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The Netherlands

Writing Chinese art history in early twentieth-century China

Guo, H.

Citation

Guo, H. (2010, March 3). *Writing Chinese art history in early twentieth-century China*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/15033>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Introduction

In 1929, Zheng Wuchang (1894-1952), *guohua* painter and art historian, published his book *A Complete History of Chinese Painting Studies* (*Zhongguo huaxue quanshi*). The work was an immediate success, and many of Zheng's contemporaries considered it truly groundbreaking. The three categories of data Zheng used in his writing—artists and their biographies, artworks and their ownership, art criticism and theories—are the same as those in old Chinese texts concerning painting. His originality lies in the way that he organized his material and how he explained its internal connections. In the preface to his book, Zheng admitted the value of earlier writings, but he was now eager to construct a history of Chinese painting in a modern discourse. He summarized the limitations of all publications on Chinese painting studies, and then pronounced his ambition to overcome them. He would attempt to:

“collect, list, cultivate, synthesize all works and words; organize chronologically, obey [the principles in] the development of art, and use scientific methods to distinguish the origins of the schools and their relationship between the rise and fall of politics and religion; form a systematically narrated history of scholarship...” (Zheng 1929: 3)¹

Zheng Wuchang's attitude was shared by many Chinese scholars in the 1920s and '30s. They felt an urgent need to compile anew China's art history, particularly since scholars of other countries, Japan in particular, had already made considerable progress.

Focusing on art historical publications in early twentieth-century China, such as Zheng Wuchang's *A Complete History of Chinese Painting Studies*, this dissertation studies the historiography of Chinese art. In particular, it examines modern indigenous strategies for creating Chinese art history narratives. I argue that writing Chinese art history in late Qing and Republican China evoked a cultural essence of Chineseness in reinterpreting Chinese traditions. Art history, dedicated to the history of a cultural form, is “committed to the idea of tradition” (Brzyski 2007: 5). Chinese art historical texts, whether traditional or modern, are no exceptions. Chinese elites from the Song dynasty onwards established the classical accounts of Chinese art around the so-called Southern tradition of calligraphy and literati painting. During the early decades of the twentieth century, this by now entrenched paradigm was challenged by factors such as China's internal needs to develop, her indirect and direct encounters with Western art and Western ideas, and the conclusions to be drawn from any comparison with modern Japanese scholarship. Tradition was still essential to modern Chinese scholars of art history. What changed was how they interpreted that tradition. Even during the New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong*), which, from the

¹ Cited from (Andrews and Shen 2006: 2-6) with minor alternations.

end of the 1910s to the beginning of the 1920s, has generally been considered the period of the most radical iconoclasm, writers of Chinese art historical works turned to antiquity in order to legitimize their innovations. When art traditions of the recent past in China did not meet with Western modern artistic standards, Chinese intellectuals frequently tried to solve this shortcoming by drawing art traditions of the ancient past into modern art historical discourse. Most obviously, this appropriation buttressed Chinese scholars' confidence in China's artistic inheritance and cultural identity. Crucially, however, the ancient past of art in China was (re)invented by Chinese experts in order to forge the field of Chinese art history into a modern professional discipline.

State of the Field

Chinese art between the 1850s and the 1950s has recently attracted increased scholarly attention both inside and outside China. Nevertheless, the initial formation of this field was slow.

The first Western art historian to take twentieth century Chinese art seriously, Michael Sullivan, published *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* in 1959. It is the first publication in the West which adopts an art historical view to analyze twentieth-century Chinese art. Over the following four decades, a few texts (Kao 1972, 1981; Yoshida 1994, 1998; Tsuruta 1991, 1996, 1997, 1998; Andrews and Shen 1998b) have provided rich visual and textual materials of modern Chinese art. Some of the basic data for an exploration of modern Chinese art history has been available from early on. Pioneering studies by Kao Mayching and Yoshida Chizuko will be discussed below. In addition, the field is helped immeasurably by Tsuruta Takeyoshi's articles on art education, art societies, art students, and art exhibitions. The first landmark exhibition on twentieth-century Chinese art was organized by Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi in 1998 (Andrews and Shen 1998b).

