

Qi Baishi: Three Questions

Jonathan Hay Ailsa Mellon Bruce Professor, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

Abstract:

In this essay I raise three questions, none of them new: First, why did Qi Baishi, who was not a *wenren* by family background and never became a *wenren*, nonetheless spend most of his life painting in a mode that had originally been invented and developed by *wenren*? A possible answer is that Qi was able to adapt this mode of painting to the concerns of post-1911 society, and to the replacement of a dynastic frame of reference in favor of a national/international one. Both his pictorial themes and his stylistic voice, I suggest, find their context in the national debate over the civic values appropriate to a post-imperial society.

Second, how can one explain the striking visual directness of his art? Although this was partly a matter of stylistic voice, the significance of the directness far exceeds the narrow frame of an artist's personal style. It has every bit as much to do with long-term epistemological changes conditioning the ways in which painting as a medium could convincingly engage with the world around it. Here I propose that Qi Baishi developed further a principle of "image-writing" that had first emerged in the early nineteenth century. His use of image-writing, I suggest, was a response to the contemporary reality of visual assault in an increasingly commercialized visual environment.

Third, what accounts for the artist's enormous popularity and influence during and after his own lifetime? To answer this question, I address formal and thematic patterns of coexistence, connection, and cohesion in Qi Baishi's art. These patterns crystallize on a deep-structural level where cosmologies of painting, society, and nature intersect in a sense of experienced "rightness" that escapes both artistic intention and straightforward interpretation. The patterns, one might say, belong to the social unconscious of Qi Baishi's art. On this level, Qi's art of the Republican period obliquely but powerfully addressed what was perhaps the most fundamental question of a post-imperial China: Could this new republican society cohere and endure? I suggest, therefore, that Qi's art was influential because it offered a narrow path along which an artist could articulate, partly outside the framework of political expectations, what was at stake in the 1911 and 1949 transformations of society.

In this essay I raise three questions, none of them new: First, why did Qi Baishi, who was not a *wenren* by family background and never became a *wenren*, nonetheless spent most of his life painting in a mode that had originally been invented and developed by *wenren*? Second, how can one explain the striking visual directness of his art? And third, what accounts for the artist's enormous popularity and influence during and after his own lifetime? These familiar questions have perhaps been explored too narrowly up to now.

Among the defining features of Qi Baishi's from around 1920 on is its minimization of sensuous, atmospheric reference in favor of a strongly declarative treatment of pictorial motifs that foregrounds their character as signs. This basic approach—one of several distinct performative modes of ink painting that today are often confusingly given the same name of *daxieyi* (a type of Chinese painting that relies on free strokes and shans details) — pre-existed Qi Baishi. It can be traced back from Wu Changshuo to Zhao Zhiqian (1829-1884), and eventually to such eighteenth-century artists as Li Fangying (1696-1755) and Jin Nong (1687-1764). Still further back, Gao Qipei (1660-1734) and Bada Shanren (1626-1705) were early exponents. Although many more artists could be cited as precursors of Qi Baishi's mature approach, those I have mentioned are all painters in whom Qi took a direct interest. The declarative mode of *daxieyi* painting was generally associated with *wenren* (the literati in ancient China) artists, and as my list suggests they developed it in many different stylistic directions. In the nineteenth century it proved especially attractive to *wenren* artists involved with the *jinshixue* movement. Zhao Zhiqian and later Wu Changshuo adapted it to a fusion of the principles of painting, calligraphy, poetry, and seal-carving that allowed them to monumentalize their fragmentary subjects in images that identified literati culture with the nation. Art historians have often situated Qi Baishi in a lineage leading back through his Beijing mentor Chen Hengke (1876-1923) to Wu and Zhao.

