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THE NEW "TRADITIONAL" CHINESE PAINTING: OUT OF THE DARK

Less than a decade has passed since China was opened to us in the U.S. for travel, but those years have transformed it in our popular view from a remote and somewhat mysterious culture to a living reality. One effect of this great change, for those of us who teach the history of Chinese painting, is that we have become accustomed to a frequent question for which we have no simple answer: "But what is happening in Chinese painting now?" We have had to respond with uneasy generalizations, and by recommending the writings of the few specialists who try to keep up with what artists in the People's Republic of China are thinking and painting, such as Michael Sullivan (whose articles "New Directions in Chinese art," in Art International for 1982, and "Art and the Social Framework" in the Times Literary Supplement for June 24, 1983, are probably the best guides to the subject that we have in English.) Most of all, we have tried to warn that the kinds of pop-traditional contemporary Chinese paintings with which we are too familiar from many commercial gallery exhibitions and auction catalogs--works that tend to replicate the styles of well-known modern masters, and are chosen usually with an eye more to saleability than to quality--do not represent the most original and interesting work that contemporary Chinese artists are doing.

Now a more representative, and far more positive, view of painting in China today is accessible to U.S. audiences in an excellent exhibition that is touring the country, and will be on view at Asia House Gallery in New York from June

21st to August 28th, 1984. It will be shown at six other museums (see schedule at end) after its San Francisco showing (November 12th, 1983, to January 18th, 1984.) Titled "Contemporary Chinese Painting from the People's Republic of China," it was organized by Lucy Lim, Executive Director of the Chinese Culture Foundation in San Francisco, together with Michael Sullivan and myself. The three of us, working with the Chinese Artists Association in Beijing and its regional branches, received complete cooperation from the Chinese authorities as well as from the artists themselves, and were given a free hand in selecting the paintings. The result, we feel, is an exhibition that brings to foreign viewers for the first time the most interesting developments in China's kuo hua or "traditional painting" during the years following the liberalization of 1976, the fall of Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four which the Chinese sometimes call the "Second Liberation."

To write "traditional" will sound a note of alarm in the minds of many readers; and to add that most of the artists belong to painting academies in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities will strengthen their suspicions that this will turn out to be just another show of "traditional" and "academic" paintings--more of the imitations of famous old and modern masters, more of the bland landscapes and charming bird-and-flower pictures and over-appealing figures that have given recent Chinese painting a dubious image abroad. The Chinese alternatives to kuo hua--Western-style oil painting, along with the "avant garde" experiments of the Xing-xing (Star-star" group and others that imitate recent movements in art

outside China--all of which are unrepresented in this exhibition, have in fact been seen by some as the only truly vital movements in contemporary Chinese painting. What we have tried to demonstrate in this exhibition, contrary to that view, is that one has only to look behind the over-visible surface of kuo hua to find a great deal of vitality and innovative energy: in less-typical works by some of the older masters, or in paintings by young artists, women artists, artists who have not been much exhibited and remain unknown outside China.

In trying to assess the achievements of Chinese painters in the People's Republic today, we have to consider sympathetically what they have undergone in the past. They did not, first of all, inherit a very healthy tradition from the decades before the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Chinese painting in the first half of this century produced some notable masters but no really flourishing and successful movements to which young painters could attach themselves. Mao Tse-tung's call for a new Chinese painting that would be socialist in content and Chinese in style recognized that the older kinds, besides being (from the new viewpoint) tainted with elitism, could not easily be adapted to the social messages that art was now supposed to carry. Socialist realism in the Russian manner was officially encouraged for a time in the 1950s, and oil painting began to be practiced more than it ever had been before in China.

Traditional Chinese painting continued, however, with sometimes minimal accomodations to the new demands--a

factory or a bridge construction in the midst of a traditional landscape, or the retitling of a conventional flower composition to make it illustrate Mao's dictum "Let the Hundred Flowers Bloom." The relative freedom enjoyed by artists in these early years of the People's Republic ended in 1957 when the pluralistic "Hundred Flowers" doctrine was abruptly reversed by Mao; the Cultural Revolution followed, and the ascendancy of Jiang Qing and the Gang of Four, bringing twenty years of terrible times to artists and intellectuals. The fall of the Gang in 1976 ended this awful hiatus in the continuity of Chinese culture, and opened the way for artists to--what? Return to the styles of the fifties, as though nothing had happened between? Take advantage of the new freedom to imitate what they had been led to believe were the bourgeoise and socially regressive tendencies of foreign art? Indulge in the strongly discouraged but not totally forbidden practices of abstraction, self-expression, the erotic pleasures of the nude? And if not these, what?

I myself had few clues to how those questions were being answered by Chinese artists until, in October of 1981, I saw in Shanghai an exhibition of about a hundred paintings, one each by that many artists in the Peking and Shanghai Painting Academies, including many young painters completely new to me. It was an exhibition that seemed to expand significantly the limits of the Chinese tradition as I had understood them up to then, and I left it with a more optimistic feeling about the future of Chinese painting. I have tried since then to see more of the work of some of these young artists; they are

mostly well represented in the present exhibition, often by the same paintings that seemed so outstanding in the 1981 show.

