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Leiden
The Netherlands

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Lin, F.

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THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF FANS

'During Su Shi's (1037-1101) heyday, Li Gonglin (1049-1106) went to his house and painted ancestral portraits for his family. However, after Su was later demoted to the south, upon encountering Su's children and younger brothers in the capital, Li once used a fan to conceal his face and did not even greet them. He was unkind like this.'¹

This is a tale of loyalty and betrayal between two of the most cultivated men during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). At the centre of the story lies a fan held by the renowned painter Li Gonglin, which serves as a narrative device to lead the storyline. While it may be fictional, the *Qingming shanghe tu* (Along the river during the Qingming festival) produced during the same time period does depict a man hiding his face behind a fan (fig. 1). The anecdote and the painting point to multiple dimensions of the social significance of fans. Though fans may appear trifling, utilitarian, and disposable, their close relationship with the human body gives rise to various social meanings. They delimit body space, convey emotions, signal taste and status, and define social relationships with others. Just like many other trivial objects in our daily lives, fans have a long, complex history. It would be impossible to reduce their functions and forms to a single category or to trace their history to a single origin.

The earliest known fans date back to the Eastern Zhou Period (771-256 BCE) and were found in tombs located in Hubei and Jiangxi provinces, which belonged to the Chu region. Among these discoveries, the trapezoid-shaped fan excavated from a Warring States Period (476-221 BCE) tomb in Mashan (Hubei province) showcases the sophisticated techniques of combining bamboo weaving and lacquering in fan-making.² In early China, fans were commonly made of bamboo or feathers, as demonstrated in the characters referring to fans. The character *sha* 箑/箴 contains a bamboo radical 竹; the character, *shan* 扇 is composed of the door 户 and feather 羽 components. Originally denoting a door panel, *shan* came to stand for fans in general. Due to its connotation that a flat panel revolves around an axis, the character was borrowed to refer to both larger long-handled fans and smaller hand-held fans in the 3rd and 4th centuries.

Fans were not just functional objects for cooling the air. In the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), they began to acquire social, cultural, and artistic significance. In the context of autumn, a fan served as a metaphor for abandonment. This meaning was first coined by Lady Ban, the consort of Emperor Cheng (r. 33-7 BCE) during the Western Han Period (202 BCE-9 CE). Following

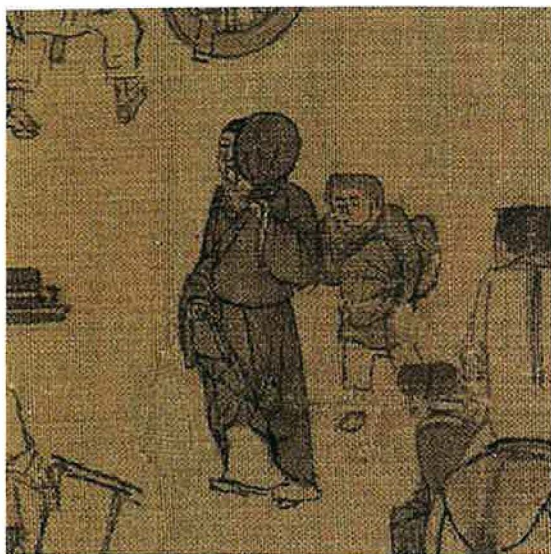


Fig. 1 (left)
Zhang Zeduan, detail
of *Qingming shanghe tu*
(Along the river during
the Qingming festival),
handscroll, ink and
colour on silk, 24.8 x
528.7 cm, Northern
Song (960-1127), Palace
Museum, Beijing



Fig. 2 (right)
Gu Hongzhong, detail
of *Han Xizai yeyan tu*
(Night banquet of Han
Xizai), handscroll, ink
and colour on silk,
28.7 x 335.5 cm,
Southern Tang (937-
976), Palace Museum,
Beijing

her fall from grace and loss of favour with the emperor, Lady Ban penned a poem entitled 'Yuange xing' (Song of resentment):

'Newly cut white silk from Qi,
Glistening and pure as frost and snow:
Made into a fan of 'joined for joy,'
Round, round as bright moon.
It goes in and out of my lord's breast and sleeves;
Waved, it stirs a breeze.
I always fear autumn's coming,
When chilling winds dispel blazing heat.
Then it will be thrown into a box,
And his love will be cut off midcourse.'³

Assigning the sophisticated emotion of lament and sorrow to a silk fan, this poem is considered one of the first *yongwu shi* (poems about objects) giving an anthropomorphic voice to an otherwise inanimate object. In the literary tradition, the metaphorical meaning of the *wanshan* (silk fan) in autumn is an allusion for the complaint of a lady about being cast aside or rejected.⁴

In the 4th century, fans were often embellished with decorative elements. According to *Jin shu* (Jin history), in order to help an old lady to sell fans, the renowned calligrapher Wang Xizhi (303-361) wrote five characters on each of her hexagon-shaped bamboo fans. Thanks to his reputation, all the fans instantly sold out at a high price.⁵

Throughout China's long history, fans have taken on diverse sizes and shapes, crafted from a variety of materials such as bamboo, wood, lacquer,

feather, plantain leaves, paper, ivory, and silk.⁶ Given the constraints of space, this article only examines the two most common forms: round fans and folding fans.

