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## **Political Expression and the Recent Chinese Landscape Painting of Ding Fang**

### **ABSTRACT**

'Landscape' was not devalued by the socialist realist oil painting of post-1949 China, but moved sideways as a subject and back into the picture plane as the framing site for heroic acts or transformative moments in the development of a socialist future. With the rise of the New Currents in Art movement of the 1980s, landscape was re-imagined as a site for a surrealist dreaming, whether counter-establishment or nationalist in intent. This 1980s and 1990s landscape painting, largely in oils, has survived both academic neglect and inattention from ostensibly more contemporary discourses, to obtain some recognition as a representation of the Chinese 'folk' or 'national' spirit. Landscape oil painting, despite sometimes being expressionistically naïve or technically less impressive than its painters might suppose, may respond to a need in its audience and a discursive demand for a modern cross-over between post-1949 and earlier imaginary landscapes in Chinese painting. The paper will be a tentative move towards a survey of the horizon of these issues chiefly by reference to the paintings and writings of Ding Fang (b.1956), and some notions from Warnke's *Political landscape*, 1992.

### **Introduction**

It might be thought that landscape is a purely descriptive term for a particular kind of pictorial representation, found under varying cultural conditions and through the means of varying pictorial discourses. In fact, as the elegant summaries of Andrews and incisive theorisations of Mitchell among others have demonstrated, landscape is a highly constructed and ideologically problematic term.<sup>1</sup> It is not simply the name for a genre or subject category of painting subject matter. It is intimately tied up not merely with describing land but with representing the forces that politically dominate it. As Martin Warnke indicates, landscape can show 'Nature's freedom as political freedom', and landscape representation may also be used to deploy natural states as metaphors for actual or desired political conditions.<sup>2</sup> Landscape does not arise simply as the result of a re-theorisation of pictorial discourse in relation to the natural world, as Gombrich would have it, but as an evolution of painting discourse and of market demand which is subject to the political needs of a time.<sup>3</sup> But however it is interpreted, landscape representation should be seen as the result of a particular and interested desire to see, and not as a disinterested and more-or less accurate or 'natural' homology of the 'actually seen' world.

Andrews summarises the key features of 'landscape' as follows: (i) 'the other', non-human world that is, or was, our home; (ii) a portrait of nature in physical forms functioning as the embodiment of an abstract ideal; (iii) a section of the countryside; (iv) a frameable transcript; (v) a topographical record and (vi) a symbolic form of an ideal world.<sup>4</sup> Clearly it is the last representation that is of particular interest here. The history of Chinese landscape painting in records goes back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, if we presume that the existing Zhou records of portraits of illustrious personages may also have included landscape elements. If we take landscape representation to be of an actually seen place, these are certainly found in the Northern Song works given to Ju Ran (fl. 10<sup>th</sup> century), and by

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<sup>1</sup> Andrews, 1999; Mitchell, 1995, pp. 103-118.

<sup>2</sup> Warnke, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, 1995, p.114, supports the political account of landscape's development found in Friedlander, 1963, pp. 88-89.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, 1999, p.10.



Fig. 1. Gong Xian (1617-1689), *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 62 x 102 cm, Zurich, Rietberg Museum.



Fig. 2. Jerome Wierix, *Christ Praying in the Garden*, engraving, from Geronimo Nadal, *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines*, Antwerp: Plantin, 1593.

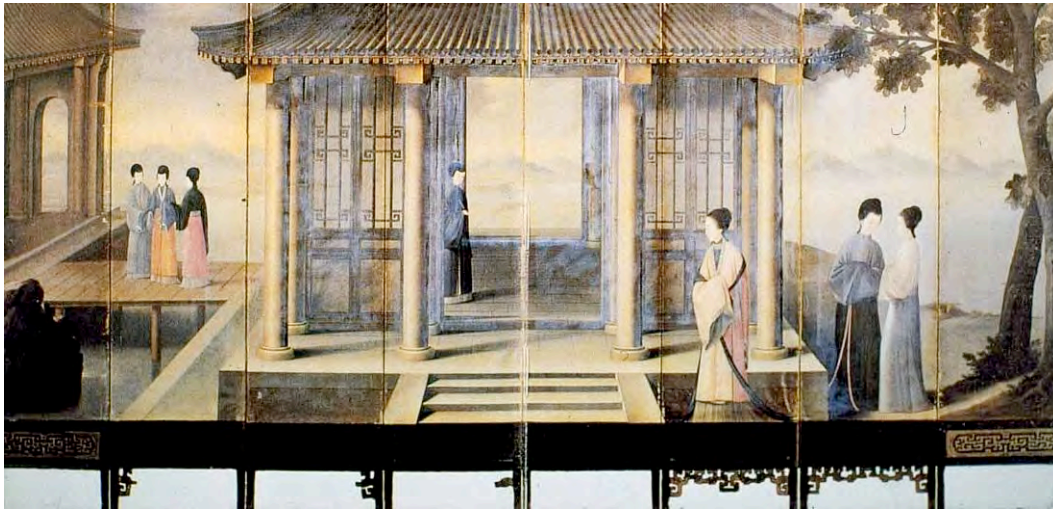


Fig. 3. (top)  
Anonymous,  
Screen depicting  
ladies at leisure, ca.  
1700 (?), oils on  
silk(?), 128.5 x 326  
cm, Hong Kong,  
Hong Kong Art  
Museum.

Fig. 4. (below)  
Anonymous,  
Classroom in Tu  
Shanwan Art  
School, Shanghai,  
1880s (?),  
photograph.



the 1600s, in the work of Gong Xian (1618-1689, Fig. 1) and others, European renaissance representations of cities (Fig. 2) had changed the way landscape was represented and motivated in China.<sup>5</sup> To cut a long and complex story short, it is only with the separation of Chinese landscape painting from its literary base between the 1850s and the 1920s via much more radical contact with forms of Euramerican representation (including photography), that Chinese painting began to include painting of a place as a kind of pure, even potentially abstract painting. It is not insignificant that this development coincided with the rise of a vernacular or *baihua* literature, leading to an elaborate and highly conditioned intersection of literary and pictorial references (Fig. 3). But almost as soon as Chinese landscape painting was separated from its literary base, other ideological constraints interposed (Fig. 4). One of these constraints, still not fully investigated in the development of twentieth century Chinese painting, was the naming of famous places by their re-motivating as pictorial subjects under a nationalist code of interpretation. Under these terms, famous places were privileged as sites of cultural sublimity, or as places by whose representation a claim to possession could be made by a new Chinese spirit of the times, against Western imperialists, Japanese aggressors, and various domestic political enemies.

