

# Biographical Notes on Three Seventeenth Century Chinese Painters

By Ellen Johnston Laing

Today, most knowledge about secondary Chinese painters is derived from skimpy entries in a few standard biographical compendia; dwelling tersely on artistic style or subject matter, such notices are dryly laconic, often silent, on aspects of purely biographical import. It is small wonder, then, that when placed beside the richly documented careers of major masters, the lives of minor artists pale into thin abstractions seemingly devoid of human personality.

Rectifying this situation demands tremendous effort, for information, fragmentary and tenuous though it may be, about such minor painters' lives and activities, is recovered only by slogging through vast, uncharted seas of written material. The purpose of this paper is to present, after summarizing already readily available facts on each, some newly-discovered data concerning three seventeenth-century artists: Ch'en Kuan, Li Chao-heng and Tseng I.

## Ch'en Kuan 陳禎

The following composite biography of Ch'en Kuan is drawn from the standard cyclopedias (omitting the strictly critical comments on his painting style). A native of Suchou, he was originally named Ch'en Tsan 陳瓚, *tzu*, Shu-kuan 叔禎; he later took Kuan as his personal name and adopted Ch'eng-chiang 誠將 as his *tzu* and Po-shih 白室 as his *hao*. His landscapes, which visitors to Suchou strove to acquire, were after those of Sung and Yuan masters; Chao Po-chü 趙伯駒 and Chao Meng-fu 趙孟頫 are specified as is Wen Cheng-ming 文徵明 of the Ming dynasty. As a calligrapher, Ch'en was noted for his running and standard scripts. Fond of reading the *Li Sao* ("On Encountering Sorrow") and the *Wen Hsüan* (Anthology of Literature), he was himself a poet. He finally retired to Tiger Hill, passing the time composing and chanting poems; a collection of his writings was entitled *Yü-chieh chi* 嫗解集.<sup>1</sup> This basically is all that can be learned about Ch'en from the usual sources. His *Yü-chieh chi* is apparently now lost, although couplets on his paintings preserve examples of his poetic achievement.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Chiang Shao-shu, *Wu-sheng shih-shih* 姜紹書, 無聲詩史, *Hua-shih ts'ung-shu* 畫史叢書 ed., 4.69; Hsü Ch'in, *Ming hua lu* 徐沁, 明畫錄, HSTS ed., 4.48; *Su-chou fu-chih* 蘇州府志 (reprint ed., Taipei, 1970), 87:82b; Lu Chün, *Sung Yuan i-lai hua-jen hsing-shih lu* 魯駿, 宋元以來畫人姓氏錄 (n.p.), 7:23b-24a; Sun Ta-kung, *Chung-kuo hua-chia jen-ming ta-tz'u-tien* 孫毓公, 中國畫家人名大辭典 (reprint ed., Taipei, 1962), p. 435.

<sup>2</sup>See P'an Cheng-wei, *T'ing-fan-lou shu-hua chi* 潘正煒, 聽颿樓書畫記, *Mei-shu ts'ung-shu* 美術叢書 ed., IV/7, ch. 3, p. 269; *Ku-kung chou-k'an* 故宮週刊, 151. Two poems have been translated, one in *The Restless Landscape: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Period*, James Cahill, ed. (Berkeley, 1971), p. 162 and one in Chu-tsing Li, *A Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines: Chinese Paintings in the Charles A. Drenowatz Collection*, Artibus Asiae Supplementum XXX (Ascona, 1974), vol. I, p. 83.

A few of Ch'en's scrolls have been discussed by Oswald Sirén,<sup>3</sup> Marsha Smith,<sup>4</sup> and more recently by Chu-tsing Li. Sirén and Smith both give approximate dates for Ch'en's activity as between 1610 and 1640. Li, puzzling over a work dated only by the cyclical sign *hsin-wei*, which can be either 1571 or 1631, argues for the former, and thus extends Ch'en's period of activity from 1570 to 1640; he further proposes that Ch'en may have attained ninety or one hundred years of age.<sup>5</sup>

New information from Ch'en's own inscriptions on his paintings and from the writings of his contemporaries help illumine this painter's personal and artistic life.

Ch'en's inscriptions disclose that he, like many another artists, generously presented works to his comrades (most, unfortunately, as yet unidentified) and that he participated in making cooperative paintings with such partners as Ch'eng Chia-sui 程嘉燧 (1565-1634), Wen Ts'ung-chien 文從簡 (1574-1648), Sheng Mao-yeh 盛茂擘 (fl. c. 1625-1640), and Pien Wen-yü 卞文瑜 (fl. c. 1620-1670).<sup>6</sup> In Ch'en's circle of friends was the well-known literatus, artist and critic, Li Jih-hua 李日華 (1565-1635) to whom, in 1609, Ch'en sent a scroll by the Yuan master, Huang Kung-wang 黃公望.<sup>7</sup>

Still another acquaintance, Ch'en Chen-hui 陳貞慧 (1604-1656), wrote this sketch of Ch'en Kuan:

