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Life Patterns and Stylistic Directions: Tang Yin and Wen Cheng-ming as Types

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The distinction between the lumpers and the splitters is familiar to anyone who, in addition to studying his subject, also studies studies of his subject. At the same time, the simple act of recognizing the distinction indicates some lean in the direction of the splitters, who are inclined to move toward understanding by recognizing distinctions, by classifying and categorizing. The lumpers, by contrast, tend to blur over distinctions or deny their validity altogether; they would probably maintain that the splitters and lumpers are not really so different in their approaches, but only express their perceptions differently, or something of the sort. By setting up the matter in these terms, I have revealed myself as a confirmed splitter, which will be no surprise to anyone. Splitters are always worrying that their subject is being muddled up by lumpers; worries of just that kind inspired the present paper.

The distinctions commonly held to affect style in Chinese p'tg. are the usual ones: distinctions of period, of locale, of the artist's social and economic status, of his individual character or personality. The first two and the fourth give little trouble; they are accepted by most everyone as playing significant parts in setting the coordinates by which styles are defined. The third is the sticky one. Some people seem to be disturbed, for good, liberal, confused reasons, by the idea that style has any clear correlation with social position of artist or economic grounding of his activity; resist assigning significance to such distinctions as professional vs. amateur, gentry vs. plebian, etc. In support of their views they point out that there are exceptions and borderline cases--of course there are, as always; or that artists of different classes assoc. with each other--why shouldn't they; or that scholar-officials admired & collected works by profes. p'trs.--what could be more natural; or that if one looks at the p'tgs. through sufficiently blurry glasses, the differences can be made to disappear. Or they suggest that the distinctions were invented by Tung Ch'i-ch'ang and other later critics. But when all these lumping efforts are done with, the correlations are still visibly there. Specifically, when one reads in detail the lives of Ming p'trs. and looks at their works, as I have been doing recently in the course of writing a book, correlations emerge that are clear and demonstrable. Question is not whether they are real--of course they are--but how we should account for them, or explain them.

Here we come to root of problem. What people are really objecting to, I think, is idea that a social status, or the status of a profes. or an amateur or whatever, is like a quality inhering in the artist which has its natural

expression in a certain kind of style. But we needn't think of it that way at all. I want to suggest a different way, one that has considerable currency these days in analagous situations--such as, for instance, differences in speech, behavior, other forms of expression, between the sexes. If we were to gather exhib. of ptg. or callig. by Chinese women artists, could probably find characteristics in most of the works which are not common to Chinese ptg. or callig. as a whole, and which we might then proceed to label as features of "feminine" styles. But if we explain this by saying, or implying, that they ptd. this way because they were women, as though these styles were natural, more or less inevitable expres. of feminine temperament, strong objections might be voiced--and properly, since idea is objectionable. Instead, such a situation is dealt with these days, typically, by pointing out that a person grows up and develops in environment in which certain expectations always present: girls expected to act like girls & boys like boys, from earliest age; and same extends into their creative periods as artists. And they tend to conform, w/o thinking about it or being aware of it. Same in matters of race, from childhood, when children are likely to perform in school acc. to expectations estab. for their racial or ethnic group, into artistic careers, when, for instance, an artist with a Jap. or Chinese name pretty well knows the kind of thing art critics are going to write abt. his ptgs., whatever he does--and he, too, tends to conform and paint pictures with some "Oriental" elements of style. These are not conscious, articulated sets of expectations; rather implicit, always there. No one asks, in such a case, who is doing the expecting--everyone is, including subject herself, or himself.

Similarly, I suggest, artists occupying certain positions in Chinese society, and functioning on certain economic bases, were subject to corresponding expectations on part of all around them. They lived and created in situations within which such sets of expectations were important and (to some degree) controlling factors; could no more ignore them than we can ignore the ways of behaving, dressing, talking, thinking, assoc. with roles in which we have been cast or have cast ourselves. The way of looking at this problem that I propose, that is, is by no means new, or espec. controversial; on the contrary, pervasiveness of this phenomenon generally recognized.

