

Dong, Yifang 董義方 and His Art in Modern China

In 1925, Dong Yifang was born into a wealthy gentry family in the northern city Zunhua 遵化 in Hebei 河北 Province. His grandfather served in the prestigious *Hanlin* Academy (翰林院) in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). With the defeat of the Qing dynasty in the Opium Wars, Western missionaries gained the right to evangelize in the Chinese interior. Dong's father, the owner of real estate and several other businesses, was on the board of trustees of a local Christian school. By the time of Dong's birth, China had just emerged from two millennia of imperial rule and established the Republic of China in 1911. In the tumultuous decades that followed, Dong Yifang received modern education from primary school through college, became a professional artist and college professor, and concluded his productive career with more creative work after retirement until his passing in 2006. The artistic training Dong received in his early years was characterized by the exploration of Chinese artists during the first few decades of the 20th century, when artists balanced traditional Chinese conventions and the impact of modernity found in Western painting. In his early twenties, Dong moved away from Chinese scholarly styles to the study of Western realism. After 1949, the political dictation of painting subjects and styles superseded personal choices. It was not until the 1980s that Dong Yifang could finally return to his own pursuit of beauty in nature as he rendered southern Chinese landscape in his matured artistic style. This exhibition displays Dong Yifang's works in chronological order, showing how the artist illustrated the times he witnessed and how his paintings reflect his observation throughout the vicissitude of modern China from the 20th to the 21st centuries.

I. 1911-1949 The Era of Republic of China

From 1911 until 1925, the newly established Republic of China barely maintained a nominal unity as warlords contended with each other for power and territory. Dr. Sun Yat-sen 孫中山, who successfully led the 1911 revolution to overthrow the Qing Dynasty, temporarily yielded the presidency to the former Qing military general, Yuan Shikai 袁世凱, because Yuan negotiated the abdication of the last Qing emperor. Yuan had agreed to democratic elections, but rejected the results that propelled Sun's party into power. In 1915, when Yuan proclaimed

himself the emperor of the Chinese Empire in Beijing, he encountered immediate resistance from other warlords resulting in Yuan's abdication in 1916, and Yuan died later in the same year. Realizing little could be achieved without the backing of a formidable military force, Sun Yat-sen withdrew to the south to build the Whampoa Military Academy 黄埔军校 near Guangzhou 广州. After Sun's death in 1925, his protégé and the president of the military academy, Chiang Kai-shek 蒋中正, emerged as the new leader of the Nationalist Party, founded by Sun.

In 1926, Chiang Kai-shek led the Nationalist army to launch the Northern Expedition from the southern city Guangzhou where his military academy was based. With the help of the Soviet Union and Chinese Communists, the expedition basically united most parts of China in 1928. Meanwhile, his alliance with Communists, formed originally by Sun, dissolved. Chiang established the new capital for the newly united Republic of China in today's Nanjing 南京.

The following decade (1926-1937) of relative political stability, often dubbed "the Nanjing decade" or the golden era of modern China, ushered in new marriage laws to replace polygamy and established modern hospitals and education system. Chinese elites from Suzhou fled the chaos of Taiping Rebellion and Western investment turned the small fishing village Shanghai 上海 into a major international city with western banks lining the Bund along the Huangpu River 黄浦江. Unfortunately, the prosperity was short-lived. Japan became increasingly aggressive and launched a major aerial bombing campaign during the Battle of Shanghai in 1932. In 1937, the Sino-Japanese war broke out, which turned China into a major battlefield in Asia until the surrender of Japan in 1945. After the war broke out, the Japanese army soon marched down from Manchuria to take over most parts of northern and eastern China along the coast, forcing the Chinese government, led by Chiang Kai-shek, to relocate to Sichuan 四川 province and the southwest part of China. During his retreat, Chiang had professional art connoisseurs carefully select and meticulously pack the best art works and treasures from the Forbidden City 紫禁城 in Beijing 北京 to keep them from the impending Japanese army by transporting them to Sichuan.

