

The Visual Poetry of Chinese Bamboo: Some Notes on Traditional Chinese Xieyi Painting

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Chinese painting (*Huo Hua*) which dates back to the Han Dynasty (25 A.D.-135 A.D.) has two traditions: the *Xieyi* and the *Gong Pi*. *Xieyi* means “writing the meaning down” and its practitioners are literati artists who execute expressionistic and gestural strokes. *Gong Pi* painting is known for its application of colors and fine strokes. It is a naturalistic rendition of the subject that imitates the superficial likeness of the world. While *Xieyi* painting aims to capture the *Qi* or the vital spirit in the practice of painting and calligraphy,¹ the naturalistic rendition of *Gong Pi* painting exhibits the dexterity of the artist. However, capturing the *Qi* is a more sophisticated preoccupation as far as the Chinese scholars of the classical times are concerned.

Xieyi painting is associated with literati paintings or the *Wen Ren Hua* practiced by scholars. It includes mainly landscapes, flora and fauna, human figures, and the *Si Jun Zi Hua*² or the Four Noblemen Painting. In the *Si Jun Zi Hua* painting of the Bamboo, the different brushstrokes of Chinese calligraphy are applied.³ Unlike *Gong Pi* painting which takes many days or weeks to finish,⁴ the *Xieyi* painting is finished in one sitting. A *Xieyi* painting is composed by the artist on the spot. The blank paper signifies *Yin* and the brush strokes signify *Yang*. To balance a composition is to achieve harmony and wholeness. A good composition is achieved when the spirit or the essence of the subject is captured with the masterful brush strokes and a good sense of balance in the composition.

In this paper, I will examine the history of Chinese literati painting, its materials, its tradition and milieu, the symbolism of its themes, and its practice in post-Cultural Revolution China.

THE TOOLS OF PAINTINGS

The Chinese have a huge variety of objets d'art that includes ceramics, jade carvings, bronze sculpture, lacquers, and other fascinating items. Brushes, ink stone, ink stick, and paper are referred to as “The Four Treasures in the Reading Room” (*Wen Fan Si Bao*).⁵

Brushes with bamboo, bronze, cloisonne or jade handles,⁶ brush washers, brush containers, paperweights, water dropper, ink rest, seal box, etc., are part and parcel of a scholar's belongings and are fascinating objects to collect. Ancient ink stones of precious material with exquisite carvings have been preserved. The old ink sticks of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties have also been preserved in museums today.

Another important item is the name seal or the personal stamp/chop. The seal or the stamp is highly personalized, carved with the owner's name (*Ming, Zi, or Hao*) or one's favorite literary phrase. The painters and calligraphers usually have a huge collection of seals. The position of the seal in a painting or calligraphy is part of the composition of the piece. The collector of a precious painting also places his seal on his favorite painting giving weight to the historical background of an important artwork.

Paperweight is also an important item. The most common paperweight is a pair of bronze rulers—carved, painted with one color and embossed with calligraphy/a couplet. The pair is placed on the two sides of the rice paper.

Chinese brushes are mostly made from the hair of goat, deer, fox, weasel, and pig, held together by a bamboo tube. The brushes come in different lengths and thickness. For bamboo painting, a brush made from hard outer weasel hair and soft inner goat hair is often used. A brush, being an extension of oneself, is to be held firmly and masterfully with full understanding and awareness of subject and composition.

Paper and silk are also used in Chinese painting. Silk painting is mostly for *Gongpi Hua* because silk absorbs paint, hence it is easy to achieve the exquisite end result with silk. There are two kinds of rice paper (*xuan zhe*): “raw paper” (*sheng xuan*) and “baked paper” (*shu xuan*), the

latter seeming thicker than the former. Both silk and baked rice paper are used for *Gong Pi* painting. Most of the literati paintings such as the bamboo paintings and calligraphic works are painted on raw rice paper.

When working on a *Xieyi* painting, the little personal possessions of the artists come into great use. Before painting or writing, it is important to practice hand movement by dissolving a portion of the ink stick on the ink stone. Then a piece of paper is brought out and is put in place by the pair of bronze paperweight rulers on two sides. Sometimes, another paperweight is placed on the upper part of the paper, another bronze ruler with a dragon figurine nestling on the handle.

