

# Rubric and Art History

The Case of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou

Ju-hsi Chou

In the history of Chinese painting, numerical rubrics occur with a degree of frequency. The Four Yuan masters, the Four Wangs, the Eight Friends of Nanjing, Nine Painter-Friends and the Two Stones are examples that easily come to mind. In some of these instances, the intent appears simply to provide an easy handle. Some stem from friendship among those so grouped. Often it contains a hint of the achievement level of the artists involved, such as the Four Yuan masters, or those within a notable and noble heritage, for example, the Four Wangs. Sometimes, a rubric such as the Two Stones evokes a common bond, stemming from perception of priestly identity and rebelliousness.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, these numerical rubrics, while useful in highlighting groups of artists, should be treated with a degree of caution. It would not be prudent to impart to them any more group identity or solidarity than intended. The Nine Painter-Friends never assume much historical significance, perhaps because the friendships involved were not so much among the painters themselves but between the creator of the rubric and the painters.<sup>2</sup> The Four Wangs are united by their surname, and by their common approach and heritage. They are however separated in time, in generation (three), and in style - the gap being particularly noticeable in a dynastic and thus conceptual vein. The Two Stones came to be when the pairing of Daoji (Shitao) and Kuncan (Shixi) was thought to be sensible, but was actually based on *perceived*, not real, affinities. Ostensibly, both appeared to be *yimin*, Chan priests, and rebels. Today we are ever more aware of the fact that while Kuncan's *yimin* identity is assured, Daoji's life betrays ambiguities that defy simple dynastic allegiance. Whereas Kuncan's association with Chan is beyond question, Daoji's ended with an open apostasy. In another way, while Daoji's art is still revered for its 'rebelliousness,' Kuncan's passionate devotion to Dong Qichang may cast himself right

in the midst of the mainstream. Only the rough texture of his works affords a surface contrast with the orthodox paintings, such as those of the Four Wangs. The rubric survives, but it is clear that, once fashionable, it is no longer current in art historical circles.

### The Eccentrics of Yangzhou

Let us come to the central issue: the utility of the rubric, Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou. First, it is important to note that, like most if not all of these numerical clusters, the rubric emerged after the fact. To date, no evidence of its earlier usage comes to light prior to the Guangxu period.<sup>3</sup> It was Wang Yun (1816 - ?) who, in his *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu* (preface date: 1883), first presented to us this concept; however he tantalized the reader by naming only two masters, Li Shan (1686 - 1762) and the little known Li Mian (active 1840-60).<sup>4</sup> Others soon followed suit.<sup>5</sup> Li Yufen proposed, under the entry Luo Ping (1733 - 1799) in his *Ouboluoshi Shuhua Guomu Kao* (1897), a full list.<sup>6</sup> They are: Li Fangying (1695 - 1755), Li Shan, Jin Nong (1687 - 1764), Huang Shen (1687 - 1772), Zheng Xie (1693 - 1765), Gao Xiang (1688 - 1753), Wang Shishen (1686 - 1759), plus Luo Ping himself. Other listings are also suggested, with overlaps and occasional unique choices. The word *guai*, meaning 'eccentric,' 'unusual,' 'unique,' 'extraordinary' and 'strange,' is thought to allude to both the life patterns and artistic practices of these artists.<sup>7</sup>

The time gap of roughly a century makes the rubric of Eight Eccentrics a 'distant' perception. By then, none of the eccentrics were living. They were history. Their lives had either become legends or cautionary tales. Those who coined, or subscribed to, this rubric are themselves from different generations. They can be either casual or judicious, either whimsical or serious, either condemning or worshipful - depending upon their attitudes and their affiliations. Overall, with a single, but important, exception, the Eight Eccentrics were approached with a growing sense of awe. To an ever-increasing degree they came to symbolize the best that Yangzhou in its heyday could offer, the avant-garde of the time.

But as hinted, the term, the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, has its share of problems. Ideally, if we can come to a clear understanding of the commonality underlying them, *guai*, and then apply it to the artists, the task should be complete. In the current usage, however, the 'eccentricity' of these eccentrics is far from certain. It means different things to different people, and it shifts in mysterious ways between art and life.

In a number of cases, one senses that it is not so much that the artists fall under its imperative as it yields to the varying individualities of the artists. That is to say, if the identity of the eccentrics is contingent upon the core criterion of *guai*, then conversely the concept of *guai* is also dependent upon who the eccentrics were. Given the varying lists hinted above, each compiler has his idea of the Eight Eccentrics, *who* they were as much as *what* they were.

### The Identity Crisis

Regarding the 'who' factor, the discordance among the lists of Eight Eccentrics has an unsettling effect. No other numerical rubrics display the same degree of fluctuation. Would we question the identity of the Four Wangs, the Eight Friends of Nanjing, or the Two Stones? Of course not. They are fixed from the outset. True, in the case of the Four Masters of the Yuan period, some changes did take place. However, once settled, it leaves little room for debate. They cannot but be Huang Gongwang, Wu Zhen, Ni Zan and Wang Meng. To recall Zhao Mengfu to their midst, as he was initially, would be quixotic at the best. The un-certain identities among the Eight Eccentrics are exceptions to the rule.

Given that, we may note that, among the known lists, Wang Yun's choice of Li Mian is not shared by others. As popular as it is, the *Ouboluoshi Shuhua Guomu Kao* proposal faces a challenge from Lin Xia, who omits Wang Shishen, Gao Xiang and Luo Ping and replaces them with Gao Fenghan (1683 - 1748), Bian Shoumin (1684 - 1752) and Yang Fa (active 1830 - 1850).<sup>8</sup> That, one could argue, is nothing short of dramatic, involving no fewer than half of the eccentrics. While Lin Xia's list avoids the dangling of Luo Ping at one end of the temporal spectrum - Luo clearly was of a different generation than the rest - the inclusion of the little known Yang Fa is just as puzzling as Li Mian in Wang Yun's case. Both are practically unknown. Still others would insert Hua Yan (1682 - 1756) into the group although, from the very start, it was Wang Yun's premise that the Fujian master and the Eight Eccentrics stood on opposite sides.<sup>9</sup> In the words of this Yangzhou native, Hua Yan rose to correct what he considers to be the 'excess' of the Eccentrics:

Fortunately, there came the Fujian master (Shinluo Shanren), who rose to turn back the decline. At a swing of his brush, the demons and obstacles vanish. As [his brush] descends onto the paper, the mist and cloud rise from four quarters. His artistry is shown even where the surface is empty and it leaves no visible trace where it is filled to the hilt...<sup>10</sup>

To go back to these lists, it appears that up to the 1960s, Li Yufen's proposal upheld a general tide of popularity.<sup>11</sup> Lin Xia's was the least known; his still had to be discovered. And Wang Yun, with his incomplete list, stood ostracized for having entertained unfavorable views towards the Eight Eccentrics, in spite of his having been the possible originator of the term. The consequence is that the vision of the seven eccentrics plus a dangling Luo Ping assumes a critical *gestalt* in the art of the Qianlong reign. Scholars in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and abroad have long accepted it. Publications and exhibitions of the eccentrics generally adhere to the Li Yufen's proposal.

