A Discourse of Originality in Late Ming Chinese Painting Criticism

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The quality of newness and uniqueness, what we normally call ‘originality’, was persistently demanded by artists and art critics of seventeenth-century China. It seems reasonable to suppose that this concern left its mark on the pictorial style of that period, but to date, few scholars have openly linked a discourse of originality with the sudden appearance of highly unusual pictorial trends. Examination of critical texts of the period reveals this discourse, and indicates that those artists who have traditionally been characterized, post facto, as ‘individualist’ or ‘eccentric’, actually shared a common anxiety over the newness, uniqueness and originality of their work.

The discourse of originality turns around a cluster of terms. Though it seems to originate in intellectual societies whose members belonged to the cultural, if not also gentry elite, the new discourse was shared across society. This was possible because of a relatively high level of literacy, a flourishing publishing industry, and social shifts resulting in part from pressures on the civil service system and a rapidly developing market economy. The discourse is evident in critical texts of the period, and readers are clued in to it by the subject matter under discussion, as well as by the terms engaged. Critics apply the key critical terms to the works that represent the dominant trend in painting during the late Ming period. Although artists interested in these ideals manifest the discourse in their paintings, this topic is sufficiently complex to warrant a discussion that focuses on the aesthetic criticism of the period.

It is essential to acknowledge that frequently used terms are aids to understanding period values in China as elsewhere. One need only recall the change in meaning from one period to the next of such terms in European art as ‘aestheticism’, ‘picturesque’ and ‘sublime’, to understand the validity of this approach. Scholars such as Raymond Williams and John Shearman have been particularly helpful in this regard. Words such as these provide a major means for understanding the art described by them in their respective periods. The same methodology can be called upon to tease out period values for the late Ming. In this case, the knotty problem is bilingual (Chinese and English) and bicultural (concerning the producers of the art and the Chinese and Euro-American historians who interpret this material). Moreover, the issue engages a series of paradigm shifts enacted during subsequent times that are still in operation today.

As is evident from the way late Ming paintings have typically been described,
art historians generally agree that profound changes from mid-Ming norms are evident during this period. (Examples of late Ming painting are provided in plates 28, 29, 31 and 33.) A rough measure of the depth of change can be sensed in the English language descriptors such paintings typically inspire: ‘strange’, ‘bizarre’, ‘eccentric’, as well as ‘iconoclastic’, ‘heterodox’, ‘individualistic’ and ‘eclectic’. Less of a problem, perhaps, is much of the Chinese-language literature, in which many historians characterize such paintings as bianyi, ‘distorted’, and bianxing, ‘transforming’, ‘transfigurative’, perhaps even ‘disfiguring’. These terms unintentionally imply that various, sometimes negative, assumptions were made about these works and their makers at the time of their production. Consequently, scholars have missed the point that these commonalities indicate a substantial and shared discourse active among artists and critics during the late Ming period. My purpose here is to excavate this discourse.

Many scholars have clearly been discomfited by the very words that they have nevertheless found useful to describe late Ming paintings. For example, English-writing authors sometimes set words such as ‘eccentric’ and ‘bad brushwork’ within quotation marks to indicate their ironic connotation. Granted, as Andrew Plaks notes, in consonance with much Qing criticism, these terms are ‘not always fully derogatory’. Still, because no alternative language has been suggested, these locutions have filtered into the mainstream discourse of how to discuss, categorize, and think about these paintings. Arguably, this has resulted in subconsciously negative interpretations of the material, enabling some scholars to assert that the paintings by the ‘eccentrics’ were not appreciated in their own time, or even to question the paintings’ relative importance today. Reexamination of a substantial body of critical literature by the most important theorists and intellectual elite of the late Ming, including Dong Qichang (1555–1636), Yuan Hongdao (1568–1610), Xie Zhaozhe (1567–1624), Jiao Hong (1541–1620), Tang Zhiqi (1579–1651), Shen Hao (1586-mid-seventeenth century) and others, counters this view. This study reveals that these intellectuals not only valued these ‘original’ artists, but also promoted their work in the art world, where cultural capital was exchanged.

By drawing more extensively on interdisciplinary material, an alternative reading may be constructed of the dominant painting trends evident in the late Ming, a period ranging from approximately the 1570s to 1644, or what is often broadly identified as the (long) first half of the seventeenth century. Though the discourse of originality continued throughout the rest of the seventeenth century, the discussion here is restricted to the late Ming. When viewed from a meta-cultural position that considers movements in art practice and criticism, philosophy and literary criticism, as well as social and economic developments, the aesthetic movements of the late Ming point to a discursive strategy that champions originality and authenticity of the self. Where earlier models have interpreted the major causes of these trends as the reflection of ‘dynastic decay’ or the appropriation of European forms, I propose that the evident visual distortions are the purposeful and desired products of a dynamic discourse within Chinese culture at a time of radical social change. During this time, it is not merely that painters worked in idiosyncratic styles as we have understood the situation heretofore, but that their efforts to show visual difference point to a shared aesthetic for originality in apposition to established standards.
To understand best late Ming criticism and critical terms, it is imperative to understand the socio-economic context into which they fit. Specifically, this relates to art collecting and institutions of exchange; the dissemination of information about collecting, criticism and ideas; the relationship of visual art criticism to literary criticism; and, underlying all, to the Neo-Confucianist philosophy of the period. The first of these to consider is art collecting and criticism as viable alternative goals and (av)vocations to government service.

Art collecting and criticism as alternatives to civil service

Though the civil service was the vocation of choice, art criticism and collecting were serious pursuits for many seventeenth-century cognoscenti. (I use the term ‘cognoscenti’ to include educated members of all classes, and to sidestep the acknowledged problematic literati/professional polemic.) Involvement in the arts could provide an appealing alternative to bureaucratic service because it demanded the manifestation of the same set of social values and abilities. That is to say, the same display of erudition and integrity that was the basis for success in civil service was also performed in the creation of visual arts and criticism.

Although there prevails a notion that late Ming cultural production reflects societal decay, due in large part to a stagnating and crumbling imperial bureaucracy, many have shown that the national economy was blossoming into a competitive commercial culture. The long-established route to career success could still be achieved by passing through the civil service examination system, yet, by the late Ming, this course was even more arduous than before, because of: a sharp increase in the numbers of candidates attempting to pass the examinations; regional quotas, which made it difficult for many qualified candidates to pass the examinations; imperial diffidence, which left many official positions unfilled despite the number of qualified candidates prepared to serve; and court factionalism, which made it dangerous to hold a position once a candidate took office. At the same time, class distinctions between merchant and scholar-official families became increasingly blurred as the goals for social and economic success compelled more merchants’ sons (and some daughters) to devote themselves to study, and scholar-official families no longer regarded it shameful to engage in commerce. As Wai-kam Ho has pointed out, new towns could even be founded by retired government officials who began second careers in the commercial sector. In turn, prospering regions such as these supported an expanding gentry class which afforded more men the opportunity to enter the official circuit.

According to official ideology, merchants occupied the lowest rung and the scholar-officials the highest, but in actuality overt signs of wealth and influence were no less impressive in China than elsewhere. Many of the cognoscenti, supported by rents from land holdings, turned from the vexations of public service to focus their attentions on the intellectual pursuits of literature and the visual arts. Characteristic examples are Dong Qichang and Chen Jiru. ‘In some ways’, observes Chu-tsing Li, ‘this was typical of the late Ming when . . . state affairs fell into the hands of inept officials and public life lost interest for people of integrity. Involvement in the arts became almost a means of escape. Such was the basic
28 Wu Bin, *Landscape (Pine Lodge Amidst Tall Mountains)*, hanging scroll, ink and light colours on paper, 306 × 98.5 cm, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection, Gift of the Brundage Symposium Funds and the M. H. de Young Museum Trust Funds
29 Ding Yunpeng, *Arhats in a Grotto*, 1606, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 142.8 × 68 cm, National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China
character of literati life during the late Ming period. Late Ming social shifts came about because the economy was heating up, and men could earn their livelihood and achieve social prominence outside of the civil service system. Visual arts representative of the old status quo no longer satisfied the needs of this society in flux.

As in glutted job markets everywhere, alternatives are available to the well-trained few, but it does not take long for the few to become the many. While the bureaucratic system was becoming increasingly crowded, participation in the art world became similarly competitive. Just as Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) bureaucratic candidates in Shandong had found it necessary to display their filiality to the state via the rhetoric of subject matter and style in the sculptural relief programmes at their family’s public funerary shrines, it was requisite for late Ming cognoscenti to advertise their own genuineness and originality in order for their peers to acknowledge them as individuals of worth and value. What was being offered for judgement, then, was their (performance of) raw integrity expressed in word and image, characteristically manifested in a surprising and sometimes disquieting manner. Judith Zeitlin and other literary scholars have discussed the marked increase in seventeenth-century publications of stories of the strange (zhiguai). A commensurate impulse for the strangely wondrous, different and, in a word, original (qi) is evident in the visual arts. It is no accident that these creative endeavours also carried a market value. The ideal of originality required an increased articulation of visual ‘difference’ to enable competing groups of critics and artists to distinguish themselves in a robust art market.

