1 Translating modern and contemporary Chinese art and artists

Art and artists as culture-specific entities

In this chapter we will explore the way in which discussion of the visual arts, or at least some of them, is expressed in Chinese, and how it might best be rendered into English. Human beings have been making images for thousands of years, in two dimensions and in three dimensions. Our culture of art must cross not only geopolitical boundaries, but also generational boundaries. What our grandparents saw as tasteful and chic may now seem outmoded and vulgar to us, and what they would once have seen as indecent may, to us, be ravishingly beautiful. The differences are compounded when we work between languages and cultures, but on the other hand, we may be attracted by what is exotic, and identify with novelty.

In the following sections we see how artists describe their own motivations, ways of working and inner processes. Most artists are accustomed to working in visual, audio or tactile media, making their art communicate what writers would put into verbal media. This is something of an over-simplification, since some visual artists work with words, and in China painting is integrated with calligraphy and poetry. Yet even when the message of a painting or graphic is clear, a forest of discourse grows up around it, as artists and critics defend, deconstruct and debate. In this chapter we will look at translation of the meta-discourse of art: that is how artists and their critics or commentators talk about their work, how they fit into the cultural milieu, how they see their ways of working and how they use their art as a vehicle for change. We see how post-liberalisation artists have adapted and adopted from Western forms and techniques in order to shock and challenge.

Traditional Chinese painting

The Chinese paint on paper, as do artists in many other cultures, and other supports, which are made from all sorts of materials, as in other cultures. In creating a ‘national’, or Chinese painting (国画), they use brushes, which are a universal tool of the painter, and they use water-based inks and colour paints on highly absorbent paper, ideally handmade. The tools of any artist range from the highly specialised to the mundane, and differ in detail between cultures. They may be regarded as culture-specific items, but as concrete items...
that can be described in terms of material, form and function, they present relatively few problems in translation. On a more abstract level, the styles of painting, the nature and appellation of the artists and the language of criticism and appreciation are also culture-specific items, but may present a greater degree of abstraction and a wider range of choices for the translator, inviting translators’ exploration of nuance and rhetoric.

While the brush is a universal tool for a painter, the way it is held and handled may be specific to the culture. As we will see in the following sections, the display and storage of a work of art may differ between cultures, but what drives an artist to create may be universal. The artists whose work is covered here dovetail historically, covering a century of change. Wu Guanzhong was maturing as Qi Baishi reached old age, and our younger subjects, Lin Tianmao, Ma Liuming and Li Wei Han were maturing at about the time that Wu was reaching old age.

What it means to be an artist in the Chinese tradition: Qi Baishi

Qi Baishi (1863–1957) is one of the best-known Chinese painters of the twentieth century. Spanning two half-centuries in which China underwent major political and cultural changes, his work is still greatly admired today. While he was evidently a master of the traditional, he took the xieyi or impressionistic (写意) style to new heights of freedom, expanding the range of subjects in ever looser and bolder brushwork. Significantly, he rose from artisan, to craftsman, to painter, following a path that probably gave him greater insights into life than if he had been ‘born into’ the literati world of painting. The following excerpt is from He Huaishuo’s introduction to Qi’s autobiography 白石老人自述 (Old Baishi’s Autobiography). He reflects on why Qi is held in such great esteem, given that he was just one in a long line of superb painters and calligraphers. He Huaishuo first summarises the essence of a Chinese artist as traditionally and conventionally perceived:

Example 1a

齊白石繼續了文人畫傳統的精華。‘何謂文人畫？ 即畫中帶有文人之性質，含有文人之趣味。’而以‘思想、學問、才情、人品’，為特質。這是陳衡恪（師曾）對文人畫的看法。‘文人畫’原來也被稱為‘士大夫寫意畫’。具體而言，包括了幾個特色：寫意的技巧，以水墨為主或淡設色，書畫同源（在用筆方面常以書法用筆為依據），詩（文）、書法與畫合一，加上篆刻，成為‘三絕’或‘四絕’的綜合體。

(He Huaishuo in Qi 2001/2003: 19)

Qi Baishi continued the refinement of traditional literati painting. In the view of Chen Hengke (also known as Shi Zeng), literati painting has all the qualities and taste of the scholar artist. It embodies ideology,
scholarship, talent and personality. ‘Literati painting’ was originally known as ‘the impressionistic style of the scholar’. In concrete terms, it had certain specific characteristics: the technique is chiefly ink painting, with some light colour, and the calligraphy and painting spring from the same source. The brush technique of the painting relies on calligraphy technique; the poetry and the calligraphy are integrated into the painting – a combination known as the three perfections. The addition of seal carving gives us the four perfections.

