

Semiotics for Art History

Semiotics for Art History:

Reinterpreting the Development of Chinese Landscape Painting

By

Lian Duan

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This book is dedicated to
Dr. David Pariser
who has given me lifelong scholarly guidance.

For my mother, who is always supportive, spiritually.

In memory of Peter Fuller (1947-1990)
who paved the road for me to approaching art.

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The writing of this book was initiated from my teaching of “Chinese Visual Culture” at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. It has been offered as an introductory course in Chinese culture in the Department of Classics, Modern Languages, and Linguistics since 2007, and then cross-listed in the Department of Art History. Before that, in the fall semester of 2003, I taught a similar course of Chinese Art History in the Department of Art at Marlboro College in Vermont, USA. Going even further back to the late 1980s, I taught the same course in the Chinese Department at Sichuan University in China. With this momentum, I wish to extend my thanks to all my students of the past and present from the three institutions who have given me the chances to contemplate the crucial issue of how to teach, and experiment with a topic-centered series of lectures. It is their feedback to my teaching that has taught me how to teach and how to organize lectures, which eventually gave birth to this book.

Needless to say, my teachers taught me a great deal as well. Among them, first and foremost is Dr. David Pariser, who is my former MA and Ph.D. adviser, and life-long mentor, from the Department of Art Education at Concordia University. A renowned scholar of visual psychology and an art educator, Dr. Pariser has a profound understanding of visual thinking and visual form, which was endowed by his own mentor Rudolf Arnheim (1904-2007) back in his Harvard years. No doubt, due to his inspiration, I read almost all of Arnheim’s key writings on art, which greatly enriched my understanding of visual language. In the meantime, I enjoyed reading Dr. Pariser’s publications as well, in the fashion of the critical method of formalist “close reading.” With close reading, I learned both how to do research and how to write about my research. Importantly, this is not only about studying art, but about how to be a human living with art.

I would also like to extend my thanks to Professor Mieke Bal of Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (ASCA). My specific interest in semiotic study of art is inspired by her writings in visual analysis.

As always, I am grateful to my mother's spiritual support. A journalist, she inspired my early interest in writing and painting.

L. D.
May 18, 2018, Montreal

PREFACE

DAVID PARISER

I am honored that Lian Duan has included me in the dedication to this ambitious volume. From the first time we met when he entered the Master's in Art Education program at Concordia I was struck by his multifaceted engagement with two daunting – one might even say “inscrutable” topics – the art and philosophy of ancient and contemporary China and modern Western aesthetic and literary criticism. I know that Lian Duan has interviewed major artists on both sides of the Pacific-artists of the caliber of Mark Tansey for example. So, he is not satisfied to simply contemplate art works from a lofty critical distance but also wishes to gain insights through conversation with the artists themselves.

From the start of our acquaintance and through his professional career, Duan has found intellectual bridges between the work of Chinese avant-garde artists and their Western counterparts. He was also eager to find ways of applying Chinese aesthetic and art historical methods to Western art, and vice-versa – using Western critical methods and insights as a way of gaining new insights into Chinese visual art from all eras. He has explored the ways in which Western aesthetic-critical approaches could be applied productively to sophisticated visual work from an ancient culture.

In effect, his quest has much in common with the shift in orientation and method that was called for by late 20th century Western anthropologists. These scholars proposed two ways of developing a more credible approach to understanding “exotic” cultures. On the one hand there was an added emphasis on accommodating the views and understandings of the members of the culture itself – the “emic” view. On the other hand, professional Western anthropologists insisted that it was high time for non-Western anthropologists to take Western culture as their object of study. They invited trained non-Western anthropologists to turn their eyes on Western culture. This is a highly attractive position to take as it is both informative and equitable. It offers an “outsider's” view of what is taken for granted by Westerners – and thus there is the opportunity for new discoveries and new insights which present themselves to those with fresh

eyes. There is also a certain justice in having those “outsiders” who for so long were considered the passive “objects” of scientific observation to now turn the tables – and “observe the observers.”

