

## The Artistic Universe of Irene Chou

Mayching Kao

Irene Chou (Zhou Luyun) had often described herself this way: “I am a very ordinary woman; having had a conventional education, having worked for two years after graduation, I got married, with an ideal husband, and became a tender wife and a loving mother.”<sup>1</sup> This wife and mother, who had never attended any art academy, took up the brush to paint and developed into an eminent artist of regional and international acclaim. It was no ordinary life at all. Her artistic quest began as “Sunday painting”, a leisurely past-time beyond the chores of a housewife, but it soon turned into serious pursuits for individual creativity as she explored the issues of the self, life and human existence. Charged with a distinctive personality and innovative style of art, Irene Chou is considered to have painted “the most profound works of art that express the spirit of her times among the modern ink painters in Hong Kong.”<sup>2</sup> (Plate 1) Her life journey began in Shanghai in 1924, but Hong Kong was her home for the larger part of her life. In her late years she moved to Brisbane, Australia, where she passed away on 1 July, 2011. The vicissitudes of life that



Plate 1  
Irene Chou in the 1980s

she endured, including the breakup of her maiden family in her youth, the uprooting from her native home in the prime of life, the frustration and disillusionment experienced in her marriage, the passing away of her teacher and husband, her near-encounter with death due to a stroke at her old age and having to be uprooted again to join her son in Australia, a strange piece of land on which she passed away, were daunting challenges and difficulties that Irene took in her stride as she roamed freely in the infinity of her artistic universe. In her artistic pursuits she “derived her own contentment and pleasure” (*zi de qi le*),<sup>3</sup> at the same time created a legend in the history of art in Hong Kong.

Irene Chou's growth as a modern artist started in Hong Kong when she was at the age of twenty-six. She had a relatively late start as compared to other contemporary ink painters. However, she brought with her a wealth of life experiences, much of these were closely related to the dramatic changes in China in the last hundred years. Both her parents, Zhou Lianxuan and Jin Qichao, were progressive young man and woman inspired by the spirit of “New Culture” generated by the iconoclastic May Fourth Movement of 1919. Her father, being the only son of an old rich family of Songjiang, Jiangsu Province, resisted the traditional practice of marriage among families of similar social status. He fell in love with his high school sweetheart without the family's blessing. The two lovers eloped to Shanghai and earned their living by working at the Commercial Press. Irene Chou was born in 1924 in this cosmopolitan city.<sup>4</sup> She received westernised, modern education and had intended to become a medical doctor. She subsequently changed her study to economics and social



Plate 2  
Irene Chou with her  
husband Yi Wen and  
their children

science, graduating from St. John's University in 1945. As she was growing up, China had been in a turbulent era when old values clashed with the new; internal strife and external aggression gave rise to endless wars. The attack of Shanghai by the Japanese forces in 1932, called the "28 January Incident", directly affected Irene Chou and her family. She felt deeply the horrors of war as they fled the city for safety. During the eight years of the Sino-Japanese War, her father went to work in Chongqing, the wartime capital. Her mother stayed behind in Shanghai to maintain the household on her own. The separation of her parents during these years planted the seed of their breakup after the end of the war.

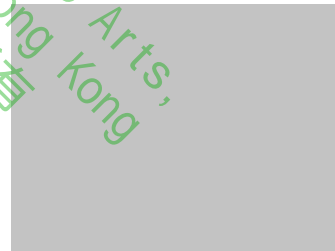
After graduation from St. John's University, Irene Chou worked as a reporter at the newspaper *Peace Daily*. She went to Nanjing by herself to cover the news of the Constitution of the Republic of China and translated into Chinese the book *Plastic in the World of Tomorrow* by Burr W. Leyson, published by the Commercial Press. In 1947 she married Yang Yanqi (Evan Yang, alias Yi Wen; 1920-1978), the chief editor of *Peace Daily*. In 1949 the Chinese government changed hands; Irene Chou, like many Chinese of the time, put a stop to her career and left China with her husband. They stayed in Taipei briefly, arriving in Hong Kong in 1950. Here she became a housewife, playing the roles of a wife and a mother. Within five years a son and two daughters were born (Plate 2). Her husband soon established himself in the cultural sector in Hong Kong. Apart from his work as a newspaper editor, he was active as a scriptwriter, lyricist and essayist. More importantly, he joined the film industry and became a successful director under the pen name of Yi Wen.<sup>5</sup> At this point Irene assisted her husband in his diverse engagements, but her involvement in writing screenplays, newspaper columns and lyrics, compared to her own achievement in painting, still awaits further study.<sup>6</sup> It was also in 1950 that she felt lost amidst her busy schedule of family and social obligations, so she had the idea of learning to paint with a master. It did not come as a surprise as culture and art imbued the family in which Irene grew up. Her father loved music, art and photography and counted among his friends were the eminent painter He Tianjian (1891-1977) and photographer Lang Jingshan (1892-1995). Her mother excelled in calligraphy. So Irene had been well familiar with the use of brush, ink and Chinese paper from childhood. At the same time she was exposed to western art and relevant knowledge in her school curriculum. However, her real ambition was to become a medical doctor. She did not see herself becoming an artist in the future.

