ART AND ITS HISTORIES

Views of Difference: Different Views of Art
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What about Chinese art?

CRAIG CLUNAS

Writers in China have concerned themselves with the visual arts for a period of over 2000 years. Very large quantities of writing on art survive from all periods of Chinese history, including extensive works on the biographies of painters (which were written many centuries before Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*), technical treatises, theoretical statements of great sophistication, and comprehensive histories of painting. The world's first printed book to be illustrated with reproductions of works that actually existed was produced in China in 1607. Much of this literature is now available in English translation, and some of it has been known outside Asia for nearly 200 years. Yet many of the standard works of art history for the English-speaking world either ignore China altogether, or else restrict their coverage to a very limited series of generalizations. For example, *The Story of Art* by E.H. Gombrich includes a few pages on China in a chapter entitled 'Looking Eastward', which makes it clear that in the (singular) story of art the people doing the looking stand very firmly in something called 'the West'. It is as if 'art history' and 'Chinese art history' are two very different things.

This case study will introduce some examples of Chinese writing about the history of art in China, as well as some of the central ideas that educated Chinese people used in considering issues of representation and picture-making. It will also consider the place of 'Chinese art history' in the broad field of study today, looking at how Chinese art has been written about by Europeans and Americans in recent times.

The history of art in China

Although the case study will focus on the history of painting in China, it is important to understand that the value placed on different forms of artistic expression in China may not be the same as it has been historically in Europe. As with Europe, the 'hierarchy of the arts' (that is, which art forms have been most valued) has not been constant across time. However, it is in general true to say that for about the last 2000 years the greatest prestige has attached to the art of calligraphy, that is, the writing of the Chinese script (Plate 79). It is, for example, an art still practised by many political leaders in China in the present century.

Painting has come second to this, which is reflected in the order of the words in the term *shu hua*, 'calligraphy and painting', always written in this way. Although the Chinese script (the individual elements of which are usually called 'characters' in English) is in no sense made up of 'pictures', most Chinese theories of the image held that both writing and painting had a common origin, and were related at the conceptual level. For example, in the
fourteenth century, the statesman and philosopher Song Lian repeated long-established ideas when he stated in an essay entitled ‘The Origins of Painting’:

If there were no writing there would be no means to record things; if there were no painting there would be no means to show things. Is it not that these two reach the same point by different routes? Thus I say that writing and painting are not different Ways, but are as one in their origin.

(Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, p.109)

Western accounts of Chinese art usually treat calligraphy much less thoroughly than they do painting, which is the apex of the hierarchy in European terms. The other two elements of the European system of ‘fine arts’, namely architecture and sculpture, have not, prior to this century, been seen in China as possessing anything like the same prestige as calligraphy and painting. Relatively little was written about them, and we have almost no biographical information on the practitioners of these skills, in contrast to the large amounts written about calligraphers and painters. This does not mean that architecture and sculpture were of no importance, but it does mean that they were understood as being conceptually different from calligraphy and painting. At various times in China’s past, prestige has been accorded to other types of object, some of which would now be placed in the (lower) category of ‘crafts’ or ‘decorative arts’. For example, during the Ming dynasty in China, embroidered pictures or pictures of silk tapestry made on a loom (Plate 80) were in certain contexts catalogued as equivalent to paintings made with a brush on silk or paper. Today, embroidery is given a lower position than painting, or at best is viewed as a separate ‘decorative’ ‘art’.

Prior to the early twentieth century, Chinese writers, both within the Chinese-speaking world and beyond it, did not use a single term to encompass all the forms now thought of as the ‘fine arts’. The word meishu was re-appropriated from Japan to serve as a blanket term for all the ‘fine arts’ in the European sense, and in modern Chinese it can be used to cover all sorts of object: ceramics, textiles, crafts such as metalworking and lacquering, as well as sculpture, painting, and calligraphy.
The extensive theoretical writing on calligraphy and painting in China dates back to at least the fourth century, when details of the careers of individual painters and vivid descriptions of specific works of art first appear, none of which now survive in their original form. Processes of canon-formation begin at this time too, with artists like Gu Kaizhi (c.345–c.406) establishing themselves as among the key famous names (Plates 81 and 82).

