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Ming-Qing II: Essay for Catalog

Introduction

This second exhibition of "Masterworks of Ming and Qing Painting from the Forbidden City" follows on the highly successful first one of 1989, which was shown in five U.S. cities and seen by hundreds of thousands of people. The excellent catalog of that exhibition (hereafter referred to as Ming-Qing I), copies of which must now be in a great many public and private libraries, included an essay by Sherman Lee that provided an expert overview of matters basic to Chinese painting: forms and materials, underlying aesthetic theory, the prevalence of amateur artists or scholar-gentleman painters in these later centuries and the implications of that, etc. It offered also a brief, useful art-historical account of Ming-Qing painting: schools and artists, broad stylistic tendencies, orthodoxy and individualism, the importance of the court academy in the Qing. Because this second exhibition attempts, like the first, to represent (within its limits) the important masters and schools of the period evenly and comprehensively, Sherman Lee's essay is no less applicable this time; and since it will be accessible to most readers, along with other good accounts of Ming-Qing painting, it seems unnecessary to rehearse the basic matters it covered. The present essay, then, will be devoted to other concerns, perhaps less fundamental but still of interest, we hope, to viewers of the exhibition and lovers of Chinese painting.

Ming-Qing Painting in the West

The esteem in which painting of the Ming-Qing periods is held among Western scholars and art-lovers (an esteem well expressed in Richard Barnhart's "Foreword" to the earlier catalog) is now so complete that we might stop to recall how recent a phenomenon it is. As late as the 1940s, an exhibition of Chinese paintings that included no works before the Ming would have been greeted as not quite top-class. Most of the specialists in Chinese art active then, academic scholars and museum people alike, believed firmly that the Tang-Song period, the eighth through the thirteenth centuries, was the great age of the art, and all that followed was decline. Arthur Waley's pioneering (and, for its time, remarkably perceptive) Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting of 1923, after devoting 234 pages to the periods through Song, accorded the later dynasties only a twelve-page chapter titled "Yuan and After." Osvald Siren's 1938

History of Later Chinese Painting gathered together a quantity of reproductions and information and added some commentary, but fell short of making the subject seem attractive, or advancing appreciably the study of it.

Ludwig Bachhofer's A Short History of Chinese Art, published in 1946, was in many ways a big step forward; it brought the methods of stylistic analysis, as practiced by a trained and sensitive art historian, to the field, and so was able to make valuable contributions to the study of Chinese sculpture, early painting, and other art forms. At the same time, Bachhofer's treatment of Ming-Qing painting exemplifies the old bias at its worst. For Bachhofer, the major late Ming master Dong Qichang (cf. no. 34 in this exhibition) was "an execrable dilettante," Wang Hui (cf. no. 57) "a mediocre artist," Wang Yuanqi (cf. no. 61) "only a trifle better," and so forth. The authoritativeness of Bachhofer's judgements was eroded by the bad choices he made to represent the post-Song artists: an obvious fake purporting to be the work of the great Yuan master Ni Tsan, for instance, was reproduced and then characterized as an "anaemic painting," with the implication that this characterization applied to Ni's works as a whole. The artists praised were those who imitated Song styles with some success. That later painting could be based on a quite different, equally valid aesthetic value system was scarcely suspected by Bachhofer, or others who held this attitude.

Meanwhile, a series of events and circumstances were gradually conveying a shattering truth to Western scholars and collectors: that the overwhelming majority of the "early"paintings that filled their collections, with attributions to famous Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song masters, were in fact works of the later periods: at best, good paintings by Ming-Qing artists provided with spurious signatures or attributions to enhance their value (as is the case with many of the paintings bought by Charles Lang Freer in the early decades of the century, now in the Freer Gallery of Art); at worst, outright fakes. And a counter-argument began to be advanced: since what we could realistically expect to acquire, with a few exceptions, were Yuan-Ming-Qing paintings in any case, why not collect honest works by artists of those dynasties, instead of imitations of the older ones? And in fact by the 1940s good examples of later Chinese paintings were increasingly entering museums and private collections--the number and quality of these alone would ultimately have forced a re-assessment.

But the battle was still not over. One of the prominent hold-outs was Alan Priest, Curator of Far Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum, whose strengths of understanding were more in the decorative arts of China, and Chinese sculpture, than in painting. He argued vehemently that Song-style paintings, even those of clouded authenticity (today we would call them by a harsher name), were still more beautiful than genuine works of later periods. Priest's last act of defiance against the new approach was promoting the acquisition by the Metropolitan of the A. W. Bahr collection, some 170 paintings for $300,000, a sum which at that time could have, if skilfully employed, purchased a large group of fine, genuine works. What the Metropolitan got instead for its money was a collection made up mostly of Ming and later imitations of Song paintings. Only a few can be salvaged from it for exhibition today. It would be years before the museum would recover from this perversely perpetrated mistake.

