Parting the Mists


Lucien van Valen

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 nationalistic 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 followed the great 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 (1854-1915) is presented as an ‘artist-cum-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 Sei-gai 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’. 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, specifically ‘for-eign painting’. The term 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 46.5 cm. Private collection. Source: Shen C.Y.

Zhang Daqian

Past: The Paintings of Chang Daqian.
Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gal-

er; Seattle: University of Washington Press.
p. 157
2. Nihongyo, transcending the past: Japanese-

style painting. 1868-1938. St. Louis, MO,
1995, p. 135
3. Tantare Horsemens and a Rolling Horse.
14th-15th century. Silk on panel, 120 cm x
65.5 cm. Acc. No. F 196.516.
4. Beerens, Anna. 2006. Friends Acquaint-
ances, Pupils and Patrons, Japanese Intellec-
tual Life in the Late Eighteenth Century: a
Prosopographical Approach. Leiden-Leiden
University Press.

Lucien van Valen is a sinologist and painter. She trained at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. Later she studied Chinese Language and Cultures at the University of Leiden. She finished her PhD with the thesis ‘The Matter of Chinese Painting, Case studies of 8th century Murals’ in 2005. She currently researches chinese painting materials.

Ivan.valen@let.leidenuniv.nl