Chinese Art and Chinese Artists in France (1924-1925)

Résumé

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The participation of the young Chinese Republic in the great Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes à Paris (fig. 1), held from April to October 1925, may have seemed to its instigators to have been a failure. It received no press coverage at the time, nor has it received any attention since. It won none of the many prizes which were such an integral part of the exhibition process. It aroused no great enthusiasm among even the intellectual public of China, and was treated with indifference by the Chinese government. It failed to boost China’s handicraft exports, or to alter the unfavourable view which western pundits held about contemporary China’s art or politics. The Chinese Section of the exhibition was in many ways a “non-event”, which struck no resonances at the time and left no visible effects behind it.

And yet, it was an event rich in significance for an understanding of modern China’s cultural dilemmas, which involved at least one of the key talents of twentieth century Chinese art. It was a brave, even a heroic, attempt to have China (a “third-world” country, to use our current term) speak for and represent itself, in a context where the rest of Asia (with the significant exception of Japan), Africa and the Islamic world were spoken for and represented, if at all, by the orientalist discourse of their colonial possessors, principally France. It was also an event rich in irony, since China speaking for itself went unregarded by western opinion precisely at the time when a strong strand of Chinese-derived exoticism was so prominent in the art and design of European nations. It cannot but have continued to work on its Chinese protagonists after their return to China, and involvement in the struggles of a uniquely turbulent period in that nation’s cultural life.

Although European conventions of picturing were known in China from the 17th century, both through Jesuit transmission and through the greater flow of imagery via the port cities of Shanghai and Canton in the 19th century, the formal introduction of western art practice education to China has been located in the years 1906-1909 when the Nanking Normal School operated a western art department, to be followed in 1911 by the Peking Normal School. These years preceding the 1911 revolution were also those which saw the first Chinese students go abroad to study art, initially to Japan. Their goal was the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, which after 1898 increasingly addressed itself to the creation of a modern school of Japanese painting involving the imported conventions of representation.

Although French influence on the developing modern art scene within China was not lacking in this early period, exercised mainly through the Jesuit Université Aurore at Xujiahui (Zikawei) in Shanghai, the first Chinese student of subsequent artistic significance to study in France was Fang Junbi, the daughter of parents settled in France, who attended the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1917. She was soon followed by a young man from a less privileged background, Lin Fengmian. Known variously in France as Lin Fon Ming or Fon-Ming Lin, he was born in 1900 in Guangdong province into a family of stone cutters specialising in calligraphic inscriptions. In 1918 he went to France under the “work/study” scheme, earning his living as a sign painter and enrolling in the École des Beaux-Arts at Dijon. In 1920 he moved to Paris, and to the École des Beaux-Arts there, an institution sadly adrift from the
contemporary currents which sustained Paris’s reputation as the capital of the international avant-garde. He studied there in the studio of the seventy-five year old Fernand Piestre (1845-1924), known as “Cormon”, a relic of nineteenth century academism now remembered, if at all, as a specialist in biblical and pre-historic scenes, and as the decorator of the Musée d’histoire naturelle. However no evidence seems to survive for work by the young Lin Fengmian executed in the academic manner. One of the earliest of his works to be published, “Vouloir vivre” (fig. 2), instead shows his adoption of both the type of subject matter and some of the mannerisms associated with the Japanese-trained Lingnan (Cantonese) school of painters, and in particular with its leader, Gao Qifeng (1889-1935). It seems likely too that Lin was adopting some of Gao’s symbolic message, the snarling and defiant big cats expressing personal ambition on a romantic scale, as well as the artist’s aspirations for the Chinese nation.