1 The family name, or surname, comes first in Chinese, which is here spelled in the pinyin system for turning Chinese characters into the Latin alphabet. The same artist might be referred to in some books as Ku K'ai-chih.
Plate 82  Attributed to Gu Kaizhi but now believed to have been painted in the Tang dynasty as a close copy of the original, *Admonitions of the Instructress to Court Ladies*, detail, hand scroll on silk, British Museum, London. Photo: by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.
CASE STUDY 5 WHAT ABOUT CHINESE ART?

Gu, who holds his place in the canon of Chinese painting to this day, also wrote extensively on technique, and on theories of the image, establishing a tradition whereby the leading artists and the leading theorists were often the same people (not so regularly the case in Europe). He is famous above all as a painter of the human figure, and it is clear that at this early period it was this kind of subject that dominated painting in China. Such work was frequently executed at the courts of rulers, and displayed there either in the form of painting on plastered walls or of scrolls. The subject-matter was often didactic, as in the scroll Admonitions of the Instructress to Court Ladies (Plates 81 and 82), showing models of ideal male and female behaviour. Theories of the image down to Gu’s time held that much of the value of a painting lay in the value of its subject-matter (an aesthetic position paralleling in some ways that of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), whose influence on European artistic theory has been enormous). In the third century, the imperial prince Cao Zhi wrote:

Of those who look at pictures, there is not one who, beholding the Three Majesties and the Five Emperors, would not look up in reverence; nor any that before a painting of the degenerate rulers of the Three Decadences would not be moved to sadness.

(Bush and Shih, Early Chinese Texts on Painting, p.26)

However, this view of the didactic role of painting was not to endure, and much painting in China came at a very early date to be judged more on the how than the what of representation. Painters came to be measured against the criteria set down by the sixth-century writer Xie He, in his ‘Six Laws’ (or ‘Six Elements’):

What are these Six Elements? First, Spirit Resonance which means vitality; second, Bone Method which is [a way of] using the brush; third, Correspondence to the Object which means the depicting of forms; fourth, Suitability to Type which has to do with the laying on of colors; fifth, Division and Planning, that is, placing and arrangement; and sixth, Transmission by Copying, that is to say the copying of models.

(Bush and Shih, Early Chinese Texts on Painting, p.40)

These are enigmatic even in Chinese, and very hard to translate into English, with several competing attempts to understand them having been made by modern scholars. What is important to notice is that, however they are interpreted, the ‘Laws’ privilege expression by the artist (‘Spirit Resonance’, vitality) over the transcribing of visual phenomena. A ninth-century text, for example, tells of the wife of an eminent official who is shown two portraits of her husband, and asked to comment on them:

She replied, ‘Both paintings are likenesses, but the second one is better.’ Again he asked, ‘Why do you say that?’ She responded, ‘The first painting has merely captured my husband’s appearance, while the second has also conveyed his spirit vitality ... It has caught his personality and his manner of laughing and talking.’

(Bush and Shih, Early Chinese Texts on Painting, p.57)
This position was systematized in the eleventh century by a group of intellectuals, of whom the most important was Su Shi. A very famous poem by him sums up his doctrine:

If anyone discusses painting in terms of formal likeness,
His understanding is close to that of a child.
If someone composing a poem must have a certain poem,
Then he is definitely not a man who knows poetry.
There is one basic rule in poetry and painting,
Natural genius and originality.

(Bush and Shih, Early Chinese Texts on Painting, p.224)

Elsewhere, Su discusses at greater length the association of painting with individual creativity, and the importance of the artist having more than merely technical skill if he (and there is a clear implication that the artists is usually he) is to deal with the complexity of phenomena observed in the world. He writes, 'The artisans of the world may be able to create the forms perfectly, but when it comes to the principles, unless one is a superior man of outstanding talent, one cannot achieve them' (Bush and Shih, Early Chinese Texts on Painting, p.220). This stresses the importance of painting as a means of communicating the artist's ideas that is independent of the subject-matter of the work. Such views support a shift of attention nearly 1000 years ago from the subject of the picture to the manner in which it is executed, a shift that European culture found it very difficult to make prior to this century. This situation is only explicable by relating it to some very fundamental issues in the way certain Chinese writers have understood the world and its workings. These provide a distinctive philosophical basis for picture-making that is very different from that prevailing in most of European history. It is necessary to take a look at these issues, even if they cannot be gone into in detail.

