

Shitao (1642–1707) and the Traditional Chinese Conception of Ruins

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SHITAO IS ONE OF THE most celebrated painters in Chinese history. Born two years before the fall of the Ming in 1644, his relationship with the bygone dynasty was more spiritual than political, and his identity as a ‘leftover subject’ (*yimin*) was complicated by his shifting religious affiliation with Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Except for a short stay in Beijing, he spent most of his life in the lower Yangzi River region, where he travelled to famous mountains and historical sites. His theoretical treatise *Huayulu* articulates his nearly mystical notion of ‘one line’ (*yi hua*), a state of complete self-immersion with the Dao that transcends any method or style. Whereas the idea of an ecstatic union with nature was not new in traditional Chinese aesthetics, Shitao pursued this elusive goal through vivid, spontaneous visual expressions. As one modern scholar observes: whatever Shitao paints—landscape, figure, or still-life—‘his forms and colors are ever fresh, his spirit light, his inventiveness and wit inexhaustible’.¹

Why do I link Shitao with the conception of ruins—a topic which has not been addressed in the rich scholarship on the artist?² Briefly, this

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¹Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, 5th edn. (Berkeley, CA, 2008), p. 269. For two outstanding studies of Shitao in English, see Richard Edwards, *The Painting of Tao-Chi* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1967) and Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge, 2001). Shitao’s original name was Zhu Ruoji. He is also known as Daoji or Yuanji.

²To my knowledge, the only in-depth study of ‘dynastic ruins’ in Shitao’s work is Jonathan Hay’s ‘Ming palace and tomb in early Qing Nanjing: a study in the poetics of dynastic memory’, *Late Imperial China*, 20 (1999), 1–48. Hay’s paper interprets specific paintings, whereas the present essay deals with the conception of ruins as a specific aesthetic category.

connection emerged in a project which I have pursued on and off for the past fifteen years. I started this project, a study of the conceptual and representational modes of ruins in Chinese art and visual culture, around the mid-1990s. At the time I reread Hans Frankel's and Stephen Owen's writings on the Chinese poetic genre *huaigu*, often translated into English as 'lamenting the past' or 'meditating on the past'.³ Their writings inspired me to conduct a survey of ruin images in Chinese painting, because such images frequently appear in *huaigu* poems. The result surprised me: among all the examples I checked (which cover a chronological span from the fifth century BC to the mid-nineteenth century AD), fewer than five depict ruined buildings. Typically, the architectural structure in a painting shows no trace of damage, even if the artist has inscribed a poem next to the image that identifies it as a ruin. One such example is Shitao's *Qingliang Terrace* (Fig. 1). The painting bears a poem by the artist which includes these two sentences: 'Crows return to a ruined entrenchment—silent, silent the midnight; | Flowers bloom in an abandoned garden—long, long is my thought.' But the buildings at the centre of the composition, supposedly the 'ruined entrenchment' and 'abandoned garden', show no signs of physical decay.

I was no less astonished when I turned to actual architecture: there was not a single case in pre-twentieth-century China in which the ruined appearance of an old building was purposefully preserved to evoke what Alois Riegl has theorised in the West as the 'age value' of a manufactured form.⁴ Many ancient timber structures do exist, but most of them have been repeatedly renovated or even completely rebuilt. Each renovation and restoration aims to bring the building back to its original brilliance, while freely incorporating current architectural and decorative elements.

Although I can still continue my search, these initial findings were forceful enough to prompt me to ponder on their implications. Logically, I first questioned why I was so surprised by such findings: clearly I, like many other people, had presumed that ruins were an integral element of traditional Chinese culture and existed in both architectural and pictorial forms. It is also clear that in such a presumption I was unconsciously following a cultural/artistic convention which is at odds with the traditional

³Hans H. Frankel, *The Flowering Plum and the Palace Lady: Interpretations of Chinese Poetry* (New Haven, CT, 1976), especially the chapter 'Contemplation of the past', pp. 104–27; Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: the Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), especially pp. 16–32.

⁴Alois Riegl, 'The modern cult of monuments: its character and its origin' (1903) (trans.) K. W. Forster and D. Chirardo, in W. W. Forster (ed.), *Monument/Memory, Oppositions*, special issue, 25 (1982), 20–51; especially, 31–34.



Figure 1. Shitao, *Qingliang Terrace*, hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, Nanjing Museum.

Chinese ways of representing ruins—if such representations indeed existed in art. This realisation led to two kinds of reflections, about the origin of such misconception and about indigenous concepts and representational modes of Chinese ruins.

So I started to read scholarship on European ruin images and architecture, whose abundance and global reach may have shaped a modern Chinese observer's imagination of ruins in premodern China. I also started to think about alternative visual modes in Chinese art, which might express a 'ruin aesthetic' through non-architectural forms. This second inquiry led me to discover some interesting examples and also to see many familiar images in a different light. When I finally began to write on the topic, I naturally selected the examples I found most compelling to illuminate my findings. Only then did I realise that many examples I had selected came from a single person: Shitao. This essay utilises this realisation for two interrelated purposes: first, I want to define some basic modes of ruin representations in traditional Chinese art for which I will use Shitao's work as the main visual evidence; second, in so doing I also hope to explore some unnoticed dimensions in Shitao's art, and to demonstrate that the ancient conception of ruins can help us see some familiar images anew.

