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Introduction

This book studies the symbiotic relationship between the artistic creation and literary narration of Chinese art from the fourth century BCE to the early twentieth century CE. This introduction identifies a major narrative mode of this art, explains why we need to investigate it based on the formative experience of the field of modern Chinese art history, and provides a synopsis of the book's content.

The Modern Field of Chinese Art History: A Brief Reflection

Although China has a long tradition of art historical writing, producing the first comprehensive painting history as early as the ninth century,\(^1\) the modern field of Chinese art history, either in China or elsewhere, did not naturally grow out of this premodern scholarship. Instead it emerged as part of a sweeping global modernization movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which reorganized local knowledge into supposedly universal systems of disciplines.

After the birth of the modern discipline of art history in Europe in the eighteenth century, it soon expanded its focus to include non-European art traditions. Early Western “ethno-art historians” were all trained in European art; the criteria and methods they used in collecting, evaluating, and interpreting non-European works were naturally derived from European art history. Thus when the British Museum began to build its Chinese art collection in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paintings, sculptures, and objects were classified into categories that were preestablished in European art; their developments were mapped out according to stylistic revolutions.\(^2\) Similar classifications and formal analyses provided a unified basis to assemble heterogeneous art traditions into encyclopedic museums in the West. The first versions of a globalized Chinese art history were produced in this context.

The idea of art history as a “humanistic discipline” was introduced to China in the early twentieth century, where it gave birth to a new kind of art historical writing that instantly delegitimized the old-fashioned literati discourse on art. Such a break from tradition was possible because China was undergoing a profound transformation into...
a modern nation-state. Reformist intellectuals not only adopted Enlightenment ideology to reshape China’s sociopolitical systems but also strived to rewrite the country’s cultural history based on “scientific” models provided by Europe and Japan. “Art history” or *meishu shi* entered the Chinese language in 1911 and became a required course in teacher training schools in 1912, the year of the Republican Revolution. Unlike traditional Chinese scholarship on art, which focused exclusively on painting and calligraphy, this modern art history significantly broadened the scope of art to include sculpture and architecture, religious icons and temple murals, tombs and mortuary artifacts, and various kinds of crafts. The concepts of formal beauty and stylistic evolution prevailed in telling this new story of Chinese art.

While this redefinition of art was largely inspired by Western precedent, the new Chinese art history invented in China did not simply copy Western prototypes. First of all, it had a regional or “national” framework that differed fundamentally from the multinational structure of a Western encyclopedic museum. This regional focus encouraged Chinese art historians to utilize local resources, including rich textual materials and archaeological finds, and to develop close ties with other social and humanistic disciplines established around the same time. The formation of this regional Chinese art history was also indebted to important interdisciplinary events in the early twentieth century, such as the excavations of the last Shang capital at Anyang, the establishment of Dunhuang studies focusing on the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas at Mogao Grottoes, and the systematic investigations of ancient architectural remains. At the same time, European, Japanese, Indian, and Russian art was introduced through translation and reproduction. When China’s first art history department was founded in 1957 in Beijing’s Central Academy of Fine Arts, it offered a globalized program, in which ancient and modern Chinese art was taught side by side with Western art; a course on Marxist esthetics started from Hegel and Kant.

This situation was not limited to China, of course, but was symptomatic of the emergence of a globalized art history characterized by the construction of various regional or national art historical narratives in non-European languages. Formulated roughly from the early twentieth century through the Cold War, each of these narratives has its specific materials and chronology, but all share a basic classification of art forms and the pattern of linear evolution. On the surface, these regional art histories were written by local scholars to meet local needs. But because they thoroughly internalized the concepts and logics of Western art historical writings, it can be argued that these local art histories were actually more global than their Western models. This seems paradoxical but is not. The reason is that although a Western encyclopedic museum gathered artworks from different places around the world, its global collection was enabled by the expansion of Western political and economic power, not inspired by the local cultures that produced the collected works, including the indigenous classifications and narratives of these works. In contrast, the new art histories written in China and other places, though regional in scope and focus, emerged from real interactions between
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Due to its inherent geographical focus and linear evolutionary approach, modern Chinese art history, like other regional art histories, is constructed as a self-contained narrative that privileges national art traditions; interactions with other countries and regions are played down or even vehemently denied. This was especially true in China during the 1960s and 1970s. In the Cold War atmosphere and during the Cultural Revolution, Chinese art historians were cut off from their international colleagues; officially sanctioned history books rejected any influence from the outside world. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, all art historical programs stopped except for routine work in a few museums. The young field of Chinese art history seemed suddenly to have vanished. Retrospectively, this extreme situation also ended the first stage of globalized Chinese art history, or the creation of the field based on foreign models, including one from the former Soviet Union.

