

XU ZHIMO: THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL AND ART REFORM IN CHINA

YIYAN WANG

Victoria University of Wellington

Abstract

Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897-1931) was a poet, writer, editor and translator, whose poems are still widely read today in the Chinese-speaking world. However, he was also an art critic and was involved with China's art reform and, to date, his considerable contribution here has not received the attention it deserves. This essay will trace Xu Zhimo's trajectory as a public intellectual with an emphasis on his activities in the arts arena. These demonstrate not only the close connection between writers and artists of the 1920s, but also illuminate the largely ignored question of how Chinese intellectuals were concerned about art reform in general. On the one hand, this essay highlights the importance of the intellectual discourse in China's drive towards visual cultural modernity. On the other, it also underlines the relevance of visual cultural modernity to China's nation-building at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Introduction

The epitaph of Xu Zhimo (1897-1931) declares in elegant calligraphy: Tomb of Poet Xu Zhimo (Shiren Xu Zhimo zhi mu). His close friend, Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962), a leading and influential thinker, essayist and diplomat, believed that Xu Zhimo's life is like a poem and only his own poetry can represent the entirety and the poetic quality of his life.¹ Indeed, no one can doubt the position of Xu Zhimo as a significant poet in modern Chinese literary history. He was a pioneer in composing poems in the vernacular with characteristic lyrical beauty and his promotion of lyricism paved the way to popularising Chinese vernacular poetry. His poems have been continuously selected for publication in Chinese school textbooks, which in turn perpetuates his reputation as one of the outstanding modern Chinese poets.² In December 2017, Xu Zhimo's grandson, Tony Hsu, launched his book, *Chasing the Modern: The Twentieth-Century Life of Poet Xu Zhimo*, in New York. (Hsu 2017) The New York Chinese

1 Hu Shi, 'Zhuidao Zhimo' (In memory of Zhimo), *Xinyue*, vol. 4, no. 1. Hu Shi published this piece under his other name, Hu Shizhi.

2 For information on Xu Zhimo as a major poet in the Republican Period, see Yeh 1993:5-12; McDougall and Louie 1997: 51-54. Bonnie McDougall again recently introduced Xu Zhimo as a representative modern Chinese poet in a collection of international poems from other languages into English. Collins and Prufer 2017: 113-120.

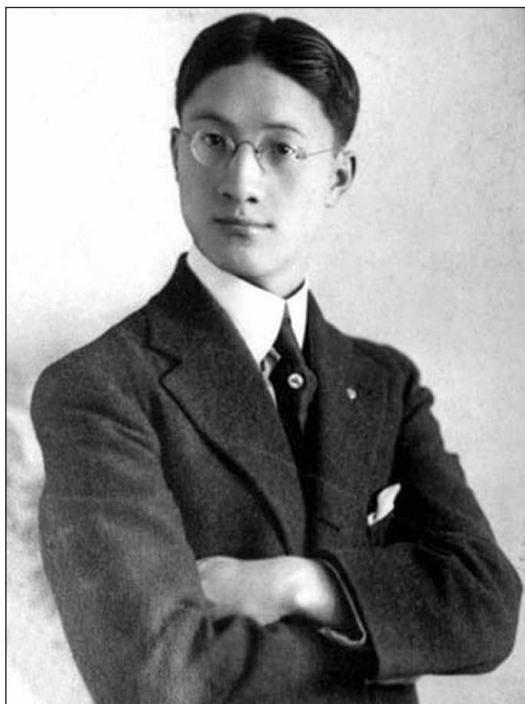


Figure 1: Xu Zhimo around 1922 when he was studying at Columbia University.

Humanities Association organised a reading and performance of Xu Zhimo's poems for the occasion and hundreds of people turned up to enjoy and celebrate the lyrical beauty of the poetic lines Xu Zhimo composed decades ago.

The following is the first and last stanzas of probably Xu Zhimo's best-known poem:

再別康橋
輕輕的我走了，
正如我輕輕的來；
我輕輕的招手，
作別西天的雲彩。

....

悄悄的我走了，
正如我悄悄的來；
我揮一揮衣袖，
不帶走一片雲彩。

Second Farewell to Cambridge

Softly I am leaving,
 As I softly came;
 I wave my hand in gentle farewell
 To the clouds in the western sky.

... ..

Quietly I am leaving,
 As I quietly came;
 I raise my sleeve and wave,
 Without taking away a whiff of cloud. (Yeh 1992: 10-11)

Public memory of the recent decades, however, has been dominated by a fixation on Xu Zhimo's private life. Since the 1990s, Xu Zhimo's marriage and divorce as well as his subsequent romantic relationships with prominent women of the time have been the subject of dozens (if not hundreds) of publications. In 1999 a television series focusing on Xu Zhimo's romances, *Renjian siyue tian* (Spring days), was made with the collaboration of producers, directors and actors in Taiwan, China and Hong Kong, and attracted audiences from the entire Chinese speaking world.³ The house in his hometown given to Xu Zhimo by his father when he married Lu Xiaoman 陸小曼 (1903-1965) has now been restored and become a popular tourist site. In short, the label of 'romantic poet' has stuck onto Xu Zhimo and it has been detrimental to a proper understanding of this significant historical figure to both modern Chinese literary and art history.

In Anglophone scholarship, Xu Zhimo has been recognised as an important figure in China's literary and intellectual arena in the early decades of the twentieth century. He featured in two significant monographs on modern Chinese intellectual and literary history, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* by Leo Ou-Fan Lee in 1973 and *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* by Jonathan Spence in 1985. Lee was the first scholar writing in English to appraise Xu Zhimo's personal evolution and literary achievements against the large historical context of China's social and cultural change. Lee compares Xu Zhimo with Yu Dafu 郁達夫 (1896-1945), since the two were high-school classmates in Hangzhou and remained friends throughout their lives, although Yu Dafu spent an extended period in Japan and was a founding member of the League of Left-Wing Writers. Lee discusses in detail their backgrounds and upbringing before outlining the necessarily different paths they subsequently took. Lee's appraisal stresses Xu Zhimo's association with the Anglophone educated, such as Hu Shi and Liang Shiqiu (1903-1987), essayist, translator and a scholar well-known for his study and translation of William Shakespeare, and evaluates Xu's contribution as editor of

3 For further information about the series, see <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/人間四月天>. Accessed 8 January 2019.

Chenbao fukan (the literary supplement of morning news) and *Xinyue yuekan* (The crescent moon monthly). Lee also attributes Xu Zhimo's personality to his carefree childhood and youth, and his family wealth. Lee considers Xu Zhimo similar to Icarus, the winged figure in Greek mythology characterised by 'passionate enthusiasm, rapid elevations of confidence, flights of imagination, exaltation, inflation of spirits, ecstatic mystical up-reading.' (Lee 1973: 173) Spence singles Xu Zhimo out as a case in point to discuss the process of China's transition to modernity. He emphasises the 'modern' way Xu Zhimo conducted life, made friends, pursued knowledge and engaged in social activities. (Spence 1982: 188-216)

Indeed, as Lee and Spence show, for the poets and writers of that time, a wider sense of social responsibility outweighed their passion for literary creativity. This self-imposed social responsibility goes far back to the Chinese scholar-official tradition as Yu Yingshi 余英時 has argued. (Yu Yingshi 1987) Historical conditions and cultural norms were very different, especially in terms of the roles and expectations of writers and poets as public intellectuals. The educated elite were part of the social and political structure. Much of their writing, literary or otherwise, was intended as social commentary or political intervention. The early decades of the twentieth century saw the gradual transformation of the educated elite into intellectuals in Chinese society, as exemplified by leading thinkers of the time, such as Lu Xun 鲁迅, Hu Shi, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 and Xu Zhimo.

Furthermore, literature and art, or more precisely, poetry and painting, used to be symbiotic cultural practices to the extent that one could not exist without the other. This intimate connection between literature and the arts was still commonplace in the early decades of the twentieth century. With these traditions continuing to dominate social and political practice at the time and art reform being an important and integral part of China's modernisation project, many intellectuals and writers were actively engaged in art-related writings and activities. Literary and popular journals also published images of art works and art criticism.

As a member of the educated elite of the first part of the twentieth century, Xu Zhimo's social and political engagements were not unusual at all. His literary achievements notwithstanding, this essay will discuss Xu Zhimo's role as a public intellectual with a focus on his connections with art reform. His art related activities were extensive, ranging from high level decision making to close relationships with individual artists. Although never a visual artist himself, his editorship of leading newspapers and magazines enabled him to promote art works of many kinds. Whether they were by Chinese artists or foreigners, whether of contemporary production or classics from the distant past, Xu Zhimo promoted them where he could. He also wrote art criticism and participated in the debate about China's reception of art historical ideas from Europe.

