

Metaphysics, Corporeality and Visuality: A Developmental and Comparative Review of the Discourses on Chinese Ink Painting

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Abstract: This paper will address two main questions: How should we understand modern Chinese ink art and its many possibilities, when we agree that this has a great bearing on how the traditional medium of ink is being internationally recognized? Is there anything essential about ink art? The discussion begins with a recent ink art exhibition entitled, "New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond", which shapes new ink art under its various social and cultural contexts. With the controversies on the modernization issues of ink painting, this paper is devoted to reviewing some of the essentialist views of ink painting discussed in the Chinese tradition, and the observations on new ink art from some developmental perspectives, with particular regard to the problems of technique, visuality and metaphysics. The aesthetical references in the Confucian and the Taoist contexts will be revisited, with the example of the theories and the work of Shih Tao, the great Chinese ink painter. The discussion will then be compared and contrasted with the Western Kantian model and Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics. The metaphysical beliefs will be emphasized in the comparative revelation when the focus is on the understanding of art, visuality and corporeality implied in the media.

Keywords: new ink art, technique, visuality, metaphysics, Confucian, Taoist.

Introduction: New Ink Art and the Question of “What is Ink Painting”?

How should we understand modern ink art and its many possibilities, when we agree that this has a great bearing on how the traditional medium of ink is being internationally recognized? Is there anything essential about ink art? Or should we see it in an open form or in something like Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblance”? It should be revealing to review the developing art form in the context of technovisuality and cultural re-enhancement.

In an exhibition at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in the Fall of 2008 entitled “*New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond*”, the curator, King, quoted the Tang Dynasty literati Wang Wei’s words on ink painting in her foreword:

In the art of painting,
Works in ink surpass all.
They stem from nature,
And fulfill the functions of the universe.

(Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 14)

It has been emphasized that traditional Chinese ink painting, from its ancient beginnings in decorating Neolithic pots, has evolved and flourished in the hands of great masters from different dynasties, and has been shaped by the social, economic and cultural values of the times. It has come full circle as some artists have sought to expand beyond the two-dimensional confines of ink on paper or silk, and the continuous re-interpretation links ink art to our present-day society and keeps it alive (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 14).

This exhibition is a good point of departure for the above discussion, as it aims at raising the question of how ink art, with over 3000 years of history, has evolved through time in terms of artistic form and language to become an art form that corresponds to contemporary cultural issues. The modifications involved are innovative departures from its traditional form and constraints. The curator, as many contemporary ink art exhibition curators have done, claims “to understand “ink” in its broadest sense, seeing it not merely as a selected medium but rather a necessary reference central to Chinese culture” (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 14).

To better understand the different facets of ink art, the exhibits are divided into several themes, though at the same time, the categorizations seem to be in excess. It exhibits a few masterpieces of Hong Kong forerunners like Lui Shou-kwan and Luis Chan. It explores modern interpretations of traditional subject matter such as the landscape paintings by other Hong Kong painters Liu Guosong and Wucius Wong. It demonstrates the attempts of contemporary Chinese artists like Gu Wenda who deconstructed and reconstructed Chinese calligraphy in innovative ways. It shows daring artists like another local painter Kwok Mang-ho who freely transcend the traditional boundaries of ink art to develop their own visual vocabulary. It even refers to artworks that seemingly have nothing to do with the ink brush tradition, but utilize media such as organic installation, acrylic on canvas, and digital art. Some of the exhibited new ink art presents Hong Kong artists' views of the city with a focus on social and cultural concerns intertwined with urban references. (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 15-16)

It is interesting to see in the following discussion how Hong Kong has become a center for the development of new ink painting in the late 20th century when China was under its Socialist regime, and how it is the first city in the region to emerge as a center of new ink art. It is noted that for political reasons, it was only much later when such creative leaps of imagination took place in the Mainland towards the end of the 1970s. The rapid development of the art form leads to the final question raised at the exhibition: Is it ink art?

