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A New Perspective in Chinese Art:
Unearthing Vernacular Painting in High Qing

FUNG ON-TSUN, ANDREW

James Cahill's recent publication, *Picture for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* opens a previously untouched area to scholars and art collectors.¹ The genre of vernacular painting has never been explored in the literati-oriented academic circle. This groundbreaking book attempts to counterweight this domination. It provides a systematic organisation and analysis of images produced by professional urban studio artists with a focus on figure paintings. More important, the approach adopted by Cahill can potentially change the discourse of Chinese art history. This essay attempts to evaluate the potentiality of this book in expanding our understanding of Chinese art. The essay first looks into the background of vernacular painting and the reasons for the lack of scholarly attention to it. Following this, it examines Cahill's visual and sociological approach to vernacular art. This work ends with an evaluation of his new methodology.

UNDERSTANDING VERNACULAR IMAGES

Vernacular images, as defined by Cahill, served practical functions in China that ranged from carrying congratulatory New Year's messages, decorating brothels, to provoking erotic imaginations. Different from literati paintings, their production heavily relied on commissions. Their subjects can vary greatly from landscape to figure paintings. But the most common one remains human figures indulging in various kinds of everyday activities. There was also a minimal interest by the artists in writing inscriptions on the pictures. In fact, vernacular art has existed since the earliest period of Chinese paintings. Their production, however, greatly increased during the high Qing. This period covering the reign of the Kangxi 康熙 (r.1662-1722), Yongzheng 雍正 (r.1722-1735), and Qianlong 乾隆 (r.1736-1795) emperors forms the focus of Cahill's book. Despite the popularity of this genre among the general public and even the court sometimes, in a culture that despised functionalism,

¹ James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

they enjoyed low status. The same goes for those who painted them. They are the professional urban studio painters, who received commissions from middle class to wealthy clients.² In order to meet their tastes, these artists usually had to conceal their personal style. This “erasure of human agency” gives a higher sense of realistic representation.³ Seeing their impersonal nature, these artists were valued in court for their skills. Some, therefore, had to move between cities and the court to work. Yet, it is also because of their lack of expressive personality that they were generally considered having a passive role in Chinese society. This explains their low status among the elitist circles. Certain professional urban masters rose to prominence, such Qiu Ying 仇英 (1494-1552) and Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470-1524), but these instances were rare.

The pictorial features of vernacular paintings are best illustrated by a comparison between a literati work and a vernacular one. *Landscape in the manner of Huang Gongwang* by the prominent scholar Wang Shimin 王時敏 (1592-1680) is a clear example of a literati landscape painting (fig.1). To the Western viewers in particular, this hanging scroll will match their expectation of what a Chinese painting looks like. To begin with, it is monochromatic. Also, the trees and mountains were executed by non-descriptive and expressive brushwork. On the top left is an inscription that praises the artist as heir to the lineage of Huang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269-1354) and Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636).⁴ For that reason, instead of merely capturing the scenery, the artist expresses some personal and lofty ideas. The most distinctive difference from Wang’s work of the vernacular example *A Family Celebrating New Year’s* is its subject matter (fig.2). It is a genre painting that serves a particular function of carrying a New Year’s message. The silk painting depicts a

² Powerful officials, Qing bannermen families and wealthy enterprises such as restaurants and brothels made up a rich community of consumers for vernacular paintings. For a detailed discussion on patronage, please refer to *Ibid.*, 87.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

family scene celebrating New Year in colourful details and fine outline. The specific games and lively human interaction shown must be a result of close observation of people's life. Compared to the previous example, this image is easier to consume for its contemporary audience who commissioned the work due to its aesthetic quality. In short, having compared this pair of images, we notice clear differences in terms of its visual language and messages behind.