However, an equally relevant group of precursors has received less attention, probably because no stylistic lineage links Qi Baishi to the artists in question. Their relevance to Qi lies not on the level of style (they differ stylistically even among themselves) but in the fact that they anticipated Qi Baishi's translation of this originally *wenren* mode of painting into socially more accessible terms, with eye-catching performances of simplified compositions. Hu Yuan (1823-1886), Xugu (1823/4-1896), and Pu Hua (1830?-1911) were painterly artists, full participants in a Shanghai culture of painting as spectacle. In terms of his relationship to literati culture, Qi Baishi had more in common with these artists than with Zhao Zhiqian or

Wu Changshuo. It is true that Qi did follow Zhao and Wu in practicing both seal-carving and calligraphy and incorporating them into his paintings. But, like Pu Hua, he stripped calligraphy and seal-carving of their *jinshixue* overtones, instead using their specifically visual qualities to expand the signifying and affective possibilities of his work.^[1] Although Qi's painting retained literati forms and conventions, it pulled them free of the matrix of literati culture by linking them to non-literati subjects and a personal stylistic voice of a post-literati type. In the hands of Qi Baishi, the literati origins of the declarative *daxieyi* mode finally dissolved into a more broadly based art with a new context in the emergent national culture of the Republican period. Here we should also note the role of Japan. As early as the 1870s, the declarative *daxieyi* mode had found success as a quintessential statement of Chinese cultural values among Japanese patrons who did not feel the need to distinguish between Zhao Zhiqian and Wu Changshuo on the one hand, and Hu Yuan, Xugu, and Pu Hua on the other. The earlier success of all these artists paved the way for the important role that Japan played in Qi Baishi's career during the 1920s, as it did in Wu Changshuo's as well. Whether the Japanese connection had an effect on a stylistic level as well remains an open question for Qi Baishi as much as his predecessors.

Qi's pictorial subjects most obviously demonstrate the shift toward a national/international frame of reference. In his hands, well-established themes such as fish, the fisherman, cormorants, ducks, water buffalo, or the village by the water took on new meaning. While these subjects had always served to evoke the slower temporality of China's hinterland, it was usually in the service of a court artist's or literati observer's characterization of the countryside. Qi, on the other hand, often identified his art with hinterland values, or what he called *tianjia fengdu*, the "rustic lifestyle." His treatment of rustic subjects conspicuously avoided both the slickness of court art and the exclusionary dependence on allusion and citation that characterized literati depictions. Qi also expanded the range of rustic themes to include a host of new or previously minor subjects, such as shrimp, crabs, frogs, crickets, chicks, sunflowers, and farm tools. Yet, the fact remains that Qi Baishi spent the latter part of his life and the years of his greatest professional success

Notes:

[1] Although for the purposes of this discussion I am stressing the differences between Pu Hua's approach and Wu Changshuo's, it should be noted that Pu was an important influence on Wu.

in Beijing (from 1917 on). His art certainly speaks to an urban sense that the countryside had held on to essential values that were being eroded by the faster, "shallow-time" temporality of modern urban life. But this point can be stressed too much. The great metropolitan centers, too, had a place for the "deep-time" values of the hinterland as part of a Chinese common culture that had a strong presence in commercial, ritual, and domestic settings. Such themes as crickets and their cages or birds in cages cut across the urban-rural divide, as did the many subjects that Qi took from popular religious practice, such as Guanyin, Dongfang Shuo, Li Tieguai, Liu Hai, or Zhong Kui. Beyond the apparent nostalgia for the countryside, Qi's art consistently valorizes a national common culture that after 1911 received increasing attention from foreign visitors and Chinese intellectuals alike.

