

Picturing Voice in Early Qing: Gong Xian's Art

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1. Voice in the Painting

Can an ink painting capture or convey a voice? If so, how? An album leaf by Gong Xian (1618–1689) provides us with a good test case. At the outset, we are struck by its apparent rhythmic quality. An array of vertical strokes—those marshland grasses—form a cadenced pattern. The lull of the rhythmic thrusts, or beats, of the grasses look to extend horizontally forever. A sudden interruption breaks the spell. Two sets of curvature—the left-inclining tree and the pole hoisting the fishing net submerged in water—overlay the otherwise relentless rhythm of short thrusting strokes. These two curves—heaving notes and tonal inflections—appear much like a soprano's voice bursting out or emerging from a humming chorus (Fig. 1). We only need to compare it with an alternative treatment of a similar scene by Gong's contemporary Liu Yu 柳埏 (fig. 2) to appreciate Gong's vested interest in a tonal painting. Gong's own inscription crystalizes and sharpens our vaguely intuited grasp of this highly musical painting. The painting is indeed about a voice:

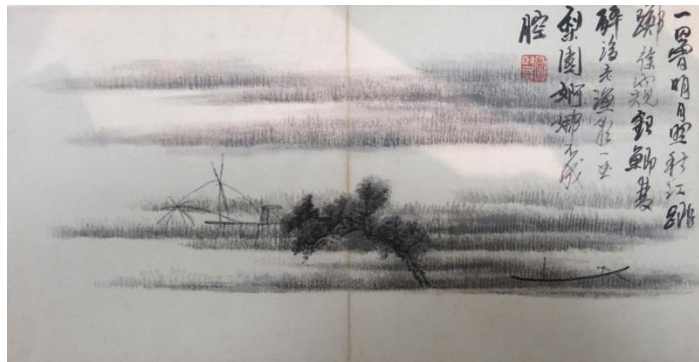


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

A shade of moonlight illuminates the fall riverfront	一叢明月照秋江，
The shimmering waves offer glimpses of twin carps' luster	跳躑徐窺銀鯽雙。
Old and inebriated, the fisherman lets out a tune	醉後老漁歌一曲，
Ever so graceful, the Pearl Garden girl chokes amidst her madrigal.	梨園婀娜不成腔。

The painting prompts two kinds of questions, one historically specific and the other aesthetically general. The specific questions include: what is it that causes the singer to break down while singing the fisherman's song? General questions concern the ontological status and expressive property of the medium of Chinese ink painting. If the inscription is about the emotional act of choked singing, to what extent does a painting of this kind simulate or capture this singing voice? Answers to the first set of questions are to be sought in the historical circumstances: the events and persons the painting allude to, and so on. The second kind of questions concerns the medium property of ink painting: can painting have or depict a voice?

Indeed, to speak of a painting carrying a voice sounds like yet another refrain of the old concept of "voiced painting" 聲畫. In 1178, a scholar named Sun Shaoyuan compiled an anthology of poetic inscriptions on paintings, and titled it *Anthology of Voice Paintings* 聲畫集. The central idea Sun proposed is not to rhetorically short-circuit the distance between poetry and painting by asserting their common ground; rather, acknowledging the respective medium specificity of poetry and painting, Sun suggests each as an analogue in experiencing the other medium. Therefore, poetry is characterized as "voiced painting" 有聲畫 and painting, the "mute poetry" 無聲詩.¹ These tropes gained currency in Song times. Overtime, they gradually lapsed into stale, tiresome, and hollowed notions—ahistorical assertions that treat the matter purely as an aesthetic issue divorced from historical contexts. Things, however, took on a different complexion in the early Qing.

The upheaval of the dynastic changeover in 1644 and its following years no doubt prompted poets and painters to find ways of voicing their strong sentiments.² There was a great deal of wailing and howling at the time. Some notable early Qing paintings make a point of capturing such audible acts. Xiao Yuncong's *Wailing at Xitai* 西臺恸哭 is one striking instance. But Xiao's painting reveals the challenges to the pictorial medium in evoking the effect of wailing. Little in the painting formally simulates the "voice" beyond its iconographic allusion to the Song loyalist Xie Ao's offering to his much-heralded martyred friend Wen Tianxiang in mountains. In any case, much as he is an able painter, Xiao's pictorial rendition of Xie's wailing amounts to a failed attempt to simulate a voice in painting.

A more revealing example is Wu Weiye's 吳偉業 (1609-1671) *Spring Rain at Nanhu* 南湖春雨圖 (1652). The painting was derived from Wu's own writing, a long seven-character ancient-style poem titled "Song of the Mandarin Duck Lake" 鴛湖曲, which Wu had composed in 1647. Taking up nearly half of the scroll, the poem mourns Wu's old friend Wu Changshi 吳昌時, a member of the Restoration Society, who was killed by the Southern Ming regime in 1643. With the overwhelming presence of the inscribed song literally hovering over the painted landscape, it is hard not to sense its melodies permeating the pictorial space (Fig. 3). For a premodern medium, the scroll now acquires a sound track. We feel the presence of the voiceover, that of the poet Wu Weiye, presiding over the painting. The artifact makes us acutely aware of how many similar landscape paintings, with or without such a long inscribed poem, must carry their own voices.

By "voice" I mean the subjectivity effect attending the painting. It is a mechanism in a painting that solicits from its viewer a certain illusion of a voice. The illusion thus created posits a presence as if the painting has a tone or unheard sound track. Chinese scroll painting in particular makes a compelling case for the imagined presence of a "voice." If we allow that a text carries a voice, then the time-honored convention of inscribing poems and notes by the painter and his viewers *on* or *within* the pictorial composition creates the impression that the textual voice is carried over and integrated into the pictorial fabric. The inscription may or may not correlate closely to the pictorial content. However, our conventional presumption of its voice and its intrusion into the pictorial composition fosters a conviction that the painting must likewise have a voice. So acclimated are we to Chinese paintings filled with inscriptions that we can feel their potential presence even in paintings *sans* inscriptions. For viewers long accustomed to seeing paintings with inscriptions, the expectation of inscribed poems on the composition is likely part of the perceptual experience.

My intention here is not to prioritize discursive content. In most cases, there is a gap between what the inscription says and what the painting shows. Their relationship is tenuous at best in most cases. Inscriptions are often the painter's afterthought as they perform a venerable poetic act expected to be part of the making of a painting. Social conventions oblige painter's friends, hosts, patrons, distinguished viewers, etc., to inscribe on paintings. The inscriptions resulting from these occasions are often rhetorical and perfunctory performances. However, the point is that the pictorial space in scroll painting is constructed in such a way that *articulation* of some thoughts is expected therein.

In fact, the voice in the painting is not to be equated with either what the inscription says or what the painting shows. The inscription is a physical and material trace left by its author. It is in and of itself just as mute until someone activates its voice and detects its tonality. Much as one may imagine it as a straightforward stenographic record, it depends on the reader to grasp its tonality and moods. With the inscribed poem, the voice is *not* a textual property, but what the text triggers in the reader's mind. The "voice" is therefore no more than a "voice effect," a tonal quality the reader/viewer deduces from reading—or reading between—the lines. The quality is

not something verifiable; nor is it internal to the property of the artifact. It is instead an analytic construct that posits the reader/viewer's act of experiencing the poetic lines. This is to say that the "voice effect" is extralinguistic in disposition. Just as the voice attending the inscribed poetic lines is itself "in the air," so we may speak of a similar quality—call it voice—presiding over and permeating the pictorial composition.

2. How to both sulk and sing?

The early Qing situation makes an interesting case for the study of the voice in paintings. As the poetry of the time cultivates some strong voices, it is to be expected that comparable impulses and consciousness permeate the contemporary paintings. One strong sentiment at the time is the lament over the vicissitudes of life. The increasing prevalence of this sentiment after the tumultuous dynastic changeover comes as no surprise. Poetic expressions of this sentiment often strive after extralinguistic states and ineffable effects. The reasons are easy to grasp. For many, the discourse of praise and blame was hard to sustain. The situation of the late Ming corruption and factionism, the turmoil of the peasant uprising and Manchu invasion, the southern Ming infighting and self-destructiveness, etc., was too entangled for one to sort out the causes. Many of the Han-Chinese scholar-officials served as the "twice-serving officials" 貳臣 under both the Ming and Qing. Their response to the drastic historical changes was likely to be complicated and ambivalent. Then there was the curious situation of the Manchu regime's repeated harsh measures to bring the Jiangnan gentry to submission in tandem with the relatively lax control over writing in early Qing. All these added up to create a climate of expressive outpouring mixed with diffused polemic focus due to lack of moral clarity. The urge to vent was strong; yet, what was it that was to be vented was not always clear. As such, aesthetical stance tends to be the best solution.

It is against this backdrop that the poetic rhetoric of lamenting 詠嘆 the rise and fall 興亡, the vicissitude of the world 滄桑變遷 gained currency. The rhetorical urgency is palpable; only its discursive energy is unfocused, displaced, and distracted—or driven to distraction. What typically provokes sighs is invariably the speed and scale of the rise and fall that amounts to a cause for grief. The force of the rhetoric often resides in its tonal quality: the ardor, anguish, lament, and resignation, and so on.

Just as the lament of vicissitudes of world and life dominates the early Qing poetry, so it runs through painting of the period as well. There we see the challenges painters face in view of the medium property. Vicissitudes-inspired lament is about *time*, in which poetry excels. A poetic couplet can easily draw contrast between the past and present, thereby inducing a lament about the dramatic gap between the then and now, the before and after. Poetry is after all an art of time. Painting in general does not deal with time well; its forte is in handling space. Since the early Qing painters shared the same climate with poets—most of them were poets themselves—and their circles consisted of poetically sensitive scholar-officials, it is to be expected that they were compelled to perform similar singing and sighing, albeit in *their* medium, painting. This is where

the painter is likely to be out of sorts in trying to put into form the dramatic conceit of past/present contrast.

Early Qing painters found an easy way out. Their solution to the problem is to use the decay-and-bloom 枯榮 motif to articulate their strong sentiment about vicissitude.³ The impossible juxtaposition of desiccated and luxurious trees easily inspire thoughts about the rapid seasonal changes and dynastic successions, the up and down of life swinging between fortune and ill fate, and good and bad times. No wonder Yun Shouping (1633-1690) defines “pictorial overtone” 畫意 as a “howling” 叫 amid “old trees against a bleak sky” 荒天古木. However, paintings derive their effect not just from the iconographic coupling of decay-and-bloom images. Properties of ink painting have the potential to simulate the voice effect in such laments. Two paintings illustrate this point well. One is Hongren, (1610-1663) *Poetic Sentiment Inspired by the Willow Colors* 雨餘柳色圖 (1656) (fig. 4).⁴ The other is Kuncan, (1612-after 1674) *Landscape* (1670) (fig. 5).



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Both paintings foreground a cluster of barren trees next to leafy or blooming ones. However, the contrast between the two painters is just as striking. Hongren's sparse landscape is primarily articulated in contour lines with dry ink brushes. In comparison, Kuncan's lush landscape is

suffused with gushing passages of *contourless* moist ink washes and highlighted with emphatic ink dots. They draw on different models. Ni Zan's (1301–1374) sparse landscape informs Hongren's conception; the Mi tradition, characterized by the contourless ink wash and ink dots, lays behind Kuncan's landscape.

