INTRODUCTION

TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN CHINA

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China has become linked increasingly to the world economy in the last decade and its visual culture has been transformed accordingly. Its mass media are awash with imagery equivalent to any other of the industrial world’s consumer markets; but whether advertising shampoo, refrigerators, or cars, the familiar tropes of global advertising in China sit amid the residue of a vast visual culture that goes back thousands of years. How does the newcomer to Chinese visual culture begin to make sense of the change in social and cultural circumstances that have created the contemporary Chinese world of images? What are the visual histories that are being transformed by the globalised cultural industries? And what are the Chinese art and design community’s opinions, observations, and analyses of the relationship between its art and design traditions and the universalising condition of globalisation? This book is a collection of essays by Chinese scholars, educationalists, and practitioners who are
able to give the reader an initial glimpse into the range of debates and observations on the subject. A great deal has been written about Chinese avant-garde art, and the range of literature on Chinese architecture is substantial. Other areas are less well served, but the biggest lacuna in the study of Chinese visual culture in the West is the Chinese perspective. This book is written by those embedded within the debates that the English-speaking world observes at a distance. It is for this reason that I hope this collection of essays can provide a fresh view of a visual culture facing the biggest changes to its practices since the Cultural Revolution.

I have chosen a broad range of voices for inclusion in this book, and it will not take the reader long to identify the differing theoretical perspectives, ideological positions, and contradictions evident in this collection. This is deliberate on my part. It is important that the reader is aware of the deep-seated Chinese cultural need for harmony (Cheng, 1999), but whilst the Maoist principle of ‘resolving contradictions’ might be a very attractive one, the need for ‘unity’ (Kau & Leung, 1992, p. 315) in addressing this or any problem in China now belongs to a philosophical world enthusiastically left behind decades ago by all but the most pro-establishment intellectuals. I have tried to reveal the complexity of Chinese views and arguments concerning globalisation and traditional visual culture rather than impose an outsider’s overview, and I have tried to balance polemic with research. I have also asked some contributors to include some background information in order to contextualise the wider issues for the reader who is unfamiliar with the debates.

My responsibility in this introduction is to briefly frame three overarching themes: Chinese modernity’s (sometimes ambivalent) relationship to tradition at the start of the twentieth century, the processes of economic reform started in the 1980s and their importance to both the eradication and rescue of traditional practices, and the ideological issue of cosmopolitanism and how it frames the older academic generation’s attitudes to globalisation. It is important to grasp the value of these points as they have been an important part of the discourse surrounding contemporary
Chinese visual culture (Zi, 1987). As the reader progresses through this book, it will become clear that the debates that surround visual culture are not purely aesthetic ones. An understanding of the ideological issues surrounding the appearance of things and the social circumstances that result in the making of traditional artefacts are as important as how a traditional object may look.

The attitudes towards tradition in China have not always been as benign as they are now. For the greater part of the twentieth century, they were held in contempt by many progressive intellectuals. However, this attitude was not universal, and at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, there was a cultural divide between those who saw tradition as a bastion of resistance against foreign occupation and those who saw tradition as an impediment to modernising Chinese culture. In his 1922 preface to *A Call to Arms*, Lu Xun (see figure 1) observed sardonically that when as a boy he chose not to study the Chinese classics or take the examinations for the imperial bureaucracy (the *Keju*), but to study Western medicine instead, his mother was upset because ‘anyone who studied “foreign subjects” was looked down upon as a fellow good for nothing, who, out of desperation, was forced to sell his soul to foreign devils’ (1972, p. 2). The *Keju*, which had been in place for over a thousand years, was an educational and administrative mechanism designed to ensure that the brightest minds of the country were identified and then recruited to the service of the state, regardless of their distance from the imperial centre (Elman, 2002). The system also ensured the loyalty of these individuals to the government administration. To disregard a means of intellectual and official advancement of such longstanding tradition and fundamental importance to the coherence of the gigantic Chinese state was an act of cultural transgression that is difficult for a Westerner to understand, but Lu Xun saw China’s traditions as so overpowering and oppressively claustrophobic that, for a while, he even viewed his artistic struggle against them as futile. In the preface, he recounts a conversation with a young activist friend who visited him and then chastised him for copying traditional calligraphic epigraphs,
suggesting instead that he write something for the radical journal *New Youth*. Lu Xun replied:

Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn? (1972, p. 5)

Lu Xun’s attitudes towards tradition were more sophisticated than they were later portrayed during the years of the Cultural Revolution (Clark, 2008), when he was viewed as a precursor of revolution. He trod a delicate line between valuing aspects of traditional practice and wishing to sweep away the accumulated habits of thousands of years that he believed were keeping China from adopting Western advances
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in science, particularly in the field of medicine. This is why his characterisation of tradition as a suffocating house is such a compelling one. He was aware of being immersed in it himself and was not immune to some of its charms, as the photograph of him wearing traditional clothes demonstrates (see figure 2).

