

# Transplantation of European Styles of Painting in China in the Early Twentieth Century

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*When the Venetian traveler Marco Polo (1254-1324) brought tales of the Chinese Kingdom back to Italy in the fourteenth century, the Occident and the Orient remained two worlds far apart. The presentation of two European clocks by another Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) to the Wanli emperor (1573-1620) of the Ming dynasty (1368-1633) court on 24 January 1601 marked the beginning of the history of China's interaction with the West. For the first time, the Chinese saw the meticulous and life-like religious paintings brought by the missionary from the West. The Emperor Qianlong's (1736-95) fascination with Western art and artifacts led to the founding of an atelier in the Imperial court led by the Jesuit Castiglione (1688-1766) from Milan.*

*By the nineteenth century, European nations empowered by the success of the Industrial Revolution were resolved to open the Chinese market to the huge quantity of goods produced in their factories. When European diplomatic missions to China failed to secure the trading privileges they sought, military skirmishes ensued and ended in defeats and humiliating treaties for China.*

*In order to counter the Western powers, China embarked on the road to modernization and westernization. Chinese students were sent overseas to acquire knowledge in science, technology, and culture, and among them were some of the best Chinese artists.*

*The first generation of Western painters in China went to Japan to learn Western painting because Japan was closer and the First World War was raging in Europe. When the war ended in 1919, Chinese students went to France to study the contemporary styles of Western painting. This paper studies the historical background of the beginning of Western painting in China and examines how Impressionism, among other Western European styles, affected Chinese artists of the early twentieth century.*

**Keywords:** *art impressionism in China, Europe and Chinese art, modernization and Chinese art, westernization and Chinese art.*

*European styles of painting in China in the early 20th century*

As one of the oldest civilizations in the world, China maintained a high level of political and cultural supremacy until the late eighteenth century when the newly risen European powers looked to the East for markets to absorb their abundance of goods produced as a result of the success of the Industrial Revolution. When European diplomatic missions to China failed to secure the trading privileges from the Chinese court, military skirmishes ensued. The confrontations often ended in defeat and humiliating treaties for China.

The frailty of national defense and the lack of political, social, and economic structures to counter the West necessitated China to launch a program of reform that came to be known as the Self-Strengthening Movement. The Manchu dynasty modeled her reform effort after Japan's because the Meiji Restoration had succeeded in putting Japan on the road to modernization. Without other recourse in the face of European military strength, China thus began a reluctant and desperate effort of national salvation. The Chinese attributed the success of the West's ascension to power to science and democracy. Democracy and science were deemed as the means for China's national salvation. The strategy of the Self-Strengthening Movement, therefore, was to acquire the skills and learning of the West.

Modernization through westernization was an acknowledgement of the inherent inadequacies of Chinese traditional culture. Reform efforts were met with great resistance from the overwhelming conservatism of the scholar Mandarin class who were ardent subscribers to traditional Confucian values. Soon Confucian precepts came under attack by the reformers who blamed Confucian tradition as the cause of China's weakness and therefore the main obstacle to reform. In art, traditional Chinese ink painting was also considered backward and unscientific. Chinese artists turned to the study of Western painting in search of a solution to modernize the art of China.

In the heat of the rampant debates between the conservatives and the reformers, China began sending students overseas to acquire knowledge in science, technology, and culture as well as all aspects of government and society. Many went to Japan, others to the United States and Europe. The knowledge acquired was applied to build up a modern nation with military, economic, and social systems at par with those of the West.

## **PAINTING IN CHINA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

In China, the revered forms of art practice are calligraphy and painting done by scholars who were also officials at court. Between calligraphy and painting, calligraphy is considered the more superior form of artistic expression. Both employ the same materials: ink, brush, and paper.

Since the fourth century, artists have signed their names on paintings that came to be known as literati painting. The association of artistic personality with art in literati painting distinguished China's pictorial tradition as a form of independent cultural expression for the individual artist.

After centuries of development, Chinese painting was considered highly satisfactory and adequate in itself that Chinese painters believed that the internal dynamics would continue to renew and invigorate itself. With a culture steeped in historicity, the style was passed on from one generation to another. Artists began their studies by copying the works of old masters. After a mastery of technical and stylistic repertoire of all the historic styles and techniques, they could then create styles of their own. Nonetheless, it was a slow evolving process, and reference to the styles of old masters was still considered an essential mark of the scope of the knowledge of scholar-painters.

Chinese painting reached its height of development in the twelfth century. By that time, the technical vocabulary and iconography as well as content were well established. Brush techniques were reduced to type-forms that were considered to have been perfected by historic masters. Iconography spanned the breadth of history, mythology, religion, literature, philosophy, etc. Content included the main subjects of landscape, figure, and bird-and-flower.

