return to China such as Wu himself, a thorough calculation needed to be done to determine if there was a more promising future back in their native country. It would surely have been taken into account that the PRC was founded one year before Wu's return, which promised Wu a brand-new art world to establish his artistic authority. Indeed Wu recalled that there were lobbyists from the PRC who encouraged him and other art students to return to serve the new China.⁷⁹ Imagining that the atmosphere in the newly founded PRC could be as inclusive as in the Hangzhou Academy, Wu made up his mind. In summary, the syncretism manifested in Wu's art was nurtured through his study experience in both China and France. He rejected imitation and embraced free expression during his study of Chinese painting. He rejected academism and realism and embraced the modernist style when studying Western painting. This led to his exploration of a common ground between classical Chinese painting and Western modernism.

⁷⁹ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 18.

CHAPTER 2

ARTISTIC CHOICE AS RESPONSE TO THE CULTURAL POLICIES OF THE PRC (1950-1976)

Wu's experience during the first few decades of the PRC seemed to prove him wrong in making the decision to return to China in 1950. His advocacy of Western modernist art was seriously incompatible with socialist realism. His artistic pursuit was so constantly criticised that in the end, he was transferred out of the most authoritative art institute in 1953. However, the marginalization did not end Wu's career. On the contrary, it provided him with new opportunity. It was the moment when Wu decided to switch to landscape painting, the genre he considered less restricted by socialist ideology than figure painting. Fortunately, Wu's exploration of landscape painting was supported by the Communist Party's relaxed art policies, for example, the Hundred Flowers campaign 双百运动 (Shuangbai yundong, which began in 1956), which was launched to encourage artistic production in all forms that presented the beauty of China. Wu became the most proactive artist participating in the *xiesheng* movement that began to prevail among the art circles in the wake of the new art policies. Wu and his peers travelled around China with the mission to depict landscapes which evoked Chinese people's love for their native country. It was during the *xiesheng* practices that Wu began applying the multiple perspectives to landscape painting, in order to better present the panoramic view of the scenery and to better convey a sense of the scenic grandeur. This exploration directed Wu's attention to the unique features of Chinese ink landscapes, which he came to believe should be applied to oil landscapes.

Like most artists, Wu was prohibited from painting during the first few years of the Cultural Revolution. But another turning point in his career occurred in 1971, when he was summoned back to Beijing for an art commission for the Beijing Hotel. The commission not only gave Wu the chance to practice the multiple perspectives he developed for presenting panorama, but also inspired him to change the painting medium from oil to ink. In this chapter, I will investigate the reasons behind this medium transition.

It is clear that Wu's every artistic turn occurred as an active response to the changing cultural policies or the circumstances of socialist China, when the state stipulated art styles for either domestic or international ideological purposes. The importance of sociopolitical context to the development of Wu's art is brought into sharp relief when compared with that of Zao Wou-ki, an artist who has many parallels with Wu himself. Wu and Zao's cases both demonstrate "syncretism". The visible differences in their art styles can be explained by the fundamentally divergent socio-cultural environment in France and socialist China.

2.1 Socialist Realism and the PRC's Cultural Policies as Context

After the founding of the PRC, the CCP needed to establish a new art genre. Due to its ideological similarity to the Soviet Union, the new art of socialist China was to a large extent adopted from Soviet socialist realism. Soviet socialist realism was generated from “a Russian version of the nineteenth century academic painting that was popular in Paris salons.”⁸⁰ That Russian version, which was also called Grand Manner Painting, was famous for depicting heroic figures from history or from the Bible, in a style, which was realistic technically, yet idealistic and divine in spirit.⁸¹ The Soviet socialist realism adopted such principles and techniques, only replacing the biblical subjects with new heroes that met Socialist values. However, the CCP demanded that a uniquely Chinese socialist realist art be established, not just an imitation of the Soviet version. Such a command was revealed in Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 (1893-1976) “Zai yanan wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua” 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话 (Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art) on 2nd May 1942. Mao in the speech specifically referred to the selective importation of realist art: “Internationally, the good experience of foreign countries, especially Soviet experience, can also serve to guide us,” however, “uncritical transplantation or copying from the ancients and foreigners is the most sterile and harmful dogmatism in literature and art.”⁸²

During the progress of exploring Chinese socialist realist art, Xu Beihong's art style proved to be compatible with the Party's principles. Xu advocated the art genre which was an academic style with realist techniques. It was Xu's own study experience in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the 1920s that cast a heavy influence on his art advocacy of academism and realism. Learning under Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929, a leading figure of the naturalist school), Xu gained a close understanding of verisimilitude in European academic art, which he constantly emphasised in his own artistic career.

Xu's art was favoured in socialist China also due to his endeavor to appropriate themes from traditional Chinese culture into his academic realist painting. Take Xu's painting

⁸⁰ Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986*, Cohen, New York: Harry N Abrams, 1987, p.18.

⁸¹ Ibid, p.18.

⁸² *Modern Chinese Literary Thoughts: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945*, Kirk A. Denton ed., Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 470-471.

The Foolish Man Moving the Mountain 愚公移山 (Yugong yishan, 1940, Fig. 2.1), for instance. On the theme of a well-known Chinese fable, Xu's *The Foolish Man Moving the Mountain* depicted a group of villagers endeavoring to move a mountain that got in their way, under the leadership of "the foolish man" 愚公 (yugong). The fable in China has been taken as a song of praise to someone who was able to lead his people and overcome the difficulties before them. Xu's realist style provided a life-like effect to demonstrate the figures' strength in the painting. The villagers' tense muscles were faithfully depicted to demonstrate a dynamism that shows their hard work of moving the mountain. Under the circumstances of China's war against Japan, *The Foolish Man Moving the Mountain* was created with a clear propagandizing purpose to encourage Chinese people, showing them that they were capable of overcoming any obstacles in front of them. The topic of the ancient Chinese folktale made the positive implication easily understood and effectively received by Chinese audiences. Xu's *The Foolish Man Moving the Mountain* had been taken as model of Chinese socialist realism, with an optimistic theme chosen from traditional Chinese culture and realist techniques that were forceful enough to touch the viewers.

Meanwhile, Xu had always held a low opinion on French avant-garde art. In Xu's 1929 article "Huo" 惑 (Perplexed), he made crystal clear his contempt for the French modernists, for instance, Edouard Manet (1832-1883), Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) and Henri Matisse (1869-1954), who were specifically famous for expressing their emotions in free styles. Xu's comment on their expressive-styled artwork was respectively, "mediocre" 庸 (yong), "vulgar" 俗 (su), "superficial" 浮 (fu), and "inferior" 劣 (lie). In Xu's opinion, one could finish two such paintings in an hour.⁸³ Since Xu gained the vertex of political power as head of the CAFA, and president of the CAA, he was able to strongly promote academic realism in China and diminish the influence of avant-garde art at the same time. Xu rearranged training duration and the curriculum in the CAFA, requiring all students to study sketching 素描 (sumiao) for the first two years to master realist painting techniques, regardless of their majors in Western or Chinese painting.

Therefore, Beijing was not Wu Guanzhong's ideal destination when he returned to

⁸³ Xu Beihong, "Huo" 惑 (Perplexed), first published in 1929, see in Wang Zhen and Xu Boyang, eds., *Xu Beihong wenji* 徐悲鸿艺术文集 (The anthology of Xu Beihong), Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1994, p. 93.

China in 1950. He planned to teach in the Hangzhou Academy, which he always remembered fondly with great nostalgia. However, this plan was changed by an encounter in Beijing with Dong Xiwen, his fellow student in the Hangzhou Academy. Dong was interested in Wu's figure paintings, which Wu completed when studying in Paris. Dong even borrowed some to carefully read them.⁸⁴ What surprised Wu was that after several days Dong came back with not only Wu's paintings but also a job offer as lecturer in the CAFA. Dong took the figure paintings he had borrowed from Wu to be examined by the Communist cadres in the CAFA. Wu's artwork had been approved by the committee and he was therefore employed by the academy. Wu was touched by Dong's thoughtfulness in helping him behind the scenes and without his knowledge. After a thorough discussion with Dong, Wu decided to take the offer and settle down in Beijing.⁸⁵

Wu had his reservations about going to work in the CAFA. He was aware of Xu Beihong's negative view of the French avant-garde; Xu was president of the CAFA at the time. Wu was worried whether his own advocacy of modernist art in the expressive style would be acceptable under Xu's leadership. It was Dong who dispelled Wu's concern. Dong explained the authority of the CCP in the academy:

“To be honest, Mr. Xu just has his position (as president of the academy) but not the autocratic political power. Nowadays it is the Communist Party that controls both the macro political principles and the micro administrative arrangements. No one is taking autocratic charge anymore.”

老实告诉你，徐先生有政治地位，没有政治质量，今天是党掌握方针和政策，不再是个人当权独揽。⁸⁶

Dong's persuasion indicated that the Party would interfere whenever there were different opinions between individuals, which gave Wu the hope that advocacy of different art styles could coexist.

However, Wu's art advocacy was marginalized under the dominance of socialist realism. Wu was given the task of teaching one of the *sumiao* classes in the CAFA, in which

⁸⁴ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 24.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 24.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 24.

he felt unsatisfied with the students' emphasis on realist techniques. In Wu's opinion, these students were "emotionless" 无情无意 (wuqing wuyi) when sketching plaster casts.⁸⁷ In addition, Wu was shocked to realise that none of his students had ever heard of the widely known European modernist artists, such as Maurice Utrillo and Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920). Meanwhile, Wu found himself ignorant of the Russian realist, Ilya Yefimovich Repin (1844-1930), who was generally considered the greatest realist artist in the Soviet Union. Aspiring to apply what he had acquired in Paris to China, Wu decided to teach the students in a different way. He "evoked their individual sensitivity to art, and encouraged different aesthetic approaches." 我竭力赋予大刀阔斧, 引发各人的敏感, 鼓励差异。⁸⁸ However, Wu's encouragement of aesthetic exploration and self-expression was rejected by many students. Wu's efforts to introduce modernist art to Chinese students failed.⁸⁹

Wu's art would have gone in a completely different direction, if only he had been able to adjust his artistic pursuit like his friend Dong Xiwen. Dong also studied oil painting at the Hangzhou Academy, but he successfully adapted his art to a style with which the Communist cadres were satisfied.⁹⁰ No example is better than Dong's oil painting, *The Founding of the Nation* 开国大典 (Kaiguo dadian, 1952-1953, Fig. 2.2).⁹¹ *The Founding of the Nation*, which depicts the occasion of Mao standing on the Tiananmen Square and proclaiming the establishment of the PRC. Beside Mao, who stands in the centre of the picture, several figures are depicted on the left side of the painting, each one of whom is of particular political importance. On the right side of Mao is the expansive Tiananmen Square, where large crowds stand in phalanxes, holding banners and red flags. Dong applied garish red, yellow and blue to fill the large-scale canvas (230 cm × 400 cm), which would have reminded Chinese audiences of the colourful folk art with which they were familiar, while clearly conveying a rejoicing, Chinese-festival-like atmosphere. As for the composition, one can see

⁸⁷ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 25.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25-26.

⁹⁰ More information of Dong, see Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 90-94.

⁹¹ The illustration used here is the newest version of the painting created in 1972 by Zhao Yu and Jin Shangyi, who imitated Dong's work done in 1952-1953. The painting had to undergo revisions in order to stay attuned to the contemporary moment, which is partly the reason why the original illustration created in 1952-1953 is not available. More information of the various versions of the painting *The Founding of the Nation*, see Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, pp. 75-86.

Mao's position in relation to the many other figures standing behind him, in a linear perspective. On the other hand, there is a vanishing point from where Mao stands to the remote Zhengyangmen 正阳门 gate tower in the background, to the right of the painting, which is perpendicular to the line between Mao and his fellows. This structure is often associated with European historical painting. *The Founding of the Nation* is a good representation of a socialist artist's endeavour to combine Western painting techniques with Chinese aesthetics.⁹² Dong's work proved to be highly successful. The painting received great praise from Mao himself and subsequently secured its place in the canon of Chinese socialist realism.

Wu indeed endeavoured to create paintings which would be compatible with socialist realism. Take, Wu's sketch, *Figure 人体* (*Renti*, 1951, Fig. 2.3), for instance. One can see from the sketch that Wu endeavored to manifest realist painting techniques in depicting the figure and to accommodate these to the socialist ideology. The appropriate body ratio and the shape of the muscles reveal the artist's precise observation of the model, as well as his adequate capability of delineating them on paper. However, one can also see the lack of enthusiasm through the realist-style depiction. It appears as if the artist needed to intentionally hide his passion and compromise himself to produce the drawing. And the resulting work, of such a compromise, is mediocre. Even though the extant material is only a human model study, one can foresee that the detachment Wu displays here would not be conducive to making the sketch a contribution to a more accomplished final work. Comparing it with Dong's *The Founding of the Nation*, one can see the failure of Wu's attempt to make his own path in socialist realism. Also, regardless of his endeavors, Wu recalled that his work was still criticised as "formalist" 形式主义 (*xingshizhuyi*) and "smearing the image of peasants, soldiers, and factory workers" 丑化工农兵 (*chouhua gongnongbing*). His art advocacy was criticized as "the Capitalist art" 资产阶级文艺 (*zichanjieji wenyi*). Wu remembered his isolation, which made him feel like being blocked by a "river", with him and his art advocacy on one bank, and the CCP cadres and the Chinese people on the other.⁹³

⁹² Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, p. 80.

⁹³ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 27. In the socialist context, the term *xingshizhuyi* was used to malign artistic expression that tended to emphasise form over content or art for art's sake. See more discussion in Chapter 4.

2.2 The Relaxed Political Environment and the *Xiesheng* Movement in the 1950s

Apart from Xu Beihong, Jiang Feng 江丰 or 江豐 (1910-1982) was another figure who played a significant role in the process of constructing Chinese socialist art. As an artist and bureaucrat, Jiang made considerable contribution to the politicisation of art after the founding of PRC. Initially trained as a woodcut artist, Jiang paid great attention throughout his career to establishing new art genres that only suited the Chinese socialist revolution and its construction. Jiang held a firm belief in Communism and Socialism and made persistent efforts to create art genres that served these political causes. As Julia Andrews has commented:

“Jiang Feng was an idealistic, courageous, and hard-working revolutionary. He was a man of great selflessness and personal integrity, committed to improving China and the world. He was largely consistent, even uncompromising, in his beliefs and actions and inevitably found himself in conflict with inconsistent party policies.”⁹⁴

There is great controversy as to how to evaluate Jiang's undertakings in the construction of the new Chinese art. Jiang strongly promoted the art genres, styles and techniques appreciated by “the working masses”, and rejected or remolded all other art genres that did not fall within that criterion. French avant-garde art that emphasised self-expression, and traditional Chinese painting, which was considered merely serving “the upper class”, were criticised and excluded under Jiang's leadership as vice-president of the CAA. A good number of artists who advocated and practiced such genres, including Wu Guanzhong, were therefore required to remold themselves to better meet the needs of socialist propaganda.

However, from the early 1950s, this strict art policy changed, marked by Zhou Yang's 周扬 (1907-1989) “Zai zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe dierci daibiaodahui shang de baogao” 在中国文学艺术工作者第二次代表大会上的报告 (Report on the second conference of representatives for Chinese workers of literature and art) on 24th September

⁹⁴ Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, p. 42.

1953.⁹⁵ Zhou's major argument was that there was a lack of adequate emphases and systematic studies on Chinese national literary and artistic heritage since the May Fourth Movement 五四运动 (Wusi yundong) in 1919. Against some negative opinions on Chinese traditional culture and arts, Zhou pointed out that "this kind of attitude, when joined with a blind reverence for the culture of the Western capitalist class, was a harmful influence on the subsequent development of new literature and art." Instead, Zhou suggested:

"Organizing and researching the national artistic legacies should become focal points for the teaching and research of arts schools....first we must take the democratic and progressive aspects of our heritage and distinguish them from the feudal and backward parts, take the realistic parts and distinguish them from antirealistic parts....In national painting, for example, that which does not stress description of real life...must be opposed."⁹⁶

Zhou's emphasis on the national literary and artistic heritage indicated a subtle turn in the CCP's art policy. Although his overall speech still followed the principle of Jiang Feng's insistence on the politicisation of art, Zhou's call for more research on the "democratic and progressive" aspects of the national cultural heritage signified a relatively looser environment in which certain art genres embodying Chinese artistic heritage might be accepted.

The Hundred Flowers Campaign 双百运动 (Shuangbai yundong), that was carried out in 1956, loosened up Jiang's art policy to a new level. The name of the campaign came from Mao's concluding remarks in a conference on 2nd May 1957: "Let a hundred flowers blossom, a hundred schools of thought contend" 艺术问题上百花齐放，学术问题上百家争鸣 (Yishu wenti shang baihua qifang, xueshu wenti shang baijia zhengming).⁹⁷ Subsequently Mao's words were developed in an official speech by Lu Dingyi 陆定一 (1906-1996, President of the Propaganda Department at that time) on 26th May. Lu elevated Mao's words into a new art policy, which officially declared that socialist realism was not "the only

⁹⁵ Zhou Yang was Vice-Minister of the Propaganda Department at that moment.

⁹⁶ Zhou Yang, "Zai zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe dierci daibiaodahui shang de baogao" 在中国文学艺术工作者第二次代表大会上的报告 (Report on the second conference of representatives for Chinese workers of literature and art), September 24, 1953. Translated by Julia Andrews, see *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, p. 120.

⁹⁷ Translated by Ellen Johnson Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*, University of California Press, 1989, p. 23.

method” for artists to adopt:

“Socialist realism, in our view, is the most fruitful creative method, but it is not the only method. Provided he sets out to meet the needs of the workers, peasants and soldiers, the writer can choose whatever method he thinks will best enable him to write well, and he can vie with others. As to subject matter, the Party has never set a limit to this. It is not right to lay down such dicta as: write only about workers, peasants and soldiers, it stands to reason that we must praise the new society and positive people....So the choice of subject-matter in literature is extremely wide....As for questions relating to the specific characteristics of art and literature, the creation of the typical, and so on, they must be the subject of free discussion among writers and artists, letting them freely hammer out different opinions till they gradually reach agreement.”⁹⁸

Published in *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 (*The People's Daily*, the CCP's official newspaper) a few days later, Lu's speech, based on Mao's words, officially became a new art policy, the Hundred Flower campaign, in the fields of art and literature, declaring the Party's encouragement of free creation and discussion by the intellectuals, writers and artists. Lu's speech was consistent with Zhou's talk given three years before, since they both referred to the significance of the Chinese artistic heritage. But the Hundred Flowers campaign took a further step, to reduce the artistic dependence on Soviet socialist realism. As Ellen Johnson Laing has stated, “Lu played down the socialist realism, spoke out strongly in favour of indigenous and national art forms, and warned against overreliance on the Soviet Union.”⁹⁹ Under the circumstances, the art genres, national and traditional, were not just tolerated but also functioned to counterbalance the influence from Soviet socialist realism. It is noteworthy that the Hundred Flowers campaign was launched as Mao's endeavour to inject a certain level of freedom within the implementation of the Party's policies in many fields, yet it soon developed into a political tool for navigating and attacking enemies among the cadres.¹⁰⁰

One response in the Chinese art circles to the relaxed policy was the emergence of an

⁹⁸ Lu Dingyi, “Baihuaqifang, baijiazhengming” 百花齐放，百家争鸣 (A hundred flowers blossom, a hundred schools of thought contend). Online source: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66662/4493084.html>. See English translation in Ellen Johnson Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 1989, pp. 23-24.

⁹⁹ Ellen Johnson Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 1989, p. 23.

¹⁰⁰ More information, see Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, 1995, pp. 179-200.

outdoor practice of landscape painting – *xiesheng* 写生 (drawing from life). In the first half of 1954, a small group of artists in the CAFA, including Li Keran 李可染 (1907-1989) and Zhang Ding 张仃 (1917-2010), went out of their studios and travelled to the Jiangnan area for landscape painting practice. The intention of the *xiesheng* journey, as Li Keran and Zhang Ding proposed to the academy, was to follow Zhou Yang’s 1953 speech and reform traditional Chinese landscape painting to make it more socialist and progressive. Their programme for the *xiesheng* journey was to reject “the uncritical continuation of traditional techniques” and “to improve Chinese landscape painting by synthesizing Western techniques with native ones.”¹⁰¹ The *xiesheng* squad returned to Beijing five months later, and their products turned out to be a great success. The reformed landscape paintings were even favoured by some headstrong Party cadres such as Jiang Feng, who did not believe in the progressive aspect of Chinese ink painting in the first place.

One product is Zhang Ding’s ink painting *Fuyang cuntou* 富阳村头 (Fuyang village, 1954, Fig. 2.4). The traditional houses, the bush and the willows in the painting present the artist’s adoption of Chinese ink painting techniques. Meanwhile, one reads the painting from the fixed-point perspective, with the river in the foreground, the largest-scale house in the middle-ground, and the row houses in the background accordingly. The fixed-point perspective testifies to the artist’s borrowing from Western realist painting. Injecting the realist techniques into the painting reinvigorates the image of an ordinary Jiangnan village. It fills the ink painting with such vitality that one could almost breathe the air and imagine oneself living there. The Chinese subject matter and the ink painting skills retain the Chinese aesthetic of the work, meanwhile the Western painting techniques achieve a lifelike effect on paper, deeply involving the audience emotionally.

Subsequently, *Xiesheng* became popular in Chinese art circles, since it successfully implemented Zhou Yang’s call for the conservation and development of national artistic heritage. Nowadays, *Xiesheng* might be a term that is commonly discussed by Chinese landscape painters, but its connection with Chinese landscape painting is a relatively new construct. *Xiesheng* initially indicated flower-and-bird painting in classical Chinese, in which context, *sheng* refers to the “living creatures in nature”, and the genre specifically indicates

¹⁰¹ Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, pp. 169-170.

flower-and-bird painting, instead of still-life or landscape painting.¹⁰² The changed understanding occurred, as Yi Gu has stated, when the term was adopted in Japanese art circles in the Edo period (1603-1867). In the Japanese context, the connotation of *xiesheng* (pronounced *shasei* in Japanese) was altered to refer to the depiction of the “vital force of an object, and sometimes even the practice of sketching of life.” When it came to Meiji modernisation in 1868-1912, *shasei* was furthermore injected with a new layer of meaning, to refer to the translation of the “drawing or painting from life from real objects from Western languages into Japanese.”¹⁰³ As Yi Gu has noted, the original connection of the term *xiesheng* with flower-and-bird painting had been neglected during its assimilation into the Japanese art world. The phrase had been understood or interpreted to represent the capture of the “force” of the painting object. Subsequently, due to the strong desire among Japanese intellectuals to modernise their native art, *xiesheng*, the term that was borrowed from classical Chinese art, was construed by Japanese innovators as an advanced painting technique, which entailed a Western realist spirit. In 1903, *xiesheng* as a modern painting concept was introduced to Chinese schools to train art teachers, with an emphasis on the faithful depiction of painting objects. As Gu has pointed out, “In the 1910s, *xiesheng* as ‘drawing from nature’ became one of the most prominent art terms in the Republican China.”¹⁰⁴ As such, the term *xiesheng* shifted its definition from the flower-and-bird painting genre to a Western modern painting technique, which emphasised faithful depiction of reality. The term had indeed originated in classical Chinese art. But it became a neologism when it was resurrected in the Republican era.

Xiesheng was adopted in the Republican era by art theorists with completely opposite leanings: those who were in favour of Western modernism and those who advocated Chinese traditionalism. The Shanghai Academy of Art 上海美术专科学校 (Shanghai meishu zhuanke xuexiao), for instance, adopted the term *xiesheng* to broadcast its status as the artistic authority to impart the authentic Western painting skills in China at the time. Their theory was that, “drawing is the essence of Western style painting and *xiesheng* is the essence of

¹⁰² Christine Ho, “Drawing from Life: Mass Sketching and the Formation of Socialist Guohua in the Early People’s Republic of China (1949-1965)”, PhD diss., Stanford University, 2014, p. 27.

¹⁰³ Yi Gu, “Scientizing Vision in China: Photography, Outdoor Sketching, and the Reinvention of Landscape Perception”, PhD diss., Brown University, 2009, p. 60.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 61.

drawing.”¹⁰⁵ However, it is worth noticing that, at that moment, *xiesheng* referred more to the faithful perception of reality than to the artist’s expression. It was mainly attributed to the suggestion of scientism of the New Culture Movement, in which scientific visualisation of the world was highly praised.¹⁰⁶ In other words, Chinese reformers who advocated *xiesheng* as an advanced Western painting technique constructed its meaning more as a counterpart of “realism”, rather than anything close to the art styles that were expressive and avant-garde.

It was the art theorists who interpreted *xiesheng* from the perspective of traditional Chinese painting that connected the term with the artist’s expressiveness. Hu Peiheng 胡佩衡 (1892-1962) was one of the theorists who laid the foundation of the theoretical connection of classical ink painting and the neologism *xiesheng*. In his 1921 treatise “Zhongguo shanshuihua xiesheng de wenti” 中国山水画写生的问题 (Issue of *Xiesheng* in Chinese landscape painting), Hu argued that Chinese landscape painting in the Tang and Song Dynasties already applied the *xiesheng* approach. He claimed that painters, such as Wu Daozi 吴道子 (c. 685-758) and Fan Kuan 范宽 (c. 950-1032) were actually in the vanguards of depicting landscapes by *xiesheng*. However, Hu’s proof merely existed in his address on the vivid delineation of the Tang and Song landscapists. In Hu’s perception, Wu Daozi and Fan Kuan were the forerunners of *xiesheng* due to their travel to the scenery and endeavor to memorise the views.¹⁰⁷ This is the moment, as Gu Yi noted, that *xiesheng* for the first time was discussed in terms of “painting by memory”, which is almost the opposite of “drawing from nature” as claimed from the aforementioned Chinese reformers’ perspectives.¹⁰⁸

Xiesheng with the connotation of “painting landscapes by memory” prevailed in the Chinese art world, thanks to Yu Jianhua 俞剑华 (1895-1979), another art theorist active in modern times. In the 1935 treatise “Zhongguo shanshuihua zhi xiesheng” 中国山水画之写生 (*Xiesheng* in Chinese landscape painting), Yu seconded Hu’s opinion that *xiesheng* had been applied in Chinese landscape painting since the Tang and Song Dynasties. In addition,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 70.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 78-79.

¹⁰⁷ Hu Peiheng, “Zhongguo shanshuihua xiesheng de wenti” 中国山水画写生的问题 (Issues of *Xiesheng* in Chinese landscape painting), originally published in 1921, see Hu Peiheng, *Wo zenyang hua shanshuihua* 我怎样画山水画 (On how I paint landscapes), Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2017, pp. 149-153.

¹⁰⁸ Yi Gu, p. 88.

Yu went one step further and analysed the difference between *xiesheng* in Western painting style and *xiesheng* in traditional Chinese style. Yu noted that the Western-style *xiesheng* rested in its fixed-point perspective, whereas traditional-Chinese-style *xiesheng* did not need to stick to this principle:

“There is no fixed-point in Chinese-style *xiesheng*. There is no horizon in traditional Chinese painting... (Painters) memorised the view after travelling through the whole mountain. Then...they reorganised the structure of the picture, so that the mountain they depicted only looked like that mountain at a glance. But if examined carefully...it was not ‘that’ mountain. This *xiesheng* approach...is better than the Western fixed-point perspective.”

国画之写生，并无停点，亦无视点，更无地平线...游完以后，全山景象，宛在目前，于是...重行组织，所画之画一望而为某山，而实考...则又不似某山，此种...写生方法亦即西洋固定方法所不及。¹⁰⁹

As such, Yu along with Hu endeavored to make a connection between the neologism of *xiesheng* and the “painting by memory” approach that was applied by ancient ink painters. During the process, a significant transformation occurred in the connotation of *xiesheng*: it shifted from “drawing from nature” to “painting by memory”. In other words, it shifted from the merely faithful representation of reality to the artist’s expression of his subjective perception of reality. Due to Yu’s influential status as art theorist in the PRC, the new meaning of *xiesheng* continued to spread in socialist Chinese art circles, and finally prevailed in the *xiesheng* campaign in the 1950s. The reformed landscape painting with Western techniques visualised the scenic beauty of mountains, lakes and villages around China, to awaken Chinese people’s imagination of the places in the picture. More importantly, people’s pride in their motherland was able to be evoked by the artists’ lifelike presentations. Under the dominance of socialist realism, *xiesheng* proved to be a bright path that landscape artists could follow. They would not only be tolerated for being creative in landscape painting, but also could expect to be praised by the Party. The permissible direction and the prospective bright future were vital for artists such as Wu Guanzhong, whose initial art preferences were marginalized under the rule of socialist realism.

¹⁰⁹ Yu Jianhua, “Zhongguo shanshuihua zhi xiesheng” 中国山水画之写生 (Xiesheng in Chinese landscape painting), in Yu Jianhua, *Yu Jianhua meishushi lunji* 俞剑华美术论集 (Yu Jianhua’s artistic theory), Dongnan daxue chubanshe, 2009, pp. 57-58.

2.3 Multiple Perspectives and Wu Guanzhong's *Xiasheng* Practice

Because of his incompatibility with socialist realism, Wu was transferred from the CAFA to Tsinghua University 清华大学 (Qinghua daxue) in 1953. Unlike its high reputation in the Chinese art world nowadays, Tsinghua was a university which paid little attention to the arts in those days. Wu was hired there to teach sketching and watercolour painting to architecture students. Such a post transfer seemed to be the official exclusion for Wu from Chinese art circles, but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise for his career. Wu was allowed to discuss art form in class, which used to be criticised as “formalism” in the CAFA, since “architecture design requires the study of art form.” 建筑设计要讲形式。¹¹⁰ Although the new job did not promise any bright future at that moment, it appeared to be encouraging enough for Wu, compared with the marginalization he had experienced before for his modernist painting.

Wu's subsequent transfer to Beijing Normal University 北京师范大学 (Beijing shifan daxue) in 1956 started a new chapter in his career, when he was able to devote more time to his artistic pursuits. Soon after Wu's transfer, the art school was separated from the university and renamed Beijing Fine Arts College 北京艺术学院 (Beijing yishu xueyuan). Due to the establishment of the new college and its less important status in Chinese art circles, there was a relatively free environment for teaching and research in the college. Wu displayed high enthusiasm in his new work unit, where his art advocacy was valued by Wei Tianlin (卫天霖, 1898-1977), head of the college. Wu was able to teach figure painting and discuss art form in his favoured way, and encouraged his students to analyse the ancient ink works of Bada and Shitao from Western painting perspectives. Wu was soon promoted to Director of the Painting Department, which brought him certain administrative authority.

As discussed above, landscapes became an accepted art genre in socialist China due to Zhou Yang's speech in 1953. And due to the *xiasheng* movement that subsequently prevailed in the Chinese art world, Wu was able to take advantage of these changes and

¹¹⁰ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, pp. 29-30.

practice landscapes during his tenure at the college. The ideological nature of *xiesheng* prompted artists to choose the scenery that reminded Chinese people of the grandeur of their motherland, hence evoking patriotism. Wu therefore learned to select destinations that were associated with patriotic sentiment, such as the Jinggang Mountains (Jinggang shan 井冈山), due to their critical status as the base of the Chinese Red Army:

“I love lofty mountains, steep hills and flourishing woods anyway. But because the Jinggang Mountains are the sacred place of the CCP’s revolution, they became the most appropriate place for artists to go for *xiesheng*.”

