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The Matter of Chinese Painting, Case studies of 8th century murals

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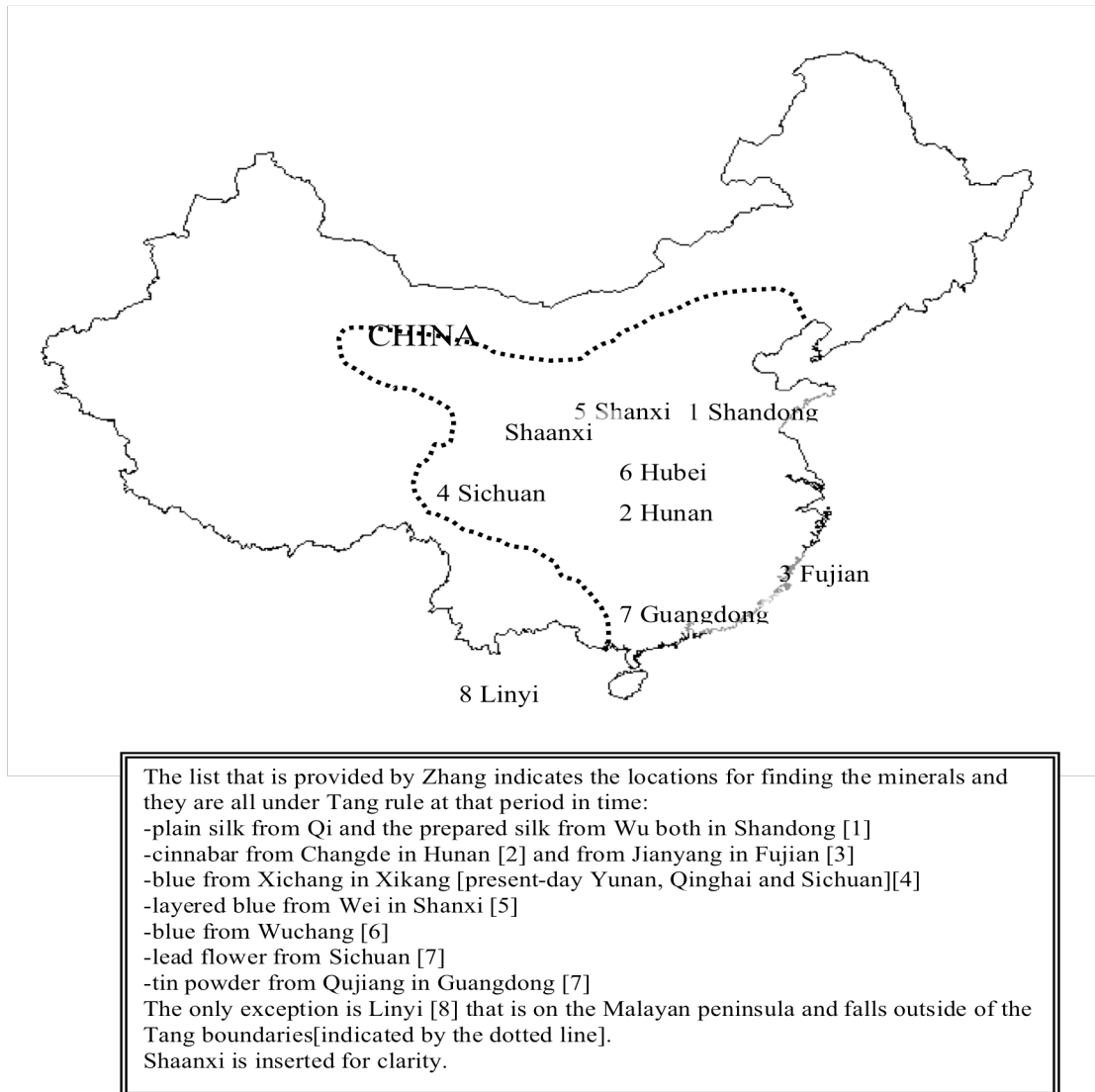
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MAP 2



Chapter 2

From Xie He to Shen Gua

This chapter aims to use a number of the written sources on painting with the goal of discovering traces of attitudes towards painting. Such written thoughts and contemplations about painting in the Chinese texts provide a glimpse into the perception of painting during that period. In addition, even more importantly for this study, they can shed some light on the practical and physical side of painting: the conception and creation of paintings.

The chosen texts date from the fifth to the eleventh century and they vary in style and characteristics. The oldest and maybe the most down-to-earth text is a farmers handbook (*Qimin yaoshu*). Because of its special character it will be dealt with separately in chapter 3. In this chapter, I shall start with the famous critique on painting by Xie He, written in 490 CE. Xie He is best known for being the first art critic in China, but he was also a painter, and I present him with that in mind. This chapter ends with a passage about painting from an encyclopedic book written in the eleventh century by a generalist by the name of Shen Gua, and will discuss various other texts from the period in between. Each one of these texts was written under different circumstances and with a different goal, but, with the distinct exception of the farmers handbook, the common denominator is the subject of painting. It is certain that like the farmers handbook, the painting manuals were all written by representatives of a literate social class that was part of a society known to put a high value on literacy. This literacy implies that the writers had knowledge of at least part, if not most, of the corpus of literature from earlier generations. This knowledge of the earlier texts is therefore an important factor to be considered in the reading of the later texts. This does not, however, imply a linear development in the texts through time, or in the art of painting for that matter, but in most cases I assume a common knowledge of the basic writing on the art of painting to be present from one generation to the next.

Xie He, *Criticism on Painters*, 490 CE

In the fifth century CE, when Xie He wrote his *Criticism on Painters* (*Guhua pinlu*), painting was still executed mostly in color on walls or on screens. Some paintings and scrolls that are

attributed to this early age are executed on silk.³² Paper may have been used for painting, but no traces have as yet been found of this usage of paper, although paper was used for packing. Other grounds, such as wood, bamboo and stoneware were also used for painting. In chapter 3 we shall even see a clam shell used for a painted scene. In this period, paintings were large in format, mostly measuring several square meters or more. We should therefore bear in mind that a considerable quantity of painting material was needed to create them, and consequently a lot of time-consuming manual labour required to prepare such materials.

The text of the *Guhua pinlu* has two parts. In the first part, to which I will refer as the *Liufa*, is an introduction, which shows us Xie He's view on painting. This first section is short and includes the most famous sentences that are translated as 'the Six rules of painting', or 'the Six Laws'³³, and many other variations.

