

Plant Paintings of Two Yang-chou Masters

By Laurence C.S. Tam

THIS ARTICLE is a study of some paintings and poems by two painters of the Ch'ing dynasty, Cheng Hsieh 鄭夔 (1693-1753) and Wang Shih-shen 汪士慎 (1686-1759), two representatives of the Eight Eccentrics of Yang-chou 揚州八怪 who were active during the reigns of Yung-cheng and Ch'ien-lung. The majority of these artists were not natives of Yang-chou, but their painting activities were centred there.

Cheng Hsieh, a native of Chiangsu, is now better known by his pseudonym, Pan-ch'iao 板橋. He obtained his *chin-shih* degree in the reign of Ch'ien-lung and was consequently appointed to the magistracies of Fan Hsien 范縣 and then of Wei Hsien 濰縣. After retirement, he led the life of a scholar-painter in Yang-chou. His favourite painting subjects are bamboo and orchid.

Wang Shih-shen, a native of Anhui, spent his life largely in Yang-chou as a recluse. He was a good friend of Chin Nung 金農, the most renowned of the Yang-chou circle. In his old age he lost the sight of one eye, hence he sometimes used a seal bearing the characters "Tso-mang-sheng" 左盲生, meaning "scholar whose left eye is blind". His most famous painting subjects is the blossoming plum.

ALTHOUGH PAINTERS before them had employed inscriptions as constructive elements in painting, it was in the hands of Yang-chou masters such as Cheng Hsieh and Wang Shih-shen that inscriptions were used with the greatest inventiveness. Cheng Hsieh would use inscriptions to enhance or stabilize pictorial movement or to replace certain realistic pictorial details. Wang Shih-shen would use inscriptions to guide the movement of his pictorial forms, and to imbue his paintings with poetic atmosphere. By analyzing the paintings and poems presented below, we hope to throw light on the artistic insights of these two men, and by so doing bring out their contribution to eighteenth century painting in their bold breakthrough from orthodox

compositional format.

Among the earliest dated paintings of Cheng Hsieh is an orchid hanging scroll which he executed in 1752. In it he painted nothing but orchids arranged in four separate groups at different levels (Pl. 81).¹ As Chinese hanging scrolls are usually painted from the bottom upwards, and are meant to be viewed that way, we shall start our visual journey into the painting from its lower margin.

There we are welcomed into the scene by a small clump of orchids in the lower left corner of the painting. The orchid leaves grow mostly upwards, inclining slightly to the right. This first group, announcing the opening of the scene, has its two longest leaves arranged in a V shape, diagonally facing the other side of the painting. Such an arrangement of leaf forms naturally leads us to the second group which grows more profusely, in a graceful and vigorous manner. Immediately above it, along the right margin of the painting, is a third clump shown only by the upper parts of some leaves and two flowering stalks, one pointing towards the centre of the painting, another shooting upwards along the right margin. Following this upward movement, we come to the orchids growing on the highest level, with flowers and leaves which seem to be dancing triumphantly in the air.

The pictorial movement, which accumulates strength as it ascends the picture plane, has thus reached a climax and begins to make its descent, and the orchids' dangling leaves usher us on to the inscription. This vertical column, reading downwards, leads our eyes back to the first orchid clump, the starting point of our journey. Thus the inscription is not only useful in completing this

¹This painting was published in *Shina Nanga Taikan* 支那南畫大觀 (Tokyo, 1926), vol. 10, pl. 6. Another orchid scroll dated 1761, of similar composition and with the same inscription, is reproduced in *Shina Nanga Taisei* 支那南畫大成 (Tokyo, 1935-37), vol. 1, pl. 184.

circular configuration, but also essential in achieving compositional balance.

