

XUGU: ARCHAIC FORMS AND CAPTURED MOMENTS

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ABSTRACT

ANNAH R. LEE: Xugu: Archaic Forms and Captured Moments
(Under the direction of Dr. Wei-Cheng Lin)

This paper examines the relationship between tradition and modernity in nineteenth-century Shanghai through the work of painter Xugu (1823-1896). Xugu's unique interpretations of time-honored subjects creates the sense that his references to tradition are not a mere continuation of China's artistic past. These artistic conventions are altered to reflect the complex changes and new directions facing artists who for the first time were confronted with an urban environment, commercial culture, and rapid cross-cultural exchange. Analysis of Xugu's paintings suggest he was not clinging to the past to preserve his cultural heritage, but was a conscious participant in the shifts that took place in urban China at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). This paper employs formal analysis of selected works of art and places them within the historic and cultural context of nineteenth-century Shanghai, in order to demonstrate the importance of Xugu to the development of Chinese modernism.

To my exceptionally supportive advisor Dr. Wei-Cheng Lin and my loving family and friends. This project is in memory of my Grandfather Sherman Emory Lee (1918-2008), who instilled in me a love of art and paved the way for scholarship in the field of Asian art.

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Introduction

In a colophon to one of Xugu's paintings, the revered Shanghai painter Wu Changshi (1844-1927) said of Xugu's work, "Ten fingers generate scents, colors, flavors, with one blow breaking through the past to modernity."¹ This sentiment is reflected throughout Xugu's oeuvre and is evident in a comparison between Xugu's *Cat and Chrysanthemums* (Fig. 1) from 1891 and the seventeenth century *Chrysanthemums, Wutaung Tree, and Rocks* (Fig. 2) by the early Qing painting master Shitao (1642-1707). An analysis of these two paintings reveals how Xugu looked to traditional depictions, but reinvented the meaning to meet his own needs. Both artists use the vertical hanging scroll format to depict the chrysanthemum, a time-honored auspicious symbol of endurance and purity. The stones used in Shitao's painting are a traditional symbol of individual character. The way in which the stone supports the flowers is carefully articulated to create a cohesive composition both visually and iconographically: not only can the picture be read through a coded language of symbols but it also creates an aesthetically engaging arrangement. Xugu emulates this basic composition, but rather than stones, he uses the form of a cat to anchor his composition. The cat is caught in an awkward moment, scratching his belly as he looks up to the sky. In capturing this unusual moment, Xugu distorts the form of the feline and reduces it to flat geometric shapes that emulate the stone in Shitao's more traditional depiction of a similar subject. Xugu's *Cat with Chrysanthemum* seems satirical in nature, yet as historian Jung

¹Jung Ying Tsao and Carol Ann Bardoff, *The Paintings of Xugu and Qi Baishi* (San Francisco: Far East Fine Arts and University of Washington Press, 1993), 67. Quoted from a colophon written on Xugu's painting *Foshoutu*.

Ying Tsao points out, “As the cat enjoys immortality in popular lore, its identification with a rock extends beyond form to character, and the enduring, individualistic strength of both parallels the chrysanthemum’s qualities.”² Xugu’s genius is not only in his ability to explore philosophical content through seemingly humorous depictions but also in his exploration of new technique, for which he was much admired by his contemporaries. In this example, Xugu marries the tightly articulated chrysanthemum blossoms with abstract boneless painting techniques and wet and dry brush strokes. Despite the varying techniques, he creates a unified composition that alludes to time-honored subjects through new modes of expression.

Through an examination of the work of nineteenth-century Shanghai artist Xugu (1823-1896), I seek to understand how his use of traditional tropes reflected dramatic shifts in Chinese culture. Xugu is placed within the Shanghai School, a painting style characterized by decorative motifs of secular and auspicious subjects rendered in bright colors for a commercial market. Yet, an examination of his work reveals a unique style and individual spirit that situate him outside of any specific art movement. Xugu’s captured moments, vertical compositions, strongly contrasted forms and colors, and unique brushstrokes create a sense that his references to traditional subjects and archaic forms are not a mere continuation of China’s artistic past. These artistic conventions reflect the complex changes and new directions facing artists who for the first time were confronted with an urban environment, commercial culture, and rapid cross-cultural exchange. Xugu’s emulation of traditional tropes imparts a feeling of nostalgia and loss in his work, and given the cultural climate in which he painted, the use of tradition becomes a social commentary.

²Tsao and Bardoff, *The Paintings of Xugu*, 138.

In nineteenth-century Shanghai, long-established Chinese ideals became fads produced for the consumption of Westerners and merchants. Xugu's depictions of familiar Chinese subjects reveal underlying evidence of urban life that suggest he was not clinging to the past to preserve his cultural heritage, but was an active participant in the shifts that were taking place in nineteenth-century Shanghai. My aim is to gain insight into how Xugu consciously used tradition to guide China's art into a uniquely Chinese sense of the modern.

This era in Chinese history marks a striking transformation in Chinese culture and its shifting self-perception due to the encroachment of the West and the fall of China's last dynasty. Because the period has been characterized as a time of aesthetic decline and market-driven production, it is often overlooked by scholars and receives only brief mention, if any, in general texts on Chinese art. Though some scholars have worked to dispel the myth of decline, artists of this period are generally not acknowledged as important contributors to China's great artistic production. Scholarship on Xugu is particularly sparse. He is mentioned in several general discussions of the Shanghai School, and his works appear in only a handful of U.S. museums. The most important works written for an English-speaking audience are Jung Ying Tsao's 1993 comprehensive study, *The Paintings of Xugu and Qi Baishi; A Century in Crisis*, a catalogue published in conjunction with the Guggenheim museum's 1997 *China 5000* exhibition; and the Honolulu Academy of Art's anthology, *New Songs on Ancient Tunes*, a 2007 publication commemorating the private collection of Richard Fabian. These texts form the foundation of English scholarship on Xugu's life and work. They focus heavily on biography, history, and formal analysis, but generally lack a critical examination of how Xugu engaged with nineteenth-century Shanghai in his work.

The notion of modernity is key to understanding the work of Xugu and his contemporaries. Modernity emerged in China through a series of traumatic events. China's loss in the Opium Wars in 1842 was more than a military defeat. It marked the end of a strong Sino-centric view of the world, and a period of anxiety about China's place in the modern global context. While outside forces shook China's sense of global authority, interior forces threatened total collapse. The outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion in 1852 resulted in the loss of twenty million lives, and countless cultural treasures. The rebellion was a violent pseudo-Christian movement against the Qing government that sought various social reforms such as an end to the practice of foot binding. The rebels targeted conventional Chinese practices and values, and posed a direct threat to time-honored artistic production. Despite the scope of China's trauma, traditional styles of painting prevailed. Artists seemed to cling to the past in their depictions of traditional subjects. Yet, many found ways to incorporate new ideas and styles into established themes. Art produced in the nineteenth century reflected the rapidly changing climate in which it was created while maintaining a strong bond to China's past.

The use of tradition to forge new paths is not unique to the Chinese experience. For instance, Hellenistic Greeks frequently incorporated archaistic motifs and figures into architecture and sculpture in much the same manner that neoclassical French art emulated a Roman heritage. Literary historian Aleida Assman studies the use of tradition in the context of eighteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Though her examples do not pertain specifically to nineteenth-century China, they do help in understanding the implications of looking to the past in the face of modernity. Assman posits that tradition is adaptable, flexible, and timeless. Because of these characteristics, tradition is uniquely suited to the

present, which is in a constant state of flux.³ This explanation of tradition and its significance to the present is helpful in understanding how Xugu and other Shanghai artists made art that was pertinent to their contemporary condition, despite its resemblance to something that may seem outdated or insignificant. In the context of my paper, tradition is understood as a language through which to communicate ideas, not a nostalgic mimesis of past masters.

Modernity is most commonly defined as a break from the past, or a departure into something completely new. Xugu explores new ideas, but his exploration is through traditional forms. In this paper I argue that Xugu's art *is* modern, but only if the definition of modern is reconsidered. The notion that modernity breaks from the past is an Enlightenment idea that comes to China through a Western filter.⁴ An attempt at redefining modernity in Chinese terms has been put forth by literary historian Dewei Wang. Wang argues that the Chinese conception of the modern was defined by an intersection with interest in the encroachment of the West and a pursuit of a new Chinese style through existing modes.⁵ In other words, Chinese modernity can be understood as something distinct from European modernity in its style, but similar in its curiosity and exploration of newness. In

³Aleida Assmann, "Reinventing Tradition," in *Meaning and Representation in History*, ed. Jörn Rüsen, 155-168 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 156.

⁴For example, in the early-twentieth century, artists like Xu Beihong (1895-1953) made a conscious movement toward modernity by producing oil paintings done in the style of the French academy. Xu pushed the philosophy that realism would launch Chinese modern art. He and his followers studied in European academies, and emulated past Western masters. He abhorred the work of contemporary Western painters such as Matisse, and chose to focus on mid-nineteenth-century styles. However, what Xu did through his European-style paintings was to impose Western modernity on China, and ultimately he failed. The problem with Xu's approach, aside from its anachronistic tone in the midst of early twentieth century innovations in European painting, is that his conception of modernity as a break from the past was a Western notion that did not effectively translate into the Chinese environment.

⁵Dewei Wang, *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 18-22.

China, art was transformed during the nineteenth century. The captured moments in works by artists like Xugu create an immediacy, a painting quality that is not present in works of earlier painters, who were largely concerned with intellectually abstract ideas. Shan Guolin, curator of painting at the Shanghai Museum, says of Xugu's style "these significant innovations simultaneously exemplified and advanced the modern transformation of painting from an instrument of uplift to an art of purely sensual enjoyment. In this respect Xugu was a pioneer in moving Chinese painting from the classical literati tradition towards the modern."⁶ Xugu used the language of tradition to explore new ways of seeing the world through a uniquely Chinese conception of the modern.

