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**“Zhongzhang passed by...” Fact and Form**  
(an examination of a painting by Ni Zan, 1301–74)

In a recently published article entitled “Connoisseurship versus Criticism”,<sup>1</sup> I argued: “The identity of a painting – versus that of a poem or musical composition – necessarily represents both a historical and an aesthetic assertion, for a painting can not be, as a poem or musical composition can be, abstracted from its material nature. By definition, therefore, a painting represents simultaneously a fact in time and a form in the mind.” I was trying to clarify what is peculiar to the identity of a painting as a material entity produced at certain time by a particular painter, versus that of a musical or literary composition which by its very nature is independent of its score or text. The distinction, I believe, has not been given the attention it deserves.

Using the critical methods laid out in the above article I want to examine a previously undocumented composition by Ni Zan (one of the four masters of the Yuan period)<sup>2</sup>, entitled “Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight”. The biographical details found within Ni’s inscription and the four contemporary colophons which accompany the composition when collated with other inscriptions and colophons by the same persons provide some important insights into Ni’s artistic milieu, and reveal in a particularly concrete manner how the major Yuan painters through a selfconscious attention to the time, place, and circumstances of a painting effectively shifted the aesthetic focus from the subject to the act itself, reifying the moment of composition.

The tradition of the scholar painter which arose towards the end of the eleventh century fully matured during the Mongol rule (1280–1368). Experimenting with the impressionistic aspects of the *po mo* (broken ink) techniques and the expressive potentials within the dedicatory inscription (i.e. the synthesis of words and image) the major Yuan painters pushed the “temporal” elements of the painting to their extremes. Selfconsciously incorporating into the composition the accidents of time and place, they realized an imminent sense of the act itself of painting. As pointed out above, a painting both represents and

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<sup>1</sup> *Bulletin de l’Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient*, tome lxxviii, pp. 229–58.

<sup>2</sup> The other three are traditionally Wu Zhen (1280–1354) Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), and Wang Meng (1308–85). Some critics also include Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322) who was the aesthetic forefather of all four.

expresses time in a way neither a poem nor a musical composition can. At the very center of the Yuan aesthetic revolution is the notion of painting as an action. No other tradition before abstract expressionism had explored as profoundly painting's existential nature. The inscription, as do all radical elements, quickly became a mere convention.

Before turning to the composition itself it is necessary to discuss some general issues of art history and criticism so as to clarify the problems which are peculiar to a critique of a painting attributed to a major scholar painter. The vast majority of the important scholar painters in China from the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries have yet to be given the kind of critical attention which is standard for important European and Japanese painters. The reasons for this are not at all clear. In part, the real subject of the article is this ignorance, or the inaccessible nature of an aesthetics as sophisticated as was that of the scholar painter after the Yuan revolution. Despite the level of critical knowledge concerning Chinese history and culture (particularly philosophy and poetry) prevalent in the occident, Chinese painting in its most sophisticated and significant terms is still a *terra incognita* for the modern critic. Besides the curious fact that Bernard Berenson collected a hand-scroll by Zhou Wenju (fl. 960) I know no example of an important European art critic or historian revealing any knowledge of the major scholar painters.<sup>3</sup> The contrast between such ignorance and the universal familiarity with Chinese lyric poetry is striking. The poet or critic today who has not read some poems by Li Bai or Du Fu is the exception. This neglect entails a more complex problem.

Every culture by definition is hermetic and resists self-scrutiny. Only very recently have the practices and values of European music and art been subject to a rigorous historical analysis. When one examines the critical history of Rembrandt's *oeuvre* since the late nineteenth century it is evident that the credibility of expert opinion regarding the authenticity of a painting attributed to a major painter is in direct proportion to the degree to which the painter and his works have been scrutinized under the light of modern criticism with its hyper-attention to individual histories and the details of technique. Such a review in the West only became comprehensive after the second world war and it still reveals the inconsistencies or lack of consensus characteristic of a discipline in its early stages. On the whole art criticism remains a discourse characterized by values and beliefs which have only been half-examined.

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<sup>3</sup> Though individual and museum collections have been studied, only Bada Shanren (1626–1705), Tang Yin (1470–1523), and Hongren (1610–'64) have been the subjects of comprehensive monographs. See my revue of *Master of the Lotus Garden: the Life and Art of Bada Shanren*, Wang Fangyu, Richard Barnhart, and Judith Smith, Yale University Press, 1991 in *Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient*, tome lxxvii, 1991; *The painting of Tang Yin*, Anne De Corsey Clapp, University of Chicago Press, 1991 and *The Austere Landscape: The Painting of Hung-jen*, Jason C. Kuo, SMC Publishing, 1990. For a more or less critical study of two major collections see *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Paintings – The Collections of the Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and The Cleveland Museum of Art*, Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980. Perhaps the recent exhibition in the States organized around Dong Qichang will change the status quo.

Critical opinions commonly fall into two types of arguments, both of which reveal certain misconceptions. The traditional connoisseur treats the painting exactly as he would any art object, such as a piece of pottery or an anonymous bronze etc, basing his appraisal on its general historical and aesthetic qualities; while the modern critic treats the composition precisely as he would a poem attributed to Marlowe or Shakespeare, basing his judgement on the details of the painter's career and the peculiarities of his art and sensibility. Most often, however, the critic unconsciously is doing both. On the one hand, he fails to fully recognize the difference between a painting which is an intelligible part of the *oeuvre* of an important painter working within a sophisticated aesthetic tradition and an anonymous period piece. The two are fundamentally different, no matter how refined or remarkable the qualities of the period piece might be. And, on the other hand, he does not fully consider how or why the identity of a painting, being essentially a material entity, is different from that of a poem or musical composition. The endless confusions surrounding the discussions of authenticity concerning a problematic painting derive from one or the other of these fallacies. Regarding the evaluation of compositions attributed to even the most important scholar painters, because of the pervasive lack of critical knowledge, such ambiguities are more often than not the norm.

Obviously the second fallacy involves a lesser type of error, for if a composition can be shown either to contradict or not to conform to the known details of the painter's life and sensibility the chances that it is actually by him are not very likely. Or, vice versa, if it conforms in a peculiar way to such elements, despite its apparent aesthetic qualities, there is a good chance it is by him. As pointed out in the above article the common vice of the critic is supposing that he knows all aspects of the mind or vision of the artist and can judge, without question, his art: that is, his (the critic's) taste and judgement are infallible. I have always been struck by the curious arrogance of otherwise sensitive critics who will say, in total confidence, "Though the painting is an authentic work by Goya (Bada etc.) nevertheless *it is poorly done.*" The opinion may be justified but when confronted by a painting by such a painter the critic should at least have the modesty to say "In my eyes the painting seems..." or "I do not quite see..."

When it comes to judging art we too often display the solipsistic nature of a child who thinks what it sees is all that is there. Art is visible only in the intellectual sense (I include within the intellect all modes of reflection). For aesthetic values, which are peculiar to human society, appear to derive from the primary power of the intellect i.e. the capacity to discern and appreciate affinities. In a strict sense a painting can not be considered to be a painting per se until the painter is aware of and consciously plays with the formal dynamics of the tradition (its affinities and differences) i.e. when the painter self-consciously defines his or her own style within the critical context of other styles, or in the case of primitive or naive painting when the critic does the same. All art focuses on a given spectrum of visual nuances which involve a particular sensibility that can be learned or acquired and, in the larger historical sense, lost.

However, in addition to experience, art also requires a proclivity to question and contemplate.

The peculiar fragility of the aesthetic equation has not, in my opinion, been fully appreciated. Art can and does disappear without its artifacts disappearing, and vice versa, later, when a homologous sensibility re-discovers its aesthetics, can re-appear. This is obviously what happened to Greek plastic art in Europe during the Middle Ages and then at the beginning of the Italian renaissance; and this was also the case until fairly recently in Europe for the major scholar painters of China from the eighth through the eighteenth centuries. For the vast majority of European critics before abstract expressionism, the acutely refined *po mo* paintings of Ni Zan or Bada Shanren were merely “sketchy drawings” devoid of any recognizable aesthetic qualities.

It is also true that a culture can lose a part of its own past or, after a certain time, become indifferent to and unable to appreciate a sophisticated element of its own aesthetics. Piero della Francesca and his art were effectively ignored in Italy after Raphael (fl.1510) and were not re-discovered, and then by German and English critics, until the later half of the nineteenth century. In China by the beginning of the twelfth century scholar critics such as Mi Fu (1052–1107) had a limited understanding of and appreciation for the exceptionally refined aesthetics of the figure tradition from Han Gan (fl.740) through Cui Bo (fl.1070). Or, there is the case of El Greco (fl. 1600) and Bada Shanren (fl 1690) whose paintings were not fully appreciated until nearly three hundred years after their times. What makes art visible or invisible remains a mystery. Though it is obvious that if a painter’s interpretation of the tradition focuses on elements which are outside or contrary to the taste and the understanding of the connoisseur his paintings will be ignored, but what actually gives his art the force it finally has is not at all clear. We forget how easy it would be to lose the peculiar sensibility which makes a Cezanne landscape or a Van Gogh still-life more than a pretty or a gaudy picture.

It is necessary before going any further to define what I mean above when I talk of a “sophisticated aesthetic tradition”. It is generally recognized that European music between the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries i.e. from Palestrina (1526–1594) through J.S. Bach (1685–1750), went through an evolution which gave to the individual composer an importance he did not have before, and ultimately distinguishes it from all other musical traditions. With the discovery of the overtones and the articulation of the tonal accidents within the music of Monteverdi (1567–1643), Vivaldi (1675–1741), and Corelli (1653–1713), along with the perfection of a system of notation, and the invention of the violin and the other string instruments, culminating in Rameau’s (1683–1764) analysis of the principals of harmony European music became a selfconscious art form with its own history, principals, and values. Bach had available to him not only all the elements but also a thorough theoretical understanding of contrapuntal harmony which allowed him to effectively invent the classical tradition. For the first time in human history the composer emerged in all his individuality.

Though the same kind and degree of evolution occurred within Greek

literature between Homer and Aristotle, culminating with the Hellenistic writers, when literature for very the first time became an autonomous reality and the writer, in the literary sense, fully conscious, its history has not been given the critical attention it deserves. This is even more the case for Chinese lyric poetry which went through a homologous development from Chu Yuan (circa. 300 B.C. – the author of the *Li Sao* a lyric narrative) through Liu Xie (circa 510 A.D. – the author of the *Wenxin Diaolong* an analytical treatise on poetry comparable to the *Poetics*), finally culminating with the Tang lyric poets, when Chinese poetry became an autonomous tradition and the poet fully conscious of himself as such.

