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專題論述
Essays

The Art and Research of Professor Wan Qingli (1945-2017)

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Universities in Hong Kong have long attracted scholars from around the world to live and work in the city. Professor Wan Qingli (1945-2017), a distinguished art historian and artist, was one such figure. (Plate 1) Born and trained in Beijing with further studies in the United States, he came to work in Hong Kong from 1989 and stayed there until his retirement in 2011. He was a professor at the Department of Fine Arts, The University of Hong Kong, and from 2006 the founding Director and Chair Professor in Visual Arts at the Academy of Visual Arts, Hong Kong Baptist University.



Plate 1
Professor Wan Qingli.
Image provided by
Academy of Visual Arts,
Hong Kong Baptist
University.

I was Professor Wan's MPhil student at The University of Hong Kong many years ago and one of his last graduate students before he moved to Hong Kong Baptist University. He was a teacher who expected hard work and critical thinking from his students and was encouraging to students who genuinely wished to learn and improve. Many students and young scholars benefited from his teaching, supervision and erudition. His passing at his home in Florida in January last year was mourned by many. From a personal standpoint, I feel particularly grateful to Professor Wan for accepting me as his student in the first place and for encouraging me to pursue doctoral studies in Britain, which completely changed the course of my life. I was deeply saddened to hear the news of his passing.

As an art historian, Professor Wan is best known for his work on Chinese painting of the 19th and 20th centuries – areas of study that were still relatively new when he started his research career. His identity as a painter and his personal connections and friendship with major artists, such as Li Keran (1907-1989), Lu Yanshao (1909-1993) and Wu Zuoren (1908-1997), gave him unique, first-hand insight and understanding of the development of modern Chinese painting. As a painter, he studied and practiced in the brush-and-ink tradition, based of which he developed his own style that was at times witty and satirical. (Plate 2) His life experiences, artistic practice and scholarship led Wan to develop strong and clearly articulated views concerning the history of Chinese painting and its future.

Early Experiences

Professor Wan's exposure to Chinese art and classical learning began early. Born in Beijing in 1945, he grew up in a learned environment.¹ His parents were intellectuals who died when he was a child. He was brought up by his paternal aunt and her husband of Manchu royal lineage who was well-versed in Chinese literature and had an interest in European scientific texts.² Wan already showed talent for painting when he was young, and in primary school he was recommended by his teacher to study art at the Beijing Youth Palace.³ In 1963, Wan was admitted with top marks to the Department of Art

1 Wan's upbringing is mentioned in Wan Qingli and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian: Wan Qingli zhencang shiyou kuizeng shuhuayin* (Bonds of Memory: Wan Qingli's collection of Chinese art given by his teachers and friends) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2013): 42-43; Aida Yuen Wong. "Jieshi yishu de renxing mian" (Art has a human face), in Wan Qingli and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian: Wan Qingli zhencang shiyou kuizeng shuhuayin* (Bonds of Memory: Wan Qingli's collection of Chinese art given by his teachers and friends), (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 2013): 26-37; Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen. "Preface: Recluse of the Concrete Jungle." in E. & J. Frankel and Wan Qingli eds. *The Writings of My Mind: Painting and Calligraphy by Wan Qingli* (New York: E. & J. Frankel, 2002): 8-9; Lawrence Wu. "The Paintings of Wan Qingli," in *Orientalism* 16, no. 12 (Dec 1985): 42-49. Wu (1985) goes into considerable detail but the information needs to be verified.

2 Wong. "Jieshi yishu de renxing mian": 19.

3 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 40.

History at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing.⁴ As part of the art history program, he had the opportunity to learn painting from Xiao Shufang (1911-2005) who was teaching in the *guohua* (national painting) department.⁵ These early experiences gave Wan a strong foundation in the fundamentals of the brush-and-ink painting tradition.

Wan's time as an undergraduate student, however, was short-lived. Political storms were brewing by that point and he would turn out to be among the last cohort to be admitted to CAFA before all admissions ceased for the next fourteen years.⁶ In a precursor to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Mao Zedong implemented the Four Cleanups Movement (*Si qing yundong*) between 1963 and 1966, which was intended to root out corruption and instill socialist thinking among the population. In November 1965, students and teachers from CAFA and other art institutions were sent to the countryside to take part in the Movement.⁷ When Wan returned to Beijing nearly a year later, the Cultural Revolution had erupted.⁸ Students were encouraged to walk out of schools to join "revolutionary mass criticism and repudiation activities."⁹ Professors and school administrators were considered enemies of the people and targets of violent public humiliation. At CAFA, many were incarcerated in a make-shift detention center known as the "ox-shed." Wan was also imprisoned due to his family background.¹⁰

There was a silver lining in this time of suffering and deprivation. During over nine months of incarceration, Wan was able to befriend many important artists and teachers. The integrity shown by these senior figures in the face of injustice and hardship left a strong impression on Wan.¹¹ The appellation "Little friend of the Ox-shed" (*Xiao pengyou*), given to him by Zhu Dan after the Cultural Revolution, became a seal mark that he consistently used on his paintings in remembrance of that time.¹² As evident in many of his subsequent writings, this shared experience of suffering inextricably

4 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 53. Only the art history program admitted students that year at CAFA, otherwise it seems likely that Wan would have applied for the *guohua* (national painting) program instead.

5 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 67; E. & J. Frankel and Wan Qingli, eds. *The Writings of My Mind: Painting and Calligraphy by Wan Qingli* (New York: E. & J. Frankel, 2002): 70.

6 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 53.

7 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 40.

8 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 54.

9 Richard King, ed., *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010): 95.

10 Two other students were also imprisoned. See Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 19 and 41, footnote 4.

11 See for instance the many stories recorded in Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian* and Wan Qingli, *Huajia yu huashi: Jindai meishu conggao* (Artists and art history: Collected writings on modern art) (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 1997).

12 On how Wan acquired this name, see Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 41, footnote 5.



bound Wan to a generation of senior artists, and informed his strong sense of responsibility towards upholding their memory and reputation.

