

From Representation to Revelation

Irene Chou & Modernism in Hong Kong Art

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Irene Chou (Zhou Luyun)'s career is an artistic revolution in every sense of the words. Born in Shanghai, Jiangsu Province on 31 January 1924, Chou graduated from St John's University in Shanghai in 1945 and fled China in 1949 to settle in Hong Kong. In 1954, Chou became a student of Zhao Shaoang (1905-1998), a second generation master of the Lingnan School. Chou's works of that period were realistic in manner, skillful in techniques and beautiful in presentation. They demonstrated her sound foundation in Chinese painting methods such as *qiyun* (spirit-resonance) and *moqi* (ink-play); and her depiction of traditional genre such as birds and flower and insects was particularly successful. Major transformation took place in the late 1960s when she met artist Lu Shoukun (1919-1975) who, as a teacher, critic and painter, advocated a totally different approach to artistic expression. Lu was a vigorous reformer and his theories of New Ink Painting inspired Chou to move away from conventional Chinese styles and experiment with different media and techniques leading to a personal expression. Using forceful lines and dense ink washes, Chou explored through her paintings the inner workings of the mind and its relationship to the mysteries of the universe. Her abstract paintings from the 1980s onwards exploded with cataclysmic energy derived as much from dense, textural strokes as from broad, slab-like strokes of ink and color. The present article explores the directional change and development of Irene Chou's works from the 1950s to 1980s. Focusing on historical circumstances and artistic environment of colonial Hong Kong of the mid-20th Century, it touches upon some of the common ideology, mentality and struggle which an artist had to face through the works of a true revolutionary of our time.

Hong Kong Art Scene of the 1950s: A Time of Diversity & Conflict

Hong Kong art in the decade of the 1950s was very diverse in terms of style and concept. It embodied conflicting influences yet received no directorial support from the government. As one artist recalls, "The art scene of the time was uncultivated and isolated."ⁱ Many Chinese artists originating from the Mainland flooded the territory and dominated the local art scene. They used Hong Kong as a temporary place while their works continued in the traditional Chinese styles. These early immigrant artists, mainly from Shanghai and Nanjing, brought with them wealth, knowledge and traditional repertoire (namely the Shanghai School and Jin Ning School) and stylistically, they continued the orthodox tradition of Chinese ink and brush painting. In terms of cultural specifics, these traditionalists adopted a "stepping stone" mentality, as community identity and commitment were the least of their concerns. The general theme of their works could be interpreted as glorification of the classical genres. A senior artist once gives cynical remarks on these traditionalists, "*Guo hua jia* (modern Chinese traditional painters) search for a surreal and non-existent reality which belongs only to the

ancients. In that idealistic world, only the ancient Daoists with knots on their heads and dressed in robes could live harmoniously within.”ⁱⁱ

The state of local Western art remained at the amateur level or ‘Sunday outdoor sketches’ stage. In fact, foreign artists were few and not one resided or exhibited in Hong Kong. Opportunities to see genuine modern Western art were scarce so Hong Kong was entirely cut off from world art trends. The only exception to this was the Hong Kong Art Club, founded in 1925, which represented the first and foremost art organization in Hong Kong. Established and managed by wealthy British expatriates, the Hong Kong Art Club had the best collection of literature on modern Western art in the territory. Its members were all Europeans and most of them visiting artists. The styles of their works were without exception in the direction of Western realism such as the English landscape tradition and the Barbizon School. The media they used included oil and watercolor with subject matter exclusively depicting local scenery in the topographical tradition of England. The club was primarily a place of social gathering rather than artistic interchange. The works produced had minimal association with local society and made little direct contribution to the development of Hong Kong art. Their importance, as one historian notes, lay in their documentary aspects rather than artistic endeavor.ⁱⁱⁱ

Irene Chou: the Lingnan Master

In the early 1950s, the rapid influx of Chinese from the Mainland brought tremendous human resources to Hong Kong and those who practiced Chinese painting and calligraphy gradually outnumbered those who practiced Western art. By mid-decade, the most popular and influential painting group was the Lingnan School, which had its roots, as the name “Lingnan” (South of the Mountain) suggests, in Guangdong Province. Its popularity in Hong Kong was based on historical background as well as environmental elements. Zhao Shaoang, a leading artist of the second generation of the school, was the main driving force. Irene Chou met Zhao Shaoang in 1950 and soon became his private disciple. Zhao excelled in painting landscapes, animals, flowers, insects and fish and is particularly noted for painting cicadas. His teaching method was the traditional “copy and learn”, encouraging his student to mimic the exact brushstroke, its movement and “breath” as he performed a demonstration. Chou’s works of this period demonstrated exactly the result from such teaching. The present exhibition contains a group of works dating back to the 1950s and 1960s. These paintings feature a range of subject matter from bird-and-flower themes to insects and landscape, executed with stiff brushes and smooth washes, often combining the play of broken calligraphic lines with a high degree of naturalism. They possessed not only formal resemblance to Zhao’s “boneless” style, even the calligraphic inscription bore exact likeness to that of her teacher.

The Lingnan School remained a powerhouse in Hong Kong in the mid-1950s with a large number of followers and students. The school’s influence, however, gradually diminished as works by later generations of the school lacked socio-political concern, and the subject matter became too repetitive

and decorative.^{iv} As Hong Kong entered its industrialization phase in the late 1950s, a new image of modernity was in the mind of every progressive individual. This was quickened by a heightened revolutionary and cultural rebuilding process which eventually led to several social uprisings in the following decade and culminated into the infamous public riot in 1967. It was clear that Hong Kong society and regional politics had profoundly affected cultural activities whose focus shifted towards an intense concern with socio-political themes, the exact element the Lingnan artists lacked.

