

LIU KUO-SUNG: PIONEERING
CONTEMPORARY CHINESE INK ART AND THE
LEGACY OF THE FIFTH MOON GROUP*

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This article explores the significant contributions of Liu Kuo-sung,¹ a pivotal figure in contemporary Chinese ink art and one of the founding members of the Fifth Moon Group. As a key catalyst for reform in Taiwanese contemporary art, Liu Kuo-sung's revolutionary approach to ink painting has left an indelible mark on the artistic landscape. The article studies Liu's influential role within the Fifth Moon Group, shedding light on the group's endeavours to spearhead transformative reforms in the realm of contemporary art in Taiwan. By examining Liu Kuo-sung's artistic career and achievements, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of his impact on the evolution of Chinese ink art, both within Taiwan and inside mainland China.

Key words: Liu Guosong, Liu Kuo-sung, Chinese ink art, Fifth Moon Group, abstract ink art, contemporary art, reform in art, Taiwanese art scene

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¹ The most common transcription of the artist's name is used here, which is different from the official Chinese *pinyin*. The *pinyin* was applied in the transcription of the books and articles written in Chinese only. Other names follow the most common practice and therefore *pinyin* or other transcription is mentioned after the Chinese characters. Different transcriptions may appear in the bibliography, when sources are written in Chinese and therefore *pinyin* was applied to all, including the names of authors.

Introduction

Liu Kuo-sung (Liu Guosong 劉國松, b. 1932) is widely recognised as one of the most important figures in modern East Asian art, playing a crucial role in the transformation of Chinese painting and ink art. His international reputation, extensive body of work, and outspoken views on art have cemented his position as a catalyst for reform. Throughout his career, Liu has sought to break free from conventional models of Chinese painting while still engaging in traditional aesthetics, expanding its vocabulary with innovative techniques and materials (Lin, 2016; Shen, 2016). Thanks to his efforts, ink painting is now considered in the Chinese cultural universe as suitable a medium for modern art as Western oil painting.

This study investigates how Liu Kuo-sung's radical reconceptualisation of ink painting and his involvement with the Fifth Moon Group (May Painting Society 五月畫派) influenced the development of contemporary Chinese ink art in both Taiwan and mainland China. I argue that Liu's innovations not only modernised the medium within Taiwan but also repositioned it on the global stage, challenging the hierarchy that had long privileged Western oil painting over Chinese ink. Furthermore, his artistic practice and teaching exerted a profound influence on the later Experimental Ink and Wash movement of the 1990s in mainland China, as well as on generations of his students in Taiwan and Hong Kong, shaping the trajectory of ink art across the Sinosphere.² A secondary contribution of this study is the clarification of the English name "Fifth Moon", a poetic mistranslation introduced by Liu himself and later retained by the group.

The research draws on an interview with Liu Kuo-sung, primary sources such as exhibition catalogues, and the relevant scholarly literature. While catalogues are often visually oriented, they also contain critical commentary that contextualises Liu's significance. Liu's abstract ink paintings – particularly those from the 1960s – marked a radical departure from conventional understandings of ink, which had often been dismissed as outdated and unsuited to modern artistic expression.

In Taiwan, the connection with Chinese cultural traditions was never severed as radically as in mainland China, where the Cultural Revolution inflicted severe damage on the cultural heritage. After 1949, Taiwan's new political leadership actively promoted the preservation of Chinese tradition as a counterpoint to the Communist threat (Sullivan, 1996a, p. 180). Yet by the early 1960s, young Taiwanese artists increasingly were seeking alternatives to conservative, nationalistic models of painting. Through societies such as the Fifth Moon Group, they exper-

² The first attempts to modernise Chinese painting were made in mainland China before Liu and the Fifth Moon movement, by artists such as Xu Beihong (徐悲鴻, 1895–1953), Lin Fengmian (林風眠, 1900–1991), and others. However, regardless of their historical importance, they had little to no influence on the ink art movements within the broader Chinese cultural universe that focused on abstract or semi-abstract art during the 1990s.

imented with adapting international art movements – particularly Modernism – into a Chinese context. Initially sceptical of ink painting, Liu came to realise that it was not a relic of the past but a vital medium capable of becoming modern. As a founder of the Fifth Moon Group, often called the “father of contemporary ink painting”, Liu spearheaded this transformation, laying the foundations for subsequent generations of experimental ink artists.

History of Ink Painting in Taiwan

According to Liu Kuo-sung, modern Taiwanese ink painting developed out of the *literati* tradition and was particularly influenced by the celebrated painter Chang Dai-chien (Zhang Daqian 張大千, 1899–1983), who spent the last decades of his life in Taiwan. Liu often emphasised the impact of Zhang’s use of colour, as well as the legacy of indigenous Taiwanese artistic elements. In his view, East Asian³ abstract ink art has grown from these foundations (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).

In fact, the birth of modern painting in Taiwan is much more complex. Taiwanese painting before the Japanese colonisation was heavily influenced by the art of mainland China, particularly the local styles of Fujian province, where most of the artists came from. Another important factor was the impact of Japanese art education, as Taiwan was under Japanese rule from 1895 till 1945. The occupation brought new trends to the region, mostly influenced by Western contemporary art trends that had dramatically influenced Japanese art. The Japanese style of ink painting, called *nihonga* in Japan, was largely introduced into Taiwan after 1920. Western painting (*seiyoga*) was also prevalent and popular at the official exhibitions organised after 1927 (Kuo, 2020). After the beginning of anti-Western propaganda in Japan in the 1930s, the influence of Western art decreased, and Taiwan lost its connection with modern Western art.

