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Introduction

Nataša VAMPELJ SUHADOLNIK

The present volume is dedicated to Chinese art, in many ways most remarkable in its particular ways of expression through different artistic media, which offers a more direct approach as a universal language. From the earliest times images and artworks have transmitted ideas about life and the world in a manner that words and literature could not. Chinese philosophers, writers, critics and artists continually debated and argued over the primary role and inner qualities of art in numerous theoretical and philosophical works throughout history. The primary subject of their discussions was painting, which also represents a significant part of this volume. The importance of painting was already clearly perceivable in a statement made by a Western Jin 西晉 writer, literary critic and calligrapher Lu Ji 陸機 (261–303): "For making things widely known, nothing is greater than words; for preserving their form, nothing is better than painting."[1] (Zhang 1963, 2)

Chinese traditional painting is highly appreciated for its theory, expression, and technique, for all the richness and diversity, the number of recorded artists and critics, the large corpus of surviving paintings, frequently accompanied by a sophisticated critical literature, which can help us in understanding the inner core of the Chinese paintings. The special tools and materials used by Chinese artists contributed to a specific feature of Chinese paintings—the drawing of lines and the adoption of calligraphic elements, representing a rich repertoire of special brushstrokes. The use of brush can already be traced back to various decorations on Neolithic pottery. In the following dynasties (Shang 商 and Zhou 周) the use of

[1] It is quoted by Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 in his famous monumental compilation *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 *(Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties).* The English translation is taken from Murray 2007, 3.

brush and ink had already developed to such a point that the basic shapes made by brush in later depictions had not changed much. Although a tendency towards realistic representations of the subject matter prevailed in the early periods, reaching its culmination in Song 宋 dynasty, the prominent philosopher from the Warring States period Han Feizi 韓非子 (280?–233 B.C.) argued that the easiest subject to paint were ghosts, namely where nobody can judge if the likeness has been achieved or not, while the most difficult to paint are dogs, horses and other real things (Yang 1997, 1), there is the tendency towards the expression of inner qualities and spirit of the subject—where the form is subordinated to the content, already became inveterate in early periods. Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (ca. 344–406), a native of Wuxi 無錫 in Jiangsu province and a famous painter and art theoretician, set the general principle "*yi xing xie shen* 以形寫神"—"with the form depict the spirit" which remained the main principle of the Chinese painting to the modern era. Half a century later this principle was further developed by Xie He 謝赫 (active in 5th century). In the preface to his book *Guhua pinlu* 古畫品錄 (*Classified Record of Ancient Painters*) he laid down the six fundamental rules of painting, known as *Liufa* 六法 ("Six Principles of Painting") (Xie 1954), that became the main standards for the traditional Chinese painting. The first principle "*qi yun shengdong* 氣韵生動" emphasizes the "spirit consonance" (*qi yun* 氣韵) of painted forms, while the other five principles are related to brushwork, form, colour, composition and copying that are the essential medium for attaining the first principle. Later art theoreticians in discussing the principles and rules of the paintings only elaborated these principles, in their interpretations constantly affirming the first principle that the pictorial image must express the spirit of life. With the appearance of the literati artists, skilfully trained in calligraphy and poetry, the pure landscapes and various plants without prominent figures or architectural structures became one of the main subject-matters to express the feelings, internal moods and personality. They thus often rejected the outer form and accepted the more abstract dimensions of the paintings. Consequently, although a tendency to more realistic representations prevailed in the early periods, the shift towards capturing the subject's spirit is noticeable in the Song, Yuan 元, Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties. "Sketching the idea" or *xieyi* 寫意 became the chief point, truly important in painting.

Although Chinese civilization during the long dynastic history, especially in the 20th century after the Xinhai revolution 辛亥革命 in 1911 underwent radical

transformations, clearly seen in the attempt at reconstructing the traditional art as a result of China's social, political and cultural conflicts, the traditional elements in painting and other artistic forms did not just simply perish. To the contrary, with the ardent debate and critiques they became even more incorporated in the artworks of individual artists—of those who continued along the tradition of brush and ink, or those who integrated Chinese and Western styles, and even of those who eagerly criticised and rejected the rigidness of the tradition, usually by employing traditional motifs to reinterpret its meaning and re-contextualize the Chinese tradition. In order to understand this diversity and delineate the new image of controversial intentions and notions, two articles in the present volume explore a wide range of cultural and traditional issues in the art of modern and contemporary artists. Lucie Olivová explores the literati tradition in the works of Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864–1957), while Tania Becker examines the relation between tradition and modernity as reflected through the work of the contemporary artist and activist Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957).

As next characteristic of the art in China, I would like to point to its strong relation to the social, political, philosophical and cultural context of the society, which clearly reflects the ideological and value system of that time. From the theoretical work *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 *(Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties)* of Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (ca. 815–ca. 877) one can detect an attempt to bring painting into line with the ethical function of the prevailing Confucian ideology:

> Art of painting exists to enlighten ethics, improve human relationships, divine the changes of nature, and explore hidden truths. It functions like the Six Classics and works regardless of the changing seasons. (Zhang 1963)[2]

In the early dynasties the emperors and governmental officials were already carefully selecting the motifs with the moral and educational connotation to be depicted on the huge surface of the palaces' walls. They portrayed the loyal ministers and generals to show their appreciation for their loyalty and hard work. In the Song period with the establishment of the official Imperial Academy of Painting the court painters became even more restricted in following their own way of expression. They had to create works under the prevailing academic style of the court, often determined by the leading artist or the emperor. For example,

[2] English translation is taken from Yang 1997, 2.

the last emperor of the Northern Song, Hui Zong 徽宗 (1082–1135), was much more engaged in painting than in governing the country. The governmental supervision over art production has not receded ever since. Individual exhibitions are accompanied by severe restrictions or otherwise closed down, public museums and galleris exhibit artistic products of their own strict selction, and the financial support is limited only to certain art projects. Individual artists whose works denounce particular social problems or human/natural exploitation are pursued and denounced. The artistic life in the contemporary Chinese society is distinctly determined.

In order to illuminate certain aspects of Chinese art—painting, the present volume explores a wide range of cultural, theoretical and aesthetical aspects of art intertwining between tradition and modernity. It is divided into three sections. The first examines the notions of life, values, philosophy and aesthetics in early Chinese art. In the Shang and Zhou dynasties the basic artistic activity was mainly recognized in the manufacture of bronze vessels and their attentive embellishing, closely linked to state and religious functions. For more than a millennium bronze vessels played a leading role not merely in the artistic expressions, but likewise in the quality of casting bronze products, a technology which peaked in the late Shang dynasty. The article by Wang Yi and Fu Xiaowei compares the ancient Chinese bronze wares and Western artworks, and their abundant decorative patterns. They investigate the essential feature and values of aesthetics and argue there was a rather obvious difference between Chinese and Western aesthetic values, absorbed in the foundation of each culture.

A major part of the artistic products and paintings from the Han dynasty, based on the excavation up to the present, were closely connected to the creation of the underground burial structures. The Chinese were obsessed with building posthumous structures, to which they devoted an exceptional amount of labour and finance. They furnished them with exquisite objects and embellished the walls with particular iconographical motifs. Each object, its location, and various motifs on the walls, along with the design of the entire architectural structure were interconnected and contributed to the integrity of the tomb. It is thus necessary to interpret the entire tomb design and its pictorial materials together, and recognize that the integrity of the tomb is obscured when it is broken up into different objects, classified, say by their materials or numerous other classificatory criteria. As long

as studies focus on the interpretation of individual objects and motifs, the unveiling of the formative, sociological and symbolical connotations of the grave scheme remains fragmentary, entirely failing to reveal their original human significance. By considering the above factors and using diverse methodological theories, based on an interdisciplinary research, the article by Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik tries to illustrate a more profound message in the Han grave design. The author offers answers to the question about the degree to which the cosmological and philosophical notions of that time, especially the correlative cosmology of *yin-yang wuxing* 陰陽五行, were manifested through the grave architecture and its art.

The second section of this volume, devoted to specific artistic dimensions of Chinese paintings, begins with Marina Prasolova's exploration of the extant written material about the Chinese silk painting and its development in the Sanguo 三國 and Western Jin periods. By a thorough analysis of written sources, particularly the compilation *Lidai minghua ji* by Zhang Yanyuan, the author reconstructs the artistic features of lost silk paintings and elucidates the complex relations between artistic production and the prevailing contemporaneous tendencies in artistic expressions in different genres. The article in classifying different thematic groups investigates the initial stage of Chinese painting development and its traditional elements. The next article by Lucie Olivová explores the traditional dimensions, formed through the successive dynasties, in the paintings of Qi Baishi. Qi Baishi, one of the most famous painters of the 20th century, lived at a time when Chinese painting was entering a new phase of development. His favourite subjects to paint were bamboos, lotus blossoms, insects, shrimps, crabs, birds, and old houses in the mountains, which adhere to the literati tradition and carry its legacy. It is noteworthy that the meticulous styles of painting combined with free sketch evolved in his particular individual manner of expression. The author in searching for the root of this idiosyncrasy examines six paintings from the large collection of his paintings in the National Gallery in Prague, one of the largest collections of Qi Baishi's paintings outside China. Each contribution opens new insights into specific attitudes towards painting that emerged after the collapse of a powerful regime in a transitional period (of Six Dynasties as well as at the beginning of the 20th century).

The final section with articles by Minna Valjakka and Tania Becker explores the complexity of contemporary artistic expressions that evolve in diverse media

of representation. Minna Valjakka thoroughly investigates the nature of caricature in contemporary Chinese art, focusing on Mao's image as represented through the artistic expressions of contemporary artists. The author argues that the usage of caricature in Mao portraiture is best understood as an illustrative example of trans-contextual parody—that the artists are challenging the visual norms of Mao's standard image. Tania Becker focuses on the controversial Chinese contemporary artist Ai Weiwei and his particular attitude towards his own cultural tradition and Western art. By the adaption of traditional motifs he attempts to transform their original meaning and thus to re-contextualize the Chinese tradition. She examines the roots of his work in traditional art and explores his unique position between tradition and modernity, and prevalent current trends in the Western art and the Chinese culture.

The wide diversity of contributions to the present volume equips the readers with a variety of pragmatic viewpoints and interdisciplinary research methods. It brings new theoretical and methodological approaches to research of Chinese art which can enrich investigations of the long artistic tradition in China, leading to yet new and incisive interpretations.

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The Notions of Life, Values, Philosophy and Aesthetics in Early Chinese Art

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The Aesthetic Standard of *Wen*: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Early Artworks

WANG Yi and FU Xiaowei*

Abstract:

A comparative study of the ancient Chinese and Western artworks over the same period (from approximately 3300 B.C. to 200 B.C) shows that the dense and rich decorative patterns on the bronze wares in China represent a strong aesthetic appreciation of patterns/embellishment, while their counterparts in the West demonstrate an aesthetic orientation rooted in science, evident in nude bodies in bronze and marble. It is argued that there was a very obvious essential difference between Chinese and Western aesthetic values, and these divergent aesthetic orientations were present at the origins of the Pre-Qin and ancient Greek arts where they have been absorbed into the foundation of each culture.

Keywords: Chinese aesthetic feature, Western aesthetic feature, *wenhua*/embellishing, science

Izvleček:

Komparativna študija starodavnih kitajskih in zahodnih umetniških izdelkov iz enakega obdobja (od približno 3300 do 200 p.n.š.) razkrije, da strnjeni in bogati dekorativni vzroci na kitajskih bronastih posodah predstavljajo močno estetsko vrednotenje vzorcev oz. okrasja, medtem ko izdelki na zahodu nazorno prikažejo estetsko usmerjenost, ki izvira iz znanosti, kar je jasno razvidno iz bronastih in marmornih golih teles. Članek prikazuje, da so obstajale bistvene razlike med kitajskimi in zahodnimi estetskimi vrednotami. Tovrstna raznolika estetska vrednotenja so bila prisotna že v izvorni umetnosti obdobja pred

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dinastijo Qin in stare Grčije, kjer so bile kot take vsebovane v osnovanju posamične kulture.

Ključne besede: Kitajske estetske poteze, zahodne estetske poteze, *wenhua*/okras, znanost

1 Introduction

What is the essential feature of Chinese aesthetics? This is an interesting yet seemingly unanswerable question. Although this question has been discussed at great length from various points of view, little reflection and understanding has been addressed to the fundamental character of Chinese art. And almost all of those referring to the features of the Chinese art or aesthetics trace the origins of the Chinese and Western arts to the ancient Pre-Qin (先秦 the times before 221 B.C.) and ancient Greek eras respectively, which is obviously absurd (Liu 1999). This paper aims to elaborate this point by emphasizing certain features of ancient Chinese and Western arts and their aesthetic values, mainly through a comparative study of artworks made from 4000 to 2100 years ago.

We would like to make the following explanations in order to generate further discussion.

A. In a sense, as a part of human culture, the features of art in the world are largely identical but with minor differences. Thus in this paper what is referred to as a typical feature of Chinese aesthetics, the *wenshi* (紋飾 embellishing/patterning) feature, is not contained exclusively in Chinese culture. Rather, it means that the Chinese culture is permeated with the embellishing or ornamenting elements: in other words, it has more complicated and enriched expressions of embellishing or ornamentation than other cultures.

B. The reason we coin a term *wenhua* (紋化 embellishing/ornamentation) to describe the aesthetical orientation of Chinese artworks is that the character *wen* (紋) epitomizes Chinese aesthetic ideas and the common feature of the Chinese artworks. The original character of *wen* (紋) is *wen* (文). According to *Shuowen jiezi* (*Origin of Chinese Characters)*, the earliest dictionary compiled in the Eastern Han Dynasty (東漢 121 A.D.), it means interlaced strokes (文, 錯畫也) (Xu 1981, 450). Wan

Yun's (王筠) definition more clearly states that "*wen* (pattern) forms through interlaced drawing" (錯而畫之，乃成文也) (Wang 1987, 56). That is the original meaning of *wen* (文), but it also includes embellishment, or beautification (紋化). This argument has been challenged by the modern expert palaeographer Zhu Fangpu (朱芳圃), who claims that the original meaning of *wen* is rather that of tattoo, of drawing patterns on the human body (Zhu 1962, 67). Whether Zhu's scepticism is right or wrong, it offers further evidence of the existence of the beautifying feature of Chinese culture. In other words, the etymological study suggests that such a beautifying feature was already mature in the preliterate Chinese culture.

C. In this paper, the word "West" is used in its broadest sense with respect to China, intended to gloss both Mediterranean and Mesopotamian cultures. In this paper the artworks used for comparison are mainly from ancient Greece, Egypt and China.

D. Another indefinable term applied in this paper is "Bronze Age." Worldwide, the Bronze Age generally followed the Neolithic age, but the dates varied in different areas. The end of Bronze Age in any particular culture is to some extent a convenience for classification purposes, and is also considered to have varied geographically (Childe 1930; Fong 1980, xv). Historians also have different opinions regarding the ending date of the "Bronze Age" in China either by the replacement of iron tools as is applied in European and Middle Eastern history or by the persistence of bronze in tools, weapons and sacred vessels. When we mention the Bronze Age in China, we adopt the commonly accepted timeline, from 21th century B.C.–500 B.C. (White 1956, 208; Barnard 1961, 14; Chang 1986, 1; NGA 2010; Liu 2005; Jiang 2010). Therefore, for the purpose of a comparative study of bronze wares in China and the West, the term "Bronze Age" will be used in its broad sense, namely the period of any culture during which the most advanced metalworking in that culture uses bronze. It refers to a period approximately lasting from 3300 B.C.–500 B.C. and bronze wares made in ancient Greek, Egypt and China during this period of time will be put together for comparison.

2 The Chinese Aesthetic Feature of *Wenhua* (紋化) in the Bronze Age

From the late Xia Dynasty (夏, 2070–1600 B.C.) China entered into the Bronze Age, an advance that featured the diversification of *wenhua* (紋化 embellishing/ ornamentation). The colours and lines of *wen* (紋 patterns) on various bronze wares are more distinctive, with richer and more advanced grains, lines and textures. They are mainly patterns representing animals and plants. Most of these are related to the worship of dragon and phoenix, such as the *taotie* (饕餮), a bizarre, imaginative animal, and the *kuilong* (夔龍), a one-legged monster dragon, or the crawling dragon, coiled dragon, symmetrical twin dragons, flood dragon, serpent, and sea horse, etc. There are also patterns representing the more familiar bird, tiger, goat and dog, etc.[1]

A number of works on Chinese aesthetic features assert that Chinese people in the Bronze Age believed in a "Ferocious beauty 獰厲的美" (Li 1994, 32)[2]. That is, that beauty lies in ferocity, horror and solemnity, among which *taotie* is a typical representative. Nevertheless, few mention the strong characteristics of embellishing/ornamentation in these bronze wares. Here is an exception, an historian's comment on the Simuwu quadripod (司母戊鼎, see Fig. 1)—the largest and the most famous bronze sacrificial vessel in the world, unearthed in the mausoleum area of the Yin 殷 ruins. It documents the embellishing feature of Chinese aesthetic appreciation.

[1] Aesthetic studies on bronze artworks usually pay close attention to the religious meanings of the patterns. Granting these, the fact remains that no matter how many religious attributes those patterns contain, they also embody the development of the aesthetic sense of patterning.

[2] Li Zehou (李澤厚), a contemporary Chinese aesthetician, notes, "According to historical records, the *Taotie* was an auspicious symbol. … All *Taotie* designs and motifs communicate an overwhelming feeling of mystery, power, terror and ferocity." (Li 1994, 32–34)

Fig. 1: Simuwu Quadripod in the National Museum of China. (After: Wen 2008)

> 司母戊鼎紋飾美觀，工藝精巧。除鼎身四面中央是無紋飾的長方形素面外，其餘各處皆有紋飾。鼎身四面在方形素面周圍以饕餮作為主要紋飾，四面交接處，則飾以扉棱，扉棱之上為牛首，下為饕餮。鼎耳外廓有兩隻猛虎，虎口相對，中含人頭，好像被虎所吞噬，俗稱虎咬人頭紋。耳側以魚紋為飾。四隻鼎足的紋飾也匠心獨具，在三道弦紋之上各施以獸面。(Wen 2008)

> The Simuwu Quadripod is famous for its exquisite craft and delicate decorative patterns. The four spaces and the central part of the body are unadorned rectangles. But around the four rectangles it is adorned with "Taotie" patterns (紋). The four junctions are decorated with lines of door leaves, above which were figures of oxen and below images of Taotie. The external sides of the ears of the vessel are decorated with two facing tiger heads, with a human head in each tiger's mouth, hence, named "the pattern of tiger biting man's head". The other side of each ear is decorated with patterns of fish. The decoration of the four legs of the vessel show even greater originality, with animal faces over three wavelike lines[3].

Within this short Chinese passage describing the Simuwu quadripod, the author, Wen Caifeng, repeatedly uses the expression *wen* (pattern/embellish/embellishing/beautify)—8 times the character 紋 (*wen*) and seven 飾 (*shi*) and 紋飾 (*wenshi*)—to depict the bronze, underlining the aesthetics of *wenhua* (ornamentation) of that time.

This Chinese embellishing feature is also embodied in the Four-goat quadripod 四羊方尊 (Fig. 2), often to be deemed a symbol of perfect bronze wares. This

[3] All translations in the text were made by the authors

statue is adorned with lines in bold relief and plane patterns; it also has the patterns of a goat's head and legs, with dragon like lines mingled with the horns of the goat. It embodies the height of the ancient embellishing/patterning art (*wenshi yishu* 紋飾藝術) with complicated interlaced lines and dignified, elegant styled patterns. These famous artefacts demonstrate an ancient strong conviction of beautifying through embellishing/patterning (*yiwenweimei* 以紋為美).

Fig. 2: Four-Goat Quadripod in the National Museum of China.[4]

Fig. 3: A kneeling bronze human figure, Sanxingdui Museum, Chengdu.

We ought to ask next whether such embellishing features could have also found expression in the bronze statues of that time. The answer is yes. The bronze wares (mainly body statues and masks) unearthed in Sanxingdui site (三星堆遺址) near Chengdu document a culture existing contemporaneously with the Early and Late Shang (1600–1027 B.C.), and the influence from both Shang and Sanxingdui. Fig. 3 is a kneeling bronze human figure with an exaggerated head and a patterned chest. But it does not show a sense of physical beauty, as we usually find in the

[4] All the photos in the text, unless stated otherwise, are taken by the authors.

contemporaneous Greek sculptures. There is no sense of proportion or symmetrical features in the statue.

Fig. 4 is a bronze mask, most common among the unearthed relics in Sanxingdui site; it is a patterned ornamentation for a man's head. The casting technique of these bronze masks is said to be the most advanced among those contemporaneous ancient civilizations. The greatly exaggerated eyes, mouth and ears in these masks display both the basic characteristics of the aesthetic value of literary embellishment common in ancient China, and a new way of displaying the human body in the Shang Dynasty. Unfortunately, there are neither any statues of a naked human body, not even a slight sense of physical beauty that was common in ancient Greek bronze statues.

On a technological level it is hard to judge about which is better between Greek and Chinese bronze artworks in this period of time. But aesthetically, it is not so hard to find that the Greek aesthetic standard represented by its beautiful statues of the human body had already reached an entirely new level. The key point about this sense of beauty being different from that of the contemporaneous Chinese bronze works lies in its scientific and empirical features.

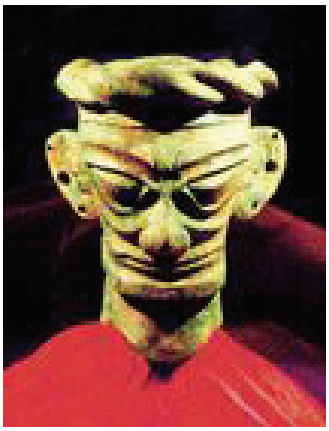

Fig. 4: A bronze mask, Sanxingdui Museum, Chengdu.

Let's take a look at the Egyptian bronze mirror (see Fig. 5). The handle of the mirror is a statuette of a naked female with a graceful figure. Each part of the girl's body is in accordance with the Pythagorean idea of beauty in terms of proportion, measure and number (Tatarkiewicz 2005, 80). Thus, it is safe to say it is a mark of

a monumental artwork of both the Egyptian bronze smithery and the mature sense of physical beauty from about 3500 years ago.

Fig. 5: Mirror with a handle in the shape of a young woman, bronze, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

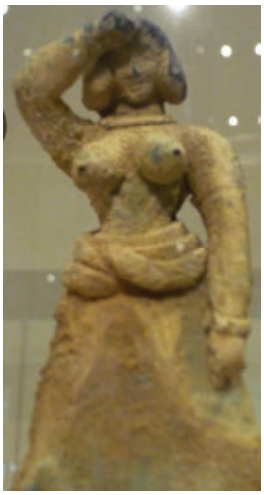

Fig. 6: Bronze female figure, Cretan, Late Minoan I, ca.1600–1450 B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 6 is a Greek bronze statue of a half-nude girl made in about the same era. Her high and rounded breasts and slender waist reveal her well-proportioned figure and exuberant vitality. It demonstrates not only the high technology in Greece, but also the mature notion of bodily beauty and aesthetic appreciation,

which is not surpassed by other nude artworks in the Axial Age (around 800–200 B.C.).

Aestheticians have sought to explain why ancient Greece became the place of the most brilliant body artworks by claiming that the Pythagoreans found and refined the whole theory of body art. However, these two pieces of artwork from Egypt and Greece irrefutably demonstrate that this sense of physical beauty had existed and already been applied a thousand years before the Pythagorean School. So it might be safe to say that it was this sense of physical beauty that provided the Pythagoreans' theoretical premise, rather than the Pythagoreans who created the theory of physical beauty.

3 The Chinese Aesthetic Idea of *Wenhua* in the Axial Age

In China, the period from the Western Zhou Dynasty (西周 ca. 11th century–771 B.C.) to the Qin Dynasty (秦) is roughly the time Karl Jaspers coined "the Axial Age"[5]. During this period the feature of embellishment, evident in bronze wares of the Shang Dynasty, became stronger, with more advanced and more intricate patterns of the animal images.

Fig. 7: Ritual wine container (Hu 壺), Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770–256 B.C.), bronze inlaid with copper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

[5] Karl Jaspers, the German philosopher, designate the term "Achsenzeit" (Axistime, or Axial Age) to describe the period between around 800–200 B.C., during which similar revolutionary thinking appeared in China, India, and the Occident (Jaspers 1953, 19).

Fig. 8: Bronze Hydria (water jar) Greek, third quarter of the 6th century B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 7 is a bronze jug from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (東周 ca. 770–256 B.C.) in China, and Fig. 8 is a jug cast about the late 6th Century B.C. in Greece. From their appearances we can see that the former has more detailed decorative patterns than the latter. The authors viewed a dozen Greek bronze jugs made in this era (Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York) and found that these bronze all show this common feature with other Greek bronze wares made about 4000 years ago, albeit with small discrepancies in model and usage. In contrast, Fig. 7 reveals a feature shared with other bronze jars made in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, with the detailed patterns.

