

## Introduction to a Symposium on the Visual Dimensions of Chinese Culture

For the last two decades, Chinese cultural history and Chinese art history have been engaging each other in fruitful ways. Historians of Chinese art have drawn on the work of scholars of Chinese history, literature, and religion to provide richly contextualized studies, showing how works of art fit into the complex social and cultural milieu of their makers.<sup>1</sup> Some have demystified the artist by asking how artists earned a living and how their relations with patrons or the market shaped the type of art they produced.<sup>2</sup> Others have looked at the use to which art objects have been put, especially to create prestige, confirm taste, or enhance legitimacy.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, scholars in other fields have drawn more fully on pictorial and other visual evidence. Historians of technology and material culture have mined the evidence from tombs and illustrated books.<sup>4</sup> Specialists in Chinese religion have analyzed the illustrated texts and temple decorations that were used to convey religious teachings,<sup>5</sup> scholars of fiction have analyzed how book illustrations affected the reading process,<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Some examples include Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1989); Martin J. Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1991); Maggie Bickford, *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1994); Chu-tsing Li, ed., *Artists and Patrons: Some Social and Economic Aspects of Chinese Painting* (Seattle: U. of Washington P., 1989).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana: U. of Illinois P., 1991); Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (Durham: Duke U.P., 1996); Julia K. Murray, *Ma Hezhi and the Illustration of the Books of Odes* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993); Wai-ye Li, "The Collector, the Connoisseur and Late-Ming Sensibility," *TP* 81 (1995), pp. 269–302.

<sup>4</sup> See the many volumes in Joseph Needham and co-authors, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1951–).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1994); Victor H. Mair, "Śāriputra Defeats the Six Heterodox Masters: Oral-Visual Aspects of an Illustrated Transformation Scroll (P 4524)," *AM* 3d ser. 8.2 (1995), pp. 1–56; Paul Katz, *Images of the Immortal: The Cult of Lü Dongbin at the Palace of Eternal Joy* (Honolulu: U. of Hawaii P., 1999).

<sup>6</sup> See Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1998); Anne E. McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

and historians of women have made much of depiction of women in many media.<sup>7</sup> It is coming to be recognized that nearly every aspect of Chinese culture, from religious beliefs, to ethnicity, gender, and social and political rank, was expressed, played with, and contested visually as well as through words, and that examining these visual manifestations enriches our understandings of China's cultural history.

Scholarly trends outside the China field deserve some of the credit for fostering increased encounters between art history and other fields of Chinese studies. The recent turn to cultural history has reawakened the long tradition in European history of using change in architecture, sculpture, or painting as keys to changes in society and culture.<sup>8</sup> Material culture studies has become an exciting field, with a sophisticated methodology for drawing meaning from objects.<sup>9</sup> Within art history, the elaboration of the concept of visual culture has fostered new looks at the visual practices of architecture, city planning, garden design, advertisements, and movies.<sup>10</sup> Extending theories about visual culture to the China case, Craig Clunas, in his recent *Images and Visuality in Early Modern China*, argues that paintings by well-known artists should be seen in a larger visual context that included a much wider range of pictures, from paintings by anonymous commercial artists, to illustrations in books and decoration on ceramics. Pictures were everywhere, he informs us, especially pictures that told stories.<sup>11</sup>

To explore further the border region between cultural history and art history, a study group and a symposium were organized at the Institute for

<sup>7</sup> See Patricia Buckley Ebrej, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1993); Francesca Bray, *Gender and Technology: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1997); Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1997).

<sup>8</sup> On these traditions in western history, see Francis Haskell, *History and its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1993). For an example of a contemporary cultural historian who draws heavily on visual material, see Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1986); Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery, *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Press, 1993); W. David Kingery, ed., *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989); Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1996).

<sup>10</sup> See Norman Bryson, Michael A. Holly, and Keith Moxey, ed., *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Wesleyan U.P., 1994); "Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77 (1996), pp. 25-70; and John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1997).

Advanced Study at Princeton during 1998-1999. The subject matter discussed at our meetings ranged widely from long-studied topics like Buddhist art to ones that have only recently drawn much attention, such as ancestor portraits and book illustration. Our conversations and debates benefited from the participation of scholars with a broad range of expertise, among them Robert Bagley, James Cahill, Hugh Clark, Nicola DiCosmo, Soren Edgren, Wen C. Fong, Valerie Hansen, Charles Hartman, Angela Howard, Ronald Knapp, Dorothy Ko, Dore Levy, Stephen Little, Yang Lu, Victor Mair, Susan Naquin, Martin Powers, Evelyn Rawski, Nancy Steinhart, Jan Stuart, Stephen Teiser, Hsingyuan Tsao, Johanna Waley-Cohen, Dorothy Wong, and Chunfang Yu. The diversity of talents and expertise in this group was a great asset. Those who participated regularly gained insight into the working lives of scholars in other disciplines – the concepts, strategies, and evidence they regularly deploy – and some were bold enough to experiment with using them to pursue their own questions.