In order to affirm the importance of Xugu to the development of Chinese modernism, I will provide a brief biography and history of the period, contextualize Xugu's work in urban Shanghai, and examine the practice of adoption and reinvention of ancient forms. Scholarly studies that trace the history of China's urbanization and print culture, along with scholarship on archaic calligraphy and antiquarian interests of this period, will supplement the literature on Xugu. These varied sources reveal how ideas of tradition were foundational in nineteenth-century China and validate the importance of considering their presence in painting. I will provide formal analysis of selected works in order to establish Xugu as an important transitional painter in the development of a Chinese conception of modern art through his use of archaic forms and captured moments.

⁶Shan Guolin, "Painting of China's New Metropolis: The Shanghai School, 1850-1900," in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-century China*, Julia Frances Andrews, Kuiyi Shen, and Jonathan D. Spence eds. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 31.

Xugu: History and Biography

Details of Xugu's biography indicate an interest in his ancestral past and coincide with important historical events that formed the cultural foundation of China during the nineteenth century. Xugu was born in 1823 with the surname Zhu and the given name Xubai.⁷ The Shanghai academic and connoisseur, Yang Yi (1864-1929) composed a biography of Xugu's life soon after his death in 1896. Yang notes that Xugu was from Yangzhou, but that his native town was Xin'an in Anhui province.⁸ This account of Xugu's life has led scholars to assume that the artist was born and raised in Anhui province and that this experience informed his subsequent art. This conclusion is based primarily on Xugu's landscape style, which is similar to traditional Anhui depictions characterized by sparse linear articulations that rely heavily on calligraphic brush techniques.⁹ However, given Xugu's wide range of styles and influences, it seems premature to categorize him as working in any specific mode.¹⁰

⁷In his discussion of Xugu for the exhibition catalogue *Century in Crisis*, Shan Guolin sites Xugu's name to have been Zhu Huairen, and his birth place to be in Anhui. However, because no source is provided for this information, I have chosen to use the scholarship of Jung Ying Tsao.

⁸Jung Ying Tsao and Carol Ann Bardoff. *The Paintings of Xugu and Qi Baishi* (San Francisco: Far East Fine Arts in association with the University of Washington Press, 1993), 51.

⁹William Watson, *The Arts of China*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 23-24.

¹⁰Furthermore, in his biography, Yang uses the term *jiben* to denote Xugu's native town in Anhui. The term is often used to denote ancestral roots, rather than a physical home. Additionally, because of Yangzhou's reputation as an urban hub of degenerate activity it was not uncommon for residents in the late Qing dynasty to claim ancestral roots outside of the city. It is possible that Xugu never laid foot in Anhui. The cold Anhui style that many historians have recognized in Xugu's work may have been a conscious emulation of the artist's ancestral roots, but there is no evidence to support the claim that he received any training in the province.

It was in Yangzhou that Xugu received formal instruction in painting. His training seems to have been in portraiture, given the high level of skill in which he paints his subjects. Xugu's style of portraiture emulates the work of Zeng Jing (1568-1650), a late Ming portraitist known for his naturalistic depictions of his subjects.¹¹ Xugu's skill at rendering realistic portraits is evident in his *Portrait of Monk Heng-Feng* (Fig. 3).¹² The highly controlled brushstrokes that compose the detailed facial features are emphasized by the stark contrast created through the loose and flat rendering of the monk's garments and the stark white background. This strong contrast reminds the viewer that this is a painted image. The face is deceptively real, almost photographic in quality, and in using a deliberately sketchy style for the rest of the portrait the artist reveals the artificiality of the image. This style of extreme contrasts, designed to reveal the picture's inability to fully simulate reality, can be understood as a response to the onslaught of photography in nineteenth-century China.¹³ Xugu's early works do not survive and his artistic production was interrupted during his years in the army.

Xugu spent nine years in the Qing army from 1854-63. He served as a lieutenant colonel during the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). His rank may have been a result of his skill as a portraitist because persons sharing his position were often selected due to achievement in either martial arts or scholastic pursuits.¹⁴ Though it is now lost, Xugu

¹¹Richard Fabian, "Xugu." In *New Songs on Ancient Tunes: 19th-20th Century Chinese Paintings and Calligraphy from the Richard Fabian Collection*, ed. J. May Lee Barrett, 250-259. (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2007), 250. See also figure 1.

¹²I was unable to find information on this painting beyond its title, it is included in Ho Kung-Shang, *Hsu Ku: Collected Paintings*. (Taipei, Taiwan: Art Book Co, Ltd.) 1985.

¹³Richard Vinograd. "Satire and Situation." In *Art at the Close of Empire*, ed. Ju-hsi Chou (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, 1998), 11-16.

¹⁴Tsao and Bardoff *The Paintings of Xugu*, 57.

painted a portrait of the Qing general Zeng Guofan (1811-1872), the man whose call to arms against the Taiping rebels likely prompted Xugu's enlistment in the army. The record of this portrait supports the claim that Xugu's rank was due to his artistic achievement. However, it was not his service to the Qing army, but rather his desertion of his post that is of most interest to scholars.

Xugu left the military before the end of the rebellion, due to a "change of heart" and a desire to move towards a nobler path.¹⁵ He became a Buddhist monk, at which time he severed his secular and familial ties and took the name Xugu, "empty ravine."¹⁶ The following poem was written shortly before his conversion, and reveals his excitement at a new life:

A dream is but a dream.
Self is other than the self.
Walls in the Fairyland are painted anew.
Guarding the purple fortress, my robes are worn thin.
Snow (once fallen) is gone forever.
Honor from the Dragon Spring remains a burden.
Just pluck a flower and smile,
The past is best forgotten.¹⁷

This passage shows Xugu's genuine interest in the Buddhist path in its emphasis on a spiritual life and a departure from the past. Yet Xugu was not a devout monk, he moved from place to place and immersed himself in city life. Due to his delight in secular subject matter and his frequent travels, scholars speculate that Xugu's status as a monk was a way

¹⁵Ibid., 58

¹⁶Shan Guolin, "Painting of China's New Metropolis: The Shanghai School, 1850-1900," In *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-century China*, eds. Julia Francis Andrews, Kuiyi Shen, and Jonathan D. Spence, 20-63. (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 21.

¹⁷Claudia Brown and Ju-hsi Chou. *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911*. (Phoenix, AZ: Phoenix Art Museum, 1992), 116. The poem was composed when Xugu was 30 years old.

for the artist to safely leave his army post under the guise of religious devotion and not a genuine act of piety.

According to the artist Qian Jingtang (1907-1983), Xugu confessed to his friend Wang Kun, a co-founder of the Yuyuan Art Society in Shanghai established during the last years of Xugu's life, that the Taiping rebels had convinced him to quit his post.¹⁸ This reported confession may help us to understand Xugu's sudden departure from the Qing army, and has led to speculation that Xugu sympathized with the Taiping cause. Specific details of this period remain a mystery and are open to misinterpretation. For example, the story of Xugu's departure was played up in 1958 by the communist government, which included him in an exhibition commemorating the most important Chinese artists entitled "Chinese Paintings of the Last 100 Years." Only forty-two artists were included in the show, which took place in Beijing, and six works of Xugu's were selected. A biography of the artist from the catalogue reveals why Xugu, an often overlooked artist, was considered important by the communist officials, "He was an officer in the Qing imperial army, but then because he refused to follow orders to fight the Taipings, he became a monk, lived in Shanghai and secretly aided the Taipings. He had the character of a revolutionary, and his paintings show a revolutionary spirit."¹⁹ There is no known evidence supporting the claims made by this catalogue. Yet, it reveals how the mystery surrounding Xugu's life has led to varying interpretations of his artistic motivation, and how his biography has often overshadowed his work.

¹⁸Tsao and Bardoff, *The Paintings of Xugu*, 58. This story is documented from an oral account given by the artist Qian Jingtang (1907-1983), who claims to have known Wang.

¹⁹Ibid., 54.

If a revolutionary spirit exists in the work of Xugu, it is not an overtly political one. In fact, according to Shan Guolin's interpretation of Xugu's poetry, his outlook was based on the avoidance of politics and the pursuit of artistic achievement.²⁰ Because so much of Xugu's art focuses on China's artistic past, it seems more likely that the artist became disillusioned with the fighting and destruction from both sides of the revolution. During the course of the rebellion many lives were lost, and precious art collections and libraries destroyed.²¹ Through analysis of his biography, I posit that Xugu's reverence for his ancestors and his continued interest in antiquities served as motivation for his desertion and his subsequent work.

Xugu's earliest surviving work dates to 1866, and it is from this time forward that more is known about the artist through his production and his interactions with fellow Shanghainese artists. His station as a monk did not prevent him from interacting with the secular world and exploring his life through art. Xugu excelled at using calligraphic brushstrokes to explore his secular subjects, often abstracting the likeness in favor of creating a rhythm or overall feeling. Calligraphy is an integral part of traditional Chinese painting. Often, the brush used to write the inscription is the same brush with which the image was painted. In the sixth century, Xie He an art critic and painter of the Southern Qi Dynasty (479-502) wrote the "Six Principles" of Chinese painting. The first two laws were based on

²⁰Guolin, "Paintings of China's New Metropolis," 30.

