



# A Flower Album of Huang Shen: A Dialogue with Ge Hong and Tao Yuanming in his Paintings, Poems and Calligraphy.

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## Abstract

In the art study programs in the Western world Huang Shen (1687-1768) is almost unknown. This paper will present one of his Flower Albums containing nine leaves including poems with calligraphy in cursive script. The poems related to the drawings are here translated in English with exegeses. Huang Shen lived in Yangzhou, an affluent city on the Jiangzi river. The art scene in those days knew the craftsman and academic scholar-artist. Huang started as a craftsman and progressed upward. He used to travel in the wider region around Yangzhou, and performed landscape scenes, besides that he painted people in the street, as well as flowers and animal scenes as his objects. In all the disciplines he was innovative and therefore is reckoned to belong to the 'Eight Eccentrics of the Yangzhou Movement'. The aesthetics of the calligraphy and drawings are discussed, in a time-related manner: the figures Huang has followed, as well as the later copyists. In search of a meaning of these art works the spiritual leaders of Huang viz. Ge Hong, the herbalist, and Tao Yuanming, the Daoist are studied.

**Key Words:** Huang Shen; Eight Eccentrics; Flower Album; Three Perfections; Kant

## Introduction

The city of Yangzhou [揚州], province of Jiangsu [江蘇], in the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the reigns of the emperors Kiangxi [康熙 1661-1722], Yongzheng [雍正 1722-1735] and Qianlong [乾隆 1735-1796] was a place where culture flourished due to the trade in salt and silk, and its situation on the crossroads of the Yangzi river [Chang Jiang 長江] and the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal [Jing hang da yun he 京杭大運河]. This attracted many theatre artists, handicrafts people such as book printers, and representants of the visual fine arts such as painters [1].

Among the latter, the group of the 'Eight Eccentrics' [Yang zhou ba guai 揚州八怪] [2] stood out, because of their lifestyle and innovations in painting [3]. In this essay the focus will be on the 'eccentric' Huang Shèn (黃慎 1687-1768), and one of his 'Flower Albums' [Hua hui zhuan ji 花卉專輯] will be discussed in detail. The attached poems, in English translation from the Mandarin text, offer an insight in his daily pursuits, and relationships. Moreover, his deeper reflections on health and life are distilled from the ephemeral verses for a hermeneutical approach [4].

## The Life of Huang Shen

Huang Shen was a native of Ninghua [寧化], Fujian [福建] province, from a poor family. His courtesy or style names were Gongshou [恭壽] and Gongmao [恭懋], while his sobriquet was Yingpiaozi [癡瓢子, master of the begging bowl, suggesting his occasional state of a subsistence minimum]. His father was a small trader who quitted studies to support his family of seven, however, died at a young age. His mother, whom he honoured throughout his life, performed her maternal task by sewing and tailoring. She inspired Huang to start a painter's career. He travelled in the mountainous Jiangnan (江南) area (Figure 1), including parts of the provinces Jiangsu (江蘇), Anhui (安徽), Jiangxi (江西) and Zhejiang (浙江) traversing their cities and mountainous terrain, hence his nick name 'mountain fellow', however, he made Yangzhou (揚州) the basis of his trajectories. He worked in daytime and studied the classics of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子 551-479 B.C.) in a local temple in order to develop himself and to better socialize with the elite [5]. After some six years of experiencing in style and objects he became a sought-after artist, and at last 'an endless string of visitors knocked at his door. [6]' So, he was able to buy a house, married a wife, acquired a concubine, and met 'twenty-three friends for poetic gatherings on a daily basis [7].'



Figure 1: Map of the Jiangnan area with Yangzhou. Source: Wikipedia.

Overlooking this life with two-time spans in Yangzhou (1729-1734 and 1751-1756) with its beautiful, material culture and luxury, also loaded with busy activities for work, and episodes in the mountains in between, with rest, natural beauty, loneliness, simplicity and transcendence as a hermit, a retired man, one could conclude Huang Shen was a 'man of two lives.'

### The scholar-artists and the protest group

Through the Chinese examination system [ke ju 科舉] a student could pursue a position in the social layer of the scholar-official [shi da fu 士大夫], literate elite or 'literati' (for the government system, justice, or art scene etc.). The candidates who succeeded to rise via the civil service exams excelled in the 'four arts' i.e. play the string-instrument guqin [古琴], play the Go game [weiqi 圍棋], practice calligraphy [shu 書] -for poetry, or expression of Confucian philosophical thoughts-and perform painting/drawing [hua 畫]. The skills to paint objects from nature such as bamboo, rocks, and pine trees- based on the calligraphic technique- did not per se promise the high social standard, more talent was needed. Huang Shen was not an affiliate of the literati group [we ren hua 文人畫] [8], and could be called a commercial artist, craftsman or artisan [shou gong yi 手工藝], while he performed in a more representational manner [9].

The scholar-artist followed the tradition to write poems onto the paintings to express his inner state and emotions challenged by the painting. Later also the owner of the painting could write a (poetic) inscription [ti hua shi 題畫詩 'poem on a painting'] onto the painting to express his appreciation or comment. Even more than one poem could be attached, together with the seals of owners, so also showing the responsibility to care for the work. One has to consider the fact that the art of painting, although employing similar

brushes, is ranked below calligraphy in the aesthetic hierarchy of Chinese art [10]. The artist's studio with its attention for the lauded peculiarities of paper, brush, ink, ink-stone, and specific skills only add to this ancient cultural domain [11].

