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Wong/Parting the Mists

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Introduction

This book offers a transnational perspective on the role that tradition plays in Chinese modernism. It explores the development of guohua or “national-style painting” against the backdrop of Sino-Japanese relations in the first half of the twentieth century. Japan enters the discussion not as a subject for comparison but as a dynamic force that shapes new visual practices, historiographic reforms, and institutional realignments. The foreign becomes embedded in China’s identity, both literally and imaginatively, rather than remaining something external as a mere source of “influence.” Chinese ambivalence towards Japan, stemming from centuries-long cultural ties and modern geopolitical conflicts, creates a unique condition that highlights the complexity of selecting a usable past for nationalist empowerment. Despite its imperialist ambition in China, Japan emerges in this volume as a critical ingredient in China’s imagination of “the nation.”

Transnationalism is a theme that has been largely neglected by art historians, who, for the most part, specialize in individual countries delineated by national borders. Traditionally in the field of Asian art, only well-endowed departments of large research universities maintain separate faculty for individual countries (China, India, Japan, Korea), creating a kind of disciplinary prestige for the segregation of national histories. Under the climate of globalization, however, institutions and scholars are now starting to pay more attention to cross-border investigations. Compared with a decade ago, today’s art historians show much greater interest in both international and regional topics. In mainland China, the reforms initiated during the Deng Xiaoping era (1970s–1990s), which promoted foreign relations through trade and cultural exchanges, have also given rise to a new academic openness to the history of Sino-Japanese relations. Representative of this development is Liu Xiaolu’s Shijie meishu zhong de Zhongguo yu Riben meishu (2001), an examination of positive interactions between the Chinese and Japanese art worlds amid the political strife of the twentieth century. Globalization adds new dimensions to the state-centered, politics-oriented framework of historical inquiry, invigorating the tradition of “cultural
histories” produced by Abe Hiroshi, Joshua Fogel, Sanetō Keishū, Tam Yue-him, Wang Xiaoqiu, and other specialists of modern Sino-Japanese relations.

Globalization has been criticized, however, for perpetuating Western (Euramerican) hegemony. A history of intra-Asiatic relations with a global perspective typically subsumes culture-specific conditions in Western models of behavior. Eurocentrism is of course not a new problem in modern historical research on China. In American academia, the late John King Fairbank (Harvard professor from 1936 to 1977) theorized that the West was the primary agent of modern transformations in Chinese society, without which, he suggested, China would have remained in a state of decay. As Fairbank’s view continues to hold sway, Japan is usually linked to China as a second-order modernizing force that had already been reformed by the West.

While there is no denying that encounters with the West precipitated a crisis of identity that drove much of China’s modernization in the twentieth century, the Fairbankian perspective is not unequivocal; it has, as pointed out by Pamela Kyle Crossley, both “antecedent and postcedent rivals.” Between the 1910s and 1930s, for example, the Kyoto school of sinology led by Naitō Konan held that the inauguration of certain modern institutions in China occurred as early as the Song dynasty (960–1279). In recent years, scholars have gained important insights into Chinese modernity by recourse to local history, feminist criticism, and literary theory.

