

Transmission as creative act . Pluriversalizing contemporary art's relationship/s to the past

Birgit Hopfener, Carleton University

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Today's lecture draws on a book I am currently completing, tentatively titled *Doing Critical Global Art History: Transcultural Analyses and a Pluriversal Conceptual Framework for Contemporary Historiographic Art*. It examines the historical dimensions of contemporary art in a critical global perspective through the lens of historiographic artworks by globally engaged Chinese artists.

I situate myself and this project at the intersection of global art history and Chinese art history. Different regional art histories have long been kept apart by the modern Western temporal and spatial regime that is deeply ingrained in the discipline of art history, a structure that has confined non-Western art histories to regional containers and constructed them as its 'other.'

So, what is at stake? My research seeks to break open these regional containers. It argues that by opening contemporary Chinese art to transcultural analysis, that is, to transcultural epistemic critique, it can leave the passive place traditionally assigned to it at the non-Western "periphery" and become an active contributor to critical global art history and theory. Rather than assuming radical cultural difference between West and non-West, my work starts from a shared yet disjunctive global present, in which humans are embedded in interconnected, rich worlds of language, aesthetics and meaning.

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So let's begin. A few art historical claims are as widely accepted as the central role of the engagement with the past in Chinese art. More recently *Reinventing the Past: Archaism and Antiquarianism in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*, a volume edited by art historian Wu Hung in 2010, explores how artistic engagements with the past were considered creative acts that

generated specific aesthetic forms, constituted subjects and legitimized political power. As early as 1976, Christian F. Murck noted in his introduction to *Artists and Traditions: Uses of the Past in Chinese Culture* that “interaction with the past is one of the distinctive modes of intellectual and imaginative endeavor in traditional Chinese aesthetics.”¹

What exactly does Murck mean by this? In what follows, I unpack his statement and use it as a starting point to argue for a long Chinese history of historiographic visual culture and art, that is, an understanding of art centered on its function of transmitting the past and writing history.

Across very different contexts, from early proto-historiographic practices in the ritual context of ancestral cults, to historically shifting practices of “returning to the past” (*fugu*), including antiquarianism, to the literati practice of art as self-cultivation, we can observe a preoccupation with reactivating, mediating and rewriting the past.

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In sketching this history, I follow what the critical global art historian Monica Juneja calls the expansion of our intellectual and historical repositories beyond Euro-American histories and discourses. My aim is to complicate and pluriversalize the conceptual frameworks through which we understand contemporary historiographic art, a global phenomenon in contemporary art. Against this background, I propose to read the historiographic works of the contemporary artists Qiu Zhijie and Liu Ding as critical engagements with this tradition.

By contemporary historiographic art, I refer to artistic practices where artists act as historiographers, engaging critically with how history is written, transmitted and embodied, and positioning themselves as participants in that process.

In contrast to academic art history, which continues to mainly rely on unified historiographical models that are structured according to stable spatial (nation, region) units and unilinear temporal periods, many artistic historiographies disclose that these structures no longer apply in present’s transcultural reality. Their works are evidence and articulation of how

¹ Christian F. Murck, *Artists and Tradition: Uses of the Past in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christian F. Murck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. xi.

contemporary art, artistic selves and identities today must be understood as continuously shaped and reshaped by multiple and intertwined histories, temporalities and epistemologies. In this sense, I understand artistic historiographies as invitations to recognize a new structure of contemporary art. The works ask us to reconceptualize contemporary art's relation to history, and thus to critique and transform common historiographical models, a task central to pluriversalizing contemporary art's critical and aesthetic frameworks. Following Peter Osborne, I understand contemporary art not as a period but as a 'critical category,'² That means, I understand contemporary art as historically and transculturally constituted, and thus as something that can be framed neither by a unilinear historical narrative nor by a relativist notion of *posthistoire*, of art after the end of history. Accordingly, this lecture takes artistic historiographies as a starting point to explore the complex historical dimensions of contemporary art in a global context, a heterogeneous historical present that Osborne has conceptualized as a "disjunctive unity of present times."

This perspective challenges the separation of art and historiography established in the European tradition and treats artistic historiographies as active contributions to art history. As the art historian Eva Kernbauer argues, artistic and academic historiography share the same social, political and media realities and the same truth politics. They should therefore be understood as entangled, complementary approaches that comment critically on each other. Artistic historiographies are thus not containers of history or witnesses to an objectively true past waiting to be retrieved, but active agents through which the past is continuously rewritten

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Liu's and Qiu's works intervene both in discourses of global art history and in official narratives in China that have been co-opting tradition for nationalist ends. The Party's central narrative today, the "Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴), tells modern Chinese history as a linear story of greatness, decline, struggle and return. Interestingly, this official narrative draws on traditional notions such as "ceaseless self-strengthening" (*zhiqiang buxi* 自强不息), a phrase from the *Book of Changes*. Yet it subordinates

² Osborne, Peter, *Anywhere or Not at all. Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London and New York: Verso, 2013.

the idea of ceaselessness (*buxi* 不息) to a teleological goal. Qiu Zhijie, by contrast, who has been engaging critically with *buxi* as what he calls an ‘operating principle’ in Chinese art, mobilizes *buxi* as an open, unending process of transformation.

