

# Parting the Mists

Wong, Aida Yuen. 2006. *Parting the Mists, Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China*. Series: Asian Interactions and Comparisons Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. ISBN 978 0 8248 2952 0

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Aida Yuen Wong's *Parting the Mists* portrays Japan as having exerted a positive and dynamic role in the development of 'national-style painting' in China. Using art, historical and linguistic sources, Wong focuses on the gradual transition to modernism in traditional Chinese art circles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a disturbing period of social and political unrest in China, when its artists looked to Europe and Japan. Foreign influences in technique and imagery were used by some and despised by others. In Wong's vision Japanese influence is responsible for the emerging *guohua* ('national-style painting') as a style of modern Chinese painting. Coupling art and politics, she takes the discourse to a another level: 'Despite its imperialistic ambition in China, Japan emerges...as a critical ingredient in China's imagination of "the nation"...the forging of a nationalist tradition in modern China was frequently pursued in association with, rather than in rejection of, Japan' (p. 100).

It is very likely that the Chinese were influenced by their oppressor during that dramatic period in history, but I doubt the Chinese will ever be able to accept Wong's concept. (It's a starting point I myself find hard to digest). That said, the book reveals many interesting personal meetings and well documented anecdotes, for example, about the exchange of works of art.

## Overlooked evidence

To support her theory Wong analyses several aspects of the artistic discourse; she addresses the education of Chinese intellectuals and artists in Japan and meetings between artists and entrepreneurs, and provides rich information on early 20th century Chinese histories of art written by Chinese or Japanese connoisseurs. At the beginning of the 20th century large numbers of Chinese artists and intellectuals travelled to Japan, as Wong writes, 'to be educated' (p. xxiv), language that suggests the trend was the equivalent of Japanese development aid to the Chinese. She provides a detailed overview of the early art historical surveys published in Japan and China, basing her argument on her analysis and comparison of their structure and content. Few European examples are mentioned and she focuses mainly on Japanese written sources.

Wong presents several paintings as evidence of her theory. Of *Horse and Groom* by Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-qian, 1899-1983, p. 19), which was exhibited in a Zhang retrospective at Washington, D.C.'s Sackler Gallery, Wong writes, 'The animals twisted torso and dancing hooves, as well as the groom's strained posture, were not taken from the Tang dynasty or the Song dynasty, as stated in the catalogue, but from Meiji Japan.' Zhang's painting closely resembles Kano Hogai's *Gallant Steed under a Cherry Tree*, a work shown at the Second Domestic Painting Exhibition in Tokyo

in 1884.<sup>2</sup> Although Wong might be correct in her assumption that Zhang must have known Kano Hogai's painting at least in reproduction, her conclusion is mistaken. In the Sackler collection I have seen the original painting that is identified as the model for Zhang's painting: *Tartare Horsemen and a Rolling Horse*.<sup>3</sup> If we compare Zhang's painting with this 14th century work, it's evident that this theme has been part of Chinese imagery for centuries, and long before the Hogai painting. Wong must have overlooked this painting in her comparison.

This leads to another flaw. China always had a strong tradition of artists following the great Chinese masters of the past, which have been discussed and honoured in traditional Chinese painting manuals. To illustrate her argument that modernism in Chinese art history books must be ascribed to Japanese influence, Wong sometimes turns to 'facts' that are not solid. For example, in chapter two, 'Nationalism and the writing of new histories', Zheng Wuchang (1894-1952) is presented as an 'artist-cum-art teacher' and a promoter of *guohua*. Zheng wrote several books on Chinese art and, according to Wong, 'was determined to prove that Chinese were more than capable of writing their own history of art' (pp. 49, 50). Yet on the next page she writes, 'Although Zheng Wuchang was not beholden to Fukuzawa, Taguchi, or any single Japanese scholar in particular, he must have known the two surveys by Omura Seigai and Pan Tianshou.' Wong repeatedly uses 'must have known' to establish facts to prove her argument.

## Japanese 'Chinese-ness'?

In her concluding chapter, 'Six Exhibitions and Sino-Japanese Diplomacy', Wong presents a string of events and meetings between Chinese artists and their Japanese colleagues as a final proof of her theory. But for at least two centuries before this period, in certain circles Japanese intellectuals had been copying 'Chinese-ness'.<sup>4</sup> Giving parts of this tradition back to China can hardly qualify as 'Japanese influence'. Rather, mutual influence between Japanese and Chinese art has been indisputably present over a long period of history.

I enjoyed reading the book for the overall impression it presented of a time of great change and moments of contact between two great Eastern traditions, but I am not persuaded by the writer's theory that Japan was 'the critical ingredient in China's imagination of "the nation"'. I want to come back to the term *guohua* in connection to 'nationalism'. Wong writes, 'The binome *guohua* was derived from the Japanese *kokuga*' (page 12). In fact, traditional Chinese painting was, and still is, called *Zhongguohua*, 中国画, in contrast to *Yanghua*, 洋画, 'foreign painting'. The term *guohua*, 国画, can be taken as short for *Zhongguohua*. Guo, 国, means country and *Zhongguo*, 中国, is the chinese name for



Zhang Daqian

China, while hua, 画, means painting. But Wong argues that *guohua*, 国画, is adopted from the Japanese *kokuga*, 国画. A mere comparison of the written characters makes Wong's argument disappear into the mist. <

## Notes

- 1 Daqian, Zhang. 1946. *Horse and Groom*. Ink and color on paper, 94.5 cm x 46.3 cm. Private collection. Source: Shen C.Y. Fu with Jan Stuart. 1991. *Challenging the*

*Past: The Paintings of Chang Daichien*. Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery; Seattle: University of Washington Press, p. 153.

- 2 Hogai, Kano. 1884. *Gallant Steed under a Cherry tree*. Ink and color on paper, 137.9 cm x 63 cm. Collection of Bansho Co. Japan. Source: Conant Ellen P. et al. *Nihonga, transcending the past: Japanese-style painting, 1868-1968*, St. Louis, MO, 1995, p. 135.
- 3 *Tartare Horsemen and a Rolling Horse*. 14th-15th century. Silk on panel, 120 cm x 46.3 cm; Acc. No F 1916.526.
- 4 Beerens, Anna. 2006. *Friends Acquaintances, Pupils and Patrons, Japanese Intellectual Life in the Late Eighteenth Century: a Prosopographical Approach*. Leiden: Leiden University Press.

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