

CHINESE VISUAL CULTURE TRADITIONS: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

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Abstract

Chinese visual culture traditions are the inescapable backstory to modern Chinese visual culture and painting is one of the richest veins for exploration. The painting of human figures, deities and animals and literati traditions of painting, especially landscapes, evolved within dynamic historical, political and social contexts. This paper reflects on the interplay among painting, calligraphy, poetry and texts in which painters discuss and evaluate the meaning and purpose of their art. It traces the reiteration and transformation of key themes in painting from the Eastern Han dynasty to the Qing and highlights the continued vitality of Chinese painting traditions in modern Chinese visual culture.

Introduction

Chinese visual culture traditions are the inescapable backstory to Chinese visual culture modernity and painting is one of the richest veins for exploration. The works of artists who inhabit modern Chinese cultural contexts echo and resonate at many levels with the traditions of Chinese painting. Over the centuries, the audience for the achievements of artists working in this medium has changed dramatically and has never been wider or more cosmopolitan than it is today. Criticism, connoisseurship and collection of Chinese paintings now happen worldwide at a high level of sophistication. A brief review of selected features of Chinese painting traditions has many rewards to offer. Among the richest of these rewards are insights into the ways that salient features of Chinese visual culture traditions continually and irrepressibly emerge in modern Chinese visual culture.

Painting developed as one variety of visual culture within dynamic historical, political and social contexts, where both continuity and constant change can readily be discerned. The traditions of Chinese painting display a range of related features evident in the genres of human figure painting, the painting of deities, animals and landscapes. From the Han dynasty to the Qing there is also a continuous thread of inter-relatedness among painting, calligraphy, and texts. Relevant text types include poetry, explanatory colophons and texts in which the painters themselves discuss the principles that underlie their art and the ways of evaluating it. A thorough-going consideration of Chinese visual culture traditions in painting would require consideration of the buildings and the gardens where paintings were made and viewed, structures which themselves were frequently the subjects of paintings. Also included are the cultures of ink, inkstones, seals, colours,

paper and silk, painting mounting, storage and display, the furniture for the houses and gardens of painters and collectors, the books, the bronze, ceramic and lacquer objects that were collected, displayed and viewed by the same people who made, collected and viewed the paintings. The iconic mountain landscapes that were a favourite subject for landscape painting and the rocks and stones that evoked these landscapes in garden settings are another important feature of Chinese visual culture traditions.

The audience for Chinese paintings needs consideration too. How, where and by whom were paintings commissioned, collected and preserved? Valuable insights can be gained from considering available evidence on the changing cultural and historical circumstances of the artists and the networks of friends, sponsors and collectors who surrounded them. Consideration of the inter-relationships among these features and of how they developed and changed over time poses a formidable, but rewarding challenge. Constraints of time and space mean that many of these important matters will occupy a peripheral position in this paper, but they are nonetheless essential elements of the context of this discussion. Fourteen themes in Chinese painting traditions, all of which have continued to engage Chinese artists in the modern era, will be explored below. This exploration will focus on three major genres: the painting of the human figure in secular and religious contexts; the painting of animals; and literati traditions in painting, especially landscapes.

Fourteen Themes in Chinese painting traditions from Han to Qing

- The brush-drawn line from Han to Qing and into the modern world
- Text and image are united in works of art
- Painting is often political
- From the Song dynasty onwards, elite artists position themselves as critics, theorists, connoisseurs and collectors of art
- From the Han dynasty onwards, a “genealogy” of texts and images can be discerned and described. Looking back is the foundation for looking forward. From the 14th century onwards, conscious historicizing is a central feature of elite traditions in painting.
- Buddhist and Daoist images and images used in sacrifices to the ancestors, have unique purposes, methods and cultural contexts.
- Elite traditions of painting in the Song and Yuan dynasties emphasise the virtuoso use of ink. Elite artists characteristically limit the use of colour or avoid it altogether. Popular and religious painting traditions revel in colour.
- From the Song dynasty onwards, painting became a vehicle for the expression of the identities of elite artists. Painting is a kind of cultural currency used to define shared cultural values and social networks.

- For the most part, Chinese painters did not depict the unclothed human body. Instead, people are characteristically depicted swathed in robes that conceal their bodies while providing abundant clues to their identity, their social status and their spiritual states
- In Song, Yuan and Ming, painters' interest in bodies focussed on animals, especially horses. The values of representation, verisimilitude or mimetic likeness (xingsi 形似) on the one hand and archaism (fugu 復古) on the other, can both be discerned in the painters' work.
- Gender: in early traditions women were infrequently depicted and artists were almost always men; in modern visual culture, women are both painted and painters
- Synaesthesia in paintings, evoking the experiences of all five senses, can be discerned in painting on the cusp between Ming and Qing.
- Audiences: in the early traditions of Chinese painting, audiences consisted of small coteries of elite men with close connections to the imperial court. In the modern age, Chinese painting is created, studied, collected and appreciated by large audiences of women and men worldwide.

In the beginning was the line: the brush-drawn line in early figure painting

One of the earliest examples of Chinese figure painting that has been preserved is on a set of monumental tomb tiles from the Eastern Han dynasty. These tiles are the lintel and pediment of a tomb that dates from as early as the first century BCE. They were excavated in 1915 in Balitai village near Luoyang in Henan Province and are now in the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. They once supported the roof and separated two rooms of a multi-chambered underground tomb. On these tiles are depicted narratives of loyal retainers and virtuous women that also appear in historical texts of the period, including Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (c.145-86 BCE) *Records of the Grand Historian* 史記 and Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79-8 BCE) *Biographies of Exemplary Women* 列女傳.

The best preserved image on the Boston tomb tiles depicts the story of Zhou Bo 周勃, (d. 169 BCE) a noble and general of the Han dynasty. Zhou Bo was loyal to the reigning Liu family, whose dominance of the court was being contested by the family and supporters of Empress Lü 呂太后 (241-180 BCE). She was the wife of Liu Bang 劉邦, Han Gaozu 漢高祖, who had founded the Han dynasty in 206 BCE. After he died in 195 BCE, his eldest son with Empress Lü reigned as Han Huidi 漢惠帝. For the next fifteen years, Empress Lü and her family manoeuvred to increase their own power and prerogatives and the number of positions occupied by members of their family at court. By the time of her death in 180 BCE, the Lü family were ready to try to overthrow the Liu family and set themselves up as a new dynastic line. Such a change from the established patriline to the line of relatives on the distaff side was, from this time forward, framed by Chinese historians as one of the greatest evils that could befall a dynasty. Zhou Bo threw his support behind the reigning Liu family and asked all the

soldiers in the garrison to bare their left arms if they too supported the Liu. If, on the other hand, they supported the family of Empress Lü, he asked them to bare their right arms. (Sima Qian, ca 94 BCE, Watson [trans.], 1961, vol. 1 p.332) In this image, we see Zhou Bo, left arm bared, performing this act of loyalty to the Liu house.

The simple outlines of the figures of the two men are extraordinarily revealing of their age and station in life. The man on the left is older and more portly while the younger man on the right, clearly Zhou Bo, is younger, athletic and fit. Each wears a small silk bonnet, tied under the chin with a cord. Zhou Bo carries a slender lance-like weapon with an arrow-shaped tip. His right hand is slightly raised and he leans forward and gazes directly into the other man's eyes, perhaps questioning him about whether he will join the Liu family cause. The psychological engagement between the two figures is effectively shown by the angle of their heads and bodies and the direction of their mutual gazes.



