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A Study of Paintings of Beautiful Woman by Selected
Guangdong Artists in the Early Twentieth Century

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In response to the growing popularity of the western style paintings and the paintings of the Lingnan School which were considered to have been derived from Japanese paintings, fourteen artists formed an organization called *Gui hai he zou hua she* 癸亥合作畫社 (Gui Hai Painting Cooperative) in Guangzhou in 1923 with the primary aim of safeguarding the traditional style of Chinese painting.¹ More artists joined this group in 1925 and the organization was renamed as *Guangdong guohua yanjiu hui* 廣東國畫研究會 (Guangdong National Painting Research Society) (“the Society”).² Although the focus of most studies on Chinese art for the 20s and the 30s of the twentieth century had been placed on the artists of the Lingnan School, I believe the artists of the Society should not be neglected as they formed a strong opposition force against the Lingnan School and had significant impact on the art scene of Guangdong during that period of time. While this group of Guangdong artists continued to make paintings in the traditional genres of landscape and flowers and birds, my investigation indicates that the genre of *meiren* “美人” (beautiful woman) was also popular amongst them. Moreover, I will show how these artists had consulted the painting manuals and had looked at the works of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) artist, Hua Yan 華嶠 (1682-1756) for inspiration. In this essay, I will study the *meiren* paintings of three core members of the Society, namely, Li Fenggong 李鳳公 (1884-1967), Huang Shaomei 黃少梅 (1886-1940) and Huang Junbi 黃君璧 (1898-1991) and why they still found the genre of *meiren* appealing. I will argue that the Fujian born artist, Hua

¹ Zhu Wanzhang 朱萬章, “The Guangdong Painting Society and its Members’ Painting Style,” in Zhu Wanzhang 朱萬章 and Chen Yafei 陳雅飛, *Guardians to Tradition: The Guangdong Painting Society, 1923-1937* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Art Museum, 2006), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

Yan had a strong presence at the art scene of the region of Guangdong from the eighteenth century and even up to the Republican period (1912-1949) and some of the Guangdong artists of the Society tried to assert that they were the successors of the heritage of traditional Chinese paintings through the adoption and manipulation of the model of *meiren* paintings of Hua Yan.

By the 1930s, the Society had more than 200 members and was active in promoting Chinese art in traditional style until the occupation of Guangdong by the Japanese in 1938.³ Two branches of the Society were set up in Hong Kong and Dongguan in 1926 and the third branch was established at the Guangzhou Academy of Arts 廣州市立美術學校 in 1935.⁴ Members of the Society took the view that the paintings by the Lingnan School artists were not authentic Chinese arts, but copied from Japan. They thought that people were too eager to learn from the west and the Japanese, but forgot about the great Chinese tradition. They were committed to preserve the national character of Chinese art and to promote Chinese paintings in the traditional style through various activities of the Society. A member of the Society, Huang Bore 黃般若 (1901-1968), the nephew of Huang Shaomei, entered into a heated debate with Fang Rending 方人定 (1901-1975), a follower of the Lingnan School at the newspapers and supporters from both sides participated in the debate in various publications which lasted for about two years.⁵ Both sides had different views on the practice of literati painting, the issue of

³ *Ibid*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid*, 10-11.

⁵ Zhu Wanzhang 朱萬章, "From Gui Hai Painting Cooperative to National Painting Research Society – Traditional Lingnan painters in Modern Art Context" "從癸亥合作畫社到國畫研究會 - 近現代美術語境中的嶺南傳統畫家." *Literature & Art Studies* (December 2008), 132.

painting from life and the problems of learning and copying from the works of old masters and Japanese artists.⁶ The traditionalists considered the Lingnan School was wrong in copying the Japanese and claiming that their works derived from the Japanese as “New Chinese Painting”. On the other hand, the Lingnan School accused the traditionalists of failing to make any progress by copying the works of the old masters and causing the decline of Chinese painting. Apart from participating in the debate which stirred up a lot of discussions on arts, the Society organized exhibitions and regular gatherings, published journals and catalogues, found a library on art and historical materials and provided services in art dealing to promote the traditional style of Chinese painting.⁷

Both Huang Shaomei and Huang Junbi were the founding members of the Gui Hai Painting Cooperative and Li Fenggong joined when the Society was renamed in 1925. The Society did not have a president, but was run by a committee and all three of them were members of the third committee of the Society.⁸ Li was an active text contributor to the publications of the Society.⁹ Artists of the Society were close, they attended weekly painting gatherings and they often painted jointly. For example, *Playing Qin* (Fig.1) is a collaborative work of Luo Genzhi

⁶ Huang Dade 黃大德, “The Debate between the New and Old Painting Schools in Guangdong in the Republican Period” “民國時期廣東新舊畫派之論爭.” *Art Observation*, vol.10 (1999), 66-69.

