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Paper for symposium "Collecting and Connoisseurship of Asian Art":

"Foreign and Local Traditions in the Collecting of Chinese Paintings"

I'm happy to be here participating in this symposium on an interesting cluster of topics. The letter from Laura Sear inviting us to give papers suggested that they focus on "American perspectives on Asia, 'orientalism,' and the early collecting of Asian art." The inclusion of "orientalism" was intended, I assume, to give a particular spin to the day: it invites us to follow Edward Said's terribly influential book in recognizing ways in which representatives of western culture have imposed their own cultural habits and assumptions on Asian cultures.

This is easy enough to do, since there's a lot of truth to that pattern of interaction of west and east. Nevertheless, I would like to begin my presentation by questioning, if not the validity of this whole approach, at least the general applicability of it, and suggesting that bringing it to bear on some feature of Asian art or culture can impoverish our understanding ~~instead of~~ more than it opens it up. (For instance, At a session organized around a similar theme at the meeting of the Assoc. for Asian Studies earlier this year, one of papers dealt with Yanagi Sôetsu's Japanese folk art movement, branding it rather dismissively "oriental orientalism" because Yanagi took his basic premises from foreign writings, specifically those of William Morris and his followers. And the speaker, a young Japanese scholar, extended her indignation to include also the study of Ukiyo-e prints and paintings and genre painting, fûzokuga, studies that were also initiated under the stigma, as she saw it, of foreign ideas and practices.

It must indeed have been galling for Japanese artlovers to have outsiders call their attention to undervalued areas of their own culture. To take a parallel case, I'm sure I'm not alone in feeling that kind of irritation over the fondness of French intellectuals for waxing enthusiastic over some products of American popular culture--Dashiell Hammett, film noir, or (god help us) Jerry Lewis--meanwhile pretending that our attempts at high culture are mostly beneath

their notice. Nevertheless, if we can leave behind for a moment the feelings of irritation that this arouses in us, we can also acknowledge that nudges from abroad can be beneficial--a whole critical literature now exists, for instance, on film noir, which (significantly) still uses the French name for it.

Similarly, the voluminous writings by Japanese art-historians on Japanese folk art, genre painting, and Ukiyo-e are in no way diminished, I would think, by the historical circumstance of their foreign-inspired beginnings. I myself have been critical of Yanagi's movement for injecting a new self-consciousness into the making of folk art, so that the folk-potter, instead of making pots for use by his fellow villagers, begins making pots to be shown in folk-art exhibitions and bought by folk-art collectors. The character of his output inevitably changes, and the whole issue of "authenticity" arises inescapably. But to be critical without admitting also the achievements of the movement in opening an important field of study, and enhancing our understanding and appreciation of Japanese folk art, would be deeply unfair. As, I believe, was the young Japanese scholar's dismissal of it as "oriental orientalism"--that argument, although not in itself without truth, immediately blocked any further consideration of the subject, and any honest recognition of the positive effects of Yanagi's movement. The fatal fault in projects of this kind, as we are increasingly coming to recognize, is the implicit assumption underlying them that once we have identified some element of convention or orientalism or gender bias or whatever in a certain practice or cultural product, we have in effect invalidated it, disposed of it, exhausted its significance. But of course that isn't true at all: we can note with interest the recovery of some hitherto submerged message in the work and then go back to a more fruitful engagement with all the rest. Shakespeare's "Tempest" isn't only or even mostly about Prospero's colonialist takeover of the island from Caliban and his mother, as some English lit. students are now being led to believe.

In looking back over the early collecting of Chinese art in the west, it would be easy enough to adopt an "orientalism" perspective and concentrate on the depredations that took place, or rather the

attitudes that motivated them--cutting stone sculptures from the walls of Buddhist caves, carting off virtually everything movable from Tunhuang, and so forth, declaring all the while that we were "rescuing them" from a culture that no longer appreciated them, at least in the sophisticated way that we did. And no one could write an adequate general account of the subject without doing that. But my intention today is to focus instead on a relatively neglected theme, one that has been left out of general accounts: that is, how the "bad taste" of foreigners, their failure (as the Chinese see it) to penetrate deeply enough into Chinese evaluations of Chinese painting, is responsible for the preservation in foreign collections of kinds of Chinese painting that are scarcely if at all to be found any more in China.