Figure 1: *Zhou Bo and another official*, tomb tile, ca. 150 BCE, Boston Museum of Fine Arts

Fast forward through another five or more centuries of figure painting and we arrive at *The Admonitions of the Imperial Instructress*, attributed to Gu Kaizhi (344-406 CE). There is considerable disagreement among scholars about the date of this painting, ranging from the view that it should be accepted as a painting by Gu Kaizhi to the view that it is likely to be a sixth century Six Dynasties copy of a fourth century original. (Barnhart, 2003; Fong, 2014) Here, we are again looking at a narrative painting. Like the figures in the Boston tomb tiles, the figures in this painting also display an exceptional level of psychological connection with each other. This is achieved through the positioning of the brush-drawn figures in relation to each other, the way their heads, eyes and bodies are angled towards or away from each other, and their withdrawn or engaged facial expressions.

Approximately six centuries later than the Han tomb tiles, this splendid painting depicts some of the same narratives, including narratives from Liu Xiang's *Biographies of Exemplary Women*. Indeed, these narratives were the subjects of multiple visual interpretations over centuries. (Cheng, 2017) They were reprised again and again, just as images of the nativity or the Madonna and child were reprised in European art. In Fig. 2 we see an image of Lady Feng, who bravely placed herself between the emperor and an escaped bear while other courtiers cowered or fled. The text of the story is interwoven with the images. This convention of Chinese painting began in the Han period and has lasted into the modern era. The text functions rather like a caption, but, unlike the captions that describe paintings in a modern Western museum, the commentary is a part of the painting, with which it shares aesthetic qualities.

In these early Chinese figure paintings, clear links are established between painting, politics and historical narrative. Paintings such as these had a didactic purpose. They were intended to educate, to inform and to persuade those who viewed them to adopt particular viewpoints in political contexts. In the *Admonitions* scroll, the message is about the subordination of women in the politics of the imperial court. From the Han to the Qing, painting is regularly used as a vehicle for political messages.



Figure 2: *Lady Feng protects the emperor from an escaped bear* Gu Kaizhi (attr.) 4th to 6th c. CE British Museum

Figure painting in later ages: traditions, genealogy and modernity in the depiction of people

With some significant exceptions, including paintings of beggars and street people, wizened scholars at their ease, and paintings with an erotic intent, the human body is not a subject that was prominent in Chinese visual culture traditions. In this early example of figure painting (Fig. 3), we see an image of the elderly Han dynasty scholar, Fu Sheng 付胜 (268-178 BCE). The painting carries an attribution to the Tang dynasty poet and painter, Wang Wei 王維 (699-759). (Cahill, 1960, p. 18), but is probably a ninth century copy of an earlier original. Many features of this painting are echoed in a Ming dynasty painting attributed to Du Jin 杜堇 (fl ca. 1465-1509). The Ming painting is in a sense a visual “quotation” from the work of more than seven centuries before and the ninth century work is a copy of a work from two centuries before that. In this way subjects, themes and even the treatment of individual figures, were re-iterated, exhibiting a relationship so close as to seem genealogical.

Both paintings take as their subject the Han dynasty scholar Fu Sheng, who is said to have hidden a copy of the Book of Documents (Shang shu 尚書), within the walls of his house during the time when scholars were persecuted and their books suppressed by the first Emperor of Qin. After the persecutions ended, Fu Sheng produced his copy of the book and devoted the rest of his life to transmitting its teachings to others. In the Ming painting, Fu Sheng is seen seated on a rush mat in a garden setting in high summer. Attended by his daughter and a young male servant, he is depicted in the midst of expounding the meaning of the classic text while another gentleman, seated at a low



Figure 3: Anonymous, ninth c. CE copy attr. to Wang Wei (699-759), section of a handscroll. Fu Sheng expounding the classics. Osaka Municipal Museum. After Cahill, 1960.



Figure 4: *Du Jin* (fl ca. 1465-1509) *The scholar Fu Sheng transmitting the Book of Documents*, Metropolitan Museum of Art

table, writes down his words. In the ninth century painting, Fu Sheng holds an unrolled scroll, surely part of the Book of Documents, in his right hand, while he points to a particular passage with his left. He leans forward, as if gently explaining an important aspect of the text. In both paintings, Fu Sheng is lightly clad, wearing just a light lower garment, a shawl that he has shaken loose from his shoulders and a silk kerchief to hold his topknot in place. Both artists show a keen interest in the anatomy of this very old man. His furrowed brow, wrinkled neck, bony breastbone and ribs and thin arms and legs are all details that the artists have observed and shared with us, the viewers.

Images such as these are unusual, however. It is much more common for human figures in Chinese visual culture traditions to be depicted fully clothed, swathed in voluminous garments from neck to toe. Their robes conceal their bodies, while at the same time providing abundant clues to their identity, their social status and their spiritual states.

Liang Kai's mid thirteenth century painting (Fig. 5) shows just such an image of the poet Li Bo 李白 (701-762 CE) chanting a poem. His simple robe covers his body completely and his hands are obscured by his robe. His feet are indicated with just two dark brushstrokes and his robe is depicted with fewer than ten calligraphic strokes, executed in much lighter ink. His head is more detailed and extraordinarily expressive. His spiky black hair is drawn back in a topknot secured with a simple black stick. His eye is dark and clear, his nose is high and his beard and moustache are wispy. His head is lifted up and his mouth slightly open as he sings his poem. The brush-drawn line, wet or dry and modulated by the pressure of the artist's hand from thick to thin and back again, provides a vivid sense of the life force, the spiritual power and the creative identity of the poet. While Li Bo's body is concealed, the painter's body, the movements of his hand and arm, can be discovered in the kinaesthetic traces of the brush.

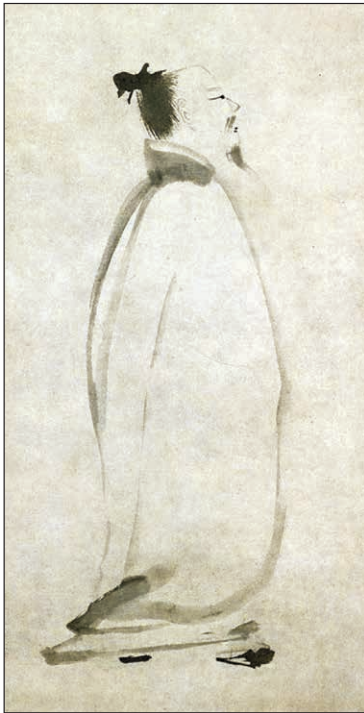


Figure 5: Liang Kai, mid 13th century, *Li Bo chanting a poem*, Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties. Tokyo, after Cahill, 1960.



Figure 6: Zhou Chen, 1516, *beggar*, album leaf mounted in a handscroll, Honolulu Academy of Arts, after Cahill, 1978.

