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From “What Art Is” to “How Art Exists”: Toward a Praxis-Existence Paradigm for Chinese Art History

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Abstract: This paper addresses a profound paradigm crisis in Chinese art history studies by proposing a new research framework centered on a practice-existence perspective. It advocates a fundamental shift from the essentialist question of “what art is” to an exploration of “how art exists.” This approach examines art as a dynamic event, practice, and mode of being that emerges within specific historical, cultural, and lived contexts of the Chinese people. Grounded in the ontological principles intrinsic to Chinese art, such as the unity of *dao* and skill and the inseparability of substance and function, the paradigm employs a dialectical methodology that respects both the differences among artistic categories and their underlying unity. It further calls for critical self-consciousness in art historical writing itself. The ultimate aim is to contribute to the construction of a discursive system with Chinese subjectivity, capable of interpreting its own aesthetic experiences and existential wisdom. The paper argues that only through this philosophical and methodological reorientation can Chinese art history transcend its dependence on Western theoretical frameworks and categorical fragmentation, evolving into a mature humanities discipline characterized by cultural self-awareness and theoretical originality.

Keywords: Praxis-existential theory; Art historical paradigm; Mutual difference and plurality; On-topological self-consciousness; Discursive construction; Chinese philosophy of art

1. Introduction: A Deep Diagnosis of Paradigm Crisis and the Urgency of Theoretical Self-Consciousness

It has been over a decade since the study of art was elevated to the status of an independent academic discipline. However, the development of art history as a field that emphasizes generality and holism remains challenging. It is often seen as a bottleneck for the broader progress of art theory. This difficulty appears on the surface as a problem of academic structuring and knowledge integration. Yet at a deeper level, it constitutes a serious paradigm crisis. The symptoms of this crisis are a dual form of conceptual inadequacy (Chen et al., 2021). When confronted with the immense and varied legacy of Chinese art, we find it hard to use concepts truly rooted in our own cultural context for accurate explanation. At the same time, we often feel a sense of distance and distortion when directly applying established Western theories. We are constrained by the strong divisions between histories of specific categories like painting, calligraphy, music, and theater, which prevents us from describing a unified picture where artistic spirits interconnect and influence each other (Clunas, 2022). Conversely, attempts to bridge these categories frequently lead to vague overviews without solid methodological support.

The root cause of this crisis is that our art historical research lacks a fundamental awareness or self-consciousness in three key areas: methodology, ontology, and its underlying philosophical approach. Methodologically, we have not yet established a truly effective historical method that can properly handle the dialectical relationship between the distinct differences and the underlying unity among art forms. Ontologically, we lack a systematic grasp of the cultural ideas, philosophical foundations, and technical characteristics that gave rise to Chinese art itself (D' Alleva, 2020). There is a tendency to unconsciously dissect native experiences using theoretical frameworks from other traditions. Philosophically, much of the research remains trapped, either explicitly or implicitly, in the traditional metaphysical habit of asking "what art is." This treats art as a passive object waiting to be defined and categorized, thereby cutting off its fundamental connection to the historical life practices of human beings (Fraser, 2020).

Therefore, a breakthrough in Chinese art history research is not simply about adding more historical materials or borrowing methods from elsewhere. It must involve a profound paradigm shift. The goal of this shift is to construct a research paradigm that belongs uniquely to Chinese art history. This paper argues that the core of this new paradigm should be called the praxis existential paradigm. It requires us to completely change the focus of art historical study. We must move away from abstract speculation about the essence of art and turn instead towards a dynamic investigation of how art exists within the concrete historical world. Art should no longer be seen as a ready made, isolated thing. Instead, it is to be understood as an event, a form of practice, and a way of being. Art in history is a process. It was created, experienced, used, and given meaning by people within specific material conditions, social relationships, cultural beliefs, and bodily perceptions (Liu, 2021). The task of art history is to contextually recover and interpret this process. It seeks to reveal how art participated in shaping the sensory world, the realm of meaning, and the ideals of freedom for the Chinese people.

Building this paradigm needs to proceed along three interconnected pillars. First, on the methodological level, we must establish the principle of dialectical unity within mutual difference and plurality as the foundational way to deal with the complexity of art categories. Second, on the ontological level, we need to deeply return to the wisdom found in Chinese art philosophy, which emphasizes the unity of self, substance, and the whole. This should serve as the base for all interpretative work. Third, on the philosophical level, we must firmly accomplish a change in our fundamental question from what art is to how art exists. This anchors art historical research on the solid ground of human practice and existence. Throughout this entire process, there must also be continuous reflection on the act of writing art history itself (Lo, 2023). This awareness, or self-consciousness of art historiography, is crucial to ensure the clarity and critical rigor of the paradigm construction.