Establishing Himself as a Painter

In July 1968, Wan was released from the ox-shed, but he was made to continue his “reform through labor” in the rural areas and factories in Hebei province. He still painted during his exile. As he later recalled, he showed Li Keran “landscape paintings in oil and a dozen of landscape sketches in brush and ink made during his time in the countryside.”¹³ These works helped to convince Li to accept Wan as his student.¹⁴

Four and a half years later, Wan was finally allowed to return to Beijing and was allocated work at the Beijing Fine Art Academy. During this time the Cultural Revolution was still ongoing. Artists were considered servants of the state and had to produce works on order for propaganda purposes. They also had to abide by the officially sanctioned socialist realist style of painting. Yet the period from 1973 to 1979 when Wan was at the Academy was in fact very productive for him as a painter. He resumed study in private with Xiao Shufang and her husband Wu Zuoren, who also taught him calligraphy and poetry in addition to painting. He became an official student of Li Keran in 1973 and later Lu Yanshao in 1976 when Lu was based in Hangzhou.¹⁵ A sketchbook dated 1974 shows that Wan had the opportunity to travel to Mount Taihang to make sketches from nature. (Plates 3, 4) Interestingly, apart from one

Plate 2

Wan Qingli, *In the Middle of the Song No One is in Sight*, set of fifteen hanging scrolls, ink on paper, 2003, 142 x 74 cm each. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art. Image provided by Hong Kong Museum of Art.

13 Wan Qingli, “Yi yi de cheng, de gao yi hou – Mianhuai enshik Keran xiansheng” (Art completed by virtue, his virtue was high and his art substantial – in memory of my teacher Li Keran) 1990; repr. Wan Qingli, *Huajia yu huashi: Jindai meishu conggao* (Artists and art history: Collected writings on modern art) (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 1997): 217.

14 Ibid., 217.

15 The 1976 was when Lu Yanshao officially accepted Wan as his student, but they had corresponded before then. See Wan, *Cun nian*: 136-39, Plate 39.



sketch (Plate 3) that shows an electric cable faintly in the distance and others that include some signs of villagers, this album of images is striking as representations of pure landscapes, with little discernible political considerations. Instead, the artist is focused on capturing the patterns of the overlapping mountainous terrain and the textures of the landscape, which would become a feature of Wan's later paintings.

In the meantime, Wan found supportive colleagues at the Academy who helped him submit paintings to exhibitions and publications, including large-scale figural works, new year images, illustrations and cartoons.¹⁶ He painted decorative works that were used as backdrops for public spaces and hotels.¹⁷ Wan was recognized for his work, including winning First Prize for New Chinese Painting awarded by the Beijing Artists Association.¹⁸ The paintings from Wan's time at the Academy have not been reproduced in catalogs of his works, and more research will be needed to explore this period of his career when he was a professional painter.

After the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, arts education in China resumed. Wan was able to continue his formal training at CAFA when he was accepted into the newly established Master's program in the *guohua* department, specializing in landscape painting.¹⁹ His supervisor was none other than Li Keran. Sketching *en plein air* was part of the program of training, which Li advocated as a way to instill vitality into the Chinese landscape painting genre.

According to Li, there were three main points to consider when sketching: firstly, one has to study nature (to observe, reflect and discover); secondly, to refrain from competing with a camera (that is, not simply painting what one sees), and thirdly, to create according to each specific scene through a

16 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 109.

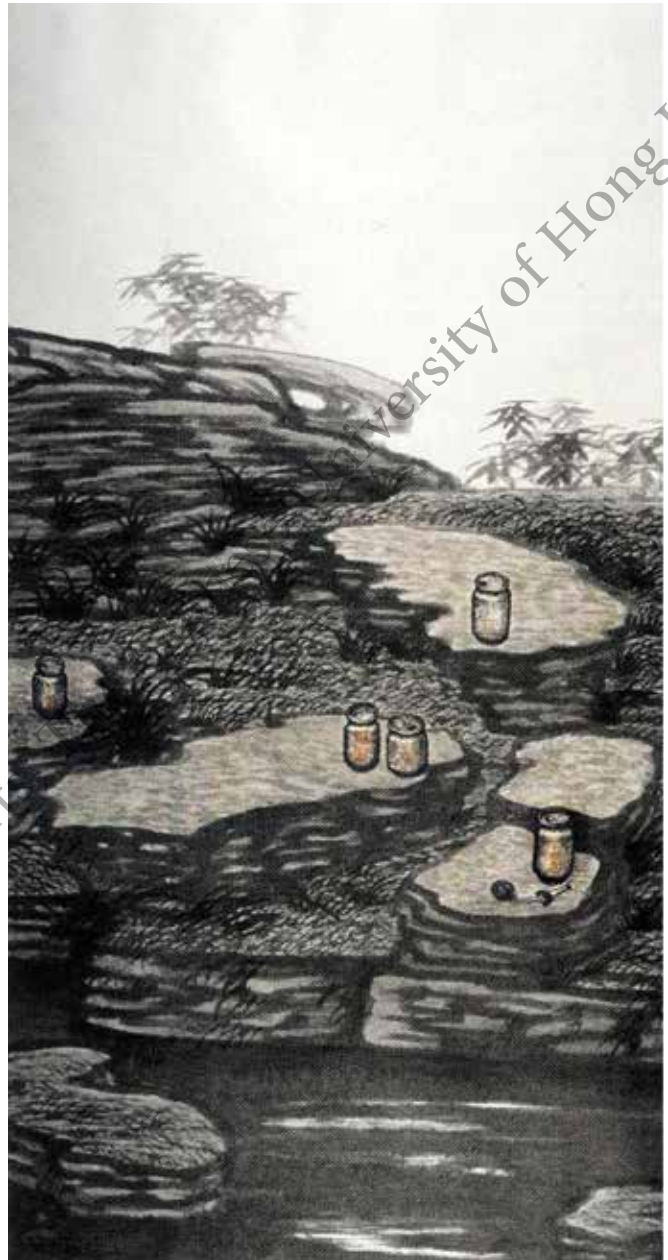
17 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 86.

