

Contemporary Chinese Art Uses and Reuses of the Past

By Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky

Contemporary artists in China are now free to make an array of different kinds of art. Artists, emerging from the limited forms of expression allowed during the second half of the twentieth century, are exploring their ancient traditions that were restricted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when the “four olds” (Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas) were forbidden. A second source of inspiration is the breadth of Western global art that had also been strictly criticized but is now a core course in art school curricula. Now able to study these masters of the past, Chinese artists are creating new kinds of art and exploring different media—painting, photography, sculpture, installations, and traditional Chinese brush and ink painting. For the most part, Chinese artists draw upon the great masterpieces of European religious art and Chinese figure and landscape paintings. Copying to acquire skill in painting is a common learning method. Chinese artists since antiquity have copied great art, a technique first described by Xie He in the sixth century; for in the absence of art schools and models, recreating famous works of art was the only means of learning.¹ Moreover, artists are adapting these models to express their responses to the new social and political environment that evolved in the post-Cultural Revolution era. By looking at their art, there is much to be learned about the current situation in China; artists are often critical of the legacy of Mao and the prominent role of the Communist Party and army, social inequity, and environmental problems that resulted from the march to capitalism, and the frustrations and difficulties of life under an authoritarian government. This article illustrates the sources of art appropriated by contemporary Chinese artists and demonstrates how they alter them to address current themes. Websites for all artists featured in this essay are available in the endnotes.² Three categories are considered—Western models, Chinese figural art, and Chinese landscape painting. In no way is this art to be viewed as mere copies; indeed, their artistic processes transform the originals into new creations.

Artists Inspired by Western Art

Among the first group of artists to be considered are those that use famous Western masterpieces. We begin with one of the great artists of this generation, Miao Xiaochun (b. 1964), whose video based on Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* painted on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican in Rome goes far beyond recreating the masterpiece.³ Using modern technology, he created a cyborg alter ego and used it to replace all of the figures. Shot in black and white and scored with an abbreviated narrative voice-over, Miao’s video also shows multiple views of the painting, views that cannot exist in the two-dimensional media of the original. The viewer floats over the top, scans the back, and views the sides of the now three-dimensional composition (Figure 1).

In his most recent video, it is Hieronymus Bosch’s (c. 1450–1516) *The Garden of Earthly Delights* that forms the backdrop for an inventive scenario.⁴ Screened on three projectors, the film retells the creation, beginning with a single numerical phrase that multiplies into two and then into ten thousand things. All manner of life—animal and mechanical—evolves, is destroyed, and is then transformed. Here, too, Miao’s cyber portrait plays all of the roles, encountering problems of modern society—warfare, pollution, and consumerism. Thus, Miao takes the Western imagery, transforms it in the computer, and invests it with new multiple meanings that refer both to his social experience and to the great treasury of artistic traditions.

Cui Xiuwen (b. 1970) was inspired by another great masterpiece, Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, when she replaced all of the figures in the mural with a modern image: that of a young schoolgirl (Figure 2).⁵ Dressed in her uniform, the girl reenacts all of the dramatic poses. The substitution raises innumerable questions. Because all of the actors are the same individual, one might imagine that this is also an internal drama. In that case the girl, and by extension the viewer, plays the roles of saint, savior,

Editor’s Note: Please visit the EAA online supplement for the artist’s images that are not shown in this article:
<http://www.asian-studies.org/EAA/TOC-17-1.htm>.



Figure 1. Miao Xiaochun: *The Last Judgment*. Chromogenic print, 2006.



Figure 2. Cui Xiuwen: *Sanjie*, 2003. Chromogenic print from video.

and betrayer. Cui uses the figure of the schoolgirl repeatedly in her art, and with each series she is older, until as a teenager she has gotten pregnant. Works for her *Angel* series show the girl locked inside the tall walls of the ancient Forbidden Palace in Beijing; she cannot escape the confines of society and the problems of unwanted pregnancy, social disease, poverty, and humiliation.



Figure 3. Gao Yuan: *Twelve Moons*, 2009. Chromogenic prints.



