

Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China

Craig Clunas

'Thus I say that writing and
painting are not different Ways,
but are as one in their origin.'

Song Lian



Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China



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4 Practices of Vision

Terms of the Image

The discussion so far, focusing as it has on *what* was looked at in the way of representations in Ming China, has avoided a number of crucial questions. Most centrally, it has avoided dealing with the contemporary understanding of representation as a discourse, and has strenuously sidestepped the issue of the terminology of representations, using words like ‘picture’, ‘map’, ‘painting’, as if there were Chinese terms whose semantic fields mapped immediately and unproblematically onto these pieces of modern English usage. It is time to remedy these very serious defects by looking at some of the words which lie behind these bland-seeming translations. I would stress at the outset of this attempt that it very consciously concentrates on Ming and early Qing Dynasty usage, that of the fourteenth–seventeenth centuries. The ‘same’ words may have been employed very differently at other times. However this was not the perception of Ming intellectuals themselves, who when they interested themselves (as they often did) in the ‘origins’ of contemporary phenomena like painting (*hua*), considered that the written forms with which they were familiar were in essence those that had been deployed in the past, all the way back to High Antiquity, the eras of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties (traditionally 2205–49 BCE), and back beyond them to the Sage Kings of the remotest past.

‘Painting’ is a term we shall come to, but there are other terms operating in the semantic area of ‘representation’ that were understood in the Ming to have both greater age and a wider compass. One of the most important of these was *xiang*, which I choose to follow Willard J. Peterson in translating here as ‘figure’.¹ He demonstrates the centrality of this term to understanding the most prestigious commentary to the earliest and most important of the canonical texts, the *Yi jing*, or ‘Book of Change’.² The ‘figures’ of which this commentary speaks, when it states that ‘Being the *Change* is a matter of providing figures. . . . Providing figures is a matter of resembling’,³ are the trigrams and hexagrams, those groups of three and six broken and unbroken lines (visible round the neck of the jar in illus. 18) which lie not only at the heart of the text’s prognosticatory

aspects, but also of its cosmological explicatory force. For Ming readers of the text (and this included the entire body of the educated), the trigrams and hexagrams are therefore without doubt the primary representations, primary not only by virtue of their antiquity but also by virtue of their comprehensive power. Peterson explains:

Each of the sixty-four hexagrams has a name, most of which are words or terms referring to particular objects and activities which are involved in ‘figuring’ (*hsiang*) [= *xiang*] the situation revealed by the act of divination. The word *hsiang*, as used in the ‘Commentary’, is sometimes rendered into English as ‘image’, which connotes resemblance and implies an act of perception. *Hsiang* often is the object of the verb ‘to observe’ (*kuan*), which supports translating *hsiang* as image. However *hsiang* are independent of any human observer; they are ‘out there’, whether or not we look. . . . Therefore I find that the English word ‘figure’ comes closer to covering the meanings of *hsiang* in the ‘Commentary’. A figure is an image or likeness, but it is also a form or shape, a design or configuration or pattern, and a written symbol; ‘to figure’ is to represent as a symbol or image, but also to give or bring into shape. Taking *hsiang* as ‘figure’ also maintains a distinction from *hsing*, translated conventionally as ‘form’. *Hsing* is used of classes of physical objects as well as particular physical objects, often with an implication of ‘that which is tangible’. *Hsiang* is used of classes of objects and particular physical objects . . . , as well as events . . . , and in the ‘Commentary’ has the added implication of ‘that which is portentous for human conduct’. Both the form and the figure of a given thing are perceivable; it is the figure, according to the ‘Commentary’, which is especially meaningful.⁴

The text furthermore provides a theoretical justification of the inadequacy of the purely verbal in the realm of representation, by claiming (and attributing the words explicitly to Confucius himself); ‘Sages set up figures [rather than rely on words] in order to bring out exhaustively what is thought’.⁵ ‘Figure’ and ‘form’ remained live terms in Ming writing on visual forms of representation.⁶ ‘Form’ in particular is a word with a very wide distribution, as when the sixteenth-century writer Lang Ying characterizes the *yang* principle as having no form, describes the geomantic configuration of a certain city as having the ‘form of a sleeping ox’, or says ‘Snow is made when water congeals to take on a form’. He uses the word to mean ‘representation’ when he says ‘Nowadays people make the forms of men and women in candy, which people take and eat; is this not near to eating people?’⁷ He uses it too in the context of painting criticism, when he writes of Shen Zhou, ‘In his paintings of mountains and rocks, from the foot of their slopes to the top, the form (*xing*) and gesture (*shi*) of the greater and lesser arteries are piled together in the configuration of layers, yet without the attitude of sleekness’.⁸

However by the Ming period *xiang*, Peterson’s ‘figure’, as seen in the previous chapter, had developed a very precise meaning, to do with repre-

sentations of the human form, principally the human visage. The older and newer meanings, now represented by two different graphs, appear together in Lang Ying again, in his discussion of the four natural phenomena of wind, thunder, rain and lightning, and the weird appearances by which the deities of these forces are represented in temple sculptures. When he says, ‘thunder takes its image from the trigram *zhen* . . .’ he employs the older form of the graph without the element indicating a human being (the ‘man’ radical: no. 9). However in discussing the ‘images’ of the deities he uses the graph with the man radical.⁹ It is this sense of *xiang* as ‘image, effigy, portrait’ that is dominant in Ming writing, but the deeper sense of ‘figure’ is never wholly absent, and remains available for appropriation, particularly in learned or more philosophically inflected writing on the visual, as when Gui Youguang writes in the second half of the sixteenth century, ‘The Way of all under Heaven cannot be sought through figures. Seeking the Way through figures is to restrict the Way to those figures . . .’¹⁰

The etymology of *xiang* meant that macrocosmic perspectives were never absent in considering images like those where conventions of social role would seem to be foremost (see illus. 50, 56 and 57). This was true largely through the association of *xiang*/figure with *xiang*/image. It was true through another homophone as well, as we have already seen. Richard Vinograd, the leading scholar of Ming–Qing portraiture sums up effectively:

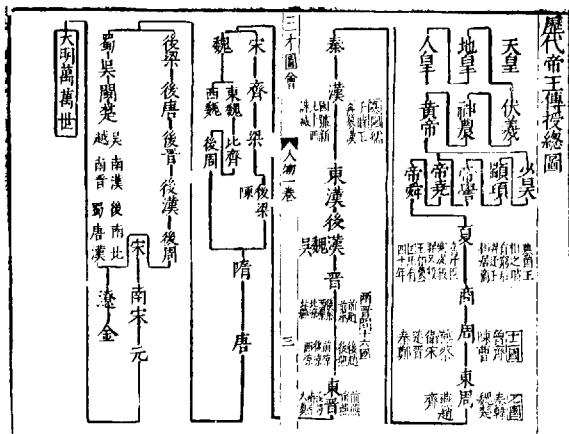
The standard Chinese character for ‘portrait’, read *xiang*, is homophonous with the character for fortune-telling or fate reading. The character for ‘portrait’ comprises a significant component for human being plus an element that refers to the images, or heavenly patterns, that are manifested in earthly objects. Thus the character might suggest that the portrait image reflects a heaven-endowed appearance that can be interpreted in ways related to the process of fate reading in physiognomic evaluation.¹¹

In Ming usage, the term was generally circumscribed to images of the individual, generally of a named individual. Thus illus. 57 is actually labelled as a *xiang*/image, and the same term can be safely attached to illus. 56, which it so closely resembles. Illus. 28 might conceivably have been conceptualized in the Ming under the title *Meiren xiang*, ‘Image of a beauty’, but it is unlikely that illus. 13 would have been titled as a *xiang* of the Song Dynasty scholar Su Dongpo, since what it represented is not the image of the man in a physiognomic cosmological sense, but an incident from his life, his triumphant return from exile. Another term would have been used for that.