THE LITERATI PRINCIPLE AND THE RECEPTION AMONG SCHOLARS

In general, present scholarship on Chinese painting focuses on literati art only. Cahill argues that this is a consequence of the domination of the literati principles. So deeply rooted in the Chinese culture, it does not only affect art production but also the study on art. Indeed, previous researches on Qing art revolve around two major strands only. They are the Orthodox and the Individualists paintings. Art historians such as Edmund Capon tend to use the term "Chinese painting" to refer exclusively to paintings that fall into these two categories only. The Orthodox school is represented by the conservative followers of Dong Qichang, such as the Four Wangs (Si Wang 四王). The Individualists, on the other hand, are characterised by their attempt to liberate from the Orthodox tradition, including Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626-1705) and the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou (Yangzhou Baguai 揚州八怪).⁵ Despite their groundbreaking intention, the Individualists are revered in the academic circle for their high-minded ideas, which can be connected to the literati ideal too. Therefore, however deviant the two seem, they both fall into the category of literati. Apart from these two traditions, a third one that is also studied by today's scholars is court painting. Court painting is more ambivalent in nature. There existed a simultaneous attempt to be noble-minded and to

⁵ Edmund Capon, *Chinese Paintings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties: 14th-20th Century* (Melbourne: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1981), 90-91.

capture observations using delicate outline and different colour pigments. They are well studied today because of the abundant supply of literary sources and documentations recording art production under their supervision during this period.⁶ Nevertheless, on the other hand, our vernacular images are often disregarded by scholars and other respectable connoisseurs.

Cahill is concerned about this. He attributes this lack of scholarly attention to two major causes. The first direct reason is related to the nature of these images. They have been badly treated owing to their functional character. They were only meant to be temporally displayed, rather than carefully stored across generations. Craig Clunas' detailed study on *Zhangwu Zhi* 長物誌, an encyclopaedic treatise written by Wen Zhenheng 文震亨 (1585-1645), provides clues to one of the purposes of vernacular images.⁷ A chapter from the treatise reads: "[...] all scrolls should be displayed according to the season so as to indicate the time of the year and various calendar festivals."⁸ This implies the short-lived nature of these decorative images. They were never supposed to be hung or preserved for a long time. Moreover, there was virtually no market for resell, nor was there a need to pass these images of little value down to the next generation. They were considered "lowly" and "vulgar" by the people at that time.⁹ Thus, that we can still see these surviving images today is a result of fortunate coincidence.

⁶ For examples of the role of the Qing court in art production, please refer to Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 179-180.

⁷ For his discussion on Wen Zhenheng 文震亨's *Zhangwu Zhi* 長物誌, see Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

⁸ Wen Zhenheng, "Calendar for the Displaying of Scrolls," *Zhangwu Zhi* (Treatise on Superfluous Things), trans. R.H. van Gulik in *Chinese Pictorial Art as Viewed by the Connoisseur* (Rome: ISMEO, 1958), 4-6.

⁹ An 18th century writer Zhai Hao 翟灏 describes the birthday images and other vernacular paintings owned by Yan Song 嚴嵩 (1480-1565) as indecent. Refer to Zhai Hao, *Tongsu Bian* 通俗編 (Arrangement of the Vernacular), trans. Anne Burkus-Chasson in "Introductory Essay on the Three Stars," *New Interpretations of Ming and Qing Paintings* (Shanghai: Shanghai Painting and Calligraphy Press, 1985), 53.

The second problem is one that is connected to the tradition of art appreciation in China, and is precisely what the book aims to challenge. Cahill holds that the unfair treatment to vernacular images originated from the conflict between the literati and academic tradition in Chinese art since the Song. Literati art, as discussed earlier, represents the expressive and free-minded group whereas the academic one emphasises observations and representational accuracy in fine outline and colours. In the Ming dynasty, the authoritative Chinese art theorist, Dong Qichang proposed a theory that divides Chinese painting into the Southern and Northern schools. Rather than a geographical classification, they respectively represent the literati and professional strands in Chinese art. What is problematic about this is Dong's naturalisation of his bias towards the Southern school over the Northern.¹⁰ This served as the foundation of preference in Chinese connoisseurship. A vicious cycle was created, as it was often the educated men from well-off families who could pass the exams and work in the government. The ruling class was then filled with these literati. Accepting the literati theory as an unchallenged notion, they also passed this on to next generations in the administrative system.¹¹ To them, literati painting equalled good art, whereas vernacular images were not worthy of any attention.