Most studies (Kao 1972; Sullivan 1996, 1997) have been preoccupied with the modernization of Chinese art in the shape of Westernization. More recent studies include monographs (Shen 2000; Lin 2003; Lai 2006) which adopt individual artists as case studies to show continuity and discontinuity in twentieth century Chinese art. Other scholars focus on an overall view of modern Chinese art, in which they see a struggle between "tradition" and "modernity" (Zhang and Li 1986; Ruan and Hu 1992; Li and Wan 1998, 2003).

One particularly rewarding approach to modern Chinese art pays greater attention than hitherto to the position of Japan in the formation of art in late imperial and modern China. In his book *Art and Revolution in Modern China* (1988), Ralph Croizier devotes a long discussion to the Japanese influence on the Lingnan School (*lingnan pai*) painters (Croizier 1988). Aida Yuen Wong's 1999 PhD dissertation focuses on the cultural

interaction between Japan and China. Her main finding is how intellectuals of both countries effectively worked together to create the concept of Eastern painting between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (Wong 1999). Wong's book based upon her thesis, analyzes further how Chinese scholars formulated national painting as *guohua* in close relation with Japan (Wong 2006). Yoshida Chizuko, in her 1994 article "Ōmura Seigai and China", explores the Japanese art historian Ōmura Seigai's (1876-1923) artistic exchanges with Chinese artists and scholars, and she argues that Seigai contributed greatly to the cultural exchanges between Japanese and Chinese painters (Yoshida 1994). Yoshida also presents all the available data concerning one hundred and three Chinese art students and their experience at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in the first half of the twentieth century (Yoshida 1998). Chen Zhenlian has published a comparative study on the modern history of painting, which adopts the exchange of paintings between China and Japan as its main method of analysis (Chen 2000). In October 2007, a conference "The Role of Japan in the Institutional Development of Modern Chinese Art" was held by Academia Sinica in Taipei. Participants aimed to construct a modern Sino-Japanese cultural relation in art mainly from social and institutional perspectives.

However, comprehensive research on the development of art history as a modern academic discipline in late imperial and modern China has been conspicuously absent, except for information on a few Chinese art historians. Michael Sullivan in *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* provides no information on art historical research in early twentieth-century China. He mentions only two art historians Lin Wenzheng (1903-1989) and Teng Gu (1901-1941), and his bibliographical index adduces only two more names Yu Jianhua (1895-1979) and Zheng Wuchang, both of whom are major figures in early modern Chinese art historical research (Sullivan 1996: 50, 65, 94, 321, 24). Shen Kuiyi's essay in *A Century in Crisis* is concerned with Zheng Wuchang's significant contribution to the formative period of Chinese art historical study as well as the *guohua* painter Fu Baoshi's (1904-1965) position as a painter and historian of Chinese painting (Shen 1998: 88, 92). Kao Mayching's essay on art education mentions only the artist and art educator Jiang Danshu's (1885-1962) pioneering works on art history (Kao 1998: 150).

In China, many essays on Chinese art historical writing are usually short articles summarizing only briefly the content and characteristics of this or that Republican publication. Examples include Deng Fuxing's "Chinese Art Studies of the Twentieth Century" (Deng 1998), Chen Chiyu's "General Review on the Study of Chinese Art History in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (I, II)" (Chen 1999a, 1999b) and Xue Yongnian's "In Retrospect and in Hope for the Study of Chinese Art History in the Twentieth Century" (Xue 2001).

Once more, Japan has an important position in any historical examination of China's early modern historiography of art. Aida Yuen Wong has examined Chinese art history surveys in the early twentieth century to show the Sino-Japanese emphasis on "content and methodology" (Wong 2006: 36). Similarly, Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi's essay "The Japanese Impact on the Republican Art World: the Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Field" has studied what the authors called "an overwhelming and now forgotten debt" of 1920s Chinese art historical literature to Japanese scholarship (Andrews and Shen 2006: 4). Shen Kuiyi's contribution to the conference "The Role of Japan in the Institutional Development of Modern Chinese Art" (Taipei, 2007) singled out two art historians Teng Gu and Fu Baoshi to demonstrate the Japanese impact on the construction of a Chinese field of art history (Shen 2007).