Qi's personal stylistic voice made an equal contribution to his engagement with a national Chinese culture. It stabilized around 1919-1920, when he finally purged his painting of all slickness in favor of a transparent frankness. This stylistic voice comprised many elements: a considered awkwardness, declarative and sometimes garish color, deliberative execution, exploitation of ink bleed, plain-spoken imagery, an artisanal approach to compositional balance, and a textual appeal to personal experience in the inscriptions. Because its central claim was to genuineness and sincerity, which required Qi to conceal his rhetorical craft, one has to be particularly careful not to take this voice at face value. When Qi, in a 1949 painting of farm tools, presents his labor as a painter as analogous to a farmer's toil, forever imprisoning him in poverty, one sees that his stylistic voice (which he also lived out) was a matter of calculated self-presentation aimed at a sophisticated urban and international audience. Without forgetting that Qi himself never aspired to the role of artist-intellectual, his stylistic voice can usefully be set against the May Fourth engagement with China's common culture across the *baihua* movement, and the collecting of folk songs and other forms of folk art expression. One of the great concerns of all those May Fourth initiatives was the valorization of the voices of the common people. Paradoxically, this often entailed the translation of rural modes of expression into a modified form more palatable to both urban taste and the political goal of modernization. This was not simply a Chinese phenomenon: all

over the world from the 1920s onwards, urban intellectuals created modern forms of "folk music," for example. Qi Baishi's stylistic voice operates similarly, articulating common culture values in a way that is easy to confuse with the real thing, and whose real context was the national debate over the civic values appropriate to a post-imperial society.^[2]

2

Although the striking visual directness of Qi's painting was partly a matter of stylistic voice, the significance of the directness — my second familiar question — far exceeds the narrow frame of an artist's personal style. It has every bit as much to do with long-term epistemological changes conditioning the ways in which painting as a medium could convincingly engage with the world around it. Zhao Zhiqian, Hu Yuan, Xugu, Pu Hua, and Wu Changshuo had already collectively introduced a new directness into painting, greater than anything seen in the work of the Yangzhou eccentrics in the eighteenth century. They did so by a) simplifying the image and identifying it more thoroughly with the picture surface, and b) deliberately restricting the atmospheric and spatial possibilities of the depiction. These innovations gave the declarative mode of *daxieyi* painting a more graphic quality which Qi Baishi (together with contemporaries such as Wang Zhen [1867-1938] and Yao Hua [1876-1930]) subsequently took even further. In order to see what was at stake in the graphic impulse which Qi Baishi embraced in his mature work, it is necessary to take a macrohistorical perspective, and also to look beyond *daxieyi* modes of painting.

Until about 1600 Chinese painting practice was dominated by the principle of the controlled bush trace (traditionally evoked by the ancient formula *qiyun shengdong*). In the course of the seventeenth century, however, the brush trace began to lose its monopolistic authority over the practice of painting. This happened in two ways. On the one hand, as women entered the painting profession, they often differentiated their art from that of their male counterparts by deliberately eschewing the principle of *qiyun shengdong* in favor of approaches

Notes:

[2] Among the other important artistic contributions to this debate was that of Wang Zhen (1867-1938), who used his painting to promote Buddhist values.

that drew on the aesthetic of embroidery. On the other hand, some early Qing male painters reinterpreted the picture surface (often evoked in critical writing by the term *bimo*), by treating either ink (Gong Xian [1619-1689] and Shi Tao [1642-1707]) or empty paper (Bada Shanren) as no less important to the generation of pictorial form and image than the brush. Although neither of these seventeenth-century initiatives challenged the traditional assumption that the pictorial image should grow organically out of the act of painting, they both vastly expanded the sense of how this might occur. From this point on, any insistence on the primacy of the controlled brush trace in the act of painting was necessarily an ideological choice. Although many eighteenth-century artists made that choice, some of the most independent-minded Chinese painters (and also, for very different reasons, many Qing court painters) chose differently. Most notably, as early as 1700, Gao Qipei used the finger-painting technique to introduce a new formal principle—the incompletely controlled mark — that escaped entirely the inherited discourses of *bimo* and *qiyun shengdong*.

