

## Chinese Art

### 4. The Ming Dynasty – Early and Middle Periods

*Pinyin spelling mostly approximates to English pronunciation apart from, notably,  
Q = “ch” in cheap. X = “sh” in sham. Zh = “j” in jasmine. Z = “ds” hands. C = “ts” as in tsar.*

*Names are given with surnames first*

## Contents

<b>Court Painting</b> .....	4
<b>Zhe School</b> .....	9
<i>Dai Jin (also spelled Tai Chin, 1388 – 1462)</i> .....	9
<i>Wu Wei (1459 – 1508)</i> .....	15
<b>Early Literati Painting</b> .....	22
<b>The Wu School (The Four Masters of the Ming)</b> .....	26
<i>Shen Zhou (1427-1509)</i> .....	26
<i>Wen Zhengming (1470-1559)</i> .....	34
<i>Tang Yin (1470-1524)</i> .....	42
<i>Qiu Ying (c 1494-1552)</i> .....	51
<b>References</b> .....	59

The rule of the first Ming emperor, Hongwu, from 1368 to 1398 was harsh. He formed a secret police force (the Brocade Uniform Guard), set up a literary inquisition which resulted in executions of thousands of scholars and established an army of over 2 million strong to eradicate the Mongols from Chinese soil. It was under Hongwu that the south-western provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou were fully incorporated into China. This conquest helped to make the army self-sufficient, as land was allotted to soldiers' families to farm. By the end of the century 200,000 military colonists had cleared at least 350,000 acres in Yunnan and Guizhou.

Hongwu's first son died in 1391 and he was succeeded by a 16-year old grandson who attempted to introduce a more lenient and civilised administration. He did not last long. He was overthrown by one of his uncles, Zhu Di who marched down from Beijing, sacked Nanjing and seized the throne. As Emperor Yongle, Zhu Di reigned from 1402 to 1424.

The Mongols had been cast out of China, but they remained a threat. Tamerlane had established a large empire in Central Asia and marched on China from the West in 1404. Two other Mongol powers, the Oirots and the Tartars, also threatened from the north. Yongle moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing. The Forbidden City there retains the layout designed by him. Yongle personally led five punitive campaigns against the Mongols between 1410 and 1424. Although expensive, the effort ended the Mongol threat for a generation.



Having taken the throne by force, Yongle was keen to establish tributary relations with nearby states to emphasise his legitimacy. However, Tamerlane had cut the Silk Road. Barred from overland travel Yongle took to the sea. From 1405 he organised six great oceanic expeditions, mostly headed by his supporter, the grand eunuch Zheng He. The first expedition had 317 ships and 27,870 men. Zheng He reached India, Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, and the East African coast as far south as Kenya and also reached Jidda. The expeditions also established contact with Java and Aden.

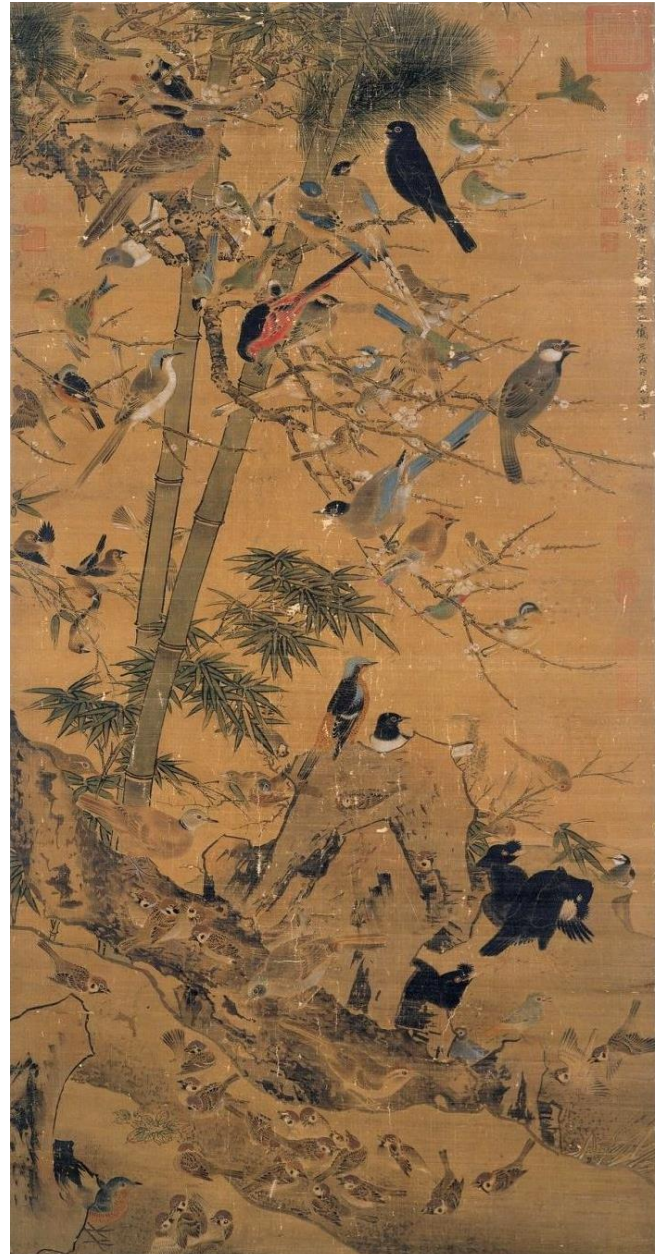
## Court Painting

Against this martial background, Hongwu and Yongle had little time for art. Indeed, as seen in Part 3, many artists called to paint for Hongwu were executed for minor or trumped-up infractions. If the first two emperors can be said to have had any taste at all, it was to favour conservative Song Academy traditions. Fujian and Zhejiang on the southeast China coast had not really been affected by Yuan art. Song styles predominated and artists from there monopolised court circles in the early Ming and the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

**Bian Wenjin (also called Bian Jingzhao, c1356 – c1430)**, from the Fujian coast and trained as a bird-and-flower painter, worked at Yongle's court. His images of birds replicated the complex social interactions of the people there.



Bian Wenjin, *Birds Flocking at Flowers and Bamboo*, c 1420



Bian Wenjin, *Three Friends [of Winter] and a Hundred Birds*, 1413

Bian Wenjin continued the old Song Academy tradition. His birds are static and arranged with little life, but show excellent detail [much as the Emperor's in Part 3].

He worked at Nanjing and then at Beijing when the bulk of the court was moved there. Like many artists who worked at court, Bian was asked to produce commemorative images for imperial staff to give to their friends. His arrangement of auspicious pine branches, plum blossoms and other flowers carried best wishes for the coming year. Sadly, the ensuing twelve months turned out disastrous for Bian Wenjin: he spent most of them in jail accused of accepting bribes from men seeking jobs at court.

The charge is likely to have been trumped up in the power games associated with the accession of the new emperor, **Xuande (also spelled Hsuan-te, reigned 1425-1435)**. Under his reign China reverted into the isolationism that would persist to the end of the dynasty. Xuande abandoned maritime expeditions and thus prevented the exploitation of the sea routes opened up by Zheng He for Chinese trade. The decision had a long-term significance. The Ming surrendered China's unrivalled position as the leading commercial power throughout Asia and the leading naval power in the Indian Ocean, effectively an opportunity to dominate world trade.

Emperor Xuande had talent as an artist, using the name Zhu Zhanji when he painted. He specialised in animals, especially cats and dogs in gardens. His *Two Hounds* are Salukis, not native to China but imported from the Middle East. They were used to hunt deer, foxes and hares, running at great speed. Xuande loved hunting.

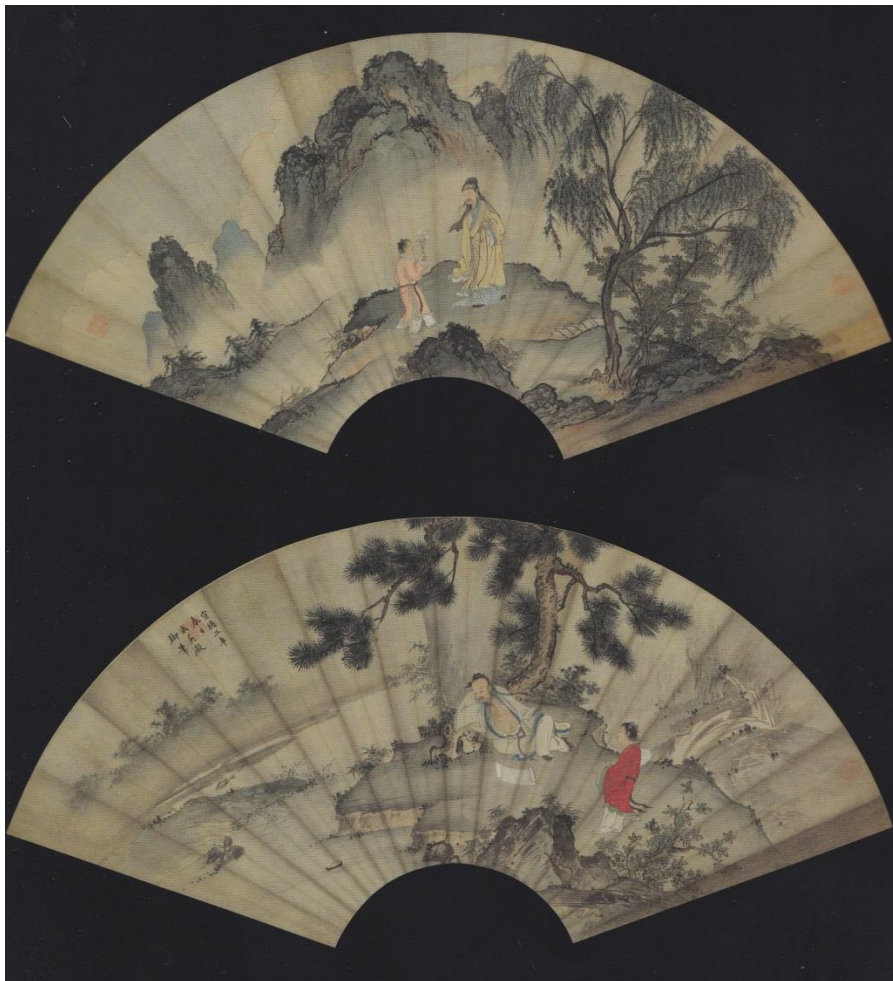
His folding fans are famous as being the earliest surviving works in the form. Folding fans were introduced to China from Japan and Korea during the Song dynasty, but their use became widespread in the early Ming and they were destined to become widespread in Chinese painting. His fans of 1427 were painted as a gift. The inscription reads; "*On a spring day of the second year of the Xuande reign painted by the imperial hand at the Hall of Military Valour*".



Bian Wenjin, *Auspicious Arrangement for the New Year, 1426*



Zhu Zhanji (Xuande), *Two Hounds*, 1427



Zhu Zhanji (Xuande), *Folding Fans*, 1427

Under Xuande court interest in art expanded. Like the Yuan, the Ming had no formal academy for painters. The artists they employed at court were given sinecures in the imperial bodyguard, thus allowing them to receive pay. Events of antiquity (equivalent to Europe's History Painting) supplied themes for court painters under Xuande. **Shang Xi (active 1430-1440)**, a court artist, painted *Guan Yu Capturing his Enemy General Pang De*. The third century general was the subject of a religious cult particularly supported by the Ming court which worshipped him as a war god and patron of the dynasty. Shang contrasts the straining muscles of the captive with the impassive general in magnificent armour, whose splendour is further emphasised by the rocks, trees and bamboo done in ink alone.

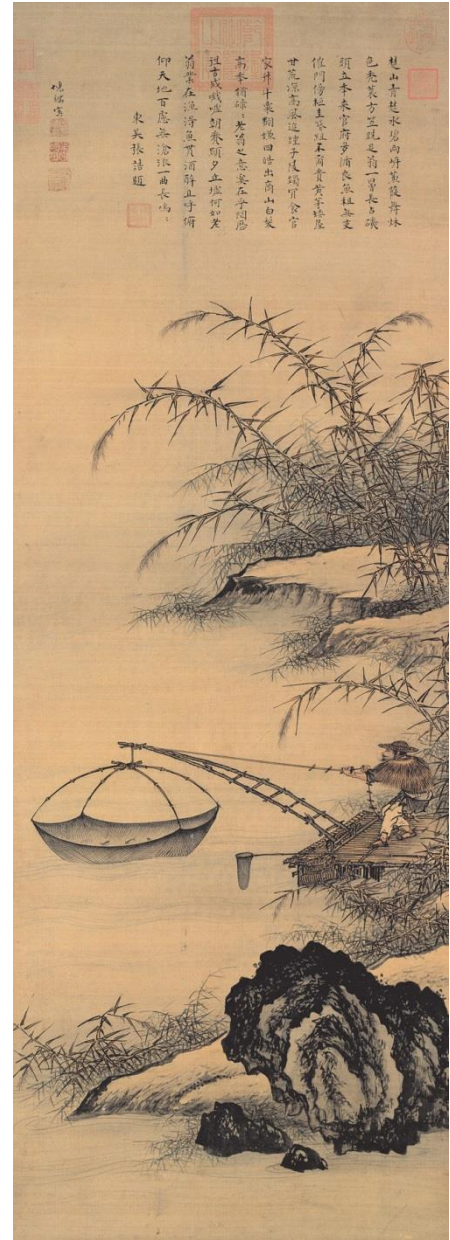


Shang Xi, *Guan Yu Capturing his Enemy General Pang De*, c 1430

Landscapes survive from the Xuande court which follow the Ma-Xia and Guo Xi styles of the Song, but with some adaptations. The landscape of **Li Zai (died 1431)** in the manner of Guo Xi is sharper and with much more detail, reflecting the court taste for decoration, but also seems flatter, with interesting masses put together to create a satisfying surface. *Catching Fish* by **Ni Duan (15<sup>th</sup> century)** has the unbalanced weight towards one corner, but modifies the Ma-Xia scheme by having the figure larger and the landscape reduced; the far horizons replaced by the pointing branches of bamboo and a sparse left side.



