Liu Guosong's *The Road of Chinese Modern Painting**

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In 1965, the painter Liu Guosong[1] published a collection of essays on painting theory in Taiwan which he called *The Road of Chinese Modern Painting*.[2] The book illustrates many of the dilemmas faced by

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* This is a revised version of a paper originally written in Taipei in February 1984. I think it addressed then—as has only infrequently been the case thereafter—the critical questions of how a theoretical justification of modernity may or may not be obtained from a position based in Chinese literati theory.

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The paper was invaluably assisted by the views of Professor Shih Hsiao-Yen, University of Hong Kong, and on points of classical painting theory by Dr Li Huishu, then of the National Palace Museum, Taipei, later of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

[1] All Chinese names are given with the surname first in *pinyin* romanization, except where a published work in English uses another system. I will not discuss Liu's biographical details nor survey his works, because these are already well enough covered in English and Chinese.
Chen Hsiang-chun, "The Problems of the Art Theory and Practice of Liu Kuo-Sung" (M.A. Thesis, Power Department of Fine Art, University of Sydney, 1994).
References:
Li Chu-tsing, *Liu Kuo-sung, The Growth of a Modern Chinese Artist* (National Gallery of Art and National Museum of History, Taipei, 1969).
Li Chu-tsing, *Trends in Modern Chinese Painting* (Artibus Asiae, 1979).
Taipei Fine Arts Museum (ed.), *Liu Kuo-sung huachan—Paintings by Liu Kuo-sung* (Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 1990).

[2] *Zhongguo xiandai huihua de lu* (Wenxing shudian, Taipei, 1965).
For the convenience of English readers I translate the contents of this collection of essays as follows, together with the original dates and sources of publication, all in Taipei, followed by the pages in Liu's text. My translations differ very slightly from the titles of those essays which are mentioned in the bibliography of Li, note 1, 1969.
I: a "Preface", pp. 1-10.
b "The Past, the Modern, the Traditional", *Wenxing*, 59 (September 1962), pp. 11-26.
c "A Painting Is Just a Painting", *Wenxing*, 86 (December 1964), pp. 27-38.

Chinese painters in confronting a choice between "Chinese tradition" and "Western modernity". The collection is essentially divided into two parts; the first deals with problems of the past, the modern, and the traditional in terms of a haphazard corpus of references to Chinese and non-Chinese painting theories. The second part, which is frequently omitted in discussion of Liu's writings and works in English, details a polemic between Liu and certain die-hard critics of "modernity" in Chinese painting, in particular a distinguished political historian, Xu Fuguan.

I shall here discuss certain themes which run through the essays in the first part of the book which are drawn from 1960-65, before going on to analyse the polemics of the second part which took place largely between 1961 and 1962. In what follows, the views given are those of Liu and other protagonists, and only my own where indicated. Page numbers in the essay refer to Liu's text in note 2.

d "Subtlety Lies in the Unpainted", *Wenxing*, 68 (June 1963), pp. 39-46.
e "On Brush and Ink", *Wenxing*, 90 (April 1965), pp. 47-62.
f "A Conversation on Painting" (undated, no source), pp. 63-72.
g "On the Differences between Chinese and Western Painting—on the PUNTO Exhibition", *Wenxing*, 70 (August 1964), pp. 73-82.
h "On the Appreciation of Abstract Painting", *Wenxing*, 34 (August 1960), pp. 83-8.
i "On Painting Criticism", *Bihui*, 2, 5 (December 1960), pp. 89-112.
j "Painting's Narrow Defile", *Wenxing*, 39 (January 1961), pp. 113-20.
II: a "Why Put Modern Art on the Side of the Enemy?", *Lianhebao*, 29/30 August 1961, pp. 121-8.
b "The Symbol of the Free World—Abstract Art?", *Lianhebao*, 6/7 September 1961, pp. 129-36.
c "Modern Art and Communist Art Theory", *Wenxing*, 48 (September 1961), pp. 137-56. Republished in *Zhongguo yizhou*, 727 (March 1963).
d "Discussing the Retrogressive Trend in Modern Art with Mr Xu Fuguan", *Zuopin*, 3 (April 1962), pp. 157-77.
e "Appendix 1: Xu Fuguan, The Retrogressive Trend in Modern Art", *Xianggang huaqiao ribao*, 14 August 1961, pp. 178-81.
f "Appendix 2: Xu Fuguan, The Retrogressive Trend in Modern Art" (written at Tokyo University 30 August 1961), *Lianhebao*, 2/3 September 1961, pp. 182-94.
g "Appendix 3: Uemura Takachiyo: The Front Line in Painting Overseas" (originally published in *Asahi shinbum*, 7 August 1961); Chinese translation: *Lianhebao*, 8 September 1961, pp. 189-94.
h "Rainbowing the West Can Rest", *Wenxing*, 57 (July 1962), pp. 195-203.
i "Appendix: Picasso's Disciples Can Rest by Xifang Hong", *Xinwenyi*, 75 (June 1962), pp. 204-6.
[Chronological sequence of essays in II is: e, a, f, g, c, b, d, i, h.]

The Historical Context

Liu's 1965 book was published seven years after the first exhibition of the Wuyue Huahui (Fifth Moon Painting Group)[3]. Liu was a founding member of this group in May 1957, but had first exhibited a year earlier in a four-man show as a final year student at National Taiwan Normal University which was then the major art department at tertiary level in Taiwan. The group was to go on exhibiting until its 16th show in 1972, although rifts among its painters, especially between Liu and his former friend Zhuang Zhe, had appeared by the 9th show in 1965. According to Liu in 1984, Wuyue initially stressed the use of modern Western painting to enrich Chinese tradition, but by about 1959 it had moved over towards an emphasis on the modern qualities already latent within the tradition and on the need to reform it from within.[4]

Parallel to this development was the growth of another group of young painters, a number of whom had a common mentor in the Surrealist and later Abstract Expressionist painter Li Zhongsheng. These had founded their own Dongfang Huahui (Eastern Painting Group) slightly earlier in 1965, but were to have their first exhibition slightly later in November 1957. The group was more diverse, and originally stressed the need for a painting which was both modern and Chinese. Many of its artists gradually came to stress that the former was more important than the latter, which would naturally follow. They exhibited from 1957 through to their 15th show in 1971, but strong relations between Dongfang members declined from the late 1960s when many went abroad.

This foreign exodus was in part due to Dongfang members being more receptive to Western techniques and to their thus being identified as "Western" in Chinese eyes. In addition, they have never quite received the seal of foreign approval. In the early 1960s, as has become clear from many interviews, foreign scholars and collectors in Taiwan were looking for painters who would satisfy a pre-conceived notion of modernizers of the Chinese painting tradition. Those who could best meet this were Wuyue and not Dongfang artists, and these were the

[3] According to Guo Yulun in my interview of 25 January 1984, Wuyue, the Fifth Moon Group, meant nothing more than that the group would meet every year in May. Guo was a fellow founder of Wuyue with Liu. A useful catalogue was published in 1981, on the occasion of the 25th Joint Anniversary Exhibition of the Eastern and Fifth Moon Groups at the Taiwan Provincial Museum, *Ershiwu Zhounian Lianzhan—Dongfang Huahui, Wuyue Huahui*, 16-22 June 1981.

