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Water and Stone: Contemporary Chinese Art and the Spirit Resonance of the World

Mary Bittner Wiseman

Abstract

My claim that the new art in China operates at the level of matter and gesture, below that of discourse, is twofold. First, much of the art that is being made exemplifies principles articulated by Hsieh Ho (fifth century) and Shih Tao (seventeenth century) and refracted through the changes wrought by Mao in 1949 and Deng in 1979. Through their art, experimental Chinese artists ask what can art be in a world turned upside down, and what can it be to be artist in such a world and, in particular, to be a Chinese artist.

Second, in the course of working through these questions, the artists have resorted to an art that is *an operation on matter*, a matter inseparable from energy, and it is *the artist's activity*, as much as what issues from it, that puts the artist in lockstep with the movement of the world of the twenty-first century.

Key Words

Chinese experimental art, Chinese traditional art, discourse, gesture, life movement, material, spirit resonance

I.

Water and stone are likened in Chinese thought to the lifeblood and structure of the world. They exemplify such contraries as blood and bone, ink and brush, which are not dominated by the opposition of mind and body and such companions as culture and nature, male and female, form and matter. That Chinese and Western worldviews are deeply different is shown by the principles of art formulated by Hsieh Ho (5th century) and Shih Tao (17th century). It follows from their difference that Western conceptions of art, supposing as they do a chasm between art and nature raw, cannot be adequate to the art of China at the turn of the new century.

Experimental Chinese art subverts the presupposition that globalization in China consists in its adopting Western conceptions of art as it has adopted Western capitalism. At the same time, the art subverts two other presumptions put at risk when Deng Xiaoping opened China to foreign investment and led the reforms that put in place a "socialist market economy." They are, one, that the Chinese people can now live under a communist government with a capitalist economy with little or no disruption in their sense of who they are and, two, that the discourses of communism and capitalism can interpret each other. The dizzying speed at which change is occurring in the People's Republic has left little time for reflection and little time to construct concepts compatible with the current political and economic discourses and with such traditional concepts as are available to the contemporary artist in China. It is left to art, operating below the level of discourse where matter and gesture live, to ask these questions: what can art be in a world turned upside down, what can it be to be artist in such a world and, in particular, to

be a Chinese artist?

The experimental artists work through these questions as they celebrate the materiality of the world with art that reigns at the level of body, the level where matter and energy interact. They celebrate not only the materiality but also the movement of the world, operating within a scheme, made new by them, within which material things and actions rather than words are the bearers of meaning. Much art of the 1990s had as its charge the evisceration of language's meaning. Best known is Xu Bing's four-year-long meditation, *Book from the Sky*. The excited chatter of members of the art world was unsettling him and to quiet himself he took to carving Chinese characters on blocks of wood. The blocks were carved and the books made of them were bound in the traditional way, but the characters were meaningless. In what follows I am going to look at some recent art that can be understood in terms of the art principles laid down in the fifth and the seventeenth centuries.

The American art critic Barbara Pollack got it just right when she wrote:

It became clear from my trips to China that a lot of people were banking on the belief that this will be the place where the art movements of the twenty-first century will be launched. I came to believe that some sort of future of the art world will undoubtedly take place in China, though *it may look quite different from our current image of an art world or of anything Chinese* (emphasis added).^[1]

That artists have undertaken the task is seen in the words of Qiu Zhijie:

We must create a new roadmap for our entire tradition of thought. The first step is to take stock of our resources: we concede that Occidentalism is now a new tradition, but more importantly that revolutionary war and socialist life have become an even newer tradition. Now add to that the lingering traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and the dazzling new political and economic conditions of the day: From these four sources we must conceive a philosophy of life, a philosophy of politics, and a natural philosophy.^[2]

In short, the traditions of Western art, Maoist art, Chinese classical thought, and socialist-capitalism vie to be heard in the new China. Seen also in these words is Qiu Zhijie's acknowledgement that the art now being made has taken off from China's history, recent and past. The job of art criticism and its older cousin, the philosophy of art, is to act as midwife, to be present at the birth of the paradigm shift that is taking place in China in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

My claim that the new art operates at the level of matter and gesture, below that of discourse, is twofold. First, much of the art that is being made exemplifies principles articulated by Hsieh Ho and Shih Tao and refracted through the changes wrought by Mao in 1949 and Deng in 1979. Second, in the course of working through these questions, experimental

Chinese artists have resorted to an art that is *an operation on matter*, a matter as inseparable from energy as one side of a sheet of paper is from the other, and it is *the doing*, the artist's activity, as much as what issues from it, that puts the artist in lockstep with the movement of the world. Look first to the principles articulated in the fifth and seventeenth centuries and then at some contemporary art that can be understood as exemplifying them.

