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## **At a Loss at the Crossroads: A Review of Zhang Zhengbo's *Other Voices: Overseas Sinologists on Ancient Chinese Calligraphy and Painting***

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**Abstract:** The rise of Orientalism in the nineteenth century prompted Western scholars to engage with Chinese art from the perspective of the “Other,” thereby inaugurating a sustained history of cross-cultural encounter between Chinese and Western artistic traditions. Over the past century, art historical scholarship in the West has developed a diverse range of methodological frameworks, including iconological analysis, stylistic analysis, cultural field theory, phenomenology, semiotics analysis and indigenous interpretive paradigms. Zhang Zhengbo’s new publication “*Other Voices: Overseas Sinologists on Ancient Chinese Calligraphy and Painting*” offers a systematic review and case-based analysis of these approaches, highlighting the divergences in interpretive perspectives shaped by distinct cultural and intellectual contexts. Focusing on the issues raised in the book, this review considers the respective strengths, limitations, and inherent tensions between approaches that seek to “translate China through the West” and those that aim to “interpret China on its own terms.” It engages these debates considering the historical experience of Sino-Western interaction and integration in modern Chinese art. In practice, cross-cultural research on Chinese art need not be confined to a single methodological approach; rather, it benefits from a stance of flexibility and responsiveness, attuned to the evolving historical and cultural context while maintaining a commitment to pluralistic inquiry. Through such sustained engagement, this approach facilitates both the self-renewal of Chinese art and the deepening of cross-cultural dialogue.

**Keywords:** The Other; cross-cultural exchange; Other Voices: Overseas Sinologists on Ancient Chinese Calligraphy and Painting; Sino-Western artistic exchange

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**标题:** 无为在歧路——评张郑波《他者异语：海外汉学家言说中国古代书画艺术》

**摘要:** 19世纪东方主义思潮推动西方以“他者”视角介入中国艺术研究，中西艺术开启了跨文化互鉴的历史进程。经过百年发展，西方学界形成了风格学、文化场域、现象学、本土阐释等多元研究路径。张郑波的《他者异语》对上述研究范式进行了系统梳理与个案分析，展现了不同文化背景学者的研究差异。本文围绕书中提出的议题，剖析“以西译中”与“以中译中”的利弊与现实矛盾，并参照近代中国艺术界中西融合的实践经验作出回应。实际上，中国艺术的跨文化研究无需追求唯一路径，应秉持顺其自然、与时俱进的理念，顺应时代、坚持多元探索，在持续实践中实现中国艺术的自我革新与跨文化对话。

**关键词:** 他者；跨文化传播；《他者异语》；中西艺术互鉴

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### 1. The Birth of the “Other”

The emergence of Western scholarship on Eastern art from the perspective of the “Other” represented a novel approach within the broader context of the global circulation of artworks, which simultaneously provoked conflict and cultural encounter. The earliest expressions of this research interest can be traced back to nineteenth-century, Paris, where the Orientalist aesthetic craze brought the enigmatic art of the East into the purview of Western aristocrats, scholars, artists, and the general public, thereby giving rise to the concept and field of study now known as “Orientalism.”

Taking into consideration, a case study of Vincent van Gogh: his artistic style was profoundly influenced by Japanese ukiyo-e prints. In *Courtesan* (1887), van Gogh directly replicated a figure from Keisai Eisen’s work (Trede 2011, p. 405). Compared with the original artwork, van Gogh situates the figure within a rectangular frame, suggesting a folding screen or curtain. This device clearly does not depict a real spatial environment; rather, it constructs a non-realist, reconstructed space. The lotus pond, weeping willow, egret, and bamboo in the background operate as a series of symbolic markers of Eastern aesthetics, composing a scene that epitomizes the Orientalist sensibility.