Compared with numerous studies on the modern historiography of Chinese history, the study of Chinese art history as a professional discipline is still in a preliminary phase. Careful reading of original materials and detailed research on images and texts have barely begun, and a comprehensive discussion of what these materials can reveal about art history in twentieth-century China remains a large gap in Chinese cultural studies. This dissertation is an attempt to do some of the work of closing the gap.

Scholars have tried to trace the history of the Chinese modern concept of art and its terminology (Chen 2000; Ogawa 2003; Huang 2004; Shao 2004). Part of the debate hinges on cardinal terms, such as the closely related yet diverse words for art, *meishu* and *yishu*. I do not deny the importance of this enquiry, but in this dissertation I focus primarily on Chinese writers in the early twentieth century who, while they certainly adopted these theoretical terms (and others), used them somewhat indiscriminately, and actually strengthened their rhetorical positions much more thoroughly by reference to contemporary social conditions and practical results (see Chapter Four).

Contexts of Art History in the West and in China: Brief Histories

Western art history can be said to owe its origins to biographies of artists during the Renaissance. The historian best known for his writing on Italian art, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) first published *Lives of the Artists* in 1550. Vasari was also a painter, a role that he combined with his literary activities in a way that often parallels ancient and modern Chinese commitments. However, the key innovation of Western art history occurred in the eighteenth century when Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), a German art historian and archaeologist, analyzed artistic style based on factors such as climate, geography, philosophy, and religion, and thereby placed art in the context of an entire culture. Very broadly, Western art history then developed into three main approaches

during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: 1) connoisseurship, basically an empirical approach, concentrated on the first-hand experience and close examinations of artworks and the inductive method in classification and analysis; 2) metaphysics, adopting Kant and Schiller's aesthetics as well as a Hegelian model to reveal the intrinsic logic and principles of idealism, and to explain the transformation of artistic styles; 3) cultural history of art, setting the studied objects in the context of the culture which produced them and considering the changing style of art as the spirit of the age. During the nineteenth century, professional training systems and academic organizations of art history appeared in Europe. With these methods and their institutionalization, art history became an academic discipline largely independent from philosophy and history (Podro 1982; Fernie 1995; Mermoz 1996; Llewellyn 1997).

Prior to the twentieth century, no general history of all forms of the fine arts existed in China. Only histories of one particular branch of art were available, and histories of Chinese calligraphy and painting formed the main preoccupation of Chinese literati. Generally speaking, traditional Chinese literature relating to calligraphy and painting is divided into four groups: 1) classification—sorting painters and calligraphers by their official statuses and their artistic accomplishments; 2) discussion—elucidating theories and methods of calligraphy and painting; 3) cataloguing—providing lists of artworks for collection and appreciation; 4) history—usually a brief historical framework of developments in calligraphy and painting constructed with biographies of artists (Cao 1997). In practice, most traditional treatises combined these four ways of writing. A leading example is *Record of Famous Painters of All the Dynasties* (*Lidai mingshua ji*) completed in 847 CE by Zhang Yanyuan (9th century), a scholar whose family background of high officials collected and practised calligraphy and painting in the Tang dynasty. Zhang's treatise dealt with the history of painting, the collection of calligraphy and painting, the materials and techniques of painting, and the appreciation and criticism of painting. Zhang aimed at extensive accounts of painters and their paintings, both those known through past accounts and those still surviving in his own day. His text served as a model for nearly all subsequent writings on Chinese painting down to the beginning of the twentieth century. Its data have been used for better or worse by all later generations of Chinese scholars on art (Bi 2008).

While many biographical and theoretical writings on calligraphy and painting survive from the fourth to nineteenth centuries, relatively few historical monographs exist to say much about other forms of art production. Take bronze for example. Luo Fuyi (1905-1981), the distinguished epigrapher and palaeographer, calculated in 1933 that thirty-five treatises had been published since about 1000 CE (Kerr 1990: 13). Even fewer ancient texts are available in architecture, and most of them are technical instructions on how to

construct buildings rather than histories of Chinese architecture. For instance, the influential text *Building Standards* (*Yingzao fashi*) is an official text explaining detailed laws and regulations of construction compiled in 1100 CE during the Song dynasty. The monographs that followed *Building Standards* seldom show major changes. Not until the end of the nineteenth century did Chinese intellectuals emphasize the importance of a history of Chinese architecture.

