



20 NOVEMBER 2017

## CHINA: NEW NATION, NEW ART 1911-1932

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There are ways in which ‘Viewing Paintings’, by Chen Shizeng (1876-1923) fits the common stereotype of a ‘Chinese painting’, and yet there are ways in which it doesn’t. The tall thin format, much higher than it is wide, is that of the typical Chinese ‘hanging scroll’, and there is writing in the top left hand corner which certainly looks like Chinese characters. Yet the subject seems unfamiliar, far from the dreamy landscape scene, the scholar in a waterside pavilion perhaps, which we might think of as the archetypal sign of Chineseness in a picture. We are indoors, not outdoors, and looking down at a press of bodies, all bundled up in coats and hats and thick robes. The front half of the crowd faces towards us, and we see faces which might be generic but might be portraits, if slightly cartoonish ones. The rear half of the crowd mostly has their backs to us, and they look intently at what might at a very first glance be taken to be windows, but which very quickly resolve themselves into two landscape paintings hanging on the wall, into two examples of exactly the type of ‘Chinese painting’, which this is not. Looking more closely, we might be drawn to the vivid patch of red in the bottom left hand corner, which must be a face but yet which isn’t a face, and look along its line of vision to the figure at bottom right who sports a long overcoat, a bowler hat and an impressive Kaiser Wilhelm moustache.

The inscription says, ‘On the thirteenth of January 1918, Mr Ye, Mr Jin and Mr Chen assembled the holdings of the collectors of the capital, and exhibited them in Central Park for seven days...

The fees of those who came to examine them went to the relief of flood disaster in the capital region. I subsequently pictured the scene of that time to record this splendid event. Chen Shizeng’. The inscription thus tell us this is a picture about looking at pictures, painted by one of the most successful artists of early twentieth century Beijing to commemorate an event in which he and three fellow artists and collectors staged a public art exhibition to raise funds for the relief of those affected by disastrous winter flooding in the region around the city. This isn’t the very first public exhibition to be staged in China, that was a show, part cultural booster and part trade fair, staged in 1910 in the dying days of the Manchu dynasty, whose boy emperor had abdicated in 1912, six years almost to the very day before the thirteenth of January, 1918. But it was one of the many new types of social space which the intellectuals of the early Chinese Republic saw as closely connected to the concept of *wenming*, of ‘civilisation’, crucially in the sense of modern civilisation. How much of that civilisation, was to be saved from the Chinese past, and how much to be bought in from ‘the West’, that was the tricky question. The audience for the exhibition so carefully pictorialized by Mr Chen will have had thoughts about this.

Chen Shizeng, who was born in 1876 and hence by Chinese count was forty-two years old at this point, had spent seven years in Japan (where he lived as a student not of art but of natural science from 1903-1910). He was the son of Chen Sanli (1853-1937), a famous poet and holder of the highest level of imperial degree in the Confucian classics, and he grew up with all the trappings of culture and education around him. He began publishing sketches in the newspapers from his move to Beijing in 1916 until his premature death at the age of forty-seven in 1923. In Japan he had encountered the technologically superior but still visibly Japanese society, which for all educated Chinese of his time represented both vexing rebuke and encouraging role model. Already well-trained at the hands



of a famous master in the style of landscape art we see in his paintings-within-a-painting, it was in Japan that he learned a new way of picturing, with the bulk of the human figure modelled in shaded washes. This picture thus lets the artist show us that he can do two things at once, he simply bridges the gap between 'Chinese' and 'foreign' by here doing both. He also bridges that gap by showing both Chinese and foreign viewers, for the lady in the bottom right (the only woman in the picture) is by dress and complexion marked out as 'western', as is the extravagantly moustachioed gentleman just to her right. Lots of the Chinese faces look like quick sketches of real people (though none have so far been identified), so are these individuals too, or are they just generic markers of the foreign, a sign that early Republican Beijing is very much connected to a wider world?