Tracing Xu Zhimo's trajectory serves at least three purposes: first, to document his activities and demonstrate his significant contribution to China's art reform; second, to mount a significant case to show that at the beginning of the twentieth century it was still common for writers/poets to be familiar with visual art; third, to assert the relevance and contribution of literary figures to Chinese visual modernity.

Formative Years

Xu Zhimo was the only son of a wealthy family in a small town called Xiashi in the county of Haining in the northeast of Zhejiang, not far from Shanghai. His father, Xu Shenru 徐申如, was a successful businessman and a banker with business both locally and in Shanghai. To the great delight of his father, Xu Zhimo was an academic prodigy and excelled with ease at school. He topped the prestigious and selective Hangzhou High School, where his essays on history, politics and geophysics were published in the school journal.

In 1915, Xu Zhimo enrolled at the Shanghai Baptist University but he soon transferred to Beiyang University in Tianjin. In 1917, the law faculty there where he was then studying was incorporated into Peking University and he became a student there. As a student, Xu Zhimo excelled in both humanities and science and took a wide variety of courses. In the 1915-16 academic year at Shanghai Baptist University, the courses he took were: English literature, Chinese literature, Chinese history, world history, physics, plane and spherical trigonometry, civics, advanced geometry, chemistry, chemistry experiments and Bible studies. At Beiyang University, he completed five courses: English literature, Chinese literature, world history, basic law, logic and psychology. In the 1917-1918 academic year, he studied at the Department of Political Science of the Peking University Law School, and took courses in political science, the political history of the West, the political history of the East, constitutional law, economics and general provisions of civil law. (Liang Xihua 1979)

Around 1913 at Hangzhou High School, Xu Zhimo's essays published in the school journal caught the attention of Zhang Gongquan (1889-1979), who was paying the school a visit. Zhang asked the principal to introduce them and this meeting would change Xu Zhimo's life forever. Zhang Gongquan 張公權 was so impressed with the charismatic, articulate lad that he facilitated the marriage between Xu Zhimo and his sister, Zhang Youyi 張幼儀 (1900-1988). The two were married in 1915, when he was eighteen and she was sixteen.⁴ The Zhang family was wealthy, highly prominent and widely connected. Zhang Gongquan was the director of the Bank of China for most of the Republican period. Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1887-1969), the other brother, was a philosopher, public intellectual and a founder of China's *Shehui minzhu dang* (Social democratic party). Connection with the Zhang family opened doors for Xu Zhimo to an elite circle of Chinese thinkers centred around Liang Qichao, who was one of the most prominent intellectual leaders at the time. During the summer of 1918 in Beijing Xu Zhimo was introduced to Liang Qichao by his in-laws and became Liang's last

4 There are many different biographies of Xu Zhimo and many different chronicles attached to the biographies. Claims differ in which year Xu went to which university or whether he graduated from any. In this essay, I rely on information from Xu Zhimo's chronology composed by Chen Congzhou (Chen Congzhou: 1949). Chen was a family relative and admired Xu Zhimo since his young age. Chen was in possession of many primary sources. As Xu Zhimo's first biographer, his version showed less bias since he had little vested interest other than the subject itself. This essay has also benefited from the information and discussion in Jonathan Spence's chapter, 'Extolling Nirvana' (Spence 1981: 188-216).

'adopted' student (*guanmen dizi*).⁵ Both his career and personal life would become intimately connected with Liang Qichao from that point onwards. Liang would have a lasting impact on Xu Zhimo, influencing his political outlook, personal networks and social engagements. On 14 August 1918, not long after meeting Liang Qichao, Xu Zhimo left Peking University, boarded a ship from Shanghai and headed towards America. Xu Zhimo would correspond with Liang across the Pacific.

Xu Zhimo was in the United States for about three years. Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts was his first place of study overseas. It was at Clark University when he adopted the name of Hamilton, after Alexander Hamilton (c.1755–1804), the first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, to show his admiration and his desire to emulate what Hamilton achieved. In his own words:

Before I was twenty-four, my interest in the theory of relativity or democracy far exceeded my interest in poetry. My father's expectation of me for my overseas study was to enter the sector of finance. My own ambition was to become the Hamilton of China.⁶

In order to achieve this goal, in his first semester, Xu Zhimo studied economics and business management, French, psychology, contemporary European history and political science and sociology. In the second semester, he studied economics (labour issues), French, history (European society and politics in the nineteenth century), history (nationalism, militarism, diplomacy and international organisations since 1789), political science and sociology, and Spanish. Clark University accepted the credits from his previous study in China so that he graduated with first class honours within one year. In the autumn of 1919, Xu Zhimo entered graduate school at Columbia University in New York to study for a Masters degree in political science. In 1921, he produced a brilliant dissertation on the topic of 'The Status of Women in China' and graduated with the prospect of working towards a PhD in political science.

Xu Zhimo was 24 years old with a BA and an MA from two reputable universities in the United States under his belt. He was enthusiastic, patriotic, tremendously intelligent and intellectually curious. From an early age, he was a thinker, as reflected in the essays on the range of topics he wrote in his high school. At university, he was even more concerned with social and political issues and began to write with the

5 There is a passage of the letter from Xu Zhimo to Liang expressing his gratitude towards Liang for accepting him as a student. There is also an entry to Xu's diary records his mixed mood at the event – he was overjoyed at Liang's acceptance of him but also felt shameful for not having produced writings as outstanding as those by Liang, such as 'on the new citizen' or 'on ethics education'. Scholarly studies of modern Chinese intellectual history frequently examine Liang Qichao's life and work, but few mention the master-student relationship between the two. (Chen Congzhou 1949: 10–11).

6 The Chinese original reads: '在二十四歲以前，我對於詩的興味，遠不如我對於相對論，或民約論的興味，我父親送我出洋留學，是要降落進金融界的，我自己最高的野心是想做一個中國的 Hamilton.' (Chen Congzhou 1949: 10).

intention of introducing ideas from other cultures to Chinese readers. He continued to read Liang Qichao's writing with enormous admiration. The two remained close until Liang's death in 1929.

In 1920, while working on his MA, Xu Zhimo wrote three essays which were subsequently published in the journal *Gaizao* (Reconstruction) edited by Liang Qichao. *Reconstruction* was one of the major platforms for dissemination of political ideas and intellectual debate in China in the 1910s and 1920s. Frequent contributors to *Reconstruction* included Zhang Junmai, Ding Wenjiang 丁文江, Jiang Baili 蔣百里, Zhang Dongsun 張東蓀, Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 and Wang Chongzhi 王崇植, all active intellectuals interested in China's political reform and social transformation in the early Republican period.

With Liang Qichao as his mentor, Xu Zhimo's name soon appeared among the leading circles of intellectuals. His first essay in *Reconstruction* was an introduction and discussion of Einstein's theory of relativity. It was published in juxtaposition to a translation of Einstein's own essay, 'A Simple Explanation of Relativity'.⁷ To explain Einstein's complicated theory, Xu Zhimo adopted very down-to-earth examples using humour. In his own words, 'to talk about science to non-scientists, one needs to use the metaphors of common sense'. (Xu Zhimo 2005, v.1: 51) His other two essays were book reviews. One was of Bertrand Russell's *The Theory and Practice of Bolshevism*, where he discussed how Russell changed his mind about Bolshevism from admiration to rejection after he travelled to Russia. (Russell 1920) He also introduced Russell's background as a philosopher, mathematician, a Cambridge don and social reformer (shehui gaizao jia). The other was a review of H.G. Wells's *Russia in the shadows*, which was contrasted with Bertrand Russell's writing, highlighting their different responses to Russian communism in the broader context of European history. (Wells 1920) Xu Zhimo was deeply impressed by Wells's sharp observation of the harsh living conditions of the Russian people under Bolshevik Rule. (Xu Zhimo 2005, v. 1: 65) Xu Zhimo was an ardent reader of works in English, capable of absorbing ideas efficiently and keen on disseminating them to the general public, although he had only been in an English-speaking country for less than three years. His reading and writing at this stage of his life were pointing to the direction of a social commentator and a public intellectual. After all, his relatives, friends and acquaintances were all prominent, influential social figures, if not all public intellectuals.

