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Chapter 3 Painting Inscriptions with Commercial Functions in the Ming Art Markets

Painting inscriptions also had an economic dimension. The central aim of this chapter is to understand the great proliferation and popularity of painting inscriptions in the Ming period in the framework of commercial production and circulation of art. It examines what happens when an inscription was an outcome of a commercial process; that is to say, who produced it? And for what purposes? When a painting bearing an inscription entered the art market, how was the inscription appreciated and evaluated, and how did the results have an effect on the painting? What social factors underpin the employment of inscriptions for commercial purposes? With these questions in mind, my ultimate aim is to reveal the social relations that the markets created in exchange, circulation and consumption of inscriptions.

In this chapter, I will start by providing a brief review of terminology in order to clarify the terms used in this discussion. This is followed by a short introduction to the general situation regarding Ming art markets. Armed with this knowledge, this chapter probes those painting inscriptions that functioned to enhance the authenticity of entire artworks. This function was facilitated by a diverse group of people - artists, collectors, connoisseurs, forgers – all of whom exploited inscriptions for their own purposes and, in the course of which, formed or represented various relations. The second part of this chapter turns to another form of inscriptions. The Ming period saw no less than ten catalogues of inscriptions. These works shaped the notion of “painting inscription” and determined ways of appreciating an inscription. Moreover, their reproduction and power in terms of spreading references for potential consumers in the reading community stimulated forgers to join the game.

Issues of Authenticity

The answer to the question that how we can ascertain whether an artwork is genuine or fake lies in terminology as much as in scientific detection. English offers us many words to describe something as “not authentic”, albeit with subtle differences in semantics. “Replica” and “imitation”, for example, are usually applied to artworks made and displayed for educational purposes, such as in a school or a museum. “Facsimile” and “duplication” are more neutral and are without any emotional meaning or value judgement. The word “copy” refuses to provide information regarding the intention of image making. Its boundary with “forgery,” a word that has a strong negative connotations, is very ambiguous. What differentiates the two is intention: the fraudulent intent is where a forgery starts. A “copy” of Rubens, by contrast, is exempt from various negative charges; however, once a copy is claimed to be real, it becomes a “fake”.¹ Artefacts made with fraudulent intentions abound. Many copies may not initially have been created deceptively, but they become “forgeries” in later circulation.

Ancient Chinese discourse has also yielded a number of terms related to authenticity and forgery. In Ming writings, *yan* 贗 is an adjective commonly used to denote “fake” and “counterfeit”. *Yan* mainly appears in art-related words such as *yanben* 贗本 (spurious copy), *yanpin* 贗品 (fake), *yanbi* 贗筆 (fake, ghost-writing or ghost-painting), and sometimes in words not relevant to art such as *yanyu* 贗語 (fabrication), *yanbi* 贗幣 (counterfeit coin). In comparison, *wei* 偽 is a much more multi-functional adjective and a verb. As an adjective, *wei* means “false”, “bogus”, “illegal” and “hypocritical”. It can combine words about objects to form compound words, such as *weizuo* 偽作 (fake), *weishu* 偽書 (ancient books of dubious authenticity, or false documents), *weibi* 偽幣 (counterfeit coin). Furthermore, it suggests that something

¹ Mark Jones et al., *Fake? The Art of Deception* (London: British Museum Trustees, 1990), 50.

may be “illegitimate” or “illegal” when used in *weichao* 偽朝 (illegitimate regime) and *weitai* 偽態 (hypocritical attitude). In short, *yan* stresses factual inauthenticity in opposition to *zhen* 真 (real, genuine), while *wei* implies an intention behind an act or an object, which is fraudulent, deceptive, or a situation that is usurping or illegitimate. In the field of painting, *yan* has higher frequency.

Ming writings also feature neutral words – *mo* 摹 (trace), *lin* 臨 (copy), *fang* 仿 (imitate), and *zao* 造 (invent) – that can be applied to objects that are “not authentic” without critical implication. In fact, these four verbs are basic Chinese painting techniques.² In contrast to the current notion that views imitation as equivalent to a lack of originality, Ming literati painters felt no embarrassment at all about imitating. Indeed, they regarded it as an essential way of learning from ancient masters and explicitly used the name of the artist whose style they had emulated when titling their own works. Of the four words, *fang* was the most favoured. To the late Ming critics Dong Qichang and Shen Hao, *fang* represented a high level of imitation in terms of spirit rather than the form.³ Any similarity between an imitation and its original model was praiseworthy. In a self-inscription on a hanging scroll, the Suzhou painter Lu Zhi 陸治 (1496-1576) proudly accentuates his efforts to make the work resemble the Yuan master Ni Zan: “In my youthful years I liked to imitate the ink method of Yun-lin. Mr. Wen, the academician (Wen Zhengming), remarked that I barely succeeded in achieving some resemblance. [...] So I selected a piece of old window paper and did this painting in imitation. My friend was kind enough to say that it was truly a quick and close resemblance.”⁴ This boastful

2 For the relation between these techniques and Chinese painters, see Joseph R. Levenson, “The Amateur Ideal in Ming and Early Ch’ing Society: Evidence from Painting,” in *Chinese Thought and Institution*, ed. John K. Fairbank (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 30.

3 Han Xueyan, “Songting shanse: Jiaowang yu yingchou zhong de Shen Zhou ‘fang Ni shanshui’ tushi” 松亭山色：交往與應酬中的沈周‘仿倪山水’圖式, *Yishu baijia* 藝術百家, No. 4 (2007): 70.

4 The inscription is on *Daoist Retreat in Mountain and Stream (Landscape after Ni Zan)*, hanging scroll, dated 1567, ink on paper, 109.1 × 45.8 cm, The Cleveland

inscription conveys an idea shared by Ming literati painters: a consummate imitation definitely deserves compliments from its audience.

For the sake of comprehensibility, it would be to use English terms such as “fake” and “forgery”, rather than inserting Chinese transcriptions or coining new phrases. It should be noted that the derogatory connotations of “illegal” and “lack of originality” in the English words “fake”, “forgery”, or “counterfeit” are missing in the general usages of the aforementioned Chinese words. As I will show, in Ming China, social distinction was reproduced via a discursive system of taste, “discerning eyes”, and knowledge. The “fake” and “forgery” employed in my writing may require pause for reflection in specific contexts. Such diction is certainly expedient, and we should always be conscious about the complexity of this issue. In any case, being “unreal” is a continuum with subtle nuances and absolute “forgery” just one extreme. I will show in this chapter that in the Ming painting world, a “not authentic” painting existed in various situations, and inscriptions were usually an efficient apparatus for creating or coping with these situations.

Art Markets

Art markets gained momentum from the fifteenth century when the national economy recovered from the destructive warfare and the suppression that had occurred in the early years of the dynasty. The markets particularly thrived in south Jiangsu and north Zhejiang and radiated to Anhui and Jiangxi, the home of rich merchants.⁵ This area is renowned for busy networks of

Museum of Art. Translation quoted from Wai-kam Ho, *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collection of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and The Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980), 234-35.

5 The flow of artworks differs from the flow of consumable goods in that the former has constant hiatus. Wan Muchun, in his study on Li Rihua, tags the pattern of Li's collecting activities as non-commerciality because the works Li Rihua collected rarely returned to the market during his lifetime. See

commerce. Most of the extant historical sources come from this area; moreover, we still know little about markets in other areas. Thus, this section is emphatically based on the Jiangnan art market.

The art market in the economically flourishing Jiangnan area featured a rapid flow of objects. A Huating 華亭 scholar, He Liangjun 何良俊 (1506-1573), stated that his family once possessed dozens of Song calligraphies, but within a few decades the entire collection had dispersed.⁶ He Liangjun was a frustrated examination aspirant. He spent many years in Nanjing and Suzhou, and befriended quite a few of the cultural elite there, including the art doyen Wen Zhengming and Wen's disciple Lu Shidao 陸師道 (1510-1573). His statement regarding the rapid accumulation and distribution of artworks illustrates the considerable scale of art transactions at that time.⁷ We also have solid facts from the collectors. The most distinguished art collector of the era, Xiang Yuanbian, established an extraordinary collection in Jiaxing, north Zhejiang. This collection dispersed soon after his death. Li Rihua, a townsman of Xiang Yuanbian, wrote a diary between 1609 and 1616. The diary provides valuable testimony that during these eight years, this enthusiastic connoisseur had examined 691 paintings and 12 albums.⁸ Many of them were for sale.

Confucian teachings discouraged educated Ming men from explicitly talking about money. But those in the art markets faced a dilemma because money was a factor that they had to deal with. Xiang Yuanbian was obviously sensitive about money. He carefully inscribed the prices he paid for paintings on new acquisitions. Pricing had already become common practice. In

Weishuixuan li de xianjuzhe – Wanli monian Jiaxing de shuhua shijie 味水軒裏的閑居者——萬歷末年嘉興的書畫世界 (Beijing: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 2008), 109. Many literati collectors engaged themselves in a similar manner. However, the hiatus of the flow of artworks resulted in even greater pressure on the markets in terms of meeting the demands.

6 He Liangjun, *Siyouzhai congshuo* 四友齋叢說 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 244.

7 For the circulation of *Foxglove Broth Letter*, see Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, 146.

8 Wan Muchun, *Weishuixuan li de xianjuzhe*, 91.

Treatise of Superfluous Things, one of the most important Ming writings on material culture, Wen Zhenheng, the great-grandson of Wen Zhengming, educates his contemporary readers about what would be considered a reasonable price for an ancient art piece.⁹ He listed the prices of calligraphies according to word count and script, which were probably average prices recognized by his contemporary collectors.

Pricing was an indication of the accessibility of the painting. Theoretically, anyone with enough money could purchase an artwork. Moreover, pricing actually facilitated the dissemination of the elite's artistic creations. This suggestion of equality, however, should be considered with caution. Ming art markets, especially high markets, did not exclude personal connection as a factor in gaining access to artworks. Valuable antiques and contemporary works were often brought from a familiar dealer rather than from an antique shop. Li Rihua's diary is rich in records of his associations with dealers. Social networks also disseminated information: for example, Xiang Yuanbian learnt about a monk's possession of a calligraphy work by Zhao Mengfu through his personal information network. In order to acquire this precious piece, he sent an instruction letter to a friend (who was probably an agent). He asked the friend either to urge the monk to come, or to personally pay a visit to the monk.¹⁰ In this chapter, we will learn more from inscriptions about how commercial activities for an anonymous audience and commercial activities with acquaintances were interwoven in Ming art markets.

The merchants were the foundation of a market. Some art merchants in the Ming period ran small businesses in the form of mobile stalls and fixed shops. *Going Upriver on the Qingming Festival* (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河圖) attributed to Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494-1552) depicts these two forms of enterprise. (fig. 3-1). People from the upper class purchased stuff from these

9 The entry "Shuhua jia" 書畫家, Wen Zhenheng, *Zhangwu zhi jiaozhu* 長物志校注, annot. Chen Zhi (Nanjing: Jiangsu kexue jishu chubanshe, 1984), 139-40.

10 Zhang Luquan and Fu Hongzhan eds., *Gugong cang Ming Qing mingren shuzha moji xuan*, 437.

places. Li Rihua, for example, once bought a landscape painting by Shen Zhou at a stall inside a temple in Hangzhou.¹¹ But Wan Muchun's research (2008) convincingly demonstrates that scholar-connoisseurs like Li Rihua relied much more on door-to-door peddlers to access artworks. Li had regular interactions with a few serious art dealers who targeted the elite and merchant collectors.



Fig. 3-1 A scene depicting an antique shop at Suzhou city selling painting, detail of *Going Upriver on the Qingming Festival*, attributed to Qiu Ying, ink and colour on silk, 30.5 × 987 cm, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang.

On the other hand, Ming merchants played an important role as influential art patrons and collectors. They became a powerful force in the field of art independent of the royal family, high officials and religious sites. The idea of merchants and the urban rich as patrons of elite artists has recently attracted increasing interest from academia. Shih Shou-ch'ien studied Wen Zhengming's poems, written in Wen's sojourn in Beijing. He discovered that most of the recipients of Wen's poems were not from the official classes, but were rather from new wealthy families.¹² Among these *nouveau riche*, the affluent Huizhou

11 Li Rihua, *Liuyan zhai biji* 六研齋筆記, juan 1, SKQS edition, 4a.

12 Shih Shou-ch'ien, "Calligraphy as Gift," 274-75.

merchants were a particularly vital group.¹³ Huizhou Prefecture – an administrative division comprising one prefecture city and six counties – is in Eastern Anhui, adjacent to the southwest part of the traditional Jiangnan area. The prefecture was on hilly ground, hence not suitable for agriculture. Thus, people living there generally turned to commerce. In the Ming time many of them became very successful merchants. Jason Chi-sheng Kuo observes their increasing power in artistic patronage and collection in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and considers their rise to be an aspect of their “gentrification” process.¹⁴

In a study on the consumptive pattern of luxury goods in late sixteenth to early seventeenth century Suzhou, Craig Clunas notes that buying art was not “buying a purely aesthetic experience, but a form of association with the great names of the past. They were affirming cultural continuity.”¹⁵ Rich Ming merchants aspired to and showed themselves economically able to join in this type of activity. The merchants’ consumption of artworks became a crucial driving force for artistic production and circulation throughout this period. In turn, these mercantile patrons and consumers aimed to self-elevate to the same stratum as the elite. Social and political issues underpinned commercial activities on the basis of a social structure that divided people into four major groups: literati (*shi* 士), farmers, artisans, and merchants. By the fifteenth century, the status barrier had been blurred to some extent by the fact that a certain number of merchant descendants had successfully passed the trial examination and entered the elite echelon. Furthermore, a large portion of educated men who had failed the examination engaged in commerce to earn a living. But the barrier never collapsed completely. In the sphere of art,

13 For the uprising of Huizhou merchants, see Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 126-29.

14 Jason Chi-sheng Kuo, “Hui-chou Merchants as Art Patrons in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Artists and Patrons: Some Social and Economic Aspects of Chinese Painting*, ed. Chu-tsing Li (Lawrence: Kress Foundation Dept. of Art History, University of Kansas, 1989), 179-80.

15 Craig Clunas, “The Informed Eye: An Authentic Fake Chinese Painting,” *Apollo: The International Magazine of the Arts*, (March 1990): 178.

a rarefied field that was tightly controlled by the cultural elite, the more the merchants became a primary force in consuming art products, the more the elite felt pressure to declare their exclusive possession of knowledge and monopoly of symbolic value. This chapter aims to unravel the conflicts, compromise and competition between these two significant social groups that were intensively projected on the consumption, circulation and discourses of painting inscriptions.

Statements of Authenticity

Transporting commodities across long distances entails costs and, as Arjun Appadurai notes, the acquisition of commodities is in itself “a marker of exclusivity and an instrument of sumptuous distinction.” But when the distance between the producer and the consumer shrinks, the issue of exclusivity gives way to the issue of authenticity.¹⁶ Consumers of domestic commodities in Ming art markets were, most of the time, concerned about provenance and quality. Manufacturer’s names were often a key factor in this regard.¹⁷ When “by whom” becomes a consumer’s first concern, names essentially become trademarks. The name served to distinguish one product from its competitors in the marketplace. The manufacturers, in turn, showed notable enthusiasm for putting their names on products. There was a wide range of Ming products bearing names: teapots, rhinoceros horn cups, inksticks, bronze cylindrical censers, zithers (*qin* 琴), and so forth.¹⁸

Paintings were also among products featuring the maker’s name in a bid to appeal to the consumers. Yet, what made literati painting distinct was the phenomenon that a simple signature

16 Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value” to *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 44.

17 Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 58-69.

