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A Companion to Chinese Art

Edited by

Martin J. Powers and Katherine R. Tsiang
To our mothers.
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Introduction

Historiographic Perspective

Martin J. Powers

The Tang period poet Wang Zhihuan (688–742) once observed that if you want a more comprehensive view, you have to move to a higher vista. The poet was not referring to altitude, but to that broader perspective one obtains from a higher intellectual stance. For historians, a broader perspective can lead to a more abstracted, theorized view, which can be stimulated by an encounter with the unfamiliar. Nietzsche famously made this point with an equally homely metaphor of the voyage away from familiar shores, such that, when we return, we feel estranged, and so can view what had seemed familiar more critically. It is hoped that this volume of chapters on the most theorized body of art outside of Europe may stimulate comparative contemplation about broad and basic issues in the history of art.

Within the historiography of Chinese art history in the West, the chapters in this volume are unusual in that every single writer has pondered what basic information about China a non-specialist would need to acquire before rethinking the core issues of the discipline from a higher vista. The scholars writing for this volume adopt a wide range of perspectives, not only in relation to the topic of their chapters but also with respect to the historiography of Chinese art. Most of our authors do not engage in comparative study themselves. Rather they provide the necessary evidence and analysis for those who wish to do so. The result is a richly informative and thought-provoking collection of chapters that, we hope, will challenge the China specialist as well as students of other traditions in the history of art. In order to appreciate the historiographic position of this volume, however, it will be helpful to take a longue durée look at the cultural politics of modern scholarship on China, with a special focus on the arts.
Long-Term Controversies

Many of the leading lights in the European tradition adopted a higher vista in viewing cultures other than their own. Oliver Goldsmith, Goethe, Bertrand Russell, and Roger Fry all embraced a cosmopolitan view of the world, and we might push it back to Voltaire, whose cultural cosmopolitanism helped to enlighten his contemporaries. Such cosmopolitanism, sadly, is the exception; throughout much of human history cultural politics appears to have been the rule, and it remains a challenge for any attempt at cultural comparison. According to Heinrich von Staden, as early as classical times the Greeks already were engaged in the construction of self-serving cultural myth. Diodorus of Sicily observed that “with respect to the antiquity of the human race not only are the Greeks in disagreement among themselves but so are many of the barbarians, all claiming that ... they themselves were the first of all humans to become inventors-discoverers of the things that are useful in life” (Von Staden 1992: 581).

In The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements, George Frederickson distinguished two kinds of historians: those who seek to develop a better theoretical understanding of a process, and those who do comparative work as a stimulus to the production of nationalist, self-celebratory histories (Frederickson 1997: 49–50). In the wake of Edward Said’s contributions to historical study, few could doubt that European and American scholarship on Asian and African cultures, at times, has been written in a self-serving manner. But in the case of China it would be misleading to view Euro-American scholarship primarily in postcolonial terms. The problem Europeans had with China was not a function of their superiority in weaponry or science; rather it was the threat that “China” posed to the European tradition. This threat precipitated a rhetoric of self-justification among European and American writers that has deeply colored scholarship in the Humanities. That tradition, in turn, has given rise to a number of critical studies attempting to nudge China scholarship away from occidental self-justification and back toward a better theoretical understanding of human behavior and institutions (Pulleyblank 1958; Cohen 1993; Farquhar and Hevia 1993: 491; Goody 1996; Vinograd 2012; Clunas 1991). The chapters in this volume cannot be extricated from this polemical dynamic. It is ever present in Chinese studies. The problem, as we shall see, is embedded in the very terms conventionally used to describe China’s history.

When Europeans arrived in other parts of Eurasia bent on conquest, rightly or wrongly, they readily convinced themselves of their cultural superiority, if not by force of arms then by the sophistication of their arts; if not the latter, then because they thought that theirs was the true religion (Blaut 1993: 50–63). China was different. European travelers could not but notice that, while commodities such as tea, porcelain, and silk enjoyed worldwide demand, European nations could boast nothing comparable. Moreover, there was no denying that this demand had created serious trade deficits in their own countries back home, thus demonstrating palpably China’s global impact on European nations (Frank 1998: 110–116). This was China’s challenge.