The beginning of the second stage of globalized Chinese art history, which has continued to this day, started from the reopening of art history programs in China in the late 1970s and the reestablishment of international scholarly communications in the following decades. These changes owed a great deal to the new political conditions, especially the ending of the Cold War and China's new Open Door policy. But the transformation of art history itself in the West also promised a new kind of globalized Chinese art history. Participating in the trends of New Art History, scholars such as James Cahill (1926–2014), Michael Sullivan (1916–2013), Richard Barnhart (1934–), and Ellen Johnston Laing (1934–) departed from the old revolutionary approach, historicizing Chinese art in various ways. Their contextual research privileged historical investigation over pure formal analysis, replacing macrocosmic narratives with reconstructed art historical events. Although these scholars still mainly focused on works in museum collections, their research led them to explore the original historical circumstances behind the creation of these works. This shift in methodology provided a new basis to bridge Western and Chinese scholarship on Chinese art.

During the same period, a group of Chinese art historians trained in both Chinese and Western systems, such as Wen Fong (1930–2018) and Chu-tsing Li (1920–2014), started working in Western universities and museums and introduced another crucial mode to develop a globalized Chinese art history. Teaching and writing about Chinese art in English, their practice is profoundly “translingual,” using foreign vocabulary and syntax to convey local historical experiences, linguistic nuances, and cultural specificities.

The 1980s and 1990s were an exciting period for this field. Historians of Chinese art based in different places finally converged and shared research interests, while scholarly publications, archaeological information, and exhibitions circulated beyond national borders. Such exchanges had an instant impact on Western scholarship on Chinese art, as demonstrated by the many groundbreaking English publications during those two decades. On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the Institute of Art History was
established in Taipei in 1990, providing a crucial venue to connect different scholarly traditions on Chinese art. In Mainland China, the field of art history started to expand rapidly after the 1990s. Since then it has produced an astonishing number of books and articles; its appeal to students and young scholars keeps growing. Large, vibrant translation projects have continuously introduced Western studies of Chinese art to Chinese scholars; dissertations written in the past ten years or so clearly reflect an awareness of different research methods and approaches. More and more Chinese graduate students are studying art history in the West. Some of them have returned to China after graduation and are teaching in top universities. Writing now in 2020, I no longer see a clear distinction between “Western” and “Chinese” scholarships on Chinese art. Differences in language, readership, and academic environment certainly exist, but global collaboration and mutual learning has become the dominant trend.

These processes, on the other hand, have also confronted historians of Chinese art with challenges. Some of these challenges are more recent, such as connecting Chinese art to other art traditions to form broader historical narratives. Others have always been there but have remained secondary to the effort to modernize the field. One challenge of this second kind is to reexamine key concepts currently used in writing about Chinese art, which are mostly loanwords derived from the study of European art. Here I’m speaking about concepts as basic as image, iconography, style, representation, gaze, monument, evolution, beauty, and many others. While these concepts have facilitated modern scholarship on Chinese art history, their adaptation was not based on first-hand research of China’s art historical reality. I should emphasize that I’m not in any way advocating replacing them with traditional Chinese terms. Rather, I hope that new research on Chinese art will simultaneously reflect on these “universal” concepts vis-à-vis indigenous art practice and discourse and will in this process redefine these concepts or expand their meaning.