When we turn to human statues in ancient China and Greece the identifiable differences are manifest. Greece in the 600–1 B.C. is often praised by artists and aestheticians as the most glorious place for the expression of physical beauty. Numerous exquisite nude statues made during this period have been studied. During this same period in Northern China there were intact bronze human figures, yet these statues possess the typical Eastern aesthetic feature: embellishment.

Let’s look closely at the roughly contemporaneous bronze chariot driver from the Eastern Zhou Dynasty to the Warring States Period (戰國 475–221 B.C.) in Fig. 9. Apart from the heavy cotton-padded jacket and the spiral-shaped coil in his hair highlighting the dress style of the chariot warrior of the time, the patterns on the jacket are the most striking feature. They demonstrate a strong sense of embellishment. In addition, the facial expression of the warrior is quite free, or we may say spiritual, rather than being specific and precise. What’s more, the proportion of the warrior’s body is not in strict accordance with the anatomical

principle we often find in the Greek statues of this time. Thus, this bronze statue of a warrior can be seen as an epitome of the Chinese aesthetic appreciation.

Fig. 9: Figure of a charioteer, Eastern Zhou Dynasty to the Warring States Period, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

However, when we switch to the Greek tradition, we see a different picture. Fig. 10 is a statute of a Greek athlete. Just like the Chinese warrior he is posing and making a gesture of driving a chariot. But the difference is that the latter is naked, with each part of his body conforming to the golden ratio. This is extremely different from the ornamental features of the Chinese warrior statue.

Fig. 10: Bronze athlete, Greek, ca.450 B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 11: Maogong Ding Tripod 毛公鼎. (After: Ting 1970, 16)

When talking about the typical embellishing feature in the ancient Chinese sense of beauty, we should bear in mind one key thing: The new way of ornamentation appeared in the Pre-Qin era—using Chinese characters as an embellishing pattern (*Yiwenweishi* 以文為飾). For example, the three most important implements—The Maogong ding tripod (毛公鼎, see Fig. 11, 12), San plate (散氏盤, see Fig. 13) and Guojizibai plate (虢季子白盤, see Fig. 14)—were not only fully engraved with patterns inside and outside, but also patterned with characters. These characters, i.e. the earliest calligraphy, add to these implements both a sense of beauty and a precious value of historical material. In this way, the feature of using characters as ornamentation marks great progress in the Chinese sense of embellishment (*wenhuaguan* 紋化觀).

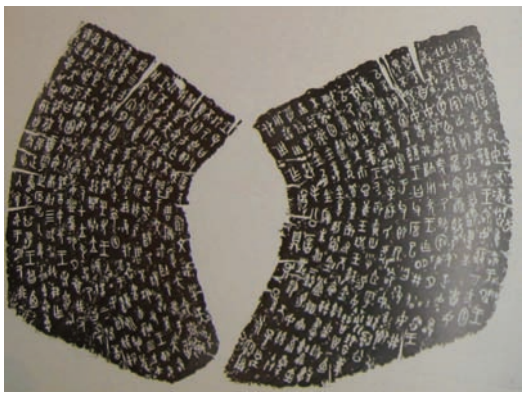

Fig. 12: Inside of Maogong ding tripod 毛公鼎 ornamented with characters.
(After: Ting 1970, 16)

Fig. 13: San Plate 散氏盤. (After: Ting 1970, 25)

Fig. 14: Guojizibai Plate 虢季子白盤. (After: Ting 1970, 26)

Contrary to this breakthrough in Chinese embellishment with characters, the ancient Greek artists in the Axial age made the most glorious body arts in the history of mankind in their statues of Aphrodite, Laocoon, Zeus (Fig. 15), and so

forth. Associated with these body arts are such aesthetic appreciation of rules as symmetry, proportion, roundness, sphericity, S-shaped curves and the golden ratio, etc. There is no need to repeat this glory, common knowledge to everyone familiar with most artistic theorists and aestheticians. What is important to stress here is that the positivism in the Greek body arts of that time also reached a brand new height. A contemporary Chinese collector Ma Weidu (馬未都) recently visited the Greek Delphi Museum and found details in Greek body art which shows this strong spirit of positivism.

Fig. 15: Bronze Zeus found at Cape Artemisium, ca. 450 B.C., ht. 2.03 m., National Archaelogical Museum, Athens.

In Figs. 16 and 17, an incomplete stone carving of a man's body demonstrates a meticulously depicted male closely tied to genuine anatomy, which Ma Weidu highly praised.

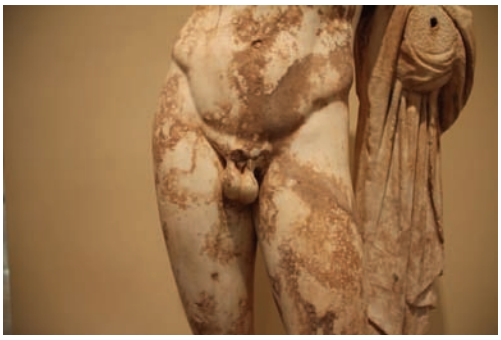

Fig. 16: A Male Torso A. (After: Ma 2011)

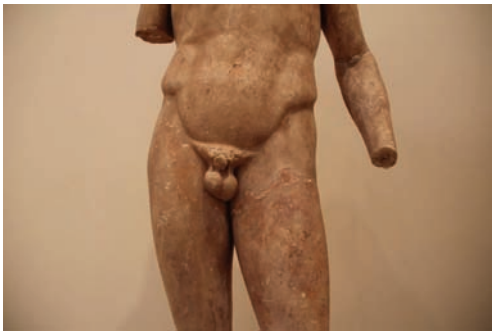

Fig. 17: A Male Torso B. (After: Ma 2011)

> The male sex has two testies, which are not in the same plane, one higher and the other lower, generally the testis of the vast majority of men (about 90%) are higher in the left and lower in the right. They are different from other human organs such as ears, nostrils, eyes, hands and feet, which are different but unable to perceive by naked eyes. The testes are not of the same scale and always in upper and lower posture. Those who are not professionals in physiology usually do not know this, but it was accurately displayed in the Greek statues (Ma 2010).

Here, Ma reveals the cultural background of the Greek arts to be the particular stress on solid evidence or science, present at the beginning of Western aesthetic culture. But in these western masterworks, we can not find the typical embellishing feature demonstrated in Chinese artworks.

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Han Mural Tombs: Reflection of Correlative Cosmology through Mural Paintings

Nataša VAMPELJ SUHADOLNIK*

Abstract

The main research materials of this study were tombs with murals from the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.). The article deals with the issue of the reflection of ancient Chinese cosmologic concepts in the iconographic design of Han mural paintings. A thorough analysis of the iconographic design of murals shows that they possessed not only a decorative function, but together with the architectural structure and other burial objects reflected the entire cosmic image. The analysis of tomb paintings reveals a developed correlative cosmology *yin-yang wuxing* which manifests its concrete image in symbolic codes of individual iconographic motifs. The article first displays a general review of tombs with murals, and then focuses on depictions in Han tomb murals, discussing representation of the images of celestial bodies, the symbolic polarity of the cosmical forces *yin* and *yang*, the symbolism of the four directions and the four seasons and the symbolic circling of the five *xings.*

Keywords: Han mural tombs, correlative cosmology of *yin-yang wuxing*, *Fuxi*, *Nüwa*, four animals

Izvleček

Osnovni raziskovalni material pričujoče študije so predstavljale grobnice s poslikavo iz dinastije Han. Pričujoči članek se ukvarja s problematiko odražanja starodavnih kitajskih kozmoloških konceptov v ikonografski zasnovi grobnega slikarstva dinastije Han. Temeljita analiza ikonografske zasnove grobne poslikave je pokazala, da poslikava ni imela zgolj dekorativne funkcije, temveč je skupaj z arhitekturno strukturo in ostalimi pokopnimi predmeti odražala celotno kozmično podobo. Analiza grobnega slikarstva

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prikaže izdelano korelativno kozmologijo *yin-yang wuxing*, ki svoj odraz dobi v simbolnih kodah posameznih ikonografskih motivov. Članek najprej prikaže splošen pregled grobov s poslikavo, v nadaljevanju predstavi prikazovanje nebesnih teles, simbolno polarnost kozmičnih sil *yin* in *yang*, simbolizacijo štirih smeri in štirih letnih časov ter simbolno kroženje petih *xingov*, kot jih upodablja grobno stensko slikarstvo dinastije Han.

Ključne besede: grobnice s poslikavo iz dinastije Han, korelativna kozmologija *yin-yang wuxing*, *Fuxi*, *Nüwa*, štiri živali

1 Introduction

A tomb as a historical, social and cultural peculiarity represents a record of a certain period and the social structure of the time. It offers the possibility of reconstructing the concrete technological achievements as well as the more abstract-philosophical and other spiritual and cosmologic values once expressed and often taken for granted. The main reason which stood behind this unusual type of building in the society of that time was surely the ever present and widespread belief in the independent existence of the soul, idealized as possessing the same wishes and yearnings as the living representatives of the human world. The desire to transcend human fugacity in the form of the soul's life after death resulted in building sepulchral places and equipping them with numerous objects the deceased might need in the world unknown to the living man. The work of archaeologists today who continuously unearth newly discovered ancient tombs thus offers us progressive insight into earlier social activities and technological achievements. At the same time it enables a thorough understanding of the spiritual yearnings of that time, their understanding of philosophical views and natural processes and not the least, of the activity of the whole universe that is the central topic of the present article. The purpose of the present article is to connect individual aspects of the traditional cosmologic system of the Han 漢 Dynasty[1] with different material elements of the tomb structure. I propose to answer two questions: First, how and to what extent did the spiritual world manifest itself through the grave architecture? Second, to what extent is the cosmologic

[1] For all Chinese terms except for longer quotes from classical works, the official latinized version of the People's Republic of China, called *pinyin* 拼音, is used. The character is written only when a particular expression is used for the first time. In case the understanding of a character contributes to the understanding of the content, this is exceptionally added also when an individual expression is repeated.

conception present in the spatial and artistic design of Chinese Han tombs with murals?

The research materials of the present article were tombs with murals from the Han Dynasty, of which up to 61 (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2006) had been excavated by 2006. All the tombs that have been unearthed so far are located north of the Yangtze River, but most are situated in Henan 河南 province and the city of Luoyang 洛陽. Special methods are required for interpreting works of art connected to the tombs where regarding the iconology and ideas, symbolical messages need to be explained. This is a relevant element, which with the help of an ideal background makes it possible to explain the defined cosmologic meaning. As long as studies focus on the interpretation of individual motifs, the unveiling of the formative, sociological and symbolical images in the iconographic scheme remains fragmentary. Consequently, they fail to offer insight into the iconographic scheme as a whole or reveal its original historical significance. An individual pictorial motif was always juxtaposed with other motifs, thus creating a logical image of decorative tendencies. It is necessary to interpret individual motifs in the framework of the entire pictorial scheme, where the position of a certain motif and its role in linking the architectural structure with the pictorial scheme is of the utmost significance. While searching for the essential value of grave paintings, it is also necessary to consider individual factors contributing to the diversity of a particular grave scheme and to pay attention to not concede to a generalizing tendency. By bearing these facts in mind and with the aid of an interdisciplinary research orientation, the present article will try to illustrate the more profound message of the grave design.

2 A General Review of Tombs with Murals

Since the beginning of the 20th century archaeologists have excavated altogether 61 tombs dated to the period of the Han Dynasty. Besides the first discovered tomb in Henan province[2] in 1916, archaeological and research work prior to the formation of the People's Republic of China was concentrated in the area of

[2] The exact year of the discovery of the first tomb with murals, named *Balitai* 八里台 is not completely reliable, but the fact is that the painting in 1924 no longer belonged to China, but had been sold in Paris to the American Museum in Boston. If the memory of the antique dealer is reliable, the tomb was discovered around 1916 (see Su 1984, 22).

Liaoning 遼寧 province where Japanese experts unearthed 5 tombs. Excavation and study of other 55 tombs were mainly performed after the formation of the new country, when the archaeological work was more systematically and clearly defined. Thus in the 50's of the last century 11 tombs were discovered and unearthed, in the 60's 3, in the 70's 10, in the 80's 16, in the 90's 11, and since the beginning of the 21st century another four tombs have been unearthed: two in Shaanxi 陕西 province (in Xi'an 西安 and in Xunyi 旬邑), one in Yintun 尹屯 in the vicinity of Luoyang in Henan province and one in Shanxi 山西 province in the town Yuncheng 運城 (Vampelj Suhadolnik 2006, 91).

The largest concentration of the tombs is in Henan province (21 tombs), especially in the environs of Luoyang city (15 tombs) which was an important economic, political and cultural centre as well as the capital of the Eastern Han Dynasty. In the surrounding areas of Henan province there are 18 tombs, in Inner Mongolia 内蒙 4, Gansu 甘肅 6 and Liaoning 遼寧 12. The majority of the unearthed tombs were situated in significant political centres, strategic military points or the economically and culturally flourishing cities of that time. From this background data it is clear that the centre of the creation of eternal places and their iconographic symbolism was located in the central region of Henan province, especially in Luoyang. Other rather remote regions at the outskirts of Chinese territory had notable military posts which guarded frontiers at the line of the Great Wall, blocking eruptions of nomadic neighbours from the north. The region of Liaoyang played the role of the capital of the eastern prefecture of that time.

These tombs belonged to wealthy officials, generals and other members of Chinese society highly ranked on the social scale. Thus grave mural paintings do not merely reflect the artistic tendencies of that time, but also present the social life of the ruling class of the Han Dynasty, their ideology and mentality and the rank of the deceased.

In attempting to classify the images by content, we can almost immediately see how diverse and opposing arrangements of images fall into individual frameworks. However, it is only after having considered the entire compositional design that the numerous, at first glance disconnected, motifs gradually reveal a hidden image, whereby one should not forget to consider also the connection between the iconographic classification and the architectural structure. By transposing certain images from the mythological or real world into a pictorial representation of three dimensional structures the form and meaning of the images as well as individual

architectural parts of the sepulchral complex change. At first, a bare sepulchral framework, offering the deceased a physical space where his corpse is kept, may change through individual pictorial images into a diminished form of the universe which within the limits of the cosmic space preserves the eternity of its own existence. It is only by studying individual scenes within the framework of the entire composition, and researching the connections between the content classification and architectural elements that general sociological and symbolic studies will gain a more solid basis. Thus murals in the tombs can only be properly interpreted in their original architectural arrangement.

On the basis of the relation between the constructional elements and individual motifs we can classify the content of the paintings into two basic groups of scenes: scenes from the heavens and celestial world, and scenes from the earth or earthly world. The scenes from the heavens to which all celestial bodies and other mythological and divine creatures of the heavenly kingdom belong are depicted on the ceiling of the tomb, on the upper parts of the walls and on the upper parts of partition walls. Scenes from the earthly world depicting private and official activities of everyday life; feasts and other images, cover the big mural areas of the sepulchral chamber. The division into heaven and earth which by themselves embody the cosmical forces *yang* 陽 and *yin* 陰 offers a rich symbolism of the two complementary forces: heavenly and earthly images reflect a constant interlacement of these two forces which encompass all the entities in the cosmic balance. Thus heavenly and earthly scenes with the artificially constructed universe in a spatial image contribute to the each and every moment created eternity.

3 The Universe as Seen in the Architectural Design of Tombs with Murals

A thorough analysis and survey of tombs and their iconographic elements have revealed that mural paintings possessed more than a mere decorative function. They had a much more profound meaning. Alongside the construction of the grave chamber and other burial objects, they reproduced the entire universe as perceived by the population of that time. Thus the soul of the deceased could attain immortality in the ever changing but never ending cosmos, and man’s questions in their search for eternity in a highly volatile world could be answered. The analysis

of grave murals has revealed an elaborate correlative cosmology based upon the binary system of the complementary pair of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 whose mechanism of constant interaction of rising and falling movement creates the source of the vital motive force of the universe. At its core it represents the continuous circle of birth, death and rebirth manifested in the circulation of the five dynamically interacting cosmic phases (*wuxing* 五行). Furthermore, a tendency to transform a religious object into a microcosm of the universe is captured in the grave construction. The common structure of grave chambers with round ceilings and square-based bearing walls manifests the *Gaitian* theory 蓋天說 and the widespread concept of a round heaven and a square earth. This chapter will explore and illustrate the construction design of sepulchral chambers in great detail, while the rest of the article will deal with the depiction of celestial bodies, the symbolic polarity of the cosmic forces *yin* and *yang*, the symbolism of the four directions and seasons as well as the symbolic circulation of the five *xings* as depicted by the Han grave mural paintings.

The *Gaitian* theory and its general concept of a round heaven and a square earth—*tianyuan difang* 天圓地方 with the metaphorical image of a large round umbrella rising above a square based carriage on a vertical pole, clearly interpreted the vision of heaven. The theory perceives heaven as a kind of a wheel that carries with it the sun, the moon and the stars, while the earth stands motionless underneath. Among the three more or less widespread views upon the structural form of the universe, the *Gaitian* theory with a round heaven and a square earth achieved the greatest influence and echo among a wider population. There is significant documentary evidence in numerous objects from that time, and it is also clearly seen in the construction design of tombs with murals.

In the long period of the Han Dynasty, the underground structure of horizontally built grave chambers developed from a simple form into a more complex one, usually consisting multiple chambers and an inclined grave path. Tombs from the middle and late period of the Western Han Dynasty, oriented towards the south or east, mainly comprised only one main chamber and two to four side chambers. The whole structure with a roof-shaped ceiling, a gable and a front wall representing the door sought to remind people of the home of the deceased. Tombs from the period of the Wang Mang's 王莽 intermezzo and the early period of the Eastern Han Dynasty reveal a similar construction design, except that brick stones were also used as a building material. It was in this period

that there a greater number vaulted ceiling constructions built from rectangular bricks started to appear, a design which became widespread in the Eastern Han Dynasty (Fig. 1).

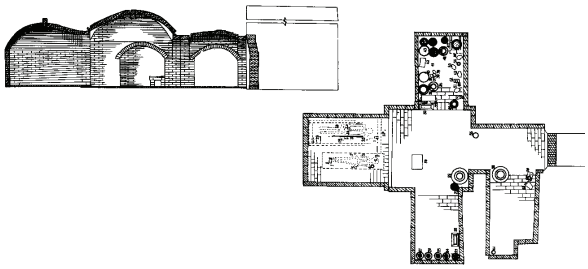

Fig. 1: Construction of the *Luoyang beijiao shiyouzhan* Tomb
洛陽北郊石油站壁畫墓. (After: Huang 1996, 142)

In the middle and late period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the vaulted structure became a commonplace in building sepulchral chambers. The grave design gradually reveals more complex structures, as more side chambers appear, and besides the central chamber a front and a rear room appear as well. These not only resemble the homes of the owners of the tombs, but simultaneously allude to the whole household, as other members of the family were normally buried there as well.

Fig. 2: Grave chambers of the *Bu Qianqiu* tomb
卜千秋壁畫墓. (After: Huang 1996, 63)

From the concise constructional scheme above, it can be seen that the form of the ceilings represents the idea of a round heaven which covers the square earth. At first, the majority of ceilings have a flat middle section, sloping towards the walls (Fig. 2). When the walls do not form a square, they mostly form a rectangle. They are always designed in a quadrangular form. Later, round and dome-shaped vaults (Fig. 3) start to appear, and the ceiling with a flat middle section gradually disappears from the interior grave structure.

Fig. 3: Central chamber of the *Mixian Dahuting 2 hao* tomb
密縣打虎亭 2 號畫像石, 壁畫墓. (After: Huang 2003, Fig. 8)

In the first version of the *Gaitian* theory, the image of a round heaven is compared to an open umbrella which instead of bending downwards spreads its spokes in all directions in approximately the same flat surface.

> 周髀家云: 天圓如張蓋, 地方如棊局. (*Jinshu*, Fang 1998, 279; *Suishu*, Wei 1996, 506)
>
> The Zhoubi school claimed that the heaven was round as an open umbrella and the earth was square as a chessboard.

Therefore, some scholars believe that the old version of the *Gaitian* theory saw the heaven as a flat surface parallel to the earth plane (Major 1993, 38). It is only with the appearance of the second version of the *Gaitian* theory, recorded in the *Zhoubi suanjing* 周髀算經 *(Mathematical Classic of the Zhou Gnomon)*, that the image of the heaven in the form of a hemisphere dome is clearly shown.

> 天象蓋笠, 地法覆盤. 天地各中高外下. (Li and Sun 1995, 85)
>
> The heaven resembles a covering rain that, the earth resembles a dish turned upside down. The heaven and the earth are higher in the centre and lower around the outer parts.

Fig. 4: The main chamber of *Xi'an Jiaotong daxue* tomb
西安交通大學壁畫墓. (After: Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo 1991, Figure (*tuban*) 1)

A similar development of theoretical suppositions about the image of the heaven can also be noticed in the ceiling construction of grave chambers. At first ceilings with a flat centre prevailed, which was later replaced by the vaulted round or dome-shaped ceiling constructions. In some graves, constructions in the form of a dish turned upside down appear, providing further evidence for the attempt to capture the heavenly image in the ceiling construction. On the other hand, the physical evidence taken in conjunction with these written accounts supports and enables an empirical reconstruction of these theories. For example, the original ceilings with a flat centre offer evidence for a parallel image of the heaven and the earth. Here, it has to be remembered that a grave construction taken by itself does not offer enough evidence to reconstruct the *Gaitian* theory. It can only be confirmed with an analysis of pictorial motifs which in connection with the architectural design create an expressive iconographic scheme of the entire cosmologic composition. Only when a certain scene is located at an exactly defined place, not only in the iconographic composition but in the whole architectural design, does it become a relevant source of information in the context of the whole composition. It then not only tells us about the literary content of the paintings, but offers evidence of construction and iconographic information. The ceiling depicts with complementarily operating forces *yin* and *yang* and the eternal cycles of the five *xings*, symbolizing heaven and celestial bodies in an organic whole with individual godlike creatures which are sometimes represented on the upper parts of the walls. It is especially the middle and lower parts of the walls that routinely depict scenes that reflect the real earthly life of the deceased and his soul (Fig. 3). Above the door, lintels, or walls above the door can be depicted guardians

of the tomb either in the form of godlike creatures or in the form of real guardians. In some tombs, a brownred line even more clearly indicates the boundaries of heavenly and earthly scenes, and thereby bifurcate the interior of the tomb into a round heaven and square earth (Fig. 4).

4 The Depiction of Celestial Bodies

The next step in the reconstruction of an artificial universe is the depiction of celestial bodies on the ceiling of the tomb. Although we cannot talk about any accurate celestial maps, the clear circles on the ceiling in an exactly defined structure indicate various constellations.

According to written sources, celestial images were painted on the ceiling of the tombs in the 3rd century B.C., if not even before. “Above are celestial bodies, below is the image of the earth” (Sima 2000, 160) is an expressive description of Qinshi’s 秦始 underground palace. Thus the first material evidence is provided by the tombs from the Han Dynasty. The oldest tomb with a celestial map on the ceiling, called *Luoyang shaogou 61 hao* 洛陽燒溝 61 號壁畫墓, was unearthed in 1957 in the city of Luoyang (see Henan sheng wenhuaju wenwu gongzuodui 1964). It dates from the later period of the Western Han Dynasty, the time of the emperors Yuan 元帝 and Cheng 成帝 (48–7 B.C.). Twelve bricks of the ceiling of the front chamber represent in a successive horizontal composition the sun, the moon and stars, among which twist red and black patterns of clouds (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Ceiling painting in the *Luoyang shaogou 61 hao* tomb 洛陽燒溝 61號壁畫墓. (After: Wei and Li 1995, 11)

On the ceiling are represented only individual celestial bodies, identified by Li Falin (Li 1986) and Xia Nai (Xia 1965) as individual lodges of the 28-lodge system and other constellations. The red sun with a bird is located at the beginning of the painting on the eastern side, and the moon with a toad and a hare is located among stellar images towards the western side of the tomb. The circulation of the universe is here clearly captured in the intertwinement of the forces *yin* and *yang*, indicated by the sun with the bird in the east and the moon with the toad and the hare in the west. The cyclic circulation of time is even more clearly indicated by the number 12 and the fact that the scene is composed of exactly 12 bricks[3]. The number 12 played a very important role in the concept of time and space at that time. Even before the Han Dynasty they knew of 12 earthly branches and 10 heavenly stems which helped to count days and form a cycle of 60 years. In the poem *Tianwen* 天問 from the *Chuci* 楚辭 we can already perceive a 12-part division of the universe (*Chuci*, Zhou 1993, 94) and the number 12 appears also in more serious astronomical treatises of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. A period of 12 years marked a heavenly year, the result of the observation of the movement of Jupiter. Accordingly, they divided the area around the ecliptic into 12 parts of approximately the same size, and named them by 12 earthly branches. The division of the year into 12 months is important as well, and *Huainanzi* reminds us that "The heaven has twelve months with which it regulates 360 days" and that also "a man has 12 joints with which he controls 360 knuckles" (*Huainanzi* 3, He 1998, 283). Besides the division of the year into 12 parts, the time unit of one day was divided into 12 two-hour parts which were also connected with 12 earthly branches. The concept of time at that time can be related to the paintings on the tomb ceiling. It was in accordance with the whole iconographic design indicating the circulation of day and night, of the year or even of the heavenly year. The image of the sun and the moon especially attracts attention. The sun is depicted on the first and the moon on the seventh brick, i.e. exactly in the middle of the painting which splits the whole into two parts. The first six bricks and the sun thus symbolize the day, and the moon with the following five bricks symbolize the night. Evidently each brick could represent one out of twelve two-hour periods of the day. This was an attempt to reproduce the cycle of time which by the constant exchange of day and night never ends and thus creates eternity. It is highly

[3] According to Xia Nai and Li Falin, only individual lodges and constellations chosen from the five heavenly palaces are depicted. The fact that the scene is depicted on 12 bricks is, according to them, irrelevant (See Xia 1965 and Li 1986).

probable that within this context bricks no. 2 and 11 depict the Great Bear *beidou* 北斗, which even more emphasizes the temporal circulation of the cosmic image. *Beidou* played a very important role in Chinese astronomy, as it never disappeared from the observers' eyes and it always seemingly circled around the North Pole. Taken as a guide it helped to discover the locations of invisible lodges and other constellations, and furthermore, its circulation around the equator and the ecliptic formed four palaces. It also played the important role if a time determinant, marking the progress of the night time and the change of individual seasons, and thus contributed to the formation of the earliest time system. It soon became a symbolic image of the emperor's carriage whose circular movement around the North Pole governed the whole heavenly image. While such a role is depicted on the stone in the *Wurong* 武榮 temple from Shandong province (Fig. 6), Sima Qian 司馬遷 in his historical work *Shiji* 史記 comments as follows:

> 斗為帝車, 運於中央, 臨制四鄉. 分陰陽, 建四時, 均五行, 移節度, 定諸紀, 皆系於斗. (Sima 2000, 1022)

> *Beidou* serves as the emperor's carriage. Circling around the heavenly centre, it controls the four directions, separates the *yin* and *yang*, indicates the four seasons and balances the harmony of the five *xings*. It arranges the degrees of solar sectors and defines all units of the calendar year. All this refers to *dou*.