Qiu: a mound of rubble

The oldest term used for ruins in the Chinese language is *qiu* 丘. Meaning originally a natural mound or hillock, it also came to denote the ruined site of a village, town, or dynastic capital. We do not know when this second usage began, but it is quite explicit in a third-century BC poem called 'A Lament for Ying' (Ai Ying), which Qu Yuan (340 BC–278 BC) composed before casting himself into the Miluo River:

...
 I climbed a steep islet's height and looked into the distance,
 Thinking to ease the sorrow in my heart:
 But only grief came for the rich, blest River Kingdom,
 For its cherished ways, now lost beyond recall.
 I may not traverse the surging waves to return there,
 Or cross south over the watery waste to reach it.
*To think that its tall palaces (xia) should be mounds of rubble (qiu),
 And its two East Gates a wilderness of woods!*⁵ (italics added)

⁵ David Hawkes (trans.), *The Songs of the South: an Anthology of Ancient Chinese Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (London, 1985), p. 165. The original translation of the seventh line in this

There has been much discussion about the subject of Qu Yuan's lament. My interest here lies instead in its definition of *qiu* as remains of former palatial halls. Unlike a stone Classic or Gothic ruin in Europe, such remains no longer convey the grandeur of the original building: the timber superstructures had disappeared, and only their foundations remained in the form of 'mounds of rubble'. A *qiu*, therefore, indicates the location of a former building but does not preserve its shape. This conception of ruins is therefore dependent on the notion of erasure: frequently, it was the 'void' left by a destroyed timber structure that stimulated a lament for the past. Significantly, in addition to a natural or artificial mound *qiu* has a second meaning. An entry in the earliest Chinese encyclopedia *Guang ya* reads: '*Qiu* means emptiness'.⁶ These two significations of *qiu*—as architectural remains and as signifiers of emptiness—together construct an indigenous concept of ruins in China.

This is an enduring concept, because we find it underlying images created nearly two thousand years later, as exemplified by two of Shitao's (1642–1707) 'memory paintings'.⁷ A descendant of the Ming royal house which surrendered its power to the Qing in 1644, Shitao developed a complex psychology toward the past, both longing for it and hoping to escape its grip.⁸ The two paintings in question belong to two albums he painted in the last years of the 1690s, both depicting his earlier journeys around Jinling (the present-day Nanjing), the first Ming capital and Shitao's residence from 1680 to 1687. The first image, from the album *Reminiscences of Qinhuai River*, has an unusual composition even among Shitao's own works. Without a larger landscape setting and human traces, the leaf is filled with the image of a desolate *qiu*: a mound of rubble on which brambles grow (Fig. 2). Jonathan Hay has connected this image with contemporary descriptions of ruins.⁹ One such description comments on the Hall of the Great Foundation (Daben tang), a Ming palace whose name Shitao adopted as one of his many studio names. After recalling its history and

stanza reads: 'To think that its palace walls should be mounds of rubble.' I changed 'palace walls' to 'tall palaces' because the character *xia* means 'large halls.'

⁶ *Guang ya*, 'shigu' 3. This encyclopaedia was compiled by Zhang Ji of the third century.

⁷ There are other related examples. An album in the Los Angeles County Museum dated to 1694, for instance, contains a similar scene. For an illustration of this painting, see Stephanie Barron, *et al.*, *Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (New York, 2003), p. 66.

⁸ For a detailed investigation into Shitao's attitude toward the past and the present, see Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge, 2001).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120; also Jonathan Hay, 'Ming palace and tomb in Early Qing Jiangnan', especially pp. 41–2.



Figure 2. Shitao, 'An Overgrown Hillock', a leaf in *Reminiscences of Qin-Huai*, album of 8 leaves, ink and light colour on paper, Cleveland Museum of Art.

glorious days, the seventeenth-century commentator Yu Binshuo turned to the building's present condition: 'Today the former palace is planted with millet. Seekers after history pass through the ruins, the misty waste spotted with white dew, squirrels amid the clumps of brambles. With a

single breath, they all sigh.¹⁰ Readers cannot miss the similarity between these words and Qu Yuan's 'Lament for Ying'.

The second image, less politically oriented but authenticated as a 'ruin image' by Shitao himself, depicts his journey to the Flower-Rain Terrace (Yuhua tai) when he lived in Nanjing (Fig. 3). According to local lore, the place became a popular scenic spot beginning in the third century and gained its name in 507 from a miraculous event: when the eminent monk Yunguang constructed a platform and lectured on Buddhist Dharma there, flowers fell from the sky. In the album leaf, Shitao has painted himself standing on a large, cone-shaped earthen mound, which contrasts the surrounding landscape with its strange form, soft contour, and unnatural bareness. Clearly the painter intends to tell the viewer that it is a man-made mound, not a natural rocky hill. This impression is supported by the poem Shitao has inscribed on the page, which begins with these two lines: 'Outside the city walls stands an ancient terrace in wilderness. | Today's folks still tell the legend of the flower rain.' He also appended a narrative



Figure 3. Shitao 'Flower-Rain Terrace', *Eight Views of the South*, album of 8 leaves, ink and light colour on paper, British Museum, London.

