

## INTRODUCTION

Among a small group of contemporary Chinese artists who have obtained world-wide renown, Lu ShengZhong is unique in his quest to express individuality and contemporaneity through a Chinese vernacular art form - the art of paper-cutting. The other artists in this group all derive their idioms from elite traditions, whether traditional Chinese ink painting or western conceptual art; Lu ShengZhong has been insisting on rediscovering the potential of a folk art tradition that is associated mainly with illiterate peasant women. On the other hand, his quest also has little to do with the Maoist doctrine of creating art for the masses by adopting grassroots styles, because his reinterpretation of paper-cutting is highly individualistic and aims to express his personal understanding of some fundamental human values.

This unique position explains Lu ShengZhong's self-imposed solitude over the past 15 years. His first major exhibition in 1988 transformed China's National Art Gallery into a temple filled with totem-like images, footprints suspended in mid-air, and silhouette patterns accompanied by illegible writing. The grand spectacle of this exhibition astonished Beijing's art critics, but Lu ShengZhong sensed no victory and kept describing his art as "a lonely struggle along a desolate path."<sup>1</sup> In a longer explanation of this exhibition he wrote:

Exerting the utmost strength I squeeze out of a marketplace filled with contentious crowds, and find a silent, forgotten little path to walk on. Intrigued by unfamiliarity and longing, I follow it to retrieve original characteristics of humankind that have been filtered out by civilization, to summon images of lost souls in the polluted air, to understand the spiritual pursuit of mankind in its infancy, and to search for the deep connections linking my native land with the rest of the world. All my effort is to nourish the empty, worn heart of modern man with the unspoiled blood of an ancient culture.

Thus suddenly I gain confidence, because in my mind I have paved a spiritual path for today's art.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, Lu ShengZhong has been following this artistic path. He has also traveled to many countries to stage shows large and small. The current exhibition in New York is his first appearance in America; he has decided to present some older projects that he first conceptualized in the late 1980s. I believe there are two reasons behind this decision. The first -- as he explains in his article in this catalogue -- is that these projects constituted a foundation for all his later artistic experiments; they should also constitute a foundation for a long-term relationship between him and his American audience. The second reason -- which he does not mention in his article but which to me is more essential -- can be found in the dynamic life cycle of paper-cutting: an old design continues its vitality through endless recreation and variation. Anyone familiar with Chinese paper-cutting knows



that the essence of this art lies in its constant renewal. Year after year, remaking paper-cuts at holidays and festivals, weddings and funerals marks the passage of time and punctuates people's lives.

This exhibition thus allows us to reflect upon some basic elements in Lu ShengZhong's art, which also intimate what he has found most essential to the art of paper-cutting. The first element is the dynamic relationship between positive and negative forms, which are always created simultaneously in the making of a paper-cut. To Lu ShengZhong, the significance of this art never resides in either the positive or negative image alone, but must be realized through these two forms together, which come from a single piece of paper and are always linked in a conceptual whole. The relationship between these two forms offers him an ontological model enriched by countless metaphors: the body and the soul, image and text, dark and light, substance and emptiness, yin and yang. These various conceptual and metaphorical associations then become the "themes" of his various projects.

The second basic element in Lu ShengZhong's art is related to the materiality of paper-cutting. First, this art always generates tension between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality: although a seemingly weightless paper-cut is easily conceived as "two-dimensional," it differs essentially from a painted image adhering to a flat surface. No matter how thin a paper-cut is, it still possesses volume and still has a front and back. When Lu ShengZhong attaches a paper-cut to a board or makes it freestanding on the ground, he associates it with painting and sculpture, respectively, yet always contests its relationship with these two art forms. Second, a paper-cut is always imbued with the sense of fragility: it is ephemeral, vulnerable to fire, rips, and all sorts of natural and human disasters. Not coincidentally, we find that "fragility" has often become the subject matter of Lu ShengZhong's work, expressed sometimes in displaying damaged images in an exhibition and sometimes in a voluntary destruction of his paper images.

The third and last basic element in Lu ShengZhong's art is the temporal, meditative nature of paper-cutting. He has repeated many times in his writing a conversation he had with a peasant woman back in the mid-80s. When he asked her what she was thinking while making a paper-cut, she told him: "Nothing, there is really nothing in my mind." In interpreting this answer, Lu ShengZhong approaches paper-cutting as a creative process that involves little emotional urge or rational thinking. In fact, this process is so rudimentary and spontaneous that it can hardly be called "creative": what the woman - and himself - do in making a paper-cut is merely to release part of themselves into an essential visual form.<sup>3</sup>

Wu Hung

Harrie A. Vanderstappen Distinguished Service Professor  
The University of Chicago

1. Lu ShengZhong, "Minjian meishu de jiben gainian" (Basic concept of folk art), *Meishu* (Fine arts), 1987, no. 10. 52.

2. Cited in Lu Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo xiandai yishu shi 1979-1989* (A History of contemporary Chinese art 1979-1989) (Changsha: Hunan Meishu Chubanshe, 1992), 320.

3. See Lu ShengZhong, *Mihun ji* (On searching the soul) (Changsha: Hunan Meishu Chubanshe, 1996). 205.