Picture-making and representation

In Europe, ideas of the image and of representation owe a great debt to the Greek philosopher Plato (c.429–347 BCE), whose concept of 
epistata (Greek, ideal form), as laid out in Book 10 of his work The Republic, has been and remains immensely influential. For Plato, actual objects visible in the world about us are merely poor reflections of the ideal and unchanging forms of things, present in some superior realm of transcendence (about which he is very vague), ‘above and beyond’ the world we inhabit. His thought, and much European thought subsequent to him, privileges ‘being’, the unchanging, the constant, over ‘becoming’, the changing, the situation in flux. A representation, for example a painting, is for Plato but a poor reflection of a poor reflection of the ideal form, and hence to be despised as being at several removes from ultimate truth. After the dominance of Christianity, Plato’s ideas were modified to situate the ideal forms of things with the unchanging God who created all. If representations were inferior to ultimate reality, they were nevertheless related to it by a series of links, which provided a justification of representation. By the Renaissance in Europe, the possibility of the artist achieving direct contact with the realm of the ideal formed an important part of artistic theory.
Much Chinese thought, by contrast, privileges ‘becoming’, accepting change and flux as the natural condition of the cosmos. There is no creator God and very little emphasis on myths of the creation (or indeed the end) of the universe. A painting is therefore not simply an attempt to ‘represent’ (re-present) something called ‘reality’, which is existing elsewhere, beyond the picture. Rather the relationship between the picture, the maker of the picture, and the subject of the picture is much more of a shared enterprise. The fourteenth-century artist Wang Lü (Plate 83) describes the process whereby he created a set of small paintings of Mount Hua in terms that allow a great deal of agency to the mountain itself, as an active teacher of the artist not as the passive recipient of his ‘realistic’ gaze:

I kept my paintings at home, and once someone by chance saw them. He thought they were contrary to all painting styles, and with surprise asked, ‘Who is your master?’ I replied, ‘I take my heart-mind to be my teacher. It takes as its master my eyes, which in turn revere Mt. Hua as their teacher.’

(Liscomb, Learning from Mt. Hua, p.62)

Obviously, it should not be assumed that the theoretical positions written down by Chinese male intellectuals are the only key to understanding the history of painting in China. A great range of formats, of subject-matters, and of styles has existed at various periods. Many pictures survive that are, for a variety of reasons, very different in manner from that promoted by theorists like Su and Wang. These include narrative subjects (Plate 84) and portraiture (Plate 85). Nor should it be assumed that the theoretical positions can be explained thoroughly in the relatively small amount of space allotted to Chinese art within this book. However, a consideration of them may help to explain why a Chinese and a European picture of the same date look so different.

Plate 84

Plate 85
Please look at *The Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca (Plate 86) and *Poet on a Mountain Top* by Shen Zhou (Plate 87). How and why are the two works different?

Plate 86  Piero della Francesca, *The Flagellation*, c.1460, tempera on panel, 59 x 81.5 cm, Galleria Nazionale, Urbino. Fratelli Alinari, Florence.

Plate 87  Shen Zhou, *Poet on a Mountain Top*, Ming dynasty, album leaf mounted as a hand scroll, ink on paper, 38.7 x 60.2 cm, Nelson–Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust.
Discussion
The subject-matter and the treatment of the paintings is very different. The European painting depicts an episode in a story, whereas the Chinese painting shows a scene or landscape without an obvious narrative content. Whereas The Flagellation is peopled with figures, Poet on a Mountain Top shows only one. The oil painting employs rich colours by comparison with which the album leaf appears subdued, but the delicacy of the individual brushstrokes is highlighted in the contrast. The two paintings embody the different assumptions of the two cultures as to what constitutes excellence in artistic practice.

The two pictures are by contemporaries, but they have very different theoretical bases, and are trying to do very different things. For the Chinese artist Shen Zhou (1427-1509), ‘telling a story’ is not what art sets out to do, whereas for the Italian artist Piero della Francesca (1410/20–92), the istoria, or subject, of a picture is its prime element, as laid down by the Italian artist and theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72). From the Italian point of view, the Chinese picture lacks this central feature; it does not seem to be ‘about’ anything. From the Chinese point of view, the Italian picture is totally lacking in ‘brush method’, the visible expression of style and of artistic personality. The Chinese picture, although it has a sense of spatial recession, is not obsessed with the mathematically calculated fixed point perspective of the Italian one. Nor is colour of central importance. Perhaps most importantly, the Chinese picture, by its prominent inscription at the upper left (a poem composed by Shen himself), brings literally to the foreground the fact that it is a picture, marks on the surface of a sheet of paper, and not an illusionistic window onto a world. The first European comments on Chinese painting, in the seventeenth century, stress its lack of ‘proper’ perspective. The first Chinese comments on European painting, at around the same time, see it as an interesting optical trick, but lacking in real artistic value.

