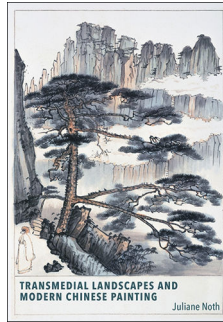


JULIANE NOTH, *TRANSMEDIAL LANDSCAPES AND MODERN CHINESE PAINTING*

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Reviewed by
John Clark

The inception and growth of modern Chinese painting with traditional media and subjects in the 1920s and 1930s is an important topic in art history which Juliane Noth has handled with care and depth. It is also a field with a large and growing literature in Chinese, Japanese, and English to much of which Noth refers, so her book is something of a primer in recent research of the debates on so-called ‘national’ painting. This followed the earlier distinction in Japan between ‘Painting in Western style and media’ [*Yōga*] and ‘Painting in Japanese style and media’ [*Nihonga*].

The first chapter introduces readers to the role of inter-media references or practice transfer between photography and ink painting in the debates on modern national painting in China. The works, ideas, and career trajectories of He Tianjian (1891–1977), Yu Jianhua (1895–1979), and Huang Binhong (1865–1955) are covered from the viewpoint of practice interpenetration (inter-media influence) between photography and ink landscape in succeeding chapters. These are interleaved with essays on subjects derived from travel writing and the picturing of famous sites in the 1920s and 1930s, and on the making of one landscape subject with a specific iconography,

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Mt. Huang in Anhui. In the last chapter Noth's epilogue examines how themes of landscape painting were re-articulated in the time of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945, with some final mention of how these images and stylistics were carried on after the end of the Civil War in 1949.

In art history the Song-Yuan binary was established in Japan by Ômura Seigai (1868–1927) and later translated to China as various scholars have indicated,¹ but He Tianjian, quoting directly from a plethora of fifth- to seventeenth-century texts, made what is an ahistorical case that “landscape had been the most prestigious genre in Chinese painting ever since it became an independent subject, and that it continues as such in his own time” (p. 30). According to Noth, He Tianjian,² in 1935 “interprets Chinese painting practice and its large body of theory using modern artistic concepts introduced from Europe” (p. 32), such as “imagination”, “genius”, and “art”. He “stops short of an outright rejection of form-likeness and mimetic realism and instead affirms the superiority of the abstract [Chinese literati] concepts of inner cultivation, spirit-resonance, the Dao, *xieyi*, and imagination” (p. 32). In a clearly self-privileging view, He believes that “Landscape painting and its theoretical foundations emerge as timeless truths. The contemporaneity of the tradition also implies that the canon of the past is not detached from the present but can be reinterpreted and remodelled” (p. 32), where “He inserts Chinese art, both historical and modern, into a global discursive field that was dominated by Euro-American concepts, with the goal of putting *guohua* discourse on an equal footing with other artistic forms” (p. 32).

By a rather simple process of equating mutual interchange between painting technique and traditions with those of the very specific linguistic domain of poetry, Noth thinks He's essay is an exercise in translanguing practice (p. 32), which “emphasizes the multifaceted nature and reciprocal directionality of the processes of translation” (p. 12). Aside from the major issue of whether “linguistic trans-linguality” is equivalent to, or the analogue of, cross-projections of different visual discourses and some of their media, this problematic sets aside the issue of systemic collapse of visual and ideological systems so eloquently charted by Levenson,³ and even

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Fully analysed by Olivier Krischer in his 2010 PhD thesis at Tsukuba University: *Making “Oriental” Art History. Ômura Seigai and Sino-Japanese Art Relations in the 1910s–1920s*, uncited by Noth. This work was partially deployed in Olivier Krischer, Ômura Seigai's Conception of Oriental Art History and China, in: Inaga Shigemi (ed.), *Questioning Oriental Aesthetics and Thinking. Conflicting Visions of “Asia” under the Colonial Empires*, Kyoto 2010, 265–287, cited by Noth. See in particular Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, The Japanese Impact on the Republican Art World. The Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Field, in: *Twentieth Century China* 32/1, 2006, 13–15 on Ômura, cited by Noth.

2

See Noth, Chapter 1, 338, n. 21, for a list of He Tianjian's publications.

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Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate. A Trilogy*, Berkeley, CA 1958, 1964, 1965, see Part One, II, The Amateur Ideal in Ming and Early Ch'ing Society. Evidence from Painting, 15–44.

admitted to by art historians such as Cahill.⁴ If the intellectual world of Confucian China broke down in the nineteenth century, as the Chinese political and ideological power systems did, why should we think that other Chinese thought systems such as those implied by Chinese painting practices, particularly applied to landscape, should be exempt?

