



Title	John La Farge' s Letters from Japan and Its References : Eastern Thoughts through Translations and Images
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Citation	Proceedings of International Seminar 2021 : Coping with the “New Normal” and the Promotion of International Exchange. 2022, p. 65-72
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/89125
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John La Farge’s *Letters from Japan* and Its References: Eastern Thoughts through Translations and Images

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Abstract: While John La Farge (1835-1910) has been regarded as a pioneer of American *Japonisme* in the art histories, close analyses on his travelogue *An Artist’s Letters from Japan* (1897) have been long neglected, especially in terms of its environment and the popularity of Eastern thoughts in America when it was written. Buddhism became dramatically popular especially among the American elites after Edwin Arnold’s *the Light of Asia* was published in 1879, and Chinese thoughts also became influential after their translations were published around the same period. By analyzing La Farge’s text carefully, my research connects the influence of translations of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucianist texts with his art, which suggests new approaches to his sophistication of his own style. My presentation for this seminar will focus on his references on those Eastern thoughts whose translations enabled him to have access in America.

Introduction

John La Farge was an American artist who was active mainly in the Newport and New York areas from the latter half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. Japanese woodblock prints (ukiyo-e) and curios inspired many of his essays, paintings, and illustrations that brought him renown as a pioneer of American *Japonisme* (Adams, 1985). In summer 1886, he voyaged across the Pacific to the Yokohama Bay of Japan with the historian Henry Adams and traveled from the eastern areas including Tokyo, Nikko, and Kamakura, to the western regions such as Kyoto, Nara, and Gifu. He utilized this experience to establish his distinctive style of American modernism. His travelogue, *An Artist’s Letters from Japan* (hereinafter, *Letters*), was published in 1897 with more extensive information supplementing his notes written in Japan, which implies that La Farge must have referred to some books regarding East Asia.¹ Thus, some scholarly studies exist on La Farge; however, close analyses of his texts have been neglected for long, especially apropos references to the East. My presentation will compare John La Farge’s texts and images with some newly identified references.

La Farge and Buddhism

Many Boston elites such as La Farge and Adams were fascinated by Buddhism after Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* was published in 1879. This Victorian poem was as influential as Paul Carus’s 1894 publication of *The Gospel of Buddha* after the Chicago Exposition of 1893 hosted the sensational World’s Parliament of Religions.

¹ Some chapters of the travelogue were previously serialized in *The Century* magazine from 1890.

Thomas Tweed's *The American Encounter with Buddhism* (2005) categorized American Buddhists who emerged between 1875 and 1912 into three types: the esoterics, rationalists, and romantics. Tweed included La Farge and numerous other Boston elites in the last type, who were more interested in the cultural and aesthetic aspects of Buddhism than its religious purposes. Around the same time, Western scholars interpreted Buddhism as the other of Christianity while discovering similarities between the two worldviews (Snodgrass, 2003, p. 114).

La Farge's watercolor, *Meditation of Kuwannon* (ca. 1886), may be cited as a prominent example of this conflation of Buddhism and Christianity. His depiction of the bodhisattva Kannon (Kuwannon or Kuwanon in La Farge's spelling) as a white woman in a white-robe mirrored Virgin Mary as a deity, and translated her into a Western-style painting on canvas, which is traceable in his notes on the impression of Kannon in *Letters*: "Of all the images that I see so often, the one that touches me most—partly, perhaps, because of the Eternal Feminine—is that of the incarnation that is called Kuwanon, when shown absorbed in the meditations of Nirvana" (1897, p. 175). In addition, when the American scholar and art critic, Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853-1908), took him to show a Kannon painting by the Chinese monk painter of the 13th century, Muqi (Mokkei in Japanese), at the Daitoku-ji temple, "Mr. LaFarge, devout Catholic as he [was], could hardly restrain a bending of the head as he muttered, 'Raphael'" (Fenollosa, 1921, p. 50). La Farge was infatuated with the feminized Kannon, and projected unto the bodhisattva liberated from reincarnation by attaining Nirvana, which sympathized with his ideal of a compassionate woman.

Therefore, it is quite obvious that La Farge intentionally depicted this image as the female archetypes and saw Kannon as a counterpart of Virgin Mary familiar in such Old Masters' paintings as Raphael's. However, Avalokiteśvara (Kannon's original name in Sanskrit)² "has never been represented as a goddess in India, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and or Southeast Asia" (Yü, 2000, p.2). Eva Zhang's research demonstrates that feminization of Kannon began in China from the end of the Tang to Song dynasties and Western missionaries discovered similarities between Kannon and Virgin Mary, when one of the manifestations as Songzi Kuanyin (meaning "child-giving kannon" in Chinese) first emerged in the sixteenth century (2012, pp. 173-7). Interestingly, white-robed Kannon types also appeared in Zen paintings of the Song dynasty (Yü, 2000, p.6).

How, then, did La Farge attain the notion of feminization that these recent Kannon studies revealed, if not from the visual information received through his encounter with Muqi's Kannon painting at Daitoku-ji? He mentions a story about the transformations of Kannon in *Letters*, which matches accounts about the daughter of the Chinese king Miao-chuang-yen, Princess Miao-shan:

² Avalokiteśvara contains *Īśvara*, meaning a lord, and its process being translated as *yin* in Chinese is discussed further by Studholme (2012).