The year 1950 marked the beginning of Irene Chou's artistic exploration. She found a teacher in Chao Shaoan (Zhao Shao'ang; 1905-1998), a second-generation master of the Lingnan School of painting.<sup>7</sup> Originated in Guangzhou, the School pioneered the reform of Chinese painting tradition in the early twentieth century by "synthesising Chinese and western art and harmonising ancient and modern art". With a large number of second-generation artists of the Lingnan School settling in Hong Kong in the 1950s, they found the city receptive to their reformist eclectic styles integrating Chinese and western art, and soon became the mainstream of traditional painting in the territory. Thus Irene was counted as one among the many students of Chao, said to be more

than a thousand over the years. Together with the Lingnan artists, well over one hundred artists came to Hong Kong in the 1950s, including Gu Qingyao (1896-1978), Zhang Pihan (1909 -1995), Peng Xi ming (1908-2002) and other traditional literati painters from the Jiangnan region. Rather than studying painting styles of an orthodox lineage from a region of her home town, Irene chose the Lingnan School from Guangdong. She could have been attracted by the idea of its integration of Chinese and western painting and its pleasing visual characteristics, not to mention her identifying the style with a revolutionary spirit. However, her experience as a student was mostly confined to imitating the works of her teacher, alongside the copying of landscape masterpieces of the Song and Yuan dynasties. She received little training in drawing from life. She was a serious and hardworking student; soon her imitations of her teacher's works could not be distinguished from the originals. One such painting is *Plum Blossom and Bird* (Plate 3) in which she painted a lively bird chirping on a branch. The branches are drawn with flying-white strokes and enhanced

Plate 3  
Irene Chou, *Plum Blossom and Bird*, ink and colour on paper, 46x82cm, 1950s

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by moist ink dots. There is a profusion of plum blossoms of red and white in full bloom, while fallen petals drift lightly in areas tinted by colour wash. It appears that Irene not only followed his teacher's style and technique, but also aspired to convey the romantic mood of his art. Irene's period of imitation and copying lasted for as long as twenty years. She considered the time well spent in building a firm foundation in tradition, though it was far from innovative creation and self-expression. Her study of the brush manner of earlier masters allowed her "discovered a subtle aura of serenity in the brush and perceived a mood not easily attainable in the contemporary world, a mood characterised by tranquility and elegance. I was able to renew my understanding about life.... I also became conscious, when I was imitating, of the profound changes my strokes and ink underwent."<sup>8</sup> At this time she also developed an immense interest in philosophy and religion. Blessed with a sensitive heart and endowed with rigorous training in brush manner, Irene Chou later embarked on her quest for creative expression with great facility.

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Hong Kong at the turn of the 1960s saw the emergence of modern art trends. Irene too felt that imitation alone could not lead her to self-expression. She started to look for change and for innovation. Gradually she shed herself off the mannerisms of the Lingnan School and its attractive world of flowers and birds. She was determined to pursue creative freedom and to do paintings of her own. She craved for any knowledge of art, spending long hours at the libraries of United States Information Service and the British Council where she read about the latest developments in modern art in Europe and the United States. She discovered *The Meaning of Art* by Herbert Read and was inspired by Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce who considered “art is expression” and the artist must inject his or her emotions into the creative act. Even though she did not abruptly stop her copying of ancient and modern masters, she began her attempt to view the world with her own eyes and her own mind in her search for the meaning of self, life and human existence. She also tried to formulate her personal style to express these findings.<sup>9</sup> She turned to non-representational styles and experimental materials for her new direction in art. She sought to give expression to interesting aspects of daily life and her inner response to them, therefore the subject matters of her works during this period mostly were derived from her family life and living in the city. She considered herself a typical woman “Sunday painter”. Take *The Hand* (Plate 4) as an example. Irene completely removed herself from the visual vocabulary of the Lingnan School to explore on her own. The painting shows the collage of two bright red gloves in the centre. She wrote a short passage in red onto a black ground, saying, “My children, the back of my hand is my flesh, so is the palm of my hand!” She explained that the painting was a mother’s way of resolving disputes between her young children. The message is so simple and direct that even young children will understand.<sup>10</sup> Her calligraphy is written irregularly as if by the untrained hand of a child. Other elements of this work, such as the strong red and green colours, the gathering of dots to form surfaces, the use of the dripping technique and the thunder pattern borrowed from bronze decoration, forecast techniques and motifs that Irene would develop in the years to come.



Plate 4  
Irene Chou, *The Hand*,  
mixed media, 57x119cm,  
1950s



Plate 5a/b  
Media coverage on Irene  
Chou's solo exhibition  
at the Hong Kong  
City Hall, 1968. *The  
Companion Pictorial*,  
issue 170 (1968)

A further examination of Irene's artistic development in the 1960s shows that she went through a stage of diversified experimentation. She applied watercolours, acrylics and oils on Chinese paper with no inhabitation. Her techniques are varied and the compositions diverse, giving full testimony to her freedom and joy of creation. Many of these experimental works were shown in her first solo exhibition at the Hong Kong City Hall in 1968 (Plate 5). This exhibition not only served to confirm her status as a professional artist, but also her identity as "a founder of the Modern School of Chinese Art". Her work was hailed as preserving "the ancient quality of 'vital rhythm' but applies to her own day." As she injected into her paintings "her love, joy and inspirations for life", her art was recognised for her characteristic vital force even at this early stage and it would develop into a hallmark of her personal style.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the above, we note four new developments in the 1960s that had a direct impact on Irene Chou's future career, namely her personal observation of nature, her relationship with Lui Shou-kwan (Lu Shoukun; 1919-1975) as a teacher and a friend, her study of calligraphic lines and her engagement in *qigong* exercise.

