

THE MONUMENTAL LANDSCAPES OF

LI HUAYI

BY MICHAEL KNIGHT AND LI HUAYI

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ASIAN ART MUSEUM—CHONG-MOON LEE CENTER
FOR ASIAN ART AND CULTURE

A LIFE IN ART

Michael Knight and Li Huayi: A Conversation

FAMILY

Li Huayi was born in Shanghai in 1948, one year before the founding of the People's Republic of China. Although Shanghai had suffered tremendously during the Sino-Japanese War, in 1948 it was still China's most cosmopolitan city, with tremendous wealth and strong connections to the West. For nearly one hundred years Shanghai had been a "treaty port," one of the Chinese cities that were open to foreign ships and more or less governed by foreign interests. Its large population and access to both domestic and international shipping had made it a major industrial city with foreign and Chinese businesses. As it developed during the second half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, Shanghai was divided into territories. The old city, or the Chinese territory, is now famous for the Yuyuan (the Yu gardens). Around it lay the newer foreign territories.

Shanghai was also one of China's centers of art production. Supported by affluent Chinese and foreign patrons, Shanghai artists developed their own style of painting and calligraphy known in Chinese as *haipai*. Often intended for large Western-style buildings and for a wealthy but at times not overly sophisticated audience, *haipai* paintings tend to be decorative, often featuring bright colors and bold brushwork. However, interest in traditional Chinese culture and antiquities remained

FACING Solitary Pine
and Flowing Water
(detail of cat. no. 9).

strong, and certain innovations in Shanghai school painting and calligraphy were based on serious studies of ancient Chinese art forms.

Li Huayi's grandfather, Li Chichao (Li Haoran), was the comprador for a large Swiss company. The family home was located on Sanpailou, part of the old city, not far from the Yuyuan. Accordingly known as the Sanpailou Lis, the family numbered among Shanghai's wealthy elite. Li Huayi's grandfather and father associated with other members of the elite, including Wang Zhen (Wang Yiting), who was famous as a rich comprador to Japanese firms, a philanthropist, and an artist. Li Chichao also collected a few works of art, mostly paintings of the Shanghai school.

Li Huayi's father, Li Shude (Li Yi), who inherited much of Li Chichao's wealth, studied law at Fudan University in Shanghai. Thanks to his father's reputation, he was on many corporate boards, his most significant title being that of president of the board of a large electrical company in Wuzhou, Jiangsu province. Most of his positions were largely honorary, but they did provide significant income. He moved the family from the old city to the French territories in 1937 when Sanpailou was bombed by the Japanese. Like his father, he collected some art. Li Huayi remembers album paintings by the famous late Ming artist Dong Qichang and a large collaborative hanging scroll by the Shanghai painters Wang Yiting, Wu Changshi, and Ren Bonian.

Naturally under suspicion because of his background—he was a Catholic active in the local parish, and he practiced law under the Nationalist government—Li Shude had serious difficulties with Communist Party officials in 1955. During a crackdown on foreigners and foreign religions in Shanghai, he accompanied a French priest to the train station and made certain his travel arrangements were in order; such treatment is considered an important sign of respect in traditional Chinese culture. Li Shude was subsequently arrested and in 1958 was sent to prison in Qinghai, northwest China, thousands of miles from his family. They heard nothing from him from the time Li Huayi was ten until he was twenty-

eight. In 1976 Li Shude returned to Shanghai, and in 1982 his criminal record was erased during one of Deng Xiaoping's reforms. He died in Hong Kong in 1987.

Li Huayi displays little emotion in discussing his father's arrest. His mother, Lin Liming, raised him, his brother, and his two sisters through the turmoil of the years leading up to and through the Cultural Revolution. Still alive in Shanghai at the age of eighty-nine, she continues to be a strong, resourceful woman.

My earliest memories go back to about 1953. At that time Shanghai was still surprisingly cosmopolitan. Like now, many foreigners lived there, but nobody paid much attention to them. The Communist Party did not control things as strictly as they did elsewhere in China. My father even went back and forth from Hong Kong until 1952. We went to church on Sundays, and many priests were still in the city. There was bowling at church, and we could play baseball there on Sundays. This situation continued through 1955. Other places had changed long before then, but Shanghai was different.

I remember my father calling me, "This afternoon, we will go to the city," meaning Yuyuan. He called Yuyuan "the city" because it was the old city—the other sections, like the French territories, were newly developed. We would walk around and everybody would call him "young master." My father, a very clever man, studied acupuncture as a hobby. After his arrest, during all his years in Qinghai, he survived by running the local clinic.

In the first years after my father was sent away, we were okay financially because we had income from our family properties and other sources, including the electric company—I remember that every Chinese New Year our table was filled with fresh food they sent as gifts.

FIG. 14 Bust of the Writer Maotun, 1984, by Zhang Chongren (1907–1998). Bronze. Reproduced in Jean-Michel Coblence and Tchang Yifei, *Tchang!* (Paris: Moulinsart, 2003), 124.



