

## Preamble to the Roundtable Discussion

### ‘Contemporary Chinese Ink Painting and the Persistence of Daoism’

SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London

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I am **Prof. Paul Gladston**, the Judith Neilson Chair of Contemporary Art at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. I’ll be moderating today’s roundtable which takes place in association with the current SOAS Gallery exhibition ‘Strange Wonders: Jizi and Other Pioneers of Contemporary Ink Painting from China.’ Also participating are my friends **Dr. Katie Hill** of Sotheby’s Institute, the chief curator of ‘Strange Wonders: Jizi and Other Pioneers of Contemporary Ink Painting from China’, and **Prof. Wang Chunchen** of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing who is the son of Jizi, one of the artists featured in ‘Strange Wonders.’ Chunchen is also a Visiting Professorial Fellow in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture at UNSW. This roundtable will explore the relationship between Daoism and Chinese contemporary ink painting. Discussion among the participants will be followed by an audience Q&A. Before we begin our discussion, I would like to say a few words about the subject of our roundtable by way of historical contextualization.

Since the compilation of its founding text, the *Daodejing* circa the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Daoism has been a discursive focus for metaphysical speculation on the nature of the cosmos and relations within it. Daoism’s key conception of a dynamic, uncertainly bounded but ultimately harmonious reciprocal relationship between the seemingly opposed cosmological principles of *yin* and *yang* – as pictured by the now globally famous *Taijitu* symbol – informs a historical diversity of meanings and practices in the context of Chinese culture and society. These include the calming (quasi-Buddhist) achievement of *neixin* (heart - innermost being) in the face of worldly conflicts and suffering as well as resistances to state and other forms of social discipline and control. Two prominent examples of the latter are the classic Daoist text the *Zhuangzi* (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), in which the principle of *wu-wei* (effortless action in accordance with the Way of Nature) is upheld as a corrective to overly rationalising imperial-Confucian human authority, and the so-called Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, who in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE resiled from public service at a time of major political upheaval in China to engage in the contemplation of Daoist teachings and related cultural activities, sometimes under the boundary blurring influence

of alcoholic intoxication in addition to actual or feigned insanity. The conception of *yin-yang* was already a founding part of Confucian thought in the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century BCE – viz. the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), one of the five classics of Confucianism – and before that an immemorial aspect of what would come to be seen as Chinese culture.

From the Tang Dynasty (618-907) until the overthrowing of imperial China in 1911, Daoism and Buddhism were part of a durable discursive formation known as Neo-Confucianism whose syncretic outlook was adopted as the basis for state governance, familial relations, personal development and ethical conduct. In this discursively syncretic context, the dynamically reciprocating dialectics of Daoist cosmology not only provided a foil to unduly rationalizing Confucian idealism it also buttressed a dominant Confucianism's aspirations toward a harmoniously ordered society. Daoism - as in some sense an 'accursed share' or *pharmakon* - cannot be separated definitively from China's syncretic Confucian traditions and, indeed, Confucianist discourses prior to the Tang Dynasty.

That dual-facing syncretic relationship extended to ink paintings produced by dynastic-imperial China's Confucian-literati administrative class. Such works were understood to demonstrate the capacity of their makers to govern society along harmonizing Confucianist lines through their subtly integrated formal compositions and relational aesthetical affects associated with the Daoist-related concepts of *qiyun shengdong* (vital energy resonance) - considered to be the ruling desideratum of Chinese ink painting - and *xushi* (emptiness-substance) – the reciprocal juxtaposition of formal absence and presence. They were also used to signal oblique displeasure with overweening imperial authority by asserting the value of inward reflection, individualism and a spontaneous existential accord between the three cosmological realms of *Ren* (Human), *Di* (Earth) and *Tian* (Sky-heaven). Daoist thought and related cultural practices conceive of the ineffable ontological nature of the cosmos as something that can ultimately only be felt rather than comprehensively cognized. All of this is culturally distinct from the more directly oppositional critical dialects of European/American post-Enlightenment aesthetic modernity.

Despite the interruptive impact of Maoist revolutionary ideology and western/ized modernism and postmodernism on traditional culture during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Daoist principles have continued to inform painting and other forms of artistic expression in China – albeit in sometimes substantially altered transcultural forms influenced by high modernist formalism/abstraction - e.g. the work of Zhao Wuji and Qiu Deshu, revolutionary socialist realism -

e.g. Pan Tianshou, and post-/modernist defamiliarization - e.g. Wang Dongling and Yang Jiechang. Syncretic - Daoist/Buddhist-inflected - neo-Confucian thinking and practice also had a significant impact on the development of romanticism and early modernism in European/American contexts from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century – especially regarding a shared emphasis on the idea of sublime illimitability. Daoism and Buddhism were particularly influential on the work of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American modernists and postmodernists, including Georgia O’Keefe, Mark Tobey, Agnes Martin, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Brice Marden and Bill Jensen. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, romanticism, modernism and postmodernism in turn impacted significantly and in diverse ways on Chinese culture, often diffracted through translations in non-Western cultural contexts such as India and Japan. This field of transcultural relations qualifies any definitive sense of modern Chinese and European/American cultural identity while also informing the persistence of both.

Doubts were cast by some intellectuals in China during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century about the continuing relevance of Chinese ink painting because of what was seen as an inexorable shift toward ‘universalism’ in art thinking and practice brought about by the global impact of western/ized aesthetic modernity. At much the same time during the 1980s, connections between Chinese contemporary art, including ink painting, and China’s syncretic discursive traditions were upheld as part of the phenomenon known as ‘cultural fever.’ Those connections were upheld to differentiate Chinese contemporary art from contemporary art more generally as an expression of a specifically Chinese national/civilizational cultural, social and political identity – ideas that echoed debates as part of the May 4<sup>th</sup> movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and that also contributed to a post-revolutionary breaking with stagnant official ideology.

Since the 1990s, Confucian ideas of social harmony have been officially re-adopted in support of CCP aspirations toward a harmonious society and the so-called ‘China Dream.’ Until very recently this involved the habitual casting of Daoism in a negative light by Chinese intellectuals because of its historical resistance to rationalizing authority as well as perceptions of being cognate with the non-/rationalism of western/ized deconstructionism (in actuality Daoism and deconstructionism are conceptually resonant but point in quite different directions; the former toward ultimate states of harmony, and the latter pervasive scepticism with such metaphysical conceptions – Daoism and deconstructionism are not the self-same thing). Numerous artists in contemporary China, including those showcased by the current SOAS exhibition, have nevertheless continued to align their thinking and practice with Daoist principles. Those alignments can be understood to signal oblique resistances to accepted authority,

cultural or otherwise. To complicate matters further, in 2024 Daoism has been officially recognised as a religion in China alongside Buddhism and Christianity.

The roundtable will discuss the continuing relationships between Daoism and Chinese ink painting and their implications for resistances to authority, individualism, transcendent spirituality, care for the self and respect for nature. Also discussed will be the situating of contemporary Chinese ink art as part of the now conspicuously pluriversal conditions of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century contemporaneity downstream of post-Cold War globalization. The extent to which the relationship between Daoism and ink painting can indeed be spoken or written about will be addressed given Daoism's recourse to feeling rather than cognition as a way of gaining insight into the ineffable ontology of the cosmos.