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Wu Shujuan: An Architect of Cultural Innovation or a Traditionalist Conservative?

Xiaoqin Zhou, PhD^{1,*}, Dr. Haji Baharudin bin Haji Mohd Arus²

ABSTRACT

Wu Shujuan was a Chinese female painter working in the tradition of the masters, whose works were predicated upon the ideological framework of Confucianism and yet managed to incorporate the heterogeneity of the emerging modern China. She broke into the genre of the male preserve of observational landscape painting and introduced Chinese art to the world's art collectors, utilising new innovations in quality printing. This article makes an estimate as to where the balance lies between Wu as a moderniser and innovator and Wu as a traditionalist and conservative. In engaging in this study I employ a methodology based on analyses of: gender roles; the nature of the Chinese gentry; the resonance of Confucian norms and values; the emergence of a Chinese bourgeoisie and the consequent growth of the art market; and the emergence of modernity in the discourse of the emergent Republic of China. I conclude that Wu Shujuan was cultural reformist who sought changes within the existing framework of norms and values that were integral to the Chinese gentry's way of life.

Keywords: Wu Shujuan; innovation; Confucianism; traditionalist; filial piety.

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1. Introduction

Wu Shujuan (1853-1930) was one of the women artists who, as the Qing Dynasty drew to a close, increasingly came to be based in the great trading metropolis that was Shanghai. In the process of assessing her value and the extent of her contribution to our cultural inheritance, I do so recognising that Chinese women artists have all too often been relegated to being seen as the occupants of an inferior place in the process of cultural production. That place being categorised as having merely reflected and represented the area of limited interest, the: 'domestic'; 'inner chamber', 'private sphere', as a place that was distinctly 'separate' from the areas of greater cultural interest and significance in the public arena.

* Corresponding author.

¹ Doctoral Candidate at Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

Email: 77650572@qq.com

² Professor at Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.

Email: arusbaha@yahoo.com

Such underestimation is arrived at as a consequence of a failure to interrogate the past and thus examine the complexity and contradictions that existed within the framework of highly patriarchal social structures that were based on Confucianist norms and values. Thus an increasing number of scholars argue that the role of Chinese women has been historically caricatured as passive and powerless; with their often resolute acceptance of, and participation in, the structures of their existing society being perceived as a product of false consciousness and/or powerlessness, thus failing to recognise these women artists as active agents capable of pursuing their own interests and those of their family (Ropp, 1994). However, in more recent times, the activity of cultured women has been the focus of significant scholarly work (Ko, 1992, 1994; Mann, 1997, 2005, 2007; Furth, 1992; Fong & Widmer, 2010; Wang, 2020).

My study of Wu Shujuan is predicated upon the comprehension of the ever-presence of women's cultural creative agency, emanating from and operating within the framework of the Chinese indigenous cultural inheritance power relations and social discourses. Such an assessment requires an understanding of the flexibility and capacity for adaption to social changes on the part of Confucian culture. Within such a framework I aim to give a glimpse of how Wu consistently exercised agency, pursuing her own interests.

After an initial introduction of Wu herself focus is placed on her emerging as a traditional painter of flower and birds who would become a pioneer of a Chinese renaissance in the genre of Chinese literati landscape painting.

Her work was an expression of her aspiration to preserve the heritage of literati landscape painting, thus attempting to maintain the authenticity of the historical inheritances bequeathed to her. She would consciously work within the limitations of the parameters of operation that were conducive to the acceptance of traditional Confucian norms and values, albeit with revisions to meet the needs of modern times, placing a greater emphasis on harmony at the expense of hierarchy, in order to facilitate a more open relationship to the non-Chinese world and the presence of women artists within the male dominion of her adopted artistic genre. In this sense Wu, as a culturally conservative Chinese traditionalist, was at the same time a radical iconoclast who brushed aside the limitations on a respectable woman's mobility and public obtrusiveness. Furthermore, she was able to utilise the technological innovations made in printing to market her work in China and globally, thus breaking down further social and geographical barriers.

2. Literature review

Although Wu Shujuan did achieve success in the art circles in her own time, the full extent of that success can be perceived of as having been, partially but significantly, hidden from the history, excluded from the historical canon of late Qing Chinese artists, as has largely been the case regarding women artists more generally. However, present day contemporary scholarship increasingly started to bring to our attention the richness and extent of women's talent in the fields of art and literature. Such research and consequent production of scholarly literature paved the way for greater exploration of Chinese female artists, mostly the Ming and Qing dynasties (Jia & Tao, 1998; Li, 1998, 2008; Tao and Li, 2000; Liao, 2005; He, 2008; Bao, 2006; Cao, Q., 2013). Such works are of contextual assistance in this attempt to contribute to a process by which Wu Shujuan, a great artist of her time, might be legitimately recognised as having a rightful place of significance in the history of Chinese art and, furthermore, to make an assessment as to the nature of her contribution and the fullness of that significance.

