

Toward a disjunctive diachronics of Chinese art history

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The diachronics that Western art historians have constructed for Chinese art history in the course of the twentieth century has by and large employed a stratigraphic model of periodization—a view of the past in terms of sedimented layers of cultural time. In this essay I begin by exploring the particular form stratigraphy has taken in the Chinese field, as well as its weaknesses, and why it has had any role at all. I go on to consider a related but analytically distinct question: that of macrohistorical narrative, which provides the story lines for the long-term historical development of art. What are its models in Western historiography of Chinese art? Where do these models come from? Completing a brief overview of the modern Western diachronics of Chinese art history in English-language writing, I then examine the historiographic role played by the temporal unit of the century, an ostensibly neutral slice of historical time that has consistently been pressed into interpretative service by both stratigraphy and narrative, and has served as a bridge between the two. In the modern West, scholars have assumed the necessity of bringing stratigraphy and macrohistorical narrative into alignment. Is it worth continuing these efforts today, or is it now time to jettison this core assumption of modernist art historical practice? At the end of the essay, I make the case for the latter option, with the argument that we should be aiming instead at an explicitly disjunctive diachronics.¹

Stratigraphy

Whatever debt the scholarly discipline of art history may owe in its use of stratigraphy to archaeology and antiquarianism or, more distantly, to geology and palaeontology, what matters pragmatically is the form that stratigraphic periodization has taken in art historical practice.² There, it is most obviously distinguished by a

fascination with formal order as the expression of a period and place and sometimes an individual. The concept of style—until recently the discipline's single most central interpretative tool—is intimately bound up with this sense of the symptomatic importance of formal order. Also relevant to the subject at hand is the fact that, again, until recently, our sense of art historical periods has been informed by a hierarchical approach to the interpretation of style, an implicit equation being made between the dominance of a particular paradigm and its representativeness.³

I begin with these very general observations on stratigraphy for the straightforward reason that when Western art historians turned their attention to Chinese art, the assumptions I have mentioned were among those they introduced.⁴ With the advent of extensive systematic study of Chinese art by Westerners in the 1920s,⁵ the pioneering scholars took for granted the general methodological validity of the stratification

Bruce Trigger (1993:84) points out in a discussion of the Danish pioneer scientific archaeologist, Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788–1865):

It has been assumed that the stratigraphically derived chronologies of geological time constructed by geologists and palaeontologists provided a model for the development of archaeological chronologies of prehistory. Yet in Thomsen's pioneering work we see a seriation chronology of human prehistory inspired by social-evolutionary theories of the Enlightenment combining with the data collected by earlier antiquarians and with an implicit knowledge of stylistic change probably derived from the study of numismatics. Prehistoric archaeology did not begin as the result of borrowing a dating device from other disciplines. Instead it started with the development of a new technique for relative dating that was appropriate to archaeological material.

3. In this respect, the art historical use of stratigraphy may owe a debt to cultural history as it was practiced in the mid-nineteenth century by the likes of Ruskin, Burckhardt, and Taine (Haskell 1993).

4. In the field of Chinese studies, the current tendency in some quarters would probably be to characterize this as a kind of cultural imperialism. While this may sometimes be true, it is not the whole story. I suspect that equally important is China's long-standing role within European and later Euro-American culture as one of Europe's privileged Others and mirrors, a role that it has continued to play in the twentieth-century West within the intellectual framework of modernism. For a discussion of the issue, see Yang 1998.

5. I do an injustice here to writers like J. D. Fergusson, but he was something of an exception. Much of the writing on Chinese art of the period prior to 1920 was rather romantic, and has little relevance to what we do today.

1. Wanting to stay close to the theme of this issue of *Res*, I have chosen not to examine here the diachronic categories and paradigms of Chinese art history that have been developed at different historical moments in Chinese-language writing. This is not to say that these can in any sense be taken for granted. Elsewhere I have made an initial attempt to problematize Chinese dynastic divisions, specifically with regard to painting during the Ming-Qing transition. See Hay 1994.

