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Studies of Chinese Archaeology/Art History in the West: a Critical Review

Scholars who study the material legacy of ancient China are usually called either archaeologists or art historians. Both professions flourish today in China, North America and Europe, but the number of practitioners in each region differs significantly. The profession of Chinese archaeology is far more populous in China than elsewhere, while on the other hand Chinese art history may actually be more common in North America than in Europe or China. Some practitioners, like myself, see themselves as having one foot in each camp, and have become acutely aware in recent years of the important differences in goals and methods that distinguish each group. Anthropological archaeologists and humanist art historians who study ancient China may share a common research target in the most general terms, but in 1993 they approach their tasks in very different ways. Chinese and non-Chinese archaeologists likewise have important differences in outlook determined by the history, institutions and theories of their respective scholarly traditions. Not least, practitioners of art history in North America and Europe and of its analogue, *meishu kaogu* in China, also deploy different critical vocabularies and methodologies.

This paper discusses the goals and methods of western scholarship on ancient China as it was written by scholars active in the prewar decades and the immediate postwar period (c1900-1960). My comments are an effort to reflect on the nature of early western archaeological and art-historical practice and its consequences for the present-day study of ancient China. These reflections ought to be of some value in facilitating future research efforts, especially those that build on earlier scholarship or which attempt to integrate archaeological and art-historical methods. At the same time, these ruminations are also an implicit critique of many existing protocols of art-historical scholarship, and a call for approaches that might yield new scholarship.

Archaeology or Art History

From the Renaissance period onwards, investigations of the past in Europe privileged the legacy of classical antiquity, the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome, both their literary traditions and their material relics, most especially

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ancient architecture and sculpture.¹ From the outset, it was assumed that literary, epigraphic and material evidence (sometimes on the same object) could be juxtaposed in a meaningful and complementary fashion so that each would shed light on the other. It was considered possible and highly desirable to recover material objects that had been described by writers in antiquity as well as objects that had been used by actors within the historical dramas of that era. A burgeoning antiquarian love of ancient things led to the widespread looting of ancient sites such as Pompeii and, gradually, to a regimen of field practice for excavating and recording those sites.² Systematic collecting and connoisseurship grew from this passion, and with them critical vocabularies for the evaluation of ancient things, especially in qualitative or aesthetic terms. These practices and this vocabulary still underlie or inform many approaches within both Eurocentric classical archaeology and art history. Many comparisons could be made here with the activities of Chinese antiquarians and their specialised writings, especially from the Song period (10th century AD) onwards.³ Most significant is the belief that history and archaeology were seamlessly connected and the view that the latter was a handmaiden to the former.⁴

A canon of the Fine Arts as Architecture, Painting and Sculpture was defined during the enlightenment period,⁵ and interest developed in the study of 'modern,' (that is, contemporary as opposed to antique) arts. Only in the 19th century, however, did these studies take on the character of a recognised scholarly discipline with its own institutional identity, particular goals and specific methods. This new discipline became known in Germanic languages as *Kunstgeschichte* and in English, in a literal translation, as 'art history.' *Kunstgeschichte* addressed topics both ancient and modern. Its methodologies were tailored to the canon of the fine arts. The particular European experience of these arts in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance periods conditioned many of its most basic concepts and goals.⁶ Investigations were framed within an historical paradigm in which individual makers (artists) and their products (their oeuvre) were taken as basic units for analysis. Biography was often the explicit armature on which art-historical studies such as catalogues were built. The actors in these biographies were akin to the great men of history-writing;⁷ their actions and personalities determined the history of art. The traits of an individual 'artistic personality' could be read from (or more properly into) the physical and stylistic properties of objects. A history of artistic productions was written in which the fundamental concepts of genius and style were dominant. In pre-modern China, the best analogy to some of these practices and concepts can be found in the literature of painting.⁸

Studies of non-canonical objects and of non-European things more generally were often propelled by the idea that racial and cultural identity rather than an individual's traces were inherent in the objects being studied. Often the grand narratives that connected these objects were conceived in terms that today are felt to be transparently Eurocentric, imperialist and racist.⁹ In some contexts it was normal to study such topics with little regard to other factors or related subjects. Critical and aesthetic judgements woven into the narratives of art-historical writings carried these texts into a special realm of discourse, one detached from the specifics of actual history and infused instead with assumed universal impulses and abstract patterns. Germanic philosophy offered a conceptual frame and vocabulary by which such matters could be theorised and described.¹⁰ Such writings are comprehensible only within their own frame of reference, and often now seem antiquated. The late 19th and early 20th-century vogue for such discourse has passed, but its legacy is everywhere in conventional art-historical formulations and writings, and is no less felt in writings that attempt to set themselves apart from traditional practice.

In general the most enduring art-historical scholarship has been well aware of wider realms of inquiry. For example, specialised studies of the subject-matter of classical and Christian art became codified as 'iconography' and the pursuit of the same cannot be circumscribed within narrow disciplinary

¹ Haskell, Francis and Nicholas Penny 1981: *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture. 1500-1900*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

² Daniel, Glyn 1968: *The Origins and Growth of Archaeology*. New York: Crowell.

³ Rudolph, Richard C 1963: 'Notes on Sung Archaeology,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 22, 169-177; Wu Hung 1989: *Chinese Pictorial Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 38-45.

⁴ Snodgrass, Anthony M 1987: *An Archaeology of Greece: The Present State and Future Scope of a Discipline*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 37.