(Authors’ translation)

This short passage tells us a great deal about the veneration in which scholar-artists were held in China and the kind of person they were expected to be. The first challenge for the translator here is how to label the concept, well-known in China, of wen ren – the literary person (文人). The concept distils, in the briefest possible way, the ideas of culture, refinement, education, talent in painting, skill in calligraphy, ability to carve seals, knowledge of poetry, intimacy with nature and landscape and rapport with other 文人. The dictionary gives us ‘man of letters’ (from a gender point of view this is largely correct, as traditionally, prior to 1911, few Chinese women would be poets and artists), ‘scholar’ and ‘literati’. We cannot possibly say that this broad notion of the artist does not exist in European or British culture, for it does: many of the great artists, from Leonardo to Lear, from Ruskin to Paolozzi, have been polymaths, people of broad and deep understanding of literature, art and artifice. The traditional Chinese perception of the artist may be more aesthetic, perhaps even tending towards the feminine or effete. There is a contrast in Chinese culture between the ideal literary male, whose qualities embodied wen, that is culture and refinement (文), and the ideal military wu male (武), who embodied physicality, roughness, and aggression. The terms wen and wu are not confined to discussion of male character types: they are found, for example, in the preparation of Chinese medicine: 文火 (gentle heat) and 武火 (fierce or strong heat). The Chinese artist was not, generally speaking, an engineer or architect, though he might have considerable skill in garden design. He would not necessarily be a craftsman, though he would be able to carve the all-important seal that signed off his work. Prior to the twentieth century, he would almost certainly have been a civil servant, since all educated men aspired to recruitment to the Imperial civil service through the examination system. The examinations would have tested his knowledge of the Chinese classic works of literature, philosophy and history, and his ability to write the conventional essay and poetic genres.

So what do we call a 文人 in English? It may be the case here that we need a hyphenated solution such as ‘scholar-artist’ or ‘poet-artist’. Reverting to Latin is another option, in the choice of ‘literatus’, but most often this is used in the plural in English (literati) to denote a class of people. In Foster and Hartman’s English translation of Gernet, the term ‘lettered person’ is used, and expanded as ‘the man of culture and taste, qualified to exercise political
functions’ (Gernet 1972/1999: 33). 士大夫 shi daifu, the term He cites above as an earlier label of the Chinese artist, is a synonym of 文人, but what is the difference? How are the terms distinguished in Chinese, and if there is a distinction, how can we reflect this distinction in English?

The expressions ‘the three perfections’ (三絕) and ‘the four perfections’ (四絕) can be said to be culture-specific, for they are characteristic of Chinese definition and categorisation in their use of numbers in the service of abbreviation and memorisation, creating a quasi-jargon. Number expressions are used in English, but less frequently than in Chinese. What the respective three and four perfections are is clear from the context, so it is unnecessary for the translator to provide footnotes or lengthy parentheses, but 绝 has to be integrated coherently into the English text. 绝 is to cut off, in other words to define; it also implies excellence, in other words a cutting off from the ordinary. 三絕 and 四絕 are what define a true artist, and conventionally are called ‘perfections’ (Von Spee 2012: 17). We have become accustomed to Chinglish slogans such as the ‘four modernisations’, the ‘three represents’ and so on, but they do not always read comfortably in their grammatical micro-context. Does a twenty-first century translator need to adhere to conventions established many decades ago? It would be possible to translate as follows:

The definitive mastery of literati painting lies in the consummate skills of painting, calligraphy and poetry, rounded off by the fourth skill of seal carving.

This slightly adaptive approach avoids the clumsiness of slogans and the reduction to hyperbole of these very high-level skills. If the editor wished to keep the Chinese terms, especially for the purposes of an index, they could be added in brackets.