After my father was arrested and even during the Cultural Revolution, my family stayed in Shanghai. We were never sent off to the provinces. We were lucky, I don't know why. My sisters had jobs in Shanghai. The amount of repression varied. My wife, for example, was sent to the countryside for reeducation. She was there for eight years. Of course, her grandfather went to Taiwan with the Republican government and stayed there.

My father's trouble with the officials taught me at a young age that the best thing to do was to study by myself and keep a low profile. This was better not only for me but also for people I might associate with. I learned to talk less and listen more. As far as I know, I wasn't being watched—I was young, so I wasn't under suspicion—but I couldn't get an official education or certain jobs, and I couldn't have become a member of the Communist Party even if I had wanted to; they would have checked my background, and I would not have been accepted.

EARLY TRAINING

Although Shanghai was one of China's major art centers prior to 1949, none of the national art colleges were located there during the early years of the People's Republic. Instead, art training continued under the old system of private study at artists' studios. Many artists supplemented their income through students' tuition, and training was not cheap. Access to a good studio was often determined as much by wealth and family connections as by talent. Because his family was distantly related to Wang Zhen, Li Huayi began to study painting in 1954 at the age of six with Wang Zhen's son, Wang Jimel. He displayed talent at an early age.

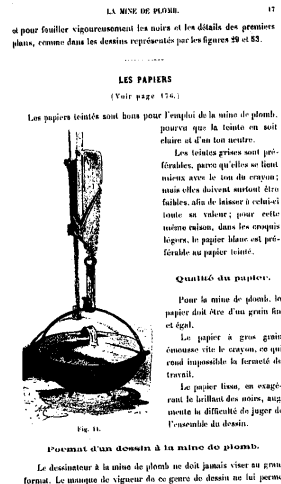
At sixteen, in 1964, Li Huayi began his study of Western art with Zhang Chongren, a Shanghai artist who had studied at the Royal Academy in

FIG. 15 Page spread from Armand Théophile Cassagne (1823-1907), *Guide Pratique pour les Différents Genres de Dessins* (Paris, 1873), pp. 16-17.

Brussels. Zhang was best known as a sculptor; he had won a gold medal in a competition while in Belgium (figure 14). Like Li Huayi's father, Zhang was a devout Catholic (he had an audience with the pope before returning to China). Prior to 1949 he had won a national competition to create a portrait sculpture of the Nationalist leader Chiang Kaishek. Although under suspicion for his religious background and association with the Nationalists, Zhang taught anatomy and sculpture at the Shanghai Art School in the 1950s and early 1960s and gained some recognition from the Communist Party's art leadership. However, he made most of his income from teaching in his private studio (Andrews, 223).

Zhang's studio, the most prestigious (and expensive) private art training facility in Shanghai, was also one of the most innovative. While at times Zhang used live models, his main tools for teaching Western sculpture and drawing were a series of full-size plaster casts of famous European sculptures he had had shipped back from Belgium and a copy of an 1873 illustrated, multivolume drawing manual by Armand Cassagne (1823-1907) published in Paris (figure 15). He was also interested in traditional Chinese painting and taught from one of the first histories of the tradition, the *Nanhua dacheng*.

Prior to the Cultural Revolution Li Huayi also undertook his own study of the Western-style drawing promulgated by the national art system. Officially adopted in 1955, this style was based on the teachings of the Russian artist Pavel Petrovich Chistiakov (1832-1919) and focused on the ability to create a believable representation of a three-dimensional subject on paper through observation of its planes and tonalities of dark and light (Andrews, 136).



My art training came through private study. From the time I was six until I was fourteen I was a regular student of Wang Jimei, son of the famous artist Wang Yiting (Wang Zhen). I started with Wang Jimei because we were distant relatives and our families had lived close to each other in the old city of Shanghai. My father was of Wang Yiting's generation but was much younger. Wang Jimei called him "Uncle."

I've now been holding my brush for fifty years. When I started to learn painting, it was fun, and there really wasn't much else to do. Of course, my parents thought I was a genius, and that was encouraging. I started with "big brush" painting in Wang Yiting's style. For a child, looking like a genius doing this style is very easy because no one can tell that you don't really know what you're doing. I felt happy because I could see immediate results in big, showy painting. Later I became less satisfied and started to seek a more serious art, something that could not be done by children.

I apprenticed in the old way—starting with grinding the ink, preparing the paper, hanging up the scrolls, and so on—just like the boys you see attending to the needs of the scholar in many classical paintings. At every lesson Wang would show me a simple painting, and I would start to copy it. He also gave me volumes of the *Jieziyuan huaJuan* (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting; figure 16) and asked me to copy and experiment with anything I found interesting. I had one lesson a week, but I painted almost every day. Each week I would show him something new.