Li Zai, *Mountain Hamlet, Lofty Retreat*, late 1420s



Ni Duan, *Catching Fish*, c 1430

**Zhou Wenjing (15<sup>th</sup> century)**, also born in Fukien, entered court service under Xuande as a diviner. He rose to prominence as a painter when the emperor awarded first prize in a competition to his picture of *Wintry Crows in an Old Tree* [not available]. Zhou Wenjing painted landscapes with the characteristics of the Ma-Xia School: an off-balance composition, angular pines, shattered cliffs and the impression of far distance. He was skilful in using carefully graded ink washes to produce mist-drenched hills and half-concealed trees, for example in *Visiting Dai Kui on a Snowy Night*.





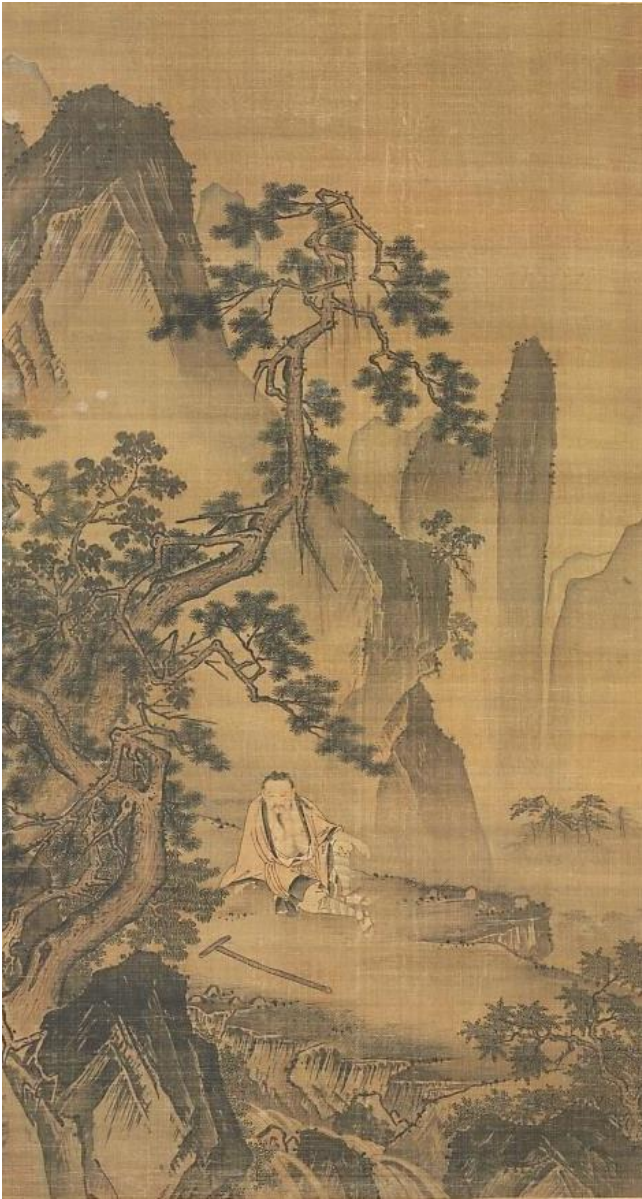
Zhou Wenjing, *Visiting Dai Kui on a Snowy Night*, c 1430s

## Zhe School

### Dai Jin (also spelled Tai Chin, 1388 – 1462)

Dai Jin, the most gifted of the artists invited to court, was born in the region of Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province and learned to paint from a master in the Song tradition. Early in the Xuande era, around 1425, Dai was recommended to the court by a eunuch named Fu, who submitted Dai's paintings of the four seasons for the emperor to examine. The other court painters were deeply envious of Dai Jin's talents and rubbished the landscapes in front of the emperor. The emperor's most trusted artistic advisor, Xia Huan condemned the works and especially a common fisherman painted in a red coat. Red was a suitable colour for gentleman-scholars but not for common fishermen. By giving a fisherman a red coat Xia Huan suggested Dai Jin was being critical of the government. Another of the landscapes showed seven well-dressed men fleeing out of China. Xia interpreted that as Dai Jin saying that the state was badly ruled. Agreeing that these were calculated slurs against the regime, Xuande ordered the eunuch Fu executed. Dai Jin was destined for the same fate, but managed to escape during the night. He hid in Buddhist temples in Hangzhou but Xia Huan pursued him, employing agents to search him out. Dai had to flee to far-away Yunnan in the southwest where he entered the service of an art-loving nobleman.

Around 1440 Dai was recalled to Peking. Xuande had died in 1435 and was succeeded by his son. There Dai received the favour of two high officials and his life in the capital for the next 20 years was well ordered and content, his works in high demand. He had to beg to be allowed to return home to Hangzhou where he died.



Dai Jin, *The Hermit Xu You Resting by a Stream*, c 1408

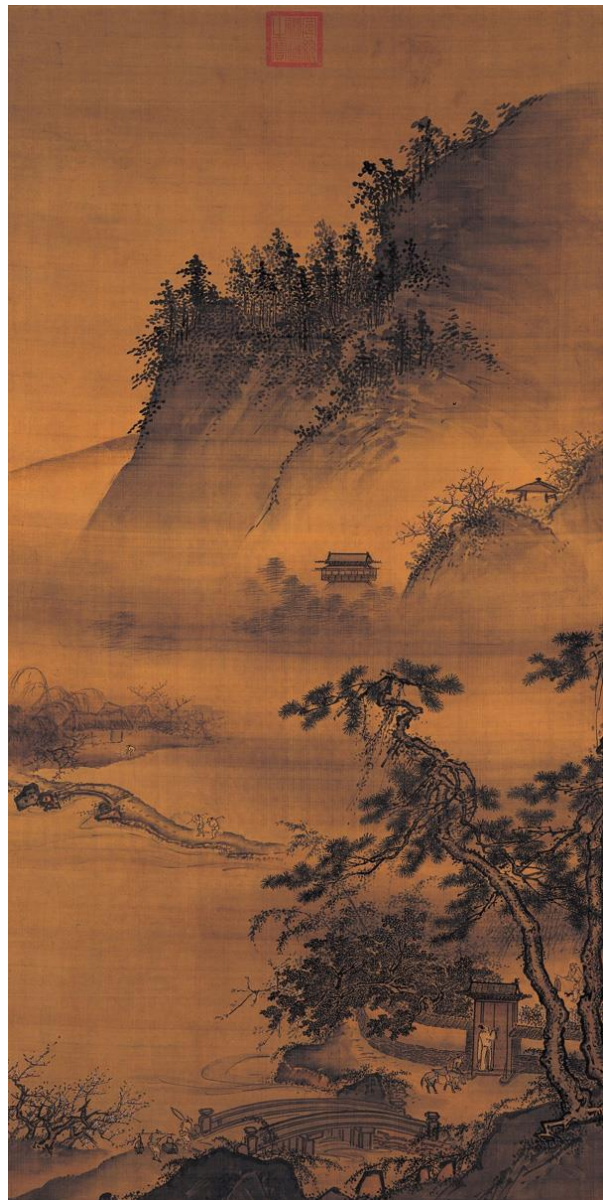


Dai Jin, *Five White Deer Beneath Pines*, 1420s

His early works reflect his learning as a youth. *Hermit Xu You Resting by a Stream* is a compromise between the true Ma-Xia diagonal composition leading to open space and a new tendency to place the subject in the centre. Dai Jin's brushwork developed away from the usual court practice and more towards the calligraphic style of the literati. *Five White Deer Beneath Pines* (which bears an inscription by Wen Zhengming, a gentleman-scholar we will meet in a while) illustrates this. Dai Jin produces a sense of otherworldliness with his strokes: the mountain peaks shimmer; outlines are rendered in restless lines; the pines twist fluidly, and the mist descends into the woods. The painting has an auspicious subject, aside from the tall pines representing long life, in Chinese five deer, *wu lu*, is a near homonym for good fortune.

Dai Jin is regarded as the founder of the Zhe School (named after the province of his birth) and the features of his mature style which influenced later artists can be seen in *Returning Late from a Spring Outing*. Figures are neither small as in monumental landscapes nor the centre of the attention (as say, his *Hermit*), but just large enough to enliven the scene. The painting is made up of large units but rather than being separated in depth they are effectively organised, with an emphasis on surface rather than space. Washes and broad strokes create areas of light and shadow across the painting.

*Returning Late* has some of the dynamic brushwork Dai Jin used in *Five White Deer*. This conveyed a sense of swiftness and ease of execution, and marked out Dai from the painstaking professional. Dai Jin's most extreme example is *Fishermen on the River*, a celebrated handscroll of thick-line cartoon-like drawing with an obvious influence of Wu Zhen [Part 3]. But Dai Jin's fishermen are not Wu's scholars. They are folk earning their living. All the figures are animated by short strokes (as are the trees and rocks); the tensions and movement of the figures economically rendered. This bold and impressionistic style is most characteristic of Dai Jin's individuality. As few were able to, professional or amateur, Dai Jin strikes a balance between freedom and discipline. His works have spontaneity but everything is in its place.



Dai Jin, *Returning Late from a Spring Outing*, 1450s



Dai Jin, *Fishermen on a River* (detail), 1440s

The departure from traditional professional styles at court started by Dai Jin was continued by other artists associated with the Zhe School. One of them, Lin Liang, began serving at court while Dai Jin was there. **Lin Liang (1416-1480)** learned painting in Canton as a youth while he worked in the Provincial Administration Office. One day the commissioner of the office was forging a famous painting he had borrowed. Lin saw him and criticised his technique. The commissioner ordered Lin flogged for his cheek. Lin quickly claimed some skill as a painter. The commissioner, demanding Lin paint the forgery, was amazed by his “divine talent”. After that his fame spread among officials and by the early 1450s Lin Liang had moved to court. He is known as a bird painter. A few of his paintings are heavily coloured in the traditional manner, inspired by Bian Wenjin, but the best are monochrome. Scholar-critics accord Lin far more praise than Bian or Lu Ji (his successor at court) and many laudatory poems, composed as inscriptions for his work, are preserved in Ming literature. Li Mengyang (1475-1531):

*Of painters of birds, over more than a hundred years,  
He is followed by Lu Ji [below] and preceded by Bian Wenjin.  
Those two were skilled at likeness, but not at conveying ideas;  
Sucking their brushes and straining their eyes, they worked with hair-splitting care.  
Lin Liang draws his birds using only ink;  
He spreads the silk and, with a half-sweep, evokes black clouds and wind.  
Water birds and land birds, all of the utmost wonder -  
Hanging his picture fills the hall, moving us to passion.*



Lin Liang, *Eagles*, 1460s



Lin Liang, *Autumn Eagle*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century

The dynamic quality of Lin Liang’s work was helped by his subject as well as his style. Instead of the small chirpy birds favoured by other painters or those that served as symbols (cranes for immortality, a pair of mandarin ducks for connubial harmony) Lin chose large strong fierce birds – hawks and eagles, often attacking their prey. Toughness not prettiness was his aim and rejecting the latter brought him praise from the literati. Lin Liang was to influence the Kano School in Japan.

A brief aside now on a famous product of the dynasty. The period between the end of the Xuande reign (1436) and the start of the Chenghua (1464), when Dai Jin was at court and Lin Liang began work there, has left little by way of paintings. The court was preoccupied with the Mongols who in the 1440s again threatened from the north and who dealt the Ming army a shattering defeat at the Battle of Tumu Fort on 3rd September 1449. Many senior Ming military commanders were killed and, humiliatingly, the emperor was captured. Subsequent campaigns stretched into the 1470s and prompted (from 1474) the building of a wall 566 miles long from northeast Shaanxi to northwest Ningxia (the beginning of the Great Wall as it is known today). The campaigns and the construction of the wall were enormously expensive, so there was a significant fall-off in imperial patronage of art.

The same is true of demand for blue-and-white porcelains for imperial use. The absence of pieces has led scholars of Ming porcelain to refer to 1436-1465 as an interregnum. In the Yuan dynasty blue-and-white porcelain was made using cobalt imported by the Mongols from Iran, which gave a stronger blue colour than Chinese cobalt. Iranian cobalt continued to be used in the Ming dynasty but motifs were standardised in contrast to the freer and foreign-influenced decoration of Yuan porcelain.



Jingdezhen Imperial Ming porcelain: Bottle, Moon Flask and Meiping Vase.

The imperial kilns at Jingdezhen used clay with a high aluminium content which produced finer porcelain. Innovation in glazes permitted lighter and whiter decorations. Despite the strictly Chinese decoration imposed by the court, the voyages of Zheng He inspired designs from abroad. A heavy bulbous form was inspired by the Middle East and made during Yongle and Xuande reigns at the imperial kilns at Zhushan in Jingdezhen. They were used in the imperial household as wine decanters or ornaments, but also given as gifts: one is in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul and another in the Ardabil Shrine in Iran.



