Chapter Ten

The Legacy of Huang Binhong

Zhejiang Provincial Museum

At Huang Binhong’s funeral a statement prepared by family members was read out by Huang Yongming 黃用明, the artist’s eldest son, bequeathing his collection to the state. (Figure 10.1) The gift of more than 10,000 items included some 4,000 paintings by Huang Binhong, as well as his library, manuscripts and antiques. It was made “in order that [the collection] receive better care” and “achieve a greater usefulness”. The gift was first offered to the East China Art Academy, where Huang had taught, but was rejected. On 25 March 1958, the third anniversary of Huang Binhong’s death, it was finally accepted by the Zhejiang Provincial Cultural Bureau (Zhejiang sheng wenhua ju 浙江省文化局) and handed over to the Zhejiang Provincial Museum (Zhejiang sheng bowuguan 浙江省博物館). The difficulty of finding an institution to accept the collection confirms the institutional indifference to the tradition of scholar-artist painting and the oeuvre of a contemporary practitioner at that time. It took a directive from the Central Committee of the Communist Party for the collection to be accepted by the Zhejiang Provincial Museum. Much to the distress of Huang Binhong’s family, the construction of a memorial at the artist’s grave was not begun until a year and a half after his

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3 Lu Xin, curator of the Pan Tianshou Museum in Hangzhou, suggests that the academy rejected the donation because it could not afford to look after the collection. Lu Xin, “Dingwei he guifanhua guanli: cong mingren jinianguan de xianzhuang yan qi,” in Mianxiang ershiyi shiji, p. 6.
4 Huang Yingjia, Huang Binhong’s youngest daughter, conversation with the author, 10 December 2001.
death, and the Huang Binhong Memorial House Museum, announced in 1956, had still not opened by March 1957, two years after his demise.⁵

Huang Binhong is buried in the Nanshan Cemetery (Nanshan lingyuan 南山陵園) in Hangzhou, a large public cemetery established in 1952. The original tombstone incorporated a sculpted torso of Huang by an artist from the Academy.⁶ (Figure 10.2) Huang was depicted wearing a traditional gown or changpao 長袍, his hands clasped to his chest, holding a book. His head was bowed and eyes downcast. The grave was desecrated during the Cultural Revolution and the sculpture smashed. Today a sombre black granite headstone has replaced the original. It is engraved with the words “Artist Huang Binhong’s Grave 1864-1955” (Huajia Huang Binhong xiansheng zhi mu 畫家黃賓虹先生之墓).⁷ The seal script calligraphy was written by Pan Tianshou, a fellow artist and academy professor, who died as a result of his suffering during the Cultural Revolution.⁸ According to a cemetery worker, the grave was overgrown and in a bad state of repair until it was refurbished in 1995, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of Huang Binhong’s death.⁹ The refurbishment, carried out by the Zhejiang Provincial Museum, included the relocation of the graves of Huang Binhong’s two wives, Hong Siguo (1868-1936) and Song Ruoying (1903-1970), whose headstones now stand to the right and left of Huang’s respectively. (Figure 10.3)

The Huang Binhong Memorial Museum (Huajia Huang Binhong xiansheng jinian shi 畫家 黃賓虹 先 生 紀 念 室), located in Huang Binhong’s former residence at 32 Qixialing, not far from the edge of the West Lake, was finally opened in 1957.¹⁰ (Figure 10.4) Huang Binhong’s second wife, Song Ruoying continued to live there. She oversaw the operation of the

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⁵ Fu Lei, letter to Huang Yuan, 31 March 1957, Fu Lei shuxin zhuan, shang, pp.256-258. Luo Jianqun states that in 1956 the provincial government announced that Huang’s former residence would be made into a memorial museum (jinian shi). Huang’s paintings were to be displayed there and his studio would be maintained in its original condition and opened to the public. Luo Jianqun, “Tan Huang Binhong wenwu de guanli: jianli zhuanku de biyao yu keneng,” in Mian xiang ershiyi shiji, p.134.


⁷ Huang Binhong’s birth according to the lunar calendar is 1864, a date which corresponds to 27 January 1865 in the Western calendar.