18 Chu-Tsing Li, “The Artistic Theories of Literati,” in *The Chinese Scholar’s Studio, Artistic Life in the Late Ming Period – An Exhibition from the Shanghai Museum*, ed. Chu-tsing Li and James C. Y. Watt (New York: Thames and Hudson in association with the Asian Society Galleries, 1987), 16.

was often not sufficient. The consolidation of the notion of the “three perfections” resulted in literati painters having to prove their versatility in three aspects – poetry, calligraphy, and painting, in one artwork. At the same time, paintings, especially antique paintings whose identification and stylistic analysis were crucial, often gained appraisal inscriptions in the course of examination and circulation. Appraisal inscriptions, mostly prosaic, implied the “presence” of connoisseurs, and provided consumers with ready means of identification. An inscription issued by a reputable connoisseur would enhance an artwork’s value, not to mention that a high-quality inscription was in itself a precious piece of calligraphy. Ming markets expected a contemporary painting to feature the painter’s autograph. An antique painting should have the writing of a noted connoisseur’s testimony. Both types of inscriptions would facilitate and even stimulate successful consumption of artworks.

Thus, inscriptions meant commercial value. This logic influenced Wen Zhengming’s decision to compensate Tang Yin with a handwritten inscription for lending him two paintings over a long period.¹⁹ The potential value of Wen’s inscription repaid Tang’s reciprocal debt. Painting inscriptions also fostered a particular realm dominated by the Ming cultural elite with their erudition and “taste”. For instance, Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578-1642) recounts that he once saw through a spurious calligraphy using palaeographical knowledge. The work is signed with the name of a Tang figure, Kai Bo 開播. Shen intelligently points out that the signature is a palaeographical misspelling of Guan Bo 關播.²⁰ A well-educated person from a celebrated scholarly family, Shen was capable of penetrating the tricky signature.

The story alerts us to two issues that relating to the high-end market of the Ming era. First, that this spurious painting was apparently a fake. Forgeries lingered on the Ming markets, so much so that sources of authenticity were urgently sought.

¹⁹ Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, 161.

²⁰ Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, 655.

Second, the person who played the trick must have been a literate and educated man, who intended to cheat people less knowledgeable and alert. Behind the scenes of this forger-connoisseur confrontation was the engagement and competition of people from various social backgrounds. The universality among these people was their close attention to inscriptions. The following sections reveal a variety of patterns relating to the exploitation of inscriptions by these people of different backgrounds, all aimed at enhancing authenticity. As we will see, the inscriptions assumed various forms and materiality. They could be physically on the picture, or mounted as a colophon, or transcribed or printed in textual collections. The form and materiality was chosen with remarkable flexibility depending on the production motives at any given moment.

There was no better way to authenticate a fake painting than to add a bogus inscription. Ancient Chinese artists left very few records relating to legal protection or records that they actively pursued lawsuits in cases of infringement. The Yuan master Qian Xuan 錢選 (1235-1305) once resorted to signing a new sobriquet on paintings.²¹ He must have been frustrated when, soon after, fakes bearing his new signature began to emerge.

The situation deteriorated in the middle and late Ming, with innumerable fake antiques and artworks being produced. Since the mid-fifteenth century, Suzhou, a collecting and distributing centre of artistic goods, had become a centre for forgeries. Fakes made by workshops in Suzhou (mostly concentrated near the Chang Gate in the east of the city) earned the nickname: *Suzhou pian* 蘇州片 (Cheating Suzhou products). Good water transport connections facilitated a similar state of affairs in the surrounding area, in places like Songjiang, Jiaxing, Hangzhou and Nanjing. Li Rihua in Jiaxing observed the mingling of genuine and fake items in the local market and boats trading arts (*shuhua fang* 書畫

²¹ The inscription is on Qian Xuan's *White Lotus* (*Bailian tu* 白蓮圖), 32 × 90cm, ink and colour on paper, excavated in 1970 and now preserved in Shandong Provincial Museum, Jinan.

舫) carrying countless “fake and vicious matters.”²² This situation remained the same, if not worsened in his later years.²³

Among these “vicious matters,” fake paintings bearing fake signatures abounded. Elite artists, who often produced paintings with literary self-inscriptions, to some extent offered the markets another source of authenticity. Zhu Yunming once complained that people forged the work of his teacher Shen Zhou. He also noticed that, in the beginning, Shen’s seal stamps were employed as a reference to tell the real from the fake, but dealers and consumers soon found fraudulent stamps rampant. Therefore, they had to turn to the artist’s poetic inscriptions for authentication.²⁴ Compared with seal stamping, an inscribed poem certainly entailed more complexity and hence made forgeries more difficult to produce.

But Zhu Yunming’s observation also testifies to an escalation of forgeries purported to be by Shen Zhou. It is not surprising that Shen Zhou’s poems would soon lose credibility as marks of identification, or at least their credibility was weakened, when people who were able to imitate the literary style and calligraphic style of Shen Zhou joined the game. An obscure painter, Wang Lai 王穉 (1459-1528) may well have been among them. On a scroll painting by Wang Lai, Wen Zhenmeng 文震孟 (1574-1635) left an inscription mentioning the similarity of his painting style to that of Shen Zhou. “Because Wang is unknown to the art circle,” Wen claims, “his signatures were always cut off from paintings with the hope to pass them as the works of Shen Zhou.”²⁵ Yang Wencong 楊文驄 (1594-1646) inscribed another colophon dated 1615, probably soon after Wen’s. Yang also notices a confusing resemblance between Wang Lai and Shen Zhou. He further writes

22 Li Rihua, *Weishuixuan riji*, juan 7, 468.

23 Li Rihua’s writing *Notes of Six-Inkstone Studio* (*Liuyanzhai biji* 六硯齋筆記) records many observations of fakes that the author had seen and examined in his later years.

24 Zhu Yunming, “Ji shitian xiansheng hua” 記石田先生畫, in *Zhu Zhishan quanji* 祝枝山全集 (Taipei: Hansheng chubanshe, 1972), 65.

25 Chen Zhuo 陳焯 (1733-1809), *Xiangguan zhai yushang bian* 湘管齋寓賞編, juan 5, *Yishu congbian chubian* 藝術叢編初編 edition, comp. Yang Jialuo, Vol. 19 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1962), 361.

that Wang always signs *Shitian* 石田 (Shen Zhou's sobriquet, lit. "Stone Field") on his own works because he "is cultured and unrestrained and entertains nobody but himself. He is too self-disciplined to boast himself to the world."²⁶ At that time, the scroll was owned by a descendant of Wang Lai, which could explain why both Wen Zhenmeng and Yang Wencong are so careful with their words. The excuses that they found for Wang Lai, nonetheless, sounds fairly far-fetched and is clearly a euphemistic reference to Wang masquerading as an active forger of Shen Zhou's work.

Forgers in the Markets

Wang Lai leads us to the issue of the forgers in the Ming art markets. He was a Suzhou recluse without any scholarly degree or official title. According to an epitaph written by Wen Zhengming, he was quite erudite, and was especially knowledgeable about history. He liked books, tea, chatting with friends, and boating on the lake. It is noteworthy that there is only a rather vague and fleeting mention of Wang Lai's painting skill in this epitaph: "He occasionally chanted poems and painted picture to lodge his interests."²⁷ Was this because the commissioner of this epitaph (we learn from Wen that the commission was placed by Wang Lai's son-in-law) intentionally or unintentionally did not provide the necessary materials to the writer? Or, did the writer avoid mentioning this on purpose? The latter explanation is probably more plausible, as Wang Lai had personal ties to a few senior masters of Wen and perhaps also Wen himself. If Wen Zhengming's great-grandson Wen Zhenmeng knew about his "imitating" business, Wen very likely knew the inside story as well. But he was invited to compose an epitaph, a genre of writing that was expected to conceal unwelcoming facts.

Wang Lai is a good example of a Ming art forger, most of whom were well-educated men. Shen Defu provides us with

²⁶ Ibid., 362.

²⁷ Wen Zhengming, *Wen Zhengming ji*, 1503-1504.

useful testimony:

Antiques have long been the subject of many cases of faking and this is particularly so in Suzhou. Scholars all depend on it to make a living. In recent generations, no one was as refined and pure as Zhang Fengyi 張鳳翼 (1527-1613), yet he could not avoid being involved in it for his livelihood. Wang Zhideng 王穉登 (1535-1612) was totally dependent on these stratagems for his income.²⁸

The two men of letters mentioned in this account – Zhang Fengyi and Wang Zhideng – were, like Wang Lai and Wen Zhengming, unsuccessful examination aspirants. The vast majority of Ming men of letters must have found themselves living in a paradoxical era. On the one hand, the lure of an official rank had intensified to unprecedented levels. In addition to ideological reasons derived from long-standing Confucianism doctrine, the benefits of an official rank would have been very motivating. These benefits included, among other things, exemption from tax, corvée and corporal punishment.²⁹ The number of examination candidates increased strikingly at this time also due to population growth and rising literacy.³⁰ On the other hand, the recruitment quota at the provincial and metropolitan levels remained relatively fixed. Thus, the pass rate had been dropping conspicuously since the fifteenth century. The phenomenon spread throughout the empire. Benjamin Elman's statistical data shows that the ratio of graduates to candidates in Metropolitan Examinations reduced drastically from 200 vs 120 (60%) in 1371 to 4700 vs 300 (6.4%) in 1601. The ratio of

28 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, juan 26, 655. English translation quoted from Craig Clunas, "Connoisseurs and Aficionados: The Real and the Fake in Ming China (1368-1644)," in *Why Fakes Matter: Essays on Problems of Authenticity*, ed. Mark Jones (London: British Museum Press, 1990), 152.

29 Gu Yanwu, "Shengyuan lun" 生員論, *Gu Yanwu quanji* 顧炎武全集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 68-69.

30 For the issue of literacy and communication in written form, see Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 56-65, 179-92, 185-90. For literacy rate in late imperial China, see notes 118-20 of Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

graduates to candidates for provincial examinations in Yingtian 應天 Prefecture declined from 800 vs 88 (11%) in 1393 to 7,500 vs 150 (2%) in 1630, and in the provincial examinations in Zhejiang from 1,800 vs 90 (5%) in 1468 to 3,800 vs 90 (2.4%) in 1607.³¹ In other words, too many educated men were competing for not enough official titles. Obviously, only a very small percentage of people succeeded at *juren* 舉人 (“recommended men”) and *jinshi* 進士 (“advanced scholar”) degrees. The overwhelming majority stopped at the primary level, achieving no more than a *xiucai* 秀才 (“distinguished talent”) degree. These frustrated social climbers had failed to secure a political position, but they were to a greater or lesser extent literate and knowledgeable. Searching for a way out, some of them turned to local politics, like Xu Wei, who took an appointment as private secretary to Commander Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 (1512-1565). More of them went in to the commercial world where they were offered a wide variety of opportunities, as tutors, diviners, astrologers, doctors, legal counsels, and geomancers.

Earning a living from painting was also worth trying. In his later years, after the death of his political patron and the upheaval of his family life, Xu Wei contributed much more time and energy to painting for the marketplace.³² An earlier Ming scholar-painter to practice professionally was Du Jin. Having never accepted any court appointment, he was, as Richard Barnhart notes, “a painter to the landed gentry: born and raised in the gentry class, patronized by that class, and painting pictures that specifically appealed to its tastes and vanities.”³³ Du Jin painted in a refined and polished style, and offered the option of an inscription if the patron desired. His lifestyle attracted a series of followers,

31 For a comprehensive study of civil examination system, see Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 653, 661, 662.

32 For Xu Wei and the economic dimension of his creations, see Kathleen M. Ryor, “Bright Pearls Hanging in the Marketplace: Self-Expression and Commodification in the Painting of Xu Wei,” (PhD diss., New York University, 1998).

33 Richard Barnhart, *Painters of the Great Ming*, 280.

the most famous of whom was Tang Yin. The group of people described can be categorized as *shengyuan* 生員, or “licentiates”; people who despite being well-educated had failed to obtain a degree or were yet to take the examinations. The Ming loyalist Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613-1682) considered this group of people a blight on society and believed that they should have been thoroughly wiped out.³⁴ His harsh criticism gives us an insight into the influence this rapidly expanding social group was having on Ming society as a whole.

Let us return to the above-mentioned figure of Wang Lai. What may surprise modern people is that despite the fact that he was suspected of being a forger of Shen Zhou’s art, he maintained a good relationship with the painter. He also had ties with some of Suzhou elite celebrities, such as Shen Zhou’s close friend Wu Kuan 吳寬 (1435-1504) and his pupil Zhu Yuming.³⁵ Contrary to the modern cliché that forgers are sneaky people, secretly hiding somewhere undertaking illegal doings, Ming forgers, in fact, seem to have enjoyed a peaceful existence and imitated works by people even from their own circles.

Wang Lai is one such example. Another also chose Shen Zhou as a victim. He was Zhou’s younger cousin Shen Yun 沈雲 (b. ca. 1459). We learn Shen Yun’s business from a poem inscription by Zhou, which jests about a forged painting carrying a fake “self-inscription.” Shen Zhou did not learn of this forgery until the moment that the painting owner presented it to him and asked for “another” inscription. It seems that he sensed that this bogus painting was actually from the hands of his cousin. The request gave him an opportunity to mock his cousin’s spurious inscription - “two paragraphs of closely inscribed words in the guise of my name.” Irritated, he compares himself to the great old master Wu Daozi and his cousin with a third-rate imitator of Wu Daozi. He also overtly derides the fake by implying that he was a

³⁴ See Gu Yanwu, “Shengyuan lun,” 68-71.

³⁵ Wu Kuan’s individual collection embodies three poems dedicated to Wang Lai. See *Paoweng jiacang ji*, juan 21, 7a; juan 24, 12a; juan 28, 11a.

victim of this visual pseudograph.³⁶

Living together, the Shen cousins had a close relationship. Both of them had received a good education in Confucian learning and painting. Sadly, Shen Yun failed to make a name for himself in either field and left no record of his examination exploits. Modern researchers Wu Gan and Chen Zhenghong assert that he is probably responsible for the spurious inscription.³⁷ Without solid evidence, though, we can only guess at what motivated him to sign the fake. How did Shen Zhou feel at the moment when he realized that fakes do not always originate from the hands of a stealthy stranger, hidden in an invisible corner, but from the hands of a close family member? Shen Zhou's euphemistic poem, which has a grumbling tone, suggests his feeling. Chen Zhenghong noticed that the poem was included in the manuscript of Shen Zhou's individual collection and was originally entitled "An Inscription for General Xie on a Painting by Shen Caishu" (*Ti Shen Caishu hua wei Xie jiangjun* 題沈才叔畫為謝將軍). The title employs a rather aloof way of naming his cousin, hinting at the poet's anger. Later on, perhaps out of a sense of guilt about such an explicit criticism, Shen Zhou changed this hostile title into a more intimate one "An Inscription for General Xie on a Painting by Brother Yun" (*Wei Xie jiangjun ti yundi hua* 為謝將軍題樸弟畫).³⁸

Unfortunately, the original painting is lost, otherwise we could see a painting on which one inscription denies and invalidates another. The tension between these inscriptions is an excellent illustration of our theme; that is, how educated Ming men employed inscriptions to claiming the authenticity of a painting and, in turn, their relations. Their use of inscription to engage in art forgery demonstrates the appeal of painting inscriptions to an increasingly larger population.

36 Shen Zhou, *Shitian gao*, 599-600.

37 Lou Wei, *Shitian qiuse: Shen Zhou jiazhu de xingsheng yu shuailuo* 石田秋色：沈周家族的興盛與衰落 (Taipei: Shitou chuban, 2012), 142-4; Wu Gan, "Shen Zhou shuhua biannian kaobian" 沈周書畫編年考辨, (PhD diss., Zhejiang University, 1999), 77; Chen Zhenghong, "Bei dashi zhebi de huajia," 130.

