

IV

The Endgame, and the Qing Eclipse

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There are histories with gaps, when centuries pass with no evidence of human activity. The European “dark ages” is the exemplary case, though its darkness is now widely contested and redistributed among a number of different cultures. The mid-third millennium BC in the Middle East, the founding centuries of Rome, and “Dynasty 0” in Egypt are also examples of periods whose sequences may always be inadequately known. Elsewhere and further back in history the gaps grow wider, and the known objects fewer and farther between. In Paleolithic Europe there are so few artifacts dispersed through so many years that it is better to speak of a history of voids, occasionally punctuated by objects. Instead of a history of sequences, broken by a few dark ages, Paleolithic archeology is almost compelled to try to tell a history of darkness, interrupted at long intervals by isolated images.

These problems are endemic to prehistory and early history, both in archeology and art history. What happens at the end of the Ming Dynasty and throughout the Qing is different in kind. Dark ages are times from which objects have disappeared, but the history of Chinese painting from the mid-seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth is replete with images. There is a profusion of painters, schools, and styles, and if art historical accounts were written in proportion to the amount of surviving material, the Qing would hold center stage in Chinese history.

Instead, narratives of Chinese art tend to fall silent after Dong Qichang. There is a traditional sequence that continues with the generations after Dong, including the “individualists” and several groups of “eccentrics,” and then ends around the middle of the eighteenth century. A few alternates give life to that sequence; some accounts also note the influence of Western printmaking and painting, or conclude by nodding in the direction of

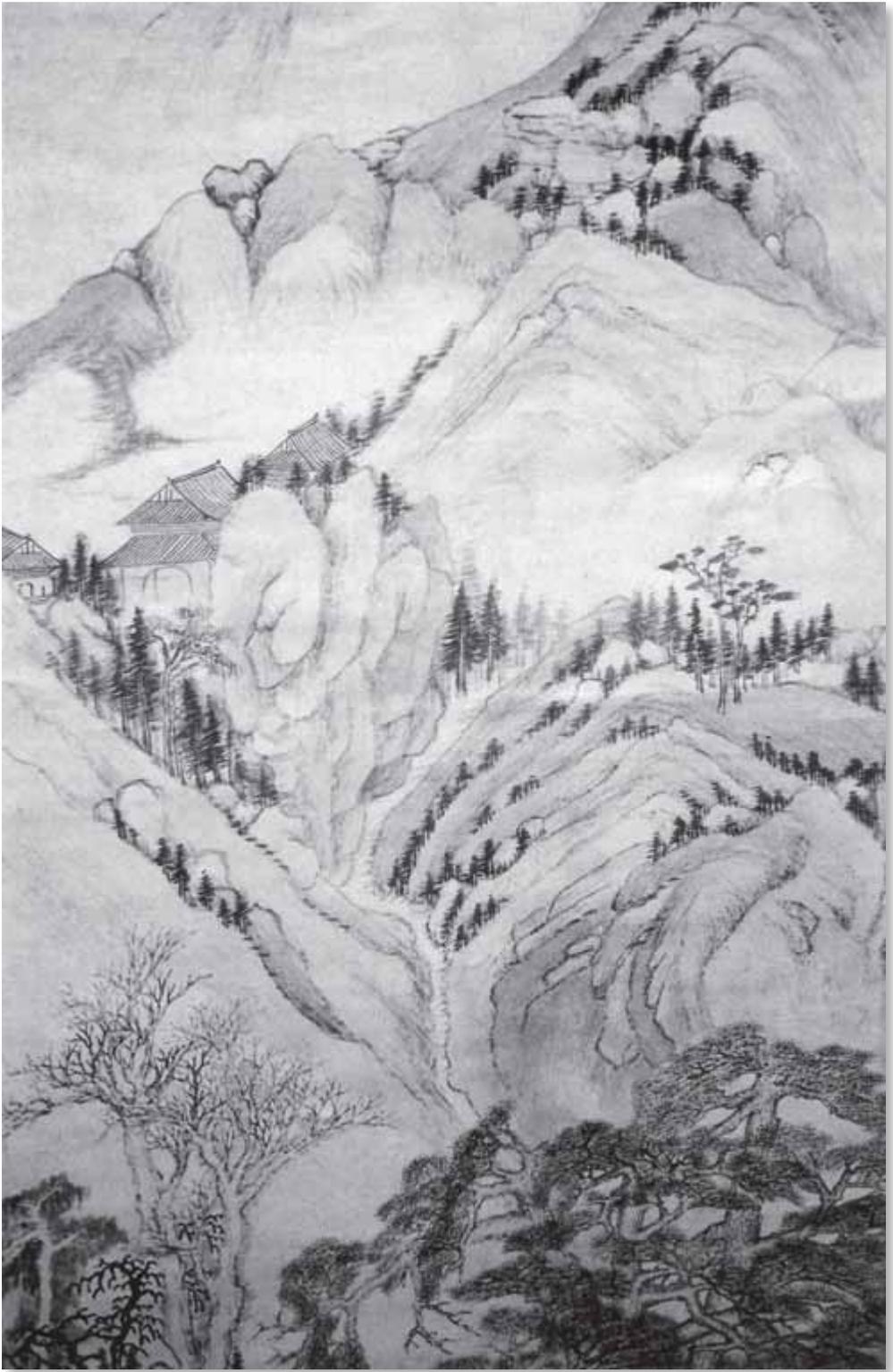


Plate 18: Dong Qichang, *Mountains in Autumn*, detail. Shanghai Museum of Art.

representative twentieth-century painters in order to show that the tradition is still alive. But many scholarly projects effectively end about two hundred years before the present.¹

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A short essay by Arthur Danto called “The Shape of Artistic Pasts: East and West” draws a comparison between modernism in China and the West. Danto observes how the past is made of “modes of available influence,” and he proposes that “modernism, alike in China and the West, meant the dismantling of these narratives and reconstitution of our relationship to the past.” Danto defines modernism in terms of historical perspectives: it begins, he says, “with the loss of belief in the defining narratives of one’s culture.”

Danto’s formulation is close to some themes I intend to explore, but there are several reasons I will not be following it here. First, I do not want to broaden the critique to embrace “defining narratives” of all kinds. Many threads weave together in the succession of artistic practices and in their slow unraveling, and the intricacy of the dissolution of painting is what impels me to keep to a somewhat narrow path. I also want to remain open about the historical limits of modernism or of later Chinese painting, so as not to end up in a one-to-one correspondence between a “Chinese modernism” and the Western one. Throughout this book I have been avoiding the phrase “Chinese modernism.” Like the Renaissance, modernism is a term that makes sense in the West, and is both analogic and problematic elsewhere. It would not do to assume China had or might have “a modernism”; it would beg the question of the meaning of such parallels.

Danto’s modernism is notoriously crisply defined. Those who find his work on modernism useful tend to follow his idiosyncratic periodization; those who do not tend to see him as a sign of his generation—as he himself does, when he muses about his experiences in the 1960s.² Other ways of construing the inception of modernism—and there are many—would lead to different conclusions. If modernism is thought of as a movement centered on Cézanne and Picasso for example, then it bears saying that perspectival representation was never merely “overturned” or “discarded” as modernist writers would sometimes have it.³ There is also a paradox lurking in Danto’s assessment, because later Chinese painting often seems marked by an *excessive* attention to tradition, rather than a break.

There are many differences between the account I am developing and Danto’s, but if we step back far enough, Danto seems right: in both China and the West something went wrong with whatever had been understood as tradition.

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To an art historian first encountering the silence that hangs about later Chinese art, the effect is spectacular. The *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* provides an example; it is the German equivalent of the multi-volume Pelican *History of Art*, though many of its texts are longer than their English counterparts. The *Propyläen* volume on China, Korea, and Japan devotes a page and a half to nineteenth-century Chinese painting, and exactly one sentence to the twentieth century: “In the twentieth century all the élan is lost, and in every domain of art one finds only torpor and decline.”⁴ The two words *Erstarrung* (“torpor”) and *Verfall* (“decline”) are very strong: *Erstarrung* also means paralysis or numbing, and *Verfall* is dilapidation, or ruin.

