

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: BEYOND NATIONALISM: THE WORK OF XU
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Beyond Nationalism: The Work of Xu Jianbai in Maoist China, 1949-1979, examines the life and work of the contemporary Chinese painter Xu Jianbai (1925 –) as an access point to reconsider Chinese art under the period of Mao Zedong as a more complex and varied narrative than what has been relayed by traditional scholarship. The project considers the biography of the artist, especially her training under Lin Fengmian and in the United States and later persecution, as a key component to understanding her choice of style and subject matter. In the thesis, I argue for a more inclusive history of Chinese painting from this era. Paintings by artists like Xu Jianbai, which one might dismiss as non-representative of art at the time, are actually an entry point into a broader understanding of the divisive and varied culture and politics in China under the dictatorship of Mao Zedong.

BEYOND NATIONALISM: THE WORK OF XU JIANBAI IN MAOIST CHINA,
1949-1979

By

Madeline L. Gent

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | ii |
| TABLES OF CONTENTS..... | iii |
| LIST OF FIGURES..... | iv |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS..... | vi |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| An Artist's Education..... | 6 |
| Return to China..... | 14 |
| Painting and Political Pressure..... | 24 |
| Xu As Professor..... | 38 |
| Conclusion..... | 46 |
| IMAGES..... | 50 |
| English Bibliography | 51 |
| Bibliography..... | 53 |

List of Figures

Figure 1

Old Tree on Dongshan Island, Xu Jianbai, 1986, oil on canvas

Figure 2

Self-Portrait, Xu Jianbai, 1944, oil on cardboard

Figure 3

Untitled (Drawing Study from Chicago), Xu Jianbai, 1948, ink, pastels, and charcoal on paper

Figure 4

Bodhisattva, Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), ca. 725/50, limestone with traces of polychromy, 157.5 cm (62 in.), Lucy Maud Buckingham Collection, Art Institute of Chicago

Figure 5

Untitled, photographer unknown, 1949, photograph (set in Guangzhou; Xu Jianbai second from the right)

Figure 6

Chairman Mao Presenting His Report on the Rectification at a Cadres Meeting in Yan'an, Luo Gongliu, 1951, oil on canvas

Figure 7

Lianhuanhua 连环画 [Picture-story book illustrations], detail of cover, Xu Jianbai and others, 1950s, ink on paper

Figure 8

Zhapogang 闸破港, Xu Jianbai, 1956, oil painting

Figure 9

Buwang 补网 [Mending the nets], Xu Jianbai, 1959, oil painting

Figure 10

A Photo Taken in Front of the Old Dwelling, Xu Jianbai, 1964, oil on canvas, National Art Museum of China

Figure 11

Untitled, photographer unknown, photograph (Huang Xinbo posing on left)

Figure 12

Kaiguo Dadian 开国大典 [The founding of the nation], Dong Xiwen, 1953, oil on canvas, NAMOC

Figure 13

Kaiguo Dadian 开国大典 [The founding of the nation], Dong Xiwen, Jin Shangyi, and others, 1953, 1974, further revisions made into the late 1970s as well, oil on canvas, NAMOC

Figure 14

Buwang 补网 [Mending the nets], Xu Jianbai, 1973, oil painting

Figure 15

Fengyuhou 风雨后 [After the rainstorm], Xu Jianbai, 1972, oil painting

Figure 16

New Doctor in the Fishing Port, Chen Yanning, 1974, oil on canvas

Figure 17

Untitled (Oil Painting Studies), Xu Jianbai, c. late 1970s, oil sketches

Figure 18

Humen kangying 虎门抗英 [Anti-British memorial at Humen], Xu Jianbai, 1974, oil painting

Figure 19

Dunhuang Pusa 敦煌菩萨 [Dunhuang bodhisattva], Xu Jianbai, 1980, oil on canvas

Figure 20

Untitled, Xu Jianbai, 1980, oil sketch

Figure 21

Xiangjiang 湘江 [Xiang River], Xu Jianbai, 1978, watercolor

List of Abbreviations

| | |
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| CAA | Chinese Artist Association |
| CFA | Central Academy of Fine Arts (Beijing) |
| CPC | Communist Party of China |
| NAMOC | National Art Museum of China (Beijing) |
| NFA | The National Fine Arts Academy (founded in Hangzhou, but in exile in Chongqing during the Second Sino- Japanese War) |
| PLA | People's Liberation Army |
| PRC | People's Republic of China (established in 1949 under the leadership of the CPC and Mao Zedong) |
| ROC | Republic of China |

Introduction

Scholarship on Chinese painting from 1949 to 1979, the era of Mao Zedong (毛泽东, 1893–1976), traditionally places paintings into one of three categories: social or Soviet realism, *guohua* (国画) or Chinese brush-and-ink painting, and the rarely studied folk-art tradition because the Chinese Artist Association during this period would through their weight behind one medium or the other. There was intense government control over culture in the newly established socialist state of the Communist Party of China. Artists for the most part aligned their ideas and style with these categories. Painted using oils, social realist art focused on the human narrative of the nation. Highly idealized and romantic, these works are dominated by dark gray and brown tonalities. Aside from a stylistic hegemony, scholars also assume that the subject and themes of all Chinese art from this time do not vary from the visual and aesthetic standards of the ruling artistic associations under Communist Party control in the People’s Republic of China.¹ In art historical scholarship on this era, we can specifically see the influence of Fredric Jameson, both a literary critic and a political theorist, who analyzes work from “third world” countries defined as exemplary of the nation-state allegory.²

This thesis will attempt to challenge the ‘definitive’ account of the nation-state allegory by interweaving a new narrative of twentieth-century Chinese art

¹ Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” in *Social Text* no. 15 (Autumn 1986): 65–66.

² *Ibid.*

history. The title, “Beyond Nationalism,” reacts to this overarching notion that all art from this period symbolizes the nation-state. This paper will examine the artistic career of Xu Jianbai, a painter active in Guangdong province from 1949 to 1989. Because of her aesthetic style, artistic training, and family background, it is amazing that she survived the cultural and political upheavals in China, let alone painted or produced a large body of work. Her art and personal narrative deepen and enrich the history of Chinese art under Mao Zedong. During a period when the idea of community reigned, she produced and perpetuated an artistic style outside the mainstream. Her work both engages and goes beyond the national and dominant styles of Chinese oil painting during the twentieth century.

My research for this thesis starts with the foundational scholarship in English on this time period. In particular, the 1994 work of Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China: 1949–1979*, Michael Sullivan’s *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* from 1996, and *A History of Art in 20th Century China* by Lü Peng from 2010. As for the scholarship in Chinese, I seek to add my voice to the growing trend of rediscovery and appreciation for artists attempting to negotiate the intense political and cultural climate of China, which includes the 2007 symposium at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing devoted to the art of Xu Jianbai.³

³ Prepared statements by speakers at the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium* (held May 16, 2007) were made available in Chinese and in English abstracts. Citations below are to the English version.

Other scholars like Craig Clunas, Julia Andrews, and Kuiyi Shen have devoted their recent work to the unearthing of information on artists like Xu Jianbai. See Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *Blooming in the Shadows* (New York: Chinese Institute in America, 2011).

Xu Jianbai's work and the paintings of similar artists have often been lost or omitted in the canons of Chinese art history and modern and contemporary art history. In some cases the art of this time has been openly ridiculed, as in the 2008 show in Shanghai, "Cao Guoqiang's Maksimov Collection."⁴ Historians, critics, and artists alike have a hard time separating the art of this period from the political circumstances and time. They view this art as inextricably linked to historical events, and so as either propaganda or political commentary. As a result, they dismiss it as homogenized and move on to more recent eras.

Art historical scholarship in English on this time period of Chinese art misguidingly ignores artists like Xu Jianbai. This omission is not altogether incomprehensible when one becomes aware of state censorship, and even more so, self-censorship of artists under authoritarianism. Xu Jianbai did not aggressively engage the political atmosphere during her time in Guangzhou, but rather attempted to express her own style within a stringent system. In comparison, artists like Xu Beihong, Li Hua, and Lin Fengmian dominate scholars' conversation because they worked in the cultural and economic centers of Shanghai and Beijing.⁵ To the Euro-American eye, the post-impressionistic style of Xu Jianbai appears out of date and place in the mid-to-late twentieth century. The paintings also defy the official Chinese narrative of her day and appear formally distanced from the work of her

⁴ Julia Andrews, "Art under Mao, 'Cai Guoqiang's Maksimov Collection,' and China's Twentieth Century," in *Writing Modern Chinese Art: Historiographic Explorations* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2010), 53–69.

⁵ Though feminist issues of art historical method are intentionally not applied in this paper, it should be noted that most if not all of the English scholarship on this subject concentrates on male artists, in particular those named above.

contemporaries. For these reasons as well, scholars may be unsure how to classify her work within its historical bounds.

