

There and Back Again: Selections from (attempts at) Revisionist Art History

It is worth repeating for the present argument the generic thesis that is the antagonist to this historiographic essay: “Chinese painting is concerned with revealing universal aspects of nature, not transient phenomena; it aims at reproducing inner-essences, not outer forms; it is fundamentally an art of line and distinct brushstrokes; it is much given ... to copying or imitating the past; it places little premium on originality; and so forth.” (Cahill, 2) While Cahill is not in favour of this thesis, he writes this in his own early attempt to offer a proto-revisionist history of Chinese art. Unlike previous art history essays, Cahill attempts to offer a history with some artistic struggle while still maintaining a Hegelian *Zeitgeist* where the counter-orthodox trends Cahill describes can still be viewed as epochal struggles couched within the dominant narrative of traditional painting. All the same, in 1979 Cahill’s revisionism was no small feat, especially in the discipline of art history, which seemed solely dominated by Western universal discourse, and where scholars’ access to primary material had hitherto been confined by political circumstance.

This is not to say that after Cahill the floodgates of revisionism were cast open. Following Cahill there was no rushing tide of reinterpretation (unlike the revision experienced by Chinese historians). In art history the focus was still largely on connoisseurship, translated from a very particular set of Chinese tastes to the gallery and

museum network in Europe and the US. Even now in contemporary art history there is still the desire to find a “universal approach” to Chinese painting. (cf. Fong) In light of this myopic tradition of Chinese art history, this essay will examine three examples of art historical revisionism. Though each of these texts’ focus is somewhat different, they all share a desire to offer an alternative to Chinese art history from a history composed solely of literati painters and paintings to one of varying diversity

One approach is to question the ways in which artists performed themselves in various social settings from patron’s commissions to marketing their own products (their paintings, fans, etc.). Ginger Hsü’s *A Bushel of Pearls: Painting for Sale in eighteenth Century Yangchow* begins with a brief historical setting before offering short monographs on four painters. Hsü is interested in discussing the stereotypical idea that “literati painters” were a) all part of the literati, b) operating within some classical model of Confucian social regulations, c) producing only paintings, and only paintings of orthodox subject matter, d) making use of orthodox literary allusion to support the paintings’ subject matter, e) supported by systems (i.e., patrons, etc.) that all followed these same social strictures. In place of these types Hsü attempts to demonstrate how the artist’s life was a performative construction somewhere between orthopraxy and counter-culture. At once pandering to the idea of what a proper “literati painter” should be, while at the same time engaging in the commercialization of their works. This history of the artists’ lives provides a renewed outlook at the art historical data. Instead of merely accepting the artistic life, a concept of performing the role of the artist in a complicated social web is offered.

Contrary to Fong's universalist proclamation that "the true value of Chinese painting lies in its own special visual language and its unique form of expressivity," (Fong, 259) Hsü's thesis demonstrates that statements such as Fong's are logically true, but practically unsound. The value of painting during the mid-Qing in Yangzhou was socially constructed, and independent of any type of immutable aesthetic, except for those which the works could engender for the purchasing customer. The 'special visual language' was as diverse and inconsistent as the variety of customers who purchased works; from the orthodox landscape to representational narrative paintings, to subject paintings depicting loosely contextualized objects in much the same way that any commodity might be displayed at a market.

Yet Fong may be historically justified in wanting to isolate some true aesthetic value. There existed a strong tendency among painters and patrons alike to partake of the identity of "men of letters," and all of the social benefits incumbent with it. (Hsü, 29) In Yangzhou the wealthiest salt merchants often competed with each other for the most ostentatious displays of wealth. In spite of the urban legends of men throwing vast sums of money into the wind, many merchants also had renowned libraries. The possession of these libraries gave some credence to disrupting the ideological boundary between merchant and scholar official. (Hsü, 25) Of course many merchants could also afford to hire excellent tutors so that their children might become recognized scholars, making this distinction also closer to lip service than fact. However, painters did play a symbiotic role with the merchants in crossing these various distinctions. Merchants had capital to

pay for luxury goods (such as painting), and painters could maximize symbolic and cultural capital by eulogizing the merchants in scholar type-paintings, poetry, etc., as was the case for Fang Shih-shu, Chin Nung, and other scholars. (Hsü, 32) To this extent, scholars themselves became a commodity among the salt merchants as a way to present the merchants' erudition. (Hsü, 43)

The merchants interested in boosting their social standing through this kind of capital were not solely limited to the wealthiest. Unfortunately, while Hsü does not produce any evidence of mercantile exchange between painters and other merchants in different class brackets, she makes a convincing suggestion that the painters' association with the wealthiest merchants was in effect a type of patronage that made their paintings more valuable (through association), but still affordable to other classes. This is an important point because it seems clear to Hsü that of the four artists she presents, only one can be described as receiving complete patronage, and even then it was certainly not overly profitable, as this painter still had to rely on other means to support himself. At the heart of the matter is the very simple notion that painters had to make ends meet like everyone else; as a result, they were under the whims of whatever market conditions they found themselves in. In effect, pandering to the highest bidder, or the most consistent clients (where quality may be undermined by quantity), undercuts typical art historical projections of a pure aesthetic untroubled by social conditions. (Hsü, 199)