The *liufa*, 六法:

气韵生动
骨法用笔
应物象形
随类赋彩
经营位置
转移模写

In the article 'the First Two Laws of Xie He' Alexander Soper's translation of the *Liufa* reads³⁴ [Soper 1, p 412-23]:

From Zhang Yanyuan (847CE) on down, art critics in the Far East have been quoting or writing about the Six Laws in an endless variety of ways.

(Good) painting has six conditions.... What are they?

1. Animation through spirit consonance
2. Structural method in use of the brush
3. Fidelity to the object in portraying the form
4. Conformity to kind in applying the colors
5. Proper planning in placing (of elements)

³² [Acker 2, Introduction, p XIV, note 1]: I do not suppose that this was the original title.....

³³ 'Laws' in this case must be intended in the sense of 'laws of nature'.

³⁴ [Soper 1, p 413], Soper, Alexander, The First Two Laws of Xie He, *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 8, Issue 4, Aug., 1949, p 412-423]

6. Transmission (of the experience of the past) in making copies
(i.e., the choice of good models to study, in formulating one's own style, rather than the current fashions.)

In the second part we find Xie He's critique on painters, and on individual painters rather than on painting in general. The first part is generally considered the more important, as we can conclude from Lin Yutang's [Lin Yutang 1, p 34] comment in his book *The Chinese Theory of Art*:

Xie He wrote in this text the most influential paragraph ever written on painting in China.

Since that time, hundreds if not thousands of comments and explanations of the text have been written in Chinese and during the last century or so western linguists, historians and art-historians have added their share of translations and interpretations of this text. It is fair to describe it now as a world-famous text. Let us not forget, however, that fame was not the reason for writing the text, and turn once again to Soper [Soper 1] who adds the following comment:

Chang Yanyuan seems to have been the first to give such high honour to Xie He's theories.³⁵

Let us return to the first part, which offers us a single paragraph containing only the *Liufa* i.e. the six rules for painting, thus laying the basic structure for Xie He's criticism on the masters of painting that appear in the second part of his text. This means that the criticism forms a far larger part, and can be seen as the main body of the text. Whether the *Liufa*, six rules, were recorded for teaching purposes or for other reasons is debatable. The fact that the *Liufa* are written down in this way might suggest that Xie He, or his readers, needed such guidelines, but why would he need them? The construction of the text, with the rules first and the critique after, could indicate a need for a solid device or set of rules with which to measure the art of his contemporaries and predecessors.³⁶ However, the grading of people was not new, and normally would be done without such an introduction. In the article "On Xie He's 'LIU-

³⁵ N.B. At the time of Soper's comment in 1949, Acker was yet to be published.

³⁶ Michael Sullivan in *The Arts of China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, p 95: "Literary criticism in the third and fourth centuries had taken the form of *pinzao*-- a mere classification (often in nine grades), according to merits and faults, first applied to statesmen and other public figures, then to poets." The *pin*, 品, were also an essential instrument in social classification of people.

FA"³⁷ Wen Fong digs into the translations and interpretations of the *Liufa* by both Western and Chinese writers:

The ambiguity and overtone of the language of these "Fa" make rich hay for Sinological digressions.

At the end of his analysis Wen Fong compares Xie He's *Liufa* with a 18th century European³⁸ example of describing the method of painting, and he draws the following conclusion:

In these categories, therefore, we have two very satisfactory listings of the major concerns of the Chinese and the Western Art of painting, although, from our viewpoint today, neither can be used as effective critical tools.

I must agree with Fong's analysis that the rules are not a tool for the critique that Xie He wrote.

In the introduction of his book *Some Tang and Pre-Tang texts on Chinese Painting*, Acker³⁹ first establishes the true nature of the six rules, stripping down each line to six bi-nomen. Naming the fourth of the six as being *suilei*, 'appropriate treatment,' Acker argues that Xie He did not understand the true meaning of this term, writing:

Perhaps the original meaning might have been that just as the Buddha knows how to adapt his teaching to the being to be converted and saved, so the painter should know how to suit his technique and approach to the subject to be painted, and give it its own appropriate treatment. Xie He limits his exercise of judgment and good taste to the choice of colors. Was he right?

My answer to Acker's question would be a plain and simple yes: I think that Xie He was right. To me, it seems more likely that in this case not Xie He, but Acker is the one who does not fully understand the meaning of this rule. The meaning of Xie He's fourth rule lies in the word colour, rather than in the bi-nomen *suilei*. The rule does not say anything about the subject, the image or the nature of the picture, and is not concerned with matters of good taste or judgment. In my view Xie He is saying, 'use the color according to its type'. This is a straightforward technical statement: each colour should be used in accordance with its type.

³⁷ Wen Fong, On Xie Ho's 'LIU-FA', *Oriental Art*, new series, 1963, vol IX. NO. 4

³⁸ Quote: "It is interesting to compare Xie He's *Liufa* with a pre-scientific Western classification by the neo - Classicist Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), who developed the earlier French academic theories to a much more elaborate form."

³⁹ [Acker 2, Introduction, p XLII] comment on XIE HE.

Replace the word colour with mineral, pigment, dye or colorant, and it becomes clear that these words point to the type of colour, as in the type of dye, the type of mineral, the type of pigment, or the sort of colorant. Chapter 3 gives a description of many of the various colours and for some of them their specific preparation for use. This shows that each color needs a different treatment to fully exploit its natural properties, and to make the best use of its specific characteristics. The proper treatment of the color according to its sort is one of the technical skills that matter to the painter, and this is equal to and in balance with the five aspects mentioned in the other rules. Acker builds on his misunderstanding of this when he compares the six rules with the Indian Sadanga, in his words [Acker 2, p XLV]:

6. *Varnika-bhanga*. Coomaraswamy has 'preparation of pigments' It is plain that there is nothing in Xie He's Six Elements to correspond to this.

Although I will not comment on the comparison with the Sadanga, it must be clear to the reader that I disagree entirely with Acker's view on his interpretation of Xie He's rule number 4. In my view, in the time of Xie He, and probably for a long period afterwards, rule 4 was of no less importance than any of the others.