However, as interest in the Eight Eccentrics mounted, new attitudes began to surface. Particularly in China, in the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of the Yangzhou eccentrics faced much debate.<sup>12</sup> A degree of elasticity was thought to be useful. The Eccentrics did not have to be eight in number, some contended. They could be ten, twelve, or fifteen. All the names mentioned above could be included under the umbrella of this nomenclature, be it Li Mian or Yang Fa, Zheng Xie or Bian Shoumin, Gao Xiang or Gao Fenghan. That, however, only served to muddy the water. A parallel tendency is to advocate the disbanding of the concept by enlarging it to include not just some but all the Yangzhou artists and schools, owing to which rises the notion of 'Yangzhou Huapai.' But more about this later.

### **The Cause**

Elasticity comes at the expense of precision. Without precision, the cohesiveness of the grouping is called into question. The conflicting or overlapping identities of these eccentrics are thus symptomatic. They signal the likelihood of numerical primacy in the usage of the term, the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou. Somewhere along the line, even if it was not from the very start, the numerical 'eight' took on a greater degree of urgency than whomsoever was used to fill it. There were eight slots, and someone, be he Li Yufen, Lin Xia, Huang Binhong or Chen Hengke, had to take the trouble of filling them.<sup>13</sup>

That being the case, the varying identities and overlapping choices become at least understandable. When assigned the task of filling in these slots, one is likely to seek out the most desirable candidates first (according to one's own rules and judgement) and to fill the remainder by resorting to the lesser ones. Thus, taking the four lists which are complete with all eight eccentrics one will find, first of all, a core group

of three, namely Zheng Xie, Li Shan and Li Fangying, whose names appear on all four lists.<sup>14</sup> In comparison, Jin Nong, Huang Shen, Wang Shishen and Luo Ping are in the second tier since they are found in three lists only. Gao Xiang and Bian Shoumin are further down the ladder, whereas Li Mian, Gao Fenghan, Yang Fa, Chen Zhuan (1686 - after 1748) and Min Zhen (1730 - after 1788), each receiving only one vote, are but peripheral.<sup>15</sup>

The above analysis is useful only to the extent that it depicts a gradation of *guai* or eccentricity. It does not define the precise nature of *guai* itself, but it encourages us to take a closer look into the alignment of the group. Shall we construe our own list, perhaps to focus upon what we consider to be the more eccentric of the eccentrics and discarding the lesser ones? That would only add to the existing confusion by interjecting a 'modern perspective'! Another danger, made apparent by the above compilations, could be the undue apotheosis of the role of statistics in an historic study. A more plausible way is to eliminate, through a rational analysis, a couple of contenders, as a corrective to the past excess. In short, we can show our mettle but, in doing so, we do not need to go all out and wipe away the past.

#### **The Non-Yangzhou Eccentrics**

In this exercise of elimination, two artists come to mind: Gao Fenghan and Min Zhen. One is a left-handed painter and ostensibly unique; another falls into the spontaneous mold, sharing with other eccentrics an 'apparent' expressiveness. As artists, they may deserve the label of eccentric. The question is: should they be associated with Yangzhou?

Indeed, from our perspective, neither Gao Fenghan and Min Zhen is suitable as a serious contender for the title of Eight Eccentrics. The duration of their stay in Yangzhou was either limited or, surprising enough, unknown. Let us deal with Gao Fenghan first.<sup>16</sup> A Shandong native, Gao Fenghan's contact with Yangzhou began with an official assignment to the neighboring Taizhou in 1733-34, when he was already in his fifty-first *sui*. Between this and 1736, he may have had several opportunities to visit the metropolis to become acquainted with its painters and patrons like the Ma brothers and Lu Jianzeng (1690 - 1768), the salt commissioner of Lianghuai in the region. The likelihood is that official duties would have curtailed Gao Fenghan's movement, so much so that his actual residence in Yangzhou proper could not have begun until 1737, that is, after his brief imprisonment that caused a decline in his health and the paralysis of his right arm. Even then, it appears that he was in a constant state of agitation. Unable to stay put,

he moved about in Suzhou, Huzhou and Jiaxing. By 1740, he was more than ready to return to his native province and did so in the following year. The total sum of his years spent in Yangzhou could not be more than four; other eccentrics were on the scene for decades. A perfect contrast is supplied by Wang Shishen, who, a native of Shexian, made his home in the city in the 1720s and stayed until his death in 1759.

In retrospect, Gao Fenghan arrived as a matured Shandong painter and departed a left-handed artist. The latter aspect imparts an impression of eccentricity, but Yangzhou and its environment were not the cause; imprisonment and the subsequent physical disability were. It can be argued of course that Yangzhou was one of the few cities in China that would provide a ready reception of his left-handed approach, a weakness turned into strength by the contemporary taste for novelty. On the other hand, given Gao Fenghan's colorful personality, his boundless energy and ego, his flair for art and literature and his official status, he would have found receptive audiences no matter where he went. Certainly he fared well in his native province upon return, where he once had found his initial niche as a posthumous student of the great poet, Wang Shizhen (1634 - 1711).

Indeed, one may logically inquire: if the four years Gao spent in Yangzhou make him into a Yangzhou eccentric, then the twenty years that Luo Ping, a Yangzhou native, stayed in the Qing capital should also make him a Beijing eccentric. If the latter proposition sounds ludicrous, so, shall we say, does the former.

