

Chinese Art

5. The Ming Dynasty – Later Period

*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

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Female Artists

Professionals

The thriving art market in the Ming dynasty had two consequences. First, fake works became common. Some popular artists used pupils and assistants as substitute brushes (*dai bi*) to turn out works in their style, which the master would then sign. This practice, also common in European art at this time, has continued up to the present day. Some *dai bi* set up their own shops and an industry of forgers developed in Suzhou. It fed the demand that Tang Yin and Qiu Ying had aroused, and turning out thousands of routine copies in the styles of Ming scholar artists, with which rich Chinese merchants were duped¹.

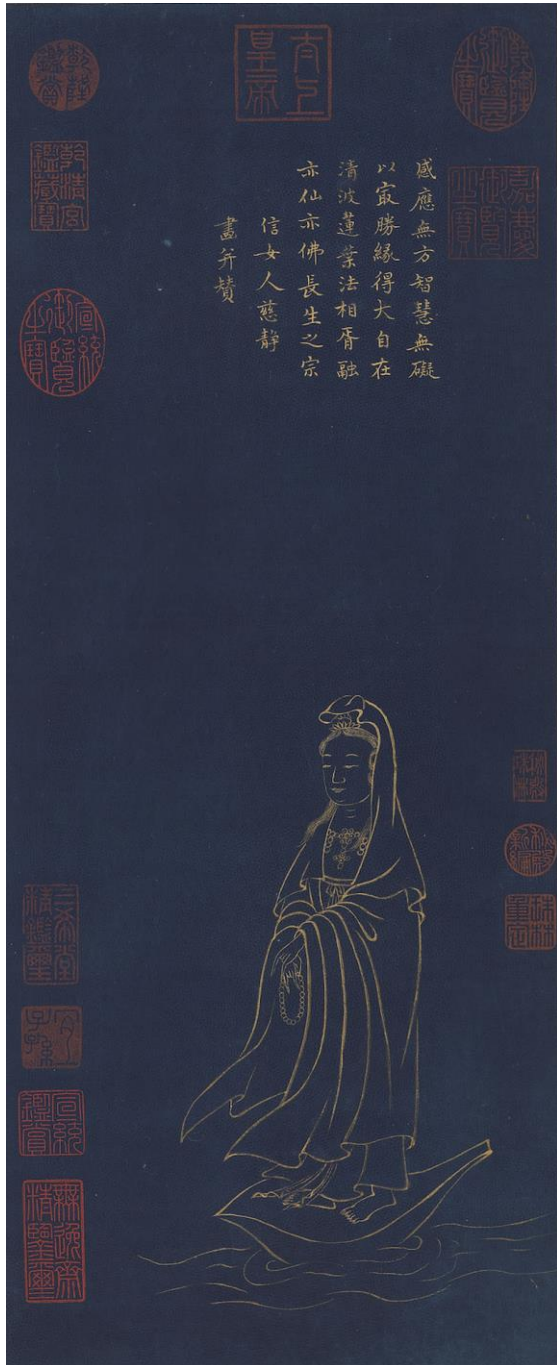
The second consequence was a growth in demand for art for women among the gentry, merchants and the middle class. Mostly this took the form of presentation pieces to be given as gifts on wedding days and anniversaries, prior to the expected date of child-birth or as consolation after a loved one was lost: paintings with themes of particular relevance to women. Such pieces came to be considered more felicitous if produced by a female. Thus, the middle and late Ming saw a burgeoning demand among women for works of art by women. Daughters and sisters of scholars or professional artists responded. Qiu Ying's daughter, Zhu, known as **Miss Qiu (active c 1550-80)**, was a professional artist famous particularly for images in gold ink of Guanyin, regarded foremost as the protector of women. The bodhisattva also came to be venerated as a sender of sons in the 16th and 17th centuries; a manifestation of Guanyin influenced by the Christian image of the Virgin Mary, brought to Ming China by Catholic missionaries. Although Miss Qiu married, she preferred living alone, "*burning incense, playing the qin, cleaning the inkstone and wielding the brush*". Her works were mainly commissioned as birthday gifts.



Miss Qui, *Guanyin and Falling Child* (from an album of 24 Portraits of Guanyin), late 16th century

¹ Young titled Englishmen on the Grand Tour were conned frequently in a similar way in Italy: exploited by their knowledge of famous artistic names but ignorance of style and technique. Hundreds of paintings in National Trust properties in England are labelled *'in the manner of ...'* or *'School of ...'*: the result of an expert being called in after the returning Honourable had proclaimed: "Daddy, I bought a Titian".

Another famous painter of Guanyin in gold was **Xing Cijing (1573-1640s)**, younger sister of famous calligrapher Xing Dong (1551-1612) and wife of a provincial commissioner excelled in painting, poetry and calligraphy and also embroidery. She was well known for depictions of Guanyin in gold on dark ground. This example has her calligraphy forming a eulogy to Guanyin.



Xing Cijing, *Guanyin, Bodhisattva of Mercy*, early 17th century

Wen Shu (also known as Zhao Wenchu, 1595-1634)

Wen Zhengming's great-granddaughter, Shu, learnt to paint as one of the accomplishments of an upper-class lady. Before she was 20, she married Zhao Jun, a descendant of the Song imperial family and a relative of Zhao Mengfu. The couple and their in-laws lived in refinement amid their gardens and pavilions just outside Suzhou. Wen Shu's paintings were done mostly after 1626, when the death of her father-in-law left the family finances in a precarious state.

Wen Shu's motifs were popular with women: begonia (associated with consolation for the lovelorn); iris (to encourage the bearing of sons, also to promote intelligence and prolong life); day lily (to ease the pains of childbirth, and to bear sons); silkworms (sericulture being the responsibility of women).

Butterflies (like rocks) signify long life because their name in Chinese has the same sound as the word for a septuagenarian. Pictures of lilies, rocks and butterflies were popular as wedding gifts.

Wen Shu was widely forged, so her husband, who loved to watch his wife paint, would sometimes inscribe her work to help distinguish it from copies. Wen Shu was sought after throughout her life as a painting tutor for young ladies.



Wen Shu, *Rock, Tiger Lily and Orchid*, 1627



Wen Shu, *Spring Silkworms Feeding on Leaves*, 1630

Embroidery was mentioned as one of Xing Cijing's skills. Although not regarded as high art, needlework was considered (by men) to be the foremost female accomplishment. Silk embroidery became popular during the Song dynasty. Zhu Kerou in the Song dynasty was famous for her *Kesi Tapestry*, of which Dong Qichang (who will be met soon) wrote:

"The needlework of Song embroidery is fine and tight, using only one or two strands of floss and needles as thin as hair. The application of colour is exquisite and delicate, with a brilliance that dazzles the eye. The landscapes distinguish far and near; the towers and pavilions obtain a real existence in space; the human figures all give the feeling of life-like movement seen from afar; and the flowers and birds have an extremely mild animated air. The best examples are superior to painting."

Han Ximeng (active 1630s - 1650s) was the most famous silk artist of the Ming dynasty. She was the wife of Dong Qichang's student Gu Shouqian. The female members of the Gu family with whom Han lived in Shanghai in the *Dew Fragrance Garden* were renowned for their needlework skills. They approached embroidery as members of her husband's social circle did painting, by looking at ancients and copying famous works of the Song and Yuan dynasties.



Han Ximeng, *Washing a Horse*, 1634 (silk embroidery)

Washing a Horse is from an album of copies of Song and Yuan dynasty paintings by Han Ximeng. The works, produced using very fine thread, replicated the brushwork in the original, as is evident in the different rendering of the tree trunk (which looks like wet ink), the leaves and the patches on the horse. This ability to manifest different brushstrokes in fine silk thread was a hallmark of the Gu women. Their work supported the Gu family's upper-class pretensions, taking advantage of the new market for art. Dong Qichang deeply appreciated Ximeng's work and asked how she produced such skilful works. Her husband replied:

In the sharp cold of winter, steamy heat of summer, windy darkness or rainy gloom, she does not dare undertake it, but when the sky is clear, the sun unclouded, the birds happy and the flowers fragrant, she absorbs the vitality of life before her eyes and stiches it into fine silk from Suzhou'

Gu embroideries were often catalogued by private collectors in the Ming dynasty on the same basis as paintings on paper or silk; as art rather than decorative pieces. As embroidery rose in status to become regarded as an art form, it was then practised by men.

Courtesans

Courtesans to the upper classes of Chinese society were not only attractive but very talented. Particularly in the Ming dynasty, elite courtesans added sketching and painting to the refined entertainments they offered visiting gentlemen.

Ma Shouzhen (1548-1604)

Ma Shouzhen, one of the *Eight Famous Courtesans of the Ming*, had a vivacious personality. Her flamboyance was matched only by another courtesan-painter Xue Susu, an accomplished equestrian who enjoyed showing off her archery skill from horseback. Ma Shouzhen had considerable fame: "her paintings were not only treasured by the elegant dandies, but her name was heard beyond the seas, and envoys from Siam also knew to buy her painted fans and collect them (Weidner)."