After the uprising in 1947, in order to prevent unrest martial law was imposed, and it remained in place until 1988. In the 1950s, Taiwan was still somewhat isolated and the political pressure resulted in a lack of personal freedom. However,

³ In the interview, Liu spoke about “Asian abstract ink art,” and at times used the even vaguer term “Eastern (*dongfang* 東方)”. After a follow-up with the artist via chat through the messenger application Line in February 2025, his daughter clarified Liu’s statement. He actually meant Chinese art, but since Taiwan has been distancing itself from mainland China over the past thirty years, he chose not to use the word “Chinese”. A more accurate term might be “Chinese cultural universe” or “Chinese-speaking countries”, but such phraseology would have sounded artificial given his age and the broader cultural context. Nevertheless, Liu believes his words also apply to Korean and Japanese art, which is why he used the term “East Asian abstract ink art”.

the situation in Taiwan was still much better in comparison to China, which remained cut off from all international art movements for more than 30 years, until the end of the Cultural Revolution and the lessening of political pressure at the end of the 1970s.

Irrespective of the political tensions, in Taiwan, there were still possibilities for cultural exchange with Western contemporary art and literature. The United States Information Agency (USIA), was established in Taipei in 1953, and played an important role in cultural circles and gave a new impetus to Taiwanese art and literature. Apart from publishing literary journals and awarding scholarships for study in American universities, the agency organised exhibitions. Many modern Taiwanese writers or artists still remember the USIA as a haven of freedom during these times of political hardship. The American news agency had a considerable influence on cultural life in Taiwan, including its art and literature. At the beginning of the 1960s, USIA exhibited photocopies of the American Abstract Expressionism, which greatly influenced Taiwanese modernist movements. European art at that time was never exhibited, but the news of the most recent art movements was covered in the newspapers and art journals.

In the 1950s, the Taiwanese avant-garde was formed and many other art associations emerged. Young artists became tired of the conservatism of the contemporary art scene. In 1951, three artists coming from mainland China, earlier associated with the Hangzhou Art Academy, Li Chun-Shan (Li Zhongsheng 李仲生, 1912–1984), Chu Teh-chun (Zhu Dequn 朱德群, 1920–2014)⁴ and Chao Chun-Hsiang (Zhao Chunxiang 趙春翔, 1913–1991) organised the first avant-garde exhibition. Modern painting associations in Taiwan attempted to reform traditional painting by adopting some elements of Western culture. These movements received high praise abroad, resulting in their members being invited to international exhibitions. However, the attitude of the Taiwanese establishment towards the modernists from the 1950s to the end of the 1960s was hostile. Although the situation in Taiwan was much less dramatic than in China, avant-garde artists were often attacked in the press, unable to work as art teachers at the prestigious universities and some artists or writers were even imprisoned (Zhang Cziráková, 2020, p. 78). In that decade, many art associations were established. One of the most significant was the May Art Group, later called the Fifth Moon Group (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).

The coming of modernism created a new path for artists living in Taiwan, enabling experiments with content and form. Naturally this fact dramatically enriched painting with ink, and it is therefore worthwhile examining modernism in

⁴ A famous contemporary abstract painter, who studied in France. He taught oil painting at the National Taiwan University and Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College, and later moved to France in 1955.

depth. Artists explored new paths, encouraged by the direction taken by Western art, to try to create something new but at the same time Chinese. This context led to the work of artists such as Liu Kuo-sung, Fong Chung-Ray (Feng Zhongrui 馮鍾睿, b. 1933), Huang Chao Hu (Huang Chaohu 黃朝湖, b. 1939), and many others (Zhang Cziráková, 2020, p. 74).

Liu Kuo-sung and the Fifth Moon Group

In 1956, four young artists, most of whom had been students of Liao Chi-Ch'un (Liao Jichun 廖繼春, 1902–1976) in the Taiwan Normal College, formed the Fifth Moon Group. One of them was Liu Kuo-sung, who became a leading figure in Taiwanese modern painting and had an incredible impact on younger generations both in Taiwan and in mainland China.

Liu Kuo-sung was born on 26 April 1932 in Bangbu, Anhui province, China. He arrived in Taiwan in August 1949 together with another 340 students of the National Revolutionary Military Orphan School (Lin, M., 2007, p. 14). His interest in art started as a child. He was enrolled in the Affiliated Senior High School of Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College in Taipei (today a part of the National Taiwan Normal University, NTNU) and continued to study at the Fine Arts Department of the Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College in Taipei. In his second year of studies, Liu Kuo-sung was exposed to Western styles of painting and materials, such as oil on canvas, tempera, watercolours. He began to use them, in particular watercolours. He was influenced by Chu Teh-chun and other teachers, who had been influenced by Modernism since the 1930s. Liu already had very solid skills in traditional Chinese painting, but he also wanted to master Western techniques.

During this period, he was searching for a unique style. He started to participate in the Taiwanese art scene. As Lin (2007) observed, in November 1954, Liu Kuo-sung published several articles explaining the differences between Japanese painting and Chinese painting (*guohua* 國畫). One of them was *Why Bring Nihonga (Japanese painting) into Chinese Painting?* in the Taiwanese newspaper *United Daily News* (p. 32). After graduating at the top of his class in 1955, he started teaching at the Keelung Municipal High School (Lin, M., 2007, p. 32). He continued painting, searching for his style. He was full of self-confidence and creative energy, abandoning watercolours and starting to use oil on canvas. He tried to participate in larger exhibitions, such as the provincial art exhibition of art teachers, but he and his friends found this quite difficult due to the very conservative atmosphere. During this period school exhibition prizes were mostly awarded for work in the impressionist manner. At this time, most of young students painted in a Western modernist style, mainly Fauvist, Post Impressionism and Cubism. They offered paintings in the cubist or modernist style to the aforementioned ex-

hibitions, but only a single impressionist painting was selected. They concluded that the state-organised exhibitions were too conservative and decided to exhibit their work outside of the state structure. They organised their first exhibition at the school, in one studio. This was very successful and was even mentioned in the national press. Consequently, these four former students of the Fine Arts Department of the Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College in Taipei decided to create an art group and to organise an exhibition every year.

