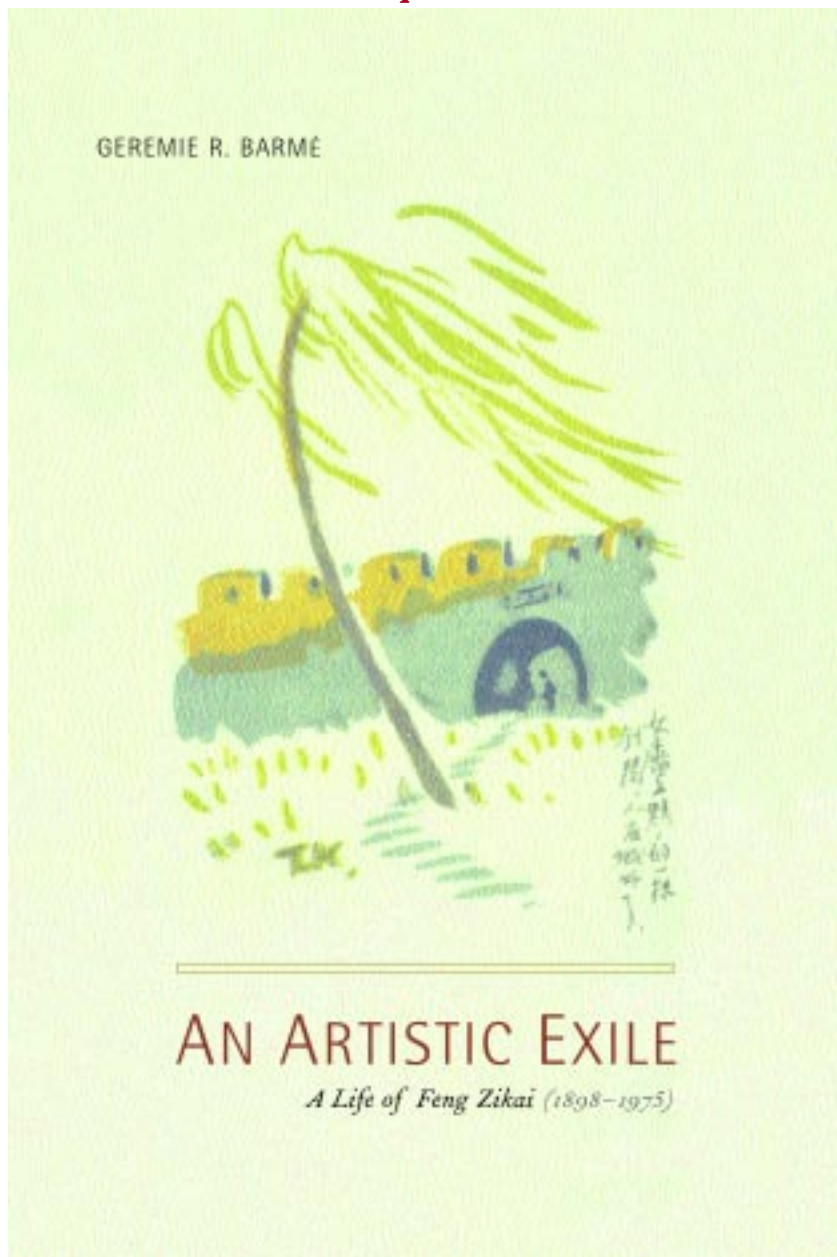


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New Paintings for Old Poems

In late 1924, after the dispute with Jing Hengyi and the local authorities over educational policy at Chunhui, a group of teachers, including Feng Zikai, resigned and abandoned the picturesque lakeside school at Shangyu to return to the urban bustle of Shanghai, where they established a new college, the Li Da High School.¹ Zikai sold the Small Willow House on the shore of White Horse Lake and used the proceeds to help his colleagues secure rooms in Hongkou in the International Settlement, where they first set up the school, although they were soon forced to move because of high rents.² The name *Li Da* was inspired by the Confucian *Analects*: “As for the good man: what he wishes to achieve for himself, he helps others achieve [*li*]; what he wishes to obtain for himself, he enables others to obtain [*da*]—the ability simply to take one’s own aspirations as a guide is a recipe for goodness.”³

The leaky and rundown rooms in which the school was first established belied the lofty aims of its founders. Li Da was to be run according to egalitarian principles of the kind that were ultimately abandoned at Shangyu, principles that were in part influenced by the precepts of the New Village Movement, led in Japan by the novelist Mushanokōji Saneatsu (1885–1976). In the years 1910–20, Mushanokōji and Shiga Naoya (1883–1871) were at the center of a new literary school that found a voice in *White Birch*, a magazine that promoted a style of optimistic humanism subsequently identified with the Taishō era as a whole. “Their message . . . offered what many young people wanted: a break from the past, confidence in one’s own feelings and . . . an escape from reality.”⁴ The New Village Movement had so impressed Zhou Zuoren when he had visited some of the settlements in 1919 that he wrote glowing accounts for the Chinese press of the sense of social equality and idealism in the communal rural organization set up by these visionary writers.⁵ In keeping with these principles, no headmaster

was appointed at Li Da, and the founders declared that the pupils were to be treated like children of the teachers, or even as friends rather than charges. As the new enterprise attracted increasing numbers of students, the group of colleagues soon acquired the means to build their own school buildings at Jiangwan in the Shanghai suburbs; following the move they changed the name of the college to the Li Da Academy.⁶

On its first anniversary, the members of the Li Da Association published a manifesto outlining the premise and goals of the institution. Signed by fifty-one teachers, many of whom also had careers as writers, artists, and translators, the program declared that the organization was not an alliance born of political ideology but one founded “with the aim of cultivating the individual, undertaking scholastic research, and achieving the transformation of society.”⁷ It was open to the public and, in addition to operating the school, the Li Da Association—many members of which were prominent young cultural activists in Shanghai—decided to inaugurate its own magazine, *Equals*, and a series of books, and to expand its activities to run various educational research groups. In 1925 the school had 139 students, and for a time it flourished, a beneficiary of the educational boom in the city. For many people in the city and the surrounding provinces, Shanghai was above all a place of hope, and one way that hope could be realized was through education. This yearning for success dovetailed with the traditional emphasis on learning, one that was reinforced by a culture—including works of popular drama and fiction—that featured stories of earnest students, official examinations, success through study, and the romance of reading. Ambition could be realized through study, and for many families the education of the young was a way to break free of the “karma of poverty.”⁸

Feng Zikai was in charge of Western art classes at Li Da, which were eventually subsumed by an arts department. When the journal *Equals* was launched in September 1926, he also took on the job of graphic designer. The magazine was a new publication for Kaiming Shudian (literally, “Enlightenment Books”), a leading progressive publishing house established by Zhang Xichen, formerly an editor with the Commercial Press. Zhang’s enterprise was supported by members of both the Li Da Academy and the Literature Research Society. Zikai was invited to devise the new house’s logo.⁹ His work with Kaiming allowed him a free hand to design the magazine, and it gave full scope to his interest in graphics. During the two years that *Equals* ran, Feng created most of the illustrations and nearly all of the accompanying artwork for articles.

