CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING as WESTERN ART HISTORY
CHINESE LANDSCAPE PAINTING as WESTERN ART HISTORY

James Elkins

With a Foreword by Jennifer Purtle
## Contents

List of Plates  vii

Foreword: “Whose Hobbyhorse?” by Jennifer Purtle  ix

Preface  xxi

Abbreviations  xxv

Iterated Introductions  1

I  A Brace of Comparisons  13

II  Tying Some Laces  49

III  The Argument  67

IV  The Endgame, and the Qing Eclipse  99

V  Postscripts  133

Notes  147

Index  175
List of Plates

B  Shitao, Landscape from An Album for Daoist Yu. Album leaf, ink and color on paper. C.C. Wang Collection, New York.  
2  Zhao Mengfu, Autumn Colors in the Qiao [Que] and Hua Mountains, detail. Handscroll, 28.4 x 93.2 cm. Taipei, National Palace Museum.  
5  Left: Matthias Grünewald, The Temptation of St. Anthony, detail. c. 1510. Germany, Colmar. Right: Li Cheng, Reading the Tablet. Sumiyoshi, Abe Collection. As reproduced in Benjamin Rowland, Art in East and West, plates 31 and 32.  
6  Left: Caspar David Friedrich, Two Men in Contemplation of the Moon. Formerly Dresden, Gemäldegalerie. Right: Ma Yuan, Sage Contemplating the Moon. Toyko, Kuroda Collection. As reproduced in Benjamin Rowland, Art in East and West, plates 37 and 38.  
7  Guo Xi, Early Spring. 1072. Hanging scroll, 158.3 x 108.1 cm. Taipei, National Palace Museum.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Temple Amid Snowy Peaks</td>
<td>Li Cheng</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Boston, Museum of Fine Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Landscape with Willow and Bridge</td>
<td>Ma Yuan</td>
<td>1372</td>
<td>Album leaf in fan shape</td>
<td>Boston, Museum of Fine Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Orchid Flowers, Bamboo, and Rocks</td>
<td>Zhao Mengfu</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains</td>
<td>Huang Gongwang</td>
<td>1686</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Taipei, Palace Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Jung-hsi Studio</td>
<td>Ni Zan</td>
<td>1372</td>
<td>Hanging scroll</td>
<td>Taipei, National Palace Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The Forest Grotto at Chü-ch’ü</td>
<td>Wang Meng</td>
<td>1372</td>
<td>Hanging scroll</td>
<td>Taipei, National Palace Museum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Cypress and Old Rock</td>
<td>Wen Zhengming</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>Handscroll on mulberry bark paper</td>
<td>Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Landscape after Lu Hong’s “Ten Views of a Thatched Hut.”</td>
<td>Dong Qichang</td>
<td>1621–1624</td>
<td>Album leaf, ink and color on paper</td>
<td>Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Pictorial Representation of the Poem by Yuweng</td>
<td>Wang Hui</td>
<td>1686</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Cloud Capped Mountains and Mists, Riverside</td>
<td>Wang Shimin</td>
<td>1658</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Mountains in Autumn</td>
<td>Dong Qichang</td>
<td>1658</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The Bamboo Pavilion at Huang-Kang</td>
<td>Qian Du</td>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Cleveland Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Endless Range of Mountains with Dense Forest</td>
<td>Dai Xi</td>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Resting by the Deep Valley</td>
<td>Fu Baoshi</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Album Leaf (one of five)</td>
<td>Yun Shouping</td>
<td>1684</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Searching for Secluded Scenery</td>
<td>Zha Shibiao</td>
<td>1684</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Nanjing, Cao Tian Palace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Eight Views of Landscape</td>
<td>Gong Xian</td>
<td>1684</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Fish and Ducks</td>
<td>Bada Shanren</td>
<td>1689</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Gathering in the Western Garden</td>
<td>Shitao</td>
<td>1689</td>
<td>Detail</td>
<td>Shanghai Museum of Art</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I read the manuscript for this book expecting to hate it. Rumors about the manuscript bemoaned a non-specialist author who presumed to tell specialists in the field of Chinese painting history working to recover traditional Chinese ideas about painting that and how they practiced Western art history. Moreover, the author allegedly did so in terms not interesting to many specialists in the field of Chinese painting history, nor fully intelligible to some. To propose the Westernness of the practice of art history in the field of Chinese painting history—which has, since the middle of the twentieth century, sought means (including rigorous sinology) to recover traditional Chinese ideas about painting—might be construed by some as proposing the failure of that enterprise. For some, the manuscript thus proposed the fundamental impossibility of thinking about Chinese landscape painting history in its own terms.

What does it mean to consider the history of the art of non-Western cultures in their own terms, especially when those cultures, despite the presence of sophisticated, indigenous strategies for thinking and writing about images and things—and/or art—lack an enterprise approximate to the Western discipline of art history? Can such a project be undertaken within the discipline of art history? Is such a project better suited to anthropological approaches to art, even though the question of what constitutes “art” outside the Western tradition remains difficult to define? Or, does such a project, even as it closes the distance between non-Western art and the Western scholar or viewer, necessarily transpose the object of inquiry into Western epistemological frameworks and strategies of academic inquiry, thus leaving an uncrossable, irreducible gap between the non-Western object and the Western practice of art history?

Universal art histories and world art, both firmly grounded in Western practices of art history (and often in the nomenclature of the nation-state), impose the epistemological limitations of their creators and practitioners on the objects of their study. Objects, moving within and beyond the conceptual borders of art history, problematize both the entry of
objects into art historical discourse and the reception of these objects in that discourse. As a result, the movement of things from one culture into the discursive fields of another is as an object lesson in cross-cultural hermeneutics. When the things are Chinese landscape paintings and the discursive field is Western art history, this object lesson reveals that the study of the history of Chinese landscape painting is defined by epistemological structures and hermeneutic practices entirely alien to it. It is precisely this point that Elkins makes in this controversial text.

**Loading the Deck**

That the history of Chinese landscape painting might be defined by epistemological structures and hermeneutic practices entirely alien to it is not limited to the historiography of Chinese landscape painting studies. In a series of paintings called *Repaint Chinese Shan Shui Painting*—some of which were shown in *Shuffling the Deck* (an exhibition in the Princeton University Art Museum in 2003 that “explored the dialogue between contemporary thought and artistic practice”)¹—the Beijing-born, New York–based artist Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943) made Chinese landscape painting Western art history. Zhang Hongtu did this by repainting the compositions of famous masterpieces of Chinese painting in the style of Western

---

*Fig. A: Zhang Hongtu, Shitao–Van Gogh. 1998.*

*Fig. B: Shitao, Landscape from An Album for Daoist Yu. Album leaf, ink and color on paper. C.C. Wang Collection, New York.*
nineteenth-century masters. In a work from this series, *Shitao–Van Gogh* of 1998 (fig. A), Zhang takes a famous composition, *Landscape from An Album for Daoist Yu* (fig. B) by one of the most famous Chinese landscape painters, Shitao (1642–1707), and repaints it in the style of Vincent Van Gogh’s (1853–1890) *The Starry Night* of 1889 (fig. C).

To the viewer who knows both traditions, Zhang’s *Shitao–Van Gogh*, like the remainder of paintings in this series, is wry and funny, the improbable meeting of two great masterpieces. In reprising a famous composition by Shitao, an egoistic painter who rejected prescriptions for painting in the style of Chinese Old Masters, Zhang Hongtu’s hybrid playfully makes Shitao the proleptic progenitor of Van Gogh. But *Shitao–Van Gogh*, like the other paintings in Zhang’s series, is a pointed meeting of Chinese landscape painting with Western art history, one with disturbing implications for historians of Chinese art: viewers unfamiliar with Chinese landscape painting see *Shitao–Van Gogh* as Van Gogh. When viewers who do not know Chinese landscape painting fail to recognize the Shitao composition, they render it invisible, eliding the status and influence of a masterpiece of Chinese landscape painting. Such viewers thus blithely assimilate one of the single most iconic compositions of Chinese
landscape painting into Western art history, shuffling the deck—or rather loading it—in favor of Western art historical outcomes.3

Just as Zhang Hongtu’s Repaint Chinese Shan Shui Painting shows how easily Chinese landscape painting can become Western art history, in Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History, James Elkins proposes six hypotheses that, based on Elkins’s sustained engagement with both Chinese and Western traditions, push his audience to consider how Chinese landscape painting is Western art history. The six hypotheses are a bracing call for art historians in all subfields, including but not limited to specialists in Chinese painting, to meditate on the conceptual framework and historical evolution of their discipline, and to consider these with respect to the practice of art history. Briefly summarized, these hypotheses: 1) propose the inherently Western nature of art history, and the place of Chinese landscape painting history as example or examples within Western art history, rather than as a co-equal of Western art history; 2) problematize comparison (entrenched in the discipline of art history), especially cross-cultural comparison; 3) advise that art history is so inherently a Western discipline that any history of Chinese landscape painting is a Western endeavor, even if written by a Chinese person in Chinese for a Chinese audience; 4) state that comparison of historical perspective (that is, a sense of relative position with respect to one’s own tradition) reveals assumptions about the nature of art history and its sequences, and shows affinities between Chinese and Western periods; 5) note that Chinese painting has an odd structure, exemplified by decline in the late Ming and derogatory, if not absent narratives of the Qing (a counter-hypothesis contends that late Ming and Qing artists appear to art history as a form of postmodernism); and 6) plead for sustained inquiry in considering art history as Western, aware that when inquiry into art objects transcends Western assumptions, it will no longer be recognizable as art history.

Though rarely voiced, some scholars of Chinese art history know, from their own working practices and institutional situations, the substance of Elkins’s hypotheses—even as their colleagues in Western art history may never have considered the odd synthesis of Western discipline and its Chinese objects that preoccupy their colleagues. For some historians of Chinese art history, Elkins’s text is an affront because he, a non-specialist, presumes to tell specialists in the field what they already know; for others, the text is an affront because he tells them something they do not know.4 For still others, the affront comes from telling specialists that the history they have constructed for the tradition that they study fails to meet basic standards of plausibility for European language art historical scholarship, thus making that history an exceptional and unusual artifact of cross-cultural encounter that privileges Western art history even as it purports to understand Chinese landscape painting in its own terms. Still other specialists find the book irrelevant because it falls beyond the questions they ask, and constructs its narrative outside the range of texts that they use to consider the history of Chinese landscape painting.
Finally, some specialists take offense at the absence of Chinese scholarship in Elkins’s text. Here, the Westernness of Chinese painting history manifests itself twice over. First, Elkins does not read modern Chinese, so cannot read this literature; he is, in this way, the archetypal Western scholar of Chinese painting history. But second, were Elkins to read Chinese, and thus to more fully engage Chinese language scholarship of Chinese painting history, this encounter would only reinforce Elkins’s position: for, unlike its Western counterparts, Sinophone scholarship of Chinese painting, from all parts of the Sinophone world, has, until the 1990s, tended to focus more on describing connoisseurial and documentary detail than on crafting grand narratives informed by Western presuppositions about historical and art historical writing. This stems partly from the fact that it is only from the late 1990s that it has been possible to earn a PhD in Chinese art history in the PRC or Taiwan (and to write that thesis in Chinese), and also partly from the fact that Sinophone scholars trained in the West often write in Western languages, and from the vantage of the Western art historical tradition in which they were trained. Thus while Sinophone scholarship serves as a foundation of the field—few among us in the field of Chinese painting history could imagine working without the great connoisseurial contributions of Xu Bangda (b. 1911),5 for example, and without the ground-breaking documentary contributions of Chen Gaohua,6 Mu Yiqin,7 and many others—it is only recently, perhaps through a process that some might call the globalization of art history,8 that Sinophone scholarship has become imbricated, institutionally and intellectually, in the messy web of Western art history and its idiosyncratic expectations for Chinese landscape painting. In the past, Sinophone scholarship did not leave itself open to Elkins’s critique, thus reinforcing Elkins’s point about the Westernness of Chinese painting history.

Specialists in the field may not be the sole or primary audience for this book. Indeed, the number of rejections the manuscript has received suggests that whoever has reviewed it does not see its worth, or a point in its publication. But if Chinese landscape painting, and Chinese art history more generally, are Western art history (not all will agree!), then perhaps it is interesting, and even beneficial, that Elkins’s hypotheses usefully explain, in the language of a theoretically- and historiographically-informed Western art history, the cross-cultural position of the field to larger art historical audiences. In an ideal world, I would hope that colleagues in Western art history would read the scholarship of colleagues in Chinese art history; but in a more instrumentalist world, I would hope that colleagues in Western art history would engage the idea of Chinese art history, even if it is this book—and not a work written by a specialist—that serves as their portal. The deck is already loaded in favor of Western art history; why not make that condition more transparent to those seeking to study Chinese landscape painting?
Some of the funniest things I have read about Chinese art history I have read in the context of the unpublished manuscript on which this book is based. Among them is a rejection letter in which a reviewer of the manuscript writes that they are sure that Jim Elkins cannot understand Chinese painting history because he does not know Chinese. What makes the letter so funny is that its writer goes on to say that because of their own very vague (but presumed superior) familiarity with Chinese culture, including having once studied Chinese (but lacking any real, current facility in it), they know what Elkins can or cannot know about Chinese landscape painting. In a move reminiscent of Zhuangzi’s (fl. fourth century BC) “The Pleasure of Fish,” this reviewer, who admits that someone who does not know Dutch might write about Dutch painting, vehemently defends the position that someone who wants to write about Chinese landscape painting must know Chinese. The point that is missed is that Elkins does not want to write about “Chinese landscape painting,” but rather about the “history of Chinese landscape painting.” The language of Elkins’s primary sources is art history.

The idea that a generalist or non-specialist—fluent in predominantly Anglophone, but also Europhone, art history—could shape perceptions of a non-Western field of art history, let alone that of Chinese landscape painting, troubles some, if not the majority, of scholars in the field of Chinese art history. But one must ask: what about the generalist or non-specialist is or should be offensive to specialist study? Of course a generalist or non-specialist might not be well equipped to study a non-Western tradition in which they have little to no language training. But using knowledge of the discipline to analyze the historiography of the subfield, might such a scholar add value to the larger debates within a non-Western subfield of art history?

Formalist inquiry and Western-language secondary scholarship are two avenues through which a generalist or non-specialist can approach Chinese landscape painting. Formalist approaches to the history of art serve as a putatively universal approach to works of art, and thus putatively give equal access to works of art to any art historian trained to use them. The specialist presumably acquires greater facility in the formal analysis of the type of work they study. But the non-specialist might also, over time, acquire similar facility—or perhaps even greater facility than some specialists whose arguments rest largely on textual sources rather than on the study of the object.

This book is brilliant, except for the places where it is dead wrong in the ways that an outsider is wrong because they do not know Chinese and thus cannot read beyond the secondary scholarship. Lacking language skills in modern and classical Chinese, a non-specialist is forced to read the secondary literature of the field. Given their linguistic limitations, non-specialists—and I think this is true of Elkins—read the European-language
secondary literature more carefully than specialists, who see such literature as bringing concepts and ideas that they know from primary sources into focus in European languages. In other words, specialists read the secondary literature of the field in dialogue with, and as indexical of, primary sources. In contrast, non-specialists readers read the secondary literature in its own terms—as art history—and hold that literature to a standard that might be accepted in any subfield of art history.

Just as Elkins posits that Chinese landscape painting is Western art history, Elkins reads the secondary scholarship of Chinese landscape painting as Western art history. Based on twentieth-century secondary literature of the field, Elkins argues, in his third chapter, that it is during the Yuan Dynasty that “a sense of the shape of the past” takes form, that the period functions as a renascence and as Renaissance. This analogy of painting of the Yuan Dynasty to that of the Renaissance, coupled with narratives of painting of the late Ming and later periods that suggest the end of art and its history, to borrow a concept from Hans Belting (b. 1935), suggest a profoundly different sense of history than that constructed in narratives of Western art; while Belting sees the history of art end with contemporary art, Elkins aptly notes that the history of Chinese landscape painting once ended after the late Ming, circa 1644. What interests Elkins here might be called, to borrow a phrase from George Kubler (1912–1996), the shape of time. Yet Elkins’s interest lies not in temporaneity and artifacts in the abstract, as was the case for Kubler, but lies instead in the way in which art historical narrative is constructed for Chinese landscape painting, a narrative that sketches swaths of time simultaneous to those described in art historical narratives of Western art, but a narrative that does not conform to a Western sense of an archetypal shape of the past.

Elkins not only analyzes the ways that other scholars have written Chinese landscape painting as Western art history, but he intentionally writes Chinese landscape painting as Western art history. Citing Georg Hegel’s (1770–1831) philosophy of history, specifically Hegel’s sense of the awareness of the subject and his perception of history, for example, Elkins positions Yuan Dynasty landscape painting as a parallel to the Italian Renaissance. The move is one that some historians of Chinese art have made. In Beyond Representation, Wen Fong makes exactly this point, as do others in a variety of texts Elkins cites. When scholars of Chinese landscape painting have made this point, they have looked to the Chinese tradition, not to Western philosophy, to justify their point. Yet, is it not possible that a single phenomenon might be analyzed both with conceptual paradigms current within a cultural system, and by those outside it? Might it not be productive—and provocative—to understand how any number of interpretive frameworks illuminate an interesting problem?

By positing, reading, and writing Chinese landscape painting as Western art history, Elkins identifies peculiarities of the secondary scholarship of Chinese landscape painting. In the third and fourth chapters of his text, Elkins questions the way in which Chinese landscape history has posited the Yuan Dynasty as a renascence, examining the narratives of artistic decline and absence of artistic production that were told, in the twentieth century, about the landscape painting of the late Ming and Qing Dynasties, and the void of scholarship
about Chinese art of the twentieth century. Whereas specialist scholars of Chinese landscape painting constructed and largely accepted this narrative in the twentieth century, they rarely probed its strangeness. While these narratives no longer have the same force that they did in 1991, when *Why Chinese Landscape Painting Is Western Art History* was written, it seems that it took an outsider reading secondary scholarship of Chinese landscape painting as art history to see—or at least to comment eloquently upon—the strangeness of the narrative that the field constructed for itself. While the field has changed in the nearly twenty years since Elkins first completed his text, the lesson that might be learned from the disjunction of his text with established narratives of Chinese landscape painting is that specialists, beguiled by the exceptionalism of a non-Western tradition putatively understood “in its own terms,” fail to recognize the implausibility of such narratives, or the historiographic factors that create them. In such moments, the perspective of the outsider, the non-specialist, can serve as an intervention into a literature that, despite the quality of its scholarship, fails to make adequate sense with respect to larger worlds of historical inquiry.

In this book, Jim Elkins, who does not speak Chinese, speaks art history. This is perhaps why he does not make much sense to some historians of Chinese painting, who, as a group, are variably fluent in Western art history. By writing in the critical and theoretical language that circulates in the academy these days, Elkins provocatively recalibrates questions and problems in the writing of the history of Chinese landscape painting with larger questions across disciplines about humanistic inquiry and historical writing. By speaking art history, Elkins offers a historiography of Chinese landscape painting that may encourage wider and more fruitful engagement with Chinese landscape painting by specialists and non-specialists alike.

**Points of Departure**

In speaking art history, Elkins’s text departs from the established reference points for writing the history of Chinese landscape painting. Rather than ground all arguments in the primary and secondary literature of the field, Elkins at times uses literature written by other non-specialists who engage the history of Chinese painting as a starting point for his inquiry. Elkins also uses works of Western art history as a point of departure for his discussion of Chinese landscape painting and its history. More often than not, specialists in the history of Chinese landscape painting ignore non-specialists’ writings; at times they even deride specialists writing in more general ways. Thus when Elkins addresses Hubert Damisch’s (b. 1928) use, in his *Traité du trait* of 1995, of only Chinese examples in his first chapter “Pinceau” (brush)—following Pierre Ryckmans (b. 1935) commentary on Shitao’s *Huayu*
lu and revisiting Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* (which he does elsewhere in the text)—he unpacks the intellectual context of the *Traité*, and shows how ideas about Chinese painting history, whether or not acceptable to specialist scholars, function in a wider intellectual context. The point that those who impugn Elkins’s text miss is that whether or not Damisch, Ryckmans, and Derrida corporately make a statement that specialist scholars might accept as being “true” of Chinese landscape painting, they nonetheless contribute an idea—and an influential one in art history—of what is at stake in Chinese paintings.

What this manuscript does, then, is inscribe other non-specialist texts as potential points of departure for inquiry into Chinese landscape painting.

To facilitate conversation, Elkins’s text also opens up the history of Chinese landscape painting to texts and ideas of Western art history that specialists in the field may not read or otherwise engage. Using works of Western art history to talk about Chinese landscape painting has been a staple of the writing of Chinese landscape painting history in the twentieth century. But Elkins positions those writings differently than would a specialist in Chinese painting, using them to leverage big ideas in ways different from the specialist. Elkins, for example, thinks through the case of the Bulgarian modernist Detchko Uzunov (1899–1986), makes references to classics of art history such as E.H. Gombrich’s (1909–2001) *The Story of Art* first published in 1950, uses Hegel to think about the abrasive nature of comparison and the self-awareness of the historian. In considering Western art historians who study only Western art, Elkins leads his reader to Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), E.H. Gombrich, Meyer Schapiro (1904–1996), and Hans Belting, effectively forcing the reader interested in Chinese landscape painting to confront authors of foundational texts of art history that might be useful in terms of thinking through larger issues of the discipline. Similarly, Elkins leads his reader to confront more recent authors such as John Onians (b. 1942), Norman Bryson (b. 1949), and David Summers (b. 1941)—all Western art historians with sustained interests in non-Western topics. Many specialists in Chinese landscape painting know these texts. But rarely are we asked to think about them with respect to our own work, let alone in rapid-fire succession. Elkins’s book is thus a stimulating and provocative read for the specialist scholar, asking them to rethink their basic assumptions about art history and the relevance of its important texts to the history of Chinese landscape painting.

Curiously, nearly a decade before the publication of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s influential book *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Elkins’s text provides a detailed, though some might say idiosyncratic, account of the ways in which Western art history serves as the framework for the study of Chinese landscape painting. Elkins’s hypotheses are hardly radical in light of recent work in postcolonial and critical area studies. Such studies make clear the implicit colonial and imperialist assumptions present in Western academic disciplines and area studies, namely, the formatting of knowledge in Western terms.\(^\text{14}\) Even though Elkins’s text might now seem dated or derivative, this is merely an artifact of not being able to get this manuscript published circa 1991. Strangely, in 1991 Chinese landscape painting could not serve as a point of departure for thinking about the implicitly colonial practices of art history.
Whose Hobbyhorse?

Who speaks for Chinese landscape painting? For whom might Chinese landscape painting serve as a hobbyhorse—perhaps not the narrowly iconological hobbyhorse of Gombrich that barely applies to Chinese landscape painting, but a larger, shape-shifting hobbyhorse, even a Chinese one, a zhuma—useful for considering any number of art historical questions? And why?

The time has come for specialists to consider how the material that we study might be of interest to non-specialist or generalist art historians. Some historians of China have already made this leap: the Harvard China Historical GIS project seeks to make as much data as possible available in English so that social and economic historians not trained in Chinese might begin to analyze the wealth of Chinese data compiled in the project, and thus cast comparative light on the social and economic development of China. The approach of the Harvard CHGIS suggests that the intelligent non-specialist, knowledgeable of another subfield of the discipline, has something to offer the specialist in the subfield as well as the larger world of ideas.

If historians of Chinese landscape painting and other forms of Chinese art embrace the position that the Harvard HCGIS promotes, this raises the stakes for those of us in the field about training non-specialists who, like Elkins, take our classes. Do we subsequently expect the non-specialist with some training and interest in our subfield to do nothing further with the knowledge they acquire? Is it simply the case that such courses were either a convenient way to fill a blank in a course schedule, or a means of fulfilling a distribution requirement? Or do we instead hope that the non-specialist/generalist will use their knowledge and considerable intelligence to forge useful ideas that illuminate the subfields on the basis of different knowledge bases?

When a non-specialist takes Chinese landscape painting as their hobbyhorse, they might alternatively serve as an interlocutor between specialists, or between specialists in the subfield and specialists in other fields and/or generalists in the discipline. As an interlocutor, Elkins functions effectively. His text is illuminating, especially when it is right, but even when it is wrong. Moreover, specialists are likely not to agree on what is “right” and what is “wrong”; and, they would do well to remember that errors are not the sole province of the non-specialist, for even specialist authors get things wrong at times, things that peer review does not always catch. As an interlocutor, Elkins questions the narratives of the
field established in the twentieth century, narratives that have lost their force with newer scholarship, but that have also not been revisited. While the field has moved on in terms of the shape of the past that it presents, no specialist has stepped in (or perhaps will step in, given the small size of the field and its need to keep moving forward rather than to look back) to write the history of these narratives, to expose their oddness. Elkins does work that no specialist will do any time soon; the interlocutor takes up a project that would otherwise remain undone. Specialists may not agree with the way Elkins connects the dots of secondary scholarship in his historiographic narrative. For, by speaking art history, Elkins’s text loads the deck in favor of new ideas about Chinese landscape painting. But rather than provide the final word on the subject, Elkins’s work becomes a point of departure, a text from which to open debate to any number of art historians for whom Chinese landscape painting might serve as a hobbyhorse.
Chinese landscape painting is very sad, so it is probably not for young people.
—The painter Yan Bo, Hangzhou, 1998

This book is an attempt to see how Chinese landscape painting appears through the lens of art history, a discipline that I will claim is partly, but finally and decisively, Western. My subject is Chinese landscape painting, and I would like to understand it as well as I am able, but I am equally interested in how the history of any non-Western art can be represented.

Saying that the history of Chinese landscape painting only appears through, or as, a Western discipline will certainly seem mistaken, and possibly also perverse. So it may be helpful to say right at the start that this book grew out of an inextinguishable interest in Chinese art: an interest that refused to let itself shrink from a possible “minor field” into an avocation or pastime—an interest that slowly grew until it became, in an illogical fashion, an emblem for art historical understanding in general. I am not a specialist in Chinese art, but I find myself intrigued and often confused by the ways art historians present Chinese painting, and also by the very conditions of such understanding and representation.

That, at least, is my excuse for writing about Chinese landscape painting as if it could also be an inquiry into art historical representation of any sort. (I say “art historical” and not “historical,” because I think the historiography of visual arts raises distinct problems; but many things I have to say in this book pertain to contemporary historical scholarship in general.) The two problems, art historical representation and Chinese landscape painting, have become entangled in my mind: the “general” philosophic question of representing other visual practices, and the “specific” example of Chinese landscape painting. At one moment Chinese landscape painting is just an art among many, and in the next it is the exemplary moment in which Western art historical understanding encounters another tradition very much the West’s equal in duration and complexity. At such times it becomes especially difficult to understand what it means that the major art historians, from Panofsky
to Gombrich, from Schapiro to Belting—the historians who had the interest and means to look beyond Western practices—remained centered on Western art. Can Chinese landscape painting ever appear as the central instance of painting? If it can, then it remains to be said why it does not. And if it cannot, then we need to start coming to terms with an inherently Western structure of historical understanding that prevents Chinese painting from being more than the most important, complex, fascinating example of non-Western painting.

One note especially for China specialists: I will not be proposing that the study of Chinese painting is exclusively a Western project, but rather that it is a mainly Western project. Westernness and Chineseness are relative, overlapping, and subject to change without notice. It has been said that Chinese scholarly production will increase, perhaps exponentially, in the coming decades, making all assertions about Westernness and Chineseness moot. In April 2005 it was announced that China intended to build one hundred world-class universities. (The announcement responded to a study that found that there can be one world-class university for every eight million inhabitants of a country. In Ireland, where I was living at the time, that report precipitated a small crisis: in a country of only four million people, could there be even one world-class university?) No one can predict what mixtures of Chinese and Western methods will develop in the coming decades; but I do not believe that economic growth, or the sheer expansion of Chinese academic life, will solve the problem I address in this book. The very idea of writing an art history of some country or region is Western in ways I will define, and that means all historians of Chinese art are culpable of trading in Western practices. A guiding assumption of this book is that it is better to try to understand those practices than to assume they will be rendered harmless by the many distractions of new art, new economic centers, new institutions, or new philosophies.

Because my subject here is Chinese landscape painting in relation to art history as a whole, I have avoided writing a text that presupposes any degree of expertise in Chinese painting. Readers unfamiliar with Chinese landscape painting can make their way through the book until Chapter III, where the argument can serve as a chronological introduction to the principal artists and works. (Chapter III could also be read as a very schematic and reductive introduction to the chronology of Chinese painting.) It may be helpful to refer to the relevant sequence of dynasties: Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties (581–960), Song (960–1279), Yuan (1279–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (1644–1912).

This is a short book, but it has an unusual structure, so it might be helpful to say something about the chapters. The Iterated Introductions give this book’s pre-publication history. Chapter I is a tour of the comparisons twentieth-century scholars made between Chinese and Western art. It is about the philosophic problem of expunging comparisons that are not defensible. Chapter II, “Tying Some Laces,” is a good place to start if you
are skeptical of this whole project. There, I defend myself against objections, such as my relative lack of Chinese, the disparity between the enormous subject of Chinese painting and the brevity of this book, and the idea that it just is not helpful to mull over parallels between East and West. Chapters III and IV are the argument itself: Chapter III rehearses apparent parallels between pre-Qing Dynasty painting and Western painting, and Chapter IV—which may be read independently, if your main interest is postmodernism—concerns the apparently steep decline of painting after the Ming Dynasty. Chapter V is where the snake bites its own tail.

A project like this one calls for more than the usual gestures of thanks. I owe the framing, the facts, and the final form of the text to critical readings by Jim Cahill, John Onians, Stanley Abe, Stan Fung, Jerome Silbergeld, and Craig Clunas. Jason Kuo’s invitation to write an afterword to his collection of interviews with historians of Chinese art was a crucial spur; the book Discovering Chinese Painting later led to Kuo’s other edited volume, Stones from Other Shores. Belated thanks, after many years, to Stanley O’Connor and Harrie Vanderstappen, whose excellent teaching made me unable to think of Chinese art as a specialty among others. And I am especially grateful to my colleague Stanley Murashige, for his patience in the face of my innumerable questions over the last decade. Thanks to Hong Zaixin 洪再新, Rick Vinograd, Qi Gu Jiang, Maggie Bickford, Fan Xiaoming 范曉明, Marty Powers, Larry Silver, Ding Ning 丁宁, and Cao Yiqiang 曹意强 for lively conversations and advice. The penultimate version of this book was read by Jerome Silbergeld and Ladislav Kesner, both of whom wrote long, thoughtful, serious critiques. Finally, special thanks to Jennifer Purtle, who jumped at my suggestion that she write a Foreword. I did not suggest its content or censor it in any way (except for one note about postcolonial theory) and I take this opportunity to say what an exemplary scholar she is: genuinely interested in debate, passionately concerned with the coherence and direction of the discipline. Thanks also to Vanee Wong, the freelance designer who thought of the idea of brushstrokes for headers; the large one is adapted from a painting by Shen Zhou (it is hiding in Plate 1).

Dynasties and major painters’ names are in pinyin; elsewhere I have retained the usages of the sources I quote.
Abbreviations


Abbreviations


This book has an unusually complicated and lengthy pre-publication history, and that history is tied in complicated and lengthy ways to the argument of the book. That is my excuse for writing such a disproportionate introduction to such a brief book.

I also have an excellent model for this oversize introduction: Hans Belting’s *The Germans and Their Art*, whose introduction is nearly the size of the text it introduces. His problem, too, was to find a way to initiate a discussion about national differences in art historical writing. It is a subject that needs to be framed and reframed; the framing of nationalism never ends.

I want to mention the most recent occasion that predates the publication of this book; then I will go back to the beginning and recount the book’s staggered development. The recent occasion was a two-day conference, with just four speakers, convened by Jason Kuo at the University of Maryland at College Park, in November 2005—fourteen years, fourteen rejection letters, I assume over twenty readers’ reports, and five complete revisions after Jim Cahill first saw the manuscript, in 1991. As a rule of thumb in academic publishing: up to ten rejection slips, and you may have a work of genius that no one recognizes; over ten, and it is likely there is a problem with your manuscript that you are just not addressing. By the time of the Maryland conference, even Jason’s graduate students were suggesting the book might be better off unpublished.
The conference was intended to address the state of scholarship on Chinese painting. There were papers on the subject of Chinese art studies since World War II and on the globalization of art history, and Jim Cahill and I held a fifty-minute public conversation. We talked at some length about Craig Clunas’s writing, and the many things that separate it from Jim Cahill’s.1

I realized then that my book would need yet another introduction if it were to stand a chance of being persuasive to readers whose first serious encounters with Chinese painting were through the lens of visual studies. My book would have to say something about the encroachment of visual studies into Chinese art history, and the gradual dissolution of Chinese painting and bronzes in a brew of lacquer, porcelain, funerary sculpture, posters, clothing, bas-reliefs, advertisements, films, performance art, and tourist photographs. I would also need to cut material that would not be persuasive to scholars interested in visual studies. All that would comprise the manuscript’s fourth introduction, and its fourth round of cutting. The problem I was trying to pose was not getting less important, but it was becoming less audible and weaker, shrunken and hidden beneath its elaborate armatures. It was time to make the excuses and write the book.

So, back to the beginning.

At Cornell University as an undergraduate, and then at the University of Chicago as a graduate student, I took courses on Chinese art and developed an interest in Chinese landscape painting that has stayed with me ever since. I was struck by the way scholars like Max Loehr, Osvald Sirén, and Ludwig Bachhofer used Western analogies to explain and interpret Chinese painting. Words like “Baroque,” “dynamic,” and “linear” came up in texts written by mid-century European and North American scholars, and I could see that the books they wrote were very different from the Chinese texts they used as sources. I suppose I should have taken such differences as part of the project of art historical writing, and to some extent I did, but something about the subject continued to seem odd. For reasons I could not articulate, it did not seem to be as much of a problem, or at least not the same kind of problem, when a twentieth-century scholar wrote about Italian Renaissance art using terms and ideas that were clearly not present in fifteenth-century Italy, as it did when a European scholar wrote in English or German about Chinese paintings that had been made on the other side of the world a millennium before the historians were born. I was intrigued by what appeared to me as enormous differences between the ways people talked about painting in, say, twelfth-century China, and the ways that were acceptable in the late twentieth century—at least in academic circles, at least in North America and western
Europe. Yet that was the way historical writing was apparently meant to work, so that it could only seem naïve to think of such differences as a problem—as if they could be solved, as if there were some way of writing art history that would be exactly and seamlessly congruent with the words, the idioms, even the accents of the people who first saw the images. North American scholars naturally used words like “Baroque” to help them understand the objects they studied, and perhaps that was at once inevitable and unobjectionable.

Now, looking back on those undergraduate- and graduate-school notions, I can see all the naïveté of a first encounter with any culture, and all the clunky questions that occur to beginners in any field. And yet there really was an issue there, even though I did not have a very clear idea about how to get at it.

Almost eighteen years ago I started writing a book on the history of Chinese landscape painting. Its original title was *Chinese Landscape Painting as Object Lesson*, because I wanted to show that it is possible to get beyond the many parallels between Western and Chinese art that continue to echo in the scholarship, and find a neutral principle, a non-Western guiding model, that could help make art historical sense of Chinese landscape painting. The idea was to write an “object lesson” for historiography in general.

Earlier scholars of Chinese art often compared the styles of Chinese and Western paintings (風格 *fēnggé*), a practice that involved projecting Western-style notions onto Chinese materials. For example, you cannot compare Shen Zhou and Van Gogh, or Caspar David Friedrich and Ma Yuan 馬遠, as several writers have done, without fairly seriously misrepresenting the artists on both sides of the equations. (It could be argued you would not want to make those comparisons unless you had fairly deep misunderstandings of either the Chinese or the Western artists, or both.) Scholars also used to draw parallels between Western and Chinese period names, calling Northern Song painting “Renaissance” and Ming painting “Baroque.” Western scholars used those and other analogies to try to make sense of Chinese painting, and to order it in a way they could recognize as art history. Scholars as different as Loehr, Bachhofer, Sirén, Laurence Binyon, Sherman Lee, and Benjamin Rowland used such comparisons. More recent scholars have tended to avoid terms like “Baroque” or overt comparisons between Western and Chinese painters, but their narratives depend on subtle versions of the same kinds of parallels. Scholars who feel they are free of such comparisons may be repeating them in new forms, without noticing how parallels can still work even when their grounding terms are expunged. (I have argued that elsewhere.)

The initial version of my book was intended to demonstrate the problem, and to propose a further model that I thought avoided the pitfalls of Western parallels. I called the method...
the “comparison of historical perspectives.” The idea was to compare Chinese and Western concepts about the shape of history at any given point. For example, from the perspective of the Yuan, to artists such as Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 and Qian Xuan 錢選, the Northern Song appeared as a distant past, largely lost and tremendously valuable. (This is a standard narrative, which I will explore later in the book.) By contrast the more recent and just recently ended Southern Song appeared as a decadent or useless period, with nothing to say to progressive artists. The Yuan was a period of the awakening of historical consciousness, and for the first time on record artists looked back beyond their immediate past history and began systematically to borrow earlier styles.

When the situation of the Yuan is put in these terms, there is an uncanny parallel between the sense of the shape of history at work in thirteenth-century China and fifteenth-century Italy. Both periods eschewed their recent cultural heritage; both looked back past a newly discovered “gap” in history to a revered past; and both produced artists who were for the first time conscious of the differences between ancient styles, and capable of picking and choosing different styles at will.

That “comparison of historical perspectives” was the core of the book Chinese Landscape Painting as Object Lesson, and the manuscript concluded with the idea that China had arrived at a state that could be called postmodern—by which I meant in particular that it was marked by a quick succession of increasingly individual styles and schools (風格 fēnggé, 畫派 huàpài in the Chinese expressions)—about two hundred and fifty years before the West. The Chinese experience suggests that postmodernism in this particular sense is less the name of a period than the name of an interminable “endgame”: a state that can only be terminated by some unexpected and violent change in the culture, such as the Chinese revolution.

Jim Cahill was very enthusiastic about the book, and wrote letters in its defense to several editors. In 2004 he gave a kind of summa of his own research at Princeton; the gist of his talk was that the great edifice of our understanding of Chinese painting is threatened by the narrowness of new scholarship and by new concerns such as postcolonial theory, and that people who are still willing to take on large themes should continue the work and see it on to its conclusion in the problematic Chinese art of the last two centuries. He noted that virtually all accounts, including his own, run out of steam when it comes to Qing painting. Scholars (again including Cahill) use words like “exhausted,” “repetitive,” “lifeless,” and “uninteresting” to describe later Chinese painting. He said that recent attempts by Barnhart and others to look at the Qing material with a fresh eye are doomed, because the work simply is bad, and people should have the courage to say so. En route to that point he mentioned that version of my book, and noted how it had not found a publisher on account of its big-brush comparisons and its position about postmodernism in China.
That was the first version of the book, *Chinese Landscape Painting as Object Lesson*. Around 1994 it became apparent to me the book needed to be rewritten. The second version, which has been published in Chinese, was different in two respects, and the changes took the book in a direction Cahill does not support. The first alteration was the inclusion of postcolonial theory. After testing parts of the manuscript on various audiences, I realized that it had to be framed in terms of current theoretical debates; otherwise it would not seem reliable or relevant. (Stan Abe was a good example for me: he took the book as a crypto-conservative manifesto, a call to return to the stylistic study of paintings without attention to their historical and political contexts.)

The second version has the title I have retained here, *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*, because I realized that even the comparison of historical perspectives was itself a Western idea. It is true that Yuan texts and paintings have been taken, by Chinese scholars and painters, to bear witness to a new sense of history, and so the comparison of historical perspectives is better grounded than the older comparisons of periods and artists’ styles. (It is better to say that Yuan paintings and Renaissance paintings respond to comparable senses of the past, than it is to say that a Yuan painting is formally akin to a Renaissance painting.) Those ideas of the shapes of the past have their own histories in modern scholarship, and some have become misleading commonplaces in the scholarship. But aside from questions of accuracy, I realized that the motivation for the comparison of historical perspectives was thoroughly Western, so I retreated just one crucial step from what I had said in the first version of the book: instead of claiming there might be a reliable principle of comparison between the histories of painting in China and West, I said that even the optimal principle of comparison seems optimal for Western reasons. The comparison of historical perspectives would set up and support a kind of writing that would remain entirely Western in intent.

Cahill thinks of this amendment as a pusillanimous retreat, or at least a dangerous equivocation. I am no longer willing simply to say that Qing art has characteristics of postmodernism: not because I disbelieve it, or because I think all such comparisons are misguided (as, for example, I imagine Craig Clunas would), but because I want to know why anyone, including my earlier self, would want to insist on it. I still think the comparison of historical perspectives is valid, dependable, and with the right qualifications largely true, and I still agree with Cahill that it is vitally important to try to build such theories. I would just say this is a truth with a dubious pedigree.
Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History

The book you are reading grew from that second version. It involves another decade of adjustments, and now it has these lengthy Iterated Introductions, but the argument is intact. I continue to be concerned about the differences between texts we produce in North America and western Europe, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and texts that were produced in China starting almost twenty centuries earlier. I would not put my concerns as I did when I was in graduate school—I no longer think that the difference itself is somehow a problem, or that there might be such a thing as perfect mimetic fidelity to other cultures—but I am still interested in trying to understand how much of our own cultural position we can articulate. This book is built on the idea that the search for optimal comparisons is itself part of the project of art history—it is a modern, Western interest—and that art history is itself Western in several identifiable senses. Although I will be concentrating on art history in this book, and on Chinese painting in particular, I take it that these issues are common in sinology in general, and in the encounter of Western metaphysics with non-Western discourse. (More on this in Section 22.)

Since I drafted the second version of this book, sometime after 1994, the subject of the Westernness of academic discourses has become central. This book is contemporaneous with at least three books on the globalization of art history. One is called Is Art History Global? and contains brief essays on the worldwide spread of art history by over thirty scholars. Another, edited by Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, addresses World Art Studies. The third project is a book tentatively titled Art and Globalization, based on a conference I helped organize in Chicago in 2007; it will include interventions by Fredric Jameson, Susan Buck-Morss, Néstor Canclini, Rashad Areen, and some fifty others.

One question in those and other publications is whether it makes sense to continue to speak of a field called “art history,” or if there are now “art histories” in different regions of the world. If there is still a discernible field or discipline, then it needs to be asked whether terms like space and form—not to mention Renaissance or Baroque—should be its leading concepts. If there is no longer a coherent enterprise called “art history,” then it needs to be asked how the historical interpretive practice of one area of the world can be read, and interpreted, by scholars in some other part of the world.

Those are broad and rich conversations, and I refer readers to all three books for examples and problems outside the Chinese context. My own position is that art history is remarkably uniform throughout the world. Scholars share university structures, conferences, journals, funding sources, bibliographies, archives, and many subtler things that are hard to quantify such as protocols of argument, interpretive methods such as semiotics, senses of how to build narratives, and customs for the deployment of evidence. I think that art history does continue as a single project, and I think the majority of its structures, from its institutions to its theories, are identifiably Western, and that fact should bother us. I do not find evidence
that there are local traditions of writing art’s history that are significantly different—on the contrary, I find that virtually all university and academy teaching that presents itself as art history does so in open emulation of what its practitioners take to be western European and North American standards.

In addition to *Is Art History Global?*, Zijlmans and van Damme’s *World Art Studies*, and the *Art and Globalization* volume, there is also the Clark Art Institute’s book *Compression and Expansion*, which contains a number of proposals about writing on world art. My own contribution to that book is a report on a project called *Success and Failure in Twentieth-Century Painting*. That essay describes my attempts to write about the Bulgarian modernist Detchko Uzunov, whom I discovered on a visit to Sofia. In Bulgaria, Uzunov is as famous as, say, Paul Klee or Piet Mondrian, by which I mean that everyone educated in art history knows him and considers him an indispensable part of the cultural landscape. It is no surprise he is not known in the West—there are many like him in many countries—but that only makes it more difficult to describe him in such a way that a reader in England or America would take him as seriously as a reader in Bulgaria would.

His early work might remind a western European viewer of Augustus John, or some other conservative modernist portrait painter. Uzunov worked for the “Regime,” producing some strong Balthus-style portraits and the usual postimpressionist views of workers in the fields. Then, in the 1970s, he began painting aerial views of Bulgarian villages. Those paintings show the characteristic pattern of Bulgarian towns: small individually owned gardens close in to the village center, with large communally operated fields on the periphery, crossed by two or three roads that meet at the village center. In the late 1970s Uzunov turned those aerial views into abstractions by omitting the roads and houses and smearing the fields into fields of color. In doing so he became one of Bulgaria’s few abstract painters, some sixty years after abstraction got started in the West.

One evening I was talking to some Bulgarian art historians and critics, and I suggested that Uzunov was influenced by CoBrA or by European gestural abstraction such as Pierre Soulages or Hans Hartung. My proposal was greeted with strong objections. Uzunov is not an abstract painter, I was told. He understands his work as concrete representations of the villages, and in interviews he has denied being influenced by any abstract painters. I had no problem understanding the idea that the abstract paintings could be concrete pictures of Bulgarian villages, because constructivism had long ago taught central European artists that abstraction could be conceived as a form of realistic representation. But I could not believe Uzunov was not influenced by western European abstraction, and I could hardly understand the idea that he was not an abstract painter. Eventually Bulgarian historians and critics persuaded me that Uzunov came upon abstraction as if it had effectively never existed, and later I learned of other Bulgarian and eastern European artists who had the same experience. A teacher named Pamukchiev at the Art Academy in Sofia maintains the same thing: he says his paintings (which look like Twombly or Tapies) are his own invention and are not abstractions. It took a while for me to realize that painters like Uzunov and Pamukchiev were not dissembling in order to look more original and preserve their inventions.
The current art world dogma is that the world is unified by faster communication and travel, and that *Flash Art* and *Artforum* and the many Biennales speak for the whole world. Experiences like my encounter in Bulgaria convinced me otherwise. The Biennale and Dokumenta kinds of art are only the top one hundredth of one percent of art production. Most of it just looks old, as Uzunov’s and Pamukchiev’s would if they were shown internationally.