It should be noted that this critique does not imply a wholesale rejection of Western theoretical frameworks. Instead, it calls for a critical and selective dialogue in which external conceptual tools may be employed to illuminate the internal logic of Chinese art, provided that such analysis remains firmly grounded in its ontological and cultural context.

2. Reconstructing Methodology: Surpassing Categorical Fragmentation through Dialectical Unity in Pluralistic Difference

The state of fragmentation in Chinese art history is first evident in the extreme diversity and complexity of its constituent elements. Calligraphy, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, theater, crafts each artistic category possesses its own unique material medium, technical language, formal principles, and developmental trajectory. For a long time, disciplinary research has been precisely built upon this foundation of classification, forming a rigid system of knowledge production. A "History of Chinese Fine Art" is almost synonymous

with the history of painting, occasionally extending to sculpture and architecture. A "History of Chinese Music" focuses solely on tonal systems, instruments, and musical forms. While such specialized, in-depth study has led to a deepening of knowledge, it has come at a great cost. It obscures the fact that art serves as a holistic cultural expression of its era and severs the intricate spiritual connections and symbiotic relationships between different artistic forms (Marchand, 2018).

To overcome this predicament, the primary task is the reconstruction of methodology. We must abandon the linear thinking that seeks a singular, pure essence and instead adopt a perspective of dialectical unity in pluralistic difference. This means that art historical research must both fully respect and deeply grasp the particularities of each artistic category, while also actively exploring and explaining how these distinct categories, within specific historical processes, influence one another, resonate with each other, and collectively constitute the aesthetic and perceptual structure of an era. This is not to abolish categorical histories, but to reposition them within a higher, more integrative framework.

The term "pluralistic difference" represents an honest confrontation with the complexity of artistic facts. The "brush and ink" language of Chinese painting is inseparable from the materials of xuan paper and ink, as well as from calligraphic cultivation. The "jianzipu" notation and the pursuit of "resonance" in guqin music reflect a functional and aesthetic outlook entirely different from the Western staff notation. The "stylized" performance of Chinese opera is a comprehensive system integrating literature, music, dance, and visual art. To ignore these fundamental differences would render any attempt at "unification" a crude conflation. Therefore, researchers under this new paradigm must first be experts in one or more specific categories, possessing the "internalist" ability to analyze deeply within forms.

However, the true breakthrough lies in the dimension of "dialectical unity." The "unity" here is not about finding an abstract, hollow concept of "art in general," but about discovering the structural bonds that connect different artistic phenomena within specific historical and cultural contexts. These bonds manifest in at least three areas: the synchronic permeation of the zeitgeist and philosophical currents; the holistic cultivation and transdisciplinary practice of creative subjects; and the deep alignment of formal aesthetics with the pursuit of artistic conception.

The synchronic permeation of the zeitgeist and philosophical currents implies that the core philosophical concepts and spiritual climate of an era permeate almost all artistic fields pervasive. The rise of metaphysics during the Wei and Jin periods, with its awakening to individual life, nature, and spirit, not only gave rise to the unrestrained individuality seen in Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, but also established Gu Kaizhi's aesthetic principle of "conveying spirit through portrayal." It further prompted philosophical speculation on the nature of music in Ji Kang's "Treatise on Sound Without Sorrow or Joy," and even manifested in the practice of character appraisal as an artistic attitude towards life. These varied artistic practices across different categories were all distinct responses to and expressions of the era's core theme: the "awakening of the self." The Song Dynasty presented a different scene. The "investigation of things to extend knowledge" spirit of Neo Confucianism led, on one hand, landscape painting towards meticulous observation and representation of natural principles and interests, and on the other hand, porcelain-making towards the realm of "unity of the Way and the vessel" characterized by purity, restraint, and elegance. The rise of literati painting became a prime example of the spiritual fusion of poetry, calligraphy, painting, and seal carving under the influence of Neo Confucianism and Chan Buddhism. Art historical research must be adept at capturing this "resonance" of the zeitgeist, discerning harmony amidst distinct phenomena.