The marriage of painting and poetry and the use of poetic inscriptions, either of the artist’s composition or by the hand of others, had been com-



Title page for *Equals—inaugural issue* (September [1926]), designed and painted by Feng Zikai. *Yiban danshenghao—jiuyue*, September 1926.

mon practice since the Song dynasty. Paintings that illustrated or mirrored lines of classical Chinese poetry were typical also in Feng Zikai's earliest published work. It was within the tradition of scholar-painting, or free-brush art, in particular in the union of painting with poetry, "the literary aspect of art" as Feng called it, that he had found an immediate cultural template for his work. In his evolution of a personalized form of scholar-art—one in which he could combine the painted line of the sketch with the calligraphic stroke of poetry for mass reproduction in popular journals—Feng was able to develop and make commercially viable the manhua art he had admired

in Japan and China. But above all, he was most keenly aware of the relevance to modern readers of the sensibility and emotions of the authors of famous lines of poetry. It is through his visual reinterpretation of lines of classical verse while working at the Li Da Academy that he now attempted to create, as he put it, "an experimental form of art . . . using Western principles in pursuit of a Chinese artistic expression," one that, while alluding constantly to elite cultural practice and vision, was in its style both popular and accessible.¹⁰

Zheng Zhenduo had initially been attracted to Feng Zikai's paintings of classical poetry because, as he claimed, "Zikai . . . has achieved something quite profound and presented us with a beguiling and ethereal vision." The paintings Zheng used in *Literature Weekly* were of a similarly otherworldly character. Based on themes from lines of classical poetry, the images often tended to jar with the mood of the magazine as a whole, although perhaps it was that Zheng was interested in creating pointed juxtapositions.¹¹ The first published "Zikai manhua," entitled "The swallows return but not he," was appropriately enough placed on a page of love songs by the Greek poet Philodemus that had been translated from the English by Zheng Zhenduo. In this image we find the characteristic repertoire of Feng's early work: swallows flying into view while breaking the frame of the picture, and the tender spring growth of a willow. The traditional symbols of longing and the new season complement the mood of the lovelorn young woman leaning on a decidedly modern-looking balcony.¹² The correlation between Feng's paintings and the contents of the weekly were, however, not always so felicitous, and only a few weeks later the painting "The jade green [of willows] caresses the heads of passers-by," one of his most famous early works, appeared alongside the third installment of Mao Dun's rather stern article "On Proletarian Literature."¹³ This issue of *Literature Weekly* appeared the day after the May Thirtieth Incident, in which twelve student demonstrators were killed at the Lousa Police Station in the International Settlement of Shanghai during a confrontation with Sikh and Chinese police under British command.¹⁴ Zikai did not have another painting in the magazine for over six weeks; the next picture to appear was "The vote," a poetic depiction of a public vote at what appears to be a public meeting.¹⁵

This painting is easily interpreted as overtly political, quite possibly an illustration of a scene at one of the rallies organized in Shanghai by concerned public, educational, and literary organizations to protest against the recent atrocity by the British. As a member of the Literature Research Society and a signatory of the joint protest issued after the incident by groups in Shanghai, Feng may well have attended a meeting where such a vote was taken. He would daresay have been as shocked and outraged by the loss of

"The swallows return but not he,"
 by Feng Zikai, signed TK. Inspired
 by a line from the Song poet An
 Jidao, written to the tune *Geng lou*
zi. *Wenxue zhoubao*, no. 172,
 10 May 1925.



life as were his associates Zheng Zhenduo, Zhu Ziqing, and Ye Shengtao, who all readily voiced their fury and sense of betrayal. Indeed, the May Thirtieth Incident marked a major point of departure in the politicization of young intellectuals. Just as Zikai was evolving an artistic style suited to his lyrical sensitivities and finding support among his friends, many of his contemporaries were becoming radicalized. Although he would remain sympathetic to the travails of students and laborers, Zikai never became politically active, as did other members of his generation, including Cao Juren (1900–72), a fellow student of Li Shutong, Rou Shi, or even his friend Ye Shengtao. Ye, who along with Mao Dun, had been at the Nanjing Road demonstration and had witnessed the massacre, wrote about the agonizing memory of the violence on that day in May and the significance of the bloodshed, while the usually mild and circumspect Zhu Ziqing, Zikai's friend from his Chunhui days, composed an accusatory "Song of Blood."

The hand of blood clearly pointing at him, me, you!
 The eyes of blood, encompassing all, staring at him, me, you!
 The mask of blood, reviling, scolding, shouting at him, me, you!
 Our heads smashed and our bellies pierced,
 We remain brothers!
 Our heads still on our necks, our hearts remain in our chests,
 But our blood? What of our blood? It is seething!¹⁶



"The vote," by Feng Zikai, signed TK.
Wenxue zhoubao, no.182, 19 July 1925.

As Tsi-an Hsia observes of the turn in literary style and the new cadences of cultural expression within the leftist literary movement that found voice at this time and in which Zhu Ziqing momentarily found fellowship,

The climactic change for a writer in the middle or later 1920s was a swing from passive sentimentality to revolutionary frenzy. His emotional instability tended to carry him to extremes, but a prevalent misconception of literature also limited his field of choice. Writing some years after 1919, he was still in a sense a pioneer. Only a few beaten tracks lay ahead of him, the other possibilities for literature being unknown. He used to be with one kind of writing, whose rhetorical devices he had begun to learn as a schoolboy. But this he was taught to despise as useless. His writings were now not to satisfy himself but rather the demands politics made on him. Literature became a means to an end; and if there were better means to serve that end, he had to employ them.¹⁷

It is obvious from Zikai's "The vote," however, that the lissome configuration created by the swaying reed-like arms raised in support of (or in opposition to) a motion put to the vote at the protest meeting was what caught the artist's eye. The image could either be taken as an artist's quasi-journalistic report of a mass gathering of protesters or as the semi-abstract depiction of a scene, the contemporary significance of which fades before its lyricism.

Regardless of his momentary political ardor, Zhu Ziqing remained one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Feng's paintings. In them, he claimed, he found something new and exciting. "We are delighted by the lyrical dimension of your manhua. Each painting is like a short poem, one with a very rare essence. In these captured images and fleeting moments you reveal to us a world of poetry. It is as though you have given us olives to eat: their flavor lingers on."¹⁸ But not everyone who saw these new manhua was equally enthralled. As Zikai himself wrote,

Some people take one look at my paintings and cry out in alarm, "But this person has no eyes or nose, only a mouth!" or, "The four fingers on this person's hand are all stuck together!" Those who congratulate themselves for their powers of observation even comment, "How come you can't see any eyes behind the glasses on this fellow?" But such remarks aren't worth responding to, so I ignore them. I was quite satisfied reading *ci* poetry, capturing my visions as they appeared to me and creating my manhua.¹⁹

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), the Bengali poet, philosopher, and Nobel laureate much celebrated among Chinese intellectuals at the time as a defender of Asian traditional values, recognized an ineffable otherworldliness when he was shown some of the paintings Zikai had done to illustrate old poems by Wei Fengjiang, a graduate of Chunhui who went to study in India in 1933.²⁰ Tagore reportedly commented to Wei,

There is no prerequisite for art to be detailed; it is enough if one can capture the spirit of an object. Your teacher's paintings depict the personality of his subjects with the most restrained use of strokes. [Although he paints] a face with no eyes, we can see what is being seen; a head may have no ears, but we can hear what is being heard. This is a most sublime artistic realm! It has come about by melding poetry with painting; it is an innovation in its own right.²¹

Feng's sketches were, nonetheless, hardly an innovation; indeed, such works had been common among scholar-painters since the Song dynasty, when Su Shi made a famous comment that there was poetry in the painting of Tang artist and writer Wang Wei (701–61), and painting in his poetry. By the reign of Zhao Ji, Emperor Huizong of the Song (r. 1101–25), candidates for the Imperial Art Academy were routinely asked to illustrate lines of poetry as part of the selection process.²²

It may seem surprising that Feng Zikai should choose lines from classical poetry as the major source for his early work. Since Feng had spent long years acquiring an understanding of and basic competence in Western art,



"Cold fingers play a jade flute,"
by Feng Zikai, signed TK. Inspired
by a line in a song lyric written by
an anonymous Song poet to the
tune *Ru meng ling*. Feng Zikai,
Zikai manhua.

and he began painting for publication at the height of the May Fourth period—the most iconoclastic era in Chinese cultural history—it is ironic that he found inspiration for some of his most memorable and successful works in the familiar and highly structured realm of traditional verse. But Zikai discovered in the multifarious interrelationship between poetry and painting a profound confirmation of his approach to art, or what he called the “literary perspective of the artist.”

