

A (Disjointed) Series of Notes towards a Reading of Lu Xinjian's Series of Paintings, Constellations

Lynne Howarth-Gladston with Paul Gladston

*Heaven is black, Earth is yellow; the cosmological significance of the colour is sited in the I Ching (Book of Changes).
Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson Chang)¹*

Cosmology

I
Methods used by Lu Xinjian in the production of his series of paintings, Constellations are similar to those related to his earlier City DNA series. Both involve mapping techniques, usually taking Google Maps as a point of departure. In the case of Constellations, stars are marked out with 'dots and circles first' and then connected 'layer by layer...in order to create a sky map', to which Lu then adds fields of transparent luminous colour. Lu asserts that his Constellation paintings relate to the 'architecture, history, economics, culture and geography [of the] man-made city' through the use of 'new technology' as well as 'myth and imagination'.²

II
Constellations is intended by the artist to adhere to a concept of cosmic harmony associated with the geomantic practice of Feng shui. The Daoist

conception of yin-yang, which informs the practice of Feng shui, upholds the notion of an interactive reciprocity between societal/architectural structures and a wider cosmology. According to the concept of yin-yang, seemingly opposed forces in nature are viewed as both interconnected and interdependent; consequently all oppositions are to be seen as relative as well as open to the possibility of harmonious reciprocation. Such thinking relates to historical Chinese cultural conceptions of 'harmony' and 'ultimate harmony' signified respectively by the terms He and Tai he. He, which signifies reciprocal interaction between otherwise non-identical objects, allows for acceptance of difference as a condition of harmony.³ Pragmatic non-absolutist ways of thinking, such as those signified by He and Tai he have persisted throughout China's intellectual tradition over the last two millennia and more.

III
Aspects of China's intellectual tradition that have been informed by the concept of yin-yang include a Daoist-Confucian desire to live in close accord with the way of nature. Both Daoist and Confucian thought uphold the notion that harmony is a fundamental feature of the cosmos. As Zhang Dainian makes clear in Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy, the 'constant' is therefore regarded as the norm 'governing the process of change' and, since 'harmony is the basic principle of the universe', there is an understanding that 'things cannot leave harmony and still exist'.⁴ Cosmology in Chinese thought is related to the principle pairing of yin and yang, whereby yang represents that which is turned toward the sun, and yin that which is turned away from the sun. This usage is found in 'The Book of Songs', where He is understood to 'determine the points of the heaven by means of the shadows'.⁵

¹ Chang Tsong-zung, Lynne Howarth-Gladston and Paul Gladston, 'Inside the Yellow Box: Chang Tsong-zung (Johnson Chang) in Conversation with Lynne Howarth-Gladston and Paul Gladston', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 2 (1), 104.
² Quotations are taken from an interview with Lu Xinjian conducted by Lynne Howarth-Gladston in September 2015.
³ Zhang Dainian, Edmund Ryden trans., *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy* (Beijing:

Foreign Languages Press and New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 270-276.
⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.
⁵ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

IV

As Dainian also indicates ‘[f]lowing qi [universal interaction between matter and energy] moves in all directions, unites and forms concrete objects’, generating ‘the myriad variety of humans and things. Its two “ends” of yin-yang in their unending succession establish the great meaning of heaven and earth’. Therefore, in the process of ‘making and transforming’ no one thing is produced like another.⁶ Within form and within qi, ‘yin-yang’ has various manifestations: ‘from the point of view of form there are things such as heaven and earth, man and woman, male and female, from the point of view of qi there are things such as cold and heat, day and night, breathing in and out, taken overall, whatever pertains to qi is yang, whatever pertains to form is yin’. Dainian concludes, ‘whatever has form and substance even up to the qi which is clouds and vapour with a shape is yin; any change, transformation, movement, rising and falling, flying around that is invisible is yang’. Moreover ‘the invisible is not independent of the visible...yin and yang were two forms of qi, cold and hot, but in later philosophy they were used as the master concepts for expressing the paired nature of reality. This development began in the Commentaries to the Book of Changes and continued especially in the works of Zhang Zai’.⁷

Enantiodromia

I

Enantiodromia is a pre-Socratic term used by the philosopher Heraclitus to signify a supposedly universal process through which cold things, warm, warm things cool, wet things dry and dry things become wet. The Greek term enantiodromia is a combination of the adjective ‘enantios’ (opposite) and the verb ‘dramein’ (to run). Such thinking is almost certainly culturally unconnected to but nevertheless resonant with conceptions of harmonious interaction within the

Chinese intellectual tradition, and in particular the concept of Fan in which all things are understood to tend cyclically towards their opposites.