S,S. An obvious and well-recognized instance of this is the kind of painting, dating mostly from the 13th-14th century (late Sung-Yuan period), done mostly in ink-monochrome in rough, seemingly quick and spontaneous brushwork, associated with Ch'an or Zen Buddhism, which now survives almost exclusively in Japan. And because this kind of painting is so well known, and the circumstances of its transmission to Japan well studied, I will simply leave these two famous examples on the screen (without insulting anybody by identifying them) while making another broad observation about my topic. We might be tempted to resolve the matter by seeing painting of this kind as somehow suiting Japanese taste but not Chinese taste. But insofar as that's true at all, it's true only for present-day connoisseurs and collectors in the two countries. The paintings were done, after all, by Chinese artists for Chinese audiences, or "consumers," who must have enjoyed them and valued them, in their own time and within a particular segment of Chinese society presumably centered on, but not limited to, adherents of Ch'an Buddhism. If critics representing a different segment, that is, the Confucian literati, dismissed the paintings as trivial and low-class, coarse in their brushwork, and so forth, as indeed they did and still do, this is only another, different Chinese viewpoint, which is no more to be hailed as quintessentially "Chinese" than the viewpoint of those who admired them. And the fact that the detractors succeeded in later times in dominating the discourse, virtually silencing all

opposition--I refer, of course, to the orthodoxy for which Tung Ch'i-ch'ang was a leading spokesman--doesn't alter that situation. The same is true of other kinds of Chinese painting I'll show today, similarly scorned by Chinese connoisseurs (for different reasons); these, too, must have had their enthusiastic audiences in their time, whose viewpoints are not reflected in the orthodox judgements that we read in the books. Our job is to reconstruct, as best we can, the conditions within which the different kinds of paintings were created and valued, not to take sides between the factions that treasured them or denounced them in China.

(S,S) Apart from so-called Ch'an painting, there are quite a few other types of Chinese paintings that are to be found only in Japan, since they were not among the types chosen to be saved in China. For the early periods, these mostly are from small artists and studios in the Chekiang region, since that is where the Japanese monks went to study who brought the paintings back when they returned to Japan. (Also, espec. later, brought commercially for sale.) (Works of P'i-ling School; specialist artists who did peonies, or quail, or vines and insects; bamboo ptg of type assoc. w. T'an Chih-jui, artist not even recorded in China.) Our understanding of Sung-Yüan painting would be greatly impoverished without these.

(→ S) Che-school painting of the Ming dynasty, although it belongs among the categories that were critically disapproved, is still amply represented in Chinese collections. Because of the low esteem in which these paintings were held in the later centuries, however, especially fine examples by small-name artists that could not be sold for prices commensurate with their quality were customarily fitted out with false attributions and signatures of Sung-period masters, to raise their commercial value and make them into respectable pieces for collectors. And many of the best works in this status have ended up in Japanese and Western collections, because in China they were regarded by sharp-eyed collectors only as fakes. Our task has been to re-attribute them by style to the original masters; I began to do this while at the Freer Gallery, and others, notably Richard Barnhart, have carried the project much further. (Here, a ptg by one of these less-famous but very good Che-school masters, Wang Shih-ch'ang,

which Barnhart has attrib. to him on basis of style--old DuBois Schanck Morris col. at Princeton, once thought to contain virtually nothing worth exhibiting, except one famous Sung ptg.) This is another case in which one might consider these paintings to have been "rescued" by the inadequacies of foreign connoisseurship--the people who bought them, that is, may have been fooled into believing the Sung datings; but what matters in the end is that they bought and preserved the paintings.

