

**Reimagining China:
History Painting of Xu Beihong in Early Twentieth Century**

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By

Ka F. Wong

Thesis Committee:
Willa J. Tananbe, Chairperson
Roger Ames
Julia M. White
Ming-Bao Yue

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Abstract

Reviewing Xu Beihong's four history paintings—*Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* (1928-30), *The Astute Judge of Horse* (1931), *Awaiting for Deliverer* (1930-33), and *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* (1940)—through an interdisciplinary approach, this study examines the relationships among the artist, his works, and the circumstances in which these paintings were rendered. Better understanding this intrigue relationships leads to three trajectories of “re-imagining” that are set apart from conventional paradigms in Chinese art history: the hybrid style that embodies both tradition and modernity, the complex subject-matter that embraces both past and present, and the link with the “imagined community” that enkindles a national consciousness both within and outside of China.

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Introduction: Reimagining Xu Beihong's History Paintings

No discussion on art in twentieth-century China is complete without Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿 (1895-1953).¹ His name and paintings are synonymous with the aesthetic canon and institutional power of modern Chinese art. The abundance of extant works (over one thousand of ink, oil, and sketches), documents relating to his life and works, along with his own writings, make him one of the most influential Chinese artists of the last century. The vast quantity of biographical materials, however, is a mere drop compared with the ocean of analyses and studies regarding his art, both positive and negative, that have continued to stream out decades after his death. Above all, Xu Beihong is one of the very few painters in China to whom an entire museum was devoted.² To many artists and critics, Xu Beihong was the vanguard of twentieth-century Chinese art. His steadfast conviction in promoting Western-style “realism” in China earned him distinction as the founding father of Social Realism, an artistic style and ideological apparatus that dominated the Chinese cultural landscape until the end of the 1970s.

In particular, Xu Beihong's history paintings, both in oil and ink, including *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* (*Tian Heng Wubaishi* 田横五百士, 1928-30)[fig.1], *The Astute Judge of Horse* (*Jiu Fanggao* 九方皋, 1931)[fig.2], *Awaiting for Deliverer* (*Xi Wo Hou* 奚我后, 1930-33)[fig.3], and *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* (*Yugong yishan* 愚公移山, 1940)[fig.4], assume notable importance. These larger-than-life creations are not only part of the sum total of Chinese art in the twentieth century, but rather are considered its icons. Adorned with praise for their technical virtuosity and patriotic ideals, Xu Beihong's history paintings are often seen as the perfect alliance of Chinese and Western art styles as well as a new vision for the modernizing nation.³ The pictorial and narrative power of *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* was said to have inspired Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893-1976) to incorporate the folk-tale

¹ This thesis uses the pinyin system for the Chinese transliteration and the simplified Chinese characters.

² Located at 53 North Xijiekou Beida street 新街口北大街 in Beijing city, Xu Beihong Memorial Museum opened in 1983. It displays over 1,200 art objects, 10,000 ancient books, stone inscription rubbings, bronze vessel rubbings, and prints created or collected by the artist.

³ For comments on Xu Beihong by various Chinese art critics and historians, among whom were many students of Xu Beihong, see Ai Zhong-xin 艾中信, *Xu Beihong yanjiu* 徐悲鸿研究 [Studies of Xu Beihong] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1981); Wang Zhen 王震, ed., *Xu Beihong pingji* 徐悲鸿评集 [Art criticism of Xu Beihong] (Guilin: Lijiang chubanshe, 1986).

into his political rhetoric.⁴ Yet, others view Xu Beihong in a less flattering light, deeming his paintings rigid, old-fashioned, and anti-modern. Michael Sullivan, among the more assertive Western critics, contends that *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains* is “one of the most unpleasant works to come out of modern China,”⁵ and Xu Beihong’s work as a whole is “seldom more than merely competent”.⁶ Much about Xu Beihong has been debated from these extreme positions over the years, which are seemingly influenced by political stands, personal tastes, and more importantly, preconceptions about “modern” Chinese art. The “lack of measure” has tinged the understanding of modern development in China. The “openness” of the art history discourse is often “closed” by interpretive codes that rely exclusively on either Euro-American centrism or ultra-Chinese chauvinism, or as Pheng Cheah puts it, the “dogmatic application of an untested universalism” by the West and “a dubious cultural relativism” by the East.⁷ ⁸ Accordingly, the complexity of the artists and their works is by and large reduced to a unidimensional label.

It is precisely to consider Xu Beihong’s history paintings outside the conventional discourses that this project is conceived. Time-honored modernization theories have long conceptualized the historical experiences of China in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in dichotomous models such as “modernity” versus “tradition,” “First World” versus “Others,” and “Western impact” versus “Chinese response”.⁹ The field of modern Chinese art history is no exception. Xu Beihong together with his contemporary artists have always been cast in autonomous and antagonist positions—“Western-style (oil) painting” against “traditional (ink) painting,” “Modernism” against “Realism,” or “Right” against “Left”—with little integration or crossover. Derived from the established Western (European and American) ideologies, these

⁴ Ai, *Xu Beihong yanjiu*, 49.

⁵ Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 50.

⁶ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 72.

⁷ See John Clark, “Open and Closed Discourses of Modernity in Asian Art,” in *Modernity in Asian Art*, ed. John Clark (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993), 4. Also see Pheng Cheah, “Universal Areas: Asian Studies in a World in Motion,” in *Trace* 1, 54-5.

⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 108.

⁹ This historical and scholarly dilemma is thoughtfully demonstrated by Paul Cohen. See *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

contrasting concepts no doubt provide fathomable interpretations about the artistic productions and movements in China during an otherwise chaotic time. Though, reality is never neatly and narrowly defined. It is also dubious that the Chinese experiences—within a physically immense and culturally diverse country—can be explained thoroughly by these binary frameworks. Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged these conclusive modes. It is by looking at the connections, contradictions, and confusions among the antonyms that a less tidy yet livelier picture of twentieth-century Chinese artists and their artworks emerges.

Through exploring the “problematic” contexts of Xu Beihong’s four history paintings, this project reconsiders the prevalent discourses on modern Chinese art and reexamines the work of Xu Beihong in a different light. A contextual reading believes that “art is in a very real sense made by historical situations”.¹⁰ Michael Baxandall suggests that historical art objects “can be explained by treating them as solutions to problems in situations, and by reconstructing a rational relationship between these three”.¹¹ If the “problem” of Xu Beihong is to lead Chinese art towards modernity, his history paintings can be seen as the “solution” under the cultural and social “situation” in the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, this thesis does not aim to re-create the historical state of mind of Xu Beihong—for even if possible, an artist’s own descriptions and explanations actually “have very limited authority for an account of intention of the object”.¹² Rather, the “intention” of a painting lies more in itself.¹³ Instead of a narrative recount of the artist’s mental outlook, this study is an analytical construct about his ends and means, inferring them from the relation of his paintings to their historical circumstances.

The endeavor to comprehend this complex relationship leads to three trajectories of “re-imagining” that are set apart from conventional paradigms in Chinese art history: the hybridity of

¹⁰ David Summers, “‘Form’, Nineteenth-Century Metaphysics, and the Problem of Art Historical Description,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 139.

¹¹ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1985), 35.

¹² Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 41-2.

¹³ Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 41-2, 72.

style, the contradictory notion in content, and the link with the “imagined community”.¹⁴ While Chapter Two looks at Xu Beihong’s history paintings as artistic solutions against the general backdrop of early twentieth-century China, each of the three following chapters concentrates on one aspect of this reimagining approach. Chapter Three questions the established label of Xu Beihong as a “Western realistic” painter by tracing his Chinese roots, especially in the Shanghai School (*hai pai* 海派) of the nineteenth century. Moving away from a typical interpretation of his works as “socialist” and “iconoclastic” symbols, Chapter Four explores the “old” sentiments in his imageries that signified his personal vision of a “new” China. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the receptive end, the often overlooked role of the audience, of Xu Beihong’s pictorial epics in regard to the imagined Chinese community that extends beyond the time-honored “East-West” continuum. This project is not a conclusive study of the life and work of Xu Beihong. Neither does it attempt to re-evaluate his paintings with ideological or moral judgment. The focus is on exploring the relationship between the four history paintings and their own times through three new interdisciplinary discourses in order to better grasp the intricate configurations of Chinese modernity in the early twentieth-century. After all, the field of art history is a network of “analytic methods, theoretical perspectives, and discursive protocols,” and the art of art history lies in its instrumentality for “imagining the social, cognitive, and ethical” pasts and transforming the understanding of “the identity and history of individuals and nations”.¹⁵

¹⁴ For the concept of “imagined community,” which is discussed in Chapter 5, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions and New Left Books, 1983).

¹⁵ Donald Preziosi, “Art History: Making the Visible Legible,” in *The Art of Art History*, 13, 18.

Chapter 1. Behind Art and History: Artistic Problems and Solutions in Early Twentieth-Century China

Xu Beihong was not the only artist to undertake the problem of modernizing Chinese art in the turbulent early decades of the twentieth century, yet his solution, history paintings that render the academic style of nineteenth-century Classical Realism, was a unique one. As the relationship between his history paintings and their problematic circumstances forms the central thread of the discussion, it is important to begin with the artist himself together with the “situation” and “problems” that puzzled his entire generation. Xu Beihong (original name Xu Shoukang 徐寿康) was born in Yixing County 宜兴县 in Jiangsu province 江苏省 on July 19, 1895. It was the same year in which General Li Hongzhang 李鸿章 (1823-1901) signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki that marked China’s defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1884-5), the Confucian scholar Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858-1927) submitted the “Proposal of Ten-thousand Words” (*wan yan shu* 万言书) that urged for a monarchical reform, and the revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866-1925) founded the “Society to Revive China” (*Xingzhonghui* 兴中会) in Hong Kong.¹ The intertwining themes of resignation, reform, and revolution foreshadowed and followed the journey of Xu Beihong. Although there is no need to trail the customary line of his life, seeing him from being a poor yet talented young painter to fighting against all odds and becoming one of the most eminent artists of twentieth-century China, certain biographical highlights are helpful in discerning Xu Beihong as a “modern” artist and the trajectory of modern Chinese art.²

■ The Artist: A Portrait of Xu Beihong as a Young Man

Painting was Xu Beihong’s love and life. At the age of six, he began his home-schooling in Confucian classics and painting under his father Xu Dazhang 徐达章 (1867-1914), who was a

¹ See Jiang Fan 蒋凡, *Zhongguo jindai xieshihuihua de dianjizhe—Xu Beihong* 中国近代写实绘画的奠基者—徐悲鸿 [The founder of realism in modern Chinese Painting—Xu Beihong] (Taipei: Xiongsi Tushu, 1978), 77-8.

² For the major events and works of Xu Beihong, see the works by his son Xu Boyang 徐伯阳 and two wives: Jiang Biwei 蒋碧薇 and Liao Jingwen 廖静文. Xu Boyang and Jin Shan 金山, eds. *Xu Beihong nianpu* 徐悲鸿年谱 [Biographical Chronology of Xu Beihong] (Taipei: Yishujia chubanshe, 1991); Jiang Biwei, *Sheng si zhi lian: Jiang Biwei huiyilu* 生死之恋: 蒋碧薇回忆录 [Love of Life and Death: Memoir of Jiang Biwei] (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1988); Liao Jingwen, *Xu Beihong yisheng* 徐悲鸿一生 [Xu Beihong: Life of a master painter] (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2001).

self-taught itinerant painter and calligrapher specializing in realistic portraiture with traditional backgrounds. During his early days in Shanghai, the struggling Xu Beihong's artistic talent was recognized by Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), the former chancellor of Beijing University and the first Minister of Education in the Republic, as well as Kang Youwei, eventually leading him to government scholarships to study overseas in Japan and France. In 1919, he left for Paris, enrolled in the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts and apprenticed himself to Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929), whose expertise in academic realism was considered largely passé in the European art world at the time [fig.5]. Xu Beihong's sojourn was by all means an enlightening experience.³ Living in a foreign land, the Chinese artist was free from familial, social, and cultural pressures. Consequently, Xu Beihong could reflect upon himself with a degree of objectivity that would have scarcely been possible at home. The sight of European historical and artistic resplendence, especially Paris and Rome, overwhelmed the young and restless Chinese painter. However, the existence of being an alien also opened his eyes, forcing him to contemplate his own ethnic and cultural identity. In 1927, Xu Beihong returned to Shanghai. *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, *The Astute Judge of Horse Jiu Fanggao*, and *Awaiting for Deliverer* were all completed shortly after his homecoming and contributed greatly to his fame as an accomplished painter and teacher.

These three works manifested his ambition to produce complex narrative compositions on ancient Chinese themes that rivaled the heroic history paintings of the nineteenth-century French Academy. They all derived their subject matter from ancient Chinese texts the same way that their European counterparts drew inspiration from antiquity and mythology. *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* was based upon a legendary figure in *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史记, ca.100 BCE), in which Tian Heng, the ruler of the Qi 齐 state during the end of the Qin 秦 dynasty (221-206 BCE), chose to prove his integrity by committing suicide instead of surrendering to Liu Bang 刘邦, the founder of the Han 汉 dynasty (206 BCE- 220 CE). In 1931, Xu Beihong painted *The Astute Judge of Horse*, another large historical composition taking its topic from the ancient text *Liezi* 列子. This time he traded the oil palette for the traditional medium of Chinese brush, ink, color and paper. The protagonist Jiu Fanggao, who lived during

³ Xu Beihong began his first overseas education in Japan with his second wife Jiang Biwei in 1917. In 1919 the couple went to France and then spent eight years in Europe. Xu first studied under François Flameng (1856-1923) at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and then with Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts. He also went to Germany in 1921 and worked with Arthur Kampf (1864-1950) in Berlin before returning to China in 1927.

the Warring States period (ca.450-221 BCE), was said to possess the power to judge good horses, a metaphor for the selection of China's talented young scholars to serve the nation. Two years later in 1933, Xu Beihong completed another huge oil painting *Awaiting for Deliverer*. Borrowing its theme from the ancient *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 书经), it depicts the desperation and suffering of the people during the end of the Xia 夏 dynasty (ca.2000-1600 BCE), while waiting for the benevolent ruler from the Shang 商 (ca.1500-1050 BCE) to liberate them.⁴

Evidently displayed in his epic paintings, Xu Beihong's strong preference for "realism" and classical academic training over more contemporary styles became a major artistic conviction and educational principle that distinguished his works from that of other European-educated artists such as Liu Haisu 刘海粟(1896-1994) [fig.6] and Lin Fengmian 林风眠(1900-1991) [fig.7].⁵ His fame steadily grew as he worked and exhibited not only in China and Europe but also South and Southeast Asia. He added one more history painting to his resume in 1940. *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* was finished in Darjeeling, India, against the backdrop of the Japanese Resistance War (1937-1945). Drawing from a popular ancient parable from the text of *Leizi*, it tells of a stubborn old man who decided to remove the mountains in front of his house. Even though the old man might not be able to finish the task in his lifetime, he believed that his offspring would carry on the mission until it was accomplished. The nationalistic sentiment and the synthesized style of the painting soon captured the attention of Communist leaders such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (1898-1976).⁶

Xu Beihong's pivotal role in modern Chinese art was cemented after the war, especially with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. He was appointed the President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1950, but, before long, he passed away on September 26, 1953 at the age of 58. His tireless campaign for "realism" was continued by the Communist regime after his death, marking the confluence of "Social Realism" that served party

⁴ The Chinese title of the painting is *Xi Wo Hou*, which is based on two lines from *The Book of History*: "*Xi Wo Hou, Hou lai ji su* 冀我后, 后来其苏," meaning "waiting for our leader; we will be saved after you arrive!"

⁵ Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 29.

⁶ Xu Beihong Museum, comp., *Paintings by Xu Beihong*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Xu Beihong Museum and Beijing Publishing House, 1979), 1-6.

politics and class struggle in the country for decades to come. Many consider Xu Beihong more fortunate than colleagues like Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian. For better or for worse, his legacy in modern Chinese art development remained momentous. Perhaps luck actually meant the “right” timing. Xu Beihong certainly did not exist in a vacuum. Understanding the whole cultural milieu of China at the time, in which he rose to the occasion, is necessary in grasping his art and his impact.

The Situation: An Era of War and Change

The success of Xu Beihong is tightly interwoven with the social fabric of China at the turn of the twentieth century. Since the defeat of the Opium War (1839-42), the Imperial Qing 清 dynasty (1644-1911) had been wrestling with internal and external pressures to catch up with the hostile world that had increasingly been thrust on it. These pressures either encouraged or resisted the idea of China’s modernization, which to a great extent was interpreted as Westernization. Awed by Japan’s speedy progress after the Meiji Restoration (1868),⁷ the Chinese elite realized that reform modeled on Western lines was the last and only chance for the country to survive. The debacle of the Hundred Days Reform (1898) and the fiasco of the Boxer Rebellion (1900) with its disastrous aftermath further intensified the interest in and demand for Western knowledge.⁸ The overthrow of the Qing and the establishment of the Republic in 1911 gave Chinese intellectuals hopes of rejuvenating China to be a powerful nation equal to the West and Japan. The enthusiasm culminated in the May Fourth Movement (1919). Under the twin banners of Democracy and Science, this new cultural movement held the steadfast belief that China’s salvation could be achieved only through Westernization.

Starting out as a literary revolution that absorbed major trends of Western literature styles and genres, such as romanticism, realism, and symbolism, into new roles for Chinese language and literature, the May Fourth Movement also nourished an outcry for art reform along the same line.⁹ Beyond the compartmentalized disciplines, the intellectual community was an amalgam of writers, artists, philosophers, and political activists who directly related and reacted to each other

⁷ For the details of the Meiji Restoration, see Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture*, 4th ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 237-8.

⁸ For the details of the Hundred Day Reform (1898) and the Boxer Uprising (1900), see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2nd ed. (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1999), 223-33.