They named the art group the May Painting Society (Wuyue huahui 五月畫派), after the May 4th Movement 1919, which advocated reform in Chinese society, mostly focused on literature (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023). This called for modernisation in Chinese society in 1919, but did not extend to visual art, except for Cai Yunpei's (蔡元培, 1868–1940) reformist attempt to challenge the traditional style of Chinese painting. This prompted reform by Wen Yiduo (聞一多, 1899–1946), who later became the dean of the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA). According to Liu, the year 1919 was the year when Xu Beihong (徐悲鴻, 1895–1953) went to Paris, and so painting was largely absent from the original May 4th Movement, which was mostly concerned with literature. Literary societies, such as the Crescent Moon, advocated the establishment of modern Chinese as a widely used language in literature, including poetry. The aim of the movement was primarily the modernisation of literature and the rejection of the old style of writing. Fiction started using modern Chinese instead of classical Chinese *guwen* 古文, as well as the so-called “new poems” *xin shi* 新詩 which almost entirely replaced poems written in the ancient manner *gushi*. Later on, the reform in mainland China became widely and closely associated with political movements and the attempts at Modernism were subsumed by the subsequent rise of Socialist Realism. This could be one of the reasons for the resentment against Modernist experimentation in Taiwanese visual art, during the 1950s. In Liu's words, he and his friends wanted to continue the May Fourth reform and bring it into visual art (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).

A secondary reason for the name was to create a connection with Parisian *Salon de Mai*. Liu Kuo-sung liked the French word “salon” *shalong* 沙龍, but he found it too Western, and too ambitious, and so they used the word “art group” *huapai* 畫派⁵ in Chinese, but continued to use the word “salon” otherwise. The movement was founded in 1956, and in June they had their first exhibition, the Joint Exhibition of Four People 四人聯合畫展 in the sketching classroom of their school (Liu, S. Y., 2016). They received support from their teacher Liao Chi-Ch'un and the May Art Group was founded in his studio (Liu, K. S., 2020, p. 13). The reform in 1919 was about using a Western style of writing in literature, and it was therefore natural that Fifth Moon also tended towards the West. They were seek-

⁵ It literally means “painting association”.

ing inspiration from Western Modernist artists. The work exhibited at the first exhibitions were all oil paintings, mostly inspired by Post Impressionism, Fauvism and Cubism. Later on, they were influenced by other Western artists, such as Franz Kline (1910–1962), Mark Tobey (1890–1976), who were, in turn influenced by Chinese calligraphy (F. Wu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).

The first official exhibition of the May group in a public space was held in 1957. The only place available was the long corridor in Zhongshan Hall, which was perhaps not the best space but was very busy and therefore many people saw their works. Originally, they planned to have an opening ceremony on 4 May, but opened on 10 May (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023). They exhibited 60 paintings, all of which were completely derived from Western styles. The May Art Group originally included Liu Kuo-sung, Kuo Tong-Jong (Guo Dongrong 郭東榮, 1927–2022), Li Fang-Chih (Li Fangzhi 李芳枝, 1933–2020), and Kuo Yu-Lun (Guo Yulun 郭豫倫, 1933–2023). They decided to accept two new members annually. Therefore, at the first official public exhibition in 1957 there were already six: the founders, Liu Kuo-sung, Kuo Tong-Jong, Li Fang-Chih, and Kuo Yu-Lun, and two new members, Chen Ching-Jung (Chen Jingrong 陳景榮, 1934) and Cheng Chung-Chuan (Zheng Qiongjuan 鄭瓊娟, 1931). During the following few years, they sought to promote the name of the Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College in Taipei, especially the Faculty of Art. This college used to be criticised for the lack of talented students and its inability to incubate artists, as the faculty was intended to educate future teachers of other art schools (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).⁶ Therefore, they decided to invite talented students who had already graduated from the Taiwan Provincial Teachers' College. After three years they were unable to find suitable candidates from this source. Therefore they changed the rules and they invited the artists they could work and share ideas with, such as Chen Ting-shih (Chen Tingshi 陳庭詩, 1913–2002), who was asked to join the fourth exhibition. In 1961, they invited Fong Chung-Ray, and the others. Many of those artists later played an important role in modern ink painting. Apart from organising yearly exhibitions, the members of the group met on a monthly basis.

After one year of having taught at the secondary school in Keelung, in 1959 Liu was recommended, successfully for the post of teaching assistant at the Department of Architecture at the National Cheng Kung University (Liu, K. S., 2020, p. 13).

⁶ Liu pointed out a well-known fact: students from the “real” art schools in both mainland China and Taiwan tended to look down on students from teachers' colleges. I personally witnessed this situation at CAFA in Beijing during the 1990s.

Other Modernist Art Groups in Taiwan

There were several other art associations trying to bring modernist influences to the art scene in Taiwan. One of them was the Orient Art Association (*Dongfang huahui* 東方畫會), established in November 1957. They were a similar society to the May group. They were all students of Li Chun-shan, who was a proponent of Eastern ink art. They were influenced by him, but they mostly painted in oil (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023). They attempted to modernise Chinese art. At the beginning they were not using traditional Chinese ink and rice paper. The intellectuals of the May 4th Movement wanted to modernise not only the language, but also all of society. The yearning of these writers for modernism and modernisation made them feel justified in cutting their links with tradition. Writers like Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881–1936), Guo Moruo (郭沫若, 1892–1978) wanted to create a new literature. It therefore was logical that for artists in the May Art Group the using of oil colours should be their natural choice. Also, oil painting was considered a global, modern medium. More importantly, choosing a different technique from Chinese ink made them feel much less restricted by the celebrated, ancient tradition of Chinese painting. Initially, Liu Kuo-sung was searching for his style. His first modernist paintings were often figurative, influenced by Henri Matisse (1869–1954), and Fernand Léger (1881–1955).

There were two important art groups in Taiwan involved in Modernism. One was the May Art Group and the second was the Orient Art Association. In Liu Kuo-sung's words they were "brothers". The artists from both groups remained close and they inspired each other. In my conversations, Liu Kuo-sung noted that the May Art Group was often referred to as "Modern Chinese Painting", while the East Group was described as "Chinese Modern Painting". This subtle distinction in naming reflects not only how the groups were perceived within the artistic community but also highlights the fluidity of definitions surrounding "modernity" in Chinese art during that period. No matter which material they used, they were still able to achieve modernism and break free of tradition (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023). In Sullivan's (1996a) opinion, the May Art Group was a small group of brave artists determined to create a style that was both Chinese and had a modern flavour. Conservatives denounced their works as inferior, inconsistent with the Chinese tradition and contrary to a patriotic spirit (p. 39).

