

BOOK REVIEW

Painting Nature for the Nation: Taki Katei and the Challenges to Sinophile Culture in Meiji Japan

Rosina Buckland

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Taki Katei 滝和亭 (1830–1901) was nothing short of a giant of the Meiji art world. By the 1890s, he was an Imperial Household Artist, had produced artwork for the imperial palace, was a prominent member of the Japan Art Association (Nihon Bijutsu Kyōkai 日本美術協会, hereafter JAA), a judge at national competitions, and the only painter to appear in the 1902 collection *Biographies of One Hundred Meiji Greats* (*Meiji hyakketsu den* 明治百傑伝) (p. 168). None of this, though, has spurred much critical scrutiny in English or Japanese of him or his works, a situation Rosina Buckland now rectifies. Developed from her 2008 doctoral dissertation, Buckland’s lavishly illustrated study presents Katei’s life, works, and times, aiming to remedy this prominent painter’s virtual disappearance from the historical record. Both Katei and the JAA have, she argues, been victims of an art historiography that over-emphasizes Western-inflected modes of painting in late nineteenth-century Japan. Postwar researchers aiming to locate elements of modernity in Meiji have discounted the work of the JAA as “old-fashioned and reactionary” (p. 5) to promote a “specific message about Japan’s experience of modernization,” in which “promising directions” in Japanese art (i.e. painters unlike Katei) were “thwarted by the oppressive mood of the 1930s and 1940s” (pp. 170–71).

Buckland’s study features five main chapters covering different phases of Katei’s career. Chapter 1 discusses Katei’s early years as an itinerant artist, as well as the position of literati arts in late Tokugawa Japan. Chapter 2 explores Katei’s work after settling down in Edo, especially his cultivation of wealthy patrons and publication of painting manuals for a broader audience. Chapter 3 covers the shifting role of “China” in Japanese consciousness and Ernest Fenollosa’s attacks on literati painting (*bunjinga* 文人画), as well as the formation of professional art organizations such as the JAA. Chapter 4 discusses Katei’s work in a re-imagined “bird and flower” genre, which, as *bunjinga* painting declined, came to be identified as distinctly Japanese; several of Katei’s own “bird and flower” paintings featured prominently in overseas displays of “Japanese” art. The much shorter Chapter 5, converted from the conclusion of Buckland’s dissertation, covers Katei’s reception during the twentieth century. Appendices also contain excerpts from Katei’s publications, information on his pupils, and reproductions and transcriptions of inscriptions and seals on his paintings.

Buckland’s study is extremely comprehensive; she has apparently left no stone unturned throughout Japan and the United Kingdom in tracking down Katei’s extant works, many of which are reproduced in full color and with considerable attention to detail and technique.

Given Katei's prominence, this is a significant contribution and makes the book a valuable resource. Buckland also makes some useful critical contributions. Chapter 4 is particularly good on the cultural and political background to Katei's paintings for the Imperial palace, as well as his participation in domestic and overseas exhibitions. The adoption of "bird-and-flower" painting as "Japanese" was, Buckland shows, intended to appeal to Western audiences, for "birds and flowers betrayed no overt cultural origins" and were "malleable enough to be repurposed as national symbols" (p. 128). Likewise, Chapter 2's discussion of "calligraphy and painting parties (*shogakai* 書画会)" and collaborative works of painting (*gassaku* 合作, *yoriatigaki* 寄合書) draws attention to the highly social nature of nineteenth-century literati artistic production.

Buckland is further to be commended for paying sustained attention to the history of Sino-Japanese cultural relations during the mid-nineteenth century, in which vein she draws on previous work by Joshua Fogel and Richard John Lynn in particular. Nevertheless, I have reservations as to how fully Buckland's study succeeds in its aim to "cast light on the vibrant world of Chinese-inflected arts in Japan from the 1850s to the 1890s" (p. 2). It is questionable whether "Sinophile," which she employs throughout, is an appropriate term here, for nineteenth-century men of letters displayed a wide range of attitudes towards China proper. On p. 57, Buckland cites the visits to China of Oka Rokumon 岡鹿門 (a.k.a. Oka Senjin 千仞, 1833–1914) and Kishida Ginkō 岸田吟香 (1833–1905) to show the vibrancy of Sino-Japanese trade during early Meiji. However, Oka's experience of China was largely negative; and Ginkō, writing to Narushima Ryūhoku 成島柳北 (1837–84), remarked acridly on the influx of Chinese painters to Japan that resulted from this expanded trade:

[Painter] Wei Zhusheng [衛鑄生, n.d.] and others of a lesser capacity have of late purchased cheap tickets to travel to Japan. They made a huge amount of money and returned home...people [in China] are all clamoring about wanting to go to Japan. Blame for this, though, is entirely to be laid at the feet of Japanese indiscretion.

This disdain for certain Chinese painters as mercenary may have had long-term effects on literati painting. Certainly, Katei's own son Seiichi's 1922 history of literati painting cited perceived over-commercialization as one of the genre's major problems (p. 100). Further exploration of this topic would surely have been productive. So too on p. 172, Buckland notes that "[f]rom the mid-1880s onwards the terms *bunjinga*, *nanshūga*, and *nanga* increasingly became the subjects of debate, and the separation and rejection of Chinese-inspired literati painting can be traced through the shifts in terminology," but does not pursue this topic. Contextualizing Katei's work with this discourse would have brought the study closer to its stated aims, as would a more nuanced discussion of "Sinophile culture" and its "challenges."

A few minor errors also appear in Buckland's discussion of Sinitic poetry (*kanshi*). To cite just two examples, her comment on p. 90 that "[k]*anshi* is a form of regulated verse, composed of five or seven syllables in four or eight lines" will strike specialists as problematic. "Regulated verse" in English-language discussions of Sinitic poetry usually refers to a subcategory, also known as "new-style poetry" (Ch. *jintishi*, Jp. *kintaishi* 近体

1 For a discussion of Oka's experiences during his stay in China, see Fogel 1996, pp. 74–82.

2 English Translation taken from Chen 2012, p. 26.

詩), of the *shi* 詩 genre, or to the regulated octave (Ch. *lüshi*, Jp. *risshi* 律詩), a specific form within that sub-group. As such, her description is misleading; also, not all *kanshi* follow the structural patterns she suggests. Elsewhere, *Haibun inpu* 佩文韻府 was not a “magazine” (p. 84), but rather the Japanese pronunciation of *Peiwenyunfu*. The *Peiwenyunfu* was a Chinese-produced rhyming dictionary for Sinitic poetry, which in 1885 had just appeared in Japan in a mass-market edition. These errors do not materially affect Buckland’s main discussion, but they suggest that her detailed attention to Katei’s life and works is not balanced by equal attention to the details of his “Sinophile culture.”

These problems aside, Buckland’s study is accessible and easy to read, enlivened with amusing anecdotes about Katei himself, especially his skill at swordsmanship (e.g. p. 45). In making Katei and his works accessible, and in its focus on the role of painting in Meiji nation-building, the study will interest art and cultural historians and non-specialist readers alike.

REFERENCES

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