

Artist and Subject in Ming Dynasty China

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A MAN SITS BENEATH a gnarled and leafless tree, on a bank overlooking a turbulent stretch of water (Fig. 1). His clothes, the long robe which covers his lower limbs, show him to be of the class which does not labour manually, but otherwise there are few clues to his identity. He has nothing with him, no companions. The composition gives no clues as to where he came from; there is no path to his place of silent sitting, no suggestion as to how the space occupied by the viewer might be connected to his space, how we might get 'there' from 'here'. Above all there is no background. The bank on which he rests appears to fall away precipitously behind him, and the picture lacks any intimations of distant human habitation, of social life, of what we might (in a dubiously linguistic metaphor) call 'context'.

This image comes from the first known work of art history to be illustrated throughout with reproductions of works of art (as opposed to portraits of artists), from a book entitled 'Master Gu's Painting Album' (*Gu shi hua pu*), which was published in 1603 by Gu Bing, a successful professional artist who had served the Ming imperial court in Beijing before returning to his native city of Hangzhou, in China's cultural and economic heartland of the lower Yangtze valley.¹ The 106 wood block print images in his book, each of which occupies the full area of a page

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¹ Gu Bing, *Gu shi hua pu*, Wenwu chubanshe edn. (Beijing, 1983). On this text see Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (1997), ch. 5, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Woodblock Reproduction'.

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Figure 1. Imaginary painting by Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), from 'Master Gu's Pictorial Album', woodblock print, published Hangzhou, 1603. After *Gu shi hua pu*, Wenwu chubanshe facsimile edn. (Beijing, 1983).

size unusually large for a published work of the period, claim to illustrate the work of the same number of artists, ranging in time from the almost legendary master of the fourth century, Gu Kaizhi (c.345–c.406 CE), to painters who were alive and working at the time of publication, such as Dong Qichang (1555–1636). Some of the pictures illustrate actual works which still survive, and which Gu may have seen in the imperial collection or in the collections of other wealthy and well-connected patrons. Some are generic renditions of an artist's style, concentrating on those characteristics most attached to an artist's name in the Ming art market; typical subject matter, some idea of style and brushwork. The picture shown here stands for the work of Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), one of the most illustrious names in the canon of Chinese painting, indeed of culture (*wen*) generally. For members of the Ming land-owning elite, Wen was admired in his own day and beyond as a paragon not only of key cultural accomplishments such as literature in prose and verse, calligraphy and painting, but of moral integrity and personal rectitude. He was (and indeed he remains) the *wenren*, the 'man of culture' par excellence, and he came very early to be identified as one of the archetypes of the discursive construction, '*wenren hua*', a concept variously transmitted into English as 'scholar-amateur painting' or 'literati painting'.² The print in Master Gu's album stands on one level for the way on which Wen's work was understood some fifty years after his death, as being typified by, for example, very dry and sparse brushwork. ('He used ink as if it were gold' was the cliché applied to Wen.) Dry and gnarled trees are certainly a feature of his surviving oeuvre. He did indeed paint a number of pictures in which a single gentleman sits alone in contemplation, often beside a body of water, as in a picture now in the Museum of East Asian Art in Stockholm (Fig. 2). The print in Figure 1 therefore, although it does not reproduce any single work, probably achieves its aim of providing Gu's readers (perhaps the culturally rather insecure), with a generic image of the great bank of cultural capital which by 1603 was bound up in the painting of Wen Zhengming. It, together with the text which accompanies the picture, provide the viewer with some of the commonplaces about Wen's life and art which enabled them potentially to participate more fully in the collective viewings of works, one of the key forms of social interaction for the Ming elite.

² Anne de Coursey Clapp, *Wen Cheng-ming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity*, *Artibus Asiae Supplementum* 34 (Ascona, 1975); Richard Edwards (with an essay by Anne de Coursey Clapp), *The Art of Wen Cheng-ming (1470–1559)* (Ann Arbor, 1976).



Figure 2. Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), 'Philosopher by a Waterfall'. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 155.7 × 65.9 cm. Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm, Sweden.

But I want to argue that this free-floating image, this man with literally no background, portrays for the late Ming viewer not just the paintings of Wen Zhengming (which they might encounter in a social or commercial context) but also functions as an image of the man himself, and through him for the elite ideal of the self. For a late Ming viewer, this picture might well be understood most comfortably as being a sort of self portrait, the identity of the sitter and the artist collapsing into each other. I want to use it then as a point of entry to an argument about changes in the understanding of the self, of subjectivity and of personal identity across the Ming period, or at least across the nearly two centuries which separate the birth of Wen Zhengming in 1470 from the traumatic fall of the dynasty to peasant insurgents and Manchu invaders in 1644. And I want to try and hint at some of the ways in which the image of Wen Zhengming in Master Gu's album is very different from the self identity which Wen Zhengming creates through his own extensive writings, particularly those writings which do not deal with matters of painting, and consequently have been little examined by art historians up to now (this forms the focus of a larger and ongoing project).

The human figure may be the focal point of the composition in the 'Wen Zhengming' print in *Gu shi hua pu*, but no one in Wen's lifetime, thought of him as essentially a figure painter any more than he did himself. Although the pictures which we nowadays so confidently call 'Chinese landscape paintings' rarely lack human occupancy altogether, there was a clear understanding by elite aesthetic theorists in the early and mid-Ming that figure painting as such occupied a lower scale on the hierarchy of the arts, and that consequently the artists who produced it were more likely to be artisans than scholars, players rather than gentlemen.³ Of course great quantities of figure painting, of narrative painting even, continued to be produced in the Ming. The rites of ancestral cults demanded portraiture, and a lively interest in the physical appearance of famous men led to the production of paintings like a portrait (Fig. 3) of Shen Zhou (1426–1509), Wen Zhengming's teacher and mentor in the field of painting, and like him a prosperous landowner from the environs of the great city of Suzhou.⁴ In Wen's lifetime, imperial processions and ceremonies continued to be documented in meticulous pictorial detail,

³ Craig Clunas, 'Human Figures in the Decoration of Ming Lacquer', *Oriental Art*, NS 32 (1986), 69–86.