Shouzhen had a large house with a fine garden in a choice position in the courtesan quarter of Nanking. She had a lifelong affair with Wang Zhideng (1535-1612) the poet and calligrapher who succeeded Wen Zhengming as the leader of the literati. Wang Zhideng invariably wrote inscriptions on his lover's works. On the fan painting *Flowers and Butterflies*, he wrote:

*A few clumps of wild blossoms,
the various kinds compete in beauty.
Butterflies have therefore come,
flitting about not wanting to leave."*



Ma Shouzhen, *Flowers and Butterflies*, 1570s/1580s

Ma Shouzhen was extremely generous. She funded a month-long party with 15 entertainers on a two-storey boat in the *Willow Catkin Garden* to celebrate the 70th birthday of her lover Wang Zhideng. Not long after this Shouzhen fell ill and died. Zhideng wrote many eulogies. Ma Shouzhen's orchid paintings were lauded. She was known as *Xianglan* (Orchid of Xiang). Although her life-style was dashing her brushstroke was restrained. The orchid below is simple but beautifully balanced against the rock.



Ma Shouzhen, *Orchid and Rock*, 1572

On the upper right Shouzhen signs and dates the work after inscribing:

*Deep green shadows are cast onto the Xiang River,
Pure aroma fills the secluded valley.*

Her paramour, Wang Zhideng, wrote (upper left):

*Sweet nourishment, three months of spring rains,
Secluded orchids, nine fields of green;
In a mountain studio sits a solitary man,
Facing wine he reads the Li Sao.*

Souzhen was particularly praised for her paintings of orchids done in the outline technique. It is easy to see from this scroll why she was also considered a fine calligrapher: the strokes for the plants and the rocks would be the envy of a gentleman-scholar. Wang Zhideng wrote the inscription:

*In late autumn at the lady's residence the rain is like dust,
the brush rest is weighted on the books all together.
A single plant extends in the shadows of Xiang,
as if traversing the waves to free those of adornment.*



Ma Shouzhen, *Orchids in Double Outlines*, 1580s

Shouzhen's relationship with Zideng was not uncommon. Many men formed deep and lasting attachments to their courtesan playmates, and visits to courtesan quarters were an accepted part of upper-class Chinese life. Although Ma Shouzhen remained in her own house, some courtesans aspired to become a concubine.

Dong Bai (1625-1651) was a beautiful singing girl working in Nanking who became the concubine of celebrated scholar Mao Xiang (1611-93). He heard of her charms when he went to the capital to take the provincial exam in 1639, but found that she had moved. Eventually they met and fell for each other, but Mao Xiang had not yet finished taking exams and had family obligations, so could not pay off Bai's debt and indenture. Qian Qianyi, a leading literary figure, came to the rescue. He had taken a famous courtesan, Liu Shi, as a concubine and was sympathetic. He paid Dong Bai's debts in Suzhou, arranged to have her released from her bond in Nanking and after a farewell banquet set her on a boat for Mao's home in Rugao, where she arrived late in 1642. They were happy together, but life as a concubine was not all fun, as there were duties to perform.

Mao describes how Dong Bai for the first four months as his concubine confined herself in a separate apartment "desisting from playing musical instruments and dispensing with rouge and powder, but applying herself to practicing needlework". For the 18 months with him, Mao spoke of her in glowing terms – kneeling in obedience to Mao's wife, mother and sisters, impressing them with her humility, mild temperament and willingness to perform menial tasks. She supervised Mao's sons' studies and kept the household accounts (Weidner).

Their happiness was interrupted when they were forced out of their home by the Manchu invasion, and the next year, having taken refuge in Haining, Zhejiang, they had to flee again as the city fell. After a gruelling trek through the countryside they were set upon by some of the invaders, who killed many of their servants and seized their clothing and possessions. Dong Bai lost all her calligraphy and paintings. They returned to Rugao in 1646 but Mao soon fell victim to political troubles and sickness. Dong nursed him through three major illnesses in five years. Sadly, she then succumbed to tuberculosis and died at the age of 26.

Gu Mei (1619-1664) was a highly sought-after courtesan who was also taken as a concubine. The poet Yu Huai (1616-96) said literary drinking parties were joyless without her. Her charms, described by the poet (*hair like clouds, face like peach blossoms, elegant little feet, tiny waist soft and fragile*), won the affections of Gong Dingzi (1616-73) poet, painter and official. Gong Dingzi took her as his second wife. At parties, he supplied his guests with poems on request and Gu responded similarly with her orchid paintings. Her handscroll, *Secluded Orchids*, includes inscriptions from other ladies of talent who knew Gu Mei.



Gu Mei, *Secluded Orchids (detail)*, mid-17th century

Although strictly belonging to the Qing dynasty, courtesan-painter **Cai Han (1647-1686)** is included here as she was taken as a concubine by Mao Xiang in 1665, 15 years after Dong Bai had died. He left no account of his relationship with Cai Han as he had of Dong Bai. He took another courtesan painter, Jin Yue, as a concubine. He seems rather to have exploited the pair. They produced works for Mao to present to his friends. He always added an inscription and some of them state that he “ordered” his concubines to paint. Cai Han’s art features pines but these vertical subjects are confined in a narrow horizontal format on a fan.



Cai Han, *Old Pine Tree*, late 17th century

Lin Xue (also known as Lin Tiansu, first half of 17th century) was a courtesan from Fujian province who took up residence by the West Lake in Hangzhou. She was gifted at verse and calligraphy, and regarded as excellent at painting. She received poems from the prominent late Ming scholar-artist and theoretician Dong Qichang. In one of his anthologies of painters he wrote: “*I have heard of ladies capable at painting. First was Lin Tiansu (Xue) and then Wang Youyun. Tiansu was an unequalled beauty and Youyun at ease, having a particular manner.*” Unlike other Ming courtesan artists, Lin Xue was primarily a landscape painter and copied ancient masters. Dong Qichang appreciated her “*untrammelled style*”. Her *Landscape* shows the waterways of the Jiangnan region.



Lin Xue, *Landscape*, 17th century

Another courtesan who became a concubine to a leading official was **Li Yin (1616-1685)**. She captivated scholar-painter Ge Zhengqi. Ge rose to the position of Vice Minister of the Court of Imperial Entertainments in Peking and Li Yin went there with him, as his concubine. Surrounded by rare art, they painted and practiced calligraphy in their leisure time. In 1643 they retired to the south to a beautiful villa. They had a close relationship. They did paintings to amuse one another. After Ge's death Li Yin lived alone and supported herself with her art. Her reputation grew: her paintings became an essential gift and she was widely faked.



Li Yin, *Flowers and Birds (details)*, 1634

One reason why Li Yin's paintings were so popular was that they followed a new style in bird and flower painting which was cemented in the late Ming. Part of that style was the use of wet-on-wet ink, as developed by Chen Daofu and Xu Wei in the mid-to-late 16th century. Li Yin would have seen examples of this technique in works in Peking, as well as sketchy manner of paintings by earlier Ming masters which often depicted a bird clinging to a single slight branch. Both of these can be seen in Li Yin's *Flowers and Birds*.

New Bird and Flower Painting

Bird and flower paintings in monochrome were produced in a new sketchy manner (*xieyi* style) by the Ming literati. Often the works only a branch to present a closer view, not so much of the plant or the bird, but of the brushwork. In Tang Yin's *Mynah Bird*, the bird clings to a high branch which is too fragile and surely must soon fly away. The naturalness evokes the same response as the sight and song of the bird would if seen and heard in reality: an example of the literati ideal of expression. Tang Yin includes the couplet on the top right:

*The mountain deserted, everything still, no human voices heard.
With the last drops of a spring shower, the songs of a roosting bird.*



Shen Zhou, *Two Crows in a Tree*, late 15th century



Tang Yin, *Mynah Bird*, 16th century

This new form of painting, developed in the Ming and the succeeding Qing Dynasty, would be the basis for a revival of the genre in the late 19th century and in the 20th century.

Chen Daofu (also called Chen Chun, 1483-1544)

Chen Daofu was a member of Wen Zhengming's circle. Although the son of an imperial censor and well-educated, Daofu never pursued an official career. He painted landscapes in the style of Yuan masters, but his most brilliant performances are in ink and wash. He developed the sketchy style of bird and flower painting, favouring more simplicity than Tang Yin and Shen Zhou.



Chen Daofu, *Cotton Rose and Wild Duck*, 16th century



Chen Daofu, *Bird and Hibiscus*, 16th century

Chen Daofu's most important contribution was the development of the wet-on-wet technique for flowers. Dark ink was applied within a still-wet area of lighter ink. He loaded the brush on one side for shaded strokes to render shadows in the depths of a flower or leaves turning at varying angles. This depth relieved the flatness of earlier flower painting in ink. A hint of this can be seen in the flowers in the two bird paintings, but the brilliance of the technique is obvious in the flower in his *Sketches from Life*. The small dark washes of dark ink on the wet grey ink produce wonderful effects, and form a lovely contrast to the leaves of the flower and the spiky single-stroke bamboo.



