

CHINESE VISUAL CULTURE AND MODERNITY: INTRODUCTION

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This special issue is a collection of articles that examine visual cultural expressions in the context of Chinese modernity. Our intention is to discern changes and continuities in modern and contemporary Chinese art practice resulting from and interacting with China's social and cultural change. When the twentieth century began, Chinese elite thinkers identified art reform as one of the key agenda items for social change, as they connected modernisation of art with China's national salvation and nation-building. Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927), Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) were among the most vocal critics of the stagnant aspects of Chinese art practice. After the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, the Ministry of Education, under the leadership of Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), initiated and implemented systematic measures for art reform. Specifically, Cai called for an aesthetics education to replace religion in order that China could produce new, enlightened citizens for a strong, modern nation. The Ministry organised major art exhibitions, established provincial and national art schools, funded scholarships for students to study art overseas and institutionalised the profession of art practice. By 1929, in the short span of less than two decades, when China's first national art exhibition was held in Shanghai, organised by the Ministry of Education, both the concept and the practice of art had been totally transformed. The exhibition marked the coming of age of China's modern art practice.

At the same time, modernisation of art was also a grass-roots movement. From the early 1900s, Chinese students started going overseas to study European art. Li Shutong 李叔同 (1880-1942) went to Tokyo in 1905 and Li Yishi 李毅士 (1886-1942) went to Glasgow in 1907, both later becoming significant figures in modern Chinese art history. By the 1940s, hundreds of art students had travelled to Japan, Europe and North America and returned to China. Some of them were funded by national or provincial government scholarships but many went with the financial support of their families. Still some went with very little financial means and supported their study through work.

Enthusiasm for European art practice also reached the commercial sector and the general population. Private art schools mushroomed, not just in Shanghai but also in other urban centres, where the first generation of Chinese art teachers was trained. Curricula offered at these schools introduced students to the basics of European art practice – life drawing, 'scientific' perspective, painting in oil and other materials, and much more.

The arrival of the printing industry and mass print media also helped. Magazines and newspapers would report news about art. Art works of past and present masters, Chinese or foreign, European artistic trends, local news related to art, were all conveyed to those with professional interests as well as those with simply spare-time curiosity.

In the meantime, exposure to ideas and perspectives from European and Japanese traditions also enriched and reenergised traditional Chinese ink-brush painting. The 1920s saw great innovations of Chinese ink art and the emergence of new masters, who in turn became the models for later generations. Chinese artists have been absorbing ideas and techniques from other cultural traditions while continuing with the reassessment and reenergising of China's own traditions. Learning from the West has greatly extended the horizons of art as practised in China.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw the Chinese Communist Party dictate both the subject matter and the style of visual expressions until the mid 1980s. Since the 1990s, with the exponential rise of China on the international stage, and in the relatively more open and relaxed political atmosphere, Chinese art practice took another great leap forward. Although artworks are now seldom produced in the name of the nation or for the nation, artworks and artists from China are now an integral part of world art.

In our exploration of aspects of modern and contemporary Chinese visual culture, we intend to seek answers to the following questions: how and why have Chinese visual cultural concepts and practice changed and been changing? What constitutes cultural modernity in the Chinese context? How can visual materials help us develop a better understanding of modern Chinese history? What can images, whether self-projections or creations by others, tell us about China's trajectory towards modernity? Through careful readings of visual representations across geographical boundaries and historical times, the articles in this issue show how Chinese visual culture has been changing and how these changes might be understood as expressions of modernity.

From the history of painting in Chinese high and popular cultures, to the various rendering of the particular, recurrent artistic motif of *Taoyuan tu* 桃源圖, Ellen Soullière and Luo Hui place tradition in the context of how Chinese strive for modernity and demonstrate how visual imagery in Chinese art evolved along with social and historical progress. Their examples show that modernity in Chinese visual culture did not arrive at a particular point in time. Rather, each generation articulates its aspirations for and interpretation of modernity through innovations in art. Yiyan Wang traces the trajectory of Xu Zhimo's engagement with art reform in the early twentieth century to demonstrate how modernity in visual art was a significant aspect of China's modernisation project and considers the active role of leading intellectuals in this. Wenwen Liu's article projects the landscape paintings by Wu Guanzhong in the first two decades of the People's Republic of China onto the political context of art policy of the socialist state and shows how the artist was able to develop an original artistic language despite and because of political restrictions. Rosemary Haddon examines the works of three significant contemporary Chinese women artists and pays particular attention to their undertaking of visual representation to embody modernity from women's perspectives and experiences. Last but not least, Dennitza Gabrakova's essay locates Chinese visual modernity in Hong Kong. She connects the poetic imageries of Leung Ping-kwan with the visual articulations of Lee Ka-sing in order to examine their particular expressions of 'art on art' and the intersection between textual and visual imageries. Gabrakova also considers how the inspiration for these two artists comes from international trends and how their artworks exemplify Hong Kong's fragmentary reception of modern European art practice.