

Mu Xin and Twentieth-Century Chinese Painting

It is only by default that the paintings of Mu Xin in the *Tower within a Tower* series can be categorized collectively as ink paintings. Although ink plays a large role in all of them, in some of the works it is combined with gouache, and perhaps other materials as well. In others the surface is so heavily and strangely worked that ink painting as a tradition—in other words, as a cultural rather than a technical category—hardly seems relevant as a context. As a starting point for an exploration of Mu Xin's place in modern Chinese painting, ink painting as medium and tradition is imperfect at best. Nonetheless, it is not clear that there is any better place to start.

Chinese Ink Painting and Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism has a long history in Chinese ink painting—a history as long as ink painting itself—yet it was not until the twentieth century that it finally became central to the practice of that art form.¹ On the Chinese mainland, beginning around 1895, this occurred in two main ways.² Some artists explicitly sought to integrate the foreign artistic approaches of which they were newly aware with inherited Chinese approaches, making a rhetorical appeal to a notion of cultural fusion. In the process, they tended to homogenize the inherited Chinese elements as aspects of a single unified tradition that was to be modernized by the introduction of foreign techniques and styles. For other artists, the basic social fact that non-Chinese visual imagery had now become unavoidable in the urban environment imposed the project of defining ink painting as the embodiment of an essential Chineseness. In their work the cosmopolitan or intercultural dimension of ink painting took the undeclared form of what might be called

an impossible refusal of the foreign—impossible both because the refusal of the foreign was an acknowledgment of its existence and because the visual means of defining Chineseness all too often involved hidden foreign elements.³ Moreover, a small but important part of the audience for such painting was itself foreign—Japanese.⁴

Despite the many deeply disruptive political changes of twentieth-century China, including the radical geopolitical restructuring of the late 1940s, these two artistic responses to globalization have continued to structure the landscape of ink painting, in ways closely linked to the larger social issue of the subject position of the artist, that is, the place in the social structure from which (s)he claims to act and speak. Those artists who have identified themselves with the modernizing project, whatever their stylistic affiliations and particular foreign reference points, have tended to define themselves as *intellectuals* on the Western model. The others, often dubbed traditionalists, have presented themselves as modern *literati*, claiming to embody a continuity with the literati of the Chinese past.⁵ Together, they have accomplished a fundamental and impressive renewal of ink painting.

The binary clarity of this schematic summary is relatively true to the rhetorical battle lines drawn up by the protagonists, but for art-historical purposes it has little more than heuristic value. With the passage of time, the relationship between the two sides became increasingly complex, not only because intermediate positions continuously emerged, but also because artists on each side had at various times reasons to borrow the other's rhetoric, in the process integrating elements of the opposing position. One result of this constant interaction was the emergence of both obviously cosmopolitan and apparently purist,

nativist forms of ink painting that can legitimately be described as specifically Chinese forms of modernism. Other work—again, both cosmopolitan and purist forms of ink painting—might better be described as Chinese examples of “modern art despite modernism.”⁶

One underlying assumption shared by all the artists concerned was that there existed a coherent prior Chinese painting tradition. Yet this supposed tradition was itself a modern invention. Among its many inventors was the Shanghai-based artist Wu Changshi (1844–1927), whose paintings—in particular those done after 1900, which were especially popular in Japan—fused calligraphy, seal-carving, and ink painting to create what effectively functioned as an essence of elite Chinese visual culture.⁷ Equally important, though in a quite different way, was the much younger Cantonese painter Gao Qifeng (1889–1933), who on the basis of his Japanese training developed a modernizing mode of painting that posited a single overall Chinese painting tradition as the object of modernization.⁸ Ink painters before Wu Changshi and Gao Qifeng had engaged with specific pictorial traditions, but it was only in the twentieth century that these were seen to add up to the larger phenomenon of Tradition. This could not happen before Chinese artists and their public had sufficient awareness of the outside world to be able, mentally, to look at China from the outside, which only became widely possible in the wake of the large-scale introduction of Western ideas and educational approaches into China at the end of the nineteenth century. The perception of Tradition is in this sense merely a symptom of modern Chinese culture's passage into a period of intensified globalization and intercultural experience—though, as I have argued elsewhere, one

has to beware of equating the invention of Tradition with the beginnings of modern art, which in fact predate this turning point by some decades.⁹

In this essay, I attempt to provide a twentieth-century art-historical context for the *Tower within a Tower* paintings, relating Mu Xin's project to the sociopolitical circumstances of painting in the People's Republic, from 1949 to his departure from China in 1982. These circumstances forced a political wedge into the above-mentioned structural oppositions between intellectuals and literati, cosmopolitan and purist artistic modes, and modernist and non-modernist modern art. Politics in the People's Republic functioned then, and continues to function today, as an unavoidable independent factor that constantly complicates the issue of artistic modernity. I shall approach



Figure 1 Xu Beihong (1895–1953). *Mount Lu*, 1932. Ink and color on paper, 111 x 107 cm. Collection unknown.

the *Tower within a Tower* paintings from three different angles: as the “subconscious” of a more politically acceptable pictorial lyricism, as a visual embodiment of internal exile, and as the pictorial expression of a cultural time warp. These overlapping characterizations—facets of a single larger characterization of the project in terms of the difficult destiny of cosmopolitanism in painting in post-1949 China—by no means chart the full territory of the work's significance. In pointing to the disruptive surfacing of desire seen in many of the paintings, I shall make no attempt to characterize that desire, nor shall I try to explore the sensibility with which such surfacings are associated or the carefully constructed effect of mystery that serves as their ambient emotional medium. Beyond politics and culture, there remain the more private negotiations that are here deposited in a tower within a tower, the discussion of which lies outside the bounds of the present essay.