⁵ Kristeller, Paul O 1965: 'The Modern System of the Arts', *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanities and the Arts*, New York: Harper, 163-227.

⁶ Gombrich, E H 1966: 'Norm and Form: the Stylistic Categories of Art History and their Origins in Renaissance Ideals.' *Norm and Form*, London: Phaidon, 81-98; and 'The Renaissance Conception of Artistic Progress,' *ibid*, 1-10; Preziosi, Donald 1992: 'The Question of Art History,' *Critical Inquiry* 18: 363-386.

⁷ Burke, Peter 1992: *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*. University Park, Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press.

⁸ Soper, Alexander C 1976: 'The Relationship of Early Chinese Painting to Its Own Past' in *Chinese Culture*, 21-47 Princeton.

⁹ Mitter, Partha 1977: *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; Kubler, George 1991: *Esthetic Recognition of Ancient Amerindian Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁰ See Podro 1982.

¹¹ Panofsky, Erwin 1955: 'The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline', *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, New York: Doubleday, 1-25.

¹² Antal, F 1949: 'Remarks on the Method of Art History.' *Burlington Magazine* 91: 49-52 and 73-75.

¹³ Carpenter, Rhys and James Ackerman 1963: *Art History and Archaeology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

¹⁴ Ridgway, Brunhilde Sismondo 1986: 'The State of Research on Ancient Art.' *The Art Bulletin* 68.1: 7-23; Snodgrass, Anthony M 1987: *An Archaeology of Greece: The Present State and Future Scope of a Discipline*.

¹⁵ Trigger 1989: *A History of Archaeological Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Willey and Sabloff 1974: *A History of American Archaeology*. San Francisco: Freeman.

boundaries.¹¹ It has never been possible strictly to delimit the boundaries separating art history and cultural history once subject-matter became the target of investigation. Perhaps the most significant development in eurocentric art history prior to the second world war was the explosion of content-based studies under the general rubric of iconography and iconology. This in turn led to contextualised approaches, a social history of art in which knowledge about society became accessible through the study of art.¹²

In tandem with European political imperialism of the 18th and 19th centuries, specialised archaeologies developed to investigate the ancient cultures of Egypt (Egyptology), the Holy Land (Biblical Archaeology), and Mesopotamia (Assyriology). Like classical archaeology, as created by their European practitioners these outfields assumed an historical paradigm, and they also exploited ancient languages whose epigraphic and textual resources transmitted valuable data that was then juxtaposed with material remains. The rationale for the study of these subjects was generated from the self-definitions of European scholars. Many scholars saw the ancient cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia in particular through the lens of Biblical accounts or as sources for the classical tradition from which European high culture had grown. The material records left by these ancient cultures did not in all cases supply evidence for the (canonical European) Fine arts, and some highly specialised fields developed in response to specific categories of objects such as numismatics and seals. The artistic legacy was sufficiently rich, however, to allow a range of studies that paralleled the art-historical investigations of Renaissance and post-Renaissance Europe (for example with reliefs taking the place of painting). Thus new methods were generally not called for, and the achievements of these early cultures could readily be used to preface conventional histories of Mediterranean and European art and culture.

During the 20th century, the study of classical antiquity has gradually been disengaged from art history, although the break has never been consistent or logical.¹³ Today in North America, for example, classical archaeologists may work in college and university departments of Classics, of Art and Archaeology or of Art History, while some programs exist independently. Separate professional associations and journals serve the two groups (the Archaeological Institute of America and its journals, the College Art Association and its journals). Some classical archaeologists continue to emphasise fieldwork, while others pursue art-historical analyses not dependent on excavations.¹⁴ In the field, classical archaeologists now deploy most of the same techniques that other archaeologists exploit, from geophysical prospecting to flotation. In general, classical archaeologists have at least a rudimentary command of classical languages, history, and even of art history. As a result they tend to view the modern landscape in which they work through the eyes of an informed and historically-conscious viewer even if the modern language, population, and culture are radically different from those of antiquity.

Since the 19th century, however, another stream of archaeology has developed in northern Europe and in the Americas to investigate ancient peoples and cultures outside the classical world.¹⁵ Just as the prehistoric eras in continental Europe and the British Isles differ from those in North and South America, so do too the histories' trajectories. The study of prehistory in North America became a recognised division within anthropology early in this century. Since mid-century, anthropological archaeologists have become more numerous on college and university campuses than classical archaeologists, and their graduate programs, professional associations and journals now dominate the larger realm of archaeology. Thus today in North America both humanistic, classical archaeologists and anthropological archaeologists work in Europe and the Mediterranean on sites from classical antiquity. Anthropological archaeologists also study other culture areas on every inhabited continent. Moreover, the methods of modern archaeology are now applied to historic sites such as those of the Roman and mediaeval periods in Great Britain and on the continent, and the post-contact period in the Americas. In this respect, archaeology is neither

confined to a distant past nor limited by Eurocentric cultural definitions, which contrasts with the views of archaeologists in China.¹⁶

Within this eurocentric historical narrative and conceptual framework, the archaeology of ancient China has had no obvious or necessary home. In order to understand that situation we must look at early studies of Chinese art and archaeology by non-Chinese scholars.

