

**“I am my art; my paintings are me”:
An exploration of the relationship between
the art and life of Irene Chou**

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Statement of originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_____

Lorena Sun Butcher

Abstract

Among the founding members of the New Ink Painting Movement in Hong Kong in the 1960s, Irene Chou (1924–2011) went the furthest in transcending the traditional boundaries of Chinese ink painting. One outstanding feature of Chou’s long career as an artist was that from the beginning of her career to the very end of her life, she continuously shifted from one style of painting to another. After painting sexually charged “landscape paintings”, she began painting line paintings. Just as she became known for her line paintings, Chou abruptly shifted to piled ink paintings. After she moved from Hong Kong to Brisbane, she shifted from painting on the traditional medium of *xuan* paper to painting on silk, board, satin, and even canvas and *ming* paper. As Chou’s work shifted from one medium to another, it became increasingly colourful. Some of her work even verged on being psychedelic. At that point, a critic warned her that she was painting herself into a dangerous zone. Why, this thesis asks, did Chou keep making so many shifts in her work, even though in some cases they appeared to put her career at risk? Most attempts to explain the shifts in Chou’s work have attributed particular shifts in her work to certain major events in her life. For example, her shift from the dark piled ink paintings to the brighter impact structural stroke paintings has been seen as the result of her getting over the death of her husband. Likewise, after her stroke, her shift from painting on *xuan* paper to painting on hemp paper with a greater use of colour was viewed by one critic as the result of Chou’s celebration of a new lease on life. This study demonstrates that there was no one-to-one relationship between the shifts in her work and the major events in her life. By employing an in-depth exploration into Irene Chou’s life and work, relying on the artist as the primary source of data, this study demonstrates that each shift took place for a host of reasons, interacting in a complex way. However, the underlying motivation for Chou to undertake the shifts was always the same: the desire to use her

painting as a way to resolve inner conflicts and at the same time reach a higher level of attainment in her spiritual aspiration. In her art, Chou sought relief from an emotional wound first inflicted during her formative years, which was reopened in her married life. In fact, it was this irrepressible urge, in the face of the lack of a ready-made vernacular in the visual language, to tell the story of a modern Chinese woman that motivated her to develop her own visual language in the first place. The developmental nature of her visual language, namely the readiness of particular techniques, was another reason for certain shifts to take place in her work. But art would merely have been a form of therapy if Chou had not also developed a wider vision of reality. Right at the beginning of her career, she embraced the Song dynasty philosopher Lu Jiuyuan's philosophy of recovering one's original self so that one can be at one with the universe. For Chou, recovering her original self involved not only the practice of *qigong*, which gave her greater access to her inner self, the subject-matter of her whole oeuvre, but also a constant effort to live a life true to her inner self. While the shifts in her work did not have a one-to-one relationship with the major events in her life, the way Chou lived her life in response to these events contributed to the continuous shifts in her work. By living as she painted and painting as she lived, Chou came to achieve what her fellow New Ink painters set out to do: make Chinese ink painting contemporary.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Among the founding members of the New Ink Painting Movement in Hong Kong in the 1960s, Irene Chou became one of the most prominent artists in the colony in the 1980s. She received the Hong Kong Urban Council Award in 1983 and was named the Hong Kong Artist of the Year in 1988. Her work came to represent 1980s Hong Kong art, and her achievement as a contemporary Chinese ink painter was confirmed when two of her works were chosen to represent Hong Kong in the inaugural Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art held at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 1993. Chou was one of the most creative ink painters to have emerged from the New Ink Painting Movement. During her long career, she made so many breakthroughs in her art that she was regarded not only as an innovator but as an artist who had transcended the traditional boundaries of ink painting (King, 2008: 16). This study's purpose is to account for the continuous breakthroughs in Irene Chou's art over her long career by examining the major changes in her life.

Attempts to reform Chinese painting began at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of the overall political, social and language reformation occurring in the country. Among those who attempted to reform Chinese painting were those who believed this artform could be reformed within the tradition, those who believed it should be replaced by Western realism and those who believed it could be created through a synthesis of Eastern and Western ways of painting. Such attempts to reform Chinese art were interrupted by the Japanese occupation of China (1937–45). When mainland China became the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the reform of Chinese painting took different courses of development in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

In Hong Kong in the 1960s, the New Painting Movement, under the leadership of Lui Shou-kwan (1919–75), a painter who was deeply grounded in traditional Chinese painting, once again took up the task of reforming Chinese painting. The New Ink painters did not seek to break away from tradition, but rather to look far back into the long tradition of ink painting, from the literati painters of the Song dynasty (960–1279) to the individualist ink painters of the Ming (1368–1627) and Qing dynasties (1644–1911), for ways to regenerate ink painting. They advocated looking to their own tradition for ways to bring changes to Chinese ink painting, at the same time drawing inspiration from contemporary art movements such as Western modernism to enrich their form, composition and content. They saw much common ground between traditional ink painting and Western modernism, and wanted to develop a genre of painting that continued to paint the traditional subject matter—landscape—using traditional painting tools, but was open to anything that assisted the artist in self-expression, even new media and Western techniques. By the time of Lui’s sudden death in 1975, the New Ink Painting movement had attracted international interest.

While Chou’s achievement as an artist and her contribution to the New Ink Painting movement are widely recognised, several aspects of Chou as an artist have puzzled art critics, art historians and those who admire her work. As a New Ink Painter, she was a paradox because while she was one of the most ardent supporters and practitioners of the New Ink Painting Movement, one of Lui Shou-kwan’s most faithful followers and a key figure in both In Tao Art and the One Art Group, the two art associations made up of Lui’s students and followers, her style of painting follows neither “that of Lui Shou-kwan nor that of her peers” (Zhu, 2005: 202). In fact, her work differs so much from that of her peers that when Lui Jianwei examined the common features shared by the New Ink painters, he decided to exclude Chou (Lui, 2001: 17).

When Chou first became a member of the New Ink Painting movement, she—like her fellow New Ink painters—started painting the traditional subject matter, landscape.

According to Chu, “The development of Chinese ink painting since the twelfth century is bound up with the single dominant theme of landscape.” (Chu, 1988: 28) It is not surprising, then, that in their attempt to bring changes to Chinese painting, the New Ink painters should start with the traditional subject matter. However, unlike her peers, Chou painted surrealistic mountains that were suggestive of sexual organs and metamorphic trees full of sexual connotations; also unlike them, she did not paint landscapes for long. Lui Jianwei observes that, “In the One Art Group Exhibition in 1977 everyone painted landscape, except for Irene Chou.” (Lui, 2001: 17) In 1984, Kao Mayching (1984) noted that, “Irene Chou has totally renounced her claim to traditional modes of landscapes or other subject matter.”

Indeed, once Chou developed her non-realistic abstract language, she began to create images that puzzled her viewers. “Sex symbols—the uterus, the ovaries and cell-like objects suggestive of sperm and nerves are found in every painting” was how Chang Tsong-zung described Chou’s work (Chang, 1988: 289). Art historian Lucy Lim simply called Chou’s work “baffling, ambiguous and paradoxical” (Lim, 1991: 22). “Not the least intriguing thing about Irene Chou,” Michael Sullivan wrote, “is the contrast between the profound, unearthly concepts of her painting and the cheerful serenity of her comments on them.” (Sullivan, 1996: 197) In 2002, Sullivan, who believed “metaphysical concepts expressed in art can be empty, or pretentious”, observed that Chou’s work, despite its metaphysical concepts, was “charged with vitality and joy of her own character” (Sullivan, 2003). Tina Pang, who was the curator for Chou’s 2006 retrospective in Hong Kong, found the “disconnect between what the eyes sees and the mind reads” the greatest challenge when it came to understanding Chou’s work. Despite Chou saying that “I am my art; my paintings are me”, Pang found that her words

“shed remarkably little light on the extraordinary world that she has created in her paintings” (Pang, 2006a: 11).

What puzzled the admirers and critics of Chou’s work even more were the continuous shifts she had made in her work during the long course of her career. Catherine Maudsley commented in 1995 on the pictorial variations in Chou’s work despite the similar themes in her work (Maudsley, 1995: 56). Beginning in the late 1960s with her sexually charged paintings with their twisted branches, sensuous lines, pitch-dark ink patches and fur-like marks, then moving to her *zen*-like minimalistic paintings, and on to the powerful sweeping, whirling cosmic paintings of the late 1980s, Chou continuously made radical shifts in her work. Referring to Chou’s work in the 1980s, Nigel Cameron, an art critic who had followed Chou’s work since the beginning of her career as an artist, wrote that, “Irene Chou’s earlier work belonged to the New Ink Painting movement ... but she has moved on from that quite a long way” (Cameron, 1991: 1).

Chou went on to make even greater shifts in her art after Cameron wrote these words. In addition to painting on traditional *xuan* paper, Chou started in 1993 to produce major work on Japanese-made *xuan* paper or hemp paper. In 1995, critics of Chou’s work began to wonder how far she could go “given the all too mundane limitations of her chosen media” (Munro, 1995: 67). After painting on her hemp paper for six years, Chou suddenly switched to painting on silk, board and satin—media not commonly used in ink painting. With the use of new media, Chou developed new techniques and used new painting tools, resulting in a decrease in brushwork and a great increase in the use of colour in her work. “Irene Chou boldly uses the dripping and splashing methods to create random circular lines and flowing surfaces”, Mayching Kao wrote, “departing from her usual practice of free brushwork enhanced by meticulous details.” (Kao, 2000: 3) While art critic Lang Zhao Jun described

Chou's work in the 1990s as "*qianghan qiyi*, intrepid and bizarre" (Lang, 1997: 26), Kao Mayching described her work of the same period as "a kaleidoscope of bright reds, greens, blues and oranges, applied through a variety of technical means" (Kao, 2000: 3). Zhu Qi, who admired Chou's work in the 1970s and 1980s, described her 1990s work as "impulsive and impetuous", and warned that the continual shifts in Chou's work were "pushing her creativity into a dangerous zone" (Zhu, 2005: 214).

In spite of Zhu's warning, Chou continued to make revolutionary shifts by painting on non-traditional media. Beginning in 2004, Chou started to paint on canvas, an indisputably non-Chinese painting medium. Applying acrylic red or green on the canvas as if she were house painting, Chou painted some of her last large works on canvas. Towards the end of 2006, Chou also began to produce large quantities of work on small squares or rectangles of *ming* paper. If Kao thought Chou's work was "a kaleidoscope of bright reds, greens, blues and oranges" in 2003, her works on *ming* paper are like volcanic explosions of bright red, green, orange, gold, silver, purple and yellow. During this long period of experimenting with media other than the traditional *xuan* paper, and the continuous development of new techniques and reinvention of old techniques, Chou's cosmic paintings—on whatever media she chose, including the *xuan* paper—became increasingly like depiction of life, growth and rejuvenation. Sprouting bulbs, impregnated neurons and cell-like organisms created by water marks are present everywhere in these paintings, which I describe as "life affirming".

For four decades, from her sensuous paintings to her *zen*-like minimalistic paintings to cosmic paintings to life-affirming paintings, Chou continued, in the words of Wong Wucius, curator for *Contemporary Hong Kong Art 2000*, "to make breakthroughs in her untiring pursuit when most of her contemporaries seemed tired and had run out of steam" (Wong, 2000: 3). In the opinion of Julia Tanski, Chou's work at the end of her career was "as

fresh and promising as those of a student getting out of art school” (“Renaissance in ink”, *The Standard*, 1 April 2006, <http://www.TheStandard.com.HK>). How, then, do we explain the continuous shifts in Chou’s art that began at the beginning of her career and continued until the very end of her life? This is the central question of this thesis.

The present study takes the fundamental stand that to explain the continuous radical shifts in Chou’s art, one needs to examine the changes in the artist’s life. The rationale behind such an approach is based the assumption that an inseparable relationship existed between Chou’s life and her work. There are two reasons, I believe, why my assumption that a relationship existed between the artist’s life and her work is valid. First, the artist herself believed that her life and her art were one inseparable entity. One of the books that Chou always claimed had the most profound influence on her was Herbert Read’s *The Meaning of Art*, which emphasizes that art is nothing but expression. In an interview in 2003, the artist told Catherine Maudsley that, “I try to put all of myself into painting ... I want to show the experience of living and express what is in my heart” (Maudsley, 2003: 55). For her retrospective exhibition in 2006, Chou wrote in exhibition catalogue, “I am my art; my paintings are me.” (Chou, 2006: 19)

Second, Chou’s art has come from a painting tradition that holds such a view regarding the relationship between the painter and his work. As early as the Song dynasty, the literati painters—the ancestors of the New Ink painters—had formulated the theory that art was “for the embodying of one’s personal thought and feeling, for conveying to others something of one’s very nature” (Cahill, 1960: 89–91). Central to this theory is the belief that there is a moral connection between the artist and the artist’s work that “the quality of a painting ... reflects the personal quality of the artist” and that “writing and painting serve a single aim, the revelation of innate goodness” (Cahill, 1960: 89, 95). Such a view requires the

artist to acquire “*xiuyan*—the discipline of the inner person” (Doran, 1997: 60) and “book learning, personal cultivation and technical competence as prerequisite ingredients to execution of good art” (Chu, 1988: 16). Such a view is still held by Chinese intellectuals today, whether they are painters, writers or musicians. For example, Fu Lei (1908–66), an intellectual who was well known for his translation of Balzac’s works, still held such a belief. “To be a great pianist you have to learn to be a man first, then an artist, then a musician and finally a pianist,” he wrote to his son, Fu Cong—a concert pianist—in 1960 (Fu, 1992: 153). Even in recent times, Leo Lee attributed the Chinese cellist Yo Yo Ma’s ability to touch his audience to the humanism behind his music: “Ma’s father insisted that his son have a four year tertiary education, and that is why Ma studied anthropology at Harvard University.” (Lee, 2008: 109)

Several art historians and art critics who have followed Chou’s work since the beginning of her career have already suggested that to understand the changes in Chou’s art, one needs to understand the changes that took place in Chou’s life. Michael Lau, the curator of Chou’s first retrospective in 1986, wrote that “an examination of her life, thoughts and convictions may help reveal the sources of her emotions and imaginations” (Lau, 1986: 10). Mayching Kao believes the changes that took place in Chou’s work after 1991 could not have happened “without influence from the sudden changes in her life in recent years” and “the signs and symbols evolved over the years, as well as the innovative techniques, speak eloquently of the close affinity of art and life of this remarkable woman” (Kao, 2000: 3). Ian Findlay, editor of *Asian Art News*, wrote that, “So much intellectual and everyday-life experience informs Irene Chou’s art ... that knowing something of the dramas and struggles of her life one might suggest that the differences [in her work] came about through facing life-changing events.” (Findlay, 2006: 126)

So far, however, those who have looked into Chou's life for an explanation have attributed the changes in Chou's work to the simple fact that the artist encountered and overcame misfortunes. Nearly all saw the "dark paintings" produced by Chou in the 1970s as reflections of her generally unhappy life associated with the death of her husband. Lucy Lim wrote, "During the difficult times in the 1970s, she painted dark and oppressive pictures which reflected her unhappiness." (Lim, 1991: 24) Others like Chui Tze-hung, a fellow New Ink painter, wrote that many of Chou's peers wondered whether, "Irene Chou's mysticism and love of darkness reflect her deep-seated anxiety, especially the surrealistic visions which must come from some unresolved psychological problems." (Chui, 1987: 154). When Chou's work shifted from her "dark paintings" in the 1970s to "lighter paintings" of the 1980s, Petra Hinterthür interpreted the shift as "the end of a depressed period in Chou's life, after the death of her husband" (Hinterthür, 1985: 99). Yet, a few years after her husband's death, Chou told one Melbourne journalist that she "felt free when he [her husband] died" (Murdoch, 1985). Chou almost certainly told Lucy Lim about the freedom she experienced after her husband's death, since in 1991 Lim attributed Chou's shift in her style of painting at that time to her new-found "independence and freedom" (Lim, 1991: 24).

When Chou's work became complex and colourful in the 1990s, writers again speculated about various reasons for the change. "She started to employ a way of painting that she first applied the powerful sweeping stroke to whip up a whirl and then filled the rest of the work with either light shades or fine brush work with strong colour," Zhu Qi wrote. "In her new style of painting she seemed to have combined what resembled Lui's *zen* painting and her own earlier style of painting which was very colourful." Zhu attributed Chou's new style of painting to having been inspired by meditation (Zhu, 2005: 214). But Chou had employed "the expressive use of colours in her early years" (Kao, 2000: 3) before she took up meditation. Victoria Finlay attributed the increase in complexity in Chou's work to her

suffering of a stroke and her subsequent move to Australia: “The work is different, more complex—not only has her searching involved the question of identity that came from leaving a place that has been home for 40 years, but also when she left she was in a wheelchair, uncertain she would ever be able to paint again.” (Finlay, 1998: 5) But national identity was never a problem for Chou, and she had made plans to immigrate to Australia in 1989 before she had the stroke (Maudsley, 1995: 100). Susan Dewar (1993) attributes the increased use of colour in Chou’s as “celebrations of a new lease of life”. Meng Gang (2005) also believes that “surviving her stroke made the artist cheerful again and thus her work came to be filled with colour”. While these writers attribute the increase of complexity and colour in Chou’s work to one reason or another, the artist herself said that “I use red because I love red and I have the desire to use it. That is all. There is no other reason” (Butcher, 2003:19).

Thus the attempts by most writers to look into Chou’s life for explanation of the changes in her work have been unsatisfactory. Attributing the changes in Chou’s work to the simple fact that the artist has encountered and overcome misfortunes discounts the complexity of the artist as a human being. Likewise, making a simple one-to-one match between certain life events in the artist’s life and the work produced by her during that time under-estimates the complexity of how the artist transforms her experiences into art.

Furthermore, these writers have ignored two important features in her life. First, they have overlooked the fact that she became an artist relatively late in life. She did not mount her first exhibition until 1968, when she was already forty-four years old. Therefore, even in 2008, at the age of eighty-four, Chou had lived less than half of her life as an artist. In other words, one cannot expect to understand Chou’s later life by ignoring the first half of her life. Another feature these writers have ignored is the fact Chou seemed to have developed her visual language in an amazingly short time. There is evidence to show Chou did not take

formal painting lessons from Zhao Shao-ang until 1959. When she met Lui Shou-kwan in 1966, she was still painting in Zhao Shao-ang's Lingnan style. Yet, just two years after meeting Lui and almost immediately after her first solo exhibition in 1968, her non-realistic abstract visual language emerged. Nigel Cameron, in emphasising that the New Ink painters in Hong Kong were all from South China—a place of origin for many of the earlier innovators of Chinese painting—had to point out that “Irene Chou from Shanghai” was the exception (Cameron, 1974: 64); however, he did not go on to say how her Shanghai background might have influenced her art. Indeed, so far no one has examined Chou's formative years in Shanghai and her life as a Hong Kong *taitai* married to a fellow Shanghainese who was a writer, editor and movie director—years that might have contributed to the visual language she came to develop.

Moreover, these writers have also overlooked the important fact that Chou was a woman, and that as a woman she did not attempt to do what the men did, namely, painting landscape, a subject that was traditionally denied to woman painters. Instead, as mentioned earlier, she painted “landscape paintings”—surrealistic trees, branches, mountain and water—with sexually charged images. In 1976, when Chou exhibited a set of silk painting using the title *Boccaccio's Decameron*, Wong Wucius described her sexually charged images as “depictions of the sensations uniquely felt by the female” (*Boccaccio's Decameron*, 1976). So what gave Chou the daring to include sexual organs in her paintings, “given their avoidance, except for erotic art, in Chinese ink and brush painting”? Maudsley attempted to answer the question: “It is as if the artist's awareness of the human condition leads to greater awareness of her own femininity.” (Maudsley, 1995: 56) Even if Chou had greater awareness of her own femininity, the question remains: what gave her courage to express sexual feelings—especially those of a woman—in the relatively conservative Hong Kong society of

the 1960s? The answer to this question, and indeed to a multitude of questions about her unique art, lies in a close examination of the relationship between her art and her life.

Since this thesis proposes that it is by exploring the relationship between the art and life of Irene Chou that one might find the answers to the research question raised by this study, I devote Chapter 2, “A Middle-class Shanghai Upbringing (1924–47)” and Chapter 3, “No Ordinary Housewife (1948–58)” to exploring Chou’s formative years in Shanghai and her early married life in Hong Kong. It is hoped that these two chapters will make it easier to understand how Chou came to develop a visual language that was capable of so many changes over such a long period of time. These two chapters will also yield information that I can use to better interpret her later life. Indeed, a key purpose of Chapter 3 is to explore why Chou responded in the way she did to the crisis in her marriage that ultimately led her on to the road to become an artist.

Chapter 4, “An Idiosyncratic Art Education” (1958-1967), explores Chou’s art education to find out what gave her the means to develop a visual language that was capable of continuous shifts. For a long time, Chou, aside from acknowledging that she had lessons first with Zhao Shaoang and later with Lui Shou-kwan, said very little about her art education. This led to a lot of misconception about her art education. Henry Au-yeung states that Chou began lessons with Zhao in 1950 and became his “private disciple” (Au-yeung, 2004: 4) when she in fact did not meet him until 1959 and then had weekly group lessons that were often suspended when Zhao went overseas. Nevertheless, nor is it true that, as Ian Findlay maintains, Chou was “fundamentally a self-taught painter” (Findlay, 2003: 79). Therefore, it is necessary to find out what kind of art education Chou really had. After all, it is inconceivable that someone without a long and arduous training in Chinese painting and a very broad art education that included extensive knowledge of both Chinese art history and

Western art history could come to develop the kind of visual language in Chinese painting that Chou did.

The following three chapters explore the relationship between Chou's life and work as a way to find an explanation for the continuous shifts in her work. I have organized Chapter 5, "A Woman Painter (1968–78)", Chapter 6, "A Free Woman (1979–91)" and Chapter 7, "The Artist" (1992–2007) according to the three major events in Chou's life: the breakdown of her marriage; the death of her husband; and suffering a stroke and living with cerebellar atrophy. It must be emphasized that these periods do not neatly coincide with changes in Chou's art; however, organizing the chapters according to the major events in her life sets the scene for her responses to these changes. After all, it was not so much the events themselves but the way she responded to them that shaped her art. Many of the changes in her life were caused by events beyond her control, such as losing her husband, suffering a stroke and being disabled by the atrophy of her cerebellum, while others were of her own making. However, even in the case of those events beyond her control, their impact was to some extent determined by the way in which she responded to them. In turn, this was influenced by her middle-class Shanghai upbringing, her life as a wife and a mother, and the idiosyncratic art education she had. Moreover, the relationship between her painting and her responses to her life events was an interactive one. As much as her responses to her life shaped her art, the act of painting and her career as an artist also influenced her responses to the events in her life. By explaining the way Chou responded to her life as a woman painter, a free woman and an artist, I hope to account for the radical changes in Chou's art that started at the beginning of her career and continued until the end of her life.

I have employed an unorthodox method to collect data on the artist's life. I had collected much of the data for this thesis before I officially began my PhD studies in 2004. I

met Chou almost as soon as she arrived in Brisbane after moving from Hong Kong to Australia in 1992. I was involved with her life and work through helping her in various ways as she established herself as an artist in Brisbane. I met many people who did business with Chou, such as agents, collectors, mounters, framers, photographers, gallery directors and curators, as well as her friends. During my long and close association with Chou, I had the chance to observe how she lived and worked at first hand. When I decided to do a PhD in 2004, Chou was pleased and signed a declaration that I could interview her and those who knew her. However, it was not long before it became clear that Chou did not want to be formally interviewed with a list of questions, nor did she particularly want me to interview those who knew her. She also stopped answering specific questions about her life, believing I had collected most of what I needed to know during our long association over the years prior to the commencement of my study. I could have stopped my data collecting then and begun writing my thesis. Instead, I continued to collect my data because, although Chou was unwilling to be interviewed formally, she was happy for me to continue to be involved with her life and work, always making her latest work available to show me and to answer specific questions about her techniques, method of painting and materials used. Chou's willingness for me to continue to collect data informally, as I had done prior to the commencement of my study, meant that my data-collection phase lasted for nearly eighteen years until Chou died in 2011. Thus the single most important source was my own observation of Chou's life, through interaction with her in myriad situations. Over the years, she also showed me letters other people had written to her, as well as letters and notes she had written to other people.

Another major source was the substantial body of literature available on Chou. First, there are articles and catalogue essays written by Chou. Compared with her contemporaries, she wrote relatively little about her own life and work, but she gave a substantial number of interviews to journals, magazines and newspapers, in both Chinese and in English. There are

many articles and catalogue essays on Chou written by art historians, museum curators, art critics and art dealers. The body of literature on Chou also includes *The Biography of Irene Zhou Lu Yun*, written jointly by Alicia Pun and Rose Lu, and published in Chinese in Australia in 2001. The great value of this book is that it is taken almost directly from what Chou told the authors during interviews. Another valuable written source is the Yearbook in which Chou's husband, Yang Yangqi, also known as Yiwen and Evan Yang, chronicled his life from the time he was one year of age to 1977, the year before he died. This provides an important source for certain parts of my thesis, providing me with an independent source of information for such details as when Chou went to Nanking to do special reporting as a journalist and the year she began lessons with Zhao Shaoang. In 2009, the Hong Kong Film Archive published Yang's Yearbook, made available by Yang and Chou's son, under the title *Evan Yang's Autobiography*. The fact that the published version is identical to the copy I have, except for one omission and one misprint, indicates that for some mysterious reason there were two virtually identical copies of the Yearbook, both handwritten by Yang. A small portion of my data came from unsolicited comments provided by mutual friends, acquaintances and Chou's son.

Since Chou was my main source of data, it is necessary to say a few words about her idiosyncratic communication style. As a teller of her own life story, she was strategic in the way she released information. She emphasized particular biographical details at certain times and not at other times. To be able to release information strategically over a long period of time and to know when to emphasize certain biographical details required an extraordinary understanding of communication, an ability to plan ahead and an excellent memory. When she recalled events in the past, she never spoke in a sentimental way. The most unusual feature of the way she communicated was that one always got the impression that the information she gave should not be taken at face value.

In fact, communication with Chou was a challenge at times. She spoke three Chinese dialects and English, but she did not come across as a talented linguist. Chou made no effort to improve her accent when speaking English and the two non-native Chinese languages she spoke. She was quite happy for her heavy accent to hide her perfect command of the languages. Even in her native language, Shanghainese, her command of the language was disguised by her idiosyncratic way of speaking. She could be the most lucid as well as the most elusive communicator, but she could also be both lucid and vague at the same time. How she said things often had more meaning than what she actually said. Chou's mode of communication therefore made it difficult to confirm precise details about her life. However, the many conversations I had with her over the years allowed me to make judgements about the accuracy of much of what she told me. In fact, Chou's mode of communication was an important source of data in its own right, because there were parallels between the way she communicated verbally and what she conveyed through her visual language. Chou liked to repeat things deliberately. "To repeat is to emphasize," she told me. This seemed to be just as true in the way she painted as it was in her verbal communication.

As for the images of her work, during the years I knew Chou, I had the privilege of seeing most of the works produced by her before they left her studio. I also attended nearly all her exhibitions from the time I first knew her. This means I saw the majority of her work produced after 1993. I also saw some of Chou's earlier works which she had kept. Because of the many exhibitions Chou had, including two retrospectives, the images of her work are well documented in exhibition catalogues. Chou continued to show me her latest work even after she moved into a nursing home, allowing me to photograph them and even take them home to study for a few days before returning them to her.

Thus it is from these three sources—the artist, the body of literature on Chou and the unintentional and unsolicited comments from those who knew Chou—that I have collected the data used in this study to explain the shifts in Irene Chou’s art.

Note: The research for this thesis was conducted in accordance with ethical approval from the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: ART/13/04/HREC).

Chapter 2: A Middle-class Shanghai Upbringing (1924–47)

Irene Chou was often thought of either as a self-taught painter or a late starter. In fact, as this chapter will show, she began her informal art education early. It is true that she did not begin formal painting lessons until 1959, when she was already thirty-five years old. Yet almost as soon as she started lessons with Zhao Shaoang, she was able to emulate his Lingnan School style of painting to the point that he could not tell his own work from hers. Moreover, just two years after being Lu Shoukwan's student, her own style of painting—nothing remotely like Lu's, and charged with irrepressible emotions—emerged. Although Chou undoubtedly had great natural talent, I argue that she also had much training prior to her formally taking up art. This training, provided by her middle-class Shanghai upbringing – an art education in the broadest sense of the word – allowed her to take full advantage of the formal art education she would receive later on. As important as the training was the wide range of emotions that she experienced as a daughter. “I experienced things at a much younger age than most people,” Chou told me. “I was exposed to the reality of life when I was only a child.” These emotions provided much of the impetus for her art.

Intellectual parents

Chou was born in 1924 to parents who were *zhishifenzi*—the “new intellectuals” of twentieth-century China. One of the characteristics that distinguished the “new intellectuals” from the traditional literati was the education they received—a combination of old and new. When Chou's parents, Zhou Lianxuan and Jin Qichao, were born, the imperial examination system was still in place. They would have begun their education by reciting the Confucian children's primer *Three Character Classic* and continued with studying of the Confucian Canon of the Four Books: *The Analects*, *The Great Learning*, *The Golden Mean* and

Mencius. In 1904, as a result of the education reform instigated by the imperial government, the old examination system was abolished and new-style schools, *xuetang*, were introduced. According to Chou, her parents met when attending the Songjiang High School, a new-style school where modern subjects—including physical education, music and art—were taught.

Chou's parents were not only *zhishifenzi*, but were described by Chou as “two of the radical intellectual young persons in [a] revolutionary tide” (Chou, 1986: 21). Lianxuan and Qichao belonged to the generation of the May Fourth Movement (1917–23), a cultural reform movement that resulted in literary, political and social reforms. In 1919, university students demonstrated in Tiananmen Square on 4 May against the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which transferred the privileges enjoyed by Germany in the Shantung province in China before World War I to Japan. Although the students' anger was directed at the corrupt old bureaucrats and the warlords who had agreed to the terms of the treaty, their anger was also directed at feudalism, the system that gave the bureaucrats and the warlords their power. Chou described her parents as “radical” because of the drastic actions they took that changed the course of their lives. When Lianxuan and Qichao's intention to get married was met with disapproval from Lianxuan's father, who thought Qichao was lacking in social status, they eloped from Songjiang to Shanghai. The patriotic fervour aroused by the May Fourth Incident gave young people like Zhou Lianxuan and Jin Qichao reasons to justify their own radical actions. Furthermore, when Chou's grandfather died, and Lianxuan and Qichao had the chance to inherit an enormous amount of wealth, they forfeited their rights to inherit. According to Chou, members of the Zhou family—especially her father's stepmother—thought her father did not deserve the inheritance since he had not been a filial son. They also insinuated that it was her mother who had turned her father into a disobedient son. “My mother listened to the accusations patiently,” Chou told me. “When the others had finished

speaking, she stood up and calmly announced that she would *fangqi*—forgo her right to inherit.” Lianxuan evidently agreed with his wife’s decision.

In Shanghai, Zhou Lianxuan and Jin Qichao found employment at the Commercial Press, he as an assistant editor and she as a proofreader. Founded in 1897, the Commercial Press became a printing and publishing house in 1907. The call by the New Cultural Movement for “modern education”, the use of the vernacular, and the study of Western science and technology meant that the publishing of new writing—textbooks as well as translations of foreign works, whether in science and technology or literature—made the Commercial Press a major business enterprise. Indeed, when Bertrand and Dora Russell arrived in Shanghai in 1921, the first place they were taken to see was the Commercial Press. Dora Russell wrote that the press was “an impressive publishing venture, which was bringing out translations into Chinese of modern books” (Russell, 1975: 114).

An unintentional art education

Chou did not receive early tuition in Chinese painting, but she received all the essential training required for a Chinese painter during the decades before she took up art. There are three important areas of training for a Chinese painter. First, learning to do calligraphy is regarded as a prerequisite to learning to paint, since the same tools are used by both art forms. Second, due to Chinese painting’s long association with the scholar-officials, Chinese painters hold the belief that a painter needs a wide perspective of the world, so book learning is an essential requirement for a painter. Third, Chinese painters believe travelling and being close to nature are important experiences for a painter. I will show that although Chou has been described by some as a “fundamentally a self-taught painter”, by the time she began lessons with Zhao Shaoang she had been equipped with all the essential requirements necessary to become a Chinese painter.

Chou's parents' employment at the Commercial Press played an important part in her early education. Although Qichao was employed as a proofreader, one of her duties was performing calligraphy. The call by one of the leaders of the New Cultural Movement, Hu Shih, for the vernacular to replace the literary language, and the subsequent implementation of the vernacular as the medium of instruction for primary one and two school children, meant that new first readers had to be written and published. Chou's biographers remembered seeing the first readers published by the Commercial Press. The characters "big dog barks, little cat jumps" were written in Qichao's strong and firm calligraphy in the regular script, with all the characters symmetrically balanced and clearly legible (Pun and Lu, 2001: 9). According to Chou, in addition to working at the Commercial Press, her mother also did calligraphy at home to earn extra income.

It was from her mother that Chou received her early training in calligraphy: "Ever since my childhood, I used to look on when my mother, who was a professional calligrapher, was working, and became acquainted with the elementary techniques in the use of the brush, ink and paper." (Chou, 1986: 21) However, from what Chou told me, she did more than just "look on" while her mother worked:

Next to my mother's own table she set up a small table for me. I had my own ink, inkstand, paper and brush. I copied whatever she did. Sometimes she swept the brush across her paper quickly. Other times she painted a thick line very slowly. She also showed me how the same character could be written in so many different ways.

In other words, while most children of Chou's generation learned to use the brush and the ink for writing, Chou also learned to use them for calligraphy. Although her mother did not demand that she practise calligraphy by writing so many lines of calligraphy per day or in

order to perfect a particular style of calligraphy, Chou had plenty of practice of calligraphy in the normal course of writing: “At that time we didn’t have ballpoint or fountain pens. My family even considered pencils too expensive as the lead would break and they required sharpening.” (Chou, 2006: 17)

As well as receiving early training in calligraphy from her mother, Chou also obtained the kind of book learning that was essential for a Chinese painter. Her book learning started at a very early age—indeed, she was probably one of the youngest children of her generation to attend kindergarten. In the 1920s, professional women were few and far between—even in a big city like Shanghai. Most professional women were not married, and the few professional women who were married with children had relatives and servants to look after them. The Shanghai Commercial Press was progressive not only in its publications but also in its management. It was one of the first modern enterprises in China to offer workers benefits other than their wages and salaries. Single men could live in the two-storey dormitory next door to the editorial department and couples with children could send their children to the Yangzheng kindergarten and Shangong Primary School run by the Commercial Press on the work premises. It appeared that Qichao returned to work when Chou was not even of kindergarten age. According to her biographers, Chou was three when her mother placed her at Yangzheng kindergarten (Pun and Lu, 2001: 11). But if, as is claimed, she “was still in nappies and using a bottle” and “unsteady on her feet” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 11), perhaps she was only a toddler at the time. Her biographers also mentioned that she was excluded from some of the physical activities at the kindergarten because of her age (Pun and Lu, 2001: 11). Chou told me her mother was able to place her in Yangzheng kindergarten when she was not yet of kindergarten age because the teacher in charge was her mother’s friend. However, in a video interview in 2008, Chou told the audience that her mother was the “school-mistress” at her kindergarten (Interview with Jeanie Mok, Chinese Virtual Exhibition). Either way, Chou

started kindergarten early. As a result, she acquired pre-literacy skills at a much earlier age than most children. Indeed, Chou probably learned to read and write before she started school. After all, the words in the first readers—written in her mother’s calligraphy—would already have been familiar to her.

When Chou started primary school, the vernacular had replaced the literary language as the medium of instruction, but she did not miss out on learning the literary language. When she was in primary school, her mother took her to Songjiang during the school holidays to visit her maternal grandmother. Songjiang was an ancient town where people lived in a traditional way that went back to the Ming dynasty. Here the *sishu*, the old-style private schools organised by the local well-to-do families, were still the place where most children started their education. Children in the *sishu* still studied the Confucian primer and the *Four Books* written in the literary language. During her visits to Songjiang, Chou attended the *sishu*, where the method of teaching was reciting after the teacher. It was believed that once the child could commit the texts to memory, understanding of them would come. In this way, Chou learned much of the literary language that children of her generation who attended the modern schools—especially schools run by missionaries—did not learn.

While she was still in primary school, Chou’s father had already introduced her to the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Outlaws of the Marsh*, novels written in the vernacular in the Ming dynasty (1368–1627). Before Chou finished primary school, she had read many of the classical novels, including *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. In 2006, when Chou was in hospital in Brisbane, a friend brought her a copy of *Yue Wei Cao Tang Ji* written by Ji Xiao Lan (1724–1805), a high official in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Her friend did not know Chou had read the book when she was only in primary school. She remembered laughing so hard with her parents over the author’s name because it contained the character *lan*, which

when pronounced in Shanghainese sounded like the word for “penis”. The book, which was a collection of stories based on real-life events, was injected with eighteenth-century moral instructions, such as “to receive one must be prepared to give” and “at the point of dying one will be judged not by what one has done outwardly but by what one’s inner thoughts have been”.

As well as reading works by the ancient and contemporary writers, Chou also read a wide range of books at a time when public libraries were few and far between in China. The Commercial Press not only published textbooks to be used in the schools, but also “fables, translated stories, picture books, cartoons, colour postcards, [and] maps”, and “launched two well-known ‘repositories’”—one of which “was designed to constitute nothing less than a modern library” (Lee, 1999: 55–6). As employees of the Commercial Press, Chou’s parents were allowed to freely bring publications home to read. Chou told me: “My parents would bring home the latest publications. We would look at them, read them, and then return them.”

Although Chou’s primary school education was not interrupted by the Japanese attack on China, the bombing of Zhabie—where the Commercial Press was located—in 1932 did interrupt the life of her family. The Japanese specifically targeted the Commercial Press, destroying the printing facilities as well as the Commercial Press’s Oriental Library. Chou recalled how, amidst fear and the sound of gunshots, she watched her mother pack their luggage. She and her newborn sister and their mother then boarded a train that took them to Songjiang, while her father stayed behind in Shanghai. After Chou, her sister and her mother returned to Shanghai, her family moved from the Zhabie area to live in the French concession while the Commercial Press was relocated to the International Settlement. The International Settlement and the French Concession were created after the Opium War in 1842. People who lived in the International Settlement and the French Concession enjoyed the privilege of

extraterritoriality, which put them beyond the reach of Chinese justice. The number of Chinese in the concessions increased so rapidly that “after 1925 the Shanghai Municipal Council of the International Settlement included Chinese councillors” (Fairbank and Goldman, 1998: 271). In the 1920s, the International Settlement and the French Concession became havens for those who sought protection from the civil war. Many Communists fled to the International Settlement and French Concession for protection. After the bombing of Zhabei, more Chinese—like the Zhous—moved into the International Settlement and the French Concession, this time for protection from the Japanese.

It is not clear whether Chou’s parents made a deliberate choice to send her to the Shanghai Municipal High School in the International Settlement after she graduated from Shangong Primary because nearly all the girls’ schools in the concessions, until quite recently, had been run by foreign missionaries. It was only in 1931 that the Shanghai Municipal Council, after opening four schools for boys, opened its first school for girls. Her high school education at the Shanghai Municipal High School was crucial in widening her scope of book learning in a way that gave her a deep appreciation of her own culture and at the same time opened her to cultures other than her own. Chou has written very little about her high school education. In the catalogue essay of her 1986 retrospective exhibition, she described her secondary education as “entirely westernized” (Chou, 1986: 22). In 2006, Chou mentioned in an exhibition catalogue that in 1942 she had “graduated from secondary school, coming first in both the physics and Chinese composition secondary education certificate examinations” (Chou, 2006: 15).

Several special features of Chou’s education at the Shanghai Municipal High School were to have a profound influence on her as an artist. One of the outstanding features of the Shanghai Municipal High School was its emphasis on giving the students a solid grounding

in their own language and culture. The headmistress of the school, Yang Nie Ling Yu, a graduate from Jinning University in Nanking who had studied in the United States, felt that in the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement many educated people had placed so much importance on imitating the West that they had forgotten about their own culture (Yang, 1933: 20). She believed that to learn from the West, the students must first know and respect their own culture.

The school's emphasis on giving the students a solid grounding in Chinese language and culture meant that students like Chou who already had a good grounding in the Chinese language were taken to an even higher level of attainment in the language. As mentioned, after the May Fourth Movement the vernacular replaced the literary language as the medium of instruction in schools. While the introduction of the vernacular increased literacy, it also meant that many lost the opportunity to receive training in the literary language in which the ancient written books were. It is not certain how much training in the literary language the students were given at the Shanghai Municipal High School, but in the case of Chou—who had undergone earlier training in the literary language—one of her teachers did not hesitate to extend her skills by showing her a copy of the *Book of Changes*, or *Yijing*, which she read from cover to cover.

Teachers who encouraged students to read ancient books also believed that training in the literary language facilitated one's ability to write well in the vernacular. Several of the Chinese language teachers at the Municipal High School, such as Huang Lu Yin and Li Hua Quan, were themselves published writers. Chou's talent in writing, which first surfaced when she was in primary school, was now nurtured by her teachers in high school. When Chou was in primary school, as a Girl Scout she was one of the students chosen to carry out the duties of the daily flag-raising ceremony held in the school hall. Inspired by her teachers' urge for

patriotism, she wrote a moving essay about her feelings and her thoughts when she watched the flag being raised. The essay was so well written that it was posted on the wall for all to read. In high school, Chou's talent as a writer, encouraged by her high school teachers, reached the highest level of achievement. Chou came first in Chinese composition not only in her class but also among all the Year Twelve students who took the school certification examination that year.

While Chou described her secondary education as “entirely westernized”, it is perhaps more accurate to describe it as a bilingual education because, as well as receiving a solid grounding in the Chinese language and Chinese literature, Chou was also given the opportunity to master the English language. Since the staff—who had studied as undergraduates overseas, completed postgraduate studies in the United States and graduated from universities such as the Yenching University—were bilingual in Chinese and English, some of the subjects were taught in English. Along with reading contemporary Chinese novels such as *Lai Yu* and *Jian, Chun, Chiu*, students read *Little Women*, *Jane Eyre* and *Gone with the Wind* in English, not in translated versions. When I visited Chou in 2008, I found her reading *Jane Eyre*. “I am reading this in Chinese for the first time,” she said. Another book I found Chou reading in her old age was Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. It was a book she possibly had read in the 1950s in Hong Kong. “Somehow it is not as powerful as when I read it the first time when I was in my young days,” Chou told me. During her later years, the title of Lewis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* became an expression that she used whenever she referred to the many sides of people's personalities.

Chou's book learning included the studying of science subjects as well. At the Shanghai Municipal High School, students were encouraged to study maths, physics, chemistry, astronomy and biology—subjects traditionally deemed to be for boys:

I was interested in astronomy too. We studied about the solar system and how the earth moved around the sun and the moon around the earth, everything revolving around everything else. It was all so fascinating.

Chou's maths and physics teacher was Wang Chen Shi, a graduate of Yenching University. "We called her *Wang Laohu* 'Tigress Wang' behind her back because she was a ferocious teacher," Chou said. Her classmates nicknamed Chou the "baby tigress" because she was Wang's best student. At the Shanghai Municipal High School, all staff members were female university graduates. Since universities in China did not take in woman students until Peking University accepted its first female students in 1920, the teachers at the Shanghai Municipal High School were among the first female graduates in China. In line with the belief that women were as academically inclined as men, students at the Shanghai Municipal High School were encouraged to take the same subjects that were studied by boys.

Indeed, book learning at the Shanghai Municipal High School even included subjects that would not have been regarded as part of book learning by many educated Chinese. At the Shanghai Municipal High School, students were encouraged to use their hands as well as their brains. Non-academic subjects such as physical education, woodwork and domestic science were treated as equally important as academic subjects. Indeed, the physical education teacher, Chen Yong Sheng, who studied as an undergraduate in the United States and who attended the Olympics in Berlin in 1936 as a spectator, was greatly respected by the students. "We nicknamed her *chayedang* [an egg cooked in tea leaves] because she was so tan from being outdoors so much," Chou said. Physical fitness was so highly regarded at the Shanghai Municipal High School that no student was allowed to graduate without having learned how to ride a bicycle.

Chou's scope of book learning was widened even further when she went to university and studied at St John's University. By the time Chou started university in 1941, the Japanese had, since 1937, occupied all but Yunan, the far west and southwest of China. In Shanghai, the French Concession and the International Settlement had been the only areas safe from the Japanese. However, when the United States entered the war in 1941, schools and universities run by missionaries in the French Concession and International Settlement were forced to close down. St John's University, which was established in 1879 by the American Episcopal Church, was allowed to continue to operate because several of its students were the children of powerful Japanese collaborators. When Chou entered St John's in 1941, she initially studied "the required core subjects of chemistry, physics, mathematics and biology" for the two-year pre-medicine course (Chou, 2006: 15). However, for reasons outlined below, she decided to give up studying medicine midway through university. By changing her major from medicine to economics and sociology, Chou in fact broadened the scope of her book learning even further: "I learned all about Karl Marx and the idea of a utopia. That was such a marvellous idea." At St John's University, Chou's mastery of the English language was extended. The high English standard that was required of students at St John's meant that someone like Chou received a truly bilingual education from high school through university. Chou's bilingual skill in the Chinese language and in English was revealed when she translated Burr W. Leyson's *Plastic for the World of Tomorrow* into Chinese soon after her graduation from university. The translation was published by the Commercial Press in May 1947.

As well as attaining the book learning required to be a Chinese painter, Chou—although growing up in the big city like Shanghai—had the experience of being close to nature. As mentioned earlier, the Commercial Press was progressive in its management. Aside from giving its employees practical benefits such as housing and schooling for the

children the Commercial Press also provided its employees with the opportunity to take up hobbies. There were photography, music and travelling fellowships, which the staff members were encouraged to take up. Rooms were provided for various interest groups to meet, including areas with record players for members to listen to music together. Chou's father, Lianxuan, was an active member in the photography fellowship as well as in the music and travelling fellowships.

Because of her father's membership in the travelling fellowship at the Commercial Press, Chou started going on trips with him. Qichao was not a traveller, but she was not unusual in this respect. Many of the wives of those in the travelling fellowship were also not interested in going on the trips with their husbands. Therefore, the travelling fellowship was essentially a male club. However, none of the men in the travelling fellowship seemed to mind that Lianxuan brought his daughter with him on these trips. Chou proved herself to be a good little traveller who did not cause the adults much trouble: "I was not even shy about using the men's toilets on these trips." When she was tired and could not walk any more, there was no shortage of volunteers to piggy-back her. Chou enjoyed listening to the conversation of these adults as much as she enjoyed the walking and travelling: "They joked and told many funny stories." She even travelled as far as Guilin on one occasion, with her father and his friends. Chou remembered this trip particularly well because her mother had thought it was too long a trip for a young child and forbade her husband to take her with him, but he took her anyway. On this trip, Chou saw a sunset that she never forgot. The colour of the sunset was to resurface in one of her paintings. As she went on these trips regularly with her father, she saw many of the scenic places in China at an early age. Chou's early travelling experience also included many trips to Songjiang, the ancient town on Songjiang River in the Songjiang county, a two-hour train ride south-west of the city of Shanghai. The many visits to

Songjiang not only exposed her to the beauty of the lower Yangtze area, but gave her the feel of a way of life that had a very long tradition.

A middle-class life

When Chou described her parents as “radical”, she was referring not only to the drastic actions that they took that altered the course of their lives but also to her their willingness to be different. When Chou was born, Lianxuan and Qichao recorded the date of their child’s birth according to both the lunar calendar—which was the twenty-sixth day of the twelfth month in the year of *hai* (year of the pig)—and the Western calendar—31 January 1924—at a time when the majority of Chinese people were still resisting the use of the Western calendar. Likewise, instead of adhering to the tradition of consulting family genealogy or giving the child’s paternal grandfather the honour of naming the child, Lianxuan named his daughter himself. He named their first-born child Luyun, which means “green clouds”, because the thick black hair the child had at birth reminded him of a scene mentioned in a Tang dynasty poem. Chou was known as Zhou Luyun, Zhou being the family name, until she became an artist, when she was known both as Irene Chou and Zhou Luyun. When her sister was born in 1932, her mother gave her second daughter her own surname, Jin, rather than her husband’s surname, Zhou, so “as to uphold the principle of ‘sexual’ equality” (Chou, 1986: 21).

In Shanghai, Lianxuan and Qichao lived a comfortable middle-class life. Chou told me once: “My parents were bohemians. They just loved everything that was new and different.” She remembered her parents cooking Western-style pancakes with an electric frying pan when most people were still cooking on wooden stoves. In their love of all things new, Chou’s parents also pursued interests and hobbies that were still foreign to the majority of people in China. As an only child for more than eight years, Chou participated in many of her parents’ interests at an early age. One of her father’s great interests was photography.

While as young as three, Chou was already her father's "model", as can be seen in the two photographs taken by her father (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Music was Lianxuan's other passion. As well as the travelling fellowship, Lianxuan was a member of both the photography fellowship and the music fellowship organised by the Commercial Press. He loved playing the different Chinese musical instruments, and would often invite other members in the fellowship to play music at his home: "Both as an amateur photographer and a lover of music, my father had an aloof and artistic temperament which had an influence on me." (Chou, 1986: 22).

Lianxuan's initial interest in photography had become a fully fledged passion—especially when all kinds of new photographic equipment had become available in the modern department stores on Nanking Road in the busiest part of the city (Lee, 1999: 15–17). As Chou grew older, she became her father's little assistant in his darkroom, watching and helping him as he developed his film. She also started going out with him, visiting many of his friends who shared his interests. Among the people Chou visited most frequently with her father was He Tianjian (1891–1977), a self-taught landscape painter who particularly enjoyed sketching from nature. Chou told me: "I used to go with my father to visit He Tianjian, often while he was teaching. I would sit among his students, all of whom were much older than me. I copied like the way they copied their teacher's work." Another person Chou and her father visited frequently was the literati photographer Lang Jingjiang (1892–1995), a well-known photographer. Chou remembered visiting Lang at his photography shop with her father: "I remember him leaning over the counter one day and commenting on the nice looking shoes I had on my feet."

While Chou called her father "an amateur photographer", Lianxuan was in fact a forerunner in modernising Chinese painting. In 1930s China, there was much talk about

modern art in Shanghai. André Breton, the surrealist, and Mark Tobey, the American abstract expressionist, visited Shanghai during this period (Clarke, 2001: 95–103). Many Chinese intellectuals thought Chinese traditional painting could be given a new spirit of nationalism by borrowing certain Western painting techniques. According to Chou, her father had come up with the idea of creating a new form of Chinese landscape painting by combining photography with painting. Lianxuan had been discussing his experiments in the darkroom with composite photography with He Tianjian and with Lang Jingjiang. Although he was a traditional painter, He Tian Jian was open-minded about embracing Western influences in Chinese painting. Lang Jingjiang actually took over Lianxuan's idea and succeeded in perfecting a compositing method that created photographs which combined the method of Chinese ink painting with Western photographic techniques. When I told Chou in 2006 how I had read about Lang's achievement in composite photography, she responded by saying: "He stole the idea from my father!"

Chou participated in her mother's interests as well. As one can see from the early photos her father took of her, as well as posing for her father, Chou also modelled the outfits her mother had made for her. In Figure 2.1, she wears a Western-style dress with loose sleeves, almost resembling a short-sleeved kimono. Chou told me: "It was made from a piece of curtain material, using the border of the curtain for the skirt part of the dress and the plainer part for the top." In Figure 2.2, she wears a distinctively Chinese-style outfit. The white sleeveless top has hand-made Chinese buttons and button holes, and the loose, dark shorts are made out of *xianyan* satin, a Chinese material generally used for making men's summer tops to be worn at home because of its coolness.

Like her husband, Qichao pursued interests that seemed foreign to most people at the time. She was interested in Western art, and Chou remembers as a young child how she

accompanied her mother to her lessons at the private Shanghai Art Academy run by Lui Haisu (1896–1994). In the 1920s, a number of institutions in Shanghai had started to give instruction in oil painting and charcoal sketching. As mentioned earlier, there was a call to modernise the thousand-year-old Chinese painting tradition, especially in Shanghai. Those who believed Chinese painting should be totally replaced by Western painting as well as those who felt modernisation of Chinese painting could be helped by the Western painting techniques started to introduce Western painting in teaching institutions. Lui Haisu, who had studied as a young man both in Japan and in Europe, and who had returned to Shanghai in 1912, had opened the Shanghai Art Academy, the first institution to teach Western painting in China. Qichao was taking lessons in charcoal sketching at the academy. Chou recalled how one day Lui Haisu did a charcoal sketch of Qichao. While her mother was sitting for her teacher, Chou helped herself to the bread that was lying around: “I thought it was for eating. I did not know bread was used as an eraser for the charcoal marks.”

While Chou gained much exposure to photography, Chinese painting, Western art and music through her parents, she also started to receive her first formal art education at the Shanghai Municipal High School. Cai Yuanpie (1868–1940), who was one of the cultural reformers and promoters for modern art in China, was educated at the University of Leipzig in aesthetics and art history. Upon his return to China from Germany, he became the first Minister of Education for the newly formed Republic in 1912. He advocated the systematic study of art as an academic discipline, and introduced the study of Western art into the school curriculum. Therefore, art classes and music classes at the Shanghai Municipal High School were given the same attention as other academic subjects. “In my time it was believed that educated people should know something about art and music,” Chou told her biographers. “It was in her high school art classes, aside from learning to paint traditional Chinese painting, that she first learned the techniques of western painting.” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 27) In 1992,

Chou told a reporter that during her high school years she had one year off school because she had contracted hepatitis. During that year, aside from studying and reading, she spent a lot of time amusing herself “by sketching whatever she could lay her eyes on” (Yang, 1992).

As well as learning art and music at school, Chou’s middle-class parents also sent her to ballet and violin lessons. In the French Concession where the Zhous lived, there were not only British, Americans, French and Japanese people, but also White Russians and Jews from Europe. While the Jews contributed to the economy in Shanghai, the White Russians contributed much to the culture of the city. While some White Russians were owners of coffee shops on Rue Joffre in the French Concession, others gave ballet and music lessons as a way to earn a living. Chou said: “I carried my violin in one arm and steered the bicycle with the other hand. I was having more fun showing off than being interested in learning how to play the violin.”

A daughter

Most people who read what Chou wrote about her parents in her exhibition catalogue essays would get the impression that she came from a happy family. “My parents met and fell in love,” Chou wrote in 2006. “My father, the heir to a large estate, eloped with my mother.” (Chou, 2006: 15) Most people would also get the impression that Chou had nothing but admiration for her mother, who she described as “a forerunner of the emancipation of women” (Chou, 1986: 21). In reality, though, her parents’ marriage caused her much pain, and her relationship with her mother was far from loving.

Chou’s first eight years were the happiest time in her childhood. Her parents were deeply in love with each other. They were young, educated and fun loving. As an only child, Chou had her parents’ undivided attention and love. Being modern parents, they did not hesitate to show their affection for each other in front of their child, nor did they feel the need

to play the role of serious and severe parents. They joked and often behaved like two energetic teenagers in front of their child. “My father, who was tall and strong, just lifted my mother, who was small and short, off her feet and threw her on the bed,” Chou told me in 2006. “I would laugh when my father did that but once my mother pretended she was injured. It alarmed my father. That made me laugh even harder.” Although she was an only child, she had the company of other children at kindergarten. Her maternal grandmother and her aunt and her family also visited her in Shanghai. Chou told her biographers how she always wanted her grandmother to sing her the “Tiger Song” as she rocked her to sleep. She also remembered how her uncle, the husband of her aunt, often picked her up from kindergarten and piggy-backed her home (Pun and Lu, 2001: 11).

However, Chou’s childhood underwent a big change after her little sister was born. Instead of experiencing the normal feeling of displacement an only child experiences when a younger sibling is born, she experienced a feeling of outright exclusion when her mother gave her little sister her own surname. It was difficult for an eight-year-old child to understand gender equality: “People at school kept asking me why I did not have the same surname as my sister.” After she became an artist, Chou always used the story that she and her sister did not share the same surname as an illustration of her mother’s belief in the equality of the sexes and her parents’ desire to be different. However, in 1993 when Chou was invited to speak about her life and her work at a lecture during the First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Queensland Art Gallery, at which she once again told the story of how she and her sister had different surnames, she added afterwards: “My parents were so immature.”