In the pre-modern history of China, bronze, architecture, sculpture, and decorative arts were treated and understood differently from calligraphy and painting. Calligraphy and painting were deemed unique, since their practice by Chinese literati demonstrated these scholars' high social status and personal cultivation. By contrast, pre-modern Chinese scholars seldom chose to practise other forms of art. They could appreciate and collect the productions of these art forms, like bronze and ceramics, but the actual production and reproduction of such objects were not their concern.

From the late nineteenth century, the Chinese art world underwent basic shifts in the social and economic roles of artists and patrons. Further changes were manifest in the styles, subject matter, and theories of art creation, and in the education and techniques of art practice. These changes became more evident in the 1920s and '30s with the spread of Western-style art. In particular, since then, the field of painting has been separated into Chinese painting (*guohua*) and Western-style painting (*xihua*). Chinese scholars and artists with their expertise in either traditional Chinese art or Western art constructed new histories of Chinese art based on their attitudes towards these two categories of production.

Art history in China during the first half of the twentieth century was a developing domain with experiments in different methods and narratives. Limited efforts to provide different stories of Chinese art occurred in the 1910s, and initial Chinese developments in modern art history at that stage were weak. A number of Chinese scholars still wrote histories of Chinese painting according to local interests long sanctioned by traditional formats. *Paintings and Painters of Sichuan* (*Shuhua shigao*, 1917) is a prime example. Its author Luo Yuanfu (1856-1931) was a scholar from Sichuan who organized a school and a publishing house for the conservation of Chinese classical texts. During the 1920s and '30s, achievements in Chinese art history were often overshadowed by more numerous and prestigious achievements in the fields of literature, philosophy, politics, and science. However, the production of innovative art historical texts and the emergence of a few dedicated art historians still brought about a new discourse with which to write art history in China.

Modern Chinese art historical literature appeared at a time when Lü Cheng (1896-1989) organized a course of art history at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts (later

the Shanghai Fine Art School) in 1916. Lü Cheng studied aesthetics in Japan for one year in 1915, and worked at the art academy for two years between 1916 and 1918. Then he turned to Buddhist studies for the rest of his life. Later in 1922, he published his lecture notes as a book *Western Art History (Xiyang meishushi)*² with the Commercial Press. His book was based on a series of Salomon Reinach's (1858-1932) art lectures at the École du Louvre in 1902 and 1903, published under the title *Apollo* in 1904 (Lü 1922: 1). Reinach, a French archaeologist and superintendent of France's national museums, was primarily interested in ancient Greece and Rome. Reinach's *Apollo* was a standard handbook on the subject of Western art history, and it was translated into different languages, including Chinese in 1937.

The first modern writing produced by Chinese scholars concerning art history in any broad sense is a history of Western art. The Chinese term for “art” *meishu* was a neologism from Japan, invented there to explain “beaux arts”. Compared to earlier discourse on calligraphy and painting of China, such a term was born in a vacuum. At this moment of *meishu*'s introduction, translating foreign works about the history of fine art was much easier than directly applying the new term to shaping the history of Chinese art. Even the first historical book about Chinese art with the word *meishu* in its title was a text consisting of two parts devoted respectively to Western art history and art history in China, rather than a text dealing solely with Chinese art. In 1917, Jiang Danshu published *History of Fine Arts (Meishushi)*, Figure 0.1). Jiang was a graduate from the first Chinese academic art department—Art and Handicraft Department of Liangjiang Normal College—in 1910. Afterwards, he taught in several art departments and art academies. His *History of Fine Arts* was published as a textbook for teacher-training colleges. Jiang Danshu provided a description of Chinese art in four parts, namely architecture, sculpture, painting, and applied arts (Jiang 1917). Although specialized publications on different forms of art, especially Chinese painting, had been long available by then, Jiang's publication was the first general art historical volume to include discussion of various forms of Chinese artistic expression.

