

WOMEN IN CHINESE ART

SYMPOSIUM ABSTRACTS AND SPEAKERS BIOGRAPHIES

An Empire of Her Own: Women, Art and Power at the End of the Qing (1644-1911)

Nixi Cura, Senior Teaching Fellow, SOAS, Hon. Res. Fellow, University of Glasgow

Since the groundbreaking 1988 exhibition and catalogue *Views from the Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists 1300-1912*, relatively little research on women as artists, viewers and other engagement in the arts has ensued. For the late Qing, there has been virtual radio silence, with the notable exceptions of Dorothy Ko, tangentially via her study on footbinding, and Frances Wood's studies on the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908). This paper will re-present the visual culture produced for, by, and at the Qing court while under the effective control of Cixi from 1861 to 1908. Media discussed include painting (by both the Empress and her substitute brushes), ceramics, and photography, considered within the wider context of the status of women around the 1898 reform movement.

Nixi Cura serves concurrently as Senior Teaching Fellow at SOAS University of London and as Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow. She read East Asian Studies at Yale University, then specialised in Chinese painting and Buddhist art, with a minor in Romanesque art, at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. Current research interests include Qing art, especially during the Qianlong reign (1736-1795), collecting and antiquarian practices in the Qing, Republican and Manchukuo periods, and contemporary Chinese visual culture.

Women Warriors of Republican China

Mary Ginsberg, Visiting Academic at the British Museum

Heroic women have been relatively neglected in the visual record of China's revolutions. Most female military and political leaders in the Xinhai Revolution, Long March and Civil War are little known and much less visible than male figures. Historical documentation of activist women has been greatly enriched in recent years, and photographs survive of a few early warriors (for example, Yin Ruizhi and Lin Zongxue). However, many figures, such as Cao Daoxin and (the imaginary?) Xu Wuying are only known from illustrated broadsheets and popular prints made around the founding of the Republic. Other popular prints show military training activities at women's institutions in the early 20th century. Heroic deeds by women of the 1920s, 30s and 40s were commemorated in children's picture books, *lianhuanhua*, stamps and other graphics, but we must look harder to find their stories than men's. Exceptions are Qiu Jin (1875-1907), Yang Kaihui (1901-30) and Liu Hulan (1932-47). They were martyrs: remembered, idealized and appropriated in all media, to this day. They appear in official propaganda -- paintings, prints, posters, statues—as well as in commercial historical films and other popular culture platforms. Drawing on a range of formats, this talk will examine the representation of Republican women warriors in art.

Mary Ginsberg is an international banker turned art historian, specializing in Soviet and Asian political art. She guest-curated the exhibition and authored the catalogue, *Art of Influence: Asian Propaganda*, and was editor/contributing author of *Communist Posters*. Mary is a Visiting Academic at the British Museum, where she has worked on paintings, prints and posters for a number of years.

'Line' in the Nudes of Sanyu

Paul Bevan, Christensen Fellow in Chinese Painting, Ashmolean Museum

Sanyu (Chang Yu 常玉 (1901-1966), was a Chinese painter who studied in Paris in the 1920s and remained in that city until his untimely death in 1966. In this paper, a painting of a female nude in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum will form the basis for an exploration into several aspects of his work, in particular his distinctive use of "line" in his painting of the female nude. "Line" is widely recognised as a central feature of his work and that of other Chinese artists who became, to a greater or lesser extent, inspired by his paintings. This exploration will be carried out largely through an examination of the views of Sanyu's contemporaries as found in writings by his friends: the poets Shao Xunmei and Xu Zhimo, and the painter Pang Xunqin, all of whom knew Sanyu from the time they spent in Paris.

The painting in the Ashmolean collection is typical of Sanyu's work in that it is a portrait of a female nude – the main target of his painting - and crucially that it displays clearly his use of "line". The "nude" has been identified as having been one of four areas central to Sanyu's creative output; the others being "still life", "animals" and "nature paintings". Having thus identified his overall output, it is the nude, and particularly the female nude that should be recognised as the prime target of both his paintings and drawings. This is certainly how those who wrote about him during the Chinese Republican period saw it, and it is through examples of his nudes, and through what his contemporaries wrote about them, that this paper approaches the question of "line" that is so central to Sanyu's work.

Paul Bevan is the Christensen Fellow in Chinese Painting at the Ashmolean Museum. He has taught modern Chinese literature, history and visual culture at the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge and SOAS. His primary research interests concern aspects of the impact of Western art and literature on China during the Republican Period (1912-1949). His research on artists George Grosz, Frans Masereel, and Miguel Covarrubias, all of whom worked for *Vanity Fair*, has resulted in extensive research on both Chinese and Western pictorial magazines. Dr Bevan's first book *A Modern Miscellany - Shanghai Cartoon Artists, Shao Xunmei's Circle and the Travels of Jack Chen, 1926-1938*, Leiden: Brill, 2015, was hailed as "a major contribution to modern Chinese studies"; his second: *"Intoxicating Shanghai": Modern Art and Literature in Pictorial Magazines during Shanghai's Jazz Age*, is currently in preparation.

