Everything is Relevant

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Aesthetic Education in Republican China
A Convergence of Ideals

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In preparing for *Shanghai Modern*, the curators—Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Zheng Shengtian, and I—paid several visits to the West Lake (Xi Hu) city of Hangzhou, ninety minutes by train west of Shanghai. One of six capital cities in the long history of China, Hangzhou was the national capital during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279). Many of China’s most celebrated poets and writers, including Lin Bu, Bai Juyi, and Su Shi, lived in and around the Hangzhou area. The beautiful West Lake, around which is poised the city of Hangzhou, is the source of many of China’s most cherished myths and fables. During the middle of the Ming Dynasty (sixteenth century), Literati traditions in literature and art flourished in Hangzhou. According to Christopher Reed, Hangzhou from the middle of the Ming through to the Qing Dynasty was the second most important centre in China for “elite publishing” by Literati artists.¹ The most important centre was Suzhou, a city a two-hour drive north in neighbouring Jiangsu Province, and cited alongside Hangzhou in the saying: “As there is paradise in Heaven, so there is Suzhou and Hangzhou on earth.”

The Literati were educated gentlemen who devoted themselves to traditional Chinese scholarship in literature and art. Often men of wealth, Literati scholars drew prestige from maintaining large libraries that included many self-published books of their own writings and commentary on important Chinese texts, expressing their identification with China’s cultural past and traditions. In art, Literati or Wenrenhua painters revitalized Southern Song Dynasty styles, including the Ma Xia landscape tradition of light brushwork and ethereal representations of space and form. The Literati model was a synthesis of both Confucian and Neo-Daoist ideals. Painting and poetry were means of self-expression that reflected the Confucian (scholarship) and Neo-Daoist (poetry and art) ideals of attaining *junzi*, or noble gentleman status. For the Literati, art and literature were defined as the ideal categories of cultural achievement and Hangzhou was one of their most important centres.

Given this historical context, it must have been a decision of considerable symbolic weight for the Ministry of Education to designate Hangzhou, in 1928, as the home of the National Academy of Art, China’s first officially sanctioned institution for an education in Western-style modernist art. It was in the tradition- and culture-laden city of Hangzhou that the project of teaching and developing a new aesthetic modernity for China would begin. Lin Fengmian, an artist who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and recently returned from Europe, was appointed to direct the National Academy of Art with the purpose

of developing “both Chinese and Western art, to create art of the day and to carry forward Chinese culture.” Carrying forward Chinese culture called for a reconciliation of China’s tradition-bound history with Western modernism. The National Academy of Art project expressed an anxiety regarding the social and technological conditions of China as compared to the standards set by the more developed and powerful West. Chinese art and literature were seen as frozen, irrelevant, and unproductive in its disconnection to contemporary life. Chinese culture and the traditional ethic represented by Confucianism were vociferously attacked in *New Youth (Xin Qingnian)*, the first magazine in China composed in vernacular Chinese and edited by the French-educated, leftist intellectual Chen Duxiu (1879–1942). Demands were made for the formation of a new culture unfettered by Confucianism and feudal ideas and institutions. One of the demands was the radical step of language reform, the legitimizing of vernacular Chinese as the official written language of China. Lu Xun, the great modern writer of this period, would be among the first to publish writings in the vernacular. More than a pedagogical tool for the advancement of universal Chinese literacy in a country of high illiteracy, the adoption of the vernacular also symbolized an important step toward an all-encompassing transformation of China by various new literary and political ideas, many of them Western in origin. A number of intellectuals feared for China’s future as the country experienced an ever-deepening crisis of what philosophers would call “the oblivion of being.” Many had lost faith in the ability of traditional culture to be renewed while others presented traditional culture as the central problem facing China. Intellectuals such as Lu Xun and Chen Duxiu argued that China was doomed unless extreme measures were adopted that could pave the path for a total redefinition of China, which would include the *mise en cause* of all sacrosanct Chinese traditions and values. As early as 1915, Chen proclaimed: “All our traditional ethics, law, scholarship, rites, and customs are survivals of feudalism. When compared with the achievements of the white race there is a difference of a thousand years in thought though we live in the same period.... I would rather see the past culture of our nation disappear than see our race die now because of its unfitness for living in the modern world.”