我爱崇山峻岭，茂林修竹，井冈山是革命圣地，今画革命圣地的峻岭与修竹，当非一般风景，便名正言顺，大大方方去画了。¹¹¹

Wu completed three oil paintings of the Jinggangshan Mountains, all illustrative of his exploration of landscape painting at the time. The one titled *Ciping Town in the Jinggangshan Mountains* 井冈山茨坪 (Jinggangshan ciping, 1959, Fig. 2.5) provides a panoramic view of the Ciping town. The terraced fields and village take up the largest proportion in the foreground of the picture, in comparison with the mountains embracing the town in the background. The depiction of the terraced fields reveals Wu’s iconic brushwork style, in which his brush wipes across the canvas in an easy-going manner. Similar brushwork can be seen in Wu’s ink work, the *Loess Plateau* 黄土高原 (Huangtu gaoyuan, Fig. 2.6) created in 1987 to depict the deforested area along the upper and middle currents of the Yellow River. Wu used ink brush to roughly outline the dry soil layers to bring dynamism into the picture. He framed each layer by flicking his brush over the paper and making curves in an improvisational way. Wu injected a vitality and fluency in the painting, the effect of which could only be achieved with his spontaneous brushwork. This style became a trademark of Wu’s landscapes, which as far as is known, made its debut in *Ciping Town in the Jinggangshan Mountains*.

The other two oil paintings, *Azaleas in the Jinggang Mountains* (Jinggangshan dujuanhua 井冈山杜鹃花, 1959, Fig. 2.7) and *The Wumachaotian Ridge of the Jinggang Mountains* (Jinggangshan wumachaotian 井冈山五马朝天, 1959, Fig. 2.8) reveal less of the

¹¹¹ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, pp. 33-35.

artist's panoramic style, but more of an influence from Impressionism. The various colours applied present Wu's perception of the vast realm of colour and luminosity on the mountains. The delicate observation and illustration show Wu's careful study of impressionist painting techniques, such as those presented in Claude Monet's *Sunrise*. However, these three paintings show that Wu was at the time still in the process of exploring which technique or style worked best for his artistic pursuit. The panoramic view and the techniques learned from Impressionism revealed the artist's effort and uncertainty in which direction to go. He had not yet found his own artistic vocabulary.

Comparing these earlier works by Wu with other famous landscape paintings on the theme of the Jinggangshan Mountains, one can see why Wu was yet to find his own art style. Take for example, Luo Gongliu's 罗工柳 (1916-2004) oil painting, *The Jinggang Mountains* 井冈山 (Jinggangshan, Fig. 2.9), from 1960. Created in the same period as Wu's works, Luo's *The Jinggang Mountains* depicted the revolutionary base of the Red Army in oils, and yet in quite a traditional Chinese painting style. The painting was done as a wall scroll, so that audiences were able to appreciate the magnificent height of the mountains. Instead of painting the whole shape of the mountains, Luo only highlighted the top of the hills, the layers of the boulders and the steepness of the cliffs. He left the main body of the mountains in the mist, which was depicted in a lighting style, bringing dynamism to the canvas. This oil painting created in traditional ink painting style successfully showcased the grandeur of the mountain-landscape in Chinese aesthetics. That is the reason why Luo's *Jinggangshan* was one of his most famous works, which brought him a considerable reputation at the time. In comparison, Wu's artwork with the same theme seemed less polished due to the mismatch between its theme and its art vocabulary.

Another destination that Wu chose for his *xiesheng* practice was Tibet. Wu went to Tibet as a participant in a *xiesheng* trip organised by the CAA to celebrate the People's Liberation Army's 人民解放军 (Renmin jiefangjun) suppression of the Tibetan Uprising in 1959. He returned to Beijing with an oil painting *The Monastery of Zhashilunbu* 扎什伦布寺 (Zhashilunbu si, 1961, Fig. 2.10). Multiple objects were presented – mountain, monastery, trees and lamas – in a panorama on the canvas. The mountain in the background occupied the largest proportion of the picture. As the middle-ground subject, the monastery was depicted in the colours of zinc white and reddish brown, in contrast to the dusty and copper-coloured

mountain embracing it. In the foreground of the painting stands a straight line of trees, the sharp black and white trunks of which were emphasized, to set off the cloudlike mass of leaves. Last but not least, a row of lamas was depicted in front of the trees, as if they were heading from the right to the left side of the picture, bringing dynamism to the canvas. As for painting techniques, the heavy brushstrokes for the mountain and the monastery, as well as the lamas, depicted a highly expressive style revealing influence from Impressionism.

Wu applied multiple perspectives for the composition of *The Monastery of Zhashilunbu*. The geography of the mountain, the monastery, the trees and lamas was different from how it was depicted in Wu's painting. The artist took different views of the objects and presented them from the best angles, instead of standing on a fixed point to complete the whole painting:

“I often experimented with multiple perspectives in my painting, grafting different views upon one another or shifting them around...*The Monastery of Zhashilunpo* was a product of this approach. I freely adjusted the positioning of the mountain, the monastery, the trees and the lamas as if I was grafting trees. I strived for creative freedom in composition, yet at the same time trying to maintain a lifelike resemblance in my depiction of the actual objects. Therefore, I called my method of landscape painting ‘drawing from life from multiple perspectives.’”

我经常运用这移花接木与移山倒海的组织法创作画面...这扎什伦布寺也属于移花接木之产品，主要是山，庙，树木，喇嘛等对象的远近与左右间的安置做了极大的调度。我着力构思构图的创意，而具体物象之表现则仍追求真实感，为此，我经常的创作方式是现场搬家写生。¹¹²

This “drawing from life from multiple perspectives’ best explained Wu’s multiple perspectives, which proved to be the most applicable approach to present the panorama of the scenery. In his article published in 1962, he discussed the adoption of such an approach as due to his dissatisfaction with the fixed-point perspective:

“I was so excited that I wanted to sit down and start drawing immediately. But I felt that none of the perspectives alone was enough for me to fully express my feeling...It is hence acceptable and reasonable for a landscape painting to be organised from various angles and directions.”

¹¹² Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, P. 36.

内心是激动的，想坐下来写生，却又感到任何一个局限的角落与方面都不足以表达自己的感受，不足以书写自己的胸襟...一幅风景画由几个不同角度，不同方向的对象组成是可以的，也是应该的。¹¹³

In Wu's opinion, since one's perception of the view changed along with his movement, there should be multiple angles from which to organise the painting, in order to best present the beauty of the scenery. It was the moment when Wu expressed his dissatisfaction with the fixed-point perspective applied in Western landscapes, despite his strong passion for Western modernist painting:

“Usually Western oil painters select one fixed angle to depict the scenery, which is called ‘view-finding’. Such a method is too restricted...Impressionism was creative at the aspect of colour usage. But it was exactly Impressionism that restricted landscape painting to a narrow corner.”

西洋画家一般只是选定一个死角落，所谓“取景”，然后对着描画。这样作画实在太局限，太被动了....印象派的绘画只表达一点新鲜的色彩感，(它)正是将风景画局限在一个死角落的始作俑者。¹¹⁴

Hence, his negativity about the fixed perspective spread to Impressionism, which he had once greatly admired. In Wu's argument, it was the impressionists' creative use of colours that was progressive. But their perspective on view-finding was too limited and therefore should not be promoted. This was also the moment when Wu expressed his admiration for the ancient Chinese landscape painters for their application of multiple perspectives:

“Chinese landscape artists usually started painting by walking through the whole mountain and taking notes of their travel, and then organised the picture (by recalling images from memory). I do think such an approach is the treasure of our traditional Chinese painting.”

我国山水画家往往是先游山，记录游踪，而后组织画面的。我看这一创作方法确是我们的传家之宝。¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Wu Guanzhong, “Tan fengjinghua” 谈风景画 (On landscape painting), *Meishu*, no. 2 (1962), p. 27.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 27-28.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 27.

Multiple perspectives are indeed what traditional Chinese painters employ in the creation of ink landscape paintings. The perspective is fundamentally different from the one that Western landscape painters adopt, since it incorporates both the pictorial presentation of the scenery and the artist's understanding of it. Youn-Jeong Chae discussed such a difference in his thesis on the Chinese visual tradition:

“The multiple perspective system is distinguished from Western perspective not just because it is multiple but because the former attempts to bring out the landscape as a whole by combining the various angles in harmony as well as the painter's knowledge and understanding of nature in order to represent both spirit and form.”¹¹⁶

As such, one can see that Wu's understanding and practice of multiple perspectives actually corresponded with Hu Peiheng and Yu Jianhua's *xiesheng* theory, which organically combined the approach for traditional Chinese landscape painting with Western painting techniques. It is also noticeable that Wu's great appreciation of multiple perspectives was also grounded in his strong belief that it was the best way for the artist's emotional expression. Quoting the words of Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877-1927, Chinese scholar in the Qing Dynasty): “every description of nature comes from the artist's emotion” 一切景语皆情语 (Yiqie jingyu jie qingyu), Wu argued that:

“Emotional expression should be an important standard for landscape painting. If it is only the pictorial presentation of objects and natural views, no matter how realist and pretty, the painting could merely be entertaining but never be alive and overwhelming.”

借景写情，这给风景画提出了一个重要的标准。无论是静物或风景，如只是表现了物和景，即使形象如何真实，色彩又多么漂亮，虽能娱人眼目，毕竟缺乏生命力，不能撼人心魄。¹¹⁷

In taking such a high opinion on the connection between multiple perspectives and emotional expression discussed in Chinese aesthetics, Wu argued that the most extraordinary

¹¹⁶ Youn-Jeong Chae, PhD diss., “Film Space and the Chinese Visual Tradition”, New York University, 1997, p. 85.

¹¹⁷ Wo Guanzhong, “Tan fengjinghua”, 1962, p. 27.

Western artists were also the ones who expressed their emotions through landscapes, in an article he published in 1980:

“Western landscapes focus on depicting the scenic beauty. However, the most extraordinary masterpieces are those attaching the artists’ emotions. For instance, Van Gogh’s landscapes are the ones that were so humanized, which can be understood as a reflection of his personality. Similarly, the Parisian cityscapes on Utrillo’s canvas can be read as a piece of a melancholic poem.”

一般看来，西方风景画中大都是写景，竭力描写美丽景色的外貌，但大凡杰出的作品仍是依凭于‘感情移入’。梵高的风景是人化了的，仿佛是他的自画像。花花世界的巴黎街市，在郁脱利罗德笔底变成了哀艳感伤的抒情诗。¹¹⁸

Hence, in Wu’s theory, multiple perspectives were necessary in the humanising of landscapes, because this was the most applicable approach to expressing the artist’s perception and emotion of the scenery. Technique-wise, Wu showed his wholehearted admiration of Western modernist art; whereas composition-wise, Wu stuck steadily to the ground of traditional Chinese painting for the multiple-perspective approach. It is Wu’s syncretism that, in his art theory, combined different approaches to serve the same purpose – expressing an artist’s emotion. Wu’s paintings and writings were seldom published in *Meishu* (the most important art periodical organised by the CAA) until *The Monastery of Zhashilunbu*. In February 1962, his painting that applied multiple perspectives was published, along with his article discussing it, marking Wu’s joining of the ranks of the phenomenal landscape artists of that time.

In summary, the frequent job transfers did not terminate Wu’s art career but enabled him to forge a new path. Wu took good advantage of the Hundred Flowers campaign to engage in *xiesheng* practice as much as possible. Apart from the Jinggang Mountains and Tibet, Wu also went to Hainan and Shaoxing in the 1950s-1960s. It was during the *xiesheng* journeys that Wu developed his theory of multiple perspectives and created the paintings that began to reveal his personal style. It was also during the journeys that Wu rekindled the appreciation for the ancient landscape paintings that he had once studied under the influence

¹¹⁸ Wu Guanzhong, “Tutuyangyang yangyangtutu: youhua minzuhua zatan” 土土洋洋 洋洋土土: 油画民族化杂谈 (Native and Western: random talk on the nationalization of oil painting), *Wenyi yanjiu*, no. 1, 1980: 131.

of Pan Tianshou. At the same time, Wu began to critically analyse Western modernist art, which he had previously unreservedly admired. One can see that this was the moment when Wu began to construct his art theory, which syncretized Western modernist painting techniques and classical Chinese painting perspectives.

2.4 Change to Ink in the 1970s

Wu suffered from all the political turbulence that struck the Chinese art world during the 1960s. Wu was transferred to the Central Institute of Arts and Crafts 中央工艺美术学院 (Zhongyang gongyi meishu xueyuan, CIAC hereafter) after the closure of the Beijing Art Academy in 1964. In 1963, the Socialist Education Movement was carried out, which prevailed upon artists to “go to farms, factories, and army units, to be with peasants, workers, and soldiers, and to participate to a certain extent in labour.”¹¹⁹ Wu was consequently sent to an extremely impoverished village in Hebei Province to perform physical labour. He was at the same time diagnosed with chronic hepatitis, which was lethal at that time. After failed treatments, Wu almost lost his will to live: “I would have committed suicide to end the agony, had it not been for my family.” 如无妻儿，我将选择自杀了结苦难。¹²⁰ The Cultural Revolution, which burst out afterwards, was a continuous torture for Wu. He was fortunate enough not to be severely attacked by the Red Guards, since he had taught in the new work unit for too short a time to make enemies. However, he still had to destroy all his paintings that he had completed in Paris to survive the criticism and denunciation of the Red Guards. Wu was soon urged to go to another village in Hebei Province, to do a course of hard physical labour again, where he was completely forbidden to paint for the first two years. In the meantime Wu suffered from both hepatitis and proctoptosis, from which he believed he had no hope of recovery. The political turmoil brought a period of tremendous agony for Wu, when he was almost completely cut off from painting.

The tide again began to change in the Chinese art world from the early 1970s. Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898-1976) summoned more than forty artists back to Beijing and other major cities. Zhou’s command was to create artworks for decorating buildings where foreign political dignitaries spent time during their stay in China. Zhou indicated that certain art genres, such as birds-and-flowers and landscapes, which represented Chinese national styles, should be displayed there. “Any subject was acceptable as long as it was not anti-Communist, feudalistic, superstitious, or erotic.”¹²¹ Zhou proposed that it would help improve China’s

¹¹⁹ Ellen Johnson Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 1989, p. 49.

¹²⁰ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 43.

¹²¹ Ellen Johnson Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 1989, p. 85.

reputation in the international community, against the CCP's negative image since the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution. Such a policy acted as a form of rehabilitation for artists who suffered from the unfairness and disgrace in the political attacks, including Wu.

In 1971, Wu was called back to Beijing to participate in the creation of the painting, *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* 长江万里图 (Changjiang wanli tu, Fig. 2.11), for the Beijing Hotel. He worked with artists Xi Xiaopeng 奚小彭 (1924-1995), Yuan Yunfu 袁运甫 (b. 1933), Zhu Danian 祝大年 (1916-1995), and Huang Yongyu 黄永玉 (b. 1924). The *xiesheng* journey that they took for the painting was initially full of inspiration. However, the commission had to be canceled due to the outbreak of the Black Painting Movement 批黑画运动 (Pi heihua yundong) in the following year.¹²² Therefore, there was never a chance to complete the painting *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River*. However, Xi Xiaopeng preserved the sketch and made it public in the 1990s. In the postscript, Wu recalled the whole process of the systematic planning for the painting *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River*:

“From 1971 to 1972, I worked with Xi Xiaopeng, Yuan Yunfu, Zhu Danian and Huang Yongyu to create a mural *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* for the Beijing Hotel. The Black Painting Movement burst out when we just completed the sketch. The plan therefore had to be canceled. Xi Xiaopeng however took the big risk of being criticised at that moment to preserve the sketch, so that we were able to review it today. What a surprise! What a sigh! Wu Guanzhong, 8th July 1990.”

一九七一年至七二年间，偕小彭、运甫、大年、永玉诸兄，为北京饭店合作《长江万里图》巨幅壁画。初稿成，正值批黑画，计划流产，仅留此综合性成

¹²² In the early 1970s, Zhou Enlai summoned a number of artists back to Beijing and other major cities to create paintings, for the urge of improving the PRC's image in international society. However, this artistic activity conflicted with the artistic authority of the Gang of Four hence faced severe attack. As a result, an exhibition about “Black Paintings” 黑画 (heihua) was organised to target their enemies. Because many artists summoned back by Zhou produced ink paintings, the exhibitions were titled “Black Painting Shows” 黑画展 (Heihua zhan). And the movement initiated by the Gang of Four was titled the “Black Painting Movement” 批黑画运动 (Pi heihua yundong). See more information of the Black Painting Movement in Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, pp. 368-376.

稿，小彭兄冒批判之风险，珍藏此稿，今日重睹手迹，亦惊喜、亦感叹！一九九〇年七月八日...吴冠中识。¹²³

As illustrated here, the sketch was cut into three sections but framed as one piece afterwards. It should be read from the section at the bottom to the one on top, from left to right. One sees various objects depicted on the canvas, which represent the bounty of the Chinese landscape, such as lofty mountains and steep cliffs, the rapid current of the river, terraced fields in the middle of the hills, and tranquil harbors and villages. Due to the collective nature of the commission, there is not an official record to indicate which parts were to be completed by Wu. However, certain objects depicted in the painting sketch imply a high possibility that they were from him. For example, the harbor, the heavy machinery and the ships painted at the upper right corner suggest the influence from Impressionism. The zinc white buildings by the harbor, with the roofs in yellowish brown, are reminiscent more of a European port city than any place in China. Considering Wu was the only artist in the group who studied in Europe and, more importantly, considering Wu was indeed favourably disposed towards Impressionism, it is fair to suggest that the harbor image was created by him.

The terraced fields which were cut in half in the middle section and the bottom section also disclose Wu's artistic style. The layers of the terraced fields were roughly sketched by a few brushstrokes. As far as is known, Wu was the only artist, especially at that moment in time, who painted the layers of the fields in such a style. A resemblance can be seen in Wu's oil painting, *Ciping Town in the Jinggangshan Mountains* from 1959 (Fig. 2.5), and his ink work, *Loess Plateau* from 1987 (Fig. 2.6).

As a whole, *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* was to be a Western-style oil painting created in the form of a traditional Chinese ink painting. It was 22.5 x 509 cm in size. The over-five-meter-length of the sketch is reminiscent of the handscroll, a format which was often adopted by traditional Chinese ink artists for landscape painting. The handscroll should be spread out bit by bit, to give viewers time to appreciate the variety of

¹²³ See the postscript in *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River*, Fig. 2.11.

the scenery, as if they were travelling there in person. Such a form, therefore, is perfect for the demonstration of Wu's multiple perspectives. Take Wu's contribution to the painting for example. The changed scenery from the harbor to the terraced fields was better depicted from multiple perspectives than any fixed-point perspective, since the purpose of the painting was to illustrate the grandeur of Chinese landscape. At the time of the commission, Wu had already been exploring such a style for presenting the panoramic effect for a while. *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* was a successful showcase of it. What is also of significance is that *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* was commissioned to present the scenic grandeur of China to foreign audiences. Therefore, a painting representing both Western and Chinese aesthetics seemed most appropriate. Wu and his co-workers completed their mission by creatively placing a Western-style landscape painting within the form of the Chinese handscroll. Their endeavor was groundbreaking not only from an aesthetic perspective; it also promised a bright future for such a synthesis of styles – the perfect vehicle to present the Chinese cultural heritage to the world in the Western modernist style.

Wu's commission to paint *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* also led to a change in the painting medium that he used – from oil to ink – the most important transformation in Wu's career. In an essay, Wu's medium transition has been interpreted as resulting from the influence of the other artists around him: "He found that almost all the other painters were working in Chinese ink on paper, and he too began to work in the traditional style he had first studied under Pan Tianshou, while at the Hangzhou Academy."¹²⁴ Wu admitted that his preference for ink on paper started from the middle 1970s. But he did not refer to any direct influence from his co-workers for such a medium change. All the other artists in his team, however, specialised in art genres relating more to the traditional Chinese style than to the Western modernist style. For instance, Zhu Dalian studied Chinese painting in the Hangzhou Academy and ceramic art in Japan. Huang Yongyu was already famous for ink painting at that moment.¹²⁵ Hence, it can be fairly asserted that Wu's change to ink likely happened under the influence of his fellow artists, who were in

¹²⁴ "Bibliography of Wu Guanzhong," In Farrer, Anne, et al., *Wu Guanzhong, A Twentieth-century Chinese Painter*, London: British Museum Press, p. 44.

¹²⁵ Huang's ink painting *The Winking Owl* 猫头鹰 (Maotouying) received the heaviest criticism during the Black Painting Movement, because it was interpreted by the Gang of Four as scoffing at socialism. See more information in Ellen Johnson Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 1989, p. 86.

favour of Chinese painting, and also, that it was encouraged by Zhou Enlai's cultural diplomacy.

From the early 1970s, Wu paid more attention to the artistic effect of ink. As stated above, emotional expression through the depiction of nature had always stood in the centre of Wu's landscape creation. For that purpose, he chose multiple perspectives over a fixed-point perspective. His consideration then went to the field of an appropriate painting medium. Wu began to be dissatisfied with the heavy quality of oil paint, which, in his opinion, restrained the free effect in the process of line drawing. Wu expressed his opinion in an article published in 1982:

“How can the sticky oil paints convey the unrestrained feeling of flowing lines? Oils are limited in movement and cannot be as spontaneous as ink...Ink painting is like calligraphy. It gives you the freedom to wield the brush in whichever way you want.”

粘糊糊的油彩如何表达线的奔放缠绵，她拖泥带水，追不上水墨画及书法的纵横驰骋...水墨画像写字一样，长缨在手，挥毫自如。¹²⁶

Hence, Wu believed the artistic effect he pursued was better conveyed by ink than oil paints:

“My oil painting gradually became monochrome, pursuing the flavour and dynamics of simplicity. Aesthetically this was closer to ink painting. I therefore started using ink to express my feelings. I was already creating ink paintings in the mid 1970s...By the 1980s, ink became my primary medium.”

我的油画渐趋向强调黑白，追求单纯和韵味，这就更接近水墨画的门庭了，因此索性就运用水墨工具来挥写胸中块垒。七十年代中期我本已开始同时运用水墨作画...到了八十年代，水墨成了我创作的主要手段。¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Wu Guanzhong, “Xiehou jianghu: youhua fengjinghua yu zhongguo shanshuihua heying” 邂逅江湖: 油画风景与中国山水画合影 (The comparison between oil landscapes and Chinese landscapes), first published in 1982, also in Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, p. 288.

¹²⁷ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 39.

I disagree with the viewpoint mentioned above that Wu changed to “the traditional style he had first studied under Pan Tianshou.” As referred to above, Pan as Wu’s Chinese painting teacher, followed the traditional style, which required students to spend significant time in imitation practice. But, as I argue earlier in this chapter, Wu was never a good student who conformed to such a traditional teaching method. He was passionate about ink painting, especially for the distinctive styles of artists such as Shitao and Bada, and repeatedly told Pan of his appreciation for their styles. Moreover, Pan gained his reputation in the Chinese art world as a traditionalist. He was the ink master who presented a good grasp of traditional painting techniques. Pan’s paintings indeed embodied creativity, which can be found in his finger paintings. But such a creativity was still based on his conformity with tradition.¹²⁸ Wu’s transition to ink occurred, and only occurred, when he realised the advantage of the Chinese painting medium for better presenting his feelings of the painting objects. Therefore, it is fair to assert that Wu leaned more towards Lin Fengmian’s style of syncretizing Chinese painting with the Western art vocabulary, than to Pan’s traditionalism; this was reflected in both his theory and artistic practice.

In summary, Wu’s return to Beijing and his participation in painting *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* for the Beijing Hotel, together with other artists, were a milestone in his art career. Wu achieved his artistic maturity through this commission. The Chinese handscroll of *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* provided Wu with an unparalleled opportunity to apply multiple perspectives to present the panorama of the scenery. Also, due to the influence from his peer artists, Chinese ink as the painting medium was brought to his mind, to more effectively convey the artistic effect that he longed for. Along with the painting vocabulary that Wu acquired from Western modernist art, he finally found his own style to wholeheartedly express himself in landscapes. Wu eventually managed to visually express his theory of syncretizing Western modernist art with Chinese aesthetics.

Wu Guanzhong indeed had to overcome many obstacles to follow his own artistic path. Initially touched by the passion of modernist art, Wu finally found his niche as a

¹²⁸ More information on Pan’s traditionalism, see Mina Kim, “Pan Tianshou (1897-1971): Rediscovering Traditional Chinese Painting in the Twentieth Century,” PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2016.

landscape artist who preferred to use ink and colour. One noteworthy feature is that every transformation in Wu's pursuit of an ideal art occurred as an active response to the changing art policies or the circumstances of socialist China, when there were movements to alter art styles for either domestic or international ideological purposes. Wu's artistic exploration came to fruition when China was over the decade-long political turmoil and eager to learn from the West for its "modernisation" 现代化 (xiandaihua). Because the syncretism of Chinese ink and Western modernist style functioned to showcase Chinese aesthetics in a modernist vocabulary, the style was appreciated by the audience from the West, as well as the Chinese viewers, who yearned to find their place in relation to the West.

Wu's ink landscapes brought him considerable renown from the 1980s onward. His first solo exhibition was held in the CIAC in 1979. From 1981, Wu led artist delegations to Hong Kong, India and Nigeria for painting exhibitions. His ink works were selected for solo shows in the West, which made him a star in the international art world. From the 1980s to the present, Wu's ink paintings have become highly favoured in the art markets of mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Europe, and America. The artistic success also led to institutional authority. He was selected as member of the CAA in the same year, and member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference 中国政治协商会议全国委员会 (Zhongguo zhengzhi xieshang huiyi quanguo weiyuanhui) in 1985.

2.5 Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki: Same Ingredients, Different Syncretism

This section offers a comparative study between Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki 赵无极 (1921-2013), to better present the specific socio-cultural context in which Wu made his different choices from those artists who stayed in the West, such as Zao. These two artists indeed had many similarities, yet retained fundamental differences in artistic style.

In contrast to Wu's impoverished background, Zao grew up in a wealthy and highly educated family, which claimed direct lineage to the royal family of the Song Dynasty. In his childhood, Zao was surrounded by his extended family, who imparted to him a wide range of knowledge about Chinese and Western culture. One of Zao's uncles, who used to study in Paris, brought him a postcard collection of reproductions of European paintings, which came to be Zao's first contact with Western art. Meanwhile, Zao's grandfather, who was a Taoist scholar, imparted to him the story of the ideograms, when Zao began to learn Chinese characters. Similar to Wu's family, Zao's family was not overly fond of the profession of artist, due to its financial uncertainty in the future. But Zao's economically safer background provided more possibilities for him to explore, and allowed him to willingly choose his own career. In comparison, Wu's family had no exposure to art by any means. Choosing art as a profession rather than school teaching therefore indicated a great burden on Wu's shoulders, considering his uncertain financial security in the future and his responsibility to his family.

Zao went to the Hangzhou Academy to study in 1935, just one year earlier than Wu. They experienced almost the same study routines in the academy: Western painting in the morning and Chinese painting in the afternoon. Compared with Wu's cheerful memory of the progressiveness of the Hangzhou Academy, Zao found the curriculum too basic and mediocre to enjoy. Zao had already found his passion at that moment – Impressionism and Post-impressionism. Zao was also inspired by Lin Fengmian and Lin personally encouraged him. When Zao graduated in 1941 from the Hangzhou Academy, which was one year earlier than Wu, he was already offered a teaching job in the Academy, which indicated that his place in the Chinese art world was guaranteed.

However, Zao decided to go to France to pursue his art instead of teaching in Hangzhou. In an interview, Wu emphasised that the circumstances of Zao's going abroad were different from his own:

“Zao Wou-Ki was different...He went abroad with his wife, which was almost impossible at that moment. The examination for studying overseas was extremely strict, as if it were the imperial examination that China had before...(Because) Zao's father was wealthy, and he was able to offer a big favour to Chen Lifu (1900-2001, Minister of Education till 1944). It was Chen that helped Zao and his wife to go abroad.”

赵无极的情况不一样...他们夫妻俩一块儿去，这在当时是不可能的，因为当时出国考试非常严格，像考状元一样...赵无极的父亲有钱，帮过陈立夫的忙，所以赵无极夫妻两个出来是陈立夫帮的忙。¹²⁹

Zao indeed held more cards in his hand than Wu. For example, Zao had already had his first solo exhibition and a group show (with Lin Fengmian as one of the participant artists) just after his graduation. Wu did not have his first solo exhibition until 1979, when he was 60 years old. Zao was able to become acquainted with the cultural attaché of the French Embassy in China during his study in the academy, who strongly encouraged him to go to France. Wu in comparison was completely off the radar of art connoisseurs, so that he had to painstakingly pass the examination in order to pursue further study in the West.

As well, Zao and Wu spent their time in Europe differently. As discussed in Chapter 1, Wu suffered from the disappointment of initially studying under the wrong teacher, which was a cause of great concern for students who had struggled to go abroad. In contrast, Zao went to Paris as an emerging young artist. He spent most of his time exploring his own art style and networking with the French art circles. By the 1950s, Zao had already made his name in the French art world, and soon, as Jean Leymarie has described, “became one of the best-known painters of his generation.” According to Leymarie's account, Picasso, Miro and Giacometti encouraged Zao and followed his progress.”¹³⁰ Zao was already receiving commissions by that time, which indicated that his identity as a professional artist had been established. In comparison, Wu at the time was a struggling new graduate, for whom the

¹²⁹ Li Huaiyu, “Wu Guanzhong: dongxi yishu gaochu xiangfeng”, 2007, p. 172.

¹³⁰ Jean Leymarie, *Zao Wou-ki*, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1979, p. 23.

better option probably was to return to China. He was far from any European art network, which could possibly have offered him a commission. Hence, returning to the newly founded PRC, where an artistic culture was yet to be established, appeared to be a fair choice for Wu.

Wu and Zao's different backgrounds led to their divergent art pursuits. Compared with Wu's initial passion about figure painting, what mostly intrigued Zao was landscapes. Wu turned to landscapes later in his career due to the strict restrictions from socialist realism, whereas Zao had been immersed in them from the very beginning. Zao's landscape, *Untitled* (1948, Fig. 2.12) presented his early landscape practice and revealed a clear influence from Impressionism. The female figure that Zao roughly sketched in the middle of the forest was reminiscent of Matisse's work. As Jean Leymarie has commented, the artist's early work was in "direct imitation" of Matisse and Picasso.¹³¹ In comparison, Wu's early landscape painting revealed a struggle between his passion for formalism and the inevitable pressure to conform with socialist realism. An example is Wu's *Wisteria* 紫藤 (Ziteng, Fig. 2.13) from 1953. (The detailed discussion is in Chapter 3).

Both of them leaned towards abstraction, but they held different understandings of it, both in concept and practice. Zao began to forge his path to abstraction after moving to France. During the mid 1950s, he completed the transition from figurative to abstract art, which was known as lyrical abstraction, and prevailed in postwar Europe. One example is Zao's oil painting, *Vague* (1955, Fig. 2.14). There is no visual clue for viewers to correlate his painting to any realist objects. What remain are the mysterious symbols, which seem like oracle bone scripts, or some suffering souls dancing in a flame of indigo. In comparison, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, Wu never indulged in pure abstraction. The furthest point that Wu ever reached in the pursuit of abstraction was "formal abstraction", which involved distilling and abstracting forms from painting objects, as seen in the ink painting, *Lion Grove Garden* 狮子林 (Shizilin, 1983, Fig. 2.15).

