Like an Image in a Mirror—
Or: A Portrait of the Ming-Qing Storyteller Liu Jingting

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The professional oral storyteller Liu Jingting (1592–1674/75), ancestor-patron for several performative storytelling traditions throughout China, has already been the subject of much thoroughgoing research, especially during the 1950s through 1970s, when interest in the alleged ‘folk arts’ was particularly strong. Apart from some 200 premodern documents of various length, such as poems and short biographies, by contemporaries and subsequent generations attesting to his life and activities, Liu Jingting is probably best known to the modern reader as a key figure in the kunqu drama by Kong Shangren (1648–1718), *Taohua shan* (The Peach Blossom Fan; 1699).

The author would like to thank Mr Chen Qide, owner of the Zeng Jing painting and proprietor of Rock Publishing International, for kindly granting copyright permission. My heartfelt thanks also go to Drs Zhou Qin and Hua Rende from Suzhou University for offering numerous suggestions and for their kind hospitality during a visit in Suzhou in the summer of 2010.


2 For a complete translation of the drama, see K’ung Shang-jen, *The Peach Blossom Fan (Taohua-shan)*, tr. by Chen Shih-hsiang and Harold Acton, with the collaboration of Cyril Birch (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1976).
Liu Jingting, who specialized in non-versified, spoken narratives (pinghua 评话), was active from around 1610 until well into the 1670s. A «celebrity» during his lifetime, he was well connected to scholar-officials and other important figures of his day. In 1643, he entered the services of Zuo Liangyu 左良玉 (1599–1649), the last remaining powerful general fighting for the Southern Ming government in its resistance against the encroaching Manchu armies. After the fall of the Ming and the death of his benefactor in 1645, the impoverished storyteller had to resume his former life as an itinerant entertainer. Both as a socially active individual and as a performer, Liu Jingting is of the greatest interest to the social and literary historian, not only for his art but also because his life spanned the entire transition period from the Ming (1368–1644) to the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, a time of traumatic events with far-reaching consequences for Chinese society.

Until recently, the only remaining pictorial evidence of Liu Jingting seemed to consist of one single half-body painting, showing the performer in his old age, dressed in Ming garb (Plate 1). In the painting, Liu is displayed holding a fan in a massive right hand vaguely reminiscent of the enormous claw of a fiddler crab. Sadly, the painting seems to have been lost at some point during the early 20th century and has come down to us only as photographic reproductions in a late Qing and an early Republican journal.3 Painted by the 19th-century artist Wang Su 王素 (1794–1877), it is itself a replica of another portrait of unknown origin and age.4 To make things worse, the journal reproductions are of inferior quality—as is arguably the painting itself. Considering these uncertainties, it is virtually impossible to tell how much the Wang Su painting resembled the real person. From an appraisal written by one of Liu Jingting’s literati friends, we know that Liu possessed at least one portrait of himself.5 Whether the Wang Su copy was done from this or from another painting is open to speculation.6

3 See the plates »Ming ji pingshuo jia Liu Jingting xiang« 明季评说家柳敬亭像 [Portrait of the Ming Period Storyteller Liu Jingting], Yueye xiaoshuo 月月小说 13,2,1 (1908), no pag.; and »Ming mo shuoshuzhe Liu Jingting xiang« 明末说书者柳敬亭像 [Portrait of the Late Ming Storyteller Liu Jingting], in Xiaoshuo shijie 小说世界, supplement Minzhong wenxue 民眾文學 17,3 (1928), no pag.

4 As is the case with his portrait of Liu Jingting, Wang Su ordinarily signed with his zi Xiaomei 小梅, but in the ancient character form 小茉. The painting was formerly owned by the Du 杜 family from Fuzhou, whose collector’s seal is visible in the upper right corner (»Du shi zhencang« 杜氏珍藏). No information is available on the size of the painting, its former owners, or its whereabouts.

5 See Wu Weiyi 吳偉業, »Liu Jingting zan« 柳敬亭赞 [Eulogistic Inscription for the Painting of Liu Jingting], in Wu Meicun quanjji 吳梅村全集 [Complete Works of Wu Meicun], ed. by Li
Breuer: The Storyteller Liu Jingting

This article concerns a multicoloured paper scroll painting of Liu Jingting by the late Ming painter Zeng Jing 曾據 (1564–1647), by Breuer. The painted image shows Liu Jingting standing side by side with his mentor and employer, General Zuo Liangyu. See, for instance, Chen Weisong 陳維崧, «Zuo Ningnan yu Liu Jingting junzhong shuojian tu ge» 左鶴南與柳敬亭軍中說劍圖歌 [Song on the Painting of Zuo Ningnan and Liu Jingting Discussing Military Affairs in the Army]; various editions, e.g., in Hubei shijij 湖海樓詩集 [Collection of Poetry from the Huhai Tower], juan 2, Sihu congkan chubian suoben 四部審刊初編選本: Chen Jiaoling shi wen ci quanji 陳鐵嶺詩詞全集 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1967), 91: 245; Xu Benshi shi 傅本詩 [Poems on Original Incidents, Continued], comp. by Xu Qiu 徐錫, juan 12 (being Benshi shi 本詩), comp. by Meng Qi 孟啓; Xu Benshi shi 傅本詩, comp. by Nie Fengxian 尼奉先; Xu Benshi shi, comp. by Xu Qiu 徐錫; Benshi ci 本詩詞, comp. by Ye Shengxiang 葉聖祥), ed. by Li Xueying 李學穎 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 372–373. All of these paintings are now lost.

Zeng Jing's dates are given as ca. 1568–1650 in older publications, but have been re-established by Zhou Jiyan 周積賢 in Zeng Jing de xiaoxianghua 曾據的肖像畫 [Portraits by Zeng Jing] (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1981), 14.

Plate 1

Wang Su (1794–1877), *Portrait of Liu Jingting*
(Reproduced from *Yueyue xiaoshuo* 月月小說 13.2,1 [1908], no pag.).
after all, was Liu Mazi or Liu Pockmarks—as a dashing, handsome young man.9

The painting by Zeng Jing not only happens to stand out for its superior artistic quality. It is also invaluable for the study of Liu Jingting in particular and of the Chinese performance arts and their socio-cultural context in general for several reasons: its lifelike authenticity and extraordinary technique convey a truthful impression of how the performer really looked at the height of his career; dated to the year 1640, it is a rare piece of early documentary evidence on Liu Jingting, whereas the great majority of documents date from the late 1650s to the 1670s, i.e., the early Qing period; last but not least, the seated figure is surrounded by sixteen appraisals plus one additional inscription from several of Liu Jingting’s literati friends, some of them rather famous and influential, such as Fan Jingwen (1587–1644), Liu Ruozai (1595–1640?), and Mao Xiang (1611–1693). These inscriptions not only provide clues to the original target audience of such paintings but also reflect on the social circles in which Liu Jingting moved.

The lack of awareness concerning this painting comes as little surprise, as it has always been part of private collections and been little advertised by its owners. The author of this article himself only chanced upon it when he browsed the internet in search of information on the Wang Su painting and discovered it on a website established by a group of wealthy art connoisseurs from Taiwan.10

The painting is now owned by Chen Qide, a Taiwanese cement magnate and founding director of the art publishing house Shitou Shuwu (Rock Publishing International) in Taipei. It was reproduced in a catalogue for a special exhibition in 2001 of select items from Chen’s art collection at the Hongxi meishuguan 鴻禧美術館 (Chang Foundation Museum) in Taipei, and is

10 The members of the club style themselves “Qingwan yaji” 清暇雅集 (Scholarly assembly for elegant pastimes). See <famehall.com/williamhuang/qingyuanyaji> (last retrieval 24 May 2011).
accompanied by a description from art historian Mei Yunqiu 梅雲秋. A presentation by the renowned mainland calligrapher, Hua Rende 華人德, which was held at the museum on the occasion, has been turned into a paper and published separately. Apart from the catalogue and the short article, apparently almost nothing has been written about the painting so far and, if so, then with a focus on the artist and his achievements, not on its significance for modern research on Liu Jingting and the nexus of the performing arts and literati circles during the late Ming and early Qing periods.

