

# Eighteenth-century Foundations in Modern Chinese Painting

Chu-tsing Li

One of the leading painters of the Yangzhou school in the middle of the eighteenth century, Zheng Xie, once attached a note above the entrance to his studio. The note, written in 1759, reads in part:

Large size, 6 taels of silver; medium size, 4 taels; small size, 2 taels; fan or album size, half tael. Gifts and food are not so acceptable as white silver, since what you send me may not be what I like to have. If you send me silver, it will please my mind, which will guarantee the excellence of both painting and calligraphy. Gifts are quite troublesome and accounts are hard to collect. I am sorry to say that being so old and tired I shall not be able to entertain you gentlemen with useless conversations.<sup>1</sup>

Reading this, one finds a mercenary spirit, a certain pretentiousness, a sense of humor, some elements of sarcasm, some forms of satire, and also a proud, uncompromising spirit. All these, except the last, reflect an anti-literati spirit. Yet, Zheng Xie was regarded as one of the leading literati painters of that period. The style of his paintings of bamboo shows a freedom of the brush, a mixture of painting and calligraphy, and a concentration on ink that are all typical characteristics of literati painting.<sup>2</sup> His new type of literati approach in the eighteenth century anticipated the modern spirit in Chinese painting.

The eighteenth century, especially the sixty year reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736-95), in many ways laid the foundation for modern art in China. It was a period when the Qing dynasty was at its apogee, with control over an empire much larger than all the territories covered by the present map of China. Besides Manchuria, which was the homeland of the Manchus, the emperor was in control of Inner and Outer Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan, and a portion of Southeast Asia. With the accomplishments of the three emperors, especially Kangxi, before him, Qianlong ruled over a large empire that enjoyed a peace

and prosperity not seen during the several centuries before. So enjoyable was the life in China that the population tripled during the reign of Qianlong. At the same time, the emperor also enjoyed himself immensely on the throne.

This sense of well-being was very much reflected in the art connected with the court. Qianlong himself, who had come to the throne at the age of twenty-four, was a painter, calligrapher and poet with a tremendous appetite for the arts, especially painting. As a painter, he thought of himself as a literatus in the mainstream of that great tradition, especially as it was represented by the work of the Four Wang school, or the orthodox school, of early Qing.<sup>3</sup> Since both Wang Hui and Wang Yuanqi, the two major figures of that school, had served under his grandfather, Kangxi, many of their followers enjoyed the benefits of the special favors they had received in the court.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that so many members of these two Wang families devoted their lives to art resulted in a curious reversal of the respective positions of the two major trends in Chinese painting. The tradition of literati painting – in particular the Ming tradition as reflected in the work of Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming, which had been known for its eremitic spirit, and had stood apart from and opposed to the works of the court professionals – now became the art of the court and officialdom. In other words, literati painting, within the tradition of the Four Wang school, became academic and professional. Imperial sponsorship resulted in a school of painting that was overly imitative, repetitive and conservative, a school that was more interested in preserving its cultural hegemony at the court than in creative efforts. Thus, although the painters of this orthodox school dominated the court and the Jiangnan area, the so-called literati painting was definitely in a state of decline. This can be seen in the works of the so-called ‘Four Little Wangs,’ such as Wang Chen and Wang Jiu.<sup>5</sup>

The good life of the period can also be seen in another type of painting connected with the court, namely figure paintings by court artists recording the activities of the emperor and his retinue. These were paintings done in the tradition made important by the Ming artist Qiu Ying, who, though never a court painter himself, developed a style of painting that laid great stress on representation, attractive colors, meticulous details and beautiful figures. Some painters of Qianlong’s court, like Xu Yang, recorded many of the emperor’s activities, such as the emperor’s famous visits to the Jiangnan region with elaborate details of various cities, towns, the countryside along the Grand Canal,

and all the ceremonies connected with the trip.<sup>6</sup> These paintings give us an extremely vivid picture of the life of the common people in the most prosperous part of China.