In 1941, amidst this national strife, after Dong Yifang graduated from a modern style middle school in his home city of Zunhua, he entered into Beijing Hebei High School in Beijing. Later his family was forced to leave for Beijing when the Japanese army took over Zunhua and set up their headquarters in the most spacious housing complex in the city, the residence of the Dong family. In Beijing, Dong Yifang became a student of his relative, the artist Qin Zhongwen 秦仲文 (1896-1974), to study traditional Chinese painting. In addition to their personal relationship, their artistic affinity flourished. Dong Yifang possessed several paintings from his teacher, and a number of them are featured in this exhibition. Due to political reasons, Qin Zhongwen had been largely neglected until very recent years. Now he is studied as an important traditional Chinese artist and art theorist.

When Dong Yifang came to Beijing in 1941, Qin Zhongwen was teaching art in his alma mater Beijing University, where he had earned a degree in politics and law. While in college, Qin started learning Chinese painting from the artists in Beijing and became a member of The Society for the Study of Chinese Painting 中国画学研究会 at its onset in 1920. As he proceeded to teach and research Chinese art, he published a volume of his collected paintings in 1925 and one of the first modern books on the history of Chinese paintings *History of the Scholarship of Chinese Painting* 中国绘画学史 in 1934. The articles he published between 1950 and early 1960's cover a wide range of his comments on the works of the past and his contemporary artists, and attest to his active participation in the discussion of the nature and future of traditional Chinese painting. Over the course of his career, Qin came to be known as one of the last literati artists for his learning, poetry, achievement in calligraphy and cross-genre Chinese paintings including landscape, bamboo, and the plum blossoms; most of all, his modesty and uncompromising integrity as a Confucian scholar.

Through Qin Zhongwen, Dong Yifang obtained the opportunity to work in the Palace Museum (the Forbidden City) in Beijing. There, he copied the works of “the Four Wangs 四王,” the most respected traditional master painters of the early Qing Dynasty in the 17th Century, under the instruction of renowned Chinese artists Huang Binhong 黄宾虹 and Yu Fei'an 于非闇. By age sixteen, Dong Yifang's artistic talents and solid training in Chinese literati painting

became evident in his earliest surviving work, *Deep Clouds in a Remote Valley* 絕壑深雲 (1941), done in the style of Wang Shimin 王时敏 (1592- 1680), the eldest of “The Four Wangs.” Now well versed in traditional art, Dong Yifang’s love for painting took him on a new path. In 1942, he was accepted by the Department of Oil Painting of National Beiping Academy of Art 国立北平艺术专科学校油画组, where he studied impressionist paintings under Wei Tianlin 卫天霖. In 1945, he went to Fu-Jen University 辅仁大学 and studied water color for four months. In 1946, at age 21, Dong became the youngest faculty member of National Beiping Academy of Art. In 1947, Dong Yifang’s mentor Qin Zhongwen and two of Qin’s colleagues in traditional Chinese painting resigned from the academy after an intense dispute over how to teach traditional Chinese paintings against Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿, the president of the academy. As a result, Dong Yifang also left the academy and became an art teacher at Tongzhou Women’s Normal College 通州女子师范学校 near Beijing.

At the conclusion of WWII, China immediately became engulfed in an ongoing civil war between the Nationalist and the Communist armies, which came to be backed by the US and USSR respectively. The civil war ended in 1949 when the Nationalists withdrew to Taiwan 台湾 and the Communists, led by Mao Zedong 毛泽东, founded the People’s Republic of China. The Communist regime under Mao had its distinct instructions for the role and function of literature and art. As early as 1942, Mao had disseminated his “Talk on Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” which condemned the traditional Chinese society as feudal and urged artists to promote the revolutionary culture of socialism by portraying the peasants, workers and Communist soldiers, and to learn from them. In Yan’an, the ensuing Rectification Campaign imposed party discipline on artists. Likewise, in Mao’s China, traditional Chinese painters had to adjust what they painted and how they painted.

II.1949-1976 The Period of High Socialism

Right at the heel of the civil war, Mao's decision to participate in the Korean War (1950-1953) was promoted by the PRC to its people as a great victory for which China won the admiration of the world for its courage against the US. Often neglected was the enormous number of casualties, the staggering amount of debts to the USSR to cover the cost of the war, and 20 years of isolation, believed to be by Mao's choice, from the Western world (Twitchett 276)¹. Consequently, China gradually fell into dire poverty while the other UN nations, including West Germany, Japan, and the Republic of China in Taiwan, rebuilt their prosperity.