In 2000, I spent some time teaching at the China Academy of Art (formerly the National Academy of Art) as an invited lecturer. By the time of our curators’ visit two years later, much had changed. The Academy was in the throes of new construction. The street-facing wing of the original Bauhaus-style campus had already been razed and replaced by a much larger and far less modestly styled building. The ambiguity of that moment was worth noting—a historical institution
that at one time spoke of the future was now deemed obsolete and about to be fully replaced by something more “contemporary.”

What vision do the new buildings represent? The original campus of several interlocking mid-rise buildings surrounding a sports field clearly proffered Bauhaus architectural values. Indeed, the founding of the National Academy of Art occurred during when the short-lived Bauhaus School of Germany was in operation, but became fully realized after the Bauhaus was forced to move from Weimar to Dessau. The appeal of the Bauhaus to a China seeking redemption with modernity must have seemed self-evident to Lin Fengmian, who, after leaving Paris in 1923, moved to Berlin with the purpose of studying German cultural ideas.3 The Bauhaus would stand as a possible generative model for China for the reason that it represented a socialist-inflected reconciliation between the forces of capitalism and a new critical modernism of industrial orientation. The reinforcement of art, architecture, and design in a new social vision of what could be achieved for the masses was crucial to the liberal vision behind the building of the National Academy of Art in 1928. The German Bauhaus was riven by a vigorous debate about the associated discursive relationship of art to politics. In Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich (1989), Elaine Hochman wrote of the rise of calculated political agnosticism at the Bauhaus—particularly during the stewardship of the architect Mies van der Rohe—as a survivalist tactic adopted during a climate of consolidating Nazi strength in German social life.4

The affiliation of the National Academy of Art with leftist politics was also ambiguous, despite the demands from nationalists for a general cultural production that would reassert traditional Chinese values, and from leftists for a cultural production that matched social needs. Though largely sublimated within the discursive logic of Western modernism, it is worthwhile to be reminded of the intercultural exchange within Bauhaus design tenets. For example, Bauhaus architecture often exhibited minimally fixed walls and sliding wall panels, an idea that is derived from Chinese and Japanese principles of architecture as an extension of landscape. There was also some mediation between Frank Lloyd Wright’s work on the Tokyo Imperial Hotel of 1922 and Bauhaus development.5

As a result of China’s economic condition in the 1920s, the presence of a modernity that could exist in a discernibly systematized fashion, as in the example of Europe, was highly tenuous. The disadvantages of economic capacity were largely compensated through new institutional arrangements advanced by the state. Intellectuals within the government promoted an education that would increase the representation

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5 Cary James, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Imperial Hotel (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1988).
of liberal ideas, such as the fostering of aesthetic education in terms of Chinese society in general.

Comparisons with the economic standards in the West were mobilized as a historical problem in the intellectual milieu of the New Culture Movement of 1917–23, a period which includes the often synonymous May Fourth Movement of 1919, a series of protests that broke ground for artists to address questions of intellectual and artistic freedom. This period deeply influenced many of China’s artists and critics in terms of receptivity toward Western ideas of art and literature, including figures such as Cao Yu, who is often referred to as the father of modern Chinese drama, and the novelist Ba Jin. As in the case of Weimar Germany, modernism in republican China was both an expression and diagnosis of cultural crisis, one that extended into questions of identity and subjectivity, both collective and individual.