Aesthetically, descriptive exactitude was underplayed in order not to interfere with the appreciation of the historic and literary references. As an adjunct of the calligraphic art, brush line that may or may not describe form was highly regarded. The manipulation of ink and its myriad grades of ink tone alluded to form and volume. The de-emphasis of color in literary painting was another aesthetic choice of the scholar-painters in representing an artistic

realm that differentiated depicted form from physical reality. The interplay of brush line and ink tones served to make literary art an embodiment of the ideal of the Confucian scholar who is steeped in history and yet able to transcend physicality through an art that emphasizes rhythm, space, and intellectual contemplation. Although Chinese painting was appreciated for the abstract qualities of line, space, and rhythm, it never developed into an abstract art. This is very indicative of the duality of the psyche of the Chinese scholars. While they took on the Confucian sense of moral obligation to serve the emperor and society, they were equally enticed by the teaching of Daoism and Buddhism and yearned to transcend the reality of worldly affairs. There was a split in their personality between the Confucian moral obligation of active participation in society versus the Daoist and Buddhist passivity and yearning for withdrawal from the dusty world.

Being closely affiliated with calligraphy, the manipulation of the brush line became a basic skill in Chinese painting. Chinese painting as we know today is the composite art of painting, calligraphy, and poetry, with the forms complementing each other in one format.

## **CHINA'S ARTISTIC EXCHANGE WITH THE WEST**

Diverse cultural choices create differing cultural practices. Since the introduction of Western paintings into China 500 years ago, the Chinese upper class regarded Western painting only as a form of imported curiosity just as the Europeans had regarded art and artifacts from China. The Confucian ideology that dominated Chinese politics created a powerful ruling class more concerned with the harmony of heaven, earth, and man. They were more interested in intellectuality than technology. The Chinese had little regard for technology, which they relegated to the materialistic and therefore lower ranking. On the other hand, Westerners, unfamiliar with the nuances of Chinese cultural manifestations, would not be able to grasp what Chinese considered significant in their cultural expressions.

Paradoxically, by the time the Chinese traveled to the West to study Western realism as a means of national salvation and artistic revival, Europe had begun its struggle to break from the domination of Academic realism. While the Chinese artists had liberated

themselves as individuals since the fourth century, their Western counterparts remained at the service of the church and the state until the nineteenth century when the official Salon style of Academic realism was challenged by artists refusing to conform to the official style. Claude Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* exhibited in Paris in 1874 heralded the overwhelming influence of the Impressionist painting movement. Therefore, when the first artist left China in 1887, Impressionism had dominated not only the art circles in Paris but also the whole of Europe and America, and changed the course of development in the West, with far reaching implications in Asia.

In the early part of the twentieth century, France was seen as the cradle of freedom and internationalism and the center of culture. The founder of the Chinese Communist Party Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) wrote in the radical *New Youth* magazine: "France is the teacher of world civilization. Today Paris is, in particular, the hub of science, culture and art. Our countrymen intending to study Western culture seriously should go and study in that country in order to find the true essence."<sup>1</sup>

The encounter of China with the West in the late nineteenth century opened up a new chapter in Chinese history. Henceforth, China had to face the West with a new outlook and a changed attitude. In art, Chinese artists acquired the contemporary technique and styles in Europe. Upon their return, Western art style became permanently transplanted in China alongside ink painting. Yet ink painting remained an art practice whose appeal to its many followers showed no sign of diminishing even as Western styles of painting had also taken root in an old country that was unrelenting in keeping up with development beyond her national boundary.

### **LI TIEFU (1869-1952)**

Li Tiefu is noted as one of the earliest Chinese artists to go abroad to study art. He was born to a poor family in Guangdong. In 1885, he was taken by relatives to America and England where he became the first Chinese student to enroll in the fine arts program in the Arlington School of Art. While in England, he became acquainted with Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925) who was traveling between England and America to spread his revolutionary ideal of toppling the Manchu dynasty and establishing a democratic republic in China.

Li became a close associate of Sun and followed him to America. After the success of the revolution and the founding of the Chinese republic in China in 1911, Li stayed behind in New York and dedicated himself to art. He enrolled in the Academy of Design. He was subsequently associated with the Academy of Fine Arts in New York and the Art Students' League. His studies in New York enabled him to gain exposure to the Western academic tradition.

