A social history of painting inscriptions in Ming China (1368-1644)

Wang, W.

Introduction

This dissertation looks at inscriptions written on paintings from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) China. It considers Ming society in general and its dimensions of social, cultural, and economic priorities interwoven with inscriptions in particular. The dissertation situates inscriptions in the contexts in which inscriptions are generated, used and circulated. It illuminates their social, commercial and cultural environments, to elaborate a social history of their production, utilization, circulation, and transmission. The present study is a history of art formed by the social and intellectual histories of the Ming era. It is based primarily on textual resources, including individual corpora, anecdotal writings, and historical and literary writings. Ming painting inscriptions survive in two main forms: inscriptions available from extant paintings, and inscriptions *outside* paintings in textual anthologies. The paths via which inscriptions ended up in these anthologies are not always self-evident. Some of them were gleaned from paintings. But the possibility that an inscription was divorced from a painting from the very beginning of its existence cannot be ruled out. The Chinese language puts all kinds of inscriptions under the category of *tihua* 題畫 without specifying the text's form and source. The vast majority of existing studies focus on inscriptions *on* paintings, but they largely neglect anthologies as another source. In the present study, the term "painting inscription" is therefore used in a very broad sense and refers to all genres of texts, either physically on paintings or in textual anthologies.

This study is provided with a starting point thanks to a record in *Outline History of Painting* (*Huashi huiyao* 畫史會要), a book about Ming painters published in 1631. The record tells us that a renowned Nanjing 南京 poet Xie Chengju 謝承舉 (fl. 1488–1566) often inscribed the paintings of his younger brother,

a landscape painter named Xie Binju 謝賓舉. In a poem that Xie Chengju bestowed on his painter brother, he describes their collaboration: "Each time you complete a painting, you ask me, an old monstrosity, to compose something; [you ask] each surface's empty space to be inscribed a poem. 圖成便索老醜作, 每幅空處題一篇."[1] This couplet reveals a fundamental picture of the creation of painting inscriptions in the Ming period. It is obvious that both the Xie brothers were well-educated men; they were both able to engage in poetry composition and reading, activities that required a high level of literacy. Their collaborations were conscious, and the flow of poem inscriptions from the poet to the painter seemed to be a frequent and a natural occurrence between the two. Inscriptions were something appreciable and desirable and, as such, both the painter and the poet searched for "empty" places on painting surfaces to fit them in.

Xie Chengju's poem proceeds to proclaim the aim of their painstaking collaboration. The second couplet of his poem reads: "My poems lent to your paintings increase their value; your paintings provide the means for my poetry, and both to be transmitted. 我詩借君畫增价, 君畫資我詩並傳." This couplet sums up several important themes that this dissertation will explore: painting, literature, the two arts as things of materiality, social interactions, literary communication, the value of painting from economic, commercial, and social perspectives, and intellectual life. The word *chuan* 傳 in Xie Chengju's poem explicitly demonstrates that inscriptions were meant for circulation and transmission. In other words, they were meant for social life. To achieve this, Ming people, including the Xie brother, had a variety of options: paintings could be lent or presented to others with inscriptions; the inscriptions could be recited or transcribed; they could be included in an anthology to be disseminated in the form of a manuscript or imprinted book. There were often concrete intentions, purposes, and motivations underlying the general desire for synchronic and diachronic

1 Zhu Mouyin 朱謀垔 (fl. 1631), *Huashi huiyao* 畫史會要, *juan* 4, the edition printed between 1627-1644, 50a-50b.

circulations; for example, wanting to build a connection with someone; to repay a favour; to make monetary profits; to strengthen a sense of local or family community; to establish a reputation in art; or, to publicize one's view. The general desire to have one's inscriptions disseminated and the very specific circumstances in which inscriptions were created provide grounds for this dissertation to study painting inscriptions in the social context.

Ironically, none of Xie Binju's paintings survive today. In a sense, Xie Chengju's ambitious blueprint to have his poems passed down with his brother's paintings failed. The partial survival of his poems was by virtue of textual dissemination, including an anthology posthumously printed by his son in 1582, and several art historiographical writings like the aforementioned *Outline History of Painting*.[2] A considerable proportion of these poems were meant for paintings.[3] Meanwhile, some other Ming people were immediately frustrated by failed attempts to have their inscriptions circulated and transmitted. For example, Xiang Yuanbian 項元汴 (1525–1590), who was mainly known as an influential collector, but who was also a competent painter, also practised inscribing on his own painting creations with the strong intention of having his inscriptions appreciated by more than just himself. But, given his notoriety for terrible calligraphy and bad taste in poetry, his inscriptions did not enjoy popularity at all. It was said that those who sought his paintings had to

2 His collection is entitled *The Collected Poems of Xie Zixiang* (*Xie Zixiang shiji* 謝子象詩集), 15 *juan*. At least two copies survive, held by Qingdao Museum and the Palace Museum in Taipei. For a brief record of this collection, see Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) comp., *Tianyige shumu* 天一閣書目, *juan* 4-1, *Wenxuanlou* 文選樓 edition printed in Jiaqing Reign 嘉慶 (1796–1820), 35a-35b. His poems also feature in a *Selected Poems of One Hundred Poets in the Flourishing Ming Era* (*Shengming baijia shi* 盛明百家詩), a book series compiled by Yu Xian 俞憲 (1508–1572). In addition, 41 poem inscriptions under 40 different titles by him are embodied in *Categorized Poems Inscribed On Paintings from All Dynasties* (*Yuding lidai tihuashi lei* 御定歷代題畫詩類), SKQS edition. This collection will be elucidated in chapter 4.

3 The poem titles *in The Collected Poems of Xie Zixiang* can be retrieved from the database "Mingren wenji lianhe mulu yu pianming suoyin ziliaoku 明人文集聯合目錄及篇目索引資料庫," accessed April 27, 2016, http://nclcc.ncl.edu.tw/ttsweb/top_02.htm.

bribe his study attendants. As soon as a painting was finished, the attendants would stamp seals on the place Xiang might fill with his inscription and take the painting away.[4] Although the credibility of this anecdote is not without question, where it stops leaves space for us to hypothesize about what might happen to these paintings next. Providing nothing unexpected happened, they would almost certainly reach the commissioners, which leads us to the aspects of art patronage and the art market. We may even imagine that some of these paintings might be taken to somebody else for inscribing, a noteworthy phenomenon that will also be discussed.

The Xie brothers illustrate a flow of inscriptions from one family member to another, while Xiang shows the flow intended for people beyond family circle. Xiang and the Xie brothers are two sides of one coin, whose practices, whether successful or not, are typical of Ming painting inscriptions. These two examples raise a series of further questions: What occasion warranted an inscription? What genre of text was preferred for inscription, and in what form? What was the relationship between the form of inscription, the social occasion, and the painting format? When Xie Chengju envisioned his writings being passed down (*chuan*) along with his brother's paintings, how exactly did he expect this to happen? What did the "value increase" in Xie's poem mean? What were the motives and benefits behind inscriptions? What role did inscriptions play in reality? Does the "blank space" on Xie's paintings, filled by his brother's poems, and those covered by seals on Xiang's, indicate an awareness of a speculative place reserved for the forthcoming inscription that even a study attendant could locate? How did the proliferation of inscriptions affect how knowledge of painting and inscription was shaped and classified? These questions are central to this dissertation. It equally treats the inscriptions of Xie Chengju and Xiang Yuanbian as products of social practices in a framework of customs, notions, conceptions, and attitudes, being generated in the context of Ming

4 Wu Xiu, *Qingxia guan lun hua jueju* 青霞館論畫絕句 , MSCS 2. 6, 217.

society, full of constant human interactions and a flow of objects. To this end, seeing inscriptions as responses to the art of painting is not enough. This dissertation thus aims at a social history that situates Ming inscriptions in the social circumstances of their conceptualization, production, utilization, and circulation.