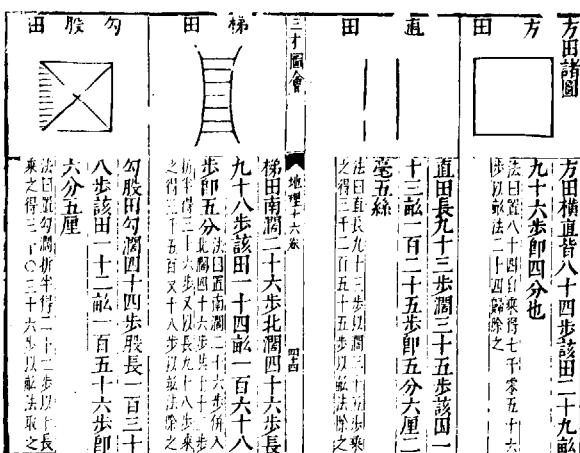
The term in question is *tu*, which the first dictionary to hand defines as ‘A map; a picture; a diagram; a portrait’, seemingly making it cover any

form of representation in visual form at all. Indeed its semantic range is such that no single English term seems appropriate. As a verb the graph can carry a range of meanings in the area of ‘to hope, anticipate, plan, scheme’.¹² All of the images in this book are capable of being subsumed under this heading, signed pictures by prestigious artists like the Shen Zhou scroll (illus. 3), as much as anonymous maps or the scenes of examination success portrayed on lacquer boxes, the one-off textile as much as the mass-produced book. The standard way in which paintings are titled in the Ming period, as indeed now, is with a phrase which ends with the word *tu*. A hand scroll (see illus. 13) is titled in Chinese *Dongpo Yu tang yan gui tu juan*, literally ‘Picture scroll of [Su] Dongpo’s return from the Banquet in the Jade Hall’. Horizontal hand scrolls are now, and were in the Ming, *tu juan*, just as vertical hanging scrolls are *tu zhou*. I have already translated *tu* frequently as ‘picture’, but this ignores the fact that in the Ming it was often used for configurations of text alone, where a word like ‘chart’ seems more appropriate. The print taken from the encyclopedia ‘The Pictorial Compendium of the Three Powers’ of 1607, and showing the succession of dynastic houses (illus. 60), is a *tu*, just as much as is any of the ‘pictures’ or ‘paintings’ shown elsewhere in this book. A *tu* could be very simple or very complex. The basic geometric forms of square and circle, taken from the *San cai tu hui* are captioned collectively as a *tu* (illus. 61). So also is the *Tai ji He tu*, ‘River Chart [or Diagram] of the Supreme Ultimate’ (illus. 5), taken from a text printed in 1602, the *Yi jing Lai zhu tu jie*, ‘Illustrated Explanation of the Classic of Change Annotated by Mr Lai’, by Lai Zhide (1525–1604).¹³ Here again, the question of pictures and visuality in the Ming seems to lead back inexorably to the foundational text of so much speculative thinking of the period, the ‘Change’. Lai himself used a visual metaphor in speaking of this text, claiming, ‘The figures are as a mirror, and in that mirror the myriad things are all reflected’. What distinguishes his text from numerous other commentaries on the ‘Change’, produced continuously from early imperial times down to the present day, is its concentration on *tu*, ‘pictures’, ‘diagrams’ or ‘charts’, of which it contains well in excess of 100 examples. There was an extremely long and illustrious history of the inclusion of such diagrams in published works of philosophy, dating back to the beginnings of the printed book in the Song period. The *Xing li da quan*, ‘Grand Compendium on Spirit and Principle’ of the Song philosopher Zhu Xi, whose work was canonical in the Ming examination system, is full of diagrams, and there was a new burst of texts in imitation of it written during the sixteenth century.¹⁴ Such diagrams should not be thought of as merely supportive illustrations to the argument, but in many cases were the argument.¹⁵

The prestige of such *tu* stemmed, although in a way which was by no



60 Woodblock print showing a chart of the orthodox transmission of political power from antiquity to the reigning Ming dynasty, from the encyclopaedia *The Pictorial Compendium of the Three Powers*, 1607.



61 Woodblock print showing geometrical forms, from the encyclopaedia *The Pictorial Compendium of the Three Powers*, 1607.

means uncontested in the Ming, from the primal images, not generated by man, which had been attached to published editions of the 'Classic of Change' since the Song. Of these, perhaps the single most important of all, and one around which learned debate swirled, was the *He tu*, the 'Yellow River Diagram/Chart/Picture'. If one turns to the section on *tu* in any Ming encyclopedia of origins, it is with this magical cosmogram that the explanation invariably begins. Although not presented to the throne until 1701, the enormous compilation *Yuanjian lei han* contains embedded within it the Ming encyclopedia *Tang lei han* of 1618, compiled by Yu Anqi.¹⁶ This makes it clear that for Ming intellectuals the locus classicus of the concept of *tu* was indeed the 'Yellow River Diagram', mentioned in classical texts and believed to have been miraculously voided out of the waters on the back of a magical beast (usually taken to be a horse) in remote antiquity. The first quotation is from the 'Change', and again

from the ‘Commentary on the Attached Verbalisations’ which is so important for the related concept of *xiang*/figure; ‘The River brought forth the Diagram, and the Sage took it as a model’.¹⁷ Numerous other quotations make this the *He tu* the locus classicus of the concept *tu*. As a modern scholar has written quite correctly:

Later commentators on the *He tu* and the *Luo shu*, moreover, interpreted these figures as the paradigms not just of nonary cosmograms, but of all *tu*, a Chinese character that might designate almost any form of graphic representation including charts, diagrams, maps and illustrations in general.¹⁸

But what exactly is the ‘River Diagram’? The early texts that mention it (and there are others from the pre-imperial centuries, including Confucius’ own lament that he had not been favored with such a miraculous charter of legitimacy) are silent on its appearance.¹⁹ Thankfully, the question of its origins is less germane to the present discussion than is that of how it was conceptualized and represented in the Ming period, and that is much less problematical. The ‘River Diagram’ is the pattern of black-and-white dots which appears superimposed on the interlocking spirals in illus. 5. (Those spirals alone form the *Taiji tu*, or ‘Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate’, often known in English since the 1960s as a ‘yin-yang symbol’.) These dots were believed to be collated with the eight trigrams, and hence with the concepts of roundness and of the heavens, while the equally numinous ‘Luo River Writing’ was a pattern of dots associated with the number nine, with squareness and with the earth.

For a sixteenth-century writer like Gui Youguang, whose interests in artistic representation were certainly only average for a man of his class (he painted no pictures, patronized no famous artists, engaged in no aesthetic debate), the illustrations to the ‘Changes’ were still of surpassing interest, and his absorption in them may be taken as not untypical. He devotes three separate essays to the subject in his collected works, and significantly they inaugurate the collection as a whole, underlining their importance.²⁰ However the point of his essays is not to explicate the *tu* printed in editions of the ‘Changes’ in his day (and which are multiplied to an unprecedented degree in Lai Zhide’s work), but to challenge their authenticity head on. Like some other scholars of the sixteenth century, Gui had become convinced that diagrams such as this were not miraculous creations of remotest antiquity, but were instead confections of the Song period. He lays the blame almost exclusively on the great numerological thinker Shao Yong (1011–77), who was certainly the creator of the ‘River Diagram’ in the form in which it was known after his day.²¹ His complaint is that in representing the concepts of the ‘Change’ in this way they are inevitably limited and in some way trivialized. His views are forerunners

of those yet more forcefully expressed in the seventeenth century and subsequently by textual scholars such as Hu Wei (1633–1714), who conclusively disproved the antiquity of these venerable images.²² What is important for the present enquiry is the existence and prosecution, from the sixteenth century onwards of debate which is essentially about the adequacy of representation, and of the contested primacy of visual and purely verbal explanations of phenomena. In some ways it parallels the arguments at court about the representation of Confucius in ritual contexts through sculpture or through written characters alone (and in both cases the ultimate victory was to be with the written word, texts were to be the source of state power and not pictures). It is also an argument about the authenticity of illustrations in books. All uses of the word *tu*, and as we have seen they are extraordinarily broad, existed in the context of this debate, which was certainly unknown to the vast majority of the population, but which was to play a part in shifts in the discursive field of representation inhabited by the educated élite.

