



India–China artistic engagements in the 20th century

Yu Yan

What is the first thing that comes to mind when we think of Indian elements in Chinese art? Without doubt, Buddhist mural painting, with its shading and highlighting techniques and its serial form of narrative painting, is the most glorious tradition that Indian art has brought to China since the initial contact was made between the two countries in the first millennium.

Unfortunately, these artistic interactions seem to have gradually disappeared in subsequent centuries. However, though it was long overshadowed by existing narratives, India in fact played a crucial role in the modern Chinese art reform of the 20th century. During this period, exchanges between Indian and Chinese artists entered their heyday, starting when the distinguished Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore visited China in 1924.

In this edition of 'China Connections', three scholars and a journalist share their latest research and newly discovered sources on 20th century India–China artistic interactions, attempting to re-examine how India interacted with China and in what ways it inspired Chinese artists during the modern Chinese art reform.

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Fig.1 (above): Zhang Daqian, *Indian Dancer*, 2019 Sotheby's Hong Kong.



Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information about the contexts of the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Since its formation, the center has made extensive efforts to promote Asian studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with Asia Research Centers in mainland China and a multitude of institutes abroad.

A forgotten place

Yu Yan

Chinese art underwent a period of thorough reform at the turn of the 20th century. It was a time when the self-confidence of Chinese culture was being shaken to its core by the influences of the West and the ensuing impact of Western civilization. Chinese art – with its age-old tradition of subject matters, techniques, aesthetics and materials – was inevitably confronted with the problem of how to respond to the needs of a changing society. The major challenge, as noted by Michael Sullivan, was “how to modernize, which has meant to a great extent how to Westernize, while remaining her essential Chinese self”.¹

Scholarship on 20th century Chinese art has hitherto concentrated much on the attitude of Chinese artists towards the West, the modernity, and China's own tradition. In the eyes of many art historians, the notion of the West in the discourse of 20th century Chinese art could be traced back to two sources – Europe and Japan – for these were the primary locations where most Chinese artists chose to study abroad at that time. Deemed as the trigger of the modern Chinese art reform, European and Japanese influences have thus long been occupying center stage of modern Chinese art studies.

However, at the same time that Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) initially advocated using the realism found in Western art to reform Chinese painting, European art was heading in the opposite direction, away from realism. So how to properly measure the impact of Western art on Chinese modern art reform? What changes did Chinese art go through in the pursuit of art reform? The pre-eminent 20th century Chinese artist Gao Jianfu (1879-1951) once suggested that the ‘new Chinese painting’ should embrace elements from all cultures. Yet in reality, owing to the dominant position of the Western-oriented modernity theory, the ‘new Chinese painting’ could hardly demonstrate the intended panoramic view of China's international artistic exchanges