The holistic cultivation and transdisciplinary practice of creative subjects stem from traditional Chinese culture, particularly the literati tradition, which values the "comprehensive

person" over the "specialist." Artistic creation is often a natural expression of the creator's complete personality and life state. Therefore, a distinguished artist is frequently a polymath excelling across multiple fields. Su Shi was not only a literary giant but also one of the "Four Masters of Song Calligraphy." His painting theories were profoundly influential, and he even contributed to the conceptual aesthetics of literati gardens. His artistic practices across different fields are all permeated by the same aesthetic and philosophical outlook characterized by openness, naturalness, and a focus on meaning. Xu Wei's unrestrained expressions in poetry, prose, calligraphy, painting, and theater collectively constituted the eruption of his tragic vitality. Studying such figures while confined to a single category fails to grasp the completeness and expressive power of their artistic spirit. Art history requires this kind of person centered, comprehensive research, using an individual's life trajectory as an axis to connect interactions between different art forms and reveal their inherent unity.

The deep alignment of formal aesthetics with the pursuit of artistic conception indicates that, despite differing media, various Chinese artistic categories often share a set of core concepts and value orientations at their highest level of aesthetic ideals. These include concepts like "spirit resonance," "artistic conception," "void and solid," "marvelous enlightenment," and "naturalness." While painting emphasizes "vividness through spirit and resonance," calligraphy likewise pursues "resonance in brushwork and ink." While music seeks "sound beyond the strings" and "lingering melody," poetry also values "limited words conveying unlimited meaning." While the theater stage uses "one table, two chairs" to symbolize the infinite through the virtual, garden art creates boundless conceptions within limited space through techniques like "borrowed scenery" and "view blocking." This shared pursuit of transcending finite form to reach infinite meaning constitutes the foundation of the Chinese artistic spirit. Art historical research should engage in cross categorical "comparative aesthetic" analysis. How does "spirit resonance" operate in brush and ink, flow in musical sound, and manifest in bodily movement? Such analysis will profoundly deepen our understanding of the characteristics of Chinese aesthetics, moving beyond isolated descriptions of categorical techniques.

Therefore, employing "dialectical unity in pluralistic difference" as a method will present art historical writing in a completely new light. It will no longer be a mechanical arrangement of categorical histories, but a symphony organically weaving together materials from various artistic categories, structured around "problems" or "epochs." For example, research on Tang Dynasty art should simultaneously mobilize multiple strands of sensory evidence: the boldness and depth of Li Bai and Du Fu's poetry, the discipline and grandeur of Yan Zhenqing and Liu Gongquan's calligraphy, the religious murals with "clothes blowing in the wind" by Wu Daozi and the equestrian figures by Han Gan, the grandeur of court banquet music and the swiftness of the Whirling Hu dance, and the opulence of gold and silver ware alongside the splendor of tri color glazed pottery. This approach aims to present a multidimensional, polyphonic portrayal of the rich connotation and sensuous character of the "Sound of the High Tang." This kind of research demands that historians possess broad knowledge and exceptional integrative ability. Their historical narrative will necessarily be theory guided and combine history with theory, much like Zheng Wuchang's approach in *A Complete History of Chinese Painting*. By grasping the "overview" of an era's art from a macro perspective, he guided the micro analysis of painters, works, and theories, thereby forming a holistic historical view with both structure and substance (Powers, 2021).

3. The Return to Ontology: Rooted in the Internal Logic of Chinese Philosophy of Art

Establishing a methodology only addresses the question of how to look. To truly understand what is being observed, we must also answer the questions of what to look at and on what basis

to understand it. This inevitably leads to the ontological level: what is the fundamental basis for Chinese art? How does its mode of existence fundamentally differ from Western art? If we unthinkingly apply the conceptual frameworks of Western philosophy of art to interpret Chinese art, whether it be Plato's mimesis, Hegel's sensuous manifestation of the Idea, or Clive Bell's significant form, we inevitably risk serious misreading and disconnect. Interpreting Chinese landscape painting as a mimesis or representation of nature completely misses its spiritual core of purifying the mind to contemplate the Dao and the aspiration for forests and springs. Defining calligraphy as abstract or expressive appears equally inadequate.