The overtones of both models are suggestive. The sparse landscape delineated by abbreviated dry-brushed contours creates the effect of a “deadening stillness” 死寂 (Fig. 4). This kind of forlorn landscape indeed spoke to the Ming loyalists' eremitic impulse in the face of the bleak and depressing early Qing political landscape. Its downside is just as apparent. It does not lend itself as a cathartic channel for emotional venting and outpouring of pent-up frustration and rankle. This intractable reticence apparently caused some unease. Even Hongren's admirers found the hushed and deliberate inarticulate quality of his austere landscape wanting in some way: “exclusively following [Ni] Yunlin [i.e., Ni Zan], the problem with Master Jian[jiang's landscape] is that it suffers from a bleak forlornness.”⁵

In contrast, Kuncan's effusive ink-washed landscape (Fig. 5) amounts to a full voicing of whatever pent-up emotions one may have. The gushing wet ink washes almost invariably prompt association with “resonances” 韻, tonality, overflow, and fluid singing qualities. The painter's own inscription on his painting says as much about his vested interest in accomplishing in ink painting the way a musical notation transcribes melodies:

I would like to picture, as music notes, autumnal melodies,	欲譜秋聲入畫圖，
I worry, though, its bleak forlornness may cause misery.	恐聞蕭瑟動人愁。
To be envied is the indifference of the solitary rockery,	無情最是孤岩好，
Letting things go and, to the decay and bloom, it remains oblivious.	不解榮枯任去留。

The painting's force of an unchecked release may appeal to the expressive impulse for cathartic release. Hence it may provide a viable corrective to Hongren's austere reticence. However, Kuncan's liberal use of effusive washes poses its own problems. The unrestrained quality inherently exudes a levity quite at odds with the pervasive gravity of the time. This comes to a head in the painter's rendition of the barren decaying trees. They are supposed to provide some counterweight to the blooming trees, so that the “bloom and decay” 榮枯 theme can be fully delivered. The barrenness of these trees is, however, registered here more as a notation rather than a formal quality. The ink-washed lavish blooming tree overwhelm and triumph over the barren trees. The painter's inscription may insist on the note of “forlornness” 蕭瑟. The levity of the unchecked ink washes, in contrast, makes it hard for the desolation to materialize, however fleetingly. Kuncan may hold his ground with this gushing style at the time—he was in any case an eccentric monk-painter whose idiosyncrasies had to be indulged. In this grim time, it comes as no surprise that Kuncan did not command much following.

The contrast between the two approaches respectively epitomized by Hongren and Kuncan encapsulate the dilemma of finding an adequate mode of visual representation in early Qing. Hongren's barrenness spoke to the pervasive spiritual forlornness, but could not fulfill the expressive urges. In contrast, Kuncan's lushness may fulfill the expressive urges, but it risked the danger of whitewashing—or literally black-washing—the gravity and grimness many felt at the time. The challenge then was to find a way of both having the cake and eating it. So the question became: how does one make the ink painting medium both to sulk and sing?

Gong Xian, for one, accomplished this impossible feat. His *Fisherman* painting is ostensibly about singing:

Old and inebriated, the fisherman lets out a tune 醉後老漁歌一曲,
Ever so graceful, the Pear Garden actress chokes amidst her madrigal 梨園婀娜不成腔.

For an artist typically given to painting barren trees, Gong uncharacteristically chooses a fully luxurious tree here as his subject. He does so apparently for a good reason. Its bent posture visually rhymes with the graceful Pearl Garden actress 梨園婀娜 in the act of singing and dancing,⁶ albeit choking amidst it. In other words, the tree embodies the singer's voice. Lament over the vicissitudes of worldly life continues to be the theme, an interest that the artist shared with his time. However, instead of settling for the clichéd visual trope of juxtaposing the decaying and blooming trees, Gong sticks to a solitary blooming tree. The force of painter's lament over the rise-and-fall of life is not diminished any less; only the formal interest is now vested more in making that lamenting voice heard through his ink medium. For the singing quality to come through, ink washes are obligatory gestures. However, conversant with Kuncan's approach, Gong appears to be wary of its limitations and has learned lesson from it. He allows for the contourless "washes" all right—only that his "washes" are not really washes. They are anti-washes, or "washes" only to the extent that they eschew contours and thrive on diffuse ink passages. They have no use for water-saturation, dilution, wetness, and moisture expected of ink washes. In their stead are relatively dry brush strokes laying down the "wash," resulting in quasi-washes, or notational washes. Lest one may still think they are washes, the artist would override that impression by overlaying the initial layers of half-tone dry-brushed strokes with yet another layer of dry ink in full dark tone. The piling continues in some cases, up to a total of a dozen layers. The effect is that of a palimpsest of dry ink layers. What for then? It provides a perfect solution to the dilemma outlined above: namely, to find a way to both sulk and sing. The quasi-wash, or the posturing and *semblance* of wash, *suggests* momentum and carries the force of release, flow, and resonance, thereby feeding the impression of singing qualities. The array of vertical brushstrokes, darker in tones, overlaying the half-tone brushstrokes, adds to the musical effect: their repeated punctuations of the half-tone underlay and the sheer force of repetition simulate the musical effect of rhythm. This is as close as the ink painting can get to create the voicing and singing effect. However, as soon as the "wash" posturing signals singing, the singing impulse is kept in check. The drying-up of the "wash" forestalls any suspicion of overflow,

levity and profligacy and adds considerable gravitas to the picture. So the total effect is one of release and check, singing and its suppression, or, as the inscription shows, a choked singing. This has not escaped Silbergeld's sensitive eye, who long ago noted this effect of Gong's "chaste, dry mode, suppressing the flow of ink and the power of the brush."⁷

The painter hit this perfect pitch after some juggling and balancing of available models. A leaf from his 1671 album reveals that juggling (fig. 6). The album leaf bears considerable structural affinity to the *Fisherman* painting: a solitary tree in the foreground. If the *Fisherman* painting is almost all about singing, the 1671 painting is about what that singing is all about. A massive array of mountains fills up the upper half of the composition; the mountain top is left out of the frame except one section showing the sky with a hilltop gate-tower peeping through an opening. Unlike the painter's inscription on his *Fisherman* painting that states the thematic thrust of the composition, Gong's inscription here leaves the pictorial content aside and unsaid—since enough iconographic cues already give away what it is, as to be discussed later. Instead, the inscription states the painter's stylistic pedigree, and provides an apology for the unusual formal quality.



Fig. 6

Ni Zan really had a painting like this. No one nowadays believes it. I have therefore made a copy of it, waiting for those who knowingly share my conviction. 倪瓚實有此圖.今人不之信.因摹之.以待知音.

The painting decidedly flies in the face of any viewer conversant with the history of Chinese painting, then and now. Leaving aside the truth claim regarding the stylistic profile of a *real* Ni Zan, the fact remains that by the seventeenth century, common perception of Ni's stylistic profile had been firmly ossified: a sparse landscape with little texturing strokes to substantiate forms and practically no use for moist ink washes. Fully aware that this *was* the shared prevalent perception of Ni Zan, Gong here begs to disagree.

3. Hush and Exclamation: Two Competing Models

Gong is not here acting out an art historian. Sabotaging established canonical knowledge was unlikely his real agenda. Instead, invoking the orthodox and *authority* of Ni Zan was a way of legitimizing the painter's going against the grain, masking his anxiety about his perceived waywardness, and defying the pervasive excess of anemic landscape under the name of Ni Zan. Late Ming arbiters of pictorial taste, such as Dong Qichang and others, had exalted and enshrined Ni Zan as the ultimate epitome of the literati aesthetics of the “untrammelled” 逸 spirit. Since style is presumed to be the man in the literati culture, the “untrammelled” profile of both one's style and person earns respect and proclaims status. For anyone to gain respectability, to paint therefore is to execute a la mode of Ni Zan. By the late Ming, painters and gentlemen little-trained in painting all strived to don the stylistic garb of a Ni Zan. Discerning critics like Li Rihua (1565-1635) began to complain in disgust: “The painting practice nowadays is getting out of hand. There is just too much of this bleakness, sparseness, and weirdness. Trees are no longer arrayed in order. The front and back of rocks are no longer differentiated. Painters often make the excuse in the name of Yuan [masters], saying: I harbor an untrammelled spirit in my breast.”⁸ Xiang Shengmo (1597–1658), the painter on whose work Li wrote the above comment, apparently shared the same sentiment. In one album leaf (fig. 7), Xiang inscribes:

The paintings by Ni the Hermit seen nowadays are all rendered in pale ink and dry brush. Little do people know that his true form is grave, deep, heavy, and thick 深沉渾厚. Not that the present-day people fail to fathom the ancients; only that we have not seen enough [of their works].

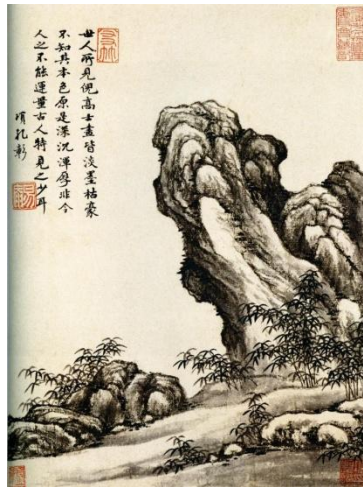


Fig. 7

Rejecting Ni-derived sparse and pale form, Xiang's rockery is a solid mass of piled-up ink brushstrokes and somber-toned layers (fig. 7).⁹ Li and Xiang were not alone in the radical revisionism of the Ni-inspired taste. Wang Duo (1592-1652) sounds decidedly exasperate—almost petulant—in his categorical dismissal of the Ni Zan model: “Though with pale flavor, the

likes of Ni Yunlin suffer from dryness and drabness, much like a frail sick man about to breathe his last. It is said to possess some lithe ease and [adorable] fragility. This is just too excessive.”¹⁰

The revisionism was directed toward what Li Rihua and Xiang Shengmo saw as stylistic malaise in late Ming. By rejecting the stale and sparse Ni-derived model, they wistfully imagined a more invigorating Ni Zan. This urge stems from their aversion to the prevalent conformism, pretension to good taste, and masking of mediocrity in the name of an exalted ancient master. In the late Ming, not much was at stake in this dispute and aesthetic posturing. The assertion was merely a matter of taste and a way of laying claim to individual originality. In the early Qing, however, growing discontent with the placid Ni Zan model registers a strong expressive impulse with grave ramifications. It is not clear whether Wang Duo made the above statement on Ni before or after 1644. But we know for certain that the revisionist urge to downplay the sparse and barren landscape associated with Ni Zan gathered momentum among some early Qing painters. Dai Benxiao (1621-1691), for instance, states clearly that the “The pedant Ni [landscape] is way too sparse and bleak. To change his method, one needs not be confined to one tradition.”¹¹

Like Li Rihua of late Ming, Gong and his early Qing contemporaries did not have an axe to grind with the Yuan landscapist per se. Their concern was more with the set of values and mode of expression for which Ni’s name served as a convenient shorthand or tag. What they needed was a darker landscape model with a more somber mood to convey their vision of the world they lived in and their troubled state of mind. Moreover, they needed a more forthcoming and expressive visual idiom. To some extent, the landscape model associated with the Mi family tradition, as already mentioned above, seems to fit the bill. Its fluid ink washes are melodious and heavier in tonal effects. Elsewhere, Gong recalls how Mi’s landscape made a deep impression on him when he first encountered it in the late 1630s. If he openly acknowledges the impact of the Mi tradition on him elsewhere, why does he conceal this fact in his inscription on the 1671 painting, in which we clearly detect the indelible imprint of the Mi model?

Much as it had been exalted, the Mi-style landscape was fraught with problems for the seventeenth-century painters. The hallmarks of the Mi cloudscape are easily recognizable: the abbreviated contourless forms, the primacy of ink washes, and so on.¹² They are also easily imitable: the casual, facile and quick and effusive application of ink washes instantly create a Mi, or quasi-Mi, cloudscape effect. There is no question that the Mi family, father and son, looms large in Dong Qichang’s pantheon of great masters and his pedigree of literati painting. The aura of Mi derives from the synergy of both the unconventional technique of ink washes, and the “untrammelled” 逸 stance coupled with self-fashioned transcendent 逸 persona associated with the evolving historical memory—and to some extent, construct—of Mi Fu and Mi Youren. For late-comers, it is easy to simulate the Mi effect, but hard to acquire the whole style-and-stance package or baggage. The contingency in loosening the control over the ink wash could easily lead to sloppiness, facileness, and court suspicion of profligacy. Much as Dong exalted the Mi

model and practiced the Mi style, he was himself wary of the potential travesty of the Mi effect for fear of “lapsing into casual frivolity” 流入率易.¹³

Gong Xian’s method provides a solution to Dong’s dilemma. As mentioned earlier, Gong counteracts the conventionally anemic and voiceless Ni landscape model by incorporating the melodic Mi cloud-mountain model. The resulting landscape could thus sing. On the other hand, rather than completely let the Mi-landscape wash over, he replaces the ink washes expected of the Mi landscape with layers of dry-ink brushstrokes so that the tone takes on gravitas.

Still, there is a discernible unease in Gong’s inscription on his 1671 painting. Gong’s silence about his apparent indebtedness to the Mi model is none the less curious, to say the least. Had an open identification with the Mi tradition been as dignifying as the allegiance to the Ni pedigree, Gong would presumably have done so. Beyond that, what is it about the Mi legacy that led to Gong’s reticence? Dong Qichang’s worry that any facile simulation of the Mi effect may lead to “casual frivolity,” as mentioned above, partly explains the matter. Gong’s silence on his indebtedness to the Mi model may have to do with its perceived moral values accrued to stylistic choices and allegiances. In Dong Qichang’s time, such choices, as mentioned before, carried no grave consequences. A painter or poet’s personal temperament may predispose him to seek stylistic self-fashioning by identifying with a certain received model. In early Qing, however, much more is at stake with such choices of stylistic profiles.