²¹Jonathan D. Spence, "China's Modern Worlds." In *A Century in Crisis : Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-century China*, eds. Julia Francis Andrews, Kuiyi Shen, and Jonathan D. Spence, 10-19. (New York: Guggenheim Museum , 1998), 11.

the already established rules of calligraphy, “rhythmic vitality” and “bone structure.”²² It is through calligraphy that an artist’s identity was known and cultivated.

As Lothar Ledderose discusses in his article “Calligraphy at the close of the Chinese Empire,” at the end of the Qing dynasty calligraphy experienced just as many radical changes as painting.²³ Artists began to experiment with multiple calligraphic styles from past masters, as well as archaic forms found on stele and ancient bronzes. To transcribe past masters’ styles was a traditional practice, but during the Qing dynasty the practice took on a tone of immediacy because of the artists’ desire to capture a primordial Chinese script. As Ledderose concludes, “In a period of political destabilization the Qing calligraphers thus reinforced the unity of Chinese culture.”²⁴ Xugu, perhaps more than his contemporaries was a master of many calligraphic styles, which are evident in his written script as well as the vast range of painted strokes that make up his paintings. The force of Xugu’s strokes and his experimentation with wet and dry brush technique in single compositions are evidence of his particular interest in archaic calligraphic forms.

Xugu’s mastery of many techniques reflects his mobile life style. He did not live his life in the monastery; he travelled between Shanghai, Suzhou, and Yangzhou (Fig. 4) and was active in social gatherings of artists in these cities, but his strongest critical acclaim was achieved in Shanghai.²⁵ Nineteenth-century Shanghai was a hotbed of literati painters who had escaped from the lower Yangzi River during the Taiping Rebellion. Though he was not

²²Michael Sullivan, *The Three Perfection: Chinese Painting, Poetry, and Calligraphy*. (New York: George Braziller, 1999), 14-26.

²³Lothar Ledderose “Calligraphy at the Close of the Chinese Empire.” In *Art at the Close of China’s Empire*, ed. Ju-his Chou, 189-208 (Tempe, AZ : Arizona State University, 1998), 189.

²⁴Ibid., 206.

²⁵Guolin, “Paintings of China’s New Metropolis,” 30.

a formal member of the literati, whose involvement entailed passing exams and receiving an appointment from the emperor, Xugu maintained literati ideals in his work. The literati tradition comprised a scholarly class of painters who worked in isolation from the public and engaged dramatically new modes of artistic production and self reflection. Unlike professional court painters whose subjects were dictated by the taste of the emperor and whose works were made for sale, the literati were free to explore lofty concepts through art and consciously contrasted the courtly style. Because of the literati's devotion to intellect, their art is considered superior to the commissioned works produced in the court. Scrolls were painted and contemplated in private viewings, and lengthy colophons were added to images by various literati within the social circle. Literati artistic production had everything to do with individual cultivation and intellectual interactions with fellow literati. Because of its ability to take the viewer through a visual and metaphoric path, landscape was the preferred subject of the literati artists.

When the Taiping rebels swept through the Yangzi river basin, the literati class of painters was not only forced to relocate but also for the first time to produce works for commercial consumption in order to maintain itself in the port cities. These artists dealt with the anxieties of the city and commercial culture in many ways, but the general characteristics of Shanghai-style painting are vertical and fan formats, auspicious or secular subjects such as bird and flower paintings, bright colors, and a heightened sense of realism. In addition to changes in style and subject, paintings were viewed in entirely different ways. Teahouses and fan shops displayed paintings side by side on their public walls, a radical difference from the literati mode which reserved paintings for intellectual private settings. The new way of viewing art in the city reveals a fundamental shift in how art functioned in Chinese society

from the opening of the ports onward. The often abstract and very individual paintings of the literati were abandoned for imagery that appealed to a wider audience of merchants, Westerners, and the urban public.

The Shanghai painters were dependent on the commercial market, but Xugu seemed to be an exception to this rule. Accounts suggest that he painted for self-cultivation and would sell directly to his admirers, but he avoided the popular art shops.²⁶ This element of Xugu's character reflects his connection to literati ideals. The only commercial space where he sold his work in a gallery-like setting was the Jiuhuatang fan shop.²⁷ Xugu's depictions of auspicious and secular subjects echo the trends in Shanghai and their influence on his art. He was undoubtedly immersed in an increasingly modern urban environment, but his disinterest in shop culture and adherence to literati ideals suggests that Xugu did not fully engage in commercial production. Consequently, his use of tradition can be read as a commentary on the shifts in art, rather than a mere reflection of life around him.

²⁶Brown and Chou. *Transcending Turmoil*, 117.

²⁷Ibid.

The Urban Antique: Imagined Realities in Nineteenth-Century Shanghai

The urban Chinese environment was not an invention of the nineteenth century. Artists dealt with problems of urbanism from the late Ming Dynasty forward (1368-1644). What set the experience of nineteenth-century Shanghai artists apart was the fact that Shanghai was a city permeated by multicultural influences, which brought with them new technologies and ideas. The city was flooded with visual stimuli in a way that had no precedence in Chinese history. Additionally, the physical strains of the built environment were a factor that many artists grappled with for the first time. The confined nature of urban life was reflected in the tightly cropped scenes and captured moments of Shanghai School paintings. Though presented through a coded language, traces of city life are evident in the paintings of Xugu and his colleagues. In this section, I trace urban influences on Chinese painting through an examination of shifts in taste, patronage, and modes of production.

Returning to Xugu's *Cat and Chrysanthemums*, it is clear that this painting is more than a clever reinterpretation of traditional imagery (Fig. 2). When read more closely, it serves as a direct reflection of the urban environment and the shifting perspectives of artists in Shanghai. The humorous undertone of the scroll suggests that the artist is poking fun at how traditional tropes are altered in an urban context. Art historian Jonathan Hay has studied the ways in which Shanghai's city environment is echoed in painting of this period. The city was built for the displaced citizens of the war years, the Chinese merchant class, and Western travelers. Because people across China flocked to urban hubs for refuge from violence,

Shanghai became a hodgepodge of various Chinese styles and customs, and for Western merchants it became an area of spectacle and entertainment.²⁸ The city was separated into southern and northern territories divided by a wall (Fig. 5). In theory, the south city was a refuge for the Chinese that was considered unpolluted by the west.²⁹ Though Chinese citizens moved freely through both sections of the city, the existence of the wall reveals an anxiety about foreign influence contaminating traditional Chinese culture.³⁰ This anxiety was not unfounded; in the north city, public buildings were designed for a foreign audience to reflect an allegedly *authentic* Chinese style and resulted in what Jonathan Hay refers to as “theme-park architecture.”³¹ Multi-storied buildings with exaggerated rooflines and swooping eaves defined Shanghai’s skyline and set it apart from other urban hubs. Another source of anxiety in the city was its urbanism. Many residents had come from rural Chinese villages, including the literati painters who had worked closely with the natural environment. The only interaction with nature that Shanghai had to offer was through domesticated animals and walled gardens.³² Caged birds and potted plants decorated windows and doorways throughout the city, a cheap imitation of a lost pastoral life.

This limited contact with the natural world facilitated the creation of a new visual language of confinement evident in Shanghai School paintings, which often depict tightly cropped natural scenes. *Cat with Chrysanthemums* shares this characteristic. The snapshot

²⁸Jonathan Hay, “Painting and the Built Environment in Late Nineteenth-Century Shanghai,” in *Chinese Art Modern Expressions*, eds. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith, 60-101. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 68.

²⁹Yu Chih Lai, “Remapping Borders: Ren Bonian's Frontier Paintings and Urban Life in 1880s Shanghai,” *The Art Bulletin*, 86, No. 3 (Sep. 2004): 563.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Hay, “Painting and the Built Environment,” 68.

³²*Ibid.*, 85.

quality of the composition does not create an environment through which the viewer can wander – the desired effect of traditional literati landscapes – but merely a scene to be observed. The cat is a daily presence in the life of Shanghai residents, and his crude posture suggests that the artist happened upon his unassuming subject suddenly. The long, loose brushwork behind the cat implies a ramshackle fence or arbor, suggesting that the scene takes place within the confines of a garden. Another interesting aspect of the composition that reflects city-life is its verticality. As mentioned above, the skyline of Shanghai was rising in the nineteenth century. This upward movement is emphasized by both the cat's gaze and the large expanse of white space above his head. Through this image, Xugu consciously merges past tropes with traces of urban life suggesting that the two are inseparable. He imparts a sense of spontaneity and confinement on a traditionally lofty theme, resulting in a modern composition that reflects and reacts to the environment in which it is painted.

Traditionally, art and gardens fulfilled a similar purpose in cities; both were viewed as an anecdote to the urban, and an escape from crowded city life.³³ Art in nineteenth-century Shanghai was also a respite from the chaos, but the city encroached on the border that separated art from reality. This encroachment was stimulated by print culture and photography, which had flooded the lives of the city's nineteenth-century residents. Mass-distributed newspapers like the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* provided intricate depictions of actual events and headlines. The *Dianshizhai* was illustrated by artists, some of whom came from a literati background and sought paid work in Shanghai.³⁴ The illustrative qualities of these

³³Jonathan Hay, *Shitao : Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10.

³⁴Ye Xiaoqing, *The Dianshizhai Pictorial: Shanghai Urban Life 1884-1898* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Center for Chinese Studies University of Michigan, 2003), 13.

images were far removed from traditional Chinese art, which was not invested in the temporal quality of daily life. The *Dianshizhai*'s aim was to create images of important events, and to depict the spectacle of new technologies such as submarines and hot air balloons. Interest in new mechanical innovations was fueled by the knowledge that China was far behind the West in its understanding of technology and industry. The images in the *Dianshizhai* sparked public interest in innovation and transformation into a more modern civilization. Because artists did not always have access to the events or inventions, a great deal of the pictorial's imagery was purely imaginative (Fig. 6). Through these images, the distinction between the real and the imagined was blurred, a notion familiar to Chinese art. However, the way in which they were used and produced was entirely new to Chinese visual culture.

