

What Would Have Happened if I Hadn't Studied Chinese?

Draft (10-22)

Julia F. Andrews

I took first year Chinese because I wanted to learn to read the inscriptions on paintings. Even though I had no idea at the time that one could have a job as a historian of Asian art, I was fascinated with Chinese and Japanese painting. The Middlebury summer program had been recommended to me as the best place to start Chinese. My four instructors, led by Perry Link, who was still graduate student, were cheerfully insistent that we learn to pronounce Chinese properly, and especially to learn our tones. We memorized nonsense syllables that we much later discovered meant things like, “So you’re drunk?”

I was soft-spoken and shy, but they didn’t let me get away with inaudibility—one of the instructors devoted an entire afternoon to drilling me on the four tones in a booth at the language lab, beginning with asking me to sing scales. As embarrassing as this was for the non-musical me, he convinced me that if I could tell a high note from a low note, I could control my pronunciation. Admonitions to us all from Perry to constantly check our tones for slippage made it less a question of linguistic talent and more one of routine self-discipline. People always think your Chinese is better than it is if you pronounce it properly, so this was a great gift. Their second gift was my beautiful Chinese name, Elegant Orchid, well-chosen for sound, meaning, and calligraphic appearance, and one that gives a good first

impression, especially for someone who wants hang out with the sort of people who look at paintings. These both have helped me work more easily in my field.

Learning to speak and read Chinese has made possible a career that I have loved. I've been on the faculty at Ohio State University for almost thirty years, my career dedicated to teaching Asian art history, particularly the arts of China. Before that I worked in museums, and along the way I've organized various exhibitions. I was amazingly fortunate to have been hired at OSU to do exactly what I wanted, to teach Chinese and Japanese painting, and then to have been cheered on when a short-term research fling turned into a book project on Chinese art under Mao. Although I actually teach a range of courses on Chinese art from Neolithic to Now, I've gradually become known as a specialist in modern and contemporary Chinese art.

In many ways my career has unfolded as a series of accidents, but this happened, at least in part, because I knew Chinese. Although this essay is not about *how* I learned Chinese, the way I learned it has determined how I could use it in my profession, and the direction my career has taken. I probably wouldn't get top marks on a standardized language exam, but I can talk to people and I know the vocabulary of my field, which surprisingly few professional interpreters do. From what I've seen, they just skip the part they don't understand, or make it into something completely different.

I returned to my senior year of college after Middlebury to take both the second year written and spoken Chinese courses at Brown. One of my Chinese teachers, Jimmy Wrenn, responded to my frustration about my slow progress in the

classroom by bringing me news of the perfect job, an opening for an English editor at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. I applied and started working a few months after my college graduation in the Calligraphy and Painting Department managing the *National Palace Museum Bulletin*. This was my first full-time job, and I learned how to do it in Chinese, seated at one of six desks paired face to face in an office next to the special viewing room. Talk in Mandarin about Chinese painting, museum politics, cultural events, random gossip, and good advice filled my ears from morning to night. The staff was then in the process of producing one of the most important scholarly exhibitions the museum had yet done, *Ninety Years of Wu School Painting*. When experts came to view paintings in storage, we would study the paintings ourselves after they moved away, or over their shoulders, and we listened avidly to every word spoken to describe or illuminate their significance. Before long I was asked to translate hand-written manuscripts, which I only accomplished with a lot of dictionary work and help from the kind colleague, Hu Sailan, whose desk was paired with mine. I can still remember the tinkle of her laugh after she looked at the character under my finger and responded, for what must have been the hundredth time, that's the yi 以 in suoyi 所以. Obviously, my epigraphic ambitions were progressing slowly, since this is one of the easiest words one can write in Chinese. My colleagues were unfailingly generous and patient, and it never occurred to me or my colleagues to speak anything but Mandarin. I gradually began to function in the world that would become my professional home.