Therefore, constructing a practice existence paradigm must be accompanied by a movement of ontological return. We must return to the intellectual and cultural soil of Chinese art itself to explore the internal logic upon which its creation, evaluation, and experience rely. This logic is not a collection of fragmented phrases but a profound, rigorous, and self consistent philosophical and aesthetic system. It includes the interconnected core propositions of the unity of Dao and skill, the non duality of substance and function, establishing images to exhaust meaning, and the unity of Heaven and humanity. These should become the indispensable pre understanding and conceptual toolkit for our interpretation of Chinese art history.

The unity of Dao and skill refers to art as a path to embody the Dao. This is the most fundamental proposition in Chinese philosophy of art. Dao is the origin, the principle, and the supreme realm of all things in the universe, while skill refers to concrete operation, method, and craftsmanship. The ultimate purpose of art is not to display technical prowess nor merely to please the senses, but to advance from skill towards the Dao. The parables of The Cook Ding and The Carpenter Qing in the Zhuangzi long ago revealed this truth: the highest skill results from the complete fusion of mind, hand, and object, following the principles of nature. In this process, the subject glimpses and merges with the great Dao. Consequently, Chinese art has never been isolated in a formalist art for art's sake island, nor has it been reduced to a mere instrument. Calligraphy is the Way of writing, painting is the Way of painting, and guqin artistry is the Way of the qin. Artistic practice itself is a form of cultivation and enlightenment. Therefore, art historical research must focus on the Dao mind behind technique. Why is the quality of brush and ink particularly emphasized in Chinese painting? Because brush and ink are not merely tools for representation; they are the direct expression of the painter's mind, cultivation, and character. They are the traces of the Dao on silk or paper. Why is guqin music so particular about finger technique and mental state? Because correct finger technique is the technical guarantee for reaching the sound beyond the strings and communicating with the spirit of Heaven and Earth. Without understanding the unity of Dao and skill, we cannot comprehend why China developed such profound and subtle technical theories nor why these skills were endowed with such lofty spiritual value.

The non duality of substance and function speaks to the fusion of art's essence and its function. Substance refers to the essence, the ontological ground, while function refers to its operation and effect. In Chinese philosophy, there is no substance separate from function, and no function separate from its substantializing role and potential. Applied to art, this means that, on one hand, the formal essence of an artwork inherently contains its meaning and function. On the other hand, an artwork always realizes its essential value within specific functional contexts. A Western Zhou bronze ding vessel: its massive form and awe inspiring décor are inseparable from its sacred function of mediating between heaven and humanity in sacrificial rituals. A Song Dynasty landscape painting: it serves both as a vehicle for the literati's armchair travel, and as a repository for their reclusive sentiments and personal ideals. A Yuan Dynasty zaju play script must be placed within the context of theatrical performance and reception by urban audiences for its literary value and social critique to be fully realized. Therefore, art historical research must maintain a dual focus on both internal and external dimensions. It must conduct

meticulous internal research, analyzing the autonomous evolution of form, style, and language. Simultaneously, it must engage in broad external research, returning artworks to their original contexts, ritual, religious, social, commercial, political, to examine how they were produced, consumed, viewed, and understood. Only by combining both approaches can we glimpse the complete life of art.

Establishing images to exhaust meaning describes art as a system of image generation and meaning transcendence. The *Xici* commentary on the Book of Changes states: The sages established images to exhaust meaning. This established the core mechanism of Chinese artistic expression: not to imitate the form of external things, but to create images to carry, suggest, and transcend meaning. This image can be the hexagram images of the Book of Changes, the poetic imagery, the brush and ink forms of painting and calligraphy, the stylized movements of theater, or the landscape scenes of gardens. The core activity of artistic creation is observing things to grasp images, and then establishing images to reveal meaning. The meaning here encompasses emotion, philosophy, spirit resonance, artistic conception, all spiritual content difficult to convey in words. Consequently, Chinese art highly values subtlety, implicitness, and the interplay of void and solid, pursuing the image beyond the image, the scene beyond the scene, and the flavor beyond the flavor. Therefore, art historical research is, to a large extent, a hermeneutics of images. It must not only trace the source, types, and formal evolution of images but also deeply interpret the historical transformation and cultural codes of the meaning that these images exhaust. For example, why did the Four Gentlemen gradually become fixed painting subjects after the Song Dynasty? Behind this lies a process of constructing and solidifying a set of symbolic meanings related to the scholar's moral character. Interpreting the generation and circulation of such image meaning systems is key to understanding the spiritual history of Chinese art (Svašek, 2020).