How, then, is it possible to describe such art—and note I am talking about the vast majority of the world’s production in this century—without sounding as if it were derivative? If I were to write “Uzunov’s work is derived from CoBrA,” or even “Uzunov’s work is derived, unconsciously, from CoBrA,” I would flatten his sense of himself and make it impossible for a reader to take him as seriously as the Bulgarian critics take him. The challenge is to describe him without using the words “derived,” “CoBrA,” or even “abstraction.”

The essay in *Compression and Expansion* tries to conjure what an astonishing impasse this is. It is next to impossible to do Uzunov justice within art history as we all conceive of it. If I were to write a poetic appreciation of his work—something like, “the colors are lovely and saturated, and the brushmarks free and sometimes violent”—I would be writing ahistorical criticism or simply poetry. In order to write art history, I would have to anchor Uzunov to other developments without mentioning them—apparently an impossibility from the outset.

To me, this problem is an emblem of the difficulty of writing art history about other cultures. Whole histories are waiting to be written without the word “influenced”—histories of modernism in central Europe, India, southeast Asia, and South America—everywhere, in short, that saw, or continues to see its art production as autonomous or independently interesting. In this context I only want to note that it may not be enough to be reflective about the problem; something close to the roots of art history and its Westernness (in this case, its western Europeanness) has to be rethought.  

The example of Uzunov’s historically invisible painting is an emblem—one example from an indeterminately large set. Such examples imply that some art historical narratives, periods, and senses of interpretation are more obdurately Western than they might seem. I think much of the optimism that there are many kinds of writing that might be understood as art history, each responsive to its local context, comes from journals like *Third Text*, which has long presented compelling case studies of local practices. The optimism may also come from a sense that the art market, and artists’ careers and publics, are now effectively transnational. I think that both those developments obscure the ongoing dependence of art
historical writing on a remarkably resilient and often effectively invisible series of Western methods, protocols, and ideals.

It is possible to argue even more broadly, however, and claim that all possible narratives—indeed, any writing that appears to the reader as art history—is Western. That is part of the burden of a book I wrote called Stories of Art, which is intended as an answer to E.H. Gombrich’s The Story of Art. Gombrich’s story of the progress of Western illusionism is as close to a normative account of the basic suppositions of art historical description and periodization as we possess. Gombrich’s story (the one that follows Western art from Egypt to Greece and Rome, and from there through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and onward to the Baroque, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism, and finally on to modernism and postmodernism), I would argue, is at the heart of survey texts such as Horst Janson’s and Helen Gardner’s, and it remains the armature, the wider impetus, for many of the discipline’s specialized inquiries. Yet comparing The Story of Art to recent work in gender studies, “low” art, cultural studies, and psychoanalytic, Marxist, and semiotic interpretations, it becomes clear that one story will no longer do. The burden of my Stories of Art is that no book that effectively replaces Gombrich’s with many competing stories can be written; any book that treats “low” art, or gives full attention to art of non-Western countries, will not be supported by the core narrative that gives Gombrich’s book, and all the other one-volume textbooks, their cogency. Stories of Art surveys textbooks of art history written in various parts of the world, in order to show that only narratives similar to Gombrich’s can appear as art history. Others seem willful, local, or partial. Stories of Art is not a call to return to Gombrich, but a suggestion that we recognize that all of what counts as art history takes its cogency from a small set of Western ways of writing and conceiving of the past. There is no way to leap outside those structures and find ways of writing about art—about Chinese landscape painting, for example—that will appear as art history. They can appear useful for art history, and they can certainly be interesting for many other reasons, but they will not be legible, or viable, as art historical writing. In Stories of Art my examples are Zhang Yanyuan’s ninth-century book on Chinese painters of all periods, and the Emperor Huizong’s eleventh-century catalogues of his bronze vessel collection, but the examples could as well have been texts by Guoxi or others. I will look at a few such examples in Section 36, but I refer readers to Stories of Art for the justification of the wider claim. It is part of the background of this book.

This introduction is iterated because I need to point to readings that inform the argument. I also want to say some words to younger scholars who may encounter this book along
with their readings in Chinese culture and visual studies. For them, the chapters that follow may seem old-fashioned. I spend most of my time on literati painting (roughly: painting by scholar-officials, rather than court painting), and I do not range very far from painterly and historiographic questions. I do not get into patronage or symbolic meanings, and I have little to say about other kinds of Chinese painting or about the cultural configurations that produced them. There are two reasons for my narrowness. First, my subject is the crucial historiographic debates about how to tell the history of Chinese landscape painting as a whole, and those debates took place mainly in the twentieth century. I find that assumptions about the structure and significance of Chinese painting that were formed between the 1930s and the 80s continue to the present, unnoticed, in many studies of subjects that seem far removed from literati painting. Second, I am not convinced that it is necessary to make the social and ideological underpinnings of older arguments explicit, as some newer scholarship intends, in order to do serious work on them. That assumption is shared by current versions of postcolonial theory, cultural theory, visual studies, and political theory. So if you are a younger scholar, whose work is not really concerned with periods, styles, or literati painting—if you are going to miss Chinese film theory, television, or contemporary painting—I would ask you to take this as a case study, an “object lesson,” which may be applicable beyond its announced topic.

That is all I want to say by way of introduction. More, and I would be writing the introduction to a longer book; less, and I am afraid what I am about to say would seem careless on the subject of the theories I am rejecting. I will close with three important definitions, and a brief summary of this book’s argument.

By comparisons I mean any terms, theories, or ideas that are taken to help elucidate an unfamiliar art. Comparisons are parallels, bridges between cultures. They can be tacit or developed; they can be presented as analytic models or as rough hunches; they can be extended theories or single words; they can be offhand remarks or deep structural elements in historical understanding; they can be understood as problems or as natural accompaniments of interpretation. Some comparisons are metaphors, some are adjectival phrases, some are concordances. It is a comparison, in my terms, if a Western art historian offhandedly compares a Western artwork to a Chinese one, just in order to get an argument started. But it is also a comparison if I try to work out patterns of historical understanding over the course of several chapters of a book. Brief passing parallels are the commonest, and the most insidious. The one I try out in this book is an enormous, slow-moving target.
Second definition: as I will be using it, “Chinese art history” means texts on Chinese art, not texts written in China before Western contact, and only occasionally texts written in China in the late twentieth century in departments of art history. Chinese art history can be written by Chinese art historians or Western ones; but it is distinct from the texts the Chinese themselves produced before and outside Western contact. “Western art history” is the entire project of art history, regardless of its subject matter, from its beginnings in writers such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Carl Friedrich Rumohr. It therefore includes “Chinese art history.” The normal locution, “Western art history,” has a crucial ambiguity: it might mean the history of Western art, or the discipline of art history. The elision, I think, is telling for the way art historians understand cultural difference. I have more to say about the Westernness of art history in Section 87, if you would like to skip ahead.

Third definition: non-Western in this book includes virtually every country outside France, Germany, Italy, England, the United States, and—intermittently—Scandinavia, Spain, and a half dozen others. This is a heuristic position, which I defend in Stories of Art: it is a way of measuring the dependence of national art histories on art histories written in North America and western Europe. Texts on Finnish art, Argentine art, or Sudanese art, depend on references to common narratives of art in western Europe and North America. Their examples may be Finnish, Argentine, or Sudanese, but the points of reference in the history of art, and the leading interpretive terms, are taken from the history of art in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, England, the United States, and a scattering of other countries. In other words, there is no such thing as an art history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Finnish art, Argentine art, or Sudanese art that is not driven by western European and North American ideas and interests. That narratological definition of “Western” is also part of what I mean to imply in claiming art history is Western. (It has been said, by way of objection, that there are national histories of art that are narratively independent of the history of western European and North American art, so that my definition of Western should be expanded. But I do not think it can be expanded by much. An instructive example here is Piotr Piotrowski, an outstanding scholar of Polish art, who has spent his career wrestling with the dependence of Poland on what I am calling Western art historical narratives.)

This book’s argument is very simple. Here are its three principal points.

First: The comparison of historical perspectives is a half-truth. It can tell us things about the history of Chinese painting that are true and illuminating, but they seem true and illuminating because they correspond to deep assumptions in art history—ideas about history that give us our sense of historical truth. Hence the ambiguity of which James Cahill disapproves: I think the comparison of historical perspectives is optimal, and that it is crucial for the art historical study of Chinese painting … but I also think the impetus to construct such a comparison comes from the West, and needs to be looked on with some suspicion.

Second: All art historical scholarship on Chinese painting involves parallels between Chinese and Western art, even when it seems it has expunged them. Some comparisons can be avoided (it is possible to stop calling Han Dynasty art “baroque”), but most are
unnoticed. It is not possible to write an art historical account without them. The comparison of historical perspectives may seem beside the point of current scholarship, but it follows from the large-scale structures that art history imputes to Western and Chinese painting, and so it cannot be avoided. What matters, in the end, is understanding as many such parallel structures as possible, and coming to terms with the ongoing desire to explain what is so commonly and dramatically, but really accurately, called the Other.

Third: All this matters beyond Chinese landscape painting, and beyond the study of Chinese art. I hope there is a moral here for all art historians who study material that is outside their own cultural context. (That includes, as an exemplary case, North American scholars writing about Europe.) Whether it is written in China or in North America, art history is Western in measurable ways, and that Westernness matters—it cannot be taken for granted, or meliorated by increasing vigilance, or made fragile by postcolonial interrogation, or accepted as an unavoidable consequence of cultural difference. It cannot be solved by opting for the latest theories, or forgotten by attending to the grit of some particular historical problem, or transcended by philosophic critique. It has not disappeared as art history has grown into visual studies and cultural critique, and it has not faded as art history has spread to universities around the world. The very idea of writing art histories, setting up and running art history departments, publishing art history essays and books, and teaching students to be art historians, is Western. Any country that adopts these practices will be pursuing a Western goal in Western terms. “Chinese landscape painting,” for example, is Western art history.
I

A Brace of Comparisons

There may be no more difficult problem visible to art history than the representation of other cultures. It is at once diffuse and unhelpfully explicit, over- and under-theorized, conventionally elided and narrowly contended. Even getting near it poses severe conceptual problems.¹

To begin (if this is a beginning point), no one seems entirely sure what the problem might be. Some practices are manifestly pernicious—for instance, the orientalizing representations made famous by Edward Said; and others seem harmless and routine—for instance, writing in English about Chinese art.² It appears to be wrong, or at least inaccurate, to characterize a Chinese painting as “Baroque,” as I mentioned in the Introduction. And yet it seems acceptable, and even inevitable, to call particular images “dynamic,” “spatial,” “curvilinear,” or any number of other traditionally Baroque qualities. Surely it would seem to be difficult and unrewarding to purge words like “dynamic” from descriptions of Chinese art.

What about calling a Chinese painting “severe,” “austere,” “flat,” or “abstract,” as Western scholars tend to say of Ni Zan’s 倪瓚 landscapes? How much Western baggage do those words bring in tow? How close are they to the Chinese 平淡 píngdàn, which is usually translated as “bland,” “severe,” “flat,” and even—in an odd, but customary locution—“insipid”?³ Does a full, or even an adequate, account have to turn to Chinese words? And if so, what about the English words that define them?

Of all cross-cultural descriptions, comparisons seem especially fraught. Outright comparisons can appear rude (are the Han Dynasty or the Yuan really akin to Western modernism, as both have been claimed to be?) but qualified, introductory, or otherwise informal comparisons can seem both appropriate and useful.⁴ It is acceptable to begin an
introductory book or a lecture on Chinese art by naming a few Western parallels, but it is a
dubious matter to carry them forward into the body of the argument and elevate them into
explanatory principles. In a recent interview with Jerome Silbergeld, Wen Fong reports that
several colleagues—David Rosand, Hal Foster—encouraged him not to make East-West
comparisons. Yet there is no sure limit, no way to decide with reasonable security when
a heuristic comparison becomes what Paul Ricoeur calls a “living metaphor,” animating
the text and governing its meaning. For some art historians the very idea of comparing
a Western work to a non-Western one is a common kind of nonsense. In that view, any
such contrast is an attempt to wield power, often by strengthening a stereotype about some
other culture’s art. (Homi Bhabha has argued along those lines.) But when does prudence
become prudery? Can it make sense to say that mentioning a Western artwork, or citing
Kant, Michel Foucault, or Walter Benjamin is an inappropriate intrusion, perpetuating
habits that in the end have to be called imperialist? When a scholar of Chinese art such as
Jonathan Hay tries to understand a Song Dynasty painting by citing Krzysztof Ziarek,
Alain Badiou, Hubert Damisch, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Didi-Huberman, Bruno Latour,
and Niklas Luhmann, he is only exemplifying the habits of some Western art history. Who
is to say that it matters that his Western sources outnumber his Chinese sources? (What
mattered in Hay’s essay was the mixture of sources, and the effect that mixture created.)

Some historians would say that Western theories and their attendant concepts are
not useful for art history, that they are more often than not wrongheaded leftovers of an
earlier generation’s taste. According to that view, artworks should be able to speak “for
themselves,” outside of Western discourse and ultimately—at least by a legitimate leap
of the reader’s imagination—outside of language itself. Others have concluded that these
problems are belabored unnecessarily. Western theories and concepts may just be small
evils, easily avoided and prone to obvious kinds of critiques; essentially, they might be
undergraduate-level difficulties that professional art historians can easily avoid. (Some art
historians who specialize in Western art regard the very idea of cross-cultural comparison as
somehow gauche or sterile. I am not concerned with that objection here, because it does not
approach the questions I want to raise.)

For still others, the issues I am raising may be problematic but they are part of the
discipline’s past. They belong to the period when people wanted to say such things as
“Han Dynasty art is dynamic,” or “Ni Zan is bland.” Now, so this reasoning goes, we have
moved on to issues of society, politics, identity, reception, and gender, and we are no longer
interested in finding ways to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of Chinese painting—indeed,
we are no longer interested in Chinese painting per se, but only in its interactions with
Chinese society. Western interest in Chinese literati painting, so this last argument goes, is
itself a thing of the past, and we have moved on and left the old interpretive problems
behind.

This last way of thinking is especially important to my project in this book. If you
find yourself partly agreeing with it, bear with me. As I suggested in the Introductions, I
am going to claim that current scholarship on Chinese painting—to the extent that it still exists, and has not dissolved into more general inquiries into Chinese culture—is wholly conceptually dependent on the apparently irrelevant concerns of previous scholars.

My guess is that a plurality of art historians would probably agree that any description of another culture’s art is going to be an impure affair, and that the art historian’s task is to control the damage that is done and remain alert to unsuspected biases. But that simple reminder is curiously difficult to flesh out, and again the discussion is bogged before it begins. Since cross-cultural comparisons are necessary, is there an optimal strategy for minimizing the distortions they inevitably cause? It might seem modest and reasonable to say scholarship should aim at promoting self-reflexivity and opening representation to critique. But it is seldom clear how that ought to be accomplished. Can an expert help alleviate misrepresentation simply by knowing more about her own practices? As a colleague of mine said in a different context, can a “great specialist … shed all culture-bound assumptions when studying a foreign tradition?”

The questions accelerate, spiraling into confusion. At first the presence of Western comparisons looks more fraught than writing that sticks to simple description, but on closer inspection any description begins to look like a comparison: after all, what is a description if not a narrative that positions an unknown object in a familiar setting? What is art history, in the end, except an endless re-presentation of more-or-less unfamiliar material?

My working definition of *comparison*, at the end of the Introductions, leads to a regress in which all writing is dependent on comparison, just as all language is dependent on metaphor. Of course I am only interested in comparisons that are identifiably *not* of the culture that is being represented. I care about words like “dynamic,” and translations of 平淡 *píngdàn*, but not as much about the matrix of Western language in which such words occur. Yet the issue may be representation itself, rather than translations, parallels, cross-cultural studies, colonialism, stereotypes, or any other more specific topics. For Hegel as for postcolonial theorists who follow in his wake, every description is abrasive: it abrades the object of study, and effaces itself a little in the process. It can be argued in a number of ways that all representation entails some violence, and that misrepresentations cannot be controlled by the agent who initiates them. George Steiner quotes I.A. Richards on the subject of transferring Chinese philosophic concepts into English: “We have here indeed,” Richards says, “what may very probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos.” Steiner takes Richards’s remark as a suggestive
hyperbole, and adds that “the complexity and range of implications were already present in the first moment of human speech.” For Steiner even a silent rumination involves nearly impossible questions of misrepresentation. How do I describe or control what happens as I move from my uncognized feelings to my dawning awareness, from there to a thought I can represent to myself, and then onward to my speech, my writing, and the universe of possible auditors in all languages and contexts?\textsuperscript{12}

It is no small part of the difficulty that a cacophony of theories and disciplines are all at work on the same questions. Representation, comparison, and analogy are vigorously debated in anthropology, where theories of “emic” and “etic” reports have helped clarify the role of interpreter and informant.\textsuperscript{13} Analogous questions occur in analytic philosophy, where “conceptual schemes” and “sufficient rationality” have been used to shape discussions about communication between people, “discourses,” and what Stanley Fish called “interpretive communities.”\textsuperscript{14} Parallel questions play a part in linguistics, where speaking and writing are taken as the exemplary arenas of representation. “Translation theory” wrestles with questions of legibility and meaning across linguistic boundaries.\textsuperscript{15} In Heideggerian philosophy, analogous issues arise in discussions of truth (\textit{aletheia, homoiosis}); in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, they involve the concept of appearance (\textit{Vorstellung}); in Hegel, the master-slave dialectic; and in Sartre, the problem of the Other.\textsuperscript{16} Cultural studies knows similar questions as unresolved issues in postcolonial relations.\textsuperscript{17} And finally, art history itself possesses a well-developed discourse on representation and misrepresentation when it comes to gendered seeing and depictions of race.

I do not want to foreclose these more philosophic problems, but I also want to keep focused on the visible. I am mainly interested in what we can see as Western in our texts, and how we construe that Westernness. We are only at the beginning of the study; I think we know very little about the cultural specificity of what we write, and how we interpret. Most of the Westernness of art history, from its apparently universal institutional structures to its apparently natural formal analyses, is Western in ways that I think are woven into the discipline.

Given the density of this initial confusion, it is prudent to begin as directly and specifically as possible. My “example” of Chinese landscape painting—since I want it to continue to appear as an example until it gathers the momentum necessary to overtake the theories that seek to constrain it to the \textit{merely} exemplary—can be approached through a series of vignettes. I will look first at a sequence of texts that compare particular Chinese paintings with Western ones; each account is apparently less naïve than the last, apparently more in control of the
problems it raises. At first the terms of comparison are nothing less than all of China and all of the West, and gradually they become narrower and more careful, until they have shrunk to provisional parallels and hints. I have called this process *atomization*: the gradual censorship of obviously Western words like “Baroque” in favor of apparently neutral terms, together with a growing unease about large-scale comparisons and a concomitant interest in subtler and smaller claims.¹⁸

In recent scholarship there are virtually no large-scale, self-assured comparisons: instead Western terms and comparisons are either identified and interrogated, as I am doing here, or treated as if they were more or less harmless accompaniments to more or less disinterested historical description. Though I think the increase in self-reflexivity in recent scholarship is real, I am less sure about the decrease in naïveté. It might be better to say that some problematic parallels are purged, while others are repressed, allowing newly unrecognizable senses of culture, history, art, and Westernness to come into play.

---

Early Western accounts of Chinese painting derive from stories promoted by Athanasius Kircher, William Warburton, and others to the effect that China has no art and an ungainly pictorial script.¹⁹ The first art historical judgments about Chinese painting are not significantly more differentiated.²⁰ Laurence Binyon compared the Chinese tradition to a hypothetical West that was not interrupted or “invaded” by the Renaissance, but “developed continuously from the art of the Middle Ages.”²¹ These days it is impossible to take such an assertion seriously, for any number of reasons. It does not sound right to foist the European Renaissance on China, even in imagination. And on closer inspection, the idea itself is incoherent. If China can be imagined with a Renaissance, then it should be possible to picture the West without one. But what could that possibly mean? Would it be like an excision, leaving some recognizable residue that we might still call the Enlightenment, or the Romantic rebellion? At least for me, it is difficult to imagine the Renaissance as a portable event that can be mentally subtracted or added to different cultures.²²

At first glance Binyon seems to be working with very rough notions of history, both his own and China’s. His sense of cultural value is severely Eurocentric, boasting as he does about the Renaissance, and imagining it as an invention on the order of linear perspective or Copernican astronomy. He is relatively uninterested in any Chinese painting after the Song Dynasty, and in that he is in line with an early twentieth-century Western preference for early religious painting as against the later landscape tradition. (Roger Fry and Clive Bell had comparable sympathies.) Because he does not care for later Chinese painting, Binyon is apt to see it as a static continuation of what had gone before, as if it
were an endless Middle Ages. For later twentieth-century scholars the *literati* tradition from the Yuan Dynasty onward appeared as a very rich field, and it may not seem as if Binyon’s understanding has anything in common with that scholarship. But I am not so sure Western scholarship has broken so definitively with its recent past (after all, Binyon was only writing a half-century ago), and I wonder if Binyon’s laconic verdict does not contain the seeds of ideas that continue to shape contemporary art history. (Binyon’s notion about China lacking a Renaissance reminds me of the commonplace that Russia lacked a Renaissance: I have not been able to trace the history of that idea, but it has not yet run its course. Its echoes can be heard in any number of media statements and policy decisions.)

In short, Binyon may be telegraphing a version of Chinese painting that is still alive today, even though it has flowered and branched into a forest of books and symposia. It is basically this: later Chinese painting is somehow marked by a gradual decline, infinitely varied and prone to dramatic recoveries, but deeply seated and ultimately devastating.

Among the questions that crowd around cross-cultural comparisons, perhaps the most insistent is one that cultural theorists sometimes call the center and the margin. Let me put this in two versions, one for Chinese art historians and the other for generalists like myself. For a Chinese art historian, a version of the question might be: Am I studying Chinese art principally or exclusively? Or am I studying it professionally while living a life surrounded by Western art? Is Chinese art giving me all, or most of, the terms of my understanding of art, or am I working in a Western context, and experiencing Chinese art as a specialized focus? From a generalist’s or non-specialist’s point of view, the same question might appear this way: Is Chinese landscape painting going to be my true subject here, the effective center of my attention? Or is it going to be the object against which I measure the West, so that it is ultimately only a compelling contrast to the kinds of art I normally study? The problem of center and margin is not black and white, and I would be surprised if any of these questions could be answered without qualification by any art historian. Nevertheless the centrality or marginality of Chinese art is crucial and ubiquitous in universities and academies: we all know people for whom Chinese art is nothing but a blip on the cultural horizon, and people for whom Chinese art is the richest source of meaning in all the visual arts, the exemplary instance of art and its history.

Considering this, it helps to be forthright about the position of Chinese studies in the discipline of art history as a whole. Few would doubt that the history of European art is still pre-eminent in art history, and that the canonical “story of art,” from Egypt or Greece to Europe or America, remains in force. If Chinese art is an equal partner, it is so only in the
discourse of multiculturalism. This can be demonstrated by a quick survey of the countries that have specialists in Chinese painting in university positions.23

In Ireland, where I taught for three years, Chinese art is barely taught in art history classes. It makes a brief appearance when it comes to Chinoiserie, but it is not taught to undergraduates as a separate subject.24 There are no specialists in Chinese art history teaching in Ireland. That situation is typical of smaller first-world countries. As of 2008, the four countries of Scandinavia have two specialists in Chinese painting (Uta Lauer and Minna Törmä).25 There are approximately five specialists in Chinese art in Scandinavia, but the others work in museums, and some are sinologists rather than art historians. In Switzerland, the University of Zürich has a professor of East Asian art (Helmut Brinker), but he is retired, and the new specialist is in Japanese art. When smaller Western countries have Chinese specialists, they are typically not art historians with teaching jobs, and the existence of Chinese specialists is usually determined by the proximity of collections of Asian art.26 At the Charles University in Prague, for example, there are no courses in Chinese art history in the Art History department, but courses are offered by a sinologist in the Department of Far Eastern Studies.27 As far as I know, France has no specialists in Chinese painting who have university positions; French specialists in Chinese art work, for example, in the Musée Guimet in Paris.

Only a few larger Western countries outside the United States have specialists in Chinese painting. In Germany there are at least two universities that offer regular courses in Chinese art, and China specialists who work in museums.28 The U.K. has a number of scholars in museums and universities who lecture in Chinese painting, although few are specialists.29

Outside the larger countries of western and central Europe, and of course outside of East Asia, Chinese art is nonexistent as a specialty. Russia has no Chinese art historians teaching in universities. As far as I know there is no full-time Chinese art historian anywhere in Latin America.

In the United States, Chinese art is commonly taught by specialists, but it remains a minority interest and is hardly ever required at graduate level. Those imbalances are reflected in textbooks.30 It is not unjust to say the history of Chinese art remains marginal in the everyday pedagogy and the professional structure of the discipline of art history. Chinese art is optional and often excluded from debates in visual theory, from entry-level historiography, and from students’ course loads. It is virtually nonexistent in visual studies.31

We propose the equality of Chinese and Western painting, but we do not quite practice it. On the other hand, Chinese art may be the most serious contender for the role of the West’s privileged and traditional counterpart. I would like to understand what that means in such a way that I can resist the usual explanation, which has it that Chinese art is a specialty like any other, one that is therefore not expected to be co-equal with Western art in the discipline as a whole. The problem is that if we say Chinese painting is marginal because of a lack of specialists, or because young scholars in North America, South America,
Europe tend to choose Western specialties, then we are implying Chinese art could be central or co-equal. It could be urged, for example, that in the next millennium, when Chinese art historians outnumber Western art historians, Chinese art history will be the principal subject of Gardner’s Art through the Ages, and European art will be interpolated as a brief interlude, as Chinese art is now. The reasoning would be that if Chinese art could be central, if it might inevitably become central, then its current off-center position is really not a philosophic or historiographic problem; it is more the dull consequence of the fact that people are more interested in the place they live in than in other places. Fixing the imbalance of Western art in art history would be the concern of hiring committees. But I suspect there is more to it, so I do not want to make it seem as if the inequality might be fixed by hiring more Chinese specialists, by teaching more Chinese art, by waiting for the population of Chinese specialists to increase, or by fiddling with the narratives in survey texts.

A simple thought-experiment can outline the issue I mean to explore. Like the West, Chinese art has its masters, and both cultures have a central list of the least contested, most permanently canonical figures—say, in the West, artists like Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Manet, Cézanne, and Picasso. In the West, artists like those still comprise the canon: they are the focus of the most research, statistically speaking. Both traditions also have their indispensable works (in the West, for example, there is the Sistine Ceiling, the Mona Lisa, Las Meniñas, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon)—works whose meanings are so integral to our understanding of words like “painting” that it is not possible to mentally subtract them from the history books and still be able to call the remainder “Western art.”

In the nature of things, it is no surprise that the names of the Chinese masters and masterpieces are less well known in the West. Nor is it unexpected that an average art historian (that is, one specializing in some period of Western art) seldom thinks about the possibility that China might have an equivalently large list of such works and artists. What I find surprising is that it can be hard to picture how any Chinese painting could be as inflected, as rich and unique, as important and irreplaceable as, say, the Mona Lisa. The very idea of a Chinese painting with that degree of difference from its historical setting can be nearly inconceivable. Even from the point of view of a Western art historian reasonably well informed about Chinese painting, the history of Chinese landscape paintings seems more uniform than the history of Western paintings, and Chinese “masterpieces” seem more alike than Western “masterpieces.”

I consider this puzzling because I am not convinced that it is only a matter of relative familiarity. If I know a tradition well, its internal structure becomes clearer, and its works
more individual and variegated. A tradition I do not know looks flat and self-similar. (It is uncomfortably close to the common racist notion that people from exotic places all resemble one another.) But does Chinese painting not remain “marginal” at least in part because to an observer trained in Western art, it looks as if it will always appear more uniform? And does that conviction not spring from something other than simple ignorance?

Binyon’s easy verdict (that China merely lacks “a Renaissance”) reverberates in Western accounts of Chinese painting, but not as a claim about the Renaissance. What keeps it alive has more to do with the lack itself, with absence. For Binyon’s generation, that sometimes meant China never discovered the challenge of mimesis: its artists seldom tried for naturalism or verisimilitude, never invented perspective, never engaged physiognomy or anatomy, never attempted chiaroscuro except in a few cases where the West spurred Chinese artists on to some idiosyncratic innovations. (The missing quality of verisimilitude is sometimes spoken of in recent scholarship in reference to portrait painting, where it is called 寫貌 xiěmào. But surely that comparison is a leftover of the older notion that Chinese art normally lacks such properties. Otherwise why single it out from the much larger field of critical terms?)

Today that kind of anatomizing seems fruitless: it only disperses, atomizes, the Renaissance into its alleged component parts so that China can be chastised separately for lacking each feature. But Binyon’s judgment has an odd echo that keeps getting louder as time passes. For contemporary writers the question no longer centers on the Renaissance (or even a renascence or a revolution); so what makes the history of Chinese painting appear different?

Perhaps the marginality of Chinese painting has to do with the feeling that China has a different kind of history, with a different articulation or internal structure. (Binyon, looking at it from a great distance, saw only a lacuna.) It is as if art’s history has a set of possible structures and permissible degrees of articulation, and China never possessed the full set.

Another way of getting at the center/margin question is to ask about Western art historians who have chosen to study only Western art. There are many reasons why art historians such
as Erwin Panofsky, E.H. Gombrich, Meyer Schapiro, and Hans Belting work principally with Western art. For Gombrich, the question of Chinese art is largely the absence of mimesis: “Chinese artists did not go out into the open,” he writes in *The Story of Art*, “to sit down in front of some motif, and sketch it. They even learned their art by a strange method of meditation and concentration in which they first acquired skill in ‘how to paint pine-trees,’ ‘how to paint rocks,’ ‘how to paint clouds,’ by studying not nature but the works of renowned masters.” For Belting, the nature of “art” is so particularly a product of the Renaissance (as opposed to the era “before art,” in the Middle Ages) that an inquiry into Chinese art, it seems, could not fail to lose its way.

For other art historians, including even Panofsky, the word “Eurocentrism” is more appropriate: qualities of Western art are what require attention, and the most sophisticated forms of meaning—as in Panofsky’s “fourth level” of iconology—are intended to help the West picture itself. Only a few art historians, such as David Summers, John Onians, Larry Silver, and David Carrier, have spent a significant portion of their time looking at Chinese art, and for each of them China has been a chapter in a larger, international inquiry.

Why haven’t individual scholars successfully sued to escape from the hold of Eurocentrism? If Eurocentrism can be named and analyzed, why can’t it also be overthrown, at least temporarily, by an act of informed volition? If art history were truly multicultural—if China appeared in the historical imagination as the equal of the West—then there would be some Western art historians who were sufficiently serious about the discipline, and sufficiently free of administrative obligations, to let Chinese painting occupy at least fifty percent of their attention. There would have been at least one art historian who decided, after moving outside her specialty, writing broadly about the world’s art, and developing accounts of worldwide phenomena, to leave the fold of Westernness and find her principal anchor, her sense of art as well as history, in China rather than in the West. But there are no such art historians—not even one.

(I want to be sure my claim here is as clear as I can make it. I am not talking about accomplished Western art historians who choose Chinese art as a specialty, such as Minna Törmä, Lothar Ledderose, or Ladislav Kesner—to name three European examples. I am concerned about the absence of any major, international scholar, on a level with Wilhelm von Bode, Meyer Schapiro, or Jan Bialostocki, who decided to base their art historical research in Chinese art. I am imagining a scholar who is not significantly limited by their teaching obligations, their travel budget, their linguistic skills, or their interests, who finds that Chinese art has such a complex history that it can serve as the basis for the understanding of art’s history in general. So far, that has not happened, and I am proposing that the reason is not only to do with the usual limitations of time, energy, and scholarly capacity, but that it is grounded in the very structure of art history, which does not, so far, allow itself to be understood as an enterprise that could begin in China and discover non-Chinese art from that perspective.)
When I wonder about this, I turn to the idea of spending more than half my time with Chinese painting. I would guess that thirty, sometimes forty percent of my research is centered on non-Western painting, and Chinese painting is pre-eminent in that minority. In practical terms, it is arbitrary to think of fifty percent as a cutoff point, but it is philosophically significant. A few percentage points over fifty, and Chinese painting would become the center, the standard against which I would compare and contrast new artworks, the touchstone for concepts and interpretations. Philosophically speaking, if I spent fifty-one percent of my time on Chinese painting, it would become the familiar term, and Western art the unfamiliar term. My way of talking about Western art would be profoundly changed.

Can it be nothing more than the everyday constraints of time and energy, or the demands and protocols of specialization, that prevent art historians from “crossing over”? If that were so, I think it would cast a sad light on the discipline, because it would mean that despite what we believe about history, we are tied to customs and conventions, deadlines and inertia.

Ever since the formation of the discipline, each generation has produced several dozen art historians whose interests have taken them outside their Western specialties. The current generation has for example John Onians, Norman Bryson, and David Summers, all of whom have long been concerned with non-Western art. One might also name Hugh Honour and John Fleming, Helen Gardner, Larry Silver, James Beck, Horst Janson, and Frederick Hartt, in their capacities as authors of survey textbooks. But each is an exception, and there are very few others. Even the consummately international Thomas DaCosta Kaufman is mainly a scholar of central Europe, despite his interest in geography; and Ladislav Kesner is a scholar of Chinese sculpture, despite his professional life in Brno, in the Czech Republic. Given the sheer variety of the discipline, surely the rule would have been broken at some point unless some more interesting obstacle prevented it.

This is a kind of mystery, because it does not present itself very clearly for analysis. I suspect the real reasons for Chinese painting’s marginality go very deep, to the foundations of our understanding of art history itself. (Not just to the foundations of the discipline of art history, because those can be thought about, and thought through; what counts is our understanding of how art has a history.) In this book the subject is historiography, but there are darker threads here as well. For writers like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Blumenberg, both historical meaning and value are Western, generated in and for Western culture. In art history, the ineradicable root of the ongoing centrality of Western art may be the awareness, occluded by general talk about multiculturalism or Eurocentrism and frequently uncognized, that the historical project itself inheres in the West; that Western culture generates, sustains, and
conditions the meaning of art, history, and art history, both as a discipline and a conceptual possibility. This is not to say that the historical project is not an indispensable feature of Chinese scholarship; it is to say that what appears as history, in academic scholarship, is articulated in Western terms.38

Let me put this down as an initial hypothesis, the first of six that will help guide my argument:

*First hypothesis.* The history of Western art is deeply related to the enterprise of art history itself, so much so that the history of Chinese landscape painting tends to appear as an example, or as a set of possible examples, and not a co-equal in the production or understanding of art history itself.

After, Binyon comparisons proliferate, though they hold more tightly to the ground of historical fact and pictorial organization.

Sherman Lee’s introductory text *Chinese Landscape Painting* (1954) makes several comparisons between individual Chinese and Western painters, and he offers reproductions of painters such as Van Gogh, Cézanne, Rembrandt, Breughel the Elder, one of the Bamboccianti, Pavel Tchelitchew, John Marin, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and Claude Lorrain.39 They are meant as pedagogical tools, to help Western students see features of Chinese painting, and Lee chooses pairs that have what he takes to be obvious gestural and compositional similarities. The atmospheric, late Song or early Yuan *Landscape with Flight of Geese* in the Art Institute of Chicago has foreground trees, a misted expanse of water, and lightly washed background, as does a landscape study by Claude Lorrain in the Cleveland Museum of Art. Lee notes an “evident effort” in both to “achieve a larger, more total effect”: but other than that, a reader might well say the two paintings look dissimilar.40 Van Gogh’s *View of Arles* in Providence, Lee says, shares “sudden and abrupt” ink marks with Shen Zhou’s *Oak and Hummocks with Three Figures at a Wall* from his album *Scenes at Tiger Hill* (plate 1).41

Such comparisons define and emphasize formal similarities, of a kind that contemporary historians have learned to regard as especially slipper and ideologically overdetermined. Formal and stylistic criteria like the ones Lee adduces tend to look natural to the person who finds them, and less so to readers who may see the same features quite differently. Reading Lee’s text, I find myself learning as much about his way of looking as about Chinese painting. I can remember discovering his book as an undergraduate and noticing the uncomfortable fact that he seemed often wrong about Van Gogh or Lorrain, but always
Plate 2: Zhao Mengfu, Autumn Colors in the Qiao [Que] and Hua Mountains, detail. Handscroll, 28.4 x 93.2 cm. Taipei, National Palace Museum.
A Brace of Comparisons
right about Shen Zhou or *Landscape with a Flight of Geese*. Since I had no other sense of the Chinese paintings, I saw immediately and fully through his eyes—until he turned back to the Western material. Unfortunately, subtracting his particular sense of “sudden and abrupt” from the Shen Zhou did not leave a legible trait behind: it just left a vacuum.

Style comparisons have become notorious, both because they are so determinedly outside politics and social contexts, and because they can depend on deceptive similarities between widely different works. Nor is it more reliable to base comparisons on aesthetic definitions of periods. Zhao Mengfu’s *Autumn Colors in the Qiao [Que] and Hua Mountains* in the Palace Museum, Taipei (plate 2) has been understood as a reaction against the Southern Song Dynasty, a reading that I will explore later. The reaction has been put, unhelpfully I think, in aesthetic terms—for example, Zhao’s “severity” has been contrasted with the “warmth” and “romanticism” of the earlier period. James Cahill points out that an anti-naturalistic reaction against romantic naturalism “has taken place only within the last century” in Western art.\(^{42}\) Zhao Mengfu’s art was self-consciously severe, and it has been taken as a reaction against what had come before; but comparisons based on aesthetic traits encourage open-ended debates about which Western periods are the best analogies. In this case, to name only two possibilities, it is also true that elements of the High Renaissance alienated the “colder,” “anti-naturalistic” *maniera* artists, and that at the turn of the nineteenth century the “severe” and “abstract” group known as *les primitifs* reacted against a “picturesque” and overly sensuous tradition by adopting archaic forms. As long as the criteria are aesthetic—the reaction of something “cold” and “severe” against something “warm” and “romantic”—too many periods are candidates, and the choices between them depend too unreliably on holistic characterizations of the works.

Benjamin Rowland’s *Art in East and West: An Introduction through Comparisons* (1954) is an entertaining book, an extended commentary on thirty pairs of slightly blurry monochrome photographs, each matching a Western artwork with an Asian one. Occasionally there is a demonstrable historical connection between the pairs, as in the sleepy almond-shaped eyes of a figure on the Rheims cathedral (thirteenth century) and a sculpture of a *deva* from Afghanistan (fifth century): both derive in part, and at several removes, from classical Western sculpture. Other comparisons are standard in introductory art history textbooks, for example the juxtaposition of Whistler’s *Old Battersea Bridge* and Hokusai’s architecturally and atmospherically similar *Fireworks at Ryōgoku Bridge*. Many of Rowland’s comparisons seem natural, as when he pairs representations of monkeys, flowers, falcons, or profile
portraits. Others look forced, as in the comparison between Han Gan’s 祁干 study of the bizarre, blocky, overweight champion horse known as *Shining Light of the Night* (eighth century) and one of Leonardo da Vinci’s studies of sinewy horses for the *Adoration of the Kings* (fifteenth century). In that case, the similarity, Rowland says, consists in the fact that both are about “impetuosity and virility, so that both are in a way ideographs of the horse in a universal sense.”

Rowland’s choices are not often based on purely formal coincidences, though he tends to begin with close matches between Eastern and Western media. They are general, loosely principled, heuristic pairings—in the Chinese expression, 中西合璧 zhōngxi hébì, good combinations of Chinese and Western elements. An exception is the comparison of Michelangelo’s study for the *Libyan Sibyl* on the Sistine Ceiling (sixteenth century) and a rubbing of a stone engraving after one of Wu Daozi’s 吳道子 paintings (eighth century), which is motivated largely by similarities in the two artists’ critical reception (plate 3). Certainly the layout of the pages, in which Wu’s design is reproduced sideways (top is to the left), does not aid the search for compositional similarities. (In any case it is fairly difficult to see Wu’s figure at all, though its deep black eyes—projections on the original stone engraving—eventually provide the key.) Paraphrasing the Chinese reception, Rowland

---

reports that Wu Daozi “is said to have been possessed with a kind of divine energy”—echoing, though he does not say it, the Italian epithet divino for Michelangelo. Wu’s paintings had “stupendous power and freedom”: this figure of a flying demon “is literally swelling with the pressure of pent-up energy,” as if it had Michelangelo’s frightening terribilis. Like Michelangelo’s figures (“the only possible comparison”), Wu’s figures have a “superhuman vitality” and “demoniacal heroic force.” For his part, Michelangelo “created figures imbued with divine energy” and “superhuman physical proportions” and “superhuman anatomy.”

All of Rowland’s superlatives echo back and forth with Chinese and Italian concepts, brewed into a heady mixture that does not quite follow either culture’s discourse but half-misrepresents both.

In looking at these comparisons, I have two thoughts in mind: I want to ask about the conditions under which they could be persuasive; and I want to name at least some of the ideas about art and history that they entail. Rowland works at a kind of mid-level of specificity, not quite citing the original texts on either side, but staying close to their rhetoric. What matters in the Michelangelo/Wu Daozi comparison is the existence of what Rowland calls “Giants of Painting” who are “extolled by critics of every period.” They are excessive by nature, breaking the bounds of mimesis in the name of “dynamic movement,” “violence,” and “divine energy.” The comparison is compelling for him because he can line up those terms on both sides of the equation. The lexica of praise are in one-to-one correspondence, and so the interpretation is valid. At the end of the passage, he distinguishes between the two painters’ purposes: Wu was after “spirit-harmony-through-life movement,” while Michelangelo’s goals were “humanistic and intensely personal.” (“Spirit-harmony” conjures 氣 qì or words such as 精神 jīngshén—there is a number of Chinese and Italian words in the air here.) Despite the distinction, the effects the two painters produced were equivalent.

What does that equation elide? Where are its moments of necessary blindness, as Paul de Man would put it? One such moment is manifest in the difference between the pictures: Michelangelo’s is a calm figure in a contemplative pose (in the fresco, she is holding a book) and Wu’s is a windswept figure with “flame-like hair.” Of course Rowland could have found a closer match if he had wanted—say, the angels atop the Last Judgment. The fact that he did not bother shows this is a match driven by clichés about the two painters, and points to its limitations. The comparison seemed inevitable because both painters exceeded their traditions; what mattered is the painters’ excess, their disproportionate energy.

Comparisons like these, which seem wrong for fairly clear reasons, afford the opportunity to search for the residue of “outmoded” thought in our own work. Is the Wu/Michelangelo connection the misguided product of a late Romantic imagination, bent on finding moments of sublimity in oceans of mediocrity? For the most part, yes; but as in Binyon’s case I am not sure we are entirely immune to it. It seems clear that the Wu/Michelangelo comparison is effectively sterile in terms of what it might say about the eighth century in China or the sixteenth century in Italy. It would not take us very far in a conference on the Renaissance
or on eighth-century China. But that kind of objection may not have much force: after all what matters in such a comparison is not where it leads in the later Tang or in central Italian mannerism, but the voice it gives to convictions about art. Misguided as it seems, what Rowland claims can also be understood as the shell of an idea that is very much alive in contemporary art history: both Wu and Michelangelo were compelled to reinvent anatomy, proportions, poses, and even mimesis. Easy as it is to say Wu Daozi is not Michelangelo, it may be next to impossible to abandon the lexicon of creative excess that Rowland conjures.

In a chapter on landscape painting, Rowland proposes a half-dozen parallels, matching pictures of the seasons, of forests, of the places of man in nature, and of emotions recollected in landscapes. Several times he uses comparisons as occasions to doubt superficial similarities. At first, he says, John Marin’s *Maine Islands* looks like *Mountain Village in Clearing Mist*, a painting attributed to Ying Yujian 瑩玉潤 (act. c. 1250): both are “very personal interpretations, recorded in what some critics like to call an individual shorthand or calligraphy” (plate 4). But it turns out the comparison is “misleading” because Marin’s work is partly abstract, “inconsistent” and “illegible,” while Ying Yujian’s is an attempt to record the impression of a single instant, a “breathless, electrifying,” “explosive” moment of clarity.48

In this account “abstraction” is a deliberate affair, while “insight” is immediate. Marin’s broken verticals and horizontals and his pseudo-hieroglyphs (on the right and left margins) are a “formula,” the “thin and merely decorative” construction of an artist who has relied on an inconsistent “marriage of impressionism and abstraction” rather than “a flash of instantaneous, often irrational, intuition.” Marin might well have added his glyphs and broken lines in an instant of “intuitive” understanding, but for Rowland any such construction is artificial: it is a deferred expression, the product of “certain mannerisms” Marin has “superimposed” on a pre-existing sensation. In accord with the Western reception of this kind of painting, *Mountain Village* is understood as the work of an instant, even though its carefully planned wet-in-wet washes are clear evidence to the contrary.