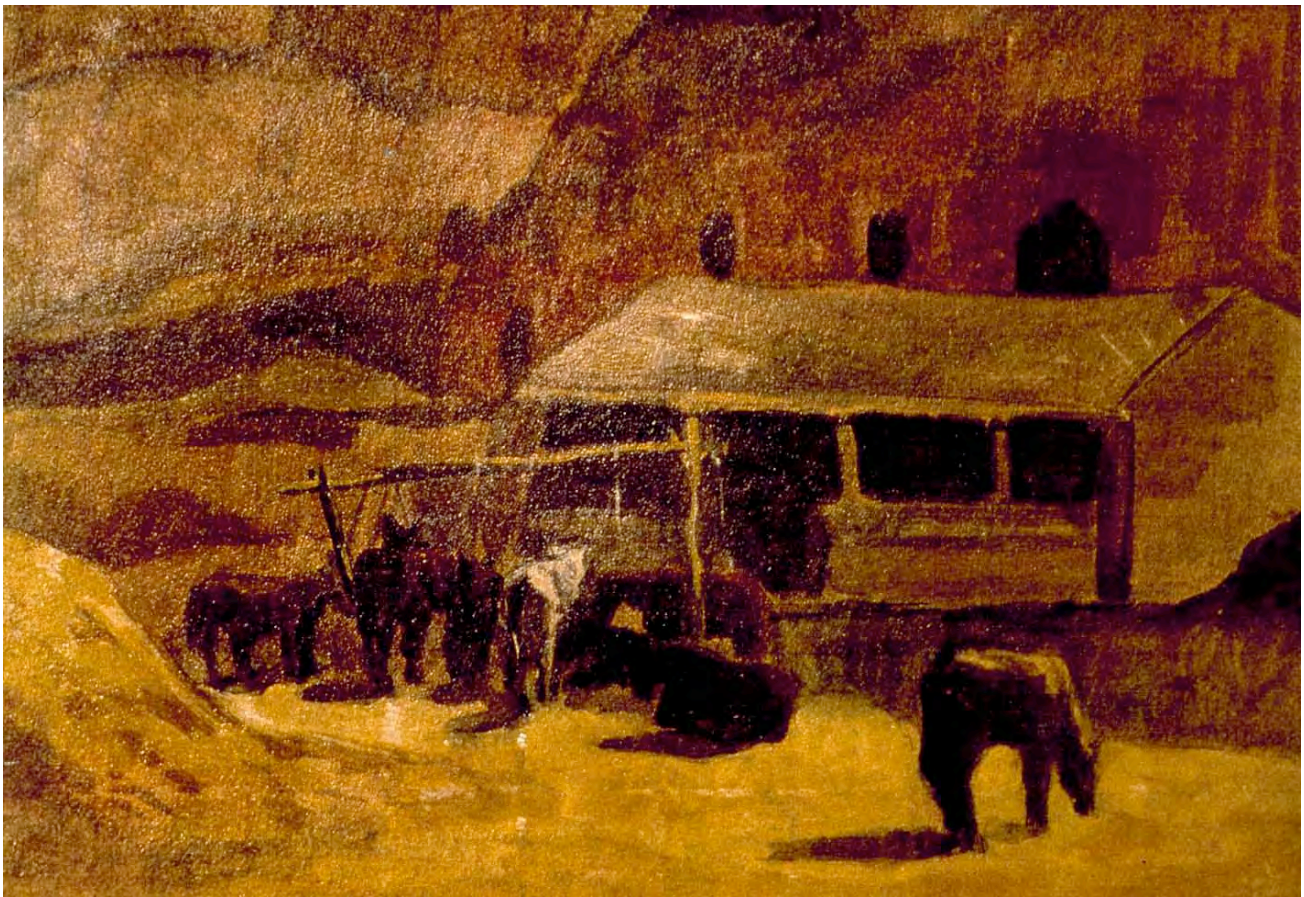


Fig. 5. Zhuang Yan, *Stable of the 8<sup>th</sup> Route Army in Yan'an*, oil on canvas, 27 x 21 cm.

<sup>5</sup> Cahill, 1982.



Fig. 6. Anonymous, *Guerillas*, 1939, woodblock, 8.4 x 9.5 cm. bottom: Shi Lu, *Pagoda Mountain*, 1940, woodblock, 4.6 x 7.3 cm.

## Landscape in post-1949 Chinese painting

My concern here is with a more limited but perhaps no less complex subject: what ‘landscape’ came to symbolise for modern art practice in China. ‘Landscape’ was not devalued by the socialist realist oil painting of post-1949 China, but placed under a new set of imperatives. Before 1949, one imperative was to ideologically give place to the sites of historic struggles in the foundation of The People’s Republic of China (Fig. 5). This moved landscape sideways as a subject and back into the picture plane as the framing site for heroic acts or transformative moments in the development of a socialist future (Fig. 6). After 1949, sites were also chosen for their capacity to articulate the progress of socialism, such as the entry of the Chinese army into Tibet (Fig. 7);<sup>6</sup> for the creation of new industries or bridges; and also as the homelands of the revolution. There were also particularly revolutionary sites in or near Yan’an, places of heroic feats by the Red Army (Fig. 8) or those associated with the birthplace and decisive moments in the life of Mao Zedong. Some of these even became a set of themes based on the leader’s own poetry.<sup>7</sup>

Because China was now to be a socialist country, enormous prestige was given to Soviet socialist realism and great efforts were devoted to learning its techniques as well as the practices of representing its ideological subjects within a specific Chinese content.<sup>8</sup> Chinese ink landscape painting was in danger of being bypassed or regarded as historically irrelevant, and there were several debates about how it might be reformed with greater relevance to socialist objectives (for example, Bai Xueshi, *The Canal of Happiness flows by the Great Wall*, Fig. 9) or the landscape heroicised with ideological connotation, sometimes despite the artist’s own best intentions (Fu Baoshi, *Xiling Gorge*, Fig. 10).<sup>9</sup> These were part of a long series of recurrent discussions about whether or not Chinese ink landscape painting could be discussed in the same terms as Western painting, let alone how the techniques or parts of the latter’s discourse might be accepted into the former or rejected.<sup>10</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution, landscape painting ostensibly became an allegorical conduit, whether in the anachronistic telegraph poles in Liu Junhua’s famous portrayal of Mao as a young pre-revolutionary intellectual (Fig. 11); an allegory for progress before the fact; or as a reinforcing symbolic adjunct for heroic prowess in the face of adversities – as seen in the raging billows and ferocious storms that often accompany representations of those serving the Motherland. The sometimes hysterical intensity, by which landscape was allegorised (Fig. 12), as well as the religious devotion of the figures it accompanied, prepared the way for the allegorising of landscape itself which followed so shortly afterward.