¹⁰ Translation from *ibid.*, p. 137.

account to the poem: ‘The Flower-Rain Terrace: When I was living in the Qin-Huai region [south of Nanjing], in the evening at sunset, I often climbed this terrace (*tai*) after people had left. Sometimes I also painted it after chanting poems.’ The painting shows that the ‘platform’ he climbed is a naked earthen hill devoid of human construction; it is its barren desolation—its emptiness—that evokes the painter–poet’s remembrance of the past.

Xu: emptiness

As these two paintings demonstrate, *qiu* as a particular concept and imagery of ruins never disappeared in traditional China. An important change, however, took place during the Eastern Zhou and significantly enriched people’s imagination of the ruin: during this period, another character, *xu* 墟, gained currency to become the main term for ruins. The reasons for this development are complex; but a main factor must be the different root meanings of the two characters: although their dictionary definitions overlap and the two terms are often used interchangeably, *qiu* means, first of all, a concrete topographic feature, whereas *xu*’s primary significance is ‘emptiness’.¹¹ The introduction of *xu* as a second—and eventually the main—term for ruins, therefore, signifies a subtle shift in the conception and perception of ruins. We can describe this shift as an ‘internalisation’ of ruins, through which ruin representations were increasingly freed from external signs, and also increasingly relied on the observer’s subjective response to particular places.

No Eastern Zhou picture depicts a *xu*. But some old poems offer a clear image of these spaces. Whereas a *qiu* was distinguished, as we have read in Qu Yuan’s ‘Lament for Ying’, by a ‘mound of rubble’, a *xu* was envisioned as a vast, empty space where the capital of a former dynasty once stood. As an empty site, a *xu* generated visitors’ mental and emotional responses not through tangible remains: it is the *site*, not dilapidated structures or surviving platforms, that crystallises historical memory. This, in turn, means that a *xu* is not identified by external signs but is given

¹¹ This is the definition given in *Er ya*. See Xu Zhaohua, *Er ya jinzhū* (A modern annotated version of *Er ya*) (Tianjin, 1987), pp. 34 and 48. Bernhard Karlgren dates *Er ya* to the third century bc in ‘The early history of the *Chou Li* and *Tso Chuan* texts’, *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 3 (1931), 1–59. The Han dictionary *Shuo wen* defines *xu* as ‘a large mound’ (*Da qiu*). See Duan Yucai (compiler), *Shuo wen jie zi zhu* (Annotated interpretations of characters and words) (Shanghai, 1981), p. 386.

a subjective reality: it is the visitor's recognition of a place as a *xu* that stimulates emotion and thought. The ancient worthy Zhou Feng thus teaches in *The Book of Rites (Li ji)*: 'Ruins [*xu*] and graves express no mournfulness; it is people who mourn amidst them.'¹²

This particular conception of ruins underlies two early examples of *huaigu* poetry. The first, recorded by Sima Qian (c.145–86 BC) in the *Shi ji* (Historical records), was supposedly written by Jizi, a former prince of the perished Shang dynasty. According to Sima, when Jizi passed the Ruins of Yin (Yin Xu) at the beginning of the Zhou, he was 'moved by the destruction of the [Shang] palaces, where the grain and millet now grew. Distressed, he could neither cry out nor weep like a woman. He thus composed the poem "Ears of Wheat" (Mai xiu) to express his inner feeling.'¹³ The poem does not mention any abandoned buildings. The only image it evokes is a field of wheat and millet, which conceal the old capital under their lush leaves. The same imagery is also employed in 'There the millet is Lush' (Shu li), a poem in the *Book of Songs*:

There the millet is lush,
There the grain is sprouting.
I walk here with slow, slow steps,
My heart shaken within me.
Those who know me
Would say my heart is grieved;
Those who know me not
Would ask what I seek here.
Gray and everlasting Heaven—
What man did this?¹⁴

This stanza is repeated twice more; only the second and fourth lines change: the millet sprouts and then produces seeds, while the traveller's grief grows darker and deeper. Again, the poem identifies neither the place nor the reason for the traveller's sorrow, which are provided later by the Han commentator Mao Heng in a preface: "'There the Millet Is Lush" is a lament for the Zhou ancestral capital. A great officer of Zhou was passing the former ancestral temples and palace buildings, which were entirely covered by millet. He lamented the collapse of the Zhou royal house and lingered there, unable to bring himself to leave.'¹⁵

¹²Ruan Yuan (compiler and ed.), *Shisanjing zhushu* (Annotated thirteen classics), 2 vols. (Beijing, 1979), p. 1313; see James Legge (trans.), *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, 2 vols. (New York, 1967), vol. 1, p. 191.

¹³Sima Qian, *Shi ji* (Beijing, 1959), pp. 1620–1.

¹⁴Translation from Owen, *Remembrances*, p. 20.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 20.

