

The Times for Dreaming

History & Cultural Survey

To the Irish, China is a remote and relatively unfamiliar country with rare face to face exchanges, although constantly aware of each others voices.

Chinese history is of long standing. According to archaeological studies, at least 8,000 years ago the Chinese civilization of the Neolithic Age began in the Yellow River Valley (1). About 3,600 years ago, inscriptions appeared on bones and tortoise shells during the Shang Dynasty. These were a relatively systematic writing system, whose methods of word-formation are still used today (2). The earliest Chinese art works took the forms of rock painting and painted pottery, most of them emerging in the Neolithic Age. Ancient Chinese art had outstanding and magnificent achievements in painting, calligraphy, sculpture, architecture, and craft, and those great accomplishments of civilization led to profound influences on the development of culture and art in the vast areas of East Asia and Southeast Asia.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, China experienced the most humiliated and tortured period in its history. Beginning with the Opium War in the latter stages of the Qing Dynasty, China was faced with turbulent times: Foreign invasions, loss of territories, civil war and the Cultural Revolution. Much of the country's precious historical and cultural heritage was lost, and the development of contemporary culture and art came to a virtual halt.

At the beginning of 1980s, with the introduction of a policy of reform and increasing openness to outside cultures and influences in mainland China, culture and art gradually came back to life with the liberation of ideology. A modern art movement called the *New Wave* occurred in 1985 in visual art, when artists in mainland China started trying to fuse western modern art with traditional Chinese art. Subsequently installation, performance and other art forms began to appear, and stereotyped themes like political slogans gradually vanished from public view. At the beginning of the 1990s, contemporary Chinese artists began to be shown on the international stage, including the Venice Biennale, the Sao Paolo Biennale and Kassel Documenta. Simultaneously, artists became increasingly active in the creation of photography and video, while the construction of art museums and educational institutes and the development of a commercial art market, made an encouraging environment in which contemporary art could be created.

In 1996 the first Shanghai Biennale was held, and China had its first platform for interactive exchanges of international contemporary art. Now, in 2004, the Shanghai Biennale has been successfully held five times, gaining comprehensive international influence and becoming one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific region.

In reality, China is more than a single country: it is a continent with a large and diverse population. About 56 regional and ethnic groups exist within China's population of 1.3 billion, in an area of 9.6 million square kilometers. This enormous scale leads to a series of social problems, including unbalanced development between urban and rural areas, a distinct gap between rich and poor, and inequality in the public education and the social welfare systems. Since the 1990s, the Chinese economy has maintained an impressively fast and stable level of growth of 8 to 10 percent, and quality of life is also steadily improving. In some of China's largest cities - Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Guangzhou - daily life is significantly globalized, and the gradual popularization of the internet, mobile communication and private automobiles are impacting greatly on social activities and daily lifestyles.

The huge population brings another problem - the artistic population is also enormous. An increasing amount of students have enrolled in art schools and academies in recent years, and the number of graduates, artists-to-be, in the country is now over ten thousand. This is undoubtedly a surprising concept.

Facing the profuse and long-standing culture, and today's colourful and affluent contemporary life, Chinese artists display vigorous enthusiasm and strong creativity. Their works use exuberant concepts and unique languages to present the profound changes happening in this ancient civilization.

The Theme of This Exhibition

A symbol of evil in western culture and tradition, the dragon is an auspicious and fortunate totem in eastern culture, the sign of god and authority, and the most worshiped talisman in the Chinese nation. Chinese people are closely emotionally attached to the dragon: dragon-dancing is always the most important aspect of traditional festivals.

China is the dragon's homeland. As early as the primitive society of 5,000 years ago, the dragon appeared on precious jade artefacts (3). Aside from people of the Han nationality – China's major population – most of the Chinese minority cultures regard the dragon as a symbol of their ancestors: Chinese people all over the world call themselves the dragon's offspring.

Not living on land and having no wings, the Chinese dragon has nothing to do with the dinosaur of ancient natural history. According to historical materials, the dragon's image is a mixture of 9 animals, and is certainly the product of the ancient Chinese people's imagination (4). *Dreaming of the Dragon's Nation*, the title of this exhibition, embodies the pursuit of a cultural identity, and is a metaphor for the imaginative character of art itself.

