

美术史与观念史

范景中 曹意强 刘 赦 主编

IX

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HISTORY
OF ART
AND
HISTORY
OF IDEAS

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Respecting China: A Reminiscence

James Cahill

Editorial Note

Ever since the publication of Professor James Cahill's Visual and Verbal (and Global?): Some Observations on Chinese Painting Studies in our **2005** volume, the discussion on the visual approach and its role in the study of art history has attracted academic awareness in China. Professor Cao Yiqiang's conceptualization about the intellectual model of the use of images as historical evidence, for instance, has further elaborated the significance of the visual approach. In the field of Chinese painting history, Professor Cahill set up a clear goal back to his **1976** Levenson article that art enters into history through the history of art. Exemplified in his **1979** Harvard Charles Elliot Norton Lecture "The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting", he argued that he is "less concerned here with what Ming-Ch'ing history tells us about the paintings than with the reverse: what Ming-Ch'ing painting, seen in its full dynamic complexity, tells us about the age." In so doing, he has bravely challenged existing canons, which are mostly based on textual traditions in China. The controversies that this visual approach has caused are both

healthy and stimulating for promoting scholarly discussion. In this vein, the accusation of his disrespecting China is utterly groundless. He recently put on his website an essay *Respecting China*, refuting such an accusation by revisiting a few typical examples in his career of his dedication to contributing significantly through a visual approach to the study of Chinese painting, as evidence of his deep feelings about China. Upon our request, Professor Cahill has agreed to have his essay republished in this journal, with some changes, to foster a continuing discussion on those fundamental issues addressed in his **2005** article.

What follows is a reminiscence about my career as a scholar-writer in the field of Chinese art history, inspired by a recent, troubling communication from someone who was once close and dear to me, but is now estranged and inclined toward negative judgments of my behavior. She writes me, after returning from a stay in China where she spent time at an art academy: "People said that you don't respect China, I have to agree with them."

What does it mean to say that I don't "respect China"? What have I done to acquire that reputation, even among a limited segment of the Chinese art-history world? Does having it trouble me? This essay is devoted to an attempted answer to those questions.

As a beginning: Imagine that you are—as, Dear Reader, you may well be—a non-Chinese China scholar, who has devoted a great part of your adult life to the study of China and its people. Now you have taken a stand that is somehow against the present Chinese government, and you find yourself accused of being anti-Chinese, or of "not really

understanding the Chinese". What would your rejoinder be? Your response might well take the form of an indignant statement that you remain as deeply devoted to the Chinese people as anyone could be, but you believe that the present Chinese government is harming them and also helping them, and you feel strongly that every one should have right to express their opinion. You would find yourself, I believe, enjoying a lot of support, both outside and inside China, for that stance.

Now, shift the ground to the field of Chinese art history, and specifically to the study of old Chinese paintings. You have, throughout most of your career, taken a similar stance—the opposition in this case being, not so much the Chinese government—or, at least, not the imperial power at the center of it—but the Chinese literati class, the minority male elite who attained position and power through literacy in old classical texts, and who dominated Chinese culture by, among other things, writing most of the books we have, and the most prestigious of them, so that they in effect “controlled the press.” You came to believe, long ago, that their near-total dominance had done great harm to the field of Chinese painting studies by monopolizing its criticism and connoisseurship, by working against the appreciation and preservation of non-literati painting (which made up the majority of what was produced, just as those who acquired and enjoyed it made up the great majority of Chinese painting’s audience). Now, by having held to this position tenaciously throughout most of your career, you are accused of not respecting the Chinese, or of “not really understanding” the central truths about Chinese painting. How do you respond? In much the same way, I think, as one would to the political charge, by pointing out that the continuing dominance of our field of study by the doctrines and dogma of this male-elite minority—a domination long ago overcome in other

areas of Chinese studies such as literary and social history—is anomalous and badly in need of revision. And by insisting that there is a huge gap between being anti-Chinese-literati and being anti-Chinese; and that, in truth, those who continue to defend the literati dogma are the ones who are harming Chinese culture by not opening it to include the tastes and beliefs of non-literati audiences and consumers of painting, including women and members of lower social and economic classes. That is the situation that I now find myself in, and that I need to respond to. The rest of this essay will be my response.