Why Painting Inscription Matters

For Scholarly Practices

The first known academic glance towards Chinese painting inscriptions was by Aoki Masaru 青木正兒 (1887–1964), a Japanese sinologist known for achievements in Chinese literature.[5] In 1937, Aoki published a groundbreaking essay entitled "The Development of Literature Inscribed on Paintings" (*Daiga bungaku no hatten* 題画文学の発展). This was the first acknowledgement in academia of *daiga bungaku* 題画文学, or "literature inscribed on paintings." The importance of Aoki's essay rests on the discussion of two crucial issues. One issue is the acceptable definition of painting inscription. Another issue is the origin of poetic inscription, which Aoki credits to *huazan* 畫讚, namely "eulogies of paintings," a form of writing that pioneered the physical juxtaposition of texts with images on the same surface. Although Aoki's opinion is widely acknowledged, the debate on the two issues still persists throughout subsequent scholarship.

Early European art collectors before the Second World War did not regard inscriptions as an integral component of the paintings at all.[6] The negligence of inscriptions did not change until the second half of the twentieth century when scholars and

5 The representative publications by Aoki in Chinese literature include *Shina bungei ronsō* 支那文藝論藪 (*Outline of Chinese Literature*, 1927) and *Shina kinsei gikyokushi* 支那近世戲曲史 (*History of Recent Chinese Drama*, 1930).

6 Lothar Ledderose, "Bolin shoucang de Zhongguo huihua" 柏林收藏的中國繪畫 [In Berlin gesammelte chinesische Malerei] (in Chinese), trans. Pao-chen Chen. *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1994):1-26.

curators began to pay preliminary attention to inscriptions as a crucial source of evidence for identifying Chinese paintings. In 1961, Max Loehr published an essay considering inscriptions "the archaeological guides for our interpretations and concepts."[7] Hence his essay sorts out the material that claims to be dated by, or to antedate, inscriptions of the Song period, drawn from sources of published paintings, unpublished yet catalogued paintings, and a few prints and stone carvings of lost paintings. Loehr also raised the question about the reliability of the dates, signaling an increasing awareness of inscriptions as a crucial factor in respect of the authenticity of Chinese painting. In the same vein, some decades later in the end of the century, the authenticity of inscriptions on *Rivers at the Bank* (*Xi'an tu* 溪岸圖), a painting attributed to the great artist Dong Yuan 董源 (fl. 943-ca.962), became a focal point in the large-scale debate in China and America on the authorship of the painting.[8]

The two issues in Aoki's essay sets the foundation for a series of subsequent explorations into painting inscriptions. I will review those which are related to the issue of the origin of painting inscriptions in the next chapter of this dissertation. On the issue about what exactly a painting inscription is, Heike Kotzenberg in her *Bild und Aufschrift in der Malerei Chinas* (1981) provides a terminological discussion of several terms used frequently to designate texts written on or about Chinese paintings. The terms include *huzan* 畫讚 , *tihuashi* 題畫詩 , *tiba* 題 跋 , and *xiangzan* 像 讚 . Her work is basically undertaken within the framework proposed by Aoki, but it shows a stronger consciousness about seeing inscriptions as a component of an artwork that has various ways of physically combining with the painting.[9] Clarissa von Spee (2008) examines Aoki

7 Max Loehr, "Chinese Paintings with Song Dated Inscriptions," *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 4 (1961): 219-20.

8 A series of relevant essays presented on a thematic symposium in 1999 are embodied in Judith G. Smith and Wen C. Fong, *Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999).

9 Heike Kotzenberg, *Bild und Aufschrift in der Malerei Chinas: Unter besonderer Berucksichtigung der Literaturmaler der Ming-Zeit (1368-1644) Tang Yin, Wen Cheng-*

and Kotzenberg's understandings of painting inscription and develops her own definition of a colophon (*tiba*). A colophon is, she proposes, "a comment made in prose or poetry by the artist, or by friends, connoisseurs or collectors that was originally not meant to be part of the composition."[10] But the present study will problematize her proposition by showing that Ming painters often anticipated colophons, and had a clear awareness that through circulation, their works would gain inscriptions from later generations.

These early explorations did not impose any disciplinary attribute to the literature inscribed on paintings. However, a modern disciplinary structure increasingly played a part in the domain since the second half of the twentieth century, and this formed a split. On one side are literary specialists who explore inscriptions for literary value. On the other side are art historians, who, not surprisingly, use paintings as their main source. *Outline of East Asian Art History* (*Tōyō bijutsu shi yōsetsu* 東洋美術史要説 , 1957) by Suzuki Kei and Matsubara Saburo is one among the very few that acknowledge textual anthologies as a source of inscriptions. A subsection in this book very briefly lists a number of titles of Ming anthologies without giving detailed introduction to each of these anthologies.[11] The primary aim that art historians examine inscriptions is to study paintings. Max Loehr's 1961 paper, which inventories Song inscriptions on paintings, can be considered, to a large degree, a response to the most urgent issue in studying Chinese painting in his day; that is, the identification and re-identification of perhaps all extant (and accessible) paintings in order to produce a chronologically accurate network of authentic and correctly dated works as a foundation for further studies.[12] To this end, Loehr believes that inscriptions and seals

ming und Shen Chou (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), 12-13.

10 Clarissa von Spee, *Wu Hufan: A Twentieth Century Art Connoisseur in Shanghai* (Berlin: Reimer, 2008), 23.

11 Suzuki Kei and Matsubara Saburo, *Tōyō bijutsu shi yōsetsu*, Vol. 2 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1957), 153.

12 Charles Hartman, "Poetry and Painting," in *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 467.

are significant and reliable evidence.

Art historians are also interested in the artistic reasons that led a Chinese artist to inscribe on a painting and the aesthetic effect of this practice on the perception of the painting. Since 1950s, "Three Perfections" (*sanjue* 三絶) – an ideal of the unity of poetry, calligraphy and painting in ancient Chinese art theory – came into the horizon of the academia. Shimada Shūjirō's essay "Three Perfections: Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting" (*Shi sho ga sanzetsu* 詩書画三絶) first published in 1956 discusses the formation of the "Three Perfections" in every historical phase. This ideal, Shimada believes, was a main reason for the development of painting inscriptions. In 1974, Michael Sullivan published a short monograph *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy*, which introduces the practices of inscribing texts on paintings in China to the West. His book is based on a series of simple questions that can be essentialize several basic facts: "Who did the writing (inscription)? Was it the painter, or someone else, and if so, who? What does it say? Why do some paintings have a lot of writing on them, others little or none? Did the painter deliberately leave room for it?"[13] These questions already touch the social facet of inscriptions and are also valid for this research.

Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting (1991) is a milestone collection of essays has been produced on this topic. 23 essays in this book were presented at an international symposium held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1985. Although many of these compositions deal with the relationship between Chinese poetry calligraphy, and painting, and the "Three Perfections," some explore how literature and painting have been practiced in a single work of art. These essays acknowledged Chinese painting's incorporation of poetry, and seek to legitimate this phenomenon of art from an artistic point of view. But, very few of them turn to explore the practical and social reasons behind this obvious preference for poetry over

13 Michael Sullivan, *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 7.

other literary genres. It is not enough to explain it simply by claiming an internal connection between poetry and painting. As I will show in the next chapter, the earliest literary genre that was associated with images was eulogy (*zan* 讚), not poetry (*shi* 詩). The preference for poetry is not self-evident; I will further show in chapter 2 that it has social roots and concerns.