It is impossible, I think, to overestimate the oddity of this elision. Its precise parallel in the West would be a four-hundred-page volume on European art with two pages on painting since Jacques-Louis David, culminating in a single, intensely derogatory sentence on the art of the last hundred years.

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Other books on Chinese art offer even less. Sherman Lee’s short, widely read *Chinese Landscape Painting* (originally published in 1954) runs through the Strange Masters of Yangzhou—about whom more in a moment—and concludes:

With these, after all, not-so-strange masters, one nears the end of creative landscape production.... by 1800 landscape and all painting has run dry in theme, technique, and mood. And so the last of our talented painters, Ch’ien Tu [Qian Du 錢杜], living on to 1844, sets himself a limited scale of dry brushwork within a severely limited size and so is able to keep touch and breath alive—just barely (plate 19).... The Chinese view of nature was still a valid one and its pictorial expression depended upon other new and individual replies, but exhaustion made no answer.⁵

I wonder if any more elegiac passage has been written about Chinese painting; it is tiring just reading it, as if there is nothing left to see and no reason to continue trying. Terse and enthusiastic as it often is, *Chinese Landscape Painting* ends by falling asleep: the author’s listless eye closes at the end of the last line, which is also the end of the book.

Lee’s *History of Far Eastern Art* (fifth edition, 1994), the major one-volume textbook available for undergraduate teaching, also ends around 1840 with no further explanation. He

provides a comparative timeline of art in China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, India, Indonesia, and “the West,” which only goes as far as the mid-nineteenth century. It is tempting to read some significance into the fact that the last entry under the column for “the West” is Postimpressionism, as if Western painting also ended a hundred years ago.⁶

Nor has the situation changed in recent years. The art historian Ho Ch’uan-hsing ends a short summary of Qing painting with a page on the “Painters of Yangzhou” (the “Eight Strange Masters”) and one on the “late Qing Paleographic School”—painters such as Wu Changshuo 吳昌碩 (1844–1927) who revived archaic calligraphic techniques.⁷ Ho’s account does not mention painting between the mid-eighteenth century and the late nineteenth, even though its purpose is to survey the entire Qing Dynasty. (He does say, in a typical gesture, that the period witnessed “an irreversible political decline.”)⁸

Wen Fong’s sequence of naturalistic representation, which I mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, pays little attention to developments after Dong Qichang.⁹ His book *Beyond Representation* is a history of Chinese painting from the eighth to the fourteenth century, and so it is under no obligation to speak about the later Ming or Qing (as Lee’s text is). But two paragraphs before the end of the 549-page volume, Wen Fong injects a virulent judgment into an otherwise carefully modulated account: “And finally, during the Qing dynasty, stultifying and lifeless imitation became a way of art.”¹⁰

Could a volume on European painting end with the sentence “And finally, after 1820 painting became stultified and lifeless”? Wen Fong’s judgment is not driven by the narrative that precedes it—no mention of the Qing is even necessary, given the text’s concerns up to that last page—and it does not function to round out the narrative, or to bring it to a provisional conclusion. Instead it implants in the reader’s mind a vision of a rich tradition that suddenly and inexplicably collapses.



If the Qing eclipse were the result of a universal negative judgment on the part of art historians, that would be strange enough. (It would correspond, in general terms, to the negative valuations of non-European cultures that were once common in art history.) But most writers do not profess opinions about the period; instead their prose just begins to fade, as if it were especially taxing to write about the later Ming. The writing flags, and the descriptions slowly lose energy, as if the historians could not keep their eyes on the pictures. It is less a negative judgment than a kind of torpor. It seems difficult to say anything about the tired, repetitive, formulaic paintings of the late Qing—they look so self-evidently like the typical products of decline (plate 20). This painting, by Dai Xi 戴熙, seems weak even in comparison to the conservative followers of Dong Qichang (see plates 16 and 17).



Plate 19: Qian Du, The Bamboo Pavilion at Huang-Kang. Cleveland Museum of Art.

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Plate 20: Dai Xi, Endless Range of Mountains with Dense Forest, detail. 1859. Shanghai Museum of Art.

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If negative opinions are uncommon, reflective negative judgments are even less so. Cahill wrote a moving peroration to his *Chinese Painting*, in which he describes how “very sophisticated” aesthetic values replaced simple ones, “awkwardness” was “sublimated into a kind of skill,” and “straightforward feeling” was expressed in “oblique allusions.” Each of these traits is connected to a withdrawal from nature and a growing fascination with what Western art theorists called invention.¹¹ Most are acceptable and even sought after in modern and postmodern art criticism, but here they are linked with a negative valuation. In a lecture given in 1990, Cahill puts it plainly: “Painting as a whole, after the K’ang-hsi era [Kangxi 康熙, early Qing Dynasty], undergoes a marked decline. To say this once more will annoy those of my colleagues who follow the different-but-just-as-good approach, but it is a conviction...”¹²

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Once again the older scholarship beckons, with its apparently outmoded opinions. Like other scholars of his generation, Laurence Binyon thought Chinese art declined after the Song: he did not even want to look at *literati* painting, much less later Ming and Qing art.¹³

On the one hand, that kind of sweeping statement is the product of a prejudice that scholarship has outgrown. But on the other hand, as I have been proposing, it may well be the not-so-distant ancestor of our own blindnesses. The latter possibility opens the way to two conclusions: either art historians are gradually curing themselves, and managing to see more and more of the tradition of Chinese landscape painting; or else the tradition as a whole has been and continues to be marked by what appears to be an irreparable decline. Perhaps those who speak ill of Qing painting do so “only by ignorance,” but they may also be following the only available shape of history.

Nor is this a phenomenon that is specific to the *literati* tradition, because the same kinds of apparent decline affect the professional Zhe School painters. At the end of a long study of Ming court painting, in a chapter called “The Disappearance of Academic Craft,” Richard Barnhart spends a few pages on a late regional school he calls the “Min School.” He describes the works as “scribbly, spontaneous, sketchy, and slapdash,” and speculates that “such practices were probably necessitated by economic reality.” As the market for court painting collapsed, painters could only “maintain a minimal standard of living” by “making and selling, say, ten paintings a week.”¹⁴ It is true that the art market was undergoing fundamental changes, and Barnhart also points out how difficult it is to reconstruct many painter’s oeuvres; but it is also curious that his terms and critical descriptions so closely match what is said about *literati* painting. Is the “slapdash” manner of *literati* painting also an economic phenomenon? As it becomes “slapdash,” historians have a more difficult time

keeping their attention on the works and even Barnhart (who usually tries to see everything, and to hold judgment in suspension as long as possible) flags; the chapter concludes several pages later.

I would go so far as to say that the decline of Chinese painting is subtly present in every narrative. When Fan Kuan's (c. 960–1030) *Travelers Among Streams and Mountains* is praised, in the context of a general survey of Chinese art, as a “great picture” with an “overwhelming grandeur of conception,” there is the faint but definite impression that later works fail by the same standards.¹⁵ Only one historian I know sees a positive light in the middle Qing, though it is not unqualified: Jung Ying Tsao notes that the period is “not usually considered outstanding,” but might be an “important transitional style” leading to new discoveries.¹⁶

Recently some writers have taken to simply laying out the material, rather than trying to judge it. Claudia Brown and Ju-Hsi Chou write at length about late Qing painting, without ever defending the interest of the paintings they catalogue; their *Transcending Turmoil* is a large exhibition catalogue, entirely given over to historical summaries, provenance, and translations of colophons.¹⁷ It is as if simply showing the paintings will be enough to overturn the weight of the historical and critical judgments that have gone against them. But in the absence of any advocacy, the result is inevitably more evidence of work that is “not usually considered outstanding.”