One of the articulate opponents of Priest's position at this time (as those of us who were studying then remember well) was Jean Pierre Dubosc, who had served as a French foreign service officer, spent some years in China, and become a dealer in Chinese art with a special expertise in Ming-Qing painting. Dubosc helped to supply paintings of these later periods to collections in Europe and the U.S., but also worked to dispel the old, uninformed attitudes toward them that were then all too prevalent. Dubosc's article "A New Approach to Chinese Painting" (<u>Oriental Art</u> III/2, 1950) was an open attack on Priest, whom he quotes as describing his gallery of Song-style paintings at the Met as "One of the most beautiful rooms in the world," and as raging against "the stormy virtuosities or suave insipidities of the Ming and Ch'ing landscapes." In 1949 Dubosc organized, in collaboration with Laurence Sickman, Director of the Nelson Gallery of Art in Kansas City, an exhibition of "Great Chinese Painters of the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties" at the Wildenstein Gallery in New York, a commercial gallery. This was probably the first Ming-Qing painting exhibition of any consequence to be held in this country, and a milestone; the catalog essays by Dubosc and Sickman are among the earliest really interesting writing on the subject in English. (More than thirty years later, in 1981, I found myself standing with the two of them in the gallery of Ming-Qing paintings at the opening of the Douglas Dillon Galleries at the Metropolitan, and felt the urge to shout down the crowd and deliver an impromptu tribute, bringing out the full significance of this historic coming-

together. But Sickman, always unassuming, talked me out of it, and the chance was missed. Both have died since then.)

Other factors were furthering this revisionist movement: the post-war strengthening of Chinese studies, including studies of Ming-Qing history and society; the coming to the U.S. of knowledgeable Chinese who could implant the taste for Ming-Qing painting in foreign eyes and minds (such as Wang Jiqian, the distinguished painter, connoisseur, collector, and dealer, who arrived in 1949); the opportunity afforded by the Second World War for American specialists to spend time in China and absorb these same tastes on their native ground. Outstanding among these last was Laurence Sickman, who had already studied in China in the 1930s. In his writing (e.g. his chapters on later painting in The Art and Architecture of China , co-authored with Alexander Soper and published in 1956) and in his collecting for the Nelson Gallery, Sickman was instrumental in bringing new, Chinese sensibilities to the appreciation of Chinese painting, supplanting gradually the Japanese attitudes that had for so long dominated the Western discourse on Chinese art. These Japanese attitudes had included a strong partisanship of Southern Song academic painting and "Zen painting," which the Chinese had traditionally under-valued, but also a neglect, at that time amounting to near-incomprehension, of exactly the kinds of painting most highly valued by the Chinese themselves: the works of the great Yüan masters, of Ming artists such as Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming, of Dong Qichang and his Orthodox-school following in the early Qing period. Sickman, during his years in China, had absorbed the highly refined tastes of the Chinese connoisseurs, virtually becoming one of them, and was able to communicate these tastes in intelligible ways to western readers and museum-goers. It is difficult to overestimate his beneficial impact on the field.

All this process might be seen from the Chinese ethnocentric point of view as the "gradual enlightenment" of once-benighted barbarians; it was nothing new to the Chinese. Ming-Qing painting and calligraphy had long been the very matter of connoisseurship, the touchstone of aesthetic refinement, for serious Chinese collectors. Even after most of the mingji or "famous relics," long-admired and well-recorded works, had been swallowed by the imperial collection in the 18th century, the vast majority of Ming-Qing paintings remained in private hands, the best of them tending to pass into known, distinguished collections. These were transmitted through the vicissitudes of recent Chinese history down to our time; and most of

the Beijing Palace Museum collection, the source of this exhibition and its predecessor, was drawn from them. It seems fitting, therefore, that we now pay some attention to how this came about, another fascinating and untold story.

The Formation of the Beijing Palace Museum Collection

The history of the National Palace Museum collection now in Taiwan is relatively well-known: originally the Manchu Imperial Household collection, brought together chiefly under the Qianlong Emperor in the 18th century, it became a national collection in1925, was packed and shipped south from Beijing in 1933 when that city was imperiled by the Japanese invaders, and finally in 1949 was taken, still crated, by the Nationalists to Taiwan, where it was stored first in Taichung and then in Taipei, in the newly-built Palace Museum. (A good account of this history is Chu-tsing Li's "Recent History of the Palace Collection," in Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America XII, 1958.) The story of the formation of the great painting collection now in the Palace Museum in Beijing is by contrast little-known, and has never, to my knowledge, been recounted in print. It seemed wise to reconstruct it, while it is possible, from the memories of the surviving two of the four people who were principally responsible for forming it, Xu Bangda and Liu Jiu'an. (What follows is based mainly on conversations with them in Beijing in July 1990. A more detailed and carefully-researched history is of course still needed; we offer here only an informal and anecdotal account, which doubtless contains some errors.)