However, references to Wu Shujuan's work and her achievements are scattered and rare in the existing literature. One can identify in more recent writings a tendency to categorise Wu in a binary and polarised way as either being more of a representative of "new woman" or "moderniser", based on her success as a woman artist in both the domestic and international arenas; or, on the contrary, as a 'traditional' elite cultured *guixiu* (meaning literally 'genteel woman in the inner chamber'), who are seen as having worked according to the traditional Confucian gendered role (Bao, 2006; David, 2012; Cao, Q., 2013; Cao, D., 2013; Zhu, 2015; Sung, 2016).

Bao Mingxin (2006) in his book *Women Artists in Old Shanghai* presented the case that there were limitations on the work of the Shanghai based female artists on the basis that their work could generally be categorized as being a continuation of the past in terms of subject matter and

technique. As such, these women artists, according to Bao, did not extend their expressive artistic talents beyond that already achieved by their male counterparts. Instead, he argues, from an aesthetic point of view these women painters sought consciously to get rid of traces of femininity and strived to pursue male aesthetic standards.

In a similar vein, Cao Danwen (2013) in her MA thesis *The study of Anhui female painter Wu Shujuan's drawing art*, positioned Wu Shujuan as one who inherited the traditions of the *guixiu*, albeit for Cao a 'new *guixiu*' who developed four new aspects to her work that differed from more traditional expectations in that she: treated painting as a career rather than a leisure pursuit; explored the subject matter that was previously the preserve of male artists; showed majestic and vigorous momentum in the application of technique; and enhanced the size of her pictures and actively participated in social exhibitions, marking a leap forward for Chinese female painters.

Elise David's (2012) *Making Visible Feminine Modernities: the Traditionalist Paintings and Modern Methods of Wu Shujuan* is an extremely useful work that presents insight into the life and her work. David's feminist approach offers an examination of how Wu Shujuan cultivated her image as a traditional painter while establishing a modern platform utilising local, national and international connections via male interlocutors, in the form of her son or her agents. She offers insight into the way in which exhibitions and publications of Wu's works served to illustrate both her feminine modernity, daring to break into the historically male dominated genre of literati landscape painting, which was balanced by the presence of tradition in a process of negotiation which included Wu's presentation of herself as a traditional Confucian women. At the same time David recognises that Wu adopted a certain revisionist approach to the classical Confucian norms.

I have drawn upon Elise David's work to seek to show the extent to which Wu extended the bounds of the traditional feminine role, not only in terms of the innovation platforms that were utilised in the process of promoting and finding markets for her work but also in terms of the audacity of the content of her work.

Drawing upon the literature, I have approached the unity and conflict of modernity and tradition that is present in the work of Wu Shujuan. In doing so, I have sought to interrogate the nuance that lies between the binary opposition of a rigid modern/traditional dichotomy in my conceptual outlook.

3. Methods of the study

I employ a methodology based on analyses of: gender roles; the nature of the Chinese gentry; the resonance of Confucian norms and values; the emergence of a Chinese bourgeoisie and the consequent growth of the art market; and the emergence of modernity in the discourse of the embryonic Republic of China.

In order to carry out the study primary and secondary sources have been drawn upon. Images and broader information are drawn from primary sources from like newspapers, paintings and letters, which were collected to help in exploring of the issues, seeking an understanding of them in their historical context. The secondary sources facilitated a more comprehensive and overarching understanding of that historical context and enabled me to draw upon existing knowledge and understanding.

4. The life and work of Wu Shujuan: The conservative innovator

Wu Shujuan (her courtesy name being Wu Hsing-Fên, and in her elderly period 'Hsing-Fên Laoren') was born in Shexian county, Anhui. Her father Wu Tze-chia was a famous painter and a Juren (a successful candidate in the imperial examination at the provincial level). Educated under her father's guidance, when 9 years old she went with him to Shanghai, where at the age of 15 she married a painter and official T'ang Kun-hua, who was to become Prefect of the Jiangsu region and rise to the rank of *daotai*, which entailed both civil and military responsibilities across regions (David, 2012). However, he resigned from office in 1899 (Tang & Zhang, 2009), going into retirement for what were to be the last few years before his death in 1904 when he enjoyed intellectual and artistic preoccupations with his wife (Wu, 1915). The couple often painted together, for example in the work *Fine Bamboo*, her husband painted the bamboo, and she painted the landscape (APLCCC, 1999).

