

## Art History in China

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The concept of art history in China began with the acceptance of Western art in that country. However, the cost of this acceptance was the concealment of the Chinese view towards art. Nowadays, discussions of the issues with art history in China fall into two categories: 1) discussions of how Western art was introduced into China and how it replaced the existing art concepts there and 2) research on where Chinese art concepts differ from Western art concepts. These two issues provide opportunities for insight into the cultural diversity refocused by Western-centered thought and post-colonialism that are the results of globalization. It is also an opportunity to change art history from an academic subject that is studied only by the few (that is, essentially by Western scholars) to an academic subject which would allow the whole world to discuss the same art problems. Through this change, art historians will be able to find even more aspects worthy of study, thus giving art history a greater scope for describing and outlining human history and culture.

The way the Chinese conceive art has passed through two different stages. The first stage preceded the emergence of conscious art awareness in China, the time of the so-called “passive art concept” (this was not an expression used by people of that era, but one applied by scholars of later periods). The second stage emerged after cultural awareness of art in China became established, which the people of that time came to refer to as the “active art concept.” This article is about the timing and formation of this “active art concept” and the issues that were associated with it.

The older “passive art concept,” however, which had emerged from the beginning of civilization to the Early Han Dynasty, was not supplanted entirely by the “active art concept” which came later, but continued in parallel with it all the way to the end of the Qing Dynasty, when the Western concept of art was introduced and popularized.<sup>1</sup> This concept is actually the one found in all cultures before their art became independently conscious. In respect of the cave paintings from the Paleolithic age, for example, no matter from what perspective one views them, it is clear that these paintings were not created solely as ends in themselves. Rather they are a result of people attempting to give form to the domain of the incomprehensible and at the same time to exert control over it. They wanted to use painting as a “special” device to engage with the incomprehensible. The application of this device is not any different from attempts at magic or the practices of primitive religion. This type of “art” is considered to have been the common form of traditional Chinese art up until the end of the Han Dynasty.

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The formation of the “active art concept” occurred between the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the beginning of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (ca. 200–400 CE.). This development came about due to foreign influences such as the introduction of Buddhism into China from India.<sup>2</sup> These influences caused Chinese philosophy and thought to evolve very rapidly. The consequent cultural and philosophical exchanges did not, however, alter the nature of the concept of art within China nor the quality of the artworks. It seems as if there was no direct relationship between the evolution of Chinese philosophical thought under this Indian influence and the degree of art consciousness because, when investigations were made into the culture of India of that period, there was no evidence found of any self-awareness in Indian art. Because of this, Buddhism cannot have been the cause of this awakening of art consciousness in China or the rest of East Asia. It may therefore be stated that the self-identification and consciousness which evolved in Chinese art around the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the start of the Jin Dynasty was achieved purely through the Chinese themselves. This is very similar to the growth of the ancient Greek civilization which absorbed influences from Ancient Egypt and the Middle East, but whose accomplishments cannot be ascribed merely to these foreign influences.

The “active art concept” over time slowly developed its own special characteristics and form, thus becoming a specialized spiritual activity. Due to these characteristics, it has emerged as a symbol of cultural difference. The “active art concept” has two properties:

1. It is neither the result of knowledge nor the result of belief, but specifically the outward expression of a people’s nature and inertia.
2. Its main difference with previous art is that there is no utilitarian purpose involved.

These two properties of the “active art concept” are very important for the understanding of Chinese art history. But the problems raised by the “active art concept” are beyond the realm of Western art. In other words, it is impossible to use Western art history to research and come to terms with these art problems. During the past century, it was very difficult for anyone with a deep connection to Western art history to involve him–or herself deeply in this matter. Instead they were only able to talk about the related sociological and political science issues or the sides of Chinese art that can be studied by Western Art History terms.

The special circumstances in China which led to the emergence of the “active art concept” can be attributed to the evolution of the writing-art (in Chinese “shufa” 书法), commonly translated as “calligraphy.” Calligraphy was the basis of all Chinese art after this “active art concept”. It is intimately related to drawing, painting, and sculpture. The greatest masterpieces of Chinese artworks have been works of calligraphy. Before the advent of Western art history perspectives, Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (who reigned from 1735 until 1795) collected over six hundred thousand artworks. From these he selected three, which represented the *crème de la crème* of the collection, to be placed in the *Cabinet of Three Masterpieces*, or *Sanxitang* (三希堂). All three were calligraphy works from the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420 CE).<sup>3</sup>

Calligraphy became the foundation of traditional Chinese art after art became independent and self-aware. Before the introduction of Western ideas it defined how art was perceived and created. Just like classical Greek art for other Western art traditions before the modern art period, traditional Chinese art, while it saw many changes and additions throughout history, had similarities which formed not only its fundamentals, but also the essence of all Eastern art. This “East” is the “Orient” that is used in parallel contrast to “Western” art. Originally, there was no parallel contrast. This contrast was created in order to emphasize the differences amongst the diverse human cultures.