The magnificence of this period can also be seen in another type of painting closely related to the last in function, though quite different in style. These were paintings in the Westernized style introduced by the Italian painter, Giuseppe Castiglione, who was sent by the Pope to the Chinese court.<sup>7</sup> Because of his skill as a painter in the Italian style he was made a court artist, and served the same function as that of Xu Yang, although he worked with a greater sense of modelling based in his European training. Castiglione and several other European artists were assigned the tasks of painting portraits, rendering special activities of the emperor, his family and other court figures, as well as depicting birds, animals and other unusual objects brought to the emperor as tributes.<sup>8</sup> The rich details of the figures and objects, the solidity of treatment, the gorgeous colors and the heightened sense of space were all delightful to the emperor and his courtiers. Indeed, the style of this group of European artists exerted a noticeable influence on the figure paintings of later court artists.

These three types of painting reflect the glories of the court of Qianlong. The last two types served the same function as official photography in the modern period, while in some ways reviving the functions of the court art of the Tang dynasty. The first type, literati painting of the orthodox school, demonstrated the emperor's appreciation of the great cultural tradition of China and his interest in becoming a part of that mainstream. However, by identifying himself with that tradition, and by his sponsorship of literati painting and artists, Qianlong inadvertently impaired its development as the most exciting tradition in Chinese art. It became stultified and lost its creative force.

All three types of court-related paintings served mainly the interest of the court and lost touch with the common people. Although court painting did have some influence on the art of the nineteenth century, it was not the major foundation for the development of modern Chinese painting. Of much greater consequence to the later development of Chinese painting was the emperor's avid taste for traditional painting and calligraphy. Because of his insatiable interest, thousands of paintings by great masters of the past, which had been in the hands of many well-known private collectors, gradually found their way into the palace. Many of the officials in Beijing and the provinces, knowing the emperor's desire, made special efforts to search for old paintings

and to present them to the emperor as a way to gain imperial favors, such as appointments and promotions. The imperial collection, as recorded in the two monumental catalogs, the *Shiqu Baoji* and the *Bidian Zhulin*, was the largest ever assembled in the history of China, containing works by famous masters from the Six Dynasties period all the way to the emperor's own time.<sup>9</sup>

This great collection had a tremendous effect on the development of modern Chinese painting, both negative and positive. On the negative side, the formation of this collection at court deprived many people, including artists, of contact with these masterpieces of the Chinese tradition. By the end of Qianlong's reign, most of the major surviving works by great masters of various periods had gone into the Emperor's collection. Whereas this was certainly good for the emperor and some of the courtiers close to him, it meant that all these masterpieces had disappeared from the world. In the days before photography and colotype printing, the result was that painters in China were quite ignorant of the great works of the past. Without access to the imperial collection, the only knowledge they had of the works of old masters was through copies and imitations made by some of the painters of their own period or shortly before. Although there were still major works in private hands, this lack of exposure made it difficult for many painters to receive direct inspiration from the masters, thus lowering the standards of traditional Chinese painting.

On the positive side, because of the loss of direct contact with the great works of Song and Yuan, many painters turned elsewhere for their inspiration. Paintings of the so-called 'Four Gentlemen' (plum blossom, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo) and 'Three Friends of Winter' (pine, bamboo and plum blossom), which had been somewhat neglected during the Ming and early Qing periods, became extremely popular during the Qianlong period. Whereas a few artists looked to some of the Ming and Qing painters, such as Chen Shun, Xu Wei, Daoji and others, as their models, none of them was so overburdened by the weight of great masters as to be essentially imitative, but were quite free to explore their own ways of expression. As a result, the creative energy of this period was not found in those works patronized by the emperor and his court but in the ones that were created at a distance from the court, such as those by Zheng Xie mentioned at the beginning of this paper.