S,S The large category of paintings I want to concentrate on today, however, is quite different from these, and less known, even among Chinese painting specialists. As it happens, I'm presently at work on two books that I hope will change that situation. One, based on lectures delivered several years ago, will be about images of women in late Chinese painting; the other, broader in subject, is tentatively titled Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Urban Studio Paintings in Late-period China. My aim is to draw together, and consider as a group for the first time, a lot of very attractive and interesting paintings that float about more or less unattached, misattributed, consigned to storage rooms, in many cases unpublished. The Chinese critics and connoisseurs regard them as low-class, beneath notice, partly because they were done by little-known professional masters working in the cities, partly because of their original contexts and functions, which were domestic settings, the pleasure districts of the cities, and so forth--not the scholar's study or a hermit's lodging in the mountains. They were not included in respectable collections, although they were owned and displayed by Chinese individuals and families for decorative, auspicious and other uses. As a result, the examples that survive are in many cases falsely attributed to earlier masters, and from the Chinese viewpoint are fakes of no value. And the significant point, for our present purpose, is that the best examples of this kind of painting have mostly survived in foreign collections. The task of digging them out, identifying them properly as to age, school or artist, and subject, has occupied me now for some years, and a great many more, I'm sure, still lie in obscurity.
Years ago, when Ellen Laing was teaching here, I came and gave a lecture that was the real beginning of this large project: titled "The Real Mme. Ho-tung," it concerned a ptg in the Fogg Mus. (as it was

then known--now called by another name, which I avoid pronouncing) that purported to be a portrait of famous courtesan-poet Liu Yin, ptd in 1643 by an artist named Wu Cho; but it was really, as I tried to show, a generic beautiful-woman (mei-jen) ptg, by some follower of Leng Mei, mid-18c or so. (Det. at left. Apologies: slides missing.) It belongs to a large and very interesting genre that includes a great many examples; ptg at right, in British Mus., called "Portrait of a Lady," another particularly fine one, with Leng Mei seal, prob. studio work. Both in foreign col. ("Mme Ho-tung" from estate of Senator Theodore Francis Green of Rhode Island); both misrepresented in subject.

S → Kuan-yin
S ← whole

S,S. A few others, quickly, to show types. In Fujii Yurinkan in Kyoto, ptg of Yang Kuei-fei bathing? or Han emperor & concubine Chao Fei-yen. Prob. by Ku Chien-lung, early Ch'ing master, or his studio (I begin to distinguish styles among these.)

S,S. A large New Year's picture, for hanging on New Year's, centered on the father of a large & prosperous family, with wives & children around. Worth more attn., but not to our point today. Was pub. in Kokka magazine in 1956; owned by dealer named Murakami. I wish I had bought it--

S← In another recent lecture I argued that these works by city artists have more human feeling, sympathetic portrayals of domestic scenes and other human-interest subjects than either literati ptgs, in which figs. are reduced to conventional signs, or court academy ptg, which is more polished but colder.

→ S. Portrayals of women, for instance, notably sensitive and affecting. In more respectable kinds of ptg, reduced to types, scarcely distinguishable.

S,S. These are upper and lower parts of anon. 18c ptg in British Mus., group portrait of family in their house and garden. A work of some elegance and interest--but unpub., and probably wouldn't find a place in a Chinese collection. If we go through old western collections, all kinds of surprises of this sort turn up.

S,S. Ptgs of this kind are, to be sure, found sometimes in Chinese collections; but likely to be neglected and unpublished, so hard to

seek out. When, on the occasion of a symposium on Ming-Qing ptg held in Beijing in 1994, we went thru study col. of Central Acad. of Fine Arts and its affiliated Middle School, found surprising number of fine & interesting ptgs. This was one: att. to Ch'iu Ying, but of course not by him; so regarded as fake, put away in "study collection" and forgotten. We exhibited & published it, along with other surprising finds. Not only of very high quality, but tells a lot abt how New Year's was celebrated by a prosperous family. (Half of scroll--) No doubt many more languishing in museum storage rms, study collections of art academies, and private collections in China.

S,S. Another category of Ch ptgs that have received no serious scholarly attention are erotic albums. Crude examples go through auctions all the time, many of them are reproduced in books with texts that seem intended only to lend them a measure of respectability. But others are the equal in quality to anything else of their time, and valuable additions, if only we will recognize it, to the corpus of later Chinese painting. Several survive that can be associated with particular Ch'ing-period artists, allowing us to construct a tentative chronology among them. These by Ku Chien-lung (R) and Hsü Mei (L), both artists who had periods of service as court ptrs in K'ang-hsi era.