“Tradition” – undefined in this book and unidentified in its index – or “transforming ways of maintaining a repositioned tradition”, might preserve literati painting codes and practices even as the class which supported it had gone, or had only just been transformed into a modern intellectual fraction by the 1920s and 1930s. A “neo-tradition” would have been constituted by them. “Neo” here points to the “new” by a-synchronic appropriation, but also in the shadow of the new to “fake”, and thereby to “kitsch”, or a false art that pretends to be a real art. These issues are not Noth’s concern, but they appear in passing as ghosts which haunt a “Chinese” modernity articulated through the practices of *guohua*.

As shown in Chapter 2, “Canon and Place in the Paintings of He Tianjian”, Noth is more concerned to identify He Tianjian’s conceptions of his relation to paintings from the past admitted to the Chinese canon, some of which had been made available since the 1910s via collotype reproduction, such as works by Dong Yuan (ca. 932–ca. 962) or Shitao (1641–ca. 1707). Such a goal aims to counter the deficiencies of contemporary painting, as in his designated “Methods of Rescue” of 1935 (pp. 61–62), by constructing a new landscape painting based on views of actual sites for which the basis in published photographs is reconstructed by Noth, even as it is avoided and it would seem denied by He Tianjian (pp. 97–98). Painted images which were used for small format album leaves in pre-Republican China became close-ups used in large hanging scrolls in He’s time. To explore and transform the formal means of the ancients in order to provide a discursive repertory, He would have Chinese painters study the historical development of schools and theories. He would then have painters visit actual famous places, sometimes later aided by photographs, to explore the sources of ancient painting, even though the actual appearance of the sites had changed since they became the subject of earlier paintings (p. 70). Ink painters made their works more marketable in terms of current presentation conventions by having “added photographic framing in their compositions and many photographers strove for a pictorialist aesthetic based on Chinese landscape painting”. Some added mists, some altered tonal recessions in the darkroom. This gave intermedial references a competitive feature because they were assimilated to other picture types, from photographs to travel

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James Cahill, *Style as Idea in Ming-Ch’ing Painting*, in: Maurice Meisner and Rhoads Murphey (eds.), *The Mozartian Historian*, Berkeley, CA 1976, 137–156. Cahill hopes to “provide the kind of understanding of our subject that can serve the needs of those who, like Levenson want to include it as one element in a broader treatment of Chinese cultural history”, 138.

sketches, which were available on the art market, in poplar reproductions or in artists' exchanges (p. 98).

The late 1920s to mid-1930s were a period of great development of railway lines in Republican China, which led to domestic expeditions to difficult-to-access famous sites, including those in Zhejiang-Jiangxi between 1932 to 1937, which were visited by artists. Noth carefully outlines how these sites were reached and commemorated by travel publicity, particularly *In Search of the Southeast*, an illustrated book published in 1935 which was preceded by a compilation of earlier published photographs, *Scenic Sites in Eastern Zhejiang* of 1933. These and similar publications opened up areas which were hitherto only available to river traffic, and

through the medium of photography a collective subject is formed whose experience of movement through the landscape forms the main narrative of the book [*In Search of the Southeast*]. The experience is shared with the authors of the poems and travelogues, whose texts likewise are variations on related motifs. (p. 115)

Thus what will appear as chosen landscapes in ink painting with echoes in earlier poetry and written discourse becomes via photography a kind of collective visual discourse to which the new ink painting selectively adjusts, as much as to any earlier sets of topics or technical painting tropes with which the motifs were historically associated. Pre-modern forms of transport, largely walking, were involved once the passengers left the trains. The intent to establish "continuity with an aesthetic they perceived as inherently Chinese led the editors to foreground non-modern aspects of landscape appreciation" (p. 129).

Mountains did not simply exist to be mapped by new visualizations in photography, they existed as part of an elaborate historical genealogy of famous or auspicious sites well recorded in texts and provincial gazetteers. Mt. Huang in Anhui had long been the subject of such appraisal but was difficult to get to by earlier means of transportation. But fame did not in itself provide for a contemporary mapping of Mt. Huang, which had been illustrated in the Song dynasty (960–1279) and whose named pines and rocks were the subject of an unillustrated catalogue in 1697 (p. 181). Contemporary travellers such as Zhang Daqian (1899–1983) and his brother Zhang Shanzi (1882–1940) recorded the mountain in the recaptured copy of a painting by Shitao (1642–1707). That is, the photograph of a painting by Shitao was recaptured in a photograph of the actual mountain, which even thus refers in Zhang Daqian's printed text to earlier Tang and Song sources where, "The bean-petal texture strokes of the masters of Tang and Song dynasties can be observed in this rock face" (p. 184).

