A Camel's Pace: A Cautionary Global

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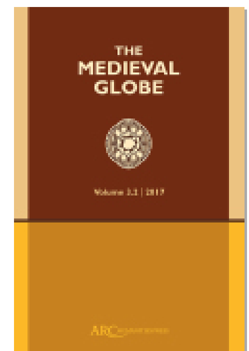


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# A CAMEL'S PACE: A CAUTIONARY GLOBAL

BONNIE CHENG

THIS ESSAY SEEKS to disentangle various interpretations of "the global" and to consider this trend's risks and rewards for the study of art in "medieval" China. Specifically, I want to sound a note of caution concerning the use of global as an analytical frame for premodern eras, particularly as the term has been variously defined in current art historical writing dominated by scholars of modern and contemporary Euro-American art.[1] At the same time, I want to distinguish productive epistemic shifts that stem from the global turn within art history for the study of Chinese art. While some dominant models of the global have resulted in problematic essentialism and misreadings, others offer a useful lens through which to reconsider both China's nationalist historiography and the complex material record of past civilizations.

My concerns echo those of a recent discussion of the rise of "world art history" among scholars of ancient art, moderated by Jeremy Tanner.[2] Tanner asked these scholars whether they saw the rise of global art as representing epistemic or organizational changes in the disciplines of art history and archaeology. Two issues, lamented and praised, emerged in their responses: the death of history, or the potential loss of any "deep historical grasp of how objects may develop within specific cultural constraints," and comparative art history, a practice that would engender dialogue across regions.[3] While accepting that comparative art history is essential, Jas Elsner remarked that "before we can even attempt some kind of comparative model of approach, we have to recognize the totally uneven basis of

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**1** I use "China" in this essay to designate the contemporary geographic terrain, recognizing that boundaries have shifted over its lengthy history. I refer to specific centuries when possible but use the term "premodern" for expedience, knowing that it asserts a problematic binary with modern. I acknowledge that the use of the term "medieval" with reference to China may evoke an imperfect temporal frame, but do so in the spirit of the stated aims of *The Medieval Globe*.

**2** Tanner et al., "Questions." "World art" is sometimes synonymous with global art, but sometimes includes visual studies outside of art history.

**3** Tanner et al., "Questions," 216.

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our scholarly starting points in relation to the cultures and arts we want to compare."[4] Elsner refers not only to the Eurocentric roots of art history, but also cautions about formidable impediments for making productive comparisons across regions. In particular, he notes the relative lack of emic intellectual perspectives on non-European arts and the differences between regions with and those without a comprehensive corpus of edited and translated texts that may facilitate art historical interpretation. Meaningful comparisons between regions requires roughly balanced sets of sources; and despite the vast material, textual, and oral traditions in Africa, China, India, or the Islamic world, these regions have not yet attracted generations of scholars to the study of their art forms in a way parallel to classic traditions in Europe.

I want to begin to rectify this imbalance, what Elsner and Parul Dave-Mukherji have described as an "asymmetry of knowledge," by exploring the relevance of the global turn for the study of art in premodern China from two vantage points: historic and epistemic.[5] I distinguish between a historical mode, by which I mean a grounding in specific socio-cultural contexts, and other epistemic impacts brought about by studies of globalization, particularly the attention they draw to the misalignments between artistic practices and political shifts in order to demonstrate that we can acknowledge a global orientation without sacrificing historical commitments. In this regard, my essay shifts the conversation away from Tanner's question about epistemic or organizational changes to focus on Elsner's concerns about the death of history and the problems of comparison. While comparative art history need not be ahistorical, premodern historical perspectives on the global past have been challenged by scholars such as James Elkins, who see globalization as a distinctly modern phenomenon.[6] Like Tanner, however, I argue that this assumption tends to obscure the diversity of premodern artistic practices and the complex histories of local adaptation. At the same time, I want to assess how current discussions of globalization help to break down other formidable historical narratives and paradigms that hinder comparative analysis across regions, especially in China. Doing so draws attention to the global turn's paradoxical impact on premodern non-Western art histories. On the one hand, despite the commitment to a "global" perspective, the largely modern focus in recent art historical discussions has reinforced a binary of West/non-West, sometimes resulting in simplified narratives that flatten out the history of earlier eras. On the other hand, the global

**4** Tanner et al., "Questions," 218.

**5** Dave-Mukherji, "Discontents," 92.

**6** Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*; and Elkins et al., eds., *Art and Globalization*.

turn has exposed the continued reliance on anachronistic narratives of nationalism and, in particular, a fixation on the supposedly bounded and monolithic categories of art and ethnicity prevalent in China Studies.

These critical reformulations are productive for analyzing the fifth and sixth centuries, part of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, because many art forms produced during this time of flux are not easily analyzed according to modern political boundaries or current periodization schema.[7] For example, scholars familiar with the Silk Road/s may know about the networks of trade and cultural exchange associated with the Tang dynasty, yet be unaware of how these networks developed in the preceding centuries, when numerous short-lived groups ruled the region from multiple seats of power. I focus on archaeologically excavated material because tombs in China have yielded objects from distant lands that raise important issues about the dimensions and frequency of early exchange. Thus the specific historical conditions of this time and place, coupled with funerary art's position outside of canonical art historiography (usually focused on painting), combine to counter narrowly modern definitions of globalism and reveal the endurance and multiplicities of forms of interaction.