Frederic Wakeman, Jr. has succinctly mapped the stylistic typology of early Qing elite regard to their temperaments, life style, literary disposition, and how these affected their post-conquest decisions. For our purpose, his characterization of the “Romantics” and “Stoics” is particularly pertinent. Noted for their “generous, bold, and expressive” temperament (p. 633), his “Romantics” excel in direct personal expressiveness with unfettered ardor. Wakeman’s exemplary “Romantics” include Qian Qianyi (1582-1664) and Wu Weiye (1609–1671). Both were among the most celebrated poets of the time. Both served the Southern Ming regime and went on to become the “twice-serving” government officials under the Qing regime, even though they felt deeply conflicted. By contrast, “intransigent integrity” characterizes Wakeman’s “Stoics.” With a disciplined disposition toward controlling and regulating excessive emotions, the “Stoics” believed in rational order and “assumed an ethic of rational responsibility and judicious ‘solitude’” in their commitment to public duties (p. 640). The exemplary “Stoics” Wakeman singles out include Chen Zilong (1608-1647), Gu Yanwu (1613-1682), and Wan Shouqi (1603-1652)—all unyielding and uncompromising Ming loyalists.

Wakeman’s schema has rich implications for the art of painting of the period. Though his list of exemplary “Romantics” include primarily poets,¹⁴ he does identify Li Liufang (1575-1629), a late-Ming painter and a disciple of Gui Youguang (1506-1571), as a catalytic agent in shaping Qian Qianyi’s intellectual attitude and disposition. Eschewing the early Ming tendency toward “phrase polishing” and favoring the expressiveness of Tang-Song styles, Li Liufang’s freewheeling pictorial style formally registers the values of the “intuitive individualism” in sync

with the iconoclastic Li Zuowu (1527-1602).¹⁵ Li Liufang's surviving paintings add credence to this characterization. Consistent and liberal application of ink washes and near absence of linear execution imbues Li's composition with an air of unfettered and untrammelled quality (fig.). In comparison, paintings by Wan Shouqi, an exemplary "Stoic" artist by Wakeman's reckoning, have no use for washes. Wan's persistent operative mode resides in sparingly dry lines in drawing sparse landscapes. To the list of "Stoics" we may add Fang Yizhi (1611-1671), Hongren (1610-1664), and so on.

Wakeman's scheme effectively redraws our conventional art historical map of the early Qing painting. To some extent, his "Romantics" have spiritual affinity with the wash-centric practitioners of the Mi model; and his "Stoics" roughly correlate to the followers of the sparse Ni model. For sure, some qualification needs to be made for his schema to work for painting. Intuitive and free-wheeling individualists such as Li Liufang—a forerunner of Wakeman's "Romantics"—can scribble a Ni-style landscape just as easily as he can paint a Mi-style cloud mountain. It is, however, the forthcoming Mi-style expressiveness—his aptitude in washes—that largely defines Li's stylistic disposition. Once we see the big picture that way, we are likely to contemplate the startling clarity and unsettling implication of Wakeman's scheme. Stylistic profiles, as Wakeman suggests, correspond, to some degree, personal decisions and choices in the confusing early Qing moral universe. His neat and stark scheme and discovery are startling and illuminating: the "Romantics" were mostly the "twice-serving" subjects; the "Stoics" were uncompromising loyalists. While this stylistic disparity does not necessarily immediately translate into polarized political stances, Wakeman's neat correlation is none the less striking. The correlation at least enables us to sense the guilt and heavy baggage of the "Romantics." They may opt for forthright emotional expression. However, no easy expression can be had; the expression had to be tempered somewhat.

How Gong Xian figures into this map is an open question. His palimpsest method of overlays of dry and heavy ink passages suggests at once his affinity to—and outgrowth of—the "Romantics" and the "Stoics." While Gong's distinct stylistic duality may carry political overtones, we are better off not reducing this method to his political stance. Even if it is politically motivated, it is too opaque and elusive for us to pinpoint. Gong befriended individuals of all ideological stripes and political stances. His friends included those persecuted by the Qing authorities and those who served as eminent Qing government officials. He consorted with members of the late Ming Restoration Society 復社, a clique of ideologically radical scholar-officials opposed to the power-wielding eunuchs and other conservative cliques. Gong's Restoration-Society association did not prevent him from reserving in his heart a soft spot for Ma Shiyong (ca. 1591-1646), the most loathed Grand Secretary and Minister of War of the Southern Ming, who was blamed by many as one of the key culprits responsible for causing the fall of the Nanjing regime. Most likely, Gong had no clear-cut political stance, to say the least; and his stylistic choice is not to be construed as formal correlate to his confused and vague political position. Rather, reconciling ink wash and dry drawing, Gong's method registers an artist's search for a perfect pitch or tonality

that fit the psychological need of the time. The wash was redolent of the late Ming romantic abandon 風流 (*fengliu*) that needs to be chastened in the grim and sobering time early Qing; the dry drawing needs to loosen up to have a new life.

4. Lyrical Voice: The Solitary Willow

The willow is the probably one of the easiest images to elicit romantic or emotional associations. Song lyricists, Liu Yong (984?-1053?) in particular, had made it a common cue for lyrical songs. The willow-derived conventional conceits are familiar. The willow is a signature part of the landscape of the Ba Bridge at the ancient capital Chang'an where ambitious career aspirations are typically pursued and often crushed; the Ba Bridge willow is where farewell takes place—a willow branch is picked as a memento for the departed guest to carry the memory of Chang'an with him on his journey.¹⁶ Willows also evoke lives lost in dissolute life style. The district of brothels in Changan, the notorious Zhang Terrace 章臺, is said to be lined with willow trees. The willow also reminds poets of the slender and lithe feminine waist.¹⁷ In the lyrical world of Liu Yong's *ci*-poems, these associations are often evoked to spell out memories of disenchantment of the earlier years of pursuing official careers in the capital and the indulgence in the dissolute nightlife of excessive drinks and dalliance with courtesans so as to be oblivious to the one's frustrations and disappointments in life.¹⁸

Liu Yong's lyrical voice has a long hold on later generations. It is hard for the literary elite to attend to the poetic or pictorial image of the willow without recalling or mentally playing Liu Yong's melancholy voice. It is a good template with which we can easily make sense of paintings such as Xiang Shengmo's 1628 album leaf (fig. 15). The early Tang couplet, which the painter perfunctorily inscribed on his painting, never mentions the willow tree.¹⁹ Nor does the willow belong in the inscription's poetic context of "gazing at the ocean on a spring day" stated in the original title of the Tang poem from which the inscribed couplet is taken. The painter's *pictorial* conception of the landscape is essentially the creation of a lyrical departure or farewell scene. The left-inclining willow is added to anchor the aroused sentiment of seeing a friend off. The cloud mountain across the water signifies the uncertainty of the future, the homeland, or the land of transcendence. Again, Liu Yong's *ci*-poems provide us with a typical lyrical template:

To the tune "The Lost Soul"

Autumn light waned on the red bridge,

A pale moon shone through the mist.

The cold stream was deep and green

Winding past the *weeping willow* road

Oppressed at parting

I held her slender hand, our tears like rain.

The waves were swift and the Sui dyke soon lay far behind

As the sail was raised.

迷神引

紅板橋頭秋光暮。

淡月映煙方煦。

寒溪蘸碧，

繞垂楊路。

重分飛，

攜纖手、

淚如雨。波急隋堤遠，

片帆舉。

Now time has suddenly passed,
 And I have not been able to keep my promise.
 I am always aware of passing spring
 As flowers and catkins begin to fill the air.
 The good evenings and fine days are all wasted now.
 The bedroom closed,
 No one behind the little screen—no heart to look.
 That *homing cloud* there
 Where is the *fairyland* it is going to
 Through the long night the fragrant quilt is warm—
 Who does she share it with?
 I wonder if she remembers
 The solemn oath she swore?²⁰

倏忽年華改，
 向期阻。
 時覺春殘，
 漸漸飄花絮。
 好夕良天長孤負。
 洞房閒掩，
 小屏空、無心覷。
 指歸雲，
 仙鄉杳，在何處？
 遙夜香衾暖，
 算誰與。
 知他深深約，
 記得否。

If we are still unclear about the overtones of the emphatic posture of that solitary left-inclining tree in the foreground, a similar composition by Wu Li 吳歷 (ca. 1632-1718) makes it explicit for us. The painting shows a left-leaning barren tree—possibly a willow—in the foreground riverbank and a stretch of cloud-veiled hills in the background. A boat in the river reveals the familiar scene from Bo Juyi's (772-846) *Pipa Song*: the singing woman playing her doleful tune on a pipa, holding the demoted scholar-official in rapt attention (fig. 8). Wu's inscription states the theme—an illustration of the *Pipa Song*—and the narrative scenario: “seeing off an exiled scholar-official is already sad enough...” 逐臣送客已多傷. Wu had initially painted the work for unknown occasions some time before 1681. He learned in 1681 that the Qing authority had demoted to Sichuan his close friend and patron Xu Zhijian 許之漸 (1613-1701), a celebrated central government censor. To console his distraught friend, Wu retrieved this painting from his studio stock and repurposed it as a gift to send to his friend in Sichuan.²¹



Fig. 8

The riverfront solitary willow in Gong's 1671 painting (fig. 6) thus cues for a lyrical voice trained on the poetic convention of bidding farewell. But only to a certain extent. The dialogue between the left-inclining willow in the foreground and the generically-suggested "cloud mountain" in the background amounts to a farewell scene, for sure. Only neither the willow is weeping-willow-like nor the "cloud-mountain" is cloudy. The mountains amount to the Mi-style cloudy mountain only to the extent that the heavy-inked "cone-shaped" hills vaguely recall the Mi landscape model. As Xiang's late Ming painting (fig. 15) demonstrates, the willow-cum-cloudy-mountain composition entails a set lyrical script or program. It easily prompts its implied viewer to play back a lyrical "sound track" à la mode of Liu Yong. The weeping willow signals the time to go; the cloudy mountain foreshadows the uncertain future ahead. Or the lyrical script can turn cavalier and dissolute: memories of dissipate nights with wine and a "feminine waist" in the imaginary universe of the willow-lined Zhang Terrace neighborhood; and now, in the morning after, the sobering and chastening awakening sets in, and all that dream has vanished into the thin air. The composition may still solicit these conventionally scripted scenarios from its viewer well-rehearsed in such lyrical set pieces. But the gravitas of Gong's composition also does much to check, if not banish altogether, overtones of this kind.

For reasons unspecified, Gong emphatically shunned the typical weeping willow image. He chose instead to render willows un-willow-like.²² For a sensitive early Qing viewer of Gong willow paintings, Gong's unconventional treatment of the willow may suggest the artist's wariness about the late Ming dissoluteness and libertinism the willow image epitomizes. So, here is the paradox. If Gong was ambivalent about the willow image and tried all he could to shed its ingrained association with late-Ming profligacy, why was he nevertheless obsessed with picturing willows in his works? Despite its un-willow-like appearance, the solitary tree in the 1671 painting is most likely intended as a willow tree. Nearly all Gong Xian paintings of a marshy landscape or riverside scene feature willows.²³ So there is no reason why this is an exception.

Gong's aversion to the conventional way of picturing willows was in sync with the early Qing trend among some elites in repudiating the Ming debonair lyrical style.²⁴ Chief among the revisionists was Qian Qianyi who envisioned a poetic art loaded with historical consciousness. To Qian, poetry should take on the weight and gravitas of the "poetic history/historian" 詩史 by addressing broader and deeper historical concerns. Willows, it turns out, were too much of a freight of historical memory for early Qing artists and poets to outgrow.

