

Collision and Challenge: Influences of Sociocultural Contexts in Early 20th Century China on Storm Society Artists' Exploration and Practice of Western Modern Art

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Abstract: This essay engages with the topic of Chinese modern artists' introduction and adaptation of Western modern art. This essay conducts its analysis on a modern artist group named the Storm Society (JuelanShe) active in 1920s and 1930s China. Inspired by a social art historical approach, this essay places its focus on the sociocultural contexts specifically present during the active years of Storm Society artists. Three factors are identified to be influential challenges in these artists' efforts of exploring and introducing Western modern art to China: Cultural conservatism, inhospitable social environment, and Japanese Invasion in World War II. On the level of academic study about Chinese modern art, this essay highlights the importance to take into account specific cultural and social contexts in analysis of its history.

Keywords: The Storm Society, modern art, social art history, cultural conservatism, social condition, Sino-Japanese War, contextual specificity

1. Introduction

When engaging with the question of Chinese modern art's origin and early development, there has been a tendency of fixating upon a discourse about Chinese modern artists' replication of their European peers' pictorial techniques. The Storm Society, a group of first-generation modern artists who were active in 1920s and 1930s China, was often included in this kind of discussion and perceived to be an iconic example of direct adaptation of European modern art styles. While this kind of approach conveniently exposes the rather awkward stage of being that early generations of avant-garde artists in China faced, it would nevertheless be partial to only identify shortcomings in the short history of the Storm Society without talking about the specific challenges and reasons that led to its disruptive end. Therefore, it is this essay's aim to shift its main methodological approach towards the Storm Society away from the traditional form of visual analysis about individual artists' creative practice or personal approach. Instead, it seeks to place its emphasis on elements of influence that were external to individuals' control and rooted in various sociocultural institutions and systems, and in doing so pointing out cultural conservatism, inadequate public environment, and Japanese invasion as three of the most influential factors that created pressure on sociocultural level. It becomes clear that the Storm Society artists' process of introducing Western modern art into China was conditioned

and largely limited by a diverse array of complex factors on cultural and social levels, the nature and influences of which were specifically subject to early 20th century China.

2. Cultural Conservative Attitude to Modern Art

One of the clear challenges against Storm Society artists' efforts came from a persisting lineage of conservative advocates who, for various reasons, insistently upheld the extreme idea of rejecting Western cultural influences in exchange for the preservation of Chinese traditional values. The main characteristic of cultural conservatives was their belief in the existence of "historically rooted native alternatives to the crumbling imperial Confucian orthodoxy" [1]. That dogmatic obsession in what was perceived to be the true and original kind of traditional Chinese culture—which was called "national essence" --transformed into a particular animosity against artistic techniques and aesthetics introduced from European countries. Essentially any art of non-Chinese origins was put aside as conservative artists repeated their practices of traditional Chinese art forms such like literati paintings or flower-and-bird paintings. A typical example is the Chinese intellectual and literature scholar Lin Shu. In response to the trend of modern art, Lin remarked that "Since I am Chinese, therefore I still hold on to Chinese traditions from the past even when I am old" [2]. These cultural conservatives created an inhospitable atmosphere in Chinese society regarding the introduction of western culture and art, which naturally put pressure on modern art groups like the Storm Society.

Asides from the obstacles imposed by people supporting conservative approaches to Chinese traditional culture and art, many peer advocates of western art also weirdly became over-conservative forces of opposition against Storm Society's progress in introducing modern artistic practice from Europe to China. In *A History of Art in Twentieth-Century China*, Lv Ping observes that many critics and peer artists in the early 20th century were still upholding the belief that the pictorial language of modern art only concerns form but not actual content and therefore is meaningless in comparison to realism [2]. That particular description applies much to Xu Beihong, arguably one of the most influential artists in early modern China. While Xu spent his student life studying in Europe since 1919, he stood firmly against the array of newly emerging Avant Garde art styles that were being introduced from European painters into China, such as Impressionism and Fauvism [2]. Xu himself was a fervent advocate of realistic style in painting. Figure 1 shows one of Xu's most representative works, *Tian Heng and his 500 Retainers*, which exemplifies this artist's close ties with the academic traditions from Europe through both its realistic depiction of characters in the painting as well as the sheer size of it. Xu can be seen as representing the many artists and intellectuals in his time whose particular favor in Western art differed greatly from the Storm Society artists' practice.



