

The Functions of Chinese Painting: Toward a Unified Field Theory

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This short essay offers a thumbnail sketch of the many functions fulfilled by painting in China over its fifteen-hundred-year history, and modern art history's uneven attention to each.¹ Such unity as the field of Chinese painting studies possesses is perhaps best perceived in this way, as an accumulating awareness of the functional density of paintings. This density of the painting can itself be conceptualized as a differentiated field in which a variety of functions overlap and intersect. In this sense, the reference to a field in my essay's title is doubled-edged, alluding to both the practice and the scholarly study of Chinese painting. Let me leave the question of what might be the principle unifying either or both fields to the end of my discussion. By that point it will, I hope, be clear that despite my rudimentary understanding of such matters, the evocation of the field theory of contemporary mathematics and physics that I imply here is not gratuitous.

The problem of function is one of the areas of common ground between art history and anthropology, as a result of the fact that art objects operate both aesthetically and non-aesthetically. For this reason we might note at the outset that an art historical account that finds a way of considering both types of function—without axiomatically privileging the aesthetic over the non-aesthetic—comes significantly closer to anthropology.

The argument that follows distinguishes among three broad types of function: instrumental, semiotic, and embodying functions. Under the heading of the *instrumental* can be brought together the several ways in which paintings in China have served as instruments of a social purpose that was not specific to the medium of painting. The *semiotic* functions concern its status as an act of communication. Finally, *embodying* functions are those that derive from the art form's character as a medium of consciousness. To put this more simply: I address here what paintings were used for, what they said, and what they projected—or more rarely challenged—as the grounding of reality. Throughout the essay I speak of painting in the past tense, acknowledging that rather different issues are raised by contemporary painting, which deserves separate discussion elsewhere.

Instrumental Functions

I begin with instrumental functions, not because these would have a more fundamental character, but because the issues they raise are also the most concrete, and come

down to a single question: What, in the simplest sense, were paintings used for? As the instruments of social purpose that was not specific to the medium, paintings fulfilled functions that were tied to their role as either document or artifact.

In any culture, a painting is a document as well as an artifact. But in Chinese society, the documentary character of paintings has been self-consciously intensified ever since written texts came to be physically linked, either as inscriptions or as separate colophons, to the painting within the larger artifact of the scroll. Often this association of text and image was at the service of painting's capacity to record—an essentially non-aesthetic function that was instrumentally tied to the documentary character of the work. The document may be purely visual—the representation of a sight—or essentially textual, established by an inscription on the picture's surface or a colophon on an attached piece of paper or silk that relates the visual image to a specific occasion; it is usually a combination of the two. But the fact that paintings recorded necessarily in a way that is centered on visual representation is functionally less important than another fact: that there existed purely textual ways of recording sights, occasions, and histories that were actually more common in the culture at every period. When it came to its instrumental functions, painting was simply a cultural resource that was or was not convenient.

The recording function of painting might be said to have a centripetal character, in that any physically associated text had to turn in on the visual image in order to provide its exegesis. In other circumstances, however, some paintings—sometimes the same painting—functioned centrifugally, notably when they took on what might be called a networking function. In such cases, the visual image served as the catalyst for an expanding series of inscriptions and colophons that took on an intertextual life of their own. The social purposes that were in play in such accumulative artifacts—I borrow this term from the study of African art—involved the affirmation of cultural and social ties across space and time. With the exception of murals and screens, paintings were easily transported by artists and owners; moreover, their historical transmission was the object of self-conscious attention by families and collectors. Those who had a painting in their possession exploited invitations to add inscriptions or colophons as a way of affirming existing social and cultural connections or establishing new ones.

Neither the recording nor the networking function of painting required aesthetic merit as a *sine qua non*, though it certainly helped if the painting itself was admired. In contrast, a number of other instrumental functions of painting were largely predicated on the perception of aesthetic value in the object, and thus

on the painting's character as artifact rather than document. One can further say: as luxury artifact, since even folk paintings can be luxury items within their particular social context. In addition, the association with any famous name—artist, patron, collector, or even colophon writers—separately gave it value. Nonetheless, it remains true that it was usually as luxury objects that paintings were able to serve as decorations, gifts, investments, or souvenirs. All of these roles were important for their exchange, and thus inspired their production in the first place.