Following this period, a key debate ensued regarding the ideological constructs that China should follow in its striving for modernity. Positions were adopted by a spectrum of intellectual proponents that ranged from the wholesale transformation of China into a Western-styled state; a non-Marxist, non-materialist democracy; or a Marxist socialist state. The fragmentation of ideological goals and the semi-colonial situation of China at this time complicated the question of national solidarity. Since the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, a consequence of China’s humiliation in the Opium Wars, China’s status as a sovereign country was severely compromised. Shanghai especially was marked by the principle of extraterritoriality under which foreign concessions siphoned off trade with China to their advantage. No genuine central government with a modicum of popular support existed during the entire period after the republican revolution of 1912 and up to the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. The so-called Warlord Period (1916–28) was followed quickly by civil war, while Japanese aggression deepened in China. Despite these terrible circumstances, there is no denying the intellectual productivity that marked this period, as various nationalisms arose and competing ideas about saving China came to the fore. The question of art’s relationship to politics was a source of vigorous debate among cultural workers. The distressed social milieu meant that artistic practice necessarily operated in a complex and often contradictory set of interactions. Chinese modernist artists such as Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian struggled to maintain the integrity of their aesthetic pursuits in the face of mounting social distress, negligent popular and economic support, and demands, especially from the left, to surrender the brand of introspective, European-rooted modernism to the project of nationalism and political reform. As Ralph Crozier has stated:
“For the left, the modernist exploration of style as a new language for communication of personal feelings was useless for China’s real needs.”

As the curators of *Shanghai Modern*, we were in Hangzhou to inspect the inventory of Ni Yide paintings in the collection of the China Academy of Art. Ni Yide, along with Pang Xunqin and others, co-founded the Juelanshe (the Storm Society) avant-garde art group. Its name is coincident with Germany’s *Der Sturm*, an art periodical that lasted from 1910 to 1932, published in Berlin by critic and poet Herwarth Walden. The Storm Society, like its German counterpart, also promoted modern and revolutionary art (in the sense of promoting radical social and political change), emphasizing the aspect of personal expression. Ni is one of the key artist-intellectuals in China’s first modernist movement. He worked in the National Academy of Art in the 1930s until just before the Chinese Revolution of 1949.

As in the case of many Chinese modernists, Ni had lived and studied abroad, in Japan. As Shu-mei Shih points out in her remarkable book *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-Colonial China, 1917–1937* (2001), despite the aggressive expansionism of Japan’s ambitions in China, Japan represented a key, albeit contradictory, exemplar for Chinese intellectuals wanting to know more about the West. According to Shih, Chinese intellectuals looked to Japan “as a model of successful modernization/Westernization.” Furthermore, “Japanese cultural products and mediated presentations of Western culture were valued and deemed necessary for China to understand the West and ‘Asianize’ it for Chinese use. More than a model, Japan was the medium and the shortcut to Westernization.” Japan emerged as an industrial state during the Meiji Era (1868–1912), when Japanese culture was modernized and Westernized. In China, Western ideas did not come to be considered as the dominant course until the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. “Another dimension of the contradictory perception of Japan as mediator,
aggressor, and exemplar was the view of Japan as an ally in the struggle against Western imperialism,” a view that Shih says “was less commonly held but nevertheless influential.”

Thus, for many of the Chinese modernists, their association with and regard for the “West,” including, curiously, Japan, represented a problem of non-identity with the experiences and expectations of art of the general public. Their own status was isolated, far from understood outside of a very small public, and generally not well supported. And yet, it was precisely their Western training that made them valuable to a China seeking to modernize by drawing lessons from the West. A response was initiated, of which the National Academy of Art was part of the outcome.

In 1917, Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940) proposed a curriculum of aesthetic education that would be taught in newly established government-supported institutions. The path toward modernity would be achieved through social evolution rather than radical revolution. According to Ralph Crozier, “Cai Yuanpei, president of Peking University and probably the most influential educator in China, first proposed the famous slogan ‘aesthetic education as a substitute for religion.’ He did not totally opt for Western art, and he did not even recognize the modernist-traditionalist controversy, but it was the supposedly rational spirit behind Western art that inspired his vision of a higher and more human culture.”

