Conclusion

Huang Binhong lived a long life. His conscious daily routine of self-cultivation involving frugality, physical and mental exercise, research and artistic practice was preparation for the artistic transformation that is manifest in the paintings he produced during the last years of his life. The late paintings are, in the end, the effortless outcome of a lifetime of practice, mediated by the art of the past, travel and the observation of natural phenomena. Through painting he sought answers to questions of the mind and spirit, affirming his place in the historical continuum of art. Like scholar-artists of the past he believed in a synchronicity between the act of landscape painting and the actual workings of the cosmos. Such matters had long pre-occupied China’s philosophers and scholar-artists. For Huang, straddling the social changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they continued to be the questions that shaped his creative endeavour.

All his life Huang Binhong was driven by a powerful and pressing desire to maintain cultural continuity in the face of change. Living in Jinhua, Shexian, Shanghai, Beiping and Hangzhou at different periods in his life, he was always an active participant in the development and re-definition of Chinese brush and ink painting. For him it was not possible to make a radical break with the past in order to move forward. Only through a deep immersion in Chinese culture and the obsessive study of aspects of tradition could he reflect on and articulate his own identity and what the future might hold. He did this through research, collecting, publishing, writing and painting. Paradoxically Huang Binhong gained strength and energy from “tradition” at a time when many people were turning their backs on Chinese culture. In the brush and ink painting, epigraphy, philosophy and history that embodied a national essence he found his answer to the crisis that confronted twentieth-century artists and twentieth-century China.

The last years of Huang’s life, from 1952 to 1954, were his most prolific. The large body of works that remain from that period are imbued with an extraordinary freedom of
expression, in some cases verging on total abandonment of traditional artistic principles. By the end of his life he sought a method which appeared to be based on no method. The loose and abbreviated brushstrokes that characterise Huang Binhong’s late works are manifestations of the “untrammeled” quality that represents the final stage of his artistic transformation. In continuing to paint with brush and ink and to seek innovation within tradition, as Chinese artists had done for millennia, Huang Binhong proved to himself that he could transcend the art of the past and find a contemporary relevance for traditional artistic practice.

Huang Binhong’s late paintings are the extraordinary outpouring of an elderly and distinguished artist who had experienced the fall of the Manchu-Qing dynasty, Japanese occupation and the establishment of a Communist government, and who wished to record in a poetic form, within the context of Chinese culture, his manifold responses to his own life and times. In his final flowering, compelled to express complex emotions through painting right to the end, Huang attained the untrammeled style he aspired to, the freedom of Zhuangzi’s butterfly.

Through a pursuit of inner beauty (neimei) and an aesthetic of darkness (yin)—ink and void, light and hope—he reflected on the crisis of Chinese tradition, insisting that cultural continuity was necessary and that through a thorough immersion in tradition a form of art was possible that connected with the contemporary spirit and could resonate well beyond China’s borders.

In a letter to a close friend written in 1961, six years after Huang Binhong’s death, Fu Lei summed up what for him was the significance of Huang’s art. “Binhong” he said, had wide learning and did not depend on any one particular style. He was familiar with the art of the Tang and Song and drew on the strengths of historic artists and created his own style. What is most precious about him is that he only sought to transmit the spirit of historical artists, not their styles. He had the ability to give you the spirit of Jing Hao, Guan Tong, Fan Kuan, or the scenery of Zijiu [Huang Gongwang], Yunlin [Ni Zan], Shanqiao [Wang Meng]. His skill in realism (I am referring to the sketches he made while travelling) exceeds any of the brush and ink artists [guohuajia] from the last few hundred years, and even a few of the most brilliant and famous Chinese practitioners of Western art would have difficulty in being compared to him. His ability to summarise and synthesise form was very strong. As a result, throughout his life he painted in the
greatest number of styles and achieved success the latest, in old age. Works dating from around the age of sixty were not yet mature. It was only after the age of seventy, eighty and ninety that he reached the summit of his achievement. In my opinion, in terms of his ability to synthesise the work of earlier artists, after Shitao there is only Binweng [賓翁].¹

Fu Lei gives us a powerful judgement on Huang Binhong’s art within the context of the artistic past. But what of Huang Binhong’s legacy today, half a century after his death?

