

Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911

Claudia Brown



(Fig. 1) Battle Scene from the Taiping Rebellion
Anonymous court artists, 2nd half of the 19th century
Wall-mounted painting, ink and colour on silk
Height 135.9 cm, width 307.3 cm
Cemac Limited

The last hundred years of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) have been looked upon as a time of tumultuous political change; a period when China was forced into submission by foreign powers, and a series of rebellions, culminating in the revolution of 1911, brought imperial rule to an end. Despite the wrenching political and social problems of the time, however, painting flourished. At the court in Beijing, in the old cities of Hangzhou and Suzhou, and in the new commercial towns of Shanghai and Canton (Guangzhou), painters enriched old traditions and established new approaches that reflected the tastes and interests of a changing society. The exhibition, *Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911*, has been organized in an attempt to initiate a deeper understanding of painting in this period.

Previous studies of the development during the nineteenth century of the arts in China have tended to be overly-influ-

enced by the perception of the period as one of political turmoil. Art historians in their eagerness to interpret this subject in the light of political and social change have often ignored aesthetic considerations. Furthermore, attempts to categorize the painting of the period as either tradition-bound or commercialized have deflected attention away from the lively and complex painting styles. The urge to find the seeds of modern revolution in the art of the nineteenth century has also distorted the interpretation of the work of late Qing artists, sometimes leading to a one-dimensional evaluation of their painting. The purpose of this article is to revise the position of nineteenth century Chinese painting within the period's political and social contexts.

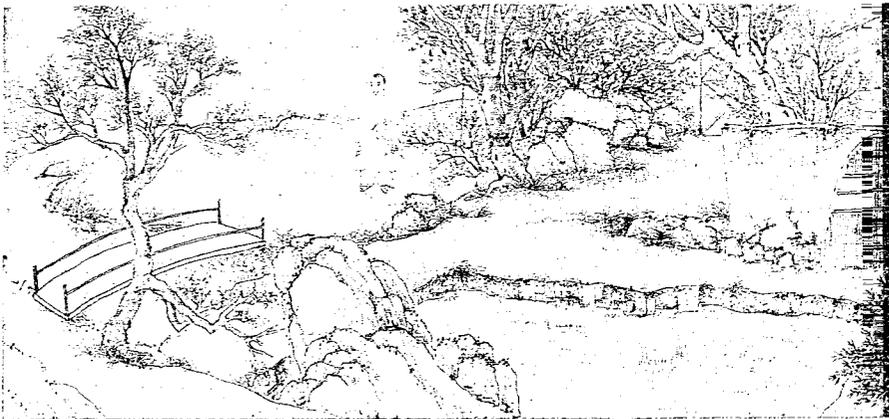
The Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95), who devoted great energy to his own painting and poetry, took imperial patronage to its apogee in the eighteenth century. However, by the end of his reign, court sponsorship of the arts had

already begun to decrease. His successors, the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796-1820) and the Daoguang emperor (r. 1821-50), were faced with a critical depletion of the imperial treasury's reserves, and instituted reforms reducing court expenditure. The vast literary and historical projects instigated by the court in the eighteenth century had gathered in Beijing scholars from all over China to work on the compilation and standardization of texts for massive compendia. As court sponsorship of such projects dwindled, fewer scholars gathered in the capital, and scholarship took on a more regional character. Painting still flourished among the literati at the fringes of the court, such as Yao Yuanzhi (1776-1852), but a decentralizing trend was clearly underway.

Court commissions continued, nevertheless, for palace decorations and commemorative paintings, such as an impressive series of battle scenes (Fig. 1) commissioned to commemorate victo-



(Fig. 2) Detail of *Longing to Travel*, dated 1823
Qian Du (1763-1844)
Handscroll, ink and colour on paper
Height 30.8 cm, length 114.9 cm
Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona



(Fig. 3) Detail of *Dreaming of Flowers*, dated 1807
Zhai Jichang (1770-1820)
Handscroll, ink and colour on paper
Height 29.2 cm, total length 262.5 cm
Howard and Mary Ann Rogers collection, Kamakura, Japan

ries of the Qing armies during the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64). The paintings, however, were executed in a style that was developed at the court almost a century earlier. Under the Empress Dowager, Cixi (1835-1908), court patronage did enjoy a revival. Cixi, perhaps thinking of the precedent set by the Qianlong emperor, turned to painting as an erudite pastime. Although Cixi's own paintings have received attention recently, less consideration has been given to works by artists who were commissioned by the court during those years. Cixi revived the practice of documenting grand court occasions in painting with the commission of a series of nine oversized albums depicting the marriage celebrations in 1889 for the Guangxu emperor (r. 1875-1908). Were it not for the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) which caused the cancellation of Cixi's sixtieth birthday celebration in 1894, she no doubt would have commissioned paintings of that occasion as well. After the Boxer Rebellion (1900-01),

Cixi often gave paintings by court artists, with her seal and signature attached, to foreign dignitaries as part of her efforts to secure foreign support.

