

The Time of Qianlong (1736–1795)

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The second half of the seventeenth century saw one of the greatest surges of artistic talent in Chinese history. By the second decade of the eighteenth century, with the passing of the leading early Qing painters – Zhu Da died in 1705, Daoji in 1707, Wang Yuanqi in 1715 and Wang Hui in 1717 – the last grand era of traditional Chinese painting came to a close. During the eighteenth century, both the court painters and scholar-artists in the north followed the orthodox manners of Wang Yuanqi and Wang Hui, while professional scholar-artists working in thriving commercial centers in the south, notably Yangzhou, emulated the bold expressive brush styles of Zhu Da and Daoji. Their combination of extreme conservatism on the one hand and free inventiveness and experimentation on the other formed the immediate background for painters in modern China, when the country's declining power and struggle for modernization threatened to destroy forever the authority of its artistic tradition.

Following the successful sixty-one-year reign of the great Kangxi emperor, during which time Manchu imperial power was firmly established, the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723-1735) further strengthened the emperor's personal power. Under Yongzheng's successor, Qianlong, who also enjoyed a long reign of sixty years, the Manchu empire was at its zenith: the territory of the state was the largest China had ever seen, and there was peace and order within the realm. The population had more than doubled, farmland and agricultural products had dramatically increased, and commerce and industries, including silk, cotton, porcelain, metallurgy and tea, flourished. Yet as minority alien rulers, the Manchus were conservative, repressive and inimical to change. Despite Qianlong's grandiloquent facade, signs of bad government and moral decline became increasingly evident toward the latter half of his reign: his extravagant Ten Great Campaigns squandered vast sums of state revenues while enriching his generals; official corruptions perpetrated

throughout the empire by his favorite, Heshen (1750-1799), and by Heshen's henchmen reached unprecedented proportions; and in 1793 a major uprising called the White Lotus Rebellion broke out in the western mountain regions, exposing the deteriorating conditions of the Manchu fighting forces.

Located on the northern shore of the Yangtze, at the junction of the river and the Grand Canal, imperial China's main artery of north-south commodities exchange, the city of Yangzhou in 1645 had been the scene of heroic Ming resistance against the Manchu force, followed by the sack of the city and a ten-day massacre. Eleven years after the city's destruction, when a company of Dutch visitors led by Peter de Goyer and Jacob de Keyzer saw it in 1656, it was said to have been totally rebuilt, standing now 'in as great Splendour as it was at first.'¹ Yangzhou owed its extraordinary prosperity during the eighteenth century to the establishment there of the Salt Transportation Superintendency (*yanyun shi*), which, along with the grain tribute and the Yellow River Conservancy, was one of the three great superintendencies administered by the central government. Growing fabulously rich on the salt monopoly, the important merchant families of Yangzhou affected a lavish lifestyle, competing with one another in conspicuous spending – in building elaborate gardens, collecting art and curiosities, growing exotic flowers, raising horses and dogs, and in nightly feasting and partying with singing, dancing and theatrical performances. A new urban population of small merchants, factory managers, brokers, accountants and pawnshop owners shared in the wealth, adding to the general demand for such accoutrements of the good life as sumptuous craftwork, calligraphy, painting as well as belles lettres.²

Because of its anti-mercantile bias, imperial Chinese government traditionally managed commerce and industry through state monopolies. Lacking the legal safeguards that supported private entrepreneurship and capital accumulation in the growth of a capitalist economy in the West, the newly rich Yangzhou merchants remained an underclass subservient to the power and values of the ruling scholar-officials. In 1758, when the Yangzhou Salt Superintendent, Lu Jianzeng, held a literary gathering called *Hongqiao Xiuxi* ('Purification Festival at the Rainbow Bridge'), he explicitly forbade anyone connected with the salt trade to participate; only one salt merchant – a man named Wang Di who had purchased a National Academy doctoral degree – was exempted from this injunction. Writers of period comedies of manners regularly portrayed the nouveaux riches merchants as clumsy bumpkins eagerly imitating the tastes and affectations of the scholar-artists, who, as their

social and intellectual superiors, amused and titillated them, often by exaggerating the eccentric and the outrageous.

One day, we are told, a wealthy merchant was giving a party, and the guests began to play a game of reciting famous lines from old poems containing the words 'flying' and 'red'. When the host's turn came, the poor fellow did not know any old poetry, so, stammering, his face turned purple, he made up something:

Willow flowers flying, piece by piece, red.