The unity of Heaven and humanity signifies art as a sensuous construction of human dwelling in the world. This is the ultimate ideal of Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, and the direct philosophical source for the practice existence paradigm. Art is not the conquest and representation of an object by a subject, but a mode of existence through which humans achieve harmonious resonance with nature, society, and the self. It is a sensuous presentation of the state of unity of Heaven and humanity. From this perspective, Chinese art exhibits a strong ecological character and a sense of place spirit. Landscape painting is not merely scenery; it is an ideal nature constructed by scholars for the mind to dwell in. The garden is a miniature universe, though made by human hand, as if created by nature, a practice of introducing natural ideals into daily life. Guqin artistry emphasizes communion with the spirit of Heaven and Earth, experiencing the rhythm of the cosmos through the playing of strings. Even calligraphy is believed to express one's nature and form one's joys and sorrows, connecting with the myriad phenomena of nature. Thus, art is deeply embedded in the Chinese way of life and life rhythms. Consequently, art historical research inevitably intertwines with the history of civilization's daily life, environment, and inner world. It must answer: in different historical periods, how did the Chinese people use art to settle body and mind, understand the world, construct meaning, and create a poetic dwelling? This elevates art history from a mere history of stylistic evolution to a history of sensuous existential construction.

Only when we take this internal ontological logic of Chinese art itself as the foundation for interpretation does the aforementioned methodological principle of dialectical unity in pluralistic difference gain its point of application and concrete content. The unity we seek is precisely this consistency of cultural spirit deeply rooted in concepts of Dao, substance, image, and Heaven. Without this ontological foundation, any cross categorical comparison risks remaining a superficial formal analogy.

4. The Fundamental Shift in Philosophical Inquiry: From “What Is” to “How It Exists”

Methodology provides the path, and ontology provides the foundation. However, the true soul of a paradigm lies in its fundamental orientation of philosophical inquiry. Traditional philosophy of art, whether Western or its deeply influenced modern Chinese counterpart, centers on the question, “What is art?” This is an essentialist, metaphysical question. It presupposes that art possesses a constant, universally valid essence, such as mimesis, expression, form, or concept. The task of art history, under this premise, becomes the search for concrete instances or variations of this essence across different eras and cultures. This mode of inquiry reifies and objectifies art, turning it into a static object awaiting definition and classification. Not only does this approach struggle to explain contemporary phenomena like Duchamp’s readymades, but more crucially, it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of Chinese art from the outset. Chinese art has never been a pure “aesthetic object” separate from human lived practice; it has always been a mode of being in the world.

Therefore, the practice-existence paradigm must achieve a thorough philosophical revolution, shifting the core question from “what art is” to “how art exists.” This shift is far from a mere semantic game; it represents a fundamental transformation in philosophical paradigm, encompassing three layers of profound implication.

The first layer moves from substance to event, viewing art as a historical becoming. The question “what is” seeks the constant attributes of a substance. The question “how it exists” investigates the happening of an event. The latter holds that the meaning and value of art are not innate properties of its material carrier but are generated and bestowed within specific historical situations, social networks, and cultural practices. That a work “exists as art” is itself a historical event. For example, the authentic manuscript of Wang Xizhi’s Preface to the Poems Composed at the Orchid Pavilion is long lost. What later generations venerate as the “foremost work of running script” is a cultural event constructed through a series of complex historical actions: Tang dynasty precise copies, endorsements by successive emperors, countless inscriptions and poetic responses by literati, and repeated narratives within calligraphic history. Gu Hongzhong’s The Night Revels of Han Xizai was first and foremost a report on personal activities with political intelligence value, only later becoming a “masterpiece of painting” through its transmission in art history. Therefore, art historical research must be a kind of archaeology of events, dedicated to reconstructing the original site and dynamic processes through which art was created, viewed, collected, interpreted, and canonized, rather than simply describing works as established facts.

The second layer moves from contemplation to practice, understanding art as an interaction of body and material. The question “what is” tends to lead to a contemplative, meditative epistemological attitude, viewing art as an object solely for mental reflection. “How it exists” emphasizes that art is first and foremost an embodied practice and a material intervention. Art exists in the moment the painter moves the wrist, applies pressure, and the breath syncs with the ink’s absorption. It exists in the friction and vibration between the qin player’s fingers and the silk strings. It exists in the dancer’s leaps, twists, and control of force through space. It exists in the artisan’s repeated refinement and mastery of heat when working clay, metal, or jade. Art history must attend to this tacit, practical knowledge. It is not only intellectual history but also a history of craft, a history of the body, and a history of material culture. We need to study how improvements in the craftsmanship of brush, ink, paper, and inkstone influenced painting and calligraphic styles. We must examine how changes in the form of musical instruments and playing techniques transformed musical listening. We should investigate how shifts in building materials and breakthroughs in structural technology reshaped spatial experience. Art exists within these concrete, sensuous, material practices.