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<sup>6</sup> See the discussion of Dong Xiwen’s ‘Spring Comes to Tibet’ in Shui, 1999, p.68. Shi Lu’s revolutionary landscape is discussed in detail in Noth, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Such as Fu Baoshi’s and Guan Shanyue’s, ‘How beautiful is the Jiangshan’. See Shui, 1999, p.69. Landscape on themes derived from Mao’s poetry or of places associated with his life also overlaps the category of ‘red landscape’ analysed first by the Taiwanese scholar Zhuang Shen in the early 1980s. See Zhuang, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> On socialist realism in China see Clark, 1991; Fokkema, 1965; Galikowski, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> For debates on *guohua* see Andrews, 1990; Andrews, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> These often seemed like re-runs of debates in the 1920s and 1930s such as that in *Guohua Yuekan*, no.1, 1934, ‘Zhongxi shanshuihua sikao zhuanhao’. This is discussed by Tao, 1999.



Fig. 7. Dong Xiwen, *Spring Reaches Tibet*, 1953, oil on canvas, 153 x 234 cm, as illustrated in *Meishu* no.1, 1956.



Fig. 8. Ai Zhongxin, *The Red Army Climbing over the Snowy Mountains*, 1955, oil on canvas, 100 x 300 cm, Beijing, Military Museum.



Fig. 9 Bai Xueshi, *The Canal of Happiness flows by the Great Wall*, late 1950s, Chinese media on paper.

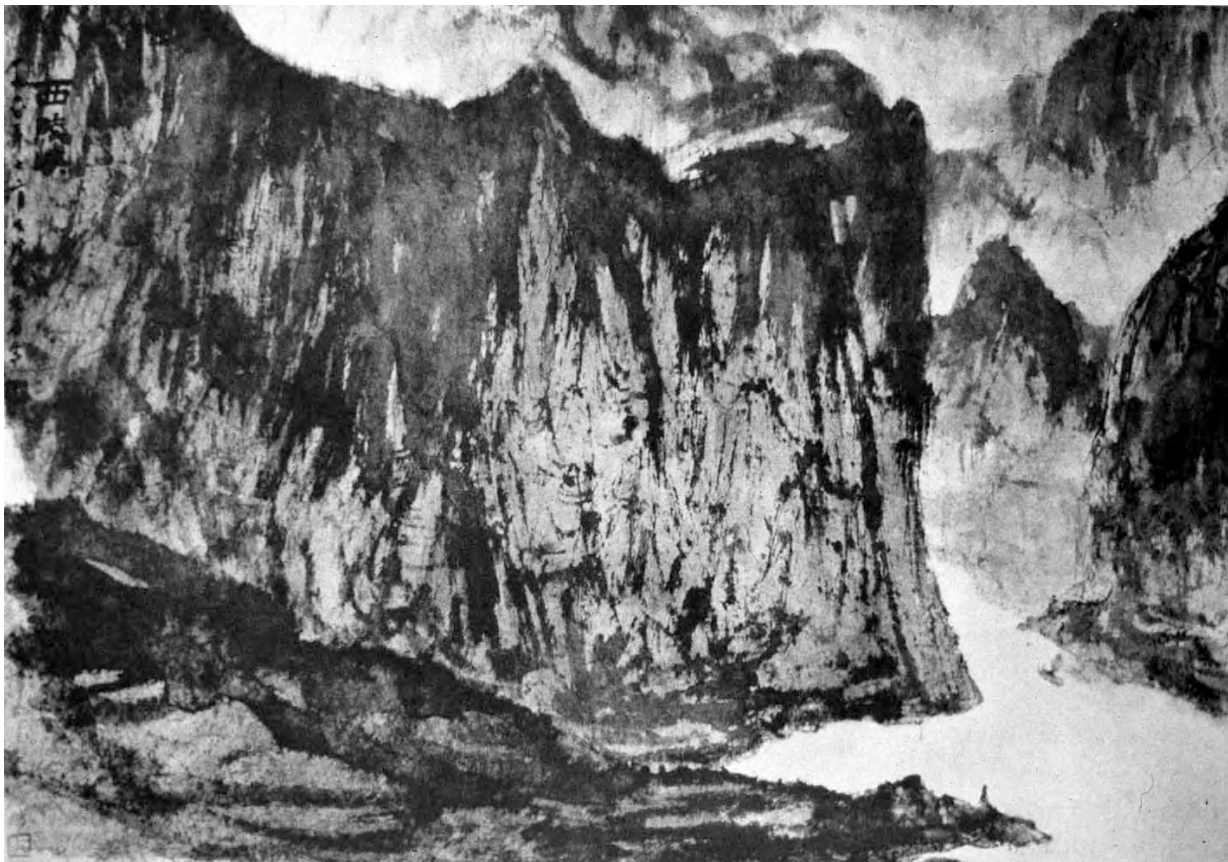


Fig. 10 Fu Baoshi, *Xiling Gorge*, March 1961, Chinese media on paper.



Fig. 11 (left)  
Liu Chunhua,  
*Chairman Mao  
goes to Anyuan*,  
1978, oil on  
canvas,  
published in  
*Renmin Ribao*, 1  
July 1978.



Fig. 12 (right)  
Zhao Zhenlin  
[Jilin],  
*Apotheosis of  
Mao Zedong*,  
1976-78, poster  
media on paper.