First, Irene Chou went into the nature, but she was not looking for the idealised and monumental landscapes as seen in traditional landscape painting. What touched her inner emotions were the poetic mood and vital spirit of sunshine, shadow of the moon, surface of the sea and grass by the roadside.<sup>12</sup> Those were the “nature” to Irene living in a big modern city, from which she taught herself to life drawing. There was a period of time when her director husband would drop her off in the countryside on his way to location shooting. Left in the woods, she sketched the trees around her. In the end she did no less than ten thousand drawings, paying special attention to close-ups of the gnarled trunks and twisting branches, as well as the intertwining vines and meandering roots. In these exercises Irene sharpened her drawing skills, at the same time found in the trees an important theme for her work in the future. *The Tree* (Plate 6) is a work of the late 1960s based on her sketches. It is evident that the main trunks and branches in a dense forest are still visible, but the slender twigs and winding roots extend themselves to interweave into an intricate web, nestling in the shadow of ink washes. Near the centre of the composition floats a large circle of turquoise colour, creating a surreal and poetic realm of fantasy. The way that Irene restructured the trees and transformed their shapes after sketching them from life indicates that by this time she was already under the strong influence of Lui Shou-kwan.<sup>13</sup>

It was in 1966 that Irene Chou started to study with Lui,<sup>14</sup> who became both her teacher and friend. He was credited to have altered Irene’s attitude to art and was instrumental in pointing out to her the direction for development as an artist. Lui Shou-kwan was best known for his role in initiating the “New Ink Painting Movement” in the 1960s. Lui undertook critical examination of the Chinese painting tradition on the one hand and advocated the study of modern art trends in the west on the other. Recognising their common characteristics, his ideal was to achieve self-realisation through the new spirit of ink painting, to which he also added his own *Chan* paintings based on the study of Daoism and Buddhism. Lui attracted many young artists keen on innovation as followers and created a major force in Hong Kong. Under his influence, Irene assimilated the modernist characteristics of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, and combined them with her understanding of the splashed ink techniques of Chinese paintings and the lines and structures of calligraphy, at the same time delved deeply into the philosophical and religious ideas of Daoism and Buddhism. Her art thus formulated is said to have joined the east and the west, as well as connected the past and the present. More importantly, her art has created an inner world of enigmatic and mysterious vision, achieving maturity in the 1970s. Her artistic affinity with Lui Shou-kwan naturally led to her involvement in the New Ink Painting Movement. She was one of the eleven founding members of the “In Tao Art Association” formed by the students of Lui’s in 1968. She took part in the inaugural exhibition of the Association with a painting entitled *Flowers*.<sup>15</sup> Irene chose the traditional subject matter of lotus and loquat, but the composition and the technique are far removed from the traditional idiom. The plants are shown close up and drawn with stylised lines. She seemed to have put into practice the new teaching method of Lui who taught his students to transform nature into dots, lines and planes.<sup>16</sup> The quality of Irene’s



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Plate 6  
Irene Chou, *The Tree*,  
ink and colour on paper,  
185x96cm, 1960s

lines is evenly heavy and thick, which reveals her long years of copying and practising the Stone Drum script of calligraphy. These lines would become an important element in her linear style of the 1970s. Irene is known to appreciate the Stone Drum script for “the novelty of character shapes, elegance of style, fullness of composition and sophisticated execution of the strokes. Each stroke and line have an air of gracefulness, serenity, continuity of the rigour of life.”<sup>17</sup> Calligraphic lines can be considered a key component of Irene’s painting style. Regardless of her reference to different kinds of scripts, they are all endowed with rhythm and movement and charged with the artist’s emotion and imagination.

As for her practice of *qigong* exercise, it in fact happened by chance. She had been asked by a relative in the Mainland to forward letters to his mother living in Taiwan because there was no direct communication between the two places. One of such letters contained instructions for the *qigong* exercise which inspired Irene to try it on her own. Later on she received further instruction from some *qigong* masters. She continued to practise *qigong* in the following decades without interruption. It had become a daily exercise for her, as meditation and *qigong* kept her mind in a free and clear state. Such a state facilitated better communication between her internal world and the external one, achieving the harmonious union of nature and man. Her creative work derived great benefit from this mental state. She frankly admitted that she found her creative inspiration from practising *qigong*, because it allowed her to become aware of the many dimensions of the universe in addition to time and space beyond our ordinary experience. It might even open up the telepathic “sixth sense”.<sup>18</sup> *Qigong* also came to her rescue after she suffered a stroke at the end of 1991. It played a major role in her rehabilitation, which ultimately helped her to recover and to paint again.