During the summer when I was on vacation from regular school, I studied calligraphy. We did our lessons in the morning because in the afternoon it was too hot to concentrate. The Shanghai style I studied was created by calligraphers like Wu Changshi, and calligraphy was important. I started to study calligraphy from rubbings. I learned most by copying what are called *bei*, inscriptions carved in



sheer cliff
uppermost

plateau

symmetrical
cascade

trees on
silhouette edge

angular
blade edges up
cascade down

overhang

boulders

FIG. 16 *Landscape from the Jieziyuan huijuan* (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting), vol. 3, plate 23. Woodblock print, Japanese recut of the original 1701 edition (Kyoto: Geichiku do, prob. 1750–1850).

ancient stone stele. The calligraphy on *bei* is rough; from it you learn painters' calligraphy, not calligraphers' calligraphy. I also studied other ancient styles and works by famous calligraphers. Becoming an accomplished calligrapher takes time and practice. Maybe I will spend more time on my calligraphy when I get older.

Shanghai school painting was fun to study but ultimately not very satisfying. When I was fourteen I began to explore other styles, and when I was sixteen I began to study Western-style drawing with Zhang Chongren. Recently Zhang's daughter published his biography, and a retrospective exhibition was held in

Taiwan in 2002. He had a number of important students, including C. C. Wang, who studied with him in the 1930s.

When the Cultural Revolution began, Zhang's religious background and the sculpture he had done of Chiang Kaishek made him a target of the Red Guard. He was forced to move to a different studio, and fewer people visited him. I became much closer to him. He survived the Cultural Revolution; he was even active as an artist during it. His paintings were mostly watercolors and some oils.

I studied Western drawing with him but also enjoyed his discussions of the history of Chinese painting. He had a whole set of *Nanhua dacheng*, a Chinese art history text published in Japan. This material was exciting because most art students had not seen it before and few people had access to it. He taught me a lot and told me many stories about important artists, both Chinese and Western.

One day when we were drawing something, his servant came in to clean the floor. The mop looked just like a great big Chinese paintbrush, and the servant dipped it in the bucket and made a sweeping gesture on the floor. Zhang suddenly told the servant, "Stop! Look at this stroke, this beautiful stroke." Then he said, "Water is the most important part of Chinese painting. Just this initial part, when it touches the surface." He went on, "It's abstract, there's nothing here, but if you can use this in your painting, then you really will make something happen." I have always remembered that lesson. He was a very good teacher.

Zhang's studio was one of the first true studios of Western art in Shanghai. He had a beautiful set of plaster casts, maybe as many as fifty, of the famous sculptures in Europe. Zhang also owned a copy of *Guide Pratique pour les Différents Genres de Dessins*, a beautiful book by Armand Cassagne, that he used to teach drawing. (I had access to the last two volumes of the book,

which had wonderful landscape drawings.) He had only one copy and many students, so he broke up the book and lent individual sections to different students. Based on this book, his focus was on line. He started us with a perfect, curved line. From this single line we graduated to a simple geometrical shape, and then on to more and more complex shapes. In many ways, his method was a very Chinese approach to Western art.

Zhang loved to tell stories about his time in Europe and about the art he saw there. For instance, he said the first time he saw Michelangelo's *Slave* he thought something was not right about the piece. He conjectured that Michelangelo first saw the stone—he probably got few chances to work on such a large piece—and looked at it for a long time, and then he finally started doing the sculpture. But the stone was not tall enough for his concept. He was a genius, but he made a mistake. Zhang also told me details about paintings by Tintoretto and where to look in them for influences from Titian and many other observations about important European art. I enjoyed his stories. My trip to Europe in 1991–92 was in part a pilgrimage to see all the works he had loved and described. I think many of his observations were correct.

Other styles of Western drawing were becoming popular in China at the same time, particularly Russian style, which dominated the government institutions. The drawing style they taught was known as the Chistiakov style. It was more practical than what Zhang was teaching, but Zhang taught in the French style of the Royal Academy in Brussels, where he had been a student. I had no involvement with the government institutions, but I was interested in Russian art. I had seen very strong works at a 1960 exhibition of Russian art, so I studied Russian-style drawing on my own.

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

In 1966 Mao Zedong and his supporters began a purge that ultimately spread to almost all Chinese political and cultural institutions. Known as the Great Cultural Revolution, this purge had a traumatic effect on China's intellectual and artistic elite. The surviving vestiges of the educated elite were targeted, as were almost all foreign institutions, even those from the Soviet Union. Nationwide, Chinese youth were organized into brigades called the Red Guard. These brigades took it upon themselves to destroy institutions and individuals who did not fit into the new order. The amount of destruction and suffering varied from region to region, family to family, and even individual to individual.

Cultural institutions were a major target for the Red Guard. Libraries, museums, and schools were closed; some were destroyed. Schooling in a traditional sense nearly ceased. Scholars, religious leaders, painters, poets, and writers—almost anyone with a modicum of education—were liable to be called in for “correction sessions” or sent to the countryside for “reeducation.” The traditional styles of Chinese painting and calligraphy were suspect, as were many of those from the West.

Still, certain arts flourished, particularly those that could be employed for propaganda. Massive paintings and sculptures of beaming peasants, workers, and revolutionary heroes in socialist realist styles were in high demand. Every new movement within the revolution required new slogans, which were printed on posters, often with images of Mao, and distributed throughout China (see cat. nos. 1a and 1b, p. 56). In an interesting reversal of the usual relationship between paintings and prints, these posters became the models used by groups of “worker artists” who reproduced them, often in gigantic scale, as paintings in highly visible public spaces. The intervals between movements were short, so the “worker artists” were kept busy. Since the Communist Party wanted the current movement's message communicated as effectively as possible,

"worker artists" were given considerable latitude on what they were allowed to access and study. Li Huayi spent a decade as one of these "worker artists."