This painting was exhibited from 21st May to the end of July 1924 at the Palais du Rhin, Strasbourg, as part of the Exposition chinoise d’art ancien et moderne, organised jointly by the Association des artistes chinois en France and the Société chinoise des Arts décoratifs à Paris. This exhibition, which brought together the small Chinese artistic community in France, has been touched on by Mayching Kao in her study of the Chinese reception of western art. However the event was explicitly intended by its organisers to act as a prelude to a major Chinese involvement in the 1925 Paris Exposition internationale, and the relatively full documentation surrounding it sheds light not only on the work of Chinese artists in France, but on the expectations it aroused among the wider community of Chinese intelligentsia abroad, expectations which in the end were not met.

These expectations are spelled out in an article published in the 28th August issue of the Shanghai periodical Dongfang zazhi/The Eastern Miscellany. Its author, Li Feng, is unflinchingly aware of the low esteem in which China is held in the West, particularly by comparison with Japan. Chinese crafts are frequently mistaken for Japanese products, and any well dressed Chinese assumed to be Japanese. Western press and cinema reflect a racist stereotype of opium and gangsters, pigtails and bound feet, a generalised picture of decadence and debauchery. Li’s solution to this lies in China’s artistic heritage, the only thing in which Chinese abroad can take justifiable pride, and the only element of Chinese culture which foreigners are prepared to treat with some respect. This makes it all the more regrettable, he goes on, that the Chinese government pays so little heed to international art events, particularly when the Japanese do so much. The Japanese had staged a major art show in Paris with government money in 1923, and are already believed to be making preparations for the 1925 Exposition internationale, while the Chinese authorities are unaware of its existence. However, Li goes on, the two organisations of Chinese artists in France had pooled their talents to mount a show of both early and contemporary art to be shown at several venues in Europe, with the selection improving each time, as a preparation for Chinese participation in the 1925 show, which he significantly describes as the Bali wanguo meishu sai hui (Paris International Art Competition). In fact, the exhibition was explicitly not about the fine arts (Chinese meishu) but about the applied arts (Chinese gongyi) as we shall see, though it was a competition in reality if not in name.

The precise composition and aims of the two groupings of artists involved (each of them tiny in terms of number of members) are confused, and vary from Li Feng’s Chinese text to the French text of the catalogue published to accompany the exhibition in Strasbourg. Li divides the participants into the members of the Huopusi hu (the “Opus Society”), who were scholars involved in research on aesthetics and art history, and the Meishu gongxue she (the “Work/Study Art Association”), who were artist practitioners. However the French preface states: “Le grand nombre des artistes chinois en France a fait naître deux groupements : l’Association des Artistes chinois en France et la Société chinoise des Arts décoratifs à Paris. Les membres s’inspirent d’une part des chefs-d’œuvre européens, de l’autre continuent à peindre tout à fait à la chinoise ; plus souvent encore ils réalisent des compositions mélangées de goût chinois et de goût européen.”}

Of the twenty-six Strasbourg artists named in the catalogue, nine are explicitly aligned with the “western” style AACF (which is probably to be identified with Li Feng’s “Opus Society”), and eleven with the “Chinese” style SCADP (his
"Work/Study Art Association"). Six claim no society affiliation, although they include the aloof figure of Xu Beihong (1896-1953), also known as Ju Péon, who was in many ways to become the most significant of twentieth century Chinese artists. He was the recipient of a Chinese government art scholarship, and was living at the time in the Avenue de Friedland, close to the Chinese embassy and on the other side of Paris from the bulk of the Chinese student community in the 13th arrondissement, where the SCADP had its headquarters. In fact, it seems possible that personalities and regional origins in China had as much to do with which of these two minuscule societies an artist joined, as did any coherent aesthetic programme. For example, Liu Ping of the supposedly "western" AACF was painting works on silk with titles like "Printemps pluvieux" and "Idée antique", while Mlle Mao of the "traditionalist" SCADP exhibited an embroidery entitled "Portrait de M. Clemenceau". It is only the painters Xu Beihong and Fang Junbi, and the sculptor "Ly Soulian" whose titles announce a totally western position. However, the SCADP did contain a significant minority from Hunan, while four of the AACF's nine members were from Canton. Taking the two societies together, the largest single grouping was from Guangdong province, followed by the inland and relatively backward region of Hunan, which was under a certain amount of French influence. Peking, the political capital, and Shanghai, the major cultural centre, were relatively poorly represented as the homes of society members.