There is an element of this role reversal in what Lian Duan is attempting in this book. He comes to the ambitious task that he lays out in this volume well-equipped. His knowledge of Chinese visual art and visual aesthetics is evident – based on his numerous publications and his long record as an art critic of both Western and Chinese visual art. His record of publications also indicates that he has a strong grasp of the main currents of Western aesthetic theory – modernist, structural, post structural and post-modern. My own research has been grounded in psychological, cognitive and sociological approaches, and my research has addressed aspects of graphic production and development. However, my experience as a student with the noted theoretician and psychologist/art historian Rudolf Arnheim, impressed me with the generative power of cross-disciplinary theoretical speculation in the arts. Although Arnheim had no research program, his conjectures and theoretical observations and eclectic speculations were, and remain a rich source of insight and experimental investigation – for those who want to test the predictive power of his vision. Similarly, Duan’s exploration of several centuries of Chinese art via the perspective of influential Western aesthetic theories will doubtless be equally generative – suggesting new connections for art historians and art critics to explore.

As we enter an era when the influence of China is more and more globally present, it is fitting that the power of China’s ancient and sophisticated aesthetic heritage should offer an approach to the Western visual arts that will compete with and even complement the aesthetic approaches that have an equally long pedigree in the West.

Although this volume does not focus on art educational issues such as curriculum or pedagogy, there is no question that, when Lian Duan succeeds in demonstrating the utility of contemporary Western aesthetic analysis as applied to ancient and modern Chinese visual art, there will inevitably be pedagogical implications – especially in the discipline of multicultural education. Perhaps in a future volume Lian Duan will consider the educational utility of the material he sets out here. In an era when provincial prejudices and narrow self-interest trump in-depth and sympathetic understanding of all manifestations of culture, work such as this, provides an important counter to petty provincial vision. Teachers of art can be at the forefront of such conceptual change – and as such, new

ways of looking at classical and contemporary Chinese visual art may well be an avenue for broader global understanding. Lian Duan's scholarly work will provide some of the tools for such understanding.

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ENDORSEMENT

OF LIAN DUAN *SEMIOTICS FOR ART HISTORY*

MIEKE BAL

Bringing Western theory to bear on art works so utterly “non-Western” as Chinese landscape paintings that cannot be seen outside the philosophical tradition of Tao from which they stem and within which they function, is, to say the least, a bold move. Only someone with deep knowledge and familiarity with both can endeavor to do this. Even bolder, and verging on the limit of academic reason, is the idea to draw a figurative “tableau” of the theory – the T-shape the author develops in the second chapter – and then establish a formal analogy between it and the traditional structure of the paintings. What he calls (in my view, too modestly) an “application” of semiotic theory to the artistic corpus amounts to making the academic text itself into an artwork of sorts. This approximates what is today called “artistic research” – the integration of artistic and academic research that bites into the firm distinctions on which these worlds are built. Verging on the limit of academic reason, then, becomes a move beyond those limits, challenging them along the way, denying them the status and power of “limits”.

Just as he remains within the mission of the history of art as it is turning into a branch of cultural analysis, when developing the insights while he is articulating them, he does this through close analyses of specific art works. The equity this established between theory and art, as well as between Western ways of thinking and Eastern philosophy and aesthetics, will be balm on the heart of all those who are justifiably tired of the distinctions themselves. The near-miraculous passage through the major thinkers we have been familiar with for so long, but now de-familiarized by the confrontation has great value not only for this innovative understanding of the pictorial corpus and its history, but also for all scholars and students who, devoting their attention to other things, can learn from this work a new potential for doing cultural analysis in whatever field. This makes the book both a precious contribution to the knowledge of a corpus mostly

more admired than understood, and to the pedagogy and methodology of the intricate relations between theory, philosophy and cultural artifacts such as paintings, and the traditions from which they emerge, on which they comment, and to which they return, actively modifying them. This can no longer be called “application”; it is, at the very least, a confrontation, an interaction that enriches both.

