Negotiating with Tradition in Contemporary Chinese Art: Three Strategies

Wu Hung – Professor, Department of Art History, University of Chicago

The development of contemporary art over the past 30 years has reshaped the relationship between *guohua* (Chinese-style painting) and *xihua* (Western-style painting) in two fundamental ways. First, to a group of ink painters, the issue at stake is no longer how to Westernize *guohua*, but how to make it contemporary and global. In pursuit of this goal they have conducted many experiments and undertaken persistent discussions since the 1980s, and have, in this process, invented a new field in Chinese art with its own agendas and history. Second, the proliferation of modern and contemporary art in the 1980s and 1990s had the effect of dismantling the medium-based division between *guohua* and *xihua*. This is because, compared with ink and oil painting, newly introduced contemporary art forms—installation, performance, site-specific art, multimedia art, body art, etc.—are not strictly culture-specific. When modern and contemporary Chinese artists embraced these forms in the 1980s and 1990s, their purpose was not to create new counterparts to either *guohua* or *xihua*, but to challenge the authority of the art establishment, including the rigid division between Chinese-style and Western-style painting in art academies. As a result, from its beginning, contemporary art transcended the historical entanglement between East and West by connecting itself to other regional branches of international contemporary art. In the global sphere, new art forms provided artists of heterogeneous origins with an “international language,” allowing them to address both local and global issues in a versatile, individualized manner. From this perspective, one finds that in numerous cases, contemporary Chinese artists have devised different ways to negotiate with the tradition in order to demonstrate their own contemporaneity.

This understanding implies two focuses in studying contemporary Chinese artists’ conversation with indigenous traditions. The first focus is a new type of ink painting that transformed *guohua* from within. It has been termed variously as “modern ink painting” (*xiandai shuimo*), “experimental ink painting” (*shiyan shuimo*), “conceptual ink painting” (*guannian shuimo*), or simply “new Chinese-style painting” (*xin guohua*). The other focus is the contemporary artist’s utilization and transformation of China’s cultural heritage from without. Experimenting with installation, performance, photography, and video, and adopting postmodern strategies of deconstruction, appropriation, and bricolage, these artists defy the framework of *guohua*, and assimilate Chinese elements into dynamic interactions between the local and the global. Because several speakers in this conference focus on the history and content of modern ink painting, I will take the second path to define three particular strategies which contemporary Chinese artists have developed to negotiate with traditions. I call them “distilling materiality”, “translating visuality”, and “refiguration”.

1
Distilling Materiality

Responding to traditions with a deconstructive twist, a host of contemporary Chinese artists have tried to distill classical Chinese painting to its essential elements. Many of them are fixated on exploring the aesthetic quality of paper and ink, the two basic materials of literati painting. Examples include works by Gu Wenda (b. 1955) and Hu Youben (b. 1961), in which ink alone becomes the subject of visual appreciation (Fig.1). Wenda Gu, Feng Mengbo (b. 1966), Shi Hui (b. 1955), and Sui Jianguo (b. 1956) have all experimented with paper, either making special “artistic paper” or constructing floating, weightless paper structures. With regard to the effort devoted to “distill” these two materials, however, few can match Zhu Jinshi (b. 1954) and Yang Jiechang (b. 1956). Zhu started as an abstract painter when he joined the Stars group in the late 1970s. He became attracted to the art of installation after moving to Germany in 1988, partly because of influences from Joseph Beuys and Mono-ha. The first project he undertook in the West was called Fangzhen, an ancient Chinese term referring to square-shaped military formations. Bernd Schulz described the project in these words: “A cubic meter of rice paper in Beijing and a cubic meter of canvas in Berlin symbolized Asian and European art respectively. Processed and integrated on site in various activities, the material was finally to be exchanged and, in Beuys’s sense, transformed into a social sculpture connecting the two cultures.” In the 1990s, Zhu Jinshi developed a method to create non-pictorial markings on sheets of xuan paper by gently crumpling them and flattening them out. This simple, meditative procedure generated a subtle paradox: whereas it made the paper unusable for painting or writing, it bestowed the material with a delicate three-dimensionality and patterned surface. Using such wrinkled paper he made a series of large installations: Mian Bi (“Meditating in front of the cliff”) in the Georg Kolbe Museum (1996), Impermanence in Beijing and Japan (1996, 1997), Tao of Rice Paper in the Vancouver Art Gallery (1997), and The Space of Nothingness in the Stadtgalerie Saarbrücken (1998). Filling large architectural spaces, these installations appeared nevertheless fragile and weightless, seemingly emanating a faint light from within. Critics saw in them Eastern ideas of beauty and spirituality. Their reaction confirms Zhu Jinshi’s fundamental assumption that imageless xuan paper is already a cultural expression and embodies specific aesthetic values.