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Qiu Zhijie’s drawing *The Map of Total Art* (*Zongti yishu ditu* 总体艺术地图, 2012) visualizes the transcultural narrative that constitutes his concept of art as life practice, which he calls “Total Art.” Multiple cultural and historical concepts, forms, practices and institutions whose common denominator is the equation of art and life are depicted through combinations of words and images. Avenues of ‘Reality,’ ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘History’ radiate from a central ‘Lake of Real Freedom,’ connecting sites such as Wagner’s Bayreuth, the Orchid Pavilion, Tagore’s Santiniketan, Duchamp’s Fountain and the ‘Bridge of Zhuangzi Watching Fish.’ By interweaving references from multiple cultures and histories, *The Map of Total Art* challenges both a linear historical temporality and the idea of a single, culturally, regionally or nationally unified history of art. As I will discuss later, the map suggests understanding knowledge as relational, situated and in constant transformation, an understanding underlined by its cropped edges suggesting temporal and spatial openness.

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Liu Ding’s installation *Evidence* rewrites history through a curatorial approach. Like Qiu Zhijie, he is not interested in linear history writing. Instead, he constructs a three-dimensional, transcultural narrative, and the constantly changing slide projections emphasize that history writing is an open, ongoing process. A white, book-rack-like shelf and a tilted frosted-glass cube display magazine clippings, reproductions of art works and the artist’s own pieces, revealing the histories that have shaped both Chinese contemporary art and Liu Ding himself. Several layers become visible. The Western canon as it reached Chinese academies through plaster casts and reproductions, the modernist idioms that became points of reference after 1978, and socialist modernity with its images of collective heroism. Two further layers are particularly pointed. Magazine articles from the 1980s document debates on artistic freedom, including an essay on Luo Zhongli’s *Father* (1980), which conservatives attacked for granting an anonymous peasant the monumental format once reserved for Mao. A photograph of Jiang Zemin in a classical

garden point to the 1990s, when the Party reframed “5,000 years of civilization” as a source of legitimacy, claiming the authority to decide which parts of the past counted as heritage. A Chinese ink painting on the shelf raises the question of how this tradition might be appropriated beyond the state’s curation. The slideshow adds a media-critical dimension. In 1980s China, artists and critics encountered art history through slides shown at conferences and gatherings. Slides could be rearranged and re-narrated, and whoever controlled the sequence controlled the story. In *Evidence*, all materials, regardless of their status, are presented on the same register, a de-hierarchization that shows frameworks of value to be constructed and therefore changeable. Some materials are partly hidden behind others, recalling the artist’s description of the work as (quote) “thinking about the invisible in art history.” (end of quote)

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In 2009, the art historian Dieter Roelstraete proclaimed a ‘historiographic turn’ in contemporary art, reading it as a response to the geopolitical shifts after 1989, accelerated globalization and the triumph of capitalism. Artistic historiographies have since been understood as offering temporal depth against a homogenized global present, and, in the wake of the global turn, as postcolonial and decolonial counter-histories challenging Eurocentric master narratives. Critical discourse has tended to judge them primarily by their political potential, leaving their epistemological and theoretical dimensions largely unexplored. I argue that although historiographic art has been treated as a global phenomenon, its conceptual framings have overlooked both the cultural multiplicity of how art relates to historiography and the transculturally interconnected nature of the global world.

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Beyond uncovering suppressed histories and archives, however, artistic historiographies also offer theoretical reflections on art, history, history writing, time and temporality. Eva Kernbauer proposes to examine them regarding three aspects, and I quote: “[how they] reflect certain historiographical problems and theories; their value as artistic contributions to historiography (their “historiographical ethos,” so to speak); and their potential to address history in a broader global context.” (end of quote)

My approach builds on Kernbauer's, which is informed by a critical philosophy of history. Like her, I ask not only what histories artistic historiographies tell, but also how they reflect on what history is and how we know it, how history is written and experienced in time and how the past shapes us. I also consider the relationship between historiography and art and the aesthetic practices of historiographic transmission. Yet I argue that the discourse on artistic historiography must move beyond Western concepts if it is to do justice to our contemporary disjunctive unity. Only in this way can we expand and shift our assumptions about how to interpret historiographic art, and, as the title of this lecture puts it, pluriversalize contemporary art's relationships to the past.

