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Writing Chinese art history in early twentieth-century China

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Conclusion

In February, 1989, Beijing, *China/Avant-Garde (Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan)* exhibited an installation “*A History of Chinese Painting and A Concise History of Modern Painting Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes (Zhongguo huihuashi he Xiandai huihua jianshi zai xiyiji li jiaoban le liang fenzhong)*” (Figure 6.1) by the pioneer of Chinese conceptual art Huang Yongping (1954-). Viewers are confronted with an old and dirty-looking wooden box which is open from the top. Still attached to the box is the original tag with Huang’s name and his old address in Hangzhou. To illustrate his change of address, Huang has added Fuzhou—the city of his new address—after an arrow mark next to the tag. The box supports a piece of broken glass on which a conglomeration of paper pulp is piled up. The contents of these pieces of paper are partially recognizable, and include characters on a book cover “a history of Chinese painting (Zhongguo huihuashi)”. On the lid of this box, Huang has inscribed the title of the artwork, the date “1987.12.1” when he created this installation, and “maintaining the humidity (*baochi shidu*)” implying the way in which he keeps this work. He informs his audience that this junk is the ruins of two art historical books, one on Chinese painting and another on Western modern painting. Huang Yongping’s choice of literature is deliberate. *A History of Chinese Painting* (1982) is an influential post-1949 art historical text written by the art historian and painter Wang Bomin (1924-); the Chinese translation (1979) of Herbert Read’s *A Concise History of Modern Painting*, is the first Western book on Modern Art translated into Chinese after the 1950s, and was considered by Chinese scholars in the mid-1980s to be an authoritative text on modern Western art (Gao 2005: 129, 56). Huang places the texts into a washing machine and turns the machine on for two minutes. The result of this cynical and destructive wash—a pile of paper paste—becomes the major part of Huang’s artwork.

Huang Yongping provides a cynical explanation of this work:

“In China, regarding the two cultures of the East and the West, traditional and modern, it is constantly being discussed as to which is right, which is wrong, and how to blend the two. In my opinion, placing these two texts in the washing machine for two minutes symbolizes this situation well and solves the problem much more effectively and appropriately than debates lasting a hundred years.” (Gao 2005)

Viewed in the context of the 1980s, this work expresses Huang’s negation of the conflicts between the traditional and the modern, the Eastern and the Western. According to Wu Hung, it also recalls the unforgettable memory of destroying books during the Cultural Revolution (Wu 1998: 62). In turn, this also suggests, obliquely, that no one has had much to say from 1949 until recently. As a result, the Republican period becomes all the more

important. At another level, then, this artwork figuratively summarizes the various efforts that Chinese scholars made in the historiography of Chinese art during the first half of the twentieth century.

Given the scope of this dissertation, I have not addressed certain aspects of writing Chinese art history in late imperial and modern China. For instance, the institutionalization of the modern discipline of Chinese art history in twentieth-century China remains a topic for further study. It is well known that courses of Chinese art history in China first appeared in the 1910s. This kind of teaching reached a new institutional definition in 1937. On 18th May that year, the Chinese Research Association of Art History was established in Nanjing. This organization was crucial for the establishment of a social network among Chinese art historians. Its members included Teng Gu, Ma Heng, Zong Baihua, and Chang Renxia. These scholars very likely envisioned a major engagement for art history, but progress stagnated amid the Sino-Japanese war. At least, no trace of activities in this institution has survived. Similarly, it is interesting to examine the roles played by modern publishing houses in art historical discourse. How and why did they choose to print particular books on Chinese art history? What profit was gained from these books? How large was the readership of these books? If appropriate data become available, these are the sorts of questions that future research will have to address.

