

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: LUO QING'S PAINTINGS OF POST-INDUSTRIAL  
TAIWAN AND THEIR INCOMPATIBILITY WITH  
*GUOHUA*

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This thesis examines the career and artwork of Luo Qing in the context of past artistic movements and current academic discourse. Using Luo Qing and his work as a point of departure, this thesis aims to combine diachronic and synchronic concerns in the arts, specifically art that is made in the medium of ink.

Luo Qing is famous for his inventive style in poetry and ink paintings. The two bodies of work selected, *Here Comes the UFO* 不明飞行物来了 and *Asphalt Road* 柏油路, not only exemplify his creative spirit in redefining ink art, they also establish him as a member of the modern Chinese literati, a scholar artist, in Taiwan. Both series were Luo's ongoing projects in the 1980s and the 1990s. A conflict between the traditional and the new was present in Chinese politics and culture at the time, and this tension affected the creative community. The dynamics between Chinese imperial history and modern Chinese industry is the subject of most of Luo's work. He creatively portrayed conflicts

between traditional Chinese heritage and contemporary Western commercialism. *Here Comes the UFO* and *Asphalt Road* both depict the modern subject of industrialization in traditional Chinese ink painting format. Luo Qing's novel way of approaching Chinese artistic traditions, both in painting and poetry, validated its importance as a new paradigm. Luo's artistic world depicted in these two bodies of work was representative of a tumultuous era in Chinese history that took place not in China, but in Taiwan.

In stark contrast, the current academic discourse on ink art originated in China and quickly spread through the research of Chinese scholars, most of whom work in North American academia. Compelling debates on ink art's importance and passionate proclamation associating ink art with Chinese nationhood are popular subjects.

These subjects, however, are distant and irrelevant to Luo's early cityscapes. The contemporary paradigm may ignore why Luo Qing came to international fame.

The first part of this thesis profiles Luo's two bodies of work and provides a comprehensive survey of his training and inspiration from the past. The second part connects these works with a thorough overview of scholarship on contemporary ink art. Using Luo's work as an intersecting point of reference, I hope to revive Luo Qing's significance to the Chinese art community and address specific, larger issues concerning contemporary theories on ink art.

LUO QING'S PAINTINGS OF POST-INDUSTRIAL TAIWAN  
AND THEIR INCOMPATIBILITY WITH *GUOHUA*

By

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I dedicate this thesis to my beloved parents, who are Luo Qing's age and grew up witnessing transformation of Chinese culture in Taiwan. I dedicate this thesis also to my little brother, who, like me, is a second-generation product of that lost era. We continue to live under its influence and digest its meaning to us.

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## **Introduction**

China saw turbulent changes throughout the twentieth century. When the Guomindang 国民党 [Kuomintang] (KMT) officially settled on the island of Taiwan in 1945, China's cultural identity faced multiple internal challenges, this conflict is reflected in Chinese art of the period. Intellectuals and artists were willing to change with the times, and most were hoping to discover a new way of expressing and identifying themselves within their society artistically. They agreed that such a task would be impossible if the change did not come from within the Chinese cultural heritage. Chinese ink painting in particular has a long tradition beginning before the Song dynasty, and the issue of how to extend this inherited form of Chinese art—quintessential of Chinese culture—became very controversial in Taiwan.

An internationally recognized artist working in Taiwan, Luo Qingzhe 罗青哲 (1948–), extends and modernizes the Chinese painting tradition through his artwork and scholarship. Luo, who goes by his pen name Luo Qing 罗青, is a well-known figure in the Chinese art and academic world. Yet in the West, only those familiar with Chinese painting traditions would know of him and understand his accomplishments. Most people do not appreciate the importance of his efforts in continuing, if not reinventing, the Chinese artistic traditions.

This thesis will introduce and reassess Luo's work, while characterizing the unique and creative aesthetics in his interpretation of the Chinese painting tradition he created while living in Taiwan. Following the introduction, I will outline Luo's life, his artistic and academic training, and his professional accomplishments as context for the chapters to follow. Chapter one reviews Luo's relation and commitment to the Chinese

painting tradition, including an explanation of his contributions to poetry and imagery, which are the features of his work that have gained the most acclaim. Two case studies follow closely after, which discuss how Luo adopts the traditional Chinese ink method to portray fantasies about modernization in a distinctively Taiwanese environment. *Here Comes the UFO* 不明飞行物来了 and *Asphalt Roads* 柏油路 are two strikingly creative and experimental series of paintings. The two sets are often considered to be Luo's most famous attempts to fall under the umbrella of a "postmodern conversation," a major concept in Luo's career.

Chapter two positions Luo in the context of the academic discourse on *guohua*. *Guohua* 国画, the traditional term for Chinese ink art or ink painting, has been used as a vehicle by many modern Chinese painters to practice the traditional ink medium in the contemporary age.

Conversations concerning *guohua* can become extremely political. The term itself, translated literally, means "nation painting."<sup>1</sup> Given the history of Taiwan and China, such a word imposes a political orientation onto the viewing and interpreting of contemporary *guohua*, especially Luo Qing's works, for Luo has always depicted Taiwanese landscapes. Luo's use of *guohua* as his creative visual outlet adds a definite air of complexity. Many of the studies on Luo Qing's work have been discussed in the context of *guohua*.<sup>2</sup> *Guohua* is a contested field in modern Chinese art scholarship; in fact, there are disagreements over whether traditions of Chinese art conflict with

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<sup>1</sup> The term will be better defined in a later chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Luo Qing's ink art and poetry have been thoroughly discussed by scholars and critics, most notably in a collection of articles from *Luo Qing Huaji* 罗青画集 [A Catalogue of Luo Qing's Paintings] edited by Jason Kuo. Scholars such as Jason Kuo, Roderic Whitfield, critics such as Sarah Jane Checkland and Lu Rongzhi, as well as painter Chu Ko, all participated in a discourse on Luo's work and its connection to the *guohua* tradition.

expectations of evolution in contemporary art.<sup>3</sup> Studying *guohua* is crucial, especially if one wishes to understand the development of contemporary Chinese art. Because *guohua* descends from the Chinese painting tradition, its obligation to evolve and adapt as a contemporary art form has provoked an increasingly vibrant academic conversation with challenging remarks from scholars concerning its relevance.<sup>4</sup> Much of the debate is on the compatibility, or incompatibility, of its fundamentally traditional nature to the modernization of the Chinese culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While Luo's depiction of natural landscape is not a purely Chinese one, his painting methods are firmly rooted in Chinese traditions. Luo's admirers often speak of his paintings as reinventions of the Chinese painting traditions, but there are more dimensions to the significance of Luo's work. The dichotomies of Chinese-ness and Taiwanese-ness, the modern and the traditional, the marginal and the international within Luo's paintings allow him to update and transform traditional Chinese ink work. Luo Qing's paintings thus become relevant on quite a different cultural and political scale as the academic discourse on Chinese ink art also updates and transforms itself in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>3</sup> Wu Hung has made a remark on the nature of ink art, which has been cited by Shen Kuiyi and challenged by Jerome Silbergeld (both are prominent scholars in the field of Chinese art). Wu stated, "The contemporaneity must be recognized as a particular artistic/theoretical construct, which self-consciously reflects upon the conditions and limitations of the present." Wu's argument is that ink art's irrelevance comes from its lack of contemporaneity. Wu Hung, "Contemporaneity in Contemporary Chinese Art," in the conference volume, *Taiwan 2002 Conference on the History of Painting in East Asia* (Taipei, 2002), 476.

<sup>4</sup> Britta Ericson. "Do We Have Time for the Subtleties of *Guohua*?" *Yishu* 1 (2008): 56–58. Ericson is among the scholars whose attitude towards *guohua* is more speculative than optimistic. Although she did not pronounce too much of her contemplation on *guohua*'s relevance, there is a distinctive between-the-lines message that echoes with the title of the article.

## Artist's Life

Luo Qing was born in 1948 in Qingdao, located in the Shandong province of China. He moved to Taiwan with his family at the age of three. Just as Luo's artwork, and arguably his career, is built upon walking the fine line between the modern and the traditional, Luo's cultural identity shares a similar construction. As the KMT fled China and claimed power in Taiwan, Chinese heritage was inevitably split in two. In the 1960s, while communist China was viewed as backward, the KMT government in Taiwan was preparing its plunge into modernization. Luo Qing's career flourished under the turbulent cultural and political currents between China and Taiwan, and his place as one of the most important contemporary ink painters must be considered in this setting.

Luo has been praised as the scholar responsible for introducing postmodern theories in Taiwanese art. Craig Clunas classifies Luo Qing in *Art in China* as "unusual among modern Chinese artists in enjoying an equally wide reputation as a poet, the ideal combination of the scholar tradition but one very rarely achieved in the past any more than at the present."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, his reputation as a Renaissance man is known even among friends; he is an artist, a poet, and an art historian who fulfills an ideal almost extinct in our time.

Luo's educational endeavors and subsequent academic career were quite successful. He first attended a prestigious public school in Jilong 基隆 area,<sup>6</sup> and graduated from Furen University 辅仁大学 with his passion in the arts clearly established

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<sup>5</sup> *Art in China*, 1997, 219–20.

