

## Politics and Art: The Lingnan School

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After the turn of the Twentieth Century, parallel to the modernization China was experiencing in the social and political arenas, Chinese art was undergoing dramatic changes. The Lingnan school of art, founded by the Gao brothers, Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng, not only promoted a new style of painting to the Chinese public, it also used art to promote the founder's political agenda. This agenda consisted of not only the adoption of a national government, but an artistic political agenda of *xin guohua* or “New National Painting”.

The Gao brothers had a solid background in classical Chinese painting, training with Ju Lian at a young age.<sup>1</sup> However, the Lingnan school style is heavily influenced by *nihonga*, Japanese style painting. The Gao brothers spent considerable time in Japan, traveling there to learn both western style painting and sketching techniques like chiaroscuro and Japanese painting styles. They also joined the Alliance Society, a political group led by Sun Yatsen, the leader of the revolutionary movement to overthrow the imperial system in China. Chen Shuren was also heavily involved in this political movement. Returning to China after years in Japan, they combined their political views for a nationalist state and overthrow of the current Manchu-led government with a desire to transform the state of Chinese painting from esoteric studies with extremely careful brushwork and limited, scholarly appeal to one of popular appeal; art that the common people could enjoy. This mirrored in some ways the goals of the nationalist revolution: a government that would be for the people of China rather than for an elite class.

Gao Jianfu combined these two interests most successfully. In his work, *Flying in the Rain*, Gao Jianfu paints a very unusual subject for a Chinese painter: a squad of biplanes. Modern technology had not been a subject of any literati painting. He uses a soft, romantic sky with dreamy atmospheric effects. Not only is the subject matter new for Chinese art, but the absence of hard edges and the whole mood of the work is much closer to the mood of western romanticism than it is to Chinese literati paintings. The painting is designed to engage the viewer and inspire wonder and excitement in the flying machines. This is subtle propaganda, but it is art with a message. This work promotes one of the modernization plans of the Republic: a development of flight technology. The fact that the painting was originally hung with a banner bearing Sun Yatsen's slogan “Aviation to Save the Country” makes the political nature of this work very clear.<sup>2</sup> The lower left background has a pagoda, a classical Chinese building. This is significant: Gao Jianfu was not seeking to purge traditional customs with his new nationalist painting ideas, but he did seek to bring China and Chinese painting into the modern age, retaining traditional elements of Chinese culture that he feels do not hold the people back. In this way, the *xin guohua* is an inclusive idea, seeking to blend the positive concepts developed in Western and Japanese art with Chinese techniques to make the best possible painting style for the new Chinese republic. This at least seems to be the goal of the Lingnan school: to promote a new way of thinking about Chinese art.

After the nationalist revolution succeeded, the Gao brothers worked together on a magazine that contained articles on culture, politics and art called The True Record. Combining political commentary with a periodic showcase of the art of the Gao brothers, this provided the perfect platform to unify the interests of the Lingnan school. In one of the cover illustrations from this magazine, Volume Twelve, we see a strong image of a lion done by Gao Qifeng. This image is meant to symbolize the Chinese republic and inspire confidence in its future.

The use of lions and eagles as powerful symbols of the Chinese nation is common in the work of the Lingnan school.<sup>3</sup> In Gao Jianfu's work *Eagle*, he uses his art to send a political statement. Painted in 1929, after the military clashes with the Japanese, it shows a majestic bird resting after a battle. He uses the eagle to represent the Chinese nation and shows the power of the bird. The vertical composition of the work adds to the majesty of the eagle; the viewer is forced to look up at it. The waves down below the eagle symbolize the turmoil of the struggles against the Japanese forces or perhaps the internal struggles of Chinese nation. The size of the bird in the work is very large, it dominates the composition. All these details make it a very powerful piece, leading to the idea of majesty and power of the bird of prey, and its symbolic counterpart, the Republic of China.

The style of *Eagle* is different from traditional Chinese painting. As compared to the very fine brushwork that was common in the most highly praised ink works that were done in the Nineteenth Century, Gao Jianfu's brushwork on the rock where the eagle rests is coarse and rough. The diagonal skew of the rock

1 Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 51

2 Ralph Crozier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 100.

3 Ralph Crozier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 89.

adds to the dynamic feeling of the work and enhances the chaotic feeling brought by the waves.<sup>4</sup> Again, the artist shows he is going for the impact of new styles and public appeal in his works.

The work *Stupa Ruins in Burma* by Gao Jianfu shows the respect he has towards ancient culture. He paints the ruins in a very romantic view, with a soft, glowing sky, and the ruins high up, in a place of prominence. His willingness to respect the ancient culture is reflected in his ideas for the *xin guohua*. Unlike some later, more radical reformers of Chinese painting who wanted to do away with the traditional Chinese styles altogether, the Gao Brothers wished to respect and retain what they thought was good about the traditional styles but not let themselves be held back by strict adherence to the values of the literati painters, who they viewed as out of touch with the common people. Gao Jianfu believed that the art should serve a function in society; it should change society for the better. In order to accomplish this goal, the art cannot be limited to the elite, but must reach a broad audience.<sup>5</sup> Gao Qifeng also believed strongly in the use of art to improve society. He says that the student of art must “work hard on the production of only such pictures as will effect a betterment of man's nature in particular and bring about an improvement of society in general.”<sup>6</sup>

The Gao brothers were very concerned with the accessibility of art to the citizenry of China. Not only did they endeavour to make their paintings easy to enjoy and easy to understand from an artistic viewpoint, they made them easier to obtain physically. The Gao brothers' shop in Shanghai was one of the very first places in China where paintings were publicly available for purchase.<sup>7</sup> The usual method of acquiring art to that point had always been commissioning paintings, which could be difficult or intimidating for the uninitiated.

Much of the subject matter of the Lingnan school, with the exception of the modern machinery in works like *Flying in the Rain* is fairly traditional subject matter: animals, birds and landscapes. However, the Gao brothers use their techniques to engage the viewer and deliver a emotional and sometimes political impact. They sought to enhance traditional Chinese paintings by “intensifying its emotional content, its popular appeal, and its capacity to carry an allegorical message”.<sup>8</sup> This is the hallmark of the Gao brother's concept of New National Painting. Unfortunately for the brothers, with the war ongoing with the Japanese, the Lingnan style fell out of favor with the Chinese public. Having studied in Japan, they had borrowed much from the *nihonga*, and there was considerable negative sentiment regarding all things Japanese.<sup>9</sup> Gao Jianfu's students continued on the style and some of the ideas from *xin guohua* were subsumed into social realist paintings of the People's Republic of China.<sup>10</sup>

The Gao brothers had several goals in their painting. They certainly wanted to support the policies of Sun Yetsen and the goals of the new Republic of China. But they also wanted to change the way art was viewed by people. They wished to transform the artistic landscape of China and to update traditional Chinese painting for the modern people. They did not quite succeed in transforming the whole of Chinese art, although they were influential. However, they did succeed in the second goal, not only through the use of Japanese and Western techniques in Chinese paintings, but through the effective appeals they made through their art to speak to the Chinese public at large.

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4 Christina Chu, “The Lingnan School and Its Followers: Radical Innovation in Southern China” in *A Century In Crisis*, ed. Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, 64-79. (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1998), 71

5 Ralph Crozier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 113.

6 Quoted in Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 53.

7 Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 53.

8 Ralph Crozier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 45.

9 Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 57

10 Christina Chu, “The Lingnan School and Its Followers: Radical Innovation in Southern China” in *A Century In Crisis*, ed. Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, 64-79. (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 1998), 76