Yet it is worth noting that Wu and Zao, in their separate pursuits of abstraction, both turned to Chinese ink later in their careers. Zao stated:

¹³¹ Jean Leymarie, *Zao Wou-ki*, 1979, pp. 11-13.

“In 1971 and 1972, I found it impossible to paint, so I went back to this wash-drawing technique, which combines chance, ink and the brush. Since I had learned it at school, I had no trouble in handling it. But I am not over fond of this absolute, almost diabolical fortuitousness; and, certainly, I do not like this limiting label of ‘Chinese painter’. This wash-drawing interlude, however, helped me a lot by giving me greater freedom and a more expansive gesture.”¹³²

Zao’s ink painting, *Untitled* (1971, Fig. 2.16), presented his search for the “greater freedom and a more expansive gesture” through ink. Although he found it more expressive by using ink and paper when stuck in the mediums of oil paints and canvas, Zao did not hold a high opinion of Chinese ink painting. His word choice of “fortuitousness” indicates the Chinese-French artist’s negativity about the spontaneous and improvisational qualities of Chinese ink painting. Zao made himself crystal clear that he did not want to be labeled as a “Chinese painter”. Therefore, Zao’s ink practice retained his lyrical abstraction style, which is reflected in *Untitled* (1971), as a piece of pure abstract art by ink on paper.

Wu addressed his transition to ink from a similar reason of creative bottleneck: “I changed to ink when my mind was stuck in oil painting.” 感到油画山穷时换用水墨。¹³³ However, there was a fundamental difference between Wu and Zao’s understandings of using ink. Wu was very much attracted to the spontaneity that Chinese ink brought by its very nature:

“My oil painting gradually became monochrome, pursuing the flavour and dynamics of simplicity. Aesthetically this was closer to ink painting. I therefore started using ink to express my feelings. I was already creating ink paintings in the mid 1970s...By the 1980s, ink became my primary medium.”¹³⁴

It was the artistic effect, which could only be expressed through ink, that in the end converted him to this Chinese painting medium. In contrast, Zao merely utilised ink as a medium experiment to expand his creative boundary. He was not interested at all in being an ink artist.

¹³² Jean Leymarie, *Zao Wou-ki*, 1979, pp. 46-47.

¹³³ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 40.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 39.

It is vitally important to study the two artists' choices of abstraction and Chinese ink in their particular contexts. Zao made his name in the Chinese art circles by imitating the impressionists' work at that time, as is shown in the oil painting, *Untitled* (1948, Fig. 2.12). But he would not be remembered as an extraordinary artist, if he kept doing the imitation after moving to France. For Zao, a connection with Chinese culture appeared to be necessary. His rejection of the label of "Chinese painter" notwithstanding, Zao still benefited from the cultural lineage with Chinese aesthetics. Appropriating ancient Chinese inscriptions on canvas (as shown in *Vague*, Fig. 2.14) represented Zao's intentional utilization of this cultural lineage. He endeavored not to be identified as "Chinese", yet at the same time was coating some Chinese elements on his European lyrical abstraction.

Although Zao deliberately kept his distance from the "Chinese" label, it appeared inevitable that his work was still appreciated in terms of its Chineseness. Dominique de Villepin, former Prime Minister of France, commented on Zao's paintings:

"Zao Wou-Ki's painting is inhabited by signs. Little by little he extricates them from their gangue of matter and flesh, he pursues them. Here signs are traces and impressions, betraying the deep roots of the world. It conveys the teaching of Chinese well-read men of his family, it passes on an understanding of the world, it draws its strength from the source of a mythical tradition. They are the traces left by the Creator that are the access roads to the universal."¹³⁵

Zao was indeed from an educated family, as referred to above, a member of which was Taoist scholar. Zao's family tradition however did not provide any necessity for him to create anything "mythical". The traditional Chinese culture inherited in Zao's family was taken for granted by Dominique de Villepin as "the traces left by the Creator that are the access roads to the universal". Hence, Zao's work bore a unique "mythical" aesthetic, because there was a cognitive connection between the artist's cultural background and the artwork he produced, specifically from the Westerners' eyes. The prime minister's perception of Zao's artwork was through an Orientalist lens, rushing to a connection between Zao's family tradition and the "mythical" nature of the long-lasting Chinese culture. In the words of Qing Pan, who studied Zao's art style:

¹³⁵ Dominique de Villepin, *Intro the Maze of Lights, Zao Wou-Ki*, 18th December 2009, published on the official website of Dominique de Villepin: <https://dominiquedevillepin.fr/2009/12/18/zao-wou-ki-into-the-maze-of-lights/?lang=en>, last access on 8 August 2019.

“Zao Wou-ki, advocated rejecting everything Chinese. He moved to France permanently and made a name for himself in the French art world. Although he still stands firmly on his ground, claiming that he received little Chinese influence, his artworks were seen by Western critics as artworks that expressed both Western influences and Chinese aesthetics.”¹³⁶

Wu also discerned Zao’s reputation in terms of its cultural imagination by the French:

“I think these Chinese artists (referring to Zao and Zhu Deqin) went to France to infuse some Chineseness into the French art circles. Their art might blossom in the French garden, only as an exotic Chinese rose.”

我觉得他们是中国画家到了法国，拿一点儿中国的味儿混在法国里面。在法国的花园里，可以开出一朵玫瑰花...品种呢，可能带有一点中国的味儿。¹³⁷

When regarding Zao’s art style as an infusion of “some Chineseness into the French art circles”, Wu indicated a surface-level combination of Western vocabulary and Chinese elements for better drawing-out the attention of Westerners. For Wu, it was an inevitable reception that Chinese artists would gain in the Western art world. He had sensed such a problem when studying in Paris. In a letter to his teacher in the Hangzhou Academy, Wu expressed that dissatisfaction:

“I do not want to be nothing but a flower for decoration in my career...If art meant no more than some visual amusement or interior decoration, it should have been derided by us!”

我不愿以我的生命来选一朵花的职业...如果绘画再只是仅求一点视觉的轻快，装点了一角壁室的空虚，它应该更千倍地被人轻视！¹³⁸

Wu’s concern that his art might be viewed merely as “decoration” in the Western art world was one major reason for his return to China. Wu’s art pursuit in the end still revealed his endeavor to find a niche between Western modernism and Chinese socialist realism, but it was in a very different sociopolitical context. There is still a “hybrid” quality entailed in Wu’s art practice, which had been appreciated due to the particular socio-cultural

¹³⁶ Qing Pan, “Creativity within Copying: A Comparative Study of Copying as a Way of Learning in Euro-American Painting and Chinese Painting Traditions”, PhD diss., Columbia University, 2007, p. 126.

¹³⁷ Li Huaiyu, “Wu Guanzhong: dongxi yishu gaochu xiangfeng”, 2007, p. 178.

¹³⁸ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 19.

environment in the 1980s, when the Chinese intellectuals both yearned for “modernisation” and to be reassured of their cultural confidence. Wu commented that Zao’s art was a Chinese rose in the French garden. However, his own artistic syncretism also entailed a degree of hybridity. It was a “modernist” rose grown in the garden of socialist China that blossomed in the era of the country’s modernisation.

CHAPTER 3

ARTISTIC MATURATION: MODERNISING LITERATI PAINTING IN 1980s CHINA

Although Wu's art style has been generally accepted as "modern" instead of "traditional", he indeed gave considerable emphasis to "literati painting" 文人画 (wenrenhua). However, Wu's interpretations of "literati painting" was engraved with a modern quality. For instance, Wu's argument on literati painting stressed a characteristic of "expressiveness", which had been a critical phrase in understanding the painting genre. As I demonstrate in this chapter, it is arguable whether "expressiveness" is interchangeable with "self-expression" in Western modernist art. Wu addressed the equality of the two terms, since he believed they both derived from the artists' impulse to express their emotions in artwork. However, for Wu, the best way to express his perception and emotion in painting was the Western modernist vocabulary. This chapter shows how Wu successfully syncretized "literati painting" and Western modernist styles. This syncretism, reflected both in his theory and painting, became an important milestone in the long history of interpreting classical Chinese art from modern perspectives.

I further illustrate Wu's modern interpretation of literati painting by examining his use of the term *yijing* 意境, which was vital in Chinese painting, and yet remained fairly vague in definition and evaluation. According to Wu, *yijing* was the artistic output of the artist's emotion, and the product of the artist's expression. In Wu's estimation, *yijing*, as the artist's expression of emotion, was best conveyed through Western modernist styles.

Wu's interpretation of *yijing* was also remarkable, because he managed to convey it through visualizing the collective cultural imaginations of socialist China. I use two examples: Wu's ink paintings of Jiangnan (the south of the Yangtze River of China) and of old trees. I argue that the Chinese socialist imagination of Jiangnan was not based on the classical Chinese ink landscapes, but rather on Lu Xun's depictions revealed in his story

Guxiang 故乡 (Hometown). Wu successfully provided a visualisation of Lu Xun's *Guxiang*, which not only expressed his own feelings for Jiangnan, but also captured the nostalgic yearnings of generations of Chinese readers, since the early twentieth century. Similarly, Wu's tree-scape clicked with the spirit of the 1980s, when Chinese intellectuals torn between modernisation and Chinese tradition hungered for artwork that resonated with the zeitgeist. These two examples (Jiangnan and tree-scape) suggest the importance of the subject selection in Wu's painting. Expressed through a combination of Western painting style and Chinese ink and colour, I argue that Wu's notion of *yijing* manifests itself most strongly through those subjects which bore cultural and political importance.

3.1 Literati Painting and Self-Expression

In the essay “Shifei deshi wenrenhua” 是非得失文人画 (Merits and demerits of literati painting, 1986), Wu expressed his opinion on the essence of literati painting:

“Shitao and Bada’s work should be categorised as literati paintings. I am not very sure of the criterion of literati painting. It seems that the perspective “poetry in painting, and painting in poetry” plays a big role in the criterion. A literatus-artist is both a poet and a painter, who emphasised expressing his emotion in painting. Expressing “self” hence stood in the centre of his artistic practice...Painting, after all, is supposed to be the expression of the artist’s disposition, in which sense literati painting had made a remarkable achievement.”

石涛与八大当被归入文人画的范畴，文人画的范畴有多大，我说不清，似乎是“诗中有画，画中有诗”这一观点促使了文人画的大发展。作者是画师兼诗人或诗人兼画师，他们重在自我感情的抒发，“自我”在作品中逐渐成为唯一的主角...绘画自身，毕竟是作者性灵的表露...文人画窥探了脱俗的艺术领域，其发现之功不可磨灭。¹³⁹

Wu started his opinion on literati painting by referring to Shitao and Bada, from which one can tell the strong impression these two ink painters left on Wu’s mind since his student days in Hangzhou. In Wu’s argument, Shitao and Bada’s style represented the nature of “literati painting” in terms of their artistic expression. Therefore the question as to how to understand “expression” in literati painting, and in which sense Wu understood it in Shitao and Bada’s work, deserve a thorough study.

So far, in English-language scholarship, the most comprehensive research of the term *wenrenhua* 文人画 (literati painting) is by Susan Bush in her book, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch’i-ch’ang (1555-1636)*. In the book, she emphasises the historical development of the term “literati painting” and gives it a full account. According to Bush, literati painting derived from *Shidafuhua* 士大夫画 (the scholar-officials’ painting) in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). The practice of scholar-officials’ painting was

¹³⁹ Wu Guanzhong, “Merits and demerits of literati painting” 是非得失文人画 (Shifei deshi wenrenhua), *Wenyi bao* 文艺报 (Literature and arts), 22 Feb, 1986, also see in Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, pp. 279-280.

initiated by Su Shi (苏轼 Su Shih, also known as Su Dongpo 苏东坡, 1037-1101, poet, calligrapher, painter, and an important figure in politics and arts in Northern Song) and his friends when they were socialising. The aim of painting was exclusively for strengthening their friendship and social bond. In contrast to the contemporary definition of literati painting as an art genre, Bush has documented that it began as a social amusement exclusively limited to a small circle of scholar-officials.

Bush has pointed out that the scholar-officials' circle headed by Su Shi indeed practiced art focusing on expressiveness, which was in nature different from the professional painting at that time. "According to Su, painting was an art, like poetry that served as an expressive outlet, and it was to be done in one's leisure time."¹⁴⁰ The criterion of literati painting, according to Bush, emerged in the Ming Dynasty, due to the endeavours of an art theorist, Dong Qichang 董其昌 (also as Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, 1555-1636). Due to Dong's contribution, an art school clarified its name, *nanzong* 南宗 (Southern school), to differentiate itself stylistically from *beizong* 北宗 (Northern school):

"Northern school artists are professionals who work hard for their efforts, and painters of the Southern school have a natural genius that enables them to succeed with ease."¹⁴¹

Paintings produced by the Southern school artists were therefore spontaneous and improvisational, which in spirit related to a highly expressive art style. As revealed in Bush's study, there was a historical process in the construction of the so-called "literati painting", from a casual pastime to an art genre with fixed criteria. During the constructive process, the "expressiveness" was a quality highlighted by Dong Qichang as a consistent feature to distinguish itself from professional painting. Su Shi, as a famous spokesman of his times, emphasised such an artistic quality in painting, which was why he has been generally studied as the forerunner of literati painting. And Dong was responsible for systemising the lineage of the expressiveness in the theory of literati painting.

¹⁴⁰ Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 159.

Bush is not the only scholar who has paid attention to the critical role that expressiveness played in literati painting. In the book *The Arts of China* (1999), Sullivan also discusses the artist's expression in literati painting. Sullivan states that the difference between the paintings that Su Shi created and appreciated and professional painting was the artist's expression:

“Su Dongpo (also Su Shi) put forward the revolutionary idea that the purpose of painting was not representation but expression...To Su and his circle, the aim of a landscape painter was not to evoke in viewers the feeling they would have if they were actually wandering in the mountains, but rather to reveal to friends something of the artists' own mind and feelings.”¹⁴²

By emphasising “the artists' own mind and feelings” in the depiction of mountains, Sullivan here distinguished literati painting from professional painting in terms of the artist's subjective expression.

Studying literati painting in terms of expressiveness has been widespread among Chinese scholars since the early twentieth century. Art theorist Teng Gu 滕固 (1901-1941) referred to three qualities to define the scholar-officials' painting in his book *Tangsong huihuashi* 唐宋绘画史 (Painting history of the Tang and Song Dynasties, 1933). As Susan Bush summarized:

“(1) Artists who are scholar-officials are distinguished from artisan painters; (2) art is seen as an expressive outlet for scholars in their spare time; (3) the style of scholar-artists is different from that of academicians.”¹⁴³

Teng's second point, that “art is seen as an expressive outlet for scholars in their spare time”, explicitly presented the “expressive” quality of scholar-officials' painting. Similarly, art theorist, Chen Hengke 陈衡恪 (or Chen Shizeng 陈师曾, 1876-1923) also highlighted the expressive quality as the core value of literati painting. In his article “Wenrenhua zhi jiazhi” 文人画之价值 (The value of literati painting), Chen emphasised the painter's “disposition”,

¹⁴² Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 4th edition, University of California Press, 1984, p.174.

¹⁴³ Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, 2012, p. 1.

“thought” and “activity” as core values in the painting process.¹⁴⁴ Chen further compared Chinese literati painting with the Western avant-garde in terms of their similar emphasis on the artist’s subjective expression.

Whether “expressiveness” in Chinese literati painting equals “self-expression” in Western modernist art deserves further analysis. Self-expression in Western art history implies that the artist has the intuitive ability to present his/her individual vision of the subjects into painting. The appreciation of the term “self-expression” and its application to the artist’s individuality are modern constructs, the emergence of which were accompanied by the ground-breaking discoveries of optical science in the late nineteenth-century. The development of optical science changed the viewpoint that all perceived the world in the same way by demonstrating that everyone visualised the world individually. Also, due to the growth of the bourgeois market at that moment, art dealers and clients came to favour artists’ selves expressed on canvas. Aesthetician Benedetto Croce made considerable contribution to the prevalence of self-expression by claiming that “the artistic personality was utmost in any consideration of art”. “Croce proposed that art was first and foremost the expression of feeling, believing that the visualisation of an artistic image was inextricable from the physical realisation of it.”¹⁴⁵ The modernist artist Henry Matisse was a typical practitioner of self-expression, who claimed the inextricable bond between his subjective feeling and his pictorial expression of it.¹⁴⁶

In terms of the difference between the artist’s expression in classical Chinese painting and the self-expression in Western modernist painting, Susan Bush has noted that:

“Self-expression in the West is often seen in romantic terms as the solitary struggle of the artist with his material. The situation was quite different in Sung China: scholars’ painting was a form of expression in which the personality of the maker was revealed, but the work of art was often created in the company of friends at a drinking party.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ Chen Hengke, “Wenrenhua zhi jiazhi” 文人画之价值 (The value of literati painting), in Chen Hengke comp., *Zhongguo wenrenhua zhi yanjiu* 中国文人画之研究 (Studies of Chinese Literati Painting), First published in 1922, online source, see York University Library: <https://archive.org/details/zhongguowenrenhu00chen>, last access on 1 October 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Julie Sheldon, “Matisse and the Problem of Expression in early Twentieth-Century Art”, in Liz Dawtrey et al. ed., *Investigating Modern Art*, Yale University Press, 1996, p. 50.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 47-59.

¹⁴⁷ Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, 2012, p. 7.

In other words, Bush argues that self-expression in Western art signified the artist's conscious endeavour to render his individuality from his mind into painting. Whereas in Chinese literati painting, although the artwork was also the product of the painter's expression, it was more of a "by-product" of their socialisation. It was the outcome of the artist's spontaneity.

Cahill's dissertation on the theory of literati painting also differentiates the two terms. Cahill discusses the difference between self-expression in Western modern art history, and the specific "expressiveness" in the context of Chinese literati painting. He argues, that the "expressiveness" of literati painting is "distinguished from romantic and expressionist theory and practice of art; for in the former (romantic art) it is usually specific emotions directed toward particular objects, and in the latter (expressionist art), violent emotions, passions, inner tensions, which are expressed".¹⁴⁸

Cahill elaborates the difference by exemplifying a term *xing* 兴 (exhilaration), which was close to the implication of the "expressiveness" in the theory of literati painting. Cahill argues that *xing*, as a sensation held by literati painters, was more like the "function of 'one's nature'", which was more than a "direct statement of emotion". According to Cahill, *xing* in the Chinese context was a broader sensation than the explicit expression in Western modernist art. In a way, *Xing* opposed "self-expression" from the perspective of Western modernist art, since the latter merely focused on explicit ways of expression. Although the two types of expressions appeared to be similar in the painting process, as Cahill argues, they were fundamentally different, hence should be considered from different approaches.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, one can see that the expressiveness in Chinese literati painting holds different connotations from self-expression in Western modernist art. Although they share that common belief that painting is to be created out of the artist's expression, it is the nature of "expression" that defines the fundamental distinction of the two concepts.

¹⁴⁸ James Cahill, "The Theory of Literati Painting in China," PhD diss., California University of Berkeley, 1962, p. 38.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 38.

When Wu exemplified Shitao and Bada's artistic styles as the essence of literati painting, especially when he argued that the significance of "emotion in painting", and "self" stands in the centre of artistic practice, he mixed the connotations of Chinese "expressiveness" and Western "self-expression". The artist's conscious struggle to present his personal disposition in painting, which fit the criterion of self-expression, became Wu's understanding of the "expressiveness" in literati painting.

Interpreting Shitao's artistic style in terms of self-expression is a modern construct. In Aida Wong's study on the modern construction of traditional Chinese ink painting from Japanese influence, she argues that the modernity of Shitao's ink work was first constructed by Japanese art theorists. Wong also states that it was a Japanese art theorist Taki Seiichi (1873-1945) who compared Chinese literati painting with the Western avant-garde, such as Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and Kandinsky's work,

"He saw similarities between Croce's ideal and the Chinese concept of *xinyin* (心音 imprints of mind), emphasising the primacy of expressiveness in literati painting. Taki also equated spirit resonance with Kandinsky's *innerer Klang* (inner sound) with the intention of drawing literati painting and modern Western art closer together."¹⁵⁰

As Wong has argued, it was the Japanese art historians such as Taki Seiichi who initiated the modern quality of literati painting, during which process Shitao was typified as an icon of modernity. Chinese art theorists who studied in Japan imparted this knowledge of literati painting to China in the early twentieth century to prove a modern quality intrinsic in classical Chinese art. For example, Chen Hengke argued that the real value of a painting:

"A painting embodies the (artist's) disposition, his thought and his activity. It is neither mechanistic nor simple."

"画者性灵者也，思想者也，活动者也，非器械者也，非单纯者也。¹⁵¹

When elaborating the essential value of a painting in terms of an artist's "disposition",

¹⁵⁰ Aida Wong, *Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006, p. 72.

¹⁵¹ Chen Hengke, "Wenrenhua zhi jiazhi", first published in 1922, online source, see York University Library: <https://archive.org/details/zhongguowenrenhu00chen>, last access on 1 October 2018.

“thought” and “activity”, Chen adhered to his modern taste of artist’s self-expression to Chinese literati painting. Chen’s modern perspective was more clearly implied in his argument that painting was “neither mechanistic nor simple”. Chen indicated photography when referring to “mechanistic” and “simple” in the article, which in his opinion copied reality in verisimilitude and created nothing original, as if “writing a thousand papers in one rhythm” 千篇一律 (qianpianyilü). What Chen actually criticised was not photography but Western realist art:

“Western painting achieved the highest level of verisimilitude. Since the 19th century, scientific understanding of light and colour had enabled ever more detailed and accurate observations of physical objects. However, later developments such as Impressionism went on a diametrically opposite way, which emphasised not objectivism but subjectivism. The subsequent emergence of Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism all reinforced the idea that verisimilitude was not the ultimate end of art. A different kind of art had to be created.”

西洋画可谓形似极矣。自十九世纪以来，以科学之理研究光与色，其于物象体验入微。而近来之后印象派乃反其道而行之，不重客体专任主观。立体派，未来派，表现派连篇演出，其思想之转变，亦足见形似之不足尽艺术之长，而不能不别有所求矣。

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Therefore, by “mechanistic” and “simple”, what Chen meant was not photography but Western realism that exclusively paid attention to pictorial verisimilitude, which in his opinion was already outdated in the Western art world. Instead, it was Impressionism, Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism that made the entrance and began to prevail, which “emphasised not objectivism but subjectivism.”

Chen’s argument aimed to prove the progressiveness of Chinese literati painting in terms of its subjectivism. As Aida Wong has pointed out, “He (Chen) recognised that people in China were demanding more realistic pictures because they seemed to embody the progress of the West, but evoking the Western avant-garde, he contended that the progress was already inherent in literati painting.”¹⁵³ By presenting realism replaced by avant-garde, Chen drew a vertical axis between realism as out of favour and avant-garde as progressiveness. Then by

¹⁵² Chen Hengke, “Wenrenhua zhi jiazhi”, first published in 1922, online source, see York University Library: <https://archive.org/details/zhongguowenrenhu00chen>, last access on 1 October 2018.

¹⁵³ Aida Wong, *Parting the Mists*, 2006, p. 66.

showcasing the modern quality of Chinese literati painting, Chen drew a horizontal axis between it and Western avant-garde to prove the similarity between the two. What Chen constructed in his essay was the homogeneity of Western avant-garde and classical Chinese painting in terms of subjectivism and self-expression, in order to prove the aesthetic progressiveness in literati painting.

Aida Wong concluded that the Chinese and Japanese art theorists' endeavoured to construct the modernity in Chinese ink masters' work: "In the eyes of their early-twentieth-century admirers, Shitao and Bada were icons of modernity possessing the spirit of European avant-garde. They became a distinct artistic *type* that many Chinese artists emulated in their effort to become 'modern'."¹⁵⁴ When Wu appreciated Shitao in terms of his expressive style, Wu himself inherited such a modern discourse, from Taki Seiichi to Chen Hengke, to highlight the modern quality of "expressiveness" embedded in Shitao's work. However, what Wu, as well as Taki Seiichi and Chen, really did was find equivalence in the expressiveness in Shitao's work with self-expression in Western modernist art.

Wu's modern interpretation of the expressiveness in literati painting is reflected in his ink landscapes. Take Wu's ink painting, *Great River Flows East* 大江东去 (Dajiang dongqu, 1985, Fig. 3.1), for instance. The artist's feeling was fully reflected in the title, which might come from Su Shi's poetry *To the tune "Recalling Her Charms", Cherishing the Past at Red Cliff* 念奴娇·赤壁怀古 (Niannujiao chibi huaigu, 1082),

The great river flows east,
 Its waves scouring away
 The dashing heroes of a thousand ages.
 West of the abandoned fortifications,
 People say, is
 Master Zhou's Red Cliff of the Three Kingdoms.
 Crags and boulders poke through the sky,
 Frightening waves pound the bank,
 Enveloping a thousand piles of snow.
 The river and mountains are like a painting,
 How many brave warriors were here!

Dimly I picture Gongjin then:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 71-73.

He had just married Little Qiao,
 Valor shone everywhere in his bearing.
 His fan of plums, kerchief of silk—
 As he chatted and laughed,
 Masts and hulls became flying ashes and smoke.
 My soul wanders the ancient realm,
 So full of feelings, others will laugh at me,
 My hair turns grey prematurely.
 Life is like a dream,
 Let me pour a libation to the river moon.¹⁵⁵

大江东去，浪淘尽，千古风流人物。
 故垒西边，人道是：三国周郎赤壁。
 乱石穿空，惊涛拍岸，卷起千堆雪。
 江山如画，一时多少豪杰。

遥想公瑾当年，小乔初嫁了，雄姿英发。
 羽扇纶巾，谈笑间，檣櫓灰飞烟灭。
 故国神游，多情应笑我，早生华发。
 人生如梦，一尊还酹江月。

The lines “Crag and boulders poke through the sky, Frightening waves pound the bank, enveloping a thousand piles of snow” provided a visualisation of thousands of water drops hitting the bank and splashing in the air by the fierce wave within an explicit reference to painting as an emphasis on the landscape’s impact. Su Shi used this imagery to lodge his sentiment of the vicissitudes of life. Wu adopted Su Shi’s exhilaration when creating the painting of the same object. The most vivid imagery in Su’s poetry was visualised by Wu’s painting style. A large amount of dry and dense black dots was spotted among the lines and curves to provide dynamism to the painting, which reminded people of the water drops pounding the rocks by the fierce wave.

In the painting, *Great River Flows East*, one can see how Wu conducted the “expressiveness”, yet in modern style. The rapid current was rendered through Chinese painting techniques. The light linear brushstroke provided an ethereal effect of the stream that

¹⁵⁵ English Translation, see Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 226-227.

cannot be achieved by oil brush. However, the major object of the painting is not the river but Chibi 赤壁 (Red Cliff) by the river bank. In the middle ground, the mountain takes a dominant proportion. Wu adopted a highly expressive style to outline the rocks. The steep angles and the multiple layers of the boulders were vividly expressed by Wu's linear and improvisational brushwork. The balance between the sparsity and density conveyed a cramped atmosphere of the rocks standing by the bank of the Great River. Similarly with the painting, *Cascade and Rocks* (Fig. 1.3), that was discussed in Chapter 1, Wu's expressive style of delineation of the landscape aimed to convey his subjective feeling of the object, instead of presenting the reality. Hence, Wu's expression presented in *Great River Flows East* hence bore a literati taste, especially considering its inspiration from Su Shi's poetry. But such a literati taste was presented through a style that was reminiscent of Western avant-garde art.

Moreover, there was romantic sentiment expressed in the poetry as well, which was expressed by Wu in modernist vocabulary. Consider the lines, "Dimly I picture Gongjin then: He had just married Little Qiao, Valor shone everywhere in his bearing. His fan of plums, kerchief of silk—as he chatted and laughed, Masts and hulls became flying ashes and smoke". Gongjin 公瑾 referred to Zhou Yu 周瑜, a general of the Three Kingdom Period. Su Shi's words depicted a charismatic image of Zhou Yu, detailing the romance of Zhou marrying his bride Little Qiao (Xiaoqiao 小乔). Then with the details of General Zhou Yu's charming adornments and his gestural confidence, Su depicted Zhou Yu as a hero winning the war not with masculine force, but with charm and charisma. As Ronald Egan has noted, "It is not his (Zhou Yu) prowess as a fighter that is emphasised, but his youth, virility, and promise (hence the mention of his bride, Little Qiao), as well as his dashing manner and wit."¹⁵⁶ Such a heroic, and yet romantic atmosphere was conveyed by Wu in the painting, through decorating black dots with rose, lemon and forest green spots, the colours of which were never used in traditional Chinese ink. The brightness injected a feminine tone to the muscularity of the "crag and boulders". If we remember how Wu resorted to Eastern poetry as a metaphor for the emotion in the painting *Bal Musette* (Fig. 1.6), one sees that he further stretched the scope of traditional Chinese aesthetics.

¹⁵⁶ Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, 1994, pp. 227-230.

3.2 Wu Guanzhong's Modern Interpretation of *Yijing*

Yijing 意境 is often used in Chinese ink painting or calligraphy to designate the highest artistic achievement that an artist could obtain. *Jing* 境 can be translated in English as “realm” or “sphere”. It is the word *yi* 意 that conveys the key information of the term and one that requires further explication. James Cahill discusses *yi* in his dissertation on the theory of literati painting,

“The word *i* (*yi*, 意) is variously translated...as ‘conception’ or ‘thought’. In its most general usage, it is best rendered by the English idea, which denotes...both the meaning of ‘any object of the mind existing in thought’ and ‘a formulated thought or opinion.’ It can thus exist in or out of the mind; the painter can harbor his conception while painting, and the picture can contain an idea, either specific, a meaning, or non-specific.”¹⁵⁷

According to Cahill, *yi* indicated any ideas or conceptions in artist’s mind, which could be both natural and formulated before painting. Cahill elaborates that *yi* can be “a memory-image in the mind of the artist”, or “a quality (loneliness, depth, coldness) rather than an image”. As for the relationship between *yi* that a literatus-painter held in mind and his artistic product, Cahill concludes that,

“In literati painting theory, the conception which the artist must have in his mind when he painted was usually considered to be an image, based somewhat on natural form but conditioned, already transformed, according to his temperament. Both the formation of this image and the objectification of it with brush and paper are acts controlled by the artist’s mind, and so partake of his feeling, reflect, ideally, his ‘exhilaration’.”¹⁵⁸

There is, in Cahill’s argument, firstly a transformative process from the artist’s perception of the “natural form” to *yi*, the conception which is already processed by the artist’s “temperament”. Then there is the second transformation conducted by artist, who

¹⁵⁷ James Cahill, “The Theory of Literati Painting in China”, 1962, p. 52.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 53-55.

conveyed the *yi* in his mind to paper, which both embodies the objective form of the subject, and the artist's subjective expression of it. One can see in Cahill's argument, that *yi* was the way an artist bore and conveyed his expression in painting. During the mental transformation in the artist's mind, from his perception of the painting object to his conception of it, to eventually the artistic product, *yi* played a critical role in "expressiveness".