As for Min Zhen, his Yangzhou connection is best described as ephemeral.<sup>17</sup> No documents exist to testify to the length and duration of his stay. Wang Yun did not even mention him when compiling the *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu*. Pushing the scenerio to an extreme, we could possibly find him in the metropolis after his lengthy Hankou and Beijing sojourn. In short, Yangzhou would have to have been his last stop in his constant and continual flight from pursuing officials and dissatisfied clients. A tantalizing glimpse into his Yangzhou connection lies in the album of 1788 in the Cleveland Museum of Art where one of his figures reveals a strong resemblance to Huang Shen.<sup>18</sup> Since by that time Huang Shen had been dead for more than a decade, and since his style was unknown in Beijing except perhaps in a tangential way, the contact could only have come about if Min Zhen descended from the capital to pursue his career in Yangzhou, where Huang left a sizable artistic legacy. Like Luo Ping, Min Zhen belonged to a new generation, active at a time when the rest of the eccentrics had passed into history.<sup>19</sup>

This simple exercise points to the inherent weakness in the concept of the Eight Eccentrics as known today. To reiterate, the rubric of Eight Eccentrics came on the scene a century late. In its present usage, the numerical primacy requires the filling of the quotas. The guideline may have once been there, but its arbitrary application and its seemingly unending elasticity have turned the rubric into a source of mounting confusion. To sustain it would require not a solution, but a miracle.

#### ***Guai* and the Nature of ‘Eccentricity’**

Looking from another angle, it is apparent, just as the identity of the eccentrics is questionable from list to list, that the nature of *guai*, likewise, is varied. Some of the Eight Eccentrics were quite eccentric indeed, others only marginally so, and still others not at all. The numerical primacy has played havoc with all of us. At that, we do not even need to probe the precise meaning of *guai* except in reference to the eccentrics that are being presented. It could be any and every shade of it, even including *kuang* (‘crazy’), *ci* (‘foolish’), *ye* (‘uninhibited’), etc. This is essentially what Lin Xia has done in his *Ode to the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou*. He sings to each and every one of the eccentrics, and extracts individual eccentricity from each. His is an *ad hoc* approach, compelled perhaps by the numerical urgency mentioned above and exhibiting a tendency to splinter into many sharply carved, seemingly unrelating and unrelated fragments. In this approach, *guai* is not a single concept; its scope and breadth admit all. It can take on any shade of meaning with tolerance and ease.

Perhaps it is reasonable to ask: how much *guai* is *guai*? That is: how eccentric can, or must, an eccentric be? Or its inverse: when or how does an ‘eccentric’ cease to be an eccentric? As a starter, perhaps we can turn to the four-tier hierarchy discussed above. In the first tier are Zheng Xie, Li Shan and Li Fangying, whose eccentricity, defined in the broadest possible terms, can be easily sustained. They also appear to share, among themselves, a similar approach to the art of painting: stark images, robust forces and effervescent temperament. Beyond that, Zheng Xie is an eccentric because of his outspokenness, his refusal to abide by the nicety of conventions, his bisexuality, and his calligraphic anomaly (the *liufenban* or ‘Six and a half style’). Li Shan’s riches-to-rags life reflects a disregard for the practical and the conventional. And the defiant Li Fangying displays quick tempo, and is uncompromising to the end. The charming episode of his making a deep bow to an ancient plum reinforces an image of eccentricity even though it recalls a similar one of Northern Song, when it was Mi Fei who paid obeisance to a rock.

When dealing with the second tier, we can still carry the flag of eccentricity to a fair degree, though some of these do not share that stylistic affinity. Wang Shishen's art is closest perhaps to the first-tier artists but, unlike theirs, it encompasses the delicate and the tortuous. Jin Nong unveils a unique combination of lyrical images with curious block-like calligraphy, hitherto unseen and untried. The calligraphy of the Fujian master, Huang Shen, is as sure-handed and uninhibited as Huaisu. His bold rendering of figures commands a mass appeal, with themes drawn from folklore and popular myths, impressive because of size, speed and effortlessness. Having broken out of Shangguan Zhou's figurative mode, Huang startled and astonished the Yangzhou public and made a legend of himself. And mentioning Luo Ping, how can one forget his vaunted ability to see ghosts in bright daylight, not to mention the result in painting?

When we come to the third or fourth tiers, the eccentricity of some of the artists rapidly fades. Confronting such a painter as Gao Xiang and/or Bian Shoumin, we recognize that neither their art nor life is particularly unique vis-à-vis any number of eighteenth-century artists. Why were they chosen? Was it for their intrinsic merit or, as we proposed above, just for the sake of filling in the remainder of the slots?

But before we proceed any further, we should recognize that this process of inquiry does little more than uphold the conventional wisdom of enumerating eccentricities of the eccentrics who are already in place. One can always find some unusual traits and an episode or two in a man's life and label him as an eccentric. Does that make him an eccentric in the full sense of the term? Hardly. To call someone an eccentric, there must be an overall appraisal of character and behavior, artistic ones included, which defies traditional bonds and practices. The irony is that the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, as a nomenclature, lacks a steady core and is therefore in itself vulnerable. It easily crumbles when challenged. As a matter of fact, it can be demonstrated that any generalization made with respect to the Eight Eccentrics, whether it involves the primary facet of *guai* or some secondary attributes, can never be substantiated fully or in a meaningful way. There are always exceptions and notable ones at that.<sup>20</sup>

There is a test one can perform. Let us simply compare the 'normal range' of works by the Eccentrics against, say, the album of plum blossoms by Qian Weicheng, an orthodox artist par excellence (*EB*, no. 24). By the quick bravura brushstrokes in rendering the bamboo and plum blossoms, the latter appears just as eccentric as some, if not all, of the Yangzhou Eccentrics. It appears as if this orthodox painter



adopted the spontaneous mode in this particular case. In comparison, even Jin Nong's version of the same plant (*EB*, no. 62) cannot muster any more force than this small album, whereas Li Fangying's (*EB*, no. 58) is Qian's twin in spirit. If an orthodox painter can so easily adopt the eccentric mode at will, then the solidarity of the eccentrics is thrown into question. It is as if we have driven a wedge into the core and found no hidden reserve there. The *ad hoc* approach has lost its edge of acuteness.