[4] According to my interview of 14 February 1984 with Liu Guosong in Hong Kong, this rift was largely caused because Liu thought Zhuang Zhe was criticizing him behind his back. Zhuang Zhe also published a collection of his own articles as *Xiandai huihua sanlun* (Essays on modern painting; Wenxing, Taipei, 1966).

ones to be granted quasi-official recognition. By 1962 Wuyue had exhibited, if only briefly, in the prestigious National Historical Museum, and was to do so again in 1970. Dongfang, however, was never to do so. They were confined, amongst other venues, to the smaller National Arts Centre, whose title belies a modesty of scale appropriate to a British provincial city library. This centre was also for a short period in 1966 active in supporting a series of books on modern Chinese artists which was largely devoted to Wuyue members.[5]

I would like to briefly interrupt this narrative now to refer to a theoretical point. The notions of "Chinese" and "Western", "modern" and "traditional", refer to descriptive categories used by artists and scholars themselves, whose connotation is necessarily vague and shifting. I shall not attempt to define these notions since this would disturb that very vagueness which is part of the material under discussion. I will, however, attempt some more general analysis on what these concepts have described at the end of this essay, and indeed have written more analytically on the problem of "modernity" elsewhere.[6]

The advent of Wuyue and Dongfang did not occur in an artistic vacuum.[7] In 1950, Li Zhongsheng and others had organized a small

[5] Li Chu-tsing has also written forewords for booklets published by the National Taiwan Arts Center on Chen Tingshi and Feng Zhongrui (*Wuyue*) in 1967, the latter with Thomas Lawton. Professor Li's catalogue of the Drenowatz Collection, 1979, referred to above, also indicates several catalogues which introduced "The New Chinese Painting" in the United States. There was clearly a new curatorial category in the making, and it would be most useful for future historians of Chinese painting if those who were then engaged in selecting and introducing such works were to outline their experience and judgements about the Taiwan art world at that time. Their judgements clearly established and then reinforced judgements of taste which did not favour other interesting work done by Taiwanese artists, especially oil painting and prints done by members of the Dongfang Huahui. That this categorization is now the received knowledge of certain curators, collectors, and art historians is quite evident from catalogues for 1984 exhibitions in Hong Kong: Tan Zhicheng, *Ershiji zhongguo huihua* (Xiangang Yishuguan, Xianggang, 1984); H. Moss, *The Experience of Art* (Umbrella, Andamans East International, Hong Kong, 1983). It is quite beyond informed art historical belief of modern art that neither of these exhibitions included a single oil painting.

For an alternative view of Chinese modern art see my "Problems of Modernity in Chinese Painting", *Oriental Art*, New Series, XXXII, 3 (1986), pp. 270-83; [Chinese translations: *Meishu shichao,* Nanjing, 4 (1987), pp. 24-30, 38, (partial); *Xiandai Meishu*, Taipei, 22 (1988); Li Jiming (ed.), *Zhongguo xiandai huihua fazhan sumiao* (Taipei Shili Meishuguan, 1990), pp. 117-43 (complete, but with errors)].

[6] See my 1986 article mentioned above.

[7] The basic historical survey for painting in post-retrocession Taiwan is Chu Ge, "Ershinianlai zhi Zhongguo huihua" (Chinese painting in the last

exhibition of modern Chinese painting in Taipei for the first time. To judge from a single drawing published in the irregular and short-lived *Xinyishu* (New Art Magazine, 1949-54), these works were mainly of a simple Surrealist or Expressionist kind, in addition to some ink paintings. Among the exhibitors were some modernists like Zhao Chunxiang and Zhu Dequn who before their move abroad in the mid-1950s, had taught at National Taiwan Normal University. But, in that institution, they were surrounded by conservatives like the art department head Huang Junbi, and the former Manchu Prince, Pu Xinyu, who were both ink painters, and by the academic watercolourist, Ma Baisui. These rigorously opposed minor and tentative attempts at Euramerican modernism after Matisse or Modigliani by their students.

Art publishing was limited by the closure of *Xinyishu*, possibly for financial reasons,[8] so artists were restricted to discussing their views in print in what were essentially literary magazines run by their friends. These were often poets, for example Yu Guangzhong, who had long been under the same kind of conservative attack for their modern poetry as the painters were now subject for their works. The poets could defend the painters as well as advise them on a clearer intellectual synthesis between the spirit of modernism and what was thought salvageable from tradition. Many of Liu's articles were also published in the more broadly based intellectual magazines such as *Wenxing* (Apollo Magazine) which was to collapse for economic and political reasons in 1965-66. Its role was marginally taken over in the late 1960s by *Youshi wenyi* (Young Lion's Literature and Art Monthly), until the commencement of regular art magazines such as *Xiongshi meishu* (Lion Art Magazine) in 1971, and *Yishujia* (Artist) in 1975, the latter being started by the former editor of *Xiongshi*, He Zhengguang. By then Liu had long been resident abroad (from 1966), or teaching in Hong Kong (from 1970).

Information about modern art was obtained from a variety of sources. Li Zhongsheng, Zhao Chunxiang, and Zhu Dequn had all trained and taught at Hangzhou College of Arts and so were acquainted with mainland knowledge of modern art. Li Zhongsheng had also trained in Japan, and after his change of residence to central Taiwan from Taipei in 1955 claimed to have obtained Japanese art magazines which he

twenty years), *Ren yu shehui* (October 1973). I am also indebted to interviews with Chu Ge, Li Zhongsheng, Zhao Chunxiang, Wu Hao, Li Xiqi, and Guo Lun. See the transcriptions *Interviews with Asian Artists II: Taiwan* [17 interviews, 349 pages] 1993, in Power Research Library, University of Sydney.

[8] On He Tiehua and *Xinyishu* see the brief biography in my "Taiwanese Painting and Europe", in Yu-ming Shaw (ed.), *China and Europe* (Institute of International Affairs, Taipei, 1985).

showed to his students in the Eastern Painting Group.[9] Li's student Xiao Qin had gone to Spain in 1956 from where he sent back European art magazines and catalogues, and from the late 1950s introduced avant-garde European art in newspaper articles.[10] Liu and the Wuyue painters were in closer contact with North American information which they obtained from art magazines available at the then United State's Information Center in Taipei.

But while the artists were, within the limits of their own linguistic competence and that of their literary friends, well-informed about modern art outside Taiwan, this information did not always percolate through to discussions in Chinese, or percolate through in an accurate and full manner. Many foreign language texts were selectively quoted or misleadingly translated in Chinese-language discussions of modern art, as we shall see below. Painters were often forced, or allowed themselves to be forced, to use concepts derived from traditional painting theory to defend themselves from the attacks of conservatives, and to thereby prove their "Chineseness". Indeed Liu argued in a 1984 interview with me that it was precisely because the conservatives accused them of treachery to the tradition whose authority they claimed by upholding it that defence of modern art was not possible from a resolutely modernist position.[11] If traditional concepts and terminology had not been used, the conservatives would simply not have listened. It was part of the difficult position of artists such as Liu that in defence of modern painting they were forced to take the opposition's ground. They also had to argue against wilful ignorance for, as we shall see, Picasso was deemed an abstract artist and a Communist, and therefore all abstract—and thus modern—artists were Communists too.