One would confront this question easily when stepping out of the exhibition exit, when one sees the installation of the tree branches in Ming Fay's 2006 lyrical organic, three-dimensional installation "Floating Reeds," which is an artificial landscape of images with brush painting (fig. 1).



1. FEI Mingjie (Ming Fay). *Floating Reeds*. 2006. Installation. Mixed media. Variable size.

Its content is about life, growth, decay, order, and spontaneity (Ng, Chow, Mac & Richard 2008, 17). It can be agreed that this exhibition and others of its type suggests the timeliness of ink art that always speaks to the living conditions through changes and developments in style and artistic language.

The curator Liu Xiaochun of the new ink exhibition *Shuimo Today* held in Beijing's new art space Songzhuang in 2006 did not refer the term contemporary ink painting to a concept of time, but to artistic conceptions similar to "experimental" and "verge," meaning marginal. Its contemporary relevance is related to the new ink works' rebellion against Chinese ink tradition and the related criticism. (Liu 2006, 7) According to the group of new ink artists in the Mainland, contemporary *Shuimo* (meaning ink art), is a kind of art phenomenon affected by Western modern and contemporary art, and the Western trends of thought adapted by innovative Chinese painters Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian in the early 20th Century. Liu argues that:

every artist is seeking for combination with tradition unconsciously, so the essence of the Western trend is that the east combines with the west and utilizes the west to strengthen itself... in the Western main-stream art's opinion, Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is not really contemporary, because it has no modern significance, and in Chinese main-stream's opinion, Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is following the West, and hence there is a lack of cultural independence. Therefore Chinese contemporary *Shuimo* art is doubly exiled, at the edge of both traditions (Liu 2006, 7).

He further points out that since ink painting has a close relation with Daoist metaphysics, it is the most outstanding representative of Chinese visual culture, and so it is not for the Western art circle to comment, as it is a special issue in the development of Chinese contemporary art. The concern is thus to show the new vitality and creativity of ink painting, and to turn it into an important part of Chinese contemporary art. (Liu 2006, 7)

With all these hopes and wishes for cultural identities, and the simultaneous controversies on the modernization issues of ink painting, it should be revealing to review some of the essentialist fervors of ink painting discussed in the tradition, and the related observations on new ink art from some developmental perspectives, with particular regards to the problems of technique, visuality and metaphysics. Here I would like to turn to Shih Tao, a great Chinese ink painter, for the discussion.

Traditional Discourse on Ink Painting: The Case of “Oneness” of Stroke Suggested by Shih Tao

Shih Tao (1642- 1707), the influential painter in the late Ming and early Qing period, is not only well known as an ink painter, but also as a prominent art theorist. His surviving notes on ink painting, *Hua-pu (Treatise on the Philosophy of Painting)*, is regarded as one of the most important Daoist philosophical reflections on the art form.

The treatise begins with the concept of the “Oneness of Brush Strokes.” Shih writes:

In remote, ancient days there were no principles. The primordial *p’ò* (or state of uncarved block) had not been dispersed. As soon as the primordial *p’ò* was dispersed, principles emerged. How did these principles emerge? They were founded upon the oneness of strokes. This oneness of strokes is the origin of all beings, the root of myriad forms. It is revealed through spiritual reality, and is innate in man (Coleman 1978, 35-36).

The Oneness obviously refers to the Daoist meaning of Nature and the ultimate reality. It is important to reach at the realm of the Dao, to access the artistic creativity and the aesthetic experience. The Daoists believe that the metaphysical realm of the Dao is the origin of the truth, beauty and goodness, and it is the ideal state of art. It will be helpful to understand the Daoist notion of aesthetic experience through a discussion of the neo-Confucian scholars who addressed the subject, and from there to grasp Shih Tao’s discourse on the aesthetics of ink painting.