The 1970s to Irene Chou was a period mixed with exuberance and sorrow. She finally broke the shackles of imitation to enter into a world of creative freedom. She was encouraged by Lui Shou-kwan to work in the new ink painting idiom which could give full expression to her personality and feelings. Her prolific output was highly regarded by the art world and invitations to participate in exhibitions in Hong Kong and overseas poured in, counting among them were solo exhibitions in Hong Kong and Melbourne, Australia in 1976 and 1977 respectively. On the one hand she was gratified by her rising reputation as an innovative artist; on the other, she was going through the darkest period in her life. She confessed: “I was overwhelmed with grief, anxiety and frustrations before and after the death of my husband. Obsessed with the problems of life, I was extremely upset and fell so ill that I had a fever for six consecutive months.” The passing away of her husband Yi Wen in 1978, in addition to the untimely death of her teacher Lui Shou-kwan three years before, were sad blows to Irene. Therefore her paintings of the 1970s “were mostly bleak, sombre and suffocating.” They were in fact a reflection of her emotional state.<sup>19</sup>



Plate 7  
Irene Chou, *The First  
Line Work or Floating  
Clouds and Flowing Water  
Show High Winds*, ink  
and colour on paper,  
83.5x60cm, ca. 1971

While the majority of new ink painters continued to choose landscapes as their subject matter, Irene Chou embarked upon a path of her own. She has completely detached herself from the traditional landscape motifs; instead she focused her attention on exploring the special effects of Chinese brush and ink on *xuan* paper in order to create a new visual language. She was greatly inspired by the British art critic John Ruskin and his book *Modern Painters*, and was committed to expand the limits of imagination and to reach the core of its spirituality. She further learned from Ruskin's idea of penetrating into an imaginary realm beyond external appearance and the physical senses.<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously she read the writings of Neo-Confucian scholars like Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) and Cheng Hao (1032-1085) of the Song dynasty. From the former she aspired to his ethical teaching of reverence and tranquility and from the latter, his emphasis on realising human nature through an understanding of the mind. Their teachings helped Irene to integrate the internal and



Plate 8 (left)  
Irene Chou, *Remembering Mr. Lui*, ink and colour on paper, 135x66cm, ca. 1975.  
(Source: *Chinese Painting by Irene Chou*, p.73)

Plate 9 (right)  
Irene Chou, *Breakthrough or External and Internal*, ink and colour on paper, 135.5x66.5cm, ca. 1979

external worlds in forming her own universe. She characterised this universe as a simple, honest, sincere and refined realm which could be elevated high and far.<sup>21</sup> It is evident that Irene sought to express through her art an inner vision and introspective imagery that could be expanded to a universe of infinity without boundary and limit. Her original style of the early 1970s was based on the use of calligraphic lines with the continuation of *The Tree* series. At this time the intertwining tree trunks and branches were even more twisted and exaggerated, showing neither leaves nor roots. Yet they conveyed a strong vitality of life.<sup>22</sup> She also ventured into pure lines in her creative work, calling such paintings “Line Works”. The lines she used were borrowed from her expertise in the Stone Drum script of calligraphy. A good example can be found in *The First Line Work* (Plate 7). She recalled that the painting was done quite accidentally. She drew an undulating line with pale ink on the top of a piece of paper without much serious consideration. Then she drew more

lines below from light to dark to scorched ink until the surface was covered. The painting was completed after applying ink wash.<sup>23</sup> The entire composition, made up of undulating lines that are even and rigorous, is indeed non-representational or abstract. However, the texture, rhythm and tension of the painting bring to mind the waves of the sea. The allusion to nature and the infinity of time and space are further enhanced by the appearance of a light roundel in the centre of the composition which could be read as the reflection of the sun or moon.<sup>24</sup> In the first four or five years of the 1970s Irene mainly painted “Line Works” to express her inner emotions and creative urges.<sup>25</sup> She explained the rationale behind her linear style, saying, “I put everything in the external world into an inner order. It expresses what in life, love and the mysteries of the universe that caused the fluctuations of my emotions. At the same time, I construct in my mind an inner universe entirely of my own. To me this universe is beautiful and serene; it is the crystallisation of the sublimation of life.”<sup>26</sup>

This beautiful and serene realm of art gave way to Irene Chou’s period of “Dark Paintings” with the death of her teacher Lui Shou-kwan and her husband Yi Wen successively in 1975 and 1978. These dark paintings reflect her depressing mood and the heavy pressure on her during that time period. A representative work of this style is *Remembering Mr. Lui* (Plate 8). Irene had time and again stressed the strong influence of Lui on her artistic development. In the 1970s Lui often visited her in her home to paint. Many of Lui’s *Chan* paintings were completed at her home’s studio. Irene used the “accumulative ink method” or “piled ink method” in painting her “Dark Paintings”, including *Remembering Mr. Lui*. She applied layer over layer of ink wash on to the thin *xuan* paper, creating a luminous black surface with subtle variations and soft tones of ink. The painting demonstrates Irene’s consummate skill in the handling of ink. The simple composition is dominated by a double sphere formed by intertwining roots or twigs suspended in the middle of nowhere. The “sphere” is one of her original symbols. Here the smaller sphere inside is supported and sheltered by the larger one outside, as if its life being nurtured. Together they emit a faint glow against a fathomless dark space. In the far distance are plant and long root-like twigs and tentacles growing from the darkness. They extend all the way to the right and tilt towards an angle as if blown by an invisible gale force. Caught in the thick twigs is a small red dot. Could this red dot be Irene herself, reminiscing and paying her respects to the spirit of her deceased teacher in the distance? It is worthy to note that in this painting Irene had switched from her customary heavy lines borrowed from the Stone Drum script to fine and firm lines from the “double-outline” technique to draw the various plant parts. Her delicate and sensitive renderings form a strong contrast to the unfathomable depth of the dark background.

