

Benjamin's Chinese Painter: Copying, Adapting, and the Aura of Reproduction

Abstract: In his famous “artwork” essay, Walter Benjamin uses the legend of a Chinese painter who disappeared into his own painting as the penultimate example of traditional art reception, performed through “concentration” and individual absorption, as opposed to distraction—the form of reception associated with contemporary mass media such as films. By exploring the historical background of this legend, this essay aims at developing a new perspective of Benjamin's theory of mechanically reproducible art and the decline of aura. Locating the origin of the legend of the Chinese painter in Edo Japan, a period of mass-produced works of art and entertainment, I argue that the aura that Benjamin associates with this legend is, ironically, a result of mechanical reproduction. By appropriating ancient Chinese aesthetic principles to justify his method of copying, adapting, and transmitting, Edo print maker and model book author Tachibana Morikuni redefined the concept of reproduction as a way to recreate the “mysterious beauty and spiritual wonder” of the original, a concept that is arguably comparable to Benjamin's “aura.”

In his famous essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” Walter Benjamin mentioned the story of a Chinese painter who disappeared his own painting. The legend is often attributed to Tang Dynasty painter Wu Daozi, but the painter that Benjamin had in mind might not be Chinese at all: in fact, it is likely that he was recalling the image of an 18th century woodblock print, made by a Japanese artist named Tachibana Morikuni. This mass-produced illustration, which is included in a widely-circulated copybook for artists, curiously become Benjamin’s penultimate example for contemplative immersion and concentration (*Sammulung*). In other words, the “aura” of this work of art remained undestroyed during its mechanical reproduction.

This paper aims to address two issues: the identity of Benjamin’s “Chinese” painter, and the auratic atmosphere surrounding this piece of artwork. First, I will reconstruct Benjamin’s “Chinese” painter’s journey to the West to locate the “Ursprung” of his legend. Benjamin mentioned this legend in three occasions: the Kunstwerk essay, *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* (1933-8), and in his review of Theodore Adorno’s dissertation, *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* (although the sentence later disappeared in the published version)¹. The same story also appeared in the works of Benjamin’s friend Ernst Bloch, and Ludwig Klages, the philosopher who significantly influenced both the early Benjamin and the Nazi rhetoric of biopolitics. In the second section, I will compare the two earliest accounts of the story—Tachibana Morkuni’s *Ehon tsūhōshi* and Wang Yunpeng’s *Liexian quanzhuan*, both of which are illustrated books widely circulated in Edo Japan—and survey the history of woodblock printing industry of Edo Japan, which is a typical example of global trade and

¹ “Es ist die aus chinesischen Märchen überlieferte Bewegung eines Verschwindens (des Malers) in dem (selbstgemalten) Bilde, das era ls letztes Wort dieser Philosophie erkennt.” See: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-91) 3:382; hereafter GS).

technological advances. In the last section, I will return to Benjamin's analysis of the aura of an original work of art, which is usually lost during its technical reproduction. Morikuni, however, suggests otherwise: by adapting and appropriating ancient Chinese aesthetic theory—namely, Xie He's Six Principles of Chinese Painting—Morikuni redefined the concept of copying. According to Morikuni, artworks aim at transmitting certain aspects of life that cannot be exhausted by our naked eyes. As a copybook maker, Morikuni focuses less on the strokes and colors of the original, but its “mysterious beauty and spiritual wonder,” a concept that is arguably comparable to Benjamin's “aura.”

Wu Daozi's Journey to the West

Benjamin's longest and most detailed description of the Chinese painter story is included in his *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*. The text is reproduced as the following:

Von allem aber, was ich wiedergab, war mir das China-Porzellan am liebsten. Ein bunter Schorf bedeckte jene Vasen, Gefäße, Teller, Dosen, die gewiß nur billige Exportartikel waren. Mich fesselten sie dennoch so, als hätte ich damals die Geschichte schon gekannt, die mich nach so viel Jahren noch einmal zum Werk der Mummerehlen hingeleitet. Sie stammt aus China und erzählt von einem alten Maler, der den Freunden sein neuestes Bild zu sehen gab. Ein Park war darauf dargestellt, ein schmaler Weg am Wasser und durch einen Baumschlag hin, der lief vor einer kleinen Türe aus, die hinten in ein Häuschen Einlaß bot. Wie sich die Freunde aber nach dem Maler umsahen, war der fort und in dem Bild. Da wandelte er auf dem schmalen Weg zur Tür, stand vor ihr still, kehrte sich um, lächelte und verschwand in ihrem Spalt. So war auch ich bei meinen Näpfen und den Pinseln auf einmal ins Bild entstellt. Ich ähnelte dem Porzellan, in das ich mit einer Farbenwolke Einzug hielt.²

Ernst Bloch first recorded a similar story in an essay entitled “Motive des inneren Verschwindens” in his essay collection *Durch die Wüste* (1923):

So hielt es ein alter Maler, als er weit genug gekommen war.
Der ging zu sich selber ein. Er rief den Kaiser und die Getreuen, ihnen letztes Bild zu zeigen. Es war ein Park zu sehen und ein schmaler Weg, sanft führte er hindurch, an Bäumen und Wassern vorüber, zu der kleinen, roten Tür eines Plastes. Als aber der

² Benjamin, GS 4: 262-3.

Kaiser sich zu dem alten Maler wenden wollte, seltsam erschüttert und um ihm Dank zu sagen: da stand dieser nicht mehr zur Seite, sondern er war im Bild, wandelte auf dem schmalen Weg, hin zu der fabelhaften Tür, stand vor ihr still, kehrte sich um, lächelte, öffnete und verschwand.³

Both Benjamin and Bloch described an image in which the viewer sees a park with trees and water flowing through, and a narrow path leading towards a small door of a palace. The painter walked towards the door, stood in front of it, turned around, smiled, and disappeared in the gate. In another version, possibly written at a later date, Bloch forgot to mention the emperor (or rather, he mistook the emperor as the painter's friend), but the other details remain relatively the same.⁴

German art historian Otto Fischer, who worked as the director of Basel Kunstmuseum between 1927 and 1938, told a similar story in his *Chinesische Landschaftsmalerei*. He wrote, "Am bekanntesten ist die Legende vom Abschied des großen Wu Tao-tse [Wu Daozi], der auf einer Wand des Kaiserpalasts eine wunderbare Landschaft entstehen läßt, dann im Beisein des Herrschers in dieselbe hineingeht und in einer Höhle verschwindet, worauf von Maler ins Werk nie wieder ein Mensch etwas gesehen hat."⁵ Fischer pointed out that the legendary painter is Tang Dynasty artist Wu Daozi (680 - c. 760). As one of the greatest artists of Chinese history, Wu Daozi devoted most of his time creating murals that depict Buddhist and Taoist themes. He was also famous for his landscapes, and eventually became an imperial painter working primarily for the Tang Emperor Xuanzong. According to Gregor Dotzauer's essay "Das

³ Ernst Bloch, *Durch die Würste: Frühe Kritische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), 140.