Where a light has been shone on inscriptions, it is not generally in the direction of the Ming era. Influenced by Japanese thought, art historians considered Song painting the apogee of painting history in China, and viewed painting in subsequent eras as trapped in a long decline. The "rediscovery" of Ming and Qing paintings in the 1980s and 1990s let scholars to reconsider the artistic value and importance of Chinese painting after the fourteenth century. Yet the inscriptions on these works do not receive the same attention as the paintings themselves. For the attention that had been paid to Ming inscriptions, most concentrate on Ming loyalist painters in the seventeenth century, such as Zhu Da 朱耷 (1626-1705), Shitao 石濤 (1642-1707?), and Kuncan 髡 殘 (1612-after 1674), for the intense emotions and an acute sense of self-reflection embedded in their inscriptions written on paintings. Therefore, in addition to assisting art historians to authenticate painting works, inscriptions are credited for guiding people to comprehend the true message of the painters, which will partially or completely be lost without the aid of the texts. In other words, the value of inscriptions seems to have lain primarily in the inner world of the artists that they successfully reveal to the reader, which is full of intensive emotions, obscure symbols, and dramatic unorthodoxies. The relation between inscriptions and the artists' everyday life – uninteresting and perhaps even unartistic at the first glance – is much less concerned.

In Chinese spoken areas, scholarship on painting inscriptions is mostly conducted by literary specialists. The subjects of their studies are inscriptions as literary texts. They analyze literary inscriptions as a part of the entire literary history, while seldom

pay attention to the visuality. That said, the present study has benefited from the work of, among others, Li Ch'i (1993, 1994). His studies on Song poetic inscriptions examine the editions and contents of two important anthologies of inscriptions that emerged in the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries. Once again, the Song dynasty is the period most frequently focused on. It is considered a crucial phase in which painting inscriptions took shape, practically and conceptually, and a period that boasts achievements in poetry much greater than those of the Yuan and Ming periods.

In the field of literary study, the Ming period is marked for its vernacular literature, while Ming poetry and prose are less regarded. As a result, Ming inscriptions, the majority of which are poem and prose, are largely bypassed. For instance, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* dedicates a whole chapter, by Charles Hartman, to the fusion of poetry and image in Chinese painting. Hartman sustains a brilliant examination of the pre-Ming period for twenty-four pages. It shows how text and image gradually appeared on the same surface in historical circumstances, and how the two arts interacted with each other, adding aesthetic and intellectual flavour to the final artwork. However, the examination halts rather abruptly at the end of the Yuan dynasty. Indeed, the space he reserves for the Ming and Qing dynasties, a historical span of 550 years, is less than a single page. Hegel and Kern observe in their review of this volume that all the contributors to the book were permitted to "stay within their own areas of expertise."[14] Still, this is not reason enough for Hartman's haste in his writing of thorough history of the interaction of poetry and painting. I posit that, at the root of Hartman's arrangement, is such a lack of appreciation for the two dynasties that they are only credited with "quantity and variety more than innovation."[15] This statement represents a widely shared disappointment among art historians toward Ming inscriptions,

14 Martin Kern, Robert E. Hegel, "A History of Chinese Literature?," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol. 26 (December 2004): 165.

15 Charles Hartman, "Poetry and Painting," 489-90.

from which they do not see any revolutionary change in terms of artistic style and principle. But this dissertation will show that the change does exist. It is less about the appearance of inscription, which can be easily observe; rather, it is at a social level in terms of how inscriptions interfere in the society in which they were produced.

The present dissertation also builds upon the work of scholars who have addressed various issues of Chinese painting as part of the visual culture being socially produced and utilized. Fu Shen's *Traces of the Brush* (1980) shows an awareness of inscriptions as calligraphic writings, and the practice of inscribing on painting as part of the history of Chinese calligraphy. De-nin Deanna Lee challenges the impression of Chinese paintings frozen in textbooks and in museum displays. She calls for attention to be directed to the materiality of paintings as artefacts with long social lives. Her essay (2011) categorizes the features of integrated image and text in different painting formats, and gives insights into the multi-layered functionality of inscriptions.[16] A later article by Lee (2012) focuses on colophons: the texts "inscribed by later viewers onto Chinese paintings."[17] She argues that colophons reveal the painting's reception history, and, to borrow her words, "a community gathered around the painting, a history of hermeneutics, and a different possibility for the uses of painting in the lives of individual human beings and in their cultural tradition."[18]

Since the 1990s, Craig Clunas has accomplished a series important studies situating Chinese painting into much broader social, cultural, and conceptual grounds. His *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming* (2003) focuses on the great mid-Ming master Wen Zhengming, acknowledging him as a social person, living in a social web in his hometown Suzhou 蘇州 and for a

16 De-nin Deanna Lee, "Chinese Painting: Image-Text-Object," in Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton eds., *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 274-75.

17 De-nin Deanna Lee, "Colophons, Reception, and Chinese painting," *Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal / Visual Enquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2012): 84.

18 Ibid., 85.

short period in Beijing, where were full of constant interactions with family members, friends, and many other, more remote connections. This provocative study shows how Wen Zhengming tacitly employed inscriptions to negotiate the demands and expectations of his paintings, and shows the effect of the negotiations on interpersonal relations.

The present study has also benefited from research by Chen Zhenghong, who is particularly interested in the relation between Ming paintings (especially handscrolls) as objects and inscriptions as texts with different means of reproduction. One of his essays (1999) notices that the Chinese handscroll is a format that allows for various ways of combining pictures and texts. The essay proposes that there is a particular type of combination, named *tuyin* 圖引, lit., "The guide of a picture," that employs a picture as both a frontispiece to the handscroll and a guide to the subsequent textual part.[19] Unfortunately, Chen fails to adequately prove that the term *tuyin* was commonly used in the Ming period, but he has touched upon the social aspect of the creation of this kind of handscroll, which involves the collaboration of multiple participants, either on special occasions or on request. Another essay by Chen (2006) notes the importance of inscriptions on paintings as a new source that could supplement and collate those inscriptions scattered in textual anthologies. The essay argues that the scholar who only reads the anthologies is confronted with a body of isolated writings, but the scholar who traces these writings to the painting may discover the circumstances under which they were created. Chen thus executes a case study, tracing several writings to a communal end: an extant handscroll painting. A reversal of his method also illuminates my discussion: mapping the trajectory of inscriptions from one painting into several anthologies reveals how inscriptions spawned multiplication and dissemination.

Zhang Hongxing (2005) looks into the physicality of Chinese

19 Chen Zhenghong, "Tuyin kao – jian bian Shen Zhou 'Shuiyun xingwo tu' de benshi" 圖引考 ── 兼辨沈周《水雲行窩圖》的本事, *Xin meishu* 新美術, No. 4 (1999): 52-57.

painting during its evolution from the eleventh to the fourteenth century. His discussion on the change of the physical position of inscriptions on scroll paintings, and the influence of that change on the painting's physicality, benefits this present study. The discussion shows that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw profound changes: a new element – a dedication – was added to paintings, and inscriptions moved away from the centre of the picture creating a new spatial relationship. By the second half of the fourteenth century, i.e. the early Ming period, inscriptions broke the boundary of the picture surface and found a new place on additional paper. This movement gave rise to the "complex painting" in Zhang's term, referring to a painting work of diverse components. Arriving at a similar point to Anne Burkus-Chasson, Zhang Hongxing notes that scrolls had been superseded as the bearer of the book since the Tang era, but they had survived as a main bearer of painting. In this process, old book elements, such as frontispieces and colophons, intruded into painting.

