

The Daoist Symbolism of Immortality in Shen Zhou's *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon at Bamboo Villa*

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The Ming artist Shen Zhou (1427-1509), regarded as the founder of Wumen Huapai (the Wu School of Painting) and one of the most important poet-painters in Chinese art history, executed several paintings related to the occasion of a literary gathering held at his Youzhu Zhuang (Bamboo Villa) in Changzhou (today's Suzhou, Jiangsu Province) on the eve of the Mid-Autumn Festival. The most famous one is a handscroll, entitled *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon* in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (figure 1), which has been mentioned in a number of books on Chinese art and is discussed at length by Richard Edwards in his *The Field of Stones: A Study of the Art of Shen Chou* of 1962.¹ In addition to the Boston scroll, two similar paintings are in Chinese collections, one previously in the Beijing Palace Museum and one in the Tianjin Art Museum.²

There is another handscroll of the same theme attributed to Shen Zhou, entitled *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon at Bamboo Villa*, which was purchased in 1996 in New York by the collectors Roy and Marilyn Papp in Phoenix.³ The handscroll includes a short painting depicting the memorable gathering at the Mid-Autumn Festival (figure 2) and a long poem composed and inscribed by the artist to give a supplementary commemoration of the event (figure 3). Although some scholarly research has been published by Howard Rogers in the *Kaikodo Journal* of 1996 and by Ju-hsi Chou in the exhibition catalog *Journeys on Paper and Silk: The Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection of Chinese Painting* of 1998, the Papp scroll is still little-known to the field of Chinese art.⁴ The aim of this article is to examine the handscroll, focusing on the Daoist symbolism of the painting which reveals the artist's fervent quest for immortality. By employing a method synthesizing icono-



Figure 1. Shen Zhou (1427- 1509) , *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon* , dated 1489.
Handscroll, ink and colors on paper, painting: 30.5 x 134.5 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Special Chinese and Japanese Fund , 15.898.

graphic analysis and literary examination, the interpretation of this extraordinary work gives a new dimension to the art and life of the Ming master.

The painting in the Papp scroll is of modest dimensions, measuring 29.2 cm in height by 91.8 cm in width. In the middle of the composition, three gentlemen are seated inside the Pingan Ting (Pavilion of Peace), a simple thatched structure located on a gentle slope within Shen Zhou's estate. They are watching the full moon on the upper left, celebrating the Mid-Autumn Festival. There are small stands of bamboo rising stylishly on the right and beyond the pavilion flows a mild river, over which a wooden bridge connects the terrace to an unknown land covered by trees and rocks on the left. Despite the festive celebration of the Mid-Autumn moon, the scene is dominated by feelings of sadness, gloominess, and emptiness, reflected in the poem colophon:

In my youth, I saw the Mid-Autumn moon,
As no different from any other moon.
In old age , I grew fond of it.
Loving the moon means also to love the fine
autumn feast.

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How many more Mid-Autumn feasts can an old man enjoy?
In truth, time flows on and cannot be detained.
We know men come and go but not the moon.
The old moon shines on newcomers with
indifference.

If there is wine in the pot then let us be merry;
And never refuse when the cup comes to you.
[Tonight] the moon is full and the friends are reunited.
When we part, the moon will also wane.
As my eyes have seen fewer old friends,
Throwing caution aside, I'd dally long under the moonlight.
I shall sing aloud Li Bai's *Asking the Moon*.
But my white hair startles me, robbing me of my youth.
If youth and white hair cannot be paired,
May my surging spirit drink up the ocean of wine
and the moon (reflected in it).
This old man has lived for sixty years of life!
Can I ask the Mid-Autumn [moon] to lend me forty more?'

Shen Zhou's recognition of mortality is expressed in the poem and it changes the painting from a depiction of a happy reunion of friends enjoying the Mid-Autumn moon to a melancholic scene dealing with the issues of death - both the loss of departed friends and the transience of his own life.

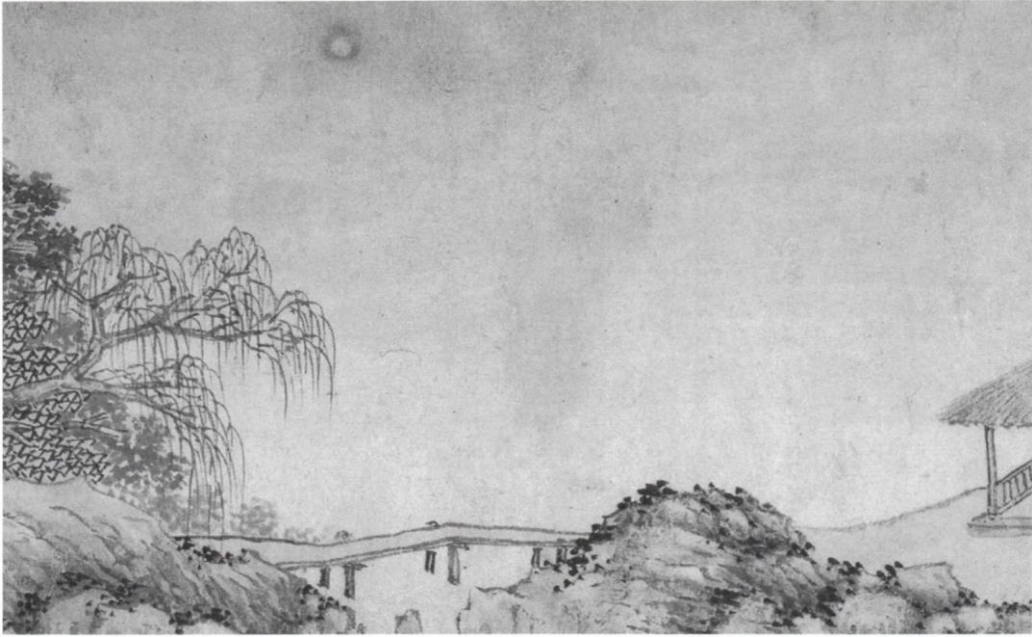


Figure 2. Shen Zhou, *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon at Bamboo Villa*, dated 1486. Handscroll, ink on paper, painting: 29.2 x 91.8 cm. The Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection. Photo by Craig Smith, courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum .

