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Chinese Fine Art of the 3rd Century: On the Initial Stage of Development of Painting

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Abstract

The paper summarizes the extant written data on Chinese painting on silk in the initial century of the Period of Disunion (Six Dynasties, Liu chao, III–VI A.D.), known as the Sanguo (220–280) and the Western Jin (265–317) epochs. While it is scattered among diverse sources, it is mainly in the *Lidai minghua ji* treatise of Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 810–ca. 990). An analysis of accounts of individual masters and their creative activities attempts to reconstruct the probable artistic and essential features of pieces of art lost afterwards, offering a novel explanation of the initial stage of the formative process of an important genre of composition in Chinese painting and culture.

Keywords: Chinese silk painting, period of Disunion, pictorial genres, figure painting, birds and flowers.

Izvilleček

Pričujoči članek povzema obstoječe pisno gradivo o kitajskem slikarstvu na svili v začetnem stoletju obdobja razkola (Šest dinastij, Liu chao, III–VI), znanem kot Obdobje treh držav (220–280) in Zahodni Jin (265–317). Ti se nahajajo v različnih virih, večinoma pa so podani v razpravi Zhang Yanyuana (ca. 810–ca. 990) *Lidai minghua ji*. Z analizo poročil o posameznih mojstrih in njihovih kreativnih aktivnostih poskuša rekonstruirati umetniške in osnovne poteze izgubljenih umetniških del in ponuja nova razlago začetne faze oblikovnega procesa pomembnega kompozicijskega žanra v kitajskem slikarstvu in kulturi.

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Ključne besede: kitajsko slikarstvo na svili, obdobje razkola, slikovni žanr, figuralno slikarstvo, ptice in cvetje

Within the Chinese traditional concept of origins of native art the painting on silk, the treatise of Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (ca. 810–ca. 990), the *Lidai minghua ji* 歷代名畫記 (*Record of Famous Paintings of Successive Dynasties* most fully reflects by and states the existence of it already for the time of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.). Different pictorial composition forms are mentioned, headed by portraiture (see Lancman 1966, 43–45). There is sufficient evidence to suggest that the birth of professional painters, originally mere artisans, was connected with the official workshop called shangfang 尚方 (Lim 1990, I, 105; Wan 1989, 232). Yet, the initial formative stage of Chinese painting on silk as a distinct artistic stratum is still commonly correlated with the Period of Disunion (Six Dynasties, Liu chao 六朝, III–VI A.D.). Above the famous Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (ca. 346–ca. 407), whose few works are known only in later replicas, about 150 names of artists are listed for these centuries (Fu 1962, 3).

1 The Artists of the Wei Kingdom

Xu Miao 徐邈 (Xu Jingshan 徐景山, 172–249), a citizen of the Wei Kingdom (Weiguo 魏國 220–264/265) of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo 三國, 220–280) epoch, is traditionally recognized as the first great painter of the Period of Disunion. As narrated in his official biography (Chen 1982, III, 27, 739–741; see also Crespigny 2007, 908), he was a native of Ji city 薊 (Jizhou 薊州) (southwest of contemporary Beijing), and during the Taihe 太和 era (227–233) held a position of *cishi* 刺史 (Regional Inspector)¹ of Liangzhou 涼州 (a part of modern Gansu province). In the first year of the Zhengshi 正始 era (239/240–249), i.e. in 239, he was appointed to the central governmental post of secretary/*shizhong* 侍中 (a Palace Attendant), at the head of *Da sinong* 大司農 (the National Treasury Chamberlain). So, given these biographical facts and knowing Xu Miao “Mu-hou” 穆侯, “Marquise Mu”, his posthumous name, it is clear that he belonged to Wei’s

¹ Here and further translations of original terms are used, proposed by: Hucker 1985.

nobility, being involved in military and state civil activities, and representing the amateur painting tradition.

