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New Traditional Chinese Painting: 100 Years

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Four Master  
Painters Of The  
New Traditional  
**CHINESE  
PAINTING**

Sun Xiaofei | Chen Yuzhen

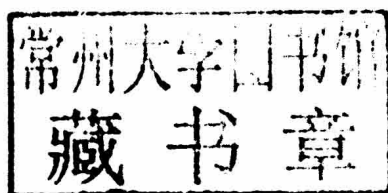


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New Traditional Chinese Painting: 100 Years

## Four Master Painters of the New Traditional Chinese Painting

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## Introduction:

### Origin and Development of New Traditional Chinese Painting

Styles of art and painting have been changing constantly since ancient times. These changes in style considered as a whole constitute the splendid history of Chinese painting.

Landscape painting was described by Wang Shizhen of the Ming Dynasty (1368—1644) to have experienced changes as the follows: “In the great history of landscape painting, a change took place in the age of Li Sixun and Li Zhaodao; in the age of Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Dong Yuan and Ju Ran; in the age of Li Cheng and Fan Kuan; in the age of Liu Songnian, Ma Yuan and Xia Gui; and in the age of Da Chi and Huang He.”

“Changes” were accompanied by innovations and inheritance. Chinese painting integrated all sorts of influences and customs of all generations, and became one of the greatest unique and charming oriental arts.

There are various reasons why styles change. The shaping force

might originate from an external structure or a force which originates from the internal structure or a combination of both might impact on, and change a painting style.

In the 1910s, Chinese painting entered a new period of reform.

The intelligentsia and art circle started to clear away the artistic heritage of the Qing Empire before the newly founded Republic of China was established. They attempted to establish new cultural values for the nation by drawing on the traumatic experience of changing times.

The liquidation of the old system and the old culture indicated the initiation of a new era of culture and arts and thought.

Unlike the cultural continuity that largely followed dynastic change in China, traditional Chinese culture wasn't a mere referential template at the time when the Qing Dynasty became the Republic of China. With the modernization of politics and the military, the modernization of culture and arts became an irreversible trend.

When modern culture began to arrive from the Western world, the culture couldn't anymore be able to absorb new cultural elements and nutrients from the the Tang and Song culture as it had been in the past. With the whole world in view, the formation of a new advanced culture based on absorbing the essence of western modern arts and transforming indigenous arts became the main-



stream of this cultural revolution.

Seen from a political perspective, this anachronism was not only conservative in terms of interest, but also a reaction in thought. “The old artists were still holding the rotten corpses of their ancestors and appreciating the stench. They didn’t scruple to restrain themselves in the cold tomb pit, refusing any new taste.” (Quotations from Lin Fengmian)

Seen from the artistic perspective, the artistic context of painting was too narrow and cramped. However, the acceptance of relevant contemporary paintings is reflected in the relatively outdated painting concept, which hindered progress to the diversity of contemporary art.

Therefore, the tide of cultural revolution that radically changed the taste and aesthetics of traditional Chinese paintings rampantly swept over China, which was still in the gloomy afterglow of the feudal dynasty.

Reform and innovation in Chinese painting, one of the key carriers of the old culture, soon became common ground for the revolutionaries in the intelligentsia and art circle.

The revolutionary party of these groups thought that Chinese painting was giving off a dense rotting stench of the old dynasty, and the stubborn defects in the objectiveness, randomness and realism that weakened modeling had become unendurable.



The revolutionary party of political circle thought that Chinese painting was an accomplice to the old aristocratic class. Chinese painting, to a certain extent, represented the decay of the Qing Dynasty and old Chinese culture, and was an eminent symbol of that old culture.

In a sense, 1912, the year of the founding of the Republic of China, is the first year of the reform of Chinese painting. The establishment of a new country must be followed by the birth of a new culture. Chinese painting, seen as complicit in the old system, was bitterly attacked by many artists.

Also in 1912, the politicians and thinkers were seeing cultural and artistic changes. Some artists boldly introduced some key elements of modern art into China. The small stone they dropped caused a spreading ripple which finally converged into huge waves and tides which submerged the conservatism of traditional culture.

In 1912, Li Shutong, who later became a famous monk, began to teach at the Normal College of Zhejiang after returning from Japan. He instructed students to sketch outdoors, "and laid the foundation for modern art education." (*Chinese Arts and Artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* by Su Liwen).

Also in that year, Liu Haisu, a student of Zhou Xiang, was brave enough to test the cultural waters.

Liu Haisu and classmates like Zhang Yuguang established

the first modern fine arts school of China – “Shanghai Fine Arts School” (later renamed the Shanghai Fine Arts College).