Wu Shujuan was a highly accomplished painter by the time of her youth, mainly depicting birds and flowers. Additionally, Wu Shujuan was engaging with *xiesheng* landscape painting, traditionally a male preserve. Her economic foundation after marriage meant that she had sufficient time and money to travel with her husband, working in the same way as a professional artist would. In such a process she would observe the landscape scenery during the day and paint at night, or working from her many sketches of a scene, she would paint when returning from her tour. Her series of paintings *Eighteen Famous Chinese Landscapes*, her albums of paintings of the West Lake in Hangzhou, and of Huang Shan (the legendary Yellow Mountain of her birthplace) were created in this way (APCLHIC, 1992).

While public appearance by such a respectable gentry woman was facilitated by her personal family circumstances, it was also made possible by the emergence of more broad-minded social attitudes. Such a cultural shift in social mentalities took place in the context of the increased presence of women painters in the mass art markets, especially in and around Shanghai. These processes were accompanied by women artists' participation in art societies, which Wu Shujuan herself was able to utilise successfully as platforms for the promotion of her works, in both exhibitions and in the print media.

Wu's achievements as a professional artist saw her holding a status that was not separated out on the basis of being a woman. On the contrary, she was seen in the same way as the other artists working in the traditions of *literati* painting. It is nevertheless the case that her work was presented for the art market by the utilization of some sort of 'novelty' factor of her being a 'lady painter', according to the marketing strategy initiated by her dealer Chen Guoquan and her son T'ang Xiong.

Wu followed traditional method of presenting her works inclusive of colophons, which often served to identify influences and to clarify lineage of the subject matter, in order to promote her recognition by the artistic elite.

Already by 1881, when Wu Shujuan was 28 years old, the long scroll of *One Hundred Flowers*, completed after two years work, received strong acclaim with famous artists and renowned statesmen and officials writing inscriptions and poems to praise her achievement. The work was published in book form of which a high number were sold, according to the 'Biography of Madame Wu Hsing-Fên' by Yang Yi in the 1915 collection of Wu Shujuan's work *Chinese Paintings by Madame Wu Hsing-Fên, the Most Distinguished Paintress of Modern China*.

Similarly, *Orchids*, executed when she was 26 years of age saw its frontispiece (preceding the paintings in the scroll) inscribed by the famous, including renowned calligrapher Yang Xian (1819-1896) and painter He Weipu (1844-1925), and the fifteen colophons (after the paintings in the scroll) are inscribed by famous artists, such as Lu Hui (1851-1920) and Wu Changshuo (1844-1927). From such illustrious association one can discern the level of prestige Wu Shujuan enjoyed at a relatively young age.

Residence in Shanghai had proved highly successful in terms of the development of her artistic abilities and her capacity to utilize the opportunities presented by that city's thriving art market. At the point of finishing *A hundred flowers*, at the age of 28, she had achieved comprehensive success. However, at this point in her career Wu was yet to make the achievements in *xiesheng* landscape painting that would finally establish her position in the Chinese painters' historical hall of fame.

The 1915 album *Chinese Paintings* focused on the need to promote the reputation of Wu Shujuan as a great female, modern artist, who at the same time as presenting her uniquely innovative posture simultaneously projected her as the living embodiment of the historical heritage of Chinese painting.

The projection of such an image by her dealer Chen Guoquan depicts Wu Shujuan reaching back to China's artistic, moral and intellectual heritages, in order that she play her part in the creation of China's future, in the form of the new Republic. In accordance with this, the penultimate paragraph (below) of Chen Guoquan's 'Introduction' to *Chinese Paintings* exudes the modernising discourse of the Republic of China, albeit, for Wu Shujuan, as the linear product of the culture that is given and inherited from the China's imperial past. Thus Chen attributes to Wu Shujuan the role of architect in a Chinese renaissance.

As there are at present very few Chinese lady-artists to be found in our country, and in order to encourage them, and also induce others to take up this important subject in a serious manner this book has been published in both English and Chinese. A nation's future depends upon the realization of its

ideals, and it is the duty of the true artist to produce the best and highest ideals in an, attractive form so as to inspire the people to action, and lift them out of their present condition to something much better. China at the present time is passing through a sudden change, and therefore the duty of the true artist is great. To create a renaissance in China depends upon the artist who in thoroughly acquainted with Chinese thought, literature, and art. Chinese art has always tried to teach moral lessons, and show the ideal in character, and personality, and this aim must be kept in view by the new school of artists (Wu, 1915: 2a).

Just as Wu was somewhat conservative artistically and socially, she was also an innovator, charting out a way forward for the promotion of women artists in the context of the emergence in China of more egalitarian outlooks and of a more open approach to cultural and economic engagement with the wider world. Indeed, she came to represent recognition that if China was to play her full role in that wider world then the Chinese sense of nationhood had to be strengthened.

