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Intergradation of Eastern and Western Art: An Analysis of Pan Yuliang's Paintings and their Significance

Zhou Xiaoqin¹, Haji Baharudin bin Haji Mohd Arus²

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, ² Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

Email: 77650572@qq.com, arusbaha@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper assesses the artistic work of Pan Yuliang in order to shed light on the nature and causation of her development as a female artist. The influences of both Chinese and Western art forms upon her draws one to question the extent to which the realization of her potential was predominantly a product of processes inherent within Qing Dynasty China, or of the penetration of Enlightenment ideas and mentalities into China. I go on to assess the extent to which Pan's work served the processes of liberation for Chinese women, or, conversely, served as a cultural impediment to such processes. An examination of secondary literature and the products of museum curation are utilized to assist in the assessment and analysis of Pan's work and the contribution it made to the process of the Intergradation of Eastern and Western artistic forms and depicted content.

Introduction

Pan Yuliang's progress can be comprehended in the context of the emergence, within educated political and social thought, of more egalitarian approaches between men and women and toward the broad mass of the Chinese people. Whether these are mainly attributable to internal factors or to the importation of Enlightenment ideas has become an issue of contention. Of course, Pan was heavily influenced by Western culture, being one of the inaugural intake of women into the Shanghai Arts Academy, where she would adopt techniques, styles and methods from Western painting.

This paper will examine Pan's process of transition; from a girl in a lowly and subordinate position, to becoming a woman of high cultural renown, identifying key enabling factors. Arising from such an enquiry is the question as to whether her works served the progress of greater equality for

women in China, or whether they provided reinforcement to the ancient and semi-colonial mentalities that served the oppression of women.

Review of Secondary Source Material

Pan Yuliang's life was depicted and interpreted in various forms; including novels, movies, and TV dramas; with such diverse sources sometimes serving to spread confusion as a consequence of inconsistencies and the exercise of artistic license.

However, a breakthrough was recorded in 1988, when Anhui Museum compiled the *Pan Yuliang Artworks Collection*, the curation of which included Xu Yongsheng's *Pan Yuliang Chronology*, which presented the main activities and major events of her life. However, this chronology has been criticized as being somewhat simplistic and for evading coverage of Pan's early experience. Building on the Anhui chronology, in 2013 Dong Song used the historical materials, that had been made available, to study Pan's life and artistic activities in a more detailed way. This study has opened up access to, and serves as a source of, comprehensive historical data about Pan.

Pan's explorations of the forms of line drawing, colored ink, and oil painting were present in both her Chinese and Western style paintings. In 2010, Dong Boxin recorded appreciation of Pan's line drawing and colored ink artworks. He noted that the 'New Culture' scholar Chen Duxiu had commented that her line drawings have the charm of 'sculpture', meaning that she utilized the perspective principle of Western painting to express the human body, giving the paintings the characteristics of Western Impressionism and Post-Impressionism (Dong, 2010: 22-3).

Wang Lulu identifies that Pan's series *Songs of Spring*; comprising nine oil paintings and five colored ink paintings produced between 1928 and 1952; served, progressively over time, to intensify the process of the intergradation of Chinese and Western art. The nude women in *Songs of Spring* are seen by Wang as an expression of the artist's love and praise of life (Wang, 2018: 14). (See Fig. 1)



Fig. 1 *Song of Spring*, 1941, oil on canvas, Anhui Provincial Museum.

Wu Jing analyzed the influence of Pan's childhood experience, identifying the presence of complications and contradictions in the expressions of resistance and fatalism, and of inferiority and of self-esteem. Wu identifies the presence of masculine traits, both in Pan's artworks and

her behaviors. She sees those masculine traits as the product of that era's critique of femininity, thought of as being inferior to masculinity (Wu, 2010:16-7). Wu identifies the lack of a father's role in Pan's early life as an impetus for her to develop masculine characteristics in order that she might exercise control and protect herself. However, Wu seems to ignore the later influences on Pan after marriage, which betrayed her more feminine side. Therefore, when Wu faced Pan's large number of female body paintings, in which she expressed a much greater degree of femininity, Wu could not present a reasonable explanation of them.

