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David Kidd: Collector, Writer, Master Orientalist
by Alexandra Munroe

In his memoir *Peking Story: The Last Days of Old China* (New York, 1988), David Kidd describes a dream in which ancestors of the aristocratic Chinese family he was married into appeared before him: 'Dressed in court robes and crowns and arrayed in shadowy tiers around me,' Kidd writes, 'they were angry and upset. Why had I not helped them, they asked?'[1] Their ancestral temple, located on the shore of the northernmost of Peking's seven lakes, had fallen into disrepair, and now, at the hands of the communists in the first year of Liberation, vandalism too. Young swimmers, David observed on the day of his dream, had wrecked the altar and sported with its generations of spirit tablets, which were now bobbing in the water. 'I had no answer and awoke, remembering the twinkle of antique crowns, the dry slither of silk, and the sadness, in a room filled, I saw, with my own private patterns of moonlight cast through the latticed windows.'

David Kidd was in China from 1946 to 1950—the last days of old Peking—and after a brief stint in New York, lived in Japan from 1951 until his death in the autumn of 1996. He arrived in China two months short of his twentieth birthday and passed away just three days shy of his seventieth. Partly by fate and partly by his own design, David's life in the Far East for that half-a-century was spent fulfilling the ancestors' call—to restore dignity to an ancient high culture that was rapidly being trashed. Making connections to a world of the past was the purpose of his life's endeavours. As an aesthete, connoisseur, art collector-dealer, author, teacher and founder of the Oomoto School of Traditional Japanese Arts, David transmitted the timeless values through living displays of art and architectural traditions, preserving the life-style of old China in three extraordinary references—a palace in Peking, a *daimyō* house in Ashiya and a stately mansion in the Kujōyama hills above Kyoto. His obituary in the *Japan Times* obituary (30 November 1996) recounts how 'these houses with their silver-leafed *fusuma* doors, furniture made of precious woods, blue and yellow dragon rugs, gilt Tibetan statues, and Chinese spirit stones, all arranged with a sensitivity bordering on genius, became famous worldwide… They gave visitors the feeling that they had fallen into a realm of pure fantasy.' For David, it was not enough to collect great art for its own sake; the real power of art lay in understanding its ritual meaning, the secrets of its original use. Grand traditional architecture provided the proper setting for felicitous arrangements of objects that would unlock those secrets and in turn, by refining daily life, shape the identity of its residents and guests.

The author was close to David Kidd and his partner, Yasuyoshi Morimoto, during the last eight years they lived in Ashiya and throughout their entire eighteen-year tenure in Kyoto. (Since David's death, Morimoto is carrying on the legacy and supervising the Tōgendō Collection in new quarters in Kyoto.) I met them in 1970 when I was twelve years old. My father, Henry Munroe, had been transferred to Japan, and we settled in Ashiya. David and my mother, an artist and writer, became fast friends, and soon the Munroes were habitual visitors to his Ashiya salon. David's friends, and even those he may have met only once, always remark on the forthright and uncanny way he entered your life and thereupon redirected your destiny. By the time I was sixteen, David had surely directed mine. My intoxication with East Asian culture began in the Ashiya living room—I think what clinched it for me was donning a Tibetan robe to stand before a Chinese Song period (960–1279) painting of White Tara during a *puja* performed by Tibetologist John Blofeld, with the fragrance of the very best *kiara* (aloes wood) incense pervading the room. Ever since, thanks to David Kidd and often in spite of his harsh critiques (he hated most modern art), Japan and China have been the focus of my life and work.