Owen suggests that, in providing this exegesis, Mao Heng ‘discovered a *huaigu*’ in this poem.¹⁶ To Mao, the grief of the traveller must have been caused by a direct encounter with the past: what triggered his emotional response was not the field of millet, but the buried Zhou capital which was absent to view. His discovery of a *huaigu* in the poem thus amounts to identifying the field of millet as a *xu*—the site of ‘the former ancestral temples and palace buildings, which were entirely covered by millet’. In other words, the Han commentator spelled out the unspoken message in the poem, as his ‘preface’ constructs a narrative framework to specify the occasion of the poetic expression. Sima Qian supplied a similar framework to ‘Ears of Wheat’: only because of his explanation can we identify the poem as a *huaigu* lamenting the ruined Shang capital.

We find a parallel situation in art: many traditional Chinese paintings depict a traveller in a landscape. The scenes are often charged with intense emotion, but both the traveller and the landscape remain anonymous unless a narrative framework is given. In the latter case, although the artist still rejects a literal portrayal of physical ruins, he identifies the place in the painting as a *xu* and the painting as an expression of *huaigu*. We can again find a typical example of this type of ruin representation in Shitao’s *Reminiscences of Qinhuai River*. Scholars agree that Shitao created this album in 1695, for a friend with whom he had travelled along the Qinhuai River near Nanjing a decade earlier.¹⁷ It is uncertain whether the album’s eight leaves depict a continuous journey, but from Shitao’s inscription on the last leaf (Fig. 4) we know that this particular scene at least conveys the artist’s reminiscences of an earlier pleasure trip, and that the purpose of that previous trip was *fanggu* and *huaigu*—searching for and contemplating ancient sites. In this case, Shitao and his friend were searching for and contemplating sites of the Six Dynasties (220–589), which established their capitals in Nanjing. We can thus describe the painting’s theme as ‘the rememberer being remembered’:¹⁸ the album is Shitao’s reminiscence of one of his previous *huaigu* experiences. As the artist recounts:

Along the river with its forty-nine bends,
I search for every marvel of the Six Dynasties.
Who has walked in wooden clogs after the snow has cleared on the East
Mountain?

¹⁶Translation from Owen, *Remembrances*, p. 21.

¹⁷Richard Vinograd, ‘Reminiscences of Ch’in-huai: Tao-chi and the Nanking School’, *Archives of Asian Art*, 31 (1977–8), 6–31.

¹⁸Owen, *Remembrances*, p. 19.



Figure 4. Shitao, 'Searching for Plum Blossom along the Qin-Quai River', a leaf in *Reminiscences of Qin-Huai*, album of 8 leaves, ink and light colour on paper, Cleveland Museum of Art.

Who has composed poems while the wind roars through the west chasm?
 Please have sympathy with the lonely plum trees,
 A few of their bare branches are left;
 Their flowers have all fallen even before Spring is over ...¹⁹

¹⁹ Based on the translation in *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting* (Cleveland, OH, 1980), p. 323.

Like ‘There the Millet is Lush’, this poem does not describe any physical remains from the Six Dynasties, and only uses a plant (in this case the plum trees) to allude to passage of time. The scene accompanying this poem employs the same strategy but forges a powerful encounter between the painter/poet with an empty *xu*. In the picture Shitao stands in a tiny boat on a winding river, looking upwards. Responding to his gaze, the mountain above him seems suddenly to bend over toward him, forming a massive cliff like an enormous lobed overhang, on which bony plum trees grow downward. Far more than a straightforward record of his visit to an ancient site, this painting conveys the sense of a spontaneous ‘spiritual meeting’ (*shen hui*) between the artist and the ancients, who once wandered there and composed their own poems a thousand years before.

Withered trees as living ruins

Here we begin to detect an interesting connection between the ‘wheat’ and ‘millet’ in the two early *huaigu* poems, and the ‘lonely plum trees’ in Shitao’s painting. Far from innocent natural plants or flowers, these images are charged with rich cultural meaning and play crucial roles in forging a unique ruin aesthetic. Even today, old trees, as living ruins, are revered in gardens and temples; but it is still taboo to keep functioning buildings in disrepair. It is not rare for a temple’s age to be measured by its trees: the buildings have been rebuilt too many times to serve as an index of time (Fig. 5).

From the same cultural tradition emerged a major pictorial image in traditional Chinese art, referred to either generally as ‘ancient trees’ (*gu mu*) or more specifically as ‘withered trees’ (*ku shu*). Figure 6 shows an early example of this image attributed to the Song painter Xu Daoning (c.970–1051/53). Five gnarled pines grow from fissures in the rocks and reach the upper edge of the picture, filling out the entire composition with their twisting and turning branches. To Max Loehr, ‘there is an air of mystery and sadness about these trees, deepened rather than lessened by the elegance of form given to their hoary shapes’.²⁰ It is impossible in this short lecture to even outline the development of this image; readers interested in these images may consult two excellent studies by John Hay and Richard Barnhart.²¹ An argument I want to advance here, however, concerns the

²⁰ Max Loehr, *The Great Painters of China* (New York, 1980), p. 142.

²¹ John Hay, ‘Pine and rock, wintry tree, old tree and bamboo and rock—the development of a theme’, *National Palace Museum Bulletin*, 4(6) (1970), 8–11; Richard Barnhart, *Wintry Forests, Old Trees: some Landscape Themes in Chinese Painting* (New York, 1972).



