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Writing Chinese art history in early twentieth-century China

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Chapter 5 Art Historical Narrative in Exhibitions: *The Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition of Chinese Art (1935)*

The significance of the 1935 Shanghai exhibition has long been obscured by another exhibition that took place soon afterwards in London.

“Never in the world’s history has there been an assemblage for exhibition of Chinese art objects and antiquities... The British people are to be envied this unique opportunity of seeing the finest art of one of the most artistic countries in the world...” (Sowerby 1935b: 360)

This is part of a report about the *International Exhibition of Chinese Art* at Burlington House, Piccadilly, held from 28th November 1935 to 7th March 1936. No doubt, this Chinese art exhibition in London was a remarkable event which presented incomparable Chinese art pieces, attracted unprecedented crowds, and broke all records for attendance. It was the first time in history that such a large amount of Chinese objects had been on loan to a foreign country. The exhibition was an outstanding success for both Britain and Republican China. Western scholars have claimed that this exhibition “inaugurated the modern era of Chinese art historical studies” in Europe (Elliott and Shambaugh 2005: 83-84). An English report at that time also commented that “China reveals itself as an influence comparable with Greece and Italy, not only in what is patronisingly called ‘the applied arts,’ but in the fine arts as well” (Sowerby 1936: 204).

However, approximately eight months before the opening of this *International Exhibition*, the Chinese Preparation Committee held a preliminary exhibition in Shanghai displaying all the art pieces originating from different Chinese collections which would subsequently travel to Europe for the *International Exhibition*. Never before had such a large selection of ancient works of art been on public display in China. Selected artworks from different Chinese public collections for the first time entered a completely new exhibition space. While Western experts called these exhibits “art treasures”, both Chinese media and scholars addressed these exhibits as “national treasures (*guobao*)”. The emphasis on the idea of “nation” instead of “art” suggests a growing conception in China that these artefacts were no longer imperial property, but items in a national tradition collectively owned by the public.

This chapter uses the *Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition of Chinese Art (1935)* as a case study to investigate the relationship between Chinese practices for exhibiting ancient art and Chinese efforts to write the history of art in China during the 1920s and ’30s. My analysis argues that the *Preliminary Exhibition* provided a narrative of Chinese art history to the exhibition visitors. The whole process of selecting, exhibiting, and viewing in the

Preliminary Exhibition affected the way in which Chinese scholars constructed anew the history of art in China.

I will first describe exhibition practices current in late imperial and modern China and introduce the entire event of the *International Exhibition*. Then I will discuss the *Preliminary Exhibition* by comparing it with the *International Exhibition*. Different foci of Chinese and British organizing committees resulted in two quite different exhibitions. These differences were most obvious in the selection of exhibits, format of display, the catalogues that they produced, and responses that they elicited from the public. These distinctions highlight crucial areas of intellectual and inter-cultural negotiation in respect of defining art in China as well as writing art history. After looking at the background, my discussion consists of four sections, focusing respectively on: sanctification of objects; hierarchy of art forms; prioritization of historical periods; and canonization of artists.

5.1 Early Exhibition Practice in China

The practice of exhibiting to the public in China probably started with the establishment of Siccawei Museum, a natural history museum built in the French Concession of Shanghai, now Xujiahui, by the French cleric Pierre Heude (1836-1902) in 1868. Before then neither imperial nor private collections in China had been destined for display before a large audience. On the one hand, the imperial collections were for the cultivation and entertainment of emperors and their imperial family members. On the other, they served as a symbol of power. Only a highly select group of people had the opportunity to see the contents of the imperial collections. Private collections in imperial times were also shown only to a limited circle of their owners' relatives and friends.

The first museum to include art as part of its display in China was the Nantong Museum, initially called *bolanguan*. In 1905, the industrialist Zhang Jian (1853-1926) founded this first domestically conceived and managed museum in Nantong, a town on the north side of the Yangzi estuary. As Lisa Claypool has shown, at that time, Chinese elites employed the Western institution of museums to create cultural, historical, and zoological narratives of China (Claypool 2005). The Nantong Museum represented an attempt to provide Chinese youth with knowledge relevant to their formal school education. It not only showed artworks with historical or aesthetic significance, but also displayed natural specimens. These exhibits, as contemporary Chinese scholars hoped, demonstrated a full control of the country on various levels.

Before the establishment of his own museum, Zhang Jian had already suggested twice to the Qing court that they build museums in every province, and establish an

imperial institution in the capital. This suggestion was ignored and Zhang had to rely on the individual support of his friends to open a local museum. In 1912, with the downfall of the Qing dynasty, the new government paid more attention to museums. The government founded the first official museum in Beijing, the National History Museum (Guoli lishi bowuguan), in July 1912. In October 1914, the Internal Affairs of the Beiyang government launched the first exhibition of imperial artefacts to the public. Since the inner court of the Forbidden City was still occupied by the last emperor, this exhibition took place in two halls in the outer court of the Forbidden City. This part of the imperial collection, then known as the Peking Antiquities Exhibition Hall (Beiping guwu chenliesuo), was later given the name National Museum. And so began Chinese citizens' acquaintance with the palace collection (Pao 1964: 23-26).

More significantly, the National Peking Palace Museum (Guoli Beiping gugong bowuyuan) was finally inaugurated in the Forbidden City on 10th October, 1925 after the last emperor was ordered to leave by the government (Elliott and Shambaugh 2005: 71). Only now did the Forbidden City open its doors fully to the public. In 1933, however, political instability in China led contemporary experts in the museum to transport what they considered to be the most prestigious items of the collection to the southern part of the country. Eventually, in 1948 and 1949, the Nationalist government moved part of the national collection to Taipei (Na 1957: 97-206).

Calligraphy and painting exhibitions

Calligraphy and painting were crucial parts of the Palace Museum's collection, and they were displayed in the museum along with bronzes, jades, ceramics, and rare books, together functioning as symbolic signs of the past. Bearing quite different contemporary connotations, calligraphy and painting in the earliest Chinese formal exhibitions were presented as educational achievements by schools and colleges. The first one of these "school achievement exhibitions (*chengji zhanlanhui*)" was organized in Suzhou in January 1909 (Tsuruta 1991: 19). Later, in various modern art schools, it became frequent practice to exhibit the productions—mainly modern categories of Western-style painting—of teachers and students. Also, imitating Western salons and Japanese exhibitions, art societies often displayed artworks created by their members.

Exhibiting calligraphy and painting was also adopted as a practice among calligraphers, traditional painters, and members of the social elite in early twentieth-century China. In late Qing, such elegant gatherings were popular as the main form of intellectual and social intercourse. Chinese calligraphers and painters, as well as scholars, wealthy merchants, and political figures regularly cooperated to organize gatherings. In

these meetings, usually held in tea houses or gardens, artists displayed their own work and attempted to sell it to other participants. Sometimes these gatherings also exhibited private collections of old artworks. In April 1912, Wenmei hui, an association for literary and art activities in Shanghai, assembled a group of Chinese artists and intellectuals in a drinking house (Liu 2003: 124). The association arranged three exhibiting rooms: one for exchanging artworks; one for selling works; and one purely for exhibition. The main purpose of these gatherings was commercial. A large percentage of the artworks shown in these gatherings were contemporary products. The number of old pieces of calligraphy and painting available for study was comparatively small.

One of the early temporary exhibition events devoted solely to ancient items of Chinese calligraphy and painting was an assembly of traditional paintings loaned by Beijing collectors and installed in the Central Park (now Zhongshan Park) in 1917. Information on this event is recorded in the inscription to Chen Shizeng's *A Picture of Reading Paintings* (*Duhua tu*, Figure 5.1). This seven-day event showed about one hundred paintings each day, with exhibits being rotated on a daily basis. Its purpose was to raise money for the victims of a flood near Beijing.

The earliest known nationwide exhibition of painting is recorded in Suzhou at the beginning of 1919. *The First Suzhou Painting Competition* (*Diyijie Suzhou saihua hui*), which was actually not a competition at all, gathered contemporary artworks in both traditional and Western style from all over the country (Tsuruta 1991: 19).

Many more modern exhibitions took place in the 1920s and '30s, especially those for Western-style painting organized by art schools and art societies in big cities. The Tianma Society organized eight exhibitions each year from the end of 1919 to 1927 in Shanghai. The majority of its exhibits were paintings in either Western or traditional style, but they also included other art forms, such as pattern drawings, photography (the seventh and the eighth exhibitions), and sculpture (the eighth exhibition) (Liu 2003: 127-28).

