The Dark Side of the Mountain:
Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and artistic continuity in
twentieth century China

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Declaration

This thesis is my own original work

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Abstract

This thesis is an interpretive study of the life and art of Huang Binhong (1865-1955). It uses empirical and textual analysis to examine the landscape paintings of Huang Binhong in particular and places them within the historical context of a period of unprecedented political and social change in China. The thesis explores the background to Huang Binhong’s creative practice and the development of his artistic style and vision. It investigates Huang’s training as a Confucian scholar and his multiple identities as painter, art historian, art editor, teacher, collector and connoisseur. The first two chapters place Huang within the cultural milieu of the Lower Yangtze Valley and his ancestral home in Anhui, noting the influence of Xin’an artists and examining paintings of Huangshan; Chapters Three and Four examine Huang Binhong’s working life and milieu in Shanghai, his art historical writings and his work to authenticate paintings in the collection of the Palace Museum, and considers the influence of his work as editor and scholar on his artistic practice. Chapter Five follows Huang’s travels to Guangxi, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Sichuan, exploring the effect of contact with different landscapes on the evolution of his artistic style. Chapters Six and Seven locate him in Beiping during the Japanese occupation, a period of artistic reflection and experimentation in which the artist’s interest in “darkness” intensified. Chapter Eight examines Huang Binhong’s move to Hangzhou in 1948 and the impact of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on his life and his late artistic style. Chapter Nine is a detailed examination of paintings from 1952 to 1955. In Chapter Ten I briefly discuss the legacy of Huang Binhong and reflect on a visit to his ancestral home in Shexian, Anhui in 2004.
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¹ An Exhibition of Works by Huang Binhong (Huang Binhong zuopin zhan) held at the Pao Sui Loong Galleries, Hong Kong Arts Centre (Hong Kong: Xianggang yishu zhongxin, Xianggang daxueyishu xi, 1980).
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10.15 Shexian Tandu Middle School. Photograph by the author, April 2004.

10.16 Site of Huang family male ancestral shrine in Shexian Tandu Middle School, and detail of the remains of the Huang family male ancestral shrine. Photograph by the author, April 2004.

10.17 Site of the Huang family female ancestral shrine in Shexian Tandu Middle School, and detail of remains. Photograph by the author, April 2004.

10.18 Site of former Xu family ancestral shrine. Photograph by the author, April 2004.

10.19 Xu Chengyao’s former home, marked with large red characters identifying it as a Local Workers’ Activity Centre. Photograph by the author, April 2004.

10.20 On the external walls of Xu Chengyao’s former home a huge slogan written in red characters during the Cultural Revolution is still visible. Photograph by the author, April 2004.

10.21 Slogan exhorting people to follow the example of Dazhai, the model Maoist agricultural commune, on the exterior wall of Wang Zhongyi’s former home. Photograph by the author, April 2004.

10.22 Slogan above an internal doorway in Wang Zhongyi’s former home declaring “We respectfully wish Chairman Mao a long life without end.” Photograph by the author, April 2004.


Official opening of the Huang Binhong retrospective at the Zhejiang Provincial Exhibition Hall, Hangzhou, part of the Seventh China Arts Festival, 12 September 2004, and 10.25a visitors waiting to get into the exhibition hall after the official opening. Photographs by the author.
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The dark side of the mountain: Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and artistic continuity in twentieth century China

Introduction

Huang Binhong (黃賓虹, 1865-1955) is one of the most important artists of twentieth-century China, yet his art remains inadequately appreciated and understood. The reasons for this are complex and go to the heart of the crisis of artistic consciousness that defined twentieth-century Chinese culture and persists to haunt it in the twenty-first century. Artistic tradition was threatened by unprecedented political and social change during the period of Huang Binhong’s long life. The continuity and defence of Chinese cultural traditions informed Huang’s life’s work.