<sup>6</sup> Jilong is a suburb of the city of Taipei. It sits on the north corner of the island of Taiwan.

before college.<sup>7</sup> His formal studies incorporated both language and visual arts; he majored in English, and in his second year of college, he changed his focus from Northern Song ink works to expressionism. Luo also says that in the same year, he started to write poems in a then trendy new literary style. He decided to abandon traditional landscapes after his sophomore year in college, and began to experiment largely with collages incorporating real materials. In his senior year of college, Luo began to explore the relationship between modern poetry (*xinshi* 新诗) and a contemporary approach to ink painting. Much of the later adaptation of Luo's *guohua* creations involved more than these contemplations during his college years. In his years spent studying abroad in the United States, Luo took time to evaluate and re-evaluate the accomplishments of the *guohua* tradition and how ink works in general can evolve from their past. Luo's commitment to see the Chinese painting tradition flourish undoubtedly came from his faith in the medium closest to his cultural heritage, yet he believed in extending that heritage by employing western literary and artistic devices. Luo followed what most modern Chinese painters from China did, which was to seek a resolution through artistic integration and development in the West. Indeed, at that time in Taiwan, studying abroad in the West was the expected next step to glorify and exemplify national identity. Luo clearly understood that studying abroad would take his career to the next level; he felt that staying in Taiwan for the rest of his life would not have helped his artistic development.

At the University of Washington, Luo earned a master's degree in English. His academic interests prove yet again the extent to which he values literary influences on

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<sup>7</sup> Luo started painting at age 14; he studied landscape paintings, bird and flower paintings, and figure paintings in the Northern Song tradition.

artistic production. In an interview he gave in 1984, Luo explains that his explorations in the literary field carry on the Song and Yuan literati tradition, yet he feels that this term needs to be updated for the modern era. More specifically, Luo suggests that the combination of poetry and ink painting must evolve. Though literati tradition is inextricably bound to Chinese history, this style should not be avoided simply because the times have changed. Luo has repeatedly emphasized this point in various interviews. One excerpt explicitly addresses his findings from the exploration of the medium of ink during his college years and beyond.

There are many ways to modernize *guohua*, and I have found several options suitable for my direction, one of which is to discover ways to carry on traditions from the Song and Yuan dynasty and further exemplify them. Therefore, exploring the relationships between contemporary poetry and new *guohua* has become a subject to which I pay much attention. Chinese art has always been affected by the political climate, and how to modernize it is the biggest problem for twentieth-century China; ethics, democracy, and science are the three essential elements in the process of modernization. Literary art is an important sub-branch; and new poetry (*xinshi*) has advanced the earliest with the most rewarding outcome.<sup>8</sup>

To modernize *guohua*, one must find the core of the problem, and the core lies in the term “modern.” The contemporary age is different from ancient times in that an agriculture-based society is inherently dissimilar to an industrialized one. The agricultural society has perfect synchronization between time and nature, and it specifically functions around the idea of space. In the modern age, because the intervention of technology disturbed the natural order of time and space, people are no longer dictated by the weather and the seasons.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Luo Qing, “Luo Qing Interview” in *Buming Feixingwu Lai le 不明飞行物来了 [Here Comes the UFOs]* (Taipei: Chuan Wenshue Chubanshe, 1984), 130. Translated by author.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. Translated by author.

国画现代化的方向很多,我自己也在这方面也找了好几条适合於我走的路子,其中之一就是如何继承宋元以来的诗画传统,加以更新发扬。因此探讨新诗与新国画之间的关系,便成了我所关心探讨的问题之一。中国艺术与整个政治社会的发展一直是息息相关的,二十世纪的中国,所面临的重大问题,便是如何现代化: 伦理, 民主, 科学, 三方面相辅相成的现代化。文学艺术, 是其中的一环, 而又以文学中的新诗, 在现代化上, 开始最早, 成绩最大。

国画要现代化, 首先要找出重要的问题焦点, 而焦点, 就在“现代”两字上。现代之所以与古代之不同, 是农业社会与工商社会之不同。农业社会的时间观念与大自然配合无间, 其空间观念, 亦随之运行。而现代社会中, “科技”的介入, 把自然时空的次序破坏了, 人们不再完全受天候或四季的支配。

Indeed, Luo has expressed that ultimately he hopes his work presents and represents the contemporary era. Arguably, the highly experimental nature of Luo's work reflects the chaotic relationship that characterized the changing Taiwanese culture of the 1970s and 1980s. However, it remains to be seen if his innovative strategy redeems *guohua* from its currently controversial position as the contested medium of an important tradition that is gradually becoming irrelevant to the global contemporary art community.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Luo Qing and His Environment**

The cultural and historic environment from which Luo's most innovative ideas and concepts emerged is an exciting one. Luo was born in 1948, in the midst of a cultural and intellectual shift from China to Taiwan. Luo's college teachers and mentors were the first generation of Chinese intellectuals who escaped to Taiwan from the communist government. These revolutionaries became his friends, teachers, and role models, all of whom inevitably influenced his art. Luo, from the start of his career, strived for "newness" in traditions, which arguably in large and small parts shared the same revolutionary spirit of his teachers. Whether it was the tradition of Chinese ink painting, or the tradition of Chinese poetry, Luo wanted to reinterpret and redefine the Chinese literary canon. Luo Qing's principle mission has been to modernize Chinese art, and his idea of modernity is closely associated with the changing political and economic environment in Taiwan at the time.

This chapter seeks to contextualize Luo's work in the scope of contemporaneous social events. In the subsections, I will address Luo's approach to linking poetry and art, as well as his fascination with the new and seemingly bizarre urban cityscapes in the modern age.

### **Luo Qing and the Poetry Reformation in Taiwan**

Just as Luo would claim that his art and poetry reflects the times, he is also a product of his generation. The creative field in Taiwan from the 1950s to the 1970s was an interesting place; intellectuals and artists had a serious sense of responsibility to evolve and progress. "Newness" was on many people's minds and "change" was a subject discussed frequently. Luo Qing, of course, was involved in various artistic

movements. One most particularly related to the aesthetics of his art work is the literary reformation in modern poetry. Yu Guangzhong, a famed senior scholar and writer believed that Luo Qing represented a new direction for Chinese poetry.<sup>10</sup> The young student soon became a prominent figure in the reformation and was accepted as a part of contemporaneous of literary circles. His career officially began when his first poetry book was published in 1972, while he was still a college student.<sup>11</sup>

Luo majored in English literature at Furen University, an demonstration of his interest in the foreign, or the Occidental, and his literary training would prove to be instrumental to his style in both poetry and art later in his life. Western literature continued to fascinate Luo Qing during his college years, and he used his insights in published poems and short stories. Toward the end of his senior year, he had secured the status as a productive writer. He then entered a master's program in Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, Seattle in 1972, advancing his education in the hope that he could further elevate his understanding of literature. Upon completing his master's degree, Luo had become a well-established writer and poet. His commitment to literary studies was not purely out of an attraction to Western literature. The dichotomy of the East and the West, the oriental and the occidental, deeply intrigued the young scholar. By understanding what was supposedly foreign and alien, Luo learned more about his own heritage, a complicated heritage split between China and Taiwan. Such an attraction to Western literature was in fact quite common. Intellectuals and creative

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<sup>10</sup> Yu Guangzhong 余光中 (1928- ) is a renowned Chinese writer who moved to Taiwan with his family in 1950s. Yu is an incredibly prolific scholar, who has published volumes of poems, essays, and articles. He is known to address the Taiwanese and Chinese identities in his work.

<sup>11</sup> See page 10.

individuals born in the 1940s grew up in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement,<sup>12</sup> the Cultural Revolution,<sup>13</sup> and the death of Lu Xun, a revolutionary figure in modern Chinese literature. Lu's *Aq Zhengzhuan* 阿Q 正传 (*The True Story of Ah Q*) first published in 1921 and written in the vernacular Chinese language, was read by absolutely everyone. The short story addresses the weak national character of China in first two or three decades of the twentieth century, when China struggled openly with its global status. Having become inferior since the demise of the late Qing dynasty, many felt that the vernacular language would save the nation by defeating the difficult classical texts. And since any reformation or revolutions would have to start with changing traditions and traditional values, the Chinese text and literature was an obvious target of the May Fourth Movement's focus. The May Fourth Movement is also incredibly important to modern art because it was the mother of modern literary movement. Chinese texts—whether they be short stories, novels, or poetry—were very much an artistic expression and a partner of Chinese visual arts. Like a poem on a painting scroll or calligraphy, Chinese texts have long had the influence to either elevate or devalue artworks. A revolution in literary text would lead to a revolution in the visual arts, and thus to Luo Qing.

The Republic of China established its sovereignty on the island of Taiwan in 1945. Chinese poetry was then divided. In mainland China, under the rule of the Communist party, verses and texts were highly politicized in favor of the ruling party. In stark contrast, Taiwanese intellectuals warmly embraced Western literary influences, which in

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<sup>12</sup> The May Fourth Movement (May 4, 1919) was a student demonstration in Beijing. Students protested China's cowardly response to The Treaty of Versailles. It is considered an intellectual turning point of Chinese cultural and political views and is considered by some as the Renaissance of China.