In art, perhaps because the real relationship between, on the one hand, aesthetic theory and history, and, on the other hand, practice is less obvious, the substantive difference between a tradition of painting like that in China which by the eleventh century had realized a sophisticated theoretical and historical analysis of its own past and had become an autonomous tradition with a peculiar if not excessive attention to the individuality of the painter, and the European tradition through the seventeenth century, which was only minimally aware of its own history and the problematic nature of its aesthetics, has been given little if any critical attention. There is no effective term in art criticism to distinguish between those traditions which have realized a critical analysis of their own history and aesthetics and become autonomous art forms and those which have not or have only partially done so. The difference is one of levels of consciousness or the point within the evolution of a culture when the painter, as does the composer or poet, becomes a fully articulate artist and painting an end in itself i.e. when the painter is aware of the tradition as a complex history of competing styles and aesthetic principals or values and he defines himself both within and in contradistinction to that complexity.

Once the artist (poet, composer, or painter) has a critical grasp of the history and dynamics of the tradition he can realize a level of individual expression which is otherwise impossible and, as a consequence, his compositions and their history take on an importance they did not have before. We still unconsciously treat all paintings as art objects placing the primary value on their immediate appeal, not realizing, as we do in literature and music, that the aesthetic force or quality of a painting by a painter as sophisticated as is Ni Zan or Cezanne is in direct proportion to our critical appreciation of the tradition within which he paints and the individual qualities of his own aesthetics.

The sustained focus on a spectrum of peculiarly light and subtle color or tonal effects and the selfconscious attention to the actual moment of composition represent the two aspects of Chinese scholar painting which most distinguish it from European painting. Possibly the earliest painting to have survived by a major figure painter in China appears to illustrate in a peculiarly immediate yet esoteric fashion the tragic history of Yang Guifei, emperor Xuan Zong's (r. 712–756) favorite consort, and the sacking of the imperial palace by An Lushan's rebel forces in late 755. "Two Imperial Horses and Groom" by Han Gan (see illustration), a painting authenticated by the Song Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1125), portrays two stout horses: a white stallion mounted by a distinctly

non-chinese or central asian looking groom, accompanying a saddled but conspicuously riderless black stallion. The white stallion is gazing at the black horse and the two horses, in a masterly play of perspective, form a triangle and describe a circle.

After 742, working under the court painter Chen Hung with his focus on reality Han Gan quickly became the prized horse painter for Ming Huang (emperor Xuanzong), a connoisseur of fine horses and women. In late 755 Ming Huang was forced by An Lushan's troops, who were predominantly non-chinese from central asia, to abandon the capital and to flee into Szechwan. During his flight he was compelled by a division of his defeated troops to execute Yang Guifei, his favorite consort (The troops blamed her and members of her family for the debacle). Ordering her to be strangled Ming Huang, half-crazed, fled to Cgang Du. For a brief period that fall An Lushan's rebel army occupied the capital, sacking the imperial palace. The white stallion portrayed in the painting was one of Ming Huang's favorite chargers, called Shining Night White. Within at least two different paintings, which survive in Song and Yuan copies, Han Gan portrayed the emperor riding the white charger with Yang Guifei mounted on or mounting a darker horse. Clearly, the tragic history explains the peculiar sadness in the white horse's eye. The composition may portray an actual scene seen by Han Gan during the occupation, but more likely he imagined it. We are told that the rebel troops destroyed all the prize horses in the imperial stables and that Han Gan died shortly after the rebellion.<sup>4</sup> Or, in another masterpiece painted some three hundred years later, Cui Bo (fl. 1068-77) catches a rabbit in that split second before running, looking back and up at the screaming jays (see illustration). Both images capture time in its most concrete yet fleeting aspects.

After the eleventh century, when the scholar painter began to assert a definitive influence on the tradition, the practice of signing and dating paintings became more and more common. By the Yuan period when the tradition fully matured the scholar painter often added a poem and/or commentary which more fully developed the moment of composition. The details of time and place along with the persons referred to and the thoughts expressed when analyzed often allow the modern critic to reconstruct the life and formation of a painter such as Ni Zan to an unusual degree.

Such a peculiar attention in Chinese aesthetics to actual time appears to derive from the Classic of the Odes, an anthology of some 300 anonymous folk lyrics and ceremonial songs dating from the twelfth through the sixth centuries B.C.. Their most distinctive rhetorical element of the odes is the trope called *xing*: a thematic refrain and image portraying a natural event, such as the osprey crying at the beginning of the first Ode or an oriel landing on a branch etc. The trope functions as a paralogical metaphor or *metaphore essentielle* (a metaphor without a stated tenor but with an implied tenor). The image is not integrated into the

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<sup>4</sup> For Han Gan's biography and the history of Ming Huang's horses see *Some Tang and Pre-Tang Texts on Chinese Painting*, William R. B. Acker, vol. II, part 1, pp. 260-263.

action of the Ode and consequently breaks the poetic discourse, juxtaposing the two possible and often separate times in a lyric poem i.e. the event itself and the moment of composition when the poet draws from his immediate surroundings images which conjure up a feeling or a memory.

An articulate lyric voice first appears in China during the early Han period circa 200 B.C.. By 200 A.D. the Jian An poets had perfected a sophisticated lyric persona giving to Chinese poetics a peculiarly concrete sense of time. The fact that scroll painting and lyric poetry in China fully matured within the same milieu, during the same period points to their shared aesthetics. Wang Wei (701–761) a poet and contemporary of Du Fu and Han Gan was considered by later generations as the father of scholar painting. The actual history is more complex. Nevertheless, there are few examples in the European tradition before the twentieth century of as detailed a sense of actual time as one finds in Du Fu's (712–770) poetic description of the above rebellion when he and his family were forced in the fall of 755 by An Lushan's troops to flee the capital, Chang-an. A peculiar fascination with time's solid yet intangible bits is common to both Du's poem and Han's painting.

Song of Peng-ya

I remember when we first fled the rebellion;  
 Hurrying north, we passed through hardship and danger.  
 The night was deep on the Peng-ya road,  
 And the moon was shining on Whitewater mountain.  
 The whole family had long been traveling on foot.  
 Most of those we met on the road had lost all shame.  
 Intermittently the birds in the valley sang.  
 We saw no travelers going the other way.  
 My baby girl gnawed at me in her hunger  
 And I feared those wild beasts would hear her cries.  
 I held her to my chest, covered her mouth,  
 But she twisted and turned crying louder in rage.  
 My little son tried his best to take care of things  
 And went off and found some sour plums...

During the later half of the eleventh century, through the efforts of painter-critics such as Su Shi and Mi Fu, the scholar painter first emerges as an effective force in Chinese aesthetics. With his cult of simplicity and his radical formalism he asserted a definitive influence on Chinese painting. Rejecting the refined line drawing and the subtle color washes along with the naturalism of the figure tradition from Han Gan through Cui Bo, the scholar painter established the monochrome landscape and the bamboo, rock, and flower still-lives along with the abstract qualities of *po mo* painting as the classical norm. We are told that the monochrome tradition derives from the landscape paintings of Wang Wei, but given what survives of art criticism from the sixth century, when a history of individual painters begins, through the ninth century, when the figure tradition fully matures, it is evident that the elements of such formalism were there from

the very beginning.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the focus on a subtle gradation of tonality within a monochrome ink must go back, in some fashion, to the curious aesthetics of the jade cult with which Chinese culture begins.

Besides moving Chinese aesthetics towards a selfconscious formalism the scholar painter in his inscriptions and colophons also intensified the awareness of the actual moment of composition. When studying the major painters after the Song period (ca. 1280) these critical and historical comments can give the modern critic a peculiar insight into the mind and life of the painter, often allowing him to detail evolutions of technique and style in a way which is impossible for even nineteenth century European painters. What is curious is how little critical attention has been paid to these elements. Most discussions of compositions by the four Yuan masters ignore their inscriptions and colophons or give them only a cursory regard, seldom interpreting the wealth of biographical information which is there. Among the most important painters of the period these elements are not merely a polite convention but represent a radical factor in their art.

It was the generation of scholar painters under the Mongol rule (1280–1368) who revived the aesthetics of Su Shi and Mi Fu. The mongols, despite their efforts to keep the various cultures and peoples they brought together apart, realized, particularly among the ruling class, a peculiarly heterogenous society which must have been a stimulus for change and innovation.<sup>6</sup> The major painters of the period, Zhao Mengfu, Gao Kegong, Huang Gongwang, Wu Zhen, Wang Meng, and Ni Zan all share in common a radical individualism. Each painter, exploring the formal and expressive elements of the *po mo* tradition, created an individual style which ultimately became a genre of its own.

More determinedly than the others Ni Zan simplified the formal elements of his compositions and realized an immediacy in his image which can best be compared to that imminent sense of time we find in the poems of T.S. Eliot or the photographs by Pierre Bonnard. The effect represents a sort of direct apprehension of the moment stripped of all sentiment but, as a consequence, even more felt. Ni's "Lonely Brook and Cold Pines" (see illustration), most likely painted in the seventh month of 1368, at the end of his life when he was sick and destitute, haunts the viewer with its naked simplicity. The inscription reads:

The Fall heat is excessive – sick and feverish  
 This itinerant traveler hates the highways.  
 Sougning among the lonely brook and pines;  
 And light and shade fill the court yard door.  
 The chill spring glides on the cliff;  
 White clouds gather in the morning and evening.  
 My reflections – alas! are like silver or jade (hard & clear);  
 Zhou Zimei (Zhou Yu, the recipient) is reckless.

<sup>5</sup> See *Some Tang and Pre-Tang Texts on Chinese Painting*, idem,

<sup>6</sup> See my discussion of a landscape attributed to Gao Kegong (1248–1310) found in *Etudes Orientales*, no 11/12, 1991, pp.205–20. Gao himself was Uighur: a Turkish speaking people from northern Mongolia.



At leisure among the shadows he wanders aimlessly.  
And conversing, laughingly says whatever he thinks.

Who is Zhou Zimei and what is all the worry about? Ni gives us some clues in his dedicatory remarks following the poem.