The loss of the original Palace Museum collection, at that time by far the largest and most important single body of Chinese paintings in existence (we are ignoring, for this essay, objects of other kinds), was a heavy blow to China, depriving it of a major part of its artistic heritage. The Nationalists claimed to be "rescuing" or "preserving" the collection, but time has shown that to have been a political claim: the great paintings that remained on the mainland have on the whole been better preserved than those taken to Taiwan, too many of which are in dangerous states of deterioration. About half of the major extant early paintings, from the Yuan period and earlier, had gone to Taiwan, along with a great many of the finest from later periods as well. Only about 5,000 objects of art, mainly from the Ming and Qing periods, remained in the Imperial City when the Palace Museum was reestablished in Beijing under the People's Republic of China. Today it is a great collection with over a

million objects, by far the richest in China, comprising some one-sixth of the total holdings of Chinese museums.

Two circumstances mitigated somewhat the loss of most of the former Imperial collection to Taiwan. First, over a thousand of the best paintings and works of calligraphy, estimated at "about half the best," had been taken by the last emperor Puyi, who sent them to his brother in Tianjin while he was still on the throne in Beijing. Puyi and his relatives and attendants left Beijing in 1924, going first to Tianjin, then in 1931 to Mukden (present-day Shenyang), and in the following year to Changchun, where he was enthroned once more, this time as the "puppet emperor" of Manchukuo under the control of the Japanese. The paintings taken were mostly works in the smaller forms, handscrolls and albums, since these were more easily portable and represented more value per unit of size and weight. This is why the early paintings now in mainland Chinese museums are mostly in these smaller forms, while the great early hanging scrolls are mostly in Taiwan--one thus receives quite different impressions of early Chinese painting in the two places, and must travel to both for a balanced view. Many of the works taken by Puyi had been sold along the way, or given to relatives and supporters, or otherwise dispersed, and what remained were scattered when the palace was sacked in 1945. Most of these works, which were known to collectors and art-historians as the Dongbei (northeast) paintings, had remained on the mainland and could be recovered after the P.R.C. was founded; others had been taken abroad but could be acquired by purchase.

The second mitigating circumstance was that the private collections remaining in China were rich in paintings of the later dynasties, the Ming and Qing. For these periods, and to a lesser extent for the early ones, a collection comparable to the one they had lost could be brought together.

The P.R.C. government, to its credit, was willing to allocate substantial funds and resources to this project. Carrying it out was chiefly the work of four men. The first, Zheng Zhenduo, was a distinguished and productive scholar of Chinese literature and art who rose to the position of Vice-Minister of Culture, and who had the prestige and political clout (including the direct support of Premier Zhou Enlai), in addition to the vision, that were needed to bring it about. He recruited Zhang Heng, better known as Zhang Congyu, a noted Shanghai connoisseur of painting and calligraphy, and gave him a position in the newly-formed Wenwuju or Bureau of Cultural

Relics, an organization directly under the Ministry of Culture which administers China's museums and archaeological programs. Zhang had originally been a rich banker and owner of a large and fine collection of Chinese paintings, the Yunhuizhai Collection, but bankruptcy had forced him to sell it (principally to the New York dealer C. T. Loo--many of the paintings are now in U.S. museums.)

Zhang Congyu had belonged to the now-famous circle of artists, collectors, and connoisseurs centered on Wu Hu-fan, whose great collection is now mostly in the Shanghai Museum. Two other noted members of that circle were the aforementioned Wang Jiqian, who had left China for New York in 1949, and Xu Bangda, who had stayed in China. In 1950 Xu Bangda, then 39, was brought to Beijing by Zheng Zhenduo, on the recommendation of Zhang Congyu, as the third member of the team, and given a position in the Bureau of Cultural Relics; he was to move to the Palace Museum when it was reestablished in 1953. From late 1951, Zhang and Xu were actively building the Palace Museum collection of paintings and calligraphy through purchase and other means. Liu Jiu'an, the fourth member, joined the Palace Museum staff in 1956; before that he had worked for one of the antique dealers in Liulichang, the books and antiques market of Beijing, and later had been a private dealer, developing through this experience the expertise and eye to distinguish good paintings from bad, genuine from fake.

For these four people, as the two survivors reveal in telling their stories, it was a connoisseur's dream come true. What, after all, determines the quality of life for a serious Chinese painting enthusiast, other than spending as much of it as possible in seeing new and unknown paintings, determining their authenticity, acquiring as many of them as one's means allow? And now they were doing all these things full-time, with virtually unlimited means, little competition, and access, in principle, to all the collections that remained in China. Themselves late products of an incorrigibly elite tradition, they were now functioning as People's Connoisseurs, turning private holdings into a great public collection, a transfer that would have made their gentry-literati ancestors groan with anti-populist anguish. It was a situation rich in ironies and rewards.

