

CLP 36

James Cahill

AFTERWORD (to my published "The Case Against Riverbank.")

The above paper was published ~~in English~~ in the symposium volume Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999, pp. 13-63.) The version delivered at the symposium, which was held at the Metropolitan Museum on December 11, 1999, was necessarily much shorter. But it also included some material that is not in the published paper, and selections from this material are appended here, along with a few notes on the symposium.

Jason: I don't know  
why the heck I  
ignore it  
(can't control  
new computer)

Two other papers offered negative views on *Riverbank*. Sherman Lee's "*Riverbank: A Recent Effort in a Long Tradition*" was necessarily brief, because of Lee's recent illness; it pointed to "discrepancies of style and representation" throughout the painting, and concluded, "The result is a morass of starts, false starts, and half starts that point inexorably to a modern pastiche all too familiar to many of us [i.e. as a work by Zhang Daqian] and unworthy of serious consideration by our serious colleagues." Hironobu Kohara's "Notes on the Recent History of *Riverbank*" supplements my own "Alternative Recent History for *Riverbank*" which is Count 14 in my paper, but differs from it on a few points, especially in arguing that the Xu Beihong letter is itself a forgery made by Zhang Daqian. Evidence may turn up in future to support one or the other version of "what really happened"; for now, both must remain conjectural, on the basis of the evidence we have. What matters is that both of us identify serious flaws and inconsistencies in the "official" account that show it to be itself a fabrication by Zhang Daqian.

A paper by Maxwell K. Hearn, Curator of the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan, titled "A Comparative Physical Analysis of *Riverbank* and Two Zhang Daqian Forgeries," which I read only after finishing my own paper, obviously demanded a reply, especially since so many people outside art history believe (mistakenly) that in

questions of authenticity, physical evidence always outweighs the stylistic. I added the following section in response to Hearn's paper:

"I think it was clever of the Met to bring the British Museum's so-called 'Juran,' a generally recognized Zhang Daqian fabrication, and hang it beside *Riverbank*, in the hope that people will say: 'These two don't look alike, they can't possibly be by the same painter.' If we were to hang the Dutch forger Van Meegeren's *Disciples at Emmaus*, the masterwork among his forgeries of Vermeer, done on canvas of Vermeer's period, painstakingly painted over seven months and carefully aged, beside one of Van Meegeren's later, quicker, and sloppier productions, the effect would be the same, I think. They wouldn't look alike, but they would in fact be by the same painter-forger.

"Some circumstances of that kind must underly the physical differences described in Hearn's paper on the comparative physical analysis of *Riverbank* and two other Zhang Daqian forgeries: they needn't be more than the differences between a work carefully painted, perhaps on old silk, and skilfully furnished with the attributes of age, vs. others on which less time was spent and less technical expertise lavished in the mounting and aging. The mounting was reortedly done for *Riverbank* by the late, remarkable mounter Meguro Sanji of Kôkakudô in Tokyo, with whom I spent many enlightening hours on many visits to his studio; he could perform near-miracles of making a painting take on more or less any appearance you chose, making seals and inscriptions appear or disappear, and so forth. As for the silk: early on in this project I turned to the only scholar I know who has made a careful comparative study over some years of old Chinese painting silks, Robert Mowry, Curator at the Sackler Museum at Harvard. He doesn't want to suggest a dating for the silk of *Riverbank* until he has studied it out from under glass; he's read Mike Hearn's essay and has some questions about it, but since he's here and can speak for himself if he wants to, I'll quote only this from a letter he wrote in

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March of last year: 'Even if the silk turns out to be 'old,' I don't think the painting is of the same age.' And more recently he writes: 'I assume that old silk was sometimes available to those who searched for it--' and: 'If the silk is old, the date of the painting still has to be determined on the basis of style and connoisseurship.' Which is exactly what I'm doing today. Robert van Gulik (*Chinese Pictorial Art*, 1962, p. 391) expresses the same view, writing that even if the silk or paper is proven old, it doesn't mean that the painting is of the same age, and he adds, on the basis of his intimate knowledge of the Japanese and Chinese mounters studios and art markets: 'In a country like China where for centuries antiquity and antiques have been regarded with nearly religious veneration, it is not too difficult to acquire blank sheets of antique paper, and unused rolls of old silk.' I myself own a painting by the mid-18th century master Li Shizhuo which, the artist writes in his inscription, was done on a piece of Song-period xuan paper.