The painting’s seventeen inscriptions were, however, previously recorded in the art catalogue of Duanfang 端方 (1861–1911), the important late Qing dynasty collector of antiques, patron, educator and career imperial officer, who obviously


13 Hua Rende, in his collection of pictures of historical Chinese personages, has replaced the Wang Su copy with the Zeng Jing painting. See Zhongguo lidai renwu tuxiang ji 中國歷代人物圖畫集 [Collection of Portraits of Historical Chinese Personalities], 3 vols., rev. ed. by Hua Rende (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), 2: 1683. Another article by Hua Rende, «Zhongguo lidai renwu tuxiang gaishu 中國歷代人物圖畫概述 [Summary of Portraits of Historical Chinese Personalities], Daxue tubuguan xuexiao 大學圖書館學報 22,3 (May 2004), 71–76 (Part 2); 22,6 (Nov 2004), 70–74 (Part 2), also contains some paragraphs on Zeng Jing in Part I, 73–74, and briefly mentions the Liu Jingting portrait in Part II, 70, but this is mainly recycled material from the earlier article. Wu Guohao 吳國豪 also mentions the painting briefly in his doctoral thesis »Wan Ming wenren de shufa shenghuo 晚明文人的書法生活 [The Calligraphic Life of Literati from the Late Ming] (Taipei: Zhongguo wenhua daxue, 2008), 31 and 321.
must have been among its previous owners. The compiler’s—probably Miao Quansun 諂葵孫 (1844–1919), perhaps Fan Zengxiang 樊增祥 (1846–1931)—transcriptions of the calligraphy (which was written in various styles and is often hard to decipher) are complete albeit sometimes faulty. Mercifully, the exhibition catalogue supplies all inscriptions and seals printed in modern type.

The scroll measures 127.5 x 41 cm and consists of a main frame with the painting proper and two attached strips of paper: one with an eye-catching large inscription above, and one, made of different paper, with a colophon below. The main frame carries three collectors’ seals: An o’clocked intaglio seal in the lower right corner reads »Xieyuan Jingshe« 禄緣精舍 (Jacket Hem Study), a square intaglio seal in the lower left corner gives »Qinbo suocang« 勤伯所藏 (From the Collection of Qinbo), and a third, square relief seal in the lower left corner has »Baisun qingwan« 柏孫清玩 (Baisun’s Object of Virtu). The three seals probably belong to one and the same person: Li Shen 李慎, zi Qinbo 勤伯, bao Baisun 柏孫 (1828–?, jinsbi 1853). Born in Tieling 鐵嶺 in today’s Liaoning province, Li served as prefect (zhifu 知府) of Fengxiang 蘇翔 around the year Guangxu 9 (1883), and was later appointed highest administrative commanding officer (dubu 都護) of Xi’an. Together with more than ten other literati, he was a member of

14 See «Liu Jingting xiaoxiang zhuan» 柳敬亭小像軼 [A Portrait Scroll of Liu Jingting], in Renyi Renyi xiaoxia lu 帝臣消夏錄 [Record of Whiling Away the Summer in the Year renyi (1902)], reproduced in Xuci Siku quanshu 填修四庫全書, 2 vols. [1089–1090] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), 1089: 613–614. The compiler has added the following specification: “畫幅——紙本、高二尺八寸、寬一尺三寸、兀傲一隻操石而生” [Picture: paper scroll painting, height 2’8”, width 1’3”, showing a proud old man placed on a rock].

Some other, unspecified reader later corrected some of the entries. For a biography of Duanfang see Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period, 2 vols., ed. by Arthur W. Hummel (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944–44), 2: 780–782. Duanfang’s formidable collection of jades, bronzes, paintings and sculptures, known as the »Taozhai« 陶齋 (Tao Studio) collection, was dispersed soon after he was murdered in 1911. For a general description of Duanfang’s collection and its fate see Jason Steuber, »Politics and Art in Qing China: The Duanfang Collection«, Apollo 1 (Nov 2005), esp. 56, 58, and 60; and Thomas Lawton, A Time of Transition: Two Collectors of Chinese Art (Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art, 1991), 5–63.


16 Duanfang reads »Ma Bo suocang« 馬伯所藏 (From the Collection of Ma Bo). The reading was subsequently corrected by the anonymous reader.

17 Duanfang reads »Baisun qingwan« 柏孫清玩. My reading follows the Yueme catalogue by Cai Yixuan.

18 Duanfang reads »Baisun jinggai« 柏孫精裱, anonymous corrects to »Baisun jingwan« 柏孫精玩.

19 See the entry on Li Shen in Huang Qing shushi 皇清書史 [History of Calligraphy from the Imperial Qing], ed. by Li Fang 李放 and Ye Mei 葉梅, juan 23, quoting from Mu Yelan faibu ji 木葉庵法書記 [Notes on Model Calligraphy by Mu Yelan], in Lianhai congshu 鯉海叢書: “隸漢
the painting, calligraphy and poetry club Qingmeng pingshe 萍盟社, founded in 1888 by the official and author Fan Zengxiang 樊增祥 (1846–1931). The club was the first of its kind in the region and stayed active until the early years of the Republic. Several of the items collected by Li Shen and fellow club member Gong Erduo 宫尔铎 are now in the collection of the National Palace Museum.

The painting has been inscribed and dated “崇祯庚辰重九, 糜園老人寫於秦淮之舍——曾鯨” (painted by the Old Man from Sugarcane Garden in his Lopsided Hut in the Qinhui [quarter] on the Double Ninth [Festival of the year] Chongzhen gengchen—Zeng Jing) in the lower right corner, i.e., it was finished on October 23rd, 1640, in the artist’s studio in Nanjing in the area along the Qinhui River, which in those times used to be a famous entertainment quarter. In 1640, Zeng Jing was in his 77th year, while the performer himself, born in 1592, must have been 49 sui old.

Information on the artist is sparse: Zeng Jing was born in 1564 in the coastal town of Putian 苑田 (situated in Fujian province between Fuzhou and Xiamen 厦門), travelled widely as an itinerant artist in the Hangzhou, Yuyao余姚, Wuzhen 烏鎮, Songjiang 松江 and Ningbo 宁波 regions, but chose Nanjing as his main residence where he also died in 1647. During the Chongzhen period (1627–1644), Zeng became an official in the Ministry of Works (gongbu 工部). Owing to his superb talent and excellent connections, he was able to secure commissions from famous contemporaries and earn no little money with his art. Zeng Jing is mentioned in several miscellanies (biji 筆記) from the late Ming and early Qing. A short entry in Tubui baojian xuzuan 圖論寶鑑續纂 (Precious Mirror of Paintings, Further Compilation; 17th c.) states that he excelled in portrait drawing. His large and small portraits are invariably just like drawn from


21 The signature column is followed by two of the artist’s square intaglio seals, »Zeng Jing zhi yin« (Seal of Zeng Jing) and »Bochen shi« (Mister Bochen). Old Man from Sugarcane Garden (»Zheyuan Laoren« 糜園老人) is one of two known hao used by Zeng Jing, the other one being Zhe’an 糜庵 (Sugarcane Hut). The Shanghai Art Museum owns a joint painting by Zeng Jing and Xiang Shengmo 項聖漠 (1597–1648) of the scholar and painter Dong Qichang 董其昌 that bears a signature »painted by Zeng Jing in Sugarcane Hut« [Zhe’an Zeng Jing xiezhao 糜庵曾鯨寫照], which corroborates Zeng Jing as the creator of paintings signed »Zhe’an« or »Zhe’an Laoren«. See Hua Rende, »Zeng Jing de xiaoxianghua he qi suo hui “Liu Jingting xiaoxiang tuzhou”«, 101.
life. He had a feeling for both pen and ink, and clothes and folds were well matched, everything being appropriate.” The late Ming connoisseur, Xie Zhao-shi, (1567–1624), notes that Zeng Jing’s paintings are not vulgar in the slightest. His portraits can be more than two feet tall or as little as some inches small, and they all bear close resemblance [to the ones portrayed] and that with his art, he tours the whole empire and has allegedly amassed a thousand pieces of gold. Yet, none of the major catalogues of painters through the 20th century lists his name. This hardly comes as a surprise when considering that portraiture as a sole specialization was deemed inferior to landscape painting, a special skill rather than the hallmark of true art.

The most significant statement on Zeng Jing’s art was made by Jiang Shaoshu, »Zeng Jing«, in his book on Ming painters, Wu sheng shi shi 無聲詩史 (History of Poems Without Sounds; completed 1679 or after, first edition 1720) praised the artist with the following words:

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22 "..." 腐皮賓臣, 荊田人, 流滌金陵。風神休整, 儀軀偉然, 所至卜築以處, 迴廻曲室, 位置瀟灑, 砭壁寫照, 如鏡取影, 妙得神情。其筆色滋潤, 賦生動, 落在楮素, 細緻流美, 偲喫逼真, 擱短釵之貌發明, 不是過也。若軒冕之英, 崇豔之俊, 閨房之秀, 方外之跡, 一經傳寫, 娉婷雅肖, 然對面時精心體會, 人我都忘。每圖一幅, 優染數十層, 必匠心而後止。其獨步藝林, 摖動觀者, 非偶然也。年八十三, "..."