The third and deepest layer moves from object to horizon, conceiving art as the opening of a lived world. This layer points directly to the core of existential thought. Art is not an isolated object within the world but a fundamental way in which human beings exist in the world. It participates in, even constructs, our lifeworld. Heidegger stated that the artwork sets up a world and brings forth the earth. In the Chinese context, art opens up an artistic conception, a state of mind, a cultural horizon. Landscape painting constructed for scholars a natural artistic conception in which they could wander, dwell, and lodge their spirit. Theater provided the populace with a moral and emotional horizon for experiencing loyalty and treachery, good and evil, and for releasing emotions. New Year's door god paintings and dragon boat races during the Dragon Boat Festival constitute folk life horizons built within festive rituals. How does art exist? It exists within these meaning worlds that it opens up and sustains. Therefore, the highest mission of art historical research is to interpret how art participated in constructing the sensible structure, meaning system, and existential realm of specific eras and groups. It must answer: through art, how did people of the past perceive time and space? How did they understand self and other? How did they confront suffering and pursue happiness? How did they imagine an ideal society and life? In this sense, art history becomes fully integrated with intellectual history, social history, and the history of mentalities, becoming a crucial dimension for understanding how the life and freedom of a civilization were possible. This aligns with the emphasis in Marxist philosophy of praxis on art as human sensuous activity, playing a great role in building a human world according to the laws of beauty (Wang, 2021).

Achieving the shift from "what is" to "how it exists" provides the practice-existence paradigm with its solid philosophical foundation and broad theoretical vision. It transforms art history from a knowledge about objects into a hermeneutics of human existential practice and meaning creation. Under this paradigm, studying the Dunhuang murals of the Tang Dynasty involves not only analyzing their composition, color, and Buddhist iconography but also exploring how they constructed a spiritual world for Silk Road travelers, frontier soldiers, and local believers, a world that fused otherworldly faith with this-worldly solace. Studying Song Dynasty literati painting involves not only brushwork and ink style analysis but also interpreting how it became a practical means for scholar-officials, in times of political frustration or daily leisure, to construct an independent personal value and a poetic living space.

5. The Integrated Manifestation of the Paradigm and the Pervasive Role of Historiographical Self-Consciousness

The practice-existence paradigm is not merely the sum of the three aforementioned pillars but an organically integrated theoretical whole. It takes the question of "how art exists" as its ultimate philosophical inquiry, the internal logic of Chinese art—such as the unity of Dao and skill and the non-duality of substance and function—as its deep interpretive foundation, and the principle of dialectical unity in pluralistic difference as its concrete methodology for handling complex phenomena. Within this overall framework, the practice of art historical research will take on a completely new character.

This research will be profoundly contextualized. It rejects generalized assertions detached from specific historical soil, insisting that any artistic phenomenon be returned to the original social relations, material conditions, technological levels, and intellectual milieu from which it emerged, whether this concerns a single work, a style, a school, or a concept. It attends to the intricate connections between art and systems of ritual, religion, the imperial examination system, markets, family lineages, and regional cultures.

This research will emphasize processuality. It is not content with static descriptions of artistic "products" but is dedicated to reconstructing the complete chain of artistic "production," "circulation," "reception," and even "re-creation." The meaning of a painting continuously

accrues and transforms from the moment it leaves the artist's brush, through its journey of collection, seal impressions, inscriptions, cataloging, reproduction, and eventual display in a museum case. Similarly, a theatrical work, from script creation and stage performance to audience reaction and critical record, constitutes a dynamic event of meaning generation. Art history should be the narrative of these processes.

This research will be inherently dialogical. It requires dialogue between "internal" and "external" research, between the "particularity of categories" and the "holistic spirituality," between "Chinese internal logic" and "external theoretical resources," and between "historical empiricism" and "philosophical interpretation." It acknowledges the limitations of any single perspective and strives for a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding.