Xu Zhimo's MA thesis, 'The Status of Women in China', was a study of Chinese women in the international context of modern feminism and social theory. Xu's thesis mounts a powerful argument against the simplistic assessment of Chinese women as mere victims of patriarchy by travellers, missionaries and academics from Europe and North America. Writing in English for an English-speaking audience, he first traces the historical and cultural reasons that led to the current position in order that his Western

7 Xu Zhimo, 'Einstein's Relativity: a Radical Revolution in the Field of Physics' (Ansitan xiangdui zhuyi: wulijie dageming 安斯坦相對主義: 物理界大革命), *Gaizao*, vol.3, no.8 (1920): 49–64; reprinted in Xu Zhimo 2005, v.1: 39–58.

readers had a historical perspective. He insists that Confucianism and Daoism, the foundational philosophies of Chinese society and culture, are not misogynist. Neither, he argues, discriminates against women intrinsically. With the Confucian emphasis on filial piety, there has been a respect for mothers historically. Daoism stresses the importance of natural balance but does not prescribe a better status for men over women; or yang over yin. He then demonstrates with examples and statistics that women were not in as hopeless a position as that shown in many Western depictions. Xu Zhimo's thesis is a solid sociological study on the subject, written with great insights and extreme elegance, given his young age and limited training at that stage. Of course, one could also argue that Xu Zhimo's viewpoints may have been tainted by his privileged position as the son of a wealthy family. But the dissertation shows Xu's ability in critical thinking, his familiarity with Chinese history and his mastery of the English language.

Xu Zhimo could have stayed at Columbia University for his PhD but he chose to leave America for Britain, as he wanted to do a PhD with Bertrand Russell, who was then a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. However, by the time Xu Zhimo reached Cambridge, Russell had resigned from Trinity and was travelling overseas. Just when he was about to start a PhD on economics at the University of London, Xu Zhimo met Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, a Fellow in politics at King's College, Cambridge and a leading promoter of the League of Nations. Dickinson persuaded him to enrol at King's as a 'special student'. Dickinson was a Sinophile and the two became good friends.

During his stay in England Xu Zhimo was to meet many members of the Bloomsbury Group and interaction with them changed his ideas about what he wanted to be and do. Apart from Dickinson, Xu Zhimo established warm relationships with Bertrand Russell, Roger Fry and Arthur Waley.⁸ Waley, a sinologist and translator of Chinese literary classics, enjoyed discussing Chinese literature and arts, and issues of translation with Xu Zhimo and was highly appreciative of the latter's depth of knowledge of Chinese literature and history. Xu Zhimo was on familiar terms with Roger Fry and on occasions, he stayed at Fry's house as a guest. (Laurence 2003: 132) Roger Fry was the Slade Professor of Art History at Cambridge and an immensely influential art critic and art historian in Britain in the early twentieth century. (Woolf 1995; Spalding 1980)

Xu Zhimo also met John Middleton Murry and his wife, Katherine Mansfield. Middleton Murry and Mansfield were not considered core Bloomsbury members but had frequently associated with the group. Xu Zhimo's brief meeting with Mansfield began his interest and commitment to translating not only Mansfield's writing but also contemporary English writing into Chinese.

8 Patricia Laurence's book offers extensive information on the connection between the Bloomsbury Group and members of the Crescent Moon Group (*Xinyue she*). Although her understanding of the formation and history of the Crescent Moon Group is mistaken at places, her discussion of the interaction between Xu Zhimo and Dickinson, and between Xu Zhimo and Arthur Waley is informative. The book does not discuss Xu Zhimo's connection with Roger Fry. (Laurence: 2003). Jonathan Spence also offers detailed information on how Xu Zhimo became friends with the circle. (Spence 1981: 193-198).

All these contacts in London and Cambridge were people with interests in arts, literature and philosophy. Their influence on Xu Zhimo was immediate and long-lasting, and his future plans changed completely. He no longer wished to study economics and started writing poetry in the Chinese vernacular. During this time, he also travelled to continental Europe, spending a good amount of time in Paris and Berlin, where he immersed himself in the art galleries and museums and acquired first-hand knowledge of European art. It was during this trip that Xu Zhimo met Chang Yu (Sanyu) and the two developed a deep connection and shared similar views on art.⁹

Promotion of Art as a Public Intellectual

From Cambridge, Xu Zhimo returned to China in October 1922. Arriving in Shanghai, he went home to greet his parents first but quickly took a trip to see Liang Qichao in Nanjing, who was giving some public lectures there. Liang Qichao had been living in Beijing since his return from Japan in 1912 and had been busy with writing and publishing. It is believed that Liang Qichao urged Xu Zhimo to return to China, as he needed assistance in English. Xu Zhimo lodged at Songpo Library near Beihai in central Beijing, which was established by Liang Qichao. By the end of October, Xu Zhimo had been appointed as a professor of English literature at Peking University. He held the post until July 1926 when he left for Shanghai. Xu remained nominally on the staff until his death. His courses were popular with students and later when Hu Shi was president of Peking University, he would urge Xu Zhimo to return to teaching there. Between 1922 and 1926, Liang Qichao and Xu Zhimo worked very closely. As a result, Xu Zhimo moved in the circles of cultural and intellectual elite and began active social and intellectual engagements. The years from 1922 to 1927 in Beijing were Xu Zhimo's most productive period when he published collections of poetry, essays and translations, and edited journals. Through these activities, Xu Zhimo established himself as a leading public intellectual.

What is meant by this term? In her edited volume, *The Public Intellectual*, Helen Small tries her best not to give a definition but provides a quotation that says she does not know 'the English for "all those who speak to the world in a transcendental manner"'. (Small 2012: 1) She believes that the term is inherently problematic, since all published authors are intellectuals to some degree and should be regarded as being in the 'public'. Her edited volume has ten contributions from established scholars in the field, including Edward Said and Stefan Collini, but their varied views necessarily defy a fixed definition. However, one aspect they do agree upon is that the term 'public intellectual' articulates concerns applicable to many other societies, although it is the product of a specifically American cultural and historical context. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces its first usage to 1967 in the *New York Times* and defines it as 'an intellectual who expresses views (esp. on popular topics) intended to be accessible to a general audience'.

9 Eugene Y. Wang has written in great detail the friendship between Chang Yu and Xu Zhimo and argued that the two shared a deep empathy and appreciation of the modernist innovation in European art practice at the time. See Eugene Y. Wang, 'Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency' in Hearn and Smith 2001: 102-161.

My intention to view the activities of Xu Zhimo in the role of a public intellectual aims to bring out his contribution to China's art reform and to demonstrate how social changes led to new roles for the educated elite and how they functioned. As Yu Yingshi shows, there are numerous similarities and differences between the Chinese scholar-official and the public intellectual in modern Western societies. The scholar-official emerged very early in Chinese society and had a continued presence and important political functions. With the emergence of a plural public sphere and modern social structure in China in the early decades of the twentieth century, the educated elite had morphed into intellectuals, and the term corresponding to their emergence had also been coined: *zhishi fenzi* 知識份子. Compared to their counterparts in modern Western democratic societies, Chinese intellectuals had an additional sense of social responsibility as they inherited the tradition of speaking to the powerful as society's conscience. Xu Zhimo's writings and activities not only exemplified the earlier generation of modern Chinese intellectuals but added the social influences of a public intellectual.

In 1922, Xu Zhimo already had a certain public fame and was respected by friends and colleagues. His opinions attracted attention and his writings appeared in influential publications. Barely had he settled in Beijing, for instance, than he was invited by Liang Shiqiu to give a public lecture at Tsinghua University. He delivered it in English on the topic of 'Art and Life'. Another friend, Yu Dafu, soon had it published in *Reconstruction* in its English original. 'Art and Life' marked Xu Zhimo's first appearance on the national stage of China's public sphere and it showed certain characteristics of his approach to social betterment. Of course, for Xu Zhimo, 'art' referred to a wide spectrum of artistic creativity and products, including fine art, music, theatre and many more. Defining 'art' in a broad sense, he placed emphasis on its central role in shaping and enriching both personal life and society. He urged young people to absorb as much art as possible and called for better social investment in art. Using English as his language of delivery, he was evidently speaking to the educated elite. 'Art and Life' would be a recurrent theme in Xu Zhimo's writing and his own life would centre around it.