Mieke Bal
Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis (ASCA)

INTRODUCTION

1. Inspiration: A Universal Grammar of Art

The writing of this book is primarily inspired by modern and contemporary theorizations of the linguistic concepts of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), one of the greatest linguists of the 20th century, specifically, his concept about universal grammar. As a language teacher, Saussure taught some ancient and lesser languages, such as Sanskrit and Persian. For each language, he taught its grammar. Towards the end of his life, he discovered the universal grammar of all languages, and taught it under the name “General Course of Linguistics.”

The general or universal grammar of all grammars is Saussurean semiology. Employing semiotic approaches in this book, I try to re-interpret how Chinese landscape painting has changed its course at every crucial historical turning point. To a certain extent, this re-interpretation involves the general and universal grammar to understanding art history and the frontline of the contemporary study of art.

Today, in the early decades of the 21st century, art history has showcased two sides of its development, HI and AI. In my opinion, art is a visual cultural product of human intelligence (HI) which has been the mainstream of art historical study since the origination of this discipline. Then, an increasingly more drastic change has happened to the mainstream since the new millennium, namely, art historical study has revealed the importance of artificial intelligence (AI) in contemporary art, such as the so-called singularity art.

In my observation, the exploration of the frontier of the development of art and art theory, as well as art criticism, has caused art historians anxiety, which I term “frontier anxiety.” In my speculation, AI is one endpoint of the frontline in the development of art in the near future, whereas HI is the other endpoint. Working together, the two integrate multiple disciplinary approaches for the study of art in the present and near future.

However, along its development of scholarly approaches on the HI side, there are still some crucial questions that have remained unanswered, and

one of them is essential: what can integrate the diverse approaches? Although there could be more possibilities, I value semiotics: modern and contemporary semiotics.

Hence, regarding the purpose, and purposes, of this study, I intend to re-interpret the development of Chinese landscape painting and outline a new framework of contemporary semiotics for art history. The two are interwoven: the reinterpretation comes from the semiotic point of view and the new framework stems from the study of Chinese art.

There are at least two kinds of art historical narrative, the archaeological and the interpretive. The latter is based on the former, but a bit more philosophical, involving current critical theories. As the subtitle indicates, this book presents an interpretive and re-interpretive study of how the genre of landscape painting developed in Chinese art history, and as the main title indicates, this reinterpretation is semiotic. Developing a semiotic framework, I wish to make a contribution, however tiny, to the contemporary semiotics for art history.

In Chinese art history, the development of landscape painting has experienced ups and downs as a main genre of painting since its early time. Although figure painting has a much longer history, it is more pragmatically utilized for religious, political, and worldly functions, and it concerns itself relatively less with metaphysics. On the contrary, landscape painting as a high art demonstrates a less utilitarian function but more metaphysical and spiritual considerations. What is metaphysics in this regard? In the terminology of semiotics, the purpose of Chinese landscape painting is to encode the Tao, which is the highest philosophical concept in Chinese culture. To the educated elite through the ages, therefore, landscape painting is more important, or “higher” in Aristotle’s words,¹ than other genres in the history of Chinese art.

Art history is traditionally a narrative that tells the story of how art has developed. Needless to say, there are different and various foci in art historical narratives. The so-called conceptual history of art focuses on the development of certain concepts, such as representation or allegorization. The pictorial history of art focuses on the evolution of image, and the stylistic history focuses on the renovation of style and innovation in artistic language. Nevertheless, I do not think a sole narrative focus is enough for an in-depth study of art history. In my opinion, semiotics might

¹ Aristotle. *Poetics*. New York: Dover Publications, 1997, p. 58.

be able to include multiple foci in its narrative, since it is not a simple narrative, but an integrated one, telling the story of art from multiple perspectives at multiple levels, – this is my perception of contemporary semiotics.