During the early years of the P.R.C., as Xu tells it, paintings were acquired in several ways. Some were confiscated from the collections of "political criminals," those who had collaborated with the Japanese or with the Guomindang (Nationalists), and from "illegal

dealers." Some paintings were presented to the museums by collectors, to gain political favor or for other reasons--the official explanation, as given now by Liu Jiu'an, is that "their children were not interested in paintings, and they knew they would be better cared for in the museum." But the bulk of the collection was acquired through purchase. Liulichang and other dealers, as well as private owners, would bring pieces for sale to show to Xu every day, from eight in the morning until noon and again from two to six; Xu would choose the best from among these for purchase. Prices then were very low--"a good hanging scroll by [the 18th century master] Hua Yan might cost 100 yuan," the equivalent of today's 10 yuan or less than two U.S. dollars. Even so, private collectors could not afford them, so there were, in effect, no competitors. Would-be sellers would give an asking price; Xu, he relates, would "argue them down--just as in pre-Liberation days." Inexpensive pieces he could buy freely, without special authorization, while for more expensive items he would turn to Zhang Congyu and Zheng Zhenduo for their support. All the best paintings went to the Palace Museum; lesser ones, and those with special historical value, went to the National Historical Museum. Working this way, they were able to bring together a collection of over 3,000 works of painting and calligraphy by the time the Huihua Guan or Painting Exhibition Hall was opened at the Palace Museum in the mid-1950s.

The purchases were not only from Beijing dealers and collectors, but also from Tianjin and Shanghai. Xu tells of spending three months in Shanghai in 1956 , buying hundreds of paintings, many from the great old collections there: the Guoyunlou Collection of the Gu family, formed by Gu Wenbin (1811-1889) and later owned by his grandson Gu Linshi (1865-1933); the large collection of Pang Yuanji (ca. 1865-1949) or Pang Xuzhai, which was sold under pressure by his widow and divided between the Shanghai Museum and the Palace Museum.

Older and more important paintings, the masterworks of pre-Song, Song, and Yuan that are now the pride of the Huihua Guan, were mostly acquired through other routes. Some were bought outside China, chiefly in Hong Kong or through Hong Kong agents, and brought back. These, by contrast with the ones in China, were not cheap at all--the "Five Oxen" scroll ascribed to the Tang master Han Huang, for example, cost them 60,000 Hong Kong dollars. Zhou Enlai personally authorized these substantial expenditures of foreign exchange, arguing that however poor the new country might be,

recovering as many as possible of the masterworks of China's heritage while it was still possible took highest priority. Two of the finest, the Dong Yuan "Landscape of the Xiao and Xiang" and "Han Xizai's Night Banquet" after the tenth century master Gu Hongzhong, were bought from the famous painter-collector Zhang Daqian, and many others were purchased through Xu Bojiao, a Hong Kong collector-dealer still active.

In particular, the Chinese were attempting to recover as many as possible of the Dongbei paintings that had been taken by Puyi. The Palace Museum now claims to own about 500, or half, of these "lost paintings." Others are in the Jilin Provincial Museum in Changchun, the last location of the "Last Emperor's" movable court, and in the Liaoning Provincial Museum in Shenyang (formerly called the Dongbei Museum), which had received the paintings confiscated from peasants and others of that region into whose hands they had fallen. "A great painting could be had in trade, at that time, for a piece of soap or a towel," Xu relates. Among these was the incomparable Qingming Shanghe-tu or "Spring Festival on the River" handscroll by the eleventh-century master Zhang Zeduan--now one of China's greatest treasures--which, Xu says, the Russian soldiers who seized paintings from Puyi as he was about to board a plane to flee "didn't know enough to steal." This, with three others of the greatest early masterworks--Li Gonglin's 'Pasturing Horses," the scroll of birds and insects by the tenth-century master Huang Quan, and the "Autumn Colors on Rivers and Mountains" by Zhao Boju--are now in the Palace Museum. They were, Xu relates, among a larger group of early works brought on loan from the Liaoning Provincial Museum to Beijing for photographing and study; and when the Huihua Guan was about to open, the decision was made to keep them, with Zheng Zhenduo's support, to strengthen the Palace Museum's holdings in the early periods. Xu has never been forgiven for this by the Liaoning Museum's director, as he relates with more relish than remorse.

Although the great period of its collecting might be said to have been over by the mid-1950s, the Palace Museum has continued to add paintings and calligraphy to its collection, along with other art objects and archaeological finds, down to the present day. Its collection now contains over 30,000 paintings and 50,000 pieces of calligraphy. Liu Jiu'an, after he joined the Palace Museum staff in 1956 , took over from Xu Bangda much of the day-to-day job of judging and choosing paintings offered for sale. He tells of sitting every Sunday morning in what is now the ticket-dispensing building

at the north entrance, the Xuanwu-men, looking at pieces brought by dealers and collectors, some from Tianjin and Shanghai as well as Beijing. From them he would keep "one or two hundred"; these would then be shown to a connoisseurship committee, which would decide whether they merited a place in the collection, and determine prices for them. The more important and expensive acquisitions continued to require the approval of Zhang Congyu and the Bureau of Cultural Relics. After Zhang died of cancer in 1962, and Zheng Zhenduo was killed in a plane crash in 1958, Xu and Liu were deprived of much of their political support; but both survived the Cultural Revolution and the terrible Jiang Qing years, and still participate, although officially retired, in the publishing, exhibition, and augmenting of the Palace Museum's collection.