Chen Daofu, *Sketches from Life, Peony and Bamboo* (detail), 16th century

Wang Chih-teng in his work on Suzhou painters wrote of Chen's paintings of this kind;

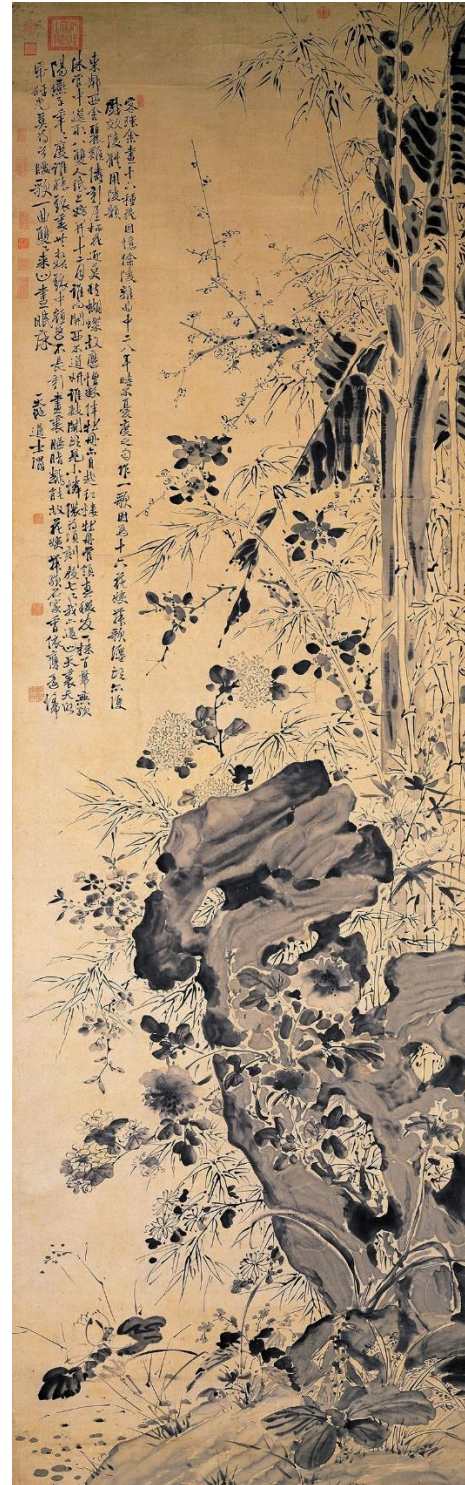
"In painting from life, he did each flower and half-leaf in dilute ink, slanting and bold, spread out randomly and turned at oblique angles, seeming disordered and even upside down but wondrously pursuing the truth. He surpassed the common crowd of painters. Their tricks of blue-greens distinguished and reds nicely calculated, petals separated and stamens and pistils divided – these are cheap devices of the ordinary artisan and can't be spoken of in the same breath with the free-running styles of the upper-class artist."

Xu Wei (1521-1593)

Xu Wei used heavy applications of ink for striking effects. His works date from 1570. In all of them he used ink freely. The next three works show how Xu Wei rendered rocks convincingly in different ways with rough strokes. The big leaves in *Flowers and Bamboo* are also wonderful.



Chen Daofu, *Summer Garden*, 16th century



Xu Wei, *Flowers and Bamboo*, 16th century

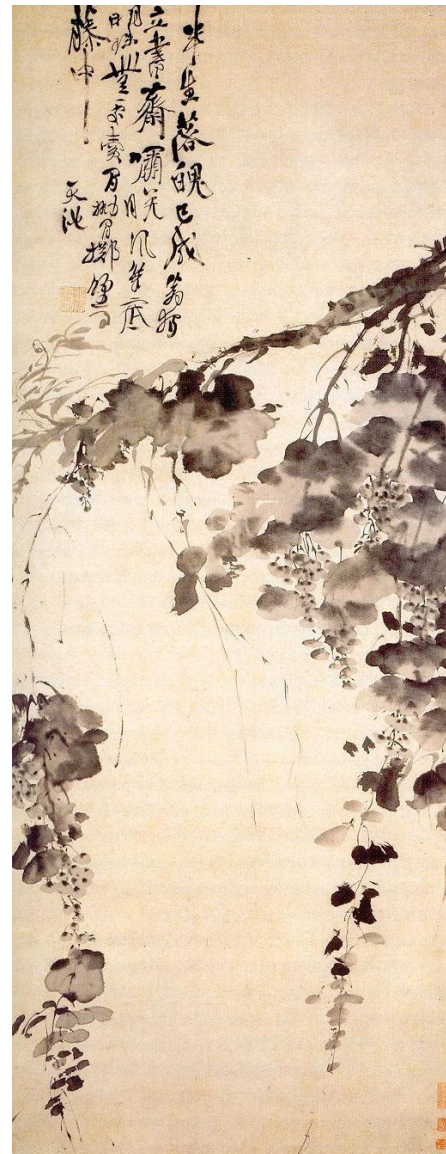
Xu Wei was the third son of a retired official who died the year he was born. His mother, a concubine, was banished from the family when Wei was only nine. He was brought up by his step-mother, Madame Miao; an educated woman who pampered him. She died when he was 14. This disrupted childhood implanted emotional disorders, yet he mastered quickly whatever he turned to; poetry, essays, opera, swordsmanship, calligraphy and painting (the last two studied seriously from the 1540s).

In 1557 he became secretary to the provincial governor who was conducting a campaign against Japanese pirates. When the governor was imprisoned in 1562 accused of complicity, Xu became afraid of being implicated and pretended madness. Some derangement was not pretence. Three years later his mental disorders were severe enough for him to attempt suicide by dreadful self-mutilation (he drove a nail into his ear, cracked his head with an axe and smashed his testicles). He composed his own obituary poem intended for his tombstone:

*He survived child disease brightly, and does not deserve to die; death hurts faith.
Tied in dread, persistently locked in, no need for him to live; lived for nothing.
Afraid of drowning he jumped in first.
Laugh at Wei, who had a bald head, it is too late to turn him into a monk.
Have pity on his misfortune, once he was an intelligent lad.
He wore the ancient sage's outfit and simulated madness.
Fought time and again to be a normal being.
He was guilty of that,
Now, all is intelligible.*



Xu Wei, *Rock with Banana, Bamboo and Plum Blossoms*, 16th century



Xu Wei, *Grapes*, 16th century

His powerfully convincing *Rock with Banana* combines abandon and discipline. The rock is painted in grey to black in heavy strokes, the stems and leaves of bamboo are done in outline, the tattered banana leaves very precisely in parched ink. *Grapes* is regarded as a *xieyi* masterpiece. In his poem at the top Xu Wei laments that many of his life's works have failed to earn him recognition and his art has been ignored just like unappetising wild grapes hanging from shadowed vines.

Friends nursed him back to health, but the following year his mental attacks returned and in a bout of insane paranoia he stabbed his third wife to death, believing she was having an affair. He was sentenced to be executed but was spared by the intercession of his friends and confined in prison for seven years. Xu's masterpiece is a long handscroll (now in Nanking museum), dazzling even in reproduction, a succession of flowers and fruits.



Xu Wei, *Miscellaneous Plants* (details), 16th century

The peony (above and those below) is derived from Chen's style but it is made up of irregular patches of ink wash laid on seemingly without planning.

"Where Chen Daofu's flower is a concentric formation of shaded strokes that are allowed to run together slightly but are still distinguishable, Xu Wei's is a single ragged-edged puddle of ink, through which darker ink suffuses to suggest the same manifold petal structure that Chen portrays more fully."



Xu Wei, *Peonies*, 16th century

During the last two decades of his life Xu Wei was ill and mentally disturbed, drinking most of the time. He repaid gifts of food with painting or calligraphy but alienated well-meaning friends by turning on them. Xu Wei died at 73 in the house of his younger son's wife, penniless. Revolutionary for its time, Wei's style influenced and inspired countless subsequent painters, such as Bada Shanren, the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou [Part 6], and modern masters Wu Changshuo and Qi Baishi [Part 7]. Qi Baishi once exclaimed in a poem that:

"How I wish to be born 300 years earlier so I could grind ink and prepare paper for Green Vine [a pen-name for Xu Wei]."

It might be natural to see in Xu Wei's style the out-pouring of the painter's disturbed mind, but nothing in his work corresponds to the dissonant colours, cruel distortions or nightmare images by which European Expressionists were later to manifest their internal anguish. Xu Wei's works have a high intensity of feeling but express a sense of release rather than of repression. Painting for Wei may have been therapeutic. It would certainly explain why the viewer's response is a feeling more of wonderment than discomfort.

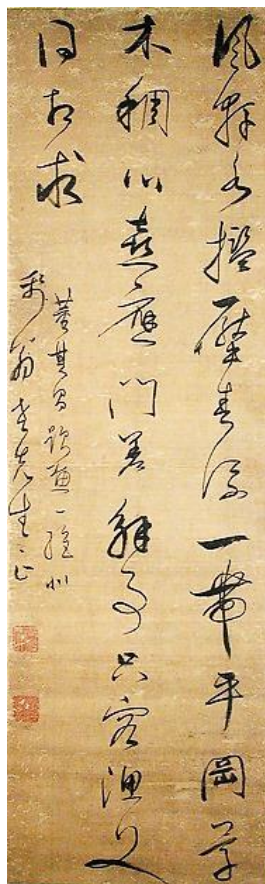
During the last century of the Ming Dynasty periods of corrupt rule by palace eunuchs became more frequent and widespread. By the 17th century, 70,000 eunuchs were in service throughout the country, 10,000 of them in the capital. Painting at the imperial court was virtually non-existent: no notable artist had worked there after around 1520. The growing population of rich merchants and the middle class drove demand for art and, with their limited education, knew only the social cachet of owning a work by an early Ming master. There were no successors to Tang Yin and Qiu Ying in Suzhou, nor a painter continuing the literati tradition sustained by Wen Zhengming. Instead there were countless hack imitators of earlier Ming artists or professionals trying their own styles to offer innovative art to the market.