Other essentials are the brush rest, water dropper, the brush washer, and a piece of paper used to check the thickness of the ink on the brush. The ink hues of black and gray are controlled by the water from the washer and the ink on the ink stone. The painting is executed with the movement of the wrist and the arm, the hand and the brush merge into one through the concentration of the artist. When seated, the elbow supports the weight of the wrist that controls the movement of the small brushstrokes. When standing, the arm controls the movement of the painting, and it is the whole body that supports the activity. The thickness of the brushstrokes depends on the control of the brush. The tip, the side/middle body, and the whole brush have varying brushstroke effects on paper. For instance, *Po Mo*, which means “splashing of ink on the brush onto the paper,” creates a desirable effect in landscapes. After the painting and the calligraphy have been finished, the seals which are dabbed in red ink from a rounded ceramic container will complete the composition.

The subject/graphic image, the writing/calligraphy, and the seal/seals complete the composition of a *Xieyi* painting.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many painting schools were established through the centuries. Artisans, academic and court painters, and literati painters⁷ produced countless paintings and decorative pieces. Art masters and teachers wrote canons and textbooks, art connoisseurs collected and treasured

these artworks, students learned from their art masters and passed on their knowledge and wisdom to their own students. Chinese painting evolved with artistic and philosophical aims different from those of Western art.

According to the *Chinese History of Arts (Zhong Guo Mei Shu Shi)* written by the late art historian Wang Xun,⁸ the early paintings in China were excavated from the Han Tombs of Hebei and Henan provinces. The early paintings were painted with brush to decorate palaces and buildings.

Buddhist art produced many religious paintings and sculptures that were highly influenced by the art of Central Asia. The Buddhist mural paintings of goddesses, dancers/fairies and celebrating musicians, garlands of flowers, landscapes and images of Buddha together with painted clay stucco, covered the walls and ceilings of the caves of Dunhuang, in the heart of the Gobi desert in north-west China. These paintings, done by monks in meditation, date back to the 4th century A.D. up to the decline of the silk trade route in the 12th century and exemplify the most graceful works of Buddhist paintings in China.



The Nymph of the Lou River. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Gu Kaizhi (c.344-c.406).

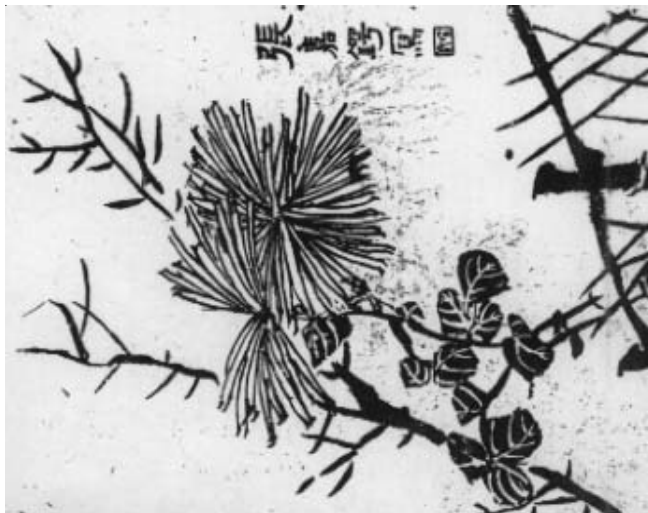
The first master in painting in Chinese art history is Guo Keizhi (c. 346-407), who painted long scrolls depicting a rich range of subjects, from the genre painting of the imperial palace to the narrative paintings based on epic poems, mythical figures and religious (Buddhist and Taoist) works. Little of his personal life is known to us and none of his original paintings survived. However, according to Wang Xun, the Sui dynasty imitation of his palace vignettes is being kept by the British Museum, and his “Luo Shen Fu Tuo” on the goddess of Luo River is being kept by the Beijing Palace Museum.