Xie He the painter

Xie He certainly seems to have been a critical person, since straight away in his introduction he bluntly states that only two painters, Lu Tanwei and Wei Xie, live up to each and every one of the six criteria of the *Liufa*. In addition, Xie He was a painter, although none of his paintings are known. As we can see in the critique *Xu Hua pin*, which was written by Yao Cui as a sequel to Xie He's own *Guhua pinlu*⁴⁰, in some aspects Xie was a very good painter, specifically at portraits, but he was not the greatest in other aspects of the profession:

Xie He

The above was very good at portraits: without waiting for them to sit for him, all he needed was one glimpse, and he would return and take up his brush. His dots and strokes, fine details and intentions strove for a full likeness. From the eyes' expression to the finest hair, nothing was missed or lost. Beautiful clothing and painted faces followed the fashions. These straight brows and domed temples were new to his generation; a new fine and elegant style was founded largely by Xie He. Afterwards he

⁴⁰ Xie He in [Xiao 2, p 299] and Yao Cui in [Xiao 2, p 314], *Han Wei Liuchao Shuhualun*, editor Xiao Peicang, Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1997

caused the searchers for the trivial things whom did not have the basics, to be sent in bending lanes. This is similar to the imitation of the frowning brows.⁴¹ With regard to his spiritual rhyme and divine quality, his total life force is not yet reached, and his brush strokes are frail and weak, not helping the creation of a feeling of elegance. Since the Zhongxing period ⁴², his portraits have not been surpassed.

The Liufa

At this point, we must take a closer look at the *Liufa*, and building on the work done by many translators before me I now translate them:

The Six Rules:	<i>Liufa</i> , 六法
1 Enliven the atmosphere and tone,	<i>qiyunshengdong</i> , 气韵生动
2 Use brushwork to structure it,	<i>gufayongbi</i> , 骨法用笔
3 Portray form in accordance with matter,	<i>yingwuxiangxing</i> , 应物象形
4 Apply the color according to the type,	<i>suileifucal</i> , 随类赋彩
5 Position the objects in the composition,	<i>jingyingweizhi</i> , 经营位置
6 Pass on model sketches,	<i>zhuanyimoxie</i> , 传移模写

On one hand the six rules are of a beautiful simplicity, showing Xie He's talent to compose a text of only 24 characters, sharing with us his understanding of painting as a skill that operates within a framework of rules — rules that might even be called universal. On the other hand, simplicity can also mean that these rules are far too general, and implementing them in a real work of art would consequently be of little value to anyone. So, the question remains; are these rules the basic principles of the art of painting? A positive answer to this question would imply that the rules are applicable to painting in general, and maybe even more than that: to painting of any and every era. In my view it is true that one can say that the *Liufa* do not favour any specific style⁴³, although through the ages they have, more often than not, been used precisely to that end. For example by the time the Literati-painters, from the

⁴¹ This is a story about famous beauty Xi Shi, who was considered very charming even when frowning her brows; but when ugly women imitate this they only become uglier.

⁴² 501 CE

⁴³ Style is the distinctive manner of a person, school or period in painting.

Song Dynasty onwards, largely ignored rule 4 [Apply the colour according to the type] when they started to favour a black ink style, they still maintained at all times the myth that the *Liufa* were the basis of all painting. The crucial point I want to make is that style is an ever-changing element in painting, strongly influenced by fashion and the mode of the day. Style is the distinctive manner of a person, school, or period in painting. Technique is a mechanical skill in art, and is the manner of artistic execution in relation to formal details. This gives technique a far greater influence on painting than style. Technique lies at the very basis of painting; it reflects on the quality of a work, without the bias of the taste of the period. At this point I would like to propose that the *Liufa* was intended as a guideline for technique⁴⁴.

The sign on the wall

From the perspective of technique, the *Liufa* are very clear on what is and is not appropriate in a painting. Based on Xie He's own words, I am convinced that the *Liufa* can be seen as a set of technical rules. The *liufa* imply that a painter should first master all six rules in order to produce high quality paintings. I take this as a purely technical argument, not as a matter of taste or aesthetics. The quality of a painting in a technical sense is at stake here. One might justly argue that there is more to the technique of painting than just these six rules.

Nevertheless, the *Liufa* provided Xie He with a structure applicable to the style and the technique of painting we now know to have existed at that time. Most of the works that were created by the painters that fell under the critical eye of Xie He are no longer known to us. The few paintings that are left from that era are of questionable pedigree. The paintings that are reliably dated to that era are mostly anonymous, so even if we are able to evaluate a painting of the period, it is impossible to judge whether the artist lived up to the *Liufa*. One would need several paintings by the same hand to be able to judge the quality and skill of an artist: it is impossible to do so based on one single work.

Paintings as evidence

The tomb paintings from the Tang-period excavated in the last part of the twentieth century provide us with some material evidence of at least part of the practice and technique of painting and painters of the Tang. In the tombs often more than one person worked on the

⁴⁴ Technique is the mechanical skill of art, and it is the manner of artistic execution in relation to formal details.

wall paintings: by comparing the brushwork one can determine which parts were done by the same hand. The painters of the tombs remain largely unknown since no trace of their names can be found in historical records. As described in the previous chapter, an inscription found in the tomb of prince Yide shed some light on this issue. Jan Fontein and Wu Tong linked the inscribed name Yang Biangui to the painter Yang Qiong, who is mentioned in Zhang Yanyuan's *Famous Painters of all Dynasties* (*Lidai minghuaji*). Here then, we at least see a name, but even then little else to go on.

Most of the Chinese books on the Tang Murals put great value on the socialist implications and knowledge represented in these works of art. This, however, tells us more about the state of the socialist society in China in the 1960s and 1970s than it tells us about the tomb-builders and the skills of the painters of the seventh and eighth century. Western books are equally biased, although it must be said that instead of favoring the socialist view, they tend to look only at iconography and from that derive religious implications of the works. It seems to me that both views err at the same basic starting point: observing the work as a picture-book story: everybody expects the painting to be something other than just what you see. Although it is true that people often need a guide or interpreter to be able to fully appreciate a work of art, it does not, however, follow that every work of art must represent a story or a history beyond the image. You can look at art as an entity of its own.



Photograph 2-01

Riding procession II, from the tomb of Li Shou, 203 x 147 cm, 8 riders on horses. Colours of the 5 horses in the front: 3 white, 1 red, and 1 purplish red. Photograph by courtesy of Zhang Qunxi. For a description of the constructions in the wall paintings in the Li Shou tomb see chapter 1. From: Yin Shengpeng, The Cream of Original Frescoes from Tang Tombs, Shaanxi 1991, p 35.

I shall now propose my theory on the practical implications of the *Liufa* as a set of technical guidelines. To illustrate the argument I will introduce one of the paintings still available for examination today. The painting dates to the early Tang Dynasty, and is one of the many wall paintings presently in the Shaanxi History Museum in Xi'an.