The irony that precisely the same arguments were applied against abstract art under the Cultural Revolution as capitalist—and thus that artists with such tendencies in China were capitalist—points directly to a specifically Chinese cultural deployment of political rhetoric in cultural debate, whatever the political regime. It cannot have been easy to develop the tools of modern painting criticism against such a wilfully impoverished intellectual background in Chinese, a language not then with the vocabulary and methodology to handle it, although this might be found by the early 1980s in the People's Republic.

The ensuing analysis will in part describe the restrictive force of conservatism, as much as Liu's own position in attempting to counter

[9] Interview with Li Zhongsheng, 15 July 1983. See the transcription in *Interviews with Asian Artists II: Taiwan.*

[10] I also give some details for Xiao Qin in "Taiwanese Painting and Europe".

[11] It sould be noted that several Taiwanese artists and critics in conversation with me have argued that Liu felt himself driven to argue in this way, and that in fact there had been enough flexibility in the public debate to argue a modernist position from non-Chinese sources.

this. Such a climate of debate may well account for the move of many artists abroad, particularly from the late 1960s.

The Situation of Chinese Modern Painting

For Liu, Chinese modern painting was caught between a traditional painting that has not essentially been creative for centuries, and a Western painting which has only been imperfectly mastered in China, and had by the 1960s turned into a stale academicism which harks back to nineteenth-century France. He quotes Huang Binhong thus:

> Tang painting is like brewer's yeast, Song painting like wine, Yuan painting like strong wine. Painting after Yuan is like the gradual watering of wine, the more recent the period, the more water added, until modern painting has already become like water without wine, so that it is thin and tasteless. (p. 67)

Liu sees the texture strokes, *cun*, of traditional painting as now being like the dried worms he had seen peasants in Guangzhou hang up in the sun and eat (pp. 4, 9). On the other hand, Liu thinks that it was ironic French-trained painters, such as Liu Haisu (b. 1986), introduced the spirit of realism into Chinese painting where they thought it has been lacking. For Liu that abandonment of realism had been a progressive development in Chinese painting during Yuan and Ming. Moreover, at the time Liu Haisu and his generation brought "perspective" into Chinese painting, Liu thinks the West was being influenced by Chinese painting to abandon it.

> Right down to the present there are still quite a few painters of the older generation in Taiwan who hold up this sign of authority which the West has thrown away. (p. 4)

> Apart from those bedrugged by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322) and Dong Qichang (1555-1636) in following the targets set by the Song and Yuan, there are the young students in pursuit of Western fashions. Those who slightly revise the methods of the ancients are deemed retrograde and traitors to their people. The others worship the West, seek a Bohemian life-style, and would extirpate even the roots of the Chinese tradition. (p. 5)

On the one hand Liu sees a false use of tradition in the Confucianist teachings manipulated by the ambitious (p. 13), on the other, an imitation of the West which cannot merely substitute for the false imitation of old Chinese painting.

> To be a modern painter in China and consider discussing creative work, we must create something not there in past or present China or the West, a new painting which belongs to China alone. (p. 4)

Liu's audience was neither aesthetically nor critically prepared to receive such a modern painting. He thinks that for "any art movement the creation of true art works is still the most important thing", but the audience is already used to seeing "painting lies" which curry their

favour by flattering their expectations (p. 16). Liu's problem is that in looking at a true work of art, how can one get the audience to change their visual expectations and to appreciate? He feels there has been too little work done by those engaged in modern art to introduce new theory and ideas (p. 17).

Exhibitions of traditional Chinese painting, *guohua*, and Western academic painting do little to raise such standards of expectation. In his 1961 essay, "Painting's Narrow Defile", on the 15th Taiwan Provincial Exhibition[12], Liu quotes the exhibition organisers as saying,

> The standard of art has increased year by year, enough to see that art education in the province has already made remarkable progress. (p. 113)

Those artists Liu regards sincere and earnest had stopped exhibiting in an exhibition for which the government every year expended US $6,000 (rough 1983 equivalent). If the standard of the works did not rise despite the organizer's self-advertisement, how could the appreciation abilities of the audience increase? (pp. 113-14). For Liu, if China wants a Renaissance, it needs to discover "humanity" afresh by introducing, "a humanism of the Western post-Renaissance kind with flesh and blood, into our country's dessicated shell" (p. 115). The problem is to what do "our country", "China" and "Chinese" refer? Liu anticipates a trajectory in much of his discussion by saying that,

> What I call "Chinese" certainly does not indicate tools and material but is on the side of spiritual expression. (p. 6)

This position will enable him to continually discuss modern painting in terms of categories derived from traditional painting theory. He can take his philosophical ground in the Daoism of Zhuangzi, Laozi, and *Xuanxue*, the mystic Daoist synthesis popular from Han (as for example on p. 45). By implication he thus defines "Chinese" as a lineage of artistic and intellectual affiliations over history. He also antithesizes "China" to which he assimilates the "East"—to the "West". He thus makes the common Chinese identification, not uncommon among "Orientalist" scholars in the "West", between the former cultural lineage and the later geographical and political entity.

Of course, the problems of such an association have long been the subject of controversy both in China and overseas. Let me simply sum up here a few problems such an association ignores. Before 1840, China was a juridical entity integrated by an imperial cult founded on a ruling house, by the central state ideology of which Confucianism was a part, and by a bureaucracy whose higher levels were selected at the

[12] For political reasons the Republic of China regards Taiwan as a province of that territory which theoretically extends to include that of the People's Republic of China. The Provincial Exhibition whilst historically the successor to the pre-retrocession Japanese Government-General Exhibition, thus represented in the 1950s and 1960s at least the equivalent of a national art exhibition on Taiwan.

centre and dispatched to rule relatively autonomous provinces. Even though the peoples they ruled in many areas were of common Han or Han-related stock and had a common script, they were homogenous neither in spoken language nor customs. Rather than the integrating and homogenizing modern political state we might look for a better comparative model for the pre-1840 administrative, cultural and ethnic linkages of China in the relations of Rome with its provinces or indeed of the central Moslem Caliphates in the Middle East with their periphery. In any case, the time taken for China to become a modern state after 1840, and its present divisions, demonstrates that prior to the first Opium War it lacked many of the conditions for becoming one. It is such questions of disjunction between political units and cultural identity—defined in painting by an historical lineage of aesthetic associations—that Liu is unable to answer, or ignores.

However, he wishes such painting lineages to stand as a metaphor for ideas he thinks appropriate to a Chinese modern painting. Thus he reveals the first stage of a modern attitude to the past in selecting from it in order to claim legitimacy,[13] and his conscious selection provides a value judgement about what China should be as represented in art. Even though such values are selected from the past they are a moral norm for what painting activity must become in future, and it is the moralistic rather than cognitive or emotive-expressive nature of such norms which might characterize them as Chinese.