For much of China’s history, the most prestigious genre of painting has been landscape (Plate 88); history painting, the summit of the European hierarchy of genres, has by contrast been less esteemed. The painting of landscape, what in Chinese is called shan shui, ‘mountains and water’, has long been linked with the amateur ideal in Chinese art. A contemporary of Su Shi named Guo Roxu wrote:

I venture to note that the rare works of the past were mainly those by talented worthies of high position or superior gentlemen in retirement, who cleaved to loving-kindness and sought enjoyment in the arts or explored the abstruse and plumbed the depths, and their lofty and refined emotions were all lodged in painting. If a man’s condition has been high, his spirit consonance cannot but be lofty.

(Bush and Shih, Early Chinese Texts on Painting, pp.96–7)
Plate 88  Guo Xi, *Early Spring*, 1072, hanging scroll ink on silk, 158.3 x 108.1 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan. Photo: The National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.
The image of the disinterested scholar, expressing his untrammelled emotions and feelings through the medium of landscape paintings, is a staple of many older books on the subject of Chinese art, as well as being a literary trope found extensively in Chinese writing of the past. It is certainly the case that men and women of high social standing, up to and including certain Chinese emperors themselves, were active as painters in a way that is not paralleled in Europe (despite claims to the contrary by writers of the Renaissance like Alberti). The image of withdrawal from the mundane world has recently been challenged by a number of scholars, who have pointed out that even ‘amateur’ painters of high standing in China were involved in social and patronage networks of great complexity, and seldom painted ‘just because they felt like it’. Even those artists who, by their status as landowners or holders of the imperial degrees (which qualified them to serve as members of the state bureaucracy), had no need to paint for a living, regularly produced work as part of a network of social obligations and reciprocal gift-giving. For example, *Beijing the Pines* (Plate 89) was painted by the upper-class artist Du Qiong for his brother-in-law, on the occasion of the latter’s assumption of a new name.

The different hierarchy of subject-matters in Chinese as opposed to European painting throws new light on the important question, ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ In posing this question in 1989 with regard to Europe (typically ‘artist’ was used to stand for ‘European artist’), the art historian Linda Nochlin was able to draw attention to women’s exclusion from the academic structures necessary to artistic success in early modern Europe, and in particular to women’s exclusion from the all-important practice of life drawing (Nochlin, ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’). Clearly, this is not the explanation in the Chinese case, where drawing from life formed no part of artistic training. Nor can it be argued that women were barred from travelling and seeing the landscape, since it was not the case that sketching in the open air was an essential part of the practice of landscape art in China. Women did paint landscapes (Plate 90), but women who painted (and these tended to be either relations of male professionals, relations of upper-class amateurs, or trained courtesans) were more likely to be restricted to flower painting, a less prestigious subject, even if one also practised by many men. The answer to the question must be essentially the same as the one Nochlin gives and must involve challenging the way ‘great artist’ has been defined. In China, this may be significantly different from the definition used in the European tradition, but China too excluded women from the institutions that provided the informal preparation for artistic ‘greatness’. It was women’s exclusion from the social networks of upper-class male interaction and bureaucratic patronage, networks that were crucial to the formation of the canon of ‘great artists’ in China, that above all led to the marginalization of woman painters (and calligraphers). Another angle on this question for both Chinese and European art would be to question the very way in which ‘art’ has been defined. We need to seek a more inclusive definition, which would incorporate the arts that women have been allowed to practise, to achieve a wider scope for the history of art.
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Plate 89 Du Qiong, Befriending the Pines, mid-fifteenth century, hand scroll on paper, 29.1 x 92.3 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing. Photo: The Palace Museum, Beijing.

Plate 90 Lin Xue, Landscape after Huang Gongwang, first half of sixteenth century, fan leaf, ink on gold paper, 19 x 56 cm, Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne. Photo: Rheinisches Bildarchiv, Cologne.