Decoration has to be understood here in the broadest possible sense, encompassing temple murals as well as domestic screens, large-scale palace finery as well as small scrolls for personal contemplation. Historians of Chinese painting have not always been good at remembering that when a wall had to be covered, or created in the form of a screen, the Chinese in every period had decorative pictorial alternatives to painting. Because textiles, lacquerwork, woodwork, and stonework are today categorized as decorative arts, we sometimes forget that the fine art of painting flourished in large part due to adaptation of pictorial capacities to decorative purposes. The principal purpose of pictorial decoration was display, if only for an audience of one, but it was subordinated to a larger social practice of display that aimed to configure an architectural environment through artifacts and ephemeral natural elements such as miniature trees and flowers. Only in the studios of artists and obsessive collectors of painting—if even there—would display sometimes have become reduced to painting alone and to its sister art, calligraphy.

In gifting, an important practice in a wide range of social situations in China, the medium was even less specific. Gift-givers often made use of artifacts, including paintings, but more commonly gave edibles, plants, flowers, and the like, for which paintings sometimes can be seen to have substituted. Since the painting's function as gift is often acknowledged in inscriptions—usually the artist's own—modern scholarship is able now to identify patterns of format, genre, and subject. Fans, for example, were frequently gifts, as were self-consciously decorative paintings, particularly those depicting plants and flowers with strong symbolic meaning. But these patterns can be misleading. From literary references and painting inscriptions, it is quite clear that in the right circumstances any format, genre, subject, or style could be, and was, used to configure painting as gift.

In considering paintings as investments, the most obvious example would normally be the antique painting, but this is not the most relevant to the argument here, which is more concerned with why paintings were produced at all. The investment function of newly produced paintings has to be understood as more than

just an economic phenomenon, for paintings could be social or political investments. From an economic standpoint, random remarks in the historical literature confirm what one would assume to be the case—that the evidence of labor and skill and the high reputation of the artist were helpful in overcoming orthodox social reticence about spending money on non-essentials. It cannot be said, however, that contemporary paintings or artworks in general were ever an important form of investment compared to land, property, or businesses. Paintings functioned as social investments because they contributed to social status, as they are known to have done throughout the history of painting, most often according to the fame of the painter. Paintings were political investment, above all in the context of royal and imperial courts, where confirmations of legitimacy and affirmations of authority were at a premium and painting, as any other cultural practice, played its role.

Finally, the painting's role as souvenir is a special case, because it is associated with travel. This is a function that became particularly important in Chinese society after the late fifteenth century, as travel and tourism intensified as part of the early modern commercial boom. At a later date, the so-called "export paintings" from the eighteenth century onward directed at Western visitors to China are one example of the intercultural dimension of the souvenir; another example, quite different in character, would be the many literati paintings acquired by Korean visitors to China in the eighteenth century and by Japanese visitors in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Until recently the only instrumental functions of painting to attract serious attention were the painting's documentary roles as ~~involving~~ recording, and networking. Ever since the beginning of the Western study of Chinese painting by Chinese-speaking art historians, the presence of text associated with an artifact was an advantage that made it possible to root painting in the facts, so to speak, of history. The Chinese themselves had recorded such textual information in catalogues and other texts for many centuries, making it easy for modern art historians, Chinese and non-Chinese, to draw on a vast body of related material. From the point of view of interpretation, the disadvantage was that the nature of this easily available textual information led art historians principally to glean biographical data from inscriptions, colophons, and visual images. The documentary function was noted but was not necessarily considered to be especially interesting in itself. The high point of such biographical work came in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Chinese painting field took off with a flood of monographic studies.² However, several trends in scholarship have since converged to change the approach. First, renewed

interest in social art history—sometimes in a straightforward contextualist vein, sometimes with more ambitious methodologies—extended from the study of European painting to Chinese painting; second, the introduction of an anthropological perspective into the field of Chinese history has had its effect on art historians, encouraging attention to such issues as ritual and identity; and third, the material culture paradigm became attractive to students of Chinese artifacts. Thus the various instrumental functions—particularly decoration and gifting—due to painting's status as a luxury artifact have become the object of significant and growing research.³ In addition, scholars have revisited the documentary functions of recording and networking using a broader sociological perspective.⁴ We are finally starting to know something about the practical uses of painting in Chinese society.

Semiotic Functions

As I turn now to semiotic functions, the focus shifts from the painting's status as artifact and document to its status as a type of representation. While I would not argue that pictorial representation should be reduced to a simple definition as a form of visual discourse, I do think that it is appropriate to focus on this dimension of representation when one is specifically concerned with painting as an act of communication. However, overt or hidden, this act is rarely a simple, direct address to an audience involving a message. Indeed, it is hard to think of a case in China where the communication by artist or patron is not likely to have partaken in a reflexive act of self-fashioning. These two dimensions of the visual discourse, communication and self-fashioning, can be postulated as being distinct semiotic functions of painting.