The Qing court recruited its artists and scholars during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the cities of the lower Yangtze river (Changjiang) delta, which for centuries has been China's richest region in the cultural as well as the material sense. With the decline of court patronage, private sponsorship from these cities began to fill the void. In Hangzhou, the style of the Southern Song (1127-1279) painting academy was only a distant memory by the late Qing period, and landscape painters, such as Qian Du (1763-1844), borrowed little from this style, but drew heavily from the tradition of depicting the famous sites of the former imperial capital and the beautiful scenery of the nearby West lake. Qian's handscroll depicting a scholar drifting in a boat on West lake (Fig. 2) is one of a series of delicately coloured,

wistful travel scenes painted for a local literatus. Illustrations of gardens formed an important genre in painting. In Hangzhou, Suzhou and other cities, gardens served as retreats where poetry composition, painting, calligraphy, music and tea-tasting were enjoyed. *Dreaming of Flowers* (Fig. 3), a handscroll by Zhai Jichang (1770-1820), is prefaced with an inscription by Wang Guozhen, the man depicted in the painting, in which he nostalgically describes his childhood spent in his father's garden, where once while napping he dreamed of being invited into the paradise of the immortals.

These works from the Yangtze river region painted in the early decades of the nineteenth century depict a world of literary and artistic accomplishment sheltered in well-tended gardens, a world which fades from view towards the middle of the century and is rarely glimpsed in the onslaught and aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion. The artists and patrons of these works rose above personal disappointments and political frustrations, but those of the second half of the century were faced with a series of national crises that precipitated the end of the empire. The occupation in the early 1850s by Taiping forces of the city of Zhenjiang (formerly Dantu) in Jiangsu province may have stunted altogether the development of a promising new style of painting that had been evolving in that city in the first half of the century. This unique style, practised by Zhang Yin (1761-1829) and Gu Haoqing (b. 1766) (Fig. 4), was not revived after Zhenjiang's liberation in the early 1860s by Qing forces.

The nineteenth century witnessed China's first direct confrontation with the West. During the Jiaqing period, trade with the West increased dramatically. The system of trade that had been in effect during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century became strained by the volume of traffic and the demands of the foreign traders. In the Daoguang period, opium traffic and the widespread addiction and corruption it fostered reached a level of crisis. The Chinese government's attempt to halt the illicit trade at Canton was met by British resistance and ultimately the invasions of the Opium War (1840-42). The resulting Treaty of Nanjing (1842) had far-reaching effects – the forced opening of new treaty ports, including Shanghai, and the surrender of Hong Kong to Britain. The

consequent economic difficulties which followed contributed to the domestic unrest that ultimately erupted into the Taiping Rebellion.

In 1853, the Taiping rebels swept into the old imperial city of Nanjing and maintained their 'Heavenly Capital' (Tianjing) there for more than ten years. China's educated and professional classes defended the establishment against what must have been viewed as an incomprehensibly odd mixture of foreign religious mysticism and the grievances of disadvantaged peasant groups. The Taiping government established its own form of civil service examination to draw literate Chinese into its bureaucracy, but the attempt ultimately failed. Few painters joined the Taiping cause, although some were recruited to decorate the Taiping palaces in Nanjing.

Moral fervour ran high among the officials of the loyal Qing forces. Strong idealism and belief in Confucian values were demonstrated by many, including the scholar-general Zeng Guofan (1811-72), who emerged as the leader of the Qing military. Artists associated with this group, particularly those who were also members of the literati, found expression in a continuation of the orthodox tradition, developed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, based on the theories of the Ming (1368-1644) literatus Dong Qichang (1555-1636). Among orthodox painters in the early nineteenth century, Dai Xi (1801-60) placed a high value on purity of brushwork. The work in Figure 5 has a pronounced astringency despite the lushness of the brushstrokes, and seems to reflect the artist's moral uprightness as an official. Dai committed suicide when the Taiping forces swept into his native Hangzhou. Tang Yifen (1778-1853), who is also referred to as an orthodox painter, perished when the Taiping army seized his native city of Nanjing. Many artists of a slightly younger generation

became refugees. Wu Tao (1840-95) of Jiaying in Zhejiang province, for example, recalled in a poem the devastation he witnessed during the years of the Taiping Rebellion:

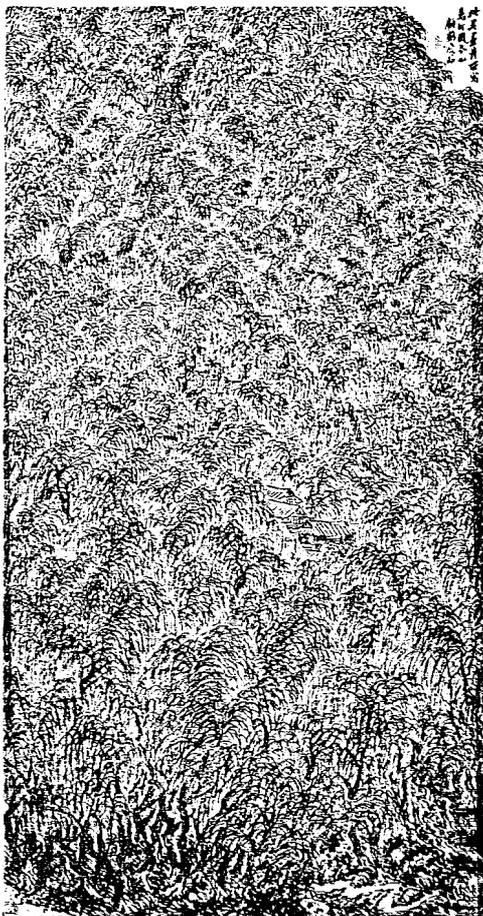
Ice-chilled through my clothes and empty belly
Plagued by hunger and cold, I cried at the end
of the road
Corpses lay around for a hundred miles, no
living soul in sight
Looking back, those years are but a distant
dream.

(Translated by Ju-hsi Chou)

Ren Xiong (1823-57) was more di-

rectly involved in the fighting, although the exact nature of his involvement is still unknown. *Thatched Cottage of Lake Fan* (Fig. 6), dated 1855 and painted for the scholar Zhou Xian (act. c. 1850-70), has the wistful, archaic and utopian character of blue-and-green landscapes that were popular in earlier periods of upheaval in China. During the rebellion and in the years following, these painters and others became increasingly part of the art circles centred in Shanghai, which was protected by foreign armies.

As a direct result of the treaties ending the Opium Wars, Shanghai had grown rapidly from a small harbour to a major



(Fig. 4) *Ten Thousand Willows*
Gu Haoqing (b. 1766)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper
Height 89.9 cm, width 47 cm
Chien-lu collection on loan to the Art Museum of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

(Fig. 5) *Viewing the Waterfall at Longqiu*, dated 1847
Dai Xi (1801-60)
Handscroll, ink on paper
Height 29.2 cm, length 262.5 cm
Purchase of the Bixby Fund and Museum Shop Fund
The St. Louis Art Museum

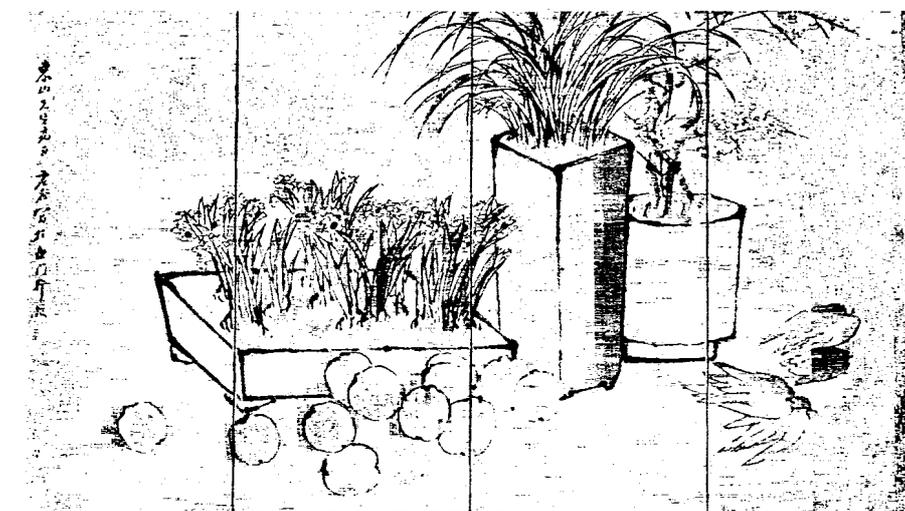




(Fig. 6) Detail of *Thatched Cottage of Lake Fan*, dated 1855
 Ren Xiong (1823-57)
 Handscroll, ink and colour on silk
 Height 35.8 cm, length 705.4 cm
 Shanghai Museum