Some of the most renowned late Ming cultural leaders promoted contemporary artists who worked in new styles. Dong Qichang, a former commoner who had attained the highest social status by dint of his efforts in civil service, praised many artists who worked in this new manner, emphasizing distortions of space and physical appearance. Some of the artists who Dong admired include commoners Wu Bin (c. 1543–c. 1626) and Ding Yunpeng (active c. 1584–1638) (plate 29). Dong’s commentaries were published in various compilations of the period. Slightly later, the collector and critic Zhou Lianggong (1612–72) endorsed not only established masters, but also important emerging artists in his Duhualu, published by 1667. These are but two examples that can stand for the many seventeenth-century critics and critical movement. A number of late Ming art-critical texts are examined below. To understand the concerns expressed in these texts, however, it is helpful to be appraised of the social and intellectual context into which they fit.

Ming institutions of art exchange

Historians of Chinese art accept as a commonplace an art world involving not just the painters and collectors, but also critics, appraisers and galleries. The interests of seventeenth-century art collectors were enriched and promoted by the circulation of art manuals, histories and critical texts. Reproductions of pictures could be exchanged via various media including engraved stone rubbings, woodblock-printed books and single-sheet prints. Among the best known of
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these books are the *Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Painting*, preface dated 1627, and *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, preface dated 1679.

Impetus for the creation of art works and ways that paintings entered the market range from commissioned works to others produced, as the paragon of literati values Ni Zan (1301–1374) once put it, ‘merely to sketch the inspiration of freedom in my heart and nothing more’. Implicit within these institutions is the alleged status of painters either as amateurs (the literati) or as professionals. Even though this simple dichotomy can no longer be accepted as an apt description of the social realities of the time, it is important to recognize that the concepts were important to period critics because they highlighted the independence of these individuals in the face of servitude to the court or the market. By the seventeenth century, numerous primary institutions of art exchange were long established in China. These included making paintings for the government, for gifts to friends, on commission, to commemorate special events, with private sponsorship, for sale by self, gallery or pawnshop. Because the cognoscenti were an unusually literary-minded group, I will focus primarily on their observations and judgements about the art of the period.

**Publishing industry aids dissemination of critical texts**

Understanding the historical context of art criticism includes consciousness of how easy it was to obtain such texts. In fact, a publishing industry flourished during the late Ming when literacy rates increased rapidly in urban and rural areas among both gentry and commoners, and when private and semi-private academies blossomed as educational institutions. Unlike book printing in contemporaneous Europe, China’s publishing industry was characterized by low production costs, frequently much higher book runs, and a language shared across a vast empire. Clearly, such a publishing industry served more than just a select few. It supported a markedly increased demand for art-critical texts, texts that likewise had a broad potential readership, though granted such books were likely to have smaller runs than the more popular editions of stories and drama. It is not precipitous to conclude that the written word played an important role, therefore, in the dissemination of ideas on art at this time.

Indeed, the ideals of the intellectual elite could filter throughout Chinese society into various classes and geographical areas largely because of the publishing industry’s efficacy at a time when social goals emphasized the display of cultural literacy. As Craig Clunas has shown, the socially mobile found it imperative to surround themselves with appropriate signifiers of the gentry establishment, and they had to learn swiftly how to do this correctly. One way to assume the mantle of the power elite was through the rhetoric of visual culture, and one of the primary ways the public learned how to do this was through books.

Granted, not everyone understood the rhetorical subtleties of the class-conscious literati brushwork. One artist with court and scholar-official connections, Gu Bing (fl. 1594–1603) produced an illustrated woodblock-printed catalogue of his ideal collection in *Gu shi huapu* (preface dated to 1603). The catalogue includes works assigned to the most illustrious painters from the fourth century to the sixteenth, though for the most part, the illustrations display few or
no stylistic affinities with the artists they purport to be by. Tellingly, however, they do reveal that while Gu did not own anything by these artists, he knew what he should collect if he ever could. While not a member of the highest social stratum, Gu is an example of those who bought into their popularized values current at the time.

**Exchange of critical ideas**

But how were critical ideas about art exchanged? Competition between collectors, critics, and artists gave rise to several specialized institutions and genres for exchanging ideas about art. Though not necessarily new at the time, these genres mushroomed in the late Ming. Art-critical texts could assume various formats. 1) Artists or critics could write their comments as a colophon directly on a painting or append them on a separate sheet attached to the painting to record a social event focusing on art appreciation. As these could be read whenever the objects were viewed, they would help ‘frame’ the context in which the image would be considered. Later, these colophons could be published for a general critical readership. 2) Private collectors could publish catalogues listing and discussing works within their own collections, as well as objects seen in the collections of others. 3) Collectors or critics could compile a kind of diary of comments on works found in the collections of others. Often chatty in style, this genre of art criticism becomes more conspicuous in the late Ming than in any previous period. 4) Critics or theorists could write essays or devote special treatises to art creation, appreciation and evaluation. Texts in these genres cited herein include Dong Qichang’s *Hua zhi*, Shen Hao’s *Hua zhu*, Tang Zhiqui’s *Huishi weiyao*, Xie Zhaozhe’s *Wuzazu*, and Yuan Hongdao’s *Yuan Zhonglang quanji*.

**Target audience**

Were these critics writing only for themselves, a small elite in-group? Or were they sharing their ideas with the hoi polloi? It is impossible to pin down the precise reading audience, in part because of the wide availability of books, discussed above, and also because the authors and the artists creating this rhetoric and their audience were a mix of scholar-officials (many of whom had commoner backgrounds) and commoners. A cogent example from the world of visual representation provides an indication of the complexity of the situation and suggests one of the likely audiences of this critical information. The renowned theorist, painter, calligrapher, scholar-official Dong Qichang – himself originally a commoner before passing the highest level examinations in the civil service system – typically painted landscapes that stylistically referenced old masters. Such citations would have been obvious to any connoisseur, both then and now. Yet Dong consistently inscribed his works with comments identifying his primary source, surely an unnecessary – if not downright obnoxious – act, if this information could be presumed common knowledge. This suggests that Dong Qichang understood his primary audience for these paintings needed labels for its
comfort in viewing and acquisition. Therefore, it is likely that many of the intended recipients of his paintings and texts were not connoisseurs, but instead belonged to the larger group of the upwardly mobile. Since Dong Qichang was an acknowledged leader in painting and criticism, his followers surely observed similar practices. While Dong may have given his close friends first shot at examining his texts and paintings, too many venues for wider dissemination of this type of material existed to presume that only this small group had access to it.

Art critical discourse in relationship to literary criticism and philosophy

To understand the context of late Ming visual arts criticism, it is helpful briefly to review relevant contemporaneous literary criticism, especially since critics of literature were often also critics of the visual arts, and both responded to developments in philosophy. These disparate threads come together most obviously in the context of the foremost group of literary critics known as the Gong’an school. Led by Yuan Hongdao and his brothers, originally from Gong’an in Hubei province, the group was active in Beijing and elsewhere. The group advocated the thought of one of their members, Li Zhi (1527–1602), the most prominent iconoclastic Neo-Confucianist philosopher of the day. These critics incorporated Li’s ideas into their own critical writings. Other members of the literary group included some of the eminent art critics already encountered: Dong Qichang, Xie Zhaozhe, and also Mi Wanzhong (c. 1570–1628). These men served as the leading arbiters of taste in literature and the visual arts. Their ideas were influential in the development of intellectual history throughout the late Ming and beyond.

The important relationship between late Ming painting and the Gong’an school of literary theorists was first signalled by Wai-kam Ho, who asserted that it was an overlooked factor that could help explain trends in late Ming painting. Ho further observed that

The main thesis of the Gong’an school can be summed up in a few words: for intrinsic quality, truthfulness (zhên) [or following A.C. Graham, “authenticity”28] was demanded against the false and the insincere; hence imitation was to be detested. For external expression, eccentricity (qi) [or, as I would prefer, “originality”] was preferred over the familiar and the conventional; therefore any fixed formula was to be avoided. An artist was obligated to be truthful to his object, to his own time and surroundings, and above all to his own “mind”.29

Ho’s commentary is powerfully insightful, though I now challenge his English renderings of zhên and qi. Though there are many ways to translate qi, including eccentric, unbalanced, strange, different, extraordinary and innovative, the intellectual content relating the art criticism to period literary criticism and its emphasis on zhên, ‘authentic’, tips the scale in favour of ‘originality’.