2. Before preparing this article I had assumed that the stratigraphic method in art history was originally borrowed from geology. However, the example of archaeology suggests otherwise. As

paradigm, and set about identifying the strata. However, their search was conditioned from the outset by the existence of a native Chinese practice of art history, with deep roots in the Chinese past. Since systematic scholarly inquiry into the history of art has a much longer history in China than in the West, any serious inquiry by Western art historians into the Chinese artistic past thus inevitably ran up against the preordering of artistic material that had been undertaken by Chinese writers. The influence of this preordering was all the more difficult to avoid, given that indigenous Chinese art history had its own developmental models, usually aligned with dynastic sequence. This sequence, it should be noted, was itself an interpretative construction, resulting from the process by which Chinese historians long before the 1920s had submitted the more unruly sections of the dynastic past to a process of rationalization. Periods of imperial disunity when short-lived dynasties coexisted and succeeded each other were given their own general name and treated as the equivalent of a single dynasty in negative.⁶ Periods when Chinese territory was only partially controlled by a Han Chinese dynasty and other "barbarian" dynasties menaced the Han Chinese power were nonetheless generally known by the name of the Han Chinese dynasty.⁷ By dint of such simplifications, then, the dynastic sequence had been given a respectably linear and unified character, stretching back into the second millennium B.C.E.⁸ It is little wonder, therefore, that early twentieth century Western attempts at periodization largely adopted the dynastic divisions as a framework for the diachronics of style, and that these remain even today the most common basis for dividing up the art historical past in museum exhibitions and survey texts.

However, the fact that it was possible for Western art historians to give a specifically stratigraphic interpretation to the Chinese dynastic sequence testifies not only to their unwavering belief in the general validity of the stratigraphic model, but also to a rather less scientific willingness to see analogies with Western

art history. The influence of these imagined analogies was subterranean, the analogies themselves usually being left vague and unexamined—perhaps because they are so problematic. Thus the so-called Chinese Bronze Age of the Shang and Zhou dynasties was allowed to evoke another Bronze Age in the West, while its alternative description as "ancient China" put China in the select club of ancient civilizations. The Warring States period of the late Zhou dynasty and the following "early imperial" China of the Qin and Han dynasties, were together equated with the Western classical period. The period in between the Han and the Song dynasties—i.e., Northern and Southern Dynasties, Sui and Tang—became that of "medieval Chinese art" in direct reference to medieval Europe. The Song and Yuan dynasties were implicitly understood as a Chinese Renaissance, on the basis of a revival of Confucianism thought to parallel the Renaissance rediscovery of Antiquity; the succeeding Ming and Qing dynasties were seen in post-Renaissance terms. As for the twentieth century, it had no need of an analogy, because it was assumed that modernity was a Western phenomenon that by the twentieth century was either being adopted by the Chinese as the only viable way to further progress or, alternatively, being resisted as a threat. Together, the various analogies of period created a single overarching analogy between the histories of Western and Chinese art, as separate wings of a larger transcultural stratigraphic sequence. This remains today one influential Western model in the interpretation of the Chinese artistic past.

The aforementioned comparisons, each one with its grain of truth, continue today to distract attention from the fundamental falsity of the larger and largely unspoken analogies of period with which they are associated. In the end, what is the common measure between a Chinese Bronze Age where bronze technology was channelled by an aristocratic elite into the production of ritual objects, and a Bronze Age defined by the use of bronze for tools? How meaningful is it to equate early imperial China with a Roman empire whose agonistic relationship to Greek culture has no counterpart in China? To characterize as medieval the period separating the Han dynasty from the Song, from the third to the ninth century C.E., is to *overestimate* the importance of Buddhism and to *underestimate* the achievement of the Sui-Tang multiethnic, multicultural empire. Song culture was arguably no more or less "humanist" than was Tang culture before it, and certainly had no single belief system dominating it as Christianity did the Renaissance,

6. For example, the Northern (317–589) and Southern (386–581) Dynasties, the Five Dynasties (907–960), the Ten Kingdoms (907–979), and so on.

7. Thus the Song gives its name to a period from 960–1279 when large parts of Chinese territory were ruled, at different points, by the Liao, Xixia, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, as well as by the Dali kingdom.

8. The historical record goes back beyond the Shang dynasty, archaeologically attested for a period circa 1600–circa 1100 BCE, to the Xia dynasty, whose existence has not yet been archaeologically confirmed. But even the Shang dynasty was only one of several political entities competing for power on what we now think of as Chinese territory.

despite the attempts to make neo-Confucianism fit this role.⁹ Post-Song and post-Yuan art, that is, art from the late thirteenth or, alternatively, the late fourteenth century onwards, has a relationship to an accumulated past stretching back to the Tang dynasty and beyond that is quite different from the more focused relationships to the past in post-Renaissance art. Finally, as I have argued elsewhere, Chinese art was deeply implicated in a social experience that can be described as modern (or “early modern”) long before it came into contact with the full-blown Western modernity of the nineteenth century, and that retained many elements of that indigenous modernity into the twentieth century. Among the consequences of this revised perception is that so-called traditional ink painting of the last 150 years reveals itself to be the site of a specifically Chinese modernism.¹⁰

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the analogies of period on which Western views of China’s art history have depended for so long were in fact manufactured by the stratigraphic mode of thinking and have no life or usefulness beyond that conceptual framework. The overall structural sequence of the Chinese artistic past that the analogies delineate is, fatally, a shadow version of a preexisting European past.