Like the great majority of his friends and acquaintances, Huang Binhong was trained in Confucian thought. Traditional Chinese scholarship required a broad knowledge of Chinese language, epigraphy, literature, poetry, history and philosophy, and the ability to compose poetry, write calligraphy and paint scholarly subjects. Classical Chinese learning was based on the foundations of the past. It was on the basis of the past that the future was imagined. But in an age of rapid social change, traditional-style scholars found themselves defending the survival of classical language and scholarship and the validity of Chinese brush and ink painting, and protecting the material cultural heritage of China as it came increasingly under threat. During his lifetime Huang Binhong was highly regarded as scholar, art historian, art editor, teacher, collector and connoisseur. These activities and multiple identities formed an integral aspect of his creative practice. He understood that he and his contemporaries were mediating a period of great cultural transformation and that for him at least, the past had to inform the future.
Despite his strong interest in the study of Chinese history and his promotion of cultural continuity, however, Huang Binhong cannot simply be classified as a “conservative”. During a thirty-year period of residence in cosmopolitan Shanghai, from 1909 to 1937, he developed a wide network of friends and acquaintances, including artists and writers who had travelled overseas, many of them much younger than himself, some of them foreigners. Huang was fascinated by outsiders’ perceptions of Chinese art and by perceived points of confluence between Chinese and western art. From a creative point of view he was driven by a strong desire to forge an independent artistic style, even as he was preoccupied with questions of artistic continuity at the same time. Only by embracing and fully understanding the two interconnected concepts of continuity and change or renewal (bian变), he believed, could life, energy and aesthetic relevance be restored to Chinese brush and ink painting. The desire to create an artistic language of his own, based on a deep study of Chinese epigraphy, philosophy and art history, yet made relevant to the present, became more pressing the older he became.

The second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth ushered in a world of shifting ideas and values where past and present were not easily reconciled. For many intellectuals the period of extraordinary socio-political unrest was characterised by “darkness”. Light became a metaphor for cultural continuity, encompassed by the study of past traditions of the kind Huang Binhong advocated.

In brush and ink painting darkness and light represent solid and void. Like yin 隱 and yang 阳, their balance and interaction determine the character of a painting. Towards the end of his life, Huang Binhong’s paintings were criticised for being too black. In 1955, the year of Huang’s death, a graduate student from the Hangzhou art academy observed Huang adding brush strokes of thick dark ink to paintings that he had made many years earlier. Some, he said were ‘as dark as a blackboard’.² But for Huang Binhong darkness always contained light. Even Huang’s darkest paintings are relieved by the chinks of void and pathways and halos of

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light that are strong characteristics of his late painting style. Darkness, he said, should be as spirited as the light shining in the dark eyes of a young child.  

The first major exhibition of Huang Binhong’s paintings after his death was held at the Shanghai Museum in May and June of 1959. Comments made by members of the public in the visitor’s book reveal the polarisation of views on Huang Binhong’s art at that time. Many people praised Huang’s paintings and thanked the museum for mounting the exhibition, but others expressed frustration at their inability to understand his art. Some requested a guide to explain traditional Chinese artistic principles and techniques. Shen Dingbang 沈定邦 and Zhang Zhicheng 張志成 wrote a detailed critique encapsulating the disjunction between Huang Binhong’s mental world and the reality of China in the late 1950s when the country was consumed by the Great Leap Forward.

After viewing the exhibition the two of us could not understand what the merits of these paintings actually are. We also are not clear on what the paintings actually reflect, and there is no explanation of what good national painting is to the expression of the national culture of our motherland and so on. None of this is explained. It would be best if there were explanatory texts next to the paintings or there was a dedicated guide. This would help audience members understand the meaning of the paintings.  

Viewers perceived an imbalance between solid and void, darkness and light. Opposed to the external (yang) beauty that characterised much of the art produced in the period, after 1949 Huang Binhong continued to create dark paintings and explore what he termed inner beauty (neimei). What are we to make of his late paintings, which seem to celebrate the very blackness of Chinese ink? What was it that attracted Huang Binhong to the dark side of the mountain?  

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3 Huang Binhong, “Hua fa yaozhi,” in Huang Binhong wenji, shuhua bian, shang (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1999), pp.495-496.
4 Huang Binhong xiansheng huazhan yijian bu diyi ce (May 1959), unpaginated (ZPM 05713, 05714).
This thesis begins from a detailed analysis of Huang Binhong’s dated paintings designed to chart the artist’s development as a landscape painter and to understand key works from different periods of his life. The challenge of stylistic analysis is compounded when an artist is inspired by predecessors from different periods spanning a millennium. The quotation of art historical sources contributes to the great diversity of styles in Huang’s paintings and complicates the task of plotting his stylistic development. But Huang never followed art historical styles literally and a distinctive artistic style emerges with increasing strength in his final years.