This dissertation has focused instead on historiographical practices linked to authors, texts, artworks, and exhibitions in the early twentieth centuries. The legacy of this period is still felt today. Despite the wide temporal gap, the extensive absorption of foreign ideas in Chinese art circles between the 1980s and the beginning of the twenty-first century resembles the situation of Chinese art during the 1920s and '30s. Recent studies of contemporary Chinese art trace the roots of contemporary Chinese artworks to the Republican period, in particular the 1920s and '30s. This period is crucial for art historians to understand how the production and historiography of Chinese art integrated native and foreign elements. In revealing a new aim to promote a modern nation-state, new categories of fine arts, new academic methodologies of art history, and last but not least, the new institutional developments for the discipline, writing Chinese art history in the 1920s and '30s both reorganized and constructed new canons for Chinese art.

Faced with the external pressure from Western art, a totally different artistic tradition; seeing the impact of Japanese scholarship on its own art and Chinese art; and realizing the need to maintain an indigenous knowledge of China's own past, Chinese art scholars in the late Qing and Republican period were keen to rewrite the history of Chinese art. They mixed what they understood as Chinese traditional scholarship on calligraphy and painting with what they had learned from Japan and Western methods that they considered useful. In this dissertation, I identify these indigenous and foreign elements and explore the reasons

behind modern Chinese art historians' choices.

Although he did not admit it, Shi Yan, the author of *Eastern Art History*, followed the new strategy for dealing with Japanese art and Western art that had been provided by Japanese art historians. His ancient history of Chinese art examined Chinese art within an Asian scope in order to show the significance of Chinese art for other Asian arts. Shi believed that Chinese art had initially learned from Indian art and then proceeded to develop into a greater and more influential tradition. His extreme claims included the idea that Chinese art had defined the shape of Japanese art, and that the latter was only a variation of Chinese art. He concluded that, due to its power in Asia, Chinese art was in a strong position to confront the dominance of Western art in modern times. While some of the points Shi Yan made are contentious, they serve well his ultimate goal of promoting Chinese ancient art.

As a scholar, the ink painter Fu Baoshi followed the traditional practice of a Chinese artist. Fu's version of Chinese art history inherited a unique Chinese art historical language. During his stay in Japan, he chose to follow the relatively conservative methods of modern Japanese studies on Chinese art history. His detailed analysis of written documents and his relevant painting productions balanced the textual and visual dimensions of art history. Fu Baoshi's answers to historical questions of Chinese painting are sometimes biased, and consequently they have been challenged by later generations of art historians. However, his visual approach to art history, by means of image representation rather than word explanation, has been adopted and carried on by later scholars.

In his article "Painting and the Built Environment in Late-19th-Century Shanghai", Jonathan Hay suggests that the traditional Chinese painters of the Shanghai School unconsciously used the inherited resources of Chinese culture to show the changes in China. For Hay, indigenous painting proved adequate to respond to these changes. So its vitality in the nineteenth century affirmed a sense of Chinese cultural belonging (Hay 2001). In the early twentieth century, Chinese authors of art history took an extra step. These scholars incorporated the history of Chinese art within the intensified social changes of their day in order to create a cultural identity for China as a nation. For these authors, artworks were concrete proof of a national art tradition and a means by which their readers could easily participate in the glory of Chinese culture. During the 1920s and '30s, art historical writings in China carried very strong nationalistic overtones. Chinese intellectuals emphasized the importance of objects still extant in China in order to legitimize China's cultural identity in the world. For most Chinese intellectuals in the Republican period, the history of Chinese art was a battlefield, which ranged themselves on one side against foreign scholarship—Japanese studies on Chinese art in particular—on the other. They felt that it was their responsibility to create a satisfactory history of art for China as a modern nation.

Comparatively speaking, Teng Gu's approach to Chinese art history is more academic. He discovered in Wölfflin's style analysis of Renaissance Art and Baroque Art a powerful tool with which to construct a history of Chinese painting. He tried to divide the history of Chinese painting according to style development rather than political changes. He also explored the stylistic divergence between Chinese paintings in different periods. Since painting in China and in Western countries was so different, Teng Gu encountered unavoidable difficulties when trying to interpret Wölfflin's terms in ways suitable for the context of Chinese painting. He had to adjust his explanation a few times in essays he produced during the 1930s. Teng's discussion of Tang-Song art in his three publications of the 1930s—"An Investigation into the History of Academic Style Painting and Literati Painting" (1931), *A History of Painting from Tang to Song Times* (1933), and "The Characteristics of Tang Art" (1935)—exemplifies the changes in Teng's adaptation of Wölfflin's theory. At first, he directly applied his Chinese translation of Wölfflin's terms. Then he invented the names of styles in Chinese painting. His last step was to extend these stylistic notions in Chinese painting to other forms of art, such as Chinese sculpture. The outcome was quite mechanical and odd, but Teng Gu's daring endeavour inaugurated a new perspective with which to examine the history of Chinese art.

