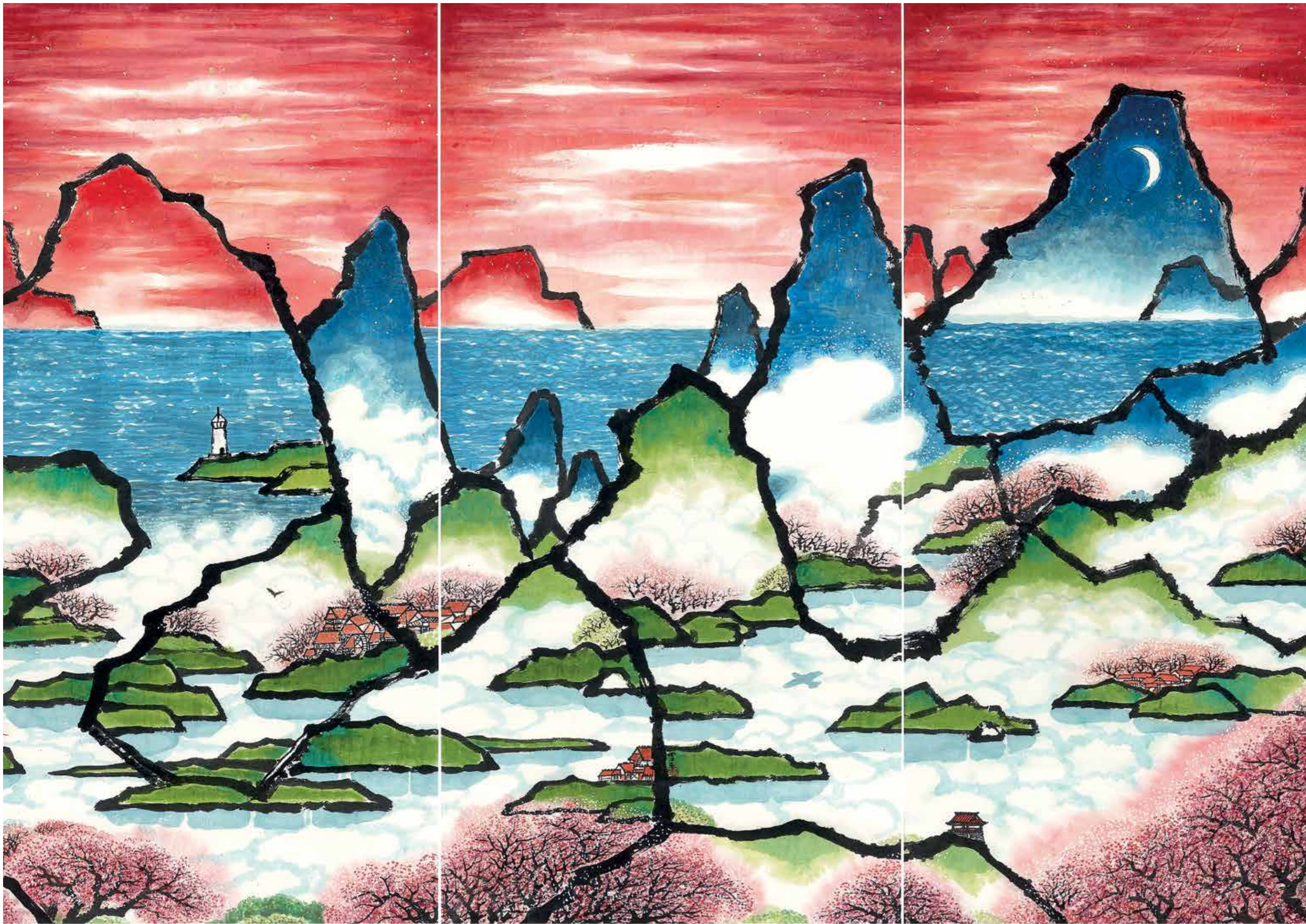


CHINESE  
CONTEMPORARY  
INK ART

WHY

BUY

NOW?



Lo ch'ing 罗青



Qiu Deshu 仇德树



Li Huayi 李华弋



Wei Ligang 魏立刚

**C**HINESE INK ARTISTS are profoundly relevant to contemporary Chinese society but until recently have been largely neglected by curators and critics alike with prices therefore undervalued.

They are important as representing the link between China's great past and the galloping pace towards her future. Their work incorporates a deep understanding of classical Chinese culture which they believe to be essential in their quest to create a new pictorial language which expresses the fundamentals of today's world. I believe therefore that the new generation of collectors in China and the diaspora will look at this area of the art-market as the most significant contemporary manifestation of Chinese civilization, with all that that will mean for price levels.