But that wasn’t all. While Europeans remained locked in bloody contests over the True Religion, China offered a non-sectarian moral system and religious toleration as standard policy. Worse still, China’s post-aristocratic social system suggested to Europe’s leading radicals a viable alternative to the European tradition of political authority as hereditary esteem, an alternative offering opportunities for talented but non-noble intellectuals (Israel 2006: 640–642). This was China’s threat. What could have been
more terrifying than the destabilization of a tradition of hereditary privilege spanning more than a thousand years (Scott 2008: 5–7)? And so, while Louis Le Comte cautiously admired China’s system of salaried officers, men who were held to public legal standards, the French authorities took a different view, banning his book and burning the copies that remained. Christian Wolfe thought that China’s non-sectarian morality might be useful in a Europe torn by religious strife. For this he was stripped of academic rank and told to leave town in 24 hours, or be hanged. And then there was Abbe Raynal, who wrote the most widely read radical text of the late eighteenth century. He, too, admired China’s post-aristocratic social system, but he was exiled, and his book was burned (Lottes 1991: 69–70; Israel 2006: 640–642).

From these examples it should be clear that Europeans responded to China’s threats, not with the confidence of conquering colonizers, but rather more defensively. Louis Le Comte in fact did not often approve of Chinese ways. He dismissed China’s tea as a necessary remedy for their foul water. He could not deny that many of China’s cities seemed larger and more prosperous than most back home, but then, he claimed those cities “have been forced to open their gates to the Gospel, and are partly subdued by our religion” (Le Comte 1698: 89). The formula employed here, “Yes, the Chinese accomplished X but it doesn’t count because of Y,” can be found repeatedly in Le Comte’s text. Today all this sounds like special pleading, but the point is that claims about China remained defensive for centuries to come, giving rise to a wide range of rhetorical ploys that must be appreciated in order to understand the nature of modern China scholarship in the humanistic disciplines, including the history of art.

Fortunately many colleagues in Chinese studies have devoted no small effort to exposing these sophistries and their origins. Paul Cohen, for example, disparaged what he called the “intellectual imperialism of American historians,” identifying some of the more common rhetorical ploys he found in American scholarship. One of the most widely used was the “impact-response” paradigm (Cohen 1984: 150–151). This paradigm, which has had considerable influence on histories of Chinese art, achieves its effect by presuming, a priori, that China’s history is best understood as a series of reactions to Western stimulus. In this way, without needing to argue the point, the historian situates the agency for change in China’s history, in the West. A few years later Jack Goody, in “The West’s Problem with the East,” likewise detected signs of intellectual finagling: “In looking at Europe, and specifically England, our natural egocentricity has often led us to assume a priority at deep, socio-cultural levels whereas the evidence for this is either thin or non-existent” (Goody 1996: 8). More recently Ming Dong Gu has published a thorough critique of the long-term biases in Euro-American descriptions of China, arguing that these distortions are systemic and fundamentally distinct from the phenomenon we now call Orientalism (Gu 2013: 1–14).

Each of these critiques is a response to a long history of historical misrepresentation, but I would suggest that the distortions to which these authors refer are not so much the product of egocentricity as an attempt to defend an imaginary “West” from the threat posed by the basic facts of Chinese history. In essence this has meant denying, disguising, or trivializing those developments in China’s history that are meant to feature as uniquely Western in triumphalist narratives. Craig Clunas has been among the more forthright of art historians in excoriating such practices. Referring to Quentin Bell’s work on fashion, Clunas observed “Despite the fact that everything Bell has to say about China as a ‘static’ society without the concept of fashion is quite wrong and
What follows is a review of three of the most important deceptive ploys devised for “China” so that the reader may appreciate better the historiographic position of the chapters in this volume. The arguments discussed below occur commonly in sinological writing but, with few exceptions, I will not cite specific examples. The aim is not to cast blame—particularly as I am not blameless in all this—but simply to provide samples of common rhetorical practices that may still be found and, it is hoped, occur rarely in this volume.