The *Dianshizhai* targeted a mass audience and encouraged the viewer to visualize Chinese society moving forward through direct participation.³⁵ For example, an image published in 1884, "The Sun at Noon," shows a group of Chinese men dressed in contemporary costume looking up at a clock and time ball in the French section of the city (Fig. 7).³⁶ The Chinese viewer who saw this image was not merely engaged in observation of the unusual device, but also envisioned himself engaged with the new technology. The *Dianshizhai* and other pictorials introduced the idea of empirical representation to a mass audience, while they consciously created scenarios in which the audience was an active participant. Print media cultivated a new self-awareness in the urban Chinese audience, who

³⁵In using the term "mass audience", I refer to the people living in Shanghai. Distribution of the *Dianshizhai* and other pictorials did not reach those living outside of an urban context.

³⁶The time ball was a contraption that dropped when the clock hit noon, creating a spectacle around the physical manifestation of the passing of time.

were encouraged to visualize their own place in a global modernity that was illustrated for them in “accurate” detail.³⁷ The intricate use of the gaze is what makes these images so effective; the figures in the image observe the new technology and in turn are observed by the viewer.

The complex gaze played out in print media likely reflects the visual experience of daily life in Shanghai. Tea houses installed floor length mirrors and interior balconies, two devices that facilitated a looking game between observer and the observed, who were often one in the same.³⁸ The boundary between public and private life was broken down by a constant awareness of watching and being watched. Hay explains that this new way of looking created a self-consciousness in the viewer. Artists like Xugu disclose this self-consciousness in portraits produced in the city. In the undated, *Portrait of Canying*, Xugu uses a complex series of gazes to capture his subject (Fig. 8). Xugu’s painting uses traditional tropes of portraiture to reveal the character of Canying, likely a poet, given the clues provided in this painting.³⁹ Yet Xugu departs from tradition through his use of perspective and gaze, which create a sense that Canying is depicted at a particular moment. The unusual view point elevates the viewer above a garden wall looking into Canying’s studio. This creates the impression that the viewer may be looking out of a high window or from an outdoor balcony down into the garden of Canying. In doing this, Xugu places the viewer of the portrait in the role of voyeur. However, Canying is not unaware; he stares

³⁷As mentioned above, illustrators often took liberties in depictions of technologies to which they had no access, but the images were always presented as factual representations.

³⁸Hay, “Painting and the Built Environment,” 76.

³⁹Note the simple dress of Canying, the inkstone, and paper carried by the attendant. Furthermore, the banana tree outside the window is an attribute of poets in Shanghai.

directly at the observer with knowing eyes. The fact that the subject of the painting is aware of his observer reflects the sense of self-consciousness that pervades city life. Canying and the viewer are both active participants in the composition, and serve as a reflection of the new ways of looking that emerge in nineteenth-century Shanghai.

In addition to the tenuous boundary between the public and private space evident in print media and city life, artists working in Shanghai had to deal with the shaky boundaries that separated the traditional Chinese city from the Westernized commercial city.⁴⁰ Art historian Yu-chih Lai discusses the effects of Shanghai's urban environment on the work of Shanghai artist Ren Bonian (1840-1896) in her article "Remapping Borders."⁴¹ Lai examines paintings that depict the northern frontier of China as a reflection of the patrons' taste as well as a manifestation of the various boundaries present in Shanghai (Fig. 9). These paintings are constructed after an ancient literary tradition, *biansai wenxue* (frontier literature), and function as a preservation of traditional Chinese values.⁴² According to Lai, the popularity of the frontier paintings in Shanghai reflects the tendency to protect tradition in order to create a balance within the constantly shifting urban chaos. The images of China's frontier also functioned as a declaration of China's borders and nationality. Lai points out that by 1870 at least twenty foreign countries maintained a presence within the borders of Shanghai. The strong foreign presence threatened to change Chinese culture; the taste for frontier paintings that alluded to China's literary production and history preserved the notion of an established and pure China. Despite the attempt to preserve an authentic sense of the nation,

⁴⁰See previous section for a discussion of the physical and imagined borders in place in Shanghai.

⁴¹Yu-chih Lai, "Remapping Borders: Ren Bonian's Frontier Paintings and Urban Life in 1880s Shanghai," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 86, no. 3 (Sep., 2004): 550-572.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 550.

the scenes that these paintings depict are purely fictional. They do not portray actual places or landscapes, but instead provide the idea of a place that is understood by the native Chinese observer and unavailable to the Western viewer. The images of the deserted, frigid tundra allude to traditional stories in order to create a sense of authenticity, despite the fact that they are purely imaginary in the context of Shanghai's tropical and heavily populated environment. The demand for these paintings reveals a tension that existed in Shanghai to preserve tradition in the midst of rapid change. This tension is reflected in the frontier paintings, in which a boundary is created between reality and authenticity through the relationship of the viewer to the subject.

Perhaps a more important boundary present in the images of Ren Bonian, Xugu, and their contemporaries is that between individual expression and patronage. Shifts occurred in patronage and taste in nineteenth-century Shanghai as a direct result of commercial culture. Through these shifts it is evident that a taste for tradition existed at the end of the nineteenth century. Artists working for the market of Shanghai appealed to this taste, but also allowed their encounters with modernity to shine through. According to Jonathan Hay, popular taste is in part a product of commercialization: "The literati tastemaker's role...was to reposition certain traditional skills within a new, commercially oriented elite context in which all means of finding a secure place were valid."⁴³ The literati, who were the conventional cultivators of individual character, became important players in the commercial market. The demand for traditional painting types was fueled by the desire to preserve Chinese culture in the midst of Western influence. At the same time, Western patrons intensified the demand for authentic Chinese art for trade. Painters whose self-cultivating artistic explorations were now dictated

⁴³Hay, *Shitao*, 19.

by urban tastes often reacted through increasingly psychological depictions in private portraiture and poetry. These more intimate studies were often collaborative efforts, and artists themselves commissioned the works. Hay states that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries “an aggressively individualist ‘I’ for the first time took possession of pictorial sites, forms and styles, imposing both its authority and its neuroses.”⁴⁴ The emergence of the self-conscious artist in this earlier period sets a precedent for the artists of nineteenth-century Shanghai, who faced immediate demands in the city environment that were not present in the early Qing period.

Xugu’s *The Squirrel Sneaking to the Ink Stone* provides insight into artists’ self-awareness in the urban milieu (Fig. 10). In this image, a squirrel has trespassed into the artist’s studio. His front paws and nose explore the ink stone as if the animal were foraging for food on the forest floor. The extreme cropping of the image creates an urban vignette in which the squirrel has been caught. Typically, in Chinese painting squirrels are depicted in a natural environment, often playing in a pine tree or leaping from rocks. In this unusual scene, the auspicious rocks and trees have been replaced by the artist’s tools, an ink stone, water, and bamboo. Xugu is uninterested in grounding the scene in a particular place, which is evident through the use of a flat white background. Though this painting is unique in the scene depicted, squirrels are the subject of numerous paintings by Xugu, who claimed to be influenced by the early Qing master Hua Yan (1682 – 1756).⁴⁵ Hua’s squirrels are tightly rendered in a naturalistic fashion that creates cohesion between the landscape and the playful animals (Fig. 11). Xugu’s squirrel is isolated in unfamiliar surroundings, unlike Hua’s depictions of the animals frolicking in their natural environment. The wiry brushstrokes used

⁴⁴Ibid., 23.

⁴⁵Tsao and Bardoff. *The Paintings of Xugu*, 182

to render the squirrel contrast with the strong wide lines that define the rest of the scene. The eyes bulge, creating both a sense of humor and anxiety. This anxiety is emphasized through the inaccurate rendering of the ink stone, which is drawn in such a way that it cannot lie flat on the surface of the table, rendering it useless to the artist. This awkward articulation is heightened when contrasted with the accurately painted water vessel. In this scene, the squirrel crosses two distinct boundaries that are rarely breached in Chinese art. It represents untamed nature in an interior human environment, and its location on the ink stone draws the viewer's attention to the artist's materials, emphasizing both the artificiality of the created image and the identity of its creator. In addition to crossing these boundaries, the squirrel can be read as a reinterpretation of a traditional motif that reflects the self-conscious and heightened self-awareness of an urban artist.⁴⁶

In an environment where boundaries were being broken, the importance of the here and now was increasingly apparent. Capturing a particular moment in time through ink and brush was a new trope at which Xugu excelled. The use of an imaginary landscape and vast expanses of negative space in *Boating Among Plum Blossoms*, 1892 invoke Ren Bonian's frontier paintings (Fig. 12). Images from the *Dianshizhai* pictorial reveal that in reality the waterways around Shanghai were congested with commercial activity and boats (Fig. 13).⁴⁷ Yet Xugu's serene scene is seemingly untouched by the modern world. The boating motif is a conventional variety of landscape painting that dates back to the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Ni Zan (1301-1374) established the genre, and was frequently mimicked by later

⁴⁶Xugu painted two images in which a squirrel is shown in the artist's environment. Both are undated, and found in Ho Kung-Shang, *Hsu Ku: Collected Paintings*. (Taipei, Taiwan: Art Book Co, Ltd., 1985).

⁴⁷As stated above, the illustrators of the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* tended to exaggerate or even fabricate their vignettes. As a reference this image cannot be analyzed as photographic evidence but instead as a general idea of what the port may have looked like.