As Chinese scholars became more familiar with the Western practice of art exhibitions, they adapted it to promote Chinese traditional art as well. Two major societies of traditional art in Beijing during the 1920s and '30s—the Society for the Study of Chinese Painting (*Zhongguo huaxue yanjiuhui*) and the Lake Society (*Hu she*)—held many exhibitions of traditional painting. The Lake Society, from the moment of its establishment, organized an exhibition approximately every two weeks, and each event usually included both its members' new productions and old masterpieces for study. Yu Zhuyun, one of the society's members, recorded that three paintings, by two Ming artists Dai Jin and Ding Yunpeng (1547-1621), and the early Qing painter Wang Hui, respectively, had been on display (Yu 1928). The Society for the Study of Chinese Painting and the Lake Society

succeeded in co-organizing six Sino-Japanese painting exhibitions between 1921 and 1931. The initiator of these joint exhibitions was the Japanese artist Watanabe Shimpo (1867-1938). His original plan was to include old masters' paintings alongside contemporary works. The first four exhibitions (Beijing, 1921; Tokyo, 1922; Beijing and Shanghai, 1924; Tokyo and Osaka, 1926) only displayed contemporary paintings by both Chinese and Japanese artists. The last two exhibitions (Tokyo, 1928; Tokyo, 1931) were different. They showed only ancient Chinese works from both Japanese and Chinese private collections. The main audience for these last two exhibitions in Tokyo was Japanese rather than Chinese. According to Aida Wong, all six joint exhibitions were semi-official, a status impossible to achieve without the support of government authorities in Japan and China (Wong 1999: 71-96).

Exhibitions of ancient paintings turned out to be more successful than those of contemporary Western-style paintings in attracting audiences' attention. A good example is the first officially-organized national art exhibition known as *the Ministry of Education First National Fine Art Exhibition (Jiaoyubu diyici quanguo meishu zhanlanhui)*. It took place in Shanghai in April 1929. Planning for this exhibition lasted seven years from the original proposal to its realization. The location for the exhibition was Xinpuyu Hall (*xinpuyu tang*), a complex of two three-floor buildings in the Huangpu District of southern Shanghai. The exhibition divided its exhibits into seven sections: calligraphy and painting; inscriptions; Western-style painting; sculpture; architecture; applied arts; and artistic photography. It also included contemporary Japanese paintings, works by foreigners living in China, masterpieces by recently deceased artists, and ancient Chinese paintings, which served as so-called "reference works". Chinese private art collectors from all over the country, such as Chen Xiaodie (1897-1989), Pang Yuanji (1863-1949), and Di Baoxian, presented the best items of their collections. They rotated these items daily in a fierce spirit of competition. Although this national exhibition was impelled by scholars and artists under Western and Japanese influence, such as the Western-style painter Liu Haisu, ancient works of art dominated this event (Yen 2002). It had never been the intention of the organizers to emphasize the antiquity section, nonetheless, reports on this event in *Shenbao*, and also the exhibition catalogue published in 1930, devoted more than half of their coverage to ancient exhibits. Scholars, and in particular those focusing on Western knowledge, discussed and wrote extensively on contemporary works. Yet, for the general public, classical artworks were apparently much more attractive. Even the price of a ticket to see the ancient section of the exhibition was twice as much as the price of the ticket for the contemporary works. The success of the ancient part of this exhibition inspired the authorities to position old artworks as the major emphasis for the next two national art exhibitions in the 1930s.

International Exhibition of Chinese Art

China's art collections caught the attention of a worldwide audience from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Many art pieces found their way to Japan and Western countries. After the establishment of the Palace Museum in 1925, foreign art collectors became more familiar with the former imperial art collection. The organizers of *The 1928 Exhibition of Masterpieces from the Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties* at the Tokyo Imperial Household Museum had originally intended to borrow works from the Palace Museum. The Japanese organizers even wrote to Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), then leader of the Nanjing government, to ask for help. Despite nominal support from Chiang, the Palace Museum refused to loan pieces from its collection due to the increasing hostility towards Japan in the late 1920s, and the anxiety over the possibility of losing precious art objects (Wong 1999: 89). In the end, only art pieces from Chinese individual collectors, such as Ye Gongchuo and Luo Zhenyu, appeared in this Sino-Japanese exhibition.³⁰

The decision made by the Republican government and the Palace Museum following another loan request six years later was different. At the end of 1932, some British collectors proposed to hold a comprehensive exhibition of Chinese art in London. Formal negotiations with the Chinese government for a loan of China's art objects started in 1934. After a long discussion, China's Ministry of Education, which was in charge of national cultural events, decided to take part in this *International Exhibition*. In order to demonstrate to the Chinese public that the ownership of the artworks was not being handed over to foreign powers, the Republican government promised to organize a preliminary exhibition in Shanghai, before shipping the exhibits to Britain, and to hold a repatriation exhibition in Nanjing on their return from London (Zhuang 1936; Na 1957: 145-46).

It was the first time that national art possessions were sent abroad officially. Only two loans were granted by the Chinese government in the first half of the twentieth century. The *International Exhibition* was the first and only one in which such a large amount of art objects from the Palace Museum was sent to a foreign country. The second official loan consisted of about one hundred objects of secondary importance, which were transported to the Soviet Union between 1939 and 1942 (Elliott and Shambaugh 2005: 84-85). Usually, exhibitions of old Chinese art pieces in foreign countries were organized with local or international help from private collectors. For example, in Paris, *the Exposition de la peinture chinoise* (1933) exhibited old pieces from some French collections. But the significance of these exhibits was transcended by the official loan of art to London two years later.

³⁰ And indeed, a large amount of these loaned objects from Chinese private collections were bought by Japanese collectors and became part of Japanese collections.

The government attached great importance to the *International Exhibition* as both a symbolic representation of the nation and as a diplomatic tool with which to gain support for its war against invaders. It established a special Chinese preparatory committee of eleven high officials led by Wang Shijie (1891-1981), the Minister of Education. Other ministries in the government pledged unconditional support. The committee worked together with its British counterpart to decide which pieces from the holdings of public collections would be sent to London. The final selections were gathered in Shanghai and exhibited in the former German Club from 8th April to 5th May, 1935. The *Preliminary Exhibition* was an outstanding event in Shanghai. Despite the relatively high admission price, which was two *yuan*, the exhibition was very popular. On 8th April, 1935, the opening day, more than two thousand people arrived to visit. The exhibition had to add ticket offices in different branches of the Bank of China and of the Shanghai Commercial Saving Bank to meet public demand. The hours of admission were originally between 9:00 am to 4:30 pm. From 10th April, the last admission was postponed to 6:00 pm and the closing time was 7:00 pm. It was also open on Sundays and only closed on Monday mornings. From 14th April, one week after the opening, overcrowding forced the Chinese committee to limit the number of daily visitors to three thousand. Group visits made the situation worse, and the organizers had to restrict the hours for group visiting. More than a hundred groups from different universities, middle schools, painting societies, and companies visited the exhibition within the first two weeks. Following a public request for extension, the Chinese committee prolonged the exhibition by five days from 30th April to 5th May. On the last day which was, coincidentally, a Sunday, a huge number of people went to the exhibition, and some refused to leave before closing. The total number of visitors during these twenty-eight days reached sixty thousand. Only a limitation on numbers kept the attendance figures from going even higher.

On 7th June 1935, the British cruiser HMS *Suffolk* left Shanghai, transporting ninety-three steel cases with 1,022 items from Chinese collections to London. Between 28th November, 1935 and 7th March, 1936, the *International Exhibition of Chinese Art* was held at Burlington House, the Royal Academy of Arts in London. Eight hundred and fifty-seven artworks out of 1,022 items sent by the Chinese government were exhibited alongside another 1,294 pieces from more than two hundred and forty collections from various countries (Zhuang 1936; Na 1957: 149-50; Jie 2004). The exhibition was a great success both politically and culturally. Immediately afterwards, delegations came from America, France, and Germany proposing that the objects be transported to other places for new exhibitions. However, these proposals failed, and the artworks were shipped directly back to Shanghai.

On 1st June 1936, *the Nanjing Exhibition for the London Exhibits of Chinese Art* opened as promised. Besides all the items returned from London, the exhibition included 1,360 photos of exhibits from various overseas collections, all the items which had featured in the *International Exhibition*. These photos indicated the general status of Chinese art collecting abroad (Chen 2003).

Through these three internally-connected exhibitions, Chinese artworks were viewed by an unprecedented number of people inside and outside China on a scale that had never before been attempted.

5.2 Sanctification of Objects

These three serial exhibitions in Shanghai, London, and Nanjing happened at a crucial point in the development of a public understanding of national art heritage. The emergence of this idea of “national heritage” was connected with the transformation of the imperial collection to its new status as a public collection.

At the end of 1924, the imperial household collection was placed in the custody and ownership of the Chinese government. The government deliberately chose 10th October, Republican China’s National Day, as the opening of the Palace Museum in 1925 (Lin 2002). This transformation meant that all pieces in this imperial collection became a national heritage owned by the public. Added to other objects discovered in the geographical region of China, a Chinese national collection was formed, and one with the potential to grow.

In 1932, fearing the threat of Japanese aggression after the 1931 occupation of Manchuria, the Republican government decided to move part of the Palace Museum collection to Nanjing and Shanghai. After five months, archives from the Palace Museum arrived in the new capital of Nanjing. Art objects and ancient books reached Shanghai. It was mainly from this part of the national collection, stored in the French and British Concessions of Shanghai, that the Chinese selection committee chose objects representative of all branches of Chinese art (Zhuang 1936; Na 1957: 146-49).