The most intriguing parallels are those in which Rowland has a difficult time seeing any flaw. He compares a detail of Matthias Grünewald’s *The Temptation of St. Anthony* with a painting attributed to Li Cheng 李成 called *Reading the Tablet* (plate 5), in order to show how “demon groves” are a theme in China and in the West.49 Li Cheng’s painting “represents a traveler seated on a donkey, scrutinizing with fearful intensity the inscription on a stele that rises like a menhir before a grotesque group of pine trees that arch their dragon branches against the empty sky.” Rowland is hypnotized by the “concentration and isolation of the twisted trees with their tortuous, iron-hard trunks and crab-claw branches,” and he finds the same “sinister” mood in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, where “all nature, dreadful and deformed, enters into the demoniacal conspiracy against St. Anthony.” The branch Rowland excerpts is an icon of evil: it “stretches its dead, moss-covered branches in a kind of malediction over the amphitheater of monstrosities.”50
For Rowland, there is not much wrong with this comparison, except that the rest of *The Temptation of St. Anthony* “would be unthinkable for a Chinese artist.” Considered alone, however, the “ragged, broken elements of the landscape” are a perfect match for Li Cheng’s lugubrious scene. From the distance of a half-century, Rowland’s prose can be assigned to a kind of late Romanticism, and a contemporary art historian would want to resist Rowland’s notion that Li Cheng had anything like “malediction” in mind. (Richard Barnhart has written an excellent short essay on the meaning of old trees in Chinese painting: they have more to do with longevity and independence than evil.) Many of Rowland’s words can be found in the Western discourse of the sublime and the picturesque, and his fascination with the macabre is specifically a holdover from the *fin de siècle*. The comparison seems faultless to him because the pictures do nothing to stop him from replaying the bewitching evil he has in mind.

I think of these examples as cautionary tales: just because we can link Rowland’s interest in spidery trees to late Romanticism, or his belief in spontaneity to early modernism, does not mean we are free of them. Marin’s compositions *do* look “mediated,” as if he had to think carefully about how to place lines in order to create an effect of brilliant light, and Li Cheng’s painting *does* look a bit haunted. It helps to be aware of the history of the modern sublime, of figures of evil, of abstraction, and of spontaneity, but historiography...
alone cannot eliminate the remnants of old ideas. Rowland’s accounts are clearly dependent on early twentieth-century Western interests, but it would be treacherous to think that we have come very far since then.

A few comparisons in *Art in East and West* are nearly perfect. It seems entirely inevitable that Caspar David Friedrich’s *Two Men in Contemplation of the Moon* in Dresden (painted in 1819 in Neubrandenburg, Germany) should be paired with a Southern Song painting such as *Sage Contemplating the Moon*, attributed to Ma Yuan (plate 6). The two share almost everything: off-center compositions, lone trees, gnarled branches, cliffs, the moon, scenes of aristocratic contemplation. Formally and ideologically, they look like versions of the same theme. Although Rowland does not say so, they even share a touch of the ghostly, what was called “apparition painting” in Chinese criticism (亡靈畫 wánglíng huà). As Rowland remarks, the Ma Yuan (who is attested from 1189–1223) is “the exact Oriental counterpart of the romantic point of view,” and the parallel goes even deeper, since it is also “a complete epitome of the romantic point of view toward nature in China”—in other words, Romanticism exists both in the West and in China, and its two manifestations are equivalent in these paintings. The only reservation Rowland has is that Friedrich makes us
“conscious of a straining for expressiveness” and of “overstatement rather than economy.”52 The Chinese painter needed only “a minimum of pictorial statement,” while the German was unnecessarily preoccupied with “problems of space, light and texture” and therefore “failed to capture the sense of divinity in nature.” These are exactly the qualms about mediation and lack of spontaneity that drove Rowland’s disparaging comments about Marin’s Maine Islands, but here they are only an afterthought to an otherwise perfect comparison.

It might be said that Art in East and West is a primer in a certain kind of scholarship, where cultural parallels are supported by keeping a certain distance from the texts. If Rowland had wanted, he could have consulted the appropriate texts and found exceptions to his parallel. As it turns out, late Tang poetry is very different from early German Romantic poetry, and the two provide strongly dissimilar contexts.53 Such, at least, might be the usual art historical corrective. But I would rather think of this as a more obdurate problem, one that cannot necessarily be solved by calling in a specialist. I would wager that no amount of reading in Tang or Romantic poetry would make these paintings look entirely dissimilar. And where do we go from whatever remains of Rowland’s comparison? Probably back to the texts and the related paintings, to recover a sense of their difference … but the parallel remains a bit haunting. It is solecistic, symptomatic, and radically insufficient, but it stubbornly gives voice to an affinity that is inseparable from our experience of the paintings.

Comparisons are not often the products of concerted research. They begin informally, in the course of teaching and in talks with students and colleagues. They are usually unplanned and ephemeral, and as the decades pass they accumulate in the corners of our scholarship.

Michael Sullivan gives a brief tour of comparisons toward the end of his book The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art (1989), intending to show how some movements in modern art are based on “thoroughly Oriental” philosophic concerns.54 Some of his comparisons are formal ones: he says the “aims and techniques of the Cubists were, to some extent, anticipated by the Chinese landscape painter Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642–1715).” Both Wang and Cézanne had a method of “pulling … mountains and rocks apart and reassembling them into a tightly organized mass,” and both worked with a kind of “laborious intensity.” He pairs Paul Klee with Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), since both artists “twisted and contorted” forms in the pursuit of “expressive distortion.”55 (The match between Chinese and modernist pictorial distortions is an intriguing one, and I will return to it later.) He cites Pollock’s claim: “When I am in my painting I am not aware of what I’m doing,” and links Pollock’s notion of painting’s ecstatic “pure harmony” to ideas voiced by the Qing painter Shitao 石濤 (1642–1718), especially the notion of the “one
line” (一畫 yīhuà “whereby the artist’s exhilaration carries him through the painting on an unbroken surge of creative power.” For Sullivan, Shitao’s meditations on the “fundamental unity of Heaven and Earth … concerns precisely that ecstatic losing of oneself in the creative act that Jackson Pollock so wonderfully described.”

Here it is not the formal similarities that matter, but the underlying concepts. Sullivan contrasts Mountain Village in Clearing Mist, the same painting Rowland cites (see plate 4), with Action Painting. He says the Tang Dynasty “ink splashers” were given to “spectacular antics” along the lines of Georges Mathieu—pouring ink, using their hands, and painting with their hair—and Sullivan muses that “the essential difference” between them is that while Action Painters “left their gestures and splashes as complete statements, their Chinese predecessors of a thousand years ago” turned theirs into landscapes “by a few deft touches of the brush.”

Other comparisons turn mostly on concepts, avoiding formal coincidences entirely. Sullivan sees a concord between Kandinsky’s notion of “inner resonance” and Breton’s idea of “rhythmic unity.” Those concepts, in turn, have “much in common” with Xie Ho’s 謝赫 concept of “animating spirit” 氣 qì, as he sets it out in a short treatise written in the middle of the sixth century. Chinese painters, Sullivan proposes, “would have agreed absolutely with Kandinsky that ‘form harmony must rest only on the purposive vibrations of the human soul’.” There are three or four other parallels in Sullivan’s brief chapter, each of them leading to the conclusion that the Chinese painters would have thought modernist texts on art were “statement[s] of the obvious.”

I read texts like this in two ways. On the one hand, the comparisons are suggestive, varied, and undogmatic, and they often lead to interesting speculations. They are not burdened by obvious assumptions about modernism, and they are both general and eclectic. On the other hand, they only work at a certain critical distance from the paintings and the concepts that articulated them. Was the painting attributed to Ying Yujian really like Action Painting—that is, at least up to the moment the artist added a few rooftops, a footbridge, and two hunched figures? If I say that Wang Yuanqi’s distortions are like Cézanne’s, what can I say then? (Does it help if I believe that they both worked on their distortions with a “laborious intensity”?) The Chinese qì is a notorious term, impossible to translate directly (“energy” is usually said to be closest), and hard even to paraphrase. If it is equivalent to aspects of Kandinsky’s “inner resonance” or Breton’s “rhythmic unity,” it can only be so in a very general sense. The question here is not veracity, since there is some parallel to be made: rather the issue is the kind of conversation that is possible starting from an equivalence of qì and “inner resonance.” The comparison works in the compass of Sullivan’s ten-page section called “Oriental Art and Twentieth-Century Painting in the West,” but loses cogency beyond that. (In other books Sullivan is circumspect, and avoids breaking with historical context.) Toward the end of the section he concludes:
We could go on matching the theories and methods of modern Western artists against those of the traditional Orient, but there is no need to labor the point that what has happened in Western art in the twentieth century has brought it, in certain fundamental respects, into accord with that of the Far East. It is as though the inhabitants of one country, with immense imaginative effort, had succeeded in creating a new language, only to discover that it was the native tongue of another land on the other side of the world.

No doubt there is a fundamental “accord,” but it only makes sense when we are not looking or reading too closely. It is as if the range of interpretations, from most specific to most general, were arrayed like the stations on an old analogue radio dial. The comparisons Sullivan entertains work at specific frequencies, and it is easy to drift to one side or the other and lose them. That is what it means for comparisons to be “useless”: they are suggestive, but whatever they suggest leads away from them.

The comparison with Zen painting was a part of Abstract Expressionism almost from the beginning. In 1995 an exhibit at the China Institute in New York put a new twist on the parallel by proposing that Chinese calligraphy is even closer to gestural abstraction than Zen painting. The curator, H. Christopher Luce, put original specimens of calligraphy next to photographic enlargements of single characters, as if each could be considered an independent composition. The catalogue proposes viewers compare a character by Wen Jia лё to paintings by Robert Motherwell, and a character by Wen Zhengming 文征明 to paintings by Franz Kline. At first glance, that critical move is a cliché, repeating hopeful links that had been set out in other contexts since the 1950s. But our helplessness about the very terms of the comparison becomes apparent when it comes time to say why Luce’s comparison is so unrewarding. Reviewing the exhibit for the New York Times, Pepe Karmel observed that “any viewer sophisticated enough to benefit from Mr. Luce’s references to artists like Kline or Motherwell will probably have enough visual acuity to appreciate Chinese calligraphy as an art in its own right.” But what would it mean, after all, to “benefit” from the comparison? What kind of knowledge of Kline might be helpful in thinking about Wen Zhengming? And what could it mean to understand the calligraphy “in its own right”? (If something in history could be understood “in its own right,” then it would presumably be meaningless, and not just unnecessary, to also understand it in some other terms.) At the beginning of the review Karmel asks, “Does it make sense to view Chinese art through the lens of Western art, or should we strive to understand it on its own terms, without reference to familiar
models?” Karmel is an exceptionally thoughtful observer of art history, but in the confines of a newspaper, perhaps it was necessary both to encompass and avoid the central problem. The difference between “striving” to approximate a foreign discourse and feeling that one might understand it “on its own terms” is crucial, and it underpins many disagreements about how Chinese art history can be written. In a sense this entire book is an effort to see what it could possibly mean to understand something Chinese “on its own terms,” while also recognizing the narrative that gives us that understanding as art history.

The most extensive attempt to understand something Chinese “on its own terms” is probably David Hall and Roger Ames’s *Anticipating China* (1995). Even though their parallels are philosophic and not visual, it is worth spending a little time with their text, because their problems are also art history’s problems whenever the conditions for comparison are themselves in doubt. Hall and Ames’s initial purpose is to understand Western philosophy in enough detail to enable them to see how it clouds our understanding of China. The strategy is then to keep Western assumptions at bay while the Chinese concepts unfold. Ultimately, Chinese words might speak for themselves, and Westerners might be able to hear them correctly.

As I read it, their book turns on the hope that China might finally be seen “on its own terms.” From the outset, that hope bifurcates into two forms: either Chinese thinking will reveal itself “on its own terms,” or there will be an asymptotic approach, where finer and finer distinctions reach ever more closely toward the unattainable goal. Though the first choice is their goal, the authors also find the second choice attractive; they call it “extremely challenging.” It is a matter of maintaining “real sensitivity to the nuances of Chinese experience,” without getting “lost in the details,” and the principal strategy is to increase self-awareness: “our argument will be that awareness of at least some of the important ideas and beliefs that have shaped us … will prevent us from too easily resorting to ‘transcendental pretense’ in our approach to alternative cultures.”

Hall and Ames imagine their inquiry as a negotiation of two modes of thinking they call “first” and “second problematic.” The former is a characteristically Chinese mode that is “analogical or correlative”; it “accepts the priority of change or process over rest and permanence.” The latter is the typical Western rationalism, which the authors call “causal thinking.” Awareness and sensitivity are themselves blends of Chinese and Western modes, and therefore appropriate for their interpretive project.

The primary goal, of allowing Chinese concepts to speak for themselves, is no less entangled. At first they compare full understanding to Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit figure. When interpretation seems most sure of itself it may be in the most trouble, since the Chinese may have drawn a duck where we see a rabbit. If an interpreter is able to “make out the outlines of a rabbit only over against the insistence of the artist that the figure is a duck,” then is full understanding also full projection? A few pages later it turns out that understanding Chinese thinking on its own terms is only possible because the mirroring is not perfect:
Our comparative exercise would be philosophically empty were it not for the fact that, as we shall attempt to demonstrate, comparisons between classical Chinese and Western culture turn out to be comparisons of contexts shaped by alternative problematics analogous to the two just described: A form of first problematic thinking, while recessive in the West, dominates classical Chinese culture. Likewise, the cultural dominant of the West, which we are calling second problematic or causal thinking, is recessive within classical Chinese culture.  

In other words, comparisons only work where there are analogies, and not perfect equivalents; but at the same time, it is necessary that a little of the given interpretive principle has to be present in the foreign material in order that the interpretation can recognize its object. The give-and-take is logically slippery, like a sluice filling and emptying by turns. The authors return to the asymptotic model, and insist they are not trying to tell readers about China “on its own terms”: “our project is not at all to tell it like it is; we merely wish to present a narrative which is interesting enough to engage those inclined to join the conversation.”

These are hermeneutic forests, thick at times and desperately confusing. If I find myself in the position of thinking that I am understanding something Chinese “on its own terms,” where am I? On the other hand, if I come to believe that sensitivity and nuanced analysis can put me on a glide path to Chinese concepts, then who do I want to say is guiding me? I do, and do not, recognize myself in the Other; and as long as I think about that I am myself a little lost. Hall and Ames enlist Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Donald Davidson, and Richard Rorty in a Western “assault upon the dominance of rational and causal thinking”; but what is Anticipating China if not an elaborately staged rational enterprise? The problem of speaking slightly illogically, or acausally, has plagued many writers from Heraclitus to Hélène Cixous, and it is not easier to grasp here than it has been in the past. If Chinese thinking is “effectively a nonlogical procedure,” then strictly speaking—and logic is strictness itself—it cannot be exposited, or “correlated” with logic at all. Hall and Ames want to surrender “ambitious, globalizing assertions which essentialize cultural experience and interpretation,” in favor of “more modest and localized understandings.” But when exactly does an interpretation large enough to link two cultures shrink into an interpretation too “local” to be fairly representative?

“As it possible,” as Hall and Ames ask at one point, “that the Chinese might actually think differently from us, and if so, what might this mean?” As Wittgenstein might have pointed out, among the things this question means is that the person asking it is mistaking problems for pseudo-problems. Anticipating China is an example of the circuitous deferral that greets anyone willing to think in a protracted manner about what it means to interpret something that is utterly Other and yet always the same. There is little that is mistaken, I think, in Anticipating China, aside from some arguable constructions of Western philosophy;
but there is also nothing that does not quake underfoot. I find myself doubting not so much the particular propositions the authors make, as their motivations for making those propositions. (The same issues arise in the currently popular books by François Jullien, and in other attempts to find keys to the conceptual differences between Chinese and Western languages.)

Thinking about comparisons brings on this queasiness. Most of the time things are much more orderly because the comparisons are either paraded in full view (in which case they quickly look suspicious) or else they are done subtly, hidden away even from the writers who deploy them. I will round out this survey of comparisons with two more, both current and both within art history.

Of all terms used by Western art history to describe Chinese landscape painting, “fictive space” may be the most fraught, and the least well controlled. As a concept, space certainly exists both in English and in Chinese writing, and the meanings of the relevant terms are generally taken to overlap and coexist. It is therefore entirely appropriate to say Chinese painters were concerned with creating and deploying space, provided the word is adjusted in each context so it is fairly clear what it signifies.

Around and about space there are other words—illusion, representation, flatness, recession, depth, abstraction, surface, the picture plane, “surface abstraction”—that are variably Western, and variably present in the Chinese texts. Wen Fong has written several extensive analyses exploring a “linear sequence” in Chinese landscape painting “from representation to surface abstraction.” In his view, surviving Tang Dynasty paintings present viewers with three distinct depths, “viewed frontally and organized additively.” In *Images of the Mind* (1984) he proposes the three depths “exist in three parallel planes, each with its own suggested ground plane tilting at a different angle away from the viewer.” Eventually the three-part construction gave way to a “second phase,” practiced from 1050 to 1250, in which a number of different depths were depicted “receding in a continuous sequence.” In such paintings “the composition techniques change to accommodate and match more closely the natural vision that collects landscape forms in a unified spatial continuum.” Finally in the third phase, lasting from around 1250 to around 1400, “the landscape is depicted as [a] spatially integrated, physical environment.” In the second phase there is “still no real ground plane” since each mountain peak may be seen from a slightly different vantage. Only in the third phase does the ground plane come into existence, assuring the continuity of fictive space and “physically linking the landscape elements.” As examples of the third period Wen Fong adduces Zhao Mengfu’s *Autumn Colors in the Qiao [Que] and Hua Mountains,*
which has a continuous ground plane (see plate 2), 黄公望 and Huang Gongwang’s *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, in which “the earlier additive spatial organization has been eclipsed by the overall flow of the composition” (see plate 11). In later generations, Fong says, painters turned away from naturalistic representation and experimented increasingly with surface patterns; illusion had lost its appeal or run its course. Although the Chinese tradition never entirely renounced naturalism, from the fourteenth century onward “painters turned, more and more, to problems of surface organization and decorative values.” What interested them were “calligraphic mannerisms and archaizing motifs,” which they used for “decorative purposes” and ultimately—with the Ming painter Dong Qichang—“as abstract forms in space” (see plate 15).

Given the attention Wen Fong devotes to social and political information, I would not want to imply that he locates the principal meaning of Chinese landscape paintings in their presentation of space, but it is often the case that spatial analyses guide the progression and direction of the narrative, motivating the changes between generations and schools, while the cultural background runs in parallel and independent streams. On the other hand, few scholars introduce spatial concepts as leading metaphors for their work, and most contemporary scholars avoid all discussion of the space in paintings. (The Finnish scholar Minna Törmä is an interesting exception; her “Looking at Chinese Landscape Painting: Traditions of Spatial Representation” is a careful analysis of space, centering on the Song Dynasty.) In that light it is fair to say that Wen Fong’s concept of the development of fictive space in Chinese painting is fundamental for his writing.

It then becomes important to assess how Western such an interest in space might be. Painters in several traditions have struggled with naturalism, and synonyms for “space” and “depth” are common. But only the West possesses a critical tradition that centers on the analysis of space. Since the eighteenth century “space” has been an important term in critical accounts of paintings (before that it was rarely mentioned as such), and it has typically been discussed in reference to an ideal, “continuous” space rising from a ground plane and receding to a horizon line or central point. Some elements of spatial analysis are specifically twentieth-century art historical strategies, and are otherwise unknown in the literature. Only since Clement Greenberg, and particularly in America, has it seemed crucial to oppose depth to “surface” or the “picture plane.” Fong provides geometric diagrams, “exploded” views of the spatial constructions inherent in key paintings. I have critiqued such diagrams when they are used to explore the fictive space in Renaissance paintings: since no such inquiries were made in the Renaissance, any reconstruction of fictive space is anachronistic. In Chinese painting the practice may be even more culturally distant, and it can be argued in general terms that the interest in space as a foundational concept in the analysis of representation is characteristically Western.

The question, then, is not so much whether Fong’s descriptions match the paintings, as whether the apparatus, vocabulary, or direction of his interest is not to some relevant degree impelled by a mid or late twentieth-century Western art historical understanding of space.
as a fundamental—perhaps even the fundamental—property of pictures. Is it important that Western art historians mention space far more often than the Chinese texts they adduce? How different would our accounts look if we spent the same amount of time on fictive space as the Chinese sources?

Other scholars have also taken the treatment of space as a primary interpretive principle. Picking up a phrase invented by James Cahill, Jackie Reardon has analyzed the “calculated irrationality” of Hongren’s painting—especially his propensity for unlikely and spatially ambiguous forms. She argues that the resulting “contradiction, tensions, and ambiguity” make the paintings only inconsistently available as illusions of homogeneous space. One sign that her account may be following Western interests in spatiality is the implication (which occurs throughout the literature on painters such as Hongren, Cheng Zhengkui, Wang Shimin, and others who were influenced by Dong Qichang) that the spatial anomalies were planned, or at least noted and fostered by the artists. In Reardon’s account it appears Hongren’s “calculated irrationality” is entirely deliberate, the fruit of his creative appropriation of Dong Qichang. But it also seems possible that the “structural tensions”—rocks about to tip over, “flat” planes tilted up toward the viewer—may have been habitual and only partly cognized. In Cézanne, for example, there are a number of “compositional devices”—spatial gaps in the midfield of the painting, weakened right margins, forms that tumble from the upper left to the lower right—that were made literally without his notice, as part of his habits of working. It is often not the case that it makes sense to claim Cézanne adjusted the contour of a cup, or tilted a table, in order to dismantle perspective. Such effects are part of more complex, and less well-understood, habits of seeing and rendering. They were not necessarily cognized, or conceptualized by the painter as problems. By speaking in terms of deliberate “spatial tensions,” some of the scholarship on Hongren (and on Dong Qichang) turns the paintings into visual essays on problems of spatial relations, rather than possibly incompletely cognized products of idiosyncratic acts of seeing and making. It seems to me that taking the quirky spatial constructions of painters like Hongren as half-noticed traits rather than intellectual accomplishments, virtuoso manipulations of fictive space, or visual essays in abstraction, only adds to their fascination.

I have the same slight reservation about Reardon’s work as I do about aspects of Wen Fong’s: I find myself agreeing with the observations—which are often acute, and well argued—but feeling uneasy about the promotion of spatial terms. Space is so thoroughly and so specifically a concern of Western twentieth-century art history and criticism that I hesitate to see Chinese painting from its perspective.
My last example is so subtle that it is not really a comparison at all, because its author avoids any such imputation. Hubert Damisch’s *Traité du trait* is based on an exhibition he curated at the Louvre in 1995; the text is whimsically and sometimes evasively modeled on Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (Damisch’s subtitle is *Tractatus tractus*, “treatise on the mark”). Like Wittgenstein’s book, Damisch’s has paragraphs numbered in decimals: number 1 is followed by 1.1, and then by 1.1.1, 1.2, and so on in deliberately unsystematic fashion from 1 through 6. In Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, the number 7 is represented by only a single entry, with a famous line: “Concerning that about which nothing can be said: there we must remain silent.” Damisch avoids the impending epiphany by moving from proposition 6.8 to a short chapter of propositions numbered 0.0, 0.0.1, 0.0.2, and so forth. He also gives his chapters titles: “0. Incise, 1. Pinceau, 2. Contour, 3. Aspect, 4. Géométrie, 5. Expression, 6. Histoires,” and “00. Brèche.” Everything in the book is Western except Chapter 1, “Pinceau,” which is entirely given over to Chinese examples. The comparison between East and West is therefore unavoidable but implicit.

The opening paragraph, numbered 1, proposes that even though the West divides painting from drawing, Chinese art embraces painting, drawing, and writing as a single concept, so that a “preliminary detour” through Chinese art may well be a journey to the “central place” of all marking.

In accord with the format, Damisch is not obligated to pursue his opening gambit in any systematic fashion. Instead, the chapter consists of eighteen short sections on various subjects on and around the coincidence of painting, drawing, and writing. A few comments pertain more directly to landscape painting, but even there Damisch’s eye is attracted by writerly moments in the painting.

He looks at a painting by Zhu Da (c. 1625–c. 1705) of six old trees on a patch of ground, and is struck by the differences between them; in a conventional Chinese fashion the six are depicted as different “characters” and the painting is called *Six Gentlemen*. Damisch’s paragraph number 1.2.3, in its entirety, is:

1.2.3. Six essences of trees, six varieties of marks.

Taking Shitao’s phrase *yībǐ* “writing with one mark” (a variation of his *yīhuà*, “one line”), Damisch extracts the character for “one,” *yī*, which is drawn with a single horizontal stroke. Then following Pierre Ryckmans’s commentary on Shitao’s treatise, Damisch muses on the fact that the single horizontal mark, “the simplest grapheme,” is the point of departure for both painting and writing. Just adjacent to this text he reproduces a small detail of Zhu Da’s painting, showing a rock painted in superimposed horizontal
marks. It is painting-like, and also writing-like, and by repeating the single line it also shows itself as “the sure sign of mastery.”

The Western interest here, and the implicit comparison, is with the fundamental nature of the graphic mark. The *Traité du trait* opens with a reproduction of a painting by Lucio Fontana, a single vertical slit cut in a white canvas. Twenty pages later, Fontana’s black vertical echoes in the horizontal stroke of the character  yi. The *Traité du trait* closes with close-ups of the vertical stripe, the “zip,” in Barnett Newman’s *The Break*. All three are fundamental marks, “units” or “graphemes” in pictures, and each has its particular shape given it by the artist’s gesture: Fontana’s is curvilinear and sharply attenuated; the  yi has its minute but indispensable starting and ending strokes; and the “zip” has a lacerated-looking scumbled outline.

This is no longer Ezra Pound, mesmerized by the naturalistic pictures he found in Chinese characters, but a later and more abstract interest in the apparently pictorial conditions of marking, what Derrida calls the “transcendental conditions of the trace.” Derrida’s musings are cited throughout Damisch’s text, and in the chapter on Chinese painting another one-sentence paragraph is devoted to an idea from *On Grammatology*: 1.3.1. The mark [trait] as space or figure of the *gramme*—or of the *grapheme*—which could be called the unit.

“Gramme” is a neologism, recalling the suffix “-gram” as in “pictogram” and also its more distant Greek origin in *gramma*, meaning writing, painting, or drawing. At the point in *Of Grammatology* that Damisch cites, Derrida is thinking about the fundamental constitution of writing, and the irreducible “conditions” under which a mark can occur. The “grapheme” known to linguistics is a little too concrete and practical, and Derrida uses the word *trait* instead. Damisch follows suit, and brings his short meditation on the confluence of writing and picturing into the fold of Derrida’s broadly conceived sense of “writing.”

Of the authors I have mentioned, Damisch is the most recent and the closest to my own preferences. The idea of writing a treatise on species of marks is appealing, though I can also see Damisch’s chapter as the continuation of a Western fascination with the elementary graphic nature of specifically Chinese marks. In particular he is unaware of the literature criticizing the Western notion that Chinese painting and poetry are at root the same practice. The short chapter “Pinceau” concludes with other thoughts about “l’Unique Trait de Pinceau” that divides itself into history, painting, writing, and drawing, and then Damisch returns to Western art. As Damisch knows, what he says makes sense principally within a Western framework, hence the Fontana and the Newman, bracketing the text. The comparison is implicit, but it implies a lot; at the very least it means China has a privileged place in the question of the mark, and the mark’s relation to history.
I hope that the more infelicitous or old-fashioned of the comparisons I have just surveyed do not make it seem as if comparisons can be easily set aside. It understates the case to say that comparisons are ubiquitous, or even—as I will be claiming—in inevitable. Philosophically speaking, comparisons, parallels, and analogies are forms of difference, and difference is what allows understanding in the first place. Hegel, Kant, and Derrida each have accounts of what difference is, and how it provides the contrast that sets thought in motion; without it, there is no possibility of finding an object, or of finding thought itself.

That observation may seem remote from the exigencies of Chinese markmaking, and it certainly cannot explain the individual comparisons. I take it as a reminder that comparisons cannot be eradicated. The question is not how to avoid comparisons, though we might well want to stay away from certain comparisons; the question is how it is feasible, within a given disciplinary practice, to manage the comparisons that continue to give us our art and our history. There is a moral to be drawn, I think, about not running from comparisons:

*Second hypothesis.* Because all understanding works by comparison, no account can be free of it. Comparisons to Western art continue to mold what is said about Chinese landscape painting. Being self-critical, provisional, sensitive, linguistically accomplished, circumspect, abstract, or informal about comparisons does not vitiate their power, and there is no evidence that we have escaped from even the largest mismatches.

Before I conclude this opening section, it needs to be acknowledged that, from the 1920s onward, Chinese and Japanese *literati* writers made extensive comparisons between Chinese, Japanese, and European painters. The contemporary Japanese scholar Shigemi Inaga read this book in an earlier form, and remarked that many East Asian writers took Japanese and Chinese painters as their “known” terms and compared them with Western painters. “I suspect,” Inaga writes, “that for many Orientals, modern Western masters were evaluated in reference to the Chinese Masters, and not vice versa. If Cézanne is a Chinese Wang Shigu, Renoir may be a French Yun Nan-tian. Gauguin might correspond to Bada Shanren [八大山人], van Gogh may be Chen Lao-lian [陳老蓮].” Those comparisons would themselves be interesting material for a study; I wonder what they might reveal about the early- and mid-century commerce in received ideas about artists.
These days art historians are particularly careful about cross-cultural comparisons. Sometimes comparisons are limited to the first few sentences of a chapter or a book, and occasionally they are even confined to footnotes. That practice helps authors and readers concentrate on the Chinese material; but it is important, I think, not to suppose that treating comparisons with circumspection disarms them. It is not possible to keep cultural comparisons safely in the footnotes.

Wen Fong makes three comparisons in the introduction to Beyond Representation: first matching “early Chinese figural representation, from the Han dynasty in the third century BC through the Tang in the eighth century AD” with “the so-called Greek miracle … of the awakening of the figure from its representation in a rigid archaic frontality”; then pairing “the late Northern Song scholar-official artist to the late nineteenth-century European avant-garde artist”; and finally comparing the Song-Yuan transition to the displacement of representational art by expressive art in the twentieth-century West. The second comparison has to do with the rise of an “avant-garde” of politically disengaged artists. Wen Fong describes Northern Song artists such as Mi Fu as “brilliant and uncompromising,” with the courage “to retreat from politics and to lead a reclusive, Thoreau-like existence.”

Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” is cited in support of the parallel, because Greenberg locates the origin of the avant-garde in early modern bourgeois culture. The third comparison is more important: it has to do with “the end of Western mimetic representation and its replacement of realism with abstraction,” which Wen Fong finds in a passage of Greenberg’s “Modernist Painting.”

The three claims are made principally in footnotes, and they do not figure in the remainder of the book. The first two are certainly heuristic, to give readers footholds in unfamiliar territory. The third parallel may be a different case. The newly found interests in the “flat surface” (Greenberg’s term, as Wen Fong quotes it), in “expression” as opposed to “representation,” and in “abstraction” as a kind of formal manipulation, are cardinal points in Wen Fong’s sequence of Chinese landscape painting, and the words recur throughout the book and elsewhere in his writing. Later in Beyond Representation they appear culturally neutral or Chinese. But in the scholarship on modern art, words like “abstraction” and “representation” are under intense and ongoing scrutiny, and they are meaningful only within certain contested approaches to mid-century modernism, especially Greenberg’s. Is it safe to assume their Western origins need only be mentioned in footnotes?

Mentioning Western art in a text on Chinese art gives the writing a certain flavor. Much as scholars have grown to dislike it, the flavor lingers; we do not often say so, and we do not
believe it in any simple sense, but Chinese paintings are still Romantic or Classical, flat or illusionistic, abstract or realistic. It may not help to dilute the references to Westernness so much that they cannot be recognized, because—like a homeopathic remedy with a minute amount of medicine—they will still be present everywhere in the mixture. There are innumerable examples. In Valérie Ortiz’s study of twelfth-century painting, Su Shi’s 蘇軾 (1036–1101) concept of the “picture idea” (畫意 huà yì) is compared to Paul Klee’s notion of the juxtaposition of visual and verbal signs, as that idea is cited in Michel Foucault’s essay on Magritte. Later in the essay, Ortiz compares the quality of 氣 qi in a colophon by Mi Youren 米友仁 (c. 1072–1151) with a passage in Goethe’s Sonnets to Orpheus. Ortiz’s description of Su Shi’s “picture idea” reads in part:

According to Su, in order to offer the viewer a poetic allusion more evocative than a concrete object presented under his eyes, painting must be imbued with the emotive suggestion of poetry. Painting thus has the potential to provide both verbal signs and visual representation at once, with no subordination. See also Paul Klee, who displayed [according to Michel Foucault] the “juxtaposition of shapes and the syntax of lines in an uncertain, reversible, floating space (simultaneously page and canvas, planes and volumes, maps and chronicle).”

This is in a footnote, and the parallel is not pursued or explained, and it is really only meant as a passing aid for readers unfamiliar with the concept of “picture idea.” And yet it is an East-West comparison, suffused with all the problematic assumptions that the large-scale comparisons of entire periods and dynasties once had. One might wonder, for example, if it is apposite to describe Su Shi’s concept as a matter of “verbal signs and visual representation”—that is, already firmly in the vocabulary of twentieth-century semiotics. Comparisons are like mercury: the big blobs can be cut and divided into little droplets, but they can never be entirely dissolved away. Even the tiniest atomized droplets, which seem so isolated, can be virulent, because each one is a microcosm of assumptions about Western and Chinese art.

Some droplets are small, and others are spread so thin they are nearly invisible. Jonathan Hay’s study Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China ranges widely and includes a number of incisive critiques of previous scholarship, and yet I agree with Craig Clunas that the concepts modernity and modernism are only partly reformulated in the book. Because Hay’s sense of modernism centers on self-awareness and subjectivity—that is, in a mixture of Kantian and Greenbergian privileging of reflexivity, and partly in Romanticism’s sense of inner life—there are passages in which a distinctively older and very Western sense of modernism can be discerned in the text. Clunas notes passages in which Hay speaks of “genius” and the artist’s “autonomy”; Clunas is certainly right that such concepts exert a “very strong gravitational pull,” and he is right to point to the many interesting claims in
Hay’s text that have nothing to do with that sense of modernism. It would not be quite accurate to say it is hard to expunge such ideas; it is—so I will be claiming—impossible. After reading Hay’s text it is no longer possible to subscribe to the received idea that “Shitao’s gestural brushwork [is] a sort of unconscious precursor to Abstract Expressionism.” That idea is “surely laid to rest forever,” but it is subtly entangled in larger ideas about modernism, artistic agency, aesthetic autonomy, subjectivity, reflexivity. An author can scan her text, and delete references to Klee or Foucault, but the larger understandings of modernism are modernism. Some Western references are small and seem as if they can be deleted (like a footnote to Klee) and other references are spread so thin—they are so diluted, so watery—that they are effectively mingled with the fabric of historical understanding.

I have been suggesting that comparisons are entangled with the project of art history; they are not optional, and they cannot be subtracted, leaving a pure Chinese painting washed of its Western colors. And—this is a claim I will be developing as I go along—if we could have a text that presented Chinese art “on its own terms,” purged of even the subtlest of atomized and refined comparisons, we would not be able to read that text as art history.

In art history, Chinese painting is “abstract” and “realistic” by turns, and many comparisons appear both deeply suggestive and true. And that is good, because the comparisons can guide inquiries and lead historians to new insights about the Chinese material. The anthropologist Steven Feld, who studies musical traditions in New Guinea, has a wonderful pair of terms that capture the condition: schizophonia and schismogenesis. Schizophonia is the dissonance between music made in situ and the “same” music as it sounds when it is presented on a compact disk—or in this context, the difference between the painting itself and its appearance in an art historical text. Schismogenesis is the impure origin of any music, for instance an “authentic” non-Western music that turns out to be influenced by Western music. Chinese painting is schismogenetic since it must necessarily appear partly Western and partly Chinese. That is not an ailment, but a condition of understanding, and we should embrace it at the same time as we try to understand it.
II

Tying Some Laces

At this point I could begin my argument about the “comparison of historical perspectives” and the reasons it is both optimal and suspect. But it is a messy argument, so I want to start by naming several obstacles and pitfalls. First, to dispose briefly of an objection that will seem irrelevant to scholars of Chinese art: that the Chinese tradition is apt to be understood in Western terms because it is simpler or narrower than our own. Western art, in this view, has a richness of historiographic and critical literature, and a diversity of media, schools, and styles, that is deeper, or at least broader, than the Chinese tradition.

Now I do not know any scholars who would say that openly, although I have talked to perfectly intelligent people seriously engaged with Western art who do think more or less just that. Against such notions it is a pleasure to point out that the Chinese tradition is measurably more complex as well as longer-lived than European painting. Chinese historiographic and critical literature on painting is greater in volume than Western literature, and the number of Chinese schools and movements easily rivals those of the West. Zhang Yanyuan’s Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties 歷代名畫記, a chronicle of Chinese art done before the West had an art history, has been said to excel Vasari’s account “in scope and sophistication.”

It may be that Westerners who find a difference in complexity between the two traditions simply lack familiarity with Chinese painting; I say this, echoing Section 15, because apparently intractable disagreements sometimes come down to questions of knowledge.
Another issue has to do with the conditions under which it can make sense to speak about Chinese landscape painting (or even a subset of it) as if it were a single subject fitted to the span of a short book. Let me call this the “weave of the net” problem.

Each historical inquiry must cast a net with a certain fineness of weave in order to catch its intended prey. If I am writing a conventional survey of Renaissance art, I will have neither space nor reason to include any number of fascinating minor artists, since they will have to give way even to less important artists whose place is assured by some fortuitous circumstance. Jacopo Copi di Meglio and Girolamo Macchietti have won mention in Renaissance histories by their presence in the studiolo of Cosimo I, but Barbatelli, Girolamo Genga, and thousands like them must be excluded because their works and names are not associated with “essential” surviving monuments. If I write a specialized monograph on one of those artists, it will probably not be read by people outside the specialty or taught as part of an introductory survey. Art historians are supplied rules of exclusion and inclusion in extenso by the various genres in which they write. Surveys, monographs, catalogues, and specialized studies are Baedekers for these problems, because they define reasonably stable standards of inclusion and exclusion.

Perhaps the weave of the net I am casting here is simply too large to catch anything interesting. I am going to be looking at comparisons between large portions of the art of two cultures, so I will risk speaking very broadly—perhaps too broadly to be relevant to specialized research. It may seem unhelpful to cast such a wide net, but then again it is difficult to say how the large scale of one inquiry might be related to the detailed focus of another. This is why the “weave of the net” problem is so difficult: the specialized monograph on Barbatelli owes its larger purpose to the contexts in which it might find itself, even if it is often omitted from those contexts.

The “weave of the net” problem becomes especially difficult when a text undertakes a comparison between different weaves. What rules of inclusion should operate in such a case? This problem touches on some fundamental issues regarding the constitution of the discipline of art history (its continuing reliance on standards of coherence) and its philosophic strength (especially its ability to adjudicate rival definitions of “essential” works). The argument I am going to pursue depends on several simultaneous weaves, and it is therefore open to the legitimate charge of bowdlerizing historical texture in favor of some dubious goal. Instead of answering this directly—I have no metatheory concerning the manipulation of disparate weaves—I have tried to write in such a way as to invite and meet dissenting accounts.
It is also possible that the net is cast in the wrong place, so that it misses some kinds of fish altogether. In particular, much of what I have to say here concerns Wu School painting (broadly speaking, works by literati or scholar-painters, 文人 wénrén) rather than Zhe School painting (equally broadly, works by professional artists and court painters). For several decades, Richard Barnhart and others have been advocating that art historians study both kinds of painting equally. Recently scholarly attention has turned to other kinds of visual objects, and within the field of painting there have been some detailed studies of crossovers between the “schools” (for example Elizabeth Brotherton’s study of a twelfth-century painting made for Emperor Huizong’s court). The idea that art history should expand its subject matter is a familiar one in Western art; it begins with Alois Riegl, and includes the study of “low” art, mass media, and non-art images. In other contexts, I am an advocate of all such expansions. I will not be pursuing those expanded fields in this book, because I am interested in the history of the conceptualization of Chinese painting, and I will be arguing that it can be found in the scholarship that privileges wénrén painting 文人畫.

There is also the question of the limits of this kind of expansion. Riegl’s attention to decorative arts has not resulted in a generation of art historians that gives equal time to paintings and Persian rugs; despite a few major works on decoration—E.H. Gombrich’s Sense of Order, Oleg Grabar’s Mediation of Ornament—most art historians continue to prefer images closer to fine art. Visual studies has its own self-imposed restrictions, not to fine art, but largely, still, to Western art or postcolonial art influenced by the West. Virtually no art historians or visual studies scholars are interested in non-art images in science, engineering, law, or other fields. The state of Chinese art history is similar: as more studies appear, the Zhe School will become incrementally more interesting to art historians, but it is possible that no amount of study will raise it to the level of interest that the Wu School continues to attract. The literati or 文人 wénrén tradition will remain central for the structure of Chinese historiography and the meaning of painting in China. I agree with Barnhart when he advocates Zhe School painting, and when he finds evidence that Cahill’s writing is slightly but clearly biased against the professional painters; but I agree with Cahill when he doubts Barnhart’s willingness to trade a painting by a major Wu School painter for a painting by a comparable Zhe School artist.

If the inequality were a matter of habit, then studies like Barnhart’s and Cahill’s might eventually make professional painting as attractive as literati painting. If the unequal attention paid to the Wu School were an after-effect of some Ming Dynasty theories, then we might well shake it off. Even if it were mainly the product of the specifically modern, Western interest in spontaneity, eccentricity, and the avant-garde, art historians might well be able to master their inclinations and begin to see the Zhe School from its own perspective. But if the inequality is more deeply implicated in a shared sense of art history, then no
amount of filling-in will avoid the inevitable judgment. Nor will it be possible to will oneself not to have bias, as Barnhart does when he says “I have no a priori value assumptions either way” about Zhe and Wu School paintings. What would be needed, in that case, would not be more nets—not more accounts that try to tell more of the story—but an inquiry into our preferences, their historical origins, and their intimate relation to what gets counted as the history of Chinese painting.

The same is true, I think, of contemporary scholarship on Chinese art that places itself outside this entire debate. If you are a specialist, you may have been reading these last pages with increasing frustration, because it may seem as if the field has long ago left the question of Wu and Zhe behind. Books like Craig Clunas’s Art in China have had very wide influence on the current generation of scholars. Not only has the field turned away from the study of wénrén painting, but it has turned away from the study of pre-Revolutionary painting altogether. It is now possible to study Chinese visual culture as a whole, and to see older Chinese painting, including Zhe School painting, as part of a larger cultural matrix. The problems that have worried scholars like Cahill and Barnhart now seem part of the discipline’s past, and the enormous field of Chinese visual production—provincial decorative arts, nostalgic posters from occupied Shanghai, mass-produced porcelain designs, the styles of Chinese mannequins—is like a garden of new possibilities. When it comes to my own scholarship, I find myself much farther out on this road than some colleagues—I have written on tamagotchi, Siberian picture-writing, samples of porcelain teeth, dog tags, photographs of diatoms, and all sorts of images outside of Western fine art—but in this case, for the purposes of this study, I think it is necessary to revisit the history of the discipline. Judgments were made in relation to wénrén painting that continue to inform current scholarship, and if we do not take them seriously, then we are, as they say, condemned to repeat them.

The fact that I am not a specialist, that I have only poor Chinese, poses both a contingent and an apodictic limitation: contingent because the literature on Chinese landscape painting in European languages has now reached such a bulk that it could easily occupy a lifetime (or create a new specialization); and apodictic since I am sometimes forced to believe in the transparent veracity of European texts—something that is precisely the worst thing to do in an inquiry such as this one. My only plea for that shortcoming is that I have made liberal use of the comments of specialists, themselves unverifiably implicated in various art historical schools but also likely to be careful in transcribing concepts and categories from Chinese into European languages. In particular I have been heavily dependent on the
histories written by James Cahill, because it is his observations on historical change that provoked this study and made its comparisons possible—and then, in the inevitable turn, made me wonder about the nature of the histories they entailed.

If the time comes when the knowledge of Chinese is a sufficient guard against the kind of assumptions and unnoticed contrasts that form my subject in this book, then art history as a whole will have changed shape immeasurably. Often, I think, it is the other way around: specialist knowledge serves to make it seem as if there are domains within art history that are self-nourishing. The generalist and the specialist are both blind, in their own ways.

A further objection may arise in relation to the idea of comparing traditions, because it is arguable that “tradition” in China and in the West are two quite distinct concepts. The Chinese tradition has been described as more continuous than the West’s and less marked by important catastrophic renascences and revolutions of the Western type. (David Hall and Roger Ames make such a claim about Chinese philosophy, as I mentioned in Section 22.)

In part the claim is demonstrably true. At least the later Chinese artists had access to rubbings and other “shadowy copies” of their founding artists’ works, while Western artists had to rely on shadowy texts in Pliny, Philostratus, Lucian, Plutarch, and Pausanius. It is interesting to speculate on the effect on Western art if the Renaissance had had access to copies of, say, Apelles’ masterworks or Polygnotos’s *Iliupersis.* The presence of copies, it can be argued, rendered the Chinese tradition at once more continuous and richer in historical nuance and schools. In practice, although Chinese painters did not find it difficult to ignore certain earlier schools, the continuing presence of examples of those rejected schools helped sharpen the definitions of accepted styles in various periods, keeping them “purer” for longer than they might otherwise have been.

“Tradition” was also alive in a more personal sense: the practice of copying older styles has remained strong in China, and it has sometimes absorbed a substantial fraction of artists’ lives. *Literati* artists could well have possessed greater historical knowledge than their average Western counterparts, and spent more of their lives in what Westerners would call “apprenticeship.” Their studies were aided, especially after Dong Qichang, with a vocabulary of emulation parallel to our words “copy” (臨mó), “free copy” (仿fǎng), “imitation,” and “adaptation,” but possessed of wider currency and greater conceptual clarity. Wen Zhengming, for example, made more-or-less close copies, imitations, and adaptations of a wide range of works and styles throughout his long life, a condition unthinkable in the West after the Renaissance. The analogous situation, if such a thing is conceivable, would be if some of Rembrandt’s works were so successful in their emulation of Raphael, Leonardo, and...
other Renaissance masters that they could not be securely identified as Rembrandt’s unless they were signed. Even in the more continuous traditions such as Renaissance Venice, it is not possible to imagine Titian devoting his work through the 1540s to copies of paintings by Mantegna, Pordenone, Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini, and Giorgione, and only then striking out on his own.