Wu had his understanding of *yijing* in literati painting: "Recently people asked about my opinion on literati painting. I think... (literati painting) has a literary quality. The advantage of it is an emphasis on *yijing*. But it also has a disadvantage. The disadvantage is that the literary part often takes over its artistic part."¹⁵⁹ When Wu discussed the advantage of literati painting in its *yijing*, he recognised the role that *yijing* played in artistic expression. The way he managed to practice it was by the application of multiple perspectives for landscape painting. As discussed in Chapter 2, out of the dissatisfaction with the fixed perspective that was generally accepted in Western landscape painting, Wu preferred to adopt the ancient Chinese painters' approach, since he believed it was the best way to express his feeling when perceiving scenic beauty. When addressing his "excitement" when facing the grandeur of the scenery or judging if a landscape painting was "overwhelming", Wu implied a strong intention to convey *yijing* through painting. And he explored his own *xiesheng* style for the best presentation of it.

On the other hand, Wu recognised the insufficiency of presenting *yijing* through traditional Chinese painting techniques, since it diminished the "artistic effect" of the painting. Wu elaborated his viewpoint in another article:

"Chinese landscape painting can be summed up as a number of brushstroke techniques. This approach set aside the fundamentals, while going in search of the inessential. When the methods became fixed, they also became limited. As a result, the expressiveness of Chinese painting became weaker and weaker, rigid and fossilised...Meanwhile in the West, modern artists for the most part worked in nature, 'making a commotion in the East, while attacking in the West.' They used a range of complex tactics. They exhaustively explored form, light, line, dot, plane and a range of other creative artistic means. They gave full expression to the powers of a wide variety of factors. Comparatively speaking, their hundred flowers blossomed, while we were

¹⁵⁹ Wu Guanzhong, "Wangjin tianya lu: ji wo de yishu shengya" 望尽天涯路 — 记我的艺术生涯 (My artistic career), in *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学 (People's literature), October (1982): 84-85.

impoverished and dull.”¹⁶⁰

山水画中也归纳为多少种皴法，舍本求末，既定法，法就有限，表现能力于是越来越弱，僵死，干瘪...而西方近代画家们大都在大自然中声东击西，并挖尽了形，光，色，线，点，面等等所有造型艺术的手段，充分发挥各种因素的威力，相比之下，他们百花齐放，我们贫乏，单调。¹⁶¹

What concerned Wu was the poor artistic effect presented in Chinese painting, which Wu blamed on the ossified and restricted techniques. In his argument, Chinese landscape artists, especially literati painters, had restricted themselves to the limited techniques which led to the boredom and unproductiveness of their art creation. In contrast, Wu believed that Western modern artists were more adventurous and more successful in their exploration of the inventive vocabulary to better present *yijing* and “self-expression”.

It is fair to claim that there is a somewhat plain effect when Chinese ink painting is presented on paper in comparison with Western oil painting. Cahill discusses such a visual difference in his article: “It is instructive to remember my recent experience of standing in the Chinese painting galleries at the Metropolitan Museum and watching people emerge from an exhibition from French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting and then walk through rooms of fine, major Sung and Yuan scrolls without looking right or left.”¹⁶² Cahill here points out the reality that traditional Chinese ink painting was in a somewhat unfavourable position in comparison with Western modernist painting due to the former’s relative weakness in visual presentation. In other words, the *yijing* of Chinese ink painting needed to be appreciated from its own perspectives. Whereas Cahill aims to bring out the unique and subtle aesthetics of Chinese ink painting, Wu was less positive. Instead, Wu believed that the problem lay in Chinese painting’s inferior vocabulary in comparison with Western modernist art, which hindered its ability to convey *yijing*. For this reason, he believed in syncretising

¹⁶⁰ “Making a commotion in the East, while attacking in the West” is the translation of the Chinese idiom *shengdong jixi* 声东击西. It occurs first in the ancient Chinese text *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (c. 139 BC) and gradually became a common saying when discussing military tactics thereafter. Also, Wu in the text uses “hundred flowers” 百花齐放 to satirise the ill development of Chinese painting in contrast to the prosperity of Western painting.

¹⁶¹ Wu Gunzhong, “Shifei deshi wenrenhua”, first published in 1986, also in Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 281.

¹⁶² James Cahill, “Styles and Methods in the Painting of Wu Guanzhong”, in Lucy Lim ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, p. 23.

Chinese painting with the vocabulary of the Western avant-garde.

The ink painting, *Two Swallows* 双燕 (Shuangyan, 1988, Fig. 3.2), is representative of Wu's landscape style which combined his multiple perspectives with the Western modernist art vocabulary. The title was probably inspired by the Tang poem, *Blackgown Alley* 乌衣巷 (Wuyixiang):

“And the swallows which once graced the Wang and Hsieh halls,
Now feed in common people's homes without their knowing.”¹⁶³

旧时王谢堂前燕，飞入寻常百姓家。

The poem itself expresses the melancholy of a changed era, which can be inferred from the changed habitats of the swallows – from “the Wang and Hsieh halls” (which represents the mansions of nobility) to “common people's homes”. The sentiment of nostalgia was conveyed by Wu through appropriating the key image of the poem to the title of his painting. *Two Swallows* depicted a traditional residence in Jiangnan, which was reminiscent of his hometown. By using the image of swallows from a famous classical poem, the artist transmitted the nostalgic sentiment from the poetry to his painting to speak of his own sorrow of homesickness. By associating his painting with a widely known classical Chinese poem, Wu expanded the emotional resonance of the painting from the limited number of viewers who might be familiar with the scenery depicted, to a much broader audience, who would recognise the poem and appreciated its *yijing*.

But Wu did not stop at merely depicting the subject. What is of even greater importance to him is the artistic vocabulary that he used to convey this *yijing*. It is a very geometric structure that Wu constructed to depict the traditional house in *Two Swallows*. The rectangular shape of the architecture is cut in the middle by a tree standing in the middle-ground of the picture, the vertical visual image of which challenges the overall horizontal composition. The house is delineated in white for the wall, which takes the largest proportion

¹⁶³ Translated by Lin Yutang, in Shen Liwen 申丽文, “Cong wuyixiang de yingyi kan zhutjianxing xia hanshi yijing de fanyi” 从《乌衣巷》的英译看主体间性下汉诗意境的翻译 (On Translation of Chinese Poetic Ideorealm from the Perspective of Translation Intersubjectivity – With Blackgown Alley by Liu Yuxi as Example), online source: <https://www.sinoss.net/uploadfile/2015/0518/20150518114844109.pdf>, last access on 1 October 2018.

of the painting, and in black for the tiles and outlines. The large proportion of the white wall provides a relaxing atmosphere, whereas the desiccated brushwork whipped downwards to sketch the contour of the house presents a forceful and improvisational effect. Such a strong visual contrast is softened by the artist through rendering a river in the foreground of the picture, which was painted in traditional techniques. Wu's inkbrush made a forceful dip of dark ink and a full dip of water, to render the tenderness of the water's surface on paper. These pairs of visual contrasts worked for the audiences: their nostalgia was presented through a scenery with which they could identify and which resonated with them, and it was presented in such a modern style that the old view appeared so refreshingly new.

The composition of *Two Swallows* makes it clear that Wu's *yijing* was conveyed in a Western modernist style. The dry and heavy contours of the house help to highlight the rectangular structure of the architecture, the geometric shape of which shows its Western modernist infusion. It somehow reminds people of Piet Mondrian's (1872-1944) oil painting *Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Grey, and Blue* (1921, Fig. 3.3). It is the thick and heavy lines for delineating the rectangles that connected the two artist's work together. Wu himself admitted the inspiration from Mondrian while also addressing his difference:

“*Two Swallows* focuses on the combination by geometric shapes through artistic division of plane. For example, there is a strong visual contrast between the long horizontal white lines and the short vertical black blocks. Mondrian's painting pursues a beauty of simplicity by composing geometric shapes too. But its emotion is expressed too vaguely to be even recognised. To the contrary, *Two Swallows* conveys a clear Eastern sentiment: the homesickness remains even the swallows flee away.”

双燕着力于平面分割，几何形组合，横向的长线及白块与纵向的短黑块之间形成强对照。蒙德里安的画面几何组合追求简约，单纯之美，但其情意之透露过于含糊，甚至等于零。双燕明确地表达了东方情思，即使双燕飞去，乡情依然。¹⁶⁴

Mondrian's *Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Grey, and Blue* was a rich source of inspiration for Wu's *Two Swallows*. But for Wu, the avant-garde composition and visual contrast by different colours were but the means to highlight emotional expression. Wu emphasised the “Chinese sentiment” that was conveyed through the modernist

¹⁶⁴ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 38.

vocabulary, which prevailed over the composition of geometric shapes. Therefore, in Wu's mind, *yijing* dominated artistic creation, and was better presented through the avant-garde vocabulary. However, the self-expression was poised on an intersection of the personal artistic self and a certain shared "Eastern" sentiment, just like in *Great River Flows East*, in a creative contrast to Western modernism.

3.3 The Realisation of *Yijing* through the Motif of Hometown

It is not surprising that Wu at first chose the cityscape of Beijing as a subject when he began his landscape journey in the 1950s. As the capital of the newly established PRC, Beijing was apparently an appropriate theme for painting. Wu selected various subjects representing Beijing culture. One can see from Wu's artwork in this period that there are quite a few Beijing cityscapes, such as the watercolour paintings, *A Street Scene of Beijing* 北京街景 (Beijing jiejing, Fig. 3.4), from 1955, and *A Street Corner of Beijing* 北京街头 (Beijing jietou, Fig. 3.5) from 1956. Being influenced by Utrillo's Parisian cityscapes, Wu was passionate about presenting his feelings through cityscapes. The fixed-point perspective in the painting, *A Street Scene of Beijing*, reveals Wu's indebtedness to Utrillo – the scene looks as if the viewer is standing at the crossroads, facing the vanishing point of the street directly in front of him. The dominant colour of the painting, *A Street Scene of Beijing*, is ochre, seeking to create an atmosphere of the vicissitude of a city that stood witness to the earth-shattering changes in the past hundreds of years. The dusty colour functioned to produce a slightly unpleasant and stifling feeling, that anyone who was able to visit Beijing in person would surely experience. However, although Wu applied all the techniques he learned from Utrillo, he still could not convey the *yijing* completely in these paintings. This was because the depiction of some junction in Beijing was not enough to summon up the grandeur and historical depth of this ancient city. Besides, watercolour as a medium, while bringing a tender and ethereal atmosphere to the paintings, did not quite match the heaviness of the vicissitude that the subject aimed to convey.

Wu's preference for the scenery in Jiangnan also began in the 1950s, when he took the chance to do *xiesheng* practice around China. One can see from his early oil paintings on the theme of Jiangnan, as in the painting, *Hometown Morning* 故乡之晨 (Guxiang zhi chen, 1960, Fig. 3.6), that Wu adopted an impressionist painting vocabulary to express his homesickness. The view was taken as if one was facing the river in front of him. The vertical perspective was interrupted by a bridge depicted across the river, to extend the horizontal space of the composition. The most obvious influence from Impressionism in the painting was Wu's colour application of the surface of the river. Various oil paints were brushed

heavily and overlapped with each other to illustrate the changeable spectrum on the water surface due to the changeability of the morning sunlight. Wu's *Hometown Morning* revealed his acquisitions from Western modernist art. However, such artistic vocabulary did not fully serve the purpose of expressing the artist's nostalgia. The Chinese aesthetic was hidden by the dominant Impressionist style that Wu made an effort to adopt.

One can see a complete difference in Wu's *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown* (Fig. 1.7) from 1986. As discussed above, the fixed-point perspective gave audiences the impression that they were standing on the other side of the river bank taking an overview of the village. It is possible that Wu learned to take the view of the corner from Utrillo. But the Parisian cityscape did not haunt Wu's *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown*. The audiences' strongest impression would not be the Western modernist style, but a clear Chinese aesthetic. The contrast of the white walls and the black tiles take dominant proportion of the painting, reminding the audience of the traditional architecture in Jiangnan. Chinese ink as medium provides a tender and ethereal atmosphere, which was just appropriate to evoke the audiences' gentle sentiment of nostalgia. Wu was eventually able to properly adopt the painting vocabulary he learned from the Western modernist art to serve his purpose, without letting it dominate the artistic effect that he intended to convey. He was eventually able to organically inject the Chinese aesthetics as the spirit into the painting. In the 1986 painting, *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown*, Wu finally was able to find his own artistic vocabulary to convey the *yijing* he had always intended.

An important perspective to look at Wu's exploration of the expression of *yijing*, is to situate the subjects he chose to paint in the particular sociocultural context. As referred above, Wu began his landscape exploration by depicting the scenery of Beijing. This was partly due to the geographic convenience, since he worked in Beijing at that moment. It was also because of the important status of Beijing as the capital of the newly founded PRC. Praising the scenic beauty and the rich culture of Beijing appeared to be a wise choice for the artist. That is why one can find that Wu selected subjects such as "Clock Tower" 钟楼 (Zhonglou, Fig. 3.7) in 1954, "Glass Factory" 琉璃厂 (Liulichang, where antique shops were located, Fig. 3.8) in 1956, and "Autumn in Beijing" 北京之秋 (Beijing zhi qiu, Fig. 3.9) in 1956. Unfortunately, these subjects about Beijing did not make successful combinations with the Western painting vocabulary that Wu desired to apply in order to convey the *yijing* he

pursued. Therefore, the outcome of his artistic creation during this period remained ordinary. One proof is that among his artwork about Beijing, only a watercolour painting, *Autumn in Beijing*, was published in *Meishu* in the 1950s.¹⁶⁵

Autumn in Beijing indeed presented a relaxed atmosphere to audiences, which surely complied with the PRC's ideology. As discussed above, landscape painting began to be accepted in the Chinese art circles in 1956 due to the relatively relaxed art policy then launched. However, it did not mean an entire directional change from socialist realism. Paintings such as Dong Xiwen's *The Founding of the Nation* (Fig. 2.2), which combined realist techniques, heroic landscape set as background, and significant political theme were still dominant. In comparison, *Autumn in Beijing* simply lacked political significance. More likely, it was published to encourage the landscape artists' endeavors to depict the scenic beauty of PRC's capital and the joyous atmosphere of the people residing there. But it did not have any element to become a piece of art that was worth canonization, at the time.

It is therefore interesting to observe the trickiness for artists and writers to extol Beijing culture in socialist China. Among the highly praised artwork and literature in the early stage of PRC, very rarely were they about Beijing. *The Founding of the Nation* indeed depicted the event happening in Beijing. But its nationwide perspective undoubtedly prevailed over the geographical location where the event occurred. In the field of literature, one can see the rarity more clearly. Lao She 老舍 (1899-1966) was the only prominent writer who was renowned for writing about Beijing culture. Although Lao She expressed his unparalleled love of Beijing through his novels, his work was highly praised in socialist China for different reasons: to criticise the cruelty of the old society and to spread the heartfelt gratefulness for the CCP establishing the new society.¹⁶⁶ Seemingly, Beijing could only be presented through its political importance as the PRC's capital, not through its cultural antiquity. This may explain Wu's unsuccessful endeavor to express Beijing's character in painting.

¹⁶⁵ Wu Guanzhong, *Beijing zhi qiu* 北京之秋, watercolour on paper, *Meishu*, no. 11 (1956), p. 36.

¹⁶⁶ More information on the cityscape of Beijing, also see in Michael Meyer, *The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed*, London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

The artistic appreciation of the landscape of Jiangnan also malfunctioned in the early periods of socialist China. Landscapes of Jiangnan dominated classical Chinese painting, especially in the late imperial era. All the famous literati painters in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties had been renowned for their landscape paintings about the region. For instance, Huang Gongwang's 黄公望 (1269-1354, one of Four Masters in Yuan) *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* 富春山居图 (Fuchunshan ju tu, 1350) painted the Fuchun Mountains in Zhejiang area. One of Wen Zhengming's 文征明 (1470-1559, one of Four Masters in Ming) most renowned artwork is *Deep Snow in Mountain Passes* 关山积雪图 (*Guanshan jixue tu*, 1528), which depicted the snow view of the mountains in Jiangsu. Shitao's painting *Music of Mountains and Waters* 山水清音图 (*Shanshui qingyin tu*, 1707) illustrated the mountainscape of Mount Huangshan 黄山 (Huangshan), which is located in Anhui. Although it has often been acknowledged that one characteristic of classical Chinese landscape painting is that artists tended to paint anonymous mountains and rivers, I find that it is equally important to bear in mind that most of the anonymous mountainscapes in Chinese painting were located in the Jiangnan area, instead of north China. However, due to the unfavorable position of the traditional Chinese painting in the construction of Chinese socialist art, the lineage of depicting the landscapes of Jiangnan had been broken.

Wu began to develop his nostalgia for Jiangnan not from the works of early ink painting masters, but from the literature of Lu Xun, the most prominent writer in modern China. In his autobiography, Wu admitted the heavy influence from Lu Xun:

“My passion about literature started in middle school. Lu Xun was my favourite modern writer then...His work casts a lifelong influence on me. The figures in Lu Xun's novels always feel familiar, as if they were people from my hometown. But under the current circumstances, it is already impossible to embody my art style through painting those fictional figures. I thought about Lu Xun's *Guxiang*. He returned to his hometown which was hundreds of miles away that he left twenty years ago, only to find the desolate villages under the gloomy sky. Then I thought I could start painting the landscape of Jiangnan. I would feel emotionally related and creatively liberated to painting the landscape of Jiangnan. I hence decided to start from depicting the bridge of my hometown. From the 1960s onward, I constantly went to Shaoxing. Shaoxing looks just like Yixing, only more pictorial. It made me feel closer to Lu Xun.”

中学时代，我爱好文学，当代作家中尤其崇拜鲁迅...鲁迅的作品，影响我的终生。鲁迅笔下的人物，都是我最熟悉的故乡人，但在今天的形势下，我的艺术观和造型追求已不可能在人物中体现。我想起鲁迅的《故乡》，他回到相隔两千余里，别了二十余年的故乡去，见到的却是苍黄的天底下的萧条的江南村落。我想我可以从故乡的风光入手，于此我有较大的空间，感情的，思维的及形式的空间。我坚定了从江南故乡的小桥步入自己未知的造型世界。六十年代起我不断往绍兴跑，绍兴和宜兴非常类似，但比宜兴更如画，离鲁迅更近。¹⁶⁷

Guxiang 故乡 (Hometown), the story that Wu referred to, is one of Lu Xun's most well-known works. The short story is written by Lu Xun in a style that is heavily autobiographical: "I" returns to the hometown to sell the old house, when "I" had the chance to be reunited with people that "I" knew in childhood. One main figure is named Runtu 闰土, who was "my" childhood friend that "I" had a lot of fun hanging out with. Lu Xun then describes how life changed the friendship of the two: Runtu now could only be subservient to call "me" *laoye* 老爷 (lord), leaving no room for bringing their happy old time to the present. "I" in the end express a bone-deep loneliness due to the isolation he felt from his childhood mate. The isolation and estrangement that Lu Xun conveys in the novel is overwhelming:

"I was leaving the old house farther and farther behind, while the hills and rivers of my old home were also receding gradually even in the farther distance. But I felt no regret. I only felt that all around me was an invisible high wall, cutting me off from my fellows, and this depressed me thoroughly."¹⁶⁸

Meanwhile "I" makes a wish for the next generation to have a different, more warm-hearted future:

"I hope they will not be like us, that they will not allow a barrier to grow up between them. But again I would not like them, because they want to be akin, all to have a treadmill existence like mine, nor to suffer like Jun-tu (Runtu) till they become stupefied, not yet, like others, to devote all their energies to dissipation. They should have a new life, a life we have never experienced."¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 36.

¹⁶⁸ Lu Xun, *Guxiang* (My old home), in *Selected Stories of Lu Xun*, translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1963, p. 89.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 89-90.

Lu Xun's *Guxiang* has been reinterpreted differently since it was published in the 1920s. Fujii Shozo's study uncovered the long reading history starting from the Republican era. Fujii demonstrated that the discussion of *Guxiang* among the Chinese intellectuals initially focused on the isolation that the intellectuals experienced when returning to their home culture.¹⁷⁰ However, from the 1930s, the CCP's rhetoric of *Guxiang* became dominant, which dug out the collapse of the rural economy in the novel, and a bright prospect for revolution.¹⁷¹ During the Maoist era, the socialist ideology forced the intellectuals to concentrate more on the aspect of social class presented in *Guxiang*. Runtu's image due to his social class as "peasant", was hence emphasised as the main protagonist of the story, who was reinterpreted heroically. However, along with the eclipse of Mao's impact and the authoritative establishment of Deng Xiaoping, Chinese intellectuals tended to understand *Guxiang* more from a literary perspective, and endeavoured to return to its fictional nature.¹⁷²

Meanwhile, Fujii noted that there was a pictorial change about the story among readers. Artist Situ Qiao 司徒乔 (1902-1958) was renowned for making an illustration of *Guxiang* – *Lu Xun and Runtu* 鲁迅与闰土 (Lu Xun yu Runtu, 1954, Fig. 3.10). In the illustration, the artist portrays the author Lu Xun standing next to the figure of Runtu. Despite the well-known information that "I" in *Guxiang* is fictional, the general acceptance in the Chinese intellectual world was that the image of "I" in many ways echoed Lu Xun himself. As Fujii argued, such a visual correspondence revealed the Chinese readers' fixed imagination in the novel, in which Lu Xun's progressive image as a revolutionary writer played a major role. However, in Deng's era, such a visual identification diminished along with the intellectuals' endeavour to return *Guxiang* to its fictional nature. Debates on whether the "I" was Lu Xun took place. Consequently, there was a general acceptance that no correspondence between "I" and Lu Xun existed.¹⁷³ Such an iconoclastic undertaking in Deng's times implied the Chinese intellectuals' dissatisfaction with the fixed image, which

¹⁷⁰ Fujii Shozo 藤井省三, "Lu Xun *guxiang* yuedushi yu zhonghuaminguo gonggongquan de chengshu" 鲁迅故乡阅读史与中华民国公共圈的成熟 (The history of reading Lu Xun's *Guxiang*, and the maturation of the intellectuals' circles of Republican China), in *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中国现代文学研究丛刊 (Modern Chinese literature studies), no. 1 (2000), pp. 115-116.

¹⁷¹ Fujii Shozo 藤井省三, *Lu Xun "Gu xiang" yuedushi: xiandai zhongguo de wenxue kongjian* 鲁迅《故乡》阅读史: 现代中国的文学空间 (The history of the reading of Lu Xun's *Guxiang*: the space of modern Chinese literature), Translated by Dong Binyue, Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2013, p. 105.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 159-167.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 150-158.

brought the overly strong ideological colour, and their expectation of an open visualisation of the famous story.

Not just the images of the protagonists in *Guxiang* were waiting to be visualised, but also the landscapes. The title of the story brings a strong nostalgic sentiment that every reader yearned to visualise. Moreover, the way Lu Xun described the scenery for expressing the feeling was considerably effective. Therefore, when Chinese readers were indulged in savoring the loneliness and estrangement that permeated the story, they imagined the pictures of the “old house”, “hills” and “rivers” which were able to bring up those sentiments. However, in contrast to the long history of reading Lu Xun’s stories, the visualisation of the landscapes depicted in Lu Xun’s writing had been absent from Chinese readers’ minds for decades. Besides *Guxiang*, quite a few of Lu Xun’s works had been widespread in socialist China, such as *Shexi* 社戏 (Village opera), and *Cong baicaooyuan dao sanweishuwu* 从百草园到三味书屋 (From Hundred-Plant Garden to Three-flavour Study). One characteristic of Lu Xun’s writing is that his stories, especially the ones selected to be widely circulated in China, always cast a vivid image of the environment in which the events occur. And the environment always brings a strong flavour of Jiangnan. However, as abovementioned, due to the banishment of the aesthetic inheritance of traditional landscape painting in the PRC, there had been a lack of the scenic images of the hometown of the most prominent writer in modern China.

I would argue that Wu’s ink landscapes of Jiangnan function to fill the Chinese readers’ visual gap that they yearned to be filled, whenever reading *Guxiang*, or other stories by Lu Xun. Wu’s depiction of Jiangnan can be traced back to his oil painting, *Hometown Morning* (Fig. 3.6). The title reveals the artist’s inspiration from Lu Xun’s literature. In fact, there is not much scenery depicted in *Guxiang*. Lu Xun began the story by writing:

“It was late winter. As we drew near my former home the day became overcast and a cold wind blew into the cabin of our boat, while all one could see through the chinks in our bamboo awning were a few desolate villages, void of any sign of life, scattered far and near under the somber yellow sky. I could not help feeling depressed.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Lu Xun, *Guxiang*, 1963, p. 79.

This paragraph of the landscape depiction uncovers the “my” visualisation of the journey to the hometown: the “desolate villages,” “void of any sign of life.” Moreover, it is the “I” that sees the bleak view in a cold winter when the “wind blew in the cabin of our boat.” It is therefore vivid enough for one to imagine the view of the hometown in Lu Xun’s story: shabby houses randomly scattered on the horizontal line, under the gloomy yellow sky. More importantly, one can sense “my” emotional response to see the scenery – “depressed.” The overall tonality of the landscape in *Guxiang* is therefore bleak, gloomy and depressing. No cheerful colours and bright sunlight is to be tolerated in this imaginative landscape. However, Wu’s painting, *Hometown Morning* failed to express the feeling that matched the readers’ expectations. Apparently the heavy grey oil paint fit the dismal atmosphere, which Wu highly likely learned from Utrillo. But the depressing sentiment of the painting therefore was too dominant. The direct aesthetics of fully presenting one mood through painting might be appreciated by French modernists, but not by Chinese audiences.

The emotional richness of *Guxiang* lies in “my” depressing feeling for the hometown in contrast to “my” exhilarated wish for the future. In contrast to the gloomy silhouette of the village, the “I” depicts the image of Runtu in a highly colourful style:

“A golden moon suspended in a deep blue sky and beneath it the seashore, planted as far as the eye could see with jade-green watermelons, while in their midst a boy of eleven or twelve, wearing a silver necklet and grasping a steel pitchfork in his hand, was thrusting with all his might at a *cha* which dodged the blow and escaped between his legs.”¹⁷⁵

Various bright colours are used in the “my” description of this scene: golden, deep blue, jade-green, silver and steel. Moreover, these colours function to set each other off to highlight Runtu’s image. The “my” imagination of Runtu is that he shows up wearing a silver necklet and grasping a steel weapon, standing among jade-green watermelons in the midnight blue sky under the shine of golden moonlight. Runtu’s image is depicted in such a gloriously radiant style, which stresses his role in the story as a hero. It is hence undoubtedly the case that in Chinese readers’ minds, the image of Runtu is the highlight in the landscape of *Guxiang*. Regardless of the bleak air permeating the beginning of the novel, the readers’

¹⁷⁵ *Cha* 獾 (zha) is the wild animal described in *Guxiang* which looks like a badger. Lu Xun, *Guxiang*, 1963, pp. 80-81.

imagination of *Guxiang* is more complex. The famous ending with the narrator's thoughts on hope forcefully introduce an impersonal, panoramic scale that dislodges the fixed present of his despair.

There is a clear transition of tonality in Wu's depiction of Jiangnan since he changed to ink. For example, in his 1986 painting, *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown* (Fig. 1.7), there is no trace of the sentimental gloom left. As discussed above, Wu managed to provide the overview of the villa by taking a view as if one was standing across the bridge, on the other side of the riverbank. This painting evoked for audiences a sentiment of nostalgia instead of sadness. Although the piece is about *Zhou Villa* instead of Shaoxing, my view is that Wu's *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown* visualises the landscape of *Guxiang* more effectively than *Hometown Morning* (Fig. 3.6).

First of all, the overview of the villa is better presented in *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown*, which suits the rhetoric in the beginning of *Guxiang*. When the "I" looks out through the chinks in the bamboo awning, there is supposed to be a whole view of the village. *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown* presents a panoramic effect on paper, as if one is in a boat flowing down the river, seeing the whole villa. The pictorial effect of this piece prevails over *Hometown Morning* in visualizing the entire hometown. Secondly, Chinese ink and colour as the medium is more suitable to convey the sophisticated aesthetic that Chinese readers experienced through Lu Xun's *Guxiang*. In *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown*, Wu made the brush fully dipped with ink and water to render the windows and outlines of the traditional houses. The ink is soaked in paper and spread gradually over the shape of the windows, to convey a sentiment of antiquity. The reason that "I" had to return to my hometown is that the old house had to be sold. The grey colour applied in Wu's depiction of the houses in Jiangnan was able to visualise the sense of antiquity. Meanwhile, differing from oil paint, Chinese ink and colour is by nature lighter and more ethereal. They are usually unsuitable for expressing strong emotions. As shown in *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown*, the contrast between white and black does not bring any direct and extreme feeling. To the contrary, they convey a faintly discernable sorrow of the vicissitudes of life, which is reminiscent of the emotional tone of the "I" in *Guxiang*, as he laments how much people have changed by the suffering in their lives. The basic tone of *Zhou Villa in the Rivertown* is lighter than in most traditional Chinese ink paintings, which is attributable to the colourful dots of bright red, green, yellow and blue. These dots are barely recognizable, unlike those presented in the painting *Great River Flows*

East (Fig. 3.1). But they function to lighten up the whole painting, bringing dynamism to the desolate architecture. It corresponds with the nuanced optimism expressed at the end of *Guxiang*: to place hope for the next generation to live a more fulfilling life in the future. By ink and colour, Wu successfully grasped the complex emotion that Lu Xun intended to convey in *Guxiang*, which had been well known by Chinese people, but unable to be visualised until Wu's presentation of *Jiangnan*.

3.4 Treescape and the Importance of Subject Choice

Wu began to paint trees after his transfer to Tsinghua University in 1953, and these became a recurring subject in his painting for the rest of his career. Wu's tree depiction also has gone through a process of finding the appropriate artistic vocabulary for the appropriate subjects. Wu's passion for the twining and interlacing form of the branches can be seen as early as in his watercolour work, *Wisteria* (Fig. 2.13) from 1956. The painting is fairly figurative, portraying a wisteria in its full panoply of foliage in a backyard, where tables and chairs are set in the foreground of the picture. Perhaps due to the ideological requirement at that time that painting should serve the proletariat and express the happiness of their lives, Wu had to organise the composition in a realist way, although the title was exclusively about the wisteria. However, one can still observe the artist's enthusiasm about the formal beauty that the winding branches bring. The trunk of the wisteria interlaces and rises up to the roof where all the branches and leaves flourish in abundance. Wu used dark colour to outline the writhing rhythm of the branches and twigs. They extend horizontally in a frenetic and violent manner to declare the vitality of life. However, the lightening nature of watercolour diminished the vigorousness of the wisteria. And the tables and chairs dragged the audiences' attention away from being indulged within the appreciation of the main object of the painting. Wu referred to his journey of painting wisteria:

“I often paint vines. I like their twists and turns. Whenever I paint vines, even though I have done my best to delineate every detail, I am not satisfied with the result. I can finish the painting, but the knots of my affection remain tied.”¹⁷⁶

Wu himself indeed realised the technical insufficiency for completely conveying the beauty of the vines, as seen in *Wisteria*. He was able to observe the twisting form of the tree, but he was yet to find the matching style for artistic presentation.

¹⁷⁶ Christina Chu, “From Dissolution to Resolution: Wu Guanzhong's Treescapes”, in *Vision and Revision: Wu Guanzhong*, HongKong: Urban Council of Hong Kong, 1995, p. 49.