What is striking about the entirety of the entry on *tu* in the 1701 encyclopedia *Yuan jian lei han* is how brief and in a sense unproblematical it appears (it covers just two pages). Its selection of quotations in which the term appears goes on to other *tu* mentioned in the Classics, some of which must be what we would call ‘pictures’, like the ‘Phoenix Bit Picture’ looked at by the Yellow Emperor and his Minister, and mentioned in the ‘Spring and Autumn Annals’ attributed to Confucius, and some of which we would call ‘maps’. But some are patterns, like the stones the third-century strategist Zhuge Liang laid out to form the famous *ba zhen tu*, ‘Diagram of the Eight Configurations’, with which he trained his troops in military manoeuvres. Most of these are related to place and space at the beginning, but that gives way to entries (p. 15b) like the ‘Picture of the Gathering of Kings’ (*Wang hui tu*) showing the tributaries of Tang Taizong, or a more contemporary case like the *Di jian tu shuo* ‘Illustrated Account of the Mirror of Emperors’, a printed work presented to the throne in 1571 by Zhang Juzheng. There is a listing of a few other Tang, Song, Yuan and Ming famous *tu*, in the sense of ‘pictures’, all of which are distinguished by being in some way connected with governance, whether they be pictures of auspicious omens, or a picture of Luoyang to aid the Hongwu Emperor in considering the city as a capital site at the very beginning of the Ming. These ‘pictures’ are all anonymous. The selection of entries is very different from Ming discussions of ‘picture as art’, which forms an entirely different category in another part of the encyclopedia altogether, under the heading of yet another term which now needs to be engaged with, that of *hua*, conventionally ‘painting’.

At least one Ming text uses the verb *hua* to describe the activity of creat-

ing the trigrams, and all relevant writers agree on the antiquity of the procedure, however it is understood.²³ Right at the beginning of the Ming, the statesman and philosopher Song Lian (1310–81), not a figure very prominent in the history of painting although distinguished as a calligrapher, provided his explanation of the boundaries of this category in an essay entitled, 'The Origins of Painting' (*Hua yuan*):

Shihuang and Cangjie are both ancient sages. Cangjie created writing (*shu*) and Shihuang made painting (*hua*).²⁴ Thus writing and painting are not different Ways, but are as one in their origin. When Heaven and Earth first opened up, the ten thousand things were born in transformation, each with their own colour and form, in profusion and multiplicity, yet they had no names, since Heaven and Earth did not have the means to name them. The sages appeared, and rectified the names of the ten thousand things, which were the lofty ones and which the mean, which were the animal ones and which the vegetable, and after this they could be apprehended. Thereupon the forms of sun and moon, wind and thunder, rain and dew, frost and snow above, the manifestation of rivers and seas, mountains and peaks, grasses and trees, birds and beasts below, and in the middle the differentiation of human affairs, separating and uniting, the principles of things, fullness and emptiness were transformed through divine power, made appropriate through alteration, and achieved the needs of the people together with a fulfillment of the desires of things. If there were no writing there would be no means to record things; if there were no painting there would be no means to show things. Is it not that these two reach the same point by different routes? Thus I say that writing and painting are not different Ways, but are as one in their origin.²⁵

He goes on to stress the didactic and above all representational aspects of painting, its ability to record the all-important details of clothing and regalia which underlay the ideal hierarchical social order of antiquity. Painting's intimate connections with one of the six traditional classes into which characters were categorized, that of 'figures of forms' (*xiang xing*), make it capable of representational acts which the script forms to which it is so closely allied cannot achieve. Thus it was that in ancient times the classical texts were all illustrated; he names specifically the 'Book of Songs', 'Classic of Filial Piety', the dictionary *Er ya*, the Confucian 'Anlects' and the 'Spring and Autumn Annals', and of course the 'Book of Change.' However, with the decay of ancient virtues and morality painting has inevitably declined from its original lofty, and above all mimetically representational, purpose. Now what is represented are the splendours of chariots, horses and servant girls, the beauties of flowers and birds, the remoteness of mountains, rocks and waters, such that 'the ancient intention is decayed'.

Song Lian's analysis may be in line with political discourses of decline from a golden age, but it is not totally idiosyncratic. Several elements of it

are strongly visible nearly two centuries later in the writing of a figure from the mid-Ming who knew many of the most important élite artists of the day, and who wrote extensively on the history and present state of painting, He Liangjun. His entry on the origins of painting forms part of his extensive comments on the subject, contained in his miscellany, ‘Collected Discourses from the Studio of the Four Friends’, first published in 1560; ‘Writing and painting come originally from a common source, for painting is one of the six forms of the script, the so-called “figures of forms” (*xiang xing*)’.²⁶ He too stresses the mimetic functions of painting in representing correctly the insignia of rule. Clearly as a man of taste in mid-Ming terms, He Liangjun did not believe that it was the function of art slavishly to represent the observable world. He knew far better than that, and indeed says so at other points in his extensive writings on painting.²⁷ However the stress that he and other writers put on the mimetic, didactic and representational *origins* of the very category *hua* should make us aware that however far ‘beyond representation’ a number of theorists had gone, the question of representation in visual culture was still a live one in the sixteenth century, a ground of dispute rather than an uncontested foundation. There is an awareness of this in the definitions of painting given in the *Yuanjian lei han*, and taken from a number of early dictionaries:

The *Guang ya* states that painting is similitude (*hua lei ye*). The *Er ya* states that painting is form (*hua xing ye*). The *Kao gong ji* states that the craft of laying on colours is called painting. The *Shuo wen* states that painting is boundaries, that images of the boundaries round fields are painting. The *Shi ming* states that painting is hanging up, hanging up the coloured images of things.²⁸

However by comparison with the brief coverage of *tu* as a category in this text, that of *hua* is very extensive, quoting extensively from canonical writers on the history of painting and famous practitioners back to the fifth century, giving mini-biographies of famous artists. This is by and large a discussion not about ‘painting’ but about *painters*, individual named creators. The reader is given accounts not only of painters and painting drawn from dynastic histories, but also from painting texts and *biji*. A typical example would be the mini-biography/characterisation of Shen Zhou drawn from the writings of Wang Shizhen.²⁹ The *Yuanjian lei han* is an imperially sponsored compilation, created by a team of leading scholars, but if we look at a much more ‘popular’ (in the sense of commercially published) encyclopedia of the Ming period, the same concentration on painters as the central part of the discourse of painting is equally evident. The encyclopedia *Shan tang si kao* was brought out in 1619 by a prolific publishing house in Fujian, which catered to the lower end of the (still élite) literate

part of the population.³⁰ Painting here appears as part of the broad category of 'Skills and Arts', together with not only such activities as medical practice, divination, physiognomy and geomancy (with which it may share a cosmological basis), but also with acting and acrobatics, archery, chess and the game of pitch-pot. What the reader is supplied with is mostly a series of anecdotes about famous painters, culled from a wide range of historical sources. Occasionally these may assume a certain level of knowledge on the part of the reader (e.g. by the use of some of the technical language of aesthetic debate, words like *qi yun* 'spirit consonance'). But more often they provide the reader with the material for cultured conversation, explaining quite clearly topoi of painting like the Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei's painting of his Wangchuan Villa, and quoting the relevant lines of poetry. There is a heavy concentration on the Tang Dynasty and on citations from Tang poetry, but there are also hefty chunks of the near-canonical writings of Su Shi, mixed in with anecdotes from fiction, including examples of the genre (often with erotic overtones) in which pictures come to life.³¹ This density of cultural allusion is one of the things, if not the only thing, that separated the category of 'painting' from the broader category of 'pictures'. One of the proofs of the narrower nature of the category is that it was possible to make a picture of a painting, as is seen in the early fifteenth-century primer *Xin bian dui xiang si yan*, arguably the earliest illustrated primer in the world (illus. 62).³² Here each object stands to the left of the character that names it (the characters for the right-hand column of pictures are on the facing page), and second from the top on the extreme left is painting, *hua*, clearly a hanging scroll with its mounting, the subject-matter possibly being bamboo and pine. A painting was a thing as well as a category, and as such could be pictured. To picture a picture, a *tu* in the same way would have been impossible.

