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Interpreting Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715): Imperial Court, Literati Culture and the Orthodox School of Painting

Abstract

The author evaluates social and artistic identity of Wang Yuanqi (1642–1715), one of the most important and influential artists of the Qing Orthodox School of painting in China. Four main social roles played by the painter are analysed in detail: that of a high ranking court official, a literati artist, a professional painter at court, and an art theorist. Evidence of Wang's activity in each of the related fields is given and discussed, showing a complex nature of the painter's legacy. Wang's biggest achievement seems to be the ultimate transmission of Chinese literati culture onto Manchu court and a shift of imperial artistic tastes. Contrary to some common beliefs, his art was that of transformation and reinterpretation, rather than that of imitation and repetition.

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Wang Yuanqi (王原祁, 1642–1715) is considered one of the most important and influential artists of the Qing Orthodox School of painting, responsible for further development of literati landscape painting which shaped Chinese imperial art of the 18th and 19th centuries. The youngest of the Four Wangs¹, Wang Yuanqi became a symbol of orthodoxy in painting, advocating following the old masters and concentrating on technical subtleties of the brush rather than on artistic creation itself. Despite a disregard for Qing Orthodox School landscape painting heritage quite common among some Polish

¹ The Four Wangs are: Wang Shimin (王時敏, 1592–1680), Wang Jian (王鑒, 1598–1677), Wang Yuanqi (王原祁, 1642–1715), Wang Hui (王翬, 1632–1717). Together with Wu Li (吳歷, 1632–1718) and Yun Shouping (惲壽平, 1633–1690) they are usually called the Six Masters of Early Qing (清初六家) or simply Four Wangs, Wu and Yun (四王吳惲). In English they are usually referred to as the Orthodox Masters.

researchers,² it is worth having a closer look at the main proponent of the school, examining the complex identity and work which earned him a lasting place of such unclear value in the history of Chinese art.

While many experts agree to high level of technical expertise shown in Wang Yuanqi's landscapes, it is usually said that his art is devoid of spontaneity and creativity which is usually expected of a great artist. His is an art of careful analysis, painstaking work on details of composition, subtle play of multilayered ink and colour, in other words painting theory put to life rather than life itself. Coupled with his deep respect for tradition and a seeming disregard for the real world portrayed in his paintings, Wang is often made responsible for the overly theoretical and imitative nature of later Qing Dynasty landscape painting at court. It is not the purpose of this paper to defend the qualities of Wang Yuanqi's landscapes. It is rather to look at his life and work in order to establish what kind of artistic and social identity Wang and his oeuvre present.

Wang Yuanqi was a grandson of the oldest of the Four Wangs, Wang Shimin (王時敏, 1592–1680), an old Ming loyalist (*yimin*, 遺民). Since childhood exhibiting an interest and talent in painting, Wang started taking regular painting lessons in his youth. He learned from his own grandfather and his friend – the second of the Four Wangs, Wang Jian (王鑒, 1598–1677). For several years working in the capacity of a provincial official, Wang passed his *jinshi* (進士) exam in 1670, at the age of 28. Thanks mainly to his painting talent and possibly also with some help from the family, Wang finally entered the court, where he engaged in various affairs and projects. His career at court developed in three distinctive fields: that of a painter, an art connoisseur and that of an official. As an artist, Wang worked for a time in the Southern Library (*Nan shufang*, 南書房), painting for Kangxi Emperor (Kangxi – 康熙, actual dynastic name Shengzu – 聖祖, reigned 1662–1722), who on numerous occasions would accompany Wang during extensive hours of his work, observing the way he painted and learning from him about the artistic principles of the Orthodox School.³ Some maintain that much of what Kangxi knew and understood about Han literati culture initially came from the time he spent with Wang Yuanqi.⁴ Apart from dozens of landscapes painted by Wang for the emperor himself, he was also engaged in a large project to commemorate Kangxi's 60th birthday – the *Wanshou Shengdian* (萬壽盛典). The publication included a separate volume of woodblock illustrations showing inhabitants, officials and common people of virtually the entire Beijing paying tribute to the great emperor and wishing him longevity.⁵

² It is regrettable that several Polish authors have even expressed very critical views of Qing painting on the whole, without ever producing viable evidence of the reasons for their opinions. There are also authors who discredit Ming and Qing painting altogether, reducing this magnitude of different artists, schools and unsurpassed achievements to 'imitation' and 'stagnation'. Such opinions, sadly, only show how low the level of awareness of Chinese painting history is in Poland, and how much more needs to be done in order to bring Polish research on Chinese art up to internationally accepted scholarly standards.