Qi Baishi rose to prominence as a painter over his long life not only by means of pure talent, but by ‘turning art around’:

Example 1b

齊白石的畫風既然是由八大、八怪、趙之謙、吳昌碩而來，繼承在野文人畫的傳統，而且其風格面目，尤其與八大、金農、老缶如此相近，為什麼仍享有最高的評價？我認爲主要在於齊白石的創造性，表現在將傳統文人畫的美感情趣轉向移位，開闢了一個平民化、世俗化的繪畫天地，注入了生機活潑的世俗人情。

(He 2003: 18)

Qi Baishi’s style continued the ‘outsider’ tradition of Ba Da, the Eight Eccentrics, Zhao Zhiquan and Wu Changshuo, yet, whereas his style was, on the surface, similar to that of Ba Da, Jin Nong and Lao Ji, why does he enjoy so much greater critical acclaim? My belief is that his creativity lies in the way he has changed the direction of aesthetic appreciation,
Translating modern Chinese art and artists

opening it up for ordinary people; he has universalised the universe of painting, filling it with the vigour and vitality of human emotion.

(Authors’ translation)

This explanation of Qi’s success appears to be a string of clichés, and perhaps that is what is required for a man who was and is a household name. His achievement is compared to that of his predecessors, including the ‘eight eccentrics’ or ‘mad monks’, working during the late years of the Ming dynasty and the early years of the Qing. They included Bada Shanren and Jin Nong. As artists who, by choice or by force of circumstance, did not hold positions as officials, they were outsiders (在野文人) (Hejzlar 1980: 24). A note on these earlier artists may be desirable, depending on the destination of the text.

Qi was creative. He took the image of the eccentric scholar-artist and turned it around, he made it accessible to everyone, he universalised it. This is where his achievement breaks the mould. In his autobiography he tells the story of his rise from cowherd to carpenter, and from carpenter to carver to painter. As in many cultures, the ‘art’ of Chinese painting and calligraphy are considered to be more elevated, and indeed, elitist, than the craftsman’s skills of carving, potting, weaving, lacquering etc. Qi tells how people would buy his paintings, but ask him not to sign them: they considered him of too lowly a social class to be publicly acknowledged. In the following excerpt we see the link between Qi’s artisan skills and his art, when he learns the traditional techniques of mounting pictures. The passage is a simple narrative, but is full of ‘the tools of the trade’: paper, fabric, timber and gadgets. It is also full of conventional Chinese third person reference and terms of address, which must be sensitively but readably rendered in English.

Example 1c

我們家鄉，向來是沒有裱畫鋪的，只有幾個會裱畫的人，在四鄉各處，來來往往，應活做工，蕭縣師傅就是其中的一人。我在沁園師家讀書的時候，沁園師曾把蕭師傅請到家裏，一方面叫他裱畫，一方面叫大公子仙連，跟他學做這門手藝。特地勸出了三間大廳，屋內中間，放著一張尺碼很長很大的紅漆桌子，四壁墙上釘著平整乾淨的木板格子，所有軸幹、軸頭、別子、綸緞、絲條、宣紙以及排筆、槹糊之類置備得齊齊備備，應有盡有。沁園師對我說：“漸生，你也可以學學！你是一個畫家，學會了，裱裱自己的東西，就透著方便些。給人家做做活，也可以作爲副業謀生。”沁園師處處為我打算，真是無微不至。我也覺得他的話，很有道理，就同仙連，跟著蕭師傅，從托紙到上軸，一層一層的手續，都學會了。

(Qi 2001: 77)

There had never been a picture mounting shop in my home town, just a few people who could do the job, who travelled about from place to place...
place, taking jobs as and when. Master Xiao Xianggai was one of them. When I was studying at the home of Master Qin Yuan, Master Qin invited Master Xiao to his house to mount some pictures, and at the same time teach this craft to Master Qin’s eldest son Xian Bu. He had set aside three big rooms. In the centre stood an enormous red-lacquered table, and on the walls were hung wooden boards, all very neat and clean. There were dowels, knobs, clips, silk gauze, silk strips, xuan paper, paste brushes and paste – all the materials needed for mounting pictures. Master Qin Yuan said to me: ‘Pinsheng, you can learn too. You are a painter, and if you can learn to do mounting, you can do your own things, and that will be much more convenient. You could do it for other people too, as a sideline.’ Qin Yuan always had a thought for me; he was very considerate. He was absolutely right. I joined Xian Bu and together we learned from Xiao Xianggai every step of the procedure, from making the paper support to fixing on the roller.

(Author’s translation)

A good English version would need some re-structuring within the sentences, as Qi Baishi’s narrative contains a number of typical Chinese ‘paratactic’ sentences, strings of co-ordinating clauses, or short sentences (短句), divided by commas. These might be replaced in English by full stops, and they might need to be re-ordered. Often, explicit linking words are needed to indicate co-ordinating, causal, conditional and temporal links.