⁹ Kuiyi Shen, “The Lure of the West: Modern Chinese Oil Painting,” in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 172.

through personal friendships, journal publications, art exhibitions, and social protests. Many artists joined forces in the field of belles-lettres, who in turn, became chief art critics, sponsors and promoters. Kang Youwei and Cai Yuanpei were mentors to Xu Beihong, while the painter himself was a close friend of the May Fourth littérateur Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962) and a great admirer of Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), who defended Xu Beihong's style of "realism" and praised him as a "great painter" (*da hua jia* 大画家).¹⁰ The high-profile public debate about the relevance of Post-Impressionism to modern Chinese art in a series of open letters titled "Puzzlement" (*Huo 惑*) between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1896-1931), a famed romantic poet who had studied in England and the United States, was another example of the dynamic cultural climate, which is discussed in Chapter Four. Xu Beihong states in his autobiography that "the purpose of art is identical to literature—perfecting beauty and virtue (*zhi mei jin shan* 至美尽善) for the masses (*zhiguangda* 致广大)."¹¹ "Literature, science, and art," he argues, "are the three complementary components of knowledge".¹² It is thus very difficult, if not impossible, to separate modern art development from literary and cultural phenomena.

Fueled by the May Fourth Movement, the golden age of modern Chinese art came in the early years of the Republic of China, cut short only by the outbreak of the Japanese Resistance War. The 1920s and 1930s saw the splendor of Western-style painting reach its zenith. It was then an exciting era when Westernization was making inroads into the landscape of China. Despite the menace of Imperialist infringements, life in the bustling coastal cities "had the quality of a gilded age".¹³ Divided into different concessions and dominated by foreign powers, Shanghai was a cosmopolis where Western lifestyle and fashion were no longer an alternative but the norm.

¹⁰ While Lu Xun did not formally know Xu Beihong, in his article "Who is falling" (*shuizaimulou* 谁在没落) published in May 1934, he defended the press's charge against Xu Beihong's "realism". Later that year in November, commenting on the buzz of the Beijing opera singer Mei Lanfang's 梅兰芳 performance in the Soviet Union, Lu Xun notes in one of his essays: "Our Professor Xu Beihong, the great painter, has also gone to Moscow to paint and exhibit". See Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 98 & 104.

¹¹ Xu, "*Beihong zichuan*" 悲鸿自传 [Autobiography of Beihong, 1933], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 徐悲鸿艺术文集 [Collection of Art Criticism by Xu Beihong], vol.1, eds. Xu Boyang 徐伯阳 and Jin Shan 金山 (Taipei: Yishujia chubanshe, 1987), 27.

¹² Xu, "*Gujin zhongwai yishu lun*" 古今中外艺术论 [Commentary on art, from ancient to present, China to foreign, 1926] in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 97.

¹³ Wen C. Fong, *Between Two Cultures: Late Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Chinese Paintings from the Robert H. Ellsworth Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 91.

The creative buzz of this international city was hardly a beat behind Paris or Tokyo, with an affluent and educated audience that was already familiar with not simply European culture but also the latest trends in the art world. At the peak of this cultural ardency rose the generation of modernist artists—including Chen Baoyi 陈抱一 (1893-1945), Guan Liang 关良 (1900-1986), and Guan Zilan 关紫兰 (1903-1986)—who after finishing their studies in Japan had returned to China by the 1920s. Meanwhile, the force of modernism was strengthened by accomplished French-trained artists such as Pang Xunqin 庞薰琴 (1906-1985) and Pan Yuliang 潘玉良 (1902-1977). Together with the established Liu Haisu, Lin Fengmian, and Xu Beihong, these Chinese artists brought extraordinary hype and hope for the country's art revival.

The aspiration of the artistic community, however, was also filled with anxiety, an “obsession with China”.¹⁴ Looming large over the glistening surface of economic prosperity and tenuous peace were the shadows of conflicts—discords among the ruling warlords, the accelerating aggression of Japan, and the internal rift between the Nationalist government and the Communist party. Chinese artists, like their contemporary writers, felt an overwhelming patriotic desire uplift the nation's fate by importing modern Western ideas or systems. Preoccupied with this obsessive “provinciality and naiveté of faith,” many artists were eager to make history and change the destiny of China.¹⁵ Painting became their channel through which a wide range of issues, from personal feeling to national identity to the country's future, would be addressed.¹⁶ As the Chinese intelligentsia sought to save the country from national crises, the question of how the art of “modern” China should look ranked high on their agendas. While some artists pledged their loyalty to the conventional medium and determined to reform Chinese art within the tradition, others held a different view. Many artists and art educators were convinced that the answer was a completely new art style and form. Regarded as more scientifically based, Western-style painting, hence, would not only represent a new China visually but also transform art to be socially more involved than that of the time-honored literati art which has lost its potency by the late eighteenth century.

¹⁴ See C.T. Hsia, “Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature,” in *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 533-54.

¹⁵ Hsia, “Obsession with China,” 536.

¹⁶ David Der-wei Wang, “In the Name of Real,” in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, eds. Maxwell K., Hearn and Judith G. Smith (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 42.

In order to be “westernized,” directly learning from the West was an obvious choice. The overseas-educated Chinese artists played a crucial role in the development of modern art in China, and their firsthand experiences in Western cultures added exceptional weight to their views on modernizing Chinese art. They did not come back home with a unified notion, however. There was a quandary among these artists as to which direction within the Western mode China should proceed. The contest was soon polarized between the “modernists” and the “realists”. Epitomizing the former group were Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian, who believed in an open attitude that embraced contemporary European art trends like Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), Henri Matisse (1869-1954), and “everything that came after Post-Impression” into the repertory of modern Chinese art.¹⁷ Xu Beihong, on the contrary, disagreed with following the vogue of the international art circle and contended that nineteenth-century European Classicism, and Realism in particular, was the absolute answer to China’s calling.

The Problem: Lost and Gained in Translation

The different approaches to China’s modernity were, at least partially, complicated by the problems of “translation,” both literally and metaphorically. Living in an epoch of revolution and jostled by numerous competing ideas of modernization, many Chinese artists took onto themselves a new task of reviving Chinese art. The predicament that the Chinese painters faced, and still an issue that puzzles many contemporary artists to this day, is how the “modern” can be identified pictorially or stylistically. From Max Weber’s consciousness of a new humanity inspired by rationalization to various frameworks fixed to different social models,¹⁸ attempts to untangle the meaning of modernity in art vary greatly from chronological designation to ideological content.¹⁹ Needless to say, how this multitudinous idea, which had its historical and social roots in late nineteenth century Europe, could be transplanted into the soil of China was anything but definite.

On a more practical level, the discourse of translating modernity to China, which was itself a set of contexts limited by an interpretative code, already restricted the possible ways the

¹⁷ Eugene Y. Wong, “Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency,” in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, 113.

¹⁸ See Peter Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Nikos Stangos, ed., *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 7.

multi-layered concepts could be understood in relation to each other.²⁰ Accordingly, the language, terminology, and neologism that the Chinese artists used to illustrate Western theories or ideas—mostly translations from the West or rediscovered loan-words from Japan—signified something quite different in their Chinese content from the original. Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century found a new realm of vocabulary, recently created by the Meiji elite using Chinese characters (*kanji*) in classical texts to articulate Western notions.²¹ Since the 1900s, some of these Japanese/Chinese terms such as “civilization” (*bunmei/wenming* 文明) “freedom” (*jiyul/ziyou* 自由), “art” (*geijutsu/yishu* 艺术) and “fine arts” (*bijutsu/meishu* 美术) have become inseparable from modern Chinese expressions.²² Nevertheless, translation is always a mode, and the transmission can never be total.²³ Through the act of translation, meanings are not so much transmitted or “transformed” as “invented” within the local environment.²⁴ Many of the Chinese translations were derived from traditional literature, Confucian philosophy, and missionary texts that were already loaded with cultural meanings. Furthermore, there was not yet any consensus in the application or rendition of art terms that one may consider universally understood today, such as “modernism,” “realism,” or “naturalism”. The relationship between their Western origins and Chinese signification altered from one artist to another, from one context to the next, and was different then from now. It is said that Chinese artists adapted modern European trends—for instance, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, and Expressionism—for their own purposes.²⁵ The effort to apprehend “modern” Chinese art was by all means a challenge to both the artists and their critics.

Of course, the modernization of Chinese art can never be simply “translated” as Westernization. Modernization involves the use of a variety of instruments and concepts of Westernization, which are imported and infused into local cultural contexts, only to be repatriated

²⁰ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1976), 57.

²¹ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 238.

²² For a list of the Chinese adoption of Japanese terms, see Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), appendix B & D, 284-98, 302-42.

²³ Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 70.

²⁴ Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 26.

²⁵ Shen, “The Lure of the West,” 173.

as a “modern” and “national” art form that can free China from not only the burden of its past but also the hegemony of the West. This was undoubtedly a contradiction. Being a mirror image of the teleologically advanced Europe and America, or even an indirect reflection of that mirrored image as in the case of Meiji Japan, was the predominant parameter to measure “modernity”. But a mere duplication of the West, albeit modern and modish, was not what the Chinese artists had in mind. Above all, they were proud of and wanted their arts to be “Chinese”.²⁶ Even when the radicals during the May Fourth Movement talked of a complete Westernization, they did not really mean “the mechanical substitution of Western society and culture for Chinese but the transformation of China in line with a highly selective vision of what the West was all about”.²⁷ The problem, thus, was which style and direction within the diverse Western tradition Chinese artists should adopt in modernizing their work, on one hand, and how to achieve such a feat without selling out their Chinese souls, on the other.

Xu Beihong believed that “modernity” signified in the context of Chinese art should be different from the “modernism” prevailing in the latest trend in the West. Among the inimical few at the time, he sought to uphold the principle of “depicting reality” as the remedy for China’s art reform although his definition of “realism” was quite different from his compatriot artists and contemporary Western precepts.²⁸ His idea of realism, even within the context of Academic Realism to which he was institutionally akin, was rather broad with hues of Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism in the twentieth-century Western sense. In fact, he states that the international art world with all the diverse movements can be divided into two categories: realism (*xieshi* 写实) and conceptualism (*xieyi* 写意), which also had their roots in traditional Chinese aesthetics.²⁹ Allying to the former group, he remarks that “art is no different from science as they

²⁶ The European educated Liu Haisu founded the first art school, Shanghai Art Academy (*Shanghai tuhua meishu yuan* 上海图画美术院) in 1912. He recognized the connection between Western modernism and traditional literati art. He personally was a “humble student” and “an avid collector” of traditional Chinese painting. Likewise, Lin Fengmian, another famous French-educated modernist oil painter and the director of the National Hangzhou Arts Academy, strove to “create an art for the present epoch” that was “both modern and Chinese, exposing students to up-to-date Western concepts and traditional Chinese painting alike”. See Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 28. Also see Mayching Kao, “The Quest for New Art,” in *Twentieth Century Chinese Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1984), 143.

²⁷ Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 13.

²⁸ Xu, “*Zhongguohua gailiang zhi fangfa*” 中国画改良之方法 [Methods of Improving Chinese painting, 1918], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 41.

²⁹ Xu Beihong writes: “all the painting in the world, with different categories, such as Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism, or Futurism... eventually is either *xieyi* or

strive for truth; just as mathematics is the basis of science, figure drawing is the foundation of art”.³⁰ “Without the ability to represent the appearance,” he continues, “there is no way an artist can grasp the essence.” One of his initial solutions to push for his artistic agenda was a series of history paintings, which was made to match the century-old European classical masters such as Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) and Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) instead of the “up-to-date” celebrities like Cézanne or Matisse.

In the vibrant yet violent epoch of early twentieth century China, the quest for artistic modernity was as much about aesthetics and style as it was about the social function of art in the nation’s political and cultural struggle. Xu Beihong’s preference for “realistic” narrative paintings with moralistic overtones from history verifies his conviction in “art for life” rather than the individualistic and freer inclination of the modernists. Having spent eight years in Europe where Post-Impressionism and Fauvism were breaking new ground, Xu Beihong’s ardent fondness for “realism” and hostility towards other contemporary movements smacked of an “anachronism” in the eyes of many sophisticates in Shanghai and Hangzhou.³¹ For Xu Beihong and his peers, the shared modernizing “problems” under the same historical “situation” apparently did not guarantee a similar “solution”. This study is interested, then, in reconsidering the conventional narrative of Xu Beihong by opening the conflux and contradiction through his artistic visions. With the four history paintings as focal points, each of the three following chapters concentrates on a different reconstruction of the relationship between his history paintings and their problematic circumstances.

xieshi these two types.” Xu, “*Faguoyishi jinkuang*” 法国艺术近况 [Contemporary state of French Art, 1936], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 72.

³⁰ Xu, “Dangqian Zhongguo zhi yishu wenti” 当前中国之艺术问题 [Problems of Chinese Art Today, 1947], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 533.

³¹ Wang, “In the Name of Real,” 30.

Chapter 2. Beneath Tradition and Modernity: Stylistic Link Between Traditional and Modern Chinese Painting

In the four history paintings executed in the decade between 1930 and 1940 Xu Beihong arrived at the first formal idiom with which his name became commonly associated—Academic Realism. Xu Beihong’s undertaking was obviously indebted to the European classical genre and style. Labeling his work simply as “realism” or him as a “Westernized painter” can be misleading, nonetheless. His artistic reputation rested not so much on his “modern” oil pieces as on a corpus of horse paintings in “traditional” Chinese medium and manner. The reasons behind Xu Beihong’s stylistic divergence are barely acknowledged among scholars. The four monumental paintings bear the mark of this paradox. Both *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Follower* and *Awaiting for Deliverer* were conducted in oil on canvas, whereas *The Astute Judge of Horse* and *Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains* were in ink and color on paper. The different media, however, are only parts of the ambiguity and discrepancy.

This chapter examines the first reimagining aspect of Xu Beihong’s history paintings through their images and style. As the binary paradigm always placed Xu Beihong at the spearhead of the “modern” pole, many of his “traditional” attributes have been overlooked. His education in Europe and his mastery of Western artistic techniques do not necessarily make him a “westernized” painter. In order to avoid the inadequacy of a one-sided perspective, this section orients the investigation towards the “traditional” facets of Xu Beihong. In this regard, his solution to rekindle the problem in the art world—promotion of “realism” with the backing of Western visual language and practice—was his platform to mediate a specific realistic exemplar in Chinese art history that he saw as the most vital element in reinvigorating modern Chinese painting. His discourse rests in the flower-and-bird genre (*huaniao hua* 花鸟画) and its nineteenth-century heir, the Shanghai School. Xu Beihong notes, “realism should be only the means but not the ends” to achieve the essence of “nature” and “humanity” in the “renaissance” of Chinese art.¹ Flaunting the logo of realism in his four history paintings, Xu Beihong was able to triumph in legitimizing his cause, and hence, buttress his artistic beliefs as well as fulfill his duty as a traditional intellectual.

¹ Xu Beihong, “*Zhongxihua de fenye*” 中西画的分野 [The difference between Chinese and Western painting, 1939], in *Xu Beihong yishu wen ji* 2, 376; Also see “*Shijieyishu zhi moluo yu Zhongguoyishu zhi fuxing*” 世界艺术之末落与中国艺术之复兴 [The decline of World Art and the Renaissance of Chinese art, 1947], in *Xu Beihong yishu wen ji* 2, 522.

The Realism of Xu Beihong

Xu Beihong and his peers were determined to portray China anew through abandoning the old pictorial paradigm and adapting a novel visual vocabulary from the West. Despite the mutual agreement that art should be the “authentic representation” of reality and life, the consensus of a new Chinese realism was never reached. Xu Beihong was a “devotee of realism” (*xieshi zhuyi* 写实主义), yet his notion was not the same as the “*Le Réalisme*” of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) or the more naturalistic manner of Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875). Although he gave credit to the two founding fathers of realism in contemporary Europe, Xu Beihong’s artistic ideal went further back to the classics—Michelangelo (1475-1564), Titian (ca.1480-1576), and Rembrandt (1606-1669).² He was certainly leaning towards the “traditional” even within the Western discourse. Xu Beihong expressed his veneration and wrote extensively about the arts of ancient Greece and its reincarnation during the Renaissance, which were the archetype of Classical Realism in late eighteenth and nineteenth century France.³ Within the more recent European trend, he found the Academic works of Pierre-Paul Prudhon (1758-1823), Delacroix, and his own teacher Dagnan-Bouveret most admirable.⁴

During his days in Europe, the magnificence of history paintings struck a chord in Xu Beihong’s heart. His association of Chinese modernity with Academic history painting would find parallels elsewhere in Asia, notably in Meiji Japan where Kuroda Seiki 黑田清辉 (1866-1924), the forefather of the modern *yoga* 洋画 (Western-style painting) movement, also heeded such illustrious epic representation as the first step to Japanese modernity [fig. 8].⁵ The appeal of Western history painting to the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Eastern art reformers is understandable. Exemplified by the Neoclassicism and Romanticism of the French Academy

² Xu, “*Beihong zhichuan*,” 27.

³ In his autobiography, Xu Beihong describes his love for the art of ancient Greece and the Renaissance, see Xu, “*Beihong zhichuan*,” 23-4. For his other writings about Greek art, see Xu, “*Bayiduinongcandui xu*” 巴尔堆农残堆序 [Introduction to Basilica, 1935], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 295-6, and “*Bayiduinong*” 巴尔堆农 [Basilica, 1935] in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 297-304. For Renaissance, see “*Wenyifuxing yuanzhu qiaotuo chuan*” 文艺复兴远祖乔托传 [The biography of Giotto, the forebear of Renaissance, 1932], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 205-8; “*Mikailangjilo juapin zhi huiyi*” 米开朗基罗作品之回忆 [Memory of Michelangelo’s works, 1947], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 509-12.