Similarly, artist Gao Yuan (b. 1970?), in her series *Twelve Moons*, looks to Renaissance images; in this case, it is paintings of the *Madonna and Child* (Figure 3).⁶ Though the similarities in subject and composition are readily appreciated, the nuanced meaning of the piece requires more intense consideration. The series is a model of time and space. As for space, she includes in the lower areas of each composition views of China that contrast past and present, rural and city, north and south, water and mountains. As for time, each photo takes place at a different time of day and under different weather conditions. Moreover, each child is tattooed with one of the Chinese zodiac signs that represent the twelve months of the year. More importantly, the subjects of the photos are the wives of itinerant rural migrants who eke out a meager survival living on the outskirts of

Beijing. Yet, they proudly display their infants. Shown like the *Madonna and Child*, these photos affirm the supreme importance of their single child, in accord with modern Chinese population-control policies.

Similar examples of inspiration by Western masterpieces may be found in the work of the sculptor Sui Jianguo (b. 1956), who uses ancient Greek models and Renaissance sculptures of Michelangelo—in particular his marble portrayal of slaves from the second decade of the sixteenth century that are now in the Louvre Museum in Paris.⁷ These he manipulates in a series based on Western notions of the ideal man. For his *Study on the Folding of Clothes* from 1998, Sui recast the classical images: some remain naked, and some are clothed in a Mao suit (Figure 4). In this way, Sui scrutinizes the ethical, social, and political agenda inherent in the physical ideal and simultaneously questions the value of cultural propaganda in both the past and present.



Figure 4. Sui Jianguo: *Study on the Folding of Clothes*, (Discobolus) 1998. Exhibited at the Shanghai Biennale, 2002.

Artists Inspired by Chinese Figural Art

Contemporary artists who look back to Chinese artistic traditions, now that the past no longer needs to serve only the present, are more numerous. Liu Fenghua (b. 1956) and his wife Liuyong make clay sculptures that replicate the most famous ancient artifacts—the soldiers of the third century BCE first emperor of China, Qin Shihuangdi (Figure 5a).⁸ Using clay from the area around the excavation of the emperor's tomb in Xi'an, a popular tourist destination, they recreate the soldiers in both small and life-size figurines. By selecting this subject, they pay homage to the importance of the archaeological discovery and the fame that the site has achieved, for the clay soldiers are nearly synonymous with China to the hordes of tourists that visit the country. Historically, the first emperor in China was a megalomaniac who brutalized his subjects. In their artistic process, Liu and his wife do not fire the clay sculptures, which would make them stronger; rather, they allow them to dry naturally, which results in their remaining fragile. In addition, the soldiers are gaily decorated in a style of pop painting that draws upon the people, events, and ideologies that had an impact on the Chinese people over thousands of years, including Bill Gates, Albert Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, Andy Warhol, Confucius, Mao, and more (Figure 5b).

Many Chinese artists relate to the great figural painting tradition in China. One example is Zhu Wei (b. 1966). In his painting *Comrades*, he appropriates the famous eighth-century painting of *Palace Ladies Preparing Silk* attributed to Zhang Xuan. But here the figures unroll the imperialist flags of Great Britain and Russia.⁹ The flags, as well as the army personnel in the background, represent the unintentional repercussions of nationalist agendas on the people.



Figure 5a. Terra-cotta warriors, tomb of Qin Shihuangdi, BCE 210–209, Xi'an.



Figure 5b. Liu Fenghua and Liuyong: *New Terra-cotta Warrior*, 2008. Acrylic on ceramic.

When artists use more recent art, they call into question the values imbued in that work and establish an interaction with the modern viewer who is acutely aware of the art. For example, Wang Qingsong (b. 1966) photographed models covered in either gold or silver paint who posed to resemble the famous sculptures from the *Monument to the People's Heroes* in front of Mao's Memorial, seen every day by thousands of visitors (Figures 6 and 7).¹⁰ Ostensibly, the silvered figures resemble the massive sculptural group, but there is also an intentional appearance of artificiality in the concept and in the execution of the work. Wang restates this representation of the struggles and achievements of the people of Communist China, fleshing them out while addressing the issue of propaganda and aggrandizement of the state by means of the hard work and sacrifices of the people. Wang questions how their representations were used to ennoble questionable policies that compromised their welfare.



Figure 6. Wang Qingsong: *Past Present Future*, 2001. One of three chromogenic prints.



Figure 7. *Monument to the People*, Mao's Memorial, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 1977.