³ Xue Yongnian (薛永年), Shao Yan (邵彥), *Zhongguo huihua de lishi yu shenmei jianshang* (中國繪畫的歷史與審美鑒賞), 中國人民大學出版社 2000, p. 366.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This volume is entitled the *Wanshou Shengdian tu* (萬壽盛典圖)

The original paintings, which woodcarvers copied, were done by W a n g Yuanqi himself, among other, less distinguished court painters.

Wang was also being employed by Kangxi to assess the authenticity and value of Qing imperial collection of art. In this capacity of a connoisseur, W a n g would examine mainly paintings. He was also engaged in a major editorial and research project – the *Peiwenzhai shuhuapu* (佩文齋書畫譜, *The Book of Calligraphy and Painting from the Peiwen Studio*). *Peiwenzhai shuhuapu* is the most important and comprehensive Qing compilation of earlier treatises on art, artist biographies, inscriptions and colophons, connoisseur and collector writings. *The Book*, comprising 100 volumes (*juan*) and including descriptions of more than 1,800 calligraphies and paintings, was completed in 1708 and published with another court scholar, S u n Yueban (孫岳頒), as the editor-in-chief.

As a court official, after years of service, W a n g reached the distinguished position of Vice President of the Board of Agriculture, Civil Affairs and Revenue (*Hubu zuoshilang*, 戶部左侍郎), equivalent to our modern Vice-Minister of the Government. With authority, influence and respect came financial gains which enabled W a n g to lead a comfortable life. This made his existence much different from that of professional court painters, who often had trouble sustaining themselves on meager court pensions.

He was a court official, but much more than that. Interested in painting since childhood, he was never one of those bureaucrats, who painted or wrote calligraphy out of snobbery, trying to prove to others how educated and inspired they were. W a n g was definitely first a painter, and only then an official, and his love for art was a genuine one.

Being a painter at court, W a n g was not, however, a typical ‘court painter’. These would largely recruit from artisans, and their position at Qing court was far from comfortable and secure. During W a n g’s times, they would usually produce paintings in the detailed *gongbi* (工筆) manner, similar in fact to what was produced by court painters of the Ming. Introducing these artists to the Dong Qichang (董其昌, 1555–1636) legacy of literati painting was W a n g Yuanqi’s own contribution, which changed the face of later Qing court art. It is difficult to establish what Wang’s own attitude towards court painters was, and what kind of relationships and contacts they maintained. Judging from mere facts, however, given the obvious differences between Wang’s position and the nature of their existence at court, he might not have felt any affinity with those artists-artisans. And yet painting on Kangxi’s order does in fact make Wang a court painter, and collaborating with court painter-artisans for the *Wanshou Shengdian* illustrations project proves that communication and contacts between the two did actually occur.

W a n g Yuanqi’s activity at the court shows him to be a high-ranking official, a painting connoisseur and expert, and, practically, a court painter, despite a marked difference in status compared to other artists within this group. Was he also true literati?

At that time, even though Beijing was the capital of the vast and powerful Empire, the famous literati centre of China was not Beijing at all, but rather the Jiangnan (江南) area in the Yangzi delta region, which, beginning with Yuan times, continued increasing in importance as a cultural, artistic and commercial hub of China in opposition to the capital far to the North. All influential painting schools of the Ming were based within

the borders of the Jiangnan area: both the Zhe and the Wu schools (浙派, 吳派), as well as Dong Qichang's Songjiang school (松江派). In Wang Yuanqi's times, Yangzhou was gradually gaining importance as a new merchant and artistic centre, first with Shitao (石濤, orig. Zhu Ruoji – 朱若極, Buddhist name Yuanji – 原濟, 1642–1707), who spent later days of his life there, and then with numerous artists of the Yangzhou Baguai (揚州八怪, Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou) group.⁶ Beijing was an administrative centre of the country but hardly a cultural one. With the presence of various officials from the South and due to efforts of erudite Qing emperors, Beijing did become an important place to be in for Chinese literati, but was not explicitly recognized as such by the intellectual elites. Wang Yuanqi came from Taicang (太倉) in Jiangsu Province, so he was in fact a Southerner, but spending much of his life in Beijing, he did not really belong to the Jiangnan literati society.⁷