⁴ Discussed with translations of the inscriptions in Richard Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraiture 1600–1900* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 28–9.



Figure 3. Anonymous, 'Portrait of Shen Zhou at Age Eighty', c.1507. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 71 × 52.4 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

and carefully preserved in the palace as part of the formal record of the doings of the Son of Heaven (Fig. 4). But the makers of the great imperial procession scrolls, like the artist of the portrait of Shen Zhou, are anonymous artisans, their names preserved nowhere in the voluminous Ming writing on art, or in the *biji*, 'brush-note' literature which members of the educated elite produced in unprecedented quantities. It is Shen Zhou's own inscription on the image, the calligraphic presence of his body, rather than the image itself, which enables it to perform the cultural work of raising issues of image, likeness and the position of the viewing subject, issues which for Shen's European contemporaries were more often posed in the specific context of self-portraiture merely by pictures alone, or by text alone, but more rarely by their mutual engagement.

People are far from absent in Wen Zhengming's own pictures, or in those of his peer group. Indeed they are often central to the meaning of those pictures (Fig. 5). Shen Zhou's masterpiece 'Lofty Mount Lu' may

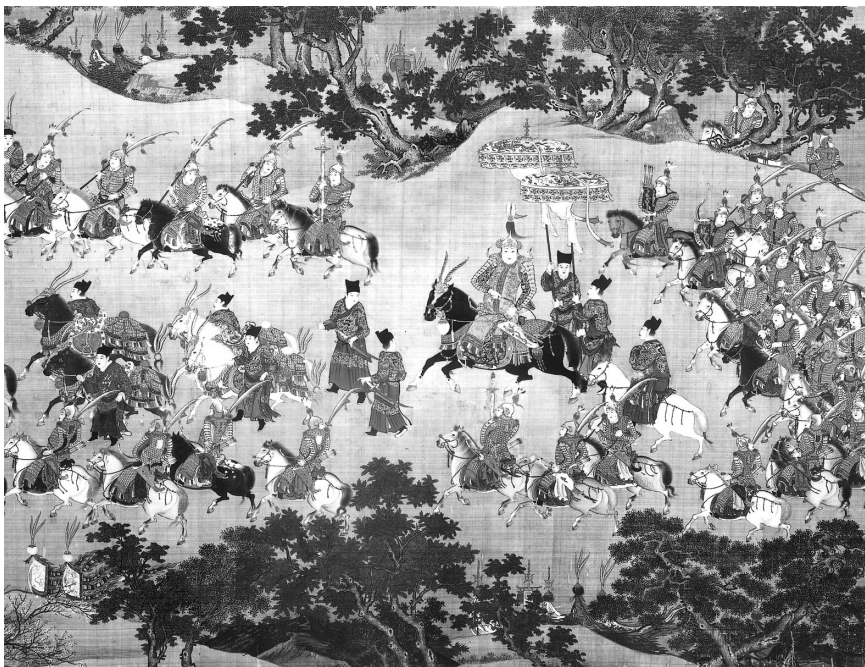


Figure 4. Anonymous, 'The Jiajing Emperor in Procession to the Imperial Mausoleum', c.1536–8 (detail). Hand scroll, ink and colour on silk, 97.6 × 2995.1 cm. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.



Figure 5. Shen Zhou (1427–1509), ‘Lofty Mt Lu’, dated 1467. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 193.8 × 98.1 cm. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taiwan, Republic of China.

be dominated formally by the towering peak which gives the picture its title, but the entire point of the work, its explicit eulogy of the virtues of the artist's teacher Chen Kuan as exceeding the scale of the mountain, is lost if we do not notice the figure of Chen himself standing in contemplation at Mount Lu's foot.⁵ And many Ming paintings by elite artists are effectively portraits, particularly the so-called *biehaotu*, 'or alternative name pictures', which often portray gentlemen in the setting of some pieces of property, often a garden pavilion, with which they metonymically share a name.⁶ So in an example by Wen Zhengming's contemporary, the Suzhou professional Zhou Chen (c.1455–after 1536), *Bai tan tu* or 'Picture of Clear Pool' (Fig. 6), the title 'Clear Pool' is applicable both to the body of water, and to the gentleman who sits by it.⁷ In this case no such pool need actually have existed, and the absence of the merely topographical raises the status of the image.

Wen Zhengming certainly did own a building on his property known as the *Ting yun guan*, or 'Halting Clouds Lodging' the immediate referent in the title of one of his most famous pictures (Fig. 7), *Ting yun guan yan bie tu*, most frequently translated as 'Farewell at Halting Clouds'.⁸ It depicts the artist, in the summer of 1531, bidding farewell to a close friend by the name of Wang Chong (1494–1533), who was on a journey to the southern capital at Nanjing. The Halting Clouds Lodging itself is nowhere to be seen, but the grammatical rigidities of English force the translator to insert prepositions which occlude the indeterminacy with which the property and its owner are identified. It would do no violence to the grammar of the Chinese to *also* translate the title as 'Halting Clouds Lodging Talks of Farewell', where Halting Clouds Lodging means no more nor less than 'Wen Zhengming'.