From what Chou said, although her mother truly believed in the equality of the sexes, her decision to give her second daughter her own surname was partly motivated by jealousy.

She had come to resent her husband's attention towards their elder daughter, so by giving her second daughter her own surname she was trying to get even with her husband. Qichao had come to feel that she was the odd one out in the three-way relationship because her husband was spending a lot of time with their elder daughter by taking her on his trips and letting her work with him in the darkroom. According to Chou, her mother had also become resentful towards her husband for spending so much time, as well as money, in pursuing his interests and hobbies. Qichao became even more unhappy when her husband invited the members of the music fellowship to come and play music regularly at their home. "My mother had to cook and entertain these friends when they came over to play music," Chou told me. As well as sharing fewer and fewer common interests, Qichao's political views were moving further and further away from those of her husband. She had become increasingly sympathetic towards the Communists while her husband remained a staunch Nationalist.

In 1937, just two years after Chou started high school, her father left Shanghai for Chongqing because the majority of major industries and institutions, including universities, had moved to Chongqing, the wartime capital of China, or to Kunming, one of the few places in China not occupied by the Japanese. Chou's father left for Chongqing with the Commercial Press, leaving Chou, her mother and her baby sister in Shanghai. It is not clear how long her father was away, or how frequently he came home. According to Chou, it was during one of her father's visits home that she discovered love letters written by a woman to her father: "My sister and I had rushed to open my father's suitcase to see what he had brought home for us when I discovered the letters." Chou never said what went through her mind when she took the letters to show her mother, but she remembered that her mother never said anything to her husband about his affair.

Chou believed it was her mother's pride that prevented her from confronting her husband about his affair, as well as from forgiving her husband, and her pride ultimately drove him to take a concubine. According to her biographers, Chou "had advised her mother that she should employ a woman's femininity to win back her husband's heart" after he had had an affair (Pun and Lu, 2001: 22). Chou told me she understood the male pride very early in life:

Although my father was an editor and my mother a proofreader, she in fact wrote better than him. Once I heard my mother do the very rare thing of praising my father for a piece of work he wrote. When I saw the delight on his face I learned that a man's ego needs nurturing.

However, instead of taking up her daughter's advice, Qichao received Lianxuan with coldness when he returned from Chongqing after the war. At some point during the time Lianxuan was in Chongqing, he had sent over a servant girl to help Qichao with her housework. The young girl was a distant relative to a tea-man who worked at the Commercial Press. Qichao treated the young servant girl—who was only four years older than Chou—well: "My mother let her have her own room while my sister and I shared a room." The servant continued to work for the Zhous after Lianxuan returned to Shanghai. According to Chou, the tension in the Zhou household would have been unbearable if it were not for the bubbly servant girl. The servant girl felt sorry for her master, who received no affection from his wife. In turn, Lianxuan, in his inability to regain Qichao's love and respect, found comfort in the servant girl. They soon moved out of the house and set up their own household.

Chou's comments, and those of her biographers indicate that her parents' political views were by now at opposite poles. The civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists, which had been shelved during the united effort to fight the Japanese, had

resumed even before the Japanese surrendered. Lianxuan's loyalty to the Nationalists was born out of his dislike and distrust for the Communists, whereas Qichao was attracted to the Communists by their ideology. When Chou was at the Shanghai Municipal High School, she participated in the "Little Teacher" program initiated by the well-known educator Tao Xin Zhu, who believed teaching was learning. He started a program that selected older students who were strong academically to teach younger students on a regular basis. Chou, however, found out that some of her fellow "little teachers" had taken on their roles not only as teachers but also as Marxist propagandists. "I decided to withdraw from the program because some of us were being persuaded by others to show preference for Communism," she said. Chou believed that her parents' different political views eventually divided the family into two political camps: Chou and her father in the Nationalists' camp and her mother and her sister in the Communists' camp: "My sister, influenced by my mother, eventually became a devoted Communist."

Chou experienced all the difficult emotions of a child whose parents were in an unhappy marriage, but what made her experience more devastating was that her mother shifted her love from her to her younger sister as her way of dealing with her marital problems: "Whenever my mother lost her temper my father and I just retreated to the darkroom." At other times Chou and her father just went visiting friends, like He and Lang. When Chou received news that she had been accepted by St John's University, she expected her mother to be pleased. Instead, her mother complained that if they sent her to the most expensive university in Shanghai there would be no money left when the time came for her younger sister to go to university. "Well, I will just have to wait until my sister has finished university before I go to university then," Chou remembered saying to her mother at the time. Her mother's preference for her sister hurt Chou deeply. After her father moved out to live with the concubine, Chou—who was by now living with her mother and sister—recalled

arriving home on many evenings to find that her mother and sister had already had their dinner without leaving any food for her.

As Chou's relationship with her mother worsened, she found comfort in a family who lived across the road. The Sha family had three children, two sons and a daughter. Their father, Dr Sha, had been the Zhous' family doctor. Some time during the last years of high school, Chou had a high fever that lasted for a week. Dr Sha never found out why she suffered such a sustained fever. Meanwhile, Chou had become friendly with the Sha family and started to tutor the two younger Sha children as a way of earning some pocket money. The Sha's eldest son, Zhikui, was the same age as Chou. He began to ask Chou to go on excursions and picnics with him, and his brother and sister, at the French garden where they rowed, played games and took lots of photographs. Like Chou's father, Sha Zhikui was a keen photographer. Although he was the same age as Chou, he was two years behind her in school. When her relationship with her mother became unbearable, Chou moved to a small room next door to live on her own. Her room now was directly opposite to her boyfriend's room across the road. "I would put a statue of the Virgin Mary at the window sill to let him know I was home," Chou said. Zhikui's mother, who was a good cook and who very fond of Chou, often sent over food for her.

When Chou went to university, she intended to study medicine: "Like many young people with ideals at that time, I thought I could become a barefoot doctor helping the poorest in the countryside." Like many of her classmates, she also felt it was her duty to "save" China from the Japanese. The patriotic feelings she had felt since she was in primary school had become stronger after the Japanese occupied China in 1937. One incident further ignited her feelings of patriotism. One day she and three school friends, two boys and a girl, had cycled to the countryside for a day trip. They came across some Japanese soldiers. One of the boys

forgot to bow to the soldiers. He was slapped on his face for his disrespect while the others looked on in horror and helplessness.

Despite her plan to become a doctor, towards the end of her second year at university, Chou made a dramatic decision to give up studying medicine. “At that time, I felt a strong desire to become a housewife and have children,” Chou wrote in 2006. “In short, I wanted to get married.” (Chou, 2006: 15) Chou told both her biographers and me how Sha distracted her from concentrating on her studies. She came to resent the chemistry labs that were held in the afternoons because Zhikui would be waiting outside her lab to take her somewhere: “I was so immature then. I chose to study sociology and economics because they required minimal studying as far as I was concerned.” However, in the catalogue essay for her 2006 retrospective exhibition, Chou explained that she switched from medicine to economics and sociology, as “these would surely make finding a job easier” and said the reason she needed to find a job as soon as she graduated from university was that Sha Zhikui, who just started studying accountancy at Da Dong, would not be able to support her for at least two years until he graduated from university (Chou, 2006: 16).

Perhaps Chou’s strong desire “to become a housewife and have children” was due to her desperation to get out of her unhappy home situation and create her own happy family. As much as Chou was deeply hurt by her mother, it was also painful for her to watch her mother suffer. Not long after the servant girl moved out, she returned one day to collect some belongings she had left behind:

I remember my mother was practising her calligraphy in the living room when the servant girl came in. Out of the blue, the girl told my mother that she was going to give my father a son that *she* never gave him. She then left feeling all satisfied with herself.

Chou saw how her mother—a person with the highest self-respect—was wounded to the core by her marriage. Moreover, as independent a person as she was, she now had to ask her husband to support her. Like traditional Chinese men, Lianxuan continued to support his wife and children after he left to live with his concubine. However, like most men, after a while he also started to decrease the amount of financial support he gave her. According to her biographers, Chou often had to go to her father to ask for more money from him on her mother's behalf (Pun and Lu, 2001: 22). Chou never explained why her mother, who believed that women should be financially independent, would ask her husband to support her. Nor did she explain why her mother did not return to work after the birth of Luichuen. The closing down of the kindergarten after the Commercial Press was bombed by the Japanese in 1932 might have been one reason. In any case, after 1937 her mother was virtually a sole parent looking after two children while her husband was away in Chongqing. Another reason Chou was so desperate to marry Zhikui, according to her biographers, was because her mother was “trying to persuade her to marry her sister's son” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 30).

Chou's relationship with her mother was a complex one. As much as her mother had wounded her emotionally, she had the greatest admiration for her mother. In her old age, she always recounted with pride the story of how it was her mother who forfeited her own father's great fortune. She greatly admired her mother's capacity to endure material and physical hardship. During the Japanese occupation, her father sent money from Chongqing each month for the family, but often the money did not arrive on time because it was interrupted by the war. Food was scarce at times, and often rice was not available in the market. Chou remembered having to eat soybeans instead of rice but her mother looked after them very well under difficult circumstances: “My mother was able to endure hardship better than anyone I know.” Her mother's courage in eloping, and her daring to be different all inspired Chou, who wrote: “She inculcated in me, her first daughter, the zeal and fervour she

had in the new culture.” (Chou, 1986: 21) However, Chou was also disappointed that her mother, in the end, was destroyed by her own pride. “She could have become a writer,” Chou told her biographers, “but she was unable to give her writing the undivided attention and in the end she was so consumed by her own bitterness that she could not find her way out of it again.” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 22) Her mother died in 1950 before she reached the age of fifty.

Chou maintained a close relationship with her father after he left her mother. She was close enough to her father that she was even able to talk to him about intimate matters. While she initially disapproved of her father taking a concubine, she soon came to understand his situation. Indeed, she continued to be her father’s best friend and companion even after he moved to live with the concubine, accompanying him to many of his social functions.

Conclusion

Several things emerge from this chapter. Although Chou took up formal painting lessons only as an adult, she had already had training in Chinese painting in her childhood. Long before she came to imitate Zhao Shaoang’s Lingnan School style of painting, she had practice in imitating what her mother did with the brush and ink on paper. Her book learning, which included the studying of *gujinzhongwei*—traditional-contemporary-Chinese-foreign—prepared her well to become a modern Chinese painter. Belonging to the generation of Chinese who were the first to receive a bilingual education without going overseas, Chou was able to continue to develop a solid grounding in her own language and culture while mastering a foreign language and learning about foreign cultures. Her strong sense of patriotism reinforced her love of her own language and culture. It is also evident that Chou was exposed to modernism long before she met Lu Shou-kwan in Hong Kong. Her whole middle-class Shanghai upbringing, including her parents’ love of all things new and their readiness for change, was an education in modernism for Chou. Her mother imparted in her

early the idea of the infinite possibility of the ink marks the brush could make on paper. Her father introduced her to the idea of how modern technology, such as photography, could be used in conjunction with Chinese painting to produce a new kind of landscape painting. Her training in calligraphy, her early childhood travels, her book learning, her exposure to modernism and her wide perspective on the world, acquired through book learning and from life experiences, all prepared her well for the formal art education she came to receive. As important as the early training were the emotions Chou experienced as a daughter. She experienced the pain and the sadness of a child watching parents who had loved one another turn against each other. She experienced the agony of having to make the choice of being loyal to one parent and disloyal to the other. Worst of all, after being so loved by her parents as an only child, she was suddenly excluded from her mother's love. Although there was still no sign of Chou becoming a painter by the age of twenty-four, the propensity for her to find expression for her emotions in art was already present.

Chapter 3: No ordinary housewife (1947–58)

In interviews and in her own writings, Chou frequently provided two incorrect pieces of information about her early life. One was that she was “an ordinary housewife” before becoming an artist (Kao, 2000: 6); the other was that she “began to learn painting formally in 1954” (Zhang, 2011). The reasons Chou misled others will become clear in the following chapters. First, however, I will show that during the first decade of her marriage, during which she became the mother of three children, Chou was anything but an ordinary housewife. In fact, at the time she took up painting—in 1959 rather than 1954—she was a sophisticated and worldly woman who had experienced much in life.

Marrying Yang Yanqi

Chou met Yang Yanqi when she secured a job as a journalist at the *Peace Daily* after graduation from university. After the war ended, the *Saotang Pao*, a Nationalist newspaper, that had now changed its name to *Peace Daily*, moved back to Shanghai from the wartime capital of Chongqing. Yang, who was twenty-eight years old, was the chief editor at the *Peace Daily*. Although she was already engaged to Sha Zhikui, Chou was soon travelling to Nanking with Yang to meet his mother. When Sha learned that Chou was going out with Yang, he became alarmed. According to Chou, Sha enlisted his father’s help to secure her the job as the head of the social work department at the Sino-American Hospital. “I felt that I owed it to Sha to try to distance myself from Yang,” Chou said. Chou took up the job at the Sino-American Hospital in the spring of 1947, but secretly became engaged to Yang. In December 1947, Chou and Yang were married.

Chou discovered her passion for writing when she worked as a journalist at the *Peace Daily*. She wrote in 2006:

I reported on the news, wrote features and, when the opportunity arose, conducted special interviews; on occasion I also wrote columns and short stories. At that time I was working nearly 12 hours a day, completely absorbed in my writing. (Chou, 2006: 16)

In November 1946, Chou even travelled to Nanking to do special reporting (Yang's Yearbook, 1946). It is not surprising that Chou should discover that she had a passion for writing. As we have seen, she had demonstrated a talent for writing since childhood, when her primary school composition about the raising of the flag received recognition. When she graduated from high school, Chinese composition was one of the two subjects in which she topped her class (Chou, 2006: 15). Moreover, the ideals that prompted her to study medicine now motivated her to write. Many young people of Chou's generation, inspired by the example set by Lu Xun, the father of modern literature, who gave up studying medicine to be a writer, believed one could "save" China with the pen as well as one could by being a doctor.

When Chou met Yang, she found someone who shared her passion for writing. Yang had wanted to be a writer since childhood. He was only sixteen when he earned his first income from writing an article for the *Morning Post* in Nanking. Yang majored in political science and history at university, but he spent more of his time writing, meeting with friends and going to the dance halls than studying. In his Yearbook, he listed the names of all the magazines—*West Wind*, *Free Speech*, *Damei Bao*, *Xin Bao*, *Universe Wind*—to which he contributed as a writer. At university, he became friends with many writers and scriptwriters, among whom were Xu Xu, Liu Yichang and Shao Xunmei. They frequently met for coffee at the popular restaurant Xin Ya in Shanghai, where they discussed everything from writing to

politics. Chou said: “He [Yang] told me he went to university not to study, but to grow old enough to be a writer.”

Yang had had a remarkably similar education to Chou’s. He learned to read in the literary language at an early age. At the age of eight he was reading classics such as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and *Xu Xiake’s Travel Notes*, and at the same time reading *Children’s World* and *Little Friends*, periodicals for children (Yang’s Yearbook, 1928). He started primary school in Shanghai and received his high school education in Nanking, where he attended the prestigious Jinning High School, a private school run by the missionaries. However, unlike Chou’s university education Yang’s was disrupted twice. First he had to transfer from Jinning University in Nanking to St John’s in Shanghai because of the Japanese occupation of Nanking. His university studies were disrupted again in 1940 when two of his closest friends were assassinated by the Guomindang (KMT) government. Yang’s mother, who suspected her son’s friends might have been involved with the collaborators and was afraid her son might be implicated, urged him to go to Hong Kong.

It was during Yang’s two years in Hong Kong, while continuing his university studies, that he started his career in the media. In Hong Kong he met up with an old high school friend with whom he tried to publish a newspaper but failed. His father then secured him a job at the *Sin Ta Ri Bao* and later at *Da Gong Bao*. In December 1941, when Hong Kong was occupied by the Japanese, Yang and his father fled to Chongqing. With his father’s connections as well as his working experiences at the two newspapers in Hong Kong, Yang secured a job at *Saotang Bao* as the head of the newspaper’s archive department and later head of the editorial department. While he was in Chongqing, he wrote and published two novels, *Autumn Night Letters* and *The Women of the Next Generation*. When *Saotang Bao*

moved from Chongqing to Shanghai and changed its name to the *Peace Daily*, Yang became its chief editor.

Chou felt she had met the perfect man in Yang. She loved him so much that she felt she must have him as her husband. “I was the one who proposed to my husband,” she told me. Although he was only four years older than Chou, he was already a man of the world, having lived, studied and worked in several cities and experienced much of life: “When my father first met my husband he thought he was meeting one of his contemporaries rather than someone of a younger generation.” When Chou met Yang she also found someone who shared her ideals. They were both patriotic and supporters of the Nationalists. Patriotism was very important to Chou because when she broke up with Sha patriotism was one of the reasons for the split. Although Chou was fond of the whole Sha family, she disliked Mrs Sha’s sister who, after she was divorced, came to live with the Sha family. She started going out with men who were collaborators during the Japanese occupation. Chou’s strong sense of patriotism made her find Sha’s aunt despicable: “If I married Sha I would have to live under the same roof with his aunt.” In Yang, Chou also found a match for her own intelligence, wit and intellectual ability. “I wanted a first-class husband,” Chou said to me in her old age. “Sha could only be a good husband looking after and taking care of me.”

Chou’s decision to marry Yang instead of Sha was a dramatic one. After all, she had given up medicine for Sha. Moreover, the Sha family had been treating Chou like a daughter-in-law already for many years. “Sha’s mother wept when I married my husband,” Chou told me, “but I don’t think I was ever in love with [him].” Her decision to break up with Sha hurt him so deeply that he remained single for the rest of his life. According to Chou’s biographer, soon after Chou got married, Sha tried to forget her by frequenting nightclubs. He had a one-

night stand with a young nightclub singer. Chou's biographers wrote: "They had a daughter, and the child was adopted by the Sha family." (Pun and Li, 2001: 117)

After making the decision to marry Yang, Chou made another one: to go with her husband when he left Shanghai for Taiwan. As the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists worsened, the Nationalists were preparing to retreat to Taiwan. Yang was going to Taiwan because he was told that the *Peace Daily* was going to be relocated there. Yang's mother urged Chou to remain in Shanghai, since she was pregnant and was about to give birth, but she was defiant. With the help of a maid, she left Shanghai with Yang without saying goodbye to his mother, who was at church on the morning they left. In Taiwan, Yang soon found out the *Peace Daily* was not moving to Taiwan after all. So in 1949, the Yangs moved to Hong Kong, where Yang became the editor of the *Shanghai Morning Post*.

Becoming a mother

Between 1949 and 1954, Chou became the mother of three children. It appeared that Chou's "strong desire to become a housewife and have children" overrode her desire to have a career, as she did not pursue a career in journalism after she was married. Instead, she went back to work at the Sino-American Hospital for several months before she stopped: "After all, it was a job Sha Zhikui secured for me so that I would leave Yang to marry him." After she left the hospital, she found work at the Shanghai Telephone Company and when she became pregnant she left the telephone company to teach at a primary school. She told me that she became a teacher when she found out she was pregnant because of the long-held Chinese belief that a baby's learning begins in the mother's womb.

However, soon after Chou had her first child, a son, she came to discover she was not as maternal as she had thought. After she and her husband arrived in Hong Kong, she became pregnant with her second child. "It was too soon to have a second child. I tried to have an

abortion but I did not succeed.” Six months after she gave birth to her daughter, Chou went to work. “My husband was working and busy all the time. I was bored staying at home. He encouraged me to get a job.” She went to work for a trading company, doing its accounts. Four months later, she became the receptionist for Wu Zaixi, a Shanghainese dentist. He had employed a Cantonese nurse but he needed a receptionist who knew English and who spoke Shanghainese because most of his clients were Shanghainese. Chou left work in 1954 when she became pregnant with her third child, a daughter.

A partner in writing

“When I graduated [from university] in 1945, I became ... a professional journalist and developed a fairly keen interest in writing,” Chou wrote in 1986. “But this career was cut short when I emigrated to Hong Kong in 1949.” (Chou, 1986: 22) While it is true that Chou did not work as a journalist in Hong Kong, she became a partner in writing with her husband almost as soon as they arrived in Hong Kong. The newspaper publishing business was booming when the Yangs arrived in the British colony. In the early 1950s, with the Communists ruling on the mainland, the Nationalists occupying Taiwan and the Americans fighting in Korea, newspapers with diverse political viewpoints sprang up all over the British colony. Many of these papers also had supplements and serialised stories. The serialised stories, which had their origin in the traditional Chinese novel, the *zhanghui xianshuo*, and were generally only 500 words long in each instalment, were used by the newspapers to increase their readership. Many *zhishifenzi* became the writers of these serialised stories, which were inspired by their own experience and a whole genre of “refugee literature” emerged in the colony in the 1950s (Liu, 1997).

Yang, who first worked as the editor of *The Shanghai Morning Post*, soon became the editor for the supplement of the *Hong Kong Times*. By 1951, as well as writing for the *Hong*

Kong Times, Yang was writing in nearly all the major Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong, including *The Sing Tao Morning Post*, *The Sing Tao Evening Post*, the *New Evening Post*, the *Shanghai Daily* and the *News World*. He was writing editorials as well as serialised stories. Well versed in English, he effortlessly read novels written in English. He would then write Chinese versions of these stories. Therefore, he was able to churn out material with exceptional speed. He also wrote under several pen names.

Chou started off by submitting short pieces to various newspapers, but soon began writing a newspaper column with her husband. One day, the editor at *Sing Tao Evening Post*, Cha Liangyong (1924–), who was to become one of the most influential modern Chinese-language novelists with his *wuxia xiaoshuo*, martial arts and chivalry novels, came to the Yangs' flat to offer them a column in his newspaper. "We asked him to stay for dinner," Chou told me. "We served him some take-away noodles with chicken. It was awful. How embarrassing!" Yang and Chou accepted Cha's offer and decided to write it jointly under the pen name Yun Si. They generally discussed what to write at dinner, and after dinner they would write a rough draft together. Then the article was left to whoever had the time to polish it before sending it off to the editor.

Meanwhile Yang also started writing screenplays for the Cantonese-speaking and Mandarin-speaking movies. Yang was introduced to his first Hollywood film at the age of eight, when his parents took him to Da Guan Ming, the newly opened cinema in Shanghai, to see *Wings*, the winner of the first Academy Award for Best Picture. From that time, Yang—who already wanted to become a writer—developed an interest in writing screenplays as well. While Hollywood movies were popular among the educated, the Chinese film industry had also taken off in Shanghai and Hong Kong. When Yang was still in high school, he submitted his first screenplay to the Shanghai Mingxing Company, which rejected it for its

lack of a central theme. Yang eventually succeeded in having one of his screenplays, *Chasing Your Dream*, made into a movie. It was directed by Tang Wang and produced by the Central Film Company in Shanghai in 1948.

In Hong Kong, a whole new Mandarin-speaking movie industry sprang up after 1949 alongside the existing Cantonese-speaking movie industry. The large influx of immigrants from China, just before and after 1949, had increased the population in Hong Kong from 600,000 in 1945 to over two million in 1951 (Wong, 1988: 3). Among the new immigrants were industrialists and entrepreneurs who came with capital. Lee Zuyong, a tycoon from Shanghai, who had no experience with the film industry, started a Mandarin-speaking film company called Yung Hwa. Then Zhang Xi Kwan, an experienced film maker who had made a name for himself back in Shanghai, went into partnership with Lee, only to leave soon afterwards to form his own company, the Great Wall. He employed Yuen Yangang, a former lawyer in Shanghai, to be his manager. Before long, Yuen bought Zhang out and renamed the company the New Great Wall, while Zhang formed his own company with his wife and called it Xing Hua. Yang came to know all three men soon after he arrived in Hong Kong. Lee was an old friend of his father's, and Yuen was a good friend of one of his uncles. Through Lee he came to know Zhang. Yang began writing screenplays soon after he arrived in Hong Kong.

He wrote screenplays for both the Cantonese-speaking movies and the Mandarin-speaking movies. Born in Peking in 1920, he had learned to speak Mandarin as a child. In 1926, when Yang was six years old, his family moved back to Shanghai, where he learned to speak Shanghainese. Then, during the two years he was in Hong Kong during his university days, he learned to speak Cantonese. Yang was not only fluent in all these languages, but also had a special interest in phonology.

As well as writing a joint column with Yang, Chou became involved with her husband's screenplay writing. In 1952, Yang wrote nearly a dozen screenplays in one year (Yang's Year Book, 1952). One of the reasons why he was so prolific was that Chou wrote them with him. "Screenplays are much easier to write than essays," Chou told an interviewer in 2003. "We made up a plot and then just filled in the dialogue afterwards." (Shu Qi, 24 February 2003).

When Yang became a lyric writer, Chou practically took over this work from him. In the 1950s, EMI had opened up a new market in recording popular song numbers and movie theme songs from the Mandarin movies in Hong Kong. Other record companies followed. Lyric writing became a good way of earning an income for many writers. "I wrote all the lyrics and my husband just put his name to them," Chou told me in 2004. "I wrote whatever came to my mind. It was not so much using my imagination but just being a little crazy. My husband found my lyrics innovative." Though satisfied with what she wrote, Yang would nevertheless call upon his own perfect Mandarin and his knowledge in phonology to make a few changes: "He would change a word here and there to make the lyrics easier for the singer to sing."

In 1953, Yang—who was now better known by his pen name, Yi Wen—became a movie director. When Chou first met Yang, she and her husband not only shared a passion for writing, but were also passionate about going to the movies: "We would skip dinner in order to see two movies in a row. We munched on our bread as we watched the movies." However, neither Chou nor Yang thought he would become a movie director. "Yuen Yangang looked upon my husband as his nephew," Chou said in an interview. "When my husband, who had no training in directing, showed interest in directing, Yuen just let him do it. So my husband was really a self-taught director." (interview with Shu Qi, 2003) Yuen Yangang had been a

lawyer in Shanghai before he became the proprietor of Great Wall. By the end of 1952, Yang had picked up enough about directing to be asked to co-direct *The Notorious Woman*; he gladly accepted the challenge. His co-director was Tang Wang, the very man who had directed Yang's first screenplay, which was made into a movie in Shanghai. *The Notorious Woman* was such a success that it opened the path for Yang to embark on a career as a movie director. In 1955 he was asked by Zhang Xi Kwan, the proprietor for Xing Hua, to direct *Blood Will Tell*, the first Chinese Eastman Kodak colour film.

The Yangs had come from Shanghai with very little money, but by 1955 they were among the highest income earners in Hong Kong. When they first arrived in Hong Kong, Yang was earning \$280 a month as the editor of *The Shanghai Morning Post*. However, the Yangs were soon making a very good living from Yang's writing and their joint efforts in writing screenplays and lyrics. Screenplay writers were paid \$3000 for each screenplay, regardless of whether it was made into a movie or not. Lyric writers generally received \$100 for a song and were usually contracted to write ten songs per month (Chu, 2000: 152). After Yang became a director in 1953, the Yangs' income increased dramatically. In 1955, Yang earned \$45,440 (Li, 2009: 23). It was a hefty income, considering that it cost only \$30 to \$40 a month to hire a live-in maid who worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Yang's quick success had to do with being at the right place at the right time. Yei Si wrote: "The 1950s and 1960s Hong Kong was a time that the literati were involved in the film industry." (Yei, *Ming Pao Monthly*, April 2002: 49–51). Many of the movies that were being produced at that time were based on books written by contemporary writers and literary giants. Therefore, a scriptwriter like Yang—who had a background in literature and was a writer in his own right—was ideally placed to turn a piece of literary work into a screenplay. Indeed, almost as soon as he arrived in Hong Kong, Yang was asked by Lee Zuyong to

dramatise Zhen Zhongwen's famous novel *Bien Zeng*. Among the first movies Yang directed were *Half Way Down* and *Gloomy Sunday*; both novels were written by contemporary writers and dramatised by Yang. Well versed in English and familiar with Western literature, Yang was also well suited to direct movies with stories taken directly from Western sources. Among his very early movies, *Blood Will Tell* was taken from Baroness Orczy's novel *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *Madam Butterfly* was taken from Puccini's opera of the same name.

Chou was able to be a partner in writing with Yang because she had the educational, cultural and social background that was required to do the work being demanded by the film industry in Hong Kong at that time. In 2006, I happened to see a few of Yang's earliest works at the Hong Kong Film Archive, and Chou's input into them was evident. A lot of the dialogue sounded like Chou's words. Some of the expressions, such as "I am not so mighty" or "You are bullying me", were used in the way that she often used them. The female protagonists also had occupations such as a writer or journalist. Some of the ideals upheld by Yang and Chou were expressed through dialogue such as "Life is not just about eating well and dressing in good clothes".

Chou continued to be involved in her husband's screenplay and lyric writing even after he became a director at Motion Picture and General Investment (MP&GI) in 1956. Although Yang was employed as a director and although prominent playwrights and writers like Yao Ke, Qin Yifu (Nellie Chin) and Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) were employed as professional scriptwriters at MP&GI, Yang wrote most of the scripts for his movies. Indeed, Yang's first directed work at MP&GI, *Gloomy Sunday*, was based on a novel written by his friend, Xu Xu. Yang not only directed *Gloomy Sunday* but he also wrote the script and the lyrics for the movie. The fact that MP&GI specialised in producing comedies and melodrama that were heavily decorated with songs and that it also produced musicals meant that lyric

writing was in demand. “Most people knew Yi Wen [Yang] as a director and a scriptwriter,” Lan Tianyun wrote in 2009, “but few knew he was also a prolific lyric writer who wrote the lyrics for the songs in his own movies as well as those of others.” (Lan, 2009: 12) Of course, very few would know that his wife wrote a lot of his scripts with him and that she was the one who wrote most of his lyrics. Indeed, Chou continued to write screenplays and lyrics with her husband even when she was about to become an artist. In 1965, Yang wrote and directed *The Longest Night*, a movie that was set during the Japanese occupation. “I helped Yiwen with the narrative. It was my idea to end the story without killing the Japanese, the enemies,” she told Shu Qi in 2003. “I gave the story an idealistic ending rather than a patriotic ending.” (Interview with Shu Qi, 2003)

Although Chou was not working as a professional scriptwriter, through being her husband’s partner in writing, she was expressing views that were similar to those of other women writers of her generation. Among the six professional scriptwriters employed by MP&GI were Eileen Chang (1920–95) and Nellie Yu (1929–). Eileen Chang, who had studied both at the University of Hong Kong and at St John’s University, was already a famous writer in the late 1940s in Shanghai. Nellie Yu, a literature graduate from the University of Hong Kong, was an actress as well as a professional scriptwriter. Chou shared a very similar educational and cultural background with these two female professional scriptwriters. Chang and Yu were described as writers with a special sensibility for the modern city woman. In Chang’s *June Bride*, the protagonist refuses to accept destiny and would not commit to marriage until her inner doubts are resolved. In *Her Tender Heart*, Yu affirmed a married woman’s right to pursue love. Such sensibility for the modern city woman was also found in much of Yang’s work. For example, in *Air Hostess*, the protagonist wanted to live a life different from that of her mother’s generation (Wong, 2002: 162–73).

That such a modern view of women writers was expressed through the Hong Kong movies of the 1950s, when Hong Kong was still a relatively conservative society, had much to do with Loke Wan Tao, the proprietor of MP&GI. Loke, who was the son of one of the richest Chinese in Malaya, was educated in Switzerland and Cambridge and was described by his niece as a man with “a certain charisma” (Choo, 2002: 311). He had a wide variety of interests, including anthropology, ornithology, photography and art. According to Fu Poshek, Loke was “more a scholar in love with the world of ideas and truth than a businessman obsessed with deals and profits” (Fu, 2002: 66). His mission was to modernise the “everyday life of Southeast Asia” by providing people with modern movie cinemas that were air-conditioned and “generously equipped with the most advanced Western-made acoustic and visual technology (e.g. Cinemascope), and lushly decorated with chairs and carpets imported from USA and Europe” (Fu, 2002: 67). To accomplish his mission, he needed people who were “well-educated and well versed in both Chinese and western cultures”, and had “a broad world view” like himself, who could produce modern movies to be enjoyed by his audience in his modern cinemas. Thus the people at MP&GI, “from general manager Robert Chung to production manager Stephen Soong (Song Qi) to director Evan Yang (Yi Wen) and screenwriters like Yao Ke, Qin Yifu (Nellie Chin) ... and ... Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing)” possessed the qualities Loke thought necessary (Wong, 2002: 162).

Chou’s involvement with her husband’s career as a movie director also enabled her to witness and participate in the efforts made by the literati of Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s to modernise Chinese film. Leung Ping-kwan wrote: “The literati involvement in the Hong Kong film industry was nowhere more prominent than at MP&GI.” (Leung, 2009: 158). Indeed, Yang was at the forefront of calling for the modernisation of Chinese film. “During the Chinese film’s sixty years of history, not much has been achieved,” Yang wrote in 1956. “Some would say that is because film is not purely an art but an industry. Since

China has been poor in its development of its industries, the film industry is no exception. But leaving the industry part aside, one still does not see much achievement in the film in terms of artistic creativity and innovations.” (Yi Wen, 1956: 44). By being a partner in writing with her husband, Chou was in fact contributing to the production of works by MP&GI that were “free of the burdened morality typical of the Chinese intelligentsia” (Low Kar, 2002: 80) and that depicted “a modern world marked by a new way of life and a new habit of mind in Chinese societies” (Fu, 2002: 70).

In her involvement with her husband’s career, Chou also came to gain an insight into film as a medium of expression. In 2003, when Su Qi interviewed Chou, she displayed much knowledge about how her husband learned to direct, how he constructed the stories he told in his films and the kind of preparation he made before shooting (Shu Qi, 2003). Although it is not certain whether Chou was ever present when Yang was directing, she saw all his movies: “I always went with my husband to see his movies whenever a new one was released.” Just as she saw how her father tried to create a new kind of Chinese landscape painting by combining photography with Chinese painting, she saw how her husband tried to employ Western filming techniques to modernise Chinese film. Yang, who translated Mervyn LeRoy’s *It Takes More Than Talent*, a book on Hollywood filmmaking, into Chinese in 1953, as well as having watched Hollywood movies since early childhood, was greatly influenced by Hollywood films in his own work. He experimented with Western filming techniques and was particularly fond of using montage in his work.

An open marriage

At Chou’s first exhibition in 1968, a reporter wrote: “The artists I usually meet are often temperamental, frustrated people, angry at themselves and the world, but not Mrs Yang, who has been happily married for 20 years and has three grown-up children.” (San, 1968) During

the first decade of their marriage, Yang gave Chou the best a man could give his wife materially. Arriving in Hong Kong with no money and hardly any possessions, the Yangs were living a life of luxury in only a few years. From a small apartment, they moved to an expensive flat on Shore Road in Kowloon where the well-to-do lived. In 1959, they moved into an even more comfortable place on Boundary Road in Kowloon. They employed two live-in maids to do the housework and look after the children. In the evening, Chou and Yang would often skip home-cooked meals prepared by the maids to eat out. “My husband liked seeing me dressed up rather than being a home-body. He also liked having conversations with me.” In 1955, only a few months after her third child was born, Chou travelled to Japan where Yang did location shooting for several movies. “Late at night, Luyun flew in with the camera crew for outdoor shooting and went straight to the International Tourists Hotel,” Yang recorded in his Yearbook (Yang’s Yearbook, 1955). The following year, Chou travelled to Taiwan with Yang. “In the 1950s, few people travelled outside of Hong Kong,” Poshek Fu wrote, “and even fewer travelled by aeroplane.” (Fu, 2002: 72) “My husband spent money like water. Out of the blue he would take me to Repulse Bay Hotel to spend a night just to enjoy the luxury offered by an expensive hotel,” she said. At other times they would spend a night at the Sing Shang Hotel in the New Territories. In 1958, the Yangs bought their first car (Yang’s Yearbook, 1958). In 1950s Hong Kong, owning a car was only for the very wealthy. Women drivers were rare, but Chou was driving the family car before Yang did as she was awarded her licence first. In short, Chou was a married woman who apparently had everything: a talented and high-earning husband, children—including a son—and a luxurious lifestyle.

However, what the reporter wrote about Chou being happily married was not entirely true because, while Yang and Chou seemed like a perfect couple to the outside world, celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary in 1957, Chou had been extremely unhappy

because of her husband's infidelity. Before they were married, she already knew Yang had had an affair with a married woman. One of his first novels, *Autumn Night Letters*, was based on his own experience. Chou, who was deeply in love, hoped once she and Yang were married he would be faithful to her. However, Chou soon discovered that Yang was not a family man. Instead, he was an ambitious man who put his work and social life above everything else. Yang had grown up in an environment where work and socialising were inseparable. Since childhood, he had watched how his father, Yang Xianli, a high official in the KMT government, socialised with other high scholar-officials. According to Chou, her father-in-law was a man with great skills in dealing with people. When Chou first met her father-in-law, Yang Xianli was already in his early sixties:

He was a man with great vitality and one of the best conversationalists. When he sat down at a table of twelve to have dinner he would talk to every single person to make each of them feel comfortable. When he was engaged in a conversation with one particular person he gave that person his full attention.

Yang had learned much from his father, and his rapid career success after his arrival in Hong Kong was partly due to his skills in socialising with a great number of people, making use of old connections and creating new ones. Yang's unwillingness to put his family first was evident during Chou's second pregnancy:

I was often feeling sick. I remember one night begging my husband not to go out and to stay home with me to keep me company because I was feeling sick.

He told me I needed to see a doctor and since he was not a doctor he said there was no point of him staying home with me.

Not long after they had their second child, in 1952, Yang embarked on his first affair since their marriage (Yang's Yearbook, 1952).

Having watched what had happened to her parents' marriage, Chou saw the need for her to rescue her marriage before it was too late. Indeed, even though she found motherhood boring, Chou stopped work after her third child was born in an attempt to save her marriage. Not having to go to work allowed her to travel to the location shootings with her husband in 1955 and 1956, and to become more involved in his work. Unlike her mother, instead of punishing her husband for being unfaithful she made the most of her femininity to try to win him over. She spent a lot of time making herself look as glamorous as the movie stars her husband worked with. She went to the hairdresser weekly to have her hair washed and her nails manicured. "A lady even came to the flat regularly to do my toenails." She tried to be tender and loving towards her husband. "To show how dependent I was on him, I always held on to his arm when we walked." However, her efforts did not stop Yang from having more affairs. Indeed, soon after Chou visited Yang in Japan on his local shooting, he had an affair with a woman he met in Tokyo (Yang's Yearbook, 1955), and after she spent time with him in Taiwan for his location shooting there in 1956, he had an affair with one of the actresses (Yang's Yearbook, 1956). In both instances Yang stayed on in these places for several months to complete his work while Chou returned to Hong Kong to be with their children.

When Yang became a director for MP&GI in 1956, it was a turning point in his career as he went on to acquire the reputation of a "literati movie director" and to win many awards for his work, but his new job also gave him more opportunity to become involved in extramarital relationships. At MP&GI, not only were women like Qin Yifu and Eileen Chang hired as scriptwriters, women—rather than men—were also the focus of the movies produced by MP&GI. Yang became a popular director with women movie stars: "My husband was not tall and handsome but he was always impeccably groomed." Indeed, Yang's attraction to the women movies stars who worked with him was not so much his physique but his intelligence, gentleness, sensitiveness and willingness to listen. These qualities were rare for directors,

since they could usually afford to be authoritative, demanding and dogmatic. According to Chou, only a few actresses, such as Li Li Hua and Li Mei, did not succumb to Yang's charm. Other women who worked with Yang found themselves easily attracted to the soft-spoken director who bestowed much attention upon them.

While Yang was discreet about his earlier affairs, he became quite open about his later ones. In fact, he soon gained a reputation as a "dissolute gifted scholar" in addition to being a literati director. "I knew he was going to bed with the movie stars he worked with when he started to speak to me in Mandarin [rather than in Shanghainese] when we made love," Chou said. "Once he even called out someone else's name." When her husband took her to a luxurious hotel to spend the night, she knew that he had taken other women there, and when he bought her an expensive present, such as a fur coat, she knew "he had given a similar present to his girlfriend" (Pun and Lu, 2001: 53).

Yang started to conduct an affair openly with one of his actresses around 1956. "She was not a great beauty but a very talented young actress," Chou told me. After a movie directed by Yang in which she starred became a big hit in 1957, the two of them made a series of movies together. "My husband's relationship with her was like the relationship between Gong Li and Zhang Yimou." Their love affair was written about in the movie magazines and gossip columns of the newspapers. "I went to the hairdresser's and I heard people talking about my husband and her." While Chou felt totally humiliated, she also worried that her two older children, who were about nine and ten at the time, might hear about their father's affair or even read about it in the newspapers. When Chou confronted him about his affair, he responded that, "A man wants his main meal but enjoys his dessert too."

Chou considered several options when deciding whether she should divorce her husband. One was to return to Shanghai to live with her father, who by now had become a

widower. Chou even took up Russian lessons, since Russian had replaced English in China as the foreign language to learn. However, her father urged her not to go back to Shanghai because the “purge of the rightists” had started in China. Chou even took up Yang’s suggestion to look for her own dessert. “My understanding was that you were disgusted with living with a man who ‘eats dessert’ while leaving you, the rice pot, at home,” wrote Chou’s god-daughter in 1996. Chou’s response was, as her god-daughter put it, to date “that ugly ugly man” (letter from Chou’s god-daughter, 29 January 1996). According to Chou, “this man was not clever but sincere. He was everything my husband was not. He wanted to marry me.” The relationship went on for some time, but she eventually got tired of him. Chou told me she had two abortions during this period. She told her biographers that when she decided to break up with him, he was so angry that he attempted to strangle her (Pun and Lu, 2001: 74).

She also considered the option of studying to gain a qualification that would be recognised by the Hong Kong government so that she could teach or take up a job in the public service to support herself and the children, but decided against it. “I am a practical person. I knew raising three children on my own would be very difficult.” Aside from not wanting to lose her children, Chou also did not want to lose Yang entirely. While Yang was a philanderer, he was in her eyes a good husband in other ways:

My husband was a man ahead of his time in his view of the role of a wife.

Unlike most men he did not see me as someone who was there to cook, to keep house for him or to have sex with. He saw me as someone with whom he shared many common interests and with whom he enjoyed a stimulating conversation.

Chou’s decision not to divorce Yang was different from the decisions made by many of the educated women of her generation who could be financially independent. Women

writers like Eileen Chang and Su Xing, who suffered the same fate as Chou, had divorced their husbands and sought economic independence by writing. Chou suffered the added humiliation of her husband's affairs being so public. Therefore, Chou's response to her marriage gave the impression to many around her that she was a woman who just accepted her fate. "When I first met her in the 1950s," Chong Ling Ling, one of the movie stars who worked with Yang, wrote, "my impression of her was that she was an old-fashioned and pitiful woman whose existence was defined by her husband." (Chong, 1987: 4)

It would appear that what really motivated Chou to stay in the marriage was that she still loved Yang and wanted to save the marriage so that she could succeed where her mother had failed. Unlike her mother, who let her marriage be destroyed in front of her eyes, Chou set out in a practical way to save her marriage. "To save my marriage I needed my husband to become more of a family man. He needed to spend more time at home." To entice Yang to spend more time at home, Chou started giving *mahjong* parties at their flat. She would have a table of four players for the ladies and another table of four players for their husbands or male players. These *mahjong* parties generally started in the afternoon, although sometimes they even started in the late morning, and would go on until late at night. The hostess would provide lunch, afternoon tea, dinner and even midnight snacks. Liang Qicao, the great twentieth-century reformer and scholar, famously said that only studying can make one forget about *mahjong* playing and only *mahjong* playing can make one forget about studying. Yang had not played the game before, but once he took up the game he instantly became a regular player and many of his colleagues at MP&GI became his regular *mahjong* partners. "In the last two to three years," Yang wrote in 1959, "I have developed a great interest in *mahjong* playing. It has become a nice pastime." (Yang's Yearbook, 1959)

Conclusion

Chou was no ordinary housewife before she took up painting. In fact, she was a modern woman who contributed to the family's income, who drove and travelled overseas by plane, leaving her children at home with maids. She was also a modern wife who shared a lot of interests with her husband. In 2006, Chou wrote that she was ignorant of art as a medium of expression until she read *The Meaning of Art* by Herbert Read. "So this is art!" she wrote. "It opened my eyes to what art can be." (Chou, 2006: 16) However, from what has been presented in the last chapter and this one, it is evident that long before Chou read Read, which was not until around 1964, she already knew what art could be. In fact, she had been engaging in the creative arts—painting, photography, writing, film—for a long time. Moreover, although it would be many years yet before she became involved with Lui Shou-kwan's New Ink Painting movement, she had also been exposed to the literatis' attempt to modernise Chinese arts. She saw how her father attempted to modernise Chinese painting through photography, and later she saw and participated in the efforts by her husband and his colleagues to modernise Chinese film.

What is significant about her life during this period was that she had experienced herself as a woman in the widest sense: she had fallen deeply in love, given birth to three children, experienced the feeling of betrayal when her husband philandered, had a sexual relationship with someone she did not love and had two abortions. In her later years as an artist, some—like Catherine Maudsley—wondered whether "the artist's awareness of the human condition leads to greater awareness of her own femininity" (Maudsley, 1995: 56). Chou's experiences suggest that it was in fact her greater awareness of her own femininity that led to her increased knowledge of the human condition.

What is even more significant about her early married life is that a wound that never had a chance to heal became even deeper. The once hurtful feeling her mother bestowed upon her was now repeated by her husband. While her mother transferred her love to her younger daughter and made her feel totally replaceable, her husband shared his love for her with other women. Chou was so emotionally wounded by her husband's preference for other women that she became completely consumed by her feelings of jealousy: "I was so jealous that nothing could ease the turmoil inside me." Such irrepressible emotions propelled Chou on to the path to becoming an artist.

Chapter 4: An idiosyncratic art education (1958–68)

“I began receiving formal training [in] painting from teachers in 1950,” Chou wrote in the catalogue for her first retrospective exhibition in 1986. “The teacher I was with for the longest time was Mr Zhao Shaoang of Lingnan, and the teacher who most deeply altered my attitude to work was Mr Lui Shou-kwan.” (Chou, 1986: 22) In this chapter, I will show that Chou’s study with Zhao and Lui was in fact only part of a comprehensive idiosyncratic art education that to a large extent was shaped by her marriage. The inseparability of her art education and her married life meant that it is not possible to give a full picture of her art education without showing what was happening in her marriage. Indeed, as much as her art education was shaped by her marriage, what she learned from her art education affected the way she lived her life.

Lessons with Zhao Shaoang

In 2006, Chou wrote that she took up painting lessons with Zhao Shaoang “quite by accident” (Chou, 2006: 16). She had not planned to take up painting lessons; she certainly had not planned to learn to paint in the Lingnan School style of painting. Zhao was a master of the Lingnan School, a school of painting that emphasises the use of washes and colour, a “boneless” style of painting, rather than lines and brush strokes and tonal gradations of the black ink valued by the traditional literati painters. The Chinese painters who first started combining the Chinese “boneless” style of painting with the Japanese Nihonga way of painting—a style of painting influenced by the French Impressionists—attempted to develop a “New National Painting” with the hope of modernising Chinese painting. Their distinctive style of painting, which also employed Western fixed-point perspective, chiaroscuro and realism, and emphasised sketching from nature and painting contemporary subject-matter,

came to be known as the Lingnan School of painting. Zhao, who was a second-generation Lingnan School painter, was an accomplished artist who was described as having “an amazing aptitude for wet washes” and possessing an “all-round technical virtuosity” (Croizier, 1988: 135–6).

In 1959, when Chou took up lessons with Zhao, the Yangs were financially very well off, with an income of \$50,089 per year (Li, 2009: 23). As mentioned in the last chapter, they lived in a luxurious flat, drove a new car and had live-in maids to do the housework and look after the children. Therefore, although Chou had three children under the age of ten, she could afford to play *mahjong* during the day:

I played with the wives. Sometimes we went out to eat before we played. Other times I just drove my friends around in my car and we went visiting interesting places. One day we decided that we would go to Huang Da Xien [a temple in Kowloon] to have our fortune read. The fortune teller looked at my hands and said my hands were those of an artist. I asked him if playing *mahjong* was art. My friends all laughed. On our way home, one of my friends told me that she knew someone who learned Chinese painting from Zhao Shaoang. She would make inquiries for me.

In Chou’s weekly Thursday class with Zhao, attended by eight to ten other students, Zhao taught in the traditional way. He began each lesson by demonstrating techniques. Chou credited all her painting techniques to Zhao. She told me:

During the ten [in fact six] years I studied with Zhao I learned enough painting techniques from him to last me a life time. He taught his students that if a dry brush is dipped into ink the blackness one would achieve on the paper would be

very dark, a kind of lifeless black. He showed us how to soak the brush in water first and then squeeze the water out properly afterwards. By dipping a wet brush into the ink one would achieve a blackness that is glossy with life. He also showed us how to dip the brush in water, colour and ink all at one go. The rule was always to dip the brush in water first, followed by the light colours and leaving the darker colours, including ink, last. He also instructed us to use the tip of the brush only when dipping into the darker colours or in ink. He talked while he demonstrated and he would describe a particular technique or the quality of a particular work by using a four character phrase. For example, he would say *li dao zhi bei*, meaning the strength of the brush seeps through to the back of the paper, to describe the high quality of a work, or *luo di you sheng*, meaning the brush touches the paper with audible sound, to describe a particular technique.

By the end of each lesson, Zhao would have painted enough paintings in his demonstration for every student to take one home to copy. At the next lesson, he would look at the student's copy of his work and make comments and corrections. Some students would be asked to copy the same painting again. Others would be given a different one to take home to copy. "We copied easy things such as bamboo first then birds, insects and flowers. Zhao was famous for his crickets. I found his birds easiest to copy and next was flowers," Chou said. When the students had done well on the easy subjects, they proceeded on to copying animals, people and finally landscapes.

Chou's familiarity with the brush and ink, her experience in copying what her mother did in calligraphy as a child, and her sitting in on He Tianjian's painting classes as a child all helped her to pick up painting with extreme ease. Her husband described the speed with

which she took to painting as *jin bu shen su*, progressing in mythical speed, in his 1959 entry in his Yearbook (Yang's Yearbook, 1959).¹ In 2004, when Henry H. Au-yeung staged an exhibition of Irene Chou's early work, he wrote that her work "possessed not only formal resemblance to Zhao's 'boneless' style, even the calligraphic inscription bore exact likeness to that of her teacher" (Au-yeung, 2004: 4). *Chrysanthemums* (Figure 4.1) was painted soon after Chou took up lessons with Zhao. The work contains all the characteristic features of the Lingnan School style of painting, with the petals and leaves created by colour washes and ink washes instead of by brush strokes. Powder is sprinkled on to the petals to give a glossy look. Light and shade are created by gradation in colour and ink. The haziness in the middle of the big chrysanthemum creates an out-of-focus effect, giving the impression that the flower is moving in the breeze. In applying Zhao's techniques faithfully when copying his work, Chou produced work that even Zhao had difficulty discerning from his own. "He started to make corrections on his own work." Even though she was able to make carbon copies of her teacher's work, at times she also added her own ideas. In copying of one of Zhao's landscapes, which was painted with a fixed point perspective, an atmospheric quality produced by wet washes, and a misty and romantic feel, Chou copied everything faithfully except for the colour of the sky at sunset. She had seen such a sunset when travelling to Gulin with her father as a child. "I remember that colour so well," she told me. "I decided to paint the colour I remembered rather than the colour used by Zhao."

When Chou started lessons with Zhao, Yang was supportive of her new-found interest. Although Yang did not paint, he was an excellent calligrapher as well as a seal carver. From early childhood, Yang had watched his father, a scholar-official amateur calligrapher, practise his calligraphy and later studied calligraphy under the guidance of his father, who trained him to copy the rubbings of old calligraphy to develop his own style.

¹ For some reason, these four Chinese characters are missing in the published version of Yang's Yearbook.

Yang won many prizes at school for his calligraphy. His knowledge in calligraphy expanded during the years when his father worked for Yu Yuren. After Chiang Kai-shek established his government in Nanking, a new ministry was set up and Yu became the director. In 1931, Yang's father became secretary to Yu Yuren, who excelled at the cursive script, a style of calligraphy that was extremely difficult to emulate. Yu was interested in collecting rubbings of ancient cursive script all over China, and in attempting to categorise them. He enlisted Yang's father as his assistant for the project. Because of his father's involvement in this project, Yang came to acquire much knowledge about calligraphy.

Just as they collaborated on writing, Chou and Yang collaborated in painting after she began painting lessons. Traditionally, Chinese painters were also seal carvers and calligraphers, as seals and inscriptions are part of a painting. Chou neither did seal carving nor did she claim to be a calligrapher. Yang carved nearly all of Chou's seals used in her early works. Although Chou occasionally inscribed her own work, most of the inscriptions in her early works were by other people, including Yu Yuren. Zhao inscribed on Chou's work occasionally as a form of praise for a particularly good piece of painting. Since most of Yang's colleagues were literati, those who became regular players of *mahjong* at the Yangs' home were people who knew something about painting, calligraphy, seal carving and poetry. Several of Yang's fellow movie directors were calligraphers, including Wang Zhibo, who had published several books on the subject of Chinese calligraphy. When they came over to play *mahjong*, they asked to see Chou's latest work: "They marvelled at the likeness of my work to Zhao Shaoang's." Zhang Che, also a movie director, would comment on Chou's work and make suggestions for improvement. He also inscribed on several of Chou's artworks. One of the works on which Chou and Yang collaborated was *Butterfly*, with the top half of the painting covered in Yang's calligraphy written in the "head of a fly" style, with each character literally the size of the head of a fly and the bottom half of the painting painted by Chou.

Although Chou could imitate Zhao's work almost as soon as she took up lessons with him, she continued her lessons with Zhao up to 1966 as she found Zhao had even more to offer after he began travelling the world in the early 1960s. "He started to paint banana trees, a subject matter he had not painted before." Instead of using washes to build up the forms for the large banana leaves, he used a flat brush loaded with ink and painted the leaves with broad swift strokes, like the broad strokes used by the abstract expressionists.

Chou accredited Zhao not only for her painting techniques but also for inspiring her to become an artist. All the students in Zhao's class were women like Chou who were married to well-to-do husbands. After all, each weekly lesson cost \$50, more than a live-in maid received in a month. But for her classmates the weekly lessons were mainly an opportunity to socialise with each other:

They often went out to eat after the lessons and even played *mahjong* together afterwards. During class, while Zhao explained and demonstrated, many just talked among themselves about their husbands and children or gossiped. They exchanged recipes on how to make the best curry or water chestnut cake. They also came to their classes to show off their expensive handbags, shoes and clothes. They were always asking you how much you paid for your shoes and your handbags. One day I came to class with a small black crocodile handbag. I flung it on the table for all to see. Without anyone asking me how much I paid for it I told them it only cost five dollars.

While Chou came to find her classmates frivolous, she grew to admire Zhao's lack of concern for appearances:

While Zhao demonstrated in class I saw ink and colour would seep through the paper onto the table. To prevent the paper from soaking up the excess ink or

colour from the table he would shift the paper off the table frequently as he painted. While using one hand to lift the paper he would just use his other hand [rather than a towel] to wipe off the table.

Living among the glamorous people in the film industry where appearance was everything, Chou found Zhao Shaoang's lack of ostentation refreshing. "Ah, I thought then, how free it must be to be an artist," Chou said to me in 2005.

Not long after Chou started lessons with Zhao, she faced another crisis in her marriage. As mentioned in the last chapter, when Chou confronted Yang about his affair with the actress, Yang responded by saying that he must have his "dessert". After she decided not to divorce Yang, Chou did not expect him to stop seeing the actress, nor did she expect him to stop seeing other women. However, in 1960 it appeared that Yang was ready to replace his main meal with his dessert. To put up with her husband's philandering was painful enough, but to watch him falling in love with another woman was unbearable for Chou. It was made all the more unbearable by the public nature of the relationship. Just as Chou's friends at school all knew when her mother shifted her love from her to her sister, everyone knew about it when her husband fell in love with the actress. "Her [the actress's] mother had the good sense to persuade her daughter not to ruin her life by involving herself with a married man with three children." In 1961, the actress married but returned to work to honour her contract. Between 1961 and 1963, Yang made some of his best movies with this actress, including *Sun, Moon, and Star*, for which he won the best director award. Chou had to continue to endure gossip when people took the films directed by Yang and starring this actress with titles such as *Teach Me How Can I Not Think of Her* as evidence that Yang was still in love with her even after she was married.