This experience both sealed my fate—I saw that there were actually people who did what I wanted to do, and for a living—and helped me begin building the

specialized vocabulary to enter it. Needless to say, being surrounded by curators talking about the exhibitions they were preparing, discussing questions of dating, authenticity, or provenance, as well as chatting about museum events, politics, and personalities, and even response to or gossip about the American professors who visited the museum (and who I might eventually choose as graduate advisor), gave me a view of the future field as practiced both in my own country and as seen from outside.

After my struggles with the many quotations in the manuscripts I was translating, I knew I needed more work on classical texts, so left the museum to study classical Chinese, poetry, canonical painting texts, newspaper reading, and, for fun, some modern fiction and even spoken Taiwanese at the Stanford Center at National Taiwan University. The program there focused heavily on orally translating the classical texts into modern spoken Mandarin. Needless to say, upon returning to graduate school, the written language was necessary for my academic work.

My advisor at Berkeley, James Cahill, had gone to the PRC on two delegations, in 1973 and 1977, where he had seen and photographed many masterpieces of Chinese painting that were preserved in mainland collections. The graduate students were eager to make similar new discoveries. With my now adequate language skills, systematic training in Chinese art history, and a dissertation topic on late Ming painting I went to Beijing in the fall of 1980 on a Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC dissertation fellowship. The CSCPRC assigned me to the only graduate art history program then accepting foreign students, the Central

Academy of Fine Arts. This was one of the many accidents that determined my later trajectory, because it was also the most prestigious art school in China, and over the previous three decades had trained the most important network of artists and art historians in China. I was able to waive the otherwise mandatory year-long training at the Beijing Foreign Language Institute and directly move into the dorm at the Central Academy, where almost no one with whom I was in contact spoke any foreign language other than Russian. Even the foreign students, of which there were two Japanese, two Swedes, two Germans, one Norwegian, one Frenchman, one Australian, and me, had only Chinese as a common language. Actually, I later learned that the Frenchman, who is now an esteemed professor of pre-imperial Chinese art and archaeology in Paris, was only pretending that he couldn't speak English, but that was enough to tip the balance for the whole group. If my two years in Taiwan completely sealed my commitment to studying Chinese painting, my three semesters at CAFA changed my career in other equally profound ways.

The CAFA art history curriculum at that time was quite good, but the courses and the methodology were unlike anything available in the U.S. The faculty had little or no experience with foreign students, and simply lectured as usual, which was good for our listening comprehension on matters of Chinese art history. Our textbooks were mimeographs, and helped our recognition of simplified characters. We had eye-opening classes from CAFA faculty on folk art, Chinese archaeology, and classical painting theory, among other topics, as well as superb guest lectures from visitors, such as Qi Gong on calligraphy and Wang Shixiang on furniture. The folk art professor, who was also a great enthusiast of Peking opera, had personally

assembled much of the school's folk art collection when he was a student, and waxed lyrical about its significance, function, history, and manufacture. I had little experience with the political theory of contemporary China, so the well-polished Marxist-Leninist-Maoist framing of the archeology lessons was a crash course in this respect. The class on painting texts was taught by an erudite recent graduate who had studied as a youngster with some of Beijing's most venerable old artists. He spoke rapidly, quoting classical texts from memory, as though he were talking to his learned old teachers, and all I really remember is his beautiful Beijing diction and how nice his tea looked in the glass pickle jar he used as a teacup. Twenty years later he gave brilliant courses to my OSU students as a visiting professor, and still dazzled us by reciting the classical texts from memory. Now, however, after two decades in the classroom, he also wrote them on the board and explained them in the modern language.

With the intervention of my tutors at the academy I was eventually, after many months, able to see some of the paintings I had hoped to work on, but I should confess that I made virtually no progress on my dissertation during this period. The libraries were still largely non-functioning, since the card catalogues had been trashed during the Cultural Revolution, and almost everyone in a position of responsibility was so filled with fear and various other unhelpful emotions that getting permission to use a library book was ridiculously time-consuming and difficult. Still, it was wonderful to ride my bike to my weekly tutorial in Xidan, where my elderly professor, who had studied in London, lived in a corner of a small courtyard house.