2. Reinterpretation: The Necessity of This Study

The writing of this book is to present my reinterpretation of the development of Chinese landscape painting from its origin, through its history of renovation and innovation, to the current situation in the early 21st century. For this purpose, I choose to apply theories of modern semiotics and explore a new concept of contemporary semiotics for art historical investigation by taking the best from the intrinsic study and extrinsic study, mingling art history and critical theories.

Regarding reinterpretation, although this study focuses on the development of Chinese landscape painting, its significance is not confined, but extends to a more critical, cultural, and philosophical reconsideration: what is art history and how is art history made? Firstly, art history is not an objective natural entity existing beyond art historians' discourses. In fact, the so-called art history is a narrative product of intelligentsia, just like the fact that art itself is a product of artists, a product of civilization, culture, and communal activities. In this sense, art history is a scholarly artifact, and Chinese art history is no exception. Secondly, since the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese art history has been made, or written, under Western influence by two scholarly forces: art historians in China and art historians outside China. Chinese scholars and Western scholars offered different historical narratives based on their different interpretations of the different bodies of Chinese art works. Such differences have raised some crucial questions to art historians: is there a correct narrative of art history, and how to interpret art in its historical and social context?

Regarding the differences, we have to pay attention to a specific historical situation. At least since the beginning of the 20th century, along with the collapse of imperial China, the biggest collection of Chinese art in the imperial palace in Beijing has been disbursed out, and a large portion of it has been relocated in the West: New York, Boston, Chicago, London, Paris, Berlin, as well as St-Petersburg and Tokyo, to name a few. Then, due to the Second World War, another big portion of the rest, mostly the best of the age-old imperial collection, has been relocated to Taipei. As a result, before the 1980s, due to a political barrier, Western scholars did not have easy access to the rest of the imperial collection in mainland China

and neither did Chinese scholars have easy access to the collections in Taipei and the West. In such a political circumstance, scholars had to tell the stories of Chinese art history differently based on the different bodies of art works they accessed. Once again, history is a historical product of historians' narrative discourses, and so is art history. Not against all odds, as said, there were at least two different narratives of Chinese art history or two Chinese art histories, – the story told by scholars in China and the story told by scholars outside China. Needless to say, each of them was partial and even biased. However, since the 1980s the political barrier has been removed and scholars from the West and China have enjoyed direct access to the collections of Chinese art in China and outside China. With this great advantage, scholars of today face a new unprecedented challenge: how to re-interpret Chinese art, and how to re-write Chinese art history without political preference and bias, if possible?

By and large, before the 1980s, Western scholars of Chinese art history employed formalist theory and method in their study, which was largely a stylistic analysis contextualized in socio-cultural history. In the meantime, Chinese scholars employed Soviet-Marxist theory and method, which was fundamentally a political-functional interpretation of art. Since the 1980s, due to the dominance of postmodern politics in the discipline of art history, Western scholars have largely abandoned formalism and turned to social economics and cultural politics in the study of Chinese art. Meanwhile, surprisingly or not, Chinese scholars have embraced the Western formalist approach. Obviously, there is a temporal, scholarly, and cultural swop-switch, namely, a mismatch between the two. Thus, the issue of Chinese misreading of Western art theory arose. Since the dawn of the 21st century, this mismatch and theoretical difference have seemingly faded away, and the contemporary Western “critical theory” has dominated the study of Chinese art history, in the West and in China as well.

In this light, my reinterpretation of the development of Chinese landscape painting is not simply to adopt the century-old semiotics, but to revise and renovate it in the context of contemporary intelligentsia, and apply it to question the commonly accepted understandings of Chinese art and art history. For instance, applying the semiotic theory of Saussure in the study of the definition and origin of Chinese landscape painting, I first re-examine Saussure's concept of sign, revising his “arbitrary” principle to “non-arbitrary” and then use it to subvert the common sense notion that the origin of Chinese landscape painting is found in the process of turning natural scenery from background in a painting to the subject matter. Opposing that notion, I argue that subject matter in a landscape painting is

merely a signifier, which is not fully capable of defining Chinese landscape painting. Based on a theoretical discussion, I further argue that the purpose of Chinese landscape painting is not to represent beautiful scenery alone, but to encode the Tao. Therefore, Chinese landscape painting must be redefined by both the signifier and the signified. Throughout this study, my redefinition of Chinese landscape painting frames all the reinterpretations of art historical issues.

