

Acquiring Identity

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It started it out like this: there was a woman called Nüwa, In the land it was raining, it never stopped raining, and then this villain repaired the sky. So then there were the snow mountains, all the seas, an oasis, the grasslands, and also a desert. To the north of the snow mountains were the barbarians and on the edge of the desert were Chinese warriors. Then somehow the Yellow River appeared, and along with it the emperor called the Yellow Emperor. The desert connected to what we call the “Stans,” and people from the Middle East came to do trade and settle down.

Further south there was agriculture starting, but every now and then there was an upheaval, fighting among the peasants and their warriors, just fighting, looting, anything to survive. Confucianism came out of the Warring States Period in the Nine Provinces, around what's now Shandong. The Arabs also came to shore, to spread their religion.

After the fighting, after the unification, Confucianism travelled to the furthest north, to near today's Xian area. The Qin Emperor didn't believe in Confucianism, but he listened in the very beginning and tried to understand. By the time he unified China he killed all the intellectuals. China became a so-called Emperor state. After the Qin came the Han, which was basically a continuation of the Qin. It's a constant cycle of dynasty, internal fighting, decentralization, unification again.

The Yangzi and Yellow River are the same river. There's only one river that runs across China but with different civilizations, different cultures forming. In the south there was Shennong, the God Farmer. With his gifts the peasants started growing more profitable crops. In Sichuan Da Yu built canals to control the waters, starting civilization there. People from the south, they still don't understand anything from the north, they have their own different ideas of how to be Chinese.

It was never called China until later, it was only called by different names. China has no religion, no really centralized religion. Everyone believes in the Emperor, because an emperor is a heavenly emperor, right? I think Daoism is essentially inspired by a bunch of aristocrats in the state of Wei during the Three Kingdoms period getting high in the woods. It's the ultimate emptiness. If you're stoned, of course it's empty. Then the Tang took over and start promoting Buddhism to China. Buddhism was essentially an Indian immigrant, and the Tang emperor discovered it could be useful. Everyone was trying to figure out a way to govern China, to give it a religion or identity. The written language was only for emperor's court, more like coded political messages than a language for the people.

After the Tang it was the Song, then the Jin, the Jin being nomads from the north of mountains, and then the Mongols, also barbarians. To this day, no one knows what the Mongols looked like. They probably don't look the way they do now. They may look more white than they are now. They invaded southern China until Hangzhou and saw people

growing rice for the first time: “Oh wow, that grass looks weird.” They didn’t know what it was so they fed it to their horses. If you want to talk about Chinese culture, maybe it is just rice. Figuring out how to cultivate rice and settling down to grow it is one of the major accomplishments in Chinese history. Though of course they only grow rice in the south.

In the Song Dynasty, that’s when what we think of as Chinese aesthetics and painting started. The idea that painting can document sociopolitical discontent began then. Drawing a secluded, lonely landscape to show the contrast with society is different from the scrolls of beautiful figures, women, and emperors that came before. Because traditional Chinese art can be incredibly political. Mountains can represent a doomed society, animals can represent the fall of the emperor and shit like that. By the Ming dynasty when the Han were back in control, there was a famous painter called Qiu Ying, who started manufacturing paintings, because in a prosperous society everyone needed some kind of painting. This was way before Andy Warhol.

But even this Chinese culture doesn’t fit with the idea of being Chinese. Earlier on the famous poet Li Bai wasn’t Chinese, he was born in Kyrgyzstan, and he came to China to write his drunken poetry. Later all the other ethnicities were chased down the coast. In Fujian, so many people have Arab blood. People have Mediterranean anemia, which is identical to what’s found in the Middle East.