Another innovation of the Yongle period was gourd-shaped porcelain, which combined the domestic (Chinese auspicious gourd with side handles) and foreign (Middle Eastern kaleidoscopic decoration).



Ming porcelain appeared in Europe in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, but was very rare. Andrea Mantegna's *Adoration of the Magi* has Caspar presenting a Ming porcelain bowl from China filled with gold. Excavations at the Jingdezhen imperial kilns confirm that the bowl depicted, with a delicate floral motif, was a court product made in the Yongle reign. Perhaps the Gonzaga family, for whom Andrea was court painter at Mantua from 1457, or the Pope Innocent VIII, another patron, owned such a bowl. Four Ming pieces are mentioned in the inventory of Isabella d'Este, matriarch of the Gonzaga family and patron of a roll-call of illustrious Italian painters.



Andrea Mantegna, *Adoration of the Magi*, c 1495-1505

## Wu Wei (1459 – 1508)

Returning to the Zhe School, one of the most successful artists classed as a follower of Dai Jin was Wu Wei. “Follower” in style rather than as pupil for Wu Wei was born only shortly before Dai Jin died. Wu Wei is the first court painter who paid heed to the art market as well as the tastes of the emperor. Nanjing lost half its population and much splendour when the capital was moved to Beijing, but retained the advantages of being at the centre of the richest and most productive area of China. Nanjing’s commerce did not compare to Suzhou’s but the city remained an important centre of trade and a place where intellectuals and merchants interacted. The rise of merchants and their aspirations for seeking art which they believed would mark them out as gentry was an important feature of the Ming Dynasty.

Wu Wei’s family had produced distinguished scholar-officials in the past, but his father brought the family to ruin through a devotion to alchemy, dissipation and collecting art (a beguiling lifestyle!) Wu Wei was left an orphan, brought up by a provincial official, but he learned painting from his father’s collection. When he was 17 Wu went to Nanjing to seek his fortune as a painter and his success there earned him an invitation to court at Beijing. Wu would brook no criticism, expressed contempt for high-ranking officials and nobles, and often refused requests for paintings. As a result, he was expelled from court and returned to Nanjing where a Ming source tells what happened;

*“Wei was devoted to the theatre and drinking; he sometimes went ten days without eating. The libertines of Nanjing who sought his paintings invited him every day to drinking parties. When they saw that he was also fond of singing girls [prostitutes] and couldn’t really enjoy his drinking without them, they began to compete with each other in gathering girls for him, as bait.”*

Clearly, the fruit fell not too far from the tree. No wonder that literati critics, who linked the quality of a work with the artist’s character, often had low opinions of Wu’s paintings.



Wu Wei, *Winter Landscape with Travellers*, c 1480s

Wu followed Dai Jin in the nature of his paintings and he had a commercial reason; romantic and bucolic images were enjoyed immensely by the market in Nanjing. Some of his early work is clearly based on Dai Jin. *Winter Landscape with Travellers* is one example. The composition (vertical on one side, horizontal on the other) is a standardised plan originating with Dai and employed by later painters of the school for countless routine productions. The figures of the plodding traveller and his servant are placed close to the viewer and, as in Dai Jin, are neither too small nor so large that they dominate. *Fishermen under a Willow Tree* is similar to Dai Jin’s *Returning Late*. Like Dai Jin, Wu Wei was admired for the dash and brilliance of his brush-strokes, which gives a restlessness to trees and rocks. Wu seems to aim for animation everywhere. His figures in the snow are drawn in jagged nervous lines.

Wu Wei was also master of portraits, which he painted in rough, impulsive strokes or fine and delicate touches – the choice decided by subject and patron. Pictures of Daoist or Chan Buddhist adepts or low-life characters (fishermen, farmers, woodcutters) are typically done in a rough manner.

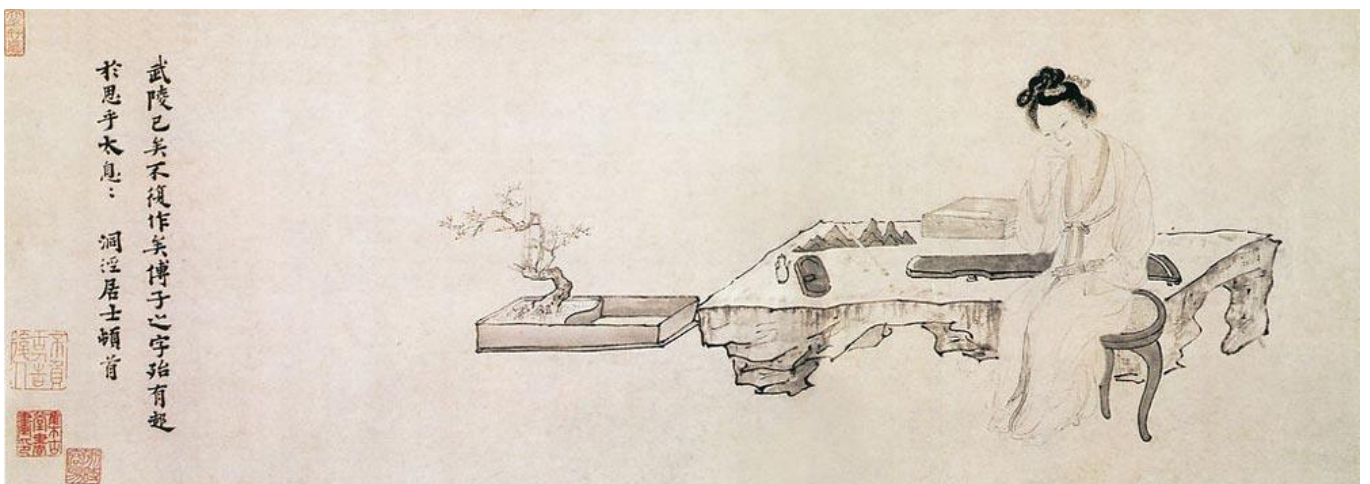


Wu Wei, *Fishermen under a Willow Tree*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century



Wu Wei, *Daoist Adepts*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century

Wu's delicate portraits were done in fine-line style, which in the Ming was practised only by professionals because it was apparent to everyone that they could do it much better than scholar-amateurs. Wu Wei used it with great finesse in *The Iron Flute* [unavailable], but his *Sketch of Wuling Chun* shows the delicacy attained. She was a well-known courtesan renowned for her musical compositions and poetry.



Wu Wei, *Sketch of Wuling Chun*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century



His vigorous brush-strokes made Wu Wei popular in the Nanjing art market and marked the beginning of a trend among some artists to adopt some eccentric manner to appeal to customers. Wu Wei presented old images in dashing new ways. Wu Wei's *Pleasures of Fishermen* is an adaptation of the work of Dai Jin but rendered with brushwork rough and scratchy, loose and unrestrained, with scribbles at different angles producing maximum agitation. This novelty appealed to the market.



Wu Wei, *Pleasures of Fishermen*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century

Wu Wei was called back to court in 1489 and imperial favours were heaped on him. He finally escaped – feigning illness – and returned to Nanjing. He had four wives and at least four children. In 1508 the new emperor summoned Wu back to the capital but while preparing to accompany the envoy back to Beijing, Wu died from the effects of over-drinking.

One of Wu Wei's contemporaries in Beijing was **Lu Ji (c1440- c1505)**, regarded as the leading master of bird-and-flower subjects and the best-known Ming painter of them. He was born in the important port of Ningpo and learned painting from local traditions as well as from Tang and Song bird-and-flower masters. He was recommended to court around 1490. He was stiff and ceremonious in manner – the impression of earnestness his paintings convey (one Ming critic called them methodical) reflect the man. The fluidity of brushwork popularised by Dai Jin was developed in two ways; for the effects of impetuosity or roughness, even wildness (Wu Wei being the exemplar), or elegant sleekness of form, flowing line and smooth washes. Li Ju was the most successful in using this second manner for bird and flower paintings, many of them large (5-6' x 3-4'); sumptuous decorations for the halls of the upper classes. Hundreds bear his signature, but the four hanging scrolls in the Tokyo National Museum representing bird and flowers of the four seasons are accepted as the standard by which others are judged. Only poor copies are available (next page) but two other of Lu Ji's works clearly show his handsome and impressive style.



Lu Ji, *Snowy Landscape and Birds*, c 1470s



Lu Ji, *Apricot Blossoms and Peacocks*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century



Spring



Autumn



Summer



Winter

Lu Ji, *Birds and Flowers of the Four Seasons*, late 15<sup>th</sup> century

Wu Wei's followers in Nanjing tended to exaggerate his style, partly to appeal to the art market, but ended up being rejected as being too wild. A late 16<sup>th</sup> century writer Kao Lien, a native of Zhekiang who was generally sympathetic towards the Zhe School condemned these later painters. His judgement was shared by the greatest collector of the age, Xian Yuanpien (1525-96) and an eminent critic, Ho Liang-chun, who declared that the paintings of **Zhang Lu (1464-1538)** are good only to mop the floor with. Zhang Lu, the most famous of Wu's followers in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, was a northerner from Kaifeng in Hunan Province. He studied for an official career and went to the National University in Nanjing but failed the exams and was forced to find other means to support himself. The response to Zhang Lu's paintings during his life was favourable – people who got one of his works treated it “*as though they had acquired a precious disc of jade.*” Zhang Lu painted portraits of Daoist Immortals; his most famous perhaps showing Laozi, carrying the classic text, the Dao De Jing.



Zhang Lu, *Laozi riding on a Water-buffalo*, early 16<sup>th</sup> century

The work seems to show empathy between Laozi and his beast, whose bulk is portrayed impressively and in fine contrast to the brief light folds of Laozi's robe. Leaves from Zhang Lu's *Album of Eighteen Daoist Immortals* (on gold-flecked paper) show his abbreviated manner: terse effective portrayals which use, unusually, colour and shading to the flesh which form a wonderful contrast with simply drawn robes.



Cao Guojiu



He Xiangnu on a flying crane



Lan Caihe on the Turtle of Longevity

Zhang Lu, *Album of Eighteen Daoist Immortals*, early 16<sup>th</sup> century

A critic wrote: “Zhang Lu missed the refinement and freedom of Wu Wei’s style, catching only its firmness and muscular strength. But, Northerners value his works as great treasures” to which another critic added, “connoisseurs feel that his paintings aren’t really in the best of taste, with the result that both his reputation and his prices have declined gradually in recent times.” Nevertheless, Zhang Lu was prolific and his works survive in considerable numbers.

## Early Literati Painting

The purges imposed by Hongwu on Suzhou and the surrounding region, with scholars executed in their thousands, nearly extinguished the cultural brilliance of Suzhou. This crisis was exacerbated by Yongle’s support from eunuchs in gaining the imperial throne. Hongwu had deeply distrusted eunuchs – banning them from learning to read and write on pain of death – but Yongle relied on them to run his government. Eunuchs used the secret police to make sure the deaths and deprivations suffered by scholars, their only serious rivals, were continued. The century from Hongwu’s rise to power until the maturity of the first Great Master of the Ming, Shen Zhou, around 1470, represents a hiatus in the course of literati painting. However, there were a few artists who carried on Yuan traditions in this terrible period.

**Wang Fu (1362-1416)** was the most important painter to carry the Yuan style into the Ming. He was not from Suzhou proper but from Wuxi, birthplace of Gu Kaishi and Ni Zan. He passed the examinations in 1376 and two years later went to Nanking in search of employment.

It seems Wang Fu was implicated in the scheme which resulted in Wang Meng’s execution and that smear led to Wang Fu being banished with his wife and two sons to the desolate outpost at Datong in Shanxi Province. He served there in considerable hardship for more than twenty years as a frontier guard. He finally returned south in 1400. His poems and paintings made him admired, and around 1403 he was given a post as a calligrapher in the imperial library at Nanking. He continued working at court, moving to Peking in 1414 where he died in 1416. He painted only infrequently, while travelling and especially after drinking, but his surviving work suggests a serious dedication to art. Apart from painting river landscapes in the manner of Ni Zan, Wang Fu used Wang Meng’s style.