Li declared himself on his visiting card as "Lee Y. Tian A. M., Professor of Portrait, Follower of Mr. William M. Chase and Mr. John Sargent, 1905-1925".<sup>2</sup>

William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) founded the Chase School of Art in 1896, which became the New York School of Art two years later. He was instructor at the school until 1907. Prolific in the painting of portraits, landscapes and still lifes, his most famous still-life subject was dead fish, which he liked to paint against dark back-grounds.<sup>3</sup> He adopted the plein air method of painting in his landscapes and often depicted women and children in leisurely pursuits in the outdoors. Chase had a close association with Monet and brought Impressionism back to America.<sup>4</sup> The landscapes of Shinnecock works in particular have come to be thought of by art historians as especially fine examples of American Impressionism.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Li's claim, no document has been uncovered to prove that he studied with Chase. But Li's emulation of the style of Chase can be seen in the large number of still-life paintings of fish that Li left behind as a major corpus of his legacy (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> His painting *Countryside in New York* of 1924 also points to a stylistic reference to Chase.<sup>7</sup>

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) was an American painter who was schooled as a French artist. Spending most of his time in Europe and moving in the circle of the Impressionists, he came to know most of them and was particularly close to Monet. In sharing the artistic aspiration of the Impressionist movement, his celebrated style of portrait painting shows the influence of the Spanish master Velazquez, the Dutch master Frans Hals, and his teacher Carolus-Duran. His landscape paintings done after the 1880s are more akin to the technique and style of the Impressionists. The influence of Sargent on Li can be appreciated in the latter's portrait paintings with rich textures.<sup>8</sup>

Li remained loyal to Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary cause until Sun succeeded in toppling the Manchu dynasty and founded the Republic of China in 1911. Li stayed on in New York and was able to sustain himself there as a professional painter. When he finally decided to go back to China, he returned to Canton in 1930, and in 1932, he moved to Hong Kong, then a British colony. Li left Hong Kong to take refuge in China from 1942 to 1947 when China was at war with Japan. He returned to China in 1950, one year after the People's Republic of China was founded by the Chinese Communist Party. He died in 1952, bequeathing all his paintings to the state.<sup>9</sup>

While Li Tiefu was a trailblazer as one of the earliest Chinese artists to professionally acquire Western-painting skills, his career of turmoil and material deprivation denied him the opportunity to pass on his legacy to the very few followers that he had taught. Thus, his part in the subsequent development of Western painting in China did not have the impact it would have had if he had lived in less tumultuous times.

### **LI SHUTONG (1880-1942)**

More than a decade after Li Tiefu began his studies in Western painting, Li Shutong took up the same advocacy in learning techniques of Western painting in order to bring about an artistic revival in China. Compared to Li Tiefu, Li Shutong was able to inspire a tremendous following in his career as an artist and a teacher. As an artist of great prominence in the early period of development of Western art in China, he was also a musician, dramatist, calligrapher, seal carver, and poet. However, his artistic career was cut short when he became a monk. Li Shutong, the artist, came to be known as Buddhist master Hongyi.

Li Shutong was born in Tianjin in 1880.<sup>10</sup> As a young man, he was already interested in Western art and its potential in China when, around 1900, he came under the influence of Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), who was trained as a lawyer in Germany. He was inspired by Schiller's idea of aesthetic education. After his return to China, he assumed high position in the Chinese educational system and proposed "replacing religion with aesthetic education" (*meiyu dai zongjiao shuo*). He saw in aesthetic education the means to social and moral redemption and a tool to cultivate a sense of mission

(*shiming*) among artists as their calling to bring about the salvation of the nation.

In 1905, Li Shutong, together with Zeng Yannian (d. 1921), went to Japan to study art. After spending some months studying the Japanese language, Li Shutong enrolled in the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, which was the most prominent art school in Japan at the time. The head of the school then was Kuroda Seiki (1866-1924), who had studied art for nine years in France under Raphael Collin (1850-1916), a Salon artist of the plein air school who taught Kuroda Academic painting. As a result of Kuroda's training in Europe, he believed that mastery of drawing of the anatomy should form the basis of painting and, therefore, nude sketching was important in the training of an artist.

Kuroda's own style of oil painting that combined the detailed naturalism of the Academic school with early Impressionism attracted a large following.<sup>11</sup> Kuroda's *Reading* of 1901 shows a young girl of Grez, the daughter of Kuroda's landlord, reading by the light streaming in through the slats of the louvered window.<sup>12</sup> The tendency towards Impressionist techniques became even more evident in his later works.

In promoting the style of the Impressionists, Kuroda formed the White Horse Society (*Hakubakai*), which organized exhibitions to show Impressionist paintings by Japanese artists. Kuroda's contribution to the development of Western art outside Europe was not only confined to Japan. Through his Chinese students, Impressionism was also introduced to China and set a new course of development in a very old culture with her own highly developed painting tradition to which Japanese painting had close allegiance for centuries back.

When Li Shutong went to Japan in 1905, he was already an accomplished Chinese painting master. Under the mentorship of Kuroda, Li Shutong studied anatomy and the sketching of live nude models. When he returned to Shanghai after his graduation in 1911, he became China's first Japanese-trained artist in Western painting. Following the example of his Japanese mentor, Li Shutong dedicated himself to a career in art education.