Figure 5. Ancient tree and newly renovated hall in the Forbidden City, Beijing.

relationship between such trees and the notion of *memory*. These tortured natural forms are associated with memory because they embody the experiences of decay, death, and rebirth, but never lend themselves to the construction of a teleological historical process.²²

Long before the Song, Chinese writers had developed an intense interest in this image. This interest found its first major literary expression in Yu Xin's (513–81) 'Poetic disposition on withered trees' (Ku shu fu). Stimulated by a dying locust tree in the courtyard, Yu recalled some beautiful and awe-inspiring trees in their prime, whose trunks were like sculptures created by master artists, whose flowers were like multi-coloured embroidery, and who were even bestowed with honorable titles by emperors and princes. But in time,

... none of them could avoid a tragic fate: moss and fungus obscured their shape; birds and worms destroyed their appearance. Frost and dew lowered their branches; dusty winds shook their body and spirit. [This is why] a temple was dedicated to a Pale Tree (Baimu) at Donghan, and a sacrificial altar was built for a Withered Mulberry Tree (Kusang) near Xihe ...²³

Yu Xin's exposition on withered trees closely resembles a ruin poem such as Bao Zhao's (414?–66) 'Ruined city', in which the poet always recalls a place's former splendour and then laments its fatal destruction. A withered tree is a particular kind of ruin, however: it is withered but not necessarily destroyed. Indeed, the power and mystery of such trees in Chinese painting is rooted in a visual and conceptual ambiguity: their ruinous forms possess at the same time an extraordinary energy and spirit.²⁴ While displaying signs of death and winter, they also offer hope for rebirth and spring. Rather than an image of *finality*, a withered tree pertains to a chain of perpetual transformation. Borrowing Pierre Nora's words on memory, a withered tree 'remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived'.²⁵

²² I say 'rarely' because in some cases withered trees gained the significance of political omens and were used to construct dynastic history.

²³ Yu Xin, 'Ku shu fu' (Poetic disposition on withered trees).

²⁴ For an interesting discussion of *ku shu* in Chinese philosophy, religion, and art, see Zhu Liangzhi, *Quyuan fenghe* (Lotus blown by wind in a winding courtyard) (Hefeng, 2004), pp. 113–42.

²⁵ Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history: les lieux de mémoire,' *Representations*, 20 (Spring 1989), 7–26, quotation from 8–9.



Figure 6. Attributed to Xu Daoning, *Old Trees*, ink on silk, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Shitao was likewise fascinated by the idea of ancient trees. Unique among Chinese painters, however, he bestowed such images with an autobiographical significance, and especially emphasised their symbolism in conveying the notion of ‘rebirth’. I want to focus on two groups of his works. The first group was likely created around 1695 and 1696, when Shitao was about 53 or 54 years old. The most important image in this group is found in the last scene in a complex handscroll known as *Calligraphy and Sketches by Qingxiang*.²⁶ Concluding a series of scenes and poems, this image shows, in Richard Vinograd’s words, ‘a withered but beatific figure, with protruding ribs and wrinkled face and neck, wearing a monk’s robe, and meditating with a blissful smile within the hollow trunk of a tree’ (Fig. 7).²⁷ Next to the image Shitao inscribed in large, formal characters: ‘An old tree in the empty mountains: He sits within it for forty small-*jie* cycles.’ Following these words is a passage written in smaller characters, which ends with a rhetorical question: ‘The man in the picture—can he be called the future incarnation of Blind Abbot or not? Ha, ha!’ Since Blind Abbot (Xia Zunzhe) is one of Shitao’s adopted names, we know that the meditating monk inside the old tree is a pseudo-self-portrait, representing himself sixty-seven million years from 1696, the year he painted the image. (In Buddhist numerology one small-*jie* cycle equals about seventeen million years).

Iconographically, this pseudo-self-portrait of Shitao is related to a type of Arhat (Ch. Luohan) image, invented several hundred years ago by Guanxiu (832–912), a famous poet–painter who lived in the late Tang and early Five Dynasties period. Several series of Arhat paintings attributed to Guanxiu depict strange-looking monastic figures seated in deep meditation. Some of them dwell in caves while others sit beneath withered old trees; both their dried-up bodies and their landscape environment seem worn away by the passing of countless eons (Fig. 8). Scholars suspect that these images are Song copies of Guanxiu’s work. An imprint that originated in the Song shows a further development of this visual tradition. This is one of the famous *Five Hundred Luohans at Mt. Tiantai*, completed by Lin Tinggui and Zhou Jichang in 1178 (Fig. 9). The composition is roughly divided into two vertical halves. The lower half is occupied by a group of figures in vivid clothes, including four monks and an armoured man resembling Skanda (Chi. Wei Tuo), the Dharma guardian. Some of them look upward. Following their gaze we find a withered tree

²⁶ For a description and analysis of this scroll, see Hay, *Shitao*, pp. 122–3.

²⁷ Richard Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600–1900* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 62.