Not surprisingly, mainland Chinese scholars today, having become aware of the ambiguous nature of the term *guai*, are beginning to tear it down. Not only, as we mentioned above, are they eager to be rid of the numerical limitation, but some are on the verge of sinking the ship altogether. Openly skeptical, they pit these Yangzhou Eccentrics collectively against the eccentrics of the old, Gu Kaizhi, Mi Fei, Liang Kai, Xu Wei, Bada and Daoji, and came to the conclusion that the eccentricity of the former was mild by comparison.<sup>21</sup>

When these tendencies, freedom from the limitation of eight and the doubt on the nature of *guai*, are carried to a logical conclusion, the result is an emasculation of the concept itself. This is a course of action that displays itself strongly in the recent series of exhibitions and publications under the new rubric of *Yangzhou Huapai* ('the Yangzhou School or Schools').<sup>22</sup> Under this new rubric, one can either extend the ranks of the eccentrics to include more (as seen above) or, going a step further, diffuse the focus in such a way as to require the full coverage of all the contemporary currents in the city of Yangzhou: Yu Zhiding in portraiture and figure painting, Yuan Jiang and Yuan Yao in *jiéhua* or boundary painting, Fang Shishu in landscape, etc. Soon, we are no longer dealing with the eccentrics as a group, but rather individual artists in the circumstances of that burgeoning city. In a tentative way, we might describe this process as 'from rubric to art history.' Liberated from the former, we seek to uncover a complete view of Yangzhou art, and in turn we might evaluate the so-called eccentrics in terms of the larger picture, whether they are unique, exceptional, innovative or original. We can then either regroup the eccentrics or disperse them, as the situation warrants.

Given that so few of the so-called the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou are Yangzhou natives, it was our contention in *The Elegant Brush: Chinese Painting under the Qianlong Emperor, 1735-1795* that a regional orientation may best be brought to suit the circumstance. Let us place Jin Nong in the Hangzhou environ and attribute his art to a Zhejiang source,

restore Huang Shen's Fujian root, and have Gao Fenghan carry the Shandong flag, for there was so much of Shandong heritage in him. In this way we are enabled to see the merging of all of these heritages in a city made rich by the salt-industry, with painters and scholars clinging to that wealth. From near and from far, the artists came. From Xinhua came Li Shan and Zheng Xie. From Huaiyin hailed Bian Shoumin. Li Fangying arrived from Tongzhou. Still more converged on it from more distant lands. As is well known, it was Yangzhou's socio-economic ambiance, with its nascent, pre-capitalistic development, which made that mix possible.<sup>23</sup> There was not one style, not one eccentric grouping, but a multiplicity of styles that functioned along different socio-economic strata (such as Ginger Hsü has proposed in the article in the present volume). Fang Shishu carried the orthodox heritage and supplanted it with the Anhui tradition; he appealed to and was acceptable to all. Zheng Xie, Li Shan, Li Fangying and Jin Nong satisfied a certain range of patrons, primarily the gentry. Huang Shen's works embraced a broader spectrum, overlapping them in certain respects, but also aiming at a mass appeal. On the other hand, Yuan Jiang and Yuan Yao (see Alfreda Murck's 'Yuan Jiang: Image Maker' in this volume), with their intricate and polished *jiehua*, catered to still a differing set of patrons, Shanxi merchants included. In sum, the vitality of Yangzhou lay in its ability to absorb what the other cities and towns supplied, and integrate them into its existing socio-economic hierarchy. Like Shanghai during the nineteenth and twentieth century, it was the magnet that constantly enriched itself by embracing both the accepted and the novel, the traditional and the rebellious, the normal and the eccentric, the professional and the scholarly. The contemporary city of Beijing sorted and screened out the malcontent by imposing its ideal on the newcomers. Yangzhou had no set conventions, but thrived in the face of a continually expanding horizon.

#### **Wang Yun and the Eccentrics**

How did an innocuous concept of the Eight Eccentrics, about which scholars and laymen alike have shown such a fondness, result in a cacophony of discord? Shall we, as suggested above, renounce the concept of the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou altogether? Is there validity to the term at all? If it fails to work for the Yangzhou painters during the Qianlong era is there any way it can? Can it, for instance, carry a different sort of meaning in the subsequent century, when the term first appeared? One may be reminded that the historical process lies not in one dimension alone, and the birth of the rubric, if not the phenomenon it covers, is indicative of some needs, however private, parochial or even whimsical these may be.

Rhetoric aside, we can wade through this series of interrelated questions and attempt to find answers. Let us suspend our disbelief for the moment and return to Wang Yun and his *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu*, in which the Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou made, as far as we know, its initial appearance.<sup>24</sup> That assumption, if true, is important in at least three respects. First of all, we must take him and his text far more seriously than hitherto. Second, we can understand better the chaos presented above by attributing it in part to Wang Yun's refrainment from making the full list of the eccentrics available. That was the start of the guessing game, where each advocate put his own selection of candidates into the existing slots. Finally, there is also the likelihood of a wrenching twist from Wang Yun's first conception along a critical line to one which showered applause on the Eccentrics. That could only magnify the confusion that was already present. Take a group which someone rejects, and then attempt to extract traits in order to gain a positive light, that is the task with which the later advocates of the Eight Eccentrics had to contend. The initial *raison d'être* needs to be discarded; but the new findings are by nature strained and therefore may not be able to supplant the old in terms of viability and coherence.