Figure 1: Xu Beihong (1895-1953), *Tian Heng and his 500 Retainers*, 1928-30, oil canvas, 197 x 349 cm. Original Source: https://www.xbhjng.com/web/collection/detail.html?exhibit_id=42.

In comparison to Xu, the styles that Storm Society artists favored often challenged Realism and contradicted the traditional aesthetics, which can be clearly proven by looking at some of their major

works in different styles: Wang Jiyuan's *Apples and Grapes* shown in Figure 2 exhibits a strong post-impressionist approach similar to what Cezanne had towards manipulating the perspective and rendering volume of objects; Pang Xunqin's *Mother and Son* in Figure 3 have clear traits of influences from Cubism regarding the representation of spatial relationships, and Yang Taiyang's *Man Tuo Ling Yu Yan Tong* in figure 4 displays possible linkages with the European Surrealist approach in its imaginary composition in the pictorial space. The most significant attack on modern Western art from Xu came in his article *Huo (Confusion)* in 1929, in which he straightforwardly expresses his criticism and dislike against modern European artists like Cezanne and Matisse [3]. Xu even claims that the decision for museums to purchase and collect paintings from these modernist artists is contemptible and corrupted [3]. In the same manner, Xu's student Wu Zuoren criticized those who pursued modern art for merely being "moving from one mistake to another" [4]. Artists like Xu Beihong and Wu Zuoren were different from extreme cultural conservatives in that they did not reject Western art completely, but their diminishing attitude towards modern art appeared to be nevertheless overwhelmingly conservative and dogmatic for Storm Society artists to peacefully bear along with. With Xu Beihong and intellectuals like him occupying certain significant positions in academic institutions, it was natural for Storm Society artists to feel that the resources and support for their exploration of modern Western art were unfairly limited and oppressed. The cultural pressure on Storm Society artists, therefore, consisted of at least two layers of meaning: Those who insisted upon grasping traditional values and art forms from Chinese heritage in absolute rejection against Westernization, and those who prioritized more academia, realistic art styles for being more culturally and aesthetically valuable.

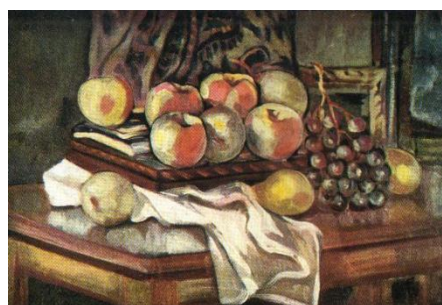


Figure 2: Wang Jiyuan (1893-1975), *Apples and Grapes*, Oil on Canvas, 1920s. Original Source: <https://www.jiaxiangwang.com/fa/fa-modern-wangjiyuan.htm>



Figure 3: Pang Xunqin (1906-1985), *Mother and Son*, 1928. Pencil, ink, watercolor on paper, 36 x 26.5 cm. Original Source: <https://www.chinesenewart.com/chinese-artists15/pangxunqin.htm>



Figure 4: Yang Taiyang (1909-2009), Man Tuo Ling Yu Yan Tong, Oil on Canvas, 1930s.

3. Problematic Social Environment of the Popular Mass

At the same time as conservative forces rooted within Chinese society and arts attacked Storm Society artists from a cultural perspective, they too encountered challenges from the audience in the popular social sphere. Even as intellectual movements like the New Culture Movement started to take place at the start of the 20th century in China, their participants were still the minority in Chinese society. The mass population of China at that time was still facing a lack of proper art education with their interests largely placed on popular arts such as decorative prints for the New Year or “serially illustrated picture-books” [5]. Recognizing that there was this lack of proper education in modern art, it was logical that in nearly every statement and writing piece by members of the Storm society there was a remark about the vulgarness of public taste and the environment for art. The Storm Society Artist Ni Yide openly criticizes the social environment of China during the starting years of Storm Society for the fact that “because art education has not yet rooted deeply into the popular folk, vulgar taste still rules our people. They do not need true art in the beginning.” [6]. Such ranting was an honest reflection of the big division between modern Chinese artists and the commonplace public in society. The lack of knowledge about modern art in the majority of Chinese society means that the audience was not prepared on a basic level to appreciate Avant Garde artworks, which added to the difficulty of gathering social support and resources for the Storm Society’s cause. In extreme cases, Chinese society’s inhospitality against operations of the Storm Society was so strong that it reached a point where its members received direct threats from people who disagree with them. Figure 5 shows the painting *Son of the Earth*, which was painted by Pang Xunqin to depict not any cheerful fantasy about Chinese society but rather a clearly sad and traumatic scene. The painting features a family of Chinese farmers where the wife and husband sit in desperation as their young son was dying under their watch. After Pang Xunqin exhibited this painting in the fourth Storm Society exhibition, an anonymous warning was sent to him saying that “Pang Xunqin had to leave Shanghai” [7]. Incidents like this reveal the fact that the tension between modern Chinese artists and the Chinese public was substantial in that the antagonist responses from the social mass had not only created obstacles in Storm Society's advocacy of western modern art but also directly troubled the daily lives of artists. The initial passion of the Storm Society artists to bring modern art to the Chinese public was constantly tested when in reality the atmosphere of society and responses from the audience were unfavorable.