Worse still, Cahill argues that this situation has continued to today's scholarly circle with "virtually all members of it [belonging to] the literati class."¹² This is not merely a Chinese phenomenon. Other Western historians of Chinese art also show a general tendency to pander to this literati-centric bias. Apart from Capon who we have examined before, George Rowley, another major figure in Far Eastern art studies, also exemplifies this inclination. In his *Principles of Chinese Painting*, Rowley tries to formulate a set of Chinese pictorial and cultural principles. He describes Chinese art as "intuitive, abstract and suggestive" already in

¹⁰ For a brief discussion on Dong's theory, see Cahill, "The Orthodox Movement in Early Ch'ing Painting," *Artists and Traditions: Uses of the Past in Chinese Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 178-179.

¹¹ Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

the preface.¹³ Also, according to him, it does not speak of “beauty or aesthetic value but of spirit or *qi*”, which is essentially an elusive concept.¹⁴ Perhaps his interpretation is neither positive nor negative. It, however, acts like a big blanket that can impair our vision in understanding Chinese art. Our earlier example of the vernacular painting already demonstrates that Chinese art is not necessarily intuitive, abstract, or related to the elusive idea of *qi* (fig.2). But scholarly works by Capon and Rowley have great impact of how people, particularly non-Chinese, perceive traditional Chinese painting. This explains why people nowadays tend to presume that Chinese art is serious and difficult to comprehend.

At this point, we can consider the scholarly attention to other vernacular art form to contrast the lack of so to Chinese vernacular painting. Japanese *ukiyo* 'e is a close correspondence to our Chinese example. This genre of woodblock prints and paintings is also vernacular in nature. But due to their decadent and sometimes sexually explicit content, they were previously viewed as evidence of “degeneration by [...] early Western observers.”¹⁵ This negative perception, according to David Bell, underwent a change following Fenollosa's systematic organisation of the studies on this genre. His *The Masters of Ukiyoe* established the paradigm for “all subsequent historical surveys of this subject.”¹⁶ If Japanese *ukiyo* 'e is too remote, we can also compare a closer example of Chinese vernacular art form, that is, vernacular fictions. Despite their similarly vernacular quality, studies on these Chinese fictions seem less restrained by the literati philosophy. This is evidenced by the abundant supply of academic literature devoted to them. David Johnson is a scholar in this field. He believes that without the scholarly attention to non-elite literature, “all the great

¹³ George Rowley, *Principles of Chinese Painting* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, revised edition, 1959, initial edition, 1947), preface.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-33. I have modified the translation slightly for standardised use of pinyin.

¹⁵ David Bell, *Ukiyo-e Explained* (Folkestone, Kent: Global Oriental, 2004), xvii.

¹⁶ For Bell's evaluation on Fenollosa's contribution to the studies on Japanese *ukiyo* 'e, see *Ibid.*, 3; For Fenollosa's discussion on *ukiyo* 'e, see Ernest Fenollosa, *The Masters of Ukiyoe: A Complete Historical Description of Japanese Paintings and Color Prints of the Genre School* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1896).

advancements [...] in recent decades would not have happened.”¹⁷ These “great advancements” refer to our new understanding of Chinese social history, including the perception of gender and the status of women. In theory, Cahill’s book has a similar intention in opening up the studies on Chinese vernacular art.