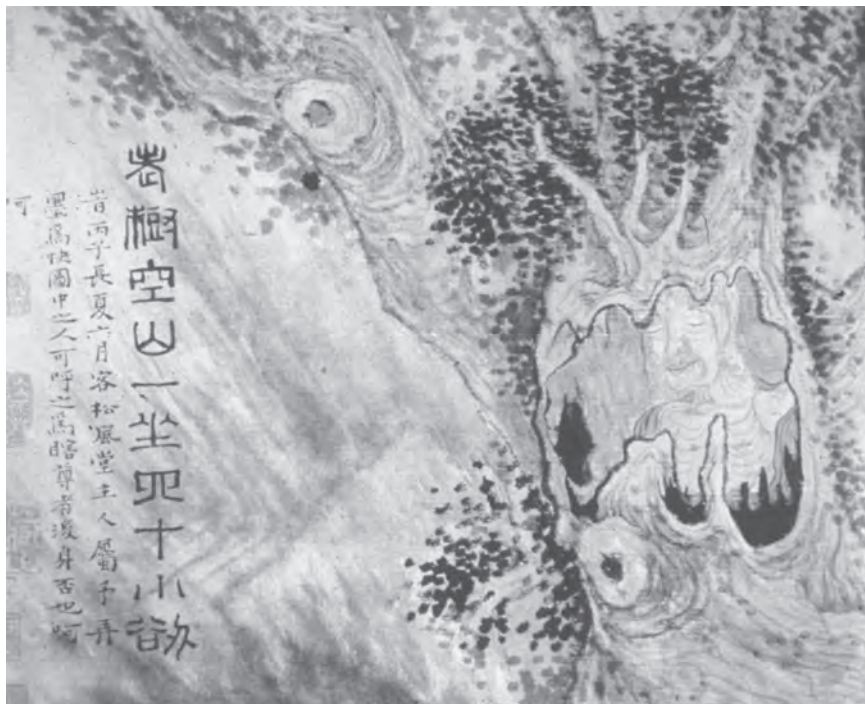


Figure 7. Shitao, *Calligraphies and Sketches by Qingxiang*, dated 1696, handscroll (detail of final section), ink and colour on paper, Palace Museum, Beijing.

growing out of water and mist. Painted entirely in ink like the landscape, an old monk is sitting inside the tree trunk in meditation. His unusual setting, as well as his protruding ribs and wrinkled face, connects the image with Shitao's painting, and in turn links Shitao's self-imagination with the idea of an Arhat—a holy man who has achieved nirvana through gaining insight into the true nature of existence.

This painting can be linked with two other works by Shitao. One of them, a double album leaf created a year earlier, again portrays a figure sitting inside a tree trunk (Fig. 10). Because I have serious questions about the authenticity of this work, however, I will omit it from this discussion.²⁸ The other painting is undated; but the signature Blind Abbot places it before 1697, when Shitao abandoned his Buddhist identity and formally presented himself as a Taoist. One of the eight leaves in a large album, it represents what is at first sight an unremarkable mountain view, with a

²⁸ Judging from the brushwork, especially the calligraphy of the inscription, it is likely that this work was made by Zhang Daqian, a famous forger of Shitao's work.



Figure 8. Attributed to Guanxiu, *Arhat*, ink and colour on silk, hanging scroll, Kodaiji Temple, Kyoto.



Figure 9. Lin Tinggui, *Luohan Meditating in a Tree*, 1178, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, Daitokuji Temple, Kyoto.



Figure 10. Shitao, 'Hermit within a Hollow Tree Trunk', a leaf in an album of 5 leaves, dated 1695, mounted as a handscroll, Sichuan Provincial Museum.

variety of trees growing in the mid-ground (Fig. 11). The uniqueness of the painting lies in its focal image, a leafless young tree with underdeveloped branches. It differs from all other trees in the painting in its stiff posture and striking bareness. With its straight trunk placed exactly on the painting's



Figure 11. Shitao, 'This Is My Former Incarnation', a leaf in *Landscape and Flowers*, album of 8 leaves, ink on paper, Tianjin Art Museum.

vertical axis, this humble image is given an iconic status and connected to Shitao's inscription on the painting: 'This is my former incarnation.'

While any relationship between the two images in Figures 7 and 11 can only be speculative, it is significant that their creation coincided with a major change in Shitao's life: after moving back to the south from the capital, he would soon abandon his long-time Buddhist identity. Relating this second change with the 1696 pseudo-self-portrait, Vinograd has interpreted the image as a 'final, somewhat wistful letting-go of a long-maintained role and identity, with its spiritual attainment deferred to a possible future incarnation'.²⁹ But my interest here is not about the religious implications of these pictures, but about the role of the trees in Shitao's conceptualisation of selfhood: from the undernourished young tree to the hollowed but still energetic juniper, these images encompass millions of years in an imagined lifespan, and embrace conflicting religious and intellectual identities of the artist.