<sup>13</sup> The Cultural Revolution (1949–1976) was a period of widespread social and political upheaval in the People's Republic of China, causing chaos and economic depression to the entire nation.

turn created enough differences from that of mainland China to establish an alternative literary canon.

Away from the Communist party in mainland China, Luo was active in the safety of the intellectual circle in Taiwan, where he was free from political danger. Luo's experimentation with words in the poems accompanying his paintings recalls the intellectual challenge issued by the rebels of the May Fourth Movement. Artists, political activists, and academic intellectuals in the early twentieth century until the 1920s challenged Chinese culture by changing the Chinese text—manipulating words and sentences to synthesize and deconstruct meaning. Half a century later, Luo's free experimentation with words, much in the spirit of *baihua* 白话 (vernacular language), distinctly echoes the fundamental crises of Chinese culture during the May Fourth Movement. In fact, many consider Luo Qing's simple yet enigmatic publication on watermelons (*Six Ways to Eat a Watermelon*, first published in 1972) an extension of promotion of the vernacular language, a practice that began during the May Fourth Movement. However, this plain and un-poetic "poem" is unnerving in its simplicity and confusing in its spontaneity. Joseph Allen states eloquently,

Many different elements merge to form the artistic sensibility and poetic language of Lo Ch'ing [Luo Qing]. I would suggest, however, that these elements, both in his poetry and painting, cluster around a principle of integration. This often is the conventional with the unconventional, the traditional with the new, the Oriental with the Occidental; it allows for the joining of the serious and the humorous, the simple and the complex, the concrete and the conceptual; and perhaps most important, it fuses the visual and the verbal.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Allen, "Lo Ch'ing's [Luo Qing] Poetics of Integration: New Configurations of the Literati Tradition," *Modern Chinese Literature* 2 (1986): 145.

In turn, Luo Qing's poems and paintings produced a new genre, and their artistic integrity depends on the way each part complements the other. There are many scholarly interpretations of Luo's approach to poetry, especially in the midst of an active movement where many were also experimenting with the Chinese language. Writer Dominic Cheung comments on the postmodern implication of Luo's literary art,

Although Lo Ch'ing's [Luo Qing] most significant works reflect a continuation of modernist influence in contemporary Chinese poetry, nevertheless the large variety of objects he presents and the unique insight of abstracting them have indeed opened for Lo Ch'ing [Luo Qing], and his post-modern contemporaries, such as Su Shoalien, a new way out of the modernist impasse."<sup>15</sup>

Cheung's comments contain many layers and require some unpacking. It is evident that Luo's method of composing texts and verses was different from his contemporaries. Using Cheung's word, "unique," Luo's short, simple, and accessible poetic forms presented a refreshing use of Chinese text. The term "modern," however, complicates Luo's working aesthetic. The Literary Reformation, taking place in the early twentieth century in Shanghai and extending its influences in the 1960s and 70s to Taiwan, revitalized Chinese culture and identity. Poets in Taiwan inquired critically into issues of identity during the reformation. Such inward-focused self-inquiry is undoubtedly a characteristic of modern aesthetics that was appropriated from Western literary traditions in which intellectuals and artists ask open-ended questions about issues that are without resolution. Luo's poetry, full of tension between its simplistic form and aesthetics of the

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<sup>15</sup> Dominic Cheung, "New Direction in Contemporary Chinese Poetry" in *An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Taipei: National Institute of Compilation and Translation, 1975), 62.

everyday, touched on the main concerns of modernity as a condition of the 1970s and 1980s in Taiwan.

Luo's work is inherently founded on the concept of juxtaposition. He notes "juxtaposing" as an outcome of "contingency," or *xing* 兴, a concept of ideas, or events, converging at a particular moment from *The Book of Changes*. Having experimented with creating collages in his college years, Luo is familiar with placing subjects that are in opposition to each other in a single composition. The opposing contents, or subtexts of the subject matter, create tension that embeds conflicts into the work, thus enhancing the viewing experience. In this sense, Luo's work can be fairly understandable and accessible to a public that is not necessarily informed about modern Chinese history and debates on contemporary Chinese ink work.

### ***Here Comes the UFO***

Here comes the UFO

Right by the other end of the highway

Not stars, not lights, not fireflies, and not fire

An unknown foreign object that is not anything familiar

It is an unofficial warning to the future

A warning to all humans of the world

To always practice wisdom and knowledge

In order to rediscover, to understand

The million substances in the universe

And their transubstantiated connections with each other

不明飞行物来了  
就在高速公路的那一边  
非星，非灯，非营，非火  
非任何已知物体的不明飞行物  
是一种非正式的未之不明飞行物

警告全世界的人类  
千万要善用知识与智慧  
去重新研究了解  
宇宙中万物与物质 的之间  
非物质 的关系。

-Luo Qing, December, 1983

Industrialization and post-industrialization are major subjects in Luo's work. Luo's depiction of alien saucers and floating rocks and mountains demonstrate a fresh curiosity that had not yet been explored in the practice of *guohua*. Scholars often use the phrase "reinvention of the Chinese landscape" to describe and define the main theme of Luo's work, but this characterization is not entirely correct. After all, Luo's industrialized landscapes were found in Taiwan from the 1970s to the 1990s, but not in China. Luo's work depicts the environment from which its content was derived. Urbanism is a subject in opposition to the tradition of Chinese literati landscape painting, since modern cities are not natural creations. Luo's urban landscapes bring destruction to the idea of painting nature with ink.

The night scenes that Luo Qing has painted are among the most compelling and confounding of his works. In a series of landscapes and small skyscapes, the dark washes of blue pigments and black ink form a quiet night sky (figs.1-6). Sparkles, created with brilliant bits of gold leaf, are scattered all over, sometimes far apart from each other and sometimes in clusters; the star-like gold leaf sharply penetrates the darkness with a

definite glow. The shape of the gold leaf pieces (fig.1) convey a sense of proximity to the viewer, the closer ones have more defined shapes and the farther ones are ambiguous in their forms, exuding filtered, soft-edged haloes. Although one might expect a harsh contrast between the serene beauty of the landscapes and the bizarrely bright and obnoxious gold light, there is nothing jarring about the scene. In fact, Luo's night scenes would lose much of their intrigue with a clear and cloudless sky. If one observes more closely, it quickly becomes clear that the night sky serves as the canvas for the clusters of gold sparkles, which are not intrusive, but are expected guests. Indeed, surrounding landscapes serve merely as a welcoming backdrop to the brashly colored stars without becoming the focus of the paintings.

In various interviews, Luo Qing refers to his paintings of curious lighting to be sights of “unknown flying saucers 不明飞行物 [buming feixingwu]” and “aliens 外星人 [waixingren]” arriving.<sup>16</sup> In his explanations, the odd scenes portray the foreign and the unfamiliar, both of which are represented by the unusual lights that resemble stars. The mesmerizing gold color exudes such incredible beauty, yet its oddity creates an unfamiliar distance that makes the intrigue inaccessible. The dichotomy of the odd source of light and the landscape creates a sense of unease. The unknown flying saucers or aliens are foreign forces that can be understood as metaphors for timeless philosophical concepts. As it is with all of Luo Qing's works, there are a number of possible interpretations. One theme in most of his paintings is the portrayal of certain visual aspects of life in Taiwan. In the case of these lightening paintings Luo explains,

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<sup>16</sup> Luo Qing, “Luo Qing Interview” in *Buming Feixingwu Lai le 不明飞行物来了 [Here Comes the UFOs]* (Taipei: Chuan Wenshue Chubanshe, 1984), 134. Translated by author.

I have many paintings portraying night scenes; my purpose was not to portray night but to handle how time and space have mutated under the influence of technology. That is why in several of the almost traditional paintings, we can observe that the source of light, the development of angles, and the extension of perspectives are all mutated.<sup>17</sup>

我有许多张画夜景的画，目的不在描写夜景，而是在处理时空在科技的影响下如何错乱变形。所以在几张几乎接近传统的画中，大家可以看到光线的来源，角度的发展，远近的推移，全都变形了。

As previously mentioned, Luo's chosen medium, Chinese ink, has become controversial. In the Chinese ink painting tradition, artists do not portray unknown flying objects. We can thus consider Luo's unconventional paintings of the night scenes to not only present his ability to experiment with ink works, but also as a representation of the state of *guohua*.

Luo's night scenes reinterpret, if not subvert *guohua*. The night scenes thus become works that contain far greater significance in national and historical context than simple colored pieces. In Luo's words, the contrast between the old traditions of ink paintings and the new direction of *guohua* is the stark change between agricultural societies to an industrial one. The oddity, as well as the intriguing beauty, of Luo's night scenes visually addresses the phenomenon of scientific and technological innovation. After the arrival of KMT forces in Taiwan, the island soared in economic growth and became one of the key import and export gates of East Asia. Due to its booming economy and the introduction of Western industry and technology, Taiwan experienced drastic social changes. The process is generally termed "modernization," and Taiwan indeed

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 133. Translated by author.

transformed and evolved under such conditions. While Taiwan grew economically, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping were reorganizing China politically. As a result, ink works on traditional Chinese landscape paintings fell from their prestigious academic status during this turbulent time. While the physical features of a Chinese landscape painting might still depict the geographic parts of China, as a result of modernization, the real content of a traditional Chinese ink painting no longer reflects, represents, or answers the pressing emotional, political, and intellectual concerns of the nation.