(Zhou Yu) abandoning his studies and companions, in the Fall heat leaves his parents. He is about to enter active service. Therefore, I drew "Lonely Brook and Cold Pines", adding the five syllable quatrain as a gift, just like the reflections found in "Zhao Yin (Shi)" (An anonymous fu poem in the *Chu Ci* concerning a recluse who is called into active service) Seventh month, 18th day – Ni Zan

Though the Yuan dynasty had collapsed a few years earlier Zhu Yuanzhang did not establish his supremacy as the emperor of the Ming dynasty until the beginning of 1368. Obviously Zhou Zimei had been called up to serve under the new rule, most likely to fight whatever resistance remained. Saying what you think in China was always dangerous, but during the period, as we will see, it was particularly so for an intellectual from Suzhou.

Though Ni Zan has been accused of "hammering the nails into the coffin of naturalistic illusion"<sup>7</sup> and despite his boasts about the total lack of resemblance of his images to reality and his own madness, both his landscapes and his rock and bamboo compositions are, in their own terms, imminently real. It is wrong to consider them as only mental exercises or pure inventions. As did Cezanne, Ni carefully studied the details and paradoxes of space and volume. To transform reality in all its complexity into a sensible two-dimensional abstraction, as he said himself, is no easy task. However, it is important to note that the effect of Ni's radical simplifications, as was also that of Cezanne, was to push the scholar painter away from reality and observation. It is, however, the acute sense of actual time and space, as is true for most of the Yuan masters, which distinguishes Ni's paintings from later imitations.

It is probably necessary to repeat that, contrary to what one often hears among critics and scholars, arguments treating the authenticity of a painting attributed to an important painter both deal with the fundamental elements of his identity and raise the essential questions concerning the nature of his aesthetics. They are, in a certain sense, the most important arguments because they can articulate in a critical fashion the problematic nature of the *oeuvre* (which is, I would argue, the essence of its significance). In the end, the Rembrandt Research Project is not simply correcting some errors of judgement; it is re-examining both the history and the aesthetics of Rembrandt, and by so doing is questioning the elements of our understanding of painting. If discerning and precise, the observations could form the basis for a renaissance.

The resistance even among otherwise sophisticated critics to recognize the critical nature and importance of the questions of authenticity surrounding a problematic painting by a major painter is, I believe, a part of a historical

<sup>7</sup> See *Along The Border of Heaven*, Richard Barnhart, Metropolitan Museum Of Art, 1983, p. 162.

evolution. In both China and Europe painting is the most culturally-centric of the arts. Perhaps because vision is the least or the least consciously reflective of the senses – we believe what we see is simply what is there – the modern critic is just beginning to view European painting and its aesthetics as a particular history and, therefore, as part of a larger history. As a consequence, questions concerning the real nature of Rembrandt's or Bada Shanren's aesthetics become for the first time meaningful.

“Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight” provides an interesting case in point. Despite the eminently assessable or analyzable nature of the composition with its inscription by Ni Zan and its colophons by four important calligraphers of the period the scroll was recently sold at Sotheby's as “attributed to”.<sup>8</sup> The contemporary testimony, if genuine, is the equivalent of having a painting by Camille Pissarro documented by Pierre Bonnard and the brothers Goncourt. The doubts surrounding the authenticity of the composition simply underline the kind of ignorance and indifference which still besets paintings by major scholar painters. The materials and the means for evaluating the historical details of such compositions are all there, but they have seldom been given the critical attention they would be given if such testimony were available for even a minor sketch attributed to Raphael or El Greco.

One of the few examples of an analysis of the colophons found on a painting attributed to an important Yuan painter is Dr. Fu Shen's monogram entitled «Confirmation of the “Nine Verdant Peaks” as a Genuine Painting by Huang Kung-wang ». <sup>9</sup> Dr. Fu, the director of the Freer Gallery, convincingly argues for the authenticity of Huang's painting by demonstrating that the two contemporary colophons by Yang Weichen and Wang Feng, who were close friends of Huang, are genuine. Carefully collating and comparing the formal details of the calligraphy, signatures, and seals of each calligrapher as found in other examples of their writings, i.e. isolating the idiosyncrasies of each hand, he shows without a doubt that the two colophons are genuine and therefore the painting is more than likely genuine. The monograph is significant because it explores in a critical fashion the historical elements which often accompany compositions by major scholar painters, and, more particularly for “Bamboo & Rock in Moonlight” because it provides documentation on Wang Feng, a minor calligrapher who was a close friend of Huang Gongwang and Ni Zan. As Dr. Fu points out, he is the first critic to assemble and examine the materials.

Before setting out an analysis of “Bamboo & Rock in Moonlight” it is necessary to note that, as in the case of Huang Gongwang's “Nine Verdant Peaks”, the vast majority of the documentation and details needed for such an

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<sup>8</sup> See Sotheby's *Fine Chinese Paintings*, May 30, 1990, item 5. The painting is presently in the C.C. Wang collection.

<sup>9</sup> The article was published as part of the collected papers read at a colloquium in Taipei, Taiwan under the title: *Zhongyin yanjiu-yuan guoji hanxuehui yilun wenji*, November, 1982, pp. 501-518.

argument have yet to be assembled or evaluated, such as indexing all the existing examples of colophons by contemporary scholars which accompany paintings by major scholar painters, or referencing the critical notices to such compositions which are found in the enormous body of traditional documentation. As a result, I have not had the time or means to exhaust all the materials which are there. The intent is simply to outline the kinds of arguments possible. However, because there exists so much critical confusion within the field concerning some basic facts, such as the capacity to identify the hand of a known calligrapher and to recognize copies and imitations, at times I might be guilty of belaboring a point.

I will begin the examination by describing the scroll itself. “Bamboo & Rock in Moonlight” is a monochrome ink composition on paper measuring 30.5 x 40. cm, with the attached colophons 30.5 x 55.9 cm. The painting is accompanied by a seven syllable quatrain dedicated to a certain Lord Shen (Shen Jiong) and signed *Zan*. There is a fragment of the upper half of a collector’s seal reading *rong* in the lower left hand corner.<sup>10</sup> Attached to the right-hand side of the mounting is a title with a brief authentication, signed *Chong Zhuang Pan Zhenfu*<sup>11</sup> and dated *Kuangxu kengzi* (1900), with one seal: *Zhenfu*. Though the scroll has suffered some worm damage and flaking it reveals only minor repairs. Ni’s quatrain along with the dedication reads:

Lord Shen loves the ancients and has a passion for what is eminently plain/  
Queer rocks and subtle bamboo groves are his heart’s delight/  
Therefore I draw the scene below **Yun Lin**’s window/  
The moon shines and the spring drizzle soaks (my) lapel – **Zhongzhang**<sup>12</sup> (Shen Jiong) passed by while I was in the studio; I sketched the bamboo & rock along with the poem as a gift – *Zan*.

The painting and dedication to *Zhongzhang* along with the poem with the

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<sup>10</sup> Given its style and content the seal might well belong to the Suzhou calligrapher and painter Yao Kuangxiao (1335–1418) who carried the title *Rong Guo Gong* (what remains of the second character is consistent with the form of the character *guo*). As a member of the Suzhou literati Yao would have known doctor Shen the recipient of the scroll and also as a specialist in bamboo painting he might have taken an interest in the composition and eventually either bought or have been given the scroll for services rendered. See *Zhongguo meishu jia ren ming zidian*, p. 590. Concerning the practice of doctors in the Suzhou area being paid in paintings and later selling them see *The Paintings of Tang Yin*, *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Pan Zhenfu is apparently a descendent of Pan Shien (1770–1854) from Wuxian in Jiangsu. Pan’s children all used the *fu* character in the second part of their sobriquets. During the nineteenth century the family was famous for its scholars, art critics, calligraphers, and connoisseurs. See *Eminent Chinese of the Qing Period*, Hummel, Library of Congress, vol. II, p. 607–8.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that in the other inscription dedicated to Lord Shen, which I cite below, Ni refers to Shen by the sobriquet *Rizhang*. They could be the same person or perhaps brothers. *Shen Zhongzhang* is referred to twice by Ni within the *Qing Bige Quanji* and once within the later collection entitled *Ni Yunlin Xiansheng Shiji* as indexed in the compendium *Yuanchao Mingren Lu – Repertory of Proper Names In Yuan Literary Sources*, Igor de Rachewiltz and Mary Wang (Lou Chan–mei), Southern Materials Center Inc. Taipei, 1988. I can find no other references to *Shen Rizhang*. The above compendium, which I discovered only after writing this article, is an invaluable resource tool for research on Yuan biographies. If I had been aware earlier of the existence of such an exhaustive repertory of proper names it would have saved me months of idle searching.

character “*chuang*” (window) altered to “*zhai*” (studio) are all recorded in the Ming collection of Ni’s writings entitled *Qing Bige Quanji* (8/4a).<sup>13</sup> *Yun Lin* “Clouds & Trees” was the name of Ni’s home which he abandoned in 1352. During the late sixties he used the title along with *Yun lin zi* and *Yun lin sheng* as his sobriquet. The epithet here could be understood as a simple possessive i.e. “Yun Lin’s (my) window” or as a generic reference to a window like that found at Yun Lin or possibly to an actual window at Yun Lin and to a scene remembered. The reference to “spring drizzle” dates the inscription between the second and the fourth lunar month. The peculiarly loose wet and dry yet taught formal qualities of Ni’s calligraphy precisely match other examples of his writing after 1365 – particularly those written ca.1368.<sup>14</sup>

I want to take the time here to comment on the importance of the autograph inscriptions which often accompany paintings by major scholar painters, particularly after the Song Period. In both their formal elements and their content the inscriptions give the modern critic a unique tool for assessing and dating a composition. When we have sufficient genuine examples, the writings of a painter can often be verified more definitively than his paintings. The extreme formalism of the calligraphic tradition provides a more perceptible media for differentiating identity. The hand of every calligrapher has its idiosyncracies or “signature” and those formal qualities can no more be perfectly imitated than can his paintings or personality.

Because of the subtle skills of a practiced calligrapher, who can not only work in range of styles but also mix them, it might seem that a calligrapher’s handwriting has lost the individuality it had when less practiced. This is not the case. In fact, the reverse is true. Experience and real skill bring with them a greater level of individuality. It is much harder to imitate the qualities of a master calligrapher than those of a mediocre one, and therefore, vice-versa, easier in the end to distinguish fakes or copies of a major calligrapher than it is those of a minor. The opposite might seem to be the case simply because the Chinese spent more time and effort trying to copy the writings of Zhao Mengfu, Zhu Yunming or Dong Qichang than they did those of Dai Jin, Cha Shibiao or Wang Hui.