Colour and line

This is an example of the way western books on Chinese painting describe the painting technique from the book *Art in China*, by Craig Clunas, 1997, p 46:

An example from the tomb of the Tang Prince Li Zhongrun (682-701) is particularly valuable as it is unfinished, and therefore shows something of the technical process by which large-scale paintings on plaster walls were executed at the time. The artist or team of artists has first carried out a fairly sketchy underdrawing of the outlines on prepared dry plaster, finished with white paint and a sealant of lime and glue, before areas of colour have been blocked in. It is known that, for court connoisseurs, the drawing of the line was deemed more 'artistic' than the laying on of colour, and that the subsidiary artists who did the latter were already at this date considered of lower status.

It seems to me to be like a children's colouring-in book: do not move outside the lines and put the colors nicely in the right place.... This may derive from the second of the *Liufa*; often translated as 'outline drawing', but by 1935 Soper had already disagreed with this view:

To render *gufa* by 'outline drawing' seems to me almost misleading. [.....] I can find no better equivalent than 'structure'.⁴⁵

However, in 1997 in the book *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, [Barnhart, p 8]⁴⁶, in a section called 'Approaches to Chinese Painting' written by James Cahill we still find:

The original style of Chinese painting, seen in the earliest examples that survive, combines fine-line delineation of forms- with an emphasis on contour but also some interior drawing- with washes of color. This outline-and-color mode persists through

⁴⁵ [Soper 1, p 416]

⁴⁶ Barnhart, R.M. et al., *Three thousand years of Chinese painting*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997

the Tang dynasty, after which it slips into a conservative and sometimes archaist status, while the most innovative tendencies in painting are developing in other directions.⁴⁷

The painting in the tomb of Li Zhongrun [Yide] forms part of my empirical research, and in the following chapters I will come back to this. The technical details of this specific unfinished painting in the Yide tomb differ substantially from the description given above by Craig Clunas, as will be explained below.

Standing in front of the early paintings from the walls of the tomb of Li Shou[M], my impression differs substantially from the general view that we are dealing with 'outline' drawing, and makes me agree with Soper. There are some parts of the image that have something that you might call an outline – I would suggest the word border is more fitting – and these lines are an integrated part of the whole scene. Sometimes the colours do fall within these borders, but sometimes the colours are placed over and next to the border, giving the whole technique a very lively touch. All of the brushstrokes are broad and vividly applied by the skilled hand of a mature painter. Here we have a painter that knows his material and is not frightened of depicting the shape and form of his subject.

1 'Enliven the atmosphere and tone'

From the way this artist places the nostrils and the tongues of the horses it is clear that this painting is not done by an artisan: it shows the subtlety of an artist. This is no artisan colouring in an outline; this is a skilled painter at work at the peak of his career. The brushstrokes almost seem to caress the horse's hindquarters and tail. The tongue resists the pull of the bit; the nostril draws in all the air it can get. For me, Rule 1, 'Enliven the atmosphere and tone' is definitely accomplished in this image. The painter portrays more than just an image of a group of figures: we are confronted with a moment in time; the whole group is moving. One of the riders looks us directly in the face, a remarkable element that adds to the lively atmosphere of the image.

⁴⁷ [Cahill 3]

2 'Use brushwork to structure it'

So, let us go one step further to Rule 2, 'Use brushwork to structure it'. This is mostly interpreted as a order to make an outline in ink, and so this rule is more or less responsible for the colouring-in book interpretation.⁴⁸ From a painter's point of view, this rule can be interpreted very differently: 'brushwork' relates to *all* the brushwork, not only the outline but every single stroke. Every stroke, whether black or coloured, thick or thin, works together to create the structure of the scene in the painting. As mentioned before, if it is necessary for the sake of expressiveness, this painter does not hesitate to allow the coloured brushstrokes to run over and across the black brushstrokes to let them work together to create a cohesive image.



In the example chosen, I can see expression in every brushstroke that is still to be seen: variations between thick and thin, bold and subtle, and wet and dry brushstrokes.

Photograph 2-02

Section of a mural in the tomb of Li Shou. On the side of the mural part of the structure that is used for backing the work is just visible. Photograph by courtesy of Zhang Qunxi. See larger photograph on page 70

⁴⁸ [Acker 1, p XXXIII]: " ..demand for calligraphic line work as an essential element in painting..."

3 'Portray form in accordance with matter'

Rule 3 adds to Rule 2, in underlining the need for expression of texture. Texture is vital: it enables us to portray the difference between, for example, stone and a living creature. Since everything is basically portrayed using the same paint, the painter has to vary his brush technique and the strength of his touch to accomplish the right texture for each individual texture. This requires that hair should look like hair and stone like stone, and even the difference between various types of hair (for example between the hair of a horse and the hair of a mouse) must be expressed. In painting, the brush stroke and the expression of the texture are inseparable, just as the flesh is connected to the bone. The choice of colour takes this textural expression on to the next rule.

4 'Apply the colour according to the type'

Rule 4, 'Apply the colour according to the type' is usually read to imply that the colour must express the inner nature of the matter that is being painted; as with the 'form' of Rule 3. At this point I want to emphasize that Rule 3 and 4 do not exclude either form or colour from rule 2. As mentioned earlier, brushwork is required for every brushstroke, in every form and – this is important – for every colour. Colour can make matter look warm or cold, coarse or tender, glowing or dull, lively or dead.

Another, more practical interpretation of Rule 4 opened my eyes to another possible reading of this rule: you must follow the type of colour when applying it. In this reading the meaning of Rule 4 lies in the word colour. This is a straightforward technical statement: each colour should be used in accordance with its type. This points to the type of colourant, as in the type of dye, the type of mineral, the type of pigment. Each colour needs a different treatment to fully exploit its natural properties, and to make the best use of its specific characteristics. The proper preparation of the colour according to its type is one of the technical skills most vital for a painter. This is equal to and in balance with the skills mentioned in the other rules.

As I have argued above, I see the rules as a direct and technical pointer for the painter; colour has to be treated properly and according to its composition. This proper treatment of the matter is a technical skill of the painter. It can in fact be proven by the condition of the mural in my example. The construction of the tomb was in 630 CE, so almost 1400 years have

passed since the paintings were made, but the painting still displays a great variety of colours, and in some places even an abundance of colour. From the fact that the colour is still vibrant, I can conclude that the painter or painters of the murals in the Li Shou tomb had mastered this fourth rule of technique.

5 '*Position the objects in the composition*'

Rule, 5 'Position the objects in the composition', is the basis for any form of painting.

However, for this example of a section of a large-format tomb painting, this rule can only be applied in a very limited way. Why is that?