David Kidd was born in 1926 in Corbin, Kentucky, and grew up in Detroit, where his father was an automotive executive. His father was something of a rascal, but David adored his Southern-belle mother. Although he was never able to explain his original fascination with China, he often spoke of three experiences that influenced his youth. The first and most important was listening, at the age of thirteen, to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. 'I instantly knew: if this music can exist in the world, anything I want to do is possible.' Thereafter, his genius went unhindered. Hollywood movies of the '30s and '40s were another major force in David's youth and, like early modern symphonic music, remained an abiding passion. The silver screen instilled in David a love of glamour—the old-fashioned, graceful kind—and emboldened him to cultivate with his stunning good looks to cultivate dashing affectations like fur coats and ivory cigarette holders. Artifice, he maintained, was civilizing, and nothing was more pleasurable than beauty. Kidd's third memory involves his teenage friend Walter Brown, now a writer, with whom he encountered the supernatural when consulting the Ouija board on a whim. Although he never became a follower of any sect (because, as he often said, 'I never become a member of anything') David was immensely learned in world religions, spiritual practices and the occult. It was with Walter that he made a blood-pact to meet in Peking on New Year's eve, 1950. But, as the fates would have it, each arrived well before that.

David Kidd left for China in the autumn of 1946 as the American half of an exchange between The University of Michigan, where he had recently graduated as a student of Chinese culture, and Peking's Yenching University. He was to teach English at Tsinghua University and study poetry at Yenching. He writes:

> Peking was everything I expected it to be—a great walled and moated medieval city enclosing some one million people in twenty-five square miles of palaces, mansions, gardens, shops, and temples, the center of what had been the world's largest empire.

Within a short time, Kidd began to make friends with an extraordinary group of foreigners for whom Peking was home. Scholars and orientalists, they savored life in a city that 'invited us to stay, to settle down in a fine old house, to enjoy its cedar-shaded courtyards, to give parties to view the moon or gardens filled with snow.' Even in the late '40s, he adds, the former imperial capital that was falling slowly into ruin still 'had the power to touch, transform, and refine all those who lived within its ancient walls.' His friends included the poet and critic Sir William Empson, author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and his South African sculptress wife Hetta Crouse; John Blofeld; a student of Ezra Pound's called Bob Winter, who had come to Peking in the '20 s and stayed to collect Ming furniture and cultivate rare strains of iris; and Charlotte Horstmann, whose antique shop in the Peking Hotel was one of their favourite meeting places. Sinologist William Gilkey, who was living in Suzhou at the time, knew of David by reputation: 'I heard a lot about this flamboyant figure—his Chinese robes, his cigarettes, his scandalous friends—mostly from missionaries, who hated him.'[2]

David was also famous for speaking flawless Chinese, and in the period before Peking surrendered to the communist army in late January 1949, he cultivated equally extraordinary friendships with some of Peking's oldest and most aristocratic residents. The former director of the Summer Palace, for example, arranged for Kidd to reside in an apartment over the North Gate for a season or two. The palace had been built as a private retreat at the end of the nineteenth century by the Empress Dowager Ci Xi (1835–1908), who constructed it with funds that had been ear-marked to create a modern Chinese navy. Had the navy been built, Kidd reflects, it would be lying at the bottom of the China Sea, sunk on its first encounter with a foreign power, 'while the empress's extravagance still stands, a delight to all who see it and, before the revolution when it was briefly my home, a very special delight to me.' (David was adept at remarks like this that piqued the politically righteous.) On warm moonlit nights, he would embark with his friends on a boat across the lake and stay out, while the oarsman slept, until the first rays of sun would rise over the glassy waters.

David Kidd met his bride, Aimee Yu, at a Peking Opera performance in the summer of 1948. Their friendship developed during the communist siege—she would bring him tureens of fatty pork cooked with aniseed at a time when he would have languished on watered rice alone—and they were married hastily in 1949 when it became apparent that the Communist authorities would never approve a union between a 'bureaucratic-capitalist' Chinese and an American 'spy'. Aimee was the fourth daughter of the former Chief Justice of the Chinese Supreme Court, and lived in one of Peking's greatest mansions. It was surrounded, along with its out-buildings and its large garden, by a wall, and contained