Zhang Yanyuan praises him as a unique master of goldfish painting (Zhang 1964, 89; on Xu Miao's works in brief see also: Shen and Shao 2002, 39). The next legend is cited in his treatise, taken from the *xiaoshuo* 小说 (“Short Stories”) collection *Xu Qi Xieji* 續齊諧記 (*Continuations of Records of Qi Xie*) by Wu Jun 吳均 (469–520). Emperor Mingdi 明帝 (Cao Rui 曹睿, ruled 227–239) is reported there to have once been enjoying a walk along the River Luo (Luoshui 洛水, near modern Luoyang city, Henan province) when he saw white otters. He became fond of these pretty creatures, but despite all attempts failed to catch any of them. Then Xu Miao drew a number of goldfish on a sheet of paper and placed it near the shore. When otters noticed the picture they hurried to it, taking the painted fish for living beings. It does not matter whether this story was based on a real historical episode, or it is a mere fiction. This legend, varied in some other texts (Zhang 1964, 89) exemplifies very well the way Xu Miao was honored by his contemporaries and subsequent generations, and the way his skill was perceived. It also helps justify the legitimacy of assuming that Xu Miao's “sheet with goldfish” was typologically close to “bird-and-flower” (*huaniao hua* 花鳥畫) compositions. This genre, from the common point of view (see Laing 1992)², evolved in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), went through its formative stage during the Five Dynasties (*Wudai* 五代, 907–960), due mainly to the creative activities of Huang Quan 黃筌 (ca. 900?–965) and Xu Xi 徐熙 (10th century), and flourished during the Northern Song period (960–1127). Gradually it was distinguished by a great number of thematic groups (devoted to different plants, birds, insects, etc.), among them especially fish. The latter kind is defined at *Xuanhe huapu* 宣和畫譜 (*Catalogue of Paintings [in Governmental Collection] of Xuanhe [Era]*), issued at 1004, and reached its peak in the next few centuries (Siren 1956, II, 152). The legendary story offers corroboration to the idea that the “fish thematic group” as well as the *huaniao* genre as a whole already existed at the beginning of the 3rd century A.D.

Another figure among the Wei artists is Cao Mao 曹髦 (Cao Yanshi 曹彦士, 241–?), a member of this kingdom's ruling family. He was enthroned by the powerful warlord clan of Sima 司馬, acting as its puppet-ruler for ten years

² There are also a number of works on the item in Russian, e. g.: Kravtsova 2004, 595–598; Vinogradova 2009.

(Shaodi 少帝, r. 254–264) and then murdered (Chen 1982, I, 4, 131–147). Nevertheless, despite his miserable bad fortune, Cao Mao can be regarded as the first (or one of the first) Chinese august painters, the beginner of the monarchical tradition of creative activity, best known because of the painting and calligraphy of Huizong 徽宗 emperor (r. 1101–1125) of the Northern Song. From this point of view, special attention must be paid to the fact that Zhang Yanyuan traces Cao Mao's passion for fine art from his childhood and his rapid progress in the field (Zhang 1964, 88). He clearly states that “he was the most skillful artist of the Wei epoch kingdom” (*du gao Wei dai* 獨高魏代) (Zhang 1964, 88). Some other characteristics of Cao Mao's manner of painting can be found in the *Zhenguan gongsi huashi* 真觀公私畫史 (*Records on Paintings from Official and Private [Collections] of the Zhenguan [627–650] Era*) of Pei Xiaoyuan 裴孝源, a courtier of the Tang Dynasty in the second half of the 7th century (Zan 1984, 1379; see also: Malyavin 2004, 288). This narrative includes the most complete list of Cao Mao's works (Huang 1994, 42–43; Shen and Shao 2002, 39). They are: *Zu er shu tu* 祖二疏圖 (*Two Ancestors*), *Dao Zhe tu* 盜着圖 (*Dao Zhe*), *Huanghe liushi tu* 黃河流勢圖 (*Storm at Yellow River*), *Xinfeng fangji quan tu* 新豐放雞犬圖 (*Releasing Cock and Dog for New Abundance*). One more picture under the title *Qianlou fufu xiang* 黔婁夫婦像 (*Portrait of Poor Intelligent Pair*) is named in *Lidai minghua ji* (Zhang 1964, 88). To be sure, due to the character *xiang* 像 in its title this picture belongs to the genre of portrait painting. As for the *Dao Zhe tu* it could have depicted Dao Zhe, the legendary bandit of the Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–475 B.C.) epoch, spoken about in chapter 29 (*Dao Zhe*) of *Zhuangzi* (*Master Zhuang*) (Guo 1988, 426–429). This picture also could have depicted generalized character of a robber: the lexical formula *dao zhe*, derived from the personal name Dao Zhe, stays in the Chinese language for “a robber” (Oshanin 1983, 425). In the first case it could have been either a portrait of Dao Zhe, or just a scene with him. In the second case a life-descriptive drawing may be employing a robber's image in order to create a composition about an outrage theme. The picture *Two Ancestors* also could have represented either Cao Mao's ancestors, suggesting its relation to religious or even secular portraiture; or it could be a scene from their life, a composition against the background of palace-dealings or even every-day items. But all of these probable artistic variants correspond to this or that thematic group of the Chinese figure painting, included in the general *renwu hua* 人物畫 (“figure painting”) genre. The title of the picture *Xinfeng fangji*

quan tu is based on the expression, which means “an autumn time and a harvest”. Hence, it could have been a multi-figured composition that incorporated harvesting peasants. So, it seems to be more than possible that Cao Mao’s pieces reflected the thematic variety of figure painting of the time, or even gave birth to separate groups, who engaged further on in the *renwu* genre.

