Contemporary vs Traditional Chinese Paintings

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**Introduction**  
 Contemporary Chinese art reflects a lot what happened to China before it embraced modernization. I have chosen two paintings for my paper: Hung Liu’s “Three Fujins" as contemporary Chinese painting and Tang Yin’s masterpiece “Court Ladies in the Shu Palace” as traditional Chinese painting. My paper will compare and contrast both paintings. I will discuss how traditional work of Tang Yin's could have been the inspiration for Hung Liu in casting a spell in her painting. Moreover, I will discuss how contemporary painting of Hung Liu bridges with Chinese traditions.

**The history behind these Paintings**

In the middle of the 20th century, after the establishment of new China, there was a painful history of oppression and violence beside the astounding growth which made it a strong competitor against capitalism of the West. Before the 20th century, China faced a tough time embracing modernization. The poison of discrimination, people deprived of their rights, oppression, and violence, was all part of China. Slavery and prostitution were on the peak. Whereas today, workers have rights in the organizations that they work for, they cannot be treated as “slaves” in the past who were treated inhumanely and had no rights all. Their efforts were not appreciated, and they had no name for the hard work they did all their lives. Tang belonged to the period of the Ming Dynasty whereas Hung Liu is a 20th century’s Chinese –born American artist. Both artists’ compositions movingly address the same issue in a deep and inspirational way.

**Visual analysis**

Tang’s “Court Ladies in the Shu Palace” is a color and ink painting on thin silk hanging scroll and is 124.7 x 63.6 cm in length. It is about four court ladies of Shu state who are standing. Two of them can only be seen from the back, they are more likely to be court servants, and two women who are facing viewers are more likely to have noble status (Cahill, James, Handler, Julia, 2013).. As the women who can only be seen from back in the painting are serving the two, who are facing viewers. Moreover, this claim can also be confirmed by dresses, style, and actions of the women in the painting. Those who are wearing vibrant, floral and colored clothes, showing delicacy and manners, and are being served by others, obviously show that they have noble status. Those who are wearing dull colored and simple clothes, and who are in action of serving others, shows these two women are servants and have low status in the society. Servant on the right refills a glass of wine for the lady in dark dress, the lady in the red dress seems to be persuading her friend to not to drink more as she may lose her manners in doing that.

Hung Liu’s “Three Fujins” is a 96 x 126 x 12 inches oil canvas painting. It is about three women sitting on chairs holding cages. Women in the painting were younger sisters of Ci Xi Empress and concubines of Xianfeng Emperor. They are shown all dressed up for their work. Birdcages in their hands represent the submission and bowing down of Empress herself in male-controlled society (Cahill, James, Handler, Julia, 2013). They are wearing masked like faces which represent that something about them needs to be hidden. The focus of the artistic work is on the women who are sitting in the middle, and the background tells no deep story.

Tang used (gongbi zhongcai) in painting, or a fine brush with the heavy style of color and did nothing more for the background of the painting. He used dynamic and yet fine strokes of brushes to paint dresses of the ladies and used a traditional sanbai method by using additional white color for their noses, chins, and foreheads to make it look like they are wearing makeup. He painted flowers, leaves and clouds of the coronas of ladies and their dresses’ motifs in bright, vibrant and noble color (Barnhart, Richard, 1993).

Whereas, Hung Liu used much of her artistic creativity on the mask-like faces and makeover of the women to symbolize them for the agony of roles that they are enforced to play in their lives and portray irony of belonging to the royal lifestyle but as nothing but slaves. Hung Liu made them hold birdcages and fans in their hands which correspond to the dresses that are wearing. The colors she used are dark and muddy in appearance. As she has used oil paints for her painting, she did an amazing job in the distinction of uncontrolled lines with controlled lines with the help of linseed oil which shows liberation in her work. Effects of her liberated lines create a dynamic outcome, as if the painting is mourning and weeping that is most suitable tone, describing that painting theme involves slavery, subjugation and suppression of women (Barnhart, Richard, 1997).

Both paintings share the story about slavery in the history of China. They describe the low, inhumane and immoral treatment of slaves. The concept of "Namelessness of slaves" is shared by both artists. They have described how slaves did not even have a chance to reveal who they were and what they were capable of. Their faces remain hidden all their lives and world value none of their efforts. As, in tang’s painting, slave women are shown as unseen and unimportant. Their faces cannot be seen by viewers which shows how society ignores them. Moreover, in “Three Fujins”, faces of sex workers of Emperor are hidden beneath their makeover as well. These workers work for the Emperor namelessly; they are forced to do what they do. Their abilities and capabilities are masked by force. If they had the power to break free from this slavery they would but they are living a life without rights, and they have no right to speak up for themselves (Cahill, James, Handler, Julia, 2013).

Tang has used facelessness of the working women and described the whole point through that whereas Hung Liu has used faced with a makeover to explain the invisibility and sacrifices of the slave women. Moreover, Hung Liu has used bird cages in the hands of women because they are a symbol of her vocabulary. They are a symbol of weakness, helplessness and bowing down of Empress to the man-dominating society. On the other hand, Tang has used dull colors in his painting to make to show the weakness and helplessness of the slaves.

Hung Liu being an American, was familiar with the liberal world. She knew about the venom of social evils like gender discrimination and about rights of employees. When she got hands on the picture of these women and learned how inhumanely they were treated all their lives, she decided to honor these nameless women in her masterpiece, “Three Fujins.” Her work in this particular painting establishes strong connectivity with Tang’s “Court Ladies in the Shu Palace.” As both of them are discussing slavery which was the part of Chinese history. Both have specifically used women to convey their message because, in that era, women had lesser rights and no power at all to speak up and raise their voice for their rights.

Furthermore, the concept of hiding faces of slaves in Tang’s painting could have been an inspiration for Hung Liu’s work as she used the same concept in her painting as well. She has creatively hidden painful souls, shattered hearts, agony, grief and helplessness of the women in their makeover (Xu, 2017). All their abilities, desires, talents, skills, emotions, rights are hidden underneath the mask they are wearing. They are not allowed to expose their selves like that just like in Tang’s painting which addresses the same issue.

In dark ages, like the rest of the world, China had strict and discriminatory traditions as well. Such traditions engulfed the rights of many and none had fought for such social injustices. Hung Liu being a part of modern society knew the significance of discussing such matters of utmost importance. Her work has given modern art the glimpses of horrible history women had in China. She honored those women in her painting who were forced to be sex slaves of the Emperor, who were caged, given no right and no freedom at all to live life according to their goals and ambitions. However, Tang’s work is antique and reflects old Chinese traditions, but the main point is that the artist actually belongs to that time period and has eye-witnessed ugly injustices of the society.

Tang mourns and raises voice for those whose efforts, struggles, and hard work is hidden and ignored by the horrible notions of society. Tang's concept in “Court Ladies in the Shu Palace” entangles Hung Liu’s work with motivation and inspiration in “Three Fujins.” Both paintings raise voice for the rights of women slaves in China and speak strongly for their freedom to choose the way of life that they want to. Mourning and grieving in both paintings is inspirational for their viewers and both artists did more than just playing with pretty colors, they move heart of the viewers through the strength of the stories that they tell.

**References**

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