

The Myth of Vincent Van Gogh in Modern Japan and China

This paper treats one aspect of the myth of Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890). Needless to say, the figure of Van Gogh constitutes an outstanding case of cultural exchange between the Netherlands and Japan. Simultaneously, he is the culminating figure of the so-called Japonisme movement in Europe, and the most influential and beloved artist in Japan. In a larger context, it must be noted that Vincent Van Gogh also became the most famous Western painter in all of East-Asia in the 1920s. He was not only worshipped among the young Japanese intellectuals, but also welcomed by Chinese readers. Therefore, the formation and transformation of his image in modern East-Asia offers a privileged case for studying the representation of Westerners by East-Asians.

To this end I propose examining two biographies of Vincent Van Gogh published in Japan and in China during the 1920s. The first is by Kuroda Jûtarô (1887-1970) and published in Japanese in 1921. The other is by Feng Zikai (1898-1975), published in Chinese in 1929. The initial question I wish to raise is whether the East-Asian myth of Van Gogh is reducible to its Western prototype. I will rather argue that the Van Gogh phenomenon gained a new dimension in its contact with East-Asian aesthetics in the context of the cosmopolitan modernity of the twenties.

Let us begin by asking two questions about the myth of Japan as dreamed by Vincent Van Gogh. As is well known, Van Gogh idealized Japan and repeatedly declared that in Arles “I am in Japan”. “To contemplate nature under the clearer sky [in Arles] gives us a more precise idea of how the Japanese feel and make drawings.” For Vincent, the Midi of France was literally an equivalent of his imagined Japan. Where did this fantastic identification come from? We also know that Vincent repeatedly talked about the community of artists. With the Japanese example in mind, Vincent proposed exchanging work among camarades. “Since long ago, I have been touched by the fact that the Japanese artists quite often practised the exchange of work between themselves,” he wrote to his brother Theodore (1854-1891) and also to Emile Bernard (1861-1948). But where did he get the inspiration for such an exchange?

It is interesting to note that one of the first civilian French voyagers to Japan declared that a certain similarity existed between the limpid colour of the Midi in France and the particularly vivid colouration of the Japanese climate, which he believed to be faithfully rendered in the Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints. “Looking at these Japanese prints, one is finally convinced that in order to reproduce certain effects of nature, there are new procedures which merit experimentation. For these Japanese images betray a surprising fidelity to nature,” this person wrote in 1885.¹ Surprisingly enough, what Vincent was going to write to his brother Theodore, immediately after his arrival at Arles, would appear as if Vincent were trying to verify the similarity of Arles’ climate with the

¹ “A Midi, en été, toute couleur vous apparaît crue, intense, sans dégradation possible ou enveloppement dans une demi-teinte générale. Eh bien! Cela peut sembler étrange, mais n’en est pas moins vrai [...]. Il a fallu l’arrivée parmi nous des albums japonais pour que quelqu’un osât s’asseoir sur le bord d’une rivière, pour juxtaposer sur une toile un toit qui fût hardiment rouge [...], une route jaune et de l’eau bleue. Avant l’exemple donné par les Japonais c’était impossible, le peintre mentait toujours. [...] Lorsqu’on a eu sous les yeux des images japonaises, sur lesquelles s’épalaient côte à côte les tons les plus tranchés et les plus aigus, on a enfin compris qu’il y avait, pour reproduire certains effets de la nature qu’on avait négligés ou cru impossibles à rendre jusqu’à ce jour, des procédés nouveaux qu’il était bon d’essayer. Car ces images japonaises que tant de gens n’avaient d’abord voulu prendre que pour un bariolage, sont d’une fidélité frappante” (Théodore Duret, *Critique d’avant-garde*, 1885).