Not long after I began to study with Zhang Chongren, the Cultural Revolution began. Officially it started in the summer of 1966, but in 1965 we already felt the strain. Everything changed, including the structure of society. Owning or even reading books was terrifying, since no one knew for certain if any particular book was acceptable to the Red Guard. If it was, the next day someone might decide that the book contained some commentary against the government, and possessing it could be disastrous.

In a strange way the Cultural Revolution decided for me that I was going to be an artist. It was almost fate. Before then, I enjoyed art and painting very much, but I had not made the decision to become an artist. During the Cultural Revolution I was a worker artist, part of a group of artists who painted what the Communist Party wanted us to paint. We painted mostly in socialist realist styles using Western media. Fortunately, my training with Zhang Chongren and my studies of the Chistiakov system of drawing had prepared me for such work. One of our big jobs was taking prints that were sent to us by the party and copying them, in much larger scale, on exterior walls and places where they were easily seen by the public (see cat. nos. 1a and 1b, p. 56).

We received no training, just a lot of practice. The party or the Red Guard handed us posters and we reproduced them. Sometimes they wanted us to create new artworks. Of course, everything had to be approved by the leadership first. Enormous numbers of paintings were needed, and we often did works from the same poster or about the same subject over and over. Some of the paintings were very large. I soon became familiar with how

the party wanted the main images to appear—strong and positive for the workers and peasants, cartoon-like and evil for intellectuals and the targets of the current movement—so the work became routine. Every new movement needed new propaganda art, so we would regularly whitewash over our existing paintings and make new ones. None of the paintings I created during that period survive, though the prints do.

The work was not particularly difficult, but I could not use my own interpretations or artistic style. Because of my family background, there was no chance of my becoming famous. Keeping a low profile also seemed prudent. But in my leisure time I could paint in any style I wanted—as long as I didn't get caught. I did have some friends I could talk to about art. They were good people. Since I didn't want to get them into trouble—again, due to my background—I had to be careful, both for them and for myself. Actually, most people were very careful.

As a worker artist I was expected to improve my style through study, even though I was not in school. Every time a big propaganda exhibition took place and we were required to create something new, there was chaos. Often no one seemed to know who was in charge. At those times, if we talked to the right people and said we needed some books for reference, they would take us to the library, which was closed, and give us access to the art books. We were not supposed to look at books that were not allowed, but once we got in, who knew what was allowed? So we shared everything. Thus, even during the Cultural Revolution, I was able to see many old publications featuring works by Chinese as well as Western masters.

I read and studied other things as well. I could always get copies of "white cover" books, so called because they were forbidden and therefore their covers were blank. I read Jack Kerouac's

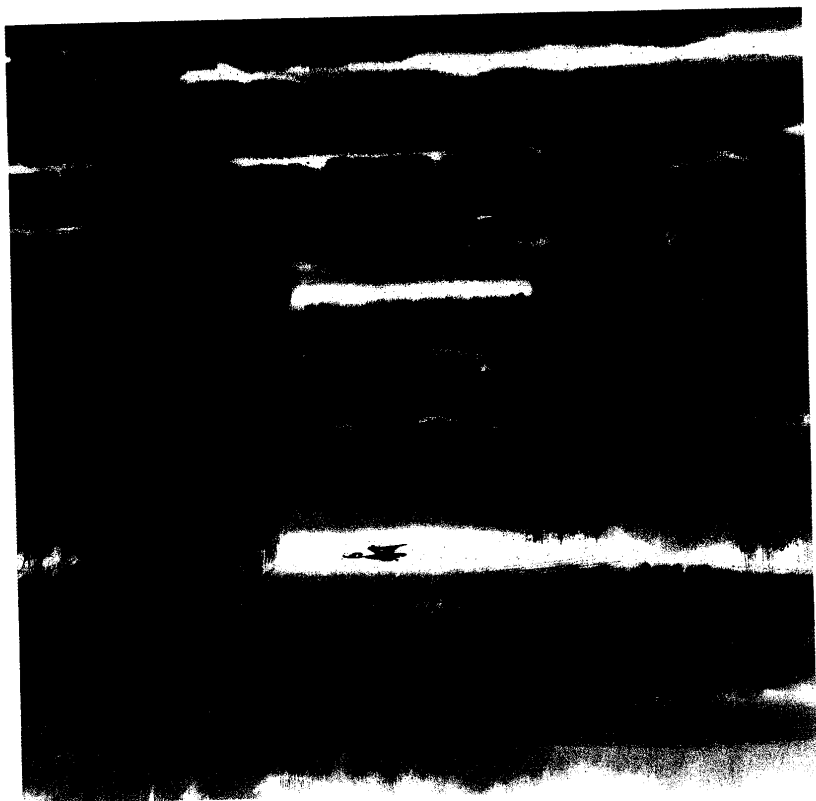


FIG. 17 *River landscape with autumn willows*, n.d., by Lin Fengmian (1900–1991). Single panel, framed, ink and color on paper, 26½ × 27 in. Wujuzhai Collection.