**Figure 1.** Zhao Mengfu, *Trees and Few Rocks*. Yuan Dynasty, Palace Museum, Beijing.

All traditions begin of fine arts with a culture becoming self-aware and self-identifying. This is what happened during the middle and late period of the Classical Greek age. During that period, there was great change in the development of creative art and in the quality of its creations. Moreover, it may be said that self-criticism develops as self-identification becomes more commonplace. Art consequently becomes self-sufficient and alive and is no longer an activity which is passively pushed forward by cultural trends. For China, this happened first during the period between the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty and the beginning of the Eastern Jin Dynasty. Roughly three hundred years later, shortly before the Mongol invasion, Chinese art experienced a renaissance that was a little like the revival of Greco-Roman art during the European Renaissance.

Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) came to the conclusion that Chinese painting and calligraphy were intimately related. His painting “Trees and Few Rocks” best illustrates this point (Figure 1).

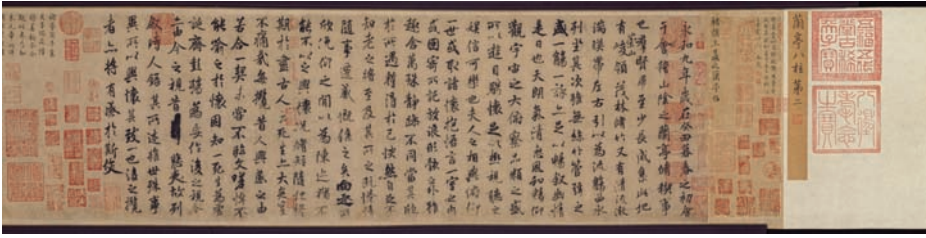
On the surface, this picture looked like a common Chinese-style ink painting, but in actuality, it demonstrated his theory in graphic terms.<sup>4</sup> While the highest-level representation of Chinese art is ink painting, its origin comes from calligraphy, especially the self-aware and self-identifying calligraphy developed after the Han Dynasty. To fully express his theory, Zhao wrote a poem beside the picture:

Rocks as in flying white, trees as in seal script;  
 When painting bamboo, one should master the spreading-eight [pa-fen, late clerical script] method.  
 Those who understand this principle thoroughly  
 Will recognize that calligraphy and painting have always been one.<sup>5</sup>

An important consideration is whether the ancient period that Zhao Mengfu revived was that between the end of the Han Dynasty and the Eastern Jin Dynasty. It is possible to measure the criteria of self-awareness in art by examining the art concepts and art works from this period.

What follows is an examination of the four pre-conditions mentioned above to shed light on the emergence of the self-awareness in Chinese art during this time period, as well as how it differed from the art of previous times:

1. There were a large number of art creations during this period. This large amount shows that:
  - a. Individual artists must have spent considerable time to create the vast amount of art-works attributed to them. For example, there were several thousand of Wang Xizhi’s



**Figure 2.** Wang Xizhi, Lanting Xu, *The Orchid Pavilion* (the Tang Copy by Chu Suiliang). Palace Museum, Beijing.

works on record during the Tang Dynasty (Li Fang 1959: 1601–1602), and even today, there are still several scores of these that have survived.

- b. There were a large number of people who produced similar creations, and a considerable percentage of those achieved success.<sup>6</sup>
2. A rapid increase in quality. In art history, when the quality of a type of artwork has reached a peak, then that artwork is considered the pinnacle of all that can be achieved. The calligraphy from this period progressed to such an elevated state. Since Chinese art became self-aware, the calligraphy from that period has always been considered the finest (just as Phidias's works are considered the pinnacle of Greek sculptural art before the modern era.) The Emperor Qianlong's calligraphy collection consists mostly of calligraphy from this period.

At the same time, there is a formation of the norms. When the form of calligraphic characters change their original shape, the change is based on a dual constraint of the shape of the strokes as well as the space allotted to the structure of character. Before this change a character must be placed in the middle of a square space, meanwhile the ends of strokes must be added plus decoration allowing the character to fully express its style (just as sculptures made during the archaic period had to have an archaic-style smile).