Irene Chou: the Modernist

Born to a family of revolutionaries in Shanghai – father Zhou Lianxuan (a writer) and mother Jin Qichao (calligrapher) were both radical intellectuals affected by the May 4th Movement, Irene Chou was destined to become a reformer of her time. One of the most widely read publications of the period, *Zhong Guo Xue Sheng Zhou Bao* (*Chinese Student Weekly*), addressed a common sentiment shared by many of Chou's generation. In its two decades of circulation between 1952 and 1974, the magazine focused on local issues by featuring local writers and brought new blood to the stagnant Hong Kong literary scene. Its opening manifesto entitled "A Generation's Responsibility" states:

Human culture is faced with an unprecedented threat; Chinese culture has been totally destroyed. Our generation can no longer remain silent and do nothing about it. We are not confined by any parties or restrictions, will not be exploited by politicians... we have free expression, independent thinking and choice of subjective matter...^v

In 1968, along with other modernists such as Wucius Wong and Laurence Tam, Chou joined the New Ink Painting Movement initiated by Lu Shoukun and later formed the In-Tao Art Association to collectively exhibit their works. To Chou's group, the term "Modernism" was synonymous to progression and acceptance of their identity as an open-minded individual balancing on a tightrope between Chinese and Western influences. Technically, Lu's works featured the combination of western formal abstraction and spirit of Chinese ink washes. He advocated the "six colors" of the Chinese ink; which he believes contains a wide range of tonal variation possible to achieve only through proper application, fusion and dilution. Lu also encouraged his followers to experiment different mediums and processes. Chou's works of the 1960s featured her experimental works influenced by Beijing Opera, drama and monotype paintings. Chou was fascinated by the linear qualities of the Chinese brush lines as she imitated lines of the drum-shaped stones inscription from the Warring States period (403–221 BC). She painted with a many-layered "piled ink" technique to create thick, dark and concentrated effect. Chou also dabbled with splash ink technique and painted pointillist spheres, a motif which ultimately became her signature in the early 1980s.

It is without doubt that Irene Chou's signature style – a mysterious ink world embracing a cosmic vision and revelation – was a direct derivative of her experimental works created during this transitional period. The sense of

primeval birth, of massive pressure, is released through a delicate balance of motif, composition and execution. Indeed, balance was essential in all of Chou's paintings as the artist believes the importance of harmonizing opposite energies and self-expression:

Yin (feminine energy) and *Yang* (masculine energy) keep the universe in balance, the balance between human existence and life, the balance between intellectual thoughts and the emotions of gladness, anger, grief and happiness. True art is the product of such a balance. What I am after is a realm of calm, true-heartedness and sincerity from which one can emerge as a one with independent self-hood.^{vi}

From Representation to Revelation: Trends at a Transitional Time

Lu Shoukun and the In-Tao Art Association's idea of modernism and reform was not exclusive to the practice of art and can be seen as an ideological transformation. Critical of the local art scene, Lu, in 1952, gave his opinion on the second and third generations of the Lingnan School in an inscription on his painting:

The painting of the Lingnan School is dazzling and attractive; the bone method of the brush and ink is given up; coloring is treated as the essence of beauty; outlines and wet washes are the techniques required. Its formal likeness pleases the eyes. Learners can easily grasp the techniques of the art of this school and reach the destination quickly. Therefore, it is very popular at this time. Though the art of this school has its successful aspect, yet to profit from it one must understand its merits and demerits. Furthermore, one must know where one's honesty lies.^{vii}

Lu Shoukun's criticism of the Lingnan School was based on the Guangdong school's obsession with technicality and formal likeness, thus implying a lack of depth and creativity in the works by School's followers. The terms "dazzling and attractive" were critical remarks and we only have to look at any one of Lu's *Zen* paintings to understand the rationale behind such criticism. What concerned Lu was certainly not formal representation, a quality from which his style was most distanced, but the expressive and enlightening power.

But perhaps the most revealing aspect of this inscription is that it gives a clear indication of the artistic environment of the mid-20th Century Hong Kong. The reason for the popularity of the Lingnan School was the result of its easy acquisition of techniques and its formal likeness which pleased the eye. However, at a time when the local art world was filled with ultra-traditionalist and amateur painters and a society with strong revolutionary fervor, the Lingnan style could be seen as inept and incapable by those who sought a new, indigenous art form. Avant-garde artists such as Lu Shoukun, Wucius Wong and Laurence Tam, were few, yet their style and teachings were slowly emerging to become a powerful movement. Irene Chou, a modernist and the most influential woman artist of the group, found her own voice by shifting her style from representation to revelation; and her transitional works of the present exhibition illuminated this and an important chapter in the development of modern Hong Kong art.

ⁱWucius Wong, "The Development of Hong Kong Art in the Past Ten Years," *Ming Pao Monthly* (January 1, 1976), 169-170.

ⁱⁱ*ibid*, 170.

ⁱⁱⁱ Flora Kay Chan, *The Development of the Art of Lu Shoukun* (M Phil. Thesis) (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 1991).

^{iv} Ralph Croizier, *Art*, 1988 and Ralph Croizier, "Reverse Current: Early 20th Century Japanese Influence on Chinese Painting," in *Sino-Japanese Cultural Interchange 1* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1981), 181.

^v *Zhong Guo Xue Sheng Zhou Bao* (volume 1, July 25, 1952)

^{vi} Petra Hinterthur, *Modern Art in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Myer Publishing Ltd, 1985), 96.

^{vii} This painting and the translation are taken from Flora Kay Chan, *The Development*, 58.

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