That wider world was of course at this point in the final agonies of the First World War, and the first agonies of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, so it cannot have been solely domestic disasters that were on the minds of Beijing's cultivated art lovers in January 1918. Less than a year before, on 17 February 1917, the German adoption of the policy of unrestricted U-boat warfare had claimed a victim much less famous than the *Lusitania* and with fewer dead, but also with far-reaching consequences. When *Athos I* went down off Malta on that day, among the 745 taken to their deaths were 543 Chinese labourers bound for the Western front. The following month China broke off diplomatic relations with imperial Germany, and after intense and heated debate war was declared in August 1917. China was newly at war with Germany when this picture was painted. Is the foreigner then a caricature? It seems unlikely, but it serves to remind us that Chinese intellectuals, whatever cultural or political positions they adopted, by this time all took a keen interest in the rest of the world. After nearly eighty years of pretty relentless imperialist onslaught they could do no other. A young man from Chen Shizeng's home province of Hunan was closely following the development of war in Europe and revolution in Russia. In April 1918, as anarchists and Bolsheviks fought in the streets of Moscow, Mao Zedong (1893-1976) joined classmates in forming the Renovation of the People Study Society, prior to his own move to Beijing in 1919 and involvement in the first tentative Marxist groupuscules that would coalesce into the Chinese communist party. So perhaps 'Viewing Paintings' is a bit more than a joky commemoration of a circle of friends, painted as it was in a world which must have felt uncertain and threatening. As the increasingly dysfunctional Chinese Republic stuttered into the status of a failed state, the claims made for the place of culture were important.

We have to start by acknowledging that for most of the short twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals have known massively more about 'the West' than educated people in 'the West' have known about China. General knowledge of modern Chinese art in Britain pretty much runs in a sequence which goes: traditional landscape painting /scholars in a pavilion, then the hysteria and destruction of the Cultural Revolution /adulation of the Great Leader, then Ai Weiwei. What these lectures want to try and give you is an overview, with all the necessary omissions and oversimplifications, of how the visual arts in China experienced *and made* the twentieth century, and the very varied responses produced to the challenges it posed. Variety will be central here, but so will connectedness, an attempt to demonstrate that art in China has always been part of a larger, even of a global, conversation, even if other parts of the world have sometimes been slow to, or unwilling to, listen.

The Chinese Republic which succeeded the last imperial dynasty on the abdication of the boy emperor in 1912 was initially far from achieving the ambitions which its founders had for it. One of the catalysts of their disappointment was the decision of the victorious allied powers (of which China was technically one) at the Versailles peace conference to award the colonies in China of a defeated Germany, not back into Chinese hands but to the Japanese, a prize for their participation. It was a demonstration in 1919 against this decision, and against what many saw as supine Chinese government acquiescence in it, which gave its name to what's often been called a 'May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement'. Young intellectuals from Beijing's new modern university were at the core of this movement, and its alternative name of 'The New Culture Movement' gives us a hint that this was a call for a thorough renovation of China's cultural as well as political scene. This sense that the old ways will no longer do was more or less universal among Chinese elites of the early twentieth century, even among those who later get called 'conservatives', and even as fierce debate about what should be put in their place raged. The early death in 1925 of Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), 'Father of the Nation', opened the way for a more effective if much less broad-minded political hegemony from



1927 of the Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), even as more radical solutions to China's plight were mooted from a left group around a small but intensely committed Communist Party. Supporters of both were equally opposed to the continued role played by political and economic imperialism, made visible and material by the foreign presence of which Shanghai was the largest and most splendid example.