I soon decided to learn about what I could see and not worry so much about what I couldn't. I spent weeks in the painting galleries of the Palace Museum, which was a short bike ride away from the campus on Wangfujing, to study a remarkable exhibition of Ming painting of court academy and Zhe school, and in the absence of a published catalogue carefully copied the monolingual painting labels and made notes and sketches of the paintings.

The department at CAFA quite sensibly considered this exhibition a good learning experience for the students, and arranged a Q&A with the curatorial team. Because relationships with foreign people were still very tightly controlled, the chief curator was not permitted to speak to us alone, and but was required to come to CAFA in the company of a group of curators. I can't remember how we knew this. Presumably this was so that someone could report back if anything problematic was said. I think one of our teachers must have said something. Those of us who had lived under martial law in Taiwan knew something about the avoidance of political topics in routine conversation, but this was another order of control, and gave us a hint of what life must have been like in the high socialist period.

As one of two Ming painting students in our class, and with a sense of how important renewed contacts between Chinese and Western art historians might be someday, I earnestly prepared a list of questions to ask the chief curator, and at the proper time asked them in my loudest voice and clearest tones. In retrospect, this was my debut in the Chinese art historical community, and it laid the groundwork for subsequent collegial relations. As it turned out, several of the young curators had graduated from the art history department at CAFA. One of the junior curators,

with whom I would subsequently collaborate, later became chief administrator of the Palace Museum director's office and then head of the Painting and Calligraphy Department. Twenty-odd years later we were able to recruit him and his Shanghai-based twin brother, an equally well-known art historian, to give a course on Ming painting at OSU, based on works in their museums.

Every semester the school took us on field trips to Buddhist caves, archaeological museums, scenic sites, folk art workshops, and special painting exhibitions in various parts of China. At school, however, we were surrounded by students learning oil painting and *guohua*, prints and sculpture. None of their work looked like the classical art I was studying, nor did it look like anything I had seen in the way of Western contemporary art. I became quite curious about it, but was determined to finish my dissertation, so waited a few years before I let it distract me further.

Upon graduation from Berkeley I went to work as an assistant curator of Far Eastern Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. My Chinese skills were useful for researching objects, for calling China to make arrangements for the archaeology show the department was planning, and for translating catalogue materials provided by the Chinese lenders. It seemed to me, after my time in China, that the time might be right for the department to begin acquiring modern Chinese paintings, but it was made clear to me that this was not our territory--this was the responsibility of the department of Modern and Contemporary Art, which wasn't interested.

Some time during my second year at the museum, a notice arrived from the Durfee Foundation describing an odd grant for employees of Los Angeles County public institutions, the “American/Chinese Adventure Capital Program.” The grant would fund an extended stay in China, and its main requirements were that one’s employer had to agree to a leave of absence, and the project had to be something unrelated to one’s job responsibilities. Since contemporary art was outside my duties, I applied for a grant to go to China for three months to try to answer some of the questions that had come to mind during my stay at CAFA, and particularly the legacy of Cultural Revolution art on that of the contemporary period. We were working on the exhibition catalogue for the archaeology exhibition, *Quest for Eternity*, which opened in 1987, but when I assured the museum director that all the translations would be finished in time, he granted me leave for the fall of 1986.

I had intended to spend just these few months and write something short, but the more I learned the more questions I had. The way I approached this adventure was to conduct a combination of informal interviews with art world veterans and to read anything I could find. Depending upon the worldview and inclination of the people with whom I was talking, they would tell me their own stories, or stories about other people, or sometimes they would outline for me their own conclusions regarding what had happened, and why. The trauma of the Cultural Revolution was still fresh, and everyone was thinking about the past and trying to live for the future. I was probably one of the first foreigners to visit these artists and ask such questions, and almost all were extremely welcoming. Many of them gave me books, or magazines, or other kinds of publications, or let me

photograph their artwork. Most of them suggested other people I should talk to. All of these conversations and readings gave me useful clues I could follow in my search for more evidence.