Eurocentric and Sinocentric Paradigms

Even though China was never colonised by the European powers, the pursuit of China's antiquities began in the 19th century within an imperialist paradigm in which Europe was regarded as the centre of the world, and European concepts and values were assumed to constitute a norm against which all else should be judged. In recent years, the term orientalism has been adopted to designate the relationship of Europeans with the Islamic world,¹⁷ and indeed some of the same mechanisms were at work in the ways in which European scholars addressed China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Classical humanism and Christian morality strongly affected the ways in which Europeans perceived China and its cultural heritage.¹⁸ Any wholesale appropriation of the concept of orientalism, however, is in my view inappropriate to the Chinese case. Like India,¹⁹ there were distinctive factors that made the European relationship to China different from the experience with Islam, not least the considerable strength of the Chinese empire through the 18th century, the initial fascination of European intellectuals with Confucian culture,²⁰ and the European appreciation for Chinese decorative arts and crafts.²¹

European and American amateur archaeologists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some of them self-styled sinologists, established many of the goals and methods sustained in this field to the present day. Some of these amateurs adopted the outlook of their Chinese scholar contemporaries. They began to collect certain objects in a spirit much akin to the antiquarians of the Song and Qing periods. Édouard Chavannes' (1865-1918) photographic albums employed a modern technology to record stone images and inscriptions that Chinese scholars had traditionally recorded by making ink rubbings.²² John C Ferguson (1866-1945), having embraced Chinese scholars' taste, produced a handbook to antiquities organised by the media-based categories they themselves used.²³ Berthold Laufer (1874-1934) collected all manner of things under the general rubric of ethnology during his trips to China, from baskets to Daoist images to Han pottery to jades, relying on the same Chinese agents who also supplied local Chinese collectors. Laufer then catalogued his materials using Chinese encyclopaedias and other reference works.²⁴ Bernhard Karlgren (1889-1978), after extensive philological studies of the Chinese classics, studied bronze vessels on the basis of the judgements of his Qing and Republican-era peers, using their catalogues as his database.²⁵

Such studies appeared in a European and American world in which bona-fide experts were few and far between, and in which common intellectual goals and cultural values could be assumed among Europeans and Americans. The works of Chavannes and Karlgren explicitly validated the goals and methods of Qing dynasty scholarship and by extension proclaimed China's respectability as a great ancient culture. China in the early 20th century might be politically, militarily and economically weak, but her cultural traditions had ancient roots and her best scholars were worthy of emulation. Within a European context, the categories of objects given attention by these writers were exotic: ceremonial jades, ritual bronzes, engraved pictorial stones and calligraphic inscriptions; and stood apart from the trade goods and collectibles then in vogue. Most scholars unselfconsciously adopted a vocabulary taken wholesale from the lexicon of European antiquarians: stelae, bas-reliefs, tumuli, etc. The enfolding historical matrix that Chinese scholars employed was likewise taken for granted. Karlgren's investigations of bronzes were after all an attempt to improve on the rather vague datings to the Three Dynasties then in use by his Chinese contempo-

¹⁶ On the limits of archaeology in China; see Xia Nai and Wang Zhongshu 1986.

¹⁷ Said, Edward 1978: *Orientalism*. New York: Knopf.

¹⁸ Zhang Longxi 1988: 'The Myth of the Other China in the Eyes of the West.' *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn): 108-131.

¹⁹ Mitter 1977.

²⁰ Mungello, David 1985: *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology*. Stuttgart: Steiner.

²¹ Lach, Donald F 1965-77: *Asia in the Making of Europe*. 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²² Chavannes, Édouard 1913: *Mission archéologique dans la Chine septentrionale*. Paris: E Leroux.

²³ Ferguson, John C 1919: *Outlines of Chinese Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁴ For example, Laufer, Berthold 1912: *Jade: a Study in Chinese Archaeology and Precision*. Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History. (Reprint edition. New York: Dover, 1974).

²⁵ Elkins, James 1987: 'Remarks on the Western Art Historical Study of Chinese Bronzes, 1930-1980.' *Oriental Art* 33.3: 250-260.

²⁶ Laufer 1912: 29, 120-68, for discussions of *cong* and *bi*.

raries. Laufer, as a critical modern scholar of his time, doubted the existence of a neolithic stage in Chinese prehistory, even as his study of jades illustrated what we now know to be such objects.²⁶ These non-Chinese scholars were both serious and credulous. As experts in an arcane field their role was to introduce exotica to the larger world in terms that would be credible to their non-Chinese audiences. Their project was an informed translation, based on advanced scholarship in China, that normalised Chinese things within a conventional Chinese frame of reference.

²⁷ Mirsky, Jeannette 1977: *Sir Aurel Stein: Archaeological Explorer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁸ Hopkirk, Peter 1980: *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road*. London: John Murray; see also Table A.

Other European amateurs pursued an agenda more akin to that of their peers active in Egypt or in Mesopotamia. Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943) is perhaps the most famous of these archaeological explorers, who “conducted reconnaissances in Chinese territory, selectively to carry back to his sponsors in the British Empire.”²⁷ Many other European explorers, driven by a mixture of scholarly and nationalist zeal, crossed the ancient trade routes of present-day Tibet, Xinjiang and the steppes, and their collections came to decorate the museums of many European capitals.²⁸ Sven Hedin’s (1865-1952) expeditions were exceptional in their Sino-Swedish sponsorship, and the provisions made to work with Chinese scholars on the one hand, and to leave collections in Chinese hands on the other. French and German explorers shared much of the glory for their remarkable discoveries; their exploits parallel those of British and Dutch colonial archaeologists in India and Indonesia. Unlike colonial archaeologists, who had putative authority to investigate and collect, the Europeans in Central Asia were taking advantage of a political vacuum. There was no one to stop them most of the time, and their removal of objects could be rationalised by recourse to a racist orientalism, in which native peoples could not be trusted to preserve their own cultural heritage. By contrast, Victor Ségalen’s (1878-1919) harvest was photographic and literary. His experiences became the basis for one of the earliest synthetic accounts of Chinese sculpture.²⁹

²⁹ Ségalen, Victor et al 1923-24: *Mission archéologique en Chine. 1914 et 1917*. Paris: P. Geuthner. *The Great Statuary of China*. E. Leveux, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1977.