Modernist Lyricism

The brief introductory account offered above drastically simplifies a history that took form in relation to the complicated political turns of twentieth-century China, several of which ensnared Mu Xin in ways that are dealt with elsewhere in this catalogue. He was born Sun Pu in 1927, was an art student in Shanghai and Hangzhou in the late 1940s, was a citizen of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to 1982, and since 1982 has been a resident of the United States. Mu Xin attended art school at the Shanghai Fine Art Institute in the late 1940s, graduating in 1948. During this period, he also frequented the National Hangzhou Arts Academy in Hangzhou, not far from Shanghai. The Shanghai Fine Art Institute, the

leading art school in China's most cosmopolitan city, was a vanguard institution that had existed since 1912. The National Hangzhou Arts Academy, along with the National Academy of Art in Beijing, had been founded at the end of the 1920s as a national institution.¹⁰ Its first director was Lin Fengmian (1900–91), who took up the post in 1928 upon his return from studies in Belgium and France, and headed the Academy until 1937. Lin became a spokesman for modernism's relevance to China and an individualistic approach to modern art. In this role, he stood at the opposite pole from Xu Beihong (1895–1953), his counterpart at the Beijing Academy and later at the National Central University in Nanjing, who practiced and prominently argued for an academic approach that was one version of the “modern art despite modernism” mentioned earlier. Both art schools taught ink painting as well as Western painting and sculpture, and throughout the 1930s Lin and Xu personally practiced self-consciously modernized but otherwise contrasting forms of ink painting alongside their main specialty of oil painting.

Although Xu Beihong was not the only artist of the time who sought an accommodation between Western academic drawing and Chinese ink painting, he set himself apart by taking on the perversely difficult task of rigorously reconciling the principles of Western academic drawing with those of expressionistic ink painting (fig. 1).¹¹ During the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), for both practical and ideological reasons, ink painting took on a new importance for Xu, with results that deserve more critical respect than they have commonly received; the number of his successful works before and after 1937 is remarkably high given the difficulty of the project. During the 1930s Lin Fengmian, in common with the slightly younger, Shanghai-trained Li

Keran (1907–89), took what was in a sense an easier route, seizing on the affinities between Fauvist and Expressionist spontaneity and the spontaneity of *xieyi* (“idea-writing”) ink painting, with more obviously attractive, if still modest results (fig. 2). Following the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 and the evacuation of the Hangzhou Academy to Chongqing, in the interior of China, Lin gave up the directorship and distanced himself from its activities. After the Academy returned to Hangzhou in 1946, he continued for several years to be an influential member of the faculty. At the time Mu Xin came into contact with him in the late 1940s, Lin had already largely given up oil painting. In Chongqing during the war, with Western painting materials scarce and nationalism resurgent, he had turned to painting in ink on paper in a more serious way (fig. 3). That intense period of experimentation included his introduction of gouache into ink painting, and by the late 1940s the ink-and-gouache combination had become his principal mode of artistic expression.¹² The shift from oil painting to a modified form of ink painting, however, did nothing to alter the close ties between his art and Western and Japanese modernism of broadly post-Impressionist and Cubist-derived kinds. In 1952 Lin moved to Shanghai, where he worked as an independent artist. He continued to symbolize an openness to modern Western art during the 1950s and 1960s, long after the political climate became unfavorable to such cosmopolitanism.

Lin Fengmian’s work in ink, and in ink and gouache, is of particular interest here as an influential and pioneering example of a larger phenomenon to which Mu Xin’s *Tower within a Tower* paintings also belong—the practice of lyric ink painting by artists who had acquired a serious modernist training (fig. 4). Lyric ink painting had a long

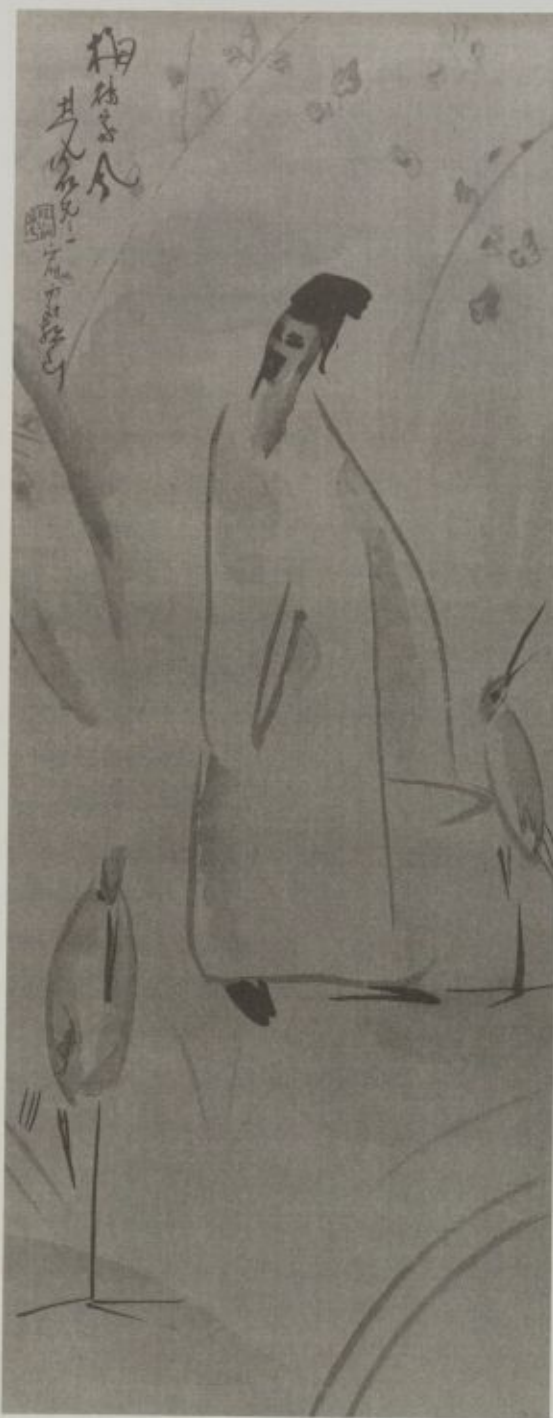


Figure 2 (left) Lin Fengmian (1900–91). *Scholar and Cranes*, 1931. Ink and color on silk, 106 x 41.2 cm. Collection unknown. Figure 3 (right) Lin Fengmian (1900–91). *Landscape*, 1943. Ink and color on paper. Private Collection.