⁷ Zhu Wanzhang 朱萬章, “The Evolution and the Study of the Affair of the Guangdong National Painting Research Society” “廣東國畫研究會之演變與藝事考.” *Lingnan Culture and History* (February 2006), 24-27.

⁸ Zhu Wanzhang, “The Guangdong Painting Society and its Members’ Painting Style”, 10.

⁹ Huang Xiaogeng 黃小庚 and Wu Jin 吳謹, ed. *Guangdong xian dai hua tan shi lu* 廣東現代畫壇實錄 (Record of Contemporary Guangdong Art Scene) (Guangdong: Lingnan meishu chu ban she, 1990), 17-18 and Zhu Wanzhang, “The Evolution and the Study of the Affair of the Guangdong National Painting Research Society”, 24-25.

羅良齋 (1890-1954), Huang Shaomei and Li Fenggong. They also composed poems for other fellow members and inscribed on the paintings of each other.

Li Fenggong, Huang Shaomei and Huang Junbi all painted the subject matter of *meiren*. Li Fenggong and Huang Shaomei together with another member of the Society, Deng Songxian 鄧誦先 (1894-1964) were considered as the three best painters in the genre of *meiren*.¹⁰ Why did they still paint this genre in the twentieth century? *Meiren* paintings can be appreciated by both literati and less cultured viewers for their decorative and voyeuristic properties and also for their flexibility in expressing different ideas. This genre was popular in Qing, in particular, in the areas of economic prosperity such as Jiangnan and Guangdong where there was a growing demand from the merchants and the city-dwellers. Its popularity continued even after the fall of the Qing dynasty.

The genre of *meiren* shows idealized women in private spaces engaging in feminine and often literary activities. The women in these paintings are depicted as languid beauties following a prototype of conventionalized physical appearance of an oval face, almond-shaped eyes, eyebrows curved in the shape of willow leaf, slender shoulders and a narrow waist.¹¹ Ladies are identified as *meirens* by their conventionalized appearances and the objects and architectures surrounding them, but their faces usually do not give any clues about their identities, personal characters or internal feelings. These paintings not only offer their viewers visual pleasure

¹⁰ Li Jian'er 李健兒. *Guangdong xian dai hua ren zhuan* 廣東現代畫人傳 (The Biography of Contemporary Guangdong Painters) (China: Guang wen shu ju, 1941), 38.

¹¹ Yang Xin, Nie Chongzheng, Lang Shaojun, Richard M. Barnhart, James Cahill and Wu Hung, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press and Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1997), 290.

through their decorativeness, they also offer voyeuristic experiences of sighting beauties in their private chambers. Moreover, the genre can be easily manipulated to give more complex meanings. The *meirens* were described by Wu Hung as “signifiers without a focus of signification” or as having an “empty-vessel syndrome” as suggested by Roberta Wue.¹² *Meirens* are empty vessels which are opened for impositions of various meanings and even for self-projections. Artists appreciate the malleability of *meirens* and they can easily manipulate the genre to express any meanings they want. In all three paintings by Li Fenggong, Huang Shaomei and Huang Junbi, a beauty is depicted in a private space through a window, but they represent different people and carry different meanings. In Li Fenggong’s painting (Fig.2), a beautiful woman is making a traditional Chinese landscape painting with ink and brush inside a private studio. The artist’s inscription¹³ and the poem by his friend and a fellow member of the Society, Lu Zishu 盧子樞 (1900-1978) in the colophon¹⁴ were developed from a line from the lyric poem of the Song (960-1279) female poet, Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-c.1151) which describes

¹² Wu Hung, “Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Early Qing Court and the *Dream of the Red Chamber*,” in Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 326, 329-330 and Wue, Roberta, “Deliberate Looks: Ren Bonian’s 1888 *Album of Women*,” in Jason C. Kuo, ed., *Visual Culture in Shanghai 1850s-1930s* (Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007), 58.

¹³ “簾捲西風人欲瘦，畫臨北苑興偏佳。君華吾兄詩句屬圖。鳳公寫時丁丑春三月。” Li Fenggong, *Inscriptions on Lady Painting at her Studio*, 1937. “The curtain is blown up by the westerly wind, the lady is thin. Painting in the style of Bei Yuan (Dong Yuan, d.962) making one feels particularly good. Brother Jun Hua’s (Wang Junhua 王君華, 1916-1992)¹³ poem makes words for the painting. Painted by Fenggong in Spring, the third month in the year of *ding chou* (i.e.1937).” The English translation is my own translation.