Ways of looking

Roland Barthes' famous demand for a 'history of looking' might be criticized by now for its rather naive-seeming presumption that there would be *a history of looking*, rather than culturally specific multiple histories of looking. This subject has scarcely been addressed at all with regard to the extremely rich material on the history of visuality in China, and the present attempt can be no more than a sketch of what needs to be done and the questions posed. We need to take up the challenge that Peter Wagner derives from Bourdieu, when he asserts:

For the eye of the beholder is not a given constant; it is the product of institutional settings and social forces constituting that which Bourdieu labels the 'habitus'. It is by historicizing the categories of thinking and perceiving in the



62 Woodblock print, from the primer *Xin bian du xiang si yan*, 1436. To the right of each picture is the character for that item; *hua*, ‘painting’ is second from the top on the extreme left-hand column.

observer’s experience, not by dehistoricizing them in the construction of a transhistorical (‘pure’) eye, that we can arrive at an adequate understanding of understanding.³³

What was the understanding in the Ming period of what it meant to ‘look at’ a picture? Given that ‘picture’, as I have attempted to show above, is a complex term, it will be no surprise to engage with the claim that ‘looking’ was no less complex, and similarly represented by a number of different terms, whose deployment and semantic spread we can barely begin to apprehend without a great deal more work.

It is important to keep hold of the fact that before vision can take place, however it is conceptualized, opportunities for vision must present themselves. The question of who gets to look, where and when, must be considered together with what there was to look at. In some cases it might be purely geographical distance that prevented viewing of some particular thing; Zhang Dafu writes of how ‘The Zhanyuanfang of the Jingdesi has sixteen images (*xiang*) of lohan, which are traditionally from the brush of Guanxiu. I have heard of them for twenty years, and today happened to be passing and managed to inspect seven of them’.³⁴ The writings of the Ming élite are full of such accounts of works which they ‘managed to see’. But more usually it was social distance, rather than geo-

graphical, which stood in the way of ‘managing to see’ some famous picture, especially with the abandonment of the mural format by major artists, and the concomitant rise of more intimate types of picture. In the Ming, what you saw depended on who you were, and who you knew, also on what time of the year you were viewing the work. It is an assumption, but a reasonable one, that seasonal and festival factors may have governed which pictures from a collection were brought out to be shown to visitors; if you visited Xiang Yuanbian in summer you did not look at ‘winter subjects’ such as plum blossoms. This opens up the possibility of understanding Carlo Ginzburg’s ‘iconic circuits’ in the Chinese setting as seasonal rather than geographical. When it came to ‘painting’ (*hua*), the formats of handscroll, hanging scroll and album leaf gave the owners of the physical objects a control over the viewing of the representations which was different from that enjoyed by the patron of the larger forms of contemporary painting in Europe. There, access to the space where the picture was (even though this was restricted on the grounds of status or gender) gave access to the picture. In China, where there was no space where the picture continuously ‘was’, every act of viewing was also an act of social interaction. The great Wen Zhengming, touchstone of taste for the Suzhou élite, was frequently visited by his younger friend He Liangjun who describes what must stand for thousands of such élite interactions over paintings, if at a particularly rarefied level.

Hengshan [= Wen Zhengming] was particularly fond of the criticism of calligraphy and painting. Whenever I visited him, I would always go with something from my collection. The master would examine it for the whole day, and would also produce items that he owned to the best of his abilities. He would often come into his study bearing four scrolls, and when they had been unrolled he would go in and change them for another four, untiring even though we went through several complete changes.³⁵

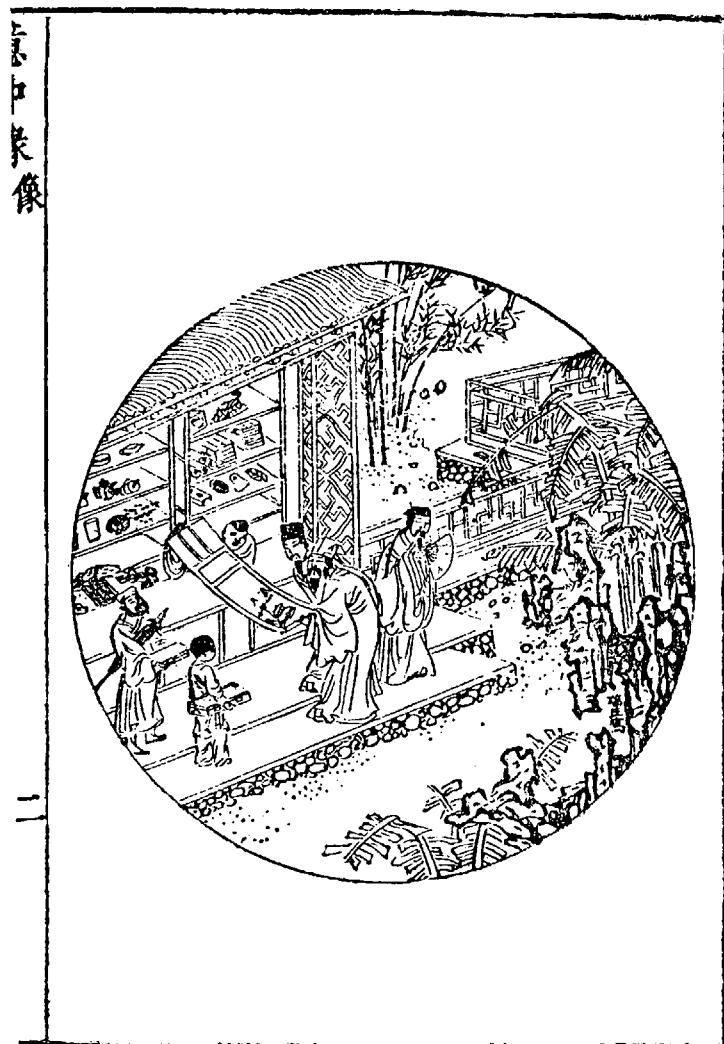
Such accounts are so ubiquitous as to have become almost invisible, but this example from among so many is worth pausing to consider. It shows, for example, the importance of reciprocity. He Liangjun is shown pictures from Wen’s collection so freely precisely because he would ‘always go with something from my collection’. Expecting to see but not to show was neither good manners, nor likely to be successful. Indeed it seems likely that the particular place of painting and the viewing of painting in the lives of the Ming élite was made possible precisely by the portability of the pictures they valued, and the ease with which any important work could be transported to an occasion of viewing. Another obvious point emerging from the passage is that looking was, at least ideally (and Wen’s behaviour for the admiring He always embodies the ideal) both limited and intense. A few pictures are looked at for a long time, and the visitor

does not see the total scope of the collection, stored in a room different from the one where it is viewed, a room not accessible even to an intimate. There is a reticence of vision here that we shall see more fully expressed in the ideal as the Ming period goes on, an élite reticence which runs directly counter to, and is in tension with, the expanded sphere of the pictorial found in things like books, and on figuratively decorated ceramics, lacquer, textiles and other luxury goods.