On the Road, *Catcher in the Rye*, and many other novels, all in Chinese; they had been translated, but were hard to obtain. I also had access to books and magazines in English; I remember novels by Dickens and magazines like the *National Geographic*.

During this period I continued to practice Chinese painting in private and even experimented in some new styles. Since I was using color all the time as a worker artist, I tried some work in color. Lin Fengmian interested me because of his use of color (figure 17). I also painted landscapes in ink. Occasionally I had opportunities to travel, and I visited various temples, famous mountains, and scenic areas, including Huangshan around 1971 (figure 18).



FIG. 18 *Li Huayi at Huangshan*, Anhui province, 1971. Courtesy of the artist.

One of my friends was a student of the famous artist Liu Haisu, so I visited Liu Haisu about five times (figure 19). Liu had strong ideas about trying to create a new painting style based on the Chinese tradition and incorporating movements in the West. He invited me to become his student—he had many students during the Cultural Revolution, though I did not mingle with them—but I declined. Liu always said that French art was better than Russian art, a sentiment that caused him trouble with party authorities even before the Cultural Revolution. Not until an exhibition of French art came to Shanghai in 1980 was he vindicated.

One irony of the Cultural Revolution was that, because Western-style painting was used so much for government projects and propaganda, many artists began to react against it and look back to traditional Chinese styles. Chinese painting seemed like fine art, the only fine art we could turn to. I visited older artists, like Liu Haisu and Lu Yanshao, who practiced traditional styles. In their work I sought a new way to do things.



FIG. 19 *Pine, juniper, and rock*
by Liu Haisu (1896–1994).
Hanging scroll, ink on paper.
Wojuzhai Collection.

My personal art was not for public consumption. Understanding that both creating and viewing forbidden art was risky, I showed my paintings only to a few select friends. Many good artists were also privately creating art in a more traditional Chinese vein. Even those who continued to use Western techniques began to look for subjects that were more typically Chinese. Of course, a lot of people were just worker artists, getting by. I didn't concentrate on Western styles. I was seeking a personal breakthrough and tried many things on paper, with water and ink.

POST-CULTURAL REVOLUTION, 1976–1981

The severity of the Cultural Revolution began to diminish as early as 1972. One sign of this relaxation was Richard Nixon's visit that year. Over the following years China continued to open gradually to the West and to its own traditional culture. With Mao's death in 1976 and the subsequent arrest of the Gang of Four, the Cultural Revolution officially ended, and the

opening of China accelerated. By the 1980s young artists in many parts of China were conversant with trends in Western contemporary art, and the Chinese art scene changed dramatically. Official, private, and underground exhibitions of art in international contemporary styles were held in Beijing and other parts of China. The validity of traditional Chinese art was again called into question, this time in light of the developments that these shows highlighted.

With the relaxation of travel restrictions, Li Huayi made frequent trips to Beijing and other parts of China to view exhibitions. Two notable 1978 shows he saw in Beijing featured modern Western art from the collection of Boston's Museum of Fine Art and art treasures collected during the Cultural Revolution. The former provided him with his first direct exposure to post-World War II American art, while the latter allowed him to view a monumental landscape painting of the Northern Song dynasty. Both had a dramatic impact on his current style.

Between 1979 and 1981, Li Huayi was in a kind of limbo. Awaiting emigration to the United States (his new wife's family was eligible for U.S. citizenship), Li Huayi knew he would be leaving China and had no clear role there. He used the time to visit scenic and culturally significant sites and to develop his own style.

In 1979 he traveled to far northwest China to visit the Buddhist caves at Dunhuang. For a time he practiced a style influenced by the paintings he saw there.

As I said, in a way I was lucky during the Cultural Revolution. Despite my family background, I did not suffer too much. I was even able to travel, visit libraries, access art publications, and so on. And in private I developed my own artistic style. By the end of the Cultural Revolution I knew I wanted to be a good Chinese painter, a contemporary Chinese painter.



FIG. 20 *Sketch of Guanyin, 1979, by Li Huayi. From the artist's book of sketches of paintings at Dunhuang, folio bound book, ink and color on paper.*

In 1979, three years after the Cultural Revolution ended, my life took an unexpected turn. In May I married Lin Yin, whose father had been born in America and therefore had the right to American citizenship. In June, her family got a call from the American embassy in Beijing. Lin's entire family, including me, went for an interview, and the embassy official asked if we wanted to go to the United States. It was not a long debate. It just happened. Because we were going as immigrants, we had to wait two years for the quota. Actually, those two years were good for me; I traveled, saw exciting places and works of art, and further developed my painting style. China was beginning to open up, and many new and interesting things were going on.