⁴ Xu, “*Huo*” 惑 [Puzzlement, 1929], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 132.

⁵ For Kuroda Seiki and history painting in Japan, see Shuji Takashina, Thomas Rimer, and Gerald D. Bolas, *Paris in Japan: The Japanese Encounter with European Painting* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 1987), 54-5.

since the late eighteenth century, history paintings were paintings of ideas—patriotism and virtue in the new era of revolution and nationalism.⁶ This was certainly an artistic ideal with which Xu Beihong and his like-minded Asian counterparts identified. Burgeoning from rationalism in the Enlightenment, European Neoclassicism pledged explicit allegiance to the aesthetics of ancient Greece, implying a style of representation that not only took its fundamental bearings in mimetic fashion but also aimed to confront the reality of life on a theatrical stage through symmetry, modeling of light and shadow, hard outlines as well as balanced proportions. Meanwhile, the human form was always at the heart of the composition and narrative. It echoed with a newly defined social consciousness in art, one that was truly politically motivated.⁷

Xu Beihong applied all of these European and classical characteristics to his renditions of history paintings. Staging almost life-size figures across the canvas in dramatic ambiance, his first effort *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Follower* strove to employ the Western format and style to tell a Chinese story. In his essay “The Difficulties of History Painting,” Xu Beihong compared this work to *Alexander Before the Family of Darius* by Paolo Veronese (ca.1525 – 1588) [fig.9], a Venetian Renaissance artist whom he praised as “one of the world’s most famous painters”.⁸ Similar composition, figural arrangement, atmospheric charge, and historical anachronism can also be found in Jacques-Louis David’s *The Oath of the Horatii Between the Hands of Their Father* (1785) [fig.10]. Likewise, one can detect *Awaiting for Deliverer*’s stylistic debts to Delacroix’s *The Massacre at Scio* (1824) [fig.11].⁹ The Chinese art student in Paris, upon seeing this Delacroix painting for the first time at the Louvre, was said to be deeply touched as tears helplessly streamed down from his eyes.¹⁰ There was undeniable European influence on Xu

⁶ For the development of Classicism and Neoclassicism in nineteenth-century Europe, see Thomas Crow, “Patriotism and Virtue: David to the Young Ingres,” in *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, ed. Stephen F. Eisenman (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 14-77.

⁷ Anna C. Krausse, *The Story of Painting: From the Renaissance to the Present* (Köln: Könemann, 1995), 53.

⁸ Xu, “*Lishihua zhi kunnan*” 历史画之困难 [The difficulties of history painting, 1939], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 379.

⁹ Xu Beihong writes: “Delacroix’s paintings such as *The Massacre at Scio* (1824) and *The Bark of Dante and Virgil* (1822) are outstanding masterpieces. Looking back at all the works in my life, I have produced hundreds of paintings, yet only two percent can match his.” Xu, “*Huo zhi bu jie 2*” 惑之不解二 [Unsolved Puzzlement 2, 1923], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 136.

¹⁰ Liao, *Xu Beihong*, 58.

Beihong's larger-than-life projects, but the French connection was not all that concerned the Chinese artist in his advocacy of "realism". This study, indeed, looks in greater detail at the traditional features in this most renowned "modern" painter's works.

Academic realism served more as Xu Beihong's agency and a reconfirmation of his own artistic goals—making a name for himself and promoting his version of "realism". In the world of early twentieth century China, especially in great port cities like Shanghai, nobody spoke louder in the game of "modernization" than those intelligentsia with Western credentials and connections. Managing to exhibit in the most prestigious *Salon des Artistes Francais* and executing a "classy" though not necessarily "modern" type of Western genre in his history paintings, Xu Beihong proved his artistic merits as a painter. It was a prologue to his subsequent realism campaign. Moreover, Xu Beihong was not alone in trying to rejuvenate Chinese art via Western concepts and resources. Founded by Gao Jianfu 高剑父 (1879-1951), Gao Qifeng 高奇峰 (1889-1933) and Chen Shuren 陈树人 (1884-1948), the Lingnan School 岭南派 had called for a syncretism of both traditional and modern painting (especially *Nihonga* 日本画, Japanese painting) to formulate a distinctively Chinese art style, "New National Painting" (*xin guohua* 新国画).¹¹ Xu Beihong befriended and was indebted to these Cantonese masters of romantic landscape and naturalistic still life. He has increasingly painted in traditional medium and the genre of landscape, flowers and animals, notably horses, since his return from Europe. However, Xu Beihong's focus at the time was "realism," and in particular, the emphasis on life modeling and drawing even in traditional medium. Unlike any of his peers, Xu Beihong's central idea was the transference of European history painting with realistic human figures at its core into the Chinese context.

Rediscovering Realist Tradition in Chinese Art

Realism was not an exclusive European creation. Neither was Xu Beihong satisfied with a mere copy of Western concept and practice. "The future of Chinese painting," Xu Beihong declared, "must rely on Chinese classicism" (*gudian zhuyi* 古典主义).¹² Like the Neoclassicists in the

¹¹ For the discussion of Lingnan School, see Ralph Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: the Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906-1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Christina Chu, "The Lingnan School and Its Followers: Radical Innovation in Southern China", in *A Century in Crisis*, 64-79; Laurence C.S. Tam, "Lingnan School Painting," in *Twentieth-century Chinese Painting*, 110-29.

¹² Xu, "*Gujin zhongwai yishi lun*," 103.

French Academy, Xu Beihong traced back to the strongest contender for realism in the course of Chinese art history and found his justification in antiquity—the “flower-and-bird” paintings from the glorious Tang 唐 (618-907 CE) and Song 宋 (960-1279 CE) dynasties.¹³ It was then the apogee of China’s material wealth and technological advancement that was the envy of the West. “The highest form of art in China is painting,” Xu Beihong maintained, “and the most beautiful school of painting belongs to the flower and bird”.¹⁴ Being “the best contribution of Chinese art to the world,”¹⁵ the flower-and-bird paintings of the Song, with patronage from the Imperial court, accomplished the “*Realisme idealise*”.¹⁶ If “realism” was a mimetic claim to be faithful reflections of realities, then the meticulously depicted, painstakingly detailed, and colorfully represented flower-and-bird painting of the Tang and Song adequately fitted Xu Beihong’s requirement. The representational artistry of this kind of painting, generally referred to as *gongbi* 宫壁 (crafted brush of fine line), was always tied to the court and professional artisans, and for this reason, it was disdained by the literati artists who valued the conceptual, self-expressive, and amateurish approach. The bifurcation between the “realistic” Northern School and the “conceptualist” Southern School was firmly canonized by the seventeenth-century art theorist and connoisseur Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636), whose treatise has since overpowered the discourse of Chinese art history.¹⁷ Reversing the arbitrary hierarchy set out by Dong Qichang, Xu

¹³ Xu Beihong wrote in many occasions that praised the “flower and bird” painting from the Tang and Song as the epitome of Chinese art, see “*Lun Zhongguohua*” 论中国画 [Commentary on Chinese Painting, 1938], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 357-64; “*Tan Gao Jianfu xiansheng de hua*” 谈高剑父先生的画 [Talking about Mr. Gao Jianfu’s paintings, 1935], *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 287; “*Meishu yican mantan—yibufen zhongguo huaniao hua*” 美术遗产漫谈——一部分中国花鸟画 [General Talk about Art Legacy—a part of Chinese flower and bird painting, 1950], *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 597-600; “*Zhongxi hua de funye*,” 376.

¹⁴ Xu, “*Gujin zhongwai yishi lun*,” 101.

¹⁵ Xu, “*Gujin zhongwai yishi lun*,” 99.

¹⁶ Xu, “*Lun Zhongguo hua*,” 359.

¹⁷ The Ming dynasty (1368-1644) art historian and theorist Dong Qichang traced the development of Chinese painting back to the Tang dynasty and divided painters into two schools that mirrored the division in Chan 禅 Buddhism—Northern (gradualist) and Southern (sudden) enlightenment sects. The Southern School, promoted by Dong, favored the spontaneous expressions by amateur literati in opposition to the verisimilitude representation of real scenery, as in works produced by the Northern School. The Southern School generally included literati painters, like Wang Wei 王维 (699-759), Mi Fu 米芾 (1051-1107), Mi Youren 米友仁 (1075-1151), Huang Gongwang 黄公望 (1269-1354), and Ni Zan 倪瓒 (1301-1374). The Northern School generally included professional and court painters, such as Zhao Gan 赵干 (mid 10th c.), Zhao Boju 赵伯驹 (mid.12th c.), Ma Yuan 马远 (a.1189-1225), and Xia Gui 夏圭 (early 13th c.). For Dong’s concepts, see Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch’i-ch’ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1971), 151-72.

Beihong praised the resourcefulness, precision, and potency manifested in the “crafted brush” Northern School (*beipai* 北派) as a far superior feat than the exquisite yet uninspiring pieces of the Southern School (*nanpai* 南派).¹⁸ To him, it was the greatness (*weida* 伟大) in the works of the Northern school artisans, not the Southern School literati, that could be compared to the music of Beethoven and the paintings of Michelangelo.¹⁹

When examining Xu Beihong’s revolt against Dong Qichang and his promulgation of “realism” in Chinese art history, one cannot help but recall the ideas of his mentor, Kang Youwei, an influential Confucian scholar who played a central role in the futile Hundred Days reform during the late Qing period. During Kang Youwei’s visit to Europe in 1904, he was so dazzled by the realistic vigor of Renaissance paintings that he lamented the “regression” of Chinese painting.²⁰ He believed Western art successfully portrayed the “truth” (*zhen* 真), while Chinese art “evolved against the trend” by denying it.²¹ It was no surprise that Kang Youwei blamed the decline on Dong Qichang, who favored the conceptual literati paintings that failed to “convey the essence of nature”.²² To Kang Youwei, “realism implies not only a technique but also a world-view and a belief” in “claiming the truth” and capturing reality.²³ The reformer sought to revive “realism, which he alleged to have flourished in the Six Dynasties (220-589) and Tang periods”.²⁴ “To capture spirit does not mean to deny form,” he asserted. “The intent should never be presented at the expense of concrete objects. Paintings from all nations share this rule, so contemporary American and European paintings resonate in method with Tang and Song paintings”.²⁵ Together with his student Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873-1929), Kang Youwei voiced that “Chinese knowledge should remain as the core, and the Western learning be used for

¹⁸ Xu, “*Faguoyishi jinkuang*,” 73.

¹⁹ Xu, “*Faguoyishi jinkuang*,” 73.

²⁰ Kang Youwei, “*Wanmucaotang canghuamu*” 万木草堂藏画目 [Bibliography of the Painting Collection in Ten Thousand Tree Studio], quoted in *Zhongguo huihua lilunshi* 中国绘画理论史 [A Critical History of Chinese Painting] (Taipei: Dongda tushu, 1997), 361-2.

²¹ Kang, “*Wanmu caotang canghua mu*,” 362.

²² Kang, “*Wanmu caotang canghua mu*,” 362.

²³ Wang, “In the Name of Real,” 39.

²⁴ Kang, “*Wanmu caotang canghua mu*,” 362.

practical matter” (*zhongxueweiti, xixueweiyong* 中学为体, 西学为用). Therefore, they advocated a realistic form of modern art that united traditional essence and Western techniques without forsaking its “Chineseness”.

In his own hermeneutic quest into finding the “modern potentialities” in the Chinese past,²⁶ Xu Beihong traced the “realism” lineage of flower-and-bird painting to the nineteenth-century Shanghai School, in which he praised Ren Bonian 任伯年 (1840-1895) as the number one artist in contemporary China [fig.12].²⁷ Although at times considered “commercial” and “Westernized” and bending to the taste of the urban bourgeoisie, the Shanghai School’s blending of diverse stylistic elements and emphasis on technical discipline, remarkably shown in flower, animal and figural paintings, “steered a difficult course between truly popular styles and classical refinements”.²⁸ The pursuit of vigorous, plebeian, and easily comprehensible artistic styles was always the basic objective of the Shanghai School.²⁹ Moreover, these artists sought neither approval from the court nor acceptance from the cultural elite but commissions from the affluent populace of the metropolises.³⁰ Combining expressionistic brushwork with realistic fine-lined detail in a free yet controlled manner, Ren Bonian was the most versatile and brilliant master from this school. His famous figural paintings gave form to a harmonious manner that synthesized both Western life-drawing technique and Chinese ink convention.³¹ His style

²⁵ Kang, “*Wanmu caotang canghua mu*,” 362.

²⁶ The concept of “modern potentialities” indicates that apart from a range of factors that hindered China’s modernization process, there were also important features of the Chinese political, economic, social, artistic and intellectual heritage that were ultimately conducive to reform. However, certain of these potentialities were in a state of repression or decline since the mid-nineteenth century under the Qing dynasty. See Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 82; the term was first used by the Rudolfs to shed light into the modernization of India. See Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967), 5-6.

²⁷ Xu, “*Lun Zhongguohua*,” 361.

²⁸ For the accomplishment of the Shanghai School, see James Cahill, “The Shanghai School in Later Chinese Painting,” in *Twentieth-century Chinese Painting*, 54-77. Also see Shan Guolin, “Painting of China’s New Metropolis: The Shanghai School, 1850-1900,” trans. Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, in *A Century in Crisis*, 20-34.

²⁹ Shan, “Painting of China’s New Metropolis,” 24.

³⁰ Chu-Tsing Li, “Looking at Late Qing Painting with New Eyes,” *Phoebus* 8 (1997), 34.

³¹ Ren Bonian’s early teacher was another Shanghai School master, Ren Xun 任薰 (1835-1893). In his thirties, Ren Bonian studied at the painting studio of the Xujiahui Catholic church in Tushanwan and came to understand the strength of Western-style art. See Shan, “Painting of China’s New Metropolis,” 26-7.

continued to reach twentieth-century ink painters like Qi Baishi 齐白石 (1864-1957), a great idol and close friend of Xu Beihong, who in return, was influenced by both “traditional” artists.³²

Xu Beihong’s formative years were spent under the artistic heritage of the Shanghai School. His father Xu Dazhang’s self-taught mode of portraiture, realistic depiction of the face yet traditional brushwork for the body against customary landscape background, as seen in *Coaching my Son Under a Pine Tree* (1905) [fig.13], derived its style from the works of Ren Bonian.³³ Long held in low-esteem, his father’s painting was at best regarded as dexterous craftsmanship by the dominant literary school that disparaged representational likeness. Xu Beihong first learned to paint from his father and by copying the realistic print-illustrations of Wu Youru 吴友如 (d.1893). His home-schooling by his father in the conventional way was important to not only his artistic upbringing but his own character. The “traditional” demands for a good artisan—diligence, discipline, and keen observation of real life—were engraved in Xu Beihong’s development of “realism,” in which free-spirited creativity and spontaneity had no part.³⁴ One of his earliest extant works, *Portrait of the Seniors* (ca. 1915) [fig.14], displays the stylistic affiliation with his father as well as Ren Baonian’s figural paintings. Nonetheless, he shows his own proficiency in verisimilitude, capturing human features and physiques in a realistic manner. Many compared Xu Beihong’s paintings at this age with Lang Shining 郎世宁 (Giuseppe Castiglione, 1688-1766) [fig.15-16], an Italian Jesuit missionary and court painter of Qing Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r.1736-1799). Also renowned for his horse paintings, Lang Shining was among the first painters who incorporated Western realist technique into traditional Chinese medium. Although Xu Beihong acknowledged Lang Shining’s skill of “resembling” realities,” he preferred to see himself as a maverick and was reluctant to associate with the Italian painter or with any particular school at this point.³⁵

If Xu Beihong was vocal in rebelling against the literati tradition and resurrecting the overlooked realistic traits for Chinese art reform before he left for Paris, he found the confidence and credibility to support his theories and launch his attacks with a stronger voice after studying

³² Shan, “Painting of China’s New Metropolis,” 28. For the connection of Qi Baishi and the Shanghai School see Cahill, “The Shanghai School in Later Chinese Painting,” 69.

³³ Liao Jingwen. *Xu Beihong: Life of a Master Painter* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1987), 5.

³⁴ Xu, “*Beihong zhichuan*,” 2; Liao, *Xu Beihong*, 6.

³⁵ Xu, “*Zhongguo hua gailiang zhi fangfa*,” 45.

for almost a decade in the European art world. He proposed that depicting realities and observing nature—sketching from life with precision and figure drawing with anatomy—were the primary representational skills that were to become the prerequisites for all other artistic expression. The French academic tradition of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth century, with which Xu Beihong closely identified, concerned non-idealized human figures that were drawn from life in natural poses as they were in reality. This was a process that Xu Beihong actively fostered, granting “realistic” and “scientific” treatment an equal aesthetic acceptance in Chinese art. What was new, however, was his insistence on modeling and sketching even for ink Chinese painting, a conceptual art form that was prized for its spontaneous and amateurish quality. The excellence of a painting, according to him, was in its ability to fuse aesthetics (*mei* 美) with craftsmanship (*yi* 艺) and represent nature as if it were real (*weimiao weixiao* 维妙维肖).³⁶ Within this context, it is only natural that he found the detailed draftsmanship of the bird-and-flower school inspiring and vindicating.

The scale and style of *Tien Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* and *Awaiting for Deliverer* were by all means impressive and unseen in early 1930s' China. The analysis of their Western-style technique, effect, and composition, in either favorable or unflattering light, has been much discussed over the years.³⁷ However mixed the reviews were, these history paintings instantly brightened Xu Beihong's brand name as the leading spokesman and maestro of European art in China. Meanwhile, he came up with seven principles of painting, using terminology in French that gave his beliefs a chic Western flavor: *Mise en place* 位置得宜, *proportion* 比例正确, *clair-obscur* 黑白分明, *movement* 动态天然, *balance de la composition* 轻重和谐, *caractere* 性格毕现, and *expression* 传神阿堵.³⁸ Xu Beihong did not stop at theorizing modern art practice in Western terms. The French Academic framework was a technical means to his end: promoting his own idea of Chinese realism manifested in the Shanghai School masters.