This thesis is not without its challenges, the foremost being the gaps between language and history. I have provided a list of abbreviations commonly used in scholarship of this period after this introduction. Because of the original dependence on the Soviet model, I use the terms *socialist realism* and *Soviet realism* interchangeably until the disintegration of the Sino-Soviet pact in the late 1950s and early 1960s. After the dissolution, this painting model still dominated as a style and teaching method, but Chinese artists sought out other styles and sources. As a result, artists from this period still cite soviet models as their source, even though a huge rift exists between the two countries and political parties.

Though research in the literature has been invaluable, the time I personally spent with the artist, her family, colleagues, and a former student allowed me to gain further insight into her work and China at that time. I have incorporated these interviews conducted with the artist and her family, in particular her youngest daughter Janet Tan, as well as a brief interview with her student, Mian Situ.

Xu Jianbai's biography is far from unique. Millions suffered economically, politically, and culturally under the choices made by Mao Zedong; but contextually her artistic style differs drastically from those around her. By closely examining her life, her artistic training, and various pieces from her oeuvre, this paper seeks to add another artist to the evolving canon of twentieth-century Chinese modernism, who not only lived through the drastic political upheavals of the twentieth century in China,

but also produced a large body of work that looks quite different from those of her compatriots or comrades.

An Artist's Education

In 1986 Xu Jianbai (徐坚白, 1925–) painted *Old Tree on Dongshan Island* (Figure 1). The painting features a single tree growing out of a steep and unwelcoming hillside. Its thick and sturdy trunk reaches downward and transforms into its various roots, grasping firmly onto the land's edge. The viewer cannot help but look at the tree and wonder, how did that tree make it, how did that tree survive?

By 1986, Xu had survived the Japanese invasion of China (1937–1945), a civil war (1927–1950), the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–1961), The Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1967–1974), to name the major catastrophic events in the history of twentieth century China. When Xu Jianbai returned to China from studying abroad in 1949, she did not attempt to hide her family's economic and academic history. Her father studied philosophy at Beijing University under the great literary reformer Hu Shi (胡适, 1891–1962), who fled with the Nationalist Party to Taiwan. He later became a banker, as did her brother. This family background, defined by capitalist notions of the economy and society, greatly differed from that of the proletarian farmer, the class Mao Zedong would define as essential to Chinese socialism. Her painting style differed greatly from the state-favored socialist realism and the traditional Chinese brush-and-ink painting. When one reads her biography with even a basic knowledge of Maoist Chinese history, one cannot help but wonder how the artist and her work survived. Even more than her personal history, her artistic training proved anything but ideal for survival. From 1941 to 1945 she studied with Lin Fengmian (林風眠, 1900–1991)

at the National Fine Arts Academy (NFA). Shortly after, in 1953, the state condemned Lin and forced him to resign. Prior to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) rise in 1949, Xu Jianbai studied in two institutions in the United States, later considered one of China's greatest military enemies due in part to America's involvement in wars in Korea and Vietnam and its relationship with the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan.

When we return to the painting, we can see that the tree is solid, and its limbs branch out in every direction. Though a cloudy day, the atmosphere or mood is not depressing. The tree's roots reach deep into the rocks and soil of the riverbank, at times becoming one with the land. The tree does not precariously dangle on the rock's edge, but rather thrives in its environment.

Xu Jianbai started painting at a very young age, and throughout her studies in China and the United States, she dug deep into various artistic traditions to establish a unique style. When one looks through her various paintings and places them within the context of China under the thumb of Mao Zedong, they appear both out of place and yet perfectly part of their time, like the old tree grasping on the steep side of the hill on Dongshan island.

At the age of sixteen, she entered the NFA, then at Chongqing. Lin Fengmian, one of the great early twentieth-century Chinese painters, had established the NFA at Hangzhou. The students, faculty, and administration fled to Chongqing during the Japanese invasion of World War II, also known as the Second Sino-Japanese War. Throughout his teaching career, Lin Fengmian tutored some of today's most recognizable and prominent figures in twentieth century Chinese art that now work

both inside and outside of China like Zhao Wuji (赵无极 Zao Wu-ki, 1921–), Wu Guanzhong (吴冠中, 1919–2010), and Xu Jianbai’s future husband, Tan Xuesheng (谭雪生, d. 2011). From 1941 to 1945, she studied with Lin Fengmian in Chongqing, establishing important personal and professional relationships with her fellow artists.

By 1941, Lin Fengmian’s reputation as the leader of the Chinese modern arts movement had dwindled.⁶ Political maneuvering by his rivals and the upheavals of the Japanese invasion left the once-emboldened artist and art theorist much more reserved and quiet. According to his young pupil, the teacher no longer spoke of searching for a universal, pure art like he had in his 1927 essay, “A Letter to China’s Artistic Community.”⁷ Rather, he instilled in Xu Jianbai an even greater artistic skill—observation of both the world around them and other artistic genres. He advised the young painter and her fellow students to look at the paintings from various cultures, including their own, and to be open to their influence.⁸

During her time at Chongqing, Xu Jianbai completed several self-portraits, including one that Lin Fengmian complimented (Figure 2).⁹ This self-portrait features the young woman from her shoulders up. She turns toward us, not quite fully frontal. Her mouth is closed. Her hair is down and swept away from her face, revealing a

⁶ Tang Xiaobing, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 96.

⁷ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 23, 2012. See Lin Fengmian, “A Letter to China’s Artistic Community” in *Shanghai Modern: 1919–1945*, trans. Michael Fei (Munich: Museum Villa Stuck, 2004), 371.

⁸ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 23, 2012.

⁹ Janet Tan (artist’s daughter), interview by the author, Falls Church, VA, February 2, 2011. Tao Yunbai, in abstracts of the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium* (National Art Museum of China, Beijing, China, May 16, 2007)

gentle gaze. She catches the gaze of the viewer, but only out of the corner of her eye. She is a young girl, but confident.

In 2011, this painting was included in a retrospective of women's self-portraits in China at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CFA).¹⁰ The curators of the show sought works that encapsulated a very humanistic approach to the subject matter; the self-portrait as an image of how women see themselves, how women artists show emotion both on their own faces and in their art, and how these pieces create a narrative of the shared experience of Chinese women artists in the twentieth century.¹¹ However, this latter institutional frame is too allegorical for the artist's work at this time and speaks again to the trend of showering all Chinese art from this period with some sort of metaphor. At this point in Xu's life, though living through a war, she was still experimenting with form and color. Her off-centered pose and searching gaze point to this idea: while confident in her own hand, she is still learning. Like the paintings of her teacher, her work exhibits formal connections to the paintings of the French Fauvists, especially in the brushwork and the unnaturalistic color in some low-lit areas of her face.¹²

Self-portraits serve a practical end for painting studies. Students, whether male or female, have to paint what is available when mastering shape, form, and

¹⁰ Li Zemei ed., ““Ziwohuaxiang’ Nvxing yishu zai zhongguo bainian licheng huigu” 自我画像”女性艺术在中国百年历程回顾 [The female “self-portrait”: a review of the past one hundred years], *exhibit.artron.net* (December 2010), accessed December 16, 2010, http://exhibit.artron.net/show_news.php?newid=140150.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² David Clarke, “Exile from Tradition: Chinese and Western Traits in the Art of Lin Fengmian,” *Oriental Art* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1993–94): 23–25.

line.¹³ This learning to look at objects or sites proves even harder during times of war, when travel and supplies are limited. Xu Jianbai recalled a time when she and her fellow students ate the fruit used for the still-life painting class—fruit that the professor had intended to take home to feed his own family.¹⁴ By painting their self-portrait, artists could represent the same figure (object) in multiple ways, allowing them to practice various formal and aesthetic techniques.

The painter also honed her skills by painting portraits of her fellow classmates. Aside from formal studies, the face provides an easy way to engage visually arrange of human emotions on a two-dimensional surface. In this practical context, the self becomes the easiest and most convenient model for a young artist.

Due to traditional societal roles imposed on women and due to the burgeoning civil war, the painter found few working options in China after her four years at Chongqing. Upon graduation, Xu Jianbai taught at the *Nanjing Second Middle School*, until, with the help of Christian missionaries, she obtained the needed permissions and paperwork to continue her art education in the United States. In 1947, she began her American education at Nazareth College in Kentucky.¹⁵ Later that same year, she joined the student body at the Art Institute of Chicago as the only student from China then enrolled.

At Chicago, the faculty challenged the artist to return to the building blocks of oil painting in a way the wartime situation at Chongqing had not allowed. A series of studies in design the artist completed at Chicago still exists in her family's private

¹³ Janet Tan, interview by the author, Falls Church, VA, September 13, 2011.

¹⁴ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 23, 2012.