bright colour of the Japanese prints which he had already copied in Paris.²

The same Frenchman, who was also known as one of the first collectors of Japanese art in Europe, deposited with Maurice Joyant a series of Japanese *surimono* albums. The three volumes concerned had been assembled by a certain Nagashima Sadahide who collected rare Japanese order-made prints as a token of his collaboration with other satirical *kyōka* poets (presently in the Collection Duret at the Cabinet des Estampes of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris). It would have been sufficient for Vincent to simply glance at such a collection, in order to be convinced of the practice of exchange among Japanese artists: many of the print specimens were of different size and different style and had been put together and meticulously stuck on the panel. The fact that these albums were accessible at Maurice Joyant's house at the time when Vincent was in Paris, allows us to suppose that Vincent could have had the occasion to discover similar examples. Moreover, Maurice Joyant (1864-1930) would succeed Theodore Van Gogh at the Montparnasse branch of the Goupil Society, after Theodore's death.

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The “eyewitness” Frenchman I have been evoking is Théodore Duret (1838-1927), who published a biography of Vincent Van Gogh in 1916. The richly illustrated book was the first of its kind in France. The publisher, Bernheim-jeune, is known to have organised the first important exhibitions on Vincent Van Gogh in 1901 and in 1908. At the end of the second edition, published in 1924, Théodore Duret added several phrases in order to celebrate the publication in Japanese of a biography of Vincent Van Gogh, written by Kuroda Jutarō, based in Kyoto.³

² “Ayant promis de t’écrire, je veux commencer par te dire que le pays me paraît aussi beau que le Japon pour la limpidité de l’atmosphère et les effets de couleur gaie. Les eaux font d’un tel émeraude et d’un riche bleu dans les paysages ainsi que nous le voyons dans les crépons [estampes japonaises]. Des couleurs de soleil orangé pâle, faisant paraître bleues les terrains. Des soleils jaunes splendides.” (Van Gogh, lettre à Émile Bernard, B-2, mars 1888.)

³ “Le premier tirage de ce livre se terminait par ces mots: ‘Van Gogh sera demain partout où il n’est pas aujourd’hui.’ Notre prédiction est en voie de se réaliser. [...] Il est une terre lointaine, le Japon, où Van Gogh a maintenant pris pied et où il est admis comme s’il était un enfant du pays. Il avait compris l’art japonais, il en avait étudié la technique, il lui avait fait des emprunts.

Kuroda published his biography of Vincent Van Gogh in 1921. He had started out faithfully translating the biography by Théodore Duret, but then added numerous citations from the letters of Van Gogh, as well as the observations of European art critics. The name of the artist had been enthusiastically worshipped by young Japanese intellectuals upon the initiative of the *Shirakaba* school, composed of young aristocratic students at the *Gakushûin* highschool in Tokyo. When Kuroda's biography was published, already four critical biographies of Vincent were available in Japan, and according to professor Kinoshita Nagahiro, who conducted an exhaustive research on Van Gogh literature in Japanese language, Kuroda's work is "too scholarly and too balanced to be recognized as really an original contribution in the reception of Van Gogh in Japan".

However this apparent shortcoming Kuroda's work is valuable if we see it as typifying of Van Gogh's reception in Japan. The conceptual differences between the European view of Van Gogh and that of Japan can be traced in the adaptation by Kuroda. Let us summarize three main characteristics.

First, as far as the aesthetic judgment is concerned, the excessively impressionistic view of Théodore Duret was modified by Kuroda. Let us take one typical example. While translating faithfully Duret's passage into Japanese,⁴ Kuroda, being himself an artist and art critique, added one modification. According to Kuroda, Vincent Van Gogh was referring not only to impressionistic procedure in his colouration, as Duret asserted, but also "he made one more step, it seems to me, by obtaining the synthetic effect" stemming from the *Fin de siècle* symbolism with which Vincent had been impregnated. Duret, as the famous champion of Manet and the Impressionists simply repeated his old idea, whereas Kuroda made up for the apparent lack in Duret's oversimplified and too impressionistic view

Aussi les Japonais ont-ils reconnu en lui celui des artistes européens qui se rapprochait le plus des leurs. Dans ces conditions, M. Kuroda, prenant son point de départ dans les ouvrages publiés en Europe, a écrit sur Van Gogh un livre excellent, qui a permis aux Japonais de le bien connaître comme artiste et comme homme." (Théodore Duret, *Van Gogh* [1916] 1924, p. 103).