**Oriental despotism** One of the oldest and most persistent of defensive ploys is “oriental despotism.” E. G. Pulleyblank wrote of this theory during the Cold War era in words that might well have been written yesterday: “It is a matter for great regret that such a hoary stereotype should be given fresh life and apparent scholarly justifications [in Karl Wittfogel’s work] at a time when so much depends on the creation of real mutual appreciation and understanding between East and West” (Pulleyblank 1958: 657). Originally oriental despotism was the brainchild of Charles the Second, Baron of Montesquieu. To properly deconstruct this “hoary stereotype” it will be necessary to understand what the good baron meant by “despotism.”

Prior to Montesquieu, Giovanni Botero (1540–1617) had observed that “The government of China has much of despotism.” “Despotism” was the only term Botero could conceive for describing a nation that was not governed by aristocracy: “one should know that there is no other lord in all of China than the king; neither do they know what is a count, marquis or duke; nor is there any other one to whom taxes or duties are paid” (Demel 1991: 55). Like most seventeenth-century Europeans, Botero could not have imagined a system such as China’s where political authority was invested in hundreds of offices under the state, and where the state was formally distinguished from the court. Since he knew there was no aristocracy, the only conceptual alternative the classical tradition offered was “despotism.”

Baron Montesquieu, as a member of the European aristocracy, was concerned about the possibility that China’s meritocratic ideals might be adopted in Europe. His defense of hereditary privilege therefore required a sustained attack on China’s meritocratic system. He favored the English approach. In England the hereditary privileges of the aristocracy were protected even as the latter claimed to be looking after the “commons.” Despite this noble concern for commoners, it was clear that the latter should not be allowed to look after themselves:

> There are men who have endeavored in some countries in Europe to abolish all the jurisdiction of the nobility; not perceiving that they were driving at the very thing that was done by the parliament of England. Abolish the privileges of the lords, of the clergy, and of the cities in a monarchy; and you will soon have a popular state, or else a despotic government. (Montesquieu 1752, vol. I: 22)

Here “despotic” clearly derives from earlier usage, designating a political system in which the aristocracy has been deprived of its social and political privileges. Ironically,
Montesquieu’s subtle equivocation enabled him and other aristocrats to demonize the only major government of the time that made political authority available on the basis of public service rather than hereditary privilege. This subterfuge was revived by Karl Wittfogel, “the primary academic McCarthyite” according to a study published only a few years ago (Cummings 2010: 94–99). While acknowledging that few today would promote the theory in Wittfogel’s terms, this author observed “The theory never really got a proper burial, though, it just reappears in less-conspicuous forms.”

Here is where the history of art enters the narrative. In what “less-conspicuous forms” did the despotic oriental theory survive in the field of Chinese art history? Ironically, because Marx adopted Montesquieu’s locution for China’s political system, the theory survives robustly in China itself. In the academic world in China, including the History of Art, “despotic” (zhuanzhi) is the technical and ordinary designation for the political system of late imperial China. Oddly that is not far from the truth if we take that word to designate a post-aristocratic political system, but that is not what is intended. In China this locution is essentially a pejorative term sanctioned by intellectuals who continue to work under the thrall of the May Fourth tradition, which construed all things Western as enlightened and all things Chinese as benighted. To be fair this, and other Cold War constructs, have been critiqued in Chinese scholarship in recent years (Yang 2005: 3–9).

Social hierarchy In the United States the term “oriental despotism” is rarely mentioned explicitly, but the idea survives in Cold War scholarship and even up to the present in a preference for descriptive terms that cast China’s cultural tradition and social practice as normatively dogmatic, inflexible, or servile. As a common example, Cold War warriors rarely lost an opportunity to characterize China’s late imperial social order as “hierarchical,” usually preceded by one or more intensifiers. Generally they neglected to mention that all advanced societies are hierarchical in structure, as are all modern corporations, governments, universities, and indeed any advanced form of administration. The point of repeating this term was to hide the fact that China’s hierarchy differed fundamentally from those of European nations in that one’s place in the hierarchy could be based on talent and performance rather than inherited social station. Acknowledging this fact would have threatened Cold War claims to long-term cultural superiority. The simple yet elegant solution was to repeatedly characterize China’s social order as “hierarchical” without getting mired in factual detail.