Hidden away in warehouses by the government, the significance of these art pieces could hardly be understood by the Chinese or any other public. Only through displaying, did these objects gain a new level of profound meaning. As Carol Duncan has suggested, art museums are excellent examples of the disguised ritual sites that publicly represent the values and truths of their communities (Duncan 1998). In this light, the *Preliminary Exhibition* in Shanghai functioned like a religious ritual to sanctify Chinese art objects from the previous dynasties. Its exhibition space was carefully chosen and arranged by the Chinese organizers. The exhibition required its visitors to obey certain rules. Its exhibits

were no longer just art pieces, but objects in a national heritage which represented Chinese civilization. Advertisements for this exhibition in *Shenbao* (6th April, 1935) called the exhibits “the crystallization of Chinese art (*Zhongguo yishu zhi jiejing*)”. The Chinese organizers hoped that the Chinese public would cherish, appreciate, or even worship the selected exhibits.

The Shanghai art exhibition conformed closely to Cai Yuanpei’s famous proposition that aesthetic education might substitute the role of religion in society. From the late 1910s Cai began to promote aesthetic education. In his opinion, art museums and exhibitions formed a crucial part of aesthetic education, which he envisaged as essential for a harmonious society. Cai believed that aesthetic education could function as religion had done, and it should replace religion in order to cultivate the sublime and moral feelings of all members of society (Teng and Faribank 1979: 274-79).

Objections against loaning

Intense enthusiasm for a new-found national heritage also engendered reverse effects. Objections against loaning China’s art were strong. Following the request from the British committee to select ancient artworks for the *International Exhibition* in early 1934, a vigorous argument ensued about loaning valuable items for the exhibition. Two opposite opinions appeared. Some scholars thought that it was too dangerous to send these artworks belonging to the national heritage so far away. They worried that if anything untoward happened to these objects there would be no recourse to compensation. Rumours circulated that the government had actually mortgaged these items in order to borrow money from Britain. Opposing this pessimism was the idea that the exhibition was an opportunity for China to show Westerners the high achievements of Chinese art. Most people in the West, with the exception of a few specialists, knew little about Chinese culture. Wang Shijie resolutely promoted and supported the loaning idea. In his view, risks had to be taken for the opportunity to put Chinese culture on display, and in October 1934, the Republican government finally decided to loan artworks to the *International Exhibition* (Zhuang 1936; Na 1957: 145-46).

In Nanjing, on 25th January, 1935, Xu Beihong decried this decision by the government as seriously irresponsible (Xu 1935). And two days later, on 27th January, 1935, four professors from Tsinghua University published a protest against the loan of artworks in the *Peking Morning Post* (*Beiping chenbao*). They stated:

“since the Nine Eighteen Incident [*jiuyiba shibian*], [these artworks] can not be seen by citizens. Now following one simple request from Britain, the government will allow [a loan abroad]. It is indeed unfair. These so-called ‘national treasures’ have degenerated into an anniversary gift from the politicians, containing nothing to do with the nation.”

Another group of professors in Beijing, including Liang Sicheng and the writer Zhu Ziqing (1898-1948), made a second declaration against the lending of art objects (Lin 2002). These scholars considered the loan to be part of an inappropriate foreign policy. In their opinion, art items belonging to the whole nation should not be used by the government to oil the wheels of foreign policy.

Surprisingly, by the time of the *Preliminary Exhibition's* inauguration in Shanghai in April 1935, much of this opposition had become muted. Some of these voices may have had been suppressed by the government. Other opponents shifted their attack to criticizing the selection and display of the exhibition.

Authenticity of objects

The Chinese selection committee of the *Preliminary Exhibition* worked together with a delegation of five Western experts from the British organizing committee of the *International Exhibition*. Painstakingly, they decided the final list of artworks which would be first on display in Shanghai and then sent to London. The Chinese experts believed that the chosen exhibits were authentic.

In 1934, the experts in the Palace Museum spent several months making the initial choice from more than sixty thousand objects in Shanghai. They presented 2,054 artworks for further checking. Likewise, other institutions, such as the Henan Museum (Henan bowuguan), conducted their own primary selections and provided another two thousand pieces (Zhang 2006).

Once these initial selections were gathered in two storage rooms in Shanghai, the Chinese selection committee began their examination. Aside from Ma Heng (1881-1955), director of the Palace Museum, the committee included museum staff, officials from the Ministry of Education, Chinese art collectors, connoisseurs, and artists, such as the traditional landscape painter and art collector Wu Hufan (1894-1968), the art collector and specialist in ceramics Guo Baochang (1867-1940), and Xu Bangda (1911-), a connoisseur of calligraphy and painting (Cao 2004). The committee also employed the services of a special advisor, John Ferguson (1866-1945). Ferguson, an American collector and scholar of Chinese art, had long acted as an adviser on cultural policies to successive Chinese governments from 1903 onwards. The British organizing committee of the *International Exhibition* invited five experts to Shanghai. The British selection committee consisted of the French sinologist and historian Paul Pelliot (1878-1945) and four British experts, namely Sir Percival David (1892-1964), initiator of the *International Exhibition* and authority on Chinese ceramics, Robert Hobson (1873-1941), Keeper of the Department of Oriental Antiquities of the British Museum at that time, George Eumorfopoulos (1863-1939), and

Oscar Raphael (1874-1941), both prestigious collectors of Chinese antiquities. They arrived in Shanghai in early spring of 1935 (Sowerby 1935a: 307).

The Chinese and British parties discussed and evaluated together for more than two months. Their final selection for the *International Exhibition* included 1,022 items from seven public institutions and one private collector. Seven hundred and thirty-five pieces were from the Palace Museum, forty-seven objects from the National Museum, eight bronzes (found in Henan in 1923) from the Henan Museum, four bronzes from the Anhui Library (Anhui tushuguan), fifty ancient books from the Peking Library (Beiping tushuguan), one hundred and thirteen archaeological examples from the Academia Sinica (Zhongyang yanjiuyuan), and sixty-five jades from the collection of Zhang Naiji (1900-1949), a collector most famous for his interest in ancient coins.

The Chinese selection committee attempted to provide fine examples of Chinese art with both high historical and artistic values. However, larger pieces of extraordinary size were not included because of the technical difficulties involved in displaying them (Chinese Preparatory Committee of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London 1936b: 13-14). Moreover, mindful of the consequences if a piece were to be damaged or lost, the Chinese committee followed a guiding principle: if one piece was the only representative item of an artist or an artistic genre, or if it was too fragile to travel, it was excluded from the exhibition list. For example, the painting *Kuanglu tu* attributed to the painter and theorist Jing Hao (ca. 855-915), was considered too precious to be sent abroad by the Chinese committee. The same reason was given for the exclusion of a bronze vessel, *Sanshi pan* dating to Western Zhou and excavated in the late seventeenth century (Na and Zhuang 2007).

In order to establish each object's authenticity, Ferguson recalled that committee members usually looked into records of earlier ascriptions and studied seals and signatures on the objects themselves. Since it was impossible to draw any absolute conclusion regarding pieces of dubious origin, the experts from the Chinese side were not always unanimous. Nevertheless, all the decisions were finally passed by a majority of the selection committee (Ferguson 1936).

Obviously, the British committee wanted to select the finest examples of Chinese art. They could not understand the rule of the Chinese committee not to select the most valuable pieces and as a result were dissatisfied with choices provided by the Chinese side. However, the Chinese committee insisted on this rule and the British had no choice but to concede and accept it. Subsequently, they turned to collections of Chinese art in other countries for more possibilities (Sowerby 1935a: 307).

During their stay in Shanghai, the British delegation scrutinised every piece minutely.

They were careful in making decisions. For instance, one of the British experts found that the shape of a pot in a painting on silk considered to be a painting from Southern Song was similar to pots of Qing times. He doubted the authenticity of this painting and eliminated it from the exhibition list (Na and Zhuang 2007). There was a clear preference within the British selection criteria for those pieces with inscriptions and seals of Qing emperors, most notably Qianlong (1711-1799). The British selectors did not hesitate to put items with these marks on the list (Wu 1935a).

Final decisions were made through consultation between the Chinese and British sides. According to the official catalogue produced by the British organizing committee, the process of selection was pleasant and expeditious. However, in his interview with Jeannette Shambaugh Elliott, Basil Gray (1904-1989), former Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum, suggested something quite different. Gray claimed:

“Having failed to persuade the Chinese side to allow the joint Sino-British Committee to make the selection, the London Committee ... set about to fill in the gaps, visiting Europe, the United States, and China. After having assessed the Chinese loans in Shanghai, and having failed to persuade the officials to modify their selection by addition or subtraction, they proceeded to Japan.” (Elliott and Shambaugh 2005: 83)

On the other hand, the Chinese committee also declared that the British side made the final decision regardless of their objections. As far as the Chinese side was concerned, the British delegation was responsible for the selection. In response to public criticism of the *Preliminary Exhibition*, Wu Hufan explained:

“During the consultation, the British side had the power of decision-making and the Chinese side just made the initial selection. The British side removed most of those items which were not to their taste. And they were free to include again those pieces which had already been omitted from consideration by the Chinese side. As a result, the efforts made by the Chinese side for the initial selection were useless.” (Wu 1935b)

Actually, both sides participated in the decision-making. It is clear from their comments that a number of conflicts arose during the negotiation process. The British side took much more control of the *International Exhibition*, whereas the *Preliminary Exhibition* in Shanghai lay largely in the hands of the Chinese side.