By 1912, he was teaching at the Zhejiang First Normal College in Hangzhou. There he devised a course based on that of the Tokyo

School of Fine Arts, which included not only Western painting and music but also art history and drawing of nude male models. It was a significant development in art education in China. Li Shutong's innovative teaching methods also included sending his students out to draw from nature, a venture so unheard of in China. In his teaching, he stressed the importance of advertising and commercial art, which he considered important communication tools. He was the first person to introduce graphic illustrations into newspapers. Drawing some of the illustrations himself for the art and literature magazine *Taipingyang bao* (Pacific Monthly), which he edited, he was also the first one to develop woodcut as an art form, cutting and printing his own blocks. He was the first to advocate the reform of Chinese traditional painting. He wrote the first Western art history book for China entitled *Lectures on the History of Western Art*, and he organized the first art society on Western art, the Western Painting Research Association.

In 1917, Li Shutong suddenly gave up his teaching and devoted himself to study Daoism. One year later, he gave up society altogether. He gave all his oils and watercolors to the Beijing National Academy of Fine Arts. All were lost during the chaotic years of war. As a Buddhist monk, he took the name of Hongyi. Until his death in 1942, his artistic venture was confined to calligraphy and a few Buddhist pictures that he left behind.

Despite the overwhelming acknowledgement of Li Shutong's contribution to the advancement of the knowledge of Western art in China and the innovative methods he introduced to art education in China, very little is known about his art.

On a photograph of a charcoal drawing of the face of a young girl, Feng Zikai, a student of Li Shutong, wrote an inscription pointing out that it was one of the earliest works by Li Shutong that was done when he first began to learn Western painting.<sup>13</sup>

Another reference to his art is a little watercolor landscape he painted on the back of a postcard that he sent back to his family in Tianjin during his first year as an art major in Japan in 1905.<sup>14</sup> An oil painting of a nude reclining in a chair barely survived into the Cultural Revolution but failed to escape the fate of destruction. Only a black and white photograph kept by Feng has remained to bear testimony to his free and assured brushwork.<sup>15</sup>

The only surviving artistic creation by Li Shutong is a self-portrait now in the collection of the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts (Figure 2).<sup>16</sup> Compared with Van Gogh's *Self Portrait*, Li Shutong had painted the background in broad vertical strips of varying colors rather than of Van Gogh's halo-like arrangement. The vibrant short strokes and vivid application of pigment is a clear indication of the influence of Impressionist concepts and styles that his mentor Kuroda taught.

Despite Li Shutong's short career as an artist and art educator, his impact on the art circle was important. By the time he retreated into monastic life, China was ready for the reception of Western art. The gifted and dynamic personalities of Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu were to follow the suit of Li Shutong to become the most illustrious names in the art reform movement in China in the twentieth century.

### **XU BEIHONG (1895-1955)**

Xu Beihong was the son of a poor country painter who taught him to paint in the traditional style. He traveled with his father as an itinerant painter doing conservative ancestral portraits for rich families.

Xu's fascination with the Western style of commercial painting in advertisements led him to search for opportunities in Shanghai in 1912. He became acquainted with Gao Jianfu (1879-1951) who had returned from studies in Japan. Gao was dedicated to artistic reform in China and advocated his idea in his publication of the first art periodical *Zhenxiang buobao* (The True Record Illustrated Magazine). Gao and his brother Gao Qifeng (1889-1933), together with Chen Shuren (1884-1948), were the founders of the Lingnan School of Painting in Guangdong. They were focused on the reform of traditional Chinese painting, and they advocated the concept of *xin guohua* (New Chinese Painting) that aimed to reform traditional Chinese painting by introducing aesthetic and pictorial techniques of Western art to renew the traditional medium.

Gao Jianfu's enthusiasm in the reform of Chinese painting affected Xu deeply. With the help of a patron, he went to Japan for a brief study in May 1917. In Japan, he was first exposed to the

plein air school of painting practiced by Japanese painters to achieve individualistic styles through careful observation and description of nature and new approaches to the use of materials. He was also inspired by the Japanese painters of ink painting, *Nibonga*, and contemplated on the possibilities of merging Chinese and Western techniques and methods to re-invigorate Chinese painting, just as Gao Jianfu was ardently promoting after he returned to Shanghai from Japan.

In December 1917, Xu returned to Beijing that was a center of intellectual ferment of the time. Many progressive publications including *New Youth*, *The Weekly Review*, and others launched severe attacks on traditional culture. Every aspect of the old order was repudiated as the culprit of China's weakness. These publications ardently promulgated the ideas of democracy and science to their readers. Xu was an enthusiastic supporter of these new ideas. He soon became a sympathizer and vocal proponent of reform in Chinese painting. He attributed the decline of Chinese painting to the conservative method of copying old masters that stifled creativity.