One often hears that a particularly skilled painter and/or calligrapher, such as Wang Hui or Zhang Da Qian, can create perfect copies of the writings or paintings of the masters. The fact is, when we have sufficient materials, all such fakes are apparent. The myth derives from the complex of cultural realities or the different levels of historical and aesthetic consciousness which make up Chinese society. The scholar painter through the 17th century represented a distinctly aristocratic phenomenon and his focus on a subtle range of graphic modalities

<sup>13</sup> For all Ni’s various references to *Shen Zhongzhang* consult *Repertory of Proper Names in Yuan Literary Sources*, idem. Variants within the published versions of Ni’s dedicatory poems are common.

<sup>14</sup> Compare the writings by Ni accompanying his paintings dated between the third and the tenth month of 1368 listed below.

reveals the esoteric qualities characteristic of such a milieu. When ultimately the tradition became a part of the values of the society at large the average connoisseur not only could not accurately distinguish between copies and originals but he was, in a sense, indifferent to the subtle differences (Traditionally stone engravings of famous pieces of calligraphy have been revered almost more than the originals). The connoisseur was content if the imitations met certain general standards of taste, for he had no precise knowledge of the individual aesthetics of the painter. Moreover, as we now know was also the case in Europe through the nineteenth century, he often preferred the imitations because they conformed more to his notions of beauty. Concerning the landscape paintings of Li Cheng (919–67) Mi Fu (1052–1107), one of the most sophisticated critics in the tradition, claimed by his times only fakes were considered genuine and the originals were ignored.

Not only are fakes attributed to major scholar painters as discernable as are fakes attributed to major European painters but, because of the peculiar amount of documentation which exists within the scholar tradition, the arguments are often more definitive. One has only to compare the documentation surrounding “Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight” with that available for any painting by Rembrandt to see the real and significant differences in criteria. Regarding copies or imitations of the writings by major artists there are, in effect, three types and each type requires a different level of observation to be recognized.<sup>15</sup>

1) An imitation in the style of – these are the most common types of fakes and if done by an excellent calligrapher can have a quality analogous to that found in the genuine writings of the artist. Within the tradition the best of these imitations were, more often than not, accepted as genuine. As with the imitations attributed to Rembrandt, the primary task of modern critic is to sort out the genuine writings from the false attributions: first, using a complex of historical criteria, to identify a body of authentic writings, and then, analyzing their details and transformations, to isolate the elements of the artist’s hand. When that is done the differences and discrepancies are always apparent. The imitator invariably confuses or mixes elements which were historically separate and creates a style of his own. Because Ni often inscribed and dated his compositions and many of his letters and autograph poems survive we have an unusually precise knowledge of the idiosyncracies and evolutions of his hand.

2) A free copy of an original – if done by a master calligrapher these are the most difficult to identify. It ultimately requires a comparison of the original and the copy or an analysis of other examples of the artist’s writings of the same period. Because the copier has a precise model before him he will not make the obvious mistakes he would make if extemporizing. But, he will invariably change certain elements or qualities and if the copy is done with minute attention to details a rigidity or artificialness is always apparent, for the task is extremely

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion in greater detail of the types of copies and forgeries of Chinese calligraphy see *Traces of the Brush*, Shen C.Y. Fu, Yale University Press, 1977.

demanding (It is important to understand that even the artist himself could not perfectly copy a particular piece of his own writing). There are always real and apparent differences between the two hands.<sup>16</sup> Copies of Ni's simple epistolary style, which he often used in his colophons on other paintings, when done by a master forger at first sight can be very convincing, but his most subtle calligraphy as found within "Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight" with its daubing and dabbling effects has a painterly quality to it which I have never seen reproduced.

3) Traced and filled in copies – often from a photograph or without the use of a magnifying glass such copies are indistinguishable from the originals. They are as close to photographic reproductions as one can fabricate by hand. Nevertheless, when scrutinized, normally with the natural eye and always with a magnifying glass, the fact that the characters have been artificially constructed is obvious. To be effective the technique requires sharp outlines and not too subtle a gradation in ink tonalities. Zhao Mengfu's hand is particularly susceptible to such techniques, but it would be impossible to copy in such a manner the daubs and splashes of Ni's hand.

An analysis and comparison of the brushwork elements in the painting itself also point to the year 1368 as the probable time of composition. The sketchy nature of the painting with its scumbled and fused dry washes, blurred and scribbled outlines, and subtle random spotting, which form a complex and idiosyncratic synthesis of brush elements realizing a minutely nuanced impression of space, volume, and atmosphere, closely match the same elements in Ni's landscape and bamboo and rock compositions dated between the third and the seven month of 1368 (see illustrations). In addition the lack of a seal and the simple signature *Zan* are typical of that period.<sup>17</sup> Yuan painters did not always, as usually Chinese painters did afterwards, mark their inscriptions with seals. Obviously, the inscription was seen as authoritative enough. In Ni's case the choice may well have been an aesthetic one. The color and linear nature of the seal's impression would disrupt the delicate formal balance he realizes between the inscription and the image. The peculiarly fragile and "spotty" calligraphy accompanying, "Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight" clearly echoes or expresses the rainy moonlit image. As already remarked, in his best calligraphy Ni creates a distinctly painterly effect.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the forgery of Bada Shanren's version of Su Shi's poem *Zui-weng yin* "Song of A Drunk Old Man" apparently copied by Zhang Daqian as published in Sotheby's *Fine Chinese Painting*, Dec. 2, 1992. The original is published in *Bada Shanren Hanmo ji*, *Zhizhi* chubanshi, 1990, pp. 54–60

<sup>17</sup> Compare Ni's calligraphy (particularly the characters *dan*, *you*, *huang*, and *chuan*) and his dry scumbled brushwork to those found in compositions dated or datable to 1368, as illustrated in *The Four Great Masters of the Yuan*, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 1975, illus. 306, 307, 308, 310, 311 & 326; in *Zhongguo meishu quanji – yuandai huihua*, vol.V, pls.118, 119, 120 & 122, & idem – *song yuandai shufa*, vol. 4, pl. 108, pp. 188–89; in *Shuhua jiangding jianshu* pl. 13; in *Along the Border of Heaven*, figs. 60, 74, 75; *Gugong shuhua tulu*, vol. 4, pl. 44; *Five Thousand Years of Chinese Art, Yuan Painting*, Part I, Taipei, Taiwan, 1991, illus. 21, 23 & pp. 166 & 269; in *Chinese Painting – Leading Masters and Principles*, Siren, Hacker Art Books, 1973, vol. vi, plates 97, 99; and a colophon dated 1368 on a composition of Wei Qiu-Ding (fl 1360), *Three Hundred Masterpieces of Chinese Painting from the Palace Museum*, vol. IV, no. 176.

It has been pointed out that after the beginning of the Ming dynasty in January of 1368 Ni less often dates his compositions and (contrary to popular myth which portrays him as pro-Ming) he never again uses the reigning title as he did up to the end of the Yuan. Often during that year he appears to give only the month and the day without the cyclical title. My own belief is that Ni suppressed the cyclical title in 1368 for a combination of reasons: 1) the actual time was self evident from the complex of references and/or allusions accompanying the composition such as the names of those present or the place itself etc.; and 2) in a certain sense time had stopped or the reality of Zhu Yuanzhang's victory could well have been in question in the Suzhou area for at least the first year. Sometime in early 1368, when the new Ming emperor was more securely in power, Ni along with other refugees returned silently to Suzhou. He later moved to a studio on lake Tai.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the impressionistic qualities discussed above Ni's inscription contains some unusual and archaic forms.<sup>19</sup> Within a bamboo composition also dedicated to Lord Shen, which belongs to the later part (the seventh month) of the same year, Ni tells us that Shen was a passionate connoisseur of calligraphy. The quatrain accompanying the painting echoes elements of the quatrain on "Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight", as well as those found in other poems by Ni datable to 1368. It reads:

After the rain within the empty hall the Fall moon shines/  
The silhouette of the branch in the window is silently (sadly) eccentric (*zong-heng*)/  
Lord Shen still delights in copying calligraphy/  
Carefully he grinds (his ink) and dips (his brush) and the generous nature of his mind is spontaneously lucid – *Yun linzi* (Ni Zan) drew the bright shoot and poem as a gift for *Rizhang zhenshi* (Shen Jiong): the seventh month twenty-first day.<sup>20</sup>

The two inscriptions contain obvious thematic parallels and the selfconscious archaizing qualities of Ni's calligraphy, along with those of the four colophons, which I will discuss later, appear to reflect the peculiar interests of the recipient. Lord Shen has been identified as Shen Jiong (d.1390) the father of the court physician Shen Xuan (1369–1437). The Shen family were for generations physicians in Changzhou (Suzhou prefecture). Shen was a close friend of Wang Xing who was one of the famous "Ten Friends of the North Wall" which gathered

<sup>18</sup> See "An-chu Studio", *The Four Great Masters of the Yuan*, idem, plate 307 & pp. 184–5. If one reads closely Ni's writings dated or datable to 1368 he seems to tacitly recognize the Ming dynasty in the early months of 1368 but not to fully accept the reality until after the sixth month. See the discussion of Tao Zhen below.

<sup>19</sup> See *The Four Great Masters of the Yuan*, pl. 311. The forms of *dan* "plain", *shi* "rock", *suo* "where", *xie* "draw", *yi* "by" and *chuan* "window" are irregular or archaic. In the case of *dan*, *shi*, *xie*, *suo*, and *chuan* the forms are found elsewhere among Ni's writings. See a landscape dated 1372, ninth month as found in *Pai Yuan Tang – The Collection of C.P. Huang*, vol.1, p.48 and the other citations.

<sup>20</sup> See *The Four Great Masters of the Yuan*, idem, p.65, plate 311. It is interesting to note that, apparently, three days earlier within the inscription accompanying "Lonely Brook and Cold Pines" Ni tells us that he is "sick and feverish". Had Doctor Shen been called in to treat his sickness?

about the poet Gao Qi (1336–1374) during the last years of the Yuan dynasty. Ni, who was sick and destitute during his final years, may well have given the two paintings as payment for medical services. Doctors within the Suzhou area, as members of a class of skilled artisans, often preferred, in lieu of fees, to be paid with paintings or pieces of calligraphy.<sup>21</sup> In addition, as we will see later, Shen and Ni not only shared common aesthetic interests but they were both closely associated with the cause of Zhang Shicheng, Zhu Yuanzhang's (the first Ming emperor) rival.

