

Michael Sullivan and his Study of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Painting

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The 2013-14 academic year was a winnowing time for the field of East Asian art history, claiming a host of preeminent senior scholars who had re-defined and guided East Asian art studies throughout much of the post-World War II era. Among them were Michael Sullivan (1916-2013, Stanford University and Oxford) and James Cahill (1926-2014, Freer Gallery of Art and University of California at Berkeley) in Chinese art history, John Rosenfield (1924-2013, Harvard University) and Donald McCallum (1939-2013, UCLA) in Japanese art history. Ill health removed still others from continuing service, most notably Wen Fong (Princeton University). Theirs was the generation that shifted the dominant locus of research and publication from museums to the college classrooms, who made intensive language training and usage a professional necessity, and who assured that even those working in the museums would have a rigorous scholastic background in order to publish scholarly research at the highest levels in their fields.

Among these scholars, Michael Sullivan will be remembered best for his pioneering role in the study of modern and contemporary Chinese painting. Before Sullivan's efforts took effect, late Qing period and twentieth-century Chinese painting was considered either too derivative of earlier Chinese painting to deserve serious attention or too belated and derivative of Western painting to be seriously considered as Chinese. He wrote the first major book on the subject, *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century*, in 1959, long before the subject became popular, and he followed that with a half-century of increasingly sophisticated and informative publications that help to chart the growth of the discipline, among them: *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (1973, revised and expanded 1989); *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (1996); *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary* (2006).¹

Despite this distinction, Sullivan was not a specialist in the subject—he never taught a course on it²—and he should be remembered as well for a remarkable breadth

¹ *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century*, London: Faber and Faber, 1959; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959; *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; revised and expanded edition, 1989; *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996; *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. [Note: All publications cited herein were authored by Michael Sullivan unless specified otherwise. Except in titles, Chinese transliterations originally in Wade-Giles have been converted into Pinyin.]

² Nonetheless, three of Sullivan's Stanford University Ph.D. students completed the first dissertations on twentieth-century topics: Mayching Gao, "China's Response to the West in Art,

of interests and knowledge unmatched in later generations of Asian art scholars. It was this breadth that made possible his authorship of the most popular of all Chinese art history textbooks, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, 1960, revised in five successive editions as *The Arts of China*. This was the first general survey to bring the general reader fully up to date, which he did with this passage introducing the latter two centuries:

It is the general custom for books on Chinese art to end with the pious abdication of [the emperor] Qianlong in 1796, as though from that moment until today nothing of the least significance had occurred. If we glance at the decorative arts, there is indeed enough depressing evidence to support such a view. The porcelain, lacquer, carved jade and other crafts of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century are derivative and uninspired. Although a chiefly foreign demand has kept the quality of the workmanship at a high level, these things betray a consistent refusal to recognize the fact that China has been undergoing a hundred years of revolution. Even more depressing are the decorative arts produced since the People's Government came to power in 1950; for though the techniques have been maintained, and even improved, the designs are generally a pastiche borrowed indiscriminately from every epoch in Chinese history. The position in regard to painting, however, is rather different. For painting is a private art, and cannot but reflect in a highly personal way the response of the individual to the world around him. Indeed, the painting of the last fifty years provides us with a vivid illustration of the conflicting forces that have been at work in shaping modern China.³

In this one hears the voice of the critic alongside that of the historian, more unabashedly judgmental than that of the generation of writers who followed. It also implies a preference for the medium of painting, unlike his British colleagues who tended to prefer and collect ceramics and other 'objects,' which derived from Sullivan's experience in China and suited him well for the years of teaching and publication in the United States that lay ahead.

When Michael Sullivan came to China for the first time, in 1940, he brought with him a British background—born in Toronto of a Canadian father and American mother but reared in England from the age of three; a Cambridge education—a degree in architecture completed in the previous year, with strong interests in archaeology and European art history as well; and a skill in driving vehicles—his interest in things Chinese was kindled by a friendship with fellow architecture student Wang Dahong, who many years later designed the Sun Yat-sen Memorial in Taipei and whose fast-moving Voisin automobile Sullivan had raced at 100 miles per hour in 1937. It was the

1989-1937" (1972); Shirley Sun, "Lu Hsün and the Chinese Woodcut Movement, 1929-1936" (1974); James Soong, "A Visual Experience in Nineteenth-century China: Jen Po-nien (1840-1895) and the Shanghai School of Painting" (1977).