A key factor in the development of Wu's career, and thus her power and influence, was the potential to engage with sections of the female population in China and also internationally. New forms of communications aimed at women, such as magazines and periodicals, became ever more popular amongst urban, relatively privileged, Chinese women, while also attracting a male readership due to the presence of discussions within them about the relationship between the sexes in the 'new China'. The Ladies' Journal (Funü Zazhi 妇女杂志), first published in 1915, was such a publication. The magazine would publish discussion articles by many thinkers, including those representing the ideas of the New Culture Movement. The Ladies' Journal was engaged in the promotion of a discourse which would explore the interface between commercial activities, art, and social and domestic life.

Wu Shujuan (Figure 1) was the featured artist in the monthly publication throughout 1918, with twelve landscape paintings of what was to be published as her Eighteen Famous Chinese Landscapes being the cover picture of the magazine for each month of that calendar year, with an additional five of her paintings displayed inside the magazine during that year.

Among the twelve of Wu's paintings depicted on the magazine's cover pages there were a number of symbolic sites of China. The February edition's cover showed Wu's depiction of Huang Shan (the Yellow Mountain, Figure 2) in Anhui province. Huang Shan is shown as the clouds surround and submerge the peaks; a scene depicted under the title of Huang Hai ('Yellow Sea').

Other cover depictions were: Song Shan, in Henan province, which is known as the central mountain of the five great mountains of China and the home of symbols of the Taoist and Buddhist belief systems so integral to the diversity of China's culture; the Zhongnan Mountains, in Shaanxi



Figure 1. The only known photograph of Wu Shujuan was published here when she was 65 years old, Ladies' Journal, 4(12), 1918. Courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Library, Heidelberg University. (https://kjc-sv034.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/frauenzeitschriften/public/magazine/issue.php?magazin_id=4)

province, on one of which is situated the Louguantai Temple, among the most revered of places for China's Taoists; and the Qiantang River, in Zhejiang province, where for hundreds of years on the eighth month of the lunar calendar people had gathered along its shores at the head of Hangzhou Bay to witness the waves of its tidal bore, a phenomenon that is depicted her painting (see below extant cover of the Ladies Journal of April 1918 and a reproduction of the painting itself, Figure 3); and the Mount Wuyi, in Fujian province, a site of historic importance for both Taoism and Buddhism.

Such was the geographical, cultural and historical diversity, albeit as representations of one China, which Wu would depict in the Eighteen Famous Chinese Landscapes, twelve of them being shared with the 1918 readers of the Ladies' Journal. These pictorial images served to exude a sense of unity and belonging to the Chinese nation based on a shared, yet heterogeneous, culture. The paintings drew upon a sense of that entire civilisation state's history, including its history of art.

Her pictures, executed in the traditional Chinese styles, nevertheless served to challenge the norms of gender roles in the arts, demonstrating both the potential of women artists and the enhancement of the position of Chinese culture in the world (Andrew, 2018).

Eighteen Famous Chinese Landscapes, was published in the following year of 1919, with each of the eighteen sites chosen for depiction being from each of the eighteen provinces of China in existence up to the last period of the Qing dynasty – they being Shandong, Henan, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Fujian, Shaanxi, Anhui, Jiangsu, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Guizhou, Shanxi, Hunan, Hubei, Yunnan, Zhili, and Gansu (David, 2012).

In addition to her high status as an artist being recorded in the printed media, we can also see this reflected in the presence of her work in prestigious exhibitions. Liu Jun (2017) recalls that in that same year of 1918, the scholar, critic, artist and teacher Yu Tiansui, who had been Sun Yat-sen's (the first President of the Republic of China) secretary, was invited to visit Wu's exhibition of over 100 of her own works. The inspiration that Yu derived from his experience was expressed in a series of around eleven articles by him published in the Republic of China Daily from April 4th to April 17th 1918 entitled Tianxinyi's Commentary on Paintings. Yu commented on Wu Shujuan's dozens of landscapes and flowers painting, one by one, heaping high praise on them, thus reflecting her status among sections of the Republican minded elite.