In fact, all four groups of orchids have prominent leaves pointing towards this inscription, which consists of a poem followed by the date of execution and Cheng's signature. The poem reads:

*How prosperous are the youths of Black
Costume (Lane),
And so similar are they to the Southern
Dynasty's Wang and Hsieh clans.
Abundant were the virtues planted by
their ancestors for a hundred years;
So, naturally, the nine fields all come to
bloom.*

烏衣子弟何其盛，
酷似南朝王謝家。
百歲老人多種德，
自然九畹盡開花。

In this poem, Cheng demonstrates his skill in the play of words as subtly as he exhibits his mastery of brushwork in the painting. The use of the term "youths of Black Costume (Lane)" in the first line has a historical connotation. The lane was actually a place situated in what is now southeastern Nanking where many nobles of the Chin dynasty (265-420) used to live, while the so-called "Black Costumes", made from a coarse black cloth, were a kind of fashionable dress worn by those gentlemen. The term "youths of Black Costume" denotes youths of noble breed, and makes us think of the orchids on the painting, which are executed in black ink. This term receives further clarification in the second line through the mention of Wang Tao 王導 (267-330) and Hsieh An 謝安 (320-385), once renowned inhabitants of that area, both prominent officials of the Chin dynasty. They were noted for their scholarship, talents and integrity of character, qualities which, according to Chinese tradition, are symbolized by the orchid.² Then, in the third and fourth lines, a

²For the biography of Wang Tao, cf. the *Chin Shu* 晉書, *chuan* 65, Biographical Section 35, pp. 1-10. In the same *chuan*, pp. 10-17, are biographies of his sons and grandsons. The biography of Hsieh An is given in the same text, *chuan* 79, Biographical Section 49, pp. 4-8, and biographies of his sons and grandson, his brothers and nephews are on pp. 8-23.

causal relationship between successive generations is exemplified by the pronouncement that Wang Tao and Hsieh An's merits brought forth their descendants prosperity. In a moralistic manner, the poet conveyed to us his belief in the Taoist idea of *ch'eng fu* 乘負, which asserts that the meritorious services or evil acts of a person will affect the future lives of his descendants.³

It is interesting to note that Cheng Hsieh used such words as "plant" and "nine fields" to link up the theme of his poem and the representation of orchids in his painting. The word "plant" 種, which can also mean "seeds", carries the metaphor between good deeds done by past generations and seeds that grow unnoticed in the ground: both are sure to lead to later prosperity. The term "Nine Fields" 九畹, a poetic substitute for blooming orchids,⁴ continues this idea of prosperity and echoes the painting's cheerful growth of orchids. Thus our thoughts complete a circuit of ideas as we peruse the poem and view the painting.

Skilled in brush work, Cheng Hsieh can execute gradations in ink tones with the effect that his heavier strokes stand out like accents in Chinese poems. Large areas of empty space sometimes occur in his plant paintings, giving us the feeling of a natural open space where the plants are supposed to grow. Sometimes these spaces function like long pauses in a poem, preparing our thoughts for new realms of ideas as our eyes leave one group of plant forms to meet another with

³This idea of Cheng was also expressed in a letter to his brother, Mo 墨; cf. *Cheng Pan-ch'iao chi* 鄭板橋集, (Shanghai, 1965), p. 4.

⁴"Nine fields" is a literal translation of the Chinese term "*chiu wan* 九畹". It was originally used to indicate an area of land. In the *Li Sao* 離騷, a long poem of the *fu* style by Ch'u Yuan 屈原 (343 B.C.-?), a line goes like this:

*I have cultivated orchids of uni-floral stalk
in chiu wan.*

余既滋蘭之九畹兮

According to Pan Ku 班固, author of the *Han Shu* 漢書, "wan" is equivalent to twenty "mou" 畝 (1 mou ≈ 6,000 sq. metres), while Hsu Shen 許慎 in his *Shuo wen* 說文 took "wan" to be equal to 30 "mou". Later scholars used the term "*chiu wan*", here translated as "nine fields", to mean "a place of land for growing orchids", or, simply, "orchids".

different structural details.⁵

AMONG THE EXTANT works of Cheng Hsieh are some large bamboo paintings in the form of scrolls or screens. The way in which these were painted is told by him as follows:

People think that it is difficult to execute a large bamboo painting, but I think it easy. Everyday I paint only one stalk, completing it to my full satisfaction. In five or seven days, five or seven stalks are painted. Each stands by itself and is complete in all its excellence. Then bamboos in light ink tone, bamboos of smaller sizes and bamboos in broken form are woven into the pattern. The forms can be arranged widely separated or close together. The ink tone may vary from dark to light. Their forms can be long or short, and fat or slender. The tempo (of painting) may be fast or slow according to the state of my mind. A large composition is completed in this way.⁶