New Directions in Ming-Qing Painting Studies

As was recounted in the first part of this essay, the serious study of later Chinese painting in the west has been going on for little more than forty years. Nevertheless, it has already exhibited its own patterns of historical development: phases and factions, advances, turning points. Just now it is taking some interesting new directions, which are reflected in the selection and cataloguing of this exhibition and the previous one, and in much other recent writing on the subject.

The shift of attention in the 1940s-50s to painting of the later dynasties, as we saw, represented a shift also to a position more in agreement than before with traditional Chinese approaches to the study of the art. This seemed for a time to be an unmixed good: those of us working in the field in that period were so pleased with ourselves over being able to read the Chinese texts and apply their wisdom to our understanding of the paintings that we took this wisdom as a sufficient truth, an ultimate end of our studies. That the Chinese writers might also have had cultural blind-spots about their own art was all but beyond our imagination. Now, more and more, we realize that they did have blind spots, and crucial ones. And we recognize this without in any way losing, or even lessening, our respect for them.

Chinese theorists and critics in the later periods appreciated Chinese paintings primarily as aesthetic objects, as records of the creative activity of individual masters. They were concerned with issues of authenticity and quality, with identifying stylistic sources

and lineages. Traditionalist scholars in more recent times have supplemented these concerns with others: documentation of the paintings, their provenances and histories; research into the artists' biographies, their affiliations with other artists, or with otherwise notable people of their time; careful studies of the artists' writings, and writings by others about them. Following their lead, and with the analytical methods of German style-history at our disposal as additional tools, we constructed biographical accounts of the painters, traced their stylistic developments, argued over the authenticity of works ascribed to them. We are still engaged in these pursuits, and must continue to be, since they are indispensable.

At the same time, we are more inclined than before to recognize that in important ways the traditional Chinese approach falsifies the original character of the paintings, most of which were not produced purely for aesthetic admiration. Much of the time, they were made to carry particular meanings applicable to special uses and occasions, and cannot be fully understood unless we know what those were, and how the paintings fulfilled them. We pay more attention now to the subject matter of the paintings, which we often neglected before in our preoccupation with style and authenticity; we do our best to read the images as they were read by the intended audiences of the paintings, gathering what evidence we can for our readings. We try to interpret the subjects of the paintings, that is, along with their compositional structures and other formal properties, in terms of commonly-understood meanings and social functions, and within a context of the circumstances in which they were created, insofar as we can reconstruct it. In doing these things we are, to be sure, following current trends in art-historical studies, even though not yet on the level expected among our Western-art colleagues. But we try to remain sensitive to the special nature and conditions of the Chinese works, without attempting to accomodate them to any foreign methodological models.

An example from the present exhibition will illustrate these points by showing how asking different questions of the paintings will lead to different readings of them. Ni Duan's "Inviting the Hermit" (no. 81) is one of a considerable number of paintings of virtuous hermits of antiquity, and especially of scenes in which they are invited to court by the rulers of their time, that were painted by Ming artists who served in the imperial court. In fact, one cannot find many pictures of this theme by artists who were <u>not</u> Ming court painters, or artists of the so-called Zhe school from which many of

the court painters came. Such a correlation should alert us to look for a better explanation of the prevalence of the theme than the one that sees it as a matter of individual choice among the painters--to look, that is, for reasons why representations of them were in demand among members of whatever segment of society the artists typically worked for, which in this case was comprised of members of the court aristocracy, up to the emperor himself, and government officials serving inside and outside the court. Years ago, suspecting such a connection but lacking the evidence to establish it firmly, I gave the theme of "virtuous hermits of antiquity in Ming court painting" as a masters thesis topic to one of my best students, Chang Chu-yü. She turned up the evidence, from writings of the time, and made a convincing argument about how the paintings functioned, what messages they carried, in their original context. The Ming government was actively recruiting capable men into official service at that time, partly to restore the institution of officialdom to favor among such men, after the damage done to it by the tyrannical first emperor of the Ming, Hung-wu. Likening these men to the ancient hermits, who were reclusive by nature but sometimes came forth from retirement to serve a virtuous ruler, was to praise them and attract them. For the officials themselves, the central issues of their lives, on which their fortunes rose or fell, were the prospects of appointments and promotions, and decisions about when to serve and when to retire. Paintings of hermits of antiquity, along with other themes frequently depicted by Ming court-related and Zhe-school artists, carried generally-understood meanings that allowed them to function in particular situations, to convey congratulatory or consoling messages, to serve as gifts on occasions of appointments and retirements.