In contrast is the work of the very popular and successful portraitist Qi Zhilong (b. 1962) who paints his female subjects in the guise of figures from the Cultural Revolution.¹¹ These works seem nearly inexplicable, outside of conveying a sense of historical continuity and identity with the past. As the artist explains, taking off their furs and jewels to pose, rich ladies pay dearly to be cast in the role of young spirits of the revolution.

Sometimes recreating a masterpiece of modern art is treated with suspicion. Cai Guoqiang (b. 1957) recreated the beloved *Rent Collection Courtyard* for the Venice Biennale, a work produced by an artist collective in Sichuan in 1965.¹² Much to the West's consternation, Chinese intellectuals soundly rebuked Cai for trying to appropriate a sincere and important work of art for his own benefit. For them, merely recreating the work for a Western audience is neither appropriate nor sufficient to transform the original into an inspired, new work of art.¹³

Artists Inspired by Chinese Landscape Painting

That Chinese landscape painting provides a source of inspiration for modern artists is understandable. Since the tenth century, it was the primary subject of pictorial representation; by the thirteenth century, figure painting was second in popularity and often the domain of professional artists. Scholar-gentry, or literati, who often worked in the government, enjoyed recreating landscapes on which they included large calligraphic displays of their poetry or sentiments. Such paintings done with only black ink on paper draw attention to the similarity of brushstrokes that define the forms of the landscape and the inscriptions written nearby on the painting; these paintings rejected decorative embellishment and storytelling elements. In accord with the teachings of Confucius, the past was revered, and so art did not develop in the same way that it did in the West.

The work of ancient artistic titans was reproduced over 1,000 years, a practice that is easily documented, since painters left records of their efforts. One of the most copied and inspiring artists was Ni Zan (1301–1374), whose sparse landscapes are heartfelt and fairly uniform in appearance, for it was only the brushstrokes, not the subject of the painting, that was important.¹⁴ Beginning with the sixteenth-century master Shen Zhou (1427–1509), who reinterpreted the fourteenth-century composition, artists have consistently studied Ni's style.¹⁵ But one can only wonder at the ironic intent of Zhou Tiehai (b. 1966), who in 2001 engaged a professional artist to make an awkward rendition of Ni's work in acrylics, apparently a conceptual artist's sardonic comment on traditional values.¹⁶

Some artists who identify with literati landscape painting include writing as an important element of their work. For example, Wenda Gu (b. 1955), one of the foremost artists on the global stage, strives



Figure 8. Wenda Gu: *The Myths of Lost Dynasties—Form A: Flying Pseudo-characters in Landscape*. Nine works, splashing ink on rice paper, seal, New York, 1996–97.

to maintain the lost arts of the past, including stele carving and handmade paper and ink that are no longer in great demand because modern artists often work in Western media.¹⁷ In a series of large-scale works, Gu uses the traditional brush and ink to create giant characters that loom over a Chinese style landscape (Figure 8). Although the writing resembles actual ideographs, it is written in a false language willfully created by the artist. The landscape below recalls the seventeenth-century artist Gong Xian (ca. 1619–1689). Following the defeat of the Ming dynasty by the northern Manchu peoples, Gong went into reclusion and painted unsettling monochromatic barren landscapes filled with eccentric forms that conveyed his disappointment.¹⁸ A sympathetic association seems to be in play, as Gu, responding to the Cultural Revolution, finds solace in one of the artists who used his art to protest the Manchu invasion.

Xu Bing (b. 1955), perhaps the most famous contemporary artist, also created his own form of Chinese writing.¹⁹ Among his many provocative works is a series of ink paintings that employ actual written characters to create the parts of the landscape. For example, he uses the character for tree, or *shu*, repeatedly for the forest-covered mountains and *shi*, or stone, for the foreground rocks. In addition, the composition, medium, and ink technique clearly derive from traditional landscape painting. The profound influence of sixteenth-century long monochrome hand scrolls is evident but not immediately apparent in Cui Xiwen's new work, *Existential Emptiness*.²⁰ The dense pine forest submerged in deep mist stretches over eight feet in width; only the midsection of the forest is visible—a compositional device employed by such artists as Wen Zhengming (1470–1559).²¹ The composition is updated by the inclusion of a young lady and her double, in this case a doll fabricated in Japan. The duality implied by this pairing incurs Chinese theories of yin and yang, true and false, live and inanimate, and more.