³⁶ Xu, “*Zhongguo hua gailiang zhi fangfa*,” 45.

³⁷ Li Yu, “*Cong eguo dao zhongguo: zhongguo xiandai huihua lide minzu zhuyi he qianwei fengge*” 从俄国到中国:中国现代绘画里的民族主义和前卫风格[From Russia to China: Nationalism and Avant-Garde in Modern China], in *Xiongshi meishu* [Lion Art] 137 (1982), 59-60; Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 70; Wang, “In the Name of Real,” 37; Fong, *Between Two Cultures*, 95-7

³⁸ Xu, “*Hua fan xu—xinqifa*” 画范序—新七法 [Introduction to the principle of painting—seven new methods, 1932], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 173-4.

The Artistic Connection between Xu Beihong and Ren Bonian

Xu Beihong's deep respect for the Shanghai School did not wither, but even strengthened, after he returned from France. His now confident command of Western-style painting and drawing only boosted his comfort in returning to the traditional medium. His zealous admiration for Ren Bonian was so well-known that Ren's heirs gave him a number of the Qing artist's paintings as a gift in 1928,³⁹ the year when his attempt at history painting began. The striking similarities between his *Portrait of Huang Zhenzi* (1930) [fig.17] and Ren Bonian's *Portrait of Gao Yong* (1877) [fig.18] are self-evident. With an almost identical composition and use of visual motifs, they both feature realistically rendered bust portraits atop a highly conventionalized body base with calligraphic lines drawn in a simplistic and conceptual manner. In addition, Ren Bonian expanded his figural painting repertory to historical heroes, myths and legends, contemporary customs, and religious icons that appealed to all classes of metropolitan society, from highbrowed elite to common folks alike.⁴⁰ Comparably, Xu Beihong's history paintings of epic stories and familiar parables can be seen as an exaltation of this effort. The ultimate endeavor of Xu Beihong in establishing his "realism" heredity from the Shanghai School was his organization of the 1933 exhibition of modern Chinese painting in Paris. In order to project to the European art world the parallel image of realism in China, he included ten Qing traditional paintings, all from the "realist" branch, including Ren Bonian and his own father, an otherwise unknown painter in art history, as a "self-justifying genealogy" of Chinese Realism.⁴¹ As for the "modern" part, Qi Baishi received the most recognition with nineteen paintings, and Xu Beihong himself with fifteen among seventy-five artists presented.⁴²

In reference to the style of Ren Bonian, *The Astute Judge of Horse* and *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains* were Xu Beihong's showcases of realist virtuosity that coalesced European sources and the Shanghai School influences. Practicing his own doctrines, he made

³⁹ *Xu Beihong huaji* 徐悲鸿画集 [Collection of Xu Beihong's Painting] (Taipei: Museum of National History, 1994), 145.

⁴⁰ Shan, "Painting of China's New Metropolis," 27-8.

⁴¹ See Richard Vinograd, "Relocations: Spaces of Chinese Visual Modernity," in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, 177; also see Wong, "Sketch Conceptualism," 135.

⁴² The exhibition in Paris showcased 181 works by 75 artists. While Xu Beihong's favorite artists like Qi Baishi, his father and himself are well represented with great numbers, others equally famous "modernist" painters seemed to be underrepresented, with Liu Haisu had only one and Lin Fengmian two included. See Wong, "Sketch Conceptualism," 135; also see Xu, "*Ji Bale Zhongguo meishu jianlanquei*" 记巴黎中国美术展览会 [Records of Chinese painting exhibition in Paris, 1933], in *Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 223-40.

numerous drafts of the narrative and sketchings of human models before he transformed the drawings onto the brush and ink composition. Applying the Western classical format of a horizontal panorama through Chinese medium and manner, Xu Beihong owed as much to the pictorial language from the Shanghai School as to the French Academy [fig.19-22]. He claimed *The Astute Judge of Horse* was by far his best work upon its completion after seven drafts.⁴³ Of course, creating a grand narrative with brush and ink on absorbent paper that was intolerant for “error” and “correction” needed further attention and precision in drafting. In his own defense, Xu Beihong maintains that “Chinese painting is different from Western oil painting, which can be scraped off and repainted, and his method was to repeat the composition many times”.⁴⁴ Working in his “Chinese” way, Xu Beihong pursued Ren Bonian’s eclectic mode of detailed fine line and impressionistic brushwork with Western-style drawing to bolster the figures’ anatomy and accuracy. The clarity of spatial organization and clear background, unlike the crowded scenes in *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* and *Awaiting for Deliverer*, seem to be taken from the inviting and simplistic compositions of Ren Bonian. From human to animal to plant, all the images in *The Astute Judge of Horse* are configured with black line and shaded with color, with a contrast between the realistic portrait for the five men and the more abstract strokes for their garments and the horses. Every near life-size character is emphatically defined by ink contour of the facial features—brow, eye socket, nose, cheek, jawbone, and hair—and the mood of the individual. At the center is the virile black horse that is rendered with anatomical correctness and painted with a combined style of firm outline and inky gouache, a unique representation that eventually earned Xu Beihong his greatest fame.

Drawing on the same artistic recipe, *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* was finished nine years later. This time Xu Beihong used the ink technique that he had developed from the Shanghai School to boldly depict a row of nude male figures raising their iron rakes and tilling the soil [fig.23-24]. The sharp ink delineation traces the images that spread out in the horizontal plane. The flesh of the naked working men, brought to life with washes of tan pigment and light ink shades, conveys a feeling of volume and likeness based on life-drawings. There is some awkwardness in the picture—such as the static composition, the angles of the rake and the human figure, and the perspective of the elephant. Furthermore, the effect of chiaroscuro

⁴³ Xu, “*Lishi hua zhi kuennan*,” 382.

⁴⁴ *Xu Beihong yanjiu* 徐悲鸿研究 [Study of Xu Beihong] (Taipei: Taipei Municipal Art Gallery, 1989), 108-9.

modeling in ink on paper is limited and hence different from the result of oil on canvas or even the chalk and charcoal drafts Xu Beihong did for the painting earlier. Looking through “Western” eyes, many critics, therefore, concluded that the artist failed in his task of promoting “realism” in these two ink history paintings. However, one can also argue that Xu Beihong’s undertaking was not to recreate European realism in Chinese medium but revive Chinese realism by way of Chinese means. Capitalizing on the inventiveness of Ren Bonian whose use of linear contour and fluent brushwork achieved three-dimensional forms, Xu Beihong, at the very least, took a unique if not always successful path to reintroduce “realism” and inspire “modernity” in Chinese art.

The Victory of Realism

The stylistic hybridity of Xu Beihong’s history paintings accentuates the vexing issue of demarcating between “traditional” and “modern” art in a non-Western context. Transmission of artistic style across cultural boundaries and time periods means that what is looked upon as old-fashioned in one place can be regarded as avant-garde in another because of its absence in the current discourse.⁴⁵ The incorporation of Eastern notions and techniques, notably Japanese *ukiyo-e*, in works by artists such as Edgar Degas (1834-1917) and Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), or the impact of “primitive” African masks on Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), have enriched and even came to represent the concept of “modernity” in the European art experience. Consequently, modernism in the West ushered in a legion of subjective expressions that deplored mimetic representation and underscored individual feelings and spirits through forms, textures, and colors.

On the contrary, the story in China was entirely different. The dominant literati painting style of conceptualism focused on transcending the descriptive likeness and embodying the poetic spirituality of both the objects and the artists. This stress on the subjectivity and renunciation of verisimilitude was what had won the hearts of “modernist” painters in the West and contributed to their rebellion against Academic Realism. But this emphasis on conceptualism was precisely the burden of the literati tradition that Xu Beihong was striving to unload.⁴⁶ To Xu Beihong, literati painting (*wenrenhua* 文人画) was insufficient in grasping reality and the true nature of life. It was part of the obsolete tradition that had contributed to China’s backwardness. He frequently and openly blamed the decadence of Chinese art on the disheartening state of literati painting,

⁴⁵ Clark, “Open and Closed Discourses,” 4.

⁴⁶ Wang, “In the Name of Real,” 29.

which had betrayed its poetic and amateur origins and turned into lifeless repetition and technical conservatism over the earlier three centuries.⁴⁷ He believed that the trend of “copying” from antiquity instead of painting from life was encouraged by Dong Qichang’s theory, the writer and publisher Li Yu’s 李渔 (1611-1680) “Mustard Seed Garden Manuel” (*Jieziyuan huapu* 芥子园画谱), and the dominating orthodox painters, the Four Wangs— Wang Shimin 王时敏 (1592-1680), Wang Jian 王鉴 (1598-1677), Wang Hui 王翬 (1632-1717), and Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642-1715).⁴⁸

Further diminishing the charm of literati art in Xu Beihong’s mind was its repression of the *gongbi* school of realistically and professionally crafted painting. This was ostensibly a more personal issue for Xu Beihong, for his father and himself started their careers with works that were closely related to this manner. Hence, Xu Beihong considered uttermost verisimilitude of figural and animal paintings, not literati conceptualism of fantastic landscapes, as the solution to the present dismal situation of Chinese art. His target for modernity and rejection of tradition, or more precisely, the literati art tradition, was two-fold. On one hand, he polished his “modern” stance and rationale through Western academic realism. This nineteenth-century mimetic “tradition” that European modernists strove to break away from turned into a high cultural form and “modern” alternative with reference to extant visual discourse in China, and accordingly, became the forte of Xu Beihong. On the other hand, he pushed for the “realistic” quality already embedded in the Chinese artistic heritage, especially the Shanghai School, but which had long been looked down upon by the hegemonic literati tradition. His goal was to reaffirm the role of representational skills in modernizing Chinese art. The result was an interface of Western technical practices and Chinese visual conventions that would have made his mentor Kang Youwei proud. While other modernist artists like Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian shared conceptual and introverted traits with the literati mode, the realistic style of Xu Beihong was substantially different, and thus, appeared more scientific, comprehensible, and modern to the majority of the Chinese audience.

The rhetoric of realism, however, was not confined to Xu Beihong or to artists’ manifestos. It had been a continuing dialogue among intellectuals, writers, and artists who saw

⁴⁷ See Xu Beihong, “Lun Zhongguohua,” 358-62; also see “*Xijeyishu zhi molou*,” 518-9.

⁴⁸ Xu Beihong, “*Lun Zhongguo hua*,” 360.

realism as the key to modernize Chinese humanities since the dawn of the twentieth century.⁴⁹ The boosting of the use of vernacular language in writing and the recognition of literature that concerned the weak and oppressed were two of the most significant achievements of the May Fourth Movement. The writer Lu Xun asserted that if the modern Chinese wanted to “come to life,” they needed to speak the language of “living men” and use “easily understood” vernacular “to give clear expression to thoughts and feelings”.⁵⁰ This idea certainly applied to the art world as well.

Radical Chinese intellectuals demanded that modern artists match the literary reforms and political struggle. They had to make the visual language of art itself comprehensible and enjoyable to the masses. The oftentimes-abstract modernist paintings, together with the air of an elite literati tradition, were seen as out of sync with the emotional needs of the people in an era of turmoil. After all, the realistic paintings of recognizable imageries and familiar stories were much easier for the ordinary folks to understand. Xu Beihong maintained that Chinese painting must adapt an apparent and straightforward manner as seen in Western-style painting; the idea that only through the comprehension of the complicated interpretative cultural codes—“ancient visual, literary and poetic conventions”—could one appreciate Chinese painting was a “total mistake”.⁵¹ In many ways, the aesthetic dispute between “tradition” and “modern,” or “conceptualism” versus “realism,” was class related. It was a social battle between the literary elite and the common people as to whose taste should be ratified as the national discourse. The emergence of the middle and working class as the most important audience and arbiter of the art is further discussed in Chapter Five. Utilizing realistic style, impressive scale, and popular themes, Xu Beihong’s history paintings aptly supported his artistic depositions and soon claimed victory in the twentieth-century Chinese art world. For this reason, these paintings assume a particular historical

⁴⁹ Almost all the leading figures of modern Chinese literature sought the same path in realism to reform modern Chinese culture; the list is extensive, including Lu Xun 鲁迅, Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981), Lao She 老舍 (1899-1966), Ba Jin 巴金 (1904-97), and Ding Ling 丁玲 (1907-86). See Wang, “In the Name of Real,” 41.

⁵⁰ Lu Xun, “Silent China,” in *Lu Xun—Selected Works*, vol. 2., trans., Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1980), 332-3.

⁵¹ Xu Beihong, “*Zhongxihua de fuye*,” 376-7.

significance with a life of their own that is quite independent of their quality and the artist's intent.⁵²

⁵² Robert L. Thorp & Richard Ellis Vinograd, *Chinese Art & Culture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 398.

Chapter 3. Between Past and Present: Icons and Meanings of Chinese Modernity

The rise of Xu Beihong's realism as the single most important art style in twentieth-century China lies not so much in its merits as an aesthetic revelation of modernity but as a social revolution that harnessed art to promote political ideals. Often praised as "the most ambitious attempts to nationalize Western painting" in the early twentieth century,¹ Xu Beihong's epic works are celebrated precisely because of their "patriotism".² There is no casual relationship between the genre of history painting and the concept of nationalism in both European discourse and in Xu Beihong's case. His intention was certainly not making illustrations for historical events but rather using historical images to say something else. Xu Beihong's propagation of artistic realism aimed to help the masses to better grasp the truth of life and the painter to further engage with the world. The link between his pictorial narratives of the past and the Chinese nation at present is unmistakable. "Art is connected with the expression of life," he maintained, and one must avoid the danger of aestheticism (*weimei zhuyi* 唯美主义), which only indulges beauty (*mei* 美) but ignores the truth (*zhen* 真) and virtues (*shan* 善); to him, virtue means "content" (*neirong* 内容).³

These history paintings, then, can be seen as Xu Beihong's visual text of "national allegory," a concept that Fredric Jameson coins as the "political dimension" in Third-World literature, which reflects "the embattled situation" of the people's long repressed aspirations within their culture.⁴ Considering *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* as a parable of

¹ Wang, "In the Name of the Real," 37.

² For the discussion of patriotic ideas in Xu Beihong's history paintings, see the following essays in *Xu Beihong pingji*: Wu Zuoren 吴作人, "Xu Beihong xiansheng he tadezuopin" 徐悲鸿先生和他的作品 [Mr. Xu Beihong and his works], 36-40; Liao Jingwen 廖静文, "Xu Beihong zuopin de aiguo zhuyi jingshen" 徐悲鸿作品的爱国主义精神 [Patriotism in Xu Beihong's works], 41-3; Wang Zexing 王泽兴, "Xu Beihong de aiguo sixiang yu yishu geming" 徐悲鸿的爱国思想与艺术革命 [Xu Beihong's Patriotic thoughts and artistic revolution], 44-7.

³ Xu, "Meishu manhua" 美术漫话 [General Talk about Art, 1942], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 414.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," in *Social Text* 15 (1986), 69. The concept of "national allegory," however, provokes much controversy, and this study uses this theory as a departure point to address "other" allegorical issues raised in Xu Beihong's history painting. For the criticism of Jameson's article, see Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (1987), 3-25.

communal power that can accomplish any difficult goal, Mao Zedong, for example, ensured that this painting can be read no other way but as a “socialist icon”.⁵ In the same vein, Liao Jingwen 廖静文, the wife of Xu Beihong, has suggested that *Awaiting for Deliverer* expresses the people’s yearning for liberation during the painful years of the Japanese invasion, and in particular, the “tyrannical” rule of the Nationalist regime.⁶ Whereas *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* is a laud for loyalty and martyrdom in a time of national crisis, *The Astute Judge of Horse* is a criticism of the Republican government’s inability to recognize talent.⁷ There is no doubt that these history paintings gave sensible forms to Xu Beihong’s political ideas and the prevailing view of the world in which he was living. However, doubts can be cast on the linear explanation along the rigid party or even geopolitical lines. Serving as Xu Beihong’s “problem-solving” efforts in the chaotic and complex era, the signification of these paintings is unlikely a simple one and requires a multi-perspective interpretation.

This chapter focuses on the second reimagining aspect of Xu Beihong’s four pictorial epics: the “historical problematics” and allegorical meanings in his portrayals of China.⁸ The canvases of the four history paintings are the stages where the artist plays out his personal ideas and political ethos. The “performances” of these works, nonetheless, are not irreducible givens, not even by the intention of Xu Beihong himself, but must be examined in their own right. Apart from the obvious patriotic theme, an alternative understanding of the relation between the visual signs and what they signify in different contexts is the subject of the following discussion. This chapter explores the possible interpretations of the images constructed in Xu Beihong’s visual spectacles in relation to their historical circumstances, while the subsequent one looks at the agency of these paintings in the larger imagined Chinese community at the turn of the twentieth century.

⁵ Thorp & Vinograd, *Chinese Art & Culture*, 399.

⁶ Liao Jingwen, “*Xu Beihong zuopin*,” 42.

⁷ Liao, “*Tan Xu Beihong de hua*” 谈徐悲鸿的画 [Talking about Xu Beihong’s paintings], in *Xu Beihong pingji*, 191-2.

⁸ “Historical problematic” is understood as a theoretical entity, which “must be grasped in a different way from traditional representational or philosophical one”. See Fredric Jameson, “Foreword,” in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China—Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique*, eds. Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 1-2.