The challenge of adopting a global view of this material is not to rectify how non-Western nations have been "deprived of history" in dominant art historical narratives but to reconcile the gulf between the limited knowledge of these regions in the West and the fervent nationalist narratives and paradigms that structure Chinese historiography. This is especially true for art historians who work with archaeological material, much of which has been unearthed in the last half century under the aegis of nationalist agencies. Indeed, the call for a global art history largely overlooks the challenges faced by scholars working with the less familiar materials of smaller subfields, who are pressed to grapple with broadly comparative questions even as they write the initial histories of long-ignored or recently excavated objects. It further ignores the legacy of traditionalist nationalist historiography in China, with its strong textual bias, in shaping scholarship in related disciplines, particularly archaeology and history.[8]

## Global Views of Art History

Despite the sense of urgency surrounding the promotion of global art history in the past decade, there remains little consensus on how scholars understand the

**7** Davis and Puett, "Periodization," 10.

**8** On the uneven archaeological work in China in the twentieth century and its intersection with art history, see Cheng, "Functional and Non-Functional," 73–74.

term. At least three meanings of global or "world" art history appear to be in current usage. For some, "the global" expands the geographic parameters of the discipline beyond Europe and North America and sometimes includes art history as it is studied in discrete parts of the world. For others, "the global" draws attention to contemporary conditions brought about by late capitalism, digital technology, and the impact of global imaginaries, networks, and flows on art markets, as well as on conditions of artistic practice and production.[9] Though this latter group of theorists are predominantly interested in exploring contemporary art and its contexts, some argue that aspects of these globalizing conditions appear in earlier eras—but how far back, and in what ways, is debated.[10] Still others deploy "the global" to denote multiple paths of engagement in an expanded geographic sphere, for example across the Atlantic or between other regions. This latter definition, championed by Monica Juneja, outlines a broader approach to the study of art that takes the notion of transcultural (comparison) as its basis.[11]

Together, but to different degrees, these three meanings of globalism reflect different positions on, and reactions to, the conditions of contemporary globalization; and they also critique disciplinary conventions tied to art history's origins in eighteenth-century Europe: approaches that continue to inform contemporary scholarship and structure the discipline. The first two meanings, however, pose some practical problems. The first interprets globalism literally and encourages an expansion of studies to cover a broader geography. This expansion may take place in scholarly writing, but may also occur in introductory courses or survey books, or on an institutional level through the creation of new tenure track lines. This goal might at first seem laudably straightforward, but the depth of response at a pedagogical and institutional level remains limited.[12] More importantly, inclusion of overlooked geographic regions alone does not guarantee a reorientation of methodological perspective.[13] Meanwhile, the second definition of "the global" emphasizes interconnectedness between regions, which is held to be a precondition for any claims to a global system. Advocates of this global frame attempt to keep pace with theoretical shifts of the past decades in other fields. However, in

9 See, for example, Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

10 See the discussion in Joselit and Wood et al., "Roundtable."

11 Juneja, "Global Art History."

12 Chiem and Colburn, "Global Foundations." See also Casid and D'Souza, *Wake of the Global*.

13 For example, David Summers's *Real Spaces*, which attempted to offer an analytical model for world art history based on formal criteria, was critiqued for his choice of conceptual frames—perspective, facture, planarity, etc.—because his terms derive from European notions of space and form. Elkins, "David Summers."

practice, scholars inconsistently adopt or incorporate themes and perspectives developed within disciplines such as anthropology, economics, social history, and sociology. Recent volumes edited by Hans Belting and Elkins demonstrate the range of these largely contemporary perspectives.[14] Because of the connections they draw between globalization and late or new global capitalism, scholars working within this definition of globalism problematically presume the validity of narratives of modernity and the nation, even when their core aim is to draw attention to the dissolution of political boundaries through the study of the art market or multinational conglomerates.[15] As Elkins writes, "Literature on the worldwide dissemination of art assumes nationalism and ethnic identity, but rarely analyzes it."[16] Such narratives remain defined by binaries (of west/non-West) that reinforce the categories they seek to unframe.[17]

Globalism, as conceived in the third definition, responds to and builds on earlier definitions but rejects not only nineteenth-century assumptions and narratives of progress but also the political logic of the modern nation-state. Advocates for this third definition propose a transcultural focus on processes and changes that occur through relationships. This allows for paradigmatic shifts away from older categories and challenges incommensurable units of comparison by approaching time and space as non-linear and non-homogenous. It resonates with the term *mondialisation*, which encompasses "a larger, multidirectional phenomenon of diffusion of ideas, things, and people" and "leaves open a network of reactions."[18] What is attractive about *mondialisation* and the transcultural approach is that by underscoring process they do not presume any dominant unit of comparison or rely on either essentialized or fixed categories and understandings about non-Western regions or about the past. This approach accommodates local responses and allows for a more nuanced historical view.

## Risks of Ahistorical Engagements

One cannot deny the appeal of expanding the material and conceptual scope of art history to highlight less commonly studied regions or to learn new analytical

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**14** See note 6.

**15** Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

**16** Elkins et al., *Art and Globalization*, x.

**17** Dave-Mukherji, "Discontents," 91–95.

**18** Gruzinski, *Les Quatre parties du monde*, as cited by Alessandra Russo, in Joselit and Wood, "Roundtable," 4–5. As they note, English does not offer this nuance of meaning, translating both *globalization* and *mondialisation* as "globalization."

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methods for productive comparison through dialogues with scholars of disparate regions. But scholars who specialize in art produced outside Europe and North America remain reluctant to accept the manner in which these discussions have been framed.[19] Ladislav Kesner, for example, enumerates what he sees as more pressing questions: the purpose of the discipline and the erosion of tradition. He also observes how institutional obstacles, of local contexts or language, assert a distinction between art historians with an international audience versus those with a local one.[20] Kesner argues that the lack of a global view does not stand in the way of enjoying or understanding Chinese art, but wonders whether the absence of non-Western critical concepts and terms in art historical discourse is a signal of their limited applicability to art history or a sign of ignorance, as such emic concepts have been deployed by historians of Chinese art.[21] Kesner also laments the lingering myth of "national qualities" that only cultural insiders can "get" and explain. This myth evokes an old, lengthy debate familiar in Area Studies, to the effect that language mastery can unlock native knowledge.[22] Similarly, in an attempt to "unframe" the extant orientation of discourse on Ming art and culture, which overemphasizes *wen* (literati) culture, Craig Clunas critiques both the broader impact of the "first in the West and then the rest" paradigm and the textual bias of Chinese historiography.[23] These criticisms demonstrate that scholars of diverse periods of Chinese art face other pressing, but no less relevant, issues and obstacles than those outlined by scholars of the West.