Of course, being able to speak and read Chinese was essential to these conversations. When I began, this was a completely new area for me, and my follow-up questions were often very basic—I would frequently fail to understand the name of an organization, or a bureaucratic procedure, or wouldn't recognize the name of a person. I would then ask how to write it, and my obvious ignorance would often lead to a long explanation of what the thing was and how it worked, or who the person was. People today are far too busy for such leisurely discussion. This in turn might lead the conversation off on an interesting tangent. If a translator had come between me and my conversation partner, anything not immediately comprehended would undoubtedly have been dropped from the translation, the follow-up question would never have been asked, and I would never have learned about these new things.

My original project had been to explore why most artists of the 1980s seemed unable to throw off the legacy of the Cultural Revolution. I soon found, however, that when artists themselves thought about these difficulties, they didn't leave off with the Cultural Revolution, but also spoke about the policies and institutional reforms of the 1950s. The scope of my work expanded to accommodate this development, which then had to include such topics as the disruptions of other political campaigns, most notably the anti-rightist campaign. One elderly artist, a Communist veteran of the woodcut movement at Yan'an, laid

out for me his straightforward view of what had happened: the anti-rightist campaign (1957-58) was a rehearsal for the Cultural Revolution, and the Yan'an Rectification campaign (1941-42) was a dry run for the Anti-Rightist campaign. He was an old party veteran who came very close to blaming everything that had gone wrong on Mao. Indeed, many former rightists in the mid-1980s seem to have believed that the Anti-Rightist campaign would soon be renounced by the party and its injustices recorded and corrected. I therefore heard quite a lot about it, and soon came to see how important it had been to the careers of certain artists and to the art world as a whole.

When people spoke of their colleagues who were “rightists” they would usually try to explain the person’s bad luck. As one would expect, people who knew the victim more or less well had very different explanations. Some might attribute it to certain things the person had done recently, or long in the past, or to the person’s personality, or to some minor social conflict, or to being on the wrong side of a policy shift, or any number of other reasons. One might hear different versions of how Rightist X and Accuser Y had long ago courted the same girl. Varied memories seemed a reasonable thing to expect of colleagues who might have known a person in different contexts and time periods. But I began to realize that some otherwise very thoughtful people recalled a specific individual in exactly the same way, and even told their stories in almost identical words. When I later read the condemnations of major “rightists” in the party art journal, I realized that what such people believed to be their own memories were actually propaganda that they had read or heard in the context of the anti-rightist campaign. Some of these accusations

were completely false, most were exaggerated or manipulated to justify the label of “counter-revolutionary,” all were products of the propaganda machine. I was astonished to see such a clear demonstration that *propaganda really works*. Intelligence and education offered no immunity. The only people who did not completely succumb were those who had some deep personal familiarity with the person, prior experiences that remained more vivid than what they were subsequently told.

Of course, my personal revelation, that propaganda works, is not anything new or profound, but I still remain impressed, or rather dismayed, by its great durability, its capacity to transform the collective memory of a society. Needless to say, since the propaganda machine is still at work, noticing when its shadow falls remains significant to my teaching, research and life as an ordinary citizen. If I had not heard such words in the original Chinese I am unlikely to have even noticed, much less been so profoundly struck.

The book that developed from this project, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*, didn't finally appear until 1994. In the spring of 1995, I received a phone call from the Guggenheim Museum asking if I would help with planning an exhibition to display the history of Chinese art from its earliest time up to the present. The museum director, Tom Krens, later told me that he wanted to tell the “whole story of Chinese art,” and justified his venture into a period completely outside the Guggenheim's normal programming as a need to present the art of China's past so that American viewers might better understand the art of its present. He and his deputy-director, Jay Levenson, persuaded the

emeritus director of the Cleveland Museum, Sherman E. Lee, to work on the pre-modern section and asked me to do the same for the modern part.