prior history: for several hundred years educated artists who were proficient in the art of poetry had transferred poetic principles into the practice of painting.¹³ However, as early as the 1930s artists like Lin Fengmian and Li Keran, who considered themselves intellectuals rather than literati, were developing a new lyric aesthetic for that medium on mainstream modernist principles of flatness, mark-making, and visual immediacy. In mainland China, starting with the Japanese invasion in 1937, there were fewer and fewer chances to develop oil painting in this direction; ink painting offered greater opportunities. It should be noted, too, that by then most ink painters no longer had a solely or even primarily "traditional" artistic training. Some had dabbled in ink painting since childhood, others studied it as a sub-specialty in art school, and yet others only turned to it later in their careers. But, no matter how they had arrived at the practice of ink painting, because they had almost always studied non-Chinese modes of picture making as well, they all served as conduits for radically new approaches to line, space, color, composition, and format. These approaches altered—and continue today to alter—the landscape of ink painting. Sometimes, as in the case of Lin Fengmian's introduction of gouache into ink painting, these foreign-informed artists also made technical innovations that altered or challenged the boundaries of the medium itself. Mu Xin is among the artists who followed Lin in this direction.

Although I have chosen to frame this essay according to the (evolving) boundaries of a particular medium, the explorations of lyricism by Chinese modernist artists cut across such boundaries. In fact, the terrain of modernist lyricism in twentieth-century Chinese painting is vast, encompassing oil painting as well as ink painting, abstraction

as well as figuration, taking widely different forms that were conditioned by the artists' geographic and political circumstances. And while it is true that Lin Fengmian was a key figure both as an oil painter and as an ink painter, it is certainly not a terrain with any one center. Some of the most significant contributions were isolated initiatives. To take just two examples, as early as the late 1920s, the Paris-based oil painter Chang Yu (1901–66) turned female nudes, still lifes, and animal-inhabited landscapes into meditative inscriptional images by transposing from ink painting the lateral treatment of the image field.¹⁴ In China, meanwhile, the Paris-trained Pang Xunqin (1906–85) experimented from the 1930s onward in oils, water-colors, and eventually ink paintings. His explorations of intersections between the decorative and the symbolic employ a veritable smorgasbord of cultural references, European and Chinese, ancient and modern.¹⁵

In other cases, it seems possible to see historical patterns, as, for example, in the development of various forms of lyric abstraction from the late 1940s onward in China, Taiwan, Europe, and the United States by a group of artists who studied and/or taught at the Hangzhou Academy in the 1930s and 1940s, including Wu Dayu (1903–88), Li Zhongsheng (1911–84), Zhao Chunxiang (1913–91), Zhu Dequn (b. 1920), and Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji, b. 1921) (fig. 5).¹⁶ In another example of such a pattern, at the same time as some Chinese artists outside China were moving toward abstraction, a number of modernist painters who stayed behind in China after 1949—often former colleagues of those who would become abstractionists—reacted to the unfavorable political circumstances by taking refuge in the ink-painting medium. Zhu Qizhan (1892–1996), for example, who had the benefit of a joint

literati and intellectual education, repositioned himself as a "traditional" ink painter in Shanghai, continuing his exploration of post-Impressionist coloristic and textural principles within that apparently unpromising framework.¹⁷ The list of such modernists-in-disguise is long, especially in the generation born around 1900; it includes, most notably, Li Kuchan (1898–1983), Guan Liang (1899–1986), the Hong Kong-based Ding Yanyong (1902–78), Pang Xunqin, and Li Keran.¹⁸

The ink-and-gouache version of ink painting practiced by Lin Fengmian in China following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 thus represents a specific location on the larger map of modernist lyricism, lying somewhere between the modernists-in-disguise and the



Figure 4 Lin Fengmian (1900–91). *Spring Breeze*, 1960. Ink and gouache on paper, 67 x 67 cm. Shanghai Artists' Association.

Hangzhou-connected abstractionists.¹⁹ His art is defined by a consistent attempt to push figural representation to the edge of abstraction, by an interest in compositional and gestural rhythm, and by an engagement with the materiality of surface that is particular to ink, gouache, and paper. Lin's thematic territory covers landscapes, still lifes, and human figures; while it is sometimes clear that a specific memory is being reworked, in other cases the emphasis is on the intimacy of the everyday. Paintings by



Figure 5 Zao Wou-ki (b. 1921). *Wind and Dust*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 200 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Gift of G. David Thompson, in memory of his son, G. David Thompson, Jr., class of 1958.

Mu Xin from the 1960s and the late 1970s unconnected to the *Tower within a Tower* series demonstrate how much his art owed, in other circumstances, to Lin Fengmian, but also how different his sensibility is. *Intoxicated Village* (ca. 1960s) uses the ink-and-gouache technique in the squarish format favored by Lin (fig. 6). However, it lacks the older painter's obsession with immediacy and structure; instead, Mu Xin allows atmosphere to displace form, creating a more softly meditative effect, enhanced by the title, which here and elsewhere in his work takes on an importance rarely found in Lin's painting. (The images of the *Tower within a Tower* series, presented in this catalogue under four-character Chinese-style titles, were at one point given two character Western-style titles as well, underlining their complex intercultural status.) A 1979 landscape in the same square format, *Twilight*, has a new economy of means, playing masterfully with the viewer's perception of time and space. The particular stillness of the image and the velvety smoothness of the image field (partly achieved by the application of ink to the back of the paper) are entirely Mu Xin's (fig. 7). *Dancers*, a rare figural painting from around the same time, displays similar qualities of formal economy and texture, but is in clear dialogue with Lin Fengmian's rhythmic treatment of the human body, which it transforms in the direction of a resolution of opposites, bringing the image ultimately back to the meditative stillness characteristic of Mu Xin's art (fig. 8). Works such as these identify Mu Xin as one of Lin's most creative followers in the People's Republic, alongside the better-known artist Wu Guanzhong (b. 1919).²⁰ The *Tower within a Tower* series completely alters this picture, however. Due to their experimental nature, notably somber tone, and strikingly small and apparently



Figure 6 Mu Xin (b. 1927). *Intoxicated Village*, ca. 1960s. Ink and gouache on paper. Collection unknown.

private scale, these landscape paintings stand apart not only from the work of those artists with whom Mu Xin otherwise has the greatest affinity, but also, it would seem, from his own work before and after. One is reminded that due to the political disruptions of the twentieth century the history of modern Chinese art is a history of *episodes* that may take up much of one artist's career, or for a shorter time involve several artists, but in other cases may be restricted to one relatively brief moment in the life of a single artist. The importance of the episode does not depend on the duration, as the *Tower within a Tower* series vividly demonstrates.