Despite a general comment made by scholars who work on comparative philosophy that systematic aesthetics is absent in traditional Confucian and Daoist philosophies, neo-Confucian scholars have reconstructed theories of human primal experience according to traditional Confucianism and Daoism that allude to aesthetic experience. For example, the late writings of Mou Zongzan (1909-1995), the prominent neo-Confucian philosopher who resided in Hong Kong since 1950s, argues that Daoist theory is aesthetic in nature. Firstly, he points out that the “subjective principle” of Daoism is “wu wei” (no action), which refers to the effort of the human subject’s mind to transcend all kinds of human epistemological functions and move towards the realm of a more metaphysical Dao (Mou 1974, 208-211). Daoist philosophy promotes the annulments of subjective activity and knowledge to recover the presentation of nature in itself which has been hidden and distorted by the self’s understanding, perception and conception. According to Daoism, to know is to be “not knowing,” to be wise is to be ignorant, so that only

the so called fools are able to grasp the truth of nature.

Mou said in the realm of the Dao, when the human mind has stopped “knowing” and travels with the basic universal element *Chi*, it is able to perceive things in their original nature. These are not “phenomena” in the Kantian sense of epistemology, but the original nature of things which can only be understood after the abolition of the dominant scheme of subject-object relations exerted by the knowing subject. It is said that the state of “intellectual intuition” of the mind in the Daoist sense corresponds with the “calmness of mind” described by Zhuangzi’s “*Xin Jai*” as described by the representing and original Daoist:

Do not be the master of knowledge (to manipulate things). Personally realize the infinite to the highest degree and travel in the realm of which there is no sign. Exercise fully what you have received from Nature without any subjective viewpoint. In one word, be absolutely vacuous (*hsu*). The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not lean forward or backward in its response to things. It responds to things but conceals nothing of its own. Therefore it is able to deal with things without injury to (its reality) (Chan 1963, 207).

With “calmness of mind,” there are no differentiations of mind and body, form and matter, or subject and object but the emergence of all things (including the mind) in themselves. They are juxtaposed with each other without being known. It is thus a disinterested, non-intentional and non-regulative state, and is therefore, aesthetic in nature. Mou’s elaboration of the state is as follows:

The state of mind of *xin jai* is the termination, tranquility, emptiness, and nothingness that follow the abolition of the quest and dependency on learning and knowing. The *wu wei* of the above necessarily implies a certain kind of creativity, whose form is so special that it can be named as negative creativity...that in the light of the tranquil state..., things present themselves in the way that they are...not as an object, but as an ideal state...and this is the static ‘intellectual intuition’ (Mou 1974, 208-211).

In the transcendental realm of the Dao, a thing is not an object but an “ideal state,” a form in itself, appreciation of which is capable only with Daoist wisdom, in which the sense of beauty and aesthetic pleasure, the real form of freedom, spring up in tranquility. Achievement of this state requires an effort of transcendence of all human epistemological constraints or judgments, as Kant’s aesthetics prescribes, and engagement in the metaphysical realm of the Dao. This explains the criteria and aesthetic categories in Daoist aesthetics, e.g. Lao Tze’s “*chi*,” “*wei*,” “*miao*” and

“*xu*,” which refer to the activities and characters of the realm and are applied in the evaluation of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy.

According to neo-Confucian scholars, objectification of the mind takes place only after the primal experience has happened in the realm of the Dao from which comes the division of subject and object. Functions and activities including epistemological and artistic ones then begin to exert their influences and judgments, or manifesting the metaphysical experiences through artistic media. (Tang 1987, 187) Activities can be divided into those that are related to the cognitive (the truth), the perceptive or the aesthetic (the beautiful) and the willful (the good) and are undertaken according to the subject’s state of mind. Yet the origin of aesthetic experience is in the transcendental state. This explains Shih Tao’s saying that the art of painting is a manifestation of truth. As he writes in *Hua Pu*:

With regard to the delicate arrangement of mountains, streams, and human figures, or the natural characteristics of birds, animals, grass, and trees, or the proportions of ponds, pavilions, towers, and terraces, if one’s mind cannot deeply penetrate into their reality and subtly express their appearance, one has not yet understood the fundamental meaning of the oneness of strokes. . . Hence, oneness of strokes embraces all strokes before their differentiation. Myriad brush strokes and ink wash all derive and diminish here. Merely rely upon the grasp of men. A single stroke which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things (Coleman 1978, 37-38).