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A pluriversal approach critiques universalist claims about the nature of art and offers art history a new theoretical scaffolding, one better suited to the plurality of our world. It contributes to an epistemic shift that takes the world's human, intellectual and aesthetic plurality seriously and keeps open a space for multiple forms of knowledge, in ways that echo calls for cognitive justice.

The concept of pluriversality was coined by Latin American decolonial theorist Arturo Escobar. According to him a pluriversal world is based on (quote) "pluriversality as a shared project based on a multiplicity of worlds and ways of worlding life." (end of quote). Agreeing with literary scholar Pheng Cheah that pluriversal theories risk bringing a West/non-West binary back in through the back door, and, ultimately, a collapse into cultural relativism, I understand a pluriversal world, and a pluriversal conceptual framework for art as continuously generated in transcultural processes of exchange, negotiation and critique.

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A recent publication supports my argument for a longer history of Chinese historiographic art. In 2019, the journal *Ars Orientalis* published a special issue on "art-historical art" in China from the Song dynasty to the present. In a conversation with the art historian Martin Powers, the New York-based artist Zhang Hongtu explained that artists like himself see themselves as (quote) "part of the conversation." (end of quote) I read this as an argument for a

historiographic art tradition in which artists do not merely cite the past, but take part in writing art history, in dialogue with those who came before and those who will come after.

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Many scholars emphasize China's long historiographical tradition and the constitutive, even existential, role that history and history writing have played in the country's self-understanding. At the risk of sounding essentialist, I would like to quote the historian Chun-chieh Huang, who explains, and I quote, that "Chinese people are imbued with profound historical consciousness" and that "to be human in China is to be historical," which "(...) is to inherit history, that is, to live up to the paradigmatic past." (end of quote) This is a claim that I will unpack and complicate in what follows.

This significance of history and history writing in China must be understood in its cosmological context. As the sinologist Axel Schneider explains, it is rooted in the (quote) "close relationship between Dao and history." (end of quote) Dao, often translated as "the Way," refers to the generative force and underlying order of the cosmos. Whereas dominant strands of European historical thought have been shaped by the biblical narrative of a world created by God and by a corresponding concept of truth, Chinese conceptions of history and history writing are rooted in a cosmological tradition that understands the world as a continuous process emerging from Dao. This continuous process of *ziran* 自然, often translated as "self-so-ing," unfolds autopoietically through never-ending processes of differentiation. In a first act of division, Dao's two complementary forces, yin and yang, come into being. Through the ongoing reciprocal interpenetration of yin and yang, the world, also called the 'ten thousand things' (*wanwu* 萬物), is constantly generated as an endless process of transformation. Against this cosmological background, and in contrast to dominant European traditions, history and history writing are not grounded in the idea of a transcendent God or in the notion of a historical truth that can be uncovered and recorded through empirical facts. Instead, history is understood as the unfolding of the Dao. Yet this unfolding does not happen on its own. It depends on human beings who enact it by transmitting, interpreting and writing down the past. History writing therefore does not simply describe events from the outside, as a "neutral" distanced observer would. By transmitting the past, historiographic practice helps to keep the Dao unfolding, and so becomes

part of the very process it describes. History, in this sense, is never a fixed past waiting to be recorded, but an ongoing process in which humans actively take part. There is no history apart from its transmission, it is always already historiography.

In the Confucian tradition, which shaped official Chinese historiography, the past served as a normative model. Confucians believed that the ideal order of the Dao had been fully realized during the so-called Golden Age of the Three Dynasties, the Xia (c. 2070–1600 BCE), the Shang (c. 1600–1046 BCE) and the Zhou (1046–256 BCE). As the sinologist Benjamin Schwartz explains, this order (quote) “is not primordial and is not already actualized in the original state of humans,” (end of quote) but must be continuously re-actualized by human agents through ritual. Transmitting the past meant ensuring the continuity of the Dao, both as the ideal order of society and as the ongoing process of the world. History writing has therefore long been closely tied to ritual practice. From the late Shang and Western Zhou periods onward, the court scribes, the shi 史, were ritual specialists who recorded divinations, sacrifices and the deeds of rulers. This act of recording was itself part of the ritual.

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The earliest proto-historiographical artifacts in China, oracle bones and ritual bronzes, were created in the context of ancestral rituals during the late Shang (c. 1250–1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046–256 BCE) dynasties. They served as media of communication with the ancestors and are the earliest surviving written records from China. The archaeologist and sinologist Lothar von Falkenhausen sees in them the beginning of historiography in China, explaining that (quote) “religious ideas and practices associated with the ancestral cult gave rise to the formation of a historical consciousness.” (end of quote). Communication with the ancestors was possible because the world of the living and the world of the dead were thought to be intertwined. Diviners, employed by the ruler, heated ox scapulae and turtle plastrons and read the cracks as the ancestors’ answers. Only the king could interpret the cracks, but scribes recorded the question and its outcome. They can therefore be understood as proto-historiographers. Falkenhausen sees in these inscriptions (quote) “an emerging notion (doubtless religiously motivated) of historical rectitude: the scribes recorded the outcome of a matter that the king had determined through divination, even when that outcome did not match the king’s

prediction.” (end of quote) It is to be understood in this context then, that from the very beginning, historiographers held a powerful position in China.