The Qing Dynasty had collapsed in 1911 after the Xinhai Revolution, and the Republic of China was founded in the following year. The period of political confusion that followed was disappointing for those intellectuals who wished to see China embrace modernity, and the formation of the New Culture Movement was a response to that disenchantment. The movement was grouped around the intellectual Cai Yuanpei, who was chancellor of Beijing University and who advocated a critical scrutiny of ‘old Confucian values and institutions [to] reject what had held China back, and find in China’s past the elements of a new culture’
(Fairbank & Goldman, 1994, p. 266). This also illuminates Lu Xun’s position, and it is clear that there was an attempt to theorise why certain traditions should be left behind and others conserved. Cai had been a relative latecomer to the idea of the constraints of tradition: ‘My youth was devoted to pedantic learning, a scholasticism confined to explaining the classics and annotating historical works. I began to discover its limitations at the age of 30’ (Gao, 1984, p. 139). He left China in 1907 to study philosophy and art in Germany and returned in 1911. Upon his return, he acted as the Republic’s minister of education for a year before becoming rapidly disillusioned with the chaotic environment in which he was working, and he left once again for Europe. He returned once more to Beijing in 1916 to take up his post at the university, where he appointed key figures from the New Culture Movement, like Chen Duxiu (who had founded *New Youth* in 1915). It was the university’s radicalised students who were largely responsible for the 1919 Beijing demonstrations that protested against the European Allies’ bequest of Germany’s colonial territories in Shandong to the Japanese in the Treaty of Versailles, which concluded World War One. There was a deep sense of unease about the way in which the U.S. and European colonisers were still able to control the destiny of China. These demonstrations politicised working class, bourgeois, and intellectual communities across Chinese society and became known as the May Fourth Movement. This movement may be seen as the point at which the pendulum swung away from traditional values as solutions to social and cultural problems as well as the point at which the intellectual struggle for autonomy from feudal values became, if not normative, then at least familiar (Schwarz, 1990).

The struggles for power between the nationalists and communists after the founding of the Communist Party in 1921 (their brief alliance to fight the Japanese until the close of the Second World War) and the subsequent success of the Communist Revolution in 1949 are too complex a tale for such a brief introduction to unravel. For the purposes of the debates that follow in this book, however, it is not too far reaching to observe that the nationalists used Confucianism to legitimise their position (Lee, 2006), whereas the communists promoted Western
materialism and a revolutionary approach to cultural transformation. This does not, however, mean that tradition was uniformly dismissed by the young communist state in its early manifestation. To ensure the success of the republic’s early reforms, the communist state apparatus promoted a form of ‘Confucian communism’ (Ikeo, 1996, p. 179) that relied on traditional views of personal responsibility, loyalty, discipline, thrift, and education to cement a feeling of national solidarity in the young socialist republic.

Mao Zedong was the first chairman of the People’s Republic, but after fluctuating success in managing the economy (especially after the disastrous economic results of his 1957 initiative known as the ‘Great Leap Forward’), Mao’s influence had begun to wane by the middle of the 1960s. The pragmatic association of social Confucianism with practical economic management by the Communist Party had resulted in slow economic growth. Mao had become sidelined by Party pragmatists, amongst them Deng Xiaoping who later initiated the Open Door Policy. To regain power, Mao instigated a populist attack on the country’s intellectuals (the ‘liberal bourgeois’ elements in the party) that would cause chaos for over a decade. What is now known in the West as the ‘Cultural Revolution’ was built on this unrest created by Mao. In 1966, the Communist Party, with the ambition of transforming China’s education, literature, and arts, formally announced the ‘Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution’. The impact the Cultural Revolution had on traditional culture was devastating (Lu, 2004).