The issue of originality indicated by qi, and its correlate, authenticity, zhên, is best understood in the context of intellectual trends dominated by the Neo-Confucianist theorists, especially Li Zhi and the Yuan brothers. Li Zhi wrote of
the untainted ‘school of the mind’ (xinxue) and the ‘childlike mind’ (tongxin) as the fountainhead of innate, authentic or genuine (zhen) expression, and thus personal uniqueness. In his words,

A childlike mind is an authentic/genuine (zhen) mind. If a childlike mind is impossible, then an authentic mind is impossible. If a childlike mind exists, then the false will be terminated and the genuine purified, and the very first single memory is from an original (ben, literally: root, source) mind. If you lose your childlike mind, then the authentic mind is lost. Once the authentic mind is lost, then the genuine person is lost. If one is a person and yet not authentic/genuine, then you can never return to the beginning state (you chu).30 (CT-1)

This philosophical position stressed an intuitive approach to knowledge and challenged the norms of canonical authority, thus encouraging greater personal and intellectual prerogative. As Li said (in this translation by William Theodore de Bary),

Once people’s minds have been given over to received opinions and moral principles, what they have to say is all about these things, and not what would naturally come from their childlike minds (tongxin). No matter how clever the words, what have they to do with oneself (wo)? What else can there be but phony men (jiaren) speaking phony words doing phony things, writing phony writings? Once the men become phonies, everything becomes phony. Thereafter if one speaks phony talk to the phonies, the phonies are pleased; if one does phony things as the phonies do, the phonies are pleased; and if one discourses with the phonies through phony writings, the phonies are pleased. Everything is phony, and everyone is pleased.31 (CT-2)

As a consequence, Li asserts that the phonies have destroyed the best in literature. This comment was directed at the narrow canon promoted by the sixteenth-century Old Phraseology Movement.32 In contrast to that restrictive approach, Li emphasized the importance of new contributions by individuals engaged with contemporary circumstances. He writes that:

... the best in literature always came from the childlike mind, and if the childlike mind continued to exist in this way, moral principles would not be practised, received impressions would not stand up, and the writing of any age, any man, any form, any style, and any language would all be accepted as literature.33 (CT-3)

That is, Literature with a Capital L. Li’s forceful explication of the ideal of authenticity and genuineness was clearly positioned as a challenge to a status quo perceived to be morally bankrupt and out of touch with current interests. As in literary criticism, so, too, in painting criticism.

The issue is not merely one of an ‘original/authentic’ painting versus a fake one. Yuan Hongdao once referred to this type of situation to help explain his deeper philosophical stance. He asked who would want to own a fake painting by
an old master when one could have an authentic (zhen) work by a contemporary artist? The issue is not so superficial, but instead focuses on personal integrity and understanding rather than petty formalism and rules.

Li Zhi’s interest in authenticity was embraced by the Gong’an circle. One of their members, Jiang Yingke (1556–1605), wrote an essay on the subject, *Seeking Authenticity (Qiu zhen)*, and the term appears in numerous other Gong’an writings. These have been studied by literary scholar Jonathan Chaves, who has discussed the Gong’an school’s concern with the expression of authenticity or genuineness of self. Literary scholar Andrew Plaks has observed a commensurate interest by late Ming critics of literature and visual art in originality and spontaneity, though his paper does not examine art criticism and painting closely. I accept their findings, and assert that art theorists and artists, who also were often one and the same individual in late Ming China, proclaimed their authenticity (zhen) through original (qi) expression in painting and calligraphy.

Having established the means by which art and ideas were exchanged in the late Ming and the social, economic and intellectual context into which it fits, it is now possible to consider the discourse of originality in late Ming painting criticism. Since this discourse is indicated by the very words these writers chose to argue their position, I will examine them first.

**Terms**

Terms indicate values, and the key value promoted in late Ming painting criticism was originality. The discourse of originality turns around a cluster of critical words designed to highlight or valorize personal uniqueness and prerogative. In late Ming critical texts, the value of originality is most emphatically indicated by the use of the term *qi*. Qi is a complex term with a wide semantic range that encompasses the prevalent twentieth-century uses of ‘strange’, ‘different’, ‘bizarre’, and sometimes ‘eccentric’, as well as other meanings of ‘extraordinary’, ‘remarkable’, ‘wonderful’ and ‘original’. Examination of this Chinese word in the seventeenth-century applications discloses interpretations of period aesthetics. Other terms important to the discourse include *qi*/originality’s close correlate, *zhen* ‘authentic’ or ‘genuine’ as emphasized by the Gong’an group; as well as some terms long established in the history of art criticism. These include *yi* ‘free’, ‘unfettered’, or also, as frequently translated, ‘untrammeled’, *zhuo* ‘awkward’, implying unstudied genuineness and thus, integrity; *qu*, the unique aesthetic ‘interest’ of an object; and *kuang*, ‘wild’, ‘uninhibited’. Another term used with some frequency, though previously unremarked, is *xiaopin*, ‘to imitate another to one’s own disadvantage’ in the way of a philistine. The use of these terms typically links the critical approach of the late Ming critic to the period discourse. Though a number of art historians and literary scholars have signalled the importance of *qi* for art history, the term deserves further consideration.

In an effort to excavate the period meaning of the term, it is essential to be conscious of this project as a bilingual and bicultural exercise. Though overlooked, the translation of *qi* as original is well established in critical
literature. Because most art historians have emphasized the meaning of qi as 'strange’, it is helpful to recall that other scholars have translated the term qi as ‘original’ when the context forces positive readings of newness in art-historical and literary works dating from the sixth through the seventeenth centuries. Chinese writers invoked the value of originality throughout much of history. Still, the question remains, though the term has most currency in the criticism of the late Ming, did qi really mean original at that time?

Qi in late Ming dictionaries

How was qi defined in standard late Ming sources? Clearly, a one-to-one relationship of word-to-idea was as problematic then as it is today, and dictionary compilers were as aware of the need to contextualize meaning as, say, the OED authors are now. Dictionaries available during the seventeenth century uniformly identify qi ‘different’ with its common counterparts, yi, ‘anomalous’, and guai, ‘strange’, but then continue by citing a wide array of classical references that build contextual and connotative meaning indicative of something far more complex.

The seventeenth-century Zheng zi tong represents dictionaries of the period. After providing the standard primary definition associating qi with yi and guai, it describes qi as uneven, like the numbers 1, 3, 5, and therefore indicates that the term can mean ‘odd’, or ‘unbalanced’, and consequently, ‘unsettled’ or ‘unsettling’. But these are only simple shorthand definitions. A thoughtful reader would want to know more to understand how to use the term best. The Zheng zi tong therefore quickly moves on to reveal that qi harbours a psychological dimension referring to an individual’s uniqueness. It provides an illustrative entry from an oft-quoted Daoist text of obscure origins (possibly from the fourth century CE), the Classic of Immortality (Xianjing), in which it was written: ‘People have three qi: their consciousness, their character, and their thoughts or imagination.’ (CT-4) Here, qi plainly refers to a variety of psychological qualities unique to a particular individual. Even in the seventeenth-century dictionary, it is recognized that the term is complex, and does not merely mean ‘strange’ or ‘different’.

As suggested by the Zheng zi tong, it is necessary to consider the applied uses of terms when attempting definitions. A long history of critical use in the Classics reveals that, though the term does not always translate effectively as ‘original’, qi was used as a positive indicator of the new and unique. These early texts became part of a living body of received knowledge transferred from one generation to the next via the nationwide civil service examination system. In a line from the Zhuangzi, one of the most venerable of Daoist classics – and also included in the Zheng zi tong entry for qi, it is recorded:

All things are one. The putrid (choufu) can transform into something marvellous (literally, ‘divinely rare’, shenqi), and the marvellous can return to the state of the putrid. (CT-5)
It is clear that as early as the fourth–third centuries BCE and continuing into the seventeenth century CE, the term *qi* could not only hold positive value, but also could indicate something unique and desirable.

What are the other types of texts that made significant use of the term? How was it used in those sources? In addition to the early Daoist texts, the term appears significantly in tracts on warfare and literary criticism. Though these topics may seem unrelated in the extreme, their shared use of the term is even more forceful evidence.

The *Sunzi* or *Art of Warfare* (from approximately the fourth century BCE) uses the term to indicate the surprise strategy that will win the war. Roger Ames has translated this passage:

> It is ‘surprise’ (*qi*) and ‘straightforward’ (*zheng*) operations that enable one’s army to withstand the full assault of the enemy force and remain undefeated . . . (CT-6)

And therefore,

> Generally, in battle use the ‘straightforward’ to engage the enemy and the ‘surprise’ to win the victory. Thus the expert at delivering the surprise assault is as boundless as the heavens and earth, and as inexhaustible as the rivers and seas.48 (CT-7)

Translating the positively used *qi* here with ‘strange’, ‘different’, or ‘unbalanced’ would be inaccurate. One does not speak of a ‘strange’ attack, or an ‘unbalanced’ victory that is brilliantly successful, whereas ‘surprise’ works well in these cases. Moreover, such a translation would miss the point that seemingly opposing strategies are productive under different circumstances. These qualities are recognized as two sides of the same coin. There is no single correct behaviour for all conditions; the unconventional sometimes is more appropriate than the expected. This concept is understood for warfare, and has comparable applications for literary criticism. Granted, Ames does not choose to translate *qi* as ‘original’ here, and such a rendering would not work. Yet, ‘surprise’ falls well within the spectrum of the original in terms of being new, different and unpredicted.