The precondition for this was the intra-relatedness of humans with everything that shapes and reshapes the world through Dao. As Schwartz puts it, (quote) “the post-Cartesian, Western notion of a complete disjuncture between the self-contained human historical process and the processes at work in the non-human world is absent. Heaven or the Dao are at work both in the natural and the human realms.” (end of quote). Heaven (tian 天), in this context, is not a transcendent god but the impersonal order of the cosmos, closely associated with Dao. Heaven was also the source of political legitimacy, since rulers claimed to govern by the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命). In the correlative cosmology that became dominant in the Warring States (475–221 BCE) and early Han periods (Han dynasty 206 BCE to 220 CE), human affairs were thought to follow cosmic cycles, so that even the rise and fall of dynasties seemed as regular as the seasons. History thus appeared impersonal and predetermined. This raises questions that have been negotiated time and again in Chinese intellectual and art history. How much room remains for human agency? How is the Dao realized and re-actualized, and how could one emancipate oneself from a deterministic understanding of Dao and history? Since these questions concern the relationship between Heaven and humans, they are also questions of power. This historical context underlies my thesis that historiography, understood as a subjectivizing apparatus, has been central to Chinese intellectual history.

Several central features of Chinese history writing and historiographic art first emerged in this context. History writing as an act of transmission that sustains the continuity of the Dao, that means the existence of the world; a dialogical structure of history writing that allows for communication with the ancestors/the past, the premise of legibility that such communication requires, and the emphasis on human historiographic agency.

As the sinologist Pierre Ryckmans explains, continuity here means immortality, and this immortality is achieved through history writing. (quote) “From a very early stage—well before Confucius—the Chinese evolved the notion that there could only be one form of immortality: the immortality conferred by history. In other words, life-after-life was not to be found in a supernature, nor could it rely upon artefacts (my addition: or representations), instead man

only survives in man—which means, in practical terms, in the memory of posterity, through the medium of the written word.” (end of quote). Ryckmans privileges the written word over artefacts. Yet as the oracle bones and bronzes show, writing and material culture were inseparable from the start.

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Oracle bones and bronzes mark the beginning of a long history of historiographic visual culture in China. A second example is *fugu*, the “return to antiquity.” The concept goes back to Confucius (551–479 BCE) and his followers, who used it to describe the return to, and restoration of, the ideal age of the Three Dynasties. *Fugu* also shaped antiquarian practice, which sought to understand the past and verify written histories by examining inscriptions on ancient bronzes, stelae and rock surfaces. During the Song dynasty (960–1279), this “study of metal and stone” (*jinshi xue*) became a proto-scientific method for investigating the past. Song antiquarians collected, documented and reconstructed ancient objects, and above all made rubbings of them. Rubbings, one of the oldest reproduction techniques, allowed scholars to record, interpret and transmit antiquities. They were seen as a way of literally touching the past, giving viewers physical contact with the ancestors through the traces they had left behind. As the art historian Wu Hung explains, a rubbing documents the state of a stele, its inscription and surface at a specific moment in time. The more rubbings of a stele exist, the greater its significance. Ironically, making rubbings wears down the stone and threatens its legibility. Stelae die. In a world understood as constant change, even a stone stele is transient, but it can be ‘revived’ through its rubbings. Since no single rubbing can capture a stele and its history, collectors sought out rubbings of its different states and related them to one another. The historicity of stele and rubbings is thus mutually constituted, processual and, in theory, never ending. Just as the presence of the ancestors continued through the records of the scribes, the stele lives on through its rubbings. Transmission here is not preservation, but a creative act that keeps the past alive.

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My third example of historiographic art in China is the literati conception of art as self-cultivation, associated above all with calligraphy and literati painting. Here, the transmission of the past became constitutive of both the making and the viewing of art. A calligraphy or painting was not a bounded, self-contained object belonging to a single period. It was an open narrative that kept transforming as others inscribed themselves into it by copying, quoting, and adding colophons and seals. Works were created in conversation with former artists, with friends at literati gatherings (yaji 雅集), and with future generations of artists and viewers. They are thus evidence of social, intergenerational processes of history writing.

