

CHEN SHIZENG'S "THEORY OF SUBJECTIVITY": THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE LITERATI PAINTING ON THE ARTISTIC SEARCH FOR WESTERN MODERN-'ISMS' IN THE REPUBLICAN ERA

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ABSTRACT

Chen Shizeng's "Theory of Subjectivity": The Influence of Chinese Literati Painting on the Artistic Search for Western Modern-'isms' in the Republican Era

The encounter, both direct and indirect, with the West at the turn of the 20th century led to a profound crisis in Chinese art. Many young artists went abroad to study Western art in order to reform traditional Chinese painting, which was often accused of being rigid, lacking perspective and creativity, and thus unsuited to portraying the contemporary world. It was during this period that the celebrated Beijing painter Chen Shizeng in a famous essay proposed a "theory of subjectivity" in defence of literati painting. Taking that essay as a point of departure, and through the exploration of Western–Sino–Japanese interactions in artistic trends, the present paper seeks to explain why many Westernised Chinese artists identified with Western avant-garde movements instead of its academic tradition of realism. This phenomenon can also be understood as a positive reply to Chen's theory of subjectivity, in which, based on its elements of self-expressionism and subjectivism, he compared literati painting with Western modern-'isms', finding more affinities than differences between them.

KEY WORDS: Chen Shizeng, subjectivity, literati painting, Western modern-'isms', Japanese influence

IZVLEČEK

Chen Shizengova »teorija subjektivnosti«: Vpliv kitajskega slikarstva izobražencev na umetniško iskanje zahodnih modernih -»izmov« v obdobju Kitajske republike

Neposredni ali posredni stik z Zahodom je na pragu 20. stoletja prispeval tudi h globoki krizi kitajske umetnosti. Da bi reformirali tradicionalno kitajsko slikarstvo, ki je bilo zaradi togosti, pomanjkanja perspektive in kreativnosti neprimerno za upodabljanje sodobnih tem, so številni mladi umetniki odhajali v tujino na študij zahodne umetnosti. V istem času je Chen Shizeng, priznani pekinški slikar, v svojem teoretičnem eseju zagovarjal slikarstvo izobražencev, v katerem je vzpostavil t. i. teorijo subjektivnosti. Članek poskuša s raziskovanjem umetniških tendenc v zahodno-kitajsko-japonskih odnosov pojasniti večjo naklonjenost kitajskih »zahodnjaških« umetnikov do zahodne avantgardne umetnosti kot do akademskega realizma. To lahko razumemo tudi kot pozitivni odgovor na Chenovo teorijo subjektivnosti, v kateri je slikarstvo izobražencev z elementi samoizražanja in subjektivizma postavil ob bok zahodnim modernim -»izmom«.

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KLJUČNE BESEDE: Chen Shizeng, subjektivnost, slikarstvo izobražencev, zahodni moderni »izmi«, japonski vpliv

INTRODUCTION

The first official National Art Exhibition, held in Shanghai in April 1929, exhibited not only ancient and contemporary Chinese art such as paintings, sculpture, inscriptions on bronze and stone, etc., but also 354 Western works, including oil paintings, watercolours and graphics.¹ The “Doubts” debate,² as polemical as it was influential, between the painter Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 and the poet Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, provides a further indication of the unstable and bewildering situation obtaining in Chinese art in the first decades of the 20th century, a confusion which was the direct result of the cultural struggle between “East” and “West”.³ The debate, which focused mainly on the issue of painting style, i.e. the realistic depiction of the Western academic tradition vs. more Impressionist or Post-Impressionist approaches, confirms the degree to which Western art and its technical and conceptual aspects had already penetrated and was rapidly pervading the Chinese art world. Xu Beihong’s harsh criticism of modern Western movements, in which he dismissed Cézanne, Matisse and Renoir as “vulgar, shallow and inferior” (Xu 1929: 1–2), can also be seen as an appeal to those young Chinese artists who, instead of following the tenets of Western realism, identified with various modern Western-‘isms’, such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, etc.