The significance of this series of paintings lies partly in its implicit relationship to other forms of lyricism that were politically more acceptable. Rather than cite the artist's

own work again, or the work of Lin Fengmian, or the relentlessly optimistic paintings of Wu Guanzhong from the same moment in the late 1970s, the point can probably be better made in relation to the landscape painting of Li Keran. Li, more than any other artist in China, succeeded in finding a place for modernism in the very heart of the socialist cultural establishment.²¹ Having given up oil painting in favor of ink painting during the war and then moving to Beijing in 1946, where he studied with Qi Baishi (1863–1957), Li Keran from 1954 onward settled on landscape painting as the genre that offered him the greatest opportunity for a poetry of modern life under socialism (fig. 9). He often developed his compositions on the basis of earlier pencil sketches, in which he worked out the structural armature of the painting in modernist analytic terms before engaging in a series of ink improvisations of the same composition. In these impressively stable and monumental paintings, we find the overlapping realms of the national landscape, a hoped-for space of social calm, and the canonical sites of the People's Republic.²² Next to Li's paintings, Mu Xin's subversively strange images appear to give form to the unruly subconscious that is repressed in establishment lyricism. Whereas Li's paintings, by picturing the nation through the prism of earned leisure, allow the viewer to make politically acceptable connections with his or her own experience, Mu Xin's landscapes evoke a realm of private, not necessarily pleasant memory, for which any Chinese viewer in 1979 could have provided a personal counterpart. In effect, his landscapes, like those of the Ming loyalist artists of the third quarter of the seventeenth century, bear witness to the psychic damage caused by the same ideology from which Li Keran managed to recuperate something of positive value.

Intercultural Schizophrenia

Although given a collective title, the thirty-three paintings of the *Tower within a Tower* series oscillate between two approaches. The paintings of the first type—for example, *At Peace in Stone Cottage* (pl. 4), *Clear Ripples of a Waterfall* (pl. 5), *Autumn Colors at Jinling* (pl. 7), *Dark Ridge Blocking the Sky* (pl. 9), *Cicadas' Drone in Summer Trees* (pl. 14), *Mountains Enclosing the Chu River* (pl. 16), *Reciting a Tang Poem on the Road to Shu* (pl. 18), *Sunset in the Yellow Mountains* (pl. 22), *Lofty Residence of the Wei and Jin* (pl. 32), *Wisps of Auspicious Clouds* (pl. 33), all of which approximate the proportions of a hanging scroll—work within the parameters of the Chinese ink landscape, building the scene out of the customary

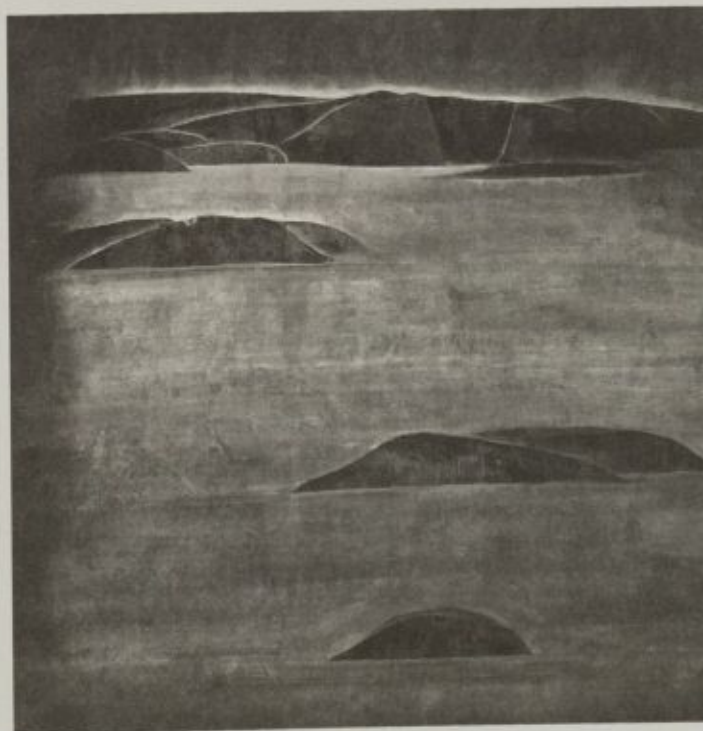


Figure 7 Mu Xin (b. 1927). *Twilight*, 1979. Ink and gouache on paper, 27 x 27 in. Private Collection.

elements employed in that genre (trees, rocks, waterfalls, lakes, paths, houses) using spatial constructions familiar from earlier in the century. These particular paintings would not look out of place in an exhibition alongside the landscapes of Fu Baoshi (1904–65) (fig. 10), with which they share a penchant for rich surfaces that make heavy use of scumbling, puddling, and dotting. This type of materiality—deliberately chaotic and suggestive of the tactile—is made up of elements that, individually, are inherited from earlier Chinese painting but that, used together, suggest a response to the physicality of oil painting. On their own, the paintings of this group—which can be extended to include works in a horizontal format, *Reminiscences of Wangchuan* (pl. 8), *In Lonely Leisure*, *Seeking Beautiful Scenery* (pl. 10), *Strong Wind in Autumn*



Figure 8 Mu Xin (b. 1927). *Dancers*, 1981. Ink and gouache on paper. Collection unknown.



Figure 9 Li Keran (1907–89). *The Li River in the Rain*, 1977. Ink and light color on paper. Collection unknown.