Tao Yongbai echoes Wu's observations on Pan's works:

Throughout her life, she has been carrying the heavy personal pressure of 'origin' which she never had the ability to control. Whether it was class, gender, or the status of her weak nation after having been to France, the psychological shadow of inferiority continued and strengthened in her mind. She protects herself with a male-like appearance and inner character, and balanced the 'inferiority subconsciousness' with extreme diligence to achieve career success (Tao, 2016: 64).

Jia Fangzhou, presents Pan as a 'new woman' who, having grown up in the aftermath of the New Culture movement, was able to avoid the restrictions of traditional culture and was therefore free to study the Western schools. For Jia, the most important outcome of this was not in the form of Pan's work, but that its content reflected Pan's own experience. "She is the artist who first turned the perspective to herself and first paid attention to the woman's living state" (Jia, 2016:75-6). Therefore, for Jia, Pan was the founder of Chinese women's art with a gender consciousness.

Methodology

This article examines and evaluates the extent to which Pan's cultural progress fits into the dominant historiographical discourse in China, which presents the emergence of Pan from her oppressed conditions as both exemplary and as symbolic of the emergence of the 'New Culture' movement that arose around 1916, and which dovetailed into the political May 4th Movement of 1919. These movements, essentially, were the way in which the ideas of the Enlightenment were imported into China. Such a view of these movements is challenged by Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko, both social historians based in the USA. They dismiss the relevance of 'the May 4th paradigm' which attributes the increased capacity of Chinese women to assert themselves in the social and public arena to external influences. Ko and Mann assert, to the contrary, that Chinese indigenous processes in the Ming and Qing dynasties were fundamental to the flowering of the creative capacities of Chinese women.

Ko criticizes this paradigm as constituting "the invention of an ahistorical 'Chinese tradition' that is feudal, patriarchal and oppressive [and] ... has obscured the dynamics ... of the relationships between men and women" (Ko, 1994: 4-5).

Susan Mann, likewise, challenges the May 4th paradigm arguing that far “from being an unremitting period of female oppression, the Ming and Qing periods were dynamic and diverse centuries of social, political and economic change, with profound consequences for gender relations” (Mann, 1997: 3-4).

During Pan’s earlier life, one can identify a framework of oppression, on the one hand, and the openings available to gain entry into concubinage and into marriage as a second wife, on the other, via which she was able to exercise agency.

Yet scholars continue to identify the emergence of the New Culture movement as a qualitative turning point at which the road opened up for women’s cultural development, especially those from the oppressed classes. In such a way, Wang Dongmei historically contextualizes the circumstances of Pan’s early life. The Chinese Revolution of 1911 and the New Culture movement are seen as circumstances within which revolutionary intellectuals, such as Chen Duxiu and Cai Yuanpei, were able challenge traditional culture. It was within that framework that modern-minded artists hoped to use western oil painting through successful transplantation to incite and transform Chinese traditional painting (Wang, 2009:7).

Similarly, Phyllis Teo, an Australian historian, records that:

Pan’s ... life and career could not but be intertwined with the turmoil and early modernization of China at the turn of the century. Her art evolved within the flux of transformations where conflicting dichotomies of East and West, tradition and modernity, male chauvinism and emerging feminism co-existed. Pan’s modernist works contain novel socio-cultural concepts with which modern reformers strove to replace outdated customs. French curator Marie-Thérèse Bobot writes of Pan’s work, ‘In her oil painting, she unites Western techniques with the sensibilities of Chinese materials and lines. What is particularly captivating is her employment of black and color ink techniques, which she experiments with on paper as she seeks inspiration from themes that are not classically Chinese (Teo, 2010:65-6).