Three centuries later, during the Ming dynasty, Zhou Chen 周臣 (1460-1535), painted an album in which he depicted beggars and street people. These people, too poor and disenfranchised to afford the protection of robes, were exposed to the inquiring gaze of the artist and to ours. Zhou Chen painted the bones of these people, covered with so little flesh that they must surely have been on the verge of starvation, and we see the deformities they suffered as a consequence of their poverty. This painting (Fig. 6) belongs to a tradition of protest that dates back at least to Song times. It is a protest about the hardships of the people, aimed directly at the emperor and his government. (See Murck, 2000, p. 38)

The subject of this painting, (Fig. 7) inhabits the opposite end of the social spectrum. Executed perhaps a century after Zhou Chen's beggar, the painting belongs within a tradition of portraiture of members of the elite. The artist was an anonymous professional painter whose work required him to produce images such as this one for



Figure 7: *Late Ming imperial lady in a red phoenix gown*, probably 16th or 17th century, Palace Museum, Beijing, after Knight and He, 2008.

families close to the imperial court. While it has no inscriptions or colophons to help us identify the sitter precisely, we can nevertheless “read” the image and absorb the information it contains about her status, beliefs, prerogatives and position in society. The artist has provided a wealth of pictorial information that positions this woman within the context of her own home and her culture. As we learn more about the context, our reading of the painting can become more precise, more nuanced and more accurate. The artist has used vivid colour, still bright after more than four centuries. He has paid careful attention to a wide range of details, including the embroidered decoration of the woman’s robe, the chair and the carpet on which she sits, the table that holds objects that provide clues to her identity and even the dress, make-up and coiffure of her servant. On the table we see a cylindrical case for a Buddhist sutra, an incense burner topped with a three-dimensional qilin 麒麟 and a vase decorated with intertwined geckos. The table is ornate and inlaid with enamels and mother of pearl.



Figure 8: *Nine Lotus Bodhisattva with the disciple Sudhana*, Ink and color on silk. Dated 1593
Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The woman's attentive young servant holds a box for cosmetics and she has a towel draped over her arm, ready to serve her mistress as needed. The woman's crown is similar to those prescribed for the titled ladies of the outer court, quite different from the crown of an empress. It is decorated across the front with five peacocks and a golden fenghuang bird extends on each side of the crown, holding a rope of pearls in its beak. Two golden fenghuang, arranged in relation to each other, adorn the front of her bright red gown. These birds are unlike those conventionally shown on the robes of the wives of senior officials and may indicate that the woman depicted here may be an imperial princess or the wife of a noble. (He, 2008) Further analysis of the multiplicity of detail in this painting may yet yield more information about her identity. What is clear is that she enjoys every privilege and protection that the hierarchical society of the late Ming could offer a woman.

A religious work with important political dimensions (Fig. 8) is an example of another of the genres of painting that were made for the imperial court during the Ming dynasty. It was commissioned by Empress Dowager Li, the mother of the Wanli Emperor. The most successful of late Ming dowager empresses, she was forty-seven years old when this painting was made and her son had been emperor for twenty years. The central image is the Bodhisattva Guanyin, seated at ease on a terrace near a lotus pond. The pond is a likely reference to the sacred lotus pond in the Pure Land Paradise Sutra. The parrot in the upper right corner of the painting is a motif that first appears in Buddhist paintings in the Tang period and is frequently reprised in subsequent centuries. In the foreground on the left side of the painting is the small figure of the disciple, Sudhana, known for having sought teaching from fifty-three spiritual masters. Although he is identified within the iconography as a disciple, his small size, child-like features and the placement of his figure in relation to Guanyin are strongly suggestive of the relationship of mother and child. The Sudhana figure gazes with reverence at Guanyin, who radiates a feminine, maternal character. A tie from Guanyin's robe provides a compositional link between deity and disciple. Guanyin wears an elaborate headdress decorated with a small red seated Buddha. Green and gold pigments dominate in this painting with delicate pinks and reds adding emphasis. Exquisitely detailed white peonies shine brightly against the now darkened silk. Nine delicate lotus blossoms bloom on the pond. Bamboo grows through a fantastic rock. The iconography links the painting to Empress Dowager Li's quest for ever higher religious and ritual status within the context of the politics of the court. Paintings such as the two examples from the Ming dynasty, above, were painted on commission by anonymous painters who served the court. Their purposes were embedded in particular social, cultural and political milieux. Their artists make abundant use of colour and their brushwork is subsumed within the overall design. The meanings they convey were intended for elite audiences who maintained a close relationship with the imperial court, but who were not themselves painters, theorists of painting or connoisseurs.

Religious paintings with Buddhist themes have continued to feature in modern Chinese visual culture. Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899-1983) was among the most prolific and popular of Chinese artists of the twentieth century. He worked in a variety of genres and is especially known for his landscapes and his figure painting. He spent two years



Figure 9: Zhang Daqian, 20th c. *Boddhisattva after Tang dynasty paintings in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang*, Sichuan Museum, Chengdu.

in the early 1940s studying the Buddhist paintings in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang. Inspired by this experience, he produced paintings with Buddhist themes as part of a movement to capture China's "national essence" Guocui (國粹) for a modern audience. In the painting (Fig. 9), we see a central image of the Buddha surrounded by seven smaller haloed deities and a flying apsara, who approaches the foot of the Buddha's seat. The setting is a garden pavilion next to a lotus pond on which two white geese swim. Zhang has given abundant attention to the architecture of the garden setting, including the lattice-work on the balustrades. The rich, subtle reds, greens and blues of this work both echo and transform Buddhist traditions.

A pointed challenge to many of the traditions of Chinese figure painting is posed in a striking nearly life-sized self-portrait by Ren Xiong 任熊 (1823-1857)(Fig. 10). He has portrayed himself as a physically powerful young man, with his head, muscular shoulders and upper arm bared and inviting our gaze. His delicate hands are crossed in front of him as if he is about to perform martial arts. The artist has coloured his skin in a life-like manner and the figure gazes intensely back at the viewer. The mimetic realism of his face and upper body contrast with the expressive brush-strokes, so energetic and powerful that they seem to carry an electric charge, that define his



Figure 10: *Self-portrait*, Ren Xiong, 1855, ink and colours on paper, Palace Museum, Beijing.

blue-grey gown and white trousers. His traditional black cloth shoes seem enormous in the perspective chosen for this painting. The calligraphy of the colophon to the left of the figure looks as electrically charged as the brush-strokes of his robe. In the colophon, Ren Xiong explains the sense of confusion he feels in the tumultuous world he inhabits. As the Taiping Rebellion shattered the peace and prosperity of the once wealthy cities of the Jiangnan region where he lived, he expresses doubts about the validity of his art and asks,

What is there to hold onto and rely on....Who are the ignorant ones and who are the sages? In the end, I have no idea. In the flash of a glance, all I can see is the boundless void.” (Ren Xiong [trans.] Cahill, 1995, p. 126)

In this painting, the brush-drawn line takes on an urgent, modern force as the artist struggles to define his identity as a man and an artist in a world marked by political turmoil and economic uncertainty, a world where he himself had only two years to live.

Painting animals, imagining men: from tradition to modernity

When elite Chinese painters from Song to Yuan painted animals, they explored the expressive qualities of brush and ink and positioned the resulting ink-animals as metaphors for human concerns that could not be expressed in other ways. With varying degrees of representational verisimilitude, in styles that reflect archaic and contemporary, aesthetic and political meanings, these animals speak to us across the centuries. Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106) won fame as a painter of landscapes and of horses. His magnificent painting of five horses with their grooms returns us to the theme of the expressive, brush-drawn line and introduces some new ideas on the interpretation of meanings in Chinese painting traditions.