A clarion call of the Cultural Revolution was the slogan ‘destroy the four olds and establish the four news’, which referred to the substitution of old ideology, culture, customs, and habits with new ones. This viewpoint was used to legitimise the wholesale destruction of the physical legacy of traditional Chinese culture. The Red Guards, the zealous young revolutionaries who considered themselves the Maoist vanguard, destroyed many sculptures, paintings, ancient shop signs, museum artefacts, and traditional buildings. It is this moment in Chinese history that frames much of the discussion in the chapters that follow. If the authors of this book had spoken enthusiastically of maintaining traditional practices
during this period, they would have faced dire consequences, ranging from public humiliation to imprisonment and perhaps execution. This is why it is so important to contextualise the current debates about traditional culture; forty years ago it was a very dangerous topic.

The Cultural Revolution period came to a close with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Deng Xiaoping, who had been persecuted during Mao’s reign, became powerful once again and denounced the Cultural Revolution in 1977. He laid the foundation of the new market economy in China that ultimately led to Jiang Zemin’s signing of the protocol that ratified China’s membership in the World Trade Organisation in 2001. This, in turn, opened the floodgates for the globalised visual culture that is now commonplace in China. Chinese cities are full of imagery from the consumer industries, and Chinese universities are filled with eager students who wish to be part of the global cultural industries, just like their Western counterparts. The remnants of traditional visual culture that continue to persevere in the countryside and smaller towns are now being threatened as much, if not more, by consumerism as they were by the four olds campaign, and they are being nurtured in these neglected corners of the country that are still resistant to this influx of mass culture.

A curious contradiction has been established after a century of debate and the active destruction of traditional cultural artefacts during the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, it seems the ideas and qualities of traditional culture can be appreciated now that they are no longer culturally dominant, and the agents of modernisation that destroyed traditional culture now have the confidence to try to resuscitate it. It is this process of attempted restitution in which the contributors to this book are engaged.

For a myriad of reasons, from the academic concerned with cultural integrity, to the business man keen to develop tradition economically, to the state that sees tradition as a means to sustain social cohesion during a time of economic upheaval, China is not alone in trying to protect its heritage. In fields ranging from linguistics to ethical philosophy, a contemporary global transformation is taking place concerning the way traditional cultures are viewed. The transformation of people’s thinking about traditional cultures is inexorably formed by changes in material
circumstances (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), and the cultural questions that are raised by debates about nationalism, internationalism, and their relationship to a globalising world economy are increasingly important in attempting to understand ‘who we are’ at an individual level as well as an institutional one. Although the debates in this book are on China, they can also contribute to a global discussion about what it is to be creative in the new conditions of the twenty-first century.

It is important to understand the contemporary context of international cultural exchange in order to be able to reinterpret the value of traditional practices (Hier, 2008). Ulrich Beck (1992) referred to the contemporary condition of globalisation as a ‘second modernity’, but how does this differ from ‘first modernity’? And how does it relate to the aesthetic, policy, and educational debates about tradition, art, and design in China?

First modernity sprung from the Industrial Revolution in Britain and Europe in the nineteenth century. In mechanising the economy and in harnessing scientific knowledge for material production, the industrial process swept away the traditions and values of a rural economy. Fuelled by coal, a new way of thinking about nature and humankind was forged that framed tradition negatively in terms of the progress of knowledge (Crouch, 1999). Knowledge was conceived as a programme of chronological development in which the past was flawed and the future perfect. Scientific knowledge was valued as a marker of the development of information about the material workings of the world and as an indicator of ethical or moral worth. From a Western perspective, the technology of enlightenment that was used as a means of colonial subjugation was simultaneously seen as a marker of the right to subjugate. Indigenous cultures, colonised cultures, and cultures lacking the mechanical hardware of more technologically advanced nations found their traditional ways of life swept away, just as the traditional cultures of industrialised countries had been transformed previously. The echo of this process in China at the start of the twentieth century is easy to identify. Given this, it is easy to understand the dilemma of an intellectual like Lu Xun. On the one hand, he wanted to revolutionise China and eliminate foreign intervention in its affairs, but on the other hand, he believed this could
be accomplished only by adopting Western attitudes. This is a dilemma that the reader will see emerging as a subtext in some of the chapters that follow; in order for China to be culturally strong enough to preserve its own culture, the country must become part of the globalising process that is eradicating its traditions.

On the one hand, first modernity can be characterised by the creation of a rudimentary internationalism in which the material experiences of life in an industrialised society (whether socialist or capitalist) were more important than traditional, preindustrial values. It could be argued that an industrial worker in Shanghai had as much in common with a factory worker in Manchester as each had in common with the preindustrial culture in which his grandparents lived. On the other hand, in an attempt to stem the erosion of distinct historical cultural identity and to regulate the social transformations caused by industrialisation as it homogenised life experiences globally, states endlessly debated the question of national culture. As industrialisation swept away identifiable cultural differences, there emerged an increasing concern about the cultural identity which the state would use to construct a narrative about itself that could act as the reference point against which individuals could measure themselves.