Ming artists such as Shen Zhou (1427-1509).⁴⁸ Xugu references this traditional genre, but through his technique and composition, he clearly grounds this painting in the nineteenth century. The cropped image cuts off the small boat in the central plane and creates an illusion of movement in the stillness of the water. This cropping gives the impression that the scene was captured through a camera's lens, imbuing it with a sense of temporality. Cropping has a presence in past Chinese works, but Xugu's use of this trope in the age of photography imbues the convention with contemporary relevance. Furthermore, Xugu's brushwork is almost impressionistic in its articulation of landscape, a quality that is not present in past masters' works. This is evident in the downward strokes used to articulate patches of the plum trees on the lower left portion of the scroll, a technique without precedence in Chinese art. These strokes create an atmospheric quality that reflects the damp, humid environment of Shanghai. Perhaps the most significant departure that Xugu makes from tradition is his division of space. The two banks are isolated in a way that is not found in early masters' paintings. For example, Shen Zhou's *Landscape in the style of Ni Zan* uses a tree to bridge the two separate masses of land (Fig. 14). The emphasis placed on the separation of the banks in Xugu's painting through the large expanse of negative space may refer to the separation of Shanghai into two distinct parts; the pure Chinese south and the polluted commercial north. Through these various tropes, Xugu uses the most treasured of Chinese art forms, landscape, as an expression of the urban experience. Yet unlike a traditional Chinese landscape, which maintains a sense of timelessness, Xugu captured a particular moment. He used traditional tropes, and imbued them with new meaning in order to reflect the anxieties and boundaries of the urban experience.

⁴⁸For further reading on the tradition of this landscape style see Sherman E. Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art* 4th ed. (New York: Harry Abrahms, 1982), 412-13, 437-39, and figures 559 and 588.

Brushes with the Past: Calligraphy and Antiquarian Studies in Modern Chinese Art

Though unusual in many of its details, Xugu's *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo* (Fig. 16) reveals an area of common interest among artists and patrons in nineteenth-century Shanghai; their exploration of ancient Chinese vessels. In this example, a single bronze is centered on a vertical scroll. The ancient vessel serves as a vehicle for a floral arrangement comprising the three friends of winter, plum, pine, and bamboo. When grouped together, these auspicious plants represent perseverance and integrity, traditional literati values.⁴⁹ Rubbing is used to carefully record the decorative base and handles of the object. Another rubbing, this one of the interior inscription, floats above the vessel and is partially framed by the plum and pine branches. Several vermilion seals of varying size have been printed throughout the image, and they mirror the faint traces of pink and rust hues used to depict the plum blossoms and pine cones. This painting is characterized as a *bogu huahui* or vase and flower painting. Because of its fusion of auspicious symbols and color and the depiction of ancient Chinese artifacts, this subject appealed to both urban merchant tastes as well as traditional literati sensibilities. The popularity of these paintings indicates that urban patrons, along with seemingly traditional artists, pushed towards something new, and that they were connected by a similar goal: to use the Chinese past and tradition as a vehicle for progress. Xugu's use of the *bogu huahui* trend reveals how this subject matter conveyed a particularly powerful meaning in the context of urban Shanghai. A close examination of *Bronze, Plum, and*

⁴⁹Fabian, "Xugu," 254.

Bamboo exposes Xugu's individuality, innovation, and sensitivity to the environment around him.

An interest in antiquities has existed in China since the discovery of a bronze vessel during the Han dynasty, in 113 BC.⁵⁰ Since then, antiquarian studies have had a strong presence amongst Chinese scholars. The great Song artist Lin Gonglin (1049-1146) had an extensive collection of antiquities, which he carefully catalogued and titled *Kaogo tu*.⁵¹ The original eleventh-century catalogue is lost; however, through copies by later antiquarians, we are able to see how a revered collector's possessions were recorded. In an undated example copied from Li Gonglin's 1091 *Kaogu tu*, it is clear that each object was carefully illustrated to show the basic structure and design of the piece (Fig. 15). A three-quarters view creates a sense of the object's volume and reveals the surface decoration along its length and width. The artist is uninterested in optical realism or illusion as evidenced in the lack of shading and the rudimentary outline that defines the shape. The function and various classifications of each object are provided in a lengthy text, which supplements the image. The illustration is not done for artistic purposes, but as a record of the object's place within the collection of the individual collector. Not until the late Ming and Qing dynasties did antiquities become the subject of artists' paintings. In the late nineteenth century, the pursuit of antiquities by artists seems particularly pertinent, considering the rapid changes as the West encroached on China's borders and empirical knowledge was considered the wave of the future.

⁵⁰Michael Loewe, "Archaeology in the New China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 65 (Mar., 1976): 1.

⁵¹Robert E. Harrist Jr., "The Artist as Antiquarian: Li Gonglin and His Study of Early Chinese Art," *Artibus Asiae* 55, no. 3/4 (1995): 242.

In his discussion of the appropriation of archaic calligraphic forms during this period, Lothar Ledderose explains the shifts in meaning of ritual bronzes.⁵² The very act of collecting and cataloguing changed the vessels' function dramatically, from ritual objects to possessions of private collectors. In the context of a private collection, antiquities were treated as individual works, although many of them had been a part of larger sets, thus erasing the initial context for these works of art. In the Qing dynasty, moreover, collectors developed new ways to catalogue their collections. They were far more interested in the actual surface of the vessels, and rather than recording them through illustrations, the practice of rubbings, called *Quan xing ta*, or composite rubbing began.⁵³ Rubbings were made by molding wet paper to the surface of the vessel, allowing it to dry, and then dabbing it with ink in varying tones, creating a realistic two-dimensional image of the object.⁵⁴ *Quan xing ta* was popular in the late Qing dynasty, in part because it created a tangible connection with the past, and also because it signified a high level of prestige. Incredible skill was required to create a detailed rubbing, and as a result composite rubbings themselves became the subject of scholarly research and appreciation.⁵⁵ Rubbings were appropriated by artists of the period, who saw an opportunity for an authenticating process of looking directly to the original. Just as artists were exploring ancient forms of calligraphy, they had a newfound interest in recording sculptural objects from their cultural heritage as well.

⁵²Lothar Ledderose, "Aesthetic Appropriation of Ancient Calligraphy in Modern China." In *Chinese Art : Modern Expressions*, ed Maxwell K. Hearn, 212-246 (New York : The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 212-245.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁴Fabian. "Xugu," 254.

⁵⁵Qianshen Bai, "From Composite Rubbing to Pictures of Antiques and Flowers (Bogu Huahui): The Case of Wu Yun," *Orientalism* 38, no. 3 (April 2007). 55.

Archaeological historian Chuang Shen discusses the impact of archaeology on the painting of late Qing artists.⁵⁶ He notes the multimedia endeavor that artists explored in incorporating bronze rubbings into their works: “With this early use of mixed media, the artist forces in the viewer an awareness of the artificial and artifactual nature of representation and at the same time confronts us with an ostensibly more ‘Authentic’ image, a rubbing taken directly from an ancient artifact.”⁵⁷ For an artist like Xugu, whose *modus operandi* was to achieve insight through abstraction, this explanation makes sense of his use of this hyper-realistic method because it emphasizes the fact that depictions seeking to mimic reality will never substitute for the real thing.

In *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo*, Xugu employs the method of rubbing to depict archaic forms and traditional symbols, but he emphasizes the artificiality of the image through his use of abstract lines in articulating the three friends of winter. The vessel that Xugu has recorded is a ritual *Fangzuo Gui* (Fig.17). Xugu has taken a rubbing of the vessel’s ornate handles, rim, and base, and uses a template to articulate the actual shape and outline of the form.⁵⁸ The overall effect is far from the typical rubbing of this period, which emphasized the volume and three-dimensionality of the vessel through gradations of tone (Fig. 18). With this study, Xugu departs from the *tromp l’oeil* effects achieved by his peers and focuses on the bold graphic quality of the surface design. His interest is clearly in the archaic carving rather than in producing a re-creation of the overall piece. The unique quality of this pared

⁵⁶Chuang Shen, “Archaeology in Late Qing Dynasty Painting,” *Ars Orientalis* vol. 24,(1994): 83-104.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁸Templates were used to articulate the general shape of bronze vessels in rubbings. Though each rubbing was unique the general shapes were not, and standardized templates gave a sense of definition to the vessels.

down *bogu huahui* can be understood in the context of collecting in nineteenth-century Shanghai.

In addition to their power to connect with the past, rubbings were valued for their association with personal possession. Collectors in Shanghai commissioned *bogu huahui* and other forms of composite rubbings as a means of displaying their wealth and status.

Merchants in Shanghai make up a class of nouveau riche in China. Their taste for what was considered superficial beauty was notorious, and it earned Shanghai and its art the derogatory name *haipai*.⁵⁹ In her introduction to the catalogue *A Century in Crisis*, Julia F. Andrews speculates that perhaps it was Shanghai's close association with the West that created a new taste so ill-received by the rest of the nation.⁶⁰ Andrews points out that a merchant class existed in China long before the nineteenth century, but never before had merchants demanded art that was not aligned with the tastes of the gentry-elite. Collectors in Shanghai commissioned portraits that depicted themselves surrounded by composite rubbings of their collections.⁶¹ This sort of commission reveals the wealth of an individual collector and provides hard evidence of his possessions. Additionally, these portraits can be read as a legitimizing strategy because of their alignment with a traditional scholarly endeavor, antiquarianism. Xugu's unique use of rubbing in *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo*, which undermines the medium's ability to mimic reality, is perhaps a way for the artist to separate

⁵⁹*Haipai* was used to indicate a lack of taste, and can be equated with tacky or gaudy in our vernacular.