畫大幅竹，人以爲難，吾以爲易。每日只畫一竿，至完至足。須五七日畫五七竿，皆離立完好。然後以淡竹小竹碎竹經緯其間，或疏或密，或濃或淡，或長或短，或肥或瘦，隨意緩急，便構成大局矣。

Now let us study a large bamboo scroll which he painted in 1757 (Pl. 82) and try to interpret the course of its execution in the light of the passage cited above. This is a big painting, measuring 223.5 cm. x 91.3 cm.. To start with, we can number the ends of the twelve stalks from left to

⁵The system of four tones in the Chinese language, and the application of unaccented tones (*p'ing* 平) and accented tones (*che* 仄) in poetry, were fully discussed as early as the Six Dynasties by Shen Yueh 沈約 (441-513) in his *Ssu-sheng-p'u* 四聲譜, and by Chou Yung 周顛 (?-485) in his *Ssu-sheng ch'ieh-yün* 四聲切韻. For a fuller discussion of the development of the tones and sounds of Chinese characters, cf. Chang Shih-lu 張世祿, *Chung-kuo sheng-yün-hsueh kai-yao* 中國聲韻學概要 (Taipei, 1969). A comprehensive study of the part played by tonal patterns in Chinese poetry is found in Huang Hsu-wu 黃錫吾's *Shih-tz'u-chü te yen chiu* 詩詞曲的研究 (Taipei, 1966).

⁶*Cheng Pan-ch'iao chi*, p. 224.

right as 1 to 12. According to the method he himself described, it would not be too far-fetched to suppose that he painted stalks 1, 2, 3, 5, 11 and 12 first. These are the major structural stalks in the painting, the main pillars in a building. They are so arranged that stalks 1 and 2 form one pair, 3 and 5 a second pair, and 11 and 12 a third. In each of these pairs, the lower ends of the stalks are drawn apart from each other but are joined together at the top. After this, stalk 4 was drawn to join the second and third pairs of stalks together. Stalk 6 was further added to support stalk 4 in its slanting position.

Of all these, stalk 2, supported by stalk 1, has been given the greatest height, its side stalks loaded with leaves drawn mainly in the traditional form like the Chinese characters *che* 介 or *ke* 个. Each layer of leaves is a repetition of these forms or their component parts. Decreasing in density and weight as they ascend in height, the leaves extend over the top portion of stalk 3, bringing the first two pairs of main stalks together, and pointing diagonally downwards, counterpoising the upward movement of the slender pyramid formed by stalks 4, 11 and 12.

Working from this orderly arrangement of pictorial elements, Cheng Hsieh wove in additional bamboo patterns according to the tempo of his own thoughts, paying attention to the relative density of ink tones and the arrangement of forms. He first broke the regularity of the feet of the bamboo stalks by adding stalks 7, 8, 9 and 10. Stalk 10 was probably added last to accentuate the density of the stalks on the right side. Stalk 7 was put in for another function. It shoots right up to the top of the pyramid and sends out five sprays of leaves in lighter ink tones. These eliminate the monotony of the scaffolding appearance at the top of the pyramid, and act like a transmitting station, receiving the message of downward movement sent from the leaves above, and passing this message down along the stalks which form the pyramid.

To find a point of concentration for the upward force of the stalks and the downward movement of the leaves above, Cheng Hsieh stressed the more profuse growth of leaves on top of the shorter, and younger, stalks 8, 9 and 10, and arranged them in a concave shape as if in a gesture to receive the downward thrust from above. The densest growth of leaves here seems to take place at a point about

Plate 82 BAMBOO SCROLL,
by Cheng Hsieh. The inscription:
*“Wen Yü-k’e, in a poem which he
inscribed on an ink bamboo paint-
ing, said: ‘I will use a section of
the finest silk. . . .’”*

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Two Yang-chou Masters

one-third up the length of stalk 11. From this point, leaves spread out in spray forms in various directions. Some shoot out towards the right, filling up the empty space beyond stalk 12, while several heavy clusters reach up towards top left, and join the upward movement of the tallest stalk, thus completing a circuit of pictorial movement in the upper half of the painting. Some sprays of leaves go downwards and, pointing towards the left, lead our eyes back to the area of the main stalks which started off the composition. The major leaves were executed in undiluted ink, and some clusters of leaves were drawn to overlap one another. The use of varying, light ink tones gives thickness to the bamboo grove as well as a three-dimensional effect to the leaves themselves. Sometimes these leaves in lighter ink tones act as bridges linking two heavy forms.