Painting came to Chou's aid as she went through the most difficult time in her marriage. According to her biographers, Chou told them she felt so humiliated by her husband that "several times she attempted to kill herself by drinking poison" and she "used alcohol to numb her pain" (Pun and Lu, 2001: 51, 53). Since Chou had never mentioned her suicide attempts to me, I asked why her biographers wrote about them. "I dramatized things a bit to keep them interested," she told me. There is, however, no doubt that Chou experienced a very difficult time during that period. After all, to experience the feeling of rejection was hard enough without the humiliation of her husband's public declaration of his love for another woman. Chou was probably close to feeling suicidal at times, but painting seemed to have helped her through her darkest hour. "In the tedious course of imitation," Chou wrote in 1986, "I managed to gain much enlightenment ... [In painting] I discovered a mood not easily attainable in the contemporary world, a mood characterised by tranquillity and elegance. I was able to renew my understanding about life." (Chou, 1986:23)

Reading the Bible

Chou, who had been exposed to Christianity since she was in high school, became a Catholic in 1960. Like painting, religion became a source of comfort for her as she dealt with the difficulties in her marriage. "Of course, I had my ulterior motives. I needed to send my children to good schools." In the 1950s and 1960s, the best education in Hong Kong was provided by the churches. Since Catholic schools gave preference to children of Catholics, by becoming a Catholic, Chou gave her children a better chance to gain entrance into a Catholic school. Becoming a Catholic also started Chou's interest in religion. "I read the Bible from the beginning to the end when I became a Catholic," Chou told me.

Studying traditional Chinese painting

“Everything started with Zhao Shaoang” was the way Chou described how her art education began. Prior to her lessons with Zhao, she had not even remotely thought about becoming an artist. However, after she began lessons with Zhao, she started actively pursuing an art education. In addition to her lessons with Zhao Shaoang, she started to study traditional Chinese painting. Zhao travelled overseas regularly in the early 1960s, and the lessons were often suspended. “When Zhao Shaoang was away I did not have his work to copy so I copied works by the ancients.” Although Chou made it sound as if she copied works by ancient painters because she had nothing better to do, she was in fact deliberately trying to give herself the training in traditional painting that was lacking in Zhao’s lessons. The Lingnan School painters did not rely on brushstrokes to build forms. Yet brushstrokes, *cun*, developed by painters over a thousand years, are essential in building forms in Chinese painting. Although there were no museums or art galleries in Hong Kong at that time, there were plenty of catalogues of old paintings, published both in China and in Taiwan. For example, the Shanghai Museum produced a catalogue of 100 paintings in its collection in 1959 and the Palace Museum in Taiwan produced *Three Hundred Masterpieces of Chinese Painting* in the same year. Aside from catalogues, large-format loose prints and photos of paintings were also available. By copying the reproductions of works by the Song (960–1273) and Yuen (1271–1368) dynasty painters, as well as works by more recent painters such as Shitao (1642–1707) and Bada Shanren (1626–1705), Chou gave herself the training she needed in traditional Chinese painting in addition to her Lingnan School lessons.

Studying Western art history and theory

In addition to studying Chinese painting, Chou also took a course on Western art offered by the extramural program at the University of Hong Kong. Up until the mid-1950s, nearly all of

the art activities in the colony were conducted by private organisations. There was hardly any support from the government for art, and no art academies where one could be trained to be an artist. However, beginning in 1956, the University of Hong Kong started an extramural program that, as it developed, started to include more and more art courses. Initially, the instructors for these extramural classes were mainly expatriates. Later, when young Hong Kong artists who had studied in the United States returned to Hong Kong to work, some of them became instructors for the extramural classes. Among them was Jin Jialun, who had studied at the Chicago Art Institute. In Hong Kong, he came to be in charge of the extramural program at the University of Hong Kong. Chou took Jin's class on Western art history and theory, which took the students from baroque to modernism, expressionism, abstract expressionism, pop and minimalism. "I liked Jin's classes so much that I repeated the course," Chou said. In his lectures, Jin showed his students numerous slides he had brought back from the United States, giving his students a feel for the kind of art that came out of that country, especially in New York, after World War II. Although Chou travelled more than most Chinese women of her generation, she generally did not speak much about her travels. However, she did tell me that she spent some time in New York in the Soho area, and also in Boston visiting the Boston Museum of Fine Art. "That was in the days when my husband was very well off financially. He told me just to go and have a good time. "I learned a lot about abstract expressionism and all that." Chou told me.

Chou supplemented Jin's classes by reading in the American Library at the United States Information Service, for which several of Yang's colleagues had worked as translators before joining MP&GI. At the American Library, Chou read about abstract expressionism, surrealism and hard-edge painting: "I generally spent the whole day reading there. I seldom checked out books. It was too much trouble carrying them home and bringing them back again." While Chou read older publications on art at the library, she read more recent books

at Swindon's bookshop, which was well stocked with the latest books in English. "I always dressed up when I went to Swindon's. I didn't want anyone to think I couldn't afford the books and would steal them." Here she found the latest books on art, philosophy, literature and many other subjects. Between the American Library and Swindon's, Chou came to read books not only on art but also, as she wrote in 2006, "on astronomy, geography, physics and science" (Chou, 2006: 16).

One of the Yangs' friends who strongly encouraged Chou to pursue an art education was Xu Xu (1908–80). Xu was a graduate from Peking University who had studied philosophy in France, where he wrote his first novel, *In Love with a Ghost: A Phantasmagoria to Kill Time*, which was published in 1939. He had known Yang when he was at St John's University in Shanghai, and they met up again in Chongqing during the war years when they worked for the same newspaper. In Chongqing, Xu published *Fung Shao Shao*, the novel that made him famous. He continued to write novels and poetry in Hong Kong. The first movie Yang directed after becoming a director for MP&GI, *Gloomy Sunday*, was based on a novel written by Xu Xu. Yang also wrote the script and the lyrics for the movie. Xu was a close friend not only to Yang but also to Chou. He often dropped by the Yangs' place just to talk to Chou (Wong, 2007: 5). Xu Xu, who had been married three times, believed there was no unchanging love. Huang San, who wrote a memorial of Xu Xu in 1999, quoted his most famous sayings about love: "A man sustains his love for one woman for a long time but he is unable to be faithful to her. A woman is faithful but her love for a man is not long lasting." (Huang, 1999: 294) Xu encouraged Chou to pursue her art education:

He told me to make something of myself and not to be just someone else's wife.

For a while he took me here and there introducing me to all kinds of cultural activities. I thought he was in love with me but he suddenly stopped taking me

anywhere. He told me now that he had shown me the way I needed to do things on my own and not to rely on another person. He told me not to follow my husband here and there [to his shooting overseas] just to be someone's companion.

Another person who helped to shape Chou's art education was Yang's cousin, Tang Dingyu, the son of his mother's brother. Tang and Yang had known each since childhood. "He came to our wedding. He knew his cousin well and was worried then that he might not make a good husband for me," Chou said. Tang had a very similar educational background to that of Yang and Chou. He initially studied law, but decided to study history as he thought China at that time needed historians to give good advice to those who ruled. At Tsinghua University in Beijing, he met eminent scholars and philosophers like Chan Yin Qua, Qian Mu and Chu Zhi Ching. After graduation, he secured a job working for the chief secretary to Chiang Kaishek. But soon he found that none of his advice ever reached Chiang or anybody else who mattered. During the Japanese occupation, he taught in Chungking and met his future wife, a Communist. In 1949, when his family—including his mother—left for Taiwan, he stayed behind in China. In 1964, Tang, who was divorced by this time, came to Hong Kong at the invitation of his former university teacher, Qian Mu (1895–1990). "Qian did not know English," Chou told me, "so having someone like Tang around was a great help to him."

Tang introduced Chou to the British Library. He would have books chosen, put on the library table and passages earmarked for her to read when they met at the library. There she read three books that had a profound influence on her: Herbert Read's *The Meaning of Art*, John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* and A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. She found that what the twentieth-century English art critic Herbert Read said in his book had much in common

with what the seventeenth-century Chinese artist Shitao said in his *Treatise of Art*, since both emphasised that art should be a means of self-expression. Reading Read, Ruskin and Housman gave rise to Chou's conviction that "in art there is no east or west but only good and bad", a conviction that was crucial to the development of her visual language.

Experimenting techniques in modern art

During the period when Chou read at the American Library and the British Council Library, and attended Jin's classes, she learned about techniques such as collage, frottage and mono-prints that were used in modern art. "When I was in Jin Jialin's class, he asked me to sketch chairs but I did not see any point in sketching chairs," Chou told me in 2005. "When I took the Star Ferry to cross the [Hong Kong] harbour, I always went by second class [lower deck]. I looked at the water and I thought I could sketch that [water ripples]." Chou also sharpened her ability to sketch by sketching over ten thousand trees. Since Yang worked on the outskirts of Hong Kong, he would drop Chou off in "some secluded, scenic spot" on his way to work. She would spend all day there sketching trees until "he finished work in the evening" and picked her "to go home for supper" (Chou, 1986: 50). Chou also studied "print making (woodblock, copperplate and lithography), watercolour, oil, etc." (Chou, 2006: 16). However, she soon gave up oil painting because she found she was allergic to turpentine.

Among the different printmaking methods Chou studied, lithography had the most direct impact on the visual language she came to develop. Through knowing the son of a friend who was doing lithography in his family's warehouse, Chou came to study lithography with Joan Ferrer in 1966. Ferrer was an American artist who had come to live in Hong Kong and taught at the University of Hong Kong in the extramural program: "She was Salvador Dali's assistant. She did all the work and Dali just put his name there." Chou picked up

lithography very quickly. After studying with Ferrer for just a short time, Chou was asked to teach her course when Ferrer went to New York:

I was very hard working. I even went to work on a Sunday. At that time Ferrer's studio which was at the Central District had moved to Hong Kong University. I would spend a whole day working there. My husband would pick me up at the end of the day and we would go somewhere to eat.

Just as Chou found Zhao Shaoang's lack of pretentiousness refreshing, she was also impressed by Ferrer's lack of concern for material comforts. Unlike other expatriates, who normally lived in the best areas in Hong Kong, Ferrer lived in Waichai, a red-light district where the rent was cheap. This impressed Chou: "When I saw Joan living and working in a garage in Waichai I understood that being an artist was not about living a materialistic life." She and Ferrer became friends: "She came and stayed with me a few times. She told me if I wanted to be a successful artist I needed a good accountant and a good lawyer."

Foreign films

Chou began watching arthouse movies at the US Information Service. When the Hong Kong City Hall was opened in 1962 and Studio One started showing movies in languages other than English and Chinese, watching art house movies and movies in foreign languages became—like reading—a part of Chou's art education. Chou even encouraged Yang to come and watch the New Wave French Movies and experimental films at Studio One to get new ideas for his work.

Learning *qigong*

One of Tang's most important contributions to Chou's art education was to introduce her to *qigong*. *Qigong* is a Chinese form of meditation, during which the mind attempts to regulate

the energy in the body. In 1949, when Tang's family left for Taiwan, he and his wife stayed behind in China. For a long time, direct communication between China and Taiwan was not allowed. Tang and his mother communicated by sending their letters to Chou, who forwarded their mail back and forth. "I read in Tang's letters to his mother about how *qigong* could cure illnesses as well as prevent illnesses," she said. In the 1960s, unlike today, *qigong* was not widely practised or known. Although *qigong* had been practised as a form of medical treatment in Confucian times, it lost its popularity during the Qing dynasty. *Qigong* was largely forgotten during the Republican period when Western medicine came to be regarded as superior to Chinese medicine, but it was revived after the Communists took over in 1949. With the arrival of Tang in Hong Kong in 1964, Chou was able to learn *qigong* directly from him.

Chou's interest in *qigong* coincided with her re-studying of Chinese philosophy. "Reading works by *zhuzi baijia* as an adult was quite different from when I read them as a young student," Chou wrote. "As an adult I can take in and appreciate the works by these great thinkers far better than when I was young." (Chou, 1975) Chou not only reread Confucius's *Analects*, Laozi's 5250-word classic *Daodejing*, Mencius, Zhuangzi and other works by *zhuzi baijia*, but she also reread *Yijing*, the *Book of Change*. In her reading of Chinese philosophy, she found Laozi mentioned *qigong* in his *Daodejing*. The Neo-Confucians believed all scholars and intellectuals should know something about *qigong*. Confucians, Taoists, Buddhists, Chinese herbal doctors and those who practised martial arts all had their own version of *qigong*.

Studying Chinese philosophy

While Chou was rereading the works by *zhuzi baijia*, she also became interested in studying Chinese philosophy more deeply. "In Hong Kong I feel we lack good teachers to help

students of philosophy,” Chou told a journalist in 1976, after she had become an artist (Ram, 1976). However, she did not tell the journalist about the guidance she had received when she studied Chinese philosophy in the mid-1960s. There was much discussion going on at the time in Hong Kong about the direction in which Chinese philosophy should be heading. “They were all talking about Zhu Xi,” Chou told me. “They” were Tang, his teacher Qian Mu and the academics at the New Asia College. Qian was one of the great historians and philosophers of twentieth-century China. In 1949, he co-founded the New Asia College in Hong Kong with help from the Yale-China Association, fellow philosopher Tang Junyi (1909–78), and economist Zhang Pijie (1904–70). At New Asia College, Tang became a lecturer in Western history and culture. Well versed in Chinese and English, he became an assistant to his former teacher. Much debate was going on at the New Asia College about the philosophy of Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who was an opponent to Lu Jiuyuan (also known as Lu Xiangshan) (1139–1191). Hearing about all the debate about Zhu Xi and Lu Jiuyuan ignited Chou’s desire to read more about the philosophies of the Song dynasty Neo-Confucian philosophers. It was Lu Jiuyuan, who equated an individual’s mind with the universe, who particularly caught Chou’s attention. His philosophy, embodied in his dictum “the universe is my heart and my heart is the universe”, became the singularly most important influence on Chou’s thinking and her outlook on life.

It is generally believed that Chou did not become seriously interested in Buddhism until much later in her life, but in fact she was familiar not only with the philosophy of *zen* Buddhism but also with the Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness during the time she was pursuing an art education. More than a thousand years before Freud, the Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness, the most abstract and intellectual school of Buddhism, had identified that human beings possessed many levels of consciousness. In the early 1960s, there was a great interest in the study of the Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness by Buddhists in Hong Kong. In

1973, Wei Tat, a Hong Kong scholar who had earlier published “An Exposition of the I-Ching”, published a complete English translation of “*Ch’eng Wei-Shih Lun: Doctrine of the Mere-Consciousness*” (Ramanath, 1973). When she visited me at my home in 1995, Chou instantly recognised these volumes in my bookcase.

Practising *Si Gu Wen*

As well as learning *qigong* and studying Chinese philosophy, Chou also started studying *Si Gu Wen*. Although Chou had practised calligraphy since childhood, she had not studied any particular style in an attempt to develop her own style of calligraphy. In deciding the style she should study, she was encouraged by Tang to study and practise *Si Gu Wen* rather than the cursive script. “My husband had all the copy books on calligraphy,” Chou told me, “including the rubbings of *Si Gu Wen*.” *Si Gu Wen* was the oldest style of calligraphy—much older than the cursive style. The only example of this ancient style of calligraphy that still exists is in the form of inscriptions on ten drum-shaped stones which are believed to have been inscribed during the Qin dynasty (255–209 BC). The inscriptions are poems. The calligraphy was described by Chou as “characterized by the novelty of character shapes, elegance of style, fullness of composition and sophisticated execution of the strokes” (Chou, 1986: 25). By copying the *Si Gu Wen*, Chou was trying not so much to develop her own style of calligraphy as to develop her own way of executing the line in her painting.

Moving apart

While Chou’s changing outlook on life had helped her to cope with her marriage, her changing views on what was important in life also came into direct conflict with Yang’s. One of their greatest conflicts was that while Chou was becoming less and less materialistic, Yang continued to seek material gain and comfort. “My husband just loved having lots and lots of money and living a luxurious life,” Chou said. “Yiwen’s income increased from \$21,743 in

1951 to \$75,200 in 1967,” wrote Li Beidi, “but there was evidence to show he was still not satisfied.” (Li, 2009: 22) At the same time that Yang desired to make more money and to live more ostentatiously, Chou—who earlier had gone along with Yang’s luxurious lifestyle—now wanted to spend money on practical things such as saving up for the children’s education. In 1963, Chou and Yang showed their greatest differences on the issue of money when Chou insisted that they move to a modest flat. For a long time, the landlady at their Boundary Road flat had continued to raise the rent. “I told my husband to write a letter to the landlady to protest the rent hike. My husband would not write the letter. He thought that would be such a face-losing thing to do.” However, without warning, their landlady decided to sell her flat. The Yangs did not have the money to buy it, so they had to move. Instead of moving into another luxurious flat, they shifted to a flat on Victory Road. It was a block of twelve flats, two on each floor, built before the war. The rent was cheap because it was an old building and it did not have a lift. Not only was the rent cheap, but it was also unlikely to go up because there was a law stipulating that landlords of buildings built before the war could not raise rent without very good reasons. The Yangs’ flat was on the sixth floor. “I thought it was a good place to live because one soon found out who your real friends were,” Chou said—but for Yang, moving into a cheaper place represented a great loss of face.

In the Hong Kong of the 1950s and 1960s, it was unusual for a high income earner like Yang not to buy a flat. “We could never save up for a deposit to buy our own place because my husband loved spending money and living in style,” Chou said. Indeed, after buying a new car in 1958, Yang traded it in for a new Opel in 1962, paying \$16,500. “In his Yearbook Yang did not try to conceal all the luxurious things he acquired in life,” Li Beidi wrote, “including spending \$200 on a summer suit.” Chou attributed her husband’s need for a materialistic life to his insecurity:

His mother was his father's concubine. His father's family was a big and complex family. Their house in Shanghai had fourteen bedrooms with many relations living under one roof. You can image what it was like to be the son of a concubine in a household like this.

In Confucian society, children—even sons—from the concubines, like their mothers, did not have the same status as children from the wife. Chou explained: “The most convenient way for a man to have his ego boosted is to be adored by women. Since most women adored men with money, my career husband needed to show he had money to spend.”

After he won the best director's award twice, Yang's career as a director started to go downhill. In 1964, Loke Wan Toh and his wife died in an air crash in Taiwan, along with several MP&GI executives. The accident happened at a time when MP&GI had already lost some of its key people. In 1962, Zhong Qiwen, the general manager at MP&GI, had resigned after a dispute with Loke Wan Toh, and Sun Jinsen, also a member on the management team, died of an illness. The following year, Song Qi, the production manager, resigned. Meanwhile, MP&GI's offbeat urban romances and musicals were threatened by the Shaw Brothers' palace epics with their costume extravaganzas, and later the *huangmei diao* opera films. Yang's career as a director was directly affected by the misfortune suffered by MP&GI as well as by the departure of several leading actresses: “My husband was very unhappy after she [the actress Yiwen was in love with] left work because he could no longer make those musicals with her.” In 1966, Yang wrote in his Yearbook how “MP&GI has lost its direction” and he had so much time on his hands that he entered a crossword puzzle competition in one of the English-language newspapers and won a watch (Yang's Yearbook, 1966).

According to Chou, she encouraged Yang to make changes if he wanted to continue his career as a director: “I asked him to come and see the art-house movies with me at Studio

I at the City Hall to get new ideas for his work.” Indeed, as Chou had foreseen, MG&IP started to hire young men such as John Woo, who had been interested in the New Wave French Movies and experimental films. Instead of listening to Chou’s advice to come up with some original idea, Yang turned to emulating others. Zhang Che, who was Yang’s fellow director at MP&GI, left MP&GI to work for the Shaw Brothers. In 1967, his first action movie, *One Armed Swordsman*, broke the box office record of HK\$1 million. Yang, who thought he could do as well as his friend did, directed an action movie in 1968 that turned out to be a disaster. “He was hopeless at *kungfu* movies,” his son Michael later wrote (Yang, 2008: 15).

Another source of conflict between Chou and Yang was their different views on how to raise the children. “She wanted her children to have a routine and her husband allowed them to do whatever they pleased and to stay up as late as they wished,” wrote her biographers:

She taught her children to be honest. When her son found a fountain pen on the road on his way to school, he turned it in to the headmaster as soon as he arrived at school. Her husband, on the other hand, thought nothing of pinching one of the antique looking lamps that was displayed near their flat because he liked it. (Pun and Lu, 2001: 65)

Chou told me she was the one who worried about the children’s future: “My husband wanted my son to be a movie director like him. But I knew my son. He was not the type to give orders and to deal with people in the complicated and complex movie world.” Chou also said that she was the one who encouraged her son to study medicine: “She helped her children with their school work especially with their science subjects” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 67). Likewise, Chou also told both her biographers and me that she was the one who saved up

money quietly on the side by buying several life insurance policies, which she cashed in later to be used to send her children overseas to study.

While Chou portrayed Yang as a bad parent, Chou also admitted that she was not the best mother. She had always struggled to be a good parent. As mentioned before, Chou went to work because she was bored staying at home with two young children. Although she stopped work after her third child was born, she still did not find motherhood particularly enjoyable. She left her youngest child with the maid while she spent day after day at the library and at Swindon's, reading, studying and watching films. "I had a very good maid who was very fond of my youngest daughter," she said. However, Chou felt the responsibility of being a parent deeply. She believed it was her responsibility to discipline the children and to bring them up properly. She tutored her son with his science subjects at school and helped him to achieve top marks in these subjects. He was trained to take up the role of the man about the house when his father was away: "Once when the car broke down he just got out of the car and started pushing it while I steered at the wheel. He was only a boy then."

Attending Lui Shou-kwan's class

Chou met Lui Shou-kwan when she was still attending Zhao's weekly painting classes:

Into Zhao Shaoang's all-female class came a young male student called Tam Wah Nan. Being the only male student, he was getting a lot of attention from the rest of us—especially from the three older ladies in the class, including myself. One day, Tam told us that he was going to Lui Shou-kwan's lecture at the Hong Kong Chinese University and asked if we would like to go with him. We did.

Lui was teaching “modern ink painting”. “Modern” or “new” referred to Western modernism and “ink painting” referred to a kind of Chinese painting that became a major branch of traditional Chinese painting in the Tang dynasty (618–903). Unlike the more decorative, colourful and restrained work painted by the professional painters, “ink painting” emphasised the creative nature of the ink when combined with water, and stressed the spiritual and expressive qualities of the ink.

At some point, Chou began to attend Lui’s two-year course at the Hong Kong Chinese University. In Lui’s class, unlike in Zhao Shaoang’s, most of the students were young people in their twenties and thirties who were interested in becoming professional artists. Chou and her two friends were the only older students. “Lui was an eloquent speaker with a quick and sharp mind,” Chou said. He dismissed the type of teaching that emphasised the students copying their teacher’s work, instead believing young painters should be given an all-round art education. Lui believed that in order for his students to do “modern ink painting”, they must have a good understanding of the history and philosophy behind Chinese painting, since the development of Chinese painting was so bound up with the development of Chinese thinking. During his lectures, Lui—who was a master of all styles of Chinese painting—would hang his works on the wall and use them to discuss a particular point he wanted to make. “We students also brought our work to class for discussion. In his class one idea would set off another idea. It just went on like that. It was never boring,” Chou said. Aside from the weekly lectures at the Hong Kong Chinese University, Lui also held classes on a Sunday using a classroom at Hwa Yun, a Catholic boys’ school near where he lived, to do demonstrations for his students.

When Chou met Lui Shou-kwan in 1966, he had become internationally known for his *zen* painting. Lui, a Cantonese, had painted since childhood. His father, Lui Canming

(1892–1963), was a traditional Chinese painter who had made his living not only by painting but also by running a shop in Guangdong trading in old paintings. He knew many collectors and painters of Chinese painting. Growing up in such an environment, Lui Shou-kwan learned to paint without much formal tuition. He became fluent in the style of the literati painting and in the Song dynasty academy style, and thus acquired a solid grounding in traditional Chinese painting. Lui, who arrived in Hong Kong from Canton in 1949, continued to paint while he worked as an inspector for Yaumati Ferry Company. In Hong Kong, he came under the influence of Huang Boye (1901–63) and Zhao Shaoang because both of them were his father's friends. Huang inspired Lui to paint the local Hong Kong scenery. From Zhao, he became aware of the influence of the French impressionists on the Lingnan School of painting. Meanwhile, he had also become interested in the work of J.M.W. Turner, the nineteenth-century British painter who explored the effect of natural light before the French impressionists. Lui was most interested in how Turner used light to create an atmospheric effect. He started to study Turner's techniques, and began to try them out in traditional Chinese painting. Through the process of imitating Turner and other Western artists such as John Piper and Graham Sutherland, Lui discovered new form, colour and space. By the early 1960s, Lui's landscapes had become more and more abstract. When Lui staged a solo exhibition at the Hong Kong City Hall in 1964, his works showed a strong emphasis on the experimental qualities of brush and ink. In 1966 he resigned from his work as an inspector to become a full-time artist and an art educator. His mission as an art educator was to help Hong Kong artists to develop a contemporary language for Chinese painting.

As well as being a great painter and an inspiring teacher, Lui was also a great organiser. Lui, who arrived in Hong Kong almost at the same time as Chou, had been involved with the development of Hong Kong art right from the beginning. He was among the first Chinese painters in Hong Kong to write about art in the newspapers and magazines.

Within the space of three years, between 1956 and 1958, Lui formed three art associations. In 1956, he organised the Chinese painters in the colony—most of whom were Cantonese—to form the Hong Kong Chinese Art Club to distinguish themselves from the members of the Hong Kong Art Club, the only other art association in the colony, whose members were mainly expatriates or Chinese painters painting in Western style, in oil or with water colour. The following year, Lui established the Society of Hong Kong Artists with Douglas Bland and Kuang Yao Ding, the former a British artist who lived in Hong Kong and the latter a graduate from the United States with a degree in landscape architecture who was practising lithography in Hong Kong. In 1958, Lui formed the Seven Artists Club with seven Chinese artists, all with new ways of approaching Chinese painting; the group included Zhao Shaoang. Lui Shou-kwan's lectures on "New Ink Painting" were so inspiring that they aroused almost patriotic fervour among his students. A sense of comradeship with a common cause developed among the students. When the two-year course came to an end, the students formed the In Tao Art Association with Laurence Tam, later a curator for the Hong Kong Museum of Art, as the first president. The aim of the In Tao Art Association was to promote New Ink Painting in Hong Kong by having public lectures and exhibitions of works by its members. "I joined because I knew to be part of something that was organised by Lui Shou-kwan I would have a chance to exhibit my work," Chou said.

Experimentation

Using materials available around the home, Chou produced *Portrait* (Figure 4.2). Applying the technique of frottage, she rubbed the paper on the thick round chopping board, a common household item in a Chinese household, to create a special textural effect on the paper as background. Then, using the glass top of her coffee table and applying the mono-print technique, she created the three overlapping circles. Finally, she used her ink and brush and

drew in the figures. In the *Portrait*, the lean figure is Yang, who is looking directly across at their elder daughter. Between Yang and the elder daughter is the thick and boxer-like hand of their son. Below their elder daughter is their younger daughter, dancing away in one of the circles.

As well as experimenting with frottage, Chou also experimented with collage. In one work, *The Hand*, she collaged a pair of red gloves on to a surface filled with Chinese characters. The characters were written in childlike hand writing and broken sentences. The two hands in *The Hand* represent Chou's two older children. "My son often quarrelled with his younger sister for fun," Chou wrote. "This paper-writing [collage] was meant for didactic purposes." (Chou, 1986: 38) In another work, *The Letter*, Chou collaged calligraphy onto her work. "Tang wrote the calligraphy in the style of large seal", Chou's biographers wrote. "Luyun cut the characters into halves and collaged the pieces onto her work" (Pun and Lu, 2001:122).

During her experimentation, after painting *A Kite* and *Luohan*, Chou told me she was quite certain then that she wanted to be a painter. In *A Kite* Chou experimented with ink and colour combining them with elements of works by Matisse, Miro and Kline as well as Chinese folk art. The work looks modern and fresh. In *Luohan* Chou combined various forms of the mythical figure Luohan with surrealistic branches: "I copied the faces of Luohan from a painting I borrowed from a friend. I made up the rest of the work by my own imagination." In *Luohan*, Chou experimented with the expressive quality of the line by exaggerating Luohan's eyebrows. In this work, a major motif—the surrealistic branches—in Chou's abstract work has already made its appearance.

All the works presented in this chapter—namely those painted in the Lingnan School style and those I have put under the heading of experimentation—are listed in Chou's

catalogue for her 1986 retrospective exhibition as being painted between 1950 and 1959. Since Chou did not take up painting lessons with Zhao until 1959, the earliest that her Lingnan School style painting could have been produced would have been after 1959, while the experimental works are likely to have been produced after she had begun her study of painting techniques in modern art. Why Chou gave the impression that she created these works earlier will become clear in Chapter 6.

First solo exhibition

Just as Chou had expected, becoming part of something organised by Lui Shou-kwan gave her the opportunity to exhibit her work. In September 1968, Chou had her first solo exhibition when she became a member of the In Tao Art Association. She had a solo exhibition even before the In Tao Art Association staged its first group exhibition at the Hong Kong City Hall in November that year. “He [Lui] chose me because he knew I could afford it,” Chou told me. “Although the venue was free, there were other expenses such as printing up invitations, producing an exhibition catalogue and the opening.” What Chou omitted to mention was that Lui probably knew that her exhibition was likely to attract much publicity because her husband was in the movie industry. Such publicity would serve as a good advertisement for the New Ink Painting Movement.

Around sixty works were shown at Chou’s first solo exhibition. Most of them were similar to those described in this chapter. *Portrait*, presented in Figure 4.2, was included in the exhibition. Art critic Nigel Cameron described the work as an “echo of those artists of the ‘playing ink’ school from Pa Ta Shan Jen of the 17th century down to Li Ko-jan” (*South China Morning Post*, 23 September 1968). One journalist described the work in the exhibition as “an assortment of collage, printing, a few done in traditional Chinese style and some [are] what she calls ‘strictly my own ideas’” (“Artist is in Search of an Identity”, 1968).

Many of the articles about Chou's work in the exhibition commented on how colourful her artworks were. Most attributed her colourful work to the joyfulness her work tried to convey. "There is no expression of sorrow, worries and dejection in her work," one journalist wrote. "She is full of hope and confidence about life." ("The Paintings of Irene Chou", 1968) "It is as if she has used strong colours," one writer wrote, "to cover up the dark side of life." (Long Xiang, 1968) Indeed, "joyfulness expressed in form and colour" was how Chou's husband described her work in the exhibition catalogue. Chou's own explanation of why her early works were so colourful, twenty years later, was that she was experimenting and had applied colour to everything that caught her attention (Chou, 1986: 16). Most critics commended Chou for trying to create something modern out of traditional Chinese painting. One reporter described her work as "a far cry from traditional Chinese art" (San, 1968). Nigel Cameron (1968) described Chou as "an artist breaking the long established tradition of Chinese Painting in search of a fresh meaning to creative art". another journalist wrote: "In recent years Zhou Luyun is one of the few artists who I have come across who is searching for her own personality and own artistic realm in her work." (Long, 1968)

In addition to the positive critical reception of Chou's work, her sales were also good. One work, *Chickens* (Figure 4.3), was different from other works in that it was painted in ink only. Chou told me:

Many people liked *Chickens*. Since there was only one at the exhibition, many people asked if they could place an order for one. So I painted many similar ones after the exhibition. My husband was my delivery man, delivering each order in person.

The exhibition not only benefited Chou personally, but also helped to gain much positive publicity for the New Ink Painting Movement.

Conclusion

The last three chapters have removed many of the misconceptions about Chou's art education. It is clear now that, aside from her natural talent, it was her early unintentional art education that enabled Chou to pick up painting so quickly once she had started lessons with Zhao. The fact that she was ready to experiment so soon after she started formal lessons with Zhao also shows the influence of her early art education. In 1967, when Chou finished attending her two-year course with Lui Shou-kwan, she had had a lifetime of art education. This art education was extraordinarily comprehensive, but its idiosyncratic nature also meant that "she had not been constrained by the strict principle and formality of the ink painting tradition" (Findlay, 2003: 79). As well as possessing all the training to be an artist, at the age of forty-four, Chou had lived life as a modern woman who had experienced much as a daughter, a wife and a mother.

Chapter 5: A woman painter (1968–78)

Almost immediately after her 1968 exhibition, Chou's Lingnan School and "eclectic" styles of painting suddenly disappeared. Instead, she started to produce works referred to by others as "landscape paintings". "Like the other New Ink painters," Chang Tsong-zung wrote, "she also started with the world of mountains and valleys" (Chang, 1988: 286). However, while at first glance Chou's "landscape paintings" look as if they portray "mountains and valleys", a closer look reveals they are images of male and female sexual organs. Then, just two years after her emotionally charged landscape paintings appeared, Chou began painting works characterised by a large area taken up by parallel lines painted freehand by a brush with ink. After she had painted almost nothing but these "line paintings" for several years, her paintings, instead of being dominated by parallel lines, came to be dominated by a large area of black ink created by the piled ink technique. As her paintings shifted from the "eclectic" style of painting to "landscape paintings", to "line paintings", and finally to "piled ink paintings" Chou not only succeeded in developing a visual language that was capable of telling a woman's own story but she also evolved, as I will explain, from a woman painter to become a painter who was also a woman.

A woman painter

For a long time, Chinese women did not tell their own stories in writing or in painting. Their stories were either told by men or not told at all. Although there had always been women writers, poets, painters and calligraphers in Chinese history; although many famous Chinese calligraphers and painters had their mothers as their first teachers; and although women's literary and artistic skills often won recognition from men, works by women—unlike those by men—were not regarded as an expression of their thoughts or a narration of their lives.

After all, “Autobiography is a narration of the self based on the assumption that there is a self to be expressed or examined” (Ng and Wickeri, 1996: 11). It was not until the May Fourth Movement, when a modern education—including admission to tertiary institutions—became more available to Chinese women, and when more women became aware that their identity did not have to be defined by their relationships to men—father, husband and son—that a significant number of women sought to be writers.

The emergence of a genre of writing called *nü xin wenxue*—women writings—through which women told their own stories, and expressed their views on marriage, love and relationship (Ng and Wickeri, 1996: 9), had much to do with the literary, cultural and political reforms that took place during the May Fourth Movement. Women were among the first to respond to the call for the replacement of the classical language by the speech-like vernacular as the means to modernise Chinese literature. The old-style novels, written in the literary language, emphasised the storylines rather than revelation of the inner thoughts and feelings of the protagonists. Ch’en Heng-che, a female writer, published her short story “One Day” in the vernacular in 1917, a year earlier than Lu Hsun, the Charles Dickens of China who is generally credited with being the first to respond to use the vernacular as the medium for new writing, published *Diary of a Madman*.

Although more women became painters after the May Fourth Movement, a genre of women’s painting did not emerge at that time. Throughout Chinese history, a genre called the *gui xiu hua*, “painting by the stay-at-home females”, existed. It was the kind of painting done by women among the elite families where they learned to paint from their fathers or brothers without ever leaving their homes. Birds and flowers were generally their subject-matter, but not landscape painting. A genre of women paintings did not emerge because the issue of how to modernise Chinese painting was not as simple as the issue of how to modernise Chinese

literature. There were two reasons for this: first, the Chinese painters had “inherited an incomparably richer tradition than did the novelists”, and second, there was not “a living vernacular language on which to found a new art movement” (Sullivan, 1996: 33–4). Due to the lack of a ready-made vernacular for them to embrace, some women painters turned to a foreign language such as oil painting. Women were among the earliest Chinese who went overseas to study painting: Fang Junbi (1898–1986) studied at Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris as early as 1912, and Pan Yuliang (1899–1977) studied in Lyon, Paris and Rome between 1921 and 1928. Other women painters took up landscape painting, a genre of painting synonymous with Chinese painting that previously had been denied to them.

I have labelled Chou as a woman painter because, like the women writers, she wanted to tell a woman’s own story. However, unlike other women painters, in the absence of a vernacular language in Chinese painting, Chou turned neither to a foreign language nor to a language that had been denied to women in the past to tell her story. Instead, she set out to develop her own visual language. “I had a lot to say and needed my own language in which to say it,” she said (Ram, 1974).

“Landscape paintings”

Chou found the “eclectic” style of painting, which she presented at her exhibition and which was described by critics as “colourful and joyful”, with “no expression of sorrow, worries and dejection”, inadequate for expressing the myriad feelings she was experiencing as a woman. “After my solo exhibition [thanks to Lui],” Chou told me, “I suddenly felt very confident. So something good came out of it.” Chou shifted almost overnight to a totally new style of painting. Suddenly her paintings became sombre, sinister and sexually charged. I have called these paintings “landscape paintings” because they depict mountains, water, trees and branches. However, while they have the appearance of landscapes, the landscape takes on

human forms. In *The Image* (Figure 5.2), the mountains and hills are also phalluses and breasts. What is reflected in the water—sexual activity in earnest—is not a mirror image of what is above the water. In *The Tree* (Figure 5.3) one sees in the trees the contours of naked female bodies engaged in sensual movements and gestures. In other works like *The Family* the mountain ranges are not mountains but people whose backs are bent, crawling in a long line weighed down by the burden they seem to be carrying. At first glance *The Fire* looks like a picture of mountains being engulfed by a fire but the stylised vermillion fire in the foreground, with almost human figures in it, seems to suggest what is engulfing the mountains might be passion, fire of a different kind.

While it was the urge to find an outlet for her couped-up emotion that led her to make the shift from the “eclectic” style of painting to landscape paintings Chou now had also developed two distinctive techniques, *shuang gou* and *dianzi cun*, that allowed her to give expression to that urge. Both are ancient Chinese painting techniques. The double hook technique, using double contoured lines, is a traditional Chinese painting technique to create the look of the forest in severe winter. The dot-like brushstroke is one of many well established brushstrokes. Since Chinese painting has had a long and unbroken tradition, artists have developed many distinctive brushstrokes through the ages. These brushstrokes or *cun* have come to be classified, given names, and designated for specific painting tasks. The names are generally descriptive, describing what the brushstrokes look like such as dot-like brushstroke, raindrop brushstroke, or cow’s hair brushstroke. Chou had been practising the dot-like brushstroke and the double hook in studies like *Roots and Branches* (Figure, 5.1). As we saw in the last chapter, as part of her art education she did much sketching of nature. After sketching a phenomenal number of trees she transferred this skill to painting what Michael Sullivan describes as “finely crafted and infinitely complex studies of trees and roots”

(Sullivan, 1996:197). She painted these roots and branches endlessly until, in Sullivan's words, "she had them in her heart" (Sullivan, 1996:197).

Her landscape paintings showed how much Chou had internalised these two ancient techniques. In *Image*, the mountains are painted by the dot-like brushstroke, dotted by a small brush with very concentrated ink, in a systematic way. Instead of being round, the dots are slightly square. Chou had applied the same technique to painting the mountains in *The Family*. In *The Tree*, using a small-sized paint brush and employing the double hook technique, Chou painted roots, branches and trees in a surrealistic style. While the double hook technique is traditionally employed to create the look of the forest in severe winter, in *The Tree* this motif has undergone metamorphosis. By using the Lingnan School technique of infusion to apply the malachite and by using white—the Lingnan School way to create light—Chou enabled the ancient motif to take on a modernist surrealistic look. In *The Fire*, while Chou used brushstrokes to paint most of the mountains, she chose the Lingnan School style of washes to paint the mountains in the foreground. Likewise, she used washes to paint both the stylised fire in the foreground and the impressionistic fire in the background.

Although vermillion is used generously in *The Fire*, and a good amount of malachite has been used in *The Tree*, Chou's "landscape painting" is dark and sombre in comparison with her earlier work. Like Huang Bin-hung (1865–1955), a painter Chou greatly admired, who painted mountains in the night, Chou's landscape painting is dark because the landscapes are seen in the moonlight. Whether the full moon is realistically depicted as in *The Image* and *The Family*, or only hinted at as a malachite halo as in *The Tree*, Chou was choosing to use the moonlight rather than the sunlight to illuminate the images. In each work, instead of coming from all directions as in traditional Chinese painting, light comes from one direction only.

In 1968, at the opening of her first exhibition, Chou appeared to be a woman with everything. After raising a family, she was now launching her own career as a professional painter. “The opening of the exhibition was attended by nearly a hundred people, twenty percent of whom were non-Chinese,” one newspaper reported. “Those attending came from the art world, film, education, media, industry and commerce.” (“Zhou Luyun and her Exhibition”, 1968) As well as having a family and a career, Chou was also married to a famous husband. Nearly all the write-ups about Chou, whether in the English or the Chinese newspapers, emphasised the fact she was the wife of Yiwen, the movie director. Newspapers used captions such as “Art Display by Director’s Wife” (1968) or “Solo Art Exhibition by Yiwen’s Wife” (1968). One reporter even asked Chou whether she had ever thought of becoming a movie star in view of “her husband’s well-established position in films” (“Solo Art Exhibition by Yiwen’s Wife”, 1968), while another asked: “How does it feel to be the wife of a noted Chinese film director?” (Pereira, 1968) What made her more enviable to other women was that her husband appeared to be so supportive of her in her new career. As we saw in the last chapter, Yang dropped Chou off to do her sketching on his way to work and picked her up at the end of the day. He also picked her up after her long day at Joan Ferrer’s studio to take her out to dinner. For the exhibition, he wrote a short essay for the catalogue as well as articles in the newspaper to praise Chou’s work. He even sent a camera crew to film the opening of the exhibition. And he secured Jon Yao, a woman writer, to open the exhibition. As mentioned in the last chapter, he even served as Chou’s delivery man after the exhibition. “One thing nice about my husband was that he was never jealous of my success,” Chou said to me in 2005. “In fact, he didn’t even mind people addressing him as Mr Chou.”

Despite all this, Chou was facing a new crisis in her marriage. Yang’s career as a movie director, which had started to go downhill after the mid-1960s, was at its lowest point at the time of Chou’s exhibition. He had been given hardly any movies to direct by MP&GI

and had to seek work in Taiwan. In 1970, he directed *Patriotic and Loyal*, a film produced by a company in Taiwan owned by a friend; however, it turned out to be his last and worst film. “It was not even released in Hong Kong,” Chou said. Accompanying the demise of Yang’s career was a drastic decrease in his income. Yang, who had an income of \$75,200 in 1967 (Li, 2009: 23), was reduced to having just enough money to survive from day to day in 1970. “I have not yet been paid for directing *Patriotic and Loyal*,” Yang wrote in his Yearbook. “I am given a monthly salary which is only enough for one person’s living expenses.” (Yang’s Yearbook, 1970) Yang bought a new Escort in 1969, but had to sell it the following year because of the need for cash to pay the bills (Yang’s Yearbook, 1970). During this period, while Yang was staying in Taiwan for the filming of *Patriotic and Loyal*, Chou and their youngest daughter were living off her income of \$900 a month from writing lyrics for EMI (Pun and Lu, 2001: 90):

those days I often passed the shops on Nathan Road where there was a Russian bakery which sold brown bread. Brown bread was more expensive than white bread then. I often wanted so much to buy a loaf but would stop myself from buying it to save money. Other times I saw roast ducks in the Chinese shops and had to resist the temptation to buy one.

At times, the Yangs were so desperate for cash that they would go to the pawn shop. “He was always the one to go into the pawn shop to pawn whatever we were pawning while I waited outside.”

As well as having to cope with financial problems, Chou had to continue to put up with Yang’s philandering. Around the time of her exhibition, Yang had started yet another affair. “Our relationship lasted for a year,” Yang wrote (Yang’s Yearbook, 1968). Aside from her husband’s infidelity, Chou was still facing a struggle between being a mother and a

professional woman. Since she had first started to pursue a formal art education, she had been torn between being a responsible mother and a woman who was free to pursue her own interests. In 1968, although the Yangs' son had already left home to study overseas and the following year their elder daughter also went overseas to study, Chou still had her younger daughter at home. Chou, who had left her younger daughter in the care of a maid most of the time when she was pursuing her art education, now had even less time for her as a teenager. In her desire to become a professional painter, she was working ten to twelve hours without a break. "She is sorry about what she did to her youngest child even today," her biographers wrote (Pun and Lu, 2001: 85).

Chou's landscape paintings have a striking resemblance to the writing of women writers of her generation, who tried to tell their "own stories, their view on marriage, love and relationship"—or, as Kao Mayching described it, "family life and urban living" (Kao, 2000: 7). In *The Fire*, Chou expresses her sentiment about the difficulty of being both a responsible mother and a professional woman. Chou painted the vermillion fire as possessing so much passion that it is going to destroy the mountains. Many years later, in 1986, Chou wrote how she found her passion for painting "reached a climax" at a time when her children were still at an age when they needed her guidance and protection. She painted *The Fire* as a reminder to herself that "painting was like a mountain fire, never let it devour you" (Chou, 1986: 48). In *The Family*, Chou expresses the financial burden of raising a family—especially the cost of children's education. In *The Image*, she makes a direct reference to the infidelity in her marriage. "The mountain is as hypocritical as a man," Chou wrote, "and its image [reflection] is secretly flirting beneath the water." (Chou, 1986: 52)

Line paintings

Chou did not paint landscape paintings for long before she started painting works such as *Composition IV* (Figure 5.4), *Fertility* (Figure 5.5) and *Tree II* (Figure 5.6). Chou referred to these works as her “numerous attempts at creating with lines” (Chou, 1986: 25), but I will simply call them line paintings because nearly two-thirds of a work is covered by either vertical or horizontal lines painted freehand in ink with a brush.

In *Composition IV*, individual egg-like organisms are trapped in the uterus-like space formed by the horizontal lines. One after another, these organisms are seeking to escape from the uterus. One, which has turned into a sphere, succeeds in escaping and ascending to the empty space above. *Fertility* is a set of four sequential paintings. In the first painting, the sphere is separated from the organism enclosed by the multitude of vertical lines. In the second, the sphere pushes against the lines in an attempt to break through the barrier of lines. In the third, the sphere has broken through the lines and is travelling up a narrow passage. In the last painting, the sphere has reached inside of the bulky, slimy and slippery organism.

While lines are still the dominant feature of *Tree II*, Chou brought the branches in her landscape paintings into this work, with the lines forming an organism that twists and turns against a background of metamorphosed branches. Some of the branches have succeeded in reaching from behind to clutch on to the moving organism. The sphere—a very important symbol in Chou’s work—made its debut in Chou’s line paintings. Combining the technique of dot-like brushstrokes with the modern pointillist technique, Chou created the three-dimensional sphere. “I used the smallest-size brush to make those dots,” Chou told me. In her practically black and white line painting, only the spheres are in colour. Chou told a reporter: “I coloured the spheres so that they would show up against the background of ink lines on white paper.” (Chen, 1973)

Chou's shift from landscape paintings to line painting was partly due to her readiness to apply a technique she had been developing. Chou, who had been practising *shi qu wen* and studying lithography for some time, started to develop lines that had the qualities—"gracefulness, serenity, continuity of the rigour of life ... unsurpassed sincerity"—she so admired in *shi qu wen* (Chou, 1986: 25). Through combining the special qualities of *shi qu wen* and the modernist look of calculation, precision and neatness, Chou came to possess her own iconic lines.

While Chou's dramatic shift from the eclectic style of painting to the landscape paintings was propelled by the inadequacy of the former style to express the full range of emotion she experienced as a woman, the shift from her landscape paintings to her line paintings was driven by the need to expand her visual language for even more urgent expression. "I find painting an agony in a way," Chou told a journalist. "I have a feeling inside me that I must put down on paper, and until I have succeeded I cannot rest." (Smith, 1972)

Despite the look of calculation, precision and neatness, the sexual content in Chou's line painting is even more explicit. "It is so much more difficult to depict love, the kind of love between a woman and a man in a painting than in a novel," Chou told me in 2005. "But then a painting can say things that words find difficult to say." Sexual intercourse is depicted clearly in *Fertility*, as the sphere finds its way to the uterus. In the depiction of sexual organs and activities, there was also a shift from the male sexual organs to the female reproductive system. Chou made no attempt to conceal the sexual content in her work. "My technique is quite unusual. It is old fashioned in itself," she told a reporter, "but the subject matter is far from traditional." (Passmore, 1973) Chou also hinted that those who were closest to her found it most difficult to accept the sexual content in her painting: "Sometimes I am surprised

by my children. They seem so much more conservative than me. And my friends, the women my age, they are a little afraid. They simply don't understand what I am doing. I have lost many of my friends because of my paintings." (Passmore, 1973)

Marital breakdown

During the period Chou produced her line painting, she encountered more difficulties in her marriage. First, Yang became unemployed. His contract with MP& GI was not renewed in 1971. Chou responded to her husband's unemployment by securing a job for him at Shaw Brothers. "He was too vain to ask for help," Chou told me. "I rang Zhang Che, who was now working as a director for Shaw Brothers, and asked him to help my husband to get a job. He secured him an administrative job with Shaw Brothers." He was first employed as a "consultant" with a minimal wage. He was responsible for reading and selecting new scripts, some promotional work and some secretarial work. Only after working there for a while was Yang given an administrative job with a salary. Much of his work involved running errands for Run Run Shaw, including representing him at functions: "He took notes as Shaw talked. He prepared documents and speeches for him." It was a big come-down for Yang from being a literati movie director to becoming an assistant to Run Run Shaw.

Second, Yang wanted a divorce from Chou. Between 1970 and 1974, Yang became involved in another serious affair, this time with a young singer. When he was shooting *Patriotic and Loyal*, he was away in Taiwan on and off—sometimes for a few months at a time. The singer visited him twice from Hong Kong (Yang's Yearbook, 1970). "I found out about my husband's affair with this young singer through Helen [her husband's cousin on his father's side]," Chou told me. "She and her husband ran into them at the place where they were staying in Taiwan." According to Chou, the young singer met Yang through recording for EMI:

At first she went to my husband to ask him about the proper Mandarin pronunciation of the lyrics. She thought of him like a teacher. Before long he was picking her up from the nightclub after her performances to take her home in his car. You can imagine what it was like for a young singer just starting out to receive so much attention from an older and experienced person. Of course she fell in love with him.

While it was Chou who had wanted to leave Yang when he had his first serious affair earlier in their marriage, it was now Yang who wanted to leave Chou. “Yang was so serious about this young singer,” Chou’s biographers wrote, that “he asked his wife for a divorce” (Pun and Lui, 2001: 91).

After experiencing hurt, betrayal, rejection and humiliation, the only feeling Chou felt now when her husband asked her for a divorce was numbness and pity. Instead of granting her husband a divorce, Chou set out to save the young singer from destroying her youth and her life. When the Yangs’ son came home from Australia for a holiday in 1972, she sent him to visit the singer and the singer paid a return visit (Pun and Lu, 2001: 91). She and her son told the singer that she should not waste her life on a sick man. Yang, who was first diagnosed as having emphysema in 1969, had lost a lot of weight. “The doctor told me I should quit smoking,” Yang wrote in his Yearbook. “The last six years I have been smoking cigars which might be too strong for me. I am going to switch back to smoking cigarettes.” (Yang’s Yearbook, 1969) Chou knew more about the seriousness of her husband’s health condition than Yang did himself. “The singer and I became friends,” Chou told me. Yang was not pleased that his wife and son had interfered in his affair. “The feeling between a woman and a man,” Yang wrote in his Yearbook, “is best not to be interfered with by others and should be left to run its natural course.” (Yang’s Yearbook, 1972) In 1974, the singer left

Yang and married someone overseas. “He had so many women in his life. In the end he had no one, not even me.” (Su Qi, 2003) “He continued to come home late every night trying to give the impression that he was still going out with someone,” Chou told me and her biographers. “I was walking home after getting off the bus one evening and saw him sitting alone in a café. I told him I had cooked dinner already and he could go home with me to have dinner.” Yang took Chou’s kindness towards him as a sign of reconciliation. “Married life has gone back to normal ... Life is quite harmonious and pleasant at the moment for us.” (Yang’s Yearbook, 1974) However, as far as Chou was concerned, “her heart was dead and she felt neither love nor hate towards her husband anymore” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 93). Indeed, there was even a limit to her pity towards him. Chou told me:

I used to be a loving wife. For example, if we were having steamboat for dinner and I cracked an egg at the table which dropped on to the table instead of going into the bowl I would insist that I had the egg that had been dropped on the table and would crack a fresh one for my husband. But during the last years of my marriage I no longer played the role of a loving wife. When my husband asked me to hand him a coke or something I just ignored him.

While the absolute absorption into copying of her teacher’s work had earlier helped her to contain the hurtful and unpleasant feelings inside her, it was now the expressing of her feelings through her own work that seemed to help her to release much of her emotion. “My paintings are my struggles—my love, my hatred, my marriage, my children,” she told a reporter in 1974 (Clewlow, 1974). In Chou’s case, sex had also given her both joy and pain in her life. “I enjoyed sex but I did not enjoy childbirth,” Chou told me in her old age, “and least of all child rearing.” In *Tree II*, the voluptuous organism—like that of a female body—is embraced by the branches, which look like a pair of hands. In 2005, I asked Chou whether the

branches in *Tree II* were meant to look like two skeletal hands clutching on to a body. “I saw my husband in the bathtub,” Chou told me. “He had lost so much weight that his body looked like a skeleton to me.” The thought of her husband having an affair with a young woman at a time when his own body had been reduced to skin and bone had conjured up the image she painted in *Tree II*.

As well as releasing her emotions, painting had given Chou a new confidence in herself. When she first began painting in 1959, she was reluctant to show her ambition. Chong Ling Ling, a movie star who worked with Yang in the 1960s, wrote:

I was surprised to find someone like her, with the kind of material comforts her husband could afford, that she did not even have a table to do her painting, let alone a room of her own. She just set up a makeshift table in the hall way when she wanted to paint and she painted only when her husband was not at home.

(Chong, 1987: 8)

Even at the time of her 1968 exhibition, Chou still referred to herself as a wife and mother rather than as a professional painter. “There are often conflicts between my housework and my painting. But I always put my housework first and my painting second,” she told a reporter. She added that being a mother was more important than having a career: “One cannot neglect the all-important motherly love for a hobby.” (Pereira, 1968). However, by the early 1970s she expressed regret that she had not taken up painting earlier. “Many times I have thought it such a pity that I didn’t wake up sooner,” she told Zelda Cawthorne. “All those wasted years.” (Cawthorne, 1972) She also came to claim her status as an artist rather than just a wife and mother. “For her work area she has taken over the main living room of the family’s apartment,” one reporter wrote, “an indulgence which goes undisputed in that household.” (Passmore, 1973) By 1974, Chou came to assume a view almost like that

of a feminist on the role of woman in society: “Having children and bringing them up doesn’t contribute enough [to society], even if it is the basic female excuse for existence.” (*China Mail*, 16 February 1974)

A member of the New Ink Painting Movement

After joining the In Tao Group in 1968, Chou became an active supporter of the New Ink Painting Movement. She also became the president of the In Tao Art group in 1970. For the next two years, she organised the group’s “Monthly Art Talks”, inviting eminent artists and scholars as speakers. At one of these monthly talks, Lui Shou-kwan spoke about the future of new ink painting. The talk attracted an audience of nearly 200 people. For a while, these talks became something many young people looked forward to attending. Chou was also responsible for organising the In Tao Art Group’s second joint exhibition: “It was a thankless job but I made every effort to make it a success. I tried to show other people’s work in the best way I could by putting them in the best spots in the exhibition. I placed my own work in the least prominent place.”

The same year as the In Tao Art group staged its second group exhibition, the graduates from Lui’s 1968–70 extramural class also formed their own art group—a group Chou would eventually come to join. They called it I Hua Huai, literally the “one-stroke art group”, but translated into English as the One Art Group. The name came from the one-stroke art theory proposed by a seventeenth-century monk, Shi Tao, who was an innovative painter with a theory that all paintings begin with one stroke from the mind of the artist and end with one stroke from the mind of the artist. He advocated that it was vital for an artist to be original, and maintain their individual artistic quality. He was against imitating works of earlier masters. His theory was not welcomed by the ruling class, nor was it popular with the orthodox scholars and painters of his time. He recorded his theory in *Shi-Tao Hua Yu Lu*, but

it was ignored by scholars and historians for nearly two centuries until, at the beginning of the twentieth century, his theory was found to be in line with the most sought-after artistic ideals of modern artists all over the world. The One Art Group invited Lui Shou-kwan and Lawrence Tam to be their advisers.