One reason to remain committed to a rigorous historical praxis is to rectify historically inaccurate information perpetuated for the sake of asserting a global dimension for one's object of study. Within some discussions of contemporary global art history, for example, categories of non-Western objects have ostensibly been "recovered" by scholars who then make broad generalizations in order to put forth arguments which may be innovative within a comparative global discourse but which reveal severely limited engagement with both the past and with distant

**19** See Kesner in Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*, 81–111; his contributions to the discussion in Chapter 3, 113–75; and the brief assessment by Clunas, 279–85. Other contributors offer similar skepticism.

**20** Kesner in Elkins, *Is Art History Global?*, 84–85, 88, 94.

**21** Ibid., 86–90. Kesner responds to questions Elkins proposed to the seminar (3–23) and beliefs he espouses throughout the book: see Elkins, "David Summers," 377–78.

**22** Gordon, "Rethinking Area Studies."

**23** Clunas, "Unframing Chinese Art."

lands: an "instrumentalist notion of non-Western knowledge systems."[24] For example, to contrast the global contemporary art network with trade in the past, Noel Carroll describes "master" ceramic artisans at Jingdezhen and "Masters of the Ukiyo-e School" working in eighteenth-century East Asia, in order to establish a false equivalency with European artists.[25] In actuality, Ukiyo-e designers and painters in Edo-period Japan produced works for vastly different classes. Artists of the Kano or Tosa schools typically painted for the ruling Tokugawa shogunate or the imperial court in Kyoto, while printmakers mass-produced Ukiyo-e for commoners. We can certainly celebrate the shedding of unexamined taxonomies which reductively dismissed ritual bronzes, ceramics, lacquer, and metalwork as "decorative arts." However, elevating the skills and status of craftsman who designed mass-produced prints, or who worked in large-scale (albeit complex) ceramic workshops, to those who painted for the court or shogun collapses vastly different modes of production and obscures the historic conditions that shaped their development.

Attention to a historically informed global past also requires a more nuanced approach to non-Western textual traditions in regions such as China and India, which have figured prominently in some accounts of global art. For example, Elkins's *Stories of Art* and other writings frequently reference Zhang Yanyuan, an author from Tang China whose ninth-century *Record of Famous Painters in Successive Dynasties* bears similarities to Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. (Zhang ranks artists and their paintings in part according to their achievement of verisimilitude, making his comparison to Vasari reasonably apt.) Though this renewed attention may yet be productive, ahistorical approaches tend to oversimplify these texts and overlook scholarship and material outside narrow knowledge of these regions and fields, while unwittingly reinforcing the preexisting textual bias in Chinese historiography. For just as Vasari's text shaped the later artistic canon through its inclusions and exclusions, Zhang's record and subsequent texts that follow its structure have similarly excluded the majority of objects crafted by artisans in a range of media, which we now come to know through archaeological discovery. Entire millennia of objects—ancient bronzes, early ceramics and glass, sculpted figurines, tomb murals of no small size and consequence (see **Figures 2.1–2**, **Plate 2.1**)—are largely absent from descriptions in early Chinese painting texts. To Zhang and many others in the centuries since, items made by artisans, and especially those for the tomb, fall beyond their definitions of painting or even art. Yet some of these small, portable objects were important items of early exchange and offer material evidence of many different kinds of interactions than those recorded by elite

**24** Dave-Mukherji, "Discontents," 93.

**25** Carroll, "Art and Globalization," 137.

Figure 2.1. Green-glazed female musician, one of over 350 figurines found in the tomb of Sima Jinlong (d. 484) at Datong, Shanxi (China); height: 21 cm. After James C.Y. Watt et al., eds., *China: Dawn of a Golden Age* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), No. 70. Original archaeological report published in *Wenwu* 3 (1972).

authors. Fragmentary textual references to images and objects, which indicate how they may have functioned or been perceived, have still not fully been explored, and scholars with diverse methodological leanings disagree on the applicability of these sources because they address the material or social, rather than merely formal, aspects of these objects.[26] Furthermore, like much of the Chinese textual tradition, these genres have their own complex genealogies which demand much more than a cursory view. While it may be too much to call Elkins's use of non-Western texts "epistemological violence," the questions he poses do not advance our knowledge of Chinese art or its historiography. Elkins's attention to these select non-Western texts further marginalizes significant material evidence by reasserting preexisting biases in Chinese historiography.

**26** For example, Yang Xuanzhi's *Luoyang qielan ji* and Duan Chengshi's *Sita ji.* Duan's text is a form of travel writing but includes descriptions of murals, while Yang's text laments the glory of Luoyang prior to its destruction in the early sixth century, recalling vivid Buddhist temples and other art forms.

Figure 2.2. Carved stone chamber found in the tomb of Song Shaozu (d. 477) at Datong, Shanxi (China); height: 2.28 m. After Datong shi kaogu yanjiusuo and Liu Junxi, eds., *Datong Yanbei shiyuan Bei Wei mu qun* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2008), plate 51.