II.

In the late fifth century, Hsieh Ho listed six technical factors of painting and said of them that few artists have mastered them all. In *The Chinese Theory of Art* (1967), Lin Yutang called it the most influential paragraph ever written on Chinese art and identified the first technique as the one undisputed goal of art in China.^[3] Here are the techniques as Hsieh Ho described them: "The first is Spirit Resonance (or Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement. The second is Bone Manner (structural) Use of the Brush. The third is Conform with the Objects (to obtain) Likeness. The fourth is Apply the Colors according to the Characteristics. The fifth is Plan and Design, Place and Position (i.e. composition). The sixth is To Transmit Models by Drawing," that is, to copy the master.^[4]

1200 years later, Shih Tao was a member of an imperial family of the Ming dynasty who became a recluse upon the accession of the Manchus in 1644. The *Expressionist Credo* that he wrote during his years of a monk-like life has been called the "best and deepest essay on art written by a revolutionary artist."^[5] He was called revolutionary because artists in the Ming dynasty had come simply to copy the ancients, whereas Shih Tao called upon artists to create rather than copy in this credo that is remarkable on two counts. The first is that the idea of heaven and earth, harmony with which should be the goal of each person, is captured in the credo and, by implication, in paintings, by the pairs hills and streams, mountains and rivers, stone and water, bones and blood, stillness and motion. This manifesto demonstrates the sheer materiality of Chinese art, an art whose matter is en-spirited, "born of the spirit and born again," in Hegel's words, but matter nonetheless. It is the material world that the work of the artists of China's avant-garde celebrates. The other count for which the credo is remarkable is that what Shih Tao calls the one-stroke method is, by his lights, the quintessential art action: it *is* the art of painting or, I add, of art-making.

Moreover, Shih Tao gives to art, born as it is of one stroke of the brush, the role that the West gives to language, which with one stroke cuts what Fernand Saussure called "ribbons of thought" into concepts and "ribbons of sound" into words. The God of Genesis divided light from darkness by saying, "Let there be light." Words came first: the world is born of a word, not a one-stroke. Again, the Gospel of John begins, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God." Shih Tao said that in the primeval chaos there was no difference, and only when difference was introduced was method or law born. It was born of the one-stroke, which "contains in itself the universe and beyond; thousands and myriads of strokes and ink all begin here and end here."^[6] The action of making one-stroke, which is how all brushwork begins, generates a world. Here is the final

section of the *Credo* that the translator calls “the strangest discourse” he has ever translated:

For the immensity of the world is revealed only by the function of water, and water encircles and embraces it through the pressure of mountains. If the mountains and water do not come together and function, there will be nothing to circulate with or about, nothing to embrace. And if there is no circulation and embracing, there will be no means of life and growth. [7]

Here are Aristotle's material and efficient causes. And here are our seventeenth century molecules in motion replaced by water and stone: stone, like the mountains, solid, still, and silent; water, transparent and ever moving.

III.

How can avant-garde Chinese art be parsed in terms of capturing the spirit resonance of the world and reveal its immensity through the method of the one-stroke? Let me try.

First I want to recognize changes that artists have rung on what the ancients bid them do. One is that they use things other than brush and ink to make art. They use their bodies in performance art, myriad objects in installations, and the land, its rivers and mountains. They use also cameras—still, video, and film—and computers, needle and thread. Another change is that the contemporary artists harmonize their bodies, not their consciousness, with the world as they capture the vibration of its vitality. There is a level below the conscious one at which the body knows. Dancers, gymnasts, and athletes live there. The classical artist was often a scholar whose way was that of intellectual deliberation and meditation. The contemporary artist, on the contrary, operates more nearly on the level of the dancer, her knowledge, of *what it is like to be*, say, the mountain or the river or to mime the flow of energy through any thing, moving or still. Briefly now look at three works with water, each of which shows water to vanquish or trump words.