Wang Fu, *A Gathering of Literati*, 1405

Fishermen had been used by the Yuan literati as a symbol of the escape from the world of strife, and particularly the stressful in-fighting of petty-fogging court officials. The symbolism derives from a 12<sup>th</sup> century couplet;

*Right and wrong reach not where men fish;  
Glory and disgrace dog the official riding his horse*

Wang Fu sustained Yuan symbolism in his *Joys of the Fishermen*



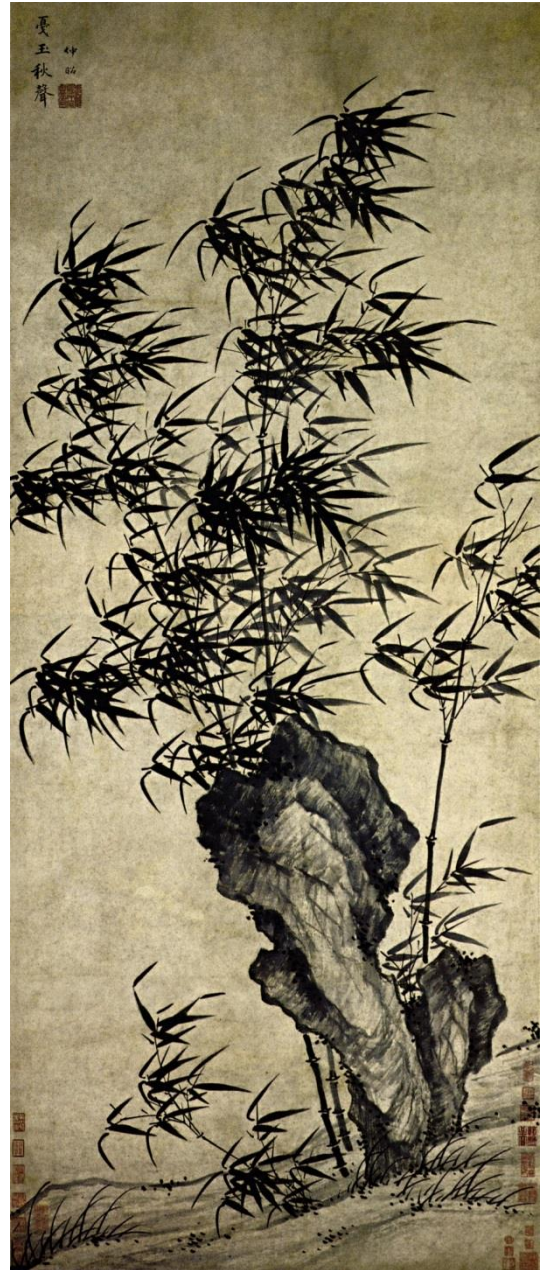
Wang Fu, *Joys of the Fishermen (detail)*, c 1410

In the first section a scholar can be seen on a bridge, perhaps wistfully glancing at the pavilion he is about to leave for the rigours of the city, while his servant waits patiently. In the lower part the pavilion, very similar to Ni Zan's structure, lies empty but surrounded by barely visible fishermen going about their honest labours. Wen Zhengming said; "*The quality of Wang Fu's painting is above competence; the critics say that the artisan's technique and the scholar's spirit are both provided by his works. His personal quality was superior, and he was not used by his art. He would give away even his small works to anyone whom he considered to be the right kind of man*".

Wang Fu was also famed as a painter of bamboo, following the style of Wu Zhen, but Chinese critics agree that Wang Fu's most gifted pupil **Xia Chang (1388-1470)** was the last of first-class ink bamboo painters. Xia Chang's handsome compositions, in the classical literati calligraphic style, survive in great numbers.



Xia Chang, *Bamboo in Wind*, c 1430



Xia Chang, *Tapping Jade Autumn Sound*, mid-15<sup>th</sup> century



Xia Chang's best works are probably the long handscrolls in which bamboo is combined with rocks and water. A long view of a river bank is brought close to the viewer by the previously-accepted method used by literati bamboo painters of cutting off the top and the bottom of the scene. Xia Chang's inscription includes; "*I love the quiet and beautiful scenery of stream and rocks, and the green and moist colour of bamboo is enough to clean away worldly worries.*"



Xia Chang, *Bamboo-covered Stream in Spring Rain (detail)*, 1441



Xia Chang, *Bamboo under Spring Rain (detail)*, c 1460

*"No later painter surpassed the breadth and boldness of Xia Chang's compositions. His very great genius as a painter of bamboo in ink transmitted the high standards of the Yuan Dynasty and codified a style."* (Sullivan).

## The Wu School (The Four Masters of the Ming)

### Shen Zhou (1427-1509)

By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century the society and prosperity of Suzhou had recovered from the privations exacted by the early Ming emperors. Shen Zhou, who came from a family with an estate in the Wu district near to Suzhou, “ended the long lull and rescued literati painting from the doldrums where it had been drifting” (Cahill). He is regarded as the founder of the Wu School.

His great-grandfather had been a friend of Wang Meng and it is likely the family had a collection of Yuan paintings and calligraphy. The artist Liu Jue, who Shen Zhou affectionately regarded as an uncle, was an early influence and noted; “while Shen Zhou was still a youth ... the old masters were his teachers and he copied many of them so successfully that his pictures could not be distinguished from theirs ... when he was over 40 he began to paint large scrolls, rugged trees with large leaves, in a freer manner.” *Walking with a Staff in the Mountains* is reminiscent of Ni Zan but the composition is compressed and the far hills brought closer: the top of the tallest tree fits neatly into an inlet. While Ni Zan excluded human figures in his works, Shen often painted a man, partly to direct the gaze and partly for the viewer to identify with and so enter the picture. Here a solitary walker, old age indicated by the hunch of his shoulders, trudges along.



Shen Zhou, *Walking with a Staff in the Mountains*,  
1470



Shen Zhou, *Wind and Snow at Ba Bridge*, late  
15<sup>th</sup> century

Shen Zhou introduces a new compositional idea. The upper segment partially forms a mirror image of the lower: one stream divides the near bank downward to the left, another the far one upward to the right; a slanting table of land at the lower left is answered by a slanting plateau at the upper right; the curving ridge in the right foreground is repeated in reverse in the uppermost ridge. This mirror effect (as well as the presence of a figure) is seen in the trees and hills of *Wind and Snow at Ba Bridge*. Another departure from Ni Zan is the absence of horizontals which gives a feeling of movement, perhaps uneasiness, in contrast to Ni Zan's evocation of serenity and isolation.



Shen Zhou, *Lofty Mount Lu*, 1467

*Lofty Mount Lu* was Shen Zhou's first large dated work, an elaborate landscape in the style of Wang Meng. The painting was done on a feast day, the 5<sup>th</sup> of the 5<sup>th</sup> month, as a birthday gift for Ch'en K'uan, an elder friend and teacher. Shen Zhou imitated Wang Meng to convey the idea of enduring life and to suggest to an old and respected teacher that he, like the mountains, might live forever. Shen relies on the same formula: foreground promontory, receding platform (of water here) to the middle-distance detail (waterfall, bridge, foundation rocks of mountain) and a backing of an angled line of mountain peaks. The painstaking nature of the composition and the detail is paralleled by the poem which packs many characters neatly into the upper right-hand corner; a long dissertation on the wonders of the "five old men", as the peaks were called, drawing an analogy with the lofty eminence of Shen's teacher.

Shen Zhou's family fortune had been established in the late Yuan. The men of the family, though well-educated, had no need to work and followed their grandfather, father and uncle in living as retired scholars entertaining literary and artistic friends. Shen Zhou complied but claimed that the duty of caring for his aging mother prevented him from taking the official exams. This seems a spurious excuse: it was not until Shen Zhou was 50 that his mother was left solely to his care by the death of his father. Nevertheless, his mother played her role well, obligingly living to nearly a hundred, so saving Shen much studying for exams. Thus, Shen Zhou was able to live a life of a country gentleman whilst gaining the reputation for family piety.

From 1477 to 1482 Shen Zhou produced an album of 22 (perhaps originally 23) landscapes for Chou Wei-te. An inscription of Zhou's on the last page: *"I have a natural liking for painting landscapes but have never attained the Samadhi [a state of perfect concentration of mind similar to yoga] of the truly skilled artist – I do them, that is, but am not satisfied with them. When the right mood of exhilaration comes, then 'trusting my hand' I wield the brush and spread on the ink. It is only a way of employing my leisure and a sense of well-fed well-being. I certainly have no intention of making them look attractive to people."*



Shen Zhou, *Album of Landscapes with Figures for Chou Wei-te*, 1482



Shen Zhou, *Night Vigil*, 1492

These album leaves, especially the second, show Shen Zhou's skill when using ink wash with short brush-strokes for highlights, and the simple lines for the figures. Shen Zhou liked to clothe his rocks with sharp dots to suggest undergrowth and to add sparkle and variety to the design. In this he was following the Yuan literati Master Wu Zhen [see *Central Mountain* (1336) in Part 3]. He applied this method to larger landscapes.

*Night Vigil* was painted as a result of Shen Zhou's experience in early fall during the full moon of the 7<sup>th</sup> month (about September in our calendar).

The work creates a sense of seclusion by setting his house in the middle ground, flanking it closely with trees and rocks, denying easy access.

The painting is quite small (yet larger than an album leaf); 8 inches wide and 30 inches high, with half the latter taken up by Zhou's inscription.

*"On a cold night, sleep is very sweet. I woke in the middle of the night, my mind clear and untroubled, and as I was unable to go to sleep again, I put on my clothes and sat facing my flickering lamp. On the table were a few folders of books. I chose a volume at random and began to read but, tiring, I put down the book and sat calmly doing nothing. A long rain had newly cleared, and a pale moon was shining through the window. All around was silence. Then after a long time absorbing the fresh brightness, I gradually became aware of sounds ...*

*Now tonight all sounds and colours come to me through this state of tranquillity and rest, and they serve thus to cleanse the mind, spirit and feelings and to arouse the will ...*

*How great is the power of sitting up at night! One should purify his heart and sit alone, by the light of a newly trimmed bright candle. Through this practise one can pursue the principles that underlie events and things, and the subtlest workings of one's own mind, as the basis for self-cultivation and a response to external things; through this, we will surely attain understanding."*

The album was the favoured medium for the literati as a gift. An album of 10 leaves, six painted by Shen Zhou and four filled by Wen Zhengming (see below) illustrating lines from Tang poetry was produced for a friend. Five of Zhou's remain. The first, in his wash, dot-accent and line method, is among his most well-known works. The sombre scene has a sense of solitude echoed in the poem:

*White clouds encircle the mountain waist like a sash,  
Stone steps mount high into the void where the narrow path leads far.  
Alone, leaning on my rustic staff, I gaze idly into the distance.  
My longing for the notes of a flute is answered in the murmurings of the gorge.*



Shen Zhou, *Poet on a Mountain* (album leaf), c 1496

This little painting, quite informal yet strong, shows Shen Zhou's mature style, direct and vivid. Later in life he used colour freely, a practice previously scorned by the literati. The decline in imperial patronage reduced the number of court artists and younger painters trained in professional methods. As a result, scholarly art gained a popularity which spread increasingly over China. The character of scholar's paintings began to change under Shen Zhou and more so under the Second Master of the Ming, Wen Zhengming. Both spent time mastering earlier techniques, and colour came to play an important role in their works, "adding a charm that was absent in the paintings of early Ming scholars (Bush)." The last two Masters of the Ming, Tang Yin and Qiu Ying, exploited this development and produced works of art under commission and for sale in the burgeoning 16<sup>th</sup> century art market in South East China.

Shen Zhou's restrained use of colour can be seen in another of his leaves for this album, *Scholar and Crane Returning Home*. The crane has a long tradition in Chinese lore and is thought to reach a fabulous age. Mounted on its back one could be carried to lands where no man dies [see *The Yellow Pavilion* (c 1350) by Xia Yong in Part 3]. The great Manchurian crane, standing almost 4 feet high today breeds in a limited region of the far north just across the eastern border of Manchuria in Siberia. Every year in October the crane flies south to the lower Yangtze Valley for winter. The Manchurian crane travels alone or in small family groups. In the wild, with its hazards, the crane lives on average only three years but in captivity 25-30.



Shen Zhou, *Scholar and Crane Returning Home* (album leaf now mounted as scroll), c 1496

The Prince of Wei in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC so loved the crane he carried one with him in his chariot. In the album leaf the scholar is Shen who carries a crane in his boat, as described in his inscribed poem:

*Carrying a crane and my ch'in<sup>1</sup>  
Homeward bound on the lake  
White clouds and red leaves  
Flying together  
My home right in the very  
Depths of the mountains  
The sound of reading within bamboo,  
A tiny couch and humble gate.*

The immortal guest is important as a companion for scholars living in retirement, seeking knowledge and strength beyond that found in the ordinary affairs of man. Further, the home of the crane is tangible proof of the realms to which sages someday depart. Shen Zhou often mentioned the crane in his poetry, alluding to the dream of living in immortal worlds:

*In the empty autumn the returning cranes;  
The clouds of Ch'u are high.  
Fishing at my door the yellow crane alights.  
Cliff and temple, a road of red leaves,  
The yellow crane in his home of white clouds.  
Already has the old man changed to a Liao-tung crane.*

Another scene for Shen Zhou's subtle colour is his horizontal scroll, *Happy Fishermen of the River Village*. Dai Jin and Wu Wei painted fishermen but Shen Zhou's rendering is much calmer. Figures are isolated but nonetheless clear: "just as he will not obscure his painting with romantic, misty distances, so too in the tiniest of figures Shen Zhou will only relate the essentials; the blown-up contours of the faces, the single strokes outlining trousers, jackets and gowns, the tremendous concentration of the fishermen. Even though the figures are dwarfed by the immensity of nature the strength of their concentration on the still line of a fishing pole creates a kind of psychic unity whereby their lives are joined with the strength of the water and sky (Edwards)"

<sup>1</sup> A stringed instrument



Shen Zhou, *Happy Fishermen of the River Village* (detail), late 15<sup>th</sup> century



Fishing is a significant activity for a scholar. The real purpose however was not to catch fish, but to still the body in quiet surroundings, thus freeing the mind to embark on great adventures. Li Bo and Tu Fu respectively produced poetic lines on the subject:

*So I sat quietly dropping my hook,  
On the banks of a grey stream.  
Suddenly again I mounted a ship,  
Dreaming of the sun's horizon.*

*And I am thinking of the many floating clouds  
above the waters of the south.  
Taking a fishing rod,  
I shall finally sail far away.*

The world of fishermen, idyllically close to nature and far from the toils of civil administration, is another recurring theme. Shen Zhou's poem written on the top left of *Happy Fishermen* describes the envy of the simple life:

*Sand and water whirl and swirl, waves slapping the shore,  
In maple leaves and rushes, both road and court recede.  
The fish-vendor beats his drum in the brisk evening breeze  
Or dries his nets and moors his boat as the western sun declines.  
In his raincoat made of rushes, a drunk old man reclines,  
And sings a river ditty while his wife is cooking.  
In society such joys are found in the homes of fishermen  
But I am beset by tax and rent and regret I wield a plough.*

Shen Zhou's development of colour combined with his wash and bone technique culminated in one of his last works.