In the earliest extant text of Chinese literary criticism, *Wenxin diaolong* (*Literary Minds and the Carving of Dragons*), Liu Xie (c. 465–c. 522 CE) repeatedly deploys the term *qi* to indicate some new and extraordinary type of writing among the Classics. Literary scholar Chen Zhaoxiu points out that Liu Xie especially prized the *qi* aspect of the *Li Sao* (*Encountering Sorrow*), a long poem from the third century BCE.49 I have slightly adapted Vincent Shih’s translation of the following passage:

> After the *feng* and *ya* were no longer written, nothing worthy emerged to continue the development. Then a remarkable (*qi*) literary achievement arose in a burst of splendor, the *Li Sao*, soaring high in the wake of the

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*Feng, ya and ci are styles of poetry.*
Ancient Poets, and in the carriage of the writers of *ci*. Can it be because the time of the author of the *Li Sao* was not yet long removed from the age of the Sage, and Chu writers were men of great talent?50 (CT-8)

And again:

Mei [Sheng, ?–141 BCE] and Jia [Yi, 200–168 BCE] entered the realm of beauty by following (*zhui*) [the style of their predecessors, Qu Yuan and Song Yu]; and Ma [Sima Xiangru, ?–117 BCE] and Yang [Xiong, 53 BCE–18 CE] attained the quality of the wondrous (*qi*) by developing their forms.51 (CT-9)

There is no doubt that what excites Liu Xie about the *Li Sao* was its fresh, new, different and, in effect, original contributions to literature. He is not writing of the ‘strange’ and ‘eccentric’ nature of this Classic.

Liu Xie recognized that just as these qualities of newness and originality were important to the early authors of the *Li Sao*, they would also be significant to anyone aspiring to literary greatness, in his own period or later. Nevertheless, in his studies Chen Zhaoxiu has observed that Liu Xie recognized the importance of retaining normative, canonical traditions because they served as a springboard for all literary innovations.52 Liu writes:

> When a writer casts and moulds his works after the patterns of the Classics, soars and alights in the manner in which philosophers and historians have soared and alighted, and is equipped with a profound knowledge of the ever-changing emotions and the ability to display with a delicate touch styles suitable to them, he will be able to conceive new ideas and carve original (*qi*) expressions.53 (CT-10)

In other words, an author is able to create something innovative and original because she or he understands the great achievements of those who have established the cultural standards. Despite twentieth-century cultural constructions to the contrary, Chinese culture has valorized the intellectually innovative, challenging, new and original for thousands of years. Having entered intellectual history through the words of some of China’s most revered and varied of intellects, the term *qi* and its connotated meanings were available to later writers for use in similar contexts, not the least of which was visual arts criticism.

Originality – a shared value in painting and literary criticism

The complexity of the term *qi* and its positive deployment argue for a more nuanced translation in art criticism than ‘strange’, ‘different’, or ‘eccentric’.54 We may take our cue from literary scholar Andrew Plaks who has emphasized the shared value of *qi* evident in ironic rhetoric of late Ming fiction and painting. He finds that the term *qi* characteristically indicates something completely new and positive in most cases of seventeenth-century literary criticism, and suggests that it
has similar applications in visual arts criticism. Whereas art historians previously tended to translate *qi* as ‘eccentric’ or ‘heterodox’, Plaks notes that for seventeenth-century criticism, the term unequivocally indicates something completely new and positive. The new manipulations of formal elements point to a ‘new critical sensibility of medium, subject, and signification’. Consequently, Plaks’s survey of art-historical studies by Ho, Cahill and Fong leads him to deduce that late Ming painting emphasized ‘a kind of affirmation of spontaneity and originality’. This understanding finds expression in critical statements by a number of leading artists of the late Ming period, although now it is a more studied, self-conscious kind of spontaneity that is being cultivated.

Plaks’s insightful observations of the visual arts and criticism based upon his deep understanding of literary history and criticism are exactly on target. Though Plaks first promoted his ideas in this regard at a conference in 1985, and his longer paper was subsequently published in 1991, art historians have neglected to consider his ideas on this subject until now, generally preferring instead to apply the currently more familiar sixteenth-century critical values to art of the seventeenth century. I have tested Plaks’s compelling argument with a close contextual reading of period art criticism. I find that not only do late Ming paintings emphasize ‘a kind of affirmation of spontaneity and originality’, but also that the term *qi* is frequently used in critical writings, not only to indicate ‘something new and positive’, but emphatically also to signify something original.

Unquestionably, *qi* has a wide spectrum of meanings, both positive and negative. And given that wide spectrum, situations exist in which it can connote more than one meaning at a time. I do not claim that *qi* only means ‘original’, but that strikingly and significantly, late Ming painting critics frequently used the term in this way. This factor, conjoined with the characteristic paintings of the period that exhibit that ‘sense of spontaneity and originality’, lead persuasively to the conclusion that this quality is not accidental, but necessary.

**Evidence of the discourse of originality in art-critical writings**

With the historical – and historiographic – context established, the term defined, and its historical usage presented, it is now possible to examine evidence of the discourse of originality in art criticism. Some of the passages cited here will be familiar to many readers. Because of the reassessed historical context, however, new interpretations of these statements are now requisite, and bring with them a paradigm shift for understanding the paintings and culture of the period. Consequently, I have updated the translations of many of these statements, and translated others afresh. The passages cited below are but a sampling from the available critical literature. I do not pretend to have combed through all critical texts of the period. In any case, this would be an insurmountable impossibility due to many factors including the fact that uncountable texts have not survived, and that much of the criticism exists on paintings and has not yet been published, or is otherwise inaccessible. What is significant, however, is 1) that these statements are by some of the most important cultural leaders and art critics of the period – and also in all of China’s long history; and 2) the remarkable ease with which I have
found and continue to find this material. Taken together in historical context, these diverse factors substantiate a recognizable value of originality in late Ming culture.

By the seventeenth century, *qi* had become one of the dominant values in painting criticism. The Yangzhou scholar-official and critic Tang Zhiqi (1579–1651) recorded his support of a statement by an otherwise unknown critic, Yuan Xuanshi, who commented that *qi* was one of the five fine qualities of landscape paintings:

Landscapes have five [kinds of] beauty: a sense of seasoned maturity, an easy freedom, originality, integrity, and elegance [in expression], (*cang*, *yi*, *qi*, *yuan*, *yun*). Landscapes [also] have five faults. [They can be] immature, stiff, unnatural, coarse, or insipid (*nen*, *ban*, *ke*, *sheng*, *chi*). (CT-11)

In this passage, these critics apply sets of contrasting human character traits to landscape painting. The positive values emphasize qualities unique to the artist while not sacrificing integrity and balance. Here, they utilize the standard parallel prose structure to contrast *qi*, ‘original’ with *ke*, ‘unnatural’, to highlight the natural and innate aspects of originality. Implicit in the comparison is the understood relationship between originality and authenticity, in which original expression is the product of the natural, child-like mind (*tongxin*) promoted in the thought of Li Zhi and the Gong’an theorists. This point of view must have had great currency in the late Ming, as the contemporary artist Li Shida (*jinshi* 1574, active to c. 1620) is also credited with authoring this statement.

Seventeenth-century critics found originality/*qi* in the compositions and brushwork of the old masters. The importance of this value in the creation of paintings is underscored by Dong Qichang’s comment below:

The old masters did not always paint in the same way. Nowadays painters have forgotten about this idea and consequently lack well-rounded skills. If an artist can plan a composition and his brushwork sufficiently expresses his artistic ideas, he is one who knows how to complete a task at hand. Then he must elucidate the empty and the substantial (or ‘the sparse and the dense’). It is necessary to understand the relationship between the empty and the substantial; both use the brush everywhere to detail or to generalize. In order to have detailed areas, you have to [play them off] general ones. The empty and the substantial are interdependent. [Otherwise], distance will not be deep, subtleties will not be tasteful. One needs only to consider carefully the empty and the substantial and make a decision on them in accordance with one’s judgement; then the painting will naturally be original/extraordinary (*hua zi qi yi*). (CT-12)

Dong asserts that original and extraordinary expression results from an artist’s innate understanding of relative values. To translated *qi* as ‘strange’, ‘different’, or ‘eccentric’ here would be to miss the point entirely.

Critics also held that originality should be found in the brushwork of great paintings generally. Dong Qichang enthusiastically writes of a number of important old master paintings that he purchased from a dealer:
There is a large hanging scroll by Meihua daoren (Wu Zhen, 1280–1354) after Juran (active circa 960–980) done in monochrome ink with wet brushwork, *Swallowing and Spitting Clouds and Mist* (*Yunyan tuntu*) – and there’s nothing better than [the] Juran [mode of painting]! Also [I acquired] Gao Kegong’s (1248–1310) *Cloudy Mountains after an Autumn Storm* (*Yunshan qiuji*), and Xie Bocheng’s (1296–1370) study of Dong Yuan’s (active mid-tenth century) *Viewing the Waterfall at Mount Lu*. All [of these paintings exhibit] original brushwork (*jie qi bi ye*).65

(CT-13)

Each of these old masters was recognized for their innovative contributions to painting history, not their strangeness or eccentricity. Although these paintings may no longer be extant, the descriptive titles of these works suggest dramatic landscapes produced with strong brushwork – the kind of brushwork, Dong tells us, that one could expect of the greatest of masters.