In this sense, does the transcendence of the mind mean total cancellation of bodily perception? What is the place for corporeality and visuality if the ideal ink painting is to manifest the aesthetic experience in the realm of the Dao, which only the pure mind can grasp? One can easily argue that it is the visuality of the mind that “sees” the truth, ultimate beauty and goodness, but it is also the artistic manifestation of the vision via the eye that requires a certain kind of sensibility and visuality. The functions and the meanings of the physical techniques including those conducted by the hands and the eye of the painter and the relation between them and the origin of art (“the oneness of stroke”) as suggested by Shih Tao require more attention and discussion.

The Oneness of Stroke and the Meaning of Technology in Traditional Ink Painting

Shih Tao's saying that the "oneness of strokes embraces all strokes before their differentiation" reminds us of Heidegger's discussion of the essence of technology in his work *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger 1977). It is more meaningful to turn our attention from technique to Heidegger's discussion of technology as he said we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology if we merely conceive and put forward the technological. Technology is not mere means or instrument but is that whereby something is effected and thus attained (Heidegger 1977, 4). He laid out the cause and effect relation and referred to the four causes in the Aristotelian doctrine when he discusses the instrumentality of technology, while his question is actually about what unites these causes from the beginning and the primal meaning of causality. Technology, according to Heidegger's sayings, is basically responsible for letting something come forth or bring forth into presencing (An-wesen) and into its complete arrival. Heidegger asked, "how does bringing-forth happen, be it in nature or in handwork and art?" (Heidegger 1977, 8-11).

Shih Tao did not inquire about the cause and effect relation nor the question of bringing forth, but he did point out that the one stroke grasped by the ink painter was the origin of art. His saying that the single stroke "which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things" presupposes the artist's reach to and understanding of the metaphysical realm. Heidegger further elaborates that technology is about bringing-forth, "brings out of concealment into unconcealment" and that the essence of technology is to arrive at revealing everything. He refers this to "truth" and understands it as "correctness of representation." He said:

The possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing. Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth. ... that *technē* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*, it is something poetic (Heidegger 1977, 12-13).

I will agree here to some parallel readings between Shih Tao and Heidegger. The meaning of the "one stroke" suggested by Shih Tao may refer to what Heidegger describes as the "utmost importance" to think of bringing-forth in its full scope. It

is the origin of art and the truth and it happens before the many strokes that come after for artistic representation. His sayings echo that of Heidegger:

The art of painting is a manifestation of truth. With regard to the delicate arrangement of mountains, streams, and human figures, or the natural characteristics of birds, animals, grass, and trees, or the proportions of ponds, pavilions, towers, and terraces, if one's mind cannot deeply penetrate into their reality and subtly express their appearance, one has not yet understood the fundamental meaning of the oneness of strokes" (Coleman 1978, 37).

Heidegger said that the bringing-forth is not only handicraft manufacture, artistic and poetical bringing into appearance and concrete imagery. The artistic techniques, skills and visuality in all the freedom and constraints of the physical movements of an artist happen in the bringing-forth process in which the growing things of nature, as well as whatever is completed through the crafts and the arts, come at any given time to their appearance, and this coming or revealing rests and moves freely (Heidegger 1977, 10-11). This reminds one of Mou's saying that when one's being is engaged in the realm of the metaphysical Dao, "things present themselves in the way that they are...not as an object, but as an ideal state" (Mou 1974, 208-211). One finds more resemblances when trying to differentiate the metaphysical implications of the Dao in traditional Chinese philosophy from the ontological meaning of Heidegger's reading.

When the essence of the technological part of art is understood through the Heideggerian notions of truth and revealing of "everything" (Heidegger 1977, 12), a question is raised here of how the artistic process leads the painter to an awareness of the self, and what one would find in the intersection with Nature, as the Daoists emphasize, as well as the meaning of the term technovisuality, which is suggested to be understood in the Heideggerian sense of the essence of technology instead of the "technological."