### Landscape representations during the New Currents of the 1980s

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, landscape was still officially positioned as the site of a grand revolutionary dreaming articulated around the military events of the Civil War (Fig. 13) or, in a peculiarly repeated trope, as the romantic myth of the minority peoples (Fig. 14). These imperatives were carried forward in two directions in the late 1970s and 1980s, firstly by the discovery of exotic and un-Han customs (Fig. 15), and secondly as the subject of a new and hitherto unexplored romantic realism, particularly in Sichuan (Fig. 16). The basis for this discourse was European academic painting, largely generated in China from various local assimilations of Russian, Soviet and French practice. Such an approach allowed on the one hand for a kind of pure landscape (Fig. 17), and on the other deeply penetrated the population at many levels of practice from the amateur upward (Fig. 18) through endless followers of Soviet painting transmitted via the academic teachers (and providers of school curricular models). Although these still occupied the various art academies, they were potentially freed of the need to blindly follow art policies set by the Party.

When the New Currents in Art Movement gained prominence between 1985 and 1989, at least two new kinds of surrealist landscape came into being (Fig. 19). One can be described as a transformation of everyday scenes or objects into dreamscapes. Here, landscape formed the ground for fantasies motivated around human subjects or their symbolic objects. The other model turned around the transformation of landscape itself into a fantasy of being, an inchoate mystery world.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I have to put aside another kind of landscape which has a long history in Chinese post-1949 painting, that of the revolutionary crowd, or group of workers, where there was a type of interior landscape setting via factory or office settings, and also of external sites, particularly in exemplary portraits of borderland guards. The late 1970s had seen the emergence of pictures which bitterly recollect the actual events of the Cultural Revolution. The 1980s thus inherited



Fig. 13. Chen Qi, with Zhao Guanqiu, Chen Jian, Wei Chuyu, *The Weihai Campaign*, 1977, oil on canvas, 180 x 450 cm, Beijing, Museum of the Revolution.



Fig. 14. (above), Zhan Jianjun, *Song of the Steppes*, 1979, oil on paper, 200 x 174 cm, Beijing, China Art Gallery.



Fig. 15. (above right), Yuan Yunsheng, *Water Festival, Song of Life*, 1979, mural, Beijing Airport [since walled up & probably destroyed].

representations in the background of an urbanised, political setting which we might well call a landscape of the masses. History was shown to be lived-out in the fantasy of an advancing mass, with a notional topic of 'China' placed somehow in a landscape or urban landscape setting. This way of visualizing the crowd may either have influenced or interacted with the visualisation of complex historical events.

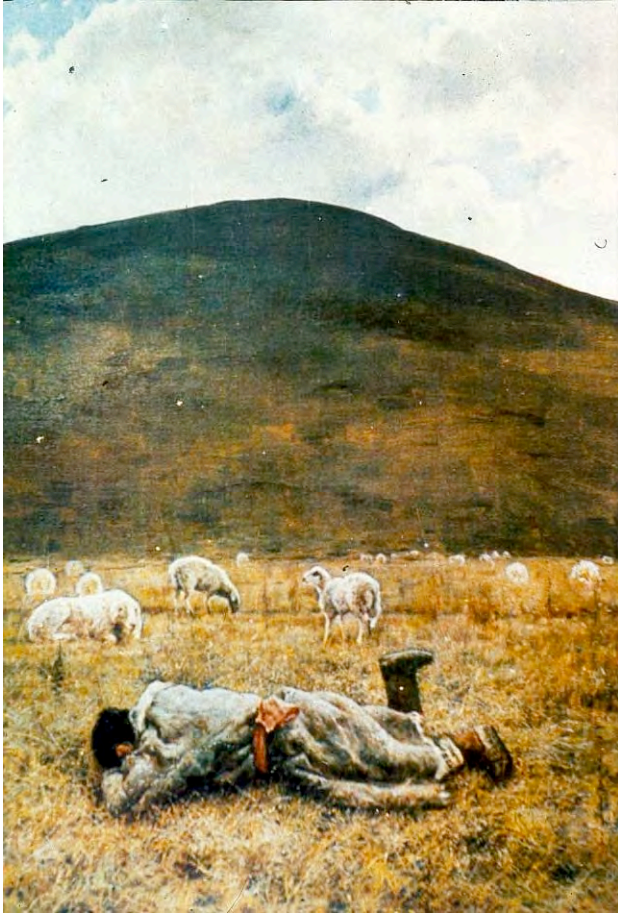


Fig. 18 Artist unknown, *Winter Landscape*, 1981, oil on canvas, exhibition in Beihai Park, Beijing, photographed in situ, 1981.



Fig. 16 (left) Ai Xuan, *Song of the Wasteland*, mid-1980s, oil on canvas.

Fig. 17 (above) Chen Ying, *Small Kiln by the water hole*, early 1980s, oil on canvas.



These shifts in the treatment of landscape in the 1980s may also be interpreted with reference to the ideas of Martin Warnke. He writes, 'Once a landscape formation is perceived and represented in anthropomorphic terms – as a resting giant, for example – an imaginative scheme has been created which can be realized in a variety of ways'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly in Chinese landscape paintings – particularly those in which bodies are incorporated into or spring from the landscape – such anthropomorphic tendencies are evinced not simply by the placement of figures but more specifically by persistent attempts to imbue the landscape itself with life, even human life. The posture or formation of a figure in an anthropomorphised landscape can have important allegorical functions. Warnke examines a sketch of the Brazilian coast where 'the horizontal figure is reminiscent of the dead Christ and so reinforces the impression of paralysed power. However, if the state assumes an upright posture and becomes an active figure, it unleashes traumas associated with all-consuming power'.<sup>13</sup>

Representations of Chinese landscapes in the late 1980s similarly appear to engage allegories of power, by turns mystic and vague or concrete and emboldened by stark materiality. Here we may contrast the dark enclosing dreams of Ren Jian (Fig. 19) with the bright, dominant figures of famous

<sup>12</sup> Warnke, 1994, p. 89

<sup>13</sup> Warnke, 1994, p. 89.

leaders, especially of Mao Zedong, which stride over the landscape. As Warnke also notes, 'the desire to demonstrate one's rule over a country and its inhabitants may seem natural, but to an enlightened view it is not so obvious why this should be done by means of giant figures that far exceed all natural dimensions'.<sup>14</sup> One can only assume that for someone who believes in the allegory and identifies with the 'figure of might' in the landscape, their representation appears as open and liberating, but for others their figuring in the natural world can only be oppressive and a kind of closure, one easily manipulated by nationalist, even chauvinist, mentalities.



Fig. 19. Ren Jian, *Elementalization*, before 1989, water and ink on paper.