In his response to Tanner's question on the impact of the global, as noted above, Elsner encapsulated the tension between the historical mode of scholarship and the presentist, even futurist, orientation of much scholarship on the global: "The fundamental epistemic change in the shift to world art is the death of history. I mean by this the move towards easy postmodernism and surface semiotics, from a close-focused, culturally and socially integrated approach to the causes and effects of the making and experience of works of art in their time of creation and their later reception."[27] Advocates of Elsner's view may be accused of methodological fogeyism, but such a critique misses the key point about the asymmetrical knowledge base of non-Western art, from which contemporary scholars may productively make comparisons. Though I share Elsner's fear of historically groundless approaches and the embrace of an uncritical global focus, I also see rewards stemming from a shift to a global view because this shift is accompanied by the dissolution of problematic paradigms. These are not the Eurocentric narratives with which art historians are already familiar, but other no less ideologically loaded historical paradigms generated by Sinology and modern archaeology in China, to which I now turn.

**27** Tanner, "Questions," 218.

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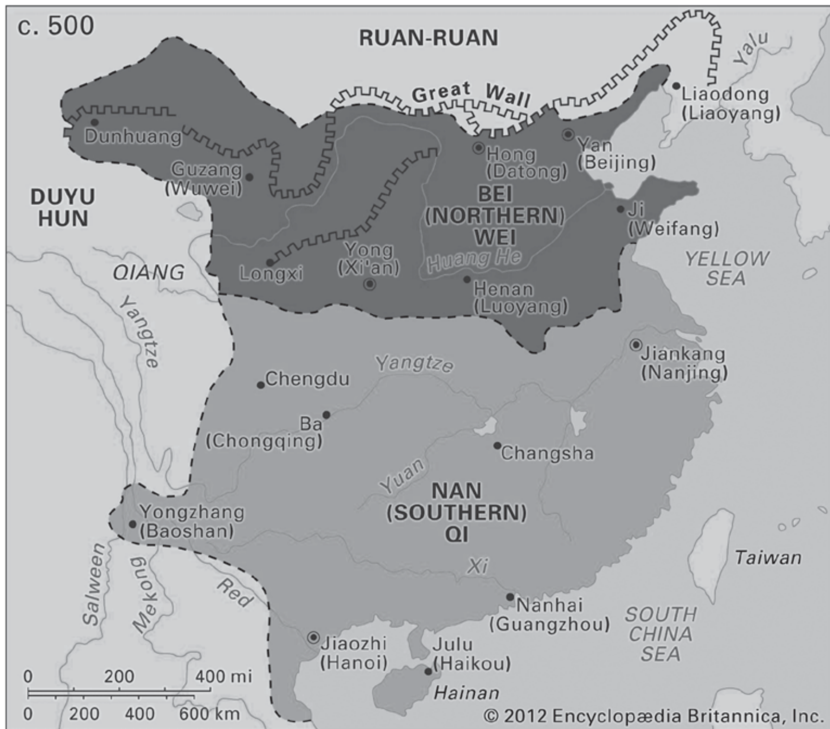


Map 2.1. Map of China showing Northern and Southern Dynasties, with the (Southern) Six Dynasties capital at Jiankang (Nanjing), ca. 500 CE. From Fairbank, Reischauer, and Craig, *East Asia*, 2nd ed. © 1989 South-Western, a part of Cengage, Inc. Reproduced by permission.

## Traditional Narratives—Central Kingdom (中國) and Ethnic Assimilation (民族融合)

An unexpected consequence of the turn toward the global is the way that scholars like Elkins reinforce preexisting mythic traditions of Chinese civilization which have been driven by nationalist ideologies with roots as deep as Hegelian narratives of progress. These narratives reshape history to glorify the achievements of the past as exemplary cultural heritage. Framed by notions of "Han Chinese" identity or ethnicity and signaled by such phrases as "5000 years of Chinese history," these paradigms collapse the diverse groups that inhabited the vast geographic region of China, and that interacted in complex ways, into a linear and conceptual continuum perceived as discretely "Chinese" (see **Map 2.1**). While the West may have a fixed idea of "China" that some theorists of global art history adopt uncritically, scholars in China perpetuate equally formidable paradigms based on similarly

reductive categories and traditionalist historiographies. One concept, the notion of the Central Kingdom, has a long history that reverses the Eurocentric rhetoric of centre and margin. The other, a problematic narrative of ethnic "Chinese" identity, was forged in the late Qing period but has since taken on fervent nationalist tone. Unsurprisingly, this latter narrative developed during decades in which China vied unsuccessfully for authority on the global scene.

Few groups who ruled China ever considered themselves marginal, as indicated by the term deployed to refer to their realm: *Zhongguo* ("Central Kingdom"). Though the term can also specify smaller regions, such as the Central Plains, its appearance in early Zhou texts reveals that elite inhabitants of the region conceived of themselves as the political and cultural centre of the world.[28] Terms such as Han or Tang could delimit individual courts and their political parameters, but Zhongguo was used by many dynasties to define their region as central, as much as it was used to define others who lived in the four surrounding directions (*sifang*) as peripheral. Those who lived outside the Central Kingdom were not only marginal; many of them were regarded disdainfully as inferior. Terms that denoted specific groups varied historically (e.g., *Hu* could designate groups to the north or west, *Yue* a group to the south, and *Yi* a group in the east) but some terms (*hu*) assumed more general meanings over time. Nonetheless, the notion that China was the centre of the world continued for centuries, long after contact was made with people in other lands, and as the network of passages across Central Asia opened up exchange to Sassanid Persia and the West.[29] Textual evidence from histories since the Han affirms knowledge of regions, peoples, and customs of vast distances. Accounts of distant regions typically appear in the final chapter of dynastic histories, their position in the historical annals revealing that they were relegated, almost to an afterthought, to the margins of the past. Entries typically begin by situating a place topographically, in relation to the presumed centre of the author's world. Thus, the *Wei shu* specifies Sute's distance from Dai, a designation for the Northern Wei dynasty: "The kingdom of Sute is situated to the west of the Pamirs. It is what was Yancai in ancient times and is also called Wennasha. It lies on an extensive swamp and to the northwest of Kangju. It is 16,000 li distant from Dai."[30] This literal localization of the foreign polity on the margins of the Central

**28** *Zhongguo* is sometimes translated as "Middle Kingdom," but its positional primacy remains the same.

**29** Knowledge of these territories is associated with Zhang Qian's expedition in the Han, recorded in Sima Qian's *Shi ji* (second century BCE).