Visuality: The Case of Merleau-Ponty

I want to argue that the new ink works are traces of the painter's awareness of a whole of visibility that is essential to the painter's own sense of self as present and actual. After reviewing Heidegger's suggestion of the essence of technology as a process of bringing-forth and truth revealing, it would be appropriate to turn to the theory of another phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, for comparison and discussion.

At a preliminary level, it can be agreed that ink painters must take notice of paper or silk as a *visible whole* in order to make a brush stroke, and also to make artistic judgment. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'flesh of the world' has provided this a contemporary discussion, as he has shown how the painter enters a visible space where the self and nature intersect in his work *The Visible and the Invisible*. Merleau-Ponty used the term "visibility" to name a corporeal element of the painter's own body which experiences objects in Nature and which is aware of the whole of the visible where the self meets Nature (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 245). We may say that when a painter continually suspends the visual experience of natural objects and appearances during the process for transcendental request, greater intimacy and closeness with Nature in the realm of the Dao is actually achieved as neo-Confucian scholars implied. It is at this point that, not only the barrier of conception is absent, but the painter's own self will become part of Nature, and Nature will become part of the painter's self.

Merleau-Ponty has also focused on the intersection of the nature of the body and its senses but at a different level. This must be differentiated from Kantian epistemology as well. Kant suggests governance of sensation by the a priori conceptual scheme of the understanding, while Merleau-Ponty stresses that the painter is aware of an intersection with Nature through what is given by sensibility *before* sensibility is conceptualized and experienced in the form of appearances or objects (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 217). Let's remember that for Merleau-Ponty, perception is primary, whereas for Kant, reason and cognition are primary.

The revelation of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of gestalt psychology is that when a painter produces a line, it must be on the paper as a visible space that is the context for all possible lines (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 207-208). One may compare this reading with the implication in Shih Tao's remarks on "one stroke" painting when he says that:

when the wrist seizes reality, it moves the brush with a revolving movement enriches the strokes by rolling the brush hairs, and leaves them unbounded by any limitations... all of these movements...are natural and are free from the slightest artificiality. All of these actions possess a lively spirit and their methods are always integrated. All things become real and their manner is vividly and fully expressed. This is because when...the principle of oneness of strokes emerged, ten thousand things were manifested (Coleman 1978, 39-40).

For Shih Tao, the "one-stroke" in ink painting should be both a visible event and a metaphysical concept. He does not deny that the ink painter contemplates and

looks intently at the visible silk or paper during the process of making a stroke, though he has not elaborated on this. In fact, this might have been assumed in his theory of the “one stroke” painting, as it is the point of departure towards the metaphysical intersection of self and Nature. One can find numerous evidences in *Hua Po* in which he stresses the transcendental origin of aesthetic experience when he mentions that the art of painting is a manifestation of truth, and with regard to all the things represented, one’s mind has to deeply penetrate into their reality to understand the fundamental meaning of “the oneness of strokes” (Coleman 1978, 37).

The penetration into the Dao or the metaphysical Nature requires a transcendental leap, which may take continuing efforts, both spiritually and physically, as he said:

To both travel far and ascend heights, one’s step begins with a single inch near at hand...A single stroke which identifies with universality can clearly reveal the idea of man and fully penetrate all things...Thus the wrist seizes reality (Coleman 1978, 38).

Yet the emphasizing point is still the spiritual capacity of the “one stroke” as he said the splashing of the ink onto the brush is to done with spirit (Coleman 1978, 56). But the corporeal act and visuality are necessary for artistic manifestation, as Shih described that the substance and function, forms and power, bowing and standing, squatting and leaping of ink strokes fully reveal the spirituality of things (Coleman 1978, 59). They attribute to continuing artistic and physical practices, as he said:

the vitality of the ink depends upon catching the absolute moment; the action of grasping the moment requires continuity of execution. Among those who know how to control movement, their brush work is inwardly real and outwardly transparent (Coleman 1978, 79).