### The Works of Huang Shen

In the earliest part of his career he excelled in 'cursive calligraphy' [cao shu 草書] the faster style of calligraphy that is nowadays readable for less than an estimated ten percent of the people in Mainland China [12]. In the cursive style the number of strokes in characters are reduced to single scrawls or abstract abbreviations of curves and dots. Strokes of varying thickness and modulation show a great variety of shapes, and is not bound by rules for even spacing, and characters need not be of the same approximate size; the calligrapher thus has the fullest freedom of expressive movement of line. He followed the Tang [唐] dynasty (618-907) calligrapher Huai Su [懷素 737-799] and favoured a meticulous style [gong bi 工筆] [13], modelled after Ni Zan [倪瓚 1301-1374]. The latter argued that 'likeness of the bamboo in a painting was not required, for painting was a self-expression and had a spiritual dimension of self-cultivation, according to the eponymous painter-poet Su Shi [蘇軾 1037-1101] [14].

Huang after the age of eighteen already painted landscapes in the (Orthodox) style [guo hua 國畫] of the Yuan [元 1271-1368] dynasty 'scholar-artist' Huang Gong Wang [黃公望 1269 - 1354] [15].

In mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century Yangzhou, however, the Orthodox style had no market anymore and a spirit of innovation arose [16]. Huang set off as a painter to make a living and began his training under the painter from Hakka origin Shang Guan Zhou [上官週 1665- 1749], but soon uttered the wish to develop a style of his own [17]. A more mad or wild style with 'swift calligraphy, impressionistic modelling,

and inspired yet calculated spontaneity' [kuan cao 宽曹], also called 'wild grass' was necessary to distance himself from the old-school [18].

In his works Huang changed to human realistic portraiture, although likeness was not a prerequisite. Among his subjects were social celebrities, Buddhist and Daoist figures such as Arhats or Lohans, beautiful ladies, common people in the street and children [19]. The 'Drunk Monk' and 'Shepherd Su Wu 蘇武 [20]' belong to his iconic works. Later he added flowers and animals, alone or in combination, and soon excelled in realizing paintings with integrated poems, and calligraphy: the so-called 'Three perfections: painting, poetry and calligraphy' (San jue: Shi shu hua 三絕: 詩書畫) [21]. The expression goes: 'A painting within the poem, a poem within the painting [22].'

He changed his style for various reasons: marketability of the paintings, appreciation of the Yangzhou audience, his patrons' tastes, and his trial-and-error experience [23].

The poems in the discussed works of Album II (below) all exist of four lines with each seven characters. Huang's rhyme scheme is the classic form AABA. The new English translation (F.H.) is performed in a free style i.e. without a rhyme scheme.

The complex writings on Huang Shens works resulted to the present day in scarce full translations, and interpretations of the

combined artistic masterpieces. This made it necessary to realise an effort in the present document.

### Flower Albums by Huang Shen

In general, the albums with leaves have a card board and silk cover, with glued binding.

**Album I.** Six leaves with flowers and blossoms; leaves no. 1, 3, 4, 6 (monochrome ink); leaves no. 2 and 5 (with light colours); each 33.5 x 45.9 cm, National Palace Museum [Guo li gu gong bo wu yuan 國立故宮博物院], Taiwan, collection code #29661 [24].

**Contents:** Leaf 1: Peach Blossoms in monochrome ink; Leaf 2: Paeonia Suffruticosa in ink and slight colour; Leaf 3: Herbaceous Peony in monochrome ink; Leaf 4: Tuberoses in monochrome ink; Leaf 5: Narcissuses in ink and slight colour; Leaf 6: Plum Blossoms in monochrome ink.

**Album II.** This Flower Album with nine leaves containing poetry and flowers is discussed intensively in this paper. Each leaf is 23x19 cm. In 2015 this Album brought RMB 900,000-1,200,000 in the China Guardian International Auction Co., Ltd. [Zhongguo jia de guo ji pai mai your xian gong si 中國嘉德國際拍賣有限公司].

**Contents:** Leaf 1: Peony; Leaf 2: Day Lilly; Leaf 3: Hibiscus; Leaf 4: Chrysanthemum; Leaf 5: Tree Peony; Leaf 6: Narcissus; Leaf 7: commentary text; Leaf 8: Plum; and Leaf 9: Hosta.



Figure 2: Image of Album II, leaf 1-9. Numbers added by author.

**Album III.** Ink on paper, colour on paper, album (12 pages)' [Shui mo zhi ben she sezhi ben cey shi'er ye 水墨紙本 設色紙本 冊頁 十二頁].

**Album IV.** Flower Album, ink on paper, with 12 leaves, Signed Huang Shen, dated the second year of the Qianlong Reign (1937), Spring, the 5th Lunar Month, with four seals of the artist, 30.2 x 22.5 cm. Sold in auction of June 2013 at 229,500 EUR.

## Description of Poems in Chinese and English of Album II

**Leaf 1.** (Image of Album II) Peony (Shao yao 芍藥 Lat. *Paeonia lactiflora*)

櫻桃初熟散榆錢 · 又是揚州四月天 · 昨夜草堂紅葯破 · 獨防風雨未成眠 ·

Ying Tao chu shu san yu qian, you shi yang zhou si yue tian.

Zuo ye cao tang hong yao po, du fang feng yu wei cheng mian.

I saw cherries ripen, elm [25] seeds as coins drop around the tree,

Near Yangzhou, that sunny day in April, free and relaxed.