Ming pictures that show gentlemen looking at pictures (and which must be taken as representations of ideal circumstances, not as documentary evidence) always stress the collective nature of looking (illus. 68), and it is rarer to see an image of someone looking at a picture entirely by themselves. In the album leaf shown, which is by the early sixteenth-century professional master Qiu Ying, the small number of pictures on the table is in contrast with the great heaps of archaic bronzes standing ready for connoisseurly perusal. And in an illustration to an early seventeenth-century drama (illus. 63), which shows gentlemen studying a picture for sale in a relatively modest antique shop, notice again that two heads are bent simultaneously over the scroll which the shopkeeper holds up. It seems highly likely that many acts of élite looking were indeed precisely acts of communal looking, occasions on which élite values were exchanged, tested, reasserted and spread to members of the younger generation. It is for occasions like this that the encyclopedias such as *Shan tang si kao* are perhaps designed, giving those without extensive collections of their own the cultural capital necessary to participate from the fringes in the presence of their elders and betters.

Another factor should be noted resulting from the physical nature of the formats of painting, and that is the necessity of servants to their manipulation. They are present in both illus. 68 and 63, in the former bringing in another picture at the bottom right, and in the latter (the shopkeeper is effectively a servant) holding the picture up. ‘Hanging scrolls’ as they are known to curators today are not often represented in Ming painting as actually hanging on the walls. Much more often they are shown being held aloft by servants on forked poles, as can be seen on the ceramic jar in illus. 27. This not only limited the amount of time a scroll could be examined (even servants have a limit on how long they can hold something up), but it also emphasized that it was people with servants who were able to look in the socially appropriate manner.

But what was that manner? What are the figures in illus. 68 and 63 actually doing? In the broadest sense what they are doing is covered in Ming usage by the term *shang jian*, a binome meaning both ‘discriminate on the grounds of quality’ and ‘tell true from false’.³⁶ Several late Ming texts give more precise prescriptions on what they *ought* to be doing, and on how



63 Woodblock print from the drama *Yi zhong yuan*, showing gentlemen inspecting a painting in an antique shop, 1644–61.

pictures ought to be (and ought not to be) looked at. These rules and prescriptions had antecedents which went back at least to the thirteenth century.³⁷ The *Hui miao*, a text with a Preface dated 1580, contains a fairly typical list of 'Rules (or 'Methods') for contemplating painting' (*Guan hua zhi fa*), opening with what was probably sound advice: 'When you see a shortcoming do not sneer at it, but seek out a strength; when you see dexterity do not praise it but seek out artlessness . . .'.³⁸ The social constraints requiring viewers to find something to praise can well be imagined, and explain the often uninformative nature of the colophons

which were added to pictures or their mountings during these acts of collective viewing. However, perhaps the most startling analogy, and one which is repeated in a number of texts, is that between looking at a painting and looking at a woman. ‘Looking at a painting is like looking at a beautiful woman (*mei ren*)’, says the *Hui miao*, in a formulation which quite startlingly anticipates the idea of the ‘gaze’, and its development in feminist theory in recent art-historical debate.³⁹ Women were certainly considered as the objects of a connoisseurly gaze in the Ming, ranked and appraised like other forms of élite male consumption.⁴⁰ Other Ming texts make exactly the same connection between women and artworks, which heads for example the miniature essay on ‘Connoisseurship’ in the ‘Treatise on Superfluous Things’ of Wen Zhenheng:

Looking at calligraphy or painting is like facing a beautiful woman, one must not have the slightest air of coarseness or frivolity. For the paper or silk of old paintings is brittle, and if one does not do it right when rolling them they can very easily be damaged. Nor must they be exposed to wind or sunlight. One must not look at pictures by lamplight, for fear of falling sparks, or lest candle grease stain them. If after food or wine you wish to contemplate a hand scroll or hanging scroll, you must wash your hands with clean water, and in handling them you must not tear them with your fingernails. Such prescriptions it is not necessary to enumerate further. However one must seek not to offend in all things, and avoid striking a forced air of purity. Only in meeting a true connoisseur, or someone with a deep knowledge of antiquity can one enter into converse with them. If you are faced with some northern dolt do not produce your treasures.⁴¹

The topos that ‘looking at a painting is like looking at a beauty’ appears again in the very influential *Shan hu wang hua lu* of 1643, in its section quoting earlier writers on painting. It gives what may be the earliest citation of the phrase, from the writings of Tang Hou (active c.1320–30), who made the somatic connection even more explicit; ‘Looking at painting is like looking at a beautiful woman. Her air, her spirit, her “bones” are there beside her flesh’.⁴² In all these texts, there are a number of words for the act of vision itself, which now needs to be examined more closely. One of these is *kan*, the simple verb ‘to see’ which every foreign student of Chinese learns in or shortly after the first lesson; in Modern Standard Chinese *Wo kan ni* means ‘I see you.’ Effort is not necessarily involved. If an object is there, a person will see it. However as used by a late Ming writer like Wang Keyu looking and seeing are not the same thing where painting is concerned. For him, *kan hua*, ‘looking at painting’, is not a natural physiological act but a learned skill, analogous to the way in modern Chinese *Wo kan shu* means not ‘I see the book’ but ‘I read the book.’ He is explicit about the socially limited suitability of ‘looking at painting’; ‘Looking at painting is basically suitable for the gentleman (*shi da fu*)’, who have

the financial resources to collect and the ‘strength of eye’ (*mu li*) to appreciate. (I will return to ‘strength of eye’ shortly.) He further states, ‘The methods for looking at painting cannot be grasped in one attempt...’, and he speaks of ‘looking at painting’ as something that needs to be ‘studied’ (the word is *xue*).⁴³ He also, at least implicitly, explains what will happen if the skills are not mastered:

When people nowadays discuss painting they know nothing of the spiritual subtleties of brush method and spirit consonance, but first point out the resemblances; resemblances are the viewpoint of the vulgar. ... When people nowadays look at painting they mostly grasp the resemblances, not realising that resemblance was the least important thing for the men of antiquity....⁴⁴

The vulgar, the uneducated, will look and will see the wrong things, or the trivial things. But at least they can look, if inadequately. There is another word for the act of regarding a picture in the Ming, which is more restricted in its usage, but richer in its connotations. This better looking, which I have rather unsatisfyingly expressed in the immediately preceding translations with the English word ‘contemplate’, is conveyed in Chinese by the word *guan*. When Zhang Dafu finally managed to see the lohan scrolls by Guanxiu, this was what he did to them. When Wen Zhenheng talks about purifying oneself after food or drink it is in order to ‘contemplate’ a scroll. The word has a presence in colloquial as well as highly literary forms of written Ming Chinese; when Master Han sets about studying the corpse of Li Ping’er to paint her portrait, the text says he *da yi guan kan*, literally ‘struck a gaze and looked’.⁴⁵ Wang Keyu quotes separate rules (*fa*) to do with ‘contemplating’ painting, which involve the separate ‘contemplation’ of the sixth-century Six Laws of Xie He, the venerable and enigmatic prescriptive basis for so much later writing on art. These are not visual objects, certainly not things the vulgar can see with their eyes. Even the élite may fail in the act of contemplation; ‘When people nowadays contemplate paintings they do not know the Six Laws, but just open the scroll and then add some comment or appreciation. If someone asks them the finer points they do not know how to reply...’.⁴⁶