38 Chen Zhenghong, "Bei dashi zhebi de huajia," 130.

Problematic Absence: Paintings without Inscriptions

When two artists with similar styles have different market prices, forgers often replace the signature of the lower priced artist with the higher priced one. A European example is Vermeer's (1632-1675) *The Painter in His Studio*, a painting that still bears the fraudulent signature "Peter de Hoogh", an artist whose works in the first half of the nineteenth century were valued much higher than Vermeer's.³⁹ Ming forgers of art applied this scheme often in forging antiques. Once again, inscriptions were utilized as a useful apparatus. The worst affected group of victims was the early Ming academic and professional painters who followed the Song tradition. Their paintings were added spurious Song signatures in order to be passed for creations of earlier masters, and this happened generally since the late sixteenth century, when these painters' reputation declined. The early-seventeenth century connoisseur Gu Fu noticed that in his day, paintings by Dai Jin, Lü Ji 呂紀 (b. 1477), and Lin Liang 林良 (1436-1487) were rarely seen. He knew very well that this was because "the original signatures and seals were washed off and replaced with those of Song men and sold to collectors [as Song paintings]."⁴⁰ Richard Barnhart sorts out a number of examples of this kind of intentional misattribution found in modern museums, and points out that it was since the ascendance of literati painters and connoisseurs from Songjiang and Huating in the fifteenth century that the academic and professional artists were greatly despised and their paintings lost the true identities.⁴¹

This market behaviour indicates a growing sense of localism in the late Ming period, a point to which I will return later. It also underpins a prevailing mania for old paintings. With regard to the art market in the Jiangnan area, which was strongly shaped by the taste of the cultural elite, pre-Yuan paintings and a limited

39 Otto Kurz, *Fakes: A Handbook for Collectors and Students*, 44-45.

40 Gu Fu, *Pingsheng zhuangguan*, juan 10, 458. English translation quoted from Richard Barnhart, *Painters of the Great Ming*, 5.

41 Ibid., 5-6.

number of Yuan masters were highly desirable. Li Rihua has a formulation in which he specifies the most elegant items that could possibly decorate a scholar's studio. The first five categories are:

- 1) Calligraphic works of the Jin and Tang dynasties;
- 2) Paintings of the Five Dynasties, Tang and the Northern Song;
- 3) Archaic calligraphic model rumblings of the Sui, Tang and Song;
- 4) Calligraphy of Su, Huang, Mi and Cai (four most renowned calligraphers of the Song dynasty);
- 5) Yuan paintings.⁴²

Obviously, Li Rihua prefers the old over the recent. Gu Qiyuan 顧起元 (1565-1628), a scholar-official from Nanjing, has a similar formulation that also ranks ancient calligraphies and paintings at the top. Interestingly, the elite also proclaimed that the ability to appreciate something as antique was more important than the ability to purchase it. In this vein, the power of knowledge exceeded the power of money. He Liangjun, for example, sneered at rich Nanjing merchants who showed a fascination for old paintings that was so indiscriminating that they spent copious amounts of money on low-grade Song works or even fakes.⁴³ He Liangjun, though not well-off, was also unable to resist the desire for antiques. In the same writing, he expressed a willingness to invest as much money as possible in an old masterpiece.⁴⁴ But, he was automatically exempt from being attacked as a superficial purchaser, because of his social identity.

The cultural elite's taste influenced the market. The ten most valuable artworks in Xiang Yuanbian's collection, according to his own records of the purchase prices, were nine calligraphies and paintings by pre-Song masters and one artwork by the Ming

⁴² Li Rihua, *Weishuixuan riji*, juan 8, 511.

⁴³ He Liangjun, *Siyouzhai congshuo*, 264.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 255.

painter Shen Zhou.⁴⁵ The markets faced the same problem of meeting the high demand for old paintings. There was a severe shortage of supplies due to their rarity and, to some degree, the difficulties of identifying pre-Yuan paintings, which rarely carried inscriptions.

This shortage, however, offered great opportunities for forgers. Replacing the names of professional Ming painters with Song names was a common trick. There were multiple options: they could add new spurious inscriptions on newly fabricated pictures, or on existing pictures. Or they could tamper with the original inscriptions on existing pictures.

Shen Defu's *Unofficial Finds from the Wanli Era* (*Wanli yehuo bian* 萬曆野獲編, hereafter "*Unofficial*") is an important record in this regard. Shen Defu's family hailed from Jiaking. His grandfather and father – both *jinshi* degree holders – had assumed posts in the central government, so Shen Defu grew up in Beijing. He established a wide circle both in Beijing and Jiaking, ranging from relatives with royal lineage, high-ranking officials and honoured military officers to educated commoners. Completed in 1607, *Unofficial* is a collection of the historical events that Shen Defu witnessed and the anecdotes and gossip that he heard. The book has one section specifically relating to anecdotes about "Old Paintings and Inscriptions" (*Jiuhua wukuan* 舊畫款識). At the beginning of the section, Shen makes his opinion known: "Painting in the ancient time did not attach importance to inscription. But today, credulous people are numerous. Inevitably, prices for uninscribed works are low."⁴⁶ We know that early seventeenth century people generally acknowledged the

45 Craig Clunas, "Appendix II," in *Superfluous Things*, 177-81. Clunas has discussion of Xiang Yuanbian's price-recording-inscriptions and linked them to Xiang's mercantile background, see *ibid.*, 123. For the prices, see also Ūnsuk Chōng, *Xiang Yuanbian de shuhua shoucang yu yishu* 項元汴的書畫收藏與藝術 (Taipei: Wenshizhe, 1984). The price-records are much less than records due to the convention against talking of money, the convention which leads Qing critics scornfully labelled Xiang Yuanbian to vulgarity. See the entry "Huang Luzhi songfengge moji" 黃魯直松風閣墨蹟, Sun Chengze 孫承澤 (1592-1676), *Gengzi xiaoxia ji* 庚子銷夏記, *juan 1* (Fengyu lou 風雨樓叢書 edition), 9a-9b.

46 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, *juan 26*, 658.

function of inscriptions as an index for identifying and evaluating paintings. But this wide acknowledgement forced the elite to reflect their position in inscriptions. Shen Defu's anecdotes are a prism refracting the attitudes and exploitations of inscriptions by different people in late Ming society.

Shen Defu tells a story about how he discovered a very old and shabby handscroll in the marketplace of Nanjing, a painting of a dozen drunken women. He vies with an old woman who also shows interest in the scroll, and hastily carries it back home. His behaviour bewilders his companion, a curio dealer named Xu Jiheng 徐季恒. Shen explains to him the painting he discovers must be a masterpiece of the traditional theme "drunken women." Shen attributes its vivid brushwork and archaic style to the Southern Song painter Ma Hezhi 馬和之 (fl. early 12th century). Shen gives Xu Jiheng the painting to save him from financial difficulties. Xu subsequently resells it to an official for a high price.⁴⁷

This story is ostensibly about the possibility of obtaining a valuable treasure in the marketplace and making a profit. But its key point is about an ability to discern the value of an un-inscribed painting based on the image alone. Shen Defu presents himself as knowledgeable enough to know that the "drunk figure" is a subject that can be traced to the Tang master Yan Linben 閻立本 (601-673). Unlike him, the scroll seller,⁴⁸ the handler Xu Jiheng and the bureaucrat buyer, have little knowledge and so had to rely on an inscription to discern who the painter was. When there is no inscription, they immediately lose their heads and are thus in danger of losing money too. *Ershi*, literally means "people fed with the eras," is the word that Shen used to tag these credulous people that he looked down upon.

The story presented to us is a one-sided narration by Shen Defu. It is unlikely that this scroll was indeed an authentic Ma

⁴⁷ Ibid., 658.

⁴⁸ Shen Defu does not make a clear reference to the identity of the scroll seller. He/she must be a shopkeeper or stall-keeper. People in this position were usually lower class.

Hezhi. In the following story, this satire is more explicit:

There is another friend of mine from a family running an antique business over generations. One day he brought me a big hanging scroll painting. In the painting, amid floors that rise up and palaces that recede, and posed cliffs and steams, is a scantily clad beauty surrounded by a group of women in attendance. [My friend was] puzzled because the painting was non-inscribed. He asked me to name it. I answered: “This is *The Picture of Lady Yang for a Granted Bath in Huaqing Pool*. You can just sign it with the name Li Sixun.” My friend was very joyful. Zhu Liaoshui 朱 蓼 水, an Imperial Academy member from Liaocheng 聊城, appreciated this work very much at the first glance. He bought it for one-hundred-taels. However, originally it was just priced at one tael.⁴⁹

It is very likely that Shen Defu seduced his friend to sign “Li Sixun” on the painting surface. This story once again shows the power of an elite connoisseur’s identification, which could, to a large degree, decide the fate of an artwork in the markets. It is unlikely that the scroll in the story was a real Li Sixun 李思訓 (651-716), seeing that Li’s work was very rare in the late Ming era and hanging scrolls were an unusual format in the painter’s days. It is even doubtful whether Shen Defu really believed his own identification. He probably just “matched” the scroll with a virtuoso of similar style to the best of his knowledge. Exploiting the aura of Li Sixun’s reputation in the commercial world, the signature written at Shen Defu’s behest would play a vital role in promoting this work in the future.

Despite the false painting identification, there was no hint of any guilty conscience from Shen Defu and his curio dealer friend, nor fear that any disclosure might endanger their reputations. Conversely, they seemed quite pleased with themselves. As Craig Clunas notes, the elite believed that shame was something

⁴⁹ Ibid., 658.

for unintelligent consumers rather than knowledgeable and intelligent forgers.⁵⁰ The attitude appears to have been that there was nothing improper about shallow-minded paying high prices for their gullibility.

The forger's exploitation undermined the reliability of inscriptions. On the other hand, once the Ming elite found that non-elite dilettantes were also relying on inscriptions, this reference system immediately became superficial. Wen Zhenheng thus mocked: "When people nowadays see an unsigned painting they immediately add a signature according to its subject matter, in search of a high price. When they see an ox, it must be by Dai Song 戴嵩 (fl. 8th cent.); when they see a horse, it must be by Han Gan 韓幹 (fl. 8th cent.). This is very laughable."⁵¹

A Case Study: *Clearing After Snowfall*

I will now examine a case that comprehensively presents the above mentioned functionalities of inscriptions and human relations around inscriptions. The case is also recorded in "Old Paintings and Inscriptions" in *Unofficial*. I will start with *Unofficial's* narration and then move on to material and historical evidence. *Unofficial* tells of a low-priced scroll that Feng Mengzhen 馮夢禎 (1548-1605), an official-scholar once the head of the Directorate of Education (*Guozijian jiji* 國子監祭酒) in Nanjing, bought from a local official. The scroll does not bear any inscription, which caused Feng Mengzhen difficulties in identifying and dating it. He was only for sure that it was an antique. Feng's coeval connoisseur Dong Qichang, however, marvelled at the work and confidently attributed it as a *chef-d'oeuvre* by Wang Wei who, to Ming aficionados and especially to the circle of Dong Qichang, was among the most venerated art masters. Dong inscribed an exceptionally lengthy colophon for the artwork, lavishing it with praise. The scroll subsequently

⁵⁰ Craig Clunas, "Connoisseurs and Aficionados," 152.

⁵¹ Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 69.

became extremely famous in the Jiangnan area. After Feng Mengzhen's death, his son Feng Quanqi 馮權奇 sold the painting to a rich Huizhou merchant Wu Xinyu 吳心宇 at an exorbitant price of 800 taels of silver.⁵²

Shen Defu in fact misreports Wu's name. This Huizhou merchant is named Wu Xiyuan 吳希元 (1551-1606), *hao* Xinyu 新宇. The price he records is also doubtful. To give a reference, the eminent ancient calligrapher Wang Xizhi's calligraphy cost Xiang Yuanbian 200 taels of silver. This was a princely sum considering that, at that time, it was the equivalent price of 2,166 pounds carp, 16,000 pigs, 20,000 cucumbers for royal sacrifice in Beijing, and for 25 *mu* (approx. 0.15 km²) of land in Huizhou Prefecture.⁵³ Yet, it was probably the case that Wu Xiyuan bid a sky-high price for the painting. The merchant was thrilled with his acquisition and organized a series of banquets over a month to celebrate and publicize his new purchase. However, he probably did not know that Feng Quanqi had, in fact, retained the genuine pictorial section. Indeed, Feng in cooperation with Zhu Xiaohai 朱肖海 (b. ca. 1545) had forged a pictorial section and removed Dong's inscription from the original and added it to the forgery.⁵⁴ Thus, what Wu Xinyu acquired was a work containing a fake Wang Wei picture and a real Dong Qichang inscription.

It is widely recognized that the Wang Wei work in question is *Clearing after Snowfall over Rivers and Mountains* (*Jiangshan xueji tujuan* 江山雪霽圖卷, hereafter *Clearing*) now in the Ogawa Chikanosuke family collection in Kyoto. In addition to the Ogawa scroll, another two extant scrolls attributed to Wang Wei also attract scholarly interest. One is *Snow along the Yangzi River*

52 For the antiquarianism activities of Wu Xiyuan and his family, see Fan Jinmin, "Binbin fengya – Ming houqi Huizhou shangren de shuhua shoucang" 斌斌風雅——明后期徽州商人的書畫收藏, *Zhongguo shehui jingji shi yanjiu* 中國社會經濟史研究, No. 1 (2013): 43-48.

53 For a record of prices in 1590s Beijing, see *Wanshu zaji* 宛署雜記 by Shen Bang 沈榜 (1540-1597), a magistrate of Wanping 宛平 County. *Wanshu zaji* (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1980), 122. For land price, see Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000-1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 158-59.

54 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, juan 26, 658-59.

(*Changjiang jixue* 長江積雪), now at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and the other is *Rivers and Mountains after Snow* (*Jiangshan jixue tujuan* 江山霽雪) in the Taipei Palace Museum.⁵⁵ Scholars are divided about the dates and attributions of the three works. Wen Fong gives the Ogawa scroll the highest credit, believing it to be a real Tang work and very probably the same one that Dong Qichang once examined.⁵⁶ Wen Fong skips over Shen Dufu's anecdotal record, while Xu Bangda bases his whole argument on this record. Xu asserts that the original Feng Mengzhen scroll should comprise a pictorial section and a colophon section containing two poems and three prosaic colophons. The inheritor, Feng Quanqi, detached the colophons and combined them with Zhu Xiaohai's freshly made forgery to form a new whole. The version, Xu believes, is the one now in Kyoto. The original image with two poems constitutes the work now in Honolulu.⁵⁷

Besides these three extant works, Ming literature provides us with a large body of records relating to snowscape paintings attributed to Wang Wei.⁵⁸ It is no coincidence that a large quantity of paintings of this topos sprang up in the late Ming period. In fact, it is likely that none of them is real. An original Wang Wei had been extremely rare by the time of Mi Fu, let alone in the late sixteenth century. Nonetheless, these paintings attached to the name of the great Tang poet-painter is not meaningless to art

55 For a brief introduction to the extant copies, see Lewis Calvin and Dorothy Brush Walmsley, *Wang Wei: The Painter Poet* (Rutland: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1968), 123-29.

56 See Wen Fong, "Rivers and Mountains after Snow (Chiang-shan hsüeh-chi) attributed to Wang Wei (A.D. 699-759)," *Archives of Asian Art*, Vol. 30 (1976-1977): 7-33.

57 Xu Bangda, *Gu shuhua wei'e kaobian*, Vol. I (Textual Section), 107-18. Wang Shiqing, however, ascribes the Ogawa scroll to a completely different source. He believes that it is a late Ming or early Qing imitation of the Taipei Palace version, therefore has nothing to do with the Feng Mengzhen's collection. See Wang Shiqing, "Jiangshan xueji gui chentu, yumu yanneng hun yezhu – Ji zhongguo huashi shang de yige dapianju" 江山雪霽歸塵土，魚目焉能混夜珠——記中國畫史上的一個大騙局, *Xin meishu* 新美術, No. 2 (1996): 19-24. The essay is embodied in *Wang Shiqing yiyuan chayi buzheng sankao* 汪世清藝苑查疑補證散考, Vol. 2 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2009), 163-72.

