



CHINA

FIGURES IN A LANDSCAPE

Eleven Chinese artists bear witness to a cultural evolution.

By Roslyn Bernstein

A Chinese artist, it is traditionally said, does not hit his peak until he is in his sixties. So at age fifty-three, **Chen Jialing**, professor of Chinese painting at Shanghai University, is still developing. Born in Hangzhou, Chen studied with the master Pan Tianshou in the Chinese painting department of Zhejiang Art Academy from 1958 to 1963, and with the noted landscape painter and calligrapher Lu Yanshao in the 1970s. Chen began by copying and imitating traditional Chinese painting. "At first," he explains, "I did not think in terms of my own technique." Around the time he began to change, the Cultural Revolution intervened. As a result, Chen stopped painting in 1966. "Frankly, I was scared to paint," he says. "I sacrificed five years to the Cultural Revolution. Most people sacrificed ten."

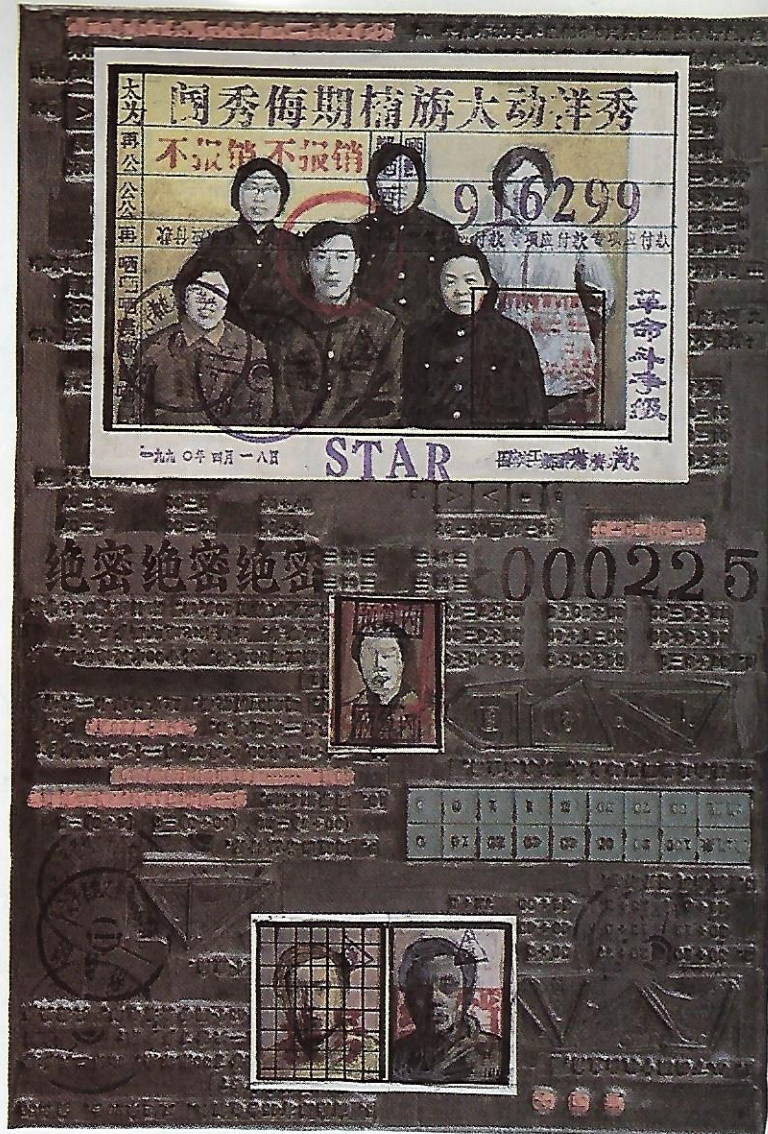
When he returned to painting in the 1970s, and particularly after 1979, when the Chinese government began its open policy, Chen's art began to change. He moved away from imitating the traditional toward a creative and innovative style that he describes as "not impressionistic but idealistic and romantic at the same time." Chen began to explore the function of the Chinese *shrensu* paper, controlling the traditional inks and playing with a strong, stippled black line. "He has an incredible sense of color and form," says Stephen McGuinness, director of the Plum Blossoms Gallery in Hong Kong. "But from the Chinese point of view, he doesn't have the classic line and brushstroke. He has discovered something new with his soft line and his signature look."