Although we cannot ascertain van Gogh’s precise intentions during the creation of this work, it is evident that, from this composition onward, traces of Eastern aesthetics became discernible in his artistic vocabulary

and had a profound impact on his artistic style. At the early stage, van Gogh's engagement with ukiyo-e exhibited a certain rigidity, being limited to the direct copying of ukiyo- emotifs. However, in just three years, he progressed from mere appropriation to a more nuanced and immersive assimilation of Eastern aesthetic principles. In his painting, *Almond Blossom* (1890), under a cobalt blue sky, the almond branches are not rendered from the roots up as a complete tree; instead, he adopted the "truncated-branches" formation, which was typical of Eastern flower-and-bird painting, thus improving the visual focus on the main subject and enhancing the decorative effect of the painting.

This bilateral exchange between Eastern and Western art was not an isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, in 1649, the Chinese Ming dynasty artist Xiang Shengmo (1597-1658) applied chiaroscuro and three-dimensional sketching techniques to depict a robust tree with a centrally placed trunk and intricately interwoven branches, producing a strikingly realistic image derived from the naturally observation rather than from the conceptual representations of trees in traditional painting manuals such as the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (Jie-Zi-Yuan Hua-Pu). Scholar Michael Sullivan notes that this instance already demonstrates the early communication and mutual influence of Chinese and Western artistic approaches. Van Gogh's study of ukiyo-e similarly involved a circuitous process: from Chinese painting to Edo-period Japanese prints, and then to Europe, where distinct national values, philosophies, and worldviews collided. Through art as a medium, these encounters generated brilliant sparks; amid these conflicts, East and West began to learn from one another, seeking both equilibrium and cultural resonance.

Furthermore, in 1916 the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London (SOAS) established the first dedicated program in East Asian art, marking the formal recognition of "The History and Archaeology of Asian Art" within Western academia. From this point onward, as the ancient civilizations of the East, particularly Chinese art, entered the modern era and came to be more visible in the West, their connections with global culture became increasingly wide-ranging and profound. Engagement with Eastern art, especially ancient Chinese art, evolved along multiple research trajectories, shaped in part by the broader promotion of cross-cultural and multicultural scholarship.

In this context, Zhang Zhengbo's new work: *Other Voices: Overseas Sinologists on Ancient Chinese Calligraphy and Painting* published in 2026, stands as a comprehensive synthesis of over a century of Western methodologies, emphases, and unresolved questions in the study of Chinese art. Zhang describes the work as both a clear roadmap and a practical guide: a macro-level overview of the "Hundred Schools Contend" of Western scholarship. It serves as an essential reference and toolkit for anyone seeking to understand the historical development, lineage, and current state of Western research on Chinese art. At the same time, it prompts people to rethink on the issues that have dominated past scholarship, the debates currently underway, and the questions that remain to be addressed.

## 2. Diverse Previous Approaches

Over the past century, Western scholarship has extensively engaged with Chinese art, yet a central question persists: how should Western scholars, positioned as "the Other," interpret Chinese artistic production? Should they approach Chinese art through the lens of Western theoretical frameworks, or return to indigenous Chinese philosophical contexts to recover its original meanings? Why do scholars from different cultural and intellectual backgrounds pursue radically divergent research trajectories, and what do these trajectories reveal

about underlying differences in perception, interpretation, and epistemology? These questions form the conceptual core of Zhang Zhengbo's *Other Voices: Overseas Sinologists on Ancient Chinese Calligraphy and Painting*, and provide the point of departure for the book's systematic review and analysis of the field's varied methodological approaches.

The book *Other Voices: Overseas Sinologists on Ancient Chinese Calligraphy and Painting* is organized into twelve main chapters, presenting twelve representative research paths in Western scholarship on Chinese art over the past century and up to the present. Within each trajectory, the book discusses its characters by utilizing one or two scholarly case studies. The book contains the various research approaches: for instance, the comprehensive historical trajectory represented by Japanese art historian Okakura Tenshin; the stylistic analysis method exemplified by Wen C. Fong, which employs deconstructivism to translate Chinese traditional art from the western perspective; the cultural field approach represented by American researcher Andrea S. Goldman, focusing on the broader cultural, political, social, and even class-related contexts behind artworks; scholar Robert Hans van Gulik specially focuses the peripheral aspects of artworks, such as mounting techniques and the role of craftsmen, highlighting how materials affect visual expression beyond the content of the work; the German scholar Gernot Böhme attention to the "atmosphere" of the painting, influenced by Western psychology, attempting to analyze the connotation of the term "qi-yun" vitality in traditional Chinese art through modern Western visual frameworks; Turn to the Francois Jullien, he approaches the Chinese art by tracing back to the unique Chinese philosophical context, aiming to interpret narrative structures from a Chinese perspective, essentially "translating Chinese art from Chinese to Chinese." This stands in contrast to the approach advocated by Wen C. Fong, who interprets Chinese art through Western theoretical frameworks.