After the establishment of the art group, Liu Kuo-sung was regarded as a rebel and a Westerniser, who had abandoned the traditional Chinese painting of his early artistic education in favour of modernist canvases. He gained an international reputation, and started to be invited to exhibitions, such as the São Paulo Bienal (Andrews & Shen, 2014, p. 7). For about seven years, from 1952 to 1959, he explored Western styles of painting, trying different styles with a strong emphasis on abstract painting.



Liu Kuo-sung. *Toward Mysterious Whiteness*, 1963, 94 x 58 cm, ink on rice paper (Courtesy of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation). In this painting, the artist used special paper, which became his trademark, and broad wild calligraphic brushstrokes. It represents the early stage of the artist's experiments with ink on Chinese paper.

In 1959, after long discussions with his colleagues in the May Art Group, Liu Kuo-sung started slowly moving towards abstraction. In 1956–1958 his reputation was growing rapidly in Taiwan. During this time, he wrote many articles elaborating his ideas. He put forward the idea that modern means abstract, but he also pointed out that the content of the work is not as important as the form. In 1958, a famous French/Chinese abstract artist Zao Wou-Ki (Zhao Wuji 趙無極, 1920–2013) exhibited in the United States and spent a brief period in Hong Kong. Taiwanese journals and newspapers reported details of his life and his work. He was the first Chinese artist to gain an international reputation for creating abstract art in Paris. That deeply influenced young artists in Taiwan (Xiao, 1996, pp. 56-57).

The Changes in the Fifth Moon and in Liu Kuo-sung's Style

During the existence of the May Art Group, the name in Chinese remained the same, but the name in foreign languages had changed. At the beginning, the official name in a foreign language was *Salon de Mai*. As previously mentioned, it was Liu Kuo-sung's ambition to create something similar to the French exhibition in Paris, although he continued not to use the word "salon" in Chinese. *Salon de Mai* soon became the trademark of the group. Being aware of the international context of their work, at the third exhibition, they also added "Annual Exhibition" in English after *Salon de Mai*, as the contacts between the USA and Taiwan were stronger than those with France. However, in 1959, Liu Kuo-sung proposed changing the group's English name to the Fifth Moon. As he explained in our conversation, the term originated from his own mistranslation: he had simply consulted a dictionary. Yet he soon found the phrase both suitable and poetic – more evocative than the original English rendering, whose strong association with the May 4th Movement resonated only within the Chinese cultural context. The moon is a very powerful symbol closely associated with ancient Chinese culture, which appears in many poems, starting from the Tang dynasty and is especially associated with one of the greatest Chinese poets, Li Bo (Li Bai 李白, 701–762). May is when the fifth full moon occurs. This non-Chinese new name was especially appreciated by the famous Taiwanese writer Pai Hsien-yung (Bai Xianyong 白先勇, b. 1937). He found it truly poetic, far better than the original name in French (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023). The group accepted the new name. However, the change of the name also signalled a significant shift in Liu Kuo-sung's artistic style (Chen, 1996, p. 196).

The year 1959 was a breakthrough in Liu Kuo-sung's work. That year he realised that Western Abstract Expressionism used Eastern calligraphy, for example the so-called "white paintings" by Mark Tobey (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 398), and

so he added calligraphic features to his abstract art. Taiwan was still rather isolated and he could only see photocopies of the American Abstract Expressionist works at the United States Information Agency. Liu Kuo-sung started questioning his style, asking himself: “If the Americans can create a fusion of Western and Eastern art, then why not try it, but from an Asian perspective?” (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023). He started incorporating features of Chinese painting into his semi-abstract art. He introduced robust brushstrokes, but still insisting on working in oil, because the medium was strongly connected with Modernism in the Far East. As Liu admitted (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023), he tried his best to make his work look like ink by using a lot of turpentine which made oil colours very thin, in order to achieve an effect similar to that of ink on paper. However, typical Chinese rice paper *xuanzhi* 宣紙 has some properties which are difficult to reproduce on different surfaces, in particular on canvas. In an attempt to achieve similar results to Chinese paper he used plaster as a base on canvas, as the plaster after drying possesses similar properties to Chinese paper.

Liu Kuo-sung’s Return to Ink Painting

After having spent years abroad, in 1961 Liu Kuo-sung finally decided to turn back to ink painting. It was not a simple choice, as Modernism in the contemporary Chinese cultural world was tightly tied to Western materials, and ink painting on typical Chinese paper was considered very traditional and old-fashioned. Two important factors drew him back to ink on paper. Firstly, he was teaching art at the Central Faculty of Architecture, and so he often participated in discussions between architects. In the 1960s, there was a fierce polemic about using concrete and trying to resemble traditional wooden structure by painting concrete columns with red to recreate traditional Chinese architecture, for example with some of the buildings of the Central University. Many architects, such as Modernists and Brutalists, strongly opposed this practice and claimed that concrete is a modern material and should therefore be exposed and celebrated. They protested against hiding it and maintained that it should constitute some of the visual effect of the buildings. Modern material requires modern attitudes (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023). The architect Wang Da-hong (Wang Dahong 王大閼, 1917–2018) said that the purpose of colours on ancient wooden buildings was to prevent the wood from being eaten by insects, but it no longer made sense to use it in modern architecture in order to imitate the antique. “What he said touched me very much. Isn’t my ink painting on canvas also a fake? After that, I resolutely threw away my oil brushes even though many people already appreciated my oil painting” (Lan, 1996, p. 213).

