

From "The Other" to "The World": Methodological Challenges and Breakthroughs in Craig Clunas's Approach to Chinese Art History

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Abstract : British sinologist Craig Clunas's *Art in China* abandons the traditional narrative of dynasty replacement and reconstructs the history of Chinese art with the five themes of tomb, court, temple, literati and market. This writing strategy is not only an innovation of compilation style, but also a profound revolution of aesthetic methodology. This paper argues that Craig Clunas's breakthrough lies in : first, through the perspective of ' material culture ', he bridged the traditional tension between art history and aesthetics, transforming static aesthetic objects into dynamic social life ; secondly, with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of " distinction, " Craig Clunas dismantled the central discourse hegemony long occupied by literati paintings, and broke the " wall of distinction " between elite art and folk crafts, painting and embroidery, East and West ; third, from the standpoint of ' cosmopolitanism ', Chinese art is liberated from the marginal position of the ' other ' and incorporated into the equal dialogue of global art history. The path of Craig Clunas is not unassailable, but his practice of " how to write non-western art history " provides an important reflection reference for Chinese local aesthetic research.

Keywords: Craig Clunas; Art in China; material culture; theory of distinction; cosmopolitanism

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In 1997, the British sinologist Craig Clunas made a bold historical experiment in *Art in China* : he reconstructed the Chinese art narrative spanning thousands of years with five spatial themes: tomb, court, temple, literati and market. This writing strategy subverts the framework of dynastic change on which Western Sinology relies, and also rejects the aesthetic hegemony that regards literati painting as the only center. However, the value of *Art in China* is far more than the innovation of compilation style. In the view of Craig Clunas, ' Chinese Art ' has never been a self-evident concept - it is not only the product of the cultural division of the gentry in the Ming and Qing Dynasties through interesting practice, but also the discourse device that was repeatedly translated, misappropriated and constructed in the collision of Eastern and Western knowledge in the early 20th century. In the face of this complex knowledge pedigree, Craig Clunas introduced the perspective of material culture and Pierre Bourdieu's distinction theory to restore art from a purely aesthetic object to a social life carrying power, capital and social functions. This path not only bridged the disciplinary tension between art history and aesthetics, but also dismantled the long-term solidified hierarchical wall between literati and craftsmen, painting and craftsmanship, and the East and the West.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the reconstruction path of Craig Clunas's *Art in China* 'on the research methodology of Chinese art history from a cross-cultural perspective, and to analyze how his ' material culture ' perspective and ' distinction ' theoretical criticism provide a reflective reference for local aesthetic research. This study focuses on three core levels : first, how Craig Clunas bridged the traditional tension between art history and aesthetics through the perspective of material culture, and restored static aesthetic objects to dynamic social life ; second, how to use Pierre Bourdieu's Distinction theory to dismantle the discourse hegemony that literati painting has long occupied, and break the hierarchical barriers between elite art and folk crafts, painting and embroidery ; third, how to transcend the binary opposition of " East / West " and " self / other " with the standpoint of " cosmopolitanism " and incorporate Chinese art into the equal dialogue of global art history. Through a systematic analysis of the writing strategies and theoretical resources of *Art in China*, this paper reveals the essence of Craig Clunas's methodological revolution - not the abolition of aesthetic value, but the disenchantment of the knowledge sociology of the art hierarchy order, and then provides a possible path of ' critical reference ' for the local writing of Chinese art history.

1 Problem posing : Art in China as an ' aesthetic event '

In 1997, Craig Clunas was invited by Oxford University Press to write *Art in China* in just 220 pages. In the face of artistic relics spanning thousands of years, he did not follow the linear time frame from the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties to the Ming and Qing Dynasties, but reorganized Chinese art into five juxtaposed spatial themes : tomb art, palace art, temple art, literati art and art market. This very ' destructive ' way of writing at that time was once regarded as an introductory book for the public. However, looking back more than 20 years later, the publication of *Art in China* is nothing less than an ' aesthetic event '.

In the Western academic tradition, the study of Chinese art history has long faced a double dilemma. First, it is the disciplinary gap between ' Sinology and art history ' : Sinology emphasizes literature textual research, and art history is obsessed with style analysis, and the two rarely intersect. Secondly, it is the value separation of ' aesthetics and function ' : the modern western aesthetic system takes Kant's ' no interest ' as the core, emphasizing the purity and autonomy of art, which makes a large number of Chinese cultural relics with practical functions (such as tomb figurines, temple artifacts, palace supplies) excluded from the ' art ' palace.

