

In the Name of Ink: the Discourse of Ink Art

Pedith Chan¹

Introduction

The establishment of M+ has given the Hong Kong art world a glimmer of hope. Aiming to build a world class contemporary art museum with a global perspective, the Museum Advisory Group advised the directors of M+ to build its collection on four categories, visual art, moving image, design and architecture, and public art. Furthermore, the M+ acquisition policy pinpoints that “Hong Kong has rich collections of ink art works. M+ should try to attract these collections, to showcase this important visual form and its interplay with other art forms.”² Given that acquisition policies provide practical guidelines for museums to accomplish their mission and vision, looking at the M+ Acquisition Policy thus raises the question of what constitutes ink art works. Although any attempt to define a genre or category of art is an aesthetic and philosophical inquiry, from an administrative point of view, this is also a pragmatic question which governs the allocation of resources.

Recently the new genre (literally, a genre is a “type” or “kind” of art) of “ink art” has received considerable attention in the international art scene. As a new artistic category invented in the late twentieth century,³ “ink art” has long been associated with traditional Chinese art and culture and has been described as a contemporary art form derived from *guohua*. However, despite its popularity in the art world as well as on the domestic and international art markets, ink art has no clear and precise definition. With reference to various curatorial statements, the classification of ink art in different cultural institutions, the list of artists included in the ink art exhibitions, and the types of artwork selected under the category of ink art, it is clear that the definition and narrative of the development of ink art remains ambiguous and problematic. By adopting a sociological approach, this paper examines the discourse of ink art, attempting to offer a different perspective for approaching the genre and for advancing our understanding of how this new artistic category entered the contemporary Chinese art discourse, how it was consecrated by different authoritative parties and institutions from the Chinese and international artistic communities, and how the genre has been classified in the Hong Kong art world.

Classification of Art

While recent times have seen a substantial amount of publication on ink art from aesthetic and discursive dimensions, few authors have dealt with the evolving process of the genre by looking closely at the close relationship between ink art and the structural Chinese art world within which the art form was created,

evolved and became legitimized. Although any discussion of aesthetics is necessarily about how an artwork is to be judged, such debates also have practical implications for how different art forms are classified and how valuable resources are allocated within the art world.⁴ From a sociological perspective, aesthetic values are socially constructed, being defined and bestowed by the participants who hold high positions in a given hierarchical art world. In a competitive art world, different art forms compete for resources and symbolic capital whose symbolic value can eventually be converted into other forms of capital, such as cultural and economic capital.

Regarding different art forms, Paul DiMaggio has offered an insightful discussion of artistic classification system from sociological perspective. In the article “Classification in art”, DiMaggio examines the close relationship between social structures, patterns of art production and consumption, and the classification of artistic genres, contending that “genres represent socially constructed organizing principles that imbue artworks with significance beyond their thematic content and are, in turn, responsive to structurally generated demand for cultural information and affiliation”, and considering the classification of artistic genres as “the processes by which genre distinctions are created, ritualized and eroded, and processes by which tastes are produced as part of the sense-making and boundary-defining activities of social groups.”⁵ DiMaggio also puts forward the idea of artistic classification systems, a term which “refers to the system of relations among genres and among their producers in a given collectivity”. The artistic classification systems reflect both the taste structure of a population and the structure of production and distribution of cultural goods. He proposes an approach to art production and distribution that takes into consideration four dimensions of artistic classification systems: differentiation; hierarchicalization; universality; and ritual potency.⁶ These dimensions provide a more comprehensive perspective from which we might advance our understanding of the complex relationship between artistic classification systems and the demand for ritual classifications generated by social structures. Furthermore, DiMaggio defines the artistic classification systems as going beyond the production systems within which art is produced and distributed and taking into consideration three industry-specific principles of classification that operate at the level of the cultural industry system, namely commercial classification, professional classification, and administrative classification. Within the system, artworks undergo different classification processes driven by specific conditions and needs of the art worlds. For instance, commercial classifications set boundaries for artworks based on economic and market considerations while professional classifications are aimed to compete for status and resources in a relatively autonomous art world. Administrative classifications are the categorization system created by the state for bureaucratic purpose.⁷

The term *shuimo yishu* refers to ink art quite literally and is both a new term and a novel concept developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The evolution of and the meanings attached to the term have undergone significant changes during this time period. The emergence and rise of the new artistic category of ink art in the Chinese and international art scenes in a way suggest changes in the system of the production and consumption of art within the socioeconomic context of contemporary Chinese society. By tracing the emergence, classifications, and usage of the term *ink art*, it becomes

clear that the new term not only mirrors the drastic changes in the structural transformation of the contemporary Chinese art world, but has also documented the on-going process of internationalization of contemporary Chinese art within the socioeconomic context of contemporary China. This paper adopts the lens of DiMaggio's artistic classification systems to explore the discourse of the new genre "ink art", aiming not only to provide a new perspective for understanding the historical development and the emergence of the genre, but also to evaluate the role and position of Hong Kong in the discourse on ink art.

From *Guohua* to Ink Painting

Undisputedly, the genre of ink art is an evolving concept derived from the categories of *guohua* (literally "national painting") and *zhongguohua* (literally "Chinese painting") which dominated in the early and second halves of the twentieth century, respectively. The emergence of the term *guohua* was inextricably linked to the introduction of the new genre *xihua* (literally "western painting") in the early twentieth century. In the face of the surrounding political upheaval and cultural crises, *guohua* artists unabashedly strove to retain the prestigious status of national painting in the hierarchy of genres and used the term *guohua* to distinguish the indigenous art form from *xihua*. One of their primary goals in doing so was to set and strengthen the boundaries between *guohua* and other new art forms and retain its ritual significance. The new artistic classification challenged the previous one that had prevailed in imperial China, which placed works of art into different categories such as landscape, figure, and bird-and-flower based on subject matter and style. The new artistic classification system was endorsed and legitimated by a majority of artists and cultural elites, which is clearly shown in the classification adopted by the "First National Art Exhibition" in 1929. In the exhibition, works of art were divided into seven categories including painting and calligraphy (*shuhua*), bronze and stone (*jinsi*), western painting (*xihua*), sculpture, architecture, craft and photography.⁸ This classification system can be seen as the watershed of a new artistic classification system in modern China.