The colophon on the left of the image of this horse (Fig. 12) reads as follows,

To the right is the horse, Phoenix Head Dapple, five feet four inches tall, given as tribute by the Yuzhen Kingdom and received by the Left Unicorn stud on the 16th day of the 12th month of the first year of Yuanyu (1086) (after Barnhart, 1993. p. 19)

Colophons such as this one characteristically tell the viewer something about the subject and the circumstances under which the artist painted it. They often also give the artist's views on how he would like the painting to be received and interpreted. Later collectors and connoisseurs added their own comments as colophons to earlier works, as well as seals that asserted their own identities. By these means, the collectors became active participants in the artistic endeavour.

In Figures 11 and 12, we see a lively linear depiction of a foreign groom leading a magnificent tall, heavy-bodied dappled grey stallion. The groom's prominent nose and ears, heavy eyebrows, scraggly beard, deep-set dark eyes and slightly detached expression mark him out as an individual, rather than a type, while at the same time identifying him as a foreigner, probably a native of the same foreign polity as the horse he attends. The horse's head, with its Roman nose and generous kind eye, is convincingly depicted. Other aspects of his anatomy, however, are less so. His breast and his front legs and shoulders are awkwardly assembled. His hocks are too low and protrude too far behind his body and his knees are too slender to support a horse of his size. Li Gonglin has studied the heads of the horse and groom with care, but his depiction of the horse's body is less persuasive. A possible explanation for this lies in Fong's (2014) arresting argument that while in European art, a stylistic sequence from



Figures 11 and 12: Li Gonglin, *Horse and groom*, dated 1090, present location unknown.

archaic schema towards naturalism can be discerned, in Chinese art, the opposite was often the case. Instead of working forward towards a goal of increasingly fine mimetic likeness (*xingsi* 形似), Chinese artists often looked back, towards what they perceived as the “higher zone of the archaic” (*fugu* 復古. (Fong, 2014) Artists developed their styles of painting by looking back in order to look forward.

In their treatment of the animals, Song and later artists sometimes show less interest in the anatomy of the horse than artists of earlier eras, especially the Tang, when the horse was more central to the daily lives of the elite. In the eleventh or twelfth century copy of an eighth century original painting (Fig. 13) we see Lady Guoguo and her sisters, riding out on a spring excursion. Two servants attend the three beautifully dressed ladies, one of whom holds her daughter in front of her on the saddle. The artist has suggested the three-dimensionality of the horses and riders as they move dynamically through space, enabling viewers to observe the engagement of the riders with each other and with their horses. The impulse towards mimesis is unmistakable.

In Chinese visual culture traditions, horses often served as metaphors for loyal men. Li Gonglin painted his *Five Horses* during a period when conflict among the officials of the court was intense. Li had links to the imperial stud, but his position was insecure. (Harrist, 1998) His painting has a clear political meaning. It asserts the dominance of the Song imperium over polities including the Kingdom of Yuzhen, which had sent this horse as tribute to the court and which expected rich gifts and a positive relationship in return. It is significant that in this case the tribute consists of



Figure 13: *Lady Guoguo and her sisters*, (detail) Zhang Xuan (attr.) 11th or 12th c. copy of 8th c. original, ink and colours on silk, Palace Museum, Taibei, after Cahill, 1960.

a magnificent horse, essential to the Song military if they were to prevail in conflicts with their well-mounted neighbours on the borders of the empire. The painting may also have been intended to suggest parallels between the qualities of the emperor's horses, all of which are stallions and warhorses, and the qualities of the officials who served the court.

In succeeding centuries, the horse continued to attract artists as a subject for their work. Gong Kai 龔開 (1222-1307) had been an official under the Song dynasty. After the Mongol conquest, he eked out a living by selling his writings, calligraphy and paintings. In this painting (Fig. 14), he depicts a fine horse that has been sorely neglected. Some anatomical issues, such as the number of ribs and how far along the horse's body they run stand between this image and mimetic likeness. Gong Kai himself wrote that a superior horse has fifteen ribs, while an ordinary horse has just ten. This belief, inaccurate by modern understandings, was allowed to override the observation of the anatomy of an actual horse. (Harrist, 1997, p. 42) What Gong did see and record were the long legs, the long, now emaciated neck, the high withers and prominent hip bones of what was once a superior horse. The colophon on this painting makes explicit the artist's intention to draw parallels between this horse's character, its former glory and present degraded condition and that of the artist and other "leftover subjects" of the Song dynasty:



Figure 14: Gong Kai ca. 1300, *Emaciated horse*, Osaka Museum of Fine Arts, Abe collection, after Zhang, 2013.

Ever since the clouds and mist fell upon the Heavenly Pass,
 The twelve imperial stables of the former dynasty have been empty.
 Today, who will have pity for the shrunken form of his splendid body?
 In the last light of the setting sun, on the sandy bank, he casts his towering
 shadow—like a mountain!

(Wai-kam Ho translation in Cahill, 1976, pp. 18-19)

During the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), animals, depicted with calligraphic techniques were again the vehicle for complex, multiple meanings. In Zhao Mengfu's 趙孟頫 (1254-1322) painting (Fig. 15) we see a smooth, round, horned sheep looking down its Roman nose at a scruffy goat. The sheep's mottled fleece is rendered with wet, blotchy strokes. This treatment offers a dramatic contrast to the roughness of the goat's hair, rendered with a series of dry, scratchy brush strokes that engage the viewer's tactile senses. The goat's lively, light-coloured eyes and marginally aggressive, slightly playful posture speak of engagement with its neighbour, the sheep. In his inscription at the left of the painting, Zhao Mengfu explains his approach to this work, citing both drawing from life and the ancient masters as his inspiration:

I have painted horses before, but have never painted sheep [or goats]. So when Zhongxin requested a painting, I playfully drew these for him from life. Though I cannot get close to the ancient masters, I have managed somewhat to capture their essential spirit. (Freer on-line)

Fast forward to twentieth century artist, Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 (1895-1953). In this painting, (Fig. 16) dated 1944, the head and hooves, mane, tail and galloping body of a horse are portrayed through powerful, sweeping, expressive brushstrokes. Xu's horse comes alive on the paper in a way that both achieves and transcends representation. His horses are made with the most traditional of tools: brush and ink on paper. Observed



Figure 15: Zhao Mengfu c. 1300, Ink and colours on paper, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Figure 16: Xu Beihong, horse, 1944, China On-line Museum.

from life and then transformed into powerful symbols of human aspiration, they gallop through the dreams of their viewers. This horse fulfils Xu's express intention of representing the rebirth and renewal of Chinese culture in the first half of the twentieth century. It stands for reform, for revolution, for modernity, and for nationalism. At the same time, the painting served a purpose within Xu's own social network. The colophon tells us that it was painted for Li Qiujun (李秋君 1899-1973), a renowned woman painter who belonged to Xu's social and professional network. Xu has turned the traditional tools of brush and ink to a new, modern purpose. At the same time, his horses embody spirit resonance and life force, a value that was first articulated in the fifth century CE.