Basic approach

By deploying a transnational perspective in order to explore Western–Sino–Japanese interactions in the area of artistic trends, the present paper will attempt to elucidate why many Westernised Chinese artists tended towards the more modern movements in the West, rather than its academic tradition of realism, even though the latter had been vigorously promoted by leading scholars in art education, such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 and Xu Beihong. The present paper examines Chinese art not only in terms of Sino-Western relations, but also takes into account a third factor in the cross-cultural dialogue – Japan. It thus seeks to move beyond a narrow interpretation of the transmission of concepts from West to East, and instead shows how the interaction was much more a mutual exchange between equals. Not only did the Chinese–Japanese “art worlds engage with each other bilaterally”, as Aida Yuen Wong (2006: 123) has demonstrated in her study on Japan and the rise of national-style painting in modern China, but the relations between China and the West were likewise reciprocal, as demonstrated by the tendency of Western painting to move away from realism and towards the expression of feelings and ideas. This crucial shift can be observed in various modern-‘isms’ in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the West, approaches that, in the minds of many Chinese artists, resonated with a millennial

1 For detailed statistical data on the items exhibited at the first National Exhibition, see Liu’s PhD dissertation on art journals and exhibitions in the Republican Period (Liu 2002: 191–192) and *An Overview of the National Art Exhibition of the Republic of China 1929–2005*, edited by Wang and Chen (Wang, Chen 2006: 27).

2 The debate between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo appeared in the *Art Exhibition Report (Meizhan huikan 美展汇刊)*, which accompanied the first National Art Exhibition. In his short article entitled “Doubts” (“Huo” 惑), Xu Beihong mocked Western avant-garde styles and ridiculed their Chinese followers. Xu Zhimo in “I Also Have ‘Doubts’” (“Wo ye ‘huo’ 我也‘惑’”) spoke in favour of new Western trends. Xu Beihong rebutted with a longer essay in which he delineated in detail the urgent need for the true depiction of objects. Their running debate was joined by Li Yishi’s essay “I Have No ‘Doubts’” (“Wo bu ‘huo’ 我不‘惑’”). For more details see Croizier (1993: 135), Wang (2001: 28–59).

3 For a detailed introduction of the theoretical foundations of these cultural struggles see Rošker (2009: 226–228).

painting tradition in China, in which the form is subordinated to the spirit. This paper will also show how Japan's role in this triangular and transcultural dialogue went well beyond being merely "China's window on the West", but instead exerted a profound influence on modern art movements in China. As such, it played an essential part in shaping so-called Chinese "modern" painting.

FOREIGN IMPACT ON THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE ARTIST IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Together with the comprehensive reforms that would transform China and its people from an old-fashioned imperial system to a modern nation of progress and technical development, the role and status of the artist also changed enormously. With the acquisition and institutionalisation of diverse, mostly Western art media – photography, modern printing and graphic reproduction, exhibitions, art journals, publishing houses and art schools – artists ceased to be the high-ranking figures of a cultural elite. Thanks to modern printing techniques, famous art works that had been mostly accessible only to a narrow circle of intellectuals suddenly become available to wider audiences. For the first time, artists who were not part of court elites were able to gain access to the paintings of the "Old Masters", and could thus study these works in terms of their calligraphy and other stylistic and technical characteristics. Newly established publishing houses began to print a vast quantity of periodicals, newspapers, posters, books and albums, thereby contributing to the popularization of art works. Exhibitions and art schools, which began to appear after the radical educational reform in 1902 and which for the first time included art subjects in the curriculum, were also important factors in the wider diffusion of art.

A major pioneer in these efforts was Gao Jianfu 高剑父 (1879–1951), a leading master of the Lingnan 岭南 school in Canton. His two-year study sojourn in Japan⁴ proved to have a decisive impact on his later activities. Greatly influenced by the art society in Meiji Japan, with its professional artists, urban art market, publications, public exhibitions and government support for the arts (Croizier 1988: 68), soon after the 1911 revolution he not only founded the "Aesthetic Bookshop" (*Shenmeishuguan* 审美书馆) in Shanghai, but began to organise public exhibitions. Together with his brother Gao Qifeng 高奇峰 and longtime intimate, Chen Shuren 陈树人, he launched a modern movement called "New National Painting" (*xin guohua* 新国画), which had the aim of reviving traditional painting through the injection of realistic elements and the inclusion of contemporary subject matter (Sullivan 1989: 179). "New National Painting" had its origins in the Japanese *nihonga* 日本画 ("Japanese-style painting") movement, begun by Ernest Fenollosa, an American scholar and Japan enthusiast, and his disciple, Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三. Its goal was to achieve a synthesis between Japanese traditional elements and Western concepts and ideas, in order to "elevate Japanese artistic achievements to the status of national symbols" (Wong 2006: 19). Gao Jianfu went even further in his declared intent to borrow from other cultures: "I believe we should not only adopt Western painting, but if there are good elements in Indian, Egyptian or Persian painting, or in ancient and contemporary masterpieces of other countries, we should absorb and adopt them in order to nourish our own painting" (Gao 2008: 89). He defined the "New National Painting" as a winning combination of "the spirit and spiritual resonance of national painting, together with the scientific techniques of Western painting" (Croizier 1988: 112).⁵ He especially advocated the need for art to be closely engaged with the contemporary world, as can be clearly seen in some of his