A paradigm shift occurred after 1949 when yet another impact on the artistic classification system of China resulted from the establishment of the People's Republic of China. The autonomous Chinese art world which was emerged in the early half of the twentieth century was soon subjugated to the state, and a new classification system was created based on the state's cultural policy, which put emphasis on the practical purpose of works of art. For instance, the first "National Art Exhibition" after 1949 divided artworks into various categories, including *guohua*, oil painting, printmaking, New Year prints, poster, paper cutting, and serial picture stories.⁹ The introduction of new categories, such as New Year prints, posters, and serial picture stories, reflects the intervention of the state into the art world, the structural changes within the art world, and the aesthetic ideology embraced by the state, which put emphasis on the recipients and viewers from the lower classes, particularly workers, soldiers and peasants.¹⁰

Although the category of *guohua* has remained in use by the state-funded National Art Exhibition to the present day, it was between 1949 and 1957, as Julian Andrews points out, that the term *caimohua* (literally

“colour-and-ink painting”) was first used as a replacement for the term *guohua*, particularly in the discourse on art published in the official art magazine *Meishu*.¹¹ For instance, in a review of the “1955 National Art Exhibition” published in *Meishu*, the author used the term *caimohua* to replace *guohua*, pointing out that among the selected exhibits, visitors were impressed by the category of colour-and-ink painting. In the past, people’s impression of the category had been that this kind of painting could not reflect the real world and deal adequately with modern life. However, the colour-and-ink paintings (referring to *guohua*, which possesses the best traditions [of China]) of this era aimed to prove that this art form could be deployed to depict real life in realistic manner.¹² An author even further explains that the differences between *caimohua* and *guohua* are that the former was able to dispense with the old practices of imitation and could remedy the imperfect themes and content of the latter.¹³ Given that art production during the Maoist era was strictly overseen by the state, the artistic classification system was governed by administrative purpose and was relatively stable during this period.

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, political turmoil drew artists and cultural elites to Hong Kong, then a British colony. These influential individuals continued to work toward the modernization of Chinese art in Hong Kong, a transformation that had not yet been seen through to its completion. Although Hong Kong’s role in preserving and perpetuating the Chinese cultural patrimony has long been neglected, works of art produced in this colonial metropolis reveal that Hong Kong was the place where the embryonic idea of modern ink painting was conceived and cultivated. Early in the 1960s, Lui Sou-kwan (1919-1975) initiated discussions on the development of Chinese painting. He evaluated the traditional art form of China and proposed new opportunities and possibilities for the development of *guohua*.¹⁴ He maintains that “*Zhongguohua* (Chinese painting) is an abbreviated form of *Zhongguo huihua* (Chinese painting), while *guohua* (national painting) actually is *Zhongguohua*. The terms are interchangeable, and their meanings have no difference.”¹⁵ For Lui, obviously, the term “ink painting” refers to a genre that was different from any existing genre.¹⁶ He further discusses the genre from a global perspective, maintaining that ink painting was treated as an independent category in Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan and East Asia but was classified as watercolour painting in Euro-America. Therefore, he argued, it is possible that ink art could rise and replace watercolour as an international art form.¹⁷ Lui predicted that like oil painting, which can be broken down into subcategories such as British, French, Dutch, German, and Italian oil painting, ink painting in the future will be broken down into Chinese, Japanese, Asian, European and American ink painting, leading to the conclusion that ink painting is a global art language.¹⁸ Lui’s idea of ink painting was disseminated through the educational system and eventually cultivated the “modern ink movement” in the 1960s in Hong Kong.

On Mainland China, after the Cultural Revolution, the door was reopened to the world and works of art entered the international art world and market, becoming what Pierre Bourdieu called “symbolic goods with a two-faced reality”: both a commodity and a symbolic object.¹⁹ In an article published in the official art magazine *Meishu*, an author even condemned a common practice in the Chinese art world, which had its roots in the commercialization of art, stating that the development of foreign trade had led to a

considerable number of Chinese paintings' being exported overseas in exchange for foreign currency. However, the author Ding Zhaocheng urged artists to understand that exportation is not the purpose of art production, asserting that "the aim of the production of Chinese painting is for the edification of the public and the Four Modernizations.....We cannot allow the lure of foreign currency to lead us astray. The fact is that recent trends indicate that artists would rather produce export paintings than paint for the masses."²⁰ Ding's condemnation of the common practice in the Chinese art world suggests that under the circumstances, the state-controlled production of art would eventually give way to the forces of the international art market.

Economic reforms began in the 1980s, resulting in a structural transformation of the Chinese art world. Different forces and factors had come into play, effecting a reorganization of the previous artistic classification system that had, until that time, been relatively steady under the strict control of the state. Although the official categorizations of art more or less remains unchanged, a new category, "experimental art" (*shiyan yishu*) will be added to the coming "National Art Exhibition" to be held in 2014.²¹ Apart from the state-run artistic system, new players such as curators, galleries, art critics, and art historians have come to the forefront and taken a leading role within the art world. In the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a relatively autonomous art world as defined by sociologists re-emerged in China, and these new participants became the dominant force in the contemporary Chinese art community.²² New artistic categories were introduced into the Chinese art world, competing with and challenging the legitimized and established art forms. Curators and art critics took charge of the art world, carving out a new niche for themselves, a development which in turn gave birth to new genres and created a new artistic classification system apart from the official structure. New categories, such as "new literati painting", "avant-garde", "installation", and "conceptual art" were appropriated. New players, the cultural professionals, regulated the new classification system, which quickly rose to dominance within the Chinese art world.