Xu Zhimo would soon be sought as an editor of influential journals. Between his return from Britain in 1922 until his death in 1931, he edited some of the most significant journals of the day: *Chenbao fukan* (the literary supplement of Peking morning news) and *Shikan* (its additional poetry supplement); *Xinyue yuekan* (The crescent moon monthly) and the journal of *Meizhan* (Art exhibition), which was the official publication accompanying the first National Art Exhibition in Shanghai in April 1929. *Meizhan* not only discussed issues related to the exhibition itself but also China's art reform in general. Members of the art community from all over China actively contributed to the discussion and as the primary editor, Xu Zhimo played a central role. In the first two journals, he consistently promoted the case for art (in its broadest definition) and devoted much space to fine art in particular.

From early 1925, Xu Zhimo was repeatedly urged to take up the editorship of *The Literary Supplement* by the owners and after much hesitation he accepted. From late 1925, he was to hold this position for more than a year and resigned from it due to his shifting to live in Shanghai. *The Literary Supplement* was a highly successful and respected periodical in the early decades of the Republican Era with enormous social

impact. Many of the leading thinkers of the May Fourth Cultural Movement published their writings and had their ideas debated there. Hu Shi, Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Chen Xiying, to name a few, were frequent contributors.¹⁰ Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q* was published there. The previous editor, Sun Fuyuan, another influential cultural and social figure, was able to attract leading thinkers and writers around him and sustain the vitality and intellectual intensity of the journal. That Xu Zhimo was chosen to replace Sun Fuyuan to host such a prominent platform for public intellectuals reflected his social standing and the respect that he then enjoyed.

As editor, Xu Zhimo retained the quality of intellectual content of the paper and made every effort to keep the publication inspiring as well as enjoyable. That was increasingly difficult because the cultural centre of China was gradually shifting towards Shanghai and intellectuals and readership were increasingly divided into different ideological camps. In spite of these difficulties, Xu Zhimo was able to attract contributions from serious scholars, outstanding writers and distinguished artists. In collaboration with theatre critic Jiao Juyin and poet/artist Wen Yiduo, Xu Zhimo introduced two new columns, one on theatre and the other on poetry. Both columns attracted a good number of readers and were influential among literary circles. Xu Zhimo also instigated changes in layout and gave more space to visual images with the assistance of Ling Shuhua, also a writer/artist. Each of the columns in *the Literary Supplement* was given a title design with motifs derived from modern European art. With the refreshing new look and injection of new content, *The Literary Supplement* was able to remain a major platform for intellectual debate for a year or two until the centre of publication and cultural activity shifted totally to Shanghai.

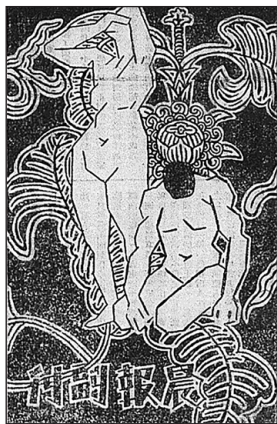


Figure 2: Title page design by Ling Shuhua for Chenbao fukan.

10 For information on literary societies and relevant journals in China's Republican Period, see Kirk and Mockx 2008.

While editing *The Literary Supplement*, Xu Zhimo paid consistent attention to debates and changes in art practice. In addition to publishing art works and art criticism, he himself also wrote about art. One of his essays on art is entitled ‘Yisimusi’ (On -isms, Xu Zhimo 2005, v. 2: 662-669), which was intended as a response to the essay ‘Delacroix and Romanticism’ by Liu Haisu, a most prominent artist of the day. Both essays were published on 8 October 1925 in *the Literary Supplement*. Liu’s essay highlights the features of Romanticism in the works of the French artist Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and viewed them as significant departures from the classicism that had dominated European art practice between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. For Liu Haisu, Delacroix’s visual rendering of literary classics was characterised by a brilliant application of colour that had not been seen in European art previously. Liu admired Delacroix’s ability to produce images not only refreshing to the eyes of the general audience but more importantly they inspired a whole generation of Impressionists after his death.

Although his intention was to respond to Liu Haisu’s introduction of French art, Xu Zhimo produced a much longer essay and addressed very different issues, especially those in contemporary art practice in China. Whereas Liu Haisu discussed Delacroix from the point of view of a practitioner, Xu Zhimo’s eyes were set on the reception of European art by Chinese artists and audiences in general. He focused on the themes of ‘art, life, liberation and freedom’ and placed emphasis, as he did previously, on the relationship between art and life. He encouraged artists to form and realise their own ‘aesthetic ideas’ through processing life’s experiences with the inner eye. In particular, he urges them to avoid blindly following artistic fashions, especially those labelled ‘-isms’. Xu Zhimo also believed that good art should naturally enrich people’s lives, because it highlights the common human experience and enliven their inner spirit. He further asserts that China’s hope for a better national culture could be achievable only when an educated audience begins to appreciate human experiences and expressions distilled by visual art. The scope of Xu Zhimo’s discussion in this essay clearly shows his wide knowledge of European art history and familiarity with current debates over art practice both in China and in Europe.

Towards the end of the 1920s, Shanghai overtook Beijing as China’s economic and cultural centre. The rapid growth of its printing and publishing industry was particularly attractive to writers, translators and many other professionals who relied on the publishing industry for a living, resulting in many of them relocating to Shanghai and the mushrooming of literary associations and journals there. Late in 1926, Xu Zhimo also moved to Shanghai, although that was also partly due to family reasons. In 1928, he was part of a group of intellectuals who shared a similar political stance and wanted to publish a journal to articulate their views. The membership of the group was rather loose but it was a circle of highly influential figures, such as Hu Shi, Liang Shiqiu, Chen Xiying and Wen Yiduo. Xu Zhimo became its first editor and named the journal *The Crescent Moon Monthly*. This could be seen as a tribute to the Indian Nobel Literary Laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who had a collection of poems entitled *The Crescent Moon* and who befriended Xu Zhimo during his visit to China in 1924. Xu Zhimo had in mind the symbolic meaning of the imagery of the crescent moon. For him, the crescent moon signalled a bright future and that was the primary

reason for his choice. This group of intellectuals and writers were not the same as those who used to gather in Beijing and who called themselves *Xinyueshe* (the crescent moon association), which no longer existed. Xu Zhimo clearly stated that the members of the group in 1928 were very different from those back in 1923 in Beijing and what connected the group was the journal itself, a platform on which the members wanted to have their voices heard.¹¹



Figure 3: Cover of *Xinyue* designed by Wen Yiduo.

In Issue No. 1, Xu Zhimo published an editorial entitled '*Xinyue de taidu*' (the attitude of *The Crescent Moon*). It began with two quotations in English, one was from the Book of Genesis: 'And God said, let there be light: and there was light'. The other was a line from a poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind'. These nicely summarise the group's perception of Chinese society being in deep darkness and their wish to bring about social enlightenment. Xu Zhimo emphasised the promotion of kindness and acceptance in society in general and saw a historical mission and responsibility to give all individuals dignity and health. Xu Zhimo was noticeably steering the group to distance themselves from any '-isms' or ideology and to avoid political radicalism. Most interesting was his repeated emphasis of the importance of dignity, which was not commonly seen in the Chinese political or cultural discourses then or now. In the harsh political environment of the late 1920s when Chiang Kai-shek was fighting against the warlords for control of China and unleashing the white terror against the communists, dignity seemed like a luxury. This call for respect and attainment of 'dignity' was seen as totally 'bourgeois' by writers and intellectuals in the camp of 'the Left-wing Writers Association'. Indeed Xu Zhimo was being rather 'bourgeois' – the demand for dignity and avoidance of ideological commitment resemble very much the attitudes represented by members of the Bloomsbury Group. The Bloomsbury influence on Xu Zhimo is obvious here. (Xu Zhimo 2005, v. 2: 1105–1111) However, it is precisely this mental and emotional distance from radical political

11 Patricia Laurence mistakenly regarded the earlier Beijing group that was called *Xinyue she* as the same group that published the journal, *Xinyue Monthly*. Xu Zhimo made it very clear that theirs was a very different group from that in Beijing in his editorial in the first issue of *Xinyue*, which was published on 10 March 1928.

stances that attracted many attacks on the group, especially from the Left. The group's lack of sympathy towards communism led to their removal from Chinese literary historiography between the 1950s and the 1990s.