In contrast to these somber monochrome works are those that draw upon the lively polychrome style popular in the eighth-century “blue and green style” decorative manner of landscape painting, as seen in a vignette from an eighth-century mural at the Buddhist caves in Dunhuang in the Gobi Desert.²² Yang Jinsong (b. 1971) replicates the style in his charming landscape painting with a portrait of himself and his beloved wife.²³ In contrast, Huang Yan (b. 1966) is far more unconventional in his works that duplicate this colorful style of landscapes on the naked bodies of living models (Figure 9).²⁴ The suggestion is that the artistic tradition is embodied in their being. Once again, the meaning seems to be that the natural environment, which has been the focus of centuries of artistic expression, is still an intrinsic part of the Chinese experience.

The photograph preserving Zhang Huan's (b. 1965) *To Add One Meter to an Unknown Mountain* performance at Miaofeng Mountain, Beijing, May 1995, is a sad commentary on the fragility of humans, whose bodies, like other organic matter, enriches the earth.²⁵ A contrast is drawn between the everlasting landscape and the ephemeral life of man.

Since the mid-twentieth century, Chinese artists have tried to harmonize the Western pictorial tradition with the native ink style, and such attempts are made fun of in

Zhang Hongtu's (b. 1943) *Impression: Zhang Hongtu's Shitao—Van Gogh #7*.²⁶ Zhang depicts a traditional Chinese landscape by the early eighteenth-century painter Shitao but renders it in the thickly painted and brightly colored manner of the post-Impressionists, as the title suggests. In this way, he seems to suggest that the two traditions are incompatible. Such jarring juxtapositions are also featured in Wei Dong's (b. 1968) *New-Comrade*, done with acrylic and ink in 1996. Here, too, is a disparate conjunction of traditional-style ink landscapes and Western-style figural depiction.²⁷ Dressed in colorful costumes that suggest modern professional occupations, corpulent members of today's China seem corrupted as they are hurled through a delicately rendered, old-fashioned Chinese monochrome landscape. The disharmony between the modern figures and the setting suggests that contemporary ethics are incompatible with the values of the past.

The last theme to be considered is the portrayal of rocks, which is an outgrowth of landscape painting that flourished in the sixteenth century when Ming dynasty artists portrayed the strange rocks in their gardens. For centuries, artists enjoyed rendering the strongly textured surfaces, irregular silhouettes, and varied shapes that evoke association with the eternal yang, the primordial and indestructible part of the natural world. In particular, Taihu rocks, scored with irregular convex and concave forms, were specially prized, and as Liu Dan's ink painting demonstrates, they are still a vital subject.²⁸ Zhan Wang (b. 1962) makes



Figure 9. Huang Yan: *Chinese Landscape Tattoo*, 1999. Chromogenic print.

Taihu rocks either out of chrome or by coating the rocks with a silvery surface.²⁹ But it is Sui Jianguo's broken and netted rock sculptures that poignantly tell of the damage sustained even by the immortal stones, which are so much more enduring than man (Figure 10).³⁰

In conclusion, contemporary Chinese artists find inspiration in the masterpieces of various cultural heritages. However, their appropriation of themes and styles is not merely derivative, for their artworks are formidable creations in and of themselves. What is more, their works are responsive to the society in which they live. Beyond art, they reflect Chinese social and political history, as well as issues of modernity. One need not necessarily know or identify the source of their inspiration to appreciate their creations, but doing so enhances understanding of the process of making art and adds additional levels of meaning to their work. ■