"Po-shih when young roamed the famous mountains and great rivers. Wherever he went [people] sought him as a guest and to acquire his paintings [as if they were rarities] like the pearls [of the Marquis] of Sui or the brocades [described in the] *Yeh* [*-chung-chi* 鄴中記]. Often his purse was filled with thousands of gold-pieces which he spent recklessly. [In this] he was rather like [the T'ang poets] Chang Hu 張祐 with his meditation and wisdom and Li Po 李白 with his wine drinking. [Ch'en] saw the myriad forms of clouds and mists, strange mirage-like buildings, the jade-plaque peaks of the Yen [-tang Mountain 雁蕩山], of several myriad *li* [and presumably included these wonders in his paintings]. He traveled until old and his wrist [i.e. brushwork] became increasingly marvellous. Late in life he retired to Tiger Hill. His wealthy, influential in-laws lent him a place to live. [When] someone asked about this, he responded, 'I pay rent for it!' and never mentioned the names [of his in-laws]. From this, one knows he really was a man of principle [*tao*]. His landscapes were moist and wet, not inferior to the ancient masters'. He once did two paintings, 'Snow Scene' and 'Spring in Kiangnan' as well as a poem and sent them [to me] to see. Opening [them] by a clear window I always exclaim over these 'ink treasures.' Earlier I did not realize he wrote poetry, but

<sup>3</sup>*Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles* (New York, 1956-58), vol. V, p. 28. Sirén mis-writes Ch'en's name as Ch'en Lo 陳祿.

<sup>4</sup>"The Wu School in Late Ming, I: Conservative Masters," in *Restless Landscape* p. 45.

<sup>5</sup>*Thousand Peaks and Myriad Ravines*, vol. I, pp. 77-79, 83-84.

<sup>6</sup>Yao Chi-heng, *Hao-ku-t'ang shu-hua chi* 姚際恆, 好古堂書畫記, *hsia*, MSTS III/8, pp. 75-76; Hu Chi-t'ang, *Pi-hsiao-hsüan shu-hua lu* 胡積堂, 筆嘯軒書畫錄 (n.p.), *hsia*, 49a.

<sup>7</sup>Li Jih-hua, *Wei-shui-hsüan jih-chi*, *Hsiao-yüan ts'ung-shu* 味水軒日記, 嘯園叢書 ed., 1:6b.

there were many things he did not let people know.”<sup>8</sup>

白室先生。壯遊名山大川。所至爭客之。得其筆墨。如隋珠鄴錦。囊中致千金裝者屢矣。輒散去不顧。張祜之禪智。李白之酒樓。庶幾似之。所見雲煙萬狀。蜃樓海市。雁峯玉板。幾萬里。遊益老。腕益奇。晚乃歸隱於虎丘也。貴人姻家。假屋以居之。或詢之。曰傲寓耳。絕不及貴人姓氏。以此知先生真有道人也。先生山水渲染。不愧古大家。曾作雪景江南春二圖並一詩見寄。晴窗展對。每呼墨寶。蚤不知先生能詩。然先生不使人知者多矣。

What could easily be the most significant discovery concerning Ch'en Kuan's life is also the most problematic. On his landscape album leaf dedicated to a certain Erh-ju 二如 the artist states that the work was done in 1632 when he was seventy years old.<sup>9</sup> Since this important painting is apparently no longer extant, its authenticity and the validity of the inscription can be only provisionally accepted. Nevertheless, all things considered, a birthdate of 1563 for Ch'en Kuan is entirely plausible.

#### Li Chao-heng 李肇亨

The son of Li Jih-hua, Chao-heng became a monk in the Ch'ao-kuo Temple 超果寺 in Sung-chiang and took the name Ch'ang-ying 常瑩. His other sobriquets were: Hui-chia 會嘉, K'o-hsueh 珂雪, and Tsui-ou 醉鷗. In addition to grapevines, he depicted landscapes after Sung and Yuan masters; his fame equaled that of Chao Tso 趙左 (fl. c. 1610-1630); he was also a poet and a calligrapher.<sup>10</sup> A handful of his paintings survive, but have never been a subject of study. He is said to have worked between the Ch'ung-chen (1628-1644) and K'ang hsi (1662-1722) periods;<sup>11</sup> Sirén suggests from around 1630 until around 1647.<sup>12</sup> A recent finding, given below, however, perhaps resolves some of the uncertainty about Li's dates.

Tseng Ch'ing 曾鯨 (t. Po-ch'en 波臣, 1568-1650), the foremost portraitist of the times, made a likeness of Li Chao-heng on which the sitter wrote a colophon. The concluding passage of Li Chao-heng's inscription goes:

“In the T'ien-ch'i [era], *ting-mao* [year, 1627] when Tseng Po-ch'en painted this portrait, I was thirty-six years old. Ten years later in the early spring of the Ch'ung-chen [era], *ping-tzu* [year, 1636] I unrolled and looked at it. Then, sighing, inscribed [it].”<sup>13</sup>

天啟丁卯。曾波臣寫此像時。我年卅有六。又十年爲崇禎丙子初春。展視慨歎而書。

Presumably it was for this portrait that Li's father, Jih-hua, presented a “thank you” poem to Tseng Ch'ing.<sup>14</sup>

Again, however, confronted with a situation where the original document ap-

<sup>8</sup>Ch'en Chen-hui, *Shan-yang lu, Shuo-k'u* 山陽錄, 說庫 ed., (reprint ed., Taipei, 1963), 6b (p. 1324). I wish to thank Professor Chang Chün-shu of The University of Michigan and Nora Ling-yün Shih Liu for their assistance in translating this text.