This issue of *Asia Major* consists of four articles that originated in the work of the project. John Kieschnick unravels the symbolism of the monk's robe; Maggie Bickford examines the three rams as an auspicious motif; Qianshen Bai analyzes the social context in which the scholar-calligrapher Fu Shan produced his art; and I examine imperial processions as spectacle in Northern Song times.

Each of these articles makes important contributions to its own field, but read together they help sharpen our thinking about Chinese visuality. What they cover and do not cover brings to the fore the immensity of Chinese visual and artistic culture. Each of the four authors takes a subject of considerable size and explores it thoroughly, but taken together these studies fill no more than a few spots on the map. From Bickford's article, we get a deeper understanding of several sorts of auspicious imagery used to decorate Chinese homes and palaces, but the four articles offer nothing on other aspects of the visual culture of residences, such as how spaces are laid out, objects arranged, and the color schemes employed in pillows or bed curtains. From Kieschnick's article we learn much about one kind of distinctive clothing, that worn by Buddhist monks, and from my article a little about the clothing worn by officials and guardsmen when they paraded through the streets, but certainly there were many sorts of clothing that carried information visually that are not touched on in any of the articles here. Of all the sorts of performances that people could watch, we deal here with only those orchestrated by the palace, not touching in any way on opera, temple rituals, or street performers. In Bai's article we learn the

many ways one particular eminent man used his writing as an item of exchange, but this set of articles does not get into any of the other ways objects valued for their visual qualities were circulated in society.

Taken together, the set of four essays provides a basis for thinking about different forms of visual communication, especially written words, images, and meaning-laden objects. Pictures, writing, and garments can all carry the meaning “woman,” “monk,” “rich,” or “auspicious,” but they do it in different ways. Occasionally, it is true, these three means of communicating may be functionally interchangeable: a store could signal its speciality with a sign inscribed with the word for knife, with a sign decorated with a picture of a knife, or it could hang an actual knife above its door. Another similarity is that convention and style enter into all three of these means of communicating visually. For even the most minimal decoding of script, clothing, or pictures one must learn some conventions (two horizontal lines make the graph for “two,” objects higher in a picture are understood as further away, red is a more festive color than blue, and so on). To get everything possible from what one sees, however, requires not only learning many more conventions but also gaining sensitivity to the subtle differences in style that allow one to recognize the elegant, up-to-date, skillful, or derivative. The disparities between the communicative potentials of words, pictures, and objects are, of course, equally significant. In some cases a picture may be better than a thousand words, but in other cases a one-word label eliminates the need for a picture. It is undoubtedly for reasons like these that in China social position was more frequently announced through clothing than labels, and labels were added to some types of pictures but not to others.

Of the four studies here, Qianshen Bai’s concentrates most fully on the visual properties of the written word. The complexities of the ways writing conveyed meaning enter into Bai’s story at many points. The literal content of Fu Shan’s calligraphic scrolls was not irrelevant; he frequently copied out Du Fu’s poems because people were comfortable with their content. But his writings were prized for aesthetic qualities associated with his individual hand. Fu Shan could choose to write in draft or clerical script, each choice carrying meaning, and he could write in ways that followed styles developed by predecessors, but it was because his personal style could be recognized that his writings were seen as especially expressive. In fact, something of his person was also believed to adhere to his writing even when it could not be visually discerned. As Bai shows, calligraphy done by Fu Shan’s son in Fu Shan’s style to fulfill a commission was not deemed an

adequate substitute for a product of his hand, even by those who could not distinguish the two by visual inspection. Calligraphy communicated visually, but also carried extra-visual meanings.

The article in this issue that most fully explores objects as repositories of meaning is Kieschnick’s study of monk’s robes. He shows these meanings to be both mutable and subject to manipulation and dispute, tied as much to literary traditions as to the physical nature of the robes. The movement from India to China brought changes in meaning, since in China robes were not viewed as a milder alternative to ascetic nudity. The garments themselves also changed, as sleeves were added and more secure means of fastening them developed. Some of the meanings assigned to robes had little to do with their physical appearance, but two sets of meanings were carried visually: the patchwork design of the outer robe was seen as representing renunciation, even when the patches were made of fine brocades; and robes of purple carried prestige because of their association with the imperial court.