58 For instance, Li Rihua had collected a namesake one. For Li Rihua's account, see *Tianzhitang ji* 恬致堂集, prefaced ca. 1637, *juan* 6, facsimile copy of late Ming printed edition, Vol. 2 (Taipei: Guoli zhongyang tushuguan, 1971), 748.

historians. They reflect a feverish search for Wang's brushworks throughout the connoisseurship circle. Dong Qichang added significant fuel to this fever by giving Wang Wei in a supremely orthodox status in the realm of painting. Before Dong Qichang had even seen *Clearing*, he had already gone to tremendous efforts to reconstruct Wang Wei's style based on the styles of this painter's followers and textual records. But he had not had a chance to see an authentic Wang Wei. From the brushworks of later followers, he saw two quite different styles. One featured meticulous and careful brushwork, and the other was rather sketchy without texture strokes.⁵⁹ For Dong Qichang, Feng Mengzhen's new acquisition, then, suddenly offered evidence to substantiate his speculation and he thereafter used it as the standard to measure the "Wang Wei" paintings he later encountered.⁶⁰

The Owner and the Connoisseur

Feng Mengzhen, Shen Defu, and Dong Qichang are key figures in the authenticity and circulation of *Clearing*. Their activities help us to understand the climate of connoisseurship in the late sixteenth century. Feng Mengzhen was Shen Defu's town fellow and also the father-in-law of Shen's younger brother. It is logical to infer that Shen overheard the story about *Clearing* from Feng, to whom he was directly connected. But his record has some obvious discrepancies. First, Feng's colophon to *Clearing* describes his acquisition as an entirely accidental discovery from a bamboo storage tube. But in Shen's recount, it was made possible by a purchase. That money played a part seems more credible and logical in the circulation of objects, especially of antiques. Moreover we should be aware that Chinese writings are stuffed with records of miracle discoveries. The aim of mystifying

⁵⁹ Dong expressed his speculation in his first letter to Feng. See fig. 3-2.

⁶⁰ Kohara Hironobu, "Tung Ch'a-ch'ang's Connoisseurship in T'ang and Sung Painting," in *The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, 1555-1636*, ed. Wai-kam Ho (Kansas City: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 85.

these discoveries was usually to legitimate or embellish the real story, which might be illegal or unseemly.

The specific date of Feng Mengzhen's acquisition remains unclear.⁶¹ It is probably earlier than the fourteenth day of the second month of 1595, the date when *Clearing* first appears in Feng's diary. In fact, his journal entry on this day indicates the second discrepancy in Shen Defu's account. His diary says he "co-examined Wang Wei's *Clearing*" with a Suzhou Buddhist. A week later, his diary records another public display of the scroll.⁶² It appears that on this day, long before Dong Qichang saw the scroll, Feng had already attributed it to Wang Wei. Obviously, Feng was eager to show his new acquisition to his associates.⁶³ Five months later, on the thirteenth day of the seventh month, Feng wrote with joy that he had received a letter from Dong Qichang, his junior but a nationally famous connoisseur, soliciting a viewing of the painting.⁶⁴ Dong's letter, which survives today (fig. 3-2), inquires eagerly: "I wonder to which style does your new scroll belong? [...] I have specialized in painting, but if your ancient masterpiece could enlighten me [as to the style of Wang Wei's brushstrokes], you would be doing me a great favour."⁶⁵ Substantiated by this extant letter, Feng's statement would have been much closer to the fact. It is almost certain that the first person to attribute *Clearing* was not Dong Qichang. The news about Feng's newly attained Wang Wei could only have come from Feng's private circle. Dong's letter attests that he only pleased with Feng to borrow the painting because

61 Ding Ruoyi proposes 1594 the year of acquisition. At that time Feng Mengzhen was assuming the official post at Nanjing. See "Shen yu wu you: Wanming wenshi Feng Mengzhen de xiuxian shenghuo – yi 'Kuaixue tang riji' wei zhongxin de kaocha" 神與物遊：晚明文士馮夢禎的休閒生活——以《快雪堂日記》為中心的考察, *Mingzuo xinshang* 名作欣賞, No. 2 (2012): 103.

62 Feng Mengzhen, *Kuaixue tang riji* 快雪堂集, *juan* 53, 1616 printed edition, 6a-6b.

63 Feng Mengzhen describes savouring the scroll in a month of Buddhism meditation ritual. See *Kuaixue tang riji*, *juan* 30, 18b-19a.

64 Feng Mengzhen, *Kuaixue tang riji*, *juan* 53, 26a.

65 Translation cited from Stephen McDowall, *Qian Qianyi's Reflections on Yellow Mountain: Traces of a Late-Ming Hatchet and Chisel* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 18n35.



Fig. 3-2 Three letters from Dong Qichang to Feng Mengzhen (dated 1595, 1596, 1604), and Qian Qianyi's colophon to the letters (dated 1642), attached to *Jiangshan xueji* scroll, attributed to Wang Wei, Ogawa Family Collection, Kyoto. Source: Wen Fong, Appendix II to "Rivers and Mountains after Snow (Chiang-shan hsüeh-chi)," *Archives of Asian Art*, Vol. 30 (1976-1977): 31.

he heard that it was a Wang Wei masterpiece. At that time, Dong was serving at the Hanlin Academy in Beijing. This means that he heard of Feng's new acquisition thousands of miles away,⁶⁶ a good illustration of the speed with which information about artworks spread.

Feng Mengzhen did not hesitate to loan the scroll to Beijing. Dong recalled his extraordinary excitement about this in his first inscription on *Clearing*, written on the fifteenth day of the tenth month of 1595. In fact, in order to welcome this precious artwork, he had even fasted for three days before unrolling it.⁶⁷ He managed to keep the scroll for a year,⁶⁸ and to memorize every

66 Celia Carrington Riely, "Tung Ch'i-chang's Life (1555-1636)," in *The Century of Tung Ch'i-ch'ang, 1555-1636*, ed. Wai-kam Ho (Kansas City: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Seattle: University of Washington Press, cop. 1992), 403-404.

67 Wen Fong, "Rivers and Mountains after Snow," 15.

68 Dong Qichang sent another letter asking for an extension of the loan on the tenth day of the second month of 1596. *Ibid.*, 12. For his eagerness to study Wang Wei, see Shih Shou-ch'ien, "Dong Qichang *Wanluan caotang tu*," 311-3. There is a puzzling aspect in his connoisseurship of this painting. It seems that he kept it for a year without making a copy of it. For further discussion in this regard, see Kohara Hironobu, "Tung Ch'a-ch'ang's Connoisseurship in T'ang

visual detail. Nine years later, in 1604, during a convalescent tour in Hangzhou, he solicited a viewing of the scroll once again. He had his wish fulfilled and left the second inscription on it.⁶⁹ The two inscriptions publically manifested that the painting was a profoundly important source of Dong Qichang reconstructing the style of Wang Wei. Dong's status as an art critic in turn imbued his inscriptions with a weighty position in art history. The painting then became a cultural monument in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.⁷⁰ Shen Defu might already have sensed the value of these lengthy and passionate inscriptions. This is perhaps the reason why Shen dismissed the attribution made by the scroll's owner Feng Mengzhen and why he gave all the credit to the influential Dong Qichang.⁷¹

The Inscriptions on *Clearing*

Clearing evidently demonstrates the value of painting inscriptions to connoisseurs for authentication and evaluation and also explains why inscriptions were painstakingly composed, inscribed, mounted, or to be divided and re-mounted. In terms of connoisseurship inscriptions, they intrinsically played a role as an extension of the appraiser to endow artwork with a written verification. Moreover, an inscription can echo with another to form a referential chain for authentication and evaluation. After he saw *Clearing*, Dong Qichang continued to extol it in his inscriptions on some other paintings; they echoed his 1595 inscription on *Clearing* and consolidated the value of the piece.

and Sung Painting," 88-90.

69 Wen Fong, "*Rivers and Mountains after Snow*," 12. For record on Feng Mengzhen's side, see *Kuaxue tang riji*, juan 61, 11b.

70 Another significant work was *An imitation of Wang Wei* (Wangchuan tu 輞川圖) preserved by Gao Lian in Hangzhou. Dong also left an inscription on this work. In 1612, Li Rihua had viewed it upon his visit to Hangzhou. For the formation of Ding Qichang's understanding of Wang Wen's painting, see also Wen Fong, "*Rivers and Mountains after Snow*," 6-33.

71 His intervention helped two paintings out of four in Xiang Yuanbian's collection reach a value of 200 taels of silver. See Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 125.

An intriguing example is an inscription he wrote in 1618 on *Boat Returning in Snowy River* (*Xuejiang guizhao tu* 雪江歸棹圖), a painting attributed to Emperor Huizong of Northern Song. The then owner of this painting was Cheng Jibai 程季白 (d. 1626), an active collector from Huizhou who ran a pawnbroking business. Dong's writing gives high praise to this painting by allying it to *Clearing*, so much so that the two works are like "Feminine Sword and Masculine Sword – a pair of equals" (*cixiong shuangjian* 雌雄雙劍).⁷² Dong was aware that the other "sword", *Clearing*, was then in the hands of Cheng Jibai's town fellow Wu Xiyuan. He playfully asked whether Wu felt jealous about his competitor.⁷³ Some studies infer that perhaps this inscription eventually incited Cheng (instead of Wu) to purchase *Clearing* sometime after 1618.⁷⁴ In this course of events, the inscription emphatically empowered the painting with commercial and cultural capital.

Inscriptions can be further enriched. Dong's correspondences with Feng in regard to *Clearing* were later mounted on the end of the scroll to reinforce the weight of the inscriptions. Ironically, sometimes Dong Qichang's status as an outstanding calligrapher competed with his fame as a good connoisseur. When the former identity was in a superior position, his inscription would empower itself with independent value for not being a connoisseurship text but a calligraphic piece. When the calligraphic value of an inscription far exceeds the recognizable value of the picture part, the integrity of the work would be in danger. The detachability of Chinese painting makes it easy to detach the inscription part as a piece of calligraphy. *Pavilions amongst Rivers and Mountains* (*Kōzan rōkan zu* 江山樓觀圖), a precious painting by the Northern Song painter Yan Wengui 燕文貴 (967-1044), now in Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts, is a good

72 For more discussion of this scroll in the connoisseurship of Dong Qichang, see Kohara Hironobu, "Tung Ch'a-ch'ang's Connoisseurship in T'ang and Sung Painting," 90-91.

73 Wang Keyu, *Shanhu wang*, Minghua tiba juan 3, 2b.

74 Yan Xiaojun, "Dong Qichang yu Hangzhou zhu wenti kao – Liu Dong Qichang Hangzhou jiaoyou yu qi Wang Wei guannian" 董其昌與杭州諸問題考——六、董其昌杭州交遊與其王維觀念, *Rongbao zhai* 榮寶齋, No. 9 (2010): 268.

example. A mid-seventeenth-century colophon by Fu Shan (fig. 3-3) notes that Dong Qichang once attached a connoisseurship colophon to the painting. During the warfare of the Ming-Qing transition period, “some vulgar person” recognized Dong’s handwriting. They cut Dong’s colophon off and discarded the painting sheet.⁷⁵ To this end, the inscription expelled the picture, even though it was created for the picture. The idea of a “harmonious integration of words and images” of Chinese painting is hence more an invented ideal. At least in the art markets, their relations were not without tension. The trajectories of this inscription and the one by Dong Qichang for *Clearing*

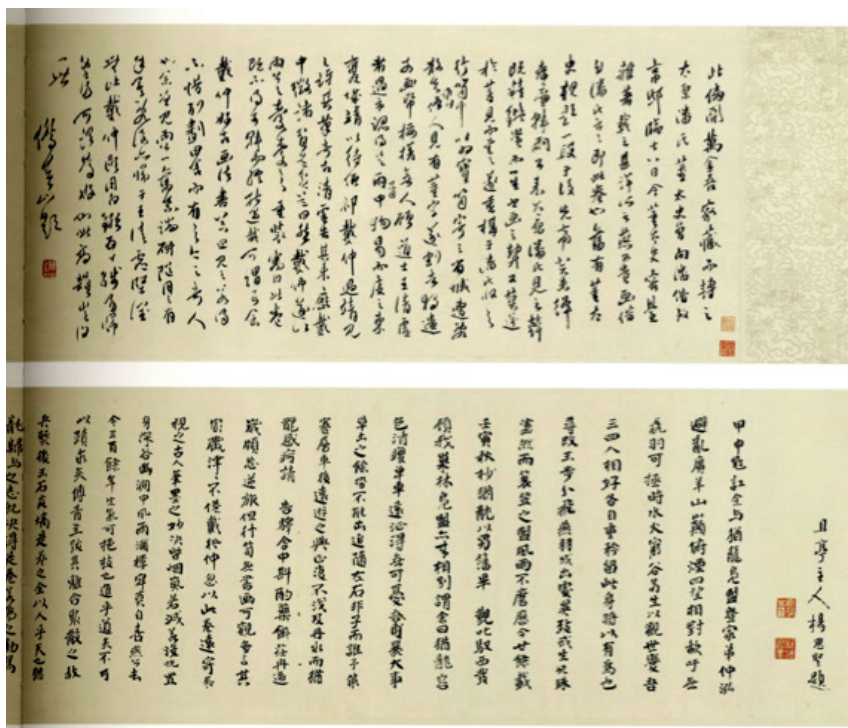


Fig. 3-3 Fu Shan’s colophon on *Pavilions amongst Rivers and Mountains*, Yan Wengui. Source: *Songhua quanji* 宋畫全集, Vol. 7, fascicle 2 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe), 26.

75 For the colophon text, see Kansai Chūgoku Shoga Korekushon Kenkyukai ed., *Kansai kyūkan shozō-Chūgoku shogaroku* 關西九館所藏中國書畫錄, Vol. 1 (Kansai Region: Kansai Chūgoku Shoga Korekushon Kenkyukai, 2013), 137. For other information of the painting, see *ibid.*, 135-47.

substantiate Ellen Johnston Laing's observation that "a (Chinese) painting could be dismembered and its separate parts considered as individual entities."⁷⁶

Forgery's Division of Labour

Clearing attests to another significant phenomenon - the division of labour of art forgers, which in itself was an indication of the commonalization of inscriptions on paintings. When inscriptions entered the forger's horizon, they also realized that the deceptiveness of inscriptions needed to be raised to a higher level. Forging became less an individual work, but a team work involved people of different skills. A native of Suzhou named Yuan Kongzhang 袁孔璋 (fl. 17th cent.), for example, is a known forger who cooperated with other Suzhou forgers. Yuan was only responsible for faking images, at which he was talented, leaving the others to work on inscriptions, seals, mountings and decorations.⁷⁷

Zhu Xiaohai is another known figure, who played a vital part the circulation of *Clearing*. He was also a native of Jiaxing, the same place as Shen Defu, Feng Quanqi, and Li Rihua. This educated man was stuck in a low social stratum. With a talent for imitation, he turned to the forging business and became notoriously famous. Even Li Rihua, a reputable connoisseur and an old family friend of Zhu's collaborator Feng Quanqi (Feng Mengzhen was Li's teacher), was fooled. Upon a visit to Feng in 1610, Li saw a section of *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* handwritten by the great Tang figure Bai Juyi; he extolled the sutra as "a rare treasure in the last days of the world."⁷⁸ However, Li soon learnt that the

⁷⁶ Ellen Johnston Laing, "Suzhou Pian and Other Dubious Painting in the Received Oeuvre of Qiu Ying," *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 59, No. 3/4 (2000): 270.

⁷⁷ Jiang Shaoshu 姜紹書 (fl. 1642-79), *Wushengshi shi* 無聲詩史, juan 7, XXSKQS, 574.

⁷⁸ Li Rihua, *Weishuixuan riji*, juan 2, 310. For the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*, now preserved in Taipei Palace Museum, and the calligrapher Zhang Jizhi, see Fu Shen, "Zhang Jizhi ji qi dazi" 張即之及其大字, *Gugong xueshu jikan*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring 2011): 1-38.

piece was a fake. It was a calligraphic work by a Southern Song calligrapher Zhang Jizhi 張即之 (1186-1263), and was deceptively transformed by Feng Quanqi and Zhu Xiaohai into a Tang piece. Zhu counterfeited a signature of Bai Juyi and forged a colophon dated to the Yuan, and Li was responsible for some other fake colophons.⁷⁹ The same as what occurred to *Clearing*, the absence of inscription provided opportunities to fake new inscriptions.

What may surprise a modern reader is that Li Rihua, although being completely duped, befriended Zhu Xiaohai. In a local gazetteer later compiled by Li Rihua and his son, Zhu Xiaohai was recorded as an “aloof” but “talented” imitator, without a critical word mentioning his forging business.⁸⁰ This bizarre example - the collector and connoisseur did not confront the forger - might be explained by the psychology of Zhu being treated as an educated man.