There was a collective preoccupation with willows in the 1660s. Gong's 1671 painting is likely to chime in with a massive topical poetry-composing trend that raged throughout China in the 1660s and continued into the 1770s. The cue came from a famous storyteller named Liu Jingting who was to turn 80 in 1671. Throughout 1660s, scholar-officials in both south and north China rushed to compose *ci*-poems for him. Liu excelled in the art of *shuoshu* 說書, a storytelling performance that may include vernacular-prose narration, prosodic recital, and singing. In the

seventeenth century, storytellers of Liu's status were still considered low and humble in social standing. Why would those elitists of the upper echelon of society bother to spend their poetic energy on a lowly storyteller? Liu is now lionized and enshrined in modern textbooks as a distinguished artistic embodiment of people's voice. Truth be told that he started out his career as a ruffian of sorts in Taizhou. His original real name was in fact Cao Fengchun 曹逢春. At the age of fifteen, he was already a rogue and outlaw on the list of the wanted and pursued by the law enforcement. He ran away, bringing with him a vernacular novel (*huaben xiaoshuo*). Now that he had nothing to do, and presumably with plenty of idle time to while away in hiding, he honed his skill on the art of storytelling on the basis of the novel he brought with him. He crossed the Yangzi River to the south-of-river region. To say farewell to his old identity—and with it, his original name—he found himself standing under a willow tree and decided that Liu 柳 (willow) should be his new family name.²⁵ The moment of rechristening marked the beginning of a new lease in his life. He soon made himself a welcoming storytelling performer in aristocrats' homes. By 1634, he had become a favored guest in the residences of Fan Jingwen 范景文 and He Ruchong 何如寵, Ministers of War. Taking advantage of his access to the upper echelon of society, Liu Jingtong found ways of boosting his fame. Soliciting autographs became Liu Jingtong's effective and quick way of self-fashioning. He often carried a fan and, wherever opportunities presented themselves, requested, or rather, pestered, the guests present in his performance to inscribe poems on his fan.

Liu certainly made history in connection with General Zuo Liangyu 左良玉. In 1644, rebels stormed Beijing, and the Chongzhen Emperor committed suicide. In response, Ming ministers in Nanjing installed Prince of Fu on the throne as the Hongguang Emperor. The young emperor was more of a figurehead. Power was wielded by Ma Shiying and a few other ministers. The regime was saddled with problems—an anemic emperor, fierce factionist in-fighting among ministers and generals, incompetent handling of military affairs, etc. The situation caused widespread frustration and grievances.²⁶ The public eagerly yearned for some radical change. General Zuo Liangyu, stationed in Wuchang, became their last hope. Zuo headed his army eastward, down the Yangzi River, toward Nanjing, intending to “cleanse the sides of the throne.” This caused panic in Nanjing. A major force headed by Shi Kefa stationed north of the Yangzi River was intended to defend the capital from the Qing army coming from north China. Ma Shiying moved Shi's force to the west to face Zuo's eastward-driving army. A circumstantial twist changed history forever. Zuo died out of illness after he reached Jiujiang. With Zuo's sudden and unexpected death, any hope of radically changing the depressing situation in Nanjing was crushed. Moreover, the domino effect was soon felt. The removal of Shi Kefa's army from the north-of-river Ming encampment eroded the defense against the Qing army from the north. When Shi Kefa led his force back to Yangzhou, it was too late. The city was laid under siege. The reinforcement Shi requested from the court did not materialize. He was captured and killed. The Qing army committed atrocities at Yangzhou, a tragedy known as the “Massacre of Yangzhou.”

How did Liu Jingting figure in all this? There was evidence that he was with Zuo Liangyu at the time and, with his eloquence and sharp tongue, he played a pivotal role in persuading Zuo to rebel and head eastward to rid the “sides of the throne” of Ma Shiying and other cancerous elements that plagued the Hongguang regime.²⁷ General Zuo’s sudden death changed the face of history forever and fed the perpetual speculation: what if General Zuo hadn’t died and reached Nanjing? Would he succeed in cleaning up the regime, thereby avoiding the fall of the Southern Ming altogether? No one knew for certain, but that was the tantalizing teaser. The Zuo incident became a black hole of un-answered questions and endless speculations. Liu Jingting’s pivotal role in this chain of events thus made him a *figure* of historical memory. The occasion of him turning eighty was not so much about a mere storyteller’s wellbeing, but what Liu stood for—a poignant memory of unfulfilled accomplishment, the reminder of what might have been, the difference he would have made had Zuo not died of illness, the entirely different historical outcome, and so on.

So it was that Liu Jingting became a topos for historical writing. Wu Weiye, Huang Zongxi, and Zhang Dai each wrote a version of his biography and eulogy. Throughout the 1660s, nearly all the prominent scholar-officials felt compelled to compose lyrical songs on the topic of Liu Jingting.²⁸ Chief among them was Qian Qianyi.²⁹ These poems and lyrical songs are invariably meditations on history, recalling—and imagining—the river scenes (i.e., Zuo’s army pushing eastward on the Yangzi River) and ruminating on what it might have been. The *ci* composition reached a height on the cue of Liu Jingting’s approaching eightieth anniversary. Liu Jingting evoked not only his association with a major decisive force (Zuo Liangyu), on which the Southern Ming’s fate hung, he epitomized the pathos and dramatic rise and fall of both the state and an individual life.³⁰

Gong’s 1671 painting coincided with this Liu-inspired vogue in *ci* composition. The convention of the time-honored genre of commemorative painting had made it customary to embed an image in the composition to rhyme with an individual’s name. So the willow 柳 (*liu*) image may in fact stand for Liu. As with other Liu-inspired *ci* poems of the time, the real focus is not Liu the individual per se, but a topos and a topic, a way of launching into poetic rumination about history. So Gong’s willow here serves the same function of cuing for historical meditation. Even if Gong did not intend to collapse Liu Jingting into his willow, the willow as a cue for poetic composition and sentiment had long been established. Other possible references are just as possible. The political landscape in the 1660s was full of rhymes with Liu 柳. Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618-1664), the courtesan whose fate was bound up with Qian Qianyi, was another 柳 “willow” that likewise easily cued for historical composition. Again, the real focus there is not about the courtesan, but the historical memory triggered by her. It is notable that writings on Liu 柳 often speak of her “standing alone” 獨立 (*duli*) as a weeping willow—a pun on her name:

The weeping willow at the ancient waterfront where there is no one:
In all its beauty standing alone on the Hantang Road.³¹

So the stance of “standing alone” 獨立 (*duli*) is the force of the lyrics here. Only that the Liu-inspired historical rumination was a period preoccupation. And the artist may well participate in that trend.

The collective preoccupation with the willow as a cue for history-minded composition indeed explains the currency of willow-dominated landscape in both poetry and painting at the time. However, it does not fully explain *how* and *why* a painting may look the way it does. After all, there are different ways of picturing a willow scene. Fan Qi’s 樊圻 (1616-1694) *Joy of Fishing at the Willow Village* 柳村漁樂圖 (1669) (fig. 9) was painted two years before Gong’s 1971 painting.³² The difference between the two paintings is striking; so are their contrasting overtones. They underscore different visions of history behind distinct pictorial conceptions.



Fig. 9

Fan’s handscroll depicts a spring scene teeming with springtime willows. The levity of the pictorial mood is, however, no basis for presuming the painter’s lack of historical consciousness. Back in 1651, Fan had collaborated with Wu Hong 吳宏 on a “history painting” that portrays Kou Mei 寇湄 (fig. 10), a Nanjing courtesan married to—and subsequently abandoned by—the Southern Ming minister Zhu Guobi 朱國弼. Epitomizing the rise and fall of the Southern Ming, Kou’s poignant life story was the subject for lament by many early Qing writers, including Qian Qianyi and Yu Huai. The sobering and chastened painting of 1651 by Fan Qi and Wu Hong registers the grim ethos in the immediate wake of the 1644 dynastic fall. In contrast, Fan’s 1669 willow painting appears to turn a new page. It decidedly projects a more relaxed, cheerful, and idyllic mood.



Fig. 10

So it seems. There are, in fact, rather suggestive and revealing details that betray some suppressed or muffled undertows. A left-inclining barren and desiccated tree in the foreground is a distinct discordant note that conveys, albeit unobtrusively, some lingering wintry chill. Its left-inclining posture points us to the scene across the span of water. There, toward the end of the scroll, is a stately pavilion amidst a cluster of willows. The ostensible configuration of the willows 柳 plus the pavilion 亭 may allude to some individuals' names, such as Liu Jingting 柳敬亭, or Ruanting 阮亭 [i.e., Wang Shizhen], known for his famous "Autumn Willow" poems 秋柳詩—Wang actually wrote a key colophon on the scroll. In any case, there is no way of knowing it for certain. Other early Qing paintings that make the pavilion an unusually highlighted iconic presence in a composition reinforce our suspicion. Wu Hong's 吳宏 *Village Residence against Mountains* 負廓村居圖 is a good example (fig. 11). A solitary but unusually stout pavilion occupies the unusually cleared middle ground, in between the decay-and-bloom trees in the foreground and monumental mountains in the background (fig. 9).³³ Such possible references are both explicit and veiled, and their certainty not to be taken for granted, especially in the case of Fan's scroll. Just as suggestive is a left-inclining willow in Fan's painting, visually echoing the similarly left-inclining barren tree on the foreground, albeit in full bloom. The decay-and-bloom motif played out across the river, as the scroll moves from left to right, finally takes us to a spatial recession of a hazy horizon, a mode of lyrical closure familiar to early Qing poets.

Fan's 1669 painting keeps the decay-and-bloom motif in a low-key. The overall effect is largely an idyllic spring landscape, with its refreshing, soothing, and vibrant green sweeping through the

entire scroll (fig. 9). The difference between this recuperative work of 1669 and the doleful 1651 painting by the same artist is striking. The painter had apparently moved on from those early traumatic years. The aesthetics in display here rhymes well with the art of the ineffable practiced and promoted by Wang Shizhen 王士禛 (1634-1711), a prominent early Qing scholar-official. Wang actually carefully took care to observe the painter's craft. He was particularly fascinated by the way painters' treat spatial recession: "From afar people have no eyes, from afar water has no waves, and from afar mountains have no textural streaks." He took cue from this pictorial spatial device and used it as a structural device in poetic composition. Mounting tensions could thus be dissolved as the eye moves into the depth of field, erasing all in the distant horizon. This spatial formal device came to stand for a set of aesthetic features, which Wang exalted as "balance, calmness, and distance" 冲和淡遠.³⁴ It comes as no surprise that Wang recognized in Fan's 1669 painting a pictorial correlative to his aesthetics. He wrote, as a colophon, a seven-character quadrant on Fan's scroll.

Crows croak at the residences' corners amid haze-shrouded willows,	鴉啼屋角柳藏煙
An array of families resides by the riverside.	一帶人家住水邊
Most delectable is the March dawn in spring afterglow,	最愛春暉三月暮
The fishing boats tethered to the slanting rays of the setting sun.	夕陽斜繫釣魚船

In the height of the Liu-inspired and history-minded poetry composition around 1669, Wang Shizhen must have been aware of willows' pointed and edgy overtones, which would have prompted his contemporaries' to conjure up the Liu-derived topos (Liu Rushi, Liu Jingtong, etc.). Yet, he chose to leave his visually efficacious images hang by themselves, loaded with no symbolic freight, with no strings attached, so to speak. The crows croaking 鴉啼 may still give a bit of chill.³⁵ The overall peace and warm glow of the dawn suffuse and erase everything.

In fact, even with Wang Shizhen, the willows are not as innocuous as they may appear here. Early Qing viewers would recall that, in 1657, Wang Shizhen had gathered a group of celebrities and formed a Society of Autumn Willows at the Daming Lake during his sojourn in Jinan. After rounds of drinks, Wang was struck by "ten or so willow trees whose sinuous branches touched the water surface. The slender shapes had the appearance of human forms. The leaves were beginning to turn somewhat yellow, bearing the new imprint of the autumn hues. They appear to have a manner of swinging and falling."³⁶ Deeply touched by the sight, Wang became melancholy 悵然.³⁷ The result was a set of four poems on autumn willows. The first one goes:

秋來何處最銷魂，殘照西風白下門。他日差池春燕影，祇今憔悴晚煙痕。
愁生陌上黃驄曲，夢遠江南烏夜村。莫聽臨風三弄笛，玉關哀怨總難論。³⁸

As soon as Wang composed the willow poems, ten or so gentlemen on the spot tried their hands in compositions on the same theme. Three years later, Wang's "Autumn Willow" poems commanded "an increasingly massive following on the left and right side of the Great [Yangzi]

River.”³⁹ It attracted hundreds of poetic responses.⁴⁰ In many ways, Fan Qi’s 1669 painting continues to provide a physical medium for the assemblage of genteel scholar-officials to vibrate toward Wang’s art of the ineffable by composing and inscribing on it their willow-themed poems over time.⁴¹

Wang’s willow poems (1657) launched the new poetic style of “spiritual resonances” or the art of the ineffable. The precise meaning of these willow poems is hard to pinpoint. Veiled allusions to willows pile up in the poems, conjuring up a series of referential topographies—the place where a Tang emperor’s battlefield-hardened horse died and the birthplace of a Jin empress, for instance.⁴² The equivocation between these references creates an effect of effete nostalgia and private solipsism, one that is further reinforced by the author’s refusal to “descant” 論. Much of the expected grandeur of the historical remembrance is thus dissolved into a private genteel self-absorption. In fact, the poem leaves the reader in a quandary, uncertain as to whether the speaker frames the boudoir sentiment in a grand historical framework, or in fact indulges his historical nostalgia by co-opting the feminine discourse. In any case, the speaker’s posture suggests that he has a lot to say; he also signals that much is better left unsaid, with the evocation of suggestive images as what T.S. Eliot calls the “objective correlative,” i.e., external scenery as projection of inner states. Everything hinges on the central trope of the willow, which at once says everything and nothing. The resulting ethereality is therefore a loaded one. The historical weight is there, but left largely to hang on the lightness of being: the weeping willow.