Given these changes, it is clear why Luo did not wish to recreate traditional ink works. In great contrast to mainland China, artists in Taiwan had greater freedom to experiment, though this is not to say that over-aggressive artists with clear political agendas would not suffer consequences. The rise of Luo's fame and the acceptance of his artwork, poetry included, call into question his political inclination. Though these concerns have never surfaced anywhere in discussions and scholarship of Luo's work, they are important in understanding Luo's creative output as a reaction to the cultural and political climate in China and Taiwan at the time. Luo's work cannot be merely studied as a new creative phenomenon; it is commentary that challenges a culture by challenging tradition. Of course, any commentary in the context of a Chinese artistic tradition practiced under a new governmental regime will never be naïve about its own political subtext. The experimental nature of Luo's work, therefore, creates a contingency, one that teeters on the fine line between tradition and innovation, and critique and acceptance.

Luo's UFOs, or unidentified flying objects, are not only symbolic forms representing the Western influences on the land of Taiwan during the years of economic growth and industrialization, they also represent eternal symbols of spirit, ideas, and

ideals. Luo, in several discussions, expressed the hope that the brilliant yet unfamiliar gold leaf (especially evident in fig. 4) resembles the genius of timeless ideas or the eternal ideals of the humanities. Luo curiously used Confucius' philosophies as an example and elaborated that Confucianism, having been at once praised, despised, and praised again, is a Chinese philosophy sustained throughout Chinese history. It is timeless. Composing the starry sky with shiny objects that symbolize various aspects and products of humanity, which last throughout eternity, is to claim inadvertently that nature, including landscapes, is temporal and thus disposable. Perhaps it is the idea of landscape that Luo is critiquing, and it is the idea of landscape that is disposable and expendable. We can extend this idea further considering that the temporality of landscape is rightly depicted during a time when the traditions of Chinese painting were dissolving and new ideas becoming the frontier of art. Once again, such a notion is in complete opposition to the concept that the Chinese landscape is eternal and unchanging; it directly challenges the idea that while history may change, mountains and water do not falter. Ultimately, when we examine Luo's night scenes we realize that they are, in fact, illustrations of the timelessness of an idea in the ever-changing world.

Understanding both time and timelessness in the same image is a difficult task for a regular viewer, for it requires an intellectual and creative mind. Yet the experience of viewing Luo's night scenes is a sensational one. The blue colors used to create the night sky are vibrant and the Chinese ink gives great depth in the clear darkness. The use of the gold leaf is a technique that Luo incorporated from local Taiwanese craftsmen. Reflecting lights in all directions, the sparkling gold almost jumps off the paper. Using the silent yet welcoming night sky as a backdrop, the gold color and the dark blue color form an

incredibly attractive image. It goes without saying that beyond the historical knowledge, cultural background, and artistic training that a viewer must possess to completely decode Luo's work, one can also simply appreciate the extravagant beauty that Luo's night pictures exude. Indeed, without completely understanding the complex ideas behind Luo's UFOs and his landscapes, a viewer is still able to detect a sense of poetic interplay between ink and color, light and shadows. While Luo's intellectual ability strengthens the conceptual ideas behind his artwork, bolstering the realization of his highly experimental projects, the integration of verbal poetry and the visual language gives Luo's works power and commands attention of his viewers.

In *Here Comes the UFO*, Luo's main theoretical platform is built on the use of icons. The unknown flying objects, in this case, convey iconic meaning, referencing the portrayal of aliens and UFOs from television and film. Steven Spielberg's 1982 film *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (fig.7 and 7.1), in addition to quite a few television shows and radio programs in the early eighties, contributed to a global obsession with the mystery of extra-terrestrials. The key point to consider is that "E.T." is an American film, a foreign entertainment product. Yet the odd-looking, friendly alien became much more than a foreign product. The film was so popular internationally that E.T. became an icon of popular culture in the early '80s and remained a subject of global fascination until the end of the decade. Luo's adaptation of the phenomenon in the medium of *guohua* injected this particular body of work with humor and irony. To dabble in the fad of fascination with UFOs, Luo undoubtedly was attempting a satirical spin by applying a traditional Chinese painting method to describe a contemporary Western obsession.

A further subtext is the Taiwanese attitude toward pop culture and trendy commercial subject matters from the West. In fact, Luo himself stated that his interest in the UFO phenomenon was caused by Spielberg's *E.T.* He adapted the popular symbol of a UFO as an innovative exploration of this idea because:

In the past, the general consensus was that *guohua* was a stiff practice, and so its content has become rigid; it is impossible to harness this medium to portray the culture generated by technology and science, which makes it vulnerable to the shock of modern civilization. Here, I firstly wish to experiment, utilizing the language of *guohua* and peasant craft technique, such as gold-leafing, to present a scientific subject matter. I hope to integrate the abstract with the realistic and seek a new direction for Chinese painting as I explore new content, topics, and presentation techniques.<sup>18</sup>

在过去,一般人都认为国画形式僵化,内容死板,已无法表现科技时代的文化,也无法适应现代文明之冲击,在此,我愿率先做一实验,用国画的语言及传统民俗的手法(如贴金箔),来表现此一科幻主题,希望能融抽象与真象为一炉,为现代中国绘画找到一个新方向,并拓展出新的内容,题材,寻求新的表现技巧。

Essentially, *Here Comes the UFO* incorporates elements from the future (UFOs) and the past (landscapes) to create a picture of 1980s Taiwan. The irony of using the UFO, an icon of popular Western culture, as the representation of the foreign and novel “something” with incredible beauty, speaks volumes about what the island of Taiwan considered progressive. Luo's *Here Comes the UFO*, therefore, depicts what Chinese intellectuals living in Taiwan considered to be the next step for Chinese culture,

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<sup>18</sup> Luo Qing, “Luo Qing Interview,” 137–38. Translated by author.

projecting the idea the hope and change lie in the foreign. Whether or not Luo has intended it, the underlying message of his night scenes is radical: it shows what intellectuals perceived as the direction of Chinese culture, and that to them Westernizing equated to modernizing.

Luo's other poem is much longer, titled "Night of the UFO." It expresses the conflicts of his rationale and his emotional attachment to his Chinese heritage. A few excerpts are as follows:

UFOs are

Flying from the Song, the Yuan, the Ming, and the Qing dynasty

Flying from Zhou, Qing, Han, and Tang

Flying from Yinshang, Xia, Tang, and the time of the Yellow Emperor

From the far-way ancient myths and tales

Flying here, flying here

Flying in front of our eyes

[...]

However, can people really identify with these aliens?

And can the aliens identify with us?

Were we once their forgotten ancestor?

Or, are they our forgotten ancestor?

Can we really identify our lineage?

有不明飞行物

从宋元明清飞来

从周秦汉唐飞来

从殷商夏禹唐虞黄帝时代来

飞来飞来

飞到我们的眼前

[...]

然而,大家真有能力辨认那些外星人吗

外星人会有可能了解我们吗

我们是不是他们一度遗忘的先祖

-Luo Qing, October 1983

The concept undoubtedly reflects Luo's own sentiment toward Chinese culture. On one hand, he is incredibly sentimental about his heritage; on the other, Luo remains doubtful and speculative as to how traditions and history can really define our future.

### ***Asphalt Roads***

Luo's ongoing series *Asphalt Roads* (figs. 8–13) is another experimental project that tests the boundaries between the new and the traditional. This project, like *Here Comes the UFO*, extracts qualities from Taiwanese industrial landscapes and adapts them to traditional Chinese painting. The asphalt road, like the UFO, is an icon of mid- to late twentieth-century Taiwan, when the island's economy flourished. In one sweeping brushstroke (see, for example, fig.8), Luo creates long strips of asphalt pavement that cut through the center of his ink landscapes, disrupting and dividing nature.

*Asphalt Roads* successfully delivers a sensation beyond the visual. One cannot resist the urge to follow where Luo's asphalt roads go, for the bristles on the brush produce thin and continuous lines that softly flow unbroken from the top of the canvas to the bottom. Luo utilizes this technique to mimic speed or motion; because asphalt roads are built for modern automobiles with electric and gas powered engines, they signify

transportation. Having cars, trucks, or motorcycles indicates Taiwan's status as an "import" island that admits foreign goods and mechanical creations invented by Westerners into its culture as well as into its natural landscapes. While Luo's works are often founded upon complex theoretical approaches, the juxtaposition of asphalt roads and nature is one that an average viewer can understand.

Beyond the superficial meaning, the asphalt roads indicate that people own cars and do not belong to a part of the natural landscape. Clearly the image of an asphalt road does not resemble anything similar in the *guohua* tradition, and Luo has brought attention to this disconnect. To update *guohua* from its original confinement to traditional landscapes, Luo has deliberately inserted the asphalt roads as icons of modernity. The combination of asphalt roads—a modern invention—and landscape depicts not only the modern versus the traditional, but also the past versus the present.