The Letter on Presenting Oranges (Fengju tie 奉橘帖) illustrates this. It is generally regarded as a Tang-dynasty tracing copy of a calligraphy by Wang Xizhi (303–361), surrounded by colophons, signatures and seals added by generations of viewers and collectors until the end of the imperial era. At that point the conversation stopped. The work became a closed art object, removed from the temporal framework of literati art and transferred into the modern ‘temporal and spatial regime’ of the museum.

This practice also had a political function. In hierarchical Confucian society, transmission maintained narratives, values and power structures. Artists and viewers were shaped by history, yet at the same time they actively wrote it. Li Gonglin’s Classic of Filial Piety (c. 1085) shows both sides. Filial piety was the foundation of the Confucian social order, extending from obedience to one’s parents to loyalty to the ruler. Li illustrates this text on moral self-cultivation, and in doing so practices it. By emulating early masters such as Gu Kaizhi and reinterpreting their style, he cultivates himself in dialogue with the ancients.

It was during the Song dynasty (960–1279), a period of political instability, that literati art became, in the words of the art historian Martin Powers, (quote) “self-consciously art historical.” (end of quote) In a visibly changing world, artists realized that their world was not timeless but historical, and they (quote) “introduced historical time as part of the content of painting.” (end of quote) Like Song statesmen who, as the historian Peter Bol observed, (quote) “no longer viewed the past as a repository of models but as a period and set of texts from

which to derive general principles,” (end of quote) literati artists developed a new historical consciousness.

Powers calls the literati practice of conducting (quote) “imaginary conversations” (shenhui) with an estranged past (end of quote) historicist. I would argue it is better described as historiographical. These conversations did not aim to reveal an objective truth about the past, but to transmit it, in dialogue with the ancients and with future viewers.

Even though legibility was crucial to ensure the continuity of the historiographic conversation, engagement with art and artists of the past was not interested in mere imitations (*fang*) of past styles but in creative and playful interpretations of them. These re-combinations of past styles are an expression of a new historiographical consciousness. Yet, in Song China, this continued to mean that historiography was understood as a mode of re-actualizing and visualizing *Dao*. Now, however, artists expressed their intrarelatedness with *Dao* from a personal perspective and no longer according to a single valid model, arguing that all partial perspectives are still rooted in the all-encompassing principle of the *Dao*.

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My fourth example is modern literati art of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period, China faced imperialism and colonialism and was shaped by intense debates about modernization. The question of how to relate to the past and how to write history was central to these debates. Broadly speaking, two positions emerged. Iconoclastic intellectuals, especially in the context of the May Fourth Movement, rejected Chinese traditions, above all Confucianism, together with the power structures and the temporal and epistemological regime associated with them, as obstacles to modernization. Instead, they advocated the adoption of Western knowledge as the key to China’s renewal. Others struck a more moderate tone. They sought to modernize China by reactualizing Chinese traditions. As the art historian and curator Pi Li has argued, with the arrival of modern Western concepts, competing regimes of art, time and knowledge began to coexist in China.

Modern literati art belongs to the latter, more moderate approach. It developed out of modern antiquarianism, which played an important role in China's transformation into a modern nation during the late Qing dynasty and the subsequent Republican period. Artists and reform-minded intellectuals such as Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Kang Youwei (1858–1927) valued antiquarian practice as a useful indigenous resource for modernizing history writing and Chinese identity. Antiquarianism was the starting point for the art movement of so-called epigraphic painting and calligraphy (*jinshi shuhua*). Epigraphic art rejected canonical script styles and instead favored ancient scripts that had conventionally been ignored or undervalued. Its painting style was influenced by the ancient scripts used in stone and bronze inscriptions, such as seal script and clerical script.

Representatives of the epigraphic school, for example the literati artists Wu Changshuo and Zhao Zhiqian, criticized the calligraphic canon of elegant standard and running script, represented by the tradition of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi, as too refined and historically unreliable, since it had been transmitted only on paper. In contrast, they regarded scripts preserved in stone not only as more authentic and trustworthy, but also as traces that allowed “direct” physical contact with the ancients and the past. As you can see on the slide, modern epigraphic literati art often incorporated rubbings of ancient objects into paintings.

The monk and highly respected antiquarian Dashou (1791–1858) is regarded as the inventor of this new kind of epigraphic art. His series *One Hundred Years*, mounted as hanging scrolls, consists of complex compositions of rubbings of inscriptions on small metal and stone objects, red seals and ink painting. Contrasts between light and dark create three-dimensionality and the illusion of depth. The objects Dashou used for the rubbings in this series belonged to his personal collection, which consisted mainly of objects from early Chinese history but also included non-Chinese items, among them Russian coins.

