

Re-Evaluating the Role of Chinese Painting

The prevailing narrative that has structured the history of twentieth-century art is that of a shift in the centre of gravity from the Parisian artistic scene to New York after the Second World War. Although this narrative has various convenient pedagogical elements and is partly related to the reality of the art market, it has now been challenged by many exhibitions and recent theories, which have replaced the image of competing and primarily hegemonic poles of attraction with those of differentiated and interconnected networks.¹ Hence, the artistic output of the Asian, Latin-American, and African countries has gradually been incorporated into major Western museums and into the syntheses intended for specialists or the general public, while the biennials and many contemporary art fairs held around the world have become the subject of research. Nevertheless, the desire to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the artistic reality of the twentieth century has resulted in a pronounced dissymmetry in the knowledge and diffusion of works of art. Indeed, the artistic works originating from places that have long been considered as marginal in the artistic creative economy are often only considered in relation to their integration into dominant or well-established interpretative frameworks.

Hence, the abstract expressionist works created in Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s suffered from many handicaps. On the one hand, they came from a desperately peripheral country; although the Japanese domination (1895–1915) facilitated contact with Western culture, this was mostly indirect and was generally subjected to prior selection by the occupying power. When Taiwan regained its autonomy after the Second World War, it was almost immediately governed by the continental authorities, consisting of the Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist party, which had been thrown into disarray before the onslaught of the Communists. Furthermore, the government of Taiwan was gradually excluded from the world's representative bodies as it was replaced by that of mainland China. It depended on the support of the Americans and their omnipresence during and after the Korean War (1950–1953) to guarantee its security and survival. Hence, the Taiwanese were able to benefit from ready access to American culture, but lost some visibility as citizens of one of China's marginal territories and as an American satellite. In addition, as their careers were often fragmented, it is merely possible to gain a one-dimensional appreciation of works created in a complex political and cultural context, and which were characterised by numerous hybridisations.

The life and work of Fong Chung-Ray (馮鍾睿) attest to this patchwork of fragmented identities and varied expectations that paradoxically gave unity to an ensemble of paintings created in Taiwan after the Second World War. Born in 1934 in China's Henan Province, Fong Chung-Ray joined the Marine Corps during the civil war that followed the defeat of the Japanese. When the Kuomintang retreated—supposedly as a temporary measure—in the face of the Communists, Fong Chung-Ray moved to Taiwan. After graduating from the Political Cadres Academy in 1954, he practised his art in the army until 1968. At the same time, in 1957, along with three fellow soldiers, he founded the Four Seas Artists Association (四海畫會). The same year, the first exhibition was held by the 'Fifth Month Painting Society' (五月畫會), which was given the name in reference to the May Fair, but which is better known by the English name of the Fifth Moon Group, which Fong Chung-Ray was asked to join in 1961.² The latter did not have the same academic knowledge as the other members of the group, who mostly came from the fine arts department in the Taiwan Provincial Normal University, and is often described as being self-taught.³ Nevertheless, he shared with the other

¹ See, for example, JOYEUX-PRUNEL, Béatrice, 'Un centre, des périphéries ? Les arts dans la géopolitique culturelle mondiale, XIXe-XXe siècles', in POIRRIER, Philippe, and TILLIER, Bertrand (ed.), *Aux Confins des arts et de la culture : approches thématiques et transversales XVIe-XXIe siècle*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2016, pp. 159–175.

² 'The Wuyue Group or Fifth Moon Group (1957–1972)', in VAZIEUX, Sabine (ed.) *From China to Taiwan, 1955–1985: Pioneers of Abstraction*, Éditions Racine and Lannoo Publishers, Brussels, 2017, p. 58.

³ LAWTON, Thomas, 'The Paintings of Fong Chung-Ray', in *Fong Chung-Ray*, National Taiwan Arts Center, Taipei, 1967, pp. 11–12.

members various artistic interests that justified his inclusion in a group that soon became one of the embodiments of Taiwanese avant-garde art, along with the Ton Fan Painting Association (東方畫會).