At the same time, Song dynasty ink paintings from the National Palace Museum's collection in Taipei were returned to Taiwan after being successfully exhibited in the United States. Afterwards, they were shown in the New Park Museum in Taipei. This was the first time these ancient paintings had been exhibited in Taiwan, and the first time that Liu Kuo-sung had experienced the beauty of ancient ink paintings. He was moved by the landscape paintings from the Song dynasty, but he was even more interested in those artists of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, such as Liang Kai. It seemed impossible that abstract beauty could originate in the thirteenth century, during the Song dynasty. The abstract features of Liang Kai's figurative paintings in the style called *da xieyi* 大寫意,⁷ made him realise the long tradition of such artists, almost forgotten in China. At about the same time, on a trip to Tokyo, he saw in the Tokyo National Museum *Two Minds in Harmony*, a famous painting by the Chinese artist Shi Ke (石恪, 10th century). Shi Ke was painting earlier than Liang Kai (梁楷, c. 1140–c. 1210), and his style was characterised by bold abstract ink brush strokes. He soon realised that apart from the well-known, historical Chinese masters there were others, almost forgotten. This made Liu Kuo-sung determined to return to ink painting.

Having come to this decision he shared such ideas with the May Art Group in their usual monthly meetings. Other colleagues harshly criticised this idea, and strongly opposed the return to ink painting. Oil painting was perceived as modern; ink was considered outdated, and therefore not suitable for modernist painting. They argued; some artists, such as Fong Chung-Ray, supported Liu directly, while others, including Chuang Che (Zhuang Zhe 庄喆, b. 1934), drew inspiration from the exhibition of Song dynasty ink paintings from the National Palace Museum's collection, previously shown in the USA, and reinterpreted them as abstract oil paintings. Liu appreciated Chuang's ideas. Afterwards the others agreed and the fifth exhibition of the Fifth Moon consisted primarily of ink painting. This attracted the attention of the famous poet Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guanzhong 余光中, 1928–2017), who was impressed enough to write an article about the exhibition.

Liu Kuo-sung and many other artists of that time believed that abstract painting was the highest form of art (Wang, 1996, p. 56). Later, aged 82, he explained this view of abstract art, saying: "China has been a nation that could appreciate abstract beauty since ancient times, and abstract aesthetics have long entered the everyday life of the Chinese" (Liu, 2014, p. 15). Other artists from the Fifth Moon also started to paint abstract or semi-abstract art in ink. The movement for modernisation of ink painting was under way and many artists from the Fifth Moon, but also from other art groups, participated in it. An important member of the

⁷ *Xieyi* literally means "writing ideas". It is a specific style in traditional ink painting, characterised by fast and bold brushstrokes and stylisation. It looks easy and relaxed, but is considered to be the most difficult style in Chinese ink painting.



Liu Kuo-sung. *Midnight Sun*, 1969, 156.2 x 304.8 cm, ink on rice paper, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University (Courtesy of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation). One of the space paintings.

Fifth Moon group was Chen Ting-shih, who was also doing semi-abstract ink paintings. His abstract and semi-abstract works were a fusion between the East and the West. “His monumental woodcuts are often charged with a kind of primordial strength and silent presence, created by empty spaces punctuated by large solid blocks of colour or ink, juxtaposed against each other. His style has been inspired by Abstract Expressionism in the West, but at the same time is reminiscent of the ancient art of calligraphy, rubbing and engraving” (Fu, 1988, p. 198).

Fong Chung-Ray was invited by Liu Kuo-sung to join, and exhibit. Fong emigrated to California in 1975, where he has continued to be active. He admired the New York school of Abstract Expressionism, especially painters who were influenced by Eastern art. In his early works, he used calligraphy, but he maintained that calligraphy did not have a significant influence on his subsequent style (Zhang Cziráková, 2020, p. 75). His works appear traditional, despite the artist's efforts to create contemporary works of art and the use of new tools and technique. He has sought a new direction in the development of Chinese painting (China: Modernity and Art and Discussion 1991, p. 124).

Chuang Che was one of the leading artists of the Fifth Moon and supported Liu Kuo-sung in his use of ink. He was born in Beijing, but grew up in Taiwan. In the 1970s he moved to the USA. He has long been committed to thinking deeply about abstraction from the art theorist's point of view. His abstract landscape paintings are derived from natural phenomena and his effort to move towards the

ultimate goal of form and spirit. He uses the linear structure of calligraphy, and the brushwork is sometimes ethereal and smooth, sometimes showing a rough and high-spirited momentum (Chuang, n. d.). The artist and art critic Huang Chaohu may have been associated with the Fifth Moon, but if so, only on theoretical basis. He used his writing to inspire modern painters from the Fifth Moon Group, the Orient Art Association, and others. He was considered the best art critic of the 1960s.

In 1962, after the sixth exhibition of the Fifth Moon in Taiwan, Liu Kuo-sung, Chen Chi-kwan (Chen Qiguan 陳其寬, 1921–2007), and Wang Chi-Chien (Wang Jiqian, better known as C. C. Wang 王己千, 1907–2003) were invited to hold an exhibition of the Fifth Moon Group in the Long Island Gallery, New York. At the *vernissage*, Liu Kuo-sung advocated abstract painting. In order to prove to the audience that they were not just dilettante abstract artists, they also exhibited several earlier figurative paintings demonstrating their evident proficiency in other artistic styles. Liu Kuo-sung was mostly concerned about what other artists thought about his new work (Xiao, 2011, pp. 80–81).

During the existence of the Fifth Moon Group, disagreements occurred. They had different opinions on art. Chen Jingrong insisted on realism, and afterwards went to study in Japan and left the movement in 1960 (Xiao, 1996, pp. 56–57).

Different Phases of Liu Kuo-sung's Style

Although using ink, Liu Kuo-sung didn't want to follow traditional techniques and started to experiment. He was seeking inspiration from ancient artists typified as “wild and unrestrained”. For example, Wang Mo (literarily Ink Wang 王墨, ?–805), who lived at the end of the Tang dynasty and was described as using his hands, beard and even his hat to paint. Wang is credited with inventing the fast-sketched, wild method of ink painting called *pomo* 潑墨, which means “splattering ink.” Liu Kuo-sung used this technique in creating abstract and semi-abstract art characterised by its bold brushstrokes. He experimented with splashing and collage. His work of the 1960s was bold and expressive, influenced by contemporary international trends. However, the use of Asian materials and formats and his return to the landscape as a primary subject marked out his work as different from Western art.