⁴ This version is recorded in his *Spuren* (1910-29): "Die Geschichte von dem alten Maler gehört so hierher, der seinen Freunden sein letztes Bild zeigte: ein Park war darauf zu sehen, ein schmaler Weg, der sanft hindurchführte, an Bäumen und Wasser vorüber, bis zu der kleinen roten Tür eines Palasts. Aber wie sich die Freunde zu dem Maler wenden wollten, das seltsame Rot, war dieser nicht mehr neben ihnen, sondern im Bild, wandelte auf dem schmalen Weg zur fabelhaften Tür, stand vor ihr still, kehrte sich um, lächelte, öffnete und verschwand." (See Bloch, *Werkausgabe Band 1*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985, 149.)

⁵ Otto Fischer, *Chinesische Landschaftsmalerei* (Barsinghausen: UNIKUM Verlag, 2015), 13.

Verschwinden des Verschwindens: die Legende von Wu Daozi—eine Spruensuche,” Fischer’s book was dedicated to the graphologist and philosopher Ludwig Klages, whose work interested Benjamin greatly.⁶ On August 15, 1930, Benjamin recommended to his close friend, Gershom Scholem (whose first name was still Gerhard when the letter was drafted), to read *Der Geist als Widersacher Der Seele*, Klages’ major philosophical work. Benjamin wrote, “Was mich betrifft, so habe ich den ersten Band obenhin durchgelesen, es mit Exaktheit durchzustudieren, erfordert viele Wochen. Es ist nun, in welchen Zusammenhängen auch immer der Verfasser einem suspekt sein und bleiben mag, ohne Zweifel ein großes philosophisches Werk.”⁷ The Chinese painter legend also appears in this book. However, since Benjamin claimed to have only read the first volume of the six-volume book, it is unclear if he actually read Klages’s version of the legend:

“Endlich führt uns in die Landschaft selber die Legende von dem zauberhaften Ende des Wu Taotse [Wu Daozi], der vor den Augen des Kaisers in die aufgetane Höhle der großen Landschaft verschwindet, die er zuvor auf eine Wand des Palastes gemalt: hinter ihm schließt sich der Fels, und bevor der Herrscher einen Schritt tut, ist das ganze Gemälde verschwunden und die Wand weiß wie einst Den Meister aber hat nie ein Mensch, wiedergesehen.”⁸

Interestingly, the painter in both Klages’ and Fischer’s story disappeared in a door leading towards a hole, instead of the palace, as according to Benjamin and Bloch. Furthermore, neither of them described the details of the scene so vividly as Benjamin and Bloch.

This Chinese painter’s journey to the West did not begin with Otto Fischer. Herbert A. Giles, the British sinologist known for modifying the Mandarin Chinese romanization system

⁶ Gregor Dotzauer, "Das Verschwinden des Verschwindens. Die Legende Von Wu Daozi: Eine Spurensuche." *Text + Kritik. Zeitschrift für Literatur* 31/32 (2009): 221-28.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Vol. 4: 1931-1934, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998), 525.

⁸ Ludwig Klages, *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele*, 6. Ungekürzte Auflage (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1981): 359.

and for translating classical Chinese texts such as *the Analects of Confucius*, the *Tao Te Ching*, and *Strange Stories from a Chinese studio (Liaozhai Zhiyi)*,⁹ also mentioned the story in his 1905 book *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*. Giles quoted this story from British surgeon and art historian William Anderson. Giles claimed that “I myself have failed to find the Chinese text; but Anderson, who gathered his brief note on Chinese art secondhand from Japanese sources, gives it, with an illustration, in his *Pictorial Arts of Japan*, p. 484, in the following words:

In the palace of Ming Hwang (the Emperor), the walls were of great size, and upon one of these the Emperor ordered Wu Tao-tsz’ [Wu Daozi] to paint a landscape. The artist prepared his materials, and concealing the wall with curtains commenced his work. After a little while he drew aside the veil, and there lay a glorious scene, with mountains, forests, clouds, men, birds, and all things as in nature. While the Emperor gazed upon it with admiration, Wu Tao-tsz’, pointing to a certain part of the picture, said, Behold this temple grot at the foot of the mountain within it dwells a spirit. Then clapping his hands, the gate of the cave suddenly opened. The interior is beautiful beyond conception, continued the artist; permit me to show the way, that your Majesty may behold the marvels it contains. He passed within, turning round to beckon his patron to follow, but in a moment the gateway closed, and before the amazed monarch could advance a step, the whole scene faded away, leaving the wall white as before the contact of the painter’s brush. And Wu Tao-tsz’ was never seen again.¹⁰

Although Anderson’s version was slightly different from Giles’s quotation, the details are almost the same. Neither Giles nor Anderson have found the Chinese text; Anderson’s English was translated from Edo painter Tachibana Morikuni’s illustrated book, *Ehon Tsūhōshi* [Illustrated Book of All Treasures]. Published in Osaka in 1729, this book was a popular iconographical model for Japanese illustrators, with its ten volumes depicting famous figures and everyday objects. The word “*Tsūhō*” in the title literally means “ready money,” which suggests that users

⁹ Martin Buber, the author of the first German translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi* (*Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten*), has consulted the Giles translation.