The younger painters feel, on the whole, less committed than their elders to their Chinese heritage. Their upbringing, and especially their experiences during the Cultural Revolution, have left them with very mixed feelings about it; they are as strongly drawn, often, to foreign styles. Clear traces of influence from recent Japanese painting, for instance, can be seen in the works of several of the young Beijing painters, such as Yang Gang (fig.), Yang Yanping (fig.), and Zhao Xiuhuan (fig.).

The theme of landscape has presented special problems to Chinese artists in recent times. The subject does not lend itself easily to expressions of socialist sentiment, but that difficulty can be circumvented by seeing the paintings as expressive of the artist's love for his homeland, always a worthy motive. More difficult are problems of style, and relationships to old traditions. From around the tenth century, landscape became the central subject of Chinese painting, and most of the great masters concentrated their attention on it. But from the early eighteenth century an orthodox school of landscape painting became dominant, discouraging variety and innovation. As late as the 1940s there were still prominent artists carrying on this orthodox landscape style without much change. Art critics of the People's Republic understandably associated it with elitism and political conservatism, and urged their artists in other directions. A few landscapists active in the 1950s such as Fu Baoshi, Huang Binhong,

and Li Keran broke the orthodoxy with new styles. But these, in turn, have become the basis for what looks dangerously like new orthodoxies.

This is particularly true of the followers of Li Keran. Li's own landscape style, which sets heavy applications of black ink against strongly contrasting areas of white reserve paper and color, earned his landscapes the condemnation of Jiang Qing and the gang of Four, and a place in their notorious "black painting" exhibition. With the fall of the Gang, the prohibition was lifted. Li celebrated his emancipation with a landscape (shown in the 1981 exhibition) that was blacker than ever, and accompanied by an inscription extolling the heavy-ink manner; his followers have responded with such an overproduction of inky effusions as to almost make us sympathize with Jiang Qing's view of the matter. Fortunately, the past few years have seen the emergence of some promising new directions in landscape.

One who began as Li Keran's follower is the Beijing landscapist Zhang Bu, whose 1980 "Winter Forest" (fig.) reveals him, however, using techniques outside Li's repertory. A pervasive characteristic of the new Chinese landscape painting, whether the artist is working in Beijing, Taipei, or New York, is a dependence on semi-accidental and random methods to create rich, natural-looking textures: spatter, resist techniques, special manipulations of the fibrousness or the absorbency of the paper. These are basic to Zhang's winter scene, and are interesting alternatives to traditional Chinese brush drawing, which may seem somewhat threadbare

to young artists today. Yang Yanping's "Towering Mountain" (fig.) similarly avoids the established brush disciplines of older Chinese painting, favoring a fine, stuttering line that moves over mottled areas of warm- and cool-tinted inks. Her vision is sensitive rather than strong, concentrating on refinements of touch and taste, portraying unassertively the vines that lace over the surface of her massive bluff and the greenish foliage that surrounds it.

Chinese landscape painting has always offered its artists rich possibilities for exploring borderlands between imagery and abstraction, and these possibilities continue to be exploited. Song Wenzhi, a well-established Nanking artist now in his sixties, uses watercolor-like washes of ink and red-brown, with a minimum of sharp contour, to evoke in one of his album leaves (fig.) a sight that no one can forget who has ever seen it: sunrise over the needle-sharp peaks of Mt. Huang. Wu Guanzhong, a Beijing painter of the same age who studied in France in the late 1940s, has absorbed his knowledge of van Gogh, Klee, Miro, and other foreign artists into landscapes that seem still Chinese, such as his "Ruins of Gaochang" (fig.). And Li Huasheng, an artist of Szechwan who is not yet forty, stays firmly within the Chinese landscape tradition, but draws on the free, calligraphic brushwork and quirky compositions of some of the individualist or even eccentric artists who occupied its outer fringes (fig.). Li has already attracted some favorable notice abroad, and should win more through this exhibition, since the appeal of his spirited pictures is broad and immediate.

Similar stylistic choices are open to painters of the ever-popular subjects of flowers and other plants, and similar problems confront them: the enriching and inhibiting force of tradition, and the attractions of foreign styles. Xie Zhiliu, a Shanghai painter in his seventies who is also one of China's foremost scholars of the history of Chinese painting, proves in his enchanting 1981 portrayal of "Peonies" (fig.) that the ability to use an old mode to fresh effect is by no means confined to the young. Applying the ink and colors wetly and letting them suffuse through the paper is scarcely a new idea in China. But Xie goes farther than most predecessors in dissolving forms into suggestive blurs, and may recall European parallels--Redon, or Nolde--more than Chinese models in the minds of Western viewers.