⁹ Cemetery worker at the Nanshan cemetery (Nanshan lingyuan), conversation with the author, 13 November 2000.

museum until it was closed in 1965, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, for fear its contents would be destroyed. It was refurbished in 1988 and re-opened to the public.\textsuperscript{11}

During the Cultural Revolution, Huang Binhong and his family became targets for vilification. Although he was long dead, Huang Binhong was named a “black artist” (\textit{hei huajia 黑畫家}) and his paintings were criticised as “black mountains and black water” (\textit{heishan heishui 黑山黑水}).\textsuperscript{12} (Figure 10.5) The sign outside the memorial house museum was smashed and two large \textit{wutong 梧桐} trees in the front garden were cut down to make way for apartments as additional families were moved in.\textsuperscript{13} Song Ruoying’s stipend, granted in response to the bequest of Huang’s collection, was terminated. A photograph taken shortly before her death shows a gaunt and harrowed figure. She died in 1970, fifteen years after Huang Binhong’s death, aged 66, herself a victim of the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{14}

Today the Huang Binhong Memorial Museum occupies three downstairs rooms of the original two-storey Western-style building. It was refurbished again in late 2001 on the occasion of an exhibition and conference attended by family members and a Hong Kong benefactor, Ms May Lau Tang Su Ping 劉唐小萍女士. Huang Binhong’s studio has been recreated and in two adjoining rooms didactic wall panels provide a biographical survey of the artist’s life through photographs, interpretive texts, facsimile documents and paintings. (Figures 10.6) In November 1999 a small gallery, dedicated to the display of Huang Binhong’s art, was opened on the top floor of the Zhejiang West Lake Gallery within the Zhejiang Provincial Museum complex.\textsuperscript{15} (Figure 10.7) Unlike the memorial house museum, this gallery provides a temperature and humidity-controlled environment where works from the museum’s collection can be displayed. At the entrance a bilingual plaque states that the gallery was “sponsored by Ms May Lau Tang Su Ping of Hong Kong to celebrate the artistic achievement of Huang

\textsuperscript{11} Zhao Zhijun, \textit{Huajia Huang Binhong nianpu}, p.185.
\textsuperscript{12} See Huang Binhong’s 1954 painting of the “Penglai Pavilion” (\textit{Penglai ge}) in the collection of the National Art Museum of China (Guo 00946). A paper label affixed to the exterior of the scroll catalogues the work as exhibit number 53 of the exhibition to criticise black paintings (\textit{Pipan heihu zhanlanhui ping dengjika}) held at the National Art Museum of China. The exhibition, held in 1974, was initiated by Wang Mantian and organised by Gao Jingde. For a discussion of the black painting exhibitions, see Andrews, \textit{Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China}, pp.368-376.
\textsuperscript{13} Huang Yingjia, conversation with the author, 6 December 2001.
\textsuperscript{14} Huang Yingjia, conversation with the author, 10 December 2001.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Zhejiang Provincial Museum}, p.91.
Binhong and in memory of the revolutionary artist Wu Xian 吳 憲 (Ba Xi 巴 西) who died during the Long March of the Red Army”. There is no relationship between Huang Binhong and Wu Xian. Their pairing strikes an odd chord, giving the impression that it is still difficult for Huang Binhong’s paintings to be appreciated purely on their own terms.

**Shexian and Tandu village**

In April 2004, I visited Huang Binhong’s ancestral home in Tandu village, Shexian County, in southern Anhui. Having begun my research in Hangzhou where Huang Binhong spent the last years of his life, I was curious about the place that was associated with his forebears and that so captivated his imagination. Shexian is about five hours from Hangzhou, the final approach via a narrow, winding road through tall mountains, the lower slopes of which are planted with tea bushes and mulberry trees. Shexian was once one of China’s most prosperous trading towns. Colleagues told me to be prepared for a place that was no longer as beautiful as it had once been owing to the ravages of the nineteenth century Taiping War, and the Cultural Revolution (ca. 1964-1978) some one hundred years later.

The landscape of Shexian is open and expansive, comprising river flats with mountains in the distance. The high proportion of mountains make Anhui poor in comparison with other eastern seaboard provinces, but Shexian has a higher concentration of arable land than elsewhere in the province, accounting for its relative wealth. Huangshan lies to the north-west. If you stand on the Guguan Bridge in Shexian on a clear day you can still see its peaks.