Comparisons with Western Painting

Liu's basic position is that there are two painting lineages, the "Western" and the "Chinese" or "Eastern", and that these are moving towards integration in a world culture. But he feels the methods, roots, and expression in these two lineages are in essence different. To establish this difference he contrasts Western and Chinese relations of man and "nature", which he defines as the "real world". "All actually existent people and things which the sense organs contact belong to nature" (p. 28).

Both painting lineages he sees as beginning with figure painting in the service of politics or religion, with the date of painting's historical separation from these ends differing for the two.

Even nineteenth-century Western realism, which had escaped such restraints, did not, through its criticism of hypocritical officials and sympathy with the hardships of ordinary people, entirely rid itself of political objectives (p. 30). It was Western Romanticism which brought the call for a "return to nature".

Liu thinks that whereas the Chinese concept of the divine was weak and the attitude to nature "contented" and optimistic, in the West the concepts of "nature" and "god" were mixed, and the appreciation of

[13] See "Problems of Modernity in Chinese Painting".

nature was one of workshop and religious piety. Thus Western relation with nature was one of mutual opposition, but the Chinese one that of releasing oneself into nature for rest and repose (p. 31). Despite such differences however, the imitation of nature found in Western painting might also be found in China down to the Song dynasty when landscape painting became a genre independent of the figure painting whose background it had hitherto been. In China such separation led to the literati's opposition to an imitation of the external forms with which nature is merely clothed, and to an emphasis on the personal, expressive *déformation* of natural forms with brush strokes abbreviated from their conventional pictorial denotations (p. 34).

Liu believes that the Impressionists and Cubists had not moved to a radical doubt about nature and its forms, they had merely doubted the reality of their pictorial presentation. He thinks Chinese painting had, at least since the Song, and arguably since the Tang, known how to break through nature, not to accept the limitations of nature's forms, and to use material objects to express feeling, intent, and spirit (p. 37). But Liu thinks that the Confucian doctrine of the Mean obstructed the full development of this semi-abstract painting.

> While our painters were not necessarily without a notion of "the abstract", they had not necessarily abandoned thinking in terms of natural forms, but this (development of a semi-abstract painting) had not been given due attention. (p. 37)

An exhibition called *Pantu* after the Italian *Punto*, point, was organized by several Chinese artists in Taipei in 1962, in which the painter Xiao Qin who had been in Spain until 1959 and thereafter in Milan, had invited several Spanish artists to participate. Liu, in a review of the exhibition, felt that many of the works were too geometrical, and incompatible with the "Chinese spirit of quietude" which the organizers proclaimed.

> Western painting uses architectural space as its frame and sculptured human form as its subject: Chinese painting uses calligraphy as its trunk and poetic sensibility as its inspiration. Thus the "boundary layer" expressed in Western and Chinese painting methods is completely different: one uses heavy sculpting, the other flying lines; one is an actual, the other a noumenal presence; one is rationative, the other affective; one is the opposition of self and object, the other fuses them. (p. 76)

Here Liu is contradicting his own view that technique and spirit (that is cultural identification) can be separated. It is clear that even with modern painting, his bifurcation of painting lineages is rationalized by a reductive view of Chinese spiritual essence.

> Domestic abstract painters who have undergone traditional training very rarely pursue the concepts of purely abstract Western painters. Behind their creative forms is the reciprocal philosophic spirit of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes). This uses a notion of the "dynamic" to explain the cosmos and human life. (Nature's action is inexhaustible: the Sage ceaselessly uses it to seek perfection). These forms employ dynamic dots and lines to compose an absolutely static and bare picture surface. Behind these, however, is comprised the life-rhythm of the ultimate dynamic of the cosmos, that is a dynamic which is ultimate within the static, and a static ultimate within the dynamic. (p. 78)

Given such an abstruse, even mystical formulation, which claims the ancient heritage of the *Yijing* for its authority,[14] one might even question why there should be a need to introduce foreign concepts as a theoretical support for Chinese abstract painters. Liu, however, sees Chinese painting as in need of Western painting's strength, vitality, and use of strong colours (pp. 117, 118). This recognition is not disinterested.

> We need to make efforts and struggle, to engage actively in establishing our own selves, a new tradition, and an Eastern painting lineage. We need to grab back the fight to lead world art circles from Westerners. This is our present, urgent task, and it is also the objective in starting a "Chinese cultural renaissance". (p. 25)

He thinks that the broadening of individuality is a quality which once provided for within an ethnic context can then become worthy of recognition in art on a global level.

> But creation must pass through tradition, only then can it realize the unchanging ethnic essence in Chinese painting. And it needs to pass through the Western tradition, for only then can it realize the unchanging human quality in world art. (p. 76)

Only when this task has been carried out will Chinese be qualified in Liu's terms to discuss a world culture. How then should leadership of world art be obtained?

> I often think all of today's young artists have the courage to conquer the world, to conquer international art circles, but what should we take up in this struggle? I think we only have our own strong point to take up, one which is also our winning card: "ink painting" with its profound tradition and rich experience. (p. 8)

Again it is clear that Liu adopts a position of what China should be as represented in art. Since he is an ink painter, there is no question about him being disinterested: he thinks he is suited to lead.

Aesthetic Approaches to Abstract Painting

As we have seen, Liu thinks that a notion of the abstract in painting was already present in Chinese suspicion of external form, at least since

[14] Liu quotes the *Yijing* twice. So far as I can ascertain in the absence of a proper index Liu quotes about 75 different sources of Chinese classical painting theory from the 4th to 18th centuries.

the Song (p. 72), and certainly since the Yuan, when Ni Zan (1301-1374) wrote,

> What I call a painter is someone who, whether or not his untrammelled brush is imprecise or clumsy, does not seek mimetic forms, but whose carefree heart expresses its own delight in painting. (p. 101)

It is legitimate to ask if by this quotation Liu is confusing the semi-abstracted forms of a painting language, whose mimetic object lies in the conventions that language has established, with the scope given to individual expressions of belief or feeling which such established conventions make possible by allowing their own *déformation*. Whichever may be the case, Liu thinks that Chinese literati ideas about expressive intent, together with the abstract mental frame of calligraphy, which is in black on white, assisted Western painters at an early stage to reach a notion of "pure painting" (p. 21). In their destruction of nature and in their new sensibility about form, Western painters moved their attention from Africa to the East where they found, Liu thinks, that, "Chinese calligraphic art could satisfy their desires in this, and thus the hand-written style of abstract painting was produced" (p. 116). Liu feels that this search proves that, "The confluence of Eastern and Western painting is unavoidable. A belief in a new world culture is thereby produced from this confluence." (p. 116)

For him, painting refers to painting and its conventions, not to any extensional relation, or association, between those conventions and the "real" world.