If Zhu Jinshi freed paper from the brush, Yang Jiechang sacrificed images for the sake of ink. Influenced by Zen Buddhism and Taoism, he began to make ink abstraction before leaving for France in 1989. In Paris he reconceptualized ink painting as a temporal art, obsessively applying layers upon layers of dark ink to make his 100 Layers of Ink series (1989-1998). The unfathomable “black holes” that resulted from this process betray a notion of absolutism, reminding people of the Taoist idea of a primordial chaos (huntu). Some works in the series contrast two kinds of ink surfaces: floating above a smooth, muted dark background is an angular shape, which, due to the excessive layers of ink, has acquired a metallic, nearly reflective appearance (Fig.2). The implicit sculptural quality in such layering is further accentuated in works like The 100 Layers of Ink—Vast Square, a cube of ink painting created by piling up several blackened
boards inside a metal frame. To Yang, the piece “is a conceptual work related to time, space and the material of ink. An important factor is repetition, the aspect of multiple layers.”

In addition to paper and ink, other “Chinese materials” with distinct aesthetic qualities and cultural symbolism have also attracted artists’ attention. These materials include silk (Qin Yufen (b.1954), Xu Bing (b.1955), Liang Shaoji (b.1945), cotton thread (Lin Tianmiao (b.1961), Chen Qingqing (b.1953), gunpowder (Cai Guo-Qiang (b.1957), jade (Shi Jinsong (b.1969)), bamboo (Zhu Jinshi), porcelain (Liu Jianhua (b.1963)), and lacquer and embroidery (Hong Lei (b.1960)). Some of these artists live abroad while others reside in China, so it is incorrect to attribute such interest in “Chinese materials” to a self-orientation by overseas artists, as some critics have claimed. Rather, this interest is related to the influence of conceptualism on one hand and to the notion of the “readymade” on other hand. By resorting to symbolic materials in Chinese culture, artists could effectively place ideas over images, and could ally their practices to Found Art and related trends in contemporary art.

Motivated by the desire to find their cultural roots, some artists have developed elaborate projects that border on myth-making. Over the past twenty-five years, for example, Liang Shaoji has been using live silkworms and raw silk to make installations. His Nature Series, consisting of more than a hundred projects, has the goal of transgressing the boundary between art and nature (Fig.3). For this purpose he spent a long time studying the habits of silkworms, and trained them to spin silk on any surface when they mature. His exhibitions have displayed old newspapers and books, miners’ helmets, rusty metal chains, etc., all covered by shiny raw silk, which purifies these mundane objects by bestowing them with a magical luster. He also recorded the slight noise that silkworms make as they eat mulberry leaves and spin cocoons, and then made sound installations with the recordings. Rather than a personal obsession, Liang’s fascination with the silkworm is actually rooted in the national psyche. The connection between silk-making and China is so deep that its invention is equated with the creation of Chinese civilization. Legend relates that when this civilization first emerged, the Yellow Emperor or his wife Lady Xiling discovered the method of raising silkworms and reeling silk. Their descendents managed to guard this secret for three thousand years, so China became known to the world as the Country of Silk. Liang Shaoji is familiar with this myth and many poems about silk-making. On several occasions he cited a famous line by the Tang dynasty poet Li Shangyin (813-858): “Silkworms won’t stop spinning their threads until they die.” One cannot help but think that he is speaking about himself, an artist who has committed his life to making art with the help of this little magical insect.