Stylistic distinctions bet. amateurs & professionals in some large part to be understood this way, I think; other factors involved, of course, in inception or establishing of styles as right or proper ways for artists in those categories to paint. Today, however, I don't want to dwell on that broad division, or on the standard Che School - Wu School distinction, but

rather to move beyond these into finer splitting and speak of more closely definable types of artists. Before getting to Wen Cheng-ming, will try to estab. firmly and clearly a contrasting type, that rep. by his contemp. and friend T'ang Yin. Here again, use of word "contrasting" goes against what seems to be popular tendency to deny that these two artists rep. dif. stylistic directions corresponding to their different positions in Soochow society, or to suggest that what differences there are are purely matters of individual temperament. I will try to show that they can't be accounted for adequately in that way.

Type to which T'ang Yin belongs estab. for the Ming some decades earlier by Wu Wei. Identifying his models is a more difficult problem. Could go all the way back to Wu Tao-tzu, to whom Wu Wei sometimes likened, and who estab. following characteristics for the type: childhood evidence of "divine" talent; non-conformity in personal behavior (including fondness for drinking); service as court ptr. greatly admired & favored by emperor (i.e. ~~maxxing~~ dependence on patronage from higher level--all ptrs. of type of course not court ptrs.); virtuoso manner of working, which dazzled viewers. Style indeterminable; but said to have worked swiftly, and to have adapted into ptg. style something of what he learned from "wild" calligraphy of Chang Hsi. Suggests mode of drawing somehow akin to cursive mode of callig., within stylistic context of time. Some kind of "running-line" manner.

In Sung, Liang K'ai might be offered as another model: reportedly given to drinking and eccentric behavior (known as Liang Feng-tzu); served as court ptr., but left Acad.; moved, in style, between a quite conservative, even academic manner and brilliantly abbreviated, cursive rendering of same.

Such styles not popular in Yüan; no artists of signif. come to mind who practice them. But model for social & economic position of "educated" or "cultured professional" estab. in Yüan, I think, when scholars barred from official careers turned to other means of earning livelihood, became profes. writers, diviners, etc. in cities. For ptg., really estab. as type in Ming, with Wu Wei providing its first great popular success story and becoming the paradigm. Tai Chin predecessor for some important features, but seems not to be properly ptr. of this type.

Wu Wei: son of man who had dissipated family wealth; brilliant youth, studied twd. official exams but orphaned, never took them. Came to Nanking at 17 to seek fortune as ptr. Patron gave him name Hsiao-hsien, "Small Transcendent." Successful as unconventional, "bohemian" artist. Called to court as ptr., in and out of court for rest of life; drawn periodically back to Nanking, with its facilities for refined urban dissipation. Fond

of theater, drinking, women; these provided by patrons who enjoyed his company, wanted his ptgs.

SS Style: at one end, fairly academic works; at other, cursive, rough renderings of same subjects and compositions, which were not in themselves espec. original or unusual at all--well estab. in his time by Tai Chin & others. His were bravura performances in brushwork: production of fairly conventional images by impressively or excitingly unconventional means.

§ Like early ink-splashers, Wu Wei was admired (as we know from what is written in praise of him, and anecdotes abt. him) for ability to make convincing picture in swift, seemingly improvisatory way. This becomes standard, expected way for Ming artist who either is unorthodox or wants to cultivate that image to manifest his unorthodoxy or eccentricity in ptg.; a phenomenon found among profes. artists, typically, not amateurs--fact not sufficiently recognized.

Resulting styles can be termed "scribbly" and "splashy"--which are often combined into single style. Variations of these make up typical styles of artists of type we are now considering.

SS A number of ptrs. active in Nanking in late 15th--early 16th cent. belong to this group. Not enough known abt. most of Wu Wei's followers for us to say whether or how far they had similar life-patterns as well as styles. One exception: Chang Lu. Showed great intelligence as child, studied for official career, went to National U. in Nanking, but somehow failed, turned to ptg. as means of support, imitating Wu Wei. BEcame popular; "All the officials and gentlemen enjoyed going around with him."

SS Contemp. of Wu Wei: Sun Lung, active 3rd quarter 15th cent. Described as quick-witted & unconventional as child, "like Taoist transcendent." ~~Tank~~ Served as court ptr., also active in Nanking area; took name Tu-ch'ih, "Complete Fool"; worked in wet, loose manner, sometimes scribbly.