The process of standardizing the norms of calligraphy reached the following conclusions:

- a. Although each character could be viewed independently, when characters were placed together as a single piece of art, each character formed an organic relationship with the other characters. Thus calligraphy was created with some various new styles of writing, like the modern cursive or grass script (jincao, or “in flying white” 今草).
  - b. The transformation from a square form of character into a round form of character was the result of a round shape being easier for people to focus on. With this change in character shape, many of the extraneous strokes would be eliminated, causing strokes to become the perfect combination of the simple and the refined.
3. This self-identification that developed was a result of self-criticism of the arts.

The standards of form evaluation (how distinguishing nature and function can determine the merits of writing itself) thus became clear: where there were requirements for the creation of a work, there existed evaluation criteria and a theoretical explanation for those evaluation criteria.

4. The emergence of a particular art concept. In other words, art had already become a conscious process of construction and not a passive activity affected by cultural regulations and events. An art concept is about having awareness in art, thus establishing the nature of art (what is art?) and art's function (why art?).

- a. The nature of art, or *what is art?* The nature of art is that art is sufficient to itself. Art is not just an engagement between man and the unknown. It is also an activity which bypasses all special functional interests. Its only purpose is to uplift and express the human spirit. Although art is related to various functional benefits, it has an independent value, which transcends the limits of historical time and spatial reality, and follows the path of free spirits. Therefore, the nature of art history is fundamentally conflicted with art itself.
- b. The function of art, or *why art?* It was at the end of the Han Dynasty that this question came to the fore. This expression of consciousness fully expresses the pure concept that art is art itself (this does not mean *l'art pour l'art*, but means that art has functions connected with all aspects of the activities of the people who make it, but above which there is still something more). In other words, art transcends utilitarian values. This perception has gradually evolved since the end of the Han Dynasty. It is the pure goal of calligraphy. It is a way that allows artists to slowly become more persistent and more aware. It is a resistance to and a refusal of art which is purely utilitarian. During the late Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), this change had already begun. There are two sources of evidence for this:
  - b-1. The criticism of Zhao Yi (active 147–189 CE) of this development. Zhao Yi («非草书», *Non-Cursive Script*, in Zhang Yanyuan 1964: 2–4) was against it, and pointed out several of its tendencies:
    - a. The pursuit of form had outstripped the pursuit of the content within the form. Zhang Zhi (d. 192 CE) received criticism for his particular development of calligraphy.<sup>7</sup>
    - b. There was enjoyment of the status of calligraphy. After text became a mode of communication, many started to develop its form artistically, with recreation as its principal purpose.
    - c. Zhao Yi believed that the cursive script had no practical purpose. He believed that cursive script could serve neither as a symbol of truth and sustenance for ideas, nor as a method of communication. Good calligraphy did not need to emphasize formation, only its practicality needed to be stressed. He believed that walking down the path toward aesthetic form was wrong, and because calligraphy was not in the program of the national test for entry into the bureaucracy, he believed it was a waste of time for youngsters to learn it. He however conceded that cursive script was art, and this concession bridged the relationship between writing and art.
  - b-2. After the Han Dynasty (post-220 CE) however, there was no more contention. Wei Hen of the Western Jin Dynasty (215–316 CE) succinctly summarized this treasuring of post-Han cursive script in his book *Four Styles of Scripts* as “nothing is not preserved, it is ever treasured today” (2000). Moreover, he adopted a classical perspective and praised cursive script as so perfect that “one stroke that cannot be moved.”<sup>8</sup>

In the same era, achievement in painting was not nearly as complete as with calligraphy, the reason being that its methodologies and its aesthetic theories were not as comprehensive. The painting theory of that time was outlined by Xie He in the fifth century CE as: 1. Animation through spirit consonance; 2. Structural method in the use of the brush; 3. Fidelity to the object in portraying forms; 4. Conformity to kind in applying colors; 5. Proper planning in the placing of elements; 6. Transmission of the experience of the past in making copies.<sup>9</sup> The Six Methods is incomplete, as it only refers to methods of pictorial creation and does not reveal what were the standard criteria for painting. It does not address issues such as the ontology of art, the function of painting, and the evaluation criteria of “form” in painting. Additionally, “Animation through spirit



consonance” (气韵生动) and “Structural method in the use of the brush” (骨法用笔) were borrowed from or shared with calligraphy, but with a less comprehensive understanding. That was because the function of painting did not transcend the so-called political enlightenment or other factors. The critique on painting also did not disengage painting’s ties to religion, propaganda, and commercial activities. Therefore, paintings were not in essence works of individual mental awareness but works of commercial commission or elaborations responding to the will of the patron. In such cases, artists effectively become slaves without self-awareness.