Fig. 6: Depiction of the emperor's heavenly carriage in the form of the Great Bear, the *Wurong* temple in Shandong province. (After: Feng 2001, 91)

Other stellar imageries in tombs depict individual lodges, in some case even the whole system of 28 lodges. The latter can be seen in the tomb *Xi'an Jiaotong daxue* 西安交通大學, excavated in 1987 in Xi'an city in Shaanxi province (see Shaanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo 1991). Within two concentric rings on the ceiling, 28 lodges are depicted among which four divine animals and other images of people and animals appear (Fig. 7). Stars, which are depicted here in white with a

black border, are not individually arranged on the ceiling, but connected with lines indicating individual constellations. The connection of the astronomical and the mythological traditions is interesting: it joins together the individual constellations with certain images of people or animals that are in some way connected with an individual constellation. Thus the constellation *niu* 牛 (*ox*), also named *qianniu* 牽牛 (*ox's dragging* or *shepherd)* is depicted in the image of an ox dragged by a shepherd, and the composition also includes 6 stars from this constellation.

Fig. 7: A scene on the ceiling of the *Xi'an Jiaotong daxue* tomb 西安交通大學壁畫墓. (After: Chen 2003, colour Fig. 3)

The division of the 28 lodges into four palaces is clearly symbolized by the four divine animals. They are placed between two circles and indicate the four directions, coinciding with the correct orientation of the grave chamber. Analogously, the blue green dragon is depicted in the east between the seven lodges of the eastern palace, the red bird in the south between the seven lodges indicating the southernmost part, the white tiger in the west and the black tortoise in the north of the grave chamber. The images of the four animals often appear in other toms as well. They not only embody the presence of the physical *space*, but by symbolizing the four seasons also embody the presence of the *temporal* cosmic component.

An overview of the stellar paintings reveals that the majority mainly depict 28 lodges and the office of the North Pole with the emperor's carriage, represented by the *beidou* constellation. Chinese astronomers devoted a lot of attention to the North Pole region and the 28 lodges, so the frequency of their depiction seems consistent. *Beidou* and other stars around the North Pole never disappeared from the night-time observers' eyes, which is in contrast with the 28 lodges whose

individual constellations were not visible during a certain period. For this reason they connected both systems, and thus the observation of *beidou* contributed to the location of the invisible lodges. Both systems played an important role in Chinese astronomy, which is the chief reason why they are often depicted on the ceiling of grave chambers.

The image of the stars on the ceiling is not just a result of the varied astronomical activity. It is rather mainly an expression of man's desire to connect his destiny with something more permanent than his short life. Among all the objects observed, stars and planets are those which with their accurate and regular movement keep a relatively permanent status. An approximate understanding of their routine and routes could bring answers to man's eternal desire to transcend the transitoriness of his own existence. If celestial bodies, people and other earthly creatures are a part of one and the same universe, then people could get a little closer to this eternal component of the universe, just like stars which possess an eternal spot in the heaven. In order to prove the unity of the universe, they tried to connect the routine of the stars with human activities, personify constellations and inspire them with the qualities of deities and spirits. This is strongly reflected in tomb paintings, as images of animals and people often appear among the stars. By depicting these images which symbolized different constellations, the stars and people became organically connected in the integrity of one universe. With the mechanism of the interrelated temporal and spatial design of the whole universe, the souls of the deceased could achieve immortality just like the stars. Thus the presence of stars on the rounded arch had the function of placing the deceased in the eternal context of the universe, which has the essential creative force of forming new life.

5 The Symbolic Polarity of the Cosmic Forces Yin and Yang

The union of *yin* and *yang* forces was conceived of as the source of life. Thus in order to achieve a cosmic balance and thereby overcome the transitoriness of human life, they represented the embodiment of both forces in different ways. However, one has to be very careful when trying to identify specific motifs carrying the symbolic meaning of the two forces, since concrete forms of specific representations can quite simply get reduced to a mere representation of these two forces. In order to search for ideological and symbolic meanings by taking account

of the literary tradition of that time, it is necessary to put stress on the location of the motif. Considering these decisive elements, the symbolic polarity of *yin* and *yang* was revealed in the following motifs: in the depiction of the sun and the moon; of two legendary deities *Nüwa* 女媧 and *Fuxi* 伏羲 who are often closely connected with the sun and the moon, of the *Mother of the Western Kingdom (Xiwangmu* 西王母*)* and her opposite partner the *Father of the Eastern Kingdom (Dongwanggong* 東王公*)*; and in the motif of the intertwining of two creatures of the (usually) opposite sex.

5.1 The Sun and the Moon, and *Fuxi* and *Nüwa*

In Han grave paintings, the moon and the sun painted on the round ceiling or upper parts of walls are exceptionally frequent motifs. The sun is usually painted in the eastern and southern part and the moon in the western and northern part. In accordance with the mythology, the sun is generally represented alongside the image of a bird, while the moon is depicted with the image of a toad. Furthermore, they are also often represented together with the image of two deities *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8: *Fuxi* and the sun on the ceiling of the *Qianjingtou* tomb 洛陽淺井頭壁畫墓. (After: Huang 1996, 82)

The manner in which the sun and the moon are depicted, and the fact that they always appear together as complementary polar motifs, reveal their symbolic role of *yin* and *yang*. The fact that the sun represents the essence of *yang* and the moon the essence of *yin*, both playing the leading role in the cosmogonic process of creation of the universe, was prominently mentioned at the beginning of the third

chapter of *Huainanzi*. The evolution of space and time from the primordial chaos is described with the aid of the dualistic operations inside *dao* 道.

> 天地之襲精為陰陽, 陰陽之專精為四時, 四時之散精為萬物. 積陽之熱氣生火.火氣之精者為日. 積陰之寒氣為水. 水氣之精者為月. (*Huainanzi* 3, He 1998, 165–167)

> The joint essence of Heaven and Earth forms *yin* and *yang*, the accumulated essence of *yin* and *yang* forms the four seasons, the dispersed essence of the four seasons forms ten thousand things. The hot *qi* of the accumulating *yang* creates fire, the essence of firy *qi* is the sun. The cold *qi* of the accumulating *yin* creates water, the essence of the watery *qi* is the moon.

Further in this chapter of *Huainanzi* the author offers a causal explanation of the functioning of individual substances, informing the reader in great detail that the sun is the ruler of *yang* and the moon the predecessor of *yin*.

> 日者, 陽之主也 … 月者, 陰之宗也 … (*Huainanzi* 3, He 1998, 171–172)

> The sun is the master of *yang* … The moon is the essence of *yin* ….

The iconographic groundings of showing the sun with a bird and the moon with a toad, symbolizing the force of y*ang* and *yin*, are further supported by the literary tradition.

> 日者, 陽精之宗, 積而成鳥, 象烏而有三趾. (Wang 2001, 437)

> The sun is the fundamental essence of *yang*. By accumulating it turns into a bird, such as a crow it has three legs.[4]

> 月者陰精之宗, 積而成獸, 象蜍兔. (*Huainanzi* 7, He 1998, 509)

> The moon is the fundamental essence of *yin*. By accumulating it turns into an animal such as a toad or a hare.[5]

Furthermore, the sun is always depicted in the east or south, while the moon as its opposite is always closely associated with the western direction. In the correlative cosmology of *yin-yang wuxing*, the eastern orientation is always marked with *yang*,

[4] This quotation was recorded in *Ling xian* 靈憲 *(Spiritual Constitution)* by Zhang Heng 張衡, an astronomer of great fame during the Eastern Han Dynasty. See also Wang 2001, 437.

[5] This quotation was recorded in *Ling xian* by Zhang Heng. In the *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 the quotation appears as a note to the following quotation: "Inside the moon, there is a toad", which was recorded in the seventh chapter of the *Huainanzi* (*Huainanzi* 7, He 1998, 509).

and the western with *yin*. Even in accordance with the *Gaitian* theory, the sunrise is supposed to be a consequence of a too weak *yin* force in the east; this means that the *yang* force, strengthened in the southern parts, is dominant there. Inversely, in the west, the force *yang* loses its power and the sun gradually sets under the dominance of the *yin* force.

In grave paintings, besides the sun with a black bird and the moon with a green toad, two creatures with a human face and a snake-dragon's body are often depicted which as well symbolize the two forces (Fig. 8). They usually embrace the sun and the moon with their long tails or hold them above their heads; besides the sun and the moon they often also hold a carpenter's square and a pair of compasses (Fig. 9). These tools that enable the creation of straight and circular geometrical shapes allude to their creative role in the formation of the universe—the round heaven and the square earth. This is exactly the same role as mentioned in the mythological tradition: *Nüwa* appears as a goddess who contributes to the formation of the cosmical natural order and the birth of the human race; and *Fuxi* appears as a type of a legendary ancestor who arranges and leads the human world, instructing the numerous advanced social and philosophical solutions.

Fig. 9: *Fuxi* and *Nüwa*, paintings on a stone table in the *Wuliang* shrine 武梁祠. (After: Wu 1989, 246)

The comparative method of interpreting philosophical and mythical-literary sources clearly shows that it is correct to claim that *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* embody the cosmic forces of *yang* and *yin*. The comparison of the silken manuscript (*Chu*

boshu 楚帛) from Hunan (dated from the Warring States Period) with the individual cosmogonic excerpts from the *Huainanzi* reveals a gradual transformation of mythological images into more abstract ideas of natural philosophy. The text from the silken manuscript[6] unfolds a narrative in which *Fuxi* appears and marries *Nüwa* when the cosmos is the spacious and shapeless and when Heaven and Earth are yet to form. From their union four sons are born. The four sons comprehend the fundamental cosmologic principle of *yin* and *yang*, and thus cause the beginning of the cosmos—the separation of Heaven and Earth. In this kind of mythic description of the cosmos, *Fuxi* is born in the time of primordial chaos. With the union of *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* before the existence of the human race, the first couple of male and female principle appears, while the process of separation of the heaven and the earth commences. The quotation from the seventh chapter of the *Huainanzi* reveals a similar role of the first two deities who weave the heaven and design the earth:

> 古未有天地之時, 惟像無形 … 有二神混生, 經天營地 … 於是乃別為陰陽, 離為八極, 剛柔相成, 萬物乃形. (*Huainanzi* 7, He 1998, 503–504)
>
> In the ancient times when there were no heaven and earth, there were images but no shapes … Two deities are born and united, they weave the heaven and form the earth … Therefore they divide into *yin* and *yang* and separate into eight utmost poles, the hard and the soft mutual forms, and thus the ten thousand things take shape.

Gao You, a commentator from the Eastern Han Dynasty, marked the two deities as the deities of *yin* and *yang*.

> 二神, 陰陽之神也. (*Huainanzi* 7, He 1998, 503)
>
> Two deities are the deities of *yin* and *yang*.

The presence of two deities in the primordial stage of the cosmos, clearly named as *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* in the Chu silken manuscript, is also noticeable in other quotations (*Huainanzi* 1, He 1998, 4). In the process of abstraction, the concrete images of *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* thus became the two cosmic forces of *yang* and *yin*. In the seventh chapter of the *Huainanzi*, which presents the birth of the two deities and their formation of the heaven and the earth, the abandonment of the mythic

[6] The text is very deficient, as a number of characters are illegible. However, we are indebted to the numerous contemporary experts who confirm the above mentioned content. The explanations of this text in this article is based on Feng Shi (2001) and Lian Shaoming's (1991) transcription of the text.

domain and the approach towards a more philosophical abstract explanation of the universal creation is already perceivable. Two deities born out of the cosmic chaos divide into *yin* and *yang*, which mutually form as the hard and the soft, and thus ten thousand things take shape. The third chapter of the same cosmologic reading manifests the dualism of that kind even more clearly, while the abstraction and rationalization of the cosmic creation entirely reject the mythic view of the universe. The evolution of the universe from the primordial chaos comes into being by means of the division of binary opposites, inherent in the *Dao* itself. The concrete mythological figures are entirely eliminated from the process of the universe creation, while the creation of all ten thousand things is attributed to "the dispersed essence of the four seasons" which originates from the essence of *yin* and *yang* (*Huainanzi* 3, He 1998, 165–167). The four seasons are thus produced from *yin* and *yang*, just as the four sons are descendants of *Fuxi* and *Nüwa*. And these four sons of *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* are nothing else than the deities of the four seasons. In the absence of the sun and the moon they determine the four temporal points of the universe, and after the appearance of the sun and the moon they move the heaven cover to start circling.

5.2 *Xiwangmu* and *Dongwanggong*

Xiwangmu 西王母 and *Dongwanggong* 東王公, *the Mother of the Western Kingdom* and *the Father of the Eastern Kingdom*, represent the next couple embodying the forces *yin* and *yang*. Their images appear in mural paintings, on lacquered objects, and bronze mirrors, but mainly as relief images on stones or bricks that were discovered in a great number in Shandong province. A rich literary tradition reveals a multifunctional role of the mother with many attributes which develop in accordance with the changing values of social mythological concepts. An interpretation within the developing formula is needed, enveloping the mother into different symbolic covers in different periods. Among these, an especially important function is played by the symbolic role of the *yin* cover which does not appear before the Eastern Han Dynasty. It is precisely this role which needs the creation of the opposite sex which would embody the *yang*. Thus in the 2nd century there appears the image of the *Father of the Eastern Kingdom* who represents the partner of the *Mother of the Western Kingdom*. Although their symbolic role was first clarified by Wu Hung (Wu 1989, 108–141), further research reveals that *Xiwangmu* as the symbolical image of *yin* does not actually

become relevant before to the Eastern Han Dynasty, but its source had developed before this period.

Fig. 10: *Xiwangmu* and her kingdom, *Yanshi Xin cun* tomb, Henan province 偃師辛村壁画墓. (After: Huang 1996, 137)

Among numerous attributes, a hare and a toad are the most usual motifs depicted together with the goddess *Xiwangmu* (Fig. 10). The mythological tradition offers a many materials in their connection with the moon, as both were supposed to live in the moon itself. In the grave art, the moon is thus often depicted with a hare and a toad. The appearance of the toad within the moon can be related to the tale of *Yi* 羿, an archer's wife *Heng E* 姮娥. After stealing the gift of the *Xiwangmu* from her husband she runs away to the moon where she is transformed into a toad. The toad thus possesses the elixir of immortality, and simultaneously the natural cycle of the toad itself indicates the circulation of vital force. The hare is also an important element in the lunar cult of immortality, as he was supposed to be responsible for the production of the elixir of eternal life whose tree was located within the moon. The toad and the hare thus became important components of the mother's kingdom and the cult of immortality. Simultaneously, they both indicate *Xiwangmu*'s later cosmologic role which perfects itself in connection with the male representative of the opposite kingdom. Namely, the toad and hare with their permanent abode on the moon represent the lunar essence which is "the fundamental of the accumulating yin" (*Lü shi Chunqiu*, 92). A more concrete image is cited by Zhang Heng 張衡 who says: "The moon is the fundamental essence of yin. By accumulating it turns into an animal such as a toad or a hare" (*Huainanzi* 7, He 1998, 509). Thus, the moon, the toad and the hare are recognizable symbols of the cosmic force *yin*, and the fact that they appear in the

vicinity of *Xiwangmu* contains anticipations of her later role. Further, her abode in the western mountains is located in the domain of the prevailing *yin*, which is clearly indicated by calling the goddess the "*Mother of the Western Kingdom*".

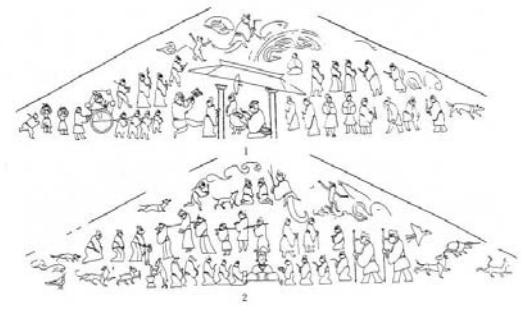

Fig. 11: Depiction on the western and eastern gable of the *Xiaotang shan* temple, Shandong province.
1–eastern gable with *Fuxi* and *Fengbo*, 2–western gable with *Nüwa* and *Xiwangmu.*
(After: Xin 2000, 155)

In the earliest depiction, i.e. in the *Bu Qianqiu* tomb 卜千秋壁畫墓, *Xiwangmu* has not yet assumed a role of *yin*, since the both forces are conspicuously manifested by *Fuxi* and *Nüwa*, the sun and the moon or other intertwining figures. However, the triangular endings of the western and eastern walls in the *Xiaotang shan* 孝堂山 temple in Shandong province (Fig. 11) already evidences the next step in the gradual assumption of a cosmic role (Wu 1989, 108–141).

The western gable shows *Nüwa* at the top, with *Xiwangmu* frontally depicted below her. So already in the 1st century AD *Xiwangmu* is depicted together with *Nüwa* embodying the universal force *yin*. This is complimented by the depiction on the opposite side of the wall on the eastern gable where *Fuxi* with a carpenter' square occupies the upper position, and below him is depicted a bigger image jumping in the air. Other depictions show the opposite partner of *Xiwangmu* as an image blowing into the roof (Xin 2000, 154). This image is identified as *Fengbo* 風伯 *(The Master of the Wind)*, who in the cosmic space represents a natural deity determined to control the wind (Xin 2000, 154; Wu 1989, 112–116). Wu Hung describes this image as the embodiment of *yang*, as it was precisely the connection between the east and the dragon that was supposed to explain his appearance and role in the eastern parts of the temples from the Eastern Han Dynasty (Wu 1989,

112–116). The symbolic polarity of the *Mother of the Western Kingdom* and the eastern *Master of the Wind*—as well as their wider role in the cosmic space—is not only indicated by their opposite position in the west and the east, but also by the clear depiction of *Fuxi* and *Nüwa.* However, this was far from an ideal depiction of the embodiment of the two forces, as the images apart from their opposite position have no common characteristics. At this time *Fengbo* represented only a transitional phase before the creation of the entire polar opposition, which ended in the middle of the second century. Thus it was beside the *Mother of the Western Kingdom* that the *Father of the Eastern Kingdom* first appeared, whereby the names of both deities (*Xiwangmu* 西王母: *xi*/west, *wang*/king, *mu*/mother, woman; *Dongwanggong* 東王公: *dong*/east, *wang*/king, *gong*/man) indicate the perfect polarity of both creatures and their symbolism of cosmic forces. This type of depiction soon became a popular motif which spread from the East to the central region of Chinese territory. The influence of their cosmic role reached the border regions of Chinese territory, and beyond to Inner Mongolia as well. The mural from the *Helingeer* 和林格爾 tomb from Inner Mongolia from the Eastern Han Dynasty represents on the eastern side of the front chamber the *Father of the Eastern Kingdom*, and on the western the *Mother of the Western Kingdom*.

In the Eastern Han Dynasty, *Xiwangmu* and *Dongwanggong* become a widely spread symbol of the essential intertwinement of the cosmic forces *yin* and *yang* from whose union the eternal rhythm of the universe is born.

6 Four Directions and Four Seasons

Certainly the four divine animals are the most common motif in Han grave art, typically termed in Chinese literature *si xiang* 四象 *(four images)*, *si ling* 四靈 *(four spirits)* or *si shen* 四神 *(four deities)*. These four mythological animals are the blue-green dragon, the white tiger, the red bird and the black tortoise.

Their role in the cosmologic scheme of the *yin-yang* and the five *xings* theories is clearly indicated in the third chapter of the *Huainanzi* (*Huainanzi* 3, He 1998, 183–188). The four symbolical images are represented as four of the five divine animals, each guarding its own palace and contributing to the creative circling of the five phases. With reference to cosmological meaning, the blue-green dragon

symbolizes the eastern palace, the culmination of spring and the beginning of the rise of *yang*. In the south, his role is assumed by the red bird that helps the southern deities at balancing and controlling the fiery phase, the culmination of summer activities and the *yang*. The white tiger continues this role on the western side, which is connected with gradual dying away, pointing to autumn activities and the beginning of the rise of *yin*. To the north, at the utmost point of the *yin* and at the culmination of the winter season, the northern deities get help and guardianship from the black tortoise. Their role as guardians or as a kind of regulators of the four directions is also indicated in the geographical work *Sanfu huangtu* 三輔黃圖 *(An Outline of the Three Regions around the Capital)*:

> 蒼龍, 白虎, 朱雀, 玄武, 天之四靈, 以正四方. (Wang 1995, 38)
>
> The blue green dragon, the white tiger, the red bird, and the black warrior[7] are four spirits of the heaven regulating the four directions.

Their connection with the four cosmic directions is clearly indicated by grave murals as well, as they usually assume the position described in literary sources. The dragon is thus usually depicted on the eastern side, the tiger on the western, the bird on the southern and the tortoise on the northern side (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12: White tiger on the western side, the *Binwang* 邠王 tomb.
(After: Greiff and Jin 2002, Fig. 23)

In their precise placement at a defined position in accordance with the whole architectural design and pictorial composition, their location is a relevant source of iconographic information and their symbolic roles. In this sense the soul of the deceased is equipped with an accurate orientation and placed into a cosmic space,

[7] The black tortoise is usually mentioned as *xuan wu* 玄武 *(the black warrior)* whose image is defined by literary and iconographic sources as a tortoise routinely encircled by a winding snake.

which facilitates its way into life after death and place it in an eternal place in the artificially constructed universe. The accurate arrangement of the four deities enables the cosmic balance—a harmonious intertwinement of both cosmic forces and their movement in the circle of the five *xings*, once again defined by divine symbols in the image of the four animals. The spatial orientation of the grave chambers is thus clearly defined with the help of the four animals who furthermore protect the tomb and the owner from evil spirits, bring luck and visually express a wish for harmonious movement with the cosmic space, and thereby a wish for an immortal form of materialization of their existence. The function of guarding the tomb and chasing away evil spirits is indicated by their locations, being often depicted above individual doors or at the door.

Furthermore, the four animals are further often depicted among the motifs of the entrance into the heavenly kingdom. They are a component part of their accompaniment, leading the soul to heavenly paradise. The leading role is corroborated by a description in a verse in the *Xishi* 惜誓 poem *(A Regretted Trust)* in the *Chuci*:

> 飛朱鳥使先驅兮, 駕太一之象輿. 蒼龍蚴虯於左驂兮, 白虎騁而為右騑.
> (*Chuci*, Zhao 1993, 313)

> The flying red bird in front of me is leading me, carrying the symbolic carriage of the deity *Taiyi*. The blue-green dragon as the left horse is windingly moving, the white tiger as the right horse is freely galloping.

They can also be noticed among stellar images which represent individual lodges or the whole system of 28 lodges. The system of 28 lodges was divided into four big stellar areas or four palaces (四宫 *sigong*), related to the four cardinal directions. Each palace had seven lodges which were further related to the four seasons and the four divine animals which symbolized individual palaces and directions. Thus the eastern palace with seven lodges, connected with spring, was represented by the blue-green dragon; the southern belonged to the red bird; the western to the white tiger and the northern palace was symbolized by the black tortoise. Such depictions can be seen in the *Xi'an Jiaotong daxue* tomb where two concentric circles are depicted and their centre is congruent to the centre of the round ceiling (Fig. 7). Inside the circles individual images of people and animals are represented, among which the images of the four divine animals are especially prominent.