Titles and terms of address are important culture-specific items. English is miserly in its use of titles and endearments in the second person, for courtesy in English dialogue is much more likely to be expressed through complex verb forms, and respectful titles are not repeated unduly in narration, but are expressed as pronouns. Throughout the passage, Qi refers to his seniors in the trade as Master (師傅), the usual term in Chinese for a craftsman who is senior in age or in experience and skill. It is an honorific, used to this day to address older men in a professional or working context. In this short passage two characteristics of Chinese writing are shown: respectful reference to seniors, and repetition of the full noun phrase (Master Xiao Xianggai). This means of expression should probably be kept, rather than exchanged for ‘Mr,’ as the events are taking place at the end of the nineteenth century. In order to preserve the cultural feel of an earlier time, the slightly archaic form is appropriate. In English, the general term ‘master craftsman’ is still used, and many crafts and skills have official qualifications or designations of ‘master’: there are master classes, masters’ degrees, masters’ of colleges and of hunts. It is a term of deep respect for a highly skilled professional. The use of the titles in this passage would help to avoid the ambiguity of an English pronoun-heavy approach, since all the characters referred to in the passage are male.

While referring courteously to his seniors, Qi narrates in a matter-of-fact, reader-friendly register: he is telling his story as an ordinary man who rose
20 Translating modern Chinese art and artists

gradually and coincidently to fame. There would be no reason to translate in a more formal or literary register. It should be noted that the reference to the three big rooms (特地勻出了三間大廳，屋內中間，放著一張尺碼很長很大的紅漆桌子。...) is not entirely clear, but we have assumed that the three rooms had been knocked together, and are used as one.

Tools and techniques

At the time when Qi was active, the motivations and attitudes surrounding art were governed to a great extent by conventions. When Qi talks about the processes of his work, he is mainly interested in tools and techniques, rather than any high-minded or rebellious intellectual motivation. In Example 1c above, we see the relationships of the generations of artists, and we also see how the techniques were passed on. Qi expands his professional skills by learning the techniques of display and preservation of paintings. One of the terms the translator needs to think about is 裱畫: Chinese pictures are prepared for display in a very different way from traditional European pictures, mainly owing to distinct methods of storage and display. In earlier times, Chinese paintings would not necessarily be hung on a wall, but stored rolled in a mothproof chest and taken out from time to time to be enjoyed. Do we translate 裱畫 as 'mounting' or 'framing'? 'Mounting' in English is only one stage on the way to the framing of a picture, so is it adequate for the Chinese procedure? The translator needs to think about what the reader will infer from the use of either term, and also consider whether a footnote should be used. An observant reader of our English translation would notice the boards hung on the walls and might question their purpose. A brief explicitation in the text would provide the information that when Chinese paintings are pasted onto their backing paper, ready for mounting, they are dried on vertical boards, and held in place by the wet paste.

The list of materials provides information on the process. ‘Axle tree’, ‘roller’, or ‘dowellling’ (軸幹) and ‘axle tree ends’, or ‘knobs’ (軸頭) tell us that this is not ‘framing’ as is known in the West. But we need the English terms that would be used for these types of materials. 排筆 might need a footnote or parenthetical note: it is a Chinese brush, but made from a row (排) of brushes joined together, so that it is very wide, like pan pipes, and used for large-scale painting, and for brushing paste onto paper or silk.

When the themes are the arts, especially poetry and painting, there is undoubtedly a tendency among some translators to over-romanticise in translation from Chinese. In his autobiography, Qi calls a spade a spade: he does not romanticise his life and art, and while the expressions he uses may be new to the foreign reader of Chinese, the concepts of making a living and finding rice to put in the pot are universal. Here is an excerpt that deals with Qi's incipient success as a painter.
**Example 1d**

By the time I was thirty, I had been painting portraits for several years, and I had travelled all over the locality, covering an area of about a hundred li. Everyone in this rural area knew that I had turned my hand to painting, and said that the pictures that I painted were better than the flowers that I carved. Business steadily improved, my income grew, and the family came to rely on my art. With time came opportunities, and at last I saw my mother's forehead, wrinkled from a lifetime of worry, gradually relax. My grandmother smiled, and said to me 'A-Zhi! You have made good use of your brush. I used to say that you couldn't cook and eat an essay, but now I see that we can live on your paintings!' When I saw how happy my grandmother was I painted several pictures. I also painted a vertical scroll with the words 'A pot for the house', signifying that we could eat – we would no longer have an empty pot.