In the inaugural issue of *Painting Magazine* published by Beijing University, Xu published the article "On the Improvement of Chinese Painting". Despite his resentment of the stronghold of conservatism in Chinese painting, he did not repudiate the practice altogether. He also considered certain aspects of Chinese painting worth preserving. He proposed that in the process of the modernization of Chinese painting, artists ought to "preserve those traditional methods which are good, revive those which are moribund, change those which are bad, strengthen those which are weak and amalgamate those elements of Western painting which can be adopted". (*The Art of Xu Beihong*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1988), p. 24.)

In 1919, Xu went to France to study art on a scholarship. He was determined to learn what he could from Western art, science, and democracy in order to bring about a renaissance in Chinese art. His studies in France began with the study of drawing in the Academie Julian. He then moved on to Ecole Nationale Superieure and studied with Flameng. Outside his lessons, he used all the time he could spare to visit major art collections in museums. Among the European masters, the works of Prud'hon, Delacroix, Velasquez, and Rembrandt at the Louvre and the Luxembourg were favorite

models for his studious copies. His visits to France, Germany, and Italy exposed him to the works by Renaissance masters, particularly the sculptures in St. Peter's and the Michelangelo frescoes in the Sistine Chapel. With his own knowledge and technical competence in Chinese painting, he carefully studied the many masterpieces of Western art with the aim of appreciating the differences between Western and Oriental art.

In the winter of 1920, Xu met Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929) who impressed upon him the importance of drafting, drawing, and accurate portrayal of the human anatomy. He also pointed out to Xu the importance of color, an element not prominent in Chinese painting. Dagnan-Bouveret directed Xu's attention to Rubens whom he considered a master colorist.

Dagnan-Bouveret, who had studied with the leading French academic painter Jean Leon Gérôme, was a well-established and acknowledged naturalist painter. Like the Impressionists, he explored the artistic possibilities recently introduced by the medium of photography. But unlike the Impressionists, his approach in modernizing the Academic tradition was to use contemporary themes and techniques in his painting to meet the aesthetic challenges posed by the Impressionists. Therefore, his interest lay in the creation of photographically accurate compositions inspired by daily life. He was in fact the upholder of the Academic tradition at a time when it was coming under attack by the modernists.<sup>17</sup>

It was this moderate approach to change that affected Xu. When he returned to China in 1927, his advocacy of Academic naturalism subjected him to a similar kind of opposition that his mentor had encountered in France. But back in China, naturalism found a responsive audience who could understand the content and marvel at the new technique. Xu soon became a leader in the new art movement. He was considered as an ardent preserver of a style that was becoming outdated in Europe. His dedicated defense of Academic realism was soon challenged by more radical artist Liu Haisu who was to become his main adversary in the struggle to lead Chinese art on the road to modernization.

Xu's large-scale oil paintings of historical subjects were most impressive for his com-patriots. His epic oil paintings were composed of many figures, which were a result of many meticulous sketches. The inclusion of nude figures in these Chinese historic

subjects, such as that in the depiction of the loyalist Tian Heng and his 500 Retainers, a story from the third century BC, was considered ingenious (Figure 3).<sup>18</sup>

Motivated by his original intention to reinvigorate Chinese painting, Xu Beihong's large programmatic figural compositions were later executed in ink and brush on equally impressive scales. The large-scale Chinese painting of Jiufang Gao, a woodcutter, a connoisseur of horses and a popular hero who lived in the second century BC, was a skillful adaptation of Western methods of anatomical sketching in Chinese paintings.<sup>19</sup> This kind of approach was considered novel and accessible to the public, and recognized as an important interpretation of modernity.

The depiction of bourgeoisie life, as in *Sound of the Flute* and *Silvery Night* (Figure 4), was a common subject in Impressionist paintings; yet, it was a genre that was new in China.<sup>20</sup> The loose application of pigment and broad strokes were traits of Impressionist technique, and the cropped composition was of course an effect of photography which equally attracted the Impressionists and Xu's mentor Dagnan-Bouveret. Moreover, the titles of the painting in themselves suggest the kind of lyricism and spirituality that underlies the pathos of the Chinese scholar-painters.

When Xu arrived in Paris, Impressionism was already overtaken by other developments in Europe. Cubism was the new trend that captured the art circle in Paris. Xu's allegiance to Academic realism was closely related to his training in the Academy and the influence of Dagnan-Bouveret. But, ultimately, it was his choice of artistic language.

Acknowledged as one of the most important modern artists in China, Xu Beihong dominated the Chinese art circle for decades after his return to China. However, the style of Academic realism that took him to the height of his fame and popularity became the target of attack by those artists who looked beyond Academism and Impressionism and found true calling in the succeeding movements in Europe. Liu Haisu was one of his critics who called Xu a "martyr of realism" in his lack of response to contemporary trends that appeared in Europe after Impressionism.