Historiographical controversy gives rise to questioning of the extent to which Pang Yuliang’s artistic progress can be seen as intrinsically linked to revolutionary developments in the second decade of the 20th century and to what extent we might see her path as being linked to the dynamism that existed in the relationships between men and women during the Qing Dynasty?

Analysis

It seems unquestionable that the external artistic influences upon Pan, most obviously in the form of the adoption of oil painting, were a product of her inquisitive spirit that sought answers from the corners of the world; thus opening the window to the styles, forms, techniques, and areas of artistic experiment and enquiry being used in Western art.

Pan was able to operate and maneuver, through flexible use of existing resources within the system, in order to gain a level of autonomy. Her success in utilizing such traditional mechanisms was made possible when, in 1912 at the age of 17, she attracted the favor of the elite and, crucially, revolutionary minded Pan Zanhua. In the following year, she achieved the status of Pan's concubine and to thank him she changed her family name to Pan. This symbolized a radical break from the past and from the confines of the traditional family system, showing her preparedness to meet the challenges of a new beginning. The flourishing of that new beginning was enabled by connections made through Pan Zanhua's network in politics.

After their marriage, Pan replaced Fang Shanyu as Pan Zanhua's official wife in political situations; travelling with her husband and establishing friendships with his male colleagues. Chen Duxiu, who was one of the advocates of the New Culture movement and an early leader of the Communist Party of China, was the only guest attending Pan's marriage, and she benefited from the friendly relationship between Chen Duxiu and Pan Zanhua.

Chen Duxiu used his influence in the cultural field to write articles on Pan's work, serving to enhance her reputation. Chen Duxiu wrote an inscription on three of Pan's human body paintings, in which he praised the works and gave her method a distinguished character and categorical definition: "Using the technique of European sculpture, combined with Chinese line drawing, I call it New Line Drawing" (Dong, 2013:174), (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *A Female Body Lying on Her Side*, 1937, line drawing, with Chen Duxiu's inscription, Anhui Provincial Museum.

Pan's produced line drawings, ink and color paintings, oil paintings, prints, pastels; the variety in her use of method matched the plurality of her engagement with the form and content of various artistic genres. We see the influence and adoption of the academic, realist, impressionist, post-impressionist, and fauvist painting styles in her work. In the 40 years of Pan's second phase in France, from 1937, she used many post-impressionist and Fauvist painting techniques. Phyllis Teo observes that Pan derived inspiration from the work of Matisse, who has been associated with the production of Western Orientalist painting. Teo goes on to assert that it is visibly apparent that Pan adopted certain aspects of the Western Orientalist aesthetics, and Teo argues "a perceptive response to her work must canvas controversial interpretations of her representation of the nude" (Teo, 2010:76; Apriani, Heryanto, 2018). This means we have to think about the

extent to which the influences of Western culture over Pan need to be considered not only in a positive way, as has been my primary focus, but also consideration needs to be given as to whether certain aspects of the 'orientalist' influences served to fall into the trap of depicting women of the eastern hemisphere - the so-called 'orient' - as enigmatic play things, based on the mentalities of 'occidental' male fantasies, thus failing to depict with women of the East as conscious agents. (See Fig. 3).



Fig.3. *Seated Nude Holding a Mirror*, ink and color on paper, 1956.

In terms of her style, Pan's nude paintings are line drawings, ink and color paintings and oil paintings. Her line drawings were influenced by the aesthetics of the ancient Greeks who admire the beauty of the human body, and the lines have the oriental charm of being "vibrant and vivid". Pan's integration of Chinese and Western art saw her develop a unique style that presented a different gender perspective to that of male artists when presenting the human body theme.

Jia Fangzhou perceptively points to the most valuable part of Pan's art not being in the form of her work, but in its theme, in that "she used her brush to express her own experiences. ... She is the first Chinese female artist to turn her perspective to herself and to pay attention to the woman's living status. Her works reflect a strong sense of female consciousness" (Jia, 2016:75; Dimasi & Theologou, 2018). This interpretation certainly serves to contradict concepts of the acceptance of "orientalist" mentalities on the part of Pan.

