



# INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

## **ICS Special Lecture: Artist Xu Beihong and His Family in Mao's China**

**Speaker:** Xu Fangfang

**Date:** 11 January 2019

**Venue:** Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA)

Director ICS, Amb Ashok Kantha, opened the special lecture by greeting Mme. Madam Xu Fangfang and introducing the audience to her and her illustrious father, Xu Beihong. Xu is renowned as the most influential Chinese artist and art educator in twentieth-century China. He also congratulated Madam Xu, on the occasion of the publication of her new book, *Galloping Horses: Artist Xu Beihong and his Family in Mao's China*. He invited her to speak on her book as well as enlighten the audience on the particularly strong India connection that her father had.

Picking up the thread from there, Mme. Xu said she was happy to be in India and to continue her father's journey that started way back in 1939. She sought to introduce the audience to some of his works, and employed a presentation in doing so. Xu was well known for his ink brush paintings, which Mme. Xu claimed captured the sorrows, joys and hopes of the Chinese people. Xu however was influenced by many external techniques and inspirations. Most importantly, he was centrally moved to improve the state of art in China by incorporating these techniques in Chinese traditions and themes. Xu's sojourn to India also left a big mark on his painting style. Horses were always a favorite subject for the artist; however their depiction saw notable change after Xu's stay in Darjeeling, and a particularly memorable trip taken to Kashmir on horseback. Mme. Xu drew the audience's attention to the long sinewy legs, lean yet anatomically strong physique, and the wild and exuberant

nature of the animal as depicted in *Galloping Horses* (1940). This is in contrast to the classical depiction of horses as being plump, groomed and tamed creatures in traditional Chinese art.

Mme. Xu spoke in some measure about the significance of Xu Beihong's stay in Shantiniketan. Xu held Shantiniketan as a centre of art and culture, and was much impressed by Rabindranath Tagore's initiative to expose Indian students to Eastern art forms and culture. He himself sought to make the most of his stay, and 'receive the great gifts that India may have to bestow upon [his] country and people'. As part of their mutual regard for each other, Tagore lauded Xu Beihong's contributions to Chinese art. Mme. Xu stated that Xu's instruction in Kala Bhavan, was appreciated by all, as everyone would gather to witness the teaching of Chinese ink brush techniques and calligraphy. She proceeded to show the audience a selection of Xu Beihong's works and give context to each painting. This selection included *Portrait of M. K. Gandhi* (1940), *Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore* (1940), *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains* (1940), *Sound of the Flute* (1926), *Boy with Buffaloes* (1931), *Spring rain in Li River* (1937), *Wounded Liao* (1938), *Tiger and Rabbit* (1935), *Against the Wind* (1936), and *Tian Heng and his 500 Retainers* (1930) among others. This selection sampled different styles and subjects that Xu Beihong involved in his oeuvre. In his graphite sketches and ink-brush paintings, his style incorporated a simple, direct and unadorned depiction of the subject. Mme. Xu clarified that even in this simplicity, Xu picked up particular details that were significant while maintaining a sense of the whole. In his oil paintings, he mastered western techniques like perspective, chiaroscuro and color mixing to illustrate traditional Chinese subjects like scenes from Chinese epics, fables and poetry. A great portion of his oeuvre include paintings of animals. Mme. Xu told the audience of the deeper meanings, analogies and symbolism operating in such artwork. *Wounded Liao* (1938) depicts a lion captured with a very particular expression and posture. The lion symbolized the Chinese people, as they were subjected to the Japanese invasion – wounded yet with a characteristically inexorable resilience.

There were two central themes that animated Xu's corpus of artwork – first, that external influences like western techniques could be incorporated to advance Chinese painting. Secondly, he advocated for realism in art, which meant that art ought to explore what is important in people's lives instead of being rigidly wedded to a particular tradition. Due to his strong views on the role of art in Chinese society, he faced a fair share of critics. Having been a pioneer in revitalizing Chinese art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Xu Beihong nonetheless beheld

considerable clout. He became the president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1949. However, Mme. Xu claims that this prestigious position didn't insulate him from a complicated power struggle in which the role of art was being re-evaluated in Mao's China. The turbulent Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) posed as one of the toughest tests for Xu's oeuvre. Mme. Xu claims her book, *Gallop ing Horses*, makes a novel effort to record the personal experience of a modern Chinese artist, and the trials and tribulations that his family and his work were put through in the midst of the chaos launched by the Cultural Revolution. She revealed that in his lifetime, Xu had developed a close relationship with Zhou Enlai, and it was Zhou Enlai's intervention that helped save the collection of Xu's work from being destroyed or confiscated in the Red Guards' led raid on the Xu family home in 1966. During the Cultural Revolution, centres of artistic instruction, such as the preparatory school Mme. Xu attended to learn playing the piano, were shut down. She along with her brother were sent to the countryside to a re-education camps instead.

She ended her presentation on a positive note, positing that perhaps surviving this grim experience affirmed a new-found confidence and strength to face all forthcoming challenges. On this note, Amb. Kantha thanked Mme. Xu for an interesting perspective on Xu Beihong's life and works. He opened the floor for questions and comments from the audience. The presentation drew interesting comments from the audience, with one member commending Mme. Xu's efforts in documenting her experience during the Cultural Revolution, instead of conveniently drawing 'a veil of silence over the historical period of turmoil'. A second comment was made regarding the difficulty faced by an audience member in securing a print of Xu Beihong's work in Beijing and Shanghai, during a recent trip to China. A question was posed whether M. F. Hussain, as a modern Indian painter, was influenced by Xu Beihong's sojourn to India in 1940. Mme. Xu answered that while there is no record of M. F. Hussain being particularly inspired by Xu's stint in India, it is well known that Hussain was inspired by Chinese art in general, and even made a notable visit to China in 1951. With this the event was concluded.

#### **About the Speaker:**

Xu Beihong's daughter, will introduce her memoir. *Gallop ing Horses: Artist Xu Beihong and His Family in Mao's China* describes how Xu Beihong's family and legacy survived the turbulence of Mao's ever-changing policies, which dictated the direction of art and music

from 1949 through the devastating ten-year Cultural Revolution. This book offers untold experiences of Xu Beihong during this period.

Born and raised in China, Xu, Fangfang moved to the U.S. in 1981 and earned a B.A. in history from the University of California, Berkeley, and an M.B.A. from Stanford University. In 2000, she became the founding director of the music department at Renmin University of China. She helped initiate and facilitate the first comprehensive solo U.S. exhibition of her father Xu Beihong's work, presented by the Denver Art Museum, Oct. 2011-Jan. 2012. She has published several articles on Xu Beihong and his art, including "Xu Beihong, Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting" in *Arts of Asia* 42, no. 1 (2012), and "Xu Beihong's Life and Art" in *Xu Beihong: Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting*, Denver Art Museum, 2011.

*This report has been written by Rashmi Muraleedhar, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.*