Irene Chou reached her artistic maturity in the 1970s. She was particularly satisfied with her series of Dark Paintings as she considered them true reflections of her moods during the lowest ebb in life as well the heavy burden of modern men. However, as she walked out of the shadow of an unhappy marriage and freed herself from the shackles of emotional stress, her artistic

exploration took a new turn. Her change was documented by several paintings executed between 1979 and 1980, all of which are titled *Breakthrough* (see Plate 9 for one of the paintings of the series). Although the painting is still shrouded in a dense darkness, a huge sphere, knitted closely together by twigs or roots, hangs in the mid-air. From the centre of this sphere there is a sudden outburst of long tendrils as if breaking loose from a cocoon, releasing infinite energy, the will of life and the movement of the cosmos.<sup>27</sup> Another painting in the same series is even more dramatic. A similar sphere with intricate twigs and roots is blown into two halves by a powerful force which also pushes the long tendrils high up in the dark sky. The scene appears to be a re-enactment of the Creation or alludes to the mystery of the Primordial Chaos, or even reveals the irrepressible creative energy of the artist.<sup>28</sup> A development parallel to the making of the Dark Paintings is Irene's invention of the "impact" technique. It is a variation of the traditional splashing and spattering ink technique, characterised by spontaneous movement and light but rigorous rhythm. Its aesthetic effect is diametrically opposed to the sombre mood of the Dark Paintings but sheds light on another side of Irene's artistic personality. This technique would be further developed into the "impact structural stroke" in the 1980s and surfaces made up of small ink dots would feature prominently in her mature style of this period.<sup>29</sup>

As can be seen from the above, Irene finally broke free from the tragic loss of her husband by the end of the 1970s. The year 1980 marked her liberation from darkness. She gained a new lease to life living alone in her studio remodeled from her home, where she devoted herself to meditation and *qigong*, as well as indulged in her passion for painting. Thereon she scaled the height of her artistic career. She received the "Urban Council Fine Arts Award (Painting - Chinese Media)" in 1983 and was named "Hong Kong Painter of the Year 1988" by the Hong Kong Artists' Guild. She was invited to participate in solo and group exhibitions in Hong Kong and around the world and her works entered into prestigious public and private collections. Her style of the 1980s became bolder and more spontaneous. She freely used the "impact structural stroke" of her own invention for a very powerful artistic effect. She wielded a giant brush over the painting surface as if enacting the process of creation itself, afterwards carefully delineated the details of the imagery so as to give full expression to her inner vision. Indeed Irene Chou "has opened up new horizons for ink painting and re-affirmed the role of the artist as the creator of the world."<sup>30</sup>

Around the beginning of the 1980s, Irene's interest in Chinese philosophy led her to the writings of eminent Neo-Confucian thinker Lu Jiuyuan (1139-1192) of the Southern Song dynasty. She has cited time and again his famous saying: "The universe is my mind; my mind is the universe", and used it as impetus and inspiration for her creative pursuits. She constantly explored the harmony of her inner world with the wide expanse of the physical universe, trying to capture in her paintings the forces originating from her inner vision and the continuous nurturing of life. Her imagination led her to return to the Primordial Chaos to search for the meaning of human existence. She made no attempt to reproduce forms in objective reality to express these spiritual

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Plate 10  
Irene Chou, *Midsummer*,  
ink and colour on paper,  
165x86cm, 1983.  
Collection of the Hong  
Kong Museum of Art



Plate 11 (Left)  
Irene Chou, *Infinity Landscape*, ink and colour on paper, 243.8x61cm, 1987

Plate 12 (Right)  
Irene Chou, *Mid-winter – Spring II*, Chinese ink and colour on paper, 179.5x96cm, 1980s

and metaphysical concepts, instead she resorted to creating her own visual language with signs and symbols, leading to the formulation of an individual style uniquely her own. As a representative work of her mature style of the 1980s, *Midsummer* (Plate 10) won for her the Urban Council Fine Arts Award in 1983, as previously mentioned. Here we encounter again Irene's sphere formed by closely knitted twigs and tendrils being placed in the centre of the composition. It is enclosed by a red outer ring, creating a dazzling imagery much like a symbol of the hot summer sun. Another imagery of the 1970s also re-emerges here with the ever growing slender branches, their intertwining tendrils spreading in all directions in the Supreme Void. These plant-forms are devoid of any leaves or flowers; they offer alternative readings such as blood vessels or nerve systems, suggesting multiple interpretations of her work. This painting is made special by the profuse use of the "impact structural stroke" technique covering almost the entire painting surface. By splashing and spattering tiny ink dots on wet paper and by controlling the direction of these ink dots,





Plate 13  
Irene Chou in 2000

Irene created a special textural surface and dynamic swirling movement that are very fascinating. This painting is blessed by a novel concept, meticulous planning and proficient execution; it is a worthy recipient of the much coveted prize. In the following year the Hong Kong Museum of Art organised the “Urban Council Fine Arts Award Winners Exhibition”; Irene Chou submitted ten works, all entitled *Infinity Landscape*. With these paintings she had successfully linked her inner vision with the infinite cosmos, creating another hallmark of her personal style.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the series of *Infinity Landscape* mentioned above, Irene Chou’s works in the 1980s and early 1990s were mostly grouped around themes such as *Genesis*, *Creation Trilogy*, *Yin and Yang*, *Movement and The Eclipse*. In the meantime one of her 1987 works illustrates another aspect of her style. Again entitled *Infinity Landscape* (Plate 11),<sup>32</sup> the painting is enlivened by the sweeping movement of a flat brush. The composition borrows from the abstract structure of Chinese calligraphy, while the sharp twists and turns of the brush impart active movement and rhythm. The handling of ink is also varied, ranging from heavy and moist lines to flying-white strokes that are dry and scorched. This aspect of the characteristic style of Irene’s reveals that she was indebted to Lui Shou-kwan, especially his *Chan* paintings, evolved into her own interpretation. After swirling the big brush freely, Irene would inevitably pick up a small brush to render fine details to complete the painting. As in this case, she added at the top right corner concentric circles with