Early Career

The 1940s—1950s saw a great opening-up of Chinese painting studies to include the later periods—after, that is, the end of the Song Dynasty in the late 13th century. Early scholars such as Ludwig Bachhofer saw post-Song painting as marked by sharp decline. A few were recognizing the importance of Yuan Dynasty painting—Werner Speiser wrote on “Die Yuan-Klassik der Landschaftsmalerei”, Max Loehr wrote a major article on Wang Meng. Slightly later, Richard Edwards opened Ming painting with his dissertation and book on Shen Zhou, *The Field of Stones*. I myself, choosing a dissertation topic in 1955, decided (foolishly) to take on the “Four Great Masters” of Yuan-period landscape: Wu Zhen, Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, and Wang Meng. All four, that is. After amassing huge card-files on all four—their biographies, criticism of them, extant works attributed to them, etc—I decided to begin with Wu Zhen for the actual dissertation, not because he was the most attractive and exciting painter—he certainly wasn’t—but because he opened the way to a consideration of literati painting (*wenren*

hua) theory. The first half of my dissertation was devoted to that, and, although it was never published except in University Microfilm printouts, copies of it were in university history of art study rooms, where they were much used. Susan Bush's fine book *Chinese Literati on Painting* (1971) depended heavily on it, as she acknowledges. I myself published in 1960 a long paper titled "Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting" that included a shorter account of the rise of literati painting theory in the eleventh century; this caused quite a stir. The discussant at the 1958 conference where it was first presented (one of the major conferences on Confucianism organized by John Fairbank, Arthur Wright, and others; this one in Aspen, Colorado) began by noting that I wrote, not just as a commentator, but as a partisan—I seemed to regard *wenren hua* theory as a major advance over previous theoretical positions. And indeed, I was making arguments about how its divorcement of the meaning and expression of the painting from its subject, placing it instead in the expressive power of brushwork, the hand of the artist, was in harmony with the beliefs behind the then-current practices among abstract-expressionist painters in New York—I was reading a lot in such writers as Harold Rosenberg, and was deeply committed to that kind of thinking.

Now, half a century later, I find myself making arguments in the opposite direction, recognizing how the dominance of literati painting theory and dogma throughout the later centuries, from the Yuan Dynasty on, has had negative effect of discouraging the serious practice of other kinds of painting by relegating it to the scorned category of "professional" or "commercial," and by working against its positive assessment and its preservation. The outcome of this literati dominance, I now recognize, is the near-loss of huge areas of painting that might

otherwise have been preserved. To understand how serious, even disastrous, this has been, we have only to ask: How would our assessment of what we call Chan or Zen painting in the 13th—14th centuries, and of Southern Song (12th—13th centuries) painting in the “academic” styles, be diminished if the great examples we have of these kinds of painting had not been preserved in Japan? These areas of Chinese painting, presently (and rightly) among the kinds we value most highly, would be almost entirely lost, because of Chinese literati disdain and rejection.

I have always been fond of musical analogies, and one I used recently was to say that my career has taken on a form like that of Paul Hindemith’s piano suite *Ludus Tonalis*, in which the last section repeats the first, only backwards and upside down. From being a fervent partisan, that is, of the literati position in Chinese painting history to being one of its leading opponents. How did this fundamental overturning of an original stance come about?

It came about, not all at once but in a series of stages, as work on research and writing projects brought me up against literati positions and their intransigent defenders. My first paper delivered at a large public gathering was for the 1970 International Symposium held at the National Palace Museum in Taipei—the second grand get-together of the world’s Chinese painting specialists—those, at least, outside mainland China. (The first had been my own two-day “Chinese Art Treasures Post-mortem Conference” held in New York in 1962, at which questions of the authenticity and dating of works that had been shown in that exhibition were debated). Michael Sullivan had prepared a crucial (for our field) paper about the European print-illustrated books that were brought to China by Jesuits and so made accessible for artists there to see