³ *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, London: Faber and Faber, 1959; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960, 204.

war itself that brought Sullivan to China. Chongqing was already under air assault by the Japanese and Sullivan was soon behind the steering wheel of an International Red Cross British Relief Unit truck, his driving skills tested by terrain that was challenging enough without bombs falling and unexploded ordnance lying all around. In 1942, he met and shortly afterward married a young bacteriologist from Amoy, Wu Huan (Khoan), who became his partner in scholarship throughout the remainder of their long and devoted life together.

In wartime China, Sullivan put his artistic interests to good use. His first publication, in 1945, was on Tibetan art in the West China Union University Museum.⁴ He participated with Zheng Dekun in 1942 excavating the 10th-century tomb of the Former Shu Kingdom emperor Wang Jian, near Chengdu, and this became the subject of his first article on Chinese art (1946).⁵ In Sichuan, Sullivan also taught Renaissance art history to Chu-tsing Li, who later taught that subject at the University of Iowa before his decades as a Chinese art specialist, most notably the arts of the Yuan dynasty and the twentieth century, at the University of Kansas.

Throughout the war years, Michael Sullivan personally befriended many of the artists and intellectuals who had retreated west to Sichuan—some individually, many together with their transplanted academies—just ahead of Japanese troops and airplanes, including Liu Haisu, Wu Zuoren, Liu Kaichu, Xiao Ding, Zhang Anzhi, Hua Tianyu, Xu Beihong, and his personal favorite, Pang Xunqin, all of whom he thanked individually for making his *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* possible, as well as Zhang Daqian, Guan Shanyue, Lin Fengmian, Zhao Wuji, Pan Yuliang, Huang Yongyu, Ding Cong, the sculptor Liu Kaiqu, and others. Sullivan's four favorite artists were represented by color plates in that publication: Fu Baoshi (who had died four years earlier, in 1965), Pang Xunqin, Zhao Wuji (Zao Wuki, who emigrated to Paris in 1948 and whose work shows an appreciation of artists ranging from Cezanne to Matisse and Klee), and Zeng Youhe (who moved to Honolulu in 1949 as Betty Ecke, the young wife of Chinese art scholar and curator Gustav Ecke). This first-hand experience shaped Sullivan's approach to his contemporary subject: not as an abstract or remote object of study but—as it had been with ancient authorities on the subject—by means of personal friendships, intimate observation, and strong emotions tempered by discriminating standards of quality. Returning to China after a long hiatus, in 1973, 1975, 1979, and many times afterwards, Sullivan renewed these friendships and continually extended his in-person studies. His contemporary studies were more like first-person anthropological reporting than secondary text-based research.

When Sullivan returned to academic studies in England in 1947, it was at first to pursue European art at the Courtauld Institute, but he soon transferred to the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) to study classical Chinese (M.A., 1950), and within another two years he had obtained his doctoral degree from Harvard—the first dissertation on Chinese painting in the English language. It was to

⁴ *An Introduction to Tibetan Culture*, Chengdu: West China Union University Museum Guidebook Series, 1945.

⁵ "The Excavation of a T'ang Imperial Tomb," *The Illustrated London News*, April 20, 1946, 429.

early landscapes that he turned for his dissertation topic (in close consultation with curator Laurence Sickman of Kansas City's Nelson Gallery of Art), later published as *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (1962) and further extended as *Chinese Landscape Painting: Vol. II, The Sui and T'ang Dynasties* (1980).⁶ Six years of teaching and curating at the Malaya University of Singapore, 1954–60, gave Sullivan an in-depth knowledge of Southeast Asian arts, Chinese trade wares, and Buddhist arts, and it was there that he wrote his first two books, already mentioned above. After six years as a lecturer in Oriental art at the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University, 1960–1966, Sullivan settled into a professorship at Stanford University's young art history department, which he held from 1966 to 1985. Two tours back to England as Slade Professor at Oxford, 1973–74 and 1983–84, and a return to Oxford's St. Catherine's College as a fellow by special election, 1979–89, where he continued to take graduate students, rounded out Sullivan's teaching career.