This said there are several counterarguments in support of his literati identity. First of all, he was raised up and educated in a highly erudite, literati family of noble descent. Taught by leading painters of the early Qing, Wang Yuanqi studied painting in a typical literati way: through copying and imitating, working on brushwork and painting theory within the framework of the Dong Qichang orthodoxy, producing paintings and theoretical works which fit perfectly with the whole literati phenomenon. His artistic legacy can be easily analyzed basing on his numerous extant paintings, both in Chinese and Western collections. Wang's theoretical views on painting are expressed in his treatise *Yuchuang manbi* (雨窗漫筆) as well as in his inscriptions and colophons both on paintings and included in a collection entitled *Lutai ti hua gao* (麓台題畫稿).⁸

Wang Yuanqi's landscapes exhibit a very strong literati affiliation, situating him in the very centre of the Dong Qichang Southern School tradition.⁹ Let us remember that his teachers, Wang Shimin and Wang Jian, were both followers of Dong Qichang. Especially works from Wang Yuanqi's early period show his very close artistic affinity with his

⁶ The group included such artists as: Huang Shen (黃慎, 1687–1770), Jin Nong (金農, 1687–1764), Zheng Xie (鄭燮, 1693–1765) and Luo Pin (羅聘, 1733–1799).

⁷ There is also an important political issue involved. In those times Beijing was a symbol of Manchu rule over the Chinese, and up until Kangxi times there were strong anti-Manch feelings among the literati. Most of them were the so-called *yimin* – 'leftover subjects' of the Ming, who did not want to collaborate with the invaders. They lived in the South, far from Beijing and its political life. Wang's grandfather Wang Shimin and Wang Jian were both *yimin* who would never want to serve the Qing. And yet, gradually, the Manchu rulers won over the support of those *yinze* (隱者) literati too, and Wang Shimin was later proud to have a distinguished grandson serving at the Qing court.

⁸ Both texts are included in Pan Yungao (潘運告, red.), *Qingren lun hua* (清人論畫), Hunan meishu, Changsha, 2004, pp. 74–135.

⁹ The division of Chinese painting into the Southern and the Northern Schools (南北宗) was introduced into art theory by Dong Qichang and his literati companions. This notion of two schools and painting traditions was immediately accepted by Qing art theoreticians and regardless clear disagreement with historical facts, survived until today. Dong's Northern School was supposed to originate with Li Sixun (李思訓, 651–716) and incorporated artists of the decorative, court painting tradition. The Southern School, which Dong made an ideal of artistic refinery, included: Wang Wei (王維, 701–761), Dong Yuan, (董源, ? – 962), Juran (巨然, active about 960–985), Mi Fu (米芾, 1051–1107) and son Mi Youren (米友仁, 1075–1151), the Four Yuan Masters (Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, Wu Zhen and Wang Meng) and, of course, himself.

grandfather. Similar brushwork, the same way of constructing masses of mountains and rocks from smaller, boulder-like units – all shows how close his landscapes were to those of Wang Shimin. What situates Wang Yuanqi close to Dong Qichang himself is rather the stress that both put on brushwork, advocating the importance of the brush and ink, while disregarding composition itself, especially in respect to its relationship with the natural world.

Wang's paintings show a persisting lack of interest with nature. His landscapes are careful, logical, well thought-out and structured, but they drift even further away from nature than do those of Dong Qichang. Wang's art is purely intellectual – a construct of mind rather than imitation of old masters, even less so an imitation of nature. This attitude is explicitly expressed by Wang in his *Yuchuang manbi*:

'In painting ... one does not need to search for a beautiful natural landscape, nor does one need to adhere rigidly to old painting sketches.'¹⁰

As the citation shows and contrary to some common opinions heard every now and then about Qing painting, Wang never advocated copying old masters. He underlined the importance of analyzing, rather than copying and imitating: 'It is much better to look at paintings than to copy them. When I find an authentic work by an old master, I try to [carefully] analyze it'.¹¹ His own style is that of inspiration, not imitation. Although it is obvious how much he relied on masters such as Huang Gongwang (黃公望, 1269–1354), Ni Zan (倪瓚, 1301–1374), Wang Meng (王蒙, ok. 1308–1385), Dong Qichang or Wang Shimin, he developed his own, very distinctive style being both a combination and a reinterpretation of those he learned from.