To a much greater degree than the solitary sitter of Master Gu's pictorial album, the figures of the 'Farewell' are socially situated. The two principal figures at the left of the picture are engaged in social intercourse both as host and guest, and as older and younger friends (arguably also as master and pupil); these are relationships which had canonical status in the writings of Confucians and as such, even in their most banal

⁵ Wen Fong and James C. Y. Watt, *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei* (New York, 1996), pp. 374–5.

⁶ Craig Clunas, *Fruitful Sites: Garden Culture in Ming Dynasty China* (1996), pp. 153–6.

⁷ *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland, 1980), pp. 193–4.

⁸ Edwards, *The Art of Wen Cheng-ming*, pp. 112–13.

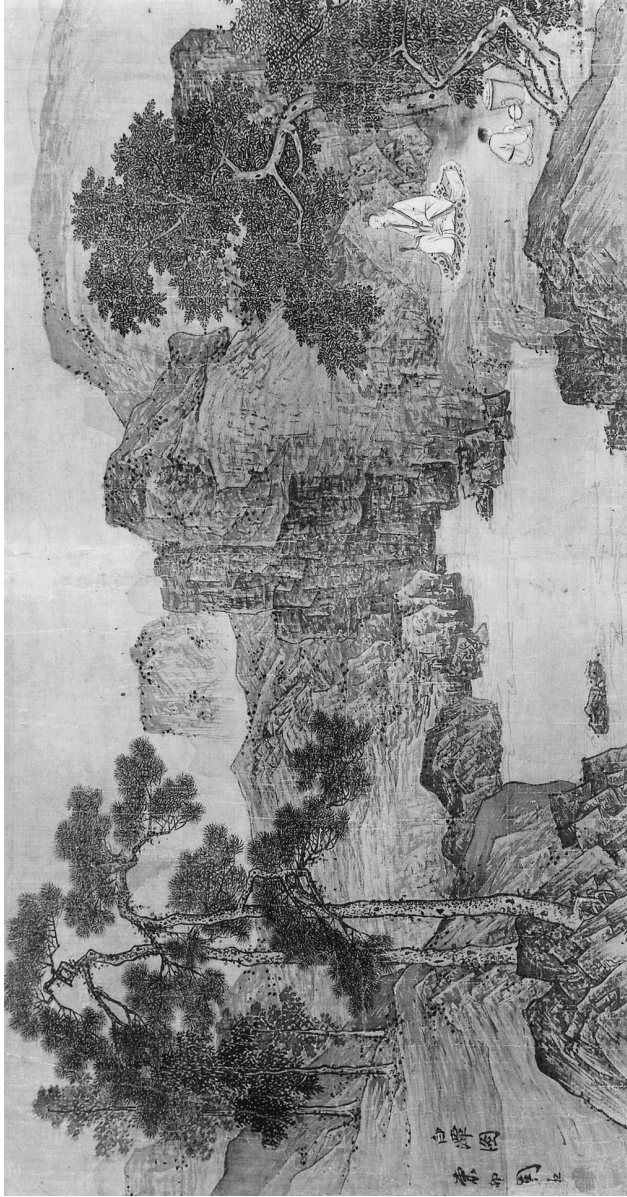


Figure 6. Zhou Chen (c.1455–after 1536), ‘Clear Pool’. Hanging scroll, ink and light colour on silk, 33.3 × 63.4 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City Missouri (Purchase; Nelson Trust).



Figure 7. Wen Zhengming, 'Farewell at Halting Clouds Lodging', dated 1531. Hanging Scroll, ink and colour on paper, 52 × 25.2 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst.

manifestations, were deemed to be strands in the thick texture of principles binding humanity into a larger cosmic order. In the right among the trees there are servants clearly visible, identifiable as such by their distinctive hairstyles, their short jackets and trousers rather than long robes, and the deferential posture in which they stand. Their subaltern status is the foil for the elite status of the two sitting men, indeed is what makes that elite status itself. There are unequal power relations too between the figures of Wen Zhengming and Wang Chong, as demanded not least by the twenty-four year gap in their ages (considerably more than a generation in Ming terms; Wang Chong was younger than Wen's eldest son). This inequality in the context of reciprocity is coded in the picture by the more central position of Wen Zhengming as host, his slightly greater size, more erect posture, and the fact that it is the younger man who gestures while the older one maintains the impassive bodily bearing associated by convention with authority and higher status. The poem with which Wen accompanies the painting in an equal imbrication of word and image, speaks of the writer's 'white head' (although the conventions of painting do not allow for this to be pictured), and of the recipient as a 'flying bird', a young man still full of promise in the vast realm of public affairs (Wang Chong's growth of beard stands for a masculine vigour, the luxuriant outward sign of a rampant inner vitality). In alluding to Wen's withdrawal from public life and retirement from service at the imperial court (an event which had taken place only four years before this picture was painted) the poem deftly manages to act as a reminder of that very prestigious service at least having taken place, and of the source of the title of *Hanlin yuan daizhao*, 'Expectant Official in the Hanlin Academy', by which Wen was already known in his lifetime and which his heirs were meticulous in attaching to his name in all formal commemorations of him. It reminds the recipient of the picture of the author's place in the dense networks of patronage and interest, and of Wen's ability to help his much younger friend negotiate the complex social world of Ming power, should his promise come to bear fruit.