The In Tao Art Association and the One Art Group soon joined forces with the aim of revitalizing Chinese traditional painting: the New Ink Painting movement was born. The movement was further strengthened by the arrival of Lui Kuo-sung in Hong Kong in 1971. Lui, an artist from Taiwan, had been offered the job as the Head of the Fine Arts Department at the Hong Kong Chinese University. In Taiwan, under the rule of Chiang Kaishek, there had not been much artistic freedom. Because Picasso was pro-Communist, abstract art became associated with Communism and was thus banned. Even so, there were artists who struggled to experiment and create their own individual style, and they formed groups such as the Fifth Moon Group. Lui Kuo-sung was one such artist. Like Lui Shou-kwan, he was invited by Stanford University to exhibit his works in *Chinese Painting Trends in the Twentieth Century* at the Stanford Museum. In February 1972, a joint exhibition by the members of the In Tao Art Association, the One Art Group and artists from Taiwan was held, strengthening the New Ink Painting movement further by combining the forces of the artists in Hong Kong and those in Taiwan.

Being a member of the New Ink Painting movement gave Chou the opportunity to exhibit her work not only in Hong Kong but also internationally. “Hong Kong art,” Lawrence Tam wrote, “was officially introduced to the world at Expo ’70 in Osaka, Japan” (Tam, 1981: 8). After Hong Kong art was introduced to Japan, it was shown also in the United Kingdom and the United States, “including the *Hong Kong Artist Exhibition* at Pacificulture-Asia Museum of Pasadena in California and the *Art Now Hong Kong Exhibition* at the Evansville

Museum in Indiana” (Tam, 1981: 8). Hong Kong art was also shown in Japan and Taiwan. Chou’s work was included in all of these overseas exhibitions. Indeed, it was her work that won the Pacificulture Asia Museum Fine Art Award in 1972. Through her own connections, she had her work shown at the 201st and 202nd exhibitions of the Royal Academy of Arts in London. Chou’s work was also shown at commercial galleries such as the Lee Nordess Gallery in New York in 1971 and the Mavis Chapman Gallery in Sydney in 1973.

Expatriates played an important role in promoting the New Ink Movement by supporting the New Ink Painters in different ways. “I sell some paintings to Europeans and other visitors,” Chou told a journalist, “but the local Chinese don’t understand the modern method.” (Smith, 1972) The expatriates were interested in the works by the New Ink Painters right from the start. Lui Shou-kwan had his first exhibition at the British Council Library; Lui was also friendly with expatriate artists such as Douglas Brand. About twenty of the hundred or so people who came to the opening of Chou’s first solo exhibition were non-Chinese, and the English-language newspapers also played an important role in promoting the works of the New Ink Painters. Nigel Cameron was among the first to write about the work of the New Ink painters in *The South Morning China Post*. The first chief curator at the Hong Kong City Hall Museum and Art Gallery, John Warner, was also an expatriate.

In addition, the expatriates were the first to sell and buy the works of the New Ink painters. In 1973, Sarah Larkin, an American from New England, became an agent for several of the artists in the New Ink Painting movement, including Chou. After graduating from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Larkin—who was interested in the theory of art—came to live in Hong Kong. She was interested in Asian art and decided to become the agent for some of the New Ink Painters. Her flat in Century Towers at mid-level Peak became her gallery for displaying the works produced by the artists she represented.

Clients had to make appointments to see the works. Chou's work was already fetching a good price in the early 1970s. "When you are paying \$2000 for a painting," Larkin told a reporter about the cost of the works she was selling, "you want to be sure you really like it." (*China Mail*, 18 August 1973) As well as showing her artists' work privately in her apartment, Larkin also showed them in a public venue when there was an opportunity to do so. In 1974, she held an exhibition for her artists at Furama Hotel as part of the Hong Kong Arts Festival. The show, opened by the Hong Kong Governor's wife, Lady MacLehose, gained much exposure for her artists' work.

Lui Shou-kwan's influence

After Chou became Lui Shou-kwan's student, they soon found out they were neighbours: "He often painted at my place for the whole day. At lunch time he would go *yumcha* and bring me back some sweet buns or egg custard tarts since he knew I liked sweet things. He would then stay to paint until late in the afternoon." Chou admitted that she and Lui were close. "Once Lui said to me that he thought he had a well-shaped nose and I said let me get my reading glasses so that I can have a proper look at your nose," Chou told me. "This was how at ease he and I were with each other." The fact that he painted at her home frequently led to rumours that some of her works were painted by him. "You know me, I like to act as if I am helpless and dependent in front of men," Chou told me in 2003. "I did that to Lui Shou-kwan too. I told him I wished I could paint a house in *Mountain Dwelling* but I did not know how." Lui immediately sat down and painted the house for her. Lui liked painting at Chou's place because he felt freer to experiment. "He knew I did not mind if he splashed ink all over the place," Chou told me. "At home he was afraid to make a mess."

It is easy for others to assume that Lui had much influence on Chou's development as an artist. She was not only his student, but they also spent much time together when he

painted and experimented with new techniques at her home. While her work in the 1970s was nothing like Lui's, her work in the 1980s showed that she employed certain techniques that resembled his. Indeed, many writers thought that it was Lui who introduced modernism to Chou. Michael Sullivan wrote: "In the late 1960s, partly under the influence of Lui Shou Kwan [Lui Shou-kwan], she broke free." (Sullivan, 1996: 197) Likewise, Mayching Kao, curator at the Hong Kong Chinese University Museum, wrote that under Lui's influence, "Irene Chou assimilated the modernist characteristics of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism" into her work (Kao, 2000: 4–5). Similarly, Nigel Cameron implied that meeting Lui Shou-kwan was crucial to Chou in terms of developing a modern visual language for Chinese painting (Cameron, 1998: 3). Petra Hinterthür wrote: "She soon abandoned experimental painting, under Lu's advice, to use Chinese materials such as paper, brushes, and ink." (Hinterthür, 1985: 96). And Lui Xiang Yang wrote: "It was obvious that it was under Lui Shou-kwan's influence that [Chou] came to re-examine the dots, lines and planes in Chinese painting." (Lui, 1987: 29). "At Lu's [Lui's] suggestion," Julia Tanski wrote, "she [Chou] started to work almost exclusively with black ink." (Tanski, 2006)

However, as we have seen, by the time Chou met Lui in 1966 she had already had a comprehensive art education. Her study with Lui only comprised the tail end of her long art education. By the time Lui started to paint at Chou's home, she had already produced her landscape paintings and was in the midst of creating her line paintings. Without her long and comprehensive art education, Chou could not have suddenly come up with her landscape paintings and line paintings so soon after meeting Lui. While Hinterthür thought it was Lui Shou-kwan who advised Chou to use Chinese materials such as paper, brushes and ink, Chou told me that it was after she painted *A Kite* (see Chapter 5) that she decided Chinese ink and brushes would be the best medium for her. This work, although not dated, was most likely to have been painted before she met Lui. While Tanski thought it was Lui who encouraged

Chou “to work almost exclusively with black ink”, I believe it was Huang Bin-hung who inspired her to experiment with the piled ink technique. “Huang was in every way a superior painter to Lui,” Chou told me.

As far as Chou was concerned, she helped Lui in his development as an artist as much as he helped her:

Those paintings with a splash of vermilion at the top [Lui’s *zen* paintings] were mostly painted on my work table in my Kowloon flat. I did all the preparation work such as grinding the vermilion stick in the crucible adding *zhu biao* (iron oxide) to give it body. I got the paper ready, smoothing it out on the table. Such preparation took time but I did not mind doing it. I enjoyed watching Lui paint, giving him suggestions and ideas and generally being his assistant. He liked painting at my place because, unlike his wife, I did not care if he made a big mess with spilled ink and splashed colour. I also had a big working table and lots of novel painting materials, such as the flat brushes, *paibi*, used by Japanese painters. I was happy for Lui Shou-kwan to use them and experiment with them.

Chou told me that she showed Lui how to apply vermilion on to the rice paper:

Applying vermilion on rice paper took some skills. I was the one who suggested to him that we used the traditional method of doing a sketch on the paper first with clear water and then applying the vermilion, which would then run into the area of the paper that was wet. One has to do this quickly, applying the vermilion immediately after the sketch is done, to achieve the result one desires.

Chou told me all this in 2002, and I was going to include it in the catalogue essay I wrote for her exhibition *The Universe is My Heart, My Heart is the Universe*, which was to be held in Hong Kong in 2003; however, Chou asked me to delete it.

Chou's request may seem strange, since she allowed her biographers to write that "Lui's *zen* paintings were mostly painted at Chou's place ... She was the one who suggested that he placed a red vermillion dot in his *zen* paintings" (Pun and Lu, 2001: 72). But Chou knew that what I had written was likely to be read by those who claimed it was Lui who had influenced her rather than the other way around. She was happy for them to continue to think this. She knew that one day it would all be clear that she influenced him as much as he influenced her. When people suggested that some of Chou's work was painted by Lui, she did not defend herself. "After Lui died I am still painting," Chou told me. "This is my best proof." However, privately Chou did want to set the record right. She wrote with a red pen next to what I had written:

I feel Zhao Shaoang was my real teacher for all my ink painting techniques.

After all those years with Zhao I learned everything I needed to know.

Afterwards it was just a matter of how I put those skills into practice. As for Lui Shou-kwan, he neither lifted (*qi*) my ignorance (*meng*), nor did he teach me any techniques in ink paintings.

Although Chou did not give Lui any credit for her painting technique, she acknowledged that it was Lui who put her on to the road to become a professional artist by giving her the chance to have a solo exhibition in 1968. She also acknowledged that Lui influenced her in another very significant way. She hinted at it when she wrote in 1986 that of the two teachers she had, the one who "deeply altered my attitude to work was Mr Lui Shou-kwan" (Chou, 1986: 22). What Chou meant by "deeply altered my attitude to work" was that

in him she found a soulmate. When she first met Lui, she was most impressed that he had given up a secure job to become an artist: “He had many shortcomings, like all of us, but he was not materialistic or greedy for money.” In her study of Chinese philosophy, Chou had come to take on a similar outlook on life: “I detest the ugliness, the hypocrisy, and the disappearance of the soul and heart in human beings in modern society,” she wrote in 1973. “We need love, peace, and humanity and a return to the realm of simplicity and vitality, sincerity and reservation.” (Chou, 1973: 166). At the time Chou and Lui met, Lui—who had been studying *zen* Buddhism and its concepts—was “at the peak of his creativity” (Wong, 1976: 126). Working with Lui on his *zen* paintings had an enormous influence on Chou’s own philosophical development. As her biographers put it, “Lui encouraged her to look to her own original self for inspiration for her work” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 71).

Spiritual aspiration

When Chou’s line paintings first appeared, Lui Shou-kwan was among the few who appreciated her work. “He knew right from the start when he first met me,” Chou told me, “that there was something in me.” Even Yang did not know what her line paintings were about. “My husband just does not understand it,” Chou told a reporter in 1972. “One painting [*Composition IV*] he said reminded him of an advertisement for California oranges.” (*Hong Kong Standard*, 9 June 1972) Nigel Cameron, who had followed her work since her first exhibition, was not sure what to make of her line paintings either. He thought one of her works might be a “landscape but perhaps it is merely an infolded shape” (Cameron, 1973).

In 1974, when Sarah Larkin staged an exhibition for her artists—including Chou—she had asked each of them to write an artist’s statement. “Happiness, amazement, sorrow and hatred are man’s fleeting sensations, miscellaneous and fragmentary,” Chou wrote. “What I am after is a realm of calm, true-heartedness and sincerity from which one can emerge as one

with independent selfhood” (Chou, 1974). In response to Chou’s statement, Nigel Cameron wrote:

Most artists should be restrained from explaining the why and how. Irene Chou is an accomplished painter who, like most others, is at her best in painting, not words. Quotations like “what I am after is a realm of calm, true-heartedness and sincerity from which one can emerge as one with independent selfhood” don’t seem [seem] to mean much in themselves. (Cameron, 1974)

But Chou’s statement makes sense if one sees that her paintings, aside from telling a story from a woman’s perspective, had also become a vehicle for her spiritual aspiration. As we saw in the last chapter, Chinese philosophy was an important component of Chou’s art education. In reading the Chinese classics and works by the ancient philosophers, Chou came to rediscover the concept of “man and nature are one”, a philosophical concept that had dominated Chinese people’s thinking for more than two thousand years. In 1973, not long after her line painting emerged, Chou published an article written in Chinese in which she spelled out how her thinking had been influenced by the Confucian philosophers Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, and by John Ruskin and A.E. Housman. “To attain the realm of simplicity, sincerity, containment, and salutation is what I desire,” Chou wrote, “at first to attain this realm in one’s heart then to let it spread higher and higher, further and further away.” (Chou, 1973: 166) In her line paintings, Chou was beginning to contemplate about procreation, the meaning of life and the sublimation of the soul. In her artist’s statement, she was declaring the spiritual aspiration she had set for herself.

As mentioned earlier, it was during the time Chou painted her line paintings that her sphere—her spiritual symbol—first appeared. “I call my sphere *zhong*,” Chou said in 1973, “because it represents absolute concentration and utter devotion of attention.” (Chen, 1973)

“A leitmotif that appears often in her paintings is the sphere,” Lucy Lim wrote. “To her, the sphere—a full circle and a perfect form—represents the ideal and the absolute, a spiritual reality of love and sincerity, of beauty and tranquillity ... She devised this symbol in her paintings of the 1980s [in the 1970s] after reading a poem by A.E. Housman on love and sincerity that moved her deeply.” (Lim, 1981: 25) In 1989, Chou told a journalist that her “discovery in her geometry class that the radii of the circle all converge on one single point” made a lasting impression upon her, which eventually came to inspire her to create the sphere in her painting (Ah, 1989). However, Chou told me that it was from physics, her best subject in high school, that she first thought about the beauty and perfection of the circle and sphere: “For all my study of the Chinese Classics I could not find anything that I could use as a symbol for such power of concentration. In the end I recalled what I learned in my physics class in high school. I decided to device a sphere to represent the concentration of the sincerity in my own heart.” (Chou, 2002) Whatever its source, the sphere became a spiritual symbol for the artist.

The spiritual aspiration that Chou set for herself is most clearly expressed in *Composition IV*. Like Miro’s ascending to a higher reality in *Dog Barking at the Moon*, there is an upward movement in *Composition IV* that is created by the egg-like organisms becoming smaller and smaller as they move upwards and away from the viewer. In this work, each entrapped egg-like organism not only struggles to free itself from the uterus but to transform itself from an egg into a sphere. One egg succeeds in transforming itself into a sphere before leaving the uterus. Another egg-like organism, after succeeding in transforming into a sphere and escaping from the entrapment, appears to float into infinity and beyond.

What Chou expressed in her line paintings continued to resemble what was expressed by many of the women writers of her mother’s and her own generation. Lu Ying, a teacher at

the Shanghai Municipal High School and a significant novelist in the 1920s, and Su Sueling, a contemporary of Lu Ying, had written how a woman's fate was inseparable from her body and childbirth. Writers like Chang Ailing and Su Qing of Chou's generation had written how women's lives were destroyed by the men they loved and by marriage. Chou made reference to her husband's philandering in *Tree II* and the inseparability of a woman's fate with her body and childbirth in *Fertility* and *Composition IV*. One reporter described the lines in Chou's work as "tortured" and "twisted" (Smith, 1972). "Somewhere between those lines", another journalist wrote, "you seem to detect a note of helplessness, of frustration at life" (Clewlow, 1974).

However, as we have seen already, while Chou continued to tell the story of a modern woman, she was moving towards a broader vision of reality. While sex was still a strong undercurrent in her line paintings, the depiction of sex was overtaken by Chou's concern for the ingenuity of the reproductive system and her reverence for the procreative power. "The workings of the human body are intricate and marvellous," Chou told Binks. "Life is so short and my knowledge is not enough." (Binks, 1998: 38) The sphere, Chou's symbol for sublime love, has taken on the role of a phallus—determined, as seen in *Fertility*, to make its way into the grey organism surrounded by the thick wall of parallel lines. Moreover, in *Composition IV*, her painting had now taken on an added dimension, becoming a means of exploring her spiritual aspiration as well as telling her story. She wrote: "The texture and the rhythm of the lines gave expression to my feelings towards life, love and the mystery of the universe." (Chou, 1986: 25).

Piled ink paintings

Suddenly Chou, who had painted nothing but line paintings between 1971 and 1974, decided to stop them. Her decision was dramatic, particularly in view of the fact that her line

paintings had made her a well-known artist in Hong Kong. The explanation Chou generally gave people was that she was accused her of copying Bridget Riley's 1960s black and white signature Op Art style painting. However, among the body of literature on Chou, I have not come across anyone insinuating that she was copying the work of the British artist. Later in life, Chou also told me that anyone who thought she copied Riley just did not know her. "I had infinitely more substance in me than Riley," she said. In any case, although one sees qualities of calculation, precision, neatness and detachment in her lines, they also contain qualities that are the opposite to hard-edge painting. Furthermore, unlike hard-edge painting, where the transition of colour is often abrupt, the change of one shade of black to another in Chou's line paintings is gradual.

A more plausible reason was that Chou wanted to continue to extend her visual language. In re-examining the abstract elements in Chinese painting, she had explored dots in her landscape paintings and the lines in her line paintings. Now she came to explore the plane by using the ancient technique of *jimo* or piled ink. She wrote:

Since the Chinese paper was usually very thin and soft, it was difficult to achieve the effects of having the ink look thick, dark and concentrated. The technique of ink accumulation, which means the careful application of certain layers of thin ink, one over another, on both the back and front of a paper, had to be resorted to so as to make the black ink look concentrated and soft. (Chou, 1986: 26)

Thus these works came to be known as her "piled ink paintings." "Piled ink painting is a great challenge to the artist," Chou quoted Huang Bin-hung as saying in 1986 (Chou, 1986: 26). Chou not only took up the challenge of piled ink painting, but covered a large area of the surface in piled ink, not unlike the colour field produced by Rothko and Paul Klee. It

was a very audacious act, considering that in traditional ink painting a white background or a light background is essential—except in religious art—for the ink brush strokes to show up. In the hands of lesser skilled ink painter, covering two-thirds of a painting in ink could be disastrous. “I am not afraid of using black like some people are,” Chou told me. “Without black I wouldn’t know how and what to paint.” (Butcher, 2003: 11) Chou had been practising her piled ink technique for many years before she applied it to her piled ink painting.

In *External and Internal* (Figure 5.7), *My Inner World I* (Figure 5.8) and *My Inner World II* (Figure 5.9), nearly three-quarters of the surface is covered in ink. In *External and Internal*, Chou’s branches have become vein-like and have twisted into a big sphere. Propelled by the energy at the base of the sphere, the branches straighten into lines bursting into the brightness beyond. At the base of the sphere, there seem to be some small protoplasmic substances floating among the branches. In *My Inner World I*, the vein-like and artery-like branches have twisted into a big sphere and a small sphere. The protoplasmic substances have now taken on the shape of a foetus. Three such foetus-like protoplasmic substances float from the big sphere towards the small sphere. In *My Inner World II*, the branches are spread out in the form of the female reproductive organ with thin red lines forming the shape of a uterus before becoming one single red line running into the darkness. “I placed my silver chopsticks down on the paper to form a line,” Chou told me. “Then I painted black all around the chopsticks. Afterwards I lifted the chopsticks off the paper and painted the white line formed by the chopsticks red.”

In the midst of creating her piled ink paintings, Chou also painted a set of fifteen paintings on silk that she titled *Decameron*. In *Decameron I* (Figure 5.10), the branches on the left are thinner and are painted with a shade of red, whereas the branches on the right are denser and are painted with a shade of light grey. They have come from opposite directions

and have merged into one straight branch down the middle of the painting. Their fusion is symbolised by the flower with three petals in red and two in grey, with a long stamen in the middle. In this work, Chou seemed to be making a reference to Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Two Callas Lilies*. In *Decameron II* (Figure 5.11), two tree trunks—which look like the nude bodies of a female and a male—are standing side by side. In their twists and turns, their branches are embracing each other. Their eventual fusion is so explosive that it sets everything around them in flames. In *Decameron III* (Figure 5.12), an indented sphere filled with vein-like branches has risen from the icy white against a pitched black background. A newly formed foetus is entangled among the vein-like branches. In *Decameron IV* (Figure 5.13), the protoplasmic substances have taken on the shape of two skeletons dancing amidst the nerve-like filaments trapped in an odd-shaped enclosure. The orange sphere is moving towards the strangely shaped enclosure as if in an attempt to make fusion.

Chou emphasised the sexual content of her *Decameron* paintings by painting them on silk, which was a medium used by Chinese painters before paper became readily available. In modern times, silk is not so much thought of as a material for painting but as the material associated with female sensuality. Chou made the most of silk’s special qualities, such as its ability to absorb a large quantity of liquid without tearing. In *Decameron II*, the upper half of the silk was wetted with water first. Ink and vermilion were then poured on to the wet surface and allowed to run into each other, creating a layered look. Silk is also the best medium for articulated brush strokes. Unlike on *xuan* paper, lines can be painted over again on silk. Chou again capitalised on her medium as the branches motif with its fine brush strokes took centre stage in her *Decameron* paintings. “She possesses the kind of feeling, sensation, and perception that is unique to the female,” Wucius Wong wrote when he saw Chou’s *Decameron* (Wong, 1976: 8).

The *Decameron* set is a good example of the way Chou borrowed widely and boldly to create her visual language. When Chou named her work on silk *Decameron*, art critic Nigel Cameron wrote that it “may seem odd that a Chinese ... painter is inspired by reading the 14th century Italian writer”, but suggested that “the human element they [the stories] contain is perhaps finding some expression in her new work” (Cameron, 1976). According to Chou, she came to read the *Decameron* quite by accident: “I read the book because my husband had a copy in his collection.” Many Chinese intellectuals of Chou’s generation were familiar with the book. Indeed, the title *Decameron*, which is translated into Chinese as *Shi Ri Tan*, “Ten Days’ Talk”, was used as the title for a Chinese magazine published by Zhao Xing Mei, a graduate from Cambridge, in Shanghai in the late 1920s (Hui, 2004: 41). “My husband used the title for one of his newspaper columns to talk about anything from politics to literature,” Chou told me. “In those days, Chinese translators put a lot of thought into translating foreign names. Boccaccio’s name was translated into Chinese as *Bo Jia Qiu*, meaning the monk who wore a see-through vestment, to allude to the sexual content of the book.” She borrowed the title used by Giovanni Boccaccio because her silk paintings, like the stories told in Boccaccio’s book, are about the infinite variety of human sensations from sexual feelings to thoughts of death. In Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, seven young women and three young men who fled from the plague-ridden Florence for a villa outside of the city walls passed their time by each telling a story for the ten nights they stayed at the villa. Each storyteller assumed the role of a king or a queen as he or she told the story. Chou almost certainly was also aware that Salvador Dali did a set of ten etchings in 1972 named *Decameron*. While Chou borrowed from Boccaccio and she may have also been inspired by Dali, she remained fiercely original in her work. “Like the kings and queens in Boccaccio’s book,” Chou wrote, “I conveyed my sensations and feelings in my painting straight from my heart, completely from my own perspective.” (Chou, 1976)

Although the sexual content is prominent in Chou's piled ink and *Decameron* paintings, death is also a strong undercurrent. As we have seen, the protoplasmic substance in the shape of a foetus or a skeleton appears regularly in these paintings. These works, however, are not morbid because for Chou death and life are the two sides of the same coin. *Decameron IV* best illustrates her view. In this work, although death—represented by the two skeleton—is inevitable, the orange sphere that is moving towards the odd-shaped enclosure in an attempt to make fusion signals regeneration.

Life's difficulties

Chou painted the piled ink paintings during a period in her life when she had to face myriad difficulties. First there was the sudden death of Lui Shou-kwan, who died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-six in September 1975. "He suffered from angina," Chou told me, "but he would not go and see a doctor about the pain." She felt particularly bad about his death because she had asked him not to come and paint at her place anymore. According to Chou, Lui stopped going to her place to paint about two years before he died. "He went travelling somewhere [Taiwan]. After his return from the trip, he painted a set of [representational] landscapes which sold very well." After painting some representational work, he was ready to experiment and paint abstract work again. According to Mary Tregear, in his move towards abstraction, Lui often returned to a representational theme to regain momentum (Tregear, 1980: 200). But according to Chou, contemporary paintings were not easy to sell in those days, and even Lui had to paint something more traditional every now and then to make some sales:

When he wanted to come back to my place to paint again, I told him that my husband needed to take naps during the day because of his poor health and did

not like to be disturbed. The truth, of course, was that I needed more time to do my own work. I couldn't paint when Lui was around.

Perhaps another reason why Chou did not want Lui to paint at her home anymore was that their close association had caused her family to suspect they might be having an affair. "Once when my daughter came home from school and opened the front door with her own key she saw Lui Shou-kwan was there," Chou told me. "She instantly withdrew behind the door as if she thought she was not supposed to see both of us there." Her daughter was not the only one who thought her mother might be having an intimate relationship with Lui. Yang did as well: "My husband and Lui Shou-kwan only met once at a restaurant but throughout the meal Yiwen did not cast Lui Shou-kwan a single glance. I learned then he was jealous of Lui." Chou also found out that even Lui's wife thought he might be having an affair with her. After Lui died, Chou, together with Wong Wucius and several other painters who were represented by Sarah Larkin, went to see Larkin to take an inventory of what paintings Lui had left with her. Chou knew Lui's wife did not know English, and would not know how to deal with Larkin. She made a photocopy of this inventory and took it to Mrs Lui. To Chou's surprise, Mrs Lui told her she did not want the inventory. Chou realised then that Mrs Lui's refusal to accept her help was an expression of her resentment towards her.

At the same time of Lui's death, Chou received the grim news that she would be confined to a wheelchair one day. For a long time, she had suffered from severe headaches and had undergone many medical investigations to find out their cause, all the time fearing that she might have a brain tumour. It was not until around the time of Lui's death that she was diagnosed as suffering from atrophy of the cerebellum. "It was a great relief to us," Yang wrote in his diary, "to know that it was mere atrophy of the cerebellum" (Yang's Yearbook, 1975). While it was good news that it was not life threatening, it was bad news because the

condition would deteriorate. “It was from the nurse that I learned that I would be in a wheelchair one day,” Chou told me. “Tears just gushed out of me uncontrollably.” From what Yang wrote in his diary, it appeared that Chou did not tell him about her prognosis. In fact, Chou did not reveal to others that she was suffering from atrophy of the cerebellum for a long time.

Chou’s health problems had a direct impact on the images of her piled ink paintings. Her experience of searching for the cause of her headaches resulted in a new motif in her work:

I had an iodine-containing compound injected into my veins and arteries through a major artery in my thigh so that the blood vessels and the nerves on my brain would show up on the X-rays. While the doctor looked at the X-rays trying to come up with a diagnosis, I looked at the X-rays over and over again afterwards finding them as fascinating and beautiful images. These images made a deep impression on me. (Butcher, 2003: 15)

As we have seen in her piled ink paintings, her branches motif had become both vein-like and artery-like. In *External and Internal*, the vein- and artery-like branches have twisted into a brain-like structure. These vein- and artery-like branches are connected to a huge bundle of nerves in the centre, firing upwards from the brain-like structure. In *My Inner World I*, the vein- and artery-like branches have twisted into a big and a small sphere. Chang Tsong-zong described these spheres as “overgrown with nerve-like filaments”. It is obvious that even in 1988, Chou had not told many people about the cerebellar atrophy. “She explains this [the overgrown nerve-like filaments on her sphere] as the result of an old fear of brain tumours,” Chang wrote (Chang, 1988: 289).

However, the grim prospect that she would eventually be confined to a wheelchair was not the only thing that was worrying Chou. She was also under enormous pressure to succeed as an artist. According to Chou, she was up against three things when she became a professional artist: being a married woman, old and Shanghainese. When the Hong Kong government staged its “Hong Kong Arts Festival First Exhibition of Contemporary Hong Kong Art” in 1975, Chou was the only Chinese woman among the sixteen artists whose work was shown. According to Chou, her fellow New Ink Painters initially did not take her seriously, because she was a married woman and especially one who was married to someone in the entertainment industry: “They thought I was a movie star and would not last long.”

When it appeared that Chou was going to be a serious artist, however, she was viewed as an extra competitor in a very competitive art world. In 1976, Chou’s small *Decameron* paintings, sold through the Quorum Galleries, were fetching HK\$4000 each (Kim Schmidt, November 1976). In 1977, Christine Ramsay, the director of the Raya Gallery in Melbourne, arranged an exhibition of Chou’s work in Melbourne. Raya was one of Melbourne’s first galleries to show contemporary Asian art in 1970s, and Chou had met Ramsay through Sarah Larkin. In his Yearbook, Yang recorded that Chou’s exhibition in Melbourne was a great success and that she sold nearly all her work (Yang’s Yearbook, 1977). However, Chou’s success as an artist was causing jealousy among her contemporaries. She told a reporter in 1989 that in the 1970s many of the painters in Hong Kong thought “she should step aside because there was no place in the art world for a woman” (“Zhou Luyun’s Journey as an Artist”, 1989). She was also disadvantaged by her age:

I was older than most of my fellow New Ink painters so I was excluded from an exhibition which was to show works by young artists. It was only when one of

the artists pulled out at the last minute that John Warner, the chief curator, asked Wong Wucius, who was the assistant curator at the time, to contact me.

Moreover, according to Chou, there was also prejudice against her because she was not a Cantonese:

My best evidence that such prejudice existed is what the Cantonese painters did to Lui Guosong. It was at one of our meetings or seminars, either organized by the In Tao Art Association or the One Art Group, and we were all going to meet afterwards at the Coffee House to have a cup of coffee. I asked Lui Guosong to join us and he was delighted to be invited. As everyone made their way to Coffee House, I got a message that I was needed at home. So I ended up not joining everybody at the Coffee House. I was told later that Lui Guosong was very upset because not one single person spoke to him all making the excuse that they did not speak Mandarin. The truth was that they did not want to make him feel welcome because he was not a Cantonese.

Up against such prejudice, Chou had to work extra hard to make it as a professional artist but she continued to struggle between being a good mother and wife and building her career as an artist. Until her youngest daughter went overseas to study in 1973, Chou lived with the guilty feeling of neglecting her youngest daughter in order to pursue her own career. When Chou was finally able to devote herself entirely to her work, she was confronted with more health problems. As well as being diagnosed with cerebellar atrophy, Chou had high blood pressure and severe backaches: "In March this year she was in hospital for three days to find out the cause of her severe backaches. Unfortunately, no effective treatment was found for her backaches." (Yang's Yearbook, 1977)

Among the problems Chou was facing was worry about money. Because Yang continued to be a spendthrift after he was no longer a high income earner, the Yangs were still unable to save money despite Chou's paintings selling well in the 1970s. Almost as soon as he gained a job in 1970, Yang—who'd previously had to sell his Escort to pay his bills—bought a new Japanese car (Yang's Yearbook, 1970). Then, in 1977, Yang had the car completely reconditioned: "I had new body parts put in and had the whole car repainted." (Yang's Yearbook, 1977) Earlier that year, Yang checked into the luxurious Hong Kong Hotel to stay for ten days when Chou was not feeling well (Yang's Yearbook, 1977). Yang also recorded in his Yearbook that they spent a tremendous amount of money for their trip to Brisbane for the family reunion.

Chou was not altogether lying when she told Lui Shou-kwan that her husband was not well and needed to take naps during the day. In 1977, although Yang was still working full time and took four trips to Taiwan during the first half of the year, he nevertheless had to cut back on his many duties and obligations because his emphysema had worsened. In September that year, the Yangs travelled to Brisbane, where their eldest son and his family lived, for a family reunion. It was the last time Yang saw his three children, as he became gravely ill soon after he returned to Hong Kong. In March 1978, Yang had difficulty breathing and had to be admitted to hospital. "The doctor had told me earlier that he had cancer," Chou told me, "and had only five years to live." Like many family members of cancer sufferers in those days, Chou did not tell Yang he had the disease. "He had been on many different medications. He did not take note that some of the drugs he was taking were hardening his liver."

When her husband became very sick, Chou had to struggle again between putting her career first and being compassionate towards her husband. "When my husband checked in at

the hospital the orderly brought over a wheelchair and asked who the patient was. I told him I was.” Chou refused to fall back into her former role of a loving wife even when Yang was critically ill. According to her biographers: “She continued to work rather than taking time out to look after him.” (Pun and Li, 2001: 102) However, Chou told me that although she got a lot of work done when Yang was in the hospital, she did not ignore him completely. “I worked all day and walked over to the hospital in the evening to have dinner with him in the hospital’s restaurant. They served Western food.” One evening, just as soon as Chou was arriving home after visiting Yang, she was called back to the hospital. Chou told me: “When I arrived, he had died. The doctor sat me down on a chair. He then squatted down to my level, next to my chair to talk to me. It was his way of saying how sorry he was that my husband had died so suddenly. The TV in his room was still switched on. It all seemed so surreal.” Yang was fifty-seven years old when he died on 29 March 1978.

As Chou had expected, Yang left nothing when he died: “He only had \$75 in his bank account. At first I thought it was US dollars but it was only Hong Kong dollars. That was not enough even for me to pay his taxes from his income from EMI.” Her biographers recorded the amount as HK\$2000 (Pun and Lu, 2001: 106). “They [the biographers] exaggerated the amount because they felt embarrassed for me that my husband had so little money to his name at the time of his death.”

Death is certainly a strong undercurrent in many of Chou’s piled ink paintings and *Decameron* paintings. Protoplasmic substance, in the shape of a foetus or a skeleton, appears frequently in these works. In *External and Internal*, a protoplasmic substance is just starting to take on the shape of a foetus amidst the vein-like and artery-like branches. In *My Inner World I*, three pieces of protoplasmic substances, which have already taken the shape of a foetus, float from the big sphere towards the small sphere. In *Decameron IV* (Figure 5.13), an

indented sphere filled with vein-like and artery-like branches has risen from the icy white against a pitched dark background. A newly formed foetus is entangled among the vein-like and artery-like branches. In *Decameron V* (Figure 5.14), the protoplasmic substances have taken on the shape of two skeletons dancing amidst the nerve-like filaments trapped in an oddly shaped enclosure. The orange sphere is moving towards the odd-shaped enclosure as if in an attempt to make fusion.

Dark paintings

Chou's piled ink paintings are often referred to as her "dark paintings", but as we have seen all of her paintings to date are dark. In her landscape paintings, the dark landscape is lit up by the moonlight and in her line paintings the lines are lit up by a non-solar and non-lunar light. In her piled ink paintings, the dark piled ink patch, which covers at least two-thirds of the painting, is lit up by an icy bright light that seems to have come from a mysterious source. The contrast between darkness and brightness is strongest in her piled ink paintings because of the depth of darkness created by the piled ink patch. "Piled ink is much more than a patch of dark ink," Chou wrote. "It requires a systematic mode of structured layers, fullness and depth" (Chou, 1986: 26). Hugh Moss described Chou's ink piled patch as "gradations of ink from silky, fathomless black to subtle shades of grey blending with constantly changing colour tones" (Moss, 1983: 186). "The feeling of awe comes especially from the artist's amazing use of black ink to create a sensation of unfathomable space," wrote Cesar Guillen-Nunez (1987).

"My piled ink paintings were attempts at discovering the self," Chou wrote (Chou, 1986: 26). The creation of the greatest contrast between darkness and lightness in her paintings enabled Chou to explore the spiritual theme further. "What I want the black area to express is the 'never ending landscape'," Chou wrote. "The small white area, which is empty

and quiet, belongs to me.” (Chou, 1975) Having created the greatest contrast between darkness and lightness in her piled ink paintings, Chou began the task of linking the two together:

In my painting I may use a line or a painting technique to link my own inner universe with the outer universe because only when the universe and the individual human being are connected with each other can there be eternity.

(Chou, 1975)

In the Introduction, I pointed out that many writers are inclined to interpret Chou’s dark paintings as being sad and grim, and her colourful paintings as happy and joyful. Because her piled ink paintings were dark and painted during the period when both Lui Shou-kwan and Yang died, many writers came to assume that it was their deaths that caused the darkness, hence the sadness and grimness, in her paintings. “His [Lui’s] death ushered in a mood of despair, reflected in ... the dark paintings,” Cameron wrote (1986). Catherine Maudsley (1995: 99) wrote: “Devastated by his [Lui’s] death, Zhou produced a number of black, oppressive and depressing paintings in remembrance of Lu.” And “His [Yang] illness and death made her world even more grim and sad.” (Maudsley (1995: 99) Petra Hinterthür (1988: 99) cited a work Chou had painted in 1980 as the mark of “the end of a depressed period in Chou’s life”, implying that Chou was depressed at the time of her husband’s death. Michael Sullivan observed “[changes] of mood, notably after the death of her husband when she expressed her loss in paintings that, for a time, were dark and turbulent” (Sullivan, 2003).

These writers are wrong on two accounts. First, as we have seen, the deaths of Lui and Yang were just two of many problems Chou was facing during the period when she painted her piled ink paintings. Moreover, while Chou was saddened by Lui’s death, she was not sentimental about it. She named one of her piled ink paintings *Remembering Mr Lui* to

commemorate him, but she did not hesitate to sell it when someone in Melbourne wanted to buy it in 1977. “Christine Ramsay [Director of Raya Gallery] told me just to paint another one,” Chou told me. “So I painted *Remembering Mr Lui*, the one in the catalogue [for the 1986 retrospective exhibition].” As for Yang, Chou was certainly very upset about his death, but since his last serious affair her feelings for him had been all but dead. Chou also told me that the greatest relief for her after her husband died was that she did not have to listen to or to read gossip about her husband anymore. In 1995, when Chou’s god-daughter first read about Chou’s grief over Yang’s death in a catalogue that Chou sent her, *Collectors’ Choice: The Cosmic Vision of Zhou Luyun*, she was puzzled: “In the book (the catalogue) it mentioned about 1970s you had a period of depression etc.,” she wrote in a letter to Chou, “What was it [that about]?” (Letter from Chou’s god-daughter, 1995).

Second, while it is true that blackness in Chou’s work conveys her dark emotions, such as sadness and despair, the act of painting darkness also relieved her of many unpleasant emotions. “Black makes me content,” Chou told a journalist in Melbourne (Michie, 1985). Likewise, the artist told me: “I don’t know why the act of turning a surface black gives me such pleasure ... In fact, black is a part of me, the person.” (Butcher, 2003: 11) Moreover, blackness represented the infinite universe for her. Covering two-thirds of the painting was her way to convey her spiritual aspiration to fuse her inner self with the universe. These dark paintings are in fact filled with hope and joy.

In her piled ink paintings, Chou continued to tell the story of a modern woman. She depicted the female reproductive organs in many of her piled ink paintings, and even made references to her abortions. However, in comparison with the landscape paintings and line paintings, Chou’s depiction of sex had become more subtle in her piled ink paintings. The depiction of the physical fusion between a man and a woman in one of the paintings has

become so embedded in the depiction of the spiritual fusion of an individual and the universe that the sex element escaped some viewers. One journalist wrote: “The painting is presented in such an artistic and reserved symbolic way that without her explanation, one can hardly see what the real motive is behind the painting.” (Lo, 1976) Indeed, in addition to expressing the emotions of a modern woman, Chou’s piled ink paintings had become a vehicle through which she explored the relationship between the self and the universe.

Conclusion

I have labelled Chou as a woman painter because, like the women writers who emerged after the May Fourth Movement, she told the intimate story of a modern Chinese woman.

However, unlike the women writers, Chou had to develop her own vernacular to tell her story. “Traditional Chinese paintings express happiness and anger, feelings deemed to be male feelings”, Liu Guosong wrote. “Feelings such as sadness, melancholy, sorrow, worries, anxiety, depression and dejection are deemed as emotions belonging to women.” (Liu, 2002: 26) Chou seems to have succeeded in developing such a language, certainly in the eyes of one female viewer, Chong Ling Ling, one of the movie stars who had worked with Yiwen:

Her works in the 1970s were her life story of that period. She might have experienced happiness but what I could feel from these works were nothing but endless feelings of distress, melancholy, sadness of someone whose life had been bound up in these emotions. The images she produced were those of a person telling us of her unfortunate life story, weeping and speaking in a low despondent voice. Those images, made up by the dark colours, twisted lines and oppressive ink patches, were like ocean waves coming at us one after another. These images made one’s heart bleed. (Chong, 1987: 4)

Chou could not have undertaken the task of developing her own vernacular without the depth and scope of her art education. Her very early training in using the brush and ink, as well as her natural talents, explain why she was able to pick up her painting skills so quickly after starting formal painting lessons with Zhao Shao-ang so late in life. By the time she met Liu Shou-kwan, she had had a lifetime of art education. To become involved in Liu's New Ink Painting Movement at that point in her art education was fortuitous. When Liu gave her the chance to have a solo exhibition, it provided her with the confidence she needed to "break free". The comprehensive art education she had experienced allowed her to borrow boldly and widely, not only from traditional Chinese sources but from abstract art, pop art and surrealism, while remaining fiercely original in her own work.

In the Introduction, I raised the question of why Chou, an ardent supporter and practitioner of the New Ink Painting Movement and one of Lui Shuo-kwan's most faithful followers, did not paint in a style that followed that of Lui Shou-kwan or her peers. The answer to this is now obvious. While her peers were concerned with modernising Chinese painting, she was interested in creating her own visual language. In their attempt to modernise Chinese painting, her peers avoided anything that might lead them back to the traditional way of painting. "The New Ink Painters avoided using the calligraphic lines," Liu Jianwei wrote, "in fear of falling back onto traditional style of painting since calligraphy was inseparable from traditional Chinese painting." (Liu, 2001: 24). The New Ink painters also avoided the traditional *xuan* paper for fear of employing traditional techniques that catered to the nature of the *xuan* paper (Liu, 2001: 24). In contrast, Chou would employ any means as long as it helped her to create her visual language. This explains why she was not afraid to use traditional techniques and traditional painting materials. It also explains why, while her peers avoided the calligraphic lines, she painted the line paintings; and while her peers avoided the *xuan* paper, she painted exclusively on *xuan* paper. As we have seen, in the midst

of painting on *xuan* paper, she even painted a set of work on silk, the most ancient medium in traditional Chinese painting, because it enhanced what she wanted to express at the time. In answering this question, I have indirectly answered another question that I raised in the Introduction, which was what gave Chou the daringness to depict sex in her work. “I think I am the first one to introduce sex into Chinese ink and brush painting,” Chou claimed. However, as we have seen, it is not so much that she set out to introduce sex into Chinese ink painting; rather, love, sex, infidelity, childbirth and abortion are all part of the story she wanted to tell.

However, as we have seen, almost at the same time as Chou attempted to develop a visual language that could express the emotions of a woman, her visual language also became her vehicle to explore a much wider vision of reality. “Metaphysical concepts expressed in art can be empty, or pretentious,” Michael Sullivan wrote. “But Irene Chou’s ideas, and feelings, are not only conveyed through a masterly technique, refinement of brushwork and daring use of colour, but are also charged with the vitality and joy of her own character that they spring to life.” (Sullivan, 2003) Chou’s metaphysical paintings are not empty or pretentious for two reasons. First, while Sullivan wrote that by “the ‘sixties’ she was already moving away from recognisable images into a language of abstraction” (Sullivan, 2003), in fact Chou’s abstract paintings were never completely devoid of recognisable images. As we have seen, roots, branches, trees, spheres, veins, phalluses, breasts, skeleton hands and fetuses are all recognisable in her work. Second, these recognisable images have not come from nowhere, but instead have sprung from her responses to her life events. Her branches became skeleton-like when she expressed her disgust at her dying husband’s affair with a young singer. They turned vein-like and artery-like after she saw the many x-rays of her own brain. The small spheres in her line paintings became medium-sized and large-sized spheres with overgrown

nerve-like filaments after her health scarce. In other words, Chou's metaphysical concepts were fully grounded in her responses to her life events.

In her attempt to create her own visual language to tell the story of a modern woman, Chou had evolved from a woman painter to become a painter who was also a woman. Not long after her first piled ink paintings appeared, she wrote in a piece of obscure writing in which she referred to her shifts from one style of painting to another as *bian*—change:

I have changed three times already. I feel joy and contentment each time after I have changed. This pressure [to change] gave me great pain and joy at the same time. I used to actively seek such pain and joy but now they just come to me naturally because now I have an inner world in me. (Chou, 1975)

Her painting, shifting from the “eclectic” style to “landscape paintings” to line paintings to piled ink paintings, in addition to telling the life story of a modern woman, was now also a vehicle to explore the inner self and its aspiration to fuse with the universe.

Chapter 6: A free woman (1978–91)

Chou continued to paint after her husband died, but her painting shifted to yet another style. Instead of covering two-thirds of a painting in piled ink, Chou covered a large area of her painting in the fur-like ink marks created by her latest “impact” technique. Some of her “impact structural stroke paintings” are almost as dark as her work in the 1970s. No sooner had she started this new style of painting than she began painting a dramatically different style of painting from all her previous styles. The “sweeping stroke paintings”, with sweeping ink strokes running boldly across the painting, leaving behind broad, narrow, dry and wet ink-brush-sweeps, are light and minimalistic. She painted the *zen*-like sweeping stroke paintings alongside her impact structural stroke paintings until the late 1980s, when her painting shifted yet again. This time, Chou shifted to a style of painting that I term the “whirling stroke paintings” because many of the paintings are dominated by colourful whirls of cosmic magnitude. As she lived the life of a free woman, as she held on to her philosophical ideals steadfastly and as she reached a higher level of attainment in her *qigong* practice, Chou—who had relinquished the traditional subject-matter, landscape, at the outset of her career—was now painting landscape in its widest scope, the universe.

A free woman

Although Chou no longer loved her husband at the time of his death, she found becoming a widow a shock. “I had become so independent of my husband emotionally that I did not think his death would affect me very much,” Chou told me in her old age. “But to find myself suddenly having to deal with everything on my own was difficult.” One of the major problems Chou faced after her husband died was lack of money, as he left her no property, cash or any other assets. Although her works had been selling well, the market for

contemporary Chinese ink paintings in the 1970s was still small in Hong Kong. “Nearly all of my fellow ink painters had to live on earnings from sources other than the sale of their work,” Chou told me. “Many had to teach and others had to do whatever gave them an income.” As we saw in the last chapter, although her husband was unemployed for a short period after his career as a movie director came to an end, he did bring in a regular income after he started working for Run Run Shaw. With the death of her husband, Chou lost the security that there would always be her husband’s income to pay the monthly rent.

In 1974, Chou told a reporter: “We have different problems from Western women, different traditions to break away from.” (Clewlow, 1974) One of the traditional Chinese rules about women is that a woman should obey her father when she is single, her husband when married, and her son when widowed. Obedience, of course, came with rewards: a single woman should be supported by her father, a married woman by her husband and a widowed mother by her son. Not only was the idea that a widowed mother should be supported by her son still strong among those of Chou’s generation, so too was the idea that parents should be supported by their children in their old age. “Our son and daughter-in-law had expressed the desire to support us [financially] in our old age,” Yang wrote in his Yearbook after visiting their son and his family in Brisbane in 1977. “I think I can plan on retiring after the age of sixty [then].” (Yang’s Yearbook, 1977) As Yang expected his son to look after him in his old age, he was also willing to look after Chou’s father in his old age. “My husband was the one who kept urging me to get my father to come and live with us in Hong Kong,” Chou told me. “But I did not want to because I knew if I had to look after my father I would not be able to paint.” As Chou did not look after her father in his old age, nor did she expect her son to look after her after she became a widow.

Although in the 1970s Chinese people of Chou's generation would have approved unequivocally of a widowed man remarrying, many still frowned upon a widowed woman remarrying. Tang, who had been her friend, mentor and lover, wanted to marry her. "His daughter was very keen for Tang and me to get married," Chou told me, "so that he would have a companion in his old age." However, all those years while she and Tang were lovers, Chou never wished she was free to marry Tang. She told her biographers that she did not once let Tang stay overnight at her place (Pun and Lu, 2001: 123).

Having decided that she was not going to rely on her son for financial support and that she was not going to remarry, Chou set out to find ways to support herself so that she could continue to be an artist. First, she approached Run Run Shaw for assistance: "He was generous in helping out with the expenses of Yiwen's funeral and memorial services both in Hong Kong and Taiwan." Chou went to see him to see if he could help to have Yang's Yearbook published as a series in one of the pro-KMT newspapers in Taiwan while his reputation as a "fine literati director" was still fresh in people's minds, as a way of making some money. Chou also considered going into trading in shares:

After my husband died I had lunch with the dental nurse and the dentist at the surgery where I used to be the receptionist. They still had their hot lunches delivered to them at the surgery from home. I discovered next to the dentist's surgery there was now a share trading company. I popped in to have a look and thought perhaps I could start trading in shares.

And she even considered returning to writing: "I thought I could write half a day and paint half a day," Chou told me. However, none of her ideas worked out. Run Run Shaw did not want Yiwen's Yearbook published:

He said that since Yiwen mentioned his love affairs with other women in his Yearbook it would make me, the wife, lose face. That was just an excuse. The truth was that Yiwen had written things in his Yearbook things that were not so complimentary about Shaw.

Chou also decided it was too risky to go into share trading. As for returning to writing, she decided against that too: "I did not think I could do well in two things at a time.

Chou finally secured a job teaching Chinese ink painting in the extramural program at the University of Hong Kong. Two years earlier, Chou had taught lithography in the extramural program with fellow artist Cissy Pao. "I told Martha Lesser I needed a meal ticket," Chou said. Martha Lesser, an expatriate who was in charge of the art courses in the extramural program, gave Chou a job. Chou devoted much time to her teaching. Her Chinese ink painting class was taught quite differently from the way Zhao Shaoang had conducted his classes. Chou took her students through both Chinese and Western art history. For Chinese art history, she took the students through from Five Dynasties (907–960) to the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), showing them lots of slides of paintings that she had collected and bought at the Palace Museum in Taiwan. For Western art history, she took them through from the baroque to cubism, borrowing slides from Jing Jialun. "After giving the students some idea about the development of art both in China and in Europe, I showed them what I thought was the common ground between Chinese art and Western art," Chou said. For the practical part of the course, the students painted at home as homework and brought their work to class for comments and criticisms, the way Lui Shou-kwan had done in his class:

At the end of each term, I helped each individual student to select works to present to the examiner, who was usually Martha Lesser. There was also an oral

examination. I would be the one to ask the student questions while the examiner marked the student's answers.

Chou reaffirmed her decision not to remarry in 1982 when she went to Shanghai to see her dying father. According to her biographers, her trip to Shanghai had a big impact on her. "Her father's death reminded her how transient life was," they wrote. "She became more determined than ever that she would devote the rest of her life to art." (Pun and Lu, 2001: 82) While she was in Shanghai, she saw Sha, the man for whom she gave up the study of medicine and whom she eventually dropped to marry Yang. Sha had been devastated after Chou married Yang. As mentioned earlier, when he was drunk one night he had a one night stand with a nightclub singer who bore him a daughter, who his family adopted. Sha never took the woman as a wife, nor did he ever get married. He visited Chou with his aunt in Hong Kong in the early 1950s. "While he was in Hong Kong he ran into an old friend with whom he had a cup of tea at a hotel. His friend was a KMT member and their meeting was spotted by a Communist spy in Hong Kong." During the "Anti-Rightist" Movement, Sha was sent off to hard labour for the next twenty years. When Sha and Chou met again, Sha wanted to marry Chou—especially since she was now a widow. But Chou turned down Sha's proposal. "I told him in the kindest way I could. I told him if I ever became a bride again I would not let the groom be anyone else but him."

As well as deciding not to rely on her son or to remarry, Chou began living life in the most unconventional way. She began her new life by disposing of all the material things she deemed no longer necessary. She gave her husband's car away: "I gave his car to a friend who had helped out at Yiwen's funeral. Later, he came back with a jar of coins that Yiwen had kept in the car for parking. I told him to keep the jar of coins as well." After getting rid of the car, she "threw away the television, alarm clock and washing machine" (Murdoch, 1985).

Chou also stopped wearing designer clothes, exquisite *qibao* and jewellery. “I used to wear good things and jewellery,” she told a reporter in 1991. “My friends don’t feel at ease with my looking the way I am.” (Green, 1991) Chou’s non-materialistic life not only made some of her friends ill at ease, but also created an impression in the minds of her relatives that she had been a failure. “My sister’s son, who visited me in Hong Kong on his way from China to study overseas, thought I had not done very well in Hong Kong because I did not have a car and I lived in a rented flat.”

Chou had wanted to live life differently for a long time. Her earlier admiration for Zhao Shaoang’s lack of concern for appearances, her admiration for Lui Shou-kwan’s lack of greediness for money and her respect for Tang’s devotion to his teaching rather than making money were all signs of her own desire to live a simple and non-materialistic life. As we have seen, Chou did attempt to live a less materialistic life after she became an artist.

“Materialistic temptations are everywhere and I am in a dilemma of self conflict”, Chou told a journalist, “though I’ve been trying my best to live as simple a life as possible.” (Lo, 1976) She attributed her difficulty to living a non-materialistic life to “her other half who sought nothing but materialistic enjoyment in life” (Hong, 1989). However, Chou also felt that earlier she did not have the maturity and the courage to live the way she wanted to live. “When I was young I was so delicate, got hurt so easily and cared so much about what other people said,” Chou told me in 2003. “I started to change not long after my husband died.”

As well as becoming non-materialistic, Chou also withdrew from many social relationships. She described her life with her husband as “shackled by mundane affairs, human relationships, social intercourse and hypocrisy” (Chou, 1986: 28). After he died, she sought to live a hermit-like life. “Sometimes she stays alone for days with the telephone pulled out from the wall.” (Murdoch, 1985) At other times, she simply did not answer the

phone. “When I did not answer the phone people thought I had gone to Australia to visit my son.” Chou gave a lucid description of her life as a widow in her 1986 retrospective exhibition catalogue:

I lived alone on the sixth floor of an old building in which there was no elevator. Every time I returned home, I had to negotiate many flights of steps, as though climbing a high mountain, before I got to my own apartment. After opening the door with the keys, I would then take a little rest, draw a long breath, sip some tea and listen to the music. I was completely free and could experience the pleasure and serenity a hermit enjoyed. (Chou, 1986: 106)

Living alone, Chou also increased her practice of *qigong* to two hours a day.

I have labelled Chou as a free woman in this chapter because, in order to understand why there were continuous shifts in her work in the 1980s, one needs to see her as a free woman. As we have seen in the previous chapters, despite her difficult marriage, Chou had had more freedom in her marriage than most Chinese women of her generation. “I am very lucky,” she wrote, “because in my marriage my husband and I give each other a lot of space and freedom.” (Chou, 1975). However, while it was true that her husband gave her the freedom to pursue her own interests, she still did not have the freedom to live life completely according to her own ideal. His death gave her that freedom, as she said on many occasions. Chou told a Melbourne journalist in 1985 that she “felt free when he [her husband] died” (Murdoch, 1985). When asked by another journalist how she felt living alone after her husband died, Chou replied: “This is the best time in my life.” (Shan, 1987) “After her husband died,” one reporter wrote, “she experienced this feeling that her world had suddenly opened up, infinitely wide and free.” (Kai, 1990) “Of course it was not a good thing,” she told another reporter in 1991, referring to her husband’s death, “but afterwards I felt quite

free and released. I feel I have got a lot of time of my own. I'm free to do anything, free to lead my simple, humble life.” (Green, 1991) It is because of this freedom to live a life according to her own ideals that I have labelled her as a free woman during this period.

Impact structural stroke paintings

While working on one style of painting, Chou was always practising another technique at the same time. Indeed, while she was painting the line paintings she was not only practising on the piled ink techniques but also experimenting with the ancient splash ink technique. During the period when Lui painted at Chou's home, he was not only painting the broad sweeping ink stroke *zen* paintings with a dash of vermillion patch but also *zen* paintings that employed the ancient splash ink technique. As mentioned before, one of the reasons why Lui liked painting at Chou's home was that she did not mind him splashing ink all over the place. Whether it was Chou who inspired Lui to experiment with the splash ink technique or the other way around is not important, as both of them were familiar with the ancient technique. What is important is that Chou, in her experimentation with the ancient splash ink technique, came to invent a new technique called the “impact” technique. The technique involves hitting an ink-loaded brush against something hard and letting the ink run in all directions on the wetted *xuan* paper. Chou called the fur-like ink marks created by this new technique a *cun* because it looked as if it were painted stroke by stroke by the brush. She named it the *jisan cun*, literally meaning the “jetting everywhere stroke”. “It was Tang who came up with the name *jisan cun*,” Chou told me, “and then translated it into English as ‘impact structural stroke’.”

For a long time, Chou had been releasing her emotion through the painstaking techniques of painting branches, lines and piled ink patches. The repetitiveness and tediousness of such painting techniques released her emotion in a slow and controlled way.

