Translation

The Internal Logic and Cultural Conditions of the Development of Chinese Ink Painting since the 1950s: On the Relationship between the Experimental Ink Art Movement and the Chinese Avant-garde

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Since the 1950s, the true pioneers of the modern expression of ink have been Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) (Fig.1) and Guan Liang (1900-1986) (Fig.2). Lin Fengmian advocated a compounding of Chinese and Western elements, claiming that it did not matter which label a painting took. In his work, the smooth, sharp, and light lines and large areas of ink characterized by visible brush marks drawn from porcelain painting prove that there is a possibility for the emergence of new meaning through the transformation of ink discourse. The work of Guan Liang, meanwhile, combines the use of ink styles with exaggerated and distorted modeling, choosing to ignore the determined forms of traditional ink painting and reject the “bone method” in a breakthrough of perspective that allows ink to enter the space of modern expression. Shi Lu (1919-1982) is an incredibly contradictory figure, one of few artists eager to attempt to use the discourse of ink to express the truth of present sensations and experiences during the 1960s (Fig.3). Although he was at that time criticized for attempting to escape from the restraints of traditional brushwork in the debates that revolved around the question of innovation in Chinese painting, courageously inserting a number of nontraditional codes or symbols into the language of painting and even using oil-based material to paint on traditional xuan paper, he was ultimately unable to break free from the shackles of the traditional discourse of ink.

The ’85 New Wave marks an important stage in the formation of a modern discourse of ink, providing not only the breakthrough for the modern transformation of the language of ink but also proving the very possibility of this transformation, thanks to the efforts of a group of artists attempting to escape the standardized language of the old ink art. Gu Wenda (b.1955), for instance, brings together the conceptual modes of communication from Western modern and postmodern art with the expressive techniques of Chinese ink; the motives of this synthesis are clearly primarily influenced by Western concepts (Fig.4). The critical reexamination of tradition is a major marker of thinking on culture during that time. But, in the early works of Gu Wenda, we see also a profound passion for tradition that emerges through the spirit of his brushwork. His contributions involve his later ink works, in which the direct use of Western conceptual symbols not only reveals the weaknesses and failings of traditional ink language in the current cultural context and provides a potential space for the modernist turn in the discourse of ink, but also proves the viability of such a breakthrough in his own operation of ink. We should say that the radical work of Gu Wenda was a special case until the 1990s. The vast majority of ink painters hoping to escape from the old scope of ink discourse are actually only able to perform a very basic task of reorganization in the register of formal technique. However, these
attempts - wandering outside the realm of contemporary art - are not more than a facelift for the old system. They were far from contributing a critique to the reality, nor did they represent a new visual vigor, although they laid the foundation for the double development of localization and internationalization of ink art language in the 1990s.

After the mid-1990s, abstract ink became a force of momentum under the public banner of “experimental ink”, its common spiritual direction reflecting on the loss of humanity and nature wrought by modernization and the development of high technology. Experimental ink, through a methodological change in its practice, came to seek the right to speak on issues of contemporary concepts even as it enhanced the visual power of the languages of ink to an unprecedented degree. Abstract ink art in the 1990s tended towards the minimal, averse to the accumulated sediment of history, but this very tendency appeared differently in the hands of different artists, who chose to emphasize various concepts and spiritual aspects. In the first half of the 1990s, experimental ink art was considered a cult, as the world of art criticism remained concerned with the future of Chinese painting and entangled with issues of “tradition and modernism”, “heritage and innovation”, “brushwork and concept”. In 1996, as experimental ink entered the critical spotlight, it became a new growth area and a hot topic of Chinese contemporary art. In the mid- and late-1990s, alongside a gradual increase in the exposure of abstract ink art at integrated art exhibitions, the restlessness and anxiety over experimental ink art that had characterized its early stages gradually subsided. However, the calmness does not mean the cultural theme of experimental ink art is regarded as settled.