If Chavannes, Ferguson and Karlgren operated within the conceptual categories of their Chinese intellectual peers, albeit with a transposed European vocabulary, writers like Stein and Ségalen were fixated on a vision of World History and World Art in which the classical civilisations of the Mediterranean were the point of reference, and in which, therefore, eurocentric criteria determined the value and interest of Chinese things. Rather than operating within a coherent (albeit sinocentric) view of China’s antiquity, Stein and Ségalen saw China instead as a distant civilisation beyond the eastern borders of *their* classical world. Stein’s fascination with China was fuelled by his desire to connect events in this classical world to the lands beyond. He was ecstatic to find the traces of an artisan-painter named Tita (Titus) at Miran on the southern Silk Road in Xinjiang, and like others of his day saw the Buddhist art of China as Greco-Buddhist, firmly ensconced within the legacy of Hellenistic culture.³⁰

³⁰ Abe, Stanley K 1993: ‘Wonder House: Buddhist Art and the West.’ Unpublished MS.

In spite of their different frames of reference, however, Chavannes and Stein shared a common intellectual goal: to understand the past through a conflation of its literary and material traces. For both scholars, archaeology was an historical project, ancillary to the primary tasks of reading and interpreting received historical texts. It is a coincidence that in both the Chinese and European historiographical traditions, archaeology served the role of supplementing and correcting received records.³¹

³¹ Beasley, W G and E G Pulleyblank 1961: *Historians of China and Japan*. London: Oxford University Press.

For both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars, therefore, great prestige was attached to the recovery of textual or epigraphic sources (Shang oracle-bone inscriptions, Zhou bronze inscriptions, Han slips, Dunhuang manuscripts). For both groups of scholars, history was the arbiter of the significance of a find or site. If a sand-buried city could be correctly identified with historical people and events, it was unquestionably important; prehistoric and ahistoric finds were another matter. In their earliest phase, therefore, archaeological investigations of ancient China were carried forward by non-native scholars who accepted the same goals and deployed the same methods that drove the practice of classical archaeology and art history in European and Mediterranean lands.

Table A | Archaeological Works 1900-1937

Author	Publication
1 • EXPEDITIONS AND EXCAVATIONS	
Andersson, J G	<i>Preliminary Report on Archaeological Research in Kansu</i> (1925) <i>Children of the Yellow Earth</i> (1934)
Arne, T J	<i>Painted Stone Age Pottery</i> (1925)
Black, D et al	<i>Fossil Man in China</i> (1933)
Chavannes, E	<i>Les Documents Chinois</i> (1933) <i>Mission Archéologique</i> (1913, 1915)
Conrady, A	<i>Die Chinesischen Handschriften</i> (1920)
Grünwedel, A	<i>Bericht über Archäologische Arbeiten</i> (1906) <i>Altbuddistische Kultstätten</i> (1912)
Palmgren, N	<i>Kansu Mortuary Urns</i> (1934)
Pelliot, P	<i>Les Grottes de Touen-Houang</i> (1920-24)
Ségalen, V	<i>Mission Archéologique</i> (1923-24)
Stein, M	<i>Ancient Khotan</i> (1907) <i>Serindia</i> (1921) <i>Innermost Asia</i> (1928)
von le Coq, A	<i>Chotscho</i> (1913) <i>Die Buddhistische Spätantike</i> (1922-23) <i>Bilderatlas zur Kunst</i> (1925)
Warner, L	<i>Buddhist Wall-paintings</i> (1938)
White, W	<i>Tombs of Old Lo-Yang</i> (1934)

2 • GENERAL WORKS

Hentze, C	<i>Chinese tomb figures</i> (1928)
Laufer, B	<i>Jade: A Study in Chinese Archaeology and Religion</i> (1912) <i>Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty</i> (1909) <i>Chinese Clay Figures</i> (1914)

Table B | Art-Historical Works 1915-1937

Author	Publication
1 • CATALOGUES	
Anonymous	<i>The Chinese Exhibition</i> (1936)
Janse, O	<i>Briques et Objets céramiques</i> (1936)
Kummel, O	<i>Chinesische Kunst</i> (1930)
Laufer, B	<i>Archaic Chinese Jades</i> (1927)
Nott, S	<i>Chinese Jade</i> (1936)
Pelliot, P	<i>Jades Archaïques de Chine</i> (1925)
Rostovtzeff, M	<i>Inlaid Bronzes of the Han</i> (1927)
Salmony, A	<i>Sino-Siberian Art</i> (1933)
Yetts, P	<i>The George Eumorfopoulos Collection</i> (1929-32)
2 • GENERAL WORKS	
Fischer, O	<i>Die chinesische Malerei der Han-Dynastie</i> (1931)
Hobson, R	<i>Chinese Pottery and Porcelain</i> (1935) <i>The Art of the Chinese Potter</i> (1923)
Rostovtzeff, M	<i>The Animal Style</i> (1929)
Sirén, O	<i>A History of Early Chinese Art</i> (1929-30) <i>Chinese Sculpture</i> (1925)