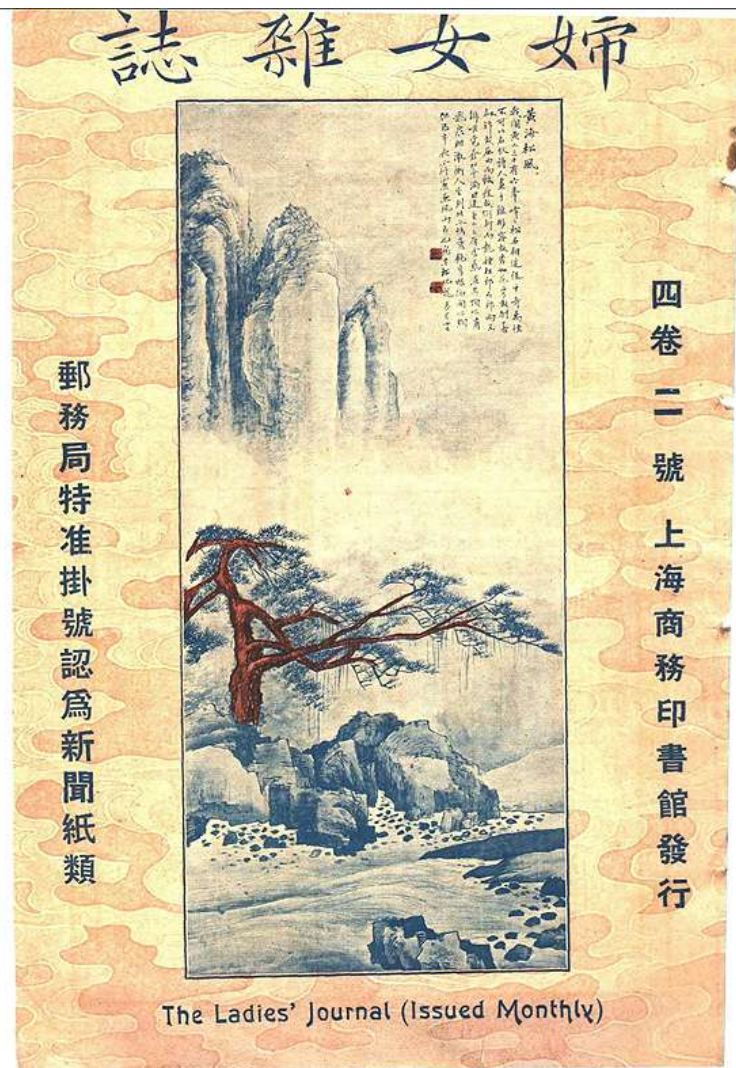


Figure 2. Wu Shujuan's Yellow Sea on the cover of The Ladies' Journal, 4(12), 1918. Courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Library, Heidelberg University.



Figure 3. Wu Shujuan's Qiantang River Tidal Bore 钱塘观潮 on the cover of The Ladies' Journal, 4(8), 2018. Courtesy of the Institute of Chinese Studies, Library, Heidelberg University and Arton.Net (<https://auction.artron.net/paimai-art0030780041/>)

When commenting on Wu, Yu Tiansui (2018) conducted comparative analyses of female painters in the Qing dynasty. His findings expressed particular admiration for Wu's art, even commenting that he considered her paintings "marvelous", and as a symbol of his admiration he declared her "Hou Nan Lou"; meaning 'the new Nan Lou', Nan Lou being the courtesy name for Chen Shu (1660–1736), who was an outstanding women painter during earlier Qing period. Yu (2018) recorded the sources of influence on Wu Shujuan, from the masters of Chinese art history, including the use of techniques derived from: two greats of the Tang Dynasty, Li Sixun and Wang Wei; Li Cheng of the early Song dynasty; Zhao Mengfu and Madame Guan (working as husband and wife) and Wang Meng of the Yuan Dynasty; Qiu Ying of the Ming Dynasty.

Wu's participation in public and institutional exhibitions marked a leap forward for female painters (Cao, D., 2013). The 1910 domestic selection of Wu's work as part of the representation of China, saw her as the only Chinese artist to win a prize (Andrews, 2006) at the 1911 international exhibition in Rome. In the first issue of 1911, the current affairs newspaper monthly *Shishi Xinbao Yuekan* 時事新報月刊 introduced the Rome exhibition in an article entitled 'Overseas circular: to note the opening of Chinese artworks in Rome' (海外通函：记中国美术画品在罗马开幕事), reporting that "Madame Tang - teacher of Shanghai Girls Middle Private School- has many paintings in the exhibition". The subsequent purchase by the Queen of Italy of paintings by Wu might be seen as a new turning point in her achievement of even higher status, as she branched out into the world's art market.