IT IS RATHER unusual for an inscription to be placed the way it is in this painting. The bamboos on the left look as if they are growing out from the inscription. In a way, the whole inscription may be looked upon as a solid mass. Cheng's use of inscriptions to simulate the effect of rocky masses, or their surface textures, can be seen elsewhere in his other works: a bamboo painting dated 1753 (in the Tokyo National Museum collection), a painting of auspicious plants growing out from a rock, dated 1761 (exhibited in the Hamburg Exhibition of 1949), and a painting of fragrant orchids and bamboos dated 1762 (reproduced in *Yang-chou pa-chia hua-chi* 揚州八家畫集, Peking, 1961). In a painting of orchids and bamboos done by Cheng at the age of seventy (Pl. 83), he replaced the textural strokes of the upper rock mass with an inscription. If the inscription is removed from the painting, the rock jutting out from the right margin will look uninterestingly bare, and the strokes representing the orchid plant and the bamboo leaves will appear as unduly heavy and somewhat out of balance. The presence of the inscription adds weight to the rock mass, giving the rock sufficient latent force to hold the orchid and bamboo firmly in place.

Returning to Plate 82, we can interpret the inscription as a rocky mass coming into the picture plane from behind the bamboo stalks at the lower left corner. The downward movement of the calligraphy not only balances the strong upward

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movement of the major stem, which sends its leaves right to the top of the picture plane, but also gives added interest to the spaces between the tall bare bamboo stalks in that corner of the picture. Also, it counterpoises the bend of stalk *11* and the leaves on stalks 2 and 7 towards the right. The first line of the inscription is put alongside a stalk leaning towards the left, which makes quite obvious the painter's intention: he wanted to accentuate the left-bending force of that stalk to keep the painting in visual balance.

The following is a literal translation of the words in the inscription:

Wen Yü-k'e (Wen T'ung 文同, 1018-1079), in a poem which he inscribed on an ink bamboo painting, said:

*"I will use a section of the finest silk,
To sweep on wintry stalks a myriad
feet in length."*

Mei Tao-jen (Wu Chen 吳鎮, 1280-1354) said:

*"I, too, have a pavilion deep in the
bamboo grove,
And also the thought of returning
home to hear the autumn sounds."*

Their poetic thoughts are most exquisitely pure. They are remembered not for their paintings alone. Because they are remembered not only for their paintings, their paintings are therefore even better remembered. I am proficient in neither poetry nor painting. Yet I exert myself to inscribe a few lines:

*"They said that the frosty stalks had
withered.
Who knew that green leaves would
again abound?
Gusts and thunder over the clear river
last night
Released the dragon's descendants (i.e.
young bamboo shoots) ten thousand
in number."*

These are words from a vulgar person not worthy to be compared with those of the early masters. I wish that my dear old friend and classmate Shih-lan⁷ will correct this.—

Painted and inscribed by Cheng Hsieh, in the year *ting-ch'ou* in the reign of Ch'ien-lung (i.e. 1757).

文與可題墨竹詩云，擬將一段鵝溪絹。掃取空梢萬尺長。梅道人有云，我亦有亭深竹裏。也思歸去聽秋聲。皆詩意清絕，不獨以畫傳也。不獨以畫傳而畫益傳。余不能詩又不能畫，然亦勉題數句曰，只道霜筠幹已枯，誰知碧葉又扶疏。風雷昨夜清江上，拔出龍孫一萬株。鄙夫之言，有愧前哲也，唯石蘭同學老世長兄政之。乾隆丁丑板橋鄭燮畫並題。

The Sung dynasty painter Wen T'ung has often been hailed as the founder of the most influential school of bamboo painting known as the Hu-chou School 湖州派.⁸ Executing bamboo leaves and sections of the stalks each with one single stroke of the brush, he presented his plants according to a natural system of growth, so that we can clearly discern how each small stem grows out from a larger stalk, and how a leaf in turn grows out from a small stem. In the Yuan dynasty Wu Chen continued the Hu-chou School but went one step further. He freed himself from the bondage of weaving the brush-strokes according to realistic patterns of growth, and took bamboo painting as a kind of ink play through which he tried to capture the momentary impression of the plant in his mind.⁹ Thus his brushstrokes demonstrate greater freedom and spontaneity than those of Wen T'ung.