**European writing about Chinese art**

As stated at the outset of this case study, there is a very large, self-conscious tradition of writing about art within China. The first large-scale attempt to provide a collection of artists’ biographies, and to characterize their style, was a book called *Li dai ming hua ji* (Records of the Painters of Successive Dynasties), written in 843 by Zhang Yanyuan. Zhang categorizes over 370 painters from the very earliest times to his day, and sets a pattern for writing about painters that was to be extremely long lasting. In the case of many artists within the Chinese tradition, we have the same sorts of personal detail about their lives and work that are found in the writing of Vasari many centuries later (and in some cases we even have exactly the same stories about them, written down in China hundreds of years before they surface, almost certainly coincidentally, in Europe). For example, we know of Wen Zhengming, one of the great upper-class amateur painters of the Ming period, what he normally had for lunch, and that he had notoriously smelly feet.
The famous opening sentences of Gombrich's *Story of Art*, to the effect that 'There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists', could arguably have provided him with a basis for an extensive treatment of China.

However, the way Chinese art is written about in *The Story of Art* is very different from the way in which the author treats the art of Europe, which forms the bulk of this enormously influential and popular book. Rather than building the account around named artists, only one, Gu Kaizhi, is mentioned at all. Painting in China is instead associated above all with ideas of religious practice, and seen as essentially unchanging across a very long time span. In treating it in this way, Gombrich is showing himself to be heir to a western tradition of writing about China (and Chinese art) which stresses continuities rather than change and which attempts to reduce the wide range of artistic expression in China to an essence, what Chinese art is 'really' all about. This tradition has a history that goes back above all to the philosopher Hegel, one of the first to articulate the absolute contrast between a dynamic, forward-moving 'West' and a static, unchanging 'East'. The fact that Gombrich chooses to treat the Islamic world and China in the same chapter is the clearest possible symptom of his Hegelian roots. The two cultures have nothing in common except for being 'not western', and so serve to define who 'we' who 'look eastwards' are. The current fashion for the term 'non-western art' as a way of lumping together everything that is 'not us' is a continuation of the same position.

One of the common ways of approaching art in China involves seeing it as uniquely bound up with the study of its own past, and the reworking of old themes. Such a view allows the holder to point to works such as those shown in Plates 88 and 91, created 600 years apart, and stress what is the same about them (they are both landscapes) rather than what is different (not just style, but the social roles of the two artists and the audiences for their work).

The word 'archaism', meaning a return to the ancient, is often used. Yet 'archaism' is not used to describe the phase of European art that involved the close study and use of very ancient models in the visual arts, or the continued relevance of scenes from classical Greek mythology to European artists of the nineteenth century. Instead, the former has, since the nineteenth century, been called the Renaissance, or 're-birth', a birth being above all a beginning,
something new, rather than an obsession with the past. The same is true of a term like 'neo-classicism', which might equally be described as an 'archaistic' movement in art (but never is). This is part of the dynamic West/static East division, which has been built into art history since its beginnings as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century. It affects the writing of the art history of many parts of the world other than China.

However, the Chinese situation is perhaps rather distinctive, in that China never formed the direct colonial possession of any single European power, even if it was the object of all sorts of indirect political and economic domination.3 The desire on the part of many western writers to pin down the 'essence' of Chinese art is a way of reducing the threat it poses to the single, linear history of art as a story that takes place above all in Europe. The diversity and self-consciousness of China's own large body of statements about art can only really be dealt with by being ignored (difficulties of language are often a convenient excuse here). The European interpretation of Chinese art creates particular problems when it comes to writing about the developments in art in China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, since it is a position that makes the idea of 'modern Chinese art' an impossibility. A thing is either 'Chinese' in which case it has to be in a traditional format (Plate 92), or else 'modern', in which case it is not 'really Chinese' (Plate 93).

This is now as much of a problem for writers in China as it is for those outside. Thus, a work like the self-portrait of the painter Guan Qiaochang (Plate 94) is often omitted from general histories of Chinese art, whatever language they are written in. This artist, for example, finds no place in most modern Chinese encyclopaedias of art, or in general exhibitions of Qing dynasty (1644–1911) painting. Outside China, his work is subsumed under the special category, 'Chinese export art'.