The Crescent Moon Monthly had a life span of slightly over five years from March 1928 to June 1933, which was not bad for a publication of its nature at this time. It had several editors during its lifetime, with Xu Zhimo being in charge in the initial eighteen months from March 1928 to October 1929. Later editors were Rao Mengkan, Liang Shiqiu, Pan Guangdan, Ye Gongchao, Hu Shi, Yu Shangyuan, Shao Xunmei and Luo Longji. All of them were experts in their chosen field, ranging from anthropology, theatre studies and economics, to literature and arts. Being chosen as the first editor of the journal among such a formidable group of writers and thinkers, Xu Zhimo must have been recognised and respected as an intellectual leader by his peers. His initial editorship laid the intellectual foundation for the journal, as he attracted outstanding contributors and a good readership. In the five years of the journal's life span, *The Crescent Moon Monthly* published a wide range of writings, including personal memoirs, anthropological studies, current researches in economics, political sciences and sociology in addition to literary works and art criticism. In particular, the journal concentrated on introducing the theory and practice of societal organisation from Europe and North America with publications in areas such as 'marriage and law', 'religion and revolution', 'what constitutes legal governance', 'cultural policy', 'population issues' and more. *The Crescent Moon Monthly* voiced strong opinions in favour of China becoming a liberal, democratic society when influences from communism and the USSR were increasingly powerful.

One of the most prominent issues Xu Zhimo frequently and deeply engaged with was the political system of the USSR, communist ideology and China's responses to both. Starting with his earlier reviews of Russell's and Wells's books on Soviet Russia, he frequently revisited the topic. In 1925, Xu Zhimo travelled to the USSR himself and wrote a very detailed report of his experience, uncovering the extreme state repression of social life and the harsh poverty of material existence in all aspects of people's lives. Xu Zhimo issued serious warnings against intellectual trends flirting with communism. He saw it clearly that the Soviet political system was not only an authoritarian dictatorship that was suffocating for all those under its control but it was also hostile to the fundamentals and achievements of civilisation.¹² His observation and comments were insightful, although also controversial, as many intellectuals became increasingly sympathetic to communism in the latter part of the 1920s.

There was, furthermore, a focus on visual art in the journal, which introduced a number of artists and art works. Whether they were by Chinese artists or foreigners, whether of contemporary production or classics from the distant past, Xu Zhimo promoted them with enthusiasm and understanding. He published art works by Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu and Roger Fry and those in the collections of his friends. The publication of Fry's works in *The Crescent Moon Monthly* could be seen as part of

12 See for instance, Xu Zhimo, 'Ouyou manlu 歐遊漫錄' (Random jotting when travelling in Europe). Xu Zhimo 2005, v.1: 561-607.

Xu Zhimo's effort at trying to bring him to China. During the years of 1922 and 1923, instructed by Cai Yuanpei and Liang Qichao, Xu Zhimo was corresponding with Fry in the hope that he would visit China to deliver public lectures on art and perhaps even make some of the impact that he so powerfully did in Britain.

Xu Zhimo had deep friendships with a number of China's most prominent artists of the day: Chang Yu, Jiang Xiaojian, Xu Beihong, Liu Haisu, Wen Yiduo and Ling Shuhua. He collaborated with them and discussed art, literature and social issues with them. Wen Yiduo designed the cover of *The Crescent Moon Monthly* – it had a square shape and a dark blue cover with the word *xinyue* in gold printed in the middle and his name was listed under Xu Zhimo as another editor of the journal. Their friendship started in 1925 based around a shared interest in both poetry and visual art. Xu Zhimo related fondly his first visit to Wen Yiduo's residence – it struck him that the latter had adopted a Bohemian life style with the walls of his living room painted in black on which Wen painted African women with golden earrings.

Their collaboration began very soon afterwards, when Xu Zhimo started a special column for new poetry in *The Literary Supplement of the Peking Morning News*. He made a detailed analysis of Wen Yiduo's translation of Robert Browning's poems and Wen Yiduo in turn designed at least two book covers for Xu Zhimo. One was for *Balide linzhua* (the claws of Paris), a collection of essays first published in 1928 and the other was *Mali, Mali* (Mary, Mary) in 1927. *Mali, Mali* was translation of short stories by the Irish writer James Stephens (1882-1950), which Xu Zhimo started but which was finished by Shen Xingren, a well-known woman translator at the time, who had translations published in journals such as *Xin qingnian* (New youth). Jiang Xiaojian was a well-known sculptor, painter and collector. He designed two book covers for Xu Zhimo, *Feilengcui de yiye* (One night in Florence, 1926) and *Zipou* (Introspection, 1928).



Figure 4: Book cover for *Zipou* by Jiang Xiaojian for Xu Zhimo

Xu Zhimo and China's First National Art Exhibition

The library at King's College, Cambridge has three letters, one short note and one postcard to Roger Fry from Xu Zhimo. The note and postcard are personal greetings but the letters are related to art history and of considerable significance. They are all concerned with one matter – to persuade Fry to visit China to deliver public lectures on art and to bring some paintings for an exhibition in China. The dates of these letters were 7 August 1922, 15 December 1922 and 5 June 1923. The letters repeated the invitation with a great sense of urgency and enormous enthusiasm. They promise that all the costs associated with the trip would be reimbursed, whether Fry chose to travel by sea or by land via the train across Siberia. One associated event was the impending visit of the Indian poet and Nobel Literary Prize Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore. Xu Zhimo was extremely keen for the two to meet in China and to inject new ideas and perspectives into conversations among Chinese writers and artists. Xu Zhimo's invitation was issued on behalf of Cai Yuanpei and Liang Qichao. That Cai Yuanpei and Liang Qichao would be interested in a visit by Roger Fry must have been the result of Xu Zhimo's telling them about Fry's scholarship and influence in Britain. The letters offer evidence that China's elite thinkers were taking art reform very seriously and that Xu Zhimo was directly involved with art related activities. It is not clear why Fry did not make the trip, since Fry's responses to Xu have all been lost and his half-dozen biographies do not mention any such travel plans. Xu Zhimo, however, must have received photographs of Fry's paintings and drawings, as he published them a few years later in *The Crescent Moon Monthly*.¹³

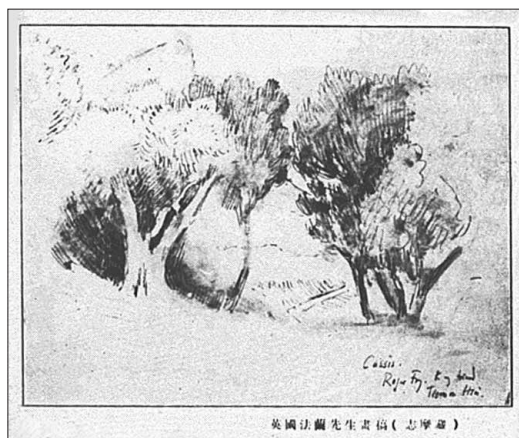


Figure 5: Drawing by Roger Fry in Xu Zhimo's collection published in *The Crescent Moon Monthly*, 1929, vol. 2, no.1.

13 See *Xinyue* 1929, vol. 2, no.1.



Figure 6: Sanyu, *Seated Nude*, 1950s. oil on paper, mounted on board, 68.5 x 58.5 cm. Yi Shu-fan Collection, Taipei.

Since Xu Zhimo had been on very familiar terms with Fry, he must have known Fry was instrumental in introducing French Post-Impressionists to Britain in the previous decade, and would have heard about the debates that Fry had with the conservative British art establishment. His friendship with Fry must also have taught him about the avant-garde in European art practice at the time. Judging from his writing and his deep appreciation of Chang Yu's artworks, Xu Zhimo was not only sympathetic to Fry's argument for open-mindedness towards innovations in art but also perceptive of the innovative qualities in the European avant-garde artistic practice.

All these experiences certainly provided a strong foundation for Xu Zhimo to appreciate European art practices of various styles and approaches. In a few years' time, this learning would turn out to give him the insight and the ability for him to edit the journal *Meizhan* in 1929 during China's first national art exhibition. The letters show that in 1923 Xu Zhimo was already highly appreciative of the value of the French avant-garde in art.

It was in 1929 that Xu Zhimo's most significant involvement with China's art reform took place. He played a pivotal role in the First National Art Exhibition (hereafter FNAE), a major event in China's modern art history. He was a member of the organising committee and chief editor of the eleven issues of the official newsletter, *Meizhan*, published during the exhibition between 10 April and 7 May 1929. During the exhibition, his debate with Xu Beihong on what kinds of approaches China's modernisation of art should take remains relevant today.