Interestingly, compared with Cahill’s previous publications, *Picture for Use and Pleasure* adopts a fundamentally different approach to Chinese art. Regarded as a major spokesman for the Chinese literati theory, he has dedicated most of his time analysing, if not promoting, literati art. His *Chinese Painting* is one of his many examples attempting to raise people’s awareness to specifically Chinese literati art. Already in the introduction, he begins by stating that Chinese painting is based on an aesthetic theory that is derived from literati principles. In China, art “serves to express the thought and feeling of individual man, besides – or even instead of – making any descriptive [...] statement about the world.”¹⁸ In this respect, his previous attitude to Chinese art puts him into same group of historians who share similar views like Capon and Rowley. Being so familiar with the literati theory, he perhaps is in the best position to criticise its limitation. He claims that this approach is inadequate in helping us understand vernacular art.

PICTORIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VERNACULAR PAINTING

Nevertheless, why are these vernacular images worthy of our attention after all? This question brings us to the pictorial significance of vernacular painting. The most distinctive feature is the their subjects of quotidian events. Urban painters attempted to capture people’s interactions and inner emotion by depicting scenes taken from everyday life. These pictorial representations provide illuminating insight into the ordinary life during the high Qing.

Literati artists, although much less often, also painted figures. However, they tended to

¹⁷ David Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China,” *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), 62.

¹⁸ Cahill, *Chinese Painting*, Treasures of Asia series (Geneva: Éditions d’Art Albert Skira, 1960), 5.

concentrate on either celebrated scholar-recluses of the past or lofty learned men. Women were also depicted in some cases. But the female characters are usually respectable Buddhist or Taoist figures, like Guanyin, who appear more stiff and less animated in the artists' hand. The purpose of these paintings is to "[narrate] popular historical stories or [bring] spiritual peace by conveying solace and auspicious wishes."¹⁹ Vernacular images can also carry similar positive messages, but they tend to also evoke a sense of vivacity.

Juxtaposing a pair of figural paintings by a literati and a professional painter can demonstrate their differences. *Wang Xizhi and the Geese* is a painting by Ren Yi 任頤 (1840-1896) from the late Qing (fig.3). The artist is characterised by his personal technique of painting with a raised wrist, which was inspired by the Individualist painter, Zhu Da. The hanging scroll depicts Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (321-379), the sage of calligraphy from the Eastern Jin. Absorbed in watching the geese and contemplating the secret of the use of brush, Wang shows "stern consternation."²⁰ Again, owing to the domination of literati principle in Chinese art appreciation, this kind of elevated figure painting is considered polite art. It is suitable for people of virtuous taste to collect and enjoy publicly. This stands in stark contrast with *Couple and Child in a Garden* by an anonymous professional artist from the high Qing (fig.4). The value of this image lies in its vivid depiction of a family scene. Here, the father is about to hold the child in his arms as the child reaches back. One can hardly find such a humane portrayal in literati paintings. Other examples show even more uncommon motifs. In *Two Women Looking Through a Moon Window*, an older woman fondly embraces the younger one (fig.5). The album leaf delicately hints at the "lesbian relationship, or at least female same-sex attachments" between women residing in traditional households.²¹ This kind

¹⁹ Susan Y.Y. Lam and Jane Sze, *Ancients in Profile: Ming and Qing Figure Paintings from the Shanghai Museum* (Hong Kong: University Museum and Art Gallery, 2001), 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

²¹ Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 128.

of charming lightness and representation of people's sentiment can perhaps only be found in vernacular works.

This revelation of everyday life can get erotic in some instances. This is another pictorial feature of vernacular images where they deal with provocative contents that can vary on the scale from mild to explicitly sexual. These subjects were denounced by traditional literati artists, but were popular among urban regions. *The Story of the Western Wing* is a milder example (fig.6). Close to life-size, this large hanging scroll visualises the popular love-drama that shares the same name with the painting. It depicts the fictional romantic encounter between Cui Yingying 崔鶯鶯 and the scholar Zhang Junrui 張君瑞, with a maid standing at the back. The willowy body of Cui, the slanted body gesture of Zhang, and the affectionate gaze between the two heat up the suggestive connotation.²² Furthermore, the picture is eroticised by the artist's depiction of an intimate interior space. The scene is set in a private boudoir, which is a shutdown space, with a bed visible at the back. This is undoubtedly a kind of blunt expression of the theme *qing* 情 or love in a vernacular medium.