A clear transition can be found in Wu's oil painting, *A Lacebark Pine of the Former Imperial Palace* 故宫白皮松 (Gugong baipisong, Fig. 3.11) in 1975. Wu referred to his love for the lace-bark pine:

“This lace-bark pine has a pervading silvery gleam and its branches and leaves are luxuriant. This is the pine at the Imperial Household in Beijing. In front of the colourful palace buildings with glazed roofs, there stand erect several huge lace-bark pines adding an air of poise and elegance. I like the lace-bark pine, I like the beauty of its abundant form, I like the beauty of its gnarled trunk and branches, and I like the beauty of the spots of colour all over it.”¹⁷⁷

One can see the artist's affection for treescapes remained, that he still yearned to present the artistic form of the trunk and branches, as well as the colourful details on them. Very different from wisteria, the lace-bark pine is a type of tree typifying the climate of north China. The straight and thick trunk, the gnarled bark and the pale colour speak for the ethos of the northern area. From the aesthetic perspective, the lace-bark pine does not suit Wu's appreciation of the twining and interlacing aesthetic that he aspired to present in tree depiction. One senses such an insufficiency in the artist's delineation of the overly straight trunk and less luxuriant leaves on top. Although the heavy oil paints overlapped and functioned to highlight the knotty and rough surface of the trunk, the leaves of the pine were only able to provide forcefulness, not dynamism on canvas.

However, there is a remarkable breakthrough in the painting, *A Lacebark Pine of the Former Imperial Palace*, in that Wu chose to paint the pine located in front of the Imperial Palace. Wu noticed, “several huge lace bark pines adding an air of poise and elegance.” What he did not speak about was the thematic importance of these trees. Standing in front of the Forbidden City, the pines therefore embodied the witnessing of the transition of the times. Its weather-beaten appearance resonated with the audiences' sentiment about the vicissitudes of life. It hence generated a greater visual and emotional impact in painting.

Wu's treescape exploration came to fruition in the ink painting, *Chinese Cypress* 汉柏 (Hanbai, Fig. 3.12), from 1983. The subject of the painting, Hanbai, is four Chinese cypresses which were planted by Deng Yu 邓禹 (2-58, prime minister of the Guangwu Emperor 光武

¹⁷⁷ Christina Chu, “From Dissolution to Resolution: Wu Guanzhong's Treescapes”, 1995, p. 45.

of the Dong Han Dynasty) at Situ Temple 司徒庙 (Situ miao) in Suzhou. The four cypresses are known for their survival from the lightning strikes during their two-thousand-year-old lives. They are also nationally known due to a visit of the Qianlong Emperor 乾隆 in the Qing Dynasty. Astonished by the longevity of the four cypresses, Qianlong named them *Qing* 清 (pure), *Qi* 奇 (strange), *Gu* 古 (ancient), *Guai* 怪 (odd), which seemingly indicated their odd appearances and yet praised their eccentric characters.¹⁷⁸

In comparison with Wu's previous treescapes, *Chinese Cypress* discloses Wu's expressive style to an extreme. Audiences might be unable to recognise that it was a painting of cypresses. What one can see is the endless, sinuous ink lines writhing up and down, and weltering across the paper. The dynamism of Wu's brushstroke reminds people of tempestuous ocean waves or spewing flames, instead of the trunks and branches of the trees.¹⁷⁹ If there is some representational residue in the painting that could be reminiscent of the cypresses, they are the thinner lines in the colour of silver grey interlacing with the dark heavy brushwork, expressing the vitality and the forcefulness of the cypresses. *Chinese Cypress* discloses what Wu eventually yearned to depict of the trees: the intertwined form of the trees that brings unparalleled dynamics into the painting, the form that excited the artist to be ground-breaking creative and expressive. As Wu commented, it was his long-remained affection.

What indeed brought *Chinese Cypress* considerable fame, apart from Wu's highly expressive style, was the thematic importance that the subject bore. Paintings of pines, cypresses, and junipers are the themes that have been considered "respectable" in classical Chinese painting.¹⁸⁰ As Ethan Prizant, a researcher of Wu Guanzhong, has discussed,

"Old trees, especially pines, junipers, and cypresses, have long been symbols of the resilience of human spirit in its desire to persevere through life's vicissitude, images of which become mirrors of the mind of the artists that painted them, pictorial devices

¹⁷⁸ See the official website of the Situ Temple: <http://www.sztravel.gov.cn/scenic-spot-detail.aspx?id=44>. Last access on 25 October 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Ethan Prizant, "Divergent Prophecies for the Nation: Wu Guanzhong, History, and the Global in early 1980s China", senior honours thesis, University of California Berkeley, 2012, p. 12, online source: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/38t2b2j3>, last access on 6 September 2019.

¹⁸⁰ James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580*, 1st edition, Weatherhill, 1978, p. 95.

serving as spaces to lodge feelings about historical, political, and personal sentiments.”¹⁸¹

Moreover, as referred to above, the four trees have stood alive through fierce lightning strikes. Their indomitable will to live did not impress just the Qianlong Emperor but also the artists and intellectuals in the socialist era. Tianhan 田汉 (1898-1968, the lyric writer of the national anthem of the PRC), Ye Shengtao 叶圣陶 (1894-1988) and Liu Haisu were three who visited the temple and left their artwork. What they had in common was their hymn to the unyielding spirit that was reflected in the longevity of the cypresses. Wu himself was also overwhelmed by the indomitableness embodied in the old trees. Wu expressed his great admiration for the spirit of the cypresses by praising them as “the spirit of our nation” 民族之魂 (minzu zhi hun), and “the backbone of our tradition” 传统骨气 (chuantong guqi).¹⁸² What is visible in Wu’s painting, *Chinese Cypress*, is the highly expressive art style, which embodies a strong modern taste. What lay beneath the artistic vocabulary, however, and what actually gave the painting privilege, was its thematic meaning, which had been accepted as the backbone of the nation. It was the subject which bore political importance in the 1980s that conjured *yijing* in Wu’s painting, and made his painting resonate with its audience. One can see that both Wu’s cityscapes and treescapes paid more and more attention to form, but this modern taste was achieved through the transitional medium and motifs of literati painting.

¹⁸¹ Ethan Prizant, “Divergent Prophecies for the Nation: Wu Guanzhong, History, and the Global in early 1980s China”, senior honours thesis, University of California Berkeley, 2012, p. 15, online source: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/38t2b2j3>, last access on 26 October 2018.

¹⁸² Wu Guanzhong, “xingshi de yuyan, yuyan de xingshi” 形式的语言，语言的形式 (The vocabulary of form), in Yanzi 燕子 ed., *Huazuo danshengji* 画作诞生记, Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2008, preface.

CHAPTER 4

THE AESTHETIC & POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF WU GUANZHONG'S ART THEORY

Apart from Wu Guanzhong's artistic achievement in forging a new path for Chinese ink painting, he also made a considerable contribution to the Chinese discourse on art through his writings. In his acclaimed article of 1979, "Huihua de xingshimei" 绘画的形式美 (Formal aesthetics in painting), he took up the polemics of *xizuo* 习作 (study and practice) vs. *chuanguzo* 创作 (creation), and *xingshi* 形式 (form) vs. *neirong* 内容 (content), and delivered an eloquent and influential critique of socialist realism. Although Wu's critique of socialist realism was grounded in aesthetics, and he did seek to modernise Chinese painting by advocating the autonomy of art form and style, his criticism should be examined in its full socio-cultural context. I argue that despite his repeated rejection of the "political" nature of socialist art, Wu's call for formal aesthetics bears an equally political nature. Through close reading of his 1979 article, I will demonstrate that Wu's advocacy of formal aesthetics was an endeavor of utilising the familiar political rhetoric of the time to fight against the dominance of socialist realism. A brief overview of the political quality embedded in Western avant-garde art lends further support to my analysis of the political rhetoric in Wu's call for formal aesthetics.

It is important to point out the high risk that such political rhetoric in literary and artistic discourses carries in China, even after the Cultural Revolution. The Black Painting movement of the 1970s can be taken as an example of the extreme changeability of the political environment of the time and the dramatic reversals in the reception of artistic creations. Writing during the "thaw" after the Cultural Revolution, Wu had to contend with a political environment no less capricious. It is generally acknowledged that Wu's pioneering call for formal aesthetics at the time was courageous. His courage and heroism notwithstanding, I am interested in how his apparently risky advocacy of formal aesthetics "succeeded" without causing him political trouble. I will demonstrate how Wu balanced the political rhetoric in his art theory to eschew the overly risky line of direct confrontation with the dominant ideology.

Finally, as illustration of the political balancing act in Wu's art history, I will give a close reading of his painting, *Ruins of Gaochang* 高昌遗址 (Gaochang yizhi, 1981), which serves as an embodiment of his conformity with the CCP's ideology on the one hand, and his subtle critique of the Party's political failings on the other.

4.1 The Political Rhetoric in Wu Guanzhong's Formal Aesthetics

Wu made his name not only as an artist but also as an art theorist by publishing the article, “Huihua de xingshimei” 绘画的形式美 (Formal aesthetics in painting), in *Meishu* in 1979. One key issue that Wu took up in the article, as I have earlier discussed, was “beauty vs. prettiness”. Wu expressed his dissatisfaction with the excessive emphasis on realist painting techniques, which resulted in mere “prettiness”. Wu’s criticism of the doctrine of socialist realism was also shown in another pair of terms that he discussed in the same article: *chuangzuo* 创作 (creation) and *xizuo* 习作 (study and practice),

“Since liberation, we have very clearly and mechanically forged opposition between *chuangzuo* and *xizuo*. When I first returned to China, I was very much against this distinction. I thought it was a mistake, utterly unjustifiable, and incongruous with the rules of artistic creation...in our actual praxis, drawing from life and depicting specific characters are all considered *xizuo* (it is precisely because these are considered *xizuo* that one can capture the object without subjective intervention). Only when depicting an event, a scenario, or a narrative is a work considered a *chuangzuo*. In creative art, other than ‘representing something’, the problem of ‘how to represent’ tugs deeply in the minds of many artists and art historians. The impressionists’ advancement in the use of colour is undeniable: can you call their sketches mere *xizuo*? To call pretentious narrative paintings ‘*xizuo*’ would actually be more appropriate.”¹⁸³

Chuangzuo and *xizuo* were two modes of art teaching that were established soon after the founding of the PRC, when the socialist art cadres took over and politicised art academies. Julia Andrews has described the difference between the two:

“*Chuangzuo* emphasised subject matter and composition, the question of how one produces a finished work of art to serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers. Ideology and art would come together in the finished work...(*Chuangzuo* class) was taught by experienced revolutionary artists...*Xizuo*, the second form of instruction, was considered less important. The class emphasised technique and was taught by

¹⁸³ Wu Guanzhong, “Huihua de xingshi mei”, translated by Michelle Wang, in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese art: Primary Documents*, 2010, p.14. Wang translated *chuangzuo* to “creative composition” and *xizuo* to “daily practice.” In this thesis, I use “creation” as the translation of *chuangzuo*, and “study and practice” as *xizuo*, which differ from Wang’s translation. Therefore, I use Chinese pinyin in the quotation.

specialists...”¹⁸⁴

One can tell from the categorisation that it was more of a political arrangement than an educational requirement. Only the politically correct themes and scenarios were considered *chuangzuo*, for example, those relating to factory workers, peasants, and soldiers, all in the context of socialist revolution or socialist construction. In contrast, the artistic creation for technical exploration, for instance, one which focused on the exploration of colour, was considered *xihou* and given less importance.

The difference between *chuangzuo* and *xizuo* implies the distinction between *neirong* 内容 (content) and *xingshi* 形式 (form) in the socialist context. The political correctness of content had always been the priority in socialist realist art, and this might come from Marxist theory. In the book, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), Terry Eagleton has referred to how Marx developed the argument on content and form based on Hegel’s aesthetic theory:

“Both thinkers (Marx and Hegel) shared the same belief that artistic form is not a mere quirk on the part of the individual artist. Forms are historically determined by the “content” they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down and revolutionized as that content itself changes. “Content” is in this sense prior to “form”, just as for Marxism it is change in a society’s material “content”, its mode of production, which determines the “form” of its superstructure.”¹⁸⁵

Adopting Marxism as the theoretical principle, the policy makers of the PRC inherited the priority of content over form in the fields of literature and arts. As Zheng Gong 郑工 has stated in his study on Chinese socialist art:

“Socialist countries...are highly totalitarian in politics. Their art needs to serve the proletarian politics, serve socialism and the people. Socialist realism therefore...embodies certain fundamental principles, for example, ‘put the political criterion first and artistic criterion second’, ‘content determines form’, ‘popularisation comes first’, ‘life is the fountainhead of artistic creation’.”

社会主义国家...要求政治上的高度统一，必须要求文艺为无产阶级政治服务，为社会主义服务，为人民大众服务。因此，社会主义现实主义...产生“政治标准第一，艺术标

¹⁸⁴ Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, p. 57.

¹⁸⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Routledge, 1976, p. 21.

准第二”，“内容决定形式”，“普及第一”，“生活是艺术创作的唯一源泉”等一系列社会主义现实主义文艺的基本创作原则和基本理论命题。¹⁸⁶

Chinese socialist art that highlighted its content for political purposes went to extremes during the Cultural Revolution. The portraiture of Mao was canonised by artists as the most legitimate theme to choose, an example of which was the oil painting, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* 毛主席去安源 (Maozhuxi qu Anyuan, 1967, Fig. 4.1).¹⁸⁷ As can be seen in the painting, Mao was presented in a heroic pose, in his move to Anyuan (where Mao successfully organised a miners' strike in 1922). Mao's face appears striking, with the artists' emphasis on the shade of his eyebrows to present the revolutionary leader's determined attitude. A panorama of landscape was depicted by the artists in the background. It appears as if Mao is standing on the top of mountains and just below the clouds, which creates a divine atmosphere to set off the revolutionary action Mao was going to take.

As revealed in the portrait, certain exaggerations, for example, the graphic structure of Mao's face, the artificially arranged clouds, and the panoramic landscape, were favoured due to their purpose of emphasizing Mao's heroic image, hence serving the socialist propaganda. It was the content of the painting (*Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan*) that determined the art form. The painting was treated as a model of socialist art: both the theme and the painting style were taken as doctrine during the Cultural Revolution.

In spite of the efforts he made to adapt to the cultural and political climate of the time, Wu would never have been able to create any work on a “politically correct” theme such as *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*. His artistic training, aesthetic preferences and indeed, personal temperament, prevented him from fully embracing art that was created solely for the purpose of political propaganda. It is therefore understandable that, when Wu sensed the first opportunity to express his artistic beliefs, he addressed the highly political categorisation of *chuangzuo* and *xizuo*, and *neirong* and *xingshi* in his 1979 article. Under the circumstances, Wu's advocacy of *xingshimei* 形式美 (formal aesthetics) took on a politically charged tone:

¹⁸⁶ Zheng Gong, *Yanjin yu yundong: zhongguo meishu de xiandaihua (1875-1976)* 演进与运动: 中国美术的现代化 (1875-1976) (Developments and Movements: the modernisation of Chinese art: 1875-1976), Nanning: Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 2000, P. 266.

¹⁸⁷ Liu Chunhua 刘春华 (b. 1944) conducted the painting under the decision made in a collective studio, more information, see Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, pp. 338-339.

“Aesthetics – formal aesthetics – is already a science that can be analysed and dissected. Analyses of the models and methods of successful artists or artworks have long been standard content in Western art schools. But in our nation’s art schools, they are still prohibited. The ignorance that young students have about this fundamental knowledge is astonishing! It’s worth considering the discontent that erupted in the art world when nineteenth-century French pastoral landscapes were first exhibited. Why is it that we must, in an age when satellites are orbiting the skies, only show foreign streamers! Many art workers hope to show European modern painting in order to fully engage with the science behind formal aesthetics. This is the microscope and scalpel of art. We need to use them to culminate our tradition, to fully develop our tradition. Oil painting must become Chinese; Chinese painting must modernise.”¹⁸⁸

It is worth noting that there is also a debate regarding the priority of “content” or “form” in Western art theory. The advocates of formalism are perhaps best represented in the art theory of Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), whereas those who believed that content was determinative, as aforementioned, had been influenced by the theories of Hegel and Marx.¹⁸⁹ However, the theoretical debate was not the main point of Wu’s article. Instead, it was the “political” tone that was highlighted in Wu’s argument for promoting “formal aesthetics”. By declaring the “need” to culminate and develop Chinese artistic tradition, and by proposing that “Chinese painting must modernise”, Wu’s argument on formal aesthetics transcended the artistic debate about content and form, to a declaration calling for the prioritised status of formal aesthetics. As such, Wu’s argument on formal aesthetics bore a political quality, which aimed to contend for the priority that the socialist content had long dominated in Chinese art circle. Although Wu repeatedly aired his dissatisfaction with the “politics” of Chinese socialist art, his address ironically bore a political quality as well.

In order to better understand Wu’s politically charged tone entailed in his formal aesthetics, a little background information about the political quality of avant-garde art may be helpful. The avant-gardeness embodied in Western modernist art is a quality that provided modernist art with a radical character. The radicalness makes sense when one considers how

¹⁸⁸ Wu Guanzhong, “Huihua de xingshimei”, in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese art: Primary Documents*, 2010, p. 16.

¹⁸⁹ More information of formalism, see Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History, The Problems of the development of Style in Early Modern Art*, translated by Jonathan Blower, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015.

the term avant-garde was introduced to be used in modernism. The pioneer in introducing the term from French to English in the rhetoric of art was Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825). In Saint-Simon's utopian idea of a social system, artists should be the intellectuals who provide and spread new ideas to society:

“We artists will serve you as an avant-garde, the power of the arts is most immediate: when we want to spread new ideas we inscribe them on marble or canvas. What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function and of marching in the van (i.e. vanguard) of all the intellectual faculties!”¹⁹⁰

In this way, the term avant-garde began to be used to describe the art that was most pioneering. David Cottington has summarised the arts labelled as avant-garde in his study of the avant-garde: “art practice (in its broader sense) that sought to say something new in its time, to acknowledge the implications and potential of new (including popular, mass) media, to stake a claim for aesthetic authority, or to challenge prevailing values.”¹⁹¹ In Cottington's definition, one can see the quintessence of avant-garde art is not just provision and dissemination of new ideas to society, but also “challenging prevailing values” that dominated the society at that moment by seeking the “aesthetic authority.” In this way, the term avant-garde embodies two qualities at the same time: up-to-date and subversive. Any avant-garde idea has to be pioneering to be able to challenge the orthodox art genres.

Emphasising the social task of challenging the orthodox art genres, avant-garde art has already been embedded with a political quality. In the book, *Art-as-Politics*, Annette Cox has discussed the artistic practice of the Abstract Expressionists that prevailed in the American art world after the Second World War, in order to examine the political implication of their artistic undertaking:

“The Abstract Expressionists believed that art should reveal the barren and oppressive nature of modern capitalist society. But, though they agreed with these radicals about the condition of the modern world, they remained determined to retain their

¹⁹⁰ “Avant-Garde”, see more information: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/avant-garde>, last access on 28 October 2018.

¹⁹¹ David Cottington, *The Avant-Garde, A very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 4.

autonomy. They had become distrustful of those that demanded a direct relationship between art and political or aesthetic ideology.”¹⁹²

Therefore, for Abstract Expressionists, art was still for the purpose of presenting their dissatisfaction with social reality. In other words, art was still political, considering its creative purpose was to address the artist’s dissent. Abstract Expressionists stood by the side and kept a cool distance from the world of politics. They used avant-garde art as a weapon to fight against the political ideology on art. Indeed they retained artistic autonomy, but the nature of their art was still political.¹⁹³

As much as the quality of “autonomy” has been attached to avant-garde art and has been proudly claimed as the quintessence of it, there are critics who maintain that the purpose of avant-garde art is, by nature, to fulfil the needs of the society. How can an art genre be political by remaining non-political? The radical nature of avant-garde art from the beginning bears such an ambiguity. Matei Calinescu has recognised the ambiguity of avant-garde art in his book on modernity:

“On the one hand, the (avant-garde) artist enjoys the honor of being in the forefront of the movement toward social prosperity; on the other, he is no longer free but, on the contrary, given – by the same political philosopher who so generously proclaimed him a leader – a whole program to fulfill, and a completely didactic one, at that.”¹⁹⁴

By pinpointing the paradoxical roles that an avant-garde artist was obligated to play, Matei Calinescu has, in addition, argued that the social obligation of avant-garde artists was therefore reminiscent of what socialist realists were supposed to do.¹⁹⁵ In terms of the didactic role that artists played in society, Calinescu saw that avant-garde artists and socialist realist artists shared a common ground. They were both conscious of their social importance as pioneers, who utilised art to promote social improvement. Regardless of their divergent affiliations to official institutes, their drive remained the same.

¹⁹² Annette Cox, *Art-as-Politics the Abstract Expressionist Avant-Garde and Society*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982, p. 6.

¹⁹³ More information in Annette Cox, *Art-as-Politics*, 1982, pp. 1-13.

¹⁹⁴ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 2nd edition, Duke University Press Books, 1987, p. 103.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 103.

Another perspective on the politics of avant-garde is found in questioning the apolitical façade of abstract expressionism in the context of postwar politics. In their article, “Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting”, David and Cecile Shapiro sharply point out that, in spite of the “free” and “apolitical” labels commonly tagged on the artwork of the American abstract expressionists, the titles of their works and the patronage of their exhibitions revealed their close connection with the official ideology of America in the propaganda war against communism.¹⁹⁶

Therefore, when Wu raised the flag of “formal aesthetics” to fight against the dominance of socialist realism, he was not addressing his disagreement on the “political” quality in socialist art. He was proposing to elevate the status of formal aesthetics to a level as dominant as socialist realism. He was calling for the promotion of art form and artistic vocabularies. By advocating the supremacy of art creation, Wu’s theory of formal aesthetics bore a strong political quality from its beginning.

¹⁹⁶ David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro, “Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting,” in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, Ellen G. Landau ed., Yale University Press, 2005, pp. 338-345. More information on the politics of abstract expressionism, see Erika Doss, Benton, *Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism*, 1st edition, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp. 311-423.

4.2 Political Correctness in Wu Guanzhong's Formal Aesthetics

It is worth noting that in the cultural climate of the PRC, any political rhetoric implied in an artistic endeavor carries a high risk. During the Cultural Revolution, there was a thaw in the Chinese art world in the early 1970s. With the objective of improving China's image on the international stage, Premier Zhou Enlai proposed to summon a number of artists back to Beijing and other major cities to produce paintings. The artists were commissioned to produce paintings for hotels and restaurants, where foreign delegations would likely stay or visit. They also collectively produced a catalogue, *Zhongguohua* 中国画 (Chinese-style painting), for export and international consumption.¹⁹⁷ However, this artistic activity conflicted with the authority of the Gang of Four and was subsequently attacked. The attack resulted in an exhibition about Black Paintings (referring to mostly ink paintings that were criticised) in the Great Hall of the People and at the National Gallery, in order to expose the artists' "anti-socialist" nature.¹⁹⁸ As mentioned above, this was the so-called "Black Painting Movement".

The most famous painting displayed in the exhibition was Huang Yongyu's *The Winking Owl* 猫头鹰 (Maotouying, Fig. 4.2). Since there was no catalogue of the exhibition published, no official record exists to show the details of the painting, *Winking Owl*.¹⁹⁹ However, it was more for the subject matter than for the painting style, that the artwork was maligned in the Black Painting Movement. The owl was depicted by Huang with one eye open and the other closed. This was explained in the Black Painting Movement as "hatred of socialist revolution and proletarian revolution" 仇恨社会主义革命现实, 仇恨无产阶级大革命 (Chouhen shehuizhuyi geming xianshi, chouhen wuchanjieji dageming).²⁰⁰ Although it is

¹⁹⁷ 吴继金 Wu Jijin, "Wenge houqi pi heihua naoju" 文革后期批黑画闹剧 (The story of the Black Painting Movement in the Cultural Revolution), *Wenshi yuekan* 文史月刊 (History monthly), no. 12 (2003), p. 30.

¹⁹⁸ 李辉 Li Hui, "Zhuixun heihua shijian shimo" 追寻"黑画事件"始末 (Investigating the Black Painting Movement), *Shucheng zazhi* 书城杂志 (Book town), no. 8 (2008): 68.

¹⁹⁹ There is no record of the original painting of Huang's *Winking Owl* exhibited in the show. See Huang's Same-motif-paintings in Li Hui, "Zhuixun heihua shijian shimo", 2008, pp. 63, 65, 74.

²⁰⁰ More information, see in Li Hui, "Zhuixun heihua shijian shimo", 2008, p. 72.

generally considered ridiculous to denounce a painting, which seemed almost harmless, I agree with Ellen Laing's argument that such an assumption might be a bit "naive". Laing has pointed out that the bird was generally accepted as the sender of an ominous signal: "The ominous connotations of the owl and the symbolic association that might be made between Mao's waning years and Jiang Qing's (Mao's wife) waxing political power surely figured in the castigation of this painting and its maker."²⁰¹ In my view, in addition to the complicated symbolism and the ominousness suggested by the owl, the gesture of the bird was also reminiscent of the Chinese idiom *Zheng yizhi yan, bi yizhi yan* 睁一只眼,闭一只眼 (turn a blind eye), which usually indicates a passive onlooker's attitude when an incident occurs. The satirical thrust of the painting might not be directly related to any important political figure. However, considering the overall circumstances in the art world during the Cultural Revolution, such a display of passiveness was surely an easy target. To add a further touch of irony, the *Winking Owl* was not even Huang's formal work. Huang recalled that it was completed as a casual sketch for a friend's leaf album.²⁰² It is highly unlikely that the artist would openly express his criticism of the Cultural Revolution in a friend's get-together. But the *Winking Owl* example highlights the intellectuals' vulnerability in an environment overrun with extreme "political factions", in which a subject of the slightest sensitivity could be utilised as a political weapon.

In the 1980s, when Wu publicly took the socialist art ideology to task, the political environment was no less changeable than it was during the Cultural Revolution. The only difference was the political fervour of the Cultural Revolution was replaced by the phenomenon of "Culture Fever" 文化热 (*wenhua re*). Culture Fever was one of the "fevers" that emerged in the 1980s Chinese intellectual circles, along with, for example, *congshu re* 丛书热 (book series fever), *zhishi re* 知识热 (knowledge fever), and *yishixingtai re* 意识形态热 (ideology fever). It was a phenomenon that prevailed among the intellectuals, who debated topics ranging from Chinese tradition, history, philosophy, and aesthetics to politics. Publications and conferences blossomed during this time with focuses on introducing Western modern theories and examining traditional Chinese culture. Culture Fever spread not only in universities but also in unofficial cultural institutions, among not only prominent scholars but also ordinary people, who were concerned with the future of their nation.

²⁰¹ Ellen Johnson Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 1989, p. 86.

²⁰² Li Hui, "Zhuixun heihua shijian shimo", 2008, p. 66.

There are disagreements in terms of how to understand the ‘Culture Fever’. Edward Gu argues that a certain level of cultural plurality and a degree of detachment from orthodox Marxism emerged due to the intellectuals’ endeavor.²⁰³ In contrast, scholars such as Li Zehou 李泽厚 and Ma Licheng 马立诚, pinpoint the political nature of Cultural Fever as being hidden under the cover of cultural discussions. For example, Li Zehou noted in his interview: “The essence of the 1980s Culture Fever is ‘Politics Fever’. People were enthusiastic about cultural issues. But their actual concern was the issue of Deng’s reforms and the related sociopolitical problems.”²⁰⁴ Ma Licheng in his study has called the culture discussion “politics as anti-politics” 反政治的政治 (Fan zhengzhi de zhengzhi).²⁰⁵ I agree with the viewpoint that Culture Fever should be studied beyond the level of cultural discussion. Although there was indeed philosophical plurality emerging during these heated discussions, as well as a certain level of detachment from orthodox Marxism, the criticism of traditional Chinese culture should be studied from the perspective of conforming with, rather than undermining, Deng Xiaoping’s policy for promoting economic reform.

Wu published “Formal aesthetics in painting” in 1979, when the Cultural Revolution had officially ended, and when Deng had already launched the economic reforms, which aimed to achieve “modernisation” of the whole country. However, Wu must have understood very well the considerable risk he took for explicitly criticising the ossified doctrines in socialist realism, such as “content determining form” and the priority of *chuangzuo* over *xizuo*. He had undoubtedly experienced enough to realise the danger of any criticism against the dominant ideology, after decades of seeking to reconcile his artistic pursuit with socialist realism. Wu worked with Huang Yongyu on the painting of *Ten Thousand Miles of the Yangzi River* just before Huang’s *Winking Owl* was attacked during the Black Painting Movement. Therefore, witnessing Huang’s downfall would have taught him a lesson. All things considered, Wu would have been quite aware of the potential danger that his own

²⁰³ Edward Gu, “Cultural Intellectuals and the Politics of the Cultural Public Space in Communist China (1979-1989): A Case Study of Three Intellectual Groups”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 58, no. 2 (May, 1999), pp. 389-431.

²⁰⁴ Li Zehou 李泽厚, “Lixiang, jiqing he xiwang de niandai” 理想、激情和希望的年代 (The times of ideal, passion and hope), *Nandu zhoukan* 南都周刊 (Southern Metropolis weekly), 20 January 2006, p. 5.

²⁰⁵ Ma Licheng 马立诚, *Dangdai zhongguo bazhong shehui sichao* 当代中国八种社会思潮 (Eight social trends in contemporary China), Beijing: Shehuikexue wenxian chubanshe, 2011, p. 128.

publication was likely to court. Under such circumstances, it was necessary that Wu keep in check the critical rhetoric in his theory of formal aesthetics.

Wu's ability to maintain political balance, in spite of personal turmoil, is reflected in Wu's objective opinion of Jiang Feng, who had advocated the categorisation of *chuangzuo* and *xizuo*, when his political power was at its peak in the early 1950s. Holding a decisive will to reform Chinese art for socialist construction, Jiang had only advocated art genres that served the revolutionary purpose. In his speech in 1953, Jiang explicitly pointed out that *chuangzuo* mainly referred to *Nianhua* 年画 (Chinese New Year poster) and *lianhuanhua* 连环画 (serial comic books).²⁰⁶ Meanwhile, he expressed a high dissatisfaction with the art genres created merely "for art's sake", which fell into his criterion of *xizuo*. Under those circumstances, many modernist artists were exiled, criticised and required to remold themselves, so as to better serve socialism and the people. The closure of the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts was one example of Jiang's iron-handed endeavor of stamping out dissent.²⁰⁷ It is therefore fair to say that Wu's hardship, that resulted from the deemed incompatibility of his own artistic work with socialist realism, was attributable to the overly rigid artistic criterion, which Jiang made every effort to promote. Therefore, Wu had every reason to hold a grudge-against the party official, who had made his art career difficult, and to express his resentment publicly, especially after Jiang suffered during the Anti-Rightist campaign and the Cultural Revolution. However, Wu never badmouthed Jiang, even when Jiang lost all political power:

"Jiang was Secretary of the Party Committee of the CAFA, when I was transferred there. He took the wheel and grabbed the absolute institutional power. As a senior cadre from Yan'an, Jiang's words used to monopolise not only the academy but also the entire Chinese art world. He was resolute in defending revolutionary art and socialist realism. Undoubtedly a "capitalist formalist" such as me became the main target of his revolutionary policy. But personally, I found him very upright. For example, he always talked about the inferior status that artwork was put in conference agendas. He was specifically dissatisfied, when they did not have time to discuss it. He even publicly criticised that Minister of Culture Qian Junrui was a layman, when it

²⁰⁶ Jiang Feng, "Sinian lai meishu gongzuo de zhuangkuang he quanguo meixie jinhou de renwu" 四年来美术工作的状况和全国美协今后的任务 (The development of Chinese art for the past four years, and the future task of the CAA), *Meishu*, no. 1 (1954), p. 5.