In 1914, Liu Haisu began to offer human body sketching classes. This revolutionary move took place 4 years before Chen Duxiu’s proposal that realism form the basis of the Chinese art revolution, and moreover, it introduced human body sketching into fine art education for the first time. Later this helped established the symbolic difference between new Chinese painting and old Chinese painting.

However, Liu Haisu’s revolution in traditional Chinese painting was somewhat of a “scandal” in those days due to his low reputation, limited artistic attainments. He was contending with the dominant force of traditional culture and people’s limited tolerance for new things.

In 1917, the Shanghai Fine Arts College held an exhibition, which showcased works depicting the human body. Some visitors hurled abuse at him: “Liu Haisu is a traitor to the arts; he is a pest in art education!” He was attacked by conservative public opinion, and some denounced him as an “unorthodox painter”. However, Liu Haisu wasn’t deterred, and delighted in the reputation as a “Betrayed of Art”.

According to a study by Mr. Lang Shaojun, there were other forerunners who successively carried forward innovations in the

arts. For example, Zhou Xiang established a Scene-Painting School in Shanghai in 1911; in 1915, Wu Shiguang, Chen Baoyi and others established the “East Painting Association” in Shanghai aimed at “facilitating the development of a Western painting movement”; and in 1916, Li Shutong organized and chaired the “Western Painting Research Society” in Hangzhou.

However, the social influence of these innovators cannot compare with that of Liu Haisu.

In 1918, Liu Haisu drafted Rules for Field Sketching and brought his students to sketch by the West Lake in Hangzhou. This broke the traditional rules of teaching in a closed classroom.

New Chinese painting starts with sketching (landscape sketching, character sketching or still-life sketching), aiming to cultivate the observational abilities of artists – to bring about more insight into real life. It was unlike old Chinese painting which focused on imitating old drawings, neglecting creativity –thoroughly isolated from reality and life.

“The basic exercise of painting should be based on natural phenomena, and should engage with the problem of ‘freehand or form’.” (Quotation from Lin Fengmian)

The new Chinese painting was established on this foundation.

Young Liu Haisu tried to reform Chinese fine art in Shanghai, and a fine arts revolution was to sweep through China.

First, Kang Youwei, the leader of the Constitutional Monarchy Party (mild political reformists) publicly launched an attack against traditional Chinese painting, and thus initiated a revolutionary period of reflection on traditional Chinese culture.

In 1917, Kang Youwei made a political evaluation of Chinese painting in his *Preface to the Paintings Collected in Wan Mu Cao Tang*. He put forward his view of the “decaying state of Chinese painting”. As Kang Youwei said:

“Chinese painting has decayed and there isn’t anyone capable of improving the culture. Two or three senior celebrity artists imitate the calligraphy of the four Wangs, and the works of two Shis (Shi Tao and Shi Xi) and their work is insipid. Their work will not be passed down to later generations, and the situation in Europe, America and Japan today is ignored.”

Praising the arts in Europe, America and Japan, Kang Youwei reproved those famous painters currently held in esteem in China as fools, because their achievements were far less than those of ancient painters. “Maybe, the four Wangs and two Shis inherited some styles of Yuan artists, but not the orthodox schools of Tang and Song. They’re inferior to the Song artists. Only two male artists, i.e. Yun and Jiang (Yun Nantian and Jiang Tingxi), have some of the verve of ancient artists, while the others are all birds of an undistinguished feather.”

Kang Youwei evaluated artistic ancestors objectively: "I've seen the paintings of many countries. All of them are the same. The painting styles of Europe and America are similar to those of the Six Dynasties, the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty. Only in modern times was Zen integrated into painting, and this tendency has been erroneously respected since *Banana Tree in Snow* by Wang Wei. Su and Mi discarded form and highlighted connotation. In the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, ruled-line painting was regarded as mere craftsmanship, and was castigated. When the literati and officialdom worked on the form of paintings, they would lay sole stress on connotation, and thus only paint mountains, rivers, flowers and bamboo. They were simple in form, but sang their own praises in terms of artistic connotation. If other schools are dedicated to form, it needs a lifetime to achieve excellence. Rejection of craftsmanship in Chinese painting was the cause of the decline in contemporary painting in China."

Kang Youwei was also pessimistic about the future of Chinese painting: "If there is no change, the scientific art of Chinese painting will become extinct. Will there be someone that can combine the best of eastern and Western painting techniques? We expect so."