Of the divinity's many incarnations one has interested me as typical, and will amuse you. It is when—in the year 696 B. C., though the precise date is not exactly material — this power is born as a girl, daughter to one of the many kings of China. Then follows a legend like that of Saint Barbara. (1897, pp.180-3)

It is interesting that La Farge happened to read her legend because it has been identified as one of the origins of female kannon by some scholars (Sangren, 1983; Yü, 2000). Moreover, Miao-shan is compared to St. Barbara here. Some other books and articles of that time also mentioned Miao-shan's story, but Ernst Johann Eitel's *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism*, published first in 1870 and reprinted in 1888, is the only text mentioning the date "B. C. 696" to my knowledge. If my identification of La Farge's reference is correct, he changed the ending of Eitel's version of Miao-shan to her being beheaded. He also borrowed the feminization of Kannon from China, presumably to make his account resemble the Western myths of St. Barbara or Medusa.

While Miao-shan's virginity is emphasized in this text, La Farge praised Miao-shan's independent choice to reject marriage. This feminized idea of Kannon that he and his circle shared was later adapted into female representations in America, which empowered those women to some extent. Murai (2009) points out that the idea of Kannon shared by the Japanese writer and art critic, Okakura Kakuzo (1863-1913), who had been friendly with La Farge since they met in Japan, gave inspirations to the painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), who drew the portrait of the American patron Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840-1924) of 1888, through Gardner that La Farge introduced. Guth (2014) extends the map of Kannon-inspired works in Gardner's surroundings even more, including Sargent's oil painting *Mrs. Gardner in White* (1922) and one of the pioneers of American modern dancers, Ruth St. Dennis, who dressed in white-robe of Kannon. Furthermore, Murai (2019) suggests that the independent posing of *Isabella Stewart Gardner* (1888) derive from the Buddha-looking *Meditation of Kuwannon*. For this sequence of Kannon-inspired representation of women, La Farge's idea of Kannon incorporated with Miao-shan appears to have played an important role in consolidating the artist's vision of the bodhisattva as a woman, underscoring the influence of Eitel's book.

La Farge and Taoism

Besides Buddhism, La Farge was influenced by Taoism. In a chapter of *Letters* titled "Tao: The Way," he adapted concepts attributed to the Chinese Tao thinker, Chuang-tzu. He recorded in this chapter that a Japanese architectural sketch he saw in a magazine captured "what the building should have been" (1897, p. 103) despite the absence of scientific techniques such as perspective drawing and shadowing. The West commanded these techniques; in contrast, La Farge stressed that Japanese architects worked without them, concentrating on the work itself. At this juncture,

he introduced a conversation between a snake and a wind attributed to “an old Chinese writer, an expounder of Tao” without indicating an information source³:

The snake hissed at the wind, saying : “I at least have a form, but you are neither this nor that, and you blow roughly through the world, blustering from the seas of the north to the seas of the south.”

“It is true,” replied the wind, “that I blow roughly, as you say, and that I am inferior to those that point or kick at me, in that I cannot do the same to them. On the other hand, I blow strongly and fill the air, and I can break huge trees and destroy large buildings. *Out of many small things in which I do not excel I make ONE GREAT ONE in which I do excel.*”

In the domains of the One there may not be managing. (p.106)

By inserting this dialogue, La Farge connected his ideas on architecture to his recollection of the story told by this Chinese writer. The body or form of the snake represented the architectural form or the rule of Western architecture; the wind, which lacked physical form, signified Eastern architecture that La Farge emphasized its reduced adherence to scientific rules.

Japanese translation of *An Artist's Letters from Japan*, *Gaka-toyu-roku*, was published in 1981, and its translators, Hisatomi and Kuwabara, noted that this segment above derives from Chuang-tzu's *The Autumn Floods*. Nonetheless, it is more important to ascertain La Farge's source of information to determine how Eastern ideas were disseminated in America. My research has evidenced that this section was cited from Herbert Allen Giles's *Chuang Tzū: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer* published in London in 1889 by Bernard Quaritch:

The snake said to the wind, “ I can manage to wriggle along, but I have a form. Now you come blustering down from the north sea to bluster away to the south sea, and you seem to be without form. How is that?”

“ 'Tis true,” replied the wind, “ that I bluster as you say ; but any one who can point at me or kick at me, excels me.

As I cannot do as much to them.

On the other hand, I can break huge trees and destroy large buildings. That is my strong point. Out of all the small things in which I do not excel I make one great one in which I do excel. (p.212)

Additionally, La Farge added a footnote to the latter part of this chapter: “if what I have written is ever seen by H. B. M.'s consul at Tamsui, he will perceive my present indebtedness to his most admirable translations” (La Farge, 1897, p.117). H. B. M. stands for Her Britannic Majesty, which is also written on the cover of Giles's translation, and La Farge should have indicated him after referring to his work.

³ The cited texts of the following comparison keep the typographical errors and indentations made in the original texts to accurately analyze the author's revisions.