Macrohistorical narrative

In turning from stratigraphy to macrohistorical narrative, it is necessary to note, first, that our scholarly practice of art history has until recently been not just modern but *modernist*, and second, that in the study of Chinese art the modernist art historical project has been dominated to an extreme degree by a formalist, style-based approach. Today, modernism as a progress-based frame of thinking and formalism as an art historical method jointly inspire ambivalence in many scholars in my field, and stimulate fewer new scholarly inquiries into the Chinese past than they used to. On the other hand, they still provide much of the macrohistorical story line for the Chinese art history field. Those of us working on Chinese art are still living with a narrative of the Chinese artistic past that was worked out during a roughly sixty-year period from about 1920 to about 1980.

Initially, a key theoretical influence was Wölfflin, through two disciples, Osvald Sirèn and Ludwig Bachhofer, who privileged the formalist side of Wölfflin’s

thinking.¹¹ Sirèn, having first published widely on Trecento painting, became the single most prolific Western writer on Chinese art history from the 1930s to the 1950s. He popularized many of the analogies I noted earlier in a long series of wordy survey texts on painting, sculpture, and architecture, at least one of which is still widely consulted.¹² Bachhofer, on the other hand, developed the ascetic formalism of Wölfflin’s *Principles of Art History* in an influential, if controversial, book entitled *A Short History of Chinese Art* (1946), positing quasi-natural laws of formal development that recurred cyclically.¹³ In *A Short History*, Bachhofer writes:¹⁴

When, in this book on Chinese art, such terms as archaic, classic and baroque are used, it is because they are familiar to anyone versed in the history of Greek, Roman, and European art, and denote very different ways of apprehending form. These same kinds of apprehension can be observed in the Far East, where they appear in the same sequence as in the West.

This approach implies a kind of historical relativism, in which different stages in history are associated with the dominance of particular media, and the same basic story is repeated from one stage to the next. The shift from one stage to another, however, required its own explanation, which was supplied by an evolutionary narrative leading from primitive to sophisticated, generally summed up in some variation of this sequence: ancient, early, late, modern.

This evolutionary model was updated in the 1950s as a reaction against Bachhofer’s ideal schemes, and out of a desire to afford a greater place to human agency. A new generation of scholars, including Bachhofer’s student, Max Loehr, promoted the idea (echoing Henri Focillon’s “*vie des formes*”) that art forms have their own specific formal potential that is only fulfilled after a long development, this achievement then being followed by the onset of a post-Classical self-consciousness. For these art historians, the same evolution also operated at the level of the overall sweep of Chinese history, early achievements being followed by the experience of

11. As Martin Warnke has shown, Wölfflin was in fact anything but a straightforward formalist. See Warnke 1989.

12. Sirèn 1956.

13. The formalist approach came under attack from a sinological direction as early as the late 1940s, when John Pope published a savage critique of Bachhofer’s *A Short History of Chinese Art* (Pope 1947). For a readable overview of the debate between formalists and sinologists, see Cohen 1992:155–199.

14. Bachhofer 1946:73.

9. See, for example, Cahill 1960.

10. See Hay 2001a, 2001b.

belatedness. This version of the evolutionary approach can be seen in all the major studies of early landscape painting published in the 1950s, and even today it continues to inform the writing of one of the most prominent scholars of Chinese painting, Wen Fong, whose first statements of the problem date from the fifties.¹⁵

Starting in the 1960s, however, following the publication of his 1960 book *Art and Illusion*, the influence of Ernst Gombrich contributed to the invention of a new story line for Chinese art history. Gombrich's approach, by rooting representation in cognitive experimentation, gave even more place to human agency. This made it possible to abandon the old evolutionary model while still retaining a basic modernist assumption of progress as an ideal. The approach took hold most quickly in studies of painting. The new cognitive narrative of Chinese painting followed Gombrich himself in privileging the most obviously cognitive artistic mode—naturalism—as the key point of reference,¹⁶ with fifteen hundred years of artistic experimentation being seen to culminate in Song landscape painting.¹⁷ Post-Song painting was correspondingly defined as an inward turn after the great cognitive advances, with regard to representation of the outside world, had been achieved. With Loehr and his student, James Cahill, taking the lead, the great achievement of post-Song painting was thus defined in terms of a sort of inner cognition, a knowing of the self, taking aesthetic form as self-expression.¹⁸ The result was that for two decades during the 1960s and 1970s, literati painting, as the only post-Song art that fully answered to this description, dominated Chinese art history studies in the United States. In Cahill's work of this period, the vast output of post-Song naturalistic painting is treated as a holdover that had its chance to renew itself through the