¹⁴ “惆悵西風，筆端寫出秋容好。拒霜紅了，籬角黃花早。山著微雲，水著明霞照，芳心抱。卷簾人悄，木末予懷懷渺。君華先生屬題，喬上綺聲，調寄點絳脣。丁丑春日盧子樞書。” Lu Zishu, *Colophon attached to Lady Painting at her Studio*, 1937. “The melancholic westerly wind blows. The brush tip paints out the Autumn scenery nicely and carries the feeling of a young lady. The cottonrose hibiscus turns red. The yellow flower at the fence is still early. The mountain is bordered by the clouds. The water reflects the shining light of the rosy clouds. A quiet lady can be seen behind the blown up curtain. At the end of the branch, her feeling of missing is insignificant. Mr. Jun Hua composed a poem for the painting. It proudly states the beautiful voice and transmit the red lips. Written by Lu Zishu 盧子樞 (1900-1978)¹⁴ on a spring day in 1937.” The English translation is my own translation.

a beautiful woman feeling melancholic while staying at home in the absence of her husband during the Chung Yueng Festival.¹⁵ However, Li Fenggong's painting and his inscription tell a different story. Although the husband is absent, the lady can still enjoy her time by painting in the archaic style of the master of the Five Dynasties. She is not feeling melancholic, a smile is depicted on her face and she is focused on the act of painting. It is a happy scene with a colourful depiction as opposed to the gloomy scene described in Li Qingzhao's poem. I believe Li Fenggong might have tried to express his contentment in painting in the traditional style through the female painter in the painting. Like the lady in the painting, he was happy as long as he could paint in the canonical style of the great master in whatever environment.

On the other hand, no narrative is offered by the inscription of Huang Shaomei's painting (Fig.3). The inscription only provides information about for whom and where the painting was made. A beautiful woman is depicted holding a brush with a piece of blank paper on her desk inside her chamber. She is an anonymous beauty who is in the process of thinking about what to write, she does not have a specific identity and viewers are free to interpret it or appreciate it for pure visual pleasure. Huang Junbi painted a beautiful woman sitting in a private space with a tea cup on a small table after a painting by Hua Yan (Fig.4). She is identified as Imperial Consort Yang by the inscription which referred to her legend about asking the king for lychee.¹⁶ We can

¹⁵ “簾捲西風，人比黃花瘦。” Original Chinese text from *Yu xuan lidai shiyu* 御選歷代詩餘 (The Imperial Selection of Poems of all Generations), vol.23 in *The Electronic Version of Siku Quanshu (Wenyuange Edition) [Intranet Version]* 文淵閣四庫全書電子版 [內聯網版] (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Ltd., 2005). <http://www.sikuquanshu.com>. My own English translation.

¹⁶ “金屋春深曉起遲，雲鬟慵整亂如絲。內廚幾日無宣喚，不向君王索荔枝。” Huang Junbi after Hua Yan, *Inscription on Yang Yuhuan after Hua Yan*. “The lady gets up late in the golden house, her hair is messy as she is lazy to do it up. She has not summoned the inner kitchen, nor did she ask the king for lychee.” My own English

appreciate the flexible quality of the genre of *meiren* through the paintings by these three members of the Society. The beautiful woman depicted can be Li Qingzhao, Consort Yang or anyone or even as the self-projection of the artist or the viewer.

The genre of *meiren* constitutes a prominent section in the painting manual, *Gu jin ming ren hua gao* 古今名人畫稿, a collection of works of well-known artists from Song (960-1279) to Qing in print format published in late Qing which was widely circulated in the early twentieth century (Figs.5 and 6). There are also images of *meiren* in the section of selections of reproductions by “masters past and present” in the 1888 version of the most famous painting manual, *Jieziyuan huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳 (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting) (Fig.7). The *meiren* paintings of Fei Danxu 費丹旭 (1802-1850) and Gai Qi 改琦 (1773-1828) were reduced into print format in these painting manuals. The painting manuals were considered as useful learning tools to artists who were trained in traditional Chinese painting. When I compare the *meiren* paintings by Li Fenggong, Huang Shaomei and Huang Junbi with the printed images in the painting manuals, I note that similar visual elements including a lady framed by a window with curtains and/or a tree are depicted. These Guangdong artists had probably studied these painting manuals.

While the Guangdong artists might have borrowed some ideas from the painting manuals, I see the original paintings of Hua Yan had a more direct and significant impact on them in deriving their *meiren* compositions. Hua always used framing devices in his *meiren* paintings.