Close to my bed, a red peony flourished,

Yesterday, in my grass covered hut, sleep fled in wind and rain! [26]

**Note.** In the analysis of this poem one sees elements of (Chinese) parallelism (對聯 diulian) in the place and time notion in Yangzhou/April and around the hut/yesterday evening; 'nature' in ripe cherries and elm seeds, in wind and rain, and in the beauty of the flourishing peony; the sentiments of relaxation, rest and freedom versus danger, anxiety, and sleeplessness; and the poverty aspect in 'money' (the metaphor of the 'coin-shaped' elm seeds) and the hut with its vulnerable grass roof. However, the tonal arrangement is not perfect for pure parallelism, as we find it in the giants: Wang Wei (王維 699 -759), Du Fu (杜甫 712 -770), and Li Bai (李白 701-762) whose melodious verses were even attractive to sing.

Egan discusses the 'peony' in works of the Northern Song scholar-official Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修 1007-1072), and shows his botanical and technical knowledge, as well as personal experience with his cultivation project, and remarks on the festival in honour of the peony. He concludes: 'Aesthetic pleasure is the key attractiveness of the flower [27].'

In a direct way the poet says 'the grass roof can break,' indirectly he means 'thus the flowers can be damaged.'

**Leaf 2. Day Lily (Xuan cao 萱草, Lat. *Hemerocallis fulva*)**

朝朝畫閣睡猶酣 · 又聽春光三月三 · 偶過鄰家閑斗草 · 背人先去摘宜男 ·

Zhao zhao hua ge shui you han, you ting chun guang san yue san.

Ou guo lin jia xian dou cao, bei ren xian qu zhai yi nan.

In the morning, I sleep in the pavilion, very deeply.

It is spring, the third day of the third month, and I hear the noises

At the game in the circle; each of the neighbors chooses a flower.

Which one is the best? It's a secret. The one I pick is full of promise.

**Note.** A young girl is sleeping in her boudoir. In this classic heptasyllabic quatrain, the poet starts with the rhyme words: han [deep sleep 酣], san [three 三], and nan [male/boy 男], the third word is cao (grass 草) and gives some tension. This creates a smooth, melodic rhythm that links the peaceful waking up to the playful activity outside, on the lawn. The double three day is special for romance and friendship parties. The (traditional) game is called grass or flower game [dou cao 斗草]. It is a metaphor for a young woman's sexual awakening and her subconscious desires. More important is the moment that she sneaks out to pick a day lily [yi nan 宜男], which closes the rhyme scheme, this means she wants to marry and have a son.

**Leaf 3. Hibiscus (Fu rong 芙蓉 Lat. *Althaea*)**

湘帘懶后坐空堂 · 病愈閑抄肘后方 · 近水芙蓉秋意淡 · 一番細雨十分涼 ·

Xiang lian lan qi zuo kong tang, bing yu xian chao 'zhou hou fang'.

Jin shui fu rong qiu yi dan, yi fan xi yu shi fen liang.

In the empty room I am sitting lazy behind the roller blind [28], I cannot lift it up.

After the recovery of my illness, I am relaxed and copy lines from Ge Hongs work [29].

The hibiscus grows near the edge of the water.

It is autumn and the drizzling rain is very cool.

**Note.** This is again a classic seven-character quatrain [qi jue 七絕]. The rhyming words are 堂 (tang), 方 (fang), 淡 (dan), and 涼 (liang), giving the verse a harmonious, and mournful melodic flow. There is parallelism in the third and fourth lines: near-water lotus [jin shui furong 近水芙蓉] mirrors drizzling rain [yi fan xi yu 一番細雨]. Autumn intent is pale [qiu yi dan 秋意淡] and mirrors ten degrees cold [Shi fen liang 十分涼]. With the expression: 'Autumn light is pale' [Qiu yi dan 秋意淡] we find synesthesia, as the visual word (pale/light) is combined with a temporal/atmospheric feeling (autumn).

In this old verse with an herbal recipe [shou zhou hou fang 肘后方] it is implicitly referring to the famous author Ge Hong (葛洪 284- 343?), who was an alchemist and Daoist, and so he was an early father of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). He wrote several books such as 'Book of the Master who embraces simplicity' [Bao Pu Zi 抱朴子], and 'Handbook of prescriptions for emergencies' [Zhou hou bei ji fang 肘后备急方]. Ge Hong accentuated the 'Godly way of Nature' and valued Daoism as an indigenous philosophy

more than the imported Buddhism.

The poet showed resilience in the face of illness and loneliness. The Empty Hall [Kong Tang 空堂] symbolizes inner tranquillity and detachment, but also hints at physical isolation or perhaps the absence of worldly distractions (a key Daoist concept). In the literal translation of the title of Ge Hong's handbook we find the word 'elbow' [zhou hou 肘后]. This refers to the bag the book was carried in (near the elbow).

The entire poem is harmonious in sound and rhythm, uses simple and archaic language, and combines movement and stillness. The first two lines depict the poet's actions and state of mind (sitting, copying), while the last two lines describe the environment and season (hibiscus, drizzle), blending the coolness of autumn with inner peace.

#### Leaf 4. Chrysanthemum (Ju hua 菊花 Lat. *Chrysanthemum*) or 'Chrysanthemums and Crabs'

螺卮擘蟹 (黄), 客中何事又重阳。年年佳节看成惯·醉榻黄花一瓣香。

Shou zhi luo zhi bai xie (huang), ke zhong he shi you chong yang.