The bridge over the Lian River is lined with a series of light boxes bearing painted images of famous people from Shexian, including philosophers, doctors, historians, scholars, artists—and Huang Binhong. But the Lian River is rarely used for transportation nowadays. Most goods are hauled by road. The new Anhui-Hangzhou highway, scarring the mountain faces in its path, will facilitate greater communication with outlying areas and, it is hoped, improve the life of people in Anhui. (Figure 10.8)

Tandu, the village where Huang Binhong lived for some ten years, lies a short distance west of the centre of Shexian. It is poor and run down. Huang Binhong’s former home, now a memorial museum, is dusty and neglected. In May 1989 the provincial government declared
that it would be protected as a site of cultural and historic significance. (Figures 10.9) A fallen stele engraved with family history lies in the courtyard. (Figure 10.10) The caretaker-curator told me that it used to stand in a pavilion near the Tandu Bridge to commemorate Huang’s ancestors, who moved into the area during the Tang dynasty. It was rescued after the destruction of the pavilion and brought to the museum. During the Land Reform movement of the early 1950s, Huang Binhong had been branded a landlord and his house was modified to accommodate seven or eight additional families. The entrance, courtyard and garden are no longer extant, making it difficult to appreciate its original configuration. It was never a large or particularly grand house and restoration has not been a priority.

Beyond the house is a pond that was once used for quelling fires and a Ming dynasty memorial archway or paifang that relates to the Huang family. (Figures 10.11, 10.12) It is the only one that remains of many that once stood proudly in the village and is useful nowadays as a makeshift laundry. Chickens fossick in the rubbish and peck at its base. Neighbours from the abutting houses are bemused by my interest in an archway they have learnt to work around.

Across the road is the Tandu Central Primary School (Tandu zhongxin xiaoxue 潭渡中心小学). (Figure 10.13) In 1997 Tandu village had a population of 1,050. An introduction to the school goes on to say:

Villagers with the surname Huang moved to Tandu in the Tang dynasty. They have an age-old association with the area and generally had a high level of education. It is the hometown of the famous landscape painter, Huang Binhong.

The principal proudly showed me to the art room and the glass-covered display boxes near his office. The boxes displayed an exhibition of Outstanding Exercises from the Binhong Literature and Art Studio (Youxiu xizuo zhan: Binhong wenyi shi 優秀習作展: 賓虹文藝室) and paintings from the Binhong Painting Society (Binhong huashe 賓虹畫社). (Figures 10.14)

\[16\] In addition to owning the house and land in Shexian, Huang also owned more than one hundred mu of land in Chizhou, not far from Shexian. See Huang Binhong, letter to Huang Shuzi, [1949], Huang Binhong wenji, shuxin bian, p.282.

\[17\] Bao Yilai, “Huang Binhong yu Huizhou gongyi,” unpublished manuscript, p.17. See also Huang Binhong, letter to Zheng Chumin, Huang Binhong wenji shuxin bian, p.323.

\[18\] “A Brief Introduction to Pu Jiu at Tandu Central Primary School” (Tandu zhongxin xiaoxue “Pu jiu” jianjie), January 1997.
It was a sincere effort to make the primary school students aware of the legacy of the famous artist who once lived across the road.

The Shexian Tandu Middle School (歙縣潭渡中學), a more substantial institution on the road to Shexian, has remnants of the Huang family ancestral shrines on its site, said to have been the largest and grandest in the area.19 (Figure 10.15) A complex of buildings comprising the family shrines once covered a huge area that is now occupied by school buildings and a large sports ground. The foundations from some of the demolished buildings are still visible, creating tell-tale patterns on the ground in constant reminder of whose land it once was. A small market garden just within the school grounds is defined by the side wall of what was once an inspiring shrine for male members of the Huang clan. (Figure 10.16) The walls are identified by decorative masonry with an incised Buddhist swastika design and sculptural panels close to the eaves carved with traditional auspicious motifs that have mostly been removed or disfigured. The quality of the materials and artistry are indicative of the former wealth and stature of the family. At the opposite end of the campus and across the playing fields in a neglected corner were the remains of the ancestral shrine for the female members of the Huang clan. The structure was lower in height and more modest in scale, but it too was decorated with the same high-quality carved decorations. (Figure 10.17) The building itself appeared abandoned. A wash area attached to one of the exterior walls had become a rubbish dump. The Huang family ancestral shrine complex was reportedly occupied by the Nationalist army during the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945). At the conclusion of the war the buildings were converted into a primary school. The eradication of the physical presence of the Huang family ancestral shrine is now almost total. Remnants that painfully suggest the grand structures that once stood on the site are unlikely to survive much longer.