Shen Zhou (painting) and Wang Ao (poem), *Ode to Pomegranate and Melon Vine* (detail), 1506 - 1509

The pomegranate is a symbol of fecundity – the seeds in their numbers and richness stand for the seeds of the human race, for the multiplication of sons to swell a family's greatness. The melon is the *ssu-kua*, foreign to the West. The melon may be eaten when it is young and tender or allowed to grow old and wither, then the core becomes a network of dry fibres which serve the household as a scouring pad. Shen Zhou contrasts the dry sturdy branch with delicate young growth.

### Wen Zhengming (1470-1559)

Shen Zhou founded the Wu School but it was his pupil Wen Zhengming who was more widely imitated among painters in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Wen developed the trend towards realistic colour in literati painting, and the works of his maturity have bold colours. *Spring Trees After Rain*, one of the few surviving early works, shows how Wen Zhengming contrasts with Shen Zhou, and marks his departure as an independent master.



Shen Zhou's *Walking with a Staff in the Mountains* is a similar composition but with much tighter elements, bold and robust, built up with powerful masses. Wen Zhengming's painting has many more objects but curiously seems sparser. The rendering is meticulous, but delicate.

Shen Zhou's art had touches of exuberance and impromptu invention. Wen is cautious and reserved. Wen's inscription on the picture says it was painted for a friend who was about to leave for an official post in Peking and suggested that looking at the picture while travelling by boat would be a reminder of the scenery around Suzhou:

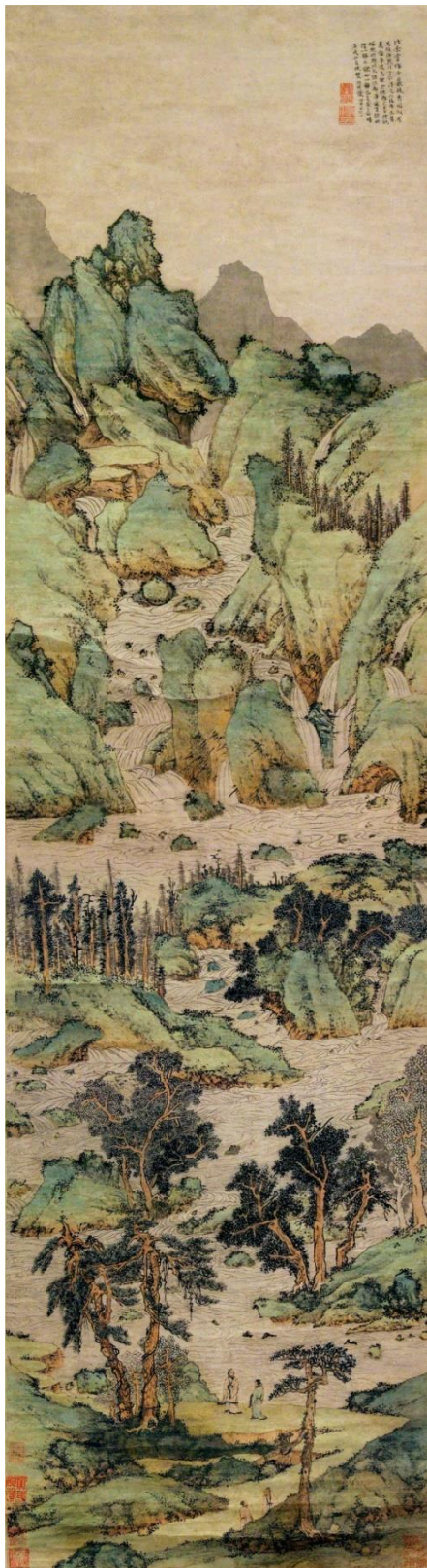
*After rain, the spring trees cast a green shade.  
I love most the western hills as they turn to evening light.  
There should be people's houses at the foot of the hills –  
Across the river, in the far distance, rises a white fog.*

*Spring Trees* indicates the character of much of Wen Zhengming's work: methodical, sensitive, reserved, of cool clarity.

Wen Zhengming's family had been distinguished in scholarship and public service since the Song dynasty. He was born in the same year as the third Master of the Ming, Tang Yin, which led inevitably to rivalry in which Zhengming came off badly – as children, Tang was precocious and brilliant, Wen reportedly a dullard. While Tang Yin partied, Wen practiced calligraphy at home. He was abstemious. Once at one of Tang Yin's parties he was confronted with a group of Suzhou party girls and invited to choose one for entertainment. He reacted in horror, screamed and pleaded to be allowed to leave.

Wen Zhengming, *Spring Trees After Rain*, 1507

These inhibitions and lack of spontaneity are reflected in Zhengming's paintings. The systematic building up of landscape in *Temple at Mount Zhiping* (1516), of which only a poor reproduction is available, is typical of early works and is also used in *Myriads of Valleys*. The recessions and the repeated use of short contrasting diagonals suggest Wen was attempting to give a feeling of depth. The work is much more solid than *Spring Trees*.



Although he received the best education of the time Zhengming failed the examination for an official post ten times between 1495 and 1522 before he was given finally a position in the capital in 1523 on the basis of a recommendation of the local governor. This succession of failures left Wen bitter, and he blamed his inability as a devotee of classical literature to write in a modern prose style. However, Wen never lost the confidence that he would prevail.

Paintings in a restrained manner and with careful brushwork continue throughout Wen's career – those in a bold style are rare. Chinese collectors have a saying; one should look for “fine Shen and rough Wen”. A striking example of rough Wen is *Lofty Leisure Beneath a Sheer Cliff*. A man with books and servant awaits the arrival of a friend; waiting and arriving appear in many of Wen's works. The waterfall is a means to fill the scene with noise and mist. The shade of the pines and leafy trees, the overhanging cliff and the impassivity of the figures create a sense of cool atmosphere.

He travelled to Peking in 1523, already in his fifties but still hoping for an official career. However, his appointment to compile the official history of the Zhengde era (1506-1522) left him unhappy, and he petitioned the emperor three times for permission to retire before finally being released in 1526. He was homesick, beset with illness and rarely paid at court. Back in Suzhou Wen Zhengming devoted his time to poetry, calligraphy and painting more assiduously than ever.

The majority of Wen's works and the best of them belong to the subsequent final decades of his life. He never again sought an official post and reportedly refused requests from politicians for his works, to avoid incurring or imposing obligations. Wen Zhengming also refused to paint for foreigners or merchants. His art was directed pretty much exclusively to his friends and relatives among the literati, and pieces were given as gifts, especially to those who were poor and could sell them to get food and clothing.

Wen Zhengming, *Myriads of Valleys*, 1520s



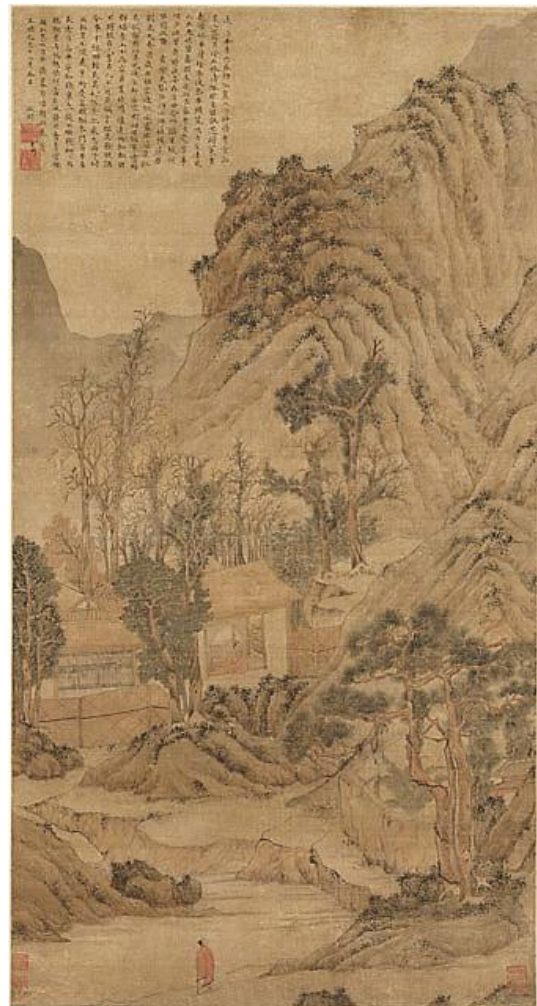
Wen Zhengming, *Lofty Leisure Beneath a Sheer Cliff*, 1520s

Many of Wen Zhengming's paintings are of the houses and gardens of his Suzhou friends. They were done as presents. *Living Aloft* is dedicated to a Mr Liu Lin (1474-1561) who had just left government service at the age of 70 and returned to Suzhou, where he planned to build a two-storey house and live on the upper floor.

Wen, suggesting that the plan reveals Liu's lofty-mindedness, portrays the house before it was completed with Liu and friends in the upper window. Wen's inscribed poem:

*Immortals have always delighted in pavilion-living,  
Windows open on eight sides-eyebrows smiling.  
Up above towers and halls well up,  
Down below, clouds and thunder are vaguely sensed.  
Reclining on a dais, a glimpse of Japan,  
Leaning on a balustrade, the sight of Manchuria.  
While worldly affairs shift and change,  
In their midst a lofty man is at ease.*

The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries saw an increase in the development of marvellously designed gardens by scholar-officials. The Classical Gardens of Suzhou are now a UNESCO Heritage Site, and include examples from the Song Dynasty. Courtyard gardens were particularly popular in the Ming period. This type of garden, designed to be viewed through openings developed into a fine art. Although the whole garden could be seen from a balcony, the essential appeal was walking around the garden in a covered corridor, looking through openings (moon-gates, latticed windows and others) which framed a view, often of a carefully placed tree or rock.



Wen Zhengming, *Living Aloft*, 1543



Youyicun Garden, Suzhou



Master of the Nets Garden, Suzhou



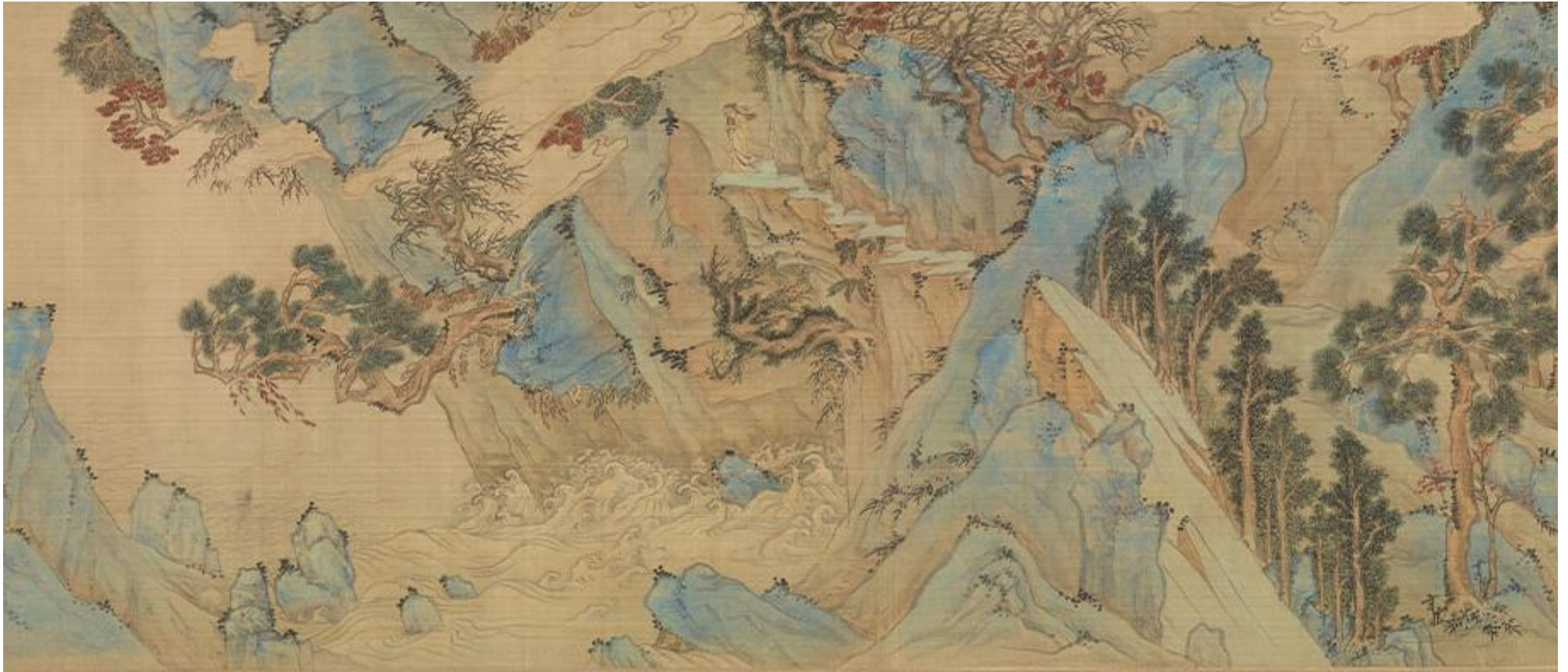
Humble Administrator's Garden, Suzhou

In 1528 Zhengming and his close friend Wang Chong stayed overnight at the Lengjia Temple on Mount Shangfang in Jiangsu. Encountering a major snowfall, Chong took out a fine piece of paper to ask Wen for a painting. After making sketches, Wen Zhengming finished *Deep Snow* for Wang Chong five years later.