One. Song Dong in *Printing on Water* (1996) stood in a sacred river in Tibet and repeatedly brought a wooden block of the sign for ‘water’ down to the water, as though to print ‘water’ on water. (Figure 1) The river resisted the coition of word and thing. The word is not the thing nor can word ever capture the thing.





Fig. 1. Song Dong, *Printing on Water* (1996)

Two. In *Writing Diary with Water*, an intermittent and sometimes private diary begun in 1995, the same artist wrote on a stone slab with a calligraphy brush using water instead of ink.





Fig. 2. Song Dong, *Writing Diary in Water* (1995)

As soon as the water dried, the written trace disappeared as spoken words do when the sounds fade. Even written words do not last. In another work, water washed ink away, as it can wash everything away.

Three. In a performance in 1997 set amidst huge stones through which a stream runs, Lao Zhu wrote a string of poems on a long silk scroll. The scroll was unrolled along the stream, sometimes across rocks, sometimes submerged in the water. In the row of photographs that document the performance are the hills and streams that comprise the world, the brush and ink with which Lao Zhu expressed the spirit and life movement of the world, and the presence of invited friends and of musicians playing traditional instruments alluding to meetings of the Chinese literati. This all refers to tradition, but it is reference with a difference because when the scroll was submerged in the stream, Lao Zhu kept writing on it even though the water washed the inked characters away. The metaphoric identification of ink and water cannot be translated into a real one: water washes ink away.

Four. Now to look at mountains, in particular, at the Himalayas that gave rise to the myth of Shangri-la and at Mt. Everest, both of which have long captured the Western imagination. In two works their artists take the measure of the land with their bodies. A 2005 performance entitled *8848 Minus 1.86* by Xu Zhen was accompanied by a text that began with a factual account of the Himalayas and ended with the announcement that he and his team would ascend to the summit on May 22 and cut off its top, reducing the mountain by 186 cm, Xu's height.

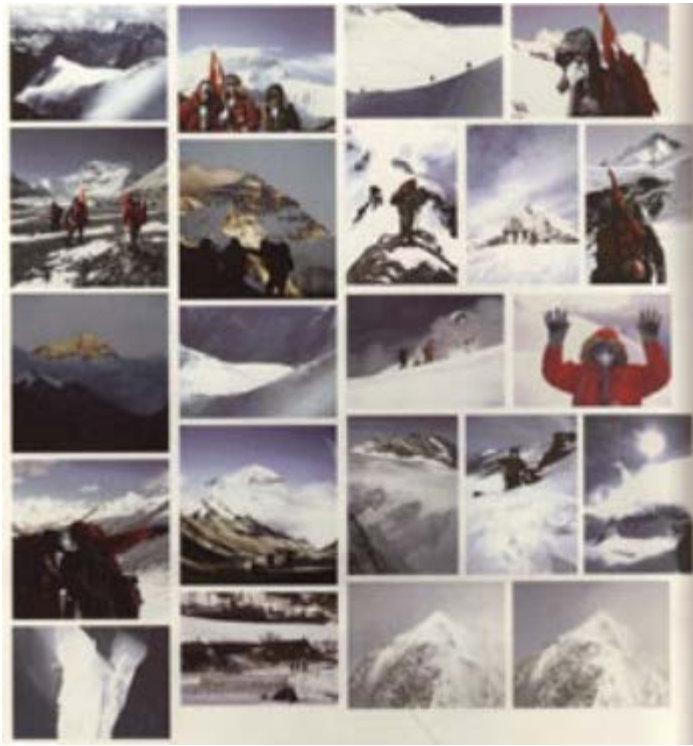


Fig. 3. Xu Zhen, *8848 Minus 1.86* (2006-7)

Xu Zhen's hypothetical performance can be read either as an act of arrogant self-assertion in the face of a powerful nature or as a comment on how the exact measurement of the mountain does not touch its splendor or its sublimity. It is vast, and wonderful for that, regardless of whether it is more or less 1.86 of its meters.