The six canons of painting were formulated by the artist Hsieh Ho during the Nan Qi era (479-502). These canons became the foundation of Chinese brush works. The English translations of the canons are as follows:

1. *Spirit (Qi) and rhythm (Yun) of vitality*
2. Tracing the contour through the strength of the brush
3. Forms correspond with the likeness of the subjects
4. Render the colors according to the category of the object
5. Managing the space and places (on composition)
6. Copying and imitating the master

A good Chinese painting is often judged by this standard. If we examine the famous scroll painting “The Poet Li Taibo” by the Song literati painter Lian Kai, we will find that the minimalist strokes rendered with strength and vitality succeeded in capturing the very essence of the subject. The literati painters had always aimed at capturing the essence rather than the likeness of the subject. The six canons of art are applied in Chinese literati paintings with the same dynamism as the perspective of Cubism of Georges Braque and Picasso, while the vitality can be compared with the sketches of horses of Charles Le Brun in the Louvre or the brushstrokes in the paintings of Eugene Delacroix. The atmosphere of a Chinese landscape often parallels Turner’s *Landscape with a River and a Bay in the Background*. Although coming from very different traditions of painting, some of the qualities that the literati painters of China achieved are qualities that we have seen in the artworks of Western masters. The evolution of painting continues through the different influences encountered by a culture and the contributions of the artists.

It was the T'ang dynasty (618-907) which saw the prosperous development of art and crafts as well as the consequent high sophistication of arts and culture. Genre paintings depicting life in the palaces and paintings of horses became part of the rich and diverse repertoire of academic and court painting. Flora and fauna painting developed through the participation of the exiled emperor Li Tan and other artists, while landscape painting flourished with Li Sixun, poet Wang Wei, Zhang Sao, and Wang Mou using a new painting technique called "Splashing the Ink" (*Po Mo*).



Chrysanthemum and plum paintings.

During the Song dynasty (960-1279), literati painting was established as a style by the friends of poet Su Shi, Mi Youren, and Mi Shi. They did the Four Gentlemen painting (*Si Jun Zi Hua*), a contemplation on the symbolism of bamboo, chrysanthemum, ground orchids, and plum blossoms. Influenced by the teachings of Taoism, the *Wen Ren* scholars argued that plants should be painted the way they grow, not the way they seem to look. Literati painting technique is derived from the technique of calligraphy writing. The sketchy representation of their subjects became the anti-thesis of the elaborate works of the court artists.

During the early Qing dynasty (1644-1911), a movement of the same caliber in literati painting appeared in Yangzhou. A group of artists who called themselves “Eight Weird Men of Yangzhou” emerged with highly impressionistic brush works and left a profound impact on Chinese painting. Zheng Banqiao specialized in poetry and painting, Jin Nong painted plums, others painted flora and fauna.



Tang Dai's Autumn Mountain. A handscroll painting. A Selection from the Xubaizhi Collection of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy—Handscroll Painting.

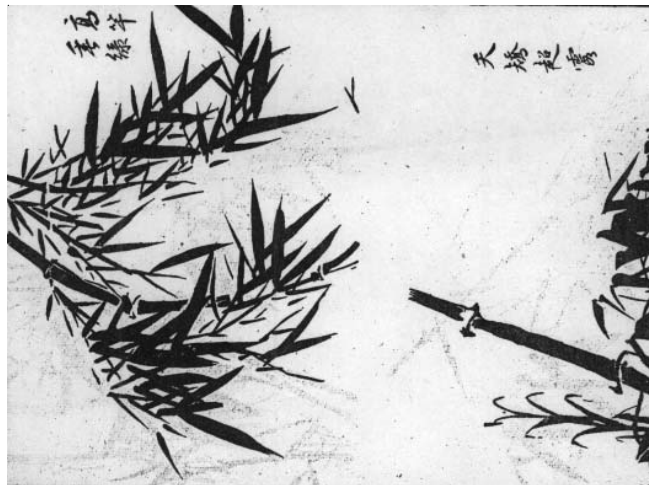
Xieyi painting developed as scholars painted on rice paper and silk scrolls in between reading as a way of meditation and self-expression. While the subjects are taken from nature, the presentation of nature is a product of one's sense of balance and rhythm, artist's mood and the accidental effects of the brushstrokes. Spiritual vitality

is highly valued by the literati artists. During periods when the intellectual vitality is dampened and the masses' sentiments are suppressed, painting acquires a deeper meaning as an expression of the rebellious spirit of the artists articulated through the expressionistic brushstrokes and the symbolism of the subject. Painting as a literati activity is celebrated as a spontaneous, on-the-spot creative occasion. The process of painting as a literati event is created by the literati artist and he/she is sometimes joined by another scholar friend to collaborate on a painting and/or calligraphy.