In the last lines of the poem, Shen Zhou indicates that he was about sixty when the memorable Mid-Autumn gathering was held at his estate in Changzhou.⁶ The age of Shen Zhou in this case provides us with grounds for discussing his attitude towards life and death because as people enter their twilight years, their sense of physical mortality usually becomes much stronger. Death is a main theme in Western art but it is seldom represented in Chinese painting, especially in the *wenren hua* (literati painting). However, this theme is central in Chinese poetry. As a poet-painter, Shen Zhou wrote many poems about his concern for mortality in his later years. For instance, he lamented the death of the Emperor Hongzhi (reigned 1488-1505) in a poem: "Being a weak man eighty years of age, my death is imminent. Getting the news, hardly can I bear my pain"⁷ Shen Zhou also inscribed on portrait of himself at the age of eighty: "These eighty years have been



totally unproductive! Yet is death now only next door to me." Added to this poem is an inscription saying: "Life and death are a dream, [my body in] the world is like dust."⁸

Facing the transience of physical life and the inevitability of death, Shen Zhou, like most human beings, desperately yearned for health and longevity. His wishes for long life are evident in one of his four seasons poems: "The mutability of things stir my thoughts now and again. Eagerly I intend to follow the immortals. Worrying in advance about the degeneration of my body, I envy the southern mountain, whose greenness looks forever young."⁹ In order to keep the body healthy and preserve its harmonious functions, Shen Zhou regularly practiced *jingzuo* (quiet sitting), especially at midnight. In his *Night Sitting* of 1492, now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei (figure 4), he recorded the experience of attaining a state of outward quiescence and inward repose through quiet sitting and meditation under the moonlight. The long inscription on the painting notes:

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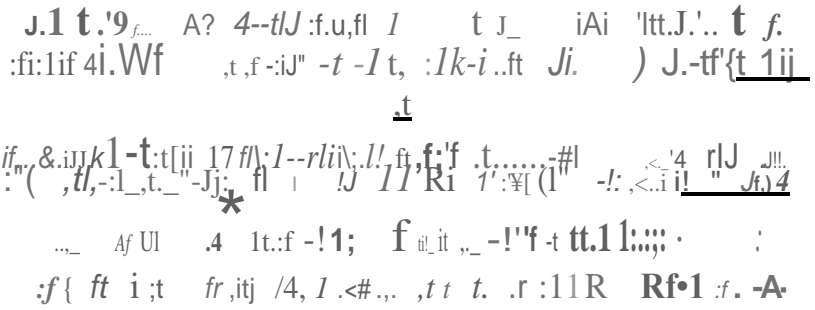


Figure 3. Shen Zhou, *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon at Bamboo Villa*, dated 1486. Handscroll, ink on paper, calligraphy: 29.2 x 1006.5 cm. The Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection. Photo by Craig Smith, courtesy of Phoenix Art Museum.

On a cold night sleep is very sweet. I woke in the middle of the night, my mind clear and untroubled, and as I was unable to go to sleep again, I put on my clothes and sat facing my flickering lamp... How great is the strength to be gained sitting in the night. Thus, cleansing the mind, waiting alone through the long watches by the light of a candle becomes the basis of an inner peace and of an understanding of things. This, surely, will I attain. '0

Shen Zhou's practice of *jingzuo* at midnight intended not only to purify his mind but, most importantly, to strengthen his body to extend his life span. He wrote in his *Night Sitting in Hot Autumn*: "Streams of stars are falling on the horizon, and the night is passing away. I sit long enough, that my mind is detached from human affairs. In fear of aging as reflected in mirrors, I try to find ways to escape...." 11 This idea of health practice springs from Daoist concepts of *yangsheng* (longevity techniques) that direct the practitioner to meditate and regulate the *qi* (vital energy) of the body at the hour of *zi* (11 pm to 1 am). In the Daoist text *Taishang lingbao wufu xu* (Explanation of the Five Talismans of Numinous Treasure), it says: "The taking in of the essence of the moon is done to nourish one's kidney-root, that gray hair can be turned black. It is good for one to meditate at midnight..." 13 The quest for prolongation of life remained Shen Zhou's main reason for practicing *jingzuo*, as shown in his *Night Sitting in Early Autumn*:



Figure 4. Shen Zhou, *Night Sitting*, dated 1492. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, 84.8 x 21.8 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China.

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The white hair is falling like leaves, I scratch my head in panic.
All earthly things are no different from me, and anyhow the
universe is full of life.
Which house isn't under the moon light; which tree doesn't
make the autumn sound?
How thankful I am to the pure land, the crane is singing in my
courtyard.¹⁴

In playful landscape paintings and poems, the crane remains one of Shen Zhou's favorite motifs, charged with beautiful suggestions about his desire for long life. Once he wrote for a *daoshi* (Daoist priest):

Green pine is a wooden friend, and white crane an immortal
courser.
These two have pure hearts, you can rely on their issues of
longevity.
The one who grows pines and rides cranes, treating life like little
games.
Longing for their brilliance, I sit and breathe the *qi* of heaven
and earth.¹⁵

Not only did Shen Zhou practice *jingzuo* and do Daoist breathing exercises, he also befriended Daoist priests and visited their temples frequently. One of the priests, named Fang Zhiqing (died 1495) was his life-long friend. Shen Zhou shows an excessive admiration for his free and unfettered lifestyle in some poems, like the lines he composed in 1475: "Joyfully he follows the immortals, traveling along the east of the river.... He persuaded me to pursue the ultimate Dao, whose abstruseness and silence are in tune to Heaven. I intend to learn but acknowledge its intricacy, and my decrepit face turns red without cause..."¹⁶ Although Shen Zhou could hardly free his mind from earthly concerns, in particular family responsibilities, to follow his friend to become a priest, he nonetheless eagerly searched for a transcendental life and considered himself a *daoren* (Daoist adept). He wrote in one of his poems: "Being a Daoist adept, my thought is as pure as water when I wake up. Leaning against a tall pine tree, I leisurely count the homebound cranes."¹⁷ Shen Zhou sometimes even had a wild dream of becoming a Daoist immortal roaming in sylphdom on a divine crane, which is indicated in a poem inscribed on a painting:

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"Being an immortal on the crane in my previous incarnation, I was punished to live on earth for a thousand years...."¹⁸

On a small painting in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (figure 5), Shen Zhou depicts himself as a recluse scholar, accompanied by a crane on his boat and welcomed by a pine tree in the foreground. According to Michael Sullivan, the artist seemed to travel home after visiting the land of the immortals.¹⁹ The crane, as an archetypal emblem of Daoist immortality, is best described in the *Xianghe jing* (Text on the Physiognomy of the Crane) of the Tang Dynasty:

It is a *yang* bird yet roams in the *yin* world. It goes through various stages of transformation and takes one thousand and six hundred years to complete its final transformation. Its white feathered body indicates the bird's pure and clean nature. The red crown on its head indicates that its calling reaches heaven. Its longevity is immeasurable... They are the senior leader of birds and vehicle for the immortals.²⁰



Figure 5. Shen Zhou, *Scholar and Crane Returning Home*. Album leaf (one of six) mounted as a hand scroll, ink on paper, 38.7 x 60.2 cm.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri.

Purchase: Nelson Trust, 46-51/3. Photo by Robert Newcombe.