Ultimately, these poems were not meant to be taken as veiled judgmental descant on the morals of history. They are meant to be experienced as a musical piece, with varying tonality and heaving and lilting voices. Just as images of death and birth, spring and autumn are juxtaposed and symmetrically balanced, so is the duet of two voices play out in Wang’s willow poem. Questions are posed and answered; inquisitive impulses are nursed and then dismissed. Emphatic notes of inquisition dissolves into resigned sighs, much like the closure of Fan Qi’s scroll.⁴³

The hold of Wang Shizhen’s poetic model on the public imagination was huge in the 1660s and increasingly so after. Gong Xian, himself an aspiring and reputable poet, was among Wang’s circle of forty-six friends in the early 1660s when Wang served as the police magistrate in Yangzhou.⁴⁴ He is known to have consorted with Wang and his community in 1661.⁴⁵ He may have participated in the frequent poetry-society gatherings hosted by Wang Shizhen. It is hard for someone like Gong Xian, himself full of historical remembrance, not to be aware of this elusive historicizing mode. As he had moved back to Nanjing in 1665, he must have also been cognizant of Fan Qi’s way of painting willow-filled pastoral scenes, which was fast becoming more of a norm at the time.

Gong, however, forcefully resisted this genteel tonality and idyllic willow-themed landscape exemplified by Fan’s 1669 painting. In his instruction to students, Gong insists that “In painting willows, the last thing to do is to go for the tenderness” 柳忌嫩. On painting willows, he has a lot to say:

Of all trees, the willow is the most difficult to paint. Of the willows, only the desolate and decaying willows are worth painting. The least one wants to paint is the slender and sinuous 婀娜婷婷 [willows] like those standing beside the Taihu rocks. Nowadays, people no longer know how to paint willows. I once visited and stayed with a distinguished friend. I rose in the morning and entered his lounge. The host had not got up yet. I therefore took time to scrutinize the painting of desolate willows in his hall. I did not know where to start [if I were to paint a picture like this] and felt frustrated for a long time. One day, in painting a gigantic tree, I had this idea of changing the tree into an old willow. Sketching a few vertical strokes downward, [I produced a picture] that looked exactly like what I saw in my friend's lounge. It then occurred to me that, in painting a willow, one ought not to conceive it as a willow 勿作畫柳想 at the outset. One should just set out to paint a tree. Once the trunk is in place, one can sketch a few strokes offhand. The result is a willow hoary and old, but elegant 蒼老有致, not the cosmetic kind of the female beauty. Its body is better rendered broad, its branches long, its hanging branches vertically straight, and the turnings forceful. It is better presented as *reclining* instead of upright 宜欹斜不宜特立.⁴⁶

He also puts into practice his instruction to his student: “willows ought to be close to water. Random growth out of desolate fields and less-trodden trails is the most exquisite.” “Underneath willows, it is fitting to put reeds.”⁴⁷ In painting the album leaf of 1671, Gong apparently followed his own advice.

Gong Xian's stance to go against the grain of picturing sinuous willows is uncompromising. Even if that means renouncing his own cherished memory of erstwhile painterly bondage and indebtedness to his friend Yang Wencong 楊文驄 (1597-1645) who typically painted lithe willows. This recant is evidenced in his alleged copy of a painting by Yang (fig. 11).⁴⁸ Gong's own inscription praises Yang's work for its “delicate manner which is touching” 文弱之態動人.⁴⁹ While Yang's original painting no longer exists, his album leaves in *Eight View of Yandang* give us a sense of the “delicate manner” that Gong saw in Yang's willows (fig. 12). Ironically, Gong's muscular and angular rendition of his own willows does much to abandon that “delicate manner.” Or, perhaps, it is the *forlornness* of Yang's barren willows in wilderness 荒柳 that moved Gong. If Gong had seen Yang's album leaf, he may also have been touched by the visual drama of these delicate barren willow standing up against the hefty weight of the collapsing mountain. In any case, it is the sort of tension that he recapitulates in his 1671 painting. Only Gong places a *solitary* willow right in the middle of the composition and clears the stage to leave the lone willow to have its distinct posture vis-à-vis the background mountains. That intense focus on a lonely willow tree cueing for poetic thought certainly amounts to a visual notation of a voice—alternatively, Silbergeld chooses to call it Gong's “self-portrait.” With slightly different emphasis, we probably mean more or less the same thing. Its barren forlornness preconditions the kind of poetic voice *not* to careen into the late-Ming indulgence in delicate effeminate self-

absorption. Instead, the cue is for a deeper and sonorous voice, a grave historical consciousness to fill up and overwhelm the horizon.



Fig. 11

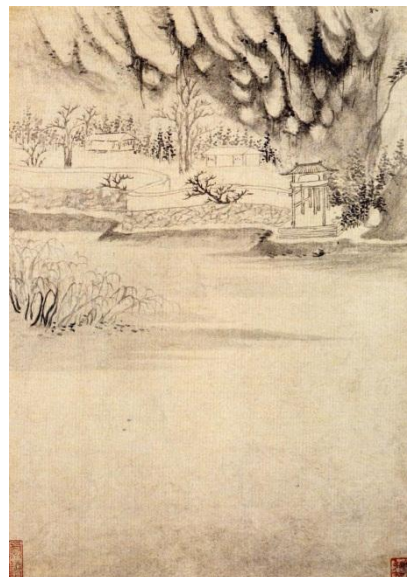


Fig. 12

The voice in question is that of lamenting the rise and fall of historical enterprises and human affairs. The solitary willow is orchestrated with other cues in the painting to create a voice effect. Other cues include the colored gate-tower and the “half-length river-mountain” 半壁江山. The gate-tower rendered in red and blue atop the mountain is most striking in view of the painter’s habitual rare use of color in his consistent monochrome painting. The contrast is the artist’s way of materializing the temporality frequently governing the *ci*-poem: *yesterday* it was the dream-like colorful banqueting; *now*, all that has vanished, we are left with this somber and chastened real world. Gong’s residence in Nanjing, where he had settled sometime between 1666 and 1668 following years of residence in Yangzhou,⁵⁰ may have further made him aware of the burden of poetic tradition associated with this ancient capital of Six Dynasties, a familiar and conventional remembrance-of-past 懷古 topos in the middle and late Tang poetry. Gong is known to have been obsessed with the mid- and late Tang poetry. He even took care to collect an anthology on the subject.

5. The Darkened Tone and “History Painting.”

Sometime around 1660, scholars began to advocate and exalt the notion of the “poetic history/historian” 詩史 (*shishi*) and “lyrical history/historian” 詞史 (*cishi*).⁵¹ The idea is that poetry and lyrical songs 詞 (*ci*), which had long been generically distinguished from history writing, has its own way of preserving and embodying history. A perceptible sudden change in poetic style of the period substantiates and validates the novelty and credibility of the claim, making it a serious and weighty matter to reckon with. Given the long-perceived

interrelationship between poetry and painting, it is curious that painters seem to have made no similarly explicit claims about the art of painting and were relatively quiet on this front. There was indeed the notion of a “Landscape Historian” 山史,⁵² but it remained no more than an isolated self-styled appellation that neither gained currency nor theorized in the way “poetic history/historian” dominated the discourse. The relative reticence regarding the “pictorial history” should not, however, be taken as a resolute disclaimer. Once we parse our sources carefully, we find that in fact the accolade of “poetic historian” extended to painters as well.

In 1662, Wang Shichen 王士禛, then the police magistrate in Yangzhou, had the occasion to view a set of four album leaves painted by Xiao Yuncong 蕭雲從 (1596-1673).⁵³ The leaf that depicts a landscape of a haze-enveloped “walled city over hills surrounded by waters” rendered in “vigorous brushes” led Wang to praise Xiao as a “poetic historian” 詩史 (*shishi*).⁵⁴

The notion of the “poetic history/historian” is a time-honored concept. The Tang poet Du Fu was considered its exemplary practitioner. While critics of different times do not always agree on what precisely amounts to a “poetic history,” there is a shared sense that it pertains to some kind of poetic vision of historical reality. In the early Qing, Qian Qianyi was the first to resurrect the notion and give it special force and complexion. Qian canonizes a succession of poets, typically those experiencing tumultuous times or dynastic changeovers. That poetry could claim the exalted status of history stems from its capacity for capturing historical experience, particularly its emotional and psychological dimensions—such as the history of mind—that elude the normative history. That Qian Qianyi was among its earliest advocates speaks to the heart of the matter. Qian was one of the so-called “twice-serving” scholar-officials, i.e., he served both the Ming and Qing dynasties. The range of emotions and complex feelings were hard to sort out. It is notable therefore that even though poetry was the medium to embody the “poetic history,” its affect is largely extra-linguistic, at once highly visual and audible. A celebrated couplet by a thirteenth century poet speaks to the point:

Hordes of horses descend from the north, dust veils the heavens—
I see Shaoling’s *shishi* as it naturally happens.⁵⁵

Foremost among what Qian Qianyi regards as the quintessential instances of “poetic history” is Xie Ao 謝翱 (1249-1295) wailing at Xitai. Xie joined Wen Tianxiang in 1276 in fighting against the Mongols’ southern-ward push. After Wen’s defeat, Xie went into hiding and secluded living. Sights of landscape reminiscent of his parting with Wen Tianxiang would bring him to tears. He is said to make offering to Wen Tianxiang’s spirit at Xitai, west of the Fisherman’s Terrace associated with Yan Ziling 嚴子陵.⁵⁶ Qian’s “poetic history” therefore essentially comes down to an art of voice, or the “way of the voice” 聲音之道:⁵⁷

[Xie] Gaoyu’s [Ao] “weeping at Xitai,” [Lin?] Yuquan’s lament for “Zhuguo,” [Wang] Shuiyun’s “drunken song,” and those chants of Yue” in [the anthology of] *Guyin* are like

severe winter and freezing cold, swift wind, austere air, sorrowful laments, angry howling; all kinds of sounds, hustle and bustle.⁵⁸

Xiao Yuncong's (1596-1673) painting of Xie's howling at Xitai would then qualify as the pictorial equivalent of Qian's "poetic history."⁵⁹ So is Wu Weiye's 吳偉業 *Spring Rain at Nanhu* 南湖春雨圖 (1652). However, as mentioned at the outset, for the art of painting to truly lay claim to being a "poetic" or "pictorial" history, it needs to have its own formal property to produce the voice effect. In the early Qing, no one succeeds more spectacularly in this regard than Gong Xian.