II

Carl Gustav Jung incorporates the term enantiodromia into his spiritual thinking, stating ‘in the course of events...everything that exists turns into its opposite’.⁸ Jung’s use of the term refers directly to Heraclitus’s notion that everything is in flux and that the only universal constant is change. Jung’s thinking encompasses the pairing action/non-action’, which has a tenuous linguistic affinity as an outcome of cultural translation to the classical Chinese conception of Wu wei (spontaneous accordance with the Dao, or way of nature, often translated literally and somewhat erroneously into English as ‘non-action’). Jung’s sometimes loosely contextualized comparative reading of eastern and western cultural thought has arguably contributed to a wider misapprehension (Californication) of the Chinese intellectual tradition associated with the proliferation of ‘new age’ thinking since the 1950s and 1960s. On its website the Jungian Center for the Spiritual Sciences claims, for example, that Wu wei encompasses conceptual pairings of chaos/cosmos and classic/romantic inherent to the history of western art and culture.⁹ Such unqualified conflation of Chinese and western cultural thought are highly contestable.

Cultural Translation

I

Cultural translations within and between the (so-called spaces of) East and West have been a significant aspect of the development of modern/contemporary art since the mid-nineteenth century. In western and westernized contexts such translations strongly inform aspects of the work of the avant-gardes and post-avant-gardes, not only supporting recurrent

⁶ Ibid. 91

⁷ Ibid. 94

⁸ Carl Gustav Jung (1949). See website of the Jungian Center for the Spiritual Sciences (www.jungiancenter.org; accessed 3 September 2015).

⁹ See website of the Jungian Center for the Spiritual Sciences (www.jungiancenter.org; accessed 3 September 2015).

aestheticist and abstractionist tendencies, but, in addition, defamiliarizing effects associated with the use of collage-montage. Translations of cultural thought and practice between East and West — in whatever direction — can be understood to involve ineluctable refractions of meaning commensurate with deconstructivist notions of linguistic as well as material displacement and remotivation. Gregory L. Ulmer's essay 'The Object of Post-criticism' — through its critical analysis of the relationship between collage-montage techniques and post-structuralist critical theory and practice — is highly suggestive in this regard.¹⁰ Consequently, in spite of numerous references to eastern cultural thinking and practice by artists as part of the development of western(ized) modern and contemporary art, in most cases any correspondence between the two is at best attenuated. Attempts by art historians and theorists to adumbrate affinities between eastern culture and modern/contemporary western art have therefore relied more often than not on circumstantial rather than substantive evidence. Consider, for example, Michael Sullivan's speculative discussion of works by Jackson Pollock and Naum Gabo as manifestations of a specifically eastern aesthetic.¹¹

II

In *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* Sullivan seeks to compare the Chinese intellectual tradition's historical espousal of non-rationalist dialectics with arguably similar tendencies among modern western thinkers, including Jung's upholding of Enantiodromia.¹² Sullivan asserts, that in relation to the making of modern art, China has moved away from the aestheticism of traditional Literati painting towards realism and particularization, while in the West high art has tended away from realism towards abstraction.¹³ Sullivan concludes that this dual translation of historical cultural tendencies may lead to an eventual convergence of eastern and western

visual languages.¹⁴ Seen from the non-rationalist standpoint of the Chinese intellectual tradition, argues Sullivan, such a convergence would not result in synthesis, as envisaged by western rationalist thought, 'but the eternal, dynamic interaction of these opposite but complementary forces'. In Sullivan's view, we should therefore 'regard the interaction between East and West as a process in which the great civilizations, while presenting their own character, will stimulate and enrich each other'.¹⁵

III

Lu Xinjian's painting brings together traces of 'western' and 'eastern' cultural thinking and practice. While Lu's painting draws manifestly on the legacy of western geometric abstraction associated with De Stijl and Constructivism — mediated through the artist's training in typographical design — it is also possible to discern (in spite of the absence of painterly gesture) latent affinities with the calligraphic 'bone method' and 'division and planning' of traditional Chinese ink and brush painting as set out in Xie He's 'Six Principles of Chinese Painting' established in the sixth century. This combination of manifest and latent factors is also evident in relation to paintings by other artists born in China including Yu Youhan and Zhao Wuji as well as the American Mark Tobey, whose abstract works intentionally seek to combine eastern and western painterly outlooks. Resonances between paintings by Tobey and those of Lu Xinjian, can be witnessed in relation to the former's statement that '[t]he line [brings about] the dematerialization of form by space penetration',¹⁶ an assertion, no doubt derived from Tobey's training in Chinese painting and calligraphy,¹⁷ that might also be applied not unconvincingly towards Lu's ostensibly abstract mappings of urban and celestial space. Whether one interprets the significance of this bringing together of differing cultural outlooks as a matter of deconstructive displacement or metaphysical

¹⁰ Gregory L. Ulmer, 'The Object of Post-Criticism', in Hal Foster ed., *Postmodern Culture* (London: Pluto, 1985 [1983]), 83-110.

¹¹ Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, revised and expanded edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997 [1989]), 244-269.