⁶⁰Julia Frances Andrews. "A Century in Crisis: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Twentieth-Century China." In *A Century in Crisis : Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-century China*, eds. Julia Andrews, Kuiyi Shen, and Jonathan D. Spence, 2-9 (New York: Guggenheim Museum , 1998), 2.

⁶¹See Thomas Lawton, "Rubbings of Chinese Bronzes," *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 67 (1995): 7-17.

his use of rubbing from the popular trend present in Shanghai and to challenge the legitimacy of merchants' adaption of a scholarly practice.

In examining bronze rubbings of this period, it is necessary to understand the relationship of the object to the collector. A bright vermillion seal imprinted inside the lip of the vessel in Xugu's *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo* identifies it as part of the collection of calligrapher Ruan Yuan (1764-1849). Ruan was not a part of the new merchant class in Shanghai. He was a legitimate member of the literati, and was renowned for his calligraphy. The fact that Xugu depicts an object from a respected scholar rather than a Shanghai merchant is important. Consequently, there is a clear emphasis on calligraphy in the image. The focus of this painting is not the vessel, but the rubbing of the interior inscription, which floats above the *gui* and records an archaic calligraphic style. The study of ancient calligraphic forms was a popular endeavor of artists at the time, yet Xugu rarely employed archaic forms in his own running-script calligraphy. Rather than mimic the archaic forms, he reproduces them mechanically, by rubbing, for the viewer. The fact that Xugu takes a rubbing of an ancient text is noteworthy because Ruan was known for his transcriptions of ancient script. In fact, Ruan's best-known work was the *Jiguzhai zhongding yiqi kuanzhi* of 1804, a compilation of transcribed inscriptions of ancient bronzes.⁶² There is a significant difference between the transmitted texts of early Qing masters and the actual rubbings of Xugu and his contemporaries. Rubbing was an innovation that expressed new ideas about how the past should be transmitted, and in the context of this painting, the contrast between

⁶²Stephen Little. "Jinshi Movement Calligraphy." In *New Songs on Ancient Tunes: 19th-20th Century Chinese Paintings and Calligraphy from the Richard Fabian Collection*, ed. J. May Lee Barrett, 109-138. (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2007), 116.

past and present is evoked. Perhaps Xugu is creating a dialogue with the deceased master through the rubbing of an inscription that Ruan himself likely transmitted during his life.

The importance of calligraphy in this image is evident in every aspect of the painting. The treatment of the decorative elements of the vessel along the rim and base resemble ancient characters. In avoiding gradations of ink that create volume, Xugu is able to maintain a contrast of black on white, emphasizing each individual design. The style of brushwork used to depict the three friends of winter is angular, strong, and dry, highlighting an interest in calligraphic strokes. In addition to the ancient inscription, Xugu includes an inscription of his own: “Xugu bu xie” or “Xugu added writing.”⁶³ *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo* is described by Richard Fabian as adhering to literati tastes and interests because it employs the epigraphic studies of the time, and thus the painting serves an important role as a reminder of past values.⁶⁴ Xugu’s emphasis on the ancient inscription in this image clearly supports Fabian’s claim, but it additionally functions as a modern reinterpretation of those values.

Xugu is not stuck in the past; this image serves as a vehicle of modernity and individual expression as well. This is evident in comparing Xugu’s painting to a more typical example of nineteenth-century *bogu huahui*. For instance, Ren Yi’s *Jijin Qinggong* of 1885 displays notable and important differences (Fig. 18). In Ren’s painting, the flowers are depicted in a realistic style that integrates with the rubbings of the vessels. Each of his vessels is connected through an overlapping branch in the arrangement. This creates a traditional winding composition that flows through the vertical form of the scroll. The point

⁶³Fabian, “Xugu,” 254.

⁶⁴Ibid.

of the painting is not the contemplation of a single object, but rather an appreciation of how the components work in tandem. Though the vessels in Ren's work are connected to one another, they are not tied to the space in which they are depicted. They seem to float in an imaginary place with no indication of reality.

In contrast, Xugu focuses his attention on a single vessel, an allusion to the format of recording individual vessels in a catalogue. As noted above, Xugu, like Ren, transforms the meaning of the vessel. Through this artistic interpretation, the vessel has shifted its function multiple times, from its initial ritual use, to its position as an object for a connoisseur, to this artistic depiction in which it has taken on a secular function as a flower vase. In isolating the single vessel, Xugu emphasizes this transformation. The object is so far removed from its initial function and context that it takes on a purely aesthetic form. Through the secular subject, the patterned surface of the vessel, the flattened form, and the sketchy arrangement within, Xugu's work has a quality of Western modernism. Furthermore, by including fallen pine cones and plum blossoms at the base of the vessel, Xugu has situated his *gui* within an actual space (Fig. 19). The rest of the background is white and flat, but by means of these few cones and petals, the object is removed from the imaginary space recorded in Ren's image. The significance of this inclusion is that it grounds the vessel in the present reality of the viewer. Perhaps Xugu is telling his audience that the ancient object of the past has a clear place in the present. If this is the aim of the artist, then the emphasis on the interior inscription of the *gui* in this composition works in much the same way; it reminds the viewer of the original context of the vessel, despite its present location in a modern reality. The technique of rubbing can also be read as a means of grounding the image in actual time. In a study of rubbings and contemporary Chinese art, Wei-Cheng Lin points to the fact that

rubbing is similar to photography in its ability to preserve an object within a particular moment. Unlike a painted image which captures the idea or essence of what is depicted, a rubbing is a record tied to a temporal moment in time.⁶⁵ Lin's reading of the process of rubbings grounds the practice in the nineteenth-century environment in which photography and mechanical reproduction permeated visual culture in China, and yet the laborious process of crafting a rubbing deliberately rejects the mechanical method of photography.

In *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo*, Xugu has created a complex dialogue between past and present. This painting breaks down the boundaries of the real and the imaginary in order to reveal what it is: a painting. Xugu clearly aligns himself with past traditions and contemporary trends in a way that creates continuity, but also clearly distinguishes the past from the present. In doing this, he paves a path to modernity in which he asserts himself as an artist who is able to reach beyond the constraints of contemporary or traditional taste in order to express his own unique style.

⁶⁵Wei-Cheng Lin "Replicating the Past: Ink Rubbing and Its Related Ideas in Contemporary Chinese Art." In *Original Intentions: Essays on Production, Reproduction, and Interpretation in the Arts of China*, eds. Nicholas Pearce and Jason Steuber (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, forthcoming), forthcoming.

Conclusion

Xugu's life, environment, and art provide evidence of the complex and rapidly changing Chinese culture of the nineteenth century. At a time when the Western world and technological innovations encroached on China, artists turned to the past as well as modern life to find ways in which they could define modernity in their own terms. China has a long history of emulating ancient styles and themes, but in the shifting climate of urban Shanghai, time-honored traditions such as the study of antiquities carried with them a sense of nostalgia rather than continuity. The past became a symbol of the temporal quality of modern life. In addition to new ways of seeing the past, boundaries in place in the city forced a shift in how art was both produced and seen. Xugu's art is clearly a product of this unstable cultural context, but it is not a passive reflection. He was actively engaged in re-interpreting Chinese art for a modern context. Xugu was able to reconcile his turbulent surroundings with his commitment to individual cultivation and past masters' works, which places him as an integral figure in the development of a modern Chinese art.

In his 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot discusses how history is used by writers to create an identity that transcends both the present and the past: "This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time of his own contemporaneity."⁶⁶ Eliot expresses the importance of looking to past masters to find a

contemporary identity. This idea can be applied to any form of artistic production, and examples are found throughout history; Xugu is a case in point, yet he does not merely engage tradition, he uses traditional tropes to engage with and comment on the world around him. To the untrained eye, the works of Xugu and his contemporaries are far from Western notions of modern art. Yet given the concept put forth by Dewei Wang that there exist varied modernities, these nineteenth-century paintings hold a clear place within the Chinese conception of modernity.⁶⁷

During this period, China was keenly aware of its technological inadequacies. National progress was of key importance, and in order to achieve an elevated status in the global environment, a conscious shift in cultural identity was in order. The Qing dynasty marked the end of China's dynastic history, and was overtaken by the nationalist party in 1912. During Xugu's lifetime, it was clear that the China of the past was slipping away. Artists who explored traditional themes and objects did so with an overarching sense of urgency and with a new interest in re-creation rather than mere emulation. The practice of composite rubbing formed a tangible connection to what would soon be replaced by a new era of Chinese history.

Anxieties for artists living within the city walls were not merely ideological, but pervaded daily life. Pictorials provided a clear vision of China's path to progress, while cramped conditions and monetary pressures were a stark contrast to China's utopian vision of modernity. Artists like Ren Bonian and Xugu created escapes from the chaotic life that surrounded them. Through close analysis of a range of Xugu's works it is evident that the

⁶⁶T.S Eliot "Tradition and the Individual Talent" *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 38.

⁶⁷Dewei Wang. *Fin-de-siecle Splendor : Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 18-22.

commercial market and the end of the formal literati system did not result in a demise of intellectually stimulating works of art. Traces of Shanghai are rarely explicit in the works of Xugu, but the tension he creates through his strong brushstrokes, varied palette, and captured moments are subdued through traditional tropes, which reveal the new urban lifestyle's lasting effect. Xugu creates complex dialogues with past and present, which are relevant in the continuum of Chinese art. This dialogue begins to break down the boundaries of tradition and modernity while revealing the complexities of nineteenth-century Shanghai.