Literati traditions: from tradition to modernity

From the fifth century CE, Chinese painters who were members of the literate elite began to articulate theories about what they were doing, how they were doing it and what it meant for them. Painting and texts about painting evolved together. Xiè Hè 謝赫 (active 479-502 CE) articulated six principles for judging the quality of Chinese paintings in a famous work entitled *Records of the Classification of ancient paintings* (古畫品錄 gǔhuàpǐnlù). Xiè Hè articulated the idea that the qualities of a painting can be classified, ranked and judged according to specific criteria. This way of thinking is deeply embedded in Chinese traditions of thinking about history, philosophy, literature and other areas of high culture endeavour. Of Xie's six principles, "spirit resonance and

life movement” (氣韻生動 qìyùnsēngdòng) is the one that has been most influential over the centuries. His idea that a painting can have vitality, a breath of life, an almost biological life force, has stood the test of time. In successive iterations, it has influenced theories of Chinese painting from Xie He’s day to this.

Painting bamboo: spiritual identity of artist and subject

The Song dynasty poet, philosopher and senior official, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), wrote extensively on the subject of painting, suggesting a spiritual merging of the identity of the elite artist with the subjects he painted.

與可畫竹時，見竹不見人。豈獨不見人？嗒然遺其身。
其身與竹化，無窮出清新。莊周世無有，誰知此凝神？

When (Wen) Yuke painted bamboo, he saw bamboo and did not see the person (himself). How could he simply not see the person? In a trance, he left his body behind. His body and the bamboo were transformed into limitless pure freshness. The world has no Zhuang Zhou now, so who can know this intensity of spirit?

(Su Shi, translation after Bush, 1971, pp. 41 and 190-191)

The Shanghai Museum of Art has a rare example of a painting attributed to Su Shi (Fig. 17) and Cahill (1960) chose another image of bamboo and an old tree by Wang Tingyun 王庭筠 (1151-1202) (Fig. 18) to represent the kind of painting that Su Shi was referring to in his text about his friend, Wen Yuke’s, 文與可 (1019-1079) bamboo painting.



Figure 17: Su Shi (attr.), detail from *Old Tree, Bamboo and Rock*, Handscroll, ink on paper Shanghai Museum, after Barnhart, 1993.



Figure 18: Wang Tingyun (1151-1202), *Secluded bamboo and withered tree*, section of a handscroll, ink on paper, Fuji Yūrinkan, Kyoto (after Cahill, 1960)

Both paintings exhibit similar characteristics, including rather dry, scratchy brush-strokes alternating with wetter ones. The subject of both paintings is a dry, old tree, hung with mosses and lichens with a few canes of bamboo growing beside it. The wetter strokes represent the green, spiky leaves of the bamboo and the mosses. Austere, not beautiful in any facile or conventional way, through the media of brush, ink and paper, the tree and bamboo express the likeness of the artists' minds. (Cahill, 1960, p. 95 and Fong, 2014)

Landscape painting, calligraphy and poetry

In the Song dynasty, too, artists began to consciously manipulate the interplay among three genres: painting, calligraphy, poetry. A popular saying from the Song states that, "Poems are paintings without form; paintings are poems with form." (詩是無形畫; 畫是有形詩) (Bush, 1971, p. 25) Li Gonglin painted landscapes as well as horses. He was an antiquarian who enjoyed collecting, describing and evaluating works from the distant past. (Harrist, 1995) One of the ways in which he expressed this archaizing impulse was to link his landscape paintings to immortal poems of earlier ages. These included Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 (c. 365-427) famous poem *Returning Home*, 歸去來辭, *guì qù lái cí*, the first stanza of which is reproduced below.

歸去來兮！田園將蕪胡不歸？既自以心爲形役，奚惆悵而獨悲？悟已往之不諫，知來者之可追；實迷途其未遠，覺今是而昨非。

Return home! Fields and gardens will be overgrown, why not return? It was I who put my heart in service. Why be disappointed, alone and disheartened? I realize that the way I have come was not wise. Those who know the way they have come can turn back. Truly the wrong road has not taken me far. I see that the present is real and yesterday was mistaken.

In 1086 Li Gonglin painted a landscape for a friend of his called An Fensou, who was on his way to take up an official post in present-day Gansu Province. For this painting, Li chose to illustrate another famous poem by the Tang dynasty poet, Wang Wei, who had written it more than three centuries earlier on the occasion of the departure through the Yang Pass to Gansu of his own friend, Yuan Er. (Harrist, 1998)

陽關三疊
送元二使安西
渭城朝雨浥輕塵，
客舍青青柳色新，
勸君更盡一杯酒，
西出陽關無故人。

Three partings for Yangguan
Seeing off Yuan Er on his mission to Kucha
City on the Wei River, morning rain wets light dust.
Green green the new colours of the guesthouse willows.
Have one more cup of wine!
When you go out west through Yang Pass, there will be no old friends.

These two famous poems were often chanted or sung and they inspired music for the Chinese zither (*guqin* 古琴), adding music as a fourth genre to the already rich cultural mix of painting, poetry and calligraphy. The blending of music, poetry, painting and calligraphy in a single work of art was characteristic of the work of the Song literati. While the poems have lived on into our own day, the paintings, like most of Li Gonglin's oeuvre, appear to have been lost. His landscapes are known to us primarily through the landscape details in the Classic of Filial Piety scrolls, preserved in New York and Beijing and also through copies such as the Longmian Mountain Villa handscroll. (Barnhart, 1993 p. 34)

Landscape paintings: traditions from linear to painterly

In Fig. 19, a painting “after” the style of the eleventh century painter, Li Gonglin, there are powerful elements of linearity in the depiction of rocky cliffs and sylvan waterfalls. The strata of the rocks are built up, layer by layer and line by clear, unambiguous line. The melding of calligraphy and painting, produced with the same brush and ink, is encapsulated in a rhymed colophon on a handscroll in the Palace Museum, Beijing. Entitled *Elegant Rocks and Sparse Trees*, and dated around 1310, Zhao Mengfu suggests that his fellow painters will achieve success if they use calligraphic techniques when they paint rocks, trees and bamboo.

石如飛白木如籀，寫竹還須八法通，若也有人能會此，須知書畫本來同。

Rocks are like flying white script, trees are like ancient seal script; you must write bamboo like the eight strokes of calligraphy. Whoever can learn to do this must know that the foundations of calligraphy and painting are the same.

(after Bush, p. 139; Freer on-line; Fong, 2014, p. 306)



Figure 19: After Li Gonglin, *Surpassing Gold Cliff* (detail) from Longmian Mountain Villa. Palace Museum, Beijing, after Barnhart, 1991.

Many, but not all, of Zhao Mengfu's contemporaries subscribed to this approach. A thirteenth century painting by Mu Qi 牧溪 (c. 1210-c. 1269), a Chan Buddhist monk associated with the Liutong monastery in Hangzhou, charted a different pathway. The painting (Fig. 20) is entitled *Evening glow on a fishing village* 渔村夕照 and it was one of Eight Views of Xiao Xiang, a subject that was treated by a number of artists of the period. Mu Qi's paintings have been beloved for their visual and spiritual qualities and were widely collected in Japan. By contrast, his work was sometimes denigrated in Chinese literati circles as lacking calligraphic brushwork and a connection to past masters. (Murck, 2000, p. 253) In the painting (Fig. 20), the importance of line is subordinated to the use of soft, glowing, subtly coloured, wet washes. Just a few scratchy brush-strokes delineate the houses, the rocks and the trunks of trees. If one applies Heinrich Wölfflin's (1929) five principles for the formal analysis of art to a comparison of this painting to the scene "after" Li Gonglin's Mountain Villa, a stylistic sequence is evident from linear to painterly, from closed to open forms, from multiplicity to unity and from the near-absolute clarity of the Li Gonglin image to the transcendent relative clarity of Mu Qi.