23 "..." 作畫之非俗也。其寫真大尺許, 小至數寸, 皆不酷肖( ... )或放逸以遊四方, 累致千金云。" Wuzi zu 五義叢 [Silk Braids from Multi-Coloured Strands], 16 juan, <zh.wikisource.org/wiki/五義叢/卷07> [juan 7] (last retrieval 24 May 2011), compiled with Hua Rende, 蘇州官立圖書館之書為華榮, 73–74.

24 Zeng Jing is mentioned neither in Zhou Lianggong’s 周亮工 (1612–1672) Duhua lu 蒐華錄 [Record About Reading Paintings], nor in Qin Zayong’s 秦祖永 (1835–1884) Tongyi lunhua 懇遊論畫 [Discussing Paintings in the Tung Tree’s Shadow], nor in Dou Zhen’s 賀偵 (1847–after 1911) Guoqiao shuba jia 画穀齋筆記 年朝畫家筆錄 [Records of Calligraphers and Painters from the Reigning Dynasty], Ye Ming’s 楊銘 (1866–1948) Guoqiao huajia shu xizhuang 年朝畫家書小傳 [Letters and Biographical Sketches of Painters from the Reigning Dynasty], or Li Fang’s 李放 (1883–?) Huajia zhixi lu 畫家知録 [Record of Painters and Connoisseurs]. Cf. Hua Rende, «Zeng Jing de xiaoxianghua», 99; id., «Zhongguo lidai renwu tuxiang gaishu», 73.

25 Jiang Shaoshu, Zeng Jing, in Wu sheng shi shi 無聲詩史 [History of Poems Without Sounds], Huabu congshu 畫史叢書, ed. by Yu Anlan 安安, 七 juan, 10 juan (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1969), box 1, fasc. 4: 71–72 [juan 4].
Zeng Jing, courtesy-named Bochen, was a native of Putian, Fujian, but took up residence in Nanjing. He was a man of neat and handsome looks, and of noble appearance. Everywhere he went, he always made his abode a pleasant residence, with graceful verandas and rooms built on an elegant and magnificent plan. The portraits he painted were all like images reflected in a mirror, with the expressions of the models skilfully captured. His use of colour was splendid, and he could make the eyes of his figures look very vivid, so that their every look or glance, smile or frown, though only on paper or silk, showed full of true life. His skill was such that not even Zhou Fang’s portrait of Zhao Zong could surpass it. Whether the subject were a dignitary or a recluse, a beauty or a religious man, every inch of beauty or ugliness in his portraiture resembled the real person. When he was face to face with his subject, he would always concentrate his whole attention on it until the self and the subject would become interpenetrated.\[26\] Every time a portrait was being painted, he would never tire of adding washes and shades, often tens of times, until he achieved real artistry. It is therefore not without reason that Zeng Jing was unequalled among contemporary artists and was famous far and wide. He died at the age of eighty-three.\[27\]

Jiang Shaoshu’s description of Zeng Jing’s portraits and their technique as »images reflected in a mirror« reads as if he were discussing Western techniques, especially since in another instance he uses a similar wording for the description of Western images.\[28\] Indeed, the portrait of Liu Jingting—and the highly mimetic technique used for rendering the head in particular—strike us as almost Western in style. Zeng Jing’s portraits, as James Cahill has observed, are generally »more realistic than any that had preceded them in China«.\[29\] Several scholars

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26 The phrase “面對時精心體會，人我都忘” has been translated—arguably with more precision—by James Cahill as «When one stood looking at such a face, one forgot both the man and oneself in a moment of spiritual comprehension». See Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 116; id., *The Distant Mountains* (New York; Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1982), 213.

27 Translation by Hsiang Ta, »European Influences on Chinese Art in the Later Ming and Early Ch‘ing Period«, *Renditions* no 6 (Hong Kong, 1976), 164. Transcription converted to Hanyu pinyin, characters omitted.


29 Cahill, *Compelling Image*, 120. As Cahill observes with regard to other paintings, Zeng Jing «[like] other portraitists of the period, [...] often painted only the figure, or perhaps only the face, leaving the landscape or other setting for some other artist to fill in. The disparity in style between realistic face and conventional setting can have the slightly unsettling effect of making a real person seem to look out from a work of art». Cahill, *Distant Mountains*, 214; cf. the discussion of this phenomenon in his *Compelling Image*, ch. 4.
have hence argued strongly for a Western influence on Chinese pictorial art during the late Ming, pointing to the «extraordinary realism of his and his followers' portraits» which was so unlike earlier Ming period portraiture.30 While an influence for the 18th century, clearly visible in court paintings of the Kangxi (1661–1722), Yongzheng (1722–1735), and Qianlong (1735–1796) periods, has been widely accepted, these scholars opine that the most significant influence occurred earlier.

Supposing there had been exposure to the Western arts, especially portraiture, how would it have come about? Since no documented evidence exists with regard to Zeng Jing's pedigree as an artist—apart from the allegation that he learned from a certain Shi 史 from Putian,31 about whom nothing further is known—the proponents of the influence hypothesis point to Zeng Jing's life and activities in Fujian and Nanjing (where contacts with foreigners and foreign art were likely) and, more importantly, to the activities of Jesuit missionaries: Matteo Ricci (1553–1610), known in China as Li Madou 利瑪竇, arrived in Macao in 1582 and continued to live in the country until his death in 1610. He first came to Nanjing, Zeng Jing’s home base, in the summer of Wanli 23 (1595) and then again in the summer of Wanli 26 (1598). Each time he stayed for only a short time, without engaging much in public activities. On 6 February 1599 (Wanli 27), however, he arrived in Nanjing again and this time erected a chapel and started to propagate the Christian religion more visibly. Those curious were able to take a look at a painting of the Mother of God inside a chapel which he had built. Ricci also used his time in Nanjing to prepare for an audience with the emperor in Beijing, which eventually took place in 1601. The gifts that he intended to present to the court included a crucifix inlaid with pearls, two clocks, a prism, a bible, one copy of a world atlas, a clavichord, as well as various devotional paintings of Christ, the Virgin and the Child with St. John, and the Mother of God, among others. Not only were these items put on public display but they were also paraded through the streets of Nanjing for a week. In addition, Ricci had also brought with him books illustrated with engravings which greatly fascinated the literati. Obviously, pictures were an important instrument for spreading the Christian faith, and local painters, too, must have been aware of Western pictorial art.32 Since Zeng Jing was a resident of Nanjing and no more

30 Cahill, Distant Mountains, 213.
32 See Hua Rende, «Zeng Jing de xiaoxianghua», 100; «Zhongguo lidai renwu tuxiang gaishu», 74; Hsiang Tä, «European Influences», 155, 156, and 164; Michael Sullivan, «Some Possible Sources of European Influence on Late Ming and Early Ch’ing Painting», Proceedings of the International
than 35–36 years of age at the time when Matteo Ricci sojourned in the city, it is well conceivable that he was able to witness these displays, was impressed by what he saw and started to apply Western techniques.