Aside from a few rare exceptions, the Fifth Moon Group was composed of artists trained in Taiwan, but who originated from the mainland. Most of them were familiar with their homeland's pictorial history, which they partly sought to continue, but they refused to copy the old models, despite the backing of the Kuomintang, which wished to perpetuate an ancestral culture of which it considered itself the guardian.⁴ In New York's contemporary painting, with which they familiarised themselves via magazines, they saw the possibility for a convergence between Western modernism and Chinese painting. All of these artists gradually developed an individual style that could be perceived both as the continuation of characteristics that were already present in the history of ink painting and as the creation of a highly contemporary style. At the time, abstract expressionism was 'new, yet seemingly familiar'⁵ to Fong Chung-Ray, because it constituted 'the period of the greatest proximity between the latter [and Western art] in the entire history of Oriental art'.⁶ Hence, the assimilation of calligraphy and ink painting, which was practised by artists such as Franz Kline (1910–1962) and Robert Motherwell (1915–1991), brought to fruition in the Chinese artistic tradition the seeds of a modernism that was simply waiting to emerge, to such an extent that one can conclude that, 'even in the absence of interaction between the East and the West, Chinese painting would have reached this stage sooner or later'.⁷

After abandoning figuration at the end of the 1950s, Fong Chung-Ray ceased to work with oil on canvas circa 1963, with the encouragement of Liu Kuo-sung (劉國松, born in 1932), another painter in the Fifth Moon Group. He subsequently devoted himself to ink painting.⁸ His focus on this medium enabled him to develop a plastic vocabulary that was not merely confined to producing variations on abstract expressionist repertoires, while his quest for expressiveness and desire to break away—at least to some extent—from the Chinese pictorial heritage led him to create his own brushes, made from palm tree leaves⁹ at the beginning of 1964.¹⁰ The tension between the two approaches, which were neither abandoned nor assimilated, was also evident in the stylistic choices and in what Louis Marin (1931–1992) would have referred to as 'marks of enunciation'. Hence, the ink works created at the beginning of the 1960s were characterised by the use of thick lines that added structure to his compositions against a background of marks and disordered lines that underlined the expressive aspects of abstract expressionism. Gradually, the interlacing and superposed marks were extended to fill the entire surface of the sheet, while textural effects became more varied and the colours imposed their presence more visibly. This abstraction borrowed the finesse of working on the differentiated saturation of inks and colours from traditional art, as well as other characteristics, such as—in the form of a signature—a colophon sometimes associated with a vermilion stamp. This inscription was also used to give the work a title via a series of numbers, employing a process from the globalised contemporary art world.

In 1967, Fong Chung-Ray began to experiment with acrylic painting, which created the effect of greater opacity, but which also gave his colours greater vivacity. This approach was complemented

⁴ See GRAVES, Linda Margaret, *Contemporary Chinese Painting in Taiwan*, Master's Thesis, Oberlin College, 1965.

⁵ FONG, Chung-Ray, 'Yi xie huiyi ji ganxiang 一些回憶及感想', in *Fong Chung-Ray: A Retrospective, 2015*, China Art Press, Hong Kong, 2015, pp. 8–9.

⁶ *Idem*.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ JOHNSON, Mark Dean, 'Fong Chung-Ray and Chinese Abstract Painting', in *Fong Chung-Ray: A Retrospective, 2015*, China Art Press, Hong Kong, 2015, pp. 186–199.

⁹ JOHNSON, Mark Dean, 'Fong Chung-ray at Eighty: Between Modern and Contemporary', *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 13, issue no. 6, November–December 2014, pp. 74–81.