The five artists named by Li Feng as the moving spirits behind the exhibition are, as well as Lin Fengmian himself; Liu Jipiao (Tépéou Liou in the French text), Lin Wenzheng, Wang Daizhi (Daitche Ouang), and Zeng Yilu (Tsen-Y-Lou). The first two were President and Secretary General of the AACF, while the latter two were aligned with the SCADP. These five were all to be important in 1925, and it seems too fair to identify them as the "activists" of the Chinese artistic community, though with the exception of Lin Fengmian their names have sunk into oblivion, and biographical information on them is almost totally lacking.

Liu Jipiao, from Canton, was in his French phase principally a decorator. He was responsible for the installation at Strasbourg, and also for the decoration of the Chinese stand in Paris in 1925 (fig. 3). He also exhibited watercolours there, and fig. 5, "Danseuses du Palais Impérial" seems a typical example of his fluent, illustrator's style and almost orientalist subject matter ("L'Impératrice Yang Kouei-Fée sortant de son bain", "Lin Tay-yon enterrant des fleurs mortes", "Princesse lointaine" are other examples). As a further touch of exoticism, he appears in the group photograph of the participants at Strasbourg dressed in an elaborately embroidered woman's gown. By 1928 he was on the staff of the Hangzhou National Academy of Art (Hangzhou guoli meishuyuan) and practising as an architect, being responsible for the pavilions of the West Lake Exhibition and the prestigious National Government Building (Guomin zhengfu) in Nanjing.

Lin Wenzheng (Ling-Vincent) showed no work of his own at Strasbourg, and may have been one of the aesthetic theorists to whom Li Feng alludes. He too was on the staff of the Hangzhou Academy by 1928. Another shadowy figure is Wang Daizhi, about whom nothing is known except that he was Hunanese, showed watercolours and paintings on silk at Strasbourg, and went on to be the Commissaire Général adjoint nommé par décret
du Gouvernement, et Représentant Général de la Mission de l’Exposition de l’Art chinois en Europe18. The last of the five was Zeng Yilu (1898-?), a Hunanese responsible for the cover illustration of the Strasbourg catalogue and for two watercolours (“Noblesse” and “Souplesse”) in the exhibition19.

A sixth figure involved in the Strasbourg show who was to have a crucial impact on the events of 1925 was Cai Yuanpei(1868-1945), a key figure in the creation of modern China’s culture as a writer and thinker, as Minister of Education (1912-1913), and above all as Chancellor of Peking University (1916-1926), during its most vibrant period as a revolutionary cultural force. Cai spent the years 1923-1926 in self-imposed exile in Belgium, France and Germany, disgusted at the situation in Peking20. A thinker in the Kantian tradition, and a firm believer in art’s role as the necessary spiritual replacement for religion in a modern society, Cai Yuanpei was an active promoter of art education in China. His prestige with both Chinese and French elites seem likely to have been factors in
getting the Strasbourg show off the ground. He even exhibited samples of his own calligraphy, along with Chen Lu[19], Chinese ambassador to France[21]. The enthusiastic Li Feng describes the show as a tremendous success, with 3,000 people at the opening, accounts in the Paris and Strasbourg newspapers, and a marked rise in respect for Chinese culture on the part of the man in the street. The Paris art press was however less than overwhelmed, with bald notices of the event, but nothing approaching a review, appearing in L’art et les artistes[9] (1924), p. 399 and Art et décoration, June 1924, p. 3. Nor did the exhibition succeed in finding other venues in Europe, as had been intended. This indifference was to be a foretaste of the reaction the following year.