Gong engaged history not just because he shared with his contemporary painters a set repertoire of historically suggestive iconographic motifs—willows, for instance. He never painted a howling figure. In fact, he rarely painted figures at all. Rather, his art resides primarily in his fine-tuning of ink tonality. If, following Qian Qianyi and others, Du Fu exemplifies the "poetic history," the accolade rests largely on the somber tonal quality of some brooding pathos 沉鬱 in Du's poetry. It is this quality that characterizes Gong Xian's mature paintings.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Gong Xian's 1671 painting epitomizes this quality. As such, it is part of the storyline of the painter's transition from the "White Gong" to "Dark Gong." The transition is indeed striking. His landscape of 1657 exemplifies the "white Gong" phase (fig. 13).⁶⁰ The album leaves produced in the same year already show Gong's gravitation toward a darkened landscapes. By 1668, his landscapes had taken on a strikingly brooding somber tone (fig. 14).⁶¹ The shift was swift and dramatic. Once the transition was made, the painter never looked back. While modern scholars all agree about this dramatic and abrupt makeover in Gong's ink tonality, they are divided in attributing the cause. Cahill famously identifies the European prints as the primary source of influence that caused Gong's sudden change of style.⁶² His theory has been faulted for vague generality and lack of evidence.⁶³ For both Cahill and his detractors, identifying the sources of influence remains their shared way of explaining this shift away. In his early career, Gong apparently accepted the pale and pallid Ni Zan-style landscape model, one that had been codified and standardized by Dong Qichang, the late Ming arbiter of taste in whose shadow Gong

acquired his pictorial taste and skill.⁶⁴ Sometime in the 1660s, however, Gong's ink-painted landscapes show signs of drastically re-modulated tonality. They become substantially heavier and darker in tone. For those not subscribing to Cahill's theory, the change in Gong's style is now commonly attributed to Gong submitting to the influence of the Mi model with its liberal use of ink washes that produce a dark tone. While the Mi-model may have certainly served as a trigger or catalytic agent in the drastic change, the influence theory hardly explains the sudden shift. After all, the Mi landscape model had always been around and available. Gong's first encounter with it dates back to the late 1630s when Mi's *Cloudy Mountains* allegedly left a deep impression on the then impressionable twenty-year-old.⁶⁵ Why is it, then, one may ask, that it took so long—no less than three decades or so—for Gong to succumb to the Mi model?

A succession of momentous events in the 1660s left deep scar on the Jiangnan gentry. To consolidate power in the South, the Qing authorities found occasions to bring the Jiangnan gentry to their knees. It was perhaps no coincidence that the establishment of regency in 1661 coincided with the Three Major Cases of Jiangnan: the "tax-clearance," the "temple-lamentation," and the "coastal treason." As a result, more than ten thousand scholar-officials and gentlemen were persecuted, and many more were fired and flogged, including quite some eminent scholar-officials.⁶⁶

The traumatic impact of these tragic events was deeply felt. The style of *ci*-poems—many of their authors were implicated in the persecutions—registers the change. The anemic feminine intimacy and delicacy that characterizes the *ci*-poems of the early decades of the Qing gave way to a grim, gritty, and spirited style with darkened mood and deepened pathos. Roughly in the period spanning 1660s through 1670s,⁶⁷ there was a revived interest in the Jiaxiang style, i.e., that of Xin Qiji's (1140-1207) *ci*-poetry, presumably because Xin's spirited mode of expression of pathos resonated well with the early Qing scholars. The tonal color of *ci*-poems appreciably darkened. It is striking that Gong Xian's landscape painting during exactly the same period displays a similar change of tonality and mood. True, the darkening of the tone in Gong's painting did not overwhelm most other painters' style comparable to what happened in *ci*-poetry. The reasons are complex. Suffice to say that the staple of cultural elegance attached to the Ni model still dominated the period pictorial taste. In contrast, the interactive convention of poetry compositions and exchanges on occasions of poetry clubs and "elegant gatherings" is more inducing to changes in poetic styles. As a committed member of the poetry community, Gong was more sensitive to the shifting trend and more willing to embrace the changing taste in the poets' circle.

He was certainly not alone in re-modulating the tonality of ink painting in the early Qing. The changes in Xiang Shengmo's (1597–1658) landscape style shows a similar re-modulation of mood and tonality. Xiang's 1628 painting (fig. 15) and his 1647 work (fig. 16) show a dramatic change in tonality. The momentous dynastic changeover of 1644 decidedly sets apart Xiang's two works, respectively of 1628 and 1647. The contrast is one of the before and after: before, it was the late-Ming ease and enjoyment of eremitic landscape, a debonair experimentation with

stylistic models and so on; after, grave concern with a grimmer landscape. Xiang's *Just Listen to the Cold Sound* 且聽寒響圖 (1647) (fig. 16) apparently reworks his 1623 composition (fig. 15). A solid massif of overlaying rock formations, textured and substantiated with dry brushstrokes now replaces the ink-washed Mi-style hill. Note the juxtaposition between the decaying and blooming tree in the foreground in the 1647 scroll (fig. 16).

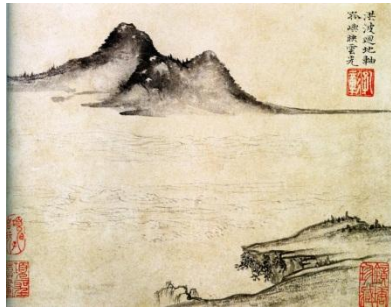


Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Most notable is the change in the background. Gone is the levity of ink wash; in comes the gravitas of massive rockery rendered in drier, darkened and chastened ink. Therein lies the story of the early Qing rejection of the late-Ming ink washes with their overtones of levity and frivolity in favor of the sobering and gloomy tonality of dark ink. Moreover, the composition ruthlessly crops out the main body of the mountain so that what is left hangs perilously and precariously at the top (fig. 16). What the mutilated form signifies is probably either the “remaining half-length precipice” 半壁江山 or “fragmented mountains” 殘山.⁶⁸ Both terms denote a mutilated surviving state.

Though the immediate circumstantial contexts behind the darkening of tonality in the works of Xiang and Gong are different, it is instructive to observe how Gong worked out his problem. Xiang's 1623 painting (fig. 15) clearly anticipates Gong's 1671 work (fig. 6) in composition.⁶⁹ The solitary left-inclining willow in the foreground vis-à-vis the contourless ink-washed Mi-style cone-shaped hills in the background evidently heralds Gong's conception.

Gong's reworking of Xiang's models is notable. His composition (fig. 6) apparently internalizes both landscape models exemplified respectively by Xiang's works of 1628 (fig. 15) and 1647 (fig. 16). Gong inherits Xiang's visual conceit of the “fragmented mountain” to recapitulate the pictorial rhetoric of lamenting the changed political landscape. In contrast to Xiang's stark and austere vision of 1647, however, Gong's design revives the cone-shaped Mi-style landscape to allow a certain degree of resonance. The result is a double-indebtedness to Xiang: a mix of his 1628 composition (with mountain top cropped out) and his 1647 somber texturing.

Gong is not alone. A painting by Lü Qian (1621-1706) (fig. 17) shows a remarkable affinity to Gong Xian's 1671 work.⁷⁰ The two were acquainted with each other, and their paths crossed a number of times. The affinity of the two compositions would naturally feed speculation about the

question of who influenced whom. There is nothing surprising about painters drawing on each other. A better way of accounting for the close affinity between Gong's and Lü's compositions is to regard their shared compositional scheme as evidence of the kind of association and interaction among poets of the time: they used a common pool of figures and conceits to provide different variations of the same theme of lamenting the vicissitude of life. The voice is a communal construct. It is a voice only because different members of the community could speak in this vein or tone.

It is revealing to note the descriptive language used to characterize the darkened tone discernible in both the poetic style of the 1660s and 1670s and the "Dark Gong" paintings. Dai Benxiao (1621-1693) phrases Gong's style as "deeply melancholy and majestic, suffused with primordial energy" 沉鬱渾莽, 元氣淋漓.⁷¹ Terms such as "deep and staccato" 沉鬱頓挫 or "self-possessed and fully articulate" 沉著痛快, etc., are often deployed to frame this ineffable effect.

The phrase "self-possession and full articulation" 沉著痛快 describes Gong Xian's ink-painting particularly well.⁷² Initially derived from early accounts of calligraphic execution,⁷³ it acknowledges the tension between the check and flow: the force of the "hidden brush-tip resides in the way of holding the brush so as to allow for self-possession and articulation" 書之藏鋒在乎執筆沉著痛快.⁷⁴ The term gained currency in the Song critics' discussion of qualities and dispositions in calligraphy, poetry, and personal traits. Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), for instance, characterizes Su Shi's calligraphy as displaying the traits of the "unfazed self-possession and full articulation" 沉著痛快.⁷⁵ Song Gaozong characterizes Mi Fu's calligraphy—most likely with regard to his semi-cursive and cursive script writing—as having this quality.⁷⁶ The way the phrase is used in the Song discourse suggests that its meaning resides in its opposition to a set of alternative traits. Yan Yu 嚴羽 (12th c.) sees this notion as the antithesis of the traits of "unhurried leisure and ease" or "taking things in good stride" 優游不迫.⁷⁷ If this strikes us as vague, Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) formulation clarifies the trait: the quality of "unfazed self-possession and full articulation" 沉著痛快 is the opposite of "flippancy" 輕浮.⁷⁸

Granted, the phrase "unfazed self-possession and full articulation" 沉著痛快 itself contains two contrary impulses: *restraint* on the one hand, and *release* on the other. This ambiguity—i.e., that it cuts both ways—can lead to a critical preference for one side of the coin. When Kuncan's 髡殘 landscape is said to possess the quality of an "unfazed self-possession and full articulation" 沉著痛快, the emphasis therein is more accented on the articulation 痛快 aspect.⁷⁹ Overall, if we track the way the term is used over the centuries, we see that the stress is increasingly on the "unfazed self-possession" 沉著. Chen Tingzhuo's 陳廷焯 (1853-1894) glossing of the term reinforces this point: "What is called the 'unfazed self-possession' is premised upon a subdued melancholy and repeated presses and turns 沉鬱頓挫.

Both Gong himself and a few of his admirers have found fitting words to verbalize this effect. Gong acknowledges that he was looking for qualities of “supple brushes with an air of substantiality” 筆圓氣厚 and “profound gravity” 深渾. Zha Shibiao 查士標 (1615-1698) hails Gong’s painting as imparting an “air of somber substantiality” 蒼厚之氣. Both identify the “substantiality” or “thickness” 厚 as a key quality which apparently works against the overflow quality associated with the Mi cloudy landscape. It is probably for this reason that Gong withholds his acknowledgement of the Mi model that informs his 1671 painting. He did not want to invite association with “wash” and overflow and whatever overtone these evoke. He wanted to have a quality of voice that is deep-seated, self-possessed, reserved, and in control. It took the late Qing critics, who were saddled with acute problems of their own times, to fully theorize the aesthetics of “melancholy and repeated presses and turns” 沉鬱頓挫.⁸⁰ Likewise, it was not until Wu Changshuo’s 吳昌碩 (1844-1927) time that Gong’s quality was fully recognized and verbalized: “[Gong’s] use of brush is somber, saturated, grave, and solemn. It is as if he had suppressed melancholy feeling inside that had built up but had not found its release” 用筆蒼潤渾穆, 似有抑鬱之氣蘊蓄而未能渲泄者.⁸¹

If we try to sort out the genealogy of Gong’s tonal quality, we see how it partially vibrated toward the early Qing Romantics’ stirring call in the 1660s—Qian Qianyi and Wu Weiye being the two most vocal—for “poetic history” 詩史. That, however, only partially explains the darkening of Gong’s ink tone. His embrace of the aesthetics of brooding pathos 沉鬱 is in fact qualified and reserved. In Gong’s own terms, he was looking for ways of finding tranquility and stillness 靜 after all that agitated and vociferous articulation. Gong sought “stillness,” as he himself allows, in the bells and chimes of old monasteries,⁸² and “[one can sustain] the cool even in the presence of myriad mountains and valleys—all because of stillness” 有千山萬壑而仍冷者, 靜故也.⁸³ The state is akin to Wordsworth’s formulation of poetry: “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.”

The intellectual source of this aesthetical conviction stems from, ironically, the late-Ming Jingling 竟陵 school’s poetics of “voiced melodies” 聲樂 and “pure sound” 清音 suffused with a “solitary feeling” 幽感. Gong is known for his passion for mid- and late Tang poetry. It has not been made clear what that means. Once we put the matter in historical perspective, we see that Gong’s taste for mid- and late-Tang poetry is mediated by the aesthetics of late Ming Jingling school.

The quality of the late Ming “voiced melody,” as advocated by the Jingling school poets and theorists, is deep and substantial 厚, as it derives from one’s inner resources, or “breath” 氣, cultivated over years of reading.⁸⁴ For Cai Fuyi 蔡復一 (1577-1625), for example, such voiced melody residing in poetry is a far better vehicle for “harbored aspirations” 心志 better than any discursive forms.⁸⁵ Early Qing scholars such as Qian Qianyi regard this preoccupation with the

inner voice, epitomized by the Jingling 竟陵 school of poetry, as excessive self-absorption at the expense of larger social concerns. Blaming the late-Ming self-indulgence as partly responsible for the fall of Ming, Qian and his like-minded early Qing critics decried the voice of this kind as “the music of a fallen state” 亡國之音.⁸⁶ They argued for a voice less distanced between individual and society and more engaged with fate of the historical rise and fall.