(Authors' translation)

This extract illustrates idiomatic wordplay, the humour of a household, and the symbolic use of the pun. When Qi Baishi was a young man, writing was still done with a brush, as was painting. The pivot of Qi's grandmother's remark is the brush that once wrote useless essays, but now produces profitable paintings. The Chinese, 你的畫，卻在鍋裏煮了 could be literally translated as 'your paintings can be cooked in the pot'. While this would not make perfect sense in English, it would be understood. It could alternatively be translated as 'live on' which can mean either 'eat', or 'support life financially'. Qi's reaction to his grandmother's compliment was to create a symbolic artwork that would continue to bring good fortune to the family: in writing 甑屋 on a scroll, he was using a pun. 甄 means 'pot' but is a homophone of 赠 – to give a gift (to the home – 家). Qi's grandmother addresses him with a family calling name, or pet name, with familiar 'a' prefix – 'A-Zhi'. Many non-Chinese readers will know that this is a name, a term of address, but for the artist reader, who may not know about Chinese culture, perhaps some indication that it is a name would be helpful. It does not need to be a footnote, but we could add the kind of phrase a grandmother might use, such as...
‘my boy’: ‘A-Zhi, my boy …’. Hyphenating the two syllables of the name will reduce the chance of ambiguous interpretation of ‘a’ as an article.

These homely anecdotes appear to contrast strongly with the abstractions and metaphors used by the successor generations of painters who practised after the 1940s, when Chinese artists, like their nation, had begun to modernise and westernise.

**Ambiguity and sensitivity in source text and target text: Translating an interview with Wu Guanzhong**

Artists generally express themselves via the work that they do: in the case of painters, the messages are mainly visual, but the celebrity opportunities of modern media have enabled many artists to express themselves verbally, and talk about their work to a mass audience. As visual art has moved away from the purely representational, some explanation or justification on the part of the artist is sometimes necessary. It may be by means of a self-authored essay or article, or more often, using the vehicle of the interview.

The interview is an interesting, powerful tool. It allows freedom for the interviewee to talk, yet at the same time imposes control and structure. It is at least partially prepared, by the interviewer, and on the part of the interviewee is at least partially spontaneous. As a spoken medium the interview can be aired undoctored on radio or television, or it can be edited and disseminated in writing on the internet and in the traditional press. For the audience, it is often a way into celebrity minds, an opportunity to see and hear them as ‘real people’ and a way of understanding what they do, what drives them and the challenges they meet in their science or art. The translation of an interview transcript, like drama or dialogue in fiction, presents a multiple crossing of boundaries, between transcript, translation, interpreting and drama. The transcript (speech recorded in writing) must be rendered as writing that looks and sounds like speech. It must be grammatical, coherent and accessible, but retain the conversational tone of the original recording.

Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010) was one of the greats of the twentieth century, his life and work overlapping that of his older peer Qi Baishi, and that of his Spanish counterpart Picasso. Unlike Qi Baishi, whose formation was in China, Wu's training took him to Paris, where he experienced the explosive movements of twentieth-century art in Europe. Like Qi, Wu paints in the national, or Chinese tradition (国画), but has embraced styles and techniques of the European tradition. In the extracts that follow, we examine Wu's explanation of the process of artistic creation and how we can sensibly translate it.

In December 2006, an exhibition of all the new works Wu had done during the course of the year was held at the Tsinghua University Academy of Arts and Design in Beijing, and he was interviewed about his creative process. The interview was published in transcript on the internet. The tone is set for the interview by a quotation from Wu's own introduction to the exhibition, in which he states that, as an older artist, aged 87 at the time, losing the urge to
create would be tantamount to losing hope. Wu’s responses to the interviewer are about painting as an inner, cerebral, spiritual and emotional process.