Among the places I went was Dunhuang, one of China's great Buddhist cave sites. Dunhuang was important to me for a number of reasons. The art there was *real*, some of it more than fifteen hundred years old (figure 20). I was the opposite of Zhang

Daqian, who had also made a pilgrimage there. Zhang had been familiar with everything in traditional Chinese painting from the Song dynasty and later, but he had never seen anything from the Six Dynasties; for that he went to Dunhuang. I could go to Dunhuang, Longmen, and other ancient sites (figure 21), but I had limited access to classical paintings.

I was fascinated with Zhang Daqian, who at that time was something of a cultural hero in certain Shanghai circles. Since I was drawn to Buddhism and Buddhist art, his studies at Dunhuang interested me. Around this time a multivolume series of books about Dunhuang was published in Japan. A publishing house in Shanghai was involved, so those of us in Shanghai had almost immediate access to them. I began to study everything I could about the site. Then a friend and I decided to go there and study the caves ourselves. That was in 1979, only a short time after the Dunhuang volumes were available.

FIG. 21 *Li Huayi at Han dynasty tombs in Henan, 1974. Courtesy of the artist.*



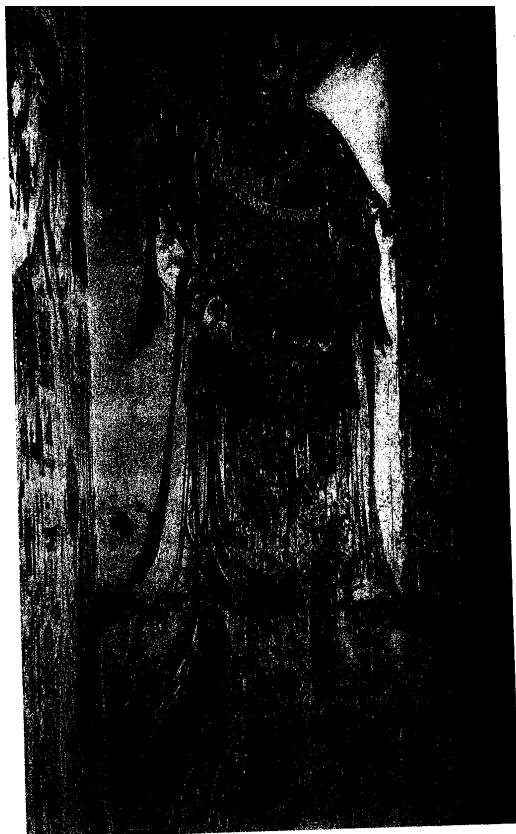


FIG. 22 *Guanyin. Wall painting in Dunhuang, Qinghai province, early Tang dynasty (ca. 617-700).*

Through an informal network of people who knew how to get into the caves, we were able to see almost all of them, including those that hadn't been photographed. At that time Dunhuang had yet to become a tourist destination. There were no hotels, and the food was really horrible. But none of that mattered because I could see the brush touch, the actual hand of those ancient artists (figure 22). In many cases the painting is rough, but I loved it because it is full of energy, in part because the artists worked on hard surfaces with temperas and gouache in opaque colors. So I played with opaque colors and Dunhuang styles on paper. Even today, I like to use opaque colors on a dark background, which is an early Chinese tradition. The challenge is to use the scheme elegantly. Studying Dunhuang painting convinced me I could not start a new art without becoming familiar with as many traditions as I could.

It did not take me long to realize that works influenced by the paintings at Dunhuang were not my ultimate artistic statement. They were experiments, a kind of detour, but it was important for me to explore the possibilities they offered. Fortunately, those paintings were well received, and my first exhibition in the United States, at the Pacific Asia Museum, featured some of them (see cat. no. 2, p. 58). The curator of that show, Dr. David Kamensky, had researched Zhang Daqian and his experiences in Dunhuang, so he appreciated my work.

I had a group of people I associated with, some friends and schoolmates, and we experimented with abstraction. I had been interested in abstract art since the late 1960s. At that time only a few books in China discussed modern Western art, and they were forbidden. However, I was able to see a few that had images in black and white; we circulated copies from friend to friend. I didn't try to copy any of the paintings entirely; I just interpreted certain details, certain sections. Starting in the late 1970s, after Mao's death and the fall of the Gang of Four, we had access to books that described Western abstract theory. At that time many art books were imported from Japan, and there was an attempt to reestablish libraries and universities. Also, an American painting exhibition came to China in late 1978. It was interesting to me to see actual abstract expressionist paintings. From that time on, I was more serious with my experiments in abstract painting in ink.

Chinese painting has always been semi-abstract, and in part, my experiments were an exploration of my own heritage. I also felt the need to be constantly searching for new material, or for a new way to look at existing topics. I needed to dig deeper, take some risks, see how far I could go.

Zhang Daqian inspired me to experiment with abstraction. By the late 1970s he had been painting big splashed-ink works



FIG. 23 *Landscape* by Zhang Daqian (1899–1983). Ink and color on paper, framed, 59 1/4 x 83 1/4 in. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Avery Brundage Collection, Gift of the artist, B73D4.

for a number of years (figure 23), and we were able to see them in reproduction—another advantage to the opening up of China. I was fascinated with them, but I did not want to do exactly the same thing. That was his style; I wanted to develop my own. Zhang stayed within the landscape tradition and did not attempt to incorporate other elements into his works. I tried to add components and styles from other traditions, and I also manipulated my areas of abstract ink in a way that Zhang did not.