At the most general level, the communicative purposes of painting in China hold no surprises. Painting throughout its long history has variously given form to religious, political, social, and personal ideals, thus functioning semiotically in much the same way as it did in the Western and Islamic worlds. The one significant general difference may lie in the relative importance of the personal. Over the two-thousand-year tradition of elite literati—initially aristocratic, later more socially diverse—which not only sponsored painting but also produced it, painting in China has always served as an important medium of personal commentary. In this role, painting developed essentially as an extension of the literary skills that were fundamental to literati self-definition.⁵ This one general difference aside, the specificity of Chinese painting as visual discourse emerges largely at the level of each of its main areas of subject matter. Here Chinese specificities of religious and political systems,

and of conceptions of social order and personhood come into play. These lie behind the importance of both narrative and iconic ^{Paintings,} for example, that portrayed exemplars of proper moral conduct.⁶ But just as influential were Chinese painting's priorities of representational code, of which the importance of nature depictions, especially landscape painting, is the most famous and most striking example.⁷

The visual discourses of Chinese painting, as I have just suggested, are almost always associated with self-fashioning as well, to the extent that the patron is making use of the artist to project a particular self-image. This phenomenon may be a universal feature of traditions of representational painting. But when the self-fashioning is that of the artist in his or her own right, an asymmetry appears between other parts of the world where—though I will be happy to stand corrected—this seems to be largely a modern phenomenon, taking the modern to include the early modern as well, and China where self-fashioning by the artist can be traced back to the very beginnings of independent representational painting in the fourth century. The reason, again, lies in the existence of a literati elite ^{which} ~~who~~ practiced painting in the same spirit as it did poetry and other forms of writing. Initially, the artist's self-fashioning was located *within* and mediated by the visual discourse. But after sporadic experiments from the eleventh century onward, by the fourteenth century the situation was being reversed in a significant proportion of paintings. There, the artist's expressive self-fashioning ostentatiously emerges in the forefront of the visual discourse in what we in the West may think of as a modern way. From the sixteenth century onward, as modernity kicked in in China too, this tendency only intensified.⁸ This long history of self-fashioning by Chinese artists led to a further particularity of Chinese painting: the importance from the fourteenth century on of art historical self-inscription, that is, the artist's practice of locating the self in history using painting's own history as the frame of reference.⁹

Historians' earliest serious attention to the semiotic functions of painting in China came in their study of Buddhist art, which, beginning in the 1920s, naturally absorbed iconological methods of the more established study of Christian art. Concurrently, Chinese and Japanese scholars drew upon China's early modern tradition of epigraphic research for similar ends. During the 1950s and 1960s secular forms of painting were also "decoded" by scholars in mainland China who were developing a politically acceptable materialist art history. It took scholars in Europe and America at least two decades to catch up, the postwar period being dominated by formalism in the Western study of secular Chinese paintings. Only in the 1970s, when a reaction against the formalist history of style set in, was the

application of iconological methods extended beyond religious painting with any seriousness. Over the last twenty-five years, an extensive international effort has begun to produce a convincing map of the discursive landscape of secular painting in its straightforward communicative aspect, albeit one that still lags somewhat behind what we know of pre-eleventh-century religious painting.

The study of self-fashioning has had a different history. Beginning in the 1940s, if not before, literati painting was recognized in the West as a specifically Chinese art historical phenomenon that could rival in sophistication any aspect of European painting. Labeled at the time as self-expression, the predominantly self-reflexive working mode of those artists had to be taken into account even in the most formalist analysis. Thus the self-fashioning of literati artists initially received more attention than that of patrons of Chinese painting of any kind.¹⁰ This particular decoding enterprise accelerated in the 1970s, and its scope soon widened to include the role of patrons, at court as well as in urban centers.¹¹ In contrast, study of the self-fashioning dimension of religious painting has lagged until relatively recently, when Chinese and non-Chinese scholars began to mine the relevant historical sources about temples, tombs, and shrines, as well as the presence of donor inscriptions on religious murals and scrolls.¹² We are finally starting to understand the range of what paintings were able to say in Chinese society, and we have recently begun to deconstruct, rather than merely decode, what was said on the model of what was once called the New Art History.¹³ For the upcoming generation of Chinese painting historians, decoding and deconstruction will be parallel projects.