The absence of previous writings on modern Chinese art, and even the paucity of available visual materials, left Michael Sullivan in a peculiar professional situation: without the benefit of museum holdings and published illustrations, like Chinese collectors of the pre-photographic past who could only write about what they saw and only see what they and friends had painted themselves or collected, Sullivan could write only about the limited number of painters he had met or come to know personally. As with writers from China's past, this tended to collapse or compress the distinction between art history and art criticism. One sees this in his writing on individual artists, however highly regarded, or individual works however famous—for example, in his comment on Xu Beihong's canonical *Yugong Moving the Mountain*: 'Though a technical *tour de force*, it is one of the most unpleasant works to come out of modern China.'⁷ Nor did he hesitate to apply this critical brush more broadly, as when writing of Cantonese painting and the leading role it had taken during the 1920s and 30s in modernizing Chinese painting by imitating the earlier marriage of East Asian and Euro-American techniques of Japan's Nihonga tradition:

In the case of the *Lingnan pai* ("Cantonese school"), it seems often that feeling is lacking altogether, being replaced by a purely technical and theoretical attitude of mind. The significance of the failure of this school to create a new art lies partly in this very synthetic basis, and partly in the nature of the foreign art which was assimilated. When certain Chinese traditional painters deserted the principles and the whole outlook that were theirs by inheritance for a foreign attitude and approach to nature which they but partly understood, the results were likely to be disastrous. How much more was this the case when that alien aesthetic had already passed through the hands of Japanese artists. Japan has notoriously fastened with enthusiasm on many of the more superficial (and even

⁶ *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962; *Chinese Landscape Painting: Vol. II, The Sui and T'ang Dynasties*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

⁷ *Chinese Painting in the Twentieth Century*, 50.

discreditable) aspects of Western culture, and she has equally failed, with a few outstanding exceptions, to take to herself the true spirit of Western art.⁸

Thus, one of the most striking and perhaps surprising impressions that comes from a re-reading of Sullivan's major texts, despite his personal enthusiasm and deep professional dedication to the subject, and his intention to counter the lack of interest and respect given to it by his contemporary peers and colleagues, is the overall negative assessment he gives to the period. His overall view, in other words, is not all that different from that of others, with his enthusiasm is reserved for the small number of artists who have risen above the ordinariness of their times, and perhaps for the notion that every period deserves its own historical accounting.

While his critical praise was bestowed on artists of 'true creativity,' they were few in number, and the object of Sullivan's negative criticism lay in what he saw as an elevation in the baseline level of conventionality under the Manchus, understood as an outgrowth of advanced antiquarianism. As he wrote in *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century*,

The last century of the Manchu Dynasty saw many feeble attempts to copy European Art and the further degeneration of the *wenren hua* [literati painting] into mere ink-play, while the stylistic moulds became fully and rigidly fixed, supported by an inevitable antiquarianism. . . . The existence of these handbooks [what Sullivan calls "pattern-books, or technical handbooks," like the *Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual* and the *Ten Bamboo Studio Painting Manual*] is significant, for not only do they demonstrate that the forms of traditional painting had become completely conventionalized, but they reveal also the inherent weakness of a tradition that could be learned by a kind of cumulative process. For so long as the artist was possessed of true creativity, the language of symbolic forms was, to him, merely a means to a higher end, no sooner mastered than taken for granted. But inevitably the accumulation of "type forms" that could be learned out of a book equipped the mediocre artist with precisely the same range of expression as his more gifted brother possessed. The degeneration of the last centuries is seen not in the creation of less beautiful pictures, but in the empty repetition of a set of pictorial formulae that had once been pregnant with vitality and meaning.⁹

This is, after all, a fairly standard account of the era, derived from fairly normal standards. It does not describe, let alone explain, why one era produces greater change than any other, or why this era in particular tolerated the lack of it. It does not define creativity nor observe that all culture is based on cumulative learning. It does not speculate on patterns of historical distortion whereby a more complete and less selective

⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

record of earlier eras than that which now survives might yield a similar impression of rampant conventionalism. As for critical standards, moreover, he rewarded artistic individualism much as his Western contemporaries did, but was dissatisfied with the kind of productive craftsmanship that one finds in the beautiful but repetitious ritual arts of tribal cultures; in reality, given its exceptional respect for traditional lineage through imitation and copywork, both in youthful study and adult practice, Chinese painting—tribal, ritualistic—may best fit somewhere in between. Moreover, once the practice of poetry, calligraphy, and belatedly (in the Song dynasty) painting were appended to the scholarly means of success and social status in China, it was perhaps inevitable that painting would become a platform for the aspirations and pretensions of an ever-expanding population of those seeking to discover and display whatever such talents they had, making it a more laborious task as time went on to critically sift and sort out works of ‘quality’ from the increasing expanse of mediocrity. Finally, Sullivan at that time—and perhaps one cannot expect this of any writing at that time—does not account for the role of the Manchus, everywhere building local support for their sprawling multi-ethnic empire by appropriating, sanitising, authorising, regularising the tamest, most conservative modes of traditional culture, rooting out all those born of or prone to dissent. In painting, that which the Manchus favored at court and eventually practiced themselves was borrowed direct from the scholars' own country-club tradition, labeled the ‘Southern school’ in the decades just prior to the Manchus arrival, and referred to by Sullivan as the ‘academic’ tradition in its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century phase:

The extreme “right wing” consists of the adherents to the academic and antiquarian traditions which have been handed down through generations of court painters and others in touch with palace circles. . . . The [royal Manchu] Pu family were perhaps a special case, for if the majority of traditional painters were merely conservative in outlook these survivors of the Manchu imperial house were utterly remote from the life around them. . . . Every Chinese painter has studied the great painters of the past, and on occasion, as a tribute to a particular favourite, painted deliberately in his style. . . . But in this decadent age few of these academic painters could do anything else, clinging instead to the belief common in traditional Chinese thinking that perfection is not something still to be striven for, but rather something that has been attained in some earlier epoch; hence [by that mode of thinking] it should be our ideal to recapture this lost greatness by a complete absorption in the achievements of the past. For this reason, the academic tradition, if it survives at all, is likely to do so in a semi-petrified state, for by its very nature it is unable to find a place for itself in twentieth-century China, except as a relic of a bygone age.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

Dividing the early twentieth-century's artists into three groups (plus the few who fit into no grouping at all), then, in addition to Beijing's 'academic' school of professional and royal painters and the already excoriated Cantonese ('Lingnan') painters, Sullivan's third group was that of the scholars of the court bureaucracy, or 'literati'—whose style had previously been appropriated by the court to form the 'academic' school early in the dynasty, which therefore, he admits, made it difficult (or, I might suggest, all but impossible) to tell them apart.¹¹ One looks here, at last, for the author's favor, only to be disappointed and to run into yet another brand of conventionalization:

The painting of the *wenren*, or *literati*, (...) represents, in a very general way, a revolt on the part of the scholar class against the extreme conventionalization of academic art. It is both freer in technique and more personal in expression, and as a result is both more alive and more susceptible to changing conditions. (...) The number of literary painters in China is enormous, for the term may be said to include any educated person who paints for pleasure. (...) This has led to the spread—one might even say dilution—of art in traditional China among a large proportion of the educated class (...) preventing that specialization of talent which alone can produce a great art. But that is a highly debatable point. (...) ¹²

And further:

To the modern *wenren*, technique too often is an end in itself. One looks in vain for a deeper content. The influence of the West on modern traditional painting has added a new vigour and a certain superficial element of realism; to this extent there has been a revival in the traditional school. But the artist is too often absorbed in the delights of the brush for its own sake. Through a long tradition of technical mastery the forms that he creates are assured a certain degree of abstract beauty and vitality, but through constant repetition they have, by losing touch with the world of outward experience, become the words and phrases of a dead language.¹³

Sullivan's *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century* covered the first fifty-five years of the century in a mere eighty-three pages (to which he appended a 'Biographical Index' listing some 261 artists¹⁴). Within this time frame, then, these three groups—Cantonese artists; court and professional painters, mostly from Beijing; and literati artists, mostly centered in the Yangzhou-Nanjing-Suzhou-Hangzhou region—plus those few artists who stood out from the conventionalised many as ungrouped individuals and occupied

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ This list was expanded to include more than 800 artists in *Art and Artists of the Twentieth Century*, and that total was more than doubled in his *Modern Chinese Artists: A Biographical Dictionary*.

much of his discussion, formed the basis of the author's organisation. Each group came with its own burden of conventionality: whether it was derived from the pictorial realism offered by Western models, or China's own art-historical past, or an infatuation with traditional Chinese brushwork, the average twentieth century Chinese artist seemed to be doomed by some uncanny capacity for studying things to death and reducing them to dry scholasticism, to mechanical repetition—the bane of genuine artistry.