The divine animals of the four directions not only symbolize the spatial concept, but also by symbolizing the four seasons indicate the temporally cyclic circle. These roles were already assigned to them in the *Huainanzi* which refers to them as four of the five animals which help the other deities to control the four seasons (*Huainanzi* 3, He 1998, 183–188). Besides this, with their four colours, four directions and four seasons they indicate the theory of the five *xings* whose cosmic idea of circulation is just as well skillfully captured in the iconographic design of the grave mural painting.

7 The Symbolic Circulation of the Five *Xings*

The most common manner of depiction of the five *xings* in the grave murals is the depiction of individual component parts of the five palaces into which the heaven was divided. Four palaces were arranged along the heavenly equator, while the fifth (central) palace spread around the North Pole, which in Chinese cosmology always had a special place due to the apparent rotation of the stars around the pole. In Sima Qian's historical work *Shiji*, the chapter *Tianguanshu* 天官書 *(Treatise on the Celestial Offices)* clearly represents the division of the heaven into five palaces (Sima 2000).

The *Luoyang Shaogou 61 hao* tomb has already been mentioned. Its ceiling between the sun and the moon represents only individual stars wrapped in the clouds. Xia Nai concluded that the stars represent individual constellations and lodges which were randomly chosen from the five heavenly palaces (Xia 1965). An even clearer image of the five *xings* is represented in the ceiling painting of the *Yintun* tomb near Luoyang. On the four walls are depicted which support the stellar image of the heaven, clearly indicated on the dome-like construction of the ceiling design (Fig. 13).

In the middle of the ceiling the sun and the moon are depicted, and around them on individual sides are represented the lodges and other constellations belonging to the five heavenly palaces. The thicker brown-green lines even more clearly divide the ceiling construction into the five palaces which thinner brown red lines further divide them into individual lodges and other constellations. The location of individual lodges and other constellations accords with the correct orientation, as we can find constellations on individual sides belonging to the corresponding directions. Particularly interesting is the location of the central

palace which is not depicted in the centre of the ceiling as we might expect, but appears rather in the northeastern part of the slanting and sloping ceiling construction. The middle part is occupied by the depiction of the sun and the moon, and thus they had to find a more suitable location, slightly moved to the northeastern part. The other four sides further depict lodges of individual palaces, among which on the eastern, western and northern side appear concrete images of animals guarding and supervising their local area.

Fig. 13: The central chamber of the *Yintun* tomb in the vicinity of Luoyang. (After: *Luoyangshi di er wenwu gongzuodui* 2005, 133, Figure (*tuban*) 7. 2)

Besides the lunar lodges of individual heavenly palaces, the iconographic composition often reveals individual deities, their assistants, planetary spirits and divine animals guarding individual palaces. Such an iconographic composition can be seen in the rear chamber of the *Jinguyuan Xinmang* 金谷園新莽壁畫墓 tomb in Luoyang. On the ceiling and on the upper parts of the eastern, western and northern walls are depicted the divine assistants and animal guardians of all the five heavenly palaces (He 2002, 50; Luoyang bowuguan 1985).

The cosmologic chapters of the *Huainanzi* and other ancient literary sources clearly represent and name individual divine images of these palaces, and incorporate them into a perfected whole of the correlative cosmology of the five *xings*. In the third chapter of the *Huainanzi* we can read that the “wooden” east is controlled by *Tai Hao* 太皞 with his assistant *Gou Mang* 句芒 and the blue-green dragon, all controlling the spring growth. The south in the sign of fire is controlled by *Yandi* 炎帝, his assistant *Zhu Ming* 朱明 and the red bird, all governing the summer merriness. The metal west is governed by the deity of the autumn *Shao Hao* 少昊, his assistant *Ru Shou* 蓐收 and the white tiger, and the northern water

area is controlled by the deity *Zhuan Xu* 顓頊, his assistant *Xuan Ming* 玄冥 and the black warrior who carefully watch over the winter sleep. The central part belongs to the deity *Huangdi* 黃帝, his assistant *Hou Tu* 后土 and the yellow dragon. They are in charge of the correct circling of the four seasons and control all the four directions (*Huainanzi* 3, He 1998, 183–188).

The whole system of depiction composed of 16 images in the *Jinguyuan Xinmang* tomb clearly, thus perfectly and systematically, reflects the *yin-yang wuxing* theory. The cosmical forces *yin* and *yang* are indicated by the sun, the moon, a bird, and a toad, along with correct placement on the southern and northern side of the tomb, while the circulation of the five *xings* is represented by the five assistants of the five palaces (*Hou Tu*, *Gou Mang*, *Zhu Rong*, *Ru Shou*, *Xuan Ming*) and the five divine animals (yellow dragon, blue-green dragon, red bird, white tiger and black tortoise) that are immediately connected with the image of leading the soul into the heaven.

8 Conclusion

The use of diverse methodological theories and archaeological materials offers answers to the questions of how and to what degree the cosmologic perception manifested itself in grave architecture and its art. The cosmologic perception was manifested not only in individual parts of the tombs, but with the aid of individual constructs the entire image of the universe was presented, and thus the grave structure is transformed into a microcosmic image of the whole universe. The universe is not only captured in the construction design of a round ceiling rising above square chambers, creating a framework of the artificial cosmic place, is further embodied in the form of symbolic codes, found in the iconographic scheme of the murals. The analysis of grave paintings has shown that the basic component of he Han grave painting concept is represented by the correlative cosmology of *yin-yang wuxing.*

The round ceiling and the square base formed the framework of the universe. The sun, the moon and the stars created artificial celestial bodies. Individual motifs of the intertwinement of two creatures of usually opposite sex, *Fuxi* and *Nüwa*, the *Mother of the Western* and the *Father of the Eastern Kingdom* and the sun and the moon separately symbolized the *yin* and *yang* principle. The four divine animals were used to depict the four seasons and directions. With individual

representatives of the five heavenly palaces, and thus with the materialization of the theory of the five *xings*, a gradual creation of the whole cosmic image concluded with a perfect imitation of the outer universe.

The purpose of such iconographic design of the cosmic space was the representation of the source and the moving force of the birth of life, the representation of harmonious order and unobstructed succession of movement of cosmic principles. It was the representation of the eternal space where the soul of the deceased could found its eternal rest. It appears that only in such harmonious balance where two complementary forces with a constant interlacement create the end and the beginning of the universe, can both parts of the dual structure of the soul's concept enter the eternal cycle of changes. The representation of the heavenly world on the round ceiling offers home to the *hun* 魂 part of the soul which after death flies into the Heaven, and the representation of the earthly world on square walls indicates the *po* 魄 part of the soul which after death returns into the embrace of the Earth's soil. Both souls were thus reunited into a whole, and their union and intertwinement in the sense of *yin* and *yang* characteristically alludes to the fulfilment of the human desire for both souls to reunite. A human desire to be reborn and reach immortality in the framework of the eternal changes of the cosmic circle was attained, and the craftsman and artist's role in building the grave was thereby fulfilled.

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Artistic Dimensions of Chinese Painting

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Chinese Fine Art of the 3rd Century: On the Initial Stage of Development of Painting

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Abstract

The paper summarizes the extant written data on Chinese painting on silk in the initial century of the Period of Disunion (Six Dynasties, Liu chao, III–VI A.D.), known as the Sanguo (220–280) and the Western Jin (265–317) epochs. While it is scattered among diverse sources, it is mainly in the *Lidai minghua ji* treatise of Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 810–ca. 990). An analysis of accounts of individual masters and their creative activities attempts to reconstruct the probable artistic and essential features of pieces of art lost afterwards, offering a novel explanation of the initial stage of the formative process of an important genre of composition in Chinese painting and culture.

Keywords: Chinese silk painting, period of Disunion, pictorial genres, figure painting, birds and flowers.

Izvleček

Pričujoči članek povzema obstoječe pisno gradivo o kitajskem slikarstvu na svili v začetnem stoletju obdobja razkola (Šest dinastij, Liu chao, III–VI), znanem kot Obdobje treh držav (220–280) in Zahodni Jin (265–317). Ti se nahajajo v različnih virih, večinoma pa so podani v razpravi Zhang Yanyuana (ca. 810–ca. 990) *Lidai minghua ji*. Z analizo poročil o posameznih mojstrih in njihovih kreativnih aktivnostih poskuša rekonstruirati umetniške in osnovne poteze izgubljenih umetniških del in ponuja nova razlago začetne faze oblikovnega procesa pomembnega kompozicijskega žanra v kitajskem slikarstvu in kulturi.

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Ključne besede: kitajsko slikarstvo na svili, obdobje razkola, slikovni žanr, figuralno slikarstvo, ptice in cvetje

Within the Chinese traditional concept of origins of native art the painting on silk, the treatise of Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (ca. 810–ca. 990), the *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 *(Record of Famous Paingtings of Successive Dynasties* most fully reflects by and states the existence of it already for the time of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.). Different pictorial composition forms are mentioned, headed by portraitures (see Lancman 1966, 43–45). There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the birth of professional painters, originally mere artisans, was connected with the official workshop called shangfang 尚方 (Lim 1990, I, 105; Wan 1989, 232). Yet, the initial formative stage of Chinese painting on silk as a distinct artistic stratum is still commonly correlated with the Period of Disunion (Six Dynasties, Liu chao 六朝, III–VI A.D.). Above the famous Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (ca. 346–ca. 407), whose few works are known only in later replicas, about 150 names of artists are listed for these centuries (Fu 1962, 3).

1 The Artists of the Wei Kingdom

Xu Miao 徐邈 (Xu Jingshan 徐景山, 172–249), a citizen of the Wei Kingdom (Weiguo 魏國 220–264/265) of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo 三國, 220–280) epoch, is traditionally recognized as the first great painter of the Period of Disunion. As narrated in his official biography (Chen 1982, III, 27, 739–741; see also Crespigny 2007, 908), he was a native of Ji city 薊 (Jizhou 薊州) (southwest of contemporary Beijing), and during the Taihe 太和 era (227–233) held a position of *cishi* 刺史 (Regional Inspector)[1] of Liangzhou 凉州 (a part of modern Gansu province). In the first year of the Zhengshi 正始 era (239/240–249), i.e. in 239, he was appointed to the central governmental post of secretary/*shizhong* 侍中 (a Palace Attendant), at the head of *Da sinong* 大司農 (the National Treasury Chamberlain). So, given these biographical facts and knowing Xu Miao “Mu-hou” 穆侯, “Marquise Mu”, his posthumous name, it is clear that he belonged to Wei’s

[1] Here and further translations of original terms are used, proposed by: Hucker 1985.

nobility, being involved in military and state civil activities, and representing the amateur painting tradition.

Zhang Yanyuan praises him as a unique master of goldfish painting (Zhang 1964, 89; on Xu Miao's works in brief see also: Shen and Shao 2002, 39). The next legend is cited in his treatise, taken from the *xiaoshuo* 小说 ("Short Stories") collection *Xu Qi Xieji* 續齊諧記 *(Continuations of Records of Qi Xie)* by Wu Jun 吴均 (469–520). Emperor Mingdi 明帝 (Cao Rui 曹睿, ruled 227–239) is reported there to have once been enjoying a walk along the River Luo (Luoshui 洛水, near modern Luoyang city, Henan province) when he saw white otters. He became fond of these pretty creatures, but despite all attempts failed to catch any of them. Then Xu Miao drew a number of goldfish on a sheet of paper and placed it near the shore. When otters noticed the picture they hurried to it, taking the painted fish for living beings. It does not matter whether this story was based on a real historical episode, or it isa mere fiction. This legend, varied in some other texts (Zhang 1964, 89) exemplifies very well the way Xu Miao was honored by his contemporaries and subsequent generations, and the way his skill was perceived. It also helps justify the legitimacy of assuming that Xu Miao's "sheet with goldfish" was typologically close to "bird-and-flower" (*huaniao hua* 花鳥畫) compositions. This genre, from the common point of view (see Laing 1992)[2], evolved in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), went through its formative stage during the Five Dynasties (*Wudai* 五代, 907–960), due mainly to the creative activities of Huang Quan 黄荃 (ca. 900?–965) and Xu Xi 徐熙 (10th century), and flourished during the Northern Song period (960–1127). Gradually it was distinguished by a great number of thematic groups (devoted to different plants, birds, insects, etc.), among them especially fish. The latter kind is defined at *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜 *(Catalogue of Paintings [in Governmental Collection] of Xuanhe [Era])*, issued at 1004, and reached its peak in the next few centuries (Siren 1956, II, 152). The legendary story offers corroboration to the idea that the "fish thematic group" as well as the *huaniao* genre as a whole already existed at the beginning of the 3rd century A.D.

Another figure among the Wei artists is Cao Mao 曹髦 (Cao Yanshi 曹彦士, 241–?), a member of this kingdom's ruling family. He was enthroned by the powerful warlord clan of Sima 司馬, acting as its puppet-ruler for ten years

[2] There are also a number of works on the item in Russian, e. g.: Kravtsova 2004, 595–598; Vinogradova 2009.

(Shaodi 少帝, r. 254–264) and then murdered (Chen 1982, I, 4, 131–147). Nevertheless, despite his miserable bad fortune, Cao Mao can be regarded as the first (or one of the first) Chinese august painters, the beginner of the monarchical tradition of creative activity, best known because of the painting and calligraphy of Huizong 徽宗 emperor (r. 1101–1125) of the Northern Song. From this point of view, special attention must be paid to the fact that Zhang Yanyuan traces Cao Mao's passion for fine art from his childhood and his rapid progress in the field (Zhang 1964, 88). He clearly states that "he was the most skillful artist of the Wei epoch kingdom" (*du gao Wei dai* 獨高魏代) (Zhang 1964, 88). Some other characteristics of Cao Mao's manner of painting can be found in the *Zhenguan gongsi huashi* 真觀公私畫史 *(Records on Paintings from Official and Private [Collections] of the Zhenguan [627–650] Era)* of Pei Xiaoyuan 裴孝源, a courtier of the Tang Dynasty in the second half of the 7th century (Zan 1984, 1379; see also: Malyavin 2004, 288). This narrative includes the most complete list of Cao Mao's works (Huang 1994, 42–43; Shen and Shao 2002, 39). They are: *Zu er shu tu* 祖二疏圖 *(Two Ancestors)*, *Dao Zhe tu* 盜着图 *(Dao Zhe)*, *Huanghe liushi tu* 黃河流勢圖 *(Storm at Yellow River)*, *Xinfeng fangji quan tu* 新丰放雞犬圖 (*Releasing Cock and Dog for New Abundance*). One more picture under the title *Qianlou fufu xiang* 黔婁夫婦像 *(Portrait of Poor Intelligent Pair)* is named in *Lidai minghua ji* (Zhang 1964, 88). To be sure, due to the character *xiang* 像 in its title this picture belongs to the genre of portrait painting. As for the *Dao Zhe tu* it could have depicted Dao Zhe, the legendary bandit of the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–475 B.C.) epoch, spoken about in chapter 29 (*Dao Zhe*) of *Zhuangzi (Master Zhuang)* (Guo 1988, 426–429). This picture also could have depicted generalized character of a robber: the lexical formula *daozhe*, derived from the personal name Dao Zhe, stays in the Chinese language for "a robber" (Oshanin 1983, 425). In the first case it could have been either a portrait of Dao Zhe, or just a scene with him. In the second case a life-descriptive drawing may be employing a robber's image in order to create a composition about an outrage theme. The picture *Two Ancestors* also could have represented either Cao Mao's ancestors, suggesting its relation to religious or even secular portraiture; or it could be a scene from their life, a composition against the background of palace-dealings or even every-day items. But all of these probable artistic variants correspond to this or that thematic group of the Chinese figure painting, included in the general *renwu hua* 人物畫 ("figure painting") genre. The title of the picture *Xinfeng fangji*

quan tu is based on the expression, which means “an autumn time and a harvest”. Hence, it could have been a multi-figured composition that incorporated harvesting peasants. So, it seems to be more than possible that Cao Mao’s pieces reflected the thematic variety of figure painting of the time, or even gave birth to separate groups, who engaged further on in the *renwu* genre.

The last one of the pictures named above was devoted to Huanhe. It is highly probable that it was a piece of the landscape painting, *shanshui hua* 山水畫 (“painting of mountains and waters’’), inasmuch as it is rather rare for Chinese art to represent a mariner scene, since more generally the focus is laid on a water phenomenon.

2 The Painting on Silk in the Wu Kingdom: the Works of Cao Buxing

The Wu Kingdom (Wuguo 吳國, 222–280) appeared after the Wei Kingdom—another important center of creative activities in the Sanguo epoch. Its leader is said to have been Cao Buxing 曹不興 (or Cao Fuxing 曹弗興), who was honoured later along with Gu Kaizhi, Lu Tanwei 陸探微 and Zhang Sengyao 张僧繇 as one of the four great masters of the Six Dynasties (Zhang 1964, 90). Almost nothing is known about his life and career, with the exception of his birthplace (a native of Wuxing 吳興 city, presently Huzhou 湖州 city, Zhejiang province), and the fact that he was close to Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252), the founder and the first ruler of the Wu state (Dadi 大帝 emperor, r. 222–252). It is possible that he held a position of a court painter, contributing to his status as a professional artist (Crespigny 2007, 35). Starting with the authority of Zhang Yanyuan’s account, that “he painted tigers, and horses very skillfully and was especially good at painting dragons” (Zhang 1964, 89), the traditional writings and eventually the modern scholarship (see Shen and Shao 2002, 39; Wan 1989, 233) gave Cao Buxing a stable place in the cohort of the epoch’s outstanding Chinese masters of animal and especially dragon painting. More than ten works are attributed to him (Huang 1994, 43), among them: *Longtou yang* 龍頭楊 *(A Sketch of Dragon Head)*, sometimes said to be a set of four separate scrolls (or, perhaps four definite artistic pieces under the same title); *Long hu tu* 龍虎圖 *(Dragon and Tiger*) and *Qingxi ce zuo chilong pan chilong tu* 青溪册坐赤龍盘赤龍圖 *([Two] Vermillion Dragons*

in Green Stream, [One]—Sitting on [Waves], [One]—Coiling), which is also said to have consisted of either two scrolls or two definite pictures entitled *Qing xi long* 青溪龍 *(Dragon [in] Green Stream)* and *Chi pan long* 赤盤龍 *(A Vermillion Coiled Dragon)* (Zhang 1964, 90). The picture with a vermillion dragon was created (according to a legend) under the special order of Sun Quan after a boat journey when he personally witnessed a creature of this kind appearing on the waves (Zhang 1964, 90). Cao's picture with a dragon is mentioned in several writings, serving as good evidence of his experiments in the area and his mastership. One of them is a passage from the *Guhua pinlu* 古畫品錄 *(Classified Record of Ancient Painters)* of Xie He 謝赫 (active ca. 500–535?):

> Scarcely any of Pu-xing's works are still preserved. There is only a single dragon in the Secret Pavilion [of the imperial collection] and that is all. Considering its notable character, how can one say that his fame was built upon nothing?" (Bush and Hsio-Yen 1985, 29).

This passage is quoted in the first chapter of the *Tuhua jian wen zhi* 圖畫見聞志 *(Overview of Paintings)* of Guo Ruoxu 郭若虛, the well-known Northern Song connoisseur in the history of painting[3]. In my opinion, all these facts strongly contradict the traditional point of view claiming that the "dragon painting" as a definite phenomenon in the Chinese fine arts was only at a formative stage during the Southern Song, and under the influence of the world concepts and aesthetic ideas of Zen (Chan) Buddhist and Daoists (Siren 1956, II, 148; Sullivan 1961, 153). To the contrary, there is a large amount of evidence to suggest that the birth of this phenomenon, like the "birds-and-flowers" genre, falls exactly within the frame of Sanguo painting on silk and was largely due to the creative activities of a dominant personality, namely Cao Buxing.

The next portion of his works was devoted, drawing from their titles, to numerous animal creatures, mainly horses (Huang 1994, 43). These are: *Yizi man shou yang* 夷子蠻獸樣 *(Sketches of Beasts of Eastern and Southern Barbarians)*, or two separate scrolls *Ma yi zi* 馬夷子 (*Horses [and] Eastern Barbarians*) and *Man shou yang* 蠻獸樣 *(Sketches of Beasts of Southern Barbarians)*, and *Nan hai jian mu jin shi zhong ma tu* 南海堅牧進十种馬圖 *(Herd Horses on [Fields with] Ten Plants near South Sea)*, or *Nan hai lin mu* 南海臨牧 *(Herd [Horses] Close to Southern Sea)*. It is very hard to decipher the referent of "beasts of barbarians" or

[3] The Russian translation of the treatise was used: Samosyuk 1978, 31.

the “Southern Sea” (the real, metaphoric or mythical geographical site). Yet, let us pay attention to the correlation of the titles of the works on horses with the *Mu fang tu* 牧放圖 *(Herd Horses)*, or *Bai ma tu* 百馬圖 *(Hundred Horses)* on scrolls, like the *Mu fang tu* by Wei Yan 偉偃 of the Tang. It is known from a copy probably made by Li Gonglin 李公麟 (Li Longmian 李龍眠, 1049–1106), the famous amateur painter of the Northern Song. It presents an impressive example of a panoramic scene (4.28 meters in length), composed of 1228 figures of horses playing with each other, rolling on the grass, bathing in a river, etc., and 140 figures of grooms and officials (Jin 1984; see also in Russian: Kravtsova 2010). It appears that this kind of panoramic animal picture could not have originated during the Tang period, but rather on the eve of the Liu Chao art history.

Another legend on Cao Buxing is narrated by Zhang Yanyuan (1964, 89), telling us about his painting a screen under the direct order of Sun Quan. He accidently splashed some ink on the screen surface, so it was covered with tiny black spots. Going on with his work, the master painted these spots into flies, doing it in such a realistic and vivid manner that his lord took the drawn flies for living ones and even tried to flap them away. This legend provides us with the significant details on Cao Buxing’s artistic skill and ability to paint not only large-size fantastic and natural beings, showing that the range of subjects of his painting included such extremely small creatures as flies.

Cao Buxing’s creative activity extended to the painting of Buddhist items. Guo Ruoxu (Samosyuk 1978, 31) connects this work of Cao Buxing with Kang Senghui 康僧會, a Buddhist monk of Sogdian parentage who is said to have been the first leader of Buddhism in southeastern China, erecting the first Buddhist temple (Jianchu si 建初寺) in Jianye 建業, the capital of the Wu kingdom (Zürcher 1959, I, 36). According to *Tuhua jian wen zhi*, Cao Buxing was so greatly impressed by the Western (Central Asian or even Indian) pieces of Buddhist art brought by Kang Senghui and he started to work in that style. He thus became the founder of both the Chinese painting of Buddhist items and of the Buddhist wall-painting art (*bihua* 壁畫) in China (Wan 1989, 43).

3 Leading Masters and Major Tendencies of the Western Jin Painting

Three leading masters are named for the Western Jin (西晉) epoch: Xun Xu 荀勖 (Xun Gongzeng 荀公曾, 107–289), Zhang Mo 张墨 and Wei Xie 衛協. The first one according to Xie He was the most gifted person in the figure painting of the time (Bush and Hsio-Yen 1985, 30; Lancman 1966, 53). He was a member of a high-ranking clan that came into service in the Wei Kingdom, and during the Western Jin epoch attained a position of *mishu jian* 秘書監 (the Supervisor of the Palace Library) and *guanglu dafu* 光禄大夫 (the Grand Master of the Palace) and a title of honor (Fang 1987, IV, 39, 1152–1158). As for Zhang Mo and Wei Xie, there is a paucity of personal data about them. What we do know is that all three of them seem to be amateur painters.

The most notable feature of their creative work was the growing tendency to make illustrations of earlier books, with a predominant focus on female personages. Four works are ascribed to Xun Xu and Wei Xie under similar titles: *Da lienü tu* 大列女圖 *(Great Women)* and *Xiao lienü tu* 小列女圖 *(Minor Women)* for the former (Zhang 1964, 94, see also: Shen and Shao 2002, 39) and *Lienü tu* 列女圖 *(Women)* and *Xiao lienü tu* for the latter (Zhang 1964, 95, see also: Shen and Shao 2002, 39–40). All of these pictures were most likely illustrations of the notorious account *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 *(Biographies of Exemplary Women)* of Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 B.C.). It is really puzzling trying to determine how to understand the contrasting lexical formulas *da nü* and *xiao nü*, normally explained as standing for a senior wife or an adult woman (a mother) as opposed to an unmarried lass or daughter (Luo 1988, 1326, 1589). Keeping in mind the *Lienü zhuan* structure (seven thematic parts: “Muyi” 母儀, “Model Mothers”, “Xian ming” 賢明, “Wise and enlightened”, etc.), there are at least two interpretative versions. First, *Da lienü tu* might be the portraits of “notorious mothers”, i.e. those women whose biographies are narrated in the first part of the treatise; and *Xiao lienu tu* consists of the portraits of the personages of the last five chapters. Second, *Da lienü tu* were the portraits of “Virtuous women” (mothers, wives, widows), and *Xiao lienü tu* were the portraits of lasses (respectful daughters, chaste girls). Despite the inherent ambiguity in the meaning of these formulas, there are no strong reasons to doubt that the works of Xiu Xu and Wei Xie provided a solid foundation for the future *nüshi huam* 女仕畵 (“painting of beauties”), a thematic

group within the *renwu* genre. This notion is supported by one more of Zhang Mo's work, entitled *Daolian tu* 搗練圖 *(Silk Processing)*, which is mentioned at *Zhenguan gongsi huashi* (Shen and Shao 2002, 40). The same title (as is well known) has a picture of the Tang great master Zhang Xuan 張萱. There appears to be no reason not to assume that the latter was a variation of the work by Zhang Mo.