For Connoisseurship, Curatorial and Publishing Practices

To a large degree, painting inscriptions are important because they shaped and are shaping the knowledge of Chinese painting inside and outside China. Despite a consensus that inscriptions can be useful tools for connoisseurship, their role in the evaluation of a painting work is not uncontroversial. The shifts of attitudes toward painting inscription is noteworthy. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, inscribing texts on paintings was once imbued a sense of experiment, and given admirable attributes such as erudite and elegance. By the Ming era, although in general inscriptions were conceived as a positive supplement, or even a necessary component of a painting, counterviews exited. A famous painting manual named *Painting Model Book by Mr. Gu* (*Gushi huapu* 顧氏畫譜), printed in Hangzhou 杭州 in 1603, included an essay that harshly mocked Suzhou artists who

"embellished" (*zhuangdian* 妝點) their paintings with inscriptions (fig. 0-1).[20]

Depreciation of painting inscription was voiced in the early twentieth century as well. For example, the painter Wang Yachen 汪亞塵 (1894-1983) published an essay in the 1920s, criticising that people in his day attached much more importance to poetry and calligraphy on a painting than to the painting *per se*. He also expressed disapproval of the phenomenon that some inscriptions were so perfunctory that their contents were completely irrelevant to the theme of the picture. Wang asserted that only paintings conveying poetic ideas by brushwork and symbolic meanings were qualified to be "oriental art," and he felt disappointment that in his day "purely oriental artworks are barely seen."[21] Another famous painter, Feng Zikai 豐子

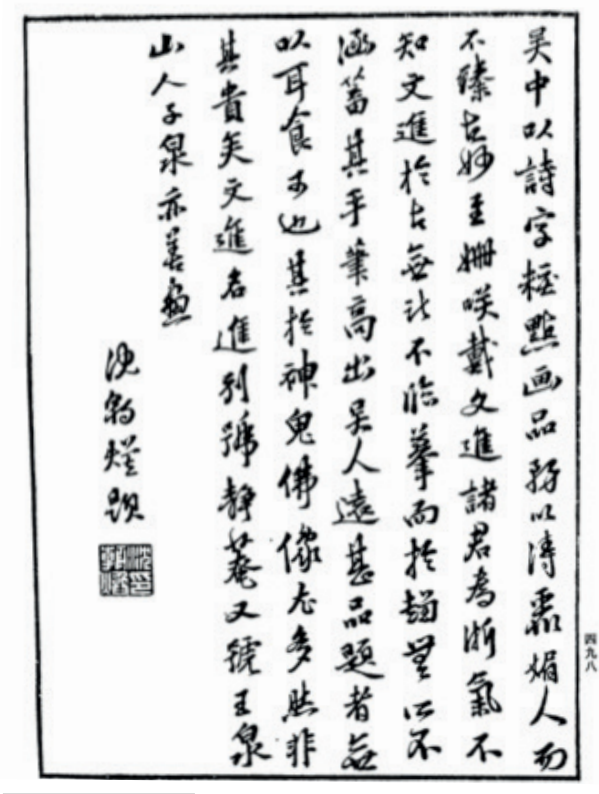

Fig. 0-1 An essay that introduces the well-known mid-Ming painter Dai Jin depreciates Suzhou painters for their habit of adding inscriptions to paintings, *Painting Model Book of Mr. Gu*, in *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan* 中國古代版畫叢刊 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 498.

20 Gu Bing, *Gushi huapu*, Zhongguo banhua congkan 中國版畫叢刊 , Vol. 3 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 498.

21 Wang Yachen, "Guohua shang tishi de wenti" 國畫上題詩的問題 , in *Xiandai yishu pinglunji* 現代藝術評論集 , ed. Xin yishu she 新藝術社 , Minguo congshu 民國叢書 , 3rd compilation, Vol. 58 (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1935), 309-11.

愷 (1898-1975), in an essay published in 1927, proposed a similar attitude. Feng differentiated inscribing texts on paintings from "poetic painting." He argued that text-inscribing had become a superficial way of combining painting with poetic idea, while "poetic painting", represented by the achievements of the great Tang poet-painter Wang Wei 王 維 (69-759), brought visual art and poetic idea into an organic unity.[22] Teng Gu 滕固 (1901-1941), one of the earliest art historan that had received western high edution in Germany, shared the same idea. In 1932, he stated in a presentation in Berlin that there was "an old and bad habit," which forced painters to be capable of poetry and calligraphy. The result of this "decadent climate" was that the painters who were not good at calligraphy were compelled to go for a ghost-writer, and who not good at poetry to transcribe old poems. [23]

It appears that in the eyes of these early-twentieth-century cultural elite, the practice of adding texts to paintings had become an old-fashioned custom that they felt obligated to innovated, or an undesired encumbrance that they wanted to abandon. In the context of an ascending trend of nationhood construction, scholars and artists reflected on Chinese painting – a significant part of Chinese culture – as an art that had persisted the old principles of literati painting (*wenren hua* 文人畫) for centuries without improvement. Consequently, painting inscription was seen as a kind of practice of dullness, lacking in qualities that stimulated. However, in the next two decades, with the wide spread of the idea of *guohua* 國 畫, or "painting of (Chinese) nation", painting inscription was once again embraced as an essence of Chinese painting, and this idea persists in today. To understand the attitudes towards inscriptions and the social reasons behind, Ming dynasty is a crucial period. The legacy of the practices and notions developed in the Ming era not only influenced the Qing artists, but also connoisseurs, collectors,

22 Feng Zikai, "Zhongguo hua de tese" 中國畫的特色, in ibid, 22-23.

23 Based on the author's Chinese translation of this presentation. See Teng Gu, *Teng Gu yishu wenji* 滕固藝術文集, (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2003), 60.

scholars, and museum curators today.

The West also has the problem in absorbing painting inscription into a framework of evaluating Chinese painting. Howard Rogers, for example, argues that Chinese painting's combination of word and image is a "non-artistic mode of expression." Rogers picks up Shen Zhou's 沈 周 (1427-1509) painting *Night Sitting* (*Yezuo tu* 夜坐圖), a widely acknowledged masterpiece, as an example. The high value that this painting receives, he suggests, is resulted merely from the word and image combination, and "the picture without the words is not really all that good as a painting alone."[24] Instead, Rogers rates highly Dai Jin 戴進 (1388-1462), a professional painting master who was posthumously labelled the leader of the so-called Zhe 浙 School. Rogers believes that unlike Shen Zhou, Dai Jin can elucidate what appears in the painting using the "dazzling virtuoso performance" of images alone, i.e. without the aid of words. He concludes his argument with the proclaim that the combination of inscriptions and paintings is only appreciable when the paintings "do very well on their own" and the inscriptions do no more than *enriching* the viewing experiences of visuality.[25] The implication being that inscriptions should be excluded from the evaluation of Chinese paintings. If an image cannot be successful by itself, then it does not deserve any reputation.

Rogers is not the first to have encountered difficulties in determining the significance of an inscribed Chinese painting. The early German collector and curator Otto Kümmel (1874-1952) tended to ignore the value of inscriptions.[26] When inscriptions came into people's horizon after the Second World War, their relationship with the artistic quality of painting works were still bewildering. In his 1961 essay, Max Loehr noticed that "[a] good [Chinese] painting may be accompanied by bad colophons (inscriptions that appeared at the end of scroll paintings), and

24 Richard M. Barnhart, James Cahill, and Howard Rogers, *The Barnhart-Cahill-Rogers Correspondence* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), 14.

25 Ibid., 14.

26 Lothar Ledderose, "Bolin shoucang de Zhongguo huihua" 12.

vice versa."[27] Thus, a general correlation between the artistic level of a painting and its inscription was problematized. Rogers pushed Loehr's observation to the level of evaluation: should we applaud a third-rate picture embellished with one or more inscriptions that dye the image with literariness and philosophical thoughts? The answer is not the primary goal of this dissertation. But this question points to the significance of a dual value system. This dissertation aims to explain how one half of this duality, i.e. inscriptions, contributed value to the system as a whole.

It would be pointless to proceed further without acknowledging the fact that the discipline of art history stems from studying European paintings. Even though inscriptions are not completely absent from European paintings, they never serve as an index of the painting's quality and value. Hence, art history does not (need to) develop a framework to incorporate a sophisticated entity of word and image, each part of which has an independent value yet also complements the other. Consequently, an inscription that contributes to the appreciation of a painting with its own value, like the lengthy prose on *Night Sitting*, is problematic for art historical studies.