This does not mean, however, that Wang tried to distance himself from or discredit nature as a source of inspiration for an artist. His writings on numerous occasions show a respect for the natural world and recognition of its importance. Earlier on in his professional life he was forced to travel extensively, and only through these he said to have finally understood the paintings of Huang Gongwang – his lifelong artistic ideal.¹² He also said: 'I believe that the old masters drew their powers from making Heaven and Earth their teachers.'¹³

As for the old masters, Wang's attitude is that of deep respect but not that of following them blindly. If we look at extant landscapes by Wang Yuanqi, we notice that a significant part of them, if not most, are the so-called 'imitations' (*fang* – 仿) – original works of art which claim strong ties with a given painting or overall oeuvre of a given painter. *Fang* are not copies, but rather, paintings inspired by a given, usually

¹⁰ '作畫 ... 不必求好景, 亦不必拘舊稿.' *Yuchuang manbi* (雨窗漫筆) IN: Pan Yungao (潘運告, red.), *Qingren lunhua* (清人論畫), 湖南美術出版社, 長沙 2004, p. 79.

¹¹ '臨畫不如看畫. 遇古人真本, 向上研求.' Ibid.

¹² *Lutai tihua gao* (麓台題畫稿), cited after *Zhongguo lidai huajia renming cidian* (中國歷代畫家人名辭典), Renmin meishu, Beijing 2003, p. 150.

¹³ '方信古人得力以天地為師也.' Ibid.

openly declared source. Many of Wang's landscapes are entitled: 'Imitating such and such artist'. Those most often imitated by Wang include: Huang Gongwang, Ni Zan, Wang Meng and Wu Zhen – not by coincidence the Four Yuan Masters.¹⁴

If we look at Wang's *fang* landscapes, it is easy to see that most of them do not exhibit especially close ties with the originals. Imitation takes a form of a loose inspiration. Wang uses Ni Zan's empty composition concepts or his 'dry brush' method, Huang Gongwang's brushwork or Wang Meng's overpowering mountain forms, yet his paintings are not made to imitate the Yuan masters, but rather to show his own re-evaluation and interpretation of the style and spirit of their works.

Wang's artistic activity by definition circles around the very core of literati culture. The artists he usually 'imitates' happen to be those most highly praised by Dong Qichang as proponents of the Southern School of painting: the Four Yuan Masters, Dong Yuan and Juran, Dong Qichang himself. Wang felt particularly close to Huang Gongwang, whose artistic achievements he praised numerous times in the *Lutai ti hua gao*, and whom he imitated virtually all his life. Focusing on brushwork and technical issues rather than purely artistic ones also brings Wang close to the Dong Qichang tradition. Finally, Wang's writings provide further, irrefutable proof of his literati identity. *Yuchang manbi* gives us a theoretical elaboration on such central issues for literati painting as *qi* (氣), *li* (理), *yi* (意), *shi* (勢), or the *kai-he* (開合) concepts (later developed by Shen Zongqian, 沈宗騫, 18th c.). Even more is written specifically on the use of the brush, the *cunfa* (皴法) – also a central literati issue since Dong Qichang.

Wang's paintings, although imitative in a very general literati kind of way, show his strictly technical and highly motivated mind. We can observe it not only in his extant paintings, but also in surviving texts. In *Guochao hua wei lu* (國朝畫微錄), mid-Qing art historian Zhang Geng (張庚) gives a detailed account of the time he spent with Wang Yuanqi observing him painting. Thanks to this text, we know exactly what Wang's technique specifically consisted of. Zhang describes step by step how Wang set about painting a landscape. There are at least 14 stages enumerated, including sketching, adding ink washes, adding colours, drying with a small iron, adding *dian* (點) dots and brushstrokes, making corrections and adjustments, etc. Zhang shows how hard-working and minute Wang was, going through his work over and over again. Knowing all this makes it much easier to understand Wang's principles of amassing ink¹⁵ or his very original way of blending ink and colours.