This act of *guan*, ‘contemplation’, is therefore for Ming élite theorists the performative part of visuality, beyond the merely physiological. It brings with it connotations of spiritual practice that link it to the written religious traditions of Buddhism and Daoism, as well as to active forms of the religious life which were of ancient origins, but which were infused with new vitality in the late Ming. Scholars of religion who have studied this have tended to use the term ‘visualization’ to translate *guan*, and this will be adhered to in the immediately following discussion. The sense of *guan* as ‘to

scrutinize, to examine carefully' predates the introduction of Buddhism to China, and the formative stages of Daoism as a religion, appearing in the first-second-century dictionary *Shuo wen jie zi*.⁴⁷ The question of priority between the two religious systems with regard to the meditative techniques which came to be known under the name does not need to concern us here. What is clear is that, by as early as the fourth century, the idea of 'visualization', often in the form of visualizing cosmic journeys, was central to the religious practices of the Shangqing 'Supreme Purity' School of Daoism. Through internal vision, the adept could assemble within the body vast cosmic forces, and hosts of deities in all the detail of their complex and numinous iconography. This idea in its turn is an element in some of the earliest of Chinese theorizing about representation and the image, theorizing which retained its force in the late Ming.⁴⁸ 'Insight meditation', which the French scholar Isabelle Robinet uses to translate *guan* or *neiguan*, is described by her as 'the active, conscious introspection of one's own body and mind'. She has stressed that what is being discussed in the Shangqing texts with regard to visualisation 'cannot be conceived in Western terms as some sort of intellectual or moral introspection, but must be understood in a very concrete way ... to represent is not simply to evoke but also to create'.⁴⁹ And it is this sense of active performance that seems crucial to the concept in all its uses. It is equally present in the Buddhist tradition, permeating the major text to deal with the practices of visualization, the *Guan wu liang shou jing*, or 'Sutra on the Visualization of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life', a fifth-century work that does not have antecedents in the canonical Buddhist literature of India, but is either a translation into Chinese from a lost Central Asian original, or else an original composition in Chinese.⁵⁰ Here *guan* 'visualization' or 'contemplation' formed one of the two key practices of the 'Pure Land' tradition of Buddhism; along with oral recitation of the name of the saviour these practices were fully alive in the late Ming. For the great renewer of Buddhism in the late Ming, the monk Yunqi Zhuhong (1535–1615), the 'Sutra on the Visualization of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life', was one of a limited number of texts which novices in the monasteries he founded were required to memorize, and one of the three Pure Land sutras on which public lectures were regularly given, lectures attended by many members of the élite with whom Zhuhong was on social terms.⁵¹ This gave the Buddhist notion of visualisation a continuing presence in Ming culture, although the precise degree of its impact outside the monastic context needs more research.

There is further evidence that the ancient Daoist understanding of visualization was still circulating in the Ming period. The wealthy Hangzhou merchant, playwright and connoisseur Gao Lian, in his 'Eight

'Discourses on the Art of Living' (1591), lists Daoist books as among those which are an essential part of any gentleman's library, and he makes explicit use of one of the key texts in his discussion of 'Prescriptions for Enlightening the Eyes and Ears'. He quotes the early sixth-century 'Declarations of the Perfected' (*Zhen gao*) by Tao Hongjing (456–536) as follows: 'In seeking the Way you must first ensure that eyes and ears are quick of apprehension, this is the chief matter. For ears and eyes are the ladder in the search for the True, the door to gathering up the Divine – they bear on acquisition and loss and the discrimination between life and death'. Gao goes on to give his own prescriptions for further empowering the eyes, through a form of massage which after two years will allow the adept to read in the dark, and which will achieve the inner alchemical transformation of the 'eye god' (*mu shen*).⁵² The point is that the 'Declarations of the Perfected' is one of the central texts describing visualization practices, which are also visible elsewhere in Gao Lian's prescriptions for a long life through such techniques as 'ingestion of the pneuma of the sun and of the essence of the moon', both of which involve visualizing (*cun*) the relevant heavenly body within one's own physical frame.⁵³ Although *guan* is not used explicitly by Gao Lian in the sense of visualizing meditation, it is at least possible that the term had some of those shadings for others like himself who were steeped in the classic Daoist texts where it is so prominent.

One other Ming word for the act of engaging visually with a picture must be examined, and that is *du*, with the modern dictionary definition 'to read'. The notion of *du hua*, 'reading a painting' may seem strikingly modern in an age when under the impact of methodologies derived from literary studies it is common to refer to a picture as 'a text'. The presence of written inscriptions on so many Chinese pictures (turning them into the 'iconotexts' studied by Peter Wagner) may make this identification even stronger, as may the numerous statements on the common origins of writing and picturing current in the Ming and discussed above. However we must be wary of giving an unacknowledged primacy to the notion of text over image, when by *du hua* Ming writers may not be using an analogy or metaphor, but drawing attention to a common type of action. The question of motion is crucial with regard to vision here. The idea of *du*, 'reading', above all implies a subject whose vision is moving, scanning the characters of a text or the surface of a picture. Importance was attached not to the legibility of the image but to the act of moving the eye across the surface, particularly of the hand scroll as it is sequentially made visible in the act of unrolling. The presence of duration in Ming ideas of visuality is important here, the idea that pictures could not by their physical nature be taken in all at once. By contrast *guan* is a subject whose vision is fixed,

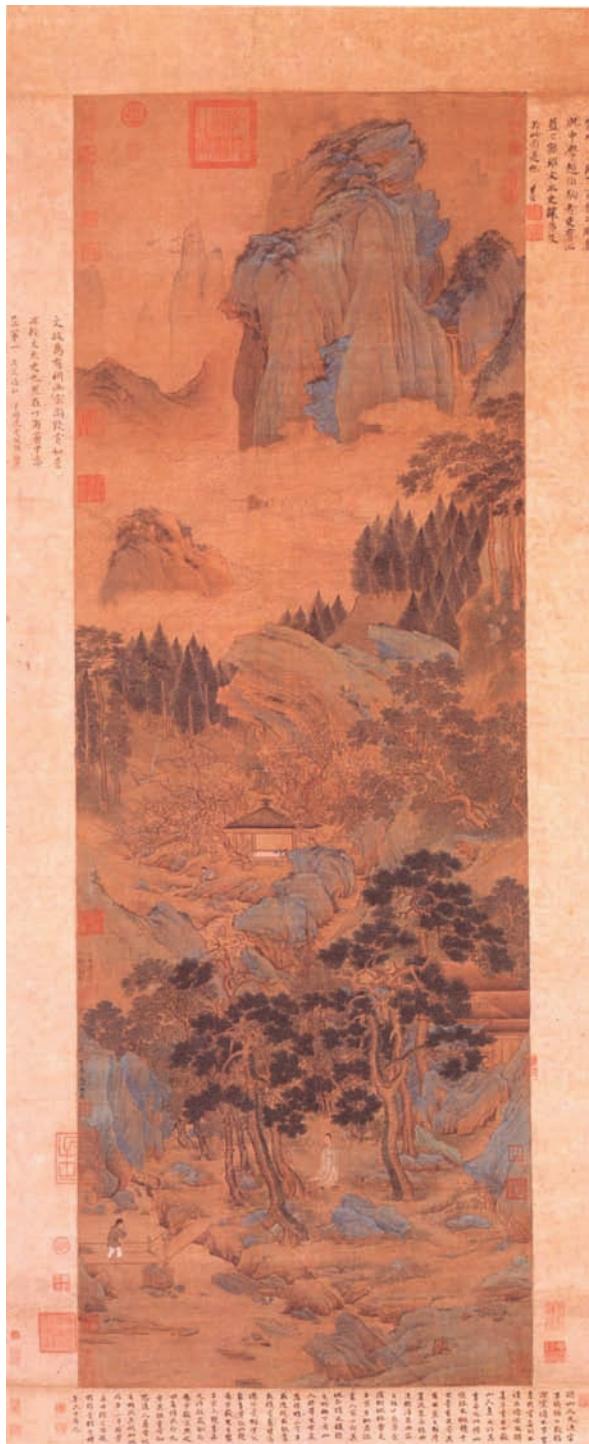
who may penetrate deeper, see more or see further *into* something, rather than across it. In a striking example of this quoted by Shigehisa Kuriyama, the Bronze Age King Hui of Liang had his thoughts read by one Chunyu Kun, of whom a later writer commented; ‘The intention was inside the breast, hidden and invisible, but Kun was able to know it. How? He contemplated (*guan*) the face to peer into the mind’.⁵⁴