The voice in Gong’s painting registers both aesthetic positions. There we ascertain both the late-Ming aesthetics of “solitary feeling” 幽感 attached to the “pure sound” 清音 of bells and chimes in remote old Buddhist monasteries and the early Qing taste for grave concern with historicizing grandeur rehearsed on the dynastic rise and fall, an aesthetic stance that Qian Qianyi describes as “poetic history.” This is where the rationale for the elusive category of “voice” is made plain for us. The aesthetic quality of Gong Xian’s “voice” is to be assessed by way of extralinguistic approximation. It has the capacity of reconciling what would be presented, in analytic and conceptual terms, as two irreconcilable stances: the late-Ming self-absorbed and self-expressive temperament and the early-Qing trans-personal and socially engaged aspiration. The very extralinguistic quality—the grain of a voice inherent in the gradations of ink tonality—makes such reconciliation possible.

Moreover, this quality is not to be equated with the artist’s political stance. Gong’s politics has remained a source of embarrassment and vexation for modern scholars. He is largely profiled as a Ming loyalist. While there is nothing grossly wrong with this profile, it cuts too many corners and leaves out far too many unspoken qualities of his work unaccounted for. For one thing, he is unlike any other Ming loyalist—he fits neither the “Romantic” nor “Stoic” types that Wakeman, Jr., profiles. Sympathetic for the Fushe members, he nevertheless had a soft spot for Ma Shiying. To characterize his political stance as “confused,” as I uncharitably did earlier, exposes our own problems. Institutional identities, factionist alliance, and political posture are simply the wrong currency to measure his “politics.” His ink-brushed landscape is the medium in which his “politics” resides—that is his comfort zone. It voices feelings and sensibility that transcends the ready-made categorical and discursive formulations of the time. It is no wonder that majority of his contemporary viewers were struggling to verbalize Gong’s distinct pictorial conception. Even his friend Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612-1672) had to settle for a general rhetorical praise, though he got it right: “there is nothing like this before; nor will be anything like this ever after.”⁸⁷ Cheng Zhengkui 程正揆 (1604-1670), another friend of Gong’s, knows better: Gong’s art “excels in tonality” 以韻勝.⁸⁸

He was a loner at the time.⁸⁹ Most of Gong’s contemporaries failed to fully grasp the import of Gong’s tonality. The question of why this was the case is a complex historical question. By the time Gong found his “voice” and stride in the ink tonality of “subdued melancholy and repeated presses and turns” 沉鬱頓挫, the taste was quickly changing. The generation of scholars who had truly lived in the Ming and Qing and had truly experienced the dynastic changeover were the ones capable of fully appreciating Gong. Yet a number of them were dying in the early 1670s.⁹⁰

That is to say, by the time Gong was producing the kind of works like his 1671 painting, the real sensitive audience who would “get” it was fast disappearing.

The new generation of critics and arbiters of taste, Wang Shizhen (1634-1711) chief among them, was tone-deaf toward the tonality of the arts of the Ming-Qing transition. Wang was only ten at the time of the Qing conquest. A telling example is Wang’s response to Liu Jingting’s storytelling art. For “left-over subjects” such as Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695), Liu Jingting’s storytelling performance brought back the memories of the traumatic years of the dynastic change:

Each time Liu produced a sound, the listener would immediately feel the clangor of the knives and swords and the charges of the armored battlefield horses filling up the space; it is as if winds were howling, rain were sobbing, birds were crying, and beasts were scampering. The rankle over the dynastic fall would immediately well up from the listener’s heart. The musician clapper’s sound is nothing in comparison.⁹¹

In comparison, Wang Shizhen had cold feet. Liu’s storytelling left him unimpressed and unmoved. He duly noted that the “eminent people and leftover subjects” 名卿遺老 all competed to compose biographies and encomiums for Liu. However, Liu’s art underwhelmed him: “his technique is the same as those street performers.”⁹²

A discussion on painting between the critic Wang Shizhen and the painter Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642-1715) is particularly revealing. Wang Yuanqi brought with him a set of eight album leaves he had painted and requested Wang Shizhen to inscribe poems on them. Wang documents the conversation as the following:

[Wang Yuanqi] then descanted on the theory of painting at great length. To make the long story short, he thinks painters following the steps of Dong [Yuan] and Ju [Ran] belong to the Southern School, like that of the Chan Buddhism. According to him, the Four Masters of the Yuan were among the heirs to the Southern School, in particular, Ni [Zan] and Huang [Gongwang]. For the two hundred and seventy years of the Ming dynasty, Tang [Yin] and Shen [Zhou] were the practitioners of this tradition; and Dong [Qichang] remains the paramount of the school. Those not following this lineage are all deviant heretics. He then said: for painters, what is prized is the ability to engage [the world] and then to disengage [the world] 始貴能入繼貴能出. The highest accomplishment is the [quality of] unfazed self-possession and full articulation 沉著痛快. I then refuted him: sir, you hold [Ni] Yunlin (i.e. Ni Zan) of the Yuan and [Dong] Wenmin (i.e., Dong Qichang) of the Ming as the epitome [of this Southern School tradition]. Now, these two masters are classified as the “untrammelled class” 逸品 among painters. Where do you ever find the [slightest trace of] what you call the “unfazed self-possession and full articulation” 沉著痛快 [in their paintings]? The Supervising Secretary [i.e., Wang Yuanqi] smiled and said, “no, no. What

appears to be the archaic, bland, leisurely, and distant 古澹閑遠 [traits in their paintings] is in fact pregnant with [the quality of] the unfazed self-possession and full articulation 沉著痛快. This is something hard for the common folks to understand. [Wang Yuanqi's] remarks set me thinking. Then, all of a sudden I figured it out. I told him: sir, your remarks on painting is supreme. In fact, this [theory] pertains not only to painting, but also extends to the modes and schools of poetry of past and present.⁹³

Wang then launches into an extended pontification about poetry by applying this dialectics of seeing the quality of the “unfazed self-possession and full articulation” 沉著痛快 in what appears to be the archaic, bland, leisurely, and distant 古澹閑遠 qualities in poems.

Wang's initial refutation is right. The “self-possession and full articulation” is a discernible quality 沉著痛快 diametrically opposed to the “archaic, bland, leisurely, and distant” 古澹閑遠 quality that characterize the style of Ni Zan and Dong Qichang. When Wang Shizhen says that he sees no trace of “self-possession and full articulation” in the works of Ni and Dong, he is right. The passage also shows how critics could force the issue by spiriting away the real discernible quality of “self-possession and full articulation” and making it a mere conceptual shade. It also shows that this quality was losing its appeal and resonance to viewers of Wang Yuanqi's generation that the opposition between “self-possession and full articulation” and “archaic, bland, leisurely, and distant” could be abolished through a mere rhetorical short-circuiting. Indeed, if one tries to *imagine* seeing “self-possession and full articulation” 沉著痛快 in the “archaic, bland, leisurely, and distant” 古澹閑遠 passages, one can always succeed in doing so.

This was the kind of viewer's mindset that may have worried Gong Xian when he painted the 1671 painting. The new generation of viewers, the likes of Wang Shizhen and Wang Yuanqi, were no longer into the “self-possession and full articulation” kind of painting, as the living historical memory of the dynastic changes that had once gripped the generation of Qian Qianyi and Wu Weiye was fading, blurring, and losing its edge among the new generation. The taste was shifting toward preference for the “archaic, bland, leisurely, and distant” mode. Gong Xian, on the other hand, was still hanging on to his vision that is a summation of the late-Ming aesthetics of “stillness” and “pure sound” and the early Qing melancholy. This was increasingly lost on Wang Yuanqi's generation.

Only an attentive few, including Gong's good friend, the playwright Kong Shangren (1648 - 1718), who, more than others of his generation, was immersed in researching and re-imagining the turmoil of the Ming-Qing transition. The epilogue 餘韻 of his *Peach Blossom Fan* orchestrates the lyrical voices of the storytellers—Liu Jingting, Su Kunshen, no less. So goes Su:

Remember the bridge that crossed Green Creek?
Not one of its scarlet planks is left.
The stream flows on, but few men cross;

你記得跨青溪半里橋，
舊紅板沒一條。
秋水長天人過少，

And in the cold sunset
Only a single willow dances slow.

冷清清的落照，
剩一樹柳彎腰。

...
I saw the crimson balconies rise,
I saw the feasting of the guests;
I have seen all lie in ruins.
Where moss creeps over the rubble,
In times long gone I dreamed of love and glory.
Now I have seen it all, the rise and decay
Of half a hundred years.

眼看他起朱樓，
眼看他宴賓客，
眼看他樓塌了。
這青苔碧瓦堆，
俺曾睡風流覺，
將五十年興亡看飽。

...
It was so real, the dream of the fragmented landscape
It is so hard to give up the land we know,
So hard to believe the map has been re-drawn.
Here is a song-set in lament for the South:
Let me wail unchecked as old age hastens nigh.

殘山夢最真，
舊境丟難掉，
不信這興圖換稿。
謫一套哀江南，
放悲聲唱到老。

Gong's 1671 painting preceded this stirring verbal picture by two decades. While this lyrical recital may serve well as the sound track of Gong's 1671 painting, it is also clear that the original voiceover embedded in Gong's painting may have been much more subdued in tonality and less gushing. For one thing, Gong's painting does keep the wailing *checked*. The disparity speaks to the easy loss of historical context in a matter of a few decades after the 1644 conquest. The voice that probably hits the right note is that of Liu Jingting, as constructed by Kong Shangren:

A few plucks of the string
Convey six reigns' vicissitudes,
The protests of a thousand ages.
A life lifetime by lake and seashore
Makes the myriad hills resound.⁹⁴
六代興亡，幾點清彈千古慨；
半生湖海，一聲高唱萬山驚。

In Gong Xian's words: "[one can maintain] the cool even in the presence of myriad mountains and valleys—all because of stillness" 有千山萬壑而仍冷者，靜故也。⁹⁵

Notes:

¹ Frankel 1957.

² For the concept of “voice effect,” see Aczel 1998: 467-500.

³ It is to be noted that the iconographic convention of contrasting decaying and blooming predates Qing, only that it gained renewed energy in early Qing.

⁴ Hanging scroll. Ink on paper, h. 84.4 cm; w. 45.3 cm. Shanghai Museum. ZHQ 21:42, pl. 47. Chen Lüsheng and Zhang Weixing 2000:838; Wu Qiming 2004:126-127.

⁵ “漸師專攻雲林，所患在枯槁寂寞。” Qian Dong’s 錢東 colophon on Hongren, 江村梅柳圖. Wang Huidong 2005:46.

⁶ Elsewhere, Gong also speaks of the tree in paintings capable of “sitting down, rising, and dancing” 坐立起舞 Gong Xian, *Gong Banqian ketu gao* 龔半千課徒稿 (Sichuan Museum).

⁷ Silbergeld 1980:36.

⁸ Li Rihua 李日華 (1565-1635) notes: “The painting practice nowadays is getting out of hand. There is just too much of bleakness, sparseness, and weirdness. Trees are no longer arrayed in order. The front and back of rocks need not be differentiated. Often the excuse is sought in the name of Yuan, saying: I harbor an untrammelled spirit.” 今天下畫習日謬，率多荒穢空疏怪幻，乃至作樹無復行次，寫石不分背面，動以元格自掩，曰：“我存逸氣耳”。相師成風，不復可挽。Li Rihua 李日華, “Colophon on Xiang Kangzhang’s pictorial scroll of *Recluse* “題項孔彰招隱圖卷,” in Li Rihua 1971:3335.

⁹ The album leaf is one of a set of eight, now in Shanghai Museum, ink on paper, 25.5 cm x 18.7 cm. The inscription reads: “世人所見倪高士畫皆淡墨枯毫。不知其本色原是深厚雄渾。非今人之不能運量古人。特見之少耳。”

¹⁰ 倪雲林一流，雖略有淡致，不免枯乾，尙羸病夫，奄奄氣息，即謂之輕秀博弱甚矣。Wang Duo, “Letter to Dai Mingyue (1609-1686),” Zhang Geng 張庚, “Guochao huazheng lu” 國朝畫徵錄 (1739), in ZSQ 10:431. An alternative reading of the final line 即謂之輕秀博弱甚矣 could be: “It has some lithe ease for sure; in fact, it is excessively anemic.”

