

Three Eremitic Pictures and a Song of Despair

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In China, literature, particularly poetry, provides constant inspiration for and insight into pictorial art. Throughout history, painters feverishly sought out literary sources because they were a ready resource for the educated, where the full variety and depth of the Chinese aesthetic experience could be found in its most condensed and transcendental form. It is in these works that the artists could find subjective symbols with which to readily identify. To illustrate this, I have chosen to discuss three paintings from the exhibition 'Fantastic Moun-

tains: Chinese Landscape Paintings from the Shanghai Museum'. All these paintings clearly draw on a specific literary work, a piece of poetic prose entitled *Yufu* ('The Fisherman'), collected in an anthology *Chuci* (*Songs of the Chu*) around the 2nd century.

Yufu, composed by an anonymous author during the late Warring States period (476-221 BCE), is a lamentation of the tragic fate of Qu Yuan (c. 340-c. 278 BCE), represented through a dialogue between Qu in his exile and a fisherman. Although a man of great virtue and fidelity, as well as a loyal courtier of the state of Chu, Qu Yuan's political talents went unnoticed, and he languished far from court. *Yufu* is a classic account in Chinese literature which is repeatedly recalled in later writings and frequently illustrated in paintings. A painting of the Ming period (1368-1644) by Zhou Chen (act. early 16th century), may well have been inspired by the story and sentiment expressed in this work (Fig. 1). The scroll bears only the painter's signature ('Zhou Chen, alias Dongcun [Eastern Village]'). Its conventional imagery, however, inspired the Shanghai Museum to give it the title, *Chanting Verse While Strolling Through the Snow* (*Taxue xingyin tu*). The painting is dominated by a solitary wanderer strolling in the wilderness along a winter riverbank. His robe and flying headdress streaming backwards suggest the strength of the buffeting wind, which also blows back the branches of the trees. A rolling outline encloses the mountain ranges in the background, which are defined by light linear texture strokes and dark ink dots of vegetation against a dim sky.

To those familiar with *Yufu*, the picture recalls the opening lines:

After Qu Yuan was banished, he wandered, sometimes along the river banks, sometimes along the marsh's edge, singing as he went. His expression was dejected and his feature emaciated. (Hawkes, p. 206)

In exile, Qu Yuan suffered from the belief that 'all the world was muddy and I alone was clear; all men were drunk and I alone was sober'. Such sentiment eventually hastened the tragic end of this virtuous man's life: he drowned himself in the Miluo river to avoid what he called 'submitting my spotless purity to the dirt of others' (ibid., p. 206). The ethos embodied in the story so appealed to the Chinese intellectual that it became a moral model for later generations. In painting, it was this account of Qu Yuan that gave birth to the imagery of the solitary wanderer on mountain and river paths. Later named '*zapan xingyin tu*' ('Chanting Verse While Strolling Along a Marshbank'), the type was popular as early as the Song period (960-1279), and became an enduring theme in Chinese landscape painting. Even



(Fig. 1) *Chanting Verse While Strolling Through the Snow*
By Zhou Chen (act. early 16th century)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk
Height 132.3 cm, width 72.6 cm
Shanghai Museum

though the wanderers in some paintings may not specifically portray the character of Qu Yuan, they were still reminiscent of this noble man. The imagery was instilled with the eremitic ideal, suggesting a lofty soul seeking an unfettered life and spiritual freedom in simple surroundings away from social constraints. Early examples can be drawn from the famous portrait of the poet Li Bai (701-62) walking and chanting a poem, painted by Liang Kai (act. early 13th century), now in the Tokyo National Museum, or from Liang's other painting in the National Palace Museum, Taipei, which depicts a gentleman walking along a waterside path. Because the figure holds a chrysanthemum in his right hand, the painting has long been associated with another moral exemplar and famous recluse, the poet Tao Qian (365-427), and was named *Scholar of the Eastern Fence* (*Dongli gaoshi*). Disgusted by corruption and suffering from the strain of duty, Tao had retired from his post as a county magistrate. Around his house, he had planted chrysanthemums, his favourite flower.

This could well be the case in Zhou Chen's picture. Although the solitary wanderer recalls Qu Yuan in exile, it may not specifically be a portrait of him. Nevertheless, the figure is connected in spirit with an illustrious historical personage, who symbolized the literati ideal, and with whom the Ming artists and patrons desired to identify themselves. Zhou Chen has captured the walking gentleman both as a radiant source of divine inspiration and a vividly real human form. The wanderer's feelings are to be inferred from his surroundings: the painting is set in winter, and the mood is harsh and austere. The old trees are bare and covered with snow, yet their rugged, battered trunks and twisted boughs still convey a sense of integrity, dignity and enduring strength. We can sense the experiences of the artist, which may well have been inspired as much by feelings of transcendence as by the visual and aesthetic legacies of early literati artists such as Liang Kai.