S,S. One on right w. seals of Leng Mei; but prob. work of his studio, somewhat later than his period, 3rd quarter of 18c or so. Left: leaf from one of two remarkable albums that belong around the same time, but which I haven't been able to associate with any particular master. All of these use elements of illusionistic style adopted from European ptg (another mark agst them, from Ch. collector's p.v.); all rise above level of crude pornography by treating their subjects with a wittiness and insightfulness that makes them the pictorial equivalent of Li Yü's fiction, or Liao-chai stories. All these are in foreign collections-one on right, dealer Paul Moss in London. (Other: don't know: can anybody tell me?) Whether there are albums of comparable quality in China is a mystery, since they are locked up and can't be seen, even by curators of museums that own them, without special permission from no less than the premier. This was until recently Li P'eng, so we haven't even tried; maybe better under

Chu Jung-chi? But I suspect that this will prove to be another case in which best examples have gone abroad.

S,S. Ptg on left, by unknown 18c master, was in collection of the Munich stage designer Emil Preetorius, who assembled collection of remarkable quality just with connoisseur's eye, untroubled by received opinions about what was proper and prestigious to acquire. One on right is large ptg, some ten feet wide, with title "Eight Beauties of the Hibiscus Terrace" written on it, along with the signature of one of these small city masters, Hua Hsüan, who was active in Wu-hsi, and date that probably corresponds to 1736. One on left prob. represents interior of brothel; on right, the exterior: seven of the women on a balcony looking down into the street? making enticing gestures and holding things that send same message. This ptg was in collection of early 20c Shanghai dealer E. A. Strehlneek, reprod. in catalog of his ptgs pub. in 1914. There dated to Ming period, claimed to represent seven consorts of Ming artist T'ang Yin. Another misrepresentation. Strehlneek seems to have specialized in ptgs and other objects of art to sell to foreign collectors--his shop, according to his printed announcement, was next to the American Express office--and the ptgs he sold appear to have been mostly of the category we can call "good in quality, bad in authenticity"--exactly the kind I'm talking about, which have survived chiefly in foreign collections.

S← Here is one that I know only from an old photograph, with Strehlneek's writing on back, offering it as a work by T'ang Yin (fake insc. by him in upper left.) A courtesan being presented to a client by her attendant who draws back the curtain; wonderfully detailed interior, including shelves with books and antiques, LS ptg hanging in further room. Exceptionally fine work, again mid-18c? As with others I'm showing, much more to say about it--for instance, the significance (rather obvious) of courtesan's sleeve held out toward viewer. But matters of that kind are dealt with in my book, not to the point here.

S,S. There is another Strehlneek catalog, undated, cat. of auction of his holdings held in Tokyo. Going through it (I have copy, which anyone who wants can look through during break) gives fairly clear picture of what he believed (from his experience as a dealer) would

appeal to foreigners; and (by extension) what Chinese collectors didn't want, so he could acquire it relatively cheap. Buddhist ptgs--another category of which best examples are outside China--great Sung examples, along with priest portraits etc., nearly all are, or were, in Japan. (China of course has great wall ptgs, Temples etc.

S,S. Interesting group of six ptgs of arhats, close in style to famous pair attrib. to Shih-k'o in Japan, altho prob. later in date. Definitely outside later Chinese taste. No idea where they went.

S,S. Not all of Strehneek's ptgs were misrepresented; included in the catalog are an album of 12 So. Sung academy fans and album leaves, several with signatures (Ma Yüan, Liang K'ai) now in notable collections (C. C. Wang, Crawford/Met, Cleveland). Of course So. Sung academy works not entirely outside Chinese taste, many fine examples there; but perhaps more highly valued, relative to other kinds of painting, in Japan and the West. Boston MFA was able to put together great collection of them, many from Japan; lots are now in other U.S. collections.

S← One could have walked off street and bought these twelve, no doubt, for a few thousand dollars? from Strehlneek.