If we are looking for artistic value and originality in Wang Yuanqi's landscapes, we can find them not in themes, not in compositions, but in technical aspects of Chinese painting. His personal style is defined not only by the use of 'dry brush', the multilayered nature of his compositions, the blending of ink and colour washes, but also by the

¹⁴ The Four Yuan Masters (元季四家) occupy central place in Dong Qichang's concept of the Southern School. By following these artists, Wang Yuanqi identifies himself with the mainstream literati painting tradition.

¹⁵ He shared the technique (*jimo* – 積墨) to some extent with the main painter of the Nanjing school, Gong Xian (龔賢). The main difference lies in Wang's use of the 'dry brush' (*ganbi* – 乾筆) method derived from Ni Zan, while Gong Xian used his very own 'wet brush' method (*shibi* – 濕筆).

‘rigidity’ of his brush, that W a n g himself called the ‘steel pestle’ (金剛杵). W a n g’s art is that of mastery of the brush, repetition striving for perfection, painstaking effort at developing complicated ‘structure’ of his rocks – a purely theoretical concept, having nothing to do with real mountains. This is literati painting at the peak of its technical achievement.

W a n g Yuanqi was neither just literati, nor a typical court painter; neither was he only a court official. Rather, he was all three at the same time. His family background and education are that of literati. His writings on art show much literary refinement. The topics dealt with also do not go beyond the scope of what Dong Qichang wrote about a mere century earlier. If we were to disregard thus expressed W a n g’s social identity, and consider only his working environment and his relationship with Kangxi, we can also conclude, that W a n g was in fact a court painter. Being a court painter, he was at the same time a high-ranking court official – which in Qing times was something of a rarity.

W a n g Yuanqi had an enormous influence on later Qing painting, especially at the imperial court. He was so popular, that he had to engage ghost painters (*daibi* – 代筆) to deal with his artistic obligations.¹⁶ Many of W a n g’s paintings made during his term of office in Beijing were in fact painted by *daibi*. He had several distinguished followers, most of which were court painters. The most famous include Tang Dai (唐岱), painter and author of an important painting treatise, the *Huishi fawei* (繪事發微). Among others are: Dong Bangda (董邦達), Qian Weicheng (錢維城), Huang Ding (黃鼎), Fang Shishu (方士庶) and Zhang Zongcang (張宗蒼). Later followers include the Little Four Wangs (小四王) and the Later Four Wangs (後四王). The whole group of Wang followers was named the Loudong School (婁東派), from the traditional name of Taicang – W a n g’s hometown.

W a n g’s influence in painting cannot be measured solely by the number of his disciples and followers. His main achievement was that of changing imperial artistic taste, shifting it from decorative, figural painting into the realm of literati art. After W a n g Yuanqi, literati landscapes, previously associated mainly with the Southern literati circles, started to define also imperial art at the court in Beijing.

Today’s appraisal of court literati landscapes is not particularly high. The paintings are considered schematic, repetitive and devoid of the *qiyun* (氣韻) – vital in a Chinese pictorial and calligraphic tradition. These opinions are probably true, and analyses of W a n g’s painting provide us with an explanation: it was virtually impossible for later painters to further develop literati landscape within the orthodoxy of Wang’s Loudong school. W a n g reaches the peak of technical achievement, beyond which only decline is possible.

W a n g Yuanqi’s social and artistic identity can be established only by means of an overall analysis of his life, art and contribution to art theory. He needs to be looked upon in more than one of the social roles he played: that of an official, a literati artist,

¹⁶ Wang’s *daibi* include Wang Jingming (王敬銘), Zhao Xiao (趙曉) and Wen Yi (溫儀). See Yang Renkai (楊仁愷, red.), *Zhongguo shuhua* (中國書畫), Shanghai guji, 2006, p. 517.

a professional painter, an art theorist. W a n g attests to the possibility of incorporating all of these in one person. This achievement, of which W a n g might not have even been aware, wins him a very special place in the history of Chinese art.

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W a n g Yuanqi, *River Mountains clearing after rain*, NPM, Taiwan



Wang Yuanqi, *Landscape in the manner of Huang Gongwang*, NPM, Taiwan



Wang Yuanqi, *Landscape in the manner of Ni Zan*, NPM, Taiwan