I have based my research almost entirely on primary source materials, including many original paintings and archival materials in China and elsewhere. The Huang Binhong archive at the Zhejiang Provincial Museum, where I began this study, has been the focus of

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5 There is a large literature on Huang Binhong’s art and life. Since the late 1980s a number of significant books and catalogues by scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan have been published in English. These include the exhibition catalogues Innovation Within Tradition: the Painting of Huang Binhong (Williams College Museum of Art, 1989) by the Taiwanese-American academic Jason Kuo, which features paintings from collections in America, and Huang Binhong (1865-1955): Homage to Tradition (Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1995) edited by Christina Chu, Chief Curator at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, which includes works from the museum’s collection and private collections in Hong Kong. Two recent and important English language works are Pikyee Kotewall, “Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and his Re-definition of the Chinese Painting Tradition in the Twentieth Century,” PhD thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1998, which is the most comprehensive English language overview of Huang Binhong’s life and art to date focussing on his writings on art, art history and the practice of Chinese painting, and Jason Kuo, Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Pin-hung’s Late Work (Peter Lang, 2004), which emphasises the importance of calligraphy to the development of Huang Binhong’s artistic style. See Appendix One for an overview of the main works in Chinese and English and the bibliography for a more comprehensive listing.

my research. The archive comprises all of the items relating to Huang Binhong’s working life that were in his studio at the time of his death. It includes a large collection of his paintings, collected historical artworks, manuscripts and personal documents numbering some 10,000 items. It is rare to find such a substantial archive relating to a significant Chinese artist in a Chinese public museum and I am privileged to be the first western scholar to have been granted sustained and generous access to the extraordinary riches of that collection. In terms of emphasis, scope and orientation, this thesis extends previous work on Huang Binhong to make an original contribution to the scholarship on the artist. I first saw Huang Binhong’s works in reproduction when I was a student of brush and ink painting at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing in 1979. My curiosity to understand those compelling and memorable paintings has stimulated this study.

Structure of the thesis

Landscape painting has, for centuries, represented the pinnacle of Chinese artistic endeavour. The genre was much admired by the scholar-gentry for its ability to convey lofty sentiments far removed from worldly concerns. Landscape painting occupied its exalted position because it challenged artists to approximate the great and mysterious workings of the cosmos. In depicting the energy or life force found in nature, artists also found correspondences with human states of mind. Paintings of landscape could be appreciated not only as literal representations, but more importantly as allusions to metaphysical states of being. In a long and prolific life Huang Binhong was best known for his landscape paintings.

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7 There are various listings of Huang Binhong’s collection. The document bequeathing Huang Binhong’s collection to the state in March 1958 refers to 1,848 books; 191 collections of seals and rubbings from objects and stone tablets; 1,453 antiquities (including jades, bronzes, pottery, porcelain and tiles); 1,001 ancient calligraphy and paintings; 5,652 of his own calligraphy, paintings, manuscripts and personal objects totalling 10,145 objects. Many of the items included multiple parts.

8 For reports on artist museums in China, see Pan Gongkai, Dong Xiaoming, eds., Mian xiang ershiyi shiji: Zhongguo shuhua mingjia jinianguan guanli gongzuo yantaohui lunwenji (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 1999).

9 Huang Binhong was also a recognised calligrapher and a gifted painter of flowers, insects and birds. The genre of flower and bird painting (hua niao hua) represented for him a more personal form of artistic expression. The private nature of these paintings, coupled with their lesser status within the
Those paintings, viewed within the context of his life and times, form the subject of the present work.

The thesis is organised chronologically and thematically according to Huang Binhong’s periods of residence in Zhejiang and Anhui (1865-1909), Shanghai (1909-1937), Beijing (1937-1948) and Hangzhou (1948-1955).10 As I shall argue, Huang Binhong derived important stimulus from the experience of living in different and particular environments. An additional chapter examines his travels to Sichuan, Guangxi, Hong Kong and Guangdong during the late 1920s and early to mid-1930s.

The thesis is not a biography, but rather an interpretive study of the life and work of Huang Binhong. It is an examination of a scholar-artist in a time of transition from a late-dynastic society to a modernising nation state. In a period of heightened nationalism and identification with Han Chinese culture, Huang Binhong embraced a forward-looking republican ethos, but at the same time was concerned to document and preserve the heritage of the past. The story of modernity is not simply the story of an avant-garde revolution.