In the inscription cited above, Cheng Hsieh acknowledged Wen T'ung's achievement as a painter of bamboo, and emphasized the magnitude and heroic feeling of his brushwork. The sheer length of the tallest bamboo stalk in Cheng's painting, measuring well over seventy inches, with emphasis laid on its bare, leafless upper part, distinctly reminds us of the "wintry stalks a myriad feet in length" in Wen T'ung's poem. But

⁷Shih-lan 石蘭 was the pseudonym of Chiang Tao 江澹, a calligrapher from Hsi Hsien 歙縣 of Anhui Province; cf. *Chung-kuo li-tai shu-hua-chuan-k'e-chia tzu-hao so-yin* 中國歷代書畫篆刻家字號索引 (Peking, 1960), vol. 1, p. 385.

⁸Yü Feng 于風 states this view in his *Wen T'ung, Su Shih* 文同, 蘇軾 (Shanghai, 1960), pp. 13-17.

⁹This analysis is carried in Ku Lin-wen 顧麟文's *Yang-chou pa-chia shih-liao* 揚州八家史料 (Shanghai, 1962), p. 6.

we are also reminded by Wu Chen's lines that Cheng's style, though inherited from the Hu-chou School, is in fact less close to Wen T'ung's style than to Wu Chen's in that it is not a mere reconstruction of bamboo forms but a reflection of the untrammelled spirit and integrity often attributed to a virtuous scholar. Cheng's own poem tells us of his joy in finding new growth emerge from old plantings, his interest and concern for bamboos which echo Wu Chen's desire to return to the bamboo grove, and his expectation of a new generation of bamboo shoots "ten thousand in number" to burst soon into luxuriant growth. Thus, with the insertion of a short poem of four lines, Cheng successfully high-lighted the subject matter of his painting, and rounded up the multiple background thoughts associated with its composition.

A THEME WELL-LOVED by literati painters of the 18th century was the "Four Gentlemen" represented by the blossoming plum, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo. Painters would choose among these plants those that suited their own tastes and make personal interpretations of them. Cheng Hsieh was fond of the bamboo and orchid, while his contemporary Wang Shih-shen specialized in the blossoming plum, and both gave us paintings that form testimony to their idiosyncrasies.

A painting of the blossoming plum by Cheng Hsieh well illustrates the difference between his and Wang Shih-shen's treatment of the plant. This is an undated work, now in the collection of the Palace Museum, Peking (Pl. 84). In it, plum branches are presented together with two stalks of bamboo which, in a rather unusual arrangement, cross one another almost at right angles just inside the small rectangle formed by the plum branches. The bamboos are executed in fewer strokes than the plum branches but, because of the radiating placement of their leaves, the density of ink tone and their clearcut shapes, they emerge more distinctly than the plum branches and blossoms. The plum in this painting lacks the control, precision and musical rhythm of Cheng's bamboos and orchids. The reason underlying this is explained in the inscription, a seven-word *chüeh-chü* poem which reads:

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Plate 84 BLOSSOMING PLUM SCROLL, by Cheng Hsieh. The inscription: "I have never painted plum blossoms so far in my life. . . ."

*I have never painted plum blossoms so far
in my life;
Nor have I known a reclusive home in
lonely hills.
Today, I painted plum blossoms as well as
bamboo,
In this cold season my mind fills with
smoky mists.*