²⁰⁷ More information on the closure of the Shanghai Academy of Art, see Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, 1995, pp. 53-56.

came to art. We all felt that Jiang was very bold...Hence it was a hideous irony that Jiang was categorised as ‘rightist’ during the Anti-Rightist campaign. It was said because of his disagreement on *guohua*, which caused unemployment of many artists. But shouldn’t such a stand be counted as ‘leftist’? How possible was it that such a stand was categorised as ‘rightist’? No one knows the whole story. However, it was true that Jiang was criticised as ‘rightist’. He disappeared for a while afterwards. Long after I found a note on my door: ‘greetings from Jiang Feng’. I was truly surprised and sorry for being out and missing him. The other day we ran into each other on *Huguosi* Street. We were friendly with each other. I apologised about missing him. He praised my landscape painting, and said that it was not the best time for exhibitions now... He was resolute in his faith believing with all his heart. The decisions he had made had nothing to do with his own personal interests.”

我被调离中央美术学院时正值江丰任院党委书记，即第一把手，大权在握。他是延安来的老革命，岂止美术学院，他的言行实际上左右中国整个美术界。毫无疑问，他是坚定保卫革命文艺，现实主义美术的中流砥柱，我这样的“资产阶级文艺观的形式主义者”当然是他排斥的对象。但我感到他很正直，处事光明磊落。他经常谈到文化部开会总在最后才议及美术，甚至临近散会就没时间议了。他在中央美术学院礼堂全院师生会上公开批评文化部长没有文化。当时文化部长是钱俊瑞，大家佩服江丰革命资历深，有胆量...但反右时，绝对左派的江丰被划为右派，这真是莫大的讽刺。据说因为他反对国画，认为国画不能为人民服务。国画教师几乎都失业了。但这不是极左吗？如何能成为右派的罪证呢？详情不知，但他确实成了右派。反右后，他销声匿迹了。很久很久以后...我的住所门上出现过一张字条：江丰来访。我很愕然，也遗憾偏偏出门错过了这一奇缘。不久，在护国寺大街上遇见了江丰，大家很客气，我致歉他的枉驾，他赞扬我的风景画画得很有特色，可以展览，但现在还不到时候...他全心全意为信念，并非私念。²⁰⁸

Considering the hardship that Wu had experienced, it would have been nothing but normal to deal out harsh criticisms against Jiang, especially when Jiang was labelled as “rightist” and lost all power. But Wu on the contrary chose not to ‘spit on Jiang’s grave’ but instead stood by his side. In spite of the unfairness resulting from Jiang’s policy that Wu experienced, he was able to be objective in regard to their divergent artistic opinions. Although highly dissatisfied with Jiang’s political categorisation of the art genres, Wu retained a fair balance in his criticism and never made it personal.

²⁰⁸ Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, pp.91-92.

A proclivity toward balance is also evident in Wu's theory of formal aesthetics: he maintained a critical position on the socialist ideology that restricted art creation, while keeping a critical distance from formalism in Western art theory. In his 1983 article "Neirong jue ding xingshi?" 内容决定形式? (Does content determine form?), Wu explicitly addressed the misguided notion that art creation should merely serve the purpose of propaganda: "Art is considered as merely a method to express the content." 美术也就被认为只是永远听从“内容”指使的手段。²⁰⁹ He advocated art form as an antidote to the overemphasis on content: "We art workers' job is formal expression, which is also what we suffer from." 我们这些美术手艺人，我们工作的主要方面是形式，我们的苦难也在形式之中。²¹⁰ He rejected the absolute domination of realism:

"'Lifelikeness' almost becomes the superior standard of an artwork! I am not completely opposing the requirement of verisimilitude, but there is no way it is the exclusive or superior standard of art creation... The value of art rests in its creativity."

“栩栩如生”，几乎成为我们赞扬美术作品的至高标准了！我并不笼统地反对模仿客观外貌真实的要求，但这不是造型艺术的最高标准，更不是唯一标准，艺术贵在无中生有。²¹¹

Indeed, an opposition to the dominance of realism stood at the centre of Wu's theory of formal aesthetics. As art critic Wang Lin 王林 has pointed out:

"Wu's formal theory is practical. It appears to stress the importance of art form to the artists, art creation and art criticism. But its real target is the decade-long political restriction on art. What it targets is the so-called socialist realism that hung in artists' heads."

吴冠中的形式理论是实践性的。从表面上看，是强调形式美，抽象美对于艺术家，对于美术创作和美术教育的极端重要性，但实际上吴冠中针对的是几十年来整治对艺术的制约，针对的是高悬于艺术家头上的所谓社会主义，现实主义理论。²¹²

²⁰⁹ Wu Guanzhong, "Neirong jue ding xingshi?" 内容决定形式? (Does content determine form?), originally published in *Meishu*, no. 3 (1983); also see in *Meishu*, no. 9 (2010), p. 42.

²¹⁰ Ibid, p. 42.

²¹¹ Ibid, p. 43.

²¹² Wang Lin, "Zhishifenzi de tianzhi shi tuifan chengjian: Wu Guanzhong xiezuo shengya yu yishu lunzheng", in Shui Zhongtian and Wang Hua, eds., *Wu Guanzhong quanji*, 2007, p. 14.

In spite of Wu's reiteration of the significance of form, Wu's formal theory fundamentally differs from the concept of formalism in Western art theory. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, formalism is "a term used in the discussion of the arts to describe an approach (on behalf of creator or critic) in which the formal qualities of a work—such as line, shape, and colour—are regarded as self-sufficient for its appreciation, and all other considerations—such as representational, ethical, or social aspects—are treated as secondary or redundant."²¹³ Therefore, one can see that "self-sufficiency" of the formal qualities is essential in formalism. This is where Wu held a different opinion:

"I emphasise the independence of art form, and hope to make the exploration of art form as much as possible, because of my disagreement on the doctrine of 'content determining form'. However, I personally am not in favour of the pure art form, which lacks *yijing*. I do not think form itself is the destination."

我强调形式美的独立性，希望尽量发挥形式手段，不能安分于‘形式决定内容’的窠臼里。但是我个人并不喜爱缺乏意境的形式，也不认为形式就是归宿。²¹⁴

Here Wu clarified his standpoint that form was not the destination for the artist to pursue. His emphasis of the importance of form rested in his strong dissatisfaction with the dominance of "content", especially the content that exclusively served socialist propaganda. By embracing the term *yijing*, Wu expanded his formal theory, from criticism against socialist realism, to a comprehensive system that incorporated other aesthetic aspects to which he paid equal attention. Wu also referred to *yijing* in the article "Formal aesthetics in painting", for expanding his formal theory:

"I also hope to see more independent works of art, which possess their own *yijing* of formal beauty and aren't saddled with added obligations to preach. When I see some of the frescoes by the French painter Chavannes, I am drawn into their image of a silent world: a forest, people lost in thought, flocks of sheep, and a light boat gently floating across a small stream...I have entirely forgotten the topic of each work, and at the time, I didn't want to understand them either, but rather revelled in the image of the artist's *yijing*. I call these works 'untitled'...The 'untitled'-ness of a painting is

²¹³ Ian Chilvers, "Formalism", *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, 5th edition, 2015, see online source: <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191782763.001.0001/acref-9780191782763-e-889>, last access on 10 October 2018.

²¹⁴ Wu Guanzhong, "Neirong jue ding xingshi?", originally published in *Meishu*, no. 3 (1983); also see in *Meishu*, no. 9 (2010), p. 43.

easy to understand: because the beauty of an image often cannot be substituted by language, why must one use language to interfere with the silence of beauty?”²¹⁵

Here, Wu’s formal theory with the incorporation of *yijing* is fully unfolded. The reason why Wu refused to pursue pure formalism was his particular understanding of the function that art form and painting vocabulary served. Just like the example of Chavannes’s landscape painting that he gave, “forest”, “people lost in thought”, “flocks of sheep”, and “a light boat” composed an image of tranquillity that did not need a title. These painting objects are hardly considered as “form” in art theory. But in Wu’s perception, they worked for conveying the *yijing* of serenity, and more importantly, did not work for any political purpose. As such, Wu’s formal theory is also embedded with his emphasis on the “personal feelings”, as stated in the same article:

“Artists must at least possess the ability to sketch objects, but the critical question is whether or not s/he is able to capture the object’s beauty. Logic requires pure objectivity; emotions tend toward personal feelings, nurturing misconception. Strictly requiring training for objective pictorialization does not always lead to art; it is sometimes actually the wrong route, the lost route, or even the route that runs in the opposite direction from art.”²¹⁶

Wu’s statement of “personal feelings” here can be seen as the central control to apply forms and painting vocabularies, and hence to achieve *yijing*. Just as Wu explained his multiple perspectives by pointing out the importance of personal feelings, here in his theory of formal aesthetics, personal feelings once again played a pivotal role. For Wu, if an artist was able to capture the “beauty” he or she need not rely on skillful ability to sketch objects, but on how freely he/she was able to artistically convey the personal feelings in painting. As such, Wu completed his formal theory not only by proposing the importance of art form, but also by incorporating other critical concepts into his art theory, such as “personal feelings” and *yijing*. Wu’s formal aesthetics became a syncretism of all he had explored and practiced in his art career, while positioning itself at a distance from formalism in Western art theory.

²¹⁵ Wu Guanzhong, “Formal aesthetics in painting”, in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 2010, p. 17. Michelle Wang translated *yijing* to “spirit consonance” in the article. I disagree on the translation, because the corresponding translation of “spirit consonance” in Chinese is *qiyun* 气韵, the definition of which differs from *yijing*. I hence choose to use *yijing* in the quotation.

²¹⁶ Wu Guanzhong, “Formal aesthetics in painting”, in Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 2010, p. 15.

Wu's explicit criticism of *chuangzuo*, prioritizing *xizuo*, and *xingshi* determining *neirong*, was groundbreaking in the Chinese art field of the 1980s. His discussion enabled other artists and critics to be conscious of the political categorisations of the two pairs of terms, and become aware of the highly restricted environment of artistic creation at the time. Thanks to Wu's reiteration of formal aesthetics, artists and critics began to pay more attention to the independence of form, such as line, shape, and colour in pictorial composition. More importantly, the uniqueness of Wu's formal theory, such as its incorporation of personal feelings, and *yijing*, inspired his contemporaries to explore formal aesthetics, not for the purpose of serving socialist propaganda, but for individual expression. As art historian Wu Hung has stated:

“This French-trained art professor (Wu Guanzhong) challenged the official doctrine of ‘content determining form’ and encouraged artists to discover abstract beauty in nature and real life. His proportions provoked numerous responses in *Meishu* and other journals over the next several years. Related to this debate, some artists and critics also tried to associate artistic creativity with individual originality, rather than the collective ideology sanctioned in official aesthetic theory.”²¹⁷

Wu Hung's linking of Wu Guanzhong with the awakening of individual originality against the dominance of collective ideology is significant in that individual originality indeed prevailed in the Chinese art world afterwards. The No Name Painting Group 无名画会 (Wuming huahui) and The Star Group 星星画会 (Xingxing huahui) were the forerunners, followed by other artists and art critics launching the 1985 New Art Movement '85 新潮运动 (Bawu xinchao yundong).²¹⁸ They endeavored to convey their individuality through various media, such as sculpture, installation, video and performance. Like Wu Hung, many art historians consider this movement as the start of “contemporary Chinese art”, and an important milestone in Chinese art history.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Wu Hung, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 2010, p.14.

²¹⁸ More information see Lü Peng, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2009, pp. 761-832.

²¹⁹ More information, see Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2014; and Lü Peng, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China*, 2009.

While Wu Hung might be hinting at an unacknowledged contribution that Wu Guanzhong may have made towards the birth of contemporary Chinese art, it is worth noting that Wu's art practice always kept a certain distance from the younger generation of avant-garde artists. Wu was sixty years old when he addressed the theory of formal aesthetics, whereas most of the key figures in the contemporary art movement, such as Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957), Wang Guangyi 王广义 (b. 1952), and Li Xianting 栗宪庭 (b. 1949) grew up during the era of the PRC and were only in their thirties in the 1980s. Wu's life experience and art path were fundamentally different from most of these avant-garde artists and critics. Decades of ups and downs, from the Republican to the socialist era, provided Wu with a longer, more balanced perspective on the trajectory of Chinese art. He served as a bridge between the old and the new worlds, between Chinese and Western art, between tradition and modernity – a role that is easily overlooked and easily misunderstood.

4.3 Painting as Political Balancing Act

How Wu managed to voice his balanced political rhetoric is best presented in his ink painting, *Ruins of Gaochang* 高昌遗址 (Gaochang yizhi, Fig. 4.3). It was created in 1981, when Wu made a *xiasheng* journey in Xinjiang. Gaochang 高昌 is an historic city located in Xinjiang, and was an important trade site on the Silk Road in the Tang Dynasty. *Ruins of Gaochang* was depicted in different tonality from Wu's other ink paintings referred to above. There is no tender atmosphere in the picture. Only strong colours and heavy brushwork were applied. The ruins of the ancient city of Gaochang take up the largest proportion in the foreground of the painting. The artist painted the remains as though they were boulders and rocks, not ruins of houses, cramped together. Dense and heavy brushstrokes were made by Wu to enhance the intensity of the contours of the object. As for the colour application, Wu used brown, tan and beige to enrich the layers of the ruins. Mountains were depicted in the background, rendered in ochre and reddish-brown. Wu said it was the Flaming Mountains 火焰山 (huoyanshan) that he had painted:

“(I) decided to use the Flaming Mountains as the background of the painting. Geographically, the Flaming Mountains are far from the ruins. But in our minds, they were a couple standing hand in hand under the scorching sun forever. I was trying to depict the Gaochang city devastated by the heat. And I had an imagination of Xuanzang 玄奘 monk travelling through the city when painting it. I was trying to recreate an image of Gaochang in its moment of glory by presenting the dessicated remains.”

(我)将火焰山移来作高昌的背景，现实中她们永不相见，但人们心中她们长相伴，在灼热中共存亡，我想表现亡于灼热天宇的高昌，从高昌念及玄奘，从干裂的遗志中窥探玄奘时代繁华的故国高昌。²²⁰

The way Wu depicted the Flaming Mountains indeed brought dynamism to the painting. The fierce colours are reminiscent of magma and flames bursting out of the mountain toward the city, full of heat. It is worth noting the geographical distance between the Gaochang ruins and the Flaming Mountains, which as Wu noted, made them impossible

²²⁰Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 54.

to be depicted together in a painting. It was multiple perspectives that Wu applied for the composition of this painting. In terms of the artistic effect, indeed, such a composition achieved a strength and richness in painting that probably would not have been achieved from any fixed-point perspective. The brown, tan and beige colours of the boulders match the reddish-brown lines which bring a dynamism onto the paper.

More importantly, the appropriation of the Flaming Mountains conveyed an implicit reference to Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664), a Buddhist monk of the Tang Dynasty, whose name was world famous for his journeys between China and India to promote interactions of Buddhist culture. Although history does record that the monk Xuanzang indeed travelled through the Flaming Mountains on his journey between China and India, this story would not be well known in modern China without the popularity of the novel, *The Journey to the West* 西游记 (Xiyouji).²²¹ Just as Wu's visualisation of Jiangnan was more attributable to Lu Xun's *Guxiang* than any literati paintings produced in the ancient era, this idea of appropriating the Flaming Mountains to set off the ruins of Gaochang was very likely inspired by the fictional account of Xuanzang in *The Journey to the West*, rather than by history itself. In addition, widespread familiarity with the novel would have enabled ordinary Chinese audiences to appreciate the *yijing* that Wu expressed in the painting. As Wu noted, by appropriating the Flaming Mountains into the picture, he reminded the viewer of Xuanzang, who had traveled through the city, thus "recreating an image of Gaochang in its moment of glory by presenting the desiccated remains." This is the *yijing* that Wu aimed to express.

This *yijing* bears multilayered political implications about Xinjiang. Since officially ruled by the CCP, the exoticism of Xinjiang has been continuously propagated by the Party. Appreciation of its unique climate, landscape and culture has been considered a celebration of Chinese ethnic harmony, where Han Chinese and minority groups live side by side in peaceful co-existence. Landscape paintings of Xinjiang therefore represent the artists' appreciations of the physical beauty of an ethnic minority culture, and to a certain extent, conforms to the Party's minority cultural policy. However, selecting Gaochang, a city in Xinjiang that flourished in early history, as the subject of the painting, suggests representing

²²¹ More information, see Wu Ch'eng-en, *The journey to the West*, translated by Anthony C. Yu, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980, vol. 3, pp. 134-150.

a deeper understanding of the long history of the region beyond the immediate concerns of the PRC ideology. Wu's implicit reference to Xuanzang, who symbolises the cultural prosperity of the Tang Dynasty, may also suggest a more general Chinese cultural pride. Xuanzang's border-crossing journey represents an empire state of mind of the Tang Dynasty, which initiated the religious and cultural interaction in the sixth century. Wu appropriated the Flaming Mountains to set off Gaochang in a backward glance at the unparalleled glory of the Tang Dynasty, when the Han-Chinese, not just politically ruled the greater Asian area, but also acculturated peoples outside the border areas. The subject of Gaochang betrays the cultural pride of a Han-Chinese artist, and brings to the fore the thorny question of art and cultural hegemony.

Other aspects of the painting's *yijing* were also revealed in the theme of the ruins. One might wonder why Wu chose such a theme which seems pessimistic, given that Deng's reforms had just been launched in the country. Nina Lenore Dubin's thesis "Future and Ruins: The Painting of Hubert Robert" (2006) sheds some light on this question. Dubin's study focuses on the French painter Hubert Robert, who was famous for his depiction of ruins in France and Italy. Dubin argues that "ruins exhibited the victory of dynamic processes over stable objects, of contiguity and exigency over integrity and self-sufficiency." Through painting the ruins, according to Dubin, Hubert Robert expressed a sense of uncertainty and contingency of the time, which echoed the critical social change going on in France at the time.²²² In *Ruins of Gaochang*, Wu conveyed the emotional complexity associated with the ruined city. As the artist stated, he was painting the ancient city 'burnt in the flame'. Indeed, such a representation would have created a decadent atmosphere, which would have apparently conflicted with the positive spirit of Deng's reforms. However, the ruins also conjure up an image, to use Dubin's words, of "the victory of dynamic processes over stable objects". In Wu's perception, the past glory of Gaochang would become inevitably engulfed in the ever-lasting river of history. Through appropriating the Flaming Mountains as background and by animating the eruption of the mountains, Wu visualised the historic process of "earth to earth, ashes to ashes" of the once glorious city.

Wu managed to convey his complicated emotions about China, through his subject

²²² Nina Lenore Dubin, "Future and Ruins: The Painting of Hubert Robert", PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006, p. 4.

selection, as well as the artistic vocabulary he employed to express *yijing*. By choosing the theme of the historic remains in Xinjiang, the artist voiced his understanding of the contingency of any regime, vis-à-vis the seemingly perpetual flow of history. His pictorial resurrection of the magnificence of the ancient Gaochang also represented a witnessing of history, which looked on and recorded all the triumphs, tragedies, moments of glory and humiliations. The permanent witness is reminiscent of the people, who were traumatised during the Cultural Revolution and other political turbulence, but whose experiences would never be forgotten by history. As Ethan Prizant has commented, Wu chose his subject “as mute witness of history, sentient reservoir for the accumulation of time and memory, yet ultimately possessing no inherent ambition to alter history’s course.”²²³ However, this was not an entirely pessimistic attitude towards the cultures in history, since Wu’s melancholic portrayal of the historical ruins also related to his optimistic attitude towards the present. Wu’s optimism is revealed through the painting vocabulary, such as the intensive composition and the vigorous brushwork. It speaks of a remarkable liveliness and an unyielding strength that thrive even from disaster. The ruins did not represent the desperation of the “ruined” but an even stronger vitality to flourish from the flame. Through conveying the magnificent *yijing* of the ruins, the painting presented not the sentiment of devastation but a remarkable resilience after disaster.

Ruins of Gaochang therefore implicitly conveyed Wu’s complex political position. What might be an inadvertent conformity with the Party’s minority culture policy is undercut by a veiled criticism of the Party’s political misconduct and the suffering it brings. What appears to be a decadent indulgence in the aesthetics of the ruins is uplifted by a resilience after disaster and a fervent hope for a bright future. Wu’s *Ruins of Gaochang* is not a painting of propaganda. It is an artwork practicing all the theories that the artist had explored and advocated, such as multiple perspectives, the expression of *yijing*, and formal aesthetics, all of which work together to visually declare the artist’s political voice in a bold but balanced tone.

²²³ Ethan Prizant, “Divergent Prophecies for the Nation: Wu Guanzhong, History, and the Global in early 1980s China”, 2012, p. 16.

CHAPTER 5

PATRIOTISM THROUGH ECLECTICISM

IN 1980S CHINESE CULTURAL DISCOURSE

Nothing reveals the aesthetic and political complexity of Wu's syncretism more than his theory of *chouxiangmei* (the aesthetics of abstraction), as espoused in his 1980 article "Guanyu chouxiangmei" 关于抽象美 (On the aesthetics of abstraction). Wu's abstraction theory is based on his understanding of Western abstract art, and agrees with its premise of abstracting form out of painting objects. However, Wu differs from the Western abstraction theory on the relation between abstraction and reality, or on the degree to which abstraction can, and should, go. In stopping short of going 'completely' abstract and losing all discernible connection with reality, Wu described his ideal of abstraction with a famous term – "a kite on a string" 风筝不断线 (*fengzheng bu duanxian*). In his theory, abstraction was "a kite on a string", maintaining a close connection with life and "the people", whereas pure abstract art was "a kite with a broken string", which he deplored as being completely cut off from the real world.

Wu's aesthetics of abstraction emphasises artistic expression and the artist's personal feelings. Thus, he connected abstraction, a concept of Western modernism, with the conception of expression distilled from his study of Chinese literati painting. Wu argued for the essential connection between Western modernist painting and classical Chinese painting, due to their mutual emphasis on abstract forms driven by artistic expression. This argument provoked a phenomenal discussion. While Wu's abstraction theory remains controversial in aesthetic terms, it was his identification of the "modern qualities" inherent in classical Chinese painting that became favoured by the intellectuals of the time, who passionately followed this line of thought. It was the cultural pride that was evoked through Wu's abstraction theory, which was, apart from "political rhetoric", another zeitgeist of the 1980s. Exemplifying an "eclectic approach" to Western artistic and cultural influences that was popular amongst the Chinese intellectuals, Wu's abstraction theory captured the zeitgeist of the 1980s and struck a chord with the nationalistic pride that drove much of Culture Fever of the era.

5.1 Wu Guanzhong's Aesthetics of Abstraction

Wu published an article, “Guanyu chouxiangmei” 关于抽象美 (On the aesthetics of abstraction), in *Meishu* 美术 (Arts) in 1980, focusing on the term *chouxiangmei* 抽象美 (the aesthetics of abstraction), which subsequently caused an intellectual storm in the Chinese art world.²²⁴ Wu afterwards gained a considerable reputation as the forerunner to public discussion of the aesthetics of abstraction after the Cultural Revolution. How to understand the term and Wu's interpretation of it in the essay, therefore merits thorough study. This section examines the term closely, by analysing both Wu's writings and related paintings.

Chouxiang 抽象 (abstraction) in the context of Chinese art is a controversial term, especially in comparison with abstract art in the Western context. Gao Minglu 高名潞 in the article “Zhongguo de chuantong yu dangdai chouxiang yishu” 中国的传统与当代抽象艺术 (Traditional and modern abstract art in China), has argued that the so-called “Chinese abstract art” was fundamentally different from abstract art that was generally accepted in the Western context:

“Chinese abstract art emerged after the end of the Cultural Revolution. It situated itself in opposition to the political art of Mao era...Chinese abstract art therefore can be seen as an art that is apolitical.”

中国当代抽象艺术重生于文化大革命终结之后，它倾向将自己定位在曾经流行于毛泽东时代的政治性主题的对立面...抽象艺术呼吁一种非政治的审美。²²⁵

Gao maintains that the difference of Chinese abstract art lies in the specific context in which it was generated, and that it cannot be understood without this context. The post-Mao

²²⁴ Wu Guanzhong, “Guanyu chouxiangmei” 关于抽象美 (On the aesthetics of abstraction), first published in the *Meishu* 美术, no. 10 (1980): 37-39. See full translation of the article in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

²²⁵ Gao Minglu, “Zhongguo de chuantong yu dangdai chouxiang yishu” 中国的传统与当代抽象艺术 (Traditional and modern abstract art in China), see online resource: https://www.pearllam.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1389770227_中国的传统与当代抽象艺术_高名潞.pdf, last access on 12 October 2018.

era provided Chinese abstract art with a non-political quality, which in Gao's argument, is vital for understanding Chinese abstract art. Gao has therefore pointed out that it is inappropriate to explain Chinese abstract art in terms of Western art theory. He has argued that the aesthetic context in which Western abstract art was generated has never existed in China:

“The abstract art that is understood in Western art theory does not exist in Chinese art. There is almost no such ‘abstract’ work as created by Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Barnett Newman in China, which ‘abstracts’ the structure of the exterior world in the two-dimensional geometrical form.”

在中国当代艺术背景中，西方现代意义的“抽象画”实际上并不存在。在中国，像马列维奇，康定斯基，蒙德里安，纽曼等人的绘画那样将外部世界的结构与精神“抽象化”为极端二维平面的几何形式的“抽象画”在中国几乎没有。²²⁶

Gao believes that the reason for this is that there was not such an “abstraction” practice in Chinese culture from its beginning. In spite of some artists' endeavors to adopt certain “abstract” form to their work, their artistic practice could not be interpreted in terms of Western abstract art. Although Gao's intention was to clarify the specific sociopolitical context in which Chinese abstract art was generated, his opinion reveals his incomplete knowledge of abstract art in Western art history. In fact, artists and art theorists had different opinions on the degree to which a piece of art should be abstracted from the representation of reality. Individuals such as Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Barnett Newman (1905-1970) therefore should not be used to represent all abstract artists' opinions on the issue.²²⁷

In the dissertation, “Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai”, Ha Yoon Jung has expressed her opinion on the post-Mao's context in which Chinese abstract art emerged:

“The variety of art was accelerated as the Chinese art world not only aggressively embraced the massive amount of information about Western modern art entering

²²⁶ Gao Minglu, “Zhongguo de chuantong yu dangdai chouxian yishu”, see online resource: https://www.pearllam.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1389770227_中国的传统与当代抽象艺术_高名潞.pdf, last access on 12 October 2018.

²²⁷ More information, see Paul Crowther, Isabel Wünsche eds., *Meanings of Abstract Art: Between Nature and Theory*, New York and London: Routledge, 2012.

through the wide open doors to Europe and America but also attempted to rediscover their traditional, local art with respect...Against this background, abstract art arose as one of the major new arts among young Chinese artists.”²²⁸

Ha Yoon Jung cautions against the Euromerican hegemony in the definition of “abstract art”. In her argument, such a definition ignores the plurality of abstract art, which she set out to demonstrate through her study of the Shanghai art circles. Similarly to Gao, Ha Yoon Jung has emphasised the plurality of meanings of the term abstract art, and the uniqueness of Chinese abstract art.

In comparison, here is Wu’s understanding of *chouxiangmei*, which he discussed in the article “On the aesthetics of abstraction” in *Meishu* in 1980:

“We need to extract the elements, such as form, colour, light and shadow, out of the objects and conduct scientific analysis and study on them. This is the study of the aesthetics of abstraction. It requires the same humble attitude as which in scientific experiments, like in mathematics or bacteriology.”²²⁹

In Wu’s theory, *chouxiangmei*, or the aesthetics of abstraction, means abstracting the elements that contribute to the formal beauty of the painting objects and presenting them in an artwork. Scholars have considered the specific definition of Wu’s aesthetics of abstraction. Sullivan has commented, “To Wu Guanzhong, abstraction means abstracting the ‘essence’ of the form.”²³⁰ Chen Xiao, a researcher of Wu’s landscape painting, discusses it in an article, “For Wu Guanzhong, ‘abstraction’ is a means to heighten the expressive power of the formal elements of dots, lines, planes and colour. It opens up possibilities of distortion and transformation.” Chen therefore regards Wu’s theory as “formal abstraction”, which emphasises the expression, exaggeration and distortion of art form in painting.²³¹

²²⁸ Ha Yoon Jung, “Abstract Art in 1980s Shanghai”, PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2014, pp. 1-2.

²²⁹ Wu Guanzhong, “On the aesthetics of abstraction”, 1980, see full translation of the article in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

²³⁰ Michael Sullivan, “Wu Guanzhong; Reflections on His Life, Thought, and Art”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, p. 5.

²³¹ Chen Xiao, “China’s Countryside in Formal Abstraction: Wu Guanzhong’s Landscape paintings of the late 1980s”, 2014, p. 24.

One can see that Wu's conception of abstraction concentrated on abstracting art form out of painting objects for the purpose of better presenting the beauty of the exterior world. However, Wu's understanding of abstraction was still rooted in reality. In an 1983 article, Wu likened his pursuit of the aesthetics of abstraction to "a kite on a string" 风筝不断线, to imply the abstract form generated from the reality. Meanwhile, he regarded the pure abstract art as "a kite with a broken string" 断线风筝 (duanxian fengzheng), which he never intended to pursue:

"(The pure abstract art) cuts off the vital string to life, to the people's feelings...art creation should not fail to communicate with the people. I prefer a kite on a string to the ground."

那条与生活联系的生命攸关之线断了, 联系人民感情的千里姻缘之线断了...艺术作品应不失与广大人民的感情交流, 我更喜爱不断线的风筝。²³²

How to understand Wu's argument on abstraction, since it agrees on the "abstract" nature, and at the same time it is emphasising its tight bond with reality? Perhaps Wu's theory can be understood better in his ink painting, *The Lion Grove Garden* 狮子林 (Shizi lin, Fig. 2.15) from 1983, which was a product of his *xiesheng* journey to Suzhou. The main object in Wu's ink painting *The Lion Grove Garden* is the rockery in the garden, which the artist depicted in abstract style. The silver grey colour thoroughly dipped by ink brush goes forward, takes pauses and curves around to frame the silhouette of the eccentric shape of the rockery. Smaller geometric figures representing the hollow-outs of the rockery were depicted among the intricate lines of the stones in a highly lifelike manner, as if they were the eyes of some living beings, full of dynamism. Wu's brush wasted no time in illustrating any delicate detail of the rockery and highly abstracting the lively shape and conveying it on paper. He so successfully extracted out the formal beauty of the rockery, that the viewer at first glance might be challenged to recognise it as a depiction of the rockery.