Literati painting as a significant part of expression in Chinese culture is still practiced today as a traditional art. The Chinese painters take their spiritual refuge in contemplating upon the most ordinary flora and fauna, landscape and genre subject and create pictures that reflect their inner vision of the universal "wholeness."

SYMBOLISM AND MEANINGS

Bamboo has a profound meaning in Chinese iconography. Bamboo for the Chinese is more than a plant. It is a symbol of the character of a sage, pliant yet unbreakable in the wind. It endures in any adversity. The bamboo leaves remain green even in winter.



Bamboo painting.

Song poet Su Shi and his friends painted bamboo as well as plums, orchids, and chrysanthemums in the literati manner of the four gentlemen painting or the *Si Jun Zi Hua*. The bamboo, pine, and plums are called “Three Friends in the Cold Season.” They all represent character and virtue—*Jie*, which is the same as the Chinese character for the bamboo joint.

Bamboo and pine trees are the only trees that have leaves even during the winter season. Plum blossoms even in winter. “Snow plum” remained a favorite subject of the Chinese even during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when the other traditional subjects were branded as “Four Olds” and were denounced and destroyed for political reasons. The red plum meanwhile symbolized the virtue of a true Communist during those ten chaotic years.

The painting of orchids developed in the late Song period (960–1279). The Chinese ground orchids are light green and possess faint fragrance (*Qing Xiang*). This symbolizes purity, elegance, and cleanliness. During the Qing dynasty, the orchid of *Qing Xiang* was a well-loved subject of the Manchurians. The orchids are usually depicted growing in a valley. This image represents serenity and peace. Two separate branches of orchids at each side of an oval stone shaped like a crab signifies literati humor.

Chrysanthemum was popular and was admired by the Chinese scholars of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The color of the chrysanthemum is mainly yellow, the imperial color that signifies royalty and refinement. Green chrysanthemum means rare and unique. Since the chrysanthemum blooms in autumn, it is associated with harvest and wine.

Bamboo painting is the most difficult to master because of the need to control the brush strokes and to balance the composition. The blank of the paper signifies yin while the brush strokes signify yang. To balance the picture is to achieve a balance of the wholeness.

The literati painters are abstract in their representation. Zheng Banqiao, one of “The Eight Weird Men in Yangzhou” (*Yangzhou Baguai*), a poet and a bamboo master in the Qing dynasty, once wrote: “Love to tear the white paper window, with the bamboo shadows entering the meditation (*Chan/Zen*) bed.” (Xu Zuoliang, 1985.

Translation is mine.) The bamboo painters meditate on the poetic idea of painting the bamboo shadows reflected on the rice paper which is also used in the Chinese window. Although celebrated by other landscape painters, the art master Ni Tsan of the fourteenth century did not see why his bamboo should be recognizable. Poet/painter Su Shi painted bamboo in red ink while taking a break from checking the Official Exams, arguing that bamboo is not black so why not paint it in red. Brush painting of bamboo in red ink has since then become a convention of Chinese painting.

The six canons of painting required the artists to trace the contour of a subject through the strength of the brush (painting the branches and stems), to capture the likeness of the subject and to render the right color (painting the bamboo shadows), to manage the composition wisely, and to study and continue the tradition of painting masters. All the six requirements can be fulfilled by bamboo painting. The success of a bamboo painting is when it confirms the spiritual virtue (*Qijie*) that the bamboo represents. The very essence of bamboo painting for this researcher is that bamboo painting is writing poetry in abstraction. In presenting a composition of bamboo painting, the literati artist reaffirms his/her poetry (now abstract as words but visible as bamboo) and by doing so continues the tradition of literati painting.