The ‘influence hypothesis’ has spawned highly controversial discussions. Several art historians, especially from East Asia, retort that Zeng Jing developed his art strictly and solely on the basis of an already existent contemporary tradition of realist portrait painting which he merely refined and imbued with new life. Yang Xin, deputy director of the Palace Museum in Beijing and leading art expert, argues that

illusionism is an inherent part of the Chinese painting tradition. [...] The difference between the Western and Chinese traditions lies in the way the spatial illusion is achieved. Zeng painted portraits which capture each sitter’s reflection as in a mirror. He made no optical adjustments, kept his viewpoint level, and painted with lines and very few shadows, thereby preserving the natural protrusions and sunken parts of his subject’s face. What are known in painting as the ‘three white spots’ (the brow, nose, and lips) stand out. [...] A good observer, he was quick to capture human gestures and expressions, and was expert at using empty space in his compositions to emphasize them.31


Yang Xin, «The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)», Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting, ed. by Yang Xin & al. (New Haven: et al.: Yale University Press, 1997), 243. Cf. Kondo Hidemi 今東秀実, «Sô Gei to Ōbaku gazô 曾幾と黃檗画像 [Zeng Jing and Ōbaku Portraits], Nihon bijutsu zakkô: Sasaki Kôzô senrei koki kinen ronbunshû 日本美術概要：佐々木俊三先生記念論文集 [Collection of Papers on Japanese Art: Essays in Celebration of the 70th Birthday of Professor Sasaki Kôzô], ed. by Sasaki Kôzô senrei koki kinen ronbunsû henshû inkai 佐々木俊三先生記念論文集編輯委員會 (Tôkyô: Meitoku shuppansha, 1998), 512. As Kondo argues, Zeng Jing, even if he had indeed seen Matteo Ricci’s Mother of God painting in Nanjing, it would have left but a general impression on him, while he developed his style entirely based on traditional foundations. Cahill, too, avoids an extremist position by stating that Zeng Jing «would appear to have inherited a tradition that had survived for centuries on a functional basis, carried on by anonymous practitioners without emerging to the level of art, and to have elevated it through his own achievement to the status of a respectable genre of painting». Cahill, Distant Mountains, 213.
Western scholars, too, have cautioned that the occasional early expressions of enthusiasm for Western art and its illusionistic techniques should not be overrated, especially since artists themselves would never admit to such an influence and since this enthusiasm is also not reflected in later writings.34

The question standing unresolved, there is little dispute, however, that Zeng Jing’s style and technique were imitated by a handful of students and artists of later generations such as Xie Bin 謝彬 (1604–1681), Shen Shao 沈濤 (1605–after 1681), Zhang Yuan 張遠 (1765–1833), Guo Gong 郭公, Xu Yi 徐易, Liu Xiangkai 劉祥開, Zhang Qi 張琦, and Shen Ji 沈紀 (all dates unknown), who are collectively referred to as the Bochen pai 波臣派 (Bochen school). His style even reached Japan during the 17th century and led to the creation of highly mimetic paintings known as ‘Ōbaku portraits’ (Ōbaku gazō 黃檗画像) by monks of the Ōbaku School of Zen Buddhism.35

Zeng Jing and the other painters of the ‘Bochen school’ employed two kinds of techniques for portraits: with the »bone-immersing convexities-concavities method« (mogu aotufa 沐骨凹凸法), the artist first applied black watery ink in several dozen layers as the chief means of description, especially when working out the facial features, and then supplemented the structure with light colours. No black ink outlines or other structural lines (‘bones’) were used. The other technique (goule tiancai fa 鈐勒填彩法) started with thin contour lines in ink for a light preliminary sketch (goule). After this, multiple layers of colour washes were added (tiancai).36

Zeng Jing excelled in both techniques, even though most of his surviving portraits, including the present one of Liu Jingting, belong to the first type. In all cases, the specific technique was employed only for the face, while the rest of the sitter’s body was done in conventional style. Compared with the figure’s almost transparent hands, the natural realism of Liu Jingting’s head becomes all the more apparent: after he had drawn Liu’s face in ‘immersed-bone work’, the

34 See Cahill, Distant Mountains, 214; Osvald Sirén, »Influences from European Painting«, Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles, 7 vols. (London: Land Humphries, 1958), Part II: The Later Centuries, V: The Later Ming and Leading Ch’ing Masters, 88–94. Sirén, although not denying early impulses, likens the influence of Matteo Ricci & al. to »slight ripples on the surface« (p. 90), since interest in Ricci’s items »was limited to the circle of his personal acquaintances and was more in the nature of a passing curiosity than of a systematic study« (p. 89).

35 See Kondo, »So Gei to Ōbaku gazō«.

36 Cf. Cahill, Distant Mountains, 213–214; Zhang Geng 張庚 (1685–1760), entry on Gu Ming 郭明 & al., »Guochao hua zhenglu 國朝畫徵錄 [Evidential Records of Painters from the Reigning Dynasty], in Huashi congshu 畫史叢書, box 2, fasc. 5: 38–39 [juan 1]; Hsiang Ta, »European Influences«, 164–165.
artist daubed it with layers of ochre and other colours, thus producing a three-dimensional effect of the facial bones and skin texture.

The painting has a very intimate character to it: upon closer inspection, it becomes obvious that Zeng Jing worked out even minute details such as wrinkles, eyelashes, and discolorations. Unlike the majority of portraits of the time, the man in the picture is shown here not as an idealized figure but with coarse skin, half-closed, almost limp eyelids, and bent posture as the outward signs of the inner self. The performer, who is looking directly at the beholder, seems to harbour thoughts without enunciating them. 37

As several contemporary authors attest, Liu Jingting was nicknamed ‘Liu Pockmarks’ (Liu Mazi 周子) and considered rather ugly. 38 Zhang Dai in his description of Liu Jingting’s performances mentions that Liu had a ‘swarthy complexion’ (libei 炎黑) and that his face was full of ‘bumpy scars’ or ‘pimples’ (halei 鼓瘤). 39 Obviously, no such disfigurements are to be detected in this portrait. Since Zhang had met Liu and listened to him perform two years prior to the painting in 1638, the scars could not have been the result of a later pox infection or other disease. Liu Jingting may have requested that they not be included, or Zeng Jing may have opted to ignore Liu’s ugly features, as was also the custom with idealized portraits of the time, in favour of a stronger focus on the performer’s inner essence. 40

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38 See, for instance, Cao Zhenji, "Diao Liu Mazi" (Song poem on Liu Pockmarks) in Kexue sanji, 81–82 [juan 5]; Xi Rende, "Liu Mazi shuoshu" (Song Poem on Liu Pockmarks Telling Stories), Xaoweng shijì 雪徵詩集 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1989), 81–82 [juan 5]; Wu Jian, "Liu Mazi xing" (Song Poem on Liu Pockmarks), in Shi ju mingjia shiguan 诗局名家诗观, ed. by Deng Hanyi (Shanghai: Shanghai shuju, 2010), 139 [j. 3]; and Cai Sheng, "Liu Mazi xiaoshuo xing" (Song poem on Liu Pockmarks and his narrations), Baidashanren shiji biannian zhu 白駒山人詩集編年注, ed. by Wang Rutaotao 王汝涛 and Cai Shengju 蔡生印 (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2002), 519–521. Numerous other sources also mention this nickname as part of the text.
39 Cf. Hua Rende, "Zeng Jing de xiaoxianghua", 102. As Hua Rende demonstrates, Zeng Jing and his school did not generally shy away from painting ugly features.
The painting shows the storyteller wearing a wujin 乌巾, or official’s square hat, and clad in a white gown, the—inexpensive and modest—dress of a late Ming man of letters. Although he is seated and his body generously covered by the gown, Liu Jingting obviously had a tall figure. In terms of overall composition, the portrait is very similar to Zeng’s portrait of Wang Shimin (1616) and particularly to those of Zhang Qingzi 張卿子 (1622) and the reclining Ge Yilong 葛一龍 (1614?) who are likewise shown with white gowns and black hats. Apart from the rock on which the performer rests, there are no other props, attributes or landscape details, only empty space, thus drawing the viewer’s attention even more strongly to Liu Jingting’s face, posture and body language. As Yang Xin has pointed out, »highlighting a persona’s character and aspirations by surrounding the figure with empty space is the most characteristic feature of Zeng Jing’s portraits«. In particular, »large areas of empty space are associated with the elegant manner of a scholar and recluse. Thus, even though the size of the figure is small, his character looms large«.

With his highly effective technique, Zeng Jing thus managed to catch the ups and downs of a performer who leads an arduous life, while the spatial arrangement and clothing suggest a man cultivating the attitude of the elegant but modest literatus who keeps himself detached from worldly concerns.

The Inscriptions

As was the custom for portraits of the Ming-Qing period, sitters often invited distinguished contemporaries and good friends to leave inscriptions or ‘appraisals’ (zan 贊). The phenomenon can be seen on several of Zeng Jing’s portraits, including the one of Ge Yilong, and such is also the case with the portrait of Liu Jingting. Fifteen appraisals were written on the main frame surrounding the figure, while one appraisal (i) was prominently attached above on a special band of paper, most likely after the other inscriptions had been added. In addition, a separate band of paper with an undated colophon by a friend of one of the appraisers has been mounted below the main frame.

Appraisal 1, by Fan Jingwen, is dated »spring of Chongzhen renwu«. Since this particular year (Chongzhen 15) lasted from 30 January 1642 to 18 February 1642.

