

About The Cover

Two Views of the New China

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“To nationalize oil painting and to modernize Chinese painting: in my view these are two sides of the same face.”—Wu Guanzhong (as quoted by Merguerian 2012)

In this issue of *EcoHealth*, we celebrate our biennial meeting in Kunming with two works representing one of China’s most enigmatic artists, Wu Guangzhong. These two images represent, to many of us from the West, our dominant view of China—a country that has been catapulted from an essentially medieval society into the twenty-first century superpower it now is, in the matter of a few decades. These two visions of Chinese society are clearly visible in the contrast between rural China and cities like Shanghai or Beijing. Far from the cities that consume their produce, farmers still work the same rice paddies that were hacked out of the mountainsides over 2,000 years ago, with the same cattle. Their children, perhaps, work in the factories and financial centers that drive China’s industrial and technological power. They wear handmade Italian suits, drink French wine and listen to rap music, as their grandfathers tarry a while and draw on their clay pipes. This is the China that Guanzhong celebrates and the China that remains a fascination to the rest of the world.

Of course, this view of China is naive in a number of ways. Firstly, the society that China represented prior to the collapse of the Empire was complex, highly structured, and deep. Layers of hierarchy flowed down from the Emperor’s Forbidden City to envelop peasant life. A complex political structure allowed this large country to function and from a young age, the ambitious would work ceaselessly to take the difficult examinations and raise themselves up to the esteemed position of a Mandarin in this system. Secondly,

the changes that seem to us, in the West, to have happened over the past three or four decades really grew during rapid industrialization under Mao. The opening up of the centralized state economy to trade with the West simply allowed us to see these changes, and watch them accelerate.

Guanzhong also saw these changes. He watched as a flood of seasonal workers moved to the cities to build high-rise homes. And he did more than watch, he painted. He painted in the traditional style, using delicate brushwork to portray the architecture in the rural towns—black and white with the occasional flash of color. He used the same brushwork to depict the new architecture, with the same colors trickling through them. His art is not a political statement, nor a statement on cultural change. It is simply a statement about what is.

And as we look closer into Guanzhong’s art, we see his genius. While earlier artists would depict a famous temple nestled between two mountains, or fishermen on a tranquil lake, Wu brings the human dimension of China to the forefront. He paints houses—grand and small, traditional, and modern. He places them not within the context of the landscape, but so that they become the landscape. He depicts modern China as Lowry painted industrial England—but here, without the matchstick men. The view of China that Guanzhong gives us becomes one that extracts its people from their historical context just as it removes them from the painting. Human development in the city seems possible without the countryside, and without the environment. No doubt, Guanzhong is a humanist, and just like any person who lived through the revolution and the rapid changes under Mao, he celebrates China from its

human perspective. As we convene in Kunming to celebrate a more holistic view, we populate these pictures with the vast diversity of modern China. We see the mountains rise behind the villages and understand the roots of modern China that plants the city within its environmental context. And our fascination grows.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010) revolutionized Chinese art. He used the traditional ink painting technique to paint images of the rapidly changing China of the twentieth century. Rather than painting buildings as a small part of a landscape, he let them dominate to the point that they obliterated the landscape. In this way, he maintained a connection between tradition and modernity that reflects modern Chinese culture.

