

# Reckoning With The Past

**An exhibition of contemporary Chinese painting, Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2nd August to 21st September, 1997**

Chinese art poses many problems for British-born Chinese. Are we supposed to admire it, praise it, even understand it, simply because it is Chinese, or are we free to apply the same critical standards and make the same judgements as we would with anyone else's art? Must we feel guilty if, in our heart of hearts, we really do not understand or even like it? Are we obliged to show an interest even if we have never set foot in an art gallery before and would much prefer to go to the disco or the football match? Approaching it from another angle, should we expect Chinese art to look Chinese? Probably most of us have grown up in houses adorned with paintings of mist-shrouded mountains and forests dotted with minuscule figures and improbably neat and tiny, pavilion-like houses. What are we to make of art that does not look like this but still calls itself Chinese? Accusations of stereotyping and ignorance will inevitably follow, but how can we identify with something that does not even look like what we imagine China to be? It's difficult enough for a mere spectator, but pity the poor, practising British-Chinese artist trying to gain acceptance simply as an artist and with not a trace of Chinese influence in their work. They may never have been to China, cannot speak a word of Chinese, and could not tell Guilin from the Gobi Desert, but for their exhibitions they nevertheless have to dig out the silk cheongsam or serge peasant smock and make themselves look like something out of a Zhang Zhimou movie. The West expects Chinese art to have a recognisable look and feel; can we who have grown up in the West be blamed for expecting the same?

Art which seeks explicitly to reflect China's recent history while still evoking memories of past cultural glories, often in starkly contrasting juxtaposition, adds another layer of difficulty for those of us who have little or no first-hand experience of that history. Reckoning with the Past is an exhibition of contemporary Chinese painting from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong (at the Cornerhouse, Manchester, 2 August to 21 September, 1997) which can be enjoyed simply for the skill of the artists, the beauty of the images, and the humour of its occasional irreverence, but a full appreciation of its cultural and political overtones is likely to elude anyone born in Britain who is under the age of fifty or who has not made a point of watching every documentary about China ever shown on British television. The familiar classical landscapes are still here, but only as the background to more modern and vaguely disturbing images, as in Wei Dong's paintings of giant women in various stages of undress, fondling themselves and each other, paintings with titles such as *Early Qing Landscape - Fellow Survivors*. We can appreciate the sumptuousness and complexity of the images and laugh at the incongruity between the peaceful mountain scenery and the mildly pornographic figures cavorting in the foreground, but how can we know if the artist meant it as a joke? Are we supposed to realise that some of the clothes being removed appear to be bits of Peoples Liberation Army uniforms, and should we infer from that some politically subversive message? I suspect that in order to grasp their real meaning we would have to know a lot more about both the Qing dynasty and the Peoples Liberation Army.

Even paintings such as He Duoling's dream-like images of women, their undeniably contemporary faces materialising out of a confused and indistinct jumble, like half-remembered memories of past loves, apparently demand more from us than the mere sensual appreciation of beauty. According to the exhibition catalogue, they 'hark back nostalgically to the aesthetics of early twentieth century China, immortalised in poetic

moods reminiscent of traditional literature,' and this nostalgia for the past is apparently a reaction to the Communists' repeated attempts since 1949 to obliterate China's traditional values, customs, and cultural heritage. This may be obvious to mainland Chinese with vivid memories of the Cultural Revolution, but most of us do not share those memories. In any case, must all Chinese art invariably carry the burden of this kind of political baggage? Is there no possibility that the artist simply likes painting beautiful women in dream-like poses? Are we not in danger here of merely conforming to the West's stereotyping, which always expects modern Chinese art to have something to do with the Cultural Revolution?