While Chang Chu-yü was working on her thesis, she took the opportunity of a visit by a famous art historian from China to ask him: why did Ming court artists paint this theme so often? His answer--"Because they admired the old hermits, and expressed their admiration in their paintings"--typifies the old way of reading Chinese paintings, locating their meanings always inside the artist instead of in the society around him, assuming always inner rather than outer motivations. Many Chinese art historians, as well as foreign ones, still resist social, political, and economic readings of paintings, feeling that to see them as functional debases them, preferring still to see the artist as independent of such motivations and constraints. But their approach not only distorts the character of the paintings but also is an interpretative dead-end: saying "the

artist painted that way because he felt that way" can explain anything, and so in the end explains nothing. Assuming a social-political function, on the other hand, as Howard Rogers does in his entry for Ni Duan's painting, allows us to integrate our subject with broader Chinese social and institutional history, and to contribute to it.

Other subjects represented by Ming court and Zhe-school artists can similarly be given political readings, and assumed to have performed similar roles in official circles. "Hongnong and Tiger" (no. 87) by Zhu Duan, another master active in the Ming court, represents a Han dynasty official whose moral strengths were so pervasive in the district he administered as to put out forest fires and persuade wild beasts (such as the tiger in the picture) to change their natures. It must have served to praise some official who was the artist's contemporary, perhaps commissioned by others as a parting gift when the man went off to assume a new post, urging on him the virtues that the old story stood for. A painting in the previous exhibition (Ming-Qing I, no. 5) by the court artist Lü Ji, who was a flower-and-bird specialist, represents a rooster, a quail, and two magpies, with pomegranates, hollyhocks, and chrysanthemums. Howard Rogers's discussion of the painting brings out the symbolism of these images; to it we might add a sound-play of the kind the Chinese are fond of making: guan, the word for the rooster's comb, sounds like guan for "official." A painting of a rooster and coxcomb flowers, for example, can be read guan shang jia guan, "to add another official title onto the rank one has." Rogers warns against reading such pictures simply like rebuses, and the warning is well taken; but we are still more prone to the opposite fault, reading them purely as aesthetic or decorative objects. After some period of controversy (in which we are presently still engaged) specialists in the subject will doubtless reach a point of balance and pay proper attention to all these aspects of the paintings, without neglecting any, and another battle will have been won.

Paintings of happy fishermen were often painted by artists of this group; Rogers, in his entry for the Ni Duan painting (no. 81), quotes a poem composed for another work by the same artist that corroborates what we know from other evidence: that this theme was another part of the symbology, or mythology, of officialdom, suggesting that the ambitious and harrassed officials would really rather be living the carefree lives of fishermen, or farmers, or woodgatherers. As an idealized alternative to the realities of their

lives, this myth corresponds to the pastoral ideal in European culture. An outstanding example of the "happy fishermen" theme by a Zhe-school master is the painting by Wu Wei (Ming-Qing I, no. 7.) Paintings of fishing villages often include, as Wu Wei's does, images of scholar-officials who have come out on the river to relax among the fishermen, or, more rarely, to fish themselves. In a painting by Wu Wei's follower Jiang Song (Ming-Qing I, no. 9), one of them is reading a book in the fishing skiff, his fishing pole laid aside. Sometimes, as in a well-known handscroll by Wu Wei, the scholar-recluse is shown in a riverside retreat, where he has come to escape the cares of the city, contemplating the more active fisherman. Depictions of this theme make up another type within the iconography of "Chinese pastoral," one that we might term: living in harmony with the simple folk in nature. An example by the court painter Li Zai was in the first exhibition (Ming-Qing I, no. 3, one of several versions of the theme that he painted.

Fishermen were also painted by the literati artists themselves--Yuan masters such as Zhao Mengfu, his son Zhao Yong, and Wu Zhen often did them, and a copy after one of Zhao Mengfu's by Yao Shou is in the present exhibition (no. 84). These offer quite different images of fishing from the typical Zhe-school works: no bustling villages, or drying nets; only a solitary scholar-fisherman--or, if more, minimal signs of communion between them; little indication of any intention to catch fish (which would lower the experience to a materialist level); a placid landscape that reads as a projection of the recluse's mind. The image of the fisherman-recluse appears frequently in landscapes by the late Yuan master Wang Meng; Sun Zhi's "Fisherman on Lake Wu" of 1587 in the present exhibition (no. 103) consciously echoes that imagery, done as it was for a man whose ancestor had been a fisherman-recluse at Lake Wu in the Yuan period, (For a fuller discussion of these matters, see the first two chapters of my <u>Three Alternative Histories of Chinese Painting</u>, University of Kansas, 1989.)