The last one of the pictures named above was devoted to Huanhe. It is highly probable that it was a piece of the landscape painting, *shanshui hua* 山水畫 (“painting of mountains and waters”), inasmuch as it is rather rare for Chinese art to represent a mariner scene, since more generally the focus is laid on a water phenomenon.

2 The Painting on Silk in the Wu Kingdom: the Works of Cao Buxing

The Wu Kingdom (Wuguo 吳國, 222–280) appeared after the Wei Kingdom—another important center of creative activities in the Sanguo epoch. Its leader is said to have been Cao Buxing 曹不興 (or Cao Fuxing 曹弗興), who was honoured later along with Gu Kaizhi, Lu Tanwei 陸探微 and Zhang Sengyao 張僧繇 as one of the four great masters of the Six Dynasties (Zhang 1964, 90). Almost nothing is known about his life and career, with the exception of his birthplace (a native of Wuxing 吳興 city, presently Huzhou 湖州 city, Zhejiang province), and the fact that he was close to Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252), the founder and the first ruler of the Wu state (Dadi 大帝 emperor, r. 222–252). It is possible that he held a position of a court painter, contributing to his status as a professional artist (Crespigny 2007, 35). Starting with the authority of Zhang Yanyuan’s account, that “he painted tigers, and horses very skillfully and was especially good at painting dragons” (Zhang 1964, 89), the traditional writings and eventually the modern scholarship (see Shen and Shao 2002, 39; Wan 1989, 233) gave Cao Buxing a stable place in the cohort of the epoch’s outstanding Chinese masters of animal and especially dragon painting. More than ten works are attributed to him (Huang 1994, 43), among them: *Longtou yang* 龍頭楊 (*A Sketch of Dragon Head*), sometimes said to be a set of four separate scrolls (or, perhaps four definite artistic pieces under the same title); *Long hu tu* 龍虎圖 (*Dragon and Tiger*) and *Qingxi ce zuo chilong pan chilong tu* 青溪册坐赤龍盤赤龍圖 (*[Two] Vermillion Dragons*

in *Green Stream*, [*One*]—*Sitting on [Waves]*, [*One*]—*Coiling*), which is also said to have consisted of either two scrolls or two definite pictures entitled *Qing xi long* 青溪龍 (*Dragon [in] Green Stream*) and *Chi pan long* 赤盤龍 (*A Vermillion Coiled Dragon*) (Zhang 1964, 90). The picture with a vermilion dragon was created (according to a legend) under the special order of Sun Quan after a boat journey when he personally witnessed a creature of this kind appearing on the waves (Zhang 1964, 90). Cao's picture with a dragon is mentioned in several writings, serving as good evidence of his experiments in the area and his mastership. One of them is a passage from the *Guhua pinlu* 古畫品錄 (*Classified Record of Ancient Painters*) of Xie He 謝赫 (active ca. 500–535?):

Scarcely any of Pu-xing's works are still preserved. There is only a single dragon in the Secret Pavilion [of the imperial collection] and that is all. Considering its notable character, how can one say that his fame was built upon nothing?" (Bush and Hsio-Yen 1985, 29).

This passage is quoted in the first chapter of the *Tuhua jian wen zhi* 圖畫見聞志 (*Overview of Paintings*) of Guo Ruoxu 郭若虛, the well-known Northern Song connoisseur in the history of painting³. In my opinion, all these facts strongly contradict the traditional point of view claiming that the "dragon painting" as a definite phenomenon in the Chinese fine arts was only at a formative stage during the Southern Song, and under the influence of the world concepts and aesthetic ideas of Zen (Chan) Buddhist and Daoists (Siren 1956, II, 148; Sullivan 1961, 153). To the contrary, there is a large amount of evidence to suggest that the birth of this phenomenon, like the "birds-and-flowers" genre, falls exactly within the frame of Sanguo painting on silk and was largely due to the creative activities of a dominant personality, namely Cao Buxing.