Embodying Functions

The functions remaining to be discussed derive from a view of painting as a medium of consciousness that passes only partly by way of representation as I have discussed it so far. Perhaps the best way to put it is that paintings in China *embodied*—whether ritually or representationally or expressively—an awareness or self-awareness that had both conscious and subconscious elements. One way of securing this vague, seemingly new-agey idea on a more solid theoretical footing is by defining paintings as visual utterances. Although an utterance is an act of communication, it is at the same time reflexive, bringing into play assumptions and desires, both social and personal, of which its author is not necessarily conscious, and which bring into play the perceiving body.¹⁴ The principal functions of Chinese painting as a medium of consciousness were the embodyings of boundaries, cultural axioms, epistemic awareness, and social interest. In each of these ways the painting

projected as natural a certain grounding of reality and might further induce a heightened awareness of this grounding or even throw it into question. Painting's embodiment of cultural axioms was institutionalized in basic principles or rules and recognized in the degree of rightness that the completed painting was felt to possess. Here we arrive at the level of painting's inherently conservative contribution to the self-definition of a culture. The importance of copying, often ridiculed by outsiders, is easier to understand and respect when one recognizes it to be a technique of internalization, of embodying psychophysically not so much a given style as the deeper axioms underlying it. These bedrock axioms ran deeper than any religious or philosophic system, and were shared with other cultural practices such as architecture, writing, and medicine. They comprised such principles as module-based production, a monumentality of proportion rather than scale, and the structuration of energy rather than mass.¹⁵ There were, however, departures from these axioms, as in the self-constructed tradition of painting by female artists which rejected the structuration of energy by means of the brush-trace in favor of a compositional principle of placement and positioning.¹⁶ Such departures were routinely trivialized by normative (male) criticism, a reflection that exposes the social inflection of cultural axioms.

Painting also embodied an epistemic awareness, by which I mean it created a potential link between experience as it was represented or presented and ontological and phenomenological assumptions that were shared by the audience. In the creation of this link lies what is often thought of as the cognitive role of painting, though for China it would be more accurate to speak of a recognitive role. As with poetry and philosophy, for the Chinese, painting had the role of revealing the underlying structural patterns of experience, to which we are blinded in daily life by the chaos of constant sensory stimulation. Assessing this aspect of Chinese painting from outside the culture, we can say that paintings constructed pictorial cosmologies to embody the epistemic awareness of their time. The process of embodiment often had a ritual performative dimension that extended beyond the religious sphere to secular painting. It entered the painting either via the act of painting itself or through the work's structural anticipation of a ritual context of use in its very structure. In a macrohistorical perspective, the cosmologies created by painting underwent a gradual and uneven secularization—a slow, irreversible shift towards subjectivity in the balance of epistemic authority in pictorial representation that comes at the expense of previously preordained orders of the world.

Among the most important examples of painting's embodiment of epis-

temic awareness is its acknowledgement of boundaries—a feature of every period, whether the boundaries were religious, social, political, cultural, or psychic. Although boundaries could also be represented, in the mechanics of embodiment they tend to be identified with the structuring of the virtual space of the image field. The historical evolution of this particular space of painting is not yet well understood.¹⁷ Embodiment does not always imply affirmation: alongside its visual ratification of boundaries, painting also questioned boundaries, and even frankly transgressed them. This function of Chinese painting was founded in the image's ontological status as a transformational boundary, about which Hans Belting has written in his contribution to this volume.

Lastly, almost by definition, a painting's embodiment of social interest went unavowed. What may seem to be avowals, as when donors had themselves ostentatiously represented beneath the painted Buddhist icons they had commissioned, are not really so at all. What is being avowed—here it is faith and devotion—is usually something different from the social interest—in this case status and thus power—that is so visible to us as outsiders to the original cultural context, and which was also noticed by people within the culture, as demonstrated by textual evidence from all periods of the history of Chinese painting. Painting's role here is ideological—not the ideology of an identifiable visual discourse, but the more insidious and ultimately more effective ideology of the naturalization of power. Painting confirmed the social order with which it was associated as natural and unopposable.¹⁸ The exception to this general rule was the tradition of paintings of righteous protest, from the eleventh century onward, that drew attention to disfunctions of the sociopolitical order that needed to be corrected. These exceptional paintings avow a social interest, but even they conceal much of what was at stake beneath their idealistic stance.