After the Korean War, Mao turned some of his attention to domestic construction, but mostly focused on dozens of political movements until his death in 1976. The movement of land reform, started before 1949 in the regions controlled by the Communist party, continued to incite local vagabonds and peasants to violently force legal landowners to release their land. In cities, private enterprise owners were forced to turn in their businesses to government ownership. "In the single month of April 1952, 70,000 Shanghai businessmen were investigated and criticized" (Ebrey 280)². In 1953, Mao was chairman of the Communist party, chairman of the Military Affairs Commission, and chairman of the PRC. Within a decade, more than a million branch Communist party committees extended into practically every organization in mainland China, including villages, factories, schools, and army units (Ebrey 279). As the new government sought to gain control of every aspect of people's life, they tightened their reign against dissidents. In the 1955 anti-revolutionary movement, anyone suspected to be related to the Nationalists, labeled as anti-revolutionists, and accused of other charges against the Communist party and against the Chinese people, were criticized, persecuted, imprisoned, sent to labor camps or executed.

1953-1957 marks PRC's first Five-Year plan, based on the Soviet model to build up the economy through industry, agriculture, and infrastructure. Fully confident in the successful progress of his economic projects, Mao solicited suggestions, comments and different views in 1956 in his Hundred Flowers Campaign. When criticism against the CCP unexpectedly poured in, Mao immediately changed his course to crack down on dissenting opinions by launching the

¹ Twitchett, Denis Crispin. *The Cambridge History of China. 1949-1965*. Cambridge: Cambridge U, 1987. Print.

² Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *China: A Cultural, Social, and Political History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

Anti-Rightist Movement 反右运动 in 1957, which silenced intellectuals. Historian Cao Shuji has shown that a major concern that schoolteachers voiced was rationing food for peasants, but those voices were suppressed (Brown, 77-101).³ With opposition to rations effectively suppressed, Mao embarked on his Great Leap Forward 大跃进 movement in 1958 to call upon Chinese peasants, rather than factory workers, to engage in industrialization in effort to “surpass the British and to catch up with the US” in 15-20 years. Villages were organized into communes all over China. They produced steel in their “backyard furnaces” by attempting to smelt any household metal -- including wooden furniture, window and door frames -- to feed the furnaces. Given ignorance of metallurgy, the results were disastrous. Local level cadre over reported grain production, and peasants were taxed to the point of starvation. When the Defense Minister Peng Dehuai wrote a private letter to Mao about what he witnessed, Mao publicized his letter, accused him as the leader of an “anti-party clique,” and forced him into retirement. By the time of its conclusion in 1961, the Great Leap Forward resulted in an estimated 30 million deaths due to starvation and a resulting man-made drought. As a result, many cadre lost faith in the party, or sought to “clean up” the countryside and rectify the mistakes of local cadre who had vied for privileges based on the economic productivity of their home regions. Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping forced Mao into retirement, but Peng was never rehabilitated. The party survived.

To encourage enthusiasm during this challenging time, artists were asked to portray grand public works, people toiling in the fields and factories, and other engineering projects in celebration of the government’s achievements. During this period, Dong Yifang painted landscapes in a Western style, but his subjects were dictated by these politics. His paintings from this period feature people working in the fields, production lines in the factory, hydraulic power plants, irrigation canals, and other government-approved subjects.

Also during this time, Dong Yifang published two articles “An Exploratory Discussion on Characteristics of Chinese Painting” 试论国画的特点 and “Problems of Establishing the System of Teaching Chinese Painting by Incorporating Sketch Drawing” 建立中国画素描教学

³ Brown, Jeremy, and Matthew D. Johnson. *Maoism at the Grassroots Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism*. Harvard University Press, 2015.