Indeed, in outlining his idea about the Eccentrics, Wang Yun comes closest to providing us with a coherent, albeit negative, explanation of the nature of *guai*. We may wish to disagree with his negative appraisal, but we cannot ignore his message, as has been the case. It deserves a close look. In time, we will also come to apprehend that he conjured up the term less for the Qianlong eccentrics themselves, but in relation to his own time and his own sensibility. He stated:

Regrettably, in our Yangzhou, there emerged a series of painters whose art lay outside of the mainstream. The eccentrics are eight in number (e.g., Li Shan and Li Mian), and their styles are different. They resemble Su [Shi] and Zhang [Xu] [in the cursive, calligraphic style] in their bombastic manner and oppose the vaunted rules of Xu [Xi] and Huang [Quan]. Their paintings are done with three or six slashes of brushstrokes, and the results are too coarse even for soy-pot covers. Their inscriptions are of the *dayou* variety, from which they derive none but self-satisfaction. While there was no lack of impact, they have ventured into the side tracks. Novelty for the time being, their work is known only within a hundred square miles.<sup>25</sup>

The strength of Wang Yun's explanation lies in its focused nature. Against the *ad hoc* practice demonstrated above, it possesses the virtue of being simple, effective and clear. *Guai* suggests not the usual sort of

delight toward the unconventional in art and life. Instead, it is limited in application and concrete in substance. Applied to the Eight Eccentrics, it refers to those painters like Li Shan and Li Mian who 'ventured into the side tracks' and 'renounced the rules of Xu and Huang.' (That very mention of Xu and Huang hints at the range of themes these so-called eccentrics favored: flowers-and-birds or plants in general). It involves both the pictorial and inscriptional, and, as such, it describes those artists marked by a propensity for quick execution and a penchant for *dayou* poetry in inscriptions, roughly hewn, seldom conceived with care, and replete with colloquial expression. The former aspect suggests immediacy, perhaps casual or even slovenly in a technical sense. The latter indicates a less than accomplished poetic skill, which in turn reflects on a dubious level of literary cultivation on the part of the artist. The resultant work is not fitting for *daya zhi lin*, a refined ambiance and audience, according to the author of *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu*.<sup>26</sup>

Due to his less than favorable appraisal of the Eight Eccentrics, Wang Yun's ideas have only been given a passing glance. Advocates of the eccentrics, who have been gaining in strength through the twentieth century, blame that on his 'conservative' and 'reactionary' outlook. They neglect to mention that Wang, while not opposing the orthodox school, reveals an edge to his taste by singling out Daoji and Hua Yan as two of the towering figures in the Yangzhou art scene.<sup>27</sup> Of the lesser known Yangzhou painters, he spoke highly of Yan Yi (1666 - after 1749), a student of Li Yin (late seventeenth - first half of eighteenth century), whose paintings, derived from Northern Song sources, show skill and aged sureness that 'even Yuan Jiang could not surpass.'<sup>28</sup> His own paintings are not what one would consider as 'conservative' in the academic sense, and certainly not in the Four Wangs' manner. An album of landscapes in the Tsun-ku Chai collection, Taipei, captures a calculated subtlety of the lean images and astringent brushwork, containing, shall we say, a hint of the Anhui lineage and recalling the art of Gao Xiang. Another painting, a figural theme, which appeared in a recent auction, suggests a degree of versatility and range. This is in spite of the fact that he was a student of Wang Tingru,<sup>29</sup> who followed in the footsteps of Dong Qichang in both calligraphy and painting, and Ni Can (1764 - 1841),<sup>30</sup> whose advice to him, in both painting and life, was *he* (meaning 'harmony,' 'moderation' and 'peace'). Let it also be mentioned that Wang studied under Wu Xizhai,<sup>31</sup> one of the master calligraphers and seal-carvers of his days and an amateur painter of the flower-plant themes, sharing the subject matters and style with some,

if not all, of the so-called Yangzhou Eccentrics.<sup>32</sup> Wu Xizhai was well known to the aspiring calligraphers and painters of the succeeding generations and could perhaps be considered as a catalyst for the art of Zhao Zhiqian, who in turn was an admirer of the Yangzhou Eccentrics.

Wang Yun lived through the nineteenth century in Yangzhou and observed the city's steep decline from its earlier heyday. The salt industry no longer supported the merchants in their lavish life style. At the heel of sudden financial collapses and bankruptcies, their ability to support the arts slipped precipitously. Also the Taiping rebellion, which swept through the metropolis in 1853, caused death and destruction. Many of Wang Yun's compatriots, men of scholarly and artistic temperament, perished during its fall. It was with a touch of poignancy that he dedicated *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu* to the memory of those who died in that year.<sup>33</sup>

Ostensibly, the *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu* is intended as a survey of the city's art scene during the Qing dynasty. The dedication and also the content, however, show that the author's eye was focused on the contemporary situation and not a hundred years before. Were we to ignore chapter headings for the time being, we can differentiate within the text two clusters of artists: those who had been active earlier, prior to Wang Yun's time, and those who were his contemporaries. About the first group, the eccentrics included, he has little to say but to cull passages from such texts as *Yangzhou Huafang Lu*, *Molin Jinhua*, *Guochao Huazheng Lu*, as well as local gazetteers. As he himself confessed, born far too late (1816) he could meet but one or two surviving masters from the previous era; they were 'as rare as the morning stars.'<sup>34</sup> The portrayal of his contemporaries, on the other hand, is frequently done with personal knowledge and etched in sharp relief. Keen observations and insights abound, rendering the text into an invaluable source for nineteenth-century Yangzhou painting. A degree of regional consciousness also compels him to set the *liuyu* ('transplants') apart from the native-born, regardless the number of years the former might have resided in the city and regardless of their role in catapulting the city toward artistic preeminence. Thus the *liuyu* section of *juan* 3 contains such long-time residents of Yangzhou: Daoji, Huang Shen, Jin Nong, Wang Shishen, etc.

Wang Yun's local pride, as well as his awareness of Yangzhou's sharp decline, compelled him to evaluate the city's achievement in art against the standard set by the Four Wangs and Yun Shouping, symbolic of outsiders. He states:

Let me try to explain. In the past, our Yangzhou is noted for our heritage in painting. Since the establishment of the present dynasty, each generation has produced [some well known artists]. If we were to consider such factors as ability and circumstance, Wang Yun (Qingci) is a match for Wang Hui. In terms of knowledge and pictorial imagination, Guan Xining is on a par with Yun Shouping. Only because they have not received the support and praise of famous officials and scholars of the time, therefore their fame paled beside the masters from Loushui and Yushan. Before the creative forces were to diminish, there suddenly rose Fang Shishu..., who in no uncertain terms could measure up to the Four Wangs. Regrettably, there was but one generation of followers and none hence (of his students there were only Huang Zhen and Fang Song). Beside these, there was Qingxiang (Daoji), whose art was sweeping and forceful, innovative and unique. Potent it was, and also encompassing [in subjects and themes]... Wang Yuanqi lamented on the impossibility of surpassing this master, a sentiment which Wang Hui also confirmed and shared. These artists crystallized what may be considered as Yangzhou's best, and they were rightly the leading figures during the Kangxi and Qianlong periods.<sup>35</sup>

Whether we agree with Wang Yun on this survey is beside the point. Few today would object to his apotheosis of Daoji and Hua Yan, as mentioned earlier, across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But to place Wang Yun (Qingci), Guan Xining and Fang Shishu<sup>36</sup> on a par with the Four Wangs and Yun Shouping, may raise a few eyebrows. This is in spite of the impact Wang Yun (Qingci) and Fang Shishu made locally and nationally, though the scope was nowhere near that of the Wangs. Today, outside of Yangzhou, Guan Xining is barely known, if at all.<sup>37</sup> And Wang Yun (Qingci) is noticed only because his art displays a kinship with the Yuan Jiang - Yuan Yao school.