Perhaps the best example of Xugu's innovative spirit is *Sailing in Autumn* (Fig. 20). Like *Boating Among the Plum Blossoms*, *Sailing in Autumn* is based on the work of Ni Zan. Two imaginary islands float in an expanse of white; a lone sailing vessel is the only element that distinguishes the negative space as water rather than cloud. Xugu's palette of saturated colors is characteristic of the Haipai aesthetic of urban Shanghai. However, it is the application of the color, rather than the hues themselves that is of greatest importance. The wet downward strokes overwhelm the landscape and create an impressionistic feeling, not unlike Monet or Pissarro. There is a clear visual connection between Xugu's watery drip-like application of paint and his European contemporaries, but more significant is the philosophical connection shared by impressionist painters and Xugu in this painting. The Impressionists reacted to industrialization in Europe through paintings that captured particular moments in time, in much the same way, Xugu engaged his rapidly changing environment through expressions grounded in specific instants. Both have a nostalgic vision of modernity, the impressionists mourned the loss of nature during the industrial renewal of Paris whereas Xugu experienced the loss of traditional culture in the midst of the commercial boom occurring in nineteenth-century Shanghai. I do not mean to suggest that Xugu is

looking to Western masters for inspiration, but it is significant that this style of painting has no precedent in Chinese art of the past.⁶⁸ It seems he has created a style that is reflective of his increasingly modern life, and explores ideas akin to European Impressionist thought. The haze created by the wet application emphasizes the artificiality of the image, yet he invites the viewer into the created space. To include architecture in a painting of this subject is not uncommon, and the empty structure, indicated by an open door is a trope that calls the viewer in. Unlike traditional paintings which use this welcoming device, the moment captured is fading, it is not a place of solidity to which the viewer can retreat and find fortitude; it is slipping away in a wash of color.

Xugu used tradition as a vehicle to engage with and comment on contemporary life. Through the use of familiar tropes paired with traces of modernity, Xugu was an active participant in the creation of Chinese modernity. He successfully articulated the anxieties of China at the crux of major change that would transform its art and culture radically within a few short decades.

⁶⁸Xugu used a similar technique in *Boating Among Plum Blossoms*, but in that example the effect was not as overwhelming or as radical.

Figures:

Figure 1: Shitao, *Chrysanthemums, Wutong Tree, and Rocks*, 17th C., hanging scroll, ink and color on paper. Reproduced from Jung Ying Tsao and Carol Ann Bardoff. *The Paintings of Xugu and Qi Baishi*. San Francisco: Far East Fine Arts, 1993, plate 35.



Figure 2: Xugu, *Cat and Chrysanthemums*, 1891, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper. Reproduced from Tsao and Bardoff, *The Paintings of Xugu*, plate, 17.



Figure 3: Xugu, *Portrait of Monk Heng-Feng*, Undated, ink and color on paper.
 Reproduced from Wen C. Fong, "The Modern Chinese Art Debate" *Artibus Asiae* 53, no. 1/2
 (1993): Plate 5.



Figure 4
Map of South-East China. Cities Xugu frequented are indicated in red.



Figure 5: Map of Shanghai from *Tongzhi Shanghai xianzhi*, 1871, engraving. Reproduced from Hay, Jonathan, "Painting and the Built Environment in Late Nineteenth-Century Shanghai." In *Chinese Art Modern Expressions*. Eds. Maxwell K. Hearn and Judith G. Smith, 60-101. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001, plate 4.

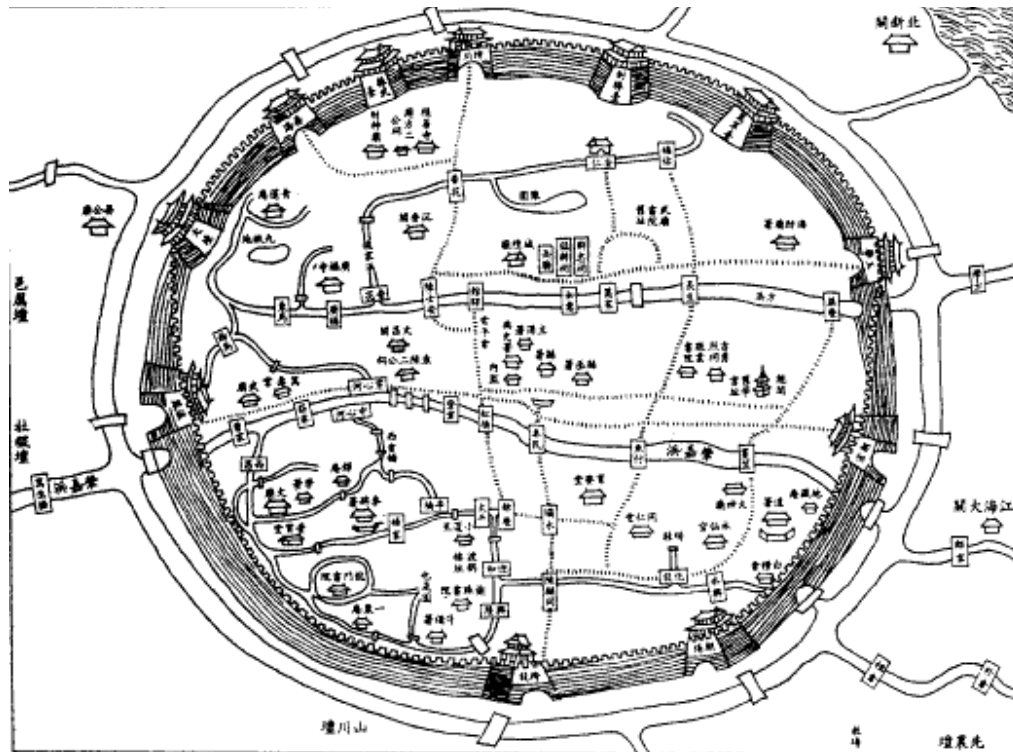


Figure 6: *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, “A Submarine” 1884, engraving.
Reproduced from Ye Xiaoqing, *The Dianshizhai Pictorial: Shanghai Urban Life 1884-1898*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan, 2003, plate 8.

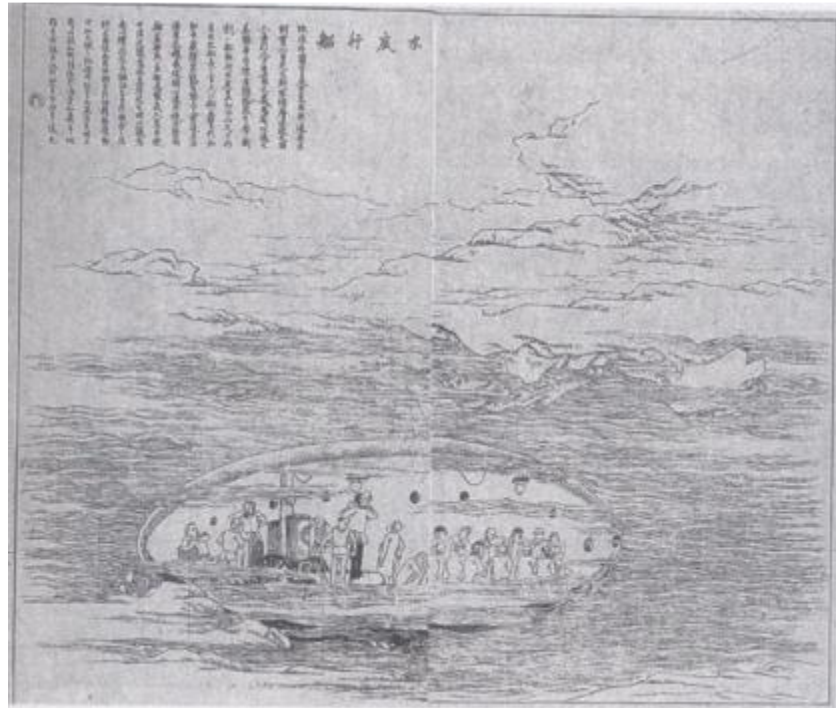


Figure 7: *Dianshizhai Pictorial* “The Sun at Noon,” 1884, engraving. Reproduced from Xiaoqing, *The Dianshizhai Pictorial*, plate 41.

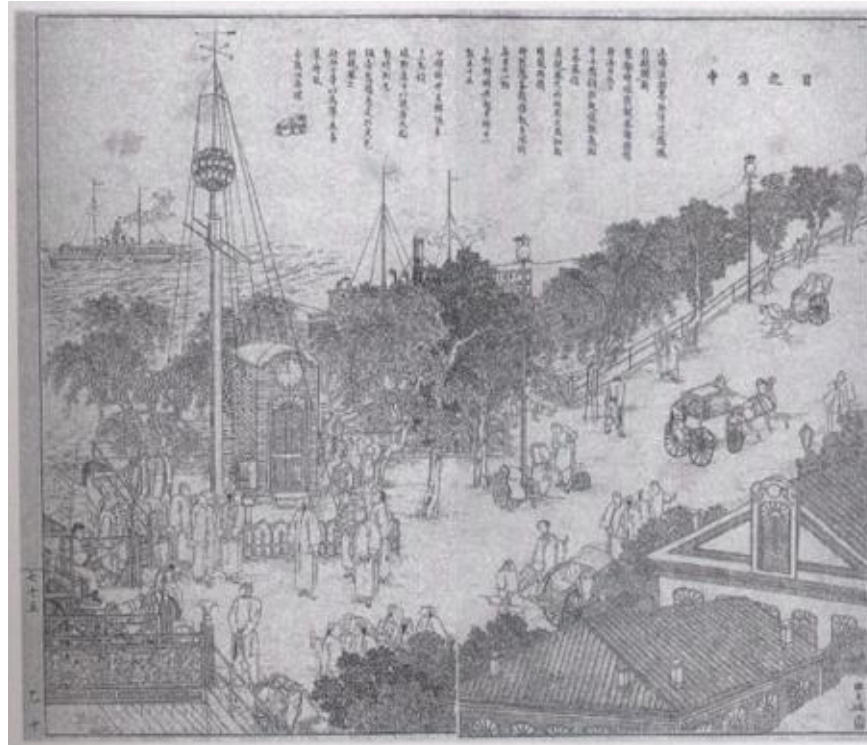


Figure 8: Xugu, *Portrait of Canying*, undated, scroll, ink and color on paper. Reproduced from Tsao and Bardoff, *The Paintings of Xugu*, plate, 5.

