

Katharine P. Burnett: Shaping Chinese Art History

Scholars of Chinese art history have shifted their attention from artists to collectors during the period from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century that saw the end of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of Republican China. [1] In doing so, they have shed light on our understanding of the agency of various actors and art objects in the canonization of Chinese art in modern China. Described in newspapers from the Republican period as a "renowned collector" and a "great wealthy merchant," Pang Yuanji (1864-1949) was crucial to the establishment of the canon of Chinese art in the twentieth century. His painting collection inspired prominent artists like Wu Hufan (1894-1968) and Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) and has been displayed in museums housing important Chinese painting collections in and outside of China. Katherine P. Burnett's *Shaping Chinese Art History: Pang Yuanji and His Painting Collection* is the first book-length research publication on Pang and his collection. It addresses the social nature of collecting activities and the creation and development of canon and tastes through a comprehensive analysis of a single collector. Drawing from gazetteers, newspapers, painting catalogues, archival materials, interviews, and site visits, Burnett tells a fascinating story of Pang, his family, his social and cultural circumstances, and his contributions to industry, business, and the art world. She examines how his collection represents and defines "Chinese painting", aiming to "replace the reductionist view of Pang Yuanji as a merchant-collector with a broader understanding of the man and his consequent significance" (4).

Structured thematically, the first two chapters focus on Pang's painting collection, and the remaining three highlight his cultural and social circumstances during a time, in which China underwent huge changes from the birth of the Republic of China to the launch of a new educational system, industrialization and technological advancement, and the emergence of modern art institutions, while being interwoven into global economic and cultural networks. By placing Pang and his painting collection in the socio-cultural-political context of the late Qing and Republican China, Burnett underscores his multiple identities as "a merchant-collector with scholar's taste" (3) and explains the significance and influence of his painting collection in and outside of China, particularly in the United States.

Chapter One offers an overview of Pang's painting collection, its quality, scale, content, and meanings, and addresses how he socially reconstructed shared meanings through the collection and its catalogues. His willingness to open the collection to the public reveals a novel way of viewing his collection globally, and as a comprehensive collection that represented the canon endorsed by the Qing elite. Visitors to his collection included artists, collectors, and scholars, such as Wu Hufan, C. C. Wang (1907-2002), Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919), and Osvald Sirén (1879-1966), who in various ways benefited from and disseminated the value generated by the collection. Prominent artist-connoisseurs like Lu Hui (1851-1920), Gu Yun (1835-1896), and Zhang Dazhuan (1903-1980) helped Pang to authenticate and develop his collection. By analyzing the collection's catalogues, Burnett claims that Pang's collecting strategy focused on paintings considered as "great work" by the standards of the Qing canon and the collection's catalogues include legible transcriptions of seals, inscriptions, and colophons that became, as Burnett maintains, important sources for early Sinologists such as Herbert A. Giles (1845-1935) and John C. Ferguson (1866-1945). She contends that Pang used modern printing technologies to publish and disseminate his catalogues in a way that made his collection accessible and transmitted the value and meanings he and his circles embraced.

Chapter Two provides quantitative comparisons (by dynasty, subject matter, and stylistic grouping) of Pang Yuanji's collection and those of contemporaneous private collectors Shao Songnian (1848-1923) and Pei Jingfu (1865-1937). To reconstruct the period's collecting trends and tastes, the author compares Pang's painting collection, based on the information gathered from his three catalogues, namely *Xu Zhai minghua*

lu (1909), *Xu Zhai minghua xulu* (1924), and *Buyi* (1925), with the collections of Shao Songnian and Pei Jingfu. The data show that most of the three collections include paintings from the Ming and Qing dynasties, landscape paintings outnumber other categories, and the artists included were regarded as prominent figures in the Qing canon. Most of Pang's 770 paintings are in the "literati-style" and date from the Yuan to the Qing dynasties, and 238 of them are from the Four Great Ming Masters and the Six Orthodox Masters. The catalogues display the taste and aesthetic value espoused by the three collectors, who purposefully followed and perpetuated the Qing canon through their collecting activities. Moreover, according to Burnett, Pang's collection expressed a message "directed toward local factions and international powers" (75) and "became a useful tool for arguing a different political legitimacy: a politics with nationalist sentiment" (75).