However, to ensure this paradigm does not become rigid or lost in its application, it is essential that "the self-consciousness of art historiography" runs through it as a consistent thread. This means researchers must maintain a conscious, reflective stance towards their own research activity, recognizing that they are not transparently presenting an "objective history" but are engaged in a "historical construction" inevitably shaped by premises, perspectives, and temporal limitations (Wu, 2023).

This self-consciousness involves a vigilance towards the constructed nature of historical sources. The "historical materials" we face—be they surviving paintings, excavated objects, documentary records, or oral traditions—are not pristine "facts." They are themselves the results of historical power, contingency, and selective mechanisms. Authentication of genuineness, tracing textual lineages, collection history, and cataloging history are all crucial aspects of source criticism. The first step in art historical research is a critical examination of the sources themselves.

Secondly, it entails reflection on theoretical premises. The choice of which theoretical framework—be it stylistic analysis, iconography, sociology, postcolonial theory, gender studies, etc.—to organize sources and pose questions will inevitably illuminate certain aspects of history while obscuring others. The practice-existence paradigm itself should also be an object of reflection, guarding against its potential ossification into a new dogma. It should maintain openness, absorbing all beneficial intellectual resources.

It also involves scrutiny of discursive power. The writing of Chinese art history since modern times has been deeply entangled with the processes of modernization and nation-building, and heavily influenced by dominant Western academic discourse. We need to reflect: Who is writing art history? For whom is it written? Whose concepts are being used? What kind of historical narrative is being constructed? What cultural politics does this narrative serve? One of the goals of the new paradigm is, through creative interpretation deeply rooted in its own tradition, to gradually construct an art historical discourse system with Chinese subjectivity capable of engaging in equal international dialogue. This is not cultural exclusivity but, as Zhang Qianyuan has articulated, a creative transformation and synthesis under the principle of "making the past serve the present and making foreign things serve China."

Finally, it encompasses the pursuit of a historical vision. Art historical research is not merely knowledge production; it is also a dialogue with great minds of the past, a transmission and rediscovery of the spirit of civilization. It should ultimately embody a humanistic concern. Just as Sima Qian sought to "investigate the interaction between Heaven and humanity, comprehend the changes from past to present, and establish a school of thought of one's own," and Zhang Yanyuan emphasized that "one who has mastered the subject should carefully distinguish the marvelous traces of the South and North, the tracks of ancient and modern, and only then can one discuss painting," so should the art historian possess the sense of mission to participate in contemporary cultural reflection and elevate national aesthetic consciousness through historical research (Zhang, 2021).

6. Conclusions: Chinese Art History as Humanistic Hermeneutics

Therefore, the proposal of the practice existence paradigm is a systematic response and theoretical construction aimed at addressing the current dilemmas in Chinese art history studies. It strives to promote three fundamental shifts in the field: philosophically, moving from the essentialist “what is” to the existential “how it exists”; ontologically, turning away from the application of Western concepts toward a deep rooting in China’s own internal logic; methodologically, overcoming categorical fragmentation through a dialectical unity of pluralistic difference.

Seen through this paradigm, Chinese art history will no longer be merely a chronicle of “artworks” or a history of stylistic evolution, but rather a grand narrative of “artistic living.” It tells the story of how, across the long course of history, the Chinese people employed various sensuous materials and formal languages within concrete practical activities to create a rich and diverse array of arts, and how through these arts they came to understand the world, settle their lives, construct meaning, and pursue freedom. It pays attention to how skill carries the Dao mind, how objects integrate into life, how images condense emotion, and how forms open up realms of experience.

Consequently, the essential nature of this discipline is closer to a form of humanistic hermeneutics. Its core task is interpretation: interpreting the generative logic of art in historical contexts, interpreting the cultural codes behind forms, and interpreting the existential wisdom embedded in aesthetic experience. Its highest goal is, through a deep understanding of past artistic practices, to enhance our knowledge of the distinctive character of our own civilization and of the possibilities of human existence.

This path is full of challenges. It demands that researchers possess the empiricism of the historian, the speculative power of the philosopher, the sensuous intuition of the artist, and the vision for cross cultural communication. Yet, only in this way can Chinese art history studies finally free themselves from the longstanding awkward oscillation between being a “compilation of historical materials” and a “theoretical dependency,” and genuinely mature into a humanities discipline with independent scholarly character, deep cultural roots, and broad prospects for the future. Only then can it raise its own distinct and powerful voice in the task of understanding China and contributing to humanity’s shared spiritual exploration.

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