The line, obviously meaningless (willow flowers being white), elicited laughter from the audience. Then, the famous poet-painter Jin Nong (1687-1764), who happened to be present, gallantly came to the rescue. He said, ah yes, what a lovely line; it is from a beautiful poem about a well-known local scenic spot, by an unknown Yuan dynasty poet. When the company pressed for the *locus classicus*, Jin Nong recited the entire poem without hesitation:

By the twenty-four bridges, twenty-four gentle breezes,
Leaning by a railing, I recall the river east of the old.
When the sun sets over the crossing, covered with peach-blossoms,
Willow flowers come flying, piece by piece, red.³

What we see in these amusing and light-hearted stories about eighteenth-century Yangzhou is not the rise of a new, successful commercial class, but rather the declining fortunes of the traditional scholars who, having been forced by penury to play the buffoon's buffoons, were compelled to vent an impotent rage in their art. Of the so-called Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou, all poverty-stricken scholar-artists dependent on the patronage of the salt merchants, only Gao Xiang (1688-1752) and Luo Ping (1733-1799) were Yangzhou natives; and the rest had come to the thriving metropolis to seek a livelihood. Li Shan (1686-1760?) and Zheng Xie (1693-1765) were born in nearby Xinghua; Jin Nong was from Hangzhou, Zhejiang; Wang Shishen (1686-1759) came from Anhui; Huang Shen (1687-1773) hailed from Fujian; and Li Fangying (1695-1755) was from Nantong, Jiangsu. Most of them came from impoverished scholars' families. Gao Xiang, Wang Shishen, Huang Shen and Luo Ping never earned any degrees; Jin Nong was recommended for the special *boxue hongci* degree in 1735, but was not chosen. Li Shan, Zheng Xie and Li Fangying had gotten onto the scholar-official track, but all lost their jobs in mid-career and had to struggle for a living as professional painters.

Since the wealth of the scholar-gentry class was tied to land ownership in their ancestral hometowns, the disenfranchised scholars working as itinerant artists led only marginal existences. As the retired magistrate Li Fangying described his plight:

Being landless, I must beg for rice to eat.
All day I paint to sell my plum paintings at [Mr Xiang's] garden.⁴

The emotion that gripped the destitute scholar was one of sourness (*suan*) and scorn, irony and pride, as Jin Nong described in one of his works:

Here I paint a horse . . . to show how it looks at itself, uttering a sour cry, and is full of pride.⁵

And on a painting of an orchid plant, a symbol of the gentleman-recluse, Jin Nong wrote:

How bitter it is for [the orchid] to be drawn out by a spring breeze,
Only to be sold on the market alongside garlic and onions.⁶

Yet the life of a scholar-official, as seen in the early careers of Li Shan, Zheng Xie and Li Fangying, could also be filled with hardships, even mortal perils. To become a scholar-official, one had first to obtain his scholarly degrees, and the process often entailed long years of privation and suffering. The son of a poor school teacher, Zheng Xie as a child lost his mother and was raised by a nursemaid. Confucian studies taught him morality and compassion for the poor, but, unfortunately for him, nothing about life or how to be tactful to others. He was loving, generous and upright, but also contentious, full of righteous indignation and always sharply critical and intolerant of worldly ills. In 1724 and 1725, he took time out from his studies to visit the capital Beijing and to see the world. He wrote a poem then, expressing his own credo for life:

Do not try alchemy, do not escape in Chan [Buddhism],
Love not the official's hat, love not his money;
Wish only on a clear autumn or summer day,
To sail Mi Fu's houseboat on the river and lake.⁷

The poem reveals both a paradox and a dilemma: the student scholar-official was a recluse at heart, and he was torn between his desire to serve and the reality of official corruption as a means of private enrichment.

Many difficult years passed before Zheng Xie had a chance to learn more about money and politics. Having finally achieved his *jinshi* degree in

1736, at the mature age of forty-four *sui*, he was in 1742 first posted as magistrate – ‘An Official of the Seventh Grade’, read one of his seals – to Fanxian, a remote district in Shandong, then in 1748 transferred to Weixian, a prosperous city in the same province. His career, however, resembled that of his idol Mi Fu (1052-1107): it ended with his loss of the job after being accused of committing irregularities in famine relief.

Zheng Xie’s administration began well enough at Fanxian, where he was greeted by a string of fine harvests. In good times, the ideal Chinese government was no government at all; as long as there was peace and harmony in the land, the scholar-official could praise heaven’s virtues and congratulate himself for exercising a benevolent moral influence on his people. In Fanxian, which was a tranquil, small rural district, the new magistrate spent most of his time painting and writing poems. As he proudly reported to his friends in Yangzhou, ‘Here there are few law suits and little legal punishment; it is wonderful that I can govern the place while sleeping on the job!’⁸

But his transfer in 1746 to Weixian coincided with the beginning of a vicious cycle of terrible coastal floods, droughts, famine and pestilence that ravaged much of northern Shandong. The imperial system of placing total fiscal responsibility on local officials severely limited their ability to respond to emergencies. When a natural disaster struck, the prudent official would write reports to his superiors, explaining the cause of the disaster and requesting help, while letting the peasants starve. Zheng Xie, however, immediately made loans to the hungry from the government granary; and to help employment he had city walls repaired and ponds dug. He also investigated private hoards of grain and ordered the wealthy to set up rice glue factories to feed the starving poor. A bamboo painting which he painted for a vice censor-in-chief included this poem:

As I slept in my residence, and heard the bamboo rustling,
I thought it was my people groaning in agony.
We small county and prefectural officials,
Are concerned with the twigs and leaves of this world!⁹

The famine raged on through the spring of 1749, but that fall good weather finally produced a plentiful harvest. Year after year, Zheng Xie raised funds to help peasants retire loans, and carried out various public works with private donations, including his own, yet he ran into increasing difficulties from all sides. In the spring of 1751, the sea once again flooded the area, and accusations of mismanagement of funds at last forced a thoroughly dispirited Zheng Xie to resign.