The Chinese government, or what remained of it, was by then in a particularly bad state to respond to Li Feng’s impassioned pleas to save China’s face by a full-scale participation in the Paris exhibition, or to Wang Daizhi’s representations to the government directly[22]. The confusion of Peking politics came to a head on April 9th, 1925 with the deposition of Duan Qirui[20] as President, and no financial support at all was forthcoming to the group of enthusiasts in Paris. Although nowhere stated, what seems to have happened is that a number of Chinese import-export houses, based in Paris, London and Shanghai, were induced to fund the Chinese stand on condition that they could use the event as a showcase for their goods. Thus was generated the very visible tension between the avant-garde setting of Liu Jipiao, Lin Fengmian and their circle of youthful artists (fig. 6, 7, 8, 9) and the very traditional styles of export handicraft shown in them (fig. 10, 11, 12, 13). This tension was exacerbated by the fact that the Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes was explicitly limited to the decorative arts, the fine arts (“Les tableaux, statues ou œuvres qui ne participeraient pas étroitement à un ensemble décoratif”) being excluded. Equally excluded were “les copies, imitations et contrefaçons des styles anciens”[23]. Not only was there no contemporary Chinese applied art which matched the idiom of the relatively advanced painting being done by Lin Fengmian (fig. 8, 9), by now making clear use of techniques worked out in a study of the work of Matisse, but the furniture, ivory carving, textiles and rock crystal imported by by firms like Hoo-Sing Hour (their shop was in rue Lafayette) were simple extensions of eighteenth century styles. The sole “modern”, Chinese craft on view was the painted (or enameled) glassware of the SCADP, sold through their shop in the not-very-fashionable rue de l’Amiral-Mouchez. A comparison of this material (fig. 7) with the designs employed on the Chinese stand suggests that Liu Jipiao was the principal, if not the only, artist involved in its decoration. It is not known how long this glassware was in production, or where in France it was made (if not in the shop itself). No surviving examples have been published, but it is possible that that the odd piece of this Chinese “art déco” may still exist in France.

The Chinese section of the exhibition, consisting of eight stands and two vestibules, was on the first floor of the Grand Palais, between the very avant-garde Russian section, and that of the Manufacture des Gobelins. Given that Cai Yuanpei’s preface to the catalogue is dated 10th August 1925, when the Exposition...
Europe killed the Shandong hairnet industry, on which half a million people were reckoned to depend for a living. This was the semi-colonial reality that Liu Jipiao and others like him were masking, from themselves as much as from anyone.

China’s invisibility at the 1925 Exhibition was powerfully ironic. For in fact China was then everywhere in the art and design of Europe, as one of a number of “exotic” and “primitive” sources of inspiration for designers and decorators. The “Petit salon chinois” of Pierre Chareau (1883-1950) was one of the successes of 1924, with its panels of “laques de Coromandel”. The lacquered furniture of Eileen Gray (1878-1976), and ranges of pottery with names like “Chang ware” and “Soon ware” were widely written about in fashionable design periodicals. At least one commentator saw “oriental” influences taking over European art to an unhealthy degree; “Every great European period has been perfectly occidental, but when losing its strength it has become subject to oriental influences.” Thus the lack of receptivity to the contemporary art of China was paralleled by an intense urge to speak for China, to appropriate it, absorb and neutralize it in the classic orientalist manner. The years 1924-1925 saw a massive outpouring of western work on the art of ancient China, by now a subject worthy of academic respect. There were major shows in Paris and the Hague, which were widely reviewed. There were significant publications by Chavannes, Pelliot, Roche, Siren, Hobson, Koop, Waley and Bushell. In fact “Art” is the largest single category in a bibliography of western books on China for the period. Ancient China was a real presence in the cultural life of Europe, but a China striving to speak for itself was nowhere. One of the authoritative sinological works of the