Thought-experiments like this suggest that Chinese tradition is different in kind from Western tradition, and in many ways it is. My answer to such an objection, however, is as simple as the objection itself: I would say that despite the wide and deep differences, Western art history continues to treat Chinese traditions as if they were comparable—in principle, in the abstract—to Western traditions.

Challenging as some of these problems are, there is another that has claims to philosophic precedence. The comparison I will be exploring in the next two chapters might seem wrong because it makes a category error, proposing we compare apples and oranges, or—to put it philosophically—equate incommensurate “conceptual schemes” or “worlds.”

There is a large literature that could be brought to bear on that question. Benjamin Whorf, the mid-century linguist, might have argued that no broad comparison between Chinese and Western painting is cogent because it will lack some common terms in Chinese and English.\(^1\) (Some of Whorf’s work centered on Hopi verb forms that have no equivalent in Indo-European languages. Whorf argued their strangeness makes the Hopi conceptual world inaccessible to Indo-Europeans.) \(Qi\) 氣 is famously not the same as “energy,” and \(li\) 理 (meaning something like “inherent pattern in nature”) is often effectively untranslatable. For Whorf such differences preclude any systematic understanding.

Nelson Goodman might have argued that Chinese and Western painting take place in different “worlds,” meaning different systems of signification, so that a comparison can hope at best to say something intermittently sensible.\(^2\) “Well-made worlds,” as he says, are equal in the coherence of their internal organization, but not often equivalent among themselves; they cohere, but they do not necessarily adhere.\(^3\)

The very large philosophic literature on “conceptual schemas” and metaphoric “worlds” goes in different directions depending on the authors’ pessimism or optimism, and depending too on their familiarity with actual cultural comparisons. It is also possible to claim, as the philosopher Donald Davidson does, that conceptual schemata are either fully translatable or utterly and hopelessly untranslatable. Davidson sees no reason to infer there might be a middle ground of ordinary flawed intelligibility.\(^4\)
It may be more plausible to assert, as the literary critic George Steiner does, that even extremely different conceptual schemata find their points of contact. Steiner praises some early twentieth-century translations of Chinese poems that were made by writers ignorant of Chinese; he says they have achieved remarkable and even unsurpassed accuracy by virtue of “the general phenomenon of hermeneutic trust.” “On sinological grounds alone,” he asserts, Ezra Pound’s “The River Merchant’s Wife: A Letter” “is closer to Li Bai [李白] than [Arthur] Waley’s ‘Ch-ang-kan’” even though Waley read Chinese and Pound did not. Like Whorf (and like Davidson, in another context), Steiner is interested in moments where translation necessarily fail, but he also realizes that meaning is continually made by encounters that depend on such illogical things as “hermeneutic trust.”

The best course, I think, is to go on as people have done, hoping that some comparisons make sense while also hoping that not all comparisons can make sense. And while we do that, we might also try understanding what it is we want to claim about mutual partial incomprehensibility in any given instance.

Then there is the question of my own implication in a kind of Western philosophy that continually suggests and guides inquiries like the one I have in mind for the next two chapters. Our ideas about how historical periods might succeed one another, and how they might be linked, and our ideas about the coherence of artistic phenomena within individual periods or contexts, ultimately derive from Hegel. His indirect influence is pervasive and constitutive of the discipline: Hegelian ideas about the meliorist progress of historical periods and the linking of phenomena within a single period drive art historical narratives in all specialties. It is not an exaggeration to say that the well of historical comparisons has been poisoned by Hegelian meliorism and Spirit-analogies. This is another large subject, which I can only evoke here: the shadow of Hegel on contemporary scholarship is so large it is largely invisible, but its effect can be gauged by imagining what an art historical monograph would look like if it failed to tie an artist’s work in to preceding and succeeding artworks, or if it failed to show how an artist’s work is related, or distinct, from contemporary artworks. Those fundamental linkages, which are anachronistically called diachronic and synchronic (the terms are post-Hegelian), determine the structure of art historical narrative at the widest weaves of the net.

Because that is so, it could be said that my project in this book is going to be yet another projection of Hegelian (Western) ideas onto a non-Hegelian tradition. My defense here would follow the lines of Karl Popper’s and E.H. Gombrich’s anti-Hegelian polemics: essentially, that it is not only possible but incumbent on historians to attempt to make better
sense of historical change, and that rational standards of comparison are available that are distinct from Hegelian notions of cultural holism, “progress,” and the unified Zeitgeist.

This is not to say that I think there are any good solutions at the moment. In Section 74, I will look at one of the most recent attempts to work outside the Hegelian system, Hubert Damisch’s anti-Hegelian vision of history as a game of chess. The gaming metaphor helps defer the idea that history progresses, but it weakens when it becomes interesting to speak about the sequence of moves or the purpose of the game. My account in this book is only provisional—how could it be otherwise? —and so I will not pursue a systematic critique of Hegelian theory; but in contemplating such a critique it helps to bear in mind that Hegelianism is rife in art history, and that it is not less present in accounts that eschew large-scale comparisons. Throughout art history, whenever the topic is the large-scale structure of movements, styles, and ideas, and their relation within a period and between periods, Hegelianism is exactly what is in question.

I take it my argument is vulnerable to these and other critiques. But it should not be forgotten that the machinery of doubt that might so easily dismantle the argument I am about to begin might also be set in motion by a desire to maintain the kinds of writing we produce under the name “art history.” It seems perilously easy to critique inquiries like this one—at least it has seemed that way to me throughout the writing of it. But what motives, I wonder, would underwrite such a critique? If this book seems wrong or wrongheaded, it might be interesting to ask what sources certify other kinds of arguments as potentially correct or apposite.

The growth of art history is like the classic physicist’s model of the expanding universe: it may seem that it has direction (I mean, galaxies may look as if they are speeding away from us), but actually each point is getting more distant from each of its neighbors. One of the consequences is that we tend to assume that neighboring specialties are becoming independent in the natural course of things, and that more distant subjects have been effectively independent for some time. In part those assumptions are good physics, and in some measure they are also the assumptions of any good collegiality. Unfortunately there are also reasons to doubt that increasing distance implies increasing independence.
Essentially the argument implied by this book’s title springs from my conviction as a
generalist and as an observer of the discipline that even the most “distant” cultures continue
to be described in Western terms, using Western conceptual apparatus, and it is therefore
incumbent on art historians to continue trying to understand the assumptions and biases with
which we (that is “we” art historians, not necessarily “we” Westerners) continue to picture
non-Western cultures.

Third hypothesis. The project of writing art history is Western, and so any
history of Chinese landscape painting is partly but fundamentally a Western
endeavor, even if it is written by a Chinese historian, in Chinese, for Chinese
readers.

That means no account of Chinese art that is recognizable as art history is also non-Western
in any non-trivial, constitutive, or systematic sense. A sensitive art historical description of
a Chinese painter’s vocabulary, using Chinese terms whenever possible, and avoiding all
references to Western theorists or Western examples, would still be an example of Western
art history. Art history, in other words, is Western no matter what it studies.

Several things might seem wrong about this. Three objections in particular have been
raised by readers of previous versions of this text. They are substantial objections, and they
have caused some readers to reject the remainder of the book.

The first objection is that art historical accounts of Chinese painting are themselves
mixtures of Western and Chinese methodologies, terms, values, and institutional concerns,
so that it does not make sense to claim that art history is Western tout court. The collection
of comparisons, from Rowland onward, that I surveyed in Chapter I shows the kind of
response I would make to this first objection. Basically I would not disagree that what gets
practiced under the name of art history, when the subject is Chinese painting, is a mixture
of Chinese and Western elements. But I think that the plurality of what is understood as art
history has demonstrably Western origins. What is invariably Chinese about the art historical
scholarship on Chinese painting is the material, the stuff of history: the names, dates, places,
social contexts, and critical terms. What remains Western, so I will be arguing, is the impetus
for writing something that wants to be known as art history; the institutional contexts
such as university departments of art history, conferences, and refereed publications; the
historiographic frames including the Hegelian inheritance that governs what is perceived
as sufficient or persuasive explanations; the methodological strategies including such
things as psychoanalytic criticism, semiotics, social art history, and feminism; and above
all, the comparisons that are implicit or explicit throughout the texts, linking the project of
understanding Chinese painting to the project of understanding Western painting.

A second major objection to the claim that art history is Western is that Chinese art, as
opposed to Chinese art history, is itself already a thorough mixture of Western and Chinese
influences. This position is associated most directly, I think, with Martin Powers. It has a
great deal to recommend it: ever since the first extant Chinese paintings there have been traces
of Western influence, at first via the Silk Route and then, more contentiously, via the direct exposure to Western prints beginning in the seventeenth century. Later, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese artists became aware of the Russian academic tradition, derived from the French Academy; and beginning in the early twentieth century a number of Chinese artists traveled to Paris and elsewhere. All this, and much more, is true. I have no objection to it here, but it is not my subject. I am concerned in this book exclusively with the representation of Chinese landscape painting in twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts that present themselves as art history, and so when those texts describe Chinese landscape painting as purely Chinese (or vice versa), I take that reading on board.

Specialists in Chinese art history have also said (this is the third objection) that artworks and their indigenous literature shape the discourse of art history, so that the literature on Chinese art is de facto Chinese. In a subject where every idea turns back on itself, and every thought has been thought many times before, this is one point at which I think it is appropriate to say very firmly: such hopes are misguided. I think the indigenous Chinese traditions of historiography of art before substantial contact with the West—for example, Zhang Yanyuan’s Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties, completed in 847, or Emperor Huizong’s catalogues of his collection—are fundamentally different from nineteenth- and twentieth-century art history in purpose and narrative structure. They do not read as art histories (instead they sound like chronicles, catalogues, or lists), and even if they were accurate and up-to-date they would not be sensible substitutes for art histories written in the last hundred years. Before Western influence, China had an intricate literature on art, but it did not have what is recognized and practiced as art history. I do not think I will be tempted to believe otherwise until a contemporary art historian writes the Record of the Famous Painters of All the Dynasties, volume 2.

This question of Zhang Yanyuan has grown in recent years, and now it is a topic in its own right. It has been said, by Craig Clunas, James Cahill, and others, that after his Confucian preface, Zhang reads like Vasari. Here I only want to signal the straightforward fact that if an art historian were to write in the manner of Zhang’s book, she would not be able to find a publisher—at least not in art history—and if that book were her main publication, she would never get a job teaching art history in a university. The same could of course be said about Vasari: Renaissance specialists still study him, but no one writes like him—and in that sense he is not art history, but a source for art history. When it begins to seem as if the history of Chinese art has reached the point that it is effectively independent of Western concerns, it helps to think of how odd, how inassimilable, how fundamentally alien books like Record of the Famous Painters of All the Dynasties continue to seem when they are considered as art history.)

These are the three principal objections readers have made to my third hypothesis. The truth, as usual, is somewhere in between. I have put the hypothesis as strongly as I can so it can clarify the position I want to explore. I know it runs against the grain of contemporary writing, in which the local or “glocal” is privileged over the transnational or global, and
in which overlaps and hybridities of cultural practices are emphasized rather than their differences. The long, ongoing, painful history of nationalism is more than enough to demonstrate the danger of overly strong distinctions between national cultures. Any number of criticisms of colonialism and nationalism (Fredric Jameson’s political critiques, Homi Bhabha’s psychoanalytic critique, Gayatri Spivak’s deconstructionist critique) and any number of engagements with constructions of the West (as a “provincialized” Europe, as Euramerica, as the shadow of an endlessly expanding capitalism, as the heritage of the Enlightenment, as the possibility of history) have shown how overdetermined it can be to insist on differences predicated on constructions of nationalism or regionalism. And yet I want to stick with this third hypothesis, because I think that art history, as an enterprise (bound to the institution of the university, underwritten by the partly private, partly state-funded systems of academia, validated by conventions of narrative, interpretation, methodology, evidence, argument, and archive) is fundamentally a product of western Europe and North America, and that it remains so even when its subject is as distant as Song Dynasty Chinese painting.

The historiography of Chinese landscape painting can be told as moments of awareness of the Westernness of art history, moments of reticence or evasiveness about that Westernness, and moments of engagement with it. At other times, for other purposes, I would urge that twenty-first century historical practices are all hybrid, that “we” in art history, art theory, and visual studies scarcely know who “we” are, that our communities are in continuous flux, that academia is an effectively transnational community of scholars … but I do not think those truths are what are needed to sharpen the conceptualization of the history of Chinese landscape painting.

I want to be fairly stark about this third hypothesis because it is obscured by a growing literature in postcolonial studies that enjoins reflexivity in historical writing, prompting scholars to become increasingly sensitive to their own historical practices. For some postcolonial theorists, that means revealing and interrogating colonial discourse, together with the reciprocal discourse that sustains the position of the colonized. Other scholars remind us that all representation entails distortion, subjugation, voyeurism, and other acts of violence. Still others recall the vicissitudes and impossibilities of cultural translation, and the concomitant need to continue to work at understanding.

In some respects postcolonial theory can be understood as an extended meditation on the conditions under which cultural representation has taken place, with special attention to colonizers’ interest in possessing representations, and the complicity between the ideology
of colonialism and the very project of representation. In practice, postcolonial studies functions to ward historians away from uncomplicated descriptions of cultural difference, and to promote an increasingly reflective approach to the histories of cultural comparison. The focus becomes the inequalities of power that make comparisons possible, rather than the revaluation of comparisons that are still useful. Such a focus tends to elide the obdurate pervasiveness of Western constructions of history and art, and make it appear as if they can be superseded by careful writing.

The account I offer in this book is broadly consonant with the interests that drive Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work, but I diverge in practice. When it comes to art history, I tend more to what Chakrabarty called the “politics of despair.” That was a closing motif in his original 1992 essay “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History,” where it appeared as an acknowledgment that the postcolonial and subaltern studies project takes place “within the institutional site of the university” and that it should therefore “realize within itself its own impossibility.” In the revised chapter in Provincializing Europe (2000), Chakrabarty notes that the “politics of despair” I once proposed with some passion do not any longer drive the larger argument presented here. I would not exactly want to call what I am doing here a “politics of despair,” because I am trying to build a new understanding, but I do not share even the guarded optimism Chakrabarty assays when he attends to fundamental categories of historical understanding. In Chakrabarty’s view, “Europe”—that is, the claims to universality, abstraction, and reason that are inherited from the Enlightenment and are taken as the conditions for an historical understanding—cannot be avoided or decisively critiqued, because it forms the basis for what we understand as historical thinking. I agree that exploring such things as the “godless” nature of Western time, with its “empty and homogeneous” structure, or the generative difference between “Heidegger” (standing for “the place of the local”) and “Marx” (standing for “the analytical heritage” and the “practice of abstraction”) can help us rethink current conditions, and as far as I can see they are helpful in exploring the histories of colonialism and the world’s relation to “Europe.” I also agree that when it comes to the histories of modernism (and modern art) in different parts of the world, it can be necessary to carefully attend to the most fundamental and abstract categories that inform historical understanding. I am working on such a project now, which I hope can address modernist painting practices in various parts of the world. But I am not as hopeful as I take Chakrabarty to be that inquiries into generative concepts and categories can meliorate, or even affect, the understanding of a subject like Chinese landscape painting. Thoughts about temporalities and the philosophic bases of historical understanding are necessary to help redirect the present and point us to other kinds of engagement with the future, but they do not work as archeological tools to excavate the past.

All that is the first difference between this book and the current developments that follow on subaltern studies and postcolonial theory. The second is the interest, in much of that literature, on issues of translation. Again it is easy to agree that “there was a time—before scholarship itself became globalized—when the process of translating diverse
forms, practices, and understandings of life into universalist political-theoretical categories of deeply European origin seemed unproblematic, and that it now appears that "colonial translations" are "rough" both as linguistic approximations and as political operations (because they served the colonialists’ interests). But it has been tempting for postcolonial theorists to note that translation "produces out of seeming ‘incommensurabilities’" not a dictionary-style equivalence or the proof of real incommensurability, but a "partly opaque relationship we call ‘difference.”’ This kind of formulation has been restated many ways, in many times, and it has come to seem that the very purpose of scholarship itself is to show, in an increasingly self-reflexive and careful manner, how misunderstandings produce the only available forms of understanding.

Hence my interest in finding the most neutral, apparently truest comparative schema for understanding Chinese landscape painting. It is an obligation for any Western discourse that wishes to become self-reflexive—that is, any discourse that understands its project to be part of the inheritance Chakrabarty calls “Europe”—to understand its own workings, and come to terms with the the structure of its own thought. Within that problematic it is more difficult and rewarding to find what is apparently true than to expose what is manifestly false. My principal purpose is to find a model that can clarify our understanding of why some narratives of Chinese art history do not appear to depend on the West. The comparison I will be exploring purports to show the parallelism that seems correct, that seems not to be a projection, and therefore that looks independent of Western models. Notice this project is all about what appears true, what seems not to be a projection, what looks independent. It is not a pre-postcolonial project, to put it awkwardly, or a conservative attempt to return to a time before colonialism and imperialism were understood as they are today. On the other hand, it is not a postcolonial project, because I do not share the optimism of postcolonial studies, which continues to believe that attention to the universal and fundamental categories of Western historical thinking, joined to an inquiry into the conditions of understanding in translation, can relieve the pressure of the machinery of Western colonial interests.

So, back to comparative principles. They vary: there is Sherman Lee’s formalism, Benjamin Rowland’s late Romantic aesthetic, Hall and Ames’s conceptually driven philosophizing. They differ, and there is no system to their difference. Some are unguarded, others canny; some visual, others impelled by texts. I take it that some will have appeared obviously mistaken, and others promising; or some partly right, and others fundamentally wrong.

The principle I will be considering in the next two chapters is meant to seem less limited than those, and (intermittently, at least) more plausible. It is the comparison of changing senses of the past, as they are described by indigenous writers—what I will call the
comparison of historical perspectives. What matters in such a comparison is the perceived shape of one’s own history at any given moment. For some Chinese literati looking back at the Yuan, for example, it seemed that from the Yuan Dynasty’s point of view history was divided into a distant period when painting flourished (the Northern Song, 960–1127) and a more recent past when painting took a wrong turn (the Southern Song, 1127–1279). A very different sense of history informed painters several generations later, because they inherited a continuous tradition that appeared to be divided into several schools or styles.

Phrases like “structure of history” or “shape of history” describe such awareness because history has often seemed to change form, articulate itself, divide and reconnect with itself. Occasionally history seems more like a dynamic tension of opposed forces, and I will also be using economic and kinesthetic metaphors. The exact tropes are of less consequence than the structure that history appears to have, as it is experienced by any given generation. In the contemporary West, for instance, history seems to be articulated around a moment usually identified as the inception of modernism: if we juxtapose an event before modernism with one after it, they will seem less similar than two events that are both either premodern or postmodern. Art historians sometimes argue, as Panofsky once did, about where the largest breaks in our sense of history occur: whether the Renaissance is ultimately the hinge that articulates premodern and modern art, or whether the seminal years around 1905 are better candidates. These are utterly fundamental kinds of arguments, and I will be considering some of them; but it helps to talk about them informally, even though they have tremendous consequences, simply because we have little understanding of the sense of art history that informs such choices.

The “conditions for the possibility” of the present comparison, to borrow Kant’s phrase, are the existence in eastern China and western Europe of a mutable sense of the historical tradition. The Yuan painters saw their past differently than the early Ming painters, just as Brunelleschi looked back on a radically different Rome than Piranesi knew only two centuries later. The changing landscape of the past is something we do not normally bear in mind, although the study of earlier historians easily shows that our views about history’s shapes are modern ones. To understand a progression of history, as opposed to a progression in history, it is necessary to attend to these conceptual shifts.

Fourth hypothesis. A comparison of historical perspectives addresses some of the deepest-lying assumptions about the nature of art history and its possible sequences. It does so because it seems to be among the most inoffensive and abstract of all comparative principles. In Chinese landscape painting, it reveals affinities between Chinese and Western periods that continue to inform the history of Chinese art.
As it turns out, such a comparison suggests that certain moments in Chinese landscape painting be paired with moments in Western art, and a parallel structure develops that correlates the two. It culminates in the comparison of later Chinese painting and Western modernism. James Cahill put it best in the introduction to an exhibition called *Fantastics and Eccentrics in Chinese Painting* (1967), and I append his statement here:

> During the past two decades, after a long period of neglect and misunderstanding in the West, Chinese painting of the later centuries has become the object of serious study … we respond immediately to the often startling creations of the so-called Individualist masters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which have generated excitement wherever they have been shown. Their affinities with some recent and contemporary Occidental painting strike any sensitive viewer at once. These are visible affinities, apparent in the pictures themselves. What is not apparent, and not so widely realized, is that behind them lie equally remarkable correspondences—or anticipations, since they occurred centuries earlier in China—of ways of thought about painting, aims and approaches in painting, that have become current in the West only during the past few generations. The concept of a painting as a medium more expressive than descriptive, a recognition of the capacity of lines and forms to carry meaning somewhat independently of what they represent, a shift of attention from the older subject-derived meaning to this new kind were phenomena well advanced in China by the fourteenth century…. We are not confronted, that is, with another body of “modern-looking” works of art that were in fact created under motivations largely or totally alien to ours, or with resemblances that are confined to the surface. A good case could be made for the statement that later Chinese painting offers the best parallel in the whole of world art—perhaps the only really valid parallel—to the directions taken by our own painting in the past century.  

The analogy leads to an interesting conundrum, because the Chinese would have reached a moment I will identify with a certain construction of postmodernism approximately three centuries before the West. Inevitably (so I will argue in Chapter IV), the Chinese past offers itself as an analogy to one of the West’s possible futures. In the frame of the analogy, the Chinese “postmodernism”—now largely dissolved into the generalized mixtures of the international art market—casts doubt on the Western hope that postmodern pluralism will wax and wane like the periods that comprise our canonical description of the Western past. Rather than coalescing into a consensus or eventually giving way to some resolution, whether
as a liberal “conversation” or something more unexpected, it might just continue on into the indefinite future as China’s tradition did—until it was interrupted by the Revolution.

That and other speculative issues appear when the comparison is pursued in a deliberately systematic way, as I will be doing. In making the parallel I am not doing several things. It is not part of my intention to produce a new machinery of cultural comparison that is somehow stripped of the inequities that plague other comparisons. Nor do I think that the particular historical parallels I will suggest are the only coherent ones. (Wen Fong and others have different candidates.)

What matters, at least at first, is showing how parallels between historical perspectives entail specific judgments about the shape of Chinese art history, and how they influence the way Western art history comprehends Chinese painting. But this is more than a hunting expedition for elusive errors. Historical truth is determined in many ways, and I find parts of the parallel extremely persuasive even though I also think—at the same moment—that the versions of Chinese art history they produce are suspiciously like what I would expect to find in looking at any unfamiliar terrain.

In many ways Chinese painting is the West’s best opportunity to contemplate an historically conscious tradition of painting that is not a version of itself. That is why it is so mesmerizing, so strange, to look into the workings of cultural comparisons and see versions of Western art history. The more a comparison is teased out, the more it looks like a slightly distorted reflection of Western conceptualizations of Western art history. It is a sequence that is very familiar in the historiography of Western art: with an interest in expressionism, political disaffection, and anti-naturalism, Max Dvořák looked to the sixteenth century and found mannerism; with an interest in humanism, cultural dislocation, and the theoretical innovations of the Renaissance, Panofsky looked to Albrecht Dürer and rediscovered the Melencolia. The process of writing art history might be described as an alternation between epiphanies, in which scholars glimpse the biases and predilections that have led them to their material; and the acts of forgetfulness, in which they relinquish any further interest in their own motives in order not to risk seeing their work as “mere” projection. In the history of Western art, those vertiginous moments when the work of historical writing seems as if it might be nothing more than the unwilled projection of the art historian's thoughts are assuaged by the conviction that many of those thoughts did inhere in the historical material. Dürer was interested in his own variably German and Italianate character (as Panofsky himself was), and some mannerists were politically disaffected and anti-naturalist (as Dvořák was). Those insights are salves, rescuing their authors from the vertigo in which history does nothing but reflect back distorted images of the art historian.
I think the salves work in the history of Western art principally because the tradition is effectively continuous from the object of study up to the time of the historian who studies it. Panofsky could console himself with the plausible thought that an unbroken cultural tradition connected him with Dürer, making it unlikely that he was only projecting his own values into an alien past. In Chinese art there is no such consolation, and the growing awareness of the Westernness of cultural parallels leads into a darkening abyss. At one moment, it looks as if Chinese art after a certain point is definitely like modernism; and at the next moment it is transparently obvious that such a judgment is a projection of Western understanding. I believe there are cogent reasons to say that a certain stage of Chinese painting resembles modernism and even postmodernism; and then I look back over the history of previous comparisons, and begin to wonder if any such thought, no matter how ill-formed and fleeting, is not a sign that I am only seeing myself. This is a serious, even debilitating problem, and I am going to leave it up in the air until the end of the book; I want it to linger, as it does in everyday writing and looking.
A comparison of historical perspectives must begin not where Chinese landscape painting begins, in the dim Jin, Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties, but where earlier paintings effectively became available as an articulated tradition for later painters: that is, in the Northern Song.¹ The earlier dynasties are populated by legends more than by surviving paintings, and even in the Song few Tang paintings survived.² The legends of pre-Song painters have some parallels in Western art, though that parallelism is less important than the inaccessibility of the paintings themselves. China and the West share formative legends of mimetic excellence, and contests such as the one between Apelles and Protagoras are in this sense analogous to the stories told of Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c. 345–406) and Wu Daozi 吳道子 (act. c. 710–60), whose paintings made their viewers “sweat” and “shiver.”³

By contrast Yuan and Ming painters had some original Song paintings, numerous copies, and fixed concepts of style criteria with which to emulate them. There are exceptions: Song painters whose work had vanished by the time of the Yuan revaluation, Tang painters such as Wang Wei 王維 who were known through fair copies, and Zhao Mengfu’s collection of the Five Dynasties painter Dong Yuan 董源. But by and large the Yuan saw styles when it looked at the Song, and only legends when it looked at the Tang.⁴ The Song therefore represents the body of art that could be discovered by the Yuan and Ming. Cahill begins his history of “later Chinese painting” with the Yuan, because it is “a new story, not merely a continuation of the old one (though of course some themes from the old do persist).”⁵

It remains tempting in this context to call the Yuan a Renaissance, and Wen Fong titles a chapter in one of his books “The Yuan Renaissance.”⁶ Cahill makes the case in several ways. “Understanding the achievements of the Yuan masters,” he writes, “is as crucial to the understanding of later Chinese painting as is understanding the Renaissance to the study
of European painting.” Like the Renaissance, the Yuan saw the elevation of painting from “acquired skill” to “expressive art,” and both periods felt “powerful reactions” against recent styles:

In the works of Qian Xuan and Zhao Mengfu this reaction takes two directions: an archaistic return to earlier modes of painting—those of the Tang, Five Dynasties, and early Song—and somewhat experimental attempts to incorporate references to this more distant past into essentially new styles [as in Qian Xuan].

Because it is not clear what it might mean to call anything a Renaissance—there is only one Renaissance, which took place at a specific time and defined that time by taking place—it may be better to say the Yuan is a renascence. It is like the Italian Renaissance to the extent that it corresponds with an emerging awareness of art’s historical and stylistic development. Like the Renaissance, the Yuan artists found principally ruins, remnants, and stories when they looked to the admired past, and like the Renaissance, the Yuan was predicated not so much on simple renewal as it was on deliberate, politically and culturally motivated archeology and well-considered modification and adaptation. In the early stages of both renascences, the artists were often concerned more with repudiating a recent style than recovering an earlier one. The Yuan may be read—incompletely, but reasonably—as a reaction against the Southern Song, just as the fifteenth century in Italy may be understood in part in terms of a productive dislike of the late medieval *stile gotico* or *tedesco* (German). This initial, negative component eventually weakened as positive advances strengthened the periods’ self-definitions and expanded their “modern” vocabularies. It was the intention to renew and reconnect, rather than any actual “rediscovery,” that was essential in both cultures. Renaissance artists and humanists selected and redefined elements that had survived in transformed and unnoticed guises, as much as they actually recovered elements that had been “lost,” and Yuan artists did the same with a past that was more consistently available to them.

Wen Fong, John Hay, and others have argued that the Yuan is a renascence among others—even if it is also sometimes a “Renaissance,” as in Fong’s *Beyond Representation*. Early in the book, he argues that “the key difference between Chinese and Western painting lies not in the difference between the artists’ perceived notions of the past, but in their different historical uses of it,” especially the fact that for the Chinese, “no single period of antiquity represents a prescriptive classical norm” as the Greco-Roman ideal does for the West. John Hay has
argued in a similar fashion that Chinese “classicism” is more various than the Western focus on Greece. But it is a slippery distinction. The Chinese looked to various real and imagined pasts, but so did European artists, and the patterns of their revivals—the alternating recurring neoclassicisms in the West, the sequences of models in China—vary in ways that are difficult to schematize. Elsewhere Fong characterizes post-Song painting as a sequence of “revival-and-synthesis” which “did not lend itself to a progressive development”—but the exact same thing could be said of post-Renaissance art; it did not progress so much as move through a series of “revivals” and “syntheses.” Seventeenth-century European landscape painting is neither a “revival” nor a “synthesis” of sixteenth-century Roman or Venetian landscape painting, and the post-Renaissance landscape tradition is not “progressive” in any strong sense. In the north, Dutch landscape painters took their “prescriptive classical norms” from very different places than their contemporary Neapolitan and Roman counterparts. In other words, Western painting conforms quite well to the patterns of shifting classicism that have been used to decenter the Yuan and distinguish the Chinese tradition from the West.

One of the reasons this question is so difficult to argue is that it is unclear how much of the specific history of the West should remain attached to the words “classicism,” “Renaissance,” or “renascence.” From the vantage of contemporary Western art those ideas are second nature—they are the structure of post-Renaissance Western art history—and so it is easy to lose sight of the fact that they began, in different cultures, at specifiable moments. In those terms I think the Italian Renaissance and the Yuan have to stand as pivotal moments.

(Note, in passing, that I am not arguing that the Yuan differed from previous dynasties on account of its artists’ lack of interest in mimesis, or naturalism. The change from a mimetic to a non-mimetic mode has been posited by Cahill, Wen Fong, and others, and it has been put in a variety of ways. Wen Fong, for instance, has explained it by reference to a shift from the “Neo-Confucian School of Principle” 理学 lǐxué to the “School of the Mind” 心学 xīnxué. The terms “mimesis” and “naturalism” are both problematic, as Jerome Silbergeld has pointed out; they are clearly Western. What I am aiming at here, in the comparison of historical perspectives, is a sense of the shape of the past, as viewed from the Yuan, that might include criteria of representational accuracy.)

It may be best to move the question of the fifteenth century in Italy and the fourteenth century in China a little away from words such as “Renaissance” or “renascence” and associate it instead with a fundamental awareness that has been called “historical consciousness.” What does it require, in the most basic terms, to think of oneself as an agent in a changing history that is partly defined by a deeper past, and partly looking toward a possible future? At the least it calls for a sense of history as an articulated sequence, something that can appear irregular, that is, not unified but has a structure, a sequence that can temporarily or permanently improve or decline, or even fail without hope of remission. Like the humanists of the early Italian Renaissance, some Yuan artists looked back into the past and saw a gap between their generation and what they admired. That apprehension is fundamental to a
sense of historical place and sequence, and it may be the most salient of the various ideas that are gathered under the term “renascence.”

Three further points are fundamental from an historiographic perspective. First there is the formation of codified versions of admired artists: the dawning sense that artists had characteristic manners, subjects, and styles that could be gleaned from prose descriptions and poems or seen in surviving works (or at least works thought to be originals). This is another kind of awareness we take for granted, so much that it can be difficult to comprehend a period in which artworks done in past centuries were still jelling into namable styles and modes.

Second is the perception of a recoverable past: the conviction that the past harbors disused accomplishments that may be studied and revived. Some pasts are not recoverable. Wu Daozi’s painting is irrecoverable, except in testimonies. Other pasts are not recoverable because they have never been lost; in that category we might place Qing bird and flower painting, or the tradition of galloping ponies now ubiquitous in Chinese restaurants, first done by Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1863–1957). (In the West, I would name Phidias as an example of an artist whose works are no longer recoverable, in the sense that his individual hand is difficult to discern among the productions of his workshop; and Abstract Expressionism is a ready example of a style that has never fully gone out of production, even though its continued practice seems increasingly artificial, or is confined to contexts where it is seldom compared directly with the first-generation originals.) The very idea that the past harbors modes and manners that can be revived is not at all trivial or obvious. Even the words “renascence” or “revival” are telling, because they imply the past is not entirely dead, but somehow in suspension, as if it were sleeping and could be wakened.

Third is the inception of a historical sense that is self-reflexive, so that the active revision of history becomes an opportunity for self-definition. As far as it is possible to understand the genesis of historical awareness, thinking about the past as a sequence—and especially one that can potentially be broken—leads to a dawning awareness of the historical self. (The complementary motion, from an emerging sense of the self as an historical agent to an understanding of history as having a structure or sequence, inevitably accompanies and informs the inception of historical sense.)

At first, historical self-portraits tend to be incomplete. In the West, Vasari is a fascinating case: he had little difficulty explaining what happened to the art of Greece and Rome (he ascribed the loss of art to political changes, and even to earthquakes and volcanoes), but as he told the history of art’s renewal he came up against the problem of his own position
in the sequence. Famously, he posited his own generation as the apex of art, but caused his future readers some perplexity by praising the discovery of qualities that could somehow be superadded to perfection itself, producing “grace” (grazia) and a pleasing “manner” (maniera). The final biographies in his book are odd ones, laboring under an ineradicable anxiety that all of recent art up to his own time had been a series of progressive accomplishments, but that somehow his own generation witnessed the suspension of all sequences and even of change itself.

As Hegel knew, the perception of sequences in history and the growth of self-awareness are intimately related. When the past first made itself available as an articulated sequence, those who perceived the past also perceived themselves perceiving it, and they asked new kinds of questions about their positions in their narratives of historical styles. Another of the reasons Hegel’s philosophy of history continues to shadow contemporary art history is Hegel’s rigorous acceptance of the relation between his awareness of himself and his perception of history. The Italian Renaissance witnessed the inception, or reinstitution, of historical self-awareness, and I will suggest that some artists of the Yuan renascence experienced an analogously growing awareness of themselves.

The first of the three traits, the formation of codified versions of admired artist, is easiest to explore. The achievements of pre-Yuan artists were both simplified and fixed in the minds of some Yuan artists, who carried mental inventories of crystallized styles that they could bring to bear on their painting and connoisseurship. As the past was rediscovered (or more accurately, as it was rediscovered as the past), the Tang and Song artists were defined with increasing sharpness, if not increasing veracity. Like moving images fixed on photographic plates, the earlier artists began to appear in fixed forms, immobilized by the definitions they were given.15

There are various ways in which styles (or modes, or manners, or artistic strategies, or oeuvres—the designation is not important in this context) can be crystallized. An important early example is Wang Wei 王維 (699–759), who is an exception to the rule of near-total disappearance of Tang paintings thanks to a famous but tenuous tradition of copies.16 His style was crystallized in part as formal conventions that could be transmitted by moderately skilled copyists and stone engravers. The components of the style included iterated recessions of tectonic formations leading from middle distance into background, handscroll-format views of continuous middle ground, and “framed” scenes in which buildings are set into corrugated hillsides. Later generations remembered Wang Wei for only a narrow set of genres, including winter landscapes (without any clear sense of what he
had done with the genre) and “topographic paintings” (in which the artist records a specific landscape, as in his masterpiece Wang Chuan Villa, which is a sequential panorama of his estate). Another conventional component of crystallized style concepts is technical traits—a fact that became increasingly important to the later Ming and Qing. According to the Ming artist Dong Qichang, Wang Wei was first to use “wrinkles” (皴法 cūnfǎ) and “tinted wash” in order “to render the texture of the soil and the crusty character of stones and mountains,” but it is doubtful whether Dong attempted to make use of those alleged innovations. In any case it is probable that Dong appreciated not Wang Wei but a “debased” style transmitted through copies, and that he misread the weak brushwork of the copies as a political sign, “a manifestation of some unostentatious, poetic purity.” Most later style crystallizations repeat these same components: the formal (compositional, tectonic, “perspectival,” and object-specific), the generic (snow scenes, topographic views), the technical (点 diǎn dots, 披麻皴 pīmácūn hemp-fiber strokes, 斧劈皴 fǔpīcūn axe-cut strokes), and the political/aesthetic (“purity,” scholarly detachment).

Song originals were also rare in the Yuan, though not as fabulously scarce as Tang works. Today Northern Song painters are lucky to be known through one or two works, and anonymous masterpieces wait for convincing attributions. In the Yuan, and even as early as the end of the Northern Song, the Northern Song painters had already begun to disappear. The authentic works of Li Cheng 李成 (919–967), as opposed to the scores of copies and forgeries, had become so rare a century after his death that Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107) supposed that Li Cheng had never existed at all.

In a sense, contemporary art historians’ conceptions of the Song painters’ styles are fated to remain in an analogous kind of petrifaction, even if our picture is somewhat fuller than that of the Ming painters. Today we have paradigmatic, widely reproduced “masterpieces” such as Early Spring by Guo Xi 郭熙 in Taipei (plate 7). On the other hand, we “know” such seminal artists as Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254–1322) by some five or six landscape paintings, and Huang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269–1354) by “a mere four or five.” It is helpful to distinguish three kinds of historical record: the history of works and styles by which a given painter was known to other Chinese painters (how Zhao Mengfu looked to the later Yuan, how he looked to the Wu School painters); the history of works by which a painter has been known to modern scholarship (for instance the effect of the rediscovery of Zhao’s River Village, The Pleasures of Fishing); and the history of modern speculations regarding the painter (in which one infers the existence of a late style from copies and echoes in later generations). This tripartite history helps to remind us that our own versions of the painters are also partly fossilized. It is as if we are studying the history of paleontology from descriptions of lost fossils.
Plate 7: Guo Xi, Early Spring. 1072. Hanging scroll, 158.3 x 108.1 cm. Taipei, National Palace Museum.
Plate 8: Li Cheng, attr., [Temple Amid Snowy Peaks], detail. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.
To understand the ways that retrospective Yuan and Ming definitions worked, it is first important to note that the “polarity” Southern/Northern Song was amplified in a fashion at once more codified and more ossified than it is described today. Especially from the early Ming onward, the basic historical paradigm is a paired opposition between two Northern Song artists, Dong Yuan (c. 934–c. 962) and Juran (act. c. 960–980), and two Southern Song painters, Ma Yuan (1160/5–1225) and Xia Gui (c. 1195–1224). This Procrustean pairing strategy, once in place, could be iterated but not softened. As Cahill has pointed out, “in addition to … Ma-Xia and Dong-Ju there was a third tradition, the Li-Guo, named after two of the greatest landscapists of early Song, the northerners Li Cheng of the tenth century and Guo Xi of the eleventh,” and there were at least two further pairs and associated artists. (This is not to say that the pairs have historical purchase; outside their historiographic uses they are often weak.) The definitions of these bipolar styles have a few parallels in the West, and they are principally of interest on account of what they reveal about how Chinese painters and theorists conceptualized their history.

The traits by which Li Cheng was praised in the twentieth century (his “undertone of desolation and loneliness,” his “atmosphere of silent thought,” and his “bleak” emotional chill) do not correspond to early Chinese interpretations, and they clearly derive from the Western rhetoric of the Romantic, the picturesque, and the sublime. The twelfth-century colophons invoke a mystic “immersion” or “forgetfulness” in the presence of Li’s pictures, notions that have been connected with “Neo-Confucian cosmology” and with the fourth-century BC philosopher Zhuangzi; and later Chinese commentators spoke of Li as a great realist. After Wang Wei, he was remembered as the second master of snow scenes, and praised for his rocks and gnarled trees (plate 8). This heterogeneous accumulation of transparent Western impositions, determined interpretations, and narrow codifications is typical, and it makes the Li-Guo pairing exceptionally difficult to interpret for modern Western eyes.

The other polarities share this obdurate layered interpretive history, and they each present problems of their own. To later generations, it did not always matter that Dong Yuan and the monk Juran were Southerners, and paintings from various regions were lumped with theirs. What mattered was the skiagraphic quality of their works (“meant to be seen at a distance,” as an eleventh-century commentator wrote), their accurate versions of the low Nanjing hills, and their evocation of a “harmonious atmosphere” of humid distance. They were more likely to present “a roundness of contour and a sun-soaked atmosphere, in marked contrast to the angular rocks … of Fan Kuan and Xu Daoning, “ and a “soft, hazy sunshine” instead of the “precise and astringent detail” of Li-Guo.

The third principal pair, Ma Yuan and Xia Gui, were linked by succeeding generations in part because of their exemplary association with the devalued Southern Song. To twentieth-century observers they appeared “less rational, more emotional and dramatic,” even “infused” with “poetic sadness.” Though Kano painters appreciated such qualities, later Chinese artists read Ma-Xia as exemplars of a discredited politics, and their crystallized
styles were therefore even more narrowly defined than Northern Song traits. The political re-reading of their work effected a collapse in the appreciation of their technique, which came to be viewed as a devalued technical expertise—regardless of the rapid “expressionism” of Xia Gui’s Pure and Remote Views of Rivers and Mountains or Ma Yuan’s more gentle mists, as in the Landscape with Willow and Bridge (plate 9).

Most of the Yuan and Ming codifications of Song artists are in need of adjustment; in this context, it is not merely the progress of historical knowledge that makes such adjustment...
The Argument

seem necessary, but rather the different purposes to which the Yuan wanted to put its past. In the West as in China, severe schematizations were imposed on the past, both to enable the recovery of “lost” styles, and to facilitate the rejection of what were largely ongoing traditions of great complexity.

The second of the salient characteristics of the Yuan renascence, the perception of a recoverable past, begins with Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) and his teacher Qian Xuan 錢選 (c. 1235–before 1307), though Qian was already nearly thirty years old when the Song Dynasty finally fell. Some Western texts on Zhao have difficulty making a convincing case for his greatness in the eyes of later Chinese landscape painters, but several traits are still discernible: an incisive anatomy of the history of Song painting; a distancing from that same tradition (even though it extended, in effect, through his own generation); and a stylistic essentialism that crystallized the Song and Tang styles. The dry bones and schematic clarity of Zhao Mengfu’s paintings are markers of a consciously achieved triumph of classificatory historical evaluation, and it is here that his parallel to Renaissance artists is most apparent (plate 10). Without insisting on names, this recalls Leon Battista Alberti’s evaluation of ancient and medieval painting; Brunelleschi’s simplified, elegant transformations of Roman and Tuscan Romanesque; or Masaccio’s “disregard” for landscape and ornament in favor of disegno and relievo. Each of those artists embarked on a largely unaided—if not

entirely unprecedented—historical revaluation, and each found it necessary to accompany classification with historical as well as formal simplification.

Zhao and artists close to him revived more traditions than any one of those Western artists—a further instance of the richness typical of the historiography of Chinese painting. Some of Zhao’s preferred modes, such as the Dong-Ju style, the Li-Guo style, and a late Northern Song style exemplified by the painter Qiao Zhongchang, are chronologically analogous to Renaissance revivals in that they involve a period of time—much shorter in China than in the West—in which the style in question had fallen into misuse or disuse. However, Zhao’s remote, refined Mind Landscape of Xie Youyu “may have been meant as an imaginary re-creation” of a version by Gu Kaizhi (c. 345–406)—a “revival” or remembrance over a gap of nearly one thousand years, and therefore a historical gesture on the scale of the Renaissance revivals of Roman architecture.

Other objects of Zhao’s attention are revivals in more complex ways. His interest in the Li-Guo manner extended from his historical researches into its tenth- and eleventh-century origins into “its continuations in the later Song and early Yuan.” In this instance, Zhao was sifting and adjusting a tradition that was in no need of revival per se. “Blue-and-green landscape” (青绿山水 qīnglǜ shānshuǐ), another of Zhao’s interests, is also a tradition without parallel in Western art, because it had already been revived before Zhao took it up, and was destined to go through several more renascences after him. (It may have its rough parallels in the intermittent, incomplete revivals of pagan antiquity throughout the Middle Ages.)

Each of these revivals, revaluations, and adjustments was done with a firm concept of historical differences in mind, and so they involve the third characteristic of the Yuan renascence, the inception of a self-reflexive historical sense. Although it is “unlikely” that Dong Yuan and Juran “strove consciously” for the simplicity of their technique, Zhao was “certainly” aware of an ideal of simplicity. We assume that the original blue-and-green landscapists did not possess a “modern” awareness that their large trees and small hills looked awkward, but Zhao’s exaggeration of that same trait in his surviving masterpiece Autumn Colors in the Qiao [Que] and Hua Mountains is entirely intentional (see plate 2). In the painting, delicately drawn peasants work among atmospherically rendered bamboos and swampland plants, and trees recede into carefully modulated, slightly misted depths—all traits unavailable to the original blue-and-green style painters.