(Fig. 8) *The Sweet Valley*, dated 1879
 Hu Yuan (1823-86)
 Hanging scroll, ink and colour on satin
 Height 154.3 cm, width 55.3 cm
 Collection of Winberta M. Yao, Phoenix, Arizona



(Fig. 7) *Flowers and plants*
 Xugu (1824-96)
 Four-panel screen, ink and colour on paper
 Height 90 cm, length 158.8 cm
 Gift of Mr Takashima Kikujiro
 Tokyo National Museum

port city. In commerce and art, Shanghai absorbed the role that Yangzhou had played in the eighteenth century. Yangzhou's wealth had been based on the lucrative salt trade that had attracted merchants from other parts of China. The arts and crafts had flourished there and many painters moved to the city, but its wealth and cultural pre-eminence faded in the early nineteenth century. The burgeoning metropolis of Shanghai absorbed its legacy, and the style of Yangzhou's painters may be glimpsed in the work of such artists as Xugu (1824-96) (Fig. 7). The presence of foreign enclaves enlivened Shanghai's urban culture, which grew rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century. This flourishing city attracted artists ready to cater to a large and varied group of patrons. The Japanese played a considerable role, and the work in Figure 8, painted by Hu Yuan (Hu Gongshou, 1823-86) for a Japanese patron, is a good

example of the taste of this sector of the market. Resident Cantonese and Ningbo merchants also had their favourite artists. Wu Qingyun (Wu Shixian, d. 1916) from Nanjing is said to have found enthusiastic Cantonese patrons in Shanghai. His misty landscapes with dark-and-light contrasts, derived from the work of Mi Fu (1051-1107) and Gong Xian (1619-89), have an illusory quality that has been attributed to a knowledge of Western art gained in Shanghai and through travels in Japan.

The artist who best typifies the Shanghai school is Ren Yi (Ren Bonian, 1840-96) who developed a large body of themes and styles, often absorbed from other artists, and occasionally incorporated Western elements into his paintings, particularly his portraits (Fig. 9). Other artists who lived in, or frequently visited, Shanghai appealed even more directly to popular taste. Qian Hui'an (1833-1911) painted simple and engag-

ing themes, and Sha Fu (1831-1906), whose family was in the business of printing New Year pictures, painted popular historical and literary figures (Fig. 10).

Toward the end of the century several artists, including some from Shanghai, began to explore ancient calligraphic styles based on archaeological discoveries. Zhao Zhiqian (1829-89) saw new possibilities in the calligraphy of Northern Wei period (386-534) steles and worked these into a new expressive brushwork (Fig. 11). Wu Changshuo (1844-1927) took the elegant curves of the stone drum script (*shigu wen*) of the fourth and third century BC and integrated them into his paintings of plum blossoms (Fig. 12) and other themes. The re-discovery of the origins of Chinese painting in calligraphy signals the last major attempt to uncover a calligraphic potential through painting.

Although these artists set the stage for the twentieth century, the temptation to treat them as revolutionaries should be tempered. Wu Changshuo declared in the inscription on Figure 12, 'I was born at the wrong time. Though in worldly affairs I've fended off pressures, I've dreamed of riding on a yellow crane'. Elsewhere he wrote, 'with sorrow I saw a great change come in the *xinhai* year [1911]. Before I could die for my country, I've become a man of the past' (Wang Geyi, 'Wu Changshuo xiansheng shishi kaoting', *Shupu*, no. 59, 1984, pp. 9 and 10). A politically revolutionary spirit might be better sought in the art of Guangdong province. This province had been profoundly affected by the Opium War, which began at the port of Canton with the famous confrontation between British opium importers and the imperial commissioner Lin Zexu (1785-1850) in 1839. Perhaps even more devastating was the economic dislocation that followed. The forced opening of new ports, particularly Shanghai, drew commerce away from Canton and left many workers unemployed. These problems exacerbated the already tense situation among the poor of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces and contributed to the momentum of the Taiping Rebellion, which was led by Hong Xiuquan (1830-64), a frustrated civil service examination candidate. In the work of Su Renshan (1814-50), who similarly experienced failure in the examinations, the energy of frustration is sublimated into bizarre interpretations of traditional themes (Fig.