The collage-like structure of these works, which relates and layers different fragments of history, is shaped by the so-called method of *jinhuidui* 錦灰堆, which literally means something like “heap of brocade ashes”, referring to fragments and remnants. Regarding questions of

history writing, the work's references to non-canonical scripts and its juxtaposition of different historical and cultural sources can be understood as a counter-narrative that challenges canonical histories of art and knowledge. The fragmentary, deliberately incomplete and open structure of the work can be linked to a new historical consciousness and a new, critical concept of history writing that understands the present as a process of historiographic and transcultural entanglements.

Some epigraphic artists went further. They questioned not only canonical histories of art, but also traditional forms of knowledge about the natural world. In his handscroll of various sea creatures, Zhao Zhiqian connects epigraphic studies, an indigenous empirical method, with modern Western natural history. He retains literati conventions such as the handscroll format and the combination of image and text, but adds 'realistic' depictions of plants and animals not previously seen in Chinese painting, together with inscriptions on each species, its habitat and characteristics, based on written sources and observation from life. As the art historian Chia-ling Yang explains, the work belongs to a moment when nineteenth-century scholars in the Jiangnan region began to relate Western natural history to the classical Chinese tradition of 'investigating things' (gewu 格物), increasingly seeking the laws of nature rather than Confucian and cosmological principles. I read Zhao Zhiqian's painting as a transcultural historiographic artwork. By bringing different concepts of art and knowledge into relation, it translates and recontextualizes them, and in this sense pluriversalizes them.

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Read through the lens of such history of historiographic art in China, Qiu Zhijie's and Liu Ding's interest in the historiographic function of art acquires further dimensions. Both artists seem to hold on to the significance attributed to historical consciousness, while exploring how an art tradition shaped by a processual and relational understanding of history writing and transmission can be rethought for the present. They describe their practice as a form of self-cultivation, yet one mobilized as a critical practice. In contrast to its conventional understanding, it does not affirm structures of knowledge and power but interrogates them. I propose to read this as part of the long-standing debate in China that I outlined earlier. How

much room remains for human agency if history is governed by the Dao, and what subjects and social relations does such an understanding of history writing produce? This debate about deterministic history has had far-reaching repercussions in different historical contexts, from the Maoist era to official historical discourse today.

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Let's revisit Qiu Zhijie's Total art map

I argue that a reference east of the central 'Lake of Freedom', the 'Bridge of Zhuangzi Watching Fish', underscores the artist's understanding of self-cultivation as a critical practice. It alludes to Zhuangzi's famous story of 'The Happiness of Fish' (yu zhi le 鱼之乐). What is transmitted here is not a fixed canon of values, but freedom itself. Yet this freedom is not given; it has to be achieved, through continuous reflection on one's own situatedness and by critically intervening in given structures of knowledge and regimes of truth. The reference to Zhuangzi not only articulates this programmatic claim but also serves to provoke a critical attitude in viewers, provided they take the time to research and interpret the story and to relate it to themselves. "The Happiness of Fish" recounts a dispute between the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, who claims to know that the fish are happy, and his friend, the logician Huizi, who denies that Zhuangzi can know this, since he is not a fish himself. The story suggests that there is no single true way of knowing and instead emphasizes the situatedness of knowledge.

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Liu Ding's *Evidence* provides insights into what histories and concepts shaped the artist and his understanding of art. Conceived as a "self-portrait," the installation continues, quite literally, the literati logic in which the self is constituted through rearrangements of historical references.

Unlike literati self-cultivation, however, which despite its open and processual character ultimately served to preserve a particular canonical system of values, Liu Ding deliberately dehierarchizes disparate historical materials and places them on an equal footing, thereby exposing the constructedness and mutability of such frameworks of value. In Liu Ding's critical engagement with a Chinese conceptual history of historiography and art, history writing is both

an interpretive condition and a governing mechanism. Narrative choices, in other words, imply epistemological assumptions and at the same time shape subjectivities and social relations.

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Liu Ding's historiographic installation *New Man* (2015) is part of a long-term research project, developed with the curator and art historian Carol Yinghua Lu, on how Socialist Realism continues to shape contemporary art in China. They start from the observation that artists in the 1980s shared the aspiration to break with Socialist Realism in order to find a new artistic language, and they consider this model limiting precisely because it is founded on the idea of breaking away. Liu Ding thus critiques the logic of the avant-garde itself, the assumption that one must break with the past in order to be modern, a narrative he sees as shaped by the Cold War dichotomy between capitalism and socialism, two sides of the same coin of modernity. Instead, he engages critically with Socialist Realist methods such as collective art making and the assignment of a central theme, methods that challenged individual subjectivity, yet were also distinctly modern ways of working. Like *Evidence*, *New Man* (2015) adopts a curatorial approach and can be understood through the lens of self-cultivation as a critical practice. The installation assembles different kinds of works and styles that shaped the figure of the 'new man,' a key term of Communist rhetoric and propaganda. It stood for a vision of revolution in which reconfigured traditions and cultures were to generate new aesthetics and new horizons. For the individual, becoming a 'new man' meant a willingness to adapt oneself to a new ideological context. Combining the historical with the contemporary, the installation revisits the successive stages of artistic reform initiated after the Communist Party came to power. Its narrative unfolds chronologically, from the 1950s to 1989.