Translating Visuality

Translation usually refers to the practice of rendering a text from one language to another. The term can therefore be adopted to mean the conversion of an image or object into a different material or medium. Such
conversion in contemporary Chinese art is related to the interest in “essential Chinese materials” discussed in the preceding section. Instead of distilling a painting to its essential elements of ink and paper, however, translation replaces such traditional materials with heterogeneous ones from a different time and place. The result is an ironic conflation of divergent temporalities. One extreme example is Zhou Tiehai’s (b. 1966) Tonic, which features modern reproductions of ancient masterpieces by Fan Kuan (fl. 990–1020), Xia Gui (fl. 1195–1224), Ma Yuan (active ca. 1190–1225), Bian Wenjin (ca. 1356-ca. 1428), and Bada Shanren (ca. 1626-1705), among others. He hired assistants to copy the ancient works from cheap prints, using airbrushes to spray chemical dye on canvas. The reproductions are deliberately blurry, as if looked at through frosted glass (Fig. 4). The masters’ distinctive brushwork, so central to traditional painting connoisseurship, is entirely gone; compositions are cropped at will; a small album leaf is enlarged to the size of a billboard. Launched as a systematic assault on traditional aesthetics, this “translation” project displaces not only the materiality but also the inherent authorship and cultural identity of traditional painting.

Two other more nuanced examples are Wang Jin’s (b. 1962) A Chinese Dream (Fig. 5) and Zhan Wang’s (b. 1962) Jia Shan Shi. A Chinese Dream (Fig. 6) faithfully reproduces a Peking Opera costume but replaces the garment’s colorful satin material with translucent plastic sheets. The fanciful embroidery is now made with nylon filament, not multi-colored silk threads. The artist’s strategy is to work with an existing type of Chinese object, duplicating its form but substituting another material. One cannot therefore analyze the work within the interpretative framework of mimesis, or the relationship between reality and representation, because it forges a new reality by “translating” an existing artifact into an analogous one. This new reality is intentionally ironic. In particular, its pre-industrial design and industrial material allude to different historical moments and aesthetic sensibilities, which signify simultaneous attachment to and detachment from a still existing indigenous art tradition. Slightly bluish in tint, the costume appears to be illusory and floating. (It is actually much heavier than a real silk costume.) Translucent rather than transparent, it is both there and not there, attracting our eye but diffusing our gaze.

Wang Jin first made such a plastic costume for one of the earliest domestic auctions of contemporary art. Taking place in 1997, this auction was conceived as a joint venture of experimental artists and businessmen to test the social viability of contemporary art in China. When invited to submit a work to the event, Wang Jin made the costume and called it A Chinese Dream, a title which has a strong commercial flavor and implies the non-Chinese identity of a potential customer. Before the auction he also hung it in the Long Corridor in Beijing's Summer Palace amidst crowds of foreign tourists, who admired its workmanship but could not decide whether it was art. Both contexts heightened the work’s intended meaning as a reflection on the commercialization of Chinese society. By displacing the material of an old theater costume and by displaying the copy in commercial venues, the artist raised questions about the authenticity of Chinese culture in this globalized, postmodern era.
Zhan Wang started making his contemporary interpretations of traditional Chinese ornamental rocks (also known as Taihu rocks or scholars’ rock) in the 1990s. By applying a pliable sheet of steel over an ornamental rock and hammering it thoroughly, he could achieve a form that reproduced every minute undulation on the surface of the stone. He explained his rationale for making such a “translation”: “Placed in a traditional courtyard, rockery satisfied people’s desire to return to Nature by offering them stone fragments from nature. But huge changes in the world have made this traditional ideal increasingly out of date. I have thus used stainless steel to duplicate and transform natural rockery into manufactured forms. The material’s glittering surface, ostentatious glamour, and illusory appearance make it an ideal medium to convey new dreams [in Contemporary China].”