This interior spatial representation is the third, and perhaps the most significant, attribute of vernacular painting because it confronts the difficulty of rendering space. According to Cahill, depicting space had been the concern of Chinese artists ever since they started figure paintings. However, there are relatively few true figures-within-interior compositions in preceding centuries.²³ The famous Five Dynasty painting, *Han Xizai's Night Revels* by Gu Hongzhong 顧闳中 (937-975) shows a feast within an interior space (fig.7). But it is not strictly in a figures-in-interior composition. The sense of space is virtually non-existent, except for the recession lines used in depicting the furniture. The figures seem to float in an ambiguous space. This kind of stylised attempt to represent space vanished later, even in the innovative hands of Qiu Ying and Tang Yin. This situation remained so until the Qing when

²² *Ibid.*, 150.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

works like *The Story of the Western Wing* began to thrive. In the same example, we can see the artist's effort to render a space with depth (fig.6). The figures were still depicted with little modelling. But the painting shows a strong sense of spatial recession through the artist's depiction of connected spaces. As we move further back through the moon door along with the recession lines of the furniture, the objects diminish in size. Eventually, we are guided to another room at the back. Its spatial intricacy was seldom practiced before this period.

This kind of see-through composition of an interior space was inspired by the Western illusionistic representation of space. The popularity of this technique among Chinese urban artists was in accordance with the increasing availability of Northern European illusionistic engravings in Chinese cities.²⁴ Nevertheless, there is a general reluctance to admit this cross-cultural inspiration among present-day scholars from China. Cahill believes that this “misdirected scrupulousness” is again a result of the literati theory. Due to their nationalistic concern and anti-Eurocentric motives, they “are in truth being protective only of a particular Chinese literati-elite viewpoint.”²⁵ This inspiration from the West, however, became too obvious to neglect since early 18th century with even more works showing illusionistic interior scenes. Cahill attempts to reconcile this conflicted view by interpreting this “influence” as an active process by the Chinese artists to absorb and appropriate the cross-cultural transplant. To begin with, it was never really a direct imitation of the Italian single-point perspective system with converging lines. Professional urban masters still employed isometric perspective theory to show space, a stylistic tradition that existed before the Qing. Their close observation of details, use of fine outlines and little modelling can also be traced back to the great professional-academic style in the Song. Meanwhile, on the other hand, professional artists also appropriated westerns technique to show depth by depicting an interior with connected space. This mingling of Chinese and European pictorial tradition

²⁴ Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 80.

²⁵ Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 69-70.

presents a successful fusion in a “unified style.”²⁶ It should therefore be considered an active process by the professional artists that liberates Chinese art and reflects their openness.

Taking these three qualities into account, vernacular images must have had a strong effect in engaging their viewers. Cahill concludes this point by describing the effect to their contemporary viewers as “less of the aesthetic and intellectual, more of the vicarious and empathic.”²⁷ The ability of these images lies precisely in their thematic inventiveness, sensitive portrayal of human emotions, and technical excellence in spatial representation. These pictorial elements will stay neglected if we continue to be blinded by the literati principles.

A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

However, according to Cahill, art history is not just about art, but also history. The social analysis, in addition to the pictorial one, is thus equally vital in comprehending these valuable works. This is especially true due to their commission-driven nature. They can reflect the desire of the patrons, hence the social and cultural phenomenon in the high Qing. The following part evaluates Cahill’s sociological approach in making sense of the relationship between the society and vernacular art.