The extent to which the 'foreign' and the 'modern' were one and the same thing was a debate which raged among intellectuals, but which touched much wider audiences as well, and the visual arts were one of the spheres in which that debate was played out. One woodblock print from the early years of the Republic, a type peddled in villages across north China and seen in even very modest rural homes, the kind of homes where the vast majority of China's population continued to live, purports to show the scenery of Sichuan province, but it's a fantasy, with its trams and its aeroplanes and its bicycles and its storied buildings and its tangle of telegraph and electric wires. Its exaggerated single-point perspective, its fiercely insistent spatial recession, also marks it out as something new. That urge for the new was therefore carried far from places like Shanghai, through pictures like this, to people who may never have seen a tram or an aeroplane at this point, but who formed an audience for the ideas about 'modernity' that they made tangible and thinkable.

Another cityscape, if in a more sophisticated style, has some of the same issues. It is an oil painting of the great south gate of Beijing, the old imperial capital, painted in 1922 by an artist named Liu Haisu (1896-1994), someone who at this point in his life had never travelled to Europe, but who already had a fluent mastery of oil painting technique. He uses it to juxtapose the ancient gate with the concrete arched roof of Beijing's railway station, made more noticeable by the telegraph wires which stand in front of it. This is the first of three pictures used here to begin thinking about the diversity of China's art in the 1920s, and the second is, 'Girl of the Autumn River', by the 18-year-old artist Guan Zilan (1903-1986); she too was almost entirely self-taught at this point, precociously aware of avant-garde tendencies in Paris which were as troubling to European audiences, for the most part, as they were puzzling to her Chinese contemporaries. The third picture is entitled 'Studio by the Water', and brings us back to Chen Shizeng, artist of the 'Viewing Paintings' scroll. This can look like a pretty stark juxtaposition of oil and ink, modern and traditional, foreign and Chinese, but it's not quite as simple as that. Or at least, if someone like Chen Shizeng painted like this, in China, in 1921, he did so not simply because he was either ignorant of other possibilities for art, or because he wanted to cling unthinkingly to a treasured past. As a student of the natural sciences in early twentieth-century Japan, Chen had had plenty of exposure to ideas outside China, and he knew quite well what was going on. He put his ideas into an essay published in 1921 and entitled 'The Value of Literati Painting' in which he had this to say:

Western painting can be described as extremely faithful to form. Since the nineteenth century, in accordance with the principles of science [Western painting] has meticulously rendered objects with light and colours. Lately, however, postimpressionism has run counter to that course; it de-emphasizes the objective, and focuses on the subjective, and is joined in its revolutionary performances by cubism and futurism. Such intellectual transformations are sufficient demonstrations that verisimilitude does not exhaust the good in art and that alternative criteria must be sought.'

In other words, rather than clinging to the past, Chen Shizeng is making a bold claim here for his own art, and those of contemporaries who made art like his, as being in some sort of global vanguard. The fact that it is not simply representational, not 'mimetic', not 'a window onto a world', that it does not concern itself with transcribing the appearance of the visible world, is what puts it in the same place as the western avant-garde practices of postimpressionism, cubism, futurism. What matters is not a transcription of the world, he says, but the expression of artistic subjectivity, and this is something which painting in China has always done; hence, the so-called 'traditional' is in fact the very essence of the modern, and fit to take its place with the other modernities of the post-war world. In the Ashmolean Museum's 1923 'Landscape' by Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), the rain-sodden landscape is caught in the silvery gleam of a bolt of jagged lightning across the sky, in a picture which might use the same



materials of paper, brush and ink as Chinese painters had been using for centuries, but which looks like no more Chinese painting from the previous centuries than a Picasso looks like a 'traditional' western painting, even though Picasso continued to use the materials of oil on canvas, and paint subjects, such as the female nude, which had centuries of tradition behind them. The emphasis on brushwork, which had always been present in Chinese art criticism, now took on a new force as the foregrounding of the artist's subjectivity, in the marks they made on the paper, became the main thing that their art was 'about'. Chen Shizeng called this art *wenrenhua*, 'literati painting', using an ancient term to which he gave a new twist, but in the years after his premature death another term gradually came into use for this mode of work, the Chinese term *guohua*, which literally means 'national painting'. It took its place alongside a raft of new terms designed to identify a specifically national, Chinese Republican form of modernity; these included *guoyu*, 'the national language' and *guobuo*, 'national products', the goods manufactured in China which the patriotic citizen of the Republic was urged to prefer to foreign imports.