18 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 109; Frankel and Wan, *The Writings of my Mind*: 70.

19 Wan, "Yi yi de cheng": 220.



Plate 2a
Wan Qingli, *In the Middle
of the Song No One is in
Sight*, the fifteenth of a set
of fifteen scrolls.



Plates 2b & 2c

Wan Qingli, *In the Middle of the Song No One is in Sight*, the tenth and eleventh of a set of fifteen scrolls.



Plate 3

Wan Qingli, one sketch from the album *In Praise of Mount Taihang*, 1974, ink and color on paper, 11.5 x 16 cm. Published in Yeung Chun-tong, ed., *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 18.

process of selecting, editing and refining that elevate the scene above ordinary life.²⁰ A comparison of Wan's 1974 sketchbook with two others he made in 1980 shows his efforts to put this teaching into practice. The sketches from 1980 are more varied and experimental in style as Wan tried different angles and ways of arranging the compositions. (Plate 5) Some images closely resemble Li Keran's works, such as in the use of layered ink and the insertion of Li's well-known depiction of a child riding a water buffalo, (Plate 6) while others demonstrate a lighter touch that is distinct from his teacher's style. These two sketchbooks from 1980 were inscribed by Li. One of the inscriptions reads "Tradition in the present" (*chuantong jinzhao*) while the other "Real mountains and real water" (*zhen shan zhen shui*), which expressed Li's teachings and his approval of his student's work.²¹ The importance of travel and experiencing nature first hand to the creation of landscape paintings would remain with Wan throughout his career.

Research and Doctoral Studies in America

After he graduated with his Master's degree at CAFA, Wan was employed in the newly established Research Institute of Chinese Painting under the Ministry of Culture, with

²⁰ Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 183; for the English see p. 309 with edits. Also discussed in Wan Qingli, "Kaipai huajia Li Keran" (Li Keran, a pioneering painter) 1984; repr. Wan, *Huajia yu huashi*: 211.

²¹ Wan, "Yi yi de cheng": 221.

its office in the Summer Palace (*Yiheyuan*).²² Wan's background in art history, his writing skills, as well as his knowledge of Chinese painting and painters, all equipped him well for this position. Although this can be considered the beginning of his professional career as a researcher and art historian, he continued to paint during this time, including for prestigious government projects.²³ (Plate 7)

At the Institute, Wan founded the periodical *Chinese Painting Studies* and became its first editor. The journal was meant as "a forum for discussions by scholars and artists on the nature of modern Chinese art, its place in Chinese society and the international art scene."²⁴ The development and future direction of Chinese painting was a critical issue for many as the country recovered from the Cultural Revolution. The implementation of the reform and opening-up policies meant that artists had opportunities to travel and had access to a wave of information about international art theories and practices. As a result, artists explored new modes of expression that challenged existing practices. In this climate, Wan also wished

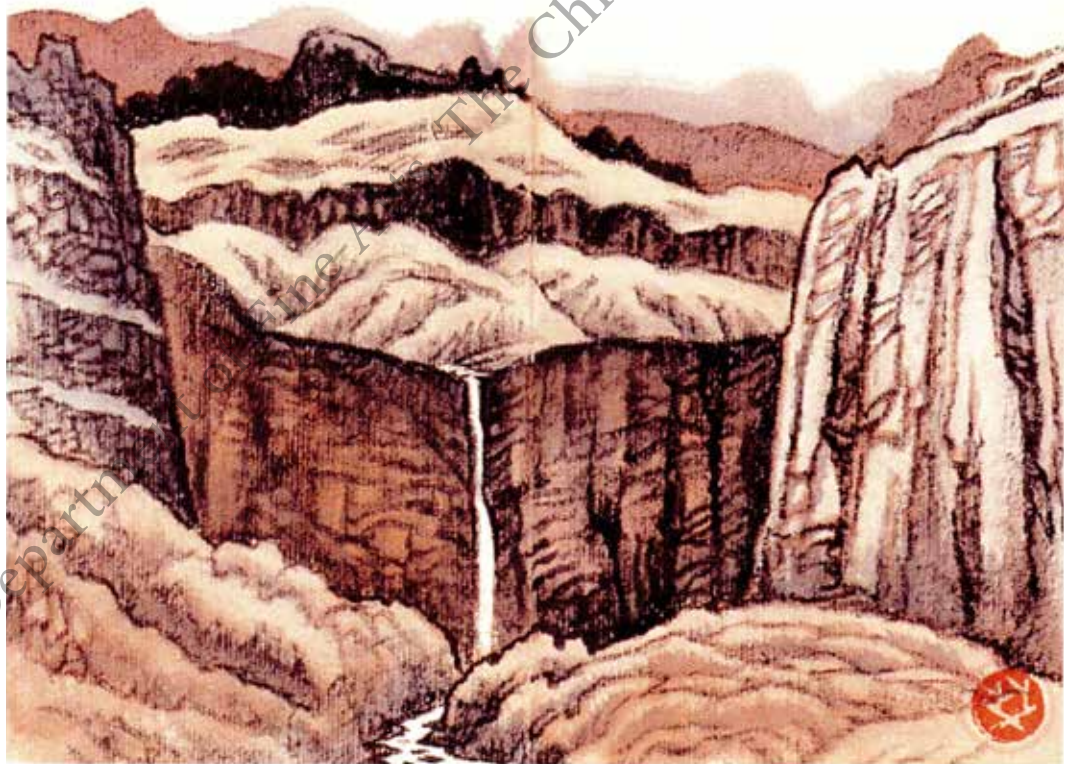


Plate 4

Wan Qingli, one sketch from the album *In Praise of Mount Taihang*, 1974, ink and color on paper, 11.5 x 16 cm. Published in Yeung Chun-tong, ed., *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 19.

22 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 151.