Chen's studio is the living room of his small Shanghai apartment, a nine-by-twelve-foot space that is as densely populated as China itself. There is just enough room to walk around his work table, and art books and supplies are crammed above and below a narrow bed. The limitation of space, however, does not seem to have inhibited the flow of Chen's imagination. His recent work seems increasingly abstract and flowing, the soft, subtle colors spreading under his strong, black lines.

Chen Wenji,
Untitled, 1987. Oil on
canvas, 55 x 75 cm
(21.5 x 29.5 inches).
Courtesy the artist.

Shi Zhong Ping, age thirty-eight, has already been to the United States to study contemporary art in SoHo galleries. An exchange visit to Lehman College of the City University of New York enabled him to establish contacts with several American galleries in Boston and Chicago. Shi focuses on the challenge of showing his art in the West. "I'm at my half-life," he jokes, explaining that, in the beginning of his career, he painted because he wanted to express his own life. "Now, I find that painting has its own language." Before he went to the United States, he was more traditional, concerned with ink and water. Most of his works were black and white. He was surprised to find that many Americans found his painting "quite sad—American people like color," he says.

The result of his East-West confrontation has been a decided shift toward strong color in his painting—a recent work portraying minority dancers in red is outlined with gold and silver paint purchased in the United States. "I want to paint what I know," says Shi, who seems torn between China, where there is no art market, and a Western audience. "When American people gain more understanding of Chinese culture, then I can be more abstract." However, despite his own thoughts about the Western market, he says, "I advise young artists not to think about selling. Just concentrate on your work, I tell them. You know, some young people just paint to make money."



Guan Wei, *Diary*, 1990. Mixed media on board. Courtesy the artist; photograph by Michael P. McLaughlin.

There are really only two officially acceptable reasons for Chinese artists to come to the United States—teaching or opening a major exhibition—and last year, many artists found their travel plans revoked after the troubles in Tiananmen Square. Now they are hoping that they will again receive permission to travel once things quiet down. Because travel to the West is expensive, it comes as no surprise that young artists are interested in selling their work, especially for American dollars.

There are no prices nor any red dots on **Wang Ming Long's** sculpture in the Shanghai Art Gallery, just across the way from the Acrobatics theater. His work is so varied that, at first glance, it appears to be a group show. Side by side with a realistic bronze of Marx and Engels looming over a joint tombstone are extremely contemporary fiberglass and plaster pieces: an abstract painted head with eyes and nose rearranged, skull open, a dove floating above it; and a smooth wooden piece entitled *Abstract Family of Three*.

Wang, age forty-five, has achieved some recognition. Several of his stone pieces can be seen at Shanghai University, and his work has been shown in Japan. He dreams of visiting the United States but has no immediate plans of going. Still, he exchanges calling cards eagerly and leaves a note offering to provide additional information about his work.

In Beijing, the mood among artists is more somber than in Shanghai. The effects of the government's military crackdown on the pro-democracy movement can be felt everywhere. One year after Tiananmen Square, tourism is way down. Hardly an English-speaking tourist is to be seen. Guides march endless groups of Taiwanese through the Buddhist monasteries. Just the name Tiananmen has the power to bring an animated social conversation to complete silence. Among young artists, the events of 4 June have definitely politicized their art. They express their anger and alienation despite difficulty in showing their work publicly, and bans on exhibitions at the homes of foreign friends.

Photographer **Liu Xiaoxian**, age twenty-seven, graduated from the Beijing Institute of Technology in 1985. He speaks some English and asks to be called by his English name, Shannon Liu. He is an intense young man, saying of his art, "Don't interpret it for me. The work speaks for itself." Last year Liu began shooting a photo-collage series of the Forbidden City entitled *Sounds of Silence*. Contrasting the old and the new, the innovative series includes red bars and gargoyles and relies on experiments with photochemicals to produce washed-out effects.