But this lapse in judgement is not so serious as it might seem. One can attribute it to his local pride. Far more serious, even shocking, that is, to a modern art historian, and even to Wang Yun's contemporaries outside of Yangzhou, is his willingness, nay willfulness, to remove a row of commanding figures such as Zheng Xie, Li Shan and Li Fangying from the survey, leaving a gaping hole. It is as if the Eccentrics had never existed. Deprived of their presence, the city of Yangzhou suddenly was wanting in what we have come to consider the unsuppressible energy some of the eccentrics had brought to it. From Wang Yun's perspective, however, this was only just and fair. He even went a step further; in his eyes, the Eight Eccentrics, whoever they were, were the scourges who, in favoring a specific but limited approach in the act of painting and in adopting the *dayou* poetry in inscription, contributed to the slide in the

Yangzhou art scene. The denigration of the Eccentrics was therefore not only essential, but necessary. He was looking at the past through the lens of his present reality.

A facet which has so far escaped critical notice is that Wang Yun's comment on the Eight Eccentrics appears under the entry on his contemporary, Yu Chan, at the heel of the latter's biography.<sup>38</sup> Although a skillful artist, Yu presented to Yangzhou a style of landscape painting which is noted for quick brushstrokes, full of energy and visually overwhelming to the spectator. Lamentably, however, he was lacking in literary cultivation and, therefore, to Wang Yun, uncouth, *buwen*. Our critic also points out that, at the time when the Yangzhou patrons were partial to flowers-and-birds or portraiture, Yu Chan's specialization in landscape rendered him vulnerable. Without patrons to support his art and without a major literary figure to lend a helping hand, his fortune endured a series of downturns. In his eighties, he was stranded in his native land, destitute beyond hope. With an undercurrent of sympathy, Wang Yun comments on this ill-fated artist, apparently to serve a warning to aspiring painters:

Yu Chan, whose *zi* is Buqing and who is a native of Ganquan, is skilled in landscape. His brushwork is strong, bold and sweeping, causing people to wonder aloud. *People today do not appreciate this type of painting* [italics mine]. Indeed, when [a painter like Yu Chan] does not have under his name major literary works or fine calligraphy to lend himself [a measure of respectability], it is only fitting that he should be cast aside...

When [Yu Chan] paints, the speed is akin to the sudden gathering of a storm. Or it may be compared to the immense surge of the tidal waves. A quick wash, the brush lifts. Light and heavy, dark and bright: all of these happen simultaneously. Within a meal time, he can complete a huge painting, and does so in a single breath. When one looks at it, one feels the ink is boiling and churning, and hears the *sasa* sound breezing through the paper. Well versed in a variety of compositions, he can [with effortless ease] produce an infinite series of combinations. In addition, he is skilled in conjuring up a variety of scenes, so much so that, having gone through several dozens of works, none are ever alike... In his late years, his circumstance experienced a downturn and he became listless, unable to pursue matters with determination. Furthermore, he was not skilled in flowers-and-birds, subjects that were in fashion at the time...Lamentably, the older he got, the poorer he became.<sup>39</sup>

Here is a man who clearly was not lacking in talent, even by Wang Yun's standard. His landscapes are awesome in a kinetic sense, change-ful and spontaneous. The effortless ease he displays, however, cannot

compensate for either the lack of culture (*wen*) or, of immediate consequence, the lack of patronage. To put in another way, it is his lack of culture that contributes to the lack of patronage. Owing to fickleness of taste, patronage in Yangzhou, as elsewhere, often was uncertain at the best; but, as Wang Yun seems to say, it required 'culture' (*wen*) to attract it. Take heed to cultivate oneself and also to expand one's repertory to cope with the unforeseen; these appear to be Wang Yun's counsels, which on the surface are more pragmatic than idealistic.

Next, Wang Yun springs to attack the Eight Eccentrics. He was apparently convinced, via Yu Chan, of the excesses that they had committed. In each of them, Wang Yun perceives a Yu Chan and the potential for disaster. Thus he points the finger at the eight painters from Yangzhou's past while serving notice that 'the number of eccentrics is eight, but their styles differ.' In other words, they were not a group, but eight individuals, with their own styles and modes. Their only commonality - or, shall we say, common fault - lay in speedy execution in painting and pseudo-literacy in inscription. These are the sole criteria of *guai*, the detection of a pattern across the varying spectrums of style. Novel and popular in their own day, they became a burden which Wang Yun thought he and Yangzhou could do without in the nineteenth century.

This reaction, private and personal on the one hand, or uncompromising and didactic on the other, is not simply spontaneous. It has a deliberate aspect. Implicit in it is a sense of purpose, that is, the revival of Yangzhou's artistic fortune. It comes about because of a number of factors. One of these possibly involves overexposure of the eccentric mode in the city itself. Surfeit of such bombastic works, bursting at the seams with speed and energy, and with inscriptions composed at the spur of the moment, without care and concern for rhyme, allusion and balance, could become tedious, less tolerable than the moderate and mild. It is as if Wang Yun were saying: We can only bear so many Li Shan's or Li Mian's at a given time before all these works begin to merge together in an awesome display of monotony!<sup>40</sup> Fatigue soon sets in, when year in and year out, one has to face an endless stream of the same by the masters and, then, replications by their disciples. Worse still, a trail of fakes and forgeries soon followed the eccentrics and extended the approach *ad nauseum*. 'People today just do not appreciate them.' This was a genuine outcry, which Wang Yun took to heart. Never mind that among his friends too there were those who espoused the eccentric mode.<sup>41</sup> Never mind that outsiders might find it novel and stimulating. For a Yangzhou native, the novelty had worn off and the time was right for a change.