In Chapter Seven, the author foregrounds Hegel's concern with structure and form of the art composition, examining their relationship to the Chinese concepts of "xingshi" (shape and configuration) and "qiyun" (spirit and vitality), and thereby prompting a discussion on whether a materialist worldview is suitable for analyzing Chinese art imbued with idealist philosophical principles. Chapter Eight explores Western psychological approaches to dream analysis, highlighting Christine Cayol's work as an example of how these uniquely psychological methodologies can be connected to classical Chinese reflections on dreams, as found in Zhuangzi, and to the expression of "Dao" in Chinese painting. Moreover, the chapter also considers the temporal dimension of artworks, addressing how meaning unfolds over time. Scholars such as Nigel Wentworth investigate the medium and modes of representation from a phenomenological perspective, with particular attention to the viewer's visual engagement and interactive experience. In Chapter Eleven, both the French scholar François Cheng and the Japanese scholar Seiichi Taki exemplify how an integrative approach can be applied to achieve a comprehensive analysis of Chinese art. In the final chapter, the author revisits the comparative perspective between Chinese and Western landscapes, highlighting Western scholar's attention to cross-cultural verification and prompting reflection on how Chinese and Western art can be meaningfully compared. These diverse and multifaceted research approaches, together with the scholars' methodological choices and analytical reasoning, underscore the book's meticulous design and deliberate organization.

The scholars selected for each chapter of the book are highly representative, and they often serve as meaningful points of comparison. In the first chapter, for example, the author examines early twentieth-century scholars' enthusiasm for compiling comprehensive histories of art. Representative figures include the Japanese scholar Okakura Tenshin and the British scholar Michael Sullivan, who sought to unveil the mysteries of Chinese art by systematically outlining its developmental trajectories and the artistic characteristics of different historical periods, while simultaneously incorporating their own perspectives as "the Other." Yet even among these "Others," scholarly viewpoints differ markedly, shaped by their distinct cultural and intellectual backgrounds.

The difference between these two analytical approaches, one oriented toward introspection, abstraction, and the spiritual, the other toward external observation, concreteness, and formal representation, which clearly reflects the influence of their distinct environments: "being within the East" versus the Western scientific perspective. Japanese scholars maintained more direct exchanges and conceptual affinities with contemporary Chinese art historians; for example, according to the book, Ōmura Seigai engaged in direct dialogue and mutual influence with Chen Shizeng (p. 14).

Among early Western scholars, there were occasional individuals with a natural sensitivity to Chinese modes of thinking and aesthetic values, who could perceptively grasp the independent spirit of this artistic language. Which therefore they paid closer attention to the abstract and philosophical dimensions of Chinese art rather than to formal composition. A typical example mentioned in the book is the Sinologist Earnest Francisco, whose prolonged residence and work in Japan exposed him to an Eastern native environment and encouraged a focus on the unique intellectual content of Eastern art, distinct from Western conventions.

Through these fascinating and readily apparent contrasts, the author not only highlights differences in scholarly approaches but also interweaves branching analytical pathways within each research trajectory. By juxtaposing scholars who share similar historical or cultural contexts with those from distinct backgrounds, the text encourages readers to reconsider how methodological choices, interpretive priorities, and cultural perspectives impact the analysis of Chinese art. This layered presentation enables a more nuanced understanding of each approach, inviting deeper reflection on the interplay between artistic form, philosophical connotation, and historiographical interpretation.