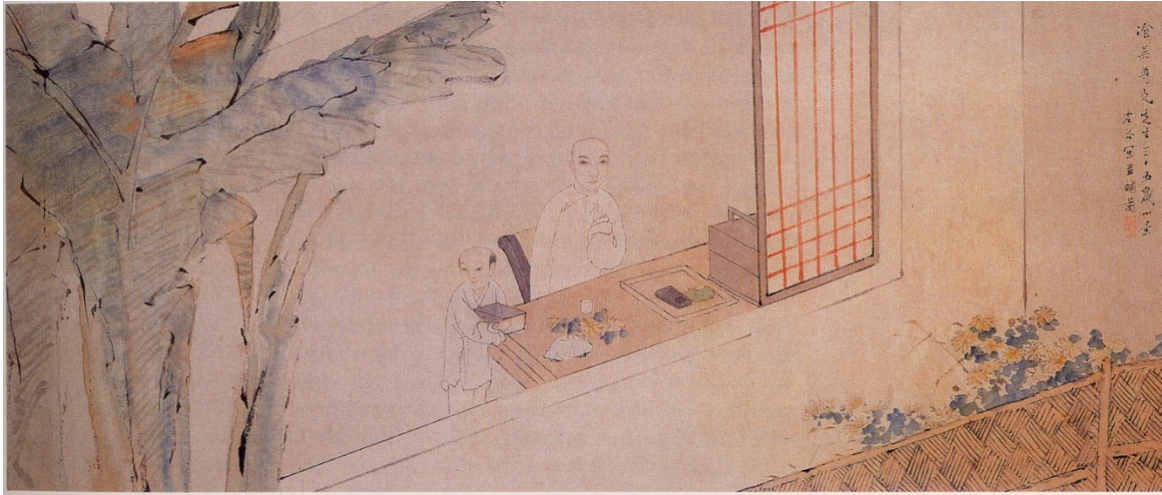


Figure 9: Ren Bonian, *Looking Toward the Deserted Frontier*, 1882, album leaf, ink and color on paper. Reproduced in Andrews, Julia Frances, Kuiyi Shen, and Jonathan D. Spence. *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-century China*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998, plate 9.



Figure 10: Xugu, *The Squirrel Sneaking to the Ink Stone*, undated, ink on paper. Reproduced from Ho Kung-Shang, *Hsu Ku: Collected Paintings*. Taipei: Art Book Co, 1985, plate, 131



Figure 11: Hua Yan, *Squirrels*, undated, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper. Reproduced from Tsao and Bardoff, *The Paintings of Xugu*, plate, 32.



Figure 12: Xugu, *Boating Among Plum Blossoms*, 1892 hanging scroll, ink and color on paper. Reproduced in Tsao and Bardoff, *The Paintings of Xugu*, plate 18.



Figure 13: *Dianshizhai Pictorial*, “A Hot Air Balloon” 1884, engraving. Reproduced from Xiaoqing, *The Dianshizhai Pictorial*, plate 7.

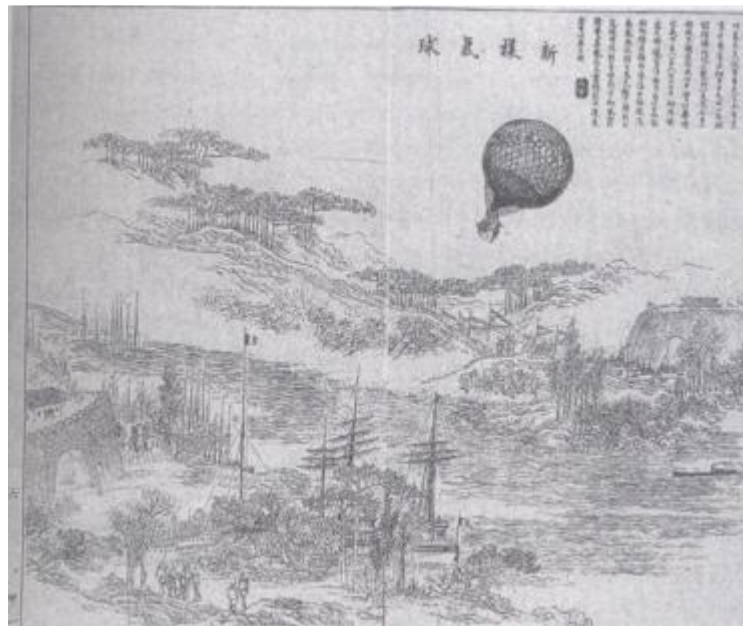


Figure 14: Shen Zhou, *Landscape in the Style of Ni Zan*, 1484, hanging scroll, ink on paper.
Reproduced from Sherman E. Lee, *A History of Far Eastern Art*, 4th ed. New York: Harry
Abrahms, 1982, plate, 588.

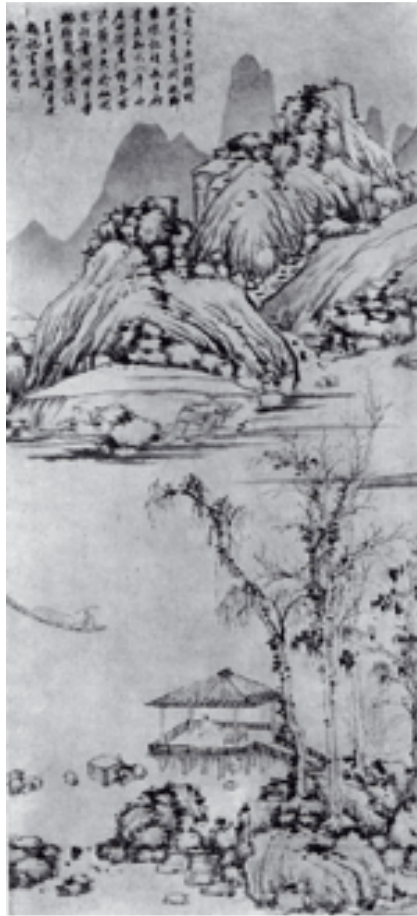


Figure 15: Zheng Fangding. Illustration from the *Siku Quanshu* edition of *Kuogutu*. Reproduced from Harrist Jr., Robert E. "The Artist as Antiquarian." *Artibus Asiae* 55, no. 3/4 (1995): 237-280, plate, 2.



Figure 16: Xugu, *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo*, late 19th C. Ink and color on paper.
Reproduced in Fabian, Richard, "Xugu," In *New Songs on Ancient Tunes : 19th-20th Century Chinese Paintings and Calligraphy from the Richard Fabian Collection*, ed. J. May Lee Barrett, 250-259. Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 2007, plate, 52b.



Figure 17: *Fangzuo Gui*, late eleventh century, Zhou dynasty (1100-221BC). Bronze.
Reproduced from "Gui." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online.



Figure 18: Ren Yi, *Jijin Qinggong*, 1885, hanging scroll, composite rubbing, ink and color on paper. Reproduced from Chuang Shen, "Archaeology in Late Qing Dynasty Painting." *Ars Orientalis*, 24, (1994), 83-104, plate, 9.



Figure 19: Xugu, *Bronze, Plum, and Bamboo*, late nineteenth century (detail). Reproduced from Fabian, *New Songs*, plate, 52b.

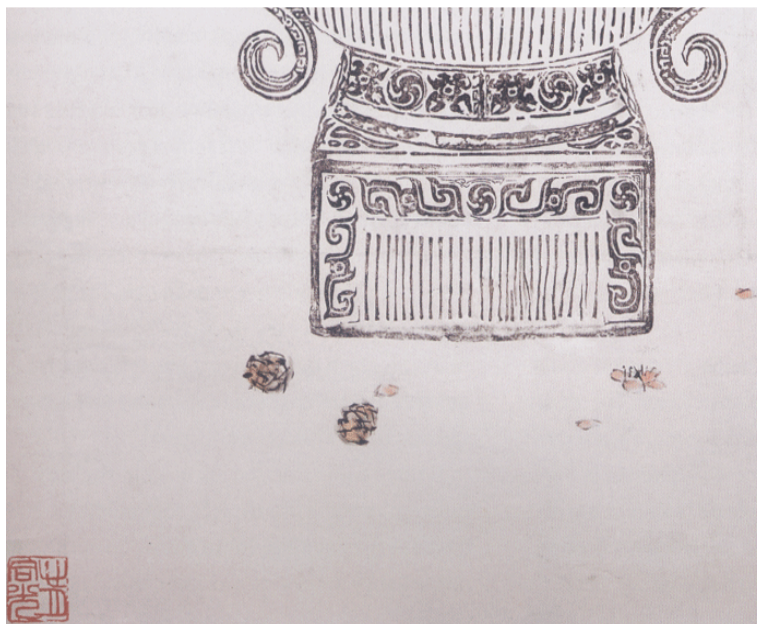


Figure 20: Xugu, *Sailing in Autumn*, undated, scroll, ink and color on paper. Reproduced in Claudia Brown and Ju-hsi Chou *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911*. Phoenix, AZ: Phoenix Art Museum, 1992, plate, 46.



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