For Zhan, “glittering surface, ostentatious glamour, and illusory appearance” are not necessarily negative qualities. His stainless-steel rocks are not designed as satire or mockery of contemporary material culture. In his view, both the original rocks and his copies are forms selected or created for people’s spiritual needs; their different materiality suits different needs at different times. Like Wang Jin, the problem he addresses is one of authenticity: Which rock—the original or his copy—more genuinely reflects contemporary Chinese culture? Interestingly, the Chinese call natural rockery jia shan shi, or “fake mountain rocks.” According to Zhan Wang, when used to decorate a contemporary environment, such rocks, even if made of real stone, have truly become “fakes”. But his stainless-steel rocks, though artificial, are actually “genuine” cultural symbols of his own time.

Gradually, the focus of his experiments shifted to the relationship between ornamental rocks and their architectural environment. Zhan Wang disagrees with many Chinese intellectuals that Beijing should be kept in its old form, but he is also dissatisfied with the random borrowing of Western forms. Believing that his stainless steel rocks represent contemporary Chinese culture in the postmodern condition, he developed a project in 1997 called The New Map of Beijing: Today and Tomorrow’s Capital: Rockery Remolding Plan. According to this plan, he would replace the ornamental rocks currently in front of major buildings with stainless steel rocks made from them. Half in earnest and half mocking, he stated that these contemporary translations of traditional rocks would best encapsulate the spirit of “today's fast-paced and competitive society,” in which “an insatiable lust for material wealth takes the place of the detached leisure and comforts favored by intellectuals who adhere to their traditional heritage.”

Refiguration

To understand the concept of “refiguration” in contemporary Chinese art we can start from a simple example, Ai Weiwei’s (b. 1957) Table with Two Legs on the Wall from 1997 (Fig.7). The piece resulted from a radical restructuring of a Qing dynasty square dining table: the flat top is bent
over to form a right angle; the four legs consequently point in two different directions, one pair standing on the ground while the other pair supporting the table from an adjacent wall. Clearly the artist cut the original table into two halves and then rejoined them to create the current form. The surgery and reconstruction were done with tremendous care, however. Not a single nail was used. Following the traditional methods of Chinese carpentry, the artist, or the craftsman he hired, dovetailed the timber joints precisely and secured them with a thin layer of glue. In an interview, Ai Weiwei describes the work’s context: “In 1997, I started making [such] furniture. By then I already had a profound knowledge of Chinese artifacts, jade, silk, bronze, wood. I was deeply impressed with the objects that had been made in the past five thousand years, and how these reflected the thinking of the people who ordered them, who designed them and who created them: what it was that they wanted to express through these objects, as well as the technical difficulties they had to overcome. I came back [to Beijing] from New York and jumped into another world. I wanted to see how to work with it, to overcome it. The furniture began there; combining the New York experience with the Chinese conditions, its history and my understanding of all.”

Here Ai Weiwei emphasizes his “profound knowledge” of ancient artifacts and his respect for their technological achievement. He also talks about his New York experience—he means the influences he received from Western contemporary art, mainly Duchamp, Fluxus, and Conceptualism. He wanted to bring these two sets of knowledge together, to “work with” Chinese cultural tradition and also to “overcome it.” The 1997 table was a product of this joint operation. This work is significant because it establishes Ai’s method as a particular kind of appropriation. It is well known that many contemporary Chinese artists, especially photographers, appropriated traditional paintings by revising existing images through digital technology. Ai Weiwei’s table, however, does not add any additional physical or technical components to the original work. What he has done is simply to remodel or reshape an old table. I call this strategy “refiguration” because the goal of such modeling is to “re-figure” reality and perception—restructuring an existing object with its own property, and in so doing re-orienting the viewer’s visual perception and mentality. Also differing from conventional practices of appropriation, refiguration does not produce a new work independent from the source material. Instead, it transforms the source material and in this way allows the artist to transform its life from within. In the case of Ai Weiwei’s table, the operation of refiguration changes, first of all, the function and identity of a piece of old furniture. The same operation also redefines the table’s relationship with people: instead of simply taking it as an antique table, one is baffled by the contradiction between its violent reshaping and its continued authenticity.