¹⁵ Located in Louisville, Kentucky, the school changed its name to Spalding University in 1984.

collection. In a drawing from Chicago, the artist draws a study of a Buddhist figure in ink, oil pastels, and watercolor (Figure 3). The artist practices line, color, texture, volume, and dimension. The Buddhist figure is a bodhisattva, a person that has reached enlightenment but puts off nirvana in order to help others. The work features a seventh-century Tang Dynasty bodhisattva acquired by the Art Institute in 1930. (Figure 4). The figure's cross-legged pose, elaborate hairstyle, and dress all align with Xu Jianbai's study; in some instances, the artist even imagines the placement of the lost arm. The artist employs Chinese art history not only in the choice of subject matter, but also in the undulating and calligraphic line in one study of the object. Though never a fully executed painting, early on in her career Xu Jianbai used Chinese iconography. This series of sketches on the sheet of paper utilizes Tang Buddhist imagery for the artist's exploration and analysis of formal techniques. Though done in the United States, these sketches hint at her later, deeper engagement with Chinese art history. In her oil painting classes as well, her professors forced her to rework many of the habits she had picked up in Chongqing, perhaps as a result of the lack of materials. Before Chicago, Xu Jianbai had grown accustomed to using a knife when painting her canvas, but a professor in the United States made her set her knife aside and hone her fine brushwork skills.

While in Chicago, Xu Jianbai could see firsthand many of the artists that she had only heard about from her teacher or very rarely seen in reproductions. By this time, the Chicago Fine Arts Institute already housed a large anthology of work, including growing Impressionist and Post-Impressionist collections of Bertha Honoré

Palmer and Helen Birch Bartlett.¹⁶ Because her funds were limited, the young artist worked in a restaurant during her time in the United States to afford books on Degas, Cezanne, Van Gogh, and many others, books that would return to China with her. Her earlier teacher, Lin Fengmian, inspired her interest in French impressionism. In 1918, a young Lin Fengmian had traveled to France under a work-study program. In Dijon he studied under sculptor Herbert Yencesse at the *École Supérieure des Beaux Arts*. After Yencesse, Lin studied in Paris at the *École de Beaux Arts* under history painter, portraitist, and teacher of Gauguin, Fernand Cormon. Xu Jianbai's time in the United States also opened her eyes to the burgeoning American art world. She made various trips to American museums and galleries—including one to New York, where she visited MOMA, then in a much smaller space, and in another gallery viewed paintings by Jackson Pollock.¹⁷ Because her home was raided during the Cultural Revolution, many of these books and pamphlets no longer exist. According to the artist, her students, and her daughter, these small books contained a collection of paintings by these European artists, probably highlights of the collection of Chicago and other museums the artist visited.

When examining Xu Jianbai's later career and life, we must consider how anomalous her earlier education was. Today, the artist still recalls with amazement the artistic educational opportunities she had as a young painter. This gratitude only grows when she compares her early training to the one received by the artists she taught in China for thirty-plus years. When the artist returned to China in 1949, her

¹⁶ For more information on Chicago's collection see Art Institute of Chicago, "1916–1939: Bridging the Tracks," accessed October 1, 2011, <http://www.artic.edu/aic/aboutus/wip/bridging/index.html>.

¹⁷ Janet Tan, interview by the author, Falls Church, VA, February 2, 2011.

experience in the United States would separate her from her colleagues initially stylistically and later politically.

Return to China

In 1949, the artist left Chicago, her degree unfinished, and returned to China with the hope that Mao's burgeoning PRC could supply her with an artistic career. According to editor of the journal *Fine Art* and art critic, Tao Yunbai (陶咏白, Tao Yongbai), Xu Jianbai returned also "because she was an idealist and wanted to serve her country."¹⁸ The China to which she returned was still racked by civil war. The hostilities rerouted her ship from Shanghai to Hong Kong, where she met up with her future husband and fellow artist, Tan Xuesheng.

The political landscape of China Xu Jianbai returned to differed greatly from the one she had left in 1947. In 1949, the Kuomintang fled the mainland of China to the island of Taiwan, where they maintained independence as the Republic of China. On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong and members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) stood atop a gateway in Beijing's Imperial City and officially announced the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

In Hong Kong, Xu joined a larger movement of artists and activists called the "Humanistic Painting Society" or "Humanity Society for Paintings" (人间画会).¹⁹ She started to attend local party meetings. At that point, the young artist was unsure what exactly the revolution meant. Her only contact in Chicago with the CPC, outside of letters home to Tan Xuesheng, had been a fellow Chinese student who used their

¹⁸ Tao, in abstracts of the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium*.

¹⁹ For more on Xu Jianbai and other painters in this group see Janet Tan, *Wo de Meishu Shijie: Siren jiyi zhongde Lingnan meishujia* 我的美术世界：私人记中的岭南美术家 (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2011).

social circle of Chinese students studying abroad to push the CPC agenda.²⁰ The Hong Kong meetings proved the first taste of a new way of life in China: daily marching drills for the takeover of Guangzhou, daily self-criticisms, and daily educational sessions.²¹

In 1942 in Shaanxi province in front of a group of intellectuals and artists, before Xu Jianbai had even entered school in Chongqing, Mao Zedong theoretically defined the role of art in China's future. His speech took into consideration both Stalin's ideas on art and the situation of the fledgling party in the mountains of Yan'an. Stalin's theories on art first appeared in the Soviet journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta* on May 25, 1932. These theories were further explicated in 1934 at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. Like Mao after him, Stalin never defined the stylistic or visual qualities of socialist realism.²² Instead, Stalin's representative in cultural affairs, Andrey Zhhanov stated that Stalin believed artists were "an engineer of the human soul" and should "depict reality in its revolutionary development."²³ Paintings and sculptures were judged for abstract political characteristics like the ability to show the leadership of the ruling party or to depict class awareness.²⁴ The lack of specific stylistic guidelines caused Soviet artists to pull from the past for aesthetic guidance. Many artists emulated the style of nineteenth-century realist painters like Gustave Courbet (1819–1877). Although recent scholarship on this style

²⁰ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 23, 2012.

²¹ Ibid.

²² David Elliott and Piotr Juszkiewicz, "Socialist Realism," in *Grove Art Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998–), accessed November 25, 2012, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T079464>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

of art and this period in the Soviet Union has shown how pluralistic the works actually are, socialist realist paintings of the USSR have been noted for their monumental scale, heightened realism, and idealization of heroic figures like Stalin, Lenin, and Marx.²⁵

From the conference with the exiled academic and artistic community in Yan'an, only Mao's words remain, testifying to his unyielding influence over the party. Recorded and published multiple times over his tenure, the "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" became the guidelines for Chinese art under the CPC until Mao's passing.²⁶ Mao set the party's cultural ideology, which it would carry into its eventual governmental policy on arts and literature.²⁷

During the talks, however, Mao never laid out a stylistic or formalistic approach to art. Rather he focused on why the work and artist served the state. According to Mao, art needed to act as a tool both to educate the rising peasant class and to transform the individualism of the party's members into a collective whole.²⁸ He also considered the artist to hold a professional position, something that had previously existed in China only in the form of the court painter. As political science professor Richard Curt Kraus notes, "Although Maoist practices harshly limited the personal independence of artists, cultural reforms of the 1950s for the first time

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ For a complete translation of the text see: Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text With Commentary* (Ann ArborMI: Center for Chinese Studies, 1980).

²⁷ Jerome Silbergeld and Jisui Gong, *Contradictions: Artistic Life, The Socialist State, and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 6–8.

²⁸ Ibid.

assured steady employment and improved working conditions for China's artists."²⁹ Mao stated at Yan'an, "Proletarian literature and art are a part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; as Lenin said, they are "a screw in the whole machine," and therefore, the party's work in literature and art occupies a definite and assigned position within the party's revolutionary work as a whole."³⁰ As Jerome Silbergeld points out, Mao borrowed from the statement attributed to Josef Stalin that artists must be "engineers of human souls."³¹ The China before Mao offered limited professional options to women. Therefore, we can see the appeal the CPC held for artists abroad and female painters like Xu Jianbai to join Mao's cause.

Through his speech and its later publication Mao implored his audience, including artists, to immerse themselves in the lives of people surrounding them. "Workers in literature and art are unfamiliar with the people they write about and with the people who read their work... Our workers in literature and art are not familiar with workers, peasants, soldiers, or even their cadres." At Yan'an, the party members day-in and day-out relied on the local people for every quintessential need; but, according to Mao, their education under the ROC government had distanced them from the people of China. Mao's talk aimed to address that notion of disconnectedness. The CPC repeatedly published these talks throughout Mao's tenure, and this idea of the out-of-touch intellectual class set the standard for the party's policy on re-education for the coming decades.

²⁹ Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arty in China: New Politics of Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2004), 144.

³⁰ McDougall, *Talks*, 75.

³¹ Silbergeld and Gong, *Contradictions*, 6.