Everything in *Chinese Art of the Twentieth Century* seemed to be happening pretty much at the same time. It was only with the last chapter of his next publication, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*, that Sullivan provided readers with a historical structure by which to gauge the diachronic development of those years, as described here:

Artists and writers became involved in bitter controversies regarding their responsibility to society, the Bohemians proclaiming a doctrine of art for art's sake, the Realists urging a closer identity with the people. Finally, all doubts about the place of the artist in modern China were resolved by the Japanese attack on Peking in July 1937. Three years of steady retreat brought the painters and intellectuals close to *the real China* [my italics], and the later work of Pang Xunqin, of the Realists such as Xiao Ding, and of the best of the wood-engravers is full of a sense of discovery—not only of their own people, but also of their own land; for they were driven by the war far into the interior, to come face to face for the first time with the beauty of the western provinces, as yet untouched by the cosmopolitan culture of the treaty ports. But, as the war dragged on, artists with a social conscience became increasingly disturbed by decay and corruption on the home front. Some joined the woodcut movement which had been founded by the great writer Lu Xun in the nineteen-twenties and was now being promoted by the Communists at Yan'an for political ends; others turned in protest to political cartooning or to an elaborate and indirect form of social symbolism.¹⁵

Art itself could not unify a badly fractured China. Only the Japanese military invasion could force the people together, physically and spiritually, and only the experience of togetherness in China's geographical interior could reveal their common heritage and offer a solution. The operant phrase, italicised above, is 'the real China,' meaning the Chinese hinterlands and especially Sichuan—the place that Sullivan himself knew best and, romantically no doubt, saw as older, truer, and more essential than the commercialised, Westernised eastern seaboard. But soon afterwards, once Japan was out of the way and China's interior was abandoned, the Chinese people divided once again, in art as they did in their civil war.

Whereas to the historian of Western culture modernity has represented an era of explosive growth in material, military, and cultural matters, to the China historian it has meant seeking the root causes of decline. And just as the Chinese themselves divided

¹⁵ *Introduction to Chinese Art*, 206-207.

over whether to seek solutions in Westernisation or some hidden virtues of their own past, China historians have been obligated to examine just what it was that separated and linked these two great cultural spheres. Having experienced China's trauma first-hand, and having already broadly surveyed its art history, it is hardly surprising that Michael Sullivan turned his serious attention to this examination and traced it backwards in time to its earliest origins. In 1970, he completed a detailed and ground-breaking study, 'Some Possible Sources of European Influence on Late Ming and Early Ch'ing Painting,' presented to an unprecedented international symposium of China art historians.¹⁶ In this, he laid open new possibilities that his California colleague James Cahill would come to utilize so well and convincingly in his own works.¹⁷ Cahill later wrote in his influential book *The Compelling Image*,

The impact of European pictures on late Ming painting remains controversial. Besides Yoshiho Yonezawa in Japan, who suggested it tentatively many years ago, and Michael Sullivan, who took the important step of identifying the European engravings that were in China and accessible to artists by the beginning of the seventeenth century, hardly anyone seems willing to recognize it at all, at least publically.¹⁸

This research was dramatically expanded to produce Sullivan's *Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (1973 and 1989), which even now remains the foremost overview of the subject. From what has already been quoted here of his earlier writings, it is unsurprising that he should have approached this subject with the realisation that Westernisation offered no quick fix for the troubles that ailed latter-day China and its artistic culture.

Exploring the topic from the arrival of the Jesuits in the late 16th century onward, with a richness in detail not found in his earlier books, Sullivan found himself obliged, in some significant sense, to raise the topic only to dismiss it:

While foreign forms and techniques in the arts might be borrowed to fulfill a particular role, there was, at least in China, a tendency for them to be kept firmly in their place. The "foreign realism" in the art of the early Qing dynasty was

¹⁶ 'Some Possible Sources of European Influence on Late Ming and Early Ch'ing Painting,' in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Chinese Painting*, Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1970, 593-634.

¹⁷ James Cahill, "Wu Pin and His Landscape Painting," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium*, 635-720 and especially 654-655; James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting*, Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982, especially chapter 1, "Chang Hung and the Limits of Presentation," 1-35 and figures 1.20, 1.22.

¹⁸ Cahill, *Compelling Image*, 70.

confined largely to the Nanking painters and professional artists; the scholars in general ignored it.¹⁹

Nor was this pattern of rejection new in China's history. While well aware from his own landscape studies of the many ways in which pre-Tang and Tang cultures were enriched by Chinese engagements with South and Western Asia, Sullivan wrote,

Buddhist art had brought with it to China a number of foreign techniques such as shading, chiaroscuro, "relief painting" and some peculiar drapery conventions which were assiduously applied by Chinese painters to the figures in the Buddhist banner and wall painting, but these techniques were, as far as we know, very little used, if at all, by scholarly masters such as Yan Liben [of the Tang] and Li Longmian [of the Song]. The Chinese evidently felt that foreign techniques were appropriate only to foreign subject matter. In fact, these techniques were gradually forgotten as Buddhism lost its hold over China. The Japanese, as we would expect, have not taken so uncompromising a view.²⁰