However not everyone was convinced, and although 'national painting' was commercially the most successful mode of art in the 1920s and 1930s, its large clientele among the old and new rich sustaining an ever growing body of artists, it took its place – at least in the marketplace of ideas - alongside work which drew more explicitly on foreign media and foreign models. It is worth stressing that these were models with which certain Chinese audiences at least had a long familiarity. Leaving aside the presence of actual European artists in the pay of the imperial Chinese court from the early eighteenth century, by the end of that same century the practice of oil painting was well-established in certain Chinese ports and major centres, catering to an extent but not exclusively for foreign customers. We have photographs surviving of a workshop in the academy established by French Catholic missionaries at Xujiahui, in modern Shanghai, where Chinese apprentices (taught by Chinese instructors) are being taught to produce images of the Madonna and other sacred subjects to meet the needs of an expanding establishment of Catholic churches across China, often in fairly remote rural areas.

By the time the ferment of the New Culture Movement was at its height, a number of art academies under Chinese direction existed where students could be formally taught the protocols of drawing and painting *both* in what would soon come to be called 'national painting', *and* in the styles now familiar to art students across the rest of the globe. In the case of the latter, these included sketching from life in the open air, and the exhibition of work, where you can just make out in photographs some of the results of these excursions into the countryside, along with the figure of the (clothed) life model, sketched from the numerous different angles taken by a class arranged in the classic classroom semi-circle. Art schools were definitely a new type of institution in early twentieth century China, replacing the older practices of apprenticeship and master-pupil relationships through which technical skill in painting had been transmitted in the past. But they did not entirely replace these older forms of learning, and this is true not just of artists working in the 'national painting' manner, but equally of those who embraced other possibilities.

One of the most subsequently famous of these figures was Xu Beihong (1895-1953), who was to become one of the most prominent advocates of a style he saw as modern not so much because of its perceived 'westernness', but because of its underpinning in science. This was a source of values seen as universal, and not the exclusive property of any one artistic tradition. If what he saw as realism was scientific, then it was potentially to be discovered in a range of times and places, and to embrace it was not necessarily to turn one's back on what was Chinese. Xu Beihong came from a family of professional painters, and from his teens he was making a living by working to order for a whole range of projects thrown up by the needs of modern life, including advertising and the art of the theatre. He painted the portrait of He Zhanli, or Lily Haw, in 1915 while still in his teens, and in the year he moved to the metropolis of Shanghai. It is an image of the youthful Californian-Chinese wife of a grand old man of Chinese politics and culture named Kang Youwei (1858-1927), who was an important early patron to Xu Beihong in his youth. This is a posthumous and commemorative portrait of the young woman, who had died prior to its execution. It mimics the conventions of the portrait photographer's studio of the day, indeed has an almost uncannily photographic quality, but it also shares a lot of its sense of style with the advertising images of the day, like a calendar poster using fashionably dressed ladies to advertise the products of the Anglo-American Tobacco



Company, most notably the cigarettes which were part of the 'modern' way of smoking increasingly replacing the tobacco pipes in use since the sixteenth century.

Xu Beihong initially enrolled in the French department of one of Shanghai's universities, but even before the ferment of the New Culture Movement reached its height he had moved to Beijing, and to a job with the Art Research Association of Beijing University, where he was already given to bold pronouncements on the lines of, 'Western materials can represent the objects adequately, but Chinese cannot do so.' We might note that 'representing the object' was precisely not what someone like Chen Shizeng, and *guobua* painters more generally, thought that painting was for, so this is as much an argument about the purpose of art as it is about how that purpose was to be achieved. It is interesting too here that he talks about materials and not style, but in any case this kind of sweeping pronouncement is very typical of certain strands of New Culture Movement rhetoric, when firebrands like Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) were given to saying apocalyptic things like, "To build a Westernised new country and a Westernized new society so that we can survive in this competitive world, we must solve the basic problem of importing from the West the very foundations of the new society... We must get rid of the old to achieve the new.'