> What is the end of painting? Zheng Chun (active 1167) of the Song put this rather well—painting is the ultimate of writing. But of course if the same person were to ask, "What is a dog?", and we were to reply, "A dog is an animal with four legs", I would think, "What is a dog?". There could only be one complete reply to this question which is that "A dog is a dog." (p. 38)

Of course many painters pursue classical philosophical problems for which they have not been equipped to analyse, nor have they the intention to pursue fully. I think Liu is trying to say that painting, like language, exists inside its own world of conventions, not in terms of any descriptive or other references it may have incidentally to the "real" world and its objects. Liu states it to be the agreed, basic view of Wuyue Huahui that "painting must seek its own independence, and it attains an increase in art by diminishing the material object" (p. 42). Painting's ultimate aim is the expression of a pure painting. "By raising the pictorial fraction to 100% and reducing the non-pictorial fraction to zero, only then can a pure painting attain its own complete beauty." (p. 68)

Liu makes further relation between philosophy and painting technique:

> Early Chinese painting, like that of the West, filled up the whole picture plane with colour and did not leave the colour of the painting ground visible. After painting had been influenced by Zhuangzi's philosophy, in which "the site of the noumenal produces pure white" and "only the Way gathers the noumenal", painters no longer wished to allow the dark shadows at the base of objects to fill up the plane of material forms and completely occupy the noumenal space of the picture plane. (p. 45)

He thinks a Daoist aesthetic of the painting process must be predicated on a self-transcendence of the phenomenal by both the painter and the viewer.

> To appreciate modern art one must transcend time, space, and all forms, just as in the appreciation of calligraphy one need not seek understanding from (the forms on) the picture plane. When you look at Wang Youjun's (303-379) album "Enjoying Clearing Skies after Snow" or at Su Jing's (239-303) "Lunar Rites", do you appreciate first their brush handling and their dancing, flying lines? Or, do you first recognize clearly the characters and see what is written in them? If you first recognize the characters, then you are someone who does not understand calligraphy. In Yu Shenan's (558-638) "Discourse on the Brush", he said—the subtlety of calligraphy must be encountered by the spirit and cannot be demanded by force; it must come from awakening the heart and cannot be obtained by the eyes. This also explains the attitude one must have in the appreciation of abstract painting. Apart from using your eyes in contemplation, you also need to use your heart and soul to encounter it. (p. 87)

Further Comparisons of Abstract Art and Calligraphy

The undertone of much of Liu's writing is that modern painting corresponds to abstract painting, and specifically abstract expressionist painting. This is precisely the type of modern painting to which Liu was exposed via his reading, and whose technique most resembled calligraphy. That he had a personal drive to equate modernity with abstraction in painting is clear from his own paintings.

This becomes evident in his essay "On Brush and Ink" which I shall not translate at length because Liu's rhetoric is to simply assemble a series of traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting texts, almost without analysis. Indeed despite his obvious textual erudition, Liu often ignores the historical and cultural peculiarities of these, and this presumably reflects the kind of art historical knowledge which was available to him at the time.[15] The essay has three sections; the first deals with the importance of brush and ink in Chinese painting, the second with the qualities of brush and ink themselves, and the third with their demands on the painter.

[15] Liu does not seem to have been aware of M. Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (University of California Press, 1962), which at least in reference to landscape painting analyses how the meaning of particular painting terms shifted with time.

The first section presents various Chinese art theories to prove that Chinese painting regards ink as essential and colour as supplementary. This is a dogmatic view of the seventeenth and eighteenth century literati, and may have been used by Liu because it was theoretically acceptable to conservative ink painters in the art world. The danger of arguing from this stance becomes clear when he slips into the domain of cultural prejudice: "there is no other people who have the same kind of universal art symbols as Chinese calligraphers" (p. 57).

Now it might not be entirely academic to argue whether Arabic calligraphy had provided the Muslim world with such a "universal art symbol". There may be a series of scripts in different cultural contexts which have such properties. One might even extend the discussion to the ideographic scripts of Sumer, Egypt, or even central America. However, this is not Liu's concern but an appeal to a common Chinese idea about a Chinese cultural product whose authority is claimed to legitimize his own work.

Liu also distinguishes different approaches to ink and colour in the second section. Ink and colour may be seen as of equal importance; ink may be seen as more important than colour which is thought to be "transient" whereas ink by implication is enduring and eternal; ink and colour may also be seen as identical in pictorial effect. Here Liu is rationalizing one particular cultural practice, and not establishing a universal set of such practices and to see how one culture's particularities are mapped among them. (Of course "Western" art historians don't do this in practice either, and like Liu universalize from within their cultural set.)

The third section discusses the problem of technique where Liu sees brush and ink techniques as the kernel of Chinese painting theory. The problem is that because of the highly restricted denotation against a conventional set of graphic signs in Chinese painting, to use its theory as a rationale for abstract art is to leave the Chinese audience he is debating with unaware that "nature" merely indicates the conventional denotation of a visual image which has undergone the painting process. Liu wants to pursuade his audience that the "unnameable form" used in abstract painting already existed within the painting tradition. But the same might be said of any other highly conventionalized painting tradition or style. The strategy of debate is in response to the contradictions of Liu's own position. If the modern is abstract and transcultural, as Liu continuously implies then it is strange to try and find it in such a culturally specific context and in arts which, however conventional their graphic signs like Chinese painting and calligraphy, were always supposed to refer to the "real" world, or at least the noumenal in the phenomenal.

One has to say his position represents a Chinese version of the nostalgia for the past, or an "essential homeland" which are found in many early modernists elsewhere, like van Gogh or Gauguin. Of course

what drives Liu specifically is a wish for recognition and legitimacy, for a belonging to the essence of a culture he sees as traduced.

Liu Guosong's Stance in the Art World

In performing the role of a critic Liu admits that it is difficult for him to throw off the influence of his environment. He has many friends in the art world with whom he stands in relations of affection or interest. While conservatives think him over-radical, his young friends think that he must render them assistance since they see themselves as of the new, of which Liu is the champion. As we have seen, Liu criticizes both the imitators of old Chinese painting and the camp-followers of the West, who are by implication the misguided young. Many young painters think they are a "lost generation", but Liu feels that it is artists without creation who have lost themselves, and this applied to ninety percent of artists in the world (p. 6). Among these are clearly to be counted some of the younger artists who simply follow the vague shadows of the teachers now famous, and have no will of their own. Liu is clearly unafraid to make acerbic criticisms.

> What I have said will already have greatly offended the National Essence and Westernization factions, the old-fashioned and the new, and all the older and younger painters. Of course, if this really is the case, I am very happy; it further proves that I have already scratched their scars, and torn open the false mask of their art. (p. 3)

Liu considers this task both a responsibility (p. 8) and a self-sacrifice (p. 13). His essays are littered with images of conflict: "I wish to be one of the assault troops of the new Chinese art" (p. 9).

"What international art circles wish is for us to create our own path and certainly not to be a petty servant under their banner" (p. 8). While Liu's vitriol at times verges on the self-aggravation of the hero-martyr, we will see in the next section that this was not wholly without cause.