Craig Clunas' *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* can be seen as truly subversive to art history norms. While Hsü certainly provides nuances that challenge

some of painting's (and painter's) accepted roles in Qing China, her thesis is still interested primarily in paintings, giving short shrift to the numerous other forms of visual material. Clunas on the other hand, begins similarly to Cahill by outlining a dominant methodological problem found in art historical research. However, Clunas immediately complicates Cahill's and Hsü's rereading of painting by arguing that whole other realms of pictorial representation exist in the form of prints, maps, albums, and even painting forgeries that belie a concomitant other mode of viewing. Involved in this project is a subscript of denying European primacy in visuality, mostly through Clunas' introduction of Chinese versions of Lacan and the Gaze. (Clunas, 116) Clunas attacks concepts of reproduction and ideological authenticity normally attributed to Walter Benjamin (Clunas, 248), and even revisionist Western art historians such as Norman Bryson (who is currently at UCSD) (Clunas, 14), showing how Western post-modern rhetoric is still imbued with a homogenous Chinese 'other'. At the very heart of Clunas' project is the thesis that formerly unrepresented large groups of Chinese (the non-elite, i.e., women, workers, etc.) had different relationships to the visual material they had access to, and that to presume a cohesive framework for a Chinese aesthetic denies the very real phenomenal experience that the visual material elicited in different viewers.

While only ever just short of contentious, Clunas is almost forced to take such a stance based on both the novelty and the subversiveness of his thesis. The material Clunas considers is often anonymous and in many ways precludes connoisseurship. Without a known author the work often refuses the kind of pedigree that Hsü traces as a market condition, and that Fong has established his career upon. Yet Clunas' reasonable thesis is

that these types of images – the anonymous prints, albums, forgeries, copies, etc. – enjoyed a much wider circulation and therefore formed a significant portion of the dominant aesthetic. While Hsü may be correct in discussing the perceived value of an orthodox painting, Clunas argues that parallel discourses occur that offer insight into the process of these paintings' valuation as well as challenge their evaluation. Clunas unveils at least three terms that affect different kinds of viewing. These types, he argues, suggest a diversity and complexity to viewing that is rarely acknowledged by Western art historians, but is essential in order to understand the specific conditions of visual culture in China (as it would be in any other case). (Clunas, 112) Through the verbs 'kan', 'guan', and 'du', Clunas looks at how different visual materials are understood differently by these verbs. While a painting may involve 'kan', and may also according to its social value involve 'guan', the difference is qualitatively important by acknowledging a difference between a simple viewing (or reading) to a deeper contemplation. (Clunas, 117) This difference indicates a networks and relationships of power by who sees and by what *can be seen*. 'Du' suggests an even more active looking, involving concepts of duration and motion, as in the shifting views of an unraveling hand scroll. Clunas also explores the mode by which these types of looking are tied to class and gender; not unsurprisingly we discover that only scholars are capable of 'guan' whereas others, especially oafs, children, and women merely 'kan'. (Clunas, 120) Ultimately Clunas arrives at a semi-phenomenological revision of Chinese art history by discussing how both the mind and the body of the viewer (in China, at this time) are very much *in the world*. Concepts of vision are as constructed as the constructs of knowledge themselves;

in other words, the diversity of Chinese epistemology needs to be addressed in order to adequately understand what it means to be a Chinese person *looking* at an object.

In order to perform this kind of evaluation Clunas expands the range of visual material included in his research. The obvious argument is that studying painting and the discourses surrounding painting lead rather ineluctably to the same conclusions that art historians have been arriving at for years. Partly to this project is the constant influence of Europe, especially “the great” Matteo Ricci, had on Chinese visual culture. (Cahill, 13)

While no one doubts that Europe did exercise a profound influence on China in matters of visual culture and in nearly every other way it seems, a part of Clunas’ thesis is to demonstrate Chinese curiosity, but not amazement, at Ricci’s maps and perspective-based images. This alternative Chinese response to images is more than just a matter of aesthetics and visibility, of course, and this is precisely what Clunas wants to demonstrate. Maps were already a part of the Chinese visual vocabulary (and not some new representation of the world that the Italians were introducing), but their position within Chinese society was different than it was for the Italians. The difference lay in the way each culture (Italian and Chinese) envisioned their world, and the types of categorization involved. While maps were a type of control over space for the Italians (one can look to recent examples such as deCerteau for this), for the Ming Chinese, especially the elite, maps were already a part of the discourse of images leading up to and incorporated within the category of mimetic representation and therefore less a tool for demonstrating power and more akin to landscape painting (not exclusive here, but qualitatively different). Thus, in one sense Clunas argues the Ming court’s fascination

with Ricci's maps can be understood as a fascination for naïve Italian landscape paintings. (Clunas, 80-1) Furthermore Ricci's approbation of "pictures of horrid monsters drawn in ink on yellow paper" displays typical (mis)understanding and evaluation of Chinese visual culture. (Clunas, 149) This seminal Italian displays the already extant Western proclivity for certain aesthetic forms; and indeed, as Clunas points out, Ricci's opinion impacts Western art history. Ricci's own accounts of his journeys as supposedly accurate assessments of China's aesthetic, as well as his own political program for devaluing the Chinese aesthetic in favour of a controlled (by Ricci and his coterie) Western Italianate aesthetic justified both Ricci's continued presence in China as well as his lobbying for increased support. (Clunas, 175)