During the "Hundred Days of Reform", Kang Youwei served as the teacher of Emperor Guangxu, guiding him to implement po-

litical reform in order to incubate a stronger nation. Although the Reform ultimately failed, Kang had a significant impact on domestic politics and culture and is still seen as playing a decisive role. Meanwhile, Kang Youwei, who was himself an influential calligrapher, had a certain knowledge about Chinese painting. Therefore, his opinions aroused a great sensation in the world of Chinese painting.

Another man that played a significant role in Chinese painting reform was Chen Duxiu, the leader of the revolution and one of the founders of the Communist Party.

On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1915, the vitally important revolutionary periodical *New Youth* was published.

The radical Chen Duxiu determined to carry out a complete revolution in China, and declared “socialism” as the standard of modern civilization in the foreword to the periodical. Several years later, *New Youth* launched a range of revolutionary reforms of traditional culture in China. Traditional Chinese medicine, Chinese painting and other aspects of culture were all covered in this revolutionary agenda but nothing was done to initiate these changes, maybe waiting for a proper time and opportunity.

In 1917, Hu Shi’s *Humble Opinions on Literature Reform* was published in *New Youth*. The articles therein put forward many new opinions, but they had no great impact on the core of traditional lit-

erature. There were only mild suggestions on how things could be improved.

In February 1917, Chen Duxiu published *On the Literary Revolution*, an article with a stronger combative tone, in *New Youth*. He explicitly put forward the target of the new literature – the “Three Great Principles”. Overthrow the affected and sycophantic aristocratic literature, and establish a plain and lyrical humanist literature; overthrow the stale and pompous classical literature, and establish a fresh and honest realistic literature; overthrow the obscure and abstruse mountain and forest literature, and establish a simple and popular social literature. He held a negative attitude toward the old feudal literature in terms of both content and form, and he advocated political and social reform through literature reform.

After the two articles were published, the cultural revolution spread across China vigorously.

Probably inspired by the article, Lu Cheng who was only 21 years old wrote to Chen Duxiu toward the end of 1917, expressly proposing radical terms such as “Fine Art Revolution” which attracted great attention of Chen Duxiu. Lu Cheng wrote in the letter: “Both literature and fine arts express their thoughts and feelings for their fundamental doctrines. Therefore, they were incompatible. Just like before, the nowadays literature and arts still need reform. And it’s particularly urgent to reform the fine arts.”



As for the critics on the decaying Chinese paintings, Lu Cheng declaimed: “The disadvantages of Chinese fine art are serious. We urgently need to carry out reform. How can we start this revolution? Answer: First, clarify the scope and essence of fine art, and make people understand what fine art is. Illustrate the origin and theories of painting, sculpture and architecture since the Tang Dynasty, (Because of the flourishing of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, sculpture and architecture reforms were very considerable, but nobody studies them). Second, make people understand Chinese fine art. Narrate the evolution of fine art in Europe and America and the truth of each new school today, and help them know the main trend of the world of fine art. Thirdly, verify the various branches of fine art in the east and West through the accepted doctrines of fine art, recognize what’s true and what’s false, so as to facilitate ambitious artists in their efforts to achieve their objectives and carry forward the arts. If these are clarified, society and fine art will be kept on the correct path, and people will have a new experience of arts and will change their habits. As a result, undesirable customs will be rejected and the positive effects of an aesthetic education will be realized.”

Chen Duxiu immediately published the *Revolution of Fine Arts-Answer to Lu Cheng in New Youth* (No. 1, Volume 6, 1919).

In this article, Chen Duxiu expressed this point of view: “To

improve Chinese painting, it first requires a revolution against the painting styles of the four Wangs. To improve Chinese painting, we have to adopt the realism of Western painting. In the North and South Song Dynasties and at the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty, the skills of copying, depicting and painting animals, buildings, flowers and trees were somewhat similar to the edicts of realism. However the dominant literati attached importance to freehand painting, neglecting a focus on objects and portraiture as advocated by Ni Yunlin and Huang Gongwang at the end of Yuan Dynasty, and later by Wen Zhengming and Shen Zhou in the Ming Dynasty. By the time of the four Wangs in the Qing Dynasty, it had become more serious. They said the paintings of Wang Shigu represented masterpieces of Chinese painting, but in my opinion, the paintings of Wang Shigu were the vulgar end result of the paintings of the school of Ni, Huang, Wen and Shen.”

As far as finding a solution was concerned, Chen Duxiu argued: “The model series of Ni Yunlin, Huang Gongwang, Wen Zhengming, Shen Zhou, the four Wangs and Southern School (known as the orthodox schools) blindly worshiped by many artistic people should be overthrown. Otherwise, they will calcify and become the largest barriers to the improvement of Chinese painting.”

In this article, Chen Duxiu expressly put forward the direction he wanted to see the Chinese painting revolution take for the first