Even twentieth-century work that could otherwise be compelling is buried by the downward pull of the traditional narratives. I want to make it clear that there is plenty of interesting twentieth-century Chinese inkbrush painting; the question at hand is the manner in which the existing art historical narratives smother that painting by placing it at the end of a long decline, in a period characterized by overwhelming Western influence. The problem is analogous to the difficulty of praising Detchko Uzunov, which I mentioned in Section 6. He can be praised, but not in such a way that he becomes indispensable in narratives that include the historical antecedents of his work in western Europe. To take a Chinese example: Fu Baoshi 傅抱石 (1904–1965) is a strong painter, but he is doubly hidden from narratives of world art: once by the Western narratives I am tracing here, and again by contemporary Chinese criticism which denies—I think absurdly—that he was influenced by Western painting (plate 21).¹⁸



What I have written in these last sections may seem too black-and-white. After all there is scholarship that takes nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese landscape painting seriously. Yu-chi Lai's study of Ren Bonian 任伯年 (1840–1896), while it is not focused on



Plate 21: Fu Baoshi, Resting by the Deep Valley, detail. 1943. Shanghai Museum of Art.

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landscape paintings, is a sympathetic iconographic study of the painter's responses to the division of Shanghai.¹⁹ But even though she cites Cahill's opinion of Chen Hongshou's 陳洪綬 *A Tall Pine and Taoist Immortal* (1635, Taipei)—namely that it evokes “the absurd world” of Ming society—she does not make use of the larger context of Cahill's argument or what it implies about Qing Dynasty painting; her citation seems mainly intended to get her own argument going.²⁰ There is also interesting work by Aida-Yuen Wong, chronicling how twentieth-century *literati* painting became associated with Western modernism—but her concern is mainly Japanese art.²¹

How are we to understand this passive, often invisible laying-down of narrative? I would not be as surprised if most reactions were like Cahill's, because then the last two and a half centuries of Chinese painting would simply be *poor work*—though I would still want to know how such a thing could happen. But it is doubly intriguing when the painting seems to be *merely uninteresting*, as if artwork could somehow just be affectively neutral, neither good nor bad. Either way the phenomenon has no parallel in the West. The West has the problem of provinces and backwaters (Uzunov's, for example), and there are many examples of belated work. But western European modernism does not simply sink out of sight: it is strong and central, and its contours are narrowly contested.

Fifth hypothesis. The history of Chinese painting has an odd structure. In particular the Ming decline and Qing eclipse have no parallels in the West, and so they may be fundamentally inassimilable.

I am going to oppose that hypothesis to another one, which is its mirror opposite, because the very invisibility of the period makes it the focus of attention. I cannot imagine a reflective reader of Sherman Lee's books, or of Wen Fong's, who is not immediately fascinated with the possibility that a major tradition could somehow take such a wrong turn that it calls down the combined wrath and indifference of its major historians.

Counter-hypothesis. Late Ming and Qing artists appear to art history as a form of postmodernism.²²

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Some of the most common explanations would have it that later Chinese painting suffered a natural decline. (Sherman Lee's description implies as much.) Thus William Willetts thinks that “pictorial schemas” in the Qing “degenerate into the most threadbare of clichés,” precipitating the end of the tradition,²³ and Michael Sullivan suggests that the tradition unraveled because Qing painters after the first generation had nothing to rebel against.²⁴

Another historian says only that the artists “seemed to have lost contact with any sources of creative energy.”²⁵

This is the “biological fallacy,” the notion that historical movements grow and then decline the way people or plants do. It borrows its terms from the arc of human life, and—as Panofsky has demonstrated—it often follows classical Greek and Roman schemata that divide a person’s life into three, four, or five parts. Ideally the Tang or Song would be the vigorous youth, the Yuan the mature man, and the Ming the decrepit old man. No one says as much, of course, but the fallacy is pervasive in history and it fits the reception here as well.

Some Western scholars mix the biological fallacy with a moral judgment in favor of youthfulness. This is more explicit in earlier sources; thus Binyon speaks of “pedantry and conservatism” and “the ingrained weakness of the Chinese genius,” and reserves his highest praise for the “lofty idealism” of the Song.²⁶ Ernest Fenollosa, too, writes about the degeneration from the “worthy” Song to the “decaying” later dynasties.²⁷ Usually the fallacy creeps into art histories in the guise of metaphors about death. Arthur Waley’s history ends with Gong Xian 龔賢 (active c. 1655, d. 1689), whom he calls a “tragic master,” whose pictures have a “blank, tomb-like appearance,” and he concludes “hactenus dictum sit de dignitate artis morientis.”²⁸

Thinking about this, it helps to ask what the biological fallacy actually explains. Do we understand a period better because it appears as a kind of natural decline? Is Qing art really like old age in any comprehensible fashion? I would rather say that the biological fallacy and its variations are descriptions, solace for a sad ending rather than analysis of the plot.



Among explanations there is Cahill’s argument that the Qing is marked by Western influence. That is chronologically plausible because the first Italian engravings appeared in 1600, and the Qing began in 1644. For some scholars, the influence of Western paintings and prints dilutes the Chinese tradition, and is cause for regret; for others, it is a delicate subject since it subtracts from the value of some Chinese artists. The longest shadow cast by this subject is the possible influence of Western prints on Dong Qichang, a possibility whose remoteness does not make it any less dangerous for a certain understanding of the tradition. Western influence is an interesting subject: it can be so subtle or unlikely that it may not exist (as with Dong Qichang), or so blatant that it produces bizarre hybrids (as with Giuseppe Castiglione, the Jesuit court painter, who put round, fully rendered Western-style horses into inkbrush landscapes). It has proven difficult to tell the story, because Qing artists refracted Western chiaroscuro, perspective, modeling, and anatomy in ways that are unexpected and perhaps even invisible to Western eyes. Yun Shouping 惲壽平, for example, painted scenes that use



Plate 22: Yun Shouping, Album Leaf (one of five), detail. Shanghai Museum of Art.

Western perspective and chiaroscuro, but his work is so enmeshed in the Chinese tradition—especially, in plate 22, the Southern Song—that it may not even make sense to pry Western from Chinese forms.

Western influence is a large subject, still mostly unexplored, but it may have its limitations in explaining the Qing eclipse. I am not sure I would want to assign the *lack of interest* in Qing painting to admixtures of Westernness. It seems to me that if Chinese-Italian admixtures were a principal trait of Qing painting, the period would be *more* interesting to art historians, and more challenging to interpret, than the art that had been made before 1600. Did Western art really only *dilute* Chinese art, making it flavorless and flat? (And would flavorless, flat painting not be alluring, as it was for Ni Zan?) Or was something else at work?

The many negative terms and acknowledgments of descriptive defeat are balanced, oddly, by a single word: 怪 *guài*. I take this as another sign of historical anomaly, because it is unusual to collapse a period, or even a generation, onto a single word. Baroque and rococo are well-known examples of derogatory terms that have become empty place-markers for their periods; *rocaille* means “rock-work” and “Baroque” comes from the name of the painter Federigo Barocci—but no one thinks of rococo art as carved gemstones, or of Baroque art as work done in Barocci’s style. Tenebrism comes to mind as a possible parallel for the centrality of *guài* (tenebrism names the shadows that crept over paintings after Caravaggio), but the situation is historically unusual and has no clear precedents in earlier Chinese art.