Wei Xie is also said to have created two pictures on the topic of the *Shijing* songs (Zhang 1964, 95), both from the *Guofeng* part—*Maoshi Beifeng tu* 毛詩北風圖, on *Beifeng (North Wind)* song (Zhu 1989, 2, 18; tr. into English: Legge 1931, 44); and *Maoshi Shuli tu* 毛詩黍離圖, on *Shuli (A Pastoral Song of the Grasslands)* song (Zhu 1989, 2, 29; Legge 1931, 74). Based on the poetic contents, it is legitimate to suggest that both of these pictures were also figurative compositions with female personages. It is even more important that we are dealing here with the first attempt at illustrating *Shijing* and poetry as such. Meanwhile, the practice of these kinds of illustrative paintings on poetry was established in Chinese art only at the end of the Northern Song, while the most complete series of illustrations on the *Shijing* were only done even later, during the Southern Song by Ma Hezhi 馬和之 (Shen and Shao Luoyang 2002, 77; Siren 1956, II, 110–111).

The most intriguing is the title of the next of Xun Xu's works, *Soushen ji tu* 搜神記圖, which can be understood as *Illustration to "In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record"*. But it could not have been accomplished after the famous *Soushen ji* 搜神記 *xiaoshuo* collection attributed to Gan Bao 干寶 (ca. 285–ca. 360), for it was compiled not earlier than the middle of the 4th century (see Kao 1985, 19; in Russian: Menshikov 1994, 11–15). Most probably there was then in existence another collection under the same title, or Xun Xu was inspired by some other writings belonging to the *guishen zhiguai* 鬼神志怪 ("stories on the super natural and fantastic") fiction group. In all cases this picture, dealing with spirits and ghosts, stands very close to the *guishen* 鬼神 ("ghosts and spirits") thematic group, first defined in the beginning of the Northern Song by the *Song chao minghua ping* 宋朝名畫評 *(Review of Painted Masterpieces of Song Dynasty)* of Liu Daochun 劉道醇 (Lachman 1989, 91–92).

My analytical outline of the written data on the leading masters of the Sanguo and the Western Jin epochs and their works affords an opportunity to draw a set of basic conclusions. First, contrary to the common point of view there is sufficient

factual data to argue that the painting of the Period of Disunion was not adequately well developed for pictorial genre differentiation, and that this process had started already during the 3rd century A.D. Second, the features of almost all major genres and groups the classical Chinese art are traced to be among the lost works, including different thematic groups of figure (*renwu*) and "birds-and-flowers" (*huaniao*) paintings. It was also the time of birth of the Buddhist painting in both silk and monumental (*bihua*) variants. Third, the firm tendency to create illustrations of ancient texts and compositions with female personages originated during the Western Jin epoch. Finally, the dominant positions in the painting circle were hold by amateur masters, normally belonging to the nobility, and among these even the most distinguished families.

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Qi Baishi and the *Wenren* Tradition

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Abstract

One of the best known painters of the 20th century, Qi Baishi came from a poor family and owed his education to scholars who had recognized his talent and determination. This article tries to answer the question of how much of the literati *(wenren)* tradition can be traced in Qi Baishi's works. Although they only form a small portion of his oeuvre, he made paintings which correspond to the literati topics; whether they also comply with the literati aesthetics is more ambiguous, however. Six paintings from the collection of the National Gallery in Prague were selected and analyzed in search of the answer.

Keywords: Qi Baishi, 20th century Chinese painting, *wenren* painting, Chen Shizeng

Izvleček:

Eden izmed najbolj znanih slikarjev 20. stoletja, Qi Baishi, izhaja iz revne družine in svojo izobrazbo dolguje učenjakom, ki so prepoznali njegov talent in odločnost. Pričujoč članek poskuša odgovoriti na vprašanje, koliko literarne *(wenren)* tradicije lahko zasledimo v Qi Baishijevih delih. Čeprav predstavljajo le majhen del njegovega opusa, je ustvaril slike, ki odgovarjajo literarni tematiki. Ali so tovrstna dela tudi v skladu z literarno estetiko, pa je nekoliko bolj vprašljivo. V iskanju odgovora je bilo izbranih in analiziranih šest del iz kolekcije Nacionalne galerije v Pragi.

Ključne besede: Qi Baishi, kitajsko slikarstvo 20. stoletja, slikarstvo *wenren*, Chen Shizeng

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1 Introduction

Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864–1957), one of the few Chinese painters who accomplished a transformation of the traditional painting (*guohua* 國畫), undoubtedly is one of the best known and the most popular ones. He also enjoyed the highest official recognition after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, despite the traditional painting's decline in favor.

Qi Baishi became well known and popular in the distant Czech Republic thanks to a large collection of his paintings in the National Gallery in Prague. The core of this collection was amassed by Vojtěch Chytil (1896–1936),[1] a Czech painter who lived in Beijing from 1921 to 1926 and joined its art scene, organizing exhibitions and teaching oil painting at the Beijing Arts Academy.[2] Chytil was an ardent collector of Chinese and Tibetan art, and proved a pioneer by concentrating on the contemporary painting in *xieyi* (寫意) mode: "conveying ideas in free-hand brushwork". Among the leading painters he met, befriended and bought paintings from while in Beijing, Qi Baishi was a prominent figure. Back in Czechoslovakia Chytil staged exhibitions of contemporary Chinese painting in 1928, 1930, and 1931, and these had a positive impact on the public. After 1949, when China hosted many Czechoslovakian experts and students, not a few of them—notably Josef Hejzlar[3]—made use of their awareness of the modern Chinese art and continued collecting. Although many Qi Baishi's paintings acquired by Czechs in China in the fifties have remained in private collections, a large portion was acquired by the Asian Art Department of the National Gallery, Prague.[4] There are approximately 150 pieces, including the significant Chytil collection which was not affected by the master's final over-production and occasional shallowness. This makes it one of the biggest collections of Qi Baishi's works outside China, not only in terms of size, but also quality. Finally, some of the paintings from this collection prompted this article.

[1] Very little is known about Chytil's life. Recently, his hitherto unknown correspondence was presented by Čapková 2010; see also Pejčochová 2008, 24–29.
[2] *Beijing meishu xuexiao* 北京美術學校, the first national (state) art school in China, was founded in 1918 (Kao 1972, 335).
[3] He is the author of the widely circulated *Chinese Watercolours*, 1978, also published in German, and French.
[4] For more on the holdings in this collection, see Borota 1994.

2 The Years of Learning

Qi Baishi grew up as the first-born child in a poor peasant family in Hunan.[5] Due to these difficult living conditions, he had to withdraw from school after mere two years of attendance and help his father in the fields. Drawing had attracted him since childhood. He was of course self-taught, first learning from "New Year" prints and later from a volume of the *Mustard Seed Garden* painting manual. He grew up too weak to labor in the fields, and so learned carpentry instead. As an apprentice, he switched to decorative wood-carving. He became a carpenter selling paintings on the side. When he approached the age of thirty, his talent attracted the attention of Hu Qinyuan 胡沁園 (b. 1914), a wealthy sponsor who enabled him to study classical poetry and painting. In the following five years, he not only acquired knowledge, but also befriended scholars who frequented his teacher's house. He further learned seal-engraving and epigraphy. Thereafter, Qi Baishi made his living as a professional artist, producing portraits and paintings on auspicious topics. In 1902, he was invited to the city of Xi'an as a private tutor of painting. In the following years, he travelled extensively in China and saw some of her breathtaking mountain scenery. On occasion, he viewed private art collections, notably Guo Baosun's 郭葆蓀 collection in Qinzhou 欽州, Guangxi. There he saw some paintings by Zhu Da 朱耷 (1625–1705) and Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) which made a rather strong impression on him (Li 1977, 11). Rejecting his former style, with perseverance he elaborated on a particular new style in *xieyi* mode.

3 Changing the Mode

In 1917, he settled in Beijing, a recognized seal-carver but a controversial painter. Qi Baishi owed a great deal to the encouragement he received from Chen Shizeng 陳師曾/Hengke 衡恪 (1876–1923), a painter and scholar who influenced his art far more than anybody else. A native of Xiushui 修水, Jiangxi, Chen studied natural sciences (*bowuke* 博物科) in Japan and then taught at various institutions in southern China. The post at the ministry of education brought him to Beijing, where he stayed on as a professor at the Art Academy. Purely by chance, he had seen Qi Baishi's seals in a shop at Liulichang 琉璃廠, and upon paying him a visit Chen learned that they shared the same progressive views on art. Thus, their

[5] The biographical information is based on *Baishi laoren* 1987 [1962].

profound relationship began. According to Qi Baishi, Chen Shizeng was the only one to appreciate his works at the time.[6] Furthermore, he encouraged Baishi to go ahead and "change his mode" (*bian fa* 變法): the sharp combination of red blossoms and black ink leaves in Qi Baishi's flower paintings from 1920 had then developed.

Furthermore, Chen Shizeng incorporated his friend's flower paintings and landscape scenes into the Joint Exhibition of Chinese and Japanese Paintings that was held in Japan in 1922. The paintings in *da xieyi* style by both painters attracted considerable attention; Qi Baishi's exhibits were all sold (Zhu 2003, 19, 22). Qi Baishi himself considered the impact of the successful exhibition in Japan the starting point for his gradual recognition at home (*Baishi laoren* 1987, 78). Finally, in 1927, he was invited to teach at the Beijing Arts Academy.[7]

Yet the established art circles of rather conservative Beijing, which went on producing landscapes of the orthodox style,[8] remained reserved. They could hardly accept the radical, free approaches to flower, landscape and figure painting presented by Chen Shizeng and the painters of his circle. Furthermore, Qi Baishi could be easily attacked because of his humble origins and spotty education (Li 1977, 47), and all he could do was stay away. "A hundred years from now," he commented, "a fair judgment will be made as to who is a better painter, who knows more about poetry, and who is the loftier one" (*Baishi laoren* 1987, 160). At the other extreme, there were the intellectuals who denigrated traditional styles of painting, considering Western realism to be the true modern solution in arts. So it was that even though Qi Baishi's work was eventually to mean so much in modernizing and reforming twentieth century Chinese culture, he did not mix with

[6] "At that time, I followed the secluded path of Bada 八大, and people in Beijing did not like me; there simply was not a single person who would have understood my paintings, except Chen Shizeng." (Zhu 2003, 19).

[7] The invitation came from the new president of the Academy, Lin Fengmian 林風眠 (1900–1991). See, for example, Zhang Huanmei (1992, 56). There is some controversy about this matter in literature. Oftentimes, Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 (1895–1953) alone is credited with appointing Qi Baishi, for example in Xu Beihong's biography by his second wife Liao Jingwen 廖靜文 (Liao 1989, 106–109). Xu Beihong took charge of the institution in November 1928. It became in the meantime a college of Beijing University, and Qi Baishi's position was elevated to a university professor (Zhang 1992, 57). That is probably why Qi Baishi feels indebted to Xu Beihong and in his memoirs remembers him rather than Lin Fengmian. Both Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong were specializing in Western style oil painting at that time.

[8] The Orthodox school (*zhengpai* 正派) asserted landscape painting in the manner of the seventeenth century "four Wangs". They in turn imitated Yuan 元 Dynasty (1278–1368) literati or *wenren* 文人 landscape painting.

the leading personages of progressive thought and literature who then lived in Beijing.

Photo 1: Qi Baishi in his studio with the housekeeper, Mr. Liu Jintao who mounted his paintings and Dr. Zdeněk Hrdlička, Beijing 1952. Photo by J. Potměšil. The photograph was kindly provided by Mrs. Hrdličková.

Qi Baishi is often categorized with other painters who reinvigorated the traditional vein of modern Chinese painting. The stylistic origin of their works lies in the tradition which began with the Yangzhou 揚州 school of painting in the 18th century, and was further developed by Zhao Zhiqian 趙之謙 (1829–1884) and Wu Changshi 吳昌碩 (1844–1927), both tied with Shanghai.[9] In Yangzhou, the rise of the *huaniao* (花鳥) or "flowers and birds" genre, executed in free style brushwork, can be explained by the demands of a new urban middle class who found them more intelligible and pleasing than the intellectually more demanding *wenren* 文人 tradition which was considered the true art. The latter were executed in ink; colours if any were subdued. A variety of brush techniques and abstracted forms conveyed the painter's highly personal views of nature, with landscape as the dominant topic. Such paintings were a vehicle for Confucian self-cultivation, and self-presentation of the amateur-scholar artist. By the time of the Yangzhou school, however, the *wenren* landscape painting was running out of breath, partly

[9] There is an indisputable link between Yangzhou painting and the Shanghai school, which in turn influenced Qi Baishi's work.

because of the self-imposed restrictions on topic and style. Zhao Zhiqian and Wu Changshi came from literati families and were well-educated; they eventually succeeded in elevating the free style *huaniao* pictures to the realms of high art. Both artists, besides being noted seal-engravers, were also well versed in epigraphy and sigillography, and therefore painted using vigorous calligraphic brushwork. In addition, they painted in bright colours. As for subject matters, they specialized in flowers and other plants, but they went beyond the boundaries of flowers with propitious symbolism, and adopted new and unusual vegetation subjects. If their works are to be recognized as *wenren* painting, then one has to step away from its old definition, formulated several centuries earlier, and allow broader criteria.

Photo 2: Věna Hrdličková, Zdeněk Hrdlička, Qi Baishi. Beijing 1952. Photo by J. Potměšil. Mr. Hrdlička served as the Czechoslovak cultural attaché in Beijing and was the recipient of several paintings by Qi Baishi. The photograph was kindly provided by Mrs. Věna Hrdličková.

Zhao and Wu were responsible for influencing numerous early twentieth century masters such as Chen Shizeng, Qi Baishi, Chen Nian 陳年/Banding 半丁 (1877–1970), and Li Kuchan 李苦禪 (1898–1983).[10] Wu Changshi in particular inspired Qi Baishi's interest in epigraphy, and influenced him in the painting of wisteria, red plum blossoms, and other flowers. This group also includes Huang

[10] Wu Changshi, Zhao Zhiqian and their followers are referred to as the Shanghai school. The artists named above, however, were all bound with Beijing, and referring to them as to Shanghai school—as in the case of the exhibition held on the occasion of the 20th International Congress of Chinese Studies, Prague 1968—is misleading.

Binhong 黃賓虹 (1865–1955), a traditional painter and important theoretician who was regarded as the greatest traditional painter in the South, while Qi Baishi was the greatest in the North.[11] The painter Chen Banding's choice of floral subject matter was similar to Qi Baishi's and in the thirties sold better than his, but both occasionally painted innovative landscapes some of which drew on the models in Chen Shizeng's painting. Another important innovator was Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983) who rivals Qi Baishi's fame in the parts of the world not under Communist China's influence. The list of reforming artists in the field of traditional Chinese painting does not end here.

It should not pass unnoticed that except for Qi Baishi, all these artists mentioned came from families with a scholarly background and received solid education, thereby naturally entering the *wenren* circles. Qi Baishi had no such origin, and his opportunity to study came relatively late. Hence, we should all the more admire his originality, depth, and wisdom. The fact that he was able to rise so high without a proper education makes him even more remarkable and must have been astonishing then—just as it is today. Yet the unevenness of his background must have been perceived, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, when classical culture was still very much alive. It may have been another reason for the reserved attitudes mentioned earlier, and mutually, it may have caused Qi Baishi to stay secluded. On the other hand, it was in fact the traditional scholars who supported Qi Baishi's urge to learn when he was in his thirties, and with whose help he made the transformation from a carpenter to a vscholar-artist. Qi Baishi's biographer notes:

> At the age of 35, he met with Xia Wuyi 夏午詒,[12] and at 37, he became Wang Xiangqi's 王湘綺[13] student. The help of these friends affected Qi Baishi's whole life. No lesser men than Wang Xiangqi and Fan Fanshan 樊樊山[14] befriended him. They came from the mandarin class, held high opinions of themselves and were rather self-conceited. Yet they actively sought Qi Baishi's company, acting as teachers and friends. They gave him guidance in

[11] Huang Binhong (born in Zhejiang) actually lived in Beijing from 1937 till 1948, this being the period of some of his most interesting artistic output.
[12] Xia Wuyi was the patron who invited Qi Baishi to Xi'an in 1902, where Xia served as an official.
[13] Wang Xiangqi (1832–1915), scholar and politician, became Qi Baishi's literature teacher in 1899. He also took a keen interest in Qi Baishi's seals.
[14] Fan Fanshan (1846–1931), an accomplished poet, met Qi Baishi in 1902 in Xi'an; he played an important role in Qi Baishi's career, inviting him to Beijing in 1917.

> learning, manners and arts, and carved a coarse stone into a rare jade. They indeed made an ingenious contribution to Qi Baishi's success (Li 1977, 10).[15]

4 Paintings with the Air of *Wenren* Tradition

4.1 Trees and Plants

As far as the choice of a subject goes, Qi Baishi was quite versatile, and his repertoire was broad. He is best remembered as a prolific painter of flowers and birds, plants and insects (*caochong* 草蟲), and various water creatures (shrimps, crabs, fish). Besides these, he created some new and unexpected themes as well. The following selection, however, is based on images of classical subject matters, in an attempt to place his works within, and confront him with, the *wenren* tradition. Among plants, *wenren* or literati-painters always favoured pine, bamboo, orchids, plum blossoms, and lotus. Consequently, whenever Qi Baishi chose one of them as his subject, he knowingly entered that tradition. Moreover, Qi Baishi sometimes directly referred to well-known scholars of the past in the inscription. "Bamboo in the Wind" (Fig. 1) shows a close-up view of three stems, their lush leaves being blown in one direction by the wind. The stems are not rooted and the leaves extend over the borders of the paper. This is far from the colorful and playful style generally attributed to Qi Baishi, primarily because it is monochrome, painted in two or more shades of ink. The leaves in the front are executed in wet, dark black brush strokes, echoed by leaves of a lighter, grey tone painted by dry brush in the second plane background. The rendering of the bamboo leaves is singular; they seem robust and untidy. The inscription is placed in the empty lower right-hand corner, its characters in the cursive *xingshu* 行書 lean in the same direction that the leaves are blown by the wind; the mutual correlation between painting and calligraphy is well demonstrated in this work. The text recalls Zheng Xie 鄭燮 (1693–1765), a celebrated bamboo painter and calligrapher active in Yangzhou, and Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1798), the leading poet of his day, who used to entertain guests in his garden Suiyuan 隨園 in Nanjing. Both men epitomize the non-conformist, progressive trends of literati culture in the eighteenth century. It needs to be emphasized, though, that Qi Baishi's rendering does not follow Zheng Xie's style of painting the bamboo, but seeks its own way.

[15] Unless otherwise stated, translations from Chinese are by the author.

The scroll was executed as early as 1924, however, Qi Baishi dwelled on the topic for many years: he painted a similar version when he was 87 years old (about 1948), with an inscription recalling "the literati of the past".[16]

Fig. 1: Qi Baishi. Bamboo in the Wind.
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, height 137 cm, width 33.5 cm.
Signed, dated 1924, seals 1. *Mujushi*, 2. *Laobai*.
Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 644.

[16] Reproduced in Ho Kung-shang 1985, 96, ill. 119.

Fig.2. Qi Baishi. Winter.
Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, height 179 cm, width 47.2 cm.
Signed, undated, seals: 1. *Qi da*, 2. *Baishi weng*.
This is one of the four scrolls of a Four-Season set. The work draws on similar paintings by Wu Changshuo.
Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 645.

Just as in the above example, the scroll representing "Winter" (Fig. 2) is quite large. It is one of the "Four-Season" set (with plum blossoms as the symbol of "Spring", yellow gourd standing for "Summer", and bent grass—not the habitual

chrysanthemum—for “Autumn”). On the whole, each painting of the set emanates a serious, vigorous mood, and there are no birds or insects to enliven them as seen in many comparable examples of this subject matter. “Winter” depicts only a section of a bent trunk, with a couple of branches hanging down. Painted on a large scale, it is cut-off at the edges of the paper, it is impossible to imagine the whole tree. It is reminiscent of similar compositions by Zhao Zhiqian, and also those painted by Wu Changshi after him. The large scroll is filled with the mighty trunk and its heavy drooping branches which are hanging in disarray in front of the trunk. The strokes conveying the rough, reddish bark are juxtaposed with the long sharp needles. The inscription goes:

入江松影看龍翻

In the shade of a pine by the river
I watched the dragons roll over.

Considering these two lines, we can imagine Qi Baishi within the surrounding scenery, somewhere near the pine, whose close-up he depicted on the scroll. In spite of its strength, the powerful pine represents only a part of the scene, a fragment of Nature.

This expressive, energetic manner was typical of Qi Baishi’s works, but was not the only one he practiced. Qi Baishi wanted and was able to express diverse sentiments, as proved, for example, by his elegant and delicate rendering of orchids (Fig. 3). Below the signature, he added: “swiftly sketched” (*yihui* 一揮), yet this small monochrome masterpiece proves his competence in adjusting the brush and technique well into his advanced years. One orchid wilted to the ground, the other seeming to recline over. The feeling of sadness is reinforced by the seal “Hall of the Lamenting Crow” (*Huiwu tang* 悔塢堂) carved in memory of his parents in 1935, after he visited their graves for the last time.[17] The inscribed title “A Message Sent Afar” (*Yaoyao yu yu* 遙遙與語) suggests a longing for someone who had left.

[17] Qi Baishi’s parents died in 1926, four months apart. His second wife Hu Baozhu 胡寶珠 died in 1943, at the age of forty one.

Fig. 3. A Message Sent Afar.
Ink on paper, height 55.5 cm, width 34.8 cm.
Signed, dated 1948, seals: 1. *Baishi*, 2. *Huiwu tang*.
Purchased in China, 1955. National Gallery, Prague, Vm 649.

4.2 Landscapes

For literati (*wenren*), landscapes, not flowers, were the typical subject-matter. It was the other way round with Qi Baishi. His landscapes count for a relatively small portion of his oeuvre, although he turned to this subject quite regularly in his sixties and seventies (Tsao 1993, 243). Qi Baishi may have preferred the plant subjects for economic reasons, since he is known as someone who always considered the financial aspect of matters. In addition, landscapes are impregnated with a profundity which hampers producing them in great numbers: something he did when painting chickens, shrimps or frogs. While these "minor" subjects also sprung from a long, careful observation and intimate familiarity with the subject, landscape paintings are based on a different kind of observation and understanding. Works which carry a symbolic meaning or an allusion connected with scholar's milieu do not present the depicted object as the ultimate goal; instead they suggest a realm of thought beyond the painting. Last but not least, like all painters of the Epigraphic school (*jinshi pai* 金石派), he confronted the problem of applying "engraving" brush-strokes to landscape (Tsao 1993, 330). In an inscription to a landscape painting, he reflected,

> My landscapes do not win the praise of my contemporaries, nor do I ask for it. It is difficult to surpass the ancients when painting a landscape, so why bother to do so. If someone says that I am not capable of painting a landscape, I shall rejoice (Li 1977, 78).

In the landscapes he painted, then, Qi Baishi did not try to imitate ancient masters. Instead, he usually depicted the places he remembered in a highly individual, unconventional style. "In landscapes, I use my own brush technique, and paint my home," he proclaimed in an inscription (Li 1977, 78). Even though he knew and admired works by Zhu Da, Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), and Shitao 石濤 (1642–1715),[18] he was determined to paint landscapes in his own manner. "When I paint a landscape, I am just afraid it will resemble [those by] Zhu Da," he wrote (Tsao 1993, 273). In the words of Jung Ying Tsao, "It was this adamant refusal to subordinate his creative impulses to the past that made him the target of criticism from prominent artists in Beijing who interpreted his independent spirit as a deplorable lack of good breeding and proper training" (Tsao 1993, 273, 275). Consequently, his landscapes were less popularized than his other, as a rule more whimsical paintings of plants, insects or shrimps. And in the view of contemporary connoisseurs, they were also the least comprehensible or acceptable of his oeuvre. Qi Baishi who, in the thirties, reached his artistic summit, was misunderstood in the most highly regarded types of Chinese painting subject matter (Lang 2002, 159).

The vigorous brushwork and simple shapes of peaks, practiced in Qi Baishi's landscapes, clearly link him to Chen Shizeng. Two towering peaks painted in the back plane of the scroll reproduced in Fig. 4 are a prime example of this link. Although the inscribed text does not state it, the scene represents a view of the Borrowed Mountain (*Jieshan* 借山) where Qi Baishi leased a house in 1900, after he left his parental home and established himself as an independent artist. It was here that he set on the route culminating in "the change of mode in his feeble years" (*shuainian bianfa* 衰年變法). He painted this place many times, using different formats of painting (hanging scrolls, albums, etc.). Some versions were

[18] As he himself admitted in an inscription quoted by Li (1977, 77). "In the *huaniao* painting," he continued, "there are Xu Wei, Shitao, Zhu Da, and Li Shan 李鱓. All the other painters are mere artisans."

inscribed with the same poem and bear the appropriate title *Jieshan yinguan tu* 借山吟舘圖.[19]

Fig. 4: Qi Baishi. Poetry Studio by the Borrowed Mountain.
Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on paper, height 137.5 cm, width 44.5 cm. Signed, dated 1930, seals: 1. *Azhi*, 2. *Mujushi*, 3. *Laobai*, 4. *Yiqie huahui wuneng jiaru*.
Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 1445.