In the following exchange, the interviewer guides Wu towards discussion of this inner process, stating that Wu has often used the word ‘pregnancy’ (怀孕) in relation to art:

Example 1e

记者：您是这么形容的，比妇女生孩子还要痛苦，对，我就经常看到您的文章里出现怀孕两个字。

吴：是，确实是这样的。但我们讲了，怀孕是最困难了，这个画家一般是不容易怀孕，他能怀孕了，他能够成长了，他将来分娩的问题，这个不是很大的问题，关键是不是能怀孕，我们很多画，都是叫无孕分娩，没有怀孕，他就画画了，实际上他没有感情，没有真感情，是这样的。所以这个文艺作品，不完全是哪一行的，是文学的，美术的，他必须有真感情。

(Wu 2007)

Interviewer: You have described [art] as being more painful than giving birth is for a woman – indeed, I’ve often seen the word ‘pregnancy’ in articles you’ve written.

Wu: Yes, that’s exactly how it is. But, as we’ve said before, pregnancy is hard. It is hard for an artist to be pregnant. He can ‘conceive’, he can ‘grow’ the baby, and eventually he’ll give birth. That is not a problem, but the key problem is that if we cannot conceive, there’ll be many paintings, but they will be works that are born without being conceived, without being gestated. It’s just painting, with no feeling, no real feeling. That’s how it is. It doesn’t matter whether it’s literature or art, a work of art has to have true feeling.

(Authors’ translation)

The interviewer introduces the idea of a woman giving birth (妇女生孩子). It will not, however, have escaped the reader that the pronouns used by Wu and the journalist are transcribed as the masculine 他, which might equally have been transcribed as feminine 她 or even neuter 它. The Chinese transcriber (who we may, perhaps, regard as the initial translator) is forced to impose a gender on this innocent little word, and the translator working from the transcript must find a sensible solution. In this written version of the interview, the ‘artist’ is undoubtedly male, a logical decision, since Wu is obviously speaking from his own point of view. In this context, however, the masculine pronoun leaves us with a slight conundrum.

Wu is pointing out that the difficulty of artistic creation is not so much in the ‘giving birth’ (the ‘delivery’ or implementation of the work of art) as in what we might label ‘inspiration’ or ‘conception’ of the artwork. His point is that in any artistic creation, true feeling is needed for the work. For the translator, the key term is 怀孕. In English translation, that can be
24 Translating modern Chinese art and artists

‘pregnancy/pregnant’ or it may be ‘conceive/conception’, two very different concepts. Wu claims that many paintings are ‘delivered without pregnancy’ (无分娩), for the work is able to develop, the artist is able to go through the pregnancy and deliver the work, but ‘cannot be pregnant’ or ‘cannot conceive’ (不能怀孕). We have to bear in mind that this was probably a spontaneous response, so we cannot expect the coherence we would see in an article written by the artist, and in addition, we have to take into account the ambiguity and the figurative nature of the term 怀孕. If, in our English rendition, we do not vary the translation of 怀孕, we end up with an apparently contradictory statement. What Wu appears to be saying is that some artists’ completed work is superficial: it is not inspired at the conception stage, and it does not develop in the foetal stage, because there is no feeling – it is ‘just painting’ (就画画了). We also need to consider the nature and meaning of ‘pregnancy’ (怀孕): why has Wu chosen this term rather than a more abstract term such as ‘development’? 怀孕 carries with it notions of love, humanity, innerness, physicality: it is a metaphor for the sensations and motivations of a committed artist. It could also be associated with the Chinese term to brew or ferment (醖釀). It is a deliberate choice on Wu’s part. The translator could opt for a scientific, formal term, such as ‘gestation’ but it lacks the personal and emotional force that Wu probably has in mind. It is perfectly possible to talk about conceiving a work of art, but less feasible (though not now impossible) to say that a male artist is ‘pregnant’. Converting the idiom to a simile (‘it is like being pregnant’) would solve a number of problems of sense, register and plausibility, while retaining the thrust of the meaning. One obvious solution is to use ‘the artist’ as grammatical subject throughout: by avoiding anaphoric pronouns, we would avoid specifying a gender, but this could sound a little awkward. Another solution is to translate directly, but use inverted commas around ‘conceive’, ‘pregnant’ etc., so that the metaphor is retained, but does not sound surreal.

The interviewer asks Wu about his style, which has absorbed elements of both ‘western’ art and Chinese traditional painting:

Example 1f

记者：您在您的这个国画里引入西洋画派的，像这个’面’，还有在西洋画派里引入国画里面的’线条’这样，我觉得在不同的时期，您一定也遭受过一些争议，比如说吴冠中的画，中不中，西不西。

(Wu 2007)

Journalist: you adopt the methods of the ‘Western school’ in your traditional Chinese painting, like planes, and when you are painting Western-style, you introduce the Chinese technique of line. I think there are times when you have been criticised for this – people have said that Wu Guanzhong’s painting is neither Western nor Chinese.