Guài is usually translated as “eccentric,” a word that passes nearly unchanged throughout European scholarship—*Exzentriker* in German, *eccentrici* in Italian, *les excentriques* in French.²⁹ Encapsulated that way, the word can seem more restricted than it actually is. In Chinese *guài* means “eccentric,” but also, according to Hans van der Meyden, “strange, rude, outrageous, wonderful, remarkable, unrestrained, extraordinary and uncanny.”³⁰ A 怪人 *guàirén* is an eccentric person. For a Westerner at the beginning of the twenty-first century, those words seem natural, a perfect match for any number of postmodern preoccupations. “Rude,” of course, means “unpolished” or “unsophisticated,” and as such it is a useful term in early modernism. The uncanny had special resonance for late twentieth-century scholarship on surrealism and its postmodern echoes, and it was the subject of a number of studies, for example Hal Foster’s *Compulsive Beauty*.³¹

Yet despite its immediate appeal and apparent potential as a descriptive term, the word *guài* also encrypts a negative judgment, as Katharine Burnett has noted.³² Van der Meyden points out that its *locus classicus* is in the Confucian Analects: “The Master did not talk about extraordinary things [*guài*], feats of strength, chaos and spirits.” Whatever positive attributes *guài* has, it is founded on a negative judgment, and in that respect every synonym and hortatory usage is an attempt at restitution.

It is curious, too, that the word “eccentric” usually appears in quotation marks in English, or in phrases like “so-called eccentrics.”³³ It becomes a central term of criticism (a critical criterion, 批評標準 *pīpíng biāozhǔn*) at the same time that it has to be bracketed in scare quotes. That might be understood as an acknowledgment that the painters in question were not merely eccentrics; but it also implies that they were really not eccentrics—after all, how could nearly three hundred years’ worth of painters all have been eccentrics? But if the “eccentrics” were not eccentrics, then why do we still follow the nineteenth-century custom of calling them eccentrics? As I read it, the ongoing editorial decision to put “eccentrics” in quotation marks is a sign of indecision. It can be especially odd to see “eccentric” in quotation marks when the artists are being described as eccentrics. The twentieth-century artist C.C. Wang 王紀千 occasionally painted in the manner of the Yangzhou eccentrics,

even though he thought it was “like singing too fast.” Jerome Silbergeld’s account of C.C. Wang follows the typographic convention and puts “eccentrics” in quotation marks, creating a strange effect: a traditional twentieth-century painter tries a brief exercise in eccentricity by copying “eccentrics.”³⁴ Like the period they typify, the eccentrics both are and are not worthy of serious attention.



Another explanation for the state of later Chinese painting is the long shadow cast by Dong Qichang. Richard Barnhart and others have suggested that we are still under the spell of Dong’s historiography, and therefore unable to “value professional painting over *wénrén* painting, to see the merit in later painters who rejected Dong’s values.” From Barnhart’s point of view “we have been ... thoroughly brain-washed by a handful of critics,” and “it is time to consider their pervasive and destructive influence.” It seems, for example, that the fact Dong coined the phrase “Zhe School” (to describe professional and court painters) must be related to the fact that Zhe School painting is still undervalued. The force of Dong’s formulation is also brought home by the fact that it has only recently seemed possible to assert that no “school” even existed in an academic sense.³⁵ Dong’s influence can then be called upon to explain the ongoing relative neglect of later Ming and Qing painting, since—as Eugene Wang puts it—Dong’s theories posit “an art-historical lineage with [Dong] himself as the ultimate end of history.”³⁶

Perhaps, then, we are faced with a lingering judgment, which has crept into Chinese historiography and even infected the painters themselves. If so, Barnhart would be right that whatever imbalance remains in Cahill’s descriptions is due to Dong’s influence; but the subject is a tricky one, because Cahill spends considerable time looking at professional painting of the kind Dong disparaged. Late twentieth-century scholarship (especially Barnhart’s) shows that such works are far from invisible, and the lingering negative judgments in some texts may not be as significant as the pages of attention that are being lavished on Zhe School painting, Buddhist painting, and other neglected forms.

I say *may not*, because Barnhart is also right to go on insisting that even the most compelling description can be effectively undermined by the gentlest negative judgment. Nor will the current work on “less important” genres and artists have lasting historiographic force unless it comes to terms with the original and ongoing imbalance between privileged and excluded styles. If we imagine Dong’s doctrines as the skeletal structure of a building, then the current work on professional artists may be less a matter of rebuilding than of painting and embellishing what is already in place.

But the principal reason I hesitate to accept the idea that Dong Qichang and the theorists who followed are responsible for the Qing eclipse is the amount of time that has passed since Dong died: over three centuries. Until very recently, Dong's theories seemed unanswerable, and his painting unimpeachable.³⁷ Yet there is a distinction to be made between acknowledging the unarguable nature of some conceptual systems, and making strong local judgments against certain parts of a system. Even if the very idea of Chinese landscape painting is effectively underwritten by Dong and his followers, and even if any discourse about Chinese landscape painting effectively speaks Dong's language, it is still possible to say—however ineffectually—that he is wrong. Dong's theories cannot be that unanswerable if the first generations of Western scholars, from Ernest Fenollosa to Laurence Binyon, managed to ignore him almost completely, or if Ludwig Bachhofer could call him an “execrable dilettante.”³⁸



The ubiquitous word “eccentric” is an initial sign that we experience Ming and Qing painting as a form of modernism. A more substantial reason is the eclipse itself. Art that cannot be represented in terms of previous art, that breaks the tradition in such a way that it appears at first invisible, that inverts values so effectively that it appears “unskilled,” that sends historians scrambling for terms when their vocabulary fails, that seems at least for a generation or two not to exist—all these are markers of Western modernism from the Impressionists onward.

In one sense it is clear that the individualists and eccentrics were only carrying on the conversation of Chinese painting. (As Jan Fontein puts it, eccentricity is “a form of traditionalism,” and the admiration and wonder aroused by eccentrics is nothing more than the “unconventional aspect of a very old convention.”)³⁹ But at the same time the eccentrics seemed to be doing it badly, or in a misguided way. The first critics of Impressionism and Postimpressionism reacted similarly: they knew that painting was at issue, but not how it was at issue, and Postimpressionist works were for a time effectively invisible to criticism. In the late Ming and in early modernism the very structure of historical schools and styles seemed in danger of collapse, so that painters had to become “individualists,” or (in the West) “independents.”

Then came a situation analogous with late twentieth-century pluralism, which has produced a startlingly large number of movements (as witness the table of contents in any textbook of twentieth-century art) and a corresponding increase in individuals who do not entirely fit those movements. The Qing has at least as many “isms” as the twentieth century, although they are named differently—usually by place or number. There are the “Four

Masters of Anhui,” “The Eight Masters of Nanking,” “The Eight Masters of Chin-ling,” “The Eight Strange Masters of Yangzhou,” “The Four Small Wangs,” “The Four Jengs,” “The New Academy School,” “The New Literati,” “The School of Shanghai,” and so forth. (To some extent Chinese writers have always organized their history in this fashion, but most groupings—for instance the Yuan Four Talents of Souchow—are later coinages.)⁴⁰

The eclipse itself, therefore, is another piece of evidence that we may be responding to later Chinese painting as a form of modernist rebellion. The eclipse is more than just a symptom of decline (though conservative critics of Western art continue to present modernism in those terms); it is a practice that has achieved such a profound critique of what has gone before that it seems at first to be a gap or a hole in history rather than an ordinary revolution or renaissance.



As the Qing progressed schools became shorter-lived, individualists and eccentrics more prominent, and styles more diverse. It was an unstable ecology in which competition forced diversification. Each artist needed to accentuate the markers of his style in order to survive. Eccentrics and more-or-less independent masters sometimes experienced the field of painting as a network of narrow paths: that is, instead of developing broadly referential, catholic styles, they embarked in specific directions, carefully restricting and underscoring their innovations. This led to a constriction and simplification of the crystallized style definitions that the Yuan artists had first given to artists of the Tang and Song.