Wen Zhengming, *Deep Snow in Mountain Passes* (detail), 1533

Wen Zhengming introduced a literary slant to Suzhou painting, and pictures based on old stories and poems appeared with greater frequency from his time. The famous poet-official, Su Shi, the originator of the idea of literati painting [Part 2] wrote two *Red Cliff Odes*, accounts of his travels with friends to Red Cliff. The *Latter Ode* was illustrated by the Song Academy artist Zhao Bosu in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By Wen Zhengming's time it was owned by one of his friends, who was approached by an official who wanted to present it to the son of the powerful Grand Secretary Yan Song. A huge sum was offered, and Wen Zhengming said to his friend; 'You can't miss the chance to sell it at that price; I'll paint you another one that will at least preserve its general appearance.'

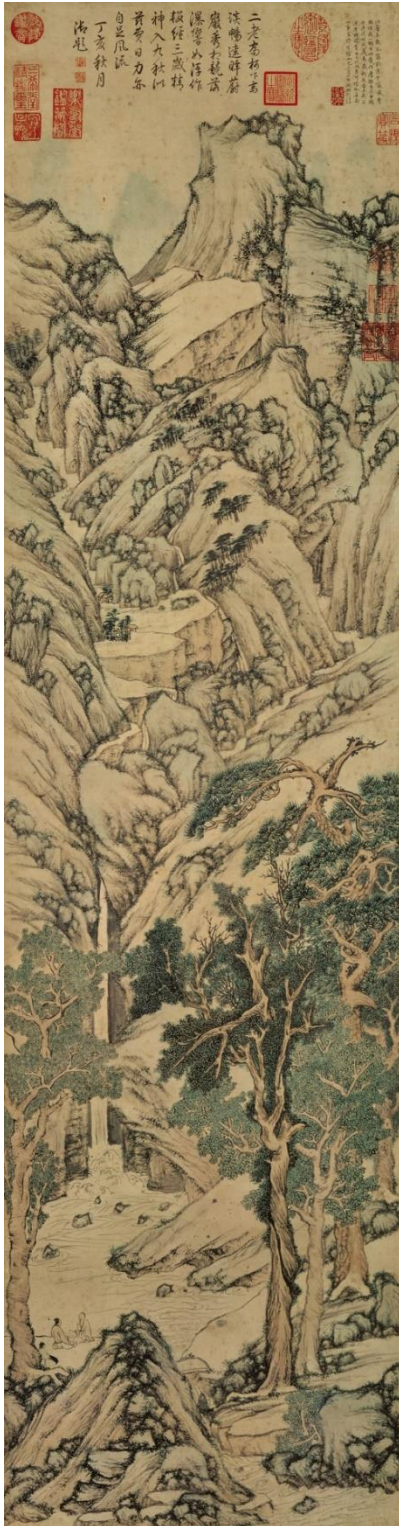


Wen Zhengming, *Imitating Zhao Bosu's "Illustration of the Latter Red Cliff Ode"* (detail), 1540s

This part of the scroll shows Su Shi frightened after climbing at night to a ledge atop the Red Cliff; *"The grass and trees stirred and shook, cries in the mountains were answered in the valleys, the wind rose and the water seethed. I felt uneasy and dispirited, frightened by the eeriness of it; I shivered, it was impossible to stay there"*.

Wen builds up to the scene (from the right) with standard devices of increasing the steepness of diagonals and crowding the space with huge unstable forms – there is a sudden shift from quiet to wind-whipped trees and the small figure, sleeves and robe billowing in the wind is poised precariously on the ledge between the scudding fog above and the churning waves below.

Wen Zhengming's pure landscapes of this late period are regarded as important works. *A Thousand Cliffs* is firm and bold. The lower half repeats the composition of *Lofty Leisure*; two men on the bank of a stream beneath trees with a pool behind them extending back to a waterfall – a hollow space enclosed by solids.



In his old age Wen Zhengming painted flowers and rocks in an austere and sombre style very close to that of Ni Zan and the literati of the Yuan. These works reflect a world free of blandishments, which was a way Wen chose to see his life – survival requiring tireless effort, practising calligraphy at home instead of partying, in which steadfastness and integrity win out.

His *Epidendrum and Bamboo* depicts orchids and bamboo on a slope in the wind. The bamboo bends slightly and the orchid blades appear like ribbons swaying in the breeze in a lively manner. The brushwork for rendering the bamboo and orchids is vigorous and powerful, reflecting Zhengming's hours of practice with calligraphy. The bamboo and orchids here are dense but have an orderly feel. The dark of the bamboo and the light of the orchids create layers giving a sense of depth.

Wen Zhengming's *Old Cypress and Rock* was painted for a young friend who lay ill at the time. The picture urges on him the fortitude of the ancient gnarled cypress, which was also an ingredient in medicine, and the inscription quotes a line of a Tang dynasty poet to allude elegantly to the young man's promise as a writer. The tree has reached its present condition by slow steady growth (internal) and the rock by much slower erosion (external), but the two are scarcely distinguished. The fusion of the two is emphasised by the composition: a line drawn to enclose the tree would trace a shape virtually congruous with that of the rock – the arching and thrusting movements of one repeated in the other.

Wen Zhengming, *A Thousand Cliffs*, 1550s





Wen Zhengming, *Epidendrum and Bamboo*, 1550s



Wen Zhengming, *Old Cypress and Rock*, 1550

Alongside the revival of literati painting under Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming in Suzhou came substantial growth in the economy and wealth of the southern China.

The new south-western provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou opened up by the Ming significantly increased agricultural output, which benefitted the rest of China. The produce from these provinces was transported up the Yangtze River to Suzhou where it was traded and moved on to the Grand Canal.

Cotton production increased under the Ming, particularly in the south-east, helped by technology transfer from the silk industry of Suzhou. As in England, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century a division of labour replaced the cottage industry: spinning remained a rural activity but weaving was done in towns. Smaller towns proliferated instead of large ones, providing a market close enough for spinners and weavers to make daily trips to obtain their raw materials and to sell their finished products.

The increase in towns was also a mark of increasing trade and the growth in numbers and wealth of merchants. Although the Ming government prohibited overseas trade, this was ineffective against an East Asian maritime community made up of Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and Chinese merchants and adventurers. Demand for Chinese silk, largely produced around Suzhou, grew from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century as a result of Yongle's voyages. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Japanese smugglers began trading their silver for Chinese silk, and the trade blossomed so much that the trade embargo was lifted in 1567.

Located on the Grand Canal near the point where it crosses the Yangtze River, Suzhou and Hangzhou were the centres of a network of transport linking the communities of the rich Yangtze delta region. The region was the leading producer of silk and cotton, and thrived on the trade of agriculture, tea and salt, as well as a handicraft industry which supplied luxury goods of many kinds to the whole country. Wealth accumulated in the hands of merchants and gentry. This burgeoning merchant/middle class recognised that the literati were the arbiters of education and culture. Owning scholarly art came to be an important part of any attempt to claim status in society. This was an echo of the demand for art by warlords in the Warring States period to show their rule was divine. And just like those warlords, the Ming merchant class had a taste for decoration. Thus, the demand for literati art was tinged with a desire for decorative devices, which explains why scholar-artists adopted some professional practices.

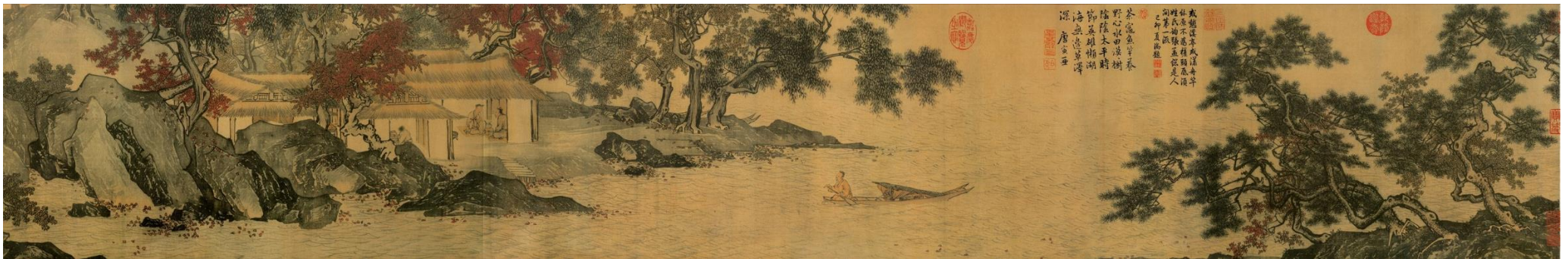
The remaining two Masters of the Ming, Tang Yin and Qui Ying, took advantage of this new market for their art. They accepted commissions, working for any patron who paid a high enough price or offered excellent lodging and entertainment. Some middle-class practitioners often asked for payment in the form of a painting or a piece of calligraphy. This was common among doctors – they preferred art to filthy lucre as it gave them status as gentry and because they felt they were being paid like gentlemen rather than artisans. Tang Yin produced a painting in exchange for treatment received from his doctor, and he was also commissioned to paint such 'presentation pieces' for other men so they could pay their medics in kind. One commission, from a man for the doctor who cured his son of a critical illness, was called *Gazing at the Apricot Tree*. The apricot was a popular symbol of medical expertise and 'gazing' representing the father's gratitude. Other presentation pieces, such as the farewell paintings became popular. Both Tang Yin and Qui Ying also produced stock to be sold on the general market.

By the early 16<sup>th</sup> century private collectors in Suzhou region (for example, Xiang Yuanbian 1525-90 and Liang Qingbiao 1620-91), became important preservers of art, taking the place of the largely indifferent Ming emperors. They ensured that the remaining masterpieces of the Song and the Yuan were saved, and encouraged Ming literati art. This domination of the market and art collections by literati painting was an important legacy to the succeeding Qing Dynasty.

### Tang Yin (1470-1524)

Tang Yin's father was of the new expanding merchant class and paid for a good education for his son. The father of Wen Zhengming was responsible for some of that education and introduced Tang Yin to the gentry and literati society of Suzhou. Yin was profligate, devoted to drink and debauchery, but 1493 and 1494 saw him lose successively his parents, his wife and a beloved younger sister (the last by suicide). These deaths sobered him. He put aside pleasures and studied for the examinations.

In 1498 he took first place in the provincial exam in Nanking (one of the many Wen Zhengming failed) and in 1499 Tang Yin travelled to Peking with a friend, a rich playboy named Hsu Ching, for the important metropolitan exam. Tang Yin was favoured to take first place but he and Hsu fell under suspicion of having received advance information from the chief examiner. Hsu confessed under torture to having bribed a servant of the examiner. Tang Yin returned to Suzhou under the cloud of a scandal. He wrote a long letter to his friend Wen Zhengming protesting his innocence. Back in Suzhou Yin returned to his old life of drinking and dissipation but he also took up painting, studying under Zhou Chen, a professional artist, from around 1500.



Tang Yin, *Fishermen in Reclusion among Mountains and Streams*, early 1500s

Tang Yin's early work reflects the teaching of the professional Zhou Chen. *Fishermen in Reclusion* is conservative, having the clarity of Li Tang's art in the Song and using conventional images for the scholar-recluse. The use of subtle colour originates partly from Zhou Chen and partly from Wen Zhengming who was using it by this time. The presentation is new, however. The scene is cut abruptly along the top, so that the mountains are largely unseen. This 'topping' came to be used frequently by later Ming artists. Yin cultivated his painting and calligraphy diligently, but the youth remained. Between bouts of work, he would spend long hours in the wine-shops and brothels of Suzhou, famed for his libertine ways, before retiring for periods of seclusion in Buddhist temples, as if to purge himself for further work.

About these habits, the poem Wen Zhengming had written to Tang Yin in their youth, before either had become a painter, still rang true:

*Your house is on Kao Bridge  
By the bawling, rumbling marketplace.  
How do you deaden the city racket?  
You fill the house with books old and new.  
On the left you play four or five volumes,  
On the right you pour from two or three bottles.*

Tang Yin soon developed his own landscape style. One of the striking features is his way of animating earth and rock by making their masses lean and twist. His compositions are more dynamic than those of Shen Zhou or Zhou Chen. This is particularly true of *Contemplating on a Donkey Ride Home*. The poem composed by the artist reads:

*A failure, taking up my books, I go back home  
Riding a mule again up the blue hills.  
Tired with a world of wind, frost and dust,  
I greet my wife, poor but not destitute.*

The painting is considered to be about the disastrous trip to Peking. If so the figure on the donkey is Tang himself, and the feeling of instability and insecurity of the landscape (in contrast to *Fishermen in Reclusion*) might be an expression of Tang's emotional state. Everything in the painting induces a feeling of perturbation.