In European landscape allegories there is often a dynamic built into the representation by opposed forces, such as the use of water as a symbol for the unstoppable force of freedom, and stone or massive rocks as an allegory for constraining bondage 'almost like a giant re-transformed into a natural shape', as in Goya's etching of *Landscape with a waterfall* of c.1810 (Fig. 20).<sup>15</sup> We might also search Chinese landscape allegories for similarly opposing forces, or oppositions between forces which otherwise remain unnamed but that have clear implications about the creative life instinct in the land that bodies forth human possibilities, be they creative or repressive (Fig. 21). Much of Ding Fang's work is paradigmatic of this kind.

### **A case study of the oil painter, Ding Fang (b. 1956)**

The work and writing of the oil painter Ding Fang makes an interesting, indicative case-study to work through various arguments about contemporary Chinese landscape painting. This is partially because his work spans a period from the early 1980s to the present, but also because he was a participant in the New Currents in Art movement of the second half of the 1980s, exhibiting in the Modern Chinese Art exhibition in 1989. He was among the first artists to leave the academy and

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<sup>14</sup> Warnke, 1994, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Warnke, 1994, p. 98.



Fig. 20 Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828), *Landscape with waterfall*, before 1810, etching & burnished aquatint, 15.6 x 28.5 cm.



Fig. 21 Ding Fang, (b. 1956), *Loess Plateau series: Deep ramparts*, 2001-2002, oil on canvas, 95 x 130cm.

work by himself in the Yang Ming Yuan artists' village in the early 1990s. After an apparent hiatus in the late 1990s,<sup>16</sup> his work and exhibitions have since received greater acceptance, perhaps indicating a wider public need for a re-imagining of the symbolic order of the Chinese landscape. Ding Fang is also unusual both in his willingness to openly proclaim his Christian faith, and in his extensive production of writings on Western European music.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Some Chinese critics privately reported in 1999, it would now seem erroneously, that he was no longer active and was working in his own design company.

<sup>17</sup> A clear understanding of the artist's inspiration is found in his writings, which include those on music, Ding, 1998, and in his retrospective exhibition for the years 1981-2001, Ding, 2002. The latter includes an essay by the art critic Li

His 2001 catalogue groups his work as follows, from each of which I have selected a few representative images indicated here by page numbers:

*I Warm Feelings for Mother Earth 1981-1984 [catalogue, plates on pages: 17, 20]*

*II Cultural Reflections 1984-1987 [23, 27]*

*III The Tragic Image 1987-1994 [29, 32, 37, 41]*

*IV The Soul's Introspection 1993-1998 [45, 49, 53]*

*V Contemporary Concerns 1996-1999 [57]*

*VI Contemporary Concerns 1997-2000 [65, 73]*

*VII Re-Building the Spirit 1998-2001 [87]*

*VIII Re-Building the Spirit 1999-2001 [92, 97]*

The first two periods of 'Warm Feelings' and 'Cultural Reflections' correspond to a text he wrote in 1986, 'Gaoyuan de Linghun' (The Soul of the [Loess] Plateau). Ding Fang indicates that he spent periods of both his childhood and his third year as an art student in 1981 in this part of China (Fig. 22). He mentions that the loess plateau determined his understanding of 'art growing its roots in life', 'particularly the unadorned dynamic strength held in store within the loess plateau'.<sup>18</sup> This text foregrounds the life-dynamic in what he feels is spirit of the landscape which includes an ancient spirituality as well as resemblances to ancient Chinese art forms (Fig. 23): 'It is silent, without voice. Ravine on ravine, between the valleys, soaring high pillar-peaks rise in serried ranks some just like the heroic might of Egyptian pyramids seen on miniature reproductions. [These landscape forms] clearly express the spiritual internality coinciding completely with the ancient, plain, regular boldness of Qin and Han seal carving art.'<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 22 Photograph of Ding Fang early autumn 2000, by the ancient great wall site at the intersecting zone between Ningxia and Shaanxi.

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Xiaoshan, as well as briefer comments by a selection of well-known academic art critics. I am grateful to Ding Fang for a copy of this catalogue.

<sup>18</sup> Ding, 1998, p.34.

<sup>19</sup> Ding, 1998, p.35.



Fig. 23. Ding Fang, *Calling Out and being Born*, 1980s, oil on canvas.

This re-discovery of the ancient forces within Chinese art that can be read or, more correctly, religiously absorbed from the landscape, never leaves him. It is a very modern rediscovery of spiritual travel in the mountains [*shenyou*] which would have been familiar to many earlier Chinese painters, but without the modern alienation, a romantic love of wilderness and the *horror vacui* with which Ding Fang engages (Fig. 24):

At the time my most vivid, direct sensation was that the walled city [*cheng*] and the plateau were complimentary, and even more had a kind of cultural taste. Of course the plateau is the deepest foundation and spiritual mother earth of the spirit of the Chinese ethos and culture of ancient China [*huaxia*], grown up over a long time, but to build a walled city at the extreme edge of the plateau means all the more that it is a kind of crystallization of ancient Chinese culture. Of course, this is not as famous as the Great Wall but seen from the aspect of its modeling, the sharp, mystical lines of the ancient ramparts make one tremble, and especially when they sit down on the plateau by the banks of the Yellow River, the three elements of walled city, loess plateau and Yellow River call to each other, and fuse into a unity.<sup>20</sup>

But already in this early explanation Ding Fang presents a key element in his later thought: that the spirituality lacking in modern life can be re-invigorated by contact with the primitive energies of this landscape. He never departs from this view, writing in 1998 that ‘Such a formidable dynamic of primitive life deeply cuts open the friable nerves of the modern soul as if cutting in with a penetrating diamond bit’ (Fig. 25).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he explicitly indicates a mystic absorption into the landscape where most sense of self is lost: ‘To indulge in such a realm and moreover to devote oneself to recording this condition [means to] to forget real time and thus many “sketcher” took more than four hours so that they bear being called ‘long-term tasks’.’

<sup>20</sup> Ding, 1998, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> Ding, 1998, p. 35.