23 He was selected to create large-scale works for the People's Convention Hall, the Diaoyutai National Guest Hotel and Zhongnanhai, the central headquarters of the Communist Party of China.

24 Cited in Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 32.

to travel abroad, not only to further his studies but also to see for himself the new artistic developments outside China.²⁵ By then, he was nearly forty years old and such a move would not have been an easy one to make, but with the encouragement of Li Keran, Wan embarked on a self-funded journey to the United States in 1984.²⁶

In America, Wan first spent two semesters at the City University of New York where he visited museums and galleries during his spare time.²⁷ He then continued his graduate studies at the University of Kansas, under the supervision of the leading Chinese art historian Li Chu-ting. Wan's doctoral thesis, *Li Keran (1907-1989) and Twentieth-century Chinese painting*, was a study of his teacher's painting

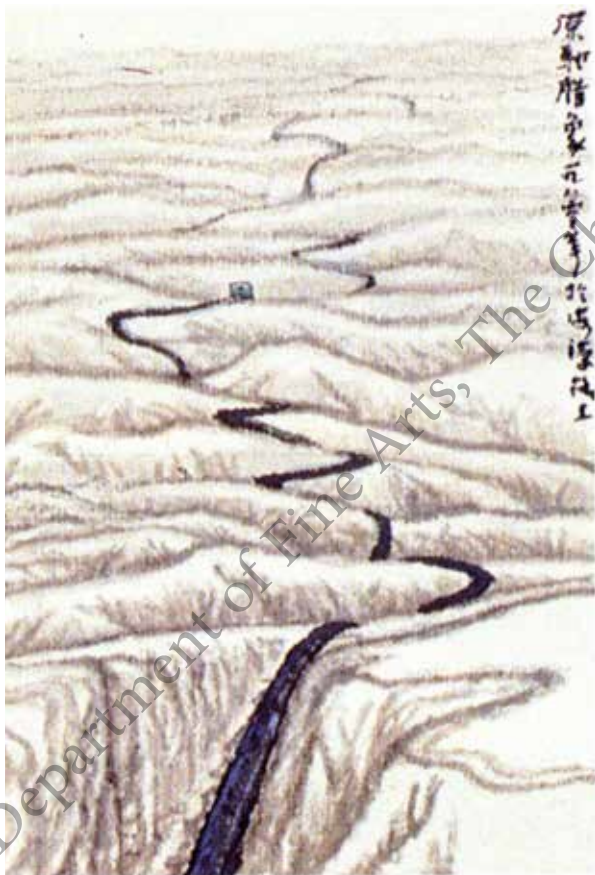


Plate 5

Wan Qingli, one sketch from the album *A Trip to Ningxia* (detail) 1980, ink and color on paper, 8 x 11.5 cm. Published in Yeung Chun-tong, ed., *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 26.

25 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 218.

26 Wan, "Yi yi de cheng": 226-27.

27 Wan Qingli, "Ye tan dangdai Zhongguo hua" (Also Commenting on Contemporary Chinese Painting) 1986; repr. Wan, *Huajia yu huashi*: 58.



Plate 6

Wan Qingli, one sketch from the album *Sketches from Nature*, 1980, ink and color on paper, 11.5 x 16.5 cm. Published in Yeung Chun-tong, ed., *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), p29.

theory and style.²⁸ Wan was able to draw on his personal experiences and access a large number of Li's authentic works and other important primary material for his research, which provided singular insight into Li's thinking and development as an artist. His research on Li formed the basis of a critical biography of the artist's life, which was published in 1995.²⁹

Rather than radically changed his practice and thinking, Wan's experiences overseas made him more determined to stand up for what he has known and learnt from his teachers in China. This is evident in a passionately argued paper written in 1986 in response to the writings of a young scholar Li Xiaoshan

²⁸ Wan Qingli, *Li Keran (1907-1989) and Twentieth-century Chinese painting* (PhD thesis, University of Kansas, 1991).

²⁹ Wan Qingli, *Li Keran pingzhuan, 1907-1989 (A Critical Biography of Li Keran, 1907-1989)* (Taipei: Hsiung Shih Art Books Co. Ltd., 1995).



in China.³⁰ Li claimed that traditional Chinese painting and the thinking it is based on had run its course and that it was useless to seek innovation based on the past. He criticized artists such as Li Keran and others categorized as *guocui* (national essence) painters for holding onto ossified ideas and aesthetics. Instead, he called for a revolutionary new kind of thinking about painting for contemporary China. Li's rejection of the past was a worrying reminder to Wan of the extreme views of the Cultural Revolution. In response, Wan defended the contributions and accomplishments of his teacher and others like him despite the persecution that they suffered.³¹ He also questioned whether Li's notion of a new kind of painting was in fact modern painting of "the west" – an argument that repeated the reforms demanded by the "New Cultural Movement" in the beginning of the 20th century.³² Wan argues that:

Plate 7

Wan Qingli, *The Moon is Brighter at Home* (detail), 1984, ink and color on paper, size unknown. Published in *Catalog of Painting Collection of Zhongnanhai* (Xiyuanchubanshe, 1993), p. 49.

30 Wan, "Ye tan dangdai Zhongguo hua": 57–63. Li Xiaoshan, "Dangdai Zhongguo hua zhi wojian" (My Opinion on Contemporary Chinese Painting) 1985; repr. *Dangdai yishu yu touzi* (Contemporary Art and Investment) (2009): 74–75. Also Li Xiaoshan, "Zhongguo hua cunzai de qianti" (The Premise for the Existence of Chinese Painting) cited in Wan's paper.

31 Elsewhere, Wan would defiantly refer to himself as a "doctoral student studying abroad, from the school of national essence" (*Liuyang boshi guocui pai*), which referenced these debates. For instance, in Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 218.

32 In this essay, I use such terms as "western art" and "the west" because these were the terms used by Wan and other scholars at the time. The implicit meaning is that "the west" broadly equals Western Europe and America.