→S. Also in catalog is a good Pa-ta Shan-jen from period of 1680s, perhaps (one can only speculate) not accepted as genuine at that time by connoisseurs? because so dif. in style & signature from works of later period.

S,S. These two are on facing pages. The catalog contains a number of fine Che-school works, mostly called "Sung," as this one is (labeled "Ma Yüan"); and a number of ptgs of beautiful women and other popular figure subjects, such as one at left, identified in the catalog as by an unknown Sung-period master. This one will be familiar to many of you: it is in fact

→S the now-famous ptg of the three principals of the Hsi-hsiang Chi or Romance of the Western Chamber: Ts'ui Ying-ying and Scholar Chang, the lovers, and her maid Hung-niang. It is now in the Freer Gallery of Art.

S← This brings me to the last section of my talk, which concerns the collecting of Chinese paintings by Charles Lang Freer. (This is portrait of him by Whistler.) Great collector who put together & gave to American people (as part of Smithsonian Institution) collection that

is now basis of Freer Gallery of Art. (Again, goes under dif. name now, but again, I find it hard to pronounce.) I was there for 8 years as curator at beginning of my career. Quite a lot of writing on Freer; most recent contribution is very interesting article pub. in Art Bulletin by Kathleen Pyne. Beginning w. quotations from Walter Pater and Bernard Berenson, she makes convincing argument that in liberal-agnostic atmosphere of elite circles of late 19c America, appreciation of art, and especially works of art that could be taken as having transcendental, spiritual content, could become a kind of religion. In this light, she gives an account of Freer's career as a collector, and ties in both Fenollosa and Berenson with this same phenomenon. Her account of Freer's collecting is mostly limited, however, to the early period, when he was heavily affected by his friendship with Whistler, and he bought a large number of Whistler's works, along with those by other American ptrs such as Dewing, Thayer, and Tryon. Freer's collecting of Asian art she handles with less understanding, and especially the crucial shift from his early collecting to his late period. Agnes Meyer, who was his close friend in his last years, tells of how, in the years following his retirement shortly after 1900, and especially after his gift of the collection to the American people in 1906, he began to pursue older and more difficult-to-find Japanese and Chinese works of art, and advised the dealers to seek out "early treasures" for him and other collectors to acquire. That's true enough so far as it goes; but there's another part of the story that hasn't been given enough weight, I think, by writers on Freer and his collecting.

(→ S.) When the Japanese art-historian Yukio Yashiro was the third recipient of the Freer Medal in 1965, he gave an address that greatly illuminates this episode in Freer's collecting. (I know it well, although I wasn't there to hear it, because--story.) In Yashiro's account, Freer arrived by boat at Yokohama on his second? trip to Japan (unclear) and was angry over the bad treatment he received from the customs people. Fortunately, he was met by Yashiro's uncle? Mr. Nomura, who, wondering what to do with this cranky foreigner, in a moment of inspiration took him to the villa of his friend Hara, who had a great collection of Asian art. In the weeks that followed, Hara introduced him in turn to Masuda, head of the Mitsui corporation and another great collector. These two, and no doubt others, showed

Freer their best pieces and gave him a crash education in the higher levels of Far Eastern art (I won't stop and justify my use of that term), which seems to have brought about a great turn-around in Freer's taste and understanding. Yashiro spoke in detail of the Japanese side of this "great enlightenment," through which Freer developed an eye and taste for the Yamato-e side of Japanese painting--early emaki (Masuda owned one of the Genji scrolls, and Hara the Nezame-zôshi); Kôetsu and Sôtatsu and early Rimpa (well represented now in Freer's collection, as everyone knows) and other areas that represented the further reaches, for that time, of Japanese art. Freer also put together a remarkably fine collection of Japanese tea wares, which were unrecognized until Koyama Fujio visited the Freer while I was curator there..(story). This experience of being immersed in old and fine Japanese art carried Freer, as Yashiro delicately suggests, far beyond the understanding of Ernest Fenollosa, whose ideas about Japanese painting were largely filtered through the Kano school, and who had never heard of Sôtatsu when Freer showed him screens by that master in his Detroit home. The Rimpa school was at that time not only unknown in the West, but had not yet become the object of scholarly research in Japan. There is no source from which Freer could have learned about it--or about other areas of Japanese and Chinese art that were as yet unknown then to western scholars--except from these very knowledgeable collectors.

