

The Flavour of Heart and Heaven

by Benoit Vermander

Art is about enlightenment. Enlightenment transforms perception. In the twinkling of an eye, the Promised Land is at hand. Light shines in the heart of darkness. Such moments are always privileged but they should not be rare. The miracle of true insight can come at any time. The world is in an ongoing process of giving birth; art reveals how the desire for light and the outpouring of light occur simultaneously: each day, the Word makes Light shine brightly.

It goes without saying that a person who enters the world of China's art sets out on a spiritual journey. Each painting manifests the spiritual energy gathered by the man who relates to the universe and its mystery. The French philosopher Henri Bergson noticed that "the fire at the center of the earth is seen only at the summit of volcanoes." Works of art are the summit of our inner universe. They portray the flow between the boundless depths and the radiance of the peak, between vapors and rocks, chasms and the source. They reveal the space hidden deep within us. And the space left empty prolongs the inner breath and carries it still deeper, and further away, silently.

There is nothing more boring, more irritating than Chinese painting that betrays its own ideal, that caricatures its own aspirations. Anyone familiar with China knows that no social event is complete without exhibitions where the often dubious calligraphic contributions of political leaders compete with paintings of birds and flowers, mountain landscapes or roaring tigers. In this respect, Chinese painting often functions as an assertion of national pride and uniqueness. The results are endlessly repetitive motifs. Furthermore, Chinese painting has often failed to recognize its own diversity, and consequently ended up being mostly the traditional ink and wash painting developed by the Literati influenced by the Chan tradition. When Chinese painting becomes nothing more than pretension, it loses its spiritual ideal; it is no longer a lesson in inner freedom. Fresco styles, silk painting, stone intaglios, motifs coming from the ethnic minorities are all part of a larger heritage, loaded with

existential and spiritual meaning, and from which much is still to be learned.

From contemporary Chinese painting, I have learned that there is room for a much freer appreciation of the Chinese artistic tradition. Names such as Huang Binhong, Qi Baishi, Li Keran, Shi Lu, Lin Fengmian already stand among the best and most creative artists of our time. Today, younger artists (e.g., Jia Youfu, Peng Xiancheng, Li) show a confidence, a creative energy that testifies to the spiritual renewal that China may well be experiencing these days.

My friend Li Jinyuan has described some of the discoveries he made while staying in the southwest of France from September 1995 to February 1996. He mentions an old horse-cart lovingly preserved in the corner of a garden and filled with flowers. This and other such sights and encounters made him realize that Westerners could feel the same love of nature and the cosmos found in the heart of Chinese people. Li Jinyuan quotes a sentence from the Sufi tradition: “His heart, your heart, my heart are one and the same heart.” When journalists asked him what he was looking for in France, he invariably replied, “I am looking for the Kingdom of Heaven.” Even though he was not baptized, he referred directly to the gospel parable about the mustard seed that grows into the biggest of shrubs. I think that for him this parable is about the invisible growth of faith and hope in China itself, even in the midst of the most adverse circumstances. I have heard him recount this parable many times, both in France and in China. Each time, he insists upon the importance of the last verse where birds come to enjoy the shade provided by the leaves. By revealing the Promised Land mysteriously in our midst, art is also a lesson in hope and in faith, as Li Jinyuan – as well as many other artists – is fully aware.

During the cultural revolution, the “Black Clique” became a special target of the “Gang of Four” and their supporters. The “Black Clique” consisted of artists using very black ink, which conveyed pessimism and betrayed a counter-revolutionary spirit. In truth, since Chinese art implies the use of ink and the play of contrast between bold black and more watered-down shades, all of Chinese art became suspect. Even the fervent revolutionary pioneer artist, Shi Lu, was caught up in the wave of repression. A true artist, he took the full brunt of the attack. He voiced his contempt for those who tried to pervert the spirit and mission of art in this way. He suffered a mental

breakdown and his last paintings – painted over previous ones, plum tree branches reduced to almost nothing--reveal his soul's anguish as well as the magnificence of his stroke. The struggle of Shi Lu testifies to the best of the Chinese artistic tradition.

A painting, by Li Keran, in 1973, expresses how the Spirit came out the winner. It depicts an enormous range of black mountains opening out onto the rapids below, shrouded in orange light. Loggers balance on logs and drive them forward with poles to avoid running aground. It is an admirable historical and spiritual metaphor.

Throughout such trials, artists in contemporary China have matured. Many of them reveal an equilibrium and a confidence in the creative power of their own tradition – a condition which may well be the happy consequence of a long and painful historical process. They have achieved a balance between an intense interest in Western things and a strong belief in the enduring spirit and value of traditional Chinese painting. As a result they see dialogue with other traditions not as a threat to their own identity but rather as an opportunity to express their own potential more fully. This is the result not only of politics or culture, but of a spiritual evolution as well. The new Chinese artists sense that their mission is to reveal something of the mystery of the world, a mystery that is universal, and just as everywhere else, it is also hidden in the heart and in the heaven of China. In their own unique way they express the secrets of the heart of nature, secrets that belong to them – but not only to them. Chinese painting's new outlook is universalistic, and the resources of Chinese tradition are finally used in a quest which is shared with the rest of humankind.

Above, I mentioned my friend, the Sichuanese painter, Li Jinyuan. When he came back from France, he wrote the following: "I have a greater sense of how creation is in process involving the integration of all the different dimensions of life. I insist upon the fact that the art I produced in France is just as much the work of my French friends as my own. If it weren't for their friendship, their explanations, meals in their company, our walks together, I would not have been able to paint in the same way. My inner belief is that I am on a journey: a journey during which I meet and get to know other fellow travelers. The path is often narrow, but sometimes it reveals wide horizons where all of humanity comes together."

This is a way of saying that art is about Love. Artistic insight enables us to see Love. It is sometimes said that Chinese art does not express suffering, that its aim is always to represent peace, elegance, harmony. This could be considered a limitation. However, let us not forget a principle at the root of Chinese pictorial art: “To paint a mountain is to paint a human person.” The body of the earth reveals the spiritual movement flowing through the human body and mind. To make the inner world ever more present, the person in the Chinese painting is almost invisible. However, if suffering, evil and ugliness do not have an explicit place in Chinese painting, it is for another reason: the ultimate purpose of such art is to see Love. It is not as though love does not know how to look at violence. On the contrary, love alone can stare violence in the face. But the look of love is steeped in beauty. Heart and Heaven have the same taste. Evil has no essence. There is nothing in evil or ugliness to “see” or to contemplate. The real protest against evil is the revelation of its opposite: it is the repeated praise of Beauty and of Truth. It is, in opposition to death, the choice of life.

The path traveled by Chinese artists during the last decades can be seen from a political, social or cultural viewpoint. Let us not forget however, that it has also been a spiritual journey. What they narrate by means of their works of art reveals the soul of today’s China. Ever changing, ever the same, this soul continues to search for her Promised Land. Through the contemplation of contemporary Chinese paintings, let us taste and witness enlightenment: within the ink, the water, the paintbrush, the Spirit is breathing our desires, our dreams, our sufferings and passions, and leading us towards the Origin of the myriad things.■