One is reminded here of the famous Daoist story of butcher Ding in Zhuangzi’s writing. It was said that when the butcher moves his knife through the body of a cow, it was as if he were dancing. The act and the interaction along with the animal body and going right through its physical form and structure, lead to the butcher’s experience of Nature, where all things travel together and encounter one another. The butcher’s departure from his corporeality, and the visibility of both his act and the object of his act, including his grasp of the cow’s physical nature when he dismembers the cow, is just like an ink painter departing from the visible whole of his strokes on the paper. The painter enters into the metaphysical realm and

executes from there. Shih said:

When he grasps the brush, it is as if he were doing nothing (Coleman 1978, 102).

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty uses the terms “flesh” and “visible” to designate an inward element of corporeality that has not been named in preceding philosophies. He suggests that the inwardness of the individual person includes an element of flesh that is composed of “the visible” and “the tangible” parts which cannot be placed over the other (Merleau- Ponty 1968, 134). As he puts it:

Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world... There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable...It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication (Merleau- Ponty 1968, 134-135).

With the term the “total visible,” Merleau-Ponty refers inwardly to the individual painter’s own corporeal context, which is a sustaining whole and stable pivot for all the experiencing, and the vital part of the revealing or the bringing-forth process discussed above. This may supplement the presupposition of the corporeal departure of Shih Tao’s “One stroke” painting that enters into the intersection of the self with Nature. Shih said it all:

the vitality of the ink depends upon catching the absolute moment; the action of grasping the moment requires continuity of execution. Among those who know how to control movement, their brush work is inwardly real and outwardly transparent... Therefore, the ancients hit the proper measure between emptiness and reality; inwardly and outwardly there was fit control; their method of painting was completely perfected... Without flaws or defects, they obtained the spirit of evasive concealment and the spirit of movement... With regard to those who face a wall, dust covered and obstructed by things, how can they avoid hatred from the creator (nature)? (Coleman 1978, 79-80).

Here one may need to note the difference between Merleau-Ponty’s reading and that of Shih Tao. The obstruction suggested by Shih may refer to the Kantian notion of cognition, where the subject and the object dichotomy is operating. Merleau-Ponty has also suggested that the term “visible” may be used to name the sensible context within which cognitive thinking temporarily discriminates particular

forms (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 130). He adds that there is never a complete merging of vision and this porous visible context; for if there were then vision would vanish due to the “disappearance of the seer or of the visible” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 131). One can see here that Merleau-Ponty is still discussing empirical vision, while Shih refers this kind of vision to a form of metaphysical departure, for the real artistic scene should only spring up after the disappearance of the seer or the sensible subject, who is replaced by a transcendental subject. In brief, the ink painting subject will absorb the empirical vision and reach the transcendental vision, while the process of the entrance to and the exit from the transcendental realm is the dancing of the ink strokes on paper.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty’s notions of the “flesh” or the “visible” also has a strong metaphysical flavor, as they designate a non-objective domain of corporeality, which refers to an inward dimension of the body and cannot be experienced as an object or material condition that conforms to empirically determined laws of scientific knowledge, though visibility is also an element essential to our own sense of corporeality (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 205-206). According to Merleau-Ponty, the “pure” artistic subject is not traveling in any metaphysical realm, but is a suspending self or an innate whole of visibility free from cognitive judgments. In this way, this contemporary development of the reading of artistic process cannot be translated into the traditional Chinese discourse on ink painting like that of Shih Tao, for there exist two different paradigms of metaphysical beliefs. The importance of pointing out the differences between the two modalities is to suggest the proper way of reading Shih Tao’s theory of ink painting as a representing Daoist aesthetics, and to avoid misunderstanding initiated by an easy adoption of a Western model. This will also explain the different positions of visuality implied. Merleau-Ponty says that the painter switches from judge to pupil, as the seeing painter stays within the innate corporeal element of the whole of the visible and repeats and affirms what is seen in the manifestation process. This is the way Merleau-Ponty reads Cezanne’s saying that “Nature is on the inside” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 125). The traditional Chinese ink painters believe in traveling in the metaphysical Nature and that the artistic bodily act is an automatic execution or manifestation of that experience, like Shih Tao’s suggestion of the “One Stroke.” This is clearly implied in this Shih’s words:

because men grasp the power of evasive concealment and vitality, mountains, streams and the myriad things offer their spirit to man. If it is not the case, how could one enable brush strokes and ink washes, within the ink, to create embryonic and structured forms, openness and closeness? (Coleman 1978, 58).