However, the splash ink technique provided her with a means of releasing her emotion instantly. “She invented her impact structural stroke at a point in her painting career she found expressing her emotion stroke by stroke tiring,” a reporter wrote. “Sometimes the slow process it took to express her emotions on the paper even made her feel agitated. The impact stroke allowed her to express emotions instantaneously and release all her couped up emotion at one bang.” (Wong, 1984) She could see the release of her emotion unveiled in front of her eyes.

Chou painted many studies with her impact structural stroke before she applied the technique to her painting. When Nigel Cameron wrote about “The Revolutionary Generation” in the October 1974 issue of *Orientations*, he included an image of one of Chou’s studies employing the impact structural stroke. It was not until the early 1980s, however, that Chou started to apply her new technique to her painting to create yet another style of painting, which I have termed the “impact structural stroke paintings”.

In *Genesis* (Figure 6.1), Chou’s familiar spheres, enclosed in the womb-like organisms, are perfectly integrated into the fur-like ink marks. One can feel the primeval energy oozing out of each of the organisms, setting the furry background into perpetual motion. Like one of her piled ink paintings *Genesis* is dark but lit up by an icy light that is not lunar, solar nor artificial. The seven spheres in the painting refer to the ancient Chinese concept that the universe began with the two opposing forces, *yin* and *yang*, and the five rotating forces known as *wuxing*—metal, wood, water, fire and earth. By having the spheres wrapped up in womb-like organisms, Chou described the origin of the universe in the same way Lao Tzu described it in *Tao Te Ching*: “Just as living creatures are born from the wombs of mothers so is the universe born from the womb of the ‘mysterious female’.” (Lau, 1963: 44) The name Chou gave this painting also referred to the Christian view of the origin of life.

Chou was contemplating the origin of life and the universe in this painting. “We are given life by our parents but where has life come from in the first place?” she said to a journalist. “Perhaps that is what *qi* is all about in *qigong*. It is the origin of life.” (Hong, 1989)

In *Movement I* (Figure 6.2), Chou seemed to be exploring the philosophical idea embodied in *Yijing* that all things are connected with each other by the same *qi* or energy. The explosive energy in the fur-like ink marks created by the impact structural stroke is gathered up by the meticulous lines, which turn into a whirl of cosmic magnitude. In the middle of the big whirl, Chou’s familiar branches rustle. The light coming from behind the big whirl—lunar, solar or artificial—lights up the surrounding darkness, illuminating the energy-laden small dark spirals painted in ink and malachite. At the bottom of the painting, a neat and tight spiral, illuminated its own light, appears to be engaged in conversation with the cosmic whirl above. “In the last ten years, I have had a keen interest in meditation,” Chou wrote in 1986, “and this painting [*Movement I*] is largely a recapitulation of my experience when I first learned to meditate.” (Chou, 1986: 96)

Movement I shows how Chou’s visual language grew as she shifted from one style of painting to another. In this work, while her latest technique—the impact structural stroke—dominates the painting, the branches in her landscape paintings, the lines in her line paintings and the piled ink patch in her piled ink paintings are all present. In other words, her visual language had become richer and more complex. In addition, the spiral—a development from her line paintings—had become a motif in its own right.

Chou’s impact structural stroke paintings would have been as dark as her piled ink paintings if it were not for the vermillion patch she had just introduced into her work. As we saw in the last chapter, Chou and Lui experimented with the use of vermillion when Lui was painting his *zen* paintings at her home in the early 1970s. However, Chou did not apply a

vermillion patch to her painting until she started painting her impact structural paintings. The vermillion patch can be an irregular shape or a circular patch, as in *Paradise Lost and Regained* (Figure, 6.3). The serenity emitted by the circular vermillion patch contrasts with the frantic activities that are going on beneath it. Here, the fur-like ink marks have coalesced into the shape of the female reproductive system. Two very subtle horizontal lines divide the painting into three sections. One is at the bottom of the painting, starting from the right-hand side of the painting. The luminous line with some realistic leaves dancing above it becomes almost invisible as it cuts across the bright light to the left hand side of the painting. Another horizontal line, which begins on the left-hand side of the painting with two small spheres sitting upon it, becomes obstructed from view as it cuts through behind the vermillion patch to the right-hand side of the painting. When one realises that the painting is divided into three sections, one begins to see that the circular vermillion patch is rising from the middle section into the top section. The orgasmic energy created by the fur-like ink marks is so strong that the circular vermillion patch is being pushed upwards into the infinity beyond.

The circle—whether it was the moon-like/sun-like circle, the malachite halo, the sphere, the spiral or the sphere with overgrown nerve filaments—had been a spiritual symbol in her work right from the beginning. The circular vermillion patch and the vermillion ring were new variations of a circle. Chou described her circular vermillion patch in *Paradise Lost and Regained* as a “garden ... made up of many layers and different types of melody”. She added that she loved “trees and nature that in its crude appearance, is filled with sincerity, self-delight, harmony and love” (Chou, 1986: 112)—qualities to which she aspired in her spiritual life. As we have seen, since Chou had moved away from her eclectic style of painting, she had used colour very sparingly in her work. The only colour she had employed in any significant amount was vermillion. Even so, she had used it generously only in a few of her landscape paintings, such as *The Fire*, and in a small number of her *Decameron* works.

As we have seen in her impact structural stroke paintings, Chou continued to use colour sparingly, except in *Paradise Lost and Regained*. “Since my constitution lacks the element of fire in the Celestial Quintet,” Chou wrote, “and I cannot stand the cold weather, I like the red colour as it looks warmer.” (Chou, 1986: 112) While vermilion might well have made Chou feel warmer physically, and while it represents passion, life and fertility in her earlier works, it had now also taken on a spiritual dimension in her work.

It seems clear now that whenever Chou shifted from one style of painting to another, the new style of painting had been brewing in the background for a long time before it appeared. In the case of her impact structural stroke paintings, thrashing the ink-laden brush on to the rod over the wetted paper had served to release her emotion for nearly a decade before it became a painting technique. Chou told a journalist in 1984: “I developed the impact structural stroke because among the traditional *cun* there was not one that could express the uncontainable emotions that jetted in all directions.” (Wong, 1984) While traditional brushstrokes such as the dot-like *cun* and rain-like *cun* were developed to paint particular things such as trees, rocks or mountains, Chou decided to employ her *cun* to paint what was beyond the boundaries of traditional Chinese landscape painting. “Since my impact structural stroke was a *cun* I needed to think what I would use it for in my painting,” Chou wrote (1987: 8). She decided to expand the boundaries of traditional Chinese landscape painting by bringing the sky into play. “I made use of knowledge we did not have before and ventured to make some trans-time/space inquiries in my painting.” (Chou, 1987: 8).

“Sweeping stroke paintings”

Not long after Chou started to paint her impact structural stroke paintings, she began painting another style of painting at the same time. I term her latest style of painting “sweeping stroke paintings”. The sweeping stroke technique is derived from the ancient Chinese painting

technique called *pomo*—broken ink technique. It is a technique that uses a large brush loaded with ink and applies it to the paper in a bold and uninhibited manner to create layers and tones of washes. As we saw in Chapter 4, Chou learned to paint banana leaves with a flat brush loaded with ink with a swift stroke in the abstract expressionist style when she was having lessons with Zhao. “Zhao Shaoang applied this technique to painting bamboo trunks as well as banana leaves,” Chou told me. Thus she had practised the sweeping stroke technique in her Lingnan School style of painting for a long time before she applied it to her sweeping stroke paintings.

At first glance, one intuitively reads the ink-brush-sweeps in *Spring I* (Figure 6.4) as going from top to bottom in one continuous action. A closer look reveals these are individual board ink-brush-sweeps with the dry board ink-brush-sweeps executed first and the thick ink-brush-slab in the middle executed the very last. An enormous amount of energy is generated from these sweeping strokes, setting the delicate branches at the top right-hand corner and at the bottom left-hand corner in motion. The movement is accentuated by the absolute stillness of the two coloured spheres perching at the edge of the top dry sweep and Chou’s large, square vermillion seal at the bottom right. In this work, Chou seemed to be exploring the idea that time does not travel in a linear way, but round and round.

In *Infinity Landscape II* (Figure 6.5), Chou created as many shades of ink as possible across the entire width of the painting, from the velvety dark ink-slab to the silky grey waves. Two tadpole-shaped vermillion strips—one above the ink-slab-sweep on the left and one below an ink-slab-sweep on the right—appear to swim towards each other. The absolute stillness on the left-hand side of the painting resembles the calm that precedes a violent storm. On the right-hand side of the painting, an ink-blob-splash has jetted ink into the light-filled sky, warning that catastrophe might be on the way. Chou described this work as a

portrait of her imagination. “I like painting because I can transcend, at will, the reality and enter the realm of imagination,” she wrote. “This painting [*Infinity Landscape II*] is a product of my musings. But even dreams may sometimes come true.” (Chou, 1986: 92)

The ink-blob-splash in *Infinity Landscape II* was a new leitmotif in Chou’s work. It was executed by thrashing an ink-loaded broad brush directly on to the paper:

When I thrash my brush into the paper to make that ink-blob-splash and when ink splatters everywhere, on to my face, my hands, and on the walls, all my emotions are flushed out of my system at once. Maybe that is one of the reasons why I like painting so much. It gives an outlet for my emotions. (Butcher, 2003: 11)

Like her impact structural stroke, Chou’s ink-blob-splash initially served to release her emotions but became yet another painting technique.

Many people remarked on the uncanny resemblance of Chou’s sweeping stroke paintings to Lui’s *zen* paintings. Cameron thought it was in Lui that “she found the intellect as well as the *zen* brush handling” (Cameron, 1986). Alice King, the gallery owner in Hong Kong, thought Chou was painting in the manner of Lui Shou-kwan. “I overheard her saying to someone that there was a woman painter who painted works like those painted by Lui Shou-kwan,” Chou told me. “I went up to her and told her that woman painter was me.” While some people took the resemblance of Chou’s sweeping stroke paintings to Lui’s *zen* paintings as further proof of Lui’s influence, Chou told me that she simply wanted to show that she could choose to paint like him, and as well as him, when she wanted to.

Indeed, Chou could also choose not to paint like Lui, as she did in *Conception* (Figure 6.6). In this work, in one big sweep from left to right, the thick broad ink-brush-

sweep has created movement of cosmic magnitude, stirring the surrealistic branches into a frenzy. At the same time, the ink-brush-sweep has created a cradle within which appears to lie a womb surrounded by petals in the shape of the Buddhist lotus. At the entrance of the womb is Chou's spiritual symbol, the sphere—bright, pure and flawless, ready to be born. In this work, Chou seemed to be alluding to the innocence human beings possess at the time of their birth. In English, she named the painting *Conception*, pointing to its sexual content; however, the Chinese name of the painting is *mingzhu*, meaning a bright pearl. As mentioned earlier, as a child Chou read Ji Xiao Lan's *Yue Wei Cao Tang*, which is a collection of stories based on real-life happenings with an injection of moral instruction. At the end of one of the stories, the author laments how few people live life maintaining “a heart as smooth, flawless, clean, and pure as a *mingzhu*” (Ji, c1800). By naming the work *mingzhu*, Chou hinted at her own spiritual aspiration.

An astute businesswoman

In 1984, six years after the death of her husband, Chou resigned from her teaching job and became a full-time artist: “I was selfish. As soon as I was able to make a living off my paintings I quit my teaching job.” Chou's success in becoming a professional artist so quickly was assisted by two external factors. One was the Hong Kong government's support for Chinese art. The Hong Kong government opened the Hong Kong City Hall in 1962, the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1977 and the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 1981. The government also promoted contemporary art by initiating the annual Hong Kong Arts Festival in 1974 and creating the annual Urban Council Award in 1975. Meanwhile, the University of Hong Kong also started to play an active role in promoting Chinese art by hosting art exhibitions at its Fung Ping Shan Museum. The other factor that assisted Chou's success in becoming a professional artist was the continuing involvement of the expatriates in Hong Kong in

promoting contemporary Chinese artists. Because of her middle-class Shanghai upbringing, her education at St John's University and her confidence in her own culture and history, Chou assumed neither a condescending nor a subservient attitude towards the "foreigners". She was able to work professionally with the expatriates, many of whom also became her lifelong friends.

Meeting Susan Munro in the 1980s was fortuitous for Chou's career. Munro, who had a great love of Chinese culture and had received a degree from Fu Dan University, worked for Charlotte Horstmann and Gerald Godfrey Ltd in Hong Kong. In the early 1980s, Horstmann and Godfrey, at their new shop at the Ocean Terminal, started to branch out into contemporary Hong Kong art. In her role as a buyer for contemporary art for Horstmann and Godfrey's, Munro started to buy work from Chou on a regular basis: "Every Wednesday Susan came to my flat. She looked at my latest work. We talked business and then she took me out to lunch using the company's gold card."

Chou also met Hugh Moss, another expatriate who was interested in contemporary Chinese art. In 1983, he staged *The Experience of Art: Twentieth Century Paintings from the Shuisongshi Shanfang Collection*. In the five years leading up to the show, he had gathered an extensive collection of modern Chinese paintings:

He used to climb the six flights of stairs to come to my flat to look at my paintings. I usually had my paintings one stacked on top of another all lying flat on the sofa in my living room with a piece of board or something over them to keep them flat. Hugh was surprised that sometimes I even had a pot plant or some junk on the board. He thought I was too casual about my paintings.

Hugh Moss, who bought many of Chou's paintings, was surprised that she did not ask more for her work. Moss wrote later that Chou was "an artistic paradox, a great artist without a great ego" (Moss, 1983: 184):

Hugh Moss thought I was too modest. What he did not know was that it was just so advantageous to be modest. What harm can modesty bring? It can only be beneficial for those who practise it.

Another expatriate who was interested in promoting contemporary Chinese art was Petra Hinterthür. In 1982, she organised *Contemporary Hong Kong Art* at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila. The following year, she organised a solo exhibition of Chou's work at the City Gallery in Manila. Hinterthür became friends with many of the contemporary artists and invited them to her home. Chou showed me photos of her and her fellow artists partying at Hinterthür's home, with Chou teaching Hinterthür to do *taichi* and Hinterthür having a home-cooked Chinese meal at Chou's flat. In 1985 Hinterthür published *Modern Art in Hong Kong*. The same year she organized *Shui Mo: The New Spirit of Chinese Tradition* at the Hong Kong Arts Centre showing work by thirty-three contemporary Hong Kong artists, including the work by Lui Shou-kwan. Meanwhile, Hinterthür, who had become Chou's close friend, also started to organise a retrospective exhibition for Chou.

Chou contributed to her own success as an artist in the 1980s not only by the work she produced but also by her astute approach to business. Although she was not greedy, as seen in her business dealings with Hugh Moss, she took business seriously: "Doing business is nothing but trying to transfer money from another person's pocket into your own pocket legitimately." Chou, who was a keen observer of human nature, set the price of her work fairly high right from the beginning because she understood most people believed things that were expensive were more valuable. In 1975, one of her paintings was selling for 100 pounds

overseas and in 1976 her 48"x48" *Decameron* paintings were already selling for HK\$4000 each, equivalent to the monthly salary of a clerk. She also understood that the more people desired a particular object, the more valuable the object became:

My dear friend, the Cantonese nurse who worked with me at the dental surgery, would come with me sometime when one of my paintings was being auctioned by Christie's or Sotheby's. I would ask her to bid for it as a way to push the price higher. After the auction we would go to an expensive hotel for a nice meal to celebrate.

Chou also understood market trends. Her *zen*-like sweeping stroke paintings appeared at the most fortuitous time—a very different time from the early 1970s when Lui Shou-kwan painted his *zen* paintings. While Lui had difficulty finding buyers for his *zen* paintings then, there was no shortage of buyers for Chou's *zen*-like paintings in the early 1970s. By then, the tourist industry was booming in Hong Kong. The tourists who visited Horstmann and Godfrey's shop at the Ocean Terminal found the *zen*-like sweeping stroke paintings by Chou spiritual, uplifting and easy to understand: "Those black and white paintings with a little bit of vermilion sold so well that I never thought making money could be that easy." An old friend of her husband's also noticed how well her *zen*-like paintings were selling. "I have seen her work displayed at a foreign shop," Long wrote. "They are not only selling well but also fetching very good prices." (Long, 1986)

In 1985, while Horstman/Godfrey Painting Gallery showed a set of twenty-two of her *zen*-like sweeping stroke paintings, Chou gave a set of dark paintings to Raya Gallery in Melbourne to exhibit, as she seemed to intuitively know that her dark, eerie and mysterious paintings were more likely to find buyers in Melbourne than among tourists in Hong Kong. In the show, Chou included not only her most recent impact structural stroke paintings but also

some of her earlier unsold piled ink paintings, including the one she had painted in 1975 to remember the death of Lui Shou-kwan. Nearly all of her work was sold. While there was no buyer in Hong Kong for the work she painted to remember Lui in 1975, it was sold in Melbourne in 1985.

Chou's lack of sentimentality in business dealings was shown again in the way she dealt with her friend Petra Hinterthür. As her work was selling well in the 1980s in Hong Kong, as one of her impact structural paintings, *Midsummer*, won the 1983 Urban Council Award and as her painting had shifted so many times since she first shifted from the Lingnan School style of painting, there was talk among her friends and those who promoted her work that it was time for her to have a retrospective exhibition. As mentioned, Hinterthür had been trying to organise a retrospective exhibition for Chou. However, when she received an offer from Dr Michael Lau at the University of Hong Kong to hold a retrospective exhibition for her at the Fung Ping Shan Museum in 1986, she promptly pulled out of the arrangements she had with Petra Hinterthür. "I was wicked," Chou told me. "Of course I preferred having my retrospective exhibition at an academic institution. So I just said no to Petra."

Chou's astuteness as a businesswoman was further revealed in the way she handled her retrospective exhibition, which was held in September 1986. A handsome 123-page hardback catalogue accompanied the exhibition of forty-seven paintings. Chou wrote her own catalogue essay, grouping her works into those belonging to the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. She also wrote a short commentary next to some of the images in the catalogue. "Michael Lau did not want me to do that because it would take up more pages but I insisted upon doing it," She said. In order to economise, Lau also wanted to produce the catalogue in paperback. "It would cost an extra HK\$10,000 to have a hardcover for the catalogue." Chou

willingly paid the \$10,000 because she knew how important the catalogue would be for advancing her career.

“The current exhibition at Fung Ping Shan Museum offers a well planned retrospective of her [Chou’s] painting from early works in the 1950s down to the present,” ,” Nigel Cameron wrote (1986). However, as we know, Chou did not start painting lessons with Zhao Shaoang until 1959. So why did Chou give the impression that she had started painting long before 1959, and was producing the Lingnan School style of painting as early as 1950? “It is rather rare,” Michael Lau wrote, “for the Museum to hold an exhibition of works of a single artist.” (Lau, 1986: 10) According to Chou, not only was it unusual for the university museum to hold a solo exhibition for an artist, but for the artist to be a woman. To reveal that she did not start formal painting lessons until 1959 would invite further criticism of her for lacking in training, as most Chinese painters at the time still believed that a long and arduous training was necessary for anyone who aspired to be a Chinese painter. Even in 2009, a couple of years before Chou died, the son of a prominent Chinese painter in Hong Kong was condescending about her work because of her lack of training in traditional Chinese painting. “She has never painted landscape,” he told me. “What can she paint then but these abstract things?”

Chou’s astute business sense also led her to appreciate investing in young local collectors. Whereas expatriates and tourists were the first to buy Chou’s work, and continued to do so in the 1980s, local Chinese were also beginning to collect her work after the 1970s: “When Michael Lau told me a young Chinese man wanted to buy my work, I immediately told him to make the price cheaper for him because young people generally could not afford my painting. It turned out this young man was very wealthy.” When a young salaried worker

wanted to buy one of her works at the retrospective exhibition but could not afford it, Chou just let her have the painting and pay her in instalments over a long period of time.

“Whirling stroke paintings”

Chou was at the height of her career as an artist in 1986. “Irene Chou takes her place among the greatest Chinese artists of this century. That there are rather few of them enhances the importance of the achievement,” Cameron wrote (1986). While Cameron considered Chou’s recent works as having “entered the time of full maturation”, another critic described her painting as having “reached a significant stage in her development” (Mealyer, 1986). However, in spite of her achievements, Chou shifted her painting to yet another style. “After the retrospective exhibition at Fung Ping Shan Museum I was feeling good and very confident,” she told me, “and this propelled me to try something new again.”

Chou took a great financial risk when she stopped painting the sweeping stroke paintings. Christine Chu, the curator at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, wrote how the affluence of the 1980s in Hong Kong was affecting artistic instinct. “[While the] traditional literati painter ... only paints for himself and a few close friends with comparable scholarly training and level of appreciation,” Chu wrote, “artists [now] are working with a different kind of awareness.” (Chu, 1988: 20) As mentioned before, Chou’s *zen*-like sweeping stroke paintings were selling very well at the time, and there was a great temptation for her to continue to paint these works. “I knew if I wanted to be a true artist I had to stop painting those paintings that were so popular,” Chou told me. “Susan Munro wanted me to paint more but she was an agent.”

Colourful whirls of cosmic magnitude dominate Chou’s whirling stroke paintings. In *Perpetual Motion* (Figure 6.7), Chou so energised her broad sweeping strokes that they whip back and forth across at a manic speed in the middle section of the painting. In the upper

third, a colourful whirl is formed, drawing energy from outer space into the icy vortex of the whirl. The perpetual movement in this painting is balanced by the calm and gentle ink sweeps at the bottom of the painting. Chou's large vermilion seal also offers a stabilising effect.

In *Coda* (Figure 6.8), two distinctive horizontal lines cut across the painting, dividing it into three sections. Darkness and stillness prevail in the bottom section of the painting. In the middle section, an ink-blob-splash has exploded:

Sometimes the visual effect of the ink-blob-splash is explosive and successful.

And other times, it is not so successful. When it is not so successful I do things in the background to add things to the foreground to make it into a satisfactory image. (Butcher, 2003: 12)

In *Coda*, the visual effect of the ink-blob-splash is too explosive to maintain the equilibrium in this painting. Chou balanced such a strong force with the cool, calm, and black and white small sphere. The vermilion seal in the far corner also provides a stabilising effect. In the upper section of the painting, the energy ejected from the ink-blob-splash propels a flying ink stroke to turn into a big colourful loose whirl. Everything that comes into the path of this big whirl, whether it is a small colourful swirl made up of short coloured strokes or a white bubble with a black dot like a rolling eyeball, is propelled into action. A dark sphere, which sits outside the orbit of the big whirl, remains still and calm.

In *Yin Yang* (Figure 6.9), two whirls dominate the painting. The radiating whirl on the left-hand side of the painting resembles the whirl in *Perpetual Motion*, but the two whirls are painted with very different strokes, the former with long and gentle strokes and the latter with short and decisive strokes. The two whirls in this painting, as the title suggests, contrast with one another, one *yin* and one *yang*. The colourful radiating whirl emits energy from the centre of the vortex towards the outer space, whereas the ink whirl on the right draws energy from

the outside towards the centre of the vortex. Although so much movement is created by the whirls, there is absolute calmness in this work. The vermillion seals placed in a row at the top of the painting provide a stabilising effect.

We see in these paintings how Chou had developed a variety of techniques of painting the whirl since she first painted this leitmotif with deliberate and labour-intensive parallel lines, as seen in *Movement I*. Some whirls, like the one in *Coda* and the ink whirl in *Yin Yang*, are whipped up by broad brush strokes. Others, like the one in *Perpetual Motion*, are created by long and narrow brush strokes. Still others, like the radiating whirl in *Yin Yang*, are painted by short, swift brush strokes. “I painted these short lines stroke by stroke freehand,” Chou told me. “Some I painted in one quick swipe. Others I painted slowly, and after they were dried I painted them over again.”

Among the most important of Chou’s whirling stroke paintings is *The Creation Trilogy* (Figure 6.10). “I have always had it in my mind to attempt a work on the theme of the Creation of the Universe,” Chou wrote. “This was especially so after I started doing *qigong*, during which I have to meditate for a long time. Whenever I do so, I would feel a certain life-force which is so overwhelmingly powerful and so much larger than life that it must be connected with the Act of Creation.” (Chou, 1995: 6) In the first painting, celestial energy is gathered from the outer darkness and whipped into a big ink and malachite whirl with a tight central vortex. In the second painting, energy of cosmic magnitude is emitted from the bright and colourful radiating whirl, sending the sweeping ink strokes down below into havoc. In the third painting, fierceness and violence have subsided. “Heaven, man and earth form the three parts of this painting,” Maudsley remarked about the third painting. “Heaven is resplendent in brilliant gold, rich malachite and azurite. Man, the link between heaven and

earth, is portrayed, in contrast, by a bold calligraphic stroke ... The earth, at the bottom of the picture, is a whirling vortex.” (Maudsley, 1990: 114)

In *Early Spring* (Figure 6.11), the sweeping whirl in the centre of the painting is different from Chou’s other sweeping whirls in that this one, with the help of colour, numerous thin swift strokes and dashes of dry ink stroke, looks three-dimensional. The centre of the whirl is lit up by the familiar non-solar and non-lunar light. Golden cosmic dust is scattering in the darkness above. The cosmic movement generated by the sweeping whirl in the centre of the painting is contrasted by the utter stillness in the darkness above as well as by the narrow strip of Chinese characters written in calligraphy at the bottom of the painting. In *Early Spring*, the paradoxical state of absolute stillness and movement of cosmic magnitude has become one harmonious whole.

In *Early Spring*, Chou had broken the traditional way of using calligraphy in painting. Traditionally, a scholar painter was competent not only in painting but also in calligraphy and poetry. By writing poems on to his painting in his beautiful calligraphy, a scholar painter showed he was competent in all three forms of the art—painting, calligraphy and poetry. Chou had never written poems on to her painting. “I don’t see why one should repeat what is already said through the painting,” she said. She also did not see any reason why a painter needed to show off his or her calligraphy in a painting. In the days when she was painting in the Lingnan School style of painting, we saw how she let Zhao Shaoang, her friends and her husband inscribe on to her paintings to show off their calligraphy. After she moved away from the Lingnan School style of painting, Chou left inscription totally out of her painting, not even signing her name in calligraphy. “After the 1960s Miss Chou had signed her name only by using her personal seals,” one journalist wrote. “It must be due to the fact that Miss

Chou did not have vigorous training in calligraphy in her early years resulting in poor penmanship too embarrassing to be used in her painting.” (Xin, 1986)

It is highly unlikely that Chou started to inscribe on to her painting to prove to Lui that she was a competent calligrapher. In *Early Spring*, by arranging the text in short rows of three to four characters across the width of the painting, Chou employed the characters to provide a steadying effect to the turbulent whirl above. In other words, she used the text written in calligraphy as a leitmotif, which is an integral part of the overall composition of the work. The characters also provide those who can read Chinese with further insight into the artist’s thought at the time of executing the painting. Chou had copied a passage from the classical text about the circulation of *qi*. “The human body is considered to have two meridians of *ren* and *du*, which unite the opposing elements of *yin* and *yang*,” the text read. “When these two meridians are flowing freely, one will have a healthy body.” (Pang, 2006c)

Like her calligraphy, Chou employed her personal seals as yet another leitmotif in her work. As mentioned in Chapter 3, her husband engraved all the seals she used in her painting. From the time he first started to engrave seals for her to use in her painting, to the time he died in 1978, he engraved a great variety of seals, ranging from large to small and from square to rectangular to oval to circle and to diamond in shape. The writing on the seals varies—some have as many as nine characters, such as *Song Jiang Zhou Lu Yun zuo hau zhi yin* (the seal for Zhou Luyun of Song Jiang to use in painting) and others have only one character, such as *Zhou*. There is one that is just a swirl, a symbol for a cloud that is one of the characters in Chou’s given name. Because Chou used her seals as a leitmotif as much as she used them for a signature, she placed them where they fitted best in the overall composition of the work. This meant that she sometimes placed them on the dark part of the painting, as she did in *Genesis*, even if it meant sacrificing the legibility of the characters on

the seals. In her sweeping stroke painting, her vermilion seals play a key role in giving the painting a fundamental balance. In *Spring I*, Chou's large square seal, placed diagonally from the spheres, provides perfect equilibrium for the painting. In *Whirlwind*, as many as five vermilion seals are present—some conspicuous and others inconspicuous. In *Early Spring*, one large seal and one small seal on each end anchor the row of calligraphy in between. Whether conspicuous or inconspicuous, they play a role in giving the painting an internal balance.

As mentioned before, Chou had used colour sparingly since she shifted from her eclectic style of painting. While she started to use vermilion more frequently and generously in some of her impact structural stroke and sweeping stroke paintings, she only began to use more colour in her whirling stroke paintings. However, as we have seen in the above works, she mostly applied colour to her cosmic whirls: "Mineral pigments such as malachite and azurite are very expensive. I used more than half a dozen different colours for this painting [*Coda*] and they were all last bits of colour I had left in my various jars." Although Chou seemed to say economy was one of the reasons why she had been using colour so sparingly, she in fact reserved colour for emphasising certain features. As we have seen, she highlighted her spheres by colouring them in her almost black and white line paintings and piled ink paintings. She gave the whirls special attention in her paintings by rendering them with colour because, like the sphere, the cosmic whirl was an important spiritual symbol for her. While the whirl is generally found in the upper third section of her paintings, representing the spiritual world, it can also—as in the third painting in *The Creation Trilogy*—appear at the bottom section of the painting, representing the physical world.

Movement

Chou literally reached a new height in her depiction of movement in her whirling stroke paintings. As we have seen, Chou started depicting movement in her painting right from the beginning, but movement depicted in her landscape paintings, line paintings and piled ink paintings is gentle, subtle and implicit. In *The Tree*, movement can only be felt by the impending growth of the leafless branches. In *Composition IV*, the upward movement of the egg-like organism is so subtle that it is conveyed only by the gentle pulsating of the horizontal lines. In *My Inner World I*, movement of the larger sphere towards the smaller sphere is only implied by the gentle floating of the protoplasmic substances from the big sphere towards the small sphere. However, in Chou's impact structural stroke paintings, not only is perpetual movement depicted by the fur-like ink marks created by the impact structural stroke, but the energy emitted from such perpetual motion whips the lines in *Movement I* into a whirl of cosmic magnitude. In *Perpetual Movement*, the back and forth sweeping brush strokes and the colourful cosmic whirl above generate movement of the magnitude of a violent cosmic storm. In Chou's whirling stroke paintings, one not only sees perpetual, linear and circular movement but also contracting and expanding movement when energy is drawn towards and radiates from the vortex. A Chinese art critic described her whirling stroke paintings as "overbearing like the roaring waves in the ocean" (Qian, 1991: 70).

The depiction of such monumental and violent movement in her paintings caused art critic Xie Yong Nien to describe Chou's work in the late 1980s as having moved away "from being simple, pure, and exquisite" (Xie, 2001). Zhu Qi, another art critic, even described them as having departed from the "amazing artistic conception—stillness and aliveness—that she had in her earlier paintings, leading her works towards being impulsive and impetuous"

(Zhu, 2005: 214). However, such comments cannot be applied to work such as *Early Spring*, as it exudes stillness and exquisiteness no less than her earlier work. Nor can such comments apply to a set of work painted by Chou between 1989 and 1990. In one of these works, *The Story of Time and Space* (Figure 6.12), it was as if a huge Chinese character, written with clear stroke order, has been written on to the centre of the painting in calligraphy. Indeed, this work fits Zhu's description of Chou's earlier work—"stillness and aliveness"—perfectly. In other words, it is not so much that Chou's work had moved away from calmness and stillness, but that she had added turbulence and perpetual motion to it. "As you know in traditional Chinese landscape, the concept of calm and peace in nature is well portrayed whereas movements and changes are not well depicted," Chou told me, "Yet perpetual motion and never ending changes are the essence of nature and the universe." (Butcher, 2003: 13).

Harmony

In her study of *Yiching* and Chinese philosophy—especially Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*—Chou came to embrace the philosophical belief that whether in nature or with mankind all changes and transformations are the manifestation of the dynamic interplay between the polar opposites of *yin* and *yang*. In her philosophical belief, accepting opposites and paradoxes, and keeping a balance between them, was the first step towards tolerance, harmony and peace. "From Taoism to Buddhism, she has found thinking consistent to the challenging path of the artist," a journalist wrote. "Irene firmly believes modern people are losing their sensitivity about the natural world and the need to harmonize with it. The balance needed in Yin and Yang—whether it be female or male, night and day or north and south—are [sic.] also goals for art. 'True art is a product of such a balance' says Irene" (Mealyer, 1986).

"From her point of total harmony with the world her works express what she calls 'small concerns'—personal feelings of no great importance," Hugh Moss wrote. "She does

not see herself as having a profound message for mankind. It is not her style.” (Moss, 1983: 184). Chou’s “small concerns” were clearly expressed in *Carelessness* (Figure 6.13), a work she painted in the mid-1980s during the period when she painted her impact structural stroke and sweeping stroke paintings. In this work, she employed one sweeping stroke from top to bottom, forming something like a great waterfall. At the very top of the waterfall, four spheres sit precariously. Using colour and spacing as devices, Chou conveys the idea that the spheres were moving towards the edge of the waterfall. One sphere is in a very dangerous position and poised to fall off the edge of the waterfall at any time, but there remains the chance for it to retreat to safety if it chooses to do so. “Harmony should prevail in the universe, among the stars, countries, societies, families and among people,” Chou wrote, “so as to maintain an overall equilibrium which, once carelessly upset, will breed disastrous results similar to those seen in this picture.” (Chou, 1986: 102)

Indeed, Chou’s belief in modern man’s need to harmonise with nature became a major theme in her whirling stroke paintings. As we have seen, the appearance of the cosmic whirls in her work happened at the same time as the appearance of the horizontal lines in them. “Abstract as they are, Chou often included a line in her compositions,” Tina Pang wrote. “These act as a horizon line, allowing the viewer to situate themselves in her fathom-less scapes.” (Pang, 2006a: 10) However, as we have seen, instead of one there are generally two horizontal lines in Chou’s work. The reason that there appeared to Pang to be only one was that they are not always equally visible and distinctive. In *Coda*, there is no question that there are two horizontal lines, but in *Whirlwind* neither of the two lines is very distinctive. Whether they are both distinctive or only one is distinctive, they nevertheless divide the painting into three sections—although not always equal parts. As we can see in *The Creation Trilogy*, the lines in the first painting have divided the paintings into three unequal parts, with the top section occupying two-thirds of the painting. However, in the third painting the lines

have shifted to divide the painting into nearly three equal parts. Heaven, man and earth, different though they are, have become a harmonious whole.

Balancing a life

After her successful exhibition at the Fung Ping Shan Museum, Chou's career as an artist continued to reach new heights. Less than a year after her retrospective exhibition, she was given a show of her work at Museum Luis de Camoes in Macau. The exhibition, *A Libertação Da Tinta*, showed forty-six of her paintings, including a set of small works painted in 1987. In 1987, the Artists' Guild was established with membership by invitation only. It was one of the first cultural organisations supported by the Hong Kong commercial sector. Chou, being older than most of her contemporaries, was among the first to be "honored in the guild's first-ever awards program which recognizes professional endeavor and commitment to local arts" (Metcalf, 1988) when she won the Artist of the Year Award in 1988 at the age of sixty-four. Winning the award was an acknowledgement of her achievement by her peers. Meanwhile, some of the younger generation Shanghainese, such as Johnson Chang (Chang Tsong-zung) and Alice King, had become prominent gallery owners and dealers in contemporary art. While expatriates like Susan Munro continued to be her agents, Chou had a show in 1987 with Alisan Art, a commercial gallery operated by Alice King in partnership with an expatriate, Sandra Walters. Likewise, while Petra Hinterthür showed Chou's work in a group exhibition, *Modern Art in Hong Kong*, in Hamburg in 1988, Chou also began showing her work with Johnson Chang at his Harnart Galleries. In 1988, Johnson Chang organised an exhibition, *Icon of the Imagination*, for four senior Hong Kong artists, one of whom was Chou. In the same year, he showed their work in Italy, and towards the end of the year, he organised a solo exhibition for Chou in New York. In 1991, Cameron—who had been staging exhibitions of works by contemporary artists at the

Rotunda, in the Exchange Square Building in Hong Kong—organised an exhibition, *Recent Paintings of Irene Chou and Hon Chi-Fun*. At this exhibition, a curator from the Queensland Art Gallery saw Chou's work, which was subsequently chosen to represent Hong Kong in the First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art held at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1993. By the early 1990s, Chou's work was fetching "higher prices and sold better than most contemporary artists [in Hong Kong]" (Ma, 1990: 38). In her 1991 exhibition at the Rotunda, one of Chou's works commanded US\$20,000. Chou's work was now often included in exhibitions that were solely for female artists, such as *Women in Art, Works of Hong Kong Woman Artists* and *Art Works of Ten Female Artists*. Chou was also one of the artists in the *Six Contemporary Chinese Women Artists* exhibition, held in San Francisco in 1991 and curated by art historian Lucy Lim. Previously being a woman, old and Shanghainese had made it more difficult for her to advance her career as an artist. Now all three were contributing to her success.

Although Chou became increasingly successful financially, she continued "to live an austere life similar to that advocated by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi who demanded a return to simplicity" (Lau, 1986: 10). "I start meditating as soon as I get up in the morning followed by doing *taichi*. Then I start my day of painting," Chou told a reporter in 1987. "In the process of creation I express myself freely." The reporter added that "after a day's work, before it was time to go to bed, Chou also had moments of loneliness and feelings of the uncertainty of the future. Yet these very same thoughts and feelings are also part of what is being painted in her work." (Shan, 1987) "In my mind, exotic food and expensive jewellery are not what make me happy," Chou told a reporter who interviewed her at her home in 1989. "When I am hungry just a bowl of plain rice is delicious." In the same interview, Chou told the reporter her definition of happiness. "What I am after is a simple and non-materialistic life and happiness is its by-product ... I believe the less one demands from other people, whatever it is, one

reduces the chance of being unhappy. No unhappiness equals happiness.” (Hong, 1989)

Chou, who was “dressed in a black outfit with a pair of colourful cotton quilted boots on her feet and her hair in two, not too long and not too short, thick plaits” when the reporter interviewed her, was a far cry from the way she looked in the days when she lived the life as the wife of a famous movie director. Her lack of concern for appearances and material possessions was noted by another journalist who visited her at her home. “Expensive high-tech equipment simply does not exist,” the journalist wrote, “nor are the furnishings in a perfectly matched set.” Indeed, the journalist thought Chou’s “dark, disorderly” flat was “in need of a face-lift” (Chan, 1990: 38).

While insisting on living a simple, non-materialistic and secluded life, Chou did not live an isolated one. One reporter wrote: “During the time I was interviewing her at her flat, our conversation was interrupted several times because visitors came by to bring her some delicacies to share.” (Kai, 1990) Although Chou cut off all unnecessary socialisation after her husband died, she never stopped dealing with people. Indeed, since she had first become a professional artist in 1968, Chou had always been her own business manager. It had always been a part of her life as an artist to manage all the people who promoted her work, staged exhibitions for her and sold her works. Her work had never been represented by one particular gallery or sold by one sole agent. Instead, she had many people selling her works for her, from a professional like Susan Munro, to a relative and the young man who mounted her paintings for her. Chou even dealt with one collector directly because she found him truly interested and appreciative of her work. Chou was also friends with many of her fellow artists, travelling regularly overseas with some of them.

Chou also kept in touch with relatives and family members. Although she neither married Tang nor Sha, she maintained her friendships with both of them. “They [Tang and

Chou] looked out for each other in their daily lives,” Chou’s biographers wrote. “They could talk about just about everything to each other.” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 123) Chou and Sha kept up their friendship by speaking to each other regularly on the phone. Sha also visited Chou in Hong Kong in 1991. Meanwhile, Chou also kept in touch with her adult children who were living overseas.

Qigong

As we saw in the Chapter 4, Chou developed a keen interest in *qigong* after she first learned it from Tang in the mid-1960s. She started practising it for its health benefits. “Luyun works hard at practising *qigong* and *taichi*,” Yang wrote in his Yearbook in 1977, “in her attempt to lower her blood pressure.” As well as the health benefits, *qigong* practice also helped Chou to attain a peaceful state of mind. “In meditation one is trying to achieve the state of mind that one is not thinking about anything, the one thousand and one things that concern us such as fame, wealth, security, illness, death, people and so on,” Chou told me. “It requires concentration and strength to achieve this state of mind.”

By the early 1980s, *qigong* practice had become an integral part of Chou’s life. “*Qigong* is important to me because it affects my concentration, which in turns affects my painting,” she told me. “It also makes me relaxed and happy, which increases my enthusiasm for my work.” As we have seen, Chou often made references to her *qigong* practice in her work in the 1980s. “To feel the *qi* circulating in one’s body is a wonderful way to relax,” Chou told a reporter. “When one demands nothing and is not under any external pressure one is naturally in a state of happiness and peacefulness.” (Hong, 1989)

In 1988, Chou met Xu Yifan, a *qigong* master who had come from Beijing to Hong Kong. She had heard from her friends that Xu could cure many ailments by giving his *qi* to the sufferer. Chou, who had suffered backaches for many years, decided to receive treatment

from Xu even though it was outrageously expensive. After she received *qi* from Xu, Chou's backache miraculously disappeared. "Zhou's [Chou] interest in *qigong* was immeasurably deepened," Maudsley wrote, "and she felt that this experience also allowed her *qigong* practice to reach a higher, more penetrating level." (*Collector's Choice: The Cosmic Vision of Zhou Luyun*, 1995: 100).

What Chou experienced when she received *qi* from Master Xu was the instant attainment of an altered state of mind. "*Qigong* practice requires one to have great power of concentration, and at the same time be absolutely relaxed," Chou told me. "Such a paradoxical state of mind, relaxed and focused, takes a lifetime of practice to achieve. "When Master Xu gave me *qi*, he told me to relax the small muscles between my eyes," Chou told me. "When I achieved it my body felt very light, so light that I almost could not feel its existence. It was a marvellous feeling."

After her experience with Master Xu, Chou became even more motivated to work towards attaining the altered state of mind in her own *qigong* practice. "Through meditation," a reporter wrote, "she has been able to experience the infinite space outside the normal boundaries of time and space which could be called the fifth dimension." (Kai, 1990) What Chou experienced in *qigong* resembled the non-intellectual reality some people experience by other means. Under the influence of trans-cranial magnetic stimulation, some have described this experience as the ability to "see the raw data of the world as it is, as it is actually represented in the unconscious mind of all of us" (Osborne, 2003). Similarly, Huxley claimed that mescaline gave him the ability to "perceive everything that is happening everywhere in the universe" (Huxley, 2011: 9).

The universe is my heart

From the time Chou first began her art education, she had embraced the philosophies of Mencius and Lu Jiuyuan. Both philosophers believed all human beings were born with a conscience that knew humanity, righteousness, propriety and wisdom. Lu Jiuyuan also believed one's natural conscience or pure heart was inevitably buried under the upbringing one received, the knowledge one obtained and the desire for material comfort and possessions. So the meaning of life and the purpose of life for each individual is to recover one's original mind or original heart. While the journey to recover one's original mind and heart is metaphysical in nature, it cannot be accomplished without practical and observable deeds. The first step towards returning to one's original heart was to live the simple and non-materialistic life advocated by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi and the Buddhists so that one could attain the quiet and peaceful state of mind that allowed one to "sharpen one's observation of the outer world and of one's inner world" (Chou 1973: 166). However, living a simple and non-materialistic life did not mean a non-active life. Zhuang Zi seemed to transcend the mundane world but was also very much in the midst of it. Likewise, Lu Jiuyuan advocated that the best way to give the nobler part of one's nature the chance to reveal itself was to engage in an active life with a firm purpose. Like other neo-Confucians, Lu believed sincerity was the key quality to possess if one wanted to recover one's original heart, because sincerity is not just a state of mind but an active force that is always transforming things and drawing humans and nature together.

What most attracted Chou to Lu Jiuyuan's philosophy was that he believed not only that humankind was born with innate goodness but also that a person's mind at birth—their "original mind" or "original heart", or in modern terms, "soul", "true self" or "innermost self"—was at one with the universe. Hence his famous dictum, "The universe is my heart.

My heart is the universe.” His belief was based on the fact that the *benti* heart—the original heart, the original mind or the conscience—shared all the characteristics of the universe itself. Both transcend time and space and have no form and shape, but both do exist. Both came into existence by the same principle of *yin* and *yang*. Since Lu equated the original heart with the universe, the greatest reward one would reap by recovering one’s original heart was to discover the mysteries of the universe and to experience the state of human and nature at one with each other.

The two-stage painting procedure

After Chou shifted from sweeping stroke to whirling stroke paintings, her two-stage procedure became a regular feature of her painting. “Her typical approach is to make a few bold brush strokes on the paper,” Chang Tsong-zung wrote, “then develop the frayed edges and stains of the mark into abstract swirling forms, nerve ends and floating spheres.” (Chang, 1988: 286) The employment of a two-stage painting procedure was a turning point in Chou’s artistic development. “If I had continued to paint the paintings with just a few sweeping strokes,” Chou told me, “I would have painted myself into a dead end. It was all right for Lui Shou-kwan to do his *zen* paintings because he died soon afterwards.”

When Chou began her two-stage painting procedure, her goal was to achieve the balance between her spontaneous first stage and the more deliberate second stage. “Starting from the earth-shaking brush mark,” Chang wrote, “she builds her world, laboriously and painstakingly, brick upon brick, until an entire vision is complete” (Chang, 1989). One of the techniques Chou employed to achieve balance between the two stages of painting was to consult the painting during the painting process. “Facing a picture, looking closely at it, thinking thoroughly, I had the feeling that I was having a dialogue with the picture,” Chou wrote, “which, if in a good mood, would respond to my ideas or would slowly guide my

inspiration.” (Chou, 1986: 28) In other words, having a dialogue with the painting was a way to get in touch with her subconscious and let it take over. “In the past, Irene painted what she wanted to paint—she was the only decision-maker for her work,” one journalist wrote. “But when Irene paints today, her brush is involved in part of the decision-making process.” (Ma, 1990: 40).

Between 1990 and 1991, Chou painted three very different paintings that all employed the two-stage painting procedure: *Spring II*, *Time and Space* and *Vortex*. *Spring II* (Figure 6.14) is divided into three sections, like many of her works painted after her 1986 retrospective exhibition, representing heaven, man and earth. The middle section, which generally represents man, depicts a woman’s reproductive organs. The generous use of vermillion highlights the allusion to the uterus. The upper section of the painting is almost a mirror image of the middle section of the work. “An evident concern of Irene Chou is the ingenuity of reproductive power ... The procreative force of complementary opposites is the theme she has explored extensively and adopted as a working method,” Johnson Chang wrote. “One finds her attention absorbed by brush marks, which grow organically out of her dreamy explorations into a tangible universe.” (Chang, 1988: 289) Chou gave many of her works the title “Spring”. In all of them, as in this one, the leafless branches—her symbol for life and growth—are present in both the upper and middle sections of the painting. In this work, Chou is alluding to the oneness of growth and life of the universe and the individual.

Time and Space (Figure 6.15) was a very different work from Chou’s previous paintings because it was not only painted on Japanese hemp paper, a medium she had only experimented with by painting a few small works but also on a size of paper—152 x 210 cm—that was much larger than her previous works. Chou painted this work in a hurry so that it could be included in her 1991 exhibition at the Hong Kong Exchange Square.

“Although it was a joint exhibition of my work and that of Hon Chi-Fun, Nigel Cameron made it clear to me that the exhibition was going to show off my work more than his work,” Chou told me in 2003. “So I was under a lot of pressure. I felt I needed to do something different.”

In *Time and Space*, as the title suggests, Chou explored the concept of time and space. “We know that the ‘fourth dimension’ is time,” Chou wrote, “and time is not unilateral [linear], it flows forward into the future but it may also flow backward into the past.” (Chou, 1989) By not clearly indicating of the coming and going of the ink marks in the impact structural stroke, by making the stroke order of the sweeping strokes ambiguous and by not making clear whether the whirls are expanding or contracting, Chou attempted to produce an image that depicted movements in all imaginable directions, like time flowing forwards into the future and backwards into the past. Meanwhile, the two- and three-dimensional whirls, the sweeping strokes which have turned calligraphic-like, and the dark and light ink marks of the impact structural stroke all help to carve out many layers of space. In *Time and Space*, Chou had developed yet another technique to increase the layers in the image. With the help of a ruler, Chou painted a dozen or so vertical lines on the left-hand side of the painting, creating a see-through screen. “Chou is studying and contemplating the profundity of *Yiching*, Buddhism and Taoism, pursuing the connection between people’s souls and exploring a person’s sixth, seventh, and eighth sense,” one reporter wrote. “That is why the themes of her recent works are time and space.” (“Dimensions in Zhou Luyun’s Paintings”, 1989)

However well it represented this theme, *Time and Space* had an unfinished look. Chou’s lack of experience of painting on such a large format, her unfamiliarity with the medium and her haste to complete the work are apparent. “Faced with so much surface space

I honestly did not know where or how to start this painting,” Chou told me in 2003. “In a situation like this one really had no choice but to be brave. So that was what I did. I just dived into the paper with my brush and ink and down with the sweeping broad strokes.” As brave as she was, the resulting sweeping broad strokes and the impact structural stroke painted in the first stage are weak for a work of this size. More importantly, the detail in this work is far from adequate. In fact, there is a blank space at the lower left-hand corner of the painting, left there for no apparent purpose. Thus the work not only had an unfinished look but there was also an imbalance between the first and second stage of painting.

In *Vortex* (Figure 6.16), the division of the painting into three parts has returned. Nearly two-thirds of the top section of the painting is occupied by a powerful whirl. So much light comes from the vortex that it would be blinding if not for the fact that part of the vortex is obstructed by the ink-blob-splash where a sphere is imbedded. The middle part of the painting, with Chou’s sphere and vermillion seals, is eerie and unsettling. The bottom section of the painting, which is only a narrow strip, is calm and peaceful. As in *Time and Space*, Chou attempted to create extra depth in the image. “I had given the painting to Mr Tsing to mount it. He wanted to know if the malachite line was an accident. I told him it was part of the painting.” In *Vortex*, instead of painting the malachite line freehand or by using a ruler, Chou created a new technique: “For some unknown reason I had painted part of this painting vertically rather than the usual way of placing the paper flat on the table. I had allowed the paint to drip and hence the malachite line” (Butcher, 2003: 11). *Vortex* is one of the paintings most befitting Johnson Chang’s description of Chou’s work: “Her painting are her private tantras, giving shape to the darker, and possibly sinister, aspects of spiritual art. They are powerful and disturbing. At their best they are also cathartic.” (Chang, 1988: 289)

Infinity landscape

When Chou's impact structural stroke painting first appeared in the early 1980s, art collector and critic Hugh Moss wrote that Nigel Cameron had "coined the apt title 'infinity landscape'" to describe her latest work, but argued that the term "might be suitably extended to much of her work over the past decade" (Moss, 1983: 186). Moss was wrong to assume that it was Cameron who coined the term "infinity landscape". In fact, it was Chou herself who called her work the "infinity landscape". "Landscape is my favourite subject matter," Chou wrote in Chinese in 1975. "For me it is not enough just to paint the outward appearance of the landscape ... What I want to paint is 'landscape without end'." (Chou, 1975) The term "landscape without end" was later translated by Sarah Larkins as "infinity landscape": "She [Larkins] even looked it up in the dictionary to make sure it was an appropriate translation," Chou told me. Moss, however, was correct to argue that the term "infinity landscape" should include Chou's works in the early 1970s. But the term should apply to her work even further back to the time when she first developed her visual language to tell her own story. "I have only painted one subject-matter," Chou told me in 2005, "and that is infinity landscape."

In 1987, a reporter asked Chou why her work was called "infinity landscape" when there appeared to be no landscape in her painting. "I paint the landscape in my heart and in my mind," Chou replied, "all my millions of thoughts." (Zhong, c.1987). What Chou did not explain to the reporter was that her "infinity landscape" was her documentation of her journey to recover her original heart. "In Lu Jiuyuan's days he would not have the knowledge to distinguish between the heart and the mind," Chou said to me, "nor would he have the modern knowledge about the soul, the inner self, the subconscious and all the knowledge Freud and Jung gave us about our inner being." At times, Chou even referred to the inner self as the fifth dimension, as one's mind can transcend time and space. In other words, when

Chou painted her “millions of thoughts”, they included her thoughts in her subconscious as well as her conscious mind. One reporter back in 1973 seemed to have understood what Chou’s subject-matter was about. “Irene painted herself onto her rice paper,” she wrote, “building up an image of the inner Irene Chou, and indirectly of all humanity.” (Passmore, 1973)

Although there appeared to be no landscape in her “infinity landscape”, Chou’s painting after her retrospective exhibition in 1986 had come to be increasingly described by others as the portrayal of the universe. Wong Wucius, one of Chou’s fellow Hong Kong artists, described her work in the late 1980s as having “unveiled a realm of cosmic fantasy with bursts of heavenly bodies and nebulae” (Kao, 1988: 217). “Cosmic storms whirl in the boundless heavens, dark and unknown. Stars glow and wane, galaxies shift,” Johnson Chang wrote in the catalogue for Chou’s 1989 exhibition. “There is no witness to the birth of planets, no elegies written for their disappearance. The vast beyond is nameless.” (Chang, 1989) Art historian Lucy Lim described her work in the late 1980s and early 1990s as conveying “a sense of immense power and movement; they are explosive, turbulent images of cosmic forces in flux, of transformations and metamorphosis” (Lim, 1991: 24).

While others saw the images produced by Chou as increasingly portraying the universe, Chou herself felt she was still a long way from attaining her goal of painting the “infinity landscape”. She told one reporter that “she has not succeeded in depicting the fifth dimension satisfactorily yet in her painting” (Kai, 1990). She said to another that painting her inner self was a lifelong goal. “She does not think she is anywhere near her goal yet,” the journalist wrote. “She said it might not be until the time she is close to death would she know if she had been successful in portraying her inner self.” (He, 1989)

While many writers observed that Chou's work was becoming increasingly cosmic, only a few noticed that the sexual content in her work had not diminished. As we have seen, in works such as *Genesis*, *Conception* and *Spring II*, the depiction of procreation is clear. "Sexual symbols—the uterus, the ovaries and cell-like objects suggestive of sperms and nerves—are found in every painting," Johnson Chang wrote (1988: 289). "Lu Shoukun's abstraction in his philosophical painting inspired Irene Zhou to examine the dynamic energy of the single cell and regenerative life forces," Christina Chu wrote (Chu, 1988: 27). While it might not be true that it was Lu who inspired Chou to examine the dynamic energy of the single cell and regenerative life forces, it is certainly true that for "Irene Chou, the microscopic fantasy of cells and the cosmic imagination of stars are two sides of the same coin" (Chang, 1989). "Sex is just like *yin* and *yang* so it is very easy to depict in painting because of the contrast," Chou told me. "So I thought why should I not paint about sex. After all sex is as much a part of the universe." (Butcher, 2003: 18)

The universe in chaos

In the late 1980s, the looming return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 made the future of the colony uncertain. Many people who feared there would be less freedom, including artistic freedom, after the takeover made plans to leave Hong Kong. In Chou's case, the most important reason why she wanted to immigrate to Australia was to be closer to her son and his family. The nurse's prediction that she would be in wheelchair one day was always on her mind. Chou thought she should move while she was still able to work and live independently. "I had planned to buy a house at The Gap and a small car when I moved to Brisbane to live."

However, just as Chou received her visa to immigrate to Australia, she decided to stay in Hong Kong for a little longer. According to Catherine Maudsley, meeting Master Xu was one of the reasons that delayed Chou's immigration to Australia. "The death of a colleague

affected her [Chou] deeply,” Maudsley wrote. “That and effects of *qigong* [meeting of Master Xu] acted as catalysts for Zhou [Chou] to establish a three-year framework to intensify painting activity before leaving Hong Kong.” (Maudsley, 1995: 100)

On the Friday before Christmas 1991, Chou suffered a massive stroke in her right hemisphere, resulting in paralysis of the left side of her body. “1991 was a very busy year for me. I had an exhibition in Germany and at the Exchange Square in Hong Kong with Hon Chi-Fun and an all female artist exhibition at the Hong Kong City Hall,” Chou told me. “I was asked to be an adjudicator for the biennial festival and an art critic for City Hall.” That year, Chou also painted over one hundred works (Pun and Lu, 2001: 130). “I fell into a deep sleep on the floor of my kitchen. When I awoke, it was already morning,” Chou wrote in 2006. “The left side of my body was ... paralysed. It was almost as if it was no longer a part of me.” (*Universe of the Mind: Zhou Luyun* (Chou, 2006: 18) According to Chou, she practised *qigong* and prayed and slept until she finally had the strength to call for help:

I managed to crawl. Focusing my efforts, bit by bit, miraculously, I was able to reach the telephone. I called a friend to get me an ambulance to St Theresa’s Hospital, where my friend’s son was working. (Chou, 2006: 18)

As Chou lay in the hospital bed after her stroke, she was not sure whether she would paint again.