Works from that period are typical for their bold calligraphic brushstrokes. Liu Kuo-sung's work was not influenced by Japanese avant-garde calligraphy, mostly because such works were not easily accessible in Taiwan at that time, unlike Western Abstract Expressionism. The later influence of Japanese calligraphy in Taiwanese art is evident. In interviews Liu explained that he attempted to use calligraphic strokes differently from Western artists, who were not that familiar

with Chinese calligraphy. He felt that there are features of calligraphy which are difficult to grasp for people who are not fully acquainted with Chinese culture (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).

After trying traditional techniques, Liu Kuo-sung started to experiment with paper. He created a new kind of traditional Chinese rice paper, with rough natural fibres made from grass and other materials. When experimenting with different kinds of paper, he realised that some paper contained rough fibres. He thought it would be good if such fibres were on the surface and could be torn off. Therefore, he visited the paper factory to investigate production of such paper. This type of paper had never been produced before, so it is now called “Liu Kuo-sung Paper” (Chen, 2021, p. 6). He tore the fibres from completed work, revealing beautiful structures of white lines irregularly crossing the paintings. The first work in which he used this specific technique was *Mountain covered by snow* (寒山雪琪), painted in 1964. These white lines became characteristic of his work. After exhibiting this new work at the 8th annual exhibition of the Fifth Moon Group, his friend, the poet Yu Kwang-chung (Yu Guanzhong 余光中, 1928–2017), was fascinated and wrote a poem celebrating this new, revolutionary style (Xiao, 2021, pp. 92–95). As Liu (2014) observed, Yu Kwang-chung believed that the white lines in Liu’s paintings perfectly represent the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi (p. 15).

According to Pan and Li (2020), Zen formally entered the discussions of the Fifth Moon Group at the end of 1962, when Chuang Che wrote an article *A modern person’s perspective on traditional Chinese Painting* (p. 57). It seems that in mainland China and in Taiwan the place of Zen Buddhism was not very prominent. It was, however, well established in Japan, where the ancient paintings of Chinese Zen artists, such as Liang Kai, Mu Qi and Shi Ke, were preserved and had become highly respected. The Zen paintings were quite different from *literati* painting and very appealing to modern artists (Pan & Li, 2020, p. 57). On the one hand, Liu has a deep understanding and mastery of both the Chinese artistic tradition and Western techniques. His international experience further broadened his vision, with the result that his artistic rebellion was rooted in Chinese tradition, and simultaneously synthesised modern sensibilities (Zhang & Chen, 2014).

Another important date in Liu Kuo-sung’s art was 1966. In that year, he exhibited in Hong Kong with two members of the Fifth Moon Group, Chuang Che and Fong Chung-Ray. The exhibition was organised by Yu Cheng-Yao (Yu Chengyao 余承堯, 1898–1993), who was then living in Taipei, together with Chen Chi-kwan and C. C. Wang, both teaching in Hong Kong. According to Li (1996), they called it “the new tradition of Chinese painting” (p. 7), and it ran for two years. This made the American public familiar with Liu Kuo-sung’s work (Li, 1996, p. 7). In the same year, Liu received a one-year travel grant from the John Rockefeller III Foundation, which was extended for two years due to praise from a renowned Chi-



Liu Kuo-sung. *A Distant View of Beilu River*, 1981, 70 x 128.5cm, Water, Pine and Stone Retreat Collection, England (Courtesy of the Liu Kuo-sung Foundation)

nese art historian, Michael Sullivan (Liu, 2020, p. 17). He stayed several months at Iowa University, and half a year in New York (Li, 1996, p. 7).

The works of Liu Kuo-sung can be divided into several periods: big brush-stroke period, space painting period, water rubbing and steeped ink period, and imaginative landscape period (Hsiao, 2020, p. 19). The Moon series was inspired by the Apollo expedition and images of the Earth from the space. According to Sullivan (1996b, p. 182), a less obvious source of inspiration were the typical Chinese red lanterns hanging from the roofs of Chinese temples.

In August 1968 the American spaceship Apollo 8 reached the Moon and took photos of the Earth. Those photos astonished Liu Kuo-sung and new inspiration was born. He always believed art came from the real life and real life had changed, because the view of the Earth was never the same as before. The style of his painting changed and his semiabstract works started to carry the images inspired by photos of the Universe, Moon and Earth. His first painting from the Moon series was *Where is the Earth?* (*Diqiu hexu* 地球何許) created in 1969, now in the collection of the National Historical Museum (*Guoli lishi bowuguan* 國立歷史博物館) in Taipei. Typical for this series is a composition consisting of semi calligraphic bold brushstrokes and precise images of round or crescent objects. Not only did the Earth interest him, but the entire Universe became a constant source of inspiration. According to Liu (KMFA, n. d.), he even started to paint black holes. In his opinion, when creating art, talent is important, but constant effort more

so. In his semi-abstract landscapes from the early period, he demonstrates how calligraphic qualities of abstraction make his works both “Chinese” and “modern”. His artistic approach of viewing the planets beyond Earth in his so-called “Space Series” also allows him to transcend the earthly boundaries of “East” and “West” while infusing his original and personal style of ink painting with a new universal appeal (Lee, 2014, p. 9.).

Years Abroad and Liu’s Influence on Mainland Chinese Ink Art

In 1971 Liu went to Hong Kong and stayed there for 21 years, teaching at several universities. After the Second World War and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong became a safe haven not only for political figures, but also for creative talents from the mainland and Southeast Asia, including artists, collectors, and filmmakers, who helped foster cultural activity in the city. Notable newcomers included Jao Tsung-I (Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, 1917–2018), Chao Shao-an (Zhao Shao’ang 趙少昂, 1905–1998), and Ting Yin Yung (Ding Yanyong 丁衍鏞, 1902–1978), whose presence contributed significantly to the burgeoning art scene (Wong, 2019, pp. 29-30). The 1960s were a period of significant development in Hong Kong art, particularly for abstract and semi-abstract painting. During this time, many art associations were established. The influence of Abstract Expressionism became increasingly apparent in visual art, intersecting in some ways with aspects of Chinese painting. Unlike in Taiwan, modernist practitioners in Hong Kong, including abstract painters, faced no governmental pressure; on the contrary, their work received official support. This encouragement fostered the growth of cultural institutions and led to the establishment of various societies, such as the Circle Group (1964) and the In Tao Association (1968), founded by Lui Show-Kwan (Lü Shoukun 呂壽琨, 1919–1976) and others, which organised exhibitions and contributed to the vibrant art scene (Zhang Cziráková, 2020, pp. 83-84).