To start the process, this book has the primary goal of uncovering a specific system of indigenous art historical discourse in relation to contemporaneous art creation. It is an open-ended discussion because I hope it will lead to more extensive comparative studies between various art traditions and theoretical systems. It is expected that such comparative studies based on combined historical and theoretical projects will lay the basis for a true global art history. As a rigid division between Western and non-Western art is collapsing, there have emerged possibilities to develop a new, three-dimensional structure for art history research and education. In this structure, “vertical” regional or national art histories can be connected into layered “horizontal” world art histories—global ancient art, global religious art, and global contemporary art are possible examples. Other links can center on more conceptual and theoretical issues, such as visuality, perception, and narrative. This structure does not abandon the established historiography of regional art traditions but provides platforms on which regional art histories can be linked on both historical and conceptual levels. Forging such cross-regional ties can potentially reshape art historical knowledge as well as art institutions such as museums and art history departments.
The Purpose and Content of the Book

At the center of the book are two interconnected questions: How was Chinese art narrated in its original cultural, sociopolitical, and artistic contexts, and how were such narratives related to contemporaneous artistic production? To tackle these questions is to investigate the interactions between art practices and historical discourses on art. Art practices encompass everything related to the production, presentation, and circulation of works of art. Historical discourses on art embrace all the sorts of writings produced in the same cultural milieu that describe and interpret art practices, including history, mythology, philosophy, ritual prescription, hagiography, as well as art historical scholarship.4

It doesn’t take much effort to realize that the most powerful and lasting narrative framework of Chinese art has been dynastic time, which organizes historical information and channels the historical imagination through successive dynasties from the third millennium BCE to the twenty-first century CE. As explained in chapter 1, this narrative framework first emerged around the fourth century BCE. Twelve hundred years later, when Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 815–ca. 877) wrote the first comprehensive narrative of Chinese art in the ninth century, he explicitly titled it Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties (Lidai minghua ji). The same mode of dynastic time still dominates our understanding of Chinese art today—a glance at the tables of contents in current introductions to Chinese art immediately reveals this fact. For example, Michael Sullivan’s Arts of China, arguably today’s most popular survey of this art in English, consists of twelve chapters starting from “Before the Dawn of History” and progressing through various dynasties—the Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing—until the twentieth century.6 By folding the twentieth century into this structure, this and similar textbooks implicitly incorporate modern and contemporary art into a linear narrative based on dynastic time. So deep-rooted is this temporal order in Chinese art history that it seems to have become self-evident and natural, as an a priori and shared chronology that escapes historical scrutiny.7 As a result, although the field of Chinese art produces huge quantities of research every year, there has been little reflection on the nature of this temporal framework and its role in both the discourse and practice of Chinese art.

My inquiry into the narrative of Chinese art thus acquires a sharp focus, that is, the nature and manifestations of dynastic time and its role in shaping the history of Chinese art. As proposed above, the symbiotic relationships between practice and discourse are the focus of my discussion. Many questions arise along this line of inquiry. For example, how did dynastic time emerge in the discourse on art and infiltrate contemporaneous art practice? How did this narrative mode constantly redefine itself in changing historical contexts? How did it interact with other temporalities of divergent historical, religious, and political systems? How did historical narratives based on dynastic time both respond to and inspire artistic creation? As these questions indicate,
this book perceives the history of Chinese art not as a retrospective reconstruction but as an evolving process that fosters its concepts and vocabulary alongside the invention of artworks, mediums, and styles, not after such inventions. Similar ideas must have occupied Walter Benjamin’s mind when he wrote in his last essay, “History is the object of a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now.”

The ten chapters of the book offer ten case studies focusing on individual moments in the history of Chinese art from the fourth century BCE to the early twentieth century CE. Far from constituting a teleological sequence, these moments witnessed the emergence of alternative modes of interaction between historical narratives and artistic practices. Rooted in the concept of dynastic time, these narratives are fundamentally ideological constructs, and as such they always control the access to history based on selective information and specific points of view. Instead of rescuing “true history” from such “biased” narratives, the book takes these narratives as valuable historical artifacts and investigates the ways in which they are conceptualized and written, the conflicting objectives they embody, and their impact on the development of art, including its changing subject matter and styles.