Art historical scholarship also finds a dilemma in tacking with Chinese paintings do not feature an inscription. Since the Ming era, Chinese connoisseurship has developed its attitude towards non-inscribed paintings. It associated non-inscribed paintings with negative labels, such as vulgar and incompetent. Works by professional painters became the primary target of this criticism. The dilemma of Modern scholarship is whether or not it should endorse this pre-modern and non-academic criticism. A controversy in the early 1980s provides us with an interesting example of the reactions to this dilemma. The debate began with a book review in which Richard Barnhart harshly accused James Cahill of bias towards (well-educated) Suzhou painters and against (less well-educated) Zhe painters, and for rashly labelling the professional painter Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca.1494-ca.1522)

27 Max Loehr, "Chinese Paintings with Song Dated Inscriptions," 221.

as illiterate.[28] A book review authored by William Watson also criticized Cahill for a tendency of believing that critics "should not read into a painting more than has been verbalized by the artist himself or his associates."[29] In response to these criticisms, Cahill countered by calling for a differentiation between analysis and judgement. "If I pointed out the Che [Zhe] school masters don't write poetic or lengthy inscriptions on their works," he said, "this is a simple and (generally) objectively true observation."[30] Both sides in this debate took the ancient Chinese discourse's dismissal of non-inscribed paintings as a preconceived bias that unguarded art historians were prone to adopt. In order to distance himself from this "bias," Cahill proclaimed: "If some Chinese critics associate negative judgments with that observation, that is their problem, not mine."[31] This reaction leads to an odd situation in which the ancient discourses become an obstacle to objective modern scholarship, provoking avoidance rather than analysis. Consequently, a simple description, like "Qiu Ying seldom inscribed his paintings on his own," requires an extra declaration if it is to avoid demeaning Qiu Ying's achievement. In a sense, this reaction only strategizes how to avoid discussions about inscription.

The drawback of past approaches in art historical studies on Chinese painting is that they are biographically determined. But the data for many biographical records pertaining to these painters barely warrant firm conclusions with regard to actual painting practice. Similarly, previous scholarship makes liberal assumptions concerning attitudes on the basis of personal preferences, which are almost impossible to define. This dissertation does not offer perfect solutions to counter these uncertainties, but it does propose that a description of social

28 Richard Barnhart, Review to *Parting at the Shore. Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580*, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (Jun 1981): 344.

29 Richard M. Barnhart, James Cahill, and Howard Rogers, *The Barnhart-Cahill-Rogers Correspondence* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981), vii.

30 Ibid., 2.

31 Ibid., 2.

evidence can lead to firmer supposition concerning practice and attitudes. The point of this dissertation is to show that the detachability of inscriptions from paintings provides options in terms of putting paintings into circulation with or without inscriptions. The painter Xie Binju apparently chose to have inscriptions. Hence his invitations to his brother, who was celebrated as a poet. Interestingly, Xie Binju was a follower of Dai Jin.[32] His interest in inscription emphatically casts doubts on the oversimplified scheme that tags Zhe painters as poorly educated men having little idea of adding inscriptions to their works. The case of Xie Chengju reminds us the complexity of a Chinese painter's style, social status, and artistic choices. As mentioned previously, Xie's paintings do not survive to day (or they do, but are labelled with "an anonymous painter" or a Song name). From a broader historical view, the loss of his works is largely due to the drastic decline of Zhe style after the mid-sixteenth century. It is possible that later collectors or dealers removed the inscriptions from his paintings, either to resell the inscription part, or to remount the picture with a fake inscription for fraudulent attribution. This dissertation will elaborate on the exploitation of detachability in the Ming art market, and the flexibility and mutability that it brought about to Chinese painting.

Another kind of reaction to ancient discourses regarding painting inscription is to suspend disputes concerning non-inscribed paintings and to actively search for appreciable features from inscribed paintings. Inscriptions are seen as an indispensable element of the art of Chinese painting, because they meet the internal demand of Chinese painters for "a purer, more personal form of self-expression." Purely driven by mental and psychological need, inscriptions afford the painters a spiritual shelter away from mundane affairs, and allow them to concentrate on spiritual improvement and inner tranquility.[33] The relationship between inscriptions and paintings is thus described

32 Zhu Mouyin, *Huashi huiyao, juan* 4, 50a.

33 See Shen C.Y. Fu et al., *Traces of the Brush: Studies in Chinese Calligraphy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 179.

as "organic," "harmonious," and "integrated". However, the above case of Xiang Yuanbian easily subverts these naive assumptions, and underpins the complexity of the relationship between inscriptions and paintings. Aesthetic concern is not always the only incentive that drove an inscriber to wield his brush. The Manchu ruler Emperor Qianlong's 乾隆 (r. 1736-1796) inscriptions on his imperial collections, for example, go beyond the interpretive capacity of the aesthetic framework.

The issue of inscriptions also prompts a review of art history's modern publishing practices. It is interesting to see that museum catalogues occasionally omit Emperor Qianlong's inscriptions, but include others. This exclusion has to do with modern curators and collectors' strident attitude towards the aesthetic quality of the emperor's creations.[34] But these criticisms are largely emotional rather than rationally academic treatment. They fail to see that these inscriptions are about canon formation – essentially a matter of taste. This example evidences that the understanding of inscription shapes the knowledge of painting and, more importantly, conditions our way of dealing with paintings. On the other hand, the neglect of inscriptions currently results in problematic methods of labelling and publishing Chinese paintings. For example, it is common for only the image part (fig. 0-2) of a long handscroll to be published, while omitting a dozen inscriptions (fig. 0-3) followed the image. This kind of minimizing way of publishing Chinese paintings distorts the original appearance of artworks and deprives readers of a chance to learn how a Chinese painting should have been appreciated and handled. In a sense, it is much more problematic than publishing a Renaissance Italian painting without the picture frame, although the omission of a frame is also controversial. Unfortunately, this kind of publishing has been accepted, and so far there has been no serious discussion of this matter.

34 Such criticisms can be found, for example, in Michael Sullivan, *The Three Perfections*, 22. Xu Bangda, "Shiwen tiba" 詩文題跋 , *Zhongguo shuhua* 中國書畫 , No. 6 (2011): 74; Zhou Jiyin, *Zhongguo hualun jiyao* 中國畫論輯要 (Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 1981), 603.

Modern publishing and curatorial practices are not central to this dissertation; but, I hope it can provoke some reflection on the issue of how we catalogue a painting that contains multiple inscriptions, the length of which may even exceed the length of the picture section, and also on the issue of exhibition, i.e. which part of a work (if the entire length exceeds the space allowed) should be displayed.

Resources and Methods

The beginning of this introduction mentioned two sources of inscriptions: inscriptions *on* paintings and *in* textual anthologies. The two sources represent the twofold nature of inscriptions: they are physical objects, on the one hand, and texts that existed either orally or in a written way, on the other. It should be noted that my investigations into inscriptions as objects entail materials from both sources, i.e. from paintings and textual books. Even though inscriptions in textual books are separated from the context of painting, I will show that these inscriptions may continue to fulfill social functions with regard to the distribution of the books that presented the inscriptions as purely literary objects.

Painting inscriptions began to feature in individual collected writings early in the history. The distinguished Tang writer Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846), who was unusual in taking a large hand in editing his own literary anthology, included nine poetic inscriptions. Certainly Bai Juyi is a rare case among Tang writers, since that the majority of the anthologies of Tang texts were out of the collecting and editing efforts of the Song people. In these anthologies of Tang poets and poems produced in the Song era, some dozens of Tang poetic inscriptions survive. In Han Yu's 韓愈 (768-824) *The Anthology of Mr. Changli* (*Changli xiansheng ji* 昌黎先生集) published around mid-thirteenth century, one can find two such poems respectively entitled "A Eulogy to A Portrait of Mr. Gao" (Gao jun huazan 高君畫贊) and "A Painting of Moon"

(huayue 畫月.) Moreover, as this thesis will discuss in chapter 4, in the twelfth century, several selective anthologies emerged, which thoroughly or partially dedicated to poetic inscriptions.