Nian nian jia jie kan cheng guan, zui ta huang hua yi ban xiang.

My hand takes a shell-cup with warm rice wine. I break a crab to eat the yellow roe.

Why am I not at home again, during the festival? I'm sad.

Each year it is customary to celebrate the festival together. Why bother?

I am misty on the couch. The chrysanthemum's scent in the garden lifts me up [30].

**Note.** The ninth day of the ninth month in the Chinese (moon) calendar is the Chongyang festival [Chong yang jie 重阳节], in the second half of October. Activities are ancestor worshipping, kiting, mountain climbing, to honour old people and eat Chongyang cakes. The chrysanthemum blooms and the crab ripens in the same season.

'I eat and drink alone', means that Huang Shen feels melancholic while travelling regularly over long distances, far away from his home, family and friends, being a migrant painter. His depressed mood is linked to homesickness, as it is often encountered in the verses of the famous Tang poet Li Bai. In recent days, the (unpublished) poetry of domestic migrant workers [Mingong 民工] is, in the long tradition of rebel poetry, well researched [31].

#### Leaf 5. Tree Peony (mu dan 牡丹 Lat. *Paeonia suffruticosa*), he ling hong (a special form)

故人过我草堂东·不问明朝米瓮空·擎着烛台成习气·夜来还照鹤翎红。

Gu ren guo wo cao tang dong, bu wen ming chao mi weng kong.

Qing zhe zhu tai cheng xi qi, ye lai hai zhao he ling hong.

The old friend was visiting me in the hut with the grass roof [32]

He asked me 'tomorrow morning will the rice pot be empty or full?' [33]

With the candlestick [34] we raised the curtain and went out of habit

In the middle of the night to enjoy the red peonies.

**Note.** This verse was originally written by the Song poet Ceng Zi [曾幾 505–435 B.C.] in his Reply to scholar Su [Da Su xue zhe 答蘇秀才], however, Huang made a small alteration. He was copying Zeng's well-known poem onto his painting [Jiuju 集句] to create a mood. He modified three words 'raise the curtain first' [jie lian xian 揭簾先] instead of 'the night returned' [ye lai hai 夜來還] purely to match the visual aesthetic of his painting. In the third and fourth line of Huang the eccentric content becomes obvious: when you are about to die, you may nevertheless enjoy the beauty of things, while sticking to traditions.

#### Leaf 6. Daffodil (shui xian 水仙 Lat. *Narcissus*)

谁怜瑶草自先春·得[得]东风立水滨·湿透湘裾刚十幅·宓妃原是洛川神。

Shei lian yao cao zi xian chun, de [de] [35] yi dong feng li shui bin.

Shi tou xiang qun gang shi fu, Fu fei yuan shi Luo chuan shen [36].

Who cherishes the jade grass when the beautiful daffodil blossoms before spring?

In a gentle spring breeze, the daffodil stands on the waterfront.

The bulb is naked, the leaves are many, just as the traditional skirt has ten layers [37].

Who likes 'flower in Heaven' more than the daffodils blooming on earth [38].

**Note.** This is a quatrain with four lines of seven characters in the style of Hu Yinglin [39]. This late-Ming poet, historian, and critic wrote an anthology beginning with Zhou up to the 'Seven Poets of Ming' in order to support a revival of antiquity [fu gu 復古]. There are three metaphors: The Yaocao is a jade-green grass, pure and not contaminated by worldly mayhem; the traditional Xiang river dress with ten layers is compared with the skirt of leaves and petals, and the peels of the bulb; the real flower is compared with the river goddess Fufei and the goddess of the Luo river (flowers in Heaven), representing simulcras of beautiful girls and unattainable love, comparable with the copies of the real paintings.

#### Leaf 7 (text)

黄慎妙笔出芙蓉·一花一叶功底深·其笔简而迅·真如作草也。

戈父萧平· 钤印：戈父、萧平。

Huang shen miao bi chu fu rong, yi hua yi ye gong di shen.

Qi bi jian er xun, zhen ru zuo cao ye. Ge fu Xiao ping. Qian yin:  
Ge fu, Xiao ping

Huang Shen can perform a beautiful calligraphy and paint the Furong [40] flower,

One flower and one leaf only, that he can do very well.

His style of painting is easy and fluent, it is like 'grass writing, [41]' just like his calligraphy.

Alias Xiao Ping. Seal: Alias, Xiao Ping.

This is a comment written by Xiao Ping [萧平 Chongqing, 1942-] painter and calligrapher who graduated from Jiangsu National Painting Institute (1962).

### Leaf 8. Chinese Plum blossom (Mei hua, 梅花 Lat. Genus *Prunus mume*)

夜深雪水自煎茶。忽忆山中处士家。记取寒香清彻骨。至今无梦到梅花。

Ye shen xue shui zi jian cha. Hu yi shan zhong chu shi jia.

Ji qu han xiang qing che gu, zhi jin wu meng tao mei hua.

Late at night I get snow to make myself a pot of boiling hot tea [42].

Suddenly I remember the hermit's house in the remote mountains.

Think of the fragrance of the blossom, it simulates a cold vigour in my bones,

So far, I haven't dreamt more often about the plum blossom [43].