The uniqueness of Craig Clunas is that he does not start from pure aesthetic speculation, but enters academic research with fifteen years of curatorial experience in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Facing the object rather than just the text, he naturally questioned the way of viewing art works that are separated from the original and only worshipped in the aesthetic temple. Therefore, *Art in China* seems to be a

general history, but it is actually a systematic methodological disenchantment of Craig Clunas on ' what is Chinese art ' and ' how to watch Chinese art '.

2 Bridging the tension : art and aesthetics from the perspective of material culture

The relationship between art and aesthetics is one of the core tensions in the history of modern aesthetics. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel equated aesthetics with philosophy of art and established the central position of art. However, the analytical aesthetics since the middle of the 20 th century has deconstructed the definition of ' art ' endlessly. In the field of overseas Chinese art research, this tension is manifested as either indulging in the aesthetic mystery of the artistic conception of pen and ink, or completely avoiding aesthetic problems and simplifying art into illustrations of social history.

Craig Clunas ' contribution lies in his introduction of ' Material Culture ' as a methodological intermediary, which transcends the binary opposition between art and non-art, aesthetics and practicality. In *Art in China* he deliberately refused to use words with strong aesthetic evaluation, such as " masterpieces " and " masters, " and turned his attention to the " social life " of works of art. For example, when he analyzed Yugui, he did not stop at praising its warm texture or concise shape, but tracked how it evolved from a sacrificial vessel in the Neolithic era to a palace collection inscribed with poems by Emperor Qianlong. In this process, Yu Gui 's " aesthetic " did not disappear, but was re-understood in the network of social relations such as power, collection, and appropriation.

This perspective is particularly sharp in the interpretation of tomb art. The traditional aesthetic discourse often regards the terracotta warriors as the artistic achievement of ' realism ', while Craig Clunas points out that the reality of the terracotta warriors is not for beauty, but to perform the ' function ' of defending the monarch in another space. Similarly, the linear carving of the brick paintings of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove unearthed in Nanjing has the aesthetic value of " vivid charm, " but the owner of the tomb carved the images of these celebrities on the brick wall, which is essentially a continuation of the life attitude of hoping to be next to Coats after death.

As a result, Craig Clunas has achieved a double transcendence of traditional aesthetic interpretation. On the one hand, he refused to take ' beauty ' as the only standard to define art, thus bringing a large number of arts and crafts (such as embroidery, ceramics and lacquerware) which have been marginalized by art history for a long time into the research field of vision. On the other hand, he did not go to extreme anti-aesthetics, but rediscovered the complex generation mechanism of aesthetic consciousness in the function, circulation and consumption of works of art. As he suggests in the book, the background of Chinese art is not abstract formal beauty, but the experience of existence with ' life ' as the core.

3 The Wall of Disassembly : The Localization Practice of Pierre Bourdieu 's Distinction Theory

If the perspective of material culture is Craig Clunas ' methodological tool, Pierre Bourdieu 's distinction theory is his aesthetic scalpel to analyze the power structure of Chinese art.

Craig Clunas keenly captures an invisible hierarchical chain in the history of Chinese art in *Art in China* and the same period 's masterpiece 'Elegant Debt ' : literati paintings are at the top, followed by calligraphy, arts and crafts and female embroidery are at the bottom, while religious sculptures and tomb murals are hardly regarded as ' art '. This hierarchical order is not natural, but the result of the cultural division of a specific social class (gentry literati) through aesthetic taste.

Craig Clunas ' strategy is not to deny the value of literati painting, but to reject it as the only narrative center. In *Art in China* , he placed literati painting and calligraphy in chapters juxtaposed with palace embroidery, folk prints, temple sculptures, etc., so that the latter was no longer the ' background ' or ' other ' of the former, but an equally dynamic artistic practice. For example, when discussing the court painting of the Southern Song Dynasty, he did not praise Mi Youren 's ' Yunshan painting ' in isolation as ' literati Yiqi ', but revealed its political function as a royal gift. When discussing embroidery in the Ming Dynasty, he did not repeat the moral narrative of ' Nvhong ', but pointed out that men in the late Ming Dynasty also joined the embroidery production, and there was a complex translation relationship between embroidery patterns and literati paintings.