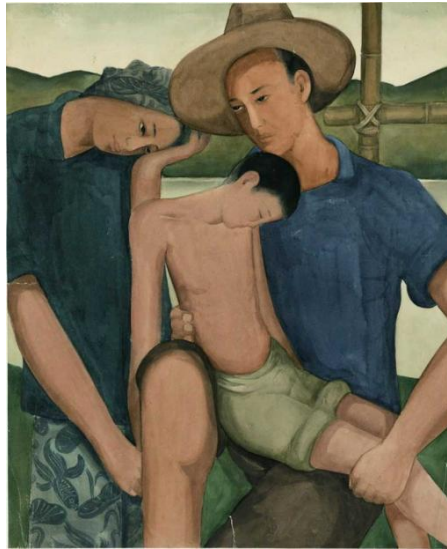


Figure 5: Pang Xunqin (1906-1985), *Son of the Earth*, 1934, Watercolor on Paper, 45 x 37 cm. Original Source: www.csart.org/wqzl/1408.html

4. Devastation of Sino-Japanese War

If we see the conservatism of cultural traditions and inhospitality in social basis as being majorly originated from the historical trajectory of Chinese history itself, the Japanese Invasion as a part of World War II was a clear demonstration of how special international events and conditions could also influence the development of Chinese modern art. The Sino-Japanese War is easily recognized today as one of the most cruel and bloody warfare that took place throughout World War II. Pang Xunqin writes about China during World War II as “a lone victim of aggression” with “little systematic help from the world community” [8]. The invasion’s consequential impacts on artists in the Storm Society were significant even before the start of it and into the later 1930s and beyond after its official dispersal. Pang Xunqin in his own biography *This Is the Path I Traveled Down* (*Jiu Shi Zhe Yang Zou Guo Lai De*) documented the growing desperation in himself and others’ responses to the Japanese invasion. The planning stage for the debut of the Storm Society started in late 1931 Shanghai with Pang Xunqin and Wang Jiyuan, a period of time which Pang recalled being continuously overwhelmed by Japanese Invasion and specifically the January 28th Incident in early 1932 when Japan launched its direct attack on Shanghai region [9]. After the end of the Storm Society in 1934, Pang was still living under the threat of Japanese military operations and had to move to Hangzhou, Beiping, and in the end Xiangxi within a short period of three years [9]. Pang recalls how he and others got huge emotional impacts witnessing the atrocities of war amid Japanese military’s attacks and bombing of Chinese cities [9]. His ending sentences in this part of his biography give away the hopelessness that all Chinese artists felt in their national crisis: “Fighting, fighting! We were truly only running away” [9]. Due to the scale and severity of this national crisis, it is doubtless that the same challenges were eminent not just to particular artists but rather too all Chinese artists during that period of time.

These physical and mental pressures disrupted modern artists like Pang from conducting barely any constructive works about avant-garde art. And together with the direct threat from Japanese military attacks there also came the substantial lack of material support and financial stability. That economic breakdown specifically influenced artists and intellectuals alike who worked in the realms of humanities and arts in that it led to “a heavy toll on the educational establishment...There were severe shortages of textbook, library materials, and scientific apparatus.” [10]. Simultaneously, inflation took place during the war as another side effect that “ravages the well-being of students and

intellectuals” [10]. This also put particular pressure on the development of modern art because not only did modern Chinese artists struggle with maintaining their own material livelihood, the financial transactions and trade of artworks on the market kept collapsing and failing to support these artists’ careers. As Storm Society artists were taking up positions to maintain their living, their situation only deteriorated more. Both the artists and their audience had no motivation to continue exploring modern art when they themselves were struggling with physical and economic hardships that destabilized the very basis of their livelihood. The war had its way of pushing the first wave of modern art movements in China into a nearly complete halt. Just as the emergence of the Storm Society took place with a bunch of students from a “liberating atmosphere of post-War Paris”, it just so happened to end in a war-haunted China [11].