Mountains (pl. 17), *Geese Arriving over a Pavilion* (pl. 20), *Pure Stone Mountain-Villa* (pl. 21), *Eroding Inscription of the Han* (pl. 24), *Tea Ranges of the Wuyi Mountains* (pl. 25)—are more idiosyncratic than strange, with familiar visual references to the ink painting of the past and its landscapes of rural villages and remote mountains. The four-character titles introduce further cultural allusions:

to the hermits of the Wei-Jin period (pl. 32), Tang dynasty poems evoking the journey through the mountains to Sichuan (pl. 18), or the Wangchuan estate of the Tang poet Wang Wei (701–61) (pl. 8). This subgroup of works includes the ones most closely related to the separate body of much larger paintings from 1979 using the same vocabulary of landscape signs, an example of which was discussed earlier (see fig. 5). This direction in Mu Xin's work is not by any means wholly backward-looking. Both the large and the small paintings anticipate, for example, the at-once atmospheric and graphic depiction of landscape in Chen Kaige's (b. 1952) early cinematic meditation on the Cultural Revolution, the 1987 *King of the Children* (*Haizi wang*).

The remaining paintings, which depend on a Western realist mode of spatial construction, contrast strikingly with the first subgroup. The resolute weirdness of these paintings—*Pure Bamboo by a Cool Stream* (pl. 1), *Wandering in a Dream to West Lake* (pl. 2), *Spring Brilliance at Kuaiji* (pl. 3), *Dawn Mood at Bohai* (pl. 6), *Dawn's Light at Fuyang* (pl. 11), *Moonlight at Pudong* (pl. 12), *Pure Mind amid Colored Clouds* (pl. 13), *Stone Cave in Desiccated Cliff* (pl. 15), *Half Thousand Li of the Ruo River* (pl. 19), *Ancient Fountainhead of the Yellow River* (pl. 23), *Slumbering Stones at a Quiet Pond* (pl. 26), *Twin Pagodas in Plum Rain* (pl. 27), *Night Banquet at Gushan* (pl. 28), *Spring Shade at the Su Embankment* (pl. 29), *Noon Thunder in the Shade of a Banyan Tree* (pl. 30), *Ancient Road at Shanyin* (pl. 31)—does not principally derive from their moody presence, nor from their compositions, which are consistently stable and only rarely illogical. The effect is produced by Mu Xin's hybridization of different species of art making. Otherwise

conventional approaches to landscape are forced into unnatural but compelling unions with exotic beasts—including, at a guess, the Surrealist decalcomania, the fantastic landscapes of Max Ernst, the photographic negative, and the work of Caspar David Friedrich. Did this have something to do with the special post-Cultural Revolution climate of the late 1970s? The world's art magazines were once again available in Chinese art schools, which were also free to allow their Western art books to be consulted, and Chinese art magazines began to reproduce modern Western art again. Among younger artists, there was a burst of eclectic sampling of modern art styles, with little regard for period or the reputation of these styles in the Western art world.²³ The situation at the end of the 1970s was to some extent a replay of that in the early 1930s, when young artists who were unable to study abroad had engaged instead in an imaginary self-displacement beyond China's borders, anticipating not only the late 1970s but also today's prevalent transnationalism among artists who do not always feel the need to leave China.

Different as the two groups of paintings comprising *Tower within a Tower* are, Mu Xin has nonetheless interspersed them to form one larger series. The series just barely coheres as the evocation of a single overall world by virtue of the space—or better, the atmosphere—that the thirty-three paintings share. It is a fluid atmosphere in which memory, history, and pure imagination flow in and out of each other, crystallizing through the sense of place. In these paintings, place is often identified in the titles, and is usually southern—the city of Nanjing, Hangzhou's West Lake, the coast of Zhejiang, the Yellow and the Wuyi mountains. But just as often it is left unspecified—which is not to say that it is unspecific, since the individual



Figure 10 Fu Baoshi (1904–65). *Scholars Watching a Waterfall*, 1943. Ink and color on paper, 104.5 x 59.7 cm. Collection unknown.

atmospheres are always precise: a season, a time of day, a quality of light or of air. Though a hasty glance over the whole series might suggest a certain sameness, when the paintings are viewed closely, the overall somber mood

gives way to infinite nuances of melancholy, from an almost lighthearted wistfulness to the dark bearing of witness evoked at the end of the previous section. Still, the general mood is dark. The artist has obliterated most of the empty paper and opted ascetically for tonal rather than color relationships. The few coloristic touches only draw more attention to their general renunciation.

It seems clear that this emotional topography belongs to a larger history of interior exile—that is, a psychic self-displacement out of the political realities of the People's Republic—in post-1949 ink painting.²⁴ This complicated and as yet largely uncharted history includes the bulk of the work produced after 1949 by certain modernist artists such as Lin Fengmian and Pang Xunqin, the private production of others involved with the literati ideal, such as Zhu Qizhan, Wu Hufan (1894–1970), Pan Tianshou (1897–1971), and Lu Yanshao (1909–93); Shi Lu's (1919–82) work from the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) period (fig. 11); and, more recently, numerous works created in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen incident of June 4, 1989.²⁵ The schizophrenic structure of Mu Xin's contribution in the *Tower within a Tower* paintings might at first be thought a weakness, until one remembers that just such a cultural schizophrenia characterized the late 1970s as China emerged from the dark tunnel of the Cultural Revolution. Among those artists in interior exile from the disfunctions of the Chinese Communist state, the desire to recover and revive a cultural heritage that had been attacked competed for importance with the desire to reestablish the contact with the outside world that had been rejected. In its very dividedness, therefore, *Tower within a Tower* is an embodiment of the fault lines of its historical moment.