Urbanization is an important constitutive component of modernization, and it marks one of the most significant changes in China since the late 20th century. The modernist structural transformations of contemporary Chinese society and the construction of modernist culture are both intimately related to this process of urbanization. The historical process of urbanization, even as it changes the natural landscape, also profoundly changes each and every person living in the city, affecting their thinking, moral beliefs, and ways of communicating. This massive process of urbanization presents for the medium of ink, a traditional tool of painting, a profound challenge: can ink expression enter the reality and psychological understanding of the space of the city? That is to say, can the artistic medium of ink, which excels in the thin, light, thorough, graceful, blurred, and fleeting, become a true vehicle of the passion, strength, speed, displacement, and other modern sensations of the metropolis, a counterpoint to the tense impulses and anxieties of the modern soul?

The explorations and experiments of modern ink since the mid-1990s have extended the space of expression with relation to the themes of urbanization in three ways, sufficiently proving that the traditional medium of ink can enter the urban spaces of reality and psychology. These three ways are: 1. Using the methods of memory, the dream, and the search to convey the sentiments of reluctance to leave nature of urban residents in the irreversible process of modernization, or using the recollection and pursuit of the spirit and humanity of the national traditional culture to
extend the lineages of tradition, in order to express the national dream of nature in modern life as a general suspicion of modernity (see Tian Liming (b.1955) (Fig.5), Wu Yi (b.1966) (Fig.6), Liang Quan (b.1948) (Fig.7)).

2. Seeking the landscape of the heart as a symbolic contrast to the material world, or directly entering the spiritual imagery of the city at the turn of the century with a realization of and sensitivity to the current status of the social existence of life in the metropolis, thus creating a source of strong visual tension and expressing the common ways of life in the metropolis through a likeness of difference and courageous application of color and brush (see Li Xiaoxuan (b.1959) (Fig.8), Liu Qinghe (b.1961) (Fig.9), Li Jin (b.1958) (Fig.10), Shao Ge (b.1962) (Fig.11). 3. Seeking for ink painting the right to speak on questions of contemporary cultural concepts, particularly in the face of the spiritual poverty, shallow thinking, and short-term profits wrought by modernization and the development of high technology, as well as the resulting loss of humanity and nature. This way borrows the imagination and freedom of the organic or random qualities of the medium of ink to create surprising schematics of ink language that function as the mythological and prophetic texts of the digital era, making the revelations of the fragmentation, poverty, and desolation of our times even more pronounced (see Shi Guo (b.1953) (Fig.12), Zhang Yu (b.1959) (Fig.13), Liu Zijian (b.1963) (Fig.14), Wei Qingji (b.1971) (Fig.15)).

Entering the new century, as the intellectual world considers globalization, many have begun to investigate the divergent developmental trajectories of modernism in countries outside Europe and North America, reflecting on the existence of “alternative modernities”. The explorations of the language of ink instigated by the experimental ink movement have turned into a profound re-evaluation, critique, and use of tradition on the level of cultural spirit. Chinese contemporary art, too, achieves a new dimension through this process. This new dimension has already been fully realized in the artistic practice of Chinese contemporary art in recent years: we see now traditional media used to express the value concepts and spiritual pursuits of the present, and we see ink, ink spirit, and ink methods transplanted into new artistic media, which becomes the new vehicle for the spirit of eastern culture. Take, for instance, Qiu Anxiong’s (b.1972) ink animation New Classic of the Mountains and Seas (Fig.16). Looking at the “Seventh Shenzhen International Ink Art Exhibition” in 2010 we can clearly grasp this new dimension: see works like Qiu Zhijie’s (b.1969) Two Trees (Fig.17), Gu Wenda’s Forest of Stone Steles, Yang Fudong’s (b.1971) Liu Lan (Fig.18), Peng Wei’s (b.1974) Night in the Courtyard of the Torso Temple (Fig.19), and Liu Liyun’s (b.1974) Landscape Scroll (Fig.20). In terms of medium, concept, and language, these works of contemporary art can be placed within the context of a long and ongoing art historical narrative with Chinese traditional culture at its center; their cultural markers are clear, and yet they are able to reveal the new value concepts and human spirit of contemporary China.
1 ‘85 New Wave” or “‘85 Art New Wave” is a Chinese Avant-garde movement flourished between 1985 and 1989.