While Xu's oil painting is held in high regard, his fame is derived from his ink painting. Depicted in rigorous strokes, his

*Galloping Horse* is appreciated both for its life-likeness and dynamics.<sup>21</sup> The attraction of his horses lies in his skillful conveyance of anatomical structure. His interest in painting horses goes back to his youthful days. His fascination with Castiglione's paintings, of horses in particular, drew him to oil painting. He had acquired his deft execution of the anatomical structure of the horse through his vigorous training in sketching and the study of anatomy in France. The swiftness of his brush application and the animation of his galloping horses made for popular consumption. It was the iconic ink painting of horses that made Xu Beihong a household name and secured for him an important position in Chinese art history.

### **LIU Haisu (1896-1994)**

Born to a well-off family in Wuxing, Jiansu in 1896, Liu Haisu began his classical education at a private school at the age of six. His leaning towards art was detected early. At age fourteen, he was enrolled in Zhou Xiang's little Ecole de Peinture de Shanghai in Baxianqiao, where students were taught to paint scenery and backdrops for photographers. When Liu discovered Velazquez and Goya in a bookshop, his ideals in art took a new course of direction. At the age of sixteen, with his father's financial help, he opened his own art school to teach Western art. The Shanghai Tuhua Meishu Yuan was the first academy of art in Shanghai. It was to develop into the highly successful Shanghai Academy of Art at a later stage.<sup>22</sup>

The art school that Liu founded was the first co-educational school in China, and for the first time, women could acquire formal training in art. In 1915, Liu was already the subject of the wrath of the conservatives for introducing the sketching of female models in his studio classes. The conservative society burst out in damning protest against moral corruption and flouting of social standards.

Liu was dubbed the "Rebel in Art". His career in promoting Western-style art was never short of drama partly due to his brave young age and mostly due to his predilection for drama, which befitted radical art advocates and certainly met the public's expectation of the behavior of a bohemian reformer of art. His father's financial assistance provided him with a lot more opportunities than many of his struggling contemporaries.

Again with financial help from his family, Liu followed the track of his predecessor and visited Tokyo twice, in 1918 and 1929. He was not formally associated with any art school while he was in Japan, but he made the acquaintance of important Japanese oil painters including those who had been trained in Europe such as Fujishima Takeji, Mitsutani Kunishiro, and Asai Chu's well-known pupil Ishii Takutei. When Liu returned to China, he published *Biography of Millet* and then *Biography of Cezanne* to introduce Western art to his countrymen.

In 1929, with the help of Cai Yuanpei, then the Minister of Education, Liu traveled to Paris. Again, he did not attach himself to any art school but traveled constantly in France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and London. In a postcard sent from Paris to his close friend Xu Zhimo, he shared his observation of the developments in the field of fine art in Europe. Dated May 1930, the postcard is a photograph of Liu with Albert Bernard taken at the latter's studio in Paris. On the card, Liu wrote: "The man with white hair in the picture is Albert Bernard. Mr. Bernard was admired and emulated by masters like Matisse. He is actually a master in the modern art scene in Europe, an important person and a contemporary of the Impressionist Movement in the nineteenth century. The Impressionists discovered a new vista in light and color. Mr. Bernard is focused on the illusion of light and color. At the same time, he paid attention to solid sketching. He is especially famous for wall painting and the vanguard of symbolism. [He is] a close friend of Rodin, Renoir, Monet and Chagall.... His works are collected in museums in different countries. He is one of the few great masters still alive today. He is now eighty years old."<sup>23</sup>

Liu's enthusiastic remarks about the new developments in art in Europe at the time also reveal his resentment of Xu Beihong whose style he considered outdated. The rivalry between Liu and Xu stretched back to the early 1920s. When Xu founded the Heavenly Horse Painting Society in Shanghai, Liu also launched a painting society in Paris. Liu named his society Heavenly Dog Painting Society, on the ground that Dog eats Horse. Xu had once derided the works of the Post-Impressionist as messy and unseemly. Equipped with new knowledge upon his return China in 1936, and with the support of the writings of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, Liu wrote a vigorous treatise in defense of Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Matisse.

Liu described the art of Van Gogh, remarking that “His world is like a sort of raging fire; it is a world of the natural force of inner life.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the solid form, vibrant brush strokes, and the heavy laid-on pigment of Liu’s canvases of the 1920s demonstrate his admiration for Van Gogh, a passionate sense of kindred communion that lasted throughout his career.