Zhao’s control of a version of historical change finds its parallel and expression in his stylistic versatility. He was among the first—possibly the second, after Qian Xuan—to
comprehend and embrace the idea that an artist could work in a selection of styles, some deliberately archaic and others intentionally refined. This momentous change accompanies the emergence of historical self-awareness, because one has first to see that things change before one can adopt stylistic “stances” appropriate to different occasions. It may have been Zhao Mengfu who codified the choice between Dong-Ju and Li-Guo (and concomitantly banned Ma-Xia); but even in his few surviving works, the acceptable prototypes Dong-Ju and Li-Guo are mixed within a single painting. The same awareness, and the same capability for polystylistic painting, emerges in the Italian Renaissance in paintings such as Masaccio’s *Tribute Money*, where a “feminine” Christ is surrounded by “masculine” apostles, and in Antonio and Piero Pollaiuolo’s *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*. The act of mixing styles rarely obliterates the identity or meaning of the individual manners, but the result is distinct from conventional quotation in which cited passages are meant to remain sealed from one another. What happens in Zhao Mengfu, Qian Xuan, Alberti, Brunelleschi, and Masaccio, is more like weaving, and it shows that a certain distance from tradition has been achieved; the artists began to imagine themselves as masters of the history of painting and of historical styles, instead of masters of a single craft.

The Yuan is the moment when history first becomes available as a vehicle for meaning, a route to self-awareness, a strategy, a tool, an object with potential use. (More precisely: it is the first moment preserved to us as in the historiographic tradition.) As such, the moment cannot be repeated. From then onward, as long as the moment remains in historical memory, the recovery of the past is an ongoing interest and burden, but the recovery of the recovery of the past is lost forever.

History becomes an object of study, and as Vasari demonstrates, art history begins to appear as a potentially meaningful pursuit. An artist’s energy can be devoted to negotiating the viable senses of the past and finding a position among them. As time passes, the past becomes ramified with choices: in China, the stark opposition between Northern and Southern Song rapidly branched into a number of possible routes and affinities. Wu Zhen, Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, and Wang Meng, the “Four Great Masters” of the later Yuan, produced a diversified field of styles, which came to be perceived as a full spectrum of possibilities; they appeared, in other words, to encompass a stylistic universe, within which any viable style could be situated. Partly as a result, the Ming and Qing saw the Yuan Four Great Masters as artists of the first rank, and “art-historically unconscious” followers of Song styles as artists of the second and third ranks. The ways that the Four Great Masters appeared to encompass the field of Yuan possibilities is telling both for the
conceptual shape of the history of painting as it appeared to the early Ming, and for its relative simplicity as compared to the possibilities available to later generations.

It is telling that the manners of the Four Great Masters can be conjured very quickly. Wu Zhen 吳鎮 (1280–1354), first of the Four Masters, presented later generations with the picture of unaffected scholarly simplicity. His “plainness and blandness” (平淡 píngdàn), inspired in large part by Zhao Mengfu, was accompanied by a much lighter, more whimsical mode of archaism. Some paintings renounce all but the most limited contrasts of wet brushstrokes. Huang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269–1354) gave the tradition his improvisatory, “unfinished” Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains (plate 11); Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301–74), the ultimate in “thinness, transparence, weightlessness,” “loneliness and remoteness … without flavor and emptied of all thought” (plate 12); and Wang Meng 王蒙 (1308–85) provided a sense of the extreme of dense, dragon-like textures (plate 13). It is easy to see how such possibilities could look like a full repertoire of painting, especially following on the relatively simple binary choices that presented themselves to the early Yuan.

In each of the Four Great Masters there are elements of the movement the twentieth century recognized as mannerism, meaning, in this context, a historical moment that has become conscious and disdainful of a recent perfection. The reaction that is precipitated does not involve striking new directions, but refinement, exaggeration, and attenuation of strategies previously held in check. Ni Zan’s behavior and his sterile “remnants of mountains and residual waters” introduce the concept of monotonous restatement (a kind of theme without variations) to Chinese painting. (Cahill remarks that Ni Zan’s signature scene of foreground trees and hut, blank water, and distant rocky hills “argues … not for any obsessive attachment
to that scene, but rather from a detachment from it and from all the rest.”)\textsuperscript{31} The same was said of maniera artists by Carlo Dolce, and monotony became one of the watchwords for the art of the later sixteenth century until the early twentieth century rediscovered (or reinvented) mannerism.

Wang Meng apparently had only intermittent control over his obsessive horror vacui. In later life he “gives up the insistence on orderly structure [inherited from Huang Gongwang], makes a virtue of unclarity, and eventually … allows no relief at all.”\textsuperscript{32} Some of his paintings, such as the Dwelling in the Qing Bian Mountains, are crow’s nests of shrubs circling threatened clearings. This crowding of tumultuous forms is another mannerist trait, as is Wang’s tendency to approach the “unintelligible or implausible” and the “disturbingly unnatural.”\textsuperscript{33} The overtones of personal eccentricity and mental illness that hang over discussions of Ni Zan and Wang Meng are also relevant, since it was the generation of the mannerists that expanded the complex of ideas surrounding the Saturnine temperament and the limits of sociopathic behavior.

Mannerists also toyed with abandoning paintings, or working so fast they ruined their paintings, or so slowly that they never finished. Huang Gongwang’s Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains is “unfinished” in the same ambiguous sense in which Parmigianino’s Madonna dal collo lungo is “unfinished.” The category of the non finito had yet to be formulated in both cultures, and Parmigianino’s and Huang Gongwang’s paintings are more problematic, and more lastingly interesting, for that reason; there is no single answer to the questions of why and when each was “abandoned,” or how long they really took to execute, or what the nascent non finito meant to either.\textsuperscript{34}

There are also spatial parallels. Mannerist artists experimented with the simple box of one-point perspective, but they did not so much abandon it (as the literature often claims) as distort its four-squareness, and shift its oppressive centrality. The “unintelligible … presentation of space and form” in Wang Meng’s Dwelling in the Qing Bian Mountains is a kind of stretching or shearing of Huang Gongwang’s three categories of “level distance,” “removed distance,” and “high distance”; in an analogous manner Pontormo’s Visitation is a topological deformation of Renaissance perspectival ludic space rather than a rupture, abandonment, or “destruction” of the Renaissance perspective box.\textsuperscript{35}

Many threads of mannerism and maniera come together in the generations after Zhao Mengfu, but rather than attempt to maneuver them into an orderly pattern—or even to insist on a comparison of the Four Great Masters and the later sixteenth century—I just want to note that there is a characteristic repertoire of strategies available to a generation that finds itself living after a decisive, perfected achievement. In the early Yuan, that achievement was Zhao Mengfu’s positioning of himself in history as a “late” evaluator of partially lost traditions, and his historically minded painting, in which a repertoire of styles became part of the artist’s skills. The generations that followed, like the generations of the mannerists, were attracted to whatever issues could be expanded without breaking the mold that had been set, and if there are deeper similarities between the Yuan and mannerism, they lie
in that direction. A theme (the canonical achievement) and its variations (the eccentric or mannerist experiments) together define a set of possibilities in relation to the past, and they do so in such a way that the topic seems closed; to artists arriving late, it can look as if little more remains to be done.

This idea, the full occupation of a conceptual field, is the essential determinant of the way that the Four Great Masters of the Yuan appeared to later generations. From the standpoint of Western theorists at the turn of the seventeenth century, the Renaissance (together with its “degenerate” and “repetitive” *maniera*) appeared as a territory that had been amply explored. This notion informs the Carracci’s view of the earlier sixteenth century, Vasari’s view of the third and final period of art, and the view of the earlier and middle fifteenth century from the perspective of Northern Italy in the 1480s. Each of these retrospective assessments also has an academic slant (the Carracci, Vasari, and Francesco Squarcione are examples of artists associated with art academies and schools) and each evinces an art historical awareness of the developments and possible ranges of styles. The later Renaissance, in particular, saw the disintegration of Vasari’s monological history and the development of the concept of coetaneous schools. (Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historians distributed their historical sequences among several cities, city-states, or regional schools, partly avoiding the problem of historical progress.) Both the rise of academies and the art historical awareness of the concept of schools are essential to the formation of the idea that a previous period has made a thorough exploration of the possibilities of its position. That judgment, and its accompanying pedagogical and historical apparatus, are shared by the later Yuan and the later sixteenth century in the West.

So far I have sketched two distinct historical moments. Neither is easy to characterize, because their traits are obscured by traditional historical period names (Renaissance, mannerism). Put succinctly, the first moment is the inception of the awareness that history can have a structure, that “old masters” can be redefined and regrouped, that it is necessary to find and redeem a more-or-less distant past, and that an artist’s position can be best known in specifically historical terms. In a word, it is the inception of a renascence, or of the Renaissance itself. The second moment is the flowering of schools, styles, or artistic strategies, the beginning of art history understood as a chronicle of overlapping or competing manners, and the apparently full exploration of the field of possibilities presented by painting; it is also the dissolution of rigidly monological versions of history in favor of a palette of choices. There is no single word for such a moment, but in Italy, parts of it certainly correspond to mannerism.
I have no wish here to rephrase a Hegelian sequence or even a Wölfflinian “history of the eye” in which painting somehow must follow some canonical succession of periods. It is occasionally important to say that the historical awareness that typifies the late Yuan is best understood as a development of a prior conception of the past, but it rarely makes sense to entertain a proposition of the Hegelian form, such as “The historical awareness typical of the late Yuan necessarily follows that found in the early Yuan.” The shape of the argument I am after is more like the arrangement of cars in a train: the engine has to come first, and the caboose last, but in between many arrangements are possible. Here the first car is what I am calling the renaissance, where (for the purposes of this argument) history first appears as a problem. The last car, and the subject of the next chapter, is a period that I will be compelled to call modernism or postmodernism. Between the two there can be as many arrangements of the historical record as there are patterns in a kaleidoscope.

In the Ming Dynasty the emulation of the past took a different form. Here is Cahill’s description:

Yuan artists themselves, such as Zhao Mengfu and Wu Zhen, had of course advocated and practiced the imitation of the past; but with them it was a matter of reviving and utilizing styles they admired either in a conscious evocation of the past or for the betterment of their own works and the cleansing (as they saw it) of their own tradition. In the Ming something different begins: the institutionalization of such imitation as a normal part of the activity of the scholar-painter, who could assume the personality of some earlier master for one work, then shift easily, as an actor changes roles, to another for the next work.

The early Ming imitators produced a kind of painting that tended to eliminate “tensions and dissonances” and so reduce “individual modes to more manageable stylistic systems.” The “secondhand” eclectics of the early Ming opened the way to the even more psychologically retiring, “formalist” painters of the middle and later Ming, inheritors of third- and fourth-hand traditions. Theirs was what Max Loehr has acutely called “art-historical art,” a kind of picture-making aware of its responsibilities and dependence on a richly layered past.

From their vantage, the prehistory of the Tang and Northern Song was decisively removed, distant, and intangible. The past, perceived as an “original” past, must have seemed farther and farther away, and to that historical disengagement there corresponded formal and emotional disengagements. The objects of study were increasingly taken from
masters close at hand, and their codified responses to the earlier tradition mattered at least as much as the close study of Song and even Yuan originals. The history of Western academies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries replicates this from its inception, because the increasingly rigid pedagogical systems of the French Academy and related institutions had the effect of delaying students’ encounter with important originals until they had imbibed a certain minimum of more recent responses to those models.

Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427–1509, plate 1) and Wen Zhengming 文征明 (1470–1559, plate 14) together occupy a specifiable art historical position, stemming from their particular relation to their past: they were not so near to the admired past that their predecessors towered over them, nor so far that earlier works seemed irrelevant or impossible to capture by patient study. Their positions as third- or fourth- generation “art historical artists” (that is, their places roughly a century after an art historical awareness had rendered naïve style choices impossible) placed them at a comfortable remove from their originals. That privileged position has psychological and formal components as well as historical parameters, and they converge to suggest a particular Western parallel.\footnote{Plate 14: Wen Zhengming, Cypress and Old Rock. 1550. Handscroll on mulberry bark paper, 10 1/4 x 19 1/4 in. Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Gallery.}
Wen Zhengming saw a different Zhao Mengfu than the Yuan artist’s contemporaries had seen. Zhao may have experimented late in life with a “poetic mode,” “concerned with … mood and feeling,” which may in turn have influenced Wen Zhengming more decisively than the handful of works by which we know Zhao Mengfu today. (Evidence of those paintings has almost disappeared, perhaps in part because they were not popular in the two centuries following Zhao Mengfu’s death.) From the end of the 1480s Wen Zhengming was studying with Shen Zhou, and Wen’s work has been taken to evince a “poetic mildness of mood and slight nostalgia” in part due to Shen Zhou’s “human” warmth and perhaps in part to Wen’s view of Zhao Mengfu and Qian Xuan. Zhao Mengfu is also behind the “air of classical coolness” that accompanies and conveys Wen’s “mildness.” (These are, as elsewhere in this account, received ideas: for a detailed exploration of Wen Zhengming’s interaction with Shen Zhou, see Craig Clunas’s study Elegant Debts—about which more is mentioned in the final sections of this book. For detailed studies of Zhen Zhou’s place in history, there are recent dissertations and essays by Jen-Mei Ma, Joan Stanley-Baker, and Chi-ying Alice Wang.)

I would like to suggest that these psychological and scholarly traits are connected to the artists’ positions in history. Shen Zhou’s imitations, and the original style he developed from his forties onward, beginning in the late 1460s, helped demonstrate that “reverence for the Yuan masters … was compatible with stylistic inventiveness; that an art-historical art need not be art-historically static, but could develop in its own right.” Wen Zhengming’s is a particular kind of art historical coolness, “methodical, sensitive, [and] reserved,” “neither topographical nor very personal,” and possessed of an intellectual edge, “a sense of severity, even harshness.” It is the mark of an artist deeply and sympathetically engaged in a variety of older styles.

Wen’s oeuvre is a remarkable instance of just how chameleon a Chinese artist can be, and it has been justly remarked that without seals and signatures, many of his works would be misattributed. (Plate 14 is in the mode of Li Cheng, plate 8.) But in saying this it is important not to lose sight of Wen Zhengming’s and Shen Zhou’s characteristic traits. Wen “seldom imitated directly,” and the styles of Dong Yuan and Juran were “discussed without playing much part in the actual production” of Soochow artists. To some extent, the Ming artists saw the Song through the veil of the Yuan. Their “Li Cheng” was the “Li Cheng” of the Yuan literati, and not the one we recognize today, despite their efforts at scrupulous archeology.

Wen Zhengming and Shen Zhou “admired the simplicity and unpretentiousness” of archaic styles, reaching back to the Six Dynasties, the ninth- and tenth-century “Jing-Guan” style, and the blue-and-green landscape style; but Wen Zhengming also favored “sophisticated and style-conscious” “poetic archaists” of previous ages in addition to his versions of the older masters. In short, he was an “artist’s artist”; he cultivated cultivators and embraced detachment. In this account, he preferred veils between himself and what we might call the power of past works, and he could afford his emotional retirement because of his historical distance.
I offer as comparison to Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming an artist such as Poussin, though in general, many early classicizing strains of the French, Dutch, English, and Italian Baroque are equally interesting candidates. I am motivated by the artists’ similar intentions in relation to their past: a commonly held ease, fluency, and intimacy couched in a quite controlled, consciously classicizing style. Both Poussin and the early Ming classicists can be warm, “poetic,” and “congenial,” and in the same breath intellectually intimidating in their rigorous mastery of historical themes and styles. Both Eastern and Western artists combine “methodical, sensitive, [and] reserved” temperaments with a wide range of classicizing archeological and philological historical research.

In the West this sense of loose, amicable connectedness is characteristic of the seventeenth century; and in the East, it appears in the middle Ming, in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Speaking of the Chinese painters, Cahill puts this in a way that applies well to the school of Poussin:

The artist … is neither portraying his subject nor imitating the antique in a simple and direct way, but is regarding both from a certain distance and from a sophisticated, art-historical viewpoint. When these archaistic styles are in turn imitated in later periods, the distancing is compounded. It is this quality of remove that … [puts] stylistic quotation marks around the picture.

The “irony” and “antiquarian whimsy” of Wen’s art historical awareness are more pronounced than Poussin’s serious, noble references to the past; to that extent, Wen’s “engaged detachment” is more advanced than Poussin’s. Other points offer closer parallels. Poussin belongs to the long line of French artists who gradually expanded the range of acceptable historical references. (Ingres is an important later link in the chain, with his allusions to early Flemish painting, Van Eyck, Perugino, Botticelli, Holbein, and Bronzino.) Both Western and Eastern artists followed a period that followed a renascence, and both devalued and ignored their immediate heritage. One of the few periods that Wen “passed over in silence” (in addition to the conventional devaluation of the Southern Song after the middle of the twelfth century) was the generations just before his own, and Poussin similarly dismissed the later sixteenth century before the ascendency of academicism. Both singled out a master of the recent renascence (in Poussin’s art as in Ingres’s, Raphael holds the pre-eminent position; in Wen Zhengming’s art, it is the “oracular authority” of Zhao Mengfu), and in both that “old master” was an ideal of harmonious assimilation of the past, “a mediator between himself and ‘high antiquity,’” who offered “a more intellectualized and liberal outlook on the past.”

Wen Zhengming, Shen Zhou, and Poussin lived in analogous moments. They did not feel the insistent fervor of the Four Great Masters, who vigorously explored what
possibilities the early Yuan suggested to them; instead they saw their pasts as collections of antiques—richly textured but perhaps psychologically distant. Theirs is an “intellectualized, art-historically conscious art,” and a sense of responsibility and erudition accompanies their archeological and antiquarian researches. Often they are content to give full rein to the scholarly side of their work.

There is an appealing equilibrium about the works of these artists: a measured distance, both historical and psychological, and a dependable decorum in their responses. (The situation is not unlike some professional art history, with its carefully parcelled enthusiasms and its studied poise, and I am tempted to see an affinity between that aspect of art history and recent discussions of Poussin.) The difficulty of maintaining the approach is that as generations accumulate, the past becomes not merely rich, but crowded, until finally it cannot be comprehended at all without radical revision.

I have been trying to articulate a comparison of historical perspectives by locating four analogous moments shared by China and Europe: a “pre-historical” past, the inception of a desire to recapture parts of that past, a period of experimentation following the establishment of the new canon, and a more comfortable, detached response associated with a proliferation of schools and styles. By the end of the sixteenth century in China, division and subdivision were the order of the day: schools and styles were multiplying, and the texture of history was thickening. In Europe the growth of “art-historical art” was more literally a matter of schools, as academies sprang up in every major city in Europe.

One option for an increasingly crowded field is a moment of extreme radicalism and unexpectedly strong judgment. Both traditions have several such moments, but from the distant perspective I am observing here each has one moment that divides it more deeply than any other. In both, the moment has rewritten art history into periods that come before it (which seem to anticipate the decisive break) and those afterward (which seem to play out its radical promise). In the West, the pre-eminent candidate is the “revolution” that launched modernism, and in the Chinese tradition, it is provided some three centuries earlier by Dong Qichang (董其昌 1555–1636, plate 15). Given that “abstraction” and its cognates have been assigned a wide range of apostrophic and polemical definitions in both cultures, it is nevertheless accurate to say that Dong Qichang and the later Ming painters “exploited the principles of abstraction,” as did Western artists from Gauguin through the rise of International Abstraction. If anti-naturalism in particular were to be the comparative criterion, Dong Qichang would be the irresistible parallel with Picasso and Braque. (There would then be an intriguing specific comparison between Huang
Plate 15: Dong Qichang, Landscape after Lu Hong’s “Ten Views of a Thatched Hut.” 1621–1624. Album leaf, ink and color on paper. Image: 56.2 x 36.2 cm. Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Gallery.
Gongwang and Cézanne, because in Dong Qichang’s eyes, the relatively stolid Huang was the important predecessor, as Cézanne was for Picasso.

I take it as a marker of the depth of art history’s commitment to Western art, and the Westernness of art historians’ concepts of pictures, that it still seems entirely appropriate, as Cahill insists, to speak of Dong in terms of “analytical” interests, “abstraction,” and “intense, conscious distortion,” much as we speak of Picasso’s tendencies from 1909 to 1918. This is true initially because Dong himself may have been the first Chinese painter to employ “formal analysis” “consciously and systematically,” and it is true specifically because Dong used his “formal” lexicon to describe his achievements in “abstraction” and “distortion.” Both Dong and Picasso were deliberate distortionists, and in both, formal experimentation led to “dissonant and uncomfortable constructions” and a kind of secondary and sometimes inadvertent expressionism. The distortions were experienced as one end of a polar pair in which artifices of anti-realism opposed a simplified, artificially clarified realism. Both Picasso and Dong swung between clear, simple “stability and order” and “deliberate disruption of stability and intelligibility,” and the continuous presence of that choice abetted an art that was often founded on unresolved ambiguity and discontinuity. Both artists exploited “the tensions between real and abstract space and form,” setting “anomalies” into contexts “familiar enough to make them more acceptable than they otherwise would be,” breaking free “of all but the most minimal requirements of adherence to natural appearances.” Neither artist would have given up a measure of realism, and Picasso made several acidic comments on the futility, weakness, and impossibility of pure abstraction (Dong had no such abstract avant-garde to contend with). In Dong, the ambiguity between “orderly structure and disarrangements of it” is echoed by the choice “between adherence to tradition and extreme departures from it,” “between paintings as … presenting an image of nature and … as embodying a separate reality,” and “between the mastery of forms … and [an] awkward, ‘raw’ quality.” The last has a particularly strong match in Picasso’s primitivism of technique and form: just as Picasso gave up the mimetically versatile academic training he associated with his father in favor of a limited repertoire of stronger gestures, so Dong produced overly strong, almost crude, paintings that rely on a handful of the Chinese repertoire of brushstrokes. (The motion of primitivism is distinct from the archaism that surfaced first in Zhao Mengfu. The latter is technically sophisticated; the former is technically unaccomplished, and prefigures the narrowing of the repertoire of techniques that marked later generations.)

As the paintings show, the principal emphasis remained on “volumes of nondescript matter arranged in a disarrayed space.” Sometimes the solutions were intricate beyond precedent (Picasso’s 1909–10 Portrait of Vollard, Dong’s 1617 Qing-pien Mountain in Cleveland) and other times reduced to bare bones (Picasso’s 1909 Reservoir at Horta de Ebro, Dong’s Hills on a Clear Autumn Day, After Huang Gongwang, also in Cleveland). An “uncompromising elimination and reduction” operate in these images, and forms are “ruthlessly subordinated” to “strongly integrated design.” Dong Qichang and Picasso both
The Argument

painted illogical bridges through space (the most amazing, in either artist, occurs in Dong’s *Landscape* in Taipei, where mountaintops bend and fuse into a vast impossible natural bridge),

as well as ambiguous disjunctions between near and far. A whole catalogue of reductive strategies could be compiled: both painters make use of imbricated “facets,” single forms anatomized into intricate structures, “surprisingly illusionistic” forms put side by side with insubstantial or unreadable ones, forms “not meant to be understood at all,”

horizontal planes—as of water—that will not lie flat,

and compositions of uncertain, “unstable and unintelligible” depth.

These are the kinds of formal parallels that have mostly been abandoned by art history. Yet despite the new information contributed by an international conference on Dong—and especially, despite the social differences between the artists that are now more apparent than ever—the parallel still seems meaningful. Part of its resilience comes from the fact that both cubism and Dong’s innovations are not from “nature” as much as they are “diagrammatic expositions” of art historical positions. “Abstraction” for Dong, Picasso, and Braque was not simply a matter of reducing whatever was taken as nature; it was also a matter of working “from an earlier style,” by “reducing it to its bare bones.” Dong was “demonstrating to the viewer, as a lecturer on art history might do, what he ‘understood’ of the Huang Gongwang style.” In cubism this is not as pronounced, because—in keeping with Western concepts of innovation—Picasso did not seek to tie himself to past styles; but the references are nevertheless clear, and become progressively more important components of reading as familiarity with the pictures increases. In Dong’s art, “abstraction” is in part the name for a pictorial strategy that mirrors an historical strategy.

My sense in reading the proceedings of the Dong Qichang conference—three heavy volumes, totaling a thousand pages—is that Dong occupied an utterly different social position than any Western modernist, and that it is entirely possible to write at length about his sense of history, his politics, and his life without mentioning Western modernism; but that when it comes to saying what he accomplished in the paintings, Western concepts of modernism and abstraction suddenly fill the air.

The parallel is an intricate matter, and it is possible to elaborate on it without even mentioning the qualities of Dong’s paintings. The key to his historical perspective are his “dogmatic and severe pronouncements,” which harbor “little nostalgia for the past.” It is significant that Dong, instead of some earlier painter, felt the need to codify the theory of the Northern and Southern schools. His position in the late Ming placed him after a period of increasing multiplication of manners, and his theory allowed him to propound a simpler
version of that past. Being able to look back upon a newly schematic history freed him for a radical departure, since his own project could be cast into artificially high relief. It appeared particularly important, both in Western modernism and in Dong’s day, to choose decisively and quickly, and to be thorough in rejection: “[a]rtistic allegiances were like political and intellectual allegiances, to be asserted and defended; styles functioned like ideas in intellectual history.” Discarded alternatives were not merely useless, they were “aberrations.”

The styles of the earlier Ming were re-conceived as stagnant, “decadent academicism,” echoing the valuation of late nineteenth-century academies made by artists of Picasso’s generation and the revulsion felt for example by the artists of the Brücke. Dong’s models included a number of artists (Ni Zan, Wang Meng, Wu Zhen, Dong Yuan, Juran), but increasingly he looked to only two: Wang Wei and Huang Gongwang. Inscriptions on Dong’s work show that he meant viewers to think of earlier artists, but that they ultimately “cannot account for much of importance” in his painting. That way of presenting the influence of previous artists is typical also of Picasso, who faced a bewildering diversity of choices, passed through a period of eclectic experiments, and arrived in the second decade of the century with a narrow canon of past artists. The young Picasso echoed and copied at least as many artists and styles as Dong studied (for Picasso, the list would include Francisco Torrescasana, Antonio Casanova y Estorach, Isidro Nonell, Santiago Rusiñol, Goya, Gauguin, Redon, Munch, Toulouse-Lautrec, Aubrey Beardsley, Maurice Denis, Whistler, Puvis de Chavannes, Théophile Steinlen, Honoré Daumier, Japanese prints, El Greco, Velázquez, Ingres, Van Gogh, Greek vases, and possibly Bellange, Jacques Callot, Holbein, the portal figures of Chartres, Anders Zorn, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, and the Pre-Raphaelites).

By 1909, however, Picasso had winnowed those influences into one overwhelming example: Cézanne, at times set opposite the Douanier Rousseau.

I am presenting these specific comparisons between Dong Qichang, Wang Wei, and Huang Gongwang on the one hand and Picasso, Cézanne, and Rousseau on the other as illustrations; they are not essential to my argument. Any number of fortuitous correspondences might present themselves if I turned to particular works or searched among the texts for parallel terminology. But the increasing complexity of cultural currents that funneled into cubism is comparable to Dong’s synthesis for several reasons: both artists needed to make radical excisions from a bewildering recent history, both began with an encyclopedic exclusion of academic styles and corresponding exaggeration of anti-academic elements, both cultivated a faux-primitivism and a deliberate lack of finesse, and above all both achieved radical solutions, which continued—and this is especially clear in the case of China—to be debated centuries after their lifetimes.
The followers of Dong, known as the Song-Chiang school, included few artists who “pushed” his innovations (to use that telling modernist word, always signifying anxious interest in an avant-garde). The ways artists addressed Dong’s challenge varied widely. Some were attracted by the idea of “fantastic scenery” in general, without specific understanding of Dong’s accomplishments. There was also an ongoing, parallel development associated with an interest in Northern Song vistas. Today much of that experimentation appears to be involved with a reassessment of the Northern Song “integral image” and it may be that it is a kind of echo, in professional circles, of formal concerns similar to Dong’s. Cheng Zhengkui (1604–1670), a pupil of Dong’s, “specialized” in studies after Huang Gongwang, and even numbered his works to distinguish them—a strategy curiously reminiscent of modern practice, in which artists such as Picasso, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Joseph Beuys, Marcel Duchamp, and Arman (Armand Pierre Fernandez) number their “researches” or “multiples” to underscore their uniformity. The most interesting developments in this context are those that took Dong’s radicalism and assimilated it into the perpetual agendas of academicism. The “Four Wangs” (Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Hui, and Wang Yuanqi) were “consummately skillful” workers whose paintings were often, from the twentieth-century perspective, small variations and homages on the newly defined academicism. The Loudong school, embracing the Four Wangs and painters such as Huang Ting and his pupil Zhang Zongcang, “formed the basis of conservative scholarly painting of the period”; in other words, Dong’s radical works of a century before had already been defused and made to serve a polished academic technique of which he would not have approved. Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715), the grandson of Wang Shimin (1592–1680), shows most clearly the experimentation with form practiced by his grandfather’s teacher Dong, and as a whole the conservative re-description of Dong’s radicalism took place quickly. Paintings by Wang Hui (plate 16) and Wang Shimin (plate 17) tend to be conservative, careful, and impeccably skillful—that is, they are academic. By comparison, even docile paintings by Dong Qichang are more inventive and significantly less bound to formulas. (In Dong’s painting the rocks mushroom and spill over, and it is done with an apparent carelessness about gravity.)

There is an interesting dissimilarity lurking here, which I would like to read as a sign that China has moved further along a certain path than the West. In Western art practice, it is not yet conceivable that Picasso, Braque, and Cézanne might be integrated with immediately preceding academic works—we still perceive them as opposites. Even so, that is exactly what did happen in the Chinese tradition approximately one hundred years after their most radical figure. It seems to me that in the next century we can expect academicism—that is, the engine of art education, which is now the nearly universal vehicle of artist training—to produce “monstrous” hybrids of Jean-Léon Gérôme and Cézanne, Lawrence Alma-Tadema
and Gustave Courbet, Oskar Kokoschka and Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier, Francesco Clemente and Giovanni Boldini. We already had the beginnings of that in pop art and in painters of the 1980s such as Sandro Chia, but they still preserve the essential integrity of the modern. Collage compositions by artists such as David Salle remained just that: more or less jarring or impertinent juxtapositions of styles still perceived to be at odds. Despite the multiplying mixtures of contemporary painting, we cannot yet conceive a full rapprochement between the Académie Française and the early modernists.

I have now reached the period where the parallel implies Chinese art experienced historical perspectives analogous to those perceived by our own century. In the next chapter I will consider what happened in Chinese art up to the end of the Qing Dynasty (1911), at which point Western influence became irresistible in the dual forms of social realism (borrowed, at several removes, from the agenda of the Baroque academies) and late romantic kitsch.\textsuperscript{109}

It is not irrelevant that Chinese art was undermined and then overwhelmed by Western influence; in fact the problem of how to work has been paramount in the minds of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean artists for generations, and it is a profound and nearly insoluble dilemma. It is only in the twenty-first century that the Chinese economic success has prompted a kind of euphoric oblivion about modernism and postmodernism. As I write these lines, in summer 2008, the most successful Chinese painters are newly minted millionaires, and have little interest in weighing themselves against any Western criticism or art theory. Yet aside from the historical oblivion of the current art market, it is still almost impossible to say under what circumstances Western and Eastern modes may be mixed without forcing viewers’ readings to collapse into attempts to name (and thus to separate) those influences.\textsuperscript{110} Artists such as Liu Xiaodong 劉曉東, Feng Zhengjie 傅正杰, Zhang Xiaogang 張曉剛, Feng Fanzhi 曾梵志, along with scores of others—Wei Dong 魏冬, Fu Hong 傅紅, Li Gang 李剛, Zhu Wei 朱偉, Wang Yuping 王玉平, Tan Ping 譚平—experience astonishing, unprecedented sales in a relative vacuum of serious criticism.\textsuperscript{111} Their work could easily be parsed into forms of European, North American, and East Asian modernism and postmodernism, but that is not the issue when they stand so directly for the economic miracle of twenty-first-century China. So their work flourishes in the absence of historically informed criticism, with almost no serious writing to support it.\textsuperscript{112}

The market for work by Zhang Xiaogang and other superstars is regional and national, even though it presents itself as international. It is difficult to conceive how it could remain art historically important unless it develops a critical literature that understands it as part of the mixed histories of Western and Chinese modernisms. At the moment there is a bizarre
disconnect between the euphoria of the art market, in which record-breaking sales are 
routinely recorded in *The New York Times*, and the almost perfect invisibility of serious 
art historical and critical scholarship. A good example of this is an article in *The New York 
Times* for March 30, 2008, which notes that a number of faculty at the Central Academy 
of Fine Arts are millionaires—a situation without parallel in the West. By contrast, “the 
most recent artistic developments and new art school curricula” are missing from the large 
compendium *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*. (Chinese inkbrush landscape 
painting is entirely omitted from newspapers in the West, but that is another subject I will 
return to in the next chapter.) To put the issue in economic terms: *The New York Times* has 
over a million subscribers, and an academic study like this book might reach a thousand 
people—so the current art market is a thousand times stronger than the kinds of critical work 
that might elucidate it.

But all that is for another book. For the purposes of this inquiry, the Western cultural 
invasion of later Chinese art is too anomalous to have a parallel, and it is best to say only 
that some such catastrophe—or to re-describe it in a positive way—some such enrichment 
remains a possible event in any culture’s future. What is more important here is the later 
history of the native tradition before the twentieth century, with its succession of schools 
and historical perspectives.
There are histories with gaps, when centuries pass with no evidence of human activity. The European “dark ages” is the exemplary case, though its darkness is now widely contested and redistributed among a number of different cultures. The mid-third millennium BC in the Middle East, the founding centuries of Rome, and “Dynasty 0” in Egypt are also examples of periods whose sequences may always be inadequately known. Elsewhere and further back in history the gaps grow wider, and the known objects fewer and farther between. In Paleolithic Europe there are so few artifacts dispersed through so many years that it is better to speak of a history of voids, occasionally punctuated by objects. Instead of a history of sequences, broken by a few dark ages, Paleolithic archeology is almost compelled to try to tell a history of darkness, interrupted at long intervals by isolated images.

These problems are endemic to prehistory and early history, both in archeology and art history. What happens at the end of the Ming Dynasty and throughout the Qing is different in kind. Dark ages are times from which objects have disappeared, but the history of Chinese painting from the mid-seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth is replete with images. There is a profusion of painters, schools, and styles, and if art historical accounts were written in proportion to the amount of surviving material, the Qing would hold center stage in Chinese history.

Instead, narratives of Chinese art tend to fall silent after Dong Qichang. There is a traditional sequence that continues with the generations after Dong, including the “individualists” and several groups of “eccentrics,” and then ends around the middle of the eighteenth century. A few alternates give life to that sequence; some accounts also note the influence of Western printmaking and painting, or conclude by nodding in the direction of
Plate 18: Dong Qichang, Mountains in Autumn, detail. Shanghai Museum of Art.
representative twentieth-century painters in order to show that the tradition is still alive. But many scholarly projects effectively end about two hundred years before the present.¹

A short essay by Arthur Danto called “The Shape of Artistic Pasts: East and West” draws a comparison between modernism in China and the West. Danto observes how the past is made of “modes of available influence,” and he proposes that “modernism, alike in China and the West, meant the dismantling of these narratives and reconstitution of our relationship to the past.” Danto defines modernism in terms of historical perspectives: it begins, he says, “with the loss of belief in the defining narratives of one’s culture.”

Danto’s formulation is close to some themes I intend to explore, but there are several reasons I will not be following it here. First, I do not want to broaden the critique to embrace “defining narratives” of all kinds. Many threads weave together in the succession of artistic practices and in their slow unraveling, and the intricacy of the dissolution of painting is what impels me to keep to a somewhat narrow path. I also want to remain open about the historical limits of modernism or of later Chinese painting, so as not to end up in a one-to-one correspondence between a “Chinese modernism” and the Western one. Throughout this book I have been avoiding the phrase “Chinese modernism.” Like the Renaissance, modernism is a term that makes sense in the West, and is both analogic and problematic elsewhere. It would not do to assume China had or might have “a modernism”; it would beg the question of the meaning of such parallels.

Danto’s modernism is notoriously crisply defined. Those who find his work on modernism useful tend to follow his idiosyncratic periodization; those who do not tend to see him as a sign of his generation—as he himself does, when he muses about his experiences in the 1960s.² Other ways of construing the inception of modernism—and there are many—would lead to different conclusions. If modernism is thought of as a movement centered on Cézanne and Picasso for example, then it bears saying that perspectival representation was never merely “overturned” or “discarded” as modernist writers would sometimes have it.³ There is also a paradox lurking in Danto’s assessment, because later Chinese painting often seems marked by an excessive attention to tradition, rather than a break.

There are many differences between the account I am developing and Danto’s, but if we step back far enough, Danto seems right: in both China and the West something went wrong with whatever had been understood as tradition.
To an art historian first encountering the silence that hangs about later Chinese art, the effect is spectacular. The *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* provides an example; it is the German equivalent of the multi-volume Pelican *History of Art*, though many of its texts are longer than their English counterparts. The *Propyläen* volume on China, Korea, and Japan devotes a page and a half to nineteenth-century Chinese painting, and exactly one sentence to the twentieth century: “In the twentieth century all the élan is lost, and in every domain of art one finds only torpor and decline.”

The two words *Erstarrung* (“torpor”) and *Verfall* (“decline”) are very strong: *Erstarrung* also means paralysis or numbing, and *Verfall* is dilapidation, or ruin.

It is impossible, I think, to overestimate the oddity of this elision. Its precise parallel in the West would be a four-hundred-page volume on European art with two pages on painting since Jacques-Louis David, culminating in a single, intensely derogatory sentence on the art of the last hundred years.

Other books on Chinese art offer even less. Sherman Lee’s short, widely read *Chinese Landscape Painting* (originally published in 1954) runs through the Strange Masters of Yangzhou—about whom more in a moment—and concludes:

> With these, after all, not-so-strange masters, one nears the end of creative landscape production…. by 1800 landscape and all painting has run dry in theme, technique, and mood. And so the last of our talented painters, Ch’ien Tu [Qian Du 錢杜], living on to 1844, sets himself a limited scale of dry brushwork within a severely limited size and so is able to keep touch and breath alive—just barely (plate 19)…. The Chinese view of nature was still a valid one and its pictorial expression depended upon other new and individual replies, but exhaustion made no answer.³

I wonder if any more elegiac passage has been written about Chinese painting; it is tiring just reading it, as if there is nothing left to see and no reason to continue trying. Terse and enthusiastic as it often is, *Chinese Landscape Painting* ends by falling asleep: the author’s listless eye closes at the end of the last line, which is also the end of the book.

Lee’s *History of Far Eastern Art* (fifth edition, 1994), the major one-volume textbook available for undergraduate teaching, also ends around 1840 with no further explanation. He
provides a comparative timeline of art in China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, India, Indonesia, and “the West,” which only goes as far as the mid-nineteenth century. It is tempting to read some significance into the fact that the last entry under the column for “the West” is Postimpressionism, as if Western painting also ended a hundred years ago.\[6\]

Nor has the situation changed in recent years. The art historian Ho Ch’uan-hsing ends a short summary of Qing painting with a page on the “Painters of Yangzhou” (the “Eight Strange Masters”) and one on the “late Qing Paleographic School”—painters such as Wu Changshuo 吳昌碩 (1844–1927) who revived archaic calligraphic techniques.\[7\] Ho’s account does not mention painting between the mid-eighteenth century and the late nineteenth, even though its purpose is to survey the entire Qing Dynasty. (He does say, in a typical gesture, that the period witnessed “an irreversible political decline.”)\[8\]

Wen Fong’s sequence of naturalistic representation, which I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, pays little attention to developments after Dong Qichang.\[9\] His book Beyond Representation is a history of Chinese painting from the eighth to the fourteenth century, and so it is under no obligation to speak about the later Ming or Qing (as Lee’s text is). But two paragraphs before the end of the 549-page volume, Wen Fong injects a virulent judgment into an otherwise carefully modulated account: “And finally, during the Qing dynasty, stultifying and lifeless imitation became a way of art.”\[10\]

Could a volume on European painting end with the sentence “And finally, after 1820 painting became stultified and lifeless”? Wen Fong’s judgment is not driven by the narrative that precedes it—no mention of the Qing is even necessary, given the text’s concerns up to that last page—and it does not function to round out the narrative, or to bring it to a provisional conclusion. Instead it implants in the reader’s mind a vision of a rich tradition that suddenly and inexplicably collapses.

If the Qing eclipse were the result of a universal negative judgment on the part of art historians, that would be strange enough. (It would correspond, in general terms, to the negative valuations of non-European cultures that were once common in art history.) But most writers do not profess opinions about the period; instead their prose just begins to fade, as if it were especially taxing to write about the later Ming. The writing flags, and the descriptions slowly lose energy, as if the historians could not keep their eyes on the pictures. It is less a negative judgment than a kind of torpor. It seems difficult to say anything about the tired, repetitive, formulaic paintings of the late Qing—they look so self-evidently like the typical products of decline (plate 20). This painting, by Dai Xi 戴熙, seems weak even in comparison to the conservative followers of Dong Qichang (see plates 16 and 17).
Plate 20: Dai Xi, Endless Range of Mountains with Dense Forest, detail. 1859. Shanghai Museum of Art.
If negative opinions are uncommon, reflective negative judgments are even less so. Cahill wrote a moving peroration to his *Chinese Painting*, in which he describes how “very sophisticated” aesthetic values replaced simple ones, “awkwardness” was “sublimated into a kind of skill,” and “straightforward feeling” was expressed in “oblique allusions.” Each of these traits is connected to a withdrawal from nature and a growing fascination with what Western art theorists called invention. Most are acceptable and even sought after in modern and postmodern art criticism, but here they are linked with a negative valuation. In a lecture given in 1990, Cahill puts it plainly: “Painting as a whole, after the K’ang-hsi era [Kangxi 康熙, early Qing Dynasty], undergoes a marked decline. To say this once more will annoy those of my colleagues who follow the different-but-just-as-good approach, but it is a conviction…”

Once again the older scholarship beckons, with its apparently outmoded opinions. Like other scholars of his generation, Laurence Binyon thought Chinese art declined after the Song: he did not even want to look at *literati* painting, much less later Ming and Qing art.

On the one hand, that kind of sweeping statement is the product of a prejudice that scholarship has outgrown. But on the other hand, as I have been proposing, it may well be the not-so-distant ancestor of our own blindesses. The latter possibility opens the way to two conclusions: either art historians are gradually curing themselves, and managing to see more and more of the tradition of Chinese landscape painting; or else the tradition as a whole has been and continues to be marked by what appears to be an irreparable decline. Perhaps those who speak ill of Qing painting do so “only by ignorance,” but they may also be following the only available shape of history.

Nor is this a phenomenon that is specific to the *literati* tradition, because the same kinds of apparent decline affect the professional Zhe School painters. At the end of a long study of Ming court painting, in a chapter called “The Disappearance of Academic Craft,” Richard Barnhart spends a few pages on a late regional school he calls the “Min School.” He describes the works as “scribbly, spontaneous, sketchy, and slapdash,” and speculates that “such practices were probably necessitated by economic reality.” As the market for court painting collapsed, painters could only “maintain a minimal standard of living” by “making and selling, say, ten paintings a week.” It is true that the art market was undergoing fundamental changes, and Barnhart also points out how difficult it is to reconstruct many painter’s oeuvres; but it is also curious that his terms and critical descriptions so closely match what is said about *literati* painting. Is the “slapdash” manner of *literati* painting also an economic phenomenon? As it becomes “slapdash,” historians have a more difficult time...
keeping their attention on the works and even Barnhart (who usually tries to see everything, and to hold judgment in suspension as long as possible) flags; the chapter concludes several pages later.

I would go so far as to say that the decline of Chinese painting is subtly present in every narrative. When Fan Kuan’s (c. 960–1030) *Travelers Among Streams and Mountains* is praised, in the context of a general survey of Chinese art, as a “great picture” with an “overwhelming grandeur of conception,” there is the faint but definite impression that later works fail by the same standards. Only one historian I know sees a positive light in the middle Qing, though it is not unqualified: Jung Ying Tsao notes that the period is “not usually considered outstanding,” but might be an “important transitional style” leading to new discoveries.

Recently some writers have taken to simply laying out the material, rather than trying to judge it. Claudia Brown and Ju-Hsi Chou write at length about late Qing painting, without ever defending the interest of the paintings they catalogue; their *Transcending Turmoil* is a large exhibition catalogue, entirely given over to historical summaries, provenance, and translations of colophons. It is as if simply showing the paintings will be enough to overturn the weight of the historical and critical judgments that have gone against them. But in the absence of any advocacy, the result is inevitably more evidence of work that is “not usually considered outstanding.”

Even twentieth-century work that could otherwise be compelling is buried by the downward pull of the traditional narratives. I want to make it clear that there is plenty of interesting twentieth-century Chinese inkbrush painting; the question at hand is the manner in which the existing art historical narratives smother that painting by placing it at the end of a long decline, in a period characterized by overwhelming Western influence. The problem is analogous to the difficulty of praising Detchko Uzunov, which I mentioned in Section 6. He can be praised, but not in such a way that he becomes indispensable in narratives that include the historical antecedents of his work in western Europe. To take a Chinese example: Fu Baoshi (1904–1965) is a strong painter, but he is doubly hidden from narratives of world art: once by the Western narratives I am tracing here, and again by contemporary Chinese criticism which denies—I think absurdly—that he was influenced by Western painting (plate 21).

What I have written in these last sections may seem too black-and-white. After all there is scholarship that takes nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese landscape painting seriously. Yu-chi Lai’s study of Ren Bonian (1840–1896), while it is not focused on
landscape paintings, is a sympathetic iconographic study of the painter’s responses to the division of Shanghai. But even though she cites Cahill’s opinion of Chen Hongshou’s 陳洪綬 A Tall Pine and Taoist Immortal (1635, Taipei)—namely that it evokes “the absurd world” of Ming society—she does not make use of the larger context of Cahill’s argument or what it implies about Qing Dynasty painting; her citation seems mainly intended to get her own argument going. There is also interesting work by Aida-Yuen Wong, chronicling how twentieth-century literati painting became associated with Western modernism—but her concern is mainly Japanese art.