Xu Beihong was given the opportunity to enhance his command of those western materials when in 1919 the patronage of another Republican grandee secured him a government scholarship to study in Paris, at that time still the unquestioned centre of the global art world, and the object of aspiration for young artists from every quarter of the globe. He was to remain in Paris, with a side trip to Berlin, until 1925, and he was to do well there, winning prizes at the École des Beaux Arts for the quality of his elegant drawings, from the life and from the plaster casts which still formed an indispensable part of artistic training at that time. He returned to Shanghai trailing all the glamour of his lengthy stay at the hub of Art, and, never a man over-burdened with self-doubt, was happy to see himself as the central figure of an alternative form of 'national painting'. This was to be one founded on science and realism rather than on the subjective vision of the artists as proclaimed by someone like Chen Shizeng. His arguments were shared by others painters of the 1920s and 1930s working in oils, but they were arguments which by and large failed to convince a broad audience, and both Xu Beihong and his companions in the practice of oil painting never made a living in the China of the early Republican period through selling their work.

Commercial success continued to belong instead to the practitioners of 'national painting' in brush and ink, whose alternative vision of a Chinese modernity was more attractive to a broad clientele. Instead someone like Xu Beihong made his living through holding positions in the new art schools and universities which continued to be established, especially after the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek consolidated its power in 1927 and instituted the 'Nanjing decade' of comparative political stability. This took its name from the site of the new Republican capital in a great historic city, closer than Beijing to the commercial and industrial heartland of Shanghai. It was in Nanjing that Xu Beihong began work on the large-scale oil painting, 'Tian Heng and his Five Hundred Followers'. This is the kind of heroic image of a distinctively national history which had inspired him in Paris, and which he sought to create as the visual counterpart of a new sense of Republican patriotism. It is a melancholy scene, showing the moment when the ancient king Tian Heng who has been defeated in battle and who sees the hopelessness of his position, prepares to commit suicide rather than surrender to a hated foe. The five hundred companions of his last stand, who will follow him in a heroic death, express varying degrees of rage, sorrow and determination. One of the most prominent of these followers, right in the centre of the composition bears the easily-identifiable features of the artist himself, as he literally paints himself into China's ancient history, claiming for this mode of art the right to be, if not 'national painting', then the painting of the national story. His other major large-scale work of this period, 'Awaiting the Deliverer', again takes its theme from the classics of Chinese literature, to represent a group of peasants, emaciated and impoverished but full of hope as they strain in anticipation of the arrival of the just and effective ruler who will bring an end to the people's woes.

It was western materials, above all the very medium of oil on canvas, which Xu Beihong saw as uniquely suited to capturing the realistic appearance of the object, and so transcend through science the dichotomy of 'eastern' and



‘western’ which in the wake of the First World War increasingly hardened into a binary opposition where never the twain could meet. But there were others in China at the same time who saw those same materials as productive and fruitful for other possibilities. In the very year of 1911 that the Republican revolution accomplished the overthrow of the imperial system, a Chinese student named Li Shutong (1880-1942) at the Tokyo University of the Arts, studying under professors who were themselves products of Parisian avant-gardes, painted a self-portrait. This already shows a degree of awareness of those currents which were ultimately to reject realism as the basis for painting in Europe, and the appropriation of the manner of someone like Georges Seurat (1859-1891) is unmistakable. Nor was it the case that you needed as a young Chinese artist to have the opportunity to travel abroad, in order to access this and similar manners. So, Guan Zilan was precociously engaging with the manner of Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Les Fauves, ‘the Wild Beasts’, even before she had the opportunity herself to study in Japan in 1927, and this engagement only deepened after the time she spent there, as is seen in her most famous single portrait, of ‘Miss L.’