What is interesting is the affinity of Cai’s use of the words “aesthetic education” with J.C. Friedrich von Schiller’s *Lectures Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), a philosophical text fundamental to any consideration of European romantic and modernist art. Cai, who studied philosophy, aesthetics, and experimental psychology at the University of Leipzig in Germany, wrote a book on *The History of Chinese Ethics* (1910) and translated several German books into Chinese before returning to China in 1911, as the revolution to displace the Manchu Dynasty was erupting. German sociologist Max Weber had argued that state-supported education was a necessary corollary to the modernization of the state. In 1912, Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Republic of China, appointed Cai minister of education. A modern and cosmopolitan thinker, Cai saw art as providing refuge from theological displacement. This is also a key theme of Schiller’s work.

Schiller conceived of art as a pedagogical tool for the elevation of human freedom, especially necessary in the context of political disorder and/or tyranny. His 1795 text was written in part as a response to the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution. Schiller argued for the centrality of aesthetic education in the healthy development of both
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society and the individual. He believed that “beauty,” as a category of sensual experience, represented the key not only to general well-being but also to a triadic model of historical progress—in a lineage akin to Hegel’s dialectic of absolute idealism—from the physical to the aesthetic to the moral. Cai was also deeply influenced by American philosopher John Dewey’s so-called Orders Objective for modern education. Dewey was a Hegelian who espoused an organic view of society in which an individual’s measure is linked to his or her performance in and for society. The system of education within such a view would be an expression of the highest form of Hegelian reconciliation, identified metonymically as an Absolute. In *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel defined the Absolute as a dialectical movement of free and constituting self-activity, motivated by the synthesis of contradiction, toward new stages of existence. Furthermore, to Hegel, each new stage marks not an end but another departure point in an endless process of the social individual’s reconstitution with the contemporary or present. With parallels to both Schiller and Hegel, Cai proclaimed: “We must follow the general rule of freedom of thought and freedom of expression, and not allow any one branch of philosophy or any one tenet of religion to confine our minds, but always aim at a lofty universal point of view which is valid without regard to space or time. For such an education I can think of no other name than education for a world view.”

Aesthetic education was proposed in China during a time of immense political uncertainty. Sustaining creative cultural life under such conditions was difficult. As an educator who followed Dewey, Cai insisted on the independence of education, unfettered by religion or politics. Similarly, artists tired of the Confucian morality that they felt represented a hindrance to China’s cultural advancement advocated the separation of art from politics and religion, as a practice with its own intrinsic and purposeful set of values. The republican government was quite liberal in cultural matters and the social upheaval reflected by national fragmentation and precarious official governance freed the curiosity of new audiences (mostly of the middle class) to new ideas in art as the old Confucian order came increasingly under challenge. The unity of art and technology was propounded in visionary terms of an aesthetic, scientific, and technically advanced future China, but during a contradictory time of utter cultural and political disorder. Aesthetic education was an ideal that was upheld as a necessity in the face of social catastrophe.

As such, the debate about art and politics around the affirmation of the sovereignty of art as a politically useful practice according to its own terms versus art as a practice of extending the social consciousness

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of the immediate political environment, was of central contention among China’s modernist artists. The relationship of art to politics is a given in the modernity of avant-garde art, as Walter Benjamin noted in his celebrated essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” The experimentation with modernist painting techniques that artists such as Ni Yide, Pang Xunqin, and Wei Tianlin performed were seen by them as advancing the political project, in the Benjaminian sense, of individual artistic expression and inner feeling. To these artists, the lack of understanding in China of modernist art was not so much a sign of their own disconnection with China but proof of their own connectedness to the more “advanced” modernity of the West, a connectedness that both highlighted China’s painful condition and the need of China to meet the level of modernity of the West. As intellectual artists with cosmopolitan experiences, they would have understood the relationship between their artistic practices and the difficult social environment in which their work was inscribed. So the debate about art and politics that ensued in China was much more complex than a contest between realist versus modernist content. The problem of what Brecht called “self-activity” was at the heart of the debate. To Brecht, self-activity was a term drafted in the category of social agency and directed at what he called “the art of living” or self-governing. Developed from Hegel, self-activity was productive and purposeful activity aligned with the needs of the working class. To China’s modernist artists, as represented by the Storm Society, the question of politics in art could not be consigned exclusively to an artwork’s content or its political intelligibility. The category of form in art is equally of value to the category of content.