In the eyes of some young friends who lack discriminant analysis, western contemporary painting seems to be an “entirely new” form of art that suddenly appeared. This does not correspond with historical fact. Western contemporary painting developed rapidly but nevertheless still progressively out of an economic, political and cultural background that was entirely different from that of our country’s... I believe research on Chinese ancient civilization has only just begun... Comprehensive and in-depth research on the Chinese painting tradition that developed mainly during the feudal period is also still lacking... To be situated in the current times, to know the past and the present, to distinguish between east and west, to build on the past and forge ahead into the future – this is the only “ideal way out” for the expansive future development of Chinese painting.³³

This 1986 article shows that Wan had already begun to formulate his own reading of Chinese painting history, which he saw as distinct from western painting traditions. It is also evident that he considered his art historical study of the past as a pursuit that was inseparable not only from his practice as an artist but also from a greater mission to create a strong foundation for the future of Chinese painting.

Exposure to contemporary art in America led Wan to further question whether it was necessary for Chinese artists to follow the same path of development as their overseas counterpart. His meeting with John Cage (1912-1992), an influential American composer and music theorist, was particularly memorable for Wan.³⁴ Cage was a leading member of the post-war Avant-garde who incorporated chance and random happenings in his compositions. Cage’s interest in East Asian philosophies, such as the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), contrasted with widespread views in the arts scene in China at the time that negated the value of past learning. In conversation, Wan told Cage that young artists in China had declared that they would surpass all the art movements that had appeared in western modern art history in the shortest amount of time. Cage expressed surprise at this and asked why that would be necessary, to which Wan had no answer.³⁵ Such encounters led Wan to question the framework that equated modernization with westernization, and whether Chinese art in the 20th century must be evaluated based on western standards.

No Brush and No Ink Equal Zero (*Wu bi wu mo dengyu ling*)

Wan’s determination to defend the value and relevance of Chinese painting history was made clear in a debate that took place between him and the artist Wu Guanzhong (1919-2010) in 1991, after

33 Wan, “Ye tan dangdai Zhongguo hua:” 60.

34 Wan Qingli, “Yi wei dui Xifang dangdai yishu you duo fangmian yingxiang de guai laotou – Yuehan Kaiqi” (John Cage, A weird old man that has multi-dimensional impacts upon western contemporary art), 1988, repr. Wan, *Huajia yu huashi*: 116-121.

35 Ibid., 121.

Wan had moved to Hong Kong. The impromptu debate initially took place verbally at an event and was expanded upon in subsequent articles by both Wu and Wan.³⁶ The debate centered on Wu's provocative statement that "brush and ink equal zero" (*bimo dengyu ling*). What this meant, according to Wu, is that brush and ink are merely tools of the artist used for the purpose of self-expression. If the brush marks are removed from the composition of the painting, then they are in themselves meaningless and should not be used as the standard to evaluate the overall quality of the work. On the other hand, Wan argues that ink brush marks are in fact the traces of an artist's singular spirit and character, and hence are not meaningless. He references the history of literati painting theories to argue that ink brush marks are imbued with humanistic significance that have repeatedly been the basis of innovation in Chinese painting history.

Wu Guanzhong's statement was fiercely debated within Chinese paintings circles. Wu's position is understandable from the perspective of an artist who seeks to be free to express himself through whatever means he sees fit. The reason that Wu's statement incited such strong responses relates to the question of cultural identity and what makes Chinese painting "Chinese."³⁷ For Wan, the issue was not so much that Chinese painting had to be defined by the materials of brush, ink and *xuan* paper. Instead, Wan's main objection lies with the implication in Wu's statement that denied the innovations made by painters in China's history and their continued relevance in the contemporary world. In particular, Wan draws attention to the "ink play" of Northern Song (960-1127) literati painters and the flourishing of this practice in the late Ming-early Qing period through the works of Dong Qichang (1555-1636).³⁸ He claims for them a vanguard position in world painting history for treating painting as a kind of game. He writes that:

*"No brush and no ink equal zero" [from the late Ming to the early Qing] because brush and ink had moved from a history of purely depicting form and being subordinate to form, into a history that transcended form, was independent from form, and where brush and ink constituted independent content of a painting. The liberation of western painting visual language from the methods of creating illusion to become pure painting in and of itself happened gradually and only began to emerge in the beginning of the 20th century. This can be said to be later than Chinese painting by several hundred years.*³⁹

36 See Wan's recollection of the debate in Wan Qingli, "Guanyu 'Bimo dengyu ling' de zhenglun – Zhi Liu Xiaochun boshi de yi feng xin" (About the debate over "Brush and ink equal zero" – a letter to Dr Liu Xiaochun) 1994, repr. Wan, *Huajia yu huashi*: 89-91. Also Wan Qingli, "Wu bi wu mo dengyu ling – Xubaizhai cang Ming Qing huihua lungao" (No brush and no ink equal zero – essays on the Xubaizhai collection of Ming and Qing paintings) 1992, repr. Wan, *Huajia yu huashi*: 80-88; Wu Guanzhong's article was published in *Ming Pao Monthly* in March 1992.

37 Jason C. Kuo, *Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Pin-hung's Late Work* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004): 187.

38 Wan, "Wu bi wu mo deyu ling": 82-84.

39 *Ibid.*, 82.

This view is in fact very similar to that expressed by another painter and educator Chen Shizeng (1876-1923) decades earlier in his 1921 essay “The Value of Literati Painting,” which art historian Craig Clunas summarizes:

*What matters is not a transcription of the world, he [Chen Shizeng] says, but the expression of artistic subjectivity, and this is something which painting in China has always done; hence, the so-called “traditional” is in fact the very essence of the modern, and fit to take its place with the other modernities of the postwar world.*⁴⁰

Thus, Wan’s equally provocative “no brush and no ink equal zero” response to Wu’s “brush and ink equal zero” should not be understood literally. Rather, for Wan, brush and ink in this context are references to the history of Chinese painting. It is also tied to a broader argument that Wan is making about the place of modern Chinese painting in the world, and how it should be studied and evaluated.