He did not use a simple perfect round or rectangular window to frame his lady as in some of the images in the painting manuals, he used multiple devices including window frame, curtain, rock, tree and other plants to form frames in his paintings (Figs.8-10). The beautiful lady depicted in Hua Yan's painting is just not surrounded by a single frame, but by multiple frames, with a frame within one after another. In figure 8, the beauty is framed by a cropped window and a curtain and then further framed by the tree at the top and the plants and rocks at the bottom. In figure 9, the lady is framed by a pair of curtains and then by the window frame. In figure 10, the beautiful woman is first framed by the white wall, then the curtains and the window and finally the tree extending from the top and the rock at the bottom. Huang Junbi made a close copy of figure 9. We can see a similar strategy of multiple framing is adopted in the paintings of Li Fenggong and Huang Shaomei.

Hua Yan was born in Fujian province and grew up there in his early years, he later moved to Hangzhou and he travelled between Hangzhou and Yangzhou frequently to sell his paintings.¹⁷ He has always been included in the Yangzhou School of eccentric painters in the eighteenth century. He was a versatile painter who painted in various genres including the genre of *meiren* to answer the demand of the market.¹⁸ His works were not only appreciated in Yangzhou, but were also bought by the collectors in Guangdong. The Orthodox School of the Four Wang, the official style of the Qing court painting, had been less influential in Guangdong

¹⁷ Yang Xin, Nie Chongzheng, Lang Shaojun, Richard M. Barnhart, James Cahill and Wu Hung, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 281

¹⁸ James Cahill, *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2010), 99.

than in the north as Guangdong was always a strong base of Ming (1368-1644) resistance.¹⁹

The Guangdong collectors were interested in the works of the Ming loyalists such as Shitao 石濤 (1642-1707), Bada Shenren 八大山人(1626-1705) and the works of the Yangzhou Eccentrics, in particular, the Fujian-born artists, Hunag Shen 黃慎 (1687-1772) and Hua Yan.²⁰ Hua Yan's works have been circulated in Guangdong and have been influential in the art scene of the area since the eighteenth century. His identity as a Fujianese made him popular amongst Fujianese collectors in Guangdong who were important patrons in cultural matters. Fujian and Guangdong provinces both have coastal cities serving as trade ports for foreign trade even back in Song. These two areas were tied together their geographical proximity and by trading ties. The Fujianese merchants were specialized in maritime trade and trade in salt and a significant numbers of them moved to Guangdong to establish their trades there. There were more than a thousand Fujianese merchants from Quanzhou and Zhangzhou trading and residing in Guangzhou even back in 1730s.²¹ When Guangzhou became the sole port for foreign trade in 1757, more Fujian merchants moved to Guangdong. The Fujianese merchants collected the works of Hua Yan and significantly contributed to the popularity and availability of his works in the area.²²

As the artists of the Society saw themselves as the guardians of the tradition of Chinese

¹⁹ Kao Mayching, ed., *Twentieth-Century Chinese Painting* (Hong Kong, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 97.

²⁰ Ralph Croizier, *Art and Revolution in Modern China: The Lingnan (Cantonese) School of Painting, 1906-1951* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), 10.

²¹ Steven B Miles, *The Sea of Learning: Mobility and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Guangzhou* (Cambridge and London: Havard University Press, 2006), 36.

²² *Ibid.*, 34

painting, they were very conscious about the idea of establishing lineage. For example, Li Fenggong claimed that he was following the method of Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106) and he always affixed the seal of “*Longmian jiafa*” 龍眠家法 which means “the method of Li Gonglin” onto his paintings as in figure 2. The Guangdong artists looked to the works of old masters for emulation and Li Fenggong, Huang Shaomei and Huang Junbi picked Hua Yan’s *meiren* paintings as their model. They chose Hua Yan probably because there was a strong local presence of Hua Yan’s works in Guangdong. The close copy of Hua Yan’s work by Huang Junbi (Figs.4 and 9) shows that the Guangdong artists had access to the works of Hua Yan. Another reason for the Guangdong artists to emulate the works of Hua Yan is the result of the change in art canon in 1920s and 1930s. There was a major shift in art canon from the Orthodox School of Four Wangs to the Individualist School in the writing of Chinese art history and in art practice in China then.²³ Painters no longer only imitated the style of the Orthodox School, they also learnt the styles of other artists. The works of the Ming loyalists and the works of the artists of Anhui, Shanghai and Yangzhou were gaining popularity and were also considered as good models of traditional style Chinese art in around 1930 when Li Fenggong, Huang Shaomei and Huang Junbi made their *meiren* paintings I discuss in this essay (Figs.2-4). Hua Yan was therefore definitely a good model for them to follow.