When I read landscape poems by ancient writers, I often discover that they have a clear sense of perspective, even if it is intangible. It is evident that both painters and poets observe nature from the same angle, the only difference being that the former use forms and colors while the latter use words to express themselves.²³

It was a correlation, however, that had not suggested itself to him immediately. While teaching at Chunhui High School in the early 1920s, a time when he was still obsessed with outdoor sketching, Zikai once took a leave of absence to spend some time drawing with a friend who lived on the West Lake in Hangzhou. Late one day he went out to sketch the moonlit scene but felt frustrated in his efforts to catch the mood of the early evening and returned to his lodgings in a state of dejection. His friend, a young man

whose passion was for poetry rather than painting, looked through the sketches Zikai had made of the lake, hills, and moon and recited a few lines by the Tang poet Bo Juyi (772–846) to the downcast artist.

The moonlight is like water,
 The water like the sky,
 Where is the person who watched the moon with me?
 The scene is cast in shadow as it was last year.

Thereupon the poet lay down on his bed and give himself over to solitary reflection.²⁴ Eventually, having given up on sketching the West Lake for the moment, Feng would work instead to depict the vision evoked by the poem. His painting would take a cue from the poetic description of the lake rather than the lake itself.

Zikai's withdrawal from his earlier artistic practice and the techniques acquired from his high-school days was a gradual process of which he became conscious only during his months in Japan. While there does not seem to have been any pivotal incident or series of events that finally motivated him to develop his personal form of art, this episode on the West Lake was memorable enough for him to record it. Zikai said he now realized that "the eye of the poet is a wondrous thing, and those who study painting must read poetry." Henceforth he made a point of "reading poetry at leisure whenever I was not painting." It was a private pursuit that took him to the core of literati culture and art as he knew it and through it to the traditional sensibilities of the scholar-amateur. His awareness of the dimensions of classical prose and poetry had been inculcated not only by his father in Shimenwan and his teachers in Hangzhou, for the students at Feng's high school, the Zhejiang First Normal College, were part of a grand tradition of cultural tourism.

Youthful wanderers of the early twentieth century saw in the hills and lake not only the passing clouds and changing lights; they saw—via the verses and songs of an older time that still reverberated in the culture—the wide variety of scenes and sentiments that had once been enacted and invoked on the lake. There were the southern courtesans and their literati patrons singing, laughing, and drinking on a moonlit spring night. There was also the solitary monk in his bare room in the hills above the snow-covered lake, and the distant sounding of the evening drums and bells. With each remembrance and recitation, those moments of pathos, captured in words and images, were once again evoked. It was not an aimless literati gesture, a careless or fatuous mimicry, for young scholars to roam the West Lake. The wandering was a purposeful journey to reclaim the tangible expressions, the recollected mystiques, and the lingering traditions of the literati life of the past.²⁵

Upon realizing how two lines by Bo Juyi could capture the essence of a scene at the Su Causeway on the West Lake far more effectively than his own attempts at painting it, Feng Zikai observed, "Now I began to pay careful attention to how scenery was depicted in poetry. Whenever I happened upon a particularly good line, I would jot it down on a strip of paper and keep it on my desk to mull over at leisure." Although often tempted to paint a scene, Feng now also found satisfaction in the simple act of reading poetry. "Often the release I found in poetry was greater even than that afforded by painting," he declared.²⁶ And it is here that we find evidence of the increasing interweaving of his experience as a maturing artist with the various dimensions of traditional cultural practice. In the writings of late-Ming connoisseurs like Li Rihua (1565–1635), for instance, considerable emphasis is placed on the artist's need to read poetry, and a familiarity with the corpus of earlier writers is a crucial element in the cultivation of the poet-painter's creative sensibility. As the art historian Wu Lipu points out, however, by the Ming period there was also a tendency among scholar-artists "to let the reading of poetry replace the artist's study of nature. . . . Indirect experience was coming to replace direct experience, with the result that artists were becoming divorced from reality."²⁷

Yet in the case of Feng Zikai, we find not merely an artist who developed a personal vision based on the correlation between poetry and painting, but also a man who resisted the temptation to paint a scene in imitation of some artistic or poetic model, or classical allusion, unless he felt he could bring to it some new and highly individual perception or appreciation. This confirmed once more the complex impact of Takehisa Yumeji, for Feng Zikai had initially been attracted to the Japanese artist's particular use of inscriptions. It was this aspect of scholar art—the inscribed image and the commerce of meaning between word and picture, between the painterly and the calligraphic—that he increasingly identified as pivotal to the Chinese artistic tradition with which he aligned himself, or rather that he reformulated in his practice as a commercial painter in the 1920s. He even rationalized the use of literary references in his painting, in a pointed response to the 1930s debate on "mass art and literature,"²⁸ by saying that language was the most easily popularized form of art, and combining lines of poetry and literary inscriptions with graphic art could create a popular art form that was a viable perpetuation of traditional painting, as well as being accessible to a contemporary audience.

Feng Zikai's choice of poetry as his first artistic theme and inspiration was perhaps a natural step for an artist who wanted, through his own work, to reinterpret conventional images and stereotypes. The willows, swallows,

mournful women, solitary scholars, desolate evening scenes, and other commonplace motifs that appear repeatedly in his early paintings are taken from or inspired by the most popular classical poems. A number of writers have commented that in both Chinese art and writing creation comes within the strictures of traditional forms, and that “the emphasis is always on *interpretation* rather than on *invention*,” and here we find a key to the significance of Zikai’s early work. As the art historian Simon Leys remarks,

For a painter or a poet, the question is not how to eliminate stereotypes, but how to handle them in such a way that, through the stereotypes, the “current” may flow. Under the efficient power of *qi*, a conventional mountain-and-water combination can then become a microcosmic creation, the worn-out image of falling flowers can turn into a poignant and universal metaphor of fate, and the old cliché of the abandoned woman on her balcony becomes an effective summing-up of the entire human condition.²⁹

Or, as F. W. Mote observes in commenting on the relationship between the past and the artist,

Fugu, or recovering the past, could be a self-deceiving slavishness in many minds, but in other minds it could be a revolutionary archaism that spawned competing repudiations of the present, and that bolstered creative approaches to all of man’s activities. One man’s *zheng* could be another man’s *bian*, and it was the individual artistic (or intellectual, or other) achievement that in the last analysis was the measure of *zheng*. The mode is different from our own. It provided one of the conditions within which the artist worked. Its implications are not simple or invariable; it suggested pattern, but did not impose rule. It was a way of linking the universality of human experience with the personal uniqueness of each man’s inner experience.³⁰

From his youth, however, Feng Zikai had enjoyed single lines of poetry more than poems as a whole: “When I felt I couldn’t find enough satisfaction in reciting that one line, I’d often translate it into a painting and put it aside to enjoy at leisure.”³¹ It is a sentiment not all that different from that expressed by the eleventh-century Northern Song artist Guo Si in his commentary on *The Great Message of Forests and Springs*, a famous treatise by his father, Guo Xi (ca. 1023–85), in which the younger Guo records lines from poetry that he believes could provide suitable inspiration for painters:

Indeed as a man of former times said: “A poem is a picture without form, a picture a poem in form.” Wise men have often discussed this [saying], and we have made it our teacher.

I have therefore in my leisure hours looked through some poems of the Jin and Tang periods and sometimes found among them excellent verses which express the things which are in a man's heart or the views which present themselves to his eyes. . . .