Following the reformist May Fourth Movement, some intellectuals on the left of the movement, observing closely the situation in the new Soviet Union, launched the Communist Party of China. There were concerns among the modernist artists that leftist demands for centralized control of economic production could very well extend to cultural production, raising the danger of the erasure of self-activity in art. It should be recalled that Stalin officially imposed socialist realism on Russian artists and writers as early as 1932. Recent scholarship has highlighted the preparation of socialist realism in Russia before the Russian Revolution, examining an artistic thread that began in mid-nineteenth-century realist art with demands that art be popular, accessible, technically proficient, and socially committed. As would be the case in China, artistic transformations occurring around the October Revolution were politically determined along the axis of “avant-garde”
artists versus “traditionalist” artists, the former being completely eliminated by the mid-1930s.

According to proponents of a socially obligated art, the modernist understanding of individual freedom and expression conflicted with the greater need of the people for freedom from hunger and oppression. Aesthetic education was a program founded on a process of social evolution that conflicted with the imperatives of social transformation. The modernists of China were somewhat paralyzed in the face of such contradictions, but held fast to their pursuits in purist fashion. They never really challenged the conventional view of the artist’s role as a purely artistic enterprise, as Benjamin insisted artists should see it. In his essay “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin saw artists as latent educators who had to master technology and industrial production techniques in order to assist in the empowerment of the audience in becoming producers as well as consumers of meaning. In this sense, both the project of the Storm Society and the programs of purely aesthetic education remained somewhat undefined (in political terms), mimicking Western models of art without challenging or, at the least, refashioning the models in a critical manner so as to raise the level of political self-consciousness and self-activity. Aesthetic education (or such educational models) assumed as truth the modernist myth of progress. It also assumed that the fundamental person, purged of religion and other traditional commitments, would then be induced by the space of creative freedom to desire and achieve unqualified good for the whole of society.

Looking at Ni Yide’s works, stored at the China Academy of Art, and considering them in the context of the historically brief and limited existence of the Storm Society, the figure of Lu Xun looms ever larger in importance. Like Ni, Lu Xun also received his formation in progressive ideas about art in Japan. In many respects, he shared the views of the modernists who admired Fauvism, Picasso, and Matisse: he challenged the Confucian social landscape as anachronistic; he was a great admirer and even collector of European avant-garde art; he was a cosmopolitan who defied any notion of a fetishized or pure China; his own literary production openly paid

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homage to Western writers such as Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, Charles Baudelaire, and Friedrich Nietzsche; and he believed in the wholesale reform of China into a modern, twentieth-century society of proper importance to the world.15 Like the modernists, he also at times felt himself distanced from China, despite his deep love for his country. While in Japan, he gained acute perspectives on the traditional conception of China he might not otherwise have gained had he remained in China. Where Lu Xun did deviate from the Storm Society modernists was in his brand of social modernism. Early in his career, his practice as an artist consistently extended to political causes. For example, he was a leading figure of the May Fourth Movement. Later in his career, he relegated himself to the role of a moralist observer of everyday life, emphasizing the lived experience of ordinary people. It was a relegation that reflected, to some degree, his uneasiness about the ever-increasing intertwining of politics and art.