Liu's work is highly controversial. In one piece, a man's clothing is torn apart to reveal a woman's breast. "It might be considered too sexy," he explains. In *Lock*, a monotype done in February 1990, four faces of the same man show eyes and mouth stitched closed with red thread.

Guan Wei, a thirty-three-year-old Beijing painter, utilizes traditional Chinese painting techniques but significantly transforms their ancient meaning. Instead of the traditional red seal, Guan uses red-circled acupuncture points. While his art walks a tightrope between mischief and metaphysics, he can be extremely serious. In one painting, barbed wire represents the limitations of human beings, and their depression. Many of the people in his paintings have no eyes and no noses—just mouths. "It's because people are machines," he says, "robots."

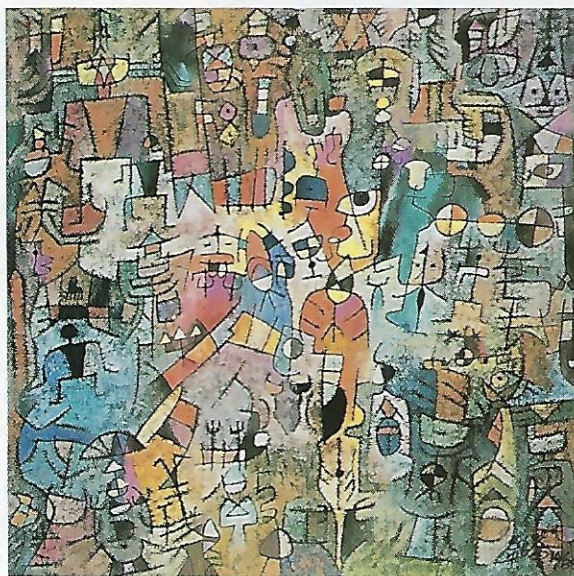
Since last year, Guan's work has become markedly political. He has made a series of phony art documents and prize certificates, with painted-over photos, imitation seals, gold stars, and red banners. Faces are crossed out and retouched. "My art reflects society's values," he says. "I've used photo-collage to mix the real with the creative." He points to some official-looking Chinese stamp seals and explains, "Those words are meaningless."

Wang Youshen, age twenty-six, has made a series of portraits to record his changing state of mind since the Tiananmen Square massacre. The faces have no features, but the heads all bear the same shape. "This could express any person's thoughts," he says. "But inside, people's thoughts are always different—they are always scattered and messy." A visual symbol of man's mental clutter can be found inside one white head, which is filled with white strings. In a second head, Wang includes a chop with characters expressing the sentiment, "everything is empty, everything is denied." In a third, an empty face has a small, square red-and-white label replacing the nose. "All the people are depressed," Wang says, explaining why he chose to do the series predominantly in black and white. "This expresses what people think now," he whispers, adding that the red label represents the limitations on human life.

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Much of the work produced by artists at the Beijing Central Institute of Fine Arts is typical of an academy, with landscapes and figurative art dominating. Still, one third of the faculty now consists of young teachers who are deeply concerned with contemporary art. Last year, there was a contemporary art exhibition in the National Art Gallery, the first time that contemporary art was shown in China on a national scale. Several younger faculty members from the institute participated.

Among these was **Chen Wenji**, a painter whose recent still-life works include draped chairs and conceptual pieces in which torn shreds of fabric cling to wire fences. Chen chooses to paint objects from his daily life: an umbrella, torn newspaper peeling on a wall, a stool, a bottle of black paint. Having recently participated in a group show in Spain, Chen is keenly interested in Western contemporary art and would like to visit the United States, because it is difficult to see contemporary work in China. There are many shops in Beijing devoted to tourist art, but unfortunately there are no galleries dedicated to contemporary art.