The Ming era saw a notable proliferation of painting inscriptions. This undoubtedly has to do with a much higher rate of textual survival compared to the writings from the pre-Ming eras. But it is also true that the anthologies of the Ming literati, particularly those who lived in or near to the artistic hubs in the Jiangnan area, manifested an unparalleled enthusiasm in creating and compiling painting inscriptions. An anthology of Shen Zhou, compiled by the famous late Ming writer Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664) in 1644, contains 505 poems, 29 ci-poems, and 40 proses, out of which there are 87 poetic inscriptions and three prose inscriptions. The proportion of poetic inscriptions in this collection has reached over 17%.

In individual anthologies, it is not rare that painting inscriptions are scattered throughout an entire book. For example, in the above anthology of Shen Zhou of eight fascicles, which is organized by textual genres, one may find inscriptions from the very beginning of the book until the last several pages. Poetic style was the most popular way of sorting out poems in an anthology in the Ming time. In terms of non-poetic painting inscriptions (in the styles of prose, eulogy, rapsody, or ci-poetry), Ming writers tended not to distinguish them from other kinds of inscriptions. In the two anthologies of a powerful fifteenth century official named Wang Zhi 王直 (1379-1462), for example, one can find that their last fascicles are devoted to the writings of "*tiba* 題跋", literally "inscriptions and colophons." These *tiba* writings cover a wide range of subjects ranging from paintings, calligraphic works and books, to imperial mandates, poems, prefaces, epitaphs, and other forms of texts. I will return to Wang Zhi and his anthology in chapter 5. In a similar way, in the prose section of Shen Zhou's collection, painting inscriptions are mixed with other genres of inscriptions, such as colophons to book and Buddhism manuscripts, and inscriptions on steles, and certain

sites. This is also the case in a series of late Ming books whose titles contain *tiba*. Examples include two compilations of the well-known Ming printer Mao Jin 毛晉 (1599-1659) by two Song lierary giants, namely *Inscriptions and Colophons by Mr. Shangu* (*Shangu tiba* 山谷題跋) by Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), and *Inscriptions and Colophons by Mr. Hui'an* (Hui'an tiba 晦庵題跋) by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1220).

At the same time, some compilations dealing exclusively with painting inscriptions appeared in the late Ming. This was the first time that writers compiled their own inscriptions in specialized anthologies. These anthologies represented a new precedent for painting inscriptions as an independent genre of inscriptions or texts. I will elaborate this point in chapter 4. In short, inscriptions whether scattered in an anthology or put together in an anthology, have provided this dissertation with a crucial source of research subjects.

Since the earliest research in this field by Aoki Masaru, textual genres have been used to categorize inscriptions. Aoki divides inscriptions into four groups: (1) "picture eulogies" (*huazan* 畫讚); (2), "poems on paintings" (*tihua shi* 題畫詩); (3) "records of paintings" (*huaji* 畫 記); and (4) "colophons" (*tiba* 畫 跋).[35] This categorization, however, is a mixture of different standards, ranging from the literary genre and inscribing place on the painting to verse-and-prose. Charles Hartman, who focuses exclusively on poetic inscription, has developed a categorization based on the content. He classifies poetic inscriptions into five groups: (1) poems as a literal description of the painting; (2) poems that use the painting as a discourse on a topic not directly generated by the painted image; (3) poems that allegorically correlate the painted image with another image or thing; (4) poems that extol the skill of the painter, and provide a discourse on theories of painting or painting history; and (5) poems that served to mark the social occasion of their conveyance from one

35 Aoki Masaru, "Daiga bungaku no hatten" 題画文学の発展 , *Shina gaku* 支那学 , Vol. 9, No. 1 (1937): 1.

owner to another.[36] Hartman's categorization already suggests a way of looking at inscriptions in terms of function: inscriptions can be descriptive, dedicative, laudatory, commemorative, documentary or socially interactive. Although extremely useful in qualifying what forms that inscriptions assumed, the earlier scholarship treats the existence of all inscription production as historically static precedent. In chapter 1, I will briefly outline the inventions of inscriptions genres and the changing popularity of these various genres and their functions.

I briefly categorize the functions that Ming inscriptions assumed into five types: (1) expressing the writer's personal emotion; (2) interacting with the image content; (3) articulating thoughts on art history; (4) providing scholarly notes on painting (ownership, pedigree, provenance); and (5) assuming social purposes, such as dedicating a painting to an event or a person, to acknowledge the commissioner behind the work; to interact with other inscribers or people present at the same event. My research primarily focuses on the fifth group, while also embracing the previous four groups when they entered into the social domain.

The analysis of this dissertation accepts one major restriction. It primarily focuses on one geographical region – the lower Yangzi delta at the juncture of modern Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui – where the majority of existing Ming painting inscriptions were generated. A notable number of cities in this area, such as Suzhou, Jiaxing 嘉興, Songjiang 松江, Nanjing , Hangzhou, and Huizhou prefecture in East Anhui (especially Xiuning 休寧 and She 歙 counties), were deeply involved in the production and circulation of painting inscriptions.[37] Although this dissertation intends a broader geographical coverage, the extreme lack of materials mean that it may only achieve limited results in the areas outside the Jiangnan region.

36 Charles Hartman, "Poetry and Painting," 487.

37 For the artistic importance of this area and the artists activated there in Yuan, Ming and Qing periods, see Marilyn Fu and Shen Fu, *Studies in Connoisseurship: Chinese Paintings from the Arthur M. Sackler Collection in New York and Princeton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 1-13.

The present study tries to avoid some over-used terms in historical studies of China, such as gentry, capitalism, and the like. But classification of people in society is unavoidable. Chinese society developed a scheme of ideal social stratification: *shi* 士, *nong* 農, *gong* 工, *shang* 商, lit., gentlemen, farmers, artisans, and merchants.[38] But a neat distinction between social classes and the homogeneity of one class should be treated with scepticism. By the late Ming time, the distinction between gentlemen and merchants was largely blurred. This study frequently employs words like "elite," "literati," "educated men," and "merchants." The terms "elite" and "literati" refer to a very small population that had received good education and reached level of literacy high enough for them to participate in the civil service examination above the prefectural level. These people were not necessarily office-holders, however. They could also be rural, land-owning gentries, such as Shen Zhou, who enjoyed a relatively steady income and hence were under less pressure to strive for an official rank. Many other educated men, like Xu Wei, were unsuccessful examination aspirants who turned to other spheres for a career. This dissertation does not intend to locate people neatly in a social coordinate. On the contrary, it hopes to reveal the sophistication in people's identity through looking at their interaction with inscriptions. The interaction was influenced by people's social background and, often, there was tension between one's image and who one was in reality.

Literate people, of course, included the reading public and the creative producers of inscriptions. Any description of this group cannot avoid the issue of literacy in the society of late imperial China. The accent on the importance of literacy when studying a society began in the 1960s, but even now, gauging – if not precisely, then generally – the literacy rate of the Ming-Qing period in China remains difficult. So far, an

38 Ch'ü T'ung-tsu has discussed the roots of Chinese stratification in pre-Han social theories and its development after the collapse of feudalism. See "Chinese Class Structure and Its Ideology," in *Chinese Thoughts and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 235-68.

acknowledged consensus is that, in this period, the illiterate population overwhelmed the literate, and this proportional relation is more salient in comparison with Tokugawa Japan before modernization. Wilt L. Idema insightfully proposes that instead of only focusing on the percentage of literate population, we should think about the meaning of the absolute number of the population to a society. Thus, China can be seen as a literate country "not so much because of the high proportion of literacy, but by virtue of the absolute numbers of its literate population."[39] This key population underwent a conspicuous expansion in the Ming period, thanks to the growth of total population, an expanding urban society in which everyday life required higher literate capacity, easier access to books for learning, and the expanded institutionalization of preparation for civil service examinations for official recruitment. This group of people who can read and write form the potential producers, readers, consumers, critics, and interpreters of inscriptions. As a social history of painting inscriptions, this dissertation also sheds light on the constitution of the educated community in Ming society and reveals its complexity and diversity rather than taking it as an undifferentiated and homogeneous group.