Having perfected the formalist aesthetics and *po mo* techniques first articulated by Su Shi and Mi Fu and later developed by Zhao Mengfu, at the end of his life Ni explored with even greater intensity the extremes of "informality" or the perfections of impressionistic "daubing" and "dabbling" in ink. Accompanying a bamboo composition dated 1368, tenth month, seventh day, he writes:

Yizhong says he always loves my bamboo paintings; but as for my bamboos – I only sketch recklessly the idle feelings in my heart and nothing more. Why would one compare their appearances (to see) whether they are or are not correct (whether) the leaves are thick or thin; the branches are crooked or straight? After I have splashed and smeared ink about a bit some see it as hemp or as reeds. I can not argue them into thinking it is bamboo. In truth what can I do about the viewer? I don't even know when Yizhong looks what he sees!<sup>22</sup>

The remark appears to represent the first clear articulation of the paradoxical relationship between painter, painting, and viewer which has so fascinated the modern critic. Was such a critical attention to the physical qualities or abstract graphic nature of the painting accompanied by a more acute or immediate awareness of the moment of composition? Was Ni Zan, as he was simplifying the formal elements of the image, increasing his own involvement within the painting and ultimately incorporating into his compositions a set of personal and/or political allusions? Given the thematic parallels found within the two poems dedicated to Lord Shen which themselves reveal a complex of parallels with the four attached colophons and the joint colophons by Wang Da and Gu Lu attached to "Empty Grove after Rain" along with the other poems and inscriptions by Ni dated ca.1368<sup>23</sup> (cf. Ni's, Wang Feng's, Gu Lu's, and Tao Zhen's use of the idiom *zong-heng*), the composition can be unequivocally dated to the late sixties or early seventies.

Before examining the four colophons which accompany the painting and looking more carefully at Ni's inscription and its historical context, it is important to recall, as was evident in Han Gan's composition, that classical Chinese paintings were often the expression of a particular situation and that, as is the case for sophisticated lyric poetry, once the details of the situation are lost a large part

<sup>21</sup> See note (20) and also *The Paintings of Tang Yin*, idem, pp. 44–45. A painting by Ni Zan, at the time, would have been easily worth its weight in gold.

<sup>22</sup> *The Four Great Masters of the Yuan*, idem, pp. 184–5.

<sup>23</sup> See *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu*, vol. ii. 1–0242.



of the reality of the composition is lost and the painting becomes a generalized image. Scroll painting was, from its very beginning in the fifth century, essentially a secular and aristocratic tradition. From the eleventh century on the scholar painter intensified the esoteric qualities of the tradition. He did not paint for a general public but rather for a small and hermetic coterie of friends and connoisseurs. As he diminished the focus on the subject itself (landscape, tree, bamboo, etc.) he increased the attention to the moment of composition. Ultimately, the accidents of the situation became or were seen as an integral part of the painting itself. When Bada Shanren (fl. 1690) incorporates into his paintings a complex set of references to the particulars of his personal life he was obviously playing with a long tradition of such cryptic allusions.<sup>24</sup>

Attached to the *shitang* (upper space) of the scroll and written on a single piece of paper are four colophons. From right to left the four colophons are attributed to: 1) Wang Da (fl. 1368–1400 from Wuxi in Jiangsu), signed *Naixuan jushi* “a recluse scholar who sticks to his study” with one seal, *Wang Dashan*; 2) Gu Lu (fl. 1368–1380 from Huaning near Shanghai), signed *Gu Lu* with one seal, *jin zhong*; 3) Wang Feng (1319–1388 from Jiangyin in Jiangsu), signed *Wang Feng* with two seals, *Wang Feng zhi yin & yuan ji*; and 4) Tao Zhen, (fl. 1370–80 from Wujiang in Jiangsu) signed *Ao sou* “tortoise old man” with one seal, *Tao Zhen*.

Besides the fact that Ni himself within the collection of his late writings entitled *Tingyulou Shi Zhuxianji* found in the *Qing Bige Quanji* (12/12b) tells us that Tao Zhen was a poet from Wujiang whose poetry had not been given the attention it deserved, we know very little else about Tao. The other three writers are well known minor painters and calligraphers of the late Yuan and early Ming periods.<sup>25</sup> Though all four men are approximately twenty years younger than Ni, during the late sixties they associated with him and his circle of friends. Other colophons by Wang Da, Gu Lu, and Wang Feng survive, attached to at least twelve important Yuan paintings. Besides those by Ni Zan they include paintings by Huang Gongwang, Zhao Yuan (fl. 1360–75), Zhang Zhong (fl. 1330–60), Zhu Derun (1294–1365), and Wang Meng (1308–1385).<sup>26</sup>

Wang Feng, who is the best documented of the four calligraphers, besides inscribing the painting by Huang Gongwang and a landscape by Zhu Derun (both analyzed by Fu Shen), also inscribed a 1371 landscape by Ni Zan and a 1351

<sup>24</sup> See *Master of the Lotus Garden: The Life and Art of Bada Shanren (1626–1705)*, idem, *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> Tao Zhen is also listed in *Zhongguo lidai shuhua zhuanke jiazi hao suoyin*, vol. II, pp. 78 & 1146 where he is identified as a minor calligrapher from Wujiang of the late Yuan early Ming periods. I have not been able to find any other examples of his writings. The other three calligraphers are listed in all the major dictionaries treating Yuan and Ming artists. cf. *Zhongguo meishu jiaren ming zidian*; for Gu Lu p. 1545; for Wang Da p. 117; for Wang Feng p. 105–6. For a comprehensive listing of references to the four men found in Ni's writings consult *Repertory of Proper Names in Yuan literary Sources*, idem.

<sup>26</sup> See below note 37.

landscape by Wang Meng.<sup>27</sup> During the sixties Wang Feng was closely associated with Wang Meng, Zhao Yuan, and Ni Zan. Gu Lu and Wang Da inscribed Ni's "Empty Grove After Rain" which Ni himself inscribed in the third month, fifth day of 1368 (I will discuss the colophons further on). Given the fact that Ni was close friend of Zhao Yuan, who besides being an important scholar painter was a military adviser to Zhang Shicheng, Zhu Yuanzhang's rival, and was later purged by the Ming emperor, as was Wang Meng; and the fact that Lord Shen was closely associated with Wang Xing and the "Ten Friends of the North Wall", all of whom were eventually purged by the Ming emperor, along with the fact that Wang Feng, Gu Lu, and Wang Da circulated among all of the above, it is obvious that the painter, recipient, and four calligraphers shared common political interests and they all would have sensed the loss and foreboding which Zhu's victory must have caused for the supporters of Zhang.<sup>28</sup>

The curious fact that all four of the above writers are known calligraphers and painters of the period, which is more often than not the case for contemporary Yuan or Ming colophons, points both to the exclusive nature of the scholar painter's world and to the fact that within the milieu there apparently was an unstated rule concerning those who could comment on a composition by a major painter i.e. such additions were seen as an integral part of the composition and therefore their calligraphy should represent a homologous level of artistic individuality. It has also been pointed out that often what was presented as an extemporaneous occasion in Chinese poetry and scholar painting was in fact a selfconscious event involving real collaboration and forethought.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in certain cases, such as the well known collaborative work by Ku An, Zhang Shou, Yang Weizhen, and finally Ni Zan, it is obviously the complex of personalities and history found within the painting, inscription, and colophons which defines or creates the composition.<sup>30</sup>

Each of the colophons represents a poem. The first three by Wang Da, Gu Lu, and Wang Feng are seven syllable quatrains and the last, by Ni Zan but cited by Tao Zhen, is a six syllable quatrain. The first three poems comment, in highly poetic terms, on the formal tensions or "calligraphic" qualities found within the painting and interpret aspects of the scene i.e. the effects of the rain and the appearance of the moon light on the bamboos and rock.

Wang Da's quatrain reads:

The coiled dragon (brushwork) and the twisting phoenix (configurations) along with the cold clouds (washes) are chill/ (but) grafted to the clear moon's light they are lucid/ Everyone (among) the vast provinces says/ only *Yun lin's* (Ni Zan's) brush force is capable of the feat.

<sup>27</sup> See *Confirmation of the "Nine Verdant Peaks" as a genuine painting by Huang Kung-Wang*, Shen C.Y. Fu, Taipei, 1981; and *The Four Great Masters of the Yuan* p. 190 and *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu*, vol. ii, 1-0244.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the rivalry and the later bloody purges of the artistic circle of Suzhou see *Hills Beyond a River*, Cahill, Weatherhill, Tokyo, 1976, pp. 120-121.

<sup>29</sup> See Anne de Corsey Clapp's discussion of the colophons by Zhu Yunming accompanying the paintings of Tang Yin found in her book: *The Painting of Tang Yin*, idem, passim.

<sup>30</sup> See *Hills Beyond A River*, idem, pp.175-76, illus.85.

Gu Lu's quatrain reads:

On the strange rock after the rain moss freshly stirs/ The moon shines and the silhouettes of the phoenix tails (bamboo leaves) are muddled or uneven/ A spring breeze suddenly passes by the trees opposite the courtyard/ I can see the light and the shade covering the ink pond.

Wang Feng's quatrain reads: (the rhymes parallel Ni's rhymes)

The ink of the delicate windblown stems is not yet dry/ The *Xiang* waters of that beautiful lady reed by reed are startling (a myth concerning the speckled markings on the bamboo)/ Confusedly one night one wonders in a spirit's dream (?)/ The luminous silhouettes are eccentric (*zong-heng*) and the mountain moon is chill.

Tao Zhen quotes an enigmatic fu poem, written by Ni for another rock and bamboo composition dated 1368, third month.<sup>31</sup> In so doing he gives us some interesting clues as to the actual time and circumstances of the four colophons. Ni's quatrain reads:

Before Huangling's temple the rain moves past Han Dan (who lived in a dream)/ The wind in the gorge reaches the hermit crazy over mountains (Ni Zan)/ His perfect clarity is eccentric (*zong-heng*) and plainly draws a Fall sound.