These trends appalled Dong Qichang the artist and theoretician who dominated the late Ming period:

"From the generation after Wen Zhengming the course of painting has been one of decline and degeneration. This is partly because what the collectors owned were mostly forgeries, so that false models were passed on [to later painters] ... Suzhou painters are not cultivated and learned men, they have not seen a single work by any old master. They follow their own minds and create independently; they smear and daub on a mountain, a stream, a plant, a tree, then hang it in the marketplace to trade it for a peck of rice ... Among them are some who choose to imitate some famous master, but the only one they know is Wen Zhengming. They manage a slight resemblance ... none of them know that Wen took his methods from Song and Yuan masters."

Dong Qichang (1555-1636)

Dong Qichang was born in Shanghai, then only a small town on the coast. His family was poor; no-one from the previous four generations had managed to pass examinations and become an official. Nevertheless, as a boy Qichang was taught the classics by his father and he learned quickly. On his father's death Qichang inherited the family's small piece of land, but before he was aged 16, Dong Qichang ran away from home to avoid labour duty (as a commoner-landowner he was liable for land-tax and corvee labour). He escaped to nearby Sungchiang and continued his education there under the sponsorship of the local prefect. At 17, Dong Qichang sat a civil service exam, in which he was confidently expected to take first place. However, he suffered the humiliation of being placed second on account of his poor hand. The disappointment spurred him to work hard to improve and he became the most celebrated calligrapher of the late Ming.



*Airy pavilions, moist balustrade, close on the spring stream,
Just a stretch of plain and hill with grass and trees to match,
My heart is joyous at the gate, all cares are gone;
Only let the fishermen seek each other here.*

At Sunchiang, Dong Qichang met prominent people who set him on his way. Aged 20, he became tutor to the family of a leading scholar-official, and nine years later, tutored the son of Xiang Yuanbian, the rich landowner, merchant and pawn-broker mentioned at the end of Wen Zhengming's section [Part 4] and for whom Qiu Ying painted flowers. This post gave Dong Qichang access to Hsiang's extensive collection of art which included Yuan and Song paintings, and he devoted time in the 1580s to studying the old masters. In 1589 Dong passed the imperial exams – his essays for them became models – and he was elected to the Hanlin Academy, the most prestigious scholarly body in the empire. He tutored the 14-year old prince, who would have a very brief reign as Emperor Taichang in 1620 (being found dead one morning a month after his accession). After a few years of tutoring, palace eunuchs grew suspicious of Dong Qichang's influence on the future emperor and sought to banish him to a provincial post. Pleading illness, Dong avoided the job and returned home in 1599. He then concentrated on producing his art theory and creating a new mode of landscape painting.

Dong Qichang, Poem, ca 1622-25

Theory of Southern and Northern Schools

Dong Qichang's theory underpins his attempt to revive literati art in the late Ming by establishing the correct tradition for the scholar to follow. Dong maintained that it was only through landscape painting that the scholar-gentleman could express his understanding of nature, and hence his own moral worth, and that he was the only kind of man able to do this as he was free from academic control and the necessity to make a living.

The separation of landscape artists in Dong Qichang's theory is based not so much on geography as on the two schools of Chan Buddhism. A scholar with his wide reading in poetry and classics, and freedom from restraint, had an intrinsic understanding of the nature of things (which equates to the spontaneous enlightenment of the Southern School of Chan Buddhism). The lower order of professional painters did not have that intrinsic understanding and could only acquire techniques, which came with constraints, through painstaking labour (thus aligning them with the Northern School of Chan Buddhism in which enlightenment comes from gradual study and careful preparation). This distinction drawn by Dong Qichang for painting had been applied in the Song dynasty to poetry by the literary critic Yen Yu to describe the "spontaneous awareness of reality" or "primary principle" of the southern, and the more exalted, school of poetry.

Dong Qichang's theory, first printed in 1627 but probably formulated in 1599 after his studies with Xiang Yuanbian and his return home from Peking, included the statements:

"The Southern and Northern schools of painting also diverged in the Tang ... The Northern School is that of the coloured landscapes of Li Sixun and his son, Li Zhaodao; it was transmitted to Zhao Boju and his brother in the Song period ... The Southern School is that of Wang Wei, who first used an elegant thinness and thus completely transformed the outline and wash technique ... As for Ma Yuan, Xia Gui, Li Tang and Liu Songnian they belonged to the lineage of Li Sixun; they are nothing that we officials ought to study."

Dynasty	Southern School
Tang	Wang Wei
Song	Jing Hao – Guan Tong – Li Cheng – Fan Kuan Su Shi – Wen Tong – Mi Fu – Mi Youren Li Gonglin Dong Yuan - Juran
Yuan	Huang Gongwang - Wu Zhen - Wang Meng - Ni Zan
Ming	Shen Zhou, Wen Zhengming

The table shows the Southern School artists named by Dong Qichang. The rest, mainly court and professional painters, he relegated to the Northern School. There are some muddles. Dong admired Zhao Mengfu and owned Zhao's *The Village by the Water (1302)* [shown in Part 3]. Despite remarking that this work followed the style of Wang Wei², and acknowledging the artist laid the foundation for the Four Yuan Masters, Dong Qichang apparently could not overlook Zhao's service at court for the Mongols. Guo Xi, who followed Fan Kuan, was also placed in the Northern School because he was a court painter. Yet Li Gonglin's service as a Song court painter was ignored because of his ink line landscapes.

Despite these inconsistencies, the prestige Dong Qichang enjoyed in his lifetime meant his theory formed the foundation for the revival of literati art. *"The impetus given to the concept of the "literary man's" painting by Dong Qichang lasted with vigour for over a century"* (Sullivan). As the Ming dynasty plunged into chaos and corruption in the 17th century, scholars who had managed to leave service in Peking and retire home to concentrate on calligraphy and painting found comfort that they were upholding literati ideals. Despite a growth in this art in the late Ming, only Dong Qichang is remembered as a notable painter.

Landscape paintings

Having listed the correct Song and Yuan masters to be followed, Dong Qichang made it clear that mere imitation was not the aim. The Southern School was not just to be revived and preserved but creatively re-interpreted.

"Even a great master of painting must start from imitation ... But, those who study the old masters and do not introduce some changes are as if closed in by a fence. If one imitates the models too closely, one is often still further removed from them ... In time there will be virtuosity and with virtuosity will come spontaneity. Once the method [of an old master] is mastered and digested by the painter he can go in and out of the method at will with his own variations and he can be completely free from his models."

² Dong Qichang inscribed this remark on a leaf of the album *Landscapes in the Manner of Old Masters* in which the Wang Meng leaf (below) appears.

Dong Qichang painted his first work in 1577 but no works dated before the 1590s survive. *Viewing Antiquities* is his first mature work, painted in 1602 during a break in a journey, as described by Dong in the inscription: "I was returning from Chia-hsing in the company of Associate Censor Ku when we were stopped by rain at Fengjing and examined the works of old masters. In the exhilaration of the moment I quickly did this picture."



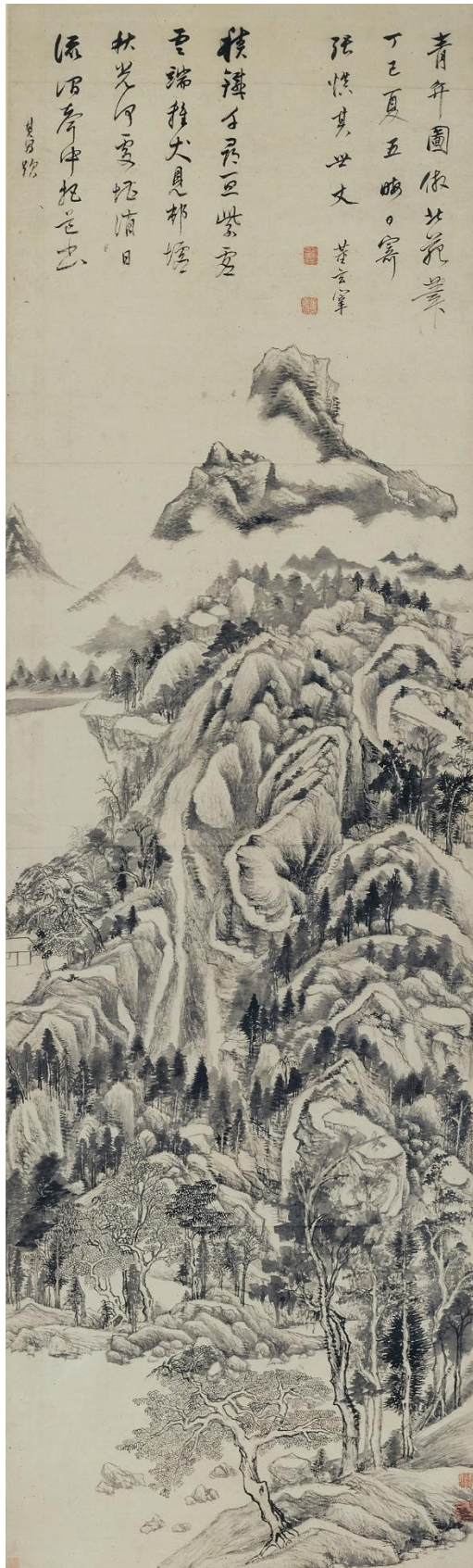
Dong Qichang, *Viewing Antiquities*, 1602 (ink on paper)

The format has echoes of Ni Zan: trees in the foreground, an expanse of water, more trees on a distant shore with mountains behind, but there is initially no feeling of calm and serenity. Rocks and mountains lean this way and that, usually towards their sides of the picture. The trees in the foreground start these movements, leading the eye in jerky steps up to the top of mountain. That gives a sense of instability. Yet the elements of the painting are firmly locked together, mostly by the trees stretching over water and overlapping the next distant landmass. The replication of buildings sandwiched between two rocky masses and overwhelmed by trees also help tighten the composition. Some of Dong Qichang's paintings have this duality: a tension between orderly structure and disarrangement.