I have recorded some of the beautiful verses of ancient poets, which my father used to recite and which contain excellent thoughts for painting.³²

The series of "new paintings from old poems," which Zikai started making from the mid-1920s, grew out of his habit of "translating" poems and, to an extent, from his practice of reinterpreting well-known paintings from the dynastic era. The debut of "Zikai manhua," however, was not without a measure of controversy, and the artist's critics questioned both the validity and the relevance of his innovation. One writer, for example, raised doubts about the painting "In silence alone I mount the west pavilion," an interpretation of a famous line depicting romantic languishing in a poem by Li Yu (937–78), an early master of song-lyric poetry also known as the Last Emperor of the Southern Tang, or Li Houzhu. Feng's painting of the line was published in *Literature Weekly* following the May Thirtieth massacre.³³

"The fellow in your painting is doubtlessly Emperor Li," observed the critic. "But by all rights he should be in classical garb. What do you think you are doing by painting a modern-day figure in a scholar's gown?" Feng's reaction is elucidating:

My aim is not to produce historical pictures, nor, for that matter, to make illustrations for a volume of Li Houzhu's poetry. I've made a painting that expresses my personal response to Li's poem. As I live in the modern world, it is only natural that I should want to create a vision that reflects my environment. . . . Such a painting is, to my mind, proof that Li's poem is a timeless work, and my appreciation of it is little more than a kind of passive creativity.³⁴

Nor was Feng Zikai's appreciation for Li Houzhu restricted to creating paintings inspired by his poetry. Writing a little over a year after this picture first appeared, he defended both Li Houzhu and the poet-painter Wang Wei, figures who were traditionally regarded as talented men who were disloyal to their dynasties, moral cowards who submitted to invaders. In the fraught atmosphere of China in the 1920s, a time when foreign powers held sway in the treaty ports and threats to national sovereignty were on the increase, the continued currency of these ancient poets with the reading public, especially among the young, was viewed by the ideologically aware as symptomatic of a dangerous and defeatist worldweariness. Mindful of the

"In silence alone I mount the west pavilion, / the moon a hook," by Feng Zikai, signed as TK. Inspired by a line from a song lyric to the tune *Xiang jian huan* by Li Yu of the Southern Tang during the era of the Five Dynasties. Feng Zikai, *Zikai manhua*.



objections of the cultural militants, Feng defended the poets for giving full rein in their poetry both to their sense of loyalty and to their loneliness. In a mood of romantic high dudgeon, he interrogated contemporary critics who chose to censor the verse of these writers:

What is it that you are asking of them? Should they have denounced the bandits and invaders before going to their heroic deaths, or should they have slit their throats in their ancestral halls just to prove that they were, respectively, a loyal minister and a wise ruler? But what need is there of ancestral halls, the altars of dynasties, and other such despicable things so long as one's sentiments are sincere, good, and beautiful? I'm quite willing to exhaust myself in defense of [their] disloyalty.³⁵

It may have come as a surprise to his colleagues that the young artist and teacher who had aligned himself with a progressive cultural group like the Literature Research Society, a man who had reached his maturity in the charged milieu of the May Fourth period, would express such strong sentiments at a time of increasing national crisis. Even though the ideological rifts in Shanghai had yet to widen to the point that contending groups and individuals were unable to reconcile their differences, it is surprising that Feng continued to publish his "translations" of classical poetry without in-



"The curtain flutters in the west wind, / She is wanner still than the yellow flowers," by Feng Zikai, signed as TK. Inspired by a line from a song lyric by Li Qingzhao of the Song dynasty, written to the tune *Zui hua yin*. Feng Zikai, *Zikai manhua*.

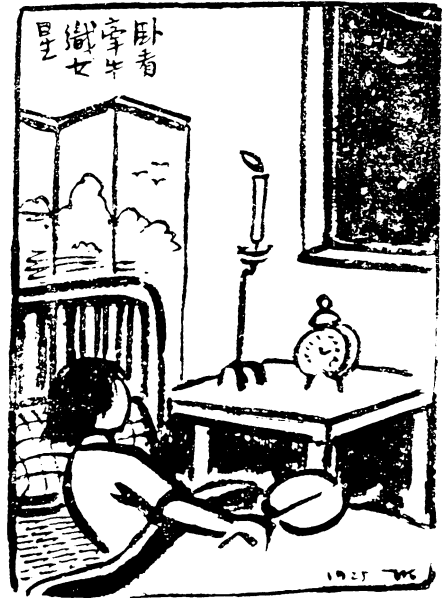
curing more overt criticism. It is also ironic that the first negative review of Zikai's manhua, one directed principally at his new paintings of old poems, came from Yu Pingbo, whose book of poetry *Memories* had been illustrated with some of Feng's earliest paintings. Yu initially praised the artist's endeavor, remarking that although they had never met, he felt that Feng had bared his soul to him through his art:

Yours may be impromptu creations done on the spur of the moment, but their genius lies in such carefree expression. . . . Your paintings are your poems.³⁶

Yu was far less enthusiastic, however, when less than a year later he published "A Few Words on Zikai Manhua" in *Equals*, the monthly journal of the Li Da Academy. The first painting with which he took issue was "The



"I'm lying down as I look at the Cow Herd and the Weaving Maiden," by Feng Zikai, signed as TK. Inspired by the Tang dynasty poet Du Mu's "Autumn." Feng Zikai, *Zikai manhua*.



"I'm lying down as I look at the Cow Herd and the Weaving Maiden," by Feng Zikai, signed as TK, a 1940s version of a 1925 original. Feng Zikai, *Zikai manhua quanji: Gushi xinhua* (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1945).

curtain flutters in the west wind, / She is wanner still than the yellow flowers." It was inspired by a line from a well-known poem by Li Qingzhao (ca. 1084–1151). Yu could not see why the artist had bothered representing the woman at all; anyway, to his eye her face was too elongated and unattractive. A bamboo curtain and some withering chrysanthemums would have been more than sufficient to indicate the sallow appearance of a pining lady.³⁷ His next comment was far more niggardly. "I'm lying down as I look at the Cow Herd and the Weaving Maiden" was based on a line from the Tang writer Du Mu's (ca. 803–52) poem "The Seventh of the Seventh," itself a meditation on abandonment, describing a lonely, bereft palace lady one autumn night. Yu remarked that while the candle on the table and the screen are a reference to the first line of the poem, the artist had ignored one important fact: the stars would be invisible from a room with a bright light in it. He also pedantically pointed out that the alarm clock and the window frame clash anachronistically with the other premodern elements in

the composition. But even if one were to excuse all of this, he continued, a fundamental error remained: the scene described in the poem was based on the perspective of someone lying down *outdoors* and not inside a room.³⁸ It is hard to say whether Feng took this well-intentioned if laborious critique to heart. The evidence would suggest not; when Zikai included a new version of the picture in *New Paintings for Old Poems*, a book he compiled during the Sino-Japanese War as part of a multivolume collection of his work, it differed from the original only insofar as the brushwork was less “sketchy” and the calligraphic inscription was now in the top lefthand corner and within the frame of the painting.³⁹

The criticisms certainly tell us something about Yu Pingbo’s appreciation, or lack thereof, of Feng Zikai’s painting. They also indicate how sympathetic contemporaries reacted to his art and to his creative and individual approach to the “sister arts” of painting and poetry. Clearly, Yu did not approve of Feng taking lines from high canonical poetic texts out of context and employing them in an art form that was casual and not ordained by tradition; although Zikai may have occasionally referred to the sense of a poem as a whole, at best his was still a seemingly random act of artistic appropriation. Yu was a young writer from a venerable literati family—his grandfather, Yu Yue (1821–1906), was a renowned classical scholar—who would go on to become a noted academic, and it is evident that he expected Feng to retain the mindset or *yijing* of the poems as they were traditionally read, and thus he mistook the very purpose of Feng’s art: recasting popular, almost clichéd, lines of poetry according to his own, contemporary sensibilities in an accessible, visual form.