Wu's engagement of art dealers; specifically Chen Guoquan and H. C. Wolfe acting as her agents; laid the path for her to reach customers much further afield than those directly within the Chinese art fraternity. It was via Chen Guoquan that James Steward Lockhart (1858–1937), the British Governor of Weihaiwei, came to be acquainted with Wu Shujuan's work. In response to such an

introduction he wrote a letter, which is published in the form of a facsimile reproduction in the 1915 volume *Chinese Paintings*. Lockhart's letter, dated 12 May 1915, gives no explicit indication as to who it had been addressed to. One suspects, however, that it may have been sent to Wu Shujuan's son, Tang Xiong, as he refers in the third person to Chen Guoquan and to "Mrs Tang", the latter being his assumption as to the appropriate way to make reference to Wu Shujuan, based on her status as the mother of Tang Xiong. The letter is striking in its display of respect and deference toward "Mrs Tang" and the gracious and humble posture that he adopts when referring to her work:

I am fully sensible of the honour conferred upon me by the artist and desire to express my sincere appreciation of her condescension in painting such a beautiful picture for me. The picture I greatly admire as it shows the culture, grace and artistic talent for which Mrs Tang has been so long and so justly famous.

I am not able to celebrate its great beauty of the picture and the culture and of artist in fitting terms but I cannot refrain from writing these few lines as a slight sign of my appreciation of the beauty and of the honour conferred upon me by Mrs Tang this distinguished artist (Wu, Shanghai, 1915: n.p.)

Wu Shujuan utilised the mediums of publishing and networking in order to enhance her reputation with foreign audiences during the 1910s. Chen Guoquan presented Wu Shujuan as a cultural icon for reconciliation between Chinese tradition and modern cultures, and used the painting *The 'Forest of Kung'* (Figure 4) to shed light on Wu Shujuan's attitude toward China's past.

The editorial accompaniment to this image in *Chinese Painting* describes an interpretation of the image thus:

The "Forest of Kung" or "Kung Ling" is situated two li on the north of Chlifu [Qufu] in Shantung [Shandong], and is celebrated as the burial place of the greatest Sage of China, Confucius.

In the year A. D. 1873, Dr. James Legge who had translated the *Five Classics and Four Books of Confucius*, paid a visit to the "Forest of Kung" while other foreign scholars and men of renown have from time to time visited the place.

Madame Wu spoke often to her son that the weakness of present China was entirely due to the fact that Confucianism was not taught in its true sense. She painted this picture to illustrate this idea, and therefore it should not be viewed as an ordinary painting, but as an artistic ideograph (Wu, 1915, no.36)

In spite of her promotion of the culture of national consciousness and her engagement in the promotion of cultural space being opened for women, Wu Shujuan continued to focus on Chinese traditionalist Confucian thought – albeit involving revisionist adaption, moulding Confucianism to the needs of that present day's modernist discourses, but also the to the subjective interests of her family. In the latter sense it seems that her adaptations of Confucian thought were not only part of the expression of a social conservatism in her outlook, with all the contradictions that this entailed in terms of her own role as a woman being at the helm of the rejuvenation of the traditions of the male genre of literati Chinese landscape painting, but also an expression of a form of political conservatism in the context of the discourses of the new China. It seems that her emphasis on harmony between nations was an expression of her family's place in an elite social strata that was increasingly dependent on the presence of economic and political relations with those whose presence in China were the product of a semi-colonial relationship, hence her emphasis on the compatibility of Confucian morality and principles with the need for friendly relations between China and other states.



Figure 4. Wu Shujuan. *The Forest of Kung*. (appears to be 1877 丁丑). Hanging Scroll. Ink and color on silk. No.36 in *Chinese Paintings*, 1915.

The framework of such a posture seems to be expressed in her work *Five Relations Among Mankind* and was exemplified in her relationships with colonists such as Lockhart and those foreign nationals within the settlements, especially those of Shanghai, facilitated by her son Tang Xiong and her dealer Chen Guoquan and then by H.C. Wolfe playing a similar role (Sung, 2016).

The hanging scroll *Five Relations Among Mankind* (Figure 5) was painted in 1901, the year after the Boxer Rebellion, the defeated peasant uprising based on hostility to foreign extraterritoriality. Wu Shujuan's response was to produce this scroll based on bird paintings in the style of court painter Shen Quan (c.1682–1760). The key was the symbolism of five bird types. They served to represent Confucianism's Five Cardinal Relations, with the 'Emperor and minister' symbolised by the presence of phoenix birds, the 'father and son' by storks, 'husband and wife' by ducks, 'brothers' by small birds and 'friends' by yellow birds. A print of the painting is accompanied by an explanatory note in the 1915 Chinese Painting album (no. 23), it reads: "This scroll was depicted by Madame Wu in the year 1901, just after the Boxer trouble in North China. The birds mentioned under heading 5 apparently refers to foreigners in China and the Chinese, who ought to try to know each other better and to be more friendly with each other."

David (2012) identifies two revisions of the traditional Confucianism in the above interpretation of the painting: the emphases on harmony over hierarchy and on the value of friendship. Such a posture thus served to advocate the revision and renewal of Confucianism in the quest to modernise China.