In preparation for the CPC takeover, artists in Hong Kong collaborated on a painting project for their march to and arrival in Guangzhou. As members of the “East River Brigade” (Dongjiangzongdui, 东江纵队), Xu Jianbai and other painters hand-delivered a larger-than-life-sized portrait of Mao to Guangzhou. Through earlier guerilla warfare, the PLA gained control over the region. The East River Brigade marched over three hundred miles from Shantou to Guangzhou to ceremoniously mark the PLA’s victory. Before the march, the artists created a massive portrait of Mao Zedong to hang on the Guangzhou Aiqun Dasha, in the center area of the city (Figure 5). Artists had painted the image on smaller, more portable pieces and installed the work in Guangzhou. In extant photographs of the painting in situ, many young artists stand in a square before the building with the portrait towering above them.³² The photograph features Xu Jianbai among her male colleagues. They all wear a plain and simple uniform while they proudly stand in front of the painting of Mao. In the painting on the building behind them, a standing Mao raises his right hand to greet and address the people. The five-pointed star of the PRC, representing the five classes of China, sits over his left shoulder. This portrait announced to Guangzhou the official arrival of Mao Zedong and the CPC as the new government of China. Similar images blossomed overnight in China as the CPC took over, and they pointed to a near future heavily invested in figurative art—in particular, socialist realism exported from the USSR.

³² A photograph from Lü Peng’s *A History of Art in 20th Century China* (Milano: Charta, 2010), 519, of the image of Mao in Guangzhou features only some of the male artists who worked on the painting. Peng also names only the known male artists: “Guan Shuanye, Yang Qiuren, Huang Xinbo, Wang Qi, Huang Mao, and others...”

Artists used this pose of Mao, raising his hand to address his people, again and again in party imagery of the chairman. In a later 1951 painting by Luo Gongliu (罗工柳, 1916–2004) titled *Chairman Mao Presenting His Report on the Rectification at a Cadres Meeting in Yan'an*, Mao extends his hand outward to address and teach the group gathered before him (Figure 6). Instead of the five-pointed star over his shoulder, Luo painted prints of portraits of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, insinuating that Mao was the rightful heir of their communist ideology.

From 1950 to 1953, both Xu Jianbai and her husband worked as lecturers of fine arts at the South China People's Literature and Art Institute in Guangzhou; they continued even after 1953, when the school shortly moved to Wuhan. During this time, the Chinese government established the Chinese Artist Association (CAA). The CAA was established to monitor and control the creation and display of any cultural product in China from this time. The CAA held the First National Exhibition of Art in 1954 and selected some of Xu's works for the show: *Young Girl* [?] and *Female Soldier* [?]. The current location and condition of these works is not known. In 1956, the National Fine Arts Museum (NAMOC) in Beijing collected two other contemporaneous paintings by the artist, *The Morning of Steel City* and *Old Woman*.

In 1957 the school became the Guangzhou Fine Arts Academy with a staff of roughly ten to fifteen teachers at any given time. Of all the teachers, only Xu had studied painting outside of China. By 1957, over half of the teachers had studied in Beijing at the CFA under the Soviet model. Though never directly mentioned in the classroom, the entire campus of Guangzhou knew that she had studied abroad in the

United States, then considered one of China's greatest political enemies because of American political and military support of Chiang Kai-shek's Republic in Taiwan.

Because Mao never specified a particular national style in his talks at Yan'an, the CAA looked to their big brother up north, the Soviet Union, as an artistic guide for style and teaching methods. As a result, oil painting surpassed traditional brush-and-ink painting to become the medium and therefore style of national painting in the PRC.³³ The CFA in Beijing, now under state control and Soviet artistic influence, passed down a curriculum devoted to the socialist realist style that celebrated the heroic figures of the revolution. The Soviet Union even sent Konstantin M. Maksimov (1913–1993), winner of the Stalin Prize, in February 1955 to teach oil painting at the CFA in Beijing for two years.

The intense and romantic Soviet realism stands in stark contrast to the post-impressionistic work Xu Jianbai so deeply admired in Chicago's collection. Therefore, the young artist-teacher attempted to introduce her students to the methods and style Lin Fengmian and the Art Institute Faculty had introduced to her. Though she could not openly lecture on the European or American methods, Xu Jianbai attempted in her teaching to include references to styles outside of the Sino-approved Soviet model.³⁴

She maintained a more personal relationship with her students than her colleagues at Guangzhou. When students had afternoons free of lecture or class, the artist invited her students into her home to look at her work. A painting student in the 1970s, Mian Situ, noted this unique relationship Xu had with her students. "Professor

³³ Julia Andrews, "Art Under Mao," 58.

³⁴ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 22, 2012.

Xu was open to conversation.... Other teachers didn't dare to speak [openly] and related all art to the revolution."³⁵ Even then she was weary of negative sentiment from her colleagues and others in Guangzhou due to her family history and studies abroad.³⁶

Aside from oil painting and teaching, Mao Zedong's push that "art occup[y] a definite and assigned position within the party's revolutionary work" meant that Xu Jianbai had to participate in group work and other forms of state-sponsored art. In the early 1950s, Xu Jianbai and other artists worked together in the "Land Reform Art Creation Team." The artists collaborated on *lianhuanhua* (连环画), literally "picture-story book illustrations." Jiang Feng (江峰, 1910–1982), a printmaker during the Communist revolution and an influential bureaucrat under the Maoist regime from 1949 to 1957, wrote about the popularity and usefulness of the *lianhuanhua* in his article "美术工作的重大发展" [*Meishu gongzuo de zhongdafazhan*, Major developments in fine arts work],³⁷ published in the CAA publication *Meishu* (美术), Jiang stated, "The serial picture-story books...have long widespread popularity among the masses.... These works have now become one of the mediums for propaganda and education, and are the most popular reading among the masses."³⁸ *Lianhuanhua*, along with the new New Year's prints, were part of a movement by the

³⁵ Mian Situ, interview by the author, Laguna Beach, CA, 24 March 2012.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Lü, *History of Art*, 483. For more detail about Jiang Feng and his bureaucratic role in China see Julia Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China: 1949–1979* (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1994).

³⁸ *Meishu gongzuo de zhongdafazhan* "美术工作的重大发展", from 美术 *Meishu* (October 1958), quoted in Lü, *History of Art*, 483.

CAA to use mediums within the Chinese folk-art tradition already familiar to the viewer.³⁹ Because of the mass production of these texts, the CPC and CAA saw the *lianhuanhua* as an incredibly useful and cheap tool to reach the Chinese people. Even though the books were strictly regulated, the state printed 89,554,000 picture-story book volumes from 1951 to 1954.⁴⁰

The piece Xu Jianbai and her colleagues collaborated on tells the story of an ideal or model military spouse (Figure 7). During this time, the PLA fought alongside the future North Koreans in the Korean civil war (1950–1953). The *lianhuanhua* depicts a Chinese woman, wife of a soldier presumably on the front lines, overcoming her own personal and political trials back in China. She faces an evil landlord, a remnant of the reign of the previous regime, and raises her children alone. Yet, she is a triumphant and celebrated character throughout the text. Xu Jianbai drew all of the figures for the work, which proves that her colleagues already noted and admired her talent. The cover of the storybook features only the model military spouse. Shown in three-quarter profile, she does not make eye contact with the viewer but rather looks heroically off into the distance. On her shirt is pinned a flower and ribbon identifying her as both a military spouse and as a heroic and decorated figure.

When the NAMOC in Beijing opened in 1953, a large and varied collection from the long history of Chinese art was put on display. The collection “shocked” the young artist.⁴¹ Because she had focused her study on the history of oil painting in Europe, she had overlooked Chinese art, aside from of her study in Chicago of the

³⁹ Lü, *History of Art*, 481.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 483.

⁴¹ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 22, 2012.

bodhisattva.⁴² When her students in Guangzhou dismissed their Chinese art history class, the teacher pushed her students to attend their course, stressing the opportunity they had to attain a greater grasp of their history.⁴³ Between the show in Beijing and her own engagement with the *lianhuanhua* illustration, the artist engaged artistic traditions native to China.

When Xu Jianbai returned to China in 1949, the future appeared both bright and ominous. Mao's talks at Yan'an made painting a profession backed by the state, but painters also had to participate in the party system of education and self-criticism. As a professional, she also had to join in group art projects and she came to appreciate the art of China's past. However, an ominous feeling existed throughout this time because she knew both her education in United States and family background fell outside of the boundaries of party ideals.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Painting and Political Pressure (1957–1974)

In order to rout out political dissidence, Mao called in 1957 for “a hundred flowers to bloom.” His words presented an atmosphere of open intellectual debate and even hinted at political pluralism. On February 27, 1957, he expressed these ideas in a speech titled “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People.”