Gao's innovation had a freeing effect on painting. Under his influence, the most important independent artists of the eighteenth century from Gao Fenghan (1683-1748/9) to Luo Ping (1733-1799) transposed the mark from finger painting into painting executed with the brush, and placed the controlled brush trace and imperfectly controlled mark in dynamic tension. Like Gao's own finger painting technique, this had the effect of liberating the pictorial image from the authority of the generative physical act of painting, allowing it to play a creative role in its own right that bypassed established formulae. Here it may be helpful to make an analogy with calligraphy. If calligraphy is the *art* of writing, there also exists the non-calligraphic dimension of writing itself. In painting, the equivalent phenomenon is the standardization of images in stable graphic signs, as *tu*. Painting, in other words, was the art of *tu* picturing in the same way that calligraphy was the art of writing. Traditionally, it was considered that if a picture was to rise to the level of a painting in the fullest sense, it had to transcend mere *tu* picturing through its conception and execution. Now, however, *tu* picturing took on an autonomous importance for painting through the capacity of any one pictorial image to evoke others from

almost any visual domain. Jin Nong's explicit mid-century claims for the originality of his images have their context in this development. Inevitably, the importance of the painting tradition was lessened; independent attention to the image in the eighteenth century relocated painting to a space of operation situated between its own tradition and contemporary visual culture in general.^[3]

It was not until the first half of the nineteenth century, however, that painters started to systematize image-making as a generative formal principle. After 1800, a number of adventurous artists including Gai Qi (1744-1829), Zhang Yin (1761-1829), Gu Haoqing (1766-?), Qian Du (1763-1824), Jiang Jie (active 1800-1832), Su Renshan (1814-1850), and Ren Xiong (1823-1857) followed up on the diverse eighteenth-century experiments in treating *tu* picturing as a generative principle in its own right.^[4] These artists, though stylistically very different, on a deeper level shared a common strategy. In their most inventive works, they all identified the pictorial image with a series of elements that had not previously been found in combination: repetition, graphic flatness, and compositional disjunction (i.e. the independence of different parts of the painting). The result was, to give a name to it, a kind of image-writing which all of these artists sought to reconcile with the older principles of the brush trace and the mark. At this point, the new direction was associated with relatively careful and detailed approaches to painting. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century it spread to other modes of painting as well. Most relevant to the discussion here is the fact that as early as the 1850s, in the work of Zhao Zhiqian, image-writing became associated with the declarative mode of *daxieyi* painting that was later inherited by Qi Baishi. Subsequently, all of the late-nineteenth century artists mentioned earlier as antecedents of Qi Baishi (Hu Yuan, Xugu, Pu Hua, Wu Changshuo) made image-writing central to their practice, developing it in a variety of stylistic directions, but always in conjunction with the mark as much as the brush trace.

It is fair to say—and this is the reason for my long excursus into the history of painting—that Qi Baishi did not become a painter of real importance until he too started to build his approach to painting around the equality of all three principles—the controlled brushtrace, the brute mark, and graphic image-writing—which he

Notes:

[3]For a fuller discussion of these developments initiated by Gao Qipei, see Jonathan Hay, "Luo Ping: The Encounter with the Interior Beyond," in *Eccentric Visions: The Worlds of Luo Ping*, ed. Kim Karlsson, Freda Murck, and Michele Matteini, 2009. It should also be noted that a parallel development took place at court, where the independent importance of the pictorial image was promoted for political reasons.

[4]All these artists are discussed in Claudia Brown and Ju-hai Chou, *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911*, 1992.

placed in dynamic tension. Distinguishing Qi's work from any of his predecessors', though, are two characteristics. One is the intensified graphic quality which he brought to the pictorial image, by virtue of simplification and standardization of type-motifs, and color that registered more strongly indexically than referentially, generating a pictorial space more thoroughly identified with the flatness of the picture surface than ever before. The other characteristic is the readiness with which he gave written inscriptions the same importance as pictorial elements. One sees this in his use of eye-catching seals, signatures, and seal-script titles; double inscriptions; large-scale single inscriptions; inscriptions that take up more space than the pictorial image; and inscriptions that form image-like blocks of varying proportions. His use of image-writing, in other words, was not exclusively pictorial, but cut across the boundaries between picture, writing, and text. In Qi's hands, image-writing took on a more expansive role than ever before.