The idea of holding art exhibitions at the national level in China was on the mind of many elite thinkers from the early 1910s and was discussed frequently in the public

sphere. Art reform held equal significance as the reforms in language and the education system, all of which were on the agenda of the Ministry of Education with Cai Yuanpei as the Minister. As early as 1912 when he was an administrator in the Ministry of Education, Lu Xun publicised the idea that a modern national should build art museums and stage art exhibitions in order to display and circulate art for public education. (Lu Xun 1956: 1-5) In 1914 the Ministry of Education held the first National Children's Art exhibition in Beijing. However, not until 1925 was the Ministry of Education able to revisit the idea. In that year, at a meeting of art educators from fifteen provinces organised by the Ministry of Education held at Shanxi University, Liu Haisu formally proposed that a national art exhibition be held. The proposal was accepted and Liu was appointed chairman of the organising committee.

However, it was not until January 1929 that the committee was able to make the decision to hold the exhibition in Shanghai, which was soon followed by a call for submission of exhibits from all provinces. Originally, the exhibition was planned to open on 20 March 1929 but later postponed to 10 April 1929 when the location was finalised as the 'National Products Exposition Hall' (*Guohuo zhanlan huichang*) on the street named after it (*Guohuo Lu*). More than twenty provinces responded and their enthusiasm was shown by over 1080 artists submitting 4600 art works from which 549 artists and 1200 artworks were selected. In addition, the committee invited 342 artists to participate, who sent 1300 art works. Selected Japanese, European and American artworks were also included in the exhibition. The exhibition had seven sections: Chinese calligraphy and painting, bronze and stone inscriptions, Western-style painting, sculpture, architecture, art and craft, and photography and a total of 2328 exhibits.¹⁴

In Shanghai, *Shenbao*, a popular local daily newspaper in the Republican era, publicised the announcement for FNAE in its regular section of 'Education News' (*Jiaoyu xinwen*), where news about FNAE would regularly appear until after it closed. According to reports in *Shenbao*, on 10 April 1929 FNAE opened to glowing reviews and its closing ceremony on 3 May was well attended by many dignitaries and celebrities. The exhibition certainly was all embracing and the open-mindedness of the selection committee was reflected in the variety of art genres, including those that belonged to Chinese traditions and those that were newly learnt from other parts of the world, especially from Europe. FNAE was remarkable, for a 'national' exhibition as it

14 This summary is based on information provided by Takeyoshi Tsuruta in *Bijiutsu Kenkyu*, no. 349, 'Materials on Chinese Painters of the Late Hundred Years Compiled by Takeyoshi Tsuruta', Part II, [based on Tsuruta's publications in *Bijiutsu Kenkyu* nos. 293, 294, 303, 307, 1974]. His description of FNAE is the most detailed among the sources that I have come across on FNAE. He provides the number of pieces of artwork on display in each individual section. The total number of 2328 is the sum of the numbers of the seven separate sections Tsuruta provides. According to Zheng Shengtian, the total number of artworks was 2,346 (Zheng Shengtian, 2004:181). Xiaobing Tang simply states that there were more than 2,200 art works on display (Xiaobing Tang, 2008: 90).

included works by foreigners and overseas Chinese.¹⁵ In the opening remarks by Xu Zhimo published in the first issue of *Meizhan*, he proudly proclaimed it a grand success in China's history of displaying art to the public, highlighting its unprecedented scale in the great number of entries, in its wide range of genres from painting, sculpture, crafts to architecture, and in its inclusion of artists from inland provinces of China and foreign countries (Xu Zhimo 2005, v. 2: 1218–1220).

Members of the standing committee for FNAE were Li Yishi, Lin Fengmian, Jiang Xiaojian, Wang Yiting, Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo in addition to Liu Haisu as the chairman.¹⁶ Li Yishi, Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong all spent extended periods of time in Europe studying painting and were all established and influential artists at the peak of their creative power. Although he did not venture to Europe until 1929, Liu Haisu had already established himself as a prominent artist and a formidable art educator since the 1910s. Wang Yiting was highly respected both as an artist in the Chinese style and a social activist in Shanghai. Jiang Xiaojian spent some time in Europe and had already collaborated with Xu Zhimo previously.

Xu Zhimo was given an extremely important responsibility – editor in chief of *Meizhan*, the exhibition's news bulletin. *Meizhan* was published every three days, beginning on 10 April 1929 when the exhibition opened. An additional issue was published on 7 May 1929 after the exhibition was closed as it was necessary to highlight some of the outstanding submissions and correspondences. Each issue was about eight pages long and contained seven to nine articles and several opinion columns. All eleven issues of *Meizhan* were compiled together and published as a monograph under the title of *Meizhan huikan* (Combined issues of art exhibition) by Xinyue shudian (Crescent moon books) run by Xu Zhimo in Shanghai.

Meizhan was a platform with many important functions. It was a crucial venue for the art community to engage with each other and to communicate their ideas to the wider world. As editor, Xu Zhimo became a major voice representing the committee's liberal attitude that welcomed all styles and expressions in art. On the one hand, the periodical devoted a great deal of space to showcase art works of contemporary artists and past masters. On the other hand, *Meizhan* encouraged and enabled intellectual discussions about art, especially how China's art reform should be carried out. Like the artworks on display, *Meizhan* also interpreted 'art' very broadly and published articles on many aspects of art and art practice, including art education, art exhibitions and

15 Judging by the circumstances, the 'foreign' works seemed to have been works of less-known foreign artists and reproductions of those European and Japanese masters the committee thought should be models for Chinese artists. Xu Beihong's first open letter mentioned his relief that the exhibition did not include certain 'despicable' European artists. Tsuruta only offers a list of Chinese-style paintings for FNAE (Takeyoshi Tsuruta in *Bijiutsu Kenkyu*, no. 349, 1974:128).

16 The list can be found in the chapter on 'Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency' by Eugene Y. Wang (Hearn and Smith 2001: 102–161). These names have also been mentioned by Takeyoshi Tsuruta's publication in *Bijiutsu Kenkyu* no. 349.

the circulation of art. Many of the prominent artists and art critics contributed to the discussion and debate in *Meizhan*.

Xu Zhimo wrote editorials and opinion pages. In his opening remarks in Issue No. 1, he proudly proclaimed it a grand success in China's history of displaying art to the public, highlighting its unprecedented scale in the great number of entries, its wide range of genres from paintings, sculptures, crafts to architecture, and its inclusion of artists from inland provinces of China and foreign countries. In Issue No. 2, Xu Zhimo's spirit remained high, apparently encouraged by the success of the exhibition. In a piece entitled "Imagined Publicity" (*xiangxiang de yulun*), he wrote about the popularity of the exhibition through 'imagined' conversations among viewers and they were full of praises for the exhibition. Xu Zhimo was very creative in promoting the exhibition and the message for the modernisation of art (Xu Zhimo 2005 v. 2: 1227–1228).

However, the most enduring legacy of Xu Zhimo's role in art is his debate with Xu Beihong, known as the 'Debate of the Two Xus' (*erXu zhi zheng*) in modern Chinese art history. Xu Beihong was one of the most influential artists at the time in China. He had a decade long's training at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, the bastion of academic realism. Admiring masters such as Delacroix and Rembrandt, Xu Beihong was an ardent believer in the power of realism. For him what China needed was art that could convey social messages to the masses and this task could only be carried out via realistic rendering of images. Xu's view, although supported by Li Yishi, was not agreed upon by the majority of the standing committee of FNAE and the all-embracing attitude prevailed. Unable to persuade the committee to take his approach, Xu Beihong resigned from the committee and withdrew all his art works from the exhibition shortly before the opening of FNAE. Xu Zhimo tried to pacify Xu Beihong but to no avail.

On 22 April 1929 in Issue No. 5 of *Meizhan*, while the exhibition was becoming increasingly popular in Shanghai and nationally, Xu Beihong's essay *Huo* (Perplexity), was published. It opened with a statement of sarcasm: 'what is really worth celebrating about this inaugural national exhibition is that there are no works by the shameless artists such as Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse or Pierre Bonnard.' Its postscript, which was directed specifically at Xu Zhimo, betrays the true intention of its author, namely to bring the standing committee's disagreement to the open and to rehearse the argument that Xu Beihong had apparently lost in previous discussions. In the same issue, there was the first part of a rejoinder from Xu Zhimo, entitled '*Wo ye huo*' (I am also perplexed), of which the rest appeared in Issue No. 6. In Issue No. 7, Cai Yuanpei published '*Meishu piping de xiangduixing*' (On the relativity of art criticism), trying to bring out the subjective nature of judgement on art merit while retaining his neutrality among the different views. In issue 8 in support of Xu Beihong's viewpoint, Li Yishi's essay declared that '*Wo bu huo*' (I am not perplexed) and forcefully reiterated Xu Beihong's view on the need for realism in art for China. Issues 9 and 10 saw Xu Beihong continue with one further commentary in response to Xu Zhimo's rejoinder. Still centering on the metaphor of perplexity, he kept saying 'perplexity unresolved' (*Huo zhi bujie*). In response to Xu Beihong's last writing, Xu Zhimo wrote a much longer rejoinder of six to seven thousand characters and sent it to Yang Qingqing, another editor of *Meizhan*. Unfortunately, as *Meizhan* ceased publication, Xu Zhimo's response was lost.