Besides the oddity of quoting a poem by the painter himself, which was attached to another rock and bamboo composition dedicated to a different recipient and thereby reversing the poem's voice, why are we told that a composition, which was done in the spring, describes "a Fall sound"?<sup>32</sup> Given the fact that within the original composition the contradiction is not apparent in the poem itself but only alongside the dedication which identifies the time as the third month, Tao must have seen the scroll and consciously sought the same paradox. Did he have reason for viewing the sentiment and situation of "Bamboo and Rock in Moon Light" as either the same or homologous to that of the other composition? If so, what were the sad circumstances (Fall is a time of melancholy) which were common to both compositions? For the intellectuals around Ni, Zhu Yuan-zhang's victory was a catastrophe and would have more than likely caused such foreboding. The poem itself is enigmatic. The images of wind and rain could well be an allusion to the turmoil of the times and the mythical references may contain a cryptic meaning.

The original rock and bamboo painting dated 1368, third month is dedicated to a "vice-commander *Yuanhui*" of *Lizhe* (an alternate name for lake Tai near Suzhou) in return for his hospitality. In another inscription, dated 1369, fifth month, accompanying a rock, bamboo and tree composition Ni identifies

<sup>31</sup> The composition is found in the Shanghai museum and illustrated in *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu*, vol. II, p. 117, no. 1-0236. Given the fact that Ni praises Tao's poetry it is possible that it was Ni who copied Tao's poem but in that case he would be guilty of plagiarism since neither the context nor his words mention Tao.

<sup>32</sup> As we will see later, there is a pun within the phrase "draws (writes) a Fall sound". The word "chou" (愁) signify "grief" both rhymes with the word signifying "Fall", *qiu* (秋), and contains the character itself.

Vice-commander *Yuanhui* as a certain Mr Liu and elaborates on his generous nature. The contents of the inscription and its quatrain, which have been added to the scroll after the dedication, appear to allude to the fact that Vice-commander Liu has recently retired from active service and withdrawn from the world i.e. entered a Buddhist monastery. Given the political affiliations of Lord Shen, Ni Zan, and the other calligraphers, it is more than likely that Vice-commander Yuanhui was one of the many commanders in the Suzhou area who had sided with Zhang Shicheng and consequently had to go into hiding. Tao Zhen most likely saw the painting at Liu's house or retreat.<sup>33</sup>

In the case of "Bamboo and Rock in the Moonlight", because the four contemporary colophons are written on a separate sheet of paper attached to the painting, the argument is not as simple as it was for Huang Gongwang's painting. The colophons could be genuine but, nevertheless, the composition a copy or fake. In such a case the authority of the contemporary colophons (I am making a distinction between those colophons which only express an opinion and those which because of a personal relationship with the painter are more definitive), if they are genuine, depends on the nature of the relationship between the colophons and the painting and the complex of other evidences relating to the two. Collectors and dealers often could not resist the temptation to augment the authority or importance of a scroll by adding false colophons and collectors seals, and copies of genuine colophons were attached to both genuine and fake compositions, with little or no attention to their content. There are numerous examples of genuine paintings being accompanied by false colophons and some rare cases of a major painter, in a kind of artistic bravado, adding his own signature and inscription to an imitation in his style. However, the situation where genuine contemporary colophons belonging to an important composition have been separated from their original scroll and subsequently attached to a fake composition or tracing copy are extremely rare and always result of very particular history<sup>34</sup>. Though at times colophons by major calligraphers such as

<sup>33</sup> The composition is found in the Nanjing Museum and illustrated in *Zhongguogudai shuhua tumu*, vol. VII, p. 18, illus. 24-0015. See also *Five Thousand Years of Chinese Art, Yuan Painting Part I*, idem, illus. 19 & pp. 161-63. The Quatrain which identifies Vice-commander Yuan-hui as Mr Liu is enigmatic and appears to allude to the official taboo concerning the use of the characters found in the ruling emperor's name. The first part of Liu's sobriquet, Yuan-hui, contains the same character as found in Zhu Yuan-zhang's name, the new Ming emperor. Liu apparently altered his name to *Xuan-hui* and retired into a Buddhist monastery. Many of Ni's friends who had opposed the Ming emperor "retired" into monasteries after 1368. The fact that Tao uses alternative characters for *dan* "plain" and *sha* "fiercely" might indicate he had only heard about the composition. However, other testimony, discussed below, points to the conclusion that Ni and Tao were together during the second and third months of 1368. It should be noted that Ni writes the more complex form for *dan* through at least the third month of 1368; after the eighth month of that year he consistently writes the simpler form.

<sup>34</sup> For the only example I know see Stephen Little's discussion of the two versions of Qiu Ying's "Zhao Meng Fu Writing the Heart Sutra in Exchange for Tea" in "The Demon Queller and the Art of Qiu Ying", *Artibus Asiae*, 46 nos. 1-2 (1985), pp. 5-128. We are told that Shen Zhou and Tang Yin did, from time to time, inscribe paintings done by an imitator. Few examples have been identified and there is a tendency within the tradition to exaggerate such practices.

Dong Qi Chang or Zhu Yunming were detached from their scrolls, particularly if the painter was relatively minor, and collected for their intrinsic value, this would not have been the case for minor calligraphers such as Gu Lu, Wang Da, Wang Feng, or Tao Zhen and most emphatically not the case if their colophons accompanied a composition by Ni Zan. In all such arguments, it is the combination of evidences which count. The historical and aesthetical details create a co-ordinate argument in which each element is capable of throwing the other into question or of giving it greater authority. The final proof is the sum of both facts.

The critical questions then are: are the colophons genuine, and if so, is the relationship between the colophons and the painting along with its inscription of such a nature as to eliminate any reasonable possibility of the painting being a fake or imitation? On first inspection the most important aspect of the four colophons and the inscription is the fact that they are clearly written by different hands. No matter how skilled a copier is when imitating different calligraphies he will invariably incorporate in each the idiosyncracies of his own hand.<sup>35</sup>

As already noted Wang Feng is the best known of the four Yuan calligraphers accompanying Ni's painting. But, as Dr. Fu Shen points out, the fact that he is a minor calligrapher of the period gives the details of his calligraphy a particular authority. Because the tradition paid very little attention to his calligraphy it is less likely that the imitator would have an accurate knowledge of the idiosyncracies of his hand and its evolution. As a consequence it is often the writings of the lesser known figures of the period accompanying an important painting which provide the strongest arguments. When we compare the details of Wang Feng's colophon with the other examples of his writings assembled by Dr. Fu, though they conform in general to all the examples and more precisely to a certain set of them, there are minor differences in the signature (the character *Wang* is more abbreviated) and the style of running script is slightly more idiosyncratic (note the peculiar form of the character *han* (cold) at the end). This could be grounds for some doubt. However, we are told<sup>36</sup> that Wang's calligraphy during his early years was particularly idiosyncratic, apparently under the influence of his friend the well known eccentric calligrapher Yang Weizhen who died in 1370, and that only later it became more classical. The evolution is

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<sup>35</sup> An example of such is found in a copy of the famous "Bird and Peach Blossom" scroll by Zhang Zhong (fl 1350) with its eighteen colophons by late Yuan calligraphers, including Gu Lu, published in Christie's *Fine Chinese Paintings and Calligraphy*, June 3, 1987, item 43. Besides the central colophon by the famous calligrapher Yang Wei-zhen, which is uncannily close to the original (now found in the Palace Museum, Taipei), all the other colophons are obviously written by one hand. Compare the calligraphy attributed to Gu Lu on the copy with that on the original and that of "Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight" and the distinctions between the two genuine writings and the copy are obvious. Also compare copies of the four colophons by Wang Da, Gu Lu, Qian Zhongyi, and Zhu Yizhen attached to "Empty Grove After Rain" which accompany a spurious landscape attributed to Ni Zan published in Sotheby's *Fine Chinese Paintings and Calligraphy*, Dec. 8, 1987, item. 22. The copier though he imitates Ni Zan's hand with some acumen completely misses the other four hands.

<sup>36</sup> See *Zhongguo meishu jieren mingzidian*, pp. 105-6.

evident even among the above examples. Finally, if we compare the peculiarities of the hand to those found within his colophon accompanying a landscape by Wang Meng dated 1351,<sup>37</sup> which Dr. Fu had not documented, the details of the two calligraphies match precisely, including the signature and the form of the character *han*. It is apparent then that Wang's colophon accompanying "Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight" belongs to his early years through the sixties when his running script was more idiosyncratic. This is a good example of how an exception which can throw doubt on the authenticity of a piece when more carefully examined, from time to time, not only proves to be correct but also provides a particular insight into the history of the artist.

It would take too much time and space to analyze in the same manner the colophons by Gu Lu and Wang Da. Though there are fewer materials (for each calligrapher I have found four examples) the details of the colophons conform in the same degree to the other examples of their writings.<sup>38</sup> As already noted both calligraphers attached colophons to "Empty Grove After Rain" which Ni inscribed in 1368, third month, fifth day. The two sets of colophons contain some important parallels which need to be analyzed.

Fu Shen in his examination of the colophons accompanying Huang's painting treated only the details of the calligraphy and signatures without discussing their contents. Though in terms of the authenticity of the painting the contents of the colophons might be less significant than their formal details, nevertheless the two elements are correlative and it is the complex of sense and form which defines the painter and painting. To summarize the gist of the above arguments, the fact that both the composition and its poem are recorded along with the detailed nature of the parallels and correlations found among the various elements of the scroll clearly establish the authenticity of the composition. In addition, the idiosyncracies of the painting itself and its inscription along with those of each of the four colophons argue, as definitively as is possible, that the scroll in all its aspects is genuine. C. C. Wang, whose collection of Ni's works is the largest in the world outside of China and whose articles on the painter are considered the most comprehensive, has examined the scroll and agrees that the composition and its colophons are "more than likely genuine". Given the level of contemporary testimony accompanying the scroll the painting and its inscription clearly represent a touchstone for other works attributed to Ni Zan of the same period.

What is of particular interest are the questions concerning the actual context of the painting raised by the dedication to Lord Shen and the four accompanying

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<sup>37</sup> See *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu*, vol. II, p. 119, illus. 1-02444. The composition is found in the Shanghai museum.