While the British side were usually very cautious in making decisions and tended to doubt the authenticity of objects, the Chinese experts were more confident in making claims for the rarity and speciality of Chinese collections. In particular, Chinese scholars treasured early paintings and considered them as genuine examples of ancient canons. They were unwilling to treat the genuineness of these works sceptically.

Ferguson criticized the British committee for considerable changes in the labels

affixed to the exhibits of the *International Exhibition*. He claimed that:

“Although I have found a few corrections in the labels of objects loaned by others, the Chinese Government seems to have been singled out as having failed in an unusual manner to supply correct information concerning its exhibits. ... A great opportunity has been lost... It is a pity that the Western world could not have learned for once what China without censorship thinks of her own things...” (Ferguson 1936)

These “corrections” demonstrated exactly the different opinions between the Chinese and the British experts. According to Ferguson, the most striking case was painting. Painting should have provided the best argued selections of the Chinese committee. The British side had comparatively little experience with calligraphy and painting. Since the expertise of the four British members of the selection committee covered neither Chinese calligraphy nor painting, the British committee had to rely on Paul Pelliot for advice. Even so, Pelliot’s contribution to the selection is not very clear. The preface to the catalogue of the *International Exhibition* mentions Pelliot’s “expert help in Shanghai, Paris, and London” (*Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6* 1935: v).

It was quite difficult for Western scholars to believe that paintings on silk or paper had survived from the ninth century or earlier. They suspected certain works’ authenticity, and they were inclined to consider them later copies of original works. As a result, the British organizing committee made a number of changes to the production dates of paintings. In the description written by the Chinese committee, the Song painting master and theorist Guo Xi’s (ca. 1001-ca. 1090) *Spring Snow on a Mountain Pass* (*Guanshan chunxue tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) was dated from 1072 CE. The British side claimed that it was “signed and dated A.D. 1072, but probably Yuan” (*Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6* 1935: 69). Two paintings, which were attributed by the Chinese side to unknown artists of the Song dynasty, the British committee considered to date from the fourteenth or the fifteenth century. Based upon ancient sources on painting, Chinese experts were happy to label paintings as the work of legendary painters in the history of Chinese art. In the Chinese catalogue, the first painting was *Lo-yang Mansion* (*Luoyang lou tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) attributed to the Tang painter Li Zhaodao (ca. 675-741). The Chinese experts used the character “attributed (*chuan*)” after the title of the painting, but the British catalogue amended this to “traditionally attributed” (*Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6* 1935: 56) to explicitly indicate the uncertainty harboured by Western authorities. In the case of the second painting attributed to Li Zhaodao *Travelling in the Mountains in Spring* (*Chunshan xinglü tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei), the British side stated directly that this painting was “possibly a Ming copy” (*Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6* 1935: 80).

Display space

In “The Art Museum as Ritual”, Carol Duncan refers to a Western practice of art museums resembling ritual sites physically and symbolically. In her view, organizers of art exhibitions deliberately choose monumental architecture as display space, and they clearly define precincts of display space to set it apart from other structures (Duncan 1998: 473-76). Like Western organizers of exhibitions, the Chinese committee of the *Preliminary Exhibition* were conscious of the importance of the exhibition’s location and space to create cultural aroma around exhibits. However, in Republican Shanghai, under the pressures of a limited time schedule, the Chinese committee struggled to find a monumental building for the exhibition. Their choice was a three-storied building at No. 22 Huangputan Road (the Bund, now Zhongshan Road) on the Huangpu waterfront. It was neither a gallery nor a formal exhibition hall. This castle-like building of baroque style was the former German Club (also known as the Club Concordia) built in 1907. After World War One, the Bank of China bought this building and used it as a branch office. At the beginning of 1935, the bank moved out and planned to pull it down. While the building was unoccupied, it was turned temporarily into an exhibition space by the Chinese committee. Within a year of the *Preliminary Exhibition*, it had been demolished (Wu 2007). The choice of this Western-style building was consistent with the idea of exhibiting as a Western practice. It is conceivable that the Chinese committee might also have considered it as a rehearsal for the *International Exhibition* and a way of visualizing the effects of displaying Chinese antiquities in a Western building.

Inside the building, the *Preliminary Exhibition* was arranged on the ground and first floors with a grand interconnecting staircase of white marble. This impressive flight of stairs along with the magnificent doorway and the monumental marble pillars resembles what Duncan has described as “borrowing architectural forms from ritual structures of the past” in the West (Duncan 1998: 475).

Although the space was rather full, the Chinese committee believed that they had achieved the most appropriate way to display these art pieces. They prioritised shape, format, content, and they stressed primarily the meanings of these exhibits as they comprehended them. As Figures 5.2 and 5.3 shows, items of calligraphy and painting, retained in their original mountings, were hung on the walls. Labels were placed on the right-hand side of these exhibits. Strainers in the form of silk ribbons were tied to scroll ends to prevent the heavy scrolls damaging pieces when hung up for a long time. No protective framing was provided. In order to avoid any damage from the audience touching the works, wooden railings were installed half a metre away from the walls in the two exhibition halls displaying calligraphy and painting. In other halls, cabinets were installed

along the walls and in the middle of the room (Figure 5.4). Ceramic objects were placed in glass-fronted cabinets. The descriptions for the objects were positioned beside them in the cabinets. For security, every screw fastening in these cabinets was covered with a small paper seal, which was meant to frustrate any attempt to open the cabinets secretly.

Experts in the Chinese committee sent by the Republican government to London were disappointed at the way the British authorities handled the calligraphy and painting exhibits. To save space, hanging scrolls and hand scrolls were folded and inscriptions were ignored, because the British organizers deemed them superfluous. Paintings covered by glass in wooden frames were hung on the wall, much higher than visitors' eye level. Sometimes the reflection of the glass blurred the visitors' view of a painting. As a result, visitors were unable to observe the details of a painting hung in this way (Zhuang 1936). Chinese scholars also noticed that a few bronze weapons and ancient books were positioned upside down (Fu 1936). These complaints by Chinese experts suggest perhaps that in the *Preliminary Exhibition* the Chinese committee controlled arrangements better. These characteristics of the *International Exhibition* were considered to be mistakes by the Chinese committee whose Chinese experts aimed to emphasize the beauty and integrity of every single object. A Chinese viewer with an awareness of general features of Chinese art needed to know more details concerning each exhibit.

The *Preliminary Exhibition* removed its exhibits from their original settings and put them into a special display space, and in doing so, redefined them as works of art to represent a national heritage. Like Western art museums, which Duncan parallels to ritual scenarios, the German Club transformed the items beyond their former decorative, religious, or practical uses into national art exhibits.

Viewing habits

Viewing these artworks in a Western exhibition format was quite different from the traditional way of viewing in China. Western exhibiting practices separated the audience from the exhibits. A visitor could only appreciate an artwork at a distance. In traditional China, a scholar always held a piece in his hand to view it. This kind of intimacy was needed to distinguish the movement of a brush and to see the details of inscriptions and seals on objects.

In the early Chinese painting exhibitions of the 1910s, this intimacy was still sometimes available. The painting *A Picture of Reading Paintings* (Figure 5.1) by Chen Shizeng records the very moment of viewing paintings at an exhibition in Beijing, in 1917. This painting depicts the traditional viewing engagement. In the foreground a group of people—male, female, Chinese and foreign—surround a table covered by a white cloth to

view calligraphy and painting. Some of them bow forward and point at some details of a painting. They can even touch the exhibits if they want. This viewing practice is consistent with the traditional viewing habits of Chinese scholars. In the background, another group of people are standing in front of two landscape paintings hung on the wall. It is not clear how close they are to the paintings. This group either still represents the traditional way of viewing or imitates the Western exhibition practice. Chen Shizeng's painting indicates neatly the situation of emerging exhibitions in early Republican China. Chinese scholars at that time began to accept the Western practice of showing artworks to a large audience. However, sometimes they still clung to old viewing habits.

Compared with the exhibition notions suggested by Chen Shizeng, the *Preliminary Exhibition* went one step further in applying Western exhibiting practices. The organization of exhibitions built a hierarchy of privileges into viewing. Only an expert engaged in authentication was allowed to handle the exhibits. In a sense, then, exhibitions permitted a larger audience to be included only in a secondary viewing practice.

Furthermore, visiting a public exhibition has acquired its own ritualization. For instance, visitors must obey certain security regulations. The usual exhibiting space "is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention ... One is also expected to behave with a certain decorum" (Duncan 1998: 476). Similarly, the *Preliminary Exhibition* established several rules: children younger than ten years old were not allowed to enter; umbrellas, canes, or cameras were not permitted in the exhibition rooms; even without cameras, visitors were forbidden to copy or record exhibits by any other means; visitors should follow the display sequence, and they should not retrace their steps; no food, drinks, or cigarettes were allowed; no one was allowed to touch the exhibits.

In the *Preliminary Exhibition*, a visitor was kept at a certain distance from the exhibits. Further emphasis was afforded to these objects by a number of policies. Distance, both physical and legal, sanctified the objects.