There are many conclusions that one can draw from the juxtapositions in Luo's work. Luo himself notably elaborates on the elements of "time" and "speed." Speed, as Luo puts it, is an essential underlying theme in the *Asphalt Road* project.

Another worthwhile question to pay attention to is speed and the role it plays in the modern society. Speed changes everything, including the concept and sensation of space and time. Therefore, I use a technique of symbolization to portray where speed stands in modern living. It is very difficult for a painter to paint speed. It might become text and illustration very easily. I chose the asphalt road to symbolize speed because an asphalt road is a product of modern civilization and technology. I injected the sensation of speed in traditional cursive calligraphy into portraying an asphalt road, thus creating motion in calmness, to redefine the relationship between modern humans and nature. Asphalt roads usually cut through nature harshly, but they sometimes must

obey nature in special natural environments such as shorelines by bending and curving around the edges. They exist for the sole purpose of speed.<sup>19</sup>

还有一个值得注意的问题就是“速度”在现代社会中所扮演的角色。“速度”改变了一切,包括时空的关念及知感性。於是我用象征的手法,来刻划速度在现生活的地位。画家要画“速度”十分困难,一不小心,便成了“看图识字式”的插图了。我选择“柏油路”来象征速度,因为柏油路乃是现代文明及科技之下的产物。我把传统草书中所含有的速度感,注入柏油路中,使其在静中有动,以便我重新诠释现代人与自然的关系。柏油路常常硬生生的分割了自然,但有时在海边地带或自然环境特殊的地方,又要曲折的顺从自然。它的存在,只为了一个目的,那就是“速度”。

Luo's choice to apply ink in a manner that suggests a sweeping motion implies action and requires the viewer to imagine a physical sensation instead of solely a visual one. The transformation from the agricultural to the industrial, according to Luo, has to a large degree depended on transportation, specifically the increased speed at which one travels in cars, trucks, and trains. To Luo, such inventions take away people's appreciation of nature. As previously mentioned, traditional Chinese landscape paintings focused on nature for as long as the tradition existed, and very often are thought by scholars to be symbols of eternity. The notion of eternity is in opposition to speed and time, for both speed and time are conceptions of motion that can be measured in increments.

Challenging the traditional Chinese landscape means Luo has to tackle the tradition of the Chinese landscape as eternal. The iconography of Chinese landscapes is thus under attack by a new icon: the asphalt road, one that leads us into a future where eternity has to be

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<sup>19</sup> Luo Qing, "Luo Qing Interview," 133. Translated by author.

redefined and where landscapes fail and falter, no longer acting as the foremost representation of Chinese intellectual and artistic creation.

Another notable point in Luo's comments quoted above has to do with the limitations of asphalt roads. Luo points out that although asphalt roads are built to transport, always cutting into natural scenes disruptively (fig.13), there are natural sites that are inaccessible to road construction. It is worthy of note that this is incidental *only* to Taiwanese geography. As an isolated island that is longer than it is wide, much of the transportation on the island necessitates traveling between the north and the south end. Taiwan is a mountainous island, especially at its center; to construct a reliable means of transportation has been problematic, because the task of cutting through mountains is an extraordinarily difficult one. As a result, most of the roads are built around forests and mountains, leaving the roads right on the edges of the island, next to seashores (fig.12), beaches, and cliffs. The play on the relationship between asphalt roads (symbolizing technology and modern living) and nature (symbolizing tradition and history) is a very interesting one, for it means that technology is limited by nature, but the limit is surpassable. Furthermore, this argument resonates especially in Taiwan, which makes Luo's asphalt road paintings, especially those with sea views, uniquely Taiwanese. The "icon" that Luo establishes under such an interpretation becomes one associated with modern Taiwan rather than with the traditional Chinese landscapes of the ink method.

*Asphalt Roads* can also be understood in the context of the political tensions between China and Taiwan. By utilizing the asphalt road, a creation to accommodate Western technological imports on the island, one can see how after Taiwan established itself as new, with a more modern, democratic, Chinese government, old symbols of

“Chinese-ness” required reconstruction. Within the *Asphalt* body of work, Luo includes a few curious cases in which he painted shadows of the bodies of airplanes (fig.10) on the road. This subtle touch echoes another iconic flying technology, the UFOs. Both are powerful symbols, not only of technology, but of modernity. Airplanes are a creation of modern technology, and a UFO is a creation of modern fantasy. Yet “modern” is meaningless without a contrast with the traditional, and Luo’s work takes advantage of the necessity of such a contrast. Although his mission is to always create distinctions between the old and the modern, Luo is also successful in utilizing visual imagery to simulate sensations.

Luo’s poem, “If I Were an Airplane,” is meant to explain his personal sentiment toward that technological invention. Its connection with *Using the Body to Feel the Earth* is an excellent example of combining the visual with the physical.

If my dreams  
Were an airplane  
I would take off softly  
To fly back to my foreign homeland  
I would fly softly, gently  
Flying so my shadow becomes a small cross  
I want to softly, gently,  
Use my shadow to comfort  
The tortured and scarred  
Land, sand, grass, and trees  
Houses, cabins; men, women, children, and the elderly  
假如我的梦  
是一架滑翔机

我要轻轻飞起  
飞回那从未谋面的故乡  
我要柔柔飞翔  
飞我那影子成了小小 的十字  
我要柔柔轻轻  
用我的影子去抚慰  
抚慰 那饱受创伤的  
一山一沙一草一木  
房舍屋宇男女老幼

-Luo Qing, January, 1984

Unlike most of Luo's *Asphalt* works, *Using the Body* (fig.9) represents a rare moment in Luo's art where, instead of juxtaposing two disparate subjects, Luo applies the aesthetics of contingency to portray a frozen slice of time. The work is thus less theoretical than his other works. In *Using Your Body* we see another dimension of Luo's medium at work: text. Words are used quite differently here than when utilized in the *UFO* series. Here, the title is indicative not of the content of the work, but of the experience needed to view the work. The poem takes such an experience further by telling the viewer/reader how the artist felt about simulating a flying experience and why he felt that way. The poem—emotional and sentimental, if not a little heart-broken—acts as a bridge into the picture Luo created, and makes the visual representation of the sensation of flying accessible and identifiable to everyday people. We can exercise our imaginations, or simply draw on memories of driving on a seemingly endless road, to materialize an airplane hovering above. What emerges are familiar feelings of excitement,

admiration, and fascination with the big metal bird (fig. 11) that accompany the despair, feelings of loss, and hidden pain that technology inflicted upon peasants living in the countryside.

Undoubtedly, Luo once more exhibits his intellectual and emotional connection to technology in this work. *Using your Body* presents a specific object in its negative form—the shadow. Experiencing its lack of presence is stronger than actually observing the airplane as it glides over the asphalt road. The painting is an extraordinary example of Luo's display of his complicated, deeply personal reaction to technology, the conveniences it created, and the destruction it brought. The complexity of Luo's response can also be translated as the response to urbanization of natural landscapes in Taiwan. Luo's creative approach to comprehend and justify modernization through his art and poetry speaks out loud the subtle and invisible damages “newness” inevitably brought to Taiwan and to its people.

### **Luo in Context: Luo Qing and Chu Ge**

When put side by side, how does Luo's work compare to that of his contemporaries? Chu Ko 楚戈 [Chu Ge] (1931–) is a Chinese painter who is a close friend of Luo. Chu Ko's art, of course, has similarities to and differences from Luo Qing's work, but the two thrived in the same environment in the 1960s and 1970s in Taiwan. The two men, born and raised seventeen years apart, are both concerned with extending Chinese tradition in art and poetry.

Chu Ko, whose real name is Yuan Dexing 袁德星, came to Taiwan in 1949. Unlike Luo, who grew up in a relatively affluent family and has always had luck with in

Chinese academia, Chu and his family were very poor. Nevertheless, Chu is well versed in Chinese literary classics and is an excellent writer and poet. While enlisted in the army and performing national duties as a low class soldier, Chu was eventually transported to Taiwan for a new post assignment along with his unit. He was not yet eighteen, but already had a mind of his own. During his time in Taiwan, where he was finally transferred to Taipei, he learned about Chinese art as well as Western art. Like his contemporaries, Chu found Western art (particularly German artist Paul Klee) exciting emotionally and intellectually. Chu would later integrate his feelings about modern abstract art into traditional Chinese ink art.

Needless to say, Luo's approach to art and poetry is based in theory. Good examples of this can be found in any of Luo's ink painting projects on the theme of post-industrialism. In *To Fly with Intuition: the Shadow of My Soul Caressing the Earth* (1992) (fig. 9), Luo uses the title of the piece to simulate the sensation of flight. The title in turn is quite explanatory; it cleverly depicts the ecstatic phenomenon of modern technology, the presence of which is presented as the airplane's shadow as the title of the piece tells us. The scale of the painting is huge (274 cm × 136.5 cm) and consists of four panels. At either end there is a slight attempt to depict some landscape, yet it is the asphalt road, which Luo argues is the symbol of modern life since it represents speed, that dominates the overall composition. The shadow of the airplane, a shape that's colored a darker grey, is at the center of painting. As our eyes linger on the small shadow at the center of a big picture, one cannot help but to be overcome with the sensation of flying. The painting is from a bird's-eye-view, which has a strong effect on the viewer. It is hard not to imagine what the asphalt road feels like as the airplane's shadow glides over the ground. The short

and controlled dashed brushstrokes portraying bushes and trees, and the straight and well-measured thin lines depicting clusters of houses, are very well done. Luo, indeed, did not hesitate to exhibit his technical proficiency using the ink and brush. At the same time, this well-practiced traditional technique of ink painting successfully enhances Luo's modern subject matter. With a color palette limited to red, grey, black, and green (there are small white spaces here and there and splashes of brown in the rocks), Luo's *Fly with Intuition* is sophisticated, calculated, and immensely theoretical in its intellectual depiction of modern life.