SS Shih Chung. Began as dif. kind of unusual child: slow-witted, couldn't even talk until he was 17. But then learned to read & write very fast, composed poetry, also popular songs which he would sing while drunk, with concubine playing p'i-p'a. Recorded as having been playwright. Cultivated reputation as eccentric, called self "the Fool," Ch'ih. BEcame friends with Shen Chou (so related in his biog., not Shen's.) Paints ~~in~~ very loose-brush renderings of standard scenes: travelers in snow, or, in Shanghai album, scene that could almost come from So. Sung except for looseness of brushwork.

SS Kuo Hsü, studied for exams, his career as official somehow abortive; served for time as court ptr., ~~reportedly recommended by Wang Yang-ming~~ called self Ch'ing-k'uang or Pure & Crazy. Ptd. in manner ~~in~~ close to

Wu Wei and Shih Chung. Already evidences of curious phenomenon of school of eccentrics, like Yangchow ptrs. in 18c., same implications.

§§ Tu Chin, Nanking ptr; studied classics but also read novels--biog. makes point of this, suggesting some special assoc. w. popular lit. Poet, callig., somewhat idiosyncratic. Took chin-shih degree but didn't place high enough to get good post, turned to ptg. as career. Called self Ku-k'uang or "Antiquated and Crazy." Ptd. figures in swift-running line, "scribbly" style. (Left: detail from well-known ptg. by him in Cleveland.)

§§ Narrative, historical, legendary scenes etc. common among artists of this group; here, his T'ao Y-m gazing at ptg. of own Peach Blossom Spring.

§ In LS, affinities w. Shih Chung etc. Tu Chin was one of strongest inf. on T'ang Yin, who met him, probably, in Nanking in 1598, wrote poems to him, clearly bases his fig. and fig-in-garden scenes on Tu's, in many cases (no time to demonstrate this w. comparisons.)

§,§ Before getting to T'ang Yin, will mention two later exemplars of type: mid-16th cent. Shao-hsing ptr. named Ch'en Hao, child prodigy, eccentric, composed dramatic lyrics, ptd. very sketchy LS & flowers, usually while drunk--none survive, to my knowledge; and more famous ptr. who learned from him, Hsü Wei. Needn't go thru Hsü's life--well known--follows pattern I've been outlining in many respects, except that he was more than merely eccentric. Composed dramas, etc. That his ptg. style, usually considered to be highly personal expres. of his disturbed emotional state, actually adheres to type estab. earlier for aberrant ptrs. is apparent when we put one of his LS w. fig. pictures beside one of Shih Chung's.

§§ His p'tgs not, like Chu T's, distorted or bizarre in imagery or composition--purely in loose, free, wet, dashing manner of execution. Apotheosis of splashy & scribbly.

§. This might seem another detail from work of Hsü Wei; but not. T'ang Yin. Great master of this manner, when he chooses to use it.

§ Trilling Bird on Branch, in Shanghai. In context I have been suggesting, T'ang's life and his styles seem, and must have seemed to people of time, in perfect harmony--not because that kind of person naturally paints that way, but because that kind of person was expected to paint that way, and could become popular & successful painting that way, and did, in early 16th cent. Soochow. Center of mvt. we have been considering seems to shift around this time from Nanking to Soochow--kind of transplant. Chou Ch'en occasionally works in these styles, altho' they seem departures from his basic, more conservative manner; Chang Ling, T'ang's good friend and drinking companion, who had passed his Chu-sheng exam. but was "deprived of his degree, because of his mad ways" (Siren). Paints in manner clearly derived from Wu Wei.

nothing known,
in any case,
abt. his personal
life;

Such a phenomenon possible only in atmosphere that rich, sophisticated cities such as Nanking & Soochow provided. Fritz Mote writes in article on Soochow:

"... there is no doubt that in traditional cities such as Soochow in Ming and Ch'ing times, freer expression of individual eccentricities was possible, and deviant behavior escaped some of the surveillance and restriction that the village would have imposed. In Soochow, with its great wealth, pleasures became more varied, the idle could congregate, imaginations stirred each other . . . Many of those who lived on the fringes of Soochow's more flamboyant dissipation were the immortals in scholarship, in thought, in literature and the arts . . ."