¹⁰ The chronology presented in the many monographies and articles devoted to Fong Chung-Ray is systematically dotted with incoherencies. The dates mentioned here and which are not taken from a bibliographical reference, were provided by the artist himself, who is not particularly interested in the question of historical accuracy.

by a better grasp of the international artistic scene, gained after a year of studies in 1970 at the University of Hawaii, and the following year on a journey around Europe and in the United States, which was funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. The direct encounter with Western paintings enabled him to redefine the specificity of his work and that of his friends; not on the basis of formal differences, but rather the expression of a Chinese approach that was proper to them. This conception, which was also based on an awareness of the progress made, enabled him to assess ‘the qualitative advances made via the works of the Fifth Moon Group with regard to the [canvases of the] New York artists, which reached their apogee after the Second World War’.¹¹ Liberated from the need to distinguish himself technically from his American counterparts, he could now—while a nativist movement (鄉土運動), which was highly critical of abstract painting,¹² emerged in Taiwan and he moved to San Francisco in 1975—opt for acrylic on canvas, as he appreciated its ability to be diluted and its capacities for creating novel effects of substance and depth.¹³

Nevertheless, this had little effect on the overall grammar of his style before 1986, when he began to regularly glue pieces of pre-painted paper in his works. These elements added greater structure to his compositions and the poetic interpenetrations of coloured areas—which deliberately evoked landscapes in whose depths the viewers could immerse themselves—were soon transformed into juxtaposed planes which draw the eye. This more affirmative two-dimensionality was softened by textural effects, the spatial values of the colours, the introduction (circa 1990) of partial inscriptions that resembled a palimpsest, and the multiple superpositions created by the collages and colours that invaded the neighbouring spaces. The stratigraphy of the pictorial layers was deliberately evocative of walls that had been given a patina by history and covered in several phases by posters or graffiti. Fong Chung-Ray often spoke of his interest in the appearance of ancient walls,¹⁴ which, adapted onto canvas, enabled him to ‘free himself from the restrictions of traditional landscapes’.¹⁵ This love of surfaces degraded by time became even more evident in the 2000s, when the artist generalised the use of a technique used in his oeuvre in 1993. He painted with acrylic on a plastic surface, then glued onto the canvas flakes of dried paint in broad, coloured pans covered in numerous cracks that revealed the underlying work.

The focus on the traces left by the passage of time is based on a religious awareness nourished since 1988 by the reading of Buddhist texts and reinforced by the death of the artist’s wife in a car accident in 2002.¹⁶ Hence, the Chinese characters that emerged in his work came, with several rare exceptions, from the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra*. They are clearly a reference to Asian culture, as well as a graphic motif that can be appreciated for its formal qualities. Hence, the writing, which became a plastic element, an identity marker, and a spiritual expression, became a résumé of the work carried out by the artist over a period of more than sixty years. Although Fong Chung-Ray now seems to consider that his generation’s objective to revitalise Chinese painting was too ambitious,¹⁷ he also believes that the latter has not yet reached its apogee and still has great potential.¹⁸ Because of the way in which the members of the Fifth Moon Group married Western aesthetic categories, ancestral techniques, and numerous references to the thought and pictorial past of China, their work undoubtedly constituted a fundamental step in this process. Hence, with them, Fong Chung-Ray contributed to fundamentally changing the a priori framework of the experience

¹¹ Quoted in CHUN, Doris Sze, ‘Zhongguo dangdai chouxiang hua xianqu – Feng Zhongrui 中國當代抽象畫先驅 – 馮鍾睿’, in *Fong Chung-Ray : A Retrospective*, 2015, China Art Press, Hong Kong, 2015, pp. 33–36

¹² PAN, An-yi, ‘The Fifth Moon Group: Pioneers of New Chinese Modern Art in Taiwan’, in *Orientalisms*, Vol. 49, issue no. 1, January–February 2018, pp. 77–82.

¹³ FONG, Chung-Ray, op. cit.

¹⁴ WANG, Olivia, ‘Breakthroughs: Interview with Fong Chung-Ray’, 19 November 2018, <http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/BreakthroughsInterviewWithFongChungRay>, last consulted on 23 August 2019.

¹⁵ Fong Chung Ray, quoted in JOHNSON, Mark Dean, 2014.

¹⁶ JOHNSON, Mark Dean, 2014.

¹⁷ FONG, Chung-Ray, op. cit.

¹⁸ WANG, Olivia, op. cit.

and practice of Chinese painting, making them compatible with those present in Europe and the United States, without ever entirely making a break with his homeland's artistic culture. Hence, the latter, which was redefined, reinterpreted, and redeployed in other countries in unprecedented ways, has pursued its course.