more than a hundred rooms connected by a labyrinth of corridors and courts. Although the house had slowly fallen into disrepair since the 1911 revolution and its garden rock-pools stood dry, the Yu family restored the Hall of Ancient Pines on the occasion of Aimee and David's wedding—an event that automatically gave David the designation of Fourth Brother—and soon afterwards he and Aimee moved into the Eastern Study, the suite of rooms that had been old Mr. Yu's retreat for contemplation. Mr. Yu had been renowned as an antique collector, and among the treasures on display in Kidd's new quarters were a pair of porcelain wine cups for which the old man had famously swapped a country estate in the Western Hills. Kidd's new family included 25 in-laws and some ten servants who, under communist influence, were quickly growing surly and rebellious. Yet he writes that from the beginning,

> I felt at home in those rooms, filled with objects that kept alive the values of the old, traditional China. I felt that despite the revolution and the rumblings of war, I was living near the timeless heart of Cambaluc itself. Like boxes within boxes, and puzzles within puzzles, Peking's walled courtyards lie one within another, all surrounded ultimately by the sloping walls and fortress towers of the Outer City. And, sitting in a box in what seemed to me the center of it all—the old man's dusty and neglected study—I often felt unreasonably complacent, convinced that what I had there was more real than what lay outside, because it had not changed.

The months and years that David passed in the Yu mansion formed the basis of his education as a connoisseur of fine and decorative Chinese arts. Even in its decline, the palace was resplendently decorated with fine Ming period (1368–1644) paintings and furniture, low tables and document cases of lacquer inlaid with mother of pearl, rare porcelains and bronzes, fine jades and gold-filigree glass, turquoise- and coral-inlaid ivory and kingfisher-feather jewellry, and great lacquer trunks filled with Qing period (1644–1911) brocades and lush silk robes. The arrangements in old Mr.Yu's study—Qing monochrome vases with faded silk tassels at the neck holding triple-eyed peacock plumes and Daoist *ruyi*, Xuande reign (1426–35) incense burners on rootwood stands, Ming blue-and-white porcelain filled with precious gemstones, brush pots, snuff bottles and scholar's rocks gracing a *huanghuali* scholar's desk with latticed sides—would be recreated over and over in David's future houses. No Westerner and few Chinese knew better than David how such objects were meant to be displayed, used and enjoyed. As a connoisseur, his brilliance lay in this capacity to capture and recreate the interior spaces of a great culture.

Peking Story, which was originally written as a series of short stories published in *The New Yorker* magazine in the 1950s, ultimately emerges as a kind of requiem for the Yu mansion itself, for the life it embodied but could no longer sustain. Rot from within and insurgence from without would gradually bring the house, and all it stood for over generations, to its sad end. An ever-increasing burden of taxation eventually forced Kidd's in-laws to sell the family mansion to the State in order to avoid outright confiscation of the property. The first

thing the new owners did was bull-doze the ancient garden to make way for a parking lot, and despite promises to the contrary, the house was soon converted into a private hospital clinic for the Ministry of Finance. When David and Aimee informed Aunt Chin of this tragedy, expecting outrage, the wise old woman who whiled her time playing mah-jongg and three-handed bridge, simply muttered:

> Houses and people and tables and chairs move and change of themselves, following destinies that cannot be altered. When things change into other things or lose themselves or destroy themselves, there is nothing we can do but let them go.

As members of the household dispersed to separate, and far more modest, quarters, David and Aimee left China for the United States.

In New York, David Kidd took a job teaching Chinese art at the old Asia Institute (which closed in 1952), whose chancellor then was Arthur Upham Pope. Prospects were slim indeed for an American who had recently, of his own free will, spent two years in Red China. 'This was near treason in the eyes of certain arch-patriots then at the peak of their power,' David wrote years later, 'leading prospective employers to view me as a greater source of trouble than I could possibly be worth.'[3] Aimee, who was trained in Peking Opera and had a degree in chemistry, performed at the institute in what finery she had managed to take out with her from China. When she and David separated soon after their arrival in the States, Aimee moved to the West Coast, where she went on to a distinguished career in physics.

