

INTRODUCTION

This book has what some might judge to be a narrow focus, but it has somewhat wider aims. It engages with a small number of paintings out of the huge total made in China between about 1500 and the late twentieth century; it does so *not* in order to provide a better definition of what “Chinese painting” is (as we shall see, there have perhaps been too many such definitions, all of them based on no broader evidence bases than the one offered here), but to cast doubt on the viability of circumscribing one of the world’s longest, largest, and deepest cultural practices through definition at all. Like the lectures that were its first form of presentation, and whose format it closely follows, the book claims the privilege of not having to explain everything or deal comprehensively with everything, of being able to sometimes allude rather than explain in detail, in a way that would seem unremarkable in a similar project that dealt with, for example, painting and its audiences in France or Italy. It is not a survey but an argument. Having in many contexts and in many fora encountered questions or comments that begin, “I don’t know anything at all about Chinese art, but what strikes me . . .,” I would be satisfied if the book was received as a contribution to making such interventions if not impossible, then just a little bit harder to utter. It is hoped that it does so in two ways. First, by telling readers who identify themselves as new to the subject some things about Chinese painting, its makers, and its audiences over a long time span, and (at least as important) by directing their attention to the large and excellent secondary literature that has grown up on the topic in the last fifty years, and on which

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this account depends to a profound degree that specialists in the field will at once appreciate. It is by now possible, without reading any language other than English, to learn extensive amounts about the biographies of painters, and the materials and contexts and contents of pictorial production, as well as to read the translated words of Chinese writers, both artists and critics, of many periods and many different social origins. The literature in Chinese itself (as well as in Japanese, and in other languages) is similarly large, by now in fact larger. It is very much hoped that this book may direct attention toward that formidable body of previous and current scholarship; this is by no means the last word, and on every topic touched on here there is more that has been and will be said. But the second way in which this book seeks to induce reflection in a broader art historical context is to make the reader think about what it means “to know nothing,” about the choices involved in “knowing nothing,” and about the ways in which a claim to “know nothing” about a topic is effectively a claim to know *everything*, in the sense of comprehending fully the value of knowledge or its absence on a given subject. How we are to position ourselves between “knowing nothing” and “knowing everything” about Chinese painting is a vein of concern running through this book.

Chinese painting has been called (in the context of insisting that it “is” something called “Western art history”), “the Döppelgänger of Western painting, the perfect double that is somehow less than perfect, the twin who differs in some fundamental and secret way.”¹ While not entirely disputing that it *has* operated in this way, the attempt is made here to pose the question of whether it must necessarily do so. The mechanism for doing this is to turn the attention away from an attempt to define the essence of what makes “Chinese painting,” and to look at some of the ways that works have been viewed, over a relatively long span of time. To put it another way, and in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell,

The point, however, is not to install a personification of the work of art as the master term but to put our relation to the work into question, to make the *relationality* of image and beholder the field of investigation. The idea is to make pictures less scrutable, less transparent; also to turn analysis of pictures towards questions of process, affect, and to put in question the spectator position: what does the picture want from me or from “us” or from “them” or from whomever?²

Quite who “us,” “them,” and “whomever” might be in the context of Chinese painting must of necessity also be part of the inquiry.