4 He left China for Tokyo during the freezing winter of 1906, and only with the aid of his friend from Canton did he manage to support himself through his painting. Six months later, he returned to Canton to bring his younger brother, Gao Qifeng, back with him to Tokyo. However, the following year returned to China to participate in revolutionary activities in Canton (Croizier 1988: 27).

5 For a detailed discussion of the theory of "New National Painting" see Croizier (1988: 110–114).

own paintings which depict modern elements such as airplanes, telephone poles and cars within traditional landscapes. It was his belief that art as “spiritual sustenance” could help shape the morality of both the individual and society as a whole, while “society can change and transform the human heart” (Gao 1955: 2).

He shared this view with another very influential figure in the cultural modernisation of China, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940). In his famous essay, *Replacing Religion with Aesthetic Education* (*Yi meiyu dai zongjiao shuo* 以美育代宗教说),⁶ Cai argued that aesthetic education could contribute to the cultivation of one’s feelings and spiritual life, which in turn could lead to the formation of an ideal and harmonious society. With the diffusion of the idea that artists should also have a sense of social responsibility, artists began to assume a more active role in shaping the new society. Many artists who had been drawn to the major cities, both to seek a livelihood and feel the pulse of modern life, began to create new forms of artistic and social collaboration. What Lang Shaojun 郎绍君 has called the “urbanisation of painters” (*huajia de chengshihua* 画家的城市化) (Lang 1997: 14), further accelerated the close interaction between painting and socio-political activities. Gao Jianfu can be seen as an ideal exemplar of this kind of meaningful interaction. Inspired by Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary ideas, he joined the *Zhongguo tongmeng hui* 中国同盟会 organisation and was involved in numerous revolutionary activities in Canton (Li 1979: 45). His example was followed by other artists, who collaborated either through the newly established art schools or as social activists, thereby contributing to the major cultural, political and social role that artists came to assume in the modernisation of Chinese society.

Because most Western artistic innovations reached China via Japan, many young artists eager to explore these new concepts and ideas went first to Japan, and it was only after WWI that Chinese students began to travel more frequently to Paris.⁷ Japan, with its very successful modernisation during the Meiji restoration, offered a paradigm of how to construct a successful modern society and thus became a mandatory destination not only for young artists, but for anyone eager to experience a more modern outlook and way of life. These young students viewed Japan as a sort of “maestro” that could assist them in building a new modern society and introduce them to the advanced technical and scientific solutions of Western society. Even the Qing government saw Japan as a kind of mediator between China and the West and sponsored students going to Japan in order to acquire the latest knowledge and techniques in their specific areas of study. Ralph C. Croizier (1988: 25) notes that while there were only 200 Chinese students in Japan in 1895, this number increased rapidly to 700 in 1900, 5000 in 1905, before reaching a peak of 8000 students in 1908. He observes further that Japan was not only a fertile source of artistic ideas, but also a “centre of revolutionary agitation” and “an inspiration for Chinese nationalism”. In the very long history of relations between the two countries, the situation was now reversed, with Chinese youth in the role of the “cultural borrower”, to use his expression (Croizier 1988: 26). However, it should be stressed that Japan not only functioned as an external influence and source for Chinese modernisation, but that its ideas contributed to the rediscovery of China’s own tradition and became deeply enmeshed with Chinese society and identity. One of the best examples of this relation is to be found in Chen Shizeng’s theory of subjectivity, and thus in a re-appreciation of literati painting.