Among the shifting constellation of art manifestoes, societies, and polemics which constituted the intense art world of Republican China, the work of Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) is of particular importance. Like Xu Beihong he came from a fairly humble background rather than being born into either old or new elites of education or wealth. He too studied in Europe in the 1920s, and returned to take up a position as a teacher and institutional leader, this time of the art school which has evolved into today’s China Academy of Art in Hangzhou. The vast, gloomy, tortured canvases with titles like ‘Death’ and ‘Humanity’ which he painted on his return to China were the sensation of the one-man exhibition which he held in Shanghai in early 1928; so successful was this exhibition that, originally free, a charge was put on entry specifically to reduce its audience to manageable proportions. But none of this work seems to have sold, and almost all of it is now lost, fallen prey to war and revolution and the dislocations of Li Fengmian’s life in China’s turbulent twentieth century. Lost too is the work from this period of his avant-garde contemporary Pang Xunqin (1906-1985), paintings like ‘The Riddle of Life’ or ‘The Wicker Chair’. Or rather, the actual works are lost, but we know of them, and hence know something of their reception and their audiences, through their reproduction in the flourishing illustrated periodical press which bound together otherwise disparate communities of readers in the 1920s and 1930s. A double page spread from the January 30<sup>th</sup> 1928 issue of the magazine *Liangyou huabao*, known also by its English title of ‘The Young Companion’ shows coverage of an art exhibition held that year in Nanjing, and there in the upper right corner is a reproduction of Lin Fengmian’s huge expressionist canvas ‘Humanity’.

To give a little bit of context about ‘The Young Companion’, which ran from 1926 to 1945, and was described by one of its editors as ‘ice cream for the eyes’, we need to see it as one of a global wave of magazines which put photographic reproduction at their heart. These include *L’illustration* in France, *Illustrated London News* and *Picture Post* here in the UK, and *Life* in the USA, as well as a whole raft of journals across Latin America and Asia from Argentina to Japan. The global dimension of a periodical like *Liangyou* (to give it now its Chinese name) is neatly shown by a cartoon from 1932 which shows Mickey Mouse and Goofy, global superstars of their era, as recognisable in Shanghai as in Aberdeen or Aberdeen, South Dakota, avidly reading the magazine, identifiable by its signature cover of a demure lovely engaging the reader’s gaze. To be a reader of *Liangyou*, which printed 35,000 copies and claimed to reach a readership of 500,000 per issue, was to stake a claim not only to be a viewer of modernity but to be modern oneself through the very act of viewing. And this is where the neat binary division of the story of Chinese art in the twentieth century into self-contained silos of the traditional and the modern, the indigenous and the foreign, the Chinese and western, ink and oils, begins to break down.

Whatever positions might be taken in the polemics of artists and critics, and they were many and vociferous, the fact is that from the viewers’ point of view, works of art of very different formal characteristics are capable of sharing the same space, and the same category as both painting, and Chinese, and modern. So on the page with ‘Humanity’ at the top of it, we see immediately beneath that work, identifiable even at a distance by its proportions if nothing else, a work executed in brush and ink and simply entitled ‘Landscape’, or rather *Shanshui*, ‘Mountain and water’, the ancient and time honoured appellation for this most enduring of subject matters. Even more strikingly,



on the bottom row and right next to each other, we see two pictures of more or less identical subject matter, of flowers in a pot, the one on the left being an oil painting and the one on the right being executed again in brush and ink. In terms of categorisation, of name calling, two of these pictures are what contemporaries would have called *yanghua*, literally ‘foreign painting’, while two of them are *guohua*, ‘national painting’. But though these distinctions mattered terribly to *artists*, and have correspondingly mattered a lot to art historians who have written about this period, we might legitimately wonder if they mattered quite so much to *audiences*. On the contrary, the great and diverse array of images in the pages of *Liangyou*, or even on the same page of *Liangyou*, gives a sense that for its readers (admittedly only a thin slice of China’s vast population), openness to a wide range of the visual arts was more important than the policing of boundaries and the erecting of walls.