A number of other paintings in the exhibition would offer us fruitful ground for the pursuit of political meanings, if space permitted; one more example will suffice. Fa Ruozhen's "Cloudy Mountains" (no. 124) is one of a large number of such paintings by this artist--pictures of mountains in clouds, or in rain, in fact make up the bulk of his surviving <u>oeuvre</u>. Some years ago I made a study of Fa Ruozhen, beginning with no idea of where it would lead; somewhat to my own surprise, it led me into an exploration of a

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complex interplay of art and political forces in early Qing history. Fa Ruozhen was one of the many Chinese scholars educated for official service whose careers were disrupted by the Manchu conquest, which forced a difficult choice on them. Some chose high-minded withdrawal from public life; others, including Fa Ruozhen, chose to accept positions in the new Manchu regime. Those who took this course argued that they were doing it for moral, disinterested reasons, to help restore stability to the country; but in the eyes of others they were collaborators who had shifted their loyalty unpardonably, by Confucian principles, from a legimate Chinese ruler to a usurping foreign one. Hills in rain, or hills enveloped in clouds, had from early times been poetic metaphors for the good administrator who brings benefits to the people as the rain benefits the farmers, and paintings of the theme had been presented to officials to convey this message of praise. Inscriptions on some of Fa Ruozhen's paintings make it clear that he was using the imagery of cloudy and rainy landscapes in this way, to justify the decision that he and others had made to serve in the new government. Once more, we do not mean to be reductive; Fa's paintings can sustain other readings, and valid ones. But this appears to have been the principal one intended.

Continuing with the meanings-and-functions approach to Ming-Qing painting, we can turn to "occasional paintings"--those done for presention or hanging on certain occasions. Birthday paintings make up a large category among these; from inscriptions on some of them we know that they were frequently painted for the highly auspicious sixtieth, seventieth, or eightieth birthdays of the recipients. Sometimes they were birthday gifts from the artists themselves, but more often they were commissioned or otherwise obtained from the artists for presentation by others. Active painters, we can assume, had suitable pictures "in stock" for such uses. The early Ming court artist Bian Jingzhao painted a number of pictures of cranes, which as symbols of longevity were especially suited to birthday paintings, meant to wish the recipient long life, like our "many happy returns." The fact that the example by Bian in the exhibition (no. 78) was done in collaboration with the scholar-official artist Wang Fu must have made it a more prestigious gift, intended as it was for an imperial prince.

Other auspicious imagery commonly seen in birthday paintings includes deer and pines (cf. Zhu Da's depiction of this subject, no. 129); the "Isles of Immortals," most often Penglai (cf. Yuan Jiang's

picture, Ming-Qing I, no. 58); and female immortals carrying symbolic attributes (cf. the painting of this subject by Chen Hongshou and assistants, Ming-Qing I, no. 33, which, like Bian Jingzhao's cranes, exists in several versions, suggesting a studio production of multiples.) Again, we cannot assume that all representations of these subjects were meant as birthday paintings, but only that the subjects made them especially suited to that use. More detailed studies will clarify the problem. Howard Rogers, for instance, suggests that Chen Hongshou's work might depict the fairy Magu, pictures of whom "were presented to couples on their silver and golden wedding anniversaries."

Other occasions for which paintings were appropriate presents include New Year's celebrations (cf. Li Shida's picture, no. 107), which typically represent children setting off firecrackers in the yard and their elders eating and drinking inside; and farewells (cf. Shen Zhou's handscroll, no. 85, and Wang Yuanqi's "On Taking Leave," no. 136.) Farewell paintings make up a large and important category within the larger subject of landscape, and typically exhibit a compositional structure that expresses their meaning: a clearly-defined foreground in which the leave-taking is enacted, and a well-marked recession that represents the departing person's passage into far distance. These were commonly given as parting gifts to someone leaving on a trip, or, for instance, to an official returning to the capital after a period of service in some province or city. Other occasions were recorded in paintings of a more particularized, less conventional kind; often we known no more about the event than what the painting tells us. Shao Mi's "Transporting the Crane" (no. 113) is a good example.

Another major sub-category within Chinese landscape painting is made up of topographical and travel pictures, those that represent, in some sense, particular places. Wang Lü's forty-leaf album of "Landscapes of Huashan" (no. 77) is one of the great surviving examples; painted after the artist's return from climbing the mountain at the beginning of the Ming period, it transmits the awesome scenery of the mountain and the impression it made on him, along with a multitude of details concerning the difficulty of the climb, the hostels and monasteries located there, etc. Huang Xiangjian (no. 121) similarly recorded in paintings a long trip to a remote region of Yünnan province, undertaken to bring back his aged father who had been left behind there after the Manchu conquest; again,

the grandeur of the scenery and the rigors of travel are the major themes in the paintings.