(Fig. 11) *Jishu Cliff*
Zhao Zhiqian (1829-89)
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper
Height 69.5 cm, width 39 cm
Shanghai Museum

13). Like other Guangdong artists, Su trained himself partly through the study of woodblock-printed painting manuals, but unlike them he imitated the inflexible 'wood-cut' line and abandoned the time-honoured fluctuating brushstroke with a vehemence that paralleled the Taiping rebels' attack on the ruling class.

(Fig. 9) Portrait of Gao Yong
Ren Yi (Ren Bonian, 1840-96), c. 1877
Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper
Height 130.9 cm, width 48.5 cm
Shanghai Museum



(Fig. 10) Leaf from the album *Classical Scenes after Old Masters*, dated 1866
Sha Fu (1831-1906)
Ink and colour on paper
Height 30.8 cm, width 32.1 cm
Yu Wei Tu Chai collection, Urbana, Illinois



In the second half of the century, Guangdong artists Ju Chao (1811-65) and his cousin Ju Lian (1828-1904) established a style of flower and insect painting (Fig. 14) that came to be identified as the Lingnan school. With its roots in the same flower and insect painting that had inspired literati painters and



(Fig. 12) Branch of blossoming plum, dated 1892
Wu Changshuo (1844-1927)
Hanging scroll, ink on paper
Height 75.2 cm, width 27.3 cm
Ching Yuan Chai collection on extended loan to the
University Art Museum of the University of California
at Berkeley

(Fig. 13) Five Dipper Stars, Five Planets
and the Cowherd and Weaving Maid
Su Renshan (1814-50)
Hanging scroll, ink on paper
Height 176 cm, width 95 cm
Hong Kong Museum of Art



松猿移竹... 仙鹿... 天... 蘇仁善... 畫

辛酉仲法... 一... 蘇仁善... 畫

(Fig. 14) Leaf from
*Album of Calligraphy
and Painting*, dated 1861
Ju Chao (1811-65) and
Ju Lian (1828-1904)
Ink and colour on paper
Height 28.1 cm,
width 42.2 cm
Jade Study, Dr S. Y. Yip
Collection, Hong Kong



court artists, including Yun Shouping (1633-90) and Qian Weicheng (1720-72), this tradition involved a poetic and pictorial interpretation of the auspicious associations of various plants, but with an underlying interest in the accurate description of flora in seasonal variation. Canton's long contact with Western culture meant that by the mid to late nineteenth century artists in the area must have had ample opportunity to see European illustrations in newspapers and books. It is not necessary, however, to turn to Western precedents for the origins of the style of Ju Chao and Ju Lian, although knowledge of Western art may have increased their awareness of the realistic techniques within their own pictorial style.

The Qing dynasty was ultimately brought down by two movements, both with their roots in Guangdong province. A progressive reform movement was initiated in the last years of the nineteenth century by members of Guangdong's educated élite. The brilliant scholar and noted calligrapher Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and his student Liang Qichao (1873-1929) took brave strides to lead the country toward constitutional government and the reform of traditional institutions. Imperial rule was finally toppled, however, by the revolutionary movement led by Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), also from Guangdong, and others who like him had travelled abroad for opportunity and education. Painting at the end of the Qing dynasty displayed two opposing trends. Artists reformed and re-evaluated traditional painting and clung to its format, medium and subject matter as well as its vocabulary of brushwork. On the other hand, there appeared a new willingness to study Japanese and Western painting. The resolution of these two apparently opposite approaches is still being played out today.

Claudia Brown is curator of Asian art at the Phoenix Art Museum in Phoenix, Arizona.

'Transcending Turmoil: Painting at the Close of China's Empire, 1796-1911', is curated by Claudia Brown and Ju-hsi Chou, professor of art history at Arizona State University, and was organized by the Phoenix Art Museum and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts and The Dial Corporation. The exhibition will be on view at the Honolulu Academy of Arts from 17 March to 19 April 1993, and the Hong Kong Museum of Art from 14 May to 18 July 1993. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with essays and entries by Claudia Brown and Ju-hsi Chou.

Orientations

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Cover: Detail of barbarian military figure (*hurennyong*)
China, western Henan regional style
Sui dynasty (581-618)
Red pottery with green glaze and painted with cold pigments
Height 57 cm
Lillie and Roy Cullen Endowment Fund
San Antonio Museum of Art, 92.58a-f/340

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