encounter with European modes of representation in the seventeenth century, but ultimately proved unable to do so. Literati painting, on the other hand, is seen as more vital, due to its commitment to abstract structural order. The overall analysis transposes to China the naturalism/abstraction binary familiar from studies of modern Western art.¹⁹ The cognitive narrative eventually took hold in other areas as well where naturalism was a moot point, notably the study of ancient ritual bronzes. Here again, Gombrich was influential, this time through his theory of ornament (Gombrich 1984), which scholars such as Jessica Rawson and Robert Bagley transposed to the ritual objects of the Shang and early Zhou period, arguing that ornament developed out of a psychological need to satisfy the sense of order.²⁰

The rejuvenation of formalism by the cognitive model was thus able to create a new macro-historical narrative for most of Chinese history within an overall tripartite development, from a preoccupation with the sense of order, through cognitive construction of the outside world, to cognitive construction of the inner world of the self. The Western origins of the narrative can be seen particularly clearly in the tendency of its proponents, most vocally Cahill and Fong, to interpret this last stage negatively, as ultimately antiprogressive, supposedly leading (albeit with brilliant exceptions) to a head-in-the-sand mentality from about 1710–1720 onwards.²¹ Progress is replaced, in the Chinese case, by failure.

19. See Cahill 1979 for the most rigorously argued statement of this position.

20. Jessica Rawson gives her most explicit statement of the theory in "Late Shang Bronze Design: Meaning and Purpose" (1993), following on an earlier, more general exploration of the question in *The Lotus and the Dragon* (1984). Bagley, a student of Loehr, sums up his position in "Meaning and Explanation" (1993). Both writers acknowledge the debt to Gombrich.

21. Thus Fong (1984:209): "Wang Hui, and the other great early Ch'ing painters in the early decades of the eighteenth century marked the beginning of the end of the great tradition in Chinese landscape painting. During the eighteenth century, under the reigns of the Yung-cheng (Shih-tsung; r. 1722–1735) and Ch'ien-lung emperors, many able painters worked at the court in the north and in the commercial centers, most notably Yang-chou, in the south, but none of these quite matched the stature and accomplishments of their great seventeenth-century predecessors, whose styles and theories they emulated. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries China's protracted struggle for modernization finally destroyed the Great Synthesis that Wang Hui and Tao-chi worked successfully to achieve." In a similar vein, Cahill writes (Cahill 1982:222, 224): "In painting—as in the rest of Chinese culture—through the two centuries that remained to the empire, tradition continued to assert itself, ever weaker and more compromised, but still ultimately in control. Even the survivals of individualism and unorthodoxy were absorbed into it, and tamed. . . . It is enough to say that virtually no painting of originality and power

15. See, for example, Lee and Fong 1956.

16. "The history of naturalism in art from the Greeks to the impressionists is the history of a most successful experiment . . ." (Gombrich 1960:326).

17. See, for example, Sullivan 1961, 1962, 1967; Fong 1969. Whereas Sullivan in these and subsequent texts (Sullivan 1979, 1980) sees the tenth–eleventh century period as the culminating moment, Fong's argument, subsequently elaborated elsewhere (Fong 1984; 1992), is that in landscape painting this cognitive experimentation culminated only in the mid-thirteenth century, in the use of a continuous receding ground plane that serves as the basis of an integrated illusionistic vision.

18. This point of view was influentially argued by Max Loehr in three essays published in the 1960s: Loehr 1961; 1964; 1967. It was concurrently, and no less influentially, espoused by Loehr's student, James Cahill, in a series of publications, reaching its most complete expression in Cahill 1971.

