

Dimensions of Originality: Essays on Seventeenth-Century Chinese Art Theory and Criticism. By Katharine P. Burnett. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2013. Pp. xxx + 414. \$59.00.

In this suite of essays, Katharine P. Burnett examines the concept of originality in seventeenth-century Chinese culture and the visual arts of painting and calligraphy. Examining only the work of Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) and Wu Bin 吳彬 (c. 1543–c. 1626), she focuses her inquiry on textual matters, having combed literary documents for various references to “originality.” Indeed, she defines her book as a “[project] of translation and interpretation” (p. 62). The task she sets before herself is a formidable one, for even Burnett cannot locate a word that denotes “original” either in modern or in ancient dictionaries of Chinese. Nonetheless, she isolates the word *qi* 奇 as an equivalent for “original,” claiming that inherent in this particular word are meanings that reach beyond its familiar denotation of “different” or “odd” (p. 42). Burnett concludes that the painting and calligraphy produced during the “long seventeenth century,” extending from the late sixteenth century into the late seventeenth, is most appropriately called “originalist,” rather than “eccentric” or “individualistic” (p. 56).

Burnett divides her discussion of “conceptual originality” into four parts. In the first part of the book, she responds to the scepticism that any notion of originality was ever delineated, or yet admired, by Chinese art-writers by collecting numerous examples of words and phrases that connote “originality,” such as *du* 獨 and *yi* 逸. Further, by reviewing the history of the collection and display of Chinese painting in the U.S., she counters that a Cold War ideology made it difficult to accept that Chinese culture could embrace either modernity or concepts of originality. This kind of analysis seems to justify her claim that her interpretations of seventeenth-century art are informed by “postmodern and postcolonial art theory and criticism” (p. 62). Finally, Burnett explains that the value given to “conceptual originality” in seventeenth-century China in particular must be attributed to the writings of the notorious philosopher Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) and the contemporary poets and literary theorists who came to be known as the Gong’an 公安 school (p. 58).

Having established the grounds of her inquiry into “originality,” Burnett proceeds in Part II, “Ideas and Words,” to suggest how the notion of *qi* spread among different social groups in China, emphasizing the prevalence of printed books during this time. She also delves further into seventeenth-century dictionaries and literary documents to find evidence for the use of the word *qi*. Part III, “What the Theorists and Critics Had to Say,” is composed of a series of three chapters, each entitled “What the Texts Say.” Here, Burnett traces a wide-ranging history of the word *qi*, beginning with writings from the sixth century and concluding with those from the seventeenth. In

Part IV, “Images,” Burnett demonstrates how the work of Dong Qichang and Wu Bin exemplifies the concept of originality. And in Part V, “The Legacy of a Concept,” Burnett observes that the value placed on *qi* diminished in the late seventeenth century, especially in the hands of painters who worked at the Qing court, notably Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642–1715).

Burnett’s investigation into the definitions and uses of the word *qi* is thorough, if not occasionally repetitive. It brings to mind other studies of critical terms, such as Alexander C. Soper’s study of the word *gu* 古.¹ Another important and pertinent work is the volume of essays on the word *qing* 情 published in 2004.² Burnett’s own suite of essays on the history of the word *qi* thus complements these works and makes an important contribution to the field of art history.

Nonetheless, Burnett’s study prompts a number of questions, if only because acts of translation lie at the heart of her book. I am intrigued, for instance, by the difference between Burnett’s definition of *qi* and that proposed by Judith T. Zeitlin, for whose work Burnett expresses admiration (pp. xxviii, 82). To understand the significance of the “strange” in the classical tales of Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), Zeitlin distinguishes the semantic ranges of three words that are commonly considered synonyms: *yi* 異 (different), *guai* 怪 (anomalous), and *qi* (translated by Zeitlin as “marvelous”).³ Regarding *qi*, Zeitlin observes that this term of praise—whose connotations encompass that which is rare, original, fantastic, odd—can also be used to designate a “deviation from the norm.”⁴ With respect to the pairing of *qi* and *zheng* 正 (proper, normative), which was common in late Ming art writings, Burnett, however, vacillates, striving perhaps too hard to support her contention that the true meaning of *qi* is “original” (pp. 99, 188–98).

Although Burnett has gathered numerous texts in which *qi* might connote “original,” she tends to seek repetition to demonstrate her point. At times, a more subtle approach to the nuances of a word seems warranted. Thus, words that denote “excellent” (*jue* 絕) and “fresh” (*qingxin* 清新), for instance, all acquire the same meaning of “original.” And yet the range of semantic meanings of the word “original” is relatively narrow; it denotes something that is primary, initial, innate, or something that is not derivative or imitative. “Original” can be used to signify inventiveness

¹ Alexander C. Soper, “The Relationship of Early Chinese Painting to Its Own Past,” in *Artists and Traditions: Uses of the Past in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christian F. Murck (Princeton, NJ: The Art Museum, Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 21–47.

² *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Halvor Eifring (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

³ Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 5–6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

or creativity. Nonetheless, this particular meaning of the word does not embrace the varied nuances of the word *qi*, which centre upon that which is “rare” and “unusual.”

Re-creating the historical context in which the word *qi* acquired such diverse connotations, Burnett evidences a similarly broad approach. For instance, to determine the cause of contemporary enthusiasm for all that was unusual (*qi*) during the “long seventeenth century,” she singles out the theoretical writings of the Gong’an poets (pp. 93–99). And yet the literary scholars whom she cites acknowledge that few writers took up the ideas of the Gong’an poets after the early seventeenth century; further, their radical theories of literary creation were also tempered during the course of their own lifetimes.⁵

Working broadly, however, allows Burnett a certain freedom. Hence, she can draw what might otherwise appear to be an unlikely comparison between seventeenth-century Chinese painters and calligraphers, who sought to transform the look and physical shapes of traditional work, and twentieth-century Euro-American painters and photographers whose practice involved repetition and reproduction. Inspired by the writing of Rosalind Krauss, Burnett thus cannot see the distinction between Dong Qichang and Sherrie Levine.⁶ But how can it be that Yuan Hongdao’s “pure self” is no different from the “self as origin” valued by a sculptor such as Brancusi? Burnett thus strives to rescue Chinese art from being perceived as an unchanging, monolithic entity (p. 60), just as she strives to reinvigorate the concept of *qi*. Nonetheless, when she misuses or misconstrues a source, she tends to muddle her own argument.⁷ This kind of confusion seems to be echoed in the unusual number of typographical errors in the bibliography.

To conclude, I wonder whether the adoption of a monolithic concept such as “originalism” will dismantle other monolithic concepts about China or simply displace one for another. Still, Burnett’s exhaustive search for variants on the word *qi* will doubtless inspire yet more research into this endlessly fascinating topic.

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⁵ See, for instance, Chih-p’ing Chou, *Yüan Hung-tao and the Kung-an School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 61–69, 113–22.

⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde,” in *idem, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 151–70.

⁷ For instance, Burnett’s misunderstanding of my own work, which she describes as an exemplification of the “political decadence argument” (p. 46), is puzzling, for these words do not appear in any of my cited publications, which she otherwise ignores.