Since returning from my dissertation research at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing at the end of 1981, and working as an assistant curator at LACMA, I had begun gently complaining that our major institutions of modern and contemporary art claimed to be “international” while exhibiting only Western European and American artists. With this phone call from New York I was being offered an opportunity to help solve this problem, and could hardly turn it down. Both Sherman Lee and I expected that we should have autonomy in our selection of objects, however, so the odds of actually pulling off the loans seemed daunting, even impossible.

In the fall of 1995, after a long silence from the museum, I was invited to a meeting in New York with Sherman Lee, the Guggenheim staff, and the “Chinese side.” The Chinese side turned out to be two separate teams that had come into being to satisfy very different parts of the post-Cultural Revolution bureaucratic agenda. The first worked under the auspices of the Cultural Relics Bureau, and had access to teams of archaeologists, art historians, and conservators who were very experienced in organizing exhibitions of archaeological treasures for showing abroad. Under the auspices of the State Council, their work, implicitly or explicitly, was to extend China’s soft power by showing its cultural treasures. Sherman Lee would work with them.

The other team, my counterparts, was a group within the Ministry of Culture that had little or no previous experience with the museum world. As far as we could

later determine, they were mainly involved in helping artists sell their work at haphazard sales shows in Chinese bookstore-galleries in various American Chinatowns, and by that means help the Ministry bring in much-needed hard currency. In the period when China still lacked a gallery or auction house infrastructure, this state-run commercial function was useful for the favored artists and the Ministry's budget, but it was a bit problematic as background for the co-organizer of a major museum show. The director and vice-director of this unit had come prepared to offer a checklist of very recent figurative oil paintings they had prepared for our selection, work that they referred to as "mainstream," and which resembled paintings shown in the official exhibitions sponsored by the Chinese Artists Association.

Their approach had a couple of problems. The most significant was that in the context of the entire project, it seemed to me that the modern section needed to be a history of twentieth century art that would connect the end of Sherman Lee's section to the art of the present-day. Thus, we needed to see what developed in ink painting after the eighteenth century, and given the Guggenheim's mission as a museum of non-objective art, China's pre-1949 modernist art was important. Moreover, the history of socialist realist art, as problematic as much of its content might have been, was a necessary story linking the Mao period with the art of the present.

Thus, my personal taste aside, the contemporary realist oil painting, the so-called mainstream, we were offered was not enough. Similar work shown by individual artists in New York in the 1980s had received almost no critical response.

Moreover, even in China such work had become somewhat problematic. The government's heavy-handed response to the June 4th killings had discredited many of the state-run activities in which artists had previously been happy to participate. I was surprised, in fact, to hear a Soviet-trained oil painting professor, a mainstay of official art, say that he would no longer participate in official exhibitions. So, we responded that the modern section would need to be more historically oriented, and we would select works that would yield a more art historical checklist. I was sufficiently pessimistic about both meeting the schedule and prevailing in the negotiations that I soon recruited a Shanghainese-American art historian with excellent political skills as co-curator for my section.

What we were proposing had actually never been done before, and our Chinese counterparts, who were painters, not art historians, had no preconceptions about how it should look. Moreover, the Guggenheim director, who probably *did* have some preconceptions, became so busy with construction at the new museum in Bilbao that he never intervened with either our curatorial plan or our travel expenses. In both we were fortunate. The research took us on an exhilarating, and exhausting, series of more than a dozen journeys to China to visit museum and gallery storerooms all over the country. The curators in the museums we visited immediately realized what we were trying to do, which was to present a fairly obvious, if revisionist, historical narrative, one that included modernism and traditionalism as positive forces, and that was still not possible to tell in a Chinese institutional setting. The art market in China was still in an almost dormant state, so that many of the works we sought had no established value. Moreover, museums,

still suffering from inadequate resources, and from bureaucratic obstacles, could not have envisioned organizing such an exhibition themselves. The only real obstacle we encountered was that some Chinese curators had never heard of the Guggenheim, and we had to go to great lengths to persuade them that it was a reputable institution (I later found a short condemnation of it published in the party art journal just after the Frank Lloyd Wright building opened, but young curators would probably not have read it). They all agreed to the loans at the local level, and we then presented the list of slightly more than 200 objects to our colleagues in Beijing, arranged alphabetically. They were satisfied and did not think to ask how we planned to organize our historical narrative.