What took Wang Chong to Nanjing (and hence occasioned the production of poem and image as physical testimony) was his intention to sit for the imperial examinations, his eighth attempt since 1510 (when he was a precocious sixteen), to attain the distinction of *ju ren*, 'elevated man', the principal point of entry into real levels of substantive rank in the imperial bureaucracy. He failed on this occasion too, and died some two years later, still under forty, to be widely mourned as the lost hope of literature in the Suzhou region. In the funerary elegy which Wen Zhengming com-

posed for him, there is real despair and genuine affection at the painful thought of such promise snuffed out too young, a sense of the loss of a favourite pupil who had been a daily companion since his childhood.⁹

Although at first glance and in many ways it fits remarkably well with an orientalist fantasy of the Chinese artist as an essentially asocial and atemporal being,¹⁰ Wen Zhengming's 'Farewell' painting for Wang Chong is therefore an artefact caught up in a dense network of social relations, which alludes to many of the most crucial concerns of the Ming elite at the point (the examination system) where interpersonal relations were bound into the fabric of state power (in a way very different from the local European understanding of 'State' and 'Society' as essential polarities).¹¹ As such it is typical of much of Wen's work, whether in pictorial or calligraphic form, whether in poetry or prose, even if we are not always able to reconstruct with such precision exactly what the social and power relations involved in the creation of a given piece of work were. These social relations, acts of giving and receiving, of deference and condescension, were central to what one might (however anachronistically and with whatever cultural incongruity), call notions of the self and the subject in Ming China. What it is important to recognise here is the understanding in the early and mid-Ming of that self as contingent, not fixed. Every master was once a pupil, every father was once a son. Even the emperor has a mother, to whom he kneels on a daily basis. Recent work on the Ming legal code shows how extremely difficult it is to draw out from that code abstract principles of hegemony and subalternity, even to say that 'men were more important than women'; the subjects of that code were always contingent, never situated in some definitively fixed hierarchy of power relations.¹² It is a moment in the evolution of these contingent subjectivities which is captured in Wen's 'Farewell' for Wang Chong.

⁹ Zhou Daozhen, ed., *Wen Zhengming ji*, 2 vols. (Beijing, 1987), I, pp. 713–15.

¹⁰ A small popular work, Mario Bussagli, *Chinese Painting* (1969), p. 112 titles it generically 'The Farewell', and remarks, 'even to a casual observer the sense of complete detachment is very clearly rendered by the relationship of the men to the trees, twisted and indifferent.' The 'groundlessness' of the figures in Chinese painting was a trope of early western criticism, to the degree that the French historian Jules Michelet could use it metaphorically in the introduction to the 1869 edition of his *Histoire de France* (p. 13): 'Without a geographical base the people, the historical actor, seems to walk in the air as in Chinese paintings where the ground is missing.' I owe the reference and the translation to Dr Robert Tombs.

¹¹ The theme of Theodore Hutters, R. Bin Wong, and Pauline Yu, eds. *Culture and State in Chinese History: Conventions, Accommodations and Critiques* (Stanford, 1997).

¹² Ann Waltner, 'Breaking the Law: Family Violence, Gender and Hierarchy in the Legal Code of the Ming Dynasty', *Ming Studies*, 36 (1996), 29–43.

The cultural and historical specificity of subjectivity has over the last few decades become a topic of considerable interest in Europe and America, in a wide range of areas of enquiry. In a recent collection of essays under the title *Rewriting the Self*, a range of scholars sets out to dismantle what Roy Porter as editor describes as ‘The Authorized Version’ of the history of subjectivity, an essentially European tale whose main chapters are formed out of writings from St Augustine to Sigmund Freud via Descartes, with a Burckhardtian ‘Renaissance’ and a Weberian ‘Reformation’ as key episodes in the ‘discovery of man’.¹³ The Foucault of *The Order of Things* is clearly one of the principal architects of the slow and incomplete downfall of this authorised version, but it is manifestly the case that for Foucault the downfall as much as the ascent of ‘man’ was something which happened between the Elbe (one is tempted to say the Rhine) and the Atlantic Ocean. A cross-cultural assault on the issue of subjectivity has, however, clearly now begun, and indeed in the volume of essays mentioned Peter Burke explicitly challenges as false the equation of ‘sense of self’ with ‘western individualism’.¹⁴ This has directed attention towards models of subjectivity other than ‘the Cartesian Subject conceived as a specific and autonomous reality’, the theme of a special issue of the journal *Discours social/Social discourse*, 6, 1–2 (1994) devoted to the ‘Non-Cartesian Subject’, and to ‘dialogue between “non-Cartesian” cultures such as China and Japan with the “First World”’. The contemporary cultural theorist Jing Wang has looked on this project with a fairly jaundiced eye, as an ‘attempt to reinvigorate the Western tradition of the subject by inquiring into other forms of the subject in non-western cultural-traditions’.¹⁵ She sees it as just one more Western appropriation of the exotic, particularly ironic in that it is happening at a time of unprecedented *Chinese* appropriation of the idea of the empowered and autonomous subject in all its glory:

The Western fascination with this aesthetic subjectless self has come a long way since Fenellosa’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Chinese ideograms and Gary Snyder’s experiments with the aesthetics of Dao and Zen. A theoretical pro-

¹³ Roy Porter, ‘Introduction’, in Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (1997), 1–14.

¹⁴ Peter Burke, ‘Representations of the Self from Petrarch to Descartes’, in Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self*, 17–28 (p. 27).