Yu also found difficult to accept the artist’s inclusion of modern, everyday objects in scenes ostensibly evoked by classical poetry. Although China in the 1920s was a hybrid mix of the old and new, classical and modern, local and foreign, the various attempts to represent the heterogeneous material landscape of the Republic via the medium of traditional ink painting had produced uneven results. Feng had elected to use the manhua sketch rather than the more formal traditional style (which was generally thought to be less accommodating to modern themes) and published them as illustrations in a popular literary journal. Therefore, his approach to creating a syncretic form of art was neither hampered by the traditional stylistic requirements of ink painting, nor subject to the aesthetic standards of connoisseurs, nor indeed limited in the form of their display, for they were not circulated through the marketplace of modern elite art in galleries or at exhibitions. Yu Pingbo focused on the sources from which Zikai was quoting, treating the often hallowed original poems as inviolable; he was responding to the manhua as illustrations of poems, rather than as paintings that moved over

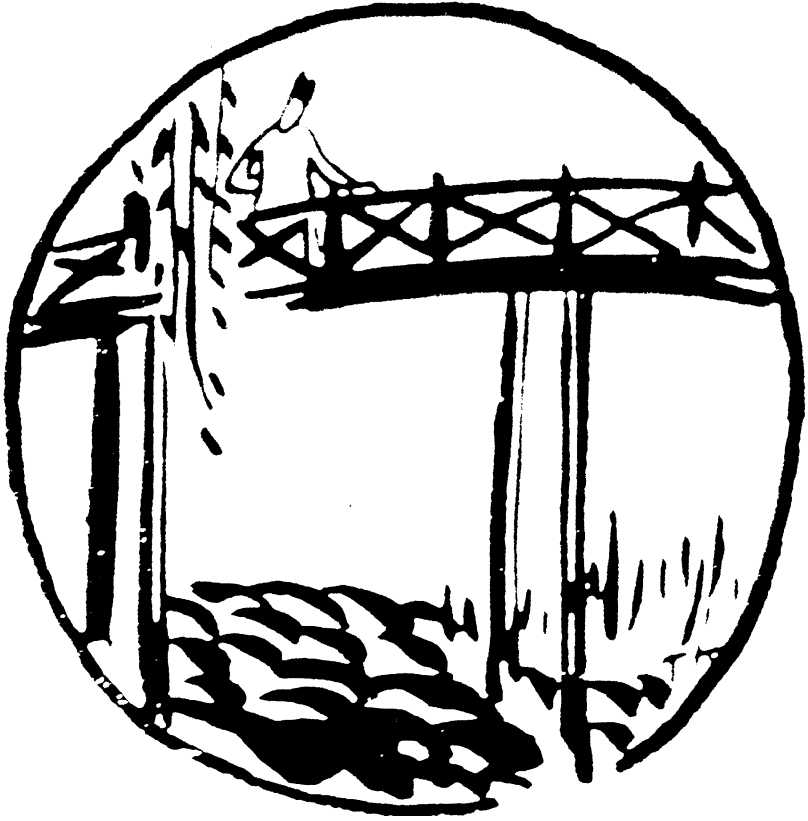
the territory marked out by classical context, refined judgment, modern inspiration, and individual interpretation.

Some of the twenty-seven paintings in the artist's first volume of images, *Zikai manhua*, did, however, take Yu's fancy. They included the cover illustration of the book, "The spring waters flow east," again inspired by a line from Li Houzhu, although the image itself was actually an homage to a painting by Takehisa Yumeji.⁴⁰ The poem is about the passing seasons and nostalgia for the irretrievable past; the painting shows a figure with a shock of hair observing the flowing waters of a river from a modern-looking bridge with a rather preposterously placed willow next to it. The artist has shifted the evocation of fleeting time into a different mode, yet by using a line that would have certainly been familiar to his audience he lays claim to its traditional resonances. At the same time he creates a sufficient distance between the poem and the modern reader to allow the artist to free the powerful image of the original from any simplistic assertion that the poetic sentiment had to remain bound to its original poetic context. It is in the use of this new dimension of space and time that Feng so successfully reinterprets the poems he quotes.

Although elicited by the sights and sounds of the adult world, many of Feng's paintings of poetry were created in the style of childhood reminiscences. They were often the result not of some direct, external stimulation, but rather of a scene that recalled a familiar verse of poetry that Feng felt he could and had to depict through *manhua*. In a sense, in the early days of his painting career Feng used the lines of poetry as a device in his quest for self-expression, just as brush and paper were his concrete medium; by using them, not only did he instill a personal and contemporary interpretation into an old poem, but he also extracted a new meaning from a well-worn and widely recognized sentiment, disguising it in an old medium, which was being reinvented in a popular guise through his art. It was here that Feng Zikai saw anew what seemed familiar, and found a language of his own—a graphic artistic vocabulary closer to the vernacular culture that had risen with the Republic, creating thereby a visual style that revealed the customary through a vision that was extraordinary.

The poetic inscriptions on the pictures were executed in a calligraphy as willowy and casual as the strokes of the paintings themselves. As François Cheng has observed in his discussion of the work of the poet-painter in Chinese scholar-art,

We see that there is no discontinuity between the written and the painted elements, both of which are composed of strokes, and drawn with the same brush. These inscribed ideograms are an integral part of the picture; they are not perceived as a simple ornament or a commen-



"The spring waters flow east," by Feng Zikai, signed TK. Feng Zikai, *Zikai manhua*, cover illustration.

tary projected from without. Participating in the ordering of the whole, the lines of the poems truly "open" the blank space, while introducing a new dimension. This dimension we may qualify as the temporal, to the extent to which the lines, according to a linear reading, reveal beyond the spatial image the painter's memory of his inspiration, his successive perceptions of a dynamic landscape. Their rhythmic incantation, unrolling itself in time, carries a contradiction to the name "silent poetry" for the painting. They open the space, open it to a lived time, a time ceaselessly renewed. By harmonizing poetry and painting, the Chinese poet-painter succeeds in creating a complete and organic universe in four dimensions.⁴¹

Feng Zikai was one of a number of artists who consciously attempted to interpret a traditional art form through a modern and relevant medium, in

the process reshaping it as a vehicle for self-expression. He argued that just as the vernacular had replaced the classical written language during the early years of the Republic, there was no reason why a similar change should not also transform the world of art.

Are we supposed to believe that with a writing brush and hand-made paper you can only depict the classical world? . . . Why should Chinese artists in the twentieth century dare only to paint the world as it was before the fifteenth? . . .

Why must we in the modern world demand of Chinese painting that it continue to lose itself in the adulation of a natural beauty that can be found only deep in the mountains? There is absolutely no reason why it should not venture forth into our sullied human sphere and depict the sorrows and joys of life, and thereby bring the two closer together.⁴²

Although these words were written in 1934, some fifteen years after the May Fourth incident, Feng's concerns were still very much in keeping with the liberating "humane" or "humanistic" spirit that had been central to the concerns of his colleagues and friends in that earlier time, and which, for a period at least, informed the activities and works of many members of the Literature Research Society.⁴³ Having said this, however, we must not forget that the spirit of Feng Zikai's earliest published work was not consciously or concretely "modern" as much as it was contemporary. His adaptations of poetic lines were stylistically simple, even naïve in the way they pursued the uncultivated and clumsy, or *zhuo*, so prized in literati art, and although there were contemporary elements in his work—at times one finds a city scene, fashionable dress, or mass-manufactured objects—he made no attempt to include cars, airplanes, or chimneys in pictures that were essentially lyrical; they were to come later. Rather, the motivating force of both his artistic practice and the ways in which he spoke of it was a melding of his own concerns with a revived, populist scholar-art sensibility. Indeed, he described the manner in which he created his manhua in language strikingly similar to that used by traditional artists:

At times a vague and fleeting vision would appear before me. I would take up my brush and immediately set to capturing it in ink, but I would only manage to sketch an outline before the vision faded. All I had caught on paper was a rough impression; the face [of the figure depicted] would be incomplete. But that is why it was a true expression of my vision, and there was no need to add any more details. Once I tried altering a painting that I had done some time earlier, but I only succeeded in making a very different picture from the original image

that had come to me; the painting was ruined. I realized that the ancients were right when they said, "Express the idea without the brush having to run its full course."⁴⁴

Zikai was describing here the role of what William Willetts calls the "eidetic image," the afterimage of an object that an artist mentally projects before painting, which plays such a crucial role in the process of creativity in scholar-art.⁴⁵ When talking about the manhua-sketch, Zikai said that the artist had to achieve the complete, intuitive expression of his impressions, as well as to create a work that would allow the viewer full play of his or her imagination. "It is crucial that the part of the painting not depicted be [filled in] by the imagination of the viewer; thus a work must be rich in its subtlety, and allow for a depth of meaning."⁴⁶ Such statements parallel some of the oldest tenets of Chinese art, in particular the concept that the artist should aim to "transmit the spirit" *chuan shen* of objects or a scene rather than attempting merely to "convey the outward form" *chuan xing*. Treatises and commentaries written over the past millennium provide numerous examples of such statements. The Southern Song critic Deng Chun, for example, writing in the "Miscellaneous Sayings" section of *Compendium on Art*, a collection of artists' biographies, concluded that,

By revolving their thoughts and preparing the brush . . . painters can represent the characteristics of everything, but there is only one method by which it can be done thoroughly and exhaustively. Which is that? It is called the transmitting of the spirit. . . . Guo Ruoxu despised deeply the works of common men. He said that though they were called paintings, they were not painting [as art], because they transmit only the forms but not the spirit.⁴⁷

Apart from Feng Zikai's statements and the evidence in his manhua, there is another clue that by the mid-1920s the painter was thinking of his work very much in terms of traditional artistic practice and perception, as understood from his reading of art theory. In "The Unique Character of Chinese Art," an article written in October 1926, he says,

As I have seen so few examples of [the Tang poet-painter Wang Wei's] paintings, I cannot comment on them at length. Yet based on what one can gather from commentaries and records it is clear that he was not interested in creating a faithful copy of nature. His genius lay instead in using nature to express the poetic vision of his mind He did not have the ingenuity of Li Sixun, who would spend months carefully detailing the landscape of three hundred *li* of the Jialing River; rather his was the vitality of a Wu Daozi, whose powerful brush could achieve its

purpose in a day. This is because he was depicting a landscape that lay within himself, and to achieve that it was necessary to use an impromptu method, the sketch. A hillock would appear in his mind, and he would paint it immediately; . . . this is what is meant by the statement “there is poetry in his painting.”⁴⁸

Questions of inspiration and poetic resonance were not the only issues that vexed Feng as he chose to articulate his efforts in the context of Chinese artistic practice. And theories about art, whether classical or modern, were for Feng Zikai the pedagogue often an important adjunct to the hectic schedule he maintained at the Li Da Academy and the other colleges and schools around Shanghai at which he was teaching.

In 1929, he gave a series of lectures on art appreciation, which he subsequently published as essays in the popular magazine *High School Student*.⁴⁹ Much of Feng’s writing on art in the late 1920s and 1930s was similarly aimed at adolescent students, the young people whom he, as a teacher, felt were being increasingly subjected to the transient political and cultural fashions of the day, and who were in particular need of art education, not necessarily so they could become artists or critics, but so they could develop what he called “an artistic or sympathetic heart, a heart of openness and honesty.”⁵⁰

Art is not a question of technique; it is a question of the spirit. It is not a component of the practical world, but the most refined activity that functions outside the scope of the everyday world. . . . In studying art, one’s aim is not to exercise the hand and wrist, but to cultivate the eye and heart [*xin*, or heart-mind]. To look at a painting one does not need the eye, but the heart.⁵¹

It was a view that echoed one of the central dicta of traditional artistic thought: that painting, or for that matter writing, is essentially a matter for the heart and mind *xin*, not merely a question of technical virtuosity. The relationship between the quality of the artist’s personality or character *renpin* and painting *huapin* had been much discussed from the time of Guo Ruoxu of the Song dynasty. During Feng’s high school years, Chen Shizeng had confirmed the importance of personal quality in the artist’s work; while in Hangzhou, Li Shutong had impressed upon his students the importance of the correlation between *renpin* and *huapin*.⁵²

In an influential essay on literati painting, for example, Chen made the point that “the essence of scholar-art lies in personal quality, scholarship, talent, and intellect. . . . Only by combining these qualities can a work of art actually touch others. This is what is known in modern aesthetics as *Einfühlungstheorie*, or *ganqing yiru*.”⁵³ In keeping with elite intellectual traditions,

Chen Shizeng called for the refinement of popular tastes, clothing his demands in a particularly Chinese new Enlightenment narrative that sought to equate high tradition with European cultural achievement. He believed that only if people searched out the essence of scholar-art, rather than constantly attempting to justify its abiding value in terms of its modern “scientific relevance,” would Chinese art be saved from stagnation and marginalization.⁵⁴

In mentioning *Einfühlungstheorie* Chen was referring to the aesthetic thought of philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Theodore Lipps, which had been introduced to China by the educationalist Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), one of the many figures who had given guest lectures at Chunhui High School in Shangyu when Zikai was teaching there. When he inaugurated the Peking University Art Research Society in 1918, Cai had proposed that “aesthetic education should replace religion” and that “the art educator should apply the theory of aesthetics in education, the aim being to mould a person’s emotions.” Including the promotion of art education, the introduction of art classes in school curricula, and the establishment of art societies, Cai’s agenda complemented that of other cultural leaders and activists at the time who wanted to use the arts to transform society and inculcate a new sense of nationhood among the people of China. According to this strategy, Cai believed that, “Refined in taste and edified in morality, the individual will relinquish the egoistic tendency to benefit himself or herself at the expense of others. The individual so refined will be ready to join his or her fellow citizens in a community of noble feeling and morality to form a better society.”⁵⁵ The Art Research Society produced a biennial *Art Magazine*, the first issue of which carried Chen Shizeng’s “The Value of Literati Painting,” quoted above.

As we noted earlier, while Li Shutong inculcated in his students a powerful interest in sketching and Western art, he also impressed upon them the importance of moral cultivation, using the traditional neo-Confucian language that depicted the relationship between artistic excellence and moral rectitude, albeit one that had been recast within the context of a modernizing educational system.⁵⁶ Feng’s view of the value and teaching of art in the 1920s and again from the late 1930s, when he returned to teaching after a period of semiretirement, was, however, more in keeping with the pursuit of nonutilitarian artistic cultivation than with Cai’s progressive and positivistic uses of aesthetics, as applied to the enterprise of transforming individuals for the sake of modernizing the nation.

My art classes are not aimed at achieving practical results. I put an emphasis on something that is quite indirect: I do not demand of my stu-

dents that they learn painting for some specific end; rather I hope to nurture in them a heart that can appreciate beauty.⁵⁷

“A Talk on Art Inspired by Plum Blossoms,” one of the lectures Feng published in 1929, was concerned with an important aspect of traditional Chinese art and his own understanding of it: the use of conventional motives like the plum blossom to represent an idealized vision of an object. Once again he explained his views in terms of the intersection of poetry and painting, beginning with a reference to Yang Wujiu (twelfth century), a Song artist noted for his paintings of plum blossoms, and the poet Jiang Kui (ca. 1155–1221), whose song-lyric poems on plums, “Hidden Scent” and “Sparse Shadows,” are among the most famous depictions of the flower in Chinese literature.