Thus, this study is not an all-inclusive general narrative of the development of Chinese art, but a topic-centered reinterpretation of the key issues at its key historical turning points. For example, the key issue concerning the change in landscape painting at the historical turning point from the Northern Song period to Southern Song period is the paradigm shift from realist representation to self-expression, which is addressed by the semiotic shift from semantic paradigm to pragmatic paradigm. Here, this reinterpretation of historical change is made possible by employing the semiotic theory of Charles Morris (1901-1979).

In the process of reinterpreting the development of Chinese landscape painting, I also put effort on constructing a contemporary semiotic model of my own for a further study of art history in general, and label it “Semiotic Structure in the Interpretation Framework.” I consider that this is a meaningful contribution to update our understanding of Chinese art and culture, to innovate the studies of art history and visual culture, to develop contemporary critical theory and methodology, and to advance our general knowledge in the field of humanities.

3. Semiotics: The Advancement of Theory and Methodology

Semiotic theory has a long history in Western philosophy, which can be traced back to the discourses of ancient Greek thinkers. Plato considered art as a mimesis and imitation, or representation, though it cannot reveal truth.² Aristotle held a somewhat different opinion, and observed that spoken words signify thoughts and written words signify the spoken words.³ Nonetheless, before the 20th century semiotics developed at a smooth but slow pace.

² Plato. *The Republic*. New York: Dover Publications, 2000, p. 177.

³ Aristotle. *Corpus Aristotelicum: Volume I: The Organon*, Excercere Cerebrum, 2016, p. 64.

In the 20th century, the development of semiotics was steady, which can be divided into four phases. The first is the foundational phase of the early 20th century. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure initiated modern semiology by proposing a binary concept of the sign system which consists of a signifier and a signified. At the same time, American logician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) also initiated modern semiotics independently by proposing a triadic concept of the sign system which consists of a representamen, an interpretant, and an object. Hence, the European, or French theory is named semiology whilst the American theory is named semiotics. In this book I use the more common term ‘semiotics’ for consistence and coherence.

The second is the structuralist phase of the mid-20th century. In the French line, some great thinkers, such as Roland Barthes (1915-1980) among others, expanded the Saussurean linguistic theory of semiotics to a cultural theory by extending the signification process. Meanwhile, in the American line, some great philosophers like Charles Morris developed the Peircean semiotics into a more general theory. Interestingly, a third line is also developed in the mid-20th century that integrated the above two. Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), a Russian-born linguist and literary critic, and leader of the Moscow-Prague School of structuralism, developed the Saussurean theory into a communication network in literary study and brought it to America. Similarly, Yuri M. Lotman (1922-1993), a Russian-born literary historian and cultural critic, and leader of the Tartu-Moscow School of semiotics, developed a structural theory of semiotics.

The third is the deconstructionist phase of the late 20th century, represented by the theory of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), a French philosopher, and one of the most controversial thinkers who provided theoretical support to the subversive cultural movement of postmodernism. Derrida challenged the Saussurean theory of signification by deconstructing the relationship of signifier and signified. Although Derrida published his deconstruction theory in the 1960s, it did not find an easy way to be accepted in the heyday of structuralist movement. Then, in the late 1970s, his theory was introduced to a bigger English readership in the United States through translation. Gradually, Derrida’s deconstruction of logocentrism was widely read as a postmodern bible in the 1980s and 1990s. In a certain sense, Derrida’s theory caused the downfall of modern semiotics across the Atlantic.