Teng Gu is the forerunner of modern Chinese art history scholarship. His views of China's past art are unique in Republican China. Teng suggested that Chinese scholars needed more archaeological discoveries to prepare them for theoretical approaches. It is no coincidence that Herbert Read, whom Teng introduced to Chinese readers in the 1920s, was reintroduced to China by art historians in the 1980s. This time Read's books became prevalent among Chinese intellectuals. Likewise, Teng Gu's style analysis of Chinese art in the 1930s finally gained currency fifty years later.

In most cases of late Qing and Republican China, the three forces of Western art historical scholarship, Japanese art studies on China, and traditional art historical treatises overlapped every author's attempt to create a modern Chinese field of art history. Ancient Chinese texts on art were basic materials for every new publication on Chinese art history no matter whether its author was inclined towards Japanese, Western, or age-old Chinese methods. Citations from Japanese and Western-language sources appeared side by side in histories of Chinese art. Researchers of Chinese art history at that time, such as Shi Yan, Teng Gu, and Fu Baoshi, could emphasize one of these three forces, but they could not employ one approach exclusively to compose a history of Chinese art.

The results of various Chinese intellectual efforts to theorize on art in the early twentieth century were a new set of canons in Chinese art. Parts of old canons were sustained with new meanings. For instance, the Tang dynasty has long been acknowledged as one of the most prosperous periods in Chinese art history. In the Republican period,

Chinese researchers discovered new merits in Tang art which had developed from the internalization of nature and the absorption of foreign elements. Other old canons were repudiated by early twentieth-century Chinese scholars. One example is the Orthodox School of painting in early Qing. Its prominent status established in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was no longer accepted by modern Chinese authors of Chinese painting history. Moreover, artists and artworks which had previously gone unnoticed by scholars now occupied a canonical position in new histories of Chinese art.

This formation of canons in the 1920s and '30s was buttressed by contemporary art exhibitions in China. Art display in early twentieth-century China affected the way in which contemporary Chinese scholars constructed the history of art in China. The exhibiting practices of old art objects gained definition in an emerging concept of art, and they generated a new narrative for the history of art in China. Both concept and narrative were echoed in the contemporary art historical writings in China. Exhibition practice and art history writing shared several common points. They prioritized the medium of calligraphy and painting in art while taking consideration of other artistic forms in order to create a comprehensive discourse of art. This process had no precedent. They considered the Tang and Song period as a peak of Chinese creativity, and diagnosed a decline of art in China from at least the nineteenth century. They canonized certain artworks and, just as significantly, they did not canonize others.

No reorganization is comprehensive; no construction encompasses every eventuality. Were that so, the efforts of nearly one century ago would not continue to generate the interest that they still do. But the achievements of Republican scholarship and criticism were unprecedented. They covered aspects of content and form; they advanced the scope of rhetorical ambitions; they shifted the dimensions of historical debate. These achievements mark a cultural founding moment, one in which observers today cannot help but see parallels. And, perhaps more striking today than then, is how pertinently Chinese experiments with Japanese and Western ideas adapted them to Chinese conditions. Republican intellectual history, if considered from an art historical perspective, did not simply welcome the new and the foreign, while discarding the old and the local. Pioneering writers of the period contributed in ways that were not disadvantageously qualified by borders or by different temporalities. Even if it was not fully realized before—and much less during the catastrophic distractions of the 1960s and '70s—it is increasingly clear today that these early voices spoke to a discourse that has grown in transnational and disciplinary relevance.