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book review of

*Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris* by Ting Chang

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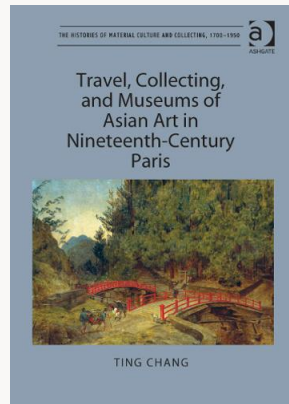
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Ting Chang,  
*Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris*.  
Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013.  
195 pp; 40 b&w illustrations; bibliography; index.  
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In her book on the formation of collections and museums of Asian art in Paris during the nineteenth century, Professor Ting Chang endeavors to expand the parameters of the discussion concerning Asian art in the West. Instead of focusing on questions of style, “taste and interpretation”, she examines the “intercultural exchange between Europe and East Asia in the nineteenth century”, the ways in which objects were purchased, how they were originally understood, and how they were displayed to both public and private audiences (1). Chang’s book centers on three individuals: Henri Cernuschi (1821–1896), Emile Guimet (1836–1918), and Edmond de Goncourt (1822–1896), important players whose role in presenting art objects from Asia provided key case studies in the evolution of a historical process that remains in need of fuller explication.

Each section of Tang’s book sets out ways in which the “power relations” of the day shaped what each man was able to accomplish. In the case of Cernuschi, his fascination with metals dominates his approach to collecting; with Guimet, Tang sees the pursuit of Asian religions as the dominant factor in his policy of acquisition; and with Edmond de Goncourt, the only member of this triumvirate who did not travel to the Far East, Tang posits that he was dominated by escapism and a desire to equate Japanese art with his obsession with eighteenth-century art in France. Using material culled from a wide variety of written sources, including travel books, journals, photographs, and business records, Tang strives to establish the reasons why she selected these men for examination over many others who could have been similarly studied. She argues that these men were capable of going beyond an exclusively aesthetic appreciation of Japanese art, to seeing how art from other countries (including China) proved increasingly significant by spurring forward transnational interrelationships between the arts.

Recognizing that these men knew one another, and had opportunities to discuss art collecting and travel together, adds to the fresh approach that this book presents. These collectors were not working in a vacuum; their interest in the Far East was spurred on by their desire to be part of a burgeoning cultural phenomenon that took hold of the Western world after the opening of Japan in the 1850s. Underlying Tang's entire discussion is her contention that new ways have to be found that would permit an understanding of collection formation presented in terms of significant historical questions that consider trade, business, consumerism, and individual preference. Positioning herself against the traditional role of the museum, which Chang (as well as others) sees as "fading in relevance", she also tries to move beyond a method of stylistic indoctrination as applied to Asian art objects (8). Her book proposes a series of timely approaches which she applies to the individuals she has selected for study. The effectiveness of her examination is at the core of the book itself; whether her "new methodology" can actually be sustained and convince readers is the crucial issue that is not fully resolved by the close of her text.

Her first chapter "The Historical Terms of Euro-Asian Object Acquisition" examines the ways in which Japan, more so than China, was originally perceived by Westerners. In the later nineteenth century, Japan was attempting to promote itself by opening the country up to the outside world; it even pursued Imperial ambitions throughout Asia (17). In response to this open policy, visitors to Japan, including Cernuschi and Guimet, took advantage of the moment to strengthen their plans for acquisition. A veritable tourist book industry developed that detailed what visitors actually experienced during their trips to Japan, promoting perceptions of both real and imagined Japan throughout the West. Chang also notes the reverse of this increasing obsession with the Far East. She documents the ways in which Japan (and China) increasingly learned from the West, displaying tremendous admiration for European dominance and the power of the military machine in many countries (26). Admiration was to turn into adulation. Only Goncourt, of the three men selected by Chang, had no interest in the daily running of the Far East; he was lost in his own private thoughts, a world stimulated by dreams and fueled by the fantasies he was seeing in the Japanese art he collected. While proposing new illustrations of the passion for Japan, Chang goes over well trodden paths, material that is familiar to students of Japonisme (the fascination of all things from Japan and a term coined in the 1870s by an enterprising French critic) without fully integrating earlier findings and discussions with the new directions that she is proposing.