A Handful of World:

The Aesthetics of Hand in Modern Chinese Art and Visual Culture, 1919-49.

Di Wang, DPhil candidate, Department of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford

This paper examines the figure of hand, especially women's hands, in modern China's art and literature from 1919 to 1949. It establishes the figure of hand as the quintessential human body image that encapsulates the violence that the modern Chinese subject has to undergo. It revisits familiar artists and writers such as Li Hua (1907-1994), and Xiao Hong (1911-1942), and popular motion pictures such as the *New Woman* (1935), while excavating a number of less discussed figures such as Wan Laiming (1900-1997), China's first animator. It argues that women's hand evolved from a metonymy of the psychosexual or physically threatened body to that of technologized and Marxist revolutionary body. The insipient Marxist prototype hands became a crucial organ of thinking, a symbol of potent labour that joined the global imaginary of early twentieth century political ideology. Ultimately the figure of hand sheds new light on the development of modern Chinese art and literature, while also contributing a crucial piece to the broader mosaic of modern female body images' global history.

Di Wang is specialized in modern and contemporary East Asian art, focusing particularly on the art and visual culture of nineteenth- and twentieth-century China. Di received her MA in East Asian Studies from Columbia University, and is currently completing her DPhil at the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford.

'From slender maids to stevedores- and back'

The characterisation of women in 20th century China (whether in fiction or in art) changed dramatically with the rise of the Communist Party. The weak, almost tubercular heroine was transformed into a tough and sturdy worker, culminating in depictions during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) of women heroically attending to telegraph poles and planting dynamite to cut canals in rock faces whilst hanging on the end of a rope. The type did not last beyond 1976 when the pale, slender and sensitive *guniang* reappeared.

As in the West, it is possible to find rare alternatives to the slender maids of tradition: Hua Mulan who famously did military service in place of her father and the women generals of the Yang family. But even into the 20th century, fragility was more highly rated than courage, pallor over rosy cheeks. Obviously the transformation was inspired by Soviet art and the new image flourished for a decade. What is perhaps less obvious is the sudden reversal to type.

Frances Wood followed a pre-diploma course at Liverpool College of Art 1966-7 and studied Chinese at Newnham College, Cambridge, 1967-1971. She spent 1975-6 at Peking University and wrote her PhD on traditional domestic architecture in Peking 1860-1930 (Percival David Foundation, 1984). She worked in the Chinese section of the British Library 2013.

She has written a number of books on Chinese history and culture, including *Stones of the Wall* 1986 (a translation of a novel by Dai Houying), *Chinese Illustration* (1986), *A Companion to China* (1989), *The Blue Guide to China* (1990, 2002), *Did Marco Polo Go To China?* (1995), *No Dogs and Not Many Chinese: Treaty Port life in China 1843-1943*, (1998), *Hand Grenade Practice in China: my part in the Cultural Revolution* (2000), *The Silk Road* (2002), *The*

Forbidden City (2005), *The Lure of China: writers on China from Marco polo to J.G.Ballard* (2009), *The Diamond Sutra: the story of the world's earliest dated printed book* (2010), *Betrayed Ally: China in the Great War* (2016), *Great Books of China* (2017) and contributed to other works including (with Andrew Lo, Wang Tz'u-cheng and Song Jiayu) *Export Paintings in the British Library* (2011).

Body, Space and Gender: Chinese Women Artists from 1980s until today

Monica Merlin, Programme Leader for the MA Contemporary Arts China, Birmingham School of Art

This seminar talk will discuss the presence and practice of women artists in mainland China from the 1980s until today against the backdrop offered by the show 'A Century of Women in Chinese Art' at the Ashmolean Museum. The talk will build on previous presentations on women artists in earlier periods, and canvass a journey through the life and work of the most significant artists within the fast-changing art ecology of China after the end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

The practice of women artists has often been marginalised or even excluded from the main art historical narratives of contemporary China as well as from national and international curatorial projects. This talk aims at reclaiming and revaluating their work by exploring the processes of their creation including reflections on media and materials, while emphasising their conceptual concerns. At the same time, the talk will offer interpretations of notions relevant to the understanding of the production and exposure of women artists' work in the last three decades, such as the category 'women's art', gender and feminism, and propose to further investigate their engagement with socio-political and environmental issues.

Dr Monica Merlin is the current Programme Leader for the MA Contemporary Arts China at Birmingham School of Art. She joined Birmingham City University after a post as lecturer in the MA Arts of China at Christie's Education (London), and a funded post-doctoral research on contemporary Chinese women artists at the Tate Research Centre: Asia (2013-4). Monica gained her MA in Asian Art at SOAS (2007) and a DPhil (2013) from the History of Art Department at the University of Oxford. Her research mainly focuses on women and gender in Chinese art history and visual culture.

Shelagh Vainker is Curator of Chinese Art at the Ashmolean Museum and Associate Professor of Chinese Art, University of Oxford. Her publications on modern Chinese painting include Catalogue of Chinese Paintings in the Ashmolean Museum and articles and exhibition catalogues on Pan Tianshou, Fu Baoshi, Xu Bing, Lui Shou-kwan, and Lin Gang amongst others.