How are we to understand this passive, often invisible laying-down of narrative? I would not be as surprised if most reactions were like Cahill’s, because then the last two and a half centuries of Chinese painting would simply be poor work—though I would still want to know how such a thing could happen. But it is doubly intriguing when the painting seems to be merely uninteresting, as if artwork could somehow just be affectively neutral, neither good nor bad. Either way the phenomenon has no parallel in the West. The West has the problem of provinces and backwaters (Uzunov’s, for example), and there are many examples of belated work. But western European modernism does not simply sink out of sight: it is strong and central, and its contours are narrowly contested.

*Fifth hypothesis*. The history of Chinese painting has an odd structure. In particular the Ming decline and Qing eclipse have no parallels in the West, and so they may be fundamentally inassimilable.

I am going to oppose that hypothesis to another one, which is its mirror opposite, because the very invisibility of the period makes it the focus of attention. I cannot imagine a reflective reader of Sherman Lee’s books, or of Wen Fong’s, who is not immediately fascinated with the possibility that a major tradition could somehow take such a wrong turn that it calls down the combined wrath and indifference of its major historians.

*Counter-hypothesis*. Late Ming and Qing artists appear to art history as a form of postmodernism.

Some of the most common explanations would have it that later Chinese painting suffered a natural decline. (Sherman Lee’s description implies as much.) Thus William Willetts thinks that “pictorial schemas” in the Qing “degenerate into the most threadbare of clichés,” precipitating the end of the tradition, and Michael Sullivan suggests that the tradition unraveled because Qing painters after the first generation had nothing to rebel against.
Another historian says only that the artists “seemed to have lost contact with any sources of creative energy.”

This is the “biological fallacy,” the notion that historical movements grow and then decline the way people or plants do. It borrows its terms from the arc of human life, and—as Panofsky has demonstrated—it often follows classical Greek and Roman schemata that divide a person’s life into three, four, or five parts. Ideally the Tang or Song would be the vigorous youth, the Yuan the mature man, and the Ming the decrepit old man. No one says as much, of course, but the fallacy is pervasive in history and it fits the reception here as well.

Some Western scholars mix the biological fallacy with a moral judgment in favor of youthfulness. This is more explicit in earlier sources; thus Binyon speaks of “pedantry and conservatism” and “the ingrained weakness of the Chinese genius,” and reserves his highest praise for the “lofty idealism” of the Song. Ernest Fenollosa, too, writes about the degeneration from the “worthy” Song to the “decaying” later dynasties. Usually the fallacy creeps into art histories in the guise of metaphors about death. Arthur Waley’s history ends with Gong Xian (active c. 1655, d. 1689), whom he calls a “tragic master,” whose pictures have a “blank, tomb-like appearance,” and he concludes “hactenus dictum sit de dignitate artis morientis.”

Thinking about this, it helps to ask what the biological fallacy actually explains. Do we understand a period better because it appears as a kind of natural decline? Is Qing art really like old age in any comprehensible fashion? I would rather say that the biological fallacy and its variations are descriptions, solace for a sad ending rather than analysis of the plot.

Among explanations there is Cahill’s argument that the Qing is marked by Western influence. That is chronologically plausible because the first Italian engravings appeared in 1600, and the Qing began in 1644. For some scholars, the influence of Western paintings and prints dilutes the Chinese tradition, and is cause for regret; for others, it is a delicate subject since it subtracts from the value of some Chinese artists. The longest shadow cast by this subject is the possible influence of Western prints on Dong Qichang, a possibility whose remoteness does not make it any less dangerous for a certain understanding of the tradition. Western influence is an interesting subject: it can be so subtle or unlikely that it may not exist (as with Dong Qichang), or so blatant that it produces bizarre hybrids (as with Giuseppe Castiglione, the Jesuit court painter, who put round, fully rendered Western-style horses into inkbrush landscapes). It has proven difficult to tell the story, because Qing artists refracted Western chiaroscuro, perspective, modeling, and anatomy in ways that are unexpected and perhaps even invisible to Western eyes. Yun Shouping 惺壽平, for example, painted scenes that use
Western perspective and chiaroscuro, but his work is so enmeshed in the Chinese tradition—especially, in plate 22, the Southern Song—that it may not even make sense to pry Western from Chinese forms.

Western influence is a large subject, still mostly unexplored, but it may have its limitations in explaining the Qing eclipse. I am not sure I would want to assign the lack of interest in Qing painting to admixtures of Westernness. It seems to me that if Chinese-Italian admixtures were a principal trait of Qing painting, the period would be more interesting to art historians, and more challenging to interpret, than the art that had been made before 1600. Did Western art really only dilute Chinese art, making it flavorless and flat? (And would flavorless, flat painting not be alluring, as it was for Ni Zan?) Or was something else at work?
The many negative terms and acknowledgments of descriptive defeat are balanced, oddly, by a single word: 怪 guài. I take this as another sign of historical anomaly, because it is unusual to collapse a period, or even a generation, onto a single word. Baroque and rococo are well-known examples of derogatory terms that have become empty place-markers for their periods; rocaille means “rock-work” and “Baroque” comes from the name of the painter Federigo Barocci—but no one thinks of rococo art as carved gemstones, or of Baroque art as work done in Barocci’s style. Tenebrism comes to mind as a possible parallel for the centrality of guài (tenebrism names the shadows that crept over paintings after Caravaggio), but the situation is historically unusual and has no clear precedents in earlier Chinese art.

Guài is usually translated as “eccentric,” a word that passes nearly unchanged throughout European scholarship—Exzentriker in German, eccentrici in Italian, les excentriques in French. Encapsulated that way, the word can seem more restricted than it actually is. In Chinese guài means “eccentric,” but also, according to Hans van der Meyden, “strange, rude, outrageous, wonderful, remarkable, unrestrained, extraordinary and uncanny.”

A 怪人 guàirén is an eccentric person. For a Westermer at the beginning of the twenty-first century, those words seem natural, a perfect match for any number of postmodern preoccupations. “Rude,” of course, means “unpolished” or “unsophisticated,” and as such it is a useful term in early modernism. The uncanny had special resonance for late twentieth-century scholarship on surrealism and its postmodern echoes, and it was the subject of a number of studies, for example Hal Foster’s Compulsive Beauty.

Yet despite its immediate appeal and apparent potential as a descriptive term, the word guài also encrypts a negative judgment, as Katharine Burnett has noted. Van der Meyden points out that its locus classicus is in the Confucian Analects: “The Master did not talk about extraordinary things [guài], feats of strength, chaos and spirits.” Whatever positive attributes guài has, it is founded on a negative judgment, and in that respect every synonym and hortatory usage is an attempt at restitution.

It is curious, too, that the word “eccentric” usually appears in quotation marks in English, or in phrases like “so-called eccentrics.” It becomes a central term of criticism (a critical criterion, 批評標準 pīpíng biāozhǔn) at the same time that it has to be bracketed in scare quotes. That might be understood as an acknowledgment that the painters in question were not merely eccentrics; but it also implies that they were really not eccentrics—after all, how could nearly three hundred years’ worth of painters all have been eccentrics? But if the “eccentrics” were not eccentrics, then why do we still follow the nineteenth-century custom of calling them eccentrics? As I read it, the ongoing editorial decision to put “eccentrics” in quotation marks is a sign of indecision. It can be especially odd to see “eccentric” in quotation marks when the artists are being described as eccentrics. The twentieth-century artist C.C. Wang 王紀千 occasionally painted in the manner of the Yangzhou eccentrics,
even though he thought it was “like singing too fast.” Jerome Silbergeld’s account of C.C. Wang follows the typographic convention and puts “eccentrics” in quotation marks, creating a strange effect: a traditional twentieth-century painter tries a brief exercise in eccentricity by copying “eccentrics.”34 Like the period they typify, the eccentrics both are and are not worthy of serious attention.

Another explanation for the state of later Chinese painting is the long shadow cast by Dong Qichang. Richard Barnhart and others have suggested that we are still under the spell of Dong’s historiography, and therefore unable to “value professional painting over wénrén painting, to see the merit in later painters who rejected Dong’s values.” From Barnhart’s point of view “we have been … thoroughly brain-washed by a handful of critics,” and “it is time to consider their pervasive and destructive influence.” It seems, for example, that the fact Dong coined the phrase “Zhe School” (to describe professional and court painters) must be related to the fact that Zhe School painting is still undervalued. The force of Dong’s formulation is also brought home by the fact that it has only recently seemed possible to assert that no “school” even existed in an academic sense.35 Dong’s influence can then be called upon to explain the ongoing relative neglect of later Ming and Qing painting, since—as Eugene Wang puts it—Dong’s theories posit “an art-historical lineage with [Dong] himself as the ultimate end of history.”36

Perhaps, then, we are faced with a lingering judgment, which has crept into Chinese historiography and even infected the painters themselves. If so, Barnhart would be right that whatever imbalance remains in Cahill’s descriptions is due to Dong’s influence; but the subject is a tricky one, because Cahill spends considerable time looking at professional painting of the kind Dong disparaged. Late twentieth-century scholarship (especially Barnhart’s) shows that such works are far from invisible, and the lingering negative judgments in some texts may not be as significant as the pages of attention that are being lavished on Zhe School painting, Buddhist painting, and other neglected forms.

I say may not, because Barnhart is also right to go on insisting that even the most compelling description can be effectively undermined by the gentlest negative judgment. Nor will the current work on “less important” genres and artists have lasting historiographic force unless it comes to terms with the original and ongoing imbalance between privileged and excluded styles. If we imagine Dong’s doctrines as the skeletal structure of a building, then the current work on professional artists may be less a matter of rebuilding than of painting and embellishing what is already in place.
But the principal reason I hesitate to accept the idea that Dong Qichang and the theorists who followed are responsible for the Qing eclipse is the amount of time that has passed since Dong died: over three centuries. Until very recently, Dong’s theories seemed unanswerable, and his painting unimpeachable. Yet there is a distinction to be made between acknowledging the unarguable nature of some conceptual systems, and making strong local judgments against certain parts of a system. Even if the very idea of Chinese landscape painting is effectively underwritten by Dong and his followers, and even if any discourse about Chinese landscape painting effectively speaks Dong’s language, it is still possible to say—however ineffectually—that he is wrong. Dong’s theories cannot be that unanswerable if the first generations of Western scholars, from Ernest Fenollosa to Laurence Binyon, managed to ignore him almost completely, or if Ludwig Bachhofer could call him an “execrable dilettante.”

The ubiquitous word “eccentric” is an initial sign that we experience Ming and Qing painting as a form of modernism. A more substantial reason is the eclipse itself. Art that cannot be represented in terms of previous art, that breaks the tradition in such a way that it appears at first invisible, that inverts values so effectively that it appears “unskilled,” that sends historians scrambling for terms when their vocabulary fails, that seems at least for a generation or two not to exist—all these are markers of Western modernism from the Impressionists onward.

In one sense it is clear that the individualists and eccentrics were only carrying on the conversation of Chinese painting. (As Jan Fontein puts it, eccentricity is “a form of traditionalism,” and the admiration and wonder aroused by eccentrics is nothing more than the “unconventional aspect of a very old convention.”) But at the same time the eccentrics seemed to be doing it badly, or in a misguided way. The first critics of Impressionism and Postimpressionism reacted similarly: they knew that painting was at issue, but not how it was at issue, and Postimpressionist works were for a time effectively invisible to criticism. In the late Ming and in early modernism the very structure of historical schools and styles seemed in danger of collapse, so that painters had to be become “individualists,” or (in the West) “independents.”

Then came a situation analogous with late twentieth-century pluralism, which has produced a startlingly large number of movements (as witness the table of contents in any textbook of twentieth-century art) and a corresponding increase in individuals who do not entirely fit those movements. The Qing has at least as many “isms” as the twentieth century, although they are named differently—usually by place or number. There are the “Four
Masters of Anhui,” “The Eight Masters of Nanking,” “The Eight Masters of Chin-ling,” “The Eight Strange Masters of Yangzhou,” “The Four Small Wangs,” “The Four Jens,” “The New Academy School,” “The New Literati,” “The School of Shanghai,” and so forth. (To some extent Chinese writers have always organized their history in this fashion, but most groupings—for instance the Yuan Four Talents of Souchou—are later coinages.)

The eclipse itself, therefore, is another piece of evidence that we may be responding to later Chinese painting as a form of modernist rebellion. The eclipse is more than just a symptom of decline (though conservative critics of Western art continue to present modernism in those terms); it is a practice that has achieved such a profound critique of what has gone before that it seems at first to be a gap or a hole in history rather than an ordinary revolution or renascence.

As the Qing progressed schools became shorter-lived, individualists and eccentrics more prominent, and styles more diverse. It was an unstable ecology in which competition forced diversification. Each artist needed to accentuate the markers of his style in order to survive. Eccentrics and more-or-less independent masters sometimes experienced the field of painting as a network of narrow paths: that is, instead of developing broadly referential, catholic styles, they embarked in specific directions, carefully restricting and underscoring their innovations. This led to a constriction and simplification of the crystallized style definitions that the Yuan artists had first given to artists of the Tang and Song.

In the Qing, the traits by which styles were known were sometimes further limited to those susceptible of hyperbole. Thus Ni Zan’s skeletal articulations continued to be important, while his sense of what we call “plasticity” and three-dimensionality were de-emphasized or altered. This restriction of personal style did not always mean that artists worked in only one style, but rather that they chose eclectically among a number of possibilities, each strongly emphasized and narrowed. The same happened in professional painting; in Barnhart’s words, sixteenth-century Min School works are “uniformly slapdash and sketchy, given to dramatic gestures of brush and ink, like an exaggerated stage performance of something that had once been quite restrained.”

In Cahill’s formulation, style had become idea: that is, the artists sought and adopted styles in the way in which ideas have been transmitted in the West, as essential and sometimes exclusive carriers of meaning. In broad terms, this inflated economy of styles marks the current art world in the West, where it is embraced under the name “pluralism” and seen as a healthy alternative to the apparently restrictive norms of earlier art.
Examples are available in the four principal “priest-hermit-individualists” (Bada Shanren, Gong Xian, Shi Tao (Yuanji 石濤), and Kuncan); in the nearly contemporaneous “Four Masters of Anhui” (Hong Ren 弘仁, Xiao Yuncong 蕭雲從, Zha Shibiao 查士標, Mei Qing 梅清, along with Dai Xiaoben 戴孝本); and in the slightly later “Eight Masters of Nanjing” (including Fan Qi 樊圻, Ye Xin 葉欣, Gao Cen 高岑, Wu Hong 吳宏, and Gong Xian) and “Eight Strange Masters (or Eccentrics) of Yangzhou” (including Hua Yan 華岩, Jin Nong 金農, Huang Shen 黃慎, Li Shan 李鳝, Luo Ping 羅聘, Zheng Xie 鄭燮, and Gao Xiang 高翔).43

Mei Qing 梅清 (1623–1697), for instance, “invented some six or eight motifs and varied them ad infinitum.”44 One of his “motifs” is a “rolling, rococo movement” “not unlike” Fragonard. Jin Nong’s 金農 (1687–1764) compositions were called “most peculiar” and “quite startling,”45 but at the same time they paid for their eccentricity by a restriction on versatility; to one scholar, the “Eight Strange Masters” are somewhat predictable since “the scope of their painting themes was narrow.”46 Huang Shen 黃慎 (1687–1768) had an “exaggerated,” “nervous, flying touch,” which “evidently puzzled his countrymen who called him ‘too extravagant.’”47 The traces of his beginning in Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, and Wu Zhen have been almost burned away in his fiery, skittish brushwork.48 Other artists took even more extreme measures. Gao Qipei 高其佩 (1660–1734) is famous for painting with his fingernails: early in the day, they were sharp and suitable for fine painting, and later they were good for “broad stains and splashes” in the pomo 漩墨 technique.48

I think this is a familiar picture. Contemporary Western art observes a similar economy in which artists adopt strategies that are at once extreme and narrow. If I name a representative list of late twentieth-century artists—say, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Christian Boltanski, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Annette Messager, Christo, Francesco Clemente, Damien Hirst, Wolfgang Laib, and Sigmar Polke—then what comes to mind, at least initially, is each artist’s signature strategy. Jenny Holzer’s LCD displays, Barbara Kruger’s National Enquirer font, Wolfgang Laib’s piles of pollen, Damien Hirst’s cows in formaldehyde, Sigmar Polke’s fugitive chemicals—those are the visual strategies that produce the effect of pluralism. Each is narrow in the sense that it is specific to the artist, and extreme in the sense that it is strongly different from any other strategy.

This is not to say that the Western artists are necessarily producing impoverished work—what are called “one liners” or “one-note works.” It may take time to spell out the actual relation between a given style and the fuller range of a work’s meaning, and there is no necessary correlation between styles that are instantly recognizable and works that are overly simple. Postmodernism, understood this way, is not a shrinkage of meaning as much as an attenuation of meaning: meaning is differently shaped than it had been.
Not all elements of the crystallized style definitions were susceptible to the kind of hyperbole that the Chinese artists desired. The class of traits amenable to hyperbole includes those that can be taken from already crystallized versions of the styles of historical figures, as well as those that can be multiplied until they become the single strategy for an entire painting, or an entire lifetime’s work.

Three of the most prominent candidates were the anatomizing of Ni Zan, the archaizing of Zhao Mengfu, and the structural inventions of Dong Qichang. Hongren (1610–1664), for instance, practiced a “bare bones” style based on the style of Xiao Yuncong, but derived theoretically from Zhao Mengfu’s strategy in relation to his past: “Hongren does to Xiao Yuncong’s style what Zhao Mengfu did to Li Cheng’s…. He depletes the color and flesh and leaves only the bare bones.” The “gentle renunciation” and “mournful loneliness” that have been seen in his works are a benefit of the style: exaggerate the style of Ni Zan, and you increase the pathos of the result (see plate 12). The “spindly trees” in Hongren’s paintings almost crackle with brittleness, and the whole is airless and blanched. Looking from a Hongren to a Ni Zan is a relief, a return to actual water and palpable rock.

The style that is “an essence of an essence, refined to the breaking point and always on the verge of disappearance” became a stock-in-trade for later painters. Zha Shibiao (1615–1698), another of the “Four Masters of Anhui,” practiced a “global mannerism,” a hyperbolic extension of Wu Zhen’s wet brush technique. In some paintings he let the wet brush become flaccid and weak, in distant emulation of Huang Gongwang’s “insistently repeated brushstrokes” (plate 23). In others, he expanded the style nearly into a “full [Western] water-color technique.” Tai Pen-hsiao, “fifth” of the Four Masters of Anhui, sometimes painted in very dry strokes, in an exaggeration of his contemporary Gong Xian’s recommendation. Man in Cave pictures a dry, crumbling world, and it is painted in a deliberately feeble and trembling manner. (It shows a mountainside, with two cut-away views into caves. In the lower center, a man sits meditating under milky stalactites.)

The Four (or five) Masters of Anhui are a typical group; they splayed themselves into as many styles as they could manage: very dry, very wet, very skeletal, very florid, very slow, very fast. Ni Zan, Zhao Mengfu, and Dong Qichang are touchstones for this kind of art because they lend themselves—for reasons that have yet to be analyzed—to hyperbole.
Western images may be another example of strategies that were “susceptible of hyperbole.” Given the recorded reactions to Western images, it is reasonable to assume that prints appeared as objects already strongly marked by immoderate visual strategies. Chiaroscuro, in particular, might well have looked like an “eccentric” strategy akin to others that were already in play.

To Western eyes, early landscapes by Gong Xian are “strange, silent” and “ominous,” and they may owe those qualities to a personal encounter with Western chiaroscuro (plate 24). That possibility, if true, strengthens the likelihood that Dong Qichang learned from Western engravings, since Gong’s forms can sometimes be read as details of Dong Qichang’s “chiaroscuro” modeling. (Gong’s leaden “close-ups” are also a form of exaggeration, since their portentous lugubriousness is made possible by the perception that Dong’s forms could be anatomized or “magnified” into a compositional principle.)

Other exaggerated mannerisms spring from iconographic conventions. Bada Shanren (born as Zhu Da, 1626–1705) is an instance of the expansion of pictorial wit and irony—not to mention the interest in versions of the “artistic temperament”—that also characterizes Western art since the late Middle Ages. As far back as Wu Zhen, elements of older traditions (especially the formulaic architecture inherited from the Northern Song) had been treated lightly or humorously by archaists. Bada Shanren’s painting explores the possibility that many other forms might be susceptible to ironic “mistreatment.” The fact
that scholars can disagree on assessments of his wobbly birds and fish (some seeing them as humorous, others as “angry-looking”)60 is readily comprehensible given the hyperbolic nature of his wit (plate 25).


The possible role of Western art, and the rise of humorous versions of themes that were once serious, are also signs that history itself was beginning to lose some of its overwhelming weight. The “eccentric” artists did not feel the pressure to align themselves with one or another style that preoccupied artists from Zhao Mengfu to Dong Qichang. History seemed more open, less fraught, more immediately and widely accessible. These are again hallmarks of postmodernism. From a postmodern perspective, history is no longer comprised of schools and styles that come up out of the distant past like mountain ranges. A postmodern artist is more free to go where he pleases, and take “shards” or “fragments” from any artist’s work, from any period.61 Ancient artists are as “close” as recent ones, and any mistake or forgotten convention can be exhumed and pressed into service for the next round of styles.

When historical styles lose their force, and negotiating or rewriting the past ceases to be a pressing issue for the formation of new modes of working, then history itself begins to seem a little distant and irrelevant. Shitao 石濬 (1642–1718), the more radical of the “Two Stones,” Shiqi and Shitao (石 shǐh means “stone”), marked his independence from history by
a preference for the album leaf format, experimentation with color, and a loose, “Western,” “no-method” brushstroke (plate 26). It may be that those strongly circumscribed sources of inspiration, and the telescoped sense of the past they entail, contributed to his sense that he was free of history, with no predecessors and no followers. This, too, is characteristic of recent Western art, in which the world of the Renaissance and its pictorial concepts is largely divorced from current concerns, and in which artists make statements declaring their absolute independence from aspects of the past. In the 1980s, Barbara Kruger’s dissociation of herself from the Western male tradition of “genius” is an example. Postmodern artists (and art historians) often lack interest in the art of previous centuries, and many lack curiosity about the historical anomaly of their lack of interest.

That is enough background to enable me to put the argument together. The Qing eclipse and its hyperbolic economy, I think, are both modeled with interesting precision by a particular Western theory about a possible end-state of history. The theory draws an equation between a prevalent construction of postmodernism and a problem in chess called the “endgame,” and it begins with slightly earlier scholarship on the affinity between chess-playing and economies of artistic production.

In art history the chess model surfaces first in Hubert Damisch’s *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* (*Cadmium Yellow Window*), a book of essays published in 1984. Damisch draws a parallel between playing chess and playing the game of art at any given moment, or in any given milieu. He distinguishes between the “match” or individual game, which he calls the *partie*, and the game itself, in its immutable rules and possibilities, which he calls the “game of painting” (*jeu “Peinture”*). The slight ambiguity between a match and a single game is tolerated because Damisch means to distinguish between plays that are made at particular historical moments, in particular conditions, and play that takes place continuously, since it is the name for the conditions and rules under which chess makes sense.

One of the problems this makes clear is the difference between playing a game of painting, and playing the game of Painting. The Abstract Expressionists may have believed they were “returning to the very foundations of the game, to its immediate, constitutive given terms,” even though what they made can be understood as the result of a particular game, a match in which certain locally meaningful problems were being worked out within a field of limited possibilities. Occasionally it is also helpful to distinguish a match from a sequence of games within it. Thus Damisch speaks of the “match” of abstraction, which has been underway since shortly after the turn of the century, and the Abstract Expressionists’ “games” begun fifty years after the match was first joined. So parties are either individual
Plate 26: Shitao, Gathering in the Western Garden, detail. Shanghai Museum of Art.
games or matches, though in other contexts Damisch calls them “plays” (in English), implying that a painter’s works might be moves within a game rather than a game itself. The slight slippage is important in putting Damisch’s argument to work. As it stands in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, the chess metaphor is a way of thinking about two levels of play: one, the game apparently set in place by the medium itself; the other, a series of games apparently set in motion by individuals, schools, styles, and other historically contingent agents. The difference is fictional, but it gives a name to a distinction that is usually played out unnoticed, as if it were just part of the given conditions, the *données*, of art.

Imagining art history as a chess game is initially a way of avoiding Hegelian historical sequences and replacing them with a combinatoric model that has no single inexorable direction. Another advantage of the model is that it pictures a work (or an artist, or school, or period) as an event bounded by certain rules. Like a chess piece, an artist’s work can move only in its neighborhood, and only in accord with capacities that are taken to be effectively inbuilt and unchangeable. (A knight, for example, cannot start moving like a bishop.) For that reason Damisch likes to speak about a “field” (*champ*) or “place” (*lieu*) where the game is played, moving at one moment right or left, forward or backward, but never merely or continuously *forward* as Hegel would have it.

Yve-Alain Bois puts a slightly different stress on these ideas when he presents them (in the form of a review of Damisch’s *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*) in his *Painting as Model*. There Damisch’s work is given a powerful, sympathetic reading, and set out as four “models” for asking fundamental questions about the object and the act of painting. Bois calls the fourth model “strategic,” and suggests it was born from Damisch’s interpretation of Barnett Newman’s apparently careless remark that “everything he had been able to do had meaning only in relation to Pollock’s work and against it.” The difference between Bois’s etiology and Damisch’s Wittgensteinian interest is slight—the two are compatible, in this context—but also decisive, because it reorients the chess metaphor as a question of personal decisions and reactions. “A work has significance,” Bois glosses, following Claude Lévi-Strauss’s account of masks, “first by what it is not and what it opposes.” It is the oppositions, then, that work to create new configurations, new strategic opportunities, and ultimately new “matches.” As I read it, Damisch’s account is more neutral, more concerned (as a chess master might be) with the configurations and patterns on the board. Bois’s story is a little more engaged, in chess terms more concerned with offense and defense, with possibilities taken up and declined.
“Endgame” is a chess player’s term, and I want to spend a few moments on its normative meaning in order to set the chess player’s understanding alongside the model that has been elaborated in art theory.

A chess game becomes an endgame when there are so few pieces left that it is unclear whether or not either player can bring the game to a conclusion. There are situations in chess where neither player can force a mate, and situations in which neither player can force a draw. In such cases one player might want to continue playing, in the hope—perhaps misguided—that an end might present itself, and the other player would then be compelled to continue without such an illusion, or else resign out of sheer lack of interest or fatigue. Endgame theories in chess are devoted to the conditions under which it is possible to force a mate or a draw, and in chess rules a game is officially a draw if neither player can force a solution in less than fifty moves.

Actual chess, therefore, puts limits on the endlessness that haunts visual theorists when they talk about “endgame art.” As it was described by artists such as Sherrie Levine in the late 1980s, the endgame condition is one of apparently endless reshuffling of possibilities that have been tried many times before. As Levine says, “the world is filled to suffocating” with images, so there is no longer any meaning in pretending that originality is possible.

The oppressive, anemic sense of the endgame was captured decades before endgame theory by Samuel Beckett, whose novel *Murphy* begins with the wonderful depressing line: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.” Murphy, the protagonist, carries “somehow on” as Beckett himself did, thinking increasingly about nothing except the mechanisms of motion and their extension into the infinite future. The interminable waiting for Godot, and the wavering, eternal surveillance in his masterpiece *Ill Seen Ill Said* are also pictures of the endgame: its mood is antihistorical, quietist, pessimist, and always dully aware of its impossibility, as if the protagonist is suffering through a perpetual low-level siege.

Even though it has not been an active part of art theory since the early 1990s, the endgame model is tempting; to some extent it trapped Beckett, despite his fierce analysis of his own motives and moods, into a kind of strangulated attention on the absence of onward motion in works like *Nohow On*. It meshes with everyday studio talk when artists speak about their latest “strategies” and “moves,” and the “stances” they take in relation to various
ephemeral issues and styles. The complicity between the historical understanding current
in postmodernism and the notion of the endgame may be deeper than what we can so far
understand. Yet if the endgame is to be made explicit and taken as a model, it may have
several specific limitations.

In particular I wonder if the endgame, and the “jeu ‘Peinture’” more generally, can
do more than stave off the Hegelian sequence and the attendant notion that the “game of
painting” somehow is, was, or should be moving forward. In the past I have argued that an
anti-historicist model may not be an effective method of overturning Hegelian certainties,
which have a tendency to resurface in ever more devious forms; but at least the endgame
provides a new conceptual field in which a non-Hegelian art might seem to thrive.24 One of the
cracks in the anti-Hegelian armor of the endgame is the drive to win, and the question of the
ultimate aim of any one move. In Damisch’s model, the interest is more formal or structural,
the way a player in the game Go is supposed to take pleasure in the shifting configurations of
the board as the game develops. In Bois’s account, the slightly greater emphasis on making
moves, especially in order to oppose other moves, also presses the question of purpose. A
chess player’s purpose, after all, is to trap pieces, that is, to create a condition in which the
opposing player is petrified. The game of Go is even more ruthless, because its players aim
to crowd their opponents so closely that they die. Actual endgames are played on a nearly
empty field, but metaphorical ones are played on very crowded fields.

So I would rather describe the endgame as a condition in which two senses of history
batter against one another: from one perspective forward movement seems impossible, and
each new move looks like it has been made many times before; but for that very reason the
slightest move forward is the object of intense interest, and nearly every thought is directed
at the faint possibility that something might change decisively. Such a condition encourages
the most virulent forms of competition. In the game of Go, the very same players who
are supposed to be disinterestedly contemplating the unfolding patterns of the board are
also “secretly” competing against one another. Go is filled to suffocating with metaphors
of suffocation, as players build walls of stone around their opponents’ pieces in hopes of
cutting off their avenues of escape and ultimately even the air they breathe.

Another limitation of the endgame, and to the chess metaphor in general, is brought out
by its affinities with Wittgenstein’s model of language games. Ultimately Damisch’s source
for the idea of a game is Wittgenstein, and he has allied himself with Wittgenstein especially
in Traité du Trait, Tractatus tractus, which I introduced in Section 24. In Damisch’s book
the early Wittgenstein becomes the ironic model for a meditation on “games” of painting
very much akin to the later Wittgenstein’s notion of “language games.” As I read it, Damisch
intends the Traité du trait to be ironically Wittgensteinian, especially because he avoids
the famous proposition 7.0 from Wittgenstein’s Tractatus (the one that declares the place
of silence “in” philosophy). At the same time Damisch is interested in playing with the
“games” of marking (traits), including the Chinese “game.” For Wittgenstein, the point of
imagining or isolating a game is to elucidate the sense and function of such ideas as truth, grammar, and certainty—in other words, a game is an occasion for clarification. Here I read a deep cleft between Damisch and Wittgenstein, since I find that for Damisch art historical games are of interest largely because they avoid the clarity of the Hegelian machinery. Their complexity matters as much as their precise configuration. This orientation helps Damisch remain as long as possible outside the ordinary machinery of art history, with its sequences, traditions, and influences, but it also means he has to keep actual gaming at arm’s length.

The endgame metaphor makes good sense of a number of traits of Qing painting. It explains the artists’ ongoing attempts to crystallize the past or to mine it for recoverable fragments of styles, because those actions imply that history itself is somehow broken. With the sequence of periods no longer in operation, any past accomplishment can be appropriated and used to energize a work, even if its effect wears off almost immediately. The intermittent awareness of the ongoing ending of a tradition also explains the increasing narrowness of artists’ strategies, and their brilliance against the background of dull repetitions; if the “game” is reduced to a repetitious shuffling of pieces, a move needs to be sharp and focused in order to stand out.

These signs are also the symptoms of kitsch, and they are among the classic traits of the avant-garde as it has been understood since the early fourteenth century. As the philosopher Karsten Harries once argued, a public immured in kitsch makes accelerating demands for pleasure, and eventually fails to even recognize strategies once thought to be outrageous. Its jaded eye sees less and less, until it is attracted only by the most spectacular and shortest-lived phenomena. The avant-garde could be described in similar terms; Gombrich has done so in speaking about the “leaven of criticism” in Renaissance art, and how it impelled artists to take increasingly long strides with each new work.

Both kitsch and the avant-garde can also be defined as movements with clear beginnings and no obvious endings short of political and ideological metamorphosis (or, in Damisch’s terms, short of the inception of a new game). The endgame probably cannot be understood apart from kitsch or the origins of the avant-garde, because it borrows ideas from both. But it has a peculiarity that suits postmodernism especially well, and that is its relative lack of change over time. It is a kind of steady-state condition that is not prone to inflation; the anxiety in an endgame art is that the play might remain as it is forever, but the anxiety in kitsch is that things might not be able to move fast enough.
Especially as it is articulated by artists such as Sherrie Levine, the endgame raises a very interesting possibility, one which casts a dim light on postmodernism’s sense of itself: by its nature, an endgame is taken to be potentially endless, and therefore, to the extent that postmodernism is experienced as an “endgame art,” postmodernism itself may not have an end. A given “game” of postmodern painting might well come to an end, and even the game of painting itself might end (as Arthur Danto, Joseph Kosuth, and others have said), but postmodernism itself may never reach a conclusion.

Generally my sense of the literature is that postmodernism is imagined as a historical period, and that we are living through a fin de siècle of multiple possibilities that will somehow be subsumed under a solidly codified postmodernism or else decisively replaced by whatever is to come. In place of this diffident meliorism, the apparent endlessness of the Qing eclipse (it was interrupted only by the Revolution, and in inkbrush painting it is still underway) implies a different future for the Western game of painting. Perhaps—not least because we may believe it ourselves—our next few centuries will see more of the same hyperbole. Perhaps, in other words, the endgame is in fact interminable, and postmodernism in the sense I have sketched it is not only a period but a state that comes after periods. In this respect Chinese painting is indeed an object lesson, a reminder that our post-Renaissance culture is still young, and that a rich ongoing disintegration may await us “after” postmodernism—at least until we can manage to tell ourselves other kinds of stories.

Abstract as this possibility is, wisps of it are in the air whenever the game metaphor is at work. It hints that postmodernism may be a different kind of concept than modernism, and not just the name of a period that follows modernism. The Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the baroque, neoclassicism, Romanticism, and even modernism would be names of periods, as they have always been taken to be; and they would be susceptible as ever to Hegelian notions of sequence and progress. Postmodernism, however, might be different: it could be the name of the “period” that arrives when the sequence of historical periods has played itself out. It was certainly that way in Beckett’s mind: his condition was interminable by definition—or more exactly, it was indefinably interminable.

(Again, I am not concerned here with what happened outside landscape painting since the Revolution, or what has happened in the last ten years with China’s exponentially growing economy. The increasing internationalism of twentieth-century Chinese oil painting (at first understood as a Western practice, 油画 yóu huà), and the euphoria of the current art market, are entirely separate questions from the lingering, moribund, marginal, but stubbornly persistent tradition of historically informed inkbrush landscape painting. It is still practiced in Chinese art academies, and its artists are represented by galleries worldwide; but in comparison to the superstars of the Chinese art market, landscape painting is barely noticed.)
The best writing on the endgame was intimately related to the dawning—and necessarily incomplete—understanding that the endless listlessness is also a form of dying. Yve-Alain Bois sees the endgame as a Freudian work of mourning, in which painting slowly recognizes its investment in “millenarianist” hopes and turns to the slow business of “working through the end of painting.” Louis Marin has also written about painting and mourning, and Derrida has taken mourning as the principal theme in Marin’s work. In Les fins de la peinture René Déморis asks about painting’s aims, its intentions and ends, and though he recognizes that the nature of painting itself enjoins these questions, and that there can be no satisfactory answer, it might be argued that his questions have the urgency and persistence that comes from the long Western expectation that periods do end. This is where metaphors of exhaustion and decline, so common in accounts of Qing painting, meet Western counterparts in a theory about a slowly gathering sense of impending—but indefinitely postponed—death.

To sum up: the later history of Chinese landscape painting is marked by brief, eye-catching, and idiosyncratic schools, and artists distinguished by single hypertrophied traits or monomaniacally repeated tricks. In landscape painting, China’s past three centuries have seen a continual simplification of narratives of the past, together with a disintegration of historical connectedness. Their artists have had to try ever harder to obtain notice, resulting in an economy of improvised ideals, idiosyncrasy, exaggeration, and eccentricity, and a concomitant shift away from conventional canons, normative ideals, serious purpose, and prolonged labor on single works.

All this is so, I think, despite the fact that inkbrush landscape painting continued throughout the later Qing and the Republic, and is practiced today in a very wide range of styles. Among the best studies of the first half of the twentieth century is Jason Kuo’s Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Pin-hung’s Late Work. Huang Binhong 黃賓虹 (1864–1955) felt himself to be part of the tradition of Chinese landscape painting that goes back to Li Cheng and Fan Kuan, and Kuo makes a sensitive analysis of what it meant to feel that long tradition as a living one that could still exert pressure on the present. A lengthy essay-review by An-yi Pan points out the increasingly problematic nature of traditional Chinese landscape painting in the years leading up to mid-century. By the 1960s literati landscape painting was in a paradoxical position: enriched by centuries of critical attention, articulated in Western-style narratives, and impoverished by its increasingly voiceless, marginal position in contemporary art. The literature on twentieth-century inkbrush landscape painting can be dense with historical meaning, but nearly devoid of historical significance. It is not promoted or demanded on the international
art market. In an email, the Czech art historian Ladislav Kesner ruminated on this: “Why,” he asked, “is contemporary landscape painting of Chinese authors not taken as seriously (in fact, often is totally excluded) from the circle of most interesting contemporary Chinese art? Take, as an example the recently published China Art Book, which claims to offer the eighty ‘most important contemporary Chinese artists.’ There is only one landscape painter there, Qiu Shihua (邱世華).” Kesner wonders “why the best contemporary landscape painters, people like C.C. Wang or Wucius Wong 王無邪, or even Chang Jin 常進 or Zhuge 朱戈 — to name some very different artists—who without question make splendid, complex and beautiful works of art, are never named among the … most important persons of global art scene?” Among the many possible answers to Kesner’s question, there is the simple matter of nationalism: landscape painting in general is excluded from international exhibitions, so the absence of the Chinese landscape painting is unexceptional. Inkbrush painting in the literati tradition has especially stale associations; experimental work by artists like Wenda Gu 谷文達 and Xu Bing 徐冰 appears much more viable as an international representation of China. There are astonishingly accomplished painters in the inkbrush tradition, but their accomplishments have increasingly failed to compel wide attention. With just a few exceptions, such as Jerome Silbergeld’s book on Li Huasheng 李華生 (b. 1944), doctoral dissertations and essays are still the norm for literati painters in the last hundred years. The voices of historians, critics, and artists become intensely eloquent, and at the same time they fade until they are nearly inaudible, precisely because the historical tradition that accounts for them is pre-eminently Western, and it is grounded on the deliquescence of the tradition.

The Chinese pluralism did not heal or define itself, and in the second half of the twentieth century the legacy of its diffuse confusion was incorporated into socialist realism, and then pop and other Western currents. An endless lingering “postmodernism” was the lot of Chinese painting before outside currents disrupted their sense of the problems and purposes of art. Despite vigilant and acute self-reflection regarding historical position and meaning (a trait shared by postmodern theory in the West) Chinese landscape painters did not imagine that they were in the midst of anything quantitatively different than the succession of styles and schools that comprised art history as they knew it.

Postmodernism in both cultures can be re-described as an interminable final stage produced and defined by the very history that appears to say it must be otherwise—that is, the history that has always defined itself by dynasties or periods, manners or styles, artists or schools. Even the monotony of later Qing art makes sense in this model: as the years wear on, the most strident voices sink into the background noise, and the most outrageous mixtures of styles blend into a uniform grey. Painting is still going, but as Sherman Lee says, exhaustion has made no answer.
That is the end of the comparison of historical perspectives. I believe in what I have just written, and I think it is an interesting way to think about the Qing eclipse and about some aspects of postmodernism.

And yet.

And yet everything I have said in this chapter comes from Western sources: Hegel, Wittgenstein, Damisch, Bois, Beckett, Levine. My story has been driven by an interest in locating the large-scale structures within the histories of Western and Chinese painting, and I know that interest comes from Western historiography and philosophy of history.

None of that means the comparison is wrong. It just makes me wonder whether I am, as the psychoanalysts used to say, projecting.
Something about Chinese landscape painting stirs my interest in questions of art and art history, rather than the other way around. What is said about the paintings raises questions, and those questions return to the paintings as if for nourishment. Because of the nature of this inquiry I have not had the opportunity to say much about what attracts me to individual paintings—their visual force, their geographic contexts, their consumers, their painters’ lives—and it may often have seemed that I would rather talk about what art history is, rather than what the paintings suggest it should be. I understand those preferences as signs of the encounter itself: when it is seen as art history, Chinese landscape painting insistently raises questions that take a viewer away from viewing and toward reflection on viewing. Before I end, therefore, I want to draw a few conclusions about Chinese landscape painting itself.

I have never felt what I assume is perfectly ordinary for a specialist of Chinese painting: the confidence that I am understanding the painting more or less the way it was intended—that I am not projecting inordinately, or generalizing inappropriately, but merely apprehending, with fair accuracy, what the artist meant his viewers to see. To some degree that deficiency on my part is one of the effects of not having a good enough command of Chinese, and so always being reminded of the veil of translation between my words and anything the artist might have said. (I have copied Chinese paintings by Huang Gongwang and others in the Academy in Hangzhou, and then the sense of intimate understanding was present in full force.) But the larger reason for my disconnection from any sense of the artists’ and patrons’ intentions is my interest in how Chinese paintings have appeared in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art history.
Why should Chinese landscape paintings spark this interest more than, say, Persian paintings or Mayan reliefs? Perhaps because the tradition of Chinese landscape painting seems so much like the tradition of Western art history: its myriad artists, schools, and interpretive texts are so like the familiar elements of Western art history. Studying a Chinese painting is very much like studying a Western painting: there are contemporaneous documents, critical and appreciative texts, contemporaneous historians and other informants, pertinent social and political circumstances. I think that to an art historian, Chinese painting is always already art historical, and for that reason it continuously returns me to questions of interpretation. When it is otherwise (as it sometimes is when I am imaginatively wandering in a painted Chinese landscape, or when I am immersed in copying one) I also recognize that I am not experiencing the work as an object in history.

The match between the study of Chinese landscape painting and the expectations of Western art history is uncanny, in Freud’s proprietary sense of the word. Chinese painting is the Doppelgänger of Western painting, the perfect double that is somehow less than perfect, the twin who differs in some fundamental and secret way. Freud’s idea of Unheimlichkeit (uncanniness) applies well here, because Chinese painting is at one and the same instant just the same as Western art history (it conforms to art historical expectations at every point) and utterly different. But this is more than a psychological effect: I think it is generated by the discipline itself, and is therefore one of the conditions for understanding Chinese art in general. I do not mean that Chinese painting has to be understood through Freud, but that it cannot be seen except as a near-miss for Western expectations. That is what I mean by the title of this book: Chinese landscape painting presents itself to us as Western art history, even though we know full well that it is not, and that tension animates and generates art historical meaning. To ignore the uncanny resemblance, or to put it in footnotes, is to avoid the full game of art history.

My first hypothesis was that “Chinese landscape painting tends to appear as an example … and not a co-equal in the production or reception of art history itself,” but that is not quite right. Chinese landscape painting is not an example, but an exemplary encounter: it is the occasion in which art history finds itself most nearly mirrored, most nearly matched by a discourse which is clearly not its own.

As in any cultural encounter (or any encounter with a ghostly twin), both sides begin to seem strange. Writing this essay has made me wonder again about my understanding of Western art history. It seems less easy, now, to look at a picture without thinking of the structures of history it implies. What does it mean to say a Western artist misunderstands
tradition (as I think Wu Bin misunderstood his)? Which artistic strategies in the West have been “crystallized” (as in Wang Wei or Li Cheng)? The Chinese tradition is not the only one that groups and opposes artists in unlikely ways. How is our sense of the Renaissance affected by the extremely implausible triad of Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo? In what ways does the Western sequence of periods conform to the supposedly non-Western sequence of shifting “renewal” and “synthesis”?

As Freud knew, the encounter with the Doppelgänger is an encounter with the patient’s own history. As it unfolds, the patient comes to understand himself. In the end, of course, there is no ghost: only an echo chamber of projections, hallucinations, and unrealized desires. Chinese landscape painting is far more frightening than Freud’s examples of ghosts, because the “ghost” is real—perhaps, as I have suggested, it is more substantial than the patient. Encountering Chinese landscape painting is a way of wondering what it means to want to write art history. Why pursue parallels, like the comparison of historical perspectives? Where does the desire to have a history of Chinese landscape painting (or any tradition, any Other history) come from? What does it mean to want painting to have a history?

So the encounter itself becomes the subject, and its problems overwhelm the investigation of the paintings. But does the encounter also lead to new knowledge about the paintings? Is there also a truth-value here, a conclusion that might be drawn about Zhao Mengfu, or Dong Qichang? I will offer three answers, one responding mainly to the principal argument; another more pessimistic; and the third, I think, the best.