⁴ "D'abord le soin d'observer partout la couleur, de reconnaître dans un ensemble la variété des couleurs, qui devront être appliqués sans atténuation, demi-teintes ou clair-obscur. Puis, pour saisir et fixer avec intensité la lumière éclairant les couleurs, le recours au système adopté par les impressionnistes, de peindre en plein air, sous l'éclat direct du grand jour et du soleil. En troisième lieu, l'emploi de touches hardies, qui préciseront les lignes et les contours du premier coup, d'un jet, sans qu'on puisse ensuite les reprendre. Il a atteint, en ce qui concerne ce procédé particulier, suggéré par les Japonais, une complète maîtrise." (Duret; *Van Gogh*, pp.67-68; Kuroda, p.198).

of Vincent Van Gogh.

Second, as for the madness of the painter, which, according to Duret, could still provoke a summary condemnation of all of Vincent's work, Kuroda's judgment was quite different from that of Théodore Duret. Duret was rather reticent concerning the remarks on the "fantastic and unreal" in Vincent's creation and simply tried to defend the artist by emphasizing his "sincerity and spontaneity". Duret also denied the relation which people had tended to suppose between the "madness" and the "fantastic side" of the artist's "imagination". However, such a concern about the madness of the artist and such a conciliating attitude to the public taste did not seem to be necessary for Kuroda. In fact Kuroda several times added the painter's words where Duret had cut off his quotations. Let us take two examples as illustration.

First, a whole phrase: "The more I am troubled, mad and imbecile, the more I become artist, creator" had been eliminated by Duret but was re-inserted by Kuroda, who found it too important to be omitted. Second, whereas Duret stops with the phrase "the morning work in the field fatigues me. That is the sun here is so fatiguing", Kuroda restored the following passage, dropped by Duret: "Oh the beautiful sun in Arles in plain summer! It slaps me on the head and I don't doubt that it makes me a man mad and crazy". The following phrase "Or, l'étant auparavant, je ne fais qu'en jouir" was freely re-interpreted by Kuroda as "It made no difference even if people treated me as a madman". Apparently Kuroda took pains to give justice to the artist's own confession of the "madness" and tried to interpret it in connection with his creative impetus.

Third, as for the cause of the madness of the painter, Kuroda tried to explain it in his own way, even taking the liberty of contradicting Duret.⁵ While Duret recognized the artist's mental crisis as an "incurable illness", a fatal disorder which lay beyond the artist's own will, Kuroda, on the contrary, tried to explain it as the artist's voluntarily self-destruction: "For Van Gogh, to be conscious of the life amounted to going ahead with his extremely intensive desire and will. To go ahead in this way was equal to being absorbed in the relentless creation. But to create relentlessly was

⁵ "L'accès de folie d'Arles a été la manifestation violente d'un état morbide permanent, prenant une forme aiguë, sous le coup de circonstances particulières et [...] si les soins, le calme ont fait cesser momentanément les crises, ils n'ont en aucune action sur l'état morbide d'où elles découlent, qui a sa racine au plus profond du peintre." (Duret, p.87; Kuroda, p.213).

doomed to perish in the access of delirium, which was much more sinister than any other possible disaster or destruction. To go ahead or to retreat? That was the question. Once again he was confronted with this contradiction which had no issue.”⁶

Kuroda, then, grasped the vicious circle inherent in Van Gogh’s compulsive desire for creation. This understanding was also attuned to the representative view of Van Gogh as shown by a contemporary painter, Kishida Ryūsai (1891-1929) who had declared: “Each painting of Van Gogh is at the same time creation and destruction. It is the interior plenitude that springs up to collapse. I cannot help trembling with awe in front of his existence. I myself have to strive to the extreme limit of my force.”⁷

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The only European painter whose biography was published in book form in the China of the Republican period (1912-1949) was Vincent Van Gogh. Kuroda’s biography was translated and adapted into Chinese in 1929 by Feng Zikai, famous essayist and caricaturist, who came to Japan in 1921 for his training in European style painting. At the end of the preface to his *Van Gogh*, Feng clearly manifested his creed of subjective aesthetics.⁸