The skillful deployment of loaded terms also could have the effect of turning imperial China’s most valorized social critics into exemplars of oriental despotism. In the history of art perhaps the most often cited case is that of Su Shi (1037–1101), a towering figure who appears frequently in this volume. Su was openly critical of the most powerful clique of the late eleventh century and was famously framed, imprisoned, and exiled as a result. Su himself saw these actions as a departure from normal procedure (Egan 1994: 36–37). Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692), looking back hundreds of years later, likewise regarded the suppression of dissent at that historical moment as an outrageous abrogation of normative standards (Wang 1964: 114). Yet, particularly in China, this case is often treated as if it were a typical instance of despotic imperial practice.

In most early modern traditions of art making, the royal court exercised hegemony over artistic taste. If there is a moment when artists reject that hegemony in favor of their own standards, historians generally regard this as a watershed in the history of artistic agency (Crow 1985: 110–133). In China, this moment occurred fairly early when, in the late eleventh-century literati artists rejected the standards of the court
academy (see Patricia Ebrey, “Court Painting and Academies”). John King Fairbank covered over this important fact by describing the late imperial monarch in sweeping terms as an oriental despot in absolute command of artistic taste, religion, and indeed all other aspect of his subjects’ lives:

At the apex of the Chinese world was the Son of Heaven, who eventually became in theory omnicompetent, functioning as military leader, administrator, judge, high priest, philosophical sage, arbiter of taste, and patron of arts and letters, all in one. In performing his multiple roles he was more than human. (Fairbank 1968: 6)

The irony here is that Fairbank’s description of China’s emperor seems modeled on the absolutist kings of seventeenth-century Europe, monarchs who set the model and standard for religion, philosophy, and artistic taste. In early modern China, by contrast, people chose their own religion and philosophy, and officials in the various ministries made most of the decisions Fairbank here attributes to the emperor.

**Individuality** Fairbank was writing at a time when American artists had developed considerable interest in the wild and idiosyncratic brushwork of the so-called “Zen” masters, in both China and Japan (Munro). This created a problem, for the artistic freedom such men exercised contrasted with the servile station of European artists at that time (tenth to thirteenth centuries) and so flew in the face of the despotic oriental narrative. Like Le Comte, Fairbank’s response was to adopt the “yes, China may have accomplished X, but it doesn’t count because of Y” ploy: “As in all countries, the creative Chinese writer, artist, or craftsman expressed his individuality, while the hermit or recluse could become a private individualist outside his community. But what was the degree of individualism in the sense of individual rights within the old society?” (Fairbank 1991: 36).

Historians of art know, of course, that it is not the case that, “in all countries” artists openly expressed their individuality. Throughout history artists have only rarely been able to assert their own will against aristocratic tutelage. Nothing could be more unusual, yet Fairbank implied that this was the norm, thus trivializing what in fact was an important development. He followed this ruse with anachronism, one of the most common of Cold War devices, asking why tenth-century Chinese artists lacked those constitutional rights that were unknown even in Europe before the nineteenth century. For those familiar with Fairbank’s scholarship, the implication was that the Chinese ink-flingers labored under a despotic, oriental regime.

**Orthodoxy** The preference for terms suggestive of dogmatic rigidity is perhaps most evident in the odd use of the term “orthodox.” I’ve written elsewhere that the Chinese term translated as “orthodox” (zhengtong) could not have possessed the semantic implications of the English term, seeing as those promoting what we call “orthodox” views often were critical of courtly taste and values (Powers 1997: 73–74). By labeling the Courbet’s and Manet’s of China as “orthodox,” scholars effortlessly transform acts of cultural defiance into examples of servile obedience.