I continued to do landscapes in traditional styles at the same time. I copied illustrations of Yuan dynasty paintings from books on the Shanghai Museum's collection—the museum was not yet open to the public. The books also contained illustrations of Song dynasty paintings, mostly small-format, Southern Song court paintings. I did not see monumental landscape paintings like those by Guo Xi or Fan Kuan.

The first important Northern Song painting I actually saw was in Beijing in 1978, at an exhibition of works collected by the government from all over China during the Cultural Revolution. One piece was famous, a work from the collection of the Zhang family in Tianjin—a snow scene attributed to Fan Kuan. The painting was beautiful, and very big. It shocked me. Seeing that painting

was a turning point. After that I started to work in the style of the Northern Song landscape. Of course, from the very beginning Zhang Chongren had told me that Northern Song landscape painting was the highest form of Chinese art. But I started practicing this style very late because I had not seen any great examples.

COMING TO AMERICA, 1982–1992

Some Chinese artists who have immigrated to a Western country have been consumed by the culture, essentially becoming Western artists with Chinese surnames. Others have bonded together in art centers, like those around New York, where they have effectively formed their own community. Still others have used their experiences in the West to attempt to reform traditional Chinese art.

Li Huayi chose a different path. He settled in San Francisco, a city that contains a large Chinese-American population but few relatively recent Chinese immigrants and almost no other foreign-born artists. He studied at an American art school, where he was particularly attracted to abstract expressionist paintings and other works by postwar American artists. And yet, due to his own inclination and the encouragement of his advisors, Li Huayi focused on traditional Chinese materials—brush and ink—combined with collage. Western movements no doubt influenced his work, but he also sought new insights in a variety of traditional Chinese art forms. In many ways, Li Huayi was an artist searching for a new voice and a new identity.

Almost immediately after coming to the United States, Li Huayi began to receive his first real public acclaim as an artist. An exhibition of his works mounted by Roberta English, a dealer specializing in contemporary art, proved to be commercially successful. He also had his first one-man exhibition at an American museum, the Pacific Asia Museum in

Pasadena, which featured a combination of his Dunhuang-style paintings and his abstract expressionist works. His abstract paintings in particular received critical acclaim from Michael Sullivan, a leading scholar of Chinese painting (see p. 6).

Once we came to America, we settled in San Francisco. Because of our special status I was able to get a green card right away and started working for the restaurant at the Sheraton, where the people were very good to me. I was able to read some English but could speak little.

In 1982 Roberta English featured my work in an exhibition. Some of my paintings sold, and I was able to pay my rent and still have a little left over. A Chinese professor at San Francisco State University liked my paintings and introduced me to some Taiwanese artists who, inspired by Liu Guosong, were doing contemporary work in traditional Chinese media. I visited State, on the professor's invitation, but since the main person there, Rich McClain, does photo-realist works (which was not my style), I decided not to study there.

Instead, I went to the Academy of Art, concentrating on painting but also studying printmaking and illustration. My coordinator there, Tom Marsh, cautioned me, "Be careful. School does not teach you a style. Try to develop your own style. Discover America, discover yourself." American postwar art interested me very much. I studied at the academy from 1982 to 1984 and received a master's of fine arts degree. I found that, because of my earlier training, whenever I picked up Western painting materials, I was not able to do abstract works. I could not rid myself of old habits or the negative feeling I had developed about Western art during the Cultural Revolution. Fortunately, my teachers

encouraged me to develop my own style using Chinese materials and techniques.

While I was studying at the Academy of Art, I continued to work with abstract forms in ink, at times combining them with collage. But, in part because I was in the United States, I began to think that more new and interesting things could be done in traditional Chinese styles, so I began to incorporate elements from traditional Chinese arts in my own works. Tradition is the spiritual core of every form of Chinese art—porcelain, pottery, rubbings, carvings, everything. But each of these arts also contains an abstract side.

Calligraphy exemplifies what I feel is the semi-abstract nature of Chinese art. The form of every character already exists, and therefore the calligrapher cannot make a new image; the characters have existed for thousands of years. What calligraphers *can* do is express themselves through the individual brush strokes. This is abstract. My thought process in making these abstract works and using these elements from traditional Chinese art was: Can I find the abstract essence, the pattern, of other traditional arts? Can I combine them in a single work with a unifying concept? Can they be treated abstractly, that is, through the technique in which they are created rather than what they represent? Even if this work was just a trial, an experiment, I felt it was worthwhile. Exploring different concepts and different ways of looking at things was rewarding.

Structurally, I have continued working in this way. If you look at one of my abstract paintings from that period and one of the landscapes I am doing today, you will see that I am using similar overall compositional structures and that I have treated the large areas of ink in much the same way. These experiments were valuable for developing this part of my vocabulary.