The Polemic of 1961-62

The principal contestant with Liu Guosong in public debate was a scholar of Chinese political thought, Xu Fuguan. He was a writer of immense learning and famous prose style but without rigorous, modern academic training. His political pre-occupation was with the reform of the Confucian spirit which he hoped would constitute the ideological base for a new China. He also extended his interests to art, and particularly the influence of Daoist thought within it. This theme runs through his important collection of essays published in 1966 as *Zhongguo yishu jingshen* (The spirit of Chinese art)[16], but in a

[16] The chronological sequence of these articles is as given in note 2 above. Since their content is repetitive, at times tediously so, I have simply concentrated on articles e, a, i, and h. I have not seen the Japanese original of Uemura's article, but comparison of Xu's purported quotations from it

rhetoric which runs parallel to Liu's, is concerned with the similarities and dissimilarities between Western—chiefly German—and Chinese thinking about art. In 1961 Xu became the vocal critic, if not the intellectual spearhead of conservatism, against the new abstract painting begun by Liu and others after 1956. I have no way of establishing what his actual links with politicians were, and what role these may have played in the polemic, but his criticisms of abstract painting unquestionably had a political content.

In Xu's "The Retrogressive Trend in Modern Art" which is reprinted as an appendix in Liu's book, Xu believes that to the question, "What does this express", when talking of an art work, the artists can reply, "We don't from the outset express any meaning." But, from the viewer's position, what Xu calls the retrogressive tendency in modern art does require consideration. For Xu, the first characteristic of modern art is an emphasis on destruction of the art form which it achieves by ridding itself of the natural form. The art form is the crystallization of the subjective and the objective. Some artistic currents centred on great artists influence others, who then imitate the forms created so that these become clear and unstable. This theory of degeneration by imitation is incidentally parallel to much of Liu's criticism of literati painting, and is a continual strophe in reforming conservative debate in Chinese 20th century polemics, not restricted to art.

Xu feels present-day artists are like cavalier heroes whose task is to destroy the effete. When their work of destruction is complete so too will their role vanish, and their existence will lose meaning. Modern art for Xu is anti-rational, and modern artists do not recognize the nomothetic character of science. It is modern artists who have to oppose the moral rationality in humanity, and are compared to Communists in not only denying the past but also in denying the future.

> If we suppose that the destructive work of modern Surrealist artists succeeds, where will it lead people in the end? They have no road to travel, and can only clear the path for the communist world. (Xu, in the appendix to Liu, p. 181.)

The indiscriminate tarring of disparate modern art tendencies with the same destructive brush is familiar in Europe, but what should be clear in the Taiwan of 1961 was how potentially dangerous it was to modern art, however defined, for it and its artists to be associated with Communism.

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with the later published Chinese translation suggest Liu's criticisms were well founded. There is a scathing critique of Liu's whole book, but which also indicates Xu's linguistic limitations, by Lin Xingyue. He was then a final-year painting student at National Taiwan Normal University, and is now a painting teacher at the National Academy of Arts. "Dongfang jingshen zai nali?" (Where is the Eastern spirit?; *Wenxing*, 93, July 1965).

Liu's rebuttal (p. 121) begins politely and circuitously, mentioning that in school his generation were only taught political history and not cultural history. Liu thinks that in a cultural situation where one merely follows the rules of precedence and abides by set phrases, there will never be new theory, nor even the advent of new schools of thought. There could, of course, be no abstract art, nor even new styles such as Abstract Expressionism, etc. Liu thinks (p. 122) that, apart from modern artists themselves, there is no point in other people discussing this art, since it is people like Xu who do not understand the basic approaches of modern art.

The last view is apparently in contradiction with his own demands for criticism at a more introductory or educational level. Be that as it may, Liu now precedes to correct Xu's views on painting forms: "the exaggeration and *déformation* of every form is a work of destruction with regard to the form originally present" (p. 123). While form was destroyed by the Dadaists, Surrealist and later abstract artists were in pursuit of a new plastic form within the form they had destroyed (p. 124). Xu is thus corrected, and now is to be admonished.

> I always think that the political phenomenon of taking victors as kings and the vanquished as bandits, as a metaphor for the changeover from old to new thinking in art, is comical and laughable. (p. 124)

Liu notes Xu's frightening inference that they "can only open the path for the communist world". For Liu the criterion of moral rationality differs according to time and place. He points out that in China young widows had formerly to remain chaste, whilst men could marry several wives. In Europe lovers can embrace in public, but (in the Taiwan of 1961) they are reported to the police for damaging public morality. Xu says Surrealism is anti-tradition, but Liu wonders how this can be referred to as aspiring towards Communism. Is it because the Communist Party also loudly proclaims its opposition to tradition, and its breaking down of conventions and legal systems? If so, this is a great error, for in art the Communist Party is one hundred percent traditional, and one only has to look at Djilas' *The New Class*, to see this (pp. 124, 125). Where even Impressionism has become "banned as anti-socialist", how can modern painting with its idealist theory of pure individualism be related to the materialist theory of the Communist Party? In the Soviet Union, Liu asserts, pathetic artists are only the slaves of political propaganda (p. 127). Liu ends his rebuttal with a plea for intellectual and artistic freedom, which he quotes from an earlier essay by Xu.

> All people of good conscience only maintain their own position with difficulty; academic autonomy is continuously subject to external interference. This, using all methods and opportunities, makes consciousness of political authority penetrate to every corner of culture and thought, and these cannot help suffering its corrosive effects. These really are the straits into which culture and thought have now fallen.

(Liu's quotation on p. 128 from Xu's essay *Sanshinianlai Zhongguo de wenhua sixiang wenxi*; The problematic of Chinese culture and thought over the last 30 years.)

As can be seen from the list of articles in the polemic,[17] Liu and Xu went through the process of rebuttal and counter-rebuttal several times. Liu even had to correct Xu's quotations from an earlier Japanese article on modern art which was later to be more accurately translated and published in Taipei. On the evidence Liu presents, Xu cannot have understood Japanese very well. This is something of an irony since Xu relied on Japanese translations for his understanding of Western art theory and was, in 1961, teaching at Tokyo University.

However, the polemic took on a new and potentially more disastrous course with the publication of a small article, "Picasso's Disciples Can Rest" in *Xin wenyi* (New literature and art). The magazine published only a few titles before being re-titled *Geming wenyi* (Revolutionary literature and art) under the direct control of the Ministry of Defence. This political association becomes even clearer when the *nom-de-plume* of the article's putative author is examined. It was signed "Xifang Hong" (Western Rainbow), which is homonymously close to the name of the then editor of *Xin wenyi*, Hong Shifan. An art critic in Taipei informed me that Hong Shifan was then in, or associated with, the Cultural Section of the Political Department in the ruling Guomindang (National Party).[18] "Hong" means rainbow but with a different and homonymous character can mean "red". The implication is obvious: abstract artists were warned not to use Western art as a means to introduce "red" ideas. The debate about abstract art was now to be extended from a mis-informed quarrel between reformists and

[17] Xu Fuguan, *Zhongguo yishu jingshen* (The Spirit of Chinese Art; Xuesheng shuku, Taipei, 1966). According to Xu's preface the writing was completed in August 1966, that is after Liu's book had appeared.