**30** Wei Shou (506–572), *Wei shu* (History of the Wei) 102.2270.

Kingdom is followed by notable historic events or characteristics that distinguish the realm and its traditions from the vantage point of the author.

Though the rulers and borders of the Central Kingdom changed many times over centuries, Zhongguo as a concept persisted and its usage has facilitated conflations of the Han and Tang empires with the Yuan and Qing, even though the latter were ruled by what have been called "conquest dynasties" during eras when parts or even all of China were conquered by the Mongols or Manchus who ruled over an ethnically diverse populous. Indeed, China's borders were stretched to their greatest extent under the Manchus and the Mongol Khaganate, farther west beyond the boundaries of the modern Chinese state. It is not only the geographical scale that makes the homogenization of these diverse regions anachronistic, but also the diversity of peoples within these territories.

The authority associated with the Central Kingdom suffered a tremendous blow during the nineteenth century, as the Qing dynasty crumbled under repeated domestic and foreign incursions. Officials such as the imperially appointed Lin Zexu clashed with local merchants to halt the trade of opium; active blockades and seizure of imports led to volatile skirmishes with British steamships in the so-called Opium Wars. Defeated, the Qing conceded to treaties that granted the British, and others after them, control over commerce and foreigners, legalized opium, opened up ports to foreign trade, granted indemnities, and fostered the establishment of diplomatic legations. Domestically, followers of Hong Xiuquan decimated central China and killed millions during the Taiping Rebellion, leaving some regions to suffer for decades. Further conflicts plagued the Qing in the final decades of the century, and they never regained the political or cultural authority that they held in the eighteenth century.

It was in response to this history and in the formulation of a modern China that nationalist intellectuals of the May Fourth movement constructed the historical framework that still dominates studies of premodern Chinese art. This "shared narrative of national becoming" takes acculturation as an inevitable process.[31] Its central concept, *minzu ronghe* ("ethnic assimilation"), asserts that when groups not ethnically "Han Chinese" come into contact with characteristically "Chinese" culture, they inevitably adopt its ideas and practices, and so eventually "become Chinese," *Hanhua* (or *Huahua*).[32] According to this model, ethnically non-Han groups who dwelled in the northern and western frontier regions, and who conquered and ruled regions of China—Mongols, Manchus, and even the nomadic

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**31** Leibold, "Searching for Han," 210.

**32** *Minzu* has no equivalent in English and can be translated as nation, ethnic/ity, and peoples.

proto-Turkic and Sarbi groups of the fifth and sixth centuries—all assimilated to the superior civilization of the Han.[33] Historians outside China have argued convincingly that "Han," as an ethnic category, is a modern invention; but the analogy of a giant snowball absorbing and fusing together other *minzu* still informs the work of scholars who identify the Han as simultaneously ancient and fundamentally impervious to change or contamination by other cultures.[34]

Ideas central to this assimilation narrative have their origins in early twentieth-century discussions by elites under Sun Yat-sen and developed in tandem with the nationalist rhetoric of the 1930s. Intellectuals such as Liang Qichao sought to extract information from traditional histories that would unify diverse populations in post-Qing territories. Though early twentieth-century scholars held diverse opinions on the roots of Chinese identity, anti-Manchu nationalists established rigid binaries to distinguish Han in opposition to Hu (understood, in a general sense, as "other"), in order to distinguish themselves from their "alien" Manchu counterparts.[35] The model of assimilation was then taken up readily by Sinologists who spread this narrative to the West, even uncritically subsuming the obvious markers of ethnic difference into this narrative, thereby occluding the significance of languages, surnames, institutions, nomadic practices such as animal sacrifice, and sometimes artistic motifs. This narrative, and the rhetoric of Han superiority, have been consistently reaffirmed and calcified since the Communists took power.

Historians have recently argued that this framework of Sinicization has been displaced, and this may be true for strands of scholarship developing in the West, such as the New Qing History of the 1990s. New Qing History scholars began to challenge the use of the Han/Hu binary and sought to revise the assimilation narrative, approaching the study of the Qing from the perspective of its so-called minority rulers by incorporating Manchu sources, rather than solely through histories written in Chinese. Yet these revisionist approaches continue to be resisted within China, as seen in the politically charged critique by the retired historian Li Zhiting, who accused advocates of New Qing History of fabricating a "history of China from an imperialist standpoint."[36] More subtly, vestiges of the assimilation narrative

**33** See Mullaney et al., eds., *Critical Han Studies*.

**34** For the snowball theory, see Xu in Mullaney et al., eds., *Critical Han Studies*; for critiques of Han as an ethnic category, see Elliott and Leibold's essays in the same volume.

**35** The intersection of these debates with Social Darwinism complicates terminology that emerged in this period. Terms such as "races" (*minzu*, *zhongzu*, *renzhong*) and classificatory schemes were popular neologisms. See Mullaney et al., *Critical Han Studies*.

**36** Li, "Scholars evaluate," at http://sscp.cssn.cn/xkpd/zm_20150/201504/t20150420_1592234.html and University of Hong Kong's China Media Project http://cmp.hku.hk/2015/04/22/38664/.