Security for transportation

In order to assuage domestic anxiety, the Republican government promised to take appropriate safety measures: a British navy vessel would transport these treasures and prevent any possible attack; experienced Chinese experts would handle these objects with care. The most important measure was mentioned above that all the exhibits from China would have a preliminary show in Shanghai before going abroad and a post show in Nanjing after returning. If the Chinese public did not trust the government, they could see the exhibits with their own eyes and compare them to know whether all the treasures remained intact after the loan (Na 1957: 145-46).

The Chinese side proposed the special requirement of transportation by a British navy vessel. They trusted the protection of a naval ship rather than the merchant fleets which usually took responsibility for transporting art exhibits. The British side dispatched HMS *Suffolk*, a Royal Navy heavy cruiser, for the task of transporting the artworks from Shanghai to Britain. At that time, this battleship was serving in the Far East under the Commanding Officer Captain Errol Manners (1883-1953). Her crew included about two hundred naval officers, and over a thousand soldiers. The cruiser was equipped with powerful weapons, such as dual and single guns, aircrafts, and torpedoes (Bishop 1998: 491). The Chinese side was satisfied with this arrangement.

On the return trip to China, no warship was available for the whole voyage and so the British organizers provided the passenger liner *Ranpura* to carry all the exhibits back to China. As a precautionary measure, five British navy vessels were to escort the liner, respectively, on different parts of this journey. The Chinese organizers accepted this plan. The *Ranpura* departed on 9th April, 1935. When the ship arrived in Gibraltar at noon on 14th April, it stopped for a break. However, when the crew tried to continue the journey later that evening, they found that the *Ranpura* had been stranded. The British Royal Naval sent two ships to the liner's aid, but the *Ranpura* was too heavy to drag. The news spread almost immediately to China. The organizers back home started to panic and telegraphed the liner several times. Rumours circulated that being stranded was just an excuse not to transport the Chinese art pieces back to China. The following evening, after the liner had discharged three thousand tons of other cargo, five ships from the British Royal Naval pulled the *Ranpura* out of the sand and into deep water. With the news that the liner had resumed its voyage the rumours abated (Zhuang 1936: 131-35). This incident illustrates just how sensitive the Chinese public were about the exhibits. They realized the value and the importance of these items.

The objects of the *Preliminary Exhibition* were sanctified in a number of remarkable ways. The Chinese government attempted to create a holy atmosphere around the country's national heritage. Unlike the *International Exhibition*, no reports on the *Preliminary Exhibition* in China touched upon the exhibition's subtle impact on viewers' everyday life. Some Western responses to the *International Exhibition* discussed the colours or patterns of Chinese art objects, and they theorized these could be utilised in European fashion and design. Such notions were not mentioned by Chinese reviewers. Rather, all their remarks focused on the representative effects of these exhibits as "true" Chinese art. The Republican government promoted these exhibits to be part of an inherited high culture. They were deemed more important for academic research than for daily use.

5.3 Hierarchy of Art Forms

Museums and exhibitions impose meaning on their exhibits through displaying. Art exhibitions display objects in certain orders. They classify them into categories which are derived from a rational system that reflects institutional and cultural priorities. The *Preliminary Exhibition* demonstrates a rather fixed Chinese hierarchy in art, which is missing in the *International Exhibition*.

Orders of classification

In the *Preliminary Exhibition*, the Chinese committee divided over one thousand exhibits into three different categories based on media: bronze, porcelain, and calligraphy/painting on paper or silk. In addition, they defined a miscellaneous group which comprised textile, jades, carvings in red lacquer, cloisonné, folding fans, furniture, stationery, archaeological specimens, and ancient books. This separation was strictly followed. Of the total six exhibition halls, five halls were attributed to a single category. Only the first hall held pieces from the categories of calligraphy/painting and miscellaneous objects. The second hall was for calligraphy and painting, the third for bronze vessels, the fourth and the fifth for ceramics, and the sixth for miscellaneous objects. Within each category, the Chinese committee decided arrangements by following a chronological order (Zhang 2006).

Conversely, the *International Exhibition* gave first priority to the chronological order (Figure 5.5). Exhibits were arranged within different periods and then by media. However, the British committee did not strictly apply these general rules. Three-dimensional and two-dimensional pieces were mixed together to fill the exhibition space. Inside the entrance, the Vestibule was labelled as “European Taste” and displayed two horizontal panels of painted paper, one silk tapestry, one mural painting (termed “*fresco*”), and one painting, all of which were from the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. The Central Hall was mainly devoted to royal loans and large items of Chinese sculpture (*Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6* 1935: xxii). Also, the compact association between calligraphy and painting in Chinese art was lost in London as works of calligraphy and painting were separated by the British committee.

These two orders employed respectively by the *Preliminary Exhibition* and the *International Exhibition* served different purposes. They both attempted to provide a clear narrative of Chinese art, taking into the consideration the viewing habits of their audiences. The Chinese audience for the *Preliminary Exhibition* already had sufficient knowledge of the history of China and the evolution of different dynasties. The display was arranged so that they would be able to observe the development of each genre of art through the

ages and gain the impression of a coherent progress of changes within each genre. Faced with a mainly European audience, the British committee chose not to create boundaries between different forms of art. They were primarily interested in offering a dynastic idea of the history of China to the audience. Objects from the same period were positioned together to generate an overview of art at a given point in history. Some rooms were even topic-driven. For example, one particular theme was Buddhism. This arrangement helped a visitor to understand these artworks in the context of religious stories, functions, rituals, and practices. Conscious of the tastes of their audience, the British committee decided to open the exhibition with a hall dedicated to “European Taste”, regardless of the differences in time and medium between the exhibits. They deliberately chose to show familiar items at the beginning of the exhibition so as to arouse a sense of acquaintance. From there the exhibition could proceed towards more unfamiliar genres. In this arrangement, items of calligraphy and ancient books were positioned at the end of the exhibition in a less central location.

The rank of categories

In pre-modern Chinese history, calligraphy and painting possessed great prestige among Chinese literati. Art objects, such as porcelain and jades were treated and understood differently. They were seen simply as items of decoration or for practical use. Unlike calligraphy and painting, Chinese intellectuals were seldom interested in the processes of their manufacture.

During the early twentieth century, under the influence of new ideas on the historiography of art, mainly absorbed through Japan, Chinese scholars began to discuss other forms of art in the same narrative of calligraphy and painting. They started to write a history of Chinese art, adding objects to the established history of calligraphy and painting. Chinese intellectuals realized that, like calligraphy and painting, porcelain, jades, woodcarving, and sculpture were great achievements of China in the past. These objects too represented the creativity of Chinese people. Consequently, more research on art objects emerged in Republican China.

It was not an easy process for the Chinese elite to fully adapt to the Western hierarchy of art. Calligraphy and painting still occupied a disproportionately large share of most art exhibitions before 1935 in China. The *Preliminary Exhibition* in Shanghai was the first exhibition of this scale organized in China where exhibits of porcelain were more numerous than those of calligraphy and painting. It was unusual that porcelain objects (three hundred and fifty-two items) numbered twice those of calligraphy and painting (one hundred and seventy-five pieces). The largest category of the exhibition—ceramic objects—comprised

more than one third of all exhibits. This situation can probably be attributed to the interest in ceramics of the British committee.

Chinese porcelain had gained tremendous attention from British collectors, merchants, and scholars since the 1840s. British collectors at the beginning of the twentieth century were mostly familiar with Chinese porcelain, jades, and bronzes. Large collections and several academic publications on Chinese ceramics were available. During the 1920s and '30s, the taste for Chinese ceramics changed in England due to the increased availability of early Chinese porcelain items (Green 2000). The general attitude was shifting from a preference for highly decorated later wares to the championing of pre-Qing porcelain. This trend was reflected in the choice of Chinese porcelain for the exhibitions. More than half of the ceramics on display in Shanghai were from pre-Qing times. Those pieces from the Qing dynasty were only wares from the period of the first four emperors (1644-1795) (Chinese Preparatory Committee of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London 1936a: 3-8).

The Chinese committee accepted the ideas about porcelain from the British side and this is reflected in the *Preliminary Exhibition*, which highlighted for the Chinese audience the amazing achievements of Chinese porcelain along with calligraphy and painting. In terms of ceramics, the *Preliminary Exhibition* was unique in Republican China. The Chinese Ministry of Education organized the *Ministry of Education Second National Fine Art Exhibition* in 1937. This exhibition, principally for contemporary art products, included a large section named “calligraphy and painting of successive dynasties (Lidai shuhua)”. This section, which was separated from the displays of contemporary calligraphy and painting, comprised more than four hundred items. Ceramics, on the other hand, both old and new, were displayed together under the category of applied arts. The number of both ancient and contemporary porcelain exhibits was about half of that of old calligraphy and painting (Tsuruta 1991).

The British executive committee for the *International Exhibition* seemed to be very confident in their expertise on Chinese ceramics. They made scores of corrections to the descriptions of porcelains written by the Chinese experts before displaying them in London. As previously mentioned, Ferguson was very dissatisfied with this action by the British committee. He commented:

“It was a rash act on the part of the London Executive Committee to set itself in opposition to this official opinion and it amounted to a challenge to Chinese experts to show cause why a small group of British experts was not qualified to teach them how to label their own national treasures”.