Of course there are paintings in this exhibition which reflect openly on China's history since 1949, but again to understand them requires more knowledge than we are likely to have. Wang Xingwei's parodies of Communist propaganda posters are incomprehensible if we are not familiar with the posters he is parodying, while Yu Youhan's icons of Mao in some kind of flower-power garb, superimposed on backgrounds depicting the dutiful masses, seem to be no more than a bit of a giggle, until we remember that to giggle at Mao in China must be like blasphemy on the Salman Rushdie scale. The collective guilt of those who willingly or otherwise participated in the cruelty and hysteria of the Mao era is hinted at in the portraits by Zhang Xiaogang: blank, expressionless faces which yet convey a sense of menace, a threat that at any moment these drab, impassive figures might turn into a screaming mob of Red Guards. But this threat can surely only be sensed by those who have seen those mobs in action, and it was after all nearly twenty years ago.

Our ignorance of the historical context is even worse when we turn to Taiwan. As far as most of us are concerned the place did not even exist until the Nationalists fled there in 1949, and while we can hardly be unaware of its economic success, we can only guess at the social and political traumas which have influenced Taiwanese artists. In any case, the paintings in this exhibition frequently seem to have less to do with the history of their country than with the artists' own psychological turmoil. Cheng Tsai-tung's *Zen Journey* seems to depict some kind of personal odyssey, a sort of oriental Pilgrim's Progress, while Wu Tien-chang's mockery of American cultural icons (e.g. a blindfolded Statue of Liberty licking her torch like an ice-cream) may have some political intent or it could simply be an amusing exercise in the Surrealist style of Magritte.

Even paintings by Hong Kong artists contain cultural and historical references which are unlikely to be meaningful to many British Chinese. Although the overwhelming majority of us relate to Hong Kong as the place of our origins, there is a wide gap between those who still regard it as home and those, not necessarily younger, who have never lived there. In the absence of any significant primary emigration to Britain, it is the latter group which will increasingly predominate, and while they may recognise images of Hong Kong in the paintings, they are less likely to understand their significance.

This exhibition offers a wealth of technical brilliance and aesthetic enjoyment, but there is a worrying aspect to it. Most of the paintings appear to be critical statements, condemnations of political or social repression, cultural vandalism, environmental despoliation, or rampant materialism. No doubt all of these criticisms are valid, but there can be few if any countries which do not suffer from these problems, and does it not present a very one-sided view? Does no one remember what life was like for the majority of Chinese before 1949: the poverty and disease and starvation, the banditry and foreign exploitation? Does no one wonder why the Communists had such an easy victory in 1949 despite the West's support for the Nationalists? Our own parents can probably tell us that even Hong Kong was no picnic in the 1950's and 60's, which is why so many of them came to Britain. Now, many of our young professional people go back to Hong Kong for the jobs and the standard of living they cannot get here. There is nothing in this exhibition which celebrates any achievements or advances: it is all negative. Can you imagine how British people would react to an

exhibition showing nothing but negative views of Britain? Should we really welcome something which so readily feeds the West's prejudices? The West wants to believe the worst of the Chinese. How else to explain the reporting of the Hong Kong handover in the Western media which harped endlessly on the fears of corruption, the end of democracy, and Tiananmen Square bloodbaths? How else to explain the acclaim for every Chinese movie depicting the horrors of the Cultural Revolution or the subjugation and degradation of Chinese women, or better still, both. Any movie which has been banned in China is almost sure to win prizes at Western film festivals.

There is a curious Frank Capra movie called *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, made in 1932, in which Barbara Stanwyck plays an idealistic missionary's fiance who falls for a Chinese warlord. It portrays the Chinese as barbaric, immoral and sinister, yet heirs to an ancient and mysterious culture. It is curious not only because it is totally unlike the populist homilies on small-town American virtues with which Capra is normally associated, but also because of its ambivalent attitude towards the Chinese: you are never sure whether it is a blatant piece of racist vitriol or a criticism of that racism. Now, in 1997, how are we portrayed in this exhibition, in the films of Zhang Zhimou, and in the reporting of the Hong Kong handover? Why, as barbaric, immoral, and sinister, yet heirs to an ancient and mysterious culture! Of course, if we consider ourselves to be British rather than Chinese, there should not be a problem; the trouble is, even those of us who have lived here all our lives tend to start feeling Chinese when confronted by something critical of China or Chinese people. Can we, with our ever latent cultural fragility, welcome or even join in such criticism? That perhaps is the most difficult challenge which this exhibition presents to us.

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