¹² *Ibid.*, 279

¹³ *Ibid.*, 279-282

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 279-282

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 282-283

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 265

¹⁷ As Sullivan indicates Tobey was 'inspired by his experience studying calligraphy in Japan' [Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, 256-258] and met with 'Chinese painter and critic Yeng K'nei, who gave him his first lessons in handling the Chinese brush. Ten years later he stayed with Teng K'nei in Shanghai, then moved on to Japan, where he spent a month in a Zen monastery, painting and practicing calligraphy, and trying to meditate' [Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, 263].

reciprocation is perforce dependent upon the effects of cultural parallax; that is to say, the particular cultural standpoint from which the object in question is observed. In the case of western discourses this is one informed by the traces of a fundamentally rationalist sense of perspective (distance between subject and object); and in the case of China non-rationalist empathetic immersion.

Myriad Modernisms

I In *Godless in Eden* Fay Wheldon makes explicit reference to Jung's use of the term enantiodromia, describing the supposedly universal processes to which the term refers metaphorically as a river that 'zigzags rather than flows steadily down a hill, reversing its direction when too much pressure mounts'.¹⁸ Wheldon appropriates enantiodromia from Jung to identify historical moments when all the currents of belief that have been running one way suddenly turn and run in another. Wheldon then extends this notion of historical reversal to explain the significance of the falling of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of Cold War political division; a moment during which, Wheldon asserts, 'freedom fled East and control fled West'.¹⁹

II The physical and ideological separation that occurred during the Cold War, not only impacted on society, economics politics but also upon culture. It was a time of myriad modernisms, each inflected by the contemporaneity of differing localized socio-economic, political and cultural discourses and practices. The pluralism more usually attributed to postmodernism was therefore already integral to the fabric of modernism both in the East and the West.

III

Writing in *Japan Architect* in 1981, the architect Kazuhiro Ishii states that modernism, is something foreign to Japan, which had to be 'imported and learned', while postmodernism is an 'inherently native' concept. Ishii asserts that 'Postmodernism in architectural relations can be defined as the situation in which new things do not expel older things but continue to coexist'.²⁰ Always-already operative postmodernist sensibilities can thus be understood to precede and to suspend those of modernism.

IV

Viewed from one cultural standpoint, Lu's paintings appear to affirm the universalizing abstractions (form and thought) of western(ized) modernism. Viewed from another, they carry traces of a localized less conceptually defined painterly-calligraphic tradition. In China there is a durable non-adherence to hypostatizing western ideas and canons of fine art practice. This is coupled with a more general blurring of boundaries between artistic disciplines.

V

There are evident formal affinities between Lu's cartographic paintings and early twentieth-century European and Soviet abstraction. Piet Mondrian's late painting *Broadway Boogie-woogie* (1943) projects what may be interpreted as an abstract mapping of New York's urban space. Lu acknowledges the formal impact of Mondrian's painting on his own. In the case of the *Constellation* series, Lu also acknowledges an interest in the work of the Zero group, principally that relating to the lunar landings of the late 1960s.²¹ The Zero group — founded by Heinz Mack and Otto Peine in the late 1950s — sought to divest its work of subjectivity in pursuit of new ways of perceiving the real as a critical response to Abstract Expressionism.

¹⁸ Fay Wheldon, *Godless in Eden* (London: Flamingo, 2008), 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰ Glenn Adamson and Jane Pavitt eds., *Postmodernism Style and Subversion, 1970-1990* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2011), 247.

²¹ Quotation taken from an interview with Lu Xinjian conducted by Lynne Howarth-Gladston in September 2015.

The Yellow Box

I

In his essay *Yellow Box: Thoughts on Art before the Age of Exhibitions* and a series of related publications including a conversation with the present author, the gallerist Chang Tsong-zung questions the curatorial limits of the 'White Cube' and 'Black Box' as means of showing artworks produced in relation to traditional East-Asian cultural thinking and practice. Chang asserts that 'as exhibit items in the modern exhibition hall the aesthetic appeal of calligraphy-painting is often seriously compromised, to the extent that even the mode of "reading" the artwork has to be modified to adapt to the public space of the White Cube'. In response to these perceived limitations, Chang argues for alternative forms of display, which he refers to under the title of the 'Yellow Box', intended to operate as a critical supplement within or in relation to the White Cube. As Chang would have it, '[t]he Yellow Box attempts to make explicit hidden parameters in the seemingly neutral White Cube'.²²

II

Within the contexts of the White Cube, artworks are viewed discretely and in perspectival relation to the gaze of the individuated viewer. In the Chinese tradition, and in particular that associated with literati culture, artworks are conventionally viewed at closer range and at times within the context of social gatherings conducive to interactive forms of viewing referred to as *wan shang* (play appreciation).

III

The relationship of Lu's *Constellation* series to thinking associated with the practice of Feng shui as well as that of his work in general to the formal

organization of traditional Chinese painting suggest an openness to showing within the context of the Yellow Box. While the relationship of Lu's work to western cultural precedents would no doubt continue to be evident, the intervention of the Yellow Box holds out the potential for a manifest pronouncing of its relationship with localized thinking and practice. Lu's paintings are therefore by no means 'hybrid' in the sense of a productively integrated composite. No such composite is ever definitively realised. Rather, their variegated and shifting significances arise precisely as a consequence of unfolding, to some extent imbricating but in the final analysis non-reconcilable multi-dimensional refractions of meaning.

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