一生從未畫梅花，
不識孤山處士家。
今日畫梅兼畫竹，
歲寒心事滿烟霞。

In the very first line of this poem, Cheng openly announced that plum blossom painting is not his specialty. The second line explains why he chose not to paint that subject—because he had never had any intention of leading a reclusive life. The third line turns to the subject of the painting and specifies the plants in it. The last line reveals the condition of the painter's mind at the moment of creating the work. This painting was probably done not long before Cheng Hsieh retired from his official career in the year 1753. Not satisfied with being a government official, he had thought of leading a life of retirement in his own native place which, however, was not to his taste either. Thus at that time his mind was not peaceful, but veiled by "smoky mists". In fact, this painting can be taken as an attempt by Cheng Hsieh to record, through the use of different plant symbols, a critical moment in his life when he had to choose between officialdom, as represented by the bamboo, and retirement, as represented by the blossoming plum. The tall bamboo, with leaves high above the plum blossoms, may be taken as a symbol of an upright official, while the bamboo, lying behind some of the lower plum branches, may symbolize an official who has to bend down to the will of others. In the poem Cheng did not indicate what decision he made, but he did suggest, by arranging the three plant forms at three different levels, that his highest ideal was to be an upright official, failing which he would descend one level and choose to be a recluse rather than an official who has to yield to the will of others.

WANG SHIH-SHEN, Cheng Hsieh's contemporary, who led a life very much like that of a recluse,

holds quite a different attitude towards the blossoming plum. He liked to paint flowering plum branches because he wanted to be identified with them, particularly in his old age. Among such paintings by him, two of the earliest are dated *ping-ch'en, ch'ing-he* 丙辰清和, i.e. the third lunar month in the year 1736 (Pl. 85), and *ping-ch'en, li-ch'iu hou ssu-jih* 丙辰立秋後四日, i.e. four days after the beginning of autumn in the year 1736 (Pl. 86). In both of these works, plum twigs enter the picture plane near the top right corner with the main branch projecting towards the left, diagonally in one, and almost horizontally in the other. Before reaching the left margin, the branch makes a turn and sends forth smaller blossoming twigs towards the right and bottom of the painting. Such a compositional format can be found in quite a few blossoming plum paintings by Yuan and Ming masters, such as those by Wang Mien 王冕 (1335-1407), the most celebrated blossoming plum painter in Chinese art history. But whereas Wang Mien tried to recreate, by a shower of blossoming branches, the gaiety and vigour of plant life in spring,¹⁰ Wang Shih-shen was used to painting only a few branches, being more interested in the arrangement of pictorial shapes than in the beauty of natural and exuberant growth. Rather than try to paint real plum branches, he borrowed their forms to weave a pattern, or to construct a setting for a theme expressed in his inscription.

Wang Shih-shen, a zealous lover of plum blossoms, wrote many poems which contain messages essential for a fuller understanding of his paintings. The scroll painted in the third month of 1736 (Pl. 85) has two inscriptions on it. The shorter one, on the upper right, tells when and where the painting was executed, and carries the signature of the painter. Placed just under where the branches enter the picture, it functions like another plum branch entering the picture and pointing downwards. The long inscription on the lower left, added after the shorter one, reads:

¹⁰[For a discussion of plum-blossom painting by this artist, see the latter part of Chu-tsing Li's article "Problems Concerning the Life of Wang Mien, Painter of Plum Blossoms" in this issue.]

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*A myriad branches crisscross,
Their wintry hue deep in the water.
Walking on a stream's bridge at dawn,
Ice cracks under my staff.
My old friends are mostly far away,
But seem as close as these plum blossoms.
Why should one still fear the spring cold,
And lie abed in the thatched chamber?*

Chin-jen inscribes again a poem composed earlier on visiting plum blossoms.

橫斜千萬枝，
寒色都在水。
曉日上溪梁，
冰漸開杖底。
故人多遠方，
得似梅花邇。
寧復畏春寒，
草堂臥不起。

近人再書探梅舊作

"Chin-jen" is the pseudonym of Wang Shih-shen. From this inscription, we learn that the poem existed before the painting. This longer inscription was probably added to the lower left corner to balance the weight of the branches and the shorter inscription. The two inscriptions thus placed look as if they were defining a passage for the inturning flowering branch. The affinity in form and relation in content of the two inscriptions create a force of attraction between them. This force exerts an invisible pressure on the branches in between, increasing the tension and agility of the lines with which the plant is delineated.