The effect on Freer's collecting was dramatic. His taste for Asian art up to that time seems to have been for a Whistlerian japanoiserie and chinoiserie; now, as if in a deliberate resolve to shake off the influence of Whistler, he sold off all his Japanese prints, which he had collected since 1892, and all his blue-and-white porcelains. Neither were represented in the collection at the time he died. (John Pope, of course, built up a new collection of blue-and-white porcelain in the 1950s-60s; Japanese prints are still absent, so far as I know.) Agnes Meyer writes that during Freer's last ten years "it became his cherished ambition and avowed purpose to help the Occident and particularly his own countrymen to an appreciation not only of the ancient art of the Chinese but of their whole civilization .." She doesn't specifically connect this resolve with his lessons from the Japanese collectors, but both Hara and Masuda owned important

early Chinese paintings, and Freer must have learned from them and others in Japan that the prized works of Sesshû and others were ultimately based on the Sung masters of landscape. But it is also true that Freer, to his credit, exercised his own eye and judgement in buying hundreds of Chinese paintings, many of them outside Japanese taste as well as Chinese.

S,S. Among the hundreds of Chinese paintings acquired by Freer between 1910 and his death in 1919 are an astonishing number of fine and important pieces, many of them well-known (such as these, ptgs ascribed to Ku K'ai-chih and Kuo Hsi),

S -- others less known, such as this handscroll attrib. to Yen Li-pen and judged by Tom Lawton to be an early Ming copy of an important early composition representing the theme "Admonishing in Chains." This was one that Freer purchased from the great Shanghai collector P'ang Yüan-chi,

→S. who was later, after Freer's death, to be a major source--perhaps for a time the most important source--for purchases of Chinese paintings, such as the famous Chao Meng-fu "Sheep and Goat." P'ang had managed to acquire quite a few paintings from the palace collection, or Manchu Household collection, including these two. He also seems to have had a separate group of lesser paintings meant for sale to foreigners, and there is a catalog of these, separate from his catalog of his serious holdings. But this is another direction I haven't been able to pursue.

S,S. Others of Freer's late acquisitions have only recently been rediscovered and properly attributed, most often to later periods. Han-shan by Chang Lu, one of many re-attributions I made myself during my many years there; Wang Shih-ch'ang, Che-school master--Father Harrie Vanderstappen gets the credit for this one (formerly called Hsü Shih-ch'ang, Sung master.) Dick Barnhart used the Freer and other works by Wang Shih-ch'ang to attribute to him by style the work I showed earlier in the old DuBois Schenk Morris collection at Princeton, from which Dick, too, has resurrected many misattributed but excellent paintings.

S,S. I want to return finally to my earlier point. If Freer and Morris and others, along with Japanese collectors, had not bought Ming-

(Anon. picture of Xixiangji, principals,)

period Che-school paintings, they would still be represented adequately, if less richly, in Chinese collections. But the same is not true of Ch'an or Zen painting as it was preserved in Japan, or of the later, more popular kinds of paintings I introduced earlier, of which the finest examples appear to be mostly in Japanese and Western collections. (Again, I say this on the basis of what is published and known, and have to admit the possibility that others lie unpublished and unnoticed in Chinese collections.) This one, according to Agnes Meyer, was a favorite of Freer's; it would not have found a home in, for instance, the early collecting of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, dominated as that was by a purportedly higher, heavily Japanese-influenced taste.

(Another detail: hands, Buddha's-hand fruit, both standing in, by device called displacement, for female sex. Specialist colleagues in the fields of Chinese literature, social history, material culture, women's studies etc. now recognize the value of these pictures as providing detailed information and insights on the matters they study, as other kinds of paintings cannot. And, as we rethink our evaluations and recognize how much they have been dominated by Chinese literati writings and biases, we will, I think, recognize also what a loss it would have been if paintings of this kind had not been rescued for us by the "low taste" of people like Charles Lang Freer. Thank you.