¹¹ 倪迂過於簡寂故變其法不必局於一家也。Dai’s own inscription on an album leaf, in Weng Wanguo Collection.

¹² Sturman 1989.

¹³ Dong Qichang, “Huachanshi suibi,” in ZHQ 3:1018.

¹⁴ Wu Weiye was more of a poet than painter, even though he painted some.

¹⁵ Wakeman, Jr. 1984:634.

¹⁶ Tang Guizhang 1986:217.

¹⁷ Silbergeld 1980:12. Hightower 1998:182. On the lyrical allusion to Zhang Terrace willows 章臺柳, see annotations on Liu Yong, “Liuyaoqing” 柳腰輕 and its annotations, ZZQS 1:15.

¹⁸ Tang Guizhang 1986:217; Hightower 1998:168-268.

¹⁹ The couplet “洪波迴地軸，孤嶼映雲光” is from the early Tang poet Yang Shidao, “奉和聖制春日望海。” It is curiously placed among the album leaves titled *Paintings Inspired by Wang Wei’s Poems*.

²⁰ Hightower 1998:265.

²¹ Chen Yuan 1996:797. Zhang Wenqin 2008:47; 51.

²² Silbergeld 1980.

- ²³ Silbergeld 1980:xx.
- ²⁴ Guo Shaoyu 1983:364.
- ²⁵ Huang Zongxi's version has it that he changed his name to Liu to escape from the death sentence. Huang Zongxi 1936: 163.
- ²⁶ Struve 1980:56.
- ²⁷ Li Jiefei 2012:105.
- ²⁸ Sun Zhimei 2003:132; Ge Henggang 2011:161; Li Jiefei 2012:99.
- ²⁹ Li Jiefei 2012:105.
- ³⁰ At the height of his career, he was in the innermost circle of the most powerful general of the Southern Ming. Soon after, he was back to his old occupation of being a street performer. Huang Zongxi 1936:164.
- ³¹ Wai-Yee Li, "The Late Ming Courtesan," 65.
- ³² Ink and color on silk, 28.2 x 167.3 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing. The scroll bears numerous inscriptions and colophons, including one by Wang Shizhen.
- ³³ Ink and color on silk, 198.5 x 98 cm. Tianjin Art Museum. ZHQ 22:22, pl. 28.
- ³⁴ See Wai-yee Li, "Early Qing poetry," in Idema 2006:87.
- ³⁵ It is not clear if Wang intended here to recapitulate the allusion to the "Crow Night Village" 烏夜村, a poetic reference to the birthday of a Jin empress. It was said that at the time of her birth, crows were croaking around the village, which was then named "Crow Night Village" to mark her birth place. Wang used this reference in his famous "Autumn Willows" poems (1657). Hui Dong 惠棟 and Jin Rong 金榮 annot. *Yuyang jinghualu jizhu* 漁洋精華錄集注 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1992), p. 68.
- ³⁶ 楊柳十餘株，披拂水際，綽約近人。葉始微黃，乍染秋色，若有搖落之態。Wang Shizhen, "菜根堂詩集序" in 蠶尾續文集卷二. Jiang Yin, *Wang Yuyang shiji zhenlue*, 29.
- ³⁷ Wang Shizhen 王士禎, *Wang Shizhen nianpu* 王士禎年譜, ed. Sun Yancheng 孫言誠 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 13-14. Jiang Yin 蔣寅, *Wang Yuyang shiji zhenlue* 王漁洋事跡征略 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 2001), 29.
- ³⁸ Wang Shizhen 王士禎, *Yuyang jinghua lu jishi* 漁洋精華錄集釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1999), 1:68.
- ³⁹ Wang Shizhen, *Wang Shizhen nianpu*, 13-14. Jiang Yin 蔣寅, *Wang Yuyang shiji zhenlue*, 29.
- ⁴⁰ Li Wai-yee, "Early Qing poetry," in Idema 2006:94-95.
- ⁴¹ The scholar-officials who wrote on the scroll include Zhang Yin 張英 who wrote in 1671; Chen Xi 陳騫, a scholar recommended for "Boxue hongru" 博學鴻儒 in 1679, and known to have consorted with Gong Dingzi 龔鼎孳 and Liang Qingbiao 梁清標; Liang Qingbiao 梁清標 (1620-1691), Wu Nongxiang 吳農祥 (1632-1708), and Zhou Sisheng 周斯盛 (fl. ca. 1675)—the three of them wrote their inscriptions in 1678. The inscriptions by Gu Zhenguan 顧貞觀 (1637-1714) and Shen Yinfan 沈胤范 are not dated.
- ⁴² Li Yufu 李毓芙, *Wang Yuyang shiwen xuanzhu* 王漁洋詩文選注, 21.
- ⁴³ For a close analysis of the musical quality of Wang Shizhen's "Autumn Willows" poems, see Yoshikawa Kōjirō 1986:341-352.
- ⁴⁴ Gong painted a hanging scroll for Wang on which he inscribed: "painted to present to Mr. Ruanting. The painting is now in the Ching Yuan Chai Collection.
- ⁴⁵ Lin Shuzhong 2005:232.

⁴⁶ Gong Xian, *Gong Banqian ketu huashuo* 龔半千課徒畫說 (Sichuan Museum). Xiao Ping, *Gong Xian*, 241. See also William Wu, “Kung Hsien’s Style and His Sketchbooks,” *Oriental Art*, n.s. 16, no. 1 (1970): 72-80.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The album leaf is now in Berkeley Art Museum.

⁴⁹ Gong’s remark is part of the inscription on the album leaf he painted in imitation of Yang Wencong. The album is now in the UC, Berkeley, Art Museum. For reproduction, see *Haiwai cang Ming Qing huihua zhenpin Gong Xian Jinling zhujia juan* 海外藏明清繪畫珍品龔賢金陵諸家卷 (Shenyang: Liaoning meishu, 1999), 69.

⁵⁰ Silbergeld 1981:405.

⁵¹ Qian Qianyi was the first to propagate the notion of “history poetry” and “poet-historian” (*shishi*). His “manifesto” of this position, “Preface to Hu Zhiguo’s Poetry” 胡致果詩序, was most likely written in 1657. Yim 2009:16. Wu Weiye made the claim in 1660 that “poetry and history were inextricably linked in ancient times” in his “Preface to the Poetry of Qian Pu Studio” 且朴齋詩稿序 (1660). Zhang Hongsheng 2008:104.

⁵² The painter Zhu Chang 祝昌 gave himself the appellation of “Landscape Historian” 山史.

⁵³ See also 王士禎杜詩批評析辨.

⁵⁴ Hui Dong and Jin Rong 1992:205.

⁵⁵ Shu Yuexiang (1217-1298), “Ti Pan Shaobai shi” (On Pan Shaobai’s poem), cited in Yim 2009:34.

⁵⁶ Zhou Jiyin 2008:511.

⁵⁷ Sun Zhimei 2003:63.

⁵⁸ Qian Qianyi, cited in Yim 2009:33.

⁵⁹ Xiao Yuncong’s painting on Xie Ao’s wailing on Xitai, ink and color on paper, height 29.2 cm, length 18.5 cm, Anhui Provincial Museum.

⁶⁰ Another instance of the “White Gong,” dated 1656, now at the Palace Museum, Beijing, contains the artist’s own inscription: 丙申春龔賢自藏畫. Reproduced in ZHQ, vol. 22, p. 119, pl. 147.

⁶¹ Examples include the set of twelve album leaves, dated 1668, 24.5 x 34.2 cm., in Shanghai Museum. Eight of them are reproduced in ZHQ, vol. 22, pp. 121-124, pls. 149-156.

⁶² James Cahill, *Compelling Images*.

⁶³ Li Peilei 2005:206-217.

⁶⁴ Scholars commonly consider Gong to be a student of Dong Qichang. There is ambiguity in the source—on which scholars base their claim—whether Gong actually apprenticed himself to Dong or simply was following the model and principles set up by Dong.

⁶⁵ In the prologue to an album of twenty-four leaves in Shanghai Museum, Gong admits that he first saw Mi-style cloudy mountain at the age of 20, and was impressed enormously. Xiao Ping and Liu Yujia 1996:164. Lin Shuzhong 2005:221.

⁶⁶ Wakeman 1985: 1068. Kessler 1976:33-36. Chen Xuan 2009.

⁶⁷ The eschewal of anemic and light-hearted lyrical intimacy in favor of the grander and spirited mood modeled after Xin Qiji’s stylistic mode characterize the register of the “history lyrics.” This trend had its currency from 1653 to 1679. Yan Dichang 1990:30.

⁶⁸ Again, the composition is not early Qing invention. It has pre-Qing precedents. A notable example is an album leaf in Yang Wencong’s *Eight Views of Yandang*.

⁶⁹ The work is one of the set of Xiang's *Album Leaves Based on Wang Wei* (1628).

⁷⁰ It is quite possible that both Gong and Lü subscribed to the cropped mountain scheme on the basis of both lamenting the “fragmented landscape” of “half precipice” (*banbi jiangshan*) and their names. Gong is known also as Gong Banqian 龔半千; Lü, Lü Banying 呂半隱. Both names contain *ban* 半.

⁷¹ Hua Derong 1988:165.

⁷² Stephen Owen renders the phrase as “firm, self-possessed, and at ease.” Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 400. Shuen-fu Lin translates the phrase as “calmness and alacrity.” Lin, “Chiang K’uei’s treatises,” in *Theories of the Arts in China*, ed. Susan Bush and Christian Murck (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 303. Peter Sturman renders it as “deep and spirited.” Sturman 1989.

⁷³ Yang Xin 羊欣 of the (Liu) Song of the Southern dynasties reports, in 采古來能書人名, that the cursive-script calligraphy by Huang Xiang 皇象 of Wu was commonly characterized as possessing qualities of 沉著痛快. See *Fashu yaolu* 法書要錄, in *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu*, 1:33. Su Shi describes Mi Fu’s calligraphy as displaying the trait of 沉著痛快. The category of “沉著痛快” is one of the “two overall situations” in poetry as defined by Yan Yu 嚴羽, *Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話, in *Lidai shihua* 歷代詩話, ed. He Wenhuan 何文煥 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981) 2:687.

⁷⁴ Zhao Xigu 趙希鵠, 洞天清祿集.

⁷⁵ Huang Tingjian, *Shangu tiba* 山谷題跋, in *Zhongguo shuhua quanshu*, 1:688. Su Shi also uses the term to characterize Mi Fu’s calligraphy.

⁷⁶ Sturman 1989:379-380.

⁷⁷ Stephen Owen translates the phrase 優游不迫 as “straightforward and carefree,” Owen, *Readings*, 400.

⁷⁸ Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) remarks: “The scholar has least for flippancy and lack of unfazed self-possession and full articulation” 學者所患, 在於輕浮, 不沉著痛快. *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, comp. Li Jingde 黎靖德; annot. Wang Xingxian 王星賢 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), 10.162.

⁷⁹ *Qing shi gao* 清史稿, by Zhao Erxun 趙爾巽 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976-1977), 504.13903.

⁸⁰ Chen Tingzhuo 陳廷焯 observes: 吾所謂沉著痛快者, 必先能沉鬱頓挫. Chen Tingzhuo 陳廷焯, *Baiyuzhai cihua* 白雨齋詞話, juan 6.

⁸¹ *Jinling zhujia huihua*, 137.

⁸² Chen Mo 2003:154.

⁸³ Xiao Ping and Liu Yujia, 220.

⁸⁴ 讀書養氣, 以求其厚. Chen Guanghong 2006:345.

⁸⁵ Chen Guanghong 2006:259.

⁸⁶ Wai-ye Li, “Early Qing Poetry: Introduction,” in Idema et al. 2006:97.

⁸⁷ Hua Derong 1988:153.

⁸⁸ Hua Derong 1988:162.

⁸⁹ Zhou Lianggong describes Gong as “of a loner’s disposition, hard to mingle with other people” 性孤僻, 與人落落難合. Hua Derong 1988:158.

⁹⁰ These include, instance, Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609-1671), Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612-1672), and Gong Dingzi 龔鼎孳 (1615-1673).

⁹¹ Huang Zongxi, “Liu Jingting zhuan,” in *Nanlei Wen Ding qianji* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), 164.

⁹² Wang Shizhen, “分甘余话.”

⁹³ Wang Shizhen 2007:1779-1780.

⁹⁴ Chen and Acton 1976:304.

⁹⁵ Xiao Ping and Liu Yujia, 220.