Chapter Three analyzes Pang's family background and social networks, which laid the foundation upon which he accumulated the economic and social capital to develop his collection. Pang's father, Pang Yunzheng (1833-1889), established a silk business in Shanghai that allowed his family to connect to modern urban culture and foreign trade. Pang invested in various other industries to expand the business and diversify and secure his family's wealth. Pang was awarded the Provincial Graduate degree due to his father's generous support of the Qing court. His brother Pang Qingcheng was a key supporter of Sun Yat-sen and the Revolution. Ton-ying & Co., established by his nephew Zhang Jingjiang (1877-1950), served as the agent through which Pang sold works of art to Charles Lang Freer and the Freer Gallery, his adopted son Pang Bingli (1910-1970) studied in England and served as a translator to help with art sales and publications, while his cousin Pang Zanchen (1881-1951) represented him in taking his painting collection to international exhibitions and collectors in the United States.

Chapter Four details Pang's business and philanthropic activities to portray other aspects of his public persona. Positioning Pang as an entrepreneur and philanthropist, the author closely examines the correspondence, gifts, and catalogues related to his art dealing with Charles Lang Freer and argues that Pang promoted Chinese art by helping others form and develop their Chinese art collections and gave Freer the manual of the imperial collection of calligraphy and painting to impart a better understanding of Chinese painting and its tradition. Thus, the author claims that the bilingual catalogues were both historical art texts and sales catalogues for foreign buyers.

Chapter Five focuses on Pang's home town Nanxun, situating his collecting and cultural activities in their socio-cultural and historical context. The author draws on historical texts such as poems and gazetteers to reconstruct the physical and cultural environment of the time, and Pang's legacy in Nanxun, for example the Yi Garden that he designed and built. Burnett cites Kuang Zhouyi (1856-1926) and Zhu Zumou's (1857-1931) *ci* poems that celebrate and praise Pang's garden to testify to his talent and taste, and unfolds the social relationship between Pang and the two leading figures in the literary field of *ci* poetry, who promoted the canonical tradition of *ci* poetry, to reassert Pang's aspiration to perpetuate canonical Chinese tradition. The author also examines Pang's participation in art societies whose mission was to preserve and promote traditional Chinese painting.


The book's epilogue traces the fate of Pang Yuanji's collection. Burnett succeeds in introducing new material and a new approach to Pang's life and his collection, enabling a greater understanding of the choices he made as a collector and advocator of China's cultural patrimony. One shortcoming of the book is the lack of analysis of the texts published in Republican China that provide information about his public persona in the art world and society. The inclusion of the non-canonical Four Monks in Pang's collection could be read as his response to the transnational interpretation and definition of "literati painting" between Japanese and Chinese actors. [2] Overall, the book makes an important contribution to scholarship on Chinese art, collecting, and modern China and provides directions for future research.

Notes:

[1] The Elegant Gathering: The Yeh Family Collection, San Francisco 2006; Clarissa von Spee: Wu Hufan. A Twentieth Century Art Connoisseur in Shanghai, Berlin 2008; Minna Törmä: Enchanted by Lohans: Osvald Sirén's Journey into Chinese Art, Hong Kong 2013; Stacey Pierson: Private Collecting, Exhibitions, and the Shaping of Art History in London: The Burlington Fine Arts Club, New York 2017; Noelle Giuffrida: Separating Sheep from Goats. Sherman E. Lee and Chinese Art Collecting in Postwar America, California 2018; Michaela Pejčochová: Emissary from the Far East. Vojtěch Chytil and the Collecting of Modern Chinese Painting in Interwar Czechoslovakia, Prague 2019.

[2] See Aida Yuen Wong: Parting the Mists. Discovering Japan and the Rise of National-Style Painting in Modern China, Honolulu 2006.

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