But it is still a representation of reality, which as Wu likened, is a kite on a string. Wu depicted pines and a Chinese pavilion in the background to strengthen the audiences' impression that it was a painting of a garden. Comparing with the abstract style applied to the

²³² Wu Guanzhong, "Fengzheng bu duanxian" 风筝不断线 (A kite on a string), *Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺研究 (Literature and art studies), no. 3 (1983), pp. 262-263.

rockery, Wu made sure that the pines and the pavilion were painted in a more lifelike way. Wu also depicted a lotus pond in the foreground in traditional painting techniques, which left a figurative effect on paper as well. *The Lion Grove Garden* is therefore still a painting of a garden, only with some abstract vocabulary for presenting the eccentric aesthetic of the rockery. Wu explained his conception of the aesthetics of abstraction presented in *The Lion Grove Garden*:

“Recently I took my students to Suzhou for a *xiusheng* practice, where they noticed hundreds of patterns of the trceries in the garden. There were various patterns of straight and broken lines, curves and arcs. They were full of variety and elegance. This is the beauty of abstraction. Also, there were rockery stones exquisitely carved and momentarily presented. Some were easily appreciated, others were eccentric. This is the beauty of abstraction as well. The Chinese wisteria planted by Wen Zhengming was robust and sturdy, lingering and interweaving, like the running-and-cursive hand in Chinese calligraphy. Whether the object itself can be recognised or not, the aesthetic in its outline is still appreciated.”²³³

The various tracery patterns, the capricious rockery stones and the writhing Chinese wisteria, for Wu, represented the aesthetics of abstraction, since they disclosed diverse geometric forms, such as lines and curves, which could be abstracted out and independently appreciated for their formal beauty. Considering Wu’s emphasis on distorting and artistically transforming the form of the painting object, I agree with Chen’s definition to refer to Wu’s abstraction theory as “formal abstraction.”

Although Wu’s aesthetics of abstraction merely focuses on the abstract form of the painting object, the intricate linear expression in Wu’s *The Lion Grove Garden* is indeed reminiscent of some Western abstract artwork. For instance, it is reminiscent of Jackson Pollock’s (1912-1956) abstract-expressionism or “drip” painting, which Pollock created by dripping, spattering and flinging enamel paints directly on canvas (see Fig. 5.1). James Cahill has referred to similarities between the two artists. He has commented that the continuity of Wu’s brushwork could only be achieved by the Chinese brush instead of the oil brush, “because it (Chinese brush) is constructed with a reservoir to hold ink and a fine but resilient tip that can release ink in the thinnest of marks.” However, Cahill points out an exception,

²³³ Wu Guanzhong, “On the aesthetics of abstraction”, 1980, see full translation of the article in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

“The drip technique of Jackson Pollock, to which Wu Guanzhong’s style is sometimes likened, was an escape from those limitations.”²³⁴ Such a reference suggests possible influence or inspiration from Pollock. However, Wu firmly denied any influence from him in an article published in 1995:

“I have not seen his paintings before. When I was in Paris in the 1940s, I did not know about Pollock or his paintings, it was not possible that I was under his influence.”²³⁵

Upon closer examination, the two paintings reveal a fundamental difference, between Pollock’s abstract-expressionism and Wu’s formal abstraction. Pollock’s painting, as Annie Ochmanek has commented:

“This direct, physical engagement with his materials welcomed gravity, velocity, and improvisation into the artistic process, and allowed line and colour to stand alone, functioning entirely independently of form. His works, which came to be known as “drip paintings,” present less a picture than a record of the fluid properties of paint itself.”²³⁶

Viewers are drawn by the rhythm, dynamism and intersections of various linear threads that Pollock dripped, splattered and flicked with abstraction and improvisation. The linear brushwork is “functioning entirely independently of form” that could possibly remind the audiences of any realistic representations. On the contrary, Wu’s formal abstraction, as discussed above in *The Lion Grove Garden* is abstracting the formal qualities of the rockery and conveying its dynamism out through drawing intricate lines. That is why Wu illustrated his point of view on abstraction as “a kite on a string”. To borrow Wu’s words, Pollock’s artwork “cuts off the vital string to life.”

²³⁴ James Cahill, “Styles and Methods in the Painting of Wu Guanzhong”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, pp. 19-20.

²³⁵ Wu Guanzhong, “Yihua zhifa yu wandian emo” 一画之法与万点恶墨 (One painting method and dots of bad ink: about Shitao’s Quotations on painting), first published in 1995, see English translation in Chen Xiao, “China’s Countryside in Formal Abstraction: Wu Guanzhong’s Landscape paintings of the late 1980s”, 2014, p. 24.

²³⁶ Annie Ochmanek, “Introduction of Jackson Pollock”, MoMA collection, <https://www.moma.org/artists/4675?locale=en>, last access on 9 October 2018.

In the 1980 article “On the Aesthetics of Abstraction”, Wu also touched upon the issue of how to achieve the aesthetics of abstraction:

“In both the East and the West, in every society, there always are artists who endeavour to faithfully express their emotions through art. This emotional expression is forever the main driving force in the development of human culture. The Impressionists discovered a new sphere to use colours. The Fauvists highlighted individual freedom in art creation. The Cubists expanded the boundary of the formal and structural composition of figurative art... All these explorations enlarged the world of figurative art.”²³⁷

In Wu’s argument, the avant-garde artists’ (Impressionists, Fauvists, and Cubists) ground-breaking contributions can all be used as examples to demonstrate the approach to achieve the aesthetics of abstraction. The avant-garde artists managed to exaggerate certain elements to expand people’s perceptions of figurative art. In other words, in Wu’s understanding, they all managed to abstract certain aspects out of the painting objects and presented them creatively. Such contributions, in Wu’s perception, fell into his criterion of the aesthetics of abstraction. More importantly, these avant-garde artists achieved the progress since they “endeavour(ed) to faithfully express their emotions through their work.” In this way Wu combined his argument of abstraction with his theory of self-expression. Chen Xiao has also discussed Wu’s theory on the artist’s expression for achieving the aesthetics of abstraction:

“Upon various observations on a particular object in nature, one can naturally generate a unique form in his mind to best represent the object in coherence with the artist’s personal understanding of it... To abstract proper visual forms, one needs to follow his own inner feeling...his (Wu Guanzhong) process of abstracting forms is a pure act upon his personal sentiments that differentiate these forms from anyone else.”²³⁸

In Wu’s argument, abstraction is driven by the artist’s impulse to express his emotions in painting. On this point, one can see how Wu’s theory of abstraction is fundamentally different from abstract art in Western art history. In spite of sharing some

²³⁷ Wu Guanzhong, “On the aesthetics of abstraction”, 1980, see full translation of the article in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

²³⁸ Chen Xiao, “China’s Countryside in Formal Abstraction: Wu Guanzhong’s Landscape paintings of the late 1980s”, 2014, p. 25.

common ground on “abstracting” forms out of painting objects, Wu understood the art of abstraction from the perspective that it was an approach to better present the artist’s personal feelings. Hence it made sense when Wu declared his abstraction was different from that of Western abstract artists’ due to the bond with reality. Wu, as Sullivan has commented, never wanted to go that far to pursue pure abstract art.²³⁹

At the end of the article, Wu denied that Western modernist artists were the first to discover the aesthetics of abstraction. He saw the aesthetics of abstraction as the essence of traditional Chinese painting. Wu cited the ink painter Huang Binhong 黄宾虹 (1865-1955) as an example, highlighting the abstract elements in Huang’s late work:

“Huang Binhong’s work in his late years had grasped the aesthetics of abstraction. In comparison, his early work was a too restricted to figurative representation. The beauty was hence hidden behind and unable to reveal itself. Compared with his late work, Huang’s early work was less successful in achieving ‘spiritual resonance’.”²⁴⁰

Huang Binhong is generally accepted as an ink painter who deftly mastered the traditional brushwork in his landscape paintings. Until he was sixty years old, Huang spent all his time studying and imitating ancient ink master’s work. In his late career, Huang managed to make innovations to his landscape painting, in which he paid less attention to imitation, and more to making renewals in the lineage of the traditional continuity. As Claire Roberts has noted, “He believed that by embracing and fully understanding the two interconnected concepts of continuity and change or renewal (*bian*), he could restore life, energy and aesthetic relevance to Chinese brush-and-ink painting.”²⁴¹ Huang’s artistic transition from imitation to innovation is also recognised by Chu-tsing Li: “In his last years his brushwork became so free and personal that he developed far beyond his old masters...Indeed, some of his works approach total abstraction.”²⁴² In Wu Guanzhong’s opinion, Huang’s artistic transformation was also characterised by a change from the

²³⁹ Michael Sullivan, “Wu Guanzhong; Reflections on His Life, Thought, and Art”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist*, 1989, p. 5.

²⁴⁰ Wu Guanzhong, “On the aesthetics of abstraction”, 1980, see full translation of the article in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

²⁴¹ Claire Roberts, *Friendship in Art: Fou Lei and Huang Binhong*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010, p. 59.

²⁴² Chu-tsing Li, “Tradition and Innovation in Twentieth Century Chinese Painting,” in *Twentieth Century Chinese Painting: Tradition and Innovation*, Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1995, p. 26.

“figurative” to the “abstract”. As discussed earlier, Wu himself was never overly fond of imitation as a traditional way of ink painting practice. He had his reservations about his teacher Pan Tianshou’s adherence to this traditional teaching method. For Wu, copying and imitating led to the direction entirely opposite to his pursuit – the expression of personal feelings and *yijing*. It explains Wu’s reserved opinion on Huang’s early work, which in his criterion was “a bit too restricted in figurative representation”. In comparison, Huang’s late work was more about experimenting with the “renewal” for the development of Chinese ink painting, hence as Roberts has commented, “it was an expression of temperament and spirit that found its final form in the imagination of the beholder.”²⁴³ The expressive quality perfectly matched Wu’s art advocacy, from which one can see the close connection between abstraction and expression in Wu’s theory.

While Huang Binhong “somehow grasped the aesthetics of abstraction”, in Wu’s estimation, Bada Shanren was the one who gained the greatest achievement in expressing abstraction through his painting:

“I do think, of all the Chinese ink masters, Bada shanren reached the deepest realm of the beauty of abstraction. Through the black-white ink play and the intricate brushstrokes, his sorrow and disquiet were expressed. Bada pursued an inner dynamic in his figurative painting to convey a “fleeting” sensation. The stone he painted has a larger top and smaller bottom, which seemed impossible to stand still, as if it is about to roll down! The melon in his painting, with a black bird standing on top, is unstable as well. The stem of the melon and the bird’s eye are reminiscent of the pattern of Tai-chi, achieving the beauty of abstraction. Irregularity and eccentricity are the hallmarks of Bada’s pine tree, which tapers off at the roots, as if it is rootless and about to fly away. His orchid and lotus are depicted in an effect that you only see blurs. Bada usually applied light ink and simple lines, which made his such paintings even more dream-like.”²⁴⁴

In Wu’s perception, Bada exaggerated the forms of rocks and trees to make them “top-heavy” and “rootless”, to express his inner “disquiet” and “sorrow” (see Fig. 5.2). Bada’s such formal exaggeration and emotional expression on paper, as discussed above, fell into Wu’s criterion of the aesthetics of abstraction. More importantly, through connecting

²⁴³ Claire Roberts, *Friendship in Art*, 2010, p. 88.

²⁴⁴ Wu Guanzhong, “On the aesthetics of abstraction”, 1980, see full translation of the article in Appendix 2 of this thesis.

Bada's paintings, created in the seventeenth century, with the theory of abstraction, Wu hereby claimed a modern quality intrinsically existing in classical Chinese painting.

Wu reiterated his theory of the modern quality inherent in classical Chinese painting. He referred to this viewpoint in his 1979 article "Formal aesthetics in painting",

"Surely Western modern artists valued classical Chinese painting. Western Modernist art is not remote from eastern classical art, they are neighbours. They would not only fall for each other at first sight, but would make a marriage and give birth to a new generation!"

现代西方画家重视、珍视我们的传统绘画，这是必然的。古代东方和现代西方并不遥远，已是近邻，他们间不仅一见钟情，发生初恋，而必然要结成姻亲，育出一代新人。²⁴⁵

By "falling for each other at first sight", Wu implied an essential aesthetic connection between Western modernism and Chinese literati painting, which was able to be recognised and appreciated. He reiterated this point in the article "Merits and Demerits of Literati Painting" (1986), that Western modernist art and classical Chinese painting were "different tunes rendered in the same method" 异曲同工 (yiqu tonggong), referring to their shared path of emotional expression through art.²⁴⁶

One can see a syncretic quality running through Wu's theory of the aesthetics of abstraction. He both agreed and disagreed with Western theory on abstraction: he agreed on the point that abstraction was essentially about abstracting form from the painting objects. But he disagreed that the art of abstraction should go to such an extreme that it lost its representation of reality. Moreover, Wu's theory of abstraction consisted of his argument on the expression of personal feelings, which gave the artist the drive to create the art of abstraction. Same as his argument on expression, in Wu's theory, abstraction was an aesthetic quality that long existed in Chinese ink painting, which suggested a modern quality intrinsic in Chinese art.

²⁴⁵Wu Guanzhong, "Huihua de xingshi mei", 1979, p. 35.

²⁴⁶ Wu Guanzhong, "Shifei deshi wenrenhua", in Wu Guanzhong, *Wo fu danqing*, 2004, p. 280.

5.2 The Reception of Wu Guanzhong's Aesthetics of Abstraction

In the essay “On the aesthetics of abstraction”, Wu laid down his criteria of “abstraction” and discussed the techniques to achieve his aesthetics of abstraction. Like Western abstract art, Wu’s theory of abstraction is also based on distilling and abstracting form out of the painting objects. However, unlike pure abstract art, Wu’s formal abstraction serves to better communicate the artist’s perception and feeling to the viewer. Wu’s emphasis on the artist’s personality and emotion brought his aesthetics of abstraction back to the roots of classical Chinese painting.

After Wu’s essay “On the aesthetics of abstraction” was published in *Meishu*, one of the most authoritative periodicals in Chinese art world, there were extensive discussions throughout the 1980s centered on the aesthetics of abstraction that Wu proposed and, more broadly, on the modern qualities inherent in classical Chinese painting. Some contributors to the discussion agreed with Wu on his view of formal abstraction as having the connotation of the term *chouxiangmei*, for example, “Luetan chouxiang 略谈抽象 (A brief discussion on abstraction, 1980), and “Yetan chouxiangmei” 也谈抽象美 (Also on the aesthetics of abstraction, 1981). But more articles only adopted the term *chouxiangmei*, but refused to agree on the definition and connotation that Wu provided. For example, the article “Xingshimei jiqi zai meishu zhong de diwei” 形式美及其在美术中的地位 (Formal aesthetics and its status in art theory) argued:

“We believe that Mr. Wu’s aesthetics of abstraction is a false statement...The concept itself does not make sense. As the term indicates, the aesthetics of abstraction refers to the beauty of abstract objects. But abstract objects cannot be evaluated as beautiful or not in the first place.”

我们认为吴冠中先生的“抽象美”概念在美学上是不能成立的...“抽象美”这个概念是反审美的。顾名思义，抽象美理应说的是抽象东西的美，可是，抽象的东西是谈不上美丑的。²⁴⁷

Also in the article “Xingshimei de chouxianxing yu chouxiangmei” 形式美的抽象性与抽象美 (The abstraction in formal aesthetics and the aesthetics of abstraction, 1983), the author Liu Xilin 刘曦林 argued:

Theoretically, the concept of “the aesthetics of abstraction” is non-scientific and unrigorous. Abstraction means abstracting common elements from various objects. Art creation, however, is exactly depicting the particularity of various objects... Therefore, the theory of the aesthetics of abstraction which suggests ignoring the particularity, is contradictory to the quintessential characteristic of art creation.

从理论上讲，“抽象美”是个不科学不严谨的概念。因为“抽象”（abstraction）是指从若干个别事物中抽出的共同的，本质的属性。而艺术的美学，尤其是美术创作，却是以诉诸真实的，个别的，具体的艺术形象为其重要特征的...“抽象美”说则主张舍弃具体的物象，无论从内容和形式哪一个角度来说，都是与美术这个重要的特征相矛盾的。²⁴⁸

During the debate, some categorically rejected Wu Guanzhong’s theory on the grounds that “abstract objects cannot be evaluated as beautiful or not”, as the members of the Theoretical Study Group of the ZAFSA 浙江美术学院文艺理论学习小组 (Zhejiang meishu xueyuan wenyi lilun xuexi xiaozu) asserted. However, their point of view was not substantiated with further analysis. Other arguments, such as Liu Xilin’s idea that “abstraction means abstracting common elements”, appeared to be either too vague or too subjective, often made without the support of rigorous academic study. The ambiguity and subjectivity of the critical positions led to the fruitlessness of this theoretical debate, and in the end the connotation of the term *chouxianxingmei* that Wu proposed remained as vague as before. The heated arguments in the end only served to reinforce one idea: that Wu

²⁴⁷ Zhejiang meishu xueyuan wenyi lilun xuexi xiaozu 浙江美术学院文艺理论学习小组 (The theoretical study group of ZAFSA), “Xingshimei jiqi zai meishu zhong de diwei” 形式美及其在美术中的地位 (Formal aesthetics and its status in art theory), no. 4 (1981), pp. 42-43.

²⁴⁸ Liu Xilin 刘曦林, “Xingshimei de chouxianxing yu chouxiangmei” 形式美的抽象性与抽象美 (The abstraction in the aesthetics of form and the aesthetics of abstraction), no. 5 (1983), p. 10.

Guanzhong had initiated the term “the aesthetics of abstraction”, a term that was influential in critical discourse and yet unresolved in definition.²⁴⁹

Wu’s aesthetics of abstraction brought about an intellectual storm in the Chinese art circles, which was a rather rare achievement, considering Wu was not an art theorist, but an artist, who just began to thrive after the Cultural Revolution. One can glean from the debate on Wu’s theory of abstraction the broader intellectual climate of the 1980s, characterised by the so-called Culture Fever. Firstly, it reveals certain weaknesses in Wu’s definition of *chouxiangmei*. Its lack of articulation provided space for disagreements and arguments. Secondly, it reflects the Chinese intellectuals’ unfamiliarity with the debates in the field of art theory in general, which required precision in definition and academic rigor in argument. Responses with ambiguity disclosed that this intellectual debate was so remote for the intellectuals, that they had no methods except their own subjective summaries. Last but not least, in spite of all the semi-academic discussions, the *chouxiangmei* debate reflects an open environment which indiscriminately drew from an eclectic array of concepts and ideas from various intellectual, aesthetic and philosophical traditions, both classical and modern, Chinese and Western.

Most importantly, even though Wu’s conception of the aesthetics of abstraction triggered a theoretical debate that remained controversial and unresolved, many critics agreed with him on his contention that abstraction, like many other aesthetic qualities that were perceived to be “modern” and “Western”, had long existed in classical Chinese painting. Most articles published in response to Wu’s article, agreed with his view that abstraction was an inherent feature of classical Chinese art. For instance, in the article “Zatan huihua zhong

²⁴⁹ More arguments on the terminology *chouxiang*, see in Liu Gangji 刘纲纪, “Luetan chouxiang 略谈抽象 (A brief discussion on abstraction), *Meishu*, no. 11 (1980): 11-13; Xu Shucheng 徐书城, “Yetan chouxiangmei” 也谈抽象美 (Also on the aesthetics of abstraction), *Meishu*, no. 1 (1983): 10-13; Hong Yiran 洪毅然 “Cong xingshigan tandao xingshimei he chouxiangmei” 从形式感谈到形式美和抽象美 (From the sense of form to formal aesthetics and the aesthetics of abstraction), *Meishu*, no. 5 (1983): 4-6, 22, and “Zaitan xingshimei he chouxiangmei” 再谈形式美和抽象美 (Reiterating formal aesthetics and the aesthetics of abstraction), *Meishu*, no. 3 (1984): 45-48; Du Jian 杜键, “Xingxiang de jielv yu jielv de xingxiang” 形象的节律与节律的形象 (The rhythm of images and the image of the rhythm), *Meishu*, no. 10 (1983): 16-20; Wang Zhong 王仲, “Xi jielv chouxiang huihua lun” 析节律抽象绘画论 (Analysing the rhythm and the abstraction in painting), *Meishu*, no. 2 (1982): 48-52, no. 3 (1982): 44-47; and Ma Qinzong 马钦忠 “Chouxiangmei wenti taolun jianping” 抽象美问题讨论简评 (On the discussion of the aesthetics of abstraction), *Meishu*, no. 1 (1984): 53-57.

de chouxianɡ” 杂谈绘画中的抽象 (Some random ideas on abstraction in painting, 1983), Yang Aiqi 杨蔼琪 stated:

“There is abstraction in Chinese painting. Ancient artists had accumulated abundant abstract forms during their long-time practice and exploration.”

在中国的绘画艺术中，抽象的艺术形式非但有，而且在中国历代画家长期的摸索和总结经验中，积淀下了丰富多彩的抽象艺术形式。²⁵⁰

Holding the same opinion on the long-existence of abstraction in ancient Chinese art, the article “Woguo chuantong yishu zhong chouxianɡ yinsu chutan” 我国传统艺术中抽象因素初探 (A preliminary research on the abstract elements in traditional Chinese art, 1983) provided the examples of the patterns on painted pottery of Yangshao culture 仰韶文化 (Yangshao wenhua, a Neolithic culture which existed by the Yellow River in China, approx. 5000-3000 BC). The author intended to prove the abstract beauty of the patterns on the pottery.²⁵¹ Furthermore, in the article “Shilun zhongguo gudian huihua de chouxianɡ shenmei yishi” 试论中国古典绘画的抽象审美意识 (On the aesthetics of abstraction in classical Chinese painting, 1983), the authors He Xin 何新 and Li Xianting 栗宪庭 generalised two kinds of abstractions embodied in ancient Chinese art. One was primitive abstraction, which was, for example, represented by the patterns of painted pottery of Yangshao culture. The other was classical Chinese ink painting, which shared a common aesthetic of abstraction with Western modernist art.²⁵²

The identification of modern qualities in classical Chinese art, however, was not Wu’s invention, but a long-existing intellectual endeavor, since the beginning of the twentieth century. One example is Chen Hengke’s argument on the real value of Chinese literati painting, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Another example is Ecker Yu-ho Tseng’s

²⁵⁰ Yang Aiqi 杨蔼琪, “Zatan huihua zhong de chouxianɡ” 杂谈绘画中的抽象 (Some random ideas on the abstraction in painting), *Meishu*, no. 1 (1983), p. 19.

²⁵¹ Mao Shibo 毛士博 “Woguo chuantong yishu zhong chouxianɡ yinsu chutan” 我国传统艺术中抽象因素初探 (A preliminary research on the abstract elements in traditional Chinese art), no. 1 (1983), p. 16.

²⁵² He Xin and Li Xianting, “Shilun zhongguo gudian huihua de chouxianɡ shenmei yishi” 试论中国古典绘画的抽象审美意识 (On the abstract aesthetics in classical Chinese painting, Part 1 and 2), in *Meishu*, January 1983 (Part 1), pp. 4-9; May 1983 (Part 2), pp. 16-19.

book, *Some Contemporary Elements in Classical Chinese Art*, published in 1963, which also focused on the intrinsically modern quality in classical Chinese art. Tseng argued that despite the conventional way of viewing classical Chinese art as outmoded and irrelevant to modernity, there were visual and philosophical elements embedded in this ancient tradition that still spoke to contemporary times. Through the examples of still-life portraits, landscape paintings, rock engravings and calligraphies, Tseng demonstrated the creative power of the line-drawings and brushstrokes as the evidence of the seemingly “primitive” yet modern quality of Chinese visual traditions.²⁵³

Whereas Chen Hengke advocated the modern value of Chinese literati painting under the threat of Western cultural imperialism in the early twentieth-century, Tseng’s study extolled classical Chinese art in the context of Chinese art being little studied and unappreciated in the West in the 1960s. By uncovering the modern qualities embedded in classical Chinese art and thus proving its progressiveness, their research, while intellectually provocative, also stoked a ubiquitous pride in Chinese cultural heritage.

A similar sentiment of cultural pride was evoked in the articles that responded to Wu’s theory of abstraction and his reiteration of the modern qualities in traditional Chinese art. For example, in the article “On the aesthetics of abstraction in classical Chinese painting” (1983), He Xin and Li Xianting stated:

“As is well known, paintings can be divided into two schools: the one of the Orient represented by Chinese ink painting, and the one of the West represented by European oil painting.”

众所周知，世界绘画可以分为两大基本系统，即以中国的水墨画为代表的东方绘画，与以欧洲的油画为代表的西方绘画。²⁵⁴

It is an oversimplification to divide all the painting traditions in the world into merely two schools, one represented by “Chinese ink painting” and the other by “European oil painting”. Through this generalisation, the authors granted Chinese painting a dominant

²⁵³ Ecker Yu-ho Tseng, *Some Contemporary Elements in Classical Chinese Art*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1963.

²⁵⁴ He Xin and Li Xianting, “Shilun zhongguo gudian huihua de chouxiang shenmei yishi” 试论中国古典绘画的抽象审美意识 (On the abstract aesthetics in classical Chinese painting), *Meishu*, no. 1 (1983), p. 4.

position on a par with European painting, thus evoking the readers' pride in their native culture. It is worth noting that such a cultural pride was built upon an eclectic approach to linking and comparing disparate artistic traditions and art histories. Liberal and indiscriminate borrowings from the West result in a boost to Chinese cultural confidence vis-à-vis the West. A similar eclecticism also runs through Wu's argument about the modern qualities inherent in classical Chinese art. Wu forged his path to modernity by aligning his theory of abstraction with Western abstract art to certain degree, only to quickly abandon it and reinforce his theory by constructing an aesthetic connection with Chinese artistic tradition.

5.3 Patriotism through Eclecticism

Wu's eclecticism is a typical product of the cultural climate of the 1980s, when Chinese intellectuals made every effort to study Western arts, culture and philosophy, a body of knowledge to which they had restricted access after the founding of the PRC. But the intellectuals of the 1980s did not research Western modernism for its own sake. They endeavoured to reinterpret traditional Chinese arts with this borrowed modernist logic, to evoke pride in their own culture and to mitigate their anxiety when China was at the crossroads of modernisation under Deng's economic reform. Their work inevitably bore an eclectic quality due to insufficient access to information and an underdeveloped system of knowledge. But it is exactly such an insufficiency that left space for creative interpretation to arise and for cultural pride to generate and spread.

No work better demonstrated this eclecticism than Li Zehou's 李泽厚 (b. 1930) *Mei de licheng* 美的历程 (The path of beauty, 1981). *Mei de licheng* provides a diachronic narrative of the historical development of a wide range of ancient Chinese arts, for example, pottery, painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature, from the Neolithic era to the Qing Dynasty. Li's objective, however, was not to present the historical development of Chinese arts per se, but to identify certain qualities that remained consistent in ancient Chinese arts through centuries of historical changes.²⁵⁵ Li begins his analysis with a comparison between Chinese palaces and religious architecture of other major cultures. Li's argument is that, unlike the religious architecture with its one single divine purpose of "creating mystery or tension, or evoking excitement or repentance", ancient Chinese palaces provided "a sense of clear, harmonious and practical values" through embodying the divine practice within secular dwellings. The embodiment of religious function from secular settings, in Li's argument, is the uniqueness of Chinese architecture, which is distinguished from architectures of all other cultures in "practical", "worldly", and "rational" terms.

²⁵⁵ Li Zehou, *Mei de licheng* 美的历程 (The path of beauty), Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981, pp.63-64; see English translation in Gong Lizeng, trans., *The Path of Beauty, A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 59-61.

Instead of highlighting any aesthetic uniqueness of Chinese arts, Li concludes the book by addressing his praise of “human nature”. In Li’s perception, human nature refers to the “sedimentation of rationality in emotion, of imagination and understanding in awareness and feeling, of content in form”. The “sedimentation of rationality in emotion”, which Li expresses in a praising tone in his rhetoric, is well elaborated through his analysis of the double functions of ancient Chinese architecture. The incorporation of secular dwelling and religious building in ancient Chinese architecture, which Li describes as “practical”, “worldly”, and “rational”, presents an aesthetic sedimentation of Chinese people’s spiritual aspiration in their everyday lives. Therefore, what Li extols at the end of the book is not just human nature in which rationality was embodied, but also the uniqueness of ancient Chinese arts, which revealed the sublimity of human nature. *Mei de licheng* was written as an aesthetic work that demonstrated the author’s argument on some philosophical terms such as “sedimentation of rationality”. Yet more importantly, it was written as a paean to classical Chinese arts and culture. Li and his book *Mei de licheng* played an instrumental role in reassuring the Chinese intellectuals about the uniqueness of Chinese art from philosophical and aesthetic perspectives. *Mei de licheng* became a bestseller during the cultural discussion in the 1980s, the prevalence of which is reminiscent of Ernst Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*. Li himself was therefore called the “youth’s mentor” 青年导师 (qingnian daoshi).²⁵⁶

However, there is a crucial problem in Li’s argument about the uniqueness of classical Chinese arts. As referred to above, Li made a comparison between Chinese palaces and the religious architecture of other cultures, since in his understanding, religious architecture, for example, the ancient Greek temples and Gothic churches were “principal historical buildings” in most other cultures, whereas palaces where emperors resided dominated in Chinese architecture history. However, it is a fairly eclectic foundation upon which to generalise one type of architecture as “principal” from all cultures other than China. More importantly, it is somewhat erroneous to make an aesthetic comparison between two different types of architecture based on such a generalisation, especially so, when there are well-known religious architectural works in China, and well-studied royal palaces in other cultures, that can be exemplified for an argument to the contrary.

²⁵⁶ More information, see Xu Youyu 徐友渔, “Li Zehou: bashi niandai dulingfengsao” 李泽厚: 80年代独领风骚 (Li Zehou: taking lead in the Chinese intellectual circles in the 1980s), (blog) 9 January 2009: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_475942ab0100bm5a.html, Last access on 27 October 2018.

The eclecticism of Li's argument was chiefly a result from the fact that the Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s had limited and unsystematic resources of art history and other disciplines, from which their arguments were constructed. The phenomenon was discussed in Orianna Cacchione's study on the artists' practices in contemporary China, in which Cacchione has pointed out a general acceptance by intellectuals of introducing and translating literatures of Western art in the 1980s cultural discussion, without providing enough background information:

“Books on art history and aesthetics were often published as series’ in addition to ‘picture books’ (*huace*), which provided general overviews of Western art history with few textual descriptions or explanations.”²⁵⁷

In addition, Cacchione specifically highlights the spontaneous importation of Western literatures by the art periodicals, which as she states, cast the most important influence in circulating the literatures around Chinese intellectual world:

“(These art periodicals) simultaneously introduced Chinese artists and critics to the history of art from ancient cave painting to recent art practices of the 1980s. The published texts were selected from available materials and often did not follow a thematic or chronological order. Within a single magazine issue, translations of Ernst Gombrich and Erwin Panofsky would be placed next to essays on modern and contemporary art in Europe and America. Articles about African, Indian, Mesoamerican and Oceanic art would be ordered before or after texts about art from different time periods, from ancient cave paintings to the Greeks and Romans to the Medieval and Renaissance periods.”²⁵⁸

Art periodicals' lack of “thematic or chronological order” to introduce and translate Western art history perhaps explained the eclecticism disclosed in Li's argument. The limited and selective importation of Western literatures prevented the intellectuals in Culture Fever from having full access to Western art history and being able to make arguments supported by thorough academic research and study. However, it was exactly this lack of sufficient

²⁵⁷ Orianna Cacchione, “To enter art history – reading and writing art history in China during the reform era”, *Journal of Art Historiography*, vol.10 (June 2014): p. 7. See source online: <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/caccione.pdf>, last access on 29 October 2018.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 7.

academic support that evoked Chinese people's pride in their traditional culture, just like Li's praise of the uniqueness of Chinese art.