This is not an exhibition of visual art concentrated on national cultural symbols. Instead, the spiritual connotation of the dragon is the subject probed in this exhibition. After hibernating for over one century, the awakened dragon brings a luxuriant visual feast for the Irish audience. In this exhibition, 49 artists participate, with 59 art works in total, including oil painting, ink painting, sculpture, installation, photography and video. It fundamentally reflects the general situation of contemporary Chinese art. Among these artists are well-known older generation artists who achieved fame at the beginning of 1980s, and also young visual artists who have become important in recent years. The participating artists are selected from areas throughout the country, they are teachers in art academies, staff of cultural institutes, and a large number of professional artists. Their styles span realism, expressionism and abstraction.

Contemporary Chinese visual art's forms are rich and diverse. At a time when painting is gradually declining in prominence in international contemporary art circles, numerous artists in mainland China are developing their talents in new forms and concepts. Besides showing their unique creativity in the technical language of oil painting, their fresh perspectives of closely observed reality also attract lots of attention from audiences at home and abroad. In this exhibition, artists like He Duoling, Zhou Chunya, Zhou Changjiang, Zhang Xiaogang, Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, Fang Lijun, Ding Yi, Xue Song, Yue Minjun, Liu Ye, Zhang Enli, Huang Yuanqing and Qu Fengguo are all outstanding representatives of contemporary Chinese oil painting.

The unique Chinese style of ink painting is an art form that many artists of the new generation are exploring. As an art form with a history of more than a thousand years, ink painting has experienced magnificence and loss, acclaim and shame. During the process of evolution of the last two decades, ink art has comparatively successfully achieved a transformation to contemporary relevance. Among others, Qiu Deshu, Liu Zijian, Zhang Yu, Wang Tiande, Xu Lei, Liu Qinghe, Wu Yiming and Zhang Jian are the new forces behind the most recent developments in ink art, and whose works show the best interpretation of this historical transformation.

Sculpture and installation have made swift progress in the last decade. Along with a requirement for the use of sculpture in the construction of many cities, installation art has become the favourite medium of many middle-aged and young artists. Experiments with various new media, themes and new concepts have become the research focus of sculptors and installation artists, and Shi

Hui, Sun Liang, Liu Jianhua, Xiang Jing, Chen Xiaodan and Yang Zhilin present Chinese artists' exploration in this field.

Another notable phenomenon is the rise of video and photography art in China. By the beginning of the 1990s, exploration in video art had already started, and with the gradual popularisation of digital photography and digital equipment Chinese video artists began to use unprecedented means to express the extremely colourful daily life around them. Zhang Peili, Wang Jianwei, Yang Fudong, Yang Zhenzhong and Lu Chunsheng's video works, with Zhao Bandi, Hong Hao, Xiang Liqing, Luo Yongjin, Hong Lei and Lu Yuanmin's photographic works, provide a rich expression of a complex contemporary life from different perspectives.

The Search for National Confidence

After a development period of more than 20 years, contemporary Chinese art has broken away from the imitation of western modern art, and self-identification has become many artists' aim. The modern art movement, beginning in the middle of the 1980s, settled down in the beginning of the 1990s, and the prosperity of the art market led to the emergence of commercial and sub-commercial themes in art works. The commercial success of *Political Pop Art* has been an excellent example of a marketing accomplishment. The curiosity of buyers and collectors from abroad for political symbols and exotic sentiments resulted in the situation that many contemporary artists began to produce products for export, labelled *Made in China*, in large quantities. Those products had a definite market orientation, and had been popular with targeted customers for many years. Some works of this type were shown in famous international exhibitions. However, products limited by buyers' taste apparently lack in independent identity, and those tourist's souvenirs, rich with associations of China Town, didn't attain critical artistic merit.

After extensively examining contemporary Chinese art resources, it is easy for us to see that many "Chinese" works are not "contemporary" at all, and numerous "contemporary" works are absolutely not "Chinese". Whether the concept of "contemporary Chinese art" could be tenable or not becomes questionable.

Does localization equal traditionalisation? Is traditionalisation only antiquity? Is antiquity just characteristic Chinese?

Is contemporisation just globalisation? Does globalisation equal monotony? Does monotony equal westernisation?

Currently, opinions about the traditional and the contemporary, the Chinese and the Western are often opposite, either/or, even completely dis severed. These two quite typical critical oppositions could not result in any constructive conclusions. It should not be forgotten that technology and culture are two problems of entirely different natures: technology brings us material affluence and power, whereas culture shapes a nation's confidence, even superiority. Contemporary Chinese society must create a contemporary culture belonging to itself. For artists, whether this contemporary culture exists or not must be evidenced by the unique visual form of art works

What are Chinese characteristics?