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As Richard Edwards has pointed out, the crane is to be seen again and again in Shen Zhou's paintings. In the Mid-Autumn handscroll in Boston, as well as in the Tianjin one, this "immortal guest" was invited to join the memorable literary gathering in the artist's Youzhu Zh uang.²¹ The crane's appearances in domestic scenes are commonplace in Ming literati paintings, like those created by the Women painters from Changzhou, because the auspicious bird had its wintering grounds in the Jiangsu area and had been raised and trained as a favorite pet among scholars since ancient times.²² Its association with Daoist immortality concepts is of great importance in understanding Shen Zhou's art; however, this aspect has attracted little scholarly discussion in the past. As Edward H. Schafer has observed, most westerners, until recently, have regarded Daoism as superstition due to the influence of the Qing rulers' revulsion against the native religion.²³ The major role of Daoist thought in Shen Zhou's artistic creation, which offers a source of imaginative themes, an ideal of transcendental spirit, and a religious salvation of human mortality, is elucidated here for the first time.

Like the Boston and the Tianjin scrolls, *Watching the Mid -Autumn Moon at Bamboo Villa* in the Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection in Phoenix is closely attached to Daoist immortality concepts. At the end of the colophon in the Papp scroll, Shen Zhou signed as "Baishi Weng " (White Stone Old Man), an assumed name he started to use at fifty-eight.²⁴ This name, both literally and metaphorically related to the famous sobriquet Shitian (field of stones), is distinctly inspired by the Daoist immortal Baishi Sheng (Master White Stone), who decocted white stones and used them as food for the sake of longevity.²⁵ In the *Taishang lingbao wufu xu*, an incantation recites:

The white stones, hard and rocky, are rolling on and on,
The gushing spring, bubbling and pervasive , becomes a thick
juice.
Drink it and attain long life-
Longevity forever longer!²⁶

On an album leaf now in the University Art Museum of Berkeley , the Daoist preoccupation with the magical and medical properties of stones is demonstrated by Zhu Chang (circa 1620-1680), a scholar-painter active in the Suzhou region in the early Qing Dynasty. A quatrain was written on the painting:

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A lofty gentleman sits among the boulders;
Wind in the pines blows on nat u re 's pipes.
The cinnabar [pill] finished, heaven and earth expand;
Decocting stones, he nourishes his longev i ty.²⁷

Although Shen Zhou might not have followed the very dietetic regimen, he was sufficiently infatuated by this Daoist idea that at least four of his leisure seals were inscribed "Zh u sh i Ting" which literally means "Decocting Stones Pavilion."²⁸ The hidden import of the names Baishi Weng and Shitian is also suggested in his *Rhyme of Decocting Stones*: "See how the ground phosphate rock from Taishan can be drunk, the cinnabar pellet from Fuling can be eaten If the Daoist priest instructs me about the secret practices, I will cultivate the field of stones for him ."²⁹

Shen Zhou's vehement desire for prolongation of life is substantiated in the case of the Papp scrol I by the identification of one special motif. The object in the central figu re 's right hand, in spite of its almost imperceptible size and shape, is of paramount importance in deciphering the painting (figure 6). Howard Rogers has suggested that the motif is

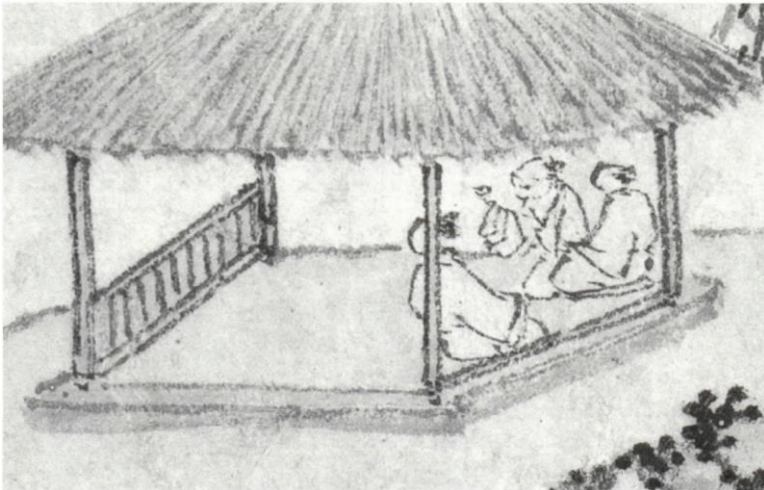


Figure 6. Detail of figure 2.

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a wine cup for toasting the full moon, probably with the literary reference to Shen Zhou's colophon.³⁰ This assumption, however, becomes dubious upon closer examination of the image, whose outline in fact has a grass-like plant form. It is also unlikely that the central figure is holding a cup in salute to the moon without the active participation of his two partners. In light of Shen Zhou's Daoist inclination and his preoccupation with longevity, a new interpretation of the motif is presented here. As a replacement for the crane in many of the artist's paintings, Shen Zhou pictured himself in the Papp scroll as the central figure holding in his right hand a potent *lingzhi*. Evidence for the new interpretation of this symbolic motif is examined below.

In contrast to the two profile faces of the anonymous men directed to the Mid-Autumn moon, the head of the central figure, with a sketchy depiction of eyes and nose, appears distracted from the lovely night scenery and turns outwards to give a subtle glance at the viewer. This frontal pose with a potential eye-engagement establishes a virtually continuous space as well as a psychic intercourse between the sitter and the beholder. The rendering of the frontal figure in pictorial art, according to Meyer Shapiro, is parallel to the grammatical form of the first person, the role of "I" in speech with its complementary "you." It is therefore appropriate for such figures to be symbols or carriers of a specific message.³¹ In the case of the Papp scroll, Shen Zhou ingeniously poses himself as a frontal figure with his head slightly turned, suggesting an eye-engagement with the viewer so as to draw our attention to the symbolism of the *lingzhi* in his right hand and to communicate some sense of his personal situation.

The *lingzhi*, known by the scientific name *Ganoderma lucidum*, is a woody fungus deep brown in color with a lacquer-like sheen that grows at the roots of trees in temperate zones (figure 7). This marvelous plant has been a symbol of happy omen for thousands of years in China, bespeaking good fortune, great health, longevity, and even immortality." According to the *Soushen ji* (In Search of the Supernatural) of the Eastern Jin period, the legendary Pengzu lived to be seven hundred years old by consuming the cinnamon *lingzhi*.³³ The idea of the supernatural fungus with miraculous potency was first recorded in the *Li ji* (The Book of Rites) of the late Zhou or early Han periods, in which *zhi* is listed as a ritual food of emperors." In the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) of the Western Han period, Sima Qian (circa 145-circa 90 BCE) noted the appearance of an auspicious fungoid plant

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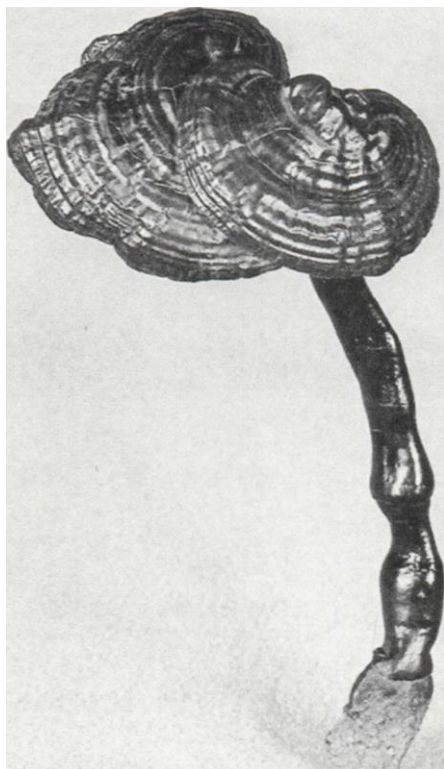


Figure 7. A tricholoma matsutake. Source: R. Gordon Wasson. *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, plate 14.