<sup>9</sup>Li Tso-hsien, *Shu-hua chien-ying* 李佐賢, 書畫鑑影 (1871, reprint ed., Taipei, 1970), 15:13b.

<sup>10</sup>Chiang Shao-shu, *Wu-sheng shih-shih*, 6:103; Hsü Ch'in, *Ming hua lu*, 5:69; Ch'in Tsu-yung, *Tung-yin lun-hua* 秦祖永, 桐陰論畫 (reprint ed., Taipei, 1967), II, *shang*, 6a; Sun Ta-kung, CKHCJMTT,

p. 200.

<sup>11</sup>Shang Ch'eng-tso and Huang Hua, comp., *Chung-kuo li-tai shu-hua chuan-k'e chia tzu-hao so-yin* 商承祚, 黃華, 中國歷代書畫篆刻家字號索引 (Peking, 1960), I, p. 870.

<sup>12</sup>Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, vol. VII, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup>Lu Hsin-yuan, *Jang-li-kuan kuo-yen lu* 陸心源, 穰梨館過眼錄, (Wu-hsing, 1891), 27:16b-17a.

<sup>14</sup>Li Jih-hua, *T'ien-chih-t'ang chi* 恬致堂集 (reprint ed., Taipei, 1971), 1:18ab.

parently is lost, it can only be proposed that a possible date for Li Chao-heng's birth was the year 1592.

### Tseng I 曾銓

Tseng I, t. Shou-po 受伯, who excelled in painting figures, birds and flowers, and portraits, is claimed to be Tseng Ch'ing's grandson. It is asserted that he was active during the K'ang-hsi (1662-1722) and Ch'ien-lung (1736-1795) eras.<sup>15</sup> I am informed by Howard Rogers that a painting by Tseng is in the Lin Po-shou collection in the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Actually Tseng I must have made his livelihood as a portrait painter and the following anecdote related by Kuei Chuang 歸莊 (1613-1673) is included here because it not only conveys a sense of the constant productivity demanded of a successful professional artist, but also highlights certain relationships between patron and portraitist.

#### "Written on a Fan for Portraitist Tseng

[The T'ang poet Tu Fu's 杜甫] poem to General Ts'ao Pa 曹霸 [says]: 'Your excellency as a painter is divinely inspired. You used also to paint portraits, though only if you met an unusual person. Today drifting about in an age of violence, you often make likenesses of quite ordinary people.'<sup>16</sup> Mr. Tseng Shou-po from Min [Fukien] is skilled at portraiture; he has been in my district for more than a month and has already painted thirty or forty [portraits] for people. I asked his age: sixty-three; [he] does not know how many myriads of 'ordinary people's' portraits he has done over the decades. In the past I have altogether seven or eight times commissioned artisans to paint portraits, not one was successful; only Tseng's is a veritable likeness. In the difficult [task] of coming upon a good artist I have been definitely fortunate, so I asked [Tseng] how many people as handsome as this he has painted in his lifetime. A laugh! I know superficial, common-world people will consider my words foolish. Written in the tenth month of the *kuei-mao* [year, 1663]."<sup>17</sup>

#### 書寫照會君扇

杜少陵贈曹將軍詩。將軍善畫蓋有神。每逢佳士亦寫真。只今飄泊干戈際。屢貌尋常行路人。閩中曾君受伯工寫真。在吾邑月餘。已為人寫三四十。問其年六十有三。不知數十年中。貌幾千萬尋常行路人矣。余嘗令畫工圖像凡七八。無一肖者。惟君乃酷肖。余固幸好手之難遇。更問君平生所畫如此佳士得幾人。一笑。吾知世俗皮相者。必以吾言為妄也。癸卯十月。壘鑿鉅山人歸莊書。

Assuming this document to be accurate, Tseng I was born in 1601; it is, then, impossible that he was still active during the Ch'ien-lung period. It is also difficult to believe that Tseng I was Tseng Ch'ing's grandson since Ch'ing would have become a grandfather at the unlikely age of thirty-three.

<sup>15</sup>Shang and Huang, *op. cit.*, I, p. 631; Sun Ta-kung CKHCJM TTT, p. 515. [Oxford, 1967], p. 144).

<sup>16</sup>The translation of this quotation from Tu Fu is that of David Hawkes (*A Little Primer of Tu Fu*

<sup>17</sup>Kuei Chuang, *Kuei Chuang chi* 歸莊集 (Shanghai, 1962), 4:295.