5. Rising Awareness in Contextual Specificity

As this essay has demonstrated above, Storm Society artists were affected and challenged by various kinds of factors in their culture and society. Each of the three sociocultural factors was immense in their influences either on the public reception of western modern art or directly on the livelihood of artists themselves. Within that being said, the question of Western influences in modern Chinese art is one of great complexity, the scope and depth of which extends far beyond the single group of Storm Society. It, therefore, always remains true that the analyses of Chinese modern art should not be conclusive or definitive in any way but rather build an open-ended perspective on Chinese modern art that welcomes all different kinds of other possible historical evidence and potential interpretations. If anything, the analysis of Storm Society does disclose the indisputable necessity for art historical studies about modern Chinese art to embrace and uphold a methodological emphasis on the contextual specificity and complexity of any individual artist or art movement that they attempt to analyze. Underlying that emphasis is the importance to refrain from imagining a vulgar binary comparison between the vision of a simply more unified and advanced West and an equally oversimplified picture of a passive and subordinated China. If a subject so small in scale as the Storm Society is conditional on a multitude of sociocultural factors, the discourse about modern Chinese art would only be more complex in nature and require more specificity in its study.

Naturally, this contextual approach contends against previous reading about the early history of modern Chinese art as nothing more than unauthentic and mimicking responses. The example of Storm Society clearly shows that one of the dangers of such an inaccurate reading lies in its inevitable tendency to deduce Chinese artists’ arduous struggles between their sociocultural environment and Western Avant Garde art into a one-way route of blatantly stealing whatever their European peers have done before. This mindset may offer an easy way out of the sophistication in history, but it in reality, leads to the acceptance and, consequently, the perpetuation of the ignorance about unique sociocultural contexts that Chinese artists were subject to in that particular time and location. It subordinates Chinese artists’ efforts to those of their contemporary European peers. In this sense, contextualizing Chinese modern art within the specific network of cultural and social relations facilitates the understanding of sociocultural conditions’ unique influences on artists and art movements, and eventually contributes to the return the academic discourse of Chinese modern art back into an equal dialect with modern art from other cultural backgrounds, European or otherwise. In the end of the day, we shall recognize that any analysis of art history in a global, intercultural context can generate genuine value only when it engages with such topics with an awareness of the specificity of unique sociocultural dynamics that distinguishes every art movement and artist group.

6. Conclusion

Art historian David Clarke concludes in his book *China-Art-Modernity* that there were “factors beyond the control of the artists themselves...ensuring that the success of Western-influenced art in early twentieth-century China was only partial” [12]. In emphasizing the existence and influence of these external factors, we can start interpreting modern Chinese artists without deducing them into isolated individuals by contextualizing them and their artworks within the corresponding network of social and cultural relations, both local and international. Bringing the Storm Society into this discourse then gives us an extraordinary example of how the great multitude of different factors present in early 20th century China converged together and created an array of equally complicated impacts on modern Chinese artists: The voice of cultural conservatism was still persisting into the early 20th century against any attempts to stray from traditional conventions; The mass population in China as the supposed audience for artistic movements was itself haunted by undereducation and poverty, making it far from offering a habitable social environment for Storm Society’s operations; The Japanese invasion in World War II too played one of the determinative roles that directly threatened the livelihood of Storm Society artists, the chain effects of which transformed into almost insurmountable obstacles on their material and financial base. Each of these three factors constituted a major aspect of social or cultural circumstances in early 20th century China and together they shaped Storm Society artists’ progress in introducing avant-garde art from Europe into their home country. With such an understanding of the contextual complexity and uniqueness about the Storm Society’s history, it became equally important for academic analyses to jump out of an outdated, colonialist modality of thinking that deduces the emergence of modern art in China into a process of individuals passively accepting and copying from European masters.

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