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with nine stalks and leaves in an inner pavilion of the Ganquan Gong (Palace of Sweet Springs), which was identified with the magic plant *zhi* by the Emperor Wu.³⁵ The Eastern Han historian Ban Gu recorded the emperor's ode for the occasion and he himself wrote a poem about this mystic fungus by using the term *lingzhi*:

Lingzhi grows with the settling dew,
The sign of the three virtues, happy omen's picture fulfilled.
It prolongs lives and glorifies the capital.
It accompanies the Emperor on high, image of the Sky!
Image of the sun and the moon, it throws out bursts of light!³⁶

For the magical powers of the fungus, the *Shennong bencao Jing* (Shennong's Materia Medica) of the Han Dynasty lists six kinds of *lingzhi* among the *shangyao* (superior drugs) that have the effects of making the body lighter, preventing old age, and attaining immortality.³⁷

Both Shihuangdi (The First Emperor of the Qin, reigned 221-209 BCE) of the Qin Dynasty and the Emperor Wu are said to have sent their necromancers to the Eastern Sea to search for the mystic fungus. Although none of the expeditions proved fruitful, the idea of the divine plant of immortality still fascinated many Chinese people in ancient times. It was the Daoists who captured this *lingzhi* concept and exploited it in their writings with whimsical imaginations. From the Daoist source *Shizhou Ji* (Notes on Ten Continents) attributed to Dongfang Shuo, the magic fungus not only prolongs life but also revives the dead.³⁸ In another Daoist text *Baopu zi* (The Master Who Embraces Simplicity) of the Eastern Jin period, Ge Hong (283-343) provides a detailed description of various kinds of *lingzhi*, including types identified as rock, wood, herb, flesh, and very small, whose ingestion in powdered form confers longevity and deathlessness to varying degrees.³⁹ The *Taishang lingbao zhicao pin* (The Classification of the Supreme Numinous Treasure Fungi), an even more comprehensive collection of 127 varieties of *lingzhi* with annotations and illustrations, was published as part of the *Zhengtong daoze* (Daoist Canon of the Zhengtong Reign) in 1445, and it became a popular catalog of the divine plant of immortality.⁴⁰ By the Ming Dynasty, the beliefs in the miraculous potency of the magic fungus had been so deeply embedded in Chinese culture that the *lingzhi* became a cliché in contemporary writings and conversation.

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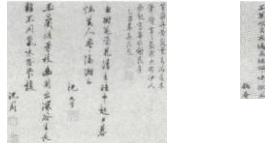


Figure 8. Shen Zbou, *Lingzhi, Orchids, and Magnolia*, dated 1478. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, 135.1 x 55.8 cm. National Palace Museum , Taip ei, Taiwan, Republic of China.



Shen Zhou, who fervently pursued longevity through cultivation of life, was also mesmerized by the immortality concept of *lingzhi*. He once recorded the discovery of the flesh *lingzhi* in his time:

On a cloudy day in the winter of *yihai* year, the mountain was under construction. At the Leying Pond, an object was dug out of the ground which looked like a baby's ruddy arm. After the object was thrown away, an expert said that it was a sacred flesh *lingzhi* which could extend human life indefinitely. What a pity!⁴¹

Shen Zhou's keen interest in the magic plant is also expressed in his poetry and painting. He wrote in a poem: "Look at the herbs in front of the courtyard, how lively they are! I taste the *lingzhi* on the rock, it's full of fragrance. Embracing the Dao, I wish to live as long as the sky and earth."⁴² In Shen Zhou's *Lingzhi, Orchids, and Magnolia* (figure 8), the three auspicious plants

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grow on a slope, with a Taihu shi situated in between. Together they convey the artist's wish for long life. As an attribute that allies Shen Zhou with Daoist immortality, the stone is always paired with *lingzhi* in his painting. They form a rebus for "*shiling*" which signifies a "long life like the stone" since the first syllable of the word *lingzhi* is homophonous with "age."

The *lingzhi*, a symbol of happy augury, has been endlessly represented in various art forms in China, from painting to carving, from porcelain to embroidery, and from bronze mirrors to furniture. One of the earliest examples of *lingzhi* in the history of Chinese pictorial art is a first-century woven silk excavated in Noin-ula in 1924-1925. The repeated design of the paradisiacal motif in the textile includes a pair of jagged crags surmounted by two downward-peering birds, a feathery plant derived from the Mesopotamian "Tree of Life," and a clumsy "poached-egg" form which is identified with the *lingzhi* by some scholars.⁴³ This magic fungus, rendered in a configuration of nine stalks attached by flattened leaves, probably relates to the account of the divine plant found in the Emperor Wu's palace. The so-called "*zhi jiujiing*" (*lingzhi* with nine stalks) was a popular theme among artists in traditional China, as embodied in the design of a Ming ink-cake made by Cheng Jun fang (1573-after 1619), which is in the collection of the Tokugawa Art Museum.⁴⁴

The iconography of *lingzhi* in association with the Daoist cult of longevity can be traced back to the Han Dynasty when the belief in immortality was popularized. On an Eastern-Han stone coffer found in Chengdu, two half-naked figures, assumed to be immortals with little wings on their arms, are rowdily playing *liubo*, a popular board game during the Han period. Behind them on the right is the divine plant *lingzhi*, cultivated as food for the immortal.⁴⁵ For the Daoists, *lingzhi* is an elixir of immortality and it can be found in the legendary Isles of the Blest or in the sacred mountains. Ge Hong describes in his *Baopuzi*: "These are all mountains which have gods of their own. Sometimes earth genii are to be found there too. Magic fungi and herbs grow here. They are good places in which to sit out war and catastrophe, not merely to prepare medicines."⁴⁶ Fascinated by the idea of the magic fungus, many Chinese painters have created fantastic pictures of the Daoist adept gathering *lingzhi* in the mountains, such as Shen Zhou's *The Bottle-Gourd Immortal* in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (figure 9). The artist's inscription on the painting is:



Figure 9. Shen Zhou, *Bottle-Gourd Immortal*, dated 1501. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, 59.7 x 26.7 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: Nelson Trust, 47-69.