¹⁰ Herbert A Giles, *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*, Second Edition (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1918), 47.

of this book should treat everything in this book as ready-to-use materials. This book had a wide circulation, and many scenes were reproduced by artists of later generations. Although painters before Morikuni, especially members of the famous Kanō school, which I will discuss later, had been using artists' manuals and copybooks (*mohon*) in their training and everyday practices, these copybooks were kept in private, and treasured as an atelier's most valuable secret. *Ehon Tsūhōshi* was one of the first copybooks that was published and widely circulated. Therefore, we could possibly argue that popularity of Wu Daozi's legend was partially due to the fame of Morikuni.

Morikuni was not the first person to record this legend in written form. His story was translated from a Chinese source, Wang Yunpeng's *Liexian quanzhuan* (1600). Morikuni's translation was relatively faithful to the Chinese original, especially because in his time, the Japanese read Classical Chinese texts by adding *kunten* markers, which are diacritical, syntactic, and punctuation markers that are inserted between Chinese characters without disturbing the original Chinese text. Readers follow the markers in order to read the text in Japanese word order, and they assign each character its Japanese pronunciation. Morikuni's "translation" from Chinese to Japanese follows this method of "*kanbun kundoku*," which literally means "Chinese writing, Japanese reading." Therefore, his "translation" of the Chinese text was technically a practice of copying with annotation. However, the illustration that Morikuni provided was dramatically different from the one in the original text. In the next section of my essay, I will compare the two images—one from Morikuni's copybook and another from Wang's Chinese original—to locate the "origin" of Benjamin's Chinese painter story.

Benjamin and Bloch's Chinese painter appeared in a vividly described landscape, in which a narrow path leads towards the gate of a palace. The painter stopped, turned around in front of the gate, and smiled, before disappearing in the gate. However, the version that Anderson, Giles, Fisher, and Klages recounted is entirely different. In Anderson's English version, which was directly translated from the Japanese and therefore probably the closest to the original, did not mention the path leading towards the gate: in fact, there was no gate mentioned at all. Instead, the painter disappeared in a hole in the landscape. None of the four authors mentioned that the painter waved and smiled before disappearing in the painting. Where are these details that Benjamin and Bloch remembered coming from? I argue that Benjamin's version of the story was not directly derived from the Chinese source *Liexian quanzhuan* (1600), nor from Morikuni's Japanese translation, but from the latter's illustration of the story.

Liexian quanzhuan, or *Youxiang liexian quanzhuan* (Illustrated Comprehensive Biographies of All Immortals), is a Taoist hagiography that includes biographies of 581 immortals [Xian 仙], 222 of which are illustrated. One of the most widely-circulated hagiographies of immortals in the Ming dynasty, *Liexian quanzhuan* was edited and published by Wang Yunpeng, the owner of one of the most well-known printing house during the late Ming period, Wanhu xuan (1573-1620), which was famous for producing dramas and novels with delicate and detailed illustrations.¹¹ The illustrations of *Liexian quanzhuan* are provided by artist Huang Yimu (1586-1641), who came from a prominent woodcarving artist family, the Huangs from Huizhou.

¹¹ The first eight volumes of the nine-volume *Liexian Quanzhuan* are signed "edited by Wang Shizhen from the province of Wu, proofread and revised by Wang Yunpeng from Xindu," and the last volume is signed "edited and supplemented by Wang Yunpeng from Xindu." Wang Shizhen 王世贞 (1526-1590) was one of the most important literary scholar of his time. However, contemporary Chinese scholars tend to believe that this book is edited by Wang Yunpeng alone, and he only borrowed Wang Shizhen's name for the latter's fame and influences.

In *Liexian quanzhuan*, Wu Daozi's disappearing is only one of the three legends recorded in his biography; the other two stories both claim that the animals—first a donkey, then a dragon—that Wu Daozi painted on the wall became alive. The story of his disappearing is the longest of the three:

There were some white walls in the palace, and upon one of them the Emperor Minghuang¹² ordered [Wu Daozi] to paint a landscape. Daozi mixed some ink and spread the entire bowl of ink on the wall. He covered the wall with a piece of cloth, and unveiled it again after a brief moment. Then he invited the Emperor to look at the painting. Mountain, water, forest, trees, men, birds, and beasts, everything was included in the painting. The emperor looked throughout the picture, praised and admired it to the point that nothing could be added. Daozi slowly walked over, pointed at the picture and said, “there is a little hole under the rocky mountain. There is a Xian¹³ in the hole, if you knock on it, he will definitely answer.” Then he knocked, suddenly the door opened, and there was a child servant standing on the side. Daozi said to the Emperor, “it is very beautiful in the hole. Please let me enter first, and I hope your majesty could enter after me.” Then Daozi walked into the mountain, and gestured at the Emperor with his hands. The Emperor could not enter; the door immediately closed, and nobody knew where Daozi went. The wall he painted is again white and bright as before, with no ink left on it.¹⁴

It seems that both Anderson and Giles ignored the child servant standing at the door. Also, Wu Daozi was only said to have gestured at the Emperor for him to enter; but both Anderson and Giles emphasized that he first turned around before beckoning his master to follow. Finally, although the original text clearly states that gate that Wu Daozi entered was leading towards a hole (or, as Giles translated, a “temple grot”), Anderson mistranslated it as “a stately building in the foreground of the picture.” Although Giles corrected this mistake in his version, Anderson's mistake was prevalent among the numerous authors who recounted this story, among them