Moving from identifying originality in old master paintings to distinguishing it in works of the later artists, Dong Qichang writes that it is necessary for the brushwork of painters and calligraphers to be original, *qi*, if they want to equal the ancients.

The world doesn’t see many painters like Youcheng (Wang Wei) or calligraphers like Youjun (Wang Xizhi). Some years ago when I was at the Grand Scholar Xiang Yuanbian’s place at Jiaxiang, I saw [Wang Wei’s] *Snowy River Picture*.66 It used only contour lines, completely without any texture strokes or wash. As to the copies transmitted in the world, such as Wang Shuming’s (Wang Meng’s, 1308–1385) *Sword Pavilion Picture*, their expressive brushwork resembles that of Li Zhongshe.67 I suspect that they do not comply with the style of Wang Wei’s painting. Also, when I was in Chang’an (i.e., a common late Ming euphemism for Beijing), I acquired Zhao Danian’s *Copy of Youcheng’s Lakeside Retreat in Clear Summer Picture* (dating to 1100).68 It also does not have any fine texture strokes, somewhat resembling the *Snowy River* in Mr. Xiang’s collection. But I personally think that it does not fully embody Wang Wei’s manner. All paintings of the top rank (*shenpin*) by great masters must have something original in their brushwork (*bi yu cunfa you qi*).69 (CT-14)

That is to say, Dong believed he had seen a few excellent paintings by some of the greatest artists of the Song and Yuan Dynasties in the mode of an even earlier Tang Dynasty master. He praises the later artists because instead of closely imitating Wang Wei’s style, they made some innovative and authentic (*zhen*) contribution with their own brushwork. Brushwork, it was commonly understood, was the manifestation of an artist’s personal and innate character. Ultimately, it is the issue of personal character exhibited through artistic expression that is at stake for Dong and the other critics, because it reveals the integrity of the author. His or her non-phony (*zhen*) expression, declared in so striking a way as to (seem to) have no precedent, will daringly break rules to say something original and genuine about contemporary values.
Zheng in criticism and art

The focus on understanding the term *qi* may be tightened by approaching it from a different direction. In Chinese criticism, important terms often occur as part of a dyadic pair, which helps establish standard meanings and applications. These pairs may sometimes be used as opposites, sometimes as appositely. ‘Content’ (*zhi*) versus ‘form’ (*wen*) is one well-known example. The dyadic complement of *qi* is *zheng*, already observed in various passages from the Classics cited above. *Zheng* typically can mean ‘upright’ or ‘balanced’, but also ‘norm’, ‘normative’, ‘standard’ and even ‘canonical’. It is sometimes translated as ‘orthodoxy’, but this reading is applicable only under limited circumstances, as Richard Edwards, James Liu, Chou Ju-hsi and, most recently, Martin Powers and I74 have shown. It is easy to see how, in accordance with basic dictionary definitions and familiar twentieth-century applications, it could seem reasonable to construct interpretations in which *zheng* would indicate the canonical standard, while *qi*, ‘strange’, would be taken as beyond the acceptable limits and thus, ‘eccentric’. Yet, again, as with all critical terms, it is context that determines meaning.

During the mid Ming period of the sixteenth century, *zheng* was often used to designate the stylistic tradition that the author regarded as the ‘best’ to be the canon. He Liangjun (1506–1573) listed the founders of the major traditions of landscape painting:

> There are many landscape painters. Guan Tong and Jing Hao form one school, Dong Yuan and Priest Juran another school, and Li Cheng and Fan Kuan still another. Coming to Li Tang, he too, forms a school. In these several masters, brush strength and elegance in expression are all complete. Later painters who were able to follow them constitute the canonical tradition (*zhengmai*).75 (CT-15)

He Liangjun also wrote about important followers within these traditions. To quote him further:

> Because [the Yuan period literati] were all men of integrity, they were ashamed to serve the [Mongolian] Yuan, and instead pursued their ambitions in reclusion. They wandered daily among the mountains and rivers, thus attaining a profound understanding of their nature and appearance. [In this, their styles] all come from Jing [Hao], Guan [Tong], Dong [Yuan], and Ju[ran]; the traditions they have passed on are also [part of the] canon (*zheng*).76 (CT-16)

For the mid-Ming He Liangjun, the term *zheng* functioned like ‘canon’. The opinions of this important sixteenth-century critic have often been cited in interpreting Chinese landscape paintings generally. While his statements provide insights for his time, applying them to all landscapes essentializes Chinese cultural production, and diminishes our ability to understand that aesthetic values shifted from time to time in Chinese art history. Recognizing these changes enables us to
see variations within the culture. By historicizing He Liangjun’s statements, it is possible to ask, How did zheng function for the late Ming? Did the term still mean ‘canon’? Did the ‘canon’ remain the same?

By the 1570s the Wu-school mode of painting was widely regarded as the canon. The most prominent exemplar of Wu-school painting was the great master and co-founder of this style Wen Zhengming (1470–1559). Wen’s art is highly admired, and deservedly so: his compositions are creative and complex. Nevertheless, we may briefly characterize his style by pointing out his frequent use of narrow formats, vertical landscape compositions that revolve around a central axis, meticulous and often intricate brushwork, and a set group of landscape forms (plate 30, see page 542). Although Wen eschews any sense of atmosphere such as typified many old master paintings, and often manipulates details of scale, still the relative distance between objects is typically clear. His mountains sit solidly on the ground and his skies lie above and behind. Overall, his compositions maintain a spatial credibility arising from a clear sense of orientation to the ground. In this approach, his work departs little from that of Song masters such as Fan Kuan (c. 960–1030) or Li Cheng (919–967?).

Although the followers of Wen Zhengming (often referred to as the late Wu-school painters) active in the late Ming looked to the same art-historical record as did Dong Qichang and his critically minded contemporaries, their attitudes were different. Typically, Dong Qichang, Yuan Hongdao and others found the (late) Wu-school approach somewhat derivative. Dong was once asked by a Gong’an literary critic whether the Wu-school founders had captured the intentions of the old masters? Dong’s response was recorded by Yuan Hongdao. It has been translated by Jonathan Chaves, and is worth repeating here:

Once, when Boxiu [Yuan Zongdao] and I [Yuan Hongdao] were visiting Dong Xuanzai [Dong Qichang], Boxiu asked, ‘of all the major figures in the recent world of painting, such as Wen Zhengming, Tang Bohu [Tang Yin (1470–1523)], and Shen Shitian [Shen Zhou (1427–1509)], can it be said that they possess something of the brush-ideas of the old masters?’ To this, Xuanzai replied, ‘Because not one brushstroke of some recent painters fails to resemble the old masters, the paintings themselves do not resemble that of the old masters.’ I was amazed to hear this, and exclaimed, ‘These are the words of one who has perceived the Dao!’ For the good painter learns from things, not from other painters. The good philosopher learns from his mind, not from some doctrine. The good poet learns from the panoply of images (senluo wanxiang), not from writers of the past. When one models oneself on the [poets of the] Tang dynasty, it is not a question of modeling one’s technique (jige), lines and words on theirs. One models oneself on the spirit of their not being like the Han [poets], or the Wei [poets], or the Six dynasties [poets]. This is the true ‘modeling’.

For the late Ming critic, even the founding Wu-school artists appeared to follow the old masters too closely without developing any thoughts of their own. Making allowances for rhetorical effect in these comments about painters who have almost always been highly regarded (on a par with the likes of a
Michaelangelo or a Raphael), nonetheless it is clear that late Ming critics considered the Wu-school painters derivative because they failed to introduce elements unique to themselves.

In fact, the canon had changed. As Wai-kam Ho and Dawn Ho Delbancano have observed, ‘Equilibrium is achieved through the surprising or unexpected: the “classical path” through the unorthodox and dangerous. Qi (strangeness) was the new Ming criterion for naturalness, replacing the old literati concept of ya (refinement and elegance) as zheng (orthodoxy).’ Despite their problematic use of the terms ‘unorthodox’, ‘dangerous’, ‘strangeness’ for qi, and ‘orthodoxy’ for zheng, their observation hits the mark. Qi/originality did become the new standard, zheng, in the late Ming.