In May 2004, sixty-three works by Huang Binhong were included in a major auction of Chinese modern and contemporary painting in Beijing. The highest price was 871,200 RMB, paid for a landscape hanging scroll dated 1948.² On 13 May 2005 an undated album of eight landscape paintings sold at auction in Beijing for 3,630,000 RMB, the highest price paid for a painting in that sale.³ In today’s market-dominated world the high values signify the change in attitude towards the artist. But even so, Huang’s paintings are still generally far more affordable than works by Zhang Daqian (張大千, 1899-1983) or Qi Baishi.⁴

Chinese brush and ink painting has continued, but without making any great impression on the world of international contemporary art. Despite the efforts of Wu Guanzhong (吳冠中, b. 1919) and later artists to translate brush and ink into a contemporary artistic language, works by Chinese artists using brush and ink have not been widely embraced by the Western art public. Young Chinese artists have, however, found a relevance in the internationalised art world of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries by separating the spirit of Chinese art from brush and ink, something that Huang Binhong believed was not possible.

¹ Fu Lei, letter to Liu Kang, 31 July 1961, Fu Lei wenji, shuxin juan, shang, p.31. Fu Lei went on to say, in parentheses, “I only dare say this because I have been collecting his work for more than twenty years and have more than fifty of his finest works. Of those paintings that are in circulation only one in ten is a masterpiece.” Liu Kang (b. 1911) was well known to Huang Binhong. He grew up in Malaysia, studied oil painting at the Shanghai Art College (1926-1929) and in Paris (1928-1933). He taught at the Shanghai Art College 1934-1937, thereafter returning to Malaysia. In 1942 he settled in Singapore. See Michael Sullivan, Draft Biographical Index of Modern Chinese Artists, forthcoming publication, 2005, p.82.

² The painting is illustrated in Huang Binhong huaji (1985), plate 8. See Chinese Modern and Contemporary Paintings and Calligraphy (Zhongguo jin xiandai shuhua, shang), China Guardian (Zhongguo Jiade), Beijing, 15-16 May 2004, vol.1, lot 476. In the same sale the top price paid for a painting by Zhang Daqian was 3,146,000 RMB (Lot 535), and Qi Baishi 1,452,000 RMB (Lot 546).

³ See Chinese Modern and Contemporary Paintings and Calligraphy (Zhongguo jin xiandai shuhua, shang), China Guardian (Zhongguo Jiade), Beijing, 13 May 2005, lot 362.

⁴ In July 2005 a record 73 million yuan was paid at auction in Beijing (Zhongbang auction house) for a 34.5 metre long handscroll by Zhang Daqian entitled “Ten Thousand Mile Landscape”. See “Chinese Art Prices Boom,” Sydney Morning Herald, 2 August 2005, p.15.
Two artists of particular note are Gu Wenda (谷文達, b. 1955) and Cai Guo Qiang (蔡國強, b. 1957). Gu was born in 1955, the year Huang Binhong died, and is a graduate of the brush and ink painting department of the National Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou. As a post-graduate student he created a large ink painting that compared brush strokes from Huang Binhong’s late paintings to those of Vincent Van Gogh. Gu was fascinated by Huang’s highly abbreviated brush strokes, so unlike conventional Chinese brush strokes with their clear beginning, middle and end. They looked to Gu as though they were painted with a small oil painting brush.\(^5\) Since then Gu has moved to New York and achieved prominence as an *avant-garde* artist. He has continued to create works with a strong Chinese cultural resonance, creating installations using pseudo Chinese characters painted and engraved on stele, tea, ink and performances involving calligraphy.

Cai Guo Qiang is a graduate of the Shanghai Drama Institute who, following a sojourn in Japan, also moved to New York. Since the late 1980s he has been creating artworks using gunpowder. Inspired by the material China invented and the form of a writhing dragon, Cai has created a series of extraordinary art happenings at symbolic sites around the world. Recently he has created a new body of three-dimensional, site-specific artworks using aeroplanes to paint pictures of the Chinese landscape using smoke against the sky. It is works like these, rather than conventional paintings using paper, brush and ink, that have been responsible for the regenerative transformation of Chinese art in the last twenty years and that maintain an important conceptual link to the spirit of Chinese painting. It is a remarkable reinterpretation of the tradition to which Huang Binhong was so committed, an extension of his legacy that he could not have imagined.

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