This is true also of paintings after a crisis in Dong Qichang's life. He was an arrogant man and resentment against him and his family built up among the local populace. He treated his students badly. In 1605 exam candidates demonstrated against his objectionable behaviour, forcing him to retire from tutoring. He insulted and beat women who came to his home with grievances. Matters came to a head in 1616 when one of his sons lead a raid against a neighbouring family and kidnapped a young girl whom Dong wished to add to his concubines. This sparked a revolt. Handbills were written and public denunciations called for revenge against the hated Dongs. Their estate was pillaged by a mob and almost completely destroyed by fire. Dong escaped but most of his art collection was looted or burned and he had to sell the rest for living expenses.

For the next four years he was in disrepute and travelled in a boat on the waterways of the region or stayed on a friend's estate where he had to paint and write calligraphy prolifically to pay his way and to try to amass funds. Some of this best works date from this period.

Dong Qichang passed Mount Qingbian while he was living on a boat and remembered seeing paintings of it by Zhao Mengfu and Wang Meng [the latter is in Part 3]. In the inscription, Dong notes that each had transmitted something of its spirit and likeness, but that the mountain had a mysterious aura.



Dong Qichang, *The Qingbian Mountains*, 1616
(ink on paper)

Again, much is recognisable from old Yuan masters – in the foreground a bank of earth slanting downward is mirrored across the river by another group and in the far distance appears a shore and mountain peak which is cut across by flat shapes of fog. But between these calm areas the central bulk is uneasy and disordered, emphasised by the orderly progression of folds of rock to the right and left with occasional groups of trees. Surrounding order encloses central instability: once more a tension between orderly structure and disarrangement. Dong Qichang's friends may have felt this equated to their sense of irrationality and disorder in the core of the empire in the palace at Peking, and more personally, Dong may be reflecting the disorder in his own life.

Dong Qichang's study of the old masters resulted in his painting departing from naturalism. Dong argued that painters (as in the past) should:

"First take the ancients as their teachers and then take creation [nature] as their teacher ... Every morning the painter must observe the changing appearances of clouds and vapour which resemble closely the mountains of his painting ... when he has made thorough observations he is naturally ready to transmit the spirit of the landscape."

Dong sees nature alive and sometimes progressing in a turbulent fashion, yet within that repeating certain forms.

This is true too of *Landscape in the Manner of Wang Meng* painted in 1623, which is unstable and warped in depth. The right side of the central mass recedes in folds but the left has a sheer vertical drop. All the forms lean one way or another, and the water is tilted to add to the movement towards the top right. Yet, the turbulence of the painting is quelled by the pattern of the surface, which is enhanced by the trees and the alternation of warm and cool colours.



Dong Qichang, *Landscape in the Manner of Wang Meng*, 1623 (Leaf 2 from an album *Landscapes in the Manner of Old Masters 1621-1624*: ink and colour on paper)

Despite the instability or disorder in these three paintings, they are presented in a cool calculated way. Max Loehr wrote:

“Dong Qichang avoided the decorative, the appealing, the laboured and the bizarre. What he offers is a new imagery of landscape whose character and strength lie in its very abstractness. His constructions are fascinating intellectually, delightful aesthetically and almost devoid of feeling.”

As well as these examples of paintings which have a duality of order and disarrangement, Dong produced landscapes which are very carefully organised with forms repeated and spaced skilfully to give a what Sullivan describes as *“an excellent sense of rhythmic design”*. Dong Qichang spoke of how the picture space should be arranged:

“Painters today start with small pieces and pile them up to make a large mountain. That is a fault of the worst kind. When an old master worked on a large scroll, he accomplished it with only three or four large divisions (fen) and unitings (ho). Although there will be a great many small parts within these, the main requirement is to capture the shih of the forms and make that the basis of the design ... In painting landscapes, you must clarify the divisions and unitings. The divisional drawing marks out the general lines of the composition. There are divisions of the whole scroll and divisions of each section. If you understand this thoroughly, you are already more than halfway on the tao of painting.”

Clear Autumn Day is a good example of Dong's severe construction. According to the inscription: "Huang Gongwang's 'Hills on a Clear Autumn Day' looks like this. It is too bad that the old master cannot see my work." No Huang Gongwang work survives of this title, but that is not the point. Dong sought the fundamental structural features of old masters, and land masses in parallel formation receding on a shallow diagonal can be seen in Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* [Part 3]; a scroll which Dong once owned. Here Dong Qichang repeats the structure but tilts the ground plane onto a sharp diagonal; new to Chinese painting. There is still the tripartite design – opening of row of trees on a river bank, enlarged and elaborated middle ground and a quiet closing in the distance – but essentially only one landmass shape is used and repeated in three divisions (and within them), united by the tilting perspective but also by overlapping trees.



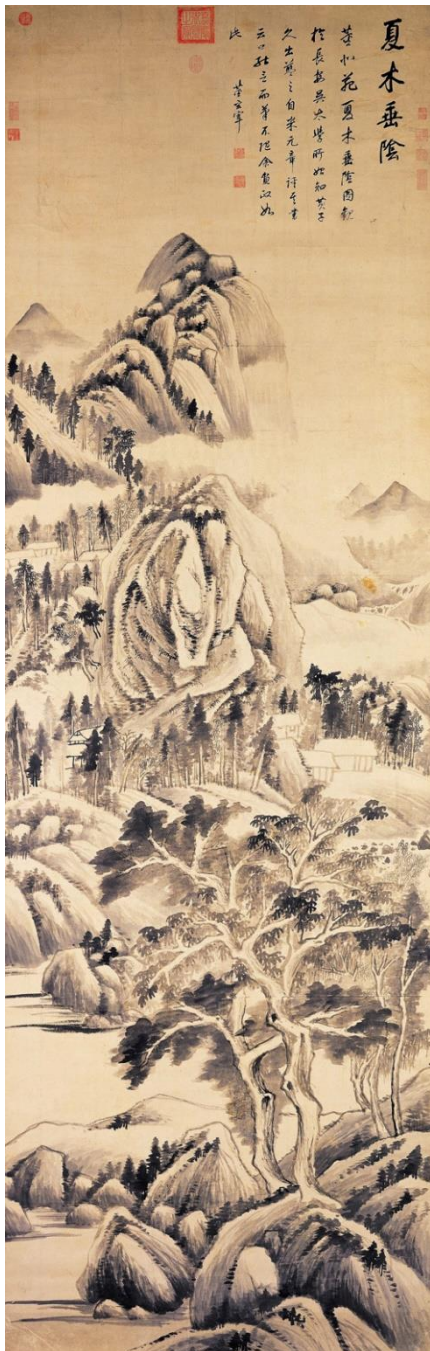
Dong Qichang, *River and Mountains on a Clear Autumn Day*, 1624-27 (pictorial section of handscroll; ink on Korean paper)

The painting is done on Korean paper which is stiff with a smooth hard surface that does not absorb ink readily, allowing neither wet brushwork nor the variety of dry brush which uses the slight surface roughness to produce textures similar to charcoal rubbed lightly over paper. Confined to limited range of brushstrokes Dong Qichang produces forms that are polished and cold. He has "accomplished the creation of an abstract style that has broken free of all but the most minimal requirements of adherence to natural appearances while offering an alternative order to that of nature." (Cahill). Despite the unnaturalness of the landscape the work is intellectually satisfying, being right and complete. This is perhaps the important aspect of Dong Qichang's abstract development of landscape art.

The work demonstrates a grasp of pure form new to Chinese painting. The art of the literati was pulled further away from direct representation of nature – conventional elements of landscape were pulled apart and reorganised as monumental forms. Dong Qichang summarised this movement:

“Painting is no equal to mountains and water for the wonder of scenery, but mountains and water are no equal to painting for the sheer marvels of brush and ink”.

These marvels prompted intense interest in painting techniques in the late Ming. Ways of painting rocks, hills and trees were studied painstakingly. One late Ming writer listed 27 ways to paint leaves. The previous three paintings show Dong Qichang’s various methods for painting foliage on trees. *Shady Trees* shows a wetter brushstroke and *Fishing Boat* contrasts those wet brushstrokes with the neighbouring detailed dry hand.