Besides attracting migrants from the Chinese-speaking world, Hong Kong was the first place to articulate *shuimohua* 水墨畫 as the expression of a local identity that was neither entirely Western nor Chinese. The term *guohua* 國畫, which means “national painting”, did not completely disappear, but by the early 1970s, it had become a synonym for conservatism or, at best, a refined aesthetic from bygone times (Wong, 2019, pp. 29-30).

It was into this dynamic and supportive environment that Liu Kuo-sung later brought his innovative approach to ink painting. His lectures, exhibitions, and personal mentorship in Hong Kong played a pivotal role in shaping local modernist practices and provided a bridge for the dissemination of his ideas, which would later influence the Experimental Ink and Wash movement in mainland China and generations of ink artists across Taiwan and Hong Kong. For ten years, commenc-



Liu Kuo-sung, *Spring Hills beyond a Rain-splattered Window*, 1995, 95 x 177 cm, ink and colours on rice paper (Courtesy of The Liu Kuo-sung Foundation)

ing in the 1970s, he advocated new ways of using the Chinese brush. At this point he led the new Chinese landscape painting programme at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). As Chair of the Department of Fine Arts at CUHK Liu designed a course on modern Chinese ink painting. He opposed the technique that used the central part of the brush in an upright position as was the custom of the *literati*. This is what he called literally “killing the centre of the brush” 革中鋒的命 (Andrews & Shen, 2014, p. 8). According to Liu Kuo-sung (1965), using the centre of the brush is only one of many possible methods. At that time, his views were regarded as revolutionary, a rebellion against hundred years of “common practice”. Tradition insisted that the only method of learning ink painting was studying classical paintings of the ancient masters as per Xie He in his *Six Principles*. His brush technique was revolutionary. He believed the complete freedom of expression and creativity was a consequence of the liberation in technique and tools. His revolt against the traditional technique of using the centre of the round brush occurred in the decade 1972 to 1981 (Lin, 2007, p. 230).

Apart from painting and teaching, Liu remained engaged in art movements and was highly active. In order to promote the tradition of ink painting, Liu Kuo-sung united groups of artists and students with a common interest to establish the Chinese Ink Painting Society in Taipei in 1968 and the Modern Ink Painting Association in Hong Kong in 1975 (Lee, 2014, p. 9). He never ceased paying attention to the art scene and continued to participate in numerous group exhibitions. His in-

ternational reputation has been growing with exhibitions abroad. In 1975, he was invited to the United States by the School of Art of the University of Iowa, where he spent a year as a visiting professor. Additionally, Western art historians interested in Chinese or East Asian art started to notice him and praised his work highly.

In November 1981 he was invited to Beijing for the inauguration of the research institute of Chinese painting, which was the first time he had visited China in 43 years. At the inauguration conference he met many well-known Chinese artists of the older generation, including Wu Zuoren (吴作人, 1908–1997), Li Keran (李可染, 1907–1989), Liu Haisu (刘海粟, 1896–1994), and others. He also communicated with Wu Guanzhong (吴冠中, 1919–2010) (Hsiao, 2020, p. 39). In 1983, Liu Kuo-sung exhibited at the China Art Gallery, simultaneously giving lectures at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Wu Guanzhong and others were embarrassed to come in person, so Li Keran's son recorded the lecture specifically for his absent father. Most of the audience were not students. Liu Kuo-sung demonstrated his new technique, using cloth and crumpled paper (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).

In the 1980s, Liu Kuo-sung's work underwent another stylistic evolution, increasingly embracing traditional Chinese landscape painting. Although he continued to advocate for abstraction, subtle references to landscapes were always present in his abstract work. During his trips to China, he visited many famous scenic sites and, inspired by their beauty, he created a more traditional series as a homage to the traditions of Chinese painting. Mu Lin (2016) considers Liu's works from this period as reinterpretations of classical Chinese landscapes (p. 7). At the same time, the modernist movement in Taiwan was in decline, and a new literary trend, the Back to Roots movement, emerged. Liu, however, was largely unaffected by this shift, as he was living in Hong Kong. His artistic focus remained rooted in Chinese landscape painting, and his travels across China further nurtured this interest, allowing it to evolve organically rather than as a consciously planned change (K. S. Liu, personal communication, 11 August 2023).

Hence, abstraction, the primary focus of his art and his theoretical writing, began to give way to landscape painting, and canvas gave way to custom-made Chinese paper and ink (Andrews & Shen, 2014, p. 7). Because his work is a visualisation of his "abstract art conception", it can represent many things, such as a horse flying in the sky, the underground world, deep oceans, or even space (Lin, M. 2016, p. 13).

Return to Taiwan

Liu Kuo-sung left Taiwan in 1971, at a politically sensitive time. While teaching in Hong Kong, he held many exhibitions in mainland China. This made him seem like an artist who betrayed Taiwan in the eyes of many people and during the



Liu Kuo-sung. 2005 Quiet Night, Snowy Mountain Tibet Series No.80, 2005, 93 x 61 cm, ink and colours on rice paper, the Palace Museum, Beijing (Courtesy of the Liu Kuo-sung Foundation)

1980s he was not allowed to return to Taiwan by the government. This news spread and caused upset in his artistic circles. He never participated in any political events, and every time he visited the mainland his only intention was to promote innovation in Chinese painting. In 1988, he was allowed to return to the place he had always considered his homeland. He immediately burst onto the art scene, began teaching, and organised exhibitions.