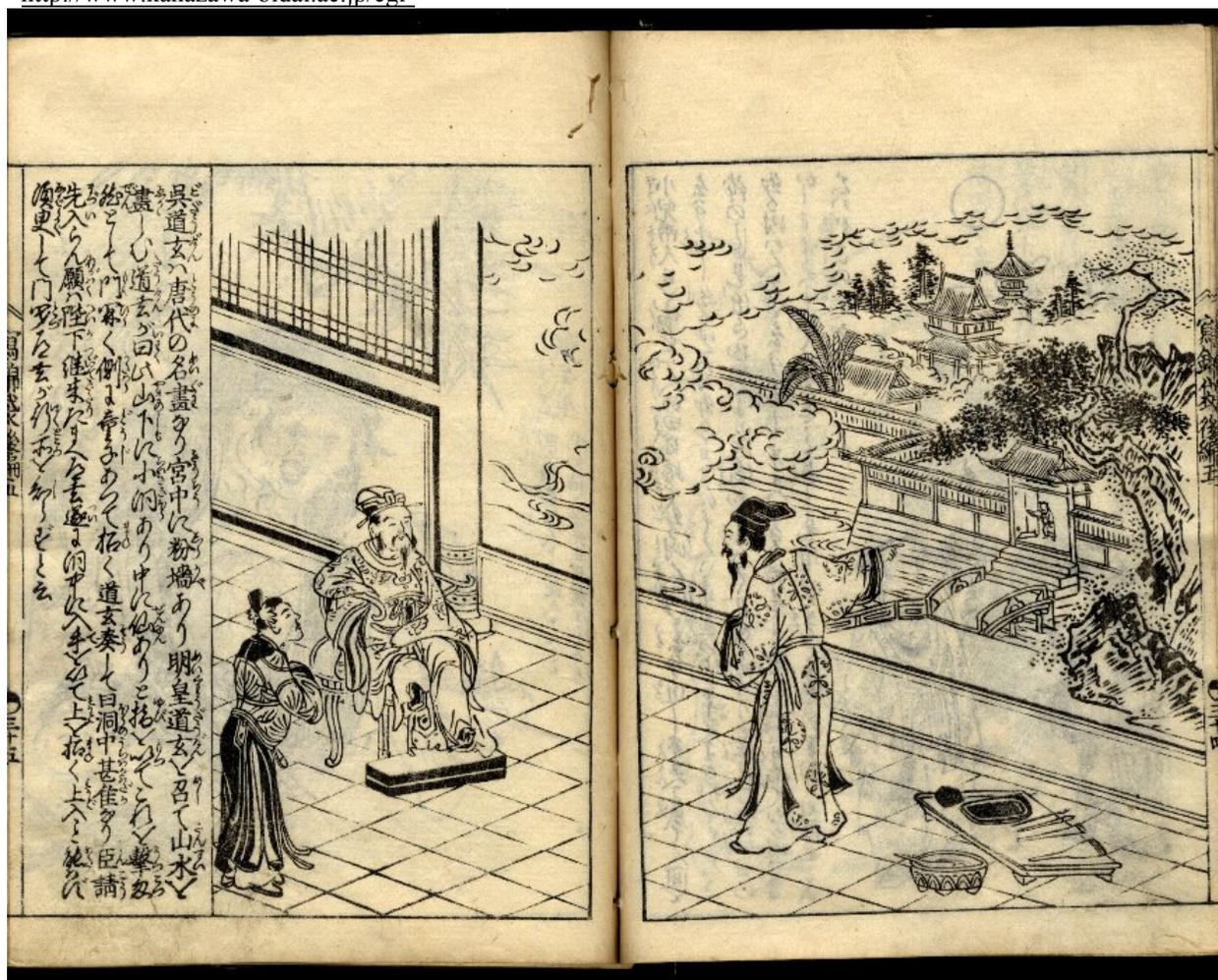
¹² The Emperor Xuanzong of Tang Dynasty was commonly known as Emperor Ming of Tang (Tang Minghuang 唐明皇), or the Illustrious August.

¹³ Xian” in this context refers to a Taoist immortal. Note that the character for Xian (仙) is an ideogrammic compound of “person” and “mountain”—literally, a “Xian” is a person in a mountain practicing the Tao.

¹⁴ Except as otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. For the original, see: Yuushou Lessen Zenden 有象列仙全伝, Fujida Shouyuemon, 139-40.

Benjamin and Bloch. The nature of this mistranslation, however, is curious. As mentioned earlier, Morikuni's version is relatively faithful to the Chinese original. Both texts use the word "Xiaodong" (jap. *kodou*, little hole), which is almost impossible to be understood otherwise. Why would Anderson translate this seemingly straightforward word as a "stately building"? Furthermore, why did Anderson and Giles ignore some details in the text and emphasized other that did not exist?

Fig. 1. Tachibana, Morikuni 橘守国. *Ehon tsūhōshi* 絵本通宝志 [Illustrated Book of All Treasures], Book V.II. Osaka: Kashiwaraya Seiemon, 1729, Woodblock Print. 20 x 25 cm. From: Kanazawa University Museum, <http://www.kanazawa-bidai.ac.jp/cgi->



[bin/edeimg.pl?owndir=77&list=ehonntsuhoushi06c012.jpg&title=%B3%A8%CB%DC%C4%CC%CA%F5%BB%D6%20%B8%DE%B2%BC](http://www.kanazawa-bidai.ac.jp/cgi-bin/edeimg.pl?owndir=77&list=ehonntsuhoushi06c012.jpg&title=%B3%A8%CB%DC%C4%CC%CA%F5%BB%D6%20%B8%DE%B2%BC) (accessed September 1, 2017).

Let us look at Morikuni's illustration, which accompanied both Anderson's and Giles's English translations [fig. 1]. On the far left stands the Emperor's servant, and on his right sits the Emperor Minghuang. Wu Daozi stands on the right, with his finger pointing at the painting. The painting on the wall occupies the center of the illustration. Surrounded by trees, stones, and clouds, a little bridge leads towards a gate of a palace. Someone is standing in the gate with his hand holding out in a welcoming gesture. The scenery behind the door is obstructed by clouds and shadow of trees, but the revealed details suggest that it might be a beautiful garden attached to a palace. This image is very similar to Benjamin's and Bloch's narrative: a narrow road, water that softly flows under the bridge, and a door leading towards a palace. Furthermore, there is a figure facing the viewers with his hand gesturing at the Emperor. However, if we compare the Japanese text on the left of the illustration, we soon realize that the person in the door is not the painter himself, but the child servant that both English translations omitted. It is likely that Anderson and Giles were influenced by the illustration, and mistook the figure of the servant as the painter himself. Therefore, they "invented" the details that the painter turned and waved towards the Emperor. Finally, although Morikuni faithfully recorded the words "Xiaodong," his illustration suggested otherwise. Let us compare Morikuni's illustration with Huang Yimu's version, which accompanied the Chinese original [fig. 2]:



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Fig. 2. Wang, Shizhen 王世貞. *Yuushou Lessen Zenden* 有象列仙全伝 [Illustrated Comprehensive Biographies of All Immortals], Fujida Shouyuemon (1650), 141. From: University of California Library, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007143392> (accessed September 1, 2017).