⁶ “Enfin, avoir la conscience de la vie, c’est pour Van Gogh, avancer selon le désir conscient d’une intensité extrême. Avancer ainsi équivaut à se donner à la création sans relâche. Mais créer sans relâche est voué à périr dans un accès de délire, choses beaucoup plus sinistres pour lui qu’aucun désastre ou destruction possibles. Faut-il avancer ou reculer? Il se trouvait à nouveau devant cette contradiction sans issue.” (Kuroda, p.224 - notre traduction).

⁷ “Chaque tableau de Van Gogh est à la fois création et destruction. C’est la plénitude intérieure qui surgit pour s’effondrer. J’éprouve le frisson devant son existence. Il me montre jusqu’à quelle intensité l’homme peut vivre. Il faut tenter de vivre jusqu’à l’extrémité de mes forces.” (Kishida Ryūsei, “Sur Van Gogh”, 1913 - notre traduction.)

⁸ “Si l’art tend à l’objectivité, la personnalité de l’artiste n’a pas de rapport profonde avec son œuvre. Si, au contraire, l’art met l’importance sur la subjectivité, un rapport étroit se noue entre l’homme et l’œuvre d’art, j’aime le mystère du dernier, et n’aime pas le mécanisme du premier. Lorsque je vois l’homme, j’applaudis le dernier qui vit dans l’art et n’aime pas le premier que trahit la virtuosité technique. La vie de Van Gogh plonge dans l’art. Son œuvre est le document complet de sa vie saisie étape par étape. C’est un exemple d’un artiste qui vit son art. C’est évidemment la personnalité que les peintres orientaux apprécient dans l’art. On dit ‘qu’avec une haute personnalité la vibration rythmique [*qi-yun*] de sa création ne peut pas ne pas être noble’. C’est pourquoi il est dit ‘qu’on distingue dans la peinture la hauteur du peintre’. De ce point de

Two characteristics must be noted. Firstly, Feng Zikai distinguished subjective painter from objective painter. This dichotomy certainly stems from the Chinese literati tradition which prefers referring to the couplet and the antithesis. Yet Feng borrowed this dichotomy from Kuroda's Van Gogh biography where Kuroda had distinguished two kinds of artists.⁹ However, Feng intentionally misinterpreted Kuroda. While Kuroda had distinguished "artist" from "human being", without implying any value judgment, Feng, for his part, shifted this opposition to introduce another opposition between "subjective artist" or an artisan-type technician who had been disdained in the Confucian tradition and the "subjective artist", whose spirituality was highly estimated by Feng Zikai. By referring to the classical book *Huātú Jiànwénzhì* by Guō Ruòxū, of the Northern Sung Dynasty, Feng Zikai simultaneously revealed his respect for the Chinese tradition and his capacity of judging Van Gogh following the criteria of the Chinese aesthetics.

As the second remarkable characteristic, Feng surprisingly qualified Van Gogh as an *Oriental painter*. Why was this qualification, at first sight so far-fetched, possible? Feng could have implicitly referred to the description given by Théodore Duret and briefly summarized by Kuroda.¹⁰

The rapidity in execution and the spontaneous fixation of the effect were the main fixed ideas in Duret's view of Japanese art. Duret had repeatedly advocated this opinion either to defend the apparent lack of "finish" in his friend Edouard Manet's contested paintings, to justify the aesthetics of the unrecognized impressionists, or to explain, like here, the

vue-là, Van Gogh est un peintre oriental." (Feng Zikai, préface). - Cf. Gao Ruoxu: *Guhua Jianwenzhi*.