One day, a young Japanese arrived at the Asia Institute to perform a tea ceremony for the public. He turned out to be Sen Sōshitsu, the sixteenth-generation heir to the Grand Master of Urasenke, visiting on a good-will mission from Kyoto. With a mandate to spread the art of tea-drinking throughout the world, Mr. Sen invited both David, who longed to return to the East, and the chancellor's assistant at the institute, Jay Gluck, to come to Japan to study at the Urasenke Centre. Three months later, the two departed on a boat which, several typhoons and numerous stops later, landed them in Osaka on a snowy Christmas eve of 1951. Although neither was converted to tea, each was transformed by Japan: quite by serendipity, both ended up living in the Kansai region for the rest of their lives.

Settled in Japan, all David had from his Peking days was a white Chinese robe, a Yuan period (1279–1368) celadon dish he used as an ashtray, an incense burner or two and a box of rubbings. While teaching at Kobe University and writing for *The New Yorker*, he dreamed of an old mansion filled with objects of magnificent beauty. His wish came true in 1963, when a great house in Japanese style in Ashiya, an elegant residential suburb of Kobe, fell miraculously into his hands. That he was able to rent such a place at an affordable price was, he later wrote, 'partly thanks to good luck, but more to the growing Japanese penchant for concrete. I moved in, so to speak, as the Japanese moved out.'[4] David was keenly aware, however, that his was no ordinary Ashiya mansion:

> Rather than being covered by the multiple roofs overlapping at varying levels and angles, standard features on most Japanese houses, this house, a rectangle some four thousand feet in floor size, was covered by one great, steeply-sloped, grey-tiled roof, ending at the corners in elaborate, ornamental tiles in the forms of auspicious symbols—flaming jewels, folded paper, or scaly fish. More distinctive than the shape, or even size of the house, were the elegantly textured woods used throughout the interior: hemlock spruce for the pillars and beams, cryptomeria for the ceilings, and cedar for the corridor floors. Some of the woodwork was finished in black lacquer as smooth as glass, while the sliding doors were surfaced with mellowed silver or gold leaf. The Japanese have always excelled at carpentry. Here, they had outdone themselves, creating vistas of unsurpassed craftsmanship at every turn.
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> At first glance, the exterior of the house, surrounded by a great garden, looked like a temple. On second glance, the roof and eaves, their under-bracketing covered in a white plaster made from pulverized clam shells, as much for their beauty as for protection against fire, looked exactly like the structure the house was said to have been—part of a castle or, to be more exact, a *yagura*, one of the basic architectural units which make up a Japanese castle.[5]

When I met David and Morimoto-san seven years after they first moved in, it was accepted lore that the house had originally been part of Matsuyama castle and that, around the turn of the century, it had been dismantled and brought by barge across the Inland Sea by an industrialist named Kada Kinzaburō. Years later, proof was discovered when a carpenter fixing a leak in the cantilevered attic happened upon a 'god box,' a fixture in all old Japanese houses. The four characters on its lid read, 'Detached Palace South of the Castle', and on its back were the names of the head carpenters who had dismantled the house in Matsuyama and re-erected it in 1902.

David never quite loved Japan as he had loved China, but he always said that Japan had preserved China better than China ever did or would itself. You could find Tang (618–906) pagodas in Nara, Song gardens in Kyoto, and Tantric temples in Kōya-san all of whose Chinese prototypes had long since been destroyed. Most valuable of all, Japan had amassed vast and superb collections of Chinese, as well as Tibetan and Korean, art. It didn't take David long to see that great material was becoming available as the Japanese, in their postwar scramble to reconstruct the nation's economy, were steadily selling off their cultural heritage. By 1967, when Ingrid Bergman came to spend the night, David Kidd was well-ensconced in his second palatial home, happily surrounded by oodles of Oriental art treasures.