The Prague version of *Jieshan yinguan tu* is noteworthy for its inscriptions which recorded the difficulties of painting not only this particular scroll, but a landscape in general. Two lengthy inscriptions tell of Qi Baishi's determination to

[19] For example, the scroll reproduced in Yang 2005, 12.

maintain the high standards that he had set for himself when painting landscape scenery. The inscription by the lower right edge of the scroll goes:

> 此幅上畫之山偶用禿筆作點。酷似馬蹄跡。余恥之。復以濃墨改爲大米點。覺下半幅清秀上半幅重濁又惡之遂扯斷。留此畫竹法教我兒孫。
>
> For the mountains on this painting, I happened to use a worn-out brush. They looked like prints left by hooves and I felt embarrassed. I prepared more ink and corrected the dots in Mi Fei's brush technique. But then I could see that the upper part of the painting was light, while the bottom part was heavy. Discontented, I ripped [the upper part] off, but preserved the [bottom part with] bamboos for the admonition of sons and grandsons.

It is "against the rules" to correct an ink painting, and it may come as a surprise that Qi Baishi humbly admitted it in the inscription. The second inscription, written on the upper part of the scroll, starts with the poem[20] and then expounds on the upper part of the scroll:

> 此幅上半幅之山已扯棄。用另昤以鄰國膠粘之補畫二山仍書原題二十八字。
>
> I ripped off the original top of this painting with its mountains. I stuck [the remaining bottom part] to a piece of paper with a foreign-made glue. Then I once again painted the two peaks, and inscribed once more the twenty-eight characters of the original inscription.

Thus, the upper part shows the serene peaks, whereas the air of the lower part is easy and pleasant, depicting "Houses amidst Myriad Bamboos" (*Wan zhulin zhong wu shujian* 萬竹林中屋數間) as stated in the opening line of the poem (in the upper inscription). Qi Baishi combined the serene mountain setting with a contrasting, picturesque rural idyll and its irresistible charm of a bamboo grove, houses, and ducks. Once again, he used analogous, unexpected combinations in many other paintings, not only landscapes.

[20] "Houses amidst myriad bamboos; Ducks in the pond in front of the doorway sit idle, like people do; As soon as lotuses stick out in spring, they dig out bamboo sprouts; They behold the layers of mountains behind their houses."

Fig. 5: Qi Baishi. Red Sun above the Lake. Ink and colors on paper, height 151 cm, width 63.5 cm. Signed, undated, seal: *Baishi weng*.
Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 3038.

"Red Sun above the Lake" (Fig. 5), is an example of a painting which the public, familiar with Qi Baishi's flowers, insects and vegetables, would find highly unusual. Still, Qi Baishi painted several versions of the lake—most likely recalling lake Dongtinghu 洞庭湖 in his native province—some also with the impressive red solar disc setting, or perhaps rising.[21] Here, the grey, smudgy water surface, merging with the sky, covers the whole scroll, large by any standard. A rocky island rises in the centre: a low, smooth hill with a conical top, so characteristic of Qi Baishi's peaks. The water is depicted in dilute, blotted ink,

[21] See the same motive in the painting reproduced in Tsao (1993, 259), etc.

evenly applied with a wide brush. Qi Baishi seems to be experimenting here with the techniques of water depiction, and avoids the more habitual thin curved strokes representing individual ripples. Countless boats on their way back home are suggested by their sails only, this being a well established short-hand for evocating boats. The composition of this painting is unusual in many respects. The central rocky island breaks out of the flat water surfaces, much as the sun, a small red spot removed to the upper right corner, shines out of the prevailing greyish tone which gives the impression of a gloomy dusk, and imbues a nostalgic mood to the captured moment. The dot representing the sun, which is inconspicuous in comparison to the limitless waters of the lake, is nevertheless made quite provocative due to its bright red colour, but again it is subdued through the circular red light reflected on the adjacent sky. There is a sharp contrast between the two dominant colours. This is a monumental waterscape, one which does conform to common expectations. Painted sometime in the late twenties, it must have been intended for a progressively minded audience.

5 A Self-portrait

The last example once more turns to the flower subject. Painted in the late forties, it depicts a faded lotus (Fig. 6). This by itself is peculiar, since the habitual depiction of a lotus is its blossom in full prime and beauty. The lotus is a popular theme, not only because of its captivating beauty, but also because of the Buddhist connotation it generally bears. Examples of faded lotus pictures, on the other hand, are not too common. Nonetheless, they were painted by the artists of the Piling 毗陵 school in the late 13th and 14th centuries. In modern times, Qi Baishi introduced the theme again and often painted it in the last three decades of his life.[22] In Figure 6, the leaves are executed in light vermilion splashes. A few strokes in light ink painted over the splashes represent the veins. Three distinct stems in dark ink balance the composition. Two of them are vertical, but the third one was broken under the weight of an empty petula, and cuts the width of the picture which, on the whole, excites a strong sense of seclusion. The picture is entitled “A Silent and Upright Gentleman”. The Confucian term “gentleman” (*junzi* 君子) implies that the lotus in this painting hardly carries the Buddhist

[22] It was only after Qi Baishi introduced the faded lotus as a type of subject matter that other painters, e.g. Cui Zifan 崔子範, started to paint it.

symbolic meaning, rather, it stands for the old man Qi Baishi who identifies himself with the flower. Its withering away refers to his great age: he was well over eighty when he painted this leaf. It also stands for his just and upright personality, worthy of a Confucian gentleman.

Fig. 6: Qi Baishi. A Silent and Upright Gentleman. Album leaf, ink and colors on paper, height 34 cm, width 34.3 cm. Signed, undated, seal: *Jieshan weng*.
The National Gallery, Prague, Vm 4331.

In this vein, it would by all means meet Chen Shizeng's definition of literati (i.e. *wenren*) painting in his article "The value of literati painting":

> What is a *wenren* painting? It is a painting that has the characteristics and concept of a literary creation. It is not simply pictorial perfection, but has metaphysical suggestiveness beyond the painting...
>
> The essence of *wenren* painting should consist of, first, quality of personality, second, scholarly knowledge, third, artistic talent, fourth, intellect.[23] (Tseng 1988, 126)

Chen Shizeng considered it most important that such a painting conveyed spiritual aspirations, with the formal aspects being secondary. To express the spiritual content beyond a painting was more important than formal likeness. But above all, he put emphasis on the artist's self. Undoubtedly, he regarded himself as a *wenren*,

[23] Translated by Tseng Yu-ho.

but one could still object to putting his work, and the works of artists close to him, to the category of *wenren hua*. Rather, they are paintings which contain the spirit of *wenren hua*. In the case of Qi Baishi, who above all was a professional painter, the denomination *wenren* in its classical sense is not quite befitting, either.[24]

6 Conclusion

Whether or not certain paintings by Qi Baishi are connected with the *wenren* tradition may not be unanimously accepted, and even if we were to agree in some cases, it would still be difficult to estimate what proportion of Qi Baishi‘s oeuvre they comprise, since it is impossible (in the first place) to accurately state how many paintings by Qi Baishi definitely exist. Ever since China became more open and the market for Chinese paintings therefore became wider, an increasing number of paintings reputedly by this master have come to our notice; consequently, the increasing problems of their authentication have made any statistic difficult to establish.

The topic, mood and execution of the selected examples (Figs. 1 to 6) clearly show that as far as the choice of topics goes, some of Qi Baishi’s works adhered to the *wenren* tradition. In terms of style, however, the revitalized manner of Chen Shizeng and his circle opened a new path, which to some extent ran parallel to “literati painting”, but in several respects departed from it. Qi Baishi was also rooted in *wenren* tradition and carried its legacy, but once he had accomplished his transformation, in the early 1920s, his art bourgeoned in his powerful individual manner. As the name of one of his studios reveals, “old winds [bring] new rain”,[25] in other words, his output, albeit nurtured by old styles, was new.

Qi Baishi is a recognized painter of ordinary topics, but his creativity was not restricted to it, and also gleaned on the literati field. The much admired clarity and simplicity of Qi Baishi’s art is no less becoming in his portrayals of various vegetation and birds than it is in landscapes: while they most distinctly reveal Qi Baishi’s progressive taste in painting, they still have their place in the *wenren* tradition. For various reasons, he did not paint landscapes very often. The economic aspect has already been mentioned, and it also seems quite clear that Qi

[24] It is used on occasion. For example, the monograph by Jiang Xun (1978) is entitled “Qi Baishi: the last wondrous blossom of the *wenren hua*”. See References.
[25] *Gufeng xinyu zhi zhai* 古風新雨之齋 (Wang and Li 1984, 47 note 1).

Baishi had a definite preference for joyful and playful topics that were reminiscent of his childhood and village life.

Finally, we should also note that Qi Baishi may have felt insecure and not quite comfortable with the elite scholarly society. After all, his uncertainty can be traced from the many memoirs and anecdotes which were told about him. When he was asked to teach at the Academy of Art in Beijing, for example, he declined three times. He was being difficult because he feared that students and colleagues would ridicule him on account of his background (Zhang 1992, 56; Liao 1989, 107). In contrast, the painter Huang Yongyu 黃永玉 pointed out the apparent affinity of mind and confidence Qi Baishi felt towards the disciple of his late years, the painter Li Keran 李可染 (1907–1989) who (like him) came from a very modest social rank (Lang 1995, 17).[26] Indeed, Qi Baishi could have felt alienated from scholarly society and its preoccupations, in spite of his mastery of and ability with the scholars' mode of painting, and in spite of his appearances as a traditional dignified gentleman. In conclusion, it may not have been so much the world of letters keeping its distance from an outsider, but rather Qi Baishi keeping his distance from the *wenren* out of modesty and a certain uneasiness. Given the circumstances, this is quite understandable.

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[26] Li Keran's father was an illiterate vendor of dumplings (*baozi* 包子) who later opened a little restaurant. Li Keran learned to read from signs and posters on the street; his elementary education was belated. He too was a self-taught painter. His education, however, took a positive turn when he entered an art school at the age of sixteen. (ibid.)

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Contemporary Chinese Art

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Parodying Mao's Image: Caricaturing in Contemporary Chinese Art

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Abstract

Although Chinese contemporary artists are often criticized for creating superficial works that parody Chairman Mao without any deeper meaning, the employment of parody is a far more complex phenomenon. Instead of being representatives of Jamesonian pastiche, many artists employ varying methods of trans-contextual parody to express their mixed and even controversial intentions and notions. With a detailed structural analysis of the art works, and taking into account the socio-cultural context and the artists' own intentions, I will show that the common assumptions—that parodying Mao is equivalent to political pop or that political pop represents pastiche—are oversimplifications of this complex phenomenon, especially when caricaturing is used as a method to violate the visual norms.

Keywords: Chairman Mao, contemporary art, trans-contextual parody, image, caricature

Izvleček:

Čeprav kitajske sodobne umetnike velikokrat kritizirajo, da ustvarjajo površinska dela parodij predsednika Maota brez kakršnegakoli globljega pomena, pa je uporaba parodije veliko kompleksnejši fenomen. Namesto, da bi bili predstavniki Jamesonove pastile, številni umetniki uporabljajo različne metode transkontekstualne parodije, da bi izrazili mešane in kontroverzne namene in ideje. Z natančno strukturalno analizo umetniških del in z upoštevanjem družbeno-kulturnega konteksta in avtorjevih namenov, bom prikazala, da so splošne domneve—da je parodija Maota ekvivalenta političnemu popu ali da politični pop predstavlja pastile—preveč poenostavljene ideje tega kompleksnega fenomena, predvsem, če se karikature uporabljajo kot metoda kršenja vizualnih norm.

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Ključne besede: predsednik Mao, sodobna umetnost, transkonktekstualna parodija, podoba, karikatura

1 Caricaturing Mao as Trans-contextual Parody

In this article, my intention is to investigate contemporary Chinese art works, which have employed forms of caricaturing in the re-creation of Chairman Mao's images.[1] In order to explain the complexity of the motivations, intentions, and targets emerging in these works, I have found Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody most clarifying. As she aptly delineates, parody is a "value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations" (Hutcheon 2002, 90).

Although this definition was initially given for parody in postmodern art, it can be applied to modern art too. Indeed, in her new introduction written in 2000 for the re-publication of A Theory on Parody, Linda Hutcheon further emphasized her argument that parody in twentieth-century art connects the modern to the postmodern. One of her major aims has been "to study this historical and formal linkage" in order to develop a theory for contemporary parody (Hutcheon 2000, xii).

Consequently, Hutcheon's theory is not confined to any specific form or type of art, and is therefore extremely beneficial for exploring the complex scene of contemporary Chinese art. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge, as John N. Duvall (1999, 385) has suggested in relation to Euro-American art, that some of the works are so complex that they deny the possibility of "reading postmodernism exclusively through the lens of parody or pastiche".

However, in China, the situation is even more complicated. Even the mere presence of postmodernism can be questioned in contemporary Chinese art, as, for example, art historian Gao Minglu (2005, 239) has pointed out. As a result, it is essential to explore more carefully the relation of parody and contemporary Chinese art before analyzing the art works themselves. In addition, besides the complexity of the contemporary scene, it is equally important to be aware of the socio-political context and norms applied to the production of the original images

[1] This article is based on the chapter "Parodying Mao" in my doctoral dissertation, *Many Faces of Mao Zedong*. See Valjakka 2011. The chapter provides a far more in-depth discussion of the methods of parody in contemporary Chinese art.

during Mao's lifetime in order to understand the re-creation of Mao's image.2 Drawing from Dominic Lopes's (1996, 217–225) notion that pictorial variation of a picture is based on variation-recognition, and is not reducible to mere subject-recognition, I argue that it is necessary to analyze these contemporary works in relation to the original ones.

A more detailed understanding of these works will also require adequate information on the status and role of caricaturing in China. After briefly explaining the history of caricature, I will approach the interesting question of creating caricatures of Mao during his lifetime, or shortly after his death in 1976. Finally, I will provide an in-depth analysis of deformations of Mao's visual image in order to illuminate the variety of the artistic creation. Through these examples I aim to demonstrate how contemporary Chinese artists are creating far more meaningful interpretations of the prominent leader than is usually acknowledged. Indeed, the act of caricaturing Mao in contemporary Chinese art is an illustrative example of trans-contextual parody. While violating the visual norms of the original images, it requires the viewer to question and negotiate their previous mental images of Mao.

1.1 Trans-contextual Parody

In the context of contemporary art, parody has often been regarded as a degenerated form, which merely imitates previous works without creative and original sentiments. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the forms and intentions of parody have been in constant flux. It is only since the 1980s that parody has become commonly regarded as an essential feature of postmodernism.[3]

The negative judgements on the postmodern parody derive from the previous writings of Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard, who all regarded modern parody as lacking content, intention, or both.[4] The most pessimistic approach to parody is represented by Fredric Jameson (1983, 112–114, 124–125; 1991, 16–21), a well-known critic of postmodernism. He has asserted that the

[2] I use the concept of image to denote both material and immaterial representations. When I wish to emphasize that the topic of discussion is only material representations, I employ the concept *visual image*. Likewise the concept *mental image* only refers to immaterial representations. For a more detailed discussion, see "Introduction" in my doctoral dissertation, Valjakka 2011.

[3] For short but illustrative introduction to postmodern theories on parody, see Rose 1995, 242–274.

[4] For a brief introduction of these negative views on "modern" parody and its influence on postmodern thinking, see, e.g., Rose 1995, 186–195, 205–206. For Baudrillard's view on parody as blind and non-intentional see Baudrillard 1994, especially pp. 1–42.

emergence of postmodernism as a historical period represents a time when no stylistic innovations are possible and consequently, parody as ridiculing imitation has become impossible. Instead, pastiche, as the humourless, neutral and blank form of parody, has become a significant feature of postmodernism.

I support Linda Hutcheon's position against Fredric Jameson's idea that parody degenerates into pastiche. Indeed, parody in art is not necessarily uninventive imitation like pastiche.[5] In the context of art works relating to Mao, parody is, however, usually used by scholars as a negative notion, deriving from Jameson. It is closely related to postmodernism, and similar to meaningless pastiche based on mere imitation (see, e.g., Lin 1997). However, my aim is to show that parodying Mao is not representing Jamesonian pastiche—a suggestion initially made by Wu Hung (Wu 2008, 8).

Consequently, I have found Hutcheon's concept of parody, which broadens the focus from mere imitation to trans-contextualized discourse, to be a far more beneficial approach. Her theory provides many insights for in-depth analysis. The first insight is that parody is not merely a mocking imitation of previous art work, but is also essentially a *critical dialogue* with the past, using ironic inversion and focusing on *difference* rather than similarity. As a result, parody has a broad range of intentions and is not necessarily comic, but can also be neutral or even reverential. (Hutcheon 2000, xii, 2–16).[6] This broad range of intent is clearly visible in the art works relating to Mao.

The second insight is that parody is double-coded. Parody not only challenges its target but also confirms the target by re-contextualizing it. In practice, the parodied works are not forgotten. Related to double-coding is Hutcheon's third insight, that parody is trans-contextual. In other words, parody can interact with previous specific works of art or with general iconic conventions in the visual arts, such as the iconographic traditions of image creation. Principally, any form of coded discourse can be the object of parody, even as a cross-genre play (Hutcheon 2000, xii–xiv, 12–18).

For Hutcheon, trans-contextuality clearly implies that a painting can parody a piece of music or literature, or vice versa. Furthermore, trans-contextuality can be

[5] I am aware that pastiche is a highly controversial concept, widely used but seldom truly examined, as Richard Dyer (2007) has pointed out. However, Dyer also emphasizes that essential to pastiche is *imitation*.

[6] Hutcheon's approach that parody is not necessarily comic is criticized, for example, by Margaret Rose, for whom parody is essentially comic and/or humorous (Rose 1995, 238–241, 266, 278).

understood as a dialogue between historical, cultural, or national art discourses, and it is "what distinguished parody from pastiche or imitation" (ibid., 12). I find this insight highly important for my research, where the clear majority of the contemporary art works do not rely on inter-art discourse itself, and even those that could be interpreted as an inter-art parody repeatedly utilize trans-contextual aspects. By this I mean that if a Chinese contemporary artist creates a painting that parodies Euro-American masterpieces, Chinese traditional paintings, photographs or statues, all these can also be considered as forms of trans-contextuality. In addition, it is important to remember that although a contemporary work of art might trans-contextualize a previous work depicting Chairman Mao, the target of parody is not necessarily the work itself, but, for example, the official iconography of Mao. Caricatures in particular are a strong form of violation of the visual norms set for the accepted iconography.

The fourth insight is that the socio-cultural context of production and viewing is relevant to interpretation of the work. Parody is clearly a process of communication that depends on appropriate encoding and decoding based on shared codes. As a result, with ironic inversion, parody reveals the politics of representations (Hutcheon 2000, xiv, 16–24, 84–99; Hutcheon 2002, 90–91, 97–102). Parody represents deconstructive criticism and constructive creativity, and this makes us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation in any medium. This multifaceted understanding of parody enables us to research the various methods used in parodying Mao.

The four major methods I have found utilized in parody by Chinese contemporary artists are: i) trans-contextualizing previous paintings, such as Euro-American masterpieces or Chinese paintings of Mao; ii) re-employing other visual images of Mao, such as documental photographs, or statues of Mao; iii) re-modifying the general iconic visual conventions of Mao through caricaturing; iv) re-modifying the general iconic visual conventions of Mao with other methods, such as erasure of the image. As can be seen, only the first category of these could be truly considered as inter-art discourse. However, because art works of this kind are also created in relation to other canonical art discourses, such as Euro-American, or socialist art in China, they are also inevitably based on trans-contextuality.

1.2 The Question of Parody in China

Although parody has been used in various forms in relation to arts and literature for centuries, it has become essentially intertwined with the heated debate on postmodernism and its implications in cultural forms in Euro-American research (see, e.g., Rose 1995; Hutcheon 2002, 89–113). In China, however, the interrelation of parody with postmodernism is not at all so evident. Even the presence and definition of postmodernism in China is highly disputed and forms a complex issue, continuously addressed by scholars. Art historian John Clark (2010, 169–185) has suggested in his detailed discussion on postmodernism in relation to Chinese art that "post-modernity concerns neither a specific set of styles nor a way of integrating them, but an *attitude to style*" (ibid., 183). As previously mentioned, even the question of whether contemporary Chinese art can be regarded as representative of modernism or postmodernism can be challenged (Andrews 1998, 9; Gao 2005, 45). Art historian Gao Minglu (2005, 239) has even suggested that "in Chinese contemporary art modernism and postmodernism represent a false distinction because China did not produce the same modernism that was produced in a different cultural context at another time".

The complex co-existence of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern in the 1990s, is also noted by the researcher of film and literature, Sheldon H. Lu (2001, 13). However, despite the simultaneous existence of the various forms and styles on the contemporary art scene, Lu concludes that contemporary Chinese artists have deliberately associated themselves with an international post-modernism and utilized collage, pastiche, and parody, the postmodernist techniques of representation, as primary methods. As a result, through fabricating the images of Chineseness, artists are negotiating and disengaging "from conventional notions of the self, the other, China, and the West" (ibid., 192). For Lu, parody and pastiche are intertwined in postmodernism, and although he does not clarify whether parody and pastiche have the same meaning, his approach primarily derives from Jamesonian postmodernism. However, whether these art works represent modernism, postmodernism, postpostmodernism, or some combination of these forms, or even a completely new, undefined artistic form, is a secondary question to their closer structural analysis. Consequently, I have found it far more interesting and meaningful to focus on exploring these art works through forms of parody, irony, and satire, which have been utilized in visual arts long before any idea of postmodernism.

It has been repeatedly claimed that the works relating to Mao are representatives of political pop and therefore merely empty parody, in other words, pastiche. Although it is commonly known that Mao's visual image has been a significant feature in the paintings of political pop, or even the most prominent feature, as art critic Karen Smith (2005, 223–224) has suggested, not all the political pop works represent Mao. In addition, previous notions that regard political pop as meaningless pastiche lacking any kind of depth and providing merely flat images (see, e.g., Lu 2001, 157) are oversimplifications. In the following I will provide examples showing that works that do not represent political pop also employ parody, and even if an art work could be categorized as political pop, it does not necessarily follow that this work is mere pastiche. Many of these art works re-explore the original art works and images of Chairman Mao created during his lifetime, with various intentions, methods, and targets. Furthermore, although it is often argued that the main intention of these works is to merely mock Chairman Mao, closer analysis will reveal that this approach is too one-sided.

Nonetheless, I do not suggest that all contemporary Chinese art works fulfil the same level of parody. To clarify this further, I think John N. Duvall's suggestion, that both Jameson's and Hutcheon's perspectives are valuable, is highly beneficial for understanding the different perceptions of parody and pastiche visible in these Chinese art works. As Duvall (1999, 385) indicates in respect to Euro-American art, some of the works are so complex that they illustrate "the difficulty of reading postmodernism exclusively through the lens of parody or pastiche." Duvall's point is highly valid for the further discussion about the characteristics of postmodernism, especially in the fields of the visual arts. In contemporary Chinese art relating to Mao, there are certainly art works that represent either Hutcheon's definition of parody, or, in some cases, the notion of pastiche as Jameson defines it, or even both of these. I agree that some art works represent simple imitations of the original visual images and therefore the concept of pastiche can be applied to them. Here, however, I find it more important to focus on the works that do represent trans-contextual parody, in order to show that not all these works are mere pastiche.

Although the artistic reproduction of Mao's image is often mentioned in academic discussion as parody, in-depth research about the forms and intentions of parody used among artists is still missing. As a result, Chinese artists are often criticized for creating superficial works that lack any deeper meaning. It has been

repeatedly claimed that works that parody Mao are examples of political pop and, consequently, are merely pastiche, or uninventive kitsch. These perceptions generally do not take into account the historical and socio-cultural context or the artists' own intentions, and therefore often fail to provide meaningful analysis.

I consider Dominic Lopes's (1996, 217–225) notion that the pictorial variation of a picture is based on variation-recognition, and is not reducible to mere subject-recognition, indispensable for the in-depth analysis of the works that derive from previous images. Variation draws the viewer's attention to the aspects that the original picture presents, but, inevitably, creates a new meaning of its own, which is not secondary to the original one. The content depends on the interrelations of the original and the re-contextualized work.