**Purposeful qi not zheng**

In contrast to outmoded mid-Ming styles, the point that contemporary late Ming paintings described as qi were neither normative nor ordinary, zheng, is made by the Suzhou art critic and artist Shen Hao (1586–mid-seventeenth century). In standard renditions, mountains typically sit low in the painting relative to mists, which often rest on the tops of mountains. Yet, in addressing the question of ‘composition’, Shen notes that he purposefully inverted normative practice by placing mists below and mountains above, and by cutting off the bases and tops of objects. (This point is illustrated by contrasting Wen Zhengming’s painting with a handscroll by Shen Hao in plates 30 and 31.) In Shen’s words:

Dachi (Huang Gongwang, 1269–1354) once said that a painting must maintain the [relative] positions of heaven and earth. This is the normal method. (*Chang fa ye.*) [On the other hand], whenever I paint, clouds and mist appear below, while a precipitous peak projects above. The individual, (*yi ren*, i.e., the artist) unifies them, and gives the impression of vigorously shaking out a cloth over several thousand feet long. A guest marvelled at this, so I said to him, ‘This approach is based on the [technique of] cutting off the tops. It is as if the peaks of the ranges were like the branches of a family tree. There is no need to reveal the connection. [Likewise] there is no need to expose the bases of cliffs or the roots of trunks. This forces the viewer to get these things [i.e., the bases] beyond [the explicit marks of] paper and brush [i.e., with the imagination].’ [Then] my guest, [recalling an old painting], said, ‘When the ancients sketched plums and dabbed bamboos, depicting a single branch across a wall, [their paintings] rejected unconventional [compositions], capturing the [bamboo’s] expressive (literally, ‘precious’) disposition (*li qi bei shi*) by using the entire stem and all the branches. Although complete, they lacked flavour. Is this what you are talking about?’ I said, ‘Yes.’

The implication is that the wilful restructuring of compositions recommended by Shen and evident in paintings by him and his contemporaries is fresher and more interesting than the mimetic methods of the old masters, whose works, in
contrast, the friend finds boring. This rhetoric presupposes an ideal of originality obtained by perverting tradition. In other words, qi here used as ‘unconventional’ (and by extension, original and innovative), suggests an ironic contrast with the norm, zheng. Shen Hao’s admiration for a reversal of standard pictorial practice can be recognized as part of a broader discourse in which opposition to the norm was becoming a mark of the true master, and his or her integrity.

This unequivocal shift in critical values from the mid- to the late Ming was coupled with a noticeable change in visual representation. ‘For a period of about a half a century,’ James Watt reminds us, ‘from the last decade of the sixteenth century to the end of the Ming dynasty, the concept of qi rather than zheng – the unbalanced as against the balanced – was in the ascendant. For once Chinese writers and artists were prepared to go to extremes.’80 Although ‘unbalanced’ is one way to translate qi, it is more negative than most seventeenth-century aesthetic criticism would warrant. Nevertheless, Watt’s point is well taken: for late Ming critics, qi was more important than zheng. This may help to explain the contrast between the mid Ming Wu-school master Lu Zhi’s (1496–1576) relatively refined and restrained brushwork, his careful spatial organization and distortions that still stay within the bounds of established norms (plate 32), and the late Ming painter Song Xu’s (1525–after 1605) landscape (plate 33), which uses bold, aggressive brushwork, and pushes the middle and far distances close up to the picture plane for a more forceful composition.

Where mid-Ming critics like He Liangjun were concerned to establish what was zheng, ‘canonical,’ late Ming Dong Qichang
favoured qi so much that he felt it could replace the old zheng as the standard:

Prior to Youcheng (Wang Wei, 699–769), the great masters (zuozhe) were good at [almost] everything. They fell short only in capturing the feel and spirit of landscapes. Beginning with Wang Wei, artists began to use texture strokes and washes [enabling the depiction of volume and texture]. Just as Wang Youjun (Wang Xizhi, 309–c. 365) who, with his soaring talent, created a new style (bian) of calligraphy against the tradition of Zhong [You] (151–230), [so did Wang Wei’s style] seem original (qi) [at the time] and opposed (fan) to canonical [methods] (zheng), (i.e., si qi fan zheng).81 (CT-18)

The zuo in zuozhe above implies an original act. Zuozhe indicates authorial presence, someone who ‘makes’ a work of art or literature in a masterful and unique way. Fan literally means to oppose or ‘overturn’. Bian is a technical term for stylistic changes that introduce new ways of seeing and painting missing from the previous masterworks. Qi clearly describes Wang Wei’s stylistic innovations, innovations which, Dong goes on to explain, made possible further contributions by many later masters. Because readers know that Wang’s work later became canonical, we understand that Dong is implying that artistic originality will only result with the cessation of unthinking, mechanical responses that would otherwise perpetuate the status quo.
Dong first records his oft-repeated theme in his earliest dated extant critical writing, a calligraphy handscroll titled *Theories on Using Brushwork* (Lun yong bi, often given as *Theories of Painting and Calligraphy*). After three decades’ experience, Dong writes that works by truly great calligraphers such as Wang Xizhi may appear uncontrolled, yet they only ‘seem strange (qi) and opposed to canonical methods (si qi er fan zhengzhe). Mundane people cannot understand this.’

Further on in the text, he notes:

> When the Old Masters wrote (zuo) calligraphy, they would never do it according to standard rules (zheng ju), but took originality (qi) to be their norm (yi qi wei zheng). \(^{83}\) (CT-20)

An alternative but plausible rendering of this statement is possible. This one emphasizes the dialectic of balanced/unbalanced for zheng/qi that might be more meaningful as the kind of technical instruction used to jolt complacent students to attention:

When the Old Masters wrote calligraphy, they would never write balanced compositions, but took the unbalanced to be their norm.

Either way, Dong’s point is that the new, different, and unconventional – in a word, original was more interesting than the standard or static.

This second version helps explain Nelson Wu’s translation as he blended the two Dong Qichang passages together. This is instructive not only for understanding the shift in values from the mid- to late Ming, but also for locating a paradigm shift now. Though Nelson Wu published his translation in 1962, it was quoted in an important article in 1992. \(^{84}\) Clearly, the

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32 Lu Zhi, *Recluse at Huaqi (Solitary Fisherman on the Flower Stream)*, 1568, hanging scroll, ink and light colours on paper, 119.2 × 26.8 cm, National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China
understanding of qi/zheng and late Ming critical values current in the mid twentieth century is still operative at the end of it. Wu’s translation reads:

Having studied the art of calligraphy for thirty years . . .
I now realize that what seems unorthodox and dangerous practice is actually the direct, sound, and classical path to excellence. It is no use to tell this to the uninitiated . . . The ancient masters never took the prosaic and static approach, because they used the surprising and the dynamic to achieve equilibrium.85

Readers will quickly note differences between Wu’s translation and mine. I would assert that there are a number of significant problems with Wu’s interpretation. Nelson Wu, like many in the cold war generation, apparently could not imagine that anyone Chinese might advocate opposing the canon, despite a long tradition of defying established authority going back to the origins of literati theory with its rejection of courtly standards. Thus, he was cornered into interpreting the passage in a strangely forced and self-contradictory fashion. Though many scholars have recognized that qi could have positive connotations from early times onward, Wu translated qi as ‘unorthodox and dangerous’. In the wake of research by Peter Bol, Ronald Egan, Amy McNair and others, such a reading sounds strange, but in the middle of the Cold War, and to those who have continued to accept that position, it must have seemed normal.

Returning to the seventeenth century, Dong embellishes his point by playing with

33 Song Xu, Winter Landscape (Waterfall in Winter), 1589, hanging scroll, ink and light colours on paper, 190 × 42 cm. Sarah Cahill Collection
his, by now, familiar phrase. What would become ‘seems original and opposed to canonical [methods]’ (si qi fan zheng), are here ‘are original and opposed to canonical methods,’ (si qi er fan zheng zhe), and ‘consider originality to be the norm,’ (yi qi wei zheng). From the start, Dong Qichang recognized that truly brilliant minds always create something new and original. For such individuals, that is their modus operandi. But could this method be imitated?

**Performance qi**

Late Ming critics were sufficiently sophisticated to understand that ‘difference’ alone is not the same as true originality, i.e., newness and uniqueness resulting from an individual’s complex intellectual activity. This is another reason why rendering qi simply as ‘different’ or ‘strange’ will not work for the seventeenth-century critical context. In a passage on brushwork, the critic Tang Zhiqi wrote:

> It’s easy to make hills and valleys (i.e., landscapes) look novel (qi) but making your brushwork mature and strong is difficult to execute. You could say that the novelty of landscapes is due to nothing more than that the mass of people have not seen such views, but if your brushwork is not yet mature and strong, then you will not be able to avoid imitating (mo) the landscapes of others. How are you going to impress the critics then? As for [the other genres of] figure or bird-and-flower painting, [if your brushwork is weak], then your work will not be much different from a copy (mo) of another painting.86 (CT-21)

Tang distinguishes between weak brushwork that merely looks novel because the scene is unfamiliar, and strong, original brushwork that captures and reveals the special qualities of a landscape. Inept painters are those forced to plagiarize the works of others. Though an exotic surface appearance may seem original and fool the undiscerning, the key to originality in a truly creative artist lies in the brushwork, traditionally understood as the visible manifestation of the artist’s character.

By disparaging qi-as-novelty, Tang Zhiqi emphasizes his high assessment of qi as originality. (Please recall, Tang is one of the critics who identified qi as an essential quality of good landscape painting.) By contrasting the term qi with mo, ‘imitative copy’, Tang asserts that superficial novelty was no better than imitation.