Zheng Xie and a number of other artists were patronized by the newly risen merchants of Yangzhou, the most prosperous city in China during the eighteenth century. During this period, there was a great

change in the social structure, making the merchants and the cities extremely important. The rise of Yangzhou as the economic center of China during this period has been the subject of much study.<sup>10</sup> In the long history of China, merchants traditionally ranked at the bottom of the four major professional groups, namely scholar, farmer, artisan and merchant. Although there were famous merchants in the past, they were at the mercy of scholar-officials. To protect their wealth, merchants would send their sons to be educated in order to pass the imperial examinations and become officials. Their social status had always been quite low, but because of their new wealth, they also became quite powerful in Chinese society. To show that they were people of status, they developed a taste for art and literature. Indeed, they became the new patrons of the arts.

During the eighteenth century, the richest merchants in China lived in the city of Yangzhou. Located on the northern bank of the Yangtze river, Yangzhou first became important during the period of the Six Dynasties. But its real importance began with the Sui dynasty, when the Grand Canal was first constructed, linking the rice-producing Jiangnan area with the capital Luoyang. In fact, Yangzhou at that time was more or less the southern capital of the empire. From that time on, since the Grand Canal became the link between the north and south, Yangzhou, located right at the crossing of the Yangtze and the canal, remained always an important city. However, it was during the Qing, with the new salt laws, that Yangzhou came to control trade in China. As a result, some of the merchants became fabulously rich, billionaires by today's standards. Yangzhou thus replaced Suzhou as the richest city of China. With new wealth came the heightened interest in culture. Scholars, poets, painters and others were attracted to the city, and great art collections and libraries were formed. Literary gatherings became one of the fashionable activities of Yangzhou.<sup>11</sup>

Yangzhou was also the forerunner of Shanghai, which became the new cultural center during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the middle of the nineteenth century, with the opening of the seaports to foreign trade after the Opium War of 1840-42, the north-south traffic, due partly to the deterioration of the Grand Canal and partly to the introduction of the steamboat, was shifted to the coastal route. Shanghai thus emerged as the new seaport for both domestic and foreign trade, gradually reducing the importance of Yangzhou. With its new wealth Shanghai began to attract artists and scholars and major art collections. In the city of Shanghai, the merchants enjoyed a new importance unmatched even in Yangzhou. This new importance

came with the development of the foreign concessions, or settlements, in Shanghai and other cities as a result of the Opium War. Under the terms of the treaty, China opened up five seaports for foreign trade, with areas in them especially designated for residence by foreigners who enjoyed extraterritorial rights, immune from the control of the Chinese authorities. At first, these settlements were mainly for foreigners, and their populations were quite small. However, during the 1850s, with the Taiping Rebellion causing great upheavals in the southern part of China, wealthy Chinese from the Jiangnan region flocked to these settlements by the thousands for safety. As a result, Shanghai, which had a rather small population during the period of the Opium War, suddenly grew to a city of half a million. Once its position as a haven from all the Chinese turmoil was known, the city grew at a fast pace. Under the protection of foreign governments, the Shanghai merchants were able to avoid all the vicissitudes of Chinese political, military and social changes and to prosper in their businesses. Thus they became independent, free from the control of the court in Beijing and the regional officials. Since in these foreign settlements the merchants from abroad were the most influential people, Chinese merchants living in these areas also enjoyed a great sense of importance and prestige, which they had never had before in Chinese history. With their wealth and position, they became great patrons of the arts.<sup>12</sup>

With these social changes came a new sociology of art. In Shanghai, which was primarily a commercial city, many artists simply came to seek their fortunes without any pretense of being high-minded literati of the past. Whereas literati painters traditionally looked at the arts as a pastime or amateurish activity, the new painters had no qualms about working for money and they regarded painting as a full-time job. Some of them, such as Ren Bonian, went so far as to try to sell his paintings in the streets.<sup>13</sup> This was never done before in China, but in the business dominated society of Shanghai, it became a common practice. With this change also came new developments in subject matter, style and ideas in painting. All of these changes can be traced back to eighteenth century Yangzhou.