From a technical point of view, it seems at first that this rule says the same thing twice over: first *jingying* meaning positioning, and then *weizhi*, composition. Since these are often represented by each other, why the repetition? I think for a painter it is essential to pay attention to both. Specifically, for the larger format of painting that was predominant in the day of Xie He, one must be done after the other. The example from the Li Shou tomb as described here forms only a part of a much larger composition; the tomb as a whole. In its present state, it can only be viewed as a section of a composition on a grand scale, and consequently the second part cannot be considered looking only at a section of the scenery. In my view, Rule 5 hints first at the positioning of the objects, or the positioning and secondly at the overall composition. To evaluate it here I would have to take under consideration the murals of the walls of the tomb as an entire composition.

Rule 5 could imply the painter's use of perspective, as we have seen in the watchtowers of the tomb of Prince Yide; standing at the foot of the tower in the real painting one can see for this section, true perspective is used.[see photograph 1-10] True perspective, which emerged in Europe in the 15th century, and is generally assumed to have been introduced to the Chinese only with the advent of European knowledge.

6 '*Pass on model sketches*'

Rule 6 'Pass on model sketches', appears to me to be the most typically Chinese rule of the six. In China, models from the past are always considered as a perfect example for learning. From a practical or technical point of view, I think it is likely that Xie He intended to say that

every painter should hand down his sketches to his apprentices. This would provide the apprentice with a basis for their technique and give them an opportunity to learn skills from the master. This is a subtle difference in interpretation from the general reading of rule 6, which implies that one should learn from those who came before.

Both readings emphasize the value of models and learning, whether from the past or extending into the future. The whole set of 6 rules is a workable and practical guideline for painters.

A 6th century sequel by Yao Cui (500 – 552?)

In the *Xu Hua pin* that was written almost a century later than and in addition to Xie He's *Guhua pinlu*, Yao Cui describes a different group of painters, among which is Xie He himself. As I have mentioned before, in the eyes of Yao Cui, Xie He was an able painter. Xie He's grading however, is not entirely approved by Yao: he feels the need to add some corrections:

So here I give my views and do not talk about good and bad; it is hard to slander the masses; I have just gathered what I heard and read. Here in this book are the things that Xie He has left out. Even though this text has only two scrolls, there are still things to be pick out: it has become one man's collected work. Surely, the old and new comments on calligraphy, the good and bad are fully argued. There are few who understand painting, which is why it is laid out in full. Because there are few I do not have to divide them, anyone can decide for themselves what is good or bad.

Yao Cui further hints at some kind of secret in his *Xu Hua pin*, and he clearly admires the painter Jiao Baoyuan for his persistence in trying to discover the method of painting that Zhang Sengyu and Xie He are unwilling to reveal:

Jiao Baoyuan

Although Jiao Baoyuan associated earlier with Zhang en Xie, they were reluctant to part with and transfer [their secrets]; he went around looking and requesting, almost as if he were stealing 'the way'; to obtain an 'old hand' by following them and picking from their hard work. The colour of his cloth, his decorations and his trees are sometimes expressed in a new and strange way, dotting the black and putting on the cinnabar, never neglecting light and dark, and although he never studied 'the autumn-carriage', he was seen and admired by 'the spring-room'. He introduced his meagre skill

and in fact obtained a position. Nowadays the gentry with their caps and clothes, are never famed for their love of study, so the colour method is lost, which is very sad.

Xiao Yi (506-554), who later became the emperor Yuandi (552-554) of the Liang Dynasty (502-556), was one of Yao Cui's contemporaries, and Yao also wrote an admiring passage about him. This specific passage seems to substantiate the claim that there was a secret to painting technique. It seems certain that in Yao's mind Xiao Yi had the full capacity to work as a painter, and as such was able to put this secret knowledge into practice. Yao regards him as the best portrait painter, never having to correct his dots, and famous 'beyond the borders' for his painting:

From youth he has been blessed with inborn knowledge; studying exhaustively nature's manifestations, his mind took creative force as its master. Never again has anyone trodden in his path. Painting has six rules. Even immortals find this difficult: but he excels especially in painting portraits, he has a quick mind and a moving hand, and he does not need to correct his dots. He does this all in addition to 'hearing the cases' and his military command, and in the time left after discussions on literature and art. When faced with an object he takes up the brush, and creates in the blink of an eye things that amaze you, enough to make Xun and Wei put down their brushes, and for Yuan Qian and Liu Tanwei to abandon theirs. Although his paintings are few, his fame has spread beyond the borders.

Xiao Yi, The secret of painting.⁴⁹ (506-554)

In this section I aim to identify this great secret in the technique of painting in China, which Xiao Yi specifies in the last section of his 6th century text on painting:

The secret of the brush method, which I have given here in great detail, must not be revealed in the living quarters.

The brush-method Xiao Yi records contains some distinct aspects of the technique of painting. He writes about the layout of landscapes, which in his view are to be created from east to west and from north to south. He emphasizes that the ink must be pure; mentions white-washed walls and white silk-screens, and stresses the importance of correct measurement. According to Xiao Yi, sometimes the *pomo*, 'broken ink' and *danqing*, colouring, lose touch

⁴⁹ Xiao Yi in [Xiao 2, p 316]], *Han Wei Liuchao Shuhualun*, editor Xiao Peicang, Hunan meishu chubanshe, 1997

with the form. He explains colour perspective, using terms like ‘fade out half of the wall’; ‘the high concealed in darkness’; and ‘the low sinking like a gully’. As for the expression of the four seasons in trees, his concepts are vivid enough; in Autumn they should look like hair, in Winter become rigid like bone, in summer they are shady and in spring they flower. He makes distinctions between colours that correspond to present-day categories of warm and cold colours: in the heat, one must use *fei*, dark red, and in the cold one uses *qing*, bluish colors. The highest part of paintings the ink must be *lü*, green, and in lower parts the ink must be similar to *zhi*, red earth. He also specifies that in illustrations, meaning cards and books, one must not make the distant mountains too big. This summarises the technical pointers that Xiao Yi left for the benefit of his colleagues, and which, especially the secret of all this, he clearly states, must not be spread among the layman.:

Liang Yuandi, Xiao Yi, Shi Cheng, 梁元帝，蕭繹，世誠

Now, of all the words of heaven and earth, creation is the most 'spiritual'. The form's essentials are distinguished, and landscapes are painted from east to west and north to south. Some must be high and the mind must be free; the real brushwork must be *Miao*, excellent and the ink must be pure. Due to the preparation of the white-washed wall the spirit must move, on white silk screens (*lianyu*) it [the preparation] must be from corner to corner: mountain ranges and water cascades must enlighten each other from head to toe, and the neck and belly must be near to each other. Yards, feet, inches and fractions of inches, have their divine principles; trees, stones, clouds and water can have no solid form. Trees must vary from large to small, in groups, in rows, solitary and clumped, supported or separated, bent or straight, striving upwards or uprooted *lingting* /chaste and alone. Suddenly undulate through the tender twigs, just like the written character...8 characters missing... Some must be hard to unite using ‘broken ink’, when the form estranged by the use of colours. One must fade out half the wall, to let what is high be concealed in the darkness, splitting the emptiness like a sword, and letting the lower part sink as if into a gully. In the autumn [trees] must be like hair, in winter like bone, in summer shady and in spring flowering; in the heat they must be dark red and in the cold, bluish. Depict the warm sun and the cold stars, huge pines and permeating water; the luxuriant wood-edges should spread outwards, and the dark spots should be covered with lush woods, flanked by many flourishing weeds. The streams and springs should be winding, and when the mist clears and the mountains break through, the heavens must be a clear blue (*jinglan*), with bridges and planks, passes and walls, and people moving and dogs barking, animals walking and birds flying up. The

ink in the high part must be green, and in the low part must be similar to red earth. If the water is interrupted, it seems to flow from afar: I want the clouds to be descending and the sunset to be light. Bamboos must not be as close as Hu and Yue, and pines must not be as hard to distinguish as these brothers. Roads must be broad and stones must be separated; the sky must move and birds must fly. Trees and stones surrounded by clouds must first be dotted (*dian*), the twigs and branches on the stones must be done last. High peaks dislike neighboring carved stones the most, and a distant mountain that is too large is forbidden when painting cards and books. The secret of the brush method, which I have given here in great detail, must not be revealed in the living quarters.

Zhang Yanyuan, *Famous Painters of all Dynasties*, 847 CE

In 847, Zhang Yanyuan wrote the *Famous Painters of all Dynasties* (*Lidai minghuaqi*) which has been mentioned several times already, both in this and the previous chapter. As we have seen above, Zhang plays an important role in the discussion of Xie He's *Liu Fa*. Indeed, were it not for Zhang, the other text would probably never have been rediscovered. W. R. B. Acker published a fully annotated translation of the *Famous Painters of all Dynasties* (*Lidai minghuaqi*) in his books *Some Tang and pre-Tang texts on Chinese painting*, part 1 in 1954 and part 2 in 1974. My observations on the Chinese text are made from a completely different perspective, since I am only concerned with the technical evidence of paint. For that reason, for the complete text and all linguistic, historical and sinological annotations and comments on Zhang's text I would like to refer the reader to Acker. The translations below are my own.

For on study, only one section of the *Famous Painters of all Dynasties* (*Lidai minghuaqi*) is directly relevant: the translation of Zhang's report on style, skill, material, and about the rubbing-off of painting and calligraphy. The other sections are rich in information on painters and places, providing records of many paintings that had already been destroyed when Zhang wrote the book.

Section of the *Famous Painters of all Dynasties* (*Lidai minghuaqi*); Zhang Yanyuan; editor Taniguchi, 1981; p. 29-31:

On painting style (*ti*, 体); skill (*gong*, 工); utility (*yong*, 用) rubbing (*ta*, 拓) and sketching (*xie*, 写).

So from yin and yang the creation of all forms derive, the dark woman transforms and escapes words, the divine work moves alone. Plants and trees bloom and prosper, independent of cinnabar and green paint; clouds and snow whirl and soar, white independent from lead powder; mountains are blue-green (*Cui*, 翠) independent of the blue (*Kong*, 空), and the phoenix is feathered independent of the five colors; For this reason to move the ink and facilitating the five colors is therefore called achieving the concept; when the concept lies in the five colors, then subject and image are contradictory.

So in painting a subject it is really taboo to depict form, appearance, colour, decoration and details, in an overcautious and meticulous manner, and to display a *qiao*, skilful *mi*, density. For this reason fear not the unfinished, but the finished. If you know the finish, what need is there to finish? This is absolutely not unfinished, but by not knowing the finish, this really is unfinished.

So if it loses its naturalness, it can still be divine (*shen*, 神)
 if it loses its divinity, it can still be excellent (*miao*, 妙)
 if it loses its excellence, it can still be strong (*jing*, 劲)
 if it is strong, it is a shortcoming,
 and the result is overcautiously meticulous.

1. The natural is the top of the top-grade;
2. The *shen* is the middle of top-grade;
3. The *miao* is the lower of the top-grade;
4. The *jing* is the top of the middle-grade;
5. Expressive but meticulous is the middle of the middlegrade.

I have here set up these five grades, and they embrace the six rules, (the Six Rules are in the first scroll) to create a connected excellence, and if you look at it critically, you can divide it into several hundred grades, which can be exhaustive. Only someone whose mind is highly connected to the divine feels it with rare grace and ease, and moves freely in mind and in nature, and can discuss connoisseurship.

So painters wanting to excel in these things, must first sharpen their tools.

Pure white fine silk fabrics from Qi⁵⁰, and soft and supple pure white silk from Wu, white silk like ice, fine, smooth and compactly woven; this is the excellent fruit of the loom.⁵¹ [from Qi 齊 indicates raw silk, from Wu 吳 indicates prepared silk]

Cinnabar from the water well in Wulin,

Mocuo-grains [cinnabar]

Yuesui *kongqing* 空青 [blue]

cengqing 曾青 from Wei [blue]

pianqing 扁青 from Wuchang, (this is top-grade mineral green)

qianhua 铅化 from the Shu commandery, (this is litharge/yellow lead, from the *Bencao*, *Materia Medica* [lead flower, masicot, litharge, lead monoxide])

jiyei 解锡 from Shixing, (*hufen* 湖粉, *hu* 湖, foreign white) [ceruse, basic lead carbonate, tin powder]

all these must be ground and melted, clarified and purified, into light and dark, light and heavy, and fine and course.⁵²

Huang 黄, yellow from Linyi and Kunlun, (this is orpiment, must never be used together with lead, *hufen*)

Yi 蜴, ant ore from Nanhai (this is purple ore, and creates powder for *yanzhi* 胭脂, rouge. Wu Lu calls this *chijiao* 赤胶, red glue)

Lujiao 鹿胶, deer glue from Yunzhong

Biaojiao 鳔胶, fish glue from Wuzhong

Niujiao 牛胶, ox hide glue from Dong'e, (used in colouring and decorating)

*Qigu*⁵³ 漆古, juice refined and decocted,

⁵⁰ Shandong silk

⁵¹ 'The fundamentals of painting' in Maimai Sze, *The Mustard Seed Garden of Painting, 1679-1701*, 1992, p 45: 'Up to the beginning of the Tang dynasty, pictures were painted on unsized silk (*sheng juan*). And up to the time of Zhou Fang and Han Kan, silk was prepared by immersion in boiling water. Powder (*fen*) was added, and the silk was beaten until it was like a silver board. Figures and objects painted on this silk had a wonderful brilliance.'