Following the publication of Jiang Danshu's book, more than fifty monographs on the history of art in China concerning a broadening range of entities and systematic methods were published in the first half of the twentieth century.

My dissertation emphasizes Chinese critics and artists' most productive period, the 1920s and '30s. By no means did art historical activities stop after 1937 when the rate of Japanese hostilities in China was accelerated. Instead, relocated in the southwest of China, Chinese historians continued their research. The Japan-trained scholar on Asian art Chang

² The division between the West (*xiyang*) and the East (*dongyang*) came from Japan. And these two terms were borrowed from Japanese. Because it categorized the whole East as one unit, the notion of *dongyang* suggested a pan-Asian focus, which will be discussed in Chapter One.

Renxia (1904-1996), for example, became well-known for his studies on Buddhist art. Later he even taught Buddhist art at Calcutta University between 1945 and 1949. However, for those still in China, the war inevitably interfered in academic life. A relative lack of printing facilities and a vaguely defined readership amid the chaos of war limited the influence of scholarly works after 1937.

Major Resources of the Study

The primary sources for this enquiry into writing Chinese art history in late imperial and modern China are the textual statements produced by Chinese scholars on art in the early twentieth century. Appendix I is a list of Chinese art historical publications in book format about art in China during the early twentieth century, excluding works translated from foreign languages. It shows that, among all the media of art, painting still formed the centre ground of art historical texts. Twenty-five treatises on Chinese painting, ten of which were still in the traditional biographical style, were completed and put into print by Chinese scholars. This number greatly surpassed the total number of monographs on all other artistic forms, including ten on applied arts (ceramics, bronze, woodcut, lacquer, and embroidery), three on architecture, and one on calligraphy. The remaining seventeen texts combined two or more forms of artistic expression in their narratives. Two of these treatises observed the traditional way to discuss calligraphy and painting together, while the other fifteen items in the list applied new notions of fine art as *meishu* and art as *yishu*. These books on various media of art formed a new phenomenon in the discourse of Chinese art.

Appendix I also shows that texts with new approaches to Chinese art in the 1910s and '20s did not yet outnumber biographical art books in classical Chinese produced at the same time. Only in the 1930s did intellectual efforts to adopt innovative ideas dominate Chinese art historical practice. *History of Modern Chinese Art Development* (*Jindai Zhongguo yishu fazhanshi*, 1936) edited by Li Puyuan (1901-1956) is a good example. The book is more a criticism and survey of contemporary art than a history of the past. It contains five essays, each by a different writer, all of which analyze contemporary developments in applied arts, music, painting, drama, and movies (Li 1936). Such a broad coverage of fields indicates authors' ambitions in this period. Fu Baoshi's *Biographies of National Artists at the End of the Ming Dynasty* (*Mingmo minzu yiren zhuan*) is another example, which inserts new concepts into biographies of artists (Fu 1939). Although Fu Baoshi did not compose a coherent history, his use of the term "national artists" in the title reveals his emphasis on the national meanings of these painters from the Ming dynasty who allegedly fought against the Manchu invasion. Fu adopted these artists as models for contemporary artists, who, as far as Fu was concerned, faced similar pressure from Western countries and Japan.

These novel art historical publications in Appendix I represent directions in which to rethink the history of Chinese art in late Qing and Republican China. Using these texts, and contextualizing them with other contemporary art historical works, my dissertation examines Chinese scholars' efforts to establish a professional field of Chinese art history for a new Chinese nation that they believed existed within the diverse new narratives that they had adopted.

Furthermore, translated works from Japanese and Western languages are essential for understanding the Chinese adaptation of foreign thought in this period. Appendix II is a list of translated art historical treatises in book format during the 1920s and '30s. Those titles which introduce the history of Western art are not immediately relevant to my discussion on the history of Chinese art, but they influenced Chinese scholars' rethinking of Chinese art history. More importantly, translations of texts on Chinese art and methodological approaches towards art history are basic to my aim to analyze the Japanese and Western impact on Chinese art historical writing.