It is important to note that Giles's translation of Chuang-Tzu influenced numerous writers. To cite just one, Oscar Wilde wrote *A Chinese Sage*, a review of the book in 1889, saying, "... thanks to Mr. Giles and Mr. Quaritch, we have his book to console us, and certainly it is a most fascinating and delightful volume."⁴ Chuang-Tzu is one of the Darwinians before Darwin" (p.293). This reaction should be natural for Wilde because Giles wrote the preface and translation that would make English readers easily understand the text (Jiang & Li, 2020, p. 479).⁵ Many other readers including La Farge should have seen Chuang-tzu as one of the counterparts of Western philosophers in Giles's work by the same token.

Meanwhile, many writers and artists of the time explored the commonality of Eastern and Western thoughts. Eastern thinkers stepped into the global frame of modernity, just as in the group photograph of the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. For example, La Farge assembled *Ancient Lawgivers* (1907) in the lobby of the Clarence Mitchell Jr. Courthouse in Baltimore: Justinian, Lysurgus, Mohammed, Moses, Numa Pompilius, and Confucius. Hashimoto Yorimitsu's study (2020) introduces other examples depicting different philosophers on one canvas along with the increasing popularity of theosophy, and indicates that their origins can be traced back to a popular Tao subject story, the Three Vinegar Tasters, which was significantly introduced in Okakura's *The Book of Tea* (1906).

Indeed, his interest in Confucius was fueled by the assistance by Okakura in reading Chinese characters. Royal Cortissoz wrote in his biography titled *John La Farge: A Memoir and A Study* (1911), "Confucius is reading from a scroll and on this La Farge got Okakura to help him inscribe in Chinese characters one of the Sage's sayings, 'First the white, and then the color on top'" (p.181). The similar account is also cited to explain the rules of Chinese painting in Okakura's seminal book, *The Ideals of the East* (1903), which presents "The Law of Bones and Brush-work" through the Six Canons of Chinese Painting conceptualized by the fifth-century Chinese artist, Hsieh Ho (Shakaku)⁶.

⁴ According to Hubert (2015), the Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges (1899-86), also got Giles's *Chuang Tzŭ* as a teenager, which offered an introduction to the Eastern works (p.86).

⁵ The following part of the preface brings philosophical perspective of the West by referring to Aristotle: "As to Chuang Tzŭ, his work can in no sense be called "sacred." Unless indeed we modify somewhat the accepted value of terms and reckon the works of Aristotle among the 'sacred' books of the Greeks. Chuang Tzŭ was scarcely the founder of a school. He was not a Prophet, as Lao Tzŭ was, nor can he fairly be said ever to have been regarded by genuine Taoists as such" (Giles, 1889, p.xvi).

⁶ Okakura introduced only the first two laws out of the six for some reason: "The Life-movement of the Spirit through the Rhythm of Things" and "The Law of Bones and Brush-work". These two attracted many arts critic and were translated in various ways, but the former was discussed more than the latter (Soper, 1949, pp. 413-5). For the overview of its influence towards post-Impressionism, see Hashimoto's 2010 paper.

This great imaginative scheme forms the bony system of the work; hues take the place of nerves and arteries, and the whole is covered with the skin of colour. That he ignores the question of dark and light, is due to the fact that in his day all painting was still on the early Asiatic method—covering the ground with white lime and laying upon this the rock-pigments, which were accentuated and marked off from each other with strong black lines. Thus Confucius says “all painting is in the sequence of white” (p.53).

It should be this explanation that first translated the Six Canons in English (Kawakami, 1952, p. 156), which might have enabled La Farge to read Okakura's Confucius-influenced understanding of this art theory, while Giles also mentioned the Six Canons in *An Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art* published in 1905.⁷ Okakura, a leading art critic writing in English, became as influential as Giles for La Farge by the beginning of the 20th century. However, it appears even more significant that Giles's *Chuang Tzŭ*, published and referred earlier than Okakura's 1903 groundbreaking book, was primarily referred and adapted into the idea of Chinese brush-work theory in La Farge's travelogue.

Conclusion

To sum up, Eastern ideas introduced through translations around the turn of the 20th century inspired many of La Farge's essays and artworks. It is presumed that he referenced Ernst Eitel's illustration of Miao-shan in the context of Buddhism and adapted the Chinese feminization of Kannon to accomplish his Kannon painting. My comparative analysis also clarifies that La Farge cited Herbert A. Giles's prominent translation of Chuang-tzu in his published travelogue, and shows that in addition to his conversations with Okakura, Giles's translation gave him a fundamental introduction to Chinese thoughts in a way that East meets West to seek for the “ONE GREAT ONE”. Global art history has long forgotten La Farge; however, such adaptations are worth contemplation for its possibilities to explore the net of Eastern thoughts in his time.

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⁷ According to Kawakami (1952), a few Japanese scholars discussed Europeans and Americans' understanding of the Six Canons as early as 1920s, which mentioned Giles and also other scholars including Raphael Petrucci, Friedrich Hirth, Stephen W. Brushell, Laurence Binyon, and Percy Brown (pp.155-56).

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