The literary historian Shih Shu-mei rejects the presumption that only when Chinese modernists took after Western modernism was “modernism” supposed to exist in China. Yet this presumption is entrenched in the periodization of modern Chinese history. It is common practice, for example, to fix the beginning of Chinese modern art at the first traumatic clash between China and the West, namely, the Opium War (1839–1842), even though it is far from self-evident how this event led to key art historical developments, such as the birth of professional art schools and public exhibitions. In addition to structuring its narrative around such developments, this volume tries to mitigate the Eurocentric bias by approaching Chinese art through reference to a non-Western country: Japan. Japan’s role is not simply a conduit for the transmission of Western ideas but an entity with unique ties to Chinese history and cultural practices. In short, this study seeks to go beyond the proverbial paradigm of “Japan as China’s window on the West.”
Another paradigm besides Eurocentrism that can easily lead to oversimplified readings of Sino-Japanese relations in art is the privileging of armed conflict as the primary analytical framework. While Japanese territorial ambition in China and other parts of Asia manifested itself most visibly on the battlefield, military activities are inadequate gauges for the extent of artistic dialogue. In some cases, armed conflict disrupted interactions; in other cases, it propelled them. There is a particularly strong inclination to view Chinese reactions to Japan from the standpoint of war sentiments, resulting in a restricted perspective predicated on Chinese victimhood and anti-Japanism. What such an approach misses is the great sense of excitement and possibility that permeated the culture of the late Qing and Early Republican periods. Artists became an increasingly visible force in the realization of a new order where people of varied educational backgrounds could contribute to social reform, a new order where opportunities for training abroad and institutions that supported creative endeavors multiplied. This book describes the rise of art as a pursuit of national importance and the coalescence of artistic visions with the aspirations of a culture in transition.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Chinese and Japanese art worlds interacted with unprecedented frequency and reciprocity. The vigorous interchange enriched the practice of guohua—an “invented tradition” that, according to Eric Hobsbawn’s definition, claims to be old but is actually quite recent. Guohua pays tribute to Chineseness by its medium of ink and mineral pigments on silk or paper, age-old stylistic models, and traditional formats of mounting. As a nationalist symbol at the start, it was more a goal than an established tradition. Like the related neologism of kokuga coined in Meiji Japan, guohua aspired for modernist meaning without forgoing native references. But whereas kokuga encompassed both Western-style and Japanese-style paintings, guohua was more narrowly nationalistic. In the main it avoided overtly Western materials and subjects, though in some instances Western methods and motifs figured as transformed Chinese-style expressions.

In this book, separate chapters explore the many aspects of guohua’s formative development in the first half of the twentieth century, including approaches to reviving past styles, the writing of new histories and theories, the development of the art market, and the relations between exhibitions and diplomacy.

Chapter 1, an overview of modern Sino-Japanese relations, describes China’s shifting attitudes towards its eastern neighbor and the impact
of these attitudes on art practices. In the late Qing and Early Republican periods, Chinese artists for the first time traveled en masse to Japan to be educated. Some of them studied Western-style painting; others gravitated towards neotraditionalist currents. Rather than offering a comprehensive study of the two groups, this chapter identifies salient features of their experience through reference to well-known figures such as Li Shutong, Gao Jianfu, Chen Zhifo, and Fu Baoshi. The styles of the last two, both bona fide traditionalists, are discussed at some length. Chen was celebrated for his paintings of flowers and birds in the finely executed gongbi style reminiscent of Song and Ming court paintings. A graduate of the graphic design program at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Chen learned to paint in a decorative manner that reflected the Japanese predilection for vibrant colors and beautified natural motifs. Some of his paintings also bore the imprint of Rimpa, a highly ornamental pictorial mode of the Edo period (1603–1867) that came back into style as part of Japan’s neoclassical revivalism in the early twentieth century. Like Chen Zhifo, Fu Baoshi rediscovered Chinese tradition through the lens of Japanese neoclassicism. A painter of human figures (and landscapes), Fu was inspired by modern Japanese portrayals of personages from history and literature, especially in nihonga (Japanese-style painting). Although Fu maintained that his love of figuration was rooted in the classical Chinese tradition of Gu Kaizhi (344–406), some of his preeminent models were unmistakably Japanese. Fu’s fascination with Gu Kaizhi was also spurred by his exposure to the writings of Kinbara Seigo, a Japanese professor who guided his study of Chinese art history in the 1930s. This chapter connects Fu’s artistic choices to his scholarly interest, a relationship rarely addressed in studies of the artist.