Early Collections: Chinese Antiquities and the Canon

The collecting of antiquities that raged in China in the decades leading to the second world war yielded a critical mass of objects in non-Chinese museums and private collections.³² At much the same time the earliest modern public museums in China were being established. Both inside and outside China, museums became repositories for a great range of material, most of which was not, however, central within any eurocentric canon of the Fine Arts. Chinese collections were always polyglot, speaking the languages of ethnology, history, archaeology, and art. Various carved and inscribed stones became the one category common in Chinese collections that most resembled European notions of a fine art: sculpture. Although there were almost no famous ancient Chinese sources who could be plausibly associated with such objects (excepting calligraphers, who in any case did not themselves carve them, bearing their texts), Han reliefs, Buddhist images and calligraphic inscriptions could be studied and criticised using much of the critical vocabulary of archaeology and art history. Stones were of course also durable, and often studied in many cases through the convenient medium of rubbings. Moreover, many stones had long attracted the interest of Chinese antiquarians due to their inscriptions, which in turn illuminated their content as well as their provenance.

The other canonical European fine arts, architecture and painting, however, posed more serious problems, both conceptually and pragmatically. Buildings in themselves and their designers or makers had no status within the pre-modern native Chinese context that might have allowed them to be elevated as an art. Noble ruins akin to those of Greece and Egypt were in short supply; almost no ancient examples seemed to survive above ground with the exception of a few gate towers and offering shrines noted early on by Chavannes, Ségalen, and ruined brick and stone Buddhist pagodas. Sites where ancient buildings had once stood were almost without exception the home of modern structures or, like the Afang or Weiyang palaces, were now desolate. And for eaves tiles, there was no pre-modern tradition of collecting architectural artefacts. When Liang Sicheng and Liu Dunzhen began their systematic excavations of the oldest extant structures, they were creating a new discipline in China, one modelled explicitly on a non-native conceptual framework. This discipline has continued to flourish in China, but not as an art-historical study; instead such studies are rationalised and promoted as a branch of the hard Chinese science and technology.

In the early 20th century ancient Chinese painting seemed to be almost totally lost. Chinese histories of painting and critical texts began in earnest in the Six Dynasties period and flourished from the Tang onwards. The most accessible pictorial art was confined to various Han engraved stones³⁴ and, after Stein and Pelliot's expeditions, Dunhuang paintings. Anyone assessing the history of Chinese painting prior to Tang in the 1920s or 1930s was forced to rely primarily on literary testimony.³⁵ As a practical matter, aside from Han stone rubbings, there was little material that might be collected. Collectors augmented true painting with other related materials in a way reminiscent of the study of Greek vases: lacquer wares, pictorial bronzes and stamped brick rubbings defined as analogues of painting. These materials offered a wider range of examples of both subject-matter and styles, and in turn permitted scholars to adduce literary sources that describe or discuss painting in the early period. The materials that came to dominate collections were objects reflecting traditional Chinese antiquarian taste, on the one hand, and the accidental archaeology of railway construction and tomb looting, on the other.³⁶ Jade carvings and bronzes, traditional targets of Chinese collecting, bulked large in both private hands and museum holdings. Ceramics, from painted urns of the Gansu neolithic cultures to the mortuary figurines and wares of Han, Six Dynasties and Tang, were also assembled in large numbers.³⁷ These ceramics were collected largely in response to the market created by non-Chinese enthusiasts. Thus when museum holdings came to resemble in some ways the collections of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Classical antiquities: durable objects, many of them

³² Clunas, Craig 1993: 'East Asian Art and Oriental Antiquities: British and American Views,' unpublished MS; Cohen, Warren I 1992: *East Asian Art and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

³³ Fairbank, Wilma C 1984: 'Liang Ssu-ch'eng: A Profile.' *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture by Liang Ssu-ch'eng*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

³⁴ Wu Hung 1989: *Chinese Pictorial Art*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

³⁵ Waley, Arthur 1923: *An Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting*. London.

³⁶ Fontein, Jan and Wu Tung 1973: *Unearthing China's Past*. Boston: Museum of Fine Arts; Goodrich, L Carrington 1957: 'Archaeology in China: The First Decades.' *Journal of Asian Studies* 17: 5-15.

³⁷ March, Benjamin 1929: *China and Japan in Our Museums*. New York: Institute of Pacific Relations.

burial contexts, some connected to history, epigraphy and antiquarian taste, some redefined as analogues to the true fine arts.

Unlike those fields, however, there was little contemporaneous archaeology taking place in that allowed the objects to be contextualised. An early 20th century curator of Chinese antiquities had few archaeological publications to draw on compared to his counterparts in departments of Egyptian or classical antiquities. Chinese collections became the focus of a combination of sinological exegesis and hybrid connoisseurship. Relatively few catalogues of these collections were compiled in the prewar years.³⁸ Those that did appear, most notably catalogues of archaic bronzes, generally aped their Chinese predecessors in format and range as well as in judgements about authenticity and historical significance.³⁹ It was often enough to assign an object to a block of time several centuries in duration and to affirm its importance because of its supposed rarity or sheer antiquity. These first stages of western scholarship (c1900-1930) on ancient China were a hybrid of antiquarian and archaeological approaches in which traditional Chinese attitudes and imported European ones were merged. A survey of scholarly publications on China held by American libraries illustrates how disconnected were the accounts that non-Chinese scholarly writers had produced at the time.⁴⁰ (See Tables A and B). I take the literature catalogued in Gardner's survey as a reasonably accurate snapshot of the kinds of activities most non-Chinese scholars interested in early China had pursued during the first four decades of the century. Publications derived from the various central Asian expeditions and catalogues of collections comprise most of the 'serious' literature. In spite of the evident respect some Sinologists showed their Chinese peers, few Chinese scholars themselves participated in these publications.