体系问题 in 1957 and 1959 in the journals *Fine Arts* 《美术》 and *Art Research* 《美术研究》 respectively. His article on characteristics of Chinese painting, published in March 1957, aroused immediate attention from scholars of the field. The editor of the journal claimed they received nearly 20 articles in response to Dong's essay within only a month, and they published a general response incorporating those critics' opinions in the issue of May. Most critics agreed with Dong that lines are important for Chinese paintings, but many disagreed with his claim that "The most predominant characteristic of Chinese painting is using lines as the foundation to create the form." In this May issue, Qin Zhongwen also published an article "Characteristics of Chinese Painting" 中国画的特点 as a response to Dong. His view appears conventional and his choice of expression toward his former student forbearing. In spite of controversy, Dong's bold statement inspired much discussion in reviewing the tradition of Chinese painting vis a vis the influence from the West. Most revealingly, we will observe lines will become an essential element of Dong's own works throughout his career.

Two years later, Dong Yifang's article "Problems of Establishing the System of Teaching Chinese Painting by Incorporating Sketch Drawing" provides deeper insights into theoretical and practical differences between Chinese and Western paintings. On that basis, he raises specific technical problems of demanding students of Chinese painting to start their training by first immersing themselves in two years of training in Western sketch drawing. Dong's careful analysis is highly convincing by drawing from his own experiences as an artist straddling the two distinct conventions. Many of the questions he raised are still being discussed today among Chinese artists and theorists. Personally, Dong continued to incorporate what he inherited with what he learned, and what he saw with what he could render.

As a method of returning to power from retirement, Mao turned to the cultural arena with the aid of the head of the military, Lin Biao. These efforts culminated in the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 from 1966 to his death in 1976. The Cultural Revolution began with Mao's seemingly innocuous introduction to stories which he imbued with highly political metaphors to condemn his political enemies. As the situation intensified, Mao encouraged students to speak out against their own teachers and to "bombard the party headquarters." Teenaged students, soon dubbed "Red Guards," rallied in the Tian'an Men Square to protect Chairman Mao against his ambitious enemies. Splitting into multiple warring factions, marauding "red guards" so disrupted

cities that Mao agreed, after a very short time, to send them to the country side to learn from the peasants. During the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution, China's time-honored traditions were labeled as feudalist poisons deserving for destruction, and China's economy came to the brink of bankruptcy. Because metaphorical representation was the primary touchstone of the Cultural Revolution, art was heavily scrutinized.

Dong Yifang was fortunate enough to steer away from political turmoil during the three decades of his most active age by contributing his artistic skills and talents mainly to works and projects dictated by the government. From 1948 to 1955 he worked as an anatomic illustrator for medical schools in Qingdao 青岛 and Dalian 大连. In 1955, his painting, *Evening at Low Tide* 《潮水落下去的傍晚》, received highly favorable reviews in China's second National Art Exhibition. In 1956-1958, he was commissioned by the Chinese Artists Association to paint the landscape in Guilin 桂林, a southwestern city celebrated for its natural beauty, with the prominent artist Li Keran 李可染 (1907-1989). Four of his works from this trip were published by People's Fine Arts Publishing House. In the meantime, Dong worked as a lecturer in the hydraulic department of Dalian Engineer Institute (now Dalian University of Technology 大连理工大学) from 1955-1959, before he was moved to Zhengzhou 郑州, Henan 河南, to work as a lecturer and then assistant professor of the architecture department of Zhengzhou Engineer Institute 郑州大学工学院. His painting *Sanmenxia Hydropower Plant Construction Site* 三门峡大坝工地一角 (1960) is a magnificent work which reflects the theme of high socialism during this period of time. In the 1960s, he had another opportunity to tour southern China to do landscape paintings. In 1964, the Chinese government presented his work *The Towering Giant* 《巍然巨人》 to Cuba as a gift.

For a time, Dong Yifang stayed in relative peacefulness and in 1972, he decorated the Henan Room 河南厅 of the Great Hall of the People 人民大会堂 in Beijing with his work *The Bridge of Luoyang* 洛阳桥. However, in 1974, he was involved in the "Black Paintings Incident"

黑画事件 when a number of renowned Chinese artists were accused by Mao Zedong's wife and her supporters of criticizing the government with concealed metaphors in their paintings. Ye Qianyu 叶浅予, one of the featured artists of this exhibition, recounted gruesome details of how he was beaten by the Red Guards with leather belt stud with bronze buckle. Qin Zhongwen's persecution was so severe that it led to his death in the same year. In comparison, Dong Yifang was much more fortunate as he managed to continue working and teaching art. From 1973-1975, he also gave art lessons to gifted children, including Wang Yani 王亚妮, who was known as a child prodigy for her paintings of monkeys. In 1976, his work *Mongshan Irrigation Station* 《邙山提灌站》 graced the Mongshan Reception Room for international visitors 邙山外宾接待室 in western Henan.