Conclusion

Many writers have attributed the shifts in Chou’s work in the 1980s to the death of her husband. Some attributed the changing style in her painting to her “emerging from the gloom ... of the seventies” (Cameron, 1986), while others thought her new styles of painting were the result of her not being depressed anymore (Zhang, 2011). “1981 was a turning point for

her ... as her life became happier and more relaxed,” Catherine Maudsley wrote, “so did her paintings.” (Maudsley, 1995: 6) Lucy Lim attributed the shift in Chou’s work to “her new independence and freedom” in her life after her husband’s death (Lim, 1991: 24).

Like the writers who attributed Chou’s dark paintings to her unhappy state of mind in the 1970s, these writers assumed there was a one-to-one relationship between her emotion and what was expressed in her painting—that is, when she was unhappy her paintings were dark and when she was happier her paintings became lighter and more colourful. However, as we have seen, Chou had already been releasing her uncontrollable emotion through her impact structural stroke since the early 1970s. By the time the fur-like ink marks created by her impact structural stroke appeared in her paintings in the 1980s, it had become a painting technique that allowed her to make trans-time/space inquiries in her painting. While executing her impact structural stroke might still serve to release her emotion, it was probably no longer releasing the same emotion. Similarly, Chou’s dark psychologically charged explosive ink-blob-splash appeared in her work in the 1980s when she was supposedly happy and relaxed.

There is absolutely no question that Chou’s need to release her emotion was the driving force behind the development of a visual language that could tell the story of a modern Chinese woman. In 1984, when her impact structural stroke painting first emerged, a reporter wrote that: “Chou, through painting, expressed all her feelings of joy, sadness, anger, and happiness.” (Wong, 1984) “I just try to find my real self and express that,” Chou told a reporter in 1985. “If I’m gloomy it comes out that way. If I’m feeling good, then it’s more peaceful and calm.” (Plant, 1985) “My paintings are nothing but my feelings about life, how I feel to live,” Chou wrote in 1987. “There are many happy rhythms but also many sad

melodies. There are many knots and unanswered questions whirling in my inner universe.”

(Chou, 1987: 8)

Indeed, Chou had a lot of unresolved emotion that continued to pain her long after the people and the events that caused her the pain had disappeared from her life. Evidence that the old wounds were still raw is found in the way Chou frequently mentioned them in her interviews with reporters. In her catalogue essay for her 1986 retrospective exhibition, Chou described her mother as “a forerunner of the emancipation of women”, and explained that her mother’s decision to give her eldest daughter her husband’s surname and her second daughter her own surname was “to uphold the principle of ‘sexual equality’” (Chou, 1986: 21).

However, elsewhere Chou spoke about the unhappiness her mother had inflicted upon the family: “My mother’s decision to have two children bearing different names was too awkward for us,” Chou told a Melbourne journalist in 1985. “Her concept of the women’s liberation movement was not mature.” (Murdoch, 1985)

In another interview, Chou spoke frankly about how her parents’ difficult marriage had affected her. “Chou’s childhood and early adulthood were both spent during wartime. She did not suffer too much because of the war or because of the lack of material comforts during the war,” one reporter wrote, “but what made her suffer the greatest pain was the conflict between her parents and her alienation from her sister because their mother gave them different surnames.” (Ping, 1990) After so many years, Chou still blamed her mother for the unhappy home situation. She told a reporter in 1990 that it was difficult for a man like her father, who had grown up in a male-dominated society, to accept having his second daughter take his wife’s surname. She felt it was natural that he should protest by ignoring his wife and his second daughter, and give all his love to his elder daughter (Li, 1990). Another old wound that appeared to refuse to heal was that inflicted upon her by her husband:

“Painting [unlike my husband] does not hurt my feelings. If I don’t like what I have painted I just paint another one.” (Hong, 1989)

While Chou’s emotional responses to her life were a driving force behind her art, emotion alone cannot explain why she continuously shifted from one style of painting to another. We have seen that Chou’s visual language served a greater purpose than simply releasing her emotion. While the rhythm of her lines gave expression to the fluctuation of her feelings towards life, it also gave expression to the mystery of the universe. Likewise, while her piled ink paintings were her “most satisfying mode of expression [for her emotions]”, they also served as her vehicle for “discovering the self [the universe]” (Chou, 1986: 26–7). In this chapter, we have seen that the changing styles of Chou’s painting continued to be driven not only by her need to release her emotion but also by her urge to document her metaphysical journey to recover her inner self.

To be a free woman and to live life according to her own ideal were important to Chou’s journey towards the goal of her spiritual aspiration. She obtained the opportunity to be a free woman not simply because of her husband’s death but also as a result of her response to her new life circumstance as a widow, choosing deliberately not to rely on her son and not to remarry. It also took a great deal of willpower to live an austere life similar to that advocated by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi. “Zhou [Chou] is ever mindful of the pull of the material world,” Catherine Maudsley wrote. “The use of opposing colours, red and green [in one of Chou’s work painted in 1990] ... reinforces the message of conflict.” (Maudsley, 1990: 112) As we have seen, Chou stopped painting her *zen*-like sweeping stroke paintings to resist the temptation of painting just for the sake for making more money. Even Chou admitted it was not easy to live a non-materialistic life. “I ... like to try to live like the

primitive man or an innocent little animal, to live as simply and as purely,” Chou wrote. “To be pure and simple of heart requires perseverance and great courage.”(Chou, 1989)

What gave Chou the courage to live life according to her philosophical ideal was her unwavering belief that her effort to recover her original heart would be rewarded by discovering the mystery of the universe. One journalist wrote: “She [Chou] truly believes the sincerity in one’s heart is so powerful that it can move the powers on high.” (Huang Jingyi, 1984) One important factor that helped Chou to maintain such faith in her pursuit of her metaphysical journey to recover her original heart was her continuous progress in her *qigong* practice. As we know, Chou had practised *qigong* since the mid-1960s. By the early 1980s, she was increasingly able to experience her inner self merging with an infinitely larger entity in meditation. Such trans-space and trans-time experience obtained in her *qigong* practice allowed her to experience her philosophical aspiration physically.

Another important factor that contributed to the continuous shifting of Chou’s painting was the nature of her visual language. As Chou’s painting shifted from one style to another, it became clear that the changes were developmental. Consequently, we see the continuous presence of branches, lines and piled ink in her paintings in the 1980s, even though she was no longer painting landscape, line and piled ink paintings. In the early 1990s, her work could no longer be labelled as belonging to a particular style of painting. We see that all her visual vocabulary—branches, lines, piled ink, fur-like ink marks, narrow ink sweeps and brush whirls—was now present in her paintings. In other words, as her painting shifted from one style to another, it became richer, more complex and more capable of depicting the changes in her inner self. When Chou wrote in 1986 that she often had a dialogue with her painting during the painting process, what she meant was that she often consulted her inner self as she painted. She believed that as long as she was true to her inner

self, and painted the true landscape of her inner self, she would have the right images in her paintings. The increasing complexity and sophistication of her visual language was vital in depicting her subject-matter—the infinity landscape—as Chou came closer and closer to attaining her spiritual aspiration.

Chapter 7: The artist (1992–2007)

After surviving her stroke, Chou moved to Australia to live in early 1992. She had just started painting on large hemp paper before her stroke, and resumed painting on this medium in early 1993. For the next six years, she painted almost exclusively on hemp paper. Then, as she entered the seventh decade of her life, just when it looked as if hemp paper would be her medium for the rest of her painting days, Chou shifted to painting on silk. During the period she painted on silk, she came to paint on board and satin as well, and produced a substantial amount of work on these three media. As Chou continued to experiment with new media, Zhu Qi warned that Chou was pushing her “creativity into a dangerous zone” (Zhu, 2005: 21). Despite Zhu’s warning, in 2005 Chou started painting on canvas, a totally foreign medium for ink painting. At her last solo exhibition in Brisbane, Chou’s large works on canvas dominated the show. For nearly two decades, as she lived the life of an immigrant, and as her physical world became smaller and smaller and she became increasingly dependent on others to do things for her, Chou painted some of her largest and most experimental works. As the images became freer and freer, Chou’s work became the embodiment of what Chinese painters have believed since literati painting first emerged as a genre more than a thousand years ago: that *huarugiren*, the painting, is like the artist.

The artist

After her stroke, Chou faced the uncertainty of whether she would be able to live independently, whether she would paint again and whether she would be able to continue her career as an artist. “When I saw the other stroke patients, like me, receiving therapy in the hospital gym,” Chou told me, “I thought what pitiful and helpless creatures we so called humans were.” She participated in daily physiotherapy as well as receiving *qi* from Master

Xu. "I no longer resigned myself to fate," Chou wrote in 2006 about her stay in the hospital after her stroke. "I became a good and proactive patient." (Chou, 2006: 18) In early February, six weeks after her stroke, Chou was well enough to travel from her hospital bed in Hong Kong to Australia. Her son, who is a doctor, brought her from Hong Kong to live with him and his family in Arana Hills, a suburb north-west of the city of Brisbane.

According to Chou, life was sheer misery during the period when she lived with her son and daughter-in-law. "At mealtimes, I often spilled food," Chou told me. "I was constantly worried about being a nuisance to my son and his family." To avoid unpleasantness, she retreated into her own room and stayed there most of the time. "I lay on my bed and looked at the ceiling, wishing I was dead. I thought of strangling myself in the built-in closet with mirror sliding doors. What a shock it would be for my son and my daughter-in-law to slide open the doors to find me there!" According to Chou, her once close relationship with her son had changed over the years. "He remembered me as his father's glamorous wife. He couldn't believe that I no longer wanted to live a luxurious life."

Chou was even more distressed by the uncertainty of whether she would be able to paint again. "Nigel Cameron brought me some crayons and paper while I was in the hospital," she told me. "He did not think I would paint again." Because the stroke had been in the right hemisphere of her brain, her right arm and hand had not been affected. This meant that Chou, who was right-handed, was able to paint with a brush immediately after her stroke. Having a stroke in the right hemisphere also meant that she suffered the consequences of brain damage less because the right hemisphere, where specific processes are distributed over larger regions of brain tissue, can withstand greater damage without producing obvious impairments.

However, even though Chou sustained minimal brain damage from her stroke, it was clear that her visual language was completely disrupted. Almost as soon as she arrived in

Brisbane, Chou, using ink, colour, brushes and paper she had left behind during her previous visits to the city, painted *Chaos* (Figure 7.1), a set of small, 30x17cm works on *xuan* paper. Aside from the spirals and her personal seals, none of the elements in her visual language is present in these works. These paintings mainly employ colour washes and the little brush work that is present, such as the spirals and Chou's signature written in calligraphy, is clumsy and shaky. While Chou had been known for putting realistic images such as birds, fish, flowers and houses in her abstract work, she had never employed geometric shapes, except for the circle, in her painting. However, in *Chaos* not only are rectangles, diamonds, ovals and zigzag shapes employed, but in one work even Chou's spiral has taken on a rectangular shape, resembling the Chinese character *hui* – meaning returning to the starting point. In another work, she used cross-hatching—something she had not painted in her work before and never did again. Colour was also used in a bizarre way with red, green, purple, yellow and orange all clashing with each other.

Chou was depressed not only by the fear that she might not be able to paint the way she did before her stroke, but also because she felt she was receiving very little support from her son to paint again. She told me and others that her son did not think much of her as an artist. “When he saw that I had written ‘artist’ as my occupation in my passport, he sneered. He told me he could buy a painting much better than mine in the supermarket in Brisbane for \$45.” In 1985, a Melbourne journalist wrote what Chou had told him about her son. “Her son, a doctor practising in Brisbane, once laughed when she told him how much her paintings sold for. He could not believe people would pay so much for her work.” (Murdoch, 1985) “Her son does not really understand his mother,” her biographers wrote. “He does not appreciate her paintings either.” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 107–8)

Many years later, Chou attributed her strained relationship with her son and daughter-in-law during that period to suffering post-stroke depression. “At his [her son's] home there

are a lot of medical books,” she wrote in 2006. “I learned from his *Medical Journal* that stroke patients can suffer from mental disorders during the first six months following a stroke and can be difficult to live with.” (Chou, 2006: 18) It is not clear whether it was at the suggestion of her son or her own request that she saw a psychiatrist. “I saw Dr John Bell in Brisbane. He told me there was nothing wrong with me. He told me I needed to paint again. He said he could even recommend an agent for me in Brisbane.”

Chou painted a set of works on *ming* paper not long after she painted the disastrous *Chaos*. *Ming* paper is small (21x19cm), rough *xuan* paper, which most commonly has been painted on with a square of gold or silver in the middle as gold and silver represent money. In China, the *ming* paper is folded into *xibo*, something that resembles gold nuggets, and burnt as money for the dead to spend in *yinjian*, the nether world, while they are waiting to be reincarnated. *Ming* paper is not meant for calligraphy or painting, but it is still *xuan* paper. “I found *xibo* lying around in my son’s house because my daughter-in-law had kept up with the Chinese tradition of burning *xibo* as an offering to the dead.” *Rejoicing I* and *Rejoicing II* (Figure 7.2) are two of a set of works Chou painted on *ming* paper. “I could not paint large works at the time, so I painted many small works including these.” Unlike the colour in *Chaos*, the colour in these works is strong and explosive. “I borrowed the poster paint from my granddaughter and used it in these works.” Although none of Chou’s old vocabulary was present in *Rejoicing I* and *Rejoicing II*, she managed the dry and wet sweeping strokes because of the miniature size of the paper. And although Chou’s signature spheres were absent, she created circles and balls that resembled these spheres.

In May 1992, just three months after moving to Brisbane, Chou shifted out of her son’s home, even though she was not ready to live on her own. “At that time I still had difficulty moving about, never mind cooking or doing the housework,” Chou wrote in 2006. “So I closed the door of my new home (so that nobody could see me), behind which I moved

around on my hands and knees like an animal to do the cooking and cleaning.” (Chou, 2006: 18) When she moved into the two-storey townhouse to live on her own, the physiotherapist who had been treating her was worried. “She thought it was too soon for me to live on my own. I was the one who had to reassure her that I could cope on my own.” Before Chou moved to live on her own, she ordered a table measuring 240cm by 137cm which had a laminex top and metal legs. The table was so large that it fitted across nearly the whole width of her rectangular living room/studio. By moving out of her son’s place at a time when others thought she was not ready to do so, Chou challenged herself to live independently again. By ordering a large work table before she moved into her townhouse, she showed that she was determined to paint the way she did before her stroke.

Chou was also determined to maintain her standing as a professional artist. Thus, almost as soon as she finished the set of miniature works on *xibo*, she sent the paintings to Susan Munro in Hong Kong so that Munro could show them in a contemporary Chinese art show in London in June 1992 because she could not afford to have her career as an artist disrupted. “These works were small studies of familiar themes of spheres and rhythmic black ink strokes,” an art critic wrote. “But the addition of vibrant colour is a successful new element in her [Chou’s] paintings.” (Fenwick, 1992: 43) Chou also knew that if she wanted to continue her career as a professional artist, she could not afford to lose the opportunity to show her work in the 1993 Inaugural Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. As mentioned in the last chapter, Anne Kirker, a curator from the Queensland Art Gallery, had seen Chou’s work at her 1991 exhibition at the Exchange Square. By the time the Queensland Art Gallery accepted Kirker’s recommendation to select Chou as one of the two artists to represent Hong Kong in the Triennial, she had moved to live in Brisbane. Chou knew that unless she could start painting large works like those she painted before her stroke, her career was in jeopardy.

It is not clear when Chou presented Kirker with *The Universe is within our Hearts I* (Figure 7.3) and *The Universe is within our Hearts II* (Figure 7.4), two large works on *xuan* paper. According to the inscriptions, these two works were painted in Brisbane in May 1992. However, if she was in the physical condition she claimed she was in at the time, she could not have painted these works then. To execute the powerful calligraphic-like stroke in these two works, she would have needed to be able to stand rather than sit at the table. She would also have needed her left hand and arm to help her to handle the large sheets of paper. *Xuan* paper tears easily when it is wet, and needs to be handled delicately.

What I think happened was that Chou painted the first stage of these works before her stroke and the second stage after her stroke. As we saw in the last chapter, since the mid-1980s Chou had adopted a two-stage painting procedure of painting the large brush work first, including the impact structural stroke, before putting in the details into a work. In fact, I believe the large brush strokes in *The Universe is within our Hearts I* and *The Universe is within our Hearts II* were executed at the same time as the large brush strokes in *The Story of Time and Space* (see Chapter 7), which she painted before her stroke. In all three works, the central stroke resembles a large Chinese character written in calligraphy. While Chou finished painting *The Story of Time and Space* before her stroke, she completed *The Universe is within our Hearts I* and *The Universe is within our Hearts II* after she moved to Brisbane. Thus she painted the powerful calligraphic stroke before her stroke but added colour, the seals, the inscriptions and details after she moved into her townhouse. Therefore she was able to finish these works soon after she moved into her townhouse. By capitalising on her two-stage painting process, Chou succeeded in keeping her career alive while she struggled to live independently and to paint again.

I have titled this chapter “the artist” because in order to understand why Chou shifted from medium to medium and became so experimental in her post-stroke period, one needs to

see her as an artist in the truest sense of the word. After her stroke, she faced the same challenge of whether to continue to be an artist as she did after her husband died. According to her son, when Chou was still in the hospital, she asked him whether he and his family would move back to Hong Kong to live. Although she never mentioned this to me herself, she did tell me that it would have been so much easier after her stroke if she had just resigned herself to being a grandmother and having her son and his family look after her. Tang also urged her to return to Hong Kong so that he could look after her. Instead, she challenged herself to live independently when the odds were against her. To forego the care given to her by her son and daughter-in-law, and to live on her own when there was every possibility that things might not work out for her, took tremendous courage. “I think I am quite brave,” Chou admitted to Hilary Binks in 1998. “I live by myself, after the stroke in Australia, to have my freedom. I don’t have talent or genius, but I am brave. Brave is not bad. I need to be brave to be sincere in my paintings. Sincerity needs courage.” (Binks, 1998: 38)

A new beginning

“Before my stroke, I was only an ordinary Irene Chou,” Chou wrote in 2003. “But now, I am the one who has undergone the stroke.” (Chou, 2003) Chou began her new life after her stroke with one goal in mind. “I am going to delay for as long as possible my confinement to the wheelchair,” she told me. As unlucky as Chou was to have suffered a stroke, she was lucky enough not only to survive the stroke but also to recover from it completely. The fact that Chou was in a resting position for many hours before receiving help might have minimised the brain damage she received. Not only had her mind and creativity not been affected by her stroke. but she also regained full use of the left side of her body. But suffering a stroke seemed to hasten the atrophy of her cerebellum. In 1993, when I first met Chou, she was able to walk unaided inside her home and was even able to take a short walk alone in the

park behind her backyard. “My legs are actually very strong,” she told me, “but I need to concentrate when I walk. I also need to walk quickly. It is like riding a bike. Speed gives one the balance.” On one occasion, she urgently needed to send something to Munro in Hong Kong. “As you know it is quite a slope going down the road from my townhouse to the shopping centre where the post office is but there is a row of trees along that road,” she told me afterwards. “It was difficult for me to walk down the slope and keep my balance. So I ran from one tree to another, stopping at each tree to regain my balance before I ran to the next tree.” Her need to concentrate while she stood and walked meant that she took her rubbish bin out each week to be picked up by the rubbish truck only when she was sure no one else in her townhouse complex was taking their bin out at the same time. “If I stopped to talk to other people or other people stopped to talk to me I would not be able to concentrate on my walking. My neighbours think I am a little strange.”

Suffering atrophy of the cerebellum meant that Chou could not drive, nor could she take public transport or walk in public places without being accompanied by someone. Therefore, it was difficult for her to do simple things such as shopping, going to the post office, going to the bank, visiting a doctor or a dentist, or shopping for painting materials without someone to drive her and accompany her. Indeed, she even had to accept her daughter-in-law’s offer to take her grocery shopping once a week. In her predicament, Chou held on to whatever independence she could muster. “The shopping trolley is marvellous,” Chou told me. “I could hold on to it and walk without having to hold on to my daughter-in-law’s arm.” For Chou to be able to do the smallest thing without someone looking over her shoulder became a great joy. “I love shopping at the supermarket where I can look at things and choose to buy things on my own,” Chou told me. Once she was so excited about having discovered that condensed milk [a favourite for most Hong Kong Chinese] came in a tube now as well as in a can.

What makes the atrophy of the cerebellum so devastating is that it increasingly reduces the mobility of the sufferer. By 1996, a few years after her stroke, Chou's balance had already deteriorated. Around the house, she had to hold on to furniture when she walked. Outside her home, she had to be accompanied by someone so that she could hold on to the person's arm. In 1998, seven years after she survived her stroke, Chou could no longer walk safely by holding on to someone's arm. She had to walk with the aid of a Zimmer frame. Whereas up until 1996 Chou could still take her rubbish bins out and water her small garden with a hose, by 1998 the fear that she would lose her balance and fall prevented her from performing these tasks. In 1998, she received a notice from the body corporate that she was not complying with the by-laws of the body corporate by leaving her rubbish bin outside her garage. "I am a disabled person (my disable card no. [is] 14307," Chou wrote in reply. "I am not able to open or close my garage door, so it is impossible for me to move my Recycling Bin into or out of my garage."

As Chou faced the new challenges in her life, she developed a renewed interest in Buddhism. "She was at a very difficult point in her life after her stroke," a journalist wrote in 1995. "Quite by accident she came to read the *Jin Gang Jing*, the Diamond Sutra, which gave her the means to re-set her internal self." (Ye, 1995) According to Chou, when her children shipped her belongings from Hong Kong to Brisbane, they left behind many of her books but they included a copy of the Diamond Sutra. "The copy came from a vegetarian restaurant in Hong Kong," Chou told me. "I never read it but I had written many telephone numbers on it. My children thought I might need these numbers." After reading the Diamond Sutra, Chou wanted to know more about Buddhism. "Friends brought her books on Buddhism and tape recordings of lectures by Buddhist monks," a journalist wrote. "She would listen to these tapes and study the sutras seriously." (Liang, 1998)

Chou was already familiar with the Buddhist concept of *she*, “letting go”, as she had been putting this concept into practice in her daily life before her stroke. “The Chinese philosophy says the great thing is not to want anything. Lao Zi said no want, no desire, nothing, is the greatest state of mind,” Chou told a Melbourne journalist. “As an artist I feel this is really right.” (Murdoch, 1985). After her stroke, she continued to live the non-materialistic life. While the townhouse, which belonged to her son, was comfortable, Chou furnished it with minimum furniture. Her living room, which was also her studio, dining room and kitchen, had only one settee made out of a single bed with two foam cushions. An exercise bike stood next to the settee. The big white laminex table was both her work table and her dining table, with plastic white stools as its matching chairs. There were no easels. The blank wall opposite the settee was where she hung her paintings to study. On the days she was not painting, her painting materials—such as ink and colour—were placed on a plastic trolley next to her working table. The numerous painting brushes rested in various tins, and containers sat on the kitchen counter as if they were cooking utensils. Indeed, the kitchen sink was where Chou washed her brushes after she used them. When Brisbane art critic Sue Smith met and interviewed Chou at her home, she described her first impression of Chou as having “total artistic dedication” and her place as “more work place than living space” (Smith, 1996). There were no bookshelves or any wall hangings except for a cross and enormous rosary beads, and a small framed piece of calligraphy. A few family photos were stuck on the refrigerator. In her garage, where there was no car, Chou stored her paper, painting materials, catalogues, a few books and some of her earlier works in scrolls. Her most recently finished works were either stacked one on top of another on the carpet in the living room or upstairs in one of the bedrooms. Her works in progress were usually hung like laundry on a line against the blank wall. The three bedrooms upstairs were equally sparsely furnished. There was no TV in the house, but there was a small radio in nearly every room.

As well as living in non-materialistic surroundings, Chou also ate simple food. She ate a breakfast of cereal, fruit and yoghurt. While she often had meat, such as steak, for lunch, she ate mainly vegetables for dinner. She did not feel that she had to have the same kind of food she had in Hong Kong. “I can’t get to Chinatown to do my shopping,” she told Chris Leung, “so I eat *qui lao* [foreign] food every day!” (Liang, 1998). Meditation continued to be an integral part of Chou’s daily life—she practised between two and three hours each day. “The nice thing about living alone is that I can get up in the middle of the night to do meditation if I feel like it,” Chou told me. Most evenings, Chou was in bed reading after seven o’clock.

While letting go of material things had already become a way of life for her, Chou found the Buddhist concept of letting go of the notion of self a great challenge. She felt she was not ready to give up her ego yet. In a conversation I had with her in 1993, I reminded her that Hugh Moss had described her as “a great artist without an ego” (Moss, 1983: 184). “How can an artist be an artist without an ego and without a strong sense of self?” Chou asked me. A few years later, Chou explained to an interviewer why she wanted to continue to be an artist:

There is really no need for me to continue to be a professional artist but just to be an old lady. Of course, there is no need for me to try to be an old lady because I am already one. However, I still want to be an artist. I still have a strong desire to paint. Painting provides me the means to express my outlook on life, my thinking, my ideals and what’s hidden in the deepest part of my heart. It also provides me with the means to chart the progress of the sublimation of my soul. Painting has greatly enriched me and reduced my loneliness and aloneness. (Chou, 1996)

Faced with the dilemma of wanting to let go of everything but at the same time still having the strong desire to be an artist, Chou found the concept of *jingjin*, which literally means “essence of moving forward”, helpful. Although *jingjin* was originally a Buddhist concept, it became a Confucian concept as well. In the Confucian context, *jingjin* means working hard and doing one’s best to achieve one’s material and earthly goals in life. In the Buddhist context, *jingjin* is one of the hierarchic steps towards becoming a Buddha. In other words, *jingjin* entails both the practical attitude of the Confucians and the religious spirit of the Buddhists. Once I accidentally saw Chou’s inscription on the inner cover of a book given to her by one of her Buddhist friends: “See through everything. Let go everything. To let go without holding back is to gain great freedom. As for work, never forget *jingjin*.”

Paintings on hemp paper

Chou was on the verge of shifting her medium from *xuan* paper to hemp paper when she painted *Time and Space* in 1991. Unlike traditional Chinese *xuan* paper, Japanese hand-made hemp paper is thick, tough, textured and can absorb a lot of ink without tearing. The hemp paper that Chou used came in large sheets of 150x214 cm each. As we saw in the last chapter, Chou’s first attempt at painting on the large hemp paper was audacious but not entirely successful. She was painting a very large work on a medium with which she was unfamiliar and when she was in a great hurry. After her stroke, as we have seen, she returned to painting on *xuan* paper. However, beginning in early 1993, Chou took up painting on the large hemp paper again. With the enormous uncertainties she faced in all aspects of her life at the time, it would have been much safer for Chou to continue to paint on a medium she had known all her life. Instead, she had taken a great risk on her career as an artist.

Rather than starting off with the full-size paper, Chou painted 107x150 cm size hemp paper by cutting the full size paper vertically into halves. *Home of Santa Claus* (Figure 7.5),

painted in early 1993, was among the first hemp paper paintings Chou created after her stroke. After applying the initial ink-laden stroke on the left, the explosive impact structural stroke at the top and a massive broad dry and wet stroke on the right, Chou filled the rest of the work with painstaking detail, including her sphere, spiral, parallel lines, vein-like branches, bubbles, splashed ink dots and scattered vermillion seals. In the bottom far left-hand corner, behind her square vermillion seal, Chou inscribed Chinese characters in gold against a dark background. The characters are not all legible, but those that are convey the message that Santa Claus is still alive—hence the title of this painting. Aside from the small amount of violet, yellow and malachite and the vermillion from the seals, *Home of Santa Claus* is almost a black and white painting. It is clear from this work, painted a little over a year after she suffered her stroke, that her visual language had not been damaged. Munro wrote: “The earlier works bear all the hallmarks of technique and imagery that continue to form the basis of Chou’s current works.” (Munro, 1995)

Creation (Figure 7.6) was painted in 1995 after Chou had been painting on hemp paper for a couple of years. In this work, she painted a few dashing ink strokes and the circular ink patch in the first stage of the painting before filling the rest of the work with details in the second stage. A new leitmotif, the large transparent disc, with the effect of a magnifying glass, adds almost “realistic” depth to the surface of the painting. One distinctive feature of the work is that the image in this work seems to be moving from right to left. By painting a white column with vertical lines of inscription on it on the left-hand side of the painting, in contrast to the black column on the far right-hand edge of the painting, by darkening the vermillion sphere on the right hand side of the sphere, and by making the inscription on the right hand corner of the painting almost invisible and the inscription on the left-hand side highly legible, Chou created a progression from darkness to light from right to left. When Anne Kirker, the curator from the Queensland Art Gallery, saw the painting she

immediately named it “Creation”. While viewers who do not read Chinese take the inscription as a leitmotif of the painting, those who do gain an insight into the way Chou’s recent study on Buddhism influenced her thinking. Part of the inscription says: “When art reaches the summit it is very close to religion. Since the sublimation of art is religion Master Hongyi’s leaving art for religion is inevitable.”²

Towards the end of 1995, Chou was ready to paint on the full-size hemp paper. *The Universe Lies Within I* (Figure 7.7) is one of six works on the full-size hemp paper which Chou painted between 1995 and 1998. She painted the first stage of this work along with three other works at the same time. All four paintings were dominated by either the double or the triple ink loops. “A lot of ink is needed for these big calligraphic strokes,” explained Chou. “I have to use up the ink quickly while it is fresh from the bottle. Ink that is starting to dry will look grey and lack vitality.” In this work, Chou rendered not only the triple ink loops but also the thick horizontal ink slab and her impact structural stroke during the first stage of the painting. She then worked laboriously to fill in the detail in the second stage. As she had done in many of her works since her stroke, she added colour to the fur-like patch created by the impact structural stroke. The horizontal lines that appeared in Chou’s pre-stroke works reappeared in this work. A new leitmotif, a bulb with dendrites, also made its first appearance in this work.

A significant feature of *The Universe Lies Within I* is the appearance of the coloured discs near the top edge of the paintings. The disc would eventually replace Chou’s signature sphere, although in this work one dark sphere is still present. “It is as if before her stroke she was defining spiritual wholeness by creating images of solidness,” a journalist wrote. “[N]ow she has realized that a flattened sphere, spread to infinite thinness, can stretch out to touch the

² Chou took these words from *Hsiung Shih Art Monthly*, August 1995, p. 59.

edges of the universe and beyond.” (Finlay, 1998) However, there was a practical reason why Chou began replacing her signature sphere with the coloured disc. Chou told me:

These spheres are time consuming to do. I use the finest Chinese brush one would use for regular script in small characters when I do the dots, putting each dot on one at a time. They are hard on my eyes. As you know, I suffer from double vision and I am also getting cataracts on my eyes.

The sphere is the only three-dimensional object in Chou’s work. As well as being her symbol for her spiritual aspiration, it had also served to provide “depth” in her painting. “Since I am an abstract and surreal painter,” she said in 2003, “there is no realism one can speak of in my paintings. Therefore perspective in the sense of making the two dimensional surface look three dimensional is not my concern.” (Chou, 2003: 14) Ironically, the extra layer created by the flat discs, seemingly floating across the surface of the painting, actually added “depth” to the work.

In the midst of painting on the full-size hemp paper, Chou also started a set of 75x214 cm narrow rectangular works on hemp paper by cutting the full size paper into halves horizontally. In *The Universe Lies Within II* (Figure 7.8), Chou’s powerful sweeping stroke sweeps from left to right, ending with two loops and taking up the whole width of the painting. She filled in just enough detail to create a perfect balance between the majestic ink stroke and the delicate lines, branches, bubbles with eyes and surrealistic houses. In nearly all of her work on hemp paper, the ink-laden and extensive sweeping ink stroke, which often ends with a double or triple loop, seems to be executed in a single spontaneous stroke—even though one knows that no matter how large the brush, it is inconceivable that it can be loaded with so much ink. “It is all a trick,” Chou told me when I asked her about her techniques. The

fact that the liquid-absorbing hemp paper allows retouching while the ink is still wet was one of the “tricks” employed by Chou.

In *The Universe Lies Within III* (Figure 7.9), Chou’s powerful brush strokes, rendered during the first stage of the two-stage painting procedure, almost merge with the three gigantic circles that she painted during the second stage. The circle on the left is covered in Chou’s impact structural stroke with a central vortex, the middle circle is filled with light created by the energy emitted by Chou’s ink-blob-splash, and the third circle on the right is a colourful radiating swirl. A row of red, green and yellow discs balance precariously on a thin line. Every detail she put in during the second stage of her two-stage painting procedure—the overlapping of the first two circles, the scattered dots around the vortex of the first and second circles, the faint branches—contributes to the “depth” portrayed in this work. With the use of new material, she developed new techniques in her painting. In her hemp paper painting, Chou increasingly was using tools other than the brush to paint. The coloured dots in this work were no longer painted by brush. “I use Q-Tips to paint my dots,” Chou told me. “I dip the head of the Q-Tip in whatever colour I use at the time.” The coloured radiating whirl, the leitmotif that first appeared in Chou’s whirling paintings before her stroke, reappeared in this work. Instead of painting the short coloured strokes stroke by stroke using a brush, she now employed the edge of a name card. “I dip the edge of the card into the colour I am using,” Chou explained, “and then print the lines one by one that way.”

The amount of detail in *The Universe Lies Within IV* (Figure 7.10) is overwhelming, but the thick ink slab that sweeps across the entire width of the painting and the black ink strip along the bottom of the painting absorb the details into an integrated whole. Chou’s engagement with Buddhism is revealed in her collage and inscription in this work. In the groove between the thick ink slab and the narrow sweeping stroke, Chou cut out from some printed matter the two characters *Jin*, gold, and *Gang*, indomitable—part of the Chinese name

for the Diamond Sutra—and collaged them on to the painting. Not surprisingly, the words she inscribed on the bottom of the painting also came from the Diamond Sutra. Much of the inscription was not legible except for the words *meng huan pao yin, ru lu ru dian*. After 1998, these words—which say that all phenomena are as transient as dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, dewdrops and lightening—were inscribed frequently on Chou’s work.

As well as making greater use of inscriptions, Chou, capitalising on the toughness of the hemp, started also to use collage more frequently in her painting. Whereas Chou had earlier collaged *xuan* paper of the same vintage on to *xuan* paper, she started to collage aged *xuan* paper on to her hemp paper painting. In one work, Chou collaged a strip of calligraphy, written more than thirty years earlier in the finest miniature Chinese characters, on to her painting. Training to write in miniature Chinese characters was a hobby for many literati. “When I saw my husband writing in these miniature Chinese characters I decided to have a go at it too,” she said. In another work, she collaged part of a page torn off from a book printed in the Song dynasty by woodblock. In still another, Chou collaged a dried maple leaf on to the painting. As we saw in *The Universe Lies Within IV*, she had also collaged printed matter on to her paintings.

Since Chou had first begun to employ her two-stage painting procedure in the mid-1980s, it had been her goal to achieve balance between the spontaneous first stage and the more deliberate second stage. However, achieving balance in large works such as those painted by Chou after her stroke required not only the powerful ink-laden sweeping strokes in the first stage but also a much bigger visual vocabulary in the second stage. As we have seen, Chou was able to achieve such a balance in her large work by taking advantage of the nature of her new medium. Making the most of the toughness of the hemp paper, Chou developed the powerful ink-laden brush strokes; some strokes even stretched the whole width of the painting—almost 1.5 metres. With her ever-growing visual vocabulary, the continuous

emergence of new painting techniques and the increased use of colour, Chou was able to fill in the kind of detail required to balance off the overpowering ink brush strokes.

Chou also took advantage of the toughness of the hemp paper to have an extended dialogue with her painting. The back and forth conversation between her and her painting meant taking the painting off the table, hanging it on the wall to study, and putting it back on the table to work on it again. In the case of *xuan* paper, Chou risked destroying the painting with too many rounds of conversation because *xuan* paper tears easily when it is wet. In the case of hemp paper, however, she could have many rounds of such conversation without fear of ruining the work. The fact that Chou had taken to riding the exercise bike prolonged the dialogue she had with her painting. “I ride my exercise bike,” Chou told me, “while I am having a conversation with my painting on the wall.” As mentioned in the last chapter, having a dialogue with her painting was an important part of her two-stage painting process because it helped her to get in touch with her subconscious. According to Chou, it was such closeness to her subconsciousness that helped her work to become more multi-dimensional, multi-faceted and multi-layered, enabling her to achieve the “depth” she wanted to portray in her work. “While I am not concerned with perspective, I am concerned with portraying depth in my painting,” Chou told me. “However, it is not educated depth. It is symbolic depth, the different layers of life and living, the kind of depth from one’s heart and mind.” (Butcher, 2003: 14).

Many writers seemed to agree that Chou’s post-stroke works on hemp paper had come much closer to depicting her inner self and mind. “Irene Chou has set herself the difficult task of seeking to express the inner workings of the mind and its relationship to the complex universe in which we live,” Susan Dewar wrote. “Her ‘paintings of the mind’ are ... explorations of the world and her own subconscious.” (Dewar, 1993). Valerie Doran described looking at Chou’s post-stroke work as “viewing the mysteries enacted beneath our

own skins, the movement of cells and blood, of nerves and fluids, of generation and degeneration: or equally, of being confronted with a telescope view of the apocalyptic transfigurations taking place in the firmament just over our heads” (Doran, 1995). Yang Wen-I, commenting on Chou’s work painted in the 1990s, wrote how the Song dynasty painters’ “unique compositional scheme that reflects the relationship between men and nature” reappeared “subtly and delicately” in her work (Yang, 1995). Xue Yongnian described Chou’s work painted after her stroke as having “entered the realm of unity of men and nature” (Xue, 1998). Although Nigel Cameron had already described Chou’s work in 1991 as displaying “full creative maturity”, he seemed to be saying that she had come closer to achieving her spiritual goal when he named her exhibition in 1998 *The Universe Lies Within*.

In 1999, Chou gave *Time and Space* a makeover and renamed it *A Passage of Time* (Figure 7.11). Although the painting was shown in San Francisco, London, Taiwan and Hong Kong, it was never sold. She compensated for the weakness in the core strokes by adding her labour-intensive lines in gold as well as increasing the detail in the work substantially. Chou’s years of experience of painting on hemp paper helped the work to achieve the richness and balance it had lacked. Comparing *Time and Space* with *A Passage of Time*, one appreciates even more the risk Chou took when she decided to shift from painting on her familiar *xuan* paper to hemp paper after her stroke.

Forging a career in Australia

When Chou first started out as a Hong Kong artist living and working in Australia, her future was bleak. “When I arrived in Brisbane in 1992 only one couple owned a piece of my work,” Chou told me. “They bought one of my works in 1985 when Raya Gallery in Melbourne exhibited my work. Raya Gallery had since closed down.” When her two works were shown

in the 1993 First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, the *Courier-Mail* ran a story about Chou with the caption “Hong Kong ‘find’ in Brisbane”, but it aroused very little interest among local gallery owners. Dr Bell, the psychiatrist, had introduced Lance Blundell, the director of Savode Art Gallery, to Chou. While Blundell liked Chou’s work very much, he did not think there was a market for it in Brisbane.

In the last chapter, we saw how Chou had not relied solely on exhibitions, shows and auctions to sell her work, nor did she have one gallery or one single agent representing her. Chou was in fact her own agent and business manager. “My paintings are not easy to sell,” Chou told me, “because they are not the kind of paintings that people buy to decorate their walls.” To make up for the difficulty of selling her work, Chou had a large number and variety of people promoting and selling her paintings. “Anyone can promote and sell my paintings,” Chou told me. “Even Mr Tseng [who mounted her work for her in Hong Kong] sells my paintings for me.” The challenge Chou faced in Brisbane was to create from scratch a similar group of people to promote and to sell her work. More importantly, she needed people to help her to break into the art world of mainstream Australia.

Chou began meeting people and cultivating friends almost as soon as she moved to live on her own. She had met several of her son and daughter-in-law’s Chinese friends during her previous visits to Brisbane. Among them was a former lawyer from Taiwan. Chou spotted her talent soon after they met. She was not only heavily involved in the local Chinese community, she made it her business to know lots of people. Indeed, as early as 1992 she had already introduced Chou to the editor of the *Brisbane Chinese Community News*, who interviewed her. Chou took the opportunity to make herself known. “My near-death experience last year has given me a new understanding of life,” Chou told the editor. “I am

determined to live my remaining years well, to seek even deeper understanding of the world, and to give my very best to my painting.” (Yang, 1992)

Chou had arrived in Brisbane at a time when the Chinese community was undergoing major changes. The Chinese population in Brisbane had increased from 8065 at the 1986 Census to around 18,000 in 1993 (Butcher, 1995: 18). The most recent Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia were generally well educated and wealthy because many of them had come to Australia as a result of the government’s Business Migration Scheme. Among the Chinese immigrants from the People’s Republic of China, the educational level was also very high. Many of them who came in the 1980s as visiting scholars, or postgraduate or English-language students, stayed on in Australia after the Beijing Massacre in 1989. Significantly, there were now writers, poets, artists, musicians and dancers among the new Chinese immigrants. With multiculturalism replacing the White Australia policy, migrants were encouraged to maintain their own culture and language. In 1992 the Chinese Writers’ Association was formed by a small group of Chinese who were interested in writing and getting published in Chinese. Meanwhile, local Chinese newspapers and magazines, with proprietors from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China, started to appear in Brisbane. The emerging local Chinese newspapers and the Chinese Writers’ Association’s own publication, the *Chinese Community Monthly*, gave members many opportunities to publish their writings.

Indeed, one of the groups of people through which Chou started to build up a network of friends was the Chinese Writers’ Association, of which the former lawyer was one of the founding members. When Chou’s works were to be shown at the First Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at Queensland Art Gallery in September 1993, the former lawyer, with the encouragement of Chou, phoned each member individually to invite them to come to the gallery to meet her and to see her work. Although the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* had run a story

about her work and the Queensland Gallery had advertised her talk, Chou took no chances that there would be an audience for her talk. Although none of the members of the Chinese Writers' Association had heard of Chou or her work before, nearly twenty of them came to meet her and to see her work as well as attending her talk about her life and work at the gallery a fortnight later. As it turned out, if it had not been for the group of Chinese friends who came to support her, Chou would not have had an audience for her talk. Aside from Anne Kirker and a couple of gallery staff, there were no other people attending the talk.

Although Chou was not officially a member of the Chinese Writers' Association, she took an active interest in everything that was going on in it. When one member gave a talk on recent trends in Chinese literature in the People's Republic of China, she sent another member who lived near her to record the talk so that she could listen to it at home. When a young artist whom Chou had met in Brisbane was returning home, she hosted a lunch to farewell him, inviting all members of the Chinese Writers' Association who were interested to come. In 1994, when the association launched its own monthly publication, the *Chinese Community Monthly*, Chou became its great supporter. Since it was a free publication, it relied on advertisements for its survival. Chou volunteered to be a paid subscriber, committing herself to a ten-year subscription. In 1995, when one member of the association, on behalf of the Chinese Fraternity Association which was funding to build a retirement home for Chinese people, approached Chou to donate one of her works, she readily agreed. Chou also paid people well for little things they did for her. "When she asks me to buy some Chinese vegetables or some little things for her she gives me a fifty dollar note," one member who often ran errands for Chou told me. "When I give her back the change she tells me to keep it to save her from having nightmares. She hates owing anyone any favours." Many members were surprised that Chou liked talking to one member's wife who obviously had very little in common with Chou. "I like talking to her because she is a great source of

information about other people,” Chou told me. “Since I can’t come and go as I please and do not attend many social activities, listening to her gossip is my way of knowing what is going on in the Chinese community.”

Ironically, the fact that Chou lived alone helped her to meet people very quickly. In the eyes of many Chinese people, there was nothing worse than to live alone in one’s old age. Such a belief assumed elderly people liked being looked after and waited on whether they needed it or not, and that all elderly people were lonely and liked company. Before I met Chou in early 1993, I was given her telephone number and was urged to give her a call by a Chinese person who held just such a belief and assumption. Soon Chou had a large array of Chinese friends who came to help her on a regular basis at her home, such as a couple from Shanghai who helped her with her garden, a Chinese shopkeeper who claimed to be a *qigong* master, who visited her to give her *qi*, and a young herbal doctor from China who gave her acupuncture treatment. The young herbal doctor, who was an excellent cook, often stayed to make Chou a Chinese meal after she had had her acupuncture session. A couple of years later, when the herbal doctor wanted to go to medical school, Chou offered to give him \$50,000 if he got into medical school.

In 1995, Chou read in the *Chinese Community Monthly* that I was collecting linguistic data on bilingual people over the age of sixty-five. Chou volunteered to be a subject. I was surprised that Chou, a busy artist, was willing to be a subject as the linguistic testing required a total of five hours of the subject’s time. The subject was first tested in Cantonese by me. In another session, the subject was tested in English by the project’s chief researcher, a native speaker of English. When I arrived at Chou’s townhouse, her long, white laminex work table was cleared, leaving plenty of room for my testing equipment. Without wasting time, she was ready to begin the test. Unlike other subjects, she needed no breaks or small talk to keep her going. She answered and performed the tasks as if her life depended on it. As I was leaving,

Chou said in the Shanghai dialect, “I eat paintings.” She had used a rather archaic expression to say that she made a living as an artist. When I saw that she had given the chief researcher several of her catalogues, I realised that while Chou was totally sincere and earnest as a subject in our study, she was also hoping to meet people who might become interested in promoting or selling her work.

Not long after Chou volunteered as a subject, she asked whether I could show the images of her work to Lucienne Fontannaz, who was staging an exhibition of writings and paintings by writers and painters from a non-English background, *Lingo: Getting the Picture*. Instead of sending the images directly to me, Chou asked a friend to give the images of her work to me to show to Fontannaz. She also enclosed the price list of her work put out by Gerald Godfrey and Charlotte Horstmann. Thus her friend, Fontannaz and I all learned how expensive her works were: “Most people are impressed by how much my work commands.” The day Fontannaz and I arrived at Chou’s townhouse to see her work, Chou had more than twenty of her hemp paper paintings stacked one on top of another in a pile on her floor in the living room. On her white work table, Chou had cleared one end to display her catalogues. Over the next few months, Fontannaz visited Chou several times and selected three of Chou’s hemp paper paintings to be included in her show.

At the opening of *Lingo: Getting the Picture* at the Brisbane City Hall Gallery, many people came to support Chou, who—despite knowing only a handful of people when she first moved to Brisbane—now had a large group of friends. It was not only friends she had made through the Chinese Writers’ Association who come to support her at her opening, but also other friends. It appeared that at the same time she was cultivating friendships among the members of the Chinese Writers’ Association she had also made many other friends, including the proprietor of a Chinese newspaper, a bank manager who worked at Hongkong

Bank, an aged-care worker from Malaysia and a Cantonese-speaking Chinese Catholic priest from New Guinea. Chou met Father Chan soon after she arrived in Brisbane. He would drive her to attend mass at the Chinese Catholic Community Centre on the other side of the city every Saturday. As well as Chinese friends, there were also non-Chinese friends who came to support Chou. Since she had moved into her townhouse, she had made friends with those who came to her home on a regular basis, such as the milkman, the community workers who ran errands for her and David McCarthy, a professional photographer who visited Chou on a regular basis to take photographs of her latest work. Chou never treated these people as service providers but as friends. She invited them to look at her work and comment on her work. "The milkman sits here at the settee to look at my unfinished work on the wall," Chou told me. "He tells me what he thinks I need to add."

To have her work appreciated by Fontannaz was fortuitous for Chou because Fontannaz soon introduced her work to Philip Bacon of Philip Bacon Galleries. When Bacon met Chou for the first time in June 1995, he was impressed by the hemp paper paintings she had produced since 1993. When Bacon asked her how much she was selling her work for, she told him she wanted \$12,000 each. When Bacon told her that \$12,000 was a lot of money, Chou explained: "I am old. I don't eat very much. But I still want my paintings known." Bacon told her that his clients were conservative, warning her that her work might not appeal to them. Even so Bacon decided to take her on as artist. In February 1996, Bacon showed twelve of Chou's large works on hemp paper in *Ancient Traditions, New Images: The works of Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Irene Chou*. The people who came to support Chou at the opening of her show at the Philip Bacon Galleries filled up the whole gallery floor. Several of Chou's Hong Kong friends who happened to be in Brisbane at the time also attended the opening. In November 1996, Bacon organised Chou's work to be shown at the Queensland Performing Art Complex to coincide with two concerts conducted by Muhai Tang. When the

Mater Hospitals' Trust had their Annual Fundraising Dinner at the Queensland Irish Club in 1997 Chou was approached, with Bacon's recommendation, to donate one of her works for auction.

In 1997, five years after she moved to Brisbane, Chou had succeeded in breaking into the art world of mainstream Australia. Sue Smith, a Brisbane art critic, was generally critical of the paintings shown in *Lingo* but singled out Chou's works as among the more "attractive" images in the show. For Chou's 1996 show with Bacon, there were stories about her work by John Hay in the *Sunday Mail Magazine* and by George Petelin in *The Australian*. For the exhibition of her work at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, there was a story by Sue Smith in the *Courier-Mail* as well as a report in the *Brisbane News*. She was also interviewed on the ABC radio's *Asian Women Artists* program. In an article titled "Chinese Art Revitalized", Sue Smith again mentioned the strength of Chou's work displayed at the Queensland Performing Arts Complex.

However, despite the number of people who attended the opening of her show at the Philip Bacon Galleries, the amount of publicity she received and the effort Bacon put into promoting her work by displaying her work at the Queensland Performing Arts Complex, Chou's work did not sell. The only work that was sold was to an international buyer who was none other than Chou's friend Lucy Lim, the art historian. In December 1996, three medium-sized works painted by Chou on *xuan* paper were shown at the Annandale Galleries in Sydney. Susan Munro had introduced Chou's work to the Annandale Galleries, but they were returned to the Philip Bacon Galleries because they were not sold. In 1996, when I took Chou to see the display of her work at the Queensland Performing Art Complex, she told me that such exposure of her work did little to help sales. "Showing my work this way," Chou said to me "is the same as putting my work under my bed."

Chou decided that it was time she took the selling of her work into her own hands. For a while, the Chinese Writers' Association had contemplated sponsoring an art exhibition as several artists, such as Huang Miaozi and Yu Feng—two cultural icons from China—had now become members of the association. However, Chou refused to participate in the exhibition. "They are celebrities in Brisbane," Chou explained to me. "People would buy their work just because they are famous." Instead, through her friendship with the bank manager, Chou learned that there was a space available at the Hongkong Bank Building in the CBD, which was large enough to hold an exhibition. Chou showed a total of forty-four works—eight large works on hemp paper, one large work on *xuan* paper, fourteen works on medium-sized *xuan* paper, and nineteen small works on *xuan* paper—in a solo exhibition in April 1997 at the Hongkong Bank Building.

The Hongkong Bank Building exhibition was a success, as all of the medium-sized works as well as several of the large works were sold. One reason why Chou's exhibition at the Hongkong Bank Building was successful was that Chou was actively involved in the staging of the exhibition. Even though she was in the midst of painting on large hemp paper, she painted a set of medium-sized works on *xuan* paper for the exhibition. "Even if people have the money," Chou said to me, "they don't necessarily have the space to hang one of my large works." Whereas her works at Bacon's show were all framed by Graham Reynolds, her works at the Hongkong Bank Building exhibition were framed in inexpensive and simple frames by her friend Mr Huang to help to keep their price down. Chou also asked Bacon whether she could borrow some of the large hemp paper paintings from his show to show them at the Hongkong Bank Building exhibition, just in case there should be a collector among the buyers. The fact that Chou had now become a well-known figure in the Chinese community also contributed to the success of her exhibition, as all buyers of her work at the show were Chinese.

At the same time Chou succeeded in carving out a career as an artist working and living in Brisbane, she had also managed to maintain her career as a Hong Kong artist living overseas. In 1994 Susan Munro arranged to have more than twenty of Chou's work on hemp paper exhibited at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum. In 1995, her long-time collector in Hong Kong showed her work in *The Cosmic Vision of Zhou Luyun*, an exhibition that showed thirty works painted by Chou, covering the period from 1981 to 1993. In 1997, the Hong Kong Museum of Art purchased a recent work by Chou. In September 1998 Nigel Cameron staged an exhibition at the Rotunda at the Hong Kong Exchange Square to show thirty-seven of Chou's latest work on hemp paper in a solo exhibition, *The Universe Lies Within*.

Chou's exhibition at the Hong Kong Exchange Square revealed her enormous skill in maintaining long-term professional relationships with a great many people. She travelled from Brisbane to Hong Kong for the opening of the exhibition. Ho Tao, the architect who designed the Hong Kong Arts Centre, and a friend of Chou's since the 1970s, opened it. More than two hundred people attended the opening, including Lui Kuo-song, Alice King and Michael Lau, all of whom had known Chou for decades. Chou's long-time collector hosted a dinner for Chou after the opening. Despite being absent from Hong Kong for seven years, Chou continued to have as many admirers for her art as she did before.

Maintaining her friendship with nearly everyone who was involved in her career before her stroke meant that these people continued to sell Chou's work after she moved to Brisbane. When she started painting again after her stroke, she was visited by many individuals, including relatives, who came from overseas to see her and to collect her most recent work to sell. During her stay in Hong Kong in 1998, many people who sold her works for her were either present at her opening or came to see her at her hotel. Just as Chou was boarding the plane to return to Brisbane, one woman handed her an envelope of cash. "She just sold one of my works," Chou explained to me.

Meanwhile, in Brisbane, Chou had successfully created a similar group of people who promoted her, staged exhibitions for her work and sold her work for her. Nearly everyone with whom Chou made friends had a role to play in helping her to push her career forward, whether it was writing about her work and life in the Chinese newspapers, introducing her to people in the mainstream art world, framing her work, taking photos of it, staging exhibitions for her or selling her work. Although Chou sold very few paintings through her exhibitions in Brisbane, many came to own an Irene Chou work. In 1995, Chou wrote to me to say she wanted to sell four of her medium-sized paintings to me. "I am sending you the slides of these four paintings," she wrote. "See if you think they are suitable for your wall. If it is okay, can I sell them to you? Each one is \$120. $120 \times 4 = 480$ total". In 1996, when the Chinese Cathay Club wanted to raise money to build a retirement home for Chinese people in Brisbane, the former lawyer from Taiwan approached Chou to donate a painting for auction. A Taiwanese businesswoman bought it for \$5000. Chou donated another painting when the Mater Hospital was fundraising in 1996. The painting was bought by a Taiwanese couple for \$10,000. After the exhibition at the Hongkong Bank Building, one buyer started to visit Chou at her home and bought more works from her. During this period, Chou also kept in touch with several of her collectors in Europe, who continued to show interest in her work.

One obvious reason why Chou was able to build up from scratch a group of people to help her to forge a career in Brisbane so successfully was her enormous talent for cultivating friendship, maintaining relationship and connecting with people. Her talent had long been put into practice. From her experience as a journalist, a writer, a receptionist, the wife of a movie director and a professional artist, Chou had had a lifetime's experience in sizing up people, judging character, and spotting talents and weakness in others. Chou's keen observation of other people's personality and character was a reflection of her own self-awareness. "To be honest with you, I am slightly afraid of myself, the way I manipulate other people," Chou

told me. “Fortunately, I have a good heart.” Chou once sent me the photocopies of several pages taken from the text of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* to encourage me to read the book. It appeared that Chou, in the way she dealt with other people, very much applied Sun Tzu’s most famous strategy: “Know your enemy and know yourself. This way victory is always yours.” “Every minute I am thinking about strategies,” she told me. “That is why I aged so quickly.”

One of the strategies that Chou employed to entice people to help her was that she always made them feel they were the only people she trusted. Many times when friends visited her, after showing them her most recent works, she would show them some of her older works on scrolls. These scrolls were stored in a big cardboard box in her garage. “Now you know where my old works are stored, you know where to look if I should die suddenly,” she said. Chou also liked to declare that someone was like a son or a daughter to her to make the person feel special. Over the years I knew Chou, she changed her will many times. Each time she showed the will to the person whom she had just included in it.