In the Qing, the traits by which styles were known were sometimes further limited to those susceptible of hyperbole. Thus Ni Zan’s skeletal articulations continued to be important, while his sense of what we call “plasticity” and three-dimensionality were de-emphasized or altered. This restriction of personal style did not always mean that artists worked in only one style, but rather that they chose eclectically among a number of possibilities, each strongly emphasized and narrowed. The same happened in professional painting; in Barnhart’s words, sixteenth-century Min School works are “uniformly slapdash and sketchy, given to dramatic gestures of brush and ink, like an exaggerated stage performance of something that had once been quite restrained.”⁴¹

In Cahill’s formulation, style had become idea: that is, the artists sought and adopted styles in the way in which ideas have been transmitted in the West, as essential and sometimes exclusive carriers of meaning.⁴² In broad terms, this inflated economy of styles marks the current art world in the West, where it is embraced under the name “pluralism” and seen as a healthy alternative to the apparently restrictive norms of earlier art.

Examples are available in the four principal “priest-hermit-individualists” (Bada Shanren, Gong Xian, Shi Tao [Yuanji] 石濤, and Kuncan 髡殘); in the nearly contemporaneous “Four Masters of Anhui” (Hong Ren 弘仁, Xiao Yuncong 蕭雲從, Zha Shibiao 查士標, Mei Qing 梅清, along with Dai Xiaoben 戴孝本); and in the slightly later “Eight Masters of Nanjing” (including Fan Qi 樊圻, Ye Xin 葉欣, Gao Cen 高岑, Wu Hong 吳宏, and Gong Xian) and “Eight Strange Masters (or Eccentrics) of Yangzhou” (including Hua Yan 華岩, Jin Nong 金農, Huang Shen 黃慎, Li Shan 李鱓, Luo Ping 羅聘, Zheng Xie 鄭燮, and Gao Xiang 高翔).⁴³

Mei Qing 梅清 (1623–1697), for instance, “invented some six or eight motifs and varied them ad infinitum.”⁴⁴ One of his “motifs” is a “rolling, rococo movement” “not unlike” Fragonard. Jin Nong’s 金農 (1687–1764) compositions were called “most peculiar” and “quite startling,”⁴⁵ but at the same time they paid for their eccentricity by a restriction on versatility; to one scholar, the “Eight Strange Masters” are somewhat predictable since “the scope of their painting themes was narrow.”⁴⁶ Huang Shen 黃慎 (1687–1768) had an “exaggerated,” “nervous, flying touch,” which “evidently puzzled his countrymen who called him ‘too extravagant.’”⁴⁷ The traces of his beginning in Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, and Wu Zhen have been almost burned away in his fiery, skittish brushwork.⁴⁷ Other artists took even more extreme measures. Gao Qipei 高其佩 (1660–1734) is famous for painting with his fingernails: early in the day, they were sharp and suitable for fine painting, and later they were good for “broad stains and splashes” in the *pomo* 潑墨 technique.⁴⁸

I think this is a familiar picture. Contemporary Western art observes a similar economy in which artists adopt strategies that are at once extreme and narrow. If I name a representative list of late twentieth-century artists—say, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Jeff Koons, Christian Boltanski, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Annette Messager, Christo, Francesco Clemente, Damien Hirst, Wolfgang Laib, and Sigmar Polke—then what comes to mind, at least initially, is each artist’s signature strategy. Jenny Holzer’s LCD displays, Barbara Kruger’s *National Enquirer* font, Wolfgang Laib’s piles of pollen, Damien Hirst’s cows in formaldehyde, Sigmar Polke’s fugitive chemicals—those are the visual strategies that produce the effect of pluralism. Each is narrow in the sense that it is specific to the artist, and extreme in the sense that it is strongly different from any other strategy.

This is not to say that the Western artists are necessarily producing impoverished work—what are called “one liners” or “one-note works.” It may take time to spell out the actual relation between a given style and the fuller range of a work’s meaning, and there is no necessary correlation between styles that are instantly recognizable and works that are overly simple. Postmodernism, understood this way, is not a shrinkage of meaning as much as an attenuation of meaning: meaning is differently shaped than it had been.

(“Strategy,” a word I have been using throughout the book, is typically postmodern in its mixture of down-to-earth artist’s technique and canny, politically informed decision. An artist “works in” a style or manner, but “adopts” a strategy or a stance. The very word evokes the labile state of affairs in postmodern art.)⁴⁹



Not all elements of the crystallized style definitions were susceptible to the kind of hyperbole that the Chinese artists desired. The class of traits amenable to hyperbole includes those that can be taken from already crystallized versions of the styles of historical figures, as well as those that can be multiplied until they become the single strategy for an entire painting, or an entire lifetime’s work.

Three of the most prominent candidates were the anatomizing of Ni Zan, the archaizing of Zhao Mengfu, and the structural inventions of Dong Qichang. Hongren (1610–1664), for instance, practiced a “bare bones” style based on the style of Xiao Yuncong,⁵⁰ but derived theoretically from Zhao Mengfu’s strategy in relation to *his* past: “Hongren does to Xiao Yuncong’s style what Zhao Mengfu did to Li Cheng’s.... He depletes the color and flesh and leaves only the bare bones.”⁵¹ The “gentle renunciation” and “mournful loneliness” that have been seen in his works are a benefit of the style: exaggerate the style of Ni Zan, and you increase the pathos of the result (see plate 12).⁵² The “spindly trees” in Hongren’s paintings almost crackle with brittleness, and the whole is airless and blanched. Looking from a Hongren to a Ni Zan is a relief, a return to actual water and palpable rock.⁵³

The style that is “an essence of an essence, refined to the breaking point and always on the verge of disappearance” became a stock-in-trade for later painters. Zha Shibiao (1615–1698), another of the “Four Masters of Anhui,” practiced a “global mannerism,” a hyperbolic extension of Wu Zhen’s wet brush technique. In some paintings he let the wet brush become flaccid and weak, in distant emulation of Huang Gongwang’s “insistently repeated brushstrokes” (plate 23).⁵⁴ In others, he expanded the style nearly into a “full [Western] water-color technique.”⁵⁵ Tai Pen-hsiao, “fifth” of the Four Masters of Anhui, sometimes painted in very dry strokes, in an exaggeration of his contemporary Gong Xian’s recommendation.⁵⁶ *Man in Cave* pictures a dry, crumbling world, and it is painted in a deliberately feeble and trembling manner. (It shows a mountainside, with two cut-away views into caves. In the lower center, a man sits meditating under milky stalactites.)

The Four (or five) Masters of Anhui are a typical group; they splayed themselves into as many styles as they could manage: very dry, very wet, very skeletal, very florid, very slow, very fast. Ni Zan, Zhao Mengfu, and Dong Qichang are touchstones for this kind of art because they lend themselves—for reasons that have yet to be analyzed—to hyperbole.



Plate 23: *Zha Shibiao, Searching for Secluded Scenery, detail. Nanjing, Cao Tian Palace.*

Western images may be another example of strategies that were “susceptible of hyperbole.” Given the recorded reactions to Western images, it is reasonable to assume that prints appeared as objects already strongly marked by immoderate visual strategies. Chiaroscuro, in particular, might well have looked like an “eccentric” strategy akin to others that were already in play.

To Western eyes, early landscapes by Gong Xian are “strange, silent” and “ominous,” and they may owe those qualities to a personal encounter with Western chiaroscuro (plate 24).⁵⁷ That possibility, if true, strengthens the likelihood that Dong Qichang learned from Western engravings, since Gong’s forms can sometimes be read as details of Dong Qichang’s “chiaroscuro” modeling. (Gong’s leaden “close-ups” are also a form of exaggeration, since their portentous lugubriousness is made possible by the perception that Dong’s forms could be anatomized or “magnified” into a compositional principle.)