Indeed, her nude female paintings are not the delicate female images of the Qing Dynasty. Especially in her works of male and female double bodies, the naked expression of passion between men and women is incompatible with the traditional Confucian morality that continued to prevail in the earlier 20th century. Pan's production of a large number of paintings of women's bodies should be seen as an expression of the praising the lives of women and as an attempt to arouse consciousness of the concerns of women in society, thus proving the existence, and

emphasizing the consciousness, of self-affirmation (Xu, 2013:22; Razak, Johari, Mahmud, Zubir, & Johan, 2018).

Conclusion

In presenting concluding identification of the key determining factors that created conditions for Pan's earlier achievements, it must first be cautioned that a one-dimensional perspective is avoided, as polarization on this matter seems to be driven by a divergence of interests. Avoidance of such a pitfall is possible by the interrogation of sources, thus facilitating the avoidance of predetermined conclusions based on one's own ideological standpoint.

Such an empirical approach enables an understanding that Pan's early development as an artist would not have been possible without the inherited potentialities for concubines to exercise agency, enabling her to negotiate openings as a cultural producer. However, as she progressed, the decisive factor for Pan was her engagement with Enlightenment minded members of the Chinese intelligentsia. The adoption of such a balanced approach should not be interpreted as indecisive. Rather, it serves as recognition of the contradictory factors that made possible Pan's capacity to realize her potential as an artist.

Pan's capacity to progress in the cultural field was facilitated both by her inheritance of potentialities for concubines to exercise agency and as a consequence of the influence of the New Culture movement and the values of the Enlightenment on Pan Zanhua, and the consequent acquaintances that she was able to make. Pan's engagement with such people would lead her to fuller engagement with Western art, creating the conditions for her work to become a uniquely successful fusion of Chinese techniques and Western comprehension and perspective.

As we look at the life and work of Pan, it is clear that the openings for women's artistic progress that had emerged from the internal dynamics of the Qing Dynasty were greatly significant. Nevertheless, it would be absurd to even contemplate her progress to being a rightly recognized great innovator in the process of global artistic and cultural interaction outside the presence of the revolutionary cultural change in China that opened a window to the world. As such, it is appropriate to recognize the validity of the observations of those like Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann, and Fang Zuyou who point to the social and cultural advancements made by women in later Imperial China. Nevertheless, it can be asserted that the circumstances of Pan's girlhood were indeed an exemplification of the "feudal, patriarchal and oppressive" nature of Dynastic China that Deborah Ko is at pains to dismiss as being merely the product of modern mythology. The arrival into China of the Enlightenment and the New Culture movement brought qualitative advancements, which would prove crucial in providing Pan with the opportunity for further advancement.

In terms of the extent to which Pan made a cultural contribution to greater liberation for women, or, conversely, served to reinforce the objectification of woman, it has to be said that her paintings of women as nudes have been seen to express contradictory complexities. On the one hand, the atmosphere of China's New Culture combined with a direct engagement with Western

art and artists served to enable her to break free of the constraints of Confucian conservative morality in relation to depiction of the human body. On the other, some have identified shades of the exotic, orientalist, depiction of Eastern women, as influenced by Matisse. But, in response to the latter, it has to be said that the women nudes in her paintings were strong physically and were introspective. Like Michelangelo's *David*, Pan's female nudes were conscious and purposeful, as if contemplating the Goliathan tasks necessary to realize their own potential.

Pan Yuliang's nudes, like the rest of her art, were surely an expression of her own experiences, hopes, fears and frustrations which she would convey as part of the process of cultural intergradation between the West and the East.

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Corresponding Author

Haji Baharudin bin Haji Mohd Arus, Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia. Email: arusbaha@yahoo.com

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