Mao pronounced:

“Let a hundred flowers bloom, a hundred schools of thought contend”.... If you want to grow only [fragrant flowers] and not weeds, it can’t be done.... To ban all weeds, and stop them growing, is that possible? The reality is that is not. They will still grow.... It is difficult to establish fragrant flowers from poisonous weeds.... Take for example, Marxism. Marxism was [once] considered a poisonous weed.⁴⁴

The speech eventually led to criticism of the party itself on posters and various demonstrations. Yet, by the spring, the movement sparked by the speech served its purpose of bringing anti-party thought into the spotlight. That April Mao Zedong turned the tables on those practicing “open” speech and began the “Anti-Rightist Movement.” From the spring of 1957 to the summer of 1958, over a half million people were labeled as reactionary and forced into various forms of reeducation. At the CFA in Beijing, Jiang Feng’s rivals named him the “number one rightist in the world” and dismissed him from his post as president of the Beijing academy.

Jiang Feng had been a printmaker during the Communist revolution and an influential bureaucrat under the Maoist regime from 1949 to 1957. He wrote for major art publications like *Meishu*, and at one point, he served as the director of

⁴⁴ Phillip Short, *Mao: A Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 460.

Chinese Artist's Association. However, the changing political tide swept aside Jiang's influence and career.

Included in the list of criticisms of the artist-turned-bureaucrat were his avid support of the Soviet model in teaching and painting over *guohua* and his alleged allowance for the teachers at the NFA at Hangzhou to use a "western" curriculum.⁴⁵ The Chinese artistic community learned of the charges against and the purge of Jiang Feng through the press. One can easily assume that Xu Jianbai's eventual persecution was the result of paranoia. Her colleagues turned their finger on her and criticized her work, rather than seeing a finger turned on them. At this time, Xu Jianbai never openly taught or acknowledged the influence of her studies in the United States, but she could never hide her overseas training. Artists, like almost every other individual in China, had to attend regular CCP meetings. Here, current international or local events would be presented and analyzed through the controlling lens of the party. It was also during these meetings that individuals were forced to undergo self-criticisms. During these self-criticisms a person openly acknowledged their history in the hopes that through recognition they could move forward in the party. However, these meetings meant that an individual's life history was revealed to all in attendance and often recorded. For Xu Jianbai, the result of these earlier meetings was that from 1958 to 1961, Xu Jianbai was forbidden to paint or teach.

Recalling both this first moment of professional and artistic restriction and a later period during the Cultural Revolution (discussed below), Xu Jianbai likened the

⁴⁵ Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 190–200.

experience to being crammed into a ceramic pot.⁴⁶ Since her 1949 return, she devoted herself to understand the ideological and political motives and methods of the party. During our interview, Xu Jianbai recollected that in 1949 “when I realized what the revolution was, from that moment on, I improved myself according to doctrine.”⁴⁷ Even when she could paint or teach again, she still faced the consequences of this early prohibition and later persecution and forced labor during the Cultural Revolution. “I sometimes think I am like the cartoon Liao Bingxiong drew of this person who lived in a pot for all these years,” the painter noted. “Once the pot is broken...he still shrinks together in a position like he still lives in the pot.... It’s not easy to free yourself from invisible restraints.”⁴⁸

From 1958 to 1961 she worked as an office secretary at the Guangzhou Fine Arts Academy. Though Xu Jianbai had worked within the party’s structure, her family background suggested she was associated with ideas threatening to Maoist thought. When she was born, Xu Jianbai’s family represented a new generation of Chinese intellectuals.⁴⁹ Her mother and her aunts had studied at one of the first universities for women students in Beijing. Her father studied philosophy at Beijing University under the great literary reformer Hu Shi. The state placed her elder brother, a banker, in a labor camp during the Anti-Rightist Movement, where he remained until his death sometime in the 1960s.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Xu Jianbai, in abstracts of the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium*.

⁴⁷ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 23, 2012.

⁴⁸ Xu, in abstracts of the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium*.

⁴⁹ “Biography of the Artist,” in abstracts of the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium*.

⁵⁰ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 22–23, 2012.

Xu Jianbai's painting style remained the largest target on her back. Her colleagues and others labeled her an "extreme rightist." They criticized the painter in front of the entire school. They accused her of teaching *xingshizhuyi* (形式主义) or formalism, a style seen as a polemic against the social realist model. Three of her colleagues from Guangzhou had already been sent to a labor re-education camp. Because she was in her third pregnancy and was married to Tan Xuesheng, an early member of the CPC, the artist association eventually granted her some leniency.

Though she could not officially paint from 1958 to 1961, the artist painted in her own private time. She painted on whatever material was available, often discarded cardboard or pieces of wood. From this period is a series of portraits, now in the family's private collection, of the artists' three children. Each picture, small in size, focuses on the face of the child. In the painting of her youngest daughter, we find evidence of the artist's lifelong interest in color. Xu Jianbai appears to utilize color in a playful way, showing a tender relationship between mother and child. The unusual use of color in certain areas hints at shadows and highlights on the child's face like the Fauvists before her. The palette is also reminiscent of the artist's early self-portrait from Chongqing.

The other extant paintings from this period are various small landscape or genre scenes, which were sketches done quickly on site for personal use, most likely models for future painting. In comparison to the works featuring Mao Zedong or other heroes of the revolution, the figures that take part in Xu Jianbai's work function as part of the scene, rather than the focal point. Their form and movements are expressed by a few quick brushstrokes in rich and vibrant colors. This quick and

sketch-like quality of her art from this time can be seen in an earlier piece from 1956. Titled *Zhapogang* (闸破港), the work features a harbor scene of fisherman returning with a full day's catch (Figure 8). She paints each fish with a quick brushstroke of bright color. The strokes run both in parallel and perpendicularly, suggesting the fishes' bodies flopping this way and that on the boat's deck. The artist spends little time distinguishing facial features or types, but rather focuses on the positioning of the boats and the hustle and bustle of the harbor. In the 1959 painting *Buwang* (补网), or *Mending the Nets*, a large net or a series of nets lay stretched out over the field (Figure 9). The individual fishermen sit hunched over, mending various sections. The real subject matter of the image appears to be the color, in particular the rich green ground and plant life and the soft yellow, purples, and whites of the cloudy sky.

One might tend to read the subject matter—the impoverished fishermen mending nets or the daily life of working in the harbor—as part of a larger pro-worker and anti-capitalist metaphor. If one does this though, one neglects to take into account her persecution by the state. The painting also reflects a more personal taste of the individual artist and points to her interest in post-impressionistic styles during her time in Chongqing and Chicago. Because of its bright and fluid style and the fact that it emerges during a period when the state prohibited the painter from working, a piece like this one does not draw connections to CPC rhetoric or Maoist ideology but rather shows a parallel narrative to socialist realist painting extant at this time.

By 1962, the ruling artist groups and associations officially lifted her ban on painting. One reason for this shift in cultural attitudes was the weakening cultural influence of the USSR. After Joseph Stalin's passing in 1953, China-Soviet relations

slowly dwindled away. As early as 1956, the Chinese press criticized the soviet state for “chauvinistic” tendencies in state and party politics.⁵¹ Though the exact charges remained vague, the state-controlled press in Beijing openly cited faults in USSR. Such an unprecedented move by the government caused the intellectuals of the party to look elsewhere for academic and aesthetic guidance. This move away from the USSR and the soviet model may be one motivation for the decision to allow Xu Jianbai to paint again in 1962, and those around her celebrated her skills as an artist. Her works were included in provincial art exhibitions and published in regional and national journals like the Guangdong Provincial Art Exhibition.⁵² One painting from this time currently resides in the collection of the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing, *A Photo Taken in Front of the Old Dwelling* (Figure 10). In the painting, a family of five proudly stands or sits in front of the ruins of their previous home in Yangjiang county, Guangdong province. The dwelling, a houseboat, points to a prior life dependent upon the fisherman’s catch. On the side of the houseboat, the artist paints the characters for *bù wàng* (不忘), “do not forget.”⁵³ In the distance lies a construction site with cranes and trucks—icons that celebrate modernization and industry.

Even the title, *A Photo Taken in Front of the Old Dwelling*, implies a more modernized China. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photography in

⁵¹ *More on the Historical Experience of the Proletarian Dictatorship*, (Peking: January 1957).

⁵² Woman’s Fishing Boat for the Guangdong Provincial Art Exhibition; Ocean published in Southern. “Biography of the Artist, in abstracts of the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium*.”

⁵³ I would like to thank my colleague Jingmin Zhang, PhD candidate at the University of Maryland, for pointing this out to me during an informal presentation on October 7, 2011.