41 The geshan 葛衫 is a garment with a grained surface, the warp being made from silk and the woof from ‘kudzu vine’ or ‘ko-hemp’ (ge).
42 For a description and a reproduction of the portrait of Wang Shimin, see Yang Xin, «The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)», 243 and 245; of Zhang Qingzi, 243 and 246; of Ge Yilong, 247.
43 Yang Xin, «The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)», 243.
1643, Fan must have written it down some time during the three months from the end of January to late April 1642. Appraisals 2–9 were obviously added in chronological order from the upper right down to the lower left. Number 9 carries the date »autumn of the year gengchen« which, if taken literally, lasted from 17 August through 12 November 1640. Accordingly, and since the painting was finished on 23 October, these first appraisals must have been added within a short three-week period after the painting’s completion, perhaps even during a single session. Summing up our calculations, we may state that all appraisals (i.e., inscriptions 1–16) were written down within a period of one and a half years after the painting had been finished, between late October 1640 and late April 1642, while the majority were probably added within just a few weeks after completion.

Having spent many years as an itinerant entertainer in the Jiangnan region, by the 1630s or perhaps earlier Liu Jingting had fixed his abode in the ‘Southern Capital’, Nanjing. There, it appears, he made his living mainly through private invitations (so-called tanghui) and was able to secure long-term engagements with prominent households, among them that of Fan Jingwen (1587–1644), zi Mengzhang, hao Siren, Canbingzhai 餐冰齋, etc. Fan had come to Nanjing in 1634 to serve as Censor-in-Chief to the Right (you du yushi 右都御史),

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44 In Banqiao zaji 板橋雜記 [Miscellaneous Records from Wooden Plank Bridge], Yu Huai 余懷 (1616–1690) mentions that the Minister of War Fan Jingwen from Wuqiao 吳橋 and Chancellor He Ruchong 何如龍 [died 1641] from Tongcheng 濟城 engaged him as a guest-retainer of honour [shangke 上客]. See Banqiao zaji, in Yu Huai, Banqiao zaji, Zhaqian Jushi 珠泉居士, Xu Banqiao zaji 紙橋雜記; Jin Sifen 金嗣芬, Banqiao zaji bu 補 (Nanjing: Nanjing chubanshe, 2006), 26 [juan 3].
and was soon appointed President of the Nanjing Board of Military Affairs (Nanjing bingbu shangshu 南京兵部尚書). Not long after the Manchu troops had started to move south in 1638, he was dismissed from office for submitting a critical memorial but continued to live in Baixia 白下, which is nowadays a district of Nanjing. Fan was rehabilitated in the autumn of 1642 and moved to Beijing where he continued to serve as President of the Board of Public Works (gongbu shangshu 工部尚書). Two years later, when Beijing was conquered by the rebels under Li Zicheng, Fan committed suicide, as was expected of a loyal official, by drowning himself in a well. Since the inscription was composed in the spring of 1642, before his rehabilitation, Fan’s use of a seal Minister of War (da sima 大司馬), strictly speaking, was of course not entirely appropriate although it reflected his honorary status.

The text has not been included in the 《Xiangzuan》 像贊 (‘portrait appraisals’) section of Fan Jingwen’s collected works, but this was a choice made by later editors. Nonetheless, it is an interesting and also touching piece of literature, for Fan is quoting almost verbatim several short sections from Pan Yüe’s (247‒300) 《Xiahou changshi lei》 夏侯常侍诔 (Funeral Dirge for Regular Attendant Xiahou). Pan, a leading poet of his time, had befriended Xiahou Zhan (243–291) when the two began their careers at a young age in the 260s. The dirge bespeaks Pan’s deep-felt affection for and sorrow over the death of his friend. Even though Fan Jingwen’s words were written in a different context and to a different purpose, borrowing from Pan’s composition implies that the minister considered Liu Jingting not simply as an entertainer who could be engaged and dismissed at discretion but as a good friend whom he trusted and who shared the same ideals. His appraisal in a nutshell echoes several of the sentiments and attitudes towards Liu Jingting that the other inscribers had already presented in their own inscriptions.


Of gentle appearance his forehead, like a halberd his beard and eyebrows, purified of defiling illusion his bosom. Upright and non-conforming, bold and unconstrained,

49 Luling refers to the city of Jizhou 吉州, nowadays known as Ji’an 吉安, Jiangxi province.

50 I was not able to find out much about this person, apart from the information that he was the author of a work titled Baiyun shigao 百雲詩稿 [Draft Poems in One-Hundred Rhymes], 1 juan. See the entry in Fanshu ouji 贊書偶記 [Occasional Notes on Purchasing Books], juan 7. <news.artxun.com/jinxiangben:0592843871.shtml> (last retrieval 24 May 2011).

51 The # (‘halberd’) has two pointed crescent-shaped blade.
domineering and uninhibited—an unconventional spirit with elegant literary taste, who enwombs the old and sheathes the strange. [He is like that old warhorse] with frosted hoofs and strong feet [which stands in the stable], bent over its trough, [but full of] aspirations [despite its old] age.\footnote{Diezuo 跪坐, usually a stylized movement in theatre, by which the actor suddenly falls down and sits on the stage. This is used as an expression of indignation or wrath. However, the term can also refer to the dignified posture of a sitting Buddha, which is probably meant here.} There he has placed himself on a solitary rock,\footnote{For Liu Ruozai's biography see the Kangxi period "Anqing fu zi" 安慶府志 [Gazetteer of Anqing Prefecture], in Zhongguo disfang zhi jicheng 中國地方志集成: Anhui fuxian zhi ji 安徽府縣志輯 [Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1998, 10: 405 (juan 16, fol. 19a). Cf. <www.aqflz.gov.cn/news_show.asp?id=DAE21-9565-42AC-BB70-17AD1C25187b> (last retrieval 24 May 2010). The site <Guangdong Huainingren> [People from Huaining in Guangdong] reports that Liu had passed the provincial examination the year before, i.e., in Tianqi 7 (1627). See <www.gdhnr.com/huaining-view.asp?id=449> (last retrieval 24 May 2010).} carefree and self-composed.—Liu Ruozai (Seal of Liu Ruozai).

Liu Ruozai (1595–1640?), from Huaining 懷寧 (today’s Anqing 安慶, Anhui province), was an eminent and influential contemporary of Liu Jingting: The fourth son of the Provincial Administration Commissioner (zhengxuan huzheng zhi si 承宣布政使司) of Shandong, Liu Shangzhi 劉尚志, he had passed the palace examination as the top-scoring candidate (zhuyuan 状元) in 1628 and had quickly risen through the ranks.\footnote{The Ming province of Huguang included roughly the equivalent of modern-day Hunan and Hubei provinces plus parts of modern-day Guangdong and Guangxi.} Liu Ruozai excelled as a calligrapher and painter and was interested in Buddhism. A tasty glutinous rice dish (Huizhou zhuyuanfan 徽州狀元飯) is named after him. In 1638, he had to memorialize the emperor five times before being granted permission to return home and care for his ailing mother.

The concept of loyalty was apparently very important to Liu Ruozai, and he always tried to promote people who shared his ideals: In 1629, he recommended the later Minister of War and defender of Yangzhou, Shi Kefa 史可法 (1601–1643), for appointment as grand coordinator of Anhui. In the following year, he sponsored Ruan Zhidian 阮之錫 (d1639), who became magistrate (zhixian 知縣) of Yicheng 楠城, Huguang 湖廣 province: Ruan refused to surrender the magistrate’s seals to rebel soldiers dispatched by their leader Zhang Xianzhong 張獻忠.
Liu Ruozai’s biography in *Anqing fu* does not specify the year of his death, only that he was posthumously awarded the name Zhanshi (also a title, ‘Head of the Household Administration of the Heir Apparent’), that he was conferred the title of Chief Minister of the Court of the Imperial Stud (*taipu qing* 太倉卿) and that he was granted burial sacrifices. According to the additional information given in the few online sources by local researchers, his mother died in the 1st month of the year Chongzhen 13 (i.e. between 23 January and 21 February 1640), and he himself succumbed to illness on 13 April 1640, at the age of 46 suì. This date, however, is at odds with the date of the painting which was finished more than six months after Liu Ruozai’s alleged death. Unless the Liu Ruozai of the appraisal is different from the historical person described above—which can hardly be the case, since the colophon (17), below, confirms his identity—or unless the painting was not finished well before October 1640 (see 14 and 16), the date of his death needs to be re-established.