### **3. Commentary And Extension On The "Cultural-Political Approach"**

In Chapter Three, the author uses Andrea S. Goldman's study of theatrical and temple fair spaces in premodern China as a case study to illustrate how art historians have shifted their focus from tangible material artworks and intangible cultural practices toward the broader concept of artistic space as an integrated whole. Zhang Zhengbo further observes that Goldman critically examines the political power embedded within theatre spaces, drawing upon and extending Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere (p. 62). This approach exemplifies a distinctly politicized mode of analysis.

From an interdisciplinary perspective bridging sociology and art history, this approach can be framed through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "cultural field." (Bourdieu 1993, pp. 74-111) In premodern China,

the traditional theatre functioned not merely as a venue for the production, cultivation, and display of operatic art, but as a dynamic public space in which social, cultural, and political forces intersected. This complex arena connected multiple strata of society: from imperial elites and bureaucratic gentry to ordinary citizens of diverse social and professional backgrounds, and encompassed a wide spectrum of participants, from the performers at the center of the stage to the troupes, stagehands, and managers operating behind the scenes. Such convergence of actors endowed the theatre with rich analytical potential, allowing scholars to investigate not only artistic practices but also the broader social hierarchies, power relations, and cultural norms embedded within these spaces.

Using this public space as its point of departure, Andrea S. Goldman's study highlights the popular cultural practices and underlying struggles for political power embedded within it. As Zhang Zhengbo observes, "Andrea S. Goldman's object of inquiry is not Qing dynasty opera itself, but rather the political power relations and moral-ethical structures indirectly articulated through the operatic stage." This exploration of the public field exemplifies an approach that integrates visual art with sociology. By examining the operational mechanisms of theatres, observing their conditions of survival, and investigating the identities of theatre owners, performers, and audiences, such research seeks to reconstruct a social panorama of the time and reveal the class relations and conflicts underlying it.

Zhang further notes that Goldman's research also extends to spaces such as temple fairs and private theatrical gatherings. This line of inquiry can be expanded to encompass other "public fields" worthy of investigation. For example, the scholar Timothy Brook examines temples in the Ming dynasty as public spaces, approaching them from a sociological perspective to analyze their operational ecology as well as the social activities associated with them, such as publishing and festival organization. While temples share many characteristics with theatrical spaces as sites of public interaction, they are even more complex objects of study. Unlike theatres, temples are not merely fields where culture and politics intersect; their analysis also requires engagement with the foundations of religious studies. How does religion disseminate belief and construct legitimacy through the creation of space? These questions are equally crucial.

Moreover, the study of temples as public spaces can be approached from psychological and spiritual perspectives, further illuminating how fixed architectural structures, in conjunction with transient activities and ritual practices, serve to reinforce religious belief, consolidate authority, and function as vital sites for social cohesion, conflict mediation, and the expression of both collective and individual aspirations in premodern society.

In recent years, the American scholar Shih-shan Susan Huang (2012) has moved beyond the study of stable spatial fields and material art forms to investigate religious rituals conducted within temples. By focusing on these ephemeral practices, she explores how ritual, as an intangible cultural medium, shapes human consciousness and belief. In this sense, art historical inquiry has expanded from two-dimensional pictorial analysis to three-dimensional spatial forms, then to four-dimensional explorations of fields, that is, the study of public spaces within specific temporal contexts, and is now extending toward a more elusive, perhaps conceptual, "fifth dimension." This emerging approach seeks to examine how fluid rituals, as a

synthesis of the visible and the invisible, operate as religious and cultural forces that shape spiritual belief and social experience. Such developments represent a bold innovation in contemporary art historical scholarship and encourage ongoing reflection on the evolving trajectories and methodological horizons of the discipline.

Beyond spatial analysis, scholars may also return to “culture” itself as a central site of inquiry. Building on Andrea S. Goldman’s discussion of theatre and the construction of power as a point of departure, researchers can refocus attention on the dramatic work itself, reassessing its significance not only in terms of aesthetic form but also in its literary, performative, and symbolic dimensions. Such an approach allows for a reconsideration of the work’s intrinsic artistic and narrative value, situating it within broader aesthetic and intellectual frameworks. Simultaneously, this analysis can be integrated with the study of the spaces in which the work was produced, performed, and circulated, revealing how the interplay between cultural artifacts and their social, spatial, and temporal contexts shapes both meaning and reception. By bridging textual, visual, and spatial analysis, this methodology illuminates the interconnections between artistic production, cultural authority, and audience engagement, offering a more holistic understanding of premodern Chinese theatre as both an artistic and social phenomenon.