The two images are dramatically different, as Huang's style is much simpler than that of Morikuni. In Huang's version, the painter's clothes are not decorated with intricate details. The figure of Wu Daozi is placed at the center of the image, rather than on the side, and the wall that he is about to paint is relatively smaller comparing to the one in Morikuni's version. There is nobody else in the background: neither the Emperor nor his servant is present. Huang depicted an earlier stage of the story, when Wu Daozi has just mixed his bowl of ink. Raising his right hand, he is about to spread the ink on the white wall and begin his work. Huang's depiction is not unfaithful to Wu Daozi's style: the painter was known not so much for the wealth of details as for the extraordinary power he possessed of producing his effects by masterly brush-work. Many of the murals he painted existed only in ink sketches, to which later generations of painters have never been able to supply coloring. He traced the outline of mountains, waters, and clouds all with a single stroke, with neither measurements nor compasses.

Unlike Huang's image, which focuses on the figure of the legendary painter and his ability to paint extremely fast without using brushes, Morikuni's illustration is centered around the painted wall. Fascinated by the story of Wu Daozi's disappearance, Morikuni titled his illustration "Go Dōgen kabe ni kakumi wo manogaru zu," or "the picture of Wu Daozi escaping from the image on the wall." This image was included in the second half of Book Five of *Ehon tsūhōshi*. Unlike the titles of other illustrations, which are no longer than four characters, the title of Wu Daozi's story contains eleven characters. Not only does the title of this image take up twice the space as any other titles, the form of the title is also different. The other titles are either names of the main character, such as "Zhong Kui," or a phrase depicting the content, such as "rain on the way" and "poem in the snow." The title of the Wu Daozi image, however, tells the entire story of his disappearing. Morikuni's translation, adaptation, and re-creation of the

Chinese legend is less about Wu Daozi himself than the disappeared painting. In a sense, by re-creating the disappeared wall, Morikuni became the legendary Wu Daozi. His illustration so successfully redirected the audience's attention from Wu Daozi himself to the painted wall, that generations of storytellers after him—among them Benjamin and Bloch—forgot everything outside of the frame. They forgot about the Emperor, the screen that covered the wall, even the name of the painter. What they remembered was nothing but the narrow path leading towards the gate of a palace, and the waving figure at the door who is about to disappear.

Benjamin wrote in his artwork essay, “Der vor dem Kunstwerk sich Sammelnde versenkt sich darein; er geht in dieses Werk ein, wie die Legende es von einem chinesischen Maler beim Anblick seines vollendeten Bildes erzählt. Dagegen versenkt die zerstreute Masse ihrerseits das Kunstwerk in sich.”¹⁵ Comparing the two types of audiences, the art lover who concentrates before a work and the entertainment seeker distracted by the film that changes continuously in front of him, Benjamin argues that the technological reproduction of art destroys the aura of traditional art forms while creating a new opportunity to organize the newly proletarianized masses to engage in art. Instead of aestheticizing politics, which risks the danger of fascist glorification of war, modern art forms such as film politicizes art, distracts the audience, and shocks them with a violent interruption. The story of the Chinese painter is used here as an example of traditional forms of art, which require concentration and contemplation. The figure of the Chinese painter retains some remaining traces of the decaying “aura”: the mysterious figure is surrounded by a strange tissue of space and time that creates the unique apparition of a distance. The “Chineseness” of the story assigns it with a figurative distance from the beholder, a space between the text and its reader, a “psychological inapproachability” claimed for the work

¹⁵ Benjamin, GS 1: 465.

on the basis of its position with a tradition.¹⁶ Furthermore, this story is told in the context of Taoist ideology and philosophy, which creates an extra layer of authenticity, authority, and religious values. But what if Benjamin's Chinese painter is not Chinese at all? What if the image he remembered so vividly and repeated so many times in his writing is only derived from a mass-produced illustration made by a 18th century Japanese print maker? If so, then the "aura" of the "Chinese painter"—if there was any—was created, ironically, by the development of technological reproduction of the 18th century Japanese publishing industry.

The "Aura" of a Copy

Tachibana Morikuni (1679-1748) was a member of the famous Kanō school of official court artists, although he later left the school. Active during the period when the school was arguably losing its artistic vitality, Morikuni broke the Kanō tradition by publishing parts of school's secret copybooks in his own copybooks for artists, or *edehon*. He not only challenged the dominance of the Kanō system, but also introduced and popularized Chinese copybooks. His copybooks had been continuously re-issued until the Meiji era (1868-1912) due to the lasting demand for artists' manuals.¹⁷ Morikuni's work is an attempt to break with tradition and to change the relationship between *hoi polloi* and art. The kind of art represented by the golden screens that Kanō painters before Morikuni painted for wealthy merchants and powerful shogunate was designed to be appreciated by a few educated individuals, whereas Morikuni's widely-circulated *edehon* provided the necessary methodological materials for amateur artists

¹⁶ Michael Jennings, "The Production, Reproduction, and Reception of the Work of Art," *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, ed. Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y Levin, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 14.

¹⁷ Nakayama Sota. "Edehon and Ukiyoe-shi: Utagawa-school Works and Chinese Gafu," *Journal of East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies* 5 (2012): 402.

and craftsmen who are not affiliated to professional painting schools. These *edehon*, combined with the development of printing techniques, lead to a significant expansion of the printing industry, and the audience for this kind of artworks also became larger than ever.

Morikuni's copybooks also significantly influenced ukiyo-e, the genre of woodblock prints that was central to forming the West's perception of Japanese art in the 19th century, and had a strong influence on the early Impressionists. It is important to notice, however, that ukiyo-e was not a purely Japanese form of art immune to foreign influences. Ukiyo-e was considered less of a form of pure art than a form of mass media: used in ordinary parts of everyday life, ukiyo-e functioned as toys, textbooks, news magazines, and advertisement.¹⁸ The function of ukiyo-e during the Edo period was similar to the illustrated magazines and newsreels that Benjamin mentioned in his artwork essay: “[u]nd unverkennbar unterscheidet sich die Reproduktion, wie illustrierte Zeitung und Wochenschau sie in Bereitschaft halten, vom Bilde. Einmaligkeit und Dauer sind in diesem so eng verschränkt, wie Flüchtigkeit und Wiederholbarkeit in jener.”¹⁹ Although Benjamin treated Morikuni's print as a “Bild”—a unique, authentic legend that carries a certain cult value—it is in fact but an “Abbild,” an inauthentic piece of reproduction. Furthermore, even though Benjamin used the legend as an example of contemplative immersion and concentration, it was, as I argue, produced for an audience seeking distraction. Like the early 20th century movie-goers, the majority of Edo ukiyo-e viewers were a group of uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures consumed by their worries. Like film, ukiyo-e also suppressed the cult value of art to satisfy its distracted audience.