Let us take a look at some of the major aspects of painting during the eighteenth century and see how they affected the art of modern China. We have mentioned above the three major types of paintings related to the court in Beijing. Although those types were continued into the nineteenth century they were definitely not the most influential. The only one of any consequence was the Orthodox school, which,

because of the favoritism of the court, continued to attract generations of painters in the Jiangnan area. Perhaps the best of these painters was Dai Xi (1801-60), a high official and a loyal subject to the Qing government. However, even in his case, he did not try to follow Wang Hui very closely, but wanted to develop in his own way, less grandiose in his compositions, simpler in his brushwork, fresher in his insight into landscape.<sup>14</sup>

The most important group in the eighteenth century to influence modern Chinese painting was undoubtedly the Yangzhou painters. Although the leading artists there were known as 'The Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou,' their number was not limited to eight and they were not necessarily eccentric. They included such painters as Wang Shishen, Jin Nong, Zheng Xie, Li Shan, Li Fangying, Huang Shen, Gao Xiang, Luo Ping, Gao Fenghan, Hua Yan, Min Zhen, and a number of others. Some of them were native to the Yangzhou area, but most of them were attracted to the city because of its reputation for wealth and patronage. As a group, they showed certain characteristics that led to the formation of modern Chinese artistic practices.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the painters in Yangzhou were full-time painters. Some of them, having passed the governmental examinations, served as officials in some parts of China or even at the court in Beijing. But when they came to Yangzhou they had already become frustrated with public life. In Yangzhou they were seeking two things. One was patrons, who were usually quite wealthy people interested in having poets and painters stay in their houses or villas, as an indication of their good taste and high prestige. This was quite a common practice in Yangzhou. The other was money. Either they worked like Zheng Xie and simply set standard prices for their paintings, or they painted for patrons who sent them gifts as compensations. These practices became quite common during the nineteenth century, especially in Shanghai. Many painters, especially the so-called 'Four Rens,' belong to this category. Thus the tradition of literati painters as amateurs was changed. Many of them openly sought patrons and money.

Another major attribute of the Yangzhou painters was specialization in subject matter. In order to establish a reputation for themselves and to sell their works, it seemed necessary to be identified with a special subject. Thus Wang Shishen first and Jin Nong later were known for their plum blossoms.<sup>16</sup> Zheng Xie was most famous for his bamboos and orchids.<sup>17</sup> Li Shan and Li Fangyin were specialists in flowers and plants and pine trees.<sup>18</sup> Huang Shen was mainly a figure painter.<sup>19</sup> Luo Ping

caused a sensation when he painted ghosts.<sup>20</sup> Hua Yan though versatile was well known for his birds and flowers in colors<sup>21</sup> as well as in historical subjects and personages. Gao Fenghan, after his right arm was handicapped in the middle of his life, became known for his left-handed paintings.<sup>22</sup> This specialization, characteristic of Yangzhou painters, became a part of the modern tradition. Some painters, such as Ren Bonian and other Rens, specialized in figure paintings, while others, such as Zhao Zhiqian and Wu Changshuo, painted mainly flowers and plants. In modern periods, Qi Baishi's shrimps and crabs, Xu Beihong's horses, water buffaloes and cats, Wu Zuoren's camels and pandas, Huang Zhou's mules, Ye Qianyu's minority dancers, and Cheng Shifa's young girls of Shishuangbana in Yunnan are all very typical, not to mention those landscape painters with specializations of Huangshan (Dong Shouping, Liu Haisu, Song Wenzhi and many others), Guilin (Bai Xueshi, Li Keran and others), the Three Gorges (many painters) and other famous sites. Although some of the modern painters, especially those active after 1949, did not specialize for mercenary purposes, the practice came from the Yangzhou painters.