**Servile obedience** It is important to understand that the use of loaded terms was a response to basic facts of Chinese history that challenged common claims for Western superiority. China’s long tradition of social criticism, for example, undermined the claim
that defiance of authority is a unique expression of a Western love of freedom, but intellectuals who defied the authorities are so important in the Chinese tradition that it would have been impossible to ignore their writings entirely. The solution Cold War scholars found was to refer to such literature as "didactic," a term that normally refers to the moralizing teachings of establishment authorities. Few readers would imagine that "didactic literature" could refer to trenchant criticisms of social injustice.

Officials who defied the monarch for the good of the people and the state were valorized in the Chinese histories as "zhongchen," or courageously forthright officers. The term was frequently applied to men who defied authority rather than obeying the monarch's every wish, but readers of English language sinology would never guess as much because zhongchen is always translated as "loyal official" or "loyal Confucian official." Since "loyal," in English, implies obedience, who would imagine what the term actually signified?

China's early modern administration was characterized by a separation of powers, with budget authority separate from policy-making, civil administration separate from the military, the court separate from the state, and so on (Kracke 1953: 28–33). Policy decisions generally were made by the cabinet, in which the emperor participated, but most judicial, financial, or personnel decisions—such as official appointments—were made within the relevant ministries. This contrasted with the more informal administrations of Europe (Scott 2008: 13–14, 27–28) in which the monarch personally made many of the decisions that, in China, were left to the experts. Knowledge of these facts would be embarrassing to the Western modernization narrative, and so Western writers often refer to the site of official decisions in China simply as "the court," thereby reinforcing in the reader's mind the notion that all decisions were made personally by an all-powerful despot.

One of the most distinctive and remarkable of late imperial institutions in China was the Yushitai, a branch of government that E. A. Kracke referred to as "information and rectification" agencies (Kracke 1953: 31). During the Northern Song this bureau was charged with opposing unjust laws, exposing the use of public office for private benefit, reversing excessive criminal sentences, and addressing any instance in which injustice had not been exposed. A sub-agency transmitted complaints from taxpayers on to bureau officers who then could act upon them (Qu 2003: 33–42). This institution remained an important part of the central administration in Ming and Qing times. In the 1730s, The Craftsman, observing that England lacked any comparable system of formal checks, suggested that the nation might benefit from a similar arrangement (Fan 1949: 145–146). Readers of China scholarship today would be unlikely to arrive at similar conclusions because in Chinese studies we refer to this institution as the Censorate, implying to most English readers that its principle function was the suppression of seditious literature as befits a despotic oriental regime.

Social status Another class of misleading terms has the unintended effect of disguising the fact that early modern China, unlike early modern Europe, was not an aristocracy (Bol 1991: 37–41). There was a hereditary monarch but, with few exceptions, he did not choose, appoint, promote, or demote officers. These were chosen through the examination system, reviewed periodically, and promoted, demoted, or fired depending upon the evaluation of the ministry of personnel. Unlike Europe, where political authority was tied to social status, a Chinese officer’s political authority resided in the office that he occupied within specified term limits. For this reason it is misleading
to speak of Chinese taxpayers as “commoners.” A society does not have “commoners” unless those who rule are nobility. *Min* refers to taxpayers who have specific rights, such as the right to bring suits to the magistrate’s court (Qu 2003: 33–42). Likewise using the term “gentry” for *shidafu* implies that political authority was situated in social status and privilege, as in England, but in China, as just mentioned, political authority was situated in the office (*zhi*). “Elites,” for educated people, likewise is misleading for, in early modern Europe, elites were hereditary elites while in China they were not. Few readers know this, however, so the sinologist who uses a term like “elite” can be confident that the reader will assume it refers to hereditary elites. A related term is “status.” Social historians all know that it is important to distinguish between ascriptive status— inherited social status—and achieved status, or official rank achieved through merit, but we sinologists rarely make the distinction. Instead we prefer to refer to “high status individuals.” While this sounds agreeably like social science terminology, it leaves out precisely that information that a social historian would need to know, namely, whether the status was ascriptive or achieved. This ambiguity ensures that most readers will interpret “high status” as referring to hereditary social status when sinologists more typically have in mind achieved official status.