(Authors’ translation)
The concept of 线条 is clearly and unambiguously ‘line’, but what should we do about 面, which the interviewer takes to be a characteristic of ‘Western’ art? Is it ‘face’ or ‘surface’? Could it possibly be ‘mask’ or ‘covering’? It is obviously opposite or complementary to ‘line’, so the translator has to take an artist’s perspective and investigate what that might be in this particular context. There are two major features of Chinese traditional painting that distinguish it from the European tradition. From fairly early on, European artists attempted to re-create the three-dimensional in their paintings, by means of the use of shade (tonality) and the use of single-point perspective. Gombrich notes that in Persian painting, there is ‘no foreshortening and no attempt to show light and shade or the structure of the body’ (Gombrich 1993: 103). Similarly, in Chinese landscape painting, which developed far earlier than it did in other parts of the world, perspective was differently executed, as multiple-point perspective. Hughes notes that ‘perspective is a generalization about experience’, schematising, rather than representing, the way things are seen (Hughes 1991: 17). In Chinese traditional painting it is the multiple points of view and staggering of different planes that give the viewer the sense of near and far (Gernet 1972/1999: 207). Wu Yangmu notes that in Chinese painting ‘it is not easy to distinguish between what is near and what is far and what should be dark and what light’ (Wu 1990: 46). In the European tradition of painting, the various surfaces of a three-dimensional object would be depicted by means of light and shade, while a Chinese artist would use texturing. This is what the interviewer means by 面: changing representations of surface that create the illusion of three dimensions, by contrast with line (线条), which creates the reality of the shape or outline of a person or object. In practical terms, these are very long explanations that may or may not have a place in the translation of an interview. The interviewer does not explain the concepts, for his art-world jargon is shared by the artist he is talking to, and he expects the interested audience to share the relevant knowledge. If the translation of the interview is to be rendered as subtitles or a voice-over, there is simply no chance of a footnote. It is therefore imperative that we find a succinct equivalent, and in English art terms, it is ‘plane’, the surface of an object that faces towards or away from the light. Wu’s final analysis, however, is that in spite of cultural differences, the aesthetic of European and Chinese art is not entirely different.

Icons and concepts in post-liberalisation China

Qi was grounded firmly in his Chinese locality and practice, Wu trained abroad, becoming Chinese yet not Chinese, Western, yet not Western (中不中，西不西). He and his contemporaries were bound by social and political constraints. Artists who have trained since 1979 have had the benefit of modern methods, motivations and approaches available since China’s liberalisation, and pursue ground-breaking practice in multi-media, abstraction, performance and conceptual art. Grosenick and Schübbe (2007) describe this
Translating modern Chinese art and artists

as ‘image spaces which oscillate between tradition and super-innovation’, and note the unprecedented growth of the art market. ‘Market’ is significant, for commercial concerns as much as, if not more than, artistic or conceptual motivations, drive contemporary (当代) Chinese art. Ai Weiwei, a driving force in post-1989 art, is scathing about this; commenting on a 2012 exhibition in London, he asked ‘How can you have a show of “contemporary Chinese art” that doesn’t address a single one of the country’s most pressing contemporary issues?’ (2012: 110). ‘Art needs to stand for something’ he says (ibid.). The photos accompanying his article illustrate his point that the art sanctioned by the leadership for international consumption is derivative and bland.

Since 1979, artists have enjoyed somewhat greater freedom to smash the icons of the past. New forms, methods and techniques have been exuberantly adopted from practice in other parts of the world and moulded in characteristic, but contemporary Chinese fashion. How does the world of art critics and commentators talk about art work which in the last century has departed so widely from the Chinese norm, and how are the comments translated? For the twenty-first century translator, the language of contemporary Chinese art could be less problematic than dealing with traditional Chinese forms and techniques. Ideas and techniques have been borrowed from the West, along with appropriate technical and specialist terms. Individual artists and critics, however, will use abstract and sometimes quite idiosyncratic epithets to describe and evaluate the work.