¹⁸ Katsuhiko Takahashi 高橋克彦, *Edo no nyu media: Ukiyoe, joho to kokoku to asobi 江戸のニューメディア* [the New Media of Edo] Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1992.

¹⁹ Benjamin. GS 1, 440.

Morikuni's print is copied from a Ming dynasty copybook, which is likely copied from other sources; and this print itself was also copied by generations of Japanese authors. As a copy of a copy, Morikuni's print was situated in a prolonged narrative of copying, reproducing, and revising. But unlike magazines, newsreels, or even films, Morikuni's work seems to have retained a certain "aura" that has not yet been destroyed by its reproduction. As a work of art, it is simultaneously reproducible and unique. On the one hand, Morikuni's image was widely circulated and significantly influenced the technological reproducible mass media of Edo Japan; on the other hand, his adaptation of the original Chinese text and image was so successful that it took on an aura of authenticity: authors such as Benjamin and Bloch all mistook it as an authentic Chinese legend. In the final section of this paper, I will discuss the relationship between Morikuni and the Kanō tradition, in order to analyze how Morikuni successfully used tradition as a weapon against tradition, and how his attempt was an intentional attempt to combine the aura of authentic "Bild" and the reproducibility of "Abbild."

Importing Chinese Copybooks

During the Edo period (1603-1868), Japan adopted a foreign relations policy which restricts the entry of foreigners and foreign goods. This policy, often referred to as *sakoku*, or closed country, placed strict regulations to commerce and foreign relations, and allowed only two kinds of trade. The first group allowed trade with the Chinese and the Dutch, which took place at Nagasaki; the second group allowed trade with the Korean Kingdom and the Ryūkyū Kingdom, which took place outside of Japanese territory. However, despite strict regulations, a steady flow of Chinese books entering Japan was not interrupted. Scholars such as Jack Ronald

Hillier acknowledged the influence of Chinese prints on literati painters in early modern Japan.²⁰ Additionally, the appearance of Japanese prints with linear perspective (*uki-e*) and of Western-style paintings during the 18th century was linked to imported prints from Suzhou, one of the largest print centers in seventeenth-century China.²¹ In fact, Japanese collections of Suzhou prints are among the largest in the world today, and early woodblock print makers repeated vignettes and techniques borrowed from these imported prints. According to Naruse Fujie, the beginning of Suzhou prints's popularity in Japan can be dated to ca. 1660 to ca. 1760. The change in Chinese trade regulations led to an increase in exports from the lower Yangtze River area to Japan.²²

While publishing during the Kan'ei era (1624-1644) was characterized by classical texts with crude illustrations produced for an elite audience, most printed books published during the 17th century included popular texts with refined illustrations that catered to all classes. Internal changes such as growing literacy, a flourishing native printing industry, and an urban audience, all contributed to the flourishing of a competitive local market for books and visual prints.²³ During the period, Osaka was an important relay point for commerce between the port of Nagasaki and the capital Edo. Before the imported books and prints were transferred to their final destination Edo, artists in Osaka, such as Morikuni and Ōoka Shunboku (1680-1763), had a chance to obtain and to study them. As a result, illustrated books that were first published in

²⁰ Jack Ronald Hillier. *The art of the Japanese book* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 75.

²¹ Julian Lee. *The Origin and Development of Japanese Landscape Prints: A Study in the Synthesis of the Eastern and Western Art*, (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1977).

²² John Lust. *Chinese popular prints* (Leiden and New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 38.

²³ See Shalmit Bejarano, *Picturing Rice Agriculture and Silk Production: Appropriation and Ideology in Early Modern Japanese Painting*, (PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2010), 143.

Osaka enjoyed great popularity across the country, and they were often re-issued in Kyoto and Edo.

The tradition of illustrated manuals started in 17th century China. Popular manuals such as *Tuhui Zongyi* [Principles of Painting] and *Jieziyuan Huapu* [Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden] were reprinted in Edo Japan and became easily accessible in all the major cities. These Chinese manuals, especially the *Jieziyuan Huapu*, were not only used by a great number of Japanese artists, but also a major element in their training process. A few decades after the import of Chinese illustrated manuals, Japanese artists also began to create their own manuals, among them Morikuni's *Ehon Tsūhōshi*. They usually took the form of woodblock printed booklets that were commercially produced by famous booksellers.²⁴

The Kanō Copybook Tradition

The Kanō school to which Morikuni initially belonged was a famous painting school that dominated Japanese painting from the late 15th century to late 19th century. Its founder, Kanō Masanobu (1434-1530), was influenced by Zen philosophy and Chinese-style painting, which was characterized by a strong emphasis on brushwork, little or no use of pigments, and the use of Chinese subjects, such as Zen patriarchs and landscapes. Taking advantage of the then military rulers, the Ashikaga shoguns' interest in Zen Buddhism and Chinese culture, Masanobu and his disciples secured the highly lucrative favor of the governors. Masanobu's son Motonobu widened the school's appeal by combining Japanese decorativeness and unique themes with the Chinese painting style. The later Kanō painters introduced a new strength and dynamism to the

²⁴ Marquet, Christophe. "Learning Painting in Books: Typology, Readership and Uses of Printed Painting Manuals during the Edo Period," in *Listen, Copy, Read: Popular Learning in Early Modern Japan* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 322.

tradition. Their so-called “monumental style” (*taiga*) is characterized by its large format, bold, rapid brushwork on gold-foil background, an emphasis on the foreground, and aggressive and confidence designs featuring motifs that are relatively large to the pictorial space, such as huge trees and regal animals like tigers, lions, and hawks. This style was often rendered on large formats, including walls, doors, and folding screens. Popular among the military government at that time, this style embodied the martial and political bravura of the warlords, and suited the grand interiors of the shogunates’ massive and impressive castles.