NOTES

1. Michael Sullivan, *Arts of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 102.
2. Website addresses are provided for the artists, but some may not be operational for a number of reasons. Please see their entry in Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
3. Miao Xiaochun's work can be viewed on his website (Miaoxiaochun.com). Michelangelo painted the fresco of *The Last Judgment* on the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican from 1537 to 1541. It depicts the day of final judgment when the saved are rescued and the sinful punished; it is noteworthy that the artist included his self-portrait among the damned.
4. Hieronymus Bosch painted the triptych the *Garden of Earthly Delights*, now housed in the Prado Museum in Madrid. The depictions include views of life in Eden and the Last Judgment.
5. Cui Xiuwen's work can be viewed on the Brooklyn Museum's website (<http://bit.ly/yPzPFb>). One of the most famous paintings, *The Last Supper*, painted by Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci around 1495–1498 for the Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, illustrates the moment when Jesus announced to his disciples that he knew one of them would soon betray him.
6. Gao Yuan's work can be viewed on her website (www.gao-yuan-artist.com).
7. Sui Jianguo's work can be viewed at his website (www.suijianguo.org); see Sullivan, (2006): 142. This series from 1998 includes life-size copies of the most famous sculptures in the West like the *Discobolus*, based on the ancient fifth-century BCE Greek sculpture of the *Discus Thrower* that survives in Roman copies, one of which is in the British Museum (see <http://bit.ly/gx0uXB>). Sui cast his copy in bronze and painted it white. Another subject was Michelangelo's marble statue of *Bound Slave*, now housed in the Louvre Museum. Sui cast it in fiberglass and painted it. Sui's series was displayed at the Shanghai Biennale, 2002.
8. Liu Fenghua and Liuyong's work can be viewed on their gallery's website (<http://bit.ly/wMIT2j>).
9. Other examples of Zhu Wei's art may be viewed on his website (<http://www.zhuweiartden.com>); see also Sullivan, (2006): 241. Zhu Wei's painting *Comrades*, done in ink and color on paper, is based on the

famous eighth-century painting of court ladies by Zhang Xuan, *Court Ladies Preparing Newly Woven Silk*, a twelfth-century copy of the hand scroll painted with ink and colors on silk, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The painting can be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/w2vROu>.

10. See the artist's website (<http://www.wangqingsong.com>) for this 2001 work (see Sullivan, 2006:162). For the original standing in front of the Mao Memorial in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, see <http://bit.ly/y8lBU7>. The sculptural group commemorates the Chinese people's accomplishments under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong.
11. For Qi Zhilong's works, see <http://bit.ly/wQuVOI>; see also Sullivan, (2006): 127.
12. For Cai Guoqiang's works, see his website (www.caiguoqiang.com); see also Sullivan, (2006): 6. This piece was subsequently exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in New York.
13. Erik Eckholm, "Expatriate Artist Updates Maoist Icon and Angers Old Guard," *New York Times*, August 17, 2000, <http://bit.ly/AzFl4m>.
14. See, for example, Ni Zan's *Woods and Valleys of Mount Yu*, dated 1372, a hanging scroll with ink on paper now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <http://bit.ly/b9ekFO>.
15. See, for example, Shen Zhou's *Landscape in the Manner of Ni Zan*, a hanging scroll of ink on paper, dated 1484, now in the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; see also Sullivan, (2008): 237, Figure 9.12.
16. This artist does sardonic recreations of other monuments of Chinese art as well; see <http://bit.ly/xmguKZ> and Sullivan, (2006): 237.
17. For Gu Wenda's work, see his website (www.wendagu.com); see also Sullivan, (2006): 43. Gu, like other artists of his generation who are incensed with the government's simplification of the written language to enhance literacy, created his own written forms that are basically gibberish, and reading his meaningless script approximates the experience much of the population had trying to read the new, simplified writing.
18. See Sullivan, 2008: 265, for Gong Xian (1620–89), *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, now in the Rietberg Museum.
19. See Xu Bing's website (www.xubing.com); see also Sullivan, (2006): 185.
20. For illustrations of Cui Xiuwen's *Existential Emptiness* series, see <http://bit.ly/wnf7FP>.
21. See Richard Edwards, *The Art of Wen Chengming (1470–1559)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976), 119; now in the Honolulu Academy of Arts.
22. For mural, see Sullivan, (2008): 144, fig. 6, 16–17, for two examples from the cave site.
23. For the artist's website, see www.yangjinsong.com.
24. For Huang Yan see <http://bit.ly/z2tnoN>; see also Sullivan, (2006): 82.
25. See the artist's website (www.zhanghuan.com); see Sullivan, (2006): 218.
26. Zhang Hongtu's work can be viewed online at <http://bit.ly/zsX05D>; see also Sullivan, (2006): 217.
27. More information on the artist may be obtained online at <http://bit.ly/x0geYi>; see also Sullivan, (2006): 168.
28. Liu Dan, *Untitled*, ink on paper, see also <http://bit.ly/xgCOWn>; see also Sullivan, (2006): 98.
29. More information on Zhan Wang is available at <http://bit.ly/zyIogv>; see also Sullivan, (2006): 212.
30. See the artist's website (www.suijianguo.org/eng/index.htm); see also work from 1990–1996.



Figure 10. Sui Jianguo: *Structure. Rock and iron*, 1990.

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