If again we fast forward, this time three centuries to the late Ming period, the figure of Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) is one whose practice in landscape painting and art history was exceptionally influential in his own day and has continued to resound down the centuries. Dong was one of the foremost figures in the art world of the late Ming, famed as a calligrapher, painter, historian and theorist of art. Like his close contemporary in Italy, Giorgio Vasari (1511-1562), who was also a painter as well as an historian and critic of painting, Dong theorised two rival schools in



Figure 20: Mu Qi, (fl. Mid-13th c.) *Evening glow on a fishing village* (detail). Eight views of Xiao Xiang, Nezu Art Museum, Tokyo, after Cahill, 1960.

a way that made clear his marked preference for one over the other. Vasari argued that the Florentine painters were superior to the Venetians. Dong Qichang's argument suggested a parallel between the Southern and Northern schools of Chan Buddhism and a Southern and Northern school of painting. He traced the origins of the schools from the Tang dynasty through Five Dynasties and Song to his own day near the end of the Ming dynasty. In Dong's view, the Northern School began in the Tang dynasty and continued through a lineage of Song professional painters, including Ma Yuan 馬遠 (ca. 1160-1225) and Xia Gui 夏圭 (fl. 1195-1224) to the Zhe School masters, many of whom came from the city of Hangzhou. Dong associated the painters of the Northern School with qualities of realism, imitation and the Confucian idea of the investigation of things. By contrast, the painters whom he grouped in a Southern School tradition began with Wang Wei in the Tang Dynasty and celebrated the Song painter Dong Yuan 董源 (934-962 CE) as one of its most successful masters. Dong Qichang argued that these painters worked in a way akin to the sudden enlightenment of Chan Buddhism. These were the literati painters with whom the Wu School masters and the city of Suzhou came to be associated. Like Dong himself, the literati artists drew many parallels between painting and calligraphy. (Fong, 1996)

A frequent note sounded in the discourse around schools of painting was the view that literati painters were superior to the professionals and that shame should attach to any exchange of paintings for "a bushel of rice." (Fan Yunlin in Bush, 1971, p. 175) This was a persistent belief even though, from at least the Ming dynasty onwards, almost every painter who achieved renown painted for a living. (Cahill, 1994) The

inclination to group and classify painters according to characteristics that they were thought to share continued during the late Ming and the Qing, when many critics again subscribed to a binary classification of painters into orthodox or individualist schools.

As a connoisseur, a collector and theorist of painting as well as a practitioner, Dong Qichang did not hesitate to assign attributions and make judgements about the paintings that came into his hands. One of these is the painting (Fig. 21) by Dong Yuan, to which Dong Qichang added an inscription affirming this attribution and his judgement. His colophon in large, bold script above the painting reads, “The world’s



Figure 21: Dong Yuan, ca. 950 CE, *Wintry groves and layered banks*, hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, Kurokawa Institute, Japan, after Cahill, 1994, p. 13.

foremost painting by Dong Yuan, from the Imperial Collection” (魏府收藏董元畫天下第一). (Cahill, 1994, 9. 12) Like connoisseurs and collectors in the present day, Dong Qichang’s contemporaries took comfort in the views of august authorities such as Dong himself on attributions and judgements of authenticity.

In what can best be described as “art historical art”, a term coined by Max Loehr in 1970, (Loehr, 1970 cited in Fong, 2014) Dong Qichang attempted to embody his understandings of Dong Yuan’s paintings in paintings of his own where he consciously set out to interpret the work of the ancient master for his own age.



Figure 22: Dong Qichang, c. 1622-25, *Shaded Dwellings among Streams and Mountains*, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The colophon on this painting (Fig. 22) reads,

董北苑《溪山槭館圖》，往在北扉得觀朱黃門所，因臨粉本篋中，今始成此，頗有肖似。玄宰

Once when I was at the Northern Cottage I had a chance to see in the eunuch Zhu's collection Dong Beiyuan's [Dong Yuan's] painting [Shaded Dwellings among Streams and Mountains] and so I made a sketch copy and kept it in my cupboard; I have just now completed this painting. It shows quite some resemblance. [signed] Xuanzai (after Metropolitan Museum of Art website)

Theory and practice in painting at the beginning of the Qing dynasty

After the Ming dynasty fell in 1644, high culture pursuits including painting continued to be tolerated and encouraged among the new elites that emerged under the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty. Facilitated by the growth of cities and new developments in printing during the late Ming, more and more people became literate and could access the elite cultural pursuits of poetry, calligraphy and painting. With the help of several other artists, Wáng Gài (王概), (1645-1710), an artist on the cusp between Ming and Qing produced a commissioned work entitled *The Mustard Seed Garden manual of painting* (芥子園畫傳), a woodblock printed book, in which he provided a series of simplified outlines of the work of famous painters of the past. The book contains a series of examples of how to paint trees, rocks, mountains, human figures, none of which are females, animals, birds, buildings, bridges, boats, furniture, flowers, insects and landscapes. Even today it is still used as the first introduction to painting composition and style. Its exemplars of rocks and mountains are modelled on the works of famous artists of earlier ages. An artist who aspired to paint like the great masters of former times, including Wang Wei, Li Cheng (李成 919-967), Li Tang (李唐 c.1050-1130), Xia Gui (夏圭 fl. 1195-1224) and Li Gonglin, could start learning to do so by following the examples in Wang Gai's book, where the compositions of great painters were reduced to basic, structural outlines. Copying was thus a tradition followed by budding artists in learning to paint. Over the centuries, it was also a cottage industry, used by those who wished to sell copies of famous paintings, with or without a deliberate intent to deceive prospective purchasers. Copies, made with a variety of levels of skill and a variety of intentions, have been an inescapable feature of Chinese visual culture traditions for centuries.

In the leaf taken from a 1679 woodblock printed first edition of the *Mustard Seed Garden* (Fig. 23), a landscape composition after Li Gonglin has been reduced to its most basic structural elements of rocks, steep cliffs and small boats making their way through a narrow river gorge. Calligraphy in archaic clerical script, echoing Li Gonglin's antiquarian interests, has also been supplied.

Even while Wang Gai prepared and sponsored the printing of this "how to" manual for traditional Chinese painting, breaking its elements down into their simplest components so that developing artists could follow the patterns, he was also a practitioner of elite, literati painting and produced work with qualities similar to the work of his more illustrious peers. In the album leaf (Fig. 24) Wang pursues an open, painterly vision of a rural landscape.