¹⁵ Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1996), p. 324. Wang’s ch. 5, ‘Romancing the Subject: Utopian Moments in the Chinese Aesthetics of the 1980s’ originally appeared in *Discours social/Social discourse*.

posals such as the 'non-Cartesian' subject still continues, to a certain extent, the sage of the Western appropriation of the romance with the holistic and immediate self. The West has yet to learn (perhaps it would be with mixed reactions) that the 'Oriental' holistic self, in an ironic reversal, is receding further and further away from the social and cultural imaginary of post-Mao China.¹⁶

If we take account of her strictures, and look at Chinese notions of the self not as a timeless totality but as a set of historically contingent and changing artefacts, is there any way of getting a purchase on some of the seemingly very disparate discourses of the range of Ming dynasty texts into which someone like Wen Zhengming is written? How for instance are we to understand the fact that his close friend He Liangjun (1506–73) seems to delight in spreading the material on Wen across the maximum area of his *biji* collection 'Collected Discourses from [or "by"] the Studio of the Four Friends'.¹⁷ This text contains a total of thirty different anecdotes, variously distributed across the categories of; History (10), Miscellaneous Records (4), Prose (1), Verse (5), Calligraphy (4), Painting (5) and Rectification of Customs (1). Far from providing an organic and holistic 'Chinese self', as the western fantasy critiqued so trenchantly by Jing Wang would imply, we get instead in He Liangjun's 'Collected Discourses' a fractured and diffuse Wen Zhengming, on whom it is hard to focus. It is hard also to see from this distance why certain anecdotes appear in certain chapters as opposed to others, but it is obvious that although He Liangjun is telling the same kind of stories about Wen Zhengming which Giorgio Vasari was (almost contemporaneously) telling about Michelangelo, he is telling them in a very different way. Why should this be so?

Some of the most productive work in advancing our understanding of issues surrounding self and subjectivity in China has been done by the philosophers David Hall and Roger Ames, who in a series of books over the last ten years have proposed a drastic re-reading of the Chinese epistemological tradition which is only just beginning to have an impact on the study of the Chinese past, art history not excluded.¹⁸ Right at the beginning of their most recent work they lay out the problem of the self in European culture, seen by them as a complex term with much-disputed

¹⁶ Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 195.

¹⁷ He Liangjun, *Si you zhai cong shuo*, Yuan Ming shiliao biji congkan, Zhonghua shuju edn. (Beijing, 1983).

¹⁸ The three books in question, all by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, are: *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, 1987); *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, 1995); (most pertinently for the present enquiry) *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, 1998).

referents, and one the very validity of which has been recently questioned repeatedly, and conclude:

For what we [meaning ‘the West’] have achieved involuntarily as a consequence of the failure of any single definition or interpretation [of the self] to realise consensual status, the Chinese have traditionally affirmed as the ground of their intellectual and institutional harmony namely, the recognition of the copresence of a plurality of significances with which any given term might easily resonate. The difference is that the Chinese understanding of self is not threatened, but deepened by this fact.¹⁹

They argue that Western interpretations have often thought of the Chinese as lacking a sense of individuality, but that what is being misunderstood here rests on an assumption that a Western construction of individuality is the only kind. (I vividly remember a Chinese classmate explaining to me that while ‘Who am I?’ is one of the central questions of the western tradition its literal Chinese equivalent, ‘*Wo shi shei?*’ simply sounds like the speaker has received a bump on the head.) Hall and Ames go on to contrast the western view, of only one form of individuality, with an alternative. In the former; ‘a single, unitary separate and indivisible thing . . . by virtue of some essential property or properties, qualifies as a member of a class’. By virtue of its membership it is substitutable. Hence equality before the law, in the sight of God etc. etc. ‘It is this definition of individual that generates notions such as autonomy, equality, liberty, freedom, will, and so on. Such a self relates to its world only extrinsically.’ By contrast they characterise a Chinese view as one which sees the individual as unique, broadly comparable to others (like a work of art) but containing no assumptions about class membership. ‘Under this definition, equality can only mean parity . . . Much of the effort in understanding the traditional Confucian conception of self has to do with clarifying the distinction between autonomy and uniqueness. While the definition of self as irreducibly social certainly precludes autonomous individuality, it does not rule out the second, less familiar notion of uniqueness expressed in terms of my roles and my relationships.’²⁰ Their model for understanding the Chinese self is one they define as ‘Self as Field and Focus’, where: ‘The variety of specific contexts defined by particular family relations, or sociopolitical orders, constitute the fields

¹⁹ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, pp. 4–5. The notion of ‘varieties of the self’ as unproblematic in Chinese terms has been previously explored in Pei-yi Wu, ‘Varieties of the Chinese Self’, in Vytautas Kavolis, ed., *Designs of Selfhood* (Rutherford, NJ, 1984), pp. 107–31.

²⁰ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 25.

focused by individuals who are in turn shaped by the field of influences they focus. *Ars contextualis*, as a practical endeavor, names that peculiar art of contextualisation that allows the focal individual to ally herself with those contexts that she will constitute and that in turn will constitute her.²¹

What I believe this means in the case of Wen Zhengming is that try as we may we are traducing the Ming discourse in which he is embedded if we try to construct an identity, even a serial identity, for him on the lines of a string of attributes like painter, calligrapher, and scholar, as is done in standard reference books like the authoritative *Dictionary of Ming Biography*.²² Any attempt to do so is an act of *de*-contextualisation by its very nature. It assumes what Hall and Ames would call a ‘one–many’ or ‘part–whole’ model, rather than the ‘this–that’ of the original. Doing a painting does not make you ‘a painter’, writing a poem does not make you ‘a poet’. Rather, ‘Since there is no overarching context determining the shape of other contexts, the world is an open-ended affair comprised by “thises” and “thats” construable from any number of different perspectives.’²³ I want to try and go a step beyond Hall and Ames’ analysis in the case of Wen Zhengming and argue that the very diffuseness of the material about him, its very different foci, is not an obstacle to understanding ‘what he was really all about’, but quite the reverse. As is quite well known, one of the great structuring devices in the modern narrative of Chinese painting history is a perceived dichotomy between ‘amateurs’ and ‘professionals’, the former having historically enjoyed higher status. Much excellent work has been done in recent years to deconstruct this model, revealing the much more complex contingencies behind the production of art.²⁴ However, I am coming to the view that our understanding of the amateur/professional dichotomy, even at the level of discourse, is perhaps still too disjunctive, and in need of looking at again.²⁵ I would also argue that we need to historicise the model of selfhood found in the work of Hall and Ames, which might be seen as unduly invariant over

²¹ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 40.