It is important to distinguish between national and traditional cultures in this international phenomenon. The two are often conflated in the chapters that follow. Traditional cultures are preindustrial and have an awkward relationship with the intellectual and physical construction of the modern industrial nation state. For example, the borders of most nations are evidence of the refusal of traditional cultures to recognise modern national boundaries. Even ancient nations, especially those that occupy different time zones and climatic conditions, have within their unified states a variety of traditional practices. Discussion of a Chinese national identity is as difficult as discussion of a British one. Both states have subsumed different national cultures under a unifying political and legal administrative system. Although this does not stop individuals from adopting a broad patriotic position, people also see themselves as having other cultural identities—for instance, Brits may also identify themselves as Welsh or Scottish, just as Chinese citizens might also be Hainanese or Miao.
Ulrich Beck (1992) argued that one of the key mechanisms that differentiates first modernity from second modernity (also referred to as late modernity; Giddens, 1991) is the redefinition of the nation state caused by the global economy. Beck (1992) has observed that ‘Nation states can no longer cut themselves off from one another; their army-patrolled frontiers are full of holes, at least as far as their insertion in the space of global communications is concerned’ (p. 17).

The tensions between national and globalising cultures in the early twenty-first century are fundamentally different from their twentieth-century manifestations. The idea of a state being completely independent, or even needing complete independence from other states, is being challenged. The new European Union is an example of this happening on a huge scale. Nations and states have not disappeared, but the need for them to negotiate their cultural and physical autonomy in a global environment is increasingly necessary for their continued existence. A willingness to negotiate in the twenty-first century is not a sign of weakness; it is a material reality in contemporary global life. However, the necessity of compromising does not stop it from being a painful experience for those educated to believe that individual identity is locked into the state’s identity.

How then can traditional culture be understood from outside the culture in which it originated? This is a new concern that has formed in the new conditions of the twenty-first century. In first modernity, individuals with progressive cultural ambitions aspired to a universalising process in which all traditions were shed and replaced with some sort of transnational practice. In painting, this practice was either abstraction or realism, depending upon one’s ideological position. Avant-garde attitudes towards traditional forms of cultural representation were ones of disruption and transgression. The original functions of the avant-garde in art were to stimulate change in cultural practices and to encourage innovation in the form and content of works. These goals were accomplished either through group manifestos or through individual struggles to find a personal voice, and it was hoped that new ways could be achieved of representing a material world that was increasingly distant from traditional
values. Experimenting with materials and their use, transforming the subject matter for painting, and transcending the boundaries of normative practices were important experiences in this process. The legacy of this attempt to transcend traditional culture is an international practice of intensely subjective work that has a devoted specialised audience, but its constant reinvention of process has become institutionalised and formularised. Often, “avant-gardism” no longer transcends anything, but has become normative. As Andreas Huyssen (1986) pointed out, the innovations of the past are repeated pointlessly in the mass media, and what was once new has been appropriated to sell us things, not to empower the individual to think differently.

This is one of the reasons a book on Chinese visual culture is important, for it has received minimal attention in contrast to Chinese avant-garde practices. The Chinese avant-garde art movement (qianwei yishu) has had an enormous impact on the Western art world in the last two decades. Work from artists like Yue Minjun and Fang Lijun have been shown in New York and London to critical approbation, and individual pieces command high prices at auction. Contemporary Chinese artists and photographers have become part of the global art market, and their works are successfully bought, traded, and discussed in Western academic texts. But where else can the avant-garde go? Rupturing and dislocating are important strategies in cultural renewal, but they imply a dialogue with a fixed structure that can be disrupted. Philosophers in line with views that were supported by Jurgen Habermas (1992) would argue that the fixed institutions of first modernity, like the nation state, are increasingly (though reluctantly and painfully) able to absorb differences of opinion (Cao, 2006), and sociologists like Beck and Lau (2005) have suggested that the either/or attitude of first modernity (either industrialise or atrophy) is being slowly replaced by both/and (industrialise and try to preserve traditions) in second modernity. Thus, the original intention of the avant-garde to transform monolithic cultural structures through oppositional practices, though whilst valuable in preglobalised societies, is increasingly redundant in globalised ones.
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Once a society has made the material step into a world economy as China did in 2001, its culture becomes embedded in a complex network of demands that enforce flexibility because cultural structures must adapt to change, just as trees in a storm must bend with the wind—or otherwise, they will not stand the test of time. It is not simply the case that one way of art making is better than another. Both avant-gardism and traditional practices have great importance in different circumstances, but both suffer the danger of becoming self-referential and self-replicating if they are unconnected to issues that are valued by communities. Traditional Chinese brush and ink painting (guohua), if taught as a set of skills rather than as a way of thinking, can be locked into a set of routines that preserve the act, treating it like a corpse that needs embalming rather than a body that needs feeding. Designers who adopt traditional forms that are unrelated to their original conception can become parodic (see figure 3). Avant-gardism can degenerate into sets of practices that become narcissistic if they cease to engage with social issues. There is room for all these practices, and the chapters of this book convey the understanding that hybrid practices are a way of looking into the future.