6 The article was first published in the highly influential journal *New Youth* (*Xin qingnian* 新青年), in August, 1917.

7 For example, Li Shutong 李叔同 one of the first two Chinese students to complete a “Western” program at the renowned Tokyo School of Fine Arts, went to Japan in 1905, Gao Jianfu in 1906, Gao Qifeng in 1907. Even Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu 刘海粟, the pioneers of modern painting who were educated in Paris, had first gone to Japan. Xu Beihong went to Tokyo in May 1917, but due to financial difficulties stayed only a few months, while Liu Haisu, who went to Japan in 1918, remained for a year (Sullivan 1996: 37).

CHEN SHIZENG'S "THEORY OF SUBJECTIVITY"

At a time when the realistic spirit of Western painting was viewed by many as the most effective means for reforming traditional painting and helping Chinese artists to free themselves from the rigid norms and stiff style of the "Six Masters of the Qing" which dominated painting at the turn of the century, Chen Shizeng's 陈师曾 important theoretical essay *The Value of Literati Painting* (*Wenrenhua zhi jiazhi* 文人画之价值) championed the essential qualities of literati painting. The essay was first published in vernacular Chinese in 1921,⁸ and then in a revised classical Chinese version in 1922. The second version was included in *Studies of Chinese Literati Painting* (*Zhongguo wenrenhua zhi yanjiu* 中国文人画之研究), where it was paired with Ōmura Seigai's 大村西崖 essay, *The Revival of Literati Painting* (*Wenrenhua zhi fuxing* 文人画之复兴), which had been translated into Chinese by Chen himself.⁹

Chen Shizeng, or Chen Hengke 陈衡恪 (1876–1923), was an eminent artist and scholar in Beijing. He had studied in Japan for several years and after returning to China had taught art in Nantong 南通 and Hunan 湖南, and later at the Beijing College of Art and at the Higher Normal College. In 1919, together with Jin Shaocheng 金绍城, Zhou Zhaoxiang 周肇祥 and others, he founded the *Society for the Study of Chinese Painting* (*Zhongguo huaxue yanjiuhui* 中国画学研究会) in order to promote native culture, especially the Song and Yuan styles of painting. He was not entirely opposed to the application of Western methods, but believed that painters should incorporate the fundamental essence and structure of traditional Chinese painting (Shen 1997: 613).

In the opening paragraph of his essay, he states that literati "painting embraces the character and palate (delight) of the literati, and does not examine the artistic techniques and production, but expresses many thoughts and reflections of the literati beyond (outside) the painting itself" (Chen 2008: 22). He then goes on to list the essential characteristics of literati painting, *xingling* 性灵 (spiritual),¹⁰ *sixiang* 思想 (thoughtful), *huodong* 活动 (active), *fei qixie* 非器械 (not mechanistic) and *fei danchun* 非单纯 (not simple). All these qualities reflect the idea of self-expression, feelings and subjectivity which constitute the true nature of literati painting. The literati painters tried to go beyond the material world and the likeness of the form, and instead sought to convey their inner feelings, emotions, thoughts and ideas. His deliberate emphasis on subjectivity and the expression of emotions is likewise evident in the two versions of the final paragraph, in which he postulates the four basic criteria for literati painting. In his first version, the four criteria are given as *renpin* 人品 (moral character), *xuewen* 学问 (knowledge), *cai* 才 (capabilities) and *qing* 情 (emotions, feelings), while in the second version the third and fourth criteria are replaced by *caiqing* 才情 (capabilities-feelings) and *sixiang* 思想 (thought). Wong explains that he decided to replace *cai* with *caiqing* because *cai* alone does not convey the idea of self-expression clearly enough, while in combination with the term *qing* "it has a more precise connotation of self-expression and subjective feelings" (Wong 2006: 66–67).¹¹ In his view, the idea of subjectivity and self-expression could also be applied to Western modern art movements, since Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism "de-emphasize the objective, and focus on the subjective ... Such intellectual transformations [in the West] are sufficient demonstrations that verisimilitude does not exhaust the good in art and that alternative criteria must be sought"¹² (Chen 2008: 25). He concludes that, with its primacy of self-expressiveness and subjectivity, literati painting resonates perfectly with Western modernist movements, thereby making it not only Chinese but modern and progressive as well.

8 The first essay appeared in *Painting Magazine* (*Huixue zazhi* 绘学杂志), published by *Society for Studying Painting Methods at Beijing University* (*Beijing daxue Huafa yanjiu hui* 北京大学画法研究会).