In the standard history of ink art, it is believed that the early 1980s is the watershed because it is during this time that three crucial events took place—the publication of Wu Guangzhong's (1919-2010) essays on abstract beauty, the launch of the debut exhibition on Liu Kuosung's (b. 1932) ink painting in Beijing, and the publication of Li Xiaoshan's (b. 1957) essay "My View of Today's Chinese-Style Painting"—which provide the intellectual context for "modern ink painting" (*xiandai shuimo*).²³ However, I would argue that the concept of "ink" had not yet entered the contemporary Chinese art discourse in the 1980s although works of art associated with "ink" were included in most of the exhibitions on modern and contemporary Chinese art. For instance, in 1986, the term *guohua* was continually applied to the category of the new art form of ink painting. Gu Wenda (b. 1955) is a case in point. As one of China's most widely-recognized ink artists, his solo exhibition on ink painting was entitled "New Exhibition of Gu Wenda's Guohua" (*Gu Wenda guohua xingzhan*).

In 1988, a symposium on ink painting was held in Beijing, with participants including the active curators and critics Pi Daojiang, Lang Shaojun, Jia Fangzhou and Shao Dazhen.²⁴ In the discussion over the future development of ink painting, the term "ink" (*shuimo*) started being employed to classify those

paintings which are affiliated neither with *guohua* nor with any other existing artistic categories. Critics, art historians, and artists put forth enormous efforts to legitimize and institutionalize the new term and new idea through the curating of exhibitions, organizing of symposiums, publishing of essays and catalogs, and introduction of the new art form to the international art scene.

In the 1990s, exhibitions on works of art done in ink flourished. In the book *20 Years of Ink Experiment*, Pi Daojian employs the term “ink art” as a collective term to include ink and ink painting within one category.²⁵ He states,

Some ten years ago, in a heated deliberation on the ink issue, art critics had already made some important points. Among the varied arguments, there had been two common factors. First, China’s domestic production within the genre suffered from a lack of the international appreciation and global influence necessary to draw enough attention and recognition for ink work to be acknowledged as a unique art form in its own right. Second, ink painting in general was lagging behind in terms of possessing a modern temperament, capable of elevating itself to be on par with and in a position of entering into a level dialogue with the prevailing contemporary art in the west.²⁶

Pi further brings up the concern that although the question of ink art is a domestic matter to be discussed and explored within the Chinese art world, the increase in Chinese artists’ participation in the international art scene has promoted these discussions to the international level. However, ink art was still marginalized in the Chinese contemporary art world in spite of the fact that more and more westerners had shown an interest in the spiritual and intellectual sentiments expressed through the genre of ink art. He traces the art form’s development back to the early twentieth century, pointing out that Kang Youwei (1858-1927), Chen Duxiu (1878-1942), Lu Xun (1881-1936), Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Lin Fengmian (1890-1991) etc. attempted to develop and transform traditional ink painting but that the project was not completed due to various historical reasons. The unfinished project was then picked up and advanced by the forces of globalization in the 1980s.²⁷ Pi’s account on the historical development of ink expounds upon the prevalent views on the past, present and future of ink. On the one hand, ink was rooted in traditional *guohua*, and on the other hand he believed that ink would continue on its path of transformation under the influence of globalization. As one of the pioneers who relentlessly promoted the new genre, Pi’s explanation exemplifies the prevailing view on ink art, suggesting that a new global perspective had been introduced to and incorporated into the discourse of ink art.

Ink goes “Global”

In the early 1990s, the Hanart TZ Gallery, a Hong Kong-based institution, organized the exhibition “China’s New Art Post-1989”, bringing contemporary Chinese art to foreign audiences. The exhibition toured in Canada, Australia, and the United States, not only attracting the attention of curators and critics but also helping to carve out a niche in the international art market for this new Chinese cultural

product. Despite the fact that more and more exhibitions on contemporary Chinese art were being held outside China, the category of ink painting was not treated as an independent category and did not gain any ground in the international art world. Ink art was eclipsed by other global art forms such as performance, multimedia, and installations—the established and recognized art forms in the international art world. Some ink artists had received substantial training in *guohua*, while some trained in other art forms, but they all attempted to elevate the status of ink painting in the global artistic hierarchy via opening up dialogues with Euro-American art worlds by deploying western artistic language in their experimental artwork.

In the 1990s, Chinese art underwent a “contemporary turn”, and Chinese artists started searching for contemporaneity in their work by abandoning traditional art mediums and artistic classifications, and choosing instead to engage with the newer art forms, such as installation, performance, and multimedia art from the mid-1990s onward.²⁸ In contrast, Wu Hung points out that in order to achieve contemporaneity, artists should dare to challenge the traditional media and styles and reflect upon the conditions and limitations of the tradition as well as the present.²⁹ Furthermore, Wu argues that in order to include contemporary Chinese art in the global contemporary art world, the artwork done by contemporary Chinese artists should be ready on the one hand to decontextualize and on the other hand to recontextualize in different socioeconomic networks.³⁰ Regarding the “contemporary turn”, Jonathan Hay contends that “the ‘G’ words—globalization, globalism, globality, and the global—serve to keep the non-western world at a safe conceptual distance, as object rather than cosubject”, and “[evoke] a two-way process—as modernity extends its reach from the West to the Rest of the world, the Rest also moves toward the West”, striving to become part of the West.³¹ It is within this complex socioeconomic context that ink art emerged, was presented as a new category in the domestic art world, and was then integrated into the global (Europe-American) art world.