was more than half over, it is likely that the Chinese participation was very much at the last minute, probably not being ready for the opening date in April. This may go some way to explaining the lack of notice it received in any of the publications devoted to the show, in galling contrast to the respectful attention given by western commentators to Japan, with its striking pavilion on Cours-la-Reine, its generous financial support from the Japanese government, and its long roll-call of distinguished exhibitors. The Chinese government limited its support to the presence of its ambassador Chen Lu (1876-1939) and its Consul-general Zhao Yitao on the Mission Honoraire. This was a mixed blessing. Chen was the focus of violent hostility on the part of left-wing Chinese students in Paris (of whom Zhou Enlai was one, living in rue Godefroy). Chen had survived an assassination attempt in 1922, but in June 1925, as the Exhibition was on, his embassy was occupied by protesting students for a number of days. His presence can have done nothing to unify the Chinese community in France round participation in the exhibition.

The larger political and economic picture also acted to subvert such high hopes as Liu Jipiao may have had. There had been a steady rise in the volume of China’s handicraft exports from 1917 to 1924, which may have fuelled optimism, but this collapsed after June 1925, when a boycott of British shipping resulted from a brutal shooting incident in Shanghai. The fragile world in which the Chinese handicraft economy lived was brutally revealed also when the fashion for bobbed hair in

Fig. 12. Shawl, shown by Millen and Co. Paris 1925.
Châle, exposé par Millen and Co. Paris 1925.

Fig. 13. Carvings in rock crystal, by Hoo-Tchang, shown by Hoo-Sing-Hour. Paris 1925.
Cristaux de roche taillés par Hoo-Tchang, exposés par Hoo-Sing-Hour. Paris 1925.
period is without doubt: ” Aucun signe n’apparaît encore d’une renaissance des arts “30.

The part played by the events of 1924-1925 in the subsequent history of Chinese art in this century is debatable. Liu Jipiao’s interiors for the National Government Building show an absorption of some of the grandiose mannerisms of quintessential historicist design practitioners like Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (1879-1933), while Lin Fengmian has clearly continued to work in a way conditioned by his exposure to post-impressionism, and to Matisse and Vlaminck in particular. But perhaps it is as a failure, as a bitter lesson in the West’s unwillingness to hear what Chinese art is trying to say, that the enterprise of 1925 has had its longest and deepest effects.

12. The importance of regionalism as an aid to understanding modern Chinese art is a major theme of Croizier, op. cit.
13. Not in Sullivan, and no biographical information currently available.
14. Sullivan, p. 91, gives 1933 as the date of establishment of the AAEF, and Zhou Ling as its first President, but it was clearly in operation nearly a decade earlier. It may have been re-founded in 1933 after a hiatus.
15. Li Feng, unnumbered plates, reproduced in Kao, ill. 20.
16. I am indebted to Dr Kao Mayching for this information, based on the journal of the Hangzhou Academy, *Yapouo* (“Apollo”).
17. *Yapouo* (1928) has an article by Lin, as well as his translation of Leu fœurs du mal!.
19. Zeng returned to hold various teaching posts in Peking, and was still showing in an exhibition of western style painting held in Shanghai in 1937. Tsuruta Takeyoshi, “Kin hyakunen rai Chokoku gajin shiryo” (“Materials on Chinese Painters of the Last 100 Years”), in four parts, *Bijutsu kenkyû* 305 (1976), p. 173. Tsuruta however gives the wrong character for the yi of Zeng’s personal name. Instead of yi, “one” it should be yi, “by means of”.
21. Li Feng, p. 33.

L’art chinois et les artistes chinois en France en 1924 et 1925


1. 方君璧
2. 林風眠
3. 蘇南梅
4. 高奇峰
5. 李風
6. 吧哩高國美術事業會
7. 美術
8. 工藝
9. 霍普金斯會
10. 美術工學社
11. 徐悲鴻
12. 劉既漂
13. 林文錦
14. 王伏之
15. 蔡元培
16. 廣州國立美術院
17. 國民政府
18. 蔡元培
19. 陳師曾
20. 陳鐵瑞
21. 周恩來