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This carefree immortal makes his home on
Penglai Isle and Fanghu Mountain;
Thatch-headed, hair a mess, a jolly face is always his.
You see how he is endowed with understanding so broad and
content;
It is the bottle gourd-there he preserves his vitality pristine! ⁴⁷

A hanging scroll of the Liao Dynasty, found in a Buddhist pagoda in Shangxi province in 1974, also shows an herb immortal in search of the magic fungus, holding one like a prize between the thumb and forefinger. The figure, walking bare-foot down a hillside with a whole set of equipment-pickaxe, double gourd, dragon-head staff, wicker backpack, and straw hat-is probably the Daoist immortal Magu (Hemp Lady).⁴⁸ Her identity can be attested by a Yuan painting in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in which Magu, with her typical topknot, is also dressed in a jacket of leaves and a rawhide cape while the *lingzhi* is placed inside her basket.⁴⁹

According to some Daoist sources, Magu brewed a special wine from *lingzhi* for Xiwangmu in celebration of the anniversary of her birth.⁵⁰ It was therefore customary to present a portrait of the immortal to an old woman as a birthday gift in traditional China. Shen Zhou made a composition of this kind in 1482.⁵¹ On the painting, now in the Tianjin Art Museum, the artist's uncle Shen Zhen (1400-after 1482) inscribed the lines: "Madame Lu is eighty this year. With a ruddy complexion, her body is still strong... Holding the banquet by the Yao Lake and singing overnight, Ma Gu should be invited as guest of honor." In fact Shen Zhou did many poems and paintings to celebrate the birthdays of his friends, using images of *lingzhi*, white stone, crane, bamboo, or pine to express good wishes for longevity. He composed a poem entitled *Purple Lingzhi and White Stone for Han Hu's Birthday*: "The hard land knows the nature of stones, and the auspicious sky believes the efficacy of *lingzhi*..."⁵² In a painting dedicated to Zhu Qi in the Zhejiang Art Museum collection, Shen Zhou even transformed himself into a crane, presenting a *lingzhi* as a birthday gift to his friend seated under the pine trees.⁵³

The symbolism of a crane holding in its beak a *lingzhi* is full of literary allusions. For instance, the *Shizhouji* recounts that during the Qin Dynasty some mystic birds appeared carrying *lingzhi* in their bills. When the magic fungus was dropped on the faces of the dead, they

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sprang again to life.⁵⁴ The Daoists' interest in the visual representation of these auspicious symbols is manifested on a nineteenth-century *daopao* (Daoist priest's robe). Woven in the red silk ground of the robe, the large roundel design contains the motif of a crane with *lingzhi* and sprigs of bamboo in its beak.⁵⁵ The *lingzhi*, crane, and bamboo appear again in a hanging scroll by Shen Zhou in the National Palace Museum in Taipei (figure 10). It was executed in honor of the doctor Zhu Puan's birthday. Among all the symbols of longevity represented in the painting, the sitter seems to be most interested in the *lingzhi* at which he looks attentively.

The rendering of Zhu Puan, who is leaning at leisure on a mat, reminds us of the figure in *The Land of Immortals* in the Cleveland Museum of Art by Chen Ruyan (circa 1331-before 1371), the grandfather of Shen Zhou's first teacher Chen Kuan (1397-1473).⁵⁶ This Yuan painting exemplifies the Daoist paradise ideal in an archetypical blue- and-green, or *jinbi* (gold and verditer) style.⁵⁷ Several formally different figures of benign appearance disport themselves against a background of shadowy mountains amidst fantastic rocks and picturesque pines, teasing the pet cranes, gathering the magic *lingzhi*, herding the sacred deer, or riding a crane-like coursier. Chen Ruyan's work should not have been unfamiliar to Shen Zhou since both his son Chen Ji (1370-1434) and his grandson were teachers for the Shen family, and this painting, though presented to a military officer as a birthday gift, was later in the collection of Chen Kuan.⁵⁸ As Chu-tsing Li has suggested, Shen Zhou's *Lofty Mount Lu*, executed in 1467 in celebration of Chen Kuan's seventieth birthday, is a work influenced by both Wang Meng (1310-1385) and Chen Ruyan.⁵⁹

Unlike the painting by Chen Ruyan, in which *lingzhi* grow sporadically in the land of immortals, Shen Zhou's *Fields of the Fungus of Longevity* (figure 11), a handscroll in the Palace Museum in Beijing, gives a different picture of this magic fungus. He reinterprets the legendary fields of *lingzhi* on the Mount Kunlun as a contemporary rural farm where the divine plant of immortality is cultivated as if it were an ordinary grain.⁶⁰ The way Shen Zhou sketches the outlines of the *lingzhi*, especially the sprouting ones in this work, is identical to that in his raised right hand in the *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon at Bamboo Villa*. The image of a scholar holding a fungus like a prize, as represented in the Papp scroll and in a painting by another Ming artist Chen Hongshou (1598-1652) (figure 12), is a distinctive visual representation

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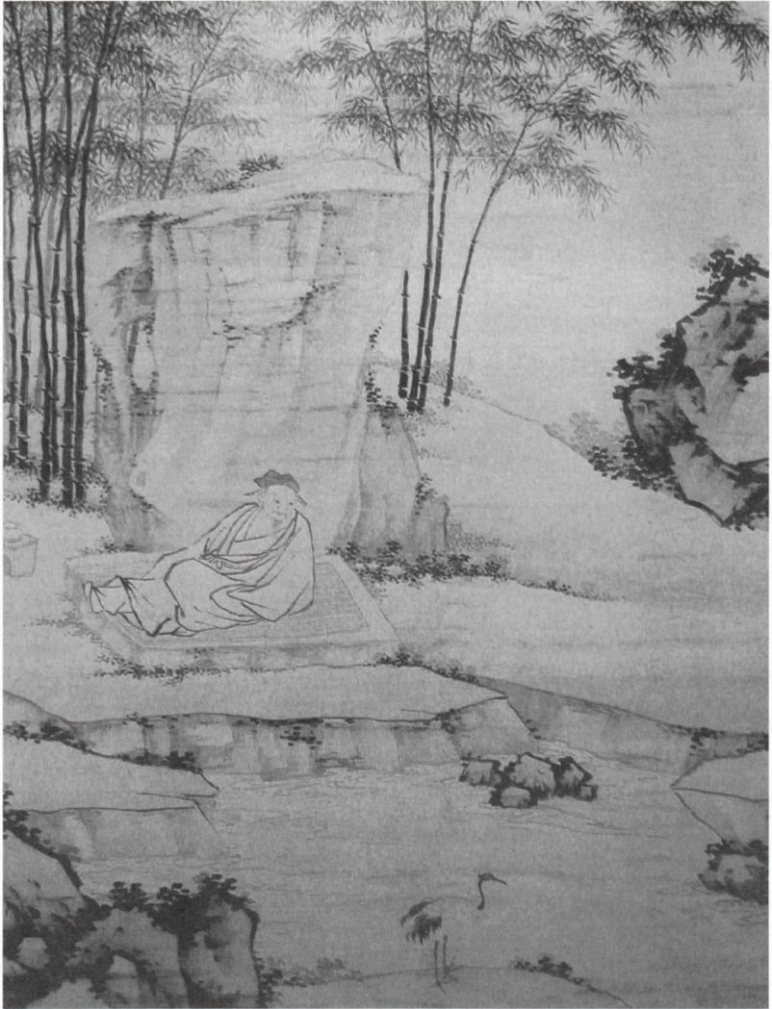


Figure 10. Shen Zhou. *Lingzhi and Crane*. Undated, detail.
Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk. 175.5 x 89.9 cm.
National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China.