**Note.** This kind of poems reminds us of 'On ink plum blossoms' [mo mei 墨梅] by the Song Dynasty Confucian Xiang Gao [向稿 a ghost name] who renounced from a place in court and preferred the hermit lifestyle and wine, linked to Wang Mian [王冕 1287-1359], a master plum blossom poet. The rhyme is cha, jia, (gu) and hua. The sharp tone of bone [gu 骨] reminds of the bone-chilling cold experience. Three expressions are relevant: self-brewing tea [Zi jian cha 自煎茶]. 'Zi' gives the idea of solitude, peaceful meditation, and clarification.

The smell of plum blossom fragrance in the cold weather means moral character, in dark times; the 'hermit's home' [Chu shi jia 处士家] refers to a scholar who refuses government posts in order to live in nature. This choice immediately infuses the poem with Daoist and Confucian ideals of moral purity and withdrawal from worldly chaos; and 'clear the bone' [Qing che gu 清彻骨]. Instead of saying the fragrance is strong, the poet says it is 'bone-penetratingly clear.' In contrast with the vivid sensory impressions or even obsession, is the total void and stillness i.e. no dreams about plum blossoms. That marks the pivot point for Huang.

### Leaf 9. Hosta (Yu zan hua 玉簪, Lat. *Lilium*)

蔚蓝天气露华新。谁拾闲阶宝玉珍。不识搔头能倍价。只今犹忆李夫人。

Wei lan tian qi lu hua xin, shei shi xian jie bao yu zhen.

Bu shi sao tou neng bei jia, zhi jin you yi Li fu ren.

The sky is azure blue and the dew gleams fresh,

Who picks the leaves, jade treasures from the courtyard stairs?

They did not realize that a simple hairpin could instantly double in price [44].

But I still remember fondly the gorgeous Lady Li [45].

**Note.** 'Baoyu' [宝玉] means (precious) jade, just like 'sao tou' [搔头] meaning a jade ornament to scratch the head. Here 'jade' points to the fallen green leaves (*debris*) of the Hosta flowers. Dew drops show in a wonderful way on its grooves. The leaves are seen as precious jade, the jade ornament became expensive after Lady Li, the historical figure of Li fu ren (李夫人) that married Emperor Han Wudi [汉武帝 157-87 B.C.], who possessed an ornament of jade and everybody wanted to wear an adornment like that, after Wudi took it to scratch his head. Similarly Huang Shen knew to add huge value to cheap paper and ink! The question remains, who picks the 'debris'?

It is known that the businessman Huang Shen did not ask for help himself (in case of hunger), neither would he talk about money (as a recluse: yinshi 隐士). This is his 'Spiritual Commercialism'. The individualist painter Shitao [石涛 1642-1707] definitively tried to make the best financial results of his works, notwithstanding the fact that he was practising Buddhist and later a Daoist, also living in Yangzhou [46].

### Calligraphy

The craftsman style has a lot of details, fine line drawing, heavy colouring and life-like portrayal, with the 'official script' [li shu 隸書] over time changing into 'running script' [xing shu 行書]. The literati style, however, had a loose, calligraphic manner with a formal structure and minimal physical likeness. The Confucian values of learning were linked to painting and the running script became a 'cursive script'. Literary allusions and famous verses quoted gave the texts a literary flavour. For Huang a breakthrough, a personal style different from his master(s) was initially loose brush strokes, without clear images.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art catalogue writes that the value of the calligraphy in the visual arts of Asia cannot be overrated; indeed, the art of painting, while employing the same brushes, is ranked below calligraphy. Though understanding the content or meaning of a written phrase certainly adds enjoyment to viewing calligraphy; the writing itself can be appreciated purely on aesthetic grounds such as balance, strength, self-expression, solidity, fluidity, flow, and rhythm [47]". Today's 'regular script' [kai shu 楷書] is the

newest of the Chinese script styles, however, artists such as Dong Yangzi [董陽孜 1942--] keep enriching us with new forms [48].

### Life in Yangzhou

The city of Yangzhou had many great periods: during the Sui, the Tang, the mid-Ming and the Qing dynasties. In-between recessions due to war, natural disasters with famines and waves of migration happened. On the crossroad of the Yangzi and the Canal's grain and salt transport was possible as well as all sorts of foreign commodities. The establishment of the Government Salt Bureau augmented the material and cultural level enormously as did further industrial activities. The high culture was seen in monuments, temples, gardens, government buildings and schools. Poetry, writing and book printing flourished, as well as singing, opera and storytelling. The industry of silk, fashion, food and luxury goods gave allure to the city. The Southern Tours of the emperors supported by the wealthy local hosts contributed immensely to Yangzhou's grandeur [49].

### Copies and Forgeries of the works of the Album II leaves

In the tradition of Chinese art an artist makes a start in his field by making copies of the old masters till he can design something new himself. He had to practice till he mastered the painting technique and style. After that he could start to make slight changes in order to develop his own style. The general Chinese idea was that imitating (*fang zhao* 仿照) in itself was an acknowledged (study) method. Similarly copying (*fu zhi* 复制), however, a 'fake', or false copy [*yan pin* 贗品] was not accepted. Many copies of Huang Shens works are known, in fact made by himself, his students, or other painters. It was all brushwork (no wood block printing): the drawing was executed first, then the calligraphy and later the seals were added.

As an example, in the collection of Zhang (1998) similar flowers were found e.g. no. 6 Narcissus on pp. 21, 99, 140, 170, 220 and no. 9 Hosta on pp. 21, 99, 142, 222, 231, 260 [50].

For *connoisseurs* this forms a trap and many reports are available on the subject [51].