The next portion of his works was devoted, drawing from their titles, to numerous animal creatures, mainly horses (Huang 1994, 43). These are: *Yizi man shou yang* 夷子蠻獸樣 (*Sketches of Beasts of Eastern and Southern Barbarians*), or two separate scrolls *Ma yi zi* 馬夷子 (*Horses [and] Eastern Barbarians*) and *Man shou yang* 蠻獸樣 (*Sketches of Beasts of Southern Barbarians*), and *Nan hai jian mu jin shi zhong ma tu* 南海堅牧進十種馬圖 (*Herd Horses on [Fields with] Ten Plants near South Sea*), or *Nan hai lin mu* 南海臨牧 (*Herd [Horses] Close to Southern Sea*). It is very hard to decipher the referent of "beasts of barbarians" or

³ The Russian translation of the treatise was used: Samosyuk 1978, 31.

the “Southern Sea” (the real, metaphoric or mythical geographical site). Yet, let us pay attention to the correlation of the titles of the works on horses with the *Mu fang tu* 牧放圖 (*Herd Horses*), or *Bai ma tu* 百馬圖 (*Hundred Horses*) on scrolls, like the *Mu fang tu* by Wei Yan 偉偃 of the Tang. It is known from a copy probably made by Li Gonglin 李公麟 (Li Longmian 李龍眠, 1049–1106), the famous amateur painter of the Northern Song. It presents an impressive example of a panoramic scene (4.28 meters in length), composed of 1228 figures of horses playing with each other, rolling on the grass, bathing in a river, etc., and 140 figures of grooms and officials (Jin 1984; see also in Russian: Kravtsova 2010). It appears that this kind of panoramic animal picture could not have originated during the Tang period, but rather on the eve of the Liu Chao art history.

Another legend on Cao Buxing is narrated by Zhang Yanyuan (1964, 89), telling us about his painting a screen under the direct order of Sun Quan. He accidentally splashed some ink on the screen surface, so it was covered with tiny black spots. Going on with his work, the master painted these spots into flies, doing it in such a realistic and vivid manner that his lord took the drawn flies for living ones and even tried to flap them away. This legend provides us with the significant details on Cao Buxing’s artistic skill and ability to paint not only large-size fantastic and natural beings, showing that the range of subjects of his painting included such extremely small creatures as flies.

Cao Buxing’s creative activity extended to the painting of Buddhist items. Guo Ruoxu (Samosyuk 1978, 31) connects this work of Cao Buxing with Kang Senghui 康僧會, a Buddhist monk of Sogdian parentage who is said to have been the first leader of Buddhism in southeastern China, erecting the first Buddhist temple (Jianchu si 建初寺) in Jianye 建業, the capital of the Wu kingdom (Zürcher 1959, I, 36). According to *Tuhua jian wen zhi*, Cao Buxing was so greatly impressed by the Western (Central Asian or even Indian) pieces of Buddhist art brought by Kang Senghui and he started to work in that style. He thus became the founder of both the Chinese painting of Buddhist items and of the Buddhist wall-painting art (*bihua* 壁畫) in China (Wan 1989, 43).

3 Leading Masters and Major Tendencies of the Western Jin Painting

Three leading masters are named for the Western Jin (西晉) epoch: Xun Xu 荀勗 (Xun Gongzeng 荀公曾, 107–289), Zhang Mo 張墨 and Wei Xie 衛協. The first one according to Xie He was the most gifted person in the figure painting of the time (Bush and Hsio-Yen 1985, 30; Lancman 1966, 53). He was a member of a high-ranking clan that came into service in the Wei Kingdom, and during the Western Jin epoch attained a position of *mishu jian* 秘書監 (the Supervisor of the Palace Library) and *guanglu dafu* 光祿大夫 (the Grand Master of the Palace) and a title of honor (Fang 1987, IV, 39, 1152–1158). As for Zhang Mo and Wei Xie, there is a paucity of personal data about them. What we do know is that all three of them seem to be amateur painters.