Like the miscellaneous parallels I entertained in Chapter I, the comparison of historical perspectives was originally designed to find out some truth about the paintings. It was supposed to be a relatively unproblematic, reasonably ideologically acceptable model. As it turned out, it was a tool of rhetoric, a way to discover how Western art history guides the exposition of the development of Chinese painting. Even so, nothing in the comparison implies that Chinese art is epistemologically inaccessible. It seems unlikely, for instance, that the Chinese senses of their past could be entirely different from the ways they are presented in Western art history. There is even evidence that art historians in the West are sometimes more Chinese than the original Chinese sources, for instance when the Western historians stress “eccentricity” even though the term became widespread only after the fact, or when they insist on pairings such as Li-Guo even though things were initially much more open-ended. In regard to the parallel of historical perspectives my own opinion is that Cahill’s account is mostly right, and that the Chinese painters’ and critics’ sense of their past does correspond, by and large, with the history as he presents it.
One of the things that it means to say an historical account is true is that it makes sense within a certain kind of writing, and a certain sense of history. A true account is adequate or sufficient to its task, meaning that it represents its subject fairly well, without misplaced emphasis. But emphasis continuously shifts in historical accounts. In the first chapter I was taking exception to some comparisons not because they seemed untrue, but because their emphases seemed decidedly Western. When Wen Fong frames the history of Chinese painting as a sequence leading from surface to depth, and then to “eccentric” elaboration, I wonder how much of his account was made possible by mid- to late-twentieth-century concerns about formalism, the flat picture plane, the dissolution of perspective, and the turn from naturalistic depiction. Although it is clear that Chinese painters were concerned with related issues, I am interested to know what happens when Chinese painting is presented as an art that can be described primarily or optimally as a negotiation of surfaces and fictive space. Space is a ruling metaphor in Western modernist scholarship in a way that it never has been in past centuries, and so in reading accounts such as Wen Fong’s I try to watch for signs of a typically Western modernist interest in the dynamic of plane and recession.

The analogous question arises in Cahill’s books whenever historical perspectives are important to the narrative. On many occasions Chinese scholar-painters were preoccupied with their positions in relation to the past. It may be a Western emphasis, however, to gather perspectives into sequences and string them into overarching narratives about the succession of painting from the Tang onward. Needless to say my own account does that in a deliberate, even mechanical fashion, and no such construct appears in any one text of Cahill’s. It is the way an argument might return to such a principle, or build from it in a consistent fashion, that makes me see a Western preoccupation.

My initial purpose in spinning out the comparison of historical perspectives was to see what the most abstract, unobjectionable comparison might look like when it is more fully developed. As I put it in the fourth hypothesis, the idea was to look at a comparative principle that seems (at least in principle) to be above suspicion. But I hope the last two chapters have made it seem increasingly unlikely that the comparison is impeccably neutral. In fact the comparison of historical perspectives might be more Western than Rowland’s, Lee’s, or Loehr’s comparisons; it might be the most elaborately camouflaged Western interpretive project of all. It may be just as thoroughly Western, just as much a projection, as Rowland’s
prose-poems about Li Cheng’s “demon groves.” I do not think we can quite see it that way, even though many details can seem unlikely when they are spelled out, because from the vantage of the twenty-first century, the parallel of historical perspectives points to a deep structure within art history itself. Yet in time, I suspect it may appear more like a grove of demon trees than a strong analytic tool for comprehending other histories.

It is as if I were at the brink of a cliff. Behind me is the confident progression of Western scholarship on Chinese painting, trying with each generation to refine its assumptions and remove its projections about China. The ground I am standing on seems to be the most solid of all, the place where historical comparisons are themselves the issue, and where a comparison of historical perspectives may have some use in structuring art historical accounts. But ahead of me everything dissolves into air. The very idea of comparing the march of periods is so obviously Western, so much in line with Western—and specifically German—scholarship on history’s large-scale structures. Its grounding defense, that each cultural moment has a particular sense of the structure of its past, repeats the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western preoccupation with self-reflexivity and perspectival thought. And the very idea of writing a book—no matter how small and improvisational—about the entire history of two traditions of art on opposite sides of the world, nearly reeks of Western colonialism, imperialism, and the spread of global interests. (At the least, it has no parallels in earlier Chinese writing about painting or art.) My efforts at finding an optimal form of understanding for Chinese painting seem to have turned, like a snake biting its tail, back onto a cycle of doubt.

Art historians tend not to spend much time thinking about themselves, or unearthing the unanalyzed assumptions they bring to their work. Reading older art history, it can be glaringly obvious how art historians were products of their time and how their conclusions say more about themselves than about their subjects. Ernest Fenollosa’s writings appear that way, and to a lesser degree so do Binyon’s and Rowland’s. They are no longer read to find out about Chinese paintings. Instead they are of historiographic interest, because they are part of the history of reception of Chinese art. From an even more distant perspective, the entire project of art history makes a stark contrast with Chinese accounts of their own art written before Western contact. From that vantage everything we do is Western, down to the pinyin transliterations and the half-tone reproductions with their Western-style captions.

It is not easy to take this obvious lesson to heart. It means that art history is not only impelled by the cultural milieu of its authors, but largely determined by it: so much so that in a few decades’ time it may well seem that twentieth-century art history was more a diary of Western impressions than a contribution to the understanding of Chinese art. Though it seems impossible now, the time may well come when future historians read accounts by Wen Fong, Cahill, and others as signs and symptoms of the latter half of the twentieth century in North America and western Europe—or texts by Craig Clunas as signs of the particular internationalisms of late twentieth-century England. Current writing on Chinese visual culture beyond literati painting is not exempt: it, too, will come to seem very much
of its time (the early twenty-first century) and place (the increasingly global community of universities that include media and visual studies). It may not be read for information about Chinese film, animation, posters, television, or advertisements, but for its historiographic value, for its place in a history of Western attempts to encounter something still taken as Other.

These are stark, unhappy thoughts, and they lead with a dull unarguable logic to the conclusion that comparisons, and therefore, as I proposed in Chapter I, historical explanations in general are primarily unnoticed opportunities for self-representation.

That is the difficult truth that so seldom appears in the course of ordinary art historical research. It strikes me that the reason the two alternatives of naïve truth and wholesale projection become such a stark opposition has to do with the nature of the subject. When Panofsky considered Dürrer, or Dvořák looked at El Greco, they saw something of themselves, and they knew as much. They saw some affinities between their own lives, their own interests and knowledge, and the worlds of Dürrer and El Greco—but they did not see too far or too much. That salve helped hide the corrosive possibility that Dürrer and El Greco had no systematic or controllable resemblance to Panofsky’s or Dvořák’s imaginings. At the same time, their historian’s half-knowledge hid the opposite and equally unproductive thought that Dürrer and El Greco were exactly as Panofsky and Dvořák imagined them, nothing more or less. Historical writing, as many people have observed, is a balance: the historian is involved, but not submerged.

Yet in contemplating Chinese painting it seems there is no balanced equilibrium (to use the ecologist’s term) and an art historian’s thoughts may oscillate wildly between an inordinate anxiety over projecting modern Western ideas, and an indefensible complacency propped up by a sense that cultural truths can be transparent. At least that is why I have presented such bald alternatives, and entwined the history of Chinese landscape painting with the apparently more general issue of comparison or representation.

It is possible to argue that the project and discipline of art history, aside from questions of Chinese art, remain Western. Because I have not done that in this book, let me telegraph the
argument here. Most obviously, the interpretive methods art historians use to understand their material are virtually all Western: iconography, semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, formal analysis, feminisms, linguistics, gender studies, historiography, and even discarded methods such as style analysis and connoisseurship, are all demonstrably Western.

(The only gray areas in this list are formal analysis, style analysis, and connoisseurship, because they have been claimed to be also Chinese or even universal. I think that claim is a sticky one, which depends on generalizing the terms until they are effectively unrecognizable. Formal analysis is a modernist, Western invention, which began with writers like Roger Fry and continued, for example, in George Rowley. Style analysis is a neo-Kantian strategy made famous by Heinrich Wölfflin; and connoisseurship is an ideologically loaded form of market-related appreciation, made famous and notorious by Bernard Berenson. To claim that formal analysis, style analysis, or connoisseurship are also Chinese is to ignore those points of origin, and appeal to a more universal human way of encountering images. It is true that we all see brushstrokes, flat surfaces, spatial cues, compositions, and so forth; but the naming of such elements, the structure of our analysis, and the conviction that we are doing something that is phenomenologically or neurobiologically fundamental to all perception of art, are all Western.)

Art history is also Western on account of its institutional forms: departments of art history, a “discipline” called art history, training that is distinct from an education in aesthetics, training distinct from training in art criticism, international conferences, expository essay-writing forms, refereed journals, monographs, academic publishers, scholarly apparatus (including the protocols of footnotes and bibliographies), and the privilege accorded to the archive: all that is Western.

These two arguments, about art history’s interpretive methods and its institutional forms, are at stake in the book *Is Art History Global?*. I think that methods and institutions like the ones I listed are evidence that despite the worldwide spread of art history and visual studies, the field remains Western. Yet most contributors to the book take a more optimistic position, saying—in different ways—that the new places where art history is practiced are evidence that the discipline is becoming productively fragmented. The consensus view, at least in *Is Art History Global?*, is that we now have many art histories, formed in their local contexts, and that pluralism has replaced the spread of Western models. I do not think that is the case, and I find that even the most far-flung practices that call themselves art history—in Paraguay, in Benin, in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, in provincial locations in China—depend wholly on Western interpretive methods and institutions. The molds are the same; the material that is poured into them differs. At least that is the short version of the claim that all art history is Western; the book *Is Art History Global?*, along with several others, are the places to go for more detailed accounts.

Given the Westernness of the project and discipline of art history, it is very unlikely that the comparison of historical perspectives is more abstract—and therefore more neutral, or more universal—than other comparisons, or that it is any more immune to being a projection
on the order of comparisons between Southern Song painters and Caspar David Friedrich. The comparison probably says less about recurring patterns of art history across cultures than about patterns that Western art historical practice automatically finds in other cultures.

Every once in a while it is important to step back from the profession itself in order to ask what it wants to do. From this farthest viewpoint, all of art history is a Western project, one with no place in China before the twentieth century. Chinese landscape painting, even when we are most vigilant, even when we pare back Western usages or corral them into footnotes, and most especially when we are satisfied with some measure of veracity, is Western art history.⁵

Overt comparisons, such as the one I have explored in this book, are like narrow searchlights playing on the dark ground of our habitual thinking. From a philosophic standpoint, all representation, all writing, depend on comparison (see Section 11). Comparisons, parallels, analogies, and metaphors are the foundation of understanding.

In the last twenty years, the large-scale concerns I have been exploring in this book have faded. Art historians have turned to local problems and contexts, and tried to avoid East-West comparisons altogether. The complexity of the tradition is stressed over any linear developments it might have had. At this point I hope I have said enough to instill some doubt about the ability of the new scholarship to avoid the problems I have been exploring. Articulating complexity only defers the moment when it becomes necessary to attend to underlying structure.⁶ The entire interpretive apparatus of contemporary art historical scholarship is demonstrably Western. Scholars of all sorts use Western interpretive methods, write in Western forms, publish in Western journals, attend Western-style conferences, work in Western-style universities. We study many things that previous scholars did not, and we look much further afield than earlier generations … but does that mean the avalanche of new objects and words exempts us from the problems that plagued earlier generations?

Recent scholars have been especially intent on avoiding style analyses and formal analyses of the kind associated with mid-century scholars. As in much of art history, the elucidation of social, economic, political contexts has come to take the place once reserved for appreciations of paintings’ technical and aesthetic properties.
There is an invigorating variety of such work. Susan Nelson’s study of paintings of Mount Lu, a place “famed as a refuge of recluses—hermits, monks, immortality-seekers,” is principally concerned with what the paintings imply about the “major cultural icon” of Mount Lu. Ginger Cheng-chi Hsü understands painting in eighteenth-century Yangzhou as “an artistic product shaped by a collective social and cultural experience;” not—as Robert Harrist, reviewing the book, notes—as the work of “individual artists” whose paintings require visual analysis. Jonathan Hay’s study of Shitao, which I mentioned in relation to theories of modernism, reads paintings mainly for signs and indices of social contexts.

Alfreda Murck’s study of Song Dynasty painting is an especially extensive example. Murck is sensitive to formal qualities of pictures, but she mentions them mainly in order to find political meanings. She finds Guo Xi’s *Early Spring* (see plate 7) “an elegant metaphor for the success of the New Policies” of the Emperor Shenzong (reigned 1067–85). Although the painting “might also be understood as an auspicious New Year’s image or as a Daoist vision of the world emerging from the *yin* of winter,” she writes, it can at the same time be “a celebration of the dawn of the new era that Shenzong … had brought to the empire.” The mists in Southern Song paintings, she writes, are “undeniably attractive and mysterious,” but mist “could convey more than beautiful effects.” In a discussion of Muqi and Yujian, she notes that a painter, like a poet, could find ways of telling his viewers that he was “sensitive and concerned about the world.” Clouds, for example, “could serve as a metaphor for evil elements shrouding the truth” as readily as they “could signal the arrival of timely rains.” For Murck’s purposes the principal interest of natural elements, in painting as in poetry, is what they say about the surrounding politics.

It is tricky to characterize the way the discipline pays attention to social and political contexts, because few studies are entirely devoid of passages that focus on formal properties. The rhetoric of art history’s descriptions of itself has it that social contexts are inevitably interwoven with many other concerns. But a telltale sign of the preponderance of interest in social contexts is what might be called the trope of the apology for the return to the work. Several recent studies are framed as returns to the works following a period of attention to their social contexts, and the authors of the studies tend to want to defend their choices. One such is Maggie Bickford’s “Emperor Huizong and the Aesthetic of Agency,” which opens with a quotation from Benjamin Rowland to set the stage for a return to the artworks. Bickford writes:

Scholars in East Asia and the West have made notable progress in contextualizing products of [Emperor Huizong] and his Academy. We have clarified institutional arrangements. We have examined the uses of art to ritual, legitimacy, and power. We have explored relationships between imperially sponsored painting the emerging art of the scholar-amateurs at the end of the Northern Song. But we have still not come to terms with these works of art as works of art.
This is put in a collegial tone, because Bickford herself has been one of the principal scholars who have contributed to the contextual study of Huizong’s art. But it is also an interesting barometer of the way the subject can appear bifurcated, and the kind of response (“works of art as works of art”) that can seem to be called for. Overall, it is a safe generalization that the study of Chinese painting, like the discipline of art history as a whole, is engaged in avoiding some old-fashioned European and North American habits by paying attention to the social forces that give value and meaning to painting.

Some of the best of this new scholarship moves very far away from what used to count as art history, taking the risk that the result might not be seen as useful or sensible art history at all. I will close with two examples: the first is recuperable as art history, and the second may not be.

Jerome Silbergeld’s study of Li Huasheng, published in 1993, stays very close to the artist’s concerns, as Silbergeld heard them in extensive interviews. Even so, he notes that some of his own interests in patronage and training, and some of his points of comparison, may seem “strangely Western” to a Chinese reader. The book is a rich mingling of art criticism’s on-the-ground immediacy and its preferred interview format, with the deeper structural and developmental concerns of art history. For John Clark, Silbergeld’s book is too uninterested in the problems of influence, social contexts, and ideological critique: “Silbergeld,” Clark writes, “seems only incidentally interested in art history … reserving his enthusiasm for the relationship between stylistic development and artistic personality.” But I wonder if this does not miss the point of what the book might contribute: art criticism remains very different from academic art history, and it may be that one way to change the terms of the conversation on Chinese painting is to listen to the sometimes uninformed, often non-political concerns of artists.

For me, the most intriguing recent example of work that is “less dependent on European conceptions of artists and their work” is Craig Clunas’s *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming* (2004). (The quotation is from the book’s dust jacket.) Clunas sets out to redress the Western art historical focus on Wen’s paintings, demonstrating that his work included calligraphy and poetry, both of which were valued more highly than painting. Clunas notes that Western scholars have long been aware of the narrow focus of their inquiries, but that they have not pursued the consequences of that fact. His study focuses on the concepts of friendship, debts, gifts, obligations, presents, and other exchanges, which structured much of Wen Zhengming’s cultural production. In that way, Clunas hopes to expand the Western interest in Wen’s paintings to accommodate an understanding of his
work that is more nearly coincident with his reception in the Ming Dynasty, and with Wen’s own self-understanding. Clunas knows that in doing that, he may appear to be “downgrading the works of art themselves as objects of inquiry, treating them as ciphers that … ‘stand for’ social relationships.” He proposes to pay attention to “agency” over “meaning,” even though it might “put the present inquiry beyond the bounds of acceptable art-historical practice.” The idea is to investigate “what called [Wen’s] work into existence,” which would then enable others to ask about “the visual qualities of individual works.” Clunas reiterates the social art historian’s interest in “the relations between agents,” which illuminate the object, and in the object, which “enacts those social relations,” with no priority to one or the other (ED, 13). At the same time, he does not subscribe to social art history that is “in thrall to … the idea of the work of art as a privileged reflection of an equally privileged ‘something else,’ be it the ‘spirit of the age’ or the ‘mode of production’.”

Elegant Debts is not the sort of social art history that just sets an elaborate stage for the reappearance of the transcendent art work (ED, 181).

There are complicated and delicate questions here, some in the text and some intentionally elided by it. Certainly it would be hard to disagree that art history’s conventional interest in individual objects could be given context and sense by a wider investigation of the conditions under which objects come into existence. I admire the conceptual clarity of the book, treating paintings as the objects of social exchange; I think Elegant Debts is the most conceptually tight production in the field since mid-century formal and style analyses. But does it follow that “the visual qualities of individual works” will be illuminated by such an account? Is Clunas’s exploration really prior to some later art historical inquiry? Or is it fundamentally different? In the book, the visual responses Wen Zhengming’s contemporaries had to his work are carefully bracketed out. It is true that for many of the people who received his paintings and calligraphy, visual qualities were less an issue than the nature of the exchange itself. (Much the same is true in the contemporary international art market, where an original by a famous artist tends to matter more than the work’s artistic or critical value). But what could be said about Wen Zhengming’s contemporaries who did notice quality, or mark the difference between a good painting and a copy? Would what could be said about those cases fit with the book as a natural extension of its concerns, or would they take the book in a different direction? I ask this because it has a provocative parallel in contemporary art history: could art historical accounts of Wen Zhengming that care about the “visual qualities” of individual artworks—that is, the majority of existing accounts—find a new ground in Clunas’s exposition, or would they need to continue from a different place?

Let me put this another way. The picture of Wen Zhengming in Elegant Debts is rich, full of historical matter, and effectively revisionist. We find Wen in a circuit of social relations, well told and carefully theorized. But as Clunas says, attention to “the visual qualities of individual works” is largely missing. Problematic paintings are side by side with weak copies, minor efforts, and paintings crucial for Chinese art history’s sense of itself.
It is systematically unclear why this should be a study of a Ming Dynasty figure known primarily as a painter—why it should be about the “Michelangelo” of the Ming Dynasty, as Clunas says at the beginning, recounting his reluctant answer to a student’s question. There is a mass of documentation about Wen, but wouldn’t any number of well-documented, well-connected Ming scholar-officials do just as well? Wouldn’t they be just as apposite for a demonstration of the social relations that interest Clunas? Doesn’t Clunas’s book belong with other studies of debt and gifts outside of visual art?21

So on the one hand (as in the previous paragraph), studies of “agency” and social contexts can make it seem as if the choice of visual artists as subjects of scholarly inquiry is somewhat arbitrary. On the other hand (as in the paragraph before that), it can be difficult to know how to connect such studies to various ideas about what might count as the “visual qualities of individual works.” I think the entire field of Chinese art history should be grateful for studies like Clunas’s, but I also think the questions they postpone may in fact end up being unanswerable. As Clunas implies, this is exactly how old conversations grow into new ones, and I think almost nothing better could happen to studies of Chinese painting than a change of conversation along these lines. My concern is that the old conversations are not connected to the new ones, and therefore they are not resolved: and as Hegel knew, unless old ideas are decisively addressed they tend to re-emerge—or worse, they direct things from behind the scenes. To be entirely self-consistent, studies like Elegant Debts should focus just as often on visually illiterate scholar-officials as on scholar-officials who happen to have made objects valued, in very different and perhaps immiscible discourses, as crucial works of fine art.

It is not impossible to avoid particular traits of older European and North American scholarship such as the focus on aesthetic properties, the fetishization of individual works, or the reliance on style analysis. A plurality of recent scholars achieve some independence from earlier work just by concentrating on social and political contexts, or by broadening the subjects of scholarship to include Chinese advertising, television, and other mass media. But Clunas’s book suggests that the most concerted efforts to avoid the old interests can go so far or so fast that they lose the run of art, if not of history. (Perhaps deliberately, and perhaps that is not a bad thing.)

Comparisons were the structure of understanding for twentieth-century Western scholars of Chinese landscape painting. Have we freed ourselves from them by looking at the social and economic conditions under which paintings were produced? Have we left these problems behind by looking at postcolonial settings, socioeconomic contexts, and the political
conditions of production? Have we made comparisons irrelevant by moving on to Chinese television, fashion, or folk art? Are parallels no longer necessary now that literati landscape painting has itself faded into the historical past? Is it safe to assume that the texts produced between Fenollosa and the recent past are irrelevant?

No, it is not safe, and I have yet to find a text that avoids the problems I have been exploring. Comparisons are built into the discipline in ways too deep to be excavated. The virtue of looking for the best available comparison, on the largest possible scale, and following it to see where it leads (instead of censoring its operative terms, and shutting it down prematurely), is that such an inquiry can help show us part of the apparently inevitable shape of art historical understanding. The really interesting questions for current writing concern the structures we cannot see how to avoid, and the optimal ways of thinking about them. We turn against comparisons, and yet we are also drawn to them; if it were not illogical I would say we are especially drawn to comparisons we do not recognize.

Why are contemporary scholars so wary of comparisons, especially when they begin to sound serious or systematic? Why avoid them so studiously, or deconstruct them so assiduously? Perhaps we sense that comparisons are symptoms of a condition that is endemic to the discipline. Like a tic, they seem to signal a deeper problem. Even though at any given moment the comparison itself is what seems faulty, the deeper issue is the shape of our imaginations, which has generated the problem to begin with. This brings me to the final hypothesis, which is a caution against the overenthusiastic hunt for ideological bias:

*Sixth hypothesis.* There are reasons to keep trying to understand how art history is Western. But any such attempt will remain within Western art history, and if an account succeeds in throwing off Western assumptions it will no longer be recognizable as art history.

In other words: the repertoire of comparisons, from the most informal, innocuous allusion to a Western painter all the way to the most pervasive, abstract sense of modernism or artistic agency, effectively is art history. Comparisons can be criticized, amended, prefaced, suppressed, analyzed, dissected, “atomized,” and silenced, but they cannot be expunged without dissolving the sense that Chinese art has a history. The cardinal overconfidence of some recent writing, both in Chinese studies and in art history as a whole, is that self-reflexivity, critical analysis, and the turn to new subjects will yield an effectively new narrative, shorn of Western perspectives. I doubt it.
Notes

Foreword

2. Perhaps Shitao’s most famous articulations of his egoism as a painter states: “That which makes me myself, my self is because I exist. The whiskers and eyebrows of the ancients are unable to grow on my face and above my eyes. The organs of the ancients are unable to lie amidst my entrails. I myself give rise to my entrails, and manifest my whiskers and eyebrows. Even when there may be some point of contact with some master, it is that master who approaches me. It is not the case that I seek to become like him. Nature has endowed me thus. With respect to antiquity, how could I have learned from it without transforming it?” Shitao (1642–1707), “Kugua heshang hua yu lu,” in Hualun congkan, edited by Yu Haiyan (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1977), vol. 1, 148; translation adapted from Richard Strassberg, Enlightening Remarks on Painting (Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1989), 65.
3. It is equally possible that a viewer unfamiliar with Starry Night, but knowledgeable of Chinese painting, would also misconstrue the relation between them. In my own classrooms at the University of Toronto, where a large percentage of my class is of East Asian descent, many students read Zhang Hongtu’s work as an actual Van Gogh that copies Shitao’s composition. In this way, they seek to make Shitao an actual historical precursor to Van Gogh, and are often slightly disappointed to discover that Shitao was not an actual influence on Van Gogh. Though my classes as a whole tend to love the playfulness of these works and the way that they problematize the relation of Chinese landscape painting and Western art history.
4. My impressions of the reception of Elkins’s manuscript are shaped by a range of informal conversations with colleagues, and are not supported statistically (though it would be interesting to see what a survey of responses might reveal about Elkins’s text and the field more broadly).
6. Chen Gaohua, Sui Tang huajia shiliang (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1984); Song Liao, Jin huajia shiliang (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1984); Yuadai huajia shiliang (Shanghai: Shanghai meishu renmin chubanshe, 1980).
9. In “The Pleasure of Fish,” the philosopher Zhuangzi (fl. fourth century BC) and his friend Huizi were strolling along the Hao River when Zhuangzi said, “See how the minnows come out and swim easily! This is the pleasure of fish!” Huizi said, “You are not a fish. How do you know the pleasure of fish?” Zhuangzi said, “You are not I, so how do you know that I do not know the pleasure of fish?” Huizi said, “I am not you, so I certainly don’t know what you know. [But] you are certainly not a fish. [So] that which you do not know includes the pleasure of fish.” Zhuangzi said, “Please return to the original [question]. You asked me how I know the pleasure of fish? Huizi said, “I am not you, [so] I certainly don’t know what you know. [But] you are not I, [so] how do you know that I do not know the pleasure of fish? Zhuangzi said, “You are not I, [so] how do you know that I do not know the pleasure of fish?” Huizi said, “I am not you, [so] I certainly don’t know what you know. [But] you are certainly not a fish. [So] that which you do not know includes the pleasure of fish.”


15. Peter Bol, Charles H. Carswell Professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations and Director, Center for Geographic Analysis, Harvard University, and comment on HCGIS addressed to the Society for Ming Studies Annual Meeting, April 1, 2005.

Iterated Introductions

1. Afterward, Jason and Jim Cahill and I decided to produce a more formal record, and Jim and I exchanged letters; as of this writing (summer 2006), Jason intends to publish them in a volume of the conference proceedings.


3. 西方美术史学中的中国山水画 Xīfāng meishùshǐxué zhōngguó shānshuǐhuà [Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History], translated from the English by Pan Yaochang and Gu Ling (Hangzhou: Zhongguo mei shu xue yuan chu ban she [National Academy of Art], 1999). ISBN 871019707X.

4. The best statement of his current position, with critical responses, is Cahill, “Some Thoughts on the History and Post-History of Chinese Painting,” Archives of Asian Art 55 (2005): 17–34: “But the main point I am making is that it can be done: Chinese painting in the early centuries is susceptible to diachronic analysis and ordering of the kind that allows the construction of an art history” (20). I admire and I try to emulate the scale of this claim, and I do not doubt its
potential truth. I differ in my lingering skepticism over the motivation for the claim: anything that appears as art history will have properties that include diachronic ordering, and those properties are identifiably European in origin, so the claim amounts to another more imperialistic-sounding claim—something like, “Chinese painting in the early centuries can be conceptualized according to the expectations of art and its history that have been developed in western Europe from the 18th century onward.” I recognize that an alternate reading is possible: one could also say that the phrase “an art history” allows the construction of a different sort of art history for Chinese painting, one effectively free of Western concepts. I do not think that the alternate reading makes sense.

5. *Is Art History Global?*, op. cit.
6. Zijlmans took the name for the program in Leiden, where she works, from John Onians’s program in East Anglia, which was the first of its kind.
7. This book will be the first volume of the Stone Summer Theory Institute seminars (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, forthcoming).
11. My book has been misunderstood as a conservative, Europeanizing return to conventional art history, but its argument is different. See for example the exchange with Parul Mukherji in *Is Art History Global?*. I discovered Mukherji’s work just before it went to press, and in spring 2008 we had a very productive exchange—all of which, unfortunately, was too late to be included in her writing. For more on Mukherji’s work see her *The Citrasūtra of Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, edited and translated by Parul Dave Mukherji, Kalāṃūlaśāstra Series (K.M.S.) vol. 32 (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre for the Arts, 2001), and the review by Doris Meth Srinivasan, “The Citrasūtra of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa,” *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* (July 1, 2004), accessed online by the editors.

I A Brace of Comparisons

1. From this beginning, the argument goes in a different direction in my review of David Summers’s *Real Spaces*, reprinted in *Is Art History Global?*, op. cit.
3. 平淡 píngdàn is literally “level and weak,” “constant and bland,” or “level and tasteless” (in the sense of “without taste”). The custom of translating it as “insipid” is surely misguided, in that “insipid” is strongly pejorative, not just weakly so; it carries the connotation “vapid” as well as “unpalatable.” I call the translation “customary” because it persists even where the context shows that nothing as strong need be used. See for instance Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 170. There is an excellent discussion of píngdàn in Jonathan Chaves, *Mei Yao-ch’ en and the Development of Early Song Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 114–25, relating it to poetry and to its uses in the Chuang Tzu. I thank Stanley Murashige for this reference. Even “flat” is misleading as a translation for píngdàn because the opposite in Western painting would be something like “thick” or “impasto,” not the Chinese nóng, meaning also “dense.”


8. This has been put best by Craig Clunas, in the course of a review of Jonathan Hay’s book on Shitao, when he wonders “whether in fact the ‘Chinese literati ideal’ of unfettered and autonomous artistic production really existed at all, even at the level of the ideal (it has effectively been demonstrated that it never existed in practice), or whether it, too, is not rather an artifact of the 20th century.” Clunas, review of Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), *Art Bulletin* 84 no. 4 (2002): 686–89, quotation on 688.


12. Steiner’s project can be made more difficult by enlisting the critiques of the philosophic subject, because he assumes an accessible intuition and cognition, bent to the task of poetic interpretation. See for example Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and compare Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), especially 110–12.


the first chapter of my *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1997).


23. In this listing, I am interested only in tenured (permanent) or full-time scholars whose specialty is Chinese painting. Many universities have part-time (adjunct, or hourly) lecturers who offer courses on Chinese painting.


25. Information about Scandinavia, Germany, and the U.K. comes from Minna Törmä; information about Germany and other central European nations comes from Ladislav Kesner (May 2008).


27. In the Czech Republic Ladislav Kesner offers courses in Brno and elsewhere, but he is not a specialist in Chinese painting.


29. For example Clarissa von Spee and Jan Stuart (who work in the British Museum), Craig Clunas, Anne Farrer, Jessica Rawson, and Lukas Nickel.

30. Textbooks around the world are another subject of *Is Art History Global?*, op. cit.
31. Perhaps the only visual studies text that discusses Chinese painting is my Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction (New York: Routledge, 2003), 152, and that is only in passing, to make this same point.

32. This is demonstrated using statistics in my “Is There a Canon in Art History?” in Canon Formation, edited by Anna Brzyski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

33. Compare also Western-influenced terms such as 寫實 xiěshí, “to paint realistically.” For 寫貌 xiěmào in the context of a discussion of Wu Tao-tzú, see Michael Sullivan, Chinese Landscape Painting, vol. 2, The Sui and T’ang Dynasties (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 50.


35. That is my reading of the implications of Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). These and other major art historians often temper their interest in Western art in a way that has been traditional in European art history since Aby Warburg and Alois Riegl: they also study Islamic and Byzantine art. In autumn 2007, Belting completed a study of perspective and visuality in the Islamic tradition.

36. I name these two very different scholars to underscore the difficulty of the question. See the chapter on Japanese art in Kaufmann, Toward a Geography of Art (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and for Kesner’s interests, see Is Art History Global?, op. cit.


38. More on this at the end of the book. The expression, “the historical project is […] an indispensable feature of Chinese scholarship,” is Ladislav Kesner’s. (Personal communication, 2008.)


40. CLP, 36. Lee says only that it is a “suggestive aesthetic parallel.”

41. CLP, 68.

42. HR, 42, 46.

43. Benjamin Rowland, AEW, 115. I thank Larry Silver for bringing Rowland’s book to my attention (and loaning me his copy).

44. The comparison is a traditional one; it can be found for example in Laurence Binyon, “Painting and Calligraphy,” in Chinese Art, edited by Laurence Binyon (London: Kegan Paul, 1935), 14.


46. AEW, 20–21.

47. AEW, 24.

48. AEW, 96–100.

49. For more on this painting, see Zhou Mi’s Record of Clouds and Mist Passing before One’s Eyes: An Annotated Translation, edited by Ankeney Weitz (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 84 n. 329, with identifications of the painting’s theme by Cahill and Bo Min.

50. AEW, 76–80.

51. Barnhart, Wintry Forests, Old Trees, Some Landscape Themes in Chinese Painting (New York: China Institute, 1972); see further BR, 77, 446.

52. AEW, 87–91.

53. There is also the question of the very different politics of the two paintings. For the Friedrich, see Joseph Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), especially 243.

54. EW, 244–61; the quotation is on 244.
55. *EW*, 249, 251.
59. *AE*, 256.
60. H. Christopher Luce, “Abstraction and Expression in Chinese Calligraphy” (New York: China Institute, 1995).
63. *AC*, xv, xvi; the elided phrase is “and of their cultural contingency.” A new theory of translation, which avoids the problem of a regress of incrementally increasing sensitivity, is proposed by Shigemi Inaga, “Is Art History Globalizable? A Critical Commentary from a Far Eastern Point of View,” an assessment in *Is Art History Global?*, op. cit.
64. *AC*, xvii, xviii, 112–19.
65. *AC*, xvi.
68. *AC*, xviii.
70. *AC*, 123.
72. In this context Jullien’s *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, translated by Paola Varsano (New York: Zone Press, 2004) is the most pertinent; in other texts, such as *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Zone Books, 2007), Jullien aims at a revision of Western concepts, which is a fundamentally different aim. But the ambition of “decoding” China for the West will always carry with it at least the possibility of comparative parallels of the kind that I am investigating here. For “decoding,” see *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, translated by Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 22. An extended philosophic assessment of Jullien is overdue. Compare his statement, in *De l’essence ou du nu* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), 82, that “la Chine antique ... est sans métaphysique.” This assertion, which he then develops with few references to current literature, has been widely debated in journals such as *Philosophy East and West*; an excellent book on the subject, which collects the history of the debate (and is missing from Jullien’s account) is Robert Wardy’s *Aristotle in China: Language, Categories, and Translation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). (*De l’essence ou du nu* has been translated as *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, translated by Maev de la Guardia [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007].)

75. Wen Fong, *Images of the Mind*, op. cit., 70–71; and see BR, 440.
76. Wen Fong, “Toward a Structural Analysis of Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Art Journal* 28 (1969): 388–97; the quotations are from 395; see also Wen Fong, “Interview with Jerome Silbergeld [January 28, 2006],” forthcoming, in which he wonders about the reluctance of Western art historians to discuss questions of space in Chinese art.
77. For an extended study of senses of space said to be indigenous to Chinese art, see *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*, edited by Chun-chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995). I feel the same about investigations of space as I do about the comparative perspectives I will be exploring in this book; I am skeptical because the concepts that drive the inquiries are specific to Western discourses from the eighteenth century to the present. I thank Ladislav Kesner for drawing my attention to *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*.
79. The most recent formulation, which includes an account of mimetic representation along with other considerations, is “Why Chinese Painting Is History,” *Art Bulletin* 85 no. 2 (2003): 258–80.
81. The possible Westernness of space is a central concern in my review of David Summers’s “Real Spaces,” *Art Bulletin* 86 no. 2 (2004): 373–80, reprinted in *Is Art History Global?*, op. cit., and in the ensuing discussion, recorded in the book.
82. These issues are pursued by David Summers, Friedrich Teja Bach, and others, outside the context of Chinese painting, in *Is Art History Global?*, op. cit.
83. Another example is John Hay’s work on the painting’s surface, which he finds thematized in colophons, in painting theory, and in the painting techniques themselves. In his account, surface was “discovered,” both as a trope and a formal possibility, in the Yuan. See Hay, “Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface,” *Archives of Asian Art* 38 (1985): 95–123.
87. By implication they come before the opening propositions in chapter “0,” since the latter begin 0, 0.1, etc., and the former begin 0.0, 0.0.1, 0.0.2, etc.—hence the book forms itself into a loop and avoids the expected ending.

88. *TT*, 31: “Un détour préalable par la Chine me paraît dès lors s’imposer, et la peinture dite des ‘lettres’; celle-ci n’accorde-t-elle pas une place centrale au trait, dans la double acception du terme, graphique et linguistique, ou à tout le moins scripturale”?

89. Literally, *yi hua* means “one stroke” or “one mark,” and *yi-pi* means “one brush.” In Shih-t’ao’s text, they are effectively synonyms. I thank Stanley Murashige for this information. (In Damisch’s text the latter term is transliterated *yi-pi*.)


92. These etymologies are entertained in my *Domain of Images*, op. cit.


94. A useful study here is Zhang Hongxing, “Re-Reading Inscriptions in Chinese Scroll Painting: The Eleventh to the Fourteenth Centuries,” *Art History* 28 no. 5 (2005): 606–25. Hongxing mentions Damisch’s book *A Theory of Cloud* as an example of Western literature that has “fallen into [the] trap” of thinking that Chinese characters are ideographs (608), and he argues against Zhang Yanyuan’s famous dictum that writing and painting share “a common being.” The latter is a trope in Chinese literature, and a misleading image in Western studies. See also my *Domain of Images*, op. cit., for a discussion of this in the context of Western image theory.

95. Damisch also touches on a theme that is more central to my purpose here: the way history is inscribed in Chinese painting by means of the mark itself. He considers a set of four landscapes by the minor painter Wang Shou-chi 王守之 (1603–1652); the first three are done in the manner of Ni Tsan, but the fourth, which the artist says was added as an afterthought, is in the manner of Shen Chou (1427–1509). The sequence sets up a very specific historical reference: Shen Chou studied Ni Tsan’s work, and ultimately adopted a style that is softer and wetter. In pretending—with “feigned unselfconsciousness,” as Damisch says—to just toss off a fourth landscape, Wang Shou-chi turns a “collage” into a series of questions about history. When Damisch makes comparisons like that, he is very close to what I have in mind for later chapters—though his purpose is widely divergent since he is only interested in hinting at the way Chinese marks embody history. *TT*, 33.


97. *BR*, 6, 8, 10 n. 20 and 11 n. 24.

98. He also uses them to characterize the West: “Since the nineteenth century, Western art has been undergoing a permanent revolution in search of new standards. Representational realism became exhausted, and modernist painting in the early twentieth century turned to abstraction and aesthetic experimentation.” Wen Fong, “The Modern Chinese Art Debate,” *Artibus Asiae* 53 (1993): 290–304; quotation on 294.

100. These examples can be multiplied indefinitely, so I will append just one more. In a review of the large edited volume *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, Alfonz Lengyel proposes that nineteenth-century European viewers were ready to take in Chinese painting because they were “well acquainted with the flat, outline-style composition of medieval European stained-glass windows,” and that Zhao Mengfu’s *Mind Landscape of Xie Youyu* is like “the painting Le Douanier by Rousseau.” (Sic: Rousseau did not paint a customs officer—douanier—he was a worker in the Customs Office, although he never reached the rank of Customs Officer.) Both these comparisons are made in passing, informally, and both are prompted by Cahill’s comparisons of Chinese painting to modernism. For me, this is a good example of how the little droplets can come back together again into little blobs: Cahill’s more abstract comparisons inspired Lengyel to make more concrete comparisons. The Western parallels are like a living organism, dividing and growing in cycles. See Lengyel, review of *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, edited by Yan Xin, Richard Barnhart, et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 260–69, quotations on 261, 265.


II Tying Some Laces


3. For Barnhart’s position, see *The Barnhart-Cahill-Rogers Correspondence*, 1981, op. cit., especially 4–7.


5. This kind of expansion is explored in my *Domain of Images*, op. cit., and *Visual Practices across the University*, edited by James Elkins (Paderborn, Germany: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007).

6. In Cahill’s words: “At the Maine conference … I made, on the spur of the moment, the offer to trade any of the … works of Ch’ en Tzu-ho and Cheng Wen-lin and Chang Lu … that I own for any comparable and genuine work of Liu Chih-chien or Shen Chou or Wen Cheng-ming that anyone could come up with, and I would stand by that, with no expectation of being taken up on it—and not just because of the greater monetary value of the latter.” To which Barnhart replied: “Your willingness to exchange any Chang Lu et al. for any Liu, Shen or Wen is the statement of a confirmed partisan. The issue is closed. You aren’t looking any more, or thinking. As for me, I
can’t think of more than a few Shen Chou’s I wouldn’t exchange for your Wu Wie, but I would probably give up most of the Tai Chin’s I’ve seen for a good Wen Cheng-ming.” The Barnhart-Cahill-Rogers Correspondence, op. cit., 1, 5.

7. The Barnhart-Cahill-Rogers Correspondence, op. cit., 5.


9. Wang Wei’s Wang Ch’uan Villa, to take a prominent example, was known not only from rubbings taken from an anonymous worker’s stone monument made in 1617 (itself probably from a copy), but also in copies made by specific artists. Kuo Chung-shu’s (c. 918–78) copy was allegedly from the original, and later Chao Meng-fu (1309) and Li Kung-lin made copies from copies. By contrast, Renaissance authors had to imagine Polygnotos’ painting from Pausanius’ description or, later, from various neoclassically inspired reconstructions. See M.D. Stansbury-O’Donnell, “Polygnotos’ IIiuipersis: A New Reconstruction,” American Journal of Archaeology 93 no. 2 (1989): 203 ff., and, for earlier reconstructions, C. Robert, Die IIiuipersis des Polygnot (Halle, 1893), and L. Faedo, “Breve racconto di una caccia infruttuosa: Polignoto a Delfi,” Ricerche di Storia dell’Arte 30 (1986): 5–15.


17. Damisch, FJC.
19. The discussion about Zhang Yanyuan is developed in the Afterword to Discovering Chinese Painting: Dialogues with Art Historians, edited by Jason Kuo, second edition (Dubuque, IO: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 2006), 249–56, and in Kuo’s conference proceedings, which are in preparation. For a discussion of Vasari along these lines, see Renaissance Theory, op. cit.
21. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 46. On the other hand, the entire Provincializing Europe ends with a formulation that is not unlike the initial definitions of the “politics of despair”: “For me, provincializing Europe has been a question of how we create conjugated and disjunctive genealogies for European categories of political modernity as we contemplate the necessarily fragmentary histories of human belonging that never constitute a one or a whole” (Provincializing Europe, 255).
22. Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 73, 254, respectively; and see further 18.
23. The book is The Project of Painting, 1900–2000; it is aimed at exploring modern painting in South America, Africa, Asia, and eastern Europe, in such a way that the histories can be of compelling interest to scholars in two large groups: first, those for whom studies of marginal or overlooked practices are not sufficient correcitives for the ongoing interest in the “master narratives” of modernism; and second, those for whom western European and North American narratives provide the sufficient framework for understanding. Parts have appeared as “Two Forms of Judgement: Forgiving and Demanding (The Case of Marine Painting),” Journal of Visual Art Practice 3 no. 1 (2004): 37–46; “Writing about Modernist Painting outside Western Europe and North America,” in Compression vs. Expression: Containing the World’s Art, edited by John Onians (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 188–214; and Master Narratives and Their Discontents, with an introduction by Anna Armar, in the series Theories of Modernism and Postmodemism in the Visual Arts, vol. 1. (Cork, Ireland: University College Cork Press; New York: Routledge, 2005).
25. An example of this kind of text, in which agreements about the kinds of misunderstandings that are built into translation comes to serve as a discussion of the subject itself, is the conversation between W.J.T. Mitchell, Jacqueline Lichtenstein, Gottfried Boehm, and Marie-José Mondzain in What Is an Image?, vol. 2 of the Stone Summer Theory Institutes (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, forthcoming).
27. This is explored in my Master Narratives and Their Discontents, op. cit.
28. This is a subject of discussion in Renaissance Theory, op. cit.
29. Cahill, Fantastics and Eccentrics in Chinese Painting, op. cit.
30. Panofsky’s position is explored in my Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts, op. cit., 272–97.
III The Argument


3. See Lewis Calvin and Dorothy Wulmsley, *Wang Wei: The Painter-Poet* (Rutland VT: C. E. Tuttle, 1968), 90. Reconstructing the work of Wu Daozi (c. 700–760) is a nearly impossible task, since much of it was probably destroyed in the Buddhist suppression of 843, too early for copies to be widely disseminated. For an account of Apelles’ “contest” see my “Marks, Traces, Traits, Contours, Orli, and Splendores: Nonsemiotic Elements in Pictures,” Critical Inquiry 21 (1995): 822–60. A sign of just how much Chinese painting has been assigned to Wu Daozi’s influence is Marsha Weidner’s observation that two fifteenth-century Chinese Buddhist paintings in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art “were still travelling in the shadow of Wu Daozi in 1993, when Richard Barnhart published them.” Weidner, “Two Ming Ritual Scrolls as Harbingers of New Directions in the Study of Chinese Painting,” Orientations, special issue in honor of Sherman Lee (January–February 2005): 64–73, quotation on 66.


5. *HR*, xiii. For Max Loehr and Wen Fong on the Song-Yuan division, see James Cahill, “On the Periodization of Later Chinese Painting: The Early to Middle Ch’ing (K’ang-hsi to Ch’ien-lung) Transition,” in The Transition and Turning Point in Art History, Ninth International Symposium organized by the Department of Art History, Faculty of Letters, Kobe University (Kobe, 1990), 52–67. Cahill cites Max Loehr, “Phases and Content in Chinese Painting,” Proceedings of the International Symposium on Chinese Painting (Taipei: Palace Museum, 1972), 285–97, and Wen Fong, introduction to Images of the Mind, op. cit. Other parallels to the Renaissance are also available, but the theme of conscious archeology and history is sufficient for my purposes here. For other accounts of the importance of the Song-Yuan transition see *LM*; also Sirén, *A History of Early Chinese Painting* (Medici Society, 1933); and Loehr, “Phases and Content in Chinese Painting,” op. cit.


7. *HR*, 3, 5, 21 respectively; Wade-Giles changed to pinyin.


9. *PS*, 4: “We have spoken here of a ‘revival’ of Song painting styles in the early Ming, although, properly speaking, they had never quite dropped into total disuse in the intervening Yuan dynasty.”