Chou was also very skilful at gaining exposure for her work. We have already seen how she gave her catalogues to the researcher to draw her interest in her work and the sneaky way she enclosed the price list of her work when showing others the images of her work. When she donated a painting for the Chinese Cathay Club to raise money to build a retirement home for Chinese people in Brisbane, instead of giving the painting to the person who approached her about the matter, she first asked a friend to select from several of her works the one to be donated. She then asked me to take the painting to Philip Bacon and to ask him what the painting should be auctioned for. Then the painting was delivered to the president of the Cathay Club rather than the person who first approached her for the donation. By not giving the painting directly to the person who approached her for the donation, Chou exposed her work to a string of people who normally would not have had a close look at it.

Chou's way of doing business seemed underhanded and even dishonest at times but more often than not her way of doing business ended up benefiting all those who were involved. For example, she asked Lucy Lim to buy one of her works at her show with Philip Bacon instead of just giving her the work to sell in the United States. She did it for two reasons. She knew her work was unlikely to sell, and she wanted Bacon to have at least one sale so that he would not be out of pocket for giving her a show. She also instructed Lim to purchase the work the day before the opening as a way to encourage Bacon to work harder to sell her work. As mentioned before, Chou borrowed several large works from the Bacon show to be exhibited at the Hongkong Bank Building exhibition. After the exhibition, Chou sent Bacon a cheque. "She is very generous," Bacon told me. Chou also thanked the bank manager by giving him one of her works painted in 1996 and delivering the painting personally. "I never forget what other people have done for me," Chou said to me.

Chou admitted that her method of managing her career and doing business demanded a lot of scheming. Yet it was by employing her unique method that she was able to maintain her status as a Hong Kong artist and at the same time carve out a career as an artist in Australia. During the first seven years after her stroke, Chou was painting at a frantic pace. "I painted day in and day out like a maniac. It was like being in bumper-to-bumper traffic," she told me in 2003, referring to the way she painted after her stroke. "You can only go forward. It was the only way to cope with the pain I was suffering inside. I had no time for self pity. I just worked and worked." Being prolific was one thing, but being able to sell her work had much to do with her method of conducting business. In 1998, Chou told an arts consultant in Brisbane that "she has sold more than 400 large paintings to international buyers since taking up residence in Australia in 1992" (Young, 1998).

Moving south

On 3 June 1999, Chou—who had lived in her son’s townhouse for seven years—suddenly decided to move to a rented house in Calamvale on the southern outskirts of Brisbane. “I fell while hanging paintings, injuring the base of my spine,” Chou wrote in her 2006 retrospective exhibition catalogue. “My son was concerned about my condition and suggested that I move to a home for the elderly to be taken care of ... If I stayed in a home, how could I even hope to paint? So I decided against my son’s suggestion, choosing instead to continue living an independent life.” (Chou, 2006: 19) As we have seen, Chou had had a difficult relationship with her son. At the heart of the trouble in their relationship was that each wanted something different from the other. “I love my paintings more than I love my children,” Chou told me. “This is something my children cannot accept.” After her death, Chou’s son gave me his perspective. “We wanted her to be our mother,” he said to me, “but she wanted us to see her as an artist.” In view of the nature of Chou’s relationship with her son, it is difficult to speculate about what was actually said between mother and son. It is quite possible that her son never suggested putting her in a nursing home. “My son said he never asked me to go into a nursing home,” Chou herself told me a couple of times. “He said it was all my own imagination.” Even so, she insisted that her son wanted to put her into a home. A doctor who was both a good friend of Chou’s and a friend of her son was horrified when she learned Chou had been telling friends that her son wanted her to go to a nursing home. “He would not have suggested that,” she told me. “He does, however, think she is a bit crazy in the way she thinks.” Whether her son did or did not suggest that she go into a nursing home, Chou succeeded in attaining what she wanted: to continue to live independently for as long as possible.

When Chou moved out of her son's townhouse, she specifically wanted to move southward. There were two reasons. One was that she believed her fortune told to her by Dong Mujie in Hong Kong in the early 1970s. "A friend had an appointment with Mr Dong," Chou told me, "but could not make it on the day. So I went in my friend's place." She showed me her *mingshu*, book of fortune, not long after we met. Mr Dong had written in her *mingshu* that she would face great danger at the age of sixty-seven and moving southward to live would be advantageous to her. Indeed, Chou suffered a stroke at the age of sixty-seven. By moving southward from Hong Kong to Brisbane, Chou felt that despite all the difficulties she had to deal with, life had not been all bad. After all, she had been able to paint again and had re-established her career as a professional artist. Thus she believed moving further southward would continue to be beneficial to her.

Chou's decision to move southward was also based on her forward thinking. Since she first met Father Chan, he had been taking her to attend mass at St Paul de Chartres, a Catholic aged care facility in Logan just south of Calamvale that was run by nuns from Hong Kong. By moving into a house that was not far from St Paul de Chartres, she made it very convenient for Father Chan, who lived near the city, to pick her up weekly to attend mass. There was also an understanding between Father Chan and Chou that when the time came for her to go into a nursing home, she would go to St Paul de Chartres. Chou also wanted to move south because she knew that, as her disability worsened, she would need good carers. Since Chou had first moved to Brisbane she had become friends with a nurse from Malaysia who worked in the aged care facility. The nurse, after working many years to assist clients of Chinese background at the Cathay Club in Chinatown, moved to live on the south side of the city, where there was a larger Chinese population, to start her private business in aged care. By moving south, Chou was able to continue to be one of her friend's clients.

Chou also wanted to be totally independent of her son and his family. By moving to a suburb nearly an hour's drive from her son and his family, she released her daughter-in-law from her duty to take her shopping weekly and her son from his obligation to visit her on a regular basis. More importantly, she also wanted to be financially independent of her son. "I first paid a deposit," Chou wrote in her 2006 catalogue essay, "after which the rent was due on a weekly basis" (Chou, 2006: 19). Indeed, after she moved to live in a rented house, she often told people she needed to paint because she had to pay rent. As mentioned before, her son did not think much of her art. "My son at least knows now," Chou told me after she moved out of her son's townhouse, "that I am a real artist."

Indeed, Chou had plans to continue to be a professional artist for several more years yet. "*Qigong* has helped to give me seven years of life so far," she told me. "I believe it will give me another seven years of life." Chou's faith in *qigong* was further strengthened when she received *qi* from her *qigong* master during her stay in Hong Kong. There was visible improvement in her balance afterwards. While *qigong* was not going to stop the atrophy of her cerebellum, Chou believed it would slow down the rate of atrophy. "I escaped death when I had my stroke. I have lived life a second time around for the past seven years," she told her supporters at a banquet held in her honour in Hong Kong in 1998. "In Russia, they make five-year plans but I make seven-year plans. I hope to come back to Hong Kong again."

After Chou made the decision to move, she did everything without any assistance from her son and his family. "Thanks to my good friends I found a townhouse in southern Brisbane about the same size as my old place," Chou wrote in her 2006 exhibition catalogue. "Moving home is hard work, but again I was fortunate to have the help of friends" (Chou, 2006: 19). Indeed, according to one friend, for a long time Chou's son did not even know where she had moved to. Chou was able to enlist a large group of friends to help her partly because—as we have seen—she had made many friends since she moved to Brisbane, but

also partly because of her success in perpetuating the image of herself as a victim of family disharmony. Nearly all her Chinese friends believed they needed to help her because her son had threatened to put her in a nursing home. Only one friend thought she might have misunderstood her son's intention. "She rang me again to tell me that I should not move," Chou complained about this friend. "I finally lost my temper with her. Her husband rang up afterwards to offer to help me to move." On the day of her move, Chou received help from one of her oldest friends, the young herbal doctor. "He took a day off from work so that he could help me move," Chou told me.

As we shall see, Chou's move southward brought her many opportunities to exhibit her work, both in Brisbane and overseas. "One must create for oneself as many opportunities as possible, because only a few lead to anything," Chou told me. By prolonging her independence, she extended her painting life. Over the next seven years, Chou's work shifted several more times.

Paintings on silk, board, satin and large *xuan* paper

When Chou first began painting on hemp paper in 1993, Susan Munro wrote that critics of Chou's work had wondered about her new medium. "Where can she go from here?" Munro wrote. "The artist's response has been to move forward with increasing strength and conviction." (Munro, 1995: 67) In 1998, just before her best works on hemp paper were to be shown at her Hong Kong exhibition, Chou—instead of continuing to paint on a medium that she had now fully mastered—suddenly shifted to painting on silk. Although Chou had painted *Decameron* on silk, the fabric she used then was very expensive because it was made especially for painting. "I wasted so many pieces of silk. I got so nervous thinking that it was costing me \$10 a foot," Chou told a reporter (Ram, 1976). "The silk I use now is the kind one uses for garments," Chou told me in 2003, "but it is still real silk" (Butcher, 2003: 15). The

fact that it was a much cheaper silk meant that Chou could afford to be more daring in her experimentation.

The two-stage painting procedure Chou employed in her silk painting was different from that used in her work on *xuan* paper and hemp paper. The first stage of painting involved almost no brushwork. By capitalising on the less absorbent and non-tearing nature of her new medium, Chou poured colour and ink directly on to the silk. Whereas ink and colour are quickly absorbed on *xuan* paper and hemp paper, on the less-absorbent silk they have a chance to run into each other before being absorbed into the material. “Where the two different colours meet, they do their own interesting mixing,” Chou told me. Sometimes Chou assisted the mixing by blowing the surface with a hair drier. Areas that she wanted to remain blank were covered most frequently by using lids of various sizes. Sometimes some ink or colour seeped through to the areas covered by a lid, but other times a blank circle was formed. While silk can soak up a lot of ink, colour and water without tearing, it becomes wrinkled when it is wet. Therefore, after the first stage of painting Chou had to send the silk away to be mounted before the second stage of painting, during which she added details—most of which involved using a brush.

In *Life is But a Dream* (Figure 7.12), myriad forms and shapes are created by the random mixing of ink, colour and water. Against such a rich background Chou added details such as her now signature coloured discs and the horizontal lines. Her horizontal line, which Tina Pan, curator of the University Museum and Art Gallery, wrote “allow[s] the viewers to situate themselves in her fathom-less scapes” (Pang, 2006a:10), appears in many places. On the bottom of the painting, a long row of vermilion seals, running the whole width of the painting, create a world of their own. Just above this mysterious work there are two surrealistic looking houses, facing each other like two persons in intense communication. The multifarious images—the seemingly changing patterns of the colour patches, the empty world

where the surrealistic houses reside, the eeriness created by the long row of vermilion seals—that Chou produced in this work give the viewer almost a vertiginous experience.

In *As You Like It* (Figure 7.13), two big round circles, very close to making contact with each other, are the central feature of the work. In the right circle, there appear to be tadpoles or sperm swimming around. In the left circle, a transformation appears to be taking place. In this work, lines and inscriptions—which are absent in many of her work on silk—have returned. Chou painted her signature ink lines in this work in gold. The golden lines and inscriptions, along with the vermilion horizontal strips across the painting, make the work glittering as well as colourful. She named this painting *As You Like It* because one can view this work both right side up and upside down. “Let us hope that from tomorrow we human beings will suddenly let ill feelings of hatred and vengeance be totally wiped out of our consciousness, and turn the world into one happy and harmonious place,” Chou inscribed in gold on the bottom left hand side of the painting. On the other side of the painting, Chou inscribed something that revealed the artist was almost in despair. “On the eve of the new millennium I am vexed and feeling lost,” Chou wrote, “so much bothering me inside that I don’t even know where to begin my woes.” She then lifted herself from her gloomy mood by becoming philosophical. Turning the painting upside down, she inscribed on the bottom of the work a quotation from Xuyun, a monk who lived until the age of 109. “Life is but a dream, all is but an illusion,” she wrote. “Birds leave no footprints behind and why would we, especially those of us who practise Dao?”

Reflection (Figure 7.14), measuring 64x138 cm, is Chou’s first work on board. According to Chou, after she finished the first stage of *Life is But a Dream* and lifted the silk off the table, she found the liquid that had seeped through the silk on to the Laminex table had left a carbon copy of its image on the table. Instead of wiping the ink and colour off the table top with Ajax as she normally did, Chou kept the image. “I will call Mr Huang over to

saw the image off from the table for me”, Chou told me on the phone. After the image was sawed off the table, Chou added her trademark ink lines on the lower right-hand corner of the board, one red disc on the far left side of the painting, one green disc at the bottom of the work and scattered ink dots, resembling cosmic dust, to the upper part of the circle and beyond.

Beginning in March 1999, Chou, as well as continuing to paint on silk, produced many works on round 44 cm boards. In *Round Board Painting I* (Figure 7.15), Chou recreated the procedure employed in producing *Reflection*, except that this time she put the round board underneath the silk. During the second stage of painting, she added details such as bubbles, fine dots, the spiral, the red disc and the short, intermittent horizontal lines on to the board. However, she soon abandoned this method of painting. Instead she started to paint directly on to the board. In *Round Board Painting II* (Figure 7.16), she first painted a very thick ink bar across the lower third of this work when the board was lying flat on the table during the first stage of painting. She then turned the board upright to let the ink drip down the board. Afterwards, Chou very skilfully turned the ink drips into stylised stalagmites. Using undiluted paint, Chou dotted a small nob of paint on the board and then lightly dragged the paint over the surface of the board, forming a thin line. The nob and the line come to form something resembling a long-tailed tadpole. In this seemingly simple work, Chou created many layers of “depth” by superimposing the radiating swirl, the thick ink bar with stalagmites, the yellow disc and the green tadpoles on one another. According to Chou, *Round Board Painting III* (Figure 7.17) was painted almost completely by accident. She had left the painting side of the board face down on the work table where there was wet ink. “When I turned the board over,” she told me, “I found this lovely pattern on it.” She only added the fine branches and two red discs to this work during the second stage of painting.

Describing Chou's work on round board, Kao wrote that Chou had departed "from her usual practice of free brushwork enhanced by meticulous details", implying that she had departed from her two-stage painting procedure (Kao, 2000: 3). However, as we have seen, while free brushwork was absent in her work on silk and board, she had continued to employ the two-stage painting procedure. What gave Kao the impression that Chou had departed from her two-stage painting procedure was that the first and second stages of painting were not as clearly defined in her work on board. As we have seen, Chou employed a number of different methods when painting on board. She also did preparatory work beforehand. "I rub the surface of the board gently with a fine sandpaper first," Chou told me, "so that the ink and colour have something to grip on to."

As Chou continued to paint on silk and board, she also started to paint on satin in 2000. In September 1999, when Philip Bacon was going to show her work on board, Mr Huang—who had provided Chou with the round boards—decided to frame them in square frames, filling the space between the round board and the square frame with ruffled white satin. His idea was rejected by Bacon. "It looked hideous," Bacon said to me. Consequently, Chou was left with several metres of white satin, a material thicker and more slippery than silk. Chou decided not to waste the material and employed it as her new medium. In *Satin Painting I* (Figure 7.18), Chou's big, broad strokes returned after their absence from her silk painting. Due to the slippery nature of the material, it is not easy to execute big sweeping ink strokes on silk or satin. However, Chou took up the challenge of executing her whirling stroke in this work. Although it broke in many places, she capitalised on the gaps by filling them in with scattered dots, creating a shimmering, dreamy and fairyland look. While it was not possible to apply her impact structural stroke on the non-absorbent board, Chou experimented with it on the slippery satin and created a cosmic look with a central vortex in this work. In *Satin Painting II* (Figure 7.19), the surrealistic mood is even stronger. She

created the dark silent night by her impact structural stroke but the colourful radiating whirl brought light to the dark sky. In the midst of the sky, there are four cell-like or bubble-like circles with rings. In these bubble-like cells, she had inscribed the famous words *meng huan pao yin, ru lu ru dian* from the Diamond Sutra (all phenomena are as transient as dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows, dewdrops and lightening). Below the sky, another world is revealed. In this work, Chou again capitalised on the less-absorbent nature of the satin. She painted the trees, the branches, the houses, the land and the road almost in the *gonbi*-style of painting. Traditionally, *gonbi*-style painting is characterised by realism, fine brushwork and close attention to detail. It is also a style of painting most suitable to be painted on silk because ink and colour are less likely to sink into the material and diffuse to blur the brushstrokes. The incongruence of the abstract and the realistic in the work has increased the mysteriousness of the work.

Thus, during the three years since Chou had first stopped painting on hemp paper, she had painted on three different media. In 2003 I asked Chou why she shifted from painting on hemp paper to silk. “When I saw the works of ancient paintings in the museum, so many of them were painted on silk,” Chou said. “These silk paintings painted in the Song and Yuen dynasties evoked for me a kind of beauty that was quiet and peaceful.” (Butcher, 2003: 23) This might have been her reason for wanting to paint on silk, but it does not explain why she shifted from hemp paper to silk at that time. The shift in fact had a lot to do with Chou’s desire to utilise skills, which she had not fully put to use. In classical Chinese painting, the skills involved in the application of ink, colour and water, in contrast to brushwork, are guided more by the painter’s own intuition than by following rules and methods. Nonetheless, Chou had learned much about the innovative ways of applying ink, colour and water when she was painting in the Lingnan School style. “Zhao has given me a lifetime supply of skills,” Chou told me. “It puts me in a good position to experiment.” Silk was the

ideal medium to experiment with a technique that involved using a good deal of liquid. While the shift from silk to board was partly accidental, it also seemed logical that after experimenting on a less-absorbent medium like silk, Chou would want to go one step further in her experimentation by working on a non-absorbent medium like board. While the shift from board to satin was also partly accidental, the similarities as well as differences between satin and silk made satin yet another ideal medium for Chou to experiment with ink, colour and water.

Chou felt a sense of achievement that she came to experiment on so many different media. “To be a true artist,” Chou told a writer in 1995, “I need to constantly negate my old self to create a new self.” (Qu, 1995: 21) “I need to stimulate myself,” Chou told me. “I am always afraid that no more new ideas would come out of me like what happened to my husband.” By developing techniques to accommodate her new media and at the same time capitalising on their special qualities, Chou was able to renew and revitalise her own artistic vision. “I’m not capable of being a leader [like Lui Shou-kwan or Liu Guosong] to promote the new Chinese painting, not copying of the ancient,” Chou told Maudsley, “but I can do my work in my own way, style. Not only on rice paper, I try to find some media [such as silk, board and satin], some colourful way I can explain myself.” (Maudsley, 2001)

It is not surprising, then, that nearly all writers who wrote about Chou’s post-stroke work pointed out the colourfulness of her work. “Emerging from the dark ink backgrounds of her paintings is a kaleidoscope of bright reds, greens, blues and oranges, applied through a variety of technical means,” Mayching Kao wrote of Chou’s post-stroke work on hemp paper, silk, board and satin. “Even the winding long lines and the rolling cloud patterns, formerly mainly done in black, assume various colours now.” (Kao, 2000: 3) In 1993, when Chou’s first works on hemp paper appeared, Susan Dewar described them as “colourful celebrations of a new lease of life”, a contrast to the “‘dark’ works she painted in the late

1970s” (Dewar, 1993). “Surviving her stroke made the artist cheerful again,” Meng wrote, “and thus her work came to be filled with colour.” (Meng, 2005)

Although many writers thought her work became colourful only after her stroke, we have seen that Chou began making greater use of colour in her work before her stroke. Like O’Keefe, who exhausted the use of charcoal before going on to use colour, Chou explored the use of ink extensively for nearly two decades before starting to increase the use of colour in her work. “*Unity of Heaven and Earth* shows the artist as a colourist,” Catherine Maudsley wrote in 1990, “using mostly mineral pigments but with occasional splashes of acrylic and silver or gold poster paints.” (Maudsley, 1990: 114) The best evidence that Chou started to experiment with colours before her stroke is in two small works she painted in 1991. These are every bit as colourful as two small works she painted in 1992, shortly after her stroke (see *Collectors’ Choice: The Cosmic Vision of Zhou Luyun*, 1995: 33, 35).

However, there is no doubt that it was after her stroke that Chou came to use colour in her work in a big way. “Right after my stroke,” Chou told me, “before I could paint large works again I painted many small colourful works. I seemed to have the need for strong colour then.” This need for strong colour continued after she recovered from her stroke. “Colour is such a mysterious thing for human beings,” Chou told me in 2003. “Lately, I just have that urge, coming from my innermost self, that cannot be satisfied but by colours, lots of colours.” (Butcher, 2003: 23) While Chou attributed her greater use of colour in her work to her inner need for colour, Munro thought it was just a natural development of Chou’s visual language. “How much can you do with ink?”

Another important factor that led Chou to make greater use of colour in her post-stroke work was her many shifts of media. “Since I came to Australia nearly ten years ago now, I have been using acrylic rather than the traditional Chinese mineral colours,” Chou told me in 2003. One of the reasons she started to use acrylic after she moved to Australia was her

shift from *xuan* paper to hemp paper: “It is difficult to apply acrylic on *xuan* paper because it tears so easily.” (Butcher, 2003: 23) The shift from *xuan* paper to the tougher and thicker hemp paper and the subsequent shifts to the non-tearing silk, board and satin provided her with media more suitable for experimenting with acrylic. There was also an economic factor. Not only was acrylic readily available in Brisbane but it was also cheaper than Chinese mineral colour. The silk, board and satin Chou employed were also not outrageously expensive. Thus Chou could afford to be more audacious in her experimentation. Some of the colourfulness in Chou’s work happened serendipitously. “A friend brought me some gold dust from China,” Chou told me. “It is real gold.” Chou did not tell me what she did with the gold dust, but she experimented with it and found it worked well on hemp paper and on silk. Since she was working on *As You Like It* at the time, the lines in this work came to be painted in gold.

After painting on silk, board and satin for nearly three years Chou painted almost exclusively on *xuan* paper for the next three years. It was in these works that Chou came to employ acrylic in a big way on *xuan* paper. “I often wondered why I did not use acrylic before. Now I know why. Chinese mineral colour is organic. It has a water component. So it looks alive on paper. Acrylic is synthetic. After it dries it is hard and looks dead on paper. So when I first started using acrylic on paper I was unhappy with the results”, Chou told me. “Having experimented with different ways of using it [acrylic], like adjusting the right amount of water to add to it, I have developed the technique of applying acrylic on *xuan* paper that produces the result I want. My experience of using acrylic on hemp paper, silk, satin and board has made applying acrylic onto *xuan* paper a lot easier” (Butcher, 2003:23).

It is not surprising, then, that one of the characteristics of Chou’s large works on *xuan* paper, such as *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing I* (Figure 7.20), *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing II* (Figure 7.21) and *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing III* (Figure 7.22), is their

colourfulness. In one work, Chou's use of pink, green yellow and blue caused Anne Kirker to comment: "You have gone psychedelic." "I have forgotten how wonderful *xuan* paper is," Chou told me. "The colour has become even sharper after mounting." In 2000, Kao mentioned how in Chou's work on hemp paper, silk, board and satin even her signature lines had assumed various colours. In fact, Chou had painted her lines in *As You Like It* gold and those in a few of her works on board red, but otherwise had not used colour when painting her lines. It was in *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing III* that Chou was finally confident enough to paint her iconic lines with acrylic. "In the beginning and also in the end," James Cahill wrote, "the line drawn by a brush remains the central fact of Chinese painting throughout its history" (Cahill, 1960: 11). In this work, Chou's lines—now in acrylic red—had become more expressive and sensuous than ever, carving out a female figure who was yearning for an intimate encounter with the male figure depicted in her ink-splash-blob and thick ink stroke.

Indeed, Chou's work on *xuan* paper was not only colourful, but the depiction of the love between a man and a woman became explicit again. Over the years, her depiction of sex had become so implicit that in 1998 when she was exhibiting her work on hemp paper in Hong Kong she was asked by a journalist if her works still contained strong sexual undercurrents. "Why not?" she asked. "I was a very fertile woman. Now I am old, I no longer experience sexual desire, but I can still convey that intense feeling in my painting." (Binks, 1998: 37–8) Since then, Chou's work had again become very explicit in its depiction of sex. In her works on *xuan* paper that were shown in the 2003 retrospective exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, biomorphic forms suggesting female reproductive organs appeared in nearly every work. "Today, what is striking about Chou's art is its ... lively sensuousness and sexuality," Ian Findlay wrote. "Chou has had to give herself over to expressing herself as completely as possible, not only as a painter but as a woman." (Findlay, 2003: 79) "There is

much depiction of sex, love, fertilization and reproduction in Chou's work," a Chinese journalist wrote. "For an open minded woman artist like Chou, sex is not a taboo at all." (Hong, 2004: 88)

However, in her work on *xuan* paper, the procreation and cosmic themes have become equally strong. In *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing I*, amidst the multi-dimensional universe, in the full glare of the radiating whirl, the sparkling Easter egg is about to be impregnated by the red disc. Meanwhile, the red dendrites from the nearby circle are also attempting to ignite the Easter egg. Procreation is taking place in the lulling arms of the vast and awing inspiring universe. In *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing II*, procreation appears to be about to take place in the sun-like circle with a thick orange rim. The tadpoles, which first appeared in Chou's work on silk and on board, have developed dendrites and become neurons. The black disc has succeeded in breaking through the thick orange rim to make contact with the neurons. Meanwhile, the radiating whirl is being cradled in the arms of the powerful ink strokes while the black disc, like Venus, is crossing the face of the sun. Houses, which look as if they were drawn by a child, pop out from nowhere. "For me it [the radiating swirl] is love," Chou told me. "It represents the love between a man and a woman, the kind of love I was so interested in when I was young." The boundary between the cosmic and the mortal is blurred. *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing III* celebrates not only the love between a woman and a man, but also the mysteriousness of the universe. The dark energy created by the impact structural stroke surrounds the white vortex. The spooky pale green light behind the ink slab and the thick sweeping stroke appear to have come from the nether world.

Another feature of Chou's work on *xuan* paper is that the visual vocabulary in her work had become richer than ever. The powerful sweeping ink strokes that had been absent, except in a couple of works on satin, had returned. The lulling ink stroke, the ink laden slab and the triple loop sweeping stroke are all back in her work on *xuan* paper. Meanwhile, her

radiating swirl, which had survived all media be it hemp paper, silk, board or satin, is ever present. In fact, the content in her work on *xuan* paper was so rich that it aroused criticism from Zhu Qi. “You are now bringing out every single sign and symbol you have developed over the years into your present work,” he said to her. “It is too much.”

Chou, who had depicted the love between a man and a woman from the beginning of the career, was able to sustain this theme well into her old age. By 2005, however, Chou was living with a feeling that was different from her earlier sexual feeling she told Hilary Binks that she had but every bit as intense. “My hormone level has decreased. My sexual desire has gone,” Chou told me, “but I still have the intense feeling I once had. Only it is now for life, painting and happiness.”

Sustaining a career

Moving south had indeed proved to be beneficial to Chou. For one thing, she had produced a massive number of works between 1999 and 2003, and as we have seen, on a number of very different media. Since cultivating social relationships and managing her career were two sides of the same coin for Chou, it is not surprising that the continual expansion of her social world helped her to continue to secure exhibitions for her work. Chou’s success in continuously expanding her social world—especially for someone of her age and with her physical disability—had to do with her belief that everything was connected with everything else in this world, and that the interaction of one individual and another had ramifications far beyond what took place at the time of the interaction. She also believed that, as much as things happened by chance, more often than not they happened as the result of one’s actions. “To sustain a relationship one must owe that person something,” Chou told me, “and for that person to owe you something.”

The subtle air of refinement that was once present in her former home had disappeared in Chou's new abode. In her new home, work space and living space had merged into one. Her work table was now in one of the bedrooms because it was the only room that had good natural lighting. The room where Chou slept was also where she stored her finished work. A stack of paintings stood next to her bed. A secondhand photocopier occupied most of the space in the main bathroom. A thick volume of *Who's Who* served as a doorstop for the bathroom door. In the living room, the array of mismatched secondhand furniture—the small chipboard desk, the wooden filing cabinet with ornate handles, the worn-out settee, the exercise bike, the wheelchairs, the Zimmer frame—would give no trace of an artist living here if it were not for the two large chipboard sheets resting against the long stretch of her living room wall with paintings in progress clipped on to them. In the kitchen, a student desk served as the kitchen table.

In September 1999, just three months after she moved into her rented house, Philip Bacon gave Chou a second show. Chou was painting on silk and board at the time. She knew her board paintings would not appeal to Chinese buyers in Brisbane because they did not regard board as a proper medium for ink painting. "Look at the ancient wall frescoes," Chou said in defence of her use of board. "Chinese painters have painted on non-absorbent surfaces since Chinese painting first began." Chou also knew her large silk work *Life is But a Dream* would be difficult to sell because of its size. Therefore, she included in her show several smaller works on silk as well as two medium-sized works. Chou even painted some *zen*-like paintings on *xuan* paper. "These paintings are what people will buy," Chou told me. In the end, however, Chou decided not to include them in the show.

As well as providing works such as the smaller works on silk and the medium-sized works on *xuan* paper that would help with the sale, Chou also made sure there were potential buyers. Around the time of Chou's second show with Bacon, she had cultivated a new group

of friends who had an interest in art for one reason or another. Among them was Meng Gang, an ink painter from China. Meng had been holding classes for housewives, most of whom were well-to-do migrants from Taiwan and China. Just before her show with Bacon, Meng organised a group of his students for a pre-sale talk by Chou at the Philip Bacon Galleries, hoping some of his student would become potential buyers. Chou even managed to entice her solicitor, John Nagel, to come to the opening of her show. Not long after she moved into her new dwelling, she wanted to make a new will. Instead of her going to Nagel's office to do the signing of the necessary documents, she asked him to come to her townhouse instead. "I have put out all my silk works for him to see," Chou told me on the phone before Nagel's visit. Nagel, attracted by her silk paintings, came to the opening of her exhibition.

However, despite Chou's effort, the great number of people who showed up at the opening, as well as the write-ups about her work in the *Courier-Mail*, *Brisbane News* and Chinese-language newspapers, sale of her work was poor at her second show with Bacon. Only the two medium-sized works on *xuan* paper were sold. Most Chinese people did not like her work on silk. "They are too loud and too crowded," one man told me. His comment echoed the sentiments of many Chinese people, who believed painters, in their old age, should learn to let go. "I am much more relaxed now," Chou told me, "but I am far from letting go." Traditionally, Chinese painters tend to become more and more minimalistic in their old age to show that they have transcended mundane things in this world. That was the reason Chou was tempted to include her *zen*-like paintings in the show. As for her board paintings, one Chinese painter told me he thought they were more like craft than art.

Just as it seemed like Chou's show with Bacon was a total failure, one of her friends turned up after the show to buy several of her works. "She is very wealthy," Chou told me. "She also enjoys spending money." Chou had earlier given her friend several of her works in

the Lingnan style as gifts. “I gave her my old paintings so that she would buy my new paintings,” Chou told me. “What a cunning woman I am!”

Not long after Chou moved into her rented house, it was rumoured that she had become a Buddhist. Such a rumour was based on people’s observation that she had visited and donated money to the Amitabha Buddhist Association. In early 1999, when her former boyfriend Sha died, she asked her friends at the Amitabha Buddhist Association to give him a Buddhist send-off. “In her dream she saw the pain on Sha’s face when he died,” her biographers wrote. “She spent two thousand dollars to engage a group of Buddhist monks to chant for Sha to assist his soul to make the transition peacefully from this world to the other world.” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 119) Her biographers also wrote that she had become a vegetarian (Pun and Lu, 2001: 3), and that she had told them she hoped her Buddhist friends would say prayers for her for three days and three nights after she died so that she could make the transition from life to death peacefully. “Her idea is the Catholic priest is very busy,” her biographers wrote, “and he might not have time to perform mass for her after she died.” (Pun and Lu, 2001: 108) Moreover, Chou had set up a Buddhist shrine in the living room of her rented house. Her big rosary beads, which used to adorn her living room, were relegated to the wall in the hallway.

The rumour was also based on the fact the Chou had formed a student–teacher relationship with a man who, after being a successful businessman and politician, wanted to become a monk. Chou’s Buddhist teacher was a widower when he and Chou met in Brisbane in the early 1990s. “He escaped from Canton to Hong Kong by swimming,” Chou told me. “He had to do it on a moonless night.” Chou admired him not only for his courage but also for his profound knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism. He shared with her his books on Tibetan Buddhism, taught her to chant in Tibetan, and took her to see the *Spiritual Treasures From China* at the Queensland Museum. Chou bought many posters and several pieces of Thang-

ga. “I am going to use the posters for collage in my paintings,” she told me. Her Buddhist teacher visited her regularly in her rented house, where they studied together.

The reasons why Chou took up Buddhist practices and created a student–teacher relationship with a man who wanted to become a monk were far from what people imaged. Chou visited and donated money to the Amitabha Buddhist Association because her friend Mr Huang, the framer, and his wife were members of the association. Huang had not just been her framer but he and his wife had also been her good friends. Huang was the one who sawed her first work on board off her table and then supplied her with the round boards. He and his wife had given her reading material published by the Amitabha Buddhist Association. Huang often undercharged Chou for the work he did for her. Thus, visiting and donating money to the Amitabha Buddhist Association was Chou’s way of repaying Huang. More importantly, it was also her way of showing respect for other people’s religious beliefs.

Chou admitted that she had an ulterior motive for studying with her Buddhist teacher. “I am not like the artists from China who have experienced much such as the Cultural Revolution,” she told me. “My life experiences are quite limited compared to theirs so I need to continue to enrich my mind and increase my knowledge.” Chou had always felt this way. “It is important to continue to increase my knowledge,” she told a reporter in 1998. “A richer mind and a mind with better concentration are of vital importance for my painting.” (Hong, 1998) Her Buddhist teacher opened up a whole new area of knowledge for her. He also brought friends who were interested in Buddhism, UFOs, the Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness and *Yijing* to hold discussion sessions at her home. “I am interested in things,” Chou told me, “that most women have no interest in.” According to Susan Munro, there were also not many Hong Kong artists who shared her interest in the subconscious. “In Hong Kong [among the New Ink painters], aside from Lu Shou-kwan, hardly anyone can see beyond what’s in front of them,” Susan Munro said to me in the presence of Chou in 2003. “You

really need to be kind of crazy to have that sort of vision because very few Hong Kong artists can reach into their subconscious [and portray it].”

In her more in-depth study of Buddhism, Chou found much common ground between Buddhism and Freud and Einstein, two people who greatly influenced her thinking. She found the Heart Sutra’s “form is emptiness and emptiness is form” similar to Einstein’s equation $E=mc^2$, setting out the equivalence between mass and energy. And she found the many levels of consciousness identified by the Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness not only similar to what was identified by Freud, but that the Doctrine also gave her the incentive to make it her goal to reach from the lower level of consciousness for the high level of consciousness. She told me in 2002:

Of the five senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch—I can say that I can forgo taste now but I can’t forgo sight and hearing yet. I am still excited by information I hear and read. However, I am attempting to attain the sixth level of consciousness, the level at which one no longer has earthly desires for such things as fame and material things. When one reaches the seventh level of consciousness one loses one’s consciousness. When one reaches the eighth level of consciousness one loses one’s subconsciousness. It goes as high as the twelfth level of consciousness when one attains the state of *kaiwu*, the wisdom to understand the universe. My paintings are hard to sell because they have to do with the Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness.

Another reason Chou began learning from her Buddhist teacher was practical: it was good to have a man around the house. “His arms are long,” she told me. “He can help me to reach things and do many things I have trouble doing because of my disability.” Indeed, Chou seemed to be able to find men who were attracted to her and were willing to do things

for her. “I know what to say to men to make them happy,” Chou told me. “When I told my Buddhist teacher the philosophy contained in Buddhism is at a slightly higher level than the philosophy in the Bible he was very pleased.”

Chou’s student–teacher relationship came to an end when her teacher left Brisbane for Canton, but they remained lifelong friends. Chou documented her friendship with her teacher in a work she started painting in 1993, but completed in 2000 when he left Brisbane. In *The Monk in the Making* (Figure 7.23), she painted the powerful sweeping ink strokes on the left and her impact stroke on the right. On the right side of the painting, she painted the portrait of a monk in the style of the Lingnan School. “Zhao Shaoang only painted one portrait,” Chou told me, “and that is the portrait of a monk.” In *The Monk* (Figure 7.24), she made very small changes to the right side of the painting but made major changes to the left side of the painting. Most noticeably, she repainted the left side to make it very dark so that the meandering lines in gold stood out. “The left side is your own situation and frustration,” Chou told Maudsley, “and the right side is removing these and having the experience like the monk.” (Maudsley, 2001) *The Monk* became one of the two paintings on hemp paper that were shown in Chou’s exhibition with Hanart TZ Galleries in Hong Kong in 2000.

Since Chou’s trip to Hong Kong in 1998, she had renewed her connection with Hanart TZ Galleries, which last showed her work in 1989. In December 2000, Hanart TZ staged a mini-retrospective exhibition showing her work on hemp paper, silk, board and satin, all painted during the first decade after her stroke. John S. Wadsworth, Jr, a trustee of the Guggenheim Museum and the Asia Society, opened the exhibition and Mayching Kao, director of the Chinese University Museum, wrote the essay for the catalogue. Chou’s god-daughter represented Chou at the opening. Even in the absence of Chou, many of her past friends showed up at the opening. “Irene Chou is without doubt one of the most loved and respected expatriate Chinese artists, as seen by the select group of faithful friends—artists,

writers, and connoisseurs—who gathered for her most recent show *The Universe is My Mind*,” Hilary Binks wrote of Chou’s exhibition. “Some of those present were colleagues from as long as 30 or 40 years ago, members of the Circle Art Group, which represented the avant-garde in Hong Kong in the 1960s, and whose meeting place was Chou’s house.” (Binks, 2001: 88)

Chou’s social universe continued to expand as she retained old friendships and cultivated new ones. In 2000 she was approached by Jeannie Mok, director of the Multicultural Community Centre in Brisbane, to participate in an exhibition. Mok had seen Chou’s work at the Bacon show. The centre had just received funding from Arts Queensland to stage an exhibition for ethnic and indigenous artists to help them sell their work. Chou was reluctant to exhibit with the Multicultural Community Centre, knowing that Mok and others who were involved in staging the exhibition were inexperienced. She also did not want to show just one or two works like the other artists who would be participating in the show. When she found out that the venue included one huge hall and three small rooms off to the side, she told me she would participate in the show only if she could have the three rooms all devoted to showing her work. “Be a little bit bold,” she told me. “One has to assert oneself sometimes and not to be afraid to take risks.” Mok thought the request was unusual and decided that they would consider it another time. Meanwhile, Chou’s show with Hanart Galleries prompted Helina Chan, director of iPreciation, to write to Chou to ask whether she could represent her work in Singapore. In early February 2001, Chan came from Singapore to meet Chou. Chou had just finished her last four works on silk when Chan visited her. “I will let Helina have these two silk paintings,” Chou told me. “They need to be mounted first by Mr Tseng. She will pick them up in Hong Kong.”

Early in 2001, Chou agreed to participate in the “Multicultural Women’s Business” exhibition in June that year after she was granted her request to have the three rooms to show

her works exclusively. When she made her request, she had in mind to stage a mini-retrospective of her work by showing her “early works” painted in the Lingnan School style in the first room, her “recent works”—*Satin Painting III* and six small works on *xuan* paper—in the second room and her “current works”—four of six large works on *xuan* paper that she had just finished painting—in the last room.

Since having a mini-retrospective of her work was Chou’s idea, she was her own curator for the show. While all her early works were on scrolls, her recent works and current works were framed. Huang framed all her recent works and current works except *Satin Painting III*. Chou wanted the mounting and framing of this work to be different from the others because it was the only work on satin in the exhibition. She sent the work to Hong Kong to be mounted on black silk by Mr Tseng and then had it framed with a black frame. For the didactics, I printed out three sheets from the computer, each with her name in English and in Chinese in bold black ink, and underneath her name I put in small print “early works” on the first one, “recent works” on the second one and “current works” on the third one. However, Chou decided this was inadequate and she added a large square vermilion seal to the centre of each sheet and dated each one as “2001 AD”. She then sent the three pieces of paper to Mr Tsing in Hong Kong, who mounted them in black silk with a red border to bring out the vermilion in the seal. In this way, Chou turned the otherwise unprofessional looking didactics into three exquisite hanging scrolls, complementing the works in each room.

Since Chou was the manager of her own career, she had always taken care of her own publicity. Since the beginning of 2000, more and more people were writing about Chou and her work in Brisbane, in Sydney and even in China. In March 2000, Meng wrote a short biography of Chou in a publication that gave accounts of a number of Chinese Australians who had made outstanding contributions to Queensland. Around the same time, a journalist from China visited Chou and wrote about her and her work in the *Jinan Times*. In August

1999, art critic Xue Yongnian, who interviewed Chou by phone from China, wrote a long article about her work that was published in *Da Gong Bao* in Hong Kong in 2001. Most of these write-ups came about because Chou encouraged friends of hers to introduce writers to her. “I just borrow other people’s mouths to say what I cannot say myself,” Chou told me. In early 2001, Alicia Pun, who had been working for the Chinese monthly magazine *Bridge*, approached Chou to write her biography. “She and her sister wanted to do something together,” Chou me, “and I became their project.” Chou met Pun, one of the founding members of the Chinese Writers’ Association, as early as 1992. In a matter of few months Pun and her sister had written Chou’s biography. They started to serialise it in the May 2001 issue of *Bridge* and the biography was published by *Bridge* in November 2001.

When Pun and her sister launched their serialisation of Chou’s biography in the May 2001 issue of *Bridge*, Chou seized upon the occasion to procure promotion not only for her own work but also the writing of Pun and her sister. She paid for one and half pages of glossy colour advertisements on both the front cover and the back cover of the magazine, showing three large images of her “current” works. Inside the magazine, in addition to the first instalment of her biography, there was also a separate article written by Pun about her work in her upcoming show at the Multicultural Community Centre. As well as promoting her own work and the writings of Pun and her sister, Chou also promoted Mok and the Multicultural Community Centre in her advertisement.

As Chou did for her Hongkong Bank Building exhibition and her second show with Philip Bacon, she included six medium-sized works in her show to help with the sale. Among the six medium-sized works two were *zen*-like paintings. The temptation to paint the *zen*-like paintings was always with Chou. In her show with the Multicultural Community Centre she could not resist the temptation anymore. “There is generally not a lot of content in my smaller works,” Chou admitted. “But people buy these works.” To help the sale of her work, Chou

also agreed to present a slide show on her work to attract more people to come and see the exhibition. As many as sixty people, both Chinese and non-Chinese, attended the talk and many more attended the opening.

However, as with her previous shows in Brisbane, despite Chou's effort the sale of her work was poor at the Multicultural Community Centre exhibition. Only four of her medium-sized works were sold. However, her show with the Multicultural Community Centre led to wider exposure for her work. After her show, the Hong Kong Association of Queensland asked Chou to donate one of her medium-sized paintings, which was auctioned for \$2600. The following year Chou, was approached by the Australian and Chinese Business Association to donate one of the four large paintings she showed at the Multicultural Community Centre to raise money for charity. A buyer bought the painting for \$5700. Mok, who was politically and socially active, raised more than \$12,000 for the Royal Children's Hospital from auctioning another of Chou's large works.

In 2002, after two unsuccessful shows, Philip Bacon decided that he could no longer represent Chou's work. Bacon's decision did not come as a surprise to Chou. Not discouraged in the least, Chou continued to seek opportunities to show her work in her own idiosyncratic way. Among the many people Chou met through the Chinese Writers' Association was a young man who had since become one of the most successful real estate agents on the south side of Brisbane. He proposed to Chou that he could stage an exhibition for her work in a hotel. "I am of two minds about having an exhibition staged by a real estate agent and by the Chinese Catholic Church," Chou said to me. "I don't know which one would have a better chance of holding a successful exhibition for me." Since she had moved south, Chou had become more involved with the members of her church. As well as attending mass, she also started to go to some activities held for seniors at the Sacred Heart Centre, the Chinese Catholic community centre, which had a large hall that was used not only for

worship but also for community activities such as dances and other social functions. Some church members suggested that Chou could have an exhibition at the Sacred Heart Centre.

As keen as Chou was to have exhibitions for her work, she was also quick to turn down unsuitable offers. In 2002, a Taiwanese businesswoman proposed an exhibition of her work with Guan Wei, a Chinese contemporary artist from Beijing who lived and worked in Sydney. Chou turned down the offer without offering any reason. Likewise, when it was suggested that the Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants and Taoists in Brisbane could jointly organise an exhibition for Chou, she discouraged the idea right from the beginning.

Meanwhile, Nigel Cameron proposed another exhibition in Hong Kong at the Exchange Square. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology also proposed an exhibition for her at the university. In Singapore, Chan suggested a retrospective for her work at the Singapore Art Museum. “I take every proposal offered to me seriously,” Chou told me, “even though I know full well most of them will not materialize.” None of the proposals came to fruition, but in 2002 the Hong Kong Arts Centre decided to hold a retrospective exhibition of her post-stroke work from 1993 to 2003 in March 2003.

As the manager of her own career, Chou attended to many mundane things connected with her exhibition in Hong Kong in 2003. As well as sending her works to Hong Kong to be mounted by Mr Tseng, who sent them back to Brisbane afterwards to be photographed, she arranged for her earlier works on hemp paper, silk and satin to be shipped to Hong Kong. She was in constant communication with the curator of the exhibition in Hong Kong, discussing the production of the catalogue, brochure and invitation, and the numerous things involved in staging a big exhibition, including securing the right people to open the exhibition for her. Chou also tended to the business side of the exhibition. “It is nice that the Hong Kong Arts Centre is giving me an exhibition,” Chou told me, “but I need to pay rent, to eat and to pay for my airfare to Hong Kong.”

Although Chou still identified herself as a Hong Kong artist, she took her Australian citizenship seriously. Among the people who were invited to open her exhibition, aside from her three fellow Hong Kong New Ink painters, was the Australian Consul-General. Chou and her Buddhist teacher had remained friends even after he left Brisbane for Canton. When he learned that she was going to have an exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre, he wrote to an Australian senator asking him whether he could ask the Consul-General in Hong Kong to attend the opening. Chou welcomed the idea. “I am all Chinese,” Chou said to me, “but I am also an Australian.”

Chou travelled to Hong Kong in March 2003 to attend the opening of her exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre. It was an important exhibition for her for two reasons. One was that, for all her success as a Hong Kong artist—she even had one of her works featured on a five dollar Hong Kong stamp in 2002—this was only her second solo museum and art centre exhibition in Hong Kong. (Her other solo museum exhibitions were in Macau in 1987 and in Taiwan in 1994.) The other reason was that the exhibition showed her work painted during the decade since her stroke. More than fifty works, from her work on hemp paper to her work on silk, satin and *xuan* paper, were shown at the exhibition. “I would like to set myself as an example to encourage the Hong Kong young people,” Chou wrote for the Hong Kong audience in a pamphlet. “If one can work as hard as I do [with my disabilities], their achievements must be higher than mine.” (Chou, 2003)

At least as many people attended the opening of Chou’s exhibition at the Hong Kong Arts Centre as the opening of her exhibition at Exchange Square in 1998. The exhibition was opened by Cissy Pao, who was an artist as well as one of the governors of the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Pao had been Chou’s friends since the early 1970s, when they did lithography together. As well as Pao, two of Chou’s fellow new ink painters, Wong Wucius and Liu Guosong, also officiated at the opening. Everyone—her collectors, Mr Tsing, those who had

written about her work, those who sold her work, her colleagues, her fellow New Ink painters, her friends—seemed to be present at the opening of her exhibition. It was as if Chou had never left Hong Kong.

Almost as soon as she returned from her trip to Hong Kong, Chou began a set of eight new works on large *xuan* paper because she wanted to give them to Chan to sell in Singapore before July 2003. All eight works were painted with the powerful sweeping stroke in the first stage of the two-stage painting procedure. While Chou added a substantial amount of detail and colour to the first set of four paintings, she added very little details to the second set of four paintings in the second stage of painting. These works—especially the set with less application of colour—closely resembled the works she painted in the early 1990s. “I am very systematic but I can also choose not to be systematic at times,” Chou told me in 2003. “To tell you the truth I can paint whatever style I painted previously be it my line paintings, impact structural paintings or my *zen*-like painting.” Indeed, she also painted a set of medium-sized *zen*-like paintings at the same time she painted the eight large works.

The reason Chou painted four of the large works in the style resembling her work in the early 1990s was so that they could be sold more easily. By early 2003, Chou had decided that she would have Chan represent her work in Singapore. “People in Brisbane are more conservative,” she told Maudsley in Hong Kong in 2003. “Chinese Australians don’t seem to have much interest in my work.” (Maudsley, 2003: 55) Chou knew her work was not easy to sell. She told me: “It will take at least ten years after my death before people will come to truly appreciate my work.” Chou was therefore never surprised when people told her that they liked her earlier work more than her latest work. But she was also not surprised that one of her works painted on silk in 1999 was chosen to represent Hong Kong in the Art Now 2000 International Exhibition, an exhibition that showed work by Hong Kong and Korean artists. Indeed, among the eighteen artists representing Hong Kong, no other New Ink

painters of her generation were included. The reason Chou painted the *zen*-like paintings was so that Chan had something easier to sell. “Many years ago, Nigel Cameron found a work in a rubbish bin painted by one of my fellow New Ink painters,” Chou told me. “These works [her *zen*-like paintings] will also be in the rubbish one day too, but meanwhile why not let them earn some money for me?”

Chan turned out to be a good agent for Chou. In September 2003, two of Chou’s large works on *xuan* paper, one of which was shown in her 2003 exhibition in Hong Kong, were installed in the foyer of the ADC House in the Brisbane’s CBD. Chan had bought the paintings on behalf of the owner of ADC House, the Government Investment Corporation of Singapore. In November 2003, Chan staged a solo exhibition of Chou’s work at iPreciation in Singapore. She even secured Michael Sullivan to write a few words about Chou’s work in the exhibition catalogue.

“Irene Chou at eighty”

Chou turned eighty in January 2004. She had much to celebrate. Not only had she reached a ripe old age but she had survived her stroke for more than a decade. Furthermore, since she had moved south, not only had she continued to live alone but she had also been financially independent. “Although Chou is 80,” a journalist wrote on the eve of Chou’s birthday, “she is as feisty as ever painting every day because ‘she wants to be a self-sufficient woman in the [new] millennium’.” (Au, 2003) “I have been happy since I moved to Calamvale,” Chou said to me. “I live with freedom, dignity, and privacy.”

Even though Chou had much to celebrate, she painted and meditated on her birthday just like any other day. While Chou did not celebrate her birthday, three events took place during 2004 that celebrated her eightieth birthday. The first was in July when Chou exhibited six large works on *xuan* paper in *Reconciliation Art Works*, an exhibition staged by Mok at

the Multicultural Community Centre. The second and the third events were two exhibitions, one held by Hanart TZ Gallery and one by Grotto Fine Art, in Hong Kong in October.

Hanart, which named the show *Irene Chou at Eighty*, showed her most recent works. Grotto Fine Art, in cooperation with Sandra Walters Consultancy, staged a show titled *From Representation to Revolution*, featuring her works from the Lingnan School style paintings to her early experimentation with her impact structural stroke and ink-and-colour washes. As mentioned in the last chapter, Walters was another expatriate who sold Chou's works in Hong Kong. Chou gave her these works just before she left for Australia. Walters kept Chou's works all these years before deciding to show them in 2004. "It was a big event for me to have two commercial galleries in Hong Kong showing my work at the same time," Chou told me. "I was once hot in Hong Kong. After my stroke people forgot I still existed. Now I am hot again."

Among these six works shown at the Multicultural Community Centre was *In Celebration of Being 80* (Figure 7.25), a significant work in Chou's oeuvre. Measuring 152x211 cm—the same size as that of her full-sized hemp paper paintings—*In Celebration of Being 80* is the only such large-sized work Chou painted on *xuan* paper. Although this work was painted in 2004, the first stage of the work was in fact painted more than a decade earlier. As mentioned before, Susan Munro visited Chou in Brisbane in December 1992. She took photographs of Chou, which were published in the March/April 2003 issue of *Asian Art News*. In one of the photographs, she is shown to be painting (or pretending to paint) a work. A careful look at this work reveals that the huge calligraphic sweeping stroke in this work is the same one as in *In Celebration of Being 80*. In other words, the first stage of *In Celebration of Being 80* was painted at least as early as 1992 and possibly even earlier. As we have seen, it was not unusual for Chou to have a time lapse between the first and second stages of painting. However, with *In Celebration of Being 80* it appeared that she had

deliberately hung on to the unfinished painting as a way to spur herself to survive her stroke for as long as possible. Chou was also realistic enough to know that longevity was no guarantee that she could continue to execute such powerful and fluid sweeping stroke. When she reached eighty, she thought it was time she finished the work. As it turned out, the work conveyed more strongly than any other work Chou's philosophical ideal and her desire to make Chinese painting contemporary. In *In Celebration of Being 80*, what is firmly anchored in the past—such as the sweeping ink brush stroke of Chinese calligraphy—sits harmoniously with the twenty-first century-looking radiating whirl painted by Chou's name card. Likewise, the fur-like texture produced by the impact structural stroke rooted in ancient splash ink technique is not incongruent with the modern, stylised, neuron-impregnated red discs. Chou's philosophical belief that time—past, present, future—is but an illusion is indirectly conveyed in this work by the seamless time gap between the time she painted the first and second stages of this work.

Paintings on small canvas, satin, round *xuan* paper, large canvas, *ming* paper

In 2004, just when it seemed certain that Chou, after experimenting on hemp paper, silk, board and satin, had returned to painting on *xuan* paper, she began painting on canvas. One of the first works Chou painted on the 122x41 cm canvas was *Inflame My Heart I* (Figure 7.26). She employed a minimal amount of colour and details in this work. The top one-third of the painting, with its perfect white circle and a red disc against a pitch black square, looks hard-edged. “The black I used in my canvas work is acrylic,” Chou told me. “The lady who does my cleaning bought it for me. It is very black. It is thick like glue in a bottle.” The bottom two-thirds of the work is as minimalistic as the upper third, except for the inscription written in Chinese. “Life is as beautiful as a piece of brocade,” the inscription says. “Only a fool

sighs in despair.” Chou had copied the quote from a newspaper clipping. Although the fourteen characters were not written by a brush, but by a felt-tip pen, they are nevertheless written in the style of Chinese calligraphy, maintaining a straight invisible vertical line in the centre or *qi* from top to bottom. “My balance is getting poorer and poorer,” Chou told. “So I thought I should at least try to keep a straight line in my writing. In any case, why write sloppily when one is able to write neatly?” *Inflame My Heart II* (Figure 7.27), like *Inflame My Heart I*, is minimalistic and hard-edged. While there is absolute stillness in *Inflame My Heart I*, there is much movement in *Inflame My Heart II*. In *Inflame My Heart II*, the ink whirl, the falling discs and the scattered ink-colour dots have created much motion, even in a small work. Opposite sentiments about the world are expressed in these two works. In the former, life is calm and peaceful. The red disc is cosily and securely embraced in the white circle, which is part of the black square. In the latter, the world is in chaos. Of the four green discs that once kept matter in balance, one has fallen and one is about to fall. The red disc, isolated, cuts a lonely figure on the left side of the work. In *Inflame My Heart III* (Figure 7.28), Chou’s trademark radiating whirl, which emerges from the pitched black universe, is just as powerful and full of motion on canvas as it is on her other media. She contrasted such a momentous image with a simple inscription, a green disc and a red disc on the bottom of the painting. Here Chou had done something she had not done before: she inscribed “Fear-Not-Be-A-Simple-Happy-Nobody-From-Inflame-My-Heart-O-Lord-By-A-Sister-SPC” in English, but wrote the words from top to bottom, one word on each line, as if they were seventeen Chinese characters. “Some of my breakthroughs are small and subtle,” Chou told me, referring to her inscription of English on to Chinese painting. In *Inflame My Heart IV* (Figure 7.29), Chou’s iconic sweeping stroke began with an ink-splash-blob and swept across the surface of the triptych in quadruple loops. She created an even more sculptural look in her sweeping stroke on canvas than on her other media.