The terms *kan*, *guan*, and *du* all appear in the studio names (names chosen by the adult male himself) of individuals in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.⁵⁵ Only one individual has a studio name using *kan*, fourteen have one containing the element *guan*, and eight have one using *du* (usually in the form *du shu*, which may mean ‘studying calligraphy’ just as much as ‘reading books’). To be sure, this is too small and random a sample for anything very meaningful to be extracted from it, but a fruitful line of enquiry might be to consider ways of looking stratified by class or status, with *guan* as a more élite way of looking, whether at a picture, a waterfall or the moon (the connoisseurly discrimination contained in the term *shang jian* is quite explicitly a social attribute). Scholars contemplate, while peasants (along with women, children and eunuchs) just look. Certainly there is a very different relationship to pictures portrayed in illus. 68 and 63 from that shown by an anonymous sixteenth-century artist in illus. 69, depicting an itinerant seller of pictures displaying his wares to a village audience. In the two former pictures, members of the élite lean into the album leaves and the hanging scroll they are inspecting, their body language speaking of an active engagement, as well as of concentrated and focused intelligences. By contrast, the unsophisticated peasants in illus. 69 react with amazement and even horror, one woman covering her face as another hides behind her body, and a young girl turns away. Their bodies stiffen at the sight of the terrifying visage of Zhongkui, queller of demons, since for them the picture is real, they are the uneducated who remain at the level of ‘resemblances’ and for whom mimesis retains its full and terrifying force.

However art-historical theorists were not the only people to whom looking, seeing and visualizing were of concern. Some of the most interesting recent work on the subject of visuality in China approaches it from the point of view of medical practice, and it is to this area, together with some comments on the broad understanding of the act of vision as physiological rather than cultural practice (admitting that to separate these two categories is a very dubious procedure), that I will now turn.

The development of powers of seeing is an aim shared by the medical practitioner, the connoisseur of art and the religious adept alike; indeed to view ‘medicine’ and ‘religion’ in early China as separate discourses may be to commit another serious mistake. Robinet describes how Daoist practices sought not only to make the adept invisible, but also to increase

64 Qiu Ying (active c.1494–c.1552),
Thatched House in the Peach-Blossom Village, first half of 16th century. Palace Museum, Beijing. Inscriptions make it clear this picture was ordered from this famous professional master to be used as a birthday gift.





65 Painted lacquer box for wedding gifts or horoscopes, dated 1600. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



66 Colour woodblock print, from *Conspectus of Sights of the Lakes and Hills* c.1620–40.
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (Estampes).



67 Anon, *Splendours of the Imperial Capital* (detail), 16th century, ink and colour on silk.
Historical Museum, Beijing.



68 Qiu Ying (active c.1494–c.1552), ‘Ranking Ancient Works in a Bamboo Court’, from the album *A Painted Album of Figures and Stories*, first half of 16th century, ink and colour on paper, Palace Museum, Beijing.



69 Anon, *Village Painter Showing his Wares*, 16th century, ink on silk. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.



70 Anonymous, *Landscape*, fraudulent signature of the Tang dynasty master Li Zhaodao, late 16th century, ink and colour on paper. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

李推革為田脫去名大田山地契內必有三四十冊一冊共
計壹畝六分三厘五毫正冊年夏秋一并收歸立此

而此惟入清重光庄



崇禎十三年⑨月廿日李推革入清重光庄
清重恩書

71 Contract dated 1640, written on colourprinted stationery. Such decorated stationery was widespread by the 17th century.

vastly the power of his own sight, through exercises which involve visualizing (*guan*) the transformation of the left eye into a shooting star and the right eye into a bolt of lightning. This is the type of practice described in a different form by Gao Lian in 1591.⁵⁶ The earliest sources on one of the quasi-mythical founders of the medical tradition tell how an elixir given to him by a mysterious stranger gave him the power to see through walls and inside bodies, a testimony to ‘the special affinity between medicine and the gaze’.⁵⁷ Differences between the post-Hippocratic Western medical tradition and that in China have recently been studied in a way which shows that, although from the perspective of Western anatomy, Chinese practice may appear as a ‘failure to look’, it is actually as dependent on visuality; a different visuality. What has been called the ‘primacy of the gaze’, over touch or smell, for example, is every bit as evident as an ideal in the early Chinese medical texts, even if the word used for the performed gaze is yet another one (*wang*), which is rarely used of the act of looking at pictures.

But what of the act of looking as it was understood physiologically? What did Ming thinkers believe was happening when one looked, at a picture or at anything else? An otherwise rather obscure writer named Chen Quanzhi, active in the mid-sixteenth century, supplies a passage which may be helpful as a point of entry:

Eyes are the mirrors of the self, ears are the windows of the body. With much looking the mirrors are dimmed, with too much hearing the windows are stopped. The face is the courtyard of the spirit, the hair is the glory of the brain. If the heart is sad then the face is distressed, if the brain is weakened then the hair is whitened. The essence (or ‘sperm’, *jing*) is the spirit of the body, the intelligence is the treasure of the self. With too much labour the essence is dispersed, planning to the point of exhaustion causes the intelligence to be diminished.⁵⁸

This vitalist position holds that the eyes are possessed of a certain degree of power or force, which can be exhausted if too much looking is done. This is surely bound up with the idea of *mu li*, ‘force of eye’, mentioned above and often referred to in Ming art-historical writing as a desirable attribute of the connoisseur. It is also something which the portraitist aims to capture.⁵⁹ An encyclopedia repeats the classical prescription from the ancient text *Laozi*, which states, ‘The five colours will render the eyes of man blind’. The mythical culture heroes of the remotest past were often possessed of extraordinary ocular apparatus; Cangjie the inventor of writing had four eyes, while the Emperor Shun famously had double pupils, as a symbol of his ‘double intelligence’.⁶⁰ Indeed there is a wealth of material in such texts from which a cultural history of vision in China, touching on topics such as blindness and mantic vision could be constructed. This will not be attempted here, although the continued necessity for such a project must render everything said in this chapter somewhat tentative.

Those who have engaged with the Chinese literature on optics (not the same thing as visuality, which is not reducible to it) generally do so from the standpoint first adumbrated by Joseph Needham in a relatively early volume of *Science and Civilization in China*. Here he stresses one of the main themes of his work, that Chinese thought about the physical world is dominated by a notion of waves and fields of energy, rather than by colliding particles, the world view he characterizes as ‘billiard ball physics’.⁶¹ He discusses in detail the extensive material on optics found in the late Bronze Age text known as the *Mozi*, its understanding of light as linear, its experiments with shadows, focal points, pinholes, inversions of the image, mirrors and refraction. He stresses that Chinese writers on the subject never propose the idea, standard in the Mediterranean world from the Greek Pythagoras down to the work of the Arab Ibn al-Haytham (965–1039 CE), that the eyes emit visual rays that touch the object seen, to give the sensation of sight. Rather the flow is in the opposite direction, from the object to the eye, as the Epicureans believed. However he goes on: ‘Little is known as yet about optical studies in later times. . . . Presumably optics and catoptrics shared in the general decline of the physical sciences during the Ming period, but after the coming of the Jesuits interest was stimulated as in so many other scientific topics’.⁶² This image of Ming decline in the sciences, revived under Jesuit stimulus, is the master narrative of *Science and Civilization in China*. Certainly it seems to be the case that there was little explicit scholarly interest in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, in the complex and corrupt text of the *Mozi*. Few people seem to have read it.⁶³ However the perceived lack of a ‘scientific’ discourse of optics should not be read as a lack of a discourse of visuality, which may be much more widely diffused.