Since the mid-1990s, debates over “ink art” were taking place in the Chinese art world. Within the context of the socioeconomic reforms in China and the marginalization of “ink painting” in both domestic and overseas art worlds, critics such as Huang Zhuan and Pi Daojian initiated discussions and debates over how to elevate the status of ink painting, and to integrate the indigenous art form to contemporary art without compromising its national identity. To extend the boundary of “ink painting”, artists, curators, and critics explored the possibilities of ink and fostered the emergence of the sub-genres of experimental ink, installation ink, performance ink, and video ink with the aims of deploying “global artistic language” in ink art, to legitimize the art form into the international contemporary art discourse and to salvage our understanding of contemporary Chinese art from the western-centric perspective.³² New terms appropriated from the contemporary art discourse, such as “conceptual ink” (*guannian shuimo*) and “experimental ink” (*shiyan shuimo*) were introduced to the discourse of ink art. Pi Daojian explains that the term “ink experiment” refers to the activities of making contemporary ink work with a variety of approaches, such as through installations and new media.³³ The curator and ink artist Zhang Yu points out that “experimental ink and wash (*shuimo*) is an art of China, of the contemporary era, and

at the same time, of the world”, and “(experimental ink painting) transcends not only the physical and the metaphysical, but also the eastern and the western. What it offers are new concepts, new ways of understanding the world, new modes of speaking, and new views of cultural value..... In the process of comprehensive development of contemporary social culture, we are devoting ourselves to the building up of experimental ink and wash as a discipline.”³⁴ Zhang’s explanation of the new genre suggests explicitly that the new category of art is not confined to the existing Chinese art world, but is in reality part of the international art world. In this regard, the genre of ink art bears “Chineseness” yet is also contemporary.

In the early twenty-first century, exhibitions dedicated solely to ink painting came into fruition and were granted access to prestigious cultural institutions in the US and Europe. The two major auction houses in the west, Christie’s and Sotheby’s, were creating platforms and special sections for the ink art sales. London-based Michael Goedhuis Gallery presented the exhibition “Ink: The Art of China” at the Saatchi Gallery in 2012, lining up art historians to contribute essays in the exhibition catalog. The exhibition introduction states that “ink painting and calligraphy is the supreme art of China” and is “the quintessential art-form of Chinese civilization and its contemporary version; rooted in works of unquestioned virtuosity and quality, it will provide new buyers with a foothold for not only in what is fashionable but also what is meaningful as a continuation of the vitality of Chinese culture.”³⁵ The explanation of “ink” reflects the rhetorical description of ink art in the Europe-American art world.

Parallel to the commercial sector’s current interest in ink art are the exhibitions on the genre organized by reputable museums, such as the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (2010), the British Museum (2012), the Musée Guimet (2012), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2013). In 2006, the MFA, Boston, invited ten Chinese ink painters including Liu Xiadong (b. 1963), Li Huayi (b. 1948), Liu Dan (b. 1953) and Xu Bing (b. 1955) to create works of art in response to the Museum’s permanent collection of Chinese arts. The museum then held an exhibition entitled “Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition” in 2010. Among the artists, eight out of ten chose the traditional medium of ink on paper or silk as the materials for their creations. Only Liu Xiaodong made use of acrylic instead of ink; however, in order to link his work to Chinese tradition, he gave up his usual canvas base and chose paper. So did Xu Bing, who gave up ink and paper but photocopied the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* and cut out motifs from the copies and reorganized them to create his own work of art. The artists’ choices of media explicitly show their interpretation of ink as a medium and its linkage to Chinese art and national identity.

Curated by Maxwell Hearn, the exhibition “Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China” was launched in 2013 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “an encyclopaedic art museum” as described in the introduction posted on the museum’s website. Featuring some seventy works by thirty-five artists in various media, the exhibition showcases the possibilities of ink art by dividing the exhibits into four sections, namely “The Written Word”, “New Landscapes”, “Abstraction”, and “Beyond the Brush”. Like most of recent exhibitions on ink art, Chinese calligraphy, and landscape (*shanshui*) were identified by default as the distinctive features of the Chinese aesthetic, assuming the visible national and cultural identity of contemporary Chinese art. Judging from the exhibition title and Maxwell Hearn’s background

as an art historian specializing in classical Chinese art, the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition was aimed at proposing to interpret the new artistic category as one linking ink art to China's past culturally, and in particular aesthetically. Artists selected to present in the exhibition include not only those who have long been affiliated with or labelled as ink artists, such as Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, Liu Dan, and Zhang Yu (b. 1959), but also those whose artistic choices are beyond the genre of ink art, such as Fan Lijun (b. 1963), Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), and Zeng Fanzhi (b. 1964). Hearn provides a rationale behind the selection criteria as well as the curatorial decision on the division of works, explaining that the sections are divided thematically and not by media or format. In doing so, the exhibition has been given the flexibility to encompass a wide variety of media and art forms.³⁶ The last section presents works of art that make references to Chinese literati culture, reviving and transforming the Chinese patrimony into its modern form. Again, Hearn attempts to extend and test the boundaries of ink art but failed to demarcate the difference between ink art and other art forms.

Although ink art has gained access to world-class museums in the US and Europe, the cultural institutions which have staged exhibitions on ink art are in fact the type of museums which are classified as "encyclopaedic" as opposed to the brand of modern art museums such as MOMA and the Tate Modern, the Parthenon of contemporary art. Classical Chinese arts have long been within the scope of these encyclopaedic art museums' acquisition and exhibition efforts, suggesting that ink art has not yet entered the inner circles of the narrative of the contemporary art world, which has long been dominated by Euro-American art. The rise of the symbolic and economic value of ink art did not indeed bestow upon the genre a proper candidacy for consecration by the high priests of the contemporary art world, obtaining only an honourable mention from the "international art world".