The most important Chinese characteristics are not external, regional, cultural symbols – rather, the internal, psychological characteristics of being. It is the rediscovering of the core of traditional spiritual resources, and visual creation based on this premise is the embodiment of our national cultural confidence.

When contemporary art is seeking for the internal, local spiritual resources, there are many questions which need to be answered. Regarding our traditional culture we need to ask ourselves where is the magnificence of the sculptures of the Qin and Han Dynasties? Where is the grace and romance of scholars of the Wei and Jin Dynasties? Where is the solemnity and sublimity of the Dunhuang and Yungang? Where is the profundity and grandeur of the landscape paintings of the Northern Song Dynasty? Regarding contemporary life, we must ask ourselves where are the

Chinese people's indigenous homes and clothing, customs and habits? Where are the Chinese people's exquisite and delicate ways to express emotions? Where are the national aesthetic taste and judging criteria? Where is the humanistic mission carried by visual art? Contemporary

Chinese people have a unique historical context and cultural experience, so contemporary Chinese art should also have its unique cultural connotation, which should find its appropriate language of self-expression, with independent grammar and pronunciation, and special feelings and thoughts. When establishing this important theoretic basis, we must not forget the profound and extensive local human resources.

How do we judge the contemporary? Nowadays, with increasingly multiple and multi-systematic international systems, should and could these standards be localised? If it cannot adapt to the constantly and rapidly changing trends of development in contemporary life, and smoothly achieve the historical transformation of contemporisation, if it cannot attract young generations one after another to love it and volunteer to inherit it, any ancient national culture will be gradually pushed to the side and turned into a curiosity. Its future could be nothing more than constant cultural import from other countries, without digestion or assimilation, not to mention accumulation and heritage. When import turns from a method into a purpose, the cultural result is colonisation.

In establishing a personality and temperament, contemporary Chinese art still has a long way to go, however, we must also be aware that, with the increasingly strengthened general national power, the time of dreaming for the development of contemporary Chinese art has arrived. The launch of *Dreaming of the Dragon's Nation* in Dublin on one hand enables the Irish audience to understand contemporary Chinese art, and on the other hand, as the curator of this exhibition, I believe that this is also an important opportunity to review our own cultural identity in an exotic context. I heartily wish that, along with the exhibition of Irish Modern Art in Beijing and Shanghai this spring, *Dreaming of the Dragon's Nation* will be the beginning of a series of visual art exchange events between China and Ireland in the near future.

Curator: Li Xu

In Shanghai on Sep 5th, 2004.

Notes:

- 1 The relics of Dadiwan in Qin'an County of Gansu Province, located in the valley of the Qingshui River and the hillside on the southern bank in Wuying Village of Qin'an County in the east of Gansu Province, covering an area of approximately 1,100,000 m², and its historical period spanning from ca. 8000 years ago to ca. 5000 years ago. So far, important archeological discoveries include fields of agriculture, pottery-production, writing, architecture, painting, etc.
- 2 Jiaguwen, inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells is the cultural results of the Shang Dynasty (ca. 17th—11th century B.C.), with history of ca. 3600 years. Emperors in the Shang Dynasty believed in ghosts and gods, and usually used animal bones or tortoise shells to predict good or ill luck before doing something, later inscribed the predicted issues, the results and relevant things on animal bones or tortoise shells, then the writing is called Jiaguwen. After inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells were discovered in Yin Relics in Anyang of Henan Province, for more than one century, about 150,000 pieces have been excavated. By now, more than 4,500 characters of Jiaguwen have been discovered, more than 2,000 characters have been recognized, with more than 1,000 characters generally acknowledged.
- 3 In the relics of the Neolithic Age called "Hongshan Culture" scattered in Wenniuteqi, Balinyouqi, Aohanqi in Inner Mongolia and Dongshanzui, Niuheliang, and etc in Liaoning Province, many dragon shaped jade articles have been excavated.

- Province, many dragon shaped jade articles have been excavated.
- 4 *Er-ya-yi* written by Luoyuan in the Song Dynasty: “The Dragon is the most superior within worms with scales.” “The Dragon’s shape is like 9 kinds of animals, its head is like that of a camel, its horns are like those of a deer, its eyes are like those of a rabbit, its ears are like those of a cow, its neck is like that of a snake, its abdomen is like that of a clam, its scales are like those of a carp, its claws are like those of an eagle, its palms are like those of a tiger. It has 81 pieces of scales on its back, which is an auspicious number. Its voice sounds like pounding on bronze, its mouth has moustache around it. It has a bright pearl under its chin.”