Without taking into account the creation process of the original visual images of Mao, it would not be possible to interpret the new or re-circulated images emerging in the contemporary art scene, especially when artists employ parody as the main method. To truly understand the levels of irony and the target of parody, one needs to acknowledge the conventions and norms related to the original reproduction. In the case of Mao's visual images, any kind of misuse or even a slightly deviant way of depicting him was considered highly inappropriate behaviour, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

2 Caricaturing Mao

Caricature,[7] originally developed in Western Europe and in the United States, has been considered both a sub-genre of portraiture and a popular method used in political graphic art. Caricaturing is inevitably based on both the recognition and deformation of the person portrayed. What sets caricature apart from other genres is the use of a satirical and humorous approach to the subject (Brilliant 1997, 69–70). By means of simplification, distortion, and exaggeration, caricature usually concentrates on the weaknesses and faults of the person depicted. As a result it is claimed that the caricature reveals the "essential" being, the true man behind the mask, even being "more like the person than he is himself" (Kris and Gombrich 1979, 189–190).

[7] The original Italian word *caricatura* means literally "loaded pictures" (Kris and Gombrich 1979, 189). It has also been translated as "a likeness which has been deliberately exaggerated" (Lucie-Smith 1981, 9).

Caricaturing as a technique has been commonly employed in cartoons but it has also been utilized in other forms of art. Nonetheless, one of the most popular forms is the usage of caricature as a political weapon, which emerged in Europe at least as early as the sixteenth century (for several examples see, e.g., Lucie-Smith 1981). Caricatures, as Lawrence H. Streicher has pointed out, are negative representations, because they aim at ridiculing and mocking the subject visually (Streicher 1967, 431). Political cartoons, in particular, frequently rely on caricaturing in order to guarantee the viewers' recognition of the topic and the people depicted, which is an essential prerequisite for an in-depth interpretation of the cartoon's meaning (Kemnitz 1973, 82–84).

If we accept Linda Hutcheon's (2000, 12–18) suggestion that parody can also be used for targeting general iconic conventions in art, such as creation or reception, then I suggest that it is possible to interpret caricaturing as a form of parody that trans-contextualizes the original conventional visual image of the person portrayed. As is commonly known, caricaturing has often been employed as a very powerful political weapon also in China. It is therefore a highly appropriate method for artists who wish to violate or question the official norms of visual representation of Chairman Mao. Before analyzing the contemporary Chinese art works that illustrate examples of caricaturing Mao's image, I will first elucidate the origins of caricature in China and the intriguing issue of whether it was possible to create caricatures of Mao during his lifetime.

2.1 Origins of Chinese Caricature

In Chinese, the concept *manhua* (漫话) denotes a wide variety of graphic arts, including comics, cartoons, caricatures, social and political satire images, graphic novels, and serial pictures (*lianhuanhua* 连环画). *Manhua* is a loan-word based on Japanese *manga* and it was first used by Feng Zikai in May 1925 (Harbsmeier 1984, 19; see also Hung 1994a, 124, note 4). Despite the lack of a specific concept, caricaturing in China has a long history, but it has not always been used for poking fun. As Streicher has pointed out, the distortions of the natural appearance do not necessarily include the notion of ridicule, but instead have been used in fine arts with other intentions. Therefore, deciding when and whether distortions become ridiculous depends on the historical context (Streicher 1967, 435–436). In Chinese visual arts, deforming the facial or bodily features has been employed to express

reverence, especially in depicting Buddhist or Daoist figures. The exaggeration and deformation of the physical features are considered to reflect the celestial characteristics and supernatural abilities of the people depicted (for deformations in Daoist images, see Little 2000, 264–269, 313).

An obvious change in the use of deformations for ridicule emerged in China in the nineteenth century. In addition, Chinese cartoons and caricatures bearing socio-political meanings were emerging. In the 1930s and 1940s, witty caricatures and cartoons commenting on both domestic and international socio-political issues were created abundantly. Cartoons by Communists were used as an effective weapon against both the Japanese occupation and the *Guomindang* (GMD) government.[8] After 1949, the political tide changed and new regulations for cartoons were set: cartoons had to be directed to praise the correct line and attack the enemy (see, e.g., Harbsmeier 1984, 36, 183–198; Hung 1994b). During the Maoist era, cartoons and caricatures were used in political campaigns because they were regarded as the most suitable form of satire for attacking specific individuals (Galikowski 1998, 46). Caricaturing was utilized as an individual form of political art and also as a visual method in political posters. As such, this gradual transformation of the usage of the caricatures in China made them reflect the common Euro-American use of caricature as a political weapon.

Political cartoons and caricatures prior to or after 1949 were not all pro-Communist, although this perception is often promoted. Images satirizing Communism did exist in mainland China and were even made by the pro-Party artists themselves.[9] "Internal satire" as Liu-Lengyel calls it, aiming at negative social issues but not directly at the Party or the socialist cause, did occur in the 1950s (Liu-Lengyel 1993, 135–136, 140–141, 153–155, 199, see also images on pp. 300–302, 317–320). During the Hundred Flowers campaign, when intellectuals, artists, and writers were encouraged to express their critique against socio-political

[8] For a brief but illuminating history of Chinese caricaturing and cartooning see Sullivan 1996, 119–125. For a history of *manhua* in English, see Wong 2002. The significant changes in political cartoons after Mao's death are discussed in Croizier 1983. For further information in Chinese see, e.g., Bi 2005. Anti-Japanese cartoons are mentioned in Sullivan 1996, 93. Hung (1994a) instead focuses on the anti-*Guomindang* images. For images of Chiang Kai-shek see ibid., 130–131 and plates no. 7–10.

[9] According to Maria Galikowski there were cartoons criticizing the Communists in the satirical art exhibition organized in Yan'an 1942. [Galikowski 1998, 142.] Liu-Lengyel (1993, 135) also mentions the exhibition. She has suggested that in the Liberated Areas there were also cartoons referred to as "interior caricature", which targeted the misbehavior of the revolutionary groups. However, in 1942 Mao addressed the issue of appropriate cartoons and insisted that they should be aimed at enemies, not at their own people (ibid., 117–118, 121).

circumstances and the Communist Party, many cartoons and caricatures criticizing the Party for its bureaucracy or extravagance were exhibited at the National Exhibition of Cartoons in January 1957 (Galikowski 1998, 63). However, the Anti-Rightist campaign was formed as a counter-measure to this short period of liberal criticism. Consequently, several cartoonists were excluded from artistic work and sent to the countryside while others focused on drawing favourable and supporting cartoons instead of internal satire in order to survive amidst the political turmoil (Liu-Lengyel 1993, 141–150). It is understandable that examples of anti-Communist caricatures are usually nonexistent in the publications of mainland China. However, some interesting reproductions can be found in Western and Hong Kong publications (Holm 1991, 329; Wong 2002, 40–43).

While Chiang Kai-shek was the main target in the caricatures of the Communists artists, it is possible that caricatures of Communist leaders, such as Chairman Mao, existed too. Unfortunately, I have not yet found any visual examples, which is understandable due to the sensitivity of the topic. However, according to Wu Hung some caricatures of Mao have existed. In a Black Painting Exhibition organized by the Red Guards of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, several cartoon images of Mao were included, covered with curtains, and shown only to the Red Guards. They were created in the early 1950s by Zhou Lingzhao (周令钊, b. 1919), a painter of the official Mao portrait in 1949, and Ye Qianyu, (叶钱予, 1907–1996) a cartoonist and professor of traditional painting in the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Wu 2005b, 180–181). At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, caricatures were unquestionably seen as the worst crime of an artist, representing malicious distortions of Mao. Due to the fact that creating any deviating image of Mao was a serious crime, the possibility for any artist in mainland China to produce caricatures of Mao during the 1960s and 1970s is indeed limited, although perhaps, not completely impossible.

2.2 Earliest Existing Caricatures of Mao

Interesting examples of political caricatures are Liao Bingxiong's (廖冰兄, 1915–2006) works, which were exhibited in 1979 at the exhibition of political cartoon art in Guangzhou. Liao's cartoons and caricatures reveal traumatic and even hostile feelings towards the Gang of Four, but the one depicting a satisfied, fat cat wearing emperor's clothes and ignoring three rats stealing fish is intriguing (see

Fig. 1). The text in the image can be translated: "This dignified cat sees the rats but doesn't catch them. Ideally he should be struck from the register of cats so as to avoid passing on this disgrace to the race of cats."[10]

Ralph Croizier (1981, 320) has suggested that the cartoon could be addressing the sensitive issue of Mao's role in the events of the Cultural Revolution. Croizier's claim is based on the fact that the word for "cat" is a homophone for Mao. However, he also reminds us that there are other possible interpretations for this image. If we recall Deng Xiaoping's famous slogan that a cat's color is irrelevant to its ability to catch mice, it is possible that the cat in the image is a representation of any selfish bureaucratic element in the Party. However, it is possible to deny the interpretation of the image as a depiction of Mao and the Gang of Four by pointing out that there are only *three*—not four—rats. I believe that it is also conceivable that depicting only three rats may have been a strategic visual choice by the artist himself: if accused of mocking Chairman Mao, he could rely on this fact for denying such accusations.

Figs. 1 and 2: Liao Bingxiong, 1979. Photo courtesy by Ralph Croizier.

Similarly, Croizier suggests that another caricature by Liao, entitled *Many Tricks of the Ghosts* (*Gui ji duo duan* 鬼计多端, see Fig. 2),[11] could be referring to the Party, or the leader of it, the Chairman himself (ibid., 320–321). The caricature depicts a legendary demon queller, Zhong Kui (鍾馗), a mythic figure, who could

[10] My translation differs slightly from Croizier's original. See Croizier 1981, 320.
[11] The title is a wordplay with homophonous words and refers to an idiom "诡计多端," which means "to be very tricky/crafty."

defeat ghosts and evil spirits. While drunk, as implied in this visual image, he is not paying attention to what is happening around him. Three caricature figures are cavorting around Zhong and making him powerless to act. A male figure is offering Zhong Kui more wine and a female figure is showing him an inscription with the flattering words, "treat evil and slay ghosts so merits and virtues will be boundless" (*zhi xie zhan gui gong de wu liang* 治邪斩鬼功德无量). While concentrating on his cup, Zhong does not notice that the other male figure is stealing Zhong's sword. As a result, he will be incapable of fulfilling his duties in the future. Although it is possible to interpret this image to imply the relation between Mao and the Gang of Four, the references to Mao are more obvious through the representation of a cat in the previous image.

Using a cat as a replacement for Mao's visual image has also been employed by contemporary artists, which strengthens the reading of Liao's work to imply Chairman Mao. For example, in 2007, Qiu Jie (邱节, b. 1961) created a painting entitled *Portrait of Mao* that depicts a cat in a so-called Mao suit, still known in China as *Zhongshan* suit (*Zhongshanzhuang* 中山装).[12] Because of the outfit, the reference to Chairman Mao is obvious, but the title of the painting leaves no chance for misreading.

The text in the painting is a part of a poem written by Mao in the early 1960s to praise plum blossoms in winter (for the poem see, e.g. Barnstone 2008, 104–105). It reads "While the mountain flowers are brightly coloured, she is smiling among them" (*Dai dai shan hua lanman shi, ta zai cong zhong xiao* 待到山花烂漫时，她在丛中笑). During the early 1960s China was encountering difficulties in international relations, and the main idea of the poem was to imply that China would survive the pressure without declining.[13]

If Liao's caricatures represent Mao, then they would be the earliest exhibited visual images with satirizing and even ridiculing sentiments for the Chairman after his death. They would precede Wang Keping's *Idol* (*Ouxiang*, 偶像, see Fig. 3), which has repeatedly been referred to as the first critical reproduction of Mao's image in contemporary Chinese art. Although created in 1978/79,[14] *Idol* was not exhibited until 1980, in the exhibition of *Stars* (*Xingxing* 星星) (Dal Lago 1999,

[12] Reproduced, e.g., in Jiang 2008, 64–65; on Saatchi Gallery's webpage (*Saatchi Gallery*).
[13] I am grateful to Jiang Junxin for pointing out the origin and meaning of the text.
[14] According to the artist, this work was done either late 1978 or early 1979. Wang Keping's email message to the author, 19 May 2011.

51; Köppel-Yang 2003, 120–130). If we bear in mind that cartoons have been regarded as a form of art in China, then we could even ponder over the question: would Liao's work, if representing Chairman Mao, be considered as the earliest published example in Chinese contemporary art? However, in this case, by focusing on the concept of image instead of art, we are able to compare and approach these images without tackling the debate of whether cartoons are art or non-art. The possibility that the Liao's cartoons might refer to Mao is already interesting, and as a result, these early examples do provide interesting approaches to the representations of Mao as caricatures shortly after his death.

Fig. 3: Wang Keping, *Idol*, 1978/79. Copyright by the artist.

Idol has been considered the earliest satirizing caricature of Chairman, although the artist did not intend his work as a caricature. Wang Keping's intention was to satirize the personality cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution by creating a cult object, a Buddha image (Köppel-Yang 2003, 121–122). Despite the artist's aim, I agree with Martina Köppel-Yang (2003, 121) and Wu Hung (Wu 2005a, 50) that this work can be seen as an example of caricaturing Mao. Stylistically speaking, *Idol* does deform the facial features of Mao. Furthermore, without doubt, it combines the facial features of Mao and Buddha, and therefore satirizes the leader's godlike status. To me, the hat is not recognizable as any specific hat, despite the fact that Cohen (1987, 63, caption) sees it as reflecting

Islamic traditions, Köppel-Yang (2003, 120) as a Buddhist headgear and Wu Hung (2005a, 50) as a Russian-style Bolshevik cap. On the forehead is an emblem that Wang argues is a reproduction of an official stamp (Köppel-Yang 2003, 121). A faintly red five-pointed star on the hat clearly connects the image with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). With a slightly mischievous facial expression and one eye partly closed, the statue seems to make fun of the viewer. This impression is emphasized by chubby cheeks and empty eyes without pupils, which are therefore unable to see anything. It seems like the *Idol* is neither willing nor able to pay attention to the real world, but instead is mentally in a transcendental sphere.

2.3 Later Contemporary Artists Caricaturing Mao

Regardless of this first and widely known example by Wang Keping, caricaturing Mao is still a rather rare trend among contemporary Chinese artists. After Wang, the next artist to experiment in this style was Zhang Hongtu (张宏圖, b. 1943). His first art works related to Mao were renderings of Quaker Oats cartons in 1985, simply titled *Quaker Oats Mao*, created in New York. In a phone interview, Zhang said that although he created the first works of this series in 1985, the ones usually displayed and published date to 1987 or later (Zhang Hongtu in a phone interview with the author, 15 March 2008, see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Zhang Hongtu *Quaker Oats* series. Copyright by the artist.

Actually, the image on these containers is not Mao—Zhang has just added a military hat to the original image of a middle-aged man. Zhang said that while living in the United States he usually ate that cereal for breakfast. After a while he just noticed that the man depicted on the cans looked surprisingly similar to Mao. Zhang further explained that after leaving China he thought he could forget Mao's image, which was depicted everywhere in China. On the contrary, he noticed the similarity with the Quaker Oats' man and felt that Mao's image was following him like a shadow (ibid.). Although the original image of the Quaker Oats' man is not deformed, the mere addition of a military hat that Mao rarely wore, except for the earliest publicity image in the 1930s and for greeting the masses at Tian'anmen, converted the original image into a humorous visual implication of Mao.

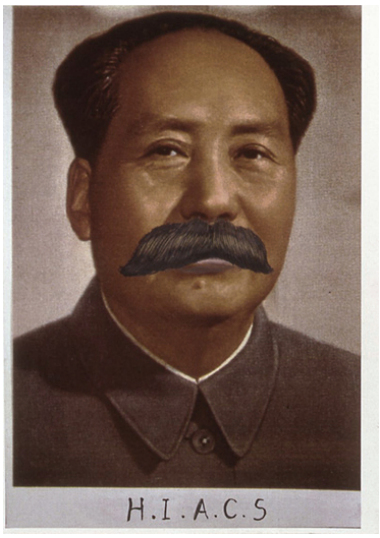

Fig. 5: Zhang Hongtu, *H.I.A.C.S*, 1989. Copyright by the artist.

In 1989, Zhang created the *Chairman Mao* series, which includes several works using laser prints, collage and acrylic on paper. Although Zhang does not actually deform facial features in all these pictures, he nonetheless modifies official portraits, at least by adding some visual elements. While all the images clearly fulfil the definition of parody, most of them can also be considered as representatives of caricature. One official portrait is modified by painting a bold moustache on Mao and is entitled *H.I.A.C.S.* (*He Is a Chinese Stalin*) (see Fig. 5). Zhang is employing Marcel Duchamp's method from *L.H.O.O.Q.* created in 1919:

by adding a moustache on a portrait of *Mona Lisa* and giving the title with letters, the original portrait is transformed.

Obviously, the title *H.I.A.C.S.* is far more political and critical than Duchamp's original pun, which could be loosely translated as "there is fire down below". The title determines the interpretation of this picture and leaves no possibility for a viewer to misinterpret the message. At the same time, the picture can be seen as slightly amusing and terrifying. Due to the very different historical socio-political context of Mao and Stalin, comparing them with each other is contentious. At least Mao's aim was truly to develop the nation, and although many Chinese ended up in unbearable conditions in numerous labour camps, they were not planned to eliminate people in a similar way as in Stalin's death camps. Nevertheless, the work challenges the viewer to reconsider the motivations and outcomes of Mao's policies. As a group, this series of twelve images effectively provokes the viewer to question how Mao has been seen. By using amusing and sometimes even absurd elements, it shatters the respectful aura of Mao's image.

When I asked Zhang Hongtu about his intentions and reasons for parodying Mao's image, he stated that the Tian'anmen events in 1989 affected him deeply. Even though he lived in the United States, he was Chinese and wished China would develop into a more democratic and opened society. With his art Zhang Hongtu wished to support and to assist the democratic movement crushed in Tian'anmen in 1989 (Zhang in a phone interview with the author 15 March 2008). Whether or not he has succeeded in his aim, is another issue because his works relating to Mao have not yet been exhibited in mainland China.

After Wang Keping, the next artist in mainland China to work with Mao's visual image through the deformation of the features, to some extent, was Zhu Wei (朱伟, b. 1966). The deformation of physical features results from Zhu's personal and slightly surrealistic approach. In the context of Zhu's paintings it is essential to remember that physical deformations were previously employed in Chinese art with respectful intentions. Keeping this historical perspective in mind, it becomes obvious that Zhu's oeuvre is not representative of caricaturing in the limited, mocking sense of the concept, but rather in a broader sense, as physical deformations that derive primarily from his own visual expression.

Since 1994, Zhu has developed his own expressive and even slightly surrealistic style based on traditional Chinese ink painting methods. His art is based on his own personal experiences, but the paintings do not document specific

historical events. Instead, Zhu Wei has reflected the socio-cultural changes around him through his personal perspective. The growing emphasis on this personal approach is visible in the titles of his solo exhibitions, *The Story of Beijing*, (*Beijing gushi*, 北京故事) 1996, *China Diary* (*Zhongguo Rizi* 中国日子) 1996, *Diary of the Sleepwalker* (*Mengyou Shouji* 梦游手记) 1998, and *Zhu Wei Diary* (*Zhu Wei Rizi* 朱伟日子) 2000, all held at Plum Blossoms Gallery in Hong Kong.

Zhu's oeuvre as a whole is an illustrative example of the fact that although these paintings include soldiers, political symbols and leaders, the primary meaning has not been to create political art works but instead to explore human relationships (see Zhu Wei's video interview in 1997 in McGuinness 2001; Li 2005, 7, in English p. 11; Smith 2001, 3). Despite re-creating images of Mao, Zhu has strongly objected to the classification of his paintings into a certain style and movement, namely political pop. This is further clarified when Zhu states that, for him, Mao "is an ordinary person, not a bodhisattva. ... I wanted to use him to address a question, as a representation of a generation and as a symbol of an era. His image reminds me of the things that I did at that time" (Zhu Wei in a video interview in 1997, see also a written excerpt reproduced in the section Catalogue, Sculpture and Lithographs. McGuinness 2001).

In his oeuvre, Zhu has depicted Chairman Mao with somewhat deformed facial and bodily features, as all the figures are in these paintings. Nevertheless, due to the mole on his chin, and the hairline, there is no alternative interpretation for the identity of this figure than Mao. In *The Story of Sister Zhao No. 2* (*Zhao jie zhi gushi liang hao*, 赵姐之故事两号, see Fig. 6), 1994, Zhu has decided to add Mao's portrait in the background, but has also deformed his image to be fatter, with smaller eyes. Occasionally Zhu has given Mao's visual image an even more unusual rendering, such as dressing him in an earring and a red outfit resembling that of Santa Claus in *Goodbye, Hong Kong No. 1*, (*Zaijian Xianggang yi hao* 再见香港一号, see Fig. 7) or blindfolding him and placing him on a stage as part of a rock group in *China Diary No. 16*, (*Zhongguo riji shiliu hao* 中国日记十六号 see Fig. 8), both created in 1995. Consequently, he has trans-contextualized and transformed the image of Mao and provided new, imaginary perceptions.

Figs. 6, 7 and 8: Zhu Wei, *The Story of Sister Zhao No. 2*, 1994 (left); *Goodbye Hong Kong No. 1*, 1995 (above); *China Diary No. 16*, 1995. Copyright by the artist.

The level of the deformation of physical features Zhu has employed does not yet turn these images into obvious representatives of caricatures, but nonetheless these paintings are clearly parodying the iconographic visual conventions of Mao by utilizing a slightly humorous edge that could not have been used during Mao's lifetime. Obviously, his main intention has been to re-employ and re-modify Mao's visual image in order to uncover his personal life, desires and dreams in relation to the changing social context as well as entice viewers to do the same.

2.4 Transforming Age and Gender

Occasionally, it has been argued that Mao's appearance had some feminine features, such as plump lips and soft delicate hands. Some of the artists have utilized these notions and developed them further in their art works. A surprising caricaturing of Mao's image as a woman is created by the Gao Brothers (高氏兄

弟, Gao Zhen 高焱, b. 1956 and Gao Qiang 高强, b. 1962). Their *Miss Mao* series includes several statues made of fiberglass and digitally manipulated photographs of these statues. Two series of sculptures in different sizes and with brilliant colours were created with the titles *Miss Mao No. 1* and *Miss Mao No. 2* in 2006 (see Figs. 9 and 10). The titles of the individual works of art include the colour of the statue, like *Blue Miss Mao No. 1* (see, e.g., Gao Brothers 2006). In these series, Mao's face is modified to look rather childish, with plump cheeks and an elongated snub nose that resembles Pinocchio's. The expression on his face is always mischievous, his eyes are turned to look at something to the upper left, and the well-known mole on his chin is clearly visible. Furthermore, the Gao Brothers have transformed these bust size statues to resemble female bodies with big breasts.

Figs. 9 and 10: Gao Brothers, *White Miss Mao No. 1*; *Red Miss Mao No. 2*, 2006. Copyright by the artists.

Why depict Chairman Mao as a woman? In an interview, the Gao Brothers explained that because Mao was originally considered the father-mother of the nation, they decided to create an image that would reveal this (the Gao Brothers in an interview with the author, 20 June 2008). A similar idea of Mao as a bisexual or omnisexual figure, "the ultimate father-mother official (*fumu guan* 父母官)" praised in literature and music, is expressed by Geremie Barmé (1996, 20–21). The idea of Mao as the only appropriate parent to children is visible in the political posters of Mao's era, in which children are seldom portrayed with their parents, but instead with Chairman Mao.

This amalgam of genders in representations of Mao is related to the notion that the Party represents a mother to all people (Kóvskaya 2007, 9; Karetsky 2007, 12). Without doubt, to claim that Mao was the father-mother of the nation was to justify the ultimate power that he eventually had by invoking the traditional concept of filial piety. Obviously, the father-mother would know what is best for the offspring and the nation, and as a respectful descendant, your duty was to respect and obey your elders. The justification for that status of Mao is nevertheless cleverly questioned in these *Miss Mao* sculptures. By adding the nose of the Pinocchio, the ultimate allegory of lying, the Gao Brothers have visualized their claim that "Mao was a persistent liar" (Gao Bothers in Karetzky 2007, 12).

In addition, the Gao Brothers have created another kind of caricature of Mao: a very childish looking image of a baby boy. One of the earliest works from this series is *Little Mao's Cyber-tribe*, where fifty-six small faces of baby Mao are reproduced in small frames side by side (see Fig. 11). The reference to Andy Warhol's works is obvious and as a result, Mao is turned into a cute commodity with an amusing impression. In some works, the image of this doll-like baby boy is further utilized by placing it in absurd surroundings, such as in the art work *Flying No. 1* from 1999 (see Fig. 12).

Fig. 11: Gao Brothers *Little Mao's Cyber-tribe*, 1998. Copyright by the artists.

Fig. 12: Gao Brothers *Flying No. 1*, 1999. Copyright by the artists.

Instead of merely parodying the previous visual images of Mao by deformation of physical features, the Gao Brothers are also trans-contextualizing the context in which Mao was usually depicted. Similarly to Zhu Wei, they are not limiting their approach to modifying only the features of Mao, but indeed, they are re-placing him in surreal surroundings such as flying on a saucer in the blue sky or lingering above Tian'anmen Gate.