The literary community in Suzhou was sympathetic to Tang Yin over the exam furore believing him to be a victim of court politics and trumped up charges. Tang Yin cultivated this image. He boasted in his writing, for the public, of the wrongs done to him to feed the legend of a dispossessed scholar. He would not forget this grievance. Writing of himself in his 40s that he said he was "old, mad and stubborn."



Tang Yin, *Contemplating on a Donkey Ride Home*, 1500s.

Tang Yin's paintings often reflect his temperament, as indeed do those of Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming. Yin, mercurial but impatient, aims to dazzle the viewer. However, Tang Yin also painted sober landscapes, either simple lyrical scenes such as *Clearing after Snow*, (which measures 70 cm by 37 cm) or complex monumental (195 cm by 103 cm) compositions like *Whispering Pines*.



Tang Yin, *Clearing after Snow in a Han Pass*,  
1507



Tang Yin, *Whispering Pines on a Mountain Path*,  
c1516

The poem on *Clearing after Snow* speaks of the first thaw of Spring and the difficulty of travel – the animals and their handlers braving the cold to deliver wagonloads of long-sought-after bales of rice. The sky and water are washed in light ink highlighting places left blank to indicate snow. The rocks have few texture strokes which emphasises snow too. Tang Yin uses curves on banks, paths and trees like a series of pendulums whose swings get shorter and sharper as they near the top. They draw the viewer upward and make the work dynamic. The red and dark accents along the curves help emphasis the line of movement.

*Whispering Pines* was painted to honour Li Cheng. He was the magistrate of Wu near Suzhou from 1514 to 1517 and paid special attention to scholars. He was promoted to the Board of Revenue in Peking, and this painting thanks Li for his service in Suzhou. Dipping, looping lines appear everywhere in cliffs, trees and water. The descending white ribbons of the waterfall draw the viewer down to the departing Li Cheng on the bridge. The patches of untouched silk, almost pure white, give a feeling of fresh air. These are most noticeable behind Li Cheng and perhaps serve as a warning; the celebrated official is leaving the clear air of the provinces for the fog and obfuscation of the capital.

These works show Tang Yin's devotion to detail. The trees in the foreground of both paintings are executed with care. The splendour of the pines in full leaf on one and their stark winter branches in the other. The carts and the figures are minutely detailed, but are not so large as to distract. The same detail in figures, structures and trees can be seen in *Thatched Cottage*, but these are contrasted with beautifully graduated washes of ink to produce a convincing misty atmosphere.



Tang Yin, *Thatched Cottage in the Western Mountains*, 1510s

Tang Yin was equally famous as a figure painter. "Singing girls" or courtesans were favourite subjects in Tang Yin's paintings, as they were in his life, especially their romantic liaisons with scholars of the past. *Tao Gu presenting a Lyric* is the best. Tao Gu (903-970) was a scholar official who served as an envoy to the Southern Tang court, which he treated with much disdain. Angered by his rudeness, the court sent courtesan Qin Jolan in the guise of a posthouse keeper's daughter to seduce him. She played the pipa for him (an instrument, like the samisen in Japan, associated with women entertainers, prostitutes, love affairs and drinking parties) and, overcome by her beauty, Tao Gu forgot his official position and indiscreetly wrote a poem for her. Next day he attended a banquet given for him by the ruler of the Southern Tang and was, as usual, all stiff and formal. The ruler summoned Qin Jolan to play for the company and she sang the poem Tao Gu had given to her. Tao Gu was humiliated and lost his composure. Tang Yin shows Qin Jolan singing to Tao Gu thus provoking him to write the poem. The setting is intimate – the inscription includes the line; "*a single night brings lovers together in a lodge*" - reinforced by the enclosing tree and plants, and by the diagonal seat and screen. Yet, a spy (from the court to check the ruse has worked?) seems to have encroached to within earshot.

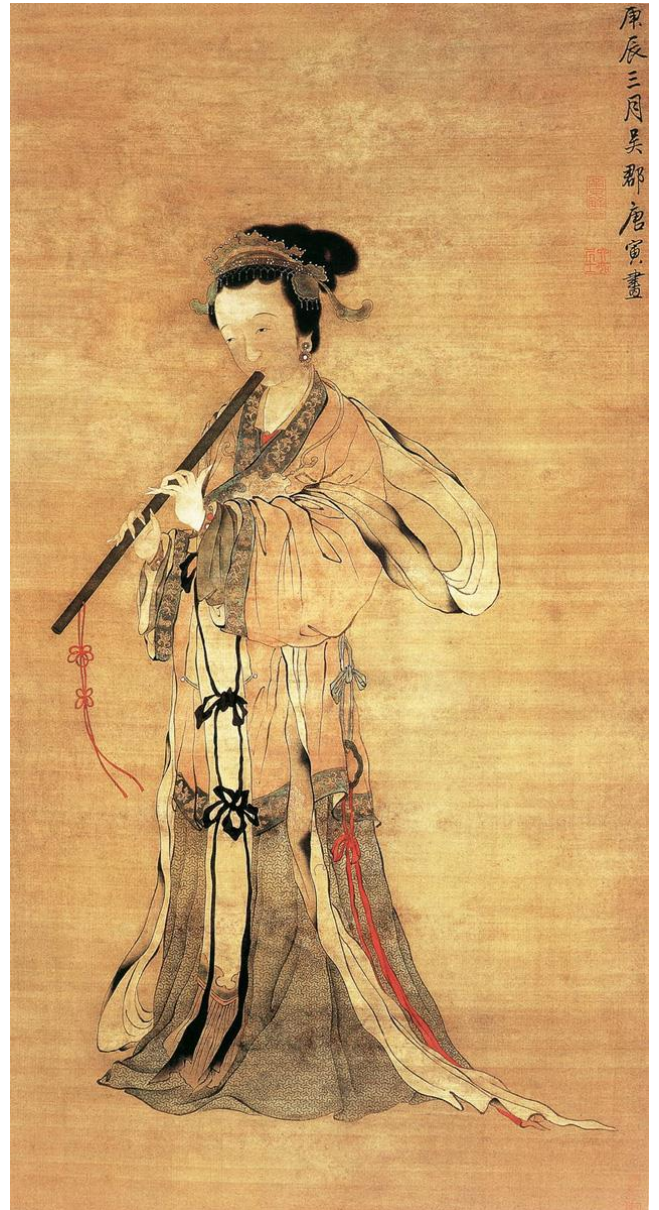


Tang Yin, *Tao Gu presenting a Lyric*, 1510s

The decorative colour is vibrant. This was another reason for Tang Yin's popularity. His paintings of court ladies were prized, and done in varying styles, from formal haughtiness to relaxed pleasure. In *Court Ladies*, the ladies-in-waiting are shown in subdued colours, anonymous with their backs towards the viewer. In contrast the slender and colourful princesses seem animated with salacious gossip. The relaxed flow of the garments of the *Bamboo Flutist* might reflect the mind of the musician, happily lost in the melodies of the tune.



Tang Yin, *Court Ladies in the Shu Palace*, early 16<sup>th</sup> century



Tang Yin, *Blowing a Bamboo Flute*, 1510s

Many of these paintings of court ladies, along with other works, were produced for the public market on which Tang Yin was forced sometimes to fall back. A poem he wrote in 1518 laments the insecurity of relying on art for a living, complaining that his landscapes and fans were not selling well:

*Calligraphy, painting, poetry, prose – none have I refined,  
Yet my living depends on them.  
Pitiful amount of money though they fetch,  
They can save me a day of penury.*

As well as these commercial aspects, Tang Yin and his friends retained the altruism of the literati. When Shen Zhou died in 1509, Suzhou's elite travelled to his ancestral home, only to find an ongoing disaster. The area had suffered a severe drought followed by floods which left the fields useless for agriculture. Yet officials still tried to tax the inhabitants in the usual way. Many families, without money or crops, were so desperate for food they had to abandon their farms. Wang Ao, who wrote the *Ode to the Pomegranate* on Shen Zhou's painting (above), was among those who had journeyed to pay their respects. He was a native of Suzhou and had ranked among the highest ministers of the land, serving in Peking for nearly 35 years. Wang Ao suggested the literati group compose a protest painting.



Protest paintings publicised an injustice and admonished the officials who were responsible. The painting was not displayed publicly but seen only by the literati circle in the gentry. Thus, the message would get to the people in government from an impeccable source. *Gazing in Sorrow at the Fields (1509)* was painted by Tang Yin and Wang Ao wrote the first poem on the scroll. The painting is lost but Wang Ao's poem was recorded.

*Eventually we reached Xiangcheng,  
Seeing from dawn to dusk  
On all sides an expanse of water  
So boundless that sky and water formed a lake.  
Only a few thatched houses stood  
All else was abandoned to water rushes and ruined willows.  
The deep water, home of fish and turtles,  
Was one with the shallows of gulls and egrets.  
Those who worked the fields  
Were not to blame for starving.  
The officials pressed for taxes,  
Most of the villagers have fled.  
Pondering this I paced back and forth,  
And stood alone a long time.  
I compose this as a song of protest  
To inform the local authorities.*

Another protest work was produced by **Zhou Chen (1460-1535)**, Tang Yin's teacher, a few years later. His now-famous scroll *Beggars and Street Characters* originally was slighted by literati critics who failed to realise the purpose of the work, judging it to be a lamentable departure from the usual bucolic depictions of peasants. The work was originally an album of 24 leaves, but only a few have survived. Zhou Chen wrote:

*"In the autumn [of 1516] I was idling under the window, and suddenly there came to my mind all the appearances and manners of beggars and other street characters whom I often saw in the streets and the markets. With brush and ink ready in hand, I put them into pictures in an impromptu way. It may not be worthy of serious enjoyment, but it certainly can be considered as a warning and admonition to the world."*



Zhou Chen, *Beggars and Street Characters* (detail), 1516

Later 16<sup>th</sup> century writers suggest Zhou Chen was making a protest against misrule by eunuchs. After the Zhengde emperor ascended to the throne in 1505 as a youth of 15, his power was usurped by a clique of eunuchs led by Liu Chin. Liu Chin and his cohorts had no interest in governing China; they used the emperor's authority to extort money. Their greed drained the country. Liu Chin conducted a reign of terror against officials who opposed him (this campaign forced Wang Ao to retire in 1509). Eventually Liu went too far and incited a revolt, for which he was put to death in 1510. The treasure he had amassed was found to be more than the total annual budget of the state.



Zhou Chen, *Beggars and Street Characters* (detail), 1516

Zhou Chen treats his subjects sympathetically but realistically, departing from the usual idealised and sentimentalised figures. The famous scholar-official Chang Feng-I who took his degree in 1564 wrote of Zhou Chen's work:

*"This album presents us with the many aspects of misery – hunger and cold, homeless destitution, infirmity and emaciations, deformity and sickness. Anyone who can look at this and not be wounded to the heart by compassion is not a humane person. [1516] was only a few years after the seditious Chin spread his poison and was the height of Chiang Pin's and Wang Ning's exercising of their brutality. I imagine also that the officials and nobles were seldom able to nurture and succour the common people. So this work by Zhou Chen has the same intent as Zheng Xia's 'Destitute People': it was meant as an aid to government and is not a shallow thing – one can't dismiss it as a 'play with ink'."*

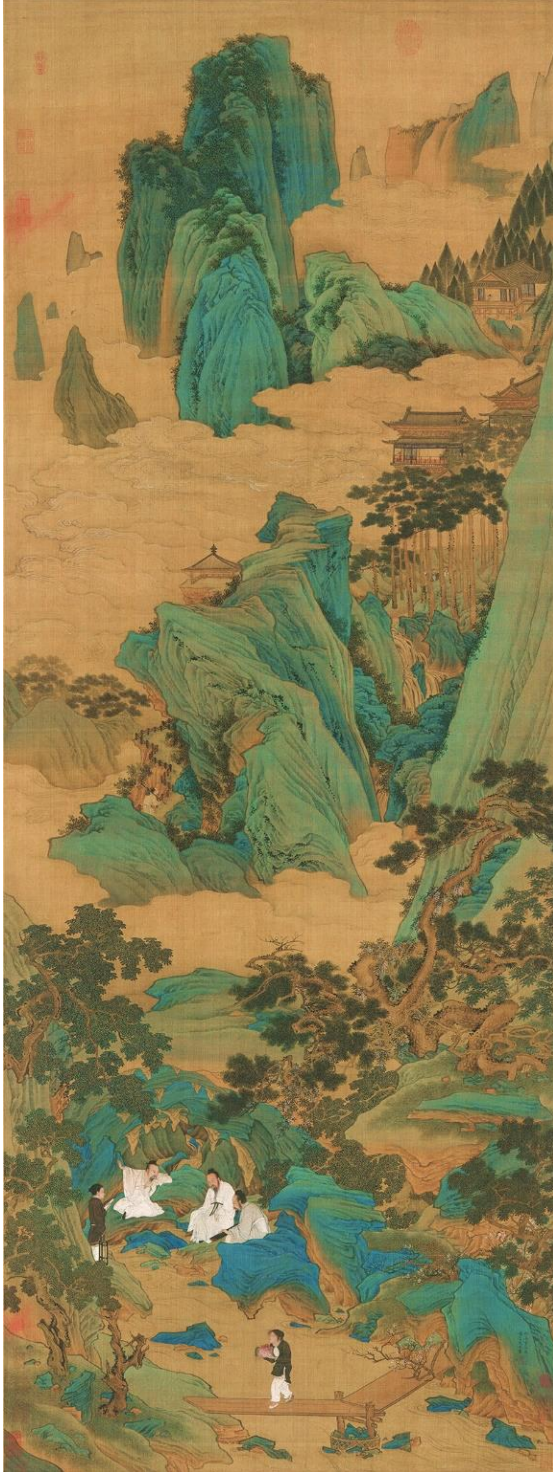


Zhou Chen, *Beggars and Street Characters* (detail), 1516

Zheng Xia 1041-1119 was an 11<sup>th</sup> century scholar-official who depicted scenes of starvation he saw in his city during the famine of 1073-4. He showed the painting to the emperor in order to shock him into action. His real target was Wang An-shih whose radical reforms he blamed for the famine. The incident led to the resignation of Wang An-shih and the suspension of his measures for a time, but later Zheng Xia was punished and sent into exile for his temerity.