The house itself, David used to say, determined the high standard of his and Morimoto's collecting. If something wasn't good, the house would simply reject it. It also seemed that once one great piece of a certain style, period or subject entered the collection, others

would follow as if by some supernatural force. In this way, Kidd and Morimoto amassed extensive collections for which they became world-renowned. From China, they concentrated on great Ming furniture in *huanghuali, zitan* or lacquer, early Qing court painting, imperial textiles, including palace carpets, and calligraphy from the Song to Ming dynasties. Their superb collection of scholar's rocks (which they began long before most Westerners) was eventually acquired by Ian and Sue Wilson of San Francisco, whose collection was recently exhibited at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and will travel to the Chicago Art Institute next year. Kidd's ever-rotating assembly of literati desk-top treasures also predated the current fad for such objects.

From Tibet, Kidd and Morimoto concentrated on *thangkas* and gilt-bronze Tantric Buddhist statuary. In the mid-1970s, they sold a formidable number of these pieces to Prince Shahram, nephew of the soon-to-be deposed Shah of Iran, who was said to possess a rare Kalachakra Mandala. For David, who so enjoyed learning about the secret meaning of a particular work of art, mandalas were especially fascinating. Although he often said, 'I can live without religion but I can't live without religious art,' I think David really hoped that, by understanding the art and science of their power, his resplendent array of cosmograms would impart some power to him.

Since the Ashiya house was, after all, Japanese, Kidd and Morimoto naturally also collected great Japanese screens. Indeed, theirs was one of the few private residences where two six-panel screens could actually be displayed side by side as their makers had originally intended. I remember some of their most prized screens well. One pair was silver, and depicted two flying dragons with wise, bulging eyes like Bodhidharma. Their grand forms, ascending and descending in clouds and fire across some seven metres, emerged as much from the ether the magical creatures conveyed as from the ink of the artist's hand. When Morimoto-san turned down the lights and lit the screens by candelabra, as they must have been shown in the temple that commissioned them, the dragons positively undulated. 'That,' a Zen monk once proclaimed of the screens' smoky, silvery glow, 'is the color of void'. (The screens, by a Kanō School master, are now in a private collection in New York.) Another pair of screens everyone remembers was their famous golden *Willow Bridge,* a superlative painting of the early Momoyama period (1573–1615). The screens depicted the conventional theme of weeping willows beside a curving wooden bridge, symbol of the arrival of messengers from the spirit realm. David loved to expatriate on the *Willow Bridge* as illustrating, in their every detail, the transition from night to day and winter to spring, from darkness to glory and from this to another world—all implying, as only art can do, Japan's late sixteenth-century passage from a mediaeval to 'modern' mind. Getting up from his 'throne'—the living-room '*kang*' on which he sat day and night while visitors gathered on the cushions below—David would guide you to view the screens as they were designed to be seen—from sitting on the floor.

In 1978, the owner of the *daimyō* house informed Kidd and Morimoto that the land was to be sold for development. They would have to move, unless, of course, they could match the purchase price of US$5 million. 'To his amazement, I took the house and went,' David recounts. 'Rather than see it bull-dozed, I had the house dismantled, piece by piece (it took three months) hoping that I might find land elsewhere cheap enough on which to re-build. I never did....'[6] For years and years, tens of thousands of pieces of the Ashiya house lay in a warehouse in Kyoto. How many art dealers in the world, he used to quip, have a palace in a box? When it became clear that Kidd and Morimoto could not re-erect it themselves nor sell it through Sotheby's, they donated it to the University of Hawaii, where David was now spending several months each year. A few more years passed before it became clear that, with the economic 'bubble' burst in Japan in the early 1990s, it would be impossible for the university to raise the necessary funds. The house reverted once again to Kidd's possession and, faced with immense storage charges, he gave it over to Yasui Komuten, the eminent shrine carpenters responsible for the Katsura Palace and other National Treasure architectural restoration projects. As of now, there are vague plans to use the house as part of a public cultural-heritage theme park. 'China was destroyed by revolution,' David would often sigh. 'Japan is being destroyed by money.'