Convenient centuries

Only now does the role of the century as a temporal unit in art historical writing become clear. The role of the periodizing century as an ostensibly objective slice of historical time needs to be seen in the light of stratigraphy and narrative, to both of which it contributes without in the end being subordinate to either. This functional relation to stratigraphy *and* narrative is far more important for an understanding of the role of the century unit in the modern Western diachronics of Chinese art history than is its cultural encoding, cosmetically masked these days by the shift to a B.C.E./C.E. formulation. Insofar as that encoding has always been obvious to modern specialists of Chinese art, it has not had a major impact on the diachronics they have created. One might note, however, that even in its original European context, century-based stratigraphy has rarely been able to attain the pragmatic neutrality to which it apparently aspires. The use of the concept of "short" and "long" centuries, for China as for Europe, is symptomatic of the need that is felt to bring centuries into line with the sedimentation and narrativization of cultural time.

The particularity of the century, from which derives its special periodizing function, is that it cuts across or falls within, but rarely coincides with, a sedimented period or a chapter of a macrohistorical story. What might at first sight seem to be a liability turns out to be full of potential for the ordering of art historical time. Stratigraphically, within a long dynastic period, the century provides the descriptive basis for a clear, if ultimately arbitrary, set of substrata for the central part of the period; these substrata sometimes overlap with—and sometimes provide an alternative to—the model of early, middle, and late that is a staple of art historical writing. The complicity between the two stratigraphic devices is confirmed by the replication, within any given century, of the "early-middle-late" model.²² In the case of short dynastic periods such as the Yuan (1267–1368), on the other hand, the century unit has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to resist division. Thus, for example,

comparable to what we have seen [for the seventeenth century] was to follow. The Chinese paintings that stand with the finest achievements of world art, the truly compelling images, end with the early eighteenth century."

22. To cite two examples at random, Jessica Rawson uses the early-middle-late model for her analysis of the development of Western Zhou ritual bronzes (Rawson 1990), as does James Cahill for his account of Ming dynasty painting (Cahill 1978, 1982; see especially 1982:5–6). Cahill replicates it at the level of the century; Rawson does not.

the thirteenth century has most often been ceded to the Song at the expense of the Yuan, while in exchange the fourteenth has most often been attributed to the Yuan at the expense of the Ming. Though barely noticed, and partly justified by the (real) lingering cultural effects of the previous dynasty, such convenient reassignments of temporal territory contribute to a reassuring illusion of temporal order that is, one suspects, far more important to the practice of art history than the discipline would admit. In the process, of course, the century unit is submitted to some quite remarkable tests of elasticity, as it is shortened or lengthened to suit its stratigraphic circumstances.

In narrative terms, the century unit's usefulness is most dramatically evident where there is dynastic change—whether multiple changes (e.g., the tenth century, with its Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms before the reunification of China by the Song in 960) or a single decisive change (the seventeenth century with its conquest of the Ming by the Qing at mid-century). In such cases, the century unit effaces the violence of political rupture in favor of cultural continuity, and imposes the authority of cultural time over any other form of time.²³ This found its most extreme form in the 1992 exhibition, "The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang," where what was effectively a "long" seventeenth century was defined around the central position of a particular artist's life.²⁴ The use of the century unit to affirm cultural continuity fits in nicely with macrohistorical narratives that assume the essential autonomy of art-making from social and political change; yet it also lends itself to the current interest in a long-term narrative of modernity (on which I will have more to say below), which proceeds on the opposite assumption. There, "long" seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries abound—and needless to say, it is premature to think we have left the twentieth century behind us.

In short, the century unit is the art historian's joker in the pack, constantly changing its guise, conjuring order out of all manner of unpromising circumstances—and masking as it goes the multiple contradictions between the stratigraphic and narrative models.

Toward a disjunctive diachronics

I have been arguing that, in the modernist art history project, a diachronics was created for Chinese art at the intersection of two ways of thinking about art historical

23. See, for example, Cahill 1982.

24. Ho, ed. 1992.

time, on the one hand the pragmatic and largely untheorized model of stratigraphic sequence, and on the other the more theoretical approach represented by formalist models of macrohistorical change. It does not imply any conscious program on the part of the scholars involved to suggest that despite the diversity of their efforts they collectively produced and reproduced a coherent system, with its own potential and limits. On the other hand, it is obvious that once it is recognizable as a system the possibility exists of challenging it. Further analysis in terms of systems theory is certainly possible, and might shed light on art historical diachronics as an expression of the driving need for order characteristic of the rationalist wing of modernism, which so often bulldozes aside the less tractable effects of contingency and chance, whether in history or in research and analysis. In these terms the modernist diachronics of Chinese art history constitutes an autopoietic system that thrives—or at least thrived—on the construction of patterns of order and to this degree is self-designed to eliminate many of the questions that now interest art historians (or the inquiries that have led to those questions), the better to focus on order.²⁵