As Wu enhanced her reputation as an artist and developed her career it was an imperative for Wu Shujuan to maintain her status as a virtuous Confucian woman who was appropriately modest and required to display the central tenet of that dominant discourse, filial piety, thus ensuring the maintenance of her 'respectable' social status and that of her family.

Her husband's retirement would have left Wu Shujuan in a situation whereby he no longer wielded authoritative political or broader social power, and thus it would be left to her to ensure that the diachronic continuity of the social status and position of her family would be maintained by the bequeathing to her sons the necessary cultural capital and connections in the social hierarchies.

It was in that familial context that Wu Shujuan's ability to develop relationships with the American Women's Club, and other such organizations composed of foreign nationals based in Shanghai, may well have been facilitated by her son Tang Xiong (Sung, 2016) whose career was to be based on his roles as promoter of his mother's work, as a reputable dealer in Chinese fine art, as a collaborating artists with his mother in the creation of paintings and, in the longer term, as the custodian of the collection of his mother's work. The continuity of the family status and wealth would be established as a consequence of the role that Tang Xiong, Wu Shujuan's only surviving offspring, played in working at his mother's behest and the status that he achieved as a consequence of the art education that had been passed to him by his mother. It is in the form of Wu Shujuan's promotion of the longer term interests of Tang Xiong, that we can identify her continued adherence to Confucian filial piety.

As Wu entered the 20th century as a highly regarded artist, she produced an increasing number of landscape paintings; including *Ten Beautiful Views of the West Lake*, an album of coloured paintings on ten silk leaves. According to the description in the 1915 *Chinese Paintings* album (no.31) "Madame Wu who had her studio near the lake, frequently visited those ten beautiful views, and in order to keep them in her mind, the album was made" (figure 6). The editorial presentation of *Chinese Painting* introduced each of the ten views of West Lake scenery; including a narrative of the historical significance of specific view depicted, in regard to China's history, thus serving to bond the history and



Figure 5. Wu Shujuan, *Five Relations among Mankind*, coloured painting on silk, 1901. No.23 in *Chinese Paintings*, 1915.

progress of the Chinese state with the beauty of nature that was gifted to the Chinese civilisation by Heaven:

II. Pavilion of the Peaceful Lake and Harvest Moon.

平湖秋月

This ting-tzu [pavilion] is on Lone Mountain road just south of ‘Broken-off’ bridge and not far from the Emperor's lodge. It was first built during the Tang dynasty, but in the early years of the Ming reign was completely demolished. The Mings, however, impressed by the beauty of the spot and by the sentiment connected with the old pavilion, caused it to be rebuilt and greatly enlarged. It stands to-day much as they built it.

The pavilion is highly prized by the Chinese as a place to sit on long summer evenings during the eighth moon and drink in the subtle beauties of the surroundings, heightened by the reflection of the soft moonlight upon the mirror-like surface of the lake (Wu, 1915, no. 31).

Wu's ‘Views of the famous Mountain Huang-shan: An Album in Twenty-four Leaves’ (Wu, 1915, no.35), was a series of coloured paintings on paper depicting the majestic and steep feeling of the expedition upwards along in the treacherous footpath that navigates the Huang Shan, the reputation of which was derived from its long standing significance in Chinese arts and literature. In accordance with that reality the editorial introduction to the paintings records that “During the Ming dynasty, Pan Chih-hêng, a well-known scholar of that locality published an historical and descriptive book regarding this mountain consisting of sixty volumes, and the book was mentioned in the catalogue of Imperial library at Peking during the Mauchu regime” (Wu, 1915, no. 35).

The longevity of the presence of the Mountain's rock and pine tree formations throughout the whole history of Chinese cultural expression serves to assert the linear continuity of the Chinese civilisation.

Publication of the albums of Wu's paintings denoted a spectacularly modern business model, in the shape of successfully utilising a new platform for the marketing of a professional artist's works by the employment of new technologies for quality printing. In this way, her reputation was successfully projected onto the national and then the international stage. Whilst it is the case that such publications were a commercial venture, it is nevertheless appropriate to recognise how the subject matter, and its presentation in these publications, served to promote the culture of national identification that was necessary if the Republic was to be able to forge itself into a cohesive state.

Let us reflect, once again, on the symbiosis that constituted the essential contradiction of Wu Shujuan's life as a professional artist. On the one hand, her consistency as a conservative artist; reproducing the styles, techniques and subject matter that were inherited from the history of Chinese art, perhaps as a product of her own ideological conservatism in the form of an adherence to the notions of the Confucian value system, in particular the values of filial piety. On the other hand, standing in sharp contradiction to such a conservative posture, was her embrace of modernity. Her adoption of a modern outlook can be identified in a number of ways, especially in her own mobility and full engagement in public life, her utilisation of the newly established domestic and international art markets, and the adoption of the most advanced techniques for the sale and distribution of her work.