It is not a coincidence that image-writing first entered the space of painting in the nineteenth century and found full expression in painting in the early twentieth century. This was, after all, the very period when image-writing gradually became pervasive in Chinese visual culture, marking the emergence of a more fully modern visual environment. Here I can list only a few aspects of this important development. First, the nineteenth century saw an explosion of interest in individuated frontispiece titles for printed books. Although calligraphers were always responsible for the design, the mediation of printing flattened out the written characters, divesting them of the depth in surface that one can see in calligraphic frontispieces to handscroll paintings. One can draw a straight line from the graphic word images of such book frontispieces to early twentieth century typographic experiments—*meishuzi*—as seen in book and magazine covers and in commercial signage. A quite different example of image-writing in the wider culture is the *huapu* genre of illustrated books which achieved enormous popularity from the 1870s onwards. *Huapu* consisted of printed versions of fragmentary working sketches for paintings (*caogao*), now easily reproducible due to the introduction of photolithography.^[5] The *huapu* images, like the frontispiece book titles, were noticeably more graphic than the originals on which they were based. Advertising introduced a third form of image-writing. Late-

Notes:

[5] See Jonathan Hay, "Painters and Publishing in Late Nineteenth Century Shanghai," *Phoebus* 8 (1998): 134-188.

nineteenth century newspaper advertisements quite commonly combined text, signage, and a simple image.^[6] Subsequently, at the beginning of the twentieth century, chromolithographed calendar posters gave the combination of image and writing a more spectacular form. All these new developments in turn made people more aware of older practices of image-writing. Shop signs comprising writing and a simple pictorial image, for example, had long silently occupied an important place in the visual environment, but now were visually documented in hand-made illustrated books for the foreign market.

Several features of Qi Baishi's practice echo these changes in the visual culture and visual environment of China's cities: the standardization and repetition of motifs, the combination of pictorial image and writing, the graphic flatness of the compositions, the declarative sign-like character of the painting-text, the suppression of any atmospheric reference. Once again, the fact that Qi drew his subjects from a non-urban, not fully modern mode of life should not prevent us from seeing that the way in which he visualized these subjects was itself unabashedly modern.

3

I have been arguing that, on the one hand, Qi Baishi's subjects and stylistic voice spoke to an emergent post-imperial national culture while, on the other, his embrace of image-writing spoke to the contemporary reality of visual assault in an increasingly commercialized visual environment. These two points already go some way toward answering the third of the familiar questions I raised at the beginning of this essay: What accounts for Qi's popularity and influence under the Republic and People's Republic? To go more deeply into the question, however, it is necessary to address a third dimension of his painting. Art in any period has the capacity to project and confirm a sense of how the world and society are ordered, doing so at a deep-structural level beyond or beneath representation, in conformity with the epistemological assumptions of its time. Elsewhere I have used the term "cosmology" to denote this dimension of painting, which mediates between painting's

Notes:

[6] See Jonathan Hay, "Notes on Photography and Advertising in Late Nineteenth-century Shanghai," in *Visual Culture in Shanghai, 1850s to 1930s*, ed. Jason Chi-sheng Kuo, 2007: 95-119.

Notes:

[7] Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China*, 2001.

epistemological assumptions and its representational purpose.^[7] For Qi Baishi, emerging as a major artist in a performative, declarative mode under the Republic, the relevant terms of painting's cosmology had been set by artists working in the same mode at the end of the Qing dynasty. Among these predecessors, Wu Changshuo was certainly the most important for Qi. Wu Changshuo's painting both presupposes and visualizes a disconnected world whose elements constantly threaten to float free as fragments, yet are provisionally brought together in powerful and sometimes monumental images of coherence. In Wu's work, the coherence of the imperial cosmos survives as a collective cultural memory embodied in a deracinated individual subjectivity. His post-1911 paintings are ritual acts of reintegration that commemorate disappearing cultural values. In the last part of this essay, I want to address Qi Baishi's redirection of Wu's pictorial cosmology toward a more affirmative engagement with contemporary Republican conditions.