The most notable feature of their creative work was the growing tendency to make illustrations of earlier books, with a predominant focus on female personages. Four works are ascribed to Xun Xu and Wei Xie under similar titles: *Da lienü tu* 大列女圖 (*Great Women*) and *Xiao lienü tu* 小列女圖 (*Minor Women*) for the former (Zhang 1964, 94, see also: Shen and Shao 2002, 39) and *Lienü tu* 列女圖 (*Women*) and *Xiao lienü tu* for the latter (Zhang 1964, 95, see also: Shen and Shao 2002, 39–40). All of these pictures were most likely illustrations of the notorious account *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (*Biographies of Exemplary Women*) of Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 B.C.). It is really puzzling trying to determine how to understand the contrasting lexical formulas *da nü* and *xiao nü*, normally explained as standing for a senior wife or an adult woman (a mother) as opposed to an unmarried lass or daughter (Luo 1988, 1326, 1589). Keeping in mind the *Lienü zhuan* structure (seven thematic parts: “Muyi” 母儀, “Model Mothers”, “Xian ming” 賢明, “Wise and enlightened”, etc.), there are at least two interpretative versions. First, *Da lienü tu* might be the portraits of “notorious mothers”, i.e. those women whose biographies are narrated in the first part of the treatise; and *Xiao lienü tu* consists of the portraits of the personages of the last five chapters. Second, *Da lienü tu* were the portraits of “Virtuous women” (mothers, wives, widows), and *Xiao lienü tu* were the portraits of lasses (respectful daughters, chaste girls). Despite the inherent ambiguity in the meaning of these formulas, there are no strong reasons to doubt that the works of Xun Xu and Wei Xie provided a solid foundation for the future *nüshi huam* 女仕畫 (“painting of beauties”), a thematic

group within the *renwu* genre. This notion is supported by one more of Zhang Mo's work, entitled *Daolian tu* 搗練圖 (*Silk Processing*), which is mentioned at *Zhenguan gongsi huashi* (Shen and Shao 2002, 40). The same title (as is well known) has a picture of the Tang great master Zhang Xuan 張萱. There appears to be no reason not to assume that the latter was a variation of the work by Zhang Mo.

Wei Xie is also said to have created two pictures on the topic of the *Shijing* songs (Zhang 1964, 95), both from the *Guofeng* part—*Maoshi Beifeng tu* 毛詩北風圖, on *Beifeng* (*North Wind*) song (Zhu 1989, 2, 18; tr. into English: Legge 1931, 44); and *Maoshi Shuli tu* 毛詩黍離圖, on *Shuli* (*A Pastoral Song of the Grasslands*) song (Zhu 1989, 2, 29; Legge 1931, 74). Based on the poetic contents, it is legitimate to suggest that both of these pictures were also figurative compositions with female personages. It is even more important that we are dealing here with the first attempt at illustrating *Shijing* and poetry as such. Meanwhile, the practice of these kinds of illustrative paintings on poetry was established in Chinese art only at the end of the Northern Song, while the most complete series of illustrations on the *Shijing* were only done even later, during the Southern Song by Ma Hezhi 馬和之 (Shen and Shao Luoyang 2002, 77; Siren 1956, II, 110–111).

The most intriguing is the title of the next of Xun Xu's works, *Soushen ji tu* 搜神記圖, which can be understood as *Illustration to "In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record"*. But it could not have been accomplished after the famous *Soushen ji* 搜神記 *xiaoshuo* collection attributed to Gan Bao 干寶 (ca. 285–ca. 360), for it was compiled not earlier than the middle of the 4th century (see Kao 1985, 19; in Russian: Menshikov 1994, 11–15). Most probably there was then in existence another collection under the same title, or Xun Xu was inspired by some other writings belonging to the *guishen zhiguai* 鬼神志怪 (“stories on the super natural and fantastic”) fiction group. In all cases this picture, dealing with spirits and ghosts, stands very close to the *guishen* 鬼神 (“ghosts and spirits”) thematic group, first defined in the beginning of the Northern Song by the *Song chao minghua ping* 宋朝名畫評 (*Review of Painted Masterpieces of Song Dynasty*) of Liu Daochun 劉道醇 (Lachman 1989, 91–92).

My analytical outline of the written data on the leading masters of the Sanguo and the Western Jin epochs and their works affords an opportunity to draw a set of basic conclusions. First, contrary to the common point of view there is sufficient

factual data to argue that the painting of the Period of Disunion was not adequately well developed for pictorial genre differentiation, and that this process had started already during the 3rd century A.D. Second, the features of almost all major genres and groups the classical Chinese art are traced to be among the lost works, including different thematic groups of figure (*renwu*) and “birds-and-flowers” (*huaniao*) paintings. It was also the time of birth of the Buddhist painting in both silk and monumental (*bihua*) variants. Third, the firm tendency to create illustrations of ancient texts and compositions with female personages originated during the Western Jin epoch. Finally, the dominant positions in the painting circle were held by amateur masters, normally belonging to the nobility, and among these even the most distinguished families.

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