Round Fans

Round fans are usually made of silk, a common medium for painting and writing. In medieval periods, round fans, regardless of their size, were adorned with painted scenes. A notable depiction is found in *Han Xizai yeyan tu* (Night banquet of Han Xizai), where the prime minister Han Xizai (902-970) holds a smaller plain fan made of bamboo threads with a lacquer handle, while his maid carries a larger round silk fan (fig. 2). The side facing the viewer features a landscape with a gnarled leafless tree and rocks in the foreground. The deliberate choice of a wintry scene likely aimed to evoke a cool and refreshing feeling.

Beginning with the Northern Song Dynasty, literati scholars emerged as the backbone of the government, primarily through the relatively egalitarian civil service examinations. Seeking to form smaller, more intimate circles among themselves, these scholars favoured portable art objects, such as handscrolls, fans, and album leaves, which were better suited for elegant gatherings. During the 12th century, professional artists in the imperial painting academy adopted the refined taste of the literati class, producing small-size paintings.⁷ As a result, silk fans were often presented as gifts to forge an intimate relationship among scholars or between the imperial families and their subjects. For instance, Empress Wu (1115-1197), consort of Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127-1163), personally inscribed a poem on a painted fan (fig. 3). Executed by the empress herself, the calligraphy thus conveyed her favour and trust to the recipient.⁸ The landscape depicted on the fan aligned with the theme and meaning of Empress Wu's poem, suggesting that the court possibly commissioned a professional court painter to produce it.

Fig. 3
Empress Wu (1115-1197) and anonymous painter, *Green Mountains, White Clouds*, round fan mounted as album leaves, ink and colour on silk, 22.9 x 23.9 cm, Southern Song (1127-1279), Palace Museum, Beijing



Fig. 4
*Thousand armed,
 thousand-eyed
 Avalokiteshvara,
 banner, colours on silk,
 981, Musée National
 des Arts Asiatiques
 Guimet, Paris*



As folding fans became more popular, round fans underwent a gender change during the late Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Known for their convenience and portability, folding fans became increasingly associated with men, whereas round fans found greater use among women in domestic settings.⁹ After the 18th century, round fans were often exquisitely embroidered with flowers, fruits, and figures, and served as gifts from the bride to the female members of her husband's family.¹⁰

Folding Fans

Folding fans, which were widely used among both literati scholars and commoners in late imperial China, were originally invented in Japan. Their adoption and assimilation in China have been extensively studied.¹¹ When these fans were first introduced to the East Asian continent, they were considered as rare and valuable objects, and were often exchanged as precious gifts.

The earliest visual depiction of folding fans in China can be traced to a silk banner portraying the thousand-armed and thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin). Commissioned in 981 by Fan Jishou, a military

officer from Dunhuang, the banner features a folding fan held in one of the bodhisattva's right hands as the attribute of his magical power (fig. 4).¹² As the fan is loosely unfolded, it is evident that the design features simple colours without elaborate painting. In the year 998, a Japanese monk presented a set of gifts to the Northern Song court, which included twenty folding fans made from cypress wood and two folding fans made from paper.¹³ Multiple written records from the Northern Song Dynasty highlight the significant role of Goryeo (918-1392) in introducing fans to China. Missionaries from both the Goryeo state and the Northern Song Dynasty brought folding fans to the capital city of Kaifeng in Henan province, where they were sold in local markets. One notable scholar, Guo Ruoxu (fl. 1071), was fascinated by the luxuriousness of Japanese folding fans. They were crafted from indigo-dyed paper and adorned with paintings of noble figures, landscape, birds, flowers, and intricate silver tracery. Guo marvelled at the rarity and exorbitant prices of these fans.¹⁴ Around the same time, the scholar Wang Pizhi (11th century) gave an account of his brief encounter with an exquisitely crafted Japanese folding fan while browsing the market near the Xiangguo Buddhist Monastery in Kaifeng:

'At the end of the Xining Era (1068-1077), I visited Xiangguo Monastery, and saw a person selling a Japanese fan. With lacquer ribs, the folding fan is made of indigo-dyed paper, as thick as a pancake. Its level-distance landscape is painted with light colours. There are sparse reeds near the bank, gulls and egrets standing still, and the scene seems to be set in the eighth or ninth month. A fisherman in a straw raincoat sits on a tiny boat. There seem to be light clouds, and birds flying on the horizon. Its meaning is deep, its brushwork subtle and miraculous. The paintings on Chinese fans may not be as good as this one. The seller asked for a very high price, but as I was then very poor, I was unable to purchase it. I am filled with regret every time I think of this. I visited the capital's market at a later time, but never saw it again.'¹⁵