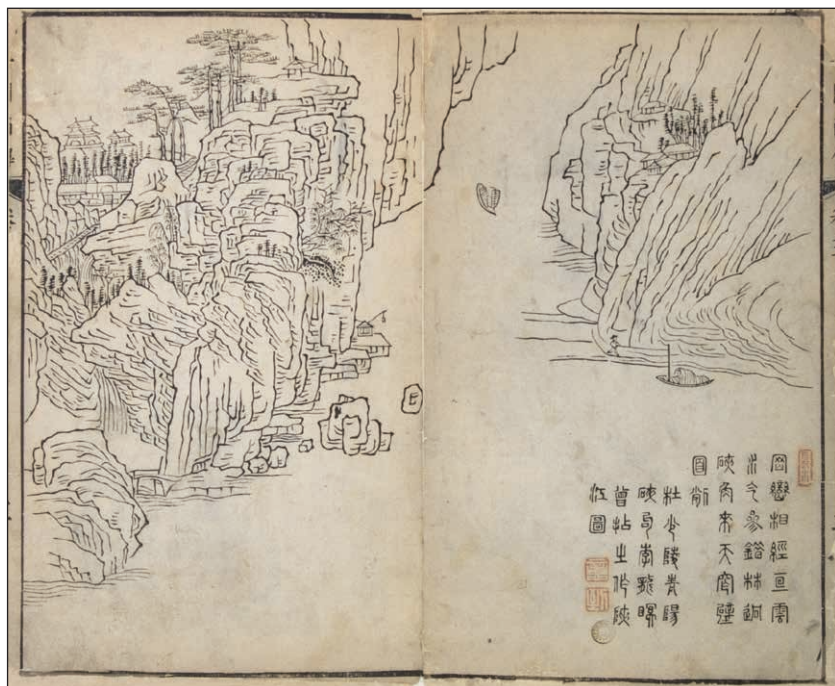


Figure 23: Wang Gai, leaf after Li Gonglin from a woodblock printed edition of Mustard Seed Garden, 1679. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Zhu Ruoji 朱若極 (1641-1707) is more often known by his numerous sobriquets. These included The Cleansed One (Dadizi 大涤子), The Dao Achieved (Dào Ji 道濟), Bitter Melon Monk (Kugua heshang 苦瓜和尚); and Stone Wave (Shí Tǎo 石濤). These sobriquets served to conceal his identity as a descendant of the Ming imperial family and at the same time to reveal his investment in successive alternative identities as a Buddhist, then Daoist monk and an increasingly prominent professional painter. Shi Tao was the descendant of an early Ming prince, the elder brother of the Ming founder. He was only two years old when the Ming dynasty fell in 1644 and his father was executed for having actively opposed the Manchu conquest. The boy survived through the offices of a faithful family servant and went on to become a monk and to have an increasingly successful career as an artist. As he grew older and the Qing rulers began to feel less threatened by the prospect of a Ming loyalist rebellion, Shi Tao grew increasingly bold about revealing his connections to the fallen Ming imperial house. Shi Tao and Wang Gai knew each other well and belonged to the same social circle as Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626-1705) and Gong Xian 龔賢 (1618-1689), among other prominent painters. Their social networks were more fluid, more open and larger than in earlier ages. During the Song dynasty, Su Shi and Li Gonglin had been leaders in the artistic



Figure 24: Wang Gai, late 17th c., landscape album leaf, Cleveland Museum of Art.

sphere while also serving periodically as senior officials in the imperial government. (Harrist, 1998). In the Yuan, Zhao Mengfu had held an official position at court for some years, enjoying ready access to the Yuan emperor. By the early Qing, elite painters were seldom also senior officials. Instead, they depended on their artistic endeavours to earn their living and maintain their large and complex social networks. And yet, they were not “professional” painters in the traditional mould. They lived their lives, cultivated their networks and pursued their artistic goals in ways that seem strikingly modern.

Three examples drawn from Shi Tao’s *Wilderness colours* (野色), an album of twelve leaves in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the bamboo, the taro and the aubergines, embody many of the themes and values of Chinese painting traditions. Painting and calligraphy are harmoniously united in different ways in each of the three leaves. All three paintings are political. They contain veiled messages of political resistance to the Qing ruling house and can be “read” at more than one level, depending on the erudition of the viewer. Like his distant relative, Zhu Da, Shi Tao spent much of his life as a monk. Like him and like other members of their network, he earned his living by his talents with the brush. His innovative use of colour marks him as distinct from many of his literati contemporaries and his clear references to synaesthesia link him to contemporary poets. The deceptively simple images in *Wilderness Colours*, painted around 1700, display the sensibility of an artist at the height of his powers, unafraid to claim his personal and artistic identity within the most discerning of social networks.

Like Dong Qichang, Shi Tao was a theorist of painting as well as a painter. He composed a treatise called “On Painting” (Hua yu lu 畫語錄), in which he developed

the idea of the “one stroke” upon which to “string the forms and the spirit of a landscape” (Lin, 1967; Fu & Fong, 1973; Loehr, 1980, p. 302) Here, like many of his illustrious predecessors, Shi Tao acknowledged the unity of the techniques for painting and calligraphy. He wrote,

The ancients combined the Eight Principles of calligraphy with the Six Principles of painting to form the method of painting. Therefore my brushstrokes sometimes resemble the ‘running’ script, sometimes the ‘regular’ or ‘seal’ scripts, or even the ‘grass’, ‘clerical’ or other methods. (Shi Tao, *Huayu lu*, Fu and Fong, 1973 trans.)

However, unlike Dong Qichang, and most of the other painters we have considered, Shi Tao sometimes positioned himself as looking forward without looking back. He insisted on his own creative transformation of everything he had studied, declaring,

I am what I am because I have an existence of my own. The beards and eyebrows of the ancients cannot grow on my face, nor can their lungs and bowels be placed in my belly. I shall vent my own lungs and bowels, and display my own beard and eyebrows. Though on occasion, my paintings happen to resemble someone else’s, it is he who comes near to me, and not I who deliberately imitate his style. This must be naturally so. When indeed have I ever studied ancient masters without transforming them? (Shi Tao, *Hua yulu*, ch. 3, Fu and Fong, trans. 1973)

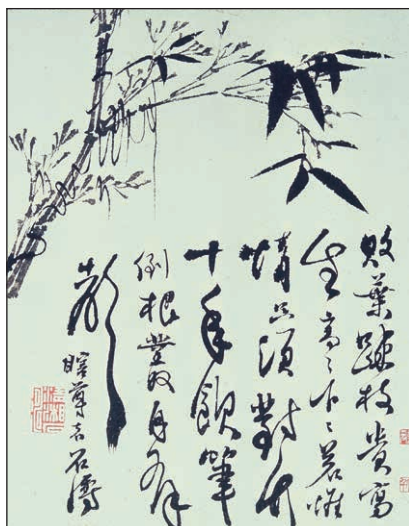


Figure 25: On painting bamboo, c. 1700, Metropolitan Museum of Art, after Fu and Fong, 1973, leaf 4.

Fig. 25 from the *Wilderness Colors* album abundantly displays many of the key themes of this analysis. The image of the bamboo and the calligraphy of the colophon, painted with the same brush and with similar modulations of light and dark, wet and dry, show a remarkable degree of unity between the text and the visual image. The colophon continues the tradition of the artist providing critical comment on his own work and advice to other painters, echoing in a new formulation the advice which his predecessors, Su Shi and Zhao Mengfu once gave to another cohort of painters centuries before.