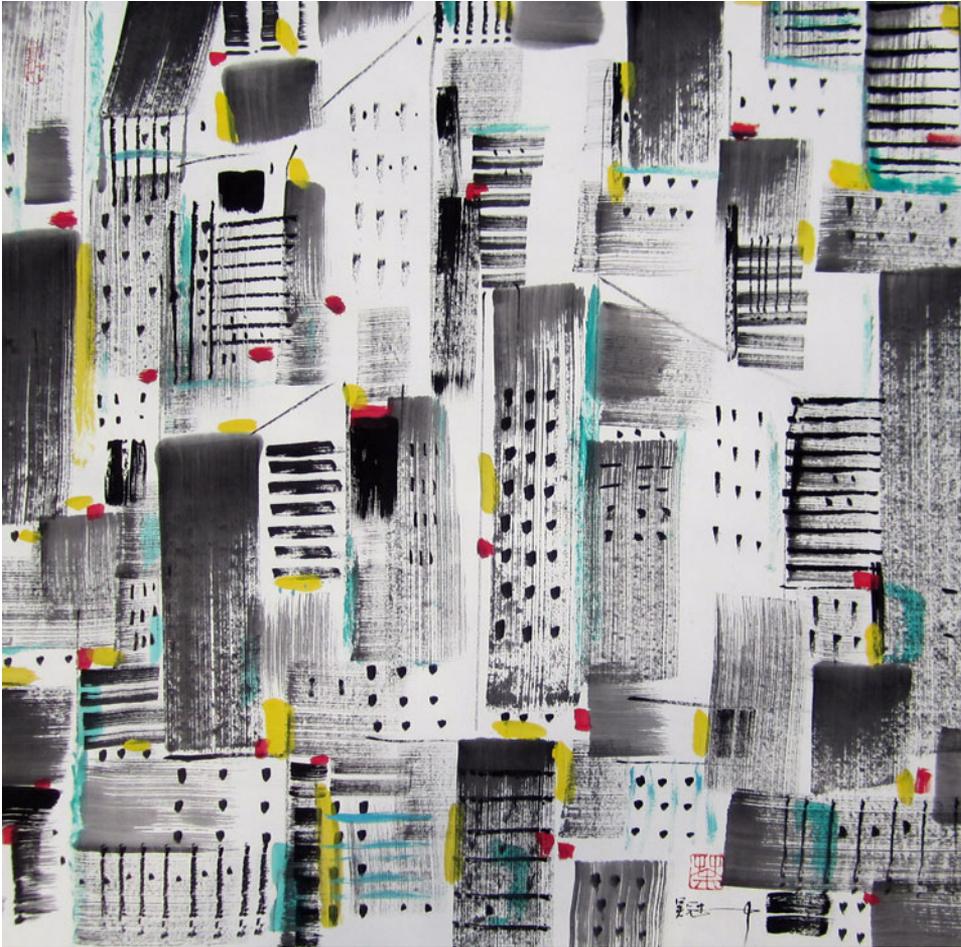
Born in Yixing in Jiangsu Province, Guanzhong was the son of a village schoolteacher. When Guanzhong was a teenager studying electrical engineering at Zhejiang University, he met students of the Hangzhou Academy of Art.

Something inspired him and, against his parent's wishes, Guanzhong transferred to the art academy and began studying under Lin Fengmian. Lin had spent several years in France before teaching at the academy, and he encouraged his students to fire their own skills in the artistic kiln of Paris. Guanzhong pursued this dream, and he received a scholarship to the *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts*, where he became a favorite student of Jean Souverbie (Sullivan 2010). Guanzhong's talents blossomed. After some years in Paris, however, Guanzhong felt "increasingly cut off from his roots," and he returned to China in 1950. His paintings are influenced by western art and formalism rather than social realism and he was unwilling to paint the typical heroic workers, peasants and soldiers much in demand at this time. Instead he turned to landscape, using both oils and ink on paper.

A prolific artist and writer on art theory and philosophy, Guanzhong famously was barred from painting, writing and teaching during the cultural revolution. He was sent to the countryside for two years of reeducation, and was able to paint only on Sundays, and on any medium he could find. In 1973, Guanzhong was rehabilitated and



"Thinking about Sichuan" Anonymous after Wu Guanzhong (1988). Ink and color on ricepaper



“City” Anonymous after Wu Guanzhong (1988). Ink and color on ricepaper

allowed to work decorating hotels and public buildings (Sullivan 2010). At this time he took to working even more extensively in ink, going against the grain by using a traditional medium when most artists were looking to the West for inspiration. He remained extremely prolific until the early part of the twenty-first century, and strived for perfection, destroying hundreds of his paintings that he did not consider of high enough standard during 1991 (Revolutionary Ink 2012).

ON THE COVER

“Thinking about Sichuan” Anonymous after Wu Guanzhong. 1988. Ink and color on ricepaper.

“City” Anonymous after Wu Guanzhong 1988. Ink and color on ricepaper.

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