If educated Chinese have always known more about European culture than vice versa, then one of the reasons for this in the Republican period was the willingness of *Liangyou* to, for example, run extensive features, spread over several issues of the journal, on the classic arts of the European Renaissance. In other ways too, journals like *Liangyou* and its competitors brought the debates which animated the relatively small world of professional artists to a wider audience. The journal was quick to seize on the possibilities for titillation and added sales suggested by the coming-into-visibility in Republican China of the nude as part of visual culture. The role of the nude and drawing from the nude as part of the training of artists in the sciences of the body and anatomy was firmly established in the consciousness of someone like Xu Beihong. Though far from uncontroversial, and leading to government clampdowns on arts schools that insisted on maintaining the practice, there was an almost inevitable leakage of this scandalous subject matter, legitimised as ‘art’, into the pages of illustrated magazines. Such themes are prominent in a title which veered more towards the risqué than *Liangyou*, but which made generally less use of the photographic in favour of the drawn and the cartoon, namely *Shanghai manhua* or ‘Shanghai Sketch’. The cover illustration to its very first issue, dated 21<sup>st</sup> April 1928, is entitled ‘Cubist Shanghai Life’, assuming a readership that is at least familiar with a term like this, enough to see it as a marker of sophistication and cosmopolitanism. In June of 1928 the *Shanghai Sketch* began a long-running feature entitled ‘A Comparison of the Global Human Form’, a fairly flimsy excuse for the publication of a range of female photographic nudes ranging across the full gamut of the ethnographic and the pin-up. It was this ‘nudes of the world’ series which led eventually to the (unsuccessful) prosecution for obscenity of its editors on October 1928.

With its focus on the photographic, from works of art to news items to images of celebrities both local and foreign, it was inevitable that a journal like *Liangyou* should take a position on the issue of the extent to which photography itself was an art form, and photographers part of the art world. Two spreads from 1928 and 1929 show the extent to which the magazine came down very firmly on the side of a positive answer to this, possibly less burdened by its European competitors with the idea that photography had somehow usurped painting’s function of recording the appearance of things. One shows a number of works from a Shanghai photographic exhibition, while the image on the lower right is ‘Collars’, by the Canadian photographer Bruce Metcalfe.

One of the pioneers of art photography in 1920s China, Hu Boxiang (1896-1989), also had his work, featuring pictorialist and soft-focus images of peasant scenes, published in the pages of magazines. These were magazines which might go out from the urban context in which they were produced to cities further afield, and even into the very villages which are here portrayed for an essentially urban gaze. But if we step back from magazines we might consider how it was probably in fact Hu Boxiang’s day job, the way he made his livelihood, which reached the widest and most diverse audiences. The posters he designed, more or less contemporaneously with his ‘art’ photography, advertise the Hatamen brand of cigarettes, again exploiting the expanded possibilities for the overtly erotic, or at least the coquettish, portrayal of women which both ‘fine art’ and commercial advertising brought to China at this time. In working for the world of commerce in this way, Hu Boxiang was in the same boat as more or less any artists who wanted to work outside the commercially dominant world of *guohua*, of ‘national painting’, and who could not secure one of the relatively few and consequently very desirable teaching jobs which were going. So it is in the world of commercial graphics, not just advertising but also book and magazine design that we see some of the most formally innovative work of the period, work which its artists could never have sold in the form of



straight painting. A 1929 cover design for a collection of short stories by the major writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) shows how graphic designers like Tao Yuanqing (1893-1929) were able to push the envelope in ways which added another dimension to the intensely diverse world of art in China at this time.