16. According to tradition, the handscroll Wang Chuan Villa was transmitted via a copy attributed to Kuo Chung-shu, which was in turn “preserved” as a stone engraving in 1617. A full genealogy devolves from those two, and from other copies attributed to Chao Meng-fu, Li Kung-lin, and others. But the tradition is not reliable: Michael Sullivan, *Chinese Landscape Painting*, op. cit., suggests that the tradition of stone rubbings derives from Wang Wei’s text and not the original image. Although forty of Wang’s works were listed in the Sung Imperial collection, it is safe to assume that many of those were copies and misattributed works.
17. This may be studied in the way Dong Qichang thought he recognized Wang Wei’s style through the intermediary of a copy by Zhao Mengfu.
18. *LM*, part 1, vol. 1, 128–29 and 130. The last quotation is Sirén’s assessment of Tung’s meaning. Tung thought of Wang Wei as his principal artistic ancestor: a variation on a “family tree” kind of revisionist history that happens occasionally in the West, and operates by imagining that the historical field narrows as it recedes in time, and begins ultimately in a single point (in Western art one thinks primarily of Vasari’s codification of the singular position of Giotto).
19. For the *wu-Li lun*, or “no Lis theory,” see *LM*, vol. 1, 197, and *DM*, 118 and 125.
20. An interesting literature in this regard studies the few other surviving works by painters known primarily for just one or two paintings. See for example the attempt to broaden Guo Xi in Ping Foong, “Guo Xi’s Intimate Landscape and the Case of ‘Old Trees, Level Distance’,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 35 (2000): 87–115.
23. *PS*, 4, 5. Wade-Giles changed to pinyin. In the Ming other early traditions became important, such as the “Large and Small Generals Li,” also called the “two Lis,” Li Ssu-hsun (651–716) and his son Li Chao-tao (c. 670–730), and “Ching-Kuan,” named for Ching Hao and Kuan T’ung (ninth–tenth centuries); and there was also the association of Li T’ang (1049–1130) with the Ma-Hsia tradition in the Zhe School. Li T’ang is today discussed as a transitional figure who left the court of Hui-Tsung to work at Hangchou, the new capital of the Southern Song. This stricter historical placement allows scholars to emphasize the remnants of Northern Song “monumentalism” in his works, where later Chinese painters saw economic and aesthetic complicity with the South. These polarities did not present future generations with an entirely static field. Since the fundamental-style polarity Tung-Chü-versus-Li-Kuo was fixed, it remained to experiment with ways of combining and separating its components. Its invention is credited to Chao Mengfu, and it was dogma for Huang Gongwang, but the ways it was utilized varied greatly. See *HR*, 45, and *DS*, 4, 10.
24. For the “Ma-Hsia” style see Richard Barnhart’s comments: “It is really only with Yüan masters like Sun [Chun-tse] and Liu Yao that something described as the ‘Ma-Hsia’ style came to exist at all.” Barnhart, *Painters of the Great Ming: The Imperial Court and the Zhe School*, with essays by Mary Ann Rogers and Richard Stanley-Maker (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1993), 28, orthography altered.
Today the “Li-Kuo” pairing appears especially anachronistic, since Li Ch’êng (919–967) and Kuo Hsi (active c. 1068–78) are now imagined as quite different artists; and indeed, Li Ch’êng was separated from Kuo Hsi by Ming artists such as Wen Chengming; and Su Chê, Su Shih’s brother, thought Kuo Hsi had “made great progress” over Li Ch’êng. (See LM, vol. 1, 216; and see Sirén’s own comments on the difference, 217–18.) Yuan and Ming artists apparently did not concern themselves with the development, often cited in Western literature, from the “archaic” painting of Li-Kuo to the fantastic, even “grotesque” creations of Hsu Taoning and Kuo Hsi: for them “Li-Kuo” was a prototype, a kind of static perfection. “Grotesque” is from CLP, 24, referring to Kuo Hsi’s Trees on the Distant Plain (private collection, New York).

25. A parallel is the pairing Masaccio/Masolino, which only exists as a live issue in scholarship up until the mid-twentieth century. See Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts, op. cit., Chapter 8.

26. The phrases are from LM, vol. 1, 198; and compare Mi Fei’s description of Li Ch’êng the page before.


28. LM, vol. 1, 208–9. However, the local influence of Tung-Chü and Li-Kuo continued in their respective areas, as witness the Yuan artists Ch’en Lin, Sheng Mou, and Wu Chen, who were primarily allied to the Tung-Chü tradition, and the artists T’ang Ti, Chu Te-jun, and Ts’ai Chih-po, who were related to the Li-Kuo tradition. See HR, 50.


33. Those are traits emphasized by Vasari, and later revived in the nineteenth century; but here I am not concerned with the history of Western descriptions. For the history of perceptions of Masaccio’s style see the account of the Brancacci Chapel in my Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts, op. cit.

34. Evidence of interest in this style in Zhao’s circle and in the early Yuan is provided by copies such as the Dragon Boat Festival, done “by some artist close to Chao Meng-fu.” See HR, 43.

35. This is adduced in relation to Zhao’s River Village: The Pleasures of Fishing, where it appears in the foreground pines, the “flat-topped banks and the bleak river plain.” See HR, 44.

36. This painter is known by a single work; see HR, 42 and plate 93. Cahill traces Zhao’s skeletal brushwork to late Northern Sung painters such as Ch’iao.

37. The Autumn Colors in the Ch’iao and Hua Mountains has been described as an essay partly in the Tung Yüan manner. It has compositional similarities, including a “removed middle ground,” and various “spatial and proportional inconsistencies” announce the archaist intention. See Chu-tsing Li, The Autumn Colors on the Ch’iao and Hua Mountains: A Landscape by Chao Meng-fu (Ascona, 1965), and the same author’s “Stages in Development in Yüan Landscape Painting, Parts 1 and 2,” National Palace Museum Bulletin IV no. 2 (1969): 1–10, and IV no. 3 (1969): 1–12, and “The Development of Painting in Soochow in the Yüan Dynasty,” Proceedings of the International Symposium on Chinese Painting (Taipei, 1970), 483–500. Li Chu-tsing’s analysis is partly followed in HR, 41–42.

38. HR, 40.

39. 青緑 qìnglǜ is short for 石緑花青 shílǜ huāqīng, “stone green and flower blue,” more specifically evocative than the abbreviated form.

41. Ch’ien Hsüan’s * Dwelling in the Floating Jade Mountains* may have precedence over *Autumn Colors in the Chi’iao and Hua Mountains* as the earliest deliberate archaism. See *HR*, plate 7.

42. See for example *River Village: The Pleasures of Fishing* (*HR*, color plate 2), in which a Li-Kuo middle ground is succeeded by a Southern background, or *Village by the Water* (ibid., plate 13), in which Li-Ch’êng trees are backed by a swampy Southern plain. The question of combinations and erasures of the style polarity is a complicated one. See Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, op. cit., 50, for the idea that “[m]ost painters seem indeed to have followed one or the other tradition, and only a few, such as Shen Mou, attempted to combine them.” Tung Ch’i-ch’ang declared that “different styles must not be mixed”—indicating they had been. Quoted in Waley, *Introduction*, op. cit., 248.

43. This is assuming that the *giornata* including Christ’s face was done by the artist who executed the surrounding figures. Roberto Longhi has argued that Masolino is responsible for the “feminine” head. See Longhi, “Fatti di Masolino e Masaccio,” *Studi sul Quattrocento*, 1910–1967 (Florence, 1975), 3–66. Against Longhi it might be urged that other quattrocento paintings, e.g. Pollaiuolo’s *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, show appropriate changes in technique between the martyr and his tormentors.

44. There were undoubtedly earlier moments in painting that were self-aware. As Ladislav Kesner pointed out, there are for example Zhao Boju’s blue and green landscapes in the eleventh century, which refer back to Tang precedents. Outside of landscape painting, the examples reach back even further; there are, Kesner adds, “conscious archaisms in Zhou bronzes.” (Personal communication, 2008.)


46. See *HR*, 74–84. He names, as “art-historically unconscious” followers of the Ma-Hsia tradition, Sun Chün-tse and Chang Yüan, and as followers of the Li-Kuo tradition, Yao Yen-Ch’ing, Chu Te-jun, and Ts’ai Chih-po.

47. See *HR*, 70, 71. Cahill mentions Wu Chen’s *Autumn Mountains* (his plate 24), which is an ambitious imitation of Chü-jan. The painting “whimsically” and “playfully” imitates the conventional architecture of the early Song.


49. The first quotation is from *HR*, 119, and the second is quoted in ibid. from Juan Yüan (1764–1849).

50. See *HR*, 120–27.

51. *HR*, 119.

52. *HR*, 122.


56. For introductions to the Ming see, in addition to sources already cited, Yoshio Yonezawa, *Painting in the Ming Dynasty* (Tokyo: Maruyama and Company, 1956), and Harrie Vanderstappen, “Painters at the Early Ming Court and the Problem of a Ming Painting Academy,” *Monumenta Serica* 15 no. 2 (1956) and 16 nos. 1 and 2 (1957).

57. Cahill, *PS*, 57, Wade-Giles changes to pinyin. The passage continues: “Wang Fu … was probably the earliest to exemplify this phenomenon.”

58. Their detached, somewhat bloodless style was already at two removes from its models, since “the process of homogenization of Yuan styles had begun already in the works of secondary late Yuan masters such as Chao Yuan, Ma Wen, [and] Ch’ en Ju- yen.” Cahill, *PS*, 57.


61. See *HR*, 45, for this opinion. The two works adduced are *Gazing at the Stream* (1309, previously unpublished, Cahill’s plate 18) and *A Ch’ en Meeting* (unpublished).

62. *PS*, 213. “Warm” is often used in relation to Shen Chou; see for example Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, op. cit. 195: “Shen Chou is something of an extrovert, who cannot help infusing a human warmth into his paintings.”


64. *ED*, 38–41, 43, and passim.


67. *PS*, 213, 214, 215. The last quotation is in contrast with Shen Zhou’s “relaxation and amiability.”


69. *PS*, 218, 219: “Li T’ang looms large at the outset of the period, and his conservative followers, later in the Sung, notably Liu Sung-nien, seem more important as stylistic models than Ma Yüan or Hsia Kuei in the same period. Chao Meng-fu is the commanding figure in the early Yuan and Ch’ en Hsiian a much lesser one. The Four Great Masters of the late Yuan are especially revered…” See also A. Clapp, in Richard Edwards, *Art of Wen Cheng-ming*, op. cit., 11: “Wen acquired the distinctive manners of Huang Gongwang,.., Wu Chen, Ni Tsan, and Wang Meng in the first decade of the 1500’s and continued to work in all of them thereafter, sometimes keeping the style fairly pure, more often as he matured, selecting and combining certain features in ways that eventually obliterated the source.” See further ibid., 60 ff. for Huang Gongwang’s influence.
70. PS, 218. For an idea of just how far Wen could get from Li Ch’êng, see his *Awaiting Snow in Winter*, discussed in WCM, 156 ff.
71. Named after Jing Hao (c. 855–915) and Guan Tong (early 10th century).
72. Especially Mi Fu, Li Gonglin (c. 1040–1106), and lesser artists such as Zhao Boju (b. c. 1162), Zhao Bosu (1124–82), Qiao Zhongchang (act. early twelfth century), and Zhao Lingrang (act. c. 1070–1100). PS, 219, and WCM, 11.
73. WCM, 1. Against this see Craig Clunas’s evaluation (discussed in the closing Sections).
74. A comparison to the Renaissance, based on “wealth, a love of the arts and a devotion to ‘classical’ truth” is suggested in WCM, 1. The same comparison is made by A. Clapp, in *Art of Wen Chengming*, op. cit., 13: “Wen’s position vis-à-vis his inheritance was the same as the later sixteenth century in the West vis-à-vis the High Renaissance.” The latter statement seems more nearly correct, but as I suggest below, the period of the *maniera* is not as apposite a parallel as the classicizing early Baroque.
75. The quoted terms are from PS, 92. A major difference between the two artists is that Shen Chou’s sense of spontaneous intimacy was often achieved by his “arbitrary” cutting of the frame, as if he were “opening the window of a sedan chair in which he is escorting the viewer,” and his innovative device of letting the horizon disappear above the top border of the painting (PS, 93). Nothing in Poussin embraces that kind of apparent randomness, although both painters produced works that inspire an analogously leisurely, touristic seeing.
76. PS, 219.
77. For Wen’s attitude to the Southern Sung see WCM, 12.
78. WCM, 12: “A statistical survey of the surviving records and paintings indicates that Wen resorted to Chao as model far more often than any other old master…”
79. DM, xv, in reference to late Ming artists.
80. This quality is one that could be pursued through T.J. Clark’s meditations on Poussin; see his *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
82. “Abstraction” in the sense in which I will be applying it to Tung also appears in Ch’êng calligraphy. See for example Huang Shen’s *Thoughts about the Li Brothers*, reproduced in Shen Fu et al., *From Concept to Context, Approaches to Asian and Islamic Calligraphy* (Washington, 1986). 56. Huang compressed columns and spaces between characters, and tilted the axes of characters, producing an effect in which the “whole composition” becomes “a pattern of rich variation.”
84. *The Restless Landscape: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Period*, edited by James Cahill (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1971), 5, makes the same parallel: “A pivotal figure among [Yuan] painters was Huang Gongwang… who, like Cézanne, accomplished a fundamental redirection of painting while ostensibly aiming at nothing more than conveying on a flat surface, more compellingly than anyone had done before, the physical presence of ordinary objects.” Cahill also speaks of Huang in Cézannean terms: as the inventor of a “mode of abstract construction”
(ibid., 115). But attractive as these specific parallels can be, I think the more general comparison is more apt; note for example that Cézanne and Tung Ch’i-ch’ang share a “technical inability to imitate closely the styles of old masters” (Cahill, Compelling Image, op. cit., 37). That inability has integral relations to the painters’ mature styles in each case.

85. DM, 92, 125. The “abstraction” in Tung is related to an extra-human quality—often his landscapes are uninhabited—which the artist recognized he got from Ni Tsan, whose landscapes are often empty of habitation save for the stereotypical t’ing-tzu, the four-posted rest shelter. The relation between uninhabited landscapes and abstractionist concerns is interesting, and pertains both to psychological issues and to the limitations on figural abstraction. However, while “deliberate distortion” and “creative distortion” are relatively unproblematic, we would not want to go much further toward naming the psychological content of that distortion. Hence I think “expressive distortion” is already problematic. Certainly Tung’s distortions are not “fantastic distortions” in the sense that Wu Pin’s are. (The three phrases including “distortion” are from Sullivan, The Arts of China, op. cit., 222, 198, and 199 respectively.)

86. DM, 115.

87. Cahill tentatively suggests that Tung’s “paintings must have been felt, at least by the more perceptive, as visual analogues for a widespread loss of faith in an intelligible order in the world, in the stability and permanence of the Confucian state, even, to some degree, in the continuing efficacy of the practice of validating the present through values transmitted from the past” (DM, 128).


89. DM, 98, 101, 102.

90. DM, 128.


93. DM, 115.

94. DM, plate 41.

95. DM, 95, speaking of the possibility that Tung was influenced by Western art. That possibility, it seems to me, need not “take away” anything from his achievement; and in this context, it raises his status still more, since he then pushed Western illusionism to places it was not to occupy in the West until Cézanne and Picasso.

96. DM, 100.


98. DM, 116.


101. DM, 118.


104. DM, 100, speaking specifically of the influence of Wang Meng and Tung Yüan.

105. For example in Wu Pin and related artists such as Fu Shan, Tai Ming-Yüeh, and Chang Jui-t’u. DM, 165, 177.
106. CLP, 93.
107. CLP, 97.
108. CLP, 102.
110. The lack of even reasonably successful models (at least, ones that might be emulated) in the past four centuries since Western contact makes this issue one of the most difficult in contemporary art. That is why I do not think it is appropriate to assume that as cultures become more mixed, and artists become more “confident,” solutions will present themselves “automatically.” See Wen Fong, “The Modern Chinese Art Debate,” op. cit., 304: “For a while longer, the struggle in the Chinese academies between traditionalists and Westernizers will rage on. But as security and confidence return to Chinese life, I hope traditionalists and rebels alike will feel free to study and imitate a multitude of models, from China’s own past as well as from the West, and literally re-invent themselves.”
111. That vacuum is the subject of a book and conference on contemporary Chinese painting, “What is Contemporary Chinese Art?”, co-organized with Qigu Jiang, set for Beijing University in 2009.
112. There are counter-examples, work that treats contemporary Chinese artists thoughtfully and critically. But the great majority of the literature is more along the lines of Contemporary Chinese Women Painters (Beijing: Wai wen chu ban she, 1995), or China’s New Art, Post-1989, edited by Valerie Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart T.Z. Gallery, 1993).
114. I am not decrying the lack of historical scholarship or critical analysis, as much as noting it. The idea that the art market somehow needs academics and art theory has been a refrain in Western criticism since the 1960s. It is analyzed, from a non-prescriptive point of view, in my pamphlet What Happened to Art Criticism? (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2003).

IV The Endgame, and the Qing Eclipse

2. I have written two critiques of Danto: in Master Narratives and Their Discontents, op. cit., and in reference to his problematic ongoing practice of art criticism after the proposed end of the history of art, in What Happened to Art Criticism? (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press [distributed by University of Chicago Press], 2003).
3. This is argued with further references to such texts in my Poetics of Perspective (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 259–60.
5. CLP, 132.
10. BR, 497.
18. Twentieth-century Chinese painting is the subject of part of a work in progress. I noted the denial of Fu Baoshi’s Westernness in Hangzhou in 1998; but one of his surviving students, Yan Bo, told me Fu Baoshi never denied he was influenced by the West, and he took it as a natural component of his work.
22. Postmodernism in this book refer to selected understandings of Western postmodernism; I am not engaging with the expression *hou xiandai zhuyi* or its uses in contemporary Chinese criticism.
24. Sullivan, *Arts of China*, op. cit., 224: “The art of Shih-t’ao, and indeed of all the Individualists, represents a private protest against the new academicism of the literati. But as the Ch’ing settled deeper into that stagnation which seems to have been the fate of every long-lived dynasty in Chinese history, the lamp of individualism burned more and more dimly. During the nineteenth century the growing foreign menace produced not more action but paralysis at the centre, and patronage shrank to almost nothing. A handful of literati kept the tradition alive, however, until in the twentieth century there took place a revolution over which the artists themselves had little control.”
27. Fenollosa, _Epochs of Chinese & Japanese Art_ (New York: Dover, 1963 [1912]), vol. 2, 51–52, 141, 144, 147. To Fenollosa, the Southern Song was the epitome of Chinese painting, and the _wen-jen_ were “pedants,” “Confucian atheists,” who clung to their “simple and uniform” ideal of the past (ibid., 140 ff.).
32. Burnett’s argument is that the pejorative stain of the English word can be removed by considering it as part of an overlooked discourse that also includes expressions like “distorted” (_變體 biàntǐ_ and “transforming” or “transfigurative” (_變形 biànféng_), and that seems a promising way forward. Burnett, “A Discourse on Originality in Late Ming Chinese Painting Criticism,” op. cit., 523.
33. This point is also made in Burnett, “A Discourse on Originality in Late Ming Chinese Painting Criticism,” op. cit., 5523.
40. _BR_, 469.
41. Barnhart, _Painters of the Great Ming: The Imperial Court and the Zhe School_, with essays by Mary Ann Rogers and Richard Stanley-Maker (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1993), 325.
43. See Robert Harrist’s elegant dismissal: “Coined in the nineteenth century, this label was one of the most useless in the number-happy history of Chinese critical writing on art.” Harrist, review
Notes to pp. 117–122


48. CLP, 124.

49. CLP, 129.


51. CLP, 129.

52. Klaas Ruitenbeek, Discarding the Brush, Gao Qipei (1660–1734) and the Art of Chinese Finger Painting (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1992); the quotation is from a review in Oriental Art 39 no. 2 (1993): 54–55, quotation on 55.

53. A good reflection on such questions is Thierry de Duve, Faîre école (ou la refaire?), nouvelle édition revue et augmentée (Geneva, 2008).

54. See also DM, Chapter 2.

55. CLP, 123, Wade-Giles changed to pinyin.


57. “Spindly trees” is from FE, 48.


60. The connection with Kung Hsien is mentioned in FE, 50.


63. This is said of the architecture in Wu Chen’s copy of Autumn Mountains after Chü-jan (Taipei). See HR, plate 24.

64. Sullivan, Arts of China, op. cit., 222.


66. This characterization is in CLP, 111–13.

67. The famous passage in which he asserts his independence of precedent is cited for example in Torao Miyagawa, Chinese Painting, op. cit., 147. As Jonathan Hay correctly observes, as a statement of autonomy it is also deeply dialogic. See Hay, Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 229, and the discussion of precedents (which is in turn indebted to Western concepts of artists’ indebtedness to the past, especially those of Michael Fried and through him, Harold Bloom).
64. The disconnection of the Renaissance from modernism and postmodernism is a theme of Renaissance Theory, op. cit.
66. FJC, 167. See also Damisch, Moves: schaken en kaarten met het museum = Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum, with an essay by Ernst van Alphen (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 1997).
67. FJC, 167.
68. FJC, 170.
69. A painter such as Ad Reinhardt, acutely aware of the limited field of possibilities, defines “un champ—on serait aujourd’hui porté à écrire: un lieu—commun, partagé: le lieu, le champ d’un jeu où ceux qu’on à cités, bien d’autres encore, auront été impliqués, chacun pour sa part et avec ses intérêts, suivant sa stratégie propre.” FJC, 157. I thank Laure Faber for bringing this passage to my attention.
70. FJC, 154, quoted in Bois, Painting as Model (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), and in “Painting as Model,” October 37 (1986): 125–37, quotation on 134. Henceforth Painting as Model will be abbreviated PM and the article “Painting as Model” as “PM.”
71. “PM,” 135.
76. Gombrich, “The Leaven of Criticism in Renaissance Art,” is discussed in my Master Narratives and Their Discontents, op. cit.
79. Kuo, Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Pin-hung’s Late Work, in the series Asian Thought and Culture vol. 35 (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).
82. Personal communication, 2008.
83. This is so even though both artists—but especially Wenda Gu—have extended their work far beyond the experiments with Chinese painting and calligraphy that continue to attract attention in the Western press. For Wenda Gu and landscape painting, see the typically short notice by Carol Lufty, “Wenda Gu Has Infused the Genre of Chinese Ink Painting With Unexpected Characters—and Materials,” ARTnews 99 no. 8 (2000): 140.
84. Among the movements that call for extended study are New Literati Painting (新文人画, xīn wénrénhuà) and Post Literati Painting (后文人画, hòu wénrénhuà). For the early twentieth-century roots of the literati revival see Aida-Yuen Wong, “A New Life for Literati Painting in the Early Twentieth Century: Eastern Art and Modernity, a Transcultural Narrative?” *Artibus Asiae* 60 no. 2 (2000): 297–326, especially the discussion of Chen Hengke 陈衡恪 (Chen Shizeng, 1876–1923) on 306. For Shanghai painters see “Innovation within Tradition: Shanghai Scholar-Painters of the Early Twentieth Century,” *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 58 no. 3 (2001): 14–19. There are many examples of individual painters who could sustain the attention of a scholarly monograph: Yang Zhengxin 揚正新 (1942– ) paints gestural marks that are comparable to Western photographic abstractions (see Shelagh Vainker, *Modern Chinese Painting: The Reyes Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* [Oxford: Ashmolean, 1996], 80–81, cat. 109); Wu Guanzhong 吴冠中 (b. 1919), paints very free patterned landscapes (for example, one in the collection of the Ostasiatisches Museum, Berlin).


V Postscripts


3. This is argued in my letters to James Cahill, in *Stones From Other Mountains*, edited by Jason Kuo (forthcoming), and in “Can We Invent a World Art Studies?” in a book on world art studies, edited by Wilfried van Damme and Kitty Zijlmans (Leiden, forthcoming).
4. In addition to the sources in the previous note, see *Art and Globalization*, vol. 1 of the Stone Summer Theory Institute, edited by James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, forthcoming).

5. It is important to note that while this makes me concerned about the nature of the project called art history, there is another, more optimistic interpretation. Ladislav Kesner epitomizes this for me; he wrote me, in relation to an earlier version of this MS, “I do believe there is an immense benefit in Western art history taking over the Chinese painting tradition in early 20th century. When I was looking at Chinese paintings with Fu Shen in the Freer gallery, or with C.C. Wang (Wang Jiqian) in his studio in New York in 1990, I had an acute sense of the distance between my ability to see and comprehend and what surely was theirs—the contemporary living embodiment of a Chinese understanding of the painting. But of course Fu Shen is part of Western art history and C.C. Wang was not outside of western art world either. So to repeat: we have nothing better to do than to continue practicing Western art history on Chinese painting, provided art history has allowed itself to absorb and utilize Chinese ways of seeing and thinking about painting.” (Personal communication, 2008.)


8. Harrist continues: “This view, which reflects trends in the not-so-new ‘new art history,’ leads her to focus on social and economic issues that determined the history of taste; visual analysis is not her primary concern. Nevertheless, the occasional readings of paintings she does offer are so consistently rich and insightful that it seems regrettable that she did not address more tenaciously the pictorial innovations that Yangchow painting displays.” Harrist, review of Ginger Cheng-chi Hsu, *A Bushel of Pearls: Painting for Sale in Eighteenth-Century Yangchow* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 no. 4 (2002): 850–52, quotation on 851.

9. See Shane McCausland’s review in *Art History* 25 no. 3 (2002): 380–81: “In terms of his book’s value to Chinese art history, Hay must face the consequences of his ‘downplaying … issues that would normally be thought important, even primordial’ (xv). In completely sacrificing style and connoisseurship for social history, Hay may have failed to enlighten all readers as to the broad base of his own critical judgment.” It is possible to agree that without critical engagement with visual analyses, it can be difficult to understand an author’s sense of which works matter—even without agreeing that those analyses need to look at “style” or “connoisseurship.” McCausland continues: “Hay’s analysis of form in the paintings is to be found in his identification of ‘iconic signs’ (a bridge as ‘transition’; a mountain as ‘stability’), and of ‘indices’ of distance, space, height, and so on. Works … were adjudged worthy [to be included in the book] on their merits within Hay’s overall social history of Shitao’s painting …” (quotation on 381).


11. See the long and largely unsympathetic review by Michael Fuller; he does not believe Murck’s central claim regarding a series of paintings by Song Di. Fuller also remarks on the book’s propensity for political meanings: “Murck’s assertion that the ‘meaning’ of the painting [*Early Spring*] is its paraphrasable political message reveals a serious flaw in her general interpretive scheme, even though it is a view shared by many moralists within the Chinese tradition itself. This flattening of the aesthetic structuring of imagery and allusions to the larger cultural traditions...
insists that political centrally defines meaning for actions, objects, and individuals. Yet much of the cultural and intellectual transformations within Song *literati* culture was an attempt to find source of meaning outside of service to the state. So there is a certain irony in Murck’s insistence that this will not do—that meaning must be dragged back to political argument. Guo Xi’s *Early Spring* may encompass themes about the state of current politics, but its iconography and aesthetics resist reduction to such themes.” Michael Fuller, review of Murck, *Poetry and Painting*, in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 61 no. 2 (2001): 442–53, quotation on 443–44. For a Daoist reading see for example Liu Yang, “Fantastic Mountains: Where Man Meets Nature in Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Oriental Art* 55 no. 3 (2005–6): 2–21.


17. Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004). The jacket copy is promotional, and so it is reasonable to assume the line responds to what was perceived as a common interest among potential readers. (Such texts are anonymous, but in theory they are always vetted by authors, and written by them or by their editors.)

18. The study of gifts and exchanges is inspired principally by the work of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss. In a review, Jennifer Purtle raises an interesting objection to the use of such sources—she finds Mauss and other theorists Clunas uses to be very Western. Using the anthropological terms “emic” (in this context, meaning a description that would be meaningful to Wen Zhengming) and “etic” (a description that would be meaningful to contemporary, Western readers of Clunas’s book), she notes that readers “might consider how the etic framework of Western art history responds to, reconstructs, and perhaps remakes, the emic categories of the mid-Ming.” In other words, she doubts that the critical language of exchanges and gifts, and the sense of Wen’s paintings as cultural objects, gets closer to the original Ming Dynasty ways of conceptualizing Wen’s output. This thesis, if it were developed, would be directly pertinent to my argument in this book; unfortunately, I have no points of comparison that would help me judge. As time passes, if Clunas’s book is seen increasingly as a product of Western (or Anglo-American) academic preoccupations of the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, then Purtle’s claim may seem increasingly compelling; but it would still be necessary to revisit the original sources to construct an alternate “emic” self-description of Ming Dynasty exchanges. From my point of view as an outsider, Purtle’s critique seems very plausible simply because anthropological and sociological theories have been in vogue in North Atlantic art history from the 1980s onward. The same issues are raised in my response to an essay by Jonathan Hay, discussed in Chapter 1. See Purtle, “Even Exchange: Craig Clunas’s *Elegant Debts* and What Art History and Sinology

19. Clunas offers a useful précis of this aspect of his book in his review of Jonathan Hay’s book on Shitao. I quote it here because it might be overlooked by readers of Clunas’s book: “Shitao is ‘an artist’ in a way someone like Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), a figure of the previous century who is often taken to personify the literati ideal, is not; Shitao has none of Wen’s extensive obituary texts written for aunts or other relatives (indeed, there is no family), no failed political career with its constant search for patronage, commemorated in a legion of poems, no commemorate essays for the coming and goings of local grandees. Similarly, of other figures of the Chinese canon, one could argue that Shen Zhou (1427–1509) was a landlord who painted and Dong Qichang (1555–1636) a senior official who painted. They were not primarily ‘artists,’ even if art history as a discipline has tended to occlude these other activities that formed their identities. But for Shitao the works are the main thing requiring explanation.” Clunas, review of Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), in *Art Bulletin* 84 no. 4 (2002): 686–89, quotation on 688.

20. One way to make the case that a study of Wen’s gifts and debts is really the larger, abstract framework for a study of Wen’s paintings is to note, as Clunas does, that Wen also engaged in metaphorical exchanges with Li Cheng, Zhao Mengfu, Mi Fu, and others. In that sense, terms like *fang* (tradition) become part of the economy of exchange (*ED*, 160). Another way to answer the question is to note that contemporaries of Wen, such as a diarist named Li Ruhua (1427–1509) was a landlord who painted and Dong Qichang (1555–1636) a senior official who painted. They were not primarily ‘artists,’ even if art history as a discipline has tended to occlude these other activities that formed their identities. But for Shitao the works are the main thing requiring explanation.” Clunas, review of Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), in *Art Bulletin* 84 no. 4 (2002): 686–89, quotation on 688.

21. It is possible to argue that Clunas’s book is not the abstract or general basis of a possible study of Wen’s paintings, but a different kind of study. That argument could be pursued by comparing Clunas’s book with studies of exchanges and gifts outside art history. One could look, for example, at Eva Shan Chou, “Tu Fu’s ‘General Ho’ Poems: Social Obligations and Poetic Response,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 60 no. 1 (2000): 165–204. For me, at least, such comparisons suggest that Clunas’s book is indeed outside the realm of specifically visual questions.
Index

Abe, Stan, 5
Abstract Expressionism, 37, 48
abstraction, 41, 90–91
academicism, 92
Action painting, 36
Afghanistan, 28
Alberti, Leon Battista, 77, 79
aletheia, 16
Ames, Roger, 38–39, 53
An-yi Pan, 129
Apelles, 53, 67
Araeen, Rasheed, 6
archaizing art, 87
"art-historical art," 84–85
art history, discipline of, 139
Art Institute of Chicago, 24
asymptotic model of understanding
China, 39
atomization, 47; definition of, 17
avant-garde, parallels with China, 46
axc-cut strokes, see fupicun

Bachhofer, Ludwig, 2–3
Bada Shanren, 45, 117, 120–21
Badiou, Alain, 14
Barnhart, Richard, 4, 33, 51–52, 107, 114
Baroque, 2–3, 6, 9, 13, 17
Beck, James, 23
Beckett, Samuel, 125
Bell, Roger, 17

Belting, Hans 1, 22
Benjamin, Walter, 14
Bhabha, Homi, 14, 59
Bialostocki, Jan, 22
Bickford, Maggie, 141–42
Binyon, Laurence, 17–18, 21, 24, 107, 111, 137
bland, as a translation of pingdan, 13, 14
blue-and-green landscape, see qinglu shanshui
Blumenberg, Hans, 23
Bode, Wilhelm von, 22
Bois, Yve-Alain, 124, 126, 129
Breton, André, 36
Brinker, Helmut, 19
Brotherton, Elizabeth, 51
Brown, Claudia, 108
Brunelleschi, Filippo, 77, 79
Bryson, Norman, 23
Buck-Morss, Susan, 6
Bulgarian art, 7–8
Burnett, Katharine, 113

Cahill, James 1–2, 4, 42, 87, 136; criticism of
this book, 11; on the Ming Dynasty, 84; on
modernism in Chinese painting, 63; on the
Qing “decline,” 107, 110–11, 116; and Zhe
School painting, 51
Canclini, Néstor, 6
canon of painting, 20
Carrier, David, 22
Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, 97
Cézanne, 35, 42, 45, 90
Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 60–61
Chang Jin, 130
Cheng-chie Hsü, Ginger, 141
Cheng Zhengkui, 42, 93
Chen Hongshou, 110
Chen Lao-lian, 45
chess metaphor, 56, 122–23, 125
chiaroscuro, 120
China Institute, New York, 37
Chinese art history, definition of, 11
Chinese language, 52–53
Chinese painting, reasons why it appears marginal in the West, 20–21
Chinoiserie, 19
Cixous, Hélène, 39
classicizing art, 87
Clunas, Craig 2, 5, 47; Art in China, 52; on Wen Zhengming, 142–44; on Zhang Yanyuan, 58
colonialism, 59
comparisons, 15, 144–45; definition of, 10; of historical perspectives, 62–63; purpose of, 61; as versions of Western art history, 64
cubism, 35
cunfa, 72
Czech Republic, lack of Chinese art history in, 19
Dai Xi, 103
Dai Xiaoben, 117
Damisch, Hubert, 14, 43–44, 122–23, 126–29; anti-Hegelian, 56
Danto, Arthur, 101–2
Davidson, Donald, 39, 54–55
da Vinci, Leonardo, 29; see also Mona Lisa
Derrida, Jacques, 39, 129; on the trace, 44
devatā, 28
dian, 72
Didi-Huberman, Georges, 14
disegno, 77
distance, see perspective
divino, 30
“Dong-Ju,” 75, 79
Dong Qichang, 35, 42, 88–93, 120; absence of historical narratives after, 99; as an explanation for the Qing “decline,” 114–15; on Wang Wei, 72
Dong Yuan, 67, 75
Dürer, Albrecht, 64
Dvorak, Max, 64
eccentricity, 82
eccentrics, see guai
Egyptian art, 9
Eight Masters of Chin-ling, 116
Eight Masters of Nanjing, 116; listed, 117
Eight Strange Masters of Yangzhou, 103, 116; listed, 117
emic and etic, 16
endgame, 4, 122–23, 126–29; see also chess metaphor
Erstarrung, 102
fang, 53
Fan Kuan, 75, 108
Fan Qi, 117
Feld, Steven, 48
Feng Fanzhi, 94
fengge, 3–4
Feng Zhengjie, 94
Fenollosa, Ernest, 111, 137
Feng Zhengjie, 94
Fenollosa, Ernest, 111, 137
Fleming, John, 23
Fontana, Lucio, 44
Fontein, Jan, 115
Foster, Hal, 14, 113
Foucault, Michel, 14, 39, 47
Four Great Masters, 79–83, 87
Four Jens, 116
Four Masters of Anhui, 115–16, 118; “fifth master,” 118; listed, 117
Four Small Wangs, 116
Four Wangs, 93
France, lack of Chinese art history in, 19
Freud, 134–35
Friedrich, Caspar David, 3, 34
Fry, Roger, 17
Fu Baoshi, 108
Fu Hong, 94
fupicun, 72
Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 23
Gao Cen, 117
Gao Qipei, 117
Gao Xiang, 117
Gardner, Helen, 20, 23
gender studies, 139
genius, 47
Germany, Chinese art historians in, 19
globalism, 58
glocal, 58
Goethe, 47
Gombrich, E.H., 9; anti-Hegelian polemic,
55–56; Westernness of his interests, 22
Gong Xian, 111, 117, 120
Goodman, Nelson, 54
Greek art, 46
Greenberg, Clement, 46–47
Grünewald, Matthias, 31
guai, 63, 113–14, 120
Gu Kaizhi, 67, 78
Guo Xi, 72, 75, 141
Gu Wenda, see Wenda Gu
Hall, David, 38–39, 53
Han Dynasty, as Baroque, 11; as modern, 13
Han Gan, 29
Hangzhou, Academy of Art, 133
Hartt, Frederick, 23
Hay, John, 68–69
Hay, Jonathan, 14, 47–48, 141
Hegel, 55–56, 84
Heidegger, Martin, 60
hemp-fiber strokes, see pimacun
Heraclitus, 39
Hirst, Damian, 117
historiography, 57
history, as object of study, 79; as self-
representation, 138; structure of, 62; see
also reflexivity, "art-historical art"
Ho Ch’uan-hsing, 103
Hokusai, 28
homoiosis, 16
Hongren, 42, 117–18
Honour, Hugh, 23
Hopi, 54
Hsü, Ginger Cheng-chi, see Cheng-chi Hsü,
Ginger
Huang Binhong, 129
Huang Gongwang, 41, 72, 79–80, 117
Huang Shen, 117
Huang Ting, 93
huapai, 4
Hua Yan, 117
hua yi, 47
Huizong, Emperor, 9, 141–42; catalogues of
bronzes, 58
hypothesis, first, 24; second, 45; third, 57;
fourth, 62, 136; fifth, 110
Hliupersis, 53
imitation, 53
individualists, see priest-hermit-individualists
Ingres, 87
Ireland, lack of Chinese art history in, 19
irony, 87
Jameson, Fredric, 6, 59
Janson, Horst, 23
jingshen, 30
Jin Nong, 117
Ju-Hsi Chou, 108
Jung Ying Tsao, 108
Juran, 75
Kandinsky, Wassily, 36
Karmel, Pepe, 37–38
Kaufmann, Thomas DaCosta, 23
Kesner, Ladislav, 22–23, 130
Kircher, Athanasius, 17
Klee, Paul, 7, 35, 47–48
Kline, Franz, 37
Kokoschka, Oskar, 94
Koons, Jeff, 117
Kuncan, 117
Kuo, Jason, 1, 129
language, see translation; Chinese language
Latour, Bruno, 14
Lauer, Uta, 19
Ledderose, Lothar, 22
Lee, Sherman, 3, 24–28, 102–3, 130
Levine, Sherrie, 125
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 124
li, 54
Li Bai, 55
Li Cheng, 31, 33, 72; received elements of his
style, 75
Li Gang, 94
“Li-Guo,” 75, 79, 135
Li Huasheng, 130, 142
linmo, 53
Li Shan, 117
literati painting, 10, 14, 51–52, 114, 129; see
also New Literati
Liu Xiaodong, 94
lixue, 69
Loehr, Max, 2–3, 84
Lorrain, Claude, 24
Loudong school, 93
Luce, H. Christopher, 37
Luhmann, Niklas, 14
Luo Ping, 117

maniera, 28, 71, 83
Marin, John, 31, 35
Marin, Louis, 129
Marx, Karl, 60
Masaccio, 77, 79
masterpiece, idea of, 20
Mathieu, Georges, 36
“Ma-Xia,” 75–76, 79
Ma Yuan, 34, 75
Mei Qing, 117
Meissonnier, Jean-Louis-Ernest, 94
metaphysics, 6
methodologies, 57
Meyden, Hans van der, 113
Michelangelo, 29–30
Mi Fu, 46; on Li Cheng, 72
Ming Dynasty, 84–97
Min school, 107, 116
misunderstanding history, 134–35
Mi Youren, 47
modernism, applied to China, 47, 63–64;
Danto’s definition of, 101
Mona Lisa, 20
Motherwell, Robert, 37
Muqi, 141
Murck, Alfreda, 141

Nelson, Susan, 141
net, see weave of the net, problem of
New Academy school, 116
New Literati, 116
Newman, Barnett, 44
New York Times, 97
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 39
Ni Zan, 13, 80–82
non finito, 82
non-Western, definition of, 11
Onians, John, 22–23
Ortiz, Valérie, 47

Panofsky, Erwin, 22, 64; on megaperiods in
history, 62
Parmigianino, 82
past, as recoverable, 70
periods, 2; see also styles
perspective, 40–41, 82, 90–91
Phidias, 70
Picasso, 88, 90–92
picture idea, see hua yi
picturesque, 33
pimacun, 72
pingdan, 13, 80
piping biaozhun, 113
pluralism, 116
Polke, Sigmar, 117
Pollaiuolo, Antonio and Piero, 79
Pollock, Jackson, 35–36
Polygnotos, 53
pomo, 117
Popper, Karl, 55
postcolonial theory, 59–61
postmodernism, Chinese analogues, 63, 117,
121–22
Pound, Ezra, 55
Poussin, Nicolas, 87–88
Powers, Martin, 57–58
priest-hermit-individualists, 117
primitifs, les, 28
progress, 56
Propyläen Kunstgeschichte, 102
Protagoras, 67
qi, 30, 47, 54; definitions of, 36
Qian Du, 102
Qian Xuan, 4, 68, 77–78
Qiao Zhichang, 78
Qi Baihsi, 70
Qing Dynasty, 99–131
Qing Paleographic School, 103
qinglü shanshui, 78
Qiu Shihua, 130

Reardon, Jackie, 42
reflexivity in history, 70, 79, 137; see also “art-
historical art”
relievo, 77
Renaissance, 6, 53–54, 69, 83; supposed
lack of, in China, 17–18; Yuan Dynasty
compared to the, 67–68
renascence, 68–70; see also Renaissance
Ren Bonian, 108
Renoir, Auguste, 45
Rheims cathedral, 28
Richard, I.A., 15
Ricoeur, Paul, 14
Riegl, Alois, 51
Romanticism, 28, 35
Rorty, Richard, 39
Rosand, David, 14
Rowland, Benjamin, 3, 28–35, 136–37
Rumohr, Carl Friedrich, 11
Russia, as lacking a Renaissance, 18
Said, Edward, 13
Scandinavia, lack of Chinese art historians in,


Shen Zhou, 24, 28, 85
Shenzong, Emperor, 141
Shigemi Inaga, 45
Shiqi, 121
Shitao, 35–36, 43, 117, 121–22
Silbergeld, Jerome, 14, 69, 114, 130, 142
Silver, Larry, 22–23
Sirén, Osvald, 2–3
skiagraphia, 75
Song-Chiang school, 93
Song Dynasty, Binyon’s lack of interest in, 17;
Northern, 67, 72; polarity of Northern and
Southern, 75
Soulages, Pierre, 7
space, 40–41
Spivak, Gayatri, 59
Steiner, George, 15–16, 55
Stories of Art, 9, 11
strategy, artistic, 118
studiol o of Cosimo I, 50
styles, Western, 2–3, 139; see also periods
subjectivity, 48
sublime, 33
Sullivan, Michael, 35–36
Summers, David, 22–23
Su Shih, 47
Switzerland, Chinese art history in, 19
Tai Pen-hsiao, 118
Tang Dynasty, 67
Tan Ping, 94
terribilità, 30
Third Text, 8
Törmä, Minna, 19, 22
tradition, 53–54
translation, 60–61
transnational, 58
Two Stones, 121
U.K., Chinese art historians in, 19
unfinished art, see non finito
Unheimlichkeit, 134
Uzunov, Detchko, 7–8, 108
van Damme, Wilfried, 6–7
Van Gogh, Vincent, 3, 24, 45
Vasari, Giorgio, 70–71
Verfall, 102
visual studies 2
Waley, Arthur, 55, 111
Wang, C.C., 113, 130
Wang, Eugene, 114
Wang Hui, 93
Wang Jian, 93
wangling hua, 34
Wang Meng, 79–80, 82
Wang Shigu, 45
Wang Shimin, 42, 93
Wang Wei, 67, 72–73
Wang Yuanqi, 35–36, 93
Wang Yuping, 94
Warburton, William, 17
weave of the net, problem of, 50
Wei Dong, 94
Wenda Gu, 130
Wen Fong, 14, 40–41, 46, 68–69, 103, 136
Wen Jia, 37
wenren, see literati painting
Wen Zhengming, 37, 87–88, 142–44; copying
practices, 53
Western art, see Western art history; non-
Western, definition of
Western art history, 12
Western influence on Chinese painting, 111–12
Whistler, James Abbott McNeill, 28
Whorf, Benjamin, 54–55
Willetts, William, 111
Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, 11
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 39, 43, 126–27
Wong, Aida-Yuen, 110
Wong, Wucius, 130
Wu Changshuo, 103
Wu Daozi, 29–31, 67
Wu Hong, 117
Wu School, 51
Wu Zhen, 79–80, 117
Xia Gui, 75
Xiao Yuncong, 117–18
Xie Ho, 36
xiemao, 21
xinxue, 69
Xu Bing, 130
Xu Daoning, 75
Ye Xin, 117
yibi, 43–44
yihua, 36
Ying Yujian, 31, 36
youhua, 128
Yuan Dynasty, 67–84; as modern, 13
Yuan Four Talents of Souchou, 116
Yu-chi Lai, 108
Yujian, 141
Yun Nan-tian, 45
Yun Shouping, 111
Zeitgeist, 56
Zen painting, 37
Zhang Xiaogang, 94
Zhang Yanyuan, 9, 49; fundamentally different from Western art history, 58
Zhang Zongcang, 93
Zhao Mengfu, 4, 28, 40, 72, 77–78; collection of Dong Yuan, 67; as seen by Wen Zhengming, 86
Zha Shibiao, 117–18
Zheng Xie, 117
Zhe School, 51, 107, 114
zhongxi hebi, 29
Zhuangzi, 75
Zhu Da, 43
Zhuge, 130
Zhu Wei, 94
Ziarek, Krzysztof, 14
Zijlmans, Kitty, 6–7