The research in the 'Yangzhou Movement of Eight Eccentrics' [Yangzhou ba guai 楊州八怪] or simply Yangzhou

School [Yangzhou huapai 楊州畫派] [52] is going till today. The debate is whether it was a 'School' or just a

Movement or Circle, as they were not well-organized, no gatherings, or exhibitions.

The paintings of the school were so much appreciated that they were copied or forged in large quantities in the

17<sup>th</sup> till 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was induced by their easy copyability and because so many people admired both the painters and their products, there was a huge demand. From some works up to 24 copies are known in rude or simple forms, but later also sophisticated ones, while only a few proved to be the originals! [53] The masters reported the fact, some were anxious, some angry, others co-operated even in this industry.

The research of Zhuang reports that at least eight variables in forgery could be detected related to subject title, composition, motif, structure, shape, inscription, date, and signature/seals. He describes versions with bad performance of style and brush stroke technique of applying ink in the painting. The calligraphic style is not in accordance with the original regarding the use of the brush tip, or the middle or side of the brush. The inscription has flaws, or the same or a similar inscription is used by different artists. He recognized several versions of identical composition, and the same or a similar inscription used by different artists. Moreover, the seals may be of bad quality of carving, while different artists could have the same characters and/or design in seals. Sometimes style and supposed time of production do not fit, or rendering of the subject and meaning do not suit with the inscription. Further the style of the forgeries of one artist resembles another artist, later forgeries could include anachronisms, and inferior forgeries are created in another style [54].

The place of the integrated poem in the space of the leaf can be different, the poem can also have a different form (number of sentences), and sometimes 'embrace' the image. Huang sticks to the cursive writing, whereas others combined several scripts [55].

Huang Shen is not as good concerning poetry as the Tang poets Wang Wei, Du Fu or Li Bai. Their poems had rhythm and sentiments. Today his poems are outdated, due to the cursive writing, and more so due to ample historical references. Some Eccentrics were better than Huang Shen e.g. Zheng Xie [鄭燮 1693- 1765], who was a scholar-official with social attitude, he mastered calligraphy and the painting of bamboo and rocks.

Here a few examples of the copies in circulation in the art market of Huang's leaves are compared with the

Image of Album II, Figure 2, leaf 6 (above), as Figure 3, *Narcissus*.



a



b

a. Slightly different flowers and similar poem at the left of the drawing.  
 b. Different flowers, similar poem at the right of the drawing. Two extra seals [56].



c



d

c. Different flowers/bulbs, same poem placed low at the right side of the drawing.  
 d. Elegant flowers/bulbs with similar poem in fine brush lines at the right side of the drawing. Source NPM Taiwan. <https://digitalarchive.npm.gov.tw/Collection/Detail/18831?dep=P>  
**Figure 3.** Some copies of Album II, Leaf 6, a-c. Narcissus, flowers and bulbs.

## Aesthetic considerations

In the above text the narrative of Huang Shen, his hometown, relationships, itineraries and his production have been elucidated. His paintings are based on a long history of 'paintings of Nature' with a series of outstanding masters, being representatives of the Chinese canon of fine painting. The classification, description and interpretation of his works, the materials used (paper, ink, brushes etc.) and the context have been given in a range of art publications. However, as a contra-standard, an 'Eccentric' with original works, he skips the conventions.

He is reckoned though, as a follower of the 'old school' of Yuan and Ming painting styles; also, regarding the poetry, he steps onto an ancient path with Su Shi and Wang Wei as precedents. The concept of 'Three Perfections' had a long history too [57]. So, there is definitely a tension of ideas. What can an art critic say more? [58] The success value and reception value of his works was good: 'Many knocked his door in a row to obtain his works; he has to work hard.' Besides, his works form exquisite examples of the kind of 'paintings of Nature,' especially his flower paintings with poems. By creating 'authentic copies' with the genuine Chinese expression 'imitation is better than innovation' in mind, the talented Huang set a new standard. What are the expectations, or what is the purpose of these works? They are meant to make the buyers/collectionneurs happy, that they can enjoy the pictures with poems, and see the prices of their investment rise, and their own star rise as well (due to the inscriptions). Judging Huang's work must be done, first, in a rational, cognitive way and second, in an emotional way. Taste and beauty are very subjective judgements, and it was the German philosopher Kant (康德 1724-1804) who tried to do away with both qualifications by objective reasoning in his 'Critique of the Power of Judgement' [Panduan li pipan 判断力批判 1790] [59]. Hussein and Wilkinson elaborate this theme even wider, from a Chinese philosophical perspective [60].

## Metaphysical Meanings of the Poems, Painting and Calligraphy

The works of Huang presented in Album II are carefully executed, following the principles of the Dao. Details are given, but also with an easy way (with *swung*) of grasping the reality. Apart from city life in Yangzhou, Huang's real and imaginary world is one of plants, rivers, woods and hills. He there lives as a recluse in poverty. Confucius wrote in Analects 6-23: "The Master said, the wise find pleasure in water; the virtuous find pleasure in hills. The wise are active; the virtuous are tranquil. The wise are joyful; the virtuous are long-lived." Besides, his inspiration was in Daoism: the power of Nature, Immortality after Ge Hong seeing the Daoist relational ontology of essence characterized as biological, empirical, and existential. Daoist empiricist psychology is regarded as an appropriate energetic power to inspire and guide life [61].