Lu Xun was also a noted advocate of women’s rights. Female freedom in place of filial piety and even chastity was a tenet of the May Fourth Movement, although according to Shu-mei Shih, the May Fourth doctrine of free love and feminine individuality reflected as much a trope of male intellectual self-regard as genuine advocacy of women’s rights and freedoms.16 Among a large collection of prints by many of Europe’s leading avant-garde artists, including Erich Heckel, Fernand Léger, and George Grosz, Lu Xun owned many prints by Käthe Kollwitz, a socialist German artist whose work often touched on the emancipation of women. His sponsorship of a veritable movement in woodcut prints established a connection between the German and Chinese woodblock print traditions, inspired by German expressionist re-conceptualizations of the traditional form. Above all, woodblock printing is an inexpensive process of art-making compared to painting. In this sense, it was more “democratic” and inherently populist than the painted form.

Lu Xun’s celebrated 1927 book *Wild Reeds*, a collection of prose poems, was inspired in part by Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) (and Baudelaire’s *Spleen et idéal* [1857]) and brilliantly conjoins the traditional form of Confucian analects with Nietzsche’s aphorisms in a deeply personal and melancholic expressivity.17 According to Shih, “Nietzschean existentialism was imported into China as early as 1902, and met with immense popularity during the May Fourth decade.”18 During his Japanese residency period, Lu Xun wrote “On Cultural Extremism,” a widely read essay in which Nietzsche is presented as “the major theoretical support for his advocacy of individualism, in which the self is situated against the masses, the individual against the collective.”19 Echoing Nietzsche’s “Superman,” Lu Xun added: “The masses constitute
the realm of conformity, vulgarity, and corrupt materialism, against which the individual must rebel."²⁰ It is at this point that Lu Xun’s caustic moralism converges with the sentimental education idealism of Cai Yuanpei and the individualist anguish of the Storm Society painters, through their common advocacy of the individual as someone embodied with the potential of deeply humane values and the modern spirit. Compare the aforementioned quotation by Lu Xun with the opening sentence of the Storm Society Manifesto: “The air around us is too still, as mediocrity and vulgarity continue to envelop us. Countless morons are writhing around and countless shallow minds are crying out.”²¹

From the perspective of today, it is interesting, even prescient, that Lu Xun should have had such an interest in Nietzsche, the great anti-rationalist philosopher of the here-and-now. Nietzsche’s attacks on the Enlightenment science of reason is at odds with the dialectical path of Kant, Hegel, and even Marx, the latter of whom Lu Xun embraced even though he was a Marxist who was at once a taciturn Communist, one who consistently refused to formally join the Communist Party. Nietzsche’s famous idea of the “eternal return of the same” expressed his concern with life lived as it is, without the escape of transcendence:

“O Zarathustra,” said then his animals, “to those who think like us, things all dance themselves: they come and hold out the hand and laugh and flee—and return.

“Everything goeth, everything returneth; eternally rolleth the wheel of existence. Everything dieth, everything blossometh forth again; eternally runneth on the year of existence.

“Everything breaketh, everything is integrated anew; eternally buildeth itself the same house of existence. All things separate, all things again greet one another; eternally true to itself remaineth the ring of existence. Every moment beginneth existence, around every ‘Here’ rolleth the ball ‘There.’ The middle is everywhere. Crooked is the path of eternity.”²²

The Eternal Return of the Same is a category of Being, a process that never ceases to become. As a finite category, Being—in order to remain Being—is obliged to implicate itself in all the things and events that comprise the world. In so doing, Being redefines itself as Being in as infinite a number of ways as there are things and events in the world. The Eternal Return of the Same is a process that must be willed or enacted. The Self is enacted in relation to all other possible and previous

²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ “The Storm Society Manifesto,” Art Trimonthly 1, no. 5 (October 1932).
selves. The Self is relativized to all other possible and previous interactions with the other.

From the perspective of today, especially in light of post-structuralism, it is interesting to compare Lu Xun’s intellectual lineage of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer to Cai Yuanpei’s lineage of Hegel and Schiller. Lu Xun’s sober and frequently despairing writings express his alienation from his Chineseness, a key correspondence to the Nietzschean loss of a given identity by way of the “death of God.” Lu Xun was opposed to the idea of Chineseness as a fixed term while he continued to develop and broaden what it meant to be Chinese. To Lu Xun, the renewal of China was possible only after the renunciation of all fixed categories of understanding China. Again, like Nietzsche, it is a renunciation that must be willed. By contrast, Hegelian movement is inexorable and implies a certain degree of stability of the self as a precondition for social betterment.