He asserted that the decisions of the Chinese Committee in Shanghai were based upon

careful examination. He claimed that the descriptions were the official view of the Chinese government (Ferguson 1936). Ferguson might have gone too far. The conflicting opinions on these porcelain pieces resulted in different narratives for the exhibitions. Faced with different audiences in two locations as far apart as China and Britain, it was inevitable that the two committees held contrasting opinions and provided different information.

Among all the items sent to London by the Chinese government, one hundred and sixty-five objects were not displayed in the *International Exhibition* due to a lack of space. The British side's reselection strengthened their own narrative of Chinese art. They prioritized Chinese ceramics. Only one piece of porcelain was dropped, while nineteen items of calligraphy and painting were removed. These nineteen pieces included a painting *Presentation of Tablets among Three Arhats* (*Sanxian shoujian tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) which the Chinese side attributed to the Song painter Yan Wengui (active 980-1010)³¹.

The British committee eliminated most of the archaeological specimens listed by the Chinese side (ninety-three pieces out of one hundred and thirteen objects). All the archaeological exhibits were contributed by the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica. Most of these artefacts were from YinXu. The Chinese side selected a number of oracle bones, stone tools, bone works, arrowheads, and ivory carvings (Chinese Preparatory Committee of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London 1936c: 119). They were proud of these very ancient items. For them, these exhibits showed the origins of a long-lasting Chinese civilization. The British understanding of different genres of art in China was more or less restricted to the Western concept of art. These primitive tools seldom belonged to the Western category of art at that moment. The *International Exhibition* only displayed twenty items from the archaeological section. These remaining exhibits were stone carvings and pottery. Thirteen such objects were provided by the Chinese committee at the special request of Paul Pelliot representing the British committee (Chinese Preparatory Committee of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London 1936b: 150).

The British experts also removed more than half of the exhibits in the “ancient books” category (twenty-seven pieces out of fifty). The craftsmanship on the production of books in ancient China had been extraordinary. But the puzzling Chinese characters made no sense to Western audience. It was difficult for them to appreciate books in the same binding style with different contents. A few fine examples in various styles would be enough to demonstrate the production of books in China.

³¹ This painting is still regarded as a Yan Wengui painting by experts in the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

All the bronze objects loaned by the Republican government remained in the *International Exhibition*. According to Ferguson, Walter Perceval Yetts (1878-1957), a professor of Chinese art and an authority on bronzes, was responsible for this decision. Significantly, Yetts made no corrections to the labels for the bronze exhibits. He just abbreviated some information. Ferguson praised Yetts as a careful and modest scholar (Ferguson 1936).

These decisions made by the British committee indicated a gap between the understandings of *yishu* in the Chinese perspective and art as a Western term at that time. Calligraphy and painting were the most important categories in the Chinese hierarchy of art. Bronze objects were crucial to an empire in pre-modern China, which legitimized the authority of an emperor over the country. Chinese scholars at that moment started to understand the artistic value of bronze vessels. Porcelain was definitely the most popular and familiar Chinese art form to a Western visitor. The hierarchy of different art genres was clear in the four volumes of the catalogue for the *Preliminary Exhibition*. Long introductory texts were available for bronze, porcelain, calligraphy/painting, and archaeological exhibits. With the exception of a brief description attached to each photo of an exhibit, no extra information was provided for objects in other minor categories of art, such as tapestry and embroidery, jades, cloisonné, and red lacquer.

Furthermore, the exhibition sequence in the *Preliminary Exhibition* placed calligraphy and painting in a primary position. The Chinese committee expected their audience to initially visit the first floor of the exhibition building, in order to see the second to the sixth halls, and then subsequently to visit the first hall downstairs. As a result, they arranged items of calligraphy and painting from Tang to Yuan times in the first hall on the first floor; bronzes in the next hall; ceramics in the next two halls; and part of the miscellaneous section in the last hall. Descending to the ground floor, the only exhibition room was arranged to display calligraphy and painting from the Ming and Qing dynasties and any remaining miscellaneous items. The message was apparent: calligraphy and painting were the most important genres of Chinese art, but the productions of the Ming and Qing periods were not as high in the art historical value system as that of the previous periods.

Even the reviews of the *Preliminary Exhibition* indicated the importance of calligraphy and painting. Most Chinese reviews were about calligraphy and painting. Some remarked on other media with a few sentences. Some just talked about painting. Shi Chongpeng (1909-2003), a traditional artist and art educator, published a series of essays in *National Painting Monthly*. His articles were about the painting part of the *Preliminary Exhibition* based on his experiences as a visitor. He gave very detailed descriptions of each painting on show: the title, size, author if known, content, inscription, and style. Shi

also made a brief comment on each painting. One year later, he combined all these essays into a book entitled *Notes on Viewing and Studying Chinese Famous Paintings* (*Zhongguo minghua guanmo ji*) (Shi 1936a). More comments on the significance of calligraphy and painting must have been given publicly or privately. One of the members of the Chinese committee, Wu Hufan, had to write an article in *Dagongbao*, one of the most important daily newspapers in early twentieth-century China, on the last day of the *Preliminary Exhibition*. He clarified the choices that had been made on calligraphy and painting in response to various critiques on that part of the exhibition (Wu 1935b). While contemporary Chinese scholars had accepted other media as different branches of art, calligraphy and painting still occupied the highest position in the hierarchy of art in China.

The symbolism of genres

The bilingual catalogue of the *Preliminary Exhibition* was published in four illustrated volumes by the Commercial Press in Shanghai, 1936. The third volume was devoted to items of calligraphy and painting. An introductory note in both Chinese and English prefaced this volume. The writers of this catalogue were the members of the Chinese committee; although the exact authorship of this particular article is unknown now. This essay divided its narrative of Chinese calligraphy and painting into two chapters. The development of Chinese calligraphy was described first. Then the narrative moved on to painting. This painting part included three sections labelled as “landscape (*shanshui*)”, “figures (*renwu*)”, and “sketch (*xiesheng*)” (Chinese Preparatory Committee of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London 1936b: 5-11). This division was unconventional. “Sketch” is a Western category borrowed by the Chinese committee to explain Chinese painting history. Traditionally, writers of Chinese painting defined different genres according to the subject matter of painting. Landscape and flower-and-bird painting were two of the most well-known genres from the Ming dynasty onwards. Compared to these two, figure painting and architecture painting were minor categories. Sub-genres, such as horse painting and Buddhist painting, were also available.

In spite of the extant system of painting genres in China, the board of the *Preliminary Exhibition* decided to create their own categories. This unusual division between landscape, figure, and sketch in the catalogue of the *Preliminary Exhibition* represents the strong intentions of the Chinese organizers. It was also consonant with the contemporary changes of conception in the Chinese art world.

The crucial genre of landscape remained in the categorization of the exhibition. Most Chinese scholars considered landscape painting to be the greatest achievement in the Chinese history of painting. It is perhaps no surprise then that the committee of the

Preliminary Exhibition gave a special status to landscape, which had been praised as the paradigmatic expression of literati painting. In fact, the number of landscape paintings (eighty items) constituted almost half of the calligraphy and painting exhibits (one hundred and seventy-five items). The catalogue followed the traditional division of two schools—the Southern and Northern Schools—to introduce Chinese landscape painting. It stated that there was no clear line between these two schools. This idea was consistent with the growing challenge to the conventional separation of these two schools at that time in publications on the history of Chinese art.

The catalogue did not mention the genre of flower-and-bird painting. Still, flower-and-bird painting was the second largest genre in the exhibition part of painting. The paintings selected included many of birds and plants with propitious and fine connotations in China, such as pines, bamboos, plums, and peacocks. The Chinese committee picked a painting of peonies attributed to the Song artist Zhao Chang (ca. 960-after 1016), who was famous for his flower painting. This choice was in accord with the taste of new Chinese art patrons in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Auspicious motifs had been very popular among the emerging elite in Chinese cities from the nineteenth century. They were undoubtedly attractive in the commercial market. However, this ink painting by Zhao Chang seemed not to be fully appreciated by the British side. It did not appear in the *International Exhibition*. Instead, another of Zhao Chang's paintings, *New Year's Day* (*Suizhao tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei), a coloured one, was on display in London.

The definitions for “figures” and “sketch” were not clearly explained in the catalogue and there was no attempt to distinguish the two. Based on the text, “figures” referred to the painting of human and animal figures. The painters of this genre either drew meticulous details in a lifelike style or painted with rough outlines in quick strokes for spiritual resonance. The genre “sketch” here specifically referred to real scenery and lifelike figures. The appearance of this type of work in the exhibition demonstrated the emphasis of the Chinese Committee on the skill of imitating nature with accurate representation. Chinese intellectuals at that time no longer exclusively favoured abstract brushwork.