³⁸ See Table B

³⁹ Wenley, A G 1946: *Descriptive and Illustrative Catalogue of Chinese Bronzes Acquired during the Administration of John Ellerton Lodge*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution; Thorp, Robert L 1991: 'Bronze Catalogues as Cultural Artifacts.' *Archives of Asian Art* 44: 84-94.

⁴⁰ Gardner, Charles S 1938: *A Union List of Selected Western Books on China in American Libraries*. 2nd edition. American Council of Learned Societies.

New Agenda: Writing about the History of Chinese Art

Professional art historians first came to the study of ancient China in the 1920s and 1930s. I refer to such important figures as Ludwig Bachhofer, Otto Kummel, Max Loehr, George Rowley, Alfred Salmony, Osvald Sirén and Laurence Sickman as professional art historians, because they earned degrees and/or pursued careers within the institutional matrix of academic art history and art museums. Some of these scholars had only a modest acquaintance with the Chinese language or even with China itself. Perhaps only two could claim to be true Sinologists: Max Loehr (1903-1988) and Osvald Sirén (1879-1966), both of whom lived and travelled for extended periods in China. Several of these scholars—Bachhofer (1896-1976), Rowley (1895-1962), and Sirén—came to Chinese art through a side-door (such as Indian art) or as a second field (after medieval or Renaissance European art). Indeed, one detects traces of their previous specialities in their approaches to Chinese topics, such as Sirén's annotated lists of Chinese painters which mimic Berenson's compilations of Italian Renaissance painters.

Writings by these scholars cover a considerable array of topics and are not easily lumped together or summed up. Only the amazingly prolific Osvald Sirén engaged the whole range of canonical topics—architecture, sculpture, and painting—as manifested in China in his writings. Sirén's works are notable because they relied on extensive photographic documentation of sites in China and objects in lieu as well as on his first-hand familiarity with objects in Chinese collections. His *History of Early Chinese Art* (1929-30) attempted to address a wide range of subjects, but most of his books focused instead more closely on a single topic, such as sculpture, the walls and gates of Peking, gardens or painting.

Several scholars—notably Olov Janse, Michael Rostovtzeff, Alfred Salmony, and Walter Perceval Yetts—published catalogues of Chinese objects in collections, in particular the holdings of the prominent dealer C T Loo. Several of these figures do not fit my arbitrary definition of professional art historians, and indeed their works are a medley of several kinds of description and analysis.

In compiling these catalogues, these scholars began the tradition of serving the interests of dealers, collectors and museums. Such owners, of course, have several interests. In addition to the genuine desire to know more about their objects, there were the needs to establish authenticity and justify value or significance. Simply to be catalogued and published brings new status to any object. To be authenticated, dated, and assessed in qualitative terms makes an ordinary or undistinguished object into an important one.⁴¹ The symbiosis of collectors and scholars was by no means confined to the new field of Chinese antiquities; it is endemic to art history in European and American society.⁴²

As a professional art historian, Ludwig Bachhofer produced the first serious one-volume survey of Chinese art in English.⁴³ Bachhofer concerned himself explicitly with the fundamental question of all formalist studies: why do things look the way they do?

No explanation should be necessary for the great emphasis laid upon problems of *form*. Form is the only means of expression an artist has at his disposal, whatever considerations may have determined his subject matter. It is form alone that makes a vessel, a statue, or a painting a work of art. But form never remains the same. It changes continually, and I saw my main task in describing these changes. They revealed themselves as so many phases of a logical, orderly, and organic evolution.⁴⁴

These few sentences are pregnant with important methodological assumptions. Form makes things works of art; artists express themselves through form; changes in form are logical and evolutionary. This is as succinct a statement of the professional art historian's credo as I have found in English writings. A new discourse was thus brought to bear on Chinese objects, and the traditional terms used by Chinese antiquarians hereafter would be less in evidence.

As a group, the common goal of professional art historians was to deploy eurocentric art-historical concepts and methods on Chinese materials. First, certain kinds of objects were defined for operational purposes as art (whatever their status may have been or be within pre-modern or modern Chinese culture). As such they were assumed to express the maker's (artist's) intentions and to manifest specific stages in a logical evolution. Thus the scholar's goal was to unlock the pattern of that evolution through the closest and most perceptive visual scrutiny of his objects. Certain patterns were to be expected, most notably a development from simple to complex, and a reaction against that complexity that has been described as a cycle of archaic, classic, and baroque.⁴⁵ The description and interpretation that art historians produced I call 'style narratives.'⁴⁶ The critical first step in such a narrative was careful visual description leading to the formal and qualitative categories developed within eurocentric art history. Whenever possible, stylistic sequences were correlated with datable monuments. Since the persuasive power of a sequence depended in many cases on establishing such correlations, serious arguments might arise over the authenticity and/or dating of certain key monuments.