Someone once asked me why David Kidd kept such strange hours (he rose after noon and went to bed at dawn), and it occurred to me that his real occupation had always been Conversation, and because the best time for conversation is between four in the afternoon and four in the morning, his schedule followed suit. David used to say that he considered his friends to be his finest 'collection'. Indeed, his brilliance, wit and remarkable life attracted people to him like a star. Famous artists and performers touring Japan would find their way to David's door and leave three days later having never seen daylight. Rock star David Bowie was so enamored by him that he bought the film rights twice to *Peking Story* to ensure that he, Bowie, would have the role of young David. Tiffany designer and Roman heiress Elsa Peretti used to rent entire inns nearby for months at a time; no one, not even Warhol, she used to say, compared to David Kidd's god-like charm. Artists like the ink painter Liu Dan, whose access to old China was destroyed by his own generation of Red Guards, and the composer Tsutomu Yamashita, devoted to reviving Japanese mystical musical traditions via electronic sound media, found in their friendships with David a learned inspiration impossible to find anywhere else in the contemporary East. Foreigners immersed in traditional Japanese arts, like the tea master John McGee and Nō dancer Joseph Houseal, relied on David for insight and humour as they pursued their arduous disciplines. Kidd attracted scientists and inventors too, and in the 1970s, befriended Buckminster Fuller, who stayed with him several times.

Perhaps the most consistent contingent of Kidd's salon were clerics. He always liked pomp and circumstance, and he reveled in the company of robed men whose practice plugged them in to millennia of accumulated esoteric knowledge. Buddhist monks and abbots, Vajrayana *tulkus* and *rinpoches*, Shinto priests, Benedictine monks and Episcopalian deans,

were all, at one time or another, involved on various projects with David. Kidd initiated and edited *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism* (Boston: 1988), which was written by his distinguished friend, Taikō Yamazaki, head priest of Jōkō-in temple in Kobe. In translation, the book was the first Western language introduction to Shingon history, doctrine and practice. Kidd also maintained an especially close alliance with Kyoto's Daitoku-ji, the historical 'Vatican' of Zen and Japanese arts. Rōshi Tachibana Daiki, the nominal head of Daitoku-ji now well in his nineties, frequently summoned David to tea to discuss topics ranging from world affairs to the poetics of a certain colophon on a Chinese landscape painting at hand. Other Daitoku-ji abbots in Kidd's circle were Yamada Sōbin of the unsurpassable Shinju-an, and Tachibana Sōgi of Tokuzen-ji, where David's ashes and one of his favorite black Cadillacs will ultimately rest. Partly under Kidd's auspices, John Toler, a fellow ex-pat in the Kobe area, entered the Daitoku-ji monastery where he underwent several years of formal Rinzai training. He emerged to become the first American abbot of a Daitoku-ji temple. (I too, thanks to David's intervention, lived at Daitoku-ji's Yōtoku-in subtemple and trained as a lay disciple at the monastery—a rather unusual arrangement for a 20-year-old foreign woman. When, much smitten, I proposed to cut off my locks, David thought it was the silliest thing he ever heard of. 'Get thee to America,' he ordered.)