China served either as portraiture for the upper and middle classes or as documentary or journalistic evidence.⁵⁴ After the 1949 Revolution, photography began to be used as propaganda by the CPC. Artists used photography to stage their heroic and romantic realist paintings. In a series of photographs in the private collection of the family of print artist Huang Xinbo (黄新波, 1916–1980), Huang and his colleagues pose for study and potential use in later visual projects. They aim rifles, take a hit, and aid a fallen comrade (Figure 11). Xu Jianbai also often used photography in her professional work during this period, and this painting references it in both title and form. Xu points to photography through the painting's contrast between the bright light that washes over the figures and the dark shadows cast behind them. The family is arranged in a downward-pointing triangle that tapers in the figure of the young infant. The infant, who suggests the future of China, grasps a small toy in her hand: a new, more sleek and modern fishing boat.

In the same painting, however, Xu Jianbai alludes to greater party politics and policies at play. The painted text 'bù wàng' derives from a phrase issuing a call to arms. This proclamation served as a reminder of China's other state, the ROC on the island of Taiwan.⁵⁵ While I will not take the time here to delve into PRC and ROC relations in this thesis, we should consider Guangzhou's seaside location and proximity to Taiwan as a reason the artist referenced this cause in her work. Xu

⁵⁴ On photography and its use in China before the 1949 Revolution see Jeffrey W. Cody and Frances Terpak, eds., *Brush and Shutter: Early Photography in China* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011).

⁵⁵ I thank Professor Minglang Zhou at the University of Maryland for pointing this out to me.

Jianbai's painting directly references the CPC's desire to take Taiwan and unite China under the PRC's socialist state.

Every year local and national artist organizations called for artists to submit one work for annual local exhibition. At the provincial level, Guangdong, a few were selected to represent all the artists in the province on the national stage. Though the school hesitated and even disliked Xu's *A Photo Taken in Front of the Old Dwelling*, the provincial level of the CAA selected her painting for the national exhibitions. The NAMOC, construction of which was complete in 1962, acquired the piece. Articles introducing the painting appeared in *Fine Arts* (美术) magazine and the CPC newspaper *The People's Daily* (人民日报), along other paintings in the national show.⁵⁶

As successful and celebrated as *A Photo Taken in Front of the Old Dwelling* appeared to be, 1964 marked the beginning of another moment of political upheaval. As noted earlier, the Sino-Soviet pact dissolved for many reasons. In 1964, those tensions reached a high point. Nikita Krushchev publically denounced the CPC when he claimed the Chinese communes established during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961) were a failure. In Beijing, both Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904–1997) and Liu Shaoqi (刘少奇, 1889–1969) fell from favor leaving a vacancy among Mao's advisors.

In 1966, Jiang Qing (江青, 1914–1991), Mao's wife, completely took over the CPC's cultural policies. That February, she conducted a meeting known today as 林

⁵⁶ "Biography of the Artist," in abstracts of the *Xu Jianbai Art Symposium*.

彪同志委托江青同志召开的部队文艺工作座谈纪要 or “Discussion notes from Jiang Qing and Lin Biao’s commission on literature.”⁵⁷ Participants at the meeting discussed arts and performance art in the PLA. Jiang Qing called for a removal of the “black line” of thought from China. In the spring of 1966, the CPC approved her edict and widely distributed it throughout the PRC. She and her proponents, who later became known as the Gang of Four, believed a new enemy faced the Chinese people. To reinforce the negative ramifications of this “black line” of thought, Jiang Qing and others called those who followed it ‘the Khrushchev-style bourgeoisie’ in reference to the political division that now existed between the PRC and the USSR. To remove this criminal line of thought, in May the Central Committee issued a new political initiative: “The Great Revolution to Establish Proletarian Culture,” more commonly known as the Cultural Revolution. They ordered the intellectual class to move to the countryside to learn from the masses, just as the early party was said to have done in Yan’an.

During the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, artists literally altered both their art and Chinese history to address the party’s changing atmosphere. In certain cases, painters would go and change the composition of figures in major works of art according to recent political endorsements and purges. The most infamous example is Dong Xiwen’s (董希文, 1914–1973) 1953 painting *The Founding of the Nation* (*Kaiguo Dadian*, 开国大典), featuring Mao Zedong and his closest advisors heroically proclaiming the inauguration of the PRC in 1949 (Figure 12). In 1972, the

⁵⁷ *Zhongguo wangluo wenxue lianmeng* “中国网络文学联盟” (Chinese online literature collection), <http://www.ilf.cn/Mate/3900.html>. Accessed 2012 April.

artist removed Liu Shaoqi from the painting as a sign of his fall from power. Even after Dong's 1971 cancer diagnosis and 1973 death, the CAA asked other artists like Jin Shangyi (靳尚谊, b. 1934) to make further changes to the work or to paint a complete new painting based on Dong's original composition (Figure 13).⁵⁸ As art historian Lü Peng notes in his analysis of this image, "In this period, historical truth was the truth in which the artist was instructed, and as soon as an artist had made the necessary ideological preparation he would find that this truth could be changed in line with the latest political struggles within the Party."⁵⁹

Both her third pregnancy and her husband had helped shield Xu Jianbai from some of the harassment of the Anti-Rightist movement, but no one was safe from the political unrest and violent turmoil of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. In 1966, the Red Guards raided her home, taking all the painting reproductions purchased in the United States, as well as works given to her by her teachers in Chongqing. The Red Guard was made up of a younger generation of Chinese men and women who had come to age since the civil war ended in 1949. They adopted military-like tactics in an effort to rid the PRC of any internal enemies. Their pursuits of these socialist goals more often included the harassment, beating, and killing of fellow Chinese citizens in the name of the cause. They also raided various government institutions, businesses and homes and burned books and artworks in order to eliminate the Khrushchev-style bourgeoisie.

Xu Jianbai was banned from painting and teaching for almost a decade. Forced to leave her three young children behind virtually without supervision, she

⁵⁸ Lü, *History of Art*, 521–526.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 525.

initially lived in the Cultural Bureau Office and later in a museum in Guangzhou. Five of those ten years were spent in a labor re-education camp. Her husband, who had joined the CPC as a young artist in Chongqing, also faced harsh persecution and imprisonment. Her teacher, Lin Fengmian, spent most of his time during the Cultural Revolution in a prison—including five years in solitary confinement. As previously noted, her brother died in a labor camp in the 1960s—most likely during these renewed afflictions.

Only eight at the time in 1966 the when the Red Guard organizations forced her mother to leave, the artist's youngest daughter, Janet Tan, witnessed the harsh realities of those persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.⁶⁰ She saw her father kicked by his own students. The Red Guard dragged a friend's mother out into the street by her hair. In the street they violently beat her and burned her skin, accusing her of "capitalist tendencies."⁶¹ Each time the woman turned to her persecutors to claim her innocence, they pushed her face back down in the dirt. Tan also recalls that during this period it was common to find in the streets of Guangzhou dead bodies of those who had committed suicide or had been beaten to death.⁶²

Across the board, Chinese artists outside of this younger generation that had come to age since 1949 fell under the persecution in some way, shape, or form. Even those who had entered the CPC at the beginning, like Tan Xuesheng, or those who had trained or worked at the CFA in Beijing, like Ye Qianyu (叶浅予, 1907–1995), faced and physically felt the country's violent upheaval. Ye Qianyu, then head of the

⁶⁰ Janet Tan, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 24, 2012.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Chinese painting department at the CFA, believed that the harassment inflicted on him and his colleagues would result in their eventual deaths at the hands of the youth of the Red Guard; he writes:

The first action of the Red Guards of the Academy of Fine Arts was to burn the old textbooks and teaching equipment, smashing the plaster casts and piling them up in the middle of the school grounds. Then they gathered up the old lecture materials and art albums, throwing them onto a huge fire, and dragged the class enemies who had been labeled demons out from the “pens” in which they had been imprisoned and made them kneel on the fire. The Red Guards proclaimed that we were the dregs of the old world who would be buried with it. The rebel group stood behind us, and if we made the slightest movement, a hand would reach out and wrench us back into position. As the fires burned more fiercely, we felt that our faces were being scorched. Kneeling beside me was the deputy director of the traditional Chinese painting department. He suffered rheumatoid arthritis and could not kneel properly. He appealed to the rebels but they were unconcerned whether he lived or died, and the more he complained the more abuse he suffered.... They didn’t kill us but I laid feigning death, convinced the rebels would throw us onto the pyre and destroy us together with the old world, or just send us to the morgue of Capital Hospital for our relatives to collect the corpses.⁶³

The political unrest throughout the country even left an uneasy feeling in the greatest and most celebrated hero of all, Mao Zedong. On July 22, 1967, in a letter addressed to Chairman Mao, the Red Guard troops of Chengdu wrote, “Eliminate the dictator whom the world has never seen from the face of the earth.”⁶⁴ The words scared the Chairman so much that he refused to ever again cross the Yangzi River and go into southern China.⁶⁵

In 1972, Xu Jianbai returned home to Guangzhou, though she was not professionally permitted to paint until 1974. When she did, her subjects did not directly engage politics, as her celebrated 1964 painting *A Photo in Front of the Old*

⁶³ Ye Qianyu, *Years of Dramatic Change* [Xixu cangsang jiliunian] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing House, 2006), 326, quoted in Lü, *History of Art*, 638.