It was a world that was not just diverse but intensely engaged as part of a global conversation. In 1929, shortly after the political pacification of 1927, the government mounted an unprecedentedly large exhibition of contemporary art, which led Xu Beihong to pen one of the best-known polemics in an age not by any means short of them. In his essay 'Doubts', he let fly at what was then becoming established as the canon of European modern art, fulminating:

On the other side, despite all their iniquities, the vulgar Manet, the boorish Renoir, the turgid Cézanne and the inferior Matisse still managed, with the help of art dealers' manipulation and publicity, to become the sensations of their time, recognised and heeded by the general public... The dignity of the fine arts has been eroded, while vulgar fashions have become chic trends...

A riposte by the poet Xu Zhimo (1897-1931) (they were not related, despite sharing a surname), claimed, 'The truthfulness or falsehood of art can be gauged neither by empirical experience nor by intuition; and art must be granted its own autonomy from which 'the genuine independent spirit' emanates.' This is one of the most famous exchanges (it went on for a couple more rounds) in modern Chinese art, and it has usually been understood to show how Xu Beihong, despite his years in Paris, had totally, almost laughably, failed to grasp where European art was going – we might even juxtapose him to his disadvantage with the champion of 'literati painting' Chen Shizeng, who at least got the point of postimpressionism, cubism and futurism as far back as 1921. But we need to avoid here the condescension of hindsight, and remember that globally in the late 1920s what we now think of as advanced 'modern art' was still very far from being accepted even in its homeland, and could be openly attacked to applause in all sorts of quarters. In 1928, just one year before Xu launched his attack on (among others) 'the turgid Cézanne', the *North China Herald*, principle English-language newspaper of Shanghai and mouthpiece of its British expatriate community, carried a review of a new book on the artist by the Bloomsbury critic and writer Roger Fry (1866-1934). This is positively foaming at the mouth in its condemnation:

It is difficult to conceive how the paintings of Cézanne, if they at all resemble the reproductions in this book, can call forth the paeans of praise bestowed upon them by Mr Fry...How they can be considered as Art is beyond the understanding of this reviewer....Without the ability to draw, with no power of conjuring up a pictorial image mentally on which to build a picture, lacking almost everything that goes to make a real artist, and swamped by an erotic temperament, Cézanne certainly does not merit the extraordinary praise bestowed upon him in this book...this style of 'art' is not to be encouraged...

It would be completely wrong to suggest that Xu Beihong got the idea Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) was 'turgid', a bad artist, from reading the *North China Herald*. But I might want to at least explore the idea that the assault on modernism, and an all the 'advanced' trends of art which it encompasses, owes something to Xu's very acute awareness of trends and developments in Paris at that time. The *Rappel à l'ordre*, the conservative 'Call to Order' was issued in 1926 in Paris by the brilliant young maverick writer Jean Cocteau. The attack on Cézanne is thus perhaps not a sign that Xu Beihong does not know what is going on, but a sign that he *does*, and a warning therefore that our understanding of the new art being made and being argued about in the new Republic of China will be impoverished if we don't keep the global aspect of its production and its consumption firmly in mind.





### **Suggestions for Further Reading:**

Craig Clunas, *Art in China* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford, 2009)

Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Ken Lum, Zheng Shengtian, eds, *Shanghai Modern, 1919-1945* (Munich, 2004)

James A. Flath, , *The cult of happiness : nianhua, art, and history in rural north China* (Vancouver, 2004)

Jason Kuo ed., *Visual Culture in Shanghai, 1850s – 1930s* (Washington DC, 2007)

Lü Peng, *A History of Art in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century China* (Milan, 2010)

Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China* (Berkeley, 1996)

Aida Yuan Wong, *Parting the Mists: Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China* (Honolulu, 2006)