An air of serenity pervades the whole poem. It begins with a picturesque description of blossoming branches by the side of a frozen stream. In this scene an old man walks, staff in hand, across a bridge over the stream, and approaches the flowering plum tree. The poet expresses slight agitation when he thinks of his friends faraway, but he soon calms down in the presence of his beloved plum blossoms and feels glad that he has not stayed late in bed and missed such a beautiful sight. At the end of the poem, he encourages others to join him in visiting the plum trees at dawn when the flowers should look their best, which shows how fond he was of the plum tree. Thus we are led to associate

the branches in the painting with that particular plum tree described in the poem, a tree which grew near the stream, bathed in the pale light of the morning sun on a freezing day in early spring. The poem certainly made the picture much more meaningful than a mere sketch of a few flowering branches.

THE PLUM BLOSSOM paintings of Wang Shih-shen lack the obvious musical rhythm which we find in most of Cheng Hsieh's paintings. Yet in them we can sense quite clearly the line of movement indicated by the branches, and the accentuation of such movement indicated by the varying density of plum blossom clusters, moss dots and other elements. In the course of painting the branches, his picture surface was divided into compartments of varying shapes and sizes. This is particularly obvious in the scroll which Wang painted in the autumn of 1736 (Pl. 86). The branches here are painted in such a way that the spaces enclosed by them look very much like rocks with moss and flowering plants growing out from their cracks and hollows. They are so arranged that they have partitioned the picture surface into two, a triangular space on the upper left and a nearly semi-circular shape on the lower right. Inside the triangular space, the painter put the title of the painting in a calligraphic style of the past, reading:

STREAKS OF FRAGRANCE IN THE AIR
written also by Chin-jen in seal script

空裏疎香
近人又篆

The size of the space left in the lower right portion of the painting and the way the flowering twigs point towards it make us expect something significant here. True enough, within this setting, the painter inserted his major inscription:

*In the small court are planted plum trees,
one or two rows;
Marking the space, their meagre shadows
cover my clothes.
When frosty crystals melt into water, and
the moon shines brighter,
The east wind brings gusts of fragrance
the whole day through.*

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Plate 86 BLOSSOMING PLUM
SCROLL, by Wang Shih-shen.
Title: "*Streaks of fragrance in the
air.*" The inscription: "*In the small
court are planted plum trees, one
or two rows. . . .*"

小院栽梅一兩行，
畫空疎影滿衣裳。
冰花化水月添白，
一日東風一日香。

The poem reveals a garden scene in which the poet stands under plum trees, enjoying the beauty and fragrance of their moonlit flowers. The poem is a picture in itself. The branches of plum blossoms painted here are, therefore, an introduction into the poetic world of which the painting is just a part.

These two paintings done by Wang in 1736 show remarkable differences in their brushwork and methods of execution. The branches in the later painting are done in saturated ink, while those in the earlier painting are done in comparatively lighter ink tones. The branches in the earlier painting look more solid and round, while those in the later one look comparatively flat, irregular and shadowy. Such differences in brushwork can be easily explained by the content of their poems. The poem in the earlier painting describes the plum trees as seen in a cold morning when the branches are still icy and lit by a clear morning sun. According to the poem on the later painting, the poet is looking up at the blossoming branches against the moonlight above, thus the branches appear to him as flickering black lines. To emphasize this shadowy effect and to keep the black ink strokes from being overly dominant, the upper part of the main branch was painted with abrupt narrowing.

Wang's plum blossom paintings are distinguished from those of other painters by their casual look of brush strokes for the branches. Often he formed each branch with one single stroke of the brush, moving the tip of the brush along the painting surface and varying its applied pressure. Unless when adding moss dots, he seldom tried to retouch the branches with the brush, or at least tried not to show his retouching strokes. Although no texture strokes were added, we do not feel the painting is lacking in them. The lines which Wang drew for these branches look very casual but, at the same time, they are full of interest and variation. Some parts of the branches are painted thicker or thinner than they should be. Occasionally, they are made to bend at awkward angles. At certain unexpected points, they are so thin that

they look as if about to break. This feeling of casualness is further accentuated by the way in which moss dots are added. They are often placed boldly on the branches, in rows of three or more, at irregular intervals. Unduly large dots may appear abruptly on thin branches. In his effort to make his paintings look effortless, Wang has successfully played with features of apparent casualness to add extra life and vividness to a common subject.