The Quest of History Painting and National Allegory

Since Xu Beihong was one of the most prominent Western-style painters in the wake of the May Fourth movement, it is easy to overlook his traditional character in order to fit him conveniently in the binary tradition-modernity paradigm. Inevitably, this resulted in a simplification, and probably distortion, of the reality. Indeed, Xu Beihong's choice of "history" painting seems to be an irony in the iconoclastic epoch when China was trying to renounce and forget its past. His unabashed act of reaching into the treasure-trove of ancient texts to find his muses appears confounding in the machine age of the twentieth century. With the promise of the Republic and the passion of the May Fourth Movement, Chinese society in the 1920s and 30s was fascinated with teleological progress. The idea of modernity was linked to "a new linear consciousness of time and history, which was itself derived from the Chinese reception of a social Darwinist concept of evolution".⁹ It was newness not antiquity that deserved recognition. The word "new" (*xin* 新) actually became the most popular component of neologism placing the "emphasis on the present moment" and a "qualitative change in all spheres of life"—from Liang Qichao's famous concept of new people (*xinmin* 新民) to May Fourth slogans such as new culture (*xin wenhua* 新文化) and new literature (*xin wenxue* 新文学) to Chen Duxiu's critical journal *New Youth* (*xin qingnian* 新青年) to Chang Kai-shek's "New Life Movement" (*xinsheng yundong* 新生运动).¹⁰

While everyone was looking forward to the future, Xu Beihong turned back to the past. One can argue that modernism in the West is inseparable from a certain fascination with the "primitive" past, and accordingly, similar fabrications of primitivism could become a new component of artistic expression within the East.¹¹ From the "spatial externality" between two cultures to the "temporality" within one, the concept of "primitive passion" can be seen internally as the Chinese intellectuals, including Xu Beihong, began to view "local reality as primitive" and visualized their nostalgia as a way to conceive the present and future.¹² Borrowing the archetype

⁹ Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Cultural Construction of Modernity in Urban Shanghai: Some Preliminary Explorations," in *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond* (Berkeley University of California Press, 2000), 31.

¹⁰ Lee, "The Cultural Construction of Modernity," 31; also Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 300-1.

¹¹ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 20-1.

¹² Chow, *Primitive Passions*, 23; also Naoki Sakai, "Dislocation of the West and the Status of the Humanities," in *Trace* 1, 85.

of academic-style history painting, an already outdated genre in the European art world, Xu Beihong decided to promote modernity through retelling traditional stories. Carrying on the previous analysis of his stylistic bond with the Shanghai School, one should assume that his “passion” for the past might extend to the content of his modern history pictures. All completed during the outbreak of the Japanese Resistance War, the four history paintings sent out powerful messages about virtue, courage, and righteousness that reflect the predicament of China at the time. However, as complicated artistic and cultural products, these works can be allegory for notions that are more traditional than modern, more personal than national.

The Old Men and China

The entanglement between “tradition” and “modern” has characterized some interpretations of the imageries in Xu Beihong’s history paintings. Not only do Xu Beihong’s projects depict historical narratives from old Chinese sources, but their compositions also draw attention to the very central figure—an old man. The pictorial world of Xu Beihong belongs to men. Yet, it is not typical young heroes but old men who are the stars of his history paintings. The protagonists of the tales as well as the paintings in *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, *The Astute Judge of Horse*, and *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* are famous seasoned patriarchs. In *Awaiting the Deliverer*, the limelight also falls onto the old folks in the middle of the canvas. In history paintings, the pivotal character is usually the embodiment of the nation, as the allegorical effect employs compositional features to give prominence to particular figures who are seen as a “transubstantiation,” in the Western Hegelian concept of the Absolute, or in the Chinese sense, the transcendence power of religious icons.¹³ Instead of the new and young, for example, Marianne as the emblematic “Liberty” of the French Revolution in Delacroix’s *The 28th of July: Liberty Leading the People* [fig.25], Xu Beihong chose to glorify not merely ancient history but also aged men. There was obviously no shortage of young heroes and heroines in Chinese history. Many modernist artists, also concerned with the malaise and disaster of the time, found their expressions in more youthful figures, such as Lin Fengmain’s *The Pain of Humanity* (1929), a now lost Impressionistic oil painting in which naked human bodies were torn and distorted by excruciating agony. Likewise, Pang Xunqin’s (1906-1985) slightly abstract oil painting *Son of the Earth* (1934) [fig.26], surviving only in form of a watercolor sketch, shows the misery of the Jiangnan 江南 droughts of 1934 through a triad of a young couple with an

¹³ John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 252.

innocent dying son. In the pressing times of reform movements and social upheavals, Xu Beihong's realistic tribute to the "wise" old man seems to be quite an odd choice.

The modern painter's endeavor first of all must be understood in terms of the stories themselves. Between 1928 and 1930, Xu Beihong produced his large oil painting *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* on the theme of unwavering integrity. According to *Records of the Historian*, Tian Heng, the ruler of a small state Qi, had adamantly rebelled against the despotic First Emperor Qin and declared his independence upon the tyrant's demise. As Liu Bang of the Han toppled the Qin dynasty, Tian Heng was driven to a remote island with five hundred loyalists,¹⁴ facing the fate of either surrender to the more powerful Han or death. The painting depicts the poignant episode when Tian Heng bids farewell to his retainers before meeting his fatal end. He then cut off his own head and had it presented to Liu Bang in the hope of saving his people. Learning of their leader's heroic sacrifice, his five hundred followers all committed suicide instead of surrendering. The Han historian Sima Qian 司马迁 (ca.145-90 BCE) praised Tian Heng's "noble uprightness" and regretted that he could only inscribe but not illustrate the story; Xu Beihong assuredly took on the mission.¹⁵

One year after the completion of *Tian Heng*, Xu Beihong finished painting the story of Jiu Fanggao, a common woodcutter who had exceptional talent in spotting good horses during the Warring Period. Being a good friend of the renowned horse judge Bo Le 伯乐, Jiu Fanggao was brought to the court of Prince Mu of Qin 秦穆公 to find a horse that could run a thousand *li* a day. After three months of searching, Jiu Fanggao located a remarkable black stallion but reported it to the Prince as a brown mare. Doubts filled everyone's mind, as Jiu Fanggao seemed to be unable to distinguish even the simple sex and color of a horse. Bo Le explained that the good judge only cared for the inner qualities but never bothered with exterior aspects, and hence, the old man totally overlooked the physical details. It turned out, of course, that the black steed was the best and fastest horse the Prince had ever seen. The drama in Xu Beihong's *The Astute Judge of Horse* takes place where Jiu Fanggao encounters the wild animal. The black stallion instantly feels its worth being recognized and is then willing to be harnessed in order to serve the old judge.

¹⁴ The island in today's Shandong Province is called Tian Heng Island after the legendary ruler.

¹⁵ See Ai, *Xu Beihong yanjiu*, 50.

The seasoned old men continue to be the most important characters in Xu Beihong's next two history paintings. Conducted almost simultaneously with the ink painting of the horse judge in 1933 was another massive oil attempt *Awaiting the Deliverer*. Inspired by two lines in the *Book of Documents*, Xu Beihong created an imaginary scene in which the impoverished and distraught people under King Jie of the Xia 夏桀 eagerly anticipated their emancipation by King Tang of the Shang 商汤. He also took artistic license and assigned the leading role to two male elders among a group of figures of all ages and both genders. On the other hand, *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* is so well known that it perhaps needs no explanation. It recounts the fable of the headstrong old man's remaining resolute to remove the two mountains in front of his house in spite of ridicule by others. Xu Beihong lines up a row of laboring Herculean male nudes, as the head of the operation, the "foolish" old man, engages in a conversation with a mother figure.

In Xu Beihong's hands, the white-haired men become exemplary symbols of morality, endurance, and self-sacrifice. Their appearances combine weathered and wrinkled physiques along with sagacious spirits and carry a statement of reaffirming rather than rebelling against traditional values. Because of his upbringing, there are reasons to speculate that Xu Beihong was essentially a conservative person.¹⁶ Apart from his cosmopolitan demeanor—speaking fluent French, wearing European attire (Western suit with a big black bow-tie), and traveling extensively around the world—Xu Beihong seems to have been a traditional man under his "modern" skin [fig.27-29]. In fact, the majority of Xu Beihong's early essays are composed in semi-classical Chinese instead of vernacular language, and references to Confucian and Mencius classics are common in his writing and painting. He talks of the intelligent use of "*Archaisme*," which is not about returning to the "primordial" past but retrieving the ancient virtuous qualities as materials, in order to produce "wholesome" artworks.¹⁷ Accordingly, only those who follow the footsteps of the ancient philosophers—"respect literature, dedicate to the masses, attend to details, perfect the highest virtues, and understand the Confucian doctrine of *The Mean*

¹⁶ Xu Beihong did not receive any formal schooling. According to his autobiography and the biography by his third wife Liao Jingwen, he was educated by his father at home. By the age of ten, he was well learned in Chinese classics such as the *Analects*, *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites*, *Historical Record*, the *Four Books*, and *Zuo Qiuming's Commentary on the 'Spring and Autumn Annals'* by the age of ten. See Xu, "*Beihong zhichuan*," 2-3; Liao, *Xu Beihong*, 4.

¹⁷ Xu, "*Huo*," 131.

(*zhongyong* 中庸)”—can qualify as good artists.¹⁸ “Since the foundation of oil painting was established in China,” Xu Beihong urges young Chinese artists to “absorb the elixir of the classics—from philosophers such as Confucian 孔子, Mozi 墨子 and Laozi 老子 to poets like Li Po 李白 and Du Fu 杜甫—so as to transform the foreign deity (Awaro Kideshevara) into a household goddess (Guan Yin 观音).”¹⁹ To Xu Beihong, traditional ethos is the Chinese essence, which, combined with Western materiality and technology, should become the core of the modern national ideal.

In his history paintings, Xu Beihong meant to bring back the lost spirit of loyalty and integrity of the ancients, which was much needed for China’s reform. The metaphorical old man as the classical sage is clearly pronounced in other paintings such as *A Chapter From the Analects* (*Lunyu yizhang* 论语一章, 1943) [fig.30], in which he depicts Confucius himself teaching about the principles of the upright ruler to his disciples,²⁰ or *Purple Clouds From the East* (*Ziqi donglai* 紫气东来, 1943) [fig.31] that portrays the legendary founder of Daoism, Laozi.²¹ Xu Beihong was extremely close to Kang Youwei,²² the most important Confucian scholar in the early twentieth century. Xu Beihong’s first history-painting project, *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, began right after his mentor passed away. He was known to be a filial son as well as a grateful young man, who had been financially supported by Huang Zhenzi 黄震之, a Shanghai socialite and businessman, for whom Xu Beihong had painted a number of portraits.²³ The message in his history paintings is clear. It is through respecting the “old” traditions that

¹⁸ Xu, “*Beihong zhichuan*,” 27.

¹⁹ Xu, “*Xin yishi yundong zi huiguyuzianjian*” 新艺术运动之回顾与前瞻 [Retrospection and prospect of the new art movement, 1943], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 433.

²⁰ The theme of the painting is taken from chapter 11 of the *Analects*, “*Xianjin bian*” 先进篇 in which Confucius talks about the principles of ruling with his four students including Zilu 子路 and Zengzhe 曾皙.

²¹ “Purple Clouds From the East” tells the story of the general in charge of the military post at Hanguguan 函谷关, upon seeing purple clouds rising from the East, realized a sage must be near. It was no other than Laozi, the famous Daoist master, who was just passing through the city-gate on an ox. The general instantly greeted the wise man and asked him to write down the classic *Daodejing* 道德经.

²² For Xu Beihong’s praise for Kang Youwei, see his autobiography, “*Beihong zhichuan*,” 9.

²³ When Xu Beihong made a listing price for his oil portraits in 1927—500 dollars for a half, 700 for a three-quarter, and 1,000 for a full, he gave all patrons with the surname Huang a half-price discount to show his gratitude towards Huang Zhengzi and another sponsor Huang Jinhuan. Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 46.

“modern” goals can be achieved. The robust and muscular builders, who exert physical strength in removing obstacles, simply follow the will and order of their unwavering patriarch. The old man’s zeal to widen his horizon and open up his view should not be undermined. While the foresight to discover unknown talent belongs to a seasoned woodcutter, the prudence to wait for a righteous deliverer also comes from elderly leaders. Whether the icon was a stubborn old villager or a dignified noble martyr, Confucius or Laozi, Xu Beihong’s accent on the traditional old man as the symbol of quintessential virtues propounds a different vision of Chinese modernity from the usual perception of complete Westernization in this era. Tradition appears not as a barrier to modernity but instead a repository of assets for its facilitation, energizing, and legitimization. After all, it has always been the old man, the father figure, who actually writes Chinese history and himself constitutes the major subject of historical discourse. To paint and honor the mainstream tradition of history is paying tribute to the “patriarchy”.

Xu Beihong’s “archaic” attitude was hardly an exclusive phenomenon. His history paintings echo the latent affinity to tradition that was inherent in modern Chinese reformers. Many historians assert that China’s heritage had been rocked to its foundations since its clash with the West, but they also note that two features of this tradition—a sense of history and a concern for politics—have always been the principal domain of Chinese intellectuals in the modernizing era.²⁴ From political activists to writers to artists, the reformers believed that China’s future was to be found in its culture and literature, and they felt a historical and moral responsibility to lead their compatriots on this road to modernity.²⁵ Yet, they could not entirely escape the Confucian tradition against which they strongly rebelled, in spite of their much-vaunted iconoclastic slogans.²⁶ Indeed, it was not the philosophy of Confucius himself that they found despicable; it was the abuse of Confucianism over the long course of Chinese history, especially the Qing government’s turning it into an oppressive tool to control intellectual freedom, that the radicals detested.²⁷ The attractiveness of Western models and methods, accordingly, was

²⁴ Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 82.

²⁵ Merle Goldman, ed., *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 5.

²⁶ “The priority [that] such men as Hu Shi, Lu Xun, and Chen Duxiu 陈独秀 (1879-1942) gave to cultural and intellectual change over social, political, and economic change and the totalistic character of their assault on Confucianism, were influenced unconsciously by deep-seated modes of thinking in the very tradition they were bringing under attack”. See Cohen, *Discovering History in China*, 85.

²⁷ Chen Duxiu, the founder of the journal *New Youth* and a key figure in the Chinese Communist Party as well as the May Fourth Movement, was among the most vocal anti-Confucian activists. However,

not merely an “instrumentalist promise” to empower China. More centrally, their appeal lay in their usefulness in “solving agonizing problems and realizing social ideals with which Confucians had long been pre-occupied”.²⁸ Notwithstanding, the most “successful” revolutionaries in the early twentieth century, including Mao Zedong, were those who had “roots in tradition and sensitivity to the real needs and aspirations of Chinese society”.²⁹ Xu Beihong, hence, can be seen as among the “traditional” and ultimately triumphant ones.

More than National Allegory: Up-close and Personal

In historicizing and allegorizing the past, Xu Beihong’s paintings probe the potential of age-old subject matter to express his own present-day dissent. These paintings have a more personal dimension as well. Like Tian Heng, Xu Beihong felt rejected upon his return to China in 1927 after spending eight years in Europe. Although he easily secured teaching posts in various art institutions, such as the Nanguo Academy of Arts 南国艺术学院 in Shanghai, the Central University 中央大学 in Nanjing, and was even appointed as the president of the Beiping Academy of Fine Arts 北平艺专 in Beijing, his “realist” approach to reform Chinese art was not at all an easy task. He resigned the position in Beijing after a mere three months, the result of strong opposition to his emphasis on “realism” and his controversial hiring of Qi Baishi as the instructor for orthodox Chinese painting.³⁰

Before long in 1929, Xu Beihong was involved in a bitter dispute over the First National Exhibition of Art. Designed to be a public display for the diverse federation of artists under the regime, the exhibition in Shanghai was a significant cultural event sponsored by the Nationalist

underneath his iconoclastic clamors, he admitted that the ideas of Confucius were “valuable” in modern China. See Chen, “*Kongzi yu Zhongguo*” 孔子与中国 [Confucius and China, 1937], in *Chen Duxiu xueshuwenhua suibi* 陈独秀学术文化随笔 [Chen Duxiu’s writings on learning and culture] (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian chubanshe, 1999), 239-53

²⁸ Thomas A. Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China’s Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 17.

²⁹ See Stuart Schram, *Mao Tse-Tung* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), 60.

³⁰ According to Liao Jingwen, the Beijing art world was extremely hostile towards Xu Beihong’s “innovation of Chinese painting. Even the employment of Qi Baishi as professor of the [Beiping Academy of Fine Arts] turned out to be a target of open censure,” in which people ridiculed “even carpenter Qi has become a professor.” Feeling isolated and helpless, Xu Beihong quit the college in anger”. Liao, *Xu Beihong*, 94. Also see “*Lun Xu Beihong*” 论徐悲鸿 [Commentary on Xu Beihong], in *Xu Beihong pingji*, 92-3.

government that had recently solidified its power through the Northern Expedition. Nevertheless, it also turned out to be a political battlefield for competing art institutions, schools, tastes, and agencies.³¹ In an open letter entitled “Puzzlement,” published in the April 23, 1929 issue of *Art Exhibition* (*meizhan* 美展), Xu Beihong castigated the current preference for Post Impressionist artworks, referring to European modernist strains as “having pandered to the tasteless art dealers and succumbed to a desire for commercial success”.³² On a different occasion, he also criticized that the “oversight” of the Shanghai school was due to similar manipulation by the art circle.³³ He went on in his essay to denounce the “mediocrity of Manet, the vulgarity of Renoir, the shallowness of Cézanne, and the inferiority of Matisse” while upholding realism as the single remedy for Chinese art reform. Xu Beihong’s letter soon invited a response from Xu Zhimo, titled “I Am ‘Puzzled’ too” (*Wo ye ‘huo’* 我也‘惑’), questioning Xu Beihong’s absolute judgment and the possibility of drawing a sharp line between “truth” and “falsehood” with simplistic moral principles.³⁴ The heated discussion continued between the modernist and realist camp in a series of “puzzled” letter exchanges. In metropolitan Shanghai where the expressive Liu Haisu (the head of the Shanghai Art Academy) and Lin Fengmian (the director of the National Academy of Art in Hongzhou) had an enthusiastic following at the time, Xu Beihong felt his conviction for realism unappreciated. He eventually withdrew from the committee and pulled his own works out of the “formalistic” exhibition.