Like any painter, Qi used an evolving and accumulating typology of motifs to define a personal pictorial world. However, to a degree unmatched by any other twentieth-century artist, Qi worked to differentiate each type-motif—crab, shrimp, pigeon, village by the water, fisherman—from every other. It was not Wu Changshuo but Xugu who had opened up the path that Qi Baishi took here. Xugu's paintings meld an intensely lyrical view of the world's singularities with a Buddhist insistence on a deeper, non-material reality underpinning their existence. From the 1920s onwards, one sees Qi steadily intensifying the "crabness" of his crabs, the "hawkness" of his hawks, etc., so that his pictorial world, like Xugu's before him, comes to hum with the reverberating tensions among all its intensified singularities. Cosmologically speaking, what Qi Baishi visualizes and highlights in this way is coexistence, which among other things is the grounding of the social, the condition of which the social is made. His thematization of coexistence embodies a worldly ethos quite distinct from Xugu's metaphysical lyricism. Small creatures are threatened by large creatures; creatures gather in groups that follow a leader; all creatures seek to survive in their own way; every creature and element of nature is ultimately alone in the world; and for every singular type of being that can be considered beautiful there is another that is awkward or even ugly. In this

sense Qi is a clear-eyed realist. But the very intensity that runs through each and every singularity making up his pictorial worlds is a reminder of the potential in coexistence for the creation of a viable sociality. Life and society are what we make of them, an ethos that brings his art unexpectedly close in spirit, though obviously not in style, to that of a much younger contemporary from the world of artist-intellectuals, Feng Zikai (1898-1975).^[8]

A second feature of Qi's art illuminates a different aspect of its pictorial cosmology. Much as a narrative is structured by a plot, a pictorial world involves configurations of latent possibilities. In one direction, Qi Baishi configured his pictorial world around the quotidian, everyday drama of contingent connection between singularities of different kinds; chicks and silkworm, rat and book, fish and crabs, lotus and frogs, chickens and pomegranate, etc. Here he often pulls the possibility of connection apart, holding it on the edge of actualization, in order to turn it into a question that the viewer is left to answer through her active participation. This is not just a matter of pictorial narrative, but often of composition as well. In elongated hanging scrolls in particular, the stretched-out composition pulls the eye both up and down, forcing the viewer to work hard to bring the pictorial and inscriptional elements together. In another direction, Qi configured pictorial worlds using repetition of the same motif. This allowed him to pull apart one or more singularities from a mass (Qi's term is *qundui*) of dragonflies, shrimps, crabs, chicks, roosters, cherries, gourds, flowers, leaves, plantain, trees, hills, houses, or boats. In cosmological terms, Qi's paintings of this kind thematize internal cohesion, presenting it as another question for the participatory viewer to answer affirmatively. During the 1920s and 30s when these emerged as central concerns for Qi Baishi, both connection across social categories and the internal cohesion of society were matters of everyday debate. Political cartoons repeatedly denounced the lack of a sense of civic responsibility; warlordism threatened to break the country apart before Japanese aggression later brought society together.

I need to be clear here. The argument is not that Qi Baishi intended his pictorial world to be a metaphor for human society. Certainly, a pictorial world exists by virtue of generating metaphoric space, but the metaphoric space of

Notes:

[8] On Feng Zikai, see Geremie Barmé, *An Artistic Exile: A Life of Feng Zikai (1898-1975)*, 2002.