The Writer as Painter

Mu Xin is perhaps first and foremost a writer and poet. One owes it to his work, therefore, to attend to his "voice," or, in art critical terms, his "sensitivity." Certain elements are constant throughout the *Tower within a Tower* series: solitude (there are no figures anywhere), the psychological distance of an outsider looking in, a hyper-refinement paradoxically drawn from messiness, an attraction to obscurity. The hybrid, visionary subgroup of paintings takes this sensitivity into territory where it becomes frankly subversive. Here Mu Xin shows himself fascinated by the beauty of spills, mess, decay, pollution,



Figure 11 Shi Lu (1919–82). *Xu You Washing His Ear*. Ink and color on paper (unmounted), dimensions unknown. Collection unknown.

ooze, and mouldlike growths, as in *Half Thousand Li of the Ruo River* (pl. 19), *Slumbering Stones at a Quiet Pond* (pl. 26), or *Night Banquet at Gushan* (pl. 28). One thinks at times of Warhol's *Piss* paintings. At the same time, Mu Xin's attraction to obscurity becomes an obsession; there is comfort in darkness. The sensibility becomes uncompromising—charm is replaced by a defiant hermeticism.

Writers who paint (as against painters who write) constitute a rare and fascinating group in the history of modern Chinese painting, notable for their cosmopolitan sophistication. As early as the 1920s, the writer and poet Wen Yiduo (1899–1946), professionally trained as a graphic designer in Chicago, dashed off a lovely 1925 ink sketch of Tolstoy, whose recently translated *What is Art?* was then so influential (fig. 12).²⁶ Another predecessor was Wen Yiduo's longer-lived contemporary, Feng Zikai (1898–1975), who adapted a modern Japanese style of genre painting to the purposes of a poetry of modern Chinese life that reached a wide audience through photolithographic publications.²⁷ At one point in the interview with Mu Xin published in this volume, "A Dialogue with Mu Xin," the artist evokes an image of the kind that Feng Zikai made famous during the Asian Pacific War of the

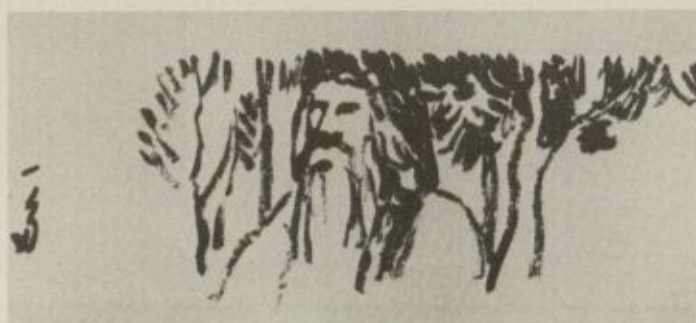


Figure 12 Wen Yiduo (1899–1946). *Tolstoy*, ca. mid–late 1920s. Ink on paper, section of a collaborative handscroll. Formerly Ling Suhua Collection.

1940s (fig. 13) to describe his own situation during the Cultural Revolution:

It is not unlike the dandelions scattered in the smoking debris after a recent battle, which proves that the attributes of plants, those possessed by culture and arts, will strategically prevail.²⁸

The other significant writer-painters of Mu Xin's generation include two native Hunan artists, Huang Yongyu (b. 1924), based in Beijing, and Chu Ge (b. 1931), based in Taiwan. Huang, a student of Lin Fengmian, began his career as a printmaker working in an elegantly illustrative modernist style comparable to the more decorative French illustration of the 1930s. After 1949 he continued to pursue a successful artistic career as a printmaker until the Cultural Revolution embroiled him and his art in political difficulties. By the 1960s, Huang had begun to link his images to parables of his own composition; and from the 1970s onward inscriptions of all kinds commanded more and more attention in his ever graphic and decorative paintings (fig. 14). As in the case of Feng Zikai, the images require their accompanying texts to command interest. Without them, they would be trivial; with them, they have the resonant power of anonymous, pointed jokes.²⁹ On the other side of the Taiwan straits, Chu Ge's no less decorative and literary painting takes a very similar artistic approach in the different direction of philosophic meditations on culture and life (fig. 15).³⁰

If only because his images are uninscribed, it would be hard to argue that Mu Xin's art shares a community of *formal* interests with these other writer-artists who, like him, found ways of reconfiguring the text-image relation-



Figure 13 Feng Zikai (1898–1975). "War and Flower." From *Manhua de miaofa* [Cartooning methods] (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1948), p. 21.

ship outside the parameters of the powerful and enduring model furnished by literati painting.³¹ If anything, he has more in common with such European writer-artists as Victor Hugo and—in his own lifetime—Henri Michaux. He shares with Michaux a deliberate modesty of format, a displacement of literary sensibility into the fabric of the visual, and a fearless evocation of bodily darkness. His painting, like Michaux's, also challenges established aesthetic categories. Such affinities may seem less surprising once one has consulted "A Dialogue with Mu Xin," where one cannot help but be struck by the artist's self-perceived kinship with European writers, philosophers, musicians, and artists, and the culture they represent.

The title given by the artist to the group of paintings is itself emblematic of this affinity. As he explains:

The tower on the inside is the ivory tower, a metaphor with ironic connotations. The tower that contains this tower is the Tower of London, a trope for a specific

situation. So the title means "An Ivory Tower inside London Tower." In literary debates since the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the self-styled "crossroads" school in China always used "ivory tower" to dismiss the other school, their opponents. I am not associated with either school. All I am saying is that I made an ivory tower when I was, so to speak, a prisoner in the Tower of London.³²

The reference here to the May Fourth Movement is crucial, because it hints at the temporal displacement within which Mu Xin was situated in 1979. After 1949, those artists and intellectuals who, like Mu Xin, "missed the boat and afterward could not budge for thirty years," found themselves trapped within a cultural time warp; they could only hold on to their cosmopolitanism privately, in a



Figure 14 Huang Yongyu (b. 1924). *Ancients Huan and Yin*, 1979. Ink and color on paper. Collection unknown. The inscription cites an anecdote recorded in the early fifth century in Liu Yiqing, *Shishuo xinyu* [A New Account of Tales of the World]. "When Huan [Huan Wen, 312–73] was young, he and Yin [Yin Hao, 306–56] were of equal reputation, and they constantly felt a spirit of mutual rivalry. Huan once asked Yin: 'How do you compare with me?' Yin answered: 'I've been keeping company with myself a long time; I'd rather just be me.'"