⁹ "Il y a deux sortes d'artiste. L'un vit entièrement comme *artiste* et il est inutile de s'intéresser à sa vie intime qui se dissimule dans son œuvre. L'autre vit avant tout comme *homme*, et il nous est impossible de couper son œuvre de son caractère ou de sa vie. Dans l'art moderne, l'exemple éminent du premier est Claude Monnet; du dernier, Van Gogh. Peu importe quel est le plus valable. Il suffit de constater que dans le cas de Van Gogh, à travers sa vie douloureuse, ce sont ses œuvres qui, étape par étape, manifestent directement l'angoisse, la mélancolie et l'extase de l'homme." (Kuroda, p.10 - notre traduction).

¹⁰ "Les Japonais, qu'ils écrivent, dessinent ou peignent, n'ont qu'un instrument et qu'un procédé: ils se servent exclusivement du pinceau promené à main levée. Or comme le pinceau met sur le papier ou la soie des lignes et des surfaces sur lesquelles il n'y a pas à revenir, elles doivent être appliquées, du premier coup, d'une manière réussie. La justesse et la perfection à obtenir de prime-saut sont ainsi devenues les qualités essentielles de la technique japonaise. [...] Aussi Van Gogh, épris des artistes du Japon, va-t-il adopter à leur exemple une exécution rapide, par touches hardies, mises avec justesse, du premier coup." (Duret, pp.35-36; Kuroda, p.91, p.198).

violent execution by Van Gogh. However, the general conception of Feng Zikai could not be reduced to this scheme proposed by Duret. From the beginning of his preface, Feng advanced another binary opposition so as to evaluate the artistic evolution in Europe at the end of the 19th century.¹¹

In this preface, Feng Zikai's ideology clearly appears. According to Feng, the subjective and expressionistic tendency in the recent Western painting, which had clearly been marked by Cézanne and Van Gogh, and followed by the Fauvism of Matisse, was regarded as a reaction to the objective representation of the Realism and the Impressionism. According to Feng's assumption, such an orientation could be explained as an outcome of the Oriental influence which the Western painting had undergone in the last decades, the phenomenon which Feng did not hesitate to call the "orientalization" [*Dōngyáng huà huà*] of Occidental painting.

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Kuroda's biography ran to more than 270 pages. It was condensed to 80 pages in Feng Zikai's translation. Nishimaki Isamu has recently published a study which systematically analyses the modifications Feng

¹¹ "Jusqu'au XIXe siècle, il existait une distance infranchissable entre la peinture occidentale et la peinture orientale, dont les styles se distinguaient nettement. A partir de la fin du XIXe siècle, la peinture occidentale a tout d'un coup subi l'influence de la peinture orientale et les arts de l'Est et de l'Ouest se trouvent en fusion progressive. Ce n'est pas un simple changement dans la peinture, mais un problème important dans le mouvement des idées de l'Europe moderne et plus encore sur le plan de la culture mondiale que nous devons étudier.
La peinture moderne en Europe découle de Cézanne. Son principe artistique se résume dans les mots que 'toutes les choses du monde naissent de mon existence', et son style est spontané, audacieux et rapide, il n'y a pas de retour possible une fois que le pinceau touche la toile. C'est une révolution par rapport à l'art objectif d'autrefois, tels que le réalisme ou l'impressionnisme en Occident. Elle a été aussi le premier essai, dans la peinture occidentale, d'y introduire le goût subjectif de la peinture orientale. Ce style se voit encore plus exagéré chez Van Gogh. Les lignes sautent, les couleurs sont hardies, l'expression est simplifiée, tout cela prouve l'orientalisation [*dōngyáng-huàhuà*] de la peinture occidentale. L'atelier de Van Gogh était décoré avec des estampes japonaises et des peintures [à l'encre] chinoises. Il était amateur d'art oriental.
Depuis que Cézanne et Van Gogh ont établi leur style, beaucoup de peintres en Occident moderne ont abandonné la manière de peindre insipide et froide pour prendre part au mouvement de l'art subjectif. Le monde de la peinture en Occident d'aujourd'hui se trouve en gros dans le prolongement de Cézanne et de Van Gogh." (Feng Zikai, préface, *La Vie de Van Gogh*, 1929).

Zikai made to Kuroda's book. Let us summarize the four main points.