The ten chapters are grouped into four parts based on chronology and interrelated themes. Part One, “Models and Patterns,” focuses on the period from the late Eastern Zhou to the Han dynasty, when special ritual artifacts and monuments became subjects of historical narratives and when these narratives began to reveal certain consistent patterns of dynastic time. Chapter 1 initiates this discussion by connecting two previously overlooked phenomena in Chinese art in the fourth century BCE. The first took place in the realm of textual production: a body of texts on mortuary rites began to associate past visual and material forms—whether real or imagined—with a succession of archaic dynasties. Around the same time, there also emerged a new system of artistic objects as demonstrated by recent archaeological excavations. In exploring the relationship between these two phenomena, the chapter first explains the concept of San dai, or “Three Dynasties,” the earliest verbal expression of dynastic time related to art. It then turns to concrete objects, primarily from King Cuo’s tomb of the state of Zhongshan. One of the greatest archaeological discoveries ever in China, this fourth-century BCE tomb yielded arrays of objects made of different materials and showing different artistic styles. Such diversity stops puzzling us once we link it with a contemporary discourse on ritual art and see it as an essential characteristic of an emerging visual system in a transformative period.

Continuing this discussion, chapter 2 introduces an alternative “dynastic history” of ritual art that also emerged in the fourth century BCE and proceeds to explore the relationship between this narrative and the First Emperor’s (r. 221–210 BCE) various art projects, including the legendary Twelve Golden Men, the Palaces of the Former Six Kingdoms, and the emperor’s Lishan Necropolis. With their complementary locations and purposes, these projects all stemmed from a radical reconceptualization of
dynastic time, the idea that the emperor now embodied the notion of the Origin of an everlasting political tradition. As Chinese history before this moment had to be reimagined as a void, new types of imperial monuments served both destructive and constructive functions to support this political narrative. Based on a detailed analysis of the Lishan Necropolis, the chapter then focuses on the materiality and scale of its sculptures and other components and in turn on the “empty center” within the Qin representational system and on the concept of dynastic subjectivity it implies.

The fall of the Qin shattered the myth of an everlasting dynasty. Art of the following Han evolved through interactions with a new political ideology and historiography rooted in the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, producing an entire visual system centered on xiangrui or “auspicious signs.” Chapter 3 investigates the historiographic basis of this system as well as its utility in glorifying sage sovereigns in the past and in legitimating Han dynastic rule in the present. “Auspicious signs” fall into two main types in terms of their political significance, either as miraculous omens forecasting the founding of the Han dynasty or as Heaven's approval of the reigning emperor's governance. Examples of the second kind especially abound in Han art. Through analyzing several outstanding works produced in this tradition, this chapter explores their function in evoking Heaven's responses through image making, their relationship with Emperor Wu's (r. 141–87 BCE) empire-building projects, and their connections with the imperial Shanglin Park, envisioned as a miniature universe filled with auspicious animals, birds, and plants. The final section of the chapter shifts the focus to identify antitheses to the Mandate of Heaven in Han art. In particular, the grassroots worship of the deity Queen Mother of the West betrayed the sentiment of the disenchanted masses in opposition to the Confucian theory of Heaven's retribution, resulting in the wide popularity of the goddess's iconic images that embody a heterogeneous visual logic.