China-centered Approach

Based on his publications and debates in America and Hong Kong, it is evident that Wan was thinking beyond individual case studies towards larger conceptual and methodological issues. He found in the publications of the historian Paul Cohen a particularly relevant and useful framework that directly addressed many of the key issues that he was concerned with. Cohen was critical of the three major conceptual frameworks that he identified in American post-war scholarship about late Qing-early Republican China.⁴¹ These approaches can be summarized as “impact-response, modernization, and imperialism,” which in turn focused on China’s response to western impact, western modernization as the norm, and the negative impact of imperialism on the development of China. Instead, Cohen argues that historians should “understand Chinese history on its own terms, paying close attention to Chinese historical trajectories and Chinese perceptions of their problems, rather than a set of expectations derived from western history.”⁴² Cohen’s critique of the prevailing premises of discussion and his advocating a “China-centered” approach resonated strongly with Wan. He found that Cohen’s critique

40 Craig Clunas, “China: New Nation, New Art 1911-1932,” Gresham College Lecture, 20 November, 2017, transcript available on Gresham College website, p. 3. Accessed 31 March, 2018, <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/china-new-nation-new-art-1911-32>.

41 For a full discussion, see Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). His arguments were also published in an article translated into Chinese in 1983, which Wan read. Paul Cohen, “Meiguo yanjiu Qingmo Minchu Zhongguo lishi de xin dongxiang” (New directions in American scholarship on late Qing early Republican period China,” in Cai Shangsi ed. *Lun Qingmo Mingchu Zhongguo shehui* (A Discussion of Late Qing Early Republican Chinese society) (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1983): 317–357.

42 Accessed 31 March, 2018, <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/discovering-history-in-china/9780231151931>.

could almost be directly applied to the study of 19th- and 20th-century Chinese painting. Drawing inspiration from Cohen, Wan proposed “three principles” for the study of modern Chinese painting, which he presented at an international symposium on Pan Tianshou (1897-1971) in Hangzhou in 1994.⁴³ The paper was included as the opening work in his volume of essays published in 1997, which suggests its central importance to Wan’s thinking.

His three principles are: Firstly, modern Chinese painting and painters should be evaluated using criteria internal to China rather than external western ones.⁴⁴ By applying western standards, Wan felt that the paintings of artists in China who learnt from the west will only ever be viewed as lesser imitations of western art. Instead, one should look within Chinese painting history and consider its development in the late imperial period as arising from a variety of factors that were not necessarily determined by western incursions into China. Continuing from the first point, Wan believes that western painting and Chinese painting have different histories and trajectories. As such, one should not forcibly apply western notions of art movements onto modern Chinese painting or expect the same movements to appear in China. In particular, Wan felt that the idea that modern art is characterized by a conscious break with the past came from the west, and that this was a damaging concept for China and Chinese painting.

Wan’s third principle takes a wider view. He suggests that ultimately a comparative approach to history needs to be conducted from a macro perspective of human civilization, rather than from a China-centric or western-centric view point, in order to seek common concerns. Interestingly, Wan includes the first two but not this third principle in his book *Not a Century of Decline: A History of Nineteenth Century Chinese Painting* (*Bing fei shuailuo de bainian: Shijiu shiji Zhongguo huihua shi*) (2005), perhaps recognizing the difficulty in reconciling these various ideas.⁴⁵ It draws attention to an unresolved issue within Wan’s principles – that they are still firmly located within a view of history that is defined by an east (China) versus west (broadly Western Europe and America) divide.⁴⁶

43 Wan Qingli, “Pan Tianshou zai ershi shiji Zhongguo huihua shi shang de diwei” (The position of Pan Tianshou in 20th century Chinese painting history) 1994, repr. *Wan, Huajia yu huashi*: 3-16.

44 I use the problematic term “western” as a direct translation of Professor Wan’s use of the term *Xifang*.

45 Wan Qingli, *Bing fei shuailuo de bainian: Shijiu shiji Zhongguo huihua shi* (*Not a Century of Decline: A History of Nineteenth Century Chinese Painting*) (Taipei: Hsiung Shih Art Books Co. Ltd., 2005): 111-2. Officially translated as “The nineteenth century was not declining in art”, but I have followed the translation used by Craig Clunas, *Chinese Painting and Its Audiences* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017): 138, which is closer to the Chinese title.

46 For recent critiques of Wan’s principles, see Clunas, *Chinese Painting and Its Audiences*: 138; Cao Qinghui, “Guanyu Wan Qingli yanjiu Zhongguo jinxiandai huihua shi de ‘san yuanze’ (About Wan Qingli’s Three Principles on the Study of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Painting), accessed 31 March, 2018, http://www.artlinkart.com/cn/article/overview/cbacxun/about_by2/C/a93gsCr.



Plate 8
Cover of *Not a Century of Decline*.

Not a Century of Decline

Not a Century of Decline can be considered a culmination of Wan's thinking on Chinese painting history. (Plate 8) The book began as a series of articles published in the art journal *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly* starting from 1992 and was completed twelve years later, during which Professor Wan had to stop work for a time when he was diagnosed with leukemia. As its bold title unmistakably conveys, this book calls for a reassessment of Chinese painting of the 19th century, refuting the belief that Chinese painting was degenerate during this period. It goes against the tide of belief expressed as early as 1917 by Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and others who saw the so-called Orthodox School of the Qing dynasty and the "Four Wangs" as the roots of this decline.⁴⁷

47 Summarized in Wan, *Bing fei shuailuo de bainian*: 11. The "Four Wangs" refers to the painters Wang Shimin (1592-1680), Wang Jian (1598-1677), Wang Hui (1632-1717) and Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715).