⁶⁴ Lü, *History of Art*, 664.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Dwelling had. She examined safer subject matter, and this self-imposed restriction reflects the uncertain and uneasy political atmosphere from which the painter had just emerged. Xu painted portraits of various people in the countryside and some smaller sized works, mainly landscapes. In a 1973 painting with the same title as an older one, *Buwang* (补网), or *Mending the Nets*, the artist uses the same subject matter she painted fourteen years previously but with completely different results (Figure 14; cf. Figure 9). Her style, still visually contrasting the dark gray and brown tones of socialist realism, appears restricted. Instead of the landscape and color dominating the canvas, two fishermen along the water's edge patch their nets. The background of the blue water is muted, and the artist concentrates on these two figures and their work.

In 1973, the Cultural Revolution was already seven years old. Even though the grip of the Red Guards had eased on the artist even more so, a weariness with the political atmosphere can be seen the choice of subject matter and composition in most of Xu Jianbai's work. Xu Jianbai often painted small genre scenes of the harbor in Guangzhou. In a 1972 painting of sailboats titled *Fengyuhou* (风雨后) or *After the Rainstorm*, the bright blues and short, quick brushwork are reminiscent of her earlier works (Figure 15). The small picture lacks the intense vibrancy of her earlier *Zhapogang*, and the figures have become almost nonexistent.

Even before the CAA lifted her painting restriction in 1974, Xu Jianbai returned to the canvas and her classroom. Guangzhou opened a graduate program in the mid-1970s, and a group of painters chose the recently reinstated Xu Jianbai as their advisor. The next generation of oil-painting students out of Guangzhou distinctly departed in their style from the previous Soviet model.

In a period of almost twenty years (1957–1974), China went through one violent upheaval after another. Due to circumstances outside her control, Xu Jianbai faced repeated attacks. During the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the artist painted only privately and unofficially, but the few works from this period prove to be some of the most vibrant and energetic of her entire oeuvre. When the powers-that-be allowed her to paint again, her work won acclaim on the national stage. Regardless of this praise, the Cultural Revolution swept China into a chaotic whirlwind that forced people out of their homes and into harsh living conditions in the luckiest of circumstances. And yet, when the grip slowly released, the artist returned to her easel to continue one of the most important aspects of her work: teaching.

Xu as Professor

Because of Guangzhou's geographic position, scholars of Chinese art never seem surprised to learn of new styles and traditions emerging out of this southern port and trading hub. In the early twentieth century, a group of artists from Guangzhou studied in Japan and returned to teach. Their style, influenced by the works of Kano Hogai, Hashimoto Gaho, and Takeuchi Seiho, attempted to merge styles they defined as "east" and "west" to create a modern painting model for China.⁶⁶ Known familiarly as the Lingnan School, these artists taught in various institutions in Republican China, influencing the next generation of Chinese ink painters. In the same way, Xu Jianbai's role as a teacher and example fueled a stylistic change visible in the work of her students from the 1970s. Xu built upon a long pedagogical tradition she acquired from the NFA, Chicago, and the region she now called home. During the 1970s, a group of artists from Guangzhou relied upon her experience and technique to produce a new style that challenged the longstanding soviet or socialist realist model.

Though Xu Jianbai's work met with some success during the last half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, it is her students' works that altered the Chinese art scene. In his 2010 publication, *A History of Art in 20th Century China*, Lü Peng writes that "in this period, the technical methods of Guangdong painters provided a subtle aesthetic trend: Highly skilled modeling, graceful brush strokes, compellingly

⁶⁶ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 52–56.

veracious colors, and plots that avoided big themes as exemplified by the unique composition and fine-pleated clothing of Chen Yanning's *New Doctor in the Fishing Port* (1974).⁶⁷ (Figure 16) Chen Yanning (陈衍宁, b. 1945) had graduated from the Guangzhou academy in 1968 but remained in the area and with the school. Lü describes Chen's work as a dramatic, yet understated step away from the artistic tastes in China. If we look at Chen's work, we can see that already by the middle of the 1970s the accepted aesthetic of socialist realism was changing. Though the monumental works were still dominated by heightened heroic and heavily idealized figures, the brushwork became more fluid and painterly. The colors of this monumental work reflected the influence of his teacher's style, rather than the heavy and deep browns favored by other socialist realist painters.

Graduate students in oil painting chose Xu Jianbai as their advisor because, even at their young age, they were disillusioned with the limited formal prospects of socialist realism. It was common knowledge at the time (though hardly spoken) that Xu Jianbai had studied in the United States, and this made her an oddity in a department full of painters who had trained only in China.⁶⁸ One of her new students, Mian Situ (司徒绵, b. 1953), sincerely believed as a child that the purpose of art and painters in China was to paint the portrait of Mao Zedong and nothing else.⁶⁹ In Xu Jianbai was an artist with a style strikingly different from the gray undertones of the other teachers at Guangzhou. How she had survived with her background proved an

⁶⁷ Lü, *History of Art*, 672.

⁶⁸ Aside from their teacher, the Russian artist Nicolai Ivanovich Fechin consisted of their only exposure to art different from the Soviet realist model because of his loose brushwork and contrasting colors. Mian Situ, interview by the author, Laguna Beach, CA, March 25, 2012.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

enigma to her students, and they each spent at least three years under her tutelage researching both the arts of Europe and America and the arts of ancient China.

Until 1974, Xu could not paint, and she simply advised her students. She introduced them to western methods and techniques through books, both those from her own collection and those recently purchased by the Guangzhou library using special funds from the Minister of Education.⁷⁰ She also strongly advocated for the reintroduction of the study of live nudes in the academy, as she had seen in Chicago. She recalled for her students the paintings that she had seen in Chicago and knew from her own studies, and she taught underpainting techniques different from those of the Soviet model, which used strong brown and gray tones. In a set of images the artist created for a never-realized textbook on oil painting, she alludes to the techniques, tonalities, and modeling of works by Rembrandt, Veronese, and Vermeer (Figure 17). In the oil sketches, she attempted to recreate them for her students. When she showed her students the various impressionist and early twentieth century painters that had struck her as a student, she would open the floor to their reaction before giving her own. “Professor Xu was different from the other professors.... She spoke about what art really is.... She was open to conversation about art for art’s sake and art that has its own value, not just for the revolution’s sake,” noted her student Mian Situ.⁷¹

The students from her first few years after reinstatement include the aforementioned Chen Yanning and Mian Situ, as well as noted contemporary and

⁷⁰ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 23, 2012. The painter remembers purchasing books on European masters from the Renaissance until the early twentieth century, but no specific titles were given.

⁷¹ Mian Situ, interview by the author, Laguna Beach, CA, March 25, 2012.

abstract painter Li Mo, Tang Xiaoming (汤小铭), Li Jinmin, and Tang Jixiang (汤集祥, b. 1939). These new oil painters coming from Guangzhou departed in one major way from their teachers: they started to sign their works individually.⁷² During their early careers Chen Yanning, Tang Xiaoming, Li Jinmin, and Tang Jixiang became affectionately known as Guangdong's "Four Guardian Warriors" because of the incredible amount of attention and praise they received locally and nationally for their work.

Xu Jianbai and her students traveled throughout the province painting. In 1974 the "Anti-British Memorial for Humen People in the Opium War," or as it is known today, "The Opium War Memorial and Museum," invited Xu Jianbai and her students to their grounds to paint. The museum and memorial were built in 1957. The memorial depicts a set of figures preparing to defend Humen City from an upcoming naval battle with the British. In her 1974 painting, quickly sketched on site, the artist depicts the entrance of the museum with bright contrasting colors and loose brushwork (Figure 18). The event and site easily lent themselves to another exhaustive historical painting in the social realist style, but she employed her own formal language learned outside of the Soviet school. Reading it from left-to-right, we see a cannon, the museum entrance, a column marking the entrance, and the commemorative statue. Facing the viewer directly, the statue is abstracted, broken into various planes defined by color. The light is dispersed evenly throughout the canvas, allowing the viewer's eye to travel over the various planes. In this way, Xu Jianbai emphasizes the flatness of the painted screen rather than treating the picture

⁷² Lü, *History of Art*, 672.

frame as a window. These later paintings of landscapes, unlike her paintings of Mao Zedong or young cadets, no longer reproduce and promote idealized memories of Chinese history in a romantic realist style. Rather, these works suggest the huge influence that both her first teacher, Lin Fengmian, and her time abroad had on her artistically.