It is important to stress that the use of such terms cannot be dismissed as a function of personal or institutional bias. The use of loaded terms and translations has been so widespread in Chinese studies that most scholars working today, including the present writer, simply learned these locutions as the standard apparatus that marked a person as a professional sinologist. In recent years, most have fallen out of use; we hope that this volume will bring greater awareness to the misunderstandings they have induced.

**Western Influence**

An important intellectual frame for Chinese studies during the Cold War era was the “impact-response” paradigm critiqued by Paul Cohen (1984: 151). Cohen was concerned principally with scholarship on modern China. He was referring to the notion that China’s modern history could be adequately understood as a series of responses to cultural impact from the “West.” In the field of Chinese art history, this paradigm generally took shape as the search for Western “influence.” During the 1950s and 1960s this was a common narrative thread in studies of Chinese art, as if the only significant information one might uncover about China’s artistic tradition was evidence of Western influence. The term had been employed by nineteenth-century German art historians who presumed that the history of any nation—meaning a people sharing a common blood origin—was driven by the unique and unchanging “spirit” (*Volksgeist*) of that nation. Naturally it was thought that some national spirits were finer than others, and that superior civilizations would tend to influence inferior ones.

Finding evidence for Western influence consequently became an important means whereby Cold War sinologists could demonstrate the intrinsic superiority of the West. This trend is not difficult to find in scholarship on Chinese art as late as the 1980s. By that time, however, the discipline of the history of art had already begun to turn away from studies of influence and lineage for, in 1985, the eminent art historian Michael Baxandall published an incisive critique of “influence” as an analytical term arguing that, among strong artists, it was usually the borrower who exercised more agency than the source (Baxandall 1985: 58–62). Since then few art historians in the United States employ the term analytically. At about the same time, area studies expertise had
undermined so many of the facile assumptions of “impact-response” scholarship that Albert Feuerwerker felt confident that this paradigm would soon be history (Feuerwerker 1985: 579–580).

In recent years, many scholars have turned away from nation-centered “influence” narratives to study regional interactions. Such study necessarily involves tracing exchanges and translations of cultural resources between and among peoples in the region, but the aim is not to assign agency for historical change to one, putatively superior source. The aim is to understand the structures and principles governing the translation and exchange of resources. Some recent studies even seek to examine the flow of visual resources so as to uncover the cognitive, ontological, or epistemological implications of certain kinds of pictorial practice. Such studies should not be confused with more old-fashioned methods bent on the pursuit of “influence.” The latter can be recognized by taking note of what constitutes an explanation. In an influence study, the author generally will be satisfied once the putative source of influence has been determined. Finding the source is considered tantamount to explaining why a given social practice existed in a particular place.

Despite the general trend away from influence narratives, old style studies still survive here and there. For instance, because German-derived nationalist rhetoric was adopted by the Soviets, it became normative in Chinese scholarship produced during the mid-twentieth century. As a result “influence” and even “national spirit” remain common terms in certain arenas of discourse in China to this day, and the game of claiming cultural priority through influence likewise retains its vitality in some areas of scholarship. Having said that, it is not all that difficult to find remnants of this argument in Western scholarship as well.

**Philosophical Pluralism**

Another challenge to comparison is the premise that different cultures are equal, but only because they are fundamentally incommensurate. This view has some historical depth in that any self-reflective individual who attempts to assess another culture using local categories prompts the question of whether comparison is, in fact, possible. In his sixth-century history of art, Yao Zui observed that people from foreign countries also produce fine paintings, but that their standards were different from those of China, and so he declined to rank them (Acker 1954: 57). Possibly he was able to remain neutral because distant foreign nations at that time, while posing a military threat, did not pose a cultural threat to China. That was no longer the case after European missionaries arrived. By the sixteenth century, contact between European and Chinese intellectuals had given rise to a host of arguments designed to glorify one group at the expense of the other. Matteo Ricci, like most other Europeans, denigrated Chinese painting as lacking in skill, but Wu Li (ca. 1632–1718) turned this argument around to China’s advantage: “Our painting values originality, not resemblance. We call this ‘inspired and free’. Their painting is all about shading, volume, and resemblance, and is achieved by laboriously following convention” (Powers 2013: 316).