In Xu Beihong's first 'Perplexity' essay, he dismissed the artistic merit of the works such as Cézanne, Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas on the grounds of commercialism and lack of solid techniques. But what really worried him, was the distraction of artistic creativity from the bigger aim of serving the nation. In contrast, Xu Zhimo's view was:

What is an artist if not an expression of the unique inspiration an artist experiences in life and transforms into the images of his painting or sculpture? Techniques should have a place. Knowledge is of course also useful. But no one can produce what you and I would call pure art if he only has refined techniques and profound knowledge. What you and I have been constantly seeking in art and in life is exactly fresh expressions of our spirit and nobility of life itself.¹⁷

Apparently, like his mentor Fry, Xu Zhimo considered it most important that art be granted its own autonomy, while he saw art as expression of the self and the audience remained secondary to creativity – as long as the artist was true to his emotions and true to the spirit of the moment. For Xu Beihong and his supporters, it was important that art works speak to the audience and that the artist must fulfil his social responsibilities by producing art works to enhance, instead of corrupting, social morals. He and his followers believed that Chinese art should be inspired by social and historical realism in order to reach a wider audience and to encourage Chinese people to aspire to a better society. His view of artistic realism was, however, more succinctly spelled out by his follower, Li Yishi, who insisted that an artist should be aware of his social responsibilities and that his works should not just be expressions of his own emotions or perceptions, as has been advocated by Xu Zhimo. This is how Li put it:

Expressions of Cézanne and Matisse are indeed more than honest emotions on their part, but I am still against their spread in China, because we may plant harmful seeds there. In the past twenty years, people's thoughts have already been distracted. What we should be doing is to use the power of art to rectify their thinking while soothing their spirit. If indeed such art works as those by Cézanne and Matisse became popular in China, what a disaster that would be! (*Meizhan* No. 8: 2, my translation)

Echoing the view that stresses the social function of art, Xu Beihong subsequently painted one of his major works: *Tianheng wubai shi* (the five hundred martyrs of Tianheng, 1930). It was actually painted during the FNAE and in the midst of the debate with Xu Zhimo. The subject matter is based on a Chinese historical tale of sacrifice and the picture conveys precisely what Xu Beihong intended to tell the masses about the relevance and importance of Chinese national spirit – loyalty, determination, courage and willingness to sacrifice for the country. The vast painting is in oil on canvas, showing strong influences of the academic realist style. The man in the middle, dressed

¹⁷ Xu Zhimo, 'Wo ye huo' (I also am perplexed) Xu Zhimo 2005 v. 2: 1229-1240; English translation, Danzker 2004: 374-377.



Figure 7: Xu Beihong, *Five Hundred Martyrs of Tianheng*, oil on canvas, 198x355cm, 1930, Xu Beihong Museum in Beijing.

in yellow, has a strong resemblance to Xu Beihong himself. This type of immaculately executed, classically composed ideological narrative painting would long remain exemplary works of art in the Maoist era.

On the surface the debate seemed to focus on the Post-Impressionists and whether China's art institutions and individual artists should value them or not. The real issue was the direction of China's art reform. Discussions about how to develop a modern art for a modern China had been ongoing since the beginning of the twentieth century but the 'perplexity' debate accentuated core issues in Chinese art reform and tried to answer questions pertinent to the creative sector. These questions include: whether modern Chinese art should welcome all styles and genres; whether artists' self-expressions should be valued; whether art should serve primarily a social function one way or another, or else a more internal one on the artist's terms. Views expressed by the two Xus and others represented the different stances and divided opinions among Chinese artists and art critics, although it is not always clear that their viewpoints were firmly demarcated. The intensity of this debate was unprecedented in Chinese art history and it manifested the importance of art reform in the minds of artists and intellectuals. The central role of Xu Zhimo in this debate underpinned his function as a public intellectual.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that Xu Zhimo was a renowned cultural figure influential nationally and internationally. He was well-connected with the cultural elite both in China and internationally and he used his connections for China's national advance, especially in the cultural arena. The list of names of leading thinkers, writers, artists and academics who had interacted with him is very long and he collaborated with them for

China's cultural causes, despite and because of their different political persuasions and varied cultural affiliations. At his death, many intellectuals gathered to mourn the loss of a warm-hearted and talented friend. Their articles in memory of Xu Zhimo's deeds overwhelmingly expressed their respect and admiration for this extraordinary individual.¹⁸

Xu Zhimo was highly gifted with wide interests and sound knowledge from literature and art to history and philosophy. A quick and earnest learner, the courses he took at university ranged from humanities, languages, law and mathematics to psychology and logic. All these courses, combined with the Chinese classical education he had received in childhood laid not only a solid foundation for his knowledge structure but also the ability to evaluate arts and literature of the world he later encountered. They also enabled him to make sharp and yet constructive comments about arts and literature and command respect from many different colleagues and friends. His achievement and popularity in modern poetry aside, he was a prolific translator and essayist. His essays won praises from renown essayists such as Zhou Zuoren. His opinions on art were taken seriously by the prominent practising artists of the time, such as Liu Haisu, Chang Yu and – his respectful adversary – Xu Beihong.

Xu Zhimo made considerable contributions as a public intellectual to China's social and cultural change in the less than ten years between his return from Cambridge in 1923 and his untimely death in 1931 in an aeroplane crash. In particular, he played a prominent role in China's art reform and cultural exchange on the international stage. He was a member of the Committee for the Chinese-British Cultural Foundation and Secretary of the Chinese Branch of PEN International, representing China at these international organisations.

Another aim of discussing Xu Zhimo's activities of cultural significance is to show the role of intellectuals and literary figures whose involvement with art reform and art historical events have not been noted in modern Chinese intellectual history. That Xu Zhimo and other literary figures contributed significantly to China's art reform was not historically incidental but was an inbuilt part of the Chinese cultural tradition. Literature and art, or more precisely, poetry and painting, were symbiotic cultural practices of educated Chinese. Their close interaction continued well into the first half of the twentieth century, when many intellectuals and literary writers were actively engaged in art-related writings and activities. Many literary and popular journals also published art works and art criticism. Xu Zhimo was one of the many public intellectuals who were advocating a modern art for a modern nation. He, like Lu Xun, exemplified the intimate connection between literature and arts in Chinese cultural traditions. There were many more who shared similar passions and devoted time to both art and literature, such as Ling Shuhua, Wen Yiduo, Ding Ling, Feng Zikai and Shao Xunmei. In the contemporary Chinese speaking world, Gao Xingjian and Jia Pingwa both are outstanding embodiment of this tradition. All the above owe much to Xu Zhimo.

18 *Xinyue* 1931 vol. 4 no. 1 was a special issue devoted to the memory of Xu Zhimo. Contributors included Yang Zhensheng, the well-known educator, Chu Anping, the social commentator, and He Jiahuai, a writer of the Left-Wing Writers Association. See also the collection of writings in memory of Xu Zhimo by his friends, colleagues and family members: Qin Xianci: 1986.

Xu Zhimo's engagement with art had two distinct features. On the one hand, he was a keen student and absorbed as much information about art as he could, especially during his sojourn and travels in Europe. He went on to enthusiastically disseminate his knowledge, and his insights into artistic issues and art criticism were respected by practitioners and fellow critics and writers alike. On the other hand, as a result of his connections with decision-makers at the highest national levels, he was also deeply involved with China's art reform. The impact and repercussions of his interventions continue today, just as the debate between the two Xus – Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo – continues to ripple among artists, critics and art historians.