Re-evaluating the words of the poems in the above nine leaves

of Album II the summary can be like this [62]. (1) I rested 'languid and free', amazed about the wonders of nature, (2) I slept and I sensed spring. Life is like a game with people around. It is a secret (of 'Peach Blossom Spring') [63], (3) From emptiness comes health, use the recipe of Ge Hong, the Master of simplicity. The essence of water is in the river and in rain. Longevity is the result of alchemist procedures, (4) Enjoy life with wine and food, the fragrance of flowers, the company of friends in party time, (5) With an old friend in a simple house: is there no food? Enjoy the flowers! (6) Compare flowers on earth and in heaven (mythical ones, immortal), (8) In remote mountains far away from the human hussle and bussle, the smell of flowers has an impact on your body. Dreams are part of our spiritual life, (9) In nature a drop of water looks like jade and that brings material thoughts, but the beautiful Lady Li was picked to be the emperor's consort to rise socially (symbolized in the stairs).

Can we look upon the travelling painter Huang Shen making a self-liberating journey back to the original unity of the Dao [道], in search for the Self or Naturalness [ziran 自然] or the Soul in Western concepts, to gain spontaneity and creativity. So, he becomes free from selfishness and desire, and learns to value sobriety. As an enlightened person he practises indeterminate action [wu wei 無為] and shows an empty mind with compassion [ci 慈], humility [bugan wei tianxia xian 不敢為天下先] and moderation [jian 儉] as the 'Three treasures of Dao' [Dao yuan sanbao 陶淵三寶] [64]. In his paintings often immortals are represented e.g. Li Tieguai [铁拐 the Immortal 1749] and 'Eight Immortals' [Baxian 八仙 1731]; and other religious persons like a 'Monk' [Dan zhai gao seng tu 啖齋高僧图 1767] or Zhong Kui [钟馗 1756] 'the demon queller' who was worshipped by travellers afraid of evil spirits or as a door-God [65].

In the 'Album of Flowers I' donated to the National Palace Museum by Mr. Lin Tsung-Yi, is depicted 'a peony blossom in a very expressive "sketching ideas" manner that is almost like wild cursive script, appearing as if rendered in just a few seconds. The bold and vigorous as well as unbridled manner of brush and ink still reveals the light and elegant form of this 'King of the Flowers.' In the space to the left is a truncated seven-character verse, the painting and calligraphy complementing each other in a lofty and beautiful manner.'

It appeared during research for this paper that in several documents various plants with their products were supposed to have a medicinal effect e.g. from the root of the hibiscus a substance (mucus) is effective against sore throat, and softens the skin (as a cosmetic). At the moment both in the Western world and the East (TCM) an impressive amount of attention is paid to this aspect, with ensuing market activities, however, it is not considered the subject of this paper.

## Conclusion

Huang Shen sets off as a craftsman-artist in the first half of the 18th century who climbed the social ladder and developed his skills to become a 'literate' professional artist. He has travelled

for long periods in the Jiangnan area with his basis for extended episodes in the culturally rich city of Yangzhou. He excels in 'The three perfections' a traditional combination of poetry, painting and calligraphy since Tang times. He produces 'mountains and water' paintings, trees, flowers, animals, and people. In all fields he is innovative and hence called an 'Eccentric painter of the Yangzhou circle'. In this paper the poems in an 'Album of Nine leaves of Flowers (II)' have been translated and critically interpreted, while putting them in a socio-cultural environment. A focus is on two Masters of Philosophy viz. the Daoist philosopher and herbalist Ge Hong, for the healing aspects of plants, as well as on the Daoist Tao Yuanming for principles such as the 'Three treasures of Tao'. With Kant's 'judgements' we find much appreciation for the aesthetics in the fine drawings: the naturalistic representation, the soft-tone color palette (with warm, earthly pastels, soft contrasts for the curves of plants and flowers) by the painter. Also showing intense talent and quality in the details of the artistic calligraphy in poetic inscriptions, altogether supporting the contents of the poem-painting. Feelings of pleasure are not Kant's first judgement; however, intellectual pleasure surely is in line with 'the three perfections (as a matter of *ought*)'. For the appreciation of the category of paintings and poetry the continuous presence in the public scene (reception value in the art-market, by multiplication, exhibition, or quoting) is important, however, difficult for its rarity and interpretability [66]. In present-day auctions of art his works continuously increase in price, a serious trap though, is the existence of copies [67]. More research to compare the works of the 'Eccentrics' and the artists in the same space and time is strongly encouraged in this category.

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10. Bian ji wei yuan hui [编辑委员会 Editorial Board of 'Sea of words', 辞海 Ci hai]. Shanghai: Shanghai ci shu chu ban she [上海辞书出版社 Lexicographical publishing house], 1979; Hussain, Mazhar, and Robert Wilkinson (2017) *The pursuit of comparative aesthetics: an Interface between East and West*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis pp. 113-26, 145-86.
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13. This style uses detailed brushstrokes that depict the objects very precisely. The works are often colourful and usually show figural or narrative subjects. The artists worked for the Royal Court or in independent workshops.
14. Su Shi 苏轼 or Su Dong Po ([蘇東坡 1037-1101) lived in Hangzhou and Yangzhou; HSÜ, 2001, p. 96
15. Cahill, James (1997) The Yuan Dynasty in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, ed. by Yang Xin, et. al. Yale University Press pp. 139-195; Yi-li kao (2009) *The landscape albums of Huang shen*, in Olivová and Vibeke pp. 376-401.
16. Ibidem. p. 94.
17. HSÜ, 2001, p. 98.
18. Ibidem, p. 99.
19. Möller Stefan (2001) Zu Darstellungen von Gauklern und anderen fahrenden Spielleuten in einem Album des Huang Shen,' [Regarding depictions of jugglers and other traveling musicians in an album of Huang Shen] *Monumenta Serica* 49(1): 367-389.
20. Su Wu (蘇武 statesman 140-60 B.C.) who endured poverty and captivity during his foreign mission by herding sheep. He remained loyal to the Han administration and left his wife and children behind when due to homesickness he returned home. He appreciated a good sip of alcohol.
21. The term 'Zheng Qian's Three Wonders' [Zheng Qian san jue 鄭虔三絕] was used by the Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (Tang xuan zong 唐玄宗) when the poet, painter and calligrapher Zheng Qian (鄭虔, 685-764 A.D.)