Historiographically, there have always been a few brave souls willing to explore painting's embodiment of cultural axioms, including one, my namesake John Hay, who has devoted much of his career to it. The rare studies by him and others over the last twenty-five years on this question and that of the embodiment of boundaries demonstrate a depth of research and sophistication of argument that were largely missing from earlier attempts.¹⁹ However, it is undoubtedly the study of what I have called epistemic awareness that has dominated the discussion of embodying functions in Chinese painting. In particular, the thesis was borrowed from Western art history that cognitive progress was the motor of development of pictorial representation, with painting conquering first the outside world, then the

inner self. This provided the intellectual justification for the formalist approaches so dominant in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.²⁰ Recent critiques of this thesis, inspired by the Foucauldian reinterpretation of the history of consciousness in social terms, have placed more emphasis on the constructedness of painting's cosmologies and on its inexhaustible capacity to redefine the historically possible parameters of subjectivity.²¹ Not surprisingly, it is also post-structuralist art historians who have begun to tackle the subtle problem of painting's capacity to embody social interest; indeed, social interest seems likely to take over from epistemic awareness as the favored topic of the next generation of Chinese painting historians. The deconstruction of visual discourses to which I alluded earlier is part of this trend.

Conclusion

Beyond the slashing generalizations and idiosyncratic terminology of my argument, it will no doubt be obvious that I am approaching the problem of function from a post-structuralist standpoint. Thus the argument assumes that the coherence of a field—be it a history, an art form, or a disciplinary area—can only be sought by examining the patterns of its discontinuities. If a single unifying principle can be proposed, it is the relation between the functional density of the painting and the differentiation of its functions. Painting's functional density is relatively stable, in the sense that with enough information and time almost any painting could be demonstrated to serve all the basic functions that I have identified: of a document; a luxury object; the articulation of a discourse; an effort of self-fashioning; and an embodiment of cultural axioms, epistemic awareness, boundaries, and social interest. In contrast, the functional differentiation of any given painting varies enormously, both in the priority given to particular functions and in the shape taken by each function. It is thus the relation between the stable functional nature of painting as a medium in China and the infinite functional variations of specific paintings that may be proposed as the unifying principle both of the field of Chinese painting and of the parallel field of its study.²² Only when these are conceived in relational terms do they take on the character of fields in the most modern sense of the term.

1. With regard to art history's uneven attention, it is not my intention here to survey the large number of relevant case studies, so I will restrict bibliographic references to historiographical essays and theoretical statements that lay out the case for specific approaches or advocate new areas of study. My apologies to any scholars whose contributions I have overlooked.
2. For cogent remarks on the documentary function of painting from this biographical perspective, see Anne de Coursey Clapp, *The Painting of T'ang Yin* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 47-66.
3. The argument for a sociological approach toward paintings as artifacts has been laid out most extensively by James Cahill in *Three Alternative Histories of Chinese Painting* (Lawrence, Kans.: Spencer Museum of Art and The University of Kansas, 1988). Cahill gives particular attention to function in Chapter 2. See also James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). I have made the argument for a different kind of social history of Chinese painting involving interpretative deconstruction alongside empirical reconstruction in Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a clear example of the anthropological approach, see Richard Vinograd, "Introduction: Effigy, Emblem, and Event in Chinese Portraiture," in *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-27. The theoretical argument in favor of the use of the material culture paradigm in Chinese art history was first made by Craig Clunas in *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 1-5, and 166-73. Clunas later explicitly extended this approach to painting in a series of texts, including "The Represented Garden," in *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 137-76; and *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
4. The greatest contribution has been made by Richard Vinograd. In addition to *Boundaries of the Self*, see his "Private Art and Public Knowledge in Later Chinese Painting," in *Images of Memory: On Remembering and Representation*, ed. Suzanne Küchler and Walter Melion (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 176-202; Richard Vinograd, "Vision and Revision in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting," in *Proceedings of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang International Symposium*, ed. Wai-ching Ho (Kansas City, Mo.: Nelson-Atkins Museum, 1992), 18.1-18.28; and "Origins and Presences: Notes on the Psychology and Sociality of Shitao's Dreams," *Ars Orientalis* 25 (1995): 61-72. See also Hay, *Shitao*.
5. For the most recent of his several theoretical discussions of this feature of some Chinese painting, see Wen C. Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History," *Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June 2003): 258-80. As in his earlier writings (see the cited article for references), Fong overstates the case by identifying significant Chinese painting with literati values, universalizing the latter as the most essentially Chinese values.
6. Julia K. Murray, "What Is Chinese Narrative Illustration?" *Art Bulletin* 80, no. 4 (December 1998): 602-15; and "The Evolution of Pictorial Photography in Chinese Art: Common Themes and Forms," *Ars Asiaticus* 55 (2000): 81-97.