At the same time, there were also theories about *tuzai*, using pictorial diagrams as methods of recording. “Theory about Diagrams” has three layers of meaning: first, the logic of diagram, or *guaxiang*, image of change; second the identification of diagram, or study of words (which in essence is an issue related to calligraphy); third the shape of diagram, or painting.<sup>10</sup> Thus only one third of these theories related to painting. The other two thirds related to the studies of calligraphic characters and configurations. Thus, calligraphy remains our main focus when we examine the artistic accomplishment of this period.

Consequently, in the period between the end of the Han Dynasty and the rise of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, calligraphy was considered the pinnacle of all art. But calligraphers did not use calligraphy in order to achieve either political or economic advantage. Rather, art was pursued for the sake of spiritual enlightenment. There was some opposition to this practice, with once again criticisms of such artistic uses of calligraphy. These critics espoused political opinions on the use of calligraphy as a practical technique. Most leading intellectuals, however, saw art as allowing for higher personal goals to be achieved and were against art created for the purposes of service toward others and service toward reality. The *Motto of Yan Family*, written at the same time, emphasized throughout the text the rejection of making art a career (Yan Zhitui 1993).

In other words, calligraphy was not a scientific achievement, nor was it an outcome of religious belief. This artistic activity did not have a utilitarian goal. It was an individual activity, which was purely intellectual and self-aware. Art was for art itself, a concept that was first achieved in calligraphy in Chinese art. This state of perfection has three dimensions: what should be done; what is currently done; rejection of what should not be done in art.

In the early twentieth century, however, the intellectual Cai Yuanpei and the artist Xu Beihong, among others, had widely come to accept Western art concepts and were using them to replace the traditional Chinese art concepts. Their main effort was to abandon the declining tradition of the “Four Wang’s Descendants,” a term that refers to artists in the late nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century who used traditional methods and concepts inherited from the four great artists of the Qing Dynasty.<sup>11</sup> The Four Wang tradition, which inherited previous traditional concepts, represented the main development of Chinese art criticism and art making in later times, outlined as follows:

Wang Xizhi: calligraphy independent (between the end of the Han and the rise of the Eastern Jin Dynasties);

Zhao Mengfu: calligraphy and painting considered as one (between the end of Southern Song and the rise of the Yuan Dynasties);

Dong Qichang: art theory of northern and southern models (Ming Dynasty);

Four Wang (between the end of the Ming and the rise of the Qing Dynasties);

Four Wang’s Descendants (to the end of Qing Dynasty), then this tradition is broken by the appearance of Western art.

In summary, the “active art concept” in China is embodied not only in calligraphy but also in other Chinese art forms, which contributed to a complex artistic situation equal to the Western art

concept and art forms. There were two other important artistic phenomena that appeared in parallel with the active art concept during the period from the end of the Han Dynasty until the Eastern Jin Dynasty. The first was the “passive art concept,” which was discussed at the beginning of this article. The other one was realist painting. Although this form of painting was not mature it can be assessed and interpreted within the framework of Western art concepts. The only tradition that has been halted and replaced is the tradition of the active art concept that contains the quintessential value of Chinese art and discusses the nature of art (what is art?) and the function of art (what is art for?). The reasons for the non-continuation of this tradition are that this kind of art is now perceived as disconnected with social reality and everyday life, and therefore of no use to political and military matters. In the twentieth century, Chinese art entered the realm of “Serving the People,” where art became a weapon and a tool, using methods and criteria passed from the Western system of academies of art. It has been during this process of self-abandonment and catering to Western perspectives that the Chinese traditions have been ignored up until the present.

However, by emphasizing the historical Chinese art concept outside of the Western viewpoint, I hope to present two meanings for art history:

First, in relation to art history itself, it needs to break through the idea of a “unilateral art history,” defined by Western art concepts. The re-examination of art history in China contributes to the realization of a “multilateral art history,” changing the narrative from an international Western art history to a global world art history.

Second, Chinese art has the character of counter-history because it emphasizes that the basis of art is to transcend life, disconnect from reality, and thus, free oneself from time. From this perspective, the basis of art is to free oneself from the limits of history. This is the eternity which all humankind has wished for. Throughout Chinese history since far in the past, there have been people who have pursued such lofty ideals. The state they seek is not to become closer to God or the divine, but to have the self-identifying ideal marker, a reputation, to be eternal. This eternity is divine, and artists who connect to eternity through their artistic creativity are regarded as saints in their time. This is why Wang Xizhi, the most famous calligrapher in history, is known as the Saint.

If the counter-historical and non-historical nature of art is confirmed, should we not cast suspicion on art history as an academic subject itself?