In light of the dispute over the National Exhibition, Xu Beihong’s intrepid “Tian Heng” can be seen as his personal ideal, representing an unyielding loyalty to one’s own belief that defies the pressure of political contingencies. *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* was a protest by Xu Beihong, who found himself going against the powerful currents of the modernists’ success in coastal cities like Shanghai. It is reasonable to believe that the idiosyncratic Xu Beihong compared himself to Tian Heng who was willing to die for dignity and integrity even if history abandoned him. Indeed, a follower of Tian Heng wearing a yellow robe in the center of the painting strikes an uncanny physical resemblance to Xu Beihong. The artist had long been deemed as a maverick; to him, an upright person should not possess an air of arrogance, yet must

³¹ Wang, “In the Name of the Real,” 33.

³² Xu, “*Huo*,” 132. Also see Fong, *Between Two Cultures*, 91.

³³ Xu, “*Xije yishu zhi molou*,” 519.

³⁴ Xu Zhimo, “*Wo ye ‘huo’*,” [I’m too puzzled, 1929], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, 102-11.

have the bones of loftiness and dignity.³⁵ The non-conformist Xu Beihong had faced an eruption of slanders and derision earlier in Beijing, and his artistic alienation continued and intensified as he boycotted the Shanghai exhibition. His steadfast attitude towards the animosity is best summed up by his calligraphic rendition of Lu Xun's famous couplet: "Lifting my eyebrows, I coolly confront the pointing fingers of a thousand men. Bowing down my head, I am willing to be a playing ox for the children" (横眉冷看千夫指 俯首甘为孺子牛) [fig.32]. Returning to the Central University in Nanjing at the end of 1929, Xu Beihong stood more uncompromisingly than ever behind his agenda of "realism".

His creation of *The Astute Judge of Horse* was another attempt to validate his determination and vent his frustrations by honoring Jiu Fanggao's discriminating ability to recognize stifled talent. Its execution in ink and brush can be seen as Xu Beihong's self-justification to the Beijing colleagues who scoffed at his propagation of integrating Western-style drawing and technique into Chinese painting. The profile of Jiu Fanggao brings to mind the portrait of Huang Zhenzi, one of his former patrons. Accordingly, Jiu Fanggao can be interpreted as a symbolic "wise old man"—representing Kang Youwei, Qi Baishi, or even his French teacher Dagnan-Bouveret—who can see the gifts and stamina hidden inside the misunderstood "black horse". Xu Beihong's galloping horses [fig.33], more than any other subject matter, are celebrated as his best artistic accomplishment. There is certainly a sense of self-projection in his spirited horse paintings, as many of the inscriptions reveal the plight of the artist.³⁶ In his autobiography, Xu Beihong compared his younger days as an inexperienced painter to an "untamed and unsaddled horse".³⁷ At the very least, the neighing black stallion in *The Astute Judge of Horse* denotes the artistic vitality and vivacity to which Xu Beihong aspired, as well as his hope that the right person with the keen eyes would acknowledge his talent. He is reported to have explained the red bridle on the horse (the only one he ever painted with any harness) in this

³⁵ This was a motto Xu Beihong learned from one of his mentors and friends Zhang Zufen, a senior teacher at the Women's Junior Normal School in Yixing. He said the older friend was his first soul mate. See "Beihong zhichuan," 4; also Liao, *Xu Beihong*, 19.

³⁶ Some of the most famous couplet-lines Xu Beihong inscribed in his horse paintings in the 1930s and early 40s include: "Tell me what use you have for your sturdy legs. Running all day for life-sustaining hay!"; "Often looking back during my ten-thousand li voyage in the autumn wind, the only place I recognize is the old battlefield"; "How can I support myself in this journey to the end of the sky? Even lamentation is in vain". After 1949, his writings on his horse paintings seem to be more positive with a militaristic overtone. For an analysis on Xu Beihong and his horse paintings, see Ai, *Xu Beihong yanjiu*, 63-5.

³⁷ Xu, "Beihong zhichuan," 14.

regard: “Horses, like men, are willing to serve those who can appreciate them, but not those who are muddleheaded”.³⁸ The desperate longing for a just ruler in *Awaiting the Deliverer* and the determined laboring towards an impossible goal in *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains*, correspondingly, can be recognized as his personal allegory against the inimical times when modernist style seemed to have a stronger hold on the Chinese art scene.

One cannot ignore the fact that Xu Beihong’s private life was rather shaky while he was working on these history paintings. Beginning in 1930, his romantic relationship with Sun Duoci 孙多慈 (1912-1975), an art student from the Central University in Nanjing, became a highly-publicized affair in the art circle as well as in newspapers.³⁹ Although the decade-long liaison itself led nowhere, Xu Beihong was then separated from his second wife Jiang Biwei and the couple eventually filed for divorce in 1944. His unstable family situation and love life occupied at least a part of the painter’s state of mind during the creation of *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, *The Astute Judge of Horse*, and *Awaiting the Deliverer*. Attributing Xu Beihong’s own misunderstood and mistreated sentiment directly to the tragic tones in his history paintings may be a too simplistic conclusion; however, such personal elements must be considered in the context and circumstances in which these artworks were created.

Even as “national” allegory, the themes of Xu Beihong’s history paintings are gloomy and knitted with a melancholy streak that resonates the pessimistic character of the painter. Xu Beihong was himself a witness to many of the most tormented moments in modern Chinese history, which inevitably colored his political view and artistic creativity. In the historical theater of his vast canvas, the grandeur of Han and Tang has no place. Instead, he chooses stories that depict the poignancy, loneliness and limitation of humanity. Xu Beihong believed that tragedy was the foundation of art.⁴⁰ His very name, in fact, betrayed any overtly rosy and optimistic reading of these history paintings. Upon the death of his father, he changed his name from “Xuo-kang” (longevity and health) to “Bei-hong,” literally meaning “sorrowful geese,” a common

³⁸ Liao, *Xu Beihong*, 99.

³⁹ Xu Beihong’s affair with Sun Duoci and marital problem with Jiang Biwei, see Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 151, 206, 210, 258, 268.

⁴⁰ Xu, “*Zhongguo xinyishi zhi zhanwan*” 中国新艺术之展望 [The prospect of China’s new art, 1944], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 467.

metaphor for the loyal yet disheartened scholar official in exile in the Chinese literati tradition.⁴¹ His undertaking of a series of traditional paintings in 1943 that were based on the *Nine Songs* from the ancient poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 400 BCE) [fig.34], the ultimate model of the faithful yet unacknowledged literati, was another example. Xu Beihong also named his first born son “*Jie sheng*” 劫生—born in calamity,⁴² and called his home in Nanjing “*Wei chao*” 危巢—Dangerous Nest. His history paintings surely reflect this sense of darkness. Despite their undeviating loyalty, the ending of Tian Heng and his five hundred followers was not salvation but death. Neither was the portrayal of the suffering people, the foolish old man, or the misunderstood horse judge a typical tongue-and-cheek celebration of national glory. His taste for tragedy was even more evident in a number of history-painting drafts he made in 1931, which he planned but finally did not transform into large-scale oil paintings. These drawings include *Farewell my Concubine* 霸王别姬 [fig.35]—the renowned suicide of the concubine Yu 虞姬 for her king, Xiang Yu 项羽 of the Chu 楚 state (ca.200 BCE) and *Qin Qiong Selling Horse* 秦琼卖马 [fig.36]—the failure of a general of the Sui 隋 dynasty (581-617), Qin Qiong, who had to sell his beloved horse to sustain a living in the succeeding Tang period.

Overall, the “nationalistic” vision of Xu Beihong’s pictorial epics, in contradiction to what most political interpretations suggest, was not positive and ambitious but rather fragile and ambiguous. This personal and perhaps pragmatic sentiment was shared by Lu Xun, who did not dismiss the existence of “hope” entirely, yet considered that the possibility for China to break out from its “iron-cast” misery was faint.⁴³

⁴¹ At the age of nineteen after the death of his father, Xu changed his name to Beihong. He never explained why he chose this name. However, the word “Bei” (sad or tragic) is a very odd choice for a name. Even his second wife, Jiang Biwei found it peculiar when they first met. In Chinese literati tradition, the goose is often linked to the famed calligrapher Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321-79) who, as the legend goes, was particularly fond of geese and fed them with Chinese ink. In general, the goose, a migratory bird, is a symbol of lonely exile and longing for home in literati paintings. For Jiang Biwei’s comment of Xu Beihong’s name, see her *Jiang Biwei nüshi huiyilu* 蒋碧薇女士回忆录 [Memoir of Ms. Jiang Biwei], vol. 1 (Taipei: Huang guan zazhishe, 1965), 30.

⁴² In 1911, the sixteen-year-old Xu Beihong married a girl from his village through traditional arranged marriage by his parents. He became a father the next year and named his son “*Jie sheng*”—born in calamity. Yet Xu’s father thought the name was inauspicious and changed it to “*Ji sheng*” 吉生—born with luck. In 1917, Xu Beihong’s first wife passed away. In the same year, he married Jiang Biwei, and the new couple went to Japan. His first son kept living with Xu Beihong’s mother in the village until he died in 1919 at the age of eight.

⁴³ Lu Xun notes: “Though I was convinced to my own satisfaction that it wouldn’t be possible to break out [from the iron room], I still couldn’t dismiss hope entirely, for hope belongs to the future.” Lu Xun,

There is no question that Xu Beihong was a patriot. Yet, the particular idea of nationalism in early twentieth-century China was complex and must not be taken for granted as equivalent to contemporary definitions in either leftist or rightist ideologies. The poignant history paintings of Xu Beihong responded to the historical moment that Chinese nationalism as a “historical topos, systematic discursive formation, and intellectual practice” became a new way to conceptualize China not only as a reborn political entity, but also, more significantly, as an “imagined community”.⁴⁴ It was also the time when “new types of histories” were written, chiefly among them a new genre called “History of the Lost Country” (*wangguo shi* 亡國史), with which Xu Beihong’s pictorial epic can be associated.⁴⁵ Amidst the despondent landscape of conflicts and chaos, the dark overtones in his paintings, hence, can be understood as both an artistic reflection and an integral element in the formation of Chinese nationalism within the global and historical framework. The “situations” of both Xu Beihong as well as China at the time were conceptually, if not physically, linked to the world around them, and the next chapter will focus on his four history paintings as artistic “solutions” for the Chinese “problems” in the transnational context.

“Preface to Call to Arms”, in *Lu Xun: Dairy of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans. William A. Lyell Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 27.

⁴⁴ Rebecca Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 7.

⁴⁵ Karl, *Staging the World*, 15.

Chapter 4. Beyond East and West: Imagined Community and Chinese Modernity on the World Stage

History painting weaves its own time and space. It celebrates the memories of the past, representing and reinventing them for the very present in pictorial form. The genre of history painting characteristically involves the use of a “dream theater technique,” in which the viewer is mirrored inside the picture as a fictional actor within the spectacle.¹ The audience then follows the painting’s course to a different realm, be it the moment when a dauntless hero is about to commit suicide or a group of helpless peasants await their savior. In an “arbitrary and stipulative way,” the painter’s role has been merely to make marks on a plane surface so that “their visual interest is directed to an end”.² The rest is left to the spectator. The final union of all the intention and interest of a painting lies not in its origin but its destination—the viewers, with their own history, biography, and psychology, who would come to understand or misunderstand the signs.³ While most of the art history discourses have focused on the author, little attention has been paid to the beholders. More than being majestic pictures that adorned the walls of a museum, Xu Beihong’s history paintings, for better or for worse, were perceived as the icons of modern Chinese art. No mere reflective mirror of the artist’s intent, these paintings played a significant role in addressing, and even bringing about, the development of modernity in China.

After reviewing Xu Beihong’s history paintings through the agencies of style and symbol in the previous two chapters, this section explores the third reimagining aspect of his work by way of the notion of “imagined community”. However “patriotic” or “pessimistic,” the nature of Xu Beihong’s works can be seen as an ideological instrument, both in terms of aesthetics and politics, which was a part of Chinese identity formation during the early twentieth century. In fact, the concept of ideology and identity itself is imaginary. Louis Althusser claims that ideology “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”.⁴ Its power comes from its imaginary quality as well as material reality. In fact, ideologies are similar

¹ Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, 252.

² Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 43.

³ The emphasis on the receiver/viewer instead of the originator in assigning meanings to a work/text is inspired by Roland Barthes, see his “The Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text,” both in *Modern Literary Theory: Reader*, 2nd rev. ed., eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (New York: Routledge, 1992), 114-8 and 166-72.

⁴ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the State,” in *Modern Literary Theory*, 56.

to “mimetic works of art in their dualism of illusory and real,” depicting “reality in a conventional and historically contingent fashion”.⁵ Consequently, it is also where Xu Beihong’s espousal of “realism” in form and “nationalism” in content merged into one. Ideological forces need not be so doctrinaire, nonetheless. They always fluctuate depending on a host of changing historical factors. The following chapter looks at how Xu Beihong’s pictorial narratives have contributed to the awakening of the self-consciousness of the Chinese subjects, and hence, the making and remaking of the notion of a modern “Chineseness”.

Nation Without Border: The Imagined Chinese Community

Upon the breakdown of the scriptural, dynastic, and cosmological tradition, the rise of the “imagined community,” according to Benedict Anderson, was the fruit of two forms of print culture—the newspaper and the novel. Print media permitted an unprecedented mode of apprehending time and allowed one to imagine the simultaneous existence of other nationals.⁶ However, the technical means for imagination in newspaper and literature relied heavily on language. The actual “image” of the nation remained imaginary. This study, thus, proposes one more type of representation through the popular press and culture—the display of artworks and the dissemination of their reproduction—as a new force in this national imagination and identification. Xu Beihong’s history paintings in the 1930s and 40s eloquently fulfilled this role. The imagining of China as a modern nation was made possible not only by intellectual concepts that were proclaimed in textual forms, but also more concretely, in visual manifestations, as in the case of Xu Beihong’s epic narratives, through exhibition and print reproduction.

No longer a territorially bounded “Middle Kingdom” that asserted itself through divine power or a centralized state, China began to emerge as an imagined community with negotiated boundaries and citizens at the end of the late nineteenth century.⁷ The history paintings of Xu Beihong advanced this cause. His visual text—the portrayal of common Chinese history with recognizable Chinese figures—became the material existence of the ideological link that bound the imagined community together. They belonged to the “common language,” or more precisely,

⁵ Eisenman, *Nineteenth Century Art*, 10-1.

⁶ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 52.

⁷ Wen-hsin Yen, “Introduction: Interpreting Chinese Modernity 1900-1950,” in *Becoming Chinese*, 3

the “national language,” that was used to communicate between Chinese nationals and their diasporaic compatriots overseas.⁸

Chinese nationalism and modern identity were enhanced by the commercially reproduced images of Xu Beihong’s history paintings that adorned the pages of newspapers, art books, literary journals, pictorial magazines, exhibition catalogues, posters and postcards. Chinese nationalism comes hand in hand with the imagined nation-state. Ernest Gellner maintains it was “nationalism” that “invents nations” and not the other way around.⁹ The idea of the modern nation has been regarded as a “construct” instead of a primordial entity or political structure, and national identity cannot be seen simply as innate commonality but deliberate creation and ever-changing concepts within the collective imagination of the “national citizenry”.¹⁰ Consciousness, and the whole package of nationalism and identity that comes with it, is always in search of a form, a language, or a vision.¹¹ Xu Beihong’s history paintings gave these abstract thoughts and feelings a tangible image. The open circulation and public display of Xu Beihong’s artistically rendered China “interpellated” the individual to not only recognize these pictures as Chinese art but also to imagine themselves as being Chinese.¹²

The new role of art propelled by the mass media and communication helped produce the conditions for a Chinese modernity. Because of this reproduction of artwork “in the age of mechanical reproduction,” Walter Benjamin laments that the “aura” of the original has withered, leading to a “tremendous shattering of tradition”.¹³ It was then this rupture of the traditional aura of art that brought success to Xu Beihong. Beginning in 1926, his works have been compiled and

⁸ The concept of language see E. Balibar and P. Macherey, “Literature as an Ideological Form,” in *Modern Literary Theory*, 62-70.

⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 169.

¹⁰ For the “construct” notion of nation-state, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nation and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, eds. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 86-106.

¹¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays (1934-38)*, ed., Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 295.

¹² For the concept of “interpellation” see Althusser, “Ideology and the State,” in *Modern Literary Theory*, 61-2.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 233.

published by two large companies—the Commercial Press (*Shangwuyin shuguan* 商务印书馆) and China Bookstore (*Zhonghua shuju* 中华书局). The four history paintings featured in many of these collections. In addition, plates of his painting frequented the covers and pages of commercial publications at the time, from newspapers to art and literary journals to popular lifestyle magazines.¹⁴ Xu Beihong himself studied European masterpieces through photographs and reproductions. He believed this was how art learning could be achieved across space and time.¹⁵ It was surely how a piece of artwork became world known in modern days, and indeed, Xu Beihong's history paintings found immortality in publications. Almost all art books regarding the modern period of China have at least one of them as illustration, reinforcing their central place in Xu Beihong's oeuvre as well as their role in the collective reimagining of the Chinese nation. More than just pictures hanging on the wall, the lives of these paintings have taken on new forms and new dimensions.