Firstly, while Kuroda described the financial difficulties Van Gogh suffered in his incapacity of making his painting profitable, Feng found in this description a positive element of virtue and a sign of the artist's detachment from worldly ambitions. "The commerce aims at making profit but the profit is a sophisticated theft". These are Vincent's words in a letter addressed to Theodore, which had been inserted into Kuroda's biography as an anecdote, was re-interpreted by Feng Zikai, as the profession of faith which Feng wrongly took for Vincent's outspoken challenge to his employer at the Maison Goupil, which he had resigned from shortly before. Van Gogh's poverty was thus transformed into the virtue of the artist who despised, to Feng's assumption, all kinds of lucrative business, with the indifference so much respected by the Confucian tradition.

Secondly, Kuroda's narrative on Van Gogh's spirit of charity and unselfishness and his devotion as a preacher during his stay in the Borinage coal mines was extensively taken up by Feng Zikai, without abridgment, thereby contributing to underline the spirituality of the protagonist. Feng placed importance on the moral aspect, overlooking the technical and practical aspects of Van Gogh's painting. This choice can also be explained by the Chinese *literati* value judgment and the Confucian philosophy.

Thirdly, Feng accentuated the artist's detachment from society. While Kuroda did not, despite Duret, ignore the fact that Van Gogh was personally responsible for having raised mistrust among the Arlesian inhabitants, Feng, on his part, found in the isolation of the painter not the lack of sociability but the greatness as an artist. It is in this context that the "madness" of the painter obtains a new dimension and is positively revalued. In the Taoist tradition of Zhuàngzǐ, the very definition of "madness" [*Kuáng*] designates a person who is misunderstood and rejected by society because of his/her eccentric behaviour but who is attuned with the will of the Heaven (in Chinese sense). "Madness" is a "distinctive mark of genius".

This idea crystalized the image of Van Gogh as a hermit who found his retreat in the Midi of France so as to concentrate on his art. Arles thus becomes, in its turn, the equivalent of the Southern Mountain in China. The Yellow House in which Vincent dreamed of creating an ideal fraternal

community of artists—following the Japanese lesson—plays here a symbolic role. The “pied-à-terre” as described by Vincent himself and called as “une bicoque” or “un abandon” in Duret’s biography was translated as an “asylum” or a “refuge” in Kuroda’s biography, and to which Feng had given the translation of *Yǎnjū de Fáng shì* or the “chamber of retreat”. The word evokes to the Chinese readers a hermitage, favourite subject of the idealized life depicted in the “Painting of the Mountains and Water”.

Thus, a frustrated and humiliated Dutch painter, as he appeared in Duret’s and Kuroda’s biographies, has now been transfigured into an idealized Taoist painter-hermit of genius, who lived in an isolated hermitage with an exemplarily detached indifference to worldly affairs and free from any mercantile speculations. Here we see the appearance of Vincent Van Gogh as an Oriental painter...

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The transformation of the image of Vincent Van Gogh in East-Asia in the 1920s has the following three major implications, which serve as my concluding remarks.

To begin with, the idealization of Vincent Van Gogh in East-Asia was first conducted by the enthusiasm of the young Japanese artists and writers and then was recast in the mould of the Chinese literary tradition. In the course, the “madness” of the painter was converted into the merit as well as the sign of his genius, which permitted at the same time to understand and recuperate the artist in the East-Asian tradition of the Taoistic creative madness.

The singularity of this reception is better understood when it is compared to the making of the Van Gogh legend in the West. As Carol Zemel’s extensive research has shown, it was only from about 1912 on that European art critics shifted their attention from the stylistic classification of Van Gogh’s paintings to the personality and the human quality of the artist himself. It was not until the First World War, i.e. with an interval of almost 25 years, that the image of the heroic martyr began to develop. In East-Asia, by contrast, the main attention was cast from the beginning

mainly upon the personality of Vincent Van Gogh. The fact that his work was accessible mainly by poor black and white reproductions paradoxically contributed to this tendency, as Kinoshita Nagahiro judiciously suggests.