On reflection, one might recognise that such achievements in the crossing of social and cultural barriers to progress as being enabled by her understanding of the limited parameters of operation that were possible within the framework of Confucian norms and values. In the circumstances, she was able to place her work as equal to the literati master painters; while simultaneously, on the basis of a



Figure 6. Wu Shujuan, Madame Wu Hsing-fen's studio [Yin Hua Ge, near the West Lake] 1897. Front piece in Chinese Paintings, 1915. (Courtesy of Arton.Net, <https://auction.arttron.net/paimai-art5080780254/>)

modern forward looking approach; being presented specifically as a woman artist who was holding the torch for the progress of Chinese women artists more generally.

Such comprehension and negotiation of those parameters of operation were only possible as a consequence of Wu's own immersion in that Confucian culture, and thus her sensitivity to its norms, enabling her to comprehend the limitations on the acceptance of the presence of a respectable gentry women, operating in the literati tradition, in the public world of commercialism and the marketing of cultural products. Her comprehension of such social realities was perhaps the key to her ability to steer around such obstacles. Her manoeuvres would take one form of her employing the talents of her son and various male agents to deal with, and be seen to deal with, the business of marketing her work via various platforms and in various forms. However, it would be erroneous to mechanistically see such progress as simply the product of her knowledge of the Confucian value systems and her exposure to the opportunities presented by the developing art market. Ultimately one can only understand her capacity to negotiate such obstacles to the progress of her career if one can appreciate the presence in her character of a sheer dogged determination to succeed.

5. Conclusion

Wu Shujuan was a historical figure who was an innovator in regard to pushing the limitations of the role that might be played by Chinese woman artists. Furthermore, she was a leader in the process of modernisation of the presentation of the historical achievements of Chinese art. This was the essential contradiction that made up her role as an artist of historical importance. She was both a conservative and a moderniser. As part of what we have identified as a 'Chinese renaissance', Wu Shujuan was very much unlike the Renaissance artists of Europe, especially those of the Italian peninsula, in that while she, like them, drew her innovation from the knowledge and creativity of past generations, she did not do on the basis that the arts and sciences of the Chinese masters had been confined to oblivion by a Chinese dark age. The Chinese masters' works were extant and could be viewed relatively widely by those in the artistic and cultured elites of Chinese society.

It is clear that, in terms of the framework of European cultural conceptualisation, Wu Shujuan was not a creature of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, she was a renaissance woman in the sense of giving a new lease of life to the culture of the Chinese masters in a process of modern assimilation, utilising the great achievements of the artists of the past in order to create new artistic expression. However, Wu maintained the ideological framework of Confucian culture handed down by the great masters (albeit modified to serve her own family's interests and the interests of the building of a modern Chinese republican state). Just as the European Renaissance would not throw off the shackles of the Christian church's domination of European culture, then so it was that Wu Shujuan's Chinese renaissance would not directly and qualitatively challenge the cultural foundations upon which the work of the old masters stood. It would be left to those who formed the New Culture Movement, who operated according to the conceptual frameworks of the European Enlightenment, to embark on such a challenge in order to present to China a fuller vision of cultural modernity.

As such, the special role that Wu Shujuan played in bringing the artistic treasures of China's past into the present and in reaching out with them to a developing global audience, was not so much a rebirth of the art of the basis, but rather an expression of a authentic and knowledgeable clarification as to the nature of those past works of the masters and an interpretation and projection of their significance into the modern world. In terms of her technique, methods, and subject matter; Wu Shujuan was not an innovator as such. However, in terms of her capacities to break through into the male genre of literati xiesheng landscape painting, she was an innovator and role model for the future of Chinese women's painting.

However, it was primarily the case that Wu achieved her status as a moderniser largely based on her role in enabling the presentation to the modern world of the cultural expressions and techniques of the masters of Chinese painting by utilising the modern forms of communication and platforms for presentation.

If Wu Shujuan did not present a direct challenge to the basis of Confucian culture, she did at least present a robust quantitative challenge to the accepted norms of Confucianism. This was based on her mobility, her audacious entry into the realms of the male literati's cultural dominion, her

embrace of modern technologies, her internationalist openness, and her role as an exemplar for other Chinese female artists. In that sense she was an agent for change who, nevertheless, sought to conserve a way of life that depended upon the resonance of the cultural norms and values that had been inherited from China's past. As such we can see Wu Shujuan as a cultural reformer who was, nevertheless, concerned to protect and conserve those norms and values which were integral to the Chinese gentry's way of life and, as she saw things, to the interests of her family.

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