Recognizing the limitations of the topic perhaps protected the author from making too much of it, as so many others both before and since have done. Throughout his study, already alert to the superficiality of many Chinese cross-cultural perceptions, Sullivan resisted superficial resemblances between arts of the East and West that merited no appreciation and deserved no analysis; for example: "There is nothing to suggest that Pollock was directly influenced by Oriental art. That Action Painting and the practices of the early Chinese Expressionists have much in common, although it brings East and West together, is pure coincidence."²¹ But Sullivan found a deeper meaning through this study than the mere dismissal of East-West relationships as a historical indicator of nothing more to offer than superficial and sterile misapprehensions, as one might by now anticipate—a meaning consistent with the views expressed earlier in his writings, namely that if Chinese art were to find any purchase in Western art it would only come when a true understanding had been achieved, nothing less. He concluded with a note that in writing,

I have not once used the word "synthesis" in this book—not, at least, with this larger meaning—for the notion of synthesis implies something final and therefore static. To the Chinese view, it is not the synthesis of *yang* and *yin* but the eternal, dynamic interaction of these opposite but complementary forces that is life-giving. So also should we regard the interaction between East and West as a process in which the great civilisations, while preserving their own character, will stimulate and enrich each other. Such a condition for the meeting of Eastern

¹⁹ *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (2nd edition), 273.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

and Western art seems to offer far more creative possibilities than a synthesis, which would be sterile if it were consciously pursued.²²

This may sound more editorial than art historical, more prescriptive than descriptive, and even unduly optimistic for the period—especially given Sullivan's typical reserve when it came to the Chinese ability to absorb the requirements of creativity and initiative into its formula for modernization. But a comment at the outset of this volume provides his rationale for optimism, and in most regards this has proven quite prescient:

Just as important as Abstract Expressionism in breaking down barriers between Eastern and Western art has been the rejection of the idea of the avant-garde. As long as it was thought that the cutting edge of modern art could be identified and localised in New York, Paris or Tokyo, it was natural to see the latest movement as something that the less advanced countries must somehow catch up with if they were to be taken seriously by the critics and art historians. But by the 1980s the idea of progress in art had been virtually abandoned. Today, in America, Europe and Japan an enormous variety of styles and techniques in art, and view of what art is, happily coexist; in Kandinsky's phrase, everything is permitted.²³

Presumably no one at that time could have predicted the economic success of Chinese painting in the later 1990s and early twenty-first century. By 1987, artists I knew were using me to hustle works with risky themes out of the country. But Michael Sullivan was right about how the audience for art was opening up to non-elite media and messages. Most of the successful Chinese artists today, whatever one may think of their aesthetics, have unhitched their fate from agendas dictated by national pride or stilled their self-satisfied identification with the avant-garde and, rather, have tagged their success to a careful reading of (pardon the apparent contradiction) the wealthy masses, that is, a conglomeration of foreign sympathies and confusion and the need of big Chinese money to be wisely invested in something—*anything*—leave it to the artists and foreign taste to figure out what. How long can this last? Perhaps, back in 1989, Sullivan already had an answer:

Today the nature of [East-West] interaction is changing, as ideas, forms, and techniques in the arts move with lightning speed across the world. In rapid succession they are borrowed, absorbed, made use of, adapted, distorted, forgotten, but they cannot be shut out for long. (...) [An] effect of this rapid flow of art from culture to culture, which we are now coming to take for granted, is that what would once have been thought of by the art historian as an exotic or

²² *Ibid.*, 282.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

fascinating event—such as, for instance, the influence of Pozzo's perspectives in eighteenth-century Chinese painting, or of Hiroshige on the Impressionists—is no longer surprising or even historically very important. When Japanese erotic prints become the starting point for paintings by Balthus or for a series of drawings by Picasso, that their inspiration is Japanese seems hardly worth mentioning. It happens too easily, and too often. The age of mutual discovery, of wonder and revelation, is almost over.²⁴