The interplay of pictures and written words is a central element of Bickford’s study of auspicious imagery. Not only do some of the textiles discussed have both written words and pictures on them, but even the entirely pictorial ones are entangled in the nexus of words and images. In the large tapestry that she introduces at the beginning of her essay we see boys, sheep, plum blossoms, pine, bamboo, rocks, and clouds. Pictures of the “three friends” (pine, plum, and bamboo) depict objects that carry ideas derived from their biological attributes as plants that flourish in the cold season. Pictures of the sheep and goats, by contrast, have nothing much to do with the biology of these animals, with their cuddly appearance or the wool or meat that can be acquired from them. Rather, their meaning derives from associations at the level of spoken and written words: the word for sheep/goat, *yang*, sounds like the word for the yang force in yin-yang thinking; and in addition, the graph used to write sheep/goat was the same in ancient times as the graph used to write the word now pronounced *xiang* that means auspicious (and is today distinguished from the graph for sheep/goat by the addition of the radical for “spirit”). Finally, the rocks and plants depicted on the tapestry do not function to convey ideas of auspiciousness, but rather to integrate the image with the visual conventions of figure-in-landscape paintings. Thus, on a single pictorial textile we see three different ways of creating meaning visually: by evoking an object, by evoking a word, and by evoking an artistic genre.

The case I took is even more complex because imperial processions

employ all three means of visual communication: written words, pictures, and meaning-laden objects. Both written words and pictures adorned the flags carried in profusion; but just as much information was conveyed through the color-coding of the garments worn by the guardsmen and officials marching in the procession, not to mention the elaborate carriages and the horses, oxen, and elephants. To get their ideas across, those putting on processions seem to have covered all bases, using all the means available to convey ideas and information. I also bring up the subject of the difference between pictures of processions and processions themselves as elements of visual culture: the visual habits seen in the procession itself, such as love of symmetry and bright colors, on the surface have little to do with the visual habits found in pictures of the procession or its component parts. But one can see them as systemically related: the confusion, movement, and over-stimulation of the procession generates the need for visual ways to breakdown, stop, and analyze the visual phenomena, both for the practical purpose of orchestrating another performance and to satisfy the desire to hold on to or possess what is inherently fleeting.

The importance of the written word to our analysis of Chinese visual culture is not limited to its signifying functions when it appears as a sign on a textile, flag, shop sign, or calligraphy scroll. As all four authors demonstrate, in the highly literate culture of imperial China, texts had much to do with both the production and the interpretation of components of China's visual culture. There are texts that prescribe, comment on, and offer interpretations of both objects and pictures, as a result shaping both how they are made and how people thought about them. Kieschnick shows us both how Chinese readings of Buddhist scriptures prompted efforts to fashion robes in sanctioned ways, but also how texts provided commentary, proffering meanings to attach to such elements of robes as the number of strips or patches out of which they were made. As I show, there were texts that specified the order in which people and objects should be arranged for a procession, texts that discussed at length the origins and symbolic meaning of specific items, and texts that proposed to add or omit specific items for various reasons. Those who knew of these texts and the arguments in them could not help but interpret a performance of the procession differently from people ignorant of these texts. In the case of the textile Bickford analyzes, the Qianlong emperor himself added a commentary in his distinctive calligraphy at the top of the work. Any literate person who looked at the textile would discover that the person who commissioned it saw coded meanings in the goats and boys it depicts, giving very little room for alternative readings.

Not everyone in Chinese society could read, so the importance of texts to the interpretation of visual phenomena forces us to recognize that we should not talk of a single, unitary Chinese visual culture, but a multiplicity of visual cultures. Even those indifferent to or hostile to Buddhism could recognize a monk by his robe, but they would not know of the meanings analyzed in the Buddhist exegetical literature. Those who pored over the ritual manuals as part of their official responsibility to put together an imperial procession would associate certain flags, streamers, banners, and vehicles with historical precedents that most of the onlookers knew nothing about. Fu Shan was well aware that not all those who wanted pieces of his calligraphy could appreciate the differences between his best and his average works, and he did his best to see that each audience got what suited it best. Much of the visual culture that Bickford deals with was very widely shared, yet even here, as she stresses, we are dealing with unstable meanings. People in different groups did not deploy or reflect on images of sheep or plum blossoms in identical ways.

The visual dimensions of Chinese culture is a rich subject. Evidence, much of it long ignored, is plentiful. As scholars venture out to explore it, raiding the toolboxes of other disciplines as need be, we will gain a richer, more nuanced, not to mention more colorful understanding of the dynamics of Chinese culture. These articles are intended as steps in that direction.