In contrast, Chu's colored landscape done in 1991, *Sunrise in the East, Rain in the West* (fig.14), seems as if it could not be more different. In the last few years of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, Chu integrated Daoist philosophy into his work, by experimenting with space on paper, trying to visually capture, in large blocks and organic forms of color, the beauty in a fleeting moment. Another good example of his Daoist influences exists in *That Rainy Day* (1991; fig.15). Both paintings display bright, bold colors in large patches. In *Sunrise*, the only trace of black outline occurs at the right of the painting where thin, slight, black brush strokes curl around several abstract bright red shapes. Leaving some white space as sky at the top, most of the painting is filled with layers of colors as earth. Here, Chu utilized *xuanran* 渲染 technique, a wet-on-wet traditional painting technique using gradating colors and tones on wet rice paper with a brush saturated with color pigments or ink. From the bottom up, the black bleeds into a few patches of red shapes. Above the red, there are parts of the earth done in a lighter shade of black on the right and deep peacock blue on the left. The topmost layers of the earth consist of many colors as well: there is dark aqua green fusing with the purple above it, and the superficial layer is

made of shades of yellow that also blend downward to indigo-colored contents. *Xuanran* is a difficult painting technique, requiring a mature and steady control of water and color ink. The process is a spontaneous one, however, allowing the artist to create beauty through chance. While Chu's brilliant colors appear loud and bold as layers of gravels in the ground, the bright tones invoke an undeniable emotional response. The vastness of the colored landscape stretches from its composition on rice paper to the viewer's mind, letting the viewer form a visceral connection between the painting and their experience of it.

In contrast to Luo Qing's intellectual process, Chu's generous use of color is not an intellectual impulse. As abstract as Chu's play on shapes and forms may appear, it creates a realistic emotional connection with the viewer. Art historian Lee Hui-shu 李慧淑 [Li Huishu] noted the following about *That Rainy Day* (1991): "The lucidity of the colors in this painting, particularly the background blue of the water, truly conveys the impression of looking at flowers in the rain."<sup>20</sup> Taking a closer look at both *Sunrise* and *That Rainy Day*, we see a different kind of abstraction in shapes, forms, and content than that found in Luo's works. *That Rainy Day* inevitably reminds one of Chu's favorite artist Paul Klee. Of course, there is the element of chan, or zen, in Chu's aesthetic of his later works, yet it is one that is less theoretical than visual.<sup>21</sup> "Those who know Chu Ko well recognize that his fascination with the abstruse doctrines of Daoism is not limited to intellectual curiosity. Rather, there is something intrinsic to his personality that makes

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<sup>20</sup> Lee Hui-shu, "Free and Easy Wandering" in *Chu Ko: A Soldier from Chu* (Taipei: Tsai Shih Art Company, 1991), 62.

<sup>21</sup>

him the best kind of Taoist possible—a natural one. He works but never labors, he achieves without ever having set a goal.”<sup>22</sup>

The differences in the two artists’ works can be traced back to their life experiences. Chu and Luo represent starkly contrasting upbringings and academic trainings. Chu Ke was not successful in entering academia; he did not test well on exams and did not place well in the university system of Taiwan. Chu was thirty-five when he began taking classes at a technical college for art. On the other hand, Luo Qing has always been welcome in the crowd of elites. As previously mentioned, he not only attended an expensive private school in Jilong as a teenager, he also attended Furen University and studied English literature. Luo’s master’s degree in comparative literature from the University of Washington firmly establishes his status in the intellectual community. Clearly Chu struggled coming from a peasant family in rural China, while in comparison, Luo enjoyed comfort and academic prestige due to his family settling in Taiwan when Luo was only three. The differences in economic backgrounds of the two men speak volumes about how living conditions varied between mainland China and Taiwan.

Taiwan was the closest shelter for Chinese academics and intellectuals to hide in while they hoped that the People’s Republic of China would soon dissolve. Taiwan was the destination for Chinese modernization, a place where creative types could pursue any literary and artistic movements without real, life-threatening consequences. Furthermore, Taiwan was a new source of economic power, with opportunities of all sorts. The creative world in which bohemians met academics in Taipei was an energetic circle, full of young

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Sturman, “Towards Modern *Chinese Painting*” in *Chu Ko: a Soldier from Chu* (Taipei: Tsai Shih Art Company, 1991), 43.

and ambitious talent. In the 1960s and 1970s, the students of the first generation of scholars who had settled in Taiwan had just begun to acquire fame on their own. This crowd consisted of poets, painters, illustrators, sculptors, art critics, and academics. Within a group that was half bohemian and half academic, Cho eventually found his own niche and received attention. Luo Qing, as previously stated, had been publishing his poems since he was in college. Academia had no problems accepting Luo and praised his scholarly training both in Taiwan and in the United States, placing him within the academic tradition that facilitated his use of art theory, cultural theory, and Western modern thoughts.

A key element needed to compare Chu and Luo's art is the disparity between the two men's ages; Chu is, after all, seventeen years older than Luo. In the 1950s, modern poetry was at its best in Taiwan. The literary world fell into chaos in the 1960s when poets and academics began to feud over what modern Chinese art and poetry should be. When Luo Qing graduated from college, fulfilled his military service, and graduated with a master's degree from the University of Washington, it was already 1974. Luo was distanced from the first-hand experience that most elderly academics and intellectuals suffered in Communist China. He was not born in 1945, when the Republic of China claimed to be official successor of the Qing Dynasty and took over Taiwan. Luo was only in college when the debate about modern Chinese art took place. The *xingshi* reformation, or what remained of it, was reinvigorated by Luo's re-interpretation of Chinese artistic tradition.

Chu's artwork is expressive, romantic, and emotional in its execution, while being sentimental and personal in its content. There is a performance aspect of Chu's work, for

he adopts a Daoist approach in painting and aims for spontaneity. Luo Qing's treatment to ink art is theoretical in concept; he is also controlling and calculating in the execution, and highly referential of the past in content. While drastically different in aesthetics, Chu's combination of European expressionism (Paul Klee's generation) and the practice of Zen gave him a modern edge to his work. Luo, on the other hand, is a devoted academic; his rigorous training taught him to be efficient and effective in the creation of ideas, even if they were intended for creative mediums such as painting and poetry. Indeed, Luo represents a new generation of Chinese academic elite, who, as the Taiwanese local would say, "*he guo yangmuoshui* 喝过洋墨水" ("has tasted the so-called Western ink"). Indeed, it was Luo's affair with the modern West that eventually solidified his stature as a new and refreshing voice in the modern Chinese world.

## CHAPTER TWO: Ink Art and Its Pertinence

Luo Qing was trained to use ink in its traditional forms before he started his own experimentations with it. His training qualifies him as a *guohua* artist or a *shuimo* 水墨 painter.<sup>23</sup> There has been impressive effort expended on studies of *guohua*. Several conferences, exhibitions, and publications have generated a vibrant international conversation on Chinese ink works. Most notably, the Third Chengdu Biennale in 2007, titled “Reboot,” was a symposium accompanying an exhibition of contemporary Chinese ink art. The exhibition and scholarly articles constructed a space that Luo Qing occupies as an international phenomenon in contemporary Chinese art. The rush of attention to *guohua* begs two questions: why is *guohua* important to us now, and how does Luo Qing fit in as a practiced user of ink?

While Chinese artists all over the world might intentionally avoid ink work, complex debate and issues arise regardless. Indeed, Chinese ink is no longer only a medium, it is a cultural icon denoting Chinese national identity. At the core of the various heated discussions on Chinese art is a disagreement over what ink should represent in contemporary discourse on Chinese art. Shen Kuiyi crisply summarizes the changing perspective on ink as a medium in the following comment from his article “Ink Painting in the Contemporary Chinese Art World”: “Our concern is not just what ink painting is,

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<sup>23</sup> *Guohua*, or by literal translation “national painting,” (short for *zhongguo hua*, “Chinese painting”) is a type of painting that requires the use of black Chinese ink and is practiced in various traditional formats, most notably landscape, portraiture, still life, and bird and flower depiction. It was also termed as the “new literati painting.” *Shuimo*, or by literal translation “water ink,” denotes the same type of paintings or artistic creations as *guohua*. The term is considered to be less politically charged without the word *guo* (“nation” or “national”) and was eagerly accepted in the 1980s. Most artists and intellectuals thought that the neutral tone of the language would expand the potential of a traditional medium and open more doors to a wider art world.

or means, but what it did, how it worked as a cultural practice. It did not merely signify or symbolize power relations; it was itself an instrument of cultural power.”<sup>24</sup>

Ink paintings are important in contemporary Chinese art scholarship because ink is a traditional Chinese medium. The history of ink-use in Chinese art and its historicity are in conflict with contemporary art, forming a gap between the Chinese painting tradition and contemporary art practices currently employed by Chinese artists. Shen outlines the condition of ink art today quite eloquently, and voices the sentiment of ink artists who worry about their own position as practitioners of the traditional medium:

They are extremely anxious about the future of Chinese painting, in part because the reasons for which it has been attacked over the past century—that it is unsuitable to modern life—have not been satisfactorily resolved. Moreover, in recent years, as China rises as a power in the contemporary economic and political world and its doors are now completely open, Chinese art more often appears in the international art scene, but the artists who practice in this traditional medium feel that they have become outsiders in a changing environment. They recognize that the current globalization of economy, technology, culture, and politics is breaking down the established borders among various human activities and social structures, and they feel an urgent need to break out of their traditional framework<sup>25</sup>.