THE DAOIST SYMBOLISM OF IMMORTALITY

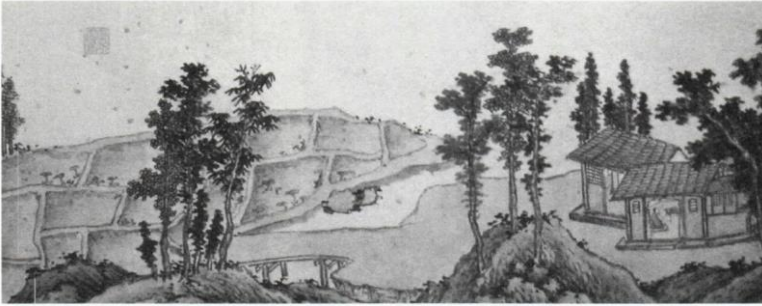


Figure 11. Shen Zhou , *Fields of the Fungus of Longevity*, dated 1493, detail.
Handscroll, ink and colors on paper , painting: 31.5 x 156 cm.
The Palace Museum , Beijing.

of the quest for immortality that derives from the iconographic tradition of the herb gatherer, as pictured in the Liao painting of Magu.

There is little doubt that the so-called *caizhi tu* (picture of gathering *lingzhi*) had been a popular theme among Chinese painters by the tenth century. According to the *Xuanhe huapu* (Xuanhe painting catalog), the Southern Tang painter Gu Deqian (active circa 960-circa 975) did two figure paintings of the *lingzhi* gatherer.⁶¹ Although these works do not survive, the iconography of the theme is well-preserved in the *Sancai tuhui* (Tripartite Picture Assembly), a Ming encyclopedia of arts and crafts that Wang Qi (1565-1514) compiled from older illustrated books, in which *caizhi tu* is listed as one of the most common themes in painting. Another illustration in the same book also portrays the Daoist immortal Leiyin Weng (Old Man Leiyin) finding a *lingzhi* with the help of the *sika* deer (figure 13).⁶²

The elegant, if not feminine, way Leiyin Weng holds the *lingzhi*, pinching the stalk lightly between his thumb and forefinger, is a gesture of profound iconographic significance.⁶³ This is the way women or Buddhist figures present their floral attributes, as shown in the *Goddess Offering Flowers* by the Song painter Liu Songnian (circa 1150-after 1225) now in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.⁶⁴ Painters like Wu Wei (1459-1508) of the early Ming period, however, preferred a more manly and solemn approach to the representation of the *lingzhi*-herb gatherer. In his *Herb Immortal* (figure 14), also in the National Palace Museum collection, the figure draws back his arm near his chest and grips the

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Figure 12. Attributed to Chen Hongshou (1598-1652). *Sage Contemplating Lingzhi*, undated. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 103 x 48.5 cm. Weng Wan-go Collection, New Hampshire. Photo courtesy of the collector.

magic fungus with both fingers while gazing ahead in contemplation. This gesture is often seen in the depiction of Daoist immortals or Buddhist deities holding the *ruyi* (as you wish) scepter. Another painting by Wu Wei in the same museum, entitled *Immortal of the Northern Sea*, shows that a *lingzhi-shaped ruyi* scepter is carried in a closed-form gesture by the Daoist legendary figure Ruo Shi of the Qin Dynasty.⁶⁵ Shen Zhou shows his great interest in Wu Wei's painting and its Daoist subject by inscribing a poem on it: "Do you know the immortal of the Northern Sea? He rides on the sacred tortoise and eats clams.... Holding his breath by the Daoist longevity technique, the immortal has passed nine thousand years...."

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The scepter, originally used as a *tanbing* (discussion stick) by orators or monks, became associated with *lingzhi* and its Daoist longevity symbolism after the Tang Dynasty. •• Most of the Ming and Qing *ruyi* scepters were carved in the standard shape of *lingzhi* and were believed to have magical powers to grant wishes. The similarity of their shapes sometimes makes it difficult to identify these two motifs in later Chinese painting. In a portrait of Qian long (reigned 1735-1796) (figure 15), the Qing emperor is dressed like a Daoist priest, and the object in his right hand can either be a *ruyi* scepter or a *lingzhi*.⁶⁷ *Ruyi* scepters were treasured by Chinese *wenren* as auspicious playthings during the Ming and Qing periods. In scholars' studios, they were frequently placed in *ping* (vases) on *an* (tables), which make the rebus for *pingan ruyi*, symbolizing peace and fulfilled wishes.⁶⁸

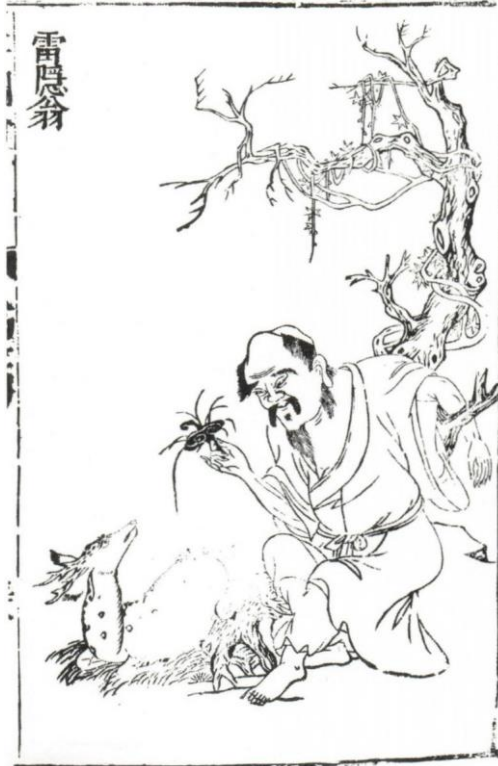


Figure 13. Illustration of Lei Yin Weng from *Sancai tuhui*, 1715. Woodblock-printed book, ink on paper, 20.8 x 13.2 cm. Source: John A. Goodall. *Heaven and Earth: A/bum Leaves from a Ming Encyclopedia*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1979, 161.