The appearance of paintings with human figures as the dominant subject in the painting space in the *Preliminary Exhibition* indicates the contemporary revival of artistic interest in figure painting in nineteenth- and twentieth- century China. Portraits from the National Museum of the first two emperors in the Song dynasty and of the emperors and their wives in the Yuan dynasty entered the list made by the Chinese side. Chinese experts usually treated these pictures as historical documents rather than artworks. Through the *Preliminary Exhibition*, they started to establish an art historical interest in these portraits.

That said, the amount of figure painting on display at the exhibition was relatively small. It was less important to Chinese scholars than landscape painting. Compared with the British organizers of the *International Exhibition*, portraits were definitely not the first concern of the Chinese side. Unsatisfied with the portion of figure painting provided by the Chinese committee, the British side added a large quantity of paintings with human figures from other collections outside China. For example, a painting *Ladies of the Palace Sewing* (*Huishan shinü tu* or *Zhishan shinütu*³², now in the Palace Museum, Beijing) was on display in the *International Exhibition*. This painting was attributed to Zhou Fang (ca. 730-ca. 800), an acknowledged figure painter from a high official family. The British committee borrowed the artwork from a private collector, Mrs. William Moore, in New York.

5.4 Prioritization of Historical Periods

From the end of 1934 to the end of 1935, experts in and outside China participated in a complicated procedure of selection for the *Preliminary Exhibition* in Shanghai and ultimately for the *International Exhibition*. The final outcome was a list of objects carefully judged by art historical standards. The emphasis of the *Preliminary Exhibition* enhanced generally accepted ideas in early twentieth-century Chinese art historical writings.

The "AD 1800" terminus

According to Xu Beihong, the British committee stated that only pieces created before 1800 CE should be selected. Chinese artworks from the modern and contemporary period were not considered worthy of representing the fine production of Chinese art.

Chinese scholars, contemporary artists especially, were outraged by this suggestion. In an article in January 1935, Xu Beihong argued that British scholars considered China after the eighteenth century to be without any great cultural accomplishment and contemporary China to be without culture. He was not happy with the members of the British delegation. He thought that they were businessmen rather than experts like Walter Perceval Yetts and Laurence Binyon (1869-1943), a pioneer in the European study of Far Eastern art. He suggested that perhaps the Chinese government should ask for a loan of British painting and sculpture only created after 1800 to form a British art exhibition

³² The Chinese and English titles of this painting seem to address totally different paintings. This English title was used in the *International Exhibition*. The two Chinese titles (literary ladies of the Palace waving a fan) are used now by the Palace Museum, Beijing. Actually, two titles pointed to different sections of this long scroll. The whole painting includes five groups of ladies in different activities: waving a fan; holding a music instrument; looking into a mirror; sewing; and, taking a rest (from right to left).

in China (Xu 1935). Xu Beihong seemed to forget that two years earlier in 1933, *the Exposition de la peinture chinoise* at the Jeu de Paume in Paris, which he co-organized, consisted of 64 ancient paintings from the Han to the Ming dynasties and 180 contemporary paintings in traditional styles. It might not have been his idea to represent Chinese painting using only traditional styles, but he agreed to do so on at least one occasion.

The Chinese committee, on the other hand, was successfully persuaded to choose nothing after the eighteenth century. It was a widely accepted idea in the first half of the twentieth century that Chinese art from the nineteenth century had undergone at least stagnation if not outright decline. In 1917, Kang Youwei stated that: “Late Chinese painting has declined terribly” (Kang 1917). Most histories of Chinese art published in the 1920s and ’30s described Chinese art from the Qing dynasty onwards as decadent. In a sense, priceless national artworks were from the pre-Qing dynasties. This narrative paralleled those choices made for the *Preliminary Exhibition*. In 1937, Li Yishi (1886-1942), an oil painter who was the first Chinese to study in a Western art academy, recalled that the selection of paintings did not go beyond the Qianlong period. He considered this decision as a sign of the degeneration of traditional painting and hoped that Chinese artists would revive Chinese art and reverse the situation (Li 1937).

The “Tang-Song transition” (618-1279)

In 1888, the founder of Japanese studies on the history of East Asia, Naka Michiyo (1851-1908) published a book entitled *The General History of China (Shina tsūshi)*. He borrowed the tripartite periodization in the Western historiography to divide the history of China into three periods as ancient times (*shanggu*), medieval times (*zhongshi*), and early modern times (*jinshi*). Many scholars in Japan and China agreed with this tripartite idea, but they developed their own approaches to separate these three periods. One influential scholar was Naitō Konan, one of the founding fathers of modern Japanese studies of China. He put forward the “Tang-Song transition” hypothesis, in which he considered the Song dynasty as the beginning of the “modern” period in China (Naitō 1922). Naitō’s periodization suggested that as early as the late Tang and early Song dynasties a total transformation in Chinese culture accompanied China’s entrance into what he conceived as “modernity”. He argued that the Tang period absorbed significant foreign elements into the Chinese culture and that the Song period resembled the glorious Renaissance in Europe (Fogel 1984: xv, 197). Similar ideas appeared in the history of Chinese art during the 1920s and ’30s.

The *Preliminary Exhibition* treated Tang and Song times in Chinese history as the most flourishing period of Chinese art, chiefly in the case of painting. Altogether, sixty-two paintings from the Tang and Song dynasties occupied more than one third of all the samples

of calligraphy and painting selected. The Song paintings (fifty-four items) dominated those of different dynasties. The introduction of the *Preliminary Exhibition* catalogue clearly stated that landscape painting became important in the Tang dynasty. It also provided a long list of painters in various periods. The Song dynasty stood out as the one with the largest number of masters (forty-one artists in all three genres of painting). This focus on Tang and Song times was closely associated with a common understanding in the contemporary Chinese art world: the greatest achievements of calligraphy and painting were represented by the Tang and Song dynasties. In 1926, Teng Gu published *A Brief History of Chinese Art*. In this book, he proposed that the period of Sui to Song was the most flourishing era in the history of Chinese art. In 1935, Teng wrote a book devoted to Tang and Song painting, entitled *A History of Painting from Tang to Song Times*. Zheng Wuchang's 1929 book *A Complete History of Chinese Painting Studies* devoted a larger portion of text to Tang and Song times than that of the subsequent Ming-Qing period. Much more information was available for art in the later ages, but Zheng chose to keep his narrative simple. Teng and Zheng were representative of contemporary Chinese intellectuals.

After visiting the *Preliminary Exhibition*, Li Puyuan summarized the merits of Tang and Song painting to analyze the problems of contemporary Chinese painting. Li admired Tang and Song painters for their harmonious relationship to nature, which they chose to depict. Li envisioned that these masters drew the light, tone, and outline of a landscape without too much ink and too many lines. By contrast, Li Puyuan criticized the pure copying technique of some Ming and Qing literati painters. As a result of his experiences at this exhibition, Li thought that Chinese painting should follow Tang and Song examples to imitate nature rather than simply copying old paintings (Li 1935).

5.5 Canonization of Artists

The presence of a particular work of art in important exhibitions such as the *Preliminary Exhibition* and the *International Exhibition* represents a form of canonization. The organizing committees distinguished the chosen artworks from the excluded ones. Based upon a set of principles, such as the authenticity of the work, how representative those art pieces were, or simply taking into consideration the need to keep an object safe, they justified the inclusion of the exhibits in the exhibitions. Those items selected had passed the shared judgement of two committees and were considered worthy of being placed in the spotlight.

Castiglione

Some differences in selection between the *Preliminary Exhibition* and the *International Exhibition* suggest disagreements on the value of certain artists and their pieces. An indication of diverging views between the Chinese and the British committees was the case of Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining, 1688-1768), the Italian Qing court painter. The Chinese side had not considered Castiglione's paintings for display. Their argument was that, since Castiglione was not an artist of Chinese origin, his works were not appropriate for this exhibition of Chinese art. The British side totally disagreed and insisted on including two of Castiglione's works for both exhibitions (Na and Zhuang 2007). In the *International Exhibition*, they even added one more painting by Castiglione on loan from the Musée Guimet in Paris. It was a painting of a historical scene entitled *Kazak Kirghis Envoys Presenting Horses to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung*. Including Castiglione, only sixteen artists had three or more works of art on show.

Castiglione's style of combining the Chinese brush and the Western perspective was more easily appreciated and understood by a Western audience at that time than the unfamiliar Chinese style which could not be measured by Western painting standards from the Renaissance. Also, Castiglione's painting demonstrated an artistic exchange between China and the West two centuries ago. The Chinese committee eventually conceded and Castiglione's paintings appeared in the *Preliminary Exhibition*. They made a compromise. In *The Illustrated Catalogue of Chinese Government Exhibits for the International Exhibition of Chinese Art in London (Canjia Lundun Zhongguo yishu guoji zhanlanhui chupin tushuo, 1936)*, the Chinese committee listed these two paintings by Castiglione at the end of the volume "Calligraphy and Painting (Shuhua)" as appendages. Particular note was made of the fact that Castiglione was from Italy.

From a different perspective, the Chinese side may well have realized, albeit reluctantly, that even though they were painted by an Italian, these paintings could still be part of the Chinese national heritage. A national heritage was not simply confined to creations by Chinese people. Instead, even those works by artists outside the Chinese tradition, since they had been collected and passed down in China, could reasonably be considered as national heritage. Castiglione's paintings were Qing court paintings commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor and had both historical and artistic merit.