In the *Yufu*, Qu Yuan encountered a fisherman at the riverbank. On learning of the sorrows of his displacement, the fisherman expressed sympathy and gave Qu the following advice:

The wise man is not chained to material circumstances, but can move as the world moves. If the world is muddy, why not help them to stir up the mud and beat up the waves? And if all men are drunk, why not sup their dregs and swill their lees? Why get yourself exiled because of your deep thoughts and your fine aspirations? (Hawkes, p. 206)

The role of this fisherman is interesting. In early Chinese literary tradition, the archetypal character of the recluse often reflected great wisdom but appeared as a humble man. In the writings of Confucius and Zhuangzi (4th century BCE), a wise recluse typically took the guise of a fisherman, a wood-gatherer or a farmer (see Confucius, *Analects*, Chapter 18; *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 31). These were either real hermits who

actually took reclusion as a way of life, or what Alan Berkowitz referred to as 'moral heroes' who went into hiding during troubled times to wait for better days (Berkowitz, p. 20). The fisherman in *Yufu* was indeed such a wise recluse, who took the guise of a humble man. The imagery has been evoked in literary discourse throughout China's history – both for the model of the hermit and also as the stimulus for the development of a type of pictorial composition called *yuyin*, sometimes translated



(Fig. 2) *Sailing Off in a Boat in the Mountain Stream*
By Zhang Lu (c. 1464-1538)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk
Height 165.8 cm, width 97.5 cm
Shanghai Museum



(Fig. 3) *Washing Feet in the Canglang Waters*
By Wen Zhengming
(1470-1559), dated 1523
Fan, ink and colour on paper
Shanghai Museum

into English as 'fisherman-recluse', or rather 'reclusion in a fishing boat'.

This kind of composition was especially popular in the early and mid-Ming among the so-called Zhe School and academy artists. The hanging scroll by Zhang Lu (c. 1464-1538) in Figure 2 is a fine example. On the right-hand side of the picture, a wind-whipped pine stretches across an overhanging cliff. Behind it a boat is just poling into view. An old gentleman sits in the prow, gazing into the distance. As a follower of Wu Wei (1459-1509), the most admired of the Zhe School masters, Zhang Lu adopted and developed the early 13th century academy painter Xia Gui's *fupi* (axe cut) broad brushstroke idiom, seen here in the depiction of rocks outlined with bold, dark lines and washed with broad strokes of lighter ink. Again the work bears no title but only a signature of the painter's alias 'Ping-shan'. The Shanghai Museum has called it *Sailing off in a Boat in the Mountain Stream* (*Xishan fanting tu*). Compositions such as this are quite different to those which depict the lives of fishermen – a subject popular in the early and middle Ming, particularly among the Zhe School artists. Apparently, the figures depicted as sailing off along mountain streams were not fishermen, but rather recluses. The differences between the real fisherman and the fisherman-recluse are observable: in the first group, the artist is concerned with revealing their unrestrained and humble nature, not their eremitism. The fishermen in these compositions are generally shown at work, as carefree people who, when their work is done, can spend their time at leisure and enjoying nature (Cahill, pp. 58-61). In the latter, the artist aims to represent those who have the appearance of fishermen yet maintain their purity in the midst of an impure world. Those seen on boats are not fishermen but scholar-recluses who are escaping an official career, fame and other social burdens.

Yufu ends with the fisherman's failure in convincing Qu Yuan to give up his stubborn political ambitions and withdraw from social affairs. He strikes his paddle in the water and makes off with a faint smile. As he departs he sings:

When the Canglang's waters are clear,
I can wash my hat-strings in them;
When the Canglang's waters are muddy,
I can wash my feet in them.
(Hawkes, p. 207)

A river named Canglang is mentioned in ancient Chinese texts like the *Shangshu* (*Classic of Documents*) dating back from the late Shang to the early Western Zhou period (11th-12th centuries BCE). One interpretation suggests that it is a branch of the river Hanshui (in modern Hubei). Although the song is already seen in writings of other authors of the earlier period, it was *Yufu* that endowed the name of Canglang with an eremitic

overtone. The song as sung by the fisherman reflects a profound Daoist view of the world. The fisherman said to Qu Yuan: 'The wise man is not chained to material circumstances, but can move as the world moves.' This meant that he should seek an official career in good times under a sage king but withdraw gracefully when times are troubled and the ruler turns immoral. It was this song that gave birth to a common theme in both literature and art, as illustrated by the elegant fan painting in Figure 3. The inscription on the fan reads: 'Washing feet in the Canglang waters, painted by [Wen] Zhengming [1470-1559] in the fourth moon of the year *guiwei* of the Jiajing reign [1523].'

The small composition is painted in Wen's favoured *xiao qingliu* (lit. less blue-and-green) technique. It depicts a rocky riverbank shaded by dense trees. A man sits at the edge of the water, paddling his feet in the flowing stream. It is interesting that Wen Zhengming painted the composition at the time when he was appointed to a position at the Hanlin Academy on the basis of a local governor's recommendation, after failing his *jinshi* civil service examination ten times. It is apparent that for Wen, renunciation did not imply ascetic self-denial; it was rather a state of mind. In another Shanghai Museum handscroll entitled *Retreat on Mount Guoqu*, which Wen Zhengming had painted for an official friend, Kezhai, in 1541, Wen commented about him: 'Although he was at court, he never forgot the mountains and forests' (see Liu Yang et al., pl. 13). By saying this, he implied a lessening of the difference between a mountain-dwelling hermit and an official recluse in society. Indeed Wen Zhengming's example illustrates a form of eremitism – what was known as *shiyin* ('reclusion in town') and *chaoyin* ('reclusion at court') (see *ibid.*, pp. 36-39). With the idea of 'withdrawal as a state of mind' or 'recluses within society', those who 'withdrew' could still play active roles in the service of the local or state authority. To them, paintings such as the three illustrated in this article would offer a chance to temporarily experience the transformation from bureaucrat to recluse, to seek an awakening, at least for a moment, before returning their life in the office.

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After a successful showing at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (12 March to 9 May) and the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore (20 May to 18 July), the exhibition 'Fantastic Mountains: Chinese Landscape Paintings from the Shanghai Museum' is now on view at the Honolulu Academy of Arts until 3 October.

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