While the members of the Society were attacked for being too conservative and were accused of lack of creativity as copiers of the works of the old masters, I took the view that

²³ Guo Hui, “Writing Chinese Art History in Early Twentieth-Century China.” Ph. D. dissertation, Leiden University, 2010, 133.

some of the members were actually very creative and had a rather open attitude towards new techniques. Although Huang Junbi (Fig.4) copied Hua Yan's *meiren* painting (Fig.9) very closely, he did make many works on his own without copying throughout his artistic career. Li Fenggong and Huang Shaomei were inspired by Hua Yan's model of framing, but they deliberately made variations in the established pictorial formula in their own compositions. In figure 2, Li Fenggong not only played with the idea of multiple framing of Hua Yan, he pushed the idea of Hua Yan further by dividing the painting into multiple non-overlapping frames which are further divided into different spaces with visual elements straddling across them. Li took the pictorial representation of spatial relationship to a new level. He also injected new elements of design like the lines on the window and the door and the use of geometry in the painting. Through the adoption and manipulation of the model of *meiren* painting of Hua Yan, Li Fenggong not only claimed the heritage of traditional Chinese painting, he brought new twist to the existing model to show off his creativity.



Fig.1 Luo Genzhi 羅良齋 (1890-1954), Huang Shaomei 黃少梅 (1886-1940) and Li Fenggong 李鳳公 (1884-1967), *Playing Qin* 彈琴圖, dated 1932. Folding fan, ink and colour on paper, 19 x 51cm. Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou.



Fig.2 Li Fenggong 李鳳公 (1884-1967), *Lady Painting at her Studio* 仕女作畫, dated 1937. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. 80.5 x 28.5cm. Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong.



Fig.3 Huang Shaomei 黃少梅 (1886-1940), *Lady composing poetry* 仕女覓句圖. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 105 x 28cm. Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong.

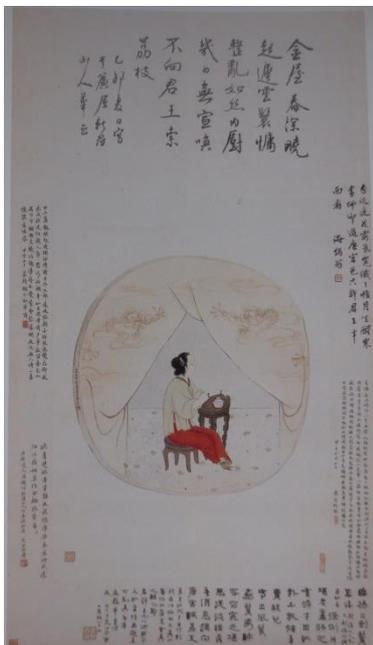


Fig.4 Huang Junbi 黃君璧 (1898-1991), *Yang Yuhuan after Hua Yan* 摹華岳楊妃圖, 1924. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper. 109.5 x 52cm. Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou.



Fig.5 *A Lady in her Chamber* 仕女圖, a print based on the work of Fei Danxu 費丹旭 (1802-1850), reproduced in *Gu jin ming ren hua gao* 古今名人畫稿 (Collection of works of past and present well-known artists) (Taipei : Wen shi zhe chu ban she, 1973).



Fig.6 *Picture of a Lady* 仕女圖, reproduced in *Gu jin ming ren hua gao* 古今名人畫稿 (Collection of works of past and present well-known artists) (Taipei : Wen shi zhe chu ban she, 1973).



Fig.7 *Picture of a Lady* 仕女圖, a print based on the work of Gai Qi 改琦 (1773-1828), reproduced in *Jieziyuan huazhuan* 芥子園畫傳 (Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting), vol.4 (Beijing : Ren min mei shu chu ban she, 1960).



Fig.8 Hua Yan 華岳 (1682-1756), *Painting of a Lady* 仕女圖, 1724. Hanging scroll, 129 x 39cm, ink and colour on paper. Guangzhou City Museum of Art, Guangzhou.



Fig.9 Hua Yan 華岳 (1682-1756), *Yang Yuhuan* 楊妃圖, 1735. Hanging scroll, 119 x 57cm, ink and colour on paper. Guangdong Provincial Museum, Guangzhou.



Fig.10 Hua Yan 華嶽 (1682-1756), *Portrait of a Lady* 仕女, 1750. Hanging scroll, 120 x 42cm, ink and colour on paper. Guangzhou City Museum, Guangzhou.

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