3 This means, for example, that the work of the scholar Edward Said, and in particular his Orientalism (1978), has been less influential in China than it has in other countries such as India. Said sought to explain the way in which much non-European art had been constructed as the art of inferior subject peoples. Chinese art has in part escaped this interpretation and most Chinese scholars today do not see themselves as heirs to colonial subjects.
The artist, who spent his entire career within the boundaries of the Chinese empire, exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London as early as 1835, but his work poses a terrible problem for the structures of art history as a discipline in the United Kingdom. As a painter in oils, he is excluded from the collections of the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum and the Far Eastern Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum (not ‘Chinese’ enough). As a ‘Chinese artist’ he is ignored by the Tate Gallery, the National Gallery, and the National Portrait Gallery, and consequently omitted from their collections also.

In *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (1989), the art historian Michael Sullivan pointed out the unfairness whereby the use by European or American artists of Asian ideas is seen as creative (think of the Impressionists and Japanese prints), whereas the use by Asian artists of ideas developed outside
Asia is seen as uncreative, sterile borrowing.\footnote{The same point about unfair comparisons was made more extensively by Martin Powers in a paper called “Re-examining the ‘West’.”} This double standard is still pervasive in the writing of art history, and contemporary artists from China, wherever they happen to live, still find it very hard to get their work shown outside the restricted context of ‘Chinese art’. Many scholars are now aware of the problems brought about by past practice, but change is difficult to achieve within the limits of art history as a discipline. If you stop to consider the effect of the inclusion of only a single case study about China in a series of books whose themes include The Changing Status of the Artist (in Europe) and Gender and Art (in Europe), you will become aware of the extent to which, whatever our intentions, this balance serves to reinforce the idea of the history of art in something called ‘the West’ as a historical and contemporary norm.

Look now at Wintry Trees (Plate 95) by Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) and Self-portrait (Plate 96) by Ren Yong (1820–57), and consider how the range of methodologies used by western art historians might be applied to understand these works of art.
Plate 95
Plate 96
Ren Yiong, *Self-portrait*, 1850s, hanging scroll on paper, 177 x 79 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.
Discussion
(The discussion provides new information about the works and the artists to illustrate the possible approaches to analysis and interpretation.)

Documentary/biographic analysis
Wen is one of the most famous of Chinese 'literati' ('educated amateur') artists, and is firmly established in the canon of major Chinese painters. His work has been extensively written about since his own time. It has also been extensively faked. Issues of connoisseurship, the identification of authentic works, are important in Chinese painting studies. The inscriptions and seals of the artist and of previous owners are useful in this respect, as well as revealing something of the circumstances in which a picture was painted (in the case of Wintry Trees, as a reciprocal gift for a friend who visited the artist to condole him on the death of his wife).

Ren was a professional artist working in Shanghai. He is one of a group of Shanghai artists in the late nineteenth century who introduced new styles of painting that appealed to the popular imagination. Their approach to art and the professional nature of their work contrasted with that of the literati artists.

Stylistic analysis
Traditional discussions of a picture like Wintry Trees might concentrate on its links to the style of earlier artists, a topic that Wen himself raises in his inscription. By contrast, Ren's Self-portrait has recently come to be a much-discussed work because of its possible superimposition of a western code of representation on assertive calligraphic brushwork.

Formalist/iconographic analysis
Western approaches such as formalism and iconology have had a definite, if limited, impact on how such works have been studied.

Contextual analysis
More recently, scholars interested in the social history of art have drawn attention to the kinds of interaction between members of the elite for which works like Wintry Trees were created, and also to the history of their transmission through subsequent collections. One of the collections to which Wen's Wintry Trees belonged was that of the Qianlong emperor (reigned 1736–95). This great imperial collection was divided as a result of the politics of the twentieth century, with part of it accompanying the Nationalist government to the island of Taiwan, and part remaining in Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China. The Beijing collections did not begin to be extensively published until the 1970s. They contain many objects of a type outside the traditional art-historical canon, including works like Ren's life-size Self-portrait.

Psychoanalytic analysis
The powerful gaze of the artist/subject makes Ren's Self-portrait of great interest to scholars working with new psychoanalytic approaches, or exploring the construction of gender or the role of subjectivity in Chinese art.
It is only quite recently that the painting of nineteenth-century China has been seen as other than the product of an age of "decline" and we need now to build on this changing perception. Instead of approaching the art of China with preconceived ideas based on stereotype, perhaps we in the West should be asking what Chinese artists see in their work and derive from it, as well as listening to how Chinese art historians wish to interpret it. It may be time to lay aside our European expectations and be open to the answers we receive.

References