7. The most convincing accounts of the importance of landscape painting in China explain it in terms of cosmological beliefs, and are to be found in Lothar Ledderose, "The Earthly Paradise: Religious Elements in Chinese Landscape Art," in *Theory of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 165–83; Jessica Rawson, "The Origins of Chinese Mountain Painting: Evidence from Archaeology," in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2001): 1–48.
8. I here summarize a historical development that has been much discussed in the alternative terms of self-expression. See, for example, Fong, "Why Chinese Painting Is History." For the constructivist argument in terms of self-fashioning, see John Hay, "Subject, Nature, and Representation in Early Seventeenth-Century China," in Wai-ching Ho, ed., *Proceedings*, 4.1–4.22; Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self*; Hay, *Shitao*.
9. For early and influential discussions of this phenomenon as "art historical art," see Max Loehr, "Some Fundamental Issues in the History of Chinese Painting," *Journal of Asian Studies* 23, no. 2 (Feb. 1964): 186–92; "Phases and Content in Chinese Painting," in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Chinese Painting* (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1970), 285–97.
10. The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this approach to literati paintings were systematically formulated at the beginning of the 1960s in James F. Cahill, "Confucian Elements in the Theory of Painting," in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1960), 115–40; Wen C. Fong, "The Problem of Ch'ien Hsuan," *Art Bulletin* 42 (Sept. 1960): 173–89; and Max Loehr, "The Question of Individualism in Chinese Art," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961): 147–58.
11. An early general discussion, written in 1980 but published much later, is James Cahill, "Types of Artist-Patron Transactions in Chinese Painting," in Chu-tsing Li, ed., *Artists and Patrons: Some Social and Economic Aspects of Chinese Painting* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1989), 7–20.
12. Some of the most sophisticated discussions have concerned not painting proper, but the pictorial art of the Han dynasty. See Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989); Martin Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).
13. Some diverse examples of deconstructive approaches, incorporating theoretical discussions, are: Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self*; Hay, *Shitao*; Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming, 1470–1559* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).
14. Although it may in some ways betray their theoretical position, my argument here owes a debt to the work of Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois on contemporary Euro-American art.
15. See John Hay, "The Human Body as a Microcosmic Source of Macrocosmic Values in Calligraphy," in *Theories of the Arts in China*, 74–102; John Hay, "Values and History in Chinese Painting, I: Hsieh Ho Revisited," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 6 (autumn 1983): 72–111; John Hay, "Values and

- History in Chinese Painting, II: The Hierarchic Evolution of Structure," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 7–8 (spring–autumn 1984): 103–36; Lothar Ledderose, *Module and Mass Production*; Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995).
16. I make these remarks fully aware that there has not yet been a serious treatment of such aesthetic specificities of the tradition of painting by women.
17. The most probing writing on this question has been done by John Hay. See his important series of articles: "Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface," *Archives of Chinese Art* 38 (1985): 95–123; "Poetic Space: Ch'ien Hsüan and the Association of Painting and Poetry," in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, ed. Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 173–98; "Subject, Nature, and Representation"; "Boundaries and Surfaces of Self and Desire," in John Hay, ed., *Boundaries in China* (London: Reaktion, 1994), 124–70.
18. Martin Powers, "Humanity and 'Universals' in Sung Dynasty Painting," in *Arts of the Sung and Yüan*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 135–45; "When Is a Landscape Like a Body?" in *Landscape, Culture, and Power in Chinese Society*, ed. Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1998), 1–22; Craig Clunas, "Artist and Subject in Ming Dynasty China," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 105 (2001): 43–72; Jonathan Hay, "The Conspicuous Consumption of Time," in *Shitao*, 26–56.
19. See notes 15 and 17.
20. For a more detailed discussion of this historiography, see Jonathan Hay, "Toward a Disjunctive Diachronics of Chinese Art History," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 40 (autumn 2001), special issue, *Desedimenting Time*: 101–8.
21. Hay, "Subject, Nature, and Representation"; Hay, *Shitao*.
22. My argument here is partially anticipated by Wu Hung's *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Addressing the problem "What is a Chinese painting?" Wu argues that "a painting must be understood both as an image-bearing object and as a pictorial image; the collaboration and tension between these two aspects makes a work a 'painting'" (9). Although useful as far as it goes, this definition—as I hope I have shown—underestimates the functional complexity of painting.