IN THE YEAR 1746, Wang Shih-shen reached the age of sixty (or sixty-one, according to the Chinese way of counting years of age). He wrote a poem on New Year's Day for his own amusement.¹¹ The poem reads:

*Sixty years having passed, the year ping-yin comes again.
For long, my tastes in life have merited the description of being humble.
An occasional desire for a cup of tea has become my single weakness.
In age, I cherish the plum blossoms as old friends.
Vegetarian food is naturally superior to rich banquet fare.
A mat-covered window can match a newly ornamented hall.
I tidy the place, sweep the floor, light incense, then sit.
Snow drifts and icicled eaves have already announced the spring.*

六十翻頭又丙寅，
多年況味得稱貧。
間貪茗碗成清癖，
老覺梅花是故人。
蔬食原勝梁肉美，
蓬窗能敵錦堂新。
安排掃地焚香坐，
積雪檐冰早占春。

In this poem, Wang tells us of his living conditions and his state of mind at the age of sixty. He admits that he has been poor all his life but, showing no regret for it, expresses quiet joy over

¹¹Recorded in Wang Huan 王幻's *Yang-chou pa-chia hua-chuan* 揚州八家畫傳 (Taipei, 1960). p. 121.

the peace and simplicity of a poor scholar-painter's life. He takes delight in such plain pleasures as sipping tea, admiring plum blossoms, eating vegetarian dishes and living in a small thatched house. On New Year's Day, when most people are busily engaged in festival activities, he welcomes the coming of spring by sitting quietly in a clean, tidy room amidst the fragrance of burning incense, to enjoy the morning scene outside the window. When he said jokingly that he failed to greet the coming of spring as early as the snow and icicle, he is in fact trying to identify himself with nature.

SIX YEARS after this, in the year 1752, Cheng Hsieh wrote an extraordinarily long couplet to celebrate his own sixtieth birthday. The right column reads:

Since I am always like a guest (in this world), why ask about my health and safety? As long as there is savings in my purse, wine in the jar and food in the cooking pot, I shall take out a few sheets of my favourite old drafts and release myself in chanting verse. One should have wide interests and a strong body. To have all five senses alert and well is better than to have a thousand offices. Thus, having lived sixty years, one remains a youth.

常如作客。何問康寧。但仗囊有餘錢。甕有餘釀。釜有餘糧。取數百賞心舊紙。放浪吟哦。興要闊。皮要頑。五官靈動勝千官。過則六旬猶少。

The left column reads:

To fix one's desire on becoming an immortal is to create trouble for oneself. I only command my ears to listen to no vulgar sounds, my eyes to watch no vulgar things and my mind to bear no vulgar thoughts. I take any few branches of fresh

bloom and arrange them casually. I retire late and rise early. A day of leisure is like two days. Counting time in this way, I am already over one hundred years of age.

定欲成仙。空生煩惱。祇令耳無俗聲。眼無俗事。胸無俗念。將幾枝隨意新花。縱橫穿插。睡得遲。起得早。一日清閒似兩日。算來百歲已多。

Here, a personality entirely different from that of Wang Shih-shen's is presented to us. Cheng Hsieh starts each of the columns by pronouncing that life and death are not matters for his concern. Yet, from his confession that he does not care for much except some daily necessities and the freedom to do what he wants, we nevertheless sense that, both physically and morally, he was a man of strict discipline. He stresses the importance of good living habits. He also advises against vulgar sounds, vulgar things and vulgar thoughts, and advocates the full use of one's senses and inherent capacity. When reading his couplet, we are confronted with an energetic man who still cherishes the pleasures of life. He favoured the painting of bamboos, rocks and orchids because they symbolize the virtuous qualities of the superior man whom he admired and looked upon as his model. In the course of executing his paintings, he consciously demonstrated his skillful depiction of plant forms, his masterly manipulation of ink tones and his power to control rhythmic movement on the picture plane. In Wang Shih-shen's poem, however, we seem to see an old monk in meditation, with little interest in the material world's excitement and joy. He favoured the painting of plum blossoms because they symbolize the qualities of endurance and purity to be found in eremitic scholars of whom he was one, and in painting plum blossoms he has given them an apparently effortless feeling, a free and easy look, as if the plant forms flowed naturally from his brush.