⁵² See for the deposits of minerals Map 1 on page 43 [modern] and Map 2 on page 44 for the locations mentioned by Zhang in Tang period.

⁵³ *Qigu* is the plant *sagina maxima*, a member of the nightshade-family.

In the Cihai: "Sagina Japonica, stone bamboo, one year growth or two year small root growth,, spreading easily. Used as guide stalks, thin shape, small parts can be planted. It blooms in spring with small white flowers; has a single leave on each twig; the flowers are thin and long; it produces berries, and can be kept over. It grows between the fields, on all types of earth and also in mountainous areas. It is common along the streambed of

All of these are used in heavy colouring, it is used to obtain lush colour. (Old paintings all use *Qigu* juice. After refining and decocting it is called *yuse*, lush colours. It is heavily used on top of greens)

Old paintings do not use *toulü*, 'first green' and *daqing*, 'great blue', (Painters use *culü* coarse green instead of *toulü*, and *cuqing*, coarse blue instead of *daqing*.)

It is used directly to help in the preparation of refined decoration.

Hundred-year-old glue will not peel off in a thousand years.

Cutt of eight feet of the edible-bamboo-hair, and every scratch will be as fine as a knife wound.

Suppose there is a very good hand at painting, who says of himself, that he is excellent at clouds, I would say to him: 'The ancients never painted clouds excellently. For example, they paint on damp and wet white silk, dripping a line with *qingfen*, calomel, or blew the powder with the mouth, what we call 'blowing the clouds': these are ways of achieving natural power. Although this is called 'getting *miaojie*', an excellent connection, since you can not see the brush strokes, you cannot call this painting. For example, a landscape-painter uses *pomo*, splattered ink, and this too cannot be called painting, and is not worth following.'

In Jiangnan, the earth is moist and there is no dust, and there are many people refined in art. Concerning the works of the three Wu, and the fame of the 'Eight-cut-off', Wang Yizhi and Gu Kaizhi; their talent in painting and calligraphy comes from there. The Huainanzhi⁵⁴ says: ([The feudal] Song people were well versed in painting, and the Wu people were well versed in colouring) (*Que*, colouring is *fuse*, the laying on of colours). Is this not truly so?

Lovers of writting and painting ought to prepare a hundred strips of Xuan-paper, using the wax method, to prepare a *moxie*, copy sketch. (Gu Kaizhi used the method of rubbing *motamiaofa*). [*ta*, facsimile]

The ancients when they rubbed paintings, got 70 or 80 % of the original painting, without losing the original expression of the brush traces.

China's Yangtze river, of the Yellow river, and in the southern parts of the Northeast. Huxiang, Japan, India also yield it. The whole weed is used in medicine, to cure fever and *jiewu*/ bind poison; fresh weed ...sap is used to smear on ... lacquer..."

⁵⁴ *Huainanzhi*; a book written under protection of the Prince of Huainan, Liu An (179-122 BCE).

There is also the rubbing done by the Yufu (imperial secretariat), which is called official rubbing. In our dynasty, the rubbing of the treasuries of the Hanlin, the Jinshen and the Mige⁵⁵ never stops. In the time of Empress Wu, for as long as we revered peace, it went on hurriedly, but after the war, the business of rubbing and transcribing of ancient writings and paintings gradually subsided. Therefore, if there is someone who can rub very good, not only do we appreciate him, but we can even hope to find brush traces of the original, and they can be kept for verification. On seeing all the paintings, only the paintings of Gu Kaizhi <The Ancient Wise Man>, really reach excellent structure. If you see a painting by Gu, you will be tired by a whole day of gasping and daydreaming, experiencing the excellence of nature, and losing the difference between the world and oneself; leaving your own body, and leaving behind the form while the wisdom vanishes. The body becomes dried up like a log of wood, and the heart turns to ashes leftover from a fire; if this is really reaching ‘excellent structure’, the rubbing and transcribing of ancient calligraphy and painting, than this is ‘the *dao*, way’ of painting. Gu Kaizhi first created a portrait of *Weimoji*, Vimilakirti; his body leans on an armrest where it shows his meagre features; you can tell he is sick, and no matter how much you look at his notes, you forget the circumstances of his words. Lu and Zhang all followed his painting method but never reached his level. (Zhan Mo, Lu Tanwei, Zhang Sengyu all painted the learned Vimilakirti, but none was up to the painting created by Gu Kaizhi.)

From my translation of this section of the text it must be clear that the substances used in painting form a serious subject in Zhang’ treatise. Some of the paints are easily identified and are still in use today in traditional Chinese painting, and some can be traced in ancient paintings. One of the unanswered questions so far is the use of *qigu*, a plant juice that is used to enhance the color green. I have not found any record of this juice as a painting material other than in this treatise. However, according to the *Materia Medica* it is a commonly used drug in the treatment of various diseases of the intestines and against bleedings. Some of the names of the substances mentioned by Zhang recur in chapter 3, which deals with the paint components that I have so far been able to identify. The locations of the minerals as given by Zhang are indicated on Map 1, page 44.

⁵⁵ *Hanlin*, *Jinshen* and *Mige* point to the the Hanlin academy, the Jinshen[?] and the Secret Treasury.

Shen Gua and his *Brush notes from the Dreamstream*

Shen Gua (1031-1095) is best known for his authorship of the first description of the moveable-type printing technique, in eleventh century China. That specific part of his book *Brush notes from the Dream stream (Mengxi bitan)*, Zhonghua shuju, Xianggang, 1975, is the most translated and reviewed part of his work. Another chapter (chapter seventeen) is very seldom mentioned and few translations, and even then only partial ones, are to be found. This chapter is about painting and calligraphy, focusing mainly on connoisseurship, and it describes famous paintings and the comments of other people in regard to these paintings. Shen Gua often contradicts the criticisms he quotes by comparing them with evidence based on mainly technical facts. This method of commenting on fine art puts realism and reality high on the agenda of Shen Gua. In his view of the world, the real craftsman is able to observe the form and substance of the things around him and paint from a keen perception of the way these things change; such as the seasons or the changing light of day and night.