【四】坐臥石上：如隴音 [to be corrected from 臨, as indicated in small script at the end of the inscription], 南陽未老，抱膝何吟？茅廬松爨，詩意禪心，貌橫而文，氣靜以深。楚公安社弟袁恭壽。[Signature stamp at beginning of inscription:] 袁。[Square intaglio seal:] 袁恭壽印。

56 Songzhu 松臥, literally, ‘pine [branches as a stag whisk].’ The *zhu* was a kind of deer, possibly a yak. During the Wei-Jin period (220–420), literary celebrities, Daoists, and other debaters would yield a whisk made from the tail of this animal (*zhuwei* 騧尾) in their *qingtan* 淸談 (‘pure talks’), the intellectual activity fashionable during the 3rd and 4th centuries. Cf. the expression *zhutan* 騧談 (stag’s tail pure talk).

57 「楚」楚 refers to the central parts of the Ming province of Huguang, roughly equivalent to the territory of modern-day Hunan and Hubei.
Bei had to make three attempts before he was finally able to meet Zhuge Liang at the latter's farm on Reclining Dragon Ridge (Wolong Gang, i.e., the 'ridge of the undiscovered talent') near Nanyang and was able to persuade Zhuge into serving as his adviser.58

Yuan Gongshou's hometown Gong'an, on the banks of the Yangtze River in Hubei province and now a district under the administration of Jingzhou, was a place of great strategic importance during the period of the Three Kingdoms (220–280). The area still abounds with sites marking major historic events and visits by important warriors and rulers. Gong'an Gate, in the southeast of the Ancient City wall of Jingzhou, is said to be the one by which Liu Bei entered the city whenever he passed through. By comparing Liu Jingting to one of the key figures of this important historical period, Zhuge Liang, Yuan Gongshou expressed a special connection to the performer and stressed his qualities as an able strategist and adviser.

Bi Maoliang (jinshi 1595), zi Shigao, bao Jiansu, was from Xixian, Huizhou Prefecture.59 Having serving in several medium-ranked appointments, Bi had eventually been promoted Vice President to the Right on the Board of Revenue (Hubu you shilang), but had been dismissed when he refused to cooperate with the clique of Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627). In the Chongzhen period, he rose to Vice President to the Right on the Nanjing Board of Military Affairs (Nanjing bingbu zuo shilang). Bi would later resign in 1644 when Li Zicheng conquered Beijing.

This is the first of several inscriptions referring to the performer by the sobriquet »Wenruo«, which was the zi of Xun Yu (163–212), a successful strategist and eminent statesman of the Three Kingdoms period. Xun began his government career in 189 and served different warlords for some time before Cao Cao, who had recognized his enormous talent, appointed him army commandant in 191. Xun Yu proved invaluable to Cao’s military projects and

58 See ch. 38 of Sanguo zhi yanyi (literally ‘Exposition on the Annals of the Three Kingdoms’, commonly known as ‘Romance of the Three Kingdoms’).
59 See Zhongguo lidai renming dacidian (Comprehensive Dictionary of Personal Names from Chinese History), 2 vols., ed. by Zhang Huizhi & al. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 1: 519.
became his most important and trusted adviser. In 211, however, he greatly displeased Cao Cao when the latter signalled his wish to be raised to the rank of duke (gong 公) and Xun opposed the move because he upheld his loyalty to the Han emperor whom he saw weakened. Xun’s death in the following year gave rise to much suspicion.60

Perhaps it is mere coincidence, but Xun Yu’s posthumous name (shi 名) was Jinghou 敬候, which of course shares the first character with the performer’s personal name, Jingting. He was described in the historical sources as a tall and handsome gentleman—which no doubt must have pleased Liu Jingting.

There are other instances attesting to the fact that Liu Jingting, unlike the majority of entertainers of his time, was able to read and write on a level that went clearly beyond basic literacy. However, Liu Wei’s lines suggest that the performer needed to concentrate hard when writing, like someone not in full control of his activity. Liu Jingting’s literary dilettantism is corroborated by a remark by one of his educated friends, Qian Qianyi 錦衣 (1582–1664), poking fun at the performer as a would-be literatus.62


61 Xiling was the former name of the town of Xixing 西興, near the city of Xiaoshan 西安, Zhejiang.

62 “Qian Muzhai once said to someone: “In what does Liu Jingting excel?” The other said: “In storytelling.” Muzhai said: “Not so. His strength is in written correspondence,” for Jingting very much liked to compose letters and insert learned references, but the pages were riddled with erroneous characters, and Muzhai thus made fun of him.” (錢牧齋嘗謂人曰:「柳敬亭何所長乎?」人曰:「說書。」牧齋曰:「非也, 其長在尺牘耳。』蓋敬亭嘗寫書與文, 別字滿紙, 故牧齋以此譏之。) Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, Liu Jingting zhuan柳敬亭傳 [Biography of Liu Jingting], »Nanlei wending« 南懷文定 [Nanlei’s Definitive Prose Writings], Congshu jicheng jianbian 綱書集成簡編, ed. by Wang Yunwu 王雲五 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1965) 1: 165 [juanji 前集, juan 10].
[7] Strike a stone, and fire comes out, yet fire originally is not a stone. Breathe out ink to portray a man, yet man originally is not made of ink. [These two things are not completely unreal [illusions], just like the flag in the wind or cracks in a rock. Does it mean that Wenruo really is to be found here? Who would not know that your literary grace and broad ambitions are noted throughout the country? And there you squat alone on a rock, motionless.—Your younger club brother from Guwan, Sun Yue-sheng. (Vigilantly guarding the—Sun Yue-sheng; The Vigilant Guardian).

The author, Sun Yuesheng (zi Zhigong 直公, hao Buyan 不岩) was a native of Huacheng 宣城, Anhui province. He would later, in Shunzhi 13 (1656), become a tribute student (gongsheng 貢生) and Assistant Instructor (xundao 訓導) at the Confucian school of Fengxian 萬縣. Sun was a gifted poet and painter of landscapes and flowers and belonged to the so-called Huacheng school of painting (Huacheng huapai 宣城畫派), also known as the Huangshan school (Huangshan huapai 黃山畫派).64

The inscription bears testimony to the fascination which the striking realism of Zeng Jing’s portraits held for scholars from the late Ming. Sun Yuesheng engages the question of the illusionist nature of objects and their relationship to an abstract truth or inner essence which they represent. With his metaphor of the flag in the wind (feng fan 風幡), Sun is of course referring to the kōan (gong’an 公案) on the Sixth Zen Patriarch Huineng 慧能 (638–713) who overheard two monks debating whether it was a flag that was moving or the wind. By stating his opinion that neither the flag nor the wind moved, only their minds, Huineng argued strongly for the non-duality of subject and object, of external nature and buddha-mind.65

63 Personal communication, Sep 13, 2010.
64 See Qiao Xiaojun 喬曉軍, Zhongguo meishujia renming cidian 中國美術家人名辭典 [Dictionary of Names of Chinese Artists: Buyi erbian 補遺二編 [Second Addendum]] (Xi’an: San Qin chubanshe, 2007), 189. Cf. <www.xcdafz.gov.cn/news/UploadFile/2009/120091109102601320.doc>. The Huacheng school of painting included artists from the Mei clan of Xuancheng, such as Mei Qing 梅清 (1621–1697), Mei Geng 梅庚, Mei Wei 梅蔚, Mei Chong 梅翀, Mei Zhuoqeng 梅琢成, as well as Cai Zhenchun 蔡鏊春, who was also born there, and Shi Tao 石涛 (1642–1718), who lived in the area for some decades.
65 The story has been included as case 29 in Wumen Huikai’s 無門慧開 (1183–1260) collection of Zen kōan, Wumen guan 無門關 (The Gateless Gate; preface 1228); T.48.2005.296c.18–20, online
In former times, Master Hu concealed his spiritual force very well: Ji Xian saw him thrice and ran away. The image of this elder Wenruo brother is merely one foot wide and can be determined—or not: His bosom

\[\text{can swallow an area the size of the Yunmeng marshes, his vital force transcend the worldly realm. At times, he stands majestic like a pine, at times, he is boundless like a watery expanse of thousands of acres, and at other times, he laughs and sings lustily. He roams about from pillar to post and has no fixed abode. And even though a spirit has no set location and turns formless, does this image not appear to be the image of the elder Wenruo brother? May he prosper and last forever!} \]


66 The expression *shengheng* 昇恒 is a reduction from the verse in the *Shijing* 詩經 [Book of Songs], «Xiaoya» 小雅 no 6, «Tianbao» 天保: “如月之恒，如日之升” (like the moon constant in phase, like the sun arising). The compound was later used as a congratulatory phrase for the flourishing of enterprises and careers.