Glossary

<i>Balide linzhua</i>	《巴黎的鱗爪》	<i>Mali, Mali</i>	《瑪麗，瑪麗》
Cai Yuanpei	蔡元培	Meizhan	美展
Chang Yu	常玉	<i>Meizhan</i>	《美展》
Chen Congzhou	陳從周	<i>Meizhan bianyan</i>	《美展弁言》
Chen Xiying	陳西滢	Pan Guandan	潘光旦
Chenbao fukan	《晨報副刊》	Qu Qiubai	瞿秋白
Chu Anping	儲安平	Rao Mengkan	饒孟侃
Ding Wenjiang	丁文江	Renjian siyue tian	《人間四月天》
ErXu zhi zheng	二徐之爭	Shao Xunmei	邵洵美
<i>Feilengcui de yiye</i>	《翡冷翠的一夜》	Shehui gaozao jia	社會改造家
<i>Gaozao</i>	《改造》	Shehui minzhu dang	社會民主黨
Guanmen dizi	關門弟子	Shen Xingren	沈性仁
Guohuolu	國貨路	<i>Shenbao</i>	《申報》
Guohuo zhanlan huichang	國貨展覽會場	Shikan zengkan	《詩刊增刊》
Haining	海寧	Shiren Xu Zhimo zhi mo	詩人徐志摩之墓
He Jiahuan	何家槐	Sun Fuyuan	孫伏園
Hu Shi, Hu Shizhi	胡適，胡適之	Wang Chongzhi	王崇植
<i>Huo</i>	《惑》	Wang Yiting	王一亭
<i>Huo zhi bujie</i>	《惑之不解》	Wen Yiduo	聞一多
<i>Jiaoyu xinwen</i>	《教育新聞》	<i>Wo buhuo</i>	《我不惑》
Jiang Baili	蔣百里	<i>Wo yehuo</i>	《我也惑》
Jiang Xiaojian	江小鶴	Xiashi	硤石
Jiao Juyin	焦菊隱	<i>Xiangxiang de yulun</i>	《想像的輿論》
Li Yishi	李毅士	<i>Xin qingnian</i>	《新青年》
Liang Qichao	梁啟超	<i>Xinyue yuekan</i>	《新月月刊》
Liang shiqiu	梁實秋	<i>Xinyue de taidu</i>	《新月的態度》
Lin Fengmian	林風眠	Xu Beihong	徐悲鴻
Ling Shuhua	凌叔華	Xu Shenru	徐申如
Liu Haisu	劉海粟	Xu Zhimo	徐志摩
Lu Xun	魯迅	Yang Zhensheng	楊振聲
Lu Xiaoman	陸小曼	Ye Gongchao	葉公超
Luo Longqi	羅隆基	Yisimusi	邑死木死-isms

Yu Dafu	郁達夫	Zhang Youyi	張幼儀
Yu Shangyuan	余上沅	Zhishi fenzi	知識份子
Yu Yingshi	余英時	Zhou Zuoren	周作人
Zhang Dongsun	張東蓀	Zhuidao Zhimo	《追悼志摩》
Zhang Gongquan	張公權	Zipou	《自剖》
Zhang Junmai	張君勱		

References

- Chen Congzhou 陳從周, 1949. *Xu Zhimo nianpu* 徐志摩年譜 (The chronology of Xu Zhimo). Shanghai: n.p.
- Collins, Martha and Kevin Prufer (eds), 2017. *Into English: Poems, Translations, Commentaries*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press.
- Danzker, Jo-Anne Birnie *et al.* (eds), 2004. *Shanghai Modern: 1919-1945*. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz.
- Han Shishan 韓石山, 2000. *Xu Zhimo zhuan* 徐志摩傳 (Biography of Xu Zhimo). Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe.
- Hearn, Maxwell K. and Judith G. Smith (eds), 2001. *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Hsu, Tony, 2017. *Chasing the Modern: The Twentieth-Century Life of Poet Xu Zhimo*. Cambridge: Cambridge River Press.
- Lang Shaojun and Shui Zhongtian (eds), 1999. *Ershi shiji Zhongguo meishu wenxuan* 二十世紀中國美術文選 (Selected writings on art in China in the twentieth century). 2 vols. Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe.
- Laurence, Patricia, 2003. *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press.
- Leo Ou-fan Lee, 1973. *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Liang Xihua 梁錫華 (ed.), 1979. *Xu Zhimo yingwen shuxin ji* 徐志摩英文書信集 (Collection of Xu Zhimo's correspondence in English). Taipei: Lianjing.
- 梁錫華, 1979. *Xu Zhimo xinzhuan* 徐志摩新傳 (A new biography of Xu Zhimo). Taipei: Liangjing.
- Lu Xun 魯迅, 1956. *Lu Xun lun meishu* 魯迅論美術 (Lu Xun on art), Zhang Wang 張望, (ed.) Beijing: Beijing renmin meishu.
- 1913. “Ni bobu meishu yijianshu 擬播布美術意見書 (Draft Proposal on the Dissimilation of Art)” in Lu Xun 1956: pp. 1–5.
- McDougall, Bonnie S. and Kam Louie (eds), 1997. *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*. Gosford, NSW: Bushbooks
- Qin Xianci 秦賢次 (ed.), 1986. *Yunyou: Xu Zhimo huainianji* 雲遊——徐志摩懷念集 (Travelling like clouds: In memory of Xu Zhimo). Taipei: Lanting shudian.
- Ruan Rongchun 阮榮春 and Hu Guanghua 胡光華, 2005. *Zhongguo jinxindai meishushi* 1911-1949 中國近現代美術史 1911-1949 (The history of modern Chinese art: 1911-1949). Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe.
- Small, Helen (ed.), 2012. *The Public Intellectual*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Spalding, Frances, 1980. *Roger Fry: Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Song Binghui 宋炳輝, 2001. *Xu Zhimo zhuan* 徐志摩傳 (Biography of Xu Zhimo). Hong Kong: Huaqianshu chubanshe youxian gongsi.
- Spence, Jonathan D., 1981. *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and their Revolution 1895-1980*. New York: Viking Press.
- Tang, Xiaobing, 2008. *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tsuruta, Takeyoshi, (ed.), 1974. 'Materials on Chinese Painters of the Late Hundred Years Compiled by Takeyoshi Tsuruta', Part II, [based on Tsuruta's publications in *Bijutsu Kenkyu* nos. 293, 294, 303, 307].
- Wang, David Der-wei, 2001. 'In the Name of the Real'. Hearn and Smith 2001: 29–59.
- Wang, Eugen Y., 2001. 'Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency'. Hearn and Smith 2001: 102–161.
- Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻, 'Huo 惑' (Perplexity), Lang and Shui 1999: 200–202; English translation, Danzker 2004: 373–374.
- 'Huo zhi bu jie 惑之不解' (Perplexity unresolved). Lang and Shui 1999: 218–222.
- 'Huo zhi bu jie 惑之不解 (xu 續)' (Perplexity unresolved) (continued). Lang and Shui 1999: 223–225.
- Xu Zhimo 2005. *Xu Zhimosanwen quanbian* 徐志摩散文全編 (The complete collection of Xu Zhimo's essays). Han Shishan 韓石山 (ed.), Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe.
- Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, 1929. 'Meizhan bianyan 美展弁言' (Opening remarks on the First National Art Exhibition), *Meizhan*, no. 1, 10 April 1929, p.1.
- 'Wo ye huo 我也惑' (I also am perplexed), Lang and Shui 1999: 203–213; English translation, Danzker 2004: 374–377.
- Yang Qingxin 楊清磐, 'Huo hou xiaoyan 惑後小言' (Some brief remarks after perplexity), Lang and Shui 1999: 226–227.
- Yang Xinmin 楊新敏, 1999. *Xu Zhimo zhuan* 徐志摩傳 (Biography of Xu Zhimo). Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe.
- Yeh, Michelle (ed. and trans.), 1992. *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Yu Yingshi 余英時, 1987. *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (The scholar-official and Chinese culture). Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe.
- Zhang Jungu 章君毅, 1960. *Xu Zhimo zhuan* 徐志摩傳 (Biography of Xu Zhimo). Taipei: Lizhi chubanshe.
- Zhao Xiaqiu 趙遐秋, 1989. *Xu Zhimo zhuan* 徐志摩傳 (Biography of Xu Zhimo). Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe.
- Zheng Shengtian. 'Waves Lashed the Bund from the West: Shanghai's Art Scene in the 1930s', Danzker 2004: 174–198.

Biographical Note

Yiyan Wang is Professor of Chinese at Victoria University of Wellington. Her research interests include modern Chinese literature and culture and diaspora studies, and she has published widely on these topics. She is currently completing a project on the modern Chinese intellectual history of art.