by the late Ming and early Qing period; he suggested, without proposing examples, that these could have “influenced” Chinese painters of that period. I used Sullivan’s pictures and information, to which I had access through correspondence with him (and through his generosity in giving me such access) to write and present a paper on “Wu Bin and His Landscape Paintings”, showing with comparisons how this little-recognized late Ming master had adopted important “stylistic ideas” (as I called them) from these foreign prints into his paintings. The response among Chinese participants was explosive. Older scholars, such as Rao Zongyi, merely suggested that the strange features of Wu Bin’s landscapes might have come instead from his viewing of real strange scenery. But two young Chinese scholars, clearly representing a wider group, delivered fiery, red-in-the-face responses, denouncing the idea that the painters of China had turned to foreign sources for some of their innovations. Their fall-back position, since the adoption was clear and beyond dispute, was that only minor Chinese artists could have committed it; Wu Bin, therefore, was after all a minor artist. I responded by pointing out the circularity of their argument: only minor artists could...etc., therefore Wu Bin was a minor artist—and adding that Dong Qichang, the greatest literati painter of that time, was sitting in the center of the circle and smiling.

Harvard Lectures

By 1978—1979, when I spent a year at Harvard as the Charles Eliot Norton Lecturer, delivering the series of six lectures at the end of the year that were later (1982) published as *The Compelling Image*, my observations about what and how late Ming and early Qing artists had

learned from European pictures had expanded greatly, to become a major theme within those lectures. I had also begun to argue that what we could read in preserved Chinese writings, even when these were written by the artists themselves, could not be trusted to tell us “the whole truth” about our subject. After the second lecture, which was about Dong Qichang, a young man who had studied with Nelson Wu, pioneer scholar of Dong Qichang, came up to say, “Old Dong really got hard knocks tonight!” And my principal host at Harvard, John Rosenfield, told me, “People are saying that you are taking a very round-eyed (non-Chinese) approach to Chinese painting.”

Fu Shen, the younger scholar from Taiwan who had taken his doctorate at Princeton with Wen Fong and was now teaching at Yale, drove up weekly to hear the lectures with his wife Marilyn (also a Princeton Ph. D., later Marilyn Wong-Gleysteen). My then-wife Dorothy was with me in Cambridge, and our two children Nicholas and Sarah, both of them students at the University of Michigan, took off time to come for them. I arranged a dinner after the first lecture for all of us, expecting some kind of congratulations and commentary. I had under-estimated the discomfort that the lectures would arouse in Chinese listeners: at the dinner after the first, and at another after the second, Fu Shen was straight-faced and silent: these were solemn, non-celebrator dinners. Marilyn told me after the second or the third lecture, bless her, “It’s going to take our field ten years to absorb these lectures and respond to them.”

She was basically right, but there were a few quicker responses. K. C. Chang, or Zhang Guangzhi, the early China specialist at Harvard whom I had come to know well, told me after the second, “Jim, I can’t accept your ideas about what Chinese painters took from European

pictures until you can give me evidence.” “But K.C.,” I responded, “the evidence was up there on the screen, in the pictures! Surely...” But no, he meant—as conservative Chinese scholars usually do—written evidence, in books of the time. And of course there was none—no Chinese artists would have admitted to drawing on the foreign pictures, nor would critics of the time have recognized and acknowledged that they were doing so. In other words, there could be no “evidence,” so it never happened. I was to encounter this kind of criticism throughout my later career, investigating as I was developments and issues in Chinese painting history that the Chinese writers, for whatever reason, had failed to write about. And these developments and issues were to become, not coincidentally, the ones that struck me as most interesting, most worth writing about.

(K.C. Chang himself was to make the mistake, as many saw it, late in his life, of insisting on finding “written evidence” when there was none—using passages from late Zhou writings in interpreting Shang—early Zhou bronze designs, to which they could not properly be made to apply. David Keightley, among others, criticized him for this.)

Disaster in Beijing

During the few years between my delivery of the Norton lectures and their publication, I delivered my conclusions about Chinese artists’ “borrowings” from European pictures as a slide-lecture at places I was invited to speak. One of these invitations came from Ambassador Shankar Bajpai, Indian ambassador to China, whose wife Mira had sat in on my docent lectures while they were in Berkeley (he as a visiting scholar at our Institute for East Asian Studies). He invited me to speak