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continue to structure our knowledge and to privilege certain artistic practices in significant ways. For example, the term Six Dynasties refers to those courts whose capital was located at Nanjing (Wu, Jin, Song, Qi, Liang, Chen) between the third and sixth centuries CE, but excludes the nomadic groups who ruled territory in the north. While the alternative term Northern and Southern Dynasties (**Map 2.1**) avoids this error, it excludes the third and early fourth centuries entirely. And since specialists are accustomed to using both of these terms interchangeably, privileging the courts at Nanjing reinforces the claims of legitimacy made by dynastic histories and reasserts a binary of "Han" rule in the south and non-Han/Hu rule in the north, even though populations intermingled both freely and forcibly during these centuries. A recent history of this period, the culmination of decades of work by the eminent historian Albert Dien, perpetuates this framework even as it incorporates material from the north.[37] Both terms, moreover, exclude the Sixteen Kingdoms, a series of short-lived "states" which occupied regions in the northwest until the Northern Wei unified the region in the fifth century.

Archaeological evidence, as a result, has been classified according to these modern political and geographic categories, with studies focused on the prehistory of China, and even archaeological reports, sometimes reflecting entrenched assumptions about ethnically "Han" objects, iconography, and practices.[38] As James Leibold and others have demonstrated, Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century sought to use the emerging discipline of archaeology to refute diffusionist theories of a common Western origin of man. Prominent historians such as Guo Moruo and Li Ji, responding to threats of foreign imperialism, also sought to bolster claims to the indigenous origins of Han through the use of scientific evidence. Archaeologists have questioned and even rejected the very possibility of scientific objectivity since the mid-1980s, but the impact of these reflections within China has been inconsistent, owing to language barriers, among other obstacles. The eminent archaeologist K. C. Chang described the early to mid-twentieth-century phase of modern scientific archaeology as a tool of Chinese historiography, but concluded that post-1949 archaeology, despite a "persistent reflection of political trends," had not been substantially affected by them.[39] Lothar von Falkenhausen offered a more critical view, describing the ebb and flow of state sponsorship for fieldwork and showing how ideology and patriotism have shaped the direction of archaeological research, which is geared towards such goals as unearthing

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**37** Dien, *Six Dynasties*.

**38** See Kohl and Fawcett, eds. *Nationalism*, esp. 205–11.

**39** Chang, "Archaeology," 167.

evidence of the Xia, traditionally regarded as the first Chinese dynasty (ca. 2000 BCE).[40] Though uncritical perspectives are fading, vestiges of the assimilation narrative persist. The catalogue for the blockbuster exhibition *The Golden Age of Archaeology* showcases this narrative in its title and content, which maps out a continuous arch of Chinese culture from the Three Dynasties to the Qin-Han and then to the Tang and Song.[41] Classifying these dynasties as "golden ages" privileges times of political coherence but conceals eras of transformation, including significant developments and interactions under non-Han rule.

As these trends suggest, the global turn of art history is moving in tandem with debates in Area Studies and critiques of ideologically driven nationalist narratives emerging from scholarship undertaken within China. The problem of the asymmetrical knowledge base, raised by Elsner and others, cuts many ways, and includes access to methodological practices as well as historical materials. Although the broad implications of the global turn are tantalizing, we must recognize how the generalizing tendencies of a global view can backfire, by reinforcing myths of native knowledge and obscuring localized historiographies.

## Dissolution of Paradigms: Stories of Interaction at a Camel's Pace

Among the rewards of the global turn in other fields are new modes of framing or *un*framing which offer ways to move beyond nationalistic discourses. Appadurai's concept of "deterritorialization," which describes the current conditions brought about by late capitalism and the transnational migrations of peoples, offers an instructive model for considering how similar conditions in the past challenge bounded notions of cultures and polities. It allows us to focus on the displacement of populations and draws attention to the exchange of commodities and cultural products on a broad scale. We may extend Appadurai's idea further by tracing how earlier processes of globalism and deterritorialization break down such dichotomies as east and west, China and other. Such an approach allows us to reconsider the misalignments between artistic practices and political shifts.[42] Even when it is possible to demarcate moments of imperial coherence or empire building as important shapers of artistic culture, political boundaries inadequately frame

**40** von Falkenhausen, "On the Historiographical Orientation."

**41** See Yang, *The Golden Age*, 25–45, the afterword by Su, and Xu's "Han and Tang Dynasties," whose overarching framework is indicative of the tendency to seek continuity of culture.

**42** Jonathan Hay, for example, has questioned our reliance on the political frame of dynastic time, and even the temporal unit of the century, as problematic markers for artistic practices that may not align with political or temporal shifts: Hay, "Suspension of Dynastic Time."

the more fluid artistic and cultural practices that crossed time and space. While premodern exchanges may have been slow, like a camel's pace, their complexity makes them fully compatible with Appadurai's notion of deterritorialization, both because of the diversity of groups moving between and within porous territorial boundaries and because of the multiple modes of appropriation and exchange that transpired in these spaces. In this respect, the broader implication of global art history is not merely the decentring of geographical focus from the West to elsewhere, where it has always been for some of us; rather, it is the simultaneous decentring of dominant narratives and categories of Western scholarship *and* (in many cases) the dissolution of the Sinocentric traditionalist paradigms that have distorted Chinese historiography and art history.