By 1979, Kidd and Morimoto had found, restored and settled into what would be David's third and last magnificent residence. The Kujōyama house was located high in the Eastern Hills of Kyoto, just beyond the Miyako Hotel. From its grand living room, glassed floor to ceiling on three sides, you could see, beyond the camellia, azalea and bamboo growing on the surrounding slopes, the twinkling lights and pagoda spires of the ancient imperial capital below. The Kujōyama house, which was in traditional Japanese style was not quite as large nor as royal as Ashiya, but within a short time it became one of Kyoto's great attractions. When Rand Castile, then director of Japan Society Gallery, led a hundred members of the Museum of Modern Art's prestigious International Council to Japan, Morimoto built a black-tiled inner-courtyard stage for the occasion. There, one evening in the spring moonlight, one of the most talented Nō performers in the land danced for their assembled guests—a fitting gesture reminiscent of the golden age of the Ashikaga court of the fourteenth century.

Kujōyama also became the base for one of the more remarkable accomplishments of Kidd and Morimoto's life—the founding and operation of the Oomoto School of Traditional Japanese Arts. Oomoto-kyō is a new Shinto sect historically associated with the arts. Its doctrine, set forth in the early twentieth century by the artist and mystic Deguchi Onisaburō, teaches that art is the highest way to cultivate spirituality. The practice of Japanese traditional arts—tea ceremony, Nō, Aikidō (founded by Oomoto as an alternative martial art), ink painting, calligraphy, pottery and silk weaving—thus forms the core curriculum of the Oomoto faith. For those familiar with the art collections of the Mokichi Okada Association (MOA Museum of Art) and the Shinji Shūmeikai (Miho Museum; see *Orientations* 1991), it should come as no surprise to learn that both 'new religions' were

offshoots of Oomoto. In 1975, the spiritual leader Deguchi Naohi approached Kidd for guidance as to what Oomoto's next world mission should be. When David visited their headquarters, built on the ruins of Kameoka castle just outside Kyoto, he was astonished to find a complete Nō stage in the worship hall, exquisite tea houses and *roji* (gardens) nestled among the cedar-wooded grounds, and a palace for the Spiritual Leader, complete with a moon-viewing terrace cantilevered over a miniature water-fall, that looked and felt right out of the *Tale of Genji.* He almost instantly conceived of an intensive month-long seminar devoted to teaching Japanese traditional arts to foreigners. With Kidd and Morimoto as co-directors, the Oomoto School of Traditional Japanese Arts opened in the summer of 1976 with some twenty students from abroad. It ran consecutively until 1996, having fulfilled its mandate.

Ultimately, David Kidd considered himself to be a writer. He was lazy and so didn't write much or that often, but his cult literary status is certain to be long lived. Besides the autobiographical short stories that were published in *The New Yorker* and compiled in book form, he wrote fiction and essays, some on art history. Kidd never cared much for academics. Their occupational blindness he expected and even politely tolerated, but what prompted him to publish scholarly articles were sweeping statements which he felt obliged to correct for the record. Representative of this genre is an article on Chinese court portraiture that appeared in *Oriental Art* ('Ritual and Realism in Palace Portraiture', Winter 1973, pp. 421–28). In a rebuttal to Hugo Munsterberg's claim in *Art of the Far East* (New York, 1968) that portraiture in the Western sense does not exist in China, Kidd discusses his own recent discovery in Japan of a Chinese official court portrait, dated 1655, of So-ni, which was presented to the latter for meritorious service at the court of the Shunzhi emperor (r. 1644–61). So-ni later became one of the four regents of the Manchu empire during the reign of Kangzi (r. 1662–1722). 'The quality of this portrait is so fine', Kidd writes, 'that if none other existed this single painting alone would still be enough to totally disprove Mr. Munsterberg's statement'.[7] Measuring some 3.5 by 2 metres, the portrait is one of the largest Chinese paintings in the world and employs the most expensive mineral pigments in the Chinese palette, including ground ruby, gold, and pulverized silica or mica to produce glitter in the textiles. While any good scholar could have researched the inscription, as Kidd did, to determine the circumstances of this opulent commission, and could have similarly confirmed, by analyzing the great size of the single piece of silk on which the painting proper is mounted, that it was meant to hang in the imperial palace, few scholars could read so freely into the painting's true meaning:

> The costume is magnificently real, and alive, with illusions of tactile sensation. The brocade is stiff with gold thread, the fur smooth and springy, while we might almost touch the necklace and feel the hard roundness of one of the ivory beads, as does the figure itself. And yet, for all its realism, the painting has about it a feel of the supernatural. The enthroned, formal positioning of the figure, dead front and dead center, so high and so huge on such a vast expanse of silk, deifies what has been

> elsewhere enlivened. The painting demands not only respect but reverence. On the one hand, it is the portrait of a great and important man who really lived (an historical document); and on the other, it is a magico-religious instrument profoundly concerned with ritualistic life essence.[8]

Kidd discusses this portrait in comparison with the various traditions of Chinese portraiture: typical "'ancestor-portraits'; imaginative portraits of famous men of history from Confucius down through the emperors; statesmen and generals, sages, paragons of filial virtue; and finally brush sketches that the scholar-poets made of and for one another. The portrait of So-ni is distinguished, he claims, by the realism used to convey the minister's highly individual character. In this, Kidd ventures, the painting is closer to Hans Holbein's *Henry VIII* than to conventional Chinese portraiture:

> The lids of the eyes are heavy, the left distinctly different from the right, while the muscles around the eyes, at the corners of the eyebrows, and particularly between the brows, are tensed, as if, at fifty-five So-ni had perhaps looked too long across too many plains, ridden too much in the cold wind and seen more plunder and deceit than most men should. We are perfectly aware that the attempt to 'read' the face in search of the living man, as we have just done, and as we do when we read history in search of some hidden message, is an old, and to some, shabby trick. It would be easy, say they, to surmise that, rather than having ridden over too many frozen plains, So-ni was merely short-sited and needed a good pair of spectacles. Since both 'readings' are beyond verification, it would be best, they advise us, to say nothing. Our opinion is that the life-giving usefulness of the 'trick', reasonably employed, outweighs the risk of reading into art and history meanings and messages which were never there. Whatever So-ni's eyes have seen (to continue a bit longer in the intuitive vein), we would like to read them as those of a brave and ruthless man who has left illusions behind. This very portrait exists because of So-ni's ability to judge men, which is why he still looks out at us today coolly appraising the quality of our nerve and the extent to which we can be trusted.[9]

For David Kidd, then, the most important tool in art history is intuition—that is, the ability, based on direct and interdisciplinary knowledge of the cultural tradition that produced the work in question, to understand the forces present at the moment the artist, or guild of artists as was the case here, created it. It requires imagination to create art; it also requires imagination to see it. What so saddened Kidd as he grew older was the violent and purposeful destruction of this connection between past and present that lends such understanding. When he returned to Peking in 1981, his first and last trip back in 31 years, the desolation of which had been the most fabled walled city in the world was worse than he had expected. Driving in from the airport, Kidd writes in the final chapter of *Peking Story*: 'I experienced for the first time the anger that would save me from despair during the days to come... How could I explain to the young driver all that had been lost?'

Hopefully, David Kidd’s legacy will provide future generations with some inkling of the eternally-modern splendours of the past he knew and loved so well.

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[1] All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from David Kidd, *Peking Story: The Last Days of Old China* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1988). This book includes nine stories that were originally published in *The New Yorker* and issued as a book, *All the Emperor's Horses*, in 1961.
[2] William Gilkey, 'Altogether Elsewhere', in *Kansai Time Out*, January 1997, p. 10.
[3] David Kidd, 'How We Saved the World (A Late Report),' unpublished manuscript, *circa* 1985, p. 1.
[4] David Kidd, 'At Home in a Daimyo Mansion,' unpublished manuscript, *circa* 1990, p. 1.
[5] Ibid., p. 2.
[6] Ibid., p. 5.
[7] Ibid., p. 421.
[8] Ibid., p. 423.
[9] Ibid., p. 427.