Dong Qichang, *Shady Trees in a Summer Landscape*, early 17th century (ink on paper)



Dong Qichang, *Fishing Boat on an Autumn River*, c 1620s (ink and colour on silk)

As an aside, painting in colour was usually condemned by the literati as being decorative, but Dong Qichang sometimes used light colours not as decoration or natural depiction, but in an abstract way alternating warm and cold tones. The Wang Meng landscape is one example, and *Fishing Boat* is similar: the blue tinge of the foreground rocks against the brown, and the wet black and grey-edged leaves contrast with the red foliage. *Landscape after Huang Gongwang* also has blues set against browns. The work is done on gold-flecked paper. Dong Qichang painted an album of eight landscapes on this paper (probably after 1625 and now in The Met, New York). Three of the landscapes are done in light colours; one is a sketchy version of *Shady Trees*.



Dong Qichang, *Landscape after Huang Gongwang* (pictorial detail), 17th century (handscroll; ink and light colours on gold-flecked paper)

Returning to the topic of the new interest in detailed painting techniques, Dong Qichang wrote:

“The method of painting trees is to concentrate on making them twist and turn; with every movement of the brush you must think of their twisting and bending. It is like applying one’s strength to the turning strokes in calligraphy – even more than there, the line must never run on unchecked. Trees have four extremities – that is to say, they have four sides, to all of which one must attach branches and add foliage. But in painting a tree one foot high, not even half an inch should be left straight – it must move twistingly with every single stroke. This is the secret of painting trees.”

The great technical work of the late Ming which resulted from this interest is the *Ten Bamboo Studio Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, first published in 1633. Containing more than 300 prints and cataloguing techniques for bamboo, rocks, flora and fauna, the manual also gave instructions on correct ways of holding the brush.

The *Ten Bamboo Studio*, owned by artist and printmaker Hu Zhengyan, produced various reference works and pioneered innovation in multi-colour woodblock printing to give graduations in colour never achieved previously. So, this manual is the most important example of early Oriental colour printing.



Hu Zhengyan, *Two Peaches on a Branch*, *Ten Bamboo Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, 1633

The manual remained in print for 200 years in editions of varying quality, but this example is thought to be from the first edition, and shows the wonderful shading in tone achieved (on the peaches particularly but also the leaves), making the work look more like a watercolour than a woodblock print.

Back to Dong Qichang: his last years coincided with the death throes of the Ming Dynasty, but he managed to avoid being embroiled in the chaos in the capitals. He left Peking in 1625 to take up an honorary post in Nanking but soon resigned and went home to safety. In 1631 he was called back to Peking but repeatedly asked for permission to return home, pleading old age. He was allowed to leave in 1634 and he died two years later. Subsequently Dong Qichang was criticised for his political apathy but activism would surely have been suicidal (as it proved for other scholar-officials). His reputation suffered later under Communism. In 1967 during the Cultural Revolution his tomb was looted and the stele with his epitaph destroyed. In the People's Republic of China his art was never exhibited. In the winter of 1977 one of his landscapes was shown in the Peking Palace Museum accompanied by a label which described his offences against common people and affronts of an artistic nature: formalism and the reactionary practice of imitating old styles.

Dong Qichang revived scholarly landscape art, re-establishing the primacy of Song and Yuan masters and opening up the possibility of deriving new styles from understanding their fundamental nature. Few scholars, however, had his skill in synthesis or his creativity. Lesser painters produced unremarkable landscapes but, because they used the "correct" styles, educated people felt obliged to approve. In this sense, Dong Qichang stifled the gentleman's art. Many subjects previously in the ambit of the literati (bamboo, flowers, birds) were excluded, as was certain brushwork (wet techniques, light and shade to produce volume in masses and anything non-calligraphic) and colour except for abstract effects.

Other Late Ming Landscapes

Revival of Northern Song

Although Dong Qichang includes Li Cheng and Fan Kuan in the Southern School, he did no works in their manner, so Northern Song monumental landscapes were ignored by Ming artists (as they had been by the Yuan).

Very late in the Ming this neglect was lamented by some scholars, including Wang To:

"In regard to paintings that are bland and without strong feeling, such as the works of Ni Zan, although such compositions are suffused with calm they cannot avoid being dry and weak, like a sick man gasping for breath. Although they are called atmospheric and elegant, they are extremely insipid and limp. Great masters do not paint in this way ...Northern Song work is finely detailed but richly mature in style, with a feeling of great expansiveness that goes beyond brush and ink. The works of a great master are substantial in this way. Artists of the lineage of Ni Zan on the other hand compete over who can be thinnest and most mannered. When they have produced two trees, one stone and a sandy bank, they proclaim it as 'A landscape, a landscape!'"

The finest Northern Song paintings in the late Ming were done by professionals but amateurs helped provide the basis for the revival. The techniques required by Northern Song monumental landscapes were usually beyond the reach of literati painters, including Dong Qichang. However, **Mi Wanzhong (1570 – 1630s)**, a famous scholar-artist, was an exception, painting the impressive *Paradise Landscape*, over 11 feet tall.

Mi Wanzhong took his degree in 1595 and served for some years at the Peking court. His fame as a painter saw him paired with Dong Qichang and gave rise to the saying "*Dong in the south and Mi in the north*". In 1625, the year of the painting, during Wei Zhongxian's purge of officials, Mi was asked to write an essay in praise of Wei which was to be placed in a temple honouring the eunuch. Mi Wanzhong replied:

"How could I, an official for thirty years, with old age approaching, degrade myself in this way?"

He was immediately dismissed from office, and retired to his garden estate on the outskirts of Peking to spend time on calligraphy and painting. Whether *Paradise Landscape* was painted before or after the dismissal, it conveys no sense of trouble, but is a majestic, serene work, in which the viewer is invited to roam around (as was the aim of the original Northern Song landscapes [Part 2]).

[Mi Wanzhong's landscape is largely monochrome with a tiny figure in a coloured robe. The work is now at Stanford but was in New York in the 1960s. Roy Lichtenstein's *Landscape with Philosopher (1996)* has a similar scheme: cool muted colours with a small figure in an orange robe.]



Mi Wanzhong, *The Paradise Landscape of Yangsuo*, 1625 (ink and colour on paper)

Wu Bin (1550? – 1630s/40s)

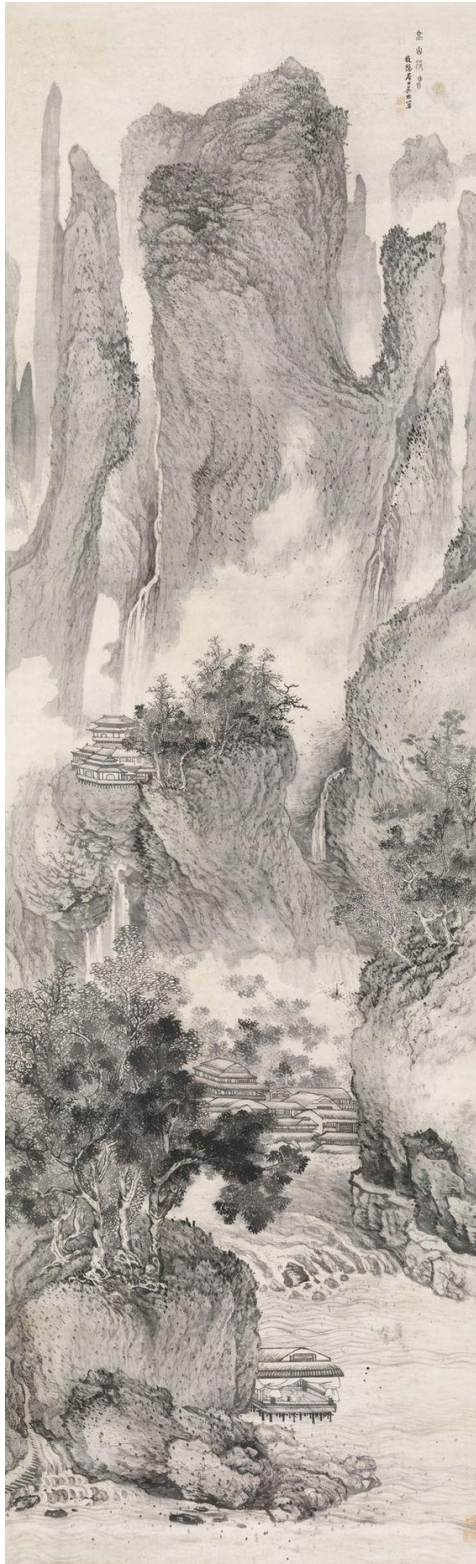
Wu Bin went to Nanking in the 1570s and served as an artist for the imperial court. He became familiar with paintings of the old masters in the imperial collection. Although now chiefly remembered for monumental landscapes, his art for the court was largely illustrative. One example is album *Records of Annual Events and Activities* illustrating the ritual observances, festivals and pastimes associated with the lunar months, as laid down in the *Book of Rites*.

The ninth leaf *Climbing on High* shows the custom, dating from the Han dynasty and used to ward off calamity, of climbing hilltops on the 9th day of the 9th lunar month carrying red bags of dogwood blossoms to drink chrysanthemum wine and look out over the scenery. From the lower right, Wu shows a long zigzag path (balanced by the mist bottom left) leading to a crowd on a flat bluff. Another group is on a lower height to the left. Everyone gazes to the left at a mountain further back. In various places (for example, the temple oddly enfolded, an odd projection from the mountain); “we see a ... conventional composition erupting suddenly into fantasy ... foretelling the visionary character of his later paintings (Cahill).”



