Art History and Sino-Japanese Relations

Following the reforms put in place by Deng Xiaoping (1904–97) and the opening up of China, the first cinematic Sino-Japanese joint venture was a movie entitled The Go-Masters (1982). It covers in sweeping, colossal fashion several decades in the lives a Chinese and a Japanese, both renowned go (Chinese, weiqi) masters whose bond forged through a shared passion for this ancient game transcends politics, war, family safety, and just about everything else. Through personal trials and the devastations of World War II, it is ultimately the individual ties sealed in this cultural mold that continue when all else is gone. Implied is not only the fundamental fact that the insane policies of their respective governments—be it the imperialist invasions of the Japanese or the domestic upheavals of the Chinese, both involving unspeakable mass murder—have proven to be devastating failures in every way, but that the only meaningful, lasting ties between the two peoples are the personal, cultural ones formed in the manner of the two men. As the film comes to a close, the two men, after many years of separation, pick up their game where they left off before devastation ravaged the continent.

Romance and melodrama aside, The Go-Masters offers some interesting instruction in Sino-Japanese cultural relations. There was a time not too long ago when the cultural interactions between Japan and China from the late nineteenth century through World War II were generally known to be important but still relatively unstudied. Although an enormous amount of work remains to be done, those many scholarly lacunae are gradually now being filled by scholars in China, Japan, Korea, and the West. One large area that particularly calls out for serious attention, though, is the realm of art history. In what ways did Japan and the Japanese of the Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa eras influence Chinese artistic movements and artists, and the development generally of art in China? What can be said about the interactions between Chinese and Japanese artists and art patrons? What role did Japanese and Chinese play in the revival and spread of artistic antiquarianism and art collecting? What role, in the final analysis, did Japan play in the institutional development of art in

1 Known in Chinese as Yipan méiyòu xiawan de qi (The unfinished game of qi [go]) and in Japanese as Mikan no taikyoku (The unfinished match).
China? These are among the many questions this volume seeks to raise and discuss.

One force that has militated against bringing these sorts of questions up earlier has been the lack of ongoing communication between historians (even cultural historians) and art historians in the East Asia field. Nonspecialists in the art realm have shied away, as they rarely do vis-à-vis other subfields, from the distinctive language and specialized training needed to make sense of art history. While all subfields require a particular form of preparatory education, for some reason historical scholarship on art seems to strike other historians as especially daunting. Many scholars have thus largely drawn back from addressing the sorts of questions raised above. Yet, however, artists and art history played a major role in forging ties between the Japanese archipelago and the Asian mainland.

For over two centuries, from the mid-seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth, actual Sino-Japanese interactions were severely curtailed. These restrictions did not end contacts between Chinese and Japanese, but they made them much more difficult. Many thousands of books (including painting manuals) traveled from China to Japan—in addition to much else—and influenced those who sought them out. Throughout these years of restricted exchange, though, many Chinese painters (usually nonprofessionals) nonetheless made their way to Japan. These men were invariably well treated, even venerated, as figures of great stature once they reached Nagasaki. By the 1860s when the ban on Japanese travel abroad began in stages to be lifted, well over one hundred such painters over the previous two centuries had made the trip to Japan for generally short stints, rarely more than one or two years.

In the 1850s and early 1860s, China was ravaged by the Taiping Rebellion, especially throughout the provinces of the lower Yangzi delta region. These heartlands of traditional Chinese culture had been targeted by the Taipings, and many thousands of members of the literate elite, including painters, made their way to the presumed safety of Shanghai with its foreign enclaves protected by extraterritoriality. Among these a few, such as Wang Kesan (b. 1822)

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3 Although we are dealing with artists here, this phenomenon of migration to Shanghai in the face of the Taiping assaults was true of many other groups as well. For a discussion of the impact on the world of regional theater, see Meng Yue, *Shanghai and the Edges of Empire.*