historically arrested form. This was the special temporality of Mu Xin's interior exile.³³ The time warp determines the references in the *Prison Notes* of 1971–72, and continues to resonate thirty years later in the "Dialogue." As the above citation makes clear, it also determines the title of the group of paintings, which evokes the terms of debate of the 1920s and 1930s that were the principal point of reference for intellectuals in China until the eve of 1949. In that debate, the politically left-wing "crossroads" school argued that artists and intellectuals had a date with history, which they would miss if they allowed themselves to take up an apolitical stance and become too attached to aesthetic form, and thus remain in an "ivory tower."³⁴ Mu Xin's ironic title, without identifying with an apolitical stance, affirms the necessity of aestheticism in the face of the oppression that uses towers to imprison artists and intellectuals. In Mu Xin's case, this aestheticism takes its most powerful form at the intersection of the temporality of the time warp and the sensibility described at the beginning of this section. The power of such paintings as *Slumbering Stones at a Quiet Pond* (pl. 26) or *Stone Cave in Desiccated Cliff* (pl. 15) lies partly in the special consonance of the two—the way that a sensibility of decay and darkness so uncompromisingly voices the temporality of the missed boat, the closed door. "That the door of China would suddenly open in the 1980s," Mu Xin states, "was something not even the wisest could have anticipated."³⁵ Not even in 1979.

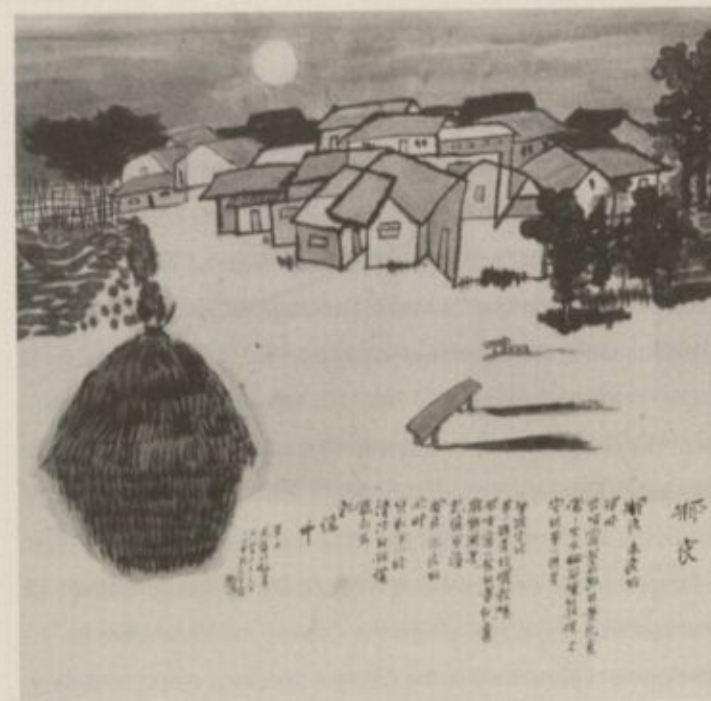


Figure 15 Chu Ge (b. 1931). *Night Approaching*, 1984. Ink and color on paper, 67.8 x 69 cm. Collection unknown. The artist's inscribed poem reads: *Night approaching, but not yet night, / That moment / When it seemed a mist was sprayed, fine dots like sesame seeds. / I would sit on a bench in the grain-drying yard / Vigilantly awaiting the night's first star. / That grain-drying yard / Where vigilantly I awaited the night's first star, / In a scene where it seemed a mist had been sprayed, / Sesame dots gradually grow denser / And my memory fades. / Night approaching, not yet night / This moment / All that is left is a single bench, / Clear and cold, / Engraved deeply in my memory.*

Notes

1 Intercultural connections between Chinese painting and Euro-American culture can be traced back to the sixteenth century.

Some relevant publications on the pre-twentieth-century period are: James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth Century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Howard Rogers, "For Love of God: Castiglione at the Court of Qianlong," in Ju-hsi Chou and Claudia Brown, eds., *Chinese Painting under the Qianlong Emperor*, *Phoebus* 6, no. 1 (1988) pp. 141–160; and Jonathan Hay, "Culture, Ethnicity and Empire in the Work of Two Eighteenth Century 'Eccentric Artists,'" *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 35 (Spring 1999), pp. 201–23.

2 Despite many interactions, it is necessary to distinguish the development of modern art on the Chinese mainland from its development elsewhere in the Chinese-speaking world, including Taiwan (which from 1895 to 1945 was under Japanese rule), Hong Kong, and Chinese communities overseas.

3 Well-known examples include Wu Changshi's use of imported pigments, the Lingnan school painters' adoption of a basically Japanese stylistic idiom, and Fu Baoshi's Nihonga-influenced formulations of Chinese historical figures.

4 See, for example, Jonathan Hay, "Painters and Publishing in Late Nineteenth Century Shanghai," in Ju-hsi Chou, ed., *Art at the Close of China's Empire*, *Phoebus* 8 (1998), pp. 134–88, especially pp. 166–67; Aida Yuen Yuen, "Inventing Eastern Art in Japan and China, ca. 1890s to ca. 1930s," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1999.

5 This nostalgic position remains vital today in many different forms, from the "new literati painting" movement that began in the 1980s to the work of artists whose careers have wholly developed outside China, such as Yu Peng, in Taiwan, and Huang Zhongfang (Harold Wong), in Hong Kong.

6 See Robert Storr, *Modern Art despite Modernism* (New York:

Museum of Modern Art, 2000). By "modern art despite modernism," I mean artmaking that speaks to modernity as a social condition but does not embrace it as a social and intellectual project.

7 See Ju-hsi Chou, *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire 1796–1911* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1992), pp. 272–79.

8 Ralph Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906–1951* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

9 See Jonathan Hay, "Painters and Publishing in Late Nineteenth Century Shanghai"; and "Painting and the Built Environment in Late Nineteenth-Century Shanghai," in Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith, eds., *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), pp. 60–101.

10 On the development of art schools in China, see Mayching Kao, "China's Response to the West in Art: 1898–1937," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1972.