a cloud pattern in its centre, leading our eyes and mind to the depth of the infinite space. In the lower part of the composition she painted in tiny dots two small ball-like spheres placed side by side; these are her personal symbols that appear often in her paintings and could have represented anything from an individual, the society, celestial bodies, her personal emotions or the perfection her ideals. Irene also concerned herself with the situation of human existence; sometimes she devoted her paintings to small pleasures of life, commented on current affairs or the changing of seasons. One such painting is *Midwinter – Spring II* (Plate 12) which conveys the artist's joy in seeing all things coming alive in the passing from winter to spring. Forceful lines derived from the cursive script fly up to the sky, pulling along the tender shoots from Mother Earth with tremendous momentum. This is Irene's tribute to the eternal cycle of life.

While Irene Chou was finding great satisfaction in her creative pursuits and relishing success in her professional career, she once again suffered the challenge of fate. In the last days of 1991, she had a stroke at home when she was all by herself. She lay on the floor for three days before a rescue came. Barely recovering from the stroke, she was taken to Brisbane, Australia in early 1992 by her son Michael, who is a medical doctor, for care and recuperation. Involuntarily she bid farewell to Hong Kong, her home for more than four decades. Her sudden confrontation with life and death and the experience of settling in a new environment may have enlightened Irene on the mystery of life and brought about a new liberation of her life and art. She was inspired by the Buddhist concept of “*jingjin*”, meaning “the essence of moving forward”,<sup>33</sup> and was determined to work hard towards the recovery of her body and spirit. Every day she meditated to clear her mind and practised *qigong* to regulate her heart and breath to be in tune with the universe. Through these exercises Irene broke the boundary between inner self and outer space, sharpened her senses and enlivened her imagination. More importantly, her body and mind became one in a relaxed state for the creative idea to be given complete and free expression. Once again she picked up her brush to paint with great enthusiasm and exuberant spirit (Plate 13), continuing her quest for innovation and change in the nearly two decades of her stay in Brisbane. Her Australian period is like adding a brilliant sunset glow to her twilight years in her adopted country. With her son in Brisbane Irene could enjoy the love and care of the family around her. Still she preferred the freedom of living alone, so that she could concentrate on her art. She continued to be active in showing her work, including solo and group exhibitions in Hong Kong, Australia and other cities of the world. It is apparent that even though she lived down under in Australia, the art world still held this master of new ink painting of Hong Kong in high esteem.<sup>34</sup>

Irene Chou's works painted in Australia carry on her introspective exploration of the universe while the cosmic and metaphysical imageries transcending time and space are as captivating as before. The signs and symbols evolved over the years, as well as the innovative techniques, speak eloquently of the close affinity of art and life of this remarkable woman. But these paintings also signify a change in her personal style. The compositions have become very dense and complex,



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Plate 14 (top)  
Irene Chou, *The  
Universe Lies Within*, ink  
and colour on paper,  
78x124cm, 1997

Plate 15 (bottom)  
Irene Chou, *As You Like  
It*, ink and colour on  
silk, 95x134cm, 2000.  
Private collection



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Plate 16  
Irene Chou, *Autumn in  
Australia*, ink and colour  
on paper, 187x96.4cm,  
1992

conveying richness in her emotional expression. There is a new emphasis on linear rhythm that celebrates the triumph of life. The sweep of her broad strokes charges her paintings with an explosive energy. The most striking feature is her return to the expressive use of colours in her early years. Emerging from the dark ink backgrounds of her paintings are kaleidoscopes of bright reds, greens, blues and oranges, applied through a variety of technical means. Even the winding long lines and the rolling cloud patterns, formerly done in black most of the times, assume various colours. With the strategic addition of gold, her paintings shimmer with light. These paintings signify that Irene had entered a new phase of artistic creation. She had finally reached a free and liberated spiritual realm in her quest of her inner self and the infinite universe. She was her own master and her art had found an inexhaustible source in her own mind. All these elements of her new style can be appreciated in *The Universe Lies Within* of 1997 (Plate 14), to which Irene added twenty seal legends of varying sizes and shapes arranged in clusters along a horizontal line. These vermilion seal impressions, their appearance in the painting totally unconventional, become an integral part of the composition and enhance its decorative effect. Irene liked to apply seal impressions to her paintings as an additional means of emotional release, at the same time she viewed their use as a way to remember her late husband Yi Wen who carved all her seals.<sup>35</sup> Another painting done in the year 2000, entitled *As You Like It* (Plate 15) also exemplifies Irene's new stylistic characteristics mentioned above. Of interest are three passages inscribed by Irene on the painting. The first one is written on broken pieces of collage to express her sense of loss as the *fin de siècle* approached. Next to this passage on the right she wrote in fine small regular script in gold her high hopes for the new millennium, saying, "I hope that starting from tomorrow us mankind will suddenly forget completely the two characters 'chou' (hatred) and 'hen' (regret). When the time comes it will indeed be a world of great unity." The third passage is interesting for its location on the top edge of the painting, but it can only be read when it is turned upside down. Here she copied the words of an old monk: "Life is like a dream; everything is illusionary. Birds fly in the air, what traces are there to be found, let alone those who study the Dao? Said Monk Xuyun, at one hundred and nineteen years of age." These three passages found on one painting shed light on the sensitive and complex emotions of Irene, while their unusual placements testify to her disregard for conventional arrangement of texts in paintings. Indeed she now had complete freedom to follow her artistic inclinations.