at his official residence in Beijing, for what I understood would be an invited audience drawn from the foreign diplomatic community. My borrowings-from-Europe talk seemed ideally suited for such an audience, and I brought my slides for it when I came to China. Too late to change, I learned to my dismay that he had in fact invited Chinese notables from the art-and-archaeology institutions in Beijing: Xia Nai, Director of the Archaeological Institute and famous archaeologist; Jin Weinuo, longtime Chair of Art History at the Central Academy of Fine Arts; officials from the Ministry of Culture; and the like. The evening was of course a disaster. Xia Nai (who had been in Berkeley and spoke good English) asked me whether these same traits of style could not have been derived from some old Chinese tradition; a woman who worked for the Ministry of Culture, and who had been one of the principal hosts of the 1977 delegation that I chaired, asked me, in an accusing tone, why I had chosen that lecture for delivery to such a distinguished Chinese audience. I had no response; the damage was done.

I could continue with quite a few events and developments, all pointing in the same direction. I had suggested Wen Fong as reviewer of my book *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in 17th Century Chinese Painting* (Harvard University Press, 1982) to the review editors of *Art Bulletin*, feeling that his public response should be made widely available for the healthy development of our field. He wrote, as expected, a generally favorable review, praising (like earlier reviewers of my books) my stylistic analyses—these posed no problems—but expressing skepticism and critical dissent on some of the more sensitive issues of China-and-Europe. Wen Fong's review was later to be translated into Chinese by a person hostile to me and to my second wife—I will not identify him, but will call him only X-person—with copies

given to all the art history students at his art academy as required reading (Wen Fong, good friend and colleague as he has always been, wrote a letter for me to that academy stating that his review was being misused, and had not been intended as such a negative judgment). The same X-person was later to attempt to orchestrate a public discrediting of me and my ideas on the last day of a conference in Beijing, organized by him and myself along with others in the 1990s. Two of the final papers, by his arrangement, were to be attacks on this same *The Compelling Image* book. But his plan failed for several reasons. One of the papers, by a colleague of his, did not engage with my book at all, and another, by a historian (not an art historian) who presumably attacked my misunderstanding of the 17th century Chinese history, fell flat as well. Meanwhile, by great good fortune, the new Chinese-language edition of this book had been published by Rock Publishing Co. in Taiwan, and a copy had been hand-carried to Beijing by (bless her) Alfreda Murck. My wife immediately gave it to Fan Jingzhong, Professor in the Art History Department at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, a department far more open to new and foreign approaches to art history than its counterpart in Beijing. Fan Jingzhong (bless him also) read through the book overnight, and the next morning, the last day of the conference, delivered a long, intense speech in praise of the book as containing the kind of new and challenging ideas that Chinese art history needed.

Introducing Fan Jingzhong to this long account permits me to credit the many Chinese colleagues and old friends who have supported me over my career; I will not try to list them all, but will only say that I could not have got through it, with the success I have enjoyed, without them. I must mention in particular Professor Hong Zaixin of that same China Academy of Art, who has supported and advised me for quite a few

years, giving me reports on art history in China and overseeing the accurate translation of my writings. I owe him a large debt of gratitude.

But, getting back to my problems as someone who “doesn’t respect China”, two more issues should be introduced before I close: my attempt at a dialectical approach to Chinese history and art history, and the “Riverbank” affair.

Levenson: “Riverbank”

By the time I wrote and delivered the Norton lectures, I had learned—mainly from my friend and U. C. Berkeley colleague, the historian Joseph Levenson—the effectiveness of a dialectical approach, which recognizes the tensions and conflicts within any historical situation instead of pursuing “great unities.” I tried to use this approach both in the *Compelling Image* lectures and in *The Distant Mountains*, the book on late Ming painting in my series: these were written more or less at the same time and published in the same year, 1982. (The committee that awarded the College Art Assn’s Morey Prize for Best Art History Book of the Year to *Compelling Image* told me that *Distant Mountains* was the runner-up). In both—as clearly stated in the prefaces to both—I tried to adopt this approach, to escape from the “harmonizing mode” that was then orthodox, and the “great unities” that were pursued and set forth, in conventional Chinese art history. This new direction was marked, and commented on negatively, by some reviewers. One younger Chinese specialist devoted some part of his writing energies to attempts to refute my wrongheaded formulations, arguing that the “Songjiang/Suzhou confrontation” set forth in both books never really took place, that Dong Qichang really respected the work of Qiu Ying,