²² Richard Edwards, ‘Wen Cheng-ming’, in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography 1368–1644*, 2 vols. (New York and London, 1976), pp. 1471–4.

²³ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 40.

²⁴ e.g. James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York, 1994).

²⁵ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, pp. 18–19 ‘In the West there is a strong tendency to construe important contrasts as disjunctive by virtue of the persuasiveness in our culture of dualistic contrasts rooted in the being/not-being problematic.’

time. There is for them but one Chinese episteme. But what if there were major shifts in Chinese views of the self over time, even across relatively short periods?

Some fifteen years before 'Farewell at Halting Clouds', another Suzhou professional artist was busy producing an album which contains some of the most distinctive images coming down to us from the Ming period. This is the extraordinary 'Beggars and Street Characters' by Zhou Chen, the artist of 'Clear pool' (Fig. 6), which is dated 1516 and is now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Fig. 8).²⁶ An inscription by the artist records how, 'I was idling under the window, and suddenly there came to my mind all the appearances and manners of the beggars and other street characters whom I often saw in the streets and markets. With brush and ink ready at hand, I put them into pictures in an impromptu way. It may not be worthy of serious enjoyment, but it certainly can be considered as a warning and admonition to the world.' Quite what Zhou meant by a warning and an admonition is open to debate; James Cahill suggested in his discussion of the picture that the warning is a Buddhist one, against committing the sins that will bring on the retribution of rebirth in this degraded state. He also quoted a sixteenth-century Chinese writer who chose a political reading of the images, as a warning against the corrupt government of the eunuch dictator Liu Jin and his successors during the reign of the feckless Zhengde emperor.²⁷ Whatever the correct answer, and they are surely not mutually exclusive, not the least striking aspect of the picture is its setting. Or rather its lack of setting. Despite the artist's statement that he often saw these characters 'in the streets and markets', there is no sign of such a background here. Instead, each individual figure floats in space, devoid even of any depiction of the ground on which they are standing. This is surely the point, that as vagabonds these pathetic creatures are devoid of any sort of context, spatial as much as social. Their lack of a place to be in a physical sense is a metaphor for their equivalent lack of any place to be socially. They may walk through the streets but they create no space in a social sense, or in the sense whereby for Michel de Certeau 'space' was 'enacted place'.²⁸ They make only empty air. They are the absolute antithesis of the gentlemen in their

²⁶ *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting*, pp. 194–5.

²⁷ James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368–1580* (New York and Tokyo, 1978), p. 191.

²⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1984), p. 117.



Figure 8. Zhou Chen, Chinese, c. 1450–after 1536, Ming dynasty. *Beggars and Street Characters* (detail), 1516. Handscroll, ink and color on paper, overall 31.9 × 244.5 cm. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2000, John L. Severance Fund, 1964.94.

courtyards, surrounded by luxurious furnishings and expensive antique collections, who are given social position, social identity, and social meaning by those things which surround them. They are the antithesis too of the socially situated, if less blatantly materialistic image of Wang Chong and Wen Zhengming in 'Farewell'. Here, to have nothing is to be nobody.

Thus it seems in one sense rather surprising that, when an interest in portraiture of actual living members of the elite, over and above the commemorative portraiture necessary for funerary ritual, revived in the seventeenth century, it should revive in the distinctive form of the figure floating in space. In an early seventeenth-century portrait of Ge Yilong (1570–1640) by the professional portraitist Zeng Jing (1566–1647), the reclining gentleman has no more than a box of books to keep him company as he hovers in the void (Fig. 9). This lack of ground is even more striking in Zeng's portraits of Wang Shimin (1592–1680) dated 1616 (Fig. 10), and of the noted Hangzhou doctor Zhang Qingzi, dated 1622, in which Zhang stands without even the props of books or mat to support his social status.²⁹ How has this lack of social background come to be the attribute of the gentleman, rather than of the street vagabond? Part of the answer may be to do with a very marked interest in the late Ming in the self and how it was constituted, an ideological and philosophical development which led among other things to an outpouring of autobiographical writing, and to an increased concentration on the individual quirks and obsessions which defined the elite male individual as something separate from the network of his social relations, and as irreducible to them.³⁰ But it is curious to say the least that the physical background should vanish at the very moment when writing about things, about the material world, reaches a new intensity, in texts like the 'Treatise on Superfluous Things' (*Zhang wu zhi*) by Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645), the great grandson of Wen Zhengming.³¹

Wang Shimin in Figure 10 is sitting on a mat, and it is a mat which

²⁹ Discussed in Vinograd, *Boundaries of the Self*, pp. 40–6. Colour reproductions in Yang Xin *et al.*, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New York, 1997), pp. 243–7.

³⁰ Romeyn L. Taylor, 'The Centred Self: Religious Autobiography in the Neo-Confucian Tradition', *Journal of the History of Religions*, 17.2 (1977), 266–83; Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton, 1990); Judith Zeitlin, 'The Petrified Heart: Obsession in Chinese Literature, Art and Medicine', *Late Imperial China*, 12/1 (1991), 1–26.

³¹ Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, 1991).