Other exaggerated mannerisms spring from iconographic conventions. Bada Shanren 八大山人 (born as Zhu Da 朱耷, 1626–1705) is an instance of the expansion of pictorial wit and irony—not to mention the interest in versions of the “artistic temperament”—that also characterizes Western art since the late Middle Ages.⁵⁸ As far back as Wu Zhen, elements of older traditions (especially the formulaic architecture inherited from the Northern Song) had been treated lightly or humorously by archaists.⁵⁹ Bada Shanren’s painting explores the possibility that many other forms might be susceptible to ironic “mistreatment.” The fact



Plate 24: Gong Xian, *Eight Views of Landscape*, detail. 1684. *Shanghai Museum of Art*.

that scholars can disagree on assessments of his wobbly birds and fish (some seeing them as humorous, others as “angry-looking”)⁶⁰ is readily comprehensible given the hyperbolic nature of his wit (plate 25).

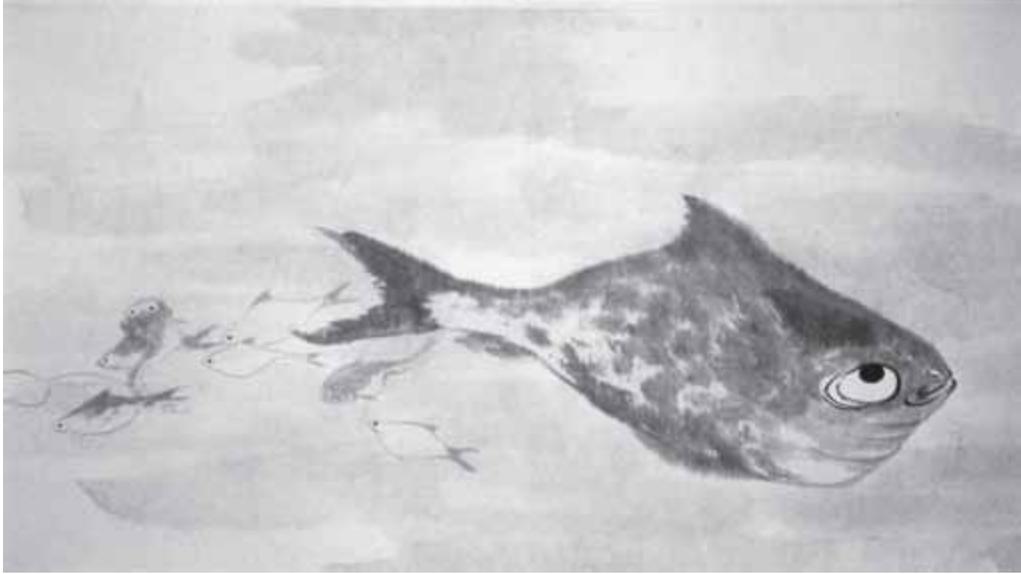


Plate 25: Bada Shanren, *Fish and Ducks*, detail. 1689. Shanghai Museum of Art.

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The possible role of Western art, and the rise of humorous versions of themes that were once serious, are also signs that history itself was beginning to lose some of its overwhelming weight. The “eccentric” artists did not feel the pressure to align themselves with one or another style that preoccupied artists from Zhao Mengfu to Dong Qichang. History seemed more open, less fraught, more immediately and widely accessible. These are again hallmarks of postmodernism. From a postmodern perspective, history is no longer comprised of schools and styles that come up out of the distant past like mountain ranges. A postmodern artist is more free to go where he pleases, and take “shards” or “fragments” from any artist’s work, from any period.⁶¹ Ancient artists are as “close” as recent ones, and any mistake or forgotten convention can be exhumed and pressed into service for the next round of styles.

When historical styles lose their force, and negotiating or rewriting the past ceases to be a pressing issue for the formation of new modes of working, then history itself begins to seem a little distant and irrelevant. Shitao 石濤 (1642–1718), the more radical of the “Two Stones,” Shiqi and Shitao (石 *shih* means “stone”), marked his independence from history by

a preference for the album leaf format, experimentation with color, and a loose, “Western,” “no-method” brushstroke (plate 26).⁶² It may be that those strongly circumscribed sources of inspiration, and the telescoped sense of the past they entail, contributed to his sense that he was free of history, with no predecessors and no followers.⁶³ This, too, is characteristic of recent Western art, in which the world of the Renaissance and its pictorial concepts is largely divorced from current concerns, and in which artists make statements declaring their absolute independence from aspects of the past.⁶⁴ In the 1980s, Barbara Kruger’s dissociation of herself from the Western male tradition of “genius” is an example.⁶⁵ Postmodern artists (and art historians) often lack interest in the art of previous centuries, and many lack curiosity about the historical anomaly of their lack of interest.



That is enough background to enable me to put the argument together. The Qing eclipse and its hyperbolic economy, I think, are both modeled with interesting precision by a particular Western theory about a possible end-state of history. The theory draws an equation between a prevalent construction of postmodernism and a problem in chess called the “endgame,” and it begins with slightly earlier scholarship on the affinity between chess-playing and economies of artistic production.

In art history the chess model surfaces first in Hubert Damisch’s *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* (*Cadmium Yellow Window*), a book of essays published in 1984. Damisch draws a parallel between playing chess and playing the game of art at any given moment, or in any given milieu. He distinguishes between the “match” or individual game, which he calls the *partie*, and the game itself, in its immutable rules and possibilities, which he calls the “game of painting” (*jeu* “*Peinture*”).⁶⁶ The slight ambiguity between a match and a single game is tolerated because Damisch means to distinguish between *plays* that are made at particular historical moments, in particular conditions, and *play* that takes place continuously, since it is the name for the conditions and rules under which chess makes sense.

One of the problems this makes clear is the difference between playing *a* game of painting, and playing *the* game of Painting. The Abstract Expressionists may have believed they were “returning to the very foundations of the game, to its immediate, constitutive given terms,” even though what they made can be understood as the result of a particular game, a match in which certain locally meaningful problems were being worked out within a field of limited possibilities.⁶⁷ Occasionally it is also helpful to distinguish a match from a sequence of games within it. Thus Damisch speaks of the “match” of abstraction, which has been underway since shortly after the turn of the century, and the Abstract Expressionists’ “games” begun fifty years after the match was first joined. So *parties* are either individual



Plate 26: Shitao, Gathering in the Western Garden, detail. Shanghai Museum of Art.

games or matches, though in other contexts Damisch calls them “plays” (in English), implying that a painter’s works might be moves within a game rather than a game itself.⁶⁸ The slight slippage is important in putting Damisch’s argument to work. As it stands in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, the chess metaphor is a way of thinking about two levels of play: one, the game apparently set in place by the medium itself; the other, a series of games apparently set in motion by individuals, schools, styles, and other historically contingent agents. The difference is fictional, but it gives a name to a distinction that is usually played out unnoticed, as if it were just part of the given conditions, the *données*, of art.

Imagining art history as a chess game is initially a way of avoiding Hegelian historical sequences and replacing them with a combinatoric model that has no single inexorable direction. Another advantage of the model is that it pictures a work (or an artist, or school, or period) as an event bounded by certain rules. Like a chess piece, an artist’s work can move only in its neighborhood, and only in accord with capacities that are taken to be effectively inbuilt and unchangeable. (A knight, for example, cannot start moving like a bishop.) For that reason Damisch likes to speak about a “field” (*champ*) or “place” (*lieu*) where the game is played, moving at one moment right or left, forward or backward, but never merely or continuously *forward* as Hegel would have it.⁶⁹



Yve-Alain Bois puts a slightly different stress on these ideas when he presents them (in the form of a review of Damisch’s *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*) in his *Painting as Model*. There Damisch’s work is given a powerful, sympathetic reading, and set out as four “models” for asking fundamental questions about the object and the act of painting. Bois calls the fourth model “strategic,” and suggests it was born from Damisch’s interpretation of Barnett Newman’s apparently careless remark that “everything he had been able to do had meaning only in relation to Pollock’s work and *against* it.”⁷⁰ The difference between Bois’s etiology and Damisch’s Wittgensteinian interest is slight—the two are compatible, in this context—but also decisive, because it reorients the chess metaphor as a question of personal decisions and reactions. “A work has significance,” Bois glosses, following Claude Lévi-Strauss’s account of masks, “first by what it is not and what it opposes.”⁷¹ It is the oppositions, then, that work to create new configurations, new strategic opportunities, and ultimately new “matches.” As I read it, Damisch’s account is more neutral, more concerned (as a chess master might be) with the configurations and patterns on the board. Bois’s story is a little more engaged, in chess terms more concerned with offense and defense, with possibilities taken up and declined.

