Wu Dacheng (1835-1902) and the Modern Fate of Chinese Literati Culture

China by the late nineteenth century had been governed for centuries by a class of scholar-officials selected by a series of civil service examinations. Scholar-officials were both the nation’s political elite and men of letters (wenren, often translated as literati) who played important roles in the field of artistic production. They were at once the primary patrons of elite art and the elite artists who produced it – poets, calligraphers, painters.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, imperial China encountered unprecedented crises in a new and challenging international environment. Many key economic and political changes took place in China at that time. In 1905, the civil service examination, the institutional foundation of the traditional scholar-official class and literati art, was abolished, and a modern educational system was introduced. Younger generations who had majored in fields of practical knowledge were recruited into the government, and the composition of the elite underwent a profound transformation. The literati or scholar-official class disappeared as a historical phenomenon in the twentieth century, yet its art has continued as a major cultural legacy and an integral component of Chinese national identity. In its new social and cultural contexts, elements of this tradition have continued to have profound effects on recent generations of non-literati. For this reason, the study of art produced by scholar-officials in the last decades of imperial China becomes a significant foundation for understanding the modern fate of literati art.

My research will attempt to answer several key questions. To what extent was art by scholar-officials of the second half of the nineteenth century a response to the challenges of the new international environment? What role did literati art play, if any, in projects to reform and modernize China? To what degree was their art transformed in its new social context? In what ways?

My study of the modern fate of Chinese literati culture (including its art) will begin by focusing on Wu Dacheng, a senior government official and distinguished scholar, artist, collector, and art patron. Wu passed his metropolitan examination in 1868 and became a successful government official, including service as governor of Guangdong and Hunan provinces. He actively participated in contemporary politics and was a member of the reform party. He had been sent to the northeastern province of Jilin in 1880 to improve defenses on China’s Russian border. In 1894-95, Wu led the Chinese army against Japanese imperial ambitions in this northern area. In short, as a senior government official, Wu was keenly aware of China’s international environment and was deeply involved in domestic politics and international affairs.
Wu Dacheng also is significant to studies of the modern fate of literati culture, for hardly any contemporary politician could match his accomplishments in scholarship and art or his impacts on scholarship and art in the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. As a scholar, Wu conducted groundbreaking paleographical studies of inscriptions found on ancient bronze and stone objects; he also studied ritual jades and seals. Overall, his scholarship profoundly influenced modern Chinese archaeology.

Wu Dacheng was a refined calligrapher and painter who created many important artworks. He also assembled a massive collection of art and antiquities. His collecting activities had enormous influence on the practices of modern collecting. His grandson Wu Hufan (1894-1968) was one of the most influential collectors of twentieth-century China.

Wu was a well-connected figure in late Qing politics and culture, and the topic of my study will be broadened by analyses of some of his contemporaries with similar backgrounds. Based on an investigation of the art and collections of Wu Dacheng and his friends, I will attempt to unfold and flesh out the relationships that prevailed between art and politics in nineteenth-century China.

In the presentation, I will outline my research on the following topics:

Introduction: Mapping the Empire in a New World

Socialization in Suzhou: Learning to Be a Literatus

From Suzhou to Shanghai: Wu Dacheng’s Early Involvement in Politics and his Early Familiarity with Western Culture

An Official’s Cultural Life in Beijing: the Art Market and Collecting Practices

Calligraphy in Late Qing Officials’ Everyday Life

The Role of Rubbing Makers in Qing Intellectual Life

Composite Rubbings and Western Learning

Painting as a Pastime for Government Officials

Hiring Artists as Secretaries

Wu Dacheng and Late Qing Military Affairs
Epilogue: The Modern Fate of Literati Culture

Research Materials:

Wu Dacheng and his friends left a huge body of textual and visual materials. In addition to their published works, such as collections of poems and essays, are such numerous informal writings as diaries, personal letters, inscriptions, and colophons in manuscript form, including about 1,000 personal letters in various scripts by Wu Dacheng. These documents enable us to reconstruct everyday life among the literati, analyze art transactions (market prices, bargaining with dealers, transportation of antiques), and so forth in much greater detail than in previous scholarship. Numerous artworks created by or collected by Wu Dacheng or his friends survive today to give us rare insights into their artistic creations and collecting practice.

Challenges:

Among the many challenges I face on this project, I list three among the most significant below. Any suggestions or advice on these issues would be appreciated.

1. Collecting research materials. This topic cuts two ways. On the one hand, the research materials I am accumulating are so vast they are hard to manage and organize. On the other hand, some Chinese institutions do not lightly grant access to their materials. Thus, some sources cannot be accessed even as others are almost inexhaustible.

2. Conceptualization and interpretation. While my research will be rich in detail, I sometimes face questions of how to conceptualize broad ideas and interpret historical phenomena. For instance, the term “literati culture” used in my title needs precise definition.

3. Structure and narrative. I have published several articles related to this book project. While these articles allow me to treat individual phenomena and issues in depth, they cannot be turned directly into book chapters. For example, having published an article on the collecting practices of Wu Dacheng and his friends, I am writing another that further develops this topic. If I am to avoid turning my book into a collection of essays, I must distribute the contents of these two articles among the book’s chapters. It will be a challenge to integrate focused discussions on the practices of collecting into the form and context of a well-structured book.