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# Bulletin





# Bulletin

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# Glimpses of a Different World

By Frederik H. Green  
Photography by Angelica Illueca

## Nineteenth Century Chinese Trade Paintings from the Sutro Orientalia Collection

*The Sutro library's exquisite collection consisting of a total of approximately 120 sheets in excellent condition depicting both highly representative as well as extremely rare examples of this genre of painting is destined to take its place among the main collections in the U.S.*

Not long after the Sutro Library found a permanent home in the two top floors of the J. Paul Leonard Library at San Francisco State University Library in August of 2012, a number of long dormant treasures were brought back to light. Among them was a set of eleven albums that had been stored in inconspicuous drawers simply labeled Orientalia Collection. Each of the albums consisted of ten to twelve colorful gouache paintings roughly measuring twenty-by-thirty centimeters that were mounted on sheets of paper and top-bound in silk-clad red front and back covers. To date, not much is known about the origin and history of the items in Adolph Sutro's Orientalia Collection other than what is recorded in a short article from the *San Francisco Call* that appeared in 1885. "In 1882," the article begins, "Mr. Sutro started for Europe, via Japan and China, with the intention of making a beginning [of his library]. While in Japan and China, and later, while in India, Mr. Sutro bought Oriental works of great value, [and] wherever he found a manuscript he bought it and had it shipped to this port [of San Francisco]." While the Orientalia Collection is comprised for the most part of nineteenth century Japanese calligraphy, paintings, and exquisite wood-block prints,<sup>1</sup> the images contained in said drawers are of Chinese origin and belong to a category of paintings that is usually referred to as "trade-paintings" as these images were produced and traded in the treaty ports of China throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Typically depicting scenes of Chinese daily life, Chinese fauna and flora, or Chinese officialdom, these colorful images were produced in large numbers in numerous workshops in Canton and later also in other port cities in China. Easy to transport because of their relatively small size and inexpensive to purchase, they became a popular souvenir for tourists and merchants involved in the China trade, as well as sought-after items for botanists and zoologists who prized them for the realism with which they depicted Chinese plant and animal life (*image 2*).

With his intention of building a world-class research library that would chronicle the growth and development of civilizations through time and that was to focus especially on natural and physical sciences and technology, it is not surprising that Adolph Sutro would have been captivated by these paintings. He subsequently purchased a large number of images that depict various Chinese crafts, such as silk-making or the production of rice and tea (*image 3*), scenes from Chinese opera and folk religion, or glimpses of daily life. Long neglected by art historians and collectors since these paintings were not part of the elite art produced and consumed by the Chinese literati class, interest in trade-paintings



### EDITOR'S NOTE

*Frederik H. Green is Assistant Professor of Chinese in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at San Francisco State University. His research interests include Chinese Republican period literature, Hong Kong literature and film, Sino-Japanese relations, and post-socialist Chinese cinema.*



Noble woman in ceremonial attire and servant girl holding a ruyi 如意 scepter that is used as religious talisman or a symbol for good fortune.



Orioles (黃鶯) & black capped kingfishers (黑頭翡翠)

has resurged in recent years as the historical, sociological, anthropological, and artistic value of these popular images has been reevaluated. Several European and American museums — such as the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Ethnographic Museum in Hamburg, Germany, to name just a few —

have since catalogued their holdings and curated special exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> The Sutra Library's exquisite collection consisting of a total of approximately 120 sheets in excellent condition depicting both highly representative as well as extremely rare examples of this genre of painting is destined to take its place among the main collections in the U.S.

While trade-paintings are now usually associated with the height of the Euro-American China trade — that is the period of the decades preceding the first Opium War of 1839-42 and the years until the end of the nineteenth century — and believed to have been produced almost exclusively for export, the genre itself, which is also referred to as pith painting for the mate-



Dismemberment as punishment for murder. Sinners reborn as pigs, awaiting slaughter.

rial onto which the extremely bright and rich gouache paints that were used for these paintings were applied, has been known to Europeans since as early as the sixteenth century when Portuguese traders first brought examples of these paintings to Europe.<sup>3</sup> Pith paper, which Europeans had first mistook to be a kind of parchment and later mislabeled as “rice-paper,”

is an ivory-white material that is produced by cutting into thin sheets the spongy cellular tissue from the inside of the stems of a tall shrub known as *tongcao* (通草) to the Chinese or *Tetrapanax papyrifera* to Western botanists and that is native to the island of Taiwan.<sup>4</sup> Pith paper, the texture of which somewhat resembles that of styrofoam, has a translucent character that

made it suitable for back painting. Application of gouache and watercolors resulted in almost three-dimensional effects owing to the cellular comb-structure of the pith. Paint applied in thick layers that filled the hollows of the cells and sat on the surface resulted in raised lines. Extremely rich and vibrant pigments were used to fill the black contours of human or animal fig-