However, if one seeks to theorize a new, or expanded, approach to the diachronics of Chinese art history, it may be more immediately helpful to reconceptualize the system in terms of historiographic *representation*. The fundamental difference between stratigraphic and narrative representation lies in the contrast between a) a temporal mapping that locates artistic events in time and space, and b) the emplotment of events into story lines.²⁶ Ultimately, any art historical diachronics needs both mapping and emplotment. However, in the modernist diachronics of Chinese art history there is a striking and fundamental imbalance between the complexity of the stratigraphic mapping and the contrasting simplicity of the narrative emplotment. Although the mapping is infinitely varied and detailed in its topographies, the narrative emplotment is restricted to a linear story with few major turning points. In this sense, the modernist diachronics of Chinese art history can be said to be cartographically strong but narratologically weak.

Since about 1980, there has been an informational and theoretical transformation of the Chinese art history field that has unavoidable implications for diachronics.

The sheer empirical accumulation of archaeological and art historical information bearing on different points in geographical space has in itself discredited the very idea of one dominant narrative story line. At the same time, the growing desire to take into account the multiplicity of possible social viewpoints in history has increasingly imposed the idea that the historiographic representation of the past requires a tissue of different narratives. Most recently, the extension of the problematic of modernity several centuries back into the Chinese past has begun to undermine the authority of dynastic sequence, post-Song belatedness, and even (for the twentieth century) modernism as organizing principles for the diachronics of the art of recent centuries. All of this has created a situation where our inherited diachronics looks woefully inadequate.

So how can we construct something stronger and more complex? One assumption that continues to inform art historical writing is that we need to bring stratigraphy and narrative into some sort of alignment. I believe that, on the contrary, we need to disalign them. Stratigraphy is more effective when it limits its claims to explanation, instead restricting itself to the necessary temporal mapping of the art historical terrain. In other words, we need to be aware of the interpretative baggage that accompanies a term like “medieval,” even when it is used descriptively, and make a conscious effort to prevent Western tails from wagging Chinese dogs. Narrative, on the other hand, will be more effective if it expands its claims by developing multiple forms, multiple emplotments of the past, which will also require us, of course, to work out the relationships among the different narratives.²⁷ Out of this, one may hope, will come two changes, both of them necessary. One is the disjunctive diachronics of which I have spoken; the other—which is really a variation of the first—is a new openness to Chinese diachronic models. To some extent, this openness has always existed, for example in the attention that has been given in the West to the Chinese notion of *fugu* or “restoration of the past,” and the dynastic cycle. However, it has been qualified by a tendency to equate Chinese models with more familiar Western ones, so that *fugu* becomes “archaism” and the dynastic cycle is equated with a model of early, middle, and late. Today, it is precisely the distance separating the Chinese model from its conventional translation that requires our attention,

25. I draw here on the analytic vocabulary of Niklas Luhmann (1995).

26. I derive the definition of narrative in terms of emplotment from Paul Ricoeur (1984).

27. For a case study of a disjunctive diachronics, see Hay forthcoming.

together with a problematization of the Chinese models themselves, starting from the dynastic unit.²⁸ The benefit, as with the acknowledgment of other forms of disjunction, would be to contribute to a kaleidoscopic representation of the Chinese past—the only kind of historiographic representation that can do justice to our currently evolving state of knowledge.

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28. See Hay 1994.

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Introduction to illustrations

Emily Cheng and Zhang Hongtu are artists who live and work in New York City. Both work with explicitly disjunctive invocations of the art of the European and Chinese past. Emily Cheng—a Chinese-American painter—proceeds by quotation, combination, layering, and reconfiguration—practices that assume the autonomy of the constituent elements and, as such, correspond to her comfort with the fragmentation of cultural experience. The straightforward assumption of a hidden and deeper common ground between cultural traditions is not an option for Cheng, who instead starts from a frank acknowledgment of her own distance from other cultures in time and space. If there is an appeal to a cross-cultural human subject in her work, it is inseparable from a self-conscious recognition that humanness is determined by the interplay between the particular cultural coordinates we inherit and those with which we choose to engage. Zhang Hongtu moved from Beijing to the United States in 1980. His recent conceptualist oil paintings rework classical Chinese ink paintings in the style of Impressionist and post-Impressionist masters, with results that are visually disorienting, inducing a sort of intercultural short-circuit. The artist's inscriptions up the ante—see the caption to *Zhao Mengfu—Monet, Noon* (fig. 4), which substitutes the modern European painter's fascination with optical experience for the fourteenth-century Chinese painter's emphasis on the somatic experience of the calligraphic event. Zhang's project is both a reflection on intercultural communication, and a critique of the authority of canonical images and styles. It can be seen as a deconstruction of the idea of East–West fusion—rejected in Cheng's images as well—that has always been a component of the modernist project, whether in the Euroamerican world or in East Asia.