Cultural and Commercial Elite

The Huizhou merchant Wu Xiyuan was successful in business. But in the realm of art, he was far less lucky than Li Rihua: he paid a high price for a fake. Furthermore, even though he was a victim, in all the records about this fraud he is mocked. Even though this commercial elite powerfully intervened in the market with financial capacity, his efforts seemed to have reinforced the already existing tension between the cultural elite and the merchants. In the eyes of the cultural elite, a non-elite person who consumed artworks was merely an imitator of their lifestyle and thus deserved no sympathy. Several decades afterwards, commissioned by Feng Mengzhen's grandson, Qian Qianyi wrote a colophon for an album embodying the three letters of request that Dong Qichang sent to Feng regarding *Clearing* (fig. 3-2). In his colophon, Qian vents his indignation about Huizhou merchants, or a group of commercial elite:

⁷⁹ Li Rihua, *Weishuixuan riji*, juan 2, 311-12.

⁸⁰ Wan Muchun, *Weishuixuan li de xianjuzhe*, 140.

[But] after the death of the Chancellor (Feng Mengzhen), when this scroll was purchased by a wealthy man from Xin'an (Cheng Jibai), an immortal example of brush and ink became buried under a mountain of copper cash (*tongshan qianku* 銅山錢庫), there languishing for over thirty years. Only when I travelled to Huangshan was I able to recover it, bring it out from its prison like the divine objects of Fengcheng 豐城. If Dong and Feng have spirits, they will certainly have applauded this.⁸¹

The “divine objects of Fengcheng” is a literary allusion to the legendary priceless swords discovered in Fengcheng. Both Xin'an and Huangshan are alternative names for Huizhou Prefecture, the home of many wealthy merchants in the Jiangnan area. Cheng Jibai came from Xiuning County of this prefecture, and Wu Xinyu from She County. Their ownership of *Clearing* stuck in the craw of the prominent scholar and writer Qian Qianyi, so much so that he felt deeply obliged to rescue this precious masterpiece from their abhorrent prison made of “copper cash.” His heroic act was monumentalized in the way that his colophon to the letter-album was also appended to the scroll. The scroll thus became a manifestation of the exploits of a remote but elegant Tang painter Wang Wei, a lucky collector Feng Mengzhen and an insightful connoisseur Dong Qichang, and, ultimately, a righteous gentleman Qian Qianyi. Ironically, the merchants' ownerships were disparaged and their traces erased. The scroll has no inscription of either Cheng Jibai or Wu Xiyuan being the two successive Huizhou pre-owners of *Clearing* for thirty years. It is logical to speculate that even if there had once been an inscription from the merchant's hands, it would have been deliberately removed from the scroll body. The silence of these mercantile collectors speaks volumes.

Despite the fact that merchants often made their collections

81 Qian Qianyi, “Ba Dong Xuanzai yu Feng Kaizhi chidu” 跋董玄宰與馮開之尺牘, in *Muzhai chuxue ji* 牧齋初學集, juan 85, SBCKCB edition, 10b-11a. English translation adapted from Stephen McDowall, *Qian Qianyi's Reflections on Yellow Mountain*, 19; for more information, see 170n39.

available to artists and art enthusiasts and that some of them were competent connoisseurs, the disdain for Huizhou merchants seems to have been widespread in the elite circle. Shen Defu refers to Zhu and Cheng as *Huizhou furen* 徽州富人, “wealthy person(s) from Huizhou.” He calls Wu Ting 吳廷 *Xin'an dagu* 新安大賈, which means “a big merchant from Xin'an” (an old name of Huizhou). But Wu Ting was an important Huizhou antiquary, who was well educated and erudite in calligraphy.⁸² These manners of address are easy generalizations and lack enthusiasm. As mentioned earlier, Shen Defu also uses a more pejorative form of address, *ershi*, implying “their passive way of consumption.”⁸³ But such scorn was often blatant and even more aggressive. In the same anecdotal book, Shen Defu mentions a greatly admired collection of antique jade seals, once in possession of his town fellow Xiang Yuanbian, who had a mercantile family background. He mockingly suggests that these seals in Xiang's hands are like an elegant noble lady who marries a humble footman. But he still acknowledges Xiang's unparalleled passion and determination in collecting artworks as he states that “the footman is after all a remarkable man (*qi nanzi* 奇男子).” But Huizhou merchants are a different story. It seems that they can arise Shen's extreme dislike. The fact that after Xiang's death the jade seals were successively purchased by Huizhou merchants at high price led him to comment brutally that these objects were like “falling into a toilet.”⁸⁴ It is unlikely that these merchants so vulgar, superficial and credulous that connoisseurship expertise and proper manners were beyond their orbit. Shen Defu's disdain is one-sided and, moreover, today we are aware of a several successful mercantile connoisseurs from Huizhou, such as Wu Ting, Wang Keyu, and Zhan Jingfeng 詹景鳳 (1532-1602). Nonetheless, the rapid change in ownership of these seals and *Clearing* was indicative of the

82 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, *juan* 26, 660. For Wu Ting, see Ma T'ai-Lai, “Mingdai wenwu dagu Wu Ting shi lue” 明代文物大賈吳廷事略, *Gugong xueshu jikan*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2005): 397-411+639.

83 For Cheng Jibai and his artistic collecting activities, see Fan Jinmin, “Ming houqi Huizhou shangren de shuhua shoucang,” 51-52.

84 Shen Defu, *Wanli yehuo bian*, *juan* 26, 660.

force of “copper cash,” a force that manipulated the motion of painting objects to some extent beyond any individual’s will.

Ming Painters’ Attitudes to Forgeries

One phenomenon in the Ming period that may perplex modern people is an ambiguous attitude that people involved in Ming art markets often projected on forgeries. From a broader cultural perspective, Ming literati are known for their tolerance to various kinds of forgeries. Bruce Rusk has showed that how Ming people disseminated and read *Stone Classics* ‘Great Learning’ (*Shijing daxue* 石經大學) while being complicit in the deception of this text.⁸⁵

In the field of art, Shen Zhou, Wen Zhengming, and Dong Qichang are three rich examples for us to look into Ming painter’s attitudes to artistic forgeries. It is said that Shen Zhou disputed with people who advised him not to help forgers by signing their forgeries; he reminded these people that these forgers might earn a living on his signatures.⁸⁶ Obviously, Shen Zhou considered bestowing approval inscriptions to forgers as a good deed. His successor of Suzhou art, Wen Zhengming, was also alleged to be merciful towards forgeries.⁸⁷ It is reported that the insatiable forgers even impertinently went to his place to obtain approval inscriptions on the fakes of Wen or for his connoisseurship inscriptions on those of others. Wen always did them the favour without any hesitation.⁸⁸ I argue that these second-hand biographical accounts are dubious. There is at least one record of Shen Zhou being so annoyed by a fraudulent work

85 See Bruce Rusk, “Not Written in Stone: Ming Readers of the ‘Great Learning’ and the Impact of Forgery”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (2006): 189-231.

86 Zhu Yunming, “Ji Shitian xiansheng hua,” 65.

87 He Liangjun, *Siyouzhai congshuo*, 130-31.

88 Feng Shike 馮時可 (ca 1540-ca.1620), “Wen daizhao Zhengming xiaozhuan” 文待詔徵明小傳, *Feng Yuancheng xuanji* 馮元成選集, juan 50, *Siku jinhui congshu bubian* 四庫禁毀書叢刊補編, Vol. 63 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2005), 58.

by his cousin that he decided to uncover the truth. Furthermore, many contemporary testimonies and modern studies have verified that gaining access to Wen Zhengming in later years was tremendously difficult for strangers.⁸⁹ What the accounts of tolerant gentlemen can reveal to us is that in the eyes of Ming people how a good-natured gentleman, a respectful Confucian, as well as a local doyen should behave with regard to the forgery issue.

Wen Zhengming was indeed tolerant to the extent that he assigned approval inscriptions, but only to works by ghost-painters from his personal circle. He actually actively employed his sons and disciples in ghost-painting.⁹⁰ Two letters from Huang Jishui 黃姬水 (1524-1570), a Suzhou fellow of Wen Zhengming who maintained close associations with scholars both in Suzhou and in Nanjing to the recipient Qian Gu 錢穀 (1508-1573) outline this ghost-painting business.⁹¹ In one letter, Huang requests Qian, a pupil of Wen and probably famous in the local circle as a major ghost-painter of Wen, to ghost-paint a picture of “pine trees and big stones.” Huang also reminds the recipient that he will personally take his finished ghost-painting to Wen Zhengming

89 Liu Jiu'an discusses the difficulties of a painting requester approaching Wen Zhengming. Normally their efforts failed, then they had to turn to Wen's disciples. See Liu Jiu'an, “Ming Qing shuhua daibi shuli juzheng” 明清書畫代筆數例舉證, in *Zhongguo lidai shuhua jianbie wenji* 中國歷代書畫鑒別文集, ed. Yang Xin (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2000), 53. Craig Clunas' research also demonstrates how a less familiar person made strenuous efforts to beg for a painting from the artist. See Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, 31-32.

90 For Wen Zhengming's ghost-painters and forgers in the market of his time and posthumously, see Chen Yixun, “Cong Wen Zhengming fengge weizhu zhi daibi huajia yu wei huajia kan shiliu shiji Suzhou yishu shichang zhi gaikuang” 從文徵明風格為主之代筆畫家與作偽畫家看十六世紀蘇州藝術市場之概況, (PhD diss., Central Fine Arts Academy, 2007). His two sons (Wen Peng 文彭 [1498-1573] and Wen Jia 文嘉 [1501-1583]) and a student Zhou Tianqiu 周天球 (1514-1595) reportedly worked served for “ghost-writing” calligraphies; for landscape painting were Wen Jia and the disciples Qian Gu 錢穀 (1508-1573), Zhu Lang 朱朗 (d.1606), and Ju Jie 居節 (ca.1524-ca.1585). Crag Clunas has insightfully shown the subtle gradations of Wen's pupils in terms of their social status and their relation with Wen. For his suspected ghost-painters, he particularly sheds light on his two sons, Qian Gu and Zhu Lang. See Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, 141-55.

91 For Huang Jishui and his activities in Nanjing, see Shih Shou-ch'ien, *Fengge yu shibian: Zhongguo huihua shilun* 風格與世變：中國繪畫十論 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2011), 325-26.

for an autograph.⁹² It is logical to conclude that without Wen Zhengming's tacit consent, Huang would not have dealt with this order. The other letter, the original copy of which is extant (fig. 3-4), reveals a commission for a fan painting as a farewell gift for a friend of Huang. This time it was Huang who instructed the ghost-painter Qian Gu to forge a signature by Wen Zhengming.⁹³ His pressing tone suggests that this kind of deal would have been quite normal in Wen's circle and did not need further explanation. It is very probable that Wen Zhengming and his ghost-painters and agents had arrived at an agreement that, if needed, Wen would examine the ghost-painted products in person, and inscribe approval dedications and signatures. For commissions of minor importance, the ghost-painters and agents could act at their own discretion. Thus, in the situation of the second letter, an urgent demand led Huang to give up on the idea of asking for an autograph from Wen Zhengming in person.

Wen Zhengming is not exceptional amongst those who probably tactically utilized inscriptions to authorize artworks done by the hands of ghost-painters. Amongst the Ming painters suspected of "hiring" ghost-painters, Dong Qichang merits particular attention, not only for the weight he bears in art history, but also for the open manner he adopted in embarking on such an enterprise. So far eight of his ghost-painters have been identified: Wu Yi 吳易, Zhao Zuo 趙左 (fl. early 17th cent.), Wu Zhen 吳振, Li Zhaozheng, Shen Shichong 沈士充 (fl. 1602-1633), Yang Yanchong 楊彥沖, Ye Younian 葉有年, Zhao Jiong 趙涇.⁹⁴ It is likely that there were more, but there is a lack of documentation and proof. *Landscape after Juran* (Fang Juran shanshui tujuan 倣巨然山水圖卷, last known collector Mr. and Ms.

92 Xu Bangda, *Gushuhua wei'e kaobian*, Vol. II (Textual Section), 122.

93 Zhang Luquan and Fu Hongzhan eds., *Gugong cang Ming Qing mingren shuzha moji xuan*, 202-203, 433.

94 Qi Gong, "Dong Qichang daibiren kao" 董其昌代筆人考, *Zhongguo lidai shuhua jianbie wenji*, 169-82. Xie Zhiliu, "Tan Dong Qichang de daibi" 談董其昌的代筆, *Douyun* 朵雲, No. 23 (April 1989): 117-18. James Cahill also has a brief discussion of the ghost-painting activities of Dong. See *The Painter's Practice*, 141-43.

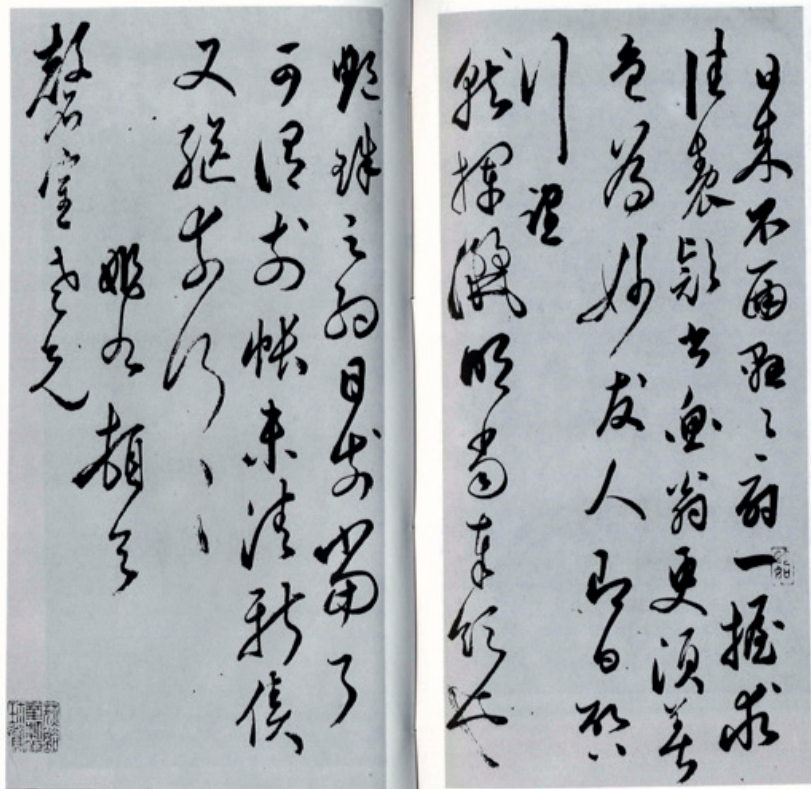


Fig. 3-4 Huang Jishui's letter to Qian Gu for a ghost-painting of Wen Zhengming. Source: Zhang Luquan and Fan Hongzhan eds., *Gugong cang Ming Qing shuzha moji xuan*, vol. Mingdai (Beijing: Rongbaozhai, 1993), 202-203.

Ullens de Schooten in 2009) is one work signed by Dong Qichang. The work's authorship is contested, however, and Shan Guolin disagrees with Xu Bangda and Xiao Yanyi's attributions to Wang Jian 王鑑 (1598-1677). Instead, he proposes that it is the work of Wang Shimin 王時敏 (1592-1680), adding another suspect to the list of names.⁹⁵

Like his predecessors, Dong Qichang faced a plethora of

95 See Shan Guolin, "Er Wang huihua yishu yu Wang Shimin daibi wenti lizheng" 二王繪畫藝術與王時敏代筆問題例證, in *Nanzong zhengmai*, 20-26. Xiao Yanyi's viewpoint, see *Bilishi Youlunsi fufu cang zhongguo shuhua xuanji* 比利時尤倫斯夫婦藏中國書畫選集 (A Selection of Calligraphy and Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Ms. Ullens de Schooten of Belgium) (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2002), 22-27.

forgeries in his name. In an essay composed to celebrate Dong Qichang's fifty-ninth birthday (sixty *sui*), Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639), one of the most eminent non-official scholars of late Ming and a core member of Dong's circle,⁹⁶ roughly gauged that only one in every ten "Dong Qichang's" circulating in the market at that time was real.⁹⁷ However, Chen Jiru's words are less a complaint and more a reflection Dong's popularity. Neither he, nor Dong Qichang were innocent in terms of the forgeries flooding the market. A frequently cited example is a letter from Chen to Shen Shichong, a major ghost-painter for Dong, in which Chen writes:⁹⁸

Senior brother Ziju (*zi* of Shen Shichong): I send you a blank sheet, and three tenths of a silver tael to moisten your brush (i.e. payment). I would like to request a landscape hanging scroll to display in the reception hall. I need it by tomorrow. You do not have to leave any inscription. I need Dong Silao (Dong Qichang) to put his name to it.