The painter is thus an “enlightened” wise man, as he said:

Because he (the painter) is wise, he transforms; because he is enlightened, he is free. When confronted by things, he is undisturbed. When he deals with forms, he leaves no traces...When he moves the ink, it is as if the work were already finished...When he grasps the brush, it is as if he were doing nothing (Coleman 1978, 101-102).

Merleau-Ponty’s painters are interested in the sensible whole of visibility that is an inward root of embodiment within nature, and it is in this sense that the painter is closer to nature. Though this contemporary interpretation of innate corporeality cannot explain the Daoist metaphysical claims as it does not presuppose the metaphysical realm of the Dao, it may still become a good reference of what the new ink painters are doing now and what ink painting has developed into. The suggestion also returns to the argument stated at the beginning of this section that the new ink works are traces of the painter’s awareness of a whole of visibility that is essential to the painter’s own sense of self as present and actual. To be enriched by Heidegger’s suggestion, the technovisuality in the sense of the essence of technology and the visual experience involved, is an unconcealment and a bringing-forth of the truth of one’s total existence.

The “Expansion” of New Ink Art

In contemporary discourses of visuality, it is said that there is no innocent perceiving eye or ideal observer (Hurley 1985, 54-97). Visuality is always contextual, social, cultural and political. The visual is extending and transforming indigenous cultural forms of seeing and looking. This is especially true of Chinese Modernity, in which modernity is seen as spectacle, and that the excessiveness of spectacle captivated modern Chinese subjects to the extent that they are actively involved in it, as suggested by Pang Laikwan. Pang suggests that through visuality, modern Chinese subjects face not only the passing of the past and the looking forward to a pluralistic future, but they also have come to terms with their own modern selves and new identities. Chinese modernity is in fact constantly renewed through the interactions between subjects and their rapidly changing cultural environment (Pang, 2007).

The New Ink movement in Hong Kong in the 1960s, for instance, has demonstrated the quest for cultural and artistic identities. Pioneers like Lui Shou-kwan have explicitly extended their concerns from artistic tradition to existential situation; that is, from metaphysical encounter to social concerns. The New Ink

Art exhibition mentioned at the beginning of this paper has selected Lui's works as exhibits, showing the changes and concerns. Lui promoted modernization of traditional ink painting and related it to Hong Kong cultural identity. His ink paintings addressed an existential crisis in the British colony – a crisis that became more serious when political tension finally grew into riots and street demonstrations in 1967 as Hong Kong's leftists protested against British colonial rule. During the riot, the radical political tensions that emerged between the British government and Chinese leftists in the colony in the 60's were initiated by a group of factory workers on strike in San Po Kong. Thousands of workers joined in the riot which led to injuries. The riot was read as a local rebellion against the colonial government. After the riot, localization policies were promoted by the colonial government to build up a sense of belonging and local awareness among Hong Kong citizens (T. Lui & Chiu 1999, 105). Lui then absorbed Western ideas into Chinese tradition in his ink work to meet the quest for a new cultural identity.

Lui's desire for individual expression caused him to become an experimentalist in what may be termed "Chinese art with a Western approach" (Lee 1963, 14). Lui mixed his experimental ideas with ink painting, which eventually led him to *Zen* painting, the style for which he was most famous in his later development.



2. Lui Shou-Kwan. Zen Painting I. 1974. Ink and color on paper. H. 70 x W. 139 cm.

On the one hand, he thought that the spirit of New Ink painting offered a mental balance to people living in a colony that was overrun with material and technological advancements. It is note worthy that the international art community was more interested in a new genre of work that grew out of local cultural innovations, though Lui and his followers are not after an international income stream. He was more interested in demonstrating or bring-forth his existential situation and adaptability of living in a colonial city as an ink painter through innovative ideas of art.

