The fifth edition of Michael Sullivan’s *The Arts of China* is an engaging tour de force. Indeed, reviewing this updated, revised, and expanded volume is an intimidating task, given its scope. The first edition was published more than 50 years ago, in 1951, as *An Introduction to Chinese Art,* in this latest version, Sullivan offers a readable summary that takes us from the Neolithic period to the contemporary scene. As he moves us through the dynasties, it is easy to see that his knowledge of the subject is vast. It is no wonder the book is now a classic, and I highly recommend it. That said, I must follow with the confession that this review cannot touch upon all the notations I made as I read, because the nuances of the book would require more space.

Suffice it to say that one of the strong points of Sullivan’s approach is that he retains the dynastic framework that he used in earlier volumes. This means he does not separate the history into chapters about painting, sculpture and so on. Nor does he present a thematic survey that carves up the subject to illustrate political, social and economic forces. Rather, understanding that the Chinese people see their history in terms of a succession of dynasties, Sullivan presents their art in a way that provides a Westerner with a comparable sense of Chinese history. Another strong point of this clear, concise and comprehensive treatment is that it includes many line drawings, plans, full-color reproductions and details. As the blurb on the book jacket notes, there are more than 400 illustrations and more than two-thirds of them are in full color. In addition, the design adds to the reading experience by using two columns of equal width. Balancing the sizes of the image and text on the book’s pages in this way allows the images and the text to complement one another in a way that strengthens the art-historical tone of the study.

Comparing the fifth edition with my copy of the third edition shows how much improved the book is by the expansion of color reproductions, more up-to-date information and longer captions. While both editions provide a general reader with a solid foundation in Chinese art history, my impression is that this type of survey works better as a textbook than as a tool for self-study. The correspondence between Roman letters and Chinese sounds is somewhat idiosyncratic, and having a professional guide in the classroom would no doubt provide the reader with some background for Sullivan’s choices. As I read through the updated fifth edition, I missed some aspects of the third. In particular, I think that Sullivan should have included a note at the beginning of the text explaining why he chose to use the pinyin system of Chinese transliteration, as he explained in the third edition why he was using the Wade-Giles system.

Briefly, Wade-Giles was the main system of transliteration in the English-speaking world throughout most of the 20th century. It was used in several standard reference books and in all books about China published before 1979. The pinyin system was developed by the Chinese government and is now widely accepted. I think many of us know the pinyin forms of familiar terms and names (e.g. the Wade-Giles *Tao is Dao* in pinyin and Mao Tse-tung is now Mao Zedong, etc.) The larger point is that for less well-known terms and names I found myself quite confused; sometimes it felt as if there was “different” information in the two books. For example, I was quite taken with the color reproduction in the fifth edition of Ni Zan’s *The Rongxi Studio,* conceived in the Yuan dynasty. In the third edition, this work is credited to Ni Tsan, titled *The Jung-hsi Studio* and noted as conceived during the Yüan dynasty. I suppose to those who work with Chinese art and history on a regular basis these differences amount to knowing that the American “airplane” is essentially the same word as the British “aeroplane.” (I was amused to also find that Sullivan uses British spellings in the third edition but American in the fifth.)

Another thought I had while reading was that the use of sidebars or a page at the end of each chapter could have added some cross-cultural context to the book in a way that I, as a general reader and a Western reader, would have liked, so that I could place Chinese history in relation to that of other cultures. For example, a sidebar on the development of paper and how it impacted printmaking would provide a student with some useful comparative information, since the Chinese used paper much earlier than Westerners. Another focused sidebar might have highlighted information in several chapters that relate Chinese art to Buddhism: maybe a discussion of how Chan (Zen) ideas were compatible with Daoism, how Chinese Chan compares to Japanese Zen and how the metaphysical quality of Indian Buddhism failed to take root in China.

An additional (possible) sidebar topic, one that Sullivan treats well within the text, is perspective. He writes:

How was it, then, that the Chinese painter, who insisted on truth to natural appearance, should have been so ignorant of even the elementary laws of perspective as the West understands it? The answer is that he deliberately avoided it, for the same reason that he avoided the use of shadows. . . . Why, he asks, should we restrict ourselves? Why, if we have the means to depict what we know to be there, paint only what we can see from one viewpoint? (p. 176)

Sullivan could have also detailed monumental sculpture in a sidebar summary. The rarity of early Chinese sculpture comparable to that of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia has long left the impression that ancient Chinese work was confined to smaller objects. As I understand it, if there were large pieces in wood or clay, they have perished, and, thus, it was long thought that there were no early large pieces. Recent discoveries have challenged some of these earlier views. One of the most remarkable discoveries was in 1986, when bronze life-size votive fig-
ures were found in Sansxingdui in the Sichuan province. What these remarkable pieces from the Shang (c. 1650–c. 1050 BC) and Western Zhou (c. 1050–256 BC) dynasties tell us is not yet quite clear. The earliest monumental stone sculpture discovered in China dates from the Western Han dynasty (c. 202 BC–6 AD)—surprisingly late in the history of one of the major civilizations, and suggestive of cultural influences from western Asia. Another remarkable discovery was the life-size pottery warriors that were found in the 1970s during archaeological excavations of the tomb of the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (c. 270–221 BC). (The emperor was buried in 210 BC.) His tomb consisted of four pits approximately 16 feet deep and contained 7,000 terra cotta soldiers, horses and chariots designed to guard the emperor in the next life.

Another idea for a sidebar is how Chinese contemporary art fits within the global art community. My last Leonardo review, on Gerhard Richter, commented on the Richter essayists who wrestled with what his painting means in a world where “painting is dead.” Reading Sullivan’s book after recently visiting exhibitions with contemporary Chinese art on display, it is clear that oil painting is not at all dead in China. Currently, oil painting has become a part of the Chinese artist’s toolbox, and the skill of these artists underscores that the “painting is dead” refrain is even more academic when we look broadly and cross-culturally.

Completed in 2008, the Sullivan book includes the latest archaeological discoveries and presents what they have added to our understanding of Chinese art and culture. Thus, this book is not a revision where the author adds a new foreword to what is essentially a new printing of the old book offered at a higher price. Instead, this book adds information based on new discoveries and is quite up to date on the contemporary scene. As with all surveys, everything is far too abbreviated. Reducing vast stretches of time to a short chapter omits so much that it is a wonder that the chapters simultaneously cover so much territory. For example, in terms of contemporary Chinese artists, key figures like Ai Xuan and Yue Minjun are mentioned so briefly that one can miss them if one isn’t reading closely. Perhaps a good follow-up book and a way to continue to ruminate on Chinese art would be to expand upon the brevity of the last chapter, “The Twentieth-Century and Beyond.” by immediately reading Sullivan’s Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China.