Professional classification of Ink Art in Hong Kong

Thanks to the rising interest in ink art in the art scene and the market, a number of exhibitions on ink art or ink painting have been launched without precedent in Hong Kong. From public museums to commercial auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's, ink became one of the hottest topics in the Hong Kong art world. Despite the fact that ink art had attracted tremendous attention in the Euro-American art world at the turn of the twenty-first century, the role of Hong Kong as a crucial place for nurturing the modern ink painting movement has been overlooked. In the latest exhibitions on ink—for instance, the "Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China" and "The Origin of Dao"³⁷ curated by Maxwell Hearn and Pi Daojian respectively—the voice of Hong Kong in the discourse of ink has been neglected or silenced. In Wu Hung's article on a short history of contemporary Chinese ink painting, he focuses to the 1980s and identifies the period as crucial in setting the intellectual context for the development of "modern ink painting".³⁸ However, I argued above that the idea of modern ink painting as a new global art genre was first put forward in the 1960s by the Hong Kong based artist Lui Shou-kwan, who initiated and cultivated the modern ink art movement in Hong Kong in the 1960s.

Although ink painting has long been acquired, exhibited, and promoted by Hong Kong's public museums,

such as the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the category has never been thoroughly reviewed from a broader perspective or by situating it within the grand narrative of ink art. In the past five years, owing to a surge of interest, three exhibitions on ink art with a focus on works of art produced by Hong Kong artists were presented by the Hong Kong Museum of Art, then the only art museum in Hong Kong, demonstrating how ink art was interpreted and classified by the Hong Kong art world.

Alice King, the founder of the Ink Society and the guest curator of the exhibition “New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond”(2008)³⁹, points out that ink is understood not merely as a medium but also as a necessary reference central to Chinese culture.⁴⁰ The purpose of the exhibition was to explore the possibilities of ink art and to further popularize the new genre, to help integrate the new genre into contemporary art. Featuring six themes, namely “The Innovators”, “Beyond Tradition”, “Evolving City Life”, “Transformed Text”, “New Frontier”, and “Is It Ink Art?”, the exhibition selected works of art by thirty artists. Among these artists, a considerable number of them are native to Guangdong or based in Hong Kong. Judging from the selection criteria, it is clear that King attempts to highlight the contribution of Hong Kong artists to the development of new ink art by locating the roots of the exhibition in three important artists, namely Ding Yangyong (1902-1978), Lui Shou-kwan and Luis Chan (1905-1995). Like most of the ink art exhibitions held previously, Chinese calligraphy and city life were included in the narrative as two of the essential components of new ink art. The last section of the exhibition entitled “Is It Ink Art?” featured works of art from a wide spectrum of media, such as mixed media and installation, attempting to test the boundaries of ink art. The categorizations and curatorial concepts suggest the dilemma that the curator encountered. For King, it seems that the boundaries of the genre “ink art” become blurred which cannot distinguish itself from the rest of the genres. For instance, Lui Chun-kwang’s oil painting and Ming Fay’s installation were presented in the last section. Looking at the multiple roles played by Alice King in the Hong Kong art world, it is not hard to see that her definition of “ink art” is governed by both professional and commercial considerations. Most of the artists included have long been promoted and represented by King’s Alison Fine Art Gallery.

“Legacy and Creations: Ink Art vs Ink Art” was staged as one of the events at the Shanghai Exposition in 2010. Presented by the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the exhibition explores the past, present, and future developments of ink art through four sections: “The New Dawn”, “The New Dimension”, “The New Horizon”, and “The New Metamorphosis of Calligraphy and Painting”. In “The New Dawn” section, the exhibition begins with Zhao Shao’ang (1905-1998) and Yang Shanshen (1913-2004), who are followed by the first generation of Hong Kong based artists including Luis Chan, Ding Yanyong, Lui Shou-kwan, and Liu Guosong, highlighting the importance of the Lingnan School and Hong Kong artists in the development of ink art. The second section presents works by Wucius Wong (b. 1936), Chu Hing-wah (b. 1935), Hung Hoi (b.1957), and Wong Hau-kwei (b. 1946) etc., whose works were done in the medium of ink and paper with subject matter associated with landscape and cities. This arrangement recalls the section “Evolving City Life” in “New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond”. Echoing the disputed issue of ink art’s boundaries in terms of medium, the section that follows selected works of art from a wide range

of media, including Koon Wai-bong's (b. 1974) mixed media, Lui Chun-kwong's (b. 1956) watercolour, and Wong Chun-yu's (b.1977) digital art. The last section examines the traditional art form of calligraphy and its modern recurring forms. Looking at the selection of exhibits, one may find the curatorial idea rather perplexing. This section showcased eleven works among which only three works—namely Jin Daiqiang's *No Basic Rules*, Feng Mingqiu's *Section Landscape Script*, and Cai Qiren's *Concealment*—can be read as part of the “new metamorphosis of calligraphy”. In the introductory essay, the Chief Curator, Tang Hoi-chiu, examines the special cultural habitat of Hong Kong, which nurtured the development of ink art, underlining Hong Kong's position in perpetuating China's cultural patrimony, especially after the 1940s. However, the exhibition failed to give a concrete definition to ink art as well as to show Hong Kong artists' contribution to the development of ink art. By looking at the categories of art set by the Hong Kong Museum of Art for the Hong Kong Art Biennial, works of art are divided simply into two categories: “Chinese media” and “Western media”. It is clear that the museum curators' understanding of artistic genres is still bound by the outdated binary of Chinese and western. Therefore, it is not surprising that the curatorial idea of “Legacy and Creations” fails to show persuasive evaluation and sophisticated interpretation of the new genre ink art from a Hong Kong perspective.

Apart from the aforementioned Hong Kong-focused narratives of the new ink art, Pi Daojian was invited by the Hong Kong Museum of Art to curate the exhibition “The Origin of Dao”(2013), taking a broader perspective to illustrate his definition and interpretation of ink art. Pi was a pivotal figure who began promoting experimental ink art in the early 1990s. With the aim of demonstrating the development of art in Chinese regions in the twenty-first century, Pi selected works of art derived from or associated with traditional Eastern media such as ink, lacquer, and ceramics. In his curatorial statement, Pi offers the rationale behind the exhibition and states that *Dao* “covers the overall range of resources from the cultural and spiritual perspectives”, contending that Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, despite their cultural and historical differences, share the same traditional cultural resources yet adopt different approaches towards modernization. Regarding Hong Kong's position in the development of the new genre, Pi maintains that this is the place where east meets west and “has a slight tendency to uphold the features of both Chinese and regional culture”, while the Mainland preserves the rich traditions of China. The way Pi positions Hong Kong within the narrative of ink art marginalizes Hong Kong's crucial role in the development of the genre as well as in perpetuating Chinese patrimony. As discussed above, Hong Kong was a place where the project of modernization of Chinese art was carried on after the 1940s.