<sup>38</sup> For other examples and a discussion of Gu Lu's and Wang Da's writings see *Traces of the Brush*, fig. 75; *The Four Great Masters of the Yuan*, p. 61; *The Nat. Palace Museum Quart.* vol. iii, no. 1, pp. 15-37; *Tang Song Yuan Ming Minghua Daguan*, vol. ii, pl. 137. *Chengwai suocang zhongguo guhua ji* section V, vol. II, pls. 44 & 58; and *The Pageant of Chinese Painting*, Tokyo, 1936, p. 460; also Wang Da's colophon on Wang Meng's 1365 composition *Ting yu lou* as discussed in *Hills beyond a River*, Cahill, p. 121.

colophons. What was the occasion of *Zhongzhang's* passing by, and when exactly did Wang Da, Gu Lu, Wang Feng, and Tao Zhen add their colophons? Was there a particular circumstance which brought the four men together? And, why did Tao Zhen quote Ni's enigmatic poem which was written for Vice Commander Liu in the third month of 1368, or Wang Feng imitate Ni's curious use of the compound *zong-heng*? Within the European tradition such questions might seem forced or absurd. If Goya or Pissaro wrote something on a painting concerning the time or the circumstances of the composition we would not seek in the detail more than a simple statement of fact. But, Chinese poetry and painting focused in a peculiar fashion on the accidents of time, often giving to them an abstruse significance, such as the central asian rider and the empty saddle in Han Gan's picture. When we examine carefully "Empty Grove After Rain" inscribed by Ni in the third month of 1368, and collate its colophons with those accompanying "Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight", their details provide some possible answers and clarify the actual circumstances of the two scrolls. But first, we need to examine in greater detail the relationship of the four colophons to the painting and inscription.

Given the appearance and content of the colophons, which are evenly distributed to cover the top of the painting and describe the composition in similar terms [note Wang's and Tao's use of the compound *zong-heng* (eccentric)], and the fact that the range of calligraphic styles seems to reflect the interests of the recipient Lord Shen, along with the fact that all of the calligraphers are more or less the same age (up and coming artists) and come from neighboring villages less than a hundred km from Suzhou (Wang Da is from Wuxi, Ni's home town), it is more than likely that the four colophons were composed and added to the painting at the same time. The evidence for exactly when that was is more complicated. In absolute terms Tao Chen's quotation of Ni's poem gives us a *terminus a quo* (1368, third month) and only Wang Feng's death in 1388 gives us a *terminus ad quem*. We do not know exactly when the other three calligraphers died. They were active from the sixties through the end of the century and all were eventually recruited by the Ming emperor (to refuse would have been grounds for suspected treason) – Gu Lu and Wang Da shortly after 1370, Wang Feng a little later, Tao Zhen's history has not been documented. But, Wang Da's epithet (a recluse scholar who sticks to his study) expresses abstinence or non-involvement and consequently suggests a period before his recruitment. In addition, Wang Feng's poem contains some obvious thematic parallels to a poem by Ni found on a rock, bamboo and tree composition datable to 1368<sup>39</sup> [The first line of Ni's poem reads: "The bamboo silhouettes eccentrically (*zong-heng*) draw the moon shine"] along with parallels to the poem quoted by Tao Zhen and the other poem written for Lord Shen. The evidence points to the conclusion that the four colophons were written sometime at the end of the Yuan or the beginning of the Ming dynasty, ca. 1368.

<sup>39</sup> See *Zhongguo gudai shuhua tumu*, vol. II, p. 119 illus 1-0242.

The four scholars may well have gathered either at Ni's studio or at Shen's house to discuss art and politics. In the second case, Shen Jiong would have requested the colophons after receiving the painting from Ni. But, the lack of any reference to Shen and the selfconscious allusions to Ni within the colophons themselves makes it more likely that the four were present when *Zhongzhang* passed by Ni's studio. As young artists in their thirties they were all of the age to be more or less Ni's disciples. In addition, Wang Feng's curious statement "the ink of the delicate windblown stems is not yet dry" along with his, Gu Lu's, and Wang Da's allusions to the moon and the night provide internal evidence that Ni executed the painting in their presence, and most importantly that the colophons were conceived as a part of the moment of composition.

The question concerning the circumstances of the colophons raises another question related to Tao Zhen's curious use of Ni's poem. The use of the compound *zong-heng* (eccentric) appears to be peculiar to Ni Zan and his circle in 1368. Ni uses the idiom three times in that year to describe the qualities of his own paintings (in the poem dedicated to Vice commander Yuanhui, in the poem dedicated to Lord Shen, and in the poem on the rock bamboo and tree composition quoted above) and once in 1373, while reminiscing about two dead friends in a colophon attached to the famous collaborative work by Ku An, Zhang Shen, and Yang Weizhen, to describe Yang Weizhen's "eccentric" (*zong-heng*) brushwork. In addition, Gu Lu in his colophon attached to "Empty Grove after Rain" uses the expression to describe Ni's brushwork, and Wang Feng in his own poem and Tao Zhen in the poem by Ni pick up the expression to describe "Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight". Why did Ni use the compound three times in 1368 and Wang Feng, Gu Lu, and Tao Zhen repeat the curious usage?

The phrase *zong-heng* denotes "vertical and horizontal structures" and through a complex of usages going back to the Warring State period (ca. 400 B.C) when the idiom was used in reference to federations and military alliances the compound took on the connotations of "rival political theories" or "intrigues". The use of the compound in the sense of "perverse", "unreasonable" or "idiosyncratic" is rare, and particularly unusual within the context of painting.<sup>40</sup> I know only of the above cases. Given the connotations of the expression and the historical context of the above six related usages, they may well contain a cryptic allusion to the partisan sentiments of Ni's circle and their opposition to the newly established Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang.

"Empty Grove after Rain" (see illustration) besides the poetic inscription by Ni carries four colophons on the painting itself and five colophons attached to the

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the idiom see *Zhongguo dazidian* under *zong*. The translations of Ni's, Wang's and Gu's use of the compound are problematic. In some cases one could interpret the idiom in its primary sense as "vertical and horizontal structures" i.e. "the bamboo's vertical and horizontal structures describe..." etc. The only other example I know within the context of painting is in Xie Ho's (ca. 530 a.d.) *Guhua pinlu* under his discussion of *Mao Huiyuan* where the phrase clearly signifies the "vertical and horizontal structures" of the scroll.



*shitang*, from right to left written by Qian Zhongyi, Zhu Yizhen, Wang Da, Gu Lu, and Zhang Shu. All nine calligraphers are known Yuan scholars who associated with Ni and his circle during the fifties and sixties. The history of the scroll is complicated and has only recently been partly explained by Kao Mu-sen in his article entitled «The problem of “Empty Grove After Rain” and The Style of Ni Zan’s Middle Age». <sup>41</sup> Kao’s article represents one of the few studies of the contemporary colophons accompanying a major Yuan painting which examines their contents and historical details in depth. The problem with the scroll is that the central inscription on the painting itself was written by Wu Rui (1299–1355) who, as he tells us himself, copies out a poem, written apparently for the painting, by Chang Yu (d.1350). Because Chang died in the Fall of 1350 and Wu Rui in 1355, the inscription must pre-date by at least 13 years, and the poem by at least 18 years, Ni’s enigmatic poem which is dated 1368 third month fifth day. The poem reads:

After the rain <sup>42</sup> the empty groves give off white smoke;  
 Within the mountain everywhere there are flowing springs.  
 Hence I looked for Lu Yu but he’s left his lonely hide-away;  
 Alone listening to the bells, my thoughts are distracted –  
*wu-shen* (1368), third month, fifth day, written by *Yun-lin Sheng* (Ni Zan)

The references to Lu Yu and the bells are obscure. Kao argues that, through a complex of allusions, Ni is actually referring to Huang Gongwang. His arguments seem somewhat forced. An exploration of all the possibilities would, however, go well beyond the limits of this article. In brief, Lu Yu was a hermit and eccentric of the Tang period who wrote the *Chajing* “The Canons of Tea”. He became a part of the cult of eccentricity so dear to Ni Zan and his circle. We also know that Zhao Yuan, Ni’s close friend and a military adviser to Zhang Shicheng, composed (most likely in the sixties) a handscroll entitled “Lu Yu Brewing Tea”. <sup>43</sup> The allusion might well have had a significance for Ni and his circle which is invisible to us.

“Empty Grove After Rain” was judged by Dong Qichang and other important Ming critics to be one of Ni’s best “late” paintings, and the scroll belonged to some of the most important Ming and Qing collections. The contradictions, however, were not noted until recently. Carefully analyzing all the elements of the scroll and amassing an impressive amount of documentation, Kao convincingly proves that both the inscription by Wu and that by Ni are genuine, and that the painting was, in fact, executed by Ni shortly before Chang’s death in 1350, later inscribed by Wu before his own death in ‘55, and subsequently inscribed by Ni in ‘68. <sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> *The National Palace Museum Quarterly*, vol. xiii, no. 1, 1978. pp. 15–37. The article is published in Chinese and an English translation.

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<sup>44</sup> Kao’s review of the traditional appraisals of the scroll, where it was judged a masterpiece of

The critical factor in Kao's argument is the authority of the eight colophons which accompany the painting and its inscription, all written by known friends of Ni. The colophons or inscriptions (the difference is one of priority) separate into two categories: those written before Ni's inscription, and those written at the time of or after his inscription. On the painting itself both Yuan Hua's (1316–ca.1376) and Zhou Nan-lao's (1301–1384) poems use Ni's rhyme pattern. On the upper attached section Zhang Shu's (fl.1370) poem does the same. Zhang also says at the end of his enigmatic poem, picking up the final line of Ni's poem: "I have not seen him (Ni) for ten years/ At night listening to the monkeys and cranes my thoughts were anxious." Kao interprets the lines as meaning that Ni has been dead for ten years. Normally one does not say "I have not seen somebody for ten years" when one knows the person has been dead for ten years. It is more likely, given the playful echoing of Ni's poem, that Zhang is simply saying this is the first time after ten years he has seen his friend. This seems to be also the case with the ironic nickname Yuan gives Ni – in a long note following his poem, explaining why he thinks Ni and Mi Fu are similar he concludes: «therefore I call Ni "doltish"». The playful irony would be inappropriate if his friend were dead. In addition Gu Lu tells us at the end of his poem, in which he uses the idiom *zong-heng* to describe Ni's brushwork: "Recently it was rumored that he (Ni) had left riding the crane/ I thought then that he was in the land of Fengying (the immortal island)." Obviously, Zhang and Gu had not seen Ni for a long time and there were rumors that he had died.