Qi's paintings cannot be specified in such narrow terms. He sometimes added inscriptions or titles that indicate intended social implications to the representation, as in his *Budaoweng* depictions from the early 1920s to the early 1950s, or his depictions of "peace doves" from 1950 to 1953. But the kinds of social and political meaning involved in those paintings are a separate (if very interesting) issue, precisely because as metaphor the meaning passes by way of representation whereas the aspect of his practice that I have been discussing operates on a cosmological level. Patterns of coexistence, connection, and cohesion crystallize on a deep-structural level where cosmologies of painting, society, and nature intersect in a sense of experienced "rightness" that escapes both artistic intention and straightforward interpretation. From the point of view of artistic agency, these patterns belong to the domain of the artist's conceptual craft, rather than that of stylistic rhetoric or voice. In social terms, the patterns map out conjoined anxieties and desires that return repeatedly across the grain of the artist's declared themes. One need not assume that the artist was aware of what he was doing, except in the negative sense that he would not have felt comfortable doing it differently. It would not be going too far to say that these patterns belong to the social unconscious of Qi Baishi's art.

On this level, Qi's art of the Republican period obliquely but powerfully addressed what was perhaps the most fundamental question of a post-imperial China: Could this new republican society cohere and endure? He took this central question into the period of Japanese occupation, and then on into the early years of the People's Republic. If I am right in asserting that in an undeclared way his art kept open a central societal question, this may be important to an understanding of the attraction Qi Baishi's art exerted both before and after 1949. As early as the 1920s, Xu Beihong (1895-1953) and Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) took Qi Baishi's painting as a touchstone for their attempts to reconcile international modes of modern painting with the Chinese tradition of ink painting—attempts that metaphorized the entire Republican experiment. Post-1949, Qi's art was a privileged point of reference not only for ink painters such as Pan Tianshou (1897-1971), but also for numerous oil painters who repositioned themselves during the

1940s and 1950s as ink painters, including Zhu Qizhan (1892-1996), Guan Liang (1901-1986), Li Keran (1907-1989), Wu Zuoren (1908-1997), and, in Hong Kong, Ding Yanyong (1902-1978). It is not enough to say that, for the former oil painters in the People's Republic, the model of Qi Baishi's painting offered a way out of potential trouble, at a moment when any identification with the pictorial modes of international modernism was rapidly coming under political suspicion and realist oil painting was becoming instrumentalized as socialist realism. It is true that Qi's humble origins and rural themes made his art uniquely acceptable to a government that owed its rise to power to rural support. But to explain the oil painters' adoption of Qi's art as a model so glibly would be to underestimate the optimism (in part founded on the CCP's reputation for honesty) that accompanied the establishment of the People's Republic, and also the courage it took to carve out a new and still relevant space of creative possibility under circumstances that quickly became difficult. Let me suggest instead that Qi's art was influential because it offered a narrow path along which an artist could articulate, partly outside the framework of political expectations, what was at stake in the post-1949 transformation of society.

An essay that wanders far and wide risks fracturing rather than sharpening one's understanding of Qi Baishi's art. I have taken the risk in an attempt to clarify Qi Baishi's art historical situation in the twentieth century. Unlike oil painters and woodblock artists, twentieth-century ink painters did not have the option of defining themselves as artist-intellectuals on a Western model. Modern art as an international phenomenon did not have a place for an art form as culture-specific as ink painting. But at the same time, once China entered the Republican era ink painting could no longer identify itself with values that had their meaning in the context of an imperial society. This has been the double bind of ink painting ever since, as it has attempted to negotiate a space of autonomy for itself between the demands of the market and the state. Qi Baishi's early-twentieth century solution, following late nineteenth century precedents, was to adapt formal conventions of literati painting to new purposes. This allowed him to engage with the intertwined conditions of modernity and cultural belatedness as they affected his life, giving rise to body of work that at once embraces the social opening of post-1911 society

and commemorates a disappearing order of stable values. Qi's solution came at a price, though his willingness to pay the price might also be seen as strategic. By continuing to evoke, even as it hijacked, the cultural authority of a wenren ideal that could no longer be put into practice, his art left modern ink painting with no basis on which to make a claim to cultural authority of its own. In this regard, Qi Baishi's art exemplifies the situation of modern ink painting in general, whose existence has always depended on eschewing any claim to cultural authority of its own—a necessary condition of its very great achievement, which is to have kept continuously open the question of cultural authority.