A decade later, Shitao created another group of tree images with the deepening theme of rebirth. An album which he created around 1705 to 1707 is completely devoted to flowering plum trees. Never before have we seen death and rebirth represented in such a succinct and dramatic manner. Opening the album we see a plum tree broken into several pieces, but continuing to produce abundant blossoms (Fig. 12). The poem about the picture identifies the plum as a relic from the past, but a relic which is full of life:

Seeing ancient plum blossom is like meeting a 'leftover man' from the
past—
But who sent the plum to mirror the ancients?
Having witnessed the up-and-down of the Six Dynasties, it hides itself
in aloof retirement;
Though broken, it doubles its spirit at the year's end.³⁰

Then there is a painting from his 1707 album *Reminiscences of Nanjing*, which shows a close-up of an ancient ginkgo tree, whose ruinous state is emphasised by the broken and hollowed trunk (Fig. 13). Shitao gives this tortured form an ironic sense of monumentality, portraying it as a powerful pillar connecting heaven and earth (*Chi. ding tian li di*). According to

²⁹ Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self*, p. 62.

³⁰ Marilyn and Shen Fu, *Studies in Connoisseurship: Chinese Paintings from the Arthur M. Sackler Collection in New York and Princeton* (Princeton, NJ, 1987), p. 299. The original translation of the first line is: 'Seeing an old plum is like meeting a "leftover man" from the past.' I changed 'an old plum' to 'ancient plum blossom' because this is closer to the meaning of *gu hua*—ancient flowers.



Figure 12. Shitao, 'Plum of Baocheng', a leaf in *Plum Blossom: Poetry and Painting*, album of 8 leaves, ink on paper, Princeton University Art Museum.

his poem on the painting, the ginkgo grows on top of the Green Dragon Mountains near Nanjing. During the Six Dynasties it was maimed by a bolt of lightning, but later defied death and sprouted a new growth.³¹ The idea of death and rebirth in this legend clearly fascinated the artist: while stressing the tree's physical damage, Shitao also painted new leaves growing on a lower branch and on the broken trunk itself. It is difficult to find a stronger proof of the artist's enduring desire for life and art, because when he created this image he had been seriously ill and would die before the year's end.

Qi: ruins as extraordinary phenomena

I can now summarise the representational modes discussed so far, each linked with a different aspect of Shitao's perception of the past. His depictions of ruins of Ming palaces represent *yi ji*, 'leftover traces' of a recently

³¹ See *ibid.*, p. 311.



Figure 13. Shitao, 'Old Ginkgo at Mt. Qinglong', a leaf in *Reminiscences of Jinling*, album of 12 leaves, dated 1707, ink and colour on paper, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

perished dynasty with which he identified himself as a 'leftover subject' (*yi min*). He portrayed himself wandering in the areas near Nanjing, where the ancient Six Dynasties had established their capitals. His images of old trees betray a Buddhist belief in endless cycle of rebirth, which extend one's life back to an infinite past and forward to an infinite future. In all

these cases, ruins are not conceived as an external existence with independent historical and aesthetic value, but are internalised into a pictorial language to express his experiences, feelings, and ideas.

This understanding prepares a basis for us to examine the last group of 'ruin' images in Shitao's work, which seems at first glance to contradict the interpretation I have just proposed. At the beginning of this lecture I mentioned that my search for 'ruin' pictures in traditional Chinese painting—that is, pictures that represent not ancient but 'ruined' buildings—had yielded fewer than five examples. Quite amazingly, the two most convincing examples in this group come from Shitao's hand. One showing a ruined stone archway and the other a stone pagoda, both pictures belong to an album depicting views of the Yellow Mountain (Figs. 14*a–b*). To modern people exposed to various kinds of ruin images on a daily basis, these pictures may seem nothing special—they simply represent two decaying structures Shitao found on his trips to the famous mountain. But I believe that to a seventeenth-century Chinese viewer they must have evoked the notion of *qi*—strange and extraordinary phenomena which transcend the ordinary. This is not only because the two images were virtually unique in traditional Chinese painting, but also because Shitao's purpose in creating the album *is* to transcend the ordinary: mingled with these two seemingly realistic pictures are images of strange peaks, rocks, and trees, as well as legends of immortals (Figs. 15*a–d*). Taken together, these images depict the Yellow Mountains as a realm of marvels, in which nature and culture, past and present, human and divine no longer follow any conventional definitions.³²

In this way, the ruined pagoda and stone gate are both *gu shi* and *shen ji*—historical traces and divine traces. Here I will use another of Shitao's Yellow Mountain pictures to illustrate this double meaning and to conclude this lecture. It is from another album in which Shitao recorded one of his journeys to the famous mountain.³³ Each of the eight pictures in the

³² Many scholars have discussed the importance of the Yellow Mountain to traditional Chinese painting. For general discussions, see James Cahill (ed.), *Shadows of Mt. Huang: Painting and Printing of the Anhui School* (Berkeley, CA, 1981); idem, 'Huang Shan paintings as pilgrimage pictures', in Susan Naquin and Chünfang Yü (eds.), *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China* (Berkeley, CA, 1992), pp. 246–92; Flora Fu, *Framing Famous Mountains: Grand Tour and Mingshan Paintings in Sixteenth-century China* (Hong Kong, 2009).

³³ There are different opinions about the date of the album. Richard Edwards suggests that it was probably made around 1670, when Shitao was thirty years old. But he also cautions that Shitao often depicted a journey long after the event. See Richard Edwards, *The Painting of Tao-chi, 1641–ca. 1720* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1967), pp. 31–2, 45–6. Other scholars have dated the album to the 1680s based on stylistic evidence.