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## Notes

1. This “passive” concept of art was tested and proved in the process of verifying “what art used to be (type A)” in Cai Guo-Qiang (2006). The idea of a concept of art “made by people who came after” that particular time formed early in China. The concept of art which was formed during China’s ancient times, and which differed from Graeco-Hebraic art, was rooted in China’s political system and cultural heritage. A class of scholar-bureaucrats was formed during the Zhou Dynasty (ca. mid 11th c.–256 BCE) whose function extended much further than providing services for the political and intellectual elites; it established as well certain types of perceptions and methodologies for conceiving social and cultural structures. This conception was built on a profound understanding of art, i.e. that it perceives the knowledge of unknown domains in the universe and the action to bring about change within these domains as a type of behavior, or, “art.” During the time of Confucius (ca. 551–479 BCE), the so-called six “arts” referred to the special knowledge of such actions of change. In later years, the presentation of such mystical, divine, noble, and high-achieving subjects was viewed as being among the most important classics, such as the six “arts.”
2. It remains a topic for further discussion regarding through which path of thought this point was reached. After accepting Buddhism, Confucianism started developing its own judgment processes and

metaphysical arguments for the concept of art, which were spread widely via Taoism and further developed through theorization, especially under the strong influence of new commentaries in the *Daodejing* by Lao Tzu. It recognized anew the surreal biophysical and psychological experiences caused by drug-taking and drinking. These developments in art went hand in hand with similar ones in literature; literature and art can be viewed as manifestations of the same spiritual outcomes in different domains.

3. Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) was celebrated as very knowledgeable and a very fine poet of odes who excelled at calligraphy and was always on the lookout for masterpieces by masters from all generations throughout China. In 1746, from his personal collection, he preserved three pieces of calligraphy from the Jin Dynasty: Wang Xizhi's "Sunny after Snow," Wang Xianzhi's "Mid-Autumn," and Wang Xun's "Letter for Boyuan." He even made 73 commentaries on the "Sunny after Snow."
4. The parallel concepts of "Diagram" (图) and "Book" (书) already existed before the Han Dynasty in China. Some scholars define some of the diagrams here as maps or illustrations, but what is more important is the notion of the Heluo Diagram (Image from the Yellow River). The Heluo Diagram is mentioned in the oldest documents in China. It remains doubtful whether the Diagram actually exists, but belief in it has ensured the continuation of a concept, namely: even though the diagram is displayed in parallel with the book, it has higher priority. The diagram is effectively the representation of the truth, having the same effect as the book.
5. Wen Fong (1984: 104). Here the "flying white", "seal script"; the "spreading-eight [pa-fen, late clerical script] method" are all titles of style of calligraphy. Another translation, by the Taipei National Palace Museum, is: "Rocks rendered with 'flying white,' trees as with seal script, and bamboo executed as one ought the eight basic calligraphy strokes." In other words, rocks are rendered with a dry brush, trees and tree branches with the supple roundness of seal strokes, and bamboo leaves with the restrained beginning and finishing which is involved in the eight basic strokes of standard script.
6. According to the compilation of Yang Xin (CE 370–442) *Calligraphers since the ancient times* (采古来能书人名), as referred by Zhang Yanyuan (born in 815 CE) of the Tang Dynasty (Zhang Yanyuan 1964: 9–16). The book listed 69 calligraphers from the Qin to the Jin Dynasty. Apart from three people, Li Si, Zhao Gao, and Cheng Miao, nobody else was from the Western Han Dynasty. All others were of the period covered by this compilation. Though recent research suggests this compilation was faked by someone from Tang Dynasty, it doesn't affect its use as a recording of the authors' distribution.
7. For critiques on Zhang Zhi's cursive scripts, see Zhang Huaiguan's "Reviews on Calligraphy," in Zhang Yanyuan (1964: 262). Also the Jin Dynasty calligrapher Wang Xizhi reviewed Zhang Zhi's calligraphy in his *Zilunshu*, evaluating him as one of the two calligraphers he admired most (Zhang Yanyuan 1964: 4–5).
8. See Cui Yuan's comments in *Caoshi*, quoted by Wei Heng (2000).
9. The translation comes from Soper (1949).
10. See Yan Yanzhi, "Theory about Diagrams," in Zhang Yanyuan (1963).
11. The "Four Wang" refer to the four artists, Wang Shimin, Wang Jian, Wang Hui, and Wang Yuanqi who were active in the early Qing Dynasty. Unifying calligraphy and painting, they established the canon for traditional art during that time, providing regulations and methods for the art creation. However, due to a lack of originality and self-criticism, the tradition had declined by the end of the nineteenth century. Later, the methods were criticized greatly by the intellectuals who promoted the importation of Western art concept and methods.

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