Xu Beihong's epic works were seen by not just the populace within the border of the Republic but also the overseas Chinese community.¹⁶ Beginning in the end of the 1930s, the paintings started to travel and exhibit around different overseas Chinese communities—Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, and India—to raise relief funds for the Japanese Resistance War. *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains* was completed in Darjeeling and joined the repertory in 1940. Xu Beihong described the “patriotism” of the Southeast Asian Chinese as unexpectedly high.¹⁷ During his year-long tour, a number of his most popular paintings were made into prints for sale.¹⁸ In the 1939 Singapore exhibition, for instance, the organizer chose to reproduce *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, *The Astute Judge of Horse*, and another oil painting

¹⁴ Xu Beihong's paintings were reproduced and published in all of the major newspaper and magazines. The list included *Shanghai News* 申报 (*Shenbao*), *Central Daily* 中央日报 (*Zhongyang ribao*), *Crescent Moon* 新月 (*Xinyue*), *Eastern Magazine* 东方杂志 (*Dongfang zazhi*), *Times* 时代 (*Shidai*), *Continental* 大陆 (*Dalu*), and *Good Companion* 良友 (*Liangyu*).

¹⁵ Xu, “*Xueshuyenjiu zi tanhua*” 学术研究之谈话 [Talking about educational research, 1926], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 1, 77.

¹⁶ For example, the new Chinese literature and cultural movement had great impact on the Chinese community in Singapore. See David L. Kenley, *New Culture in a New World: The May Fourth Movement and the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore, 1919-1932* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁷ Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 231.

¹⁸ Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 216, 241.

Three Heroes from Quangxi (*Quangxi san jie* 广西三杰, 1934) [fig.37] into posters and postcards. With its touching emotion and nationalistic sentiment, *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* was the best seller.¹⁹

This popular picture was also the most controversial one, as many critics challenged the “authenticity” of the portrayal of the ancient Chinese characters.²⁰ In response, Xu Beihong wrote the article “The Difficulties in History Painting,” stating that his images were based on detailed research; however, artistic liberty had to be taken in creating a visually harmonious and compelling picture.²¹ What is interesting is not whether Tian Heng and his people wore historically accurate attire or not. Rather, it is intriguing to see the overseas Chinese strive for a true representation of Chinese history, and thus, reveal their analogous obsession with China despite their dislocation and “non-national” status. These history paintings provoked their self-consciousness and provided the imaginative tool for them to reconnect with their motherland, however remote it may have been. The physical and temporal distance was shortened by the emotional link the paintings projected. In other words, these artworks became the ideological interpellations of a Chinese subjectivity. It was within this larger context that the underpinnings of Chinese nationalism, with boundaries which far surpassed geopolitical China, was discovered.

Indicating a shared historical past and imposing a coexisting present, Xu Beihong’s epic paintings incite the Chinese “subjectivity” in the minds of the ethnic beholders even when they were no longer Chinese citizens. The concern with “specifying the people,” as many historians have recognized, required a reinvention of the idea of being Chinese.²² The “rapid transformation in spatial consciousness that made the rendering of Chinese overseas into plausible and even

¹⁹ Xu Beihong held his solo exhibition in Singapore in March 1939 with 172 pictures. Besides the exhibition catalogue, three paintings were made into postcards by the organizer Chinese Commercial Council 中华总商会 (*Zhonghua zongshanghui*). They were *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, *The Astute Judge of Horse*, and *Three Heroes from Quangxi*. Those with Xu’s autograph were sold for five Singapore dollars each, and the one without for three dollars. The price for the twenty-four inches poster was twenty-five dollars. The attendance of the exhibition was a record-breaking 20,000, and the best-selling postcard was *Tian Heng*. See Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 216. He went on to travel and exhibit in Calcutta, India in 1940, Panang, Ipoh, and Kuala Lumpur in Malaya in 1941 before returning to China through Burma.

²⁰ See Chen Zhenxia 陈振夏, “‘Tian Heng Wubaishi’ zhi wo jian” 田横五百士之我见 [My opinion on *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, 1939], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji*, 376-80.

²¹ Xu, “*Lishihua zhi kunnan*,” 379-84.

²² Karl, *Staging the World*, 53.

central constituents of the Chinese ‘national people’ (*guomin* 国民)” is phenomenal yet seldom discussed.²³ For centuries, Chinese people, mostly from the Southern region, have been migrating overseas, particularly to Southeast Asia or the “Southern Ocean” (*nanyang* 南洋), and their economic contributions to their families back home were renowned.²⁴ Besides the late Qing government, many reformers and revolutionaries—such as Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and Sun Yat-sen—all sought to claim the political loyalties and financial support of the overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* 华侨). The conceptual effort to incorporate the overseas Chinese into the national praxis was a complex and contentious issue. Theoretical frameworks to classify or qualify the “Chinese people” generally gave rise to two major formulations of the problem: a “statist concept” of citizenry and an “ethnic concept” of race (*minzu* 民族).²⁵ Yet, identity can never be defined in absolute terms but is determined by specific historical moment and space. Individuals and groups have identified “simultaneously with several communities,” as Prasenjit Duara argues, “all of which are imagined”.²⁶ The overseas Chinese were no exception. They might have been citizens under different states, but they were also “reified ethnically through claims on their essentialized Chineseness”.²⁷

The identification with Chinese race and culture was the imaginary point where Xu Beihong’s “history” painting made its entrance. The martyrdom of an unwavering hero or the perseverance of the foolish old man is a part of the historical narrative of China that all the Chinese shared as descendants of the mythic Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi* 黄帝), a rhetoric which “came to dominate nationalist discourse throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century”.²⁸ In Xu Beihong’s “dream theater” of *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, the open form of the composition extends beyond the frame of the canvas and draws the viewer into the dramatic moment when the protagonist soberly bids farewell to his loyalists. Just like the

²³ Karl, *Staging the World*, 53.

²⁴ For the history and discussion of the overseas Chinese, see Lynn Pan, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998).

²⁵ Karl, *Staging the World*, 117.

²⁶ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 54.

²⁷ Karl, *Staging the World*, 81.

²⁸ Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 76.

various side characters, the audience is also a spectator. If Xu Beihong had placed himself within the crowd as the young man in yellow, then it is even more convincing that the past was shared not only historically but also presently with his viewers. The poignancy of the story spoke to the Chinese subjects whose living memory was the history of national defeat and natural disaster. The fact that many overseas Chinese found this work moving suggests how they sympathized with the predicament of China and their helplessness to change anything about it.²⁹

On the relationship of past to present, there is no doubt that the reinterpretations of “history” in Xu Beihong’s paintings were depicted in light of China’s imminent crises. The desolate peasants in anticipation for salvation in *Awaiting the Deliverer* millenniums ago could well be a contemporary picture of China in the 1930s and 40s [fig.38]. Forlorn scenes of refugees from the famine stricken countryside suffering on the streets were a common sight [fig.39]. The pain of the people and the nation was real. Accordingly, the people’s support of the exhibition and buying of the prints showed their nationalistic commitment to set history right. Xu Beihong’s epic paintings became the patriotic currency in the imagined Chinese community. The artist himself noted that it was his duty to promote the warfare in China to his compatriots in Southeast Asia.³⁰ In regard to the overseas Chinese, these works can be seen in a more immediate nationalist narrative of their own historical experiences. After all, they were under the rule of colonial powers, and most of them faced pending invasion by the Japanese. On a different note, Xu Beihong himself had a strong tie to Southeast Asia, and the personal link might have also contributed to his success in the area. During his most difficult times in Europe when the government discontinued his scholarship in 1925, Xu Beihong earned his living by working in Singapore for several months. It was this patronage from the Southeast Asian connection that allowed him to finish his study, and he continued to paint in Singapore on a number of occasions. In certain ways, he was also the proud son of the overseas Chinese community, hence, further demonstrating the manifold imagined relationships.

Art and Chinese Modernity: Role of the New Audience

The reaction of the Chinese audience upon viewing Xu Beihong’s history paintings opened a window that offered a glimpse of the receptive end in the artistic interaction. Xu Beihong’s

²⁹ Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 216.

³⁰ Xu, “*Bannianlai zhi gongzuoganshou*” 半年来之工作感受 [My thoughts after working for half a year, 1939], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 385.

larger-than-life narratives were not commissioned by specific individuals or groups but aimed at a new Chinese audience. In spite of his “real” motives—a showcase for his technical virtuosity, realism conviction, personal frustrations, or national duty, these works assumed an intention of their own and became subject to all of the vicissitudes of reception once launched into the world. The original home for the two mural-size oil paintings *Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers* and *Awaiting the Deliverer* was the lecture hall of the Central University in Nanjing. Yet, they also took on the ambassadorial role as the new art of a new China that flaunted the pages of publications and toured across the country and around the Pacific.

The high visibility and mobility of Xu Beihong’s work imparted an extraordinary facet about art and modernity. The collapse of the Qing and the founding of the Republic fueled efforts at redefining a new relationship between artists and the people. The new paintings were not the untouchable objects that stood solemnly on plinths and could be appreciated only by the erudite literati. They were, instead, accessible and comprehensible, a part of the machinery in the era of nation building. No longer mere fantasy, aesthetic pastime, or escapist contemplation for the elite, art broke away from its “private” cocoon and make contact with a large audience, who thronged the spaces of public exhibitions in urban centers and even had these images at home in the form of reproductions and magazine plates. By virtue of this appeal, the perceived character of the viewers also changed. The verdict of judging art, which was long the exclusive privilege of the cultural elite, was taken up by the ordinary folks, who until then had been a passive and mute crowd with no input in setting the trend of the art world. The general masses became the embodiment of active public opinion, a palpable force with a role—even a dominant one—in determining the success of a painting. The transforming power of the audience, of course, did not solely happen between social classes but also across national borders.

In a time of both internal and external social instability, the new common ground between artist and spectators can be summed up as a sense of nationalism and civil virtue. Accordingly, it is no astonishment that Xu Beihong’s realistic and obviously patriotic history paintings won the aesthetic race instead of the modernist pieces that were prized by the sophisticated intellectuals but were seemingly too high-brow and abstract for the people. There was surely risk and even danger in politicized art, and the history that followed would validate such worries. It is unfair, however, to retroactively evaluate Xu Beihong’s attempts at the time in terms of the later authoritative socialist doctrine while associating the modernist’s efforts with the liberal West. In fact, he was not affiliated with the Communist party at the time. Xu Beihong’s

history paintings were his artistic “solution” to the “problems” and “situations” that plagued the modernity of China, and they are viewed here only in light of this intricate relationship.

Beyond East and West: Identification with the “Lost” Nations

The imagining of China on the world stage always positioned the nation somewhere along a tradition-modernity continuum between East and West. This approach, notwithstanding, overlooked a “growing sense of identification with the non-Euro-American world” among the Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century.³¹ Instead of comparing China with the West and Japan, they articulated a new global and national relationship with other “lost” countries—like Turkey, Poland, India, and Burma—and found in their modern experiences clues to solve not only the Chinese dilemma but also problems of the modern world itself.³² In particular, “Asia” increasingly appeared as a mediating space and historical structure that helped link China and the world. While Xu Beihong’s history paintings played a crucial role in tying the imagined Chinese community together, *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains* was especially potent in revealing this Asian identification as China’s new way of seeing the modern world and itself.

Executed in Chinese ink and brush, the painting was finished in 1940 when Xu Beihong was lecturing and exhibiting in India during the year-long fund-raising tour in Southeast Asia. In the imposing wide composition, he places a row of six powerfully built nude men in the process of digging and toiling the ground on the right, while putting the old foolish man, a woman with two children, another strong mover and the front part of an elephant on the left.³³ Behind the sturdy working men is a woman riding on an oxcart. The undertaking of translating the famous parable about hard work and determination against the backdrop of the Japanese Resistance War

³¹ Karl, *Staging the World*, 53.

³² For example, Chen Duxiu concluded that “China was not the only country in this world being bullied by foreign countries! Look at Poland, Egypt, the Jews, India, Burma, Vietnam, and so on: they have all already been destroyed and turned into dependencies.” See Chen Duxiu, “*Shuo Guojia* 说国家 (On the Nation), *Chen Duxiu zhuzuo xuan* 陈独秀著作选 [Selected Works of Chen Duxiu] (Shanghai: Shanghai remin chubanshe, 1991), 56. For the idea of another intellectual Liang Qichao who compared China with Turkey and India see Karl, *Staging the World*, 14.

³³ According to the legend in *Liezi*, the two mountains in the “Foolish Old man” that blocked his home were Mount Taiheng 太行山 and Mount Wangwu 王屋山. Both originally stood at the North of Heyang (the South of the River) where the old man lived. The old man started his removing project with his son and grandson, together with a widow neighbor Jin and her seven-year-old boy. The Emperor of the Heaven was touched by the old man’s determination and ordered the mountains to be moved out of the old man’s way.

was conspicuous. Xu Beihong explained that the main idea for this painting was to express his passion and patriotism for the agonizing China even though he was abroad.³⁴ Meanwhile, its visual motifs of laboring and construction also corresponded to the recent completion of the Burma Road, a critical supply link for China's military resistance against Japan. In the written accounts and news photographs about its construction, the "patient and endlessly hard-working Chinese—men, women, and children"—were shown "working by hand in the mountains and gorges, hauling rock and earth in baskets, blasting stubborn boulders with bamboo tubes full of gunpowder".³⁵ The depiction of an elephant, which existed by and large in the Southwest region, seems to affirm a non-Han Chinese locale.

However, there is more than the elephant that vitiates the typical "Chineseness" of the painting. The naked male figures were drawn from Indian instead of Chinese models [fig.41-43].³⁶ Portraying non-Chinese as Chinese subjects in his historic narrative, Xu Beihong invited severe criticism as "departing from objective reality".³⁷ Of course, one had to assume his decision was a deliberate one rather than a matter of convenience. Taking artistic license in recreating the Chinese story, Xu Beihong imagined the plight of China along with all other colonized countries on the world stage. He remarked that "China and India are both glorious ancient civilizations, and their relationship was based upon a mutual esteem for helping each other".³⁸ In the modern era, however, the two Asian giants both fell victim to Imperialist encroachment and sadly shared the fate of humiliation and defeat. His friendship with Nobel poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) [fig.40 & 44] and his meeting with Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) [fig.45], moreover, widened the horizon of the Chinese artist's understanding of nationalism and freedom.³⁹

³⁴ Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 234.

³⁵ Officially opened on December 2, 1938, The Burma Road was south China's only link to the military supplies and gasoline needed to keep Chiang kai-shek's resistance viable. It runs about 715 miles (600 in China, 115 in Burma). Although it remained subject to a host of problems, its opening when the first supplies from Rangoon reached Kunming (Yunnan) in December 1938 marked a significant triumph for the Chinese. See Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 433.

³⁶ The life drawings of the mountain-mover were mostly based on an Indian model, a chef in the International University of Calcutta. See Xu and Jin, *Xu Beihong nianpu*, 231.

³⁷ One of the most outspoken critics was Tian Han. See Fong, *Between Two Cultures*, 95-6.

³⁸ Xu, "Wuo zijue bushenghuangkong zhi huanyinghui" 我自觉不胜惶恐之欢迎会 [My self-consciously anxious welcome party, 1940], in *Xu Beihong yishu wen ji* 2, 401.

³⁹ Xu Beihong wrote with great fondness about his friendship with Tagore, especially upon the Indian poet's death. See "Daonian shisheng taigoer" 悼念诗圣泰戈尔 [In memory of divine poet Tagore, 1941],

Reflecting on the death of Tagore, Xu Beihong mourned that it was an especially great loss to China, since the poet's fight for freedom rose above national borders and should be taken to heart in the face of the Japanese invasion.⁴⁰

Traveling across South and Southeast Asia in the turbulent decade between 1930 and 1940, Xu Beihong came to terms with and understood better what it took to be modern and what it meant to be Chinese. The problem of China at the time was not uniquely Chinese but a common plague among the "lost countries". The imaginary linking of the region, thus, became an inspiration for a transnational identity and political reality. Using Indian models to illustrate a Chinese tale of "nationalism," Xu Beihong undercut the narrow-minded "obsession with China" and allowed the new spatial and conceptual configurations of the Chinese nation to emerge. Xu Beihong was not alone in tying overseas Chinese into the construct of a larger imagined community. Many of his contemporary artists and intellectuals, such as Gao Jianfu, Pang Xunqin, and Yu Dafu 郁达夫 (1896-1945) also worked in South and Southeast Asia during wartime, injecting their overseas experiences into their own pursuits of Chinese nationalism. Transcending the "West-China dyadic" paradigm,⁴¹ the image of Xu Beihong's epic pictures, together with their reproductions, can be viewed as not only an impetus in Chinese modernity but also a catalyst in uniting the Chinese community that shared the global stage with other struggling nations of the world. This special connection with "Others" in the re-imagination of a modern Chinese identity, although often overlooked or downplayed in official accounts, provides a refreshing perspective in discerning modern Chinese history and deserves further investigation. Xu Beihong's history paintings, no doubt, serve as the means to this new beginning.

in *Xu Beihong yishu wen ji* 2, 407-10; "Dao Taigoer xiansheng bing lunjihuihua" 悼泰戈尔先生并论及绘画 [Remembering Mr. Tagore and talk about his paintings, 1943], in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 2, 435-40.

⁴⁰ Xu, "Daonian xixing taigoer," 409.