- presented him a gift; Sullivan, Michael. *The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry, and Calligraphy*. New York: George Braziller, 1999, digit. 2017. pp. 26, 36, 81-82; CHOU, Diana Y., Works of Huang Shen. San Diego: Museum of Art, 2016. [https://www.academia.edu/37450974/Huang\\_Shen\\_pdf](https://www.academia.edu/37450974/Huang_Shen_pdf)
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  25. Elm [Lat. Ulmus] a tree with a small seed in a coin-like paper-thin sheet, easily blown away by the wind.
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  27. Egan Ronald (2006) *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China*. Harvard East Asian Monographs 271, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center pp. 109-161. Egan discusses the 'peony' in works of the Northern Song scholar-official Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修 1007-1072), and shows his botanical and technical knowledge, as well as personal experience with its cultivation, and remarks on the festival in honour of the peony. Aesthetic pleasure is the key attractiveness of the flower.
  28. The bamboo curtain is called after the famous beauty Xiangfei. When she cried, her tears fell on the bamboo and it got brown spots.
  29. "Handbook of Prescriptions for Emergencies" (Zhou bu jin ji chu fang 肘後備急方) is a famous ancient medical book written by Ge Hong of the Jin Dynasty, courtesy name Zhichuan [稚川 283-343?], 8 vols.
  30. 'I eat and drink alone', Huang Shen feels sad while travelling regularly over long distances, far away from his family and friends. His depressed mood is linked to homesickness, as it is often seen in the verses of the famous Tang poet Li Bai (李白 701-762).
  31. Van Crevel, Maghiel (2022) How China's labor migrants write poetry in the workshop of the world.' *Jacobin Magazine* (with support of F. Heule). <https://jacobin.com/2022/04/chinese-internal-labor-migrants-factories-battler-poetry-dagong>
  32. This simple and humble house of Huang Shen is the place where the old friends (scholars or artists) sleep and eat. It contrasts with rich intellectual wisdom of the friends, and beauty of the 'crane feather red' flower.
  33. A (bamboo or clay) container for rice. The direct question 'is there any food?' refers to financial troubles. For an artist this is often the case, the friends seem to know, hence: 'don't ask' (bie wen 別問).
  34. It was Su Shi who wrote about the intellectual desire to lit the flower to enjoy it more. It is romantic and elegant. The night might harm the flower. This is not about intimacy or erotic feelings, but a bureaucratic habit (xiqi 習氣).
  35. The cursive writing is unclear about a double word 'de'.
  36. Note that the rhyme scheme of the verse is very attractive: chun, bin, and shen. Fu in the third line is not rhyming, and gives suspense.
  37. A comparison between the traditional skirt from Hunan and the bulb with its many layers is made. For the practice of making 'ten copies' of one original painting, see further the remark in this paper on 'Copies and Forgeries'.
  38. Huang Shen uses a reference to the Chinese literature and folklore. Fu Fei (宓妃) was the consort of emperor Fu Xi (伏羲). She drowned in the Luo River and became the spirit 'Luo shen' (洛神). Note that 'Mi' is the modern pronunciation of the old character 'Fu'.
  39. HU Yinglin (胡應麟 1551-1602) in 'Thickets of Poetic Criticism [Shi sou 詩藪 1525]. Transl. WANG, Minghui.
  40. Furong (芙蓉) is another name for Hibiscus, see Leaf 3 above.
  41. Here 書 (shu) means script, and 草 (cao) is quick or rough. Thus, the name 'rough script'. A related meaning of 草 (cao) is grass, hence 'grass script'.
  42. It was a habit to boil cold water for tea. See: Murck, Alfreda. "Wang Shih-shen's (汪士慎) 'asking for snow water (Qishui tu 乞水圖) tribute to a tea drinker.' *China Heritage Quarterly* China Heritage Project, The Australian National University no. 29 (2012), pp. 1-15.  
[http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=029\\_murck.inc&issue=029](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=029_murck.inc&issue=029)
  43. The plum is known as one of the so-called "Three friends of winter" (Suihan Sanyou 歲寒三友) associated with cold weather. <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-three-friends-of-winter.php>
- The blossom can survive in the cold weather, Huang wants to think this way for himself and he is longing for his own remote cabin in the mountains. Tao Qian or Tao Yuanming [陶淵明 365?- 427 AD] who travelled a lot, away from war zones, recognized that true disengagement was a state of mind, he wrote the poem
- 'I Built My Hut in a Zone of Human Habitation,' transl. Arthur Waley in: *From A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919. Poem nr. 7, part 3, p. 111.
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