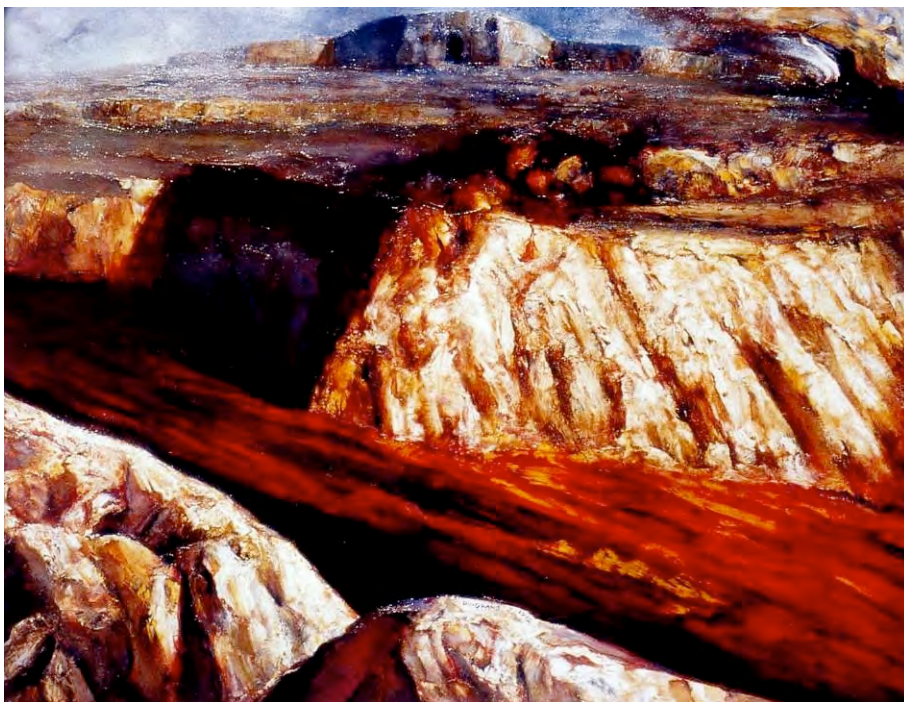


Fig. 24 (left) Ding Fang, *Walled City series: The walled city of the undying*, 1985, oil on canvas, 91 x 117 cm.

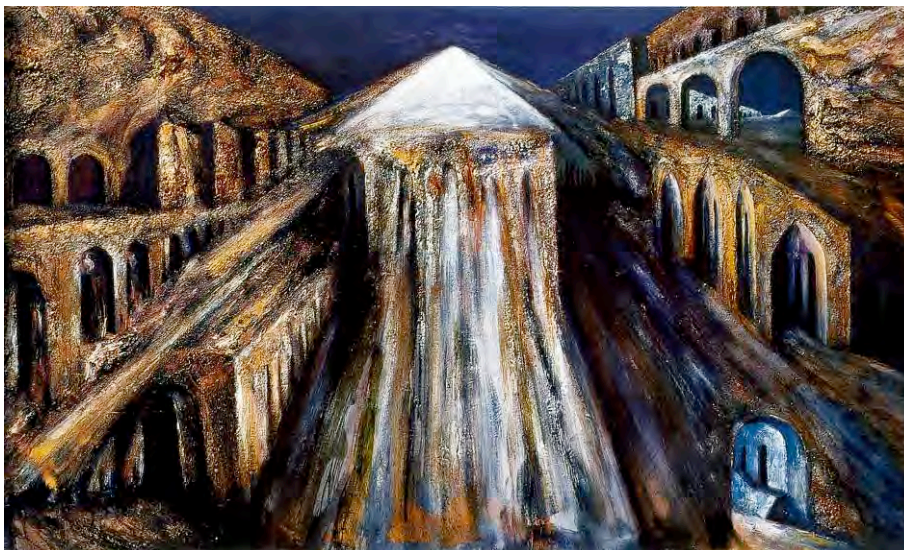


Fig. 25 (below) Ding Fang, *Walled City series: Depth*, 1985, oil on board, 100 x 160 cm.

Through painting and meditating, Ding Fang seems to have experienced a religious trance from which he only withdrew with difficulty:

This kind of contemplative release born from out of a deep meditation, like a formless flash was inducing me to see a series of super- natural images, and the manifestation of time, real time and deification formed the effect of a whole which is difficult to describe.<sup>22</sup>

Although he does not talk much about technique at this early point in his writing, he does compare absorption in paint to ‘calligraphy where the character needs to be written out’, for ‘between the touches of the brush and the mixing and scumbling between colours (Fig. 26), demanding a strong

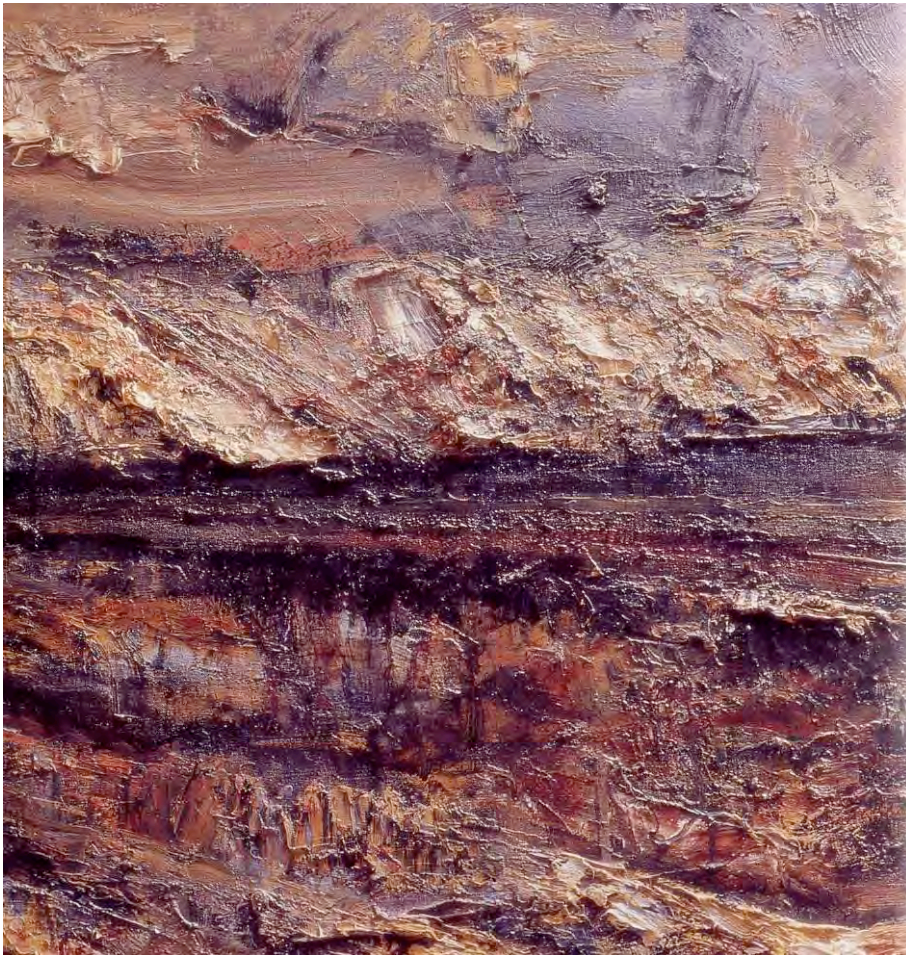


Fig. 26. Ding Fang, detail of surface of oil painting.