To this general portrayal we may add two familiar symptoms, which Wang Yun may also have observed. One is the occasional lapse of quality as a result of commercialization of the Yangzhou art. Zheng Xie's price list is a case in point; when the price is contingent upon size, and when the patrons have no say regarding the specifics of the commissioned work, the artist, assured of a level of revenue, may well be compelled by time and economy to reduce his paintings to a few well-spaced and well-chosen strokes, instead of laboring over them long and hard. By the same token, the *dayou* poems that accompany them could be the result of similar cost-cutting efforts. Viewed from another angle, it is the familiar *fanpiao* ('meal ticket') syndrome, through which the artist turns out a body of works for sale, conscious only of its monetary worth and makes little demand either on himself or on the works under production.<sup>42</sup>

But the exclamation, 'people today just do not appreciate them' could also indicate a changing pattern in patronage. As said above, the city of Yangzhou endured a steep fall from the glory of the Qianlong period, and artists and patrons were likely to experience shifting alliances, especially as the old wealth vanished. In Yangzhou, if not elsewhere, the nineteenth-century patrons may have tended to be far more moderate in circumstance and, possibly also, in taste. The conspicuous consumption of the Qianlong era was gone for good and, with it, the craving for the novel and outrageous, which, from the artists' point of view, enabled them to attract immediate notice at the expense of 'transmitability.' As the tempo slowed, as the emphasis on moderation gained hold, artists like Yu Chan, who sought to continue some of the old manners, lost favor quickly and decisively. In a practical way, Wang Yun appears to be saying, this generation of artists would do well to avoid the eccentric mode if only for the sake of regaining social acceptance and well being. In that sense, Wang Yun was a *concerned* critic, and his view in combating the Eccentrics carried conviction in his own time, even if his agenda and solution remained at best private and not loudly proclaimed.

Glancing over the text and reading between lines, we may extrapolate the following steps which Wang Yun deemed as important for the revival of Yangzhou's artistic fortune. They are: a return to the *wenrenhua* ideal, from which, according to Wang Yun, the Eccentrics had strayed;<sup>43</sup> a reaffirmation of the Xu and Huang's rules in the subject of flora and fauna; a resurgence of landscape themes to offset not only criticism from other regional centers but to strengthen Yangzhou's weakest link; and a relegation of orchid and bamboo to the status of peripheral subjects.

Of the above, the return to the *wenren* ideal, clearly signals the desire to end the eccentric mode as defined above.<sup>44</sup> Neither quick sketches nor *dayou* poetry is tolerable. This runs counter to the current ideas about the Eight Eccentrics. Modern critics have proposed that the Eccentrics actually broaden the *wenrenhua* and extend its implication beyond the traditional sense.<sup>45</sup> They single out in particular such features as the every-day subjects, concern for the downtrodden, and the close interweaving of calligraphic, poetic and pictorial imageries to an extent unknown before. In the same way, modern critics would also protest Wang Yun's desire to reaffirm the classical foundation of the Xu and Huang in flower-and-plant themes. But Wang Yun's goal is essentially one that argues for a timelessness, a refusal to be swayed by current trends.

Regarding the landscape and the orchid-bamboo themes, perhaps we should elaborate further. The emphasis on landscape is directed at Yangzhou's weakest link. A major criticism of the art of that city, one which the rival centers must have instigated, and with which Wang Yun had to contend, pertains to the absence of a classical tradition in landscape painting during as well as after the Qianlong era. (This is in spite of our hindsight that Yangzhou's significance in the formation of modern art lies precisely in subjects other than landscape painting). What Wang Yun had in mind of course was not the landscape painting of Yu Chan, but something else. He wrote:

Regarding landscape, there are few practicing it. But among non-native [transplanted] artists, there are many. Native artists seldom showed much interest in the subject. In the recent years, only Yu Chan specialized in it; however, he was unimaginative and wanting in refinement. The venerable Chen Yuan pursued his own solitary path; he was even more awkward and stiff and lacking in a free spirit. Others were [still less accomplished]: a few simple brushstrokes or a couple of trees complete the painting. They are not in the proper and true mode of Dong [Yuan] and Ju[ran] but are only equipped to fill the background. It is these painters who attracted much criticism to Yangzhou, causing it to be deemed lacking in elegance and refinement (*daya zhi lin*).<sup>46</sup>

The picture is clear. On the one hand, like Suzhou before it, Yangzhou in its days of decline was attracting criticism from rivalling centers. On the other hand, the legacy of the Eight Eccentrics survived into the nineteenth century, and steered art away from the landscape. In addition, when the eccentric mode invaded the landscape, Wang Yun contended, it could undermine the nobility of the subject. Yu Chan's case is an eloquent testimonial. Indeed, when the absence of landscape

paintings and painters was becoming a major source of embarrassment, the solution was to reintroduce a classical tradition of landscape, preferably in the Dong-Ju manner, or that of Daoji and Hua Yan, who by then were fully integrated into the mainstream and no longer just a couple of renegades.

The question is: would it have been advisable for Yangzhou to artificially inject a current of landscape painting? Hindsight, in view of the development of painting in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in China as a whole, would say no. Wang Yun's belief, then, is his own, stemming in large part from a traditional background.

Approaching from a different angle, one which is devoid of traditional backing, is Wang Yun's attempt to consign bamboo and orchid to the peripheral. He suggests that: these subjects or genres, while respectable and respected, are not the true testing grounds for a painter:

In such subjects as orchid and bamboo, heaven's will (innate endowment) matters more than human effort. There are those whose hand is able but whose mind knows little and there are those whose mind knows much but whose hand cannot take charge; they are the same. When both mind and hand are able, still one may not avoid the flaws of *ban* ('stiff'), *ke* ('contrived') and *ji* ('knotted together'). When the three faults are absent, then the work may still be plagued by being either too strong or abrupt, or too weak and sedate, either approaching chaos or stasis. Because of that, among painters of these subjects, there are but a few successful ones in a given generation, and for each, there are but a few handfuls of successful works in his corpus. I therefore hold that it is the heaven's will and not the result of human effort...<sup>47</sup>

The argument here is at best strained. One can easily counter Wang Yun's claim by reversing the logic. Due to the rarity of fine bamboo and orchid paintings and painters, one should cherish more those that excel in these subjects, heaven's will or not. One also may wonder why did he not include plum blossom within this traditional category of virtuous plants. Was it because the author himself was fond of that subject and was noted to have painted it in at least a couple of occasions?<sup>48</sup> The only conclusion we can proffer is that he deemed these as the special provenance of the Eight Eccentrics, thus plotting a strategy for their removal.