Mt. Huang's infrastructural access was improved between 1934 and 1937, as part of the activities of the Huangshan Reconstruction Commission's work "to promote economic development in

the drought-struck region” (p. 188). This saw a public relations campaign, an exhibition, and the publication of *In Search of the Southeast*. The book included two scientific travelogues, one by the painter Huang Binhong (1864–1955) and one by Wu Zhihui (1865–1953). Noth carefully discriminates between the local insider, the conservative view of Huang Binhong, who was born and lived in the area and wrote in literary Chinese, and Wu Zhihui, who had a very different intellectual background as “a prominent anarchist thinker and promoter of scientism” (p. 192), and who also wrote in the vernacular in a contribution which is “at once learned, partial, nationalistic, and ironic” (p. 192). Noth differentiates the different motivations and thought patterns of these two writers, a habit she invaluablely carries on throughout the whole book. The reader is left in no doubt about the complexity of Chinese pictorial discourses, even those close to the conservative position of Huang Binhong.

A further theme Noth develops is the “reinterpretation of painting aesthetics on photography’s terms” (p. 204), seen particularly in the re-adoption into China of Chan (Zen) pictorial aesthetics via the work of Fu Baoshi (1904–1965). Fu studied in Japan and brought back manners which followed the work of the monk-painters Mu Qi (1210?–1269?) and Yujian (late 1200s) whose work had only survived in Japanese collections. This visual manner stimulated photographs by Xu Muru which captured the cloudy and indistinct sea of clouds above Mt. Huang, published in 1935 (illustrated, p. 202). Thus was deprivileged the all-important marker of literati genealogy, linear brush work, rather than tone and wash.

Noth then moves, in Chapter 6, to interrogate how Huang Binhong’s “observations of actual landscape topographies informed his interpretations of ancient methods” (p. 227). This is the most complex chapter and tracks and re-tracks the various links between an artist’s personal history, visual memories from travel visits to the site in person, photographs for railway publicity, photographs for artistic reference, worked up relief prints carved in wood, plano-type lithographs, collotypes, brief travel sketches, worked up sketches, and finally paintings in various formats. The marker artist is Huang Binhong, whose images are claimed by Noth to be “both personal and representative” (p. 231). Even though his work was admired and influential, one doubts whether his relation to past Chinese pictorial discourses and present reprographic technologies could be entirely indicative for others. Noth indicates via reference to Claire Roberts’s PhD thesis (2014),⁵ that in the woodblock-printed *Binhong’s Travel Album* of 1934, “The stark and slightly stiff black outlines and the dots that appear to have been hatched on to the paper with the brush both anticipate and emulate the work of the carving knife” (p. 234). Maybe the greater availability of collotype and photo-lithographic reproduction in the 1910s–1920s made the artists more aware of the consequences of the reprographic medium

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Available [online](#) (24.08.2023).

to be used, and they thought more obviously about their brushwork effects according to the mode of reproduction they knew would be employed. Features of the ostensible motif, Mt. Huang, then become absorbed into the technique.

The uniform movement of the hand conveyed in the brushwork imbues the mountain with an organic character rather than a metallic one. The organic structure which serves to unify as well as rhythmise the composition characterises many leaves in the album [of sketches from Mt. Huang ca. 1930s]. Consequently, it serves to unify the leaves into a coherent whole, while de-emphasizing the natural features of Mt. Huang: the ‘strange pines and fantastic peaks’ are absorbed into Mt. Huang’s brushwork. (p. 256)

In the 1930s this “practice as discourse” anticipates Huang Binhong’s late work “where the process and the means of painting – the lines and the dots of the texture, the movement of the brush, and the handling of the ink – become the main focus of the picture” (p. 261). Already in *Sutra Chanting in Deep Mountains* of ca. 1935, “the painting is still tied to a specific place by means of the inscriptions, but the site becomes the foil for the performance of painting” (p. 297).

In the epilogue, Noth examines “Landscape Painting in Times of War”, beginning with some distorted mountain views by Yu Jianhua and ending with the painterly landscape photographs of Lang Jingshan. Because Noth is positioned to accept the neo-traditionalism of *guohua*, she does not ask if Yu Jianhua’s paintings implied a surrealist horror, or a barely suppressed nihilism.⁶ Or was the stylistic development of Chinese photography itself impeded by Lang Jingshan’s interest in conjuring “Chinese pictorial” effects in his landscape and other external views?

Noth has written a comprehensive and insightful series of analyses on the problems of landscape painting and its practitioners at the junction of intermediation via photography, and on the need to proclaim and reinforce the continuity of “Chinese landscape painting”. Because of its detail and precise analysis this text will be an important reference for some time.