In Tangmo village is the site of the shrine that belonged to the ancestors of Huang Binhong’s close friend Xu Chengyao, a scholar and editor of the Shexian Gazetteer. Like Huang Binhong, Xu came from a distinguished local family. Today all that remains are the foundations. (Figure 10.18) The large area once occupied by the masonry structures is a wasteland, finally destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, I was told. Nothing has been built

in its place. On the grey and rainy day of my visit, the climatic conditions only reinforced the poignancy of the site and its total devastation.

Scars of the past were also visible on the exterior of Xu Chengyao’s old home. The entrance was marked with large red characters identifying it as a Local Workers’ Activity Centre (zhigong zhi jia 職工之家) and on an external wall a huge slogan written in red characters was legible through the layers of whitewash extolling the longevity of Maoist thought. (Figures 10.19, 10.20) Thirty or forty years on, these markings are a continuing reminder of those chaotic years.

The long plain walls of He yi tang 和義堂 in nearby Xixi 西溪, the grand former home of Wang Zhongyi, Huang Binhong’s teacher, a jinshi and one of the most respected scholars in the area, also provided a ready canvas for later ideologues. Fading red and yellow slogans dating from the Cultural Revolution can still be seen framing the street entrance to the house. One slogan exhorts people to follow the example of Dazhai, the model Maoist agricultural commune. (Figure 10.21) Another above an internal doorway declares “We respectfully wish Chairman Mao a long life without end”. (Figure 10.22) The slogan has been blacked out but lead in the original paint makes the characters still readable behind the dark pigment. Today the house is occupied by a number of families, including descendents of the original Wang clan.

Other old family ancestral shrines have survived relatively intact, no doubt for complex reasons, and give an indication of the scale and nature of the shrines erected by the prominent families of the area. The Bao family ancestral shrine 鮑家祠堂 Qing yi tang 清懿堂 in Tangyue 棠樾 is a good example. It comprises expansive male and female ancestral halls and a line of ceremonial archways or paifang commemorating famous members of the Bao family. (Figures 10.23) A street of paifang leads to the shrines in a theatrical gesture that announces the importance of the family. (Figure 10.24) Today, well maintained, the Bao family ancestral shrine attracts many tourists, a symbol of the history of Shexian and the scholar-merchant families who once commanded such influence in the area.
Shexian not only exemplifies the decline of a once-great regional centre, but also the pell-mell dismantling of traditional Chinese society that began in the late nineteenth century and gathered momentum in the twentieth. Because development has been slower in Shexian than in most parts of China, the scars of destruction caused by the Taiping War, civil war and the Cultural Revolution have not yet been entirely erased. Remnants of the past remain like ghostly reminders of a lost world. The desolate nature of the Huang Binhong Memorial Museum and the obliteration of other sites connected with the Huang family are not unrelated to the belated recognition of the significance of Huang Binhong’s art. In Shexian the enormity of dealing with the recent past and the challenge that faces those who advocate cultural continuity is overwhelmingly apparent.

Huang Binhong had a long-term view of history. When he said that it would take thirty years for society to recognize the significance of his art did he foresee the social upheaval into which China would descend after his death? In the year 2005, the fiftieth anniversary of his death and the one hundred and fortieth anniversary of his birth, there are signs that Huang Binhong’s star is finally beginning to rise. (Figure 10.25)

21 In March 2005 a conference and exhibition were held in the city of Huangshan to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Huang Binhong’s death and the one hundredth anniversary of his birth. The Zhejiang Provincial Museum has designated 2005 “The Year of Huang Binhong” (Huang Binhong nian) and will mount a series of six exhibitions drawn from their collection over the course of the year. The museum also plans to hold an exhibition of the artists work in Taiwan. Cha Yongling, letter to the author, 2 March 2005.