The challenge to contemporary ink work is to find a way to ensure that the value of Chinese history is communicated inwardly to the Chinese people and outwardly to a global community. Contemporary Chinese ink art needs to be taken seriously in full understanding that the source of its problem is its historical legacy. Whether or not artists incorporate ink as a part or as a whole in the creative process, the medium will trigger the

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<sup>24</sup> Shen Kuiyi, “Ink Painting in the Contemporary Chinese Art World.” *Yishu* 4, no.2 (2005).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

provocative problem of historical lineage in the context of contemporary art. Shen appropriately concludes his article by pinpointing the state of discourse on ink art as a process of negotiation:

It is absolutely fundamental, however, to understand this intense and dynamic scenario as beyond the horizon of a nation—or Chinese—context, logic, and history. Chinese culture itself is already part of the current process of renegotiation between the local and the global, the very process that is generating new and constantly mutating international cultural and artistic structures. We perhaps should take up completely different approaches to reconsider the art of this era. The boundaries to conceptual exploration based upon materials and medium have created bottlenecks to artistic and critical development. We might have to see it as Richard Vinograd wrote of Chinese painting three years ago: “as plural, multiple, or poly-visual...” and an art form that “need not imply a total atomization of painting or the uselessness of any categorization.”<sup>26</sup>

The importance of researching and studying contemporary ink works by Chinese artists, no matter their geographic locations, is thus clear: we need to study them and elevate the discourse from one that is only accessible to art critics to one that is also rooted in art historical scholarship, for history is critically important. The task for art historians in the field of contemporary Chinese art is to illustrate the dynamics of the seeming lack of history in the contemporary art world and the urgency of history in the humanities studies to negotiate our present relative to our past.

As the *UFO* and *Asphalt Roads* series demonstrate, Luo Qing has internalized the conflict between tradition and progress in his work. I will discuss whether Luo belongs to the group of artists Shen Kuiyi speaks of and if the state of *guohua* or ink art necessarily describes Luo or his oeuvre.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Shen quoted Vinograd’s “The End of Chinese Painting,” in conference volume *Taiwan 2002 conference on the History of Painting in East Asia* (Taipei, 2002), 424.

## Art and Politics: Issues of the *Guohua* Debate

Luo's work, in theory, belongs to the category of *guohua*. Ink, as the medium, is an item that some scholars want to reinstate as representative of Chinese cultural "essence" under the impact of globalization. The surging economic and political power of China has increased demand for contemporary Chinese art and art scholarship, thus making the study of *guohua* urgent.

Rising from the chaotic field of modern and contemporary Chinese art, one identifiable trait that is globally understood to be unmistakably Chinese is the use of ink. As we have learned, before *shuimo hua*, there was the term *guohua*.<sup>27</sup> *Guohua* is a modern term, which most scholars agree evolved from *wenren hua* 文人画, or literati paintings.<sup>28</sup> Originally, as all Chinese art enthusiasts know, literati or scholar paintings, were created as amateur works to entertain their creators as both intellectual and aesthetic exercises. It was an activity of privilege that only people of a certain class could perform and enjoy, for creating a sophisticated ink image, composing the accompanying poem, and having an audience required education and artistic training that were not available to the peasants that made up the majority of the Chinese population before modernized educational methods took effect in the twentieth century. Literati painting, *guohua* or *shuimo hua*, gradually became a Chinese tradition, seeping into Chinese artistic practices for thousands of years. It was undoubtedly, as Shen calls it, "an instrument of cultural

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<sup>27</sup> Please refer to note 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Wenren hua*, or literati painting, is a painting tradition that existed as early as the Song dynasty (960–1279) in China. The methodology revolves and evolves around the basic concept of *xieyi* 写意, a term Shen Kuiyi loosely defines as a "free and self-expressive manner." Literal translation of *xieyi* is "to express ideas," or "delineating an idea."

power.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, there is no passage from a Chinese art historian that displays a stronger nationalistic tone than Shen’s.

The current debate is centered on the relevance of understanding the tradition of ink practices in reaction to the global artistic community. Ink works contain inherent problems where they are used in contemporary art, because they cannot, and perhaps will never be, divorced from their attachment to tradition and history. The incompatibility that exists between an age-old Chinese traditional medium and its contemporary usage creates a space for artists and scholars alike to discuss the conflict between tradition and modernity. The history of ink and its intellectual origin, is not a subject that is easily accessible to the global artistic community. Ink’s remote origin, therefore, creates yet another space for discussion, although this space is open for international artists and scholars who have never studied Chinese art or art history and are not informed on the complexity of issues in ink art. Regardless of what prompts the conversation, the result is that discussion of Chinese ink art thrives in today’s global art community. Ultimately, the agenda for an artist or a scholar lies in subject matter that is rooted in Chinese tradition and applying it to contemporary situations. To juxtapose a traditional medium and its contemporary adaptation, one must look for contextualization in definitions of what Chinese ink works do and have done, not only to the global art community, but also to the Chinese people.

How scholars and artists perceive ink’s identity, and by extension Chinese identity, remains complex. There is a sense of urgency in the tone of the ink art debate, for most participating scholars feel that due to its history of being a medium exercised by

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<sup>29</sup> See note 3.

elite intellectuals, its contemporary interpretation is overshadowed by tradition. The element most clearly shows its Chinese-ness in the global context, where it is somewhat inaccessible to critics. The *guohua* debate is plagued by other problems as well, for the attempt to pick out one specific subject (the ink medium) and to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct what it means to the Chinese culture and the global community is a nearly impossible task.

Why is ink the unofficial Chinese medium, and why is it worth global attention to the exclusion of other Chinese art forms? In the 2007 Chengdu Biennale, meticulously curated by Shen Kuiyi (from the University of California, San Diego), Britta Erickson (an independent contemporary Chinese art historian), and Lu Hong, this simple question was not answered. The exhibition included all types of art works that fell under the theme of the exploration of any subject that relates to ink and its historicity. Ink was not the medium in all the works, but rather, it was used as a subject, an object, or an idea by the artists. Papers and exhibition catalogs were published afterward, documenting all the conversations, discussions, and formal academic writing surrounding the exhibitions, which revealed that the issue is not about *guohua* or rather, the problem is not about *shuimo*. It is the history, the culture, and the tradition that *guohua* and *shuimo* created access to that become invaluable resources. To those who do not understand the medium as a gateway, the singling out of a painting or writing medium in order to launch an international discussion can be puzzling and arbitrary. For example, why not focus on the Chinese painting brush?

Second, deliberately labeling ink as the “Chinese” medium and generating discussions on “why is it Chinese and relevant, or why is it not” has a strong nationalistic

tone. The balance between a modern, inward self-inquiry and an international display of those discoveries is, indeed, delicate. Will the blatant promotion of nationalism generate any real progress toward understanding and redefining Chinese art and culture? In other words, is this *guohua* phenomenon, even the change to the term *shuimo*, genuine enough to lead the involved artists, art historians, curators, and critics toward productivity?