Was the artist one with the mountain in his performance, in harmony with it? Yes, and they were equal partners in the encounter: it did not overwhelm him and he did not diminish it. In being Everest's equal, Xu showed (would have shown) himself to have captured the spirit of the mountain and so to have satisfied Hsieh Ho's first principle. Where is Shih Tao's one stroke method here? In this reversal: in preparation for the act of making art, Shih Tao says the artist is to quiet his mind and gather himself so that he can capture its spirit within himself. Xu Zhen did not so much let Everest touch him, letting its vitality vibrate within him, as he touched Everest, identifying himself with the summit that he then put on display for all the world to see, in homage to the mountain that had let him touch it.

Five. There is a final work to be brought into this discussion about the contemporary Chinese artist's intimacy with the earth and about how this intimacy, not innocent of history, differs from that of earlier Chinese traditional artists. The work is *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu*, a multi-media installation and performance work made by Qiu Zhijie in 2006-7.



Fig. 4. Qui Zhijie, *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu* (2005)

The initial purpose was to look for the origins of the myths of Shangri-la and to discover why it had become popular in the West. The idea of Shangri-la was born as the result of the first journey made across Tibet by an outsider, Nain Singh, a thirty-three year old Indian man who, in 1863, had begun two years of training by the Royal British Engineers in India. He was to gather enough data to map the territory from the Indian side of the Himalayas to Lhasa, Tibet's capital, and to do that he learned to walk in thirty-three inch leg irons so that he could measure precisely the distance he traveled.

Qui Zhijie believed that the opening of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad on July 1, 2006 would change the Tibetan traditional way of life as nothing else had. In honor of that first trip to Tibet in 1865, and on the eve of the intrusion of the modern world with the railroad, Qui Zhijie reprised Nain's journey, but walked in the opposite direction, from Lhasa to Katmandu, which was the next leg for the then only planned railroad. He followed Nain Singh's way of measuring and wore his thirty-three inch leg irons as Singh had done. After walking about 370 of the 500 miles of the trip, bad weather forced him to stop in 2006. He completed the journey early in 2007, suffering not from the harsh weather, however, but from the leg irons eating away at his ankles.

The artist played with time in walking where a past journey was made and a future railway would be. By literally "walking the walk" to the source of the myth of Shangri-la instead of only "talking the talk" about it, Qui Zhijie put himself in the position to feel the vibrations of vitality of the Himalayas. Moreover, he took the measure of Tibet with his body, using the length of his strides rather than a measuring instrument.

Where is Shih Tao's one stroke? Did he not just copy what Nain Singh had done in 1865? No. It was his body walking and his ankles chaffing. He walked the land rather as the native Australians do in their dreaming as they walk about in the outback and, in doing so, Qui invoked the mountain's spirit. He invoked as well the spirit of the Indian man who, in the service of the imperial British, had measured what was then Britain's land and the spirit of the Tibetans whose land would soon no longer be private to them. Where the Westerner might have captured this trip across the land by representing it with paint or pencil or camera, Qiu Zhijie lived it. His act, the sheer doing of it, was the one-stroke that brought to life the spirit of those who have lived and will live in the shadow of the Himalayas, whose pulse he took on his journey of 500 miles.

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Endnotes

[1] Barbara Pollack, *The Wild, Wild East: An American Art Critic's Adventures in China* (Timezone 8, 2010), pp. 20-21.

[2] Qiu Zhijie, *Breaking Forecast: 8 Key Figures of China's New Generation Artists* (Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing exhibit, 2009), p. 212.

[3] Hsieh Ho, "The Six Techniques of Painting" in *The Chinese Theory of Art: Translations from the Masters of Chinese Art*, Lin Yutang (New York: G. F. Putnam's Sons, 1967).

[4] Osvald Siren, *The Chinese of the Art of Painting: Texts by the Painter-Critics, from the Han through the Ch'ing Dynasties* (Peiping, 1936; rpt. Mineola, New York: Dover, 2005), p. 19.

[5] Lin Yutang, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

[6] Lin Yutang, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

[7] Lin Yutang, *op. cit.*, p. 155.