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### ■ Colloquium I *Memories and Visions : From Tradition to a New Identity*

Session 2 : *The Asian Perspective*

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#### *Literati Precedent and Contemporary Chinese Aesthetic Strategies and Identities*

The literati sensibility is not something that can be easily and doctrinally defined. It would be more accurate to say it is continually derived from texts, images and objects that have survived from the pre-modern educated Chinese elite. Typically, these things are presently viewed in isolation from their historical association with a ruling class. Indeed, contemporary interest often centres on the more pensive currents which advise a withdrawn from society and focus on private encounters and self-cultivation. As described to me by those who refer to literati sources, their concern is less with historical accuracy (even as research is useful and necessary), but lies in capturing a mood or modality of interpretation, often along the lines of how might the cultivated gentlemen of the past respond to the circumstances and material resources of the present.<sup>1</sup>

In contemporary understandings of literati sensibility, aesthetic experience emerges from and is limited to the encounters of competent observers; it is an event in which objects serve opportunistically as units of phenomenological potential and latterly as souvenirs. The literati sensibility views the world as a complex and dynamic ecology in which situations mutually impinged upon one another. Experience is seen less in fixed terms or strict causality, than in terms of continual transformation and propensity for change. Appropriateness and occasions for personal responsibility are seen as more significant than creativity. In its concern for subjective understanding and social meaning, the literati sensibility challenges the object-centred concerns of global/Euro-American discourse and the conventional marketplace.

This paper briefly considers several instances in which contemporary Taiwanese artists (e.g. Cheng Tsai Tung and Yu Peng) utilise literati notions to generate paradigms for aesthetic experience and artistic identity. In describing these examples a phenomenological approach is adopted which seeks to recall the circumstances which attended particular uses or understandings of objects.

This paper derives in part from a five-year study in Hong Kong and Taiwan, involving artists, curators, dealers and collectors of contemporary and older Chinese art. Their interactions and views were considered with reference to psychoanalysis and Bourdieus sociological constructs.