Xu Jianbai also encouraged her students to look to their own rich tradition in Chinese art. In particular, she took her graduate students to see the Dazu Rock Carvings (大足石刻, Dàzú Shíkè) and the cave paintings at Dunhuang. At Dunhuang, the artist and her students could paint the caves only in the morning sunlight, but that proved enough for a rich personal exploration into ancient Chinese painting. Like the 1953 exhibit, Dunhuang forced Xu to rethink notions of abstract or geometric art in the modern world in comparison to her country's history.⁷³ A 1980 painting titled *Dunhuang Bodhisattva* (Dūnhuáng Púsà, 敦煌菩薩) features two cave figures in front of a swirling background of color that suggests ancient cave paintings from the site (Figure 19). The palette consists of greens, browns, and reds that dance across the surface of the painting, giving the figures their form. The faces are barely painted in; rather, the colors and the deep black outlines highlight their rigid yet swinging poses. In the background on the right, the viewer can barely see a third figure, either part of the painted wall or a third figure lost in the dark atmosphere of the cave. The gesture-like strokes give the figures a subtle movement, and yet their position on the canvas suggests their stoic mood and monumentality. Her palette and swirling brushwork complement the Tang Dynasty (618–906 CE) aesthetics seen in the caves. Though the

⁷³ Xu Jianbai, interview by the author, Irvine, CA, March 22, 2012.

latter half of the Tang Dynasty would be aesthetically and stylistically defined by fuller figures, vibrant colors, and ideals of beauty, the figures Xu paints here most likely refer to the earlier Tang Style or even the earlier Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE).⁷⁴ The emperors of the Sui Dynasty were ardent Buddhists, and patronized and promoted the creation of many Buddhist icons.⁷⁵ The bright colors, slender forms, and gentle sway of the poses in Xu Jianbai's painting reflect the trends of the Sui and early Tang historical periods.

In a surviving mall study from the trip to Dunhuang, the artist re-appropriates the Tang Dynasty style in a way that complements and completes her own (Figure 20). The color blocking and sway to the figures are similar to her Chicago study, but she has placed the figure of the Buddha off to the right, not, as one might expect, front and center. The viewer then reads various hand gestures and poses of figures seemingly in conversation. The strong color is surely a nod both to the cave site's actual pigments and to the artist's own love of vibrant and rich coloration that grew out of her early training and admiration for the Post-Impressionists.

About his time under Xu's tutelage, Mian Situ said that it was known among her students that "her standards were so high. However, she never handed out compliments or praise. She always pushed me to try harder.... We discussed the way to look at an object and the color (on the canvas). She impressed upon us that 'the subject itself (was) not as important as the way you look at it.'"⁷⁶ This emphasis on

⁷⁴ Dorothy C. Wang, "Dunhuang," in *Grove Art Online*, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T024048>.

⁷⁵ Carol Michaelson, "Sui dynasty," in *Grove Art Online*, accessed November 10, 2012, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T082256>.

⁷⁶ Mian Situ, interview by the author, Laguna Beach, CA, March 25, 2012.

looking at objects differently and pushing oneself can be seen in a 1978 watercolor (Figure 21). Though Xu Jianbai painted mostly with oil, some of the earliest extant examples of her work are small watercolor sketches of her classmates at Chongqing. In the 1978 watercolor *Xiang River* (湘江) the artist recreates river scenery at sunset. Rather than blending the colors of the bank, Xu Jianbai allows areas to dry before she returns to them, resulting in a segmented and abstracted landscape where the artist's hand is clearly visible. Though the riverbank is dominated by different hues of purples, blues, and grays, Xu comprises her setting sky of light pinks, yellows, and oranges. The watercolors blend into one another, highlighting the subtle changes occurring in the sky over the short period of sunset. The boats and other manmade objects blend and meld into the landscape. The work does not celebrate or exalt the ruling party or proletariat. Rather, it conveys the calming mood or atmosphere of the sunset.

Xu Jianbai and her husband Tan Xuesheng continued to work at the Guangzhou Academy until shortly after June 1989. The government began to crack down on the protests in Tiananmen Square and throughout the entire country. Uncertain and justifiably weary of what could come next, the artists' two daughters, already in the United States for study and work, made the necessary arrangements to move their parents from China to the United States.

During the last half of the 1970s, a new artistic style emerged from Guangzhou. Because the region has long been a region of aesthetic innovation, few have looked into the exact cause of the change. Though she had only very recently faced immense harassment, maltreatment, and misplacement by the Red Guards, Xu

Jianbai returned to Guangzhou to paint and teach again. Though her paintings do not garner the same attention as that given to her students', her work as a teacher should be considered one of the influences behind the new style from Guangzhou. Daring graduate students flocked to her as an anomaly and source of knowledge. She slowly changed the academy's curriculum to match her earlier education at the NFA and Chicago. She took her students out of the classroom, not to paint the rural farmer as the symbol of the proletariat, but rather to portray China's great past as a window through which to see modernist painting from over a thousand years ago. Currently, she resides in California, where she still paints every day.

Conclusion

In 1980s China, a new artistic movement emerged in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Categorized as *scar art*, the works visually and directly criticized the harsh realities of life in China during the last thirty years. Rather than reflect on the pain of the past, Xu Jianbai's paintings engage various aesthetic traditions in search of a more hopeful future. We then might want to read Xu Jianbai's *Old Tree on Dongshan Island*, painted in 1986, as part of that engagement (Figure 1). Keeping in mind both the initial audience and the artist's biography, the title of the painting might bring to mind recent historical events in Chinese history. In 1950, the Nationalist party made their last stand on Dongshan Island before completely fleeing to Taiwan, which also happens to be the location of the tree in this painting. The tree manages to grow under these harsh conditions, but the knots and gnarls of its branches and roots will always remain.

Although the painting easily offers itself to this allegorical reading, one must also consider other formal elements at play. The painting seeks to the legacy of Xu Jianbai's teacher, Lin Fengmian, and his early experimentation in the oil medium in modern China. Though his career was marred by incredible personal and professional hardship, his early body of work in oil points to the active brushwork and vibrant use of color found in his student's work. *Old Tree on Dongshan Island* is also reminiscent of the artist's time in the United States, spent studying in person some of the major Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists. We can see the influence of the early

twentieth century French avant-garde in the painting's thick black outlines and seemingly unconventional use of color.

Her aesthetic choices in this piece and earlier ones also show an artist not entrenched in the dominant social realist style of China. In his talks at Yan'an, Mao had outlined the artist as a professional vocation. In China in the early 1950s, she painted works within the party's structure and ideology, working on larger oil works for provincial and national exhibition and *lianhuanhua*, or picture-story books. Though her pieces met with success, her paintings contrasted with the mainstream social realist style even though her fellow oil painters relied on the Soviet models to supply the CPC with an "art that could serve the people."

Another iconographical reading of the painting causes us to identify the artist's personal biography with the work. Chinese political and artistic policies often forced her to thrive in tumultuous environments, just like the tree grasping onto the precipice in *Old Tree on Dongshan Island*. She survived the waves of persecution brought by the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution. At times banned from painting and removed from her home, she somehow found the motivation to always return to her painting.

Old Tree on Dongshan Island was painted in 1986, years after Mao had passed and after the artistic restrictions of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had been lifted. Not only had the artist returned to painting, but she had also returned to the classroom. In Guangzhou in the last half of the 1970s, she took it upon herself to introduce major changes in the school's curriculum, including more access to modern European and American painting styles. She also advocated direct drawing

from figures rather than painting models. In particular, she campaigned for the use of the nude human form in the classroom as a teaching tool. She also took on a group of graduate students who sought out her guidance to move beyond the prevailing soviet models in teaching and art. Her students' work would be noted for its use of color, brushwork, and modeling, different from many of the other schools in China at the time.

Like the tree on the island, the artist's work continues to reach new audiences. Her works are collected in China, Singapore, and the United States. Various exhibitions and texts feature her work as an example of a female painter during the time, as an inheritor of the modern lessons of Lin Fengmian, or as a member of a larger definition of the Lingnan School of Guangzhou. Also, the existence of her work and style point to a pluralistic voice in Chinese painting under Mao.

My interest in this area is part of a new trend in the history of twentieth-century Chinese art to look at a body of work created in China during years of political and cultural persecution now surfacing that time has passed. In the most recent Andrew Mellon lecture series at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., art historian Craig Clunas included in his final talk a few notes on a group of artists called "the no-name artists group."⁷⁷ This group worked near Beijing on small paintings for personal use and discussion. The young Clunas, studying with the first wave of international students in China at the time, had no awareness of their existence.⁷⁸ As Clunas rightly argues, these works must be analyzed in their own right

⁷⁷ Craig Clunas, "The Mellon Lectures: The People" (lecture, The National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, April 22, 2012).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

beyond the nation-state metaphor. Even more so, as Xu Jianbai so strategically painted in her 1964 piece *A Photo Taken in Front of the Old Dwelling*, 不忘 or do not forget.

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