Figure 1. Emily Cheng, untitled. Oil on panel, 18 x 14 in., 1994.

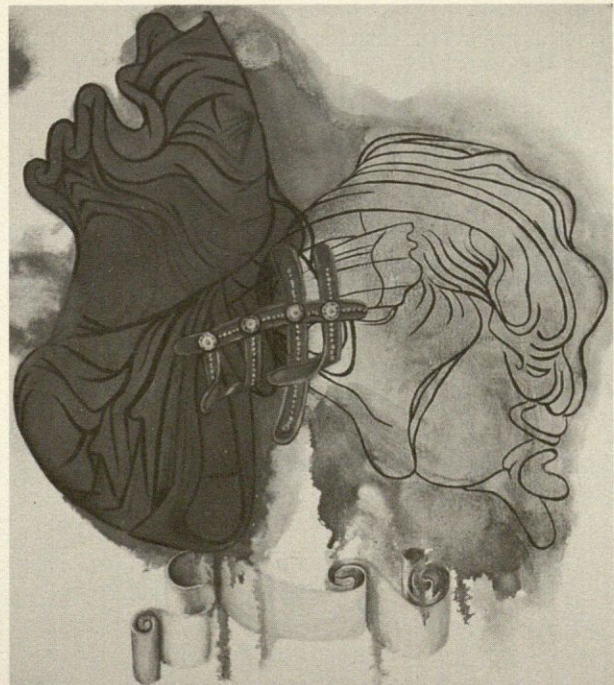


Figure 2. Emily Cheng, untitled. Oil on linen, 18 x 16 in., 1994.



Figure 3. Emily Cheng, *Giotto Swirl*. Gouache on paper, 26 x 20 in., 1996.



Figure 4. Zhang Hongtu, *Zhao Mengfu—Monet, Noon*. Oil on canvas, 34 x 78 in., 1999. Artist's inscription (upper left): "Thank you for coming so close in order to read this calligraphy. You must be able to understand Chinese, right? However, have you noticed something truly unfortunate has happened? When you come close enough to read these words, which is to say just at this moment, you lose the possibility of enjoying the painting as a whole. So . . . please step back five or six steps (but be careful not to bump into anyone or anything behind you!). Find what you feel to be an appropriate distance and angle, and shift your attention from these words to the painting. Thank you for your attention."