No time to argue here question of how dissolute or how eccentric T'ang Yin really was. While still in early forties, wrote of self as "old, mad, and stubborn." Pretended madness on one notable occasion; had reputation for profligacy and colorful ^{eccentric} behavior, figures in anecdotes and popular literature in that role. No amount of revisionist effort can make his life look like that of Wen Cheng-ming, who is unlikely ever to have referred to himself, or thought of himself, as mad. On the contrary, it's obvious that T'ang is another perfect exemplar of the pattern I've been presenting. Won't insult the audience by going through his life, dwelling on points of conformity. He does this style better than others--seemingly loose brushwork producing image that is in itself relatively naturalistic.

§§ Kao-shih t'u, in manner of Liang K'ai. Even figure & facial types like Tu Chin & others. Don't mean to diminish T'ang Yin's brilliance and greatness by pointing out degree to which he, too, follows estab. type--this only matter of general stylistic direction, certain motifs, techniques, certain range of subject matter. Within this, any degree of originality possible.

§,§ Even in more conservative works, keeps same running-line, fluid manner of drawing--can do quite Sung-like pictures when he wants to, but slightest relaxation of hand allows "splashy" and "scribbly" to emerge.

§,§ Whether T'ang doing a Sungish, Li T'ang derived style, or a Yuanish, dry-brush ptg., these characteristics break through as if irrepressibly--activate forms through "running" brushwork. T'ang painted in variety of manners, but his most reliable, most indiv. & best work have this character.

§§ Wonderful ptg. representing people saying farewell to friend outside Soochow city wall. Controlled splashy/scribbly, to be sure, but clearly within that mode. Other, detail from LS now in CCW col.

§§ Subjects typically favored by artists of this group suggested in my abstract--anecdotal, attractive or entertaining subj., of wide appeal

rather than narrow or specific reference. Beauties by Wu Wei (r), T'ang (l)

Could go on, but don't want to drive into ground.

Now, what abt. Wen C-m? Can we establ. as clearly defined a type for him, and put other Ming & earlier artists firmly into it? Yes and no. Life-patterns within gentry class, to which he belonged, in some respects more varied, understandably; had greater range of choices--whether they went into govt. service, for instance, depended on their indiv. aspirations & abilities, as well as on political circumstances of time. Chao M-f had long career in govt., Wang Meng & Wen C-m had shorter ones, Ni Tsan & Shen Chou none at all. Some of them went through periods of financial difficulty, even something approaching poverty. But they had resources others didn't--family holdings, relatives they could turn to in need--usually could retire to villas and live fairly comfortably, when out of office; ordinarily didn't need to, and in any case weren't expected to, turn their talents as ptrs. to money-making in more than occasional way, if at all. On the whole, enjoyed greater degree of economic independence.

Don't mean to oversimplify this matter; of course gentry artists didn't regularly give ptgs. away w. no thought of recompense, as idealized version has it. Seems more likely that their artistic activity should be thought of as having been conducted within a dif., looser system of exchange or repayment, a system based on the incurring and discharging of obligations, rather than on more direct, fixed payments. This is big subject that time doesn't allow us to go into here.

They also enjoyed greater independence, I think, in styles; less obliged to consider preferences of patrons. Still, altho fewer overt demands put on gentry artist, he was nevertheless subject to another set of expectations as to general nature of ptgs. he would do, and conformed to those, in ways I'll try to suggest in remaining time. He, too, was constricted, in sense that kinds of styles practiced by T'ang Yin & others seem in effect to have been barred to him.

§§ Wen's admiration for Chao M-f well known, well brought out in Anne Clapp's study of him. Many comparisons could be made; this is one of them. "Roughness" or "looseness" of brushwork among these ptrs. means something very different, as I hope everyone will agree; nothing like splashy/scribbly to be seen here; nothing of running brushwork--no such sense of swiftness, impulsion or impulsiveness. Mvts. of artist's hand more restrained, even constricted, in spite of intended effect of freedom & spontaneity.

§§ If we mention Ni Tsan and Wang Meng as others of type, and as other models for Wen C-m (as of course they were) along with such Ming predecessors as

Liu Ch'ieh and Shen Chou, these would seem to present strongest possible contrasts in their styles--and so they do. How, then, can we put them together in a group? But it is just by doing so, and by noting the characteristics of the group, that we can go on to understand the operation of indiv. temperament & other factors within the general stylistic range it allows. Because ptgs. of these artists, like their lives, have important things in common which set them off clearly from the Wu Wei/T'ang Yin type of artist.