Chou's shift from painting on *xuan* paper to painting on canvas was partly due to her friendship with a Cantonese couple she met in Brisbane in 1993. At that time, the husband was working in a Chinese restaurant as a chef. In early 2000, the husband, who was also a sculptor and a Chinese seal carver, stopped working in the restaurant and started painting. "We took her [Chou] to my exhibition at Nudgee College," he told me. "Afterwards she came back with us to our place. I gave her several pieces of my blank canvases to take home." When I asked Chou why she had decided to paint on canvas, her reply was that she just wanted to change. "I don't really have to change again. But does that mean I should stop *zuoren*, being human?" Chou asked me. "I know this sounds conceited but I think I have reached quite a lofty realm. However, although I feel this way I soon want to do something different again."

Between 2004 and 2005, Chou not only painted on canvas, she painted more work on satin. Her latest works on satin were far more colourful than her earlier works on satin. Up until that point, no matter how colourful Chou's work was, it was either painted on a black background or a white background; however, in her latest work on satin, even the background was painted in colour. While *Satin Painting IV* (Figure 7.30) has a solid bright orange background, *Satin Painting V* (Figure 7.31) has a multi-coloured background. While the upper part of the background of *Satin Painting VI* (Figure 7.32) is yellow and the lower part blue, *Satin Painting VII* (Figure 7.33) has a graduated purple to brownish gold background. The coloured background and the use of strong and clashing colours make these works look like Buddhist art. What prevented her works on satin from being garish, gaudy and decorative was Chou's absolute skill in maintaining balance in her work. For example, in *Satin Painting IV*, the colourful radiating whirl which is stirring up movement of cosmic magnitude against a strong orange background is balanced by the stillness and the calmness of the white halo and the white rectangle down below. Against such stillness and calmness, even the colours of

orange, bright green, vermillion and yellow do not seem to clash. Likewise, in *Satin Painting V*, the near psychedelic background of the upper two-thirds of the work is balanced by the organic looking black ring in the centre of the work. Two simple golden spirals, one in the upper left-hand corner of the work and one in the bottom right-hand corner, bring the work into complete harmony despite its loud and clashing colours.

As well as departing from the traditional way of applying colour, Chou also made greater use of tools other than the brush in her work on satin. She either employed a spray gun to spray the colours on to the satin or poured the colours directly on to the satin to let them do their own mixing. The perfect circles that are present in her work are created with the assistance of thin cardboard cut-outs. The hard-edge look in her work on canvas has carried through to her work on satin. The decreased use of the brush meant less use of ink, since the two generally go together. “Some painters hold on to ink and brush so hard that they forget what painting is about,” Chou told me in 2005. “When one is old one needs to bring out what is the truth in life.”

In her work on satin, Chou continued to inscribe in English. Her inscriptions, now written in English or in Chinese, came from diverse sources. “God bless you all and take care! Father Albert Chan”, Chou inscribed in English in one of the works. In another work she quoted Leo Tolstoy: “Happiness is pleasure without regret”. In still another work, Chou quoted from the Chinese translation of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*: “Death is an enigma except for the fact it will happen to everyone one day but at an unknown time. Given that is a fact one might as well delay one’s straight look at death for as long as possible.” Unlike her earlier inscriptions, which are often partially obstructed or embedded in the image, these inscriptions are highly legible. Even the written words she collaged on to her work are legible. In *Satin Painting IV*, she had collaged a piece of newspaper clipping into a yellow circle with a bright green ring. The newspaper article told a moving story of how a gecko,

which was nailed accidentally to the wall behind a painting, was kept alive by another gecko that faithfully fed it every day.

As Chou departed further and further from the traditional way of painting, the “Creation” theme of heaven, man and earth resurfaced in her work on satin. She divided each work into three horizontal sections with her iconic “horizon” lines, with heaven at the top, earth on the bottom and the link between heaven and earth in the middle. She created the “horizon” lines in a number of ways. Most of them are created as a division between two contrasting colours, such as the orange and white in *Satin Painting IV*, black and white in *Satin Painting V*, and blue and yellow in *Satin Painting VI*. Others are painted on as straight lines in contrasting colours, such as the bright green and yellow lines over purple in *Satin Painting VI*. In *Satin Painting V*, Chou created a subtle green piping as one of the “horizon” lines, whereas in *Satin Painting VI* she created a “horizon” line by compressing the branches from a neuron-impregnated disc into a straight line. Whereas in *The Creation Trilogy*, man, the link between heaven and earth, was portrayed by a bold calligraphic stroke, in these works heaven and earth are linked by a mini self-portrait of Chou. Her branches, which represent life, and her coloured discs, which represent her philosophical ideal—the two most enduring symbols in her work—appear in the middle section of each work, linking the heaven above with the earth below.

Moreover, the emotional intensity in her work on satin is as strong as ever, made evident by the ubiquitous presence of the circle. In her work on satin, all the circles she had ever used in her oeuvre appeared to be present. The overlapping circles, the moon, the halo, the ring, the spiral, the coloured disc that evolved from her sphere, the brain-like ball, filled with artery-like branches and the circular radiating whirl are all present. The circle had long been the symbol for Chou’s spiritual aspiration. “A circle has no beginning and no end. It can be infinitely large, as large as the universe. It can be infinitely small, small enough to enter

one's body," Chou said in an interview in 1995. "Although I can't touch the circle I can feel its existence and that makes me feel good." (Qu, 1994: 24) Art historian Lucy Lim described Chou's circle as "an image of wish-fulfilment, of romantic longings, of mystical escape that remains always stable and serene in the midst of fluctuations and turmoil" (Lim, 1991: 25). The ubiquity of circles in her satin paintings seemed to indicate Chou's even stronger commitment to her spiritual aspiration, and her belief in the concentrated energy that was ultimately immortal. In her work on satin, it was as if Chou was writing her own *Circle Poem*, the words of which she had inscribed in several of her paintings. "I shall draw many circles, and hope that you will know all my minds," the *Circle Poem* reads. "As my love is endless, I shall draw endless circles." (Pang, 2006b)

When writing about Chou's work on small canvas and satin in 2005, Hong Pizhu, a member of the Chinese Writers' Association, speculated on the reason she had shifted from *xuan* paper to canvas and satin. "To paint on *xuan* paper, because of its absorbent nature, the painter needs to paint with quick action and with perfect control over the amount of ink, colour and water to apply," he wrote. "In her [Chou] present physical condition it is hard for her to paint with quick action." (Hong, 2005: 27) Hong was making two assumptions about Chou. One was that, because she now relied on the walker and wheelchair to move about, her arms and hands were also less functional. "My right hand is in fact very strong," Chou told me. "I can still execute my big and powerful sweeping ink strokes." The other assumption was that she used to be a quick action painter. In fact, Chou never considered speed to be a virtue. "When I paint my action is very slow. Like the way slow cooking creates flavour, my slow action in painting creates layers and richness in content," she told me. "My paintings are not of a person who paints a work with a few quick strokes to show he has reached the summit."

In *Untitled I* (Figure 7.34), painted by Chou on medium-sized *xuan* paper in 2006, Chou's sweeping stroke was as strong as ever, but she also painted with the awkwardness of a child. In this work, Chou—as in her latest works on satin—gave the work a coloured background. However, instead of painting the coloured background first, she executed her sweeping stroke first and then filled in the red background around it afterwards. The unevenness of the colouring-in, the less than perfect white circle, and the use of two primary colours red and green next to each other gave this work a naïve look. “It seems like a child who just sat down to draw, puts a few wilful strokes on the paper,” one reporter wrote, “and then starts methodically colouring in around it” (Tanski, 2006).

As we have seen, Chou never stopped painting on *xuan* paper entirely when she was painting on other media. In 2006, as well as painting a small number of medium-sized works on *xuan* paper, Chou also started to paint on 60 cm round *xuan* paper. She painted a small number of these round works in 2003, but stopped when she started to work on canvas. Many of her works on round *xuan* paper painted after 2006 are paintings of circles within circles. There, in the innermost ring of these concentric circles, is often Chou herself. Sometimes she is represented by her personal seal, at other times by her signature *yun*. At yet other times, Chou is represented by the circle of love or by her radiating whirl. However, in *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 1* (Figure 7.35), it is as if Chou has become obliterated amidst what seems like a blob of gold in the innermost circle. She also painted many self-portraits on the round *xuan* paper, using the paper's outline as the contour of her face. In *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 2* (Figure 7.36), she painted one red dot for her left eye, one green dot for her right eye, a large square seal that says “be a happy old woman” as her big nose, and a sweeping ink stroke as her mouth. “That is exactly how she sees herself,” Meng commented when he saw the work, “an old wrinkled face woman.” Even though Chou now thought of herself as a wrinkled face old woman, the female reproductive organs—although more

abstracted than before—remained prominent in her work, as can be seen in *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 3* (Figure 7.37). “My mind is never far from thinking about sex,” Chou told me, “and the love between a man and a woman.” Indeed, the love between a man and a woman was epitomised in *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 4* (Figure 7.38), where two neuron-impregnated discs—one *yin*, one *yang*—are encased not only in their own circle of love but also in a wider circle of love as well.

Chou’s new leitmotif, the circle of love, combined into one all of her symbols for life and spiritual aspiration up to that time. Branches, which were her earliest symbol of life and growth, had developed into the sprouts on the sprouting bulb. Then the bulb developed a cell body and an axon while the sprouts developed into dendrites; together, they became a neuron. Spheres, which were Chou’s earliest symbol for spiritual aspiration, became coloured discs. Chou’s first coloured disc was red, but other colours soon followed. When a red disc and a green disc edge slowly towards each other, or one disc overlaps another, sexual energy is emitted. Around 2003, the coloured disc became impregnated by the neuron. What is conveyed by the neuron-impregnated disc is obvious. “You have become figurative in your recent work,” Munro teased Chou in 2003. The circle of love emerged when the neuron-impregnated disc became encased in a circle. Inside the circle of love, sometimes there is one lone neuron-impregnated disc, sometimes two *yang* ones, sometimes two *yin* ones and in the case of *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 4*, one *yin* and one *yang*.

Both Chou’s coloured discs and her use of red and green together in her work were criticised by an art historian from China. Zhu Qi, whose PhD thesis, “A History of Hong Kong Art”, was published in 2005, visited Chou in Brisbane in early 2003. “There are no skills involved in painting these discs,” he told her. “Chinese people [in China], who value skills above all else in painting, will stop taking your work seriously as soon as they see these discs.” He also disapproved of her employing clashing colours. “In traditional Chinese

painting we never put green next to red,” he told her. “I think you are trying to apply colour in the Western way but I don’t think you understand Western art as deeply as you do Chinese art.” Indeed, even Chinese in Brisbane were critical of Chou’s red and green discs. “What is this?” one Chinese friend asked me. “Are they supposed to be traffic lights?” Finally, Zhu warned Chou that she was painting herself into a very dangerous position. “If you continue to paint this way you will fall into a hole that you cannot climb back out of again.”

As we have seen, Chou paid no attention to Zhu’s warning. “My sphere represents concentration but my red disc, though flat, has even more energy,” Chou told me. “It represents not only concentration but my purpose in life and that is to make Chinese painting contemporary.” Chou also continued to employ red and green together in her work. “In ancient times red and green were never considered as clashing colours,” Chou told me. As we have seen, she also continued to place a red disc next to a green disc. “Green represents delight, pleasure, and joy to me,” she said. “No matter how miserable life is there are always happy moments.” Indeed, red and green became the two most frequently used colours in Chou’s work painted after 2006.

At the same time that Chou returned to painting on round *xuan* paper, she also started to paint on a set of 110x210 cm large works on canvas. “I bought the canvas from a shop in Brisbane,” Chou told me. “They call it linen but it is canvas.” Unlike the small canvas, which was stretched on a frame, the large canvas came as a sheet. In *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 5* (Figure 7.39), Chou painted the background into several strips—one broad strip of ink, an even broader strip of green, a narrow strip of white and a very broad strip of red that covers more than half the work. “The acrylic I use is very expensive,” Chou told me. “The idea of ‘very expensive’ registers in my mind for a few second and that’s all. I am never frugal with the use of colour. The green takes three layers and the red takes two layers so a lot of acrylic paint is needed.” Amid the tension provided by the division of colours, two of

Chou's circles of love brought tenderness to the work. The two love circles, one with two red impregnated-discs and one with one green impregnated-disc, are yearning to connect with each other. Collage and inscription dominate the broad green strip and some parts of the black strip. What Chou had collaged and inscribed on this work—an American stamp, photos of her earlier works, her address in English, strips of paper with Chinese writings on them, single Chinese characters such as “laugh”, “fire”, “big”, “small”, standard English phrases such as “with compliments”, “Please do not bend”—seem mundane, but they provide a glimpse into Chou's daily life, humour and beliefs. One of the strips with writing says: “A person went into a book shop and told the shop keeper he wanted to buy a book that was not a love story, not a detective story, not a crime novel but one that had a train time table.” Another strip says: “A monk has a special power. An ordinary person also has a special power and that is the power to concentrate and to be simple and pure.” In the way she collaged in this work, there is an element of assemblage, giving the viewers the pleasure of looking at ordinary things or words that are not generally seen together.

In *Life is a Many Spindoured Thing 6* (Figure 7.40) and *Life is a Many Spindoured Thing 7* (Figure 7.41), Chou's signature sweeping strokes have gone berserk. Whereas her earlier sweeping strokes and whirling strokes were the epitome of elegance, power and control, the sweeping strokes in these works are unruly and wayward. The disorderliness has been created by the disappearance of direction—namely, a beginning and an end—of the sweeping stroke. Moreover, instead of one single sweeping stroke or several parallel sweeping strokes, there are now many overlapping sweeping strokes. It is as if time has been compressed in one big tangle rather than in its linear form. In both works Chou's ink-blob-splash explodes with just as much intensity as ever before. There is also a sense of rage from these works but they also project much tenderness. In *Life is a Many Spindoured Thing 6* amid the chaos one finds Chou's circle of love, two neuron-impregnated red discs encased in

a white circle sitting lovingly next to each other. Likewise in *Life is a Many Splendored Thing* 7 amid the chaos created by the unruly and tangled sweeping strokes, in the calm sea of vermillion red on the other side of the painting, there is a photo of a young Chinese woman. Chou collaged a black and white photo of her mother on to the painting. Next to the collage she inscribed the words: “Sun is strong, parents’ love is boundless, a gentleman is magnanimous, a petty person is judgemental.”

This was the first time Chou had made reference to her mother in her painting. “The seed for me to become an artist was sown by my mother,” Chou told me in 2006. She meant this in two ways. First, she was referring to the emotional wounds her mother had inflicted upon her. “I had a very unhappy childhood,” Chou said to me. “My parents were fighting with each other all the time.” As we saw in the previous chapters, she did not forgive what her mother did to her: “I was close to my father, and I had very little sympathy for what happened to my mother.” Indeed, she often made references to her father in her painting. Since she first painted the chickens in 1968, the same chickens kept reappearing in her work because her father was born in the year of the chicken. However, being an artist had helped her to heal some of the old wounds inflicted by her mother. Indeed, in her old age, Chou not only came to forgive her mother but also to admire her. “I think I have inherited a little from my mother. She was very strong and sincere,” Chou told Hilary Binks in 1998. “She always did silly things, for instance, her marriage! But anyway, she was brave.” (Binks, 1998: 38) Second, Chou attributed her ink and brush skills to the early training she received from her mother. “I learned to hold the brush and how to employ ink when I was only three years old,” Chou told me. As well as providing her with the early training, Chou felt that it was her mother who first introduced her to the concept of individuality. “When I was little I heard my mother complaining about doing calligraphy for the textbooks,” Chou told me. “Because she had to make the characters look like they were printed rather than handwritten, she felt she

was losing her own personality. I learned then that a person has a personality that can be expressed in writing.”

Chou never considered herself a calligrapher, but she had her own distinctive style in her calligraphy. “My style is that of *zhuo*,” Chou said. “Sometimes my writing is neater than other times, that’s all.” Huang Pin-hung, a painter whom Chou greatly admired, “emphasised the aesthetic value of *cho* (*zhuo*) or ‘intentional awkwardness’” in Chinese painting (Kuo, 2004: 146). Of course, the challenge of *zhuo*—whether in painting or in calligraphy—is to make the “intentional awkwardness and “the child-likeness” look unintentional. The inscription that Chou wrote next to the collage of her mother’s photograph in *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing* 7 is typical of Chou’s calligraphic style. It is childlike, earnest, simple and awkward. Chou told me: “My handwriting mirrors the way I aspire to live my life.” Chou was not only proud of the awkwardness of her calligraphy, but aspired to attain awkwardness in her painting. She said to me proudly in 2006: “My use of colour has become *suqi*.” For Chou, to achieve *suqi*—vulgarity—in her use of colour was achieving *zhuo* in her painting.

Although Chou was not a carver, seals play an important part in her paintings. After her husband died, many friends started to carve seals for her. She told me:

It is always very tiring for me to put seals on my work. It requires concentration.

To make smudge-free seal impressions on the surface of the painting requires skill. I put slightly damp paper under the area of the painting where the impression is to be made. The degree of dampness of the paper underneath the painting makes all the difference to how well the impression is going to turn out.

She also challenged herself to make smudge-free seal impressions on her work on satin:

“Putting seals on satin takes even more effort. You have to make sure the seal is put along the

grain rather than against the grain of the material. If the seal is placed against the grain the image will crack after being mounted.”

Chou’s shift from *xuan* paper to canvas mirrored her shift from *xuan* paper to hemp paper after her stroke. Her physical condition at the time she painted her large works on canvas was almost the same as it was soon after her stroke. The physical condition Hong referred to, although it had not prevented her from painting powerful sweeping strokes, was making the handling of large sheets of delicate *xuan* paper difficult for her. “These three-layer *xuan* paper sheets which I have been using tear so easily but certain effects can only be achieved on *xuan* paper,” Chou told me. “I have to roll it on my table and put it across my walker to transport it from one room to another.” As much as she wanted to continue to paint on large *xuan* paper, she knew she had to face reality. “Reality is very real,” Chou was fond of saying. While the tough hemp paper solved her problem earlier, Chou now found a solution in canvas. Chou was able to handle the large sheet of canvas roughly, even dragging it on the floor from one room to another without the fear of tearing it.

However, Chou’s shift from *xuan* paper to canvas was not all due to her physical disability. The long years of experimenting with the use of acrylic on hemp paper, silk, board and satin gave her the courage to paint on canvas. As we have seen, the experience she gained from using acrylic on surfaces with various degrees of absorption enabled her to use acrylic with good results on *xuan* paper. By the time she painted on canvas, she had accumulated a wealth of knowledge of how to use acrylic effectively on all type of surfaces. Perhaps as important as experience and techniques was Chou’s readiness to try new things. “I will not stubbornly hold on to Chinese painting materials,” she wrote back in 1973. “I will use other materials if necessary. After all, painting is about expressing one’s thought and painting materials are only means to an end.” (Chou, 1973: 164)

Chou's post-stroke painting came full circle when, along with painting on round *xuan* paper and large canvas, she began painting on *ming* paper. *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 8* (Figure 7.42), painted in 2007, is one of Chou's first works on *ming* paper. The unevenly coloured and not quite circular golden disc is painted on the silver that comes with the *ming* paper. Three rings—the black outer ring, the white inner ring and the vermillion ring superimposed upon the white ring—surround the innermost golden disc. A thin, not so straight brown line sits above the golden disc. The vermillion ring has bits of colour missing or torn off from its surface. Water marks with orange rings surround the outer edge of the imperfect vermillion ring. The rings, with the golden disc in the centre, are expanding, threatening to engulf everything in their path, but a horizontal sweep of bright green grass with a tiny realistic looking house with a red roof perching on it has survived. In *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 9* (Figure 7.43), a big, unevenly coloured vermillion disc sits in the middle of the painting against the gold and orange background that is part of the *ming* paper. The brushstrokes, which come from all directions towards the centre of the painting, are both unruly and childlike. Some of the brushstrokes look as if they have been smudged. There are also water marks on the left-hand side of the painting. Chou's iconic branches are abstracted to simple lines.

These two works have a paradoxical quality in several respects. First, they are small and big at the same time. They are small in size but big in content. One example is in *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 8*. Despite the smallness of the work, the unevenness in the paint, the water marks, the seal, the superimposed vermillion ring, the bits of torn-off paint, the saturated paint in the horizontal sweep of green acrylic and the house with the red roof create a multitude of depths in this work. In *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 9*, not only is there depth but also violent movements—which is unexpected in such a confined space. “I have put as much thinking into painting these small works [on *ming* paper] as I have done in a

large work,” Chou said to me. Second, these works are disorderly and orderly at the same time. The imperfect vermilion ring, the less than completely circular golden disc, the water marks, the random brush strokes and the smudged ink work give these works disorderliness, but the thin brown line, the horizontal sweep of green acrylic, the well-placed seals and the decisive signatures bring all the disorderly parts of the work into a harmonious whole with absolute order. “It looks as if I have painted these works arbitrarily,” Chou said to me, “but I still follow certain compositional rules.” Finally, these works speak of death and life in the same breath. While the medium speaks of death, the water marks—the symbol for birth—speak loudly of life.

Unstoppable

Just as it appeared that Chou had been completely ignored by the mainstream art world, she managed to secure a show of her work on small canvas at the Museum of Brisbane (formerly the City Hall Gallery) in May 2005. Since her work was shown at the Queensland Performing Art Centre in 1996, Chou’s work had not been shown in any public institutions in Brisbane or anywhere else in Australia. Likewise, since Philip Bacon had the last show for her in 1999 there had not been any interest in her work from other commercial galleries. When Ray Hughes, of Ray Hughes Gallery in Sydney, was in Brisbane in 2003, and saw one of Chou’s catalogues, his response was, “Not for me.” Chou’s work was shown to the curator of 4A Gallery in Sydney, but again did not attract any interest.

Chou’s success in securing a show of her work at the Museum of Brisbane was again partly due to her perseverance in cultivating friendships. “Everyone is a genius,” Chou was fond of saying. When she met the couple from Hong Kong in 1993, they seemed to be the most unlikely people who could help her to advance her career. Yet as we have seen they were partly instrumental to her taking up painting on canvas. As it turned out, they also

indirectly helped her to secure her show at the Museum of Brisbane. In 2005, the Museum of Brisbane staged an exhibition called *Brisbane Buddhas* by asking people in Brisbane to lend their Buddha statues to the exhibition. One thousand Buddhas were collected for the show. Along with the exhibition of Buddhas, there was also an exhibition of works by fourteen Australian-based Asian artists. Instead of having her work shown with the other participating artists, Chou was given a separate room to show her work. She showed a total of twenty-two works on 122x41 cm canvas in three sets of triptychs and thirteen individual works.

As she did previously, Chou made an all-out effort to make her exhibition at the Museum of Brisbane a success. She named the exhibition *Inflame My Heart* because she was inspired by a book of poetry, *Inflame My Heart, O'Lord*, written by a St Paul de Chartres sister. Chou asked her friend from Hong Kong to translate "Inflame My Heart" into Chinese. He translated it into *dian liang wu xin*, "kindle the light in my heart", which captured Chou's philosophical ideal. He then carved the four characters into a seal. In the room where Chou's works were exhibited, her personal seal, together with the seal carved by her friend, looked stunning on a pair of black scrolls on which Elizabeth Bates, curator at the Museum of Brisbane, wrote the didactics in English.

To make sure there was plenty of publicity for the show, Chou asked friends from the Chinese Writers' Association to write about her exhibition. To attract more people to write, she wrote a few paragraphs about the exhibition, including a few words on her philosophy of life. She made many copies of what she had written, and gave them to her Chinese writer friends. As a result, there were more than half a dozen write-ups about her exhibition in the local Chinese newspapers and magazines. To ensure there would be plenty of people to attend the opening, Chou wrote out a list of one hundred and twenty names and addresses for the museum. On the opening night, Chou arrived at the opening with Father Chan. "I have

asked Father Chan to wear his tuxedo,” Chou told me the night before the opening. “I thought it would be nice to have a Catholic priest in the midst of an activity centred on the Buddha.”

In order to attract as many people as possible to come to see the exhibition at the Museum of Brisbane, Chou gave a painting demonstration as well as an artist’s talk. For her painting demonstration, she enlisted her friend from Hong Kong as her assistant. For the artist’s talk, she asked Meng to help her. Meng had been writing about her work regularly in the Chinese newspapers since he first met her. “Her work has evolved from complexity to simplicity in both composition and the use of colour,” he wrote about Chou’s work on small canvas (Meng, 2005). He brought a group of more than thirty Taiwanese housewives from two Chinese book clubs to attend her talk.

In September, when her paintings on small canvas were shown again at the Brisbane Convention Centre as an offshoot of her exhibition at the Museum of Brisbane, Chou gave another painting demonstration. Chou’s friend from Hong Kong was again her assistant. To ensure there would be enough people to come to see her painting demonstration, she again created much publicity for the event. She was interviewed by the local English newspaper, the *Southern Star*. When the photographer sent by the newspaper took a good portrait of her, she invited him to take photos of her work. She then placed his photographs in the *Queensland Chinese News* with his name next to them. There was a big turn-out of both Chinese and non-Chinese at Chou’s demonstration.

Among the people present at the demonstration was the proprietor of *Queensland Chinese News*. While there was only one local Chinese newspaper when Chou first arrived in Brisbane, there were more than half a dozen Chinese newspapers and magazines by 2005. The *Queensland Chinese News* was a latecomer to the local Chinese media development, but Chou, who had been loyal to the other Chinese newspapers and to *Bridge*, saw the potential in the *Queensland Chinese News* to promote her and her work since its speciality was using

colour photos—often lots of them—in its reporting and advertising for events. While Chou placed a full-page colour advertisement in *Bridge* for her exhibition at the Museum of Brisbane, she paid the *Queensland Chinese News* to report on her painting demonstration at the Convention Centre. “I spend money freely on things I deem necessary,” Chou told me. Indeed, Chou paid the *Queensland Chinese News* so much that it reported her subsequent exhibitions free of charge.

At the opening of her show at the Museum of Brisbane, the Deputy Lord Mayor of Brisbane described Chou as “unstoppable” in her devotion to painting. Chou was proud of herself for being able to continue to paint despite her age and disability. “I am an old and disable [disabled] woman ... Actually so stupid and clumsy, no talent,” said Chou in her deliberately broken but completely comprehensible English at the opening. “Of course I am not a genius at all. But I love art so much. I work so hard, devote all myself into my work. I feel it’s nice to be alive, even I am 81, I love life. I love to work. How can I work when I drop dead?”

Indeed, Chou’s passion for her work was greater than ever. “If one has lived as long as I have one would have experienced the whole spectrum of human emotions: happiness, sadness, ecstasy but the events that produced these emotions have all but evaporated into thin air,” she wrote in 2002. “My painting is the only thing that remains important to me.” (Chou, 2002) In 2005, Chou—who had seldom complained about being fatigued—began to tell me that she felt exhausted at times. “Sometimes I get so tired that I don’t even want to wash my bowl after dinner. I just cover it up with a plate,” Chou told me. “But as soon as I see my unfinished work on the table I start changing a bit here and adding a bit there. Before I know it I am no longer tired.” Her love of painting and her love of life had become inseparable.

Some of her urgency to paint had to do with her awareness of her physical deterioration. “I appreciated life before my stroke but I appreciate life even more after my

stroke,” Chou told me. Chou produced more work between 1999 and 2005 than she did between 1992 and 1999. “The speed at which an elderly person regresses,” Chou told me, “is as fast as the daily progress made by a newborn baby.” Her urgency to paint was driven as much by the alertness of her mind as by the deterioration of her physical condition. “Not only has my brain not aged due to normal degeneration,” Chou told me, “but my thinking also remains new and fresh.” Chou had been acutely aware of the discrepancy between her physical and mental state of health for a long time. “A needle cannot have two sharp ends,” she said. “God gave me a poor body, a body that has trouble walking but He also gave me a mind that has a perfect memory. Very few things escape my attention. I know exactly what works Helina took and did not take from me. I don’t need to write down such things.” Such appreciation of her own mind heightened her need to paint as much as possible while she could.

She also was making a continuous effort to achieve recognition for her work in Hong Kong. As we have seen, despite her achievements she had only had two exhibitions at a public institution in Hong Kong. Her lack of proper recognition was obvious in that she had only had one retrospective exhibition and that was in 1986. In early 2004, Chou told me that both the University Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Hong Kong (formerly the Fung Ping Shan Museum) and the Hong Kong Art Museum were considering staging a retrospective exhibition of her work. “My work is just as good as that of Zhao Wuji, Zhu Dequn and Liu Guosong,” she told me, referring to painters who had been given solo exhibitions at the Hong Kong Art Museum, but they are men. I hope they will publish a catalogue [for my exhibition] as big and as nice as the one they did for Lu Shou-kwan.”

However, around May 2004, Chou received word that the Hong Kong Art Museum had called off its plan to stage a retrospective exhibition for her, but the University Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Hong Kong would go ahead with its plan. Chou was

greatly disappointed, but she was still hopeful that before she died the Hong Kong Art Museum would hold a retrospective for her. “It takes at least three years to paint enough work to be included in a retrospective,” Chou told me. Although she was disappointed, she did everything she could to help her long-time collector, who was sponsoring her retrospective exhibition at the University Museum and Art Gallery, to make the exhibition a success. “It was my idea to show my latest work on satin at Hanart rather than including them in my retrospective,” Chou told me. “This way people know new things are still coming out of me.”

As well as painting relentlessly, Chou had to deal with both the day-to-day management of her career and day-to-day living. Since moving south, she had been provided with two carers by Aged Care. They each spent a couple of hours each week shopping, doing housework, running errands for her and taking her to her medical appointments. However, Chou still had a great deal to do herself. “People think other people do everything for me,” Chou complained to me sometimes. “The fact is from wrapping up my paintings ready for posting overseas to getting my meals ready, to getting my pants mended, and to getting my accounts in order so that the accountant can do my tax returns, I do everything myself.” Since 2003, she had been receiving Meals on Wheels twice a week. “I can get three meals out of them but I still have to cook a little green vegetable to give me a little extra fibre and cook the meals for the other days,” she told me. Because of her difficulty with balance, it was hard to take clothes out of the closet standing up. Her carers might have done more housework for her if she had not asked them to go shopping for painting materials for her so often. “She buys the colours I use for me,” she told me, referring to one of her carers. “Sometimes it takes her a long time before she knows what I want, but I make her get the right colours for me even if it means taking a hundred trips to the shops.”

Another thing that took up a lot of Chou's time was the sustaining of old friendships and the pursuing of new ones. Though she seemed to live a rather reclusive life, Chou in fact socialised with many people on a fairly regular basis. She lived an unconventional life in the way she conducted her own life, but when it came to socialising with others she followed very conventional rules. Whether it was the parents of some young people she knew visiting Brisbane from China, a local journalist's wife who wanted to see her work or friends who had helped her previously, Chou welcomed their visits. Chou was also happy for those who were connoisseurs to visit her, and for those who knew nothing about art to see her work. "Those who are less cultured seem to understand my paintings better," Chou told me. On all these occasions, she treated people with great hospitality. Sometimes she even took them out to lunch. At other times, she had caterers bringing food to her home. Such activities often took up much of her energy.

Throughout this period, Chou practised *Qigong* daily. *Qigong* continued to be her tool to access her subconscious mind. "In that state of mind one can see things one normally cannot see such as what others are doing when they are not in your presence," Chou told me. "One must not speak about these things to others either." *Qigong* also continued to be a form of medical treatment for her. "It helps me to balance my feelings of love and hate so I can be free of having a complex," Chou told me. "It also helps the circulation in my left leg, which still hurts from poor circulation resulting from my stroke." Chou had kept in touch with her *qigong* master by phone. "He recently told me to relax my heart muscles and let the blood flow more naturally into the arteries," Chou me. "He said if I could do that I would not die." Chou did not think she could ever achieve that but she had made own breakthrough in her *qigong* practice. "I can now direct my *qi* to flow from the left hemisphere to the right hemisphere of my brain and vice versa," she said.

Despite her daily practice of *qigong*, Chou found that she was becoming increasingly tired. Years of non-stop work, her infirmities and the inexorable process of aging were taking their toll. Thus she had decided as soon as planning began for her exhibition in Hong Kong that she would not travel to the opening in March 2006. Because she did not want to dampen her collector's enthusiasm for the exhibition, she decided not to tell him of her decision right away. "I have my strategy," Chou told me. "I will tell him when the time is right." On 8 January 2006, Chou admitted herself into Greenslopes Hospital. "I was trying to eat and to keep an eye on my laundry in the drier at the same time," Chou told me. "I slipped and fell." Chou was taken to the hospital by ambulance. "I rang 000 and I told them to get the key to my house from the manager." For the next four months, Chou stayed first at the hospital, then at the hospital's rehabilitation centre and finally at Amity Nursing Home. Her four-month stay in the hospital coincided with the time of her two exhibitions in Hong Kong.

In July 2006, Jeannie Mok was staging another exhibition, *Technicolour*, at the Multicultural Community Centre. Chou had agreed to participate in the exhibition before she went into hospital. "Jeannie Mok thought I would not have any work to show because I was in the hospital all that time," Chou told me. Yet Chou showed one large work on canvas and eleven works on medium-sized *xuan* paper. She had painted the large work, which was not for sale, on canvas before she went into hospital but painted the medium-size works on *xuan* paper after she returned home. She was able to get the work ready for the exhibition in such a short time because she only had to paint the second stage of these works. Moreover, she started working on the second stage of these works while she was still at Amity nursing home. One day, just a couple of weeks before she left the nursing home, Chou rang me to ask me to meet her at her home, as her Shanghainese friends were bringing her home for a visit. It turned out that her friends had brought her home so that she could do some work on the second stage of her *xuan* paper paintings. At the end of the visit, it was decided that they

would bring her to her home again the following weekend to do more work. Chou painted these works very quickly by applying either the impact structural stroke or the sweeping stroke in the first stage, and added relatively little detail and colour in the second stage. In some of the works, she even let the Shanghainese husband place the seals. “Be brave,” she told him. “Place it wherever you think is right.” These works resembled her earlier works, and some even looked like her *zen* paintings. “Jeannie Mok has done a lot for me,” Chou explained to me. “Why not let her make some money from this? After all, she also donates her money to her church and various charities.” Chou knew many people who could not accept her most recent works often liked her earlier works, especially her *zen*-like paintings. Chou’s own feeling about these works was revealed in the way she signed the works. In recent years, Chou, who often signed her work with just the character *yun*, had increasingly made the character resemble a question mark. To show her own disapproval of these works, she signed the question mark-like *yun* anti-clockwise rather than clockwise.

As always, a large group of Chou’s friends attended the opening. As well as her friends from the Chinese Writers’ Association, these now included the president of the Chinese Catholic Association and his wife, and the proprietor of Jeta Gardens, a nursing home that was due to open in early 2007, and his wife. Although the nursing home was a non-religious enterprise, the proprietor was a devout Buddhist. As Chou had expected, all of her work on *xuan* paper was sold. While Chou deliberately painted these works to appeal to buyers, critics like Meng and Hong regarded their simplicity as a natural development of her work. “Simplification in a painter’s work is inevitable when a painter ages,” Meng told me. Hong agreed, asking me: “Do you remember that the last time you and I were visiting Irene I predicted that her work would become simplified?”

Father Chan accompanied Chou to the opening of her exhibition. According to Chou, while she was in hospital, Father Chan tried to persuade her that she should move into St Paul

de Chartres, but in the end he conceded that she could continue to live in her rented house as long as someone could be found to live with her. “I would commit suicide if someone had to come and live with me and to look after me,” Chou told me. “I need my privacy more than anything else.” With the help of her Shanghainese friends, Chou moved back home before Father Chan had a chance to find someone to look after her.

Chou wanted to have exhibitions of her work as much as she wanted to paint and to live independently. In 2007, just as most people were expecting her to wind down because of her age and disability, Chou had her largest solo exhibition yet, *Life is a Many Splendoured Thing*, in Brisbane. A total of eighty-one works—nine on large canvas, forty-six on round *xuan* paper and twenty-six on *ming* paper—were shown. People were surprised, partly because since 2004 Chou had not shown any large works in Brisbane and partly because, as we have seen, her work on the small *ming* paper was as complex as ever. What surprised people even more—especially those who thought she had become a Buddhist—was that the Chinese Catholic Association should stage her exhibition for her at the Sacred Heart Centre.

As we have seen, Chou contemplated having an exhibition at the Sacred Heart Centre as early as 2002, but it took nearly five years to realise her goal. “I do everything by will power,” Chou said to me. “Willpower is not pretty to look at. If you are not afraid of the unsightliness of willpower and use it properly, you can do achieve anything.” According to Chou, Father Chan understood neither her work nor her need to continue to paint. “He feels responsible for me,” Chou told me. “But I told him there is work for me to do yet. I told him our parents gave us life and we need to do something with our lives. We should not sit around just to wait for God to welcome us home.” It appeared that Chou succeeded not only in convincing Father Chan that she needed to continue to paint, but also persuaded him to give his blessings to have an exhibition of her work at Sacred Heart Centre.

As with all her exhibitions, while it appeared to be organised entirely by other people, Chou was the mastermind behind it. Chou's borrowing of the title for her 2005 exhibition from the Catholic nun was no accident. The presence of Father Chan and Chou's friends at the Catholic church, including several of the committee members of the Chinese Catholic Community Association, at the openings of her exhibitions in 2005 and 2006 was in fact part of her effort to groom Father Chan and the committee members for the job. "You have seen art exhibitions organized by Chinese people that looked totally unprofessional," Chou said to me. "Not this one." She was confident that her exhibition at the Sacred Heart Centre would be put together professionally because she knew the people who organised it were capable and had worked well together as a team before. Just before the opening at the Multicultural Community Centre in 2006, Chou had given Father Chan one of her large works on canvas. "I didn't think priests collect paintings," Chou told me. "But Father Chan took one of the large paintings on canvas without any hesitation." However, Father Chan soon returned the work to her. "I did not realize that he actually looked at my painting carefully after he took it home," Chou told me later. "He discovered that I had not put my signature or my seal on the painting." When Father Chan brought her work back to her for her to put her signature on it, she told him she was buying the work back from him. "I wrote a cheque to the Chinese Catholic Church," Chou told me. By donating a substantial amount of money to the church, Chou had given more than enough money to cover the costs in the staging of the exhibition, including installing proper lighting, hiring the screens to hang the paintings and printing the catalogues and invitations.

As well as giving enough money for others to do the work for her, Chou also—as usual—did her share of the work. As well as putting a half-page advertisement for her exhibition in the *Queensland Chinese News*, she also phoned her biographer to ask her to write an article about her upcoming exhibition in *Bridge*. In return, Chou placed a colour

advertisement for her exhibition in the magazine. She even paid for an expensive colour advertisement in the *Courier-Mail*. As much as she disliked being interviewed, she was both willing to be interviewed by the *Southern Star* and by the ethnic radio 4EB in Chinese: “I am never lazy.”

More than a hundred people attended the opening at the Sacred Heart Centre on 29 April 2007. The exhibition was opened by the deputy Bishop in Brisbane, two local politicians and the Consul from the People’s Republic of China. Chou made a grand entrance when she arrived at the exhibition. Instead of being accompanied by Father Chan, she was accompanied by her collector in Brisbane. Chou, who did not like speeches, said a few words from her wheelchair to thank all those who staged the exhibition. As expected by Chou, the committee members of the Chinese Catholic Association put on an exhibition that looked totally professional. Father Chan made a point of being overseas at the time because he did not want to be seen to be promoting Chou’s art. He did, however, write one of the catalogue essays. “I have personally watched her pushing boundaries, pushing herself with great difficulties on the floor on hands and knees to do her last paintings you are seeing here,” he wrote. “They are not only expressions of her inner-self and mental and spiritual vision but an extraordinary show of courage, perseverance and physical endurance.” (Chan, 2007)

Chou gave yet another demonstration for the “meet the artist” afternoon during the week of the exhibition. As she sat at the table set up for her, she started to paint a work on a small, round piece of *xuan* paper. “I am using these two colours [red and green],” Chou told the audience, “because someone has chosen these colours for me to use today.” She spoke casually as she painted. “In life as in painting we all make mistakes,” she said. “One just has to make correction after correction.” One lady in the audience suddenly asked a question: “What does the universe in your heart and your heart in the universe mean?” Just at that point, Chou added some gold to her painting. “Now this [gold] will give the surface some

layers and depth,” Chou said. “Most people only see life as a flat surface when in fact life has many layers just like the space we live in is multi-dimensional.” After Chou finished her painting, one lady who was about to purchase one of Chou’s round *xuan* paper paintings wanted her to explain the painting to her. “I don’t need to tell you what my painting is about,” Chou said. “You have the freedom to interpret the meaning of the painting however you want just as I have the freedom to paint whatever I want.” While Chou was unimpressed by those who wanted her to tell them about her paintings, she was moved by those who actually looked at her work. As someone wheeled Chou to her car after her demonstration, they passed the security guard who had been hired to watch over the works during the exhibition. “I think you had a tragedy in life,” the guard said to Chou, pointing at the painting in front of him. “That black ink [ink-blob-splash] represents the tragedy. You went through a difficult time but these whirly things [the radiating whirl] showed that you eventually found happiness.” Chou was so taken back by the guard’s comment that she forgot to pretend that she did not speak English well. “You are absolutely right. I am moved. I want to cry. You have used your eyes, used your head and you have told me what you think. I am touched!” she said.

On 8 June, only a few weeks after her exhibition at Sacred Heart Centre, Chou, to the surprise of many people, moved into Jeta Gardens instead of St Paul de Chartres. “Father Chan is a good man but somehow he thinks I belong to him and that I need to do what he wants me to do such as to stop seeing my Buddhist teacher,” Chou complained. “But I am not one to take orders from anyone. If I was that kind of person I would have continued to paint flowers and bamboos or just to copy other people’s work.”

While her supporters looked upon her unstoppable desire to paint and to push her career forward as admirable, others criticised her for being a hypocrite. “How could she claim that

she had reached a state of mind that she could take it or leave it if she still wants others to write about her work, to advertise her exhibitions and to sell her work?" one member of the Chinese Writers' Association asked.

As we have seen, Chou had long loathed the materialistic life. "I have finally become a mature person," she told me in 2004. "I no longer desire nice clothes or tasty food." At home, Chou wore old clothes, such as coats from a bygone era, because they kept her warm. She even wore secondhand clothes to mass. "I wore my husband's old trousers to mass but no one noticed it was a pair of man's pants," Chou told me. "My husband was most particular about his attire and dressed in the most expensive clothes all his life." As well as having very little need for money for luxuries in life, Chou also had little desire to accumulate money. "I told my friend Wu Tung [curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts] that I have great respect for you because you do not regard money as all mighty," art historian Lucy Lim wrote (Lim, 1996). After Walters offered Chou money when her early works sold well at the Grotto exhibition, she told Walters to keep the money. "I gave these works to her," Chou explained. "They are her property." At times, Chou's generosity towards others verged on her being a spendthrift. "I am not generous," Chou told me. "That is just my way of showing that I do not think highly of money." Yet Chou sold her work for very high prices and sought every opportunity to sell her paintings. As we have seen, sometimes she even painted her work purely to make a quick sale. When Mr Tsing told her that one of his customers was looking for Lu Shoukwan's *zen* paintings to buy, and was willing to pay \$1000 for one, Chou told him that she could paint a few for him to sell. "I told him we will go half and half on the profit," Chou told me. "I told him if he could sell each for more than \$1000, I still want only \$500 for my share." Chou was also adamant that she did not want fame. "I said to her, I know you don't care about money but you care about fame," her son told me after Chou died. "I made her so furious." Yet, as we have seen, she sought publicity with no reserve, inviting

people to write about her and her work, spending several thousands of dollars advertising for her exhibitions. She never refused requests to be interviewed. She was also willing to be listed in the various editions of *Who's Who*, and even accepted an invitation to be nominated for Australian of the Year in 2004.

Chou was fully aware of the paradox of not wanting fame and money, but wanting to be known and to have her work sold. "I have never painted to kill time. I need to sell my work because having a job is very important to me," Chou told me. "I have a responsibility as an artist. I have spent my life on painting. To be accountable to myself I have to keep my career going." For Chou, living with the paradox of not wanting money and fame, yet wanting her work known and sold, was no different from living with all the other contradictions in life. In one of her last large works on canvas, *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 10* (Figure 7.44), she reiterated the perennial theme in her work of achieving equilibrium, harmony and balance, her solution for the human predicament. In this work, a row of coloured discs sits precariously on a horizontal line near the top of the vertical work. The scene is reminiscent of *Carelessness*, which we looked at in the last chapter, but there are major differences between these two works. First, the four spheres are now replaced by six neuron-impregnated discs and two coloured discs. Another difference is that, whereas in *Carelessness* one sphere is in danger of falling off the horizontal line, in *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 10*, two neuron-impregnated discs have actually fallen. While the former warns against upsetting the equilibrium among human beings and between man, heaven and earth, the latter proclaims that disaster has struck. Yet *Life is a Many Spendoured Thing 10* is not a work of doom and gloom. Whereas the spheres are in danger of falling into an abyss, the neuron-impregnated discs are falling into a world full of hope. Chou, unlike many women writers of her generation, was not a pessimist. Protected by the powerful sweeping ink stroke and the gold-coloured disc, the circle of love fills the painting with hope for regeneration.

Chou, in her quest to attain her spiritual aspiration, painted and lived life in the constant state of seeking equilibrium, balance and harmony. In 2007, at the age of eight-three, Chou seemed to be getting closer and closer to achieving her goal.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the relationship between Irene Chou's life and her work. It is now evident that the emotional wounds Chou suffered, both in her childhood and in her early married life, became the irrepressible driving force behind the continuous shifts in her work from the beginning to the very end of her career as an artist. During the early part of her career as an artist, Chou hardly spoke about the wounds inflicted by her mother, except mentioning here and there in an interview that her parents had had a troubled marriage. It was not until she spoke to her biographers in 2001 that she opened up about her unhappy childhood. Even so, she still wrote in her 2006 exhibition catalogue that she gave up studying medicine because she had fallen in love when the truth was that she was desperate to get married so that she could be out of her unhappy home situation. At the last minute, instead of marrying the man for whom she gave up medicine, she married someone with whom she had truly fallen in love. She was so deeply in love with him that she was able to accept that he had had an affair with a married woman. In the end, her own marriage came to mirror her parents' marriage, and in both cases she was the victim. Instead of being emotionally abandoned by her mother, who transferred her love to her little sister, Chou was now emotionally abandoned by her husband, who transferred his love to other women. While her father suffered the humiliation of having his wife give one of their children her own surname, Chou suffered even greater humiliation as a wife whose husband's philandering was so public. Not only had the emotional wounds her mother inflicted upon her never had a chance to heal, but she also now relived the emotional trauma in her childhood in her own married life. The reopening of the unhealed wounds brought her to the brink of deep depression and even contemplation of suicide.

It was art that saved Chou from being engulfed by her own negative emotions. Painting gave her the means to get in touch with her own inner reality. The psychoanalyst Alice Miller believed that to recover from the emotional trauma one has suffered in childhood, one needs to experience the pain again by getting in touch with the child within oneself (Miller, 1995: 19). Chou's interests in Freud's work, the philosophy of Lu Jiuyuan, the practice of *qigong* and the Buddhist philosophy expounded in the Doctrine of Mere-Consciousness were all motivated by her need to get in touch with her inner reality. The ancient philosophy of recovering one's original heart, the innocent mind and the undamaged self, and the Buddhist philosophy of returning to the uncontaminated consciousness were not unlike Miller's belief in the importance of the emotionally damaged adult getting in touch with the child within. Painting gave Chou the means to document the continuous dialogue that she, as a grown woman, had with the innocent child within her. Sex and procreation featured prominently in Chou's work because from being the young child who revealed her father's unfaithfulness to her mother to her discovery of her husband's continuous unfaithfulness after they were married, and her own unfaithfulness, and from pregnancies to childbirths and abortions, sex and procreation were so much part of her life experiences. Although sex and procreation gave her pleasure and joy, they were more often associated with feelings of hurt and betrayal. "When people ... have no separation from events," Anais Nin wrote, "the disintegration takes place and we despair" (Nin, 1975: 173). Painting gave Chou the means to remove herself from events, and gave her the opportunity to transform her hurtful emotions into something creative and positive. Painting also gave Chou the temporary respite from the memories of her paralysing and destructive experiences so that she could gather strength to move forward in a positive way. Marion Milner, another psychoanalyst, wrote that when she let her subconscious take over when she painted, she experienced the "feeling that the ordinary sense of self had temporarily disappeared" (Milner, 1957: 154). In Chou's case, as well as painting, the practice of *qigong* also gave her temporary respite from her consciousness.

To a very large extent, the continuous shifts in Chou's work documented her constant struggle to come to terms with the emotional drama inside her. The shifts—or what Chou referred to as *bian*, changes—were the signposts that something had taken place in her inner self, the subject-matter of her whole oeuvre, as a result of her responses to what was happening in her external environment. The first three shifts—from eclectic paintings to landscape paintings to line paintings to piled ink paintings—took place during the years her husband continued to be openly unfaithful, their youngest child was being affected by the unhappy home situation, and her husband was losing his career as a movie director. “I have changed three times already,” Chou wrote. “I feel joy and contentment each time after I have changed.” (Chou, 1975) The urge for Chou to respond negatively to what was occurring in her external environment was strong, but she was able to release her negative emotion into her painting and transformed it into something positive, resulting in shifts in her work. Her joy and contentment came as a result of feeling that she was moving forward in her quest to get closer to her inner self—or, to put it another way, moving towards her spiritual goal.

After her husband died, Chou's urge to respond negatively and destructively was strong again. She was tempted to give up being an artist. The three shifts in her work after her husband died—from piled ink paintings to impact structural stroke paintings to sweeping stroke paintings to whirling stroke paintings—were marks of Chou's triumph over her negative emotions. The shifts reflected the new insights she gained about love and loss, the purpose of life and man's relationship within the universe. She dramatically changed the way she lived her life. Her sudden shift from the sweeping stroke paintings to her whirling stroke paintings marked a significant advancement in her spiritual journey. It was at this point in her career that she developed the two-stage painting procedure, which enabled her to have even more frequent dialogue with her inner self. As she believed she was getting closer and closer to recovering her original heart, the images she produced became more and more a portrayal of the universe.

After her stroke, the temptation to give up being an artist was even greater. In 1995, when her large works on hemp paper were exhibited in Brisbane, her son's comment was that these works were nothing but an expression of his mother's suffering from depression. However, the very fact that she produced this series of works showed that she had in fact overcome the depression she suffered by not only continuing to paint but also by painting on a medium with which she was not so familiar. In fact, Chou's work on hemp paper reflected her new wisdom gained from surviving a stroke. As she dug deeper into the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, as well as the philosophy of Buddhism, she believed she was edging even closer to her inner self. These works, revealing the wonders of our body and the mysteries of the universe at the same time, convey more strongly than ever her conviction that man and nature are one.

In the face of increasing disability due to the atrophy of her cerebellum and the fragility of old age, Chou, driven by an inner necessity to seek expression, shifted her work from hemp paper to silk, board, satin, canvas and *ming* paper. Such drastic shifts in media invited disapproval from critics, who felt she had gone too far in pushing the boundaries of Chinese ink painting; however, she ignored all the warnings and criticisms, choosing to be true to herself. Even as disability and old age threatened to stop her from painting, she continued to push her career forward and to transform life's adversities into something positive and creative.

The inner necessity to resolve her emotional trauma does not, it must be emphasised, entirely explain the continuous shifts in Chou's work. The development of her visual language, its techniques and the readiness of a particular technique to be applied to her work were all responsible to a certain extent for the shifts in her work. Since calligraphic lines are the most essential elements in Chinese painting, it is not surprising that Chou, after briefly exploring dots in her landscape paintings, spent several years exploring lines in her line paintings. Her shift from line paintings to piled ink paintings was partly the result of her having explored dots and lines:

she was ready to explore planes. Chou had also been experimenting with her new technique, the impact structural stroke, while she was painting her line paintings. Her shift from piled ink paintings to impact structural stroke paintings was partly due to the readiness of her new technique. Even boredom or tiredness with a particular style of painting contributed to some of the shifts in her work. "I began to grow tired of the bleak and suffocating style of painting," Chou said, explaining her shift from the piled ink paintings to the impact structural stroke paintings (Chou, 1986: 28). Likewise, when she shifted from her sweeping stroke paintings to her whirling stroke paintings, she felt that if she kept on painting the sweeping stroke paintings just because they sold well, she would be untrue to herself as an artist.

After her stroke, the shift from medium to medium had as much to do with accommodating her disability, as with her continual interest in experimentation. Her idiosyncratic art education had given her a wide range of skills that she could apply to her new media. Some of the media she came to employ happened quite by accident. The use of new media reflected her willingness to change, to adjust to her new life circumstances and not the least to find delight and joy in doing things in new ways. Her courage to take risks at such a late stage in her career reflected her philosophical belief that change, whether in nature or with humankind, was the manifestation of the dynamic interplay between the polar opposites of *yin* and *yang*, and that accepting opposites and paradoxes, and keeping a balance between them in all aspects of life, was the only way to attain tolerance, harmony and peace in her own heart and in the world.

However, the singularly most powerful force behind the continuous shifts in Chou's work was her interminable struggle to come to terms with the emotional drama inside her. This irrepressible emotional force behind her art led Chou to develop a visual language that told her story not only as a young woman filled with emotional turmoil but also as an old, decrepit and fiercely independent woman. Her creativity, sustained by continuous breakthroughs in her work,

gave her a long career as an artist, despite her late start. Art gave her a livelihood that made her an independent woman, befitting her status as a direct descendent of the May Fourth Movement.

In sustaining her creativity, and in maintaining a long career as an artist, Chou came to achieve what her fellow New Ink painters set out to do in the 1960s Hong Kong: to regenerate Chinese ink painting. From the beginning of her career as an artist, Chou linked her inner world, the self, with the outer world, the universe. Her depiction of her ever-changing, metaphysically intriguing, and complex and paradoxical inner world also became the depiction of the universe. Whether she lived in Hong Kong or in Australia, her subject-matter was available to her. By linking her inner world, the self, with the outer world, the universe, telling her story as a woman and documenting her spiritual aspiration became a single endeavour. Seeking balance, harmony and peace in her inner self and in the wider world, including the universe, became two sides of the same coin. The age-old Chinese philosophical concept that man and nature are one became the dominant theme in her oeuvre. In living as she painted and painting as she lived, Chou succeeded in living out the Chinese literati concept of *huaruqiren*, the painting is like the artist, in the life of a modern Chinese woman. By retaining the essence of the time-honoured subject-matter of Chinese painting, the landscape, and giving it new forms, Chou succeeded in making Chinese painting contemporary.

Coda

By moving into a nursing home of her own choice, Chou prolonged her painting life for nearly another three years. While the number of large works she painted was very limited, the number of small works she painted on small round *xuan* paper and *ming* paper was astounding. She painted these works as if she were working in a factory. She would have a stack of paper on the table and would paint one after another, non-stop. She experimented with unconventional materials such as squares of food, wrapping paper and even traditional Chinese toilet paper. These later works were characterised by the absolute freedom that she employed in painting them. By painting exactly as she pleased, Chou even broke the rules in her own two-stage painting procedure. Whereas she had added details such as seals, coloured discs or inscriptions only in the second stage of her two-stage painting procedure, she now painted many of the details or put in her seals before she thrashed an ink blob or a colour blob on to the paper. In this way, many of the details were lost, obstructed or some would say ruined. In some of her late works, not only did she forsake the use of brush and ink, she even put glue on her work and sprinkled silver glitter over it and used a ballpoint pen to sign her work. Chou became even more casual in the way she handled her work. Each time she had finished one piece, she threw it on to the old newspaper that had been scattered on the floor to dry. Most of the paintings landed the right way up. If one landed the wrong way. Chou just picked it up from her wheelchair using a pair of long barbecue tongs and threw it back for it to land the right way up. When the paintings were dry, Chou peeled each one off the newspaper, not worried about the work getting torn in the process. In her late works, missing bits are part of the painting.

In the final couple of years of her life, Chou abandoned social relationships, her career and ultimately her art. She also let go of her notion of self, not because she was abandoning

life but because she continued to pursue her goal of achieving a higher realm of spirituality.

“If I am blessed by chance,” Chou had written more than two decades earlier, “I may one day experience the moment of Enlightenment” (*Paintings by Irene Chou*, 1989). It is just possible that she did experience that moment. Her last words to me, spoken as she came out of meditation ten days before she died, were “Oh so beautiful!” Chou died on 1 July 2011.

Father Chan said mass and gave a moving homily. There was no accompanying of the casket to the crematorium and no wake. Everything was done according to Chou’s wishes, including the words on her plaque at the crematorium: “An artist for life. She tried her best to be a happy person. A good artist. Sleeping here peacefully. Thank God.”

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