Throughout the centuries, the Kanō school consisted of numerous studios where craftsmen work together to serve wealthy clients, including the samurai, the Buddhist and Shinto clerics, and the affluent merchants. As the prominence of the Kanō school grew, the school expanded to become national in scale. It was divided into numerous households, including four main branches designated official painting ateliers to the shogun, twelve minor branches in Edo, even more regional Kanō painters, as well as private commercial ateliers run by Kanō trained painters. The pyramid-shaped organization of the Kanō school, which dominated Japanese painting for more than four centuries, was successful in preserving the cultural practices of the school. However, the paramount authority of Kanō masters and the rigid structure of the system were also blamed for stifling creativity and suppressing individual painter’s originality.²⁵

The Kanō curriculum is usually referred by scholars as the “copybook method.” The student lays a piece of paper of the painting to be copied, and traces the critical portions with a pure white paint called *gofun*. The student then sets the tracing aside and completes the work by looking at the original. After many practices, the student takes a clean copy to the master for his

²⁵ Breda G Jordan. “Education in the Kanō School in Nineteenth-century Japan: Questions about the Copybook Method,” in *Learning in Likely Places: varieties of Apprenticeship in Japan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

evaluation. In this way, a copybook (*mohon*) made up of master-approved copies was created, bound in a volume, and used as pictorial “data bases.” When a student graduated and moved back to his hometown, he would use these copy books to teach his own students.²⁶ Closely guarded and passed on from one generation of artists to the next, these privately produced documents are considered as the workshops’ most treasured property. Although the copybook method of teaching virtually guaranteed Kanō-trained artists with a solid background of styles and techniques, it was often questioned both from inside and outside of the school. According to Jordan’s analysis, there has been the perception that the Kanō system became increasingly orthodox and dogmatic due to its “funponshugi,” or “doctrine of model books.”²⁷

A member of the Kanō school, Morikuni studied under Tsurusawa Tanzan (1658-1729), a student of Tanyū who owned a workshop in Kyoto and filled commissions for imperial court. Morikuni’s career, however, diverged from the traditional path of a Kanō trained painter. Working mostly as a book illustrator, Morikuni’s name appeared on at least 20 books.²⁸ One of the most important visual sources of Morikuni’s work was, of course, the Kanō copybooks. Instead of treating them as treasured properties, Morikuni copied their styles, organized them into different kinds and categories, and published them as his own copybooks for painters. The fact that Morikuni published his own collections of model books that he received while working as a disciple at the Tsurusawa workshop might have resulted in his banishment from the Kanō

²⁶ Hashimoto Gahō 橋本雅邦, “Kobikichō Edokoro” 木挽町画所 [the Kobikichō painting studio], *Kokka* 3 (December 1889), 15-20.

²⁷ Jordan, 54.

²⁸ Kōno Michiaki 河野通明. "Tachibana Morikuni "Ehon Tsūhōshi" No Kisoteki Kenkyū. 橋守国 『絵本通宝志』の基礎的研究・上." [The Foundational Research of Tachibana Morikuni’s Ehon Tsūhōshi, Part I], *Shōkei Ron’i* 商経論叢 36.1 (2000): 11.

school.²⁹ As one of the two earliest *edehon* makers, Morikuni was extremely influential among non-Kanō artists, especially later ukiyo-e print makers.³⁰ For example, Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), the Edo artist famous for his series “Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji,” and many members of the Utagawa school, which was the most famous and successful woodblock print school of the 18th and 19th century, all used Morikuni’s copybooks as learning materials. They often copied and modified images from copybooks, and used in their own paintings.³¹

The “Aura” of Reproduction: The “Six Principles” as Theoretical Justification

Morikuni broke the Kanō tradition by restoring the ancient Chinese tradition of Chuanyī *moxie* 传移模写 [transmission by copying]. *Ehon tsūhōshi* opens with a preface signed by a famous poet of his time, followed by an introduction by Morikuni himself. He wrote,

(...) There are six principles to painting: “spirit resonance, vital movement”; “bone method, using the brush”; “bone method,” “correspondence to the object,” “suitability to type,” “division and planning,” and “transmission by copying.” [Painting] was never a matter of haste and simple brushwork [and thus should be seen as linked to larger concepts. (...)]³²

The Six Principles of paintings that Morikuni quoted here were established by ancient Chinese aesthetician and painter Xie He (ca. 500). One of the Six Principles stated in this earliest Chinese treatise on art theory is that of “transmission by copying.” This principle is reasserted in

²⁹ Whether Morikuni was actually banished is still unclear. Late biographical compendia such as the *Ukiyo ruikō* (various thoughts on ukiyo-e, 1789-1868) suggested that Morikuni was banished for selling secret models that he gathered while in school. Many scholars repeat this commonly accepted tradition, although others demonstrate that all biographies of Morikuni were composed after his lifetime, and were not based on historical documentation. (See: Asano Shugō 浅野秀剛. “Tachibana Morikuni to sono Monryū” 橘守国とその門流 [Tachibana Morikuni and his School], in *Ukiyoe geijutsu*: 1985, 82-84.)

³⁰ Suzuki Jūzō 鈴木重三, “Ehon to sashie” 絵本と挿絵本 [Picture Books and Illustrations], *Museum*: No. 403 (Tokyo National Museum, 1984), 6-9.

³¹ Nakayama, 389-405.