III.1976-2006 The Age of Reform and Opening

When Mao Zedong died in 1976, there was a major power struggle between warring factions in the party. As the youngest member of the old revolutionary group, Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 eventually rose to power as the most capable leader of the era. Deng eschewed constant political movements of violent class struggle, and adopted the recommendations of Chen Yun and other economists to strengthen China. With Deng Xiaoping's ascension to power, China entered a new era of reformation and opening in the early 1980's. This period is also known for "building socialism with Chinese characteristics" as the government encouraged international investments in China to boost economic growth after a precious economic landscape of the late 1970s. In the last three decades of his life, Dong Yifang witnessed and benefited from China's new policy. From 1983-1989, Dong worked in Liaoning 辽宁 as the head of the Teaching-research Section of Art of Liaoning University 辽宁师范大学艺术教研室主任, and became founder of College of Fine Arts of the University. In his retirement, he enjoyed the freedom to pursue his love for portraying nature, and developed his skills in ink painting. He spent time in Guilin rendering the landscape: hills, trees, and the shimmering river in daylight and in moonlit

evenings with monochromatic ink in subtle shades. With political and economic opening up in China, the traditional subjects of Chinese paintings banned during the Cultural Revolution period including “the four gentlemen” (plum blossoms, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum) again became permissible for artists. Dong Yifang found a new passion in Chinese bamboo paintings. He returned to traditional Chinese painters like the Ming artist Zhao Bei 赵备 (fl. early 17th Century), and spent 18 months studiously copying Zhao’s long handscroll of bamboo groves. The 10 hanging scrolls of bamboo in our exhibition is an enlargement by Dong Yifang of his first copy of Zhao Bei’s horizontal hand scroll. It is intriguing to see how each of these ten paintings can be admired individually for its intact composition, brushwork, and coloring. Yet together, the inner coherence of the paintings constructs a contiguous narration of landscape as it takes the viewer through the bamboo groves for an adventure over hills and dales and through torrents and cascades.

In the 1990’s, Dong Yifang also kept unpublished notes of his study of old masters, observation of nature and personal practice of art. The Song artist Zhao Kui 赵葵 (1186-1266) impressed him as one of the very few artists able to render bamboo groves instead of individual stalks into a long hand scroll. Dong was inspired to try his hand of this motif in a modern vision. When painting from life in southern China, he was surprised by the strong interests in his monochromatic bamboo pictures of Western tourists and the local people, which convinced him that the appreciation of a purer form of art is universal. It is especially needed in our world as it becomes increasingly crowded by loud noises and flamboyant colors promoting commerciality. The most successful Chinese artists at that time, including Li Keran, impressed their viewers with full composition of their paintings packed with monumental peaks in saturated dark ink. Dong Yifang, however, noticed another Southern Song master Muxi 牧溪 (?-1281?), forgotten by most Chinese but greatly admired by the Japanese, whose landscape was rendered in subtle shades of misty light ink, which imbued his scenery with the poetic beauty characteristic of the S. Song painting. Light ink, then, gradually became the medium Dong chose to develop through the rest of his artistic career.

In his exploration of art at the final stage of his career, Dong Yifang successfully combined the brushwork of traditional Chinese painting with his understanding of linear perspective and sensitivity to the play of light that he learned from Western paintings. His final

works depict landscapes and bamboo groves in his own unique voice, a reflection of his love for the land, a homeland that he portrayed throughout his life in concurrence with all the historical events from the 20th to the 21st Centuries, in realistic and artistic expressions, but most of all, they are visions of his heart. Dong also believed Chinese bamboo and landscape paintings will eventually win admiration from Western viewers as well through proper discourse and his tireless depiction of these subjects. This idea was developed into his artistic thoughts and integrated into his works in this exhibition.

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