When the old theory goes down, a new one comes up. The fourth is the reconstructional phase of contemporary semiotics from the 1990s to

present. The basic idea of the new theory is to take the best from the formalist intrinsic study and the postmodern extrinsic study, and thus develop a new semiotic framework for the 21st century. However, the essential question is how to do it. While semiotics experienced the deconstruction crisis in the 1980s, some scholars worked hard to reinvigorate it. In the United States, linguist Thomas Sebeok (1920-2001) and philosopher John Deely (1942-2017) greatly expanded the scope of semiotics by reaching out to other fields beyond linguistics and philosophy. In Europe, the Italian literary scholar Umberto Eco (1932-2016) published important studies of semiotics from the late 1960s through the first decade of the new century, and made a great contribution to the innovation of contemporary semiotics by developing his “interpretive semiotics” from literary to visual cultural studies.

Paralleling to the above development of semiotics in the past hundred years, in the discipline of art history, the development of interpretive theory and methodology at the turn of the new millennium has reached the point where art history meets contemporary semiotics.

Regarding art history, since the beginning of the 20th century, new theories have been proposed. Among them, two are most important: the study of stylistic development and the study of conceptual development. In the first place, formalist art historians interpreted art from a stylistic perspective, such as Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) who promoted the so-called internal study of art by focusing on the issue of visuality. Thereafter, postmodern art historians adopted the ideological perspective, such as T.J. Clark (1943-) who advocated the so-called external study by focusing on the social, economic, and political issues. Thus, as I just partially mentioned, the 20th-century scholars in the West offered two distinctive narratives of art history and they hardly made a compromise with each other. In this circumstance, a series of crucial questions arises: do we have to choose one theory and abandon another, if not, how to incorporate them to enrich our understanding and interpretation of the development of art?

As early as the mid-20th century, some art historians in the United States tried to break the boundary of the internal and external divide. Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968) modernized iconological interpretation of visual signs by taking social and cultural considerations into account. Other art historians tried to bring in semiotics, such as Meyer Schapiro (1904-1996) and Rosalind Krauss (1941-) in their writings of the 1970s and 1980s respectively.

In the postmodern time, some “New Art History” scholars rejuvenated semiotics by integrating the Saussurean and Peircean concepts of signification. For instance, Marxist art critics argued that graffiti should not be regarded as irrelevant anymore, it should be regarded as a representation of the identity of the socially marginalized other. Similarly, feminist art critics argued that the image of the female nude signified the objectification of women as a commodity for male gaze, and the naked female body was the unpackaged sexual product for immediate market consumption.

Along with this new trend of postmodern “New Art History,” in the 1990s, Dutch scholar Mieke G. Bal (1946-) developed contemporary semiotics in the fields of art history, literature, film and cultural analysis, by incorporating semiotics with the narrative theory from a reader’s point of view, crossing the border of the visual sign and the textual sign. In her well-received study of Rembrandt, Bal integrated internal stylistic analysis with external ideological interpretations, such as those of psychoanalysis, feminism, reader-response criticism, and textual-visual narrative study.

With regard to the above scholarly development, in my reinterpretation of the development of Chinese landscape painting, I do not have to follow the chronological dates in borrowing the theories and methods of the above individual scholars. Rather, I follow the above developmental process to apply the semiotic theories and methodology. This is the process from the foundational phase, through structuralist and deconstructionist phases, to the contemporary reconstructional phase. By doing so, I intend to make a contribution to advancing contemporary semiotics for art history in the 21st century. As indicated already, I label my theoretical model “Semiotic Structure in the Interpretation Framework,” which will be elaborated in the final chapter of “Conclusion” in this book.

4. Practice: Integrating the Double Goals

As stated, I have two goals with this study, reinterpreting the development of Chinese landscape painting and developing a contemporary semiotics for art history. Landscape painting is a major genre in Chinese art history and semiotics is one of the keystones constructing the 20th-century social science and humanities, including art history. The relevance of the two constitutes the subject of “semiotics for art history,” or, to be more precise, the subject of art history under semiotic eye. Then, a question comes up: should Chinese landscape painting be the main subject of this study, or semiotics? This question sounds tricky. I should probably drop the idea of

twofold goals. If so, I do not even have to bother to write this book in the first place since there are plenty of books available on Chinese art and semiotics respectively. In fact, what makes my study meaningful and worthwhile is the uniqueness of this project in both presenting how I reinterpret the development of Chinese landscape painting for a new understanding of this subject from a semiotic perspective and how I construct my own semiotic framework at the same time by adapting the methodology of modern semiotics in the process of reinterpreting Chinese art history. The infusion of the two makes this study significant.