Part Two focuses on the “middle period” in Chinese history from the Period of Division (fourth to sixth centuries) to the Tang dynasty (706–960) and explores how interactions between politics, religion, and dynastic ritual affairs inspired new types of artistic practice and discourse. With the rapid spread of Buddhism during this period, “miraculous icons” (rui xiang) of the Buddha became a central subject in both historical narrative and art making. The concept of dynastic time remained, but its meaning and utility underwent complex negotiation between religious and political authorities. Chapter 4 explores the logic and language of this negotiation by examining two sets of narratives, one textual and one pictorial. An analysis of textual materials, mainly two successive biographies of the monk Huida (b. ca. 345) compiled by Huijiao (497–554) and Daoxuan (596–667) in the early sixth and early seventh centuries, reveals multiple patterns that relate Buddhist icons to dynastic history. Paintings and sculptures in Mogao Cave 323 at Dunhuang further steer the discussion into the realm of visual representation. Following a chronological sequence, two panoramic murals on the cave's side walls illustrate tales of miraculous icons as well as deeds of famous Buddhist miracle workers and their political patrons, from the Former Han in the second century
BCE to the Sui in the late sixth century CE. The Buddha statue in the central niche then symbolizes the current reigning dynasty, the Tang. While this linear narrative implies a clear political agenda to justify dynastic time, it also delivers a strong message from the Buddhist church, that the fate of emperors must depend on their faith in Buddhism.

Chapter 5, “Landscape and Dynastic Power: Competing Yue,” turns to the relationship between dynastic legitimacy and the natural world. Although Chinese art is well known for its landscape painting, such images are rooted in much earlier historical episodes, when certain mountains and rivers were singled out from the surrounding environment to become rarified religious or political icons. A set of “dynastic mountains,” or Yue, gradually grew into a codified symbolic system. The twofold purpose of this chapter is to explore the formation and history of this system and to uncover the tensions and conflicts within it, especially when the deeply rooted patriarchal constitution of this system is challenged by a woman in her demand to be granted dynastic status. Unique in Chinese history, this woman—Wu Zetian (624–705)—successfully transformed herself from a minor palace lady into an emperor. Revising existing ritual codes and constructing new types of monuments, she also changed the site of the fengshan sacrifices—the solemnest dynastic ceremony since the Qin—from Mount Tai (Taishan) to Mount Heng (Hengshan). These reforms all aimed to shift the seat of power from male to female, implementing a gender reversal in religious, ritual, and political spheres. But because she was still working within a traditional gender framework, all her achievements were easily undone when a male member of the Tang royal family returned to the throne.

Consisting of the next three chapters, Part Three investigates the beginning of art historical scholarship and antiquarianism in China vis-à-vis the concept of dynastic time. Chapters 6 and 7, “Art History and Dynastic Time: Reading Zhang Yanyuan” and “Blind Spots of Dynastic Time: The Case of the Liao,” form a pair, examining the invention of art history from two complementary angles. Hailed as “the progenitor of the history of [Chinese] painting as well as painting history par excellence,” Zhang Yanyuan’s Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties breaks away from earlier painting criticism, which focused on evaluation and ranking. Chapter 6 inquires into what Zhang’s notion of art history consisted of and what his own relationship was with this history. Guided by these two questions, the chapter discusses Zhang’s theory of “Three Antiquities” (San gu), arguably the first attempt by any Chinese art historian to periodize the history of painting based on aesthetic judgment as well as the relationship between this periodization and dynastic time. A number of seeming inconsistencies in Zhang’s historical account then lead us to explore his notions of the past and the present and the deep historical and psychological rupture that divides the two.

Zhang Yanyuan provided later art historians with an influential model to narrate the history of Chinese art, but this model has its inherent limitations, especially in dealing with complex historical situations that defy the linear pattern of dynastic time. To explore such limitations is the purpose of chapter 7. An examination of Guo Ruoxu’s
eleventh-century Paintings Seen and Heard (Tuhua jianwen zhi) shows that this Song art historian, in compiling a sequel to Zhang’s Famous Paintings, was forced to simplify or ignore the new regional art centers that emerged in the post-Tang era for the sake of a unilinear, dynastic art history. An investigation of a group of recently discovered Liao mortuary paintings confirms such disjunction between discourse and actual artistic practices. More importantly, in demonstrating a sophisticated integration of Chinese and Khitan images and styles, these murals urge us to pursue new narrative frameworks based on real interactions of forms and ideas, actions and actors.