Liu Shaohui, *Untitled*, 1989. Oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist; photograph by Michael P. McLaughlin.

There is art to be found outside the capital, but it takes dedicated work to unearth it. There are no galleries in the city of Xi'an, some seven hundred miles west of Beijing, where the main attraction is the famous terracotta warriors. Local artists must fend for themselves. In the courtyard of the city's Shaanxi Provincial Museum, an exhibition for the benefit of the Asian games features the art of peasant painter **Li Feng Lan**, age fifty-six, a woman responsible for the peasant painting movement in Huxian County that now numbers over fifteen hundred artists. Li is considered to be the leader of the Huxian school, and several of her works, which often involve bright colors and geometric patterns, have won national prizes, including *Spring Hoeing* in 1974 (which is also on a postage stamp), and *Artists Present Mao With Their Works* in 1976 (despite his aversion to culture, Mao was very fond of farmers' painting or proletarian art).

Copying is a serious problem since there is no copyright law in China, says **Liu Shaohui**, an artist recently relocated to Guilin after twenty years in Yunnan province. He is one of the six original painters of the Yunnan school, which uses heavy color to depict minority themes. Yunnan prints are quite popular in the United States, particularly in California, and although Yunnan-style paintings and imitations can be found throughout China, one has to look hard to find this work in Guilin. There are many galleries showing traditional paintings of the famous Guilin mountain landscapes, but only one gallery shows contemporary works.

Liu Shaohui's works are influenced not only by primitive life, the Dunhuang cave murals, and folk art, but also by Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Paul Klee. In a recent painting shown in Tokyo in July, Liu uses ancient Chinese letters as an abstract design in much the same way that Klee played with languages.



Liu Xiaoxian, *Lock*, 1990. Black and white photograph, monotype, 78 x 65 cm (30.75 x 25.5 inches). Courtesy the artist.

Wang Jian is a thirty-five-year-old colleague of Liu's at the Pedagogical Institute of Guilin. He, too, experiments with heavy color, but his woodcuts display his greatest talent. He uses his knife instead of a brush to create delicate brush-like cuts. Frequently it takes him nearly a month to complete a single work, from which he then makes only five prints. "After that, they become unclear," says Wang, whose fine lines cover the entire woodcut. Collectors in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan have purchased his work, and he is actively pursuing the Asian and Western art markets.

According to Paula Fodor of the Plum Blossoms Gallery, mainland Chinese artists are quite popular with "Chuppies" (Chinese yuppies), expatriate Westerners, and the Japanese, and a serious market for contemporary Chinese work has begun to develop. **Wu Guanzhong's** *The Ruins of Gaochung* recently sold for a record HK\$1.87 million (\$240,000) at Sotheby's Hong Kong. Although no other living Chinese artists have sold works in this price range, Stephen McGuinness of Plum Blossoms says that prices have gone up over three hundred percent in the past five years. "Sotheby's and Christie's," he notes, "are now holding four auctions a year that include contemporary art." Guinness says that the most successful contemporary Chinese artist is the "bridge-type," the artist whom Westerners do not have to judge from a classic Chinese point of view.

It is now a little over a year since the pro-democracy movement was crushed in Tiananmen Square and, despite the chill, artists throughout China continue to make art publicly and privately. The events have taken their toll, however. Films, plays, and art exhibitions have been curtailed, and the National Art Gallery in Beijing, the leading avant-garde exhibition hall, has been closed for renovation until 1991. Recently, the New China News Agency announced the replacement of two deputy ministers of culture: Ying Ruocheng, who was closely associated with cultural openness, and Wang Jifu. They will be replaced by Chen Changben and Xu Wenbon, the latter of whom is a member of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

Meanwhile, in the small apartments of China, artists and writers sip tea, peel oranges, and discuss their lives since the "disturbance." Some would like to believe that nothing has happened. Most avoid the subject carefully. A few speak about the event, but they are cautious. "China has such a long history," they say. "You really can't judge anything until at least sixty years have passed."

Roslyn Bernstein is a contributing editor of Contemporanea.