67 I was not able to find any information about this individual. Wenling refers to the city of Quanzhou 泉州, Fujian province. Liu Jingting’s original clan name was Cao, his personal name Yongchang 永昌.
The people of Zheng, Zhubuozi tells us, were scared of Ji Xian since he was able to predict how soon an individual would die. Master Hu decided to test Ji Xian: The sorcerer visited, and when he left, he mentioned to Liezi that Hu was soon going to die. In tears, Liezi reported this to Hu. Hu asked Ji Xian to come over again the next day. This time, Ji Xian gained the impression that Hu Qiu had been completely healed. When Ji Xian visited for a third time, he found Hu’s condition unstable again. The following day, Ji Xian once more came to see Huzi but all of a sudden ran off, obviously since he had finally realized that the master had all the time deceived him by manipulating the appearance of his inner self.  


69 The Chunqiu and Warring States period (770–221 BCE) state of Yue 越 was situated in the area of present-day Zhejiang province. «West Brook» 西溪 refers to a wetland area in the western suburbs of Hangzhou with a history that reaches back more than 1800 years.

70 «Furong» 芙蓉 (lit. ‘lotus’): The king of Yue, Goujian, was in possession of a precious sword named «Chunjun» 春鈞. A foreign guest and sword expert from the state of Qin exclaimed in amazement that the sword was more lustrous and exquisite than lotus (furong) that had just started to grow on the river. The expression was later used figuratively for precious sharp swords. See Yuan Kang 翁康 (fl. 40 CE), Yue jueshu 越絕書 [Historical Records of Yue], juan 11, «Yue jue wai zhuanji baojian» 越絕外傳記寶劍, online at <202.101.244.105/guoxue/史記/其他/越絕書/ Yuejue.htm> (last retrieval 24 May 2011). One of Goujian’s swords was discovered in 1965, in excellent condition. See <baike.baidu.com/view/142504.htm> (last retrieval 24 May 2011).

71 Wang Yizhu, zi Ziyun 子雲, hao Bu’an 補凡, was from Huanggang 黃岡 in Huguang 湖廣 province (now part of Hubei province). He was a famous calligrapher who excelled in both standard and cursive styles. In the Tianqi era (1621–1627), he came to Beijing. When Wei Zhongxian tried to win him as a secretary, he fled. He received his juren degree in Chongzhen 3 (1630). After the fall of the Ming, he lived in seclusion and dressed in plain clothes. See Zhongguo lidai renming dacidian, v. 160; Zhongguo gujin shuhua mingren dacidian 中國古今書畫名人
The exact meaning of the individual phrases in this appraisal are yet unclear to me. Perhaps the passage on the state of Yue, West Brook, the ‘white tree stumps’ (bainie 白葉; provided that the calligraphy has been rendered correctly), the mountain, and the sword are to be understood as references to Goujian 句踐 (reg 496–465 BCE), king of Yue, who was eventually able to conquer and annex the neighbouring state of Wu 吳 after years of patient perseverance and owing to his wise choice of advisers.

Wang Yizhu, besides Chen Liang (11), Mao Xiang (14) and Gan Yuanding (16), is one of four known members of the reformist Fushe 復社 (Restoration Society) movement on this scroll.

Apart from the exuberant choice of words to describe a performer’s talent, the appraisal is interesting since the author likens Liu Jingting’s wanderings around the country to those of itinerant strategists of the Zhou period who were in constant search of employment. It also becomes clear that the performer would intermittently leave Nanjing to travel, accompanied by one of his sons (the fact itself that Liu had family and children is already known from other sources). It remains unclear whether his predominant activity and main source of income was through long-term engagements with in the city of Nanjing (as with Fan Jingwen, the author of appraisal 1) or rather in the form of rotating performances in the greater Jiangnan area.

The following three appraisals (11–13) more or less speak for themselves and can be largely left uncommented upon:

Your gaze is focused as if you were entangled by thoughts: When you were reciting, did you omit a word? When you were thirsty, did you drink a cup too little? Lonely, yet not alone; but: although poems and wine may be enough for self-amusement, do not forget the Willow [liu] on the lake!—Your younger brother Chen Liang. (Liang).

Chen Liang was a member of the Fushe (Restoration Society), like Wang Yizhu (9) and Gan Yuanding (16).

Meditating on the present and the past, thoughts on the vicissitudes of an official's life. The poems he composes soar to the clouds above the rock.—With deep affection, your little club brother, Zhu Dingzhi. (Zhu Dingzhi).

Luxuriant like verdant pines and emerald cypresses his spirit; indifferent towards gain like autumn water and white clouds his ambitions. He sits on a rock, stroking his knee, [like a] clear stream of water in the palace of the Great Void.—Your younger club brother from Nanzhou, Zhu Tongcang.

Chen Liang (originally Chen Changying 陈常莹), zi Mengzhang 夢張 and Zeliang 諸梁, various hao, was from Haiyan 海鹽, Zhejiang province. He was later to become a famous calligrapher and painter. After the fall of the Ming, he dressed like a monk and became a hermit. See Zhongguo gujin shuhua mingren daidian, 487; Zhongguo lidai renming daidian, 1: 1348; Mingren shiming biecheng zhubao suoyin 名人室名別稱字號索引 [Index of Studio, Alternative, Initiation and Style Names of Ming Individuals], 2 vols., ed. by Yang Tingfu 杨廷福 and Yang Tongfu 杨同甫 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 2: 411.
Around thirty years old when he inscribed the portrait scroll of Liu Jingting, Mao Xiang (1611–1693), zi Pijiang, hao Chaomin, Pu'an and Puchao, is probably the most notable inscriber on this scroll. Born into a gentry family from Rugao (Jiangsu), he was a precocious child who published his first collection of poetry when he was only thirteen. Soon after, he became the student of the eminent scholar, painter and calligrapher Dong Qichang (1555–1636), and became an acclaimed calligrapher himself. Mao Xiang was a member of the reformist Restoration Society (Fushe) and, cultivating a loyalist attitude, withdrew to his estate in Rugao after the downfall of the Ming and refused to cooperate with the new regime. The inscription is one of relatively few pieces of Mao Xiang’s outstanding calligraphy that have survived to this day.

The question raised by Mao Xiang about the painter—if it was not a rhetorical device—leaves us with two possible implications: either Mao Xiang really did not know who Zeng Jing was, or else Zeng Jing initially had not signed the painting but only did so ex post. In the latter case, the painting could well have been finished before October 1640, which in turn might possibly resolve the contradiction between the dating of the painting and Liu Ruozai’s date of death, pointed out above.

The phrase qianqiu zhi Gu Hutou (literally ‘a Gu Hutou of a thousand years’) refers to the famous Eastern Jin painter Gu Kaizhi (ca. 344–405), whose zi as a youth used to be Hutou. The name was later also used metonymically for painters in general.

[soars], wishing to transcend the material appearance of things [and reach the realm] beyond the mists and rosy clouds. Bold is his vision when he chats on the nexus of cause and effect in brush and ink. —Inscription by Hai Xian [Haixian] from Yongjia. (Xiaolu [The Laughing Fool]; Seal of Hai Xian).

The author of this inscription continues the discussion on the efficaciousness of illusionary painting and its relation to reality, stating that the artist was able to catch Liu Jingting’s true essence, that of a man of virtue. What then was Liu Jingting’s virtue? To make his point, Hai Xian first refers to the anecdote of Lord Ye Being Fond of Dragons (Ye gong hao long 葉公好龍), narrated by Confucius’ student Zizhang 子張 to castigate the superficial belief in appearances and the blindness towards real talent. Admiring Liu Jingting merely for his excellent rhetorical skills, the inscriber holds, would be to treat him simply as an entertainer with a talent for showmanship. Liu Jingting’s performances, however, are superior since he knows how to add finishing touches to a story or a discussion in such a way that he imbues them with life and turns them into something sublime.