EPILOGUE

Bamboo as a painting subject represents intellectual virtue. For a culture that evolved in five thousand years, and people whose tradition is highly sophisticated but whose modern history is a record of many injustices and humiliation, rediscovering the bamboo painting in the early 80's in Beijing for the researcher of this paper was very meaningful.

Then at eleven, the writer of this paper felt the complexity of order in learning to paint, the presence of a culture or the lack of it and the desire for poetry. And so this complexity took an abstract form. In another time and another place, it could be skating, dance, violin lesson, but then, at that time it was the Chinese bamboo.

In 1983, when this researcher started to take painting lessons, China was trying to salvage what was left from the ten chaotic years

of the Cultural Revolution. Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Mozart, Sebastian Bach and other Western classics in literature and music, Lu Xun, Tu Fu, and other Chinese literature from the ancient times to the May Fourth Movement became in vogue. While Communism was the official doctrine of the country, the air breathed the aspirations and the reason to live. And yet, people were highly individualistic in a post-Cultural Revolutionary way. People could still remember the spirit of the Red Guards who were responsible for the cultural destruction. The youthful rebellious spirit was deeply feared, painfully understood, and admired.

It was then that the writer of this paper started to learn and started to understand, while accepting the routine of its practice. It was a passion to want to learn a discipline that needed a lot of meditation (Chen/Zen), reflection, and control.

China with her five thousand years of tradition and history is a place that gives an individual sanctuary under a pine tree, in a bamboo garden, or drinking wine with a branch of winter plum. The condition that made appreciation of these signs possible is considered a bliss, and represented quiet elegance (*Ya Qi*).



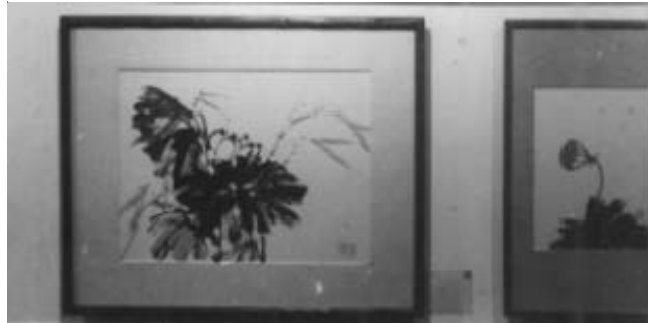
Bamboo, Ink on paper . Silk Scroll.
Maningning C. Miclat, 1987.



Orchid, Ink on paper .Silk Scroll.
Maningning C. Miclat, 1987.



Bamboo on Folding Fan. Ink on paper. Maningning C. Miclat, 1987.



Bamboo painting. Ink on paper. Maningning C. Miclat, 1987.

The bamboo painting is the Chinese classical way of putting up an installation in the art gallery. In the absence of words, Chinese scholars found themselves painting the bamboo with the technique of Chinese calligraphy, thus, recording the unspeakable in the literati painting. With its abstract representation of nature and its poetry, within its tradition, the bamboo painting remains the most profound way of expression.

ENDNOTES

¹Chinese characters are both hieroglyphic and ideographic.

²*Si Jun Zi Hua* includes bamboo, plum, ground orchids, and chrysanthemum.

³In painting the bamboo, the renditions of the four major types of calligraphy are implemented in the brushstrokes for the bamboo trunk (*Da Kai*), branches (*Xiao Qai*), leaves (*Xin Shu*), and joint (*Cao Shu*).

⁴To keep the strokes clean and refined, the *Gong Pi Hua* is rendered by different sections of colors. One section of color sometimes will only be rendered when the first one is dried.

⁵Fu-Tsung, Chiang, "Writing Materials," *Selection of Masterworks in the Collection of the National Palace Museum*, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 1974. p.124.

⁶Most of the Chinese brushes have bamboo holders.

⁷In many English written sources, the literati painters are often referred to as "amateur painters" by Western assessment.

⁸Wang Xun (1916-1963?), Chinese art historian, founded the Art History Department at the Chinese Central Art Academy in 1957 and taught at the Qinghua University in Beijing. *Chinese History of Arts (Zhong Guo Mei Shu Shi)* was published by his students Bo Song- Nian and Chen Shao-feng in 1985 based on the manuscript he left behind.

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