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For the formal resemblance between *ruyi* scepter and *lingzhi*, the rendering of the magic plant in a vase undoubtedly suggests the same symbolic meaning, like that depicted in an anonymous painting in the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.⁶⁹ The long inscription about Daoist longevity on this Ming painting attests to the symbolism of *lingzhi* in the vase. Another obvious case is a handscroll on the Daoist theme of longevity by Xie Shichen (1487-circa 1560) of the Ming Dynasty now in the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. The Ming painter, who is said to have followed the idea of Shen Zhou, creates a wonderland with reference to an ancient poem entitled *Qi Ao* (Banks of the River Qi). On the terrace by the river, a *sika* deer is presenting a *lingzhi* to a seated scholar, who places a vase of magic fungi on the table to exhibit his wishes for peace and long life.⁷⁰

In *Watching the Mid-Autumn Moon at Bamboo Villa* in the Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection, Shen Zhou might have played on the same rebus by placing the figures in the Pingan Ting and posing himself as



Figure 14. Wu Wei (1459-1508), *Herb Immortal*. Hanging scroll, ink on silk, 58.3 x 26.6 cm. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China.

Figure 15. Attributed to Lang Shining. *Hongli, the Future Qian/ong Emperor, Gathering Fungus*, dated 1734. Hanging scroll, ink on paper, 204 x 133 cm. The Palace Museum, Beijing.



a *lingzhi-holde r.*¹¹ Metaphorically allied to the blessing *pingan ruyi* and typologically associated with the pictures of the Daoist immortal, the Papp scroll is by no means an improvisation but, rather, a well-thought-out work, rich in content, deep in emotion, and specific in time. Shen Zhou leaves out the more obvious emblems in this personal creation and invests the "snapshot" of the specific Mid-Autumn gathering with the hidden Daoist symbolism, whose subtlety and understatement are in perfect conformity with the Chinese *wenren hua* ideal. Veiled behind a simple and lucid composition, the intriguing symbol of *lingzhi* is of prime importance in the Papp scroll. Like the famous discussion of a man tipping his hat in its iconological context by Erwin Panofsky,⁷² the identification of the central figure holding a *lingzhi* leads to the interpretative level of intrinsic meaning, revealing not only the artist's attitude towards life and death but also the *Weltanschauung* of Chinese *wenren* in the Ming Dynasty—a passionate desire for immortality.

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Notes

- Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Chinese sources are my own.
1. For the discussions of the Boston scroll in English publications, see Osvald Siren, *Chinese Paintings in American Collections*, volume 5 (Paris and Brussels: G. van Oest, 1928), 86, plate 164; Hugo Munsterberg, *A Short History of Chinese Art* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 177, plate 47; Richard Edwards and Tseng Hsien-chi, "Shen Chou at the Boston Museum," *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 8 (1954): 31-45, plate 1; James Cahill, *Chinese Painting* (Geneva: Skira, 1960), 128-129, plate 66; Richard Edwards, *The Field of Stones: A Study of the Art of Shen Chou* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1962), 26-31, plate 14.
 2. The Beijing scroll was formerly in the Palace Museum collection and its present whereabouts is unknown. It is listed in *Zhongguo gudai shuhua jian ding zu*, editor. *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu*, volume 1 (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1986), 7, plate 1/012. The Tianjin scroll, whose authenticity is doubted, is listed in Tianjin Art Museum, *Tianjinshi Yishu Bowuguan Canhua Ji*, volume 2 (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1963), 13-18.
 3. According to the New York dealer and scholar, Howard Rogers, the Papp scroll was previously owned by a Chinese collector in Beijing.
 4. Howard Rogers, "Shen Chou (1427-1509)," *Kaikodo Journal* 6 (1996): 18-21, 209-210; Ju-hsi Chou, *Journeys on Paper and Silk: The Roy and Marilyn Papp Collection of Chinese Painting* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1998), 18-21. Despite these publications, many new books on Shen Zhou still have not included this handscroll.
 5. Translation from Ju-hsi Chou, with a change of wording in the title of the handscroll from "enjoying" to "watching." *Journeys on Paper and Silk*, 20.
 6. A discussion on the phrase "*Laofu laoji liushi nian*" in the poem, which indicates the age of Shen Zhou when the literary gathering was held, is offered by Ju-hsi Chou, *Journeys on Paper and Silk*, 18.
 7. Shen Zhou, *Shitian Shixuan* (1781; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1987), 624.
 8. Quoted from Richard Vinograd with changes, *Boundaries of the Self Chinese Portraits 1600-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 28-29.
 9. Shen Zhou, *Shitian Xiansheng Ji* (1615; reprint, Taipei: Guoli Zhongyuan Tushuguan, 1968), 214.
 10. Translation from Edwards, *The Field of Stones*, 57.
 11. Shen, *Shitian Shixuan*, 567.

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12. For a discussion of Daoist meditation practices and breathing exercises in the Ming Dynasty, see Liu Ts'un -ya n, "Tao ist Se lf-Cul tivat ion in Ming Thought ," in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, editor (New York: Columb ia University Press, 1970), 293-297.
13. Translation from Liu, "Taoist Self -Cul tivat io n," 294 .
14. Shen, *Shitian Shixuan* , 567.
15. Shen Zhou, *Shitian Gao* (1506; reprint, Shanghai: Shangha i Gu ji Chubanshe, 1987), 520.
16. Shen , *Shitian Xiansheng Ji*, 199-200.
17. Shen Zhou, *Shitian Xiansheng Shichao* (1644; re pr i nt, Tainan: Zhuangyan Wenhua, 1997), 116.
18. Shen , *Shitian Shixuan*, 689.
19. Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China* (revised edition, Be rkeley and Los Ange les: University of Ca li forn ia Press, 1973), 195 .
20. Translation from Song Houmei, "Images of the Crane in Chin e se Paint in g," *Oriental Art* 44.3 (1998), 14.
21. Edwards, *The Field of Stones*, 23-25.
22. Edward H. Schafer, "Th e Crane of Mao Shan," in *Tantric and Taoist Studies: In Honour of R. A. Stein*, volume 2. Michae l Strickmann, edito r (Bru ssels: In st itu t Beige des Hautes Etudes Ch inoises, 1983), 379.
23. Edward H. Schafer, *Mirages on the Sea of Time: The Taoist Poetry of Ts'ao T'ang* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of Ca l if orn ia Press, 1985), 2-3 .
24. Jian g Zh ao -shen, *Wen Zh engming yu Suzhou huatan* (Taip ei: National Palace Museum, 1977), 21.
25. Lionel Giles, tra nsla tor, *A Gallery of Chinese Immortals* (Lond on: John Murray, 1948), 7-8, 18.
26. Tra nslat io n from Livia Kohn, editor, *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (Al bany : State University of New York, 199 3), 149.
27. Tra nslati on from Scarlett Jang, "Zhu Chang and an Unidentified Master," in *Shadows of Mt. Huang: Chinese Painting and Printing of the Anhui School*, James Ca hi ll, editor (Berke ley: University Art Museum, Berkeley, 1981), 89. The quatrain clearly indicates the pa i ntin g's relation to Daoist alchemy. However, Scarlett Jang believes that th e stove is used to heat wine or tea-water and the poem is irrelevant to the picture.
28. For these four leisure sea ls, see Victoria Contag and Wang Ch i-ch ie n, *Seals of Chinese Painters and Collectors of the Ming and Ching Periods* (1940 ; revised, with an int rod uction by James Ca hill , Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1966), 167, 659; Zhuang Yan and others, *Jin Tang yilai shuhuaijia jianshangjia kuanyin pu*, volum e 2 (Hong Kong: Yiwen Chuba nshe, 1991). 133.