9 This volume was reprinted in Tianjin, in 1992 (Chen 1992).

10 In Wong's version, *xingling* is translated as "innovative", i.e. as a "fundamental component of poetic expression" which does not adhere to ancient styles but strives for newness in poetry (Wong 2006: 64).

11 For an analysis of the text and its criteria see Wong (2006: 54–76).

12 English translation from Wong (2006: 65).

The notion of *qi yun* 气韵 – spiritual resonance – the main principle of Chinese painting first formulated by Xie He 谢赫 in the 5th century AD and reinterpreted by later scholars, was now linked to subjective expression as something which stood in contraposition to the likeness of form, and thus to objectivity and Western realism. According to Wong (2006: 63), Chen's polarities of subjectivism/objectivism and spiritual resonance/likeness of form (realism) derive from the Japanese discourse of *bunjinga* 文人画 or *nanga* 南画 ("literati painting") which had been steadily gaining ground in the first two decades of the 20th century. *Bunjinga* in the Japanese discourse began to be associated with the expression of the artist's personal feelings and subjectivity, which ultimately led to spiritual resonance being designated as the predominant quality of *bunjinga* or literati painting, and thus of Eastern as opposed to Western realistic art.

Hence, as the Japanese theories of literati painting clearly show, spiritual resonance vs. likeness of form or verisimilitude "assumed a strictly antithetical relationship only in modern times" (Wong 2006: 61). These theories were a key influence on Chen's essay, while also explaining the inclusion of Ōmura's essay *Revival of Literati Painting* in Chen's *Studies of Chinese Literati Painting*. The publication of Chen's essay situated literati painting in the vibrant palette of modern discourses, while at the same time reinforcing the elements of traditionalism in modern Chinese painting.

Although various scholars and artists had criticised traditional painting as being unable to portray the similarity between image and depicted object and for its lack of creativity due to its slavish imitation of the ancient styles, Chen's ideas struck a resonant chord not only with the promoters of indigenous culture and traditional painting, but also with the so-called "Westernisers", or the mostly young and promising art students who had travelled abroad to acquire the stylistic, technical and conceptual aspects of Western painting and who after their return had become vigorous promoters of Western artistic ideas.

THE WESTERNISERS' SEARCH FOR WESTERN MODERN-'ISMS'

Motivated by the crying need to reform the stagnant tradition of Chinese painting, a growing number of young artists went abroad to study Western painting. Many leading cultural and educational figures who associated the realism and innovation of Western art with scientific and technical progress¹³ also saw it as the best way to save traditional culture from its decline. They encouraged young students to go abroad to learn how to paint directly from nature and achieve similitude between the work and the object being depicted. In the highly influential journal *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian* 新青年), Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879–1942) argued for the need to apply the realistic spirit of Western painting to Chinese art, in order to free painters from the rigid painting expression which, he believed, was a direct consequence of the orthodox style of the Four Wangs (Chen 1918). Other prominent intellectuals, such as Cai Yuanpei, Xu Beihong and Lu Xun 鲁迅, also promoted Western realism as the best way for artists to fulfil their new social function. Xu Beihong (1895–1953) was especially harsh and uncompromising in his views, not only criticising the Chinese masters of the previous era, but also attacking leading modern Western artists, such as Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse and Pierre-Auguste Renoir. According to Xu, their

13 After the educational reform in 1902, a new subject called "drawing and painting" (*tuhua* 图画) was included in the curricula of all schools. This subject comprised everything from drawing simple shapes and models in the primary schools to more complex geometric, mechanical and freehand drawing in secondary schools, as well as mechanical drawing, foreshortening and perspective in the more specialised and technical schools (Kao 1983: 377). Art subjects were thus introduced into the curriculum due to the practical need for technical and perspective drawing and draughtsmanship, which were required for the development of mathematics, mechanics, electronics, medicine, physics, biology and other scientific and technical fields.

greatest error was in deviating from the conventional academic tradition and with the free use of brush-strokes and colour obscuring contours and lines. While studying in Paris, he became a student of Pascal Dagnan Bouveret, a conservative French painter. He was fascinated by the great academic masters and enthusiastically copied the works of Rembrandt, Delacroix, Rubens, Turner, Velázquez, and others. After his return to China, he became the head of the art department of the newly established National Central University in Nanjing (Sullivan 1996: 69), where he continued to promote the Western realist tradition.