Inherent in the notion of modernity is the contradictory and elusive concept of the mystery of

10 There has been much discussion of the periodisation of Huang Binhong’s art. For T.C. Lai, Huang Binhong’s early period is from the age of thirteen to fifty-five (1876-1943), the middle period from fifty-five to eighty (1917-1943) and the late period from eighty to his death at the age of ninety-two (1943-1955); for the art historian Wang Bomin, Huang Binhong’s early period ends in 1913 when Huang is fifty, the middle period stretches to 1933 when the artist is seventy, and the late period begins in 1933 and ends with his death in 1955. Jason C. Kuo has followed Wang’s periodisation, but he divides the late period into two stages, from seventy to eighty (1933-1943), and from eighty until his death at the age of ninety-two (1943-1955). Fu Shen and Pikyee Kotewall both follow Huang Binhong’s periods of residence in different parts of China, whereas Luo Jianqun, curator of the Huang Binhong archive at the Zhejiang Provincial Museum, identifies Huang Binhong’s early period as being up to the age of sixty-two in 1925, with two sub-periods 1865-1907 and 1907-1925. For Luo, the middle period begins in 1925 and extends to 1948, with two sub-periods 1925-1937 and 1937-1948, and the late period is from 1948 to 1955. See T.C. Lai, Huang Binhong (1864-1955) (Hong Kong: Swindon Book Company, 1980), pp.165-166; Wang Bomin, Huang Binhong (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1979); Jason C. Kuo, Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Binhong’s late work, pp.14-15; Fu Shen, “Huang Binhong’s Shanghai Period Landscape Paintings and his Late Floral Works in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery”, Orientations, 18, no.9 (1987), pp.66-78; Pikyee Kotewall, “Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and his Redefinition of the Chinese Painting Tradition in the Twentieth Century”; Luo Jianqun, “Huang Binhong yishu jincheng de fenqi ji liyou,” paper presented at the conference “Huang Binhong guoji xueshu yantaohui”, organized by Zhongguo yishu yanjiu yuan, August 2004.
renewal. Modernity brings with it the desire to look back and understand the past in order to define the present. The drive for modernity brings with it feelings of cultural loss, no matter whether in China or the West. There is no better example of this than Marcel Proust’s (1871-1922) *À la Recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*) written over a thirteen-year period from 1909 until the author’s death in 1922. Through the perspective of the narrator Marcel the reader gains a poignant understanding of how the present world is based on memory and how culture is at once being lost and then recovered through artistic practice.

I have chosen an approach that allows me to focus on themes that relate to particular periods of Huang Binhong’s life, but which also have wider cultural or political relevance. Chapters One and Two place Huang Binhong within the cultural milieu of Jiangnan, the Lower Yangtze River Valley, and his ancestral home in southern Anhui. These early chapters outline the family connection with the historic town of Shexian and nearby Huangshan and his identification with the scholars and artists that the area had produced. I discuss early dated paintings that take the landscape of Jiangnan, Shexian and Huangshan as their subject, as well as paintings that were inspired by or that make specific reference to famous artists from that region. The chapter describes his early painting style and demonstrates the importance of place to the development of his artistic consciousness.

In 1909, Huang Binhong moved to Shanghai, China’s most cosmopolitan city and a new centre of business, media and culture. The move marked a turning-point in the artist’s life. In Shanghai Huang worked with literary and artistic groups, newspapers, art publishing houses, exhibitions, educational institutions and a nascent art market and developed a wide and lasting network of contacts. Chapter Three examines Huang’s working life in Shanghai and his growing awareness of the need to promote and protect China’s cultural heritage. The lack of government-run museums and the absence of legal protection for China’s moveable cultural heritage made the country’s art vulnerable. Political turmoil, economic hardship and the fascination with all things new caused much traditional Chinese art to be undervalued and

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consequently the object of aggressive buying by Japanese, American and European collectors. During his thirty years in Shanghai, Huang Binhong established a reputation as a leading art historian. Chapter Four examines his art historical writings as well as artworks from this period.

Chapter Five focuses on Huang Binhong’s travels in China, and the effect of those journeys on his artistic imagination. From 1928 to 1935, he had the opportunity to travel further afield to Guangxi, Guangdong, Hong Kong and Sichuan where the Republican government was interested in promoting regional education and regional construction. While travelling Huang made many *en plein air* pencil and ink sketches that capture the essence and structure of the landscape. I consider his travel sketches in relation to ink line drawings he made while viewing historical artworks. The dual influence of observing nature and viewing historical artworks fundamentally shaped the evolution of his artistic style.