Still, critics such as Yuan Hongdao saw originality and imitation as two sides of the same problem, writing, ‘to imitate and lose is certainly not as good as to do the opposite and win; one does the opposite so as to imitate!’87 His playful assertion means that one should imitate the best quality of the old masters, that being their originality.

**Conclusion**

The methodology of studying select terms to understand period values and identify discourses is just as significant to cultural studies of China as for Euro-
America. Commercial and career options supported an environment that encouraged the value of difference and newness in the late Ming period. It is clear from the historical context that for the late Ming, qi was a term that indicated the concept – and value – of originality. Frequent use of the term by period critics indicates this prominent discourse at the time. Consequently, the terms ‘eccentric’ and ‘individualist’ are inadequate as the primary descriptors of the unconventional late Ming works. Instead, I would encourage use of the terms unconventional, original and qi for these old masters of contemporary late Ming art in our increasingly multi-cultural age.

As important as the discourse of originality was for its time, its greater significance lies in the numerous implications of this discourse for visual arts studies. The new interpretation of late Ming cultural context puts pressure on previously established assessments of the Chinese visual arts and culture. It challenges traditional assessments of Dong Qichang, his theories, and attitudes about painting. Whereas previously, scholars have tended to narrowly interpret Dong Qichang as an artist–critic who valued paintings only in the accepted standard literati tradition, Dong’s repeated emphasis on originality and his encouragement of emerging artists working outside the long-established literati mode indicates that a comprehensive contextual reassessment of his art and criticism needs to be conducted. Recognition of this discourse also challenges assessments of painters conventionally considered ‘non-literati’, such as Wu Bin and Ding Yunteng. Whereas emerging commoner artists such as these have been appreciated as ‘great’ but somehow ‘unimportant’ masters of the late Ming, to accept this discourse is to acknowledge that they – and others like them – were vital contributors to a wider social movement. As such, this forces a reworking of how we understand the social class interactions of the period and emphasizes the need for a broader understanding of the cultural contributions of these masters to the visual arts.

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Notes

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The pinyin system of romanization is used throughout this paper except to maintain published titles and personal names written in other systems. All translations are the author’s unless otherwise specified.

1 See R. Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (New York, 1983), for a discussion of the historical transformation of a selection of ‘keywords’. J. Shearman’s Mannerism (Harmondsworth, 1967) shows how a term in popular use during one period is re- and mis-interpreted to fit the agenda of later societies.

A DISCOURSE IN ORIGINALITY


3 For example, Hu S.-L. et al., Wan Ming bianxing zhuyi huajia zuopin zhan. Style Transformed: a Special Exhibition of Five Late Ming Artists, Taipei, 1977.


5 For example, see M. Sullivan’s commonly used art history textbook, The Arts of China, Berkeley, 1984, p. 212.


10 Although Zeitlin is primarily concerned with later seventeenth-century texts, she observes that interest in the strange has a long history in various literary guises. Among many examples, she points specifically to the late Ming interest in dreams. See J. Zeitlin, Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale, Stanford, 1993, pp. 135–40.


15 The types of interchange have been most clearly articulated by J. Cahill and C.-T. Li. See J. Cahill, The Painter’s Practice op. cit. (note 8), and C.-T. Li, (ed.), Artists and Patrons op. cit. (note 12).

16 Some artists worked in the court or for various ministries under the state. Although the situation for court painters in the early to mid-Ming is well established, the situation during the late Ming is murky at best. Whether there were court-sponsored painters during these years is unclear and can only be presumed. Though it is clear that some late Ming emperors, such as Wanli (r. 1573–1620), collected paintings, none has left collections catalogues, and no imperial collection seals from this period such as the stiin half-seal, are recorded in the standard reference texts. A number of officials serving in various ministries at court were also artists, but this is not the equivalent of being a ‘court-painter’.

17 Paintings could be made for oneself or as a gift for a friend or relative; these were not exchanged in a cash sale, though the works could function as a commodity in a complex matrix of social obligation. (Cahill, ‘Types of Artist-Patron Transactions in Chinese Painting’, in Li (ed.), Artists and Patrons, op. cit. (note 12), p. 11.)

18 Cahill, Painter’s Practice, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 35–9.
19 Literati artists often painted works which were typically self-described as for their ‘own amusement’, but which functioned to commemorate social events. (R. Vinograd, ‘Situation and Response in Traditional Chinese Scholar Painting’, in Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, vol. 46, no. 3, Spring 1988, pp. 366–8; Cahill, Painter’s Practice, op. cit. [note 8], p. 27; A. Clapp, The Painting of T’ang Ym, Chicago, 1991, pp. 3, 48.) While this was an effective means of networking, and could sometimes absolve debts, typically such artists refused to accept monetary remuneration as this would contravene the claim that they painted for no one but themselves.

20 An artist might enjoy private sponsorship, living as artist-in-residence in the home of a wealthy benefactor. (Cahill, ‘Types of Artist-Patron Transactions in Chinese Painting’, pp. 15–16, and idem, Painter’s Practice, op. cit. [note 8], pp. 65–67.)

21 Artists could paint as they pleased and then sell their work at home or directly in the market. (Cahill, Painter’s Practice, op. cit. [note 8], pp. 45–50.) Art galleries and pawnshops could sell paintings, both old and new. Some pawnshops were owned by prominent collectors, such as Xiang Yuanbian (1525–1590). (See K. S. Wong, ‘Hsiang Yu¨an-pien and Suchou Artists’, in such as Xiang Yuanbian (1525–1590).) Art galleries and pawnshops could function to make use of unskilled labour in her ‘Economic and Social Foundations of Late Imperial Culture’, in Popular Culture in Late Imperial China, D. Johnson, A. Nathan, and E. Rawski (eds), Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1985, pp. 17–27. R. Hegel describes the complex publishing world in Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China, Stanford, 1998. For information on the publishing industry, see especially pp. 127–63. It is helpful to remember that not all texts had high book runs. In fact, as Hegel points out, many texts were circulated among friends in manuscript form prior to or in place of publication (pp. 157–63).


23 E. Rawski explains the effect on Chinese publishing of a common language, and cheap, portable tools and materials as well as the ability to make use of unskilled labour in her ‘Economic and Social Foundations of Late Imperial Culture’, in Popular Culture in Late Imperial China, D. Johnson, A. Nathan, and E. Rawski (eds), Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1985, pp. 17–27. R. Hegel describes the complex publishing world in Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China, Stanford, 1998. For information on the publishing industry, see especially pp. 127–63. It is helpful to remember that not all texts had high book runs. In fact, as Hegel points out, many texts were circulated among friends in manuscript form prior to or in place of publication (pp. 157–63).

24 Hegel suggests the likelihood that books containing criticism and fine illustrations were limited to runs of perhaps a few hundred to a thousand books. (R. Hegel, Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China, op. cit. [note 23], pp. 330–31.)

25 Clunas, Superfluous Things and Fruitful Sites, op. cit. (note 6).

26 Gu Bing, Gu shi hua pu, preface dated to 1603, Beijing reprint, 1983.


30 Li Zhi, Tongxin shuo, in Fenshu,juan 3, in Fenshu Xu Fenshu, Beijing, 1975, p. 98.


33 Li Zhi, Tongxin shuo, in Fenshu,juan 3, p. 99. I have slightly adapted de Bary’s translation provided in ‘Li Chih as Arch-Individualist’, p. 212.


38 The qi under consideration here is a different character 之 than its more familiar homophone, 之, which can connote ‘breath’, ‘air’, ‘energy’, or, as Marty Powers has shown for art criticism, ‘personal character’. See M. Powers, ‘Character (Ch’i) and Gesture (Shih) in Early Chinese Art and Criticism’, in Proceedings from the International Colloquium on Chinese Art History: Painting and Calligraphy, part 2, Taipei, 1991, pp. 909–31.


42 R. Barnhart discusses an aspect of kuang as part of the phrase 乡cheng kuangtai active in mid-Ming aesthetic criticism in ‘The “Wild and Heterodox School” of Ming Painting’, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 365–96.
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44 A brief survey of critical literature in which qi has been translated as original is provided here. These passages primarily concern the visual arts, but one discusses literature. They are arranged chronologically according to the source author’s dates.

Timothy Wixted translates a statement by the literary critic Zhong Hong (active late fifth-early sixth century): ‘More recently Ren Fang, Wang Rong and company did not value originality (qi) in diction but were given to outdated each other in the use of novel allusions’. (T. Wixted, ‘Evaluation in the Shih-p’-in’, in Theories of the Arts in China, op. cit. [note 2], pp. 240–41.)

William Acker translates the early critic Xie He’s (active c. 500–535?) statement on the artist Zhang Ze (fifth-century) in Gubuapin lu: ‘His ideas and thoughts ran riot, and he had but to move his brush to be original (qi). His own mind was his master, and his views were his own, and he was sparing in his adaptations [of others’ ideas]’. (W. Acker, Some T’ang and Pre-T’ang Texts on Chinese Painting, Leiden, 1954 and 1974, p. 23.)