This dissolution of paradigms is especially productive for eras that defy fixed political and cultural boundaries, or for art forms that resist easy categorizations inherited from European academic practices. Approaches that underscore transcultural processes offer useful opportunities for premodern art historians to work outside deeply rooted paradigms or geopolitical frames. This is particularly relevant for material produced during times of flux. Just as the antiquated term "Dark Ages" erroneously denigrates early medieval Europe, the fourth to sixth centuries are often portrayed as "dim" ones in the Chinese context, despite being the centuries during which landscape painting developed and Buddhism took hold. The very fact that Buddhism was introduced from India and adopted by the Sarbi rulers of northern China, and that Buddhist patronage of art surged during these centuries, means that exchange was inherently characteristic of this time. Yet common knowledge of artistic practices pioneered in this era remains limited to a few monumental Buddhist constructions, calligraphy, and early paintings, or a vague sense of the Silk Road's importance. Even though this trade included startling items of textiles and fashion—seen in the hairstyles, headdresses, and musical instruments depicted in a late sixth-century tomb mural (**Plate 2.1**)—few recognize that East–West exchange was not the sole mode of interaction occurring at this time. Rulers of North China were engaged in exchange and military conquest across regions of the Silk Road but also with territories in other directions. Interaction was motivated by diplomacy, which involved the gifting and trade of material goods, the development of commercial networks, and the large-scale movement of conquered peoples, all of which sparked novel exchanges of manufactured goods and artistic technologies. Rulers of northern regions were also engaged in another form of exchange that was not spatial but temporal: adapting mural iconography for tombs from past inhabitants of the region they conquered in the fourth century, or transforming older, imported, artistic technologies that were nonetheless novel to the region.

Significant artistic achievements thus occurred largely because of the dynamic conditions of the time rather than because of centralized political and cultural coherence. In an earlier study, I explored exchange in these centuries by examining stone tomb furniture—coffins, couches, and larger house-shaped structures—bearing a range of pictorial scenes, such as hunting and banqueting, likely belonging to Sogdians, itinerant merchants of Transoxiana, who resided in Chang'an and maintained Zoroastrian beliefs.[43] Epitaphs record that some of these individuals were born in distant regions of Central Asia but were buried in tombs that included ceramic furnishings of the kind found in graves of wealthy contemporaries in northwest China. Indeed, Zoroastrians tended to eschew lavish tombs for sky-burials and ossuaries for the bones of the corpse. The large stone surfaces popular in fifth- and sixth-century China were adapted to include Zoroastrian imagery, such as a fire altar tended by a half-bird, half-man figure. Though evidence of ritual burning was found in some tombs, historians and archaeologists have reduced the complex processes of artistic and cultural exchange, and have concluded that these Sogdians assimilated Chinese funerary practices. Archaeological categories used in excavation reports reinforce notions of "fixed" cultures, even though proponents of New Archaeology have critiqued this method of "culture history" since the 1960s; but it remains a common practice in China, even as new modes of historical archaeology have emerged alongside it.

I have argued against analyzing the motifs inscribed on these pieces as markers of discrete "cultures" (Chinese, Sogdian) or religious traditions (Zoroastrian). Instead, I advocate for seeing the amalgam of cultural and religious references as choices that transcend affiliation with fixed traditions or categories. Rather than tracing the origin of individual motifs or practices as tied to one culture or another, I approach the assemblage of artistic and cultural components on these objects as a complex process of self-fashioning that demonstrated tomb occupants' varied relationships with Central Asian regions and the local communities they inhabited. This approach resonates with James Clifford's insistence on examining "routes, not roots" and acknowledges that artistic practices in northern China and Sogdiana were themselves subject to adaptation.[44] By highlighting exchange across linear time and space, I reject the assumption of fixity implied by assimilation narratives and argue against the practice of tracing artistic or cultural "origins," particularly with respect to items and motifs which we know to have circulated along complex pathways.

**43** Cheng, "Space Between."

**44** Clifford, *Routes*.

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Figure 2.3a. Silk fragment with pearl hexagon and honeysuckle designs, unearthed in Dunhuang, Gansu (China) and dated to 487 CE; 75 × 51 cm. After James C.Y. Watt et al., eds., *China: Dawn of a Golden Age* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), No. 79.

Likewise, in an exploration of intermedial exchange during the fifth century, I argued that our tendency to examine objects as fixed within discreet categories of media or religious contexts can mask the contemporary conditions that gave rise to these objects. Framing my analysis through categories that transcend media—ornament, surface, and lustre—allowed me to examine interactions between painted lacquer and textiles, for example, and between Buddhist caves and tombs.[45] Rather than looking back in time or across geographies for comparative models or roots, I explored engagements within the locality of Pingcheng, the Northern Wei capital. Motifs and patterns on painted coffins (**Plate 2.2a–b**), for instance, demonstrate affinities with diverse artistic sources, from ornament in Buddhist caves at Yungang to textiles and contemporary metalwork **(Figures 2.3a–b)**. Here, trade with distant lands certainly played a role in introducing new technologies and geometric forms, but relocated populations also contributed to this exchange. The *Wei shu* records that populations were transferred from conquered northeast regions, and metal objects from these regions have been unearthed in the capital.[46] Likewise, the account records that artisan families were forcibly relocated from northwest regions to populate Pingcheng after the Northern Wei conquered the Hexi corridor in 439.[47] Though stone was long used as a medium for tomb furniture, I have demonstrated how, after artisan families were transferred and monumental carved Buddhist caves were constructed near the capital, stone items in tombs were transformed from what had been largely a two-dimensional surface to one with greater three-dimensional character.

As noted above, the term *mondialisation* more accurately encompasses this non-linear/spatial analysis of artistic forms and better accounts for local responses to change. Even more, it allows for the recognition of the many pathways and paces

**45** Cheng, "Exchange across Media."

**46** *Wei shu* 4.

**47** *Wei shu* 4.100.

Figure 2.3b. Gilt bronze saddle plate with hexagonal design, dated to the fourth century CE and found at Chaoyang, Liaoning (China); maximum width: 45 cm. After James C.Y. Watt et al., eds., *China: Dawn of a Golden Age* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004), No. 25.

of artistic exchange. And it should remind us that attention to a global expanse need not distract us from local conditions and particular contexts. As tempting as it may be to fill gaps in our knowledge with generalizations, we must not resort to uncritical monolithic understandings of "premodern Chinese civilization," but rather look to models that can reveal the complexity of the materials we study.