Almost, perhaps, but not yet; Western interest in things Chinese has had a long run. After China, under Deng Xiaoping's new leadership, finally turned down the heat on class warfare, set revolutionary Maoism aside, and 'opened up' to the West, they sent their first exhibition of contemporary—post-Cultural Revolution—painting to America late in 1983. Over a two-year period it travelled from San Francisco to Birmingham, New York City, Ithaca, Denver, Indianapolis, Kansas City, and Minneapolis. Michael Sullivan, who had travelled repeatedly to China under a British passport in the 1970s, was ready for it and the changes it heralded, as a consultant to the exhibition and essayist for the catalogue. In it he wrote about the potential of traditional Chinese painting (*guohua*) for a modern resurgence, again in pessimistic terms, naming the one artist in the show whom he and the exhibition organiser had both liked best:

Tied to a repertoire of traditional rural landscapes, birds, flowers, bamboo, and certain edifying or at least agreeable and charming figure subjects, it simply did not touch on many things that might be the province of art. What about the types of landscape, for instance, for which there were no conventions in the repertoire, such as deserts, and the wild places where no scholar ever trod; the shape and character of the city, the canals, roofs and white damp-stained walls of Suzhou; the life of the common people in all its complexity, from the humorous to the tragic? But to break free from the pictorial conventions without violating the language was not easy. (...) For the language of the Chinese brush by its very nature tempts the artist to conventionalize. Why does a truck in a traditional landscape look out of place, a steamboat absurd? Is it that the manuals contain no stereotypes for trucks and steamboats? Or is it rather because both the style and technique of *guohua* seem to belong to a timeless past, to the world of art itself, rather than to the world of present-day visual experience. If this is so, it provides a further explanation of why so many younger painters are turning away from *guohua*, declaring that they find it "too abstract" . (...) Today one paints "in the manner of" [the old masters] only for study purposes, and there are few painting in this exhibition in which the stylistic debt to an old master is obvious, none in which it is declared in the inscription. Young painters know little of art history. Who is to say, for instance, whether Li Huasheng's apparent flouting of conventions is due to a deliberate defiance of them, or merely to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 283.

ignorance of them? Perhaps, except for the very strongest creative personalities, such ignorance is the best road to freedom.²⁵

Published in 1996, Sullivan's *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* massively revised his outdated (but still unique) *Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century*. In covering an additional four decades, and all of the decades in far greater detail than in the earlier volume, with far better historical perspective, the original 83 pages became 280; the original 81 illustrations (4 in colour) became 274 (94 in colour). Now included were nearly double the length on the previously covered years, plus new chapters on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and expatriate artists and art. Reviewers waxed favourable and unfavourable, found mistakes (a reviewer's internal delight) and overlooked others, but that is not our concern here—our attention is focused on the author's perspectives and perceptions, like this which comes toward the very end; he wrote that, looking back over the whole twentieth-century from the near-end of it, one can see

(...) the birth of the idea, shocking in ethnocentric China, that art was a world language that obliterates all frontiers; the introduction of the concept of art as a social activity and an instrument of reform and revolution; the undermining of the Chinese belief in fine art as the prerogative of an elite; the struggle to understand, abort, and adapt a plethora of traditions and styles that had evolved historically in the West but were imported into China more or less simultaneously; the crisis in personal identity felt by artists torn between East and West; and, not least, the existence from the middle of the century, of a cultural tyranny that made the free exploitation of these ideas, forms, and institutions virtually impossible. Can it be said that, by the early 1990s, artists had met and solved these problems? That they had engaged with them all, and found many solutions, must be obvious from some of the illustrations in this book. But late in the century, just when Western art seemed to have been successfully absorbed and traditional art reborn, there came from the West the wholly new question of the nature of art itself. Conceptual art, performance art, multimedia presentations of an infinite variety arrived to make some Chinese artists question the validity of all that had been achieved since 1900.²⁶

In comparing Sullivan's two texts on twentieth-century Chinese painting, written nearly forty years apart, it is evident that while his knowledge and perspective were greatly broadened, his taste had remained remarkably stable. Friends of many artists, Michael and Khoan Sullivan slowly built their own collection of modern Chinese art. Some of it was purchased but most of it gifted by the artists, in the oldest of Chinese traditions. Gifting took the control of quality and the nuanced expression of taste out of

²⁵ Lucy Lim, with James Cahill and Michael Sullivan, *Contemporary Chinese Painting: An Exhibition from the People's Republic of China*, San Francisco: The Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1983, 29-30.