[18] Some time after the article appeared it was clear to Chu Ge that Hong Shifan was indeed the author. Liu in my 1984 interview, could not recall that in his reproducing the article in his book he had reversed the eponymous author's name from Xifang Hong in the original to Hong Xifang. He only recalls naming the author of whose background he says he was unaware. Liu himself did not think in 1984 that this play on the name meant that "the West would be turned Red", but that is clearly the implication of the article and also the opinion of other contemporaries of Liu.

In any case, there is no doubt that for a brief period in 1960 modern art was under intense political pressure. In that year Liu Guosong and Yang Yingfeng had planned to establish a Contact Group for Modern Painting Societies, to the extent of writing a constitution for a Chinese Modern Art Centre. Yang was informed by an older, and politically active, watercolourist that Yang was about to be arrested by the Garrison Command, and so their plans had to be abandoned.

conservatives in the art and intellectual worlds, to one of political loyalty.

I have checked the original article against the version given in an appendix to Liu's book, and the latter is accurate. Xifang Hong jumps from thinking that Picasso is an abstract painter to his having received the Lenin Peace Prize, thus implying that all abstract artists are communists. To show that Picasso's works are incompatible with anti-Communism, Xifang Hong quotes the memoirs of Chen Qingfen, a Chinese artist in France who had visited Franco's Spain in the 1930s when Picasso's works were hardly exhibited. He then says,

> On the jewelled island of Taiwan, where we oppose Communism and Russia, there have appeared a few people aspiring towards Picasso. They have taken Picasso's abstract works (sic) with their poisonous elements and published not a few pages of introduction about them; this is really something which makes people feel anxiety and regret. (quoted in Liu, p. 205)

> May I venture to advise artists of abstract painting, and those gentlemen who worship Picasso, to wake up. If you do not wish to receive the "Lenin Peace Prize" then please change your course forthwith. Do not forget you are an anti-communist Chinese; do not forget you are Chinese with a long history and culture; do not further deceive yourself and others, harm others and harm yourself. (quoted in Liu, p. 206)

The criticisms of the traditionalist painter Liu Shi[19] and others had already been published in an earlier issue of *Geming wenyi* (August 1961). Liu had not then felt it necessary to rebut these because he thought them infantile and pathetic. He had only passively reacted to Xu Fuguan because of the latter's learning and to stop the spread of false ideas. In the case of "Picasso's Disciples Can Rest", his task was intellectually simpler because its mistakes and crude associations were more glaring, even to the extent that Xifang Hong quoted recollections from Franco's Spain to show that abstraction and anti-Communism do not mix. Such an association could only be due to perverse political prejudice in the Taiwan of the early 1960s, from where well-known artists had gone abroad to study, for example Xiao Xin and Zhao Chunxiang.

Liu thus rebuts Xifang Hong with a barrage of information about recent developments in abstract and other modern painting in Spain. He also pointed out the selective nature of the quotations from Chen Qingfen, who elsewhere in his recollections describes how Russian

[19] Liu Shi was also Liu Guosong's opponent in a debate organized by the Zhongguo Wenhua Xuehui (China Culture Association) in February 1964. Liu Shi raised the Picasso=modernism=Communism bogey but was roundly defeated by Liu Guosong and others. In the 1984 interview Liu thought this has marked the end to tacit government opposition to modern art. It remains a fact that Liu Guosong was never given a teaching appointment at Normal University.

Imperialism opposes abstract art, and who particularly emphasizes that abstract painting is a pure art (p. 203). Liu says, "what Russian Imperialism opposes is what it fears, and what it fears is what we should extol" (p. 203). Liu is thus willing to oppose the interference of politics in art when its autonomy is threatened, but is not unwilling to use political argument in its defence.

In the event, abstract artists in Taiwan were not subject to direct political constraint. I have been unable to conclude whether this was in the end due to the foolishness of his opponents' arguments, to the vigour of the defence by Liu and other artists, to the unsuitable nature of "abstract" artists as targets for tarring with a "red" brush (many were mainlanders who had already done national service in Taiwan), or to the ruling coalition of factions in the Guomindang not wishing to get involved in what, for them, was probably a peripheral issue. So far as can be inferred, the Guomindang's attitude to modern art until the 1980s was *bu paichi, dan bu guli*, not to exclude, but not to encourage. (Since I heard similar expressions used by art world officials in Beijing in 1981, this underlines the Chinese cultural dimensions to this attitude, independent of political system.)

Modern painting or even standard Bauhaus exercises was still in 1984 not part of the curriculum nor it would appear is it allowed in studios at the National Taiwan Normal University Art Department where Liu trained in the 1950s, although since 1977 third and fourth year students have had a course in "creative painting" which does allow some fantasy or quasi-surrealist expression.[20] It would appear that in the 1960s modern painting did have some official backers, if a small minority. There was then a need to find artists capable of exhibiting in international exhibitions, such as the Sao Pãolo Biennale, where Taiwan sent paintings from 1957 to 1973 as the representative of China. It may also have been thought unwise to offend American opinion by too much pressure on the art world. Until the mid-1970s there was a large American military presence in Taiwan, many of whose officers actively bought Chinese modern paintings by Liu and others like him.[21]

[20] Guo Ren who now teaches this course trained under Xu Beihong in Beijing, and after some time in Taiwan went to Spain where he moved from a vague Surrealism to an Abstract Expressionism. In an anecdote which hints much at the situation of modern art in China, he told me he has always been able to live by selling his calligraphy, not his oil paintings.

[21] Lin Xingyue suggested in his 1965 article "Where is the Eastern spirit?" that the prominence given to *Wuyue* abroad was in part the product of an American sensitivity to things "Chinese", which also sought something "modern". I have also confirmed this view in conversation with Lin and that, like the opinion of many other artists in Taipei, confirmed that sales in the 1960s were largely to American or other diplomatic clients when the few galleries were geographically organized to service this clientele with its then large concentration of Americans early in the 1970s. Galleries became more stable business after 1975, paradoxically after the Republic of China was no longer able to send works to the Sao Pãolo Biennale.

The Views of Liu Guosong in a Wider Perspective

I would now like to place Liu's book in the context of some broader considerations. For Liu, modern artists seek to destroy old forms, and here one infers he means forms in the historically received painting language which is familiar to his culture. From this destruction he will create new forms which can stand as the foundation of a new tradition. This will be new and ethnically based, and will be able to contribute to the confluence which is creating a new world art.

What structure will the continuation of art forms and rhetoric for discussing them take? Liu is concerned with the continuation of tradition after its necessary transformation, but the ceaseless historical process of destruction, re-making and re-creation is not for him a tradition of the new, where the fact that art forms can be new constitutes a tradition in itself. He is seeking to preserve the old tradition by forcing it to change, and by implication to change only once in a generation. If the tradition of the new is a modern, lineal concept of tradition, essentially homologous with the mass-production system of modern technological society and short lead-times between innovation and the establishment of a dominant style, what is Liu's notion of tradition? It would appear to be the pre-modern, cyclical tradition which is relevant to an agricultural society having long lead-times between scarce innovations and the codification of stylistic precedents.