It is interesting to note that even though the "Western realist spirit" was in the air at the time of the New Cultural Movement, many of the pioneers who blazed the path of modern Chinese painting and who had gone abroad to study perspective, chiaroscuro, shading, light and other characteristics of Western painting ultimately became much more engaged with the modern art movements of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, Expressionism, etc. than with the Western realistic tradition. Liu Haisu 刘海粟 (1896–1994), who in 1912, at only 17 years of age, had already established his own private art school, became enthusiastic about Van Gogh's art, saying of the Dutch painter that "his world is like a sort of raging fire; it is a world of the natural force of inner life" (Sullivan 1996: 73), while both Lin Fengmian 林风眠 (1900–1991) and Ding Yanyong 丁衍庸 (1902–1978) admired the great Fauvist master, Henri Matisse. Lin Fengmian, inspired by outdoor light and bold colours, studied not only Matisse but also Modigliani, and after his return to China as the head of the new art academy in Beijing and director of the Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts continued to promote the anti-academic and more avant-garde styles of the West. According to Croizier (1993: 136), it was "his call for unrestricted individual creativity" that prompted Xu Beihong to pen his famous *Doubts*, in which he mocked Western avant-garde artists and their Chinese followers. Even Li Shutong 李叔同 (1880–1942), a student of the French-trained Kuroda Seiki 黑田清輝 (1866–1924) and the first oil painter to return from Japan, inclined more towards his teacher's impressionist style¹⁴ than the more conservative art of Meiji society (Croizier 1993: 136). One of the most active women artists in Republican China, Guan Zilan 关紫兰 (1903–1983), likewise preferred avant-garde styles, such as Fauvism and Expressionism. Moreover, in 1931, the radical avant-garde group Storm Society¹⁵ (*Juelan she* 决澜社), was founded by Pang Xunqin 庞薰琴 (1906–1985) and Ni Yide 倪貽德 (1901–1970). Their *Manifesto*, which lambasted both the stagnant Chinese tradition as well as imported Western realism, demanded the "freedom to build up pure creation" (Sullivan 1996: 62), while their inspiration came from Fauves, Cubists, Dadaists and others. The *Manifesto* goes on to proclaim: "We recognise that art is certainly not the imitation of nature, nor is it the inflexible repetition of objective form. We must devote our whole lives to the undisguised expression of our fierce emotion" (Sullivan 1996, 62). The yearning of these young artists to express powerful emotions and inner feelings finds a curious correspondence with the literati painters of the Song dynasty,

14 Kuroda Seiki studied for several years in Paris. Deciding that he could better serve his country as a painter trained in Western technique than as a lawyer, he abandoned his legal studies and entered the studio of Raphael Collin. He not only pursued the more conservative forms of academic art, but showed a marked preference for *plein-air* painting. Returning to Japan in 1893, in 1896 he became the director of the newly established Department of Western painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tōkyō Bijutsu Gakkō 東京美術学校). In addition to traditional Japanese painting, Western-style painting was now added to the school curriculum. In order to differentiate between styles, Western painting was designated as *yōga* 洋画, while traditional Japanese painting was called *nihonga* 日本画 ("Japanese-style painting"). The renaming of traditional Japanese painting had a great influence in China, as well. A new term, *guohua* 国画 ("national-style painting") appeared in order to differentiate it from Western oil painting, called *xihua* 西画, *yanghua* 洋画 or *xiyanghua* 西洋画 ("Western-style painting") (Kao 1983: 373). The Tokyo School of Fine Arts and its department of Western-style painting was the one which attracted the most Chinese students, among whom Li Shutong was one of the two earliest Western-trained Chinese artists in Japan. After his return to China, he applied the teaching methods learned in Japan and encouraged students to draw directly from nature. He took his students out of the classroom and into the natural surroundings of the West Lake. In 1913, he was even more innovative and brought a nude model into his class (Kao 1983: 387).

15 See Croizier (1993).

who had sought to convey their inner thoughts and feelings in a free-style brushwork that repudiated the rigid academic style of realistic depiction that predominated at the court.