In casting aside the bamboo and orchid, Wang Yun may have one particular Qianlong artist in mind, someone who, besides Li Shan and Li Mian, could be identified with these themes. The most plausible

individual is Zheng Xie, a specialist in these genres. One recalls that it was Zheng Xie who took pride in his own specialization:

Shitao (Daoji) was skilled at painting, capable of handling myriad subjects. As to orchid and bamboo, they were not his principal interest. I, Banqiao, specialize in orchid and bamboo, and for more than fifty years, I refused to depict other subjects. He aimed at breadth, I favor specialization. Who can say that specialization is inferior to breadth of scope?<sup>49</sup>

And Zheng Xie had this to say about Li Shan, who in turn also took pleasure to repay the compliment:

Li Shan, who is also known as Futang, is an old painting master. A student of Jiang Tingxi and Gao Qipei, he is so marvelous at depicting such subjects as flowers and plants, birds, insects and fishes, but more specifically, he is exceptional in orchid and bamboo paintings. However, when I, Banqiao, paint orchid and bamboo, I refuse to follow his path. Futang was pleased: 'this is an artist who is to establish his own approach.'<sup>50</sup>

We are not far from truth if Wang Yun's list of Eight Eccentrics also includes Zheng Xie, whose orchid and bamboo in his Yangzhou phase are known for the abbreviated mode and whose inscriptions occasionally approached *dayou* poetry.

The question is inevitable: who else, besides Li Shan, Li Mian and Zheng Xie, are on the Wang Yun's list of the Eight Eccentrics? Given his narrow definition of *guai*, his contenders are, or should be, painters with sparse images and *dayou* poems. Perhaps we can point to Li Fangying or Huang Shen.<sup>51</sup> The drawback is that, without full concurrence from the author, we could not be absolutely sure. Given his historic survey quoted above in which the known eccentrics were pointedly excluded, his list is not likely to be full of surprises. The exception of course is Li Mian.

There is another way of dealing with this issue. That is, to spot those among the known lists of eccentrics who are not likely to be in Wang Yun's list. This pertains to artists whose works do not display speedy execution and whose inscriptions reflect a notable poetic achievement. Under this premise, should we not exclude Jin Nong and Luo Ping, Gao Xiang and Wang Shishen? Their respective approaches to art carry a studied and deliberate appearance, thus contrary to Wang Yun's definition of *guai*.<sup>52</sup> We may also mention that Min Zhen never made it to the *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu* and therefore his exclusion is assured.

### A Quixotic Quest

To return to Wang Yun's strategy for the revival of Yangzhou's fortune, was he successful? Did his message reach beyond the Yangzhou boundaries?

From hindsight, Yangzhou's loss of pre-eminence in the nineteenth century was a *fait accompli*. It never had a second chance. Time has essentially passed it by, save for clusters of bright lights, Wu Xizhai and Wang Su<sup>53</sup> at an earlier period and the priest Lianxi<sup>54</sup> of a later phase, painters about whom Wang Yun had fond memories. Meanwhile, critics and connoisseurs in or outside Yangzhou took to the eccentrics in droves. Lin Xia, Li Yufen, Feng Jinbo and Jiang Baolin - the latter's *Molin Jinhua* preceded the *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu* and is frequently cited there - expressed appreciation of those Wang Yun sought to dismiss. In painting, the rise of Zhao Zhiqian in effect began from where the Eight Eccentrics had left off. In this artist's work, the powerful images, recast through the strength of northern stele calligraphy, are just as provocative as the eccentrics, and set off a trend that was to culminate in Wu Changshuo and Qi Baishi of the modern period. The emergence of Shanghai to the south, marked by foreign concessions and trade and a burgeoning middle class, offered painters a complex of patronage that Yangzhou once could provide, but no longer. In Shanghai, Ren Yi and others took the commercialization of art a step further, making it into a trade not unlike other trades, with no pretension of literary flair or substance. Even *wenrenhua* became little more than an ideal about which painters could only dream, as their practice no longer conformed to its lofty aspirations.<sup>55</sup>

To sum up, there is just a touch of the quixotic in Wang Yun's writing, as in most historical quests. His taste contains sufficient breadth to go beyond the Four Wangs. He may accept Ni Can's advice on *he* (moderation and harmony) in both art and life. But he could also be bold in speaking his mind and expressing preferences when such preferences are not sanctioned, in spite of his belief that extremism is suspect, that novelty has no lasting value, or that the genre of flowers-and-birds are acceptable only if Xu and Huang's norms are maintained.<sup>56</sup> Conscious of attack by outsiders on the absence of landscape, he may have overlooked the trends elsewhere which, as exemplified by Zhao Zhiqian, emphasized matters which he considered unacceptable. Nor did he realize, even before the publication of *Yangzhou Huayuan Lu*, that the Eccentrics whom he deplored, were very much in vogue in the whole of China, not just Yangzhou.

Wang Yun's rubric, if he was indeed its original creator, did make a strong impact. Its power has been amazingly lasting, leaving an indelible impression, much as we attempt either to transform or even erase it. The resultant confusion is partly caused by his refrainment from revealing the full list and partly by the wrenching transformation from the negative to the positive. When suddenly the concept of *guai* alters from the unacceptably strange to the delightfully titillating, the tension between the desire to hold on to the rubric and the need to fill it with new ideas or masters proves to be costly. That, indeed, was the crux of the problem. The consequence is that the earlier precision is lost and the later guideline has to be re-invented each time one tries to pay homage to it by filling the slots, a task that defies the best mind. What follows are the vain attempts to search for a group cohesion and solidarity, attempts that could only leave one in the quagmire of hopeless entanglement and confusion.