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The installation opens with *Qi Baishi in 1950*, a calligraphic scroll bearing the slogan 'from the masses, to the masses' (*cong qunzhong zhong lai, dao qunzhong zhong qu* 从群众中来, 到群众中去). It is the core formula of Mao Zedong's 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian* 群众路线), which he formally articulated in 1943 and which became ubiquitous in political and cultural life after

1949. In the early 1950s, many literati artists like Qi Baishi realized that they had to reform their thinking under the new regime. Calligraphy, the literati medium of self-cultivation and of conversation with the ancients, is here mobilized to transmit a new political doctrine.

Yet Mao's slogan stands for more than a political method. It implies a specific concept of history, one that Liu Ding, I argue, engages with critically. Rooted in Marxist historical materialism, it declares the masses, not individuals, to be the true subject of history. Ideas from the masses must be gathered, systematized and returned to them by the Party as a vanguard. History is thus made from below but guided from above, a tension in which, in practice, the Party decided what counted as the 'correct' will of the masses.

The mass line also describes history as an endless process of practice and theory, constantly tested and corrected. To conceptualize revolution and class struggle as endless, Mao drew not only on Hegel and Marx, but also on the Book of Changes (Yijing). Unlike the Hegelian dialectic, which moves toward synthesis, the interplay of yin and yang knows no endpoint; it is a principle of ceaseless change (buxi). As scholars such as Frederic Wakeman and Stuart Schram have argued, Mao thus came close to traditional Chinese ideas of the world as endless change. Yet where the Confucian tradition understood the interaction of opposites as complementary and harmonious, Mao understood it as endless struggle. Ceaselessness thus became a means of permanently mobilizing class struggle

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At the center of the installation *New Man* are five oil paintings that Liu Ding did not paint himself. He commissioned painters to execute them under his direction, thereby taking up the collective, assignment-based working methods of socialist realism. The painting that gives the installation its title *New Man* quotes Wu Zuoren's depiction of a model worker (*laodong mofan* 劳动模范) operating a train, an artwork from the early years of socialist reform that embodied the promise that an ordinary person could take charge of a machine. In the foreground, Liu Ding places a member of the nouveaux riche, a young collector driving a red Porsche. Each layer is painted in a different style: the figurative realism of 1940s China, a flat, pop-like language and

Soviet socialist realism. Liu Ding describes the work as a collage of different socialisms and of scenes from different periods. Through this juxtaposition, he asks what ‘new’ means for a generation shaped by the market and reveals socialist and capitalist modernity as two sides of the same coin. As so often in his work, quotation is his method: historical styles become material for critique, and the ideologies inscribed in them are made to speak to the present.

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I would like to end with Liu Ding’s installation *Room of Boundlessness* (*Cangmang shi* 苍茫室, 2024), which the artist kindly allowed us to use for the announcement of this lecture. Its title derives from the last lines of Tang poet Du Fu’s poem “Song of Leyou Park”: “Finished drinking, this body of mine has nowhere to go. I stand alone in a boundless expanse, chanting a poem to myself.” For Liu Ding, standing alone in the room of boundlessness expresses the situation of a scholar who, in the face of a noisy world and massive social change, retreats to a corner, not out of indifference, but in order to remain alert to his own position and to stay committed to reality. At Liu Ding’s invitation, the literary historian Chen Pingyuan, who himself chose to retreat into scholarship in the early 1990s, wrote the calligraphy “Being Solitary in the Room of Boundlessness” that presides over the space.

The work consists of two chapters, presented one after another in the same gallery space in 798 in Beijing. The first chapter is about human beings constrained by the system, from the 1960s to the present. Liu Ding assembles works and archival materials by other artists and writers, among them the small self-portrait that the painter Hu Shangzong painted in 1969 before taking his own life, with his last words written on the back; Wang Rizhang’s ink painting *Firm Tree and Fierce Tiger*, made at the age of eighty-six when he was nearly blind; and Wang Jin’s *To Marry a Mule* of 1995. Liu Ding adds his own sculpture *Waiting for Orders* (2024), a delivery worker absorbed in his phone. Galvanized metal sheets cover the walls and give the room a cool, orderly and unified appearance.