It should be noted that the inscribing and other relevant social cultural, and commercial activities that this thesis dealt with are male dominated. This does not mean that Ming women played no part in these activities. Several surviving paintings were painted by female courtesans and inscribed by the male acquaintances from their circles. One such example now preserved in Shanghai Museum is by a late Ming courtesan Xue Susu 薛素素 (ca.1564-1637) active in Nanjing. Inscribing enabled communications between the genders at that period, but it is rare to see female inscriptions on existing Ming paintings and in anthologies. The focus of this dissertation on male activities is due to the nature of the resources available.

39 Wilt L. Idema, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction: The Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), LI.

Ming: A Shifting Period

Why does the Ming period deserve special attention? What distinguishes the Ming period from the times before and after? The above examples of the Xie brothers and Xiang Yuanbian already demonstrate a vigorous tendency among Ming people to accompany texts with paintings, based on the idea that inscriptions would and should enjoy circulation and transmission in the future. But what distinguished the Ming era in history is a breakthrough in terms of disseminating inscriptions in the form of printed book.

Li Rihua 李日華 (1565-1635), a retired late Ming official, printed a one-volume book, probably in the late 1610s, in his hometown of Jiaxing, a city situated in the heart of the prosperous lower Yangzi delta. This small book, which has been overlooked in all previous studies in various fields, is dedicated exclusively to 233 of Li's own painting inscriptions. The book merits our attention for being the first known individual anthology of painting inscriptions and the first imprinted anthology in China. Two decades later, one of the most important Ming printers Mao Jin, who ran a printing studio in Changshu 常熟 County of Suzhou Prefecture, 100 kilometres to the north of Jiaxing, printed another book of painting inscriptions This book, printed around 1640, is also in small scale. It culls 29 anecdotes and 137 poems by Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301-1374), an outstanding Yuan poet-painter who enjoyed a great reputation in the late Ming period. Mao Jin captioned the poem inscriptions in the book as *Tihua shi*. If naming and categorizing represent a way of conceptualizing, this caption is an indication that painting inscriptions had already been conceived as a specific subgenre of poetry.

Apart from these two books, the early seventeenth century saw several other similar books of inscriptions. Most of them came from the Jiangnan area, while a few connected with other regions in the north of the empire, such as Beijing, Kaifeng 開封 and Shandong. These books can tell us the dynamics of

inscriptions as much as paintings carrying inscriptions can. A freshly made inscription forms the end of a textual composition. It is also the beginning of the subsequent textual circulation and dissemination. These processes centred on inscriptions engaged the time and money of numerous painters, calligraphers, writers, and publishers. The inscriptions, in turn, tell us a great deal about their own genesis and that of the paintings, the readings they received, the reader's tastes and expectations, and the communications of different geographical regions of the empire and people of different social status.

Under the disciplinary framework of modern scholarship, research on painting inscriptions falls into more than one discipline: it is literary, historical, and art historical. This multi-disciplinary attribute somehow marginalizes inscriptions to the periphery of each discipline. Regarding Ming inscriptions as a body of texts that existed long before the notions of art and art history was introduced to China, this dissertation looks into a variety of social, economic and discursive issues, too seldom associated with the history of inscriptions. In sum, it is less important for us to pass judgement on inscriptions than to reconstruct the environments in which inscriptions were executed and conceived throughout the Ming period.

Firstly, for the Ming people, the value of inscriptions rested in literariness. Both Li Rihua's and Mao Jin's books manifest a strong preference for inscriptions of poetic value. More than half of Mao Jin's book is dedicated to poems, as is the vast majority of Li Rihua's book contents (221 out of 235 entries). Despite the fact that non-poetic inscriptions also abounded in the Ming period, it seems that poetic inscriptions enjoyed obvious favour over all the other genres. This study is less interested in assessing the literariness of Ming inscriptions within this established hierarchy. Rather, it is concerned with the constitution and formulation of this hierarchy and the social meaning of the literariness in building interpersonal ties and nursing a sense of community.

Secondly, the materials and forms of inscriptions invite an

investigation of inscriptions from the perspective of material culture. As previously mentioned, Ming people experienced growing access to inscriptions via books. Scholars of Chinese book history have yielded rich scholarship on the relation between book formats and reading experiences. It is not surprising that a reader in the sixteenth century, reading from a "thread" bound (*xianzhuang* 線裝) book would have an experience quite different from a reader in the seventh century reading from a manuscript scroll. Since the Tang period, successive formats have derived from the scroll form, all of which share a common principle of dividing a text into segments on discontinuous leafing. The evolution of the book form diminished the importance of recitation, while critically enabling the reader to jump to specific sections or to jump between sections. The end point of this evolution – thread binding – is believed to have largely facilitated rapid reading.[40] Even though the scroll died out as the primary format of book, it was sustained as a main form of painting. The role of scroll in the field of art created an interesting situation where, in the Ming period, painting inscriptions could be read both in bound books and on scrolls. Differences in materials and forms invite our reflection on their potential impact on the reading habits relating to inscriptions. Another observable transition is that an inscription written on a painting tended to invite group reading and, in a way, was embedded in or facilitated social interactions. But inscriptions in the book form encouraged personal reading, either silent or aloud, that did not involve the presence of other people. Moreover, since inscriptions in books are divorced from the visuality, we should also ponder the extent to which this physical separation intrigued new notions of inscriptions and even of paintings.

The inscriptions in Li Rihua's and Mao Jin's books were treasured for their literary value. Meanwhile, there was another

40 For discussions of this topic, see Anne Burkus-Chasson, "Visual Hermeneutics and the Act of Turning the Leaf: A Genealogy of Liu Yuan's *Lingyan ge*," in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. Cynthia J. Brokaw and Chow Kai-wing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 371-416. Note 11 of this essay (in page 411) gives a brief summary to the same topic.

type of book embodying inscriptions; that is, painting catalogues. The painting catalogue was not a new invention in the Ming period. But in comparison with catalogues in the Tang, Song and Yuan periods, which mainly focused on painters and painting contents, Ming catalogues broke a new path. They established inscriptions as a crucial object for the practice of cataloguing. From the mid-sixteenth century, a number of catalogues emerged that systematically document inscriptions in order to produce records of painting and calligraphy works. This dissertation situates these catalogues against a background of the drastic proliferation of inscriptions and a conspicuous expansion of the art market, to explore the motives behind their compilation and publication, and their roles in the art market. The exploration of this question will, in turn, shed light on the extent to which inscriptions shaped the knowledge of painting in the Ming era.

The number of imprinted books of painting inscriptions, including individual anthologies and catalogues, reached ten in the Ming era. This unprecedented number indicates the rise of printing in the production and distribution of inscriptions. Furthermore, it was perhaps for the first time that painting inscriptions engaged such a diverse group of people. Both Li Rihua and Mao Jin could be called *shi*, or gentlemen. The nature of the printing industry meant that it engaged various people, including woodblock carvers, paper and ink providers, printing-shop runners, bookshop runners, transport teams who brought published inscriptions to distribution points, and last but not least, printers. Even the producers came from different backgrounds. Li was a degree-holder living a gentry life, while Mao was an entrepreneur who devoted himself to the commercial world.