Ruined leaves and sparse branches are best painted from life.
 Draw some high, some low, here and there as if they had feelings.
 One need only face the bamboo alone, and drink away for ten years.
 Then when the brush turns out the bamboo roots, you hear the swishing sounds.

The colophon on the album leaf (Fig. 26) is addressed to Shi Tao's friend and fellow painter, Wang Gai and illustrates the personal, artistic and spiritual intimacy between the two men, who exchanged ideas and recipes as part of a comfortable, easy friendship. It reads,

Once Wang Anjie presented me with a poem, saying, 'Get some spring water in your copper bowl and roast some taro in the earthen stove.' He truly understood me. But what a laughable, uncouth person I am! This year I greedily obtained some huge taro roots. They were too large to be roasted in a short time, so I ate them all partly raw. Can you guess what the temperature is inside my stomach?



Figure 26: *Taro*, c. 1700, Metropolitan Museum of Art, after Fu and Fong, 1973.

The final line of the colophon 君試道腹中火候存幾分? (Jūn shìdào fùzhōng huóhòu cún jǐ fēn?) contains a double entendre. The term huóhòu means not only the temperature of a cooking fire, but also a person's inner strength and resilience, lodged in the belly, in the face of life's adversities. (Fu and Fong, 1973, leaf 2)

A final image from this album (Fig. 27) illustrates multiple themes in Chinese visual culture traditions. This painting is an image of three purple eggplants tied up with a bit of reed. Again, there is a splendid congruence between the calligraphy of the text and the brushstrokes that define the eggplants. This painting, done towards the end of Shi Tao's life, contains a wealth of subtly expressed political messages. Fu and Fong (1973) suggest that the artist is delivering a powerful political protest. The eggplants, in the colophon referred to by the term "zigua" 紫瓜, literally "purple melon", may be an allusion to a saying of Confucius, "I hate the purple for taking the place of the vermilion." (Lunyu, 6th c, BCE 17:18) The word for vermilion 朱 was also the surname of the Ming imperial house, from which Shi Tao descended. In the early years of his career, he had avoided using his birth name, Zhu Ruoji 朱若極, because of the risk that he might be persecuted by any uneasy representative of the Qing dynasty who recognised the connection and suspected him of plotting to support the Ming loyalists. It is likely that this colophon is intended to express a subtly masked distaste for the Qing dynasty, which had overthrown the Ming. The complexity of the message served to limit his audience to those who were likely to receive it sympathetically. The colophon reads,

Purple melon, purple melon- they have an exceptionally fine flavour. You tell me how much salt and pickle sauce they need. But I made a mistake. I picked them up and swallowed them raw as if they were wild plants. I hope they won't take root inside me!



Figure 27: *Eggplants*, c. 1700, Metropolitan Museum of Art, after Fu and Fong, 1973.

As in the colophon on the taro root leaf, Shi Tao is playing with language here, using the rawness of the eggplant as a metaphor for the rawness he perceived in his own creative work. On this painting, Shi Tao has applied a seal of his own design directly beneath his signature. This seal reads, 贊之十世孫阿長。This can be translated as “the scion in the tenth generation of Zhu Zanyi 朱贊儀, Prince of Jingjiang 靖江王”. Here, to an audience of any who can understand him, he makes a bold and open assertion of his identity as a lineal descendant of the Ming imperial house. (Fu and Fong, 1973)

In the world we now inhabit, Chen Danqing (陳丹青 b. 1953) has set off in a remarkable new direction in his interpretation of Chinese painting traditions for the modern era. In the oil painting (Fig. 28) entitled “Tang Taizong and Wang Yuanqi”, he has depicted images of two printed books. On the left is a painted image of a book containing a rubbing of Tang Taizong’s 唐太宗 598-649 CE) calligraphy. On the right is a painted image of a book containing a print of a landscape painting by Wang Yuanqi. (王原祁 1642-1715) Using a remarkable *trompe l’oeil* technique, Chen Danqing has produced a multi-layered work, referencing the original calligraphy and painting and the way they have been transformed and transmitted over centuries including in rubbings and printed books. The books are depicted as if they had just been opened to a favourite page. Chen has even shown us the mould and damp that are a feature of the conditions under which some Chinese connoisseurs have been forced by circumstance to store their treasured books and paintings. His oil painting has been preserved and transformed again, as he knew it would be, in the electronically transmitted images taken by innumerable cameras and in this text. His work quotes and comments on the preservation and transmission of Chinese painting traditions through books while at the same time standing outside the tradition, transforming and evaluating it for a sophisticated global audience.



Figure 28: Chen Danqing, *Tang Taizong and Wang Yuanqi*, 2005, oil on canvas, BMFA.

In this painting, Chen Danqing demonstrates the continued vitality of many of the themes that have informed creativity in Chinese painting over centuries. His work is consciously historicizing, referencing calligraphy from the Tang dynasty and painting from the Qing. Text and image are juxtaposed in startling ways. At the same time, he evokes in viewers an emotional response linked to our own identities, reminding us of the life experiences of many students and connoisseurs when looking at Chinese paintings in conditions that were far from ideal. Technically, “Tang Taizong and Wang Yuanqi” is an extraordinary display of complex cosmopolitan technical skills and understandings. Chen has abandoned the traditional Chinese media of brush and ink and pursued his creative goals in oils, a medium that arrived in China only under the influence of European traditions. Calligraphic brush strokes, line and wash, black ink and colour and the impressions of seals in vermilion ink are all rendered in oils. The trompe l’oeil technique, also rooted in European culture, has been transformed here to suit Chen’s purpose. The subject of this composition is nothing less than Chen’s wide-ranging and profound understandings of Chinese traditions of calligraphy and landscape painting. Like Dong Qichang’s reinterpretation of Dong Yuan, this painting is art historical art. A tour de force, it displays both archaism (復古) and mimetic realism (形似). Simultaneously playful and deeply serious, technically sophisticated and intellectually erudite, Chen Danqing here transcends the boundaries of tradition and modernity. In keeping with the great tradition of artists as critics, he has also published a text in which he reflects on his practice in making this painting. Philosophical and fluent in the idioms of both Chinese and Western painting traditions, and asserting his identity as an artist who moves confidently among artistic traditions, at one with his subject and with the great masters of the past, Chen writes,

2005 年寒假，缩在团结湖教工宿舍，临窗无聊，忽然手痒，画了几幅画册静物。那幅【唐太宗与王原祁】是我头一次“写生”书帖，也是头一次以油画临摹青绿山水，捏着极小的笔，点点戳戳，瞧着半边画面渐渐葱茏起来，一时以为我就是王原祁；

(Chen Danqing, 2011)

During the winter vacation of 2005, I was staying in the teachers’ dormitory at Unity Lake. Looking out the window and totally bored, suddenly my hand began to itch and I painted some still life paintings of art books. That painting, “Tang Taizong and Wang Yuanqi” was the first time I had painted art books from life. It was also the first time I had used oils to copy a blue and green landscape painting. I used tiny, miniature brushes and I worked dot by dot and stroke by stroke. As I looked, half the painting imperceptibly became green and verdant. For a time I thought that I was Wang Yuanqi.

Chen Danqing’s work provides evidence of the most inspiring kind that Chinese visual culture traditions continue to provide a fertile ground for the growth of the creative imaginations of artists in the modern world. For him, as for so many of his illustrious predecessors, looking back is a way of looking forward.

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