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“Endgame” is a chess player’s term, and I want to spend a few moments on its normative meaning in order to set the chess player’s understanding alongside the model that has been elaborated in art theory.

A chess game becomes an endgame when there are so few pieces left that it is unclear whether or not either player can bring the game to a conclusion. There are situations in chess where neither player can force a mate, and situations in which neither player can force a draw. In such cases one player might want to continue playing, in the hope—perhaps misguided—that an end might present itself, and the other player would then be compelled to continue without such an illusion, or else resign out of sheer lack of interest or fatigue. Endgame theories in chess are devoted to the conditions under which it is possible to force a mate or a draw, and in chess rules a game is officially a draw if neither player can force a solution in less than fifty moves.

Actual chess, therefore, puts limits on the endlessness that haunts visual theorists when they talk about “endgame art.”⁷² As it was described by artists such as Sherrie Levine in the late 1980s, the endgame condition is one of apparently endless reshuffling of possibilities that have been tried many times before. As Levine says, “the world is filled to suffocating” with images, so there is no longer any meaning in pretending that originality is possible.⁷³ The oppressive, anemic sense of the endgame was captured decades before endgame theory by Samuel Beckett, whose novel *Murphy* begins with the wonderful depressing line: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.” Murphy, the protagonist, carries “somehow on” as Beckett himself did, thinking increasingly about nothing except the mechanisms of motion and their extension into the infinite future. The interminable waiting for Godot, and the wavering, eternal surveillance in his masterpiece *Ill Seen Ill Said* are also pictures of the endgame: its mood is antihistorical, quietist, pessimist, and always dully aware of its impossibility, as if the protagonist is suffering through a perpetual low-level siege.

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Even though it has not been an active part of art theory since the early 1990s, the endgame model is tempting; to some extent it trapped Beckett, despite his fierce analysis of his own motives and moods, into a kind of strangulated attention on the absence of onward motion in works like *Nohow On*. It meshes with everyday studio talk when artists speak about their latest “strategies” and “moves,” and the “stances” they take in relation to various

ephemeral issues and styles. The complicity between the historical understanding current in postmodernism and the notion of the endgame may be deeper than what we can so far understand. Yet if the endgame is to be made explicit and taken as a model, it may have several specific limitations.

In particular I wonder if the endgame, and the “*jeu ‘Peinture’*” more generally, can do more than stave off the Hegelian sequence and the attendant notion that the “game of painting” somehow is, was, or should be moving *forward*. In the past I have argued that an anti-historicist model may not be an effective method of overturning Hegelian certainties, which have a tendency to resurface in ever more devious forms; but at least the endgame provides a new conceptual field in which a non-Hegelian art might seem to thrive.⁷⁴ One of the cracks in the anti-Hegelian armor of the endgame is the drive to win, and the question of the ultimate aim of any one move. In Damisch’s model, the interest is more formal or structural, the way a player in the game *Go* is supposed to take pleasure in the shifting configurations of the board as the game develops. In Bois’s account, the slightly greater emphasis on making moves, especially in order to oppose other moves, also presses the question of purpose. A chess player’s purpose, after all, is to trap pieces, that is, to create a condition in which the opposing player is petrified. The game of *Go* is even more ruthless, because its players aim to crowd their opponents so closely that they die. Actual endgames are played on a nearly empty field, but metaphorical ones are played on very crowded fields.

So I would rather describe the endgame as a condition in which two senses of history batter against one another: from one perspective forward movement seems impossible, and each new move looks like it has been made many times before; but for that very reason the slightest move forward is the object of intense interest, and nearly every thought is directed at the faint possibility that something might change decisively. Such a condition encourages the most virulent forms of competition. In the game of *Go*, the very same players who are supposed to be disinterestedly contemplating the unfolding patterns of the board are also “secretly” competing against one another. *Go* is filled to suffocation with metaphors of suffocation, as players build walls of stone around their opponents’ pieces in hopes of cutting off their avenues of escape and ultimately even the air they breathe.

Another limitation of the endgame, and to the chess metaphor in general, is brought out by its affinities with Wittgenstein’s model of language games. Ultimately Damisch’s source for the idea of a game is Wittgenstein, and he has allied himself with Wittgenstein especially in *Traité du Trait, Tractatus tractus*, which I introduced in Section 24. In Damisch’s book the early Wittgenstein becomes the ironic model for a meditation on “games” of painting very much akin to the later Wittgenstein’s notion of “language games.” As I read it, Damisch intends the *Traité du trait* to be ironically Wittgensteinian, especially because he avoids the famous proposition 7.0 from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (the one that declares the place of silence “in” philosophy). At the same time Damisch is interested in playing with the “games” of marking (*traits*), including the Chinese “game.” For Wittgenstein, the point of

imagining or isolating a game is to elucidate the sense and function of such ideas as truth, grammar, and certainty—in other words, a game is an occasion for clarification. Here I read a deep cleft between Damisch and Wittgenstein, since I find that for Damisch art historical games are of interest largely because they avoid the clarity of the Hegelian machinery. Their complexity matters as much as their precise configuration. This orientation helps Damisch remain as long as possible outside the ordinary machinery of art history, with its sequences, traditions, and influences, but it also means he has to keep *actual* gaming at arm's length.

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The endgame metaphor makes good sense of a number of traits of Qing painting. It explains the artists' ongoing attempts to crystallize the past or to mine it for recoverable fragments of styles, because those actions imply that history itself is somehow broken. With the sequence of periods no longer in operation, any past accomplishment can be appropriated and used to energize a work, even if its effect wears off almost immediately. The intermittent awareness of the ongoing ending of a tradition also explains the increasing narrowness of artists' strategies, and their brilliance against the background of dull repetitions; if the "game" is reduced to a repetitious shuffling of pieces, a move needs to be sharp and focused in order to stand out.

These signs are also the symptoms of kitsch, and they are among the classic traits of the avant-garde as it has been understood since the early fourteenth century. As the philosopher Karsten Harries once argued, a public immured in kitsch makes accelerating demands for pleasure, and eventually fails to even recognize strategies once thought to be outrageous. Its jaded eye sees less and less, until it is attracted only by the most spectacular and shortest-lived phenomena.⁷⁵ The avant-garde could be described in similar terms; Gombrich has done so in speaking about the "leaven of criticism" in Renaissance art, and how it impelled artists to take increasingly long strides with each new work.⁷⁶

Both kitsch and the avant-garde can also be defined as movements with clear beginnings and no obvious endings short of political and ideological metamorphosis (or, in Damisch's terms, short of the inception of a new game). The endgame probably cannot be understood apart from kitsch or the origins of the avant-garde, because it borrows ideas from both. But it has a peculiarity that suits postmodernism especially well, and that is its relative lack of change over time. It is a kind of steady-state condition that is not prone to inflation; the anxiety in an endgame art is that the play might remain as it is forever, but the anxiety in kitsch is that things might not be able to move fast enough.

Especially as it is articulated by artists such as Sherrie Levine, the endgame raises a very interesting possibility, one which casts a dim light on postmodernism's sense of itself: by its nature, an endgame is taken to be potentially endless, and therefore, to the extent that postmodernism is experienced as an "endgame art," postmodernism itself may not have an end. A given "game" of postmodern painting might well come to an end, and even the game of painting itself might end (as Arthur Danto, Joseph Kosuth, and others have said), but postmodernism itself may never reach a conclusion.