Figure 9. Zeng Jing (1564–1647), 'Portrait of Ge Yilong', before 1628. Section of a hand scroll, ink and colour on paper, 32.5 × 77.5 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

gives rise to the anecdote which in turn gives the 'Treatise on Superfluous Things' its name. The anecdote comes from the fifth-century text, 'New Account of the Tales of the World' (*Shi shuo xin yu*):

When Wang Gong returned to the capital from Kuaiji, Wang Chen went to see him. He observed that Gong was sitting on a six-foot bamboo mat, and accordingly said to him, 'You've just come from the east and of course have plenty of these things; how about letting me have one?' Gong said nothing, but after Chen had left, he took up the one he had been sitting on and sent it along with him. Since he had no other mats, he sat thereafter on the coarse floor matting. Later Chen heard of it and in extreme astonishment said, 'I originally thought you had a lot of them, and that's the reason I asked for one.' Gong replied, 'You don't know me very well. I'm the sort of person who has no superfluous things.'³²

³² Richard B. Mather, *Shih-shuo hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Minneapolis, 1976), p. 22 (with romanisation altered to pinyin).



Figure 10. Zeng Jing (1564–1647), 'Portrait of Wang Shimin', dated 1616. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 64 × 42 cm. Tianjin Municipal Museum.

To be the sort of person with no superfluous things may have been ideal behaviour in the fifth century, and it was so too in the seventeenth. But by the late Ming this ideal had to negotiate some form of coexistence with a world jammed full of an enormous range of luxury goods, from furniture to utensils, to clothing. These objects are catalogued and categorised in Wen Zhenheng's 'Treatise' with an almost obsessive degree of detail, detail of material, of decoration, of dimensions down to the last inch. This detail, this attempt to fix in words what was vulgar and what was elegant, what suitable only for women and what suitable for 'our sort of people' was doomed to failure, slightly pathetic in its King Canute-like project of holding back the onrushing tide of consumerism, and shoring up a social hierarchy in which the right sort of people possessed the right sort of things; in this never-never land, this utopia of stable meanings to things, the right sort of things could be recognised on the basis of who owned them, and the right sort of people could be recognised on the basis of what they owned. Wen Zhenheng's indubitably failed project was to shore up the social self of the elite male through fixing once and for all the clothes, tables, and flower vases which might unequivocally separate such a self from the herd of the 'vulgar'.

I wish to argue that one of the broad currents of change in Ming understanding of people and things from the beginning to the end of the dynasty, is what might broadly be called a movement from imbrication, from social embeddedness, and meanings which were understood as being constituted through social actions to something approaching autonomy, to floating free, to things and places that only attain temporary meaning in the act of their consumption. It seems significant to me that early-mid Ming portrayals of space which are also portrayals of identity should so often contain more than one person, while late Ming works are much more comfortable with the individual alone. Wen Zhengming's 1531 picture of his own studio, the 'Halting Clouds Lodging' (*Ting yun guan*) as I have argued shows above all an act of social interaction (Fig. 7). These two men have their feet on the ground (and on a ground we are shown). Painted nearly a hundred years later, in 1627, the self-portrait by Chen Hongshou (1598–1652) entitled, 'The artist, Inebriated', offers no such reassurances (Fig. 11). Lost in space, the inebriated artist has no one to relate to but as the viewer at whom he quizzically or brazenly but above all drunkenly stares, no context to anchor him but the enormous wine jar which seems to lurch away from him in the opposite direction to the



Figure 12. Xie Huan (active c.1410–1440), ‘Elegant Gathering in the Apricot Garden’, dated 1437 (detail). Hand scroll, ink and colour on silk, 36.7 × 240.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Dillon Fund Gift, 1989. (1989.141.3)

social mobility of late Ming China meant that categories like ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ were losing their meaning in reality, even as aesthetic theory put more and more effort into policing the boundaries between them. She shows how Chen, a figure with a much less well-defined social status than Wen Zhengming a century earlier, was a supremely effective player of social roles, assuming ‘amateur’ and ‘professional’ identities in a way which benefited him most in specific social situations, always negotiating the space between the powerful historical artefact of *wenren* mythology and a commercialised world of culture.³⁴ The ground that had been so firm under Wen Zhengming’s feet, which had supported a range of well-understood and clearly defined subject positions, was no longer there.

Another pair of pictures with more than a hundred years between them dramatises this disappearance of solid ground over time, as well as raising the issue of the presentation in Ming painting of the gendered

³⁴ Anne Burkus-Chasson, ‘Elegant or Common? Chen Hongshou’s Birthday Presentation Pictures and His Professional Status’, *Art Bulletin*, 26.2 (1994), 279–300.

subject (Figs 13 and 14).³⁵ These two paintings are of the same historical theme, that of the ancient scholar of the third century BCE transmitting the interpretation of the key Confucian classic the ‘Book of Documents’ (also known as the ‘Classic of History’, the *Shu Jing*), the text of which was nearly destroyed by the tyrant emperor Qin Shihuangdi. Fu Sheng, the story goes, had preserved the text by hiding it, as well as the exegesis of it in his memory, but was so ancient, and spoke so indistinctly that only his daughter could interpret his speech.³⁶ In the version ascribed to the fifteenth-century professional artist Du Jin (active c.1465–c.1509) and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 13) she is a passive transmitter of the mumbled words of her aged father, words which are taken down by the adult male scholar sent by the emperor, who is the focus of the composition. In the Chen Hongshou version (Fig. 14), painted over a century later, an adult woman not only balances the composition formally, she is an active instead of a passive collaborator. No other figure is present, and the most plausible understanding of the paper which Fu Sheng holds is that it is the text of his commentary, the *Shang shu da zhuan*, which she has written down at his dictation and is now showing to him for checking and discussion. This is a picture which shows the performance of the role of learned woman, of woman as active transmitter of culture, a new subject position which must reflect to some degree the increasing acceptance on the part of men in the late Ming of ‘talent’ as a necessary accompaniment to ‘virtue’ in a woman.³⁷ In the earlier Ming these had been mutually exclusive, something embodied in the tag. ‘A woman without talent is virtuous’. By the seventeenth century this was no longer universally so, with the growth of the idea of companionate marriage, and of a discursive space for a woman to be as talented as the man she married, even if the public display of her talents remained strictly regulated.³⁸ And the painter has embedded in the picture a clue that, though this may be a historical subject, these are really

³⁵ On which see Stephen J. Goldberg, ‘Figure of Identity: Topoi and the Gendered Subject in Chinese Art’, in Roger P. Ames with Thomas P. Kasulis and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice* (Albany, 1998), pp. 33–58.