#### OUR VIEW CAN BE SUMMARIZED IN THE FOLLOWING POINTS:

- A Ink painting and calligraphy is the supreme art of China.
- B As such it has had enormous prestige not only for the educated elite but also for the Chinese in general.
- C The Chinese are deeply sensitive to the loss of much of their cultural heritage extracted from them by the colonial powers in the 19th Century and are now aggressive buyers.
- D The exponential increase in wealth allied to an annual proliferation of new museums can only lead to an intensification of buying, and contemporary in China, as in the rest of the world, is...or will shortly be...cool.
- E Ink art is the quintessential art-form of Chinese civilization and its contemporary version, rooted in works of unquestioned virtuosity and quality, will provide the new buyers with a foothold not only in what is fashionable but what is meaningful as a continuation of the vitality of Chinese culture.
- F Finally leaving aside the all-important China factor, it is evident, as we see in the current museum programs and auction-house initiatives, that ink is attracting the attention of both in a big way, with all that implies for its new status in the art-world at large.

# 1

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

China is the oldest surviving civilization on earth and it is our contention that Chinese contemporary ink works, from calligraphy and painting to photography and video, express the continuation of this vast past in ways which are meaningful for society today both in China and the West.

Visitors to China today will have noticed that, unlike in India, virtually no historical monuments, let alone country houses, literati pavilions or even old villages, still exist. The architectural heritage of the past has been extinguished and now we are only left with what has been built in the past 100 years or less. This is a phenomenon virtually unique to China and is relevant to why the moral and spiritual life of the Chinese became embodied, not in their material heritage, but principally in works of the written word... in calligraphy and painting.

This dissolution of China's architectural legacy is not just due to the ravages of her many violent dynastic conflicts. Much indeed was destroyed by the Taiping insurrection in the mid-19th Century and even more devastation was inflicted by the Cultural Revolution, during which many cities lost almost every historic and cultural relic forever. But the main reason, unlike in monuments from ancient Egypt to the modern West which were built to last, has been the perishable and fragile materials used which decay rapidly and require frequent rebuilding.

The reason why this is pertinent to our study of contemporary ink art is that we have to understand that in Chinese society it has never been the survival of monuments that has counted... it is the survival of a 'past of the mind'... the only truly enduring embodiment of eternal human experience are LITERARY ones'... as F. W. Mote has so eloquently expressed it.

# 2

## CALLIGRAPHY: THE SUBLIME AND CENTRAL ACHIEVEMENT OF CHINA

It has been almost impossible until recently for westerners to grasp the significance of calligraphy for the Chinese. It has been the foundation-stone of their society since the dawn of civilization. As Simon Leys has written 'it is the most elite of all arts... practiced by emperors, aesthetes, monks and poets' throughout history but also ostentatiously alive today in advertisements cinema posters, restaurants, tea-houses, railway stations, temples and on rough peasant village doors and walls.

The original purpose of Chinese script, which goes back c. 3,700 years and appears on tortoise shells and shoulder-blades of oxen, was to forecast all major decisions of state: harvest and hunting, war and peace. Gradually however, from the latter part of the Han period (3rd century AD), its original purpose was eclipsed by a growing interest in its aesthetic character and in its role as a conduit for the calligrapher's individual creativity. And from then on it became the most important of all the arts, with painting as its intimate but subservient partner.

Calligraphy is executed in ink on silk or paper, with a brush. In order to master this brush on the absorbent paper, which tolerates no error or correction, the artist has to achieve a high degree of concentration, balance and control. It is these qualities, allied to intuition and intelligence, that make his art, like the other three major arts of china, painting, poetry and music (of the 'Qin' or zither) one of interpretation. In this respect the calligrapher can be compared to the pianist who interprets the composer but whose every touch, like every brush-stroke by a great calligrapher, becomes an extension of the interpreters mind.

Although calligraphy became the preeminent and elite art of China, with its masters, critics, connoisseurs and collectors, it has also been practiced for hundreds of years by literally millions of Chinese for whom it is a method for achieving the harmonious integration of mind and body, the key to supreme enlightenment.

But as its high status evolved, it was its indissoluble association with the scholar-gentleman and his mastery of the art that established it as manifesting the core concept of Chinese civilization... HARMONY... whether it pertains to the structure of society or to the individual's alignment with the universal rhythms of the universe. And so it became the purpose of civilized man, of the gentleman, to become part of the dynamic rhythm of creation and to contribute to the coherent ordering of society. So this elite of scholars became perhaps the most cultivated elite the world has known... intent on practicing the arts of calligraphy, painting, poetry and music in order to realize their own humanity by cultivating and developing the inner life. The rich intellectual and spiritual life of these literati has been captured in many enchanting paintings depicting their gatherings in shaded garden pavilions, drinking wine, composing poetry, practicing and enjoying calligraphy and painting, as well as refining the art of convivial conversation.

# 3

## PAINTING

Painting, together with calligraphy, poetry and music, constitutes one of the four key traditional arts of China and is an extension of the art of calligraphy. It is therefore, like calligraphy, linked to the sacred prestige of the WRITTEN WORD. One's first encounter with a Chinese painting will immediately betray its literary nature. Unlike a western painting that hangs on a wall, the Chinese work is mounted in the form of a scroll, which by its nature is related to the world of books. It belongs to the realm of the written word.