Featuring 37 Chinese artists from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas, the exhibition was divided into five sections thematically, namely “Meditation and Narration”, “Energy Field: Creation and Space”, “Writing and Self-Cultivation”, “City, The World of Morals”, and “Great Harmony”. With an ambition of exploring the possibilities for the future development of contemporary Chinese art, Pi attempts to provide a platform from which to “reconstruct modernity in the creative field of contemporary art based on Chinese culture.” These themes cover a wide range of topics, encompassing works of art referencing Chinese culture. Although most of the exhibits and collected essays in the exhibition

catalogue center on or are associated with ink art, the curatorial idea is rather broad and inclusive. It allows for the inclusion of all works of art done by “Chinese artists” with elements related to Chinese culture. Lacking a clear set of boundaries and a precise curatorial concept, the exhibition’s selection of works appears rather random. For instance, Pi’s selection of Hong Kong artists is missing some important or representative artists, such as Lui Shou-kwan, Huang Bore (1901-1968), Peng Ximing (1908-2002), Cheung Yee (b. 1936), Wilson Shieh (b. 1970), Annie Wan, Joey Leung (b. 1976) and Chow Chun-fai (b. 1980), just to name a few. The Hong Kong artists participating in the exhibition include Lam Tung-Pang (b. 1978), Leung Kui-Ting (b. 1945), Man Fun-yi (b.1968), Wucius Wong, Sara Tse (b. 1974), Kan Tai-keung (b. 1942), Eddie Lui (b. 1947), Kum Chi-keung (b. 1965), Wan Qingli (b. 1945), Chu Hing-wah (b. 1935), Hung Keung (b. 1970), and Wong Chung-yu (b. 1977). The selection of participating artists does not reflect a consistent curatorial rationale. Though the selected artists’ works are all connected in one or more ways with Chinese traditions in terms of the choice of content or media, they fail to reflect Hong Kong’s crucial position in perpetuating classical Chinese culture as well as its role in the grand narrative of contemporary Chinese art.

Commercial classification of Ink Art in Hong Kong

Undisputedly, market forces play a pivotal role in the contemporary art scene. The success of the first generation of Chinese avant-garde artists was facilitated by the flourishing market. In a review article on the rise of contemporary ink painting in the Chinese art market published in the magazine *Auction*, Lu Jing analyzes the market potential of ink painting from an economic perspective, pointing out that from 2005 to 2013 different auction houses in China have launched special sections for ink painting. For instance, the China Guardian presented a special section to ink art entitled “The New World of Ink” in 2012, resulting in net profits of over 13 million Yuan. Among the lots, four works of art fetched a hammer price of over one million. In a subsequent auction held by the Poly China, a special category was dedicated to contemporary ink art. Zhao Xiaoxuan, the director of Beijing Bonwin Art Investment Co. points out that the declining demand for Chinese oil painting in 2008 had generated the demand for a new type of art for the purposes of investment, which consequently led to the rise of ink art in the art market.⁴¹

Responding to the demand for new ink art, auction houses kicked off separate sales dedicated solely to the new genre of ink art or ink painting in the early 2010s in Hong Kong. Christie’s launched its first special exhibition on Chinese contemporary ink in Hong Kong in 2012. Entitled “Beyond Tradition”, the exhibition features eighteen works by leading ink artists such as Liu Guosong, Li Huayi, Liu Dan, Gu Wenda, and Xu Bing. Later, Christie’s held its first private sale of Chinese contemporary ink in New York in February 2013, as the first part of its exhibition. Unlike non-commercial institutions, which provide a rather broad definition of ink art in attempt to include as many art forms as possible under the umbrella of the category, Christie’s has selected representative works which were done in traditional media with innovative interpretations of the ink painting tradition injecting new artistic techniques, presentations, and subject matter into the genre. The introduction provided by Christie’s emphasizes that the artists

presented in the exhibition were trained in traditional Chinese painting and exposed to western styles and techniques after China reopened her doors to the world in 1979.⁴² The second part of the exhibition moved to Hong Kong in May 2013, with additional works by Hong Kong artists, including Lui Shou-kwan, Wucius Wong, and Irene Chou. The last part of the exhibition introduced those within the Chinese diaspora who were born in the 1940s and developed ink painting in the United States, Canada, and France, such as Wu Yi (b. 1934), Li Xubai (b. 1940), Ma Chengkuan (b.1940) and Gao Xingjian (b. 1940). Held in November 2013, the private sale exhibition featured four sections, namely “The Tradition of A Scholar”, “Reflections”, “Symbols, Calligraphy, Language” and “The Ever-changing Landscape”.