11 During the 1930s and 1940s, there were several parallel attempts to create a mode of academic realism in ink painting that would permit the depiction of contemporary life, often in line with specific political programs. Xu Beihong and his students represented the purest form of European-influenced academism. Jiang Zhaohe (1904–86) worked in a more illustrational, documentary direction, exemplified by his *Refugees* handscroll of 1942–43, commissioned by the occupying Japanese. Several Cantonese painters, including Huang Shaoqiang (1901–42) and Guan Shanyue (b. 1912), took their cue from Japanese Nihonga (modern Japanese-style painting). After 1949, these various experiments found a home in the art school establishment of the New China. One of the initiatives of the Chinese Communist Party was to extend the *xin nianhua* (new New Year's print) model of visual propaganda, originally developed in the context of print

media, to ink painting. This gave rise to a form of ink painting—initially differentiated as *caimohua*, or color-and-ink painting—where there was a prescriptive infusion of foreign ideas. The various attempts in the 1940s to push ink painting toward academic realism were further developed in this new propaganda context.

12 I am here indebted to an unpublished seminar paper by Zhijian Qian on Lin Fengmian's practice of landscape painting in wartime Chongqing.

13 See the essays in Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong, eds., *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, Part II, *Lyric Aesthetics*, and Part IV, *Poetry into Painting* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 45–220, 357–534.

14 On Chang Yu, see Leslie Jones, "Sanyu: Chinese Painter of Montparnasse," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 35 (Spring 1999), "Intercultural China," pp. 224–39.

15 In addition to works by Chang Yu and Pang Xunqin, other isolated examples of lyric modernism include the paintings of Yun Gee (Zhu Yuanzhi, 1906–63), who worked in Europe and the United States, and Tseng Yu-ho (b. 1925), in Hawaii.

16 It is to be hoped that these artists will one day be the subject of a group exhibition. Wu Dayu trained in Paris in the 1920s and worked at the National Hangzhou Arts Academy both in the late twenties and after the war. Li Zhongsheng, a Japanese-trained teacher at the academy in the late 1930s and the 1940s, based himself in Taiwan after 1949, where he became an influential figure, continuing his dialogue with a more conceptual, Japanese mode of abstraction. Zhao Chunxiang studied under Lin Fengmian before 1949 and eventually based himself for more than thirty years in New York as an abstract expressionist. Zhu Dequn, another student of Lin Fengmian, who was active in Paris from the mid-1950s, transposed ink painting's potential for kinetic

lightness, luminosity, and fluidity into lightly painted but complexly structured abstractions. Zao Wou-ki also studied with Lin. After moving to Paris in 1947, he worked for a few years in a Klee-derived pictographic mode that drew heavily on Chinese ink painting, even when it did not use the materials of ink on paper. Zao went on to develop his own lyrical form of abstract expressionism, and then late in his career returned to ink painting with large, abstract works in ink alone.

17 See *Encounter with Zhu Qizhan: Selection of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy from the Zhanyuantang Collection*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Urban Council, 1994).

18 This is another case (see above, note 16) where a future group exhibition would be illuminating.

19 For a useful essay on Lin Fengmian's art, see David Clarke, "Exile from Tradition: Western and Chinese Traits in the Art of Lin Fengmian," in *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), pp. 225–35.

20 On Wu Guanzhong, see Lucy Lim, ed., *Wu Guanzhong: A Contemporary Chinese Artist* (San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1989); Peter Sturman, "Wu Guanzhong and the Task of Painting a New China," *Oriental Art* 21, no. 3 (March 1990), pp. 36–45; and Anne Farrer, with contributions by Michael Sullivan and Mayching Kao, *Wu Guanzhong: A Twentieth-Century Chinese Painter* (London: British Museum Press, 1992).

21 On Li Keran, see Wan Qingli, "Li Keran (1907–1989) and Twentieth-Century Chinese Painting," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1991; *Li Keran de shijie* [The world of Li Keran] (Taipei: Xizhitang wenhua chubanshiye gongsi, 2000); "Li Keran and His Exhibition Paintings," in Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith, eds., *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), pp. 182–211.

22 Of course, Li Keran was by no means the only artist working in this direction. The post-1949 work of Fu Baoshi and Shi Lu's work of the late 1950s and early 1960s are among the most important examples of establishment lyricism.

23 See Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting, 1949–1986* (New York: Abrams, 1986); Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 221–24.

24 On interior exile at a much earlier date, after the fall of the Ming dynasty, see Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 37–42.

25 I would add this to the list of desirable future exhibitions (see above, notes 16 and 18).

26 See Michael Sullivan, "A Small Token of Friendship," *Oriental Art*, n.s. 35, no. 2 (Summer 1989), pp. 76–85, and fig. 9.

27 On Feng Zikai, see Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

28 Toming Jun Liu, "A Dialogue with Mu Xin," in this volume, p. 143.

29 See Eugene Y. Wang, "The Winking Owl: Visual Effect and Its Art Historical Thick Description," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (Spring 2000), pp. 435–73.

30 See Hui-shu Lee and Peter Sturman, eds., *Chu Ko, The Soldier from Chu* (Taipei: Tsai Shih Art Company, 1991); Peter Sturman, "Measuring the Weight of the Written Word: Reflections on the Character-Paintings of Chu Ko and the Role of Writing in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Oriental Art* 23, no. 7 (July 1992), pp. 44–52.

31 One limited parallel might be with the stripped-down yet lushly spacious ink paintings of Gao Xingjian (b. 1940), winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000.

32 "A Dialogue," p. 142.

33 On the temporality of interior exile in the early Qing, see Jonathan Hay, "The Suspension of Dynastic Time," in John Hay, ed., *Boundaries in China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), pp. 171–97.

34 See Bonnie S. McDougall, "The Impact of Western Literary Trends," in Merle Goldman, ed., *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 37–61. "Crossroads" was the title of a magazine published by the League of Left-wing Writers in 1931–32. The writers critiqued by the league included members of the Creation Society and Crescent Society.

35 "A Dialogue," p. 142.