There was a sharp departure among Yangzhou painters from the high and noble subjects of the literati. While many Yangzhou artists did paint the traditional subjects of the literati, such as the 'Four Gentlemen' and 'Three Friends of Winter,' others explored areas seldom touched upon before. These new subjects included common people in their everyday surroundings by Huang Shen, the ghosts of Luo Ping, the informal portraits of Luo Ping and Hua Yan, and the depiction of familiar places by Huang Shen and far-away regions by Hua Yan. The treatment of these subjects was also quite different from that of early periods. There is greater informality, such as *Master Dongxin Taking a Nap under the Shade of Banana Plants*, Shanghai Museum,<sup>23</sup> a sense of humor in many portraits,<sup>24</sup> some elements of self-pity in many poems by artists on the paintings, an extremely personal way of treating their objects like Zheng Xie's blending of poems with his bamboos<sup>25</sup> and many others. All these are parts of the modern spirit in Chinese painting. In the works of Ren Bonian, Qi Baishi and other modern painters, we find something quite similar in expression.

There was also a change in the attitudes of the artists towards society. In the past, literati painters often expressed concern for cultural values or philosophical thoughts, attempting to identify their personal situations with cultural crises and social changes. However, most of the painters in Yangzhou seemed to be far less concerned with broad, general issues than with their own personal feelings and tragedies.



Many of the poems written on their paintings express a deep sense of self-pity, lamenting some of the adversities in their lives. In some ways it was a social protest through their own personal lives. This kind of personalization became quite usual in the modern period.

All the characteristics mentioned above can be said to be the result of a business-dominated society, first found in Yangzhou and later in Shanghai. These changes in the artists' position in society, in their relationships to their patrons, in their money-making practices, in their specialization of subject matter, in the depiction of the more mundane aspects of everyday life, and in their interest in humor, satire and even social protest, are all part of the modern urban life. Added to these are paintings of beautiful ladies in their daily activities, such as those of Fei Danxu and Wang Su, and of historical and legendary figures in their typical episodes, such as those of Ren Bonian and Qian Hui'an. These were works produced to attract the interest of the new middle class in these cities.

Other eighteenth-century developments which affected modern painting were the emergence of calligraphy in the northern stele style and seal-carving as art forms. During the eighteenth century, as seen in the calligraphy of Jin Nong, who collected a large number of rubbings of stelae, there was a change in calligraphy, namely, the turning away from the tradition of Dong Qichang whose roots were in the works of Wang Xizhi, Yan Zhenqing, the Four Great Masters of Northern Song (Huang Tingjian, Su Shi, Mi Fei and Cai Xiang), and Zhao Mengfu, to the more formal and monumental approach of the northern stelae. The impact of the stone rubbings turned the taste for calligraphy from the free, elegant and vigorous style of the first half of the Qing dynasty to the formal, dignified and monumental style of the second half.

In their development, many calligraphers also became painters. Besides Jin Nong, there were Xi Gang, Huang Yi and others who were well-known as calligraphers as well as painters. The best known examples from the modern period are Wu Xizai, Zhao Zhiqian and Wu Changshuo, all known for their calligraphy in seal and clerical scripts, and in the twentieth century, Wang Zhen, Chen Hengke and Qi Baishi. This interest in calligraphy and seal-carving can also be seen as the result of some of the literati artists turning away from the court taste, which still favored the tradition of Dong Qichang. They felt a freshness in the rubbings and a new sense of antiquarianism that distinguished them from the stuffy practice of the court.

Also apart from the court taste was the interest in some local traditions of figure painting. Huang Shen and Hua Yan, both from Fujian, brought some figure paintings of folk traditions from the south. Figures from everyday life, anecdotal narratives and others were quite common among their works. They anticipated the emergence of the Four Rens. All native of Xiaoshan, close to the home of the late Ming painter Chen Hongshou, the Rens took up Chen's style but expanded his range to include all kinds of figure subjects, such as historical figures, legendary personages, literary episodes and many others. Among them Ren Bonian was the outstanding painter of this new genre.