Secondly, the somewhat biased identification of Van Gogh as an Oriental artist is tightly connected with the awakening, in that epoch, of the Asian nations' consciousness to their own cultural identity. Vincent's *Japonisme*, reported in Théodore Duret's biography and detailed by Kuroda Jûtarô, was aggrandized to its extreme by Feng Zikai. Feng's version was an Orientalism out of proportion. It claimed that the Expressionist tendencies of modern European painting could be characterized as the result of the "Orientalization" of the European Art.

It is true that Kuroda himself also suggested elsewhere that Oriental expressionism preceded the European one, but this did not imply any value judgment. In contrast, Feng Zikai assumed that the Oriental influence on the Occident in the development of subjectivity in artistic expressions proved by itself the superiority of the Oriental aesthetics to its Occidental counterpart. Feng also claimed that the spiritualist art theory of Kandinsky (1866-1944), developed in the latter's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1912), was simply a modern prolongation of the Chinese classical aesthetics. European Expressionism seems to be reduced by Feng Zikai to a belated manifestation of the Oriental influence.

Thirdly, it must be recognized that Feng Zikai was led to this oversimplified comparison between Eastern and Western Aesthetics by his Japanese sources. In his famous manifest "The Triumph of the Chinese Fine Arts in the Contemporary Art", published in the periodical *Dongfang zazhi* in 1930, Feng Zikai remarks not only on the resemblance between the recent ideas of *Einführung* by Theodor Lipps (1851-1914) and that of the rhythmic vital vibration [*qiyùn shēngdòng*] of *Xiè Hè* (479-502), but also on the superiority of the Chinese classical notion over the newly invented European idea. And, as Feng himself explicitly mentions, this nationalistic statement of Eastern superiority to Western aesthetics was indoctrinated in Feng by Japanese sinologists such as Ise Sen'ichirô (1891-1973), Kinbara Sheigo (1888-1958), and Sono Raizô (1891-1973), Japanese translator of Kandinsky's treatises. Feng also refers to eminent Japanese style painters like Nakamura Fusetsu (1866-1943) and Hashimoto Kansetsu (1883-1945), who had been frustrated by the European incomprehension of the Japanese paintings at the World Fair in Paris in 1900, and who had since been engaged with the rehabilitation of the

Chinese expressionist literary painters of the Southern school, such as Shí Taō (1642-1707) and Bádà Shānrěn (1626-1705).

This rehabilitation of the Southern school can be regarded as a result of several concurrent factors. First, the Chinese Revolution of 1911 provoked the exodus of many artistic pieces to Japan, preparing the material conditions for Japanese sinologists. Second, the expressionistic tendencies of the *literati* schools of the Southern Sung Dynasty were seen as a manifestation of their disobedience to the objective and meticulous depictions characteristic of the official style of the Northern Sung Dynasty. On this stylistic opposition was superimposed the actual political situation of the young Republic of China. The Chinese art students of the generation of Feng Zikai despised the academic style as the shameful residue of the toppled “foreign conqueror” Dynasty, the Qing.

The sinization of Van Gogh’s image in East-Asia around 1930 is now understood as a constituting element of China’s gradual return to its own tradition. While attracting young Chinese painters to Europe, Van Gogh at the same time encouraged them to turn away from it, contributing thereby to the “invention” of the Oriental tradition in modern China. The poor development of the oil painting in Modern China can be explained, partly at least, in this precise historical context (instead of invoking the cultural determinism of China and its so-called cultural chauvinism).

To conclude, let us evoke, as an unexpected avatar of Vincent Van Gogh’s veneration in Modern East-Asia, the figure of Yamashita Kiyoshi (1922-1971). This Japanese painter, with a slight mental handicap, was surnamed the “Van Gogh of Japan.” His paintings, qualified as “naive”, were highly estimated in the domestic art market. A television series, based on his autobiography, was a tremendous success, and his name is now widely known all over the country. The person who put Yamashita on the stage was Dr. Shikiba Ryūzaburō (1898-1965), a psychiatrist famous for his enthusiastic pathographical study on Vincent Van Gogh...

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