²⁶ *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, 281.

the collector's hand, except in as much as the collector chose his artist friends. But regardless of that, the contents of his private collection became a critical statement, as much as anything he might put into words and publish—and eventually, as the gifts were transferred as his own gift to Oxford University's Ashmolean Museum, it *was* published: one of the largest collections of modern Chinese art in the world (not including those few massive, and massively expensive, collections quickly built of the latest, biggest 'hits' by the best-known contemporary artists, strictly limited to the mid-1980s and after). In recognising (above) the decline of the avant-garde and the modern elite, and with the concomitant devolution of artistic judgment to a more pluralistic array of critics, Michael Sullivan might well have predicted the response to his own taste. When his collection travelled for display in 2007 to Seattle, where one of his own former pupils was curator,²⁷ this was the published response of one local journalist:

Even before this exhibit's 2001 debut [at the Ashmolean], art in China exploded far beyond the confines of the Sullivans' idea of it. Not only does Chinese art engage the global stage, it dominates it. Increasingly, artists whom the Sullivans favor have been pushed to the background.... [This] show is the equivalent of warm milk at bedtime. What could SAM [the Seattle Art Museum] have been thinking?²⁸

Seattle's other leading newspaper critic called it 'an odd and wildly uneven show (...) a haphazard array (...) that throws together academic and self-taught artists in an awkward mix.'

The artworks [in this exhibition] are billed as "modern," but that title seems to allude only to the fact that the work dates from the 20th century, with a sprinkle of additions from the past few years. It's a strange conglomerate of styles, from traditional to avant garde, that didn't lead me to any meaningful conclusions about Chinese art of the past century, except that it was in some ways influenced by Western trends. With so much contemporary Chinese art making big waves in the international art scene, it seems a shame that the Seattle Art Museum didn't seek out a show for the SAAM [Seattle Asian Art Museum] that's more timely and relevant.... As an unedited survey, [this exhibition] no doubt holds scholarly interest. But for a museum striving to serve a broader public, it doesn't add up to the wow factor.²⁹

²⁷ See *Modern Chinese Art: The Khoan and Michael Sullivan Collection*, Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2001; for the symposium that accompanied the exhibition of these works in Seattle, organised by Sullivan's pupil Josh Yiu, see *Writing Modern Chinese Art: Historiographic Explorations*, Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 2009.

²⁸ Regina Hackett, *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, March 2, 2007.

²⁹ Sheila Farr, *The Seattle Times*, March 16, 2007.

By this, the enthusiastic acceptance of modern Chinese art into the public's critical embrace was made evident and Sullivan might at last rejoice at this long-belated event, except that the range of 'modernity' now included only the most recent decade or so and excluded most of the twentieth-century. Whatever was meant by this 'wow factor,' the 'awkward mix' and the 'strange conglomerate of styles' that these local critics complained about and dismissed is exactly what had defined the twentieth-century in China, in art as in other matters.

Now that the Warholian contemporary in Chinese art had to be addressed along with the modern, Sullivan spoke to an academic audience about this in 2009,

I could give you a long list of contemporary Chinese works that I consider merely trash and others that I admire. (...) That, you will say, is just my opinion. I am an old fuddy-duddy who doesn't belong in this [twenty-first] century at all. But in the absence today of any fixed criteria, all one has to rely on is one's memory, experience, and gut feeling—the last especially—which tell one if work has integrity or is merely meretricious. Well, if I don't belong in this century, I certainly belong in the last one, but perhaps because pendulums have a habit of swinging, I'll belong in the next one, too. (...) All this sounds naive, I know. The problems and issues that face contemporary art are many and complex, and it may sound absurd to cut through them with simplistic statements of this sort. But as Kandinsky put it, "Art is the living face, not of the mind but of feeling and only feeling. For anyone who cannot feel, art is dark and silent." In other words, if we cannot trust our feelings about art, our own aesthetic conscience, we have no business to be involved with art at all.³⁰

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³⁰ These are from Sullivan's remarks delivered as an introduction to the Princeton symposium, 'Articulations,' March 7, 2009, which accompanied the opening of the *Outside In: Chinese x American x Contemporary Art* exhibition; published as 'The Best' in *Articulations: Undefining Chinese Contemporary Art*, edited by Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching, Princeton: P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art and Princeton University Press, 2009, 24–31. On Sullivan's best contemporary art list, as named there, were Zhou Chunya's *Green Dog*, Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*, the earliest grinning men of Yue Minjun, Wang Huaiqing's *Night Entertainments of Han Xizai* ('beside which,' wrote Sullivan, 'Wang Qingsong's photomontage parody of the same work is a meretricious travesty'), and sculptor Ju Ming's bronze *taiji* figures. He also had the highest regard for the painter Liu Dan.