Liu’s journeys to Japan and Europe gave him much inspiration to develop as an artist. While his *Express Train* of 1929 was again painted as homage to Van Gogh, *Dusk at Notre Dame* and *Sunset at Westminster* were close imitations of Monet.<sup>25</sup>

While Liu liberally took inspiration from the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masters, he soon moved on to more personal creations. His *Country House in Indonesia* of 1940 (Figure 5) compares interestingly with Pissaro’s *Hermitage Hillside, Pontoise* of 1873.<sup>26</sup> Although Liu may not have had that painting in mind as his model, the diagonally layered planes of landscape receding into space is a schematic composition not seen in Chinese painting. The comparison is introduced here to show Liu’s creative adaptation of a similar composition schema in his splash ink-and-color painting in his *Peaks of Mount Huang* of 1954 (Figure 6).<sup>27</sup> A similar kind of stylistic transfer lasted through a series of monumental mountain sceneries that Liu created in the remaining years of his artistic career. His *Magnificent Landscape* of 1971 and *Flower Valley of Mount Huang* of 1981 are outstanding examples.<sup>28</sup> The creative genius of Liu did not allow him to remain a mere imitator for long. His skillful adaptation of a non-Chinese composition with simple orientation gave his landscape greater impact. His drawing of pigment on the landscape is also an ingenious application which he learned from the West. His concern for texture in his application of pigment is a feature unique to his ink painting. What Liu Haisu accomplished is a consummate synthesis of the East and the West.

## **CONCLUSION**

China’s program of modernization engendered the full-scale learning of Western knowledge. Chinese artists also sought to examine Western art technique as an alternative and a tool for the strengthening of their own practice of pictorial presentation. The art academies in Europe was the official training ground for the

first generation of Chinese artists who went abroad to study art in the early twentieth century. Artists who arrived later soon learned that the style of classical realism taught in the academy was already being overtaken by various modernist styles.

When the Chinese students returned to China after study abroad during the 1920s and 1930s, they brought back their newly acquired knowledge and technique of art practice from the West. Many of them became teachers in the recently inaugurated system of academy modeled after that in France and Japan. The interest in the subject led to the formation of art societies, exhibitions, and publications on European styles.

For a long time, the Chinese considered Western realism as the work of the artisan and did not hold such in high regard. It was not until the intellectual awakening in the nineteenth century and in the processes of modernization that Chinese artists looked at Western realist painting seriously. In the art circle, European art was an important subject studied not only as an artistic practice but scrutinized in the light of ideology and culture embodied in the spirit of modernization in China at the time.

As the Chinese acknowledged science and democracy as the essential progressive elements in Western culture, they discovered in Western realist painting elements such as volume, form, texture, space, perspective, light, etc. that were lacking in Chinese traditional painting. Soon, they also saw in Impressionism similarities with Chinese water and ink painting in that the Impressionists' approach to form was not an attempt to replicate physical likeness.

After viewing Monet's *Lotus in Paris* in 1935, Liu Haisu wrote: "Monet's relationship with the artists before him is to rise above his time and extend the vista of art. He is unlike the other in his depiction of the vibrating light atoms; he has reached the centre of all physical manifestation. Therefore his art is painting, is music, is poetry, is science and is philosophy. As far as painting, his colors is a melody of shimmering light; as for music, rhythm emerges from the tip of his brush, enriched with his application of pulsating tones of colors. As for poetry, he immersed all the sceneries into 'light' that appear as intense and complex sensations. As he used a divisionistic method of color application, therefore it can be referred to as science. Since (the painting) is not restricted by physical form, it has broken the

mystery of sensory cognition; it is emotionally endowed with a communion with the spiritual.”<sup>29</sup>

Considering aesthetic sensibilities on the highest level as universally shared, Huang Beihong, regarded as the greatest master of water and ink painter in the twentieth century, suggested that “in art, there is no differentiation between the East and the West. Impressionist painting represented an artistic progress that converges with aesthetic ideals of the East.”<sup>30</sup>

Westernization was a process of self-redemption for the Chinese pictorial tradition. Many Chinese artists who tried their hand in the Western medium began their artistic training in the tradition of brush and ink painting. Turning to the West was an attempt to broaden their understanding of art practices outside their indigenous culture. They tried to understand the subtle differences of strength and weaknesses. Basically, they did not think that their own pictorial language was inadequate. Rather, when they learned about the alternative mode of visualization and picture making, they tried to incorporate what they considered modern into their painting.

In the adoption and transplantation of the Western modes of picture-making, the ultimate intention of the Chinese artists was to extend the vocabulary of their own pictorial language so as to invigorate Chinese painting. For a decade or more, many Chinese artists tended to look for what would help them better express themselves in the media they were most familiar with. Many were more interested in preserving their own pictorial language rather than giving it up to a non-native language simply because they were lacking in the understanding of the content of the indigenous culture underlying the path of the development of Western art. Thus, we can see that once these artists achieved a certain degree of technical mastery of Western painting technique and articulation of form, they applied these in their Chinese painting. The process of assimilation added new elements in the development of Chinese painting.