When Irene Chou first arrived in Australia, she had not fully recovered from her stroke. Yet she was already curious about her new environment which soon became the subject matter of her painting. She was moved by the splendour of Australian landscape to paint in 1992 *Autumn in Australia* and *Spring in Australia*, but she had no intention to depict any real scenery. As can be seen, *Autumn in Australia* (Plate 16) alludes to the autumn season only by the application of reddish brown colours in "impact structural strokes" and thin washes. The painting is dominated by the sweeping and swirling movement of a broad brush dipped in dark ink, bringing to mind a coiling dragon springing to the sky. The work not only captures her emotional response to nature, but also

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Plate 17  
Irene Chou, *Sunrise*,  
Chinese ink, colour and  
acrylic on silk, 93x60cm,  
1998

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Plate 18  
Irene Chou, *Life is a  
Many Splendoured Thing*,  
ink, colour and acrylic  
on canvas, 2006

by the expressive movement of the brush releases her pent-up feelings. Irene's exploration for new materials and technique did not slow down even at the advanced age of over seventy. It is worth mentioning her experiments in painting on silk and satin. In *Sunrise* (1998; Plate 17), for example, she took advantage of the physical property of satin being less absorbent than *xuan* paper to pour acrylic pigments of various colours on satin and allowed them to flow and mix naturally, resulting in special effects of chance happening. The painting, *As you Like It* mentioned earlier, is painted on silk; the mixture of bright colours in the large roundels in the centre of the composition is another demonstration of the special effect achieved by this technique. More of her experimentation can be found in the use of specially-prepared hemp paper, canvas and wood panel, as well as in the use of splashing ink blots and the dripping method. She also created more of her personal motifs like sprouting life spores and flat discs in bright colours. She continued to devote her life and passion to art even in her twilight years. Between the years 2006 and 2007 when she was eighty-two and eighty-three years old, Irene painted a new series called *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing* (Plate 18). These paintings demonstrate her characteristic style of pure colours, proficient brushwork, refined lines and balanced composition, along with sprouting life spores. With these paintings Irene offered her final tribute to life.

Irene Chou completed her journey of an extraordinary life on 1 July, 2011 at the age of eighty-seven. Shanghai was the starting point of this journey, Hong Kong her home for the larger part of her life; Brisbane, Australia the city where she lived out her twilight years. Her migrations from one place to another exemplify the diaspora of the Chinese people in the twentieth century. Her development from an ordinary housewife to an eminent artist enjoying regional and international acclaim testifies to her personal struggle and artistic talent. She was also an outstanding example of contemporary women artists and, with her personal achievement, bore witness to the elevation of the status of women in the modern world. She combined in her long artistic career of nearly six decades a profound understanding of traditional philosophical thought and artistic heritage to the free exploration advocated by modern trends of art and ideas in the west. More importantly, she constructed a personal universe that crossed cultures, time and space. She created her own signs, symbols and techniques so as to convey the mystery of the universe, the vitality of myriad things and her inner realm. She joined the New Ink Painting Movement pioneered by Lui Shoukwan, recognising the importance of giving a modern interpretation to the Chinese ink painting tradition as her creative direction. She became a leading exponent of this movement with her distinctive personal style and spirit of self-realisation. She successfully transformed the traditional landscape subject matter to an introspective vision encompassing the boundless outer universe and an imaginary space. The significance of such efforts lies in her contribution to the artistic identity of Hong Kong. It was not without criticism when her abstract works made their first appearance, and she even questioned herself if she had deviated too much from Chinese painting. In recent years modern ink painting as a creative medium has gained great popularity in Mainland China. Fueled by enthusiastic art critics and contemporary artists, the trends may even extend beyond



national boundaries to become a globalised development.<sup>36</sup> The achievement of the pioneers of modern ink painting in Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas is well recognised. Irene Chou's historical position as a vanguard of modern Chinese painting will inevitably be assured.

Mayching Kao is the Former Chair Professor of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

<sup>1</sup> Irene Chou, "I. The Time in Which I Was Born", in *Chinese Painting by Irene Chou* (Hong Kong: Fung Ping Shan Museum, University of Hong Kong, 1986), p.21.

<sup>2</sup> Chang Tsong-zung, "The Inner Realm of Irene Chou", in *Paintings by Irene Chou* (Hong Kong: Hanart 2, [1989]). Translated from Chinese text by the author.

<sup>3</sup> "Zi de qi le" is a seal legend of Irene Chou often found on her paintings.

<sup>4</sup> For biography of Irene Chou, see Alicia Pun and Rose Lu, *The Biography of Irene Chou Lu Yun* (Capalaba: Bridge U & Co., 2001). Chou wrote in her preface to this book that she told the two authors truthfully, so the text preserved the "the real Irene".

<sup>5</sup> For biography of Evan Yang, see Yi Wen, *Evan Yang's Autobiography* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Same as note 4, pp.59-60.