Putting in practice the principles noted above, Wan's book broadens the discussion of Chinese painting in the 19th century to include a diverse range of artworks that had previously been neglected or studied separately, including oil paintings, export paintings and graphic arts. He also brought attention to groups of painters working in different regions in China, apart from the more well-known and relatively well-studied Shanghai School. He emphasizes the importance of commercialization and urbanization, and the role that merchants played in fostering new tastes and developments in painting, changes that were already afoot in the late Ming-early Qing period. While Wan gives equal attention to various forms of painting from 19th century China, he shows particular appreciation for the calligraphers, painters and seal carvers who sought inspiration from antiquarian studies. For Wan, the stele school (*beixue*) of calligraphy that studied pre-Tang stele inscriptions as well as painting that incorporated *jinshi* scholarship of bronze and stone inscriptions were transformative and evidence of the vitality and innovation that were possible through learning from the past.

Looking back to the early Qing dynasty, Wan also offered a more positive assessment of the paintings of the "Four Wangs," particularly the works of Wang Hui (1632-1717), and situates them in the artistic trend that intensified the focus on ink brush marks and their manipulation.⁴⁸ In another article, Wan bluntly states that it is not the fault of the Four Wangs if people who try to learn from their works do not become masters of painting.⁴⁹ He had good reason to claim this, since both his teachers, Li Keran and Lu Yanshao, had to a greater or lesser degree studied the paintings of the Four Wangs but forged their own outlook and styles.⁵⁰

Scholar Painter of the Concrete Jungle

Wan continued to paint in his spare time while working as an academic in Hong Kong. He held exhibitions, but these were low key affairs with little fanfare and ceremony. Wan has been described as a scholar painter who "paints as well as he writes" and who "consciously sought to maintain the humane qualities of China's literati art."⁵¹ During his time in America, he decided that he would not be a professional artist who sold his works on the market.⁵² This "amateur" quality together with his knowledge of classical learning also connects him to the ideals of Northern Song literati painters.

48 Wan, *Bingfei shuailuo de bainian*: 21-23.

49 Wan Qingli, "Zuohua gui you guyi – Lu Yanshao shanshui hua fengge sanlun" (A sense of the ancient is valued in painting – Various discussions on Lu Yanshao's landscape painting style) 1991; repr. Wan, *Huajia yu huashi*: 294.

50 *Ibid.*, 292-294.

51 Andrews and Shen, "Preface".

52 Wan and Hong Kong Museum of Art, eds. *Cun nian*: 219.

Plate 9

Wan Qingli, *The New Houses in the Taihang Mountains*, 1981, ink and color on paper, 130 x 79 cm. Published in *Orientalism*, 1985, 16(12), p. 44.



Landscape, figures and animals were the main subject matter in Wan's paintings. A few published works from the early 1980s show Wan's interest in painting snowscapes and moonlit compositions.⁵³ (Plate 9) These quiet scenes bear surprisingly little resemblance to the works of his teachers Li Keran and Lu Yanshao, and are evidence of his conscious efforts to discover his own style. His figure paintings that depict famous Chinese cultural figures are concise and expressive with a cartoon-like quality where the background and extraneous details are omitted. (Plate 10, 11)

Some of Wan's monumental landscape paintings produced in Hong Kong may be described as art-historical art, whereby he bases his compositions on works by famous painters of the past.⁵⁴ For instance, *Autumn Mountains* (1995) is clearly a re-imagining of Juran's (10th century) *Discussing Dao in Autumn Mountains*. (Plate 12) These paintings by Wan show carefully considered brushwork and compositions that seem almost cerebral. Overtime, Wan increasingly focused on expressing the landscape of his heart-mind (*xin zhong shanshui*) that freely drew upon his memories, sketches from his travels, art historical models and his own imagination.⁵⁵ Wan's painting of *Autumn Mountains* ten years later in 2005 (Plate 13) is still based on Juran's composition but the work is now also an explosion of color.

Wan's travels in America while studying there in the 1980s seem to have inspired different approaches, which he would continue to explore in his later works. Perhaps in response to an unfamiliar landscape and travel to multiple sites by car, the sketches in a 1986 album have a dream-like quality to them.⁵⁶ Wan uses horizontal wave-like lines and washes to layer the scenery, so that the vastness of the landscape, sky and water seem to blend into one. (Plate 14) Later, these visual elements would frequently appear in Wan's paintings, usually in a narrow vertical format that emphasize the graphic quality of repeated lines.⁵⁷ (Plate 15) This interest in rhythmic lines and the changing patterns of nature have affinity with the works of Lu Yanshao.

53 Wu, "The Paintings of Wan Qingli": 42-49.

54 See examples in Yeung Chun-tong, ed. *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996).

55 Wan's thoughts on this is mentioned in Frankel and Wan, *The Writings of My Mind*, no. 3. For examples of Wan's later monumental landscapes see Luk Yu-ping, ed., *A Brush with Irony: Paintings by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 2006).

56 Yeung, ed. *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli*: 44-46. Pedith Chan, "The Dreamland of a Scholar-Painter: Landscape Paintings by Wan Qingli" in *America the Beautiful: Paintings by Wan Qingli* (New York: E&J Frankel Ltd, 2009): 23-25. With thanks to Pedith Chan for sharing this paper with me.

57 See many examples in Xiao Fenqi, ed., *Wan Qingli huazhan* (Exhibition of Wan Qingli's Paintings) (Hong Kong: Zhongguo yiyuan chubanshe, 2004).



Plate 10

Wan Qingli, 1984, *Marrying Off His Sister*, ink and color on paper, 30 x 41 cm. Published in Yeung Chun-tong, ed., *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 41.



Plate 11

Wan Qingli, *Dotting the Eyes of the Dragon*, 1984, ink and color on paper, 67 x 67 cm. Published in *Oriental Arts*, 1985, 16(12), p. 47.



Plate 12 (left)

Wan Qingli, *Autumn Mountains*, 1995, ink and color on paper, 90.5 x 165 cm. Published in Yeung Chun-tong, ed., *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 71.

Plate 13 (right)

Wan Qingli, *Autumn Mountains*, 2005, ink and color on paper, 142 x 74 cm. Published in Luk Yu-ping, ed., *A Brush with Irony: Paintings by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 2006), Plate 6, p. 37.