Lui further classified modern ideas combined with tradition as “adaptation” which should not be separated from the “root” or foundation, which, in traditional Chinese aesthetics, is the spiritual cultivation of the artist (Lui 1972, 31-33). Lui drew on these teachings to urge artists to return to the “root” – that is, to the inner self – and to nourish it, to find the wisdom to incorporate new forms of painting. By returning to the root, painters could find their own style which would reveal their own personality and ways of existence. Lui’s views on “adaptation” were reflected in the work of young artists who mixed ink with fluorescent colors or printing oil and utilized ink with concepts of Western design, while leaving their return to the “root” as an enigma. Lui’s follower, Wucius Wong, succeeds in combining ink with Western design ideas and produces landscape in distinguished style.



3. Wucius Wong. *Purification. No.2*. 1979. Ink and color on paper. H 183.4 x W 89.2 cm.

Lui's contemporary, Luis Chan, is famous in using ink to develop liberal, imaginative and free style modern painting.



4. Luis Chan, *Landscape*. 1970. Ink and color on paper. H 75 x W 43.5 cm.

The recent experiments in ink painting in Mainland China are also telling their stories. In the exhibition notes on contemporary Chinese ink experiments, Sun Xiaofeng, an active art critic in China, argued that as contemporary art is strongly expanding its range of expression, the mingling of all kinds of techniques and media must nevertheless follow certain concepts and is subject to the recent cultural pertinence, strategy and speculation, and this applies equally to Chinese ink painting. Sun Xiaofeng is typical of contemporary ink art curators:

The unique spirit and the specific cultural connotations of Chinese ink painting that were formerly concealed by the contemporary may now be implemented as a kind of accessory or special flavor of the contemporary and thus compromise with current aesthetics. To define its position within a pluralist and multicultural context, we have to introduce Western artistic grammar into the context of ink painting, with a strategy that aims at producing diversified models of a contemporary quality. Only through such a process of continuous exchange can the factors participating in it successfully participate in cultural negotiations. ...one of the tasks of the contemporary ink experiment is to rediscover the cultural functions and spiritual implications of ink and to revive ink as an artistic language, as well as for the actual grammar and rhetoric of this particular language (Sun 2007, 10, original version in English).

It is clear that new ink painting has to fulfill a number of functions: as spiritual revival and as functional as culturally identifier. That is why the curator raised such a question: “Is it correct to say ink makes a sacrifice to obtain a contemporary identity?” (Sun 2007, 10). We are reminded to avoid the illusion of the existence of a privileged domain of ink, and that there is neither a definite conclusion nor the declaration of the establishment of other norms for ink painting. It is said that there are only possibilities of ink painting as inspired by new experiments (Sun 2007, 11). The contribution of the ink experiment lies in the fact that it preserves a text of the practice of the evolution of the concepts in the field of contemporary art and culture; and it provides a valuable experience in what concerns the appropriate strategy of an autochthonous culture effected by the drive of globalization.

But what about metaphysics, if even “spiritual resonance” as the first principal of painting in the Chinese tradition was now only regarded as an act for mental balance in the life of an international city? The relevance of Shih Tao’s writing remains as an echo informing contemporary ink painters:

Those who know the subtle manifestation, but forget the origin of the fundamental principle of oneness of brush strokes, are like children who forget their ancestors If one

knows that ancient and modern works never perish, yet forgets that their achievement of merit is not limited to men, this is the same as the ten thousand things losing what is given by nature. Heaven can give man a method, but cannot give him skill... ancient and modern works of calligraphy and painting originated from heaven and were completed by man (Coleman 1978, 104- 105).

One may detect technology from the term “method” that Shih Tao suggested in his treatise on ink painting. Yet it is the “skill” of bringing-forth or unconcealment of truth or the essence of technology that he implied in his philosophy of art.

Endnotes:

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