Generally my sense of the literature is that postmodernism is imagined as a historical period, and that we are living through a *fin de siècle* of multiple possibilities that will somehow be subsumed under a solidly codified postmodernism or else decisively replaced by whatever is to come. In place of this diffident meliorism, the apparent endlessness of the Qing eclipse (it was interrupted only by the Revolution, and in inkbrush painting it is still underway) implies a different future for the Western game of painting. Perhaps—not least because we may believe it ourselves—our next few centuries will see more of the same hyperbole. Perhaps, in other words, the endgame is in fact interminable, and postmodernism in the sense I have sketched it is not only a period but a state that comes after periods. In this respect Chinese painting is indeed an object lesson, a reminder that our post-Renaissance culture is still young, and that a rich ongoing disintegration may await us "after" postmodernism—at least until we can manage to tell ourselves other kinds of stories.

Abstract as this possibility is, wisps of it are in the air whenever the game metaphor is at work. It hints that postmodernism may be a different *kind* of concept than modernism, and not just the name of a period that follows modernism. The Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the baroque, neoclassicism, Romanticism, and even modernism would be names of periods, as they have always been taken to be; and they would be susceptible as ever to Hegelian notions of sequence and progress. Postmodernism, however, might be different: it could be the name of the "period" that arrives when the sequence of historical periods has played itself out. It was certainly that way in Beckett's mind: his condition was interminable by definition—or more exactly, it was indefinably interminable.

(Again, I am not concerned here with what happened outside landscape painting since the Revolution, or what has happened in the last ten years with China's exponentially growing economy. The increasing internationalism of twentieth-century Chinese oil painting (at first understood as a Western practice, 油畫 *yóuhuà*), and the euphoria of the current art market, are entirely separate questions from the lingering, moribund, marginal, but stubbornly persistent tradition of historically informed inkbrush landscape painting. It is still practiced in Chinese art academies, and its artists are represented by galleries worldwide; but in comparison to the superstars of the Chinese art market, landscape painting is barely noticed.)

The best writing on the endgame was intimately related to the dawning—and necessarily incomplete—understanding that the endless listlessness is also a form of dying. Yve-Alain Bois sees the endgame as a Freudian work of mourning, in which painting slowly recognizes its investment in “millenarianist” hopes and turns to the slow business of “working through the end of painting.” Louis Marin has also written about painting and mourning, and Derrida has taken mourning as the principal theme in Marin’s work.⁷⁷ In *Les fins de la peinture* René Démoris asks about painting’s aims, its intentions and ends, and though he recognizes that the nature of painting itself enjoins these questions, and that there can be no satisfactory answer, it might be argued that his questions have the urgency and persistence that comes from the long Western expectation that periods do end.⁷⁸ This is where metaphors of exhaustion and decline, so common in accounts of Qing painting, meet Western counterparts in a theory about a slowly gathering sense of impending—but indefinitely postponed—death.

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To sum up: the later history of Chinese landscape painting is marked by brief, eye-catching, and idiosyncratic schools, and artists distinguished by single hypertrophied traits or monomaniacally repeated tricks. In landscape painting, China’s past three centuries have seen a continual simplification of narratives of the past, together with a disintegration of historical connectedness. Their artists have had to try ever harder to obtain notice, resulting in an economy of improvised ideals, idiosyncrasy, exaggeration, and eccentricity, and a concomitant shift away from conventional canons, normative ideals, serious purpose, and prolonged labor on single works.

All this is so, I think, despite the fact that inkbrush landscape painting continued throughout the later Qing and the Republic, and is practiced today in a very wide range of styles. Among the best studies of the first half of the twentieth century is Jason Kuo’s *Transforming Traditions in Modern Chinese Painting: Huang Pin-hung’s Late Work*.⁷⁹ Huang Binhong 黃賓虹 (1864–1955) felt himself to be part of the tradition of Chinese landscape painting that goes back to Li Cheng and Fan Kuan, and Kuo makes a sensitive analysis of what it meant to feel that long tradition as a living one that could still exert pressure on the present. A lengthy essay-review by An-yi Pan points out the increasingly problematic nature of traditional Chinese landscape painting in the years leading up to mid-century.⁸⁰ By the 1960s *literati* landscape painting was in a paradoxical position: enriched by centuries of critical attention, articulated in Western-style narratives, and impoverished by its increasingly voiceless, marginal position in contemporary art. The literature on twentieth-century inkbrush landscape painting can be dense with historical meaning, but nearly devoid of historical significance. It is not promoted or demanded on the international

art market. In an email, the Czech art historian Ladislav Kesner ruminated on this: “Why,” he asked, “is contemporary landscape painting of Chinese authors not taken as seriously (in fact, often is totally excluded) from the circle of most interesting contemporary Chinese art? Take, as an example the recently published *China Art Book*, which claims to offer the eighty ‘most important contemporary Chinese artists.’⁸¹ There is only one landscape painter there, Qiu Shihua [邱世華].” Kesner wonders “why the best contemporary landscape painters, people like C.C. Wang or Wucius Wong 王無邪, or even Chang Jin 常進 or Zhuge 朱戈 — to name some very different artists—who without question make splendid, complex and beautiful works of art, are never named among the ... most important persons of global art scene?”⁸² Among the many possible answers to Kesner’s question, there is the simple matter of nationalism: landscape painting in general is excluded from international exhibitions, so the absence of the Chinese landscape painting is unexceptional. Inkbrush painting in the *literati* tradition has especially stale associations; experimental work by artists like Wenda Gu 谷文達 and Xu Bing 徐冰 appears much more viable as an international representation of China.⁸³ There are astonishingly accomplished painters in the inkbrush tradition, but their accomplishments have increasingly failed to compel wide attention.⁸⁴ With just a few exceptions, such as Jerome Silbergeld’s book on Li Huasheng 李華生 (b. 1944), doctoral dissertations and essays are still the norm for *literati* painters in the last hundred years.⁸⁵ The voices of historians, critics, and artists become intensely eloquent, and at the same time they fade until they are nearly inaudible, precisely because the historical tradition that accounts for them is pre-eminently Western, and it is grounded on the deliquescence of the tradition.

The Chinese pluralism did not heal or define itself, and in the second half of the twentieth century the legacy of its diffuse confusion was incorporated into socialist realism, and then pop and other Western currents.⁸⁶ An endless lingering “postmodernism” was the lot of Chinese painting before outside currents disrupted their sense of the problems and purposes of art. Despite vigilant and acute self-reflection regarding historical position and meaning (a trait shared by postmodern theory in the West) Chinese landscape painters did not imagine that they were in the midst of anything quantitatively different than the succession of styles and schools that comprised art history as they knew it.

Postmodernism in both cultures can be re-described as an interminable final stage produced and defined by the very history that appears to say it must be otherwise—that is, the history that has always defined itself by dynasties or periods, manners or styles, artists or schools. Even the monotony of later Qing art makes sense in this model: as the years wear on, the most strident voices sink into the background noise, and the most outrageous mixtures of styles blend into a uniform grey. Painting is still going, but as Sherman Lee says, exhaustion has made no answer.

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That is the end of the comparison of historical perspectives. I believe in what I have just written, and I think it is an interesting way to think about the Qing eclipse and about some aspects of postmodernism.

And yet.

And yet everything I have said in this chapter comes from Western sources: Hegel, Wittgenstein, Damisch, Bois, Beckett, Levine. My story has been driven by an interest in locating the large-scale structures within the histories of Western and Chinese painting, and I know that interest comes from Western historiography and philosophy of history.

None of that means the comparison is wrong. It just makes me wonder whether I am, as the psychoanalysts used to say, projecting.