Perhaps the most long-lived of these master sequences and style narratives were Bachhofer's interpretation of Chinese Buddhist sculpture from the Six Dynasties through the Song,⁴⁷ and Max Loehr's interpretation of Shang bronze styles.⁴⁸ In each case particular observations and a rigorous logic generated a sequence in which each step seems convincingly to be the necessary outcome of what came before and the essential way station to what must come next. In Bachhofer's sculptural studies, a good supply of dated objects, few of problematic authenticity, made his overall framework that much more secure. In Loehr's case with Shang bronzes, the sequence was eminently logical but not well supported by more than logic until excavations of the 1950s and 1960s were published.⁴⁹

The ordering that each scholar achieved was considered, in art-historical terms, a notable contribution in itself, just as many striations dependent on careful formal analysis of pottery have been accepted as significant in ar-

⁴¹ Wiseman, James 1984: 'Scholarship and Provenience in the Study of Artifacts.' *Journal of Field Archaeology* 11: 67-77.

⁴² Alsop, Joseph 1982: *The Rare Art Traditions*. New York: Harper and Row; Cohen 1992: *East Asian Art and American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴³ Bachhofer, Ludwig 1946: *A Short History of Chinese Art*. New York: Pantheon; see also Vanderstappen, Harrie 1977-78: 'Ludwig Bachhofer (1894-1976).' *Archives of Asian Art* 31: 110-112.

⁴⁴ Bachhofer 1946.

⁴⁵ Fong, Wen C 1980: 'The Study of Chinese Bronze Age Arts: Methods and Approaches' *The Great Bronze Age of China*, 20-34. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

⁴⁶ To compare: Davis, Whitney 1990: 'Style and History in Art History' *The Uses of Style in Archaeology*, ed. M Conkey and C Hastorf. New Directions in Archaeology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁷ Bachhofer 1946: 63-85.

⁴⁸ Loehr, Max 1953: 'The Bronze Styles of the Anyang Period (1300-1028 BC).' *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 7: 42-53.

⁴⁹ Soper, Alexander C 1966: 'Early, Middle and Late Shang: A Note.' *Artibus Asiae* 28: 5-38; Spiro, Audrey 1981: 'Max Loehr's Periodisation of Bronze Vessels.' *Journal of Asian Culture* 5: 107-133; Thorp, Robert L 1985: 'The Growth of Early Shang Civilisation: New Data from Ritual Vessels.' *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45: 5-75.

archaeological terms. Like archaeological series, Bachhofer and Loehr imposed a shape onto the processes of time, and deduced a mechanism—progress toward a goal that the later scholar could discover—that ‘explained’ the mechanisms of those changes. What had been inchoate or incoherent prior to their studies became an obvious pattern that could be easily grasped and readily applied to new materials. From such sequences it was then possible to ascend to a higher level of more abstract analysis, and to offer opinions about larger historical trends. The patterns were expressed in conventional terms and relations taken wholesale from eurocentric art history. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that non-Chinese scholars were inclined then to make universal claims about art and its history, to assert that fundamental processes were common to all humans.

This art historical approach was not universally accepted in Europe and America, much less adopted by scholars in China. John Pope’s (1906-1982) caustic review of Bachhofer’s *Short History* was a forceful critique of the application of art-historical terms and methods of analysis without, or in preference to, sinological grounding.⁵⁰ He wrote:

“Lacking the essential tool of language and relying on stylistic formulae which had been tried and proven in the European field, the art historian ventured into the vast and complex field of Chinese art. The results of his efforts provide ample evidence that his equipment has been unsuited to the task...”

“What I regard as the shortcomings of this volume are, I believe, the inevitable shortcomings of the art-historical method when applied to this field of endeavour...”⁵¹

Pope wrote in the context of an underdeveloped field which he believed could only advance “once [we] begin to realise how little we really know ... Future progress will depend in great measure on how much we can *find out about* the circumstances under which objects were made...”⁵² From this point of view, art historians like Bachhofer were guilty of a sin of commission: not working to understand the culture of which the art objects were a part and product. While their colleagues studying European objects might adequately appreciate the larger patterns and meaning of European civilisation, Pope maintained that Chinese culture was insufficiently understood to allow such self-confident analyses.

When the great majority of specific objects discussed resided in collections and had no ascertainable archaeological provenience, as was the case with Bachhofer, the pitfalls of an art-historical approach were multiplied. The interpretation may have been suited to its objects, but what was the relation of those objects to the larger (unstudied) whole? To give the accumulation of objects in collections a systematic and rational structure, the art historian had to assume or infer the aesthetic choices and traditions of the makers. To the extent that such assumptions or inferences were derived from European experience (even if they were assumed to be universal), the structure was merely hypothetical or logical and not necessarily true to the Chinese case.

The net result of early art-historical studies was very like the time-space systematics of much 20th-century archaeology. In this situation, field archaeology was useful primarily as a ready source of new materials, and especially for better clues to dates and to points of origin.⁵³ Ultimately in such art-historical projects, however, all objects, with or without provenience, were treated as equal and discriminated on the basis of quality and rarity within the context of the style narrative. A large array of objects (or of photographs of objects) was actually more important than a large fund of data about each object, since it was the inferred connections deduced from the visual properties of the objects that held the system together.

⁵⁰ Pope, John A 1947: ‘Sinology or Art History: Notes on Method in the Study of Chinese Art.’ *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 10: 388-417.