Still, should I treat the two subjects equally? If so, how do I handle the interaction of the two, and how do I compose my writing? To answer these questions I have to go back to the primary purpose of this project. Firstly, I am writing a research book about some key issues in the development of Chinese landscape painting, and not a general survey that covers everything concerning Chinese art history. In other words, this project is not to give a plain historical narrative about Chinese art, telling the biographical stories of the important artists and describing their works chronologically. No, not at all, this book is not a simple historiography, but a topic-centered study of historical issues.

Secondly, how to apply semiotics to the study of the specific historical issues? I am trying to answer this question by exploring the interwoven relationship of the two goals. My confidence of doing so comes from what I have learned from my mentor, Peter Fuller (1947-1990), a leading British art critic in the 1980s, and from his successful writing of the well-received book *Art and Psychoanalysis* (1979), which deals with two parallel subjects, the aesthetic quality of art throughout Western art history and the development of psychoanalysis from Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) to D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971) in the 20th century, – applying the second to the study of the first. Since Fuller's primary subject is the aesthetic quality of the artistic form, he did not offer a historical survey of the development of Western art, but focused on some key issues in relation to certain works in key historical periods, such as the issues of the interaction between the form of Greek sculpture and the reader's response to art, the interaction between Michelangelo's sculpture and the artist's psyche, the interaction between the visibility of painting and personal life which is pertinent to the painters like Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and Mark Rothko (1903-1970). In fact, since I translated Peter Fuller's *Art and Psychoanalysis* into Chinese, which was published in 1988, I actually exercised a close reading of Fuller. Although my close reading happened some 30 years ago, Fuller's

influence is still strong on my conceptualization of the present project with double goals.

I assume my implied readers are both sophisticated scholars and college students fresh in the fields of Chinese art and semiotics, or art history and Chinese studies in general. Thus, writing this book, I have to introduce to my readers the necessary knowledge of the development of Chinese landscape painting and the basic theory of semiotics. Then, I place the emphasis on the related issues of the two in depth, focusing on their relevance to each other. As exemplified, I review the Saussurean arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, and revise it to a non-arbitrary relationship for the purpose of redefining Chinese landscape painting and reinterpreting the origin of landscape painting in Chinese art history.

This is to say that I do not intend to write a general introduction to the theory of semiotics and its development, but apply its theoretical concepts and analytical methods to my specific topics about Chinese landscape painting. In the Saussurean case, I do not discuss everything about Saussure, but focus on the arbitrary principle and non-arbitrariness, which is crucial to my specific subject of redefining Chinese landscape painting. Of course, many art historians have done similar work; however, my practice is different. Firstly, I adapt the original theories from semiotic philosophers, such as Saussure and Peirce, but not the second-hand methods of art historians who developed their approaches based on those philosophers. Secondly, I have a strong sense of history in my practical adaptation of the original theories. As has been pointed out already, I follow the development of modern semiotics in adapting them, just like what Peter Fuller did with psychoanalysis, from the foundational phase to the contemporary phase, and stress the theoretical and methodological relevance.

Pertaining to the above are two philosophical and cultural concepts, teleology and high art, which could be troublesome to the historical narrative in contemporary discourses on art history.

First, does the development of art follow a pre-programmed course to go forward toward a designated destination, or is the progression of art history purely accidental? If it is pre-programmed and there is a destination, then, what is it? In this case, is it the job of an art historian to explore the progressive sequence of art and present it in writing? If accidental, why should an art historian explore and interpret the development of art? Whichever is the case, when looking back at what has

already happened to art, and drawing a developmental line for art history, an art historian encounters the same questions again: is art history a biographical history of individual artists, a stylistic history of art form, a visual history of image making, a social history of representation, a conceptual history of political critique, or something else? Fathoming these questions, I see the danger of a paradoxical trap in front of art historical study.