By this time the literati notion of art as self-expression was to some extent normative even in the court, and so European artists working at the Qing court were classified as artisans (Arnold and Corsi 2003: 4). Of course two can play that game. Some will recall Kenneth Clark’s tome on landscape, where he suggested that Chinese landscape isn’t really landscape because it doesn’t use one point perspective. Clark’s criteria appear to
have been devised, not for their heuristic value, but rather to support an exceptionalist narrative. W. J. T. Mitchell pulled the rug out from under Clark’s argument. He compared the rise of landscape in China with various European nations and concluded that landscape is more likely to develop in burgeoning empires (Mitchell 1994: 9).

Mitchell’s use of the comparative method suggests that there can be heuristic value in employing analytical categories alien to the cultural tradition under examination. In the eighteenth century Hu Jing (1769–1845) did just that, describing Guiseppe Castiglione’s painting using Chinese critical terms, including shengdong, lifelikeness, and fa for style. He even compared Castiglione’s work to Chinese masters such as Li Gonglin (1049–1106), applying Chinese analytical terms and ignoring European period terms, a method not so different from what European and American scholars do in the other direction (Hu 1995: 41).

But philosophical pluralism remains an influential counter-argument to the comparativist method. It was noted earlier that “influence” and “impact” theories declined during the 1980s because area studies expertise tended to expose the weakness of those claims. Obviously this made it more difficult for nationalist scholars to assert cultural superiority. Philosophical pluralism solved that problem by doing away with evidence altogether: one need only take the desired conclusion as one’s premise to proclaim that just about anything is a “Western concept.” The Chicago Cultural Studies Group exposed the subtleties of this strategy years ago. The Group noted that, in some contexts of cultural criticism, the assertion of difference “has been to convert a liberal politics of tolerance, which advocates empathy for minorities on the basis of a common humanity, into a potential network of local alliances no longer predicated on such universals.” Those “local alliances,” of course, would be founded on strong assertions of fundamental cultural difference. As an example they cite arguments against multiculturalism published by the National Association of Scholars, an organization they describe as “reactionary.” According to the Chicago Group, “NAS argues that cultural difference makes no valuable sense without the liberal norm of tolerance, itself of Western origins” (Chicago Cultural Studies Group 1992: 537).

NAS felt no need to argue or demonstrate their claim. They assumed, a priori, that the ideal of toleration was unique to the West, in spite of the fact noted above that Christian Wolfe was nearly hanged for advocating China’s policy of non-sectarian morality and religious toleration.

The unspoken premise here is that cultures are incommensurate and, therefore, if toleration is a Western concept then it cannot possibly appear within the intellectual repertoire of a different cultural system. One could argue, for instance, that people in China lacked eating utensils because this is a Western concept. Should someone counter with facts, noting that chopsticks appear in the archaeological record more than three thousand years ago, the philosophical pluralist need only point out that chopsticks are not eating utensils, in the Western sense of the term. In this sense such arguments are similar to influence narratives but, unlike the latter, they are not subject to refutation by means of historical evidence. They are immune to refutation, so long as one feels comfortable with tautological argument.

More recent versions of this argument are common in certain strains of postcolonial scholarship, taking the form of word games derived from the premises of philosophical pluralism. The logic seems to go something like this: “art” (for instance) is an English word and, therefore, must be Western. Since cultures are fundamentally incommensurate, whatever concepts the Chinese may have, they would not include the word “art” in exactly the same sense as in English and, therefore, will be lacking in that respect.