Looking back, the hopeful social evolutionary thread of aesthetic education that Cai Yuanpei followed now seems somewhat quixotic in light of its foreclosure by China’s tragic history. In both cases, there was recognition of historical changes in the categorization of China and Chineseness, of its sense of time-honoured values and identity. Against a background of extreme social tumult, modernists such as Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei, Ni Yide, and others understood through their artistic and intellectual debates a China that was confronting its own crisis of identity. Some, such as members of the Storm Society, argued for an exploration of identity as subjectivity, a category of identity that is central to what it means to be modern, but which was repressed within the polity of Confucian culture.

Identification as a social process, particularly in relation to the question of political solidarity and commitment, is a major theme of Lu Xun’s work. From the sanctity of today, especially in the context of a prospering and awakening China, it may be difficult to appreciate the depth and breadth of the debates that ensued in the country during these decades of immense socio-political strife with respect to the question of modernism and China’s futurity. Looking back, one cannot say that Lu Xun was right and the Storm Society was wrong in terms of the artistic projects they pursued during difficult times. One is tempted to say, somewhat maladroitly, that the modernist ideals of the Storm Society were perhaps less appropriate than Lu Xun’s in terms of the comportment and actions that must be taken by artists in the face of utter social and political despair. From post-structuralism, one learns that history itself is a deeply flawed judge. So who is to say who was right, or even more right, in the intellectual debates that took place? Looking at
the work of Ni Yide, Liu Haisu, and the many other modernist painters
today, one sees beauty, pleasure, and self-understanding as important
terms in their work. One also detects great courage. The social and tech-
nical conditions at the time in which these artists worked were difficult
and would not at first seem generative of such great cultural production,
and in many respects it was not. The output of modern art from this
period in China is meagre when compared to modern art production
in Europe or Japan. Many, if not most, of the works produced during
this period have either been lost or destroyed. Still, the works that have
survived are often complex, beautiful, and deeply meaningful.

As we departed the China Academy of Art that day, workers packed
the Ni Yide paintings back in their respective crates. I took one last look
at the remaining Bauhaus-style sections of the campus, now destroyed.
I took one last look at the beautiful sculpture of Xia Peng (also known
as Yao Fu) that stands outside by the edge of the sports field facing the
sculpture wing. I had passed this sculpture many times before during
my time of teaching at the academy. It is a modest bust of the young
woman on a plinth inscribed with text. Born in 1911, in 1929 Xia Peng was
a student in the Department of Sculpture. She soon became a member of
the progressive student organization Eighteen Society, an early propon-
ent of the New Woodcut Print Movement led by Lu Xun. In 1930—five
years after the passing of Sun Yat-sen; the same year that the Nazi Party
won 107 seats in the election for the German Reichstag, thus becom-
ing the second largest political party in Germany; and the same year
that Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek unleashed several attacks against
the Communists rather than against the Japanese threat that aimed to
take over much of China—Xia Peng went to Shanghai to participate in
anti-government demonstrations. By 1932, the Eighteen Society was
shut down and Xia Peng was expelled from the academy. She joined the
Chinese Communist Party in 1933 and was twice arrested for her activ-
ism. In 1934, she was arrested once more for putting up political woodcut
posters in Wuxi, an important cultural and industrial city in the centre
of the Yangzi Jiang River Delta, two hours east of Shanghai. Xia Peng
died in prison in 1935 and is today remembered as a martyr of the school
and of her country.

This is but one story of one very special young artist living in China
during turbulent times. As I took one final look at the academy grounds,
I tried to imagine what it must have been like to be a teacher or a student
during the opening days of the academy. It must have been like a san-
ctuary and a beacon of hope during very dark times. But, as Lu Xun has
written: “Despair, like hope, is but vanity.”