The inner essence of a millennial painting tradition – spiritual resonance – which in theoretical discourses began to be equated with subjective expression as something antithetical to objectivism, resonated as well in the works of the Westernisers. Their sojourns in Europe, which were originally intended to provide them with the techniques of realistic representation, instead exposed them to the antithesis of academic realism in the various forms of modern-‘isms’. Given the long tradition of literati painting and its revival at the start of the 20th century (due also to the influence of Chen’s essay) we can easily understand the affinity these artists felt for new European art. By “de-emphasising the objective, and focussing on the subjective” (Chen 2008: 25), Western ‘isms’ neglected the real world and preferred to express the inner world of authentic feelings and emotions. This shift could also be seen in the preference for natural and everyday scenes over academic, historical or religious subjects. Chinese artists could find very similar tendencies in many Western art works, and even went so far as to detect Eastern influences in modern European art. As Pan Tianshou 潘天寿 wrote in 1926, Western painting was “tending towards the spiritual taste of the Orient” (Kao 1972: 203). When writing about the cultural exchange between the East and the West, Tao Lengyue 陶冷月 (1895–1988) concluded that:

Post-Impressionism in Western painting, on the other hand, pays attention to the tendency of strength and line. It also talks the expression of the personality [of the artist]. Since it places no importance to objective (observation) and emphasises exclusively subjectivity. It is moving away from the bondage of realistic representation towards the expression of an idea [*xieyi* 写意]. It appears to be caused by Oriental styles, this we must know about (Kao 1972: 214).

By stressing the similarities and affinities between Western modern art and traditional painting, these artists revitalised the traditional elements in art and thus transformed it into something that was modern and progressive. One of the best examples of this process is to be found in their great appreciation for the monk and early Qing painter, Shitao 石涛 (1642–1718). According to Wong (2006: 71–72), he was first rediscovered by the Japanese in the early 20th century, in conjunction with the revival of *bunjinga*. Admired for his originality and individualism, he was seen as an example of artistic freedom, and as an artist wholly dedicated to expressing his own personality. His celebrated phrase, “I am always myself, and must naturally be present in whatever I do. The beards and eyebrows of the ancients will not grow on my face, and the lungs and bowels of the ancients cannot be put into my body” (Nie 1997: 258), served as a sort of motto for artistic experiments with smashed ink. He was seen as a symbol of modernity and innovation, who also embraced the spirit of the Western avant-garde (Wong 2006: 73). Liu Haisu linked Shitao even more closely with Western avant-garde movements, claiming that he had surpassed them in his own art:

As soon as we think of the most progressive modern art of Post-Impressionism and Expressionism, even without measuring their profound artistic correspondences, we can discern in the end of their common principles. Moreover, compared to the progressive theories in these art trends of the West, the thought embraced by Shitao even seems to surpass their progressiveness in some respect (Wong 2006: 73).

CONCLUSION

Theoretical discourses at the beginning of the 20th century linked the literati painting tradition to subjectivism, individualism and progressiveness, and viewed it in parallel with modern European art. It furthermore entered into the artistic discourses and intentions of Chinese artists, and not only those of the defenders of the national essence but also of the Westernisers, who viewed Western art as a form

of salvation for a Chinese art which was in severe decline. However, in their quest for artistic solutions, they tended to find more compatibilities and similarities between their own *wenrenhua* tradition and various kinds of western modern 'isms' than in Western realism. Even Xu Beihong, who is generally acknowledged as a master of realist salon oil painting, as well as other followers of the Western academic tradition, failed in their mission. Their work seems shallow and superficial, and the profound dramatic emotions that make a painting exceptional were missing.¹⁶ In analysing Xu Beihong's painting experiments, Wen Fong explained his "superficial" realism with the different cultural backgrounds at play, and thus with the different perceptions of realistic conception and representation. As he concludes in *Modern Chinese Art Debate*, all Chinese painters "try to temper pictorial realism with calligraphic expressiveness" (Fong 1993: 291) in order to encompass the inner essence of nature's exterior. In fact, in later years most of the Westernisers reverted to the traditional Chinese media of brush and ink as being more suitable to portray Gu Kaizhi's principle *yi xing xie shen* 以形写神 ("use the form to depict the spirit") and thus capture the spiritual resonance of literati painting within their own distinctly modern ethos of innovation and creativity, freedom and subjective expression. Ultimately, the common denominators of self-expression and subjectivism in Western avant-garde and Chinese literati painting provided the basis for the reaffirmation of their own national essence.

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¹⁶ See also Vampelj Suhadolnik (2013).

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