Located near the palace, the imperial academy, and the imperial university, the market at Xiangguo Monastery was specialized in trading books, antiques, and art objects, attracting literati scholars. Like Wang Pizhi, even relatively affluent families struggled to afford the coveted art objects available at the market. One notable example is Li Qingzhao (1084-1155), the greatest female poet and daughter of the vice director of the Ministry of Rites. Her husband, Zhao Mingcheng (1081-1129), was the son of the vice director of the Ministry of Personnel and a student at the imperial university. The couple often had to resort to pawning their clothes to buy rubbings and paintings.¹⁶

The introduction of Japanese folding fans is a clear manifestation of the interconnectedness of East Asian trading networks. These fans were made in Japan, sometimes in Goryeo, and subsequently shipped to the port city Mingzhou (present-day Ningbo, Zhejiang province) in Song (960-1279) China. Although folding fans from Japan were exceedingly rare during the early Northern Song Dynasty, wealthy families started using them towards the end of this period. A telling example of this trend is a lacquer cosmetic box excavated from a tomb in Changzhou. The lid of the box

features a depiction of two ladies engaged in conversation, one holding a round fan, the other a folding fan (fig. 5). This juxtaposition demonstrates the growing recognition and acceptance of folding fans in everyday life. Similarly, *Jiaoyin jiqu tu* (Hitting the ball in the shade of banana trees), painted on a round fan also depicts a folding fan being placed on a table in the garden.¹⁷ During the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279), as documented in the *Meng liang lu* (Records of a millet dream), there were three fan shops in the capital Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province), one of which specialized in making folding fans.¹⁸

During the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368), there was a notable increase in the number of both imported folding fans and domestically produced fans. Despite the absence of a formal tributary relationship with Japan, folding fans continued to be imported to the Yuan through private trading networks.¹⁹ However, after 1403, Emperor Yongle (r. 1402-1424) of the Ming Dynasty and Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358-1408) resumed the tributary trade. In 1432, a single Japanese tribute mission brought more than 2,200 folding fans to Ming Dynasty China.²⁰ Due to the refined quality, high price, and market demand of Japanese and Korean folding fans, the imperial palace ordered them to be reproduced within the court and distributed as rewards to consorts and officials. Their popularity led to the circulation of a significant number of counterfeit versions in the market, which sold for a relatively affordable price.

By the late Ming Dynasty, folding fans had become widely used among social elites as well as commoners, resulting in a broad spectrum of quality and design. The fluidity of social order presented a challenge to established cultural tastes. To distinguish themselves from the crass taste of the nouveau riche, refined scholars such as Wen Zhenheng (1585-1645) and Shen Defu (1578-1642) took it upon themselves to cultivate and defend

Fig. 5
Lid of a cosmetic box,
lacquer, silver and
wood, 21.3 x 19.2 cm,
Southern Song (1237),
Changzhou Museum,
Jiangsu province





Fig. 6

Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), *Taihu qunyu tu* (View of Lake Tai), folding fan mounted as an album leaf, ink and colour on gold-flecked paper, 24.8 x 52.7 cm, 1543, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

the elegant taste of the cultural elite. For example, they denounced the use of excessively decorated materials. Ribs and side guards made of rare woods, ivory, and tortoise were considered vulgar, while bamboo was deemed as elegant.²¹ Even for simpler designs, meticulous craftsmanship was required at every stage of fan production. This involved treating and colouring the paper leaf, carving bamboo ribs, polishing side guards, and fixing a pin at the handle end.

The artistic value of a fan ultimately lies in its painting and calligraphy. Zheng Xie (1693-1765), a retired official and literati painter, drafted a price list for his paintings based primarily on their size. A large hanging scroll costs six taels, a medium-sized painting four taels, a small scroll two taels, and a fan or album leaf only costs a half tael each.²² Zheng's ranking made the position of fans as commodities in the hierarchy of commercial artworks explicit. With their portability and affordability, fans served as perfect gifts among scholars to foster friendships and social networks, even if sometimes the act of giving was merely symbolic. Wen Zhengming (1470-1559), a highly regarded literatus and Wen Zhenheng's grandfather, often gave painted and inscribed fans to his friends, relatives, and acquaintances. Some of these works were carefully executed, while others were completed in a more perfunctory manner to fulfil the demand for social interaction. Identifying himself as a literati painter, Wen refused to accept money for these works, but did receive various types of gifts in return.²³ A notable example is a fan he painted and inscribed himself. His close friends Zhang Huan (1486-1561) and Xu Jin (1482-1548) added their inscriptions to it (fig. 6). The poetic exchange materialized their friendship on the fan leaf.

In today's East Asia, despite the prevalence of air-conditioning and electric fans, traditional fans, especially folding ones, are still ever present and very much a part of people's life. Machines can never replace their elegant design and intimate connection with the body.

- *Lin Fan is an art historian at the Institute of Area Studies at Leiden University. Her research interests focus on mapmaking and material culture in middle period China. Her recent publications include 'The Shadow of Prosperity: Fake Goods and Anxiety in Song Urban Space' (2019), 'Knowledge, Power, and Technology: Diagrams of Troop Formation in Early Song Military History' (2021), and 'Bifurcated Memory: A Cultural Biography of the Porcelain Pagoda of Nanjing' (2022).*

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