子居老兄：送去白紙一幅，潤筆三星，煩畫山水大堂。明日即要，不必落款，要董思老出名也。

Chen Jiru did not give further explanations and instructions to the painter in this short letter. The tone illustrates that this sort of commission was familiar to all sides: the letter writer, the recipient and the supposed victim Dong Qichang. Even though this painting has probably been lost, others survive (fig. 3-5).⁹⁹ If this letter is an epitome of many more undocumented analogies in Dong Qichang's ghost-painting enterprise, it reveals

96 For research on Chen Jiru, see Jamie Greenbaum, *Chen Jiru (1558-1639): The Background to, Development and Subsequent Uses of Literary Personae* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

97 Chen Jiru, "Shou Xuanzai Dong taishi liushi xu", in *Wanxiangtang ji* 晚香堂集, juan 7, *Siku jinhui shu congkan* 四庫禁燬書叢刊 (Beijing: Beijing chuban she, 1997), 643.

98 James Cahill casts doubt on the authenticity of this letter which was first discovered by Wu Xiu. See *The Painter's Practice*, 166.

99 For more examples, Chu Hui-liang's research brings several more by Zhao Zuo, another acknowledged ghost-painter of Dong Qichang, who was also the teacher of Shen Shichong. See *Zhao Zuo yanjiu* 趙左研究, *Gugong kongkan* 故宮叢刊, series 1, No. 13 (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1979), 60-66.



Fig. 3-5 *The Pavilion amidst Pines* (*Yi song ge tu* 倚松閣圖), a hanging scroll bearing an inscription by Dong Qichang indicating his authorship, is widely acknowledged as a ghost-painting by Shen Shichong. Ink and colour on paper, hanging scroll, 143 × 55 cm. Source: *Tumu*, Vol. 8, 258.

an important division of labour, in which Chen played multiple roles as conspirator, agent and even promoter. It also divulges a quintessential formula of faking “authentic” Dong Qichang: (1) the initial commissioner or Dong himself was responsible for

preparing painting materials. (2) Dong or Chen subcontracted a ghost-painter to take care of the image, which was always the most time-consuming part. (3) Dong approved the ghost-painting with an autographic inscription. The final step in this formula is vital. The ghost-painters were replaceable, however Dong Qichang was definitely not. His handwritten inscription was the symbolic carrier of his fame and prestige, the cultural capital sought by the painting requesters. By inscribing these ghost-paintings, Dong Qichang was able to acknowledge an implicit approval, granting his cultural capital to the future owner of the ghost-painting that he thus authorized.

It is hard to ascertain whether Chen Jiru included the considerable number of ghost-paintings done in the name of Dong Qichang in his estimate of real Dong Qichangs. Nonetheless, it was an open secret to Dong's coevals that many paintings bearing his genuine inscriptions were actually done by other people. The modern researcher Shih Shou-ch'ien notices that Dong Qichang's poems that he inscribed on his own paintings are often loosely connected, or even irrelevant to the topics and contents of the visuality. Shih proposes whether this was a strategy that Dong intentionally adopted to subvert the cliché of the unity of poetry and painting. But I argue that this phenomenon is suggestive of the situation that the paintings on which Dong Qichang inscribed might not painted by him. This is perhaps why some of his inscriptions are not very much integrated to the visuality.¹⁰⁰

A few decades later, Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629-1709), a literature and art critic hailing from Jiaking but who spent the latter half of his life in Beijing, commented on this "knowingly-buying-authorised-fakes" phenomenon in a sarcastic tone:¹⁰¹

The hermit Zhao Zuo and the monk Kexue,

100 Shih Shou-ch'ien, "Zhongguo wenrenhua jiuqing shi shenme" 中國文人畫究竟是什麼, in *Cong fengge dao huayi – Fansi Zhongguo meishu shi* 從風格到畫意——反思中國美術史 (Taipei: Shitou, 2010), 64.

101 Zhu Yizun, *Pushuting ji* 曝書亭集, *juan* 16, SBCKCB edition (based on 1691 printed edition), ed. Zhang Yuanji (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1919), 11a.

Were busy answering painting requests in the name of Dong Qichang;

The rivers Jing and Wei, Zi and Sheng are intrinsically different.¹⁰²

But, because all have been inscribed, they are to be acquired for collections.

隱君趙左僧珂雪，每替容臺應接忙。

涇渭淄澠終有別，漫因題字概收藏。

The most intriguing aspect revealed by Zhu's poem is the situation of the commissioners and collectors. They were aware of Dong's ghost-painters, and fully conscious that the works they bought were ghost-paintings. Perhaps considering that the reader of his day might be unfamiliar with the context, Zhu Yizun additionally notes that Dong Qichang, being tired of responding to painting requests, often asked Zhao Zuo and the monk Kexue (1592-after 1664) to do paintings for him.¹⁰³ Once finished, he would sign his name to the work.

Zhu Yizun interpreted Dong Qichang's employment of ghost-painters as a way of escaping from an exhausting workload. But I would like to propose that rather than negative avoidance, Dong was being positive and tactical in exploiting this faking scheme. We should note that Dong was familiar with commercial operation. The above-mentioned merchant Wu Ting was his close friend.¹⁰⁴ Another friend, Chen Jiru, was also a successful model of making a name through cultural capital.¹⁰⁵ The aim of Dong's art, as Craig Clunas notes, emphatically lay in social prominence, and his achievement in this regard added appeal to his art.¹⁰⁶

102 The names of four rivers stand for multiple authorships, while, paradoxically, the fact of their inscriptions refers in each case to their common signature by Dong Qichang.

103 Kexue is the *hao* of Li Zhaozheng 李肇亨, the son of Li Rihua. He became a monk due to the dynastic change. For the stylistic relation between him, Zhao Zuo and other painters, see Chu Hui-liang, *Zhao Zuo yanjiu*, 34-39.

104 Jason Chi-sheng Kuo, "Hui-Chou Merchants as Art Patrons," 181-82.

105 For this respect, see Jamie Greenbaum, *Chen Jiru (1558-1639)*, 137-158.

106 Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, 161.

Undoubtedly, authorizing ghost-paintings by inscribing them enhanced his production capacities. The continuous circulation of these productions further facilitated his social reputation. Painters, ghost-painters, and even consumers formed a conspiracy relation around such works. Feverish buyers gave acceptance to Dong Qichang's authentic ghost-paintings by consuming them, all sides became collusive partners of the same enterprise and all sides profited from it. Dong Qichang may have one of the first to take a crucial step towards purposely producing authorized fakes by taking advantage of inscriptions, but there were plenty of successors, among whom the most famous are the literati painter Wang Shimin and a more market dependent painter Jin Nong.

Chen Jiru must have clearly understood the benefits of Dong Qichang's authorized fakes. In the congratulatory essay cited above, he frankly remarks that by virtue of those who faked Dong's artworks to earn a living, the fakes under Dong's name spread to Beijing in the north and even overseas.¹⁰⁷ Dong was so celebrated that people would rush to buy a tiny piece of his work with a cake of gold. "In our time," Chen concludes, "The only person who receives a tremendous boost in prestige is none other than Mr. Dong."¹⁰⁸ The so-called fakes promoting Dong's name included the ghost-paintings authorized by Dong's autographic inscriptions. It is tempting to speculate that Dong Qichang and his allies, including middle men like Chen Jiru and ghost-painters like Shen Shichong, might have fully understood the win-win situation. In this specific situation, inscription was a decisive factor in distinguishing an authentic fake from a fake fake. It legitimated the former and endowed it with marketability. Ostensibly contradictory to the market demand for authenticity, these kinds of ghost-paintings substantiate that the central concern beneath the varied market behaviour was not an obsession with authenticity, but rather a practical need for tokens of taste and status and for tools to exert influence on social

¹⁰⁷ Chen Jiru, "Shou Xuanzai Dong taishi liushi xu," 643.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 643.

relations.

Cataloguing Paintings by Documenting Inscriptions

The above sections have shown how inscriptions could be added, trimmed, and recombined with paintings, and the problems that might be caused by an un-inscribed painting in circulation. Ming painting inscriptions also became a type of knowledge that had value to be transcribed, preserved and circulated. One of the forms that embraced inscriptions as knowledge was the painting catalogue. Once the materiality changed, the pattern of appreciation, perception, and distribution correspondingly changed. This section is thus devoted to the journey of painting inscriptions in the form of catalogues, with a view to supplementing the economic picture depicted in the previous two sections about inscriptions on paintings. The following table (on page 192-193) lists ten such catalogues known to this day and the compilers of these catalogues. own identification. He probably just “matched” the scroll with a virtuoso of similar style to the best of his knowledge. Exploiting the aura of Li Sixun’s reputation in the commercial world, the signature written at Shen Defu’s behest would play a vital role in promoting this work in the future.

The table lists ten catalogues of painting inscriptions, which existed in the form of independent collections and were available to a larger or lesser extent to the Ming reading community. The left third and fourth columns give the information of each catalogue compiler, including his hometown and, if applicable, residence, his social identity and whether he was a degree holder (marked by Y/N). From a vertical scan of the column denoting “Hometown”, it can be seen that before the mid-sixteenth century, Suzhou was a centre for compilers of painting catalogues. Later, compilers from Huizhou, Hangzhou, Jiaking and Songjiang entered the scene and Suzhou’s status was threatened. This

Table 3-1 Painting Catalogues Available in the Ming Period

Title	Name of the compiler/author	Hometown (and living place if applicable)	Social Identity of the compiler/author (Degree holder: N/Y)	Date	Content	Arrangement
1. <i>Corals and Pearls in Bluish Green (Shanhu munan 珊瑚木難)</i>	Zhu Cunli 朱存理 (1444-1513)	Changzhou, Suzhou	Scholar and connoisseur -N	Compiled around 1500.	-8 fascicles -Inscriptions on the paintings and calligraphies Zhu had seen (where or in whose collection he had seen)	-Randomly -Fully -N
2. <i>The Implied Message (Yuyi bian 寓意編)</i>	Du Mu 都穆 (1459-1525)	Wuxian, Suzhou	High official, scholar and connoisseur -Y (<i>jinsi</i> 1499)	Written between 1517-1519. Printed in 1520s-1560s	-1 fascicle - <i>Biji</i> style -60 paintings and some calligraphy works that the compiler saw or heard.	-Randomly. -N Some paintings are just listed by title -Y
3. <i>Transcriptions of Inscriptions of Paintings and Calligraphies (Sunshi shuhua chao 孫氏書畫鈔)</i>	Sun Feng 孫鳳 (ca.1513-ca.1587)	Changzhou, Suzhou	Mounter of artworks -N	Dates unknown. Not printed until late 1910s.	-2 fascicles -Inscriptions on the paintings and calligraphies that Sun was commissioned to mount.	-Randomly -Fully -N
4. <i>Compiled Hermetic Connoisseurship of Mr. Dongtu (Dongtu xuanlan bian 東圖玄覽編)</i>	Zhan Jingfeng 詹景鳳 (1532-1602)	Xiuning, Huizhou. Living in Nanjing during 1588 and 1595.	Official, painter, calligrapher and connoisseur -Y (<i>juren</i> 1567)	First printed edition with preface dated 1567.	-4 fascicles, appendix 1 fascicle - <i>Biji</i> style -Notes on identifications of artworks; 38 independent entries of inscriptions on paintings and 400 calligraphies.	-Randomly -N -Y
5. <i>Coral gathered by iron net (Tiewang shanhu 鐵網珊瑚)</i>	Attributed to Zhu Xingfu but probably by Zhao Qimei 趙琦美 (1563-1624)	Changshu, Suzhou	Minor official benefited from ancestor's merits -N	Postscript dated 1600. Earliest known imprinted edition in Wanli Reign.	-Numbers of fascicles depend on editions -In terms for a 16-fascicle edition: fascicles 1-10 for calligraphy ; fascicles 11-16 for painting.	-Chronologically; -Fully -N

6. <i>Colophons to the Colophons on Paintings and Calligraphies</i> (Shuhua baba 書畫跋)	Sun Kuang 孫鑑 (1542-1612)	Yuyao 餘姚, Shaoxing 紹興. Moved to and living in Hangzhou.	High official and connoisseur -Y (<i>jinsi</i> 1574)	Written ca. 1614, most colophons dated after 1607. First printed in 1740 by the descendants of Sun Kuang.	-3 fascicles -1 fascicle for calligraphies, 1 for stesles, 1 for paintings -Sun Kuang's own Commentary colophons to <i>Colophon of Paintings and Calligraphies</i> by Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590).	-Randomly -Only Sun and Wang's -N
7. <i>The Clear Water Pleasure Boat of Painting and Calligraphy</i> (Qinghe shuhuafang 清河書畫舫)	Zhang Chou 張丑 (1577-1643)	Kunshan 崑山, Suzhou. Moved to and living in Changzhou, Suzhou.	Connoisseur and collector -N	Prefaced 1616. Earliest extant printed edition in 1763.	-12 fascicles -Calligraphy and paintings owned, seen or heard about (where and in whose place).	-Chronologically; within each dynasty by individual painter and calligrapher -Fully -Occasional, on provenance and identification
8. <i>Mr. Yu's Records of Inscriptions on Paintings and Calligraphies</i> (Yushi shuhua tiba ji 俞氏書畫題跋記)	Yu Fengqing 郁逢慶 (ca. 1573-1642)	Xiushui 秀水, Jiaxing	Connoisseur -N (<i>gongsheng</i> , namely tribute student)	Postscript to first compilation is dated 1633. Not printed until 1911.	-12 fascicles, sequel 12 fascicles -Calligraphies and paintings owned and seen.	-Randomly (presumably in the order in which Yu saw them) -First compilation fully, sequel occasionally -Y
9. <i>Coral Net</i> (Shanhu wang 珊瑚網)	Wang Keyu 汪珂玉 (1587-1649)	Xiushui, Jiaxing	Connoisseur -N (<i>gongsheng</i> , namely tribute student), minor official	Prefaced in 1643. The earliest printed edition is in <i>Siku quanshu</i> .	-48 fascicles -Fascicles 1-18 for scroll paintings; Fascicles 18-22 for albums and fans. -Paintings owned and seen and knew from reading.	-Basically by period -Y (Painting only) -Fully -Y
10. <i>Records of Precious Paintings</i> (Baohui lu 寶繪錄)	Attributed to Zhang Taijie 張泰階 (ca. 1588-1647)	Huating, Songjiang	Official, scholar; connoisseur -Y (<i>jinsi</i> 1619)	Preface dated 1630. Printed in 1633.	-20 fascicles -Fascicle 1 for a review of art history and historiography, and the rest for inscription records. -Predominantly of Paintings, with only calligraphies by Wang Xizhi.	-Randomly -N -Y

change synchronized with a decline in the influence of Suzhou paintings. Yet in general, throughout the entire Ming period, Suzhou was an unparalleled centre of art activities. Five out of ten catalogues in the above table were rendered here.

The right three columns return to the catalogues themselves, concerning the date of compilation and, if applicable, publishing date; the book content and volume, and the content arrangement. The “Arrangement” segment concerns three questions: In what order does the catalogue arrange the inscriptions? Does it fully document an inscription? Does it contain the compiler’s comments and artistic criticisms?¹⁰⁹ It can be seen that all catalogues appeared after the beginning of the sixteenth century. The sixteenth-century-compilations had a very limited volume for several fascicles, while since the early seventeenth century onwards, the compilations (No. 5-10) became much more voluminous. The compilers tended to not only record the inscriptions of the paintings they owned, but also those they once saw or heard. This meant that the channels in which the inscriptions ended up in these catalogues are various. *Transcriptions of Inscriptions of Paintings and Calligraphies* (No. 3) is unique in this regard, as the inscriptions in this catalogue are from the paintings that the compiler once worked on. Except for arranging inscriptions randomly, a chronological order was also popular. *Records of Precious Paintings* (No. 10) is the only exception, which sorts out inscriptions by painting formats. By the end of the Ming dynasty, no tradition in respect of whether all inscriptions on a painting should be fully documented. The compiler could make his own decision. A trend, subtle but observable, is that later compilers showed more interest than their predecessors did in the sixteenth century in assuming a presence in the catalogues by offering comments on the paintings and inscriptions that they recorded.