Jiangnan cities in China, such as Suzhou, saw turbulent changes since the late Ming. The immense growth in mercantile middle class in these prosperous regions had great impact on urban cultures. As Paul Ropp writes, “the resulting surplus of wealth and leisure produced [...] numerous entertainment centres, [including] pleasure boats and brothels.”²⁸ The public got more obsessed with material desire and less conformed to Confucian ideals.²⁹ This is also

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ Paul Ropp, “The Seeds of Change: Reflections on the Condition of Women in the Early and Mid Ch’ing,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1976), 19.

²⁹ Kathryn Lowry believes that this phenomenon during the Qing is a result of the “emotion serving self-interest rather than the interests of kin or other social networks.” See her “Duplicating the Strength of Feeling: The

true among some learned men who became skeptical to literati ideas such as seclusion. As a result, these cities of decadence saw an unprecedented growth in vernacular culture. The subject of *qing* that touches upon the courtesan culture was an important theme in vernacular literature. This culture during the Qing period was represented by the romantic relationship between talented scholars and prostitutes. A more ideal version of this *qing* culture originated from the older theme of *caizi jiaren* or scholar-and-beauty romance that developed since the late Ming.³⁰ Victoria Cass describes this ideal as a romantic liaison between “the man of talent and the woman of excellence.”³¹ This has reportedly happened in real life during the Ming. Yet, in the culture of decadence during the Qing, this only became a fantasied and commercialized concept in pictorial format. *The Story of the Western Wing* is a pictorial example of representing the zeal for this ideal in the Qing (fig.6). Cahill regards this painting as the finest example with the theme of *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 in art. With *qing* being its main subject, the painting shows a couple with matching qualities in a romantic private space.

The second important social change is related to the spectatorship of paintings, which is yet another important proposition made by Cahill. So far, at first glance, most of the images we discussed seem to be enjoyed by men. The *caizi jiaren* painting, for example, provokes male imagination of this romantic liaison. However, how do we explain the lesbian connotation in *Two Women Looking Through a Moon Window* (fig.5)? Also, could women equally consume the *caizi jiaren* paragon? Responding to these questions, Cahill puts forward a “still-hypothetical category of paintings for women.”³² His theory is in line with the rising prominence, although not necessarily status, of women in the high Qing. In vernacular literature, the use of colloquial language and the theme of *qing* would have special appeal to

Circulation of Qingshu in Late Ming,” *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 247.

³⁰ Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 47.

³¹ Victoria Cass, *Dangerous Women: Warriors, Grannies and Geisha of the Ming* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 30.

³² Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 125.

women. A substantial body of writings has already been done on this kind of female readership in the Qing.³³ The same theory may also be applied to our vernacular painting. If Cahill's assumption is correct, women could also consume these comparatively easy-to-understand vernacular pictures without difficulty even if they were illiterate. Showing the private space of women's rapport, these images could arouse a different kind of emotional response of women from that of men.³⁴ Back to the previous painting that illustrates the physical contact between two female figures (fig.5). With women as the principle subject, its portrayal of female homosexual intimacy could arouse empathy for contemporary women viewers. In reality, these viewers might share similar feelings as the painted female characters. This was not uncommon in traditional Chinese society. Recent scholarships have proved this type of close "women's friendships and bond" in traditional households during the prolonged absence of their husband.³⁵ But this speculation of women as the audience of vernacular art contradicts the Dong Qichang's literati theory yet again. According to his *Yunxuan qingbi lu* 筠軒清閨錄, one of the conditions under which painting should not be shown is "the presence of a women."³⁶ Cahill's theory is still hypothetic in nature and awaits further discovery to reinforce his claim. It, however, has the potentiality to change how we comprehend art consumption in traditional Chinese societies.

The ability to reflect popular culture in China of these vernacular images reminds me of another major Western art movement. French Impressionism, in contrast, has received a great deal of scholarly attention. Impressionist painters attempted to break away from the Academic tradition. They got inspired from contemporary culture and depicted scandalous subjects sometimes. In this regard, their attitude is not unlike our Chinese professional artists.