<sup>7</sup> Irene Chou had written a number of times that she started to study Chinese painting in 1950. See for example, Zhou Luyun, "Wo de zuohuaguocheng" (我的作畫過程) in *Zhongguorenyuekan* 4 (January 1971), pp.103-104. As for the year she started to take lessons from Chao Shaoan, she also mentioned "1957" in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *Universe of the Mind: Zhou Luyun (Irene Chou), a Retrospective Exhibition* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, University of Hong Kong, 2006), p.21. Yet another alternate date of 1954 is offered in her biography, see note 1, p.134. In her exhibition, *Chinese Painting by Irene Chou*, at the Fung Ping Shan Museum, University of Hong Kong, in 1986, she included an undated flower painting. She claimed that "it was painted thirty-five years ago when I was studying with Master Shao-an", dating the painting possibly to 1951. The work, though an imitation of the master's painting, displays sufficient technical proficiency which could help to establish 1950 as the beginning of her study under Chao. See the illustration of the painting and the accompanying text in the exhibition catalogue on pp.30-31.

<sup>8</sup> Same as note 1, p.23.

<sup>9</sup> Same as *Universe of the Mind: Zhou Luyun (Irene Chou), a Retrospective Exhibition* in note 7, p.16.

<sup>10</sup> Same as note 1, pp.38-39.

<sup>11</sup> "Modern Art Painter Miss Chou Hsien [Lu]-yun" in *Companion Pictorial Issue* 170 (1968), pp.20-21.

<sup>12</sup> Same as “Wo de zhuohuaguocheng”, in note 7, p.104.

<sup>13</sup> See Lu Shoukun, *Shuimohuajiang* (Hong Kong: 1972). His exercise on drawing trees is on pp.140-144.

<sup>14</sup> “Irene Chou Lu-yun”, in *One Art Group*. The publication information is missing, but it appears to be the catalogue accompanying a joint exhibition of members of the One Art Group. It could be the fifth joint exhibition held in 1983. See *The 30th Anniversary Exhibition of the One Art Group in Celebration of the New Millennium* (Hong Kong: One Art Group, [2000]), p.52.

<sup>15</sup> The founding chairman of the In Tao Art Association was Laurence Tam, while the other relatively well-known founding members were Lee Wei-on, Wong Wang-fai, Ng Yiu-chung and Beatrice Ts'o. In 1970 the One Art Group was formed by Lui's students from the Ink Painting Programme at the Department of Extramural Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Irene did not enroll in this programme, so she only joined the Group as late as 1977 and served as the vice-chairman for three consecutive terms in the 1980s.

<sup>16</sup> Same as note 13, pp. 150-156.

<sup>17</sup> Same as note 1, p.25.

<sup>18</sup> Irene Chou, “In My Own Words”, dated 1989, in Cat Street Galleries, *Collectors' Choice: The Cosmic Vision of Zhou Luyun* (Hong Kong: Cat Street Galleries, 1995), p.8.

<sup>19</sup> Same as Note 1, p.27.

<sup>20</sup> Zhou Luyun, “Wocong ‘xinqiri’ kaishizuohua”, in *Xiongshimeishu* 23 (January 1973), pp.70-77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> For illustration of these paintings see *In Tao Art Association: Second Exhibition* (Hong Kong: In Tao Art Association, 1970).

<sup>23</sup> Same as note 1, p.62.

<sup>24</sup> The source of inspiration of painting comes from nature because of its alternate title *Floating Clouds and Flowing Water Show High Winds*. See note 4, p.98.

<sup>25</sup> Other examples of “Line Works” can be seen in note 1, pp.62-69.

<sup>26</sup> Same as “Wo de zuohuaguochen” in note 7, p.62.

<sup>27</sup> This painting has an alternate title *External and Internal*, giving expression to Irene's intention to break the boundary between the internal and external worlds. See note 1, pp.74-75.

<sup>28</sup> See the illustration of this painting in *One Art Group*, a catalogue to accompany the joint exhibition of works by its members in May 1979.

<sup>29</sup> Examples of paintings using the “impact” technique are *Mountain* and *Yellow Plain*, both dated 1979. See their illustrations in “Zhou Luyun de hua” in *Zhongguorennyuekan* 4 (January 1979), colour plates.

- <sup>30</sup> Chang Tsong-zung, “The Inner Realm of Irene Chou”, in *Paintings by Irene Chou* (Hong Kong: Hanart Gallery 2, [1989]), n.p.
- <sup>31</sup> Hong Kong Museum of Art, organiser, *Urban Council Fine Arts Award Winners* (Hong Kong, Urban Council, 1984), pp.13-15.
- <sup>32</sup> Same as note 30. All paintings featured in this solo exhibition were entitled *Infinity Landscape*.
- <sup>33</sup> Lorena Butcher, “The Universe is my Mind; My Mind is the Universe: Recent Paintings by Irene Chou” in *The Universe Is My Heart; My Heart is the Universe: The Art of Irene Chou* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Art Centre, 2006), p.12.
- <sup>34</sup> For Irene’s exhibition record of these years, see *Universe of the Mind: Zhou Luyun (Irene Chou), a Retrospective Exhibition* in note 7, pp.103-106.
- <sup>35</sup> Same as note 33, p.13.
- <sup>36</sup> See Guangdong Museum of Art, ed., *China: Twenty Years of Ink Experiment* (Ha’erbin: Heilongjianmeishuchubanshe, 2001). See also Loong Mee-seen, curator, *Shuimo / Water Ink: Chinese Contemporary Ink Paintings* (New York: Sotheby’s, 2013).

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