The moon’s hue of days gone by—
 I wonder how often it shone on me
 playing my flute beside the plums?
 It called awake that woman, white marble,
 and heedless of cold,
 together we snapped off sprays.
 But now this poet grows old,
 and the pen that once wrote songs
 of the breeze in spring
 is utterly forgotten;
 I’m just intrigued by those sparse blooms
 over beyond the bamboo,
 how their chill scent
 seeps into party mats.

These river lands now
 lie somber and still.
 And I sigh
 to send them to someone traveling far,
 as tonight their snow begins to heap high.
 With kingfisher cups
 and easily brought to tears,
 restive, I recall
 pink petals that never speak.
 I always think back where we once held hands;
 where the freight of a thousand trees weighed
 on West Lake’s cold sapphire.
 Now petal by petal once more
 they all blow away,
 never again to be seen.⁵⁸

To fall under the spell of a poem like “Hidden Scent” quoted here, or of the paintings of ancient artists, Feng tells his students and readers, “is to appreciate a feeling more subtle than the real object could ever afford.” After referring to Oscar Wilde’s opinion in “The Decay of Lying” that “life imitates art,” and citing a number of examples to further elucidate his point—one such case being that ever since Takehisa Yumeji started painting girls with large eyes, young Japanese women all have almond-shaped eyes!—Zikai claims, in what is again a mix of traditional scholarly elitism and romantic hauteur, “that artists are so often more sensitive [than common people]; they are so often ahead of their time. Artists can depict the future, and it is merely left to other people to realize their vision.” Still very much in the vein of Wilde’s comments on the relationship between life and art, he says, “Ever since plum blossoms were depicted by Yang Wujiu and Jiang Kui, those flowers have been gradually becoming more beautiful. Without doubt plums are far more beautiful today than they ever were at the time of the Song.”⁵⁹ It is a sentiment highly reminiscent of Wilde’s arch comments on the fog in London:

Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. . . . At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.⁶⁰

The accumulation of inscribed cultural beauty in painting and art through the ages was something that for Feng could only be appreciated by those who had been trained to see it, and this required above all a sense of *quwei*—zest, taste, or interest. The concept of *quwei* was central to his developing artistic philosophy and one that was prominent among the literary friends to whom he was increasingly attracted in the 1920s.

Zikai’s first published essay on art, “The Artist’s Life,” which appeared in 1920, had emphasized that any artistic originality required “a unique *quwei*,” or sensibility, and without this crucial element “an independent spirit, the freedom to create, and all the time in the world will be of no avail.”⁶¹ The championing of *quwei* had often been expressed in such extreme and dramatic terms. When discussing the aesthetic training of the modernizing Chinese in “Art and Life,” for example, Liang Qichao had categorically stated, “You may ask, ‘What do people live for?’ And I can answer without hesitation: *quwei*.” Liang explained that there were three ways in which the indi-

vidual could realize *quwei*: first through the re-creation of an aesthetic experience; secondly, from the memory of a feeling or the observation of another's enjoyment of *quwei*; and thirdly, by creating an independent world of the spirit. "For the writer that may mean they have to create a Peach Blossom Valley [like Tao Yuanming]," Liang remarked. "For the philosopher it is to postulate a utopia, while for the religious-minded, it is found in heaven or in the Buddhist pure land. In an instant one transcends the world of reality and enters an ideal realm, a place where you are truly free. One way to achieve such a state is through the pursuit of *quwei*." According to this view, the means for inculcating an individual's sensitivity to *quwei* was also threefold: through a training in literature, music, and art.⁶² In what appears to be a paraphrase of Liang's remarks, the young aesthete Zhu Guangqian, Feng Zikai's old colleague and friend, wrote in a widely read series of open letters to high-school students published in 1926, "The happiest person in the world is not merely the most active but also the most receptive person. What I mean by being receptive is a person who can find *quwei* in life."⁶³

Like Zhu, Feng Zikai believed that artistic instruction, a cultivation of the sense of *quwei*, and the nurturing of "a heart that appreciates beauty" were the keys to any successful education and a happy life. When the teachers at the Li Da Academy launched *Equals* in September 1926, they declared in the publication announcement in the first issue that their aim was to provide readers with "articles that, above all, express *quwei*."⁶⁴

When Zheng Zhenduo visited the Li Da Academy with the editors and writers Ye Shengtao (Shaojun, 1894–1988) and Hu Yuzhi (1896–1986) to see Feng's manhua, with the aim of selecting some pictures for publication in *Literature Weekly*, a number of students joined the impromptu gathering. Zheng observed that this private exhibition was a display of the most *qu* (poetic flavor or intense interest) he had ever encountered.⁶⁵ Xia Mianzun too noted in an essay that was used to preface one of Feng Zikai's collections that the artist's mentor Li Shutong (now the monk Hongyi) could find *wei*, flavor, allure, or interest—often a shorthand for the expression *quwei*—in everything. No matter what he ate, wore, or used, he was able to give himself over to enjoying its particular flavor or essence because he knew how to treat life as a form of art. Only people who could approach life with this attitude of engaged delight or interest could be real artists. It was in this melding of life with culture that art and religion intersected in the everyday world. Xia Mianzun said that he found a similar talent for searching out *quwei* in Zikai, and that his work, as well as his daily life, were suffused with *quwei*.⁶⁶ Feng eventually chose to call a volume of his collected essays on art *The Quwei of Art*.⁶⁷

However, Feng's belief in the importance of *quwei* and the need he felt to instill it in others would increasingly bring him into conflict with his avowedly revolutionary contemporaries. Rou Shi (the pen name of Zhao Pingfu, 1902–31) was a young leftwing writer and artist and a fellow graduate of the Zhejiang First Normal College in Hangzhou. After a fugitive career as an educationalist in Zhejiang, Rou Shi moved to Shanghai in the late 1920s, where he found employment editing various literary journals and working on translation projects under the aegis of Lu Xun. The older writer, a literary celebrity and patron of the left, became his sponsor and even something of a father figure to the aspiring young man. Soon Rou Shi was an active member of the Left League of Writers. He eventually joined the Communist Party, sponsored by his friend Feng Xuefeng (1903–76), a cultural agent working for the party.

In 1930, Rou Shi denounced Feng Zikai in a truculent article in the short-lived journal *Shoots*. By this time debates in the literary world had moved on from the endless wrangling over technique and genre and were more than ever concerned with the impact of cultural works on the public. Rou Shi's critique opened with a comment on the artist's ruminations regarding plum blossoms:

What he is saying in these essays is that young students should abandon their textbooks and become besotted with plum flowers. He seems to hint that if they fail to do so they will lose whatever it is that makes them human. . . . When I read this stuff I can't help wondering whether we are being addressed by one of the ancients, or have Lin Pu and Jiang Kui suddenly learned how to write in the vernacular?⁶⁸

Threatened by imperialism and caught in the struggle with the bourgeoisie, a class that was "on a road that led to oblivion," Rou Shi declared that Chinese students who were willing to abandon their textbooks should not be encouraged to stop and look at the flowers; it was far more important that they learn about the world around them and understand the imperiled society in which they lived.

After visiting members of the oppressed classes, people who are forced to live in boats on the river, they might do well to take the time to observe the white-capped American sailors who roam the streets of Shanghai in pedicabs, twirling their batons. They are the same batons that they use to trounce rickshaw boys whenever they feel they're going too slow. I think this kind of educational excursion would be far more beneficial and thought-provoking for the young than gazing at plum blossoms. . . . At least they wouldn't end up being as woolly-headed as Feng Zikai obviously was when he wrote his essays.⁶⁹

Such an onslaught was typical of the increasingly militant style of critical prose that became common in the small but vocal left-leaning media from the 1920s onwards; it was also characteristic of the ideological animadversion to which Feng Zikai was subjected throughout his life. Although there is no evidence to suggest that he changed the direction of his work as a result of Rou Shi's vituperation, by 1929 Zikai's interest in making paintings inspired by poems was waning, as he gradually found new themes in his experiences as a teacher and resident of Shanghai.