In her discussion of Henri Cernuschi, Tang approaches the formation of his collection through his dedication to the study of metals in the nineteenth century. He saw Chinese bronzes as part of the mystery of primitive art; thus when he went to the Far East to amass the large number of pieces for his collection, he was doing so with a very personal reason in mind (40). In chronicling how Cernuschi worked, the author describes his trip to the Far East with the art critic, Théodore Duret, as part of a democratic approach to seeing material in China and Japan that needed to be explained from a social and cultural viewpoint (44). Cernuschi wanted to be the first in what he collected so that the objects themselves would provide ample evidence of a foreign culture to people in the West. A very wealthy individual, Cernuschi understood the shifting standards in the accumulation of metals; he was interested in using the bronze objects in his proposed museum as exemplars of a new global market economy. By using bronze as a means of a monied economy, Cernuschi was in the vanguard of those who wanted to destabilize the hierarchy of metals, even the importance of European civilizations. As a new

way of thinking about what Cernuschi was doing, this section of Tang's book provides intriguing directions for further research. But she needs to locate other opinions from the nineteenth century to see whether Cernuschi's interest in metals was understood in this way. Based on the presentation of the Cernuschi collection in the museum today, the installation does not make these issues clear or apparent. If Tang is actually saying that he wanted to destabilize the currency standard in France, then this would have been a huge change.

With her chapter on Emile Guimet, and the eventual organization of the Musée Guimet in France (first in Lyon and finally in Paris), Tang describes the acquisition process employed by Guimet, and his traveling companion to Japan, the artist Félix Régamey. Using a cultural point of view based on the importance of objects that would explain the religious, mythological, and cultural practices of Japan, she provides an appropriate way to discuss what Guimet amassed (73). As a type of "cultural geographer" Guimet brought things together that would help explain the anthropology of the country (75). Tang criticizes, albeit with restraint, the ways in which objects are displayed today in the Musée Guimet as it does not provide any information or discussion as to why certain objects were collected. In an informative section, she suggests that at the core of Guimet's collection were objects that would provide evidence and theoretical suggestions for a discussion of the religions of the world. Tang argues that if the museum had carried out this mission, it would have been an exhaustive study that would have used art works in a new and illuminating way. Significantly, her discussion also focuses on the ways in which Westerners traveled through Japan. Some, such as the adventurous traveler Hugues Krafft, took photographs, while others, as in the case of Félix Régamey, created watercolors and drawings that served to illustrate his travel book recording his voyage to Japan with Guimet in 1880. Enlarging the scope of how Westerners traveled in Japan during the Meiji period, Tang's volume is a noteworthy effort to elucidate this theme, especially since this historical period is now receiving increasing scrutiny from scholars. By centering attention on what Guimet acquired (although there is no clear evidence of the sources for many of his pieces), Tang has done a service for the Guimet collection. Much more needs to be done in order to assess whether, as was the case with Cernuschi, people at the time fully comprehended what Guimet was trying to accomplish.

With Edmond de Goncourt, readers are confronted by a very different personage and set of circumstances. Tang attempts to explain how Goncourt was able to elaborate a Japoniste aesthetic doctrine based on how he decorated his home, despite the fact that he had never visited Japan. Given the fact that Edmond de Goncourt laid claim to being the first individual to show an appreciation for Japan (stated in a novel he published early on), this boast is difficult to accept. Goncourt arranged his home to reveal the relationship between the eighteenth century in France and Japan, even though such a relationship has little credibility. Tang posits that it would have been difficult to verify such a claim as Goncourt was a supreme egotist immersed in his own pleasures, someone who cared very little about letting anyone enter his private aesthetic realm, his own personal museum. Given the fact that Goncourt was living a romantic dream where the objects he acquired stoked his own desires, it is difficult to fully comprehend exactly why Tang selected Goncourt in the first place since he never visited Japan except in his dreams and through his obsessions.

Even though the book provides a brief conclusion that tries to further explain the author's rationale and the organization of the chapters, it remains confusing to follow and unclear

about its objectives. Why were these individuals selected in the first place? How do the various collections provide a new way of seeing collection and museum formation in the nineteenth century? Various hints are provided, but Tang did not go deeply enough in her research into business and archival records. Where the book is most confused is in the examination of Edmond de Goncourt, who remains a mysterious figure, and still awaits a much deeper analysis of his passion for collecting Japanese art. In the end, what the book promised in its opening chapter, and hinted at along the way, does not fully come to fruition. This is unfortunate. A fuller picture of Asian art in the nineteenth century, and new perspectives on Japonisme would be both welcome and useful.

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