Guohua took advantage of the family resemblance between Chinese and Japanese aesthetics to enrich its repertoire, achieving novelty without asserting complete originality. The Japanese elements in the Chinese works were not “influence” in the conventional sense: the guohua artists (guohuajia) who took ideas from Japan seldom openly acknowledged their source as a catalyst; it was common for Chinese artists to downplay the originality of their Japanese prototypes, recasting the borrowed elements as ancillary to the exalted Chinese heritage. The main goals of guohua were to recover tradition on the ground of Chinese art itself, while trying to avoid sterile repetition, and to imbue new pictorial configurations with historical authenticity. In this regard, the guohuajia’s disinclination to admit their artistic debt to Japan is understandable.
Unlike exponents of Western-style painting such as Lin Fengmian and Wu Guanzhong who emulated foreign idioms and welcomed comparisons with them, guohuajia were confronted with the task of producing refreshingly new images that nevertheless needed to give the impression of cultural introspection. The recodification of selected visual expressions in Japanese art as Chinese was one solution, and this process collapsed the familiar with the inventive, the native with the exotic—values indispensable to the assertion of modernism. Besides artists, scholars too made vital contributions to the definition of national-style painting. Japan, once again, functioned as a critical source of ideas. It has been established that Japan was a model for Chinese “national learning” (guoxue), meaning the studies of history, classical literature, and other subjects that defined tradition. Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a pioneer of national learning, was an admirer of Japanese kokugaku andkokusuishugi (principle of national essence). Particularly influential on his thinking was Kojō Teikichi (1866–1949), who penned an essay in 1897 that described the rise and fall of Chinese learning (kangaku) before and under the Meiji Restoration (1868–1912). Published in Liang’s newspaper Shiwubao under the title “Rebirth of Kangaku,” Kojō’s essay predicted that the rising momentum in Japanese kokugaku would buoy Chinese learning, as the former was recovering from the Meiji government’s enforcement of westernization. This view appeared to contravene the initial goal of kokugaku, which had set out to undo the hegemonic dominance of Chinese learning by privileging Japan as the primary subject of inquiry. But as Japanese national interests became increasingly intertwined with those of China, kokugaku scholars including Kojō himself renewed their interest in Chinese studies. In addition to the Confucian classics that made up the core of kangaku, the new generation of Japanese sinologists (and scholars of Oriental Studies) developed expertise in literary history, linguistics, ethnography, archaeology, and art history, which in turn informed Chinese scholarship in all these fields.

Besides national learning, traditionalists in China and Japan were drawn to one another by the idea of “common language/common race” (C: tongwen tongzhong; J: dóbun dōshū). D. R. Howland maintains that even though the idea had greater currency in Japan, “the majority of Chinese scholars who traveled to and wrote about Japan in the late nineteenth century believed that China and Japan shared some common cultural identity,” and they occasionally regarded the Japanese language
as “an aberrant form of Chinese writing.” By means of “brush conversations” (communication by writing in classical Chinese), literati of the two countries exchanged views on a variety of subjects from poetry to current affairs. Japanese writings of this kind exhibited erudition in Chinese learning sprinkled with Chinese colloquialisms that could sometimes be mistaken for native Chinese writings. Linguistic complementarity became a chief rationale for the Chinese government to send students to Japan rather than the West, as exhorted in Zhang Zhidong’s “Quanxue pian.” Although “common language/common race” proved less unifying in practical communication than was supposed—and would later acquire problematic connotations as war rhetoric—Japanese texts packed with kanji indeed facilitated the translation and dissemination of Japanese knowledge in China. In the world of art, the Japanese writings circulated in early twentieth-century China ranged from instructional manuals for studio practice to survey books, period histories, and theoretical writings.

Chapters 2 and 3 maintain that Chinese perceptions of tradition underwent significant changes as translated Japanese scholarship intersected with native intellectual reforms. In Chapter 2, several histories of Chinese art produced in the Early Republican period are analyzed as products of this trend. In most cases, Western concepts of historical development, notably the Enlightenment model of linear progress (ancient–medieval–modern), provided Japanese scholars with the standard paradigm for narrating the past. But as these concepts were being applied in Japanese texts and received in translation by Chinese readers, the process became more than a diffusion of Western concepts of history. Early twentieth-century Japanese studies of Chinese art took into account updated visual archives and sinological knowledge inspired by the rigor of kokugaku, reaching a level of sophistication that Chinese historians found worthy of emulation.