Returning to Yangzhou, he decided to ply the only trade he knew – selling his poetry and paintings. He mused:

Failing in poetry, I study calligraphy;
 Failing in that also, I study painting.
 Selling it each day for a hundred cash,
 It takes the place of ploughing and sowing;
 In fact, it saves me from indigence and need,
 But I call it style and elegance.¹⁰

‘Style and elegance’ (*fengya*), the only armor left to scholar-artists, became the principal weapon they used to spite their ‘vulgar’ merchant-patrons, whose money bought their art but wounded their pride. But what is *ya*, or elegance? A scholar could rarely bring himself to speak of money matters, since to do so would be vulgar, or inelegant (*buya*). As if to taunt the hypocrisy of conventional society, Zheng Xie – who thirty years earlier had insisted, ‘love not the official’s hat, love not his money’, and whose official career was marred by difficulties in fiscal management – now decided that he would be shockingly plain and business-like about money matters. He posted his famous ‘price list’ (*bibang*) with a trenchant note:

When cash is offered, my heart is joyful and my calligraphy and painting will be excellent. Gifts or presents only cause trouble. Buying on credit is tantamount to defaulting on payment.¹¹

Such candor made Zheng an eccentric in polite company, but it was an eccentricity in resonance with that of Mi Fu and Ni Zan and was therefore instantly recognized, accepted and admired as a form of *ya*, or elegance.

Zheng Xie further declared his intention to create ‘essays that would open the heaven and lift the earth, calligraphies that shake and frighten people like thunderstorms, speeches that rant against gods and devils, and pictures that have never been seen either in ancient or in modern times.’¹² He specialized in bamboos and orchids, both symbols of gentlemanly purity, and rocks, which represented probity in difficult times, and he wrote out his paintings like calligraphy. His idiosyncratic calligraphic style, which he called ‘65 percent script’, mixed an archaic Han dynasty clerical form with running-script elements. He wrote freely on his paintings, and the power of his language is great; words and images, mixing and blending excitedly and passionately, sometimes break out in torrents of ranting eloquence.

Other Yangzhou ‘eccentric’ painters specialized in flowers, vegetables, birds, insects and small animals. Still others turned with new social awareness and interest in realism to painting portraits and genre subjects: Huang Shen portrayed human suffering with grim images of starving peasants and beggars, while Luo Ping satirized cowardice and evil with pictures of ghosts and devils. Only landscape painting, paramount in the preceding century, did not gain a new preeminence in eighteenth-century China.

If we compare the rich diversity of the art of the Yangzhou eccentrics with the austere monumentality of Zhu Da and Daoji, we can easily see the differences between the reigns of Kangxi and Qianlong. Intellectual life in Kangxi’s time bespoke an individual’s subjective response not only to the alien conquest but also to the fractured conditions of the late-Ming institution and culture, which many viewed as the direct cause for that dynasty’s calamitous fall. Kangxi art thus exhibits a corresponding scruple in defense of one’s personal integrity and values. The artist’s true self was lived within, and the inwardness in Zhu Da and Daoji served as a psychic strategy for warding off the blows of an alien world. Yet there was also a feeling of buoyancy and freshness in the country that gave life to art and culture. If the orthodox master Wang Hui openly celebrated a new era in his monumental landscapes, the inwardness of a Zhu Da or Daoji nevertheless transmuted images of nature into private visions equally grand and noble.

By contrast, Zheng Xie’s alienation during Qianlong’s time was directed outward in a protest aloud against the world. There was a new orthodoxy of dissent that, in trumpeting opinions, gloried in the act of dissension. All Yangzhou eccentrics emulated Daoji’s bravura brush technique, each trying to outdo his ‘method of no method’. Regarding the imitation of earlier masters, Zheng Xie advised:

Learn only half of it, and leave half of it, and never learn completely; not that one wishes incompleteness, but in fact, learning can never be complete, nor does it ever need to be complete.¹³

Zheng Xie admired Daoji’s bamboo painting because ‘[it loved to run as if] in a wild skirmish, seemingly without any regularity, yet there is regularity in it.’¹⁴ In his own works, Zheng made his brush run as if in a wild chase, in order to express his ‘stubborn and untamed spirit.’¹⁵

Yet for all their anger and suffering, the works of the Yangzhou eccentrics are stylish rather than lonely and fateful. Unlike the art of Zhu Da and

Daoji who, in their search for a new unification and synthesis of the past and an original relation to the present cultivated a respect for limits, the Yangzhou eccentrics displayed an art of unhappiness without terror, freedom without constraint and conflict without resolution. Rich, diverse, dazzlingly easy and viscerally to the point, it was above all a consumer's art, and a very successful one. Qianlong's Yangzhou was an earthly paradise at a time when traditional China was at its height and all its cultural riches and values – including the scholar-artist's alienation and eccentricity – could still be enjoyed in a thoroughly unselfconscious, traditional way for a last time, before the expanding Western world came knocking on its door.