Wu Bin, *Climbing on High* (from the album *Records of Annual Events and Activities*), c 1600

In *Landscape* of the second decade of the 17th century, Wu Bin resurrects the grandeur of the Northern Song monumental landscape, conveying depth and presence. However, the usual massive and stable forms are distorted. Perhaps Wu Bin is showing nature as disordered as the late Ming state, or suggesting that solace and recharging *qi* can now come only from dream landscapes rather than the riven world of the first decades of the 17th century. *Steep Ravines and Flying Cascades* goes even further.



Wu Bin, *Landscape*, 1610s (ink on satin)



Wu Bin, *Steep Ravines and Flying Cascades*, 1620s (ink on silk)

Wu has never been regarded as a master painter by Chinese writers and went largely unnoticed until the 1970s, partly because he could not be counted as “correct” in Dong Qichang’s theory. Yet two artists who would be so counted painted Northern Song landscapes. **Zhao Zuo (c 1570 – late 1630s)** usually produced scenes as carefully ordered as Dong, although less abstract. The central mass of *Landscape with Recluses* has the elements that allow one to wander around the scene.

Lan Ying (c 1585 – 1664)

Lan Ying grew up in Chekiang in the environment of the Zhe School [Part 4]. Yet, by his early twenties he was in the Songchiang circle of scholar-artists: Dong Qichang wrote laudatory inscriptions for his work.

Lan Ying produced an album of 12 leaves with paintings in the styles of Yuan and Song masters. Albums of this kind became very popular in the 17th century. Artists produced them to show they were able to follow Dong Qichang’s correct models and they sold well because the aspiring nouveau riche owner could demonstrate his higher social status by being able to recognise and appreciate each of the old masters represented in the album.

The two leaves from Lin Yang’s album shown below are *Landscape in the manner of Mi Fu* and *Landscape in the manner of Ts’ao Chih-po* which is based on Ts’ao’s *Two Pine Trees* of 1329 [no copy available]. Late Ming versions of Ts’ao’s style tend to confuse him with Ni Zan. The two were friends and Ts’ao Chih-po’s art can convey the same sense of calm, helped here by the spacing of trees into the distance.

Lin Yang did not limit himself to Dong’s acceptable models, and painted pictures in the manner of Li Tang, Ma Yuan (“*nothing we officials should study*”) and the Northern Song masters Li Cheng and Fan Kuan. *Lofty Recluses* is in the style of Northern Song with squared off heavily eroded peaks with water nearer the foreground, but has elements betraying Lan Ying’s Zhe School background, especially the relatively large figures. His *White Clouds* is monumental too, but stunningly original. The colour scheme has a wonderful rhythm which Dong Qichang might have appreciated.



Zhao Zuo, *Landscape with Recluses*, 1615 (ink and colours on paper)



Lan Ying, *Landscape in the Manner of Mi Fu*, 1642 (from album of 12 leaves, *Landscapes after Song and Yuan Masters*)



Lan Ying, *Landscape in the Manner of Ts'ao Chih-po*, 1642 (from album of 12 leaves, *Landscapes after Song and Yuan Masters*)



Lan Ying, *Lofty Recluses in Cloudy Valleys*, 1640s



Lan Ying, *White Clouds and Red Trees*, 1658

An Excursion into Naturalism

From 1514 Portuguese traders arrived regularly in China and in the 1550s were given permission to reside in Macao. In 1574 a wall was erected to seal off the Macao settlement which the Portuguese operated as a self-governing enclave. In 1577 Alessandro Valignano, the Jesuit Visitor to the Indies, arrived in Macao and was followed by Matteo Ricci in 1582, who obtained permission to start a Jesuit mission in Peking. Another mission was formed in Nanking. The Jesuits brought European knowledge and artefacts to China. To show what the rest of the world looked like, the Jesuits brought Braun and Hogenberg's *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (*Cities of the World*), six volumes of engravings published in Cologne from 1572 to 1617 depicting 546 cities, mostly European. At least the first volume had arrived in Nanking, Peking and Suzhou by 1610.



*View of Stockholm, c 1570, copperplate by Frans Hogenberg (included in Volume 1 of *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, 1572)*

George Braun was inspired to start *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* by Abraham Ortelius who produced *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, considered the first modern atlas in 1570. Ortelius was keen for a companion to his *Theatre of the World* to cover cities and towns. This atlas was also taken to China by the Jesuits.



*The Vale of Tempe, engraving by Anton Wierix (included in *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, 1579 edition)*

Some devices in these engravings were new to Chinese artists – natural colour, highlights and shadows, reflections in water, zigzag recession with diminution and oblique bird's-eye views - the last chosen by Braun and Hogenberg to give clear views of cities. The influence on Chinese artists of the early 17th century is considered minor but it can be noticed. In his *Record of Annual Events and Activities*, Wu Bin includes the reflection of a pagoda in water on one leaf and a bridge running into the picture from the foreground progressively diminishes in width.

Zhang Hong (1577 – c 1652) worked in Suzhou as a professional painter, but very little was written about him, largely because he broke with the traditions of Chinese landscapes.

His albums of *Chih Garden* (1627) and *Ten Scenes of Yueh* (1640) use some of the European landscape techniques he had seen in engravings. But, Zhang Hong had produced naturalistic landscapes before these two albums. *Mount Shixie* survives as an early example. The stream meanders into the picture, the houses and trees reduce in size with depth and colour is used naturally.

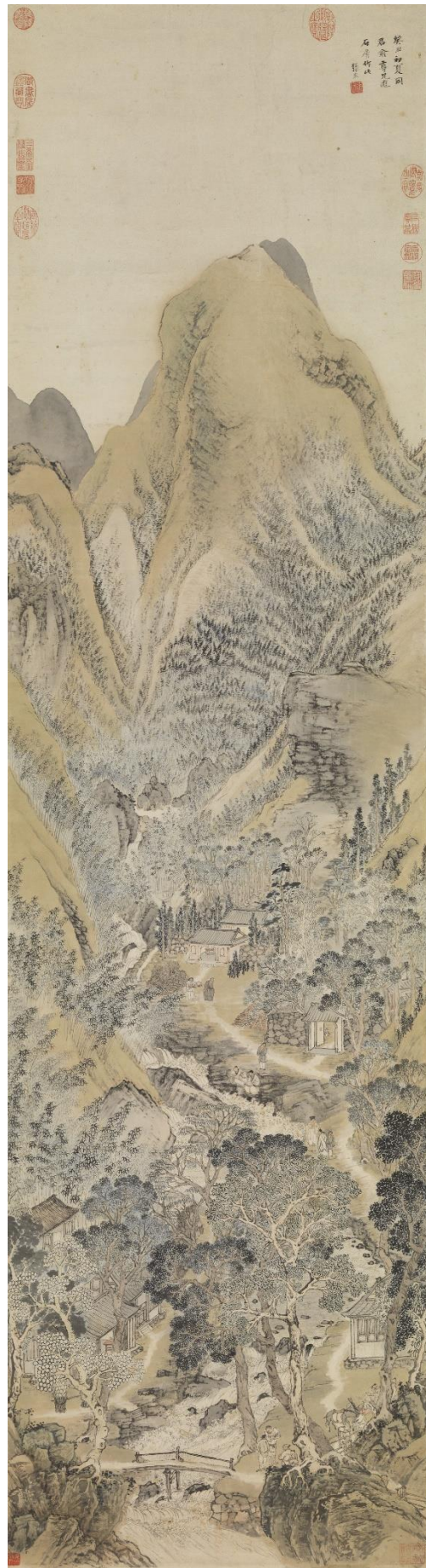
This painting has elements which explain Zhang Hong's neglect by the critics (who came from the educated class). Landscape was not supposed to be just simple scenery, and the literati disdained natural colour washes. Thus, and this applied to his other landscapes;

"the paintings might be excellent as works of art but (by Chinese standards) theoretically and critically indefensible (Cahill)."

Despite this muted reception for his works during his lifetime, Zhang Hong went further towards naturalistic landscapes. *Wind in the Pines* uses the same high viewpoint and distant high peak as *Mount Shixie* but the background does not press forward so giving a sense of openness.

Only a monochrome version of the complete work is accessible, but the detail shows how the naturalism is emphasised by the colours used.

"The addition of green and red-brown tones to ink washes had been common in Wu School painting since the time of Lu Chih but where Lu Chih and others use flat or smoothly shaded washes and tend to keep warm and cool hues apart, Chang Hung mixes them for naturalistic effects, using subtle, more neutral tones and adding tinges of green to areas of pale gray-brown or suggesting shadowed hollows with strokes of dilute ink ... The colour washes convey nicely the soft green-brown hills seen through clear air (Cahill)."



Zhang Hong, *Mount Shixie*, 1613 (ink and colour on paper)



Zhang Hong, *Wind in the Pines at Mount Kou-ch'u*, 1650 (ink and colour on paper: monochrome copy)

The artist's inscription tells how Mount Kou-ch'u, better known now as Mount Maoshan, had been the retreat of the Daoist alchemist T'ao Hung-ching (452-536) who built a house there, where he loved to listen to the wind in the pines. Zhang Hong had heard this from a friend Yu Tuan at whose house in Kou-ch'u he was staying. Zhang Hong enjoyed being able to gaze at the mountain every day from his desk and painted this work for his friend;

"I am grieved that, because of my failing years [he was 73], my ability in art has been spent. Indeed, I am unable to express the semblance of your noble thoughts on these few feet of paper."