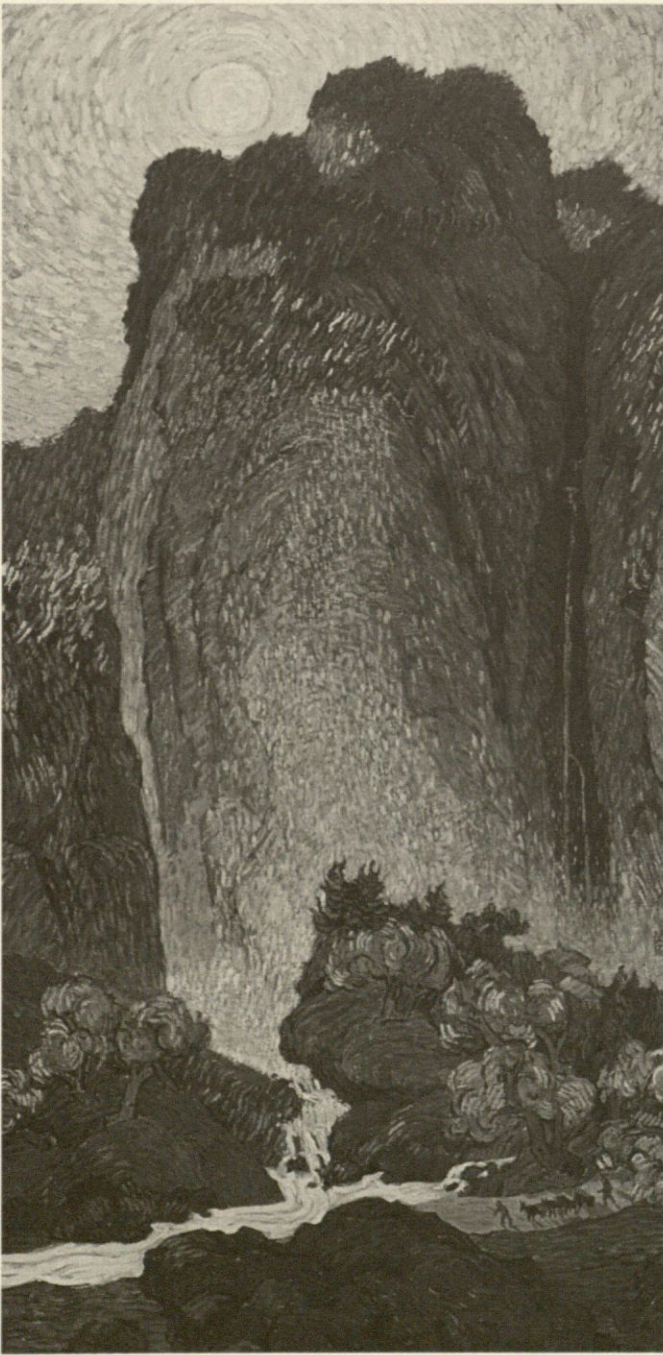


Figure 5. Zhang Hongtu, *Fan Kuan—Van Gogh*. Oil on canvas, 64 x 32 in., 1998.

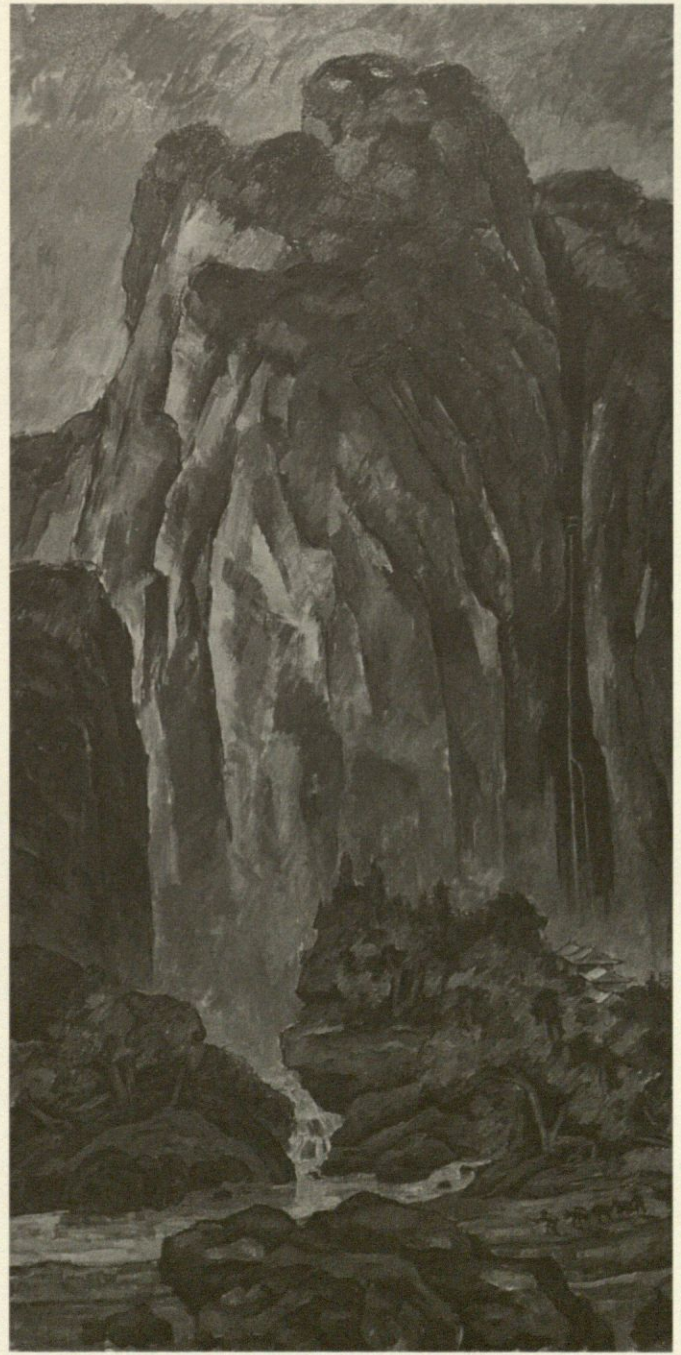


Figure 6. Zhang Hongtu, *Fan Kuan—Cézanne*. Oil on canvas, 64 x 32 in., 1998.