

Perceiving the Milieux of Chinese Paintings

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The paper studies the reception of Chinese paintings by the Anglo-American and European audiences in accordance with Richard Wollheim's framework of aesthetic content. Wollheim's theory of artistic content comprises of three components: depictive, expressive and a final component that operates as a function of imaginative identification with an internal spectator. I will establish that the misreadings of Chinese ink paintings stem not solely from the unfamiliar subject matter, medium and stylistic elements, but most importantly a failure to shift the emphasis from the depictive and expressive to the third kind of content as proposed in Wollheim's model. On the one hand, many commentators of Chinese ink paintings direct their attention to the depictive content, that is to say, the recognitional and configurational aspects that a "twofold" viewing experience entails. On the other, in the early twentieth-century, Roger Fry carved a discursive space for the critique of Chinese paintings as significantly expressive pictures imparting emotions and communicating the character and interior states of the artists through emphatically gestural marks. Despite the spate of analyses on the depictive and expressive content of Chinese paintings, there still exists a general confusion when faced with ink paintings. The confounded spectator often resorts to vague description of mystic qualities which borders on orientalist readings. This paper proposes a viewing practice that considers an identification with a spectator who resides within the milieu of the painting. Milieu, an idea borrowed from the parlance of biology, ecology and politics, intimates an environment that both envelops and is constituted by the community of the artist, spectator and the artwork. In this formulation, the spectator, painter and the picture are not discrete entities connected in a network of visibility as exemplified by Foucault's essay on *Las Meninas*, but rather related by the logic of the "analogue" (John Hay). Paintings, in this sense, are foci of a milieu that includes the spectator who responds not only to the represented content and the affective elements conveyed, but also the materiality of ink, paper and silk and its cosmological implications. The modern, "Western" viewer may look at Chinese paintings afresh by imagining the perceptual experience of the internal spectator who perceives the pictorial milieu by absorbing it into one's own bodily state of being. As a case study, I will examine Walter Benjamin's 1938 review on a Chinese painting exhibition in Paris which is a productive and provocative reading of Chinese aesthetics. The German theorist highlights crucial aspects of Chinese paintings and offers a technique to read them that simultaneously serves his larger socio-political agenda. In spite of its intention, Benjamin's article suggests a way of looking that demands an identification with an internal spectator situated within what he terms "atmosphere of resonance," or the picture's milieu. A repositioning of oneself vis-à-vis the picture in this manner may throw light on the discourses and viewing practices of both Chinese and "Western" cultures.