Materially, traditional practices are a link to preindustrial sensibilities and intelligence. They provide a perspective that is different from the increasingly dominant vision of the mass media that assimilates and neutralises avant-gardism by using its forms but ignoring its content. For example, guohua (brush and ink painting) frames the world through sets of practices that are about contemplation; it is an examination of the physical world made directly through our senses and its relationship to our emotional autonomy, which are values that are entirely absent from the dynamism of the mass media. For this reason alone, one might be happy to argue for its preservation.

The chapters that follow have been organised into four sections. The first, Understanding Chinese Visual Tradition, examines the way in which visual tradition can be understood, its underlying philosophies and visual ideologies, and their applicability in a globalised present. The section that follows, Education in the Arts, reports and comments speculatively on the condition and role of art education under the circumstances of
globalisation in China. The third section, *Transforming Tradition*, looks at the ways in which tradition survives and provides examples of how it has changed in the commodity design field. Finally, *Cultural Transformation and the Media*, examines and reports on the way in which the new media have formed and responded to the traditional models of cultural practice. Each section has a brief introduction in which the chapters are introduced in more detail and the links between them are established. This should enable the reader to move backwards and forwards through the book and still understand how the chapters interrelate.
All of the contributors to this book are Chinese, and their understanding of Chinese culture comes from their lived experience and the body of literature that has surrounded them during their education. This means that their cultural and academic reference points are not automatically those of the English-speaking world. With the exception of the towering presence of Michael Sullivan, it cannot be assumed that commentaries in English on Chinese traditional art are known in China. More recent texts on the applied arts are in the slow process of translation and distribution in China, and so a study that might be considered a key text in English might not necessarily be known in China. A celebration of the culturally different perspectives held by the contributors is one of the reasons for this book, but in the interests of the English-speaking reader who wishes to move from this introduction to a deeper examination of the issues raised, I have included an English language bibliography for each chapter. Any omissions are thus mine and not the authors’.

Finally, an understanding of the contemporary condition of traditional Chinese culture does not solely illuminate Chinese cultural practices; it becomes a lens through which an individual’s cultural circumstances can be read. I would argue that traditional cultural practices have the potential to allow an intellectual and emotional opposition to the emptiness of industrialised cultural production in the same way that was offered by the avant-garde at the start of the twentieth century. Chinese brush and ink painting carries with it a body of philosophy that is rich beyond compare. It can provide a way of looking at the natural world with fresh eyes, and it can make people rethink their relationship with the landscape and its flora and fauna. This is not just an idle romantic fancy but, it seems to me, a prerequisite for the successful custodianship of the natural world. In other words, traditional art making facilitates people’s understanding of their relationship with the world, which forces them to go emotionally and intellectually beyond surface interpretations. This, in turn, encourages people to engage with the unique artefacts of communities as well as their makers.

The seven gentlemen of the bamboo forest were third-century scholars who, disillusioned with court corruption, retreated from public life and
dedicated their lives to art in the surroundings of nature. I wonder if we can still afford that luxury. Whilst people may wish to retreat from the industrial juggernaut that perpetually changes the world in front of their eyes, there are few places left to retreat. Whilst teaching in China, I have been acutely aware of students’ concerns about the links between their rich cultural tradition and the physical environment. The destruction of either, they suggest, leads to the destruction of the other. I am inclined to agree with them. The timeframe and intellectual space for people to gather their thoughts about what is happening to Chinese traditional culture gives them only the briefest of moments to structure a collective response to its possible demise. It will always exist historically, and it will always be a resource from which to draw, but the purpose of this book is to attempt to negotiate the ways in which the traditional visual culture in China can continue to evolve and find new ways of communicating, and I hope the reader will find something here to stimulate their engagement with the issues.