Clunas' project is not a simple project, and he definitely suffers from having too many resources without the benefit of earlier scholarship on which he can draw. Still, his strong brand of revisionism succeeds in part because there is no comparable scholarship, and in part because his thesis is simple, even if its basis of support is sometimes too wide (in fact, this supports his cause even more): how can there be a single model of viewing and visuality in a space where images are proliferated at nearly all levels, and where readership of these images cannot be equalized?

It is in this sense that Liang's contribution, *Art and Aesthetics in Chinese Popular Prints*, is important. Although Liang's impressive documentation of the Muban Foundation's collection is exactly the kind of visual culture that can lend even greater proof to Clunas' argument, in the end Liang reinterprets the position of the connoisseur from the literati

painting to the “Popular Print.” Though this volume reproduces numerous 19<sup>th</sup> century woodblock prints, Liang fails to provide any kind of social history that might normally accompany such popular artifacts. That is, these prints were mass produced and used on occasions from friendly visitations to funerary proceedings, and yet Liang writes nothing on the kinds of people these images would appeal to, the prices they might be expected to pay, or any other social conditions. Instead the volume focuses nearly exclusively on the iconographic material in the prints, almost as if cataloguing their subject matter was a covert way to estimate the relative value of each piece; in fact, it seems apparent that to consider these prints as common objects might very well efface their “art and aesthetics.” (Liang, 4) While Liang’s volume is certainly a feast for eyes too long limited to literati painting, the ten page essay in the two-hundred page book (though each image does have an accompanying iconographic breakdown) brings this historiography full-circle, back to traditional art historical master narratives.

While painting was, and continues to be the focus of most art historical explorations, there is a slowly growing trend to offer alternative histories that ultimately contribute to a more comprehensive understanding. In the case of Hsü, painting leaves its normal discourse for the possibility of the marketplace. Indeed, it is the awareness that Chinese painting is commanding high prices at English auction houses that calls Hsü’s attention to this possibility in her introduction. (Hsü, 1) Still, her focus is only painting, and as a result of this her conclusions are limited to the specific, and myopic discourses already established in this particular field. Clunas has no such problem, in fact, it might very well be the opposite: there is no established discourse in the material culture he has

chosen, but it is of little importance since what matters is how to assess the limits of the established historical ideology by observing its failure when applied to a range of visual culture rarely considered, but widely available. In this regard Clunas provides the most revisionary argument, due in no small part that his aim is to completely revise how historians understand what “looking” means (and meant). While rarely considered visual culture is significant to Clunas’ project, one gets the impression that merely by looking at this material alone can ineluctably arrive at Clunas’ conclusions. Unfortunately, the failure of this hope is immediately apparent in Liang’s colorful volume. Though Liang’s volume focuses upon the kind of material Clunas would approve of, the reproduction of these popular prints in the form of a museum catalogue reintroduces the same structures of power and economy that Clunas’ sought to subvert. The total lack of social history coupled with the didactic iconography feeds directly back into normalized art history by sublimating its original status beyond the common position this cultural material once held. In effect, it makes high art out of low art; or according to Clunas’, reintroduces the etic notion of high and low art to visual material that had originally never engendered these values.

Thus the process of rewriting the history of (Chinese) art history continues at a frustratingly slow rate. In this light it is easy to see why Clunas may be contentious, and it may also be easy to see why Hsü sticks to ‘safe’ ground. In fact, the project of describing revisionism in art history writing is also the project of describing the intellectual moment of writing. Chinese painting is not readily available to viewers in most places, and certainly not as widely considered as other art categories. Whether this

is a result of myopic scholarship or social accessibility is a matter of curiosity; what is at stake is the surprisingly few revisionist histories and the alarming necessity to have more.

Bibliography:

Cahill, James. *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth Century Chinese Painting*. Cambridge: Harvard UPress, 1982.

Clunas, Craig. *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*. Princeton: Princeton UPress, 1997.

Fong, Wen C.. "Why Chinese Painting is History" in *Art Bulletin*, June 2003, Vol 85, No. 2; pp.258-280.

Hsü, Ginger. *A Bushel of Pearls: Painting for Sale in eighteenth Century*. Stanford: Stanford UPress, 2001.

Liang, Ellen Johnston. *Art and Aesthetics in Chinese Popular Prints: Selections from the Muban Foundation Collection*. Ann Arbor: UMichigan Press, 2002.