Zhao Xiuhuan's affinities are in another direction, with Japan: the mossy mottling on the rocks in her "Mountain Stream" of 1982 (fig.) is accomplished with a technique akin to tarashikomi ("dripping" water into a wet area of color wash) of Japanese painting, and the decorative effect of cool greens with ink and gold seems also Japanese-inspired. The meticulous rendering of the plants, however, belongs more to the technically finished gongbi manner of Sung Dynasty Chinese painting, and the style, whatever its sources, is in the end Zhao's own, and deeply satisfying.

Another young artist in the Beijing Painting Academy who specializes in flowers is Peng Peiquan, now in his early forties. Anyone familiar with recent Chinese painting will recognize at once his dependence on the lineage of flower

painters that includes Zhao Zhiqian in the nineteenth century and Wu Changshi and Qi Baishi in the twentieth. But they will recognize also that Peng's style is not really derivative--that he has in fact accomplished what old critics set as the artist's proper goal: originality achieved within the artistic terms and standards of past masters. Peng's brushwork and ink-values are no less disciplined than were Zhao's or Wu's or Qi's, but the disciplines are self-imposed, not accepted from outside.

Figure painting in China today presents perhaps the greatest problems for artists, who must deal not only with the distant past but also with the recent past, the ideological art of the fifties, sixties, and seventies, which was usually banal in theme and undistinguished in style, if one can speak of style in it at all.Younger artists active today grew up surrounded by this magazine-illustration kind of popular art, and many of the older ones were necessarily involved in the production of it themselves, so that their feelings about it must be complex. It is easy enough, and quite understandable, for some of them to turn away from figures altogether and concentrate on landscapes and flowers. Others, however, have chosen instead to salvage what they still find acceptable from this earlier figural art, but to raise it to a higher level of quality and originality.

The Shanghai master Cheng Shifa, born in 1921 and now China's foremost figure painter, has been guilty of some banalities himself, under the pressures to create pictures that could be understood and enjoyed by people in all strata

in China's vast and diverse population. But Cheng can still leave his many imitators behind, when he chooses to, by turning his unmatched technical versatility and inventiveness to new subjects and styles. He is represented in this exhibition by two small flower studies, an excellent landscape, and a moving portrayal of the third-century poet-musician Ji Gang sitting in shackles and playing his lute (qin) as he awaits execution for offending an imperial prince (fig.). Another impressive work in the monumental figure mode is the imaginary portrait of the Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian (fig.) by Shao Fei, who at thirty is the youngest artist represented in the exhibition. Her vision of the Grand Historian invests him with a dark, rocky massiveness, reminiscent of images known from ink-rubbings of stone engravings, an affinity strengthened by the incorporation of passages from Sima's text into the surface of the painting.

Shao Fei is one of a number of young figure specialists in the Beijing Academy. Two others who stand out are Yang Gang and Nie Ou. Yang's works are largely devoted to portraying the minority peoples of western regions, Mongolia and Xinjiang and Tibet, where he and other Beijing artists travel on study trips. His much-admired "Dawn" (fig.) portrays a woman returning from milking cows as the first light turns the mists blue-purple. His crowd-scene of "Mongol Wrestlers" (fig.), besides displaying his highly accomplished draftsmanship, conveys psychological observations about the participants with the same perceptiveness.

Nie Ou, my own favorite among China's young figure

specialists, is another in whose works a deep sensitivity to human feelings and relations is a prominent virtue--and one with which our own painting of recent times has not been notably endowed. The tenderness with which she treats her subjects is an aspect also of her style, with its dilute ink-tones and near-renunciation of calligraphic gesture. Her "Dew" (fig.) depicts young people carrying lunch-baskets to peasants working in the fields. The theme is of the kind typical of the propaganda pictures of the Cultural Revolution years, but is treated in simple human terms, not ideological ones, and as high-level, moving art. Not all figure painting in China today escapes sentimentality and shallowness so well as these, but the continued devotion of so many of China's young painters to human subjects is a trend to be applauded.

Whatever our preferences in subjects and styles, however, we can sympathize with the contemporary Chinese artists' sometimes painful pursuit of a kind of authenticity in their works: authenticity as Chinese painting, as twentieth-century painting, as art suited to a socialist society, as personal expression. These demands may seem too divergent to be reconciled, but the artists are trying to reconcile them, and, as this exhibition demonstrates, achieving impressive degrees of success.

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CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PAINTING:
An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China

(exhibition schedule)

11/83-2/84	Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco (11/22/83 - 2/18/84)
3/84-5/84	Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama (3/25 - 5/20)
6/84-8/84	Asia Society Gallery, New York City (6/21 - 8/28)
9/84-11/84	Herbert F. Johnson Museum (Cornell University) Ithaca, New York
12/84-2/85	Denver Art Museum, Colorado (12/22/84 - 2/24/85)
3/85-5/85	Indianapolis Museum of Art
6/85-8/85	Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City