The aesthetic intention of this " decentralized " writing is to dismantle four walls : first, the wall of art categories : painting and embroidery, ceramics and sculpture are no longer the relationship between higher and lower, but equal visual language practice. Secondly, the wall of creative identity : the identity gap between court painters, professional painters, amateur literati and female embroidery ladies has been broken, and art has become a social interaction in which multiple subjects participate. Thirdly, the wall of elegance and vulgarity : ' superfluous things ' are not meaningless, but the representation of the cultural capital of the elite class, whose aesthetic value and practical value are inseparable. Finally, the wall between China and the West : Chinese art is not a ' foreign variant ' of Western art, but a field of knowledge with independent logic.

It is worth pondering that Craig Clunas 's " demolition " is not a deconstruction of nihilism. He does not deny the high achievement of literati painting, but he insists that a healthy art history should not only be the narrative of the winner. As we expand our vision into tombs, temples and markets, the silent artisans, providers and consumers are also involved in shaping the concept of ' Chinese Art '.

4 Beyond the Other : From ' Chinese Art ' to Art in China

At the beginning of *Art in China* , Craig Clunas put forward a subversive question : ' Can we imagine an Art in China rather than ' Chinese art ' ? This question is directed at the core issue of postcolonial theory : when Western scholars talk about " Chinese Art, " is it still repeating the " Orientalism " operation criticized by Said - objectifying, spectacle and marginalizing different cultures ?

Craig Clunas 's response is twofold. First of all, he acknowledges that ' Chinese Art ', as a modern academic category, is itself a product of the collision of Western knowledge in the early 20 th century, with a distinct nationalist construction color. But secondly, he refused to

abandon the concept completely, but tried to reconstruct it from the perspective of 'Cosmopolitanism'.

In *Art in China* and recent series of lectures, Craig Clunas repeatedly stressed that cosmopolitanism is not a concentric circle radiating from the West to the periphery, but a network with a center everywhere. To this end, he deliberately selected a number of 'transnational moments': in 1902, Sheikh's 'six methods' were spread to Europe through the English translation of Okakura's 'tianxin' in Kolkata; in 1922, Dong Qichang's name entered the Western sinology under the introduction of Japanese scholars. In 1927, Pan Yuliang studied sculpture in Rome, and Cezanne's painting theory was translated and introduced to Shanghai... These cases reveal a fact that has long been obscured: the modernization of Chinese art is not a passive 'westernization', but an active translation and re-creation in the flow of global knowledge.

As a result, Craig Clunas transcends the "inward and outward" dispute that has plagued overseas Chinese art history for many years. He did not agree with the essentialism that closed Chinese art to its own pen and ink tradition, and also opposed to simply seeing it as a recipient of Western influence. He advocated a 'relationalist' art history—the meaning of art is not fixed on the work itself, but is constantly generated in cross-cultural viewing, appropriation and dialogue.

5 Conclusion

Craig Clunas's *Art in China* provides a model for non-Western art history writing. It proves that getting rid of Western centralism is not to return to isolated nationalist narratives, but to reposition the value of 'local knowledge' in a global context. He breaks the myth of "aesthetics" with "material," reveals the power of "taste" with "distinction," and replaces the opposition of "things" with "world." However, as Chinese scholars, we also need to maintain critical consciousness when learning from this path. Craig Clunas's success was partly due to his defamiliarized vision of the 'other', but it was this distance that led to occasional omissions in his understanding of classical Chinese literature. More importantly, the "literati painting centralism" he criticized has long been supplemented by multiple perspectives in Chinese local academic circles. Therefore, the real value of Craig Clunas's research is not to provide us with ready-made answers, but to demonstrate an academic posture of continuous self-reflection.

When Craig Clunas looks at the jade and brick paintings of a thousand years ago with a 'living' perspective, he is actually inviting us to think together: In today's irreversible globalization, how can we not only penetrate our nation's artistic blood, but also talk to the world with an open mind? This may be the most valuable aesthetic legacy left by *Art in China* to future generations.

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