Who was Shen Gua? Was he a painter or calligrapher himself, was he a connoisseur, or was he a scientist writing about everything that was considered to comprise knowledge in his day?⁵⁶ One thing is obvious: as Chancellor of the Han-lin academy, he was a well-educated man. After a military disaster for which he was one of those responsible, he was sent into exile to the province of Shaanxi. He used the pseudonym *Mengxiweng*, ‘the old man of the dream stream’: *Mengxi* being the name of a stream in the Tanyang district in Shaanxi.

Shen Gua writes the following on the calligraphy of Xu Xuan of Jiangnan [Shen Gua, scroll 17, section 289, p 172]:

Xu Xuan⁵⁷ from Jiangnan was well versed in writing small seal script⁵⁸.

When you see his characters, in reflecting sunlight, every line has exactly in its center a fine *nongmo*, 浓墨, line; even the curves and ends of the strokes have such a centreline, there is not one false spot. The tip of his brush does not commence in the contra-direction, and the tip is always exactly in the middle of the stroke. This is called

⁵⁶ Colette Dieny, in *Revue d'histoire des sciences en Chine (1)*, Methodes, contacts et transmissions, Joël Brenier et al., Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1989-1990

⁵⁷ Xu Xuan, [916-991] also known as Ding Chen

⁵⁸ Small seal script is an official form of calligraphical script.

brushwork. Xuan once said: "In my later days I gradually acquired the *waipian*, 外扁, manner." Generally speaking, one loves the long (lines) and the thin (lines) in small seal script: the *waipian* manner, which needs a very skilled hand to be able to use it.

This is my translation of Shen Gua's description of his appreciation of Xu Xuan's very skillful calligraphy. Two terms are not translated because they need to be explained further; *nongmo* and *waipian*. I will first address the question of *nongmo*.

In a dictionary, the term is translated as 'thick, dark ink line'. So the sentence would be:

"When you see his characters in reflecting sunlight every line has a exactly in its centre a fine thick, dark ink line; even the curves and ends of the strokes have such a centerline, there is not one false spot."

This might look like a suitable translation, but is in reality far from it: the problem is that the meaning of *nongmo* is not what it seems. This obviously raises the question of what a *nongmo* line in the center of a stroke in calligraphy actually is.

This can only be explained by putting this term *nongmo* within the context of a whole set of terms. In order to understand its meaning fully, I must first describe the Chinese system of terms for black ink.

Black ink in painting and calligraphy in China has a fixed set of five names, or as the Chinese would rather say: five colors; *Jiaomo*, *nongmo*, *zhongmo*, *danmo*, and *qingmo*. (焦墨, 浓墨, 重墨, 淡墨, 清墨) These could be translated as 'scorched ink, black ink, dark ink, light ink and clear ink.' However, this translation alone is still not enough to fully explain the meaning of the sentence quoted above.

I need, therefore, first to provide a very basic introduction to calligraphic technique in China, before we can begin to understand this sentence. The calligrapher uses paper, ink and brushes to perform his art. The ink is made of soot and glue and is in the form of a stick. Before use, the ink stick must rubbed on an ink stone with a drop of water, and it takes quite some time for the ink to properly develop its full strength and density. The calligrapher can only begin writing when the ink has been rubbed enough to achieve the deepest level of saturation possible, *jiaomo*. This 'scorched ink' is of a deep, shining black, and is essential for the technique of calligraphy.

We see, therefore, the written characters at first sight to be a deep and shining black.

This deep shining black ink is what surrounds the fine *nongmo* line in the strokes of Xu Xuan's characters. It now becomes clear that instead of a dark ink line in the center, we have a very thin line of another nature in the middle of the brush strokes. *Nongmo* is a black ink that is just as saturated as *jiaomo*, but with an important difference: it does not shine, which difference is only visible in reflected sunlight.

The clue to Xu Xuan's skill is therefore not only his perfect way of handling the brush, with the tip always exactly in the middle of his stroke, but also in his rubbing of the ink stick to create a fully saturated ink: the two combining to result in this fine line of ink, just as black but slightly duller, as the trace of his brush tip.

The term *waipian* is best explained by Shen Gua himself: 'Xuan once said: "In my later days I gradually acquired the *waipian* manner." Generally speaking one loves the long [lines] and the thin [lines] in small seal script; the *waipian* manner, which needs a very skilled hand to be able to use it." This shows that the method of calligraphy using long thin lines in 'small seal script' is called *waipian*.

A matter of interest

A couple of other items of interest are found scattered in Shen's book; for example a description of a method of destroying bookworms: he also comments on the confusion of color names. This is something that recurs throughout history.

[Shen Gua, scroll 2, section 53, p 42]:

Yun, 芸, Yunxiang 芸香, Rue, (*Ruta Graveolens*)

In the old days when one destroyed bookworm, *Yun*, *ruta graveolens* was used. *Yun* is a strong-smelling herb; it is now called *qilixiang*, translated as 'seven miles smell'. The leaves look like small peas. The herb grows profusely; and the leaves give off a strong smell. After the autumn the leaves are covered a white powder like *fenwu*, and it completely destroys bookworm. In the south, it is collected and spread under mats to deal with flies and lice. When I stayed in the Hall of Enlightened Culture, I received several sprigs from the family of Luogong, and I planted them behind the library, but now they are gone. This orchid-like smelling herb is known by several names. It is now called *lanbu*, *bu* is also *changpu*, *linglingxiang*, and *baizhi*.

[Shen Gua, scroll 2, section 55, p 42]:

Xuan, 玄, *Men*, 璚

Nowadays people use *Xuan* as another word for pale grey, and *men* for ochre-colored jade: both are wrong. *Xuan* is a reddish-black colour, like the feathers of a swallow, which is why he is called the *Xuan*-bird. In the Shining period (1068-1078), dignitaries and court circles in the capital wore mostly dark purple robes: the colour was known as black purple, and it was confused with black. They two colours are indistinguishable, and this is what was called *Xuan*.

Men is ochre colored, [soft clothing is *men*]; the men color of paniced millet is called *men*. *Men* is a color between red and yellow, as if it is ochre, it shines strongly en if you hold it in your hand it is clear, shining and sparkles like red pearls. This is a color of its own, it looks like ochre but it is not ochre. I say *Men* 璚 is a color name, with the *Yu* 玉 [jade] radical, it is more shining than ochre and so it serves as an example for ochre. As if *bian* 鵝 [the bird name] is the color name, and with the *niao* 鳥 [bird] radical would be similar to the birds color.

Without treading in Shen's footsteps, my next chapter aims to provide a record of paint substances and the associated terminology. Due to the limited scope possible, it cannot be exhaustive, but I will try to clarify as many terms as possible.