李世倬

“Still another authority writes: ‘The desired appearance of paper or silk of a given age could be artificially produced. On occasions, it was perhaps even possible for the forger to use a genuine piece of ancient material suitable for his purpose.’ He provides a cautionary example: in the mid-1950s Zhang Daqian brought to Japan a would-be Dunhuang painting (depicting a bodhisattva holding a flower in a glass cup) with an 8th century, Tang dated inscription--a painting that is now recognized by everyone, including this writer, to be one of Zhang's forgeries. The painting was subjected to technical analysis by laboratory specialists in Tokyo, and, he reports, ‘From the physical standpoint, the forgery was almost perfect . . . microscopically and chemically, it was thought that everything looked as one might expect of a handsome specimen of Tang workmanship. There were, in fact, plans afoot to publish the findings, as a standard textbook on technical analysis of a Tang painting.’ And he comments: ‘It is clear, therefore, that scientifically ascertained data must be interpreted not only in the framework of the stylistic evidence of the painting, but also according to our special

historical insight with regard to the problem in question.’ These wise words, with which I couldn't agree more, are from the very good 1962 article on "The Problem of Forgeries in Chinese Painting" by my colleague Wen Fong (*Artibus Asiae* XXV/2-3, pp. 98, 106)--the same person who, nearly forty years later, writes: ‘. . . it is important for us to recognize that based on physical as well as stylistic analysis, the painting [that is, *Riverbank*] cannot be a work of the 20th century nor the creation of the renowned modern forger . . . Zhang Daqian.’ (“Foreword” to the symposium volume, p. 8.) The two statements aren't absolutely irreconcilable, but they certainly pull in opposite directions. I will invoke the 1962 Wen Fong against the 1999 one and continue to argue that *Riverbank* can be 20th century and by Zhang Daqian, and that it is.”

An issue that came up repeatedly during the symposium concerns what Sherman Lee and I and others mean when we speak of “representational mistakes” or “discrepancies,” or of “garbled” and “unreadable” passages in the painting. Our meaning is consistently and deliberately misunderstood by supporters of the painting, who attempt to reduce it to a matter of more realistic or less realistic representation, and who point out (quite irrelevantly) that Chinese artists “didn’t pursue form-likeness,” so that the kind of criteria we use are inapplicable to Chinese painting. What we are referring to has nothing to do with realistic or naturalistic style, and even when the artist is using some kind of expressive distortion or idiosyncratic brushwork, the images he paints can still be “right” or “wrong” within this. That some scholars seem unable or unwilling to make the distinction indicates only a failure in their way of looking.

I concluded by pointing out once more that the Xu Beihong letter and all the rest of the “recent history” or provenance of *Riverbank*, formerly seen as a major support for the painting, has now turned into an embarrassment for its believers, since a genuinely early painting with a real provenance would not have needed such an obviously fabricated one. “Most everything that was claimed for this letter,” I said, “has been overturned in recent investigations--the recipient, the dating, the present owner, the interpretation of its contents; and supporters of the painting have been revising their stories accordingly.” But none of them, I might have added, is willing to address this issue now, or to try to explain away the inconsistencies and contradictions that we find.

My chief dissatisfaction with the symposium, in the end, was that no one except Kohara and myself addressed the problem of provenance at all--when it was brought up, in questions from the audience, none of *Riverbank*'s supporters responded in any way. As I wrote Kohara afterwards, " I believe now that they *have no effective response*, and instead decided to use the tactic that we call in English 'stonewalling.' This means ignoring an argument you can't counter, in the hope that nobody will notice. And, so far as the symposium went, they were successful. Someone should have stood up and said: 'Yes, but what about Kohara's and Cahill's arguments? If this is an old and fine painting, why was so much trouble spent on faking a provenance for it? Why doesn't anybody tell us where it really came from?' But nobody raised these questions, not even the discussants. . . So the entire symposium went by without anyone really responding to the problems we raised, after our long and careful investigations."

If a European would-be old master painting were to turn up suddenly in the hands of a known master forger, and the recent history claimed for it proved to be spurious, there would scarcely remain any room for argument, even if the painting were stylistically convincing for that period and that master (as *Riverbank* certainly is not.) By some curious double standard, a Chinese would-be old master painting is not held to the same criteria, and apparently can escape--for now--the judgement that its European equivalent would receive.

But, as I wrote Kohara, "Our trump card is that it's all a matter of time. . . forgeries have only a limited life span, and what is accepted by great experts one year looks obviously wrong to any graduate student twenty or thirty years later. It will be that way with *Riverbank*; we only have to wait."