Wood-block printing enabled textual duplication and transmission with higher efficiency, larger scale and wider scope. From the angle of literary production, imprinting endeavours could facilitate the formation of a definitive edition of inscriptions, through an influx of dozens, hundreds or even thousands of printed copies with exactly the same content. Most of all, printing

has the potential, as Joseph McDermott suggests, to depersonalize the ownership of knowledge so that "imprints may have escaped the personal ties and claims of their authors."[41] By virtue of the intervention of printing, the once relatively confined accessibility to painting inscriptions could be opened up.

On the other hand, printing is, arguably, all about profits. Mao Jin's publication is the most evident example that was targeted at commercial value. The book offered the reader vivid anecdotes and poetic painting inscriptions by Ni Zan, the Yuan artist who enjoyed great veneration at that time. Underneath the production, circulation and consumption of such a book was the power of commerce, and that power was disruptive to the social elite's exclusive monopoly of inscriptions. In the pre-Ming era, inscriptions were largely confined to a privileged circle comprised of royal family members, high court officials and wealthy educated gentries. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, commercial printing welcomed anyone. Whether someone had access to paintings with inscription or not, they could nevertheless afford a small book of inscriptions. A major group among these new readers was merchants and educated men of minor social status. In this sense, inscriptions offered historians an excellent sample of the social change of the Ming era.

While commercialization and printing began to change some long existing aspects of painting inscription, interpersonal relationships still played an irreplaceable part. Li Rihua prepared his inscriptions in a book, a form that could be easily presented to friends. His inscriptions reveal his everyday life to the reader: teasing wife and children, celebrating festivals with relatives, visiting Buddhist monks, preparing presents for friends, fulfilling reciprocal requests, and so on. 55% of the entries (131 out of 235) in this anthology have dedications. These dedications, either in a poem title or an additional comment, all explicitly acknowledge the name of the recipients. It is possible to reconstruct a considerable part of Li Rihua's contacts based on these names.

41 Joseph P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 119.

Li Rihua later published a sequel under the same title, and another two-fascicle (*juan* 卷) anthology of inscriptions in collaboration with his son. These books quickly captivated a number of followers in their circle. A disciple of Li Rihua, under the sponsorship of several friends, managed to print his own anthology of inscriptions. Unfortunately, the number of copies of these books and the pattern of their distribution remain unknown. But they were presumably initially generated for people closely connected to the authors. Such inscriptions moved away from equal readers to readers who had connections with the author. It seems contradictory that inscriptions of the Ming era on the one hand had less purchase on interpersonal relationships because of the power of commerce, while on the other hand grasped the sociality more firmly and strategically. The tension between the two directions suggests that they might not be mutually exclusive but emphatically parallel on different levels. It is logical to infer that Li Rihua might reserve a certain number of imprinted copies of his book of inscriptions for people that he had associations with, while the rest were to be sold.

In a quantitative sense, Ming painting inscriptions underwent a remarkable proliferation. This deserves attention for the extent to which this quantitative growth had an effect on the perception of inscriptions and of paintings. On the one hand, inscriptions were so conventionalized that they seemed to have become a prerequisite for a qualified literati painting. On the other hand, disfavour of inscriptions, though less obvious, also existed. *Painting Model Book by Mr. Gu* is a representative example. Counter voices like this undermine the ostensibly overwhelming victory of the advocates of inscription. Another notable phenomenon is that Ming and Qing art criticism on painting inscription seldom questioned the necessity and legitimacy of this art form to be added into paintings. The criticism was primarily concerned with a technical issue: how to locate the place on a picture surface that should be reserved for the coming inscription. To a large degree, the criticism is practical rather than theoretical, engendered in a

context demanding reflection on the compositional balance of one or several texts with an image on the painting surface.

The above aspects will be focal points in this dissertation. It explores Ming inscriptions as texts and objects of diverse functions and histories, and as a field that enabled various interactions, competitions, and creations of participants from different social backgrounds. The participants ranged from affluent social elite, literary men in pursuit of literary achievement, to painting enthusiasts who sought an easily learned tactic to prove their connoisseurship, minor painters supported by patrons, book printers targeting profits, individuals who wanted to demonstrate their cultivation and elegant public connections, and aspirants who wanted to join any one of these groups. In the Song dynasty, the literati proclaimed that a true painting could only be based on cultural refinement. Their statement excluded the rise of professional painters from the discursive domain. The Ming educated men, however, confronted a much harder situation, because their own elite identity was in flux. An examination of inscriptions emphatically sheds light onto the intellectual history of this shifting period in the history of China.

Dissertation Structure

For a better understanding of Ming painting inscriptions, it is useful to, first, briefly trace the development of inscriptions in the pre-Ming era. A number of issues are the primary concern of chapter 1: the terms that were used to denote "inscription" in Chinese; the origin and subsequent development of inscriptions; the inscribers as a mixed group; the formation of an obvious preference for poetic inscriptions; and the ideal of the "Three Perfections."

Chapter 2 contextualizes Ming inscriptions in the circumstances in which they were produced. This chapter first examines the physicality of inscriptions in relation to painting

formats and functions. It is also concerned with diverse occasions that expected or demanded inscriptions in the everyday life of inscribers. It will examine how social interactions intrigued the creation of inscriptions, and defined their form and content, and how inscriptions, in turn, enacted human relations. The end of this chapter will focus on one particular scenario of social interaction – reciprocity – in order to examine inscriptions as an apparatus for negotiating painting requests and reciprocal obligations.

Chapter 3 explores the functions of inscriptions in the Ming art market. It will show that inscriptions, on the one hand, facilitate the transaction and circulation of paintings by providing crucial information about the paintings' authorship and pedigree. On the other hand, forgers also exploited inscriptions containing deceptive information in order to produce fake paintings. Meanwhile, un-inscribed paintings became a problem for some people in the art market as they lacked information for identification. For others, though, these paintings were advantageous. This chapter will show that these commercial exploitations of inscriptions were often interwoven with or motivated by social concerns. With various people in the Ming society able to read and write inscriptions, and with a developing awareness of the functionality of inscriptions, the late Ming cultural elite started to question the validity of equating inscriptions with cultural superiority. Inscriptions also existed in the market domain in the form of painting catalogues. These catalogues indicate that inscriptions had become a significant source of knowledge in the Ming connoisseurship circle. By examining the contents and forms of these catalogues, this chapter probes into their motivation and function as a pattern of preserving and using inscriptions among Ming connoisseurs.

The fact that a few catalogues of inscriptions were printed leads us to the production and dissemination of inscriptions in the world of printing. Chapter 4 scrutinizes the compilations and publications of literary anthologies of Ming inscriptions. It builds on chapter 2's elaboration of the complexity of Ming painting

inscriptions in terms of the fact that these imprinted books of inscriptions gave a much larger public access to the inscriptions than inscriptions on paintings could ever have attained. To situate these Ming books in a broader historical scope, this chapter also examines pre-Ming anthologies and a post-Ming anthology commissioned by the imperial court. The inclusion of these two anthologies from either side of the Ming period provides a reference for the Ming endeavors.

Chapter 5 adds the dimension of time to the social lives of inscriptions, a point that Xie Chengju's poem has made explicit. Portraiture, a particular genre of painting, affords a platform on which we can observe how Ming inscriptions negotiated the self in society, social intercourses in the moment, the painted subjects in the past, and the audience in the future. Another scenario that accentuates time in the production and reception of inscriptions is re-inscription. The act of re-inscribing a painting once painted or examined exposed the inscriber in a reflection of the self with the past and provoked him, in a sense, to speak further to the future. This chapter probes the provocative power of inscriptions that, with the assistance of the materiality of Chinese painting, permitted one who re-inscribed a painting to intervene in the here and now, as well as there and then.