In late 1935 Huang Binhong was appointed to authenticate works of art in the former imperial collection. The job began in Shanghai and took him to Beiping the following year, and again in April 1937. The Sino-Japanese War erupted soon after his arrival, causing him to stay longer than expected in the old capital. Chapters Six and Seven focus on the ten years Huang lived in Beiping under the Japanese occupation, including his activities as a collector, connoisseur, teacher, writer and artist. I discuss paintings dating from these years and his first solo exhibition, held in Shanghai in 1943, organised by the scholar and translator of modern French literature Fu Lei (1908-1966). Through Fu Lei, Huang Binhong had access to an art historical view that was informed by knowledge of both European and Chinese culture, and a number of Western art enthusiasts and collectors who appreciated Huang Binhong’s abbreviated painting style. The Beiping decade was a period of considerable economic hardship and Huang accepted support from friends and patrons, in exchange for works of art. That relatively solitary period of artistic reflection and experimentation forms a background to understanding the artist’s late works.

Chapter Eight begins with Huang’s move to Hangzhou in 1948 in response to an invitation from the National Art Academy. I examine the political and cultural transformation
of the country after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 in terms of its impact on art education and on Huang Binhong’s own work. A small number of highly uncharacteristic figure paintings dating from the early 1950s attest to the elderly artist’s lack of immunity from political directives. The early 1950s was a period of personal and artistic crisis, overcome with the help of some influential friends. Chapter Nine explores works from 1952 to 1955. Despite the deterioration of his sight, he continued to assert his own artistic style. In 1953, at the age of ninety, Huang Binhong was named an “Outstanding Artist of the Chinese People”. In the same year he had a cataract operation that improved his sight and allowed him to continue painting. Huang Binhong’s late works represent the culmination of his artistic practice and the embodiment of his philosophy of art.

In Chapter Ten, the concluding chapter, I briefly discuss the legacy of Huang Binhong and reflect on a visit to his ancestral home in Tandu village, Shexian, in 2004.

**Methodology**

The methodology I have employed in this thesis is largely empirical, using visual and textual analysis in particular. Owing to the lack of a detailed study of Huang Binhong’s artworks it has been necessary to conduct foundational research in order to understand Huang’s art. Only after this grounding work has been done can consideration framed by different methodological approaches proceed on a sound basis. I have sought to examine original paintings from all periods of the artist’s life. My focus has been on dated paintings with a well-established provenance and accessible to researchers in major collections. I have worked on paintings that give an understanding of the evolution of Huang Binhong’s artistic style and that illuminate aspects of his life, milieu and *modus operandi*. 
While the largest body of his paintings is in the Zhejiang Provincial Museum in Hangzhou, there are considerable collections in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing; the Anhui Provincial Museum, Hefei; and in other public and private collections in China, notably Hong Kong, and throughout the world.\(^\text{12}\)

I have viewed works of art in the collections of Zhejiang Provincial Museum, Hangzhou; National Art Museum of China, Beijing; Anhui Provincial Museum, Hefei; Shanghai Museum; Hong Kong Museum of Art; and Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore. My interest in the posthumous fate of Huang’s paintings has also taken me to public collections in Europe, America and Australia where I have examined works in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts; Stanford University; The British Museum, London; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Museum Rietberg, Zurich; and the Museum of East Asian Art, Berlin.\(^\text{13}\) I have also corresponded with curators at the Náprstek Museum and the National Gallery in Prague; the Museum of Asia and the Pacific in Warsaw; the Cernuschi Museum in Paris and the Museum of East Asian Art Cologne.

I have also been fortunate to view artworks in some private collections in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Europe and America including collections of descendants of Huang Binhong’s close friends. A greater understanding of the

\(^{12}\) In recent years many forgeries have also appeared, encouraged by China’s thriving art market.

\(^{13}\) A large number of the paintings now in museum collections in Europe and America were acquired during the Cultural Revolution (ca.1964-1978), a period when traditional Chinese culture associated with the scholar-elite, and regarded as part of China’s feudal past, was totally repudiated by the Chinese government. Many works of art, historical and contemporary, were taken out of China by Chinese and western dealers. See Robert Ellsworth’s preface to *Brushing the Past: Later Chinese Calligraphy from the Gift of Robert Hatfield Ellsworth* (Washington D.C: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2000), pp.9-10, and Anita Christy, “The Dealer as Collector: an Interview with Robert H. Ellsworth,” *Orientations*, February (1988), pp.42-44.
important relationships between Huang Binhong and his friends and patrons will be possible as more paintings from private collections are published and exhibited.

Appendix

Appendix One is an overview of the main literature on Huang Binhong, organised chronologically to show the posthumous reception and recognition of Huang Binhong’s art and writings both within and outside China.

Appendix Two is a list of artist names used most often by Huang Binhong, many of which show the importance of Shexian and Huangshan to his artistic persona.