In the south of Fujian is Minnan. People ask me why some recent paintings I’ve done have Minnan in the title: they don’t understand that Minnan is a cipher. I can’t comprehend it looking from Beijing. It’s a strange place with strange people. Nobody in the entire world cooks like them. They’ll take fish straight out of the water and cook it with no spices, and somehow it tastes great. The people there are good at business so hundreds of years ago they were already migrating everywhere to make money. Their identity is strong but also disappears in an instant: people in Taiwan, Singapore, and Indonesia speak Minnan dialect but they would never say they’re from Minnan. Minnan tells us nothing about the rest of China, and Minnan tells us everything about the rest of China.

Anyway, it only took a while before the nomads in the north got organized again, and that’s when my ancestors the Manchus came down and started the Qing Dynasty. In the entirety of human civilization, only two races underwent reverse colonialism: the Normans invaded England and became English, and the Manchu, who after the 1600s completely wanted to give up their own identity and become Chinese. But it was the slow process. The Qing dynasty is the basis of what we now know as China, because its map is the model for the map of China. The Manchus weren’t racist, when they invaded there were Han and Mongolians in their army. They had no written language, they had just adopted the Mongolian text for themselves.

The Qing created the most sophisticated government up until that point. Missionaries brought some Western medicine so a lot of diseases were cured. Really it was the Qing dynasty that started appreciating the leftovers of the Song dynasty, the art and artisanship. Before the Qing dynasty new rulers always burnt down the buildings and temples of whatever had come before. The Qing made a lot of effort to document Chinese history and make dictionaries, both Chinese-Chinese and Chinese-Western. I think with the Manchu it was really the first

time a dynasty tried to become a modern state engaged with the world.

However the emperor Qianlong decided to enlarge the territory, taking parts of North Korea and Russia, unifying Xinjiang, even going down to Vietnam. This created the complete Qing map and Qianlong is still celebrated here, but it laid the seeds to eventually destroy China.

The prosperity of the society created more decadent people. In the 1800s the East India Company could see the opportunity to paralyze China with opium. I don't know if the British had the intention to totally destroy China, but Chinese people always do everything to the ultimate extreme. That's how the Opium Wars started, which became the biggest problem for the Qing.

So the problems got worse and worse, which is when this little guy Sun Yat-sen appears. Southerners like him always know how to make money. He was studying overseas trying to be a doctor, but his brother told him, you won't make enough money as a doctor, why don't you start a party instead. So he started the Kuomintang. People were so desperate at the time that he could earn money by basically starting a cult.

At the same time there were other people with different ideas, and Marxism seemed to make sense to them. They represented the poor people, while the Kuomintang represented the rich and the middle class. Conflict started between these two ideologies, one a homegrown cult, the other from Western ideology.

When Communists emerged in China, they utilized all the energies from avant-garde art. They were avant-garde intellectuals themselves, who had studied in Paris and Berlin. This is compared to the Nationalists, who went to American colleges. So maybe the question is, is China today the continuation of European avant-gardism?

Around this time, Chinese art students were also going to Paris. To see Impressionism or modern art there must have been like enlightenment for them. But me personally, I don't like Impressionism very much, I think it's just a sweet little break through from more conventional things. It doesn't have any social meaning at all. I prefer movements from before World War II like Suprematism from the Russian avant-garde, and I really like the Renaissance, because even though it was painters and sculptors, those mediums are not really what it's about: it's about challenging authority, the reconfiguration of religion.

I was born after the Communists beat the Nationalists. To the Communists, the Manchus had been the feudalist emperors, who made China weak and it out to the Western imperialists. The last emperor, Puyi, even became puppet ruler of Manchuria for the Japanese. After he spent a decade in prison the Communist Party eventually forgave him, but I still find him to be a tragic figure. For some reason this historical melancholy suits me, so I painted his room from the palace he had in Changchun under the Japanese. I'm fascinated with this kind of sad ending, not exactly tragic, but not clear-cut and successful either.