One is the pursuit of expres. qual. of reserve, even remoteness. Ni Tsan, on very rare occasion when he puts fig. in ptg, removes it to middle ground, makes viewer go past & around rocks & trees to get to it. So with Wen C'm, typically, as in Spelman picture. This ptg. also rep. different tendency in subject--"Dwelling Upstairs," reference to private matter, in contrast to broad appeal of subj. typically treated by others. Also, fastidiousness in line drawing, paleness of color, sparseness of composition--all contrib. to very dif. effect.

SS Same true of these. In N.P.Wong picture, woman gazes away from viewer. (Ch'iu Ying did similar comp.; neither dtd, but w/in oeuvre of two artists, seems more natural to Wen than Ch'iu.) Also, fig. typically passive, not active or striking expressive poses, as in ptgs. by other group.

SS Even a subject that might be presented in anecdotal or quasi-narrative way, such as this "Picking Mulberry Leaves," isn't; instead, treated in same reserved, ^{static} rather withdrawn manner. In line, color, comp.--in every respect, cool, fastidious, reticent.

SS So regularly is this true of Wen's quasi-narrative ptgs. that when it isn't true, as with this "Red Cliff" handscroll after Chao Po-su in Ku'kung, I think we are justified in questioning Wen's authorship of the work. Ptg. I like very much; but doubts have grown every time I see it, now inclined to think by hand of follower, dif. kind of artist.

SS Wen Cheng-ming's Red Cliff pictures, of which there are several, better rep. by Freer scroll of 1552, or this one of 1558, now Detroit Institute. Same qual. as others: less of dramatic qual. in narrative presentation; brushwork restrained, disciplined, doesn't activate forms ~~by~~ by hurrying eye over the surface; no sense of impulsive.

SS Yes, you say, but what abt. Wang Meng, and Wen's works in that style? Contrast w. ~~spare~~ spare, thin manner is extreme, no doubt. But these too have little in common w. splashy/scribbly manner; Wang Meng's brushwork never than, any more than Wen C-m's is--and nothing in common either with loose, quasi-improvised compositions of Wu Wei and others. These are in fact

carefully composed, complex structures that reveal in every case a deep concern of artist w. formal construction of his picture. Such an approach to ptg. characteristic of these artists, whether comp. are densely filled or sparse, heavily ~~■~~ textured or thin. Not characteristic of Wu Wei, T'ang Yin, Hsü Wei and others, whose works are distinguished by other virtues than innovative, ~~complex~~ spatially and formally complex compositions.

Finally, want to answer in advance another possible objection by putting on this detail from well-known ptg. of 1549, Old Trees by Water-fall, which represents Wen's deepest incursion into supple, fluid kind of brushwork. Again, I hope it's obvious to all that this is very dif. affair from running-line or splashy manner; done in shorter, sleek strokes, restricted in mvt., always disciplined. Dif. bet. this & Wen's Kansas City ptg. of followerⁱⁿ year chiefly matter of size, material (silk i/o paper), not of basic manner.

To conclude: we have on the one hand two types of artists, differing in crucial circumstances of their lives, and on the other two types of ptgs., differing in fundamental features of brushwork, composition, subject matter; and the types of artists correspond to the stylistic types, with very little crossing over. Anyone still harboring doubts about this, after all my zealous efforts in the cause of the splitters, might try to find cases, or even a single case, from the period we're concerned with, of an artist of one type who paints pictures of other type. But even though a few crossings and exceptions might be found, in a broader view the distinctions and correlations are clear and inescapable; not invented by Tung C-c, or by me; demonstrably present in the ptgs. & what we know of the painters... and could be made even clearer if there were more time to demonstrate them. I've suggested only one pair of correlations involving two types of artists; others can be discerned in Ming ptg., and should be. My intent was to suggest that recognizing and defining these is an important part of what we must do to straighten out the history of Ming ptg.; and I hope we can do it before the lumpers, working in the opposite direction, have reduced that history to a hopeless muddle.