109 This table draws materials from Xie Wei, *Zhongguo shuhua zhuzuo kao* 中國畫學著作考錄 (Shanghai: Shanghai meishu chubanshe, 1998) and Hin-Cheung Lovell, *An Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Painting Catalogues and Related Texts* (Anne Arbor: University of Michigan, 1973).

The above table indicates a crucial change in the cataloguing of paintings. Before the Ming era, the standard practices of art cataloguing focused on artists and physical information regarding artworks that the author owned or once saw. Zhou Mi's 周密 (1232-1298) *Clouds and Mists Passing Before One's Eyes* (*Yunyan guoyan lu* 雲煙過眼錄, ca.1296) was completed in the Song-Yuan transition. Its contents are organized by individual collections. Zhou Mi records a few inscriptions on some of the documented paintings.¹¹⁰ But inscriptions were by no means the main subject of his effort. By the first decades of the Ming dynasty, inscriptions were still a long way from being a subject that documented systematically. Zhu Cunli's *Corals and Pearls in Bluish Green* (No. 1) in the mid-fifteenth century represents a pioneering step when he switched his cataloguing target to inscriptions. This shift had a profound influence on later practices. Zhu's exclusive focus on inscriptions might have inspired his friend Du Mu. At the very least, their new practices were inherited by Sun Feng, Sun Kuang, Zhao Qimei, and Yu Fengqing. The catalogue titles show that while there is still some emphasis on artworks, many have an explicit focus on inscriptions, such as *Colophons to the Colophons on Paintings and Calligraphies* (No.6) and *Mr. Yu's Records of Inscriptions on Paintings and Calligraphies* (No. 8). Moreover, some compilers developed a particular style of art cataloguing. The catalogues of Zhan Jingfeng (No. 4), Zhang Chou (No. 7), Wang Keyu (No. 9) and Zhang Taijie (No. 10) combine documentations of inscriptions with their knowledge of art history, gained through reading and connoisseurship activities. In contrast to Zhu Cunli, whose voice is invisible in his catalogue, their opinions and thought are present in the form of essays and historiographical writings.

Some of these Ming catalogues, such as *Coral Net* (No. 9), are criticized for a lack of discrimination regarding the authenticity of artworks, and therefore seem to lack any value for modern users.

110 For Zhou Mi and his catalogue, see Ankeney Weitz, *Zhou Mi's "Record of Clouds and Mist Passing Before One's Eyes": An Annotated Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

But they are still significant in terms of the ambition and efforts to track the pedigrees of artworks by documenting and printing inscriptions. These catalogues of painting inscriptions strongly indicate a wide recognition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the value of painting inscriptions and the value of duplicating, editing, publishing and circulating them.

An intriguing aspect of the distribution of these catalogues is that only those by Du Mu, Zhan Jingfeng, Zhao Qimei and Zhang Taijie were published during the Ming period. The remaining six were never circulated. Their manuscript condition touches upon the issue of the written word in the late Imperial China. Even though the Ming era was known as a booming age of printing, we should be wary of arriving too hastily at the conclusion that in this period imprints dominated or even replaced manuscripts. The production and usages of manuscripts did not cease. The share of manuscripts in the late imperial China remained high, despite a clear shrinking tendency. Joseph McDermott's research on book history in late imperial China provides useful sets of data regarding the proportion of manuscripts in several Ming book collections. Accordingly, 70% in the early Ming official Wenyuan Pavilion 文淵閣 book collection were manuscripts. Half of the famous private book collection Tianyi Pavilion 天一閣 in Ningbo was probably books manuscripts. While in another private book collection *Eryou shanfang* 二酉山房 in Zhejiang, established by Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551-1602), a diligent scholar, writer and bibliophile, the proportion of manuscripts declined to 30%.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, these samples demonstrate the coexistence of manuscripts and imprinted books.

As for the manuscript catalogues, the central question is perhaps not why they were made into manuscripts, but why they remained in this form over decades and even centuries. One may speculate that the costs of printing were a major reason. Indeed, manually copying texts was remarkably cheap. The price of hiring someone to transcribe a page was only around 0.05 to 0.1 copper

111 Joseph P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book*, 54-55.

coins in the late Ming time.¹¹² This cheap price remained stable over time. In comparison, the printing technique in the Ming era saw no revolutionary improvement. Like the technique in Song and Yuan periods, the predominant method was xylography. The greatest expense in printing by means of xylography, was woodblocks, and only the printing of a large number of copies could dilute this fixed cost. Even though the Ming era saw a considerable drop in printing costs, the number of copies to be produced was still an important consideration, and often decisive in people's final choice.

It appears that a low estimation of the number of imprinted copies required prevented the six aforementioned manuscripts from being printed and entering the book market in imprinted form. But the premise of this assumption – every book in the late imperial China was supposed to reach as many readers as possible – is problematic. The problem lies in a modern perspective embedded in the premise. I would argue for a totally different perspective to understand these catalogues. Suyoung Son, in her research on the early publishing history of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, has shown that Shen Defu, an early owner of the manuscript of this novel featuring obscene content, believed that printing this work as a book would facilitate its travel to an anonymous public. This distribution was indiscriminate and uncontrollable. It would be better to keep it as manuscript, a form that could confine the accessibility of this novel to an elite coterie that was able to appreciate it properly.¹¹³ To the cultural elite, who wanted to monopolize the text, a significant difference between the manuscript and the imprint was that the former exercised a much stronger sense of control. If we extrapolate this view to the six catalogues, then we can assume that they were probably never made for wide circulation. The manuscript form was probably

112 Zhou Chunsheng and Kong Xianglai, "Song Yuan tushu de keyin xiaoshoujia yu shichang" 宋元圖書的刻印、銷售價與市場, *Zhejiang daxue xuebao (Renwen shehui kexue ban)* 浙江大學學報 (人文社會科學版), Vol. 40, No. 1 (2010): 41.

113 See Suyoung Son, "Publishing as a Coterie Enterprise: Zhang Chao and The Making of Printed Texts in Early Qing China," *Late Imperial China*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2010): 98-136.

a result of the creators' intentional control of their distribution. This desire to control leads to conjecture that these unpublished catalogues might have been produced and kept as esoteric family heirlooms, privately circulated within a very limited circle. It is even tempting to speculate that these catalogues were not printed due to a desire to limit the knowledge of painting to the hands of the few.

The "Social Identity" column in the table above reveals that a number of catalogue compilers were not degree-holders. Did the social identity of the compiler have an impact on the form of his book? Sun Kuang provides us an example. He was the most successful official among all the compilers: he won the fourth place in the metropolitan examinations and once held the post of Right Censor-in-Chief ranked 2a. His father and three brothers were high officials serving in the central government. He was almost certainly financially capable of putting a book of three fascicles into print, but his catalogue remained unpublished until 1740, when his two great-great-grandsons executed the first print. It therefore appears arbitrary to arrive at a causal relationship between an author's social status and the circulation medium of his catalogue. We cannot say that a catalogue by an official always got printed and a catalogue of a commoner always remained unprinted.

How would the catalogues in manuscript form impact the way in which painting inscriptions were read, perceived, accessed and accepted? Aside from the fact that manuscripts were less accessible than imprints, another key point is that every single copy might contain one unique set of text. Reproducing manuscripts therefore generated an array of textual variants. To this end, prints had the reverse effect of stabilizing textual content. Tian Xiaofei's study on the manuscripts of the literature of Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 (ca. 365-427) shows the variants generated in the transmission of manuscript texts in ancient China and how the variants, in turn, participated in the shaping of an authoritative version of the text. We may safely assume

that the inscriptions in these unpublished manuscripts ended up in the same mechanism. A recent scholarly comparison of ten Ming manuscripts of Mr. Yu's *Records of Inscriptions on Paintings and Calligraphies* has demonstrated how inscription texts varied through transcriptions. The researchers employ a colophon written by Feng Fang 豐坊 (1492-1563) to Wen Zhengming's *The Studio of True Appreciation* (*Zhenshang zhai tu* 真賞齋圖) – the painting that is recorded in the catalogue – as a sample text. All ten versions omit *Zhisuoyi* 之所以, and misreport *Nanyu* 南隅 as *Nanyu* 南隅. Six correctly record *yanliu suishi* 淹留歲時 while the other four mistake *shi* into *yue* 月. There are many other variants, but due to the lack of space, they will not be comprehensively listed here.¹¹⁴

On the other hand, the most fundamental aspect of inscriptions in manuscript form was that they enabled a different reading behaviour. Like the shift of reading manners from reading a codex into reading a binding book, one first freed his hands from holding the scroll. He could use one hand to write, which meant reading and transcribing inscriptions could be done simultaneously. He could also glance quickly between the two to compare the inscriptions. This manner of handling inscriptions would be extremely difficult in respect of paintings.¹¹⁵ This different reading habit was not a new invention of the Ming period, but a proliferation of inscriptions in the form of book would have reinforced the habit. On the other hand, reading from books also added another option of reading inscriptions from a painting, for example, in an elegant gathering where one might cluster with the others in front of a painting, reading aloud the inscription(s), or on a visit to someone's home for painting appreciation and where the painting was examined with the owner. With the catalogues on hand, reading inscriptions could

114 Ibid., 159-61.

115 The same effect was made by Europe's adoption of codex as a carrier of written texts from the second through fourth centuries. See Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 18-19.

be a more individualized practice. In other words, the materiality of the inscriptions conditioned the corporal modes of the act of the readers, and perhaps even their conceptualisation of the texts.¹¹⁶

What can we suppose about the readership of these catalogues? It should be noted that little is known about the consumption of those catalogues that were published. I will provide an analysis of books' sale prices in the next chapter, but as stated above, a book's price depended on the number of copies produced at one time. We may safely infer from the contents of these Ming catalogues that they were purchased or attained by people seeking credible references for artworks. The connoisseurship of Dong Qichang and Shen Defu have shown that connoisseurship in the Ming era was an experiential act. For those who desired to sharpen their skills in identifying artworks but had limited access to real artworks, catalogues of inscriptions offered a good option. They could learn from the inscriptions in these catalogues not only the provenance of a certain artwork, but also the way that the previous connoisseurs appreciated, authenticated, and evaluated paintings.

Ming merchants, a key consuming force of both artworks and books, were almost certainly among the readers. The merchant's engagement in approaching and reading inscriptions in catalogues is a sign that the type of inscription readers, which had been confined to the literati and aristocracy since the Northern Song period, was beginning to change. The merchant's engagement is more meaningful and should be understood as the result of a significant change in access to knowledge about Chinese painting. Paintings were no longer the sole source. It was no longer imperative for one in pursuit of painting knowledge or inscriptions to painstakingly build personal connections with the painting owners. Through the distribution of catalogues, particularly the four imprinted ones, even the merchants could

¹¹⁶ Roger Chartier has discussed transformation from oralized reading to silent reading in the Middle Ages and its relation to the materiality of written texts. See Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings*, 15-16.

acquire the knowledge of painting inscriptions simply by consumption.

However, to the Ming elite, this shift towards equal accessibility to knowledge was problematic. Early in the Northern Song, the high elite had absorbed inscriptions into a discursive system in which they - literate, cultivated and non-commercial - drew a boundary between themselves and the poorly educated and vulgar "others". When inscriptions were available to anyone regardless of social status, their socially distinguishing function was significantly weakened.

The Ming elite reacted in diverse ways to this crisis. Some, like the aforementioned Shen Defu and Wen Zhenheng, turned to degrading painting inscriptions into a device that only duped the shallow and indiscriminating *nouveau riche*. These *nouveau riche* were poor in antiquarian knowledge but arrogant in pursuit of the elite's way of life. Since they only knew several big names, they were gullible to any words on or about a painting, and would be at a loss when a painting did not carry any inscription hinting at its authorship, date and pedigree. The attitude of Shen and Wen strongly suggests that the strategies of discursively exploiting painting inscriptions were always in flux. The boundary lines between "elegant" and "vulgar," "capable" and "incapable," "superior" and "inferior" were correspondingly shifting. Inscriptions, once exclusively associated with the elegant, veered towards a tag of being vulgar.

Shen Defu and Wen Zhenheng did not represent the entire elite community. The catalogue *Compiled Hermetic Connoisseurship of Mr. Dongtu* offers a different view. Its compiler, Zhan Jingfeng, was an official-scholar from a Huizhou merchant family. In this catalogue, Zhan strongly emphasized the cultural prosperity of Huizhou Prefecture, which could rival that of Suzhou. He elevated the Huizhou calligrapher Zhu Tong 朱同 (1339-1385) to a level that surpassed even that of the renowned Suzhou calligrapher Zhu Yunming. At the same time, he was rather disparaging about Xiang Yuanbian from Jiaking, and Wang

Shizhen 王世貞 and He Liangjun from Suzhou. The modern researcher Fu Shen posits that Zhan Jingfeng had a much clearer and stronger regionalism complex than coeval connoisseurs.¹¹⁷ To some extent, Zhan's publication of painting inscriptions glorifies his hometown: he is the only one from Huizhou.¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, his regionalism was interwoven with a promotion of merchants, because Huizhou was the home of a great number of merchants active in the Jiangnan area. On hearing Wang Shizhen describe the rich of Huizhou as clustering around the Suzhou elite like flies clustering around foul smelling meat, Zhan immediately counter-attacked by proclaiming that, in reality, it was Suzhou elite clustering around the Xin'an rich like flies.¹¹⁹ The regionalism was thus mixed with an intense sense of competition with the non-mercantile elite.

A Case Study on Records of Precious Paintings: Faking Inscriptions in the Printing World

We now turn to the specific text, *Records of Precious Paintings* (hereafter *Precious Paintings*), a unique yet illuminating example of a large-scale falsification of painting inscriptions in the form of a printed book. There was quite a lot of criticisms from Qing scholars that Ming catalogues were indiscriminate, often a mixture of records of authentic and fake paintings. Nonetheless, they indicate a tactic to preserve trustworthy inscriptions through the power of the reading community, and a few of them resorted to wood-block printing. But what we will see in the following is a reverse case.

117 Fu Shen, "Wang Duo ji Qing chu beifang jiancang jia" 王鐸及清初北方鑑藏家, *Duoyun* 朵雲, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1991): 75-76.

118 Wang Keyu and Yu Fengqing were natives of Jiaking, and Zhu Cunli, Du Mu and Zhang Chou natives of Suzhou.

119 Zhan Jingfeng, *Zhanshi xingli xiaobian* 詹氏性理小辨, *juan* 38, SKQSCMCS, *Zi bu* 子部, vol. 112, 510.

Precious Paintings has a preface dated to 1633.¹²⁰ This preface claims its compiler and publisher was Zhang Taijie 張泰階 (zi Yuanping 爰平 or Wangping 宛平, hao Ruoshan 弱山), a scholar-official in the Ming-Qing transition.¹²¹ Records of Zhang Taijie's life are rather fragmentary. Zaixing Hong has made attempts to piece these fragments together, which is a helpful reference to this research. The Zhang family lived in Songjiang where they ran a printing studio. The printing business provided Zhang Taijie with a good learning environment and may also have familiarized him with a commercial atmosphere. The Zhang family was known for its scholarly interests. Taijie's great-grandfather Zhang Haoyi 張鶚翼 (b. 1528, *jinshi* 1548) and grandfather Zhang Bingjie 張秉介 left records of their broad enthusiasm for literature, calligraphy, painting and antiquarianism, which would have fashioned the young generation's hobbies and taste. The family also had a tradition of associating with the art circle: Haoyi had associations with Wen Zhengming and Wen's pupil Wang Chong 王寵 (1494-1533), while Taijie knew the celebrated writer and connoisseur Chen Jiru.¹²² Following the family's official trajectory, Zhang Taijie successfully attained a *jinshi* degree in 1619 and then embarked on his own official career until 1630.¹²³ However, confronting a period in the Ming regime marked by seething tensions on both the domestic and the territorial frontiers, he sought solace in literature and antiquarianism.