Lu Hung's short yet effective essay, "Only When things Belong to the World, Can They Belong to a Nation," describes precisely the ink art dilemma and pinpoints the crisis of establishing both a national and global identity. The title of the essay quotes a famous Taiwanese scholar Long Yingtai, who said, "only when things belong to a nation, can they belong to the world." Lu first expresses his agreement with Long Yingtai, stating, "I agree with Long, as her view was brought forth under the current circumstances, and not only did it constructively supplement our traditional viewpoint, but it also pointed out a very accurate direction in which our national culture can develop under current globalizing trends."<sup>30</sup> While Lu did not criticize how Chinese scholars position the discourse on ink art, he voices his concern about nationalism and cautions:

In the past, as a result of one-sided and almost unanimous emphasis on the viewpoint of "only when things belong to a nation, can they belong to the world," some of the more nationalistic artists have engaged in ink painting in the cultural form reminiscent of the proverb, "remaining unchanged in the face of myriad changes." Although they regard this as an effective means by which to distance themselves from Western contemporary art, their painting techniques, aesthetic taste, as well as compositional choices, basically originate from tradition, and they cannot create a new ink art that expresses the unique characteristics of their times, nor can they have a normal and equal dialogue with Western contemporary art. . . . No matter how ancient or great a tradition, if it

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<sup>30</sup> Lu Hung, "Only When things Belong to the World, Can they Belong to a Nation," *Yishu* 7 (2008): 54–55.

cannot form an active and responsive relationship with contemporary culture, then it has little purpose. Coming from this view point, I am inclined to believe that in order to better utilize the ink medium—this important cultural inheritance of ours—or to better emphasize national identity and difference, and to actively participate in international dialogues, it is imperative for artists to devote themselves to the task of adapting ink art to the contemporary era. In these endeavors, our globalizing environment is one important pre-existing factor that we must face; in fact, in the present day, one is neither able to transcend this all encompassing condition, nor can one return to ancient times.<sup>31</sup>

Lu wrote this essay to accompany the Third Chengdu Biennale. While he gently gives his advice on how he thinks ink art should develop internationally, he is quick to point out where it has failed in the past. Almost immediately, as evident in the title of his essay, Lu addresses the many issues that are still unresolved within Chinese cultural identity. Recalling Shen's words once more, where he claims ink art as a form of Chinese cultural power, it is unclear if scholars, critics, and artists must try to make ink art belong to the world before reclaiming it as a Chinese cultural representative. In fact, both are happening at once—scholars and artists attempt to project the importance of ink art outwardly to the world, while also redirecting its importance inwardly to the Chinese community for reaffirmation of its cultural legacy.

Regardless of the direction of the study and practice of ink art, its utility in harnessing cultural power for China remains ambiguous. Ultimately, understanding ink art and its flaws as strictly Chinese issues is incorrect. After all, most of Luo Qing's work was inspired by Taiwanese circumstances, where he distinctively portrayed landscapes and natural surroundings from the island of Taiwan, a politically charged location that

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<sup>31</sup> Lu Hung, "Only When things Belong to the World," 54–55.

shares a complex cultural identity with mainland China, but retains its own distinct global identity. We must integrate the study of ink art in a way that retains its historical legacy while simultaneously acknowledging its current global importance.

### **Luo Qing's Position in the Big Picture**

The attention on *guohua* is a recent phenomenon aided by globalization. Though the recent attention on ink art has increased its visibility in a modern context, a wide gap still exists in our understanding of Chinese culture, history, art, and the world before and after the new millennium.

Looking back at some of the subjects that Luo started to experiment with in the 1980s, such as UFOs, asphalt roads, and airplanes, we discover that these once novel subjects are now commonplace. Politically, the relationship between Taiwan and China has changed drastically. Winning the bid for the 2008 Olympics placed China under immense international scrutiny. Yet even before that, China had made dramatic improvements in its global image due to increasing economic and political power. In contrast, Taiwan could not be doing worse.<sup>32</sup>

As previously discussed, scholars' attempts to generate more academic interest in *guohua*, ink art, or ink works are inspired by the globalization of the contemporary art community. In large part, these attempts are intended to re-establish a sense of national identity in Chinese artistic circles, while simultaneously presenting a national identity to the rest of the world. It is an agenda that aims to follow a certain trend and to conform to unwritten requirements; the objective is to take part in the international community while

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<sup>32</sup> After the People's Party of Taiwan (MKT) took control with election of former President Chen Shuibien 陈水扁, some even claimed that Taiwan had entered into a dark age of political corruption and economic downfall. The island is not what it used to be; it is no longer more modern or more advanced than China.

representing the nation and its history. The demand to investigate what ink means to the Chinese people and their artistic production right now is also concurrent with the demand to create a sense of cultural identity that scholars, artists, and critics feel may have been lost globally. Luo's role in responding to the demand is entirely external; his participation in the "ink movement" is incidental, in that it is entirely based on the fact that he also uses ink and has been using ink in his work since childhood.

Luo Qing owes much of the internalization and the naturalization of his experimental ink work to the fact that he practices it in Taiwan using distinctively Taiwanese subjects. The "Chinese tradition" takes a not-so-subtle turn in the Taiwanese environment. Taiwan was, incidentally, the most welcoming place for matters of an experimental nature, particularly during the late 1970s to 1980s when Luo Qing rose to fame. The rise of industrialization, post-industrialization, and Taiwan's divided cultural identity created a nurturing ground for creative talents. Taiwan's economic success helped to place the small island on the international map as an excellent export/import gateway in East Asia. Although Taiwan had previously been a Japanese colony and had struggled to seek and maintain a sense of authenticity and cultural integrity, it was not nearly as problematic for the island to include foreign (Western) cultural experiences and influences that came with the rapid exchange of goods in the late twentieth century. In fact, Taiwan's complicated political and cultural past is directly related to its ability to thrive economically under the international spotlight; whether it is accepting, repelling, or a mixture of both, the island was at its artistic and intellectual best when it paid attention to newness, changes, and differences.

The purpose of presenting the two specific bodies of work that Luo created throughout the 1980s and 1990s, on one hand, is of course to explore the creative dimensions in Luo's work. On the other hand, *Here Comes the UFO* and *Asphalt Roads* were created during a very unique time in a very unique setting, and so they exemplify Luo's abilities not simply to produce paintings, but also to use new techniques and adapt them to changing circumstances. In a sense, Luo's use of the ink medium and inclusion in the discussion of ink art as a specifically nationalist Chinese form is problematic. Though his work is founded on his commitment to continue the Chinese literati tradition, Luo's success lies in his ability to extract essential ways of utilizing ink painting and poetry to describe a new social reality in Taiwan. The insistent focus on a nationalist ink work identity, then, obscures the contributions of innovators like Luo, who existed in a unique time and place in modern Chinese history.

The *guohua* conversation is thus a problematic context for assessing Luo's work. Because much *guohua* scholarship concerns itself with promoting the national image of China in its new era of global power, it focuses heavily on consciously creating a specific Chinese national identity. Thus, current *guohua* scholarship marginalizes the contributions of Luo Qing because he built his career away from mainland China in Taiwan.

## Conclusion

Luo Qing's paintings of post-industrial Taiwan are inventive portraits of an urban landscape. His paintings portray Taiwan's political and economic growth, yet were executed in traditional Chinese artistic methods. Such a creative approach to the portrayal of an evolving cultural environment ensures Luo Qing's status as an innovative thinker and artist. Luo's exploration of traditional Chinese arts and post-industrial ideas reflects an aesthetic edge, as well as an intricate cultural discourse. Such union resonates with the practice of art history, for the intellectual framework touches on exciting and pertinent issues of Chinese art and international cultural politics. Luo's post-industrial paintings, as a result, are politicized whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

The sense of unfamiliarity and unease in Luo's *Here Comes the UFO* and *Asphalt Road* prescribes to a universal reaction to modernization, but also addresses the awkwardness of the split in Chinese artistic heritage. While Luo was fully aware of his manipulation of Chinese ink in all of his painting series, he perhaps accidentally implicated a much more complex political history between China and Taiwan in his work than he originally intended. Although there has been no mention of Luo's political orientation in any research materials, he is famous for being very adamant about claiming his Chinese heritage to the exclusion of a Taiwanese island identity. Luo himself was trained, as previously mentioned, by first generation intellectuals who fled communist China and begrudgingly settled in Taiwan, always hoping to reclaim mainland China. As a product of this unique era in Taiwan, learning from newly arrived Chinese intellectuals and scholars, Luo Qing's education reinforced his cultural identity as Chinese. His artwork, therefore, did not intentionally embody or promote any political messages that

concerned Taiwanese islander's unique cultural identity apart from mainland China.

Viewing Luo's art through the lens of recent Taiwanese and Chinese history, however, it is impossible not to read Luo's Taiwanese cityscapes and landscapes as politically resonant.

*Guohua* is a contested field, but it is also discursive to several other disciplines such as Chinese modern history, sociology, anthropology, etc. Although *guohua* was brought to Taiwan and practiced there as a Chinese tradition, the most effective attempt to revive *guohua* as an explicitly Chinese cultural heritage did not take place until China soared to international power during the last decade. Compared to the effort of Luo's generation and that of his teachers, scholarships promoting *guohua* currently exist on a much larger scale akin to China's position in the global community. The problems of *guohua*, therefore, now need solutions, a phenomenon confirmed by scholars from around the world such as Lu Hong, Shen Kuiyi, Britta Erickson, and Peter Sturman. Yet despite their attention to *guohua*, these scholars all ignore the first wave of *guohua* reform that took place in Taiwan initiated by intellectual power concentrated on the island following the May Fourth Movement.

Chinese ink art's present role is founded on a nationalistic strategy to internationalize a Chinese cultural identity. Inwardly, however, such an attempt also hopes to refresh and revive the Chinese people's own cultural awareness. In fact, China's layered cultural identity includes the nation's tumultuous political history, and under such intellectual framework it is necessary to include artwork done by artists in Taiwan. The question Luo's paintings of post-industrial Taiwan poses is essential: how can *guohua*, or ink art, be perceived properly as a major Chinese cultural product when China's identity

remains undefined? This thesis contextualizes Luo Qing in contemporary academic discourse on ink art, but most importantly it argues that without the inclusion of paintings such as Luo's urban portraits, the discussion on contemporary Chinese ink art practices remains incomplete.

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