³³ See Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of Inner Chamber: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 202-207.

³⁴ Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 127-128.

³⁵ Ko, *Teachers of Inner Chamber*, 202-207.

³⁶ Dong Qichang, *Yunxuan qingbi Lu* 筠軒清閨錄 (Book of Yuanxuan Qingbi) trans. Timothy Brook in *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 228.

In *The Painting of Modern Life*, T.J Clark evaluates the work by Manet, the father of Impressionism, with regard to the concept of modernity. The significance of Manet's paintings lies not in their avant-garde pictorial techniques, but in their active confrontation of the contemporary social and political situation. His *Olympia* for instance is modern precisely because Manet dared to represent the culture of "decadence" and "prostitutes" in 19th century Paris.³⁷ Clark's consideration of the social condition in which paintings were produced transcends the emphasis on style and techniques in conventional Western art history. It also changes how historians of art understand Impressionism. I examine Manet's *Olympia* and Clark's sociological approach here since there is a similarity between Clark's and Cahill's attitude to unconventional paintings. I do not go as far as to arguing that Chinese vernacular painting is also modern. But similarly, Cahill also emphasises the inseparable link between art and their social background when making sense of artwork. Vernacular pictures are worthy of our attention because they captured the decadent culture and challenged the androcentric culture of art appreciation in high Qing China.

CALLING FOR A CHANGE: A NEW METHODOLOGY IN CHINESE ART

Having discussed the pictorial and social importance, we are back to the current situation regarding the studies on Chinese art. By publishing this book, Cahill also attempts to reverse the literati-centric approach and raise people's awareness towards Chinese vernacular pictures. He proposes some ways to attain this objective. The survival of images discussed in this essay is a consequence of the special taste of present Western vernacular image collectors. They have saved a genre of Chinese paintings that would otherwise vanish in a culture that places no significance in vernacular images. Therefore, the first important step is to continue to encourage this "bad" taste of collecting vernacular images. Their very

³⁷ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 105.

existence is the prerequisite for the next step. This second step deals with the scholarly work of attributing these works to artists and setting up a chronological pattern. This can be laborious work as there are many misleading identifications on these pictures. Original owners in China sometimes assigned false signatures of famous painters on them. They did so in order to move them out of the undesirable categories into the desirable and, more importantly, sellable ones.³⁸ After having correctly identified the images, scholars can then start to classify them. Classification methods in terms of geographical locations and gender clientele proposed by Cahill are still tenuous outlines awaiting further proof.³⁹ But they will serve as a foundation for future development in this field of vernacular painting and high Qing culture. In art history today, this kind of diachronic framework and classification methods in sorting works of art are deemed less popular.

His insistence on this methodology, then, inevitably brings up the question of why art even needs history? To answer this, it is best to use a pictorial example to demonstrate the disastrous effect of lacking historical understanding (fig.8). In this hanging scroll by Leng Mei 冷枚 (c.1670-1742 or after), a woman kneels on a barrel-seat and touches her lips with her finger. Leaning against the table, she poses in a way that is provocative even by today's standard.⁴⁰ Ironically, the painting was originally catalogued in the British Museum under the title *Portrait of a Court Lady*. It was practically impossible for a respectable court lady to be painted in such an erotic manner. To Cahill, this is precisely a result of misunderstanding the Qing social background. Therefore, Cahill's diachronic framework and classification systems are crucial in establishing valuable knowledge of the developmental pattern and the cultural background of vernacular painting.

³⁸ Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure*, 26.