Chapter 8 reexamines the notions and practices of fugu—“returning to the past” or “recovering the past”—in light of dynastic time. It suggests that fugu and dynastic time are inseparable in traditional Chinese thought because gu (“the past,” “the ancient”) is always understood in a historiographical sense, referring to actual or imaginary archaic dynasties and sage rulers. One goal of this chapter is to uncover some broad patterns through which dynastic time provides preexisting models for retrieving old forms, hence setting up a hidden template for fugu practices. Another goal is to situate various fugu projects in three general contexts, namely ritual, dynastic renewal, and antiquarianism, to observe the shifting ideas and focuses that define fugu as a broad cultural and artistic field. Two historical cases—Wang Mang’s (45 BCE–23 CE) evocation of antiquity in establishing his dynastic authority and the interpenetration between Song dynasty ritual reforms and antiquarian scholarship—further demonstrate the inseparability of these contexts as well as related discourses and practices.

Part Four, the last section of the book, deals with two sharp ruptures in later Chinese history, both occasioning new concepts of dynastic time and corresponding artistic practice. The subject of chapter 9, “Art of Absence: Remnant Subject and Post-dynastic Temporality,” is the liminal moment after the fall of the Ming in 1644. The post-dynastic temporality generated by this moment shifts our gaze away from seemingly smooth dynastic successions, recentering it instead on a state of uncertainty that relinquishes a clear sense of continuity and belonging. To those who were emotionally attached to the fallen dynasty, the dynastic transition incited intense feelings of loss and trauma, which then became the main motivation and subject of their work. From ancient times, such post-dynastic temporality underlay the poetic genre of “lamenting the past” (huaigu), grieving over a fallen dynasty and reminiscing about its past glory. It inspired visual expressions from the Southern Song onward, when “remnant subjects” (yi min) of a fallen dynasty used painting and calligraphy as a principal vehicle for self-expression. The fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, in particular, generated a self-sustained field of art production and discourse based on the notion of post-dynastic time, bestowing the vanished dynasty with a posthumous life in visual images.

Chapter 10 also has a sharp temporal focus: 1912, when the Republican Revolution ended China’s long dynastic history. The subject of the investigation is an emerging modern visual culture that self-consciously reflected on its newness and heterogeneity. Guided by a calendar-poster published that year, the chapter explores the intrinsic logic
of three groups of images and related discourses. First, a new type of “bilingual” calendar juxtaposing the international solar calendar and the traditional Chinese lunar calendar encapsulates the changing conception of time at this interim moment. A reflection on the origin and transformation of this format reveals multiple temporal systems, within which the newborn Republic envisioned its own historical position. The second group of images consists of photographic representations of the “queue cutting” movement. Constituting three subgroups with different purposes and representational modes, these images provide nuanced evidence for understanding the complex psychology of certain social groups at the end of China’s dynastic history. Expanding this discussion, the chapter further explores the use of the mirror and inscriptions in portrait photography, identifying a kind of “I-portrait” whose inscription imbues the image with a distinct “I” voice, transforming an anonymous studio photo into a composite representation of the self.

Finally, the conclusion returns to the two questions posed at the beginning of this introduction: How was Chinese art narrated in its original cultural, sociopolitical, and artistic contexts, and how were such narratives related to contemporaneous artistic production? While each of the ten chapters responds to these questions in a particular historical and historiographical context, the book as a whole highlights some deep-rooted patterns of dynastic time in both the creation and historical conceptualization of Chinese art. By historicizing and contextualizing these patterns, this concluding chapter connects the construction of Chinese art history with a multifaceted historiographic system and also reflects on the limitations of this system. A principal goal, to stress again, is to free Chinese art history from dynastic time by making this seemingly self-evident narrative framework a subject of historical inquiry, to show that it is anything but self-evident. More importantly, I hope that through uncovering this system of indigenous art historical discourse in relation to art practice, a new foundation can be achieved for conducting comparative studies between various art traditions and theoretical systems.
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