Second, the concept of high art is even more troublesome since postmodern has deconstructed and subverted this concept already and elitism has ever since become politically incorrect. Once the old art history is replaced by New Art History, the so-called high art finds almost no place in the academic world in the late 20th century and early 21st century. Unfortunately, the so-called high art somehow happens to be the subject of my study, and I enjoy working on it opposing the trendy political correctness in art history. This is because I value the idea of canon, although this idea is much hated in the postmodern era. In this adverse situation, semiotics becomes a remedy and rescue, which provides me with a shelter in today's fashion-chasing academic world.

5. Theorization: A Personal Experience

Returning to the topic of the scholarly contribution that I wish to make with this study, I now have a little to say about my personal experience in my early academic career, which historically pre-textualizes my theoretical framework for contemporary semiotics.

In terms of educational background and scholarly training, I am cross-disciplinary, since I studied literature and visual art in China and Canada, and I also practise literary writing (both critical and creative) and painting. When I was in college in China from 1978 to 1982, I majored in Chinese language and literature, and, due to my love of literature, I wrote my BA paper on American novelist Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), discussing his novella *The Old Man and the Sea* (1951). It was a plain discussion though, without any support from modern literary theory. Back then, I was not even aware of the issue of critical methodology, but followed the old reflection theory of Soviet-Marxism, which dominated literary study in the Chinese intellectual world at that time.

However, Western influence already reached China in the early 1980s, and the influence of Western modern critical theory was overwhelmingly embraced by students in literature. During the 3 years of graduate study in

comparative literature and Western literature from 1983 to 1986, I was fascinated with modern Western theory, mainly structuralism, and read Saussure, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009), Northrop Frye (1912-1991), and other structuralist thinkers and literary theorists. Eventually, due to their influence, I conceptualized my MA thesis with a structuralist approach, which was an examination of the internal structure, or the “conceptual structure” as I named it, in Thomas Hardy’s (1840-1928) fiction. In that thesis I treated the image of man-on-road at the beginning of each of Hardy’s seven “Novels of Character and Environment” as a sign signifying the life journey of the leading characters. Reading Thomas Hardy, I asked myself: why did the author always use the same sign and always use it at the beginning of each novel? I didn’t think it was a coincidence, but believed it was a purposeful design, which suggests a hidden structural pattern and archetype. Throughout that thesis, I discerned five structural levels in Hardy’s novels: the story level, the character level, the conceptual level, the subject level, and the philosophical level. Although I indeed took Hardy’s personal life, the rural society, and the cultural trend of the Victorian age into consideration as the background of his oeuvre, some professors in the MA degree defence committee pronounced my thesis to be a formalist intrinsic study, and a Hegelian idealist work, not an extrinsic Soviet-Marxist work. That accusation almost cost my master’s degree since my thesis was labeled as non-Marxist by two of the five committee members.

In the 1980s, since Marxism was the dominating ideology in China, Western influence had to sometimes wear a Marxist disguise. That was why Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Roland Barthes were so popular on Chinese campuses at that time, no wonder why the Birmingham School and the Frankfurt School of Marxist critical theory enjoyed a frenzy popularity in China even in the late 1990s and early 21st century, and so did the Western Marxist scholars Frederic Jameson (1934-) and Terry Eagleton (1943-). According to Soviet-Marxism, there are three key propaganda functions of literature and art: to inform readers with knowledge, to teach readers morality, and to delight readers with aesthetic fulfillment. As a student of the 1980s, I accepted this theory without thinking. Then, when I came to Canada to study art in the early 1990s and first learned that the function of art is, unexpectedly, to communicate to the readers, and communication is the main function of art, I was surprised, shocked, and also amazed, but not confused.

Communication is a network, involving at least four parties: the artist, the artwork, the art viewer, and the context. In the terminology of Roman