and powerful plastic sense, it was this plastic sense which overcame the erupting lava and its massive resistance ... making one intuit an abruptly arising momentum behind the extreme splitting apart.<sup>23</sup> It is only a matter of time before a figure arrives, a ghost in the landscape to stand as a revivifying counterpart to the artist's body: ‘once that life itself which had been made to tremble

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<sup>22</sup> Ding, 1998, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Ding, 1998, p. 37.

directly took over this force, then a real soul manifested from out of the surreal picture plane, a soul exhibiting a re-vivifying force through the whole body.'

It is remarkable how Ding Fang almost knows at this point what will emerge from the landscape. Since his identification with the landscape was both personal and religious, it is doubtful whether this figure, 'a real soul manifested out of the surreal picture plane', would have the potentially awesome and dominant characteristics found by Warnke. But this notion is still open to others who may slip from Ding Fang's religious inclination towards a nationalist interpretation, creating another kind of dominance from the forces that embody the landscape (Fig. 27). Indeed it is legitimate to ask whether this embodiment of the Chinese landscape with the forces of a national spirit does not have its origins earlier, at least in the superior, dominant figure of the great leader over the land of China. Whether there is some unconscious transfer from the images of his childhood and adolescence needs to be asked of Ding Fang himself.

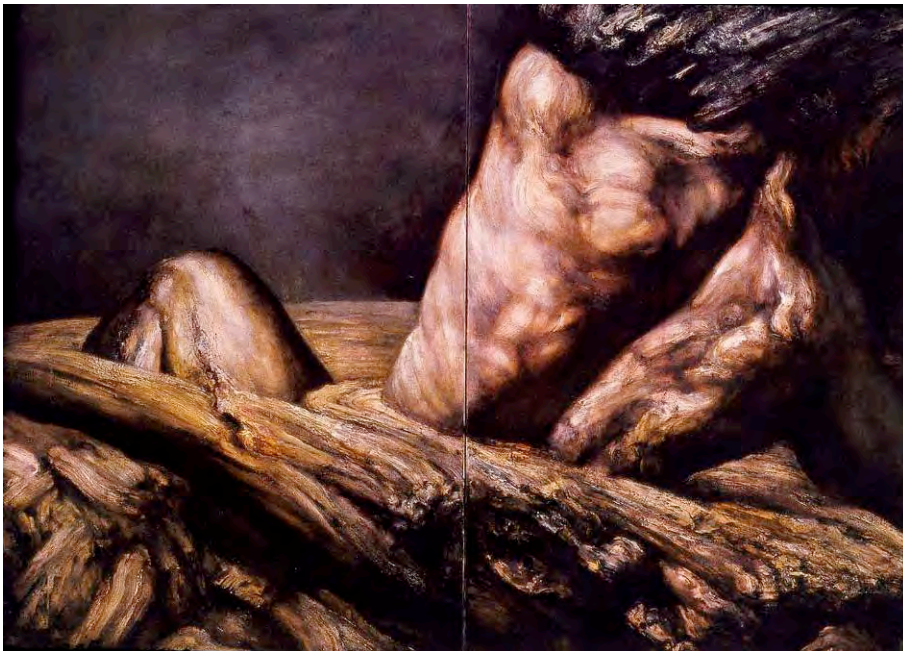


Fig. 27. Ding Fang, *The Power of Tragedy*, no.8, 1992, oil on canvas, 194 x 260 cm.

Looking back to 1981 or so from 1986, Ding Fang is quite aware that he has a long way to go as an artist, but he also displays unusual self-confidence that he has found the wellsprings for his art, writing that 'perhaps I could hardly know the distance between this belief and my immature art, but I did indeed know the power this belief gave me.'<sup>24</sup> A kind of melancholic dread overtook Ding Fang about the time he graduated and became a research student in oil painting at Nanjing Art Academy. As he recalled: 'From 1983, elements of a deep unnameable loneliness increased and spread out over my paintings. The great passion in Rouault's religious paintings forcefully penetrated into my heart and soul.'<sup>25</sup> His way of resolving his underlying psychological tensions was to lose himself in

<sup>24</sup> Ding, 1998, p. 37.

<sup>25</sup> From his later text, 'Shanhun yu renling', (Mountain spirit and human soul) n.d. (1993?), in Ding, 1998, p. 138.

modern Western European paintings and poetry of a religious inspiration, such as T.S. Elliot's 'The Waste Land', which he confessed 'gradually made me fall into a deep pondering.'<sup>26</sup>

It was shortly thereafter that Ding Fang began to codify his artistic position with a much more obviously religious position to do with life values and Christianity. His 1987 series of paintings 'The Power of Tragedy' was catalytic in this regard. As he wrote:

The result of this purification, respectful listening, and the concentration of power, began with the 1987 'The Power of Tragedy'. Respect towards teachers of the past, and the awakening to eastern and western history and to the present situation, made me experience anew the Christian spirit. From then on I would not see the Christian spirit as something Western. It belongs to humanity. A naïve way of thinking then occupied my heart and body: when the soul of modern people coagulates in the midst of a situation where there is nothing to believe and nothing to rely on, all the more is there a need to experience and understand the spiritual domain of ancient believers!<sup>27</sup>

In some of his pictures from the Power of Tragedy and the Great Earth series Ding Fang translates the opposition between a flesh tortured by the insistent energies dynamic in the earth into a religious interpretation, in a manner parallel to Goya's apposition of *Landscape and waterfall*, but quite without Goya's political-existential position.