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29. Shen, *Shitian Shixuan*, 725.
30. Rogers, "Shen Chou," 18.
31. Meyer Shapiro also points out that in many pictures of the frontal figure the head is turned slightly, which is exactly the case of the central figure in the Phoenix scroll. *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 38-39.
32. The origin of the symbolism of *lingzhi* is uncertain. Michael Sullivan regards it as indigenous to China while R. Gordon Wasson believes that the fungal symbolism came from India and was a literary reflection of soma. Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 178-180; R. Gordon Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 80-81.
33. For the tales about Pengzu, see Kenneth J. DeWoskin and J. I. Crump, Jr., translators, *In Search of the Supernatural: The Written Record* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 2-3.
34. Wasson, *Soma*, 82.
35. Burton Watson, translator, *Record of the Grand Historian of China*, volume 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 63.
36. Translation from Wasson, *Soma*, 89.
37. Sun Xingyan and Sun Fengyi, editors, *Shennong ben cao Jing* (1891; reprint, Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua Shuju, 1976), 23.
38. Kohn, *The Taoist Experience*, 49.
39. James R. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine, Religion in the China of AD 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung (Pao-pu Tzu)* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966), 179-185.
40. *Zheng tong Daozang*, volume 57 (1444-1445; reprint, Taipei: Xinwenfeng Chubanshe, 1988), 543-575.
41. Shen Zhou, *Shitianweng Kezuo Xinwen* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1995), 165.
42. Shen, *Shitian Xiansheng Ji*, 483.
43. Both William Willetts and Michael Sullivan accept the identification of the *lingzhi*, and Gordon Wasson even suggests that the bird in the textile is the crane. William Willetts, *Chinese Art*, volume 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958), 290-292; Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, 52-54; and Wasson, *Soma*, 89-92.
44. See *Kogoku: Old Carbon Ink-sticks in the Togugawa Ari Museum* (Kyoto: Shidosha, 1991), plate 245.
45. Michael Sullivan, *The Birth of Landscape Painting in China*, 68, plate 86.
46. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine, Religion in the China of AD 320*, 94.

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47. Translated from Marc F. Wilson, *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collection of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980), 190.
48. See Susan Nelson, "Revisiting the Eastern Fence: Tao Qian's Chrysanthemums," *The Art Bulletin* 133.3 (2001): 448.
49. A brief account of this painting is given by Wu Tung, *Tales from the Land of Dragons: 1000 Years of Chinese Painting* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1997), 232.
50. Cheng Yin, editor, *Zhongguoshenxian huaxiang Ji* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1996), 261.
51. Shan Guoqiang, editor, *Shen Zhou Jingping Ji* (Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe), plate 9.
52. Shen, *Shitian Shixuan*, 643.
53. See Shan, *Shen Zhou Jingping Ji*, plate 50.
54. Kohn, *The Taoist Experience*, 49.
55. Stephen Little, *Daoism and the Arts of China* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), 198, plate 51.
56. See Wai-kam Ho, Sherman E. Lee, Laurence Sickman and Marc F. Wilson, *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting*, 139-140, plate 114.
57. The *qinglu* or *Jinbi* style that Chen Ruyan applied in his *Land of the Immortals* was originally developed by Li Sixun (651-716) and his son in the Tang Dynasty. This painting style became specifically devoted to the representation of Daoist paradise scenes and the very minerals of pigments were ingredients cherished by the alchemists. See Claudia Brown, "Ch'en Ju-yen and Late Yuan Painting in Suchou" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1985), 145-150.
58. Chen Ji was the teacher of Shen Zhou's father and uncle, and the painting *Land of the Immortals* was given to Pan Yuanming (died 1382), a military chief under whom Chen Ruyan served. See Brown, "Ch'en Ju-yen and Late Yuan Painting in Suchou," 78-79, 184, 237.
59. Chu-tsing Li, "Shen Zhou zaonian de fazhan," in *Wumen huapai yanjiu*, Gugong Bowuyuan, editor (Beijing: Zijincheng Chubanshe, 1993), 201-202.
60. For the legendary fields of *lingzhi* fungus, see William F. Meyers, *Chinese Reader's Manual* (1874; reprint, Shanghai: American Presbyterian Press, 1910), 116-117.
61. *Xuanhe huapu* (1120; reprint, Taipei: Shijie Shuju, 1962), 130.
62. Cheng, *Zhongguo shenxian huaxiang Ji*, 112.
63. The gesture of holding flowers or *lingzhi* and its symbolic meanings in Chinese pictorial art is explored by Susan E. Nelson in her two articles.

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- "Tao Yuanming's Sashes: Or, the Gendering of Immortality," *Ars Orientalis* 29 (1999): 15-27; "Revisiting the Eastern Fence," 447-449.
64. *Zhongguo chuanshi renwuhua*, volume 1 (Beijing: Beijing Shudian, 2004), 88.
 65. *Masterpieces of Chinese Figure Painting in the National Palace Museum* (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1973), 148-149, plate 35.
 66. See Stephen Little, *Spirit Stones of China* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1999), 85.
 67. Richard Vinograd identifies the motif as *lingzhi*; however, it looks like a *ruyi* scepter as well. *Boundaries of the Self* 71.
 68. The rebus *pingan ruyi* has been discussed by several scholars. Edouard Chavannes, *The 5 Happinesses: Symbolism in Chinese Popular Art*, Elaine Spaulding Atwood, translator (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1973), 19; Fang Jing Pei and others, *Treasures of the Chinese Scholar* (New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1997), 137.
 69. Thomas Lawton, *Chinese Figure Painting* (Washington DC: Freer Gallery of Art, 1973), 161.
 70. For a discussion of Xie Shichen's handscroll, see Chu-tsing Li. *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines: Chinese Paintings in the Charles A. Drenowatz Collection* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1974), 19-22.
 71. In many of Shen Zhou's poems, he wrote about his Youzhu Zhuang. Since none of his poems mentions the existence of the Pingan Ting, the structure in the Papp scroll is probably fabricated by the artist to play on the rebus *Pingan ruyi*.
 72. On the iconological level of interpretation, Erwin Panofsky illustrates that the man who tips his hat is re-enacting a gesture dating from the Middle Ages, when a knight in armor would remove his helmet to signify peaceful intentions. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 3-4.