⁵¹ Pope, John 1947: 389, 393.

⁵² Fontein and Wu 1973: 417.

⁵³ *Ibid*: 417.

Post-War Syntheses *in Absentia*

From the 1940s through the 1960s, these art historical methods dominated the literature in Europe and North America. Access to China itself was hard to come by, especially for American scholars, and anthropological archaeologists, with few exceptions, turned away from Chinese studies because of the lack of field opportunities. Art historians themselves devoted their energies primarily to objects that were accessible at first hand in non-Chinese museums and private collections (and the collections on Taiwan). Their research targets were therefore a curious mixture of a relatively small number of objects of perceived high quality and a rather larger fund of less interesting and valuable material. All had come to light as a by-product of construction, looting and collecting in the first decades of the century and had passed through the various stages of the prewar antiquities trade prior to their acquisition by their current owners. The requirement for first-hand access is understandable and even commendable as a methodological bias. When the self-imposed limitations of this evidence are not acknowledged, however, the way is open for misleading scholarship.

While the range of accessible objects was reasonably diverse, it was also in many respects highly stereotyped: neolithic pottery from the Gansu corridor, Late Shang bronzes (many with an unconfirmed Anyang provenience), Eastern Zhou materials from such mysterious sites as Liyu, Luoyang, Shouzhou and Changsha, Tang grave furnishings from Henan and Shaanxi, and so on. If these holdings were plotted on a time line and a map, they would be a highly impressionistic assortment drawn only from certain episodes and a few places. Certain museum collections indeed had a pronounced regional character. The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm was known for its Gansu pottery; the Royal Ontario Museum was strong in all manner of things from Henan; the Field Museum (Chicago) was full of Laufer's Xi'an acquisitions; the John Hadley Cox collection (now Yale Gallery of Art) was largely comprised of material from Changsha. These regional specialisations reflected the collecting habits of donors rather than systematic acquisitions programs. In many collections objects from pairs and sets were represented by single specimens, their mates consigned to other hands through the vagaries of the antiquities market.

Much of the writing of the 1950s was produced by scholars with an acquaintance with China from the prewar or wartime years (for example: Richard Edwards, Wilma Fairbank, Richard Rudolph, Laurence Sickman and Michael Sullivan, all of whom had interests in early China). In their works, sites and monuments in China were frequently juxtaposed with objects in non-Chinese collections. For such scholars, a site like Longmen or the Forbidden City was real if then inaccessible, and objects in non-Chinese collections were the tip of an iceberg of related materials to be found in China. Notions of rarity or of importance were therefore informed and tempered by a sense of the larger whole, and there was an understood, if not always well articulated, sense of a larger framework into which these discrete objects fit.

In the 1950s, it became the task of academic art historians and museum curators to synthesise a picture of the material and aesthetic culture of an ancient civilisation from these randomly collected but durable traces. Some scholars and curators, like Laurence Sickman,⁵⁴ collected and displayed all manner of things for their own beauty, but accorded serious art-historical status only to those things that might stand within a narrative of the history of the Chinese canon. To carry this program forward a serious accommodation was necessary: objects were given expected canonical roles. Thus grave goods could function as early evidence in a history of sculpture, and Han reliefs and lacquer wares might stand as evidence for the pictorial art of the period. If the earliest examples adduced therefore were crude or *archaic*, that was to be expected as part of a universal pattern, rather than understood as a property of their original identity. If the subjects and styles represented in the available evidence were skewed in one direction or another, such as the Wu Liang

⁵⁴ Sutton, Denys 1973: 'The Lure of Ancient China.' *Apollo* 97 (March 1973): 2-11 and Wilson, Marc F 1989: 'Laurence Chalfant Stevens Sickman (1906-1988),' *Archives of Asian Art* 42: 82-84.

shrines, that characterisation might then be transferred to the larger subject being addressed, the history of Han painting as a whole.⁵⁵ Thus the selection of objects and their redefinition had a strong determinative effect on the generalisations of even the most sensitive and well-informed scholars.

⁵⁵ See Powers, Martin J 1991: *Art and Political Expression in Early China*. New Haven: Yale University Press, for a critique.

Conclusion

There are comparable overviews to be written for recent scholarship outside China, for the early history of archaeology in China, and for archaeology in China since 1949. In all of these assessments, the 1940s are a kind of watershed defined by the war and by the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. The practical circumstances under which archaeology has been practised have differed significantly before and after that decade both inside and outside China.

Before that decade and inside China, field archaeology was little practised by non-Chinese scholars with the notable exception of the Zhoukoudian excavations (and the activities of Japanese scholars in Manchuria). While expeditions were possible in the waning years of the Qing, little was attempted and less realised in the decades between the wars, under the Republic and its rivals. But it was precisely during this interval that eurocentric art history accommodated Chinese subjects and found a home for them within its own vocabulary and methodologies. More important than access to China or ongoing archaeological investigations were the collections that dealers, individuals and institutions were forming, making use of a very advantageous economic situation that channelled valuables out of China and into European and American hands. Scholarship followed this process and would not have developed as it did without it. This prewar situation determined the character of much scholarship on early China well into the postwar decades. It defined the rules of the game that still dictate how much scholarly work is conceived and executed. Since this kind of situation never developed in China, it is hardly surprising that a comparable scholarship did not develop, or that art history as it is defined in Europe and America has been slow to grow within Chinese academic institutions.