It was satisfying to see the results. The quality of the work impressed most people in the art world, and casual visitors saw a side of modern Chinese history that was never so immediate to them before. After New York, we installed the show at the new Guggenheim Bilbao in the summer of 1998, and many of our colleagues travelled from all over Europe to see it. My department at OSU helped me create an online exhibition with all the labels and images, a rather experimental concept in 1998, and the exhibition served classes in any English-speaking university for many years thereafter.¹ The paperback edition of the splendidly produced full-color catalogue was sold rather inexpensively, and colleges around the country began teaching courses on modern Chinese art using it as a textbook.² With the

¹ A version is found at: <http://huntingtonarchive.org/Exhibitions/5000Years.php>

² *A Century in Crisis: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Twentieth Century China*, with Kuiyi Shen, et al (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1998). Now out of print, the ebook is found at <https://archive.org/details/centuryincrisism00andr>

institutional clout of the Guggenheim behind the project, a new subfield of Chinese art history, modern Chinese art, emerged as a legitimate subject of study for the first time.

The timing of the exhibition is not something we can take any credit for, but its contents are. Another curator, a curator who didn't speak Chinese, might have skipped the art historical narrative and simply selected a group of contemporary works that were in tune with Western norms, skipping the art of the previous century. This would have corresponded with what our art history surveys presented at that time—that the great accomplishments in Chinese art history ended by 1725. A corollary to such a treatment was a kind of triumphalism—China's artists are readmitted to global culture after mastering the standards of Western postmodernism. The story is quite a bit more complicated than that.

Nobody in China, as far as we know, said anything either negative or positive about our curatorial scheme, although we did learn that the catalogue copies we sent to Beijing, which were not preapproved or censored, were generally not distributed to the lending institutions in China. Soon after the works were returned to China, however, the National Art Museum of China (中国美术馆), which had lent many works, organized a show from their own collection that included the paintings we borrowed and others. Their curators essentially followed our structure, at least as far as was possible within the limitations of their collection. For the Guggenheim we obviously did not choose socialist realist examples in order to convey to the

Also published in Spanish translation as *Un siglo en crisis: Modernidad y tradición en el arte de la China del siglo XX*, Bilbao, Spain: Guggenheim Bilbao, 1998.

American public the outdated political policies the paintings had originally been conceived to illustrate (despite what one or two art critics mistakenly thought), but rather to illustrate the evolution of formal concerns under arts policies of the Mao period. A change in Chinese exhibition practices that the subsequent NAMOC show initiated in Beijing was that socialist realist art could be exhibited simply as painting, or as art history, with little regard for its political content.

Subsequently, the National Museum of China went so far as to display two versions of a painting we had tried but failed to borrow, Dong Xiwen's *Founding of the Nation* (1952-53)—the original altered repeatedly at the demand of censors, along with a faithful recreation of its original appearance by the artist's students painted at the very end of the Cultural Revolution. Such a display enables one to compare the technical skill of two generations of prominent artists, but it also conveyed some important truths about how censorship of history had worked. Of course, gaps in the Beijing collections caused by Mao era prejudices will continue to determine what is available for display. Moreover, one can argue that propaganda painting, when misunderstood or revived by later generations, can still do damage. But in any case, the Guggenheim exhibition had a profound impact on both Western views of modern Chinese art and on China's own institutional presentation of that art, and in fact opened up the discipline of art history to the study of modern and contemporary Chinese art. It was one of the most interesting enterprises in which I have been involved, and would have been impossible if I couldn't speak Chinese.

What would my professional life have been like if I hadn't learned Chinese?
To say nothing of my personal life? It is hard for me to imagine. None of this would
have happened to me, and some of it wouldn't have happened at all.