Zhang Hong, *Wind in the Pines at Mount Kou-ch'u* (detail)

Portraiture

The introduction to China of European art is partly responsible for the rise in popularity of portraiture during the late Ming. Matteo Ricci attempted to set up a branch of the Jesuit mission in Suzhou wooing the governor at length and in 1598 presented him with a picture of Christ, probably an oil painting. The work was displayed and revered (though in a secular way). The Chinese were stunned by European portraits, convinced they were sculptures. A famous late Ming writer said of the realism of Virgin and Child paintings brought to China by Matteo Ricci;

“Their eyebrows, eyes and folds of the garments were as clear as images in a mirror. They look as if they want to move by themselves.”

Zeng Jing (1564-1647) spent his mature years as a professional portraitist in Nanking. The same Ming writer commented on Zeng’s paintings:

“He painted portraits that looked like reflections of the models in a mirror, capturing wonderfully their spirit and feelings. His colouring was deeply rich. The eye pupils were dotted for effects of animation; although the faces were only on paper and silk, they would glare and gaze, knit their brows or smile, in a manner alarmingly like real people ...when one stood looking at such a face one forgot both the man and oneself in a moment of spiritual comprehension.”

Zeng Jing used many layers of wash to produce lifelike colouration and shading that modelled facial features. He had two methods. The first used ink to describe the features which was then supplemented by light colours. The second hardly used ink (just for the preliminary sketch) then the painting was built up with colour washes. The Chinese favoured the former – the traditional approach. The latter was condemned as a corrupting foreign influence. So, the paintings which survive are mostly the lightly coloured type. Zeng often painted only the face (sometimes the figure too) and left the rest to another artist.



Zeng Jing, *Portrait of a Scholar* (detail), 1639 (ink and colour on paper)



Zeng Jing, *Portrait of Wang Shimin* (detail), 1616 (ink and colour on paper)

Lifelikeness was not usual in Chinese portraits. Faces in Ming and Qing portraits differ in shape and features but with few exceptions they all project the same bland and genial image. The Chinese relied on indirect ways of showing character. The setting or objects in it reflected the subject's mind. The portrait of Ni Zan with the figure surrounded by the accoutrements of a scholar is one example. Or the sitter was presented as an illustrious figure from the past; this being regarded as the highest form of portraiture.

There are exceptions, among them twelve portraits by unknown Ming artists. Four are shown below. The first (top left) of the artist Xu Wei [above] was painted not long before his death in 1593. Little of his tortured personality is revealed but Xu Wei does appear saddened and worn down by life. The remaining others were done by a different artist 30 or 40 years later. Li Jih-ha (top right) was a friend of Dong Qichang and a prolific writer, and hint of complacent superiority is evident in his expression. The bottom two, Liu Po-yuan and Ko Yin-liang, were both tax commissioners in the Bureau of Mines, powerful and ambitious officials whose hardness and smugness are caught by the artist.



Anonymous, *Wu Wei* (1593) and *late Ming personalities* (c 1630)

Chen Hongshou (1599 – 1652)

Chen Hongshou was a native of Chekiang Province and the leading figure painter of the late Ming. He painted in other genres too, but with less success. He began painting while still a boy and probably studied with Lan Ying. Chen was already selling paintings by the time he was 14. He came from a family of scholar-officials and studied for examinations, but never got above the first rung. Offered the position of court painter, he refused indignantly, and with abiding bitterness had to settle for the life of a professional artist. The disparity between reality and the image he wished to portray is clear in a self-portrait of 1635.



Chen Hongshou, *Pine and Longevity*, 1635 (ink and colours on paper)

According to his inscription, in beautiful calligraphy;

“Master Lotus and Nephew Han have been roaming at ease for days on end. In spring we have been intoxicated by the beauty of peach blossoms; in autumn we have contemplated the charm of the hibiscus; in summer we have stumbled through thick growths of pine; in late winter we have made verses about the whiteness of snow. In all things we have looked after each other, leafing through numerous books, feeling doubly relaxed in spirit, practising pure-talk and sketching pines and rocks. If these words accord somewhat with the Tao, why should we feel ashamed to eat three meals?”

The younger man is Chen Hongshou's nephew, shown with flowers in his hair and carrying a wine pot. The composition is traditional; the strolling scholar accompanied by his servant. The painting does not convey the usual peaceful retreat from society but is stark and distorted in space and perspective (the horizon higher on the right than the left). Chen looks morose and ill at ease, hardly a picture of lofty leisure, but rather with the countenance of a dissatisfied man.

Chen Hongshou designed illustrations for dramas and novels produced in woodblock prints, and detailed pictures for playing cards. Writers in the People's Republic of China portrayed Chen as a “people's painter”. But plays and books were written for the literati and reflected the tastes and concerns of that class. They were not aimed at popular audiences nor were they the work of popular or socially low-level writers. Richly decorated playing cards were expensive with inscriptions assuming a highly literate education. They were the leisure items of the elite.



Chen Hongshou, Woodblock illustration for the play *Romance of the Western Chamber*, 1630

The skill with fine lines in Chen's woodblock prints and playing cards is clear in his portraits. His works from 1645 to his death in 1652 are some of his best. *Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuan-ming (365-427)* was a handscroll painted for collector-patron Zhou Lianggong, a friend of Chen's for 20 years, who had fought to defend Shandong (where he was a magistrate under the Ming) from Manchu attack. Later, as a financial commissioner in Fukien Zhou was one of the first Chinese to serve the Manchu regime. A dozen scenes stressing ancient values, reclusion and the rejection of office suggest Chen Hongshou was advising Zhou to retire early and escape trouble. Zhou remained in post but later suffered a series of accusations and imprisonments for alleged irregularities in office.



Chen Hongshou, *Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuanming: Comment on Fans*, 1650 (silk handscroll),

Tao sits on a banana-palm leaf with eyes closed composing verses to inscribe on two painted fans on the flat rock before him. The inscription says: "Living in the time of Qin and Song, I adhere to the ideas of Shang and Zhou sages. With pine-soot ink and crane-feather brush, I can write out my sorrows."



Chen Hongshou, *Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuanming: Renouncing the Seal*, 1650 (silk handscroll),

The inscription on this scene seems to give Zhou a plausible excuse for leaving the Manchu administration: "To make a living I come to accept this post. Force to bow and bend my waist, I leave. This is one way out of the chaos." And in the scene below, the inscription pleads: "The pine view is longing for me. Shall I not return?"



Chen Hongshou, *Scenes from the Life of Tao Yuanming: Returning Home*, 1650 (silk handscroll)

Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, also on silk, depicts the group of 3rd century poets and musicians who met in the forest. Their colourful eccentricities were enjoyed in the late Ming as individualism became fashionable (which is another reason for the rise in popularity of portraits). People were known in the 17th century to have re-enacted their meetings in bamboo groves. These four sages form a central group; their postures of lofty ease are taken from old models. Two more sages appear to the left on the scroll mostly hidden by trees and finally a rather plainer 7th figure appears at the end of the scroll.



Chen Hongshou, *Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (detail)*, 1640s

One of the Seven Sages seems to have been a model for Chen Hongshou's 1627 self-portrait below. Of course, Chen was not a scholar-official who had withdrawn voluntarily from public life – his limited academic talents precluded an administrative career. But, professional painters often sought to cultivate eccentricities to stand out from their competitors. In the inscription Chen does not mention the death of his first wife in 1623 nor his failure in the provincial exams, but includes a comment on the collapsing of the Ming Dynasty:

"Again we have lost several thousand li [miles] of Chinese territory. Shall we ever talk about this yet again? I feel lucky to have some land to farm as an outsider, but worry that armed rebels who are rising up in the Wu and Yue regions will rob my granary."



Chen Hongshou, *Self-Portrait: The Artist Inebriated* (from an album *Figures, Flowers and Landscapes*), 1627 (ink and colours on silk)

Crises abounded soon after Chen painted this portrait. The Manchus raided south of the Great Wall in 1629, undermining confidence in Chinese forces. Drought and famine in the following years led to rebellion across the North China Plain, the success of which was helped by the diversion of government forces from there to counter the Manchu threat. The combination of rebellions and the Manchus was too much for the Ming government.

In 1641 rebel leader Li Zicheng captured Luoyang and began to attract gentry members to his cause. He already had the poor on his side having promised no taxation for 3 years in places his rebels had captured. The government could put no effective force into the field and Peking's fall was a foregone conclusion. Li Zicheng seemed destined to rule. He held hostage the father of his only remaining opponent Wu Sangui, commander of the remnant of the Ming army. But instead of surrendering as expected, Wu Sangui, in a famous act of treachery, appealed for help to the Manchu leader Dorgon. The next month the Manchu troops with Wu Sangui's soldiers inflicted a crushing defeat on Li Zicheng's rebels. Dorgon, however, was not prepared to withdraw and leave Wu Sangui in power. Instead Dorgon exploited his invitation into China to go on and orchestrate a complete Manchu conquest.

Xiang Shengmo, grandfather of the great collector who had taken Dong Qichang under his wing, painted a self-portrait against a red (*chu* = Ming) background to lament the coming of the Manchus. When Nanking was taken in 1645, Xiang fled south abandoning his estates and his grand art collection.



Xiang Shengmo, *Self-Portrait*, 1644

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