

TAM Chi Sing, Laurence, *The Cradle of New Chinese Ink Painting Movement*, Wah Yan College, Hong Kong, 2009, pp. 250.

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This publication in English is partly pedagogical and partly student exhibition catalogue. Its main bulk is formed by a collection of twelve lessons instructing students in the art of ink painting—discussed from pages 46 to 180—based on a teaching method devised in the late 1960s by its author. Some of the surviving results by the more gifted students illustrating the lessons have been presented in over seven formal exhibitions, beginning in 2007 at the Children’s Palace in Guangzhou, Foshan and elsewhere. A photograph of one such exhibition reproduced on page 218 of the book gives readers a good idea of these colourful events.

Laurence Tam’s innovative teaching experiment was first initiated at Wah Yan College, Kowloon (Hong Kong), which like its counterpart in Hong Kong Island is a leading secondary school for boys with strong historical links to the Society of Jesus. The College, referred to in the title as the “cradle” of these experimental lessons, prides itself on those of its past alumni that have entered public service and big business. The main contribution to the College’s curriculum by Laurence Tam, a former art teacher at the College but now retired and for the most part living in Canada, was in creating the new method of Chinese painting discussed and richly illustrated in the book. In fact its rather long subtitle declares it to be *A New Program of Learning and Teaching Chinese Ink Painting, First Introduced at Wah Yan College, Kowloon, in 1966-1971*.

The author was equally active as art educator in the then British colony at other institutions in the 60s and 70s, such as the Art and Design Courses offered by the Extra-Mural Department of the University of Hong Kong. He later became curator of City Hall’s City Museum and Art Gallery, and finally chief curator of the impressive Hong Kong Museum of Art in Tsim Sha Tsui. Not only that, but Laurence Tam is himself one of the leading painters of a contemporary movement of Hong Kong painters that sprung in the 1960s and which tried hard to modernize the tradition of Chinese painting in a Hong Kong where such endeavours were very much secondary to more monetary preoccupations. Among the pioneering artistic movements active at the time, one extreme wholeheartedly embraced the latest abstract currents and techniques arriving from Europe and the U.S, largely dominated by acrylics. Others, leaning towards more conservative roots in Chinese culture attempted to revitalise the traditional use of ink for painting. Whatever their source of artistic inspiration all of these artists were searching for authentic styles and techniques that would be more truly representative of twentieth-century Hong Kong art.

The method of ink painting discussed in the book instructs students by stages on the mastery of the technique of Chinese ink painting, of which Laurence Tam is an advocate, but this is done in ways that appeal to their creative imagination. It includes two papers by Laurence Tam at its beginning and end, the first one a long biographical essay, in which he recounts the ups and downs of his career and explains his method. After this introduction the mentioned new program in learning and teaching ink painting, illustrated by various student paintings, is presented.

There is a felicitous last-but-one lesson entitled “Learning from the Past”, where students are introduced to the great Chinese masters of the past. Here it is explained that the reason that it is placed at the end is “to avoid the pitfall of letting the students forming the habit of copying works by others at the early learning stages”. This presumably allows students to form their own vision and styles, something that clearly shows the reader that the aims of this method are indeed novel in the context of traditional Chinese teaching. Inevitably perhaps, as this is the production of a local college, the book has the feel of a College Yearbook. But that does not detract from the more laudable aims of what is not only a useful but also an enjoyable book.