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Plate 14

Wan Qingli, one sketch from the album *A Trip to the Western Hemisphere*, 1986, ink and color on paper, 11.5 x 17 cm. Published in Yeung Chun-tong, ed., *Painting and Writing by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 45.

Painting must have brought Wan pleasure and solace away from the pressures of academic life in Hong Kong. In some paintings he referred to himself as a “recluse of the concrete jungle,” where among the high-rises of the city, he has created a sanctuary for himself in his art. His painting also became an outlet. In Hong Kong, faced with a different language (Cantonese) and way of life, his works increasingly incorporated elements of slang and humorous or satirical observations of contemporary society. He was particularly critical of the mass media and paparazzi culture in Hong Kong (like angling unsuspecting fish, as shown in one painting), and seemed appalled and amused at the same time by the vulgarity and peculiarities of Cantonese slang. (Plate 16) In one couplet, he uses strong regular script to bring together media slang to create two lines that seems ridiculous. The couplet roughly translates as “Look closely! Juicy news with a big scoop; what are you thinking? R-rated, pirated nonsense.” (Plate 17) In a way Wan is actually taking part in the culture of *mo lei tau*, the last term in the couplet, which is synonymous with the absurdist comedies of Stephen Chow in the 1990s known for their wild creative wordplay in Cantonese. The couplet highlights the vulgarity of these terms and yet elevates them into an art form. In the end though, Wan writes that he is “imbued with a sense of melancholy” after writing it.

Wan's love-hate relationship with Hong Kong is expressed with humor in the painting *Night Dreams of a Mountain Dwelling* (2001).⁵⁸ (Plate 18) In this painting, Wan depicts himself with a Daoist priest who is wearing sunglasses in a scene reminiscent of Victoria Peak in Hong Kong. In a long inscription, Wan

58 Frankel and Wan. *The Writings of My Mind*: Plate 12, 40-41.



Plate 15

Wan Qingli, *In the Brush-mode of Yuan Masters 2*, 2003, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 142 x 36 cm. Published in Luk Yu-ping, ed., *A Brush with Irony: Paintings by Wan Qingli* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, 2006), Plate 9, p. 41.



Plate 16 (left)
Wan Qingli, *A Scoop*, 2013, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, 137.3 x 34 cm. Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art. Image provided by Hong Kong Museum of Art.

Plate 17 (right)
Wan Qingli, *A Couplet in Regular Script*, 2000, a pair of hanging scrolls, ink on paper, 132 x 30 cm. Collection of University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong. Image provided by University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong.



explains that he dreamt of a Daoist priest who turns out to be a Hong Kong local. In comic improvised verse (*dayoushi*) the two men engage in a conversation filled with a long list of complaints about the city, such as the pollution that causes cancer, to the vulgar and materialistic aspects of city life, and the many stereotypical characters of the city. The priest responds in Cantonese: “I can see that you have not broken with your Hong Kong roots. Love is mingled with hate. When you are like this, how can you not be angry?”

Whether it is elegant landscape paintings or works that incorporate humor and satire, they all derive from Wan’s honest emotions and pure thoughts. In 2001, Wan wrote about his own works, saying that:

*Most of my works from the past decade... are meant for self-entertainment or to be shared only with very close friends. They are very private in nature. It only occurred to me in the last ten years that Chinese painting can serve as a powerful vehicle to convey one’s sentiments not only by painted images, but also through calligraphic inscription and even seals. I see no reason why such a competent medium of expressions should become extinct.*⁵⁹

Bonds of Memory

In a series of short articles published while he was director and professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, Wan made clear that he believed Chinese painting will only become more diverse in the context of globalized contemporary life, and it does not need to be defined or limited by traditional forms of materials and expressions.⁶⁰ Instead he advocates the importance for artists to study, understand and respect history. In his view, self-cultivation and the pursuit of elevated artistic conception are perhaps the most relevant and important legacy of the literati painting tradition.⁶¹

For Wan who was trained in the *guohua* tradition though, brush and ink have a profoundly personal significance – they are tied to history, people, self and national identity. In the exhibition *Bonds of Memory: Wan Qingli’s Collection of Chinese Art Given by His Teachers and Friends* held at the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2013, audiences had the privilege of looking into this private world, where the

59 Frankel and Wan. *The Writings of My Mind*: 26.

60 These were published in the journal *Dangdai Zhongguo hua* (Contemporary Chinese painting) in 2007. See especially Wan Qingli, “Shenme shi ‘Zhongguo hua?’” (What is “Chinese painting?”), *Dangdai Zhongguo hua* (Contemporary Chinese painting), no. 2 (2007): 91, 83.

61 Also expressed in Wan Qingli, “Wenren hua yu wenren hua chuantong – dui ershi shiji Zhongguo huihua shi yanjiu zhong yige gainian de jieding” (Literati painting and literati painting tradition – Defining a concept in research on 20th century Chinese painting history) 1996, repr. Wan, *Huajia yu huashi*: 64-72.



Plate 18

Wan Qingli, *Night Dreams of a Mountain Dwelling*, 2001, ink and color on paper, 133 x 57 cm. Published in E. & J. Frankel and Wan Qingli eds. *The Writings of My Mind: Painting and Calligraphy by Wan Qingli* (New York: E. & J. Frankel, 2002), Plate 12, p. 41.

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calligraphy and paintings, and the traces of brush and ink convey memories of the person, the places and the ties that connected the giver with the recipient long after the moment of giving.

Many years ago, I helped Professor Wan put together a small exhibition of his works at The University of Hong Kong. The Chinese title he decided for the exhibition was *Bi xia liu qing*, which roughly means the feelings that remain in the traces of the ink brush or pen. At the time I could not come up with an adequate translation that was suitably catchy for an exhibition, so I suggested “A Brush with Irony” to fit with the wit in some of his works. In the end, Professor Wan let me have my way. In the process of writing this article, I re-read Professor Wan’s publications and studied his paintings. Filled with memories, I think I can understand what he meant a little more.

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