My family had lived in the same neighborhood in Beijing for generations. It has changed completely during my life. The endless trees, the tombs of warriors, and the pond where writers would commit suicide are all gone. When I was a kid I had to dig bomb shelters, and

dug up my ancestors' graves. In the Cultural Revolution my father broke every piece of porcelain we had so it wouldn't get taken away from us. But a few days my older classmates still came and broke up my toys, which made me want to kill someone. For 30 years afterwards I had this anger inside me that almost destroyed me, just because some motherfucker broke my toys.

It was a time of human and natural disasters. Blood was washed off of the streets. When the earthquake hit in 1976 I heard the loudest sound I'd ever experienced, like the atomic bomb we'd all been waiting for had finally hit. That day I saw the sky turn red, water run black, the bodies of animals and humans everywhere, railroad tracks twisted like spaghetti.

We were the lowest of the low because my father was a prince and an intellectual. He was also a bastard, always driving my mother crazy with his endless affairs. My grandfather was more of a gentleman, but he also an opium addict. Everyone in Beijing knew him as "Opium Zhao." Eventually we got moved from our family home to a courtyard full of other families. It was like a ghetto, but as a kid you could have fun. I would spy on the older girls and watch their topless mothers wash clothes. With the boys I would start fires in the public toilets. The toilets actually smelled good when they burned.

In 1983 I found a way to escape the 12-square-meter dormitory room that had been assigned to me: I went to Holland to study. But Europe was gray and lonely. That's when my wanderings began. At first I didn't even have the money to buy myself a drink; by the time I moved to New York I could afford to get drunk, but that turned into a problem.

In 2001 I visited Beijing to try to find my old home. Everything was gone. Now China has finally been unified — by Louis Vuitton. This is probably the first time this has happened, though maybe Teresa Teng succeeded a bit in the 80s.

I think Chinese painting hasn't developed very far. It's still romantic and fundamental, more about functionality rather than true thinking. It's about pleasing the eye, rather than inspiring viewers. Despite the fact that there are 1.2 billion Chinese people, Chinese aesthetics are in complete disarray. Aesthetics are reduced to style and formalism to provide pleasure.

That's why I repaint old classic paintings; to return to what was radical in Chinese art, to try to get into the minds of the artists at the time, when they painted these landscapes that could also be highly subversive. My painting is really about reemphasizing the circumstances of each human, of the Chinese going through the search for their own identities. I'm not sure if painting really is a crucial part of civilization. It may be more like a by-product. But I still think it is valuable. Art itself can solve issues of identity and political positions. Basically the artist's job is trying to argue with established sociopolitical structures.

The problem is that in Western art, for instance with the Renaissance, there was a clear mission to challenge a singular God, bringing in human power and science instead of the Church. It's sad, tragic even, that China never really had a centralized religion. There's no central structure to challenge and no true belief of anything, only functionality. People go to the temple... to make more money. Being a Chinese artist is very hard because you don't have a clear mission to challenge. At the beginning of my life as an artist, I was part of the so-

called avant-garde challenging the end of the Cultural Revolution. But after there's an opening up what do you challenge? That's the tragedy, the hardest part of being a Chinese artist — you could easily become a reactionary.

When you go back and think through it, there's not much civilization going on in Chinese civilization. I don't know if I am the one to take Chinese art and make it something that can inspire, but I try. I want to be in line with the handful of artists dealing with the issue of painting.

My father is on his way out now. I never truly got to know him. He was always a curious and sympathetic figure to me, but I never had a deep conversation with him. I knew he went to jail, and I was visiting him in the labor camp when the earthquake hit. He was born when the Japanese occupied Beijing, and lost his real father, so his uncle, my grandfather, raised him. But my grandfather might have done something for the Japanese in Manchuria under Puyi, who knows what. My dad, he was part of some faction in the Cultural Revolution and got caught, and my mother took him prisoner and brought him to Flushing Queens cause she still had this paranoia of him getting in trouble. Now that he's fading away I have the feeling more of saying goodbye to the era than the genetic connection of father and son. He's a vague memory that lived through constant displacement, and I'm now displaced too.