We can also apply this concept to interpreting Qiu Zhijie’s (b.1969) Assignment No. 1: Copying “Orchid Pavilion Preface” a Thousand Times, which in my view remains his most daring work (Fig.8). Born into a scholar’s family in southeast China, Qiu Zhijie studied calligraphy when he was a boy. Following the traditional method of calligraphic learning, he copied ancient masterpieces, often in the form of ink rubbings.
reproduced from stone steles. Assignment No. I utilized this traditional method of studying calligraphy, but it is also a deconstructive analysis of China’s cultural heritage and of the artist's own artistic experience. For three years, from 1992 to 1995, Qiu Zhijie continued copying the preface of the Orchid Pavilion, the most celebrated masterpiece of Chinese calligraphy, on a single sheet of paper. This tedious exercise produced a piece of imageless calligraphy, although one can also imagine that it includes in its opaque darkness numerous copies of the ancient masterpiece. Later he recounted this process of simultaneous writing and erasing: “The first time the text was written, the calligraphy was clearly of Chinese characters. As the number of times increased, the characters were destroyed by the act of writing and turned into a purely visual 'ink form' similar to an abstract painting. After the fiftieth time, I started to write on a completely black background. The brush no longer left any traces of ink.” Like Ai Weiwei’s reconstructed table, nothing is added or omitted in the new work. What it does is to utilize the original technology to transform the source material.

Shen Shaomin (b.1956) is another artist who has successfully employed the method of refiguration to negotiate with traditional Chinese culture. Like Ai Weiwei, Shen spent a long period abroad: from 1990 to 2001 he lived in Australia, where he transformed himself from a printmaker into a conceptual artist. Two groups of work he made in Australia used found materials: abandoned newspapers for one group and discarded carpets for the other. His most creative period started in the early 2000s, after he returned to China for good. One of his best works is the Bonsai series, 2007-2009 (Fig.9). In an interview he traced its origin to a book on foot binding that he accidentally found in a flea market. He was shocked to see the x-ray photographs of women’s deformed feet, and was amazed to learn that this practice had continued for a thousand years in his country until it was abolished in the twentieth century. Later on he detected a resonance between foot binding and bonsai crafting, both creating “beautiful” images by abusing living organisms. To him, however, a bonsai’s implication is even more poignant because its abuse is concealed within a pretense of naturalness. Guided by this insight, he began to systematically investigate the technique of bonsai, and went to the regions of Ningguo and Xuancheng to visit famous bonsai workshops. There he saw how little trees were cut open and twisted at will, how metal clamps forced their branches into unthinkable shapes, and how their surfaces were scorched to take on an aged look. His Bonsai series externalizes such violence into tangible forms. He reconstructed the tortuous procedure used in creating a particular bonsai that had been hidden from view. One can now see the heavy pruner and stretcher fixed on a fragile tree stem, and the implacable metal wires tied to its branches to regulate their growth. Although one may argue that new components are added in such works and thus violate the principle of refiguration, it is equally reasonable to say that they only show what is already there. As the result, each work in the series seems like a sudden halt in the making of a bonsai, to freeze the moment when a small tree hangs chained and shackled like a prisoner. Shen Shaomin calls these works “living installations”. But even when a bonsai dies, the installation will still record the cruel technique and procedure behind its previous
transformation. From a broader standpoint, the installations cast an introspective light on the notion of control. They demonstrate that control can take place in the abuse of the physical body, as in foot binding, or of a living organism, as in bonsai making. They also imply that control can be performed through a distortion of intellect and psychology, as in training children to become filial sons, exemplary wives, and war heroes. In this sense, the significance of the Bonsai series as refigured images lies in the artist’s exploration of the hidden violence within familiar, aestheticized forms.


3 Li Shangyin, “Wu ti” (Untitled Poem).


6 Zhan Wang, “Dui 'jiashan shi' xianxiang di pingshu” (Some comments on the phenomenon of “ornamental rocks”), manuscript, n.d. Translation is based on an English translation provided by the artist.

7 Ibid.


10 For a general introduction to Shen Shaomin’s life and art, see Wu Hung, “Shen Shaomin’s Artistic Path,” in Shen Shaomin: Between Heaven and Earth (Beijing: Tang Contemporary Art, 2007), pp. 131-49.

11 "Art is Indispensable to Life Experience---A Conversation between Wu Hung and Shen Shaomin," in ibid., pp. 7-129; the part about foot-binding is on p. 94.