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Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi have written widely and incisively on the transformation of Chinese painting in the 1920s and 1930s during which a new national painting or *guohua* was formed. See *inter alia*, The Golden Age of *guohua* in the 1930s, in: Julia Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *The Art of Modern China*, Berkeley, CA 2012, 93–109; The Traditionalist Response to Modernity. The Chinese Painting Society of Shanghai, in: Jason Kuo (ed.), *Visual Culture in Shanghai, 1850s–1930s*, Washington 2007, 79–93. See also Julia Andrews, Japanese Oil Paintings in the First Chinese National Fine Arts Exhibition of 1929 and the Development of Asian Modernism; Shen Kuiyi, The Japanese Impact on the Construction of Chinese Art History as a Modern Field. A Case Study of Teng Gu and Fu Baoshi, both in: Joshua F. Vogel (ed.), *The Role of Japan in Modern Chinese Art*, Berkeley, CA 2012, 181–214 and 228–244. More recently see Maeda Tamaki, “National Painting” Unbound. Modernizing Ink Painting in the Sino-Japanese Art World, in: Tomizawa-Kay Eriko and Watanabe Toshio (eds.), *East Asian History in a Transnational Context*, London 2019, 188–208; and Maeda Tamaki, Rediscovering China in Japan. Fu Baoshi’s Ink Painting, in: Josh Yu (ed.), *Writing Modern Chinese Art. Historiographic Explorations*, Seattle 2009, 70–81.

Yet there are issues which should be mentioned as worthy of further examination. Quite obviously the notion of who or what was “Chinese” was altered when a new, more direct, and hypothetically culturally unmediated *techne* in photography was available for showing this. Portraiture was a genre denigrated by the literati until the end of the nineteenth century, even before we consider its manifest nineteenth-century relation with early Chinese photography.⁷ All the “neo-traditional” painters and their critical interlocutors were the subject of photographic portraits, many of which were recorded in contemporary studies, so what was the consequence of being seen by others for the act of seeing with authentic “Chinese” eyes? How was photography an active practice for these artists, not simply a technical field for the passive representation of nature, and did that have consequences for their painting, or what they painted?

Travel to and photography in unusual places may be in the nature of modern life. The extension of travel and the atavism of paintings centred in sites pictured earlier in painting or reprographic discourses, and in the aesthetic genealogy of “Chinese painting” through the selection of paintings which typified these sites, meant that “Chineseness” could be subject to interrogation and variation. This opened up a new field of competitive self-definition by artists and for their works. The modernity of *guohua* must have been constituted in a manner similar to restoring Victorian water colours to a present-day Summer Academy show. Many audience members will think the re-appearance and transformation of such works is natural, but what researchers such as Noth show time and again is that they are a structured product of history. Perhaps only great masters, like Huang Binhong, are allowed to break through history’s constraints.

Huang Binhong was supremely confident in his art, and he did not care that his works were not to the liking of others. He lived frugally and on his own terms, particularly in old age. He understood the enormity of the dramatic political changes taking place, particularly in the late imperial and post-imperial period when the world of the traditional Chinese scholar-bureaucrat was dismantled and after 1949 when the social structure of the country was turned upside down.⁸

Huang Binhong stood at the cross-roads of historical worlds. This may be a condition of interstitiality, which, despite his “neo-traditional” formation, may be another reason why, in the *techne* of art, intermediality functions at the cross-over between different types

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See Robert Wue, *Picturing the Shanghai Artist. Subjects and Audiences*, in: id., *Art Worlds. Artists, Images and Audiences in Late Nineteenth Century Shanghai*, Honolulu 2014, 159–214.

8

Claire Roberts, *Friendship in Art. Fou Lei and Huang Binhong*, Hong Kong 2010, 196.

of practice. These all have genealogies which allow exchange, or at least suggest different sorts of parallel development. No one could have been more aware of this than Fou Lei, the art critical friend of Huang Binhong, in his appraisal of *guohua* from a modernist sensibility. But the ravaging of Fou Lei's collection, and he and his wife being driven to suicide during the Cultural Revolution,⁹ were tragedies which the Maoist national (re-)construction of *guohua* should not have forced.

Perhaps Noth will go on to examine what is sincere or authentic in external representation for the artist's internal states across many kinds of discourse, not restricted by the Chinese national construction of *guohua*. Is the state of *guohua* in the 1950s and 1960s a reflection of the politics of the time, despite ostensible state support, or is it a consequence of the very closure – despite much self-proclamation about its openness – which its national construction may have required?

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This suicide is poignantly described in Roberts, *Friendship in Art*, 178.