We are told at the end of the fifties when the Yuan dynasty began to collapse and the rivalry between Zhang Shicheng and Zhu Yuanzhang became more and more violent Ni disappeared and pursued an itinerant life on the rivers and lakes of Jiangsu. He returned to Suzhou in the early part of 1368. In a quatrain written on the landscape "River Pavilion and Distant Mountains" (see illustration) dated 1368 third month, tenth day (five days later) Ni talks about his wanderings and hardships during the second month of that year:

In the 2nd month the rain was loud/ I followed a disciple and the moon/ The three of us in a river boat worked our way across (lake Tai) staying at Wujiang (Tao Zhen's home town)/ That spring grief (*chou*)<sup>45</sup> won't go away, like being drunk/ Waves and wild winds beat against this wanderer's window – *wushen* (1368), 3rd month, 10th day

Tao Zhen could well have been the disciple who accompanied Ni to Wujiang or possibly Ni befriended him during his sojourn there. Moreover, knowing what we know about the early months of 1368 it is evident that the

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Ni's late years and a considerable amount of the details of the colophons were misconstrued, tells us a lot about the level of historical criticism within the tradition.

<sup>45</sup> The character meaning "melancholy" (*chou* 愁) both contains and rhymes with the character meaning "Fall" (*qiu* 秋). The conceit is obviously a variation on that found in the poem dedicated to Vice-commander Liu. It is important to note that, contrary to what is often said, Ni's grief is not simply a mannerism but reflects a specific situation. Barnhart argues that Ni's melancholy is simply "the stylistic means he (Ni) cultivated" to fit his compositions; see *Along the Borders of Heaven*, idem, p. 157.



蟠虬舞鳳寒雲冷  
 映以明蟾光燦  
 世人只解說浮州  
 雲林筆力能扛鼎

耐軒居士題

怪石雨餘苔鮮  
 滋月明鸞尾影  
 參差塔鼠  
 過庭對會見  
 清陰覆墨池

顧祿

灼灼風枝  
 毫末孔  
 美人如  
 杯逐聖  
 管恍然  
 枕遊仙  
 香清  
 氣脫橫  
 山月  
 空

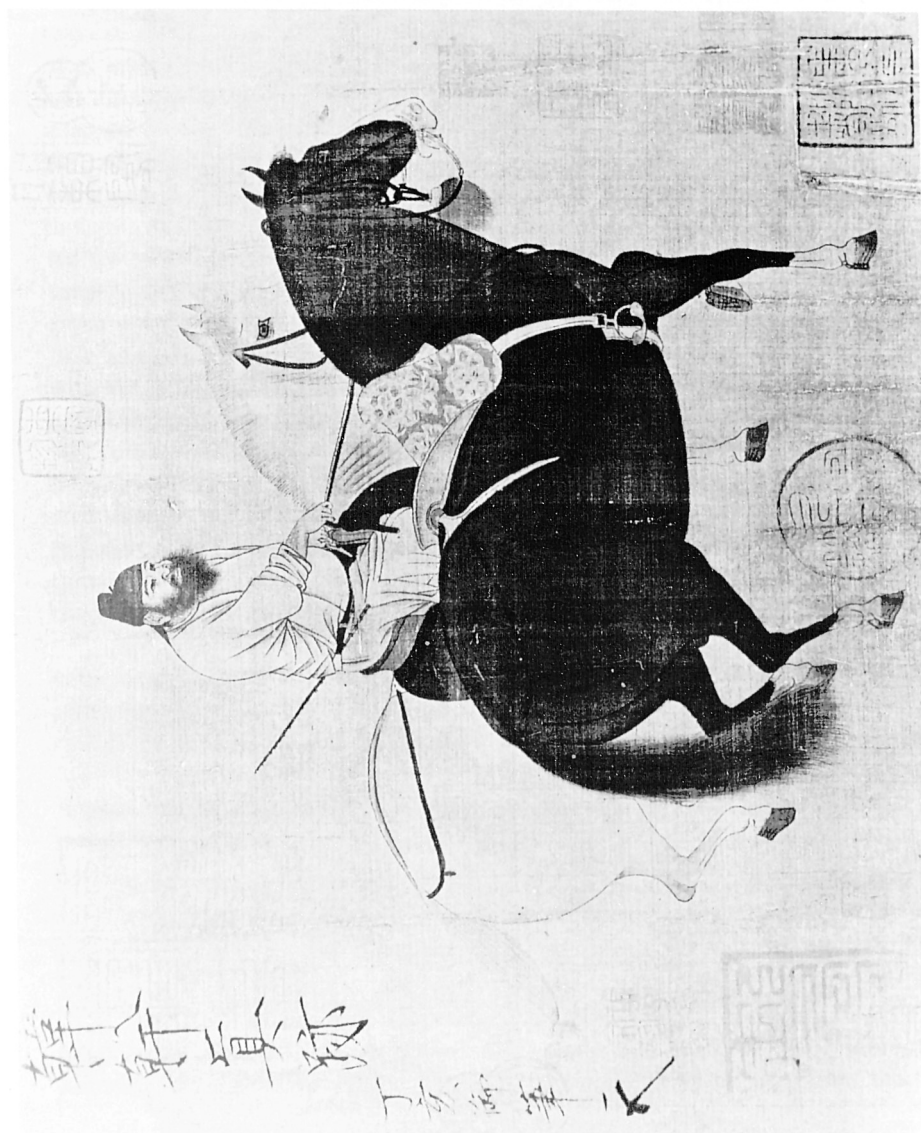
王冕

黃陵廟前雨過  
 邨野谷口風生  
 愛殺山人清致  
 從橫淡寫秋聲

龔夔

沈君好古嗜尤  
 雅奇  
 幽篁心所欣  
 為寫雲林  
 意下  
 紫月明春  
 露濕水  
 中  
 伴兼過  
 奈齊  
 中  
 高竹  
 石下  
 許以贈環

NI ZAN (1368?) "Bamboo and Rock in the Moonlight"



HAN GAN (fl. 750) "Two Imperial Horses and Groom", National Palace Museum, Taipei



CUI BO (fl. 1070) "Rabbit and Screaming Jays", National Palace Museum, Taipei



NI ZAN (dated 1368) "Lonely Brook and Cold Pines", Palace Museum, Beijing





蕭蕭風雨寒秋寒把筆  
 賴吾君相慰藉初肺  
 月十七日風雨中  
 於晚節軒中因為寫筠石齋行并題  
 絕句雪林子積

新試雅堂法薄寒谷更全賴  
 酒在寬獨備既即軒前行翠  
 色娟若可餐 袁善

清潤閣前雲滿林筠石齋  
 柯生畫陰于戈阻絕歸去清  
 寫入畫圖梅更淡趙俞

雲林道士倪元鎮老去  
 材名有幾人見畫題詩  
 空相住恍疑落月照精  
 神知白道人造

NI ZAN (1368?) "Tree, Rock and Bamboo", Cleveland Museum of Art



NI ZAN (inscribed 1368) "Empty Groves after the Rain",  
National Palace Museum, Taipei



NI ZAN (dated 1368) "River Pavilion and Distant Mountains",  
C.C. Wang Collection

“rain”, “waves”, and “winds” are metaphors for the disorders of the times. Escaping the war, Ni appears to have fled at night in a boat with his friend to Wujiang and subsequently to have made his way to Suzhou at the beginning of the third month.<sup>46</sup> Clearly, the event behind at least seven of the nine colophons accompanying “Empty Grove After Rain” was Ni’s re-emergence in Suzhou after approximately ten years of wandering in incognito. Apparently, Zhou Nanlao for the occasion brought out “Empty Grove After Rain” which Ni had painted some twenty years earlier for a now dead friend, and for some reason had not inscribed (possibly he was not satisfied with the composition). Ni then inscribed the painting and some of those present added their own thoughts. Because both the colophons accompanying “Empty Grove After Rain” and those accompanying “Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight” talk about Ni in particularly selfconscious terms, as if he had not been seen for years and his appearance in Suzhou was completely unexpected (this might explain Wang Feng’s curious image of “wandering in a spirit’s dream”) it would be reasonable to date Zhongzhang’s visit and the gathering of the four scholars at Ni’s studio shortly after he had inscribed “Empty Grove After Rain”, sometime during the third month of 1368.<sup>47</sup>

It appears then, that during the spring of 1368, after Ni returned to Suzhou at the beginning of the third month, he met with the literati of the region, most of whom had taken up the cause of Zhang Shicheng and as a result were in imminent danger. Were these meetings simply polite literary affairs or a gathering of both minds and forces? Was there within the Suzhou area some sort of *zong-heng* (alliance) forming around Ni and his coterie of scholar artists against Zhu Yuanzhang which was later crushed by the Ming emperor? We will probably never know exactly what they talked about but Ni’s “Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight” with its four colophons along with the colophons attached to “Empty Grove after Rain” assemble some of the most important participants.

What we can reconstruct of the particular circumstances behind “Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight” and understand of the references and allusions contained in Ni’s inscriptions and the related colophons of the period all suggest that Ni and his circle of artist friends consciously explored the expressive qualities of the inscription, including the details of name, place, and time, as an integral part of the moment of composition. As Marcel Proust points out, a name, a time, and a place can conjure up a complex of images. When Ni casually remarks: “*Zhongzhang* passed by” was he thinking of the whole story surrounding the event and incorporating a detail into his composition which in a concrete but enigmatic way alludes to the larger history, as Han Gan had done? The simple reference to Lu Yu or to the fact that “(Zhou Yu) is about to enter active service” may well have conjured up a complex set of feelings and memories. If so, Ni Zan

<sup>46</sup> In either case Tao would have accompanied Ni to Su-zhou (possibly providing the means) and the two men on their way may well have stopped off on lake Tai to visit Vice-commander Liu.

<sup>47</sup> Ni, at the time, may have been sick and in need of medication, hence the visit of Doctor Shen.

realized within the synthesis of "fact and form", particularly as found within his rock & bamboo paintings, a new level of selfconsciousness.

"Bamboo and Rock in Moonlight" with its "fragile" inscription and "nervous" brushwork combines image, calligraphy, and text into a unified impression of a moment. The painting represents a rare example of Ni's rock & bamboo studies in which he pushed the elements of form and representation to their most abstract levels. Nevertheless, the bamboo leaves crumple and droop under the drizzle and the rock glistens in the moonlight. In Ni's poems and paintings there is a peculiarly imminent sense of time and place. Though the composition does not represent a major work, in its selfconscious "informality" and "accidents" it embodies the most radical aspects of Ni's art. He more than any other Yuan master experimented with the primary nature of a painting as simultaneously an act and an image caught in time.