Qiu Ying (c 1494-1552)

Qiu Ying came from a humble family near Shanghai and worked as a painter's apprentice in Suzhou. Zhou Chen spotted his talent and adopted him as a pupil. In contrast to Tang Yin, who was an educated man forced to become a professional artist, Qiu Ying was a professional artist who was introduced to educated and cultured men. Indeed, Ying spend much of his life lodged, entertained and supported by a succession of wealthy patrons who received paintings in return, including the greatest collector of the age, Xiang Yuanbian.



Qiu Ying is acknowledged to be the last great painter who worked in the blue-and-green style established in the Tang and continued in the Song. *Fairyland of Peach Blossoms* shows Ying's love of detail as well as this colouring style. It is this detailed skill in drawing which is used to distinguish Qiu Ying's blue and green works from a raft of skilful imitations. His delightful pictures are widely appreciated in China and in the West, and next to Wang Hui, who we will meet in the Qing Dynasty [Part 6], is the most forged painter in the history of Chinese art.

The long scroll *Saying Farewell at Xunyang* is an extreme example of Qiu Ying's blue-and-green style. The mountains and rocks are faceted like crystals and are painted with bright enamelled colours, producing a lively pattern of tones.

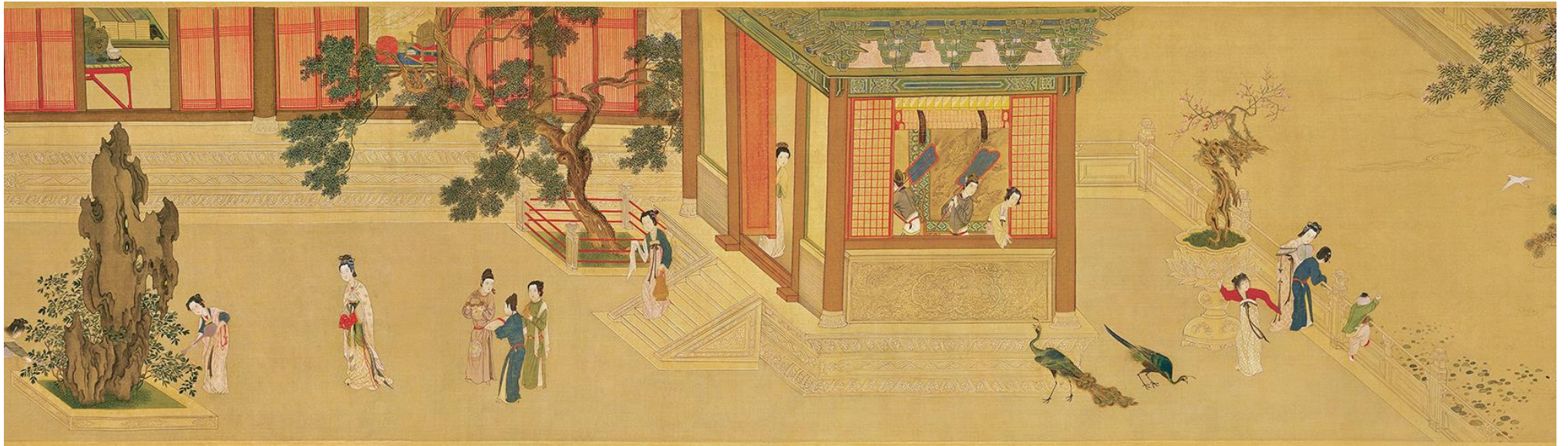
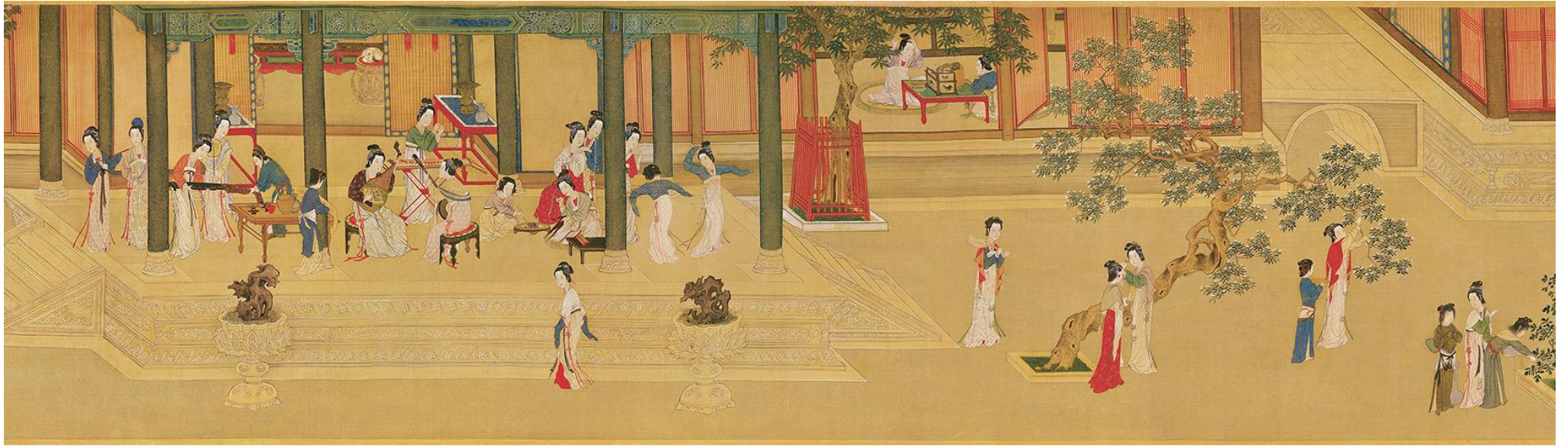
Qiu Ying, *Fairyland of Peach Blossoms*, c 1530s



Qiu Ying, *Saying Farewell at Xunyang* (detail), c 1540s

Qiu Yang spent hours in deep concentration on such long and detailed scrolls. His most finely drawn and colourful work with crisp brushstrokes is *Spring Morning in the Han Palace*, a scroll almost 6 metres long showing various activities, including the story of Wang Zhaojun. Emperor Yuan (reigned 48-33 BC) chose his concubines from across the realm by looking at their portraits. Naturally, most girls bribed the artist sent by the emperor, Mao Yanshou, to portray them as more beautiful than they were. Refusing to offer a bribe, Wang Zhaojun was depicted as comparatively ugly, and thus spent her time in minor courts as a lady-in waiting, never seeing the emperor. When a barbarian chieftain came to court seeking a Han beauty as his wife, the emperor, believing Wang Zhaojun to be the least attractive of the concubines, chose her to be the chieftain's wife. Only when he saw her did he realize that she was the most beautiful of them all. Infuriated, he had the artist executed. Wang Zhaojun is renowned as one of the *Four Beauties of Ancient China*. Qiu Ying shows the artist at work in the first of the scenes shown below.





Qiu Ying, *Spring Morning in the Han Palace* (detail), c 1540s

“Although Qiu Ying’s popular reputation is associated with these illustrative pictures in the ‘meticulous manner’ kung-pi, and highly coloured, perhaps his best works are his landscapes in ink and wash (Sullivan).” Particularly this is true of those landscapes that have clarity and detail, notably in structures and trees with their leaves, but are spacious and calm, recalling the Yuan literati. *Fishermen in Reclusion* is a fine example. The elements of the composition are beautifully crafted, graded from bottom and top, and placed to create a sense of space and peace.



Qiu Ying, *Fishermen in Reclusion at the Lotus Stream*, c 1540s

Qiu Ying had good relationships with his patrons, as a surviving letter suggests.

“... Recently you favoured me with an order to make a painting for a birthday celebration. It has been respectfully completed and is hereby presented for approval and acceptance. When you place another order, just send word to me and it will be done and delivered ... The other two paintings will be delivered soon ... Also I received the payment in silver from your brother Fang-hu. Please be sure to give him my thanks. Your messenger was paid one mace of silver for the boat trip. Returned are the remainders of silk.”

Qiu Ying produced other celebration works. Farewell paintings remained a common gift to departing friends, and demand expanded to include rich merchants, the middle class and even Japanese customers. Reception-Hall scrolls intended for display in high-ceilinged rooms became popular during the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a show of wealth and status. Two works of Qiu Ying’s which survive in this genre from a set of four depicting the seasons are over nine feet tall (but no copy is available).

Idealised portrayals of rustic retreats, a special genre of the scholar-artist of the Yuan, remained popular. Qiu Ying painted many for his patrons and *Eastern Forest* is an outstanding example. The recluse Mr Donglin sits in the doorway of his house talking to a guest. Despite this scholarly scene, to the left is all Southern Song: a slanting foreground rock, a river, a bank receding in mist echoed by the recession of peach trees through which a bank of fog floats. The diagonal into the distance is in the manner of the Ma-Xia School [Part 2]. This marrying of a genre originating with the literati painters of the Yuan, with the style of professional court painters from the Song, is another indication of how scholarly approaches to art were adapting to the developing art market in the Ming.



Qiu Ying, *Eastern Forest*, c 1540s

Qiu Ying followed the trend begun by Wen Zhengming of paintings based on old stories and poems, which became increasingly popular during the 17<sup>th</sup> century among the middle class as well as the gentry. One of the two surviving paintings of Qiu Ying's scenes from the *Red Cliff Odes* is reminiscent of Shen Zhou's *Scholar and Crane* in composition, but Ying's love of detail is evident in the cliff and the trees.



Qiu Ying, *Red Cliff Ode*, mid 1500s



Qiu Ying painted an album of ten leaves illustrating old stories. The scenes include two famous legends; *Zhuang Zi watching fish* and *Bo Ya finds a friend who truly understands his music*. Zhuang Zi was a philosopher in the late Warring States period who wrote a collection of anecdotes, named after him, about the ideal Daoist sage. The work is considered one of the two foundation texts for Daoism and includes the famous debate where Zhuang Zi argues that he knows that fish are happy.

Bo Ya was a musician in the Warring States period whose experience with Zhong Ziqi has come to exemplify the Chinese ideal of friendship. According to the famous Daoist text *Liezi*:

*"Bo Ya was good at playing the qin. Zhong Ziqi was good at listening to the qin. When Bo Ya was thinking about high mountains as he played, Zhong Ziqi would say, 'How towering like Mount Tai!' When Bo Ya thought of flowing water, Zhong Ziqi would say, 'How vast are the rivers and oceans!' Whatever Bo Ya thought of Ziqi would never fail to understand. Bo Ya said, 'Amazing! Your heart and mine are the same!' When Ziqi died, Bo Ya broke the strings of his qin and vowed never to play again."*

Another leaf in the album, *Pipa song at Xunyang*, was based on a poem by Tang scholar-official Bo Juyi [Part 1]. He had caused affront at court in the capital at Chang'an and was banished to a lowly post in the north-western Jiangxi Province. In exile, he went to the river to say goodbye to a departing friend and heard the sounds of a pipa being played in a nearby boat. Bo Yuji recognised the style as that of the capital Chang'an, and plied the performer with wine and persuaded her to sing. As he listened and remembered his own years in Chang'an he realised poignantly how much he missed good music and companionship.



Qiu Ying, *Pipa Song at Xunyang* (album leaf), 1540s

Like the other Masters of the Ming, Qiu Ying painted flowers, but his work was very different. Whereas they retained the literati approach, albeit with tinges of colour, Qiu Ying used outlines filled with colour as practised at the Song imperial painting academy.

Very few of Qiu Ying's flower paintings survive. *Narcissi and Chimonanthus* shows that while Ying might choose an academic approach, he breathes life and grace into the plants. The flowers bloom in the first lunar month, and so represent the Chinese New Year. The work was painted for one of Ying's patrons, the great Ming collector, Xiang Yuanbian (which is probably why it has survived; four of his collection seals appear on painting). Qiu Ying's inscription, which is cradled by the plants and in beautiful contrast, dates the work.



Qiu Ying, *Narcissi and Chimonanthus*, 1547

Making a living as a painter in 16<sup>th</sup> century China became feasible because works of art drew high prices. One wealthy man paid Qiu Ying 100 ounces of silver to paint a handscroll for his mother's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Another acquired a landed estate in exchange for four scrolls by Shen Zhou. Older paintings became highly valued because of the development of colour printing which meant more people saw a good copy of them. The earliest colour print in the world is from China: a frontispiece to a Buddhist scroll dated 1346. By the middle of the Ming, easily-available colour prints meant merchants and the middle class were familiar with the styles of old masters. This knowledge expanded the market for scholarly art. Demand for literati works, with some decorative effects, began to dominate. Whilst scholar-gentlemen took advantage of that, their works presented as gifts for friends and patrons retained the literati traditions.

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