On entering the room, visitors are asked to follow instructions. They are asked to first read the wall texts that provide context on the life circumstances and emotional states the artists were

in when creating the works. Prepared in this way, they are then asked to pick up the artworks that lean against the wall facing away from them, to hang them on the wall and to look at them. Wang Jin's photograph of his wedding to a mule, usually read as conceptual photography of the 1990s, thus becomes legible as the response to being refused a U.S. visa eight times, which forced him to divorce his wife. Liu Ding's delivery worker, laid off and fixated on his phone, embodies a further contradiction made redundant by the system, he still anchors his hopes in the machine that streams nationalist narratives to him, a contemporary subjectivizing apparatus. In the second chapter, which traces human beings constrained by war, from the Boxer Uprising to the war in Ukraine, Liu Ding uses the same metal sheets but rearranges them into a chaotic structure in which the works are embedded. Both orders, the neat and the chaotic, coexist in one space. Together, the two chapters address what Liu Ding calls the predicament of human beings within the framework of modernity (*xiandai kuangjia* 现代框架), works the catalog describes as 'portraits of people with nowhere to go.'

In *Room of Boundlessness*, the features of historiographic art I have traced throughout this lecture return in a new form. History is written relationally, through the works and lives of others. Viewers touch, handle and hang the works, much as literati once unrolled scrolls and added their inscriptions. Also, possibly critically engaging with literati art as articulation and evidence of social histories, the installation understands historiography, lived experience and the work of art are not separated, but brought together in a single space. And history remains open: its elements are constantly rearranged into new constellations. In this sense, Liu Ding's room of boundlessness is not a place of escape, but potentially a place in which the world comes alive.

I argue the installation also comments on the role of emotion in Chinese history writing. Sima Qian (c. 145–86 BCE), author of the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史记), believed that many of the great writings of the past came from suffering. Their authors had turned their grief and anger into words, which he called 'pouring out indignation' (*fafen zhushu* 发愤著书).

Literati artists later also put their feelings into brush and ink (*jiqing* 寄情), but they took care to

cultivate these feelings and express them only 'in due measure.' In the twentieth century, emotion became a political instrument. In 'speak bitterness' (*suku* 诉苦) campaigns, the suffering of the masses was gathered, framed by the Party and returned to them as a collective narrative of class struggle and liberation, the mass line applied to feeling. Today, the official narrative of rejuvenation still rests on an emotional plot of humiliation, struggle and redemption. *Room of Boundlessness* intervenes in this history. It does not mobilize collective feeling, but returns emotion to individuals, to their lived experience of desperation in specific social conditions, and invites each viewer to encounter it personally before encountering the work. The works gathered here are evidence not of a harmonious social order, but of its ruptures. At the same time, they show how relation-constituting art practices persisted and changed under political duress: Hu Shangzong's last words on the back of his self-portrait, like a final colophon, or Wang Rizhang's inscription dedicating his bloody tiger to a friend, still address others, even in despair. Art here is inseparable from social reality, and the installation invites us to engage with it both critically and empathetically.

Conclusion

Qiu Zhijie and Liu Ding thus rethink self-cultivation as a critical practice. Where literati art ultimately affirmed the continuity of values and power structures, they interrogate them. They resist the official nationalist narrative and its governing effects, as well as the binary avant-garde logic, the assumption that one must break with the past in order to be modern. Instead, they reveal the heterogeneous and entangled complexity of histories that continue to shape us and invite viewers to take an active part in writing them, as a form of historiographic agency and emancipation.

What do their historiographies suggest about contemporary art more broadly? They point to a new structure of contemporary art, one that is heterotemporal and transculturally constituted, and that cannot be captured by unilinear, narratives or by models of stable national, regional or cultural units. They invite us to develop new historiographical models that take this structure seriously.

As Eva Kernbauer argues, artistic historiographies often do not seek change through future-oriented teleologies. Instead, they make us experience the present as a coexistence of different histories and temporalities, a present that is not identical with itself and therefore remains open to change. In this way, the works of Qiu Zhijie and Liu Ding open new spaces of historiographical and political agency, in full awareness of the geopolitical power structures in which they operate.

This is what I mean by pluriversalizing contemporary art's relationships to the past. It does not mean replacing one universal framework with another, nor setting a Chinese tradition against a Western one. It means expanding our intellectual and historical repositories, and understanding history as shared and pluriversal, continuously generated through transcultural processes of exchange, negotiation and critique. Erudition, learning about the multiplicity of histories of art and culture, and transcultural critique are its tools. Artistic historiographies such as those of Qiu Zhijie and Liu Ding are its active contributors.

In Chinese thought, transmission has not meant reconstructing the past as it supposedly really was, in the historicist sense of an objective historical truth. It has meant keeping the past alive by rewriting it, which, as we have seen, has its own governing effects. Understood as a critical practice however, transmission is indeed a creative act, and the task of art history is not only to trace and describe the past of contemporary art, but to take part, together with artists, in its ongoing, pluriversal and boundless conversation.