³² Tachibana, n. p.

the first pages of most painting manuals of the Edo period, and *Ehon Tsūhōshi* is no exception. Morikuni gave a more detailed explanation of the principle of “transmission by copying” in the introduction to another book, *Ehon shahō-bukuro* [Illustrated Treasure Bag of Sketches, 1720]:

Without copybooks, it is impossible to replicate the form of subjects. Model book is the rule [规矩, literally: compass and square]. Since things are diverse in form, we do not know when seeing the fangs or horns alone that it might be a beast. Likewise, we do not know when seeing feathers alone that it might be a bird. Only a painting can allow one to identify a foreign bird or animal thanks to its distinctive rendering of the creature’s form and color, which enables one to distinguish it from others of its kind...To look at it, distinguish it, to exhaust that which cannot be exhausted, to measure that which cannot be measured, is the mysterious beauty (妙), the spiritual wonder (神). The mysterious beauty is the rule of heart, model book is the rule of form. (...) ³³

In this paragraph, Morikuni emphasized the importance of model books and the practice of replication, as both a means to achieve formal truth, and a substitute for direct observation. Quoting Xie He’s well-known aesthetic principles in the introduction to his own book, Morikuni justified his methodology of copying by situating himself in a thousand-year old aesthetic narrative. In Confucian ideology, the orthodox was praised over innovation; the principle of transmission by copying further justifies the practice of copying as following an ideal model. However, as we have seen earlier from his adaptation of Huang Yimu’s illustration, Morikuni’s method of copying is by no means to create a substitute for the original. He aimed at reproducing and transmitting certain aspects of painting that are unattainable in nature. Painting exhausts that which cannot be exhausted by our naked eyes, and measures that which is beyond our physical capacity. What Morikuni copied from the original painting is not the strokes, colors, and shapes, but the mysterious beauty and the spiritual wonder that are otherwise unavailable to us. By transmitting the rule of form by copying, Morikuni revealed to his audience the rule of heart.

³³ See: Kōno 25-26. This translation is based on Kōno’s modern transcription of Morikuni’s text.

Perhaps both Morikuni and Benjamin would be more intrigued by Xie He's first principle, *Qiyun shengdong* [spirit resonance, vital movement], which in a sense overlaps with Morikuni's "mysterious beauty, spiritual wonder." In an essay that he wrote about the Chinese paintings at Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in October 1937, Benjamin quoted Chinese scholar Lin Yutang's analysis of calligraphy in his book, *My Country and My People*. Lin began the chapter entitled "Chinese Calligraphy" with the following claim: "all problems of art are problems of rhythm. Hence, in trying to understand Chinese art, we must begin with Chinese rhythm and the source of artistic inspiration."³⁴ It is likely that, by emphasizing the importance of rhythm in Chinese art, Lin was referring to Xie He's first principle. One of the earliest scholars who introduced Xie He's aesthetic theories to the Western world, Japanese scholar Okakura Kakuzo translated the first principle "Qiyun shengdong" as "the life-movement of the spirit through the Rhythm of Things."³⁵ The Swedish art historian whom Benjamin mentioned at the beginning of his essay, Osvald Sirén, translated the first principle as the following: "Spirit Resonance (or, Vibration of Vitality) and Life Movement."³⁶ The harmonious resonance and the rhythmic reverberation of life in Chinese calligraphy inspired Benjamin, as he quoted Lin to describe the resemblance and atmosphere conveyed by calligraphy:

...Dans cette recherche de tous les types théoriquement possibles du rythme et des formes de structures qui apparaissent au cours de l'histoire de la calligraphie chinoise, on découvre que pratiquement toutes les formes organiques et tous les mouvements des êtres vivants qui sont dans la nature ont été incorporés et assimilés... L'artiste... s'empare des minces échasses de la cigogne, des formes bondissantes du lévrier, des pattes massives du tigre, de la crinière du lion, de la lourde démarche de l'éléphant et les tisse en un réseau d'une beauté magique.³⁷

³⁴ Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1936), 274.

³⁵ Kakuzo Okakura, *The Ideals of the East, With Special References to the Art of Japan*. (Dutton, 1920), 51.

³⁶ Osvald Sirén, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Texts by the Painter-Critics, from the Han through the Ch'ing Dynasties* (New York: Dover Publication, 2005, republication of 1936 edition) 21.

³⁷ Benjamin, GS 3:604. Benjamin was quoting from the French edition of Lin's book.

Benjamin describes Chinese calligraphy, or “jeux de l’encre,” as something that is eminently in motion (“une chose éminemment mouvante”). Although the signs are fixed on paper, they resemble a kind of movement expressed in every stroke of the brush. Benjamin believes that these virtual “ressemblances” form a mirror where thought is reflected in this atmosphere of resemblance, or resonance. Each of these resemblances become intermingled, creating a whole atmosphere that solicits thought in the same way as a breeze beckons to a veil of gauze.³⁸ This atmosphere reminds us of the way Benjamin describes the concept of aura: “An einem Sommernachmittag ruhend einem Gebirgszug am Horizont oder einem Zweig folgen, der seinen Schatten auf den Ruhenden wirft - das heißt die Aura dieser Berge, dieses Zweiges atmen.”³⁹ The aura of an artwork records and reveals the moment or the hour in their appearance. The auratic artwork is simultaneously permanent and temporal: it preserves the uniqueness of the moment that cannot be retrieved. Chinese calligraphy does precisely so, as conceived in the terms described above. In the study of rhymes, forms, and structure, calligraphy arrests the moment (*Augenblick*) of the hare’s bounding contours and the elephant’s ponderous walk, creating an unstable equilibrium that incorporated and assimilated moments and time.

Morikuni quoted the Six Principles in the introduction to his book not only as a justification, but also as an ideal, an aspiration for his artistic creation. Perhaps what he wanted to achieve in his book is a successful marriage of Xie He’s first and last principle, of ancient Chinese aesthetic theories and modern Japanese adaptation. And perhaps he was somewhat successful: by copying and re-creating the legend of Wu Daozi, he inspired generations of

³⁸ “Elles s’enchevêtrent et constituent un ensemble que sollicite la pensée comme la brise un voile de gaze,” GS 3, 604.

³⁹ GS 1, 479.

Western philosophers and theorists who mistook the incredible atmosphere or resemblance conveyed by his illustration as the aura of an original work. But ultimately, Morikuni's goal may have consisted in becoming the legendary Wu Daozi "himself," who, according to Sirén, is the only painter who possessed a complete mastery of all Six Principles. Quoting the words of Tang art historian Zhang Yanyuan (c. 815-877), Sirén wrote, "[Wu Daozi] exhausted completely the creative power of nature (he was creative to the utmost), and the resonance of the spirit was so overwhelmingly strong (in his works), that it hardly could be confined to the silk."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Sirén, 23.

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