³⁹ See Chapter three, "Adoptions from the West," of *Ibid.*, 67-99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

What we have been concentrating on is essentially vernacular images. Nonetheless, the book does not merely symbolise a new chapter in the big book of Chinese art history. By breaking with the literati tradition in understanding Chinese art, Cahill can potentially change the methodology in constructing Chinese art history. Historians of Chinese art today, again, because of the dominance of literati theory, are trained to analyse paintings by deciphering their inscriptions and high-minded ideas. This method relies a lot on primary literary sources. Writers today tend to construct their analysis from reading texts without looking adequately at paintings. In China particularly, visual studies is denounced as a foreign intrusion into the Chinese tradition that gives priority to words. This text-oriented study can lead to assertive conclusions. For example, previous writers have magnified the importance of the inconsequential use of Italian linear perspective by Chinese artists based on written records.⁴¹

In our discussion of spatial representation above, it is proven that this is an inaccurate statement. Therefore, this mode of thinking concerns Cahill. Art historians should not only read text. They should also look at the images. In light of this, Cahill calls for a change from a textual approach to a visual one. Indeed, the lively interchange of pictorial culture during the Qing are “best documented, and best traced, not in written sources but in the pictures themselves.”⁴² Furthermore, these images can provide illuminating pictorial evidence that complements textual references, giving information on vernacular and erotic pleasures in China. This is especially useful when these cultures are not the kind that would be put down in words. Freeing Chinese art history from the domination of text could be controversial to many historians of Chinese art indeed. It is because, in the first place, most traditional historians would not admit their neglect of the images. Yet, this should really not be seen as a source of discord between Cahill and other scholars. Rather, his new methodology complements the existing ones. The literati perspective can also be very useful, but it is not

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 185.

the sole theory of studying Chinese art. What Cahill suggests is that being preoccupied with digging out literati concepts from Chinese painting will only block our vision. We have to be cautious when using this approach. In this aspect, his methodology is no longer simply a matter of understanding vernacular art and the high Qing society. By challenging the literati philosophy, it encourages scholar to radically rethink the whole discourse of Chinese art.

Overall, James Cahill in his *Picture for Use and Pleasures: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* calls for a change in Chinese art history. He wants to release it from the confinement of the high-minded literati theory by raising our awareness to Chinese vernacular art. The literati theory that has its root from the Song renders our understanding of Chinese art partial. Vernacular painting is equally worthy of our attention because of its pictorial novelty, unusual subjects and distinctive social background that supports its production. Cahill hopes to change the literati-centric academic tradition, and to encourage historians of Chinese art to reflect on the current textual approach in the field. Like his many previous publications, this book will serve as an important foundation and inspire future writings on this previously unexplored field. Furthermore, the book will also potentially change our methodology in the art of China and our perception of it.

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Fig. 1. Wang Shimin, *Landscape in the manner of Huang Gongwang*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, dated 1651. 115.6 x 50.7 cm. Matsushita Collection, Tokyo.



Fig. 2. Anonymous (late Ming or early Qing period), *A Family Celebrating New Year's*, horizontal painting, ink and colour on silk. 94 x 175 cm. Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.



Fig. 3. Ren Yi, *Wang Xizhi and the Geese*, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, dated 1878. 133.4 × 65.9 cm.



Fig. 4. Anonymous (third quarter of 18th century), *Couple and Child in a Garden*, leaf from a twelve-leaf album, ink and colour on silk. 40 x 36.8 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Fig. 5. Anonymous (mid-17th century), *Two Women Looking through a Moon Window*, leaf from a eight-leaf album, ink and colour on silk. 30 x 30 cm. Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst, Cologne.



Fig. 6. Anonymous (mid- or later 18th century), *The Story of the Western Wing*, hanging scroll mounted as a panel, ink and colour on silk. 198.5 x 130.6 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 7. Attributed to Gu Hongzhong, *Han Xizai's Night Revels*, handscroll, ink and colour on silk, c.970. 28.7 x 335.5 cm.



Fig. 8. Leng Mei, *Beautiful Woman in an Interior*, with a Dog, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. 170 x 104 cm. Tianjin Museum, Tianjin.