This is not to say, however, that Feng Zikai abandoned poetry as a vehicle for and inspiration of his art, for he continued to create paintings with poetic inscriptions throughout his life, although not with quite the energy or unstudied grace of his earlier works. In 1943, he produced a final volume of pictures born from lines of classical poetry. Entitled, appropriately enough, *Poetry in Paintings*, Feng introduced the book by restating his reasons for favoring a style of art that had motivated so much of his early work:

When reading the poetry of the ancients, I often feel that some of their best lines are equally a description of the lives of modern people, or that they have spoken on my behalf. It is certainly true that poetry expresses deep emotions and, moreover, that human feelings have not changed throughout the ages. Therefore, good poetry is forever new and fresh, no matter how old it may be. This is what people mean when they speak of there being such things as "immortal works."⁷⁰

Although he gradually found themes for his art in the wider world, if anything, Feng Zikai's interest in *quwei* continued to grow. In the 1920s and 1930s, a few nonaligned members of the May Fourth generation repeatedly stressed the development of the individual, or the humanism that they identified as being a central ethos of the intellectual revolution of the early Republic, and they too encapsulated the mood of the culture and the personal style they favored in the words *qu* or *quwei*.⁷¹ Two of the leading proponents of the philosophy of *quwei* were the writers and editors Zhou Zuoren and Lin Yutang (1895–1976), men who were to play a pivotal role in helping Feng Zikai find a forum and an audience for his work. For their part, they identified *quwei* as having been prefigured in the writings of a group of late-Ming scholars; in particular they found evidence for it in the casual essays (or "minor pieces" *xiaopin*) of the poet and critic Yuan Hongdao (*zi* Zhonglang, 1568–1610) of Gongan County in present-day Hubei province.

A writer who was critical of the antiquarian and imitative literary style of his day, Hongdao and his two brothers (Zongdao, 1560–1624, and Zhongdao, 1570–1624) were known as the Three Yuans of Gongan, and they used their literary club in Beijing, the Grape Society, as a forum for literary reform.⁷² Hongdao said of the concept that was so central to their artistic sensibility,

This zest [*qu*] for living is more born in us than cultivated. Children have most of it. They have probably never heard of the word “zest,” but they show it everywhere. They find it hard to look solemn; they wink, they grimace, they mumble to themselves, they jump and skip and hop and romp. That is why childhood is the happiest period of a man’s life, and why Mencius spoke of “recovering the heart of a child” and Laozi referred to it as a model of man’s original nature.⁷³

Among Feng Zikai’s contemporaries, Zhu Guangqian even went so far as to say, “I’ve never been worried by fools, nor by overly clever people, but I’ve always felt it to be pure torture to have to engage in polite conversation with people who are lacking in *quwei*.”⁷⁴ The main proponent of this modern “cult of *quwei*,” however, was Zhou Zuoren, who praised the liberating power of a newly identified literary and artistic tradition that rejected ideological strictures and narrow orthodoxies, while reaffirming the status and taste of a cultural elite. He regarded the Three Yuan Brothers as the literary forerunners of the May Fourth cultural revolution, although he was soon taken to task for such views by the critic He Kai, who regarded the “literature of *quwei*” as both harmful to the nation—as it distracted readers from the more pressing issues of the day—and irredeemably self-indulgent.

Zhou Zuoren is an extreme individualist and, as a result, is neither as energetic nor as daring as his brother [Lu Xun] in opposing the powers that be. There is always something weak and reclusive in his attitude; he exudes the style of the dilettante, and has become a loyal advocate for the bourgeoisie.⁷⁵

For Zhou the word *quwei* meant variously “taste,” a somewhat contrived translation of the English term and, among other things, “discernment.”⁷⁶ One of his observations on this subject is of particular relevance to our appreciation of Feng Zikai’s evolving aesthetic approach in the 1920s:

I believe that the national essence can be divided into two parts. The heredity of *quwei* is alive and commingled with our very blood. There is no way we can discard it; it finds expression in all of our words and deeds, and there is no need to preserve it, for it simply is. Then there is that dead portion—the morals and habits of the past, which cannot be

accommodated with the present. There is no need to preserve this, nor indeed is there any way to preserve it.⁷⁷

By this time, Yu Pingbo was regarded as another purveyor of *quwei*. Zhu Ziqing, struggling to define his friend's place on the contemporary scene in an introductory essay for a volume of Hangzhou-inspired essays and poems published by Yu in 1928, wrote:

Recently when talking about Pingbo someone observed that his attitude and style are highly reminiscent of some Ming-dynasty scholar-officials. Of course, I knew they were referring to late-Ming literati like Zhang Dai [1599–?1684] and Wang Siren [1575–1646]. I cannot say for sure what the chief characteristics of those writers should be, but if one were to attempt a definition in our modern colloquial language perhaps you could say they “put *quwei* above all else.” . . . I should point out, however, that Pingbo has never consciously imitated them; rather he shares with them a deep-seated sympathy that is a matter of both attitude and personality.⁷⁸

Lin Yutang and Zhou Zuoren had become involved in a loose coalition of like-minded writers from the late 1920s, who through their casual essays, their *causerie*, and their lectures and publications, attempted to counter the didactic and propagandist tendencies of the revenant vernacular culture—which they saw as representing both regressive and iconoclastic tendencies in a modern form—by advocating “self-expression” and a “leisurely” style of intimate essays and prose writing.⁷⁹ Their search for cultural exemplars was partially a reaction to the attempts by many literary activists (at times including themselves) to identify artistic paragons who would inspire a transformation in the cultural life of the nation. The European powers could all boast their poetic and literary geniuses, it was argued, be they Dante, Goethe, or Shakespeare, and in comparison China seemed to be sorely lacking. Thus, when Zhou Zuoren and Lin Yutang began to promote the writings of the late-Ming Yuan brothers, they were also advertising their discovery of native genius and a lineage to which they as modern Chinese writers (the progeny, literally or emotionally, of the defunct cultural elite) belonged. It was therefore a search for self-identity that was imbricated with an affirmation of perceived national traditions and self-worth.

In Feng Zikai's essays the words *qu* or *quwei* are often interchangeable with the expressions *xingqu* or *xingwei*.⁸⁰ In the early 1930s he became a contributor to weekly literary magazines established along the lines of *The New Yorker* that Lin Yutang founded and edited, shaping them as vehicles for an urbane “literature of leisure” *xianshi wenxue*, which would appeal

to readers through a combination of post-literati culture with a knowing and mellow cosmopolitan modernism. The Lin magazines *The Analects* and *Human Affairs* were only two of the many ventures in Shanghai that sought to couple a translated sensibility with a strong local identity, even a reformulated nationalism. As a writer for these journals, Feng was thus soon identified as yet another practitioner of the nonpolitical essay, a voice speaking in the diction of highly personal “self-expression,” *yanzhi* in Zhou Zuoren’s terminology, or *xingling*, a term favored by Lin Yutang, which was borrowed from the vocabulary of the Yuan brothers.⁸¹ In 1933, Zikai even went so far as to classify himself publicly as an “amateur” or “dilettante” who found his *xingwei* in the use of literature or poetry in painting (“literary painting” as he called it, his particular version of contemporary scholar-art), despite the fact that he was by then a successful professional artist.⁸² However, regardless of this cultivated braggadocio, he had known for many years that the *quwei* that he and his fellows so strenuously pursued was expressed in its most unadulterated form not among the public advocates of *qu*, but in his family, in particular among his children:

Interest or fascination *xingwei* is something that helps grown-ups face life. In the case of children, however, *xingwei* is far more than that, for it is the motivating force of their very existence.⁸³