In Xu Beihong’s horses and Liu Haisu’s splash-ink landscape, one can sense that elements of Western art had strengthened the constitution of Chinese painting as never before. Both masters reached the height of their careers after their resolution of these elements in their ink painting. Huang Beihong, who never handled

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the paintbrush, extracted creative juices from modernist Western painting, which enabled him to refine his ink painting thus achieving for him and his art another peak of development in Chinese ink painting in the twentieth century.

Transplantation, adoption, assimilation are the underlying processes of cultural development. Just as the assimilation of Japanese elements enriched the history of modern art in the West, the adoption of Western painting elements in Chinese ink-and-brush painting also inspired many artists in China to take a very old pictorial language into the contemporary world to vie with their counterparts in different cultures in the world. In returning to ink painting, these Chinese artists' innate aesthetic sensibilities directed them to take on the aesthetic preference for a kind of spirituality and timelessness inherent in Chinese painting. The journey to the West only led them back to where they began.



Figure 1. Li Tiefu, *Fish*, n.d.



Figure 2. Li Shutong, *Self-portrait*, 1911.



Figure 3. Xu Beihong, *Tian Heng and his 500 Retainers*, dated 1928-1930.



Figure 4. Xu Beihong, *Silvery Night*, 1937.



Figure 5. Liu Haisu, *Country House in Indonesia*, 1940.



Figure 6. Liu Haisu, *Mount Huang*, 1954.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Chen Duxui, *New Youth*, “Art Revolution – Reply to Lu Zheng,” November 1916.

<sup>2</sup>See Chi Ke, ed., *Li Tiefu* (Lingnan Art Publishing House, 1985), 118.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>4</sup>Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Masterpieces – The Origins of Modern Art in France 1880-1939* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1999), 56.

<sup>5</sup>See *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Merritt\\_Chase](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Merritt_Chase).

<sup>6</sup>See illustration in Chi Ke, *Li Tiefu*, 49.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 28-29, 96, 112, 117, 307.

<sup>10</sup>*Album of Calligraphy by Buddhist Master Hongyi* (Shanghai: Duoyun Publishing House, 1993), unpaginated.

<sup>11</sup>Minoru Harada, *Meiji Western Painting*, trans. by Akiko Murakata (New York, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1968), 66-72.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, plate no. 51.

<sup>13</sup>*Album of Calligraphy*, unpaginated.

<sup>14</sup>Chen Xin, ed., *Li Shutong*, (Hubei: Hubei Art Publishing House, 2002), p. 116.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>17</sup>See Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Against the Modern: Dagnan-Bouveret and the Transformation of the Academic Tradition* (New York: Dahesh Museum of Art, 2002).

<sup>18</sup>China National Museum of Fine Art, *Masterpieces over the 100 Years Collected by China National Museum of Fine Art* (Beijing: China National Museum of Fine Art, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup>Hong Kong Museum of Art. *The Art of Xu Beihong* (Hong Kong, 1988), p. 53.

<sup>20</sup>Guggenheim Museum, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), cat. no. 61; *The Art of Xu Beihong*, cat. no. 36.

<sup>21</sup>Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Twentieth Century Chinese Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1984), cat. no. 48.

<sup>22</sup>See Ke Wenham, *Yishu dashi Liu Haisu zhuan* [Biography of the Art Master Liu Haisu] (Shandong: Shandong Fine Art Publishing, 1988).

<sup>23</sup>Hong Kong Museum of History, *Boundless Learning: Foreign-educated Students of Modern China* (Hong Kong, 2003), p. 156.

<sup>24</sup>*Liu Haisu Yishu Wenxuan* [A Selection of Articles on the Art of Liu Haisu] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Art Publishing House, 1987), p. 396.

<sup>25</sup>Illustrated in Shen Wen, ed., *Li Haisu minghuaji* [A Collection of Masterpieces by Liu Haisu] (Fujian: Fujian People's Fine Art Publishing House, 1985), plate nos. 6, 62, 13.

<sup>26</sup>*Shen, Li Haisu minghuaji*, plate no. 66; Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Impressionism: Treasures from the National Collection of France* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2006), cat. no. 24.

<sup>27</sup>Op. cit., *Tradition and Innovation*, cat. no. 38.

<sup>28</sup>*Shen, Li Haisu minghuaji*, plate nos. 21, 26.

<sup>29</sup>*Liu Haisu Yishu Wenxuan*, pp. 125-26.

<sup>30</sup>Hong Zaixin, "Cong guoji xueshu jiaoliu kan Huang Binhong di yuanjian zhuoshi" ("To See Huang Binhong's Far-reaching Views and Outstanding Knowledge from International Academic Exchange," in *Mohai yunyan* (*Mist and Clouds of the Sea of Ink*), p.222.

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