As Craig Clunas wrote in 1997, the enormous range of art forms, techniques, and materials in a country with a history as long and complex and a geography as vast and varied as China’s makes it impossible to speak of a ‘Chinese Art’. He therefore concluded that the notion of a ‘unifying principle’ of ‘Chinese Art’ is a creation of nineteenth-century Europe and America. The same is true to a degree of contemporary art in China, although market forces since the art boom of the 1980’s have seemed, at least in the west, to create exactly that—a notion of ‘Chinese contemporary art’. But there is a big but to consider: two aspects of Chinese culture and history have served to inhibit real freedom to ‘be contemporary’ in China.

One inhibitory factor resides in the history of Western influence on art in China and the controversy it has inspired—and continues to inspire—over the degree to which artists should accept and assimilate Western art media and practices. The other factor lies within the country itself, namely, the changing political environment (especially from the early twentieth century) and varying degrees of repression against freedom of expression. These two aspects of Chinese culture have created a form of what is now Harold Bloom’s proverbial—and oedipal—‘anxiety of influence’.

Western influence, notably the Portuguese, began to infiltrate China around the sixteenth century and increased through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with Britain’s opium exports. China lost two Opium Wars, and foreign concessions were established in Shanghai.

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In the nineteenth century, with the introduction of photography, the speed of the influence of western imagery increased. Officials of the Qing Dynasty tried to suppress photography, which nonetheless was well established by the twentieth century. (Under Mao, however, the medium was tightly controlled.) With the onset of the 1911 Republican Revolution, which overthrew the Qing Dynasty, open debates arose over the degree to which China should be westernized.

Early in the twentieth century, the Chinese government financed the study of a few artists in Europe, notably in London, Paris and Berlin. In 1935, hoping to show the world that there was a strong national art tradition in China, the Guomindang sent works to an exhibition in London. But this proved a double-edged sword for nationalism, because it also opened up cross-cultural artistic dialogue between East and West. At the same time, however, within China itself there was little or no market for artists working in a Western painting tradition.3

With the communist takeover of China in 1949, following civil war and the invasion by Japan, several modernist artists emigrated to Taiwan and Hong Kong. Political oversight in China inhibited modernism, and artists who wanted to succeed were well advised to toe the line of Socialist Realism. Many art schools were closed and, writes Clunas, Soviet-style art education heralded the end of the “commercial art market . . . and private patronage.”4

Mao Zedong believed that the function of art was to be morally sanguine and understandable to the general public—shades of the Council of Trent. In his 1949 lecture on art and literature, Mao laid the foundation of a Marxist ideology in which the arts are seen as reflecting economics and class. For Karl Marx, art was produced by the proletariat (the workers) and it was exploited by the bourgeoisie (the ruling, ownership classes). Capitalism, in Marx’s view, had accentuated class distinctions and in the case of art had alienated artists from the art they made.

Mao Zedong took the Marxist approach a step further. He argued that the role of art was to advance the political agenda of communism. Mao believed that art and politics, as well as content and form, should

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3 Clunas, *Op. cit.*, p. 206 and see figure 116, cites the example of Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), who was influenced by Matisse. But the art market in China rejected the Western classical tradition of the nude. Chinese taste did not accept the nude as high culture and resisted the tradition of drawing from the nude.