After retiring from his official post, Zhang Taijie settled in Suzhou, which by the late Ming was competing with his

120 There are four printed editions extant so far, in which the earliest was in 1633 while the other three in the Qing Dynasty. See Xie Wei, *Zhongguo huaxue zhuzuo kaolu*, 418.

121 Zhang Taijie was born circa 1588-1591, and died circa 1645-1647. Ibid., 418. See also Zaixin Hong, "Antiquarianism in an Easy-going Style: Aspects of Chang T'ai-chieh's Antiquarian Practice in the Urban Culture of Late Ming China," *Gugong xueshu jikan*, Vol. 22, No 1 (Autumn, 2004): 39-40.

122 It is reasonable to assume that Zhang Taijie possibly built a relationship with another renowned Huating fellow Dong Qichang through Chen Jiru, yet for the moment no direct evidence can verify this assumption. See Zaixin Hong, "Aspects of Chang T'ai-chieh's Antiquarian Practice," 40-42.

123 Ibid., 43-44.

hometown Songjiang as the chief hub for art activities.¹²⁴ He is purported to have built a treasury house named *Baohui* (Precious Painting) for storing his private art collection that contained masterpieces from throughout the ages. In 1631, he started to “compile” *Precious Paintings* based on this collection.

Content

The book is an inventory-like catalogue of 20 fascicles. The first fascicle contains several historiographical essays on art history written by Zhang Taijie. Fascicles 2 to 20 are for inscriptions extracted from more than 200 paintings (fig. 3-6), mostly paintings of nonpareil old masters from the pre-Tang era to the Yuan, such as Cao Buxing 曹不興 (fl. 222-229), Zhan Ziqian 展子虔 (fl. The second half of 6th cent.), Yan Liben, Wang Wei, Li Sixun, Li Zhaodao 李昭道 (son of Li Sixun, fl. early 8th cent.), Juran 巨然 (fl. 10th cent.), Qian Xuan, Huang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269-1354). In the book guide (*fanli* 凡例), Zhang explained that his avoidance of Ming artworks was because his knowledge was far from exhaustive. He considered those living in the Yuan-Ming transition as late Yuan figures, given their closer connection with the Yuan era.¹²⁵

Apart from meticulously explaining his selections, Zhang Taijie also attempted to detail how he was able to acquire works from almost all the pre-Ming virtuosi into an enormous collection. He proposes a set of dichotomy – *xian* 見, lit., to appear, and *fu* 伏, to hide – to describe the motion trends of paintings. At the “appearing” phase, he claims, paintings are exposed, spread, circulated, and inscribed, but at the “hiding” phase they are secretly stored in private collections for up to hundred years. One phase alternates with the other. By applying this formulation to Chinese art history he makes the following historical divisions:

124 Ibid., 37.

125 Zhang Taijie, *Baohui lu* 寶繪錄, SKQSCMCS, facsimile reprint of 1633 printed edition, *Zi bu*, vol. 72, 122-23.

(1) The reign of Emperor Huizong (of the Northern Song) was an appearing epoch, while the fall of the Northern Song marked the start of a hiding epoch.

(2) The late Yuan was an appearing epoch, while with the fall of Yuan began another hiding epoch.

(3) In the Chenghua and Hongzhi 弘治 reigns (1464-1505), arts inclined to appear, but several decades later the general trend returned to “hiding.” Later on the two trends kept alternating.¹²⁶

Obviously, Zhang Taijie was aware that his accumulation of artworks of exceptional quality and quantity may come under question. Thus, he prepared the theory of “two alternating eras” and organised a periodization according to the shifting of the eras in the very beginning of his book. He used the theory and periodization to defence himself. He characterised his era as “hidden” (*fu*), and claimed that society was ill-informed about painting. His great collection was made possible because of this depressing circumstance, which had deterred people to learn any knowledge of art. As a learned man, he intended to use his compilation, *Precious Paintings*, to illuminate this low ebb in connoisseurship.¹²⁷ Zhang Taijie also blamed his contemporaries for easily tagging paintings as false Tang works without actually having any idea about an authentic Tang painting.¹²⁸ Zhang, who had ample knowledge and experience in identifying and examining ancient paintings, was certainly immune from the criticism, and he was fully capable of assembling his valuable painting collection housed in “Precious Paintings” and catalogued in *Precious Paintings*.

Around one hundred years later, however, Qing scholars and critics began to discredit *Precious Paintings*. The *Siku quanshu* compilers in the eighteenth century cast doubts on, firstly, how Zhang Taijie could attain a mass of extremely rare paintings and some of them claimed to be painted by distinguished art masters

¹²⁶ Zhang Taijie, *Baohui lu*, juan 1, 129-30.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 129-30.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 132.

were completely unknown to anybody else. Secondly, the similar writing style of the inscriptions embodied in *Precious Paintings* raised suspicions about them being written by a single person.¹²⁹ It is true that the Qing scholars had a psychology to attack Ming writings for their low quality and spuriousness. Yet in terms of *Precious Paintings*, their criticisms were well-grounded and persuasive. Ever since the eighteenth century, *Precious Paintings* has been generally regarded as a fabrication, one that was based on “a huge collection of outrageously implausible fakes built up by the dealer Zhang Taijie.”¹³⁰

If we carefully examine *Precious Paintings*, it can be seen that Zhang Taijie’s fabrication is not groundless. There is evidence indicating a fabricating method to extract and deceitfully edited real materials. For instance: fascicle 4 contains a record of a painting collection entitled “Combination of Four Dynasties’ Treasures” (*Sichao hebi* 四朝合璧). The entry 43 records “two inscriptions to an unnamed work of Wen Zhengming.” The first inscription is a poem dated 1521.¹³¹

The piece of paper wist me into realizing that ten years have
passed,
But the green rocks and flowing jade-like-water are as they
were.
By dawn window I pick up my pen and re-inscribe the old place,
I feel ashamed that I am less intelligent than in the past.
片楮俄驚已十年，翠巘流玉尚依然。
曉窗援筆重題處，慚愧聰明不及前。

This poem should have been revised from a regulated poem (*lǜshi* 律詩) that Wen Zhengming self-inscribed on a painting in the year of 1511. The first four lines read:¹³¹

129 See Xie Wei, *Zhongguo huaxue zhuzuo kaolu*, 418.

130 Joan Stanley-Baker, “Forgeries in Chinese Painting,” *Oriental Art* N.S. 32 (1986): 57.

131 Zhang Taijie, *Baohui lu*, *juan* 4, 150.

The painting let me look back to sixteen years ago,
Its remnant red and peeling white pigments remain as in the
past.

Thanks to your appraisal I realize that the painting's value has
increased,

Yet, I worry that my intelligence is not what it was.

尺楮回看十六年，殘丹剝粉故依然。

得君品裁知增重，顧我聰明不及前。

The essential elements embedded in Zhang Taijie's record remain unchanged from Wen's original: a famous poet-painter re-inscribed a painting of a misty mountainous landscape that he had done many years previous. Compared with fabricating an utterly new inscription, retaining these old elements could have increased the probability of hoaxing readers. This touches upon the motivation of publishing *Precious Paintings*. A general accepted opinion was stated by Wu Xiu 吳 脩 (1764-1827). "Could it be that [he intended to] spread the book first," Wu questions, "and then sold forged paintings in order to acquire a big profit?"¹³² This verges on an accusation against Zhang Taijie that he duplicitously made pecuniary profits by faking painting inscriptions.

Modern academia offers some counterviews. Guo Jianping casts doubt on a fundamental issue; that is, the authorship of *Precious Paintings*. She stresses the fact that Zhang was a prestigious degree-holder from a respectable family, and his social status was unlikely to necessitate him committing such a fraud.¹³³ Guo's argument can be challenged since social status never restrained the Ming elite from engaging in art forgery. However, given that there is no evidence to solidly testify to the book's authorship, the possibility of a pseudograph indeed exists. Zaixin Hong opposes the accusations against Zhang Taijie from another perspective: He argues that Zhang truly had sold his

132 Wen Zhengming, *Wen Zhengming ji*, 224.

133 Wu Xiu, *Qingxiagua lunhua jueju*, 221-22.

land and house in his hometown to raise money for purchasing paintings, but unfortunately all his purchases turned out to be fakes. His careless antiquarian investment ended up in a fiasco. Zaixin Hong cites Zhang's physiological and mental troubles. He portrays Zhang as a crazy art lover, who "los[ing] control of his imagination and rapidly compos[ing] his twenty-volume catalogue of antique paintings."¹³⁴ However, this mental picture is contradictory. Zhang seemed to be a crafty man with rich knowledge of literature and antiquarianism on the one hand, but a novice in handling antiques on the other. He seemed to be an impulsive eccentric who lost control of his senses, but, contradictorily, the voluminous treatise he published was clearly a time-consuming endeavour requiring patience and without any sign of impulsiveness.

Unfortunately, we know little of Zhang Taijie's financial situation in his later years, which could have assisted in getting a clearer picture of this figure. Did the purported *Baohui* house and his painting collection actually exist? Did he embark on printing on his own or in partnership with other people? All these questions remain unanswered. The motivation to launch such a time-consuming printing project surely would have gone beyond making a fool of the public; in my opinion, it was a clear sign of aiming at mass distribution. The ultimate goal of the project was very likely the art markets and economic benefits. Zhang Taijie would have been conscious of the efficiency and efficacy of distributing *Precious Paintings* in print.

The Value and Influence

Precious Paintings illuminates the pattern of the late Ming art markets especially because it freezes, as Stanley-Baker proposes, an ideal antiquarian collection that any antiquarian at that time

134 See Guo Jianping, "Lun Ming Qing shiqi de huaxue zhushu fengqi – Yi zhibuzu zhai ben 'Nansong yuanyuanhua lu juan' Bao Tingbo tiba wei xiansuo" 論明清時期的畫學著書風氣——以知不足齋本《南宋院畫錄卷》鮑廷博題跋為線索, *Shoudu shifan daxue xuebao (Shehui kexue ban)* 首都師範大學學報 (社會科學版), Vol. 202, No. 5 (2011): 149-50.

would dream to establish.¹³⁵ It was not only an ideal of the cultural elite, but must also have been an ideal of the merchants who vigorously pursued the antiquarianism fashion with their own purchasing power. These merchants were exactly those mocked by Shen Defu.

Moreover, *Precious Paintings* affords us a peculiar perspective to understand painting inscriptions in the late Ming art markets. This catalogue represents a sophisticated scheme of faking paintings through the power of inscriptions. Shen Defu's accounts reveal a forging scheme by adding fraudulent inscriptions. However, the scheme could only handle unidentified or spurious paintings in small quantities. By contrast, *Precious Paintings* initiated a scheme to publish fake inscriptions and then to sell fake paintings carrying these inscriptions. It suggests the systematic mass production of forgeries on a much larger scale. This artful scheme has its qualified successor: In 1881, a Qing official named Du Ruilian 杜瑞聯 (1831-1891) published an 18-fascicle painting catalogue *Record from the Ancient Fragrance Pavilion* (*Gufenge shuhua ji* 古芬閣書畫記). This book documents some 600 paintings, the vast majority of which are fake.

How did Ming people sense the world they lived in, a world flooded with a seemingly endless stream of fakes? The late Ming literatus Ding Yaokang 丁耀亢 (1599-1669) provides us with a fictional yet vivid vision in his vernacular novel *A Sequel to Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Xu Jin Ping Mei* 續金瓶梅):¹³⁶

It is even more ridiculous than this. People take good poems and prose of other people and print it as their own. Or, they inscribe the names of celebrities on their own calligraphy, painting and writing. In addition, there are those fake pictures and writings printed by artists (*shanren* 山人) and hangers-on; they sell fake calligraphic model-books and fake antiques. Itinerary merchants and market speculators sell all their fake junk and

135 Zaixin Hong, "Aspects of Chang T'ai-chi eh's Antiquarian Practice," 56.

136 Joan Stanley-Baker, "Forgeries in Chinese Painting," 59-60.

fake dress cloth. There is also a type of false celebrities, fake fellow graduates,¹³⁷ pseudo Imperial College students, and pretend provincial degree holders. In using others' names and masquerading under different family names, they recite gentry genealogies and biographies until they in all virtually rotten with overuse. They will claim that some senior grandee is an exam colleague of their fathers,¹³⁸ or that such and such an imperial investigating Censor is an older "brother" in their own examination years; this celebrity has sworn an oath of friendship; that parvenu is a disciple of the same master. There is nothing that cannot be faked, and these people indeed manage to make their way into every walk of life. There are those who net big profits and position themselves for every available opportunity. This is why people say that that people of ourthe present generation prefers the fake to the sincere.¹³⁹

Published three decades after *Precious Paintings*, *A Sequel to Plum in the Golden Vase* portrays some infamous tricks akin to those conceived in the former. It is very hard to ascertain whether the author Ding Yaokang's intended target was actually Zhang Taijie and his book. There were almost certainly similar publications at that time. In sum, in the eyes of Ding Yaokang, the era he inhabited was overwhelmingly flooded with innumerable fake things. The society was incurably slipping into the mire of fraud, in which people "prefers the fake to the sincere."¹⁴⁰

137 The generally accepted written date of *Sequel to the Plum in the Golden Vase* is between 1648-1660. The novel is published in 1660 or 1661. For the novel, see Martin W. Huang ed., *Snakes' Legs: Sequels, Continuations, Rewritings and Chinese Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 29-35; Kang-I Sun Chang and Stephen Owen eds., *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature: Volume 2*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 215-18. For Ding Yaokang, see Ling Xiaoqiao, "Re-reading the Seventeenth Century: Ding Yaokang (1599-1669) and His Writings," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2010).

138 *Nianjia* 年家 is the appellation to style candidates who succeed the highest civil service examination in the same year with the speaker.

139 *Nianbo* refers to *nianjia* of elder generations, but sometimes it generally refers to the elders.

140 Ding Yaokang, Episode 46 "Guang huipin" 廣慧品, *Xu Jinping mei* 續金瓶梅 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 290.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has situated painting inscriptions in an economic context. The art markets became now a significant platform on which people from different social strata competed, networked, and cooperated for economic and social benefits. This chapter has focused on the art markets' increasingly urgent demand for authenticity caused by fakes, and pointed out that in the domain of painting, inscriptions had become a crucial guarantee of authenticity issued either by the artist or by reputable connoisseurs. This crucial status could be demonstrated by the fact that the absence of an inscription on a painting often raised problems for collectors and connoisseurs to identify or authenticate the work.

This chapter has also shown that Ming fake artworks were complicated entities. On the one hand, some of forgers active in the market were literati. They employed their skill in calligraphy, history, and literature to produce deceptive inscriptions. On the other hand, the literati noticed that affluent merchants, with their economic power, were active in the domains of collecting paintings, appreciating inscriptions, and generating connoisseurship views of the works. The literati's reactions represented how intensively the function of a painting inscription validated social identity. Some of the literati looked down upon inscriptions as facile documentation that only the most ignorant merchants relied on. Others managed to consolidate their authority in painting connoisseurship with inscriptions that promoted their social superiority in intelligence and cultivation.

In the above discussions, this chapter from the perspective of material culture, has showed how inscriptions were added, tempered, removed, remounted, fabricated, compiled, and printed for economic as well as social and cultural reasons. The results created new ways of approaching and reading inscriptions, and above all a novel engagement with the notion of inscriptions as a type of knowledge. The chapter in its last two sections introduced

the idea of inscriptions in textual collections. These sections have examined a number of Ming painting catalogues, the main subject of which were inscriptions. These catalogues indicated a conceptual linkage between obtaining inscriptions and obtaining the knowledge of paintings, and further with successfully authenticating the paintings. This conception gained momentum since the seventeenth century. A case study on a 1633 catalogue of spurious inscriptions showed an exploitation of this conception. The circulation of inscriptions was very probably intended to sell fake paintings on the larger possible scale.