75 «Brush and ink**: i.e., writing, painting, and calligraphy.
76 When Zizhang heard that the Duke of Lu was in search of talented advisers, he went to see him but after seven days still was not granted an audience. Upset, Zizhang left and had the following anecdote related to the duke as a message: Shen Zhuliang 沈據梁 was a nobleman and magistrate during the Chunqiu period (770–476 BCE) in the city of Ye 葉 in state of Chu 趙, and so he was called «Lord Ye» (Ye gong 葉公) by everybody. Shen was very fond of dragons and had his whole house and fitments decorated with dragon motifs. When the dragon of heaven heard this, he decided to pay him a friendly visit. However, when he landed and his massive body almost overwhelmed the house, Lord Ye was not happy but felt scared. Obviously, Lord Ye loved only depictions of dragons, not the real creatures. See Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE), Xinxu 新序 [New Preface], ch. 5 «Zazhi wu» 竇事五 [Miscellaneous Affairs, no. 5] <zh.wikisource.org/wiki/zhwikisource.org/wiki/新序/or> (last retrieval 24 May 2011).
77 The phrase on ‘adding pupils to a dragon’s eyes’ derives from another well-known chengyu ( Huawei dian jing 虎威點睛). Originally, the phrase referred to the ingenious technique of the Liang dynasty (502–557) painter Zhang Sengyou 張僧繇 (dates unclear), but was later adopted as a metaphor for someone’s ability in writing literature or in oral conversations of adding just a little detail in the right spot and thus turning the whole into a vivid, meaningful piece of art. According to the anecdote, Zhang once painted a mural of four dragons in a temple in Jinling 金陵 (Nanjing) but did not paint their eyes. Asked for the reason, he replied that since the eyes represented the dragons’ inner essence, they would fly away if he painted them. When the bystanders started laughing incredulously, Zhang demonstrated the effect by adding the eyes to one of the dragons. As a result, dark clouds started scudding across the sky, thunderous flashes lit up, and the dragon rose up, leaving everyone stupefied. See the section on Zhang Sengyou 張
The Buddhist theme raised in this inscription suggests that the author might have been a monk (Haixian being a typical monk’s name) or had at least strong Buddhist inclinations.

[十六] 坐石撫膝，其容穆然，何人提筆，繪此 [Duanfang reads 者，but anonymous reader corrects to 此] 崇賢。雖無言 [Duanfang reads 貫 and gives 言 as an alternative] 也，眉端頰際，風雅翩翩。江右社弟甘元鼎。 [Square intaglio seal] 甘元鼎印。

[16] Sitting on a rock and stroking his knee, dignified his mien. Who wielded the brush and painted this ancient sage? Although he utters no word, the space between his eyebrows and his cheeks bespeak his elegance and grace.—Your younger club brother from Jiangyou [i.e., Jiangxi], Gan Yuanding. [Seal of Gan Yuanding].

As in the inscription by Mao Xiang above, the question posed by Gan Yuanding suggests that the painter, Zeng Jing, was either not well known among Liu Jingting’s literati friends or else had not yet signed his painting.

Gan Yuanding is one of four confirmed members of the Fushe movement on this scroll.

Finally, written on a paper strip below the painting proper, we find the following colophon confirming the identity of Liu Ruozai in appraisal no 3:

[題跋] 劉若宰，懷寧劉方伯尚志子，崇禎戊辰進士狀元。艮 [Duanfang reads 至] 紜坊誼德。兄 [Duanfang reads 豐] 嘉易鍾。

[Col] Liu Ruozai, son of provincial administration commissioner Liu Shangzhi of Huaining, passed the jinshi examinations [of the year] Chongzhen wuchen [1628] as the top-scoring candidate and advanced to [至] adviser to the heir apparent [chunfang yude]. [From his] elder brother Ju Yixi. [Col79]

78 Gan Yuanding (ming or zi Yufu 亜符), renowned poet, is listed as a «club president» (shezhang 社長) at the beginning of Ming shi pinglun erji [Discussion of Ming Poetry, Second Collection], 20 juan, ed. by Zhu Kui 子槐, reprinted in Siku jinhui shu congkan 四庫禁書書靈刊 [Collection of Prohibited and Burnt Books from the Four Bibliographic Divisions], ed. by Wang Zhonghan 作家翰, 311 vols. ([Beijing] Beijing chubanshe, 2000), vol. 169.

79 The translation here follows Duanfang’s reading zhi 至 instead of gen 至, proposed in the Taema catalogue.
Some Conclusions

The painting of Liu Jingting by Zeng Jing provides us with a number of significant details and new clues about the performer and his career during the 1630s and early 1640s, a period not well covered by other documents. It also supports previous conclusions based on fragmentary evidence on Liu Jingting’s educational background, societal relations, and political stance. Several inscriptions on the scroll, for instance, confirm that Liu Jingting not only knew how to read and write but even dabbled in literary composition. This is less surprising if we consider that he specialized in entertaining highly educated literati, very much like the high-class courtesans in the Qinhua entertainment district of his day who often composed poetry themselves, engaged in witty conversations, or excelled at painting orchids and other motives.

Even after the fall of the Ming, Liu Jingting was well received and held in high esteem by an extensive group of literati, many of whom had formerly been associated with the reformist Donglin 東林 and Fushe movements. These ‘remnant subjects’ (yimin 遺民) from the old dynasty, like the scholar, poet and drama author Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609–1672), would maintain close contacts with the performer whom they regarded as a veritable incarnation of the old order, to be placed outside the ranks of ordinary entertainers. Not only did people like Wu Weiye cherish Liu Jingting’s extraordinary storytelling skills, they also enthused about his abilities as an itinerant political strategist (zonghengshi 圍橫士), his noble sentiments, and his upright and lofty attitude.

But how and when did the performer take on this iconic character? Certainly yimin appreciation of Liu Jingting can be attributed in part to Liu’s association with general Zuo Liangyu and his fight for the Southern Ming against the Manchus. In the opinion of Chen Ruheng and others, Liu Jingting’s experiences as a young man on the run and his exposure to army life in Zuo’s camp had been conducive to his developing a ‘valiant spirit’. However, this can only be half the truth. As the appraisals on the painting by Zeng Jing make clear, the same assessment and appreciation of Liu Jingting’s qualities already prevailed years before the fall of the Ming: Liu Jingting is characterized by these literati with epithets like ‘far-sighted and broad-minded’ (chaokuang 超聦), ‘chivalrous’

81 See, for instance, Chen Ruheng, Shuoshu shihua, 158–159.
82 Ibid., 167 and passim.
(xia 吏), ‘majestic and fierce’ (‘e lili 峨峨猛厲), or ‘bold and unconstrained’ (haomai yishi 豪邁逸世). But he is also said to be like a wise man or saint who manages to conceal his true essence behind a worldly exterior. Already at this point, the performer is being compared to the famous strategist-adviser Zhuge Liang and addressed as 「Wenruo», the zi of Xun Yu, a nickname that does not reappear in later sources.

As if foreshadowing his later employment with the famous general, the inscribers seem to have recognized that Liu Jingting was a man of high aspirations and outstanding breadth of mind and vision, who had the misfortune of being trapped in an inferior position without official mission and recognition. In this situation, the appraisals were also meant to encourage Liu Jingting and express comfort.

Forming societies among literati was the vogue at the time. At least four, if not more of the seventeen inscribers were also members of the reformist Fushe movement. Liu Jingting was in contact with these circles at an early age, long before the fall of the Ming. In their inscriptions, these men—except for Fan Jingwen (1), Liu Ruozai (3), Bi Maoliang (5), Hai Xian (14), and Mao Xiang (15)—style themselves shedi 社弟 (‘younger club brother’) or she xiaodi 社小弟 (‘little club brother’) or direct their appraisal to their mengshe xiong 盟社兄 (‘older sworn club brother’). One of the functions of this otherwise unnamed literary society appears to have been that of a political debating club, with Liu Jingting as a regular member. It is well conceivable that Liu’s active and impressive counselling at this or similar literati gatherings would later have prompted general Du Hongyu 杜宏域 to recommend him to Zuo Liangyu as an adviser.

Returning to the painting itself, we may be tempted to interpret Liu Jingting’s bent posture, half-closed eyelids and faint look as pointers to the strenuous, tiring life of an itinerant performer who had overexerted himself. Yet the men who inscribed Zeng Jing’s painting preferred another reading, that of Liu assuming the pose of a Chan monk or a Daoist saint, self-composed and dignified. All we know is that Liu Jingting, 49 sui old, was to live for at least another thirty-three years after Zeng Jing had finished his portrait, experiencing great adventures and facing formidable tasks but also going through great deprivation and travail. Perhaps appearances are deceptive after all and painting indeed is just an illusion.

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