Another resource for my research is a large number of essays published in both popular periodicals and academic journals. It is impossible to take every single item related to Chinese art into consideration, so I have selected principally articles directly associated with Chinese art history, especially items that were composed by established writers and published in influential journals. Entirely devoted to art in 1930, the two special issues of the *Eastern Miscellany* (*Dongfang zazhi*), are good examples. Feng Zikai's (1898-1975) interesting essay "Research on the Theory of Six Laws in Oriental Painting (*Dongyang liufa de lilun de yanjiu*)" was in the first special issue. Similar cases were *Apollo* (*Yaboluo*, 1928-1936), published by the National Art Academy in Hangzhou, and *National Painting Monthly* (*Guohua yuekan*, 1934-1935) edited by the Chinese Painting Society (*Zhongguo huahui*) in Shanghai.

Besides the literature connected to art, writings produced during the early twentieth century on various topics, such as Chinese history, archaeology, literature, and education, are also useful. For instance, the scholar in the school of National Essence (*guocui pai*) Liu Shipai's (1884-1919) articles in *The Journal of National Essence* (*Guocui xuebao*), the thinker and social activist Liang Qichao's (1873-1929) new historiography of Chinese history, and the writer and social critic Lu Xun's (1881-1936) attitudes towards literature and art all provide social, cultural, and institutional context to comprehend art historical treatises.

In addition, images are important, particularly illustrations in art historical works and paintings by Chinese scholars in the first half of the twentieth century. They are crucial to identifying the parallel relationship between textual and visual works authored by the same

person, as well as the connection between artworks and their contemporary art historical texts.

Structure of the Dissertation

My dissertation uses the following outline: 1) imagining a national art history in early Republican China under Japanese influence; 2) the internalization of Western ideas in Chinese art historical writing of the 1920s and '30s; 3) the inherited practices of artists working as art historians in late imperial and modern China; 4) canonization of artworks in early twentieth century Chinese art historical works; 5) the development of an art historical narrative in the art exhibitions of Republican China.

Chapter One discusses the central theme of Chinese art historical writing in late Qing and Republican China, and it suggests how scholars sought for a coherent art history for China as a modern nation. In Chapter Two, I explore Western scholarship's influence on Chinese art historical research during the 1920s and '30s, most clearly represented by Teng Gu's work. Chapter Three investigates Chinese writers of art historical treatises in the first half of the twentieth century. Different activities of these writers—art making, writing, collecting, teaching, and publishing—affected the ways in which they composed their historical narratives on Chinese art. The focus of Chapter Four is canons in early twentieth-century Chinese art historical writing. Chinese scholars started to draw previously neglected artists, artworks, and art categories into the new canon system. Chapter Five looks at display. My concern with art on display focuses on its invisible power to manipulate its audience's conceptualization of art history. This chapter examines the *Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London* (*Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui Shanghai yuzhan*, 1935) in order to analyze Chinese practices of selecting, exhibiting, and viewing in the Republican period.

In this study, I not only conduct detailed textual and visual analysis, but also explore the question of writing Chinese art history from a sociological perspective. I pay attention not only to the creation of new Chinese art histories but also their circulation and reception. My dissertation proposes a new history of Chinese art history via a close reading of Chinese art historical writings. Meanwhile, it investigates the social and institutional aspects of Chinese art history, including the roles of art historical writers in the society of late imperial and modern China. For example, Chapter Three examines particularly the scholar's responsibility as a teacher of Chinese art history in schools, using new teaching materials. And, Chapter Five studies the social event of an art exhibition to shed light on the public response to the official history of Chinese art created by the exhibition organizers.

This sociological investigation is important for understanding the history of Chinese

art history. Fundamentally, social institutions are responsible for the formation of art history and the circulation of its knowledge. In my dissertation, the historiography of Chinese art history in late Qing and Republican China includes both scholarly publications and social agencies of a discourse such as exhibitions and schools. Unlike in Western countries, where nineteenth-century social progress contributed so much to art history's florescence (Mansfield 2002: 2), Chinese society in the first half of the twentieth century did not fully sustain the conditions necessary for the discipline's maturity. Still, art history as an academic enquiry in Republican China gained its first permanent hold in new institutions, such as universities, museums, exhibitions, and modern publishers, in order to contribute new life to public education, cultural dissemination, and even national survival.