3 Conclusions: Methods of Violating the Visual Norms

Employment of caricature by contemporary Chinese artists in relation to Mao can be regarded as a form of trans-contextual parody because the artists are targeting the visual conventions of Mao. Although caricaturing Mao has been a rather rare trend among artists, they are using varying visual methods in their art, as the examples discussed above clearly show. Besides the quite common conventions of caricature, such as adding a moustache, modifying the facial features, or depicting the person as an animal, artists have re-formed the image further by other means. By utilizing visual signs related to Mao (sunrays, a military hat), Zhang Hongtu has transformed other images to imply Mao, while Zhu Wei has resituated Mao in a completely new context and the Gao Brothers have even modified his age and gender.

Overall, these examples demonstrate how artists are using a value-problematizing form of parody that perceives history through critical distance and,

because of the emphasis on difference and irony, enables the viewers to question the previous politics of representations of Mao. Without doubt, they are not representing Jamesonian pastiche. In addition, because they are violating the visual norms concerning Mao's images, I regard them as representing a trend that Wu Hung has called "counter images" (Wu 2005b, 165–190). Nevertheless, they do not only deface Mao but indeed also *re-face* him providing possibilities for new interpretations and meanings.

As I argue elsewhere, trans-contextual parody is only one of the main four artistic strategies that contemporary Chinese artists have employed in relation to Mao. In addition, as an artistic strategy, trans-contextual parody includes various methods, targets, and intentions, and it is not always mocking the main figure in the image, but can also be used to show reverence towards that person, or to criticize the context in which the image was created (Valjakka 2011). In the case of caricaturing, the approach is somewhat more limited, but still is *not* one-sided, aiming only to ridicule the main figure, Mao himself. Indeed, as shown above, artists are questioning the norms of production and perception of Mao in the changing Chinese society.

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So Sorry—Never Sorry. Ai Weiwei's Art between Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

Ai Weiwei's 艾未未 (b. 1957) artistic expression revolves around his use of traditional Chinese techniques to create new designs and forms, shaping traditional materials into contemporary configurations. In the face of obstruction from state officials and local politicians, Ai Weiwei exposes himself to considerable personal risk in order to continue his activities as an artist and stay loyal to his convictions. This paper examines the roots of Ai Weiwei's work in Chinese art history and looks at how the artist has deliberately adapted traditional motifs to bring about a sense of alienation. Ai Weiwei's unique stance between current trends in western art and the Chinese feeling for handicrafts is also explored.

Keywords: traditional Chinese materials, contemporary art, Chinese politics, re-contextualization of Chinese tradition

Izvleček

Umetniško izražanje Ai Weiweija (r. 1957) se vrti okrog uporabe tradicionalnih kitajskih tehnik, da bi ustvaril nove vzorce in oblike in oblikoval tradicionalne materiale v sodobne podobe. Da bi kljub oviram državnih uradnikov in lokalnih politikov nadaljeval svoje dejavnosti kot umetnik in ostal zvest svojim prepričanjem, izpostavlja samega sebe precejšnji tveganosti. Pričujoči članek proučuje korenine njegovega dela v kitajski umetnostni zgodovini in prikazuje, kako je umetnik namerno prilagodil tradicionalne motive, da bi dosegel občutek odtujenosti. Ravno tako je prikazan Ai Weiweijev edinstven

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položaj med trenutnimi tendencami v zahodni umetnosti in kitajskim občutkom za rokodelska dela.

Ključne besede: tradicionalni kitajski materiali, sodobna umetnost, kitajska politika, re-kontekstualizacija kitajske tradicije

1 A Year in the Life of Ai Weiwei

When in October 2009 *Haus der Kunst* in Munich opened the large retrospective exhibition of Ai Weiwei's 艾未未 works entitled *So Sorry*[1], nobody anticipated the extent to which the presentation of this artist's work become so politically controversial in the months that followed. In the run-up to the exhibition, Ai Weiwei was beaten by police in Chengdu and, as a direct result of the injuries he sustained, was later treated in a Munich hospital. Further conflicts with the authorities in Sichuan ensued (Osnos 2010), and he organized a demonstration in early 2010 in Beijing to draw attention to the plight of a group of artists threatened by local authorities with eviction (Lorenz 2010). On October 8, 2010 Ai described the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo 刘晓波 (born 1955) both in his own blog and on *Twitter* as the happiest moment in the history of the People's Republic of China (Hahn 2010). And when he was prevented from leaving the country shortly before the award ceremony, this did not go unnoticed by the international press (BBC News 2010).

A highly provocative action directed at Chinese officialdom was the announcement by Ai Weiwei in November 2010 that he would mark the forced demolition of his Shanghai studio with a party at which river crabs would be served. The artist was promptly placed under house arrest for seven days in Beijing. His friends and supporters staged the party in Shanghai without him under the watchful eye of the secret police, the press, and onlookers round the world. Ai's recently built and costly art studio was bulldozed away shortly afterwards (ArtSchool Vets! 2011).

But it is not only in China that Ai Weiwei's art stirs considerable controversy, causing him a lot of problems and attracting much media attention. Like all unusual new ideas or attempts to confront the public with something different, something previously not seen, his works are an irritant to the pertinent authorities,

[1] *Ai Weiwei—So Sorry*, Oct 12, 2009–Jan 17, 2010, *Haus der Kunst*, Munich.

whether these are conservationists or public health agencies. Thus, after just four days on show in the *Turbine Hall* of London's *Tate Modern*[2], his *Sunflower Seeds* installation was roped off to visitors on health grounds. As a result, the interactive and hands-on character of the artwork was lost (Herzog 2011). Another case in point is Ai Weiwei's contribution to the *Regionale 10* festival in Austria: this involved the placement of a four-ton boulder from the earthquake region in Sichuan on the Dachstein, the highest peak in the Steiermark. The Austrian Alps Society protested sharply against the project on environmental grounds (Spiegler 2010).

Since his exhibition in Munich, then, much has happened to Ai Weiwei in terms both of his artistic production and his political activism. But if things had been quiet, that would be a clear indication that his art had missed its target.

2 The Artist as Political Activist

Ai Weiwei was born in 1957 as the son of Ai Qing 艾青 (1910–1996), one of the most renowned communist poets in the early years of the People's Republic of China. After his father was banished to the provinces in 1958, he was raised in Manchuria and Xinjiang. He enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy at the age of 21. His fellow-students included Chen Kaige 陈凯歌 (b. 1952) and Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 (b. 1951), who later became prominent film makers. Between 1981 and 1993 he lived and worked in New York, where he immersed himself in contemporary Western art forms and encountered performance, photography and conceptual art. When his father fell ill, Ai Weiwei returned to Beijing in 1993. "So sorry" said the authorities when they rehabilitated his father in 1979. "So sorry", that's all, for 20 years in exile. These two words have become a kind of *leitmotif* in Ai's art, they are a constant incentive for his outrage at the actions of the Chinese regime: its *pro forma* apologies, or its failure to apologize, its cover-up of tragedies or of institutional or human misconduct, and its refusal to provide proper information and to take personal responsibility. All of this fuels Ai Weiwei's actions and initiatives in which he exposes the lack of political integrity of this great and increasingly confident political power. According to Ai, as long as the government persists in its present policies and as long as there is unwillingness to

[2] *Sunflower Seeds*, Oct 12, 2010–May 2, 2011, *Turbine Hall, Tate Modern*, London.

accept responsibility, it will not be possible to build a genuine civil, democratic society (Dercon and Lorz 2009, 8).

In an interview with former CNN correspondent Christian Amanpour, Ai Weiwei said, when asked about his father's intellectual legacy:

> From being very young it was clear in my mind that this (Chinese) society has no humanity for people who disagree with it and that it cracks down hard on them (CNN 2010).

It is precisely this society without humanity that he denounces both in his political actions and in his art. Ai Weiwei's life, his thinking and his artistic actions are an ongoing dialogue with China's political practices. Art and politics cannot be separated from one another in his work, because in everything that surrounds him and makes up his own identity, his own body and organs, he sees a political dimension. "Art is life and life is art" (Dercon and Lorz 2009, 9) is Ai's maxim. The two are inextricably interlinked, clearly present in every aspect of their interaction and, because of this, perhaps invulnerable. Ai Weiwei takes high personal risks and, despite interference by the political authorities and administration, he remains true to the incorruptible, truth-seeking driving force behind his art and social activism.

Thus, his campaign in Sichuan directly after the serious earthquake in 2008 was aimed at telling the truth to the people whom it had affected. A disproportionate number of children died in the school buildings that collapsed one after another because building and safety regulations had been violated. When Ai Weiwei asked the planning and licensing authorities some unpleasant and critical questions, he received no reply. He then began to make his own investigations, with the help of hundreds of volunteers. They gathered facts, figures, and evidence, traced the names of over 5000 children who had lost their lives in the so-called "tofu schools" and established their age, date of birth, the exact place where they had died and the construction errors that had caused their school to collapse. When at the beginning of August 2009, shortly before the opening of his exhibition in Munich and after his efforts to investigate the Sichuan earthquake, Ai Weiwei was to testify in court in defence of his fellow-campaigner, author and activist Tan Zuoren 谭作人 (b. 1954), the police raided his hotel room and held him and his volunteers for eleven hours—until the trial was over (Ai 2009, 8). A photograph that was taken during this incident and immediately published on the internet was circulated very quickly and became an iconic symbol of political repression and

human rights violations in present-day China. When his hotel room was stormed, Ai Weiwei received a severe blow on the head, which later resulted in a life-threatening brain haemorrhage. He posted the following commentary on his blog:

> They beat me so hard that I may easily have suffered lasting damage…I can afford the treatment, but thousands of my fellow Chinese who are abused by the police every year cannot (Bork 2009).

Ai Weiwei used the internet to talk about the consequences of this abuse, his subsequent admission to a hospital in Munich, and the brain surgery that followed. He posted photographs of his CT scan, his catheter, his hospital bed and his room on various web sites as a kind of logbook. With these postings, he was taking a clear stand against the suppression of free speech and directly denouncing the brutal assault by the security forces for which there had been no legal basis.

But thanks to this altercation the "Sichuan Earthquake Victims" project became more and more of a political issue. The subject was featured prominently on the façade of *Haus der Kunst* during the retrospective of Ai's works in 2009/2010: The artist installed 9000 red, green, blue and yellow children's backpacks along the length of the 100 metre long façade of the building, arranging them in a kind of mosaic to form the Chinese characters: "她在这个世界上开心地生活过七年". These are the words of a mother who neither asked for nor wanted financial compensation for the loss of her daughter in one of the schools that collapsed in the earthquake. She simply wanted her to be remembered, because "she lived happily for seven years in this world". (*Remembering* 2009)

3 "For a Harmonious Society, Eat River Crabs!"

"Down with the Confucian shop!" was the enraged battle-cry of the Beijing students who staged protests on May 4, 1919 and who saw Confucius as the root of the malaise in the Chinese state. "From whatever angle you look at it, Confucius is disgusting!" says Ai Weiwei 90 years later in his *Tweeter* and claims that Confucius is the root of the malaise in the Chinese state today (Custer 2010). But his anger is directed primarily at the Confucian-influenced notion of harmony (*he* 和), and thus at associated catchwords such as "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), the slogan that has officially represented China's political course since October 2004, since the 4th plenum of the Central Committee elected

by the 16th Party Conference (Wacker and Kaiser 2008, 7). The Chinese leadership also propagates the concept of harmony, of peaceful co-existence, on the level of international politics: For example, when Chinese President Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 addressed the UN General Assembly in September 2005, he spoke of a "harmonious world" (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界), without further comment (Wacker and Kaiser 2008, 9f.). Harmony in politics and society, in the microcosm and the macrocosm, has become a fixed term in the official political ideology. In Zhang Yimou's dazzling opening ceremony at the Olympic Games in 2008 "harmony" (*he* 和) was the *leitmotif* of the ostentatious choreography. The China's attitude towards religions, too, is changing in line with the political re-orientation: They are no longer viewed as the "opium of the people" but rather as a positive force that can contribute to building a "harmonious society" (Wacker and Kaiser 2008, 10). It is also clear, however, that for the regime to achieve this "harmonious society", in spite of resistance from divergent and disruptive elements, it has to deploy such instruments of power which are diametrically opposed to the term "harmony": censorship, surveillance, arrest, and arbitrary prison sentences.

Since the new slogan was introduced, Communist propaganda has plastered the country with so much "harmony" that the political exploitation of the term is all too obvious and the political objective has been defeated. "I've been 'harmonized'" write China's internet activists and bloggers, when yet again one of their commentaries on the web has been censored or one of their websites shut down. But as a rule they use the character for "river crab" (*hexie* 河蟹), because the word "harmony" itself is increasingly falling victim to censorship. Thus, the word "harmony" has evolved into a "river crab" and has become synonymous with censorship (Bork 2010).

Taking up this wordplay with bitter irony and artistic creativity, Ai Weiwei organized a party to mark the forced demolition of his newly built studio in Shanghai, where guests would be served river crabs. The artist's reaction to his own powerlessness in a situation where no reasons were given for the demolition of his studio, a situation that was a blatant example of political repression, reveals a subversive sense of humour and a kind of creativity which must strike officialdom as suspicious and objectionable. The action gave further momentum to the open criticism of the Chinese authorities: By eating river crabs, his guests would be symbolically devouring the abused notion of "harmony", which itself was threatening to devour them through the authoritarian control and censorship

they encountered every day. The party went ahead without the artist, because Ai was put under house arrest in Beijing for seven days. Despite this, some 800 guests came to Shanghai from all over China and protested with the traditional, but this time symbolic, river crab feast against censorship and repression. Many of them held the crabs up in the air like trophies and shouted: "For a harmonious society, eat river crabs!" (Freyeisen 2010).

4 Tradition is Dead—Long Live Tradition!

Like so much of Ai Weiwei's work, this action is somewhere between a concrete political statement and an artistic expression. His art is inconceivable without China's specific history and culture. He deconstructs tradition, and in this critical process he discovers a deep-rooted bond with tradition, both in his work and within himself. Essentially, Ai Weiwei deconstructs tradition, estranges or defamiliarizes it, re-interprets it and, finally, reassembles it. Traditional motifs can be found in almost every artefact that the artist makes or defamiliarizes. But, according to Ai Weiwei, it is only by breaking with the past and creatively defamiliarizing it in the present that a liberated future can be created, a future that is free of historical baggage. The main source of all creativity can only be found by taking this approach: "Creativity is the ability to reject the past, to change the *status quo* and to look for new potential." (Ai and Siemons 2009, 9)

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn (1995), a series of photographs that documents the art performance of the same name, is probably the best known example of Ai's de-contextualizing traditional objects and was made in his iconoclastic phase in the mid-1990s. The dropping of an ancient pot is the close-up documentation of an act of destruction, which happens within fractions of a second. It is a perfect illustration of the three Newtonian laws of motion: Ai Weiwei holds the urn (inertia), the urn is in free fall (principle of action), and the urn smashes at his feet (principle of reaction); it is also a demonstration of the law of gravity, the earth's gravitational pull, and creative destruction which makes room for new creativity. At the same time, the Han Dynasty urn embodies a cultural tradition which has outlived its usefulness. The black and white triptych transforms this two-thousand-year-old artefact into a different artwork, gives it a new permanence and a new critical relevance. The value of the original is replaced by the "valuelessness" of the fake (Liveauctioneers).

Ai Weiwei has applied bright paint to vases that date back to pre-dynastic China and transformed them into Pop Art objects[3]; and he has decorated a *Han Dynasty Urn*[4] with the *Coca Cola* logo. These are similar iconoclastic actions, where the artist reinvents traditional objects and makes their re-contextualization possible. He refers to these works as *fake-fate* (Hill 2008). The vases, though now "wrapped" in a modern design, continue to exist in the showcases of museums and galleries. But where the *Coca Cola* logo melds with the Neolithic, and where bright acrylic colours lend the faded surface of an antique vase an irritatingly commercial banality, time ceases to exist: It is no longer visible either in tradition or in modernity, either in the original or in the fake—it has ceased to exist.

The re-assembly of Qing Dynasty furniture into surreal, unfamiliar looking objects that have been divested of their function represents a break with the traditional notions of authority and authenticity in ancient China. Like his artistic forbearer Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), who coined the terms *ready-made* and *objet trouvé* at the beginning of the 20th century and who was regarded as the initiator of conceptual art, Ai Weiwei assembles everyday objects like doors[5] and furniture[6], coat hangers[7] or bicycles[8] in unexpected ways. This conceptual interaction—through the intention of the artist and through the new site—gives the ready-mades an entirely new meaning, which has nothing in common with the original object.

Ai's art bears strong traces not only of Marcel Duchamp, but also of object artists like Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) and graphic artists and painters like Jasper Johns (b. 1930), the prominent exponents of Pop Art. Even the "extended art concept" and "social sculpture" of Josef Beuys (1921–1986) appears to be mirrored in Ai Weiwei's actions and artworks. What distinguishes his work is that he is constantly moving between the cultures of East and West. Traditional Chinese art culture meets free, unrestrained Western art forms. A case in point is Ai's design for the *Beijing National Stadium*, built for the *Summer Olympic Games* in 2008 in cooperation with the Swiss architects *Herzog & de Meuron* (World News; Building Bejing Stadium 2008): It is reminiscent of an antique Chinese clay water bowl made or a porcelain rice bowl.

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[3] *Colored Vases*, 2005, 2006, 2008.
[4] *Han Dynasty Urn with Coca Cola Logo*, 1994.
[5] *Template*, 2007.
[6] *Table with Two Legs*, 2005; *Stools*, 1997; *Grapes*, 2008.
[7] *Profile Duchamp*, 1985.
[8] *Forever Bicycles*, 2006.

Ai Weiwei's close bond with his homeland is also clearly apparent in his "social sculptures" such as *Fairytale*, an action for which 1001 Chinese were invited in 2007 to the *documenta XII* arts festival in Kassel, Germany. Kassel, the town in which the Brothers Grimm lived and worked from 1798 to 1839 and which is the setting for a number of their fairytales, is today clearly marked by the physiognomy of the modern age. Selected from all sectors of the population and including farmers, teachers, students, artists, housewives and engineers, the *Fairytale* participants formed a very heterogeneous group indeed. What they all had in common and what distinguished them from their surroundings and made them recognizable was their homeland, the People's Republic of China. For many of them the opportunity to travel to Europe was a dream come true, an unexpected twist of fate that only occurs in fairytales by the Brothers Grimm or in the Tales of 1001 Nights. Their clothes, lunch bags, luggage and accessories were all designed by Ai Weiwei and his team: They were made into "social sculptures", recognizable as part of the exhibition. Commenting on his idea, Ai Weiwei said:

> To bring 1,001 Chinese to Kassel is to create the wherewithal such that each participant has the chance to confront him or herself with their own ordinary lives and at the same time to attend one of the major festivals of contemporary art. It's all about the personal experience, awareness, and consciousness as well as the direct confrontation and enlightenment they experience through the whole process. I believe this is the most important and meaningful experience that can be derived from cultural exchange (Seefranz 2007).

In his Fairytale action Ai Weiwei showed how the town of Kassel could be seen through the eyes of the Chinese, who are conditioned by quite a different understanding of and relationship toward the traditional and the modern. And vice versa, the action altered the appearance of the town, making it possible for the people of Kassel to see their own town differently. In the hundred days of *documenta XII* 2007 this act of integrating two different lifestyles, East and West, "cast a spell" on day-to-day life in Kassel in the manner of a fairytale; it left a lasting impression on the consciousness of everyone involved and created encounters which opened the way for something new, something that had never before been experienced.

Ai Weiwei is one of the rare mediators between Western forms of expression and Asian appreciation of traditional craftsmanship. His objects—made of porcelain, carpet, tea, paper and wood—are of the highest quality and are a testimony to the skills and painstaking work of many craftspeople. This perfection

in craftsmanship is a further acknowledgement by the artist of his own tradition and his own roots. Thus, several years of intricate work preceded the *Sunflower Seeds* exhibition in London, with some 1,600 craftspeople in Jingedezhen 景德鎮, the centre of porcelain making, involved in the production of porcelain sunflower seeds. With this laboriously crafted installation, in which each of the hundred million seeds were fired at a temperature of 1300 degrees centigrade, painted by hand on both sides and fired again at 800 degrees, according to the ancient porcelain-making process, Ai Weiwei was seeking ways of transposing a traditional technique into the language of present-day art. The production process was entirely traditional, which means that from the making of the clay to the finished sunflower seed there were between twenty and thirty stages. Groups of artisans in small workshops worked together closely and played their different parts in the various production stages. Work could also be taken home and done alongside the worker's household chores (Sunflower Seeds 2010). As with so many of Ai Weiwei's works, the message of the installation is multi-layered. It varies from the question of the relationship of the individual to the collective and criticism of mass production to allusions to the need to share in times of deprivation and hunger. A sunflower with its myriads of seeds also stands for the Chinese people, who turned towards the true light of the sun, Chairman Mao (Thomas 2010). Each seed, each person, is unique, distinctive in the potentiality of his or her individual expression and in this respect must be appreciated. But only together do Ai Weiwei's hundred million sunflower seeds cause a gigantic sea of porcelain to sound like the ocean and allow visitors to the *Tate* to become immersed in a new realm of experience, which may have nothing to do with China but may recall memories of one's earlier life or a long forgotten walk on a pebble beach.

A further example of an intricately hand-crafted object is Soft Ground, a 380m^2 woollen carpet woven specially for the exhibition in *Haus der Kunst, Soft Ground* (2009). It is a precise copy of the floor in hall 2 of the Munich museum, an accurate reproduction of the 969 rectangular tiles that make up this floor. Each tile segment was photographed and its position accurately recorded. It then took ninety days for the carpet to be traditionally woven in a state-owned weaving mill in Hebei 河北 province. During the production process the colours and lines of each segment were fashioned accurately and woven in wool died in a combination of threads made of six strands (Ai et al. 2009, 53). With his carpet project, Ai Weiwei was responding to the *genius loci* and engaging in a dialogue with the

ideology-steeped history of *Haus der Kunst*. This exhibition building, which was commissioned by Adolf Hitler, is built of German lime stone rather than Italian marble, and because this material is less resistant to abrasion, it bears the clear traces of the past seventy years, rather like a topography of time. On the obvious level, the woollen carpet covers the old worn stone floor. In fact, however, the ambiguity of the imitation emphasizes rather than conceals historical reality. The carpet also creates a thick buffer that muffles the sounds of the immediate present but at the same time permits the visitor to become immersed in the time dimension of an inglorious past.

Ai Weiwei's soft, thick carpet also symbolizes China's relationship to its own history, when in the imperial era outstanding craftsmanship and artistic expression flourished. Ai is addressing the relationship between the level of artistic and technical production and the level of political consciousness. In other words: To what degree can art develop freely under an authoritarian regime? For Ai Weiwei, freedom of artistic expression, both in form and content, is only possible if traditional craft techniques and freedom of artistic expression are preserved. Though *Soft Ground* provides no final answer to this question, the subtle dialogue between materials and functions is thought-provoking indeed.

Though influenced in his artistic expression by Western forebears and styles, Ai Weiwei has chosen to use only traditional Chinese materials here. In this way, the significance of tradition only becomes apparent through its elimination, a double negative so to speak: The de-contextualization of tradition transforms it into a new artwork.

5 In Praise of the Net and Freedom

Alongside these more or less conventional art objects are digital pictures and messages such as emails, blogs and particularly commentaries posted on *Twitter* or the Chinese equivalent, the microblog site *Weibo* 微博, all of which are indispensable components of Ai Weiwei's direct engagement and political activism. His website is closely monitored, censored, and regularly shut down by the Chinese authorities. Implied criticism of the regime, wordplay or comments that upset the authorities simply disappeared, albeit for a short time only. The site is quickly reinstated under a different web address; this cat and mouse game is ongoing. Although the authorities are now on the same technical level as internet

users and are spending huge sums of money on controlling and censoring the net, there are still many ways of circulating uncensored information and expressing opinions. Critical and candid web users are Ai's main audience, his harshest critics and his staunch supporters. Commenting on the significance of the internet in China, he says:

> I think we were different people before the arrival of internet technology. We humans can now be influenced in a different way. We can also exercise our rights on very different channels or exercise power in different ways. This versatility means redefining both the individual and society (Friedrich-Freksa 2010).

Through the massive spread of digital media the interaction between the individual and the collective is in the process of being redefined in China, too, and this is inevitably creating a new consciousness in the digital public sphere: The fundamental right of every individual to be allowed to question things without fear of reprisals is being expressed. And here lies the key to individual and collective freedom.

Ai Weiwei's artistic and public actions are clear reactions to and critical comments on the political and social reality in his homeland. In his work he does not belong to the Western avant-garde. His use of craft traditions and techniques that have been handed down in China through the ages reveals the artist's desire for direct expression rather than "intellectual sublimation". In the special tension between Ai Weiwei's deep roots in his own cultural tradition on the one hand and his clear position vis-à-vis China's political reality on the other, his artworks are trailblazers of a new, deeply political, re-oriented, free-thinking and creative Chinese contemporary art. They convey a true impression of the elemental importance of political and artistic freedom to him, because his art and his life are based on a radical desire for self-determination. To conclude my essay, I would like to quote Ai's own words in praise of freedom:

> My life is characterized by having no plan, no direction, and no goals … I can throw myself into the things that I like, and because there are no obstacles, I can never be trapped (Ai and Siemnons 2009, 21).

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