⁴¹ Karl, *Staging the World*, 195.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

The twentieth century dawned on China with the brave resolution and ambitious hope of making the nation “modern”. Xu Beihong, one of the most influential artists of this era, lived up to the promise by advocating European-based paradigms and “realistic” visual language to the ailing Chinese art world. Prompting an eclecticism of Western and Chinese elements, Xu Beihong’s four history paintings—*Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers*, *The Astute Judge of Horse*, *Awaiting for Deliverer*, and *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains*—are the showcase of his virtuosity and vision. However, the love or loathing of Xu Beihong eventually comes down to politics instead of aesthetics. The extreme view of him in retrospect as either a titanic hero of modern Chinese art or a tyrannical tool for Communist propaganda has tended to obscure his works, and in fact, distorted the understanding of Chinese modernity. Likewise, the typical labeling of his paintings as “Western-style” or “modern,” as opposed to “Chinese” and “traditional,” also tells little about Xu Beihong himself. The clean-cut classifications seem to sacrifice too many details and brush aside too many discrepancies at the altar of grand theory. Consequently, the character of Xu Beihong remains elusive. It is the reason why the appeal of his paintings lie less in their artistic or political achievements than in the ways they reveal their creator’s ambiguous and contrasting qualities. If contradiction is a shadow that lurks behind the splendid facet of his four epic pictures, this merely reflects the conflicting forces within China’s modernizing experiences in the early twentieth century.

As historical solutions to chaotic situations and complex problems, Xu Beihong’s four history paintings are effective means to reimagine the artist and his time, which is the focus of this thesis. The importance of his works is due not least to their contradictory features that challenge the prevalent notions of modern Chinese art. There is something contradictory about Xu Beihong, about the way he glorified ancient history in an age when China strove to break away from it, and about the way he believed in academic realism, an already outmoded art style in Europe, as the ultimate expression of modernism. Like many other Chinese reformers, Xu Beihong sought to uplift the nation’s present state of decadence by importing modern Western ideas or systems. Yet this was also where the similarity ended and the dispute began. Modernity took on different meanings to different people and in different fields. In closer examinations, Xu Beihong’s reforming effort is hued with contradicting elements. In spite of his iconoclastic rhetoric, his works manifest not a radical revolution, both in style and content, but rather a reconfirmation of tradition. Xu Beihong’s realism campaign mainly served to resurrect the

“crafted brush” tradition, which his father belonged to but had long been disparaged by the dominant literati elite. Indeed, his art style was indebted as much to the Shanghai School master Ren Bonian as to the French Academy. The utilization of classical history as painting subjects, moreover, strikes as a peculiar stance in the wake of the revolutionary May Fourth Movement. His appropriation of old men as national icons in all four pictures seems to have betrayed rather than buttressed the spirit of the nation that embraced everything new and complete Westernization.

Perhaps the contradiction in Xu Beihong’s works was embedded in his self-consciousness as a Chinese artist and, thus, a morally responsible intellectual. Even though he openly expressed contempt for the literati, he seemed to cling onto the idea of being one. From the change of his name to the choice of topics and styles in his paintings, Xu Beihong showed great respect and admiration for Confucian scholars. Of course, by then it was a politically incorrect position that no “enlightened” reformer could have taken publicly. Nevertheless, the intention of the artworks defies the proclaimed intention of the artist. Xu Beihong’s identification with the socially engaged yet politically sidelined literati saturated all of his epic pictures. At core he was a “traditional” artist. On the surface, his worldly experiences and European training as well as his ways of articulating his ideas with Western flavor obscured this crucial aspect. Xu Beihong’s true significance in Chinese art history, accordingly, is his dual role as both a revolutionary and traditionalist at once, countering the polarized perceptions of Chinese modernism.

Another great contribution of Xu Beihong to China’s modernity is how his works have embodied and enhanced the construct of the imagined Chinese community. Exploiting the potentials of modern technology and communication, the reproduction and exhibition of his paintings not only verifies the vital role of the masses in the art world but also attests to the surge of a new type of nationalism that broadens the mere “obsession with China”. In particular, these history paintings allow their overseas audience to be interpellated as Chinese subjects, and hence, transcend the narrowly-defined geopolitical boundary into a fluid imagined community. The fate of China during the Japanese Resistance War was empathized, if not shared, by many other “lost countries,” and his painting *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains* is a powerful testimony to this link.

More than just national allegory, Xu Beihong's history paintings, after all, are personal expressions of a less than perfect artist in an extraordinarily difficult time. Any simple interpretation runs the risk of undermining the complexity of a real person, whose works often come across as nostalgic about the past, insecure about the present, and doubtful about the future. The contradictions of Xu Beihong bring to life a confusing and eminently more realistic picture of modern Chinese experiences. Reimagining his four history paintings apart from the conventional trajectories, one finds Xu Beihong's projection of heroism more tragic than heroic, his portrayal of modernity more traditional than modern, and his promotion of nationalism more transnational than national. While by no means providing an absolute and complete analysis of Xu Beihong's artistic achievements, hopefully, this project has opened a small window to reexamine the established discourses on modern Chinese art and review his works from a new perspective.

Figures



Fig.1 Xu Beihong
Tian Heng and His Five Hundred Followers, 1928-30
Oil on canvas, 197x 348cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



Fig.2 Xu Beihong
Jiu Fanggao, 1931
Ink and color on paper, 139x 351cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing

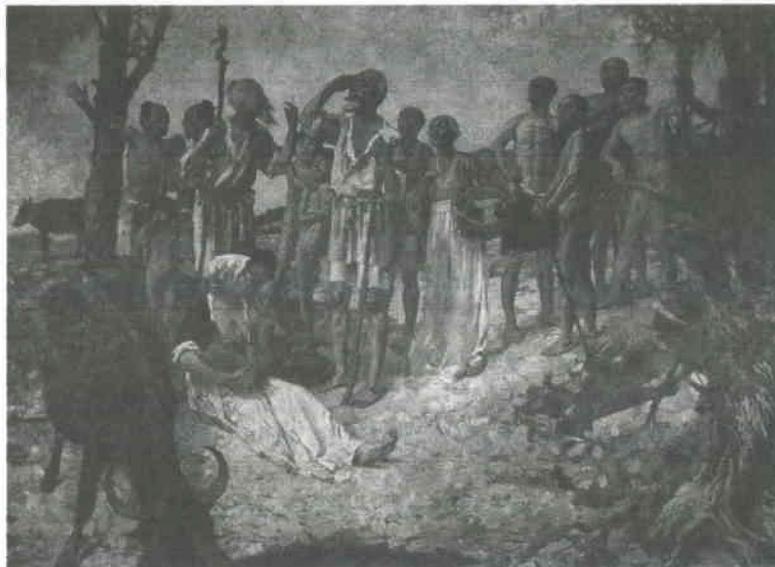


Fig.3 Xu Beihong,
Awaiting the Deliverer, 1930-3
Oil on canvas, 230x 318 cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.4 Xu Beihong
Foolish Man Moving the Mountain, 1940
Ink and color on paper, 144x 421cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.5 Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret
Hamlet and the Grave Diggers,
1883
Oil on canvas.

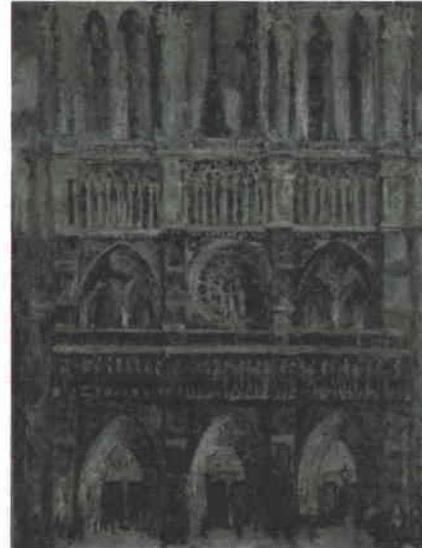


Fig.6 Liu Haisu
Glow of the Setting Sun on the Paris Chapel,
1930
Oil on canvas, 113x88cm
Liu Haisu Memorial Museum



Fig.7 Lin Fengmian
Composition, 1934
Oil on canvas.



Fig.8 Kuroda Seiki
Telling an Ancient Romance, 1898
 Oil on canvas, 189 x307cm
 (Original destroyed in World War II)



Fig.9 Paolo Veronese
Alexander Before the Family of Darius, ca.1500
 Oil on canvas



Fig.10 Jacques-Louis David
The Oath of the Horatii Between the Hands of Their Father, 1785
Oil on canvas, 329.9x 424.8cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris

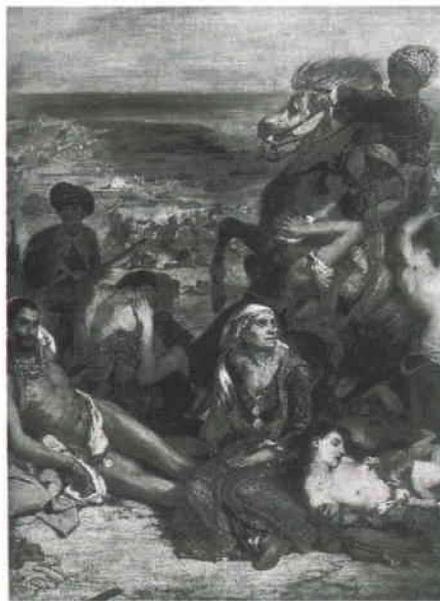


Fig.11 Eugène Delacroix
Massacre at Chios, 1824
Oil on canvas
Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 12 Ren Bonian
Portrait of the Zhao couple (details)
 ca. 1870
 Ink and color on paper



Fig. 13 Xu Dazhang
Coaching My Son under a Pine Tree, 1905
 Ink and color on paper
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig. 14 Xu Beihong
Portrait of the Seniors, ca. 1910
 Ink and color on paper
 147 x 58cm
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum,
 Beijing



Fig.15 Xu Beihong
Three Horses (details), 1919
 Ink and color on paper
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing

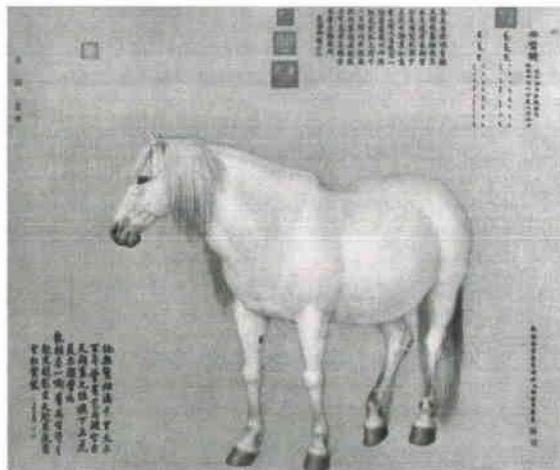


Fig.16 Lang Shining (Giuseppe Castiglione)
Steed, 1743
 Ink and color on paper
 Palace Museum, Beijing



Fig.17 Xu Beihong
Portrait of Huang Zhenzi, 1930
 Ink and color on paper, 132x 66cm
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.18 Ren Bonian
Portrait of Gao Yong (details), 1877
 Ink and color on paper, 139x 48.5cm
 Shanghai Museum



Fig. 19 Ren Bonian
Zhongkui, ca. 1870
Ink and color on paper



Fig. 20 Ren Bonian
Shooting the Stone Tiger (details),
ca. 1870
Ink and color on paper



Fig. 21 Ren Bonian
Herding Horses in Winter
(details), ca. 1870
Ink and color on paper



Fig. 22 Xu Beihong
Jiu Fanggao (details),
1931
Ink and color on paper



Fig.23 Ren Bonian
In the Cool Shade of the Banana Tree
 (details), 1888
 Ink and color on paper
 Zhejiang Provincial Museum, Hangzhou

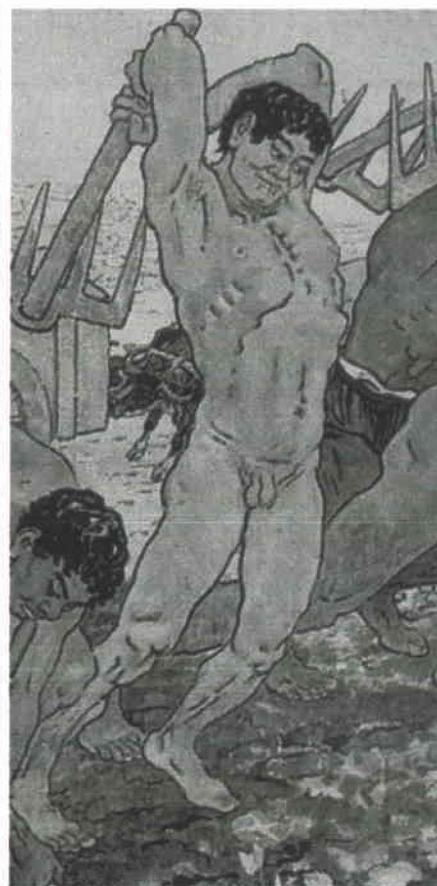


Fig.24 Xu Beihong
Foolish Man Moving the Mountain
 (details), 1940
 Ink and color on paper



Fig.25 Eugène Delacroix
The 28th of July: Liberty Leading the People, 1830
Oil on canvas, 260x 325.1 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig.26 Pang Xunqin
Son of Earth, 1934
Watercolor study, 73x45cm
Pang Xunqin Memorial Museum, Changshu



Fig.27 Xu Beihong and his oil painting *Portrait of Miss Jenny* in Singapore, 1939
Black and white photograph.



Fig.28 Xu Beihong and Qi Baishi (undated).
Xu Beihong is on the far right and Qi Baishi in the middle; the other two are Xu Beihong's students.
Black and white photograph.



Fig.29 Xu Beihong
Self Portrait, 1931
Oil on canvas, 70x 100cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum,
Beijing



Fig.30 Xu Beihong
A Chapter From the Analects, 1943
 Ink and color on paper, 109x 113cm
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing

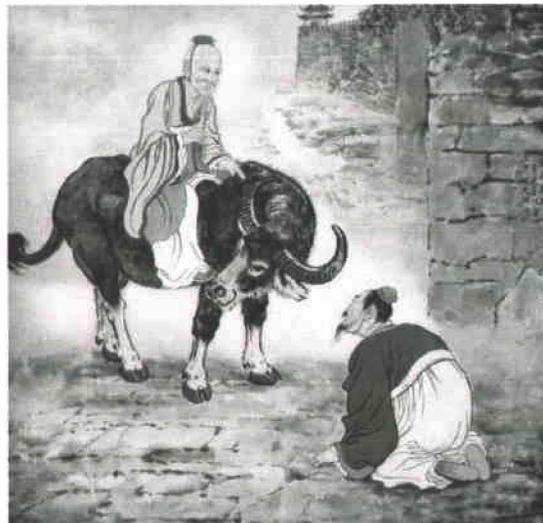


Fig.31 Xu Beihong
Purple Clouds From the East, 1943
 Ink and color on paper, 109x 113cm
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.32 Xu Beihong
Calligraphy writing of
Lu Xun's couplet
(undated).
Ink on paper.
Xu Beihong Memorial
Museum, Beijing



Fig.33 Xu Beihong
Galloping Horse, 1941
Ink and color on paper.
Xu Beihong Memorial
Museum, Beijing



Fig.34 Xu Beihong
The Spirits of the Fallen
from *Qu Yuan's Nine*
Songs, 1943
Ink and color on paper.
Xu Beihong Memorial
Museum, Beijing



Fig.35 Xu Beihong
Farewell my Concubine, 1931
Charcoal and pencil on paper, 48x 63cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.36 Xu Beihong
Qin Qiong Selling Horse, 1931
Charcoal and pencil on paper, 48x 63cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.37 Xu Beihong
Three Heroes from Quangxi, 1934.
 Oil on canvas, 240x 198cm
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.38 Xu Beihong,
Awaiting the Deliverer (details)
 1930-3
 Oil on canvas
 Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.39 Refugees on the street in
 Shanghai, ca. 1935
 Black and white photograph
 Shanghai Historical Museum



Fig.40 Xu Beihong and Tagore in Calcutta, 1940
Black and white photograph
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.41 Xu Beihong
Drawing from *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountains*,
1940
Charcoal on paper.
Xu Beihong Memorial
Museum, Beijing



Fig.42 Xu Beihong
The Foolish Old Man Removing
***the Mountains* (details), 1940**
Ink and color on paper.
Xu Beihong Memorial
Museum, Beijing

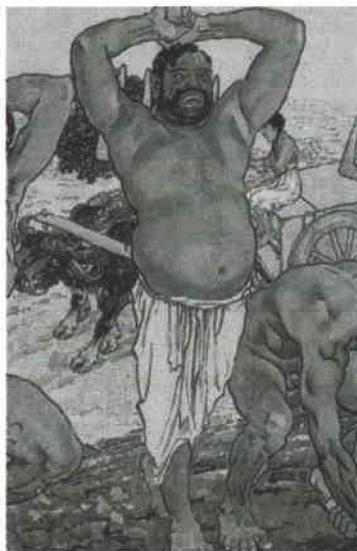


Fig.43 Xu Beihong
Foolish Man Moving the Mountain (details), 1940
Ink and color on paper
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing

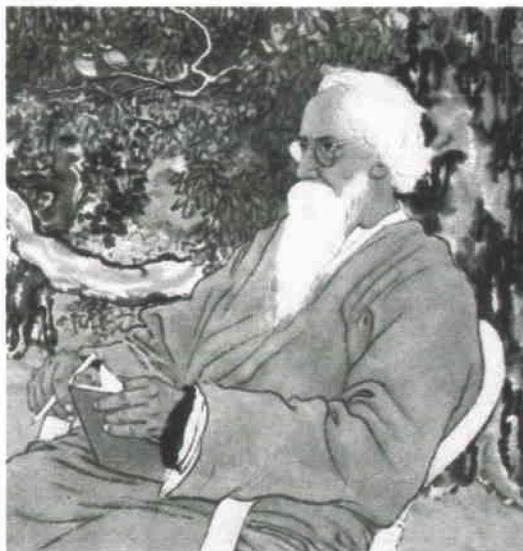


Fig.44 Xu Beihong
Tagore, 1940
Ink and color on paper, 51 x50cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing



Fig.45 Xu Beihong
Gandhi, 1940
Charcoal on paper, 19.2x 23.8cm
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing

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