It is remarkable that Liu does not discuss the end of the social conditions which permitted the amateur-gentry ideal and its expressive literati forms to have such a long history in China. I think we can see his problems better if we re-contextualize them by a comparison with Levenson[22], who sees a reassessment as to the "exhausted" literati

[22] Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (University of California Press, 1972). Since it would somewhat deflect and over-extend the scope of this paper I would just like to note that the ideas of Geertz on "Essentialism" and "Epochalism" also aid interpretation here. "To stress the first of these is to look to local mores, established institutions, and the unities of common experience—to 'traditional' 'culture', 'national character', or even 'race' for the roots of a new identity. To stress the second is to look to the general outlines of the history of our time, and in particular to what one takes to be the overall direction and significance of that history." Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, New York, 1973), p. 240. These themes do not occur in isolation and are usually entangled with each other. Liu's strategy is to use a stress on an underdeveloped expression of "Epochalism" to rationalize his choices from an essentialist position.

never having come, "until a change in role was thrust on the official class, and a change in its education, and a change in the general currency of the amateur ideal" (Levenson, p. 41).

Thus Liu has a leaning to the pre-modern tradition because he chooses to argue from cultural affiliation with a genealogy of ideals he wishes to transform. He does not argue from an identity with that wider nation-state entity which in the modern sense was established only after painful reaction to the impredations of Western imperialism. It was not amateur-literati ideals which were needed and sought for that state's defence, but specialized, rational, and technical knowledge.

> Only when the modern West impinged on China and undermined the position of the gentry literati officials, who had set the styles in art and expression as they set the rates in taxes and rents—only then did the concept of "amateur" slide into its modern sense of something less than "specialist", and what had once been precious to traditionalists and classicists seem mainly preciosity to a new youth in a new world of science and revolution. (Levenson, p. 43)

Levenson also suggested that China was faced by a change in its language not merely an enrichment of its vocabulary. The latter was in reverse the case for the West with the Impressionists' stimulation by Ukiyo-e, and even, arguably the case in much post-Meiji Japanese painting. China, on the other hand, was faced with a choice in its whole relation between the general quest for universal humanity and the specialized knowledge which rationalized the social role of its bearer.

> This change of language in a society may be described objectively as new choices made under conditions of total invasion, not of purely intellectual insinuation. It may be described subjectively as new choices made under conditions of increasing intellectual strain, the strain of efforts by main force to naturalize the alien truth and rationalize the native inheritance, the strain of steady divergence between the general and special intellectual quests. (Levenson, p. 159)

The nature of this choice is not recognized if, as Liu presents, the expressive ideals of "traditional" painting are used to rationalize modern preferences. It is the social conditions in Taiwan of the 1950s which must have determined the psychological context of Liu's borrowings, where he allows himself to inexactly "weigh off some ancient Chinese statement of some intellectual principle against the modern Western statement of the principle" (Levenson, p. 160). Nowhere is this more clear in the inability of Liu, and many other reforming traditionalists in Taiwan to come to terms with the anti-traditionalism which is basic to Communist theory. It is pre-modern to cast around for Daoist and other old ideas to rationalize painting practice. Liu is thus part of a search for a doctrine to compensate for failure of the pre-modern to fit the facts of a changed situation.

Levenson felt that at the very least the collapse of tradition itself left a gap which was filled by communism (p. 163). In art the policies

adopted were for a while a repetition of Soviet realism, a tendency certainly present since the 1930s. The variety of different responses to the collapse shown after 1978 in the People's Republic show that the implied 1950s/1960s antithesis between Communist Realism and a modern Chinese tradition—revitalized either by Western modernism or narrow conservatism—was no more than a dogmatism of the time.

However, in a more serious sense Liu in his theory, though not, I think, in his work, could not in the 1960s express a modern sense of history. This is conscious that a work is embedded in its cultural and temporal context, but refuses to be bound by that, and, making a distanced comment on the past, attempts to reorder its monuments by the introduction of a new work among them.[23] Now if, in one's polemic at least, one allows the conservatives to determine the terms of argument—or, as Liu clearly thought was the case, thinks one if forced to do so because of cultural narrowness or indirect political pressure—then one cannot re-order the monuments of the past because these serve as a standard for evaluating the new. They do so within the scale of priority evaluations provided by conservatives, to which the new may be admitted. The modern position is the reverse. Its new works provide the standard whereby a different selection of monuments from the past is admitted to the future, in which they may stand as forerunners for the new.

Liu had not, in 1965, agreed with the methods and results of one part of the modern project which the popularization of a realism certainly was in the Europe of the latter half of the nineteenth century (even if it frequently ignored as the necessary ground for the Post-Impressionists and Cubists to react against). One cannot but conclude that in the People's Republic and among realist artists in Taiwan (who were usually trained by the Japanese), an attempt had been made to re-order the old by providing the new. Because his situation and to some extent the ideological constraints on debate prevented him from arguing about

[23] "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them": T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919, various editions). Modern art is also one where, *in extremis*, the work is the subject itself. As Samuel Beckett wrote about Joyce in *Our Examination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929), "His writing is not *about something: it is that something itself* (Beckett's emphasis).... When the sense is sleep words go to sleep. When the sense is dancing, the words dance." See Deirdre Blair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, (Cape, London, 1978), p. 93. While such credos of the modern position are culture-bound in Western Europe, they do enable us to derive an analytical category or set of categories producing a dimension for the modern which may be used to question what the modern might be in other cultural and historical contexts. (If we could not accept the establishment of such analytical categories there would be no intellectual transfer between cultures.)

realism as new, since it was either "Communist", "Japanese Academic" or "Western" and hence "un-Chinese", I think he was almost forced to argue in transcendental terms derived from a tradition whose collapse he continually asserted.

In Conclusion

I have of necessity had to name many ideas and their contradictions disclosed in Liu's book as his own. But it would be too narrow and unhistorical a view to reduce these to a mere personalization around Liu, an artist for whom I have great personal affection and respect. We should rather see these ideas and the ways they were discussed as products of their time and situation, as products of the context provided by an insecure and ill-informed conservative reaction. The conservatives' misleading and disingenuous defence was to name the bearers of a whole range of modern ideas in art—beginning with Lu Xun—as traitors both to an ineffable Chinese cultural essence and sometimes as disloyal to an actual Chinese state. They claimed the prerogative to know what that essence was, and their secular authority came from their understanding of the tradition's texts. It would, I think, be a mistake to take too many of the ideas Liu presents at their face value, and to evaluate whether or not Chinese art was or was not abstract in the distant past. We have to see Liu's stand as more that of an insecure reformer in the face of a bankrupt orthodoxy. Although Liu's argument is about abstraction, it is clear that if he had been a Dadaist or Surrealist he would have as easily been the target of reactionary ire.

The argument at base is about whether the "Chinese" is incidental or intrinsic to the "modern" in a Chinese modern painting. Liu believes it to be intrinsic, but only on the stage to a unifying world art. This will in the future no longer be distinguished in terms of cultural essences or national styles, but simply by their technical base and an aesthetic preference for particular painting values. Liu's contribution as an artist and critical defender of modern art when it was under severe attack in Taiwan cannot be ignored. If his re-working of Chinese painting theory has revealed some difficulties in modernizing Chinese painting from this position, we remain in his debt for having done so.