Another aspect of painting in the nineteenth century was Western influence. The several Jesuit painters from Europe in the court of Emperor Qianlong had laid the foundation stone of this direction. Although they did not have many followers outside of the court, the impact from the West continued. However, the opening of the seaports to foreign trade exposed many more painters to Western influence. Late in the nineteenth century, there was a new interest in the West, undoubtedly spurred by Japan's turn in that direction following the Meiji Restoration. Wu Qingyun, a Shanghai painter, explored some of the effects of Western watercolors with his extensive use of washes. Gao Jianfu of Canton was deeply influenced by the 'New Japanese Painting,' which blended traditional Japanese elements with European ideas. All these developments had their antecedents during the Qianlong period.

The departure from the court influence of Beijing found its best expression in the art of Canton. Since the sixteenth century, Canton had been the most Westernized city in China after the Ming government designated Macao, less than one hundred miles to its south, as the only place in which Western traders were allowed to stay. Trading with the West made Canton a prosperous city and by the eighteenth century Canton was the center of south China culture. With prosperity, a large number of young people in Canton received good educations, passed governmental examinations, and served as officials in both Beijing and the provinces. As a result some wealthy merchants began to build up collections of painting and calligraphy. From late Ming on, there were some notable painters active in Canton. By the eighteenth century, some of them, such as Li Jian, began to gain a national reputation.<sup>26</sup> Because of its distance from Beijing, painters in Canton were the least affected by the prevailing styles of the court. Even the style of the Orthodox school, which dominated not only Beijing but also the whole Jiangnan region, did not seem to have much

influence in Canton. Indeed, to the end of the eighteenth century painters in Canton were still working in the Ming tradition. The influence of Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming persisted into the Qianlong period; the art of late Ming and early Qing masters still loyal to Ming (*yimin* painters) was quite extensive. This was partly due to the political impact of the fall of Ming in 1644. Even after the Manchu army had taken Nanjing in 1645, remnants of military forces loyal to Ming still resisted here and there in south China, with many intellectuals joining them during this time. However, following a number of military defeats they gradually retreated to the south, eventually reaching the Canton area. Some of them became monks in temples while others took up permanent residence there. Since some of them were painters, they still retained the late Ming style. A number of the *yimin* painters, whose influence came to an end during the eighteenth century due to literary persecutions, seemed to have more impact in the Canton area than in all other regions of China. For example, the influence of Daoji was particularly strong in Canton, as reflected in the works of the foremost Cantonese painter of the eighteenth century, Li Jian.<sup>27</sup> Although it is not easy to trace the history of the collecting of works by Daoji in the Qing period, it is known that there were quite a number of his paintings in Cantonese collections. Certainly his works in this area must have found quite a number of followers, such as Xie Lansheng in the early nineteenth century.

Some Cantonese painters developed bold departures from the literati tradition. Some of the most original painters, such as Su Liupeng, Su Renshan and Li Kui, all of them active in the nineteenth century, were able to form styles entirely their own. Of these, the most important was Su Renshan, who, in his rather short life, left a body of works that has no parallels in the history of Chinese painting. Learning some of his ideas from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* and other model books, he was mainly self-taught. With no restriction from teachers, he was able to release his imagination and create some startlingly fresh works. Similarly Su Liupeng and Li Kui, to a somewhat limited degree, had their own individual achievements.

From what has been mentioned above, it is clear that during the eighteenth century, the changing social, cultural and artistic climate in Yangzhou laid the foundations for the development of modern Chinese painting. Although changes during the nineteenth century came about slowly, the pace quickened during the twentieth century. Indeed, during the last thirty years we have seen many of the most radical changes in Chinese painting.

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