Portrayals of sacred mountains could function as religious icons; Sung Xu's 1588 series of paintings of the Wu Yue or "Five Sacred Mountains" (no. 101) might have been intended as that, although the inscriptions give no clue, and the fact that they are in the styles of old masters gives them a more aesthetic than iconic character. They might also belong to a type that we could call the cultural-travel picture. Someone planning to go on a trip would ask an artist for a picture of it, not so much to inform himself about the actual appearance of the place or the layout of the terrain--these are ordinarily not truly descriptive pictures, nor are they informational enough to serve as maps--as to invest the place in advance with a certain sense of familiarity, a cultural aura, so that the traveler would not have the unsettling experience of being confronted with raw nature. An instance is recorded in which the same artist, Song Xu, painted a work of this kind for a patron, probably a merchant, who was about to travel to Mt. Boyue in southern Anhui. Song Xu had made the trip himself; but cases are known also (e.g. in paintings by Shitao and Mei Qing) of artists depicting places they had never visited, relying on schemata adopted from representations by others, or even on verbal accounts. If, as I believe (and have argued elsewhere at length), the album of "Scenes of Huangshan" ascribed to Hongren (no. 122) is really by his older but less brilliant contemporary Xiao Yuncong (cf. Ming-Qing I, no. 36), this is another such case, since Xiao tells us, in an inscription accompanying the album, that he had never climbed Huangshan. Lack of first-hand familiarity usually, of course, had a price: depictions of Huangshan scenery that are really by Hongren, of which some survive, convey far more of the breathtaking effect it has on climbers than do these attractive but rather schematic leaves.

Portraits make up another functional category in Chinese painting, and are especially susceptible to the kind of social-history approach we are outlining. The questions they raise are too many and complex to take up here; it is enough to note how many excellent examples are included in this and the preceding exhibition, among which the group portrait of Chan monks in a landscape by Chen Hongshou and his assistants (no. 114) and the strikingly original self-portrait by the 19th-century master Ren Xiong (Ming-Qing I, no. 73) stand out. Only in recent years has the serious study of Chinese portraiture become possible, since most of the best examples were

unpublished and unknown before; we did not even suspect that so many excellent portraits had survived. The reluctance of the old Chinese collectors to include them in their collections, of museums to exhibit them, and of scholars to publish them, exemplify again the bias against functional paintings, or readings of paintings that emphasize their functional nature, in traditional China. Portrait specialists, like any other painters whose skills were put to the use of representation, ranked low in the eyes of Chinese connoisseurs.

In recent decades in P.R. China, portrait paintings have been lifted somewhat from the low esteem in which they were held before, and are featured prominently in the best museums and publications. This is in keeping with a general populist, anti-elite policy; popular art and folk art have similarly received more attention, and the works of such previously-devalued artists as the Zhe-school masters have been re-assessed and given more honored positions in the history of painting. These tendencies also are reflected in the selection and cataloguing of the two Ming-Qing painting exhibitions.

Painters could also function as illustrators, making pictures based on texts, or to accompany texts. Du Jin's set of illustrations to nine old poems (no. 88) were painted to be mounted with the calligrapher Jin Zong's writing of the poems; Guo Xu's "Song of the Lute" (Ming-Qing I, no. 13) seems even more an appendage to a work of calligraphy, this time written by the artist himself. Zhou Chen's "Illustrations to Historical Tales" (Ming-Qing I, no. 14) may originally have accompanied texts of the tales, but only titles written on the paintings identify them now. Some of the stories, at least, were well enough known to his audience to make texts more or less superfluous. In all these, the pictures present themselves as relatively straightforward pictorial counterparts to incidents from narratives or history (the relationship is of course not really so simple). Other artists could be given more freedom, or take more. Ren Xiong's album in the exhibition (no. 158) is one of a series, totalling 120 leaves, that he painted to "illustrate" lines from poems by his patron Yao Xie; the best of them are really highly imaginative visions inspired only loosely by Yao's lines. And the leaves in the album of "Illustrations in the Spirit of Wang Wei's Poems" painted by Xiang Sheng-mo and others between 1628 and 1631 (Ming-Qing I, no. 31) are scarcely illustrations at all, claiming nothing more than to be "in the spirit of" verses by the great Tang poet. As Xiang himself says in one of his inscriptions on the album, "if you already have the

point of the poem, why ask someone to examine in painting its sound and appearance?" The degree of dependence of pictures on text, or independence from text, reflects a variety of factors--the intended function and audience for the work, the relationship and relative statuses of artist and client, and of course (notably in Ren Xiong's album) the sheer imaginative power of the painter. The recent popularity of text-image studies among art historians makes this another rich area for exploration.

The foregoing does not begin to exhaust the new directions that Ming-Qing painting studies are taking. Investigations of matters of patronage, artist-client relationships, how the artists made their livings and were rewarded for their work, are beginning to flourish after a long period in which these concerns were avoided by both Chinese and foreign scholars as somehow distasteful, degrading to artists and paintings alike. No old Chinese writer tells us directly the things we most want to know about how painters lived and practiced their calling, but information and clues scattered through inscriptions, letters, and other writings can be pieced together into revealing accounts. We are also turning our attention more than before to practical matters of studio practice, how assistants were employed (as in the two collaborative works by Chen Hongshou and his assistants, no. 114 and Ming-Qing I, no. 33), how old designs were transmitted, how paintings were exhibited and sold. All these pursuits, like the meanings-and-functions approach to which they are closely related, are bringing us to different and richer understandings of the paintings.