In the process of emulating Japanese historical texts, at times quite extensively, Chinese authors and translators pondered the usefulness of their native tradition as well as the sources and narrative strategies of dynastic times. The rethinking of Chinese art that resulted coincided with the project of New Historiography—a major intellectual movement that deployed history writing as an instrument for consolidating the nation, a movement studied recently by Prasenjit Duara, Tang Xiaobing, and Q. Edward Wang. Yet the deterioration of Sino-Japanese political relations also forced Chinese historians to reevaluate the
merits of their Japanese models. Chapter 2 describes how in an age of Chinese historiographic reform Japanese scholarship became a vital, though not uncontested, inspiration for methodological and epistemological innovation.

Chapter 3 continues to explore the Sino-Japanese dialogue through textual analysis, focusing on Chen Hengke’s [Chen Hengque’s] “The Value of Literati Painting,” one of the most frequently cited and anthologized essays on art in twentieth-century China. This essay was paired with Ōmura Seigai’s “The Revival of Literati Painting” (in Chen’s translation) in a volume titled Studies of Chinese Literati Painting (Zhongguo wenrenhua zhi yanjiu; 1922). These two essays presented analogous arguments for the validity of literati painting (C: wenrenhua; J: bunjinga) as both a traditionalist and a modernist art form. The volume’s title suggests that the authors were addressing the same topic—that is, Chinese literati painting—but a closer study reveals that Chen’s wenrenhua and Ōmura’s bunjinga referred to two phenomena with divergent histories. This chapter discusses the conditions that allowed the coalescence of Chen’s and Ōmura’s views to make claims about a unified literati practice. This instance calls attention not only to the semantic slippages that occurred in the process of translating Japanese texts into Chinese, or vice versa, but also to the deliberate manipulation of these slippages to create a common discursive code based on the idea of a shared Sino-Japanese culture. Using the Chen-Ōmura theory of literati painting as the point of departure, the analysis delves into the elevation of “individualism” to the ultimate modern ideal through reference to reinterpretations of an ancient aesthetic criterion: “spirit resonance” (C: qiyun; J: ki-in). Although this concept emerged in Chinese commentaries on painting as early as the mid-sixth century, it was not until the Republican era that it became shorthand for subjective expression and individualism, ideas explicitly associated with modernity in the early twentieth century.

It is widely known that Japanese neologisms inundated the modern Chinese lexicon and expedited the transition from the civil-service-examination-based education to a new knowledge system in the early twentieth century. Upwards of a thousand expressions in kanji were neologistic inventions, many based on characters taken from older Chinese texts but reconfigured or reinterpreted. Some basic Chinese art terms today like meishu (fine arts), zhanlanhui (exhibition), and diaoke (sculpture) were first uttered in Japanese as bijutsu, tenrankai, and...
chōkoku, which functioned as synonymic equivalents of preexisting Western ideas. In the world of literary history, Lydia H. Liu’s important work on this phenomenon of “translingual practice” explains that the permeable boundary of the Chinese language in the early twentieth century was more than a reminder of historical happenings (such as the encounter with a foreign culture). The adoption of foreign words resulted in the displacement of former references to the same vocabulary in the native language, which could in turn alter the way the enunciator perceives the past. Liu further argues that the inevitable shifts in meaning that accompanied the translation and adaptation from Japanese terminology enabled a Sino-Japanese “coauthorship” of modernism in China. Chen Hengke’s theory of literati painting may be understood in the context of this linguistic history. While his projection of a common Sino-Japanese tradition of literati painting betrayed an incomplete knowledge of the history of Japanese art, Chen was importing Japanese concepts to assert a cross-cultural discourse of modernism. Adequate explanation of this process entails, not only the clarification of the original classical concepts he used, but also an exploration of the circumstances that permitted Japanese interpretations to supersede the Chinese.