Martin Powers revises this translation, but maintains the rendering of original for qi: ’Zhang Ze’s conceptions were wild and free (yi) and he had but to move his brush to be fresh [literally, ‘new’ xin] and original (qi). He was independent (du) in his views and relied solely on his own mind as a teacher. His ingenuity was inexhaustible’. (M. Powers, ‘Discourses of Representation in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century China’, in S. Scott (ed.), The Art of Interpreting, Papers in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University, vol. 9, 1995, p. 91.) The translation of qi as original here is bolstered by the fact that Zhang Ze despised taking ideas from others. In matching qi with ‘new’, xin, and ‘free’, yi, there can be no misunderstanding: the term assigns positive value to features of style that are new (different from predecessors) and free (show no sign of deference to authority).

Alexander Soper renders a passage by Guo Ruoxu (active last half of the eleventh century) on the late Tang artist Zhao Deqi: ‘All in his day paid homage to the originality (qi) of his work and to his untrammelled [sic] brush’. (A. Soper, trans., Kuo Juen-hsi’s Experiences in Painting, Washington DC, 1951, p. 23, and printed within the same publication, Guo Ruoxu, Tuhua jianwenzhi, juan 2, p. 5.)

For the seventeenth century, some scholars have also seen fit to translate qi as original. Oswald Siren cites a passage on the merits and demerits of landscape painting which he had found attributed to Li Shida (active c. 1574–1620), which has elsewhere been recorded by Tang Zhiqi, including the merit of originality qi. (O. Siren, Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles, op. cit. [note 2], vol. 5, p. 27.)

And finally, Jonathan Hay translates Shitao’s (1642–1707?) term, qiren, as the noun ‘original’, in the following inscription, ‘Painting by men of talent (cairen) is high-minded and far-reaching. Painting by poets (shiren) is refined and evocative. Painting by “originals” (qiren) is uninhibited and has the flavor of the past’ (J. Hay, ‘Shitao’s Late Work: 1697–1707: A Thematic Map’, PhD diss., Yale University, 1989, p. 556.)

45 Zheng zi tong, preface dated to 1670, compiled by Zhang Zilie (active 1627 and later) is based upon Mei Yingzuo’s (act. c. 1570–1615) Zi hui (Lexicon), which was printed throughout the seventeenth century. Though Mei died in 1615, his sons completed the text after his death. (L. Goodrich and C.-Y. Fang [eds], Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644, New York and London, 1976, p. 1061.)


51 I have slightly adapted Shih’s translation, p. 38, substituting ‘following’ for ‘imitating’.


55 Plaks, ‘Aesthetics of Irony’, op. cit. (note 4),
74 Burnett, op. cit. (note 11), pp. 94–5.
75 I have reworked Richard Barnhart’s translation. Most pertinent to the discussion here, where he translated zheng as ‘correct’, I prefer ‘canonical’.
76 I have again adapted Barnhart’s translation provided in ‘The ‘Wild and Heterodox School’’, op. cit. (note 2), p. 377. This passage by He Liangjun is recorded in Siyouzhai hualun, san ji san ji, op. cit. (note 75), pp. 36–7.
78 Ho and Delbancò, ‘Tung Chi-ch’ang’s Transcendence of History and Art’, p. 35.
81 Dong, Hua zhi, p. 75. This translation revises that of Marilyn Wong Gleysest, Catalogue entry to Dong Qichang’s ‘Theories on Calligraphy and Painting’, The Century of Tung Chi-ch’ang, vol. 2, p. 4. Gleysest translates one section of the passage: ‘Yu-ch’u¨n’s [Wang Hsi-chih] calligraphy was like a phoenix soaring and gliding; it looked peculiar, but was in fact quite orthodox’. Given what we now know, this translation no longer works.
82 Dong Qichang, Hua zhensi wenyuange siku chanshu, vol. 1, p. 5.
83 Dong, Huachanshi suibi, juan 1, p. 5.
84 W.-K. Ho and D. Delbancò, ‘Tung Chi-ch’ang’s Transcendence of History and Art’, p. 34.
Glossary

*bian*ti 变体

*bianxing* 变形

*fang* 做

*guai* 怪

*kuang* 狂

*mo* 慕

*qi* 奇

original, extraordinary, marvelous, wonderful, strange, different, bizarre, eccentric, odd

*qi* 气

breath, air, energy, personal character

*qu* 趣

*xiao pin* 效颦

*yi* 逸

unfettered, fresh, free, untrammeled

*yi* 异

different, anomalous

*zhen* 真

*zheng* 正

*zhuo* 拙
Chinese Text (CT)

CT-1  Li Zhi, *Fenshu, juan 3*, p. 98.

夫童心者，真心也。若以童心為不可，
是以真心為不可也。夫童心者，絕假純
真，最初一念之本心也。若失卻童心，
便失卻真心；失卻真心，便失卻真人。
人而非真，全不復有初矣。

CT-2  Li Zhi, *Fenshu, juan 3*, p. 99.

夫既以聞見道理為心矣，則所言者皆聞見
道理之言，非童心自出之言也。言雖工，
於我何與，豈非以假人言假言，而事假
事文假文乎？蓋其人既假，則無所不假
矣。由是而以假言與假人言，則假人善；
以假事與假人道，則假人善；以假文與
假人談，則假人善。無所不假，則無所
不善。

CT-3  Li Zhi, *Fenshu, juan 3*, p. 99.

天下之至文，未有不出乎童心焉者也。
苛童心常存，則道理不行，聞見不立，
無是不文，無人不文，無一様制體格
文字而非文者。
CT-4  Zheng zi tong volume zhou ji xia, p. 20b

人有三奇：精氣神也。


萬物一也。是其所美者為神奇，其所惡者為臭腐。臭腐復化為神奇，神奇復化為臭腐。


。。。。可使畢受適（敵）而無敗者，奇
正是也。


凡戰者，以正合，以奇勝。故善出奇者

，無窮如天地；不竭（竭）如江河。


自風雅寐聲，莫或抽緒，奇文鬱起，

其離騷哉！固已軒翥詩人之後，奮飛辭家前，豈去聖之末遠，而楚人之多才乎！

是以枚賈追風以入麗，馬楊沿波而得奇

...


若夫鎚鑄經典之範，翔集子史之術，洞
曉情變，曲昭文體，然後能孚甲新意，
雕畫奇辭。


山水有五美。蒼逸奇圓韻。
山水有五惡。嫩板刻生凝。

CT-12 Dong Qichang, Hua zhi, in Hualun congkan, vol. 1, p. 72.

古人畫不從一邊生去。今則失此意。故無
八面玲瓏之巧。但能分能合。而皴法足以
發之。是了手時事也。其次須明虛實。虛
實者各段中用筆之詳略也。有詳處必要有
略處。虛實互用。疏則不深遂。密則不風
韻。但審虛實。以意取之。畫自奇矣。
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CT-13  Dong Qichang, *Hua zhi*, in *Hualun congkan*, vol. 1, p. 93.

有梅花道人大軸。曠巨然。水墨淋漓。雲
煙吞吐。與巨然不復甲乙。又高克恭雲山
秋齊。與謝伯誠學董源廬山觀瀑圖。皆奇
筆也。

CT-14  Dong Qichang, *Hua zhi*, in *Hualun congkan*, vol. 1, pp. 80–1.

畫家右丞。如書家右軍。世不多見。余昔
年於嘉興項太學元汴所見雪江圖。都不皴
擦。但有輪廓耳。及世所傳摹本。若王叔
明劍客圖。筆意顧李中舍。疑非右丞畫格
。又余至長安。得趙大年臨右丞湖莊清夏
圖。亦不細皴。稍似項氏所藏雪江卷。而
竊意其未盡右丞之致。蓋大家神品。必於
皴法有奇。


畫山水亦有數家。關仝趙浩其一家也。董
源僧巨然其一家也。李成范寛其一家也。
至李唐又一家也。數家筆力神韻兼備後之
。作畫者能宗此數家便是正脈。
皆高人恥仕胡元，隱居求志，日徜徉於山
水之間，故深得其情狀。且從荊關董巨
中來。其傳派又正。

大癡謂畫須留天地之位。常法也。予每畫
雲煙著底。危峰突出。一人綴之。有振衣
千仞勢。客訝之。予曰。此以絕頂為主。
若兒孫諸岫。可以不呈。巖腳柯根。可以
不露。令人得之楮筆之外。客曰。古人寫
梅鬆竹。作過牖一枝。離奇見勢。若用全
幹繁枝。套而無味。亦此意乎。予曰然。

右丞以前作者。無所不工。獨山水神情傳
寫。猶隔一塵。自右丞始用皴法。用渲染
法。若王右軍一變鍾體。鳳翥鸞翔。似奇
反正。
予學書三十年，。。。所謂跡似奇而反
正者。世人不能解也。

。。。古人作書，必不作正局，蓋以奇
為正。

丘壑之奇峭易工。筆之蒼勁難揮。蓋丘壑
之奇。不過傲凡俗之眼耳。若筆不蒼勁。
總使摹他人丘壑。那能動得賞鑒。若人物
花鳥。更摹畫相去不遠矣。