A further distinction that has made it difficult for western art lovers to fully appreciate Chinese painting is that the Chinese is simply not interested in transcribing or depicting reality. His objective is rather to 'write the meaning of things'... to express the IDEA. Thus the role of the painting is to incorporate the minimum visual codes or clues to inspire its full and invisible fruition in the viewer's IMAGINATION.

Again, the Chinese aesthetic is very different to that of the West. The prime purpose for the scholar is the cultivation of an inner life, the ultimate aim of which is to perfect one's character in order to attain the moral stature befitting one's status as a gentleman. Thus the notion of beauty as such is irrelevant, indeed is often considered to be a superficial distraction from the purpose of nourishing the energy of the gentleman in capturing the spirit or essence of nature. In fact the ultimate 'beauty' of a work does not depend on its beauty. It is the result of its inner 'truth' and it is this moral concept that is at the heart of all Chinese aesthetics.

The above background is I hope helpful in coming to understand that art for the Chinese is part and parcel of their concept of morality and of how to live ones life and how to order society. And it is the written word (the word in ink) that is the binding agent constituting the continuity of the revered civilization and essential for understanding Chinese society past and present.

# 4

## CONTEMPORARY LITERATI ART: INK ART

The successors of the gentleman-scholars described above are today's ink artists. They are deeply aware of the classical canon and its aesthetic and moral imperatives and have carefully studied the old masters. However, just as Picasso and Cezanne studied Raphael, Poussin, Velasquez and others in order to create THEIR revolutionary pictorial language, so the new literati are doing the same in order to formulate their own revolution for their work to be relevant to, and meaningful for, the world of today. And revolutionary and culturally subversive it is. More subtle than the contemporary oil painters with their abrasive handling of overtly political themes, the ink painters embody their revolutionary message in works that are not afraid to take account of the past in order to make sense of the present.

Very many different stylistic approaches have therefore evolved over the past 30 years. Works now range from those that at first sight look quite traditional but in fact embody powerful fresh aesthetic initiatives by artists like Liu Dan, Li Xubai, Li Huayi and Yang Yanping, to those that are unambiguously avant-garde seen in the works of Yang Jiechang, Qiu Anxiong, Qiu Zhijie and others.

But all of the best contemporary practitioners have a common purpose... to create works that do not jettison the great cultural legacy of the past in formulating a language that addresses the intellectual cultural and social issues of today.

It is our view therefore that these few (only 50 or so of international stature) artists are poised to assume a historic relevance as the cultural conduit between China's great past and her future. And as such they are likely to shortly become the target of the new generation of collectors and museums in China and the diaspora who, in their new-found national pride and following the global fashion that only contemporary is cool, will be hungry for contemporary manifestations of their country's enduring civilization.

# 5

## THE MARKET

We have been collecting and dealing in contemporary Chinese art since the early nineties and have increasingly focused on ink works which until recently have been largely neglected by curators and critics and are still commercially very undervalued.

Contemporary Chinese art, including ink painting, was a niche product from the early nineties to 2004 when an explosion of interest from a small but intense coterie of buyers emerged from first Europe and then America which drove prices to five times their then value in three years. Ink painting was part of this movement but rose much less dramatically in price, yielding popularity to the oil painters' titillating political themes that attracted a somewhat gullible western audience. Many of the minor stars in the latter field have witnessed a sharp fall in their prices due to a belated re-evaluation by collectors and of course to the economic crisis, which affected western buying.

Now however, as the art-market regains momentum and connoisseurship becomes more mature, there is a growing groundswell of interest in ink art both because of its inherent quality and because of its relevance to the society of China today and by extension to the art-world in general.

The three major auction houses in the West and the two leading houses in China are all now involved in creating specific ink art sales platforms... both via conventional auctions and private treaty sales. This is a new and significant development which is allied to the series of ambitious ink exhibitions that have been taking place in western museums over the past two years (MFA Boston, British Museum, Musée Guimet, Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and others, with a major initiative INK ART at the Metropolitan Museum in December 2013).

All of this has of course begun to affect price levels and now, for a handful of artists (LIU DAN, LI HUAYI and XU LEI are examples), prices are hitting the hundreds and thousands of US dollars. But the remaining best practitioners, of whom there are only approximately forty or so in the world of recognized international stature, can still just be acquired for \$100,000 downwards. It is worth noting here that this generations' ink painting predecessors... artists who have died in the last few years... are now fetching up to \$50 million at auction in China, where the demand for modern ink painting is reaching ever new heights.

## CONCLUSION

As stated in the beginning of this brief survey, we believe that it is almost inevitable that the new generation of Chinese museum and private art-buyers, fuelled by increasing wealth and renewed national pride, as well as the for them aggravating competition from the exhibitions taking place in WESTERN institutions, will shortly turn their attention to this quintessential current manifestation of Chinese civilization. And this will have a dramatic effect on the price levels of the relatively few works of art produced in any one year by the handful of ink artists that can be ranked as world-class. Watch this space.

*Michael Goedhuis*