Wu Changshuo (1844–1927), a guohuajia who found favor with Japanese critics and public in his lifetime, is the subject of Chapter 4. Adept at painting, poetry, calligraphy, and seal carving, Wu possessed the cultivation of a literatus. Yet as an enterprising artist with a vast clientele, he was somewhat at odds with the traditional image of a lofty gentleman who produces only for himself and his social circle. Historians sometimes refrain from calling him a wenren and prefer the label “epigrapher” (jinshijia), a specialist in archaic styles of writing and seal carving. Wu’s paintings with calligraphy-inspired brushwork and dynamic combinations of figure and void extended his epigraphic skills. While current analyses of his artistic achievements abound, few texts have investigated the commercial aspect of his success. The conventional stigma associated with mercantilism in Chinese culture tends to degrade the historical significance of the art market. But as a number of studies have shown, including the volume Artists and Patrons edited by Li Chu-tsing, James Cahill, and Wai-kam Ho, as well as Jonathan Hay’s recent monograph on Shitao, economic factors can shed important light on Chinese painters and their creative choices. Similarly, the present book demonstrates that Wu’s critical acclaim was inextricably tied to his commercial
success and its related social network. To some extent, patrons’ expectations also shaped his stylistic choices.

One concept that runs through the history of modern Sino-Japanese relations is pan-Asianism—the ideological configuration of a unified geopolitical sphere in the East that resists Western hegemony and rivals the West for global influence. This notion found strongest expression in Japan, and from there it spread in various incarnations to other parts of Asia where local meanings accrued. In the history of Japanese imperialism, pan-Asianism had much in common with the Orientalism of the Western tradition criticized by Edward Said: both distorted history to justify racial inequality and territorial expansion. Stefan Tanaka’s examination of the Meiji historian Shiratori Kurakichi reinforces this perspective. Tanaka argues that Shiratori and other Japanese scholars of Oriental history (Tōyōshi/Tōyōgaku) worked to diminish China’s status in history and elevate Japan’s position as the dominant power in Asia. There is no denying that the rhetoric of Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere deployed during Japan’s invasion of China in the 1930s and 1940s was a progression from the pan-Asianism of the Meiji period, but the frequent sharing of cultural discourses between China and Japan in the decades leading up to the war demanded that pan-Asianism be examined from the Chinese vantage point. In the late Qing and Early Republican eras, pan-Asianism gained currency as one of the race-based ideas associated with Social Darwinism. Aspects of pan-Asianism could not be explained by recourse to the conventional critique of Orientalism, whose single-minded focus on the process of colonialism, especially its Eurocentric foundation, is itself problematic. Chinese organizations upholding pan-Asianist ideals with no apparent imperialist function sprang up across China in the early twentieth century, among them some quasi-religious groups in the northeast that Duara calls “redemptive societies.”

Little studied is the circulation of pan-Asianist thinking in the art world, which occasionally took the form of Sino-Japanese joint activities. Perhaps the best example of this was the series of six painting exhibitions recounted in Chapter 5. These exhibitions, the first large-scale collaborations between the Chinese and Japanese art worlds, involved, among others, two guohua organizations in Beijing—the Chinese Painting Research Society (Zhongguo Huaxue Yanjiu Hui) and the Hu Society (Hu She). Held between 1921 and 1931, these events bore witness to the escalating political tension between the two countries. To a
considerable measure, they were deployed as instruments of diplomacy. But this function did not diminish the internal commitment of the art world to promoting talents and connections through exhibitions, which were becoming increasingly crucial to the goals of art as a cultural asset and nationalist symbol.

In considering relations with Japan, this book hopes to aid in the appreciation of guohua as a phenomenon intertwined with transnationalism and modernism. While it is by no means a comprehensive account, the book calls attention to events that reveal a number of unprecedented and significant developments in the modern Chinese art world. Another goal of this study is to go beyond the typical postcolonial criticism of the Orient as a geocultural idea that treats all modern Sino-Japanese relationships as symptoms of imperialism. This approach, I think, offers new directions for research in intra-Asian ties and raises questions about the disciplinary boundaries of art historical scholarship.