I went to Europe in 1991–92 and visited all the old sites my teacher Zhang Chongren had talked about. After that, I felt I was done with oil painting, divorced from all that went with it. I had reached a new landmark on my journey as an artist. I am still exploring possibilities.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS, 1992–PRESENT

In many ways, Li Huayi is a study in contradictions. He lives in a quiet, upscale San Francisco neighborhood in a Western-style house furnished with American and European antiques. He has two sons, one entering college in electrical engineering and the other a high school student who shows promise as a violist. On the surface he leads a very American life. Yet in his painting and his philosophy about art, he has become increasingly, even adamantly, Chinese. As he has matured as an artist, his ideas about what it means to be a contemporary Chinese painter and his concepts about the interplay of Western and Chinese traditions in his work have gelled.

His new sense of self was demonstrated in 1992, ten years after he arrived in the United States, when he began to produce paintings based on his interpretations of the monumental landscape style practiced during the Northern Song dynasty. Although Northern Song monumental landscapes—large in scale and concept, and detailed and time-consuming in execution—are considered by many to be the pinnacle of Chinese painting, the style has rarely been practiced since. These paintings serve as a point of departure for Li Huayi; he strives for their monumentality and drama but uses formats and techniques Northern Song artists never considered.

His works in this style have achieved public acclaim, and the demand for them has been greater than his slow process allows him to fill. His success has been more than commercial, however. In 1998, one of his

works was selected for inclusion in *A Century in Crisis*, a major exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, with a catalogue by Kuiyi Shen and Julia Andrews (Andrews and Shen, 1998). His reputation is now international; he has had well-received exhibitions in Hong Kong and Shanghai as well as in New York and California.

After nearly ten years of exploring abstraction combined with elements from early Chinese art, I felt I was ready to create something new in the most important Chinese painting theme: landscape. Not just landscapes, but monumental landscapes like those done during the Northern Song dynasty. As mentioned earlier, I had first seen a Northern Song dynasty landscape in 1978 when I made a special visit to Beijing to view an exhibition. In 1989 I made another special trip to study Northern Song painting, this time at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. (I would have gone earlier, but I wasn't able to because of visa issues.) I was lucky enough to view several of the great surviving masterpieces of Song dynasty painting: Fan Kuan's *Travelers amid Mountains and Streams*, Guo Xi's *Early Spring*, and Li Tang's *Whispering Wind among Pines on the Mountain*.

The painter and collector C. C. Wang encouraged me to pursue this new style. He sent me a polite letter and paid me a great compliment, saying, "You are very good. Your Dunhuang-style paintings did not indicate to me that you could do landscapes like this" (figure 24).

I want my paintings to feel contemporary, to be relevant to a contemporary audience. But when I returned to China, I found that I did not agree with many new artists who are trying to be "international" and "contemporary." They believe that Chinese artists need to follow the trends in "international contemporary art." Some of these artists are great and innovative. I admire their



FIG. 24 Letter, 1994,
by C. C. Wang (Wang
Jiqian, 1907–2003).
Ink on paper.
Collection of Li Huayi.

work. Yet I am not entirely certain that all of them truly understand what they are doing.

What does it mean to be “contemporary”? Does that mean everyone has to practice a single international contemporary style? What does it mean to be “international”? Does that mean everyone has to work from a similar philosophy? Is it not possible to be contemporary while working in a traditional Chinese manner? Is it not possible to create works of art in traditional Chinese materials that reach an international audience, that are created at an international level?

To my mind, being contemporary is not about being fashionable or doing the most current thing. It is not about doing installation art simply because it is the most avant-garde, or performance art because it has become even more fashionable than installation art. Many people think tradition is a horrible thing. I do not believe this. I think being contemporary means communicating your spirit, being responsible to other people, and being true to yourself and your time.

Some critics have described my paintings as a melding of Eastern and Western styles. I am not comfortable with this concept. There is a lot I don’t understand about Western art. How can I say I put the essence of Western art in my painting? I see my art more as a bridge in time.

Of course I want to do something new. But I say that based on my feeling, a contemporary person’s feeling. Since my work is founded on styles that existed one thousand years ago, some say, “you are doing an antique thing, copying the ancient.” But I am not. I am doing something different. Look at the United States. In the past, people described it as a melting pot. But culture is not like that. In the United States there is a great emphasis on diversity, on cultural as well as individual identity. Most people can relate to food. In the United States you can get sophisticated Chinese food, Italian food, Burmese food—whatever you want, you can find. This diversity is good. The same should be true for art. If you want to create something, you base it on yourself, your own situation, your own cultural background, your own tradition. Art can be traditional and still be contemporary.

I am a modest person, but I have great ambition for my art. I want to be considered a major painter. I tell my son, who is a musician, “When you practice, be modest; when you perform, forget about the critics—think only about your art. Do the best you can. If you are good enough, you will be a soloist. Otherwise you will be part of the choir.” Of course, everyone tries to be a soloist, including me. My goal is to create great contemporary twenty-first-century Chinese paintings. When I view a Zhang Daqian painting, I think, “This is a twentieth-century person, and what he is doing is so Chinese; yet it is also a new kind of painting at an international level.” I want the viewer to feel the same way about my paintings.