This categorization of works more or less follows the classification logic that prevailed in China and the United States, accentuating the works’ connections with classical Chinese aesthetics, particularly the essential elements of literati culture, calligraphy, and landscape. However, it is intriguing that perhaps due to commercial considerations, the format of the exhibits was exclusively confined to painting. In addition, the exhibition catalogue provides a brief introduction to the rationale behind the classification of the exhibits as well as important information for potential collectors, such as records of artists’ exhibitions and collections. By closely scrutinizing this information, and particularly the information about the reputable institutions that have collected these artists’ work, one may notice that the majority of the institutions listed in the catalogue are museums with a focus on classical Asian or Chinese art in the United States. Thus, it is understandable that Christie’s strategically launched its first private sale of Chinese contemporary ink in New York, where contemporary ink paintings have been the most readily received and promoted.⁴³

Sotheby’s followed suit, launching two sale exhibitions on ink painting in 2013. Entitled “The Spirit of Ink: 12 Hong Kong Artists”, the first selling exhibition presented twelve young artists based in Hong Kong and featured works done in different yet traditional media, such as photography, sculpture and painting. In October, Sotheby’s launched its separate sale dedicated to contemporary ink painting with a focus shifting to early ink masters. Featuring works by a group of artists who have long been attached to the modern ink movement since 1970s Hong Kong, such as Liu Guosang, Lui Shou-kwan, and Irene Chou (1924-2011), the exhibition also included names which had previously been classified under the category of “20th Century Chinese Art”, such as Chen Qikuan (1921-2007), Wang Jiqian (1907-2003), and Fang Zhaolin (1914-2006). Apart from commercial considerations, the grouping logic of the artists also suggests who the Sotheby’s specialists regarded as early masters of “contemporary ink”. The highlighted artists included Liu Guosung and Lui Shou-kwan. Although this classification of contemporary ink is rather “traditional”, Hong Kong artists were also included in the map of this taxonomy.

Conclusion

Described as an art form of China with over a thousand years of history, “ink art” is in fact what Eric Hobsbawn has described as a “tradition” which was thought to be old but was actually newly invented under complicated circumstances.⁴⁴ With the introduction of the new category of ink art in the 1990s,

ink artists aspired to distinguish their art forms from those of *guohua* and avant-garde art. In the late 1990s, the new art form underwent the ritual, and professional processes in which art critics and curators set boundary for ink art and shared a common ground for comparison. They provided justifications and rationales for the new genre by employing Eurocentric terms such as “experimental” and “conceptual” to open up the dialogue between ink art and contemporary art, though ironically one of the reasons for promoting ink art was to reject the dominance of the Eurocentric aesthetic and criticism in the contemporary Chinese art world. The evolution of the names and classifications in professional and commercial processes suggest the dilemmas and ambiguities that the new category is facing. On the one hand, different parties have tried to define boundaries for the new artistic category, but on the other hand they have merely been attempting to blur the demarcation between ink art and other art forms. Defining ink art is an ongoing endeavour; it is light-heartedly predicted by some that ink will “make a splash” in the international art scene in coming years. However, if ink art continues to make reference to art that reflects the traditional Chinese aesthetic, then this blurred definition will further undermine the distinctive features of ink art and contribute to the genre’s being merged with the more generic category of contemporary Chinese art.

Copyright © 2013 Department of Fine Arts,

Pedith Chan is the Assistant Professor of Culture and Heritage Management, the City University of Hong Kong.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有

¹ The work described in this paper was supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. 154712).

² “M+ Acquisition Policy”, accessed on March 19, 2014. http://d3fveiluhe0xc2.cloudfront.net/media/_file/catalogues/Mplus_Acquisition_Policy_eng.pdf.

³ The term “ink painting” (*shuimohua*) was emerged and used to refer to painting done in the traditional manner around the late 1940s. This can be proved by search results for the term “ink painting” from the articles published between the 1910s and 1940s through the *Mingguo Periodicals Database* (民國時期期刊全文數據庫) (in Chinese).

⁴ Howard Becker, *Art World* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 2008), 131-135.

⁵ Paul DiMaggio, “Classification in Art,” *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 4 (1987): 441.

⁶ DiMaggio, “Classification in Art”, 441-2.

⁷ DiMaggio, “Classification in Art”, 449-52.

⁸ Li Yuyi 李寓一, “A review of the Education Bureau’s National Art Exhibition (I)” (教育部全國美術展覽會參觀記[一]), *Funuzazhi* (婦女雜誌) 150, no.7 (1929): 5.

- ⁹ “Notice on the speeding up of creation for the October National Art Exhibition” (關於為十月全國美展加緊創作的通告), *Meishu* 2 (1950): 6.
- ¹⁰ “An Endeavor to Represent the New China” (為表現新中國而努力), *Meishu* 1 (1950): 15.
- ¹¹ Julia Andrews, “Traditional painting in New China: Guohua and the Anti-Rightist Campaign”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (1990): 559.
- ¹² “Important Development in the Art for the People” (人民美術的重大發展), *Meishu* 3 (1955): 11.
- ¹³ “Striving for Higher Achievements in Art Creation” (為爭取美術創作的更大成就而努力), *Meishu* 4 (1955): 11.
- ¹⁴ For a thorough discussion of the early life of Lui Shou-kwan, see Lai Mei-lin, “The Early Life and Art of Lu Shoukun,” in Harold Mok ed, *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook, 2006* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008), 89-116.
- ¹⁵ Lui Shou-kwan, *Shuimo huajiang* (Hong Kong, 1972), 3.
- ¹⁶ Lui, *Shuimo huajiang*, 4.
- ¹⁷ Lui, *Shuimo huajiang*, 4.
- ¹⁸ Lui, *Shuimo huajiang*, 4-10.
- ¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods” in *The Field of Cultural Production*, (UK: Polity Press, 1993), 113.
- ²⁰ Ding Zhaocheng (丁兆成), “Two Opinions on the Creativity of Zhongguohua” (對中國畫創作的兩點看法), *Meishu* 12 (1980), 16.
- ²¹ “Information of the 12th National Art Exhibition”, accessed on March 15, 2014. http://www.caanet.org.cn/zixun.asp?news_id=1634&layer=ti1.
- ²² For a thorough discussion of the transformation of the structural art world in China see, Chi Zhang, *Contested Modernity: The Emergence of the Chinese Contemporary Art World and Its Struggle for Meaning, 1990 to 2008* (PhD dissertation, Yale University: 2009).
- ²³ See “Chronology of the important events in the development of experimental ink painting (1979-2001),” in Guangdong Museum of Art ed, *China: 20 Years of Ink Experiment – 1980-2001, 1st Space for Contemporary Ink Work* (Harbin: Heilongjiang meishu chuban she, 2001), 180 and Wu Hung, “Transcending the East/West Dichotomy: A Short History of Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting”, in Maxwell Hearn ed, *In Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 20.
- ²⁴ Guangdong Museum of Art ed., *China: 20 Years of Ink Experiment–1980-2001*, 181.
- ²⁵ Pi Daojian, “20 Years of Ink Experiment – A Spiritual Journey of Unconventional Beginning and Reassuring Juxtaposition,” in Guangdong Museum of Art ed, *China: 20 Years of Ink Experiment–1980-2001, 1st Space for Contemporary Ink Work* (Harbin: Heilongjiang meishu chuban she, 2001), 14.