The eclecticism can also be found in the articles responding to Wu's abstraction theory. In the above-mentioned article "On the aesthetics of abstraction in classical Chinese painting", the authors He Xin and Li Xianting quoted philosophers such as Karl Max, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Georges-Henri Luquet, psychologist Jean Piaget, and literati painter Shitao to argue that abstraction was inherited from classical Chinese painting.²⁵⁹ The interdisciplinary quotes were easily understood in the context, as Cacchione states: "translations of Ernst Gombrich and Erwin Panofsky would be placed next to essays on modern and contemporary art in Europe and America". Their inclusive method revealed less the intentional endeavour for making interdisciplinary studies, but more the inevitable process of academic research based on the limited source supply. And the result was a patriotism that convinced both the scholars and ordinary Chinese people of the modern and progressive quality intrinsic in classical Chinese arts.

The term "eclecticism" has also emerged as a keyword in recent critical assessments of Wu's artistic practice. For instance, Wang Nanming 王南溟 (b. 1962) has argued that Wu's theories of formal aesthetics and abstraction only sounded Western, but were different in their essence:

"Wu's form aesthetics and his aesthetics of abstraction use western concepts to interpret Chinese art...But his abstraction theory does not follow the Western concept of abstract art in terms of the independence of dot, line and plane, neither does it help with the development of Chinese contemporary ink art. Putting abstraction in the centre of his formal theory reveals Wu's criterion of formal aesthetics: he wanted to merely utilise form as a tool to express artistic effect. Wu's abstraction is still figurative. It is fundamentally different from formalism which abandons the content of the painting object. When Wu argued against content determining form, he never wanted to abandon content itself. All he wanted was the content with form."

吴冠中的“形式美”、“抽象美”是用西方的构成来解释中国的艺术...这种“抽象美”明显不是西方构成中的对物体的点、线、面的独立发展或者现代水墨画中的笔墨的独立发展及其转型。而且吴冠中又将他的“抽象美”放在“形式美”的核心

²⁵⁹ He Xin and Li Xianting, "Shilun zhongguo gudian huihua de chouxiang shenmei yishi", no. 1 (1983): 5-6.

之中...可见吴冠中的这种“形式美”是将本来作为独立发展的形式构成作为写意的工具，导致了他的这种“抽象美”就是要构成但还是要要有具体的形象...吴冠中说的内容不决定形式，就是要有形式的内容而不是不要内容。²⁶⁰

Wang's critique of Wu's art theory reveals the essential difference between Wu's formal theory and formalism: Wu only used form as a means to an end, but not an end itself; content was still important to him. Cheng Meixin 程美信 has gone a step further, commenting that Wu's painting style was "eclectic" 折中主义 (zhezhongzhuyi):

"Wu Guanzhong was a very successful eclectic-style artist. His painting combines modernist style with traditional taste, such as his "abstract" paintings, providing a syncretic aesthetic. It is understandable that the traditionalists criticised him for his inadequate traditionalism. But no one can deny his excellent painting techniques and the vitality conveyed out. Wu's Jiangnan landscape painting is the proof. In addition, his exploration of syncretizing Western with Chinese painting vocabulary at least is a very brave experiment from a formal perspective... In spite of its lack of artistic originality, Wu's art is full of modern taste and eastern flavour."

(吴冠中)是位极为成功的土洋折中派画家，其绘画将现代与传统挪捏一起，如他的“抽象”系列作品，形成一种中西结合的审美趣味。所以，传统派说他传统功底不到家也情有可原，可谁也难以否定他具有扎实的绘画功底以及充满灵气的表现力，他一系列江南水乡及风景画作都足以证明了这一点。而且，他进行中西绘画语言的结合尝试，至少在绘画形式上的大胆实验。吴冠中绘画...虽缺乏原创性价值，但不失东方韵味与现代气息。²⁶¹

In spite of the overly critical and somewhat subjective tone expressed in Wang and Cheng's criticisms, they have pinpointed some essential features of Wu's art style. Especially in Cheng's criticism, Wu's syncretism was replaced with "eclecticism", which bears a somewhat negative connotation. One can see that Wang and Cheng's critiques of Wu's art differ from the critical approaches of Sullivan, Cahill and Mayching Kao. A main point of

²⁶⁰ Wang Nanming, "Wu Guanzhong de xingshimei, chouxiangmei daodi zai shuo shenme?" 吴冠中的“形式美”，“抽象美”到底在说什么? (What does Wu mean by the formal aesthetics and the aesthetics of abstraction?), https://wuguanzhong.artron.net/news_detail_35217_2, published on 7 October 2007, last access on 24 August 2019.

²⁶¹ Cheng Meixin, "Pouxi Wu Guanzhong xianxiang: meiyou dashi shidai de dashi" 剖析吴冠中现象：没有大师时代的大师 (Wu Guanzhong phenomenon: a master in a masterless era), first published in Cheng's personal blog on 26 May 2009, online source: http://art.china.cn/Blog/2010-05/06/content_3499225.htm, last access on 24 August 2019.

difference is that Sullivan, Cahill and Kao's works were academic research in the Western scholarly style, whereas Wang and Cheng were doing Chinese-style art criticism, which tends to be more polemical. But Wang and Cheng's critiques, both published in 2009, almost twenty years after Sullivan, Cahill and Mayching Kao's researches, suggest that it might have been time for a critical reassessment of Wu's artistic achievements. Wang and Cheng perceived Wu's art style as eclecticism based on their examination of the development of Chinese art and its assimilation of Western modernism in the decades after the 1980s. Living in an era when Chinese contemporary art was mainly represented by artists such as Xu Bing and Ai Weiwei, the new generation of critics have the vantage point to look back and reevaluate Wu's art as an art of eclecticism. This eclecticism was the product of the 1980s. It is reflected in both Wu's art practice and art theory, as well as in the critical responses that had been generated in that era.

Consider Wu's ink painting *Lion Grove Garden* (Fig. 2.15) as a typical example of this eclecticism. In spite of the modern vocabulary that Wu adopted to render the rockeries with great artistic effect and affection, one cannot ignore the "literati" taste that the subject bears. Lion Grove Garden had been greatly appreciated by literati artists since the Yuan Dynasty. The garden was built in 1342, designed by Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301-1374), and renovated by Wen Zhengming 文征明. It immediately became a major inspiration for literary and artistic creation. From Yuan to Qing, artists and scholar-officials devoted numerous works of calligraphy, poetry, prose and painting in praise of the garden. Under such circumstances, Wu Guanzhong's depiction of this artistically prestigious garden revealed his literati taste, or at least his attempt to access it. Although literati taste as a way of life had been diminished since the founding of the PRC, the literati lineage continued through the sharing, reviving and transformation of literary and artistic motifs – Wu's visualisation of Lu Xun's story *Guxiang* is a telling example. In the painting *Lion Grove Garden*, by reprising the same subject as the ancient literati painters did, Wu situated himself in this time-honoured artistic lineage. The modernist painting vocabulary indeed contributed to Wu's image as a modern artist, but it was the literati-flavoured subject that provided Wu with creative and critical grounding, evoking a cultural pride in the literati tradition, while making a subtle commentary on the less than hospitable political environment in which that tradition sought to survive.

Wu's 1986 painting, *Village in the Altai Mountains* 阿尔泰山村 (Aertai shancun, Fig. 5.3) serves as a perfect illustration of both the aesthetic and ideological dimensions of Wu's theory of abstraction. Before any consideration of the political implication of the choice of another Xinjiang landscape as the subject, the viewer is immediately drawn to the dynamic spacing of the lines delineating the mountains in a vigorous style. Wu referred to the linear characteristic of the painting:

“I use different coloured lines to convey an artistic effect, and I rely on the spacing of these lines to constitute a solid surface. At the peak of the mountains the lines are vertical. The further down the mountains you go, the more they are inclined. When you get to the village at the foot of the mountains, they become horizontal broken lines. One line encompasses the effect of height, distance, verticality, breadth and the vast and unfathomable nature of the Altai Mountains. So I just rely on lines to give the effect of the overall movement and rhythm. I reject superfluous techniques except for dots, which accentuate the underlying beats in the composition.”²⁶²

The vertical and horizontal linear brushwork creates the perfect form for outlining the mountains, better than any faithful representations of the hills. The downward trajectory and the shifted angles provide an unstoppable forcefulness to the mountainscape, reminiscent of Wu's emotive expression of the rockery in *The Lion Grove Garden*. And the diverse colours of the lines, such as lemon, brown, grass green and soft red intensify the vitality of the subject, reminding the viewer of Wu's depiction of the Flaming Mountains in *Ruins of Gaochang* (Fig. 4.3), as if it was a volcano about to erupt. As Wu noted, only dots are applied in the composition, functioning to enhance the dynamics of the Altai Mountains. As such, the mountains in Wu's eyes were abstracted as lines and dots, which perfectly reflected his aesthetics of form and abstraction.

In spite of its stylistic features of abstraction, Wu's depiction of the Altai Mountains also feels very personal. The basic tonality of the landscape is light grey with a touch of brown, which is somehow reminiscent of Wu's *Loess Plateau* (1987, Fig. 2.6). The magnificent silhouette of the mountains presents the grandeur of the view. But the delicacy of the coloured lines and dots speaks of the artist's gentle sentiment rather than any feelings of

²⁶² Wu Guanzhong's note of his painting, in Anne Farrer, et al., eds, *Wu Guanzhong, A Twenty-century Chinese Painter*, 1992, p. 76.

masculinity, such as revealed in *Ruins of Gaochang*. Especially the villages at the lower right corner of the painting remind the audience of Wu's Jiangnan paintings, which bring tranquility and nostalgia onto paper. Although the landscape of Xinjiang is often associated with the ruggedness of China's wild west (which bears a clear masculine aesthetic), Wu's *Village in the Altai Mountains* is depicted in a gentle and heart-warming atmosphere. Grandeur with serenity might be an apt descriptive for the unique *yijing* that Wu managed to convey in this painting.

However, it is the *yijing* of grandeur with serenity that conveys specific political implications. Altay Prefecture is located in the outlying area of Xinjiang, where it shares the international borders with Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia. Due to its geographical importance, Altay Prefecture had been a signpost of Chinese sovereignty over the Xijiang area since the Republican era. Through consistency in the composition and painting style, Wu's *Village in the Altai Mountains* brought a sense of grandeur and harmony to the prefecture, although the actual physical and cultural landscape of the area is fairly various and diverse. In addition, in spite of the title *Village in the Altai Mountains*, the mountainscape dominates the painting, only leaving a small proportion at the lower right corner for the view of the village. In this way, the painting provides a feeling of the village being embraced by the mountain in tranquillity, with the suggestion of the natural landscape presiding over the cultural landscape. Hence, the consistent aesthetic implies a political rhetoric. By outlining a smooth fluctuation of the mountains, and by depicting the embracement of the magnificent mountains embracing the village, the painting visualises one political sovereignty of the border area of Altai, instead of the political reality of rivalry and interdependence.

It is worth noting that *Village in the Altai Mountains* and *Ruins of Gaochang* (Fig. 4.3) are both about Xinjiang. However, the *yijing* permeating the two paintings is very different. *Ruins of Gaochang* highlighted a historic process, in which one felt the uncertainty and contingency of the time from the ruins, and imagined the prospective fresh start from the ancient remains. The artist intended to convey the history of Xinjiang with religious, cultural and political connections with ancient China. It explains the heavy and dark brushwork on paper that spread a solemn air. In comparison, *Village in the Altai Mountains* depicts the artist's vision of the present-day Xinjiang. Wu aims to project 'a vibe' that the villagers reside in a beautiful and pastoral environment. Therefore, Wu's dense brushstroke shown in *Ruins of Gaochang* is much toned down in *Village in the Altai Mountains*. The outlining has

shifted from muscularity to femininity, to convey the feeling of serenity and contentment. The colours have changed from ochre and reddish-brown to lemon, brown, grass green and soft red, to express the light and joyous emotions. Adding the villages to the painting, which are more reminiscent of the traditional Jiangnan dwellings than any typical architecture in northwest China, Wu's *Village in the Altai Mountains* transcends its delineation of a village under the Altai Mountains in Xinjiang, achieving a *yijing* of home and belonging, which people from distant geographic and cultural backgrounds might share and relate to. Cloaked in a harmonious environment that is both magnificent and peaceful, Wu's painting is an idealistic composite of the very best aspects of both northern and southern landscapes of China.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of this thesis is three-fold: (1) a ‘syncretist’ biography of Wu Guanzhong incorporating in-depth studies of both his painting and writing; (2) an ‘eclectic’ inventory of Wu Guanzhong’s artistic vocabulary appropriated from both Chinese and Western artistic traditions; and, (3) a discourse analysis of 1980s Chinese culture through the lens of Wu Guanzhong’s artistic practice.

Syncretism is a term used to label – more often than not - modern Chinese artists who studied abroad, faced the crisis of their own culture confronting Western culture, and struggled to find their artistic identity throughout their careers. My case study of Wu Guanzhong demonstrates that syncretism is by no means an umbrella term that can be indiscriminately applied to all artists, even if they share similar personal circumstances or aesthetic qualities. Each artist forged their own syncretist path according to their artistic training, cultural position, and most importantly, the large sociopolitical environment – all of which contributed to the subtle differences in terms of how they related to the Chinese tradition or Chineseness. In other words, syncretism must be considered as not just an aesthetic term, but also a cultural and political one. Artists such as Lin Fengmian, Zao Wou-ki and Wu Guanzhong all forged their own brand of artistic syncretism. Their syncretism had very different political implications.

Lin Fengmian’s paintings are often considered syncretistic through their combination of Western modernist painting style and Chinese aesthetics. However, as Zhijian Qian commented in his study of Lin’s art in wartime (1937-1949), Lin was not an artist “who envisioned a world art with Chinese painting in a leading role”.²⁶³ Instead of Chinese cultural pride or ambition to promote “Chineseness”, Lin’s practice was primarily concerned with the experimentation of a fusion of artistic styles and vocabularies from both Chinese and European traditions. The politics of Lin’s art lies in its being seemingly apolitical. Zao Wou-ki’s syncretism, on the other hand, flaunts his Chineseness at every turn. Both his oil and ink paintings reflected his endeavour of manifesting his Chinese heritage. As a Chinese artist

²⁶³ Zhijian Qian, “Toward a Sinicized Modernism: The Artistic Practice of Lin Fengmian in Wartime China, 1937-1949”, 2014, p. 208.

who had chosen to make his name in the West, pleasing the Western art world by distinguishing his Chineseness was an important strategy for him.

The syncretism that was revealed in Wu Guanzhong's art practice is fundamentally different from his predecessors and peers. Lin Fengmian's art principles left an indelible mark on Wu Guanzhong during his formative years as a student at the Hangzhou Academy. Sharing many similarities in artistic training and life experiences with Zao Wou-ki, Wu might have become another Zao, had he chosen to stay in France. However, differences in personal circumstances and artistic pursuit prevented that. Wu's art practice, especially from the 1950s to 1970s, was deeply engraved with the marks of the particular art policies and environment of socialist China. The *xiasheng* practice in the 1950s, and the re-popularisation of Chinese-style ink painting in the 1970s, were significant events that shaped his syncretist path.

Wu matured as an artist in the first few decades of the PRC. In spite of his earlier training in traditional Chinese painting and Western modernist art, his syncretism had to contend with a potent third ingredient – the powerful dominance of socialist realism in communist China. This third component added a strong political dimension to Wu's pursuit of a new Chinese art. His painting was a response to the constantly changing art policies, launched one after another by the CCP. His art theory indicated his strategies of weighing and balancing in the sensitive political environments. When he finally became successful with his modern-style Chinese ink paintings in the 1980s, the Chineseness of his artwork spoke of a cultural pride and struck a chord with the Culture Fever at the time, when Chinese intellectuals were once again grappling with Chinese modernisation and Western influences. This is the answer to the research question that I raised in the introduction of this thesis.

Apart from syncretism, China's quest for cultural modernity in the 1980s can also be understood through the term eclecticism. Eclecticism is sometimes used derogatively to describe a self-evident or "shallow" character in the works of artists who, as mentioned above, studied in the West, faced the crisis of their mother culture confronting the West, and struggled to find his or her identity. It is rare to find an artist whose work does not exhibit any "Western" influence during that period. It partly explains Cheng Meixin's criticism of Wu's art style as "eclectic", since in his view, Wu merely dabbled in both Western modernist art and traditional Chinese art and mechanically combined them in his work. This is a facile criticism. However, this criticism of the shallowness of Wu's art becomes interesting when it

transcends the level of evaluating an individual artist's work. It rises up to the issue of evaluating the authenticity of Chinese artistic modernity.

My study of Wu Guanzhong points to the possibility of examining Chinese artistic modernity from an alternative angle. Indeed, Wu's artistic achievement can be easily taken for granted: the pioneering of the importance of injecting Western modernist painting vocabularies, such as the aesthetics of form and abstraction, into Chinese ink painting. Then it would be understandable to conclude that Wu's painting stays in the phase of making "a technical and thematic dialogue with tradition", considering his art is still limited in the two-dimensional medium, and the fusion remains at the aspects of the pictorial composition and the painting style. However, in Wu's practice, aesthetic choices are often responses to political and ideological demands, and aesthetic discussions are often a part of the political discourse. Art and politics are in constant negotiation, the product of which is exactly Wu's art. Wu's transitions from figures to landscapes, and from oils to ink responded to very significant changes, such as the *xiesheng* movement and the re-popularisation of Chinese style painting, in the first decades of socialist China. What is hidden behind his claim of the independence of art form is his correct subject selection that precisely delivered the intellectuals' call of the 1980s, a yearning to assert Chinese cultural pride in the face of Western modernisation. The modernist vocabulary visualized, yet also disguised Wu's art style, which as shown in this study, was in perfect pitch with the zeitgeist of the 1980s.

Wu's art had been accepted and praised in China on one condition and one condition only: it met the need of the times. As my study of Wu Guanzhong demonstrates, the modernity of Chinese art can be researched from an angle not diachronic but synchronic. Instead of categorising Wu's art and framing it in a certain stage, an individual artist's practice can be examined, evaluated and appreciated in its close connection with the particular political and cultural trends that dominated at the time. In other words, Wu's syncretism is distinguished from Lin's and Zao's, not because of the different stages in which they stand as the representatives of the modernity of Chinese art, but because of the particular blend of catalysts from ideology, politics and prevailing cultural phenomena, which formed the uniqueness of Wu's syncretism. Wu's response to socialist China's changing policies is his syncretism.

This study also raises an issue with broader implications in the field of Chinese art history, such as to what extent the critical approaches to Chinese art have been restricted by Eurocentric frameworks, or what James Elkins has described as “Western conceptual schemata”.²⁶⁴ In Elkin’s estimation, the strategies of Chinese art history writing “remain very Western”: “Chinese art historians, both in China and in universities in the West, study Chinese art using the same repertoire of theoretical texts and sources – psychoanalysis, semiotics, iconography, structuralism, anthropology, identity theory. They frame and support their arguments in the same way Western art historians do: with abstracts, archival evidence, summaries of previous scholarship, and footnoted arguments.”²⁶⁵

Elkins’ conclusion that Chinese art history becomes “Western” because of the “Western” origin of the critical approaches is admittedly flawed. As Craig Clunas has commented on this very issue: “It seems to me to be a statement that is about as interesting as claiming that the U.S. Marine Corps is ‘Eastern’ because the explosives are central to its mode of operation.”²⁶⁶ Perhaps by determining the authenticity of Chinese art history based on the cultural provenance of the critical approaches that are employed, Elkins risks falling victim to the same cultural essentialism that he intends to criticise. However, Elkins does alert us to an important issue: Chinese art history has been studied by certain prevailing theories, such as psychoanalysis, semiotics, iconography, structuralism, anthropology, and identity theory, which have been dominant in the studies of Western art history. This is also Clunas’ concern in terms of seeing Chinese art history only from the perspective that has been recognised and acknowledged: “It is my firm belief that framing devices from the discipline of both sinology and art history have made it harder for us to see what it is that we are looking at...”²⁶⁷ There is indeed a good chance that a comprehensive image of modern Chinese art has yet to be fully unfolded, because it mainly has been perceived and researched from the well-recognised “Western” theoretical perspectives.

²⁶⁴ James Elkins, “Art History as Global Discipline”, in James Elkins ed., *Is Art History Global?* New York, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 19.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶⁶ Craig Clunas, “The Toolkit and the Textbook”, in James Elkins ed., *Is Art History Global?* New York, London: Routledge, 2007, p. 280.

²⁶⁷ Craig Clunas, “Unframing Chinese art”, in *Meishushi yu guannianshi* 美术史与观念史 (History of art and history of ideas), Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2007, p. 19.

Thus, the discussions of Wu's political rhetoric (Chapter 4) and patriotism (Chapter 5) are critical not only to the understanding of Wu's artistic success in the specific periods of Chinese history, but also to the exploration of alternative approaches to the study of modern Chinese art history. Wu is a typical case, because he has been studied in terms of pioneering opposite opinions against dominant ideology. Receiving Wu's image as a vanguard raising the flag of Western modernism after the Cultural Revolution is exactly what causes Elkins and Clunas' concerns on researching Chinese art from the given perspectives. As I have demonstrated in this study, voicing criticism against socialist ideology on art is just one aspect of Wu's artistic practice. What is equally important is his tactical adjustment of overly harsh criticisms to avoid direct confrontation with the party-state, turning criticism into patriotic gestures that suited the zeitgeist of the 1980s. In other words, Wu's artistic achievement does not rely on his dissent, but on a balance he sustained through his artwork and art theory that kept his criticism constructive. If Wu's response to socialist China's changing policies is his syncretism, his political balance echoed his artistic syncretism, the two sustaining each other in the paradoxical pursuit of Chinese art in the socialist era. What has resulted from this pursuit is a new socialist art, which has inherited the Chinese aesthetic tradition and at the same time rejuvenated that tradition through encounters with Western modernism.

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APPENDIX 1

Abbreviation

CAA	Chinese Artists Association	中国美术家协会
CAFA	Central Academy of Fine Arts	中央美术学院
CCP	Chinese Communist Party	中国共产党
CIAC	Central Institute of Arts and Crafts	中央工艺美术学院
PRC	People's Republic of China	中华人民共和国

APPENDIX 2

On the Aesthetics of Abstraction

Wu Guanzhong

In this article, I would like to talk about my understanding of the aesthetics of abstraction.

Some people think the mural *Spring of Science* in the Capital Airport is a piece of abstract art. In fact, it is more symbolic than abstract. The mural uses figurative images to symbolise certain concepts, just like the sun is used to symbolise power, and olive branch used for peace. None of these however should be accepted as abstraction. Abstraction is non-figurative. As much as there are form, light, colours and lines, the art of abstraction does not represent any specific figures in the real world.

In both the East and the West, in every society, there always are artists who endeavour to faithfully express their emotions through art. This emotional expression is forever the main driving force in the development of human culture. The Impressionists discovered a new sphere to use colours. The Fauvists highlighted individual freedom in art creation. The Cubists expanded the boundary of the formal and structural composition of figurative art... All these explorations enlarged the world of figurative art.

Mathematics generated from people's practical needs, for example, to distribute things or account numbers. However, it is well known that mathematical study is theoretical now. Diseases come from human bodies. Then bacteria and virus are researched in laboratories to completely eradicate illness. Art originated from the representation of reality. However, what is more important in art is the question of beauty, not the representative of reality.

Verisimilitude does not equalize beauty. There is the issue of beauty that is present in, or absent from, the painting objects themselves. Not all the old pines are beautiful. Neither are all the flowers. Why? If we analyse a work of art in terms of form, we could find what functions is the “bacteria”. We therefore need to analyse the elements of the physical objects that contribute to beauty. We need to extract the elements, such as form, colour, light and shadow, out of the objects and conduct scientific analysis and study on them. This is the study of the aesthetics of abstraction. It requires the same humble attitude as which in scientific experiments, like in mathematics or bacteriology.

There is a Chinese idiom “a single red amid thousand shades of green”. Our ancestors discovered the beauty of abstraction of “red” and “green” in reality, and searched for the rule of the use of colour. Take the crowded houses in Jiangnan for instance. Why are painters more attracted to those architectures than skyscrapers? We used to criticise these artists for their bourgeois thoughts, since they preferred to paint old houses over new ones. It is unfair. These artists I have acquainted greatly love our country and people. They themselves preferred to live in new and clean buildings. However, they still loved to paint the traditional houses in Jiangnan. They still loved to paint the architectures although they looked desolate. These artists did not fall for the desolation, they fell for a certain charm! What kind of charm, then? Apart from the vitality of life shown in the houses, the geometric structure and the colour contrast of the white walls and black tiles achieved a fascinating beauty of abstraction. Studying how to abstract these elements and find the rule were exactly what the Cubists went through in their early-stage artistic exploration.

Who would throw out bathwater with a baby in it? I have no intention to introduce the various schools of Western abstract art. My knowledge is a bit outdated since I have been cut off from the Western art world for almost 30 years. Even if we are reluctant of imitation, we should not be reluctant of research. Besides, was Western abstract art the first to direct its attention to the aesthetics of abstraction? Definitely not. Recently I took my students to Suzhou for a *xiesheng* practice, where they noticed hundreds of patterns of the tracteries in the garden. There were various patterns of straight and broken lines, curves and arcs. They were full of variety and elegance. This is the beauty of abstraction. Also, there were rockery stones exquisitely carved and momentarily presented. Some were easily appreciated, others were

eccentric. This is the beauty of abstraction as well. The Chinese wisteria planted by Wen Zhengming was robust and sturdy, lingering and interweaving, like the running-and-cursive hand in Chinese calligraphy. Whether the object itself can be recognised or not, the aesthetic in its outline is still appreciated. One day I went outdoor to paint and left some paper on the grass. The shadow of the grass casted on paper by the sunshine, which made a fascinating piece of abstract art. Just like the shadow on the paper, the outlines of the orchid and the bamboo in Chinese ink painting can also be considered as semi-abstraction. The beauty of Chinese calligraphy rests in its linear form. Although Chinese characters were invented primarily as diagrams, calligraphy more often than not becomes an outlet of the artists' emotional expression. Chinese calligraphy can be said as the rallying place of the beauty of abstraction. The marbles from Yunnan are carved and decorated in the People's Hall, as tabletops, framed with rosewood and hung in fancy living rooms, because their grain is a marvellous creation by nature. The photos of the stalactites in Guilin and Yixing are used as posters for the same reason. These are both examples of the aesthetics of abstraction in nature. The beauty of abstraction is largely recognised in traditional Chinese architecture and garden design. For instance, the bucket arch is reminiscent of Cubist art; and the vaults and murals totally relate to Abstractionism. Ivy is technically planted to protect the wall. It also acquires a wonderful decorative function. There are three walls of ivy in the Lingering Garden in Suzhou. A massive spread of the serpentine ivy on the walls, like snakes swimming through the water, fascinating and eccentric, makes a marvellous spectacle. If it could inspire an artist to paint a mural, it would make a great tourist attraction! The bounty of the beauty of abstraction has been appreciated by not only the intellectuals, but also ordinary people. Most of the beauty of abstraction is created by artisans in the marketplace. The most remarkable example is the handicrafts, such as the colour-changing glaze, and the batik cloth. Artisans also carve tobacco pipes from bamboo roots, weave wheat straws to make abstract patterns, and sea shells and feathers to decorate pictures. Dough clay artisans knead different colours together to achieve the beauty of abstraction. They all inject great vitality to the figures they have created.

Abstraction rests in the centre of formal aesthetics. People have instinctive affection for the beauty of form and abstraction. I had a kaleidoscope in childhood, the myriad colours of which is the beauty of abstraction. The patterns of ancient faience and bronze vessels also

prove the creativity of humankind in its infancy. If one could collect the different coiffures from women of various nationalities, there would be an expo of the beauty of abstraction.

The relation between likeness and unlikeness is actually the relation between figurative art and abstract art. What is the concept of “spiritual resonance” in classical Chinese painting? The success or failure of a flower-and-bird or landscape painting lies in whether the artist has achieved spiritual resonance. This spiritual resonance is achieved through a balance of figurative and abstract elements, likeness and unlikeness, harmony and disharmony, beauty and ugliness, all of which deserve further study. Music is phonaesthetics, in which the melodic quality is the key. We don’t understand the birds’ tweets in the mountains, but we are capable of scientifically analysing why they sound so sweet. Art is aesthetic, in which the visual quality is the key. Analysing its rule is exactly like analysing the rhythm of music. Abstracting the beauty from painting objects means abstracting the aesthetic elements from them. These elements become abstract, although they are from the figurative world. Huang Binghong’s work in his late years had grasped the aesthetics of abstraction. In comparison, his early work was too restricted to figurative representation. The beauty was hence hidden behind and unable to reveal itself. Compared with his late work, Huang’s early work was less successful in achieving “spiritual resonance”. Although there are good and bad literati paintings, generally the ones that excel are the ones that have mastered the aesthetics of abstraction. I do think, of all the Chinese ink masters, Bada shanren reached the deepest realm of the beauty of abstraction. Through the black-white ink play and the intricate brushstrokes, his sorrow and disquiet were expressed. Bada pursued an inner dynamic in his figurative painting to convey a “fleeting” sensation. The stone he painted has a larger top and smaller bottom, which seemed impossible to stand still, as if it is about to roll down! The melon in his painting, with a black bird standing on top, is unstable as well. The stem of the melon and the bird’s eye are reminiscent of the pattern of Tai-chi, achieving the beauty of abstraction. Irregularity and eccentricity are the hallmarks of Bada’s pine tree, which tapers off at the roots, as if it is rootless and about to fly away. His orchid and lotus are depicted in an effect that you only see blurs. Bada usually applied light ink and simple lines, which made his such paintings even more dream-like.

There was a rock in the Lion Grove Garden in Suzhou. It was reminiscent of a lion which invited tourists to expand their imagination. But someone had to add a tail to it, thinking the others were as aesthetically ignorant as he was. In traditional Chinese arts, in the fields of architecture, painting and handcraft, the beauty of abstraction has played a deep and comprehensive role. We must preserve and develop this tradition of abstraction, which should be thoroughly researched and scientifically studied. Grasping the rule of it will strongly help us with mastering all genres of figurative art, realist and romantic, fine-brush and free-hand. The Huizong Emperor indeed grasped some essence of abstraction when painting the rocks and feather. Chen Hongshou reached the same sphere to a certain extent by depicting clothes in *the Album Leaf of Water Margin*. Their achievements were exactly what Paul Klee had been searching for. Few people understands the harwork that scientists are doing, yet when penicillin was finally succesfully developed, everyone appreciated and benefited.

When studying the aesthetics of abstraction, we should also Western abstract art. All we need to do is taking the essence from it and discarding the dregs. Paul Cezanne analysed the geometrical structure of the figurative world. Cubism expanded the sphere of figurative art by abstracting the form from the painting objects and presenting its structure. They were the pioneers of Western abstract art. There are numerous schools of Western abstract art: schools that focus on expressing space, and schools that emphasise time and speed; schools that are semi-abstraction, omni-abstraction, and schools that claimed to be pure abstraction...However, their inspirations all come from reality. No matter how remote the art looks from the reality, it is still rooted in the artist's life experience. No art is unrooted, as no one can elevate oneself from the ground by pulling at one's own hair! I am never overly fond of following Western modernist art, since Westerners' eyebrows cannot be grown on our faces. But learning is a necessity. If the barrier between the East and the West can be gradually eliminated, then different cultue would be understood. Then we would get to know that it is nothing but natural that the art of abstraction was generated under certain circumstances of their culture. There is nothing to be afraid of. Why would Kandinsky, the founding father of abstractionism, be any distinguished? I used to watch a Kunqu Opera. In Ba Yunsheng' colourful patched costume, I felt I saw Kandinsky's work!