Ding Fang has, so far as I am aware, published no writings dealing specifically with his role in imagining an originary Chinese landscape instinct with the force of a primitive life, as embodied in the contested forms of a national aesthetic during the end of the New Currents in Art movement up to 1989, and its quasi-culmination in the China Modern Art exhibition of February that year, in which he took part. Nor has he to my knowledge published writings which specifically tie his work either to the national tragedy of the June 1989 Tian'anmen Square massacre, or to the intellectual and social despondency amounting almost to a loss of faith which followed it in China. However, he has equated the social alienation of the early 1990s with a loss of values. The argument is a little tortured, but Ding Fang clearly anticipates much social disquiet with brute materialism which was to become more prevalent in the late 1990s with the arrival of a kind of consumer society, at least in the main Chinese cities.

His basic position involves a kind of existential theology: 'Once we had brought the whole of life into the real experience of contemporary culture, and when we from that manifested "the true state of life", many people felt that existence itself was indeed "meaning" and "value".' Although he does not quote many sources, one may presume from his own professed Christianity and from his citations from Heidegger that this comes from a reading of European philosophy in translation. He continues:

If we follow this through a bit further, what ultimately is this existence? It could scarcely be the hubbub, apathy, disgust, loathing, banter, flattery, absurdity which construct the contents of real everyday life, could it?.....Exactly so. We have no reason to deny the crushing [nature] of this existence, its absurdity and meaninglessness which now constitute an iron fact. From this begin and extend two clear and different value inclinations: one is to willingly remain within and consider

<sup>26</sup> 'Shanhun yu renling' in Ding, 1998, p. 139.

<sup>27</sup> 'Shanhun yu renling' in Ding, 1998, p. 142.

oneself as “freely” opposing it; another is to firmly walk out from the depths of emptiness, to re-visit belief and the sacred and to roam over the great earth.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly belief will be visited, the landscape imbued with the sacred, and a type of tragic theophany read into the forces with which the ‘great earth’ is instinct. It is significant that Ding Fang marks his own value choice as a parting of the ways, not with any particular Chinese regime or political and economic policy, but as an existential choice between ‘free’ opposition from within, and the external exploration of nature.<sup>29</sup>

Despite this, Ding Fang also claims a distance from or critical suspicion of all political values, writing that,

Belief in sacred values does not at all mean distancing from reality. The view of reality of an artist who truly has belief opposes all real institutionalized states which are sacralized as intention, because all really institutionalized situations cannot reach and realize the ideals of a universal human love. Art makes a trans-experiential situation which is eternally relative to reality. It carries throughout the critical authority of the former, and remains vigilant about all political passions. But in another aspect, it also must support the relative justice within reality, and make the institutionalized state of reality turn towards a rational direction.<sup>30</sup>

In his paintings, the motifs of loess plateau, serried cliffs and peaks – there are almost no trees or plants – walled cities, ancient fortifications, figures emerging from the ground into which they are half-twisted even as they appear to derive energy from it, the cities observed by inchoate figures, and the masked faces emerging as if on the sides of an ancient bronze, do not always invoke the metaphor of sacrifice. But a few paintings of the earlier 1990s do so in a clear reference to Christ’s descent from the Cross, and one is forced to conclude these refer to a sacrifice which the artist feels is necessary if humanity is to transcend its particular existential entwining/entombment with the forces which spring from the earth.

What is peculiar about his conceptualisation is not that the figures which arise from the landscape are empowering to Ding Fang in a spiritual sense, but that they take on ancient forms identifiable by reference to or as symbols for Chinese artefacts:

Through ‘Leaving the Castle’ a giant mask image gradually appeared in my work. It originated in awakening to the whole form of the loess plateau and at the same time to my experience of the ancient castle. That dignified and imposing form radiating a kind of spiritual light beneath the surrounding and protecting group of mountains, had even more of the broken form of a mountain chain like a giant mask, solidifying in the carved clarity of midday, and could not but make me conjecture to myself that they were in some kind of conspiratorial relationship with the masks on [ancient] bronze vessels.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Xinyang yu xiandai xuwuzhuyi’, (Belief and modern nihilism) 1992 from Ding, 1998, p.84.

<sup>29</sup> This is of course looking at China’s urban development from without and to see it as lacking in an appropriate pessimism. Unfortunately this position or direction cuts of the artist from enjoyment of the simple pleasures of daily life, and risks turning from a personal morality into a social moralism when applied to particular social issues. It can incidentally also be seen in the take of Marxist realist artists on social admonition such as Carl Hofer’s *Der Rufer* which may have been available in China via East German reproductions.

<sup>30</sup> Ding, 1998, p.84.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Shanhun yu renling’ in Ding, 1998, p.141.

However, and despite the provision of the raw stuff for artistic expression of tragedy within Chinese artifacts, Ding Fang still feels that China lacks a tragic art, and that this lack prevents the attainment of true sublimity. He does not quite state why China should lack this sense of tragedy but the tenor of his various writings leads one to suppose China has not experienced the theological fall from grace found in Christian theology, nor does its current materialist pursuits allow it to discover a kind of aesthetic redemption by entering the domain of the sublime.

I have felt from the experience of my traveling that China has the world's greatest mountain ranges, river currents, plateaus, moors and that these have raw materials for plastic forms appropriate to the birth of a tragic art, but I feel that China, however an historical [entity] it is, lacks a great and tragic art truly worth of the name. Without it one cannot speak of any splendid and sublime aesthetic domain'.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike the wooded slopes and watered valleys of literary landscapes with their sinuous dragon veins of energy flowing through living forms, Ding Fang's landscapes are elemental, desiccated, non-organic testaments to chthonic forces. They speak of existential choices and turning points much like the historical questioning which underlies the work of the German painter Anselm Kiefer, which Fang's work sometimes resembles. The saving grace of Fang's images is that they speak of a humanity saved by the recognition that it can be redeemed by its own sacrifices. If not of exclusively national construction, these are certainly achieved for Ding Fang by reference to particular Chinese histories and art forms. Ding Fang may adopt a position close to the European medieval one of St. Jerome in the Wilderness, but it is now a modern Chinese and very urban wilderness. It remains to ask whether this kind of landscape representation responds to a particular need in its Chinese audience, and whether there may be an art-discursive demand for a modern cross-over between earlier imaginary ink landscapes in Chinese painting and those painted since 1949 in oils.<sup>33</sup> These are important issues about which my understanding is yet unformed and for which there is space here just to raise.

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<sup>32</sup> Ding, 2002, p.90, notes to the section 'Rebuilding the Spirit'.

<sup>33</sup> For one analysis see Shen, 2003.

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