The transcendence of the arts in China and beyond
Historical Perspectives
Edited by Rui Oliveira Lopes
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Foreword – Rethinking the history of art in a global perspective

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Thinking about the artistic activity of China throughout time represents a natural bond with the emergence and development of its cultural institutions, such as the language, beliefs, values, symbols, exchange and perception, which define the artistic identity of that culture. Along with the hierarchy of values and practices that frame a culture, historical events are also an inherent part of artistic activity. The artworks of a particular period preserve the ideas, tastes, tradition, and the social parameters of the time, affording a visual testimony of political achievements, royal patronage and other relevant historical events.

In this order of things, cultural interaction and artistic exchange were traditionally fostered as a manifestation of cultural and artistic refinement, while adopting, adapting, and reinventing extraneous elements.

Interestingly, during his residence in China, Matteo Ricci wrote extensively and accurately about China’s culture, language, history and art, offering a clear view of the importance of cultural interaction as a measure of artistic sophistication. In his writings on Chinese culture, posthumously published as the book *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscep ta ab Societate Jesu*, Ricci describes the Chinese as being ingenious in many ways, but in terms of art they “appear to be rude (...) because they have never had any contact with foreigners to help them in that aspect”. He continues, “they don’t know how to embellish paintings using oils or shadows and, thus, their figures look more dead than alive”. Although Ricci’s assessment of Chinese art is based on European aesthetic criteria, he fully understood the benefits of cultural interaction where an acquaintance with different techniques, the use of new materials, and the artistic enrichment offered by the insights of a distinct visual culture all contributed to artistic sophistication.

Although the artistic interactions between China and other cultures have been studied widely, especially in the context of trading routes along the Silk Road and the exchange between China and Europe during the Ming and Qing dynasties, a comprehensive study examining the global repercussions of this phenomenon locally and across time has yet to be undertaken.

In 2011, the Artistic Studies Research Centre (CIEBA) within the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon, initiated the research project *Face to Face. The Transcendence of the arts in China and beyond* as part of a broader research programme entitled *Art in a Global Perspective*.

On the one hand, the project *Face to Face. The Transcendence of the arts in China and beyond* aims to develop in-depth, continuous research on the impact of cultural exchange in the arts of China, contextualising it at the crossroads between national identity and regional styles. On the other hand, it also seeks to offer a broader perspective of the mutual influence that resulted from the artistic and cultural exchange between China and the world.
The first stage of the project resulted in three complementary activities:  
1) The organization of an international conference held at the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon, Portugal, 3rd-5th April 2013, where 44 scholars from Europe, Asia and the Americas presented their recent research;  
2) The production of an artistic and curatorial project where young and renowned Portuguese artists presented their perspectives on China in exhibition of art and design;  
3) The publication of an exhibition catalogue and an edited book, in two volumes, including a selection of papers presented at the conference and other articles authored by scholars invited to participate in the project.

This book, published in two volumes, seeks to contribute to a broader knowledge and deeper understanding of Chinese art history in a global perspective, from the formation of a Chinese artistic identity in the context of intercultural dialogue, to the influential role the distinct qualities of Chinese arts played in other art histories worldwide. Such a global perspective inevitably encompasses the history of Chinese art, from the ancient period to 21st century avant-gardism. While the first volume offers historical perspectives on the imperial period, the second volume, ironically published one year before the first volume, covers approaches to modern and contemporary art.

Arranged chronologically, the papers in this volume are divided in three sections: the arts along the Silk Road; the artistic sophistication of the Song and the legacy of the Mongol invasions; and the artistic exchange in the late imperial period.

This volume offers an unprecedented survey of the artistic exchanges between China and the world during the imperial period, from the Han dynasty to the fall of the Qing dynasty.

While some papers examine the combination of Chinese and Central Asian elements in mural painting and across a wide range of media, for instance textiles, metalwork, ceramics and stone, other papers focus on the tremendous impact Buddhist imagery had on the arts of China, which, in turn, influenced the spread of Buddhist art in Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia. This volume also includes papers that explore the agency of art in the appropriation and integration of different beliefs into the cultural structure of Chinese civilization; the cultural [mis]understandings in the diplomatic relationship between the Pope and the Yuan dynasty; the legacy of tea culture on Chinese tea ware and the acquaintance of its aesthetics in Japan and the West; the influence of Chinese arts on European decorative arts; the establishment of the Sinowestern style in the pictorial tradition of the High Qing court; and the representation of China as a pictorial motif in the “China Trade” period.
Although the contributions in this volume shed new light on the understanding of the formation of artistic identities in the context of the intercultural dialogue, the Face to Face project is far from being complete. The international conference, the compilation of 37 essays published in two volumes, and the exhibition of contemporary art and design, are the first stage of this project, the means to assess and assert the level of development of research in this field, and provide a better picture of the work that needs to be done in the future. I would say that this was the first step on a journey of a thousand li.

Many people have provided important assistance in completing this volume. The production of this book was made possible thanks to Jorge dos Reis who authored the design project, and his collaborative assistant, Lúcia Buisel, whose patience and hard work on the book’s pagination was invaluable. Special thanks to Professor Luís Jorge Gonçalves, Director of the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon (FBAUL), and to Professor Fernando António Baptista Pereira, Director of the Artistic Studies Research Centre (CIEBA), for entrusting me with the responsibility of coordinating this research project. I am especially grateful to the authors who contributed to this volume, their valuable knowledge and outstanding scholarly research that enriches our understanding of Chinese arts and the artistic exchange with other cultures. I also would like to express my gratitude to Andreia Tavares, Lurdes Santos and Isabel Nunes for their administrative assistance with this project.

Finally, a very special thank you is due to the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) which provided financial support for the organization of the international conference. The work and development of these two edited volumes published in tandem with the international conference Face to Face. The Transcendence of the arts in China and beyond would not have been possible without the generous financial sponsorship from Jorge Welsh Oriental Porcelain and Works of Art, and a partnership with the Confucius Institute of the University of Lisbon and the Observatory for China.

It was a very rewarding experience for me to coordinate the international conference hosted by the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Lisbon, 3rd-5th April 2013, and to edit the two volumes that resulted from this scholarly gathering. It has also been a great pleasure to work with so many distinguished and young scholars from such a wide range of related fields within the Chinese arts, and to bring this publication to completion. Although this is a collective volume of essays written by different authors, any errors the reader may find are my responsibility alone.