Current studies of the woodblock illustrations of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* often focus primarily on pictorial content, yet frequently overlook the relationship between the depicted scenes, the original textual narrative, and the process of transforming text into image. This gap suggests a promising avenue for future research.

#### **4. A Reconsideration of the Other’s Visual Perspective**

It is worth noticing that author Zhang Zhengbo draws particular attention to a pressing question he poses to contemporary scholarship in the epilogue of the chapter Six: how should we study Chinese art from an international perspective, and how should it be presented and translated for Western audiences? He begins by discussing François Jullien’s “Chinese-to-Chinese” research approach. Although Jullien occupies the position of the “Other” in examining Chinese art, he demonstrates profound respect for the native cultural context of the foreign art he studies. He insists on situating Chinese art within the complete worldview constructed by Chinese culture and philosophy, striving even to restore the atmosphere of ancient Chinese cultural life, rather than dissecting it from a typical Western analytical perspective. Zhang acknowledges that this approach is undoubtedly one of the more awakened, popular, and progressive methodologies in contemporary scholarship.

Thus, does this question have a definitive answer? In fact, it seems to resonate closely with the concerns of early twentieth-century Chinese artists, who first encountered Western culture and were shaped by the dynamic interplay of Chinese and Western traditions alongside the pressures of modern society. During the first half of the last century, some Chinese artists pursued comprehensive reform, actively studying Western art. For example, Xu Beihong (1895-1953) travelled to Paris to study drawing, transitioning from traditional Chinese painting to oil painting, while Liu Haisu (1896-1994) introduced abstract modern art to China and founded modern-style art academies, both exemplifying a strong embrace of Westernization. Others advocated a synthesis of East and West, blending modern and conservative elements, as seen in Wu Guanzhong’s (1910-2010) colored ink paintings and Pan Yuliang’s (1895-1977) line-drawn nudes. The Lingnan School, represented by Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), studied in Japan to incorporate technical innovations from Japanese

painting into traditional Chinese art, ultimately establishing an “eclectic East-West” style. At the same time, a cohort of artists remained committed to traditional norms, including members of the Guangdong Chinese Painting Research Association. Conservative masters such as Huang Binhong (1865-1955) and Qi Baishi (1864-1957) regarded the essence of Chinese art: akin to the Dao in Laozi and Zhuangzi, as all-encompassing and eternal. Amidst these waves of transformation, which artistic paths were ultimately “eliminated,” and which could be considered “successful”?

Art history of the past century already provides some guidance. At First, to “follow the times” is reasonable: any exploration that aligns with societal needs and the spirit of the era is worth attempting and holds promising research potential. As Wu Guanzhong (2010) famously remarked, “Brush and ink should follow the times,” which he argues that artistic language must evolve in response to contemporary aesthetic conditions rather than remain confined to inherited conventions. Secondly, when reviewing a century of experimentation in Chinese painting, regardless of the length of the path, its influence, or its popularity, each effort gave rise to highly representative figures; there is no absolute “success” or “failure,” and the same principle applies to art historians studying these developments. Ultimately, judgments emerge only with the passage of time and the turning of historical tides.

Returning to the author’s reflections, the choice between a “Chinese-to-Chinese” approach and a “Western perspective on Chinese art” need not be hastily resolved. What proves truly meaningful is the sustained process of exploration and practice along one’s chosen path, leaving ultimate judgment to the passage of time. As the saying goes, “The road is difficult, with many diverging paths,” yet “to linger at the crossroads is only to invite shared lament.” This perspective may be seen to resonate with the Daoist wisdom of Laozi and Zhuangzi: to act in accordance with the natural course of things and to respond with sensitivity to changing circumstances.

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