Figure 14(a). Shitao, *Huangshan Album*, Leaf 1, ink or ink and colour on paper. Palace Museum, Beijing.

album shows the artist travelling through the mountain's famous scenic spots while discovering its secrets. The leaf in question represents his ascent of the mountain's central peak, called Tiandu Feng or the Heavenly Capital Peak (Fig. 16). Near the centre of the composition, rock boulders



Figure 14(b). Shitao, *Huangshan Album*, Leaf 4, ink or ink and colour on paper. Palace Museum, Beijing.

configure a stone giant. Shitao wrote an inscription next to it: 'Ice his heart and jade his bones, stone and iron makes this man. He is the master of the Yellow Mountain and the minister to Xuanyuan.' Here Xuanyuan refers to the Yellow Emperor, China's mythical founder, who had gone to



Figure 15(a). Shitao, *Huangshan Album*, Leaf 6, ink or ink and colour on paper. Palace Museum, Beijing.

the Yellow Mountain thousands of years before to collect herbs for making an elixir of immortality. In the picture, the stone giant's head and shoulders are covered with vegetation; cracks and erosion on his rock body further betray the endless years which have passed: this is indeed a



Figure 15(b). Shitao, *Huangshan Album*, Leaf 12, ink or ink and colour on paper. Palace Museum, Beijing.

'ruin' left from the remote past. Interestingly, Shitao also portrayed himself as a traveller below the stone giant in the same pose, thus making himself an incarnation of the master of the immortal mountain.

* * *



Figure 15(c). Shitao, *Huangshan Album*, Leaf 15, ink or ink and colour on paper. Palace Museum, Beijing.

Taking Shitao's work as my main examples, this lecture investigates the conception of ruins in traditional Chinese pictorial art. But my goal is neither to demonstrate an unchanging mode of conceptualisation nor a teleological progression of visual forms. Instead, I start by tracking down



Figure 15(d). Shitao, *Huangshan Album*, Leaf 19, ink or ink and colour on paper. Palace Museum, Beijing.

the indigenous definitions of ruins as well as a broad variety of images related to the idea of ruination. An exploration of the historical, cultural, artistic and technological conditions of these definitions and images in turn raises a range of issues, including the relationship between the concept of

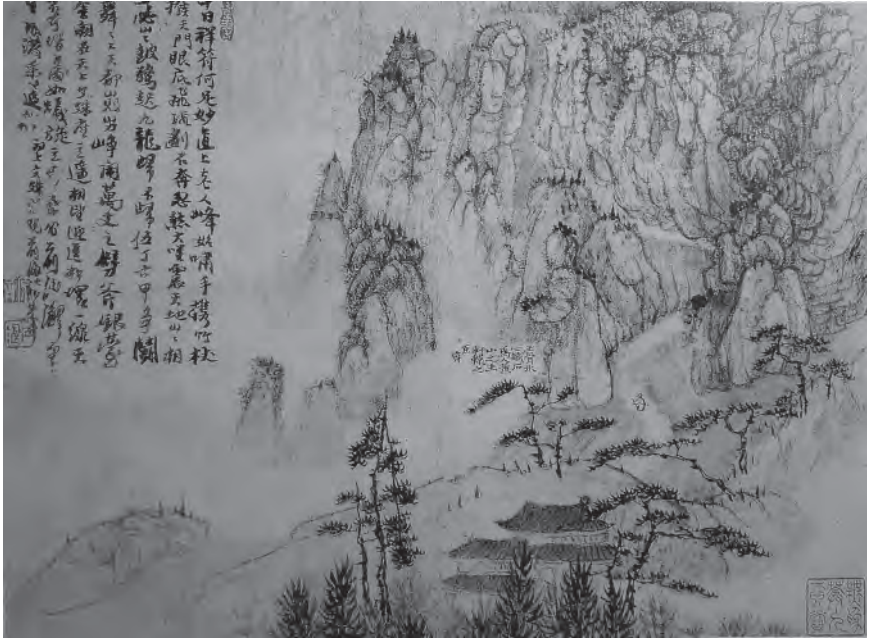


Figure 16. Shitao, 'Heavenly Capital Peak', a leaf from *Eight Scenic Spots in Huangshan*, album of 8 leaves, ink and colour on paper, Sen-oku Hakuko Kan, Kyoto.

ruins and timber architecture, the idea of the 'trace' and its visual manifestations, the metaphorical use of images in representing time, and indigenous methods for recording damage and decay. The subtly divergent meanings of two archaic characters for ruins, *qiu* and *xu*, provide this study with a semantic basis, revealing different ways of imagining and constructing 'memory sites' in literature and art. Images of 'withered trees' then offer visual testimonies to understand how various temporalities—past, present, and rebirth—are realised in pictorial forms. The final section studies several of Shitao's Yellow Mountain paintings, and links his depictions of architectural ruins with the idea of *qi*—strange or extraordinary phenomena. Although my lecture focuses on the traditional period, it will help identify new, 'modern' concepts and representations of ruins in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the aesthetic of picturesque ruins reached China from Europe and when war ruins became a frequent subject in the newly invented medium of photography. But this must be the topic of another study.