- ²⁶ Pi, “20 Years of Ink Experiment – A Spiritual Journey of Unconventional Beginning and Reassuring Juxtaposition”, 14.
- ²⁷ Pi, “20 Years of Ink Experiment – A Spiritual Journey of Unconventional Beginning and Reassuring Juxtaposition”, 15.
- ²⁸ Wu Hung, “A Case of Being Contemporary Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art,” in Terry Smith and Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, eds, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 296.
- ²⁹ Wu Hung, “Contemporaneity in Contemporary Chinese Art,” in Naomi Noble Richard and Donald E. Brix, eds, *The History of Painting in East Asia: Essays on Scholarly Method* (Taipei: Rock Publication International, 2008), 588.
- ³⁰ Wu, “A Case of Being Contemporary Conditions, Spheres, and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art,” 298-301.
- ³¹ Jonathan Hay, “Double Modernity, Para-Modernity,” in Terry Smith ed, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008), 113-114.
- ³² Zhu Ping, “From ‘shuimohua’ to ‘shuimo yishu’ - the reasons and meaning of the second focus shift of criticism” (從水墨畫到水墨藝術—批評焦點發生第二次轉移的原因及意義), in *Shejiyishu* (設計藝術) 3 (2013): 90-91.
- ³³ Pi, “20 Years of Ink Experiment – A Spiritual Journey of Unconventional Beginning and Reassuring Juxtaposition,” 16.
- ³⁴ Zhang Yu, “Planner’s Words: Experimental Ink and Wash,” in Pi Daojian ed, *Chinese Experimental Ink and Wash, 1993-2003* (Harbin: Heilongjiang meishu chuban she, 2004), 1-2.
- ³⁵ Michael Goedhuis, “Chinese Contemporary Ink Art: Why buy now?” accessed on March 15, 2014, <http://www.michaelgoedhuis.com/media/GoedhuisGoephoto/ExhibitionDocuments/why-buy-now.pdf>
- ³⁶ Maxwell Hearn, “Past as Present in Contemporary Chinese art,” Maxwell Hearn ed, *Ink Art: Past As Present in Contemporary China* (New York: Yale University Press, 2013), 35.
- ³⁷ “The Origin of Dao: New Dimensions in Chinese Contemporary Art”, May 16 to August 18, 2013, Hong Kong Museum of Art
- ³⁸ Wu Hung, “Transcending the East/West Dichotomy: A Short History of Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting,” in Maxwell Hearn ed, *In Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 20.
- ³⁹ “New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond”, Aug 22 to Oct 26, 2008, Hong Kong Museum of Art.
- ⁴⁰ Alice King, “Preface”, in Veronica Ng, Angie Chow, Kathleen Mak and Suzanne Richard, eds, *New Ink Art: Innovation and Beyond* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University SPACE, 2008), 14.

⁴¹ Lu Jing, “The Making of Contemporary Ink-paintings” (當代水墨 — 塵封已久後的「揭竿而起」), *Auction* 26 (2013): 55.

⁴² “Beyond Tradition: Chinese Contemporary Ink”, accessed on March 15, 2014, <http://www.christiesprivatesales.com/exhibitions/chinese-contemporary-ink/>

⁴³ *Chinese Contemporary Ink*, (Hong Kong: Christies, 2013).

⁴⁴ Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger ed. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

Copyright © 2013 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有

Some of the exhibitions mentioned in the essay:

部分文中提及的展覽：



Copyright © 2013 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有

Plate 1

“Fresh Ink: Ten Takes on Chinese Tradition”,
November 20, 2010 -
February 13, 2011, Ann
and Graham Gund
Gallery, the Museum of
Fine Arts Boston. (Photo
courtesy of the Museum
of Fine Arts, Boston)

圖一

「與古為徒——十個中國
藝術家的回應」：2010年
11月20日至2011年2月
13日，美國波士頓美術
館Gund展廳（圖片承蒙
波士頓美術館提供）

Plate 2 (left)
“New Ink Art:
Innovation and Beyond”,
August 22 to October
26, 2008, Hong Kong
Museum of Art. (Photo
courtesy of the Hong
Kong Museum of Arts)

圖二 (左)
「新水墨藝術 — 創造、
超越、翱翔」，2008年8
月22日至10月26日，
香港藝術館。(圖片承蒙
香港藝術館允許刊登)

Plate 3 (right)
“The Origin of Dao:
New Dimensions in
Chinese Contemporary
Art”, May 16 to August
18 2013, the Hong Kong
Museum of Art. (Photo
courtesy of the Hong
Kong Museum of Arts)

圖三 (右)
「原道 — 中國當代藝術
的新概念」，2013年5月
16日至8月18日，香港
藝術館。(圖片承蒙香港
藝術館允許刊登)

Copyright © 2013 Department of Fine Arts,
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學藝術系 版權所有



Plate 4
“Legacy and Creations:
Ink Art vs Ink Art”,
one of the Shanghai
Exposition 2010 events.
Presented by the Hong
Kong Museum of Art.
(Photo courtesy of the
Hong Kong Museum of
Arts)

圖四
「承傳與創造 — 水墨對
水墨」：香港藝術館主
辦，上海世界博覽會，
2010。（圖片承蒙香港藝
術館允許刊登）