A recent important attempt to bring the discourse of visuality to bear on Chinese image-making at the very end of the seventeenth century, and to engage in a less teleological way with the ‘impact’ of imported technologies of vision, is found in an article by Anne Burkus-Chasson.⁶⁴ Her discussion of the painting ‘Waterfall on Mount Lu’, executed in 1699–1700 by the painter Shitao, describes the work as not a topographical recording of place but ‘a representation of looking that problematized the acts and techniques of the observing subject’.⁶⁵ Both the picture and the inscriptions on it deal with the act of *guan*, of performative looking discussed above. She goes on to make it clear that Shitao’s views on vision participated in a mainstream discourse of sensory perception which was voiced by the extremely influential mid-Ming philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529), who stated, ‘The eye has no substance of its own. Its substance consists of the colours of all things’.⁶⁶ Wang’s philosophical position, which became generally normative among the educated élite of the Ming, held that the

sensory apparatus was both essentially passive, a receptor of stimuli, and of an inferior ontological status to the mind, which it linked to the external world. This primacy of ‘mind’ seems to fit well with the observed anti-mimetic, anti-transcriptional bias of Ming élite aesthetic theory. But it seems to exist in tension with the idea of an active eye, almost a personified eye, present in the notion of ‘strength of eye’ as well as in more popular notions of how vision worked. A short story by the seventeenth-century writer Pu Songling (1640–1715) contains a striking image of the eye as entirely divorced from the workings of the mind. It tells how a lascivious young scholar named Fang Dong chances on a fairy princess, going home on a visit to her family, and ogles her shamelessly. His career as a voyeur is cut short when she flings a handful of magic dust in his face, blinding him completely by causing a thick film to grow over both eyes. While repeating a Buddhist text as an act of repentance, he hears the two tiny figures who inhabit the pupils of his eyes in conversation. These tiny people are subsequently seen exiting his face via a nostril, and returning the same way. They are heard planning to break open the film over one eye from the inside, and subsequently do so, giving the unfortunate Mr Fang back his vision in one eye, but leaving him with a double pupil in his good eye as both ‘pupils’ take up residence on one side of his face.⁶⁷ This belief in miniature inhabitants of the eyeball is widely spread across the cultures of the world, and is presumed to have its origins in the observation of corneal reflections of the human figure there.⁶⁸ Just how literally educated people like Pu Songling, or his Ming predecessors, took such beliefs is at present hard to gauge.

The situation is complicated by the presence during the Ming of what were new technologies of vision, some of them of imported origin. One of these was spectacles, first referred to in the middle of the fifteenth century.⁶⁹ A late sixteenth-century source claims their first appearance was as a diplomatic gift from the Kings of Malacca in 1410, and certainly Lang Ying in the mid-sixteenth century sees them as originating in the ‘Western Ocean’.⁷⁰ Magnifying lenses in the Ming were, according to the very limited sources, seemingly restricted to a single lense rather than a pair, and were worn on a ribbon or on a handle like a lorgnette. Eyeglasses as we know them now were worn in the Ming, but some of the references seem to be to pairs used not so much to improve the sight through magnification, as to prevent and cure inflammations of the eye such as conjunctivitis. For this purpose, lenses were made not out of clear crystal (glass was not used before the nineteenth century), but out of naturally darkened crystal, often of the kind known as ‘tea crystal’.⁷¹ Both kinds probably remained very rare until the end of the Ming. It was only in the second half of the seventeenth century that occasional imports began to be

augmented by spectacles manufactured in any quantity in China, first of all in Guangzhou and Suzhou, and later in Hangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai. The earliest named businesses manufacturing them all date from after 1700, although a specialist named Sun Yunqiu (c.1630–c.1662) is known to have been active as a maker in Suzhou in mid-century, and wrote a treatise on this and other pieces of optical apparatus, a text which has not survived.⁷²

Spectacles' impact on notions of visuality may have been reinforced by that of the telescope, first introduced to China in the late Ming by European missionaries. This piece of apparatus was first mentioned in writing in a Chinese text by the Jesuit Emmanuel Diaz published in 1615, where significantly Galileo is said to have invented the device because he 'lamented the strength of the eye [as insufficient]'. Here again is the notion of 'strength of eye', *mu li*, although now it is something which can be augmented. The first telescope is believed to have been brought to China in 1618, and presented to the emperor in 1634, while in 1626 Adam Schall von Bell published his 'Treatise on the Far-seeing Lense' (*Yuan jing shuo*), illustrating and discussing the apparatus in some detail.⁷³ Telescopes were discussed by late Ming intellectuals, and the instrument provides another fictional voyeur of the period with the ability to spy unobserved on distant beauties. Sun Yunqiu was manufacturing them in mid-century Suzhou. Burkus-Chasson has therefore written of two competing models of vision as available to the élite of the early and middle seventeenth century. One of these, which she argues was ultimately to prove hegemonic in China, was of 'the eye/body within the body of the natural world'. A 'competing model of vision' was however available (but rejected) in the form of the Cartesian disjunction of the observer from the thing observed.⁷⁴ This is cogently argued, and difficult to refute on the existing evidence. However, her findings may be strengthened by an acknowledgment that there may well have been 'competing models of vision' that predated and owed nothing to the introduction of new technologies of the visual under Jesuit auspices. In addition to the expansion in the use and manufacture of spectacles (which had a foreign origin but were independent of Jesuit agency), the late Ming/early Qing seems to have been a period of experiment with regard to a range of optical toys and entertainments. Sun Yunqiu also manufactured kaleidoscopes, while various forms of zoetrope were also used, and reported by Western observers.⁷⁵ When the Jesuit Martin Martini (1614–61) lectured at Louvain in 1654 using lantern slides for what may have been the first time in Europe, he may have been deploying a technology he had seen used in his time in China. It therefore seems possible that the hegemonic model of mind/eye consonance might have faced a certain amount of, if not opposition, then supplementing, by optical

novelties not wholly of Jesuit introduction. A range of ways of seeing may well have been available for appropriation throughout the Ming period, as earlier.

What these ways of seeing may have shared is a common sense of the act of vision as being not a mechanistic response to stimuli, but an act of creation at the same time. The sense of representing as creating fits quite comfortably with recent important if speculative work in the field of epistemology in China. The anthropologist Judith Farquhar, faced with a definition of epistemology as ‘a self-conscious theory of Knowledge’ is reported to have remarked that for a sinologist every word of the definition would have to be reinterpreted, ‘quite possibly including “of”’.⁷⁶ Roger T. Ames, whose work both on his own and with David Hall has been central to this enterprise of reinterpretation, has in an important article focused attention on how translating the Chinese character *zhi* as ‘to know/knowledge’ inevitably forces it into specifically Western patterns of thought centred on the distinction between object and idea. He argues by contrast that in the early Chinese thought he has studied, ‘There is an unbroken line between image as what is real, image as the presentation (*not* re-presentation) of what is real, and image as the meaning of what is real. Image is reality’.⁷⁷ The insistence of Hall and Ames in their collective work that *zhi* is ‘fundamentally performative – it is “realizing” in the sense of “making real”’,⁷⁸ must be engaged with by art historians and those interested in the history of visuality of China, not least for its striking congruence with the sense of vision which is present in the Buddhist and Daoist traditions, and which through them forms part of educated discourse of the image in all later periods. If ‘epistemology’ in China is, as a number of recent scholars have argued, fundamentally about the centring of knowledge in the knower, then might it not be the case equally that visuality in China is about the centring of seeing in the seer?⁷⁹ The implications of this for the history of the visual image in China have only been dimly discerned at present, but if these ideas were to turn out to have any force at all then to locate the ‘difference’ between something called ‘Chinese painting’ and something called ‘Western painting’ *within the painting* would be to commit a fundamental error. Instead, attention would need to be directed to differences expressed through ways of seeing, ways of knowing, ways of connoisseurship. ‘Seeing’ in the Ming would in this argument not be about the production of knowledge but about the production of knowing subjects, a possibility which will be explored further with a case study of one Ming text about pictures aimed at producing a new kind of such subjects.

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