WATER AND STONE: ON THE ROLE OF EXPRESSION IN CHINESE ART

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“Chinese art emphasizes ‘expression’, while western art pays more attention to ‘reproduction’. So Chinese art stresses the creator’s perception, understanding and feelings of life.”

While emptiness, for example, is a value important in Chinese aesthetics but virtually absent from its western counterpart, expression is a value important in both. However, what is expressed in each is radically different, so different that when we explore its place in Chinese art, we get a privileged glance both into a tradition older and unlike any in the west and into a culture emerging from the rapid and far-reaching changes that have been occurring in China over the past several decades. The changes raise questions about what in the new China is irreducibly Chinese, questions tied to those raised by the phenomenon of globalization: what is local in any culture, what in it resists becoming global, what is irreducibly of that culture? The changes suggest that the way to track the Chinese concept of expression is not so much to compare its roles in classical Chinese and western art as to compare them in classical art theory and contemporary Chinese art. I track the concept through art rather than literature because western audiences are apt to be more familiar with the art of China than with its literature and because the high-voltage energy fueling the contemporary art scene in China is being expended in the creation of works of visual art.

A look at the experimental art being made by Chinese artists in the light of classical Chinese theory of art demonstrates two things: first, that the current art exemplifies the six techniques of painting laid out by Hsieh Ho in the fifth century—hence its Chineseness—and, second, that the new art celebrates the materiality of the world, reigning as it does at the level of the body and its gestures, which is the level at which

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1 Shuyang Su, A Reader on China: An Introduction to China’s history, culture, and civilization (Shanghai: Shanghai Press and Publishing Company, 2005), p. 196.
matter and energy interact. To show this I am going to discuss two classical writings, one contemporary essay, and two contemporary exhibitions. The classical works are Hsieh Ho’s fifth century *Six Principles of Chinese Painting* and Shih-t’ao’s seventeenth century *An Expressionist Credo*. Contemporary are “The Watery Turn in Contemporary Chinese Art,” an essay by David Clarke in *Art Journal* (Winter 2006) and *The Real Thing: Contemporary Art from China*, a 2007 exhibition at Tate Liverpool. The enterprise promises three rewards.

First, the discovery of the Chinese conception of expression in art can teach us about traditional and current Chinese views of what art is and what it does, while the application of the discovered concept to our own art can enrich our appreciation and understanding of it. Moreover, so far as the concept captures something essential to the art of China, it can trace a line from the classical tradition, through the exposure to western modernization in the first half of the twentieth century and art’s subsequent restriction to celebrating communist ideology after 1949, to the increasing freedom from that restriction and the exposure to western post-modernism after 1979. Second, on the assumption that not everything in the Chinese concept is applicable to western art, the discovery of what it is in our art that resists the concept’s full application will begin to unearth fault lines between the arts of the two cultures. Third, through our engagement with the work of Chinese artists to which we have access through the global art world, we test both our capacity to make our own what comes from a different culture and art’s capacity to transcend the ethos of the place of its birth. In short, we test our ability to assimilate what erstwhile had been the other and art’s ability to expatriate. This sense of the difference between what we can readily respond to and what strikes us as other heightens our sense of what is distinctive in Chinese art.

The artworld in China from the time of the nation’s invitation in 1979 to foreign investment and ideas up to the present has been changing so rapidly that no one style has had a chance to take root or take hold of artists’ imaginations. Limited by no genres or styles, the artists are open to influence from what other artists are doing throughout the wired world—which will soon be the whole world—and from the international exhibitions to which Chinese artists are increasingly being invited. Moreover, avant-garde artists in China are wielding ever more influence worldwide as the number of overseas exhibitions of contemporary Chinese art grows. This is why and how the art of a