## A Cautionary Global

I want to end with observations about structural asymmetries distinct to premodern materials and the written record in China, and a comment about the expanding discipline. Scholars interested in comparative studies, as I observed earlier, need to begin by recognizing the crucial imbalances that condition the possibility of such studies. First, the premodern textual corpus surviving from China is massive, with many texts now lost but referenced or quoted as fragments in later texts. The vast majority of these sources remain untranslated, and as classical texts they pose a formidable barrier even for native speakers of modern Chinese. These texts can be accompanied by centuries of commentary and criticism, a lineage with its own intertextuality. However, the corpus of extant early painting, the subject of most early texts devoted to art, is tiny. Many paintings are lost or known only through much later copies; if they were housed in temples, they have been destroyed. Thus, many art historians of Chinese painting are drawn to later periods. While their

research on understudied works and artists is steadily expanding our knowledge, more foundational work remains to be done, and collaboration among scholars should be encouraged. Indeed, scholars of Qing art are producing innovative research with attention to a "global" view.[48]

Second, and in stark contrast to the field of painting, the material evidence of early funerary art far outweighs extant textual records, which tend to avoid the taboo topic of death. While some texts discuss the preparations for burials of rulers or describe appropriate rituals, descriptions of the specific contents of tombs are rare. The recovery of this material record is thus dependent on the work of archaeologists, and the body of evidence grows with each new excavation. It should be clear that tomb art (and Buddhist art) is critical to the study of pre-Song art history, occupying two millennia of history. This vast corpus of material evidence requires not only descriptive reconstruction but also clearer articulation of how art historical questions are distinct from those posed by scholars in related disciplines. There is a heightened awareness of the need for new and more nuanced methodologies for analyzing archaeological finds, and scholars have begun to consider new modes of analysis that move beyond reconciling texts with extant paintings or to seeking material affirmation of a predetermined history transmitted through texts. Although art historical methodologies have expanded to consider other types of issues (e.g. function, performance, materiality, space), "non-canonical" texts and objects are only beginning to be explored.

Third, there is a problem of the overwhelming quantity of evidence. There are simply too few art historians to do the work of recovering China's lengthy history and too much material coming out of the ground to justify a *primary* focus on comparative study or on a theoretical but ahistorical globalism. The structure of graduate programs up until the late twentieth century has driven scholars of Chinese art to specialize more narrowly in the subfields of painting, architecture, Buddhist art, or funerary art—though this trend has shifted dramatically with the current generation of scholars. Yet, outside of a few research universities fortunate to have two or three specialists in Asian art, individual scholars are unrealistically expected to be masters, not only of their own subfield, but of the entirety of China's lengthy traditions, along with those of Japan, Korea, and even India.

Though the discipline of art history has grown in China since it first developed in the 1980s, scholars there frequently work from a range of methodologies particular to and contingent upon a given medium or time period, with variation from school to school. Archaeological material is housed in institutes outside of

**48** Wang, "A Global Perspective."

these departments and schools, and its scholars trained predominantly in scientific methods and committed to "culture history." This recent growth of art history cannot yet compare to the generations of prolific scholarship on the artistic traditions of Europe. We would also be remiss to assume that scholars within Chinese art departments are being trained in similar modes of analysis or that the shape of the discipline has the same trajectory. Further still, art history as practised in Taiwan or Japan emerged earlier, out of American and European institutions, and developed along a separate course, and so remains separate from the newer discipline in China. To claim that art history in other regions lags behind because scholars are still reading Gombrich or Wölfflin not only falsely assumes a shared historiographic corpus (or the universal relevance of that historiography), but also overlooks the status that may be attained by citing European language sources. If we are to incorporate multiple geographic areas into a global worldview, we must grapple with entire academic traditions that bear the weight and assumptions of their historical developments and practice.

Finally, and more optimistically, Appadurai's theory of global flow, or accelerated media connectivity (mediascapes), suggests that digital capabilities open up possibilities for projects on a global scale. Online searchability of the textual corpus is now available, and greater availability of archaeological reports and images is facilitating collaborations among institutions and scholars. Other forms of digital media are also accelerating the dissemination of scholarship and collaboration. Meanwhile, the many understandings of "the global" signal how art history has been moving in multiple directions for decades. This resonates with key points raised at a 2011 workshop at the Clark Institute: art history itself is multifaceted, with some scholars claiming closer ties to anthropology, others moving towards visual culture or engaging in art criticism, so working globally does not have to incorporate a single method and may be best perceived as an "arena of productive dissonance."[49] This relinquishes the need to find consensus, acknowledges the diversity of material and methodological approaches, and allows for different priorities to coexist. To change the structure of the discipline, we should reject the illusory unity of a singular global, acknowledge the disparities of our relative knowledge and the particular contours of our shared and distinct fields, and begin to engage in more productive dialogue.

**49** Nelson, "Conversation without Borders," 86.

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**Abstract** This essay interrogates the recent trend toward global art history and cautions against the uncritical embrace of "the global" as an analytical frame for premodern eras at the expense of historical depth. From the vantage point of artistic practices in fifth- and sixth-century China, it argues that this is not always a productive analytic framework for describing the historical conditions of artistic and cultural exchange. However, it acknowledges that recent critical reformulations do productively challenge longstanding categories, binaries, and nationalist paradigms that are useful for the arts of an era that defies fixed political and cultural boundaries. The conditions of this era, and funerary art's position outside of canonical art historiography, combine to counter narrow (modern) definitions and reveal the endurance and multiplicities of interactive forms and practices.

**Keywords** archaeology, artistic exchange, comparative art history, China, global art history, nationalism, transcultural exchange