Additionally, this decision was coincident with contemporary historical ideas on the development of Chinese painting. Chinese art historical writings in the 1920s and '30s praised Castiglione highly for his artistic achievement. A number of Chinese scholars and artists believed that the future of Chinese painting lay in the direction of a synthesis of Chinese and Western painting styles and techniques. Castiglione was held up as an example

of this synthesis. In the illustrations for his publication *Outline of Chinese Art History* (1931), Li Puyuan chose one work by Castiglione, from a wide array of Qing paintings available, as the sole example of Chinese art in the Qing dynasty. His special appreciation of Lang Shining's art indicates his support for modern Chinese art learning from Western elements. Castiglione's painting experience in the Qing court was a significant demonstration of the communication in art between China and the outside world. This was a point of great interest to Chinese scholars at that time.

Bada Shanren/Shitao

Bada Shanren and Shitao were both prestigious painters in the early Qing dynasty. Their styles were very distinct from the Orthodox School of their times. They gained their popularity in the Chinese art circles of the Republican period. In Shanghai in the early 1930s, there was a definite trend for Chinese painters to paint in the manner of Bada Shanren and Shi Tao instead of the "Four Wangs" (see Chapter Three).

Surprisingly, the *Preliminary Exhibition* omitted any work by Bada and included just one painting by Shitao, a collaborative piece with Wang Yuanqi, the orthodox painter praised by the Qing court. Some scholars were unhappy about the exclusion and publicly raised the issue. The explanation given by Wu Hufan was that there were no other options available in the Palace Museum collection. These two painters, both descendants of the Ming royal family, lived as left-over loyalists in early Qing times. The Qing court was most unlikely to collect their works. Thus, the Palace Museum and the National Museum which inherited the Qing imperial collection, did not obtain any individual works by Bada or Shitao.

Related to the core of this problem, Ye Gongchuo raised one of the disadvantages of organizing the *Preliminary Exhibition*. As a private collector, Ye doubted that the exhibits taken solely from the public collections could be truly representative of the entirety of Chinese art (Ye 1935). He believed that a number of classic works in Chinese art history were absent from the exhibition.

Multiplicity of media

Different media of art in China have always connected to each other. Calligraphy and painting have constantly appeared together on porcelain surfaces and in carvings of stone, ivory, wood, bamboo, and jade. They have supplied subjects and compositions to tapestry and embroidery. Yet, the Chinese organizers of the *Preliminary Exhibition* appeared unaware of the intertextuality of art forms in China. That said, they unconsciously employed the multiplicity of forms to emphasize particular works of calligraphy and painting.

The *Preliminary Exhibition* included a display of twenty folding fans. These fans, which had been categorized as belonging to the miscellaneous group, had been selected not because the craftsmanship in working bones and covering fans was extraordinary, but because the Chinese organizers favoured the works of calligraphy and painting put on them by important artists. Three of the fans had Qiu Ying's (ca. 1498-1552) painting on them. Qiu was a famous painter in the Ming dynasty who followed the so-called "academic style (*yuanti*)" of the Song dynasty. His painting *Carrying the Lute* (*Fuqin tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) was accompanied by a piece of calligraphy composed by Dong Qichang. Two other works of art by Dong, in the form of folding fans, were also presented.

Similarly, calligraphy and painting were reproduced in the form of textiles. Twenty-nine items of tapestry and embroidery were shown by the Chinese committee, although no details of the makers of these textiles were mentioned at the exhibition. Instead, the committee chose to highlight some creators of the original pieces of calligraphy and painting on display. Zhao Chang's painting *Bamboos, Plum Blossoms, and Magpies* (*Zhumei shuangque tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) was present. And a work of calligraphy on silk tapestry by the Song calligrapher and painter Mi Fu was also on display.

The multiplicity of artworks by several artists in more than one medium demonstrates the influence and popularity of these artists. The reappearance of these names beyond the usual format of calligraphy and painting strengthens their status as the canons of art in China.

Artists' gender

Gender was an unspoken issue in the *Preliminary Exhibition*. Among all the exhibits of painting whose authors were known, only two paintings were works of art by women artists. One was *Bamboos and Stones* (*Zhu shi*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) attributed to Guan Daosheng (1262-1319), probably China's most famous woman calligrapher and painter. She was the wife of the famous Yuan artist, Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322). Her work usually became a footnote to that of her husband (Weidner 1988: 20). The other was *Bodhisattva* (*Guanyin dashi xiang*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) by Xing Cijing, sister of the calligrapher Xing Tong (1551-1612). The catalogue of the *Preliminary Exhibition* mentioned that Xing Cijing excelled in flower painting and religious figure painting in the manner of Guan Daosheng. The remaining paintings in the *Preliminary Exhibition* were all done by male artists. The Chinese committee never made the gender difference explicit and no information was provided for visitors to distinguish the women painters from their male counterparts.

Female names entered the male history of Chinese painting in the tenth century. From then on they were positioned either at the end of each group or in an appendix with little information in the form of artists' biographies. Traditional Chinese writings on art overlooked women and did not take them seriously. In 1831, Tang Shuyu, wife of Wang Yuansun (1794-1836), who belonged to a scholarly family, compiled the first treatise on a history of female painters in China—*The Jade Terrace History of Painting* (*Yutai huashi*). Tang collected more than two hundred female artists from more than a hundred sources. With this one exception, there were far fewer women than men listed in any Chinese art historical record. Also, far fewer works of painting by women survived down the ages than those by men. On the whole, scholars simply did not consider women artists to be great masters. Marsha Weidner suggested that Guan Daosheng might be the only exception (Weidner 1988: 13). The presence of Guan's work in the *Preliminary Exhibition* unquestionably promoted her status in the history of Chinese painting.

In terms of other media, textiles were most likely to be associated with women. Twenty-nine pieces of tapestry and embroidery were on display in the *Preliminary Exhibition*. Still, no creators of the needlework were recorded by either the exhibition catalogue or the labels on the exhibits. In the case of folding fans, two paintings on fans were attributed to women painters. The Chinese committee gave no data on them other than their names: Zhao Wenshu and Ma Shouzhen. Both these women were from the Ming dynasty. Zhao Wenshu could be Wen Shu (1595-1634), a woman painter from a literati family active in art. Her great-grandfather was the brother of the artist Wen Zhengming (1470-1559). Wen Shu married into another old elite family in Suzhou, the so-called "cultural capital of China" at that time. Her husband's family traced its ancestry back to Zhao Mengfu. Her paintings were so well known that someone faked them for money. Weidner has pointed out that Wen Shu became a model for later generations of Chinese women painters (Weidner 1988: 31-34). In the *Preliminary Exhibition*, Wen Shu's work was a colour painting *Poppies* (*Yingsu tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) on a fan. She excelled at this flower-and-rock theme. Ma Shouzhen (1548-1604) was a courtesan in Jinling (now Nanjing), one of the entertainment quarters in affluent South China during the Ming dynasty. She was talented in painting, poetry, music, and calligraphy. The *Preliminary Exhibition* displayed a fan with her painting *Butterflies* (*Huadie tu*, now in the National Palace Museum, Taipei) in colour and a poem transcribed by her paramour, Wang Zhideng (1535-1612).

The *International Exhibition* specifically pointed out the gender of Chinese artists. It exhibited all the pieces by women artists loaned by the Chinese government. It also added one more painting *Bamboos* by Guan Daosheng. Guan was very much appreciated

by Westerners. In the catalogue of the *International Exhibition* and the labels attached to these five exhibits, female creators were addressed as “lady” before their names. Again, Guan Daosheng was the only female artist that was properly introduced by the British committee. The *International Exhibition* merely indicated the names and dates of the other three women painters; no further information was provided on these creators for the audience of the *International Exhibition*. They appeared to be unimportant for the British committee. Guan was introduced not as an independent artist, but instead as the wife of an accomplished artist—an attachment to the dominant male figures.

Most women artists and their creations were missing in the canonization of Chinese art in the early twentieth century. Nobody paid enough attention to the Chinese female creators and their works of art. They were treated as sustainers rather than innovators of art by both Chinese and foreign experts in the 1930s.

The international loan of 1935-6 and its pre-exhibition in April and May, 1935, were landmark events central to rewriting art history in China. In imperial China, Chinese art had been passed down by the imperial collection and private collections. Art historical materials also emerged within these two categories of collections. Writers of histories, classifications, and catalogues of calligraphy and painting were usually the owners of collections or lived in a family in possession of some precious pieces. The peculiarity of these collections limited the possibility for research on Chinese art history to a small group of elite scholars. From the beginning of the twentieth century, museum opening and exhibition holding in China drew in new materials and inspirations for art historical scholarship. In comparison with the *International Exhibition of Chinese Art* in London (1935-1936), the *Shanghai Preliminary Exhibition of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art* becomes a unique instance demonstrating how a Chinese practice of selecting, exhibiting and viewing in Republican China formed a historical narrative of Chinese art with elements similar to or different from Western views. An art historical narrative unfolded within the exhibiting space.