We have drawn the example in this section from Grosenick and Schübbe’s China Art Book (2007). This encyclopaedic work exemplifies the importance of translation in global markets. The text that accompanies illustrations of artists’ work consists of Chinese, English and German parallel commentaries. The commentaries are contributed by individual critics, and in some cases we can only guess which of the three languages is the source language of the commentary. It appears that in most cases it is English or German, but we cannot say for certain. In many cases, it is highly likely that the specialist terms used to describe contemporary Chinese art are of Western origin, but the reader might not know whether the Chinese artists reviewed have themselves used Chinese or foreign language terms to describe, label and classify their work. Whatever the provenance and process of the commentaries in the work, the parallel use of terms could be of great benefit to the practising translator.

Installation: The work of Lin Tianmao

Chinese artists have enthusiastically adopted the installation, and with it the term installation (装置) or installation work (装置作品). In her installations, Lin Tianmao uses the radical media of the twentieth century to discover the etiquette of social relationships (社会礼俗关系) of China. Lin’s work, while neither gory nor shocking, provokes. She uses motifs such as the winding of
thread to connote the complexity of relationships. Her processes include缠绕、盘绕和包装 (Hopfener in Grosenick and Schübbe 2007: 195). The English equivalent used by Hopfener for these highly iconic techniques is ‘winding, coiling and wrapping’. The German parallel version (ibid.: 195) is somehow much more expressive: ‘Wickeln, Aufwickeln und Einwickeln’: the repetition of ‘wickeln’ echoes and emphasises the binding element, just as the Chinese repeats绕. To achieve this effect in English, ‘binding’ and ‘winding’ could be used. ‘Coiling’ is the winding of a yarn of some sort on and in itself, but Lin’s work is really about binding other things with yarns.

Often the clue to interpretation of a work of art lies in its title. A title is a verbal translation of a visual product. So, for example, Lin’s model of a woman, whose metres-long veil-like hair is being lifted by a giant frog, is called ‘Initiator’ (创始人) (Grosenick and Schübbe 2007: 197). 创始人 may also be translated as ‘founder’ or ‘originator’, both of which carry rather different connotations from ‘initiator’. Should we be thinking here about the role of reptiles in evolution? The resonances in this piece are multiple, from the allusion to the frog-prince story to the binding possibilities of the long hair. The title guides viewers some way towards the perspective the artist has in mind: something is or was about to start: who starts it, or started it, the frog or the woman? The suggestive brevity on the one hand, or overwhelming length of a title on the other, can command the attention of the viewer.

As Chinese art evolves, it absorbs terminology and techniques from the West and simultaneously draws on traditional practice and history. Translators need to involve themselves in the language of art, which derives from both East and West.

Practical 1 Talking about art

The excerpt below is taken from Zhang Daqian (张大千) by Chen Zhulong (陈洙龙), an illustrated volume that discusses the work of Zhang Daqian (1899–1983). Zhang was a near contemporary of Qi Baishi and is revered as a great twentieth-century exponent of traditional yet powerfully innovative depictions of the natural world, including landscape and bird and flower paintings. Translate the text, bearing the following in mind:

i The excerpt uses literary grammatical structures and expressions. Why would it be appropriate for the source text author/editor to use this style? Should it be reflected in the target text? If so, how would it be rendered?

ii Repetition of grammatical linking words provides the cohesion for the whole paragraph. To what extent should this repetition be reflected in the target text? If repetition is not used, what techniques could be used to provide an adaptive translation that conveys closely the writer’s ideas?

iii How important is the punctuation to the structure of the text? Should the inverted commas be kept? Is it likely that new sets of inverted commas would be introduced in the target text?
28 Translating modern Chinese art and artists

iv The text includes culture-specific art terms and proper names. Would footnotes be imperative, and if so, what contribution might they make to the translation?

v The tone is laudatory. Should the unalloyed praise be fully reflected in the translation, or should it be toned down?

大千先生实为大师也。他的山水、人物、花鸟、要工就工，要写就写，要泼就泼，要大就大，要小就小；花鸟画也就花鸟画吧，还特擅长画那出污泥而不染的荷花，凡工凡写凡泼均极尽荷花之净、之致、之意、之情、之态。读也、看也、观止也、有人评他之画荷曰：‘兼取古今各家画荷之长，于石涛取‘气’，与八大取‘毅’，于宋人得体察物情之理，乃集古今画荷之大成。居士画荷，无论工笔、没骨、写意、设色、水墨皆精绝当世，更创泼墨泼彩法为之，气势撼人，不但超越了花卉的属性，更将文人花卉的笔墨范围，拓展至另一境地。’

(Chen 2003: 164)