By the early 1990s, Liu Kuo-sung's lifelong contributions to ink painting had gained widespread recognition, culminating in major exhibitions and prestigious awards that celebrated both his artistic innovation and influence on contemporary Chinese art. In 1990, a large exhibition was held in the Taipei Museum of Fine Arts, where several famous art theorists, including Michael Sullivan, wrote prefaces. In 1991, he was rewarded by the Foundation of Li Chun-Shan for his lifelong achievements. In 1992, after having retired from teaching in Hong Kong, he returned to Taiwan, the place he considered his home (Xiao, 2011, pp. 202-203).

Continuing his lifelong pursuit of artistic exploration, Liu sought new sources of inspiration through travel, which profoundly shaped the thematic and spatial development of his later painting series. In 2002, he visited Tibet and Mount Everest, which gave him additional inspiration, resulting in the *Spiritual Mountain 2012 Painting Series*, an evolution of the space and abstract landscapes of the 1970s (Hsiao, 2020, p. 40).

Liu Kuo-sung's Pedagogical Impact

Liu Kuo-sung has an immense influence on the art scene in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. He has always been enthusiastic about his students, often exhibiting alongside them. In Taiwan, artists such as Chen Yi-fen (Chen Yifen 陳宜芬, 1954–1957) and Chiang Li-Hsiang (Jiang Lixiang 江麗香, 1950) were deeply influenced by him, while others including Lien Yu (Lian Yu 連瑜, 1952), Lin Shaing-yuan (Lin Xiangyuan 林象元, 1949), Luo Chih-Ying (Luo Zhiying 羅志英, 1959), Wu Pui-wah (Wu Peihua 吳佩華, 1954), and Hsu Hsiu-lan (Xu Xiulan 許秀蘭, 1952) have exhibited with him despite pursuing different artistic directions (Lee, 2014, p. 10).

In Hong Kong, several of Liu's students presented their works in 1975 and 1976 at the Hong Kong Arts Centre under the title *Exhibition of Modern Ink: Liu Kuo-sung's Hong Kong Period Painting* (現代水墨畫展). Liu's Modern Ink Painting Movement (現代水墨畫運動) was further developed through his teaching at CUHK. Members of the Hong Kong Modern Ink Painting Association from the 1980s – such as Anita Lau Kam Chee (Liu Jinzhi 劉金芝, 1939), Eddy Chan Kwan-Lap (Chen Junli 陳君立, 1947), Lee Chun-yi (Li Junyi 李君毅, 1965), and



Liu Kuo-sung. *Snowy Dreams*, 2019, 61 x 95.2cm, ink and colours on rice paper (Courtesy of the Liu Kuo-sung Foundation)

Chan Shing Kau (Chen Chengqiu 陳成球, 1952) – continue to be active today (Wong, 2019, pp. 31-32).

In mainland China, Liu's lectures and exhibitions had a huge impact on the development of the Experimental Ink and Wash Movement (實驗水墨運動). Artists like Zhang Yu (張羽, 1959), Liu Zijian (劉子健, 1956), Liu Yiyuan (劉一原, 1942), and Wu Guoquan (吳國全, also called Hei Gui 黑鬼 or Lao He 老赫, 1957) found encouragement in his approach to reforming long-standing traditions. Even those who never corresponded with him personally still regarded Liu as a teacher and drew inspiration from his spirit of transformation and reformation in Chinese ink art.

Conclusion

Liu Kuo-sung stands out as a transformative force in modern Chinese ink painting, an artist whose visionary approach forever altered the possibilities of the medium. Often described as both a rebel and a pioneer, he introduced abstract art into the Chinese cultural sphere, challenging conventions while expanding

the expressive potential of ink. Yet his contribution did not end with reform alone; his artistic exploration extended across various styles and techniques, and his theoretical work and teaching further emphasise his role as the “father of modern Chinese ink painting”.

The most significant and revolutionary phase of Liu’s career was during the 1960s with the Fifth Moon Group, when he transformed traditional Chinese ink into a medium capable of expressing modern, abstract ideas. Although preceded by earlier reformers like Lin Fengmian (林風眠, 1900–1991), Liu carried the transformation further, integrating modernist concepts, inventing new paper, and shaping a new trajectory for ink art. As Cahill (1996) noted, Liu belongs to a major movement of the late twentieth century that future art historians will recognise as central to redefining the relationship between painting, ink, and modern artistic practice (p. 42).

Liu broadened and redefined the basic concepts of traditional Chinese painting. While often anti-traditional in method, he never abandoned the traditional spirit. As he himself said, “The purpose of our anti-traditional approach, is to create a newer tradition, so that the old advantages can be carried forward. It is not just rebellion for the sake of rebellion. It has a more positive meaning, that is, ‘creation’” (Qu, 2016, pp. 67-68).

Even after retiring from university teaching in 1999, Liu continued to offer instruction to the public, considering the making of modern ink painting a lofty cultural duty, comparable to the Confucian mission of continuing, inheriting, and revitalising China’s heritage (Lee, 2014, p. 10). His experiments, critical views on “brush and ink”, and strong stance against Western cultural dominance became increasingly influential in mainland China thirty or forty years later (Lin, 2004).

Apart from his personal artistic achievements, Liu’s influence on students and younger artists has been profound. His experiments, bold critique of conventions, and dedication to teaching has inspired generations of Taiwanese and Hong Kong artists, many of whom exhibit with him or follow his approach to ink painting. In mainland China, his lectures and exhibitions encouraged the Experimental Ink and Wash movement of the 1990s, and artists such as Zhang Yu (張羽, 1959), Liu Zijian (劉子健, 1956), Liu Yiyuan (劉一原, 1942), and Wu Guoquan (吳國全, Hei Gui/老赫, 1957) cite him as a key influence in their artistic development. Even today, the spirit of transformation and reformation he championed continues to shape contemporary Chinese ink art.

Liu Kuo-sung’s legacy extends beyond his own body of work: it is embedded in the evolution of ink painting across Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, as well as in the global recognition of the medium as a form capable of modern and abstract expression.

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