³⁶ Edward I. Shaughnessy, ‘Shang shu’, in Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 376–90 (p. 395).

³⁷ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in 17th-Century China* (Stanford, 1994); Kang-i Sun Chang, ‘A Guide to Ming-Ch’ing Anthologies of Female Poetry and Their Selection Strategies’, *Gest Library Journal*, 5.2 (1992), 119–60; Wai-ye Li, ‘The Late Ming Courtesan: Invention of a Cultural Ideal’, in Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in late Imperial China* (Stanford, 1997), 46–73.

³⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*.



Figure 13. Du Jin (active 1465–1509), 'The Scholar Fu Sheng in a Garden'. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 157.7 × 104.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1991. (1991.117.2)



Figure 14. Chen Hongshou (1592–1658), 'Fu Sheng Teaching his Daughter the Book of Documents', dated 1632. Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper, 81 × 40.5 cm. Liaoning Provincial Museum.

contemporary people masquerading as the sages of ancient times. This clue is a thing, an Yixing stoneware teapot, the red ceramic vessel on the ground in front of the kneeling woman, in the bottom left of the picture. These objects, almost the only kinds of Ming ceramic to be signed by their makers and so fall within the ambit of the 'star craftsman' system, were both novel and extremely expensive.³⁹ In a picture set in the Han dynasty this thing is like a mobile phone at the Siege of Troy. Contemporaries were amazed that ordinary clay pots could multiply their value, simply because of the name of the maker incised or stamped into the body. They seemed to stand for the whole subversion of hierarchy which the socially fluid, viciously competitive world of the late Ming lived through with a mixture of exhilaration and distaste.

In Chen Hongshou's painting, Fu Sheng and her father float in space, like Zhou Chen's beggars (Fig. 8) or Zeng Jing's gentlemen (Fig. 9). It is almost equally hard to 'place' the solitary figure in 1603's idea of what work by Wen Zhengming *ought* to look like (Fig. 1), but what is clear is that he is a solitary individual, not an actor of a wide range of social roles. This visual overdetermination is matched by the series of texts in which an increasingly desocialised Wen Zhengming is situated in the century after his death. There is for example a clear progression from the 'Record of Conduct of My Late Father' of 1559, through the 'Biography of Master Wen' by Wang Shizhen written in the early 1570s, to the standard 'Ming History' of 1726.⁴⁰ What that progression does is move from an essentially social discourse where the individual is literally unthinkable divorced from the structures of kinship, with their rich tactics of group survival and development, to a moralised but atomistic discourse which focuses on the 'good individual'. Painting is hardly mentioned by the filial son Wen Jia, but by the early eighteenth century it was the reason Wen was remembered at all. It is the reason he appears in the *Dictionary of Ming Biography* today, the reason he is the focus of lectures by art historians.

Is my argument then merely that 'the birth of the individual' happened in China as well? Such a conclusion would not only be premature in terms of the empirical work done on the topic but (more importantly) methodologically unsound in that it cedes right at the beginning of the

³⁹ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p. 132.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed study of these texts see Craig Clunas, 'How Wen Zhengming Became an Artist', *Sussex History of Art Research Papers*, <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/artist/sharp>

enquiry a centrality to what may in the end turn out to be local ideas of the self, even if those have been enormously productive. That productivity has been exploited not least by the discipline of art history, and its key conceptual tool of 'style' which Donald Preziosi has argued is grounded in a set of assumptions about 'an isomorphism of the significative elements of the entire system . . . grounded in a deeper belief in a homogeneity of Selfhood on the part of the artist'.⁴¹ This belief, expressed in the formula *ogni dipintore dipinge se*, 'every painter paints himself', has a long history in European discourse, with Freud giving it an extra impetus over the last hundred years. But it is a conceptual model which deals at best problematically with the fact that lots of Wen Zhengming's pictures are in what it can only call 'different styles'.⁴² However, as I hope I have shown European discourse is not the only discourse, and it is now urgent to realise fully the aim of (in Peter Burke's words) liberating ourselves

from the Western, Burckhardian assumption that self-consciousness arose in a particular place . . . at a particular time It is better to think in terms of a variety of categories of the person or conceptions of the self . . . in different cultures, categories and conceptions which underlie a variety of styles of self-presentation or self fashioning.⁴³

If this dethroning of the sovereign Western self is to be entered into seriously, then the complexities of the selves and subjectivities materialised in Chinese painting may well be good to think with.

⁴¹ Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven and London, 1989), p. 31.

⁴² In her monograph, Anne de Coursey Clapp entitles one chapter 'Problems of Classifying an Eclectic Oeuvre', implying as a norm the *non*-eclectic, homogeneous style which is isomorphic with the artist's selfhood. Clapp, *Wen Cheng-ming*, pp. 35–42.

⁴³ Burke, 'The Self from Petrarch to Descartes', p. 28.