

Asian Art Essay Prize 2015

**An Interpretation of Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt
by the Yuan-artist Zhao Yong**

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Zhao Yong 挾彈遊騎圖 (fig.1) is a formal painting, a hanging scroll done in silk, executed in colours in a detailed and realistic manner. Presently housed in the Palace Museum in Beijing, this painting was previously in the collection of the Qing court. It bears the imperial seals of Emperor Jiaqing 嘉慶 (r.1760-1820) and Emperor Xuantong 宣統 (r.1909-1912), the fifth and the twelfth (last) ruler of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Zhao Yong 趙雍 (1289- c.1360) painted *Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt* in 1347. The *Xu xiu si ku quan shu* 續修四庫全書 (*Xu xiu edition of Treasures of the Imperial Library*), in addition to a written description of the painting, also includes the poem inscription by Yuan-poet Nai Xian 迺賢.¹ The subject matter of *Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt* is figure-with-horse. In this paper I will look at both primary and secondary documents to interpret the meaning of this painting for its viewers at the time it was executed. Before turning to discuss Zhao Yong's painting and its accompanied inscription, I will briefly review the history of horse painting in Chinese art and take note of the multiple meanings that horse paintings had in Zhao's time.

The history of horse paintings can be traced back to the Western Zhou dynasty.² Prized for their strength and military prowess, paintings of horses in the Tang period served almost as "official portraits and documentations of the horses"³ because they recorded the names, the size and the origins of the horses. By the Yuan dynasty, it had become a symbol of political authority for the Mongol rulers, who were skilled horsemen and good warriors, to legitimate their rule over the Chinese.⁴ Not only is the horse a metaphor for the ruler, it can

¹ Nai Xian, *Xu xiu edition of Treasures of the Imperial Library*, vol.1077, (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 1995), 308.

² Chu-tsing Li, "Grooms and Horses by three members of the Chao [Zhao] family," in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, edited by Alfreda Murck and Wen Fong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 199.

³ Li, 208.

⁴ Jerome Silbergeld, "In Praise of Government: Chao Yung's Painting, *Noble Steeds*, and Late Yuan Politics," in *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 46, No.3. 1985,160.

also be identified with the literati painter.⁵ Chu-tsing Li noted that Yuan literati painters treated horses just as they would treat bamboo because both were “symbolic of the literati spirit, with their elegance, taste and style.”⁶ Zhao Yong and his audience would be aware of the multiple meanings in Yuan horse paintings.

In *Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt*, Zhao depicts a hunting scene in the natural setting of a forest. A man riding a horse appears on the lower left. He wears a black-coloured official’s hat, a red long robe and white pants. The black and white horse, strolls forward while the man looks back in the direction of the two tall trees that are behind him. His head is slightly raised as he gazes upward to look for birds in the trees. He is depicted as holding a catapult and on the alert, but he is not aiming at any immediate target as no bird is in sight.

The first impression given by this painting is one of calmness and relaxation as the composition is simple and orderly. On the left a man and a horse are represented on a gently sloping ground with two tall trees to the right. These four elements are placed harmoniously next to each other. The artist first drew slim and delicate outlines of the man, the horse and the trees in light black ink and then filled them in colour. The artist attentively delineated facial expression and body gestures of the man and animal figures. The spatial arrangement of the leaves, with their twists and turns, is well illustrated to convey a vivid sense of life. In the top part of this hanging scroll, about a quarter of it is *liu-bai* (remaining white), Zhao employed *liu- bai* to suggest an expanse of space as well as practically provides space for poems or inscriptions to be written on it.

Zhao’s painting appears to have been inspired by a Tang painting, *Knights of Wuling* 五陵遊俠圖, by Han Gan 韓幹 (active ca. 740-50) that was in the collection of his father

⁵ Silbergeld, 165.

⁶ Li, 217.

Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254-1322).⁷ Although the painting is lost, the subject of a Tang aristocratic youth of Wuling (near the capital, Chang'an), in a red coat riding elegantly on horseback, is similar to Zhao's subject in his painting.⁸ In the discussion of Han Gan, Yuan art historian Tang Hou 湯后 (active 1291-1295) wrote:

Although there were many horse painters during the Tang dynasty, Cao [Ba], Wei [Yan], and Han [Gan] were particularly outstanding. In other times, Li Gonglin, [zi] Boshi modelled his horse paintings exclusively on these men. One may also say that [Li is excellent enough] to enter the realm of sage painters.⁹

On one hand, Tang Hou praised Han Gan's skills in painting that later artists would like to emulate. At the same time, he had also established a lineage of horse paintings from the Tang dynasty to the Northern Song.

An initial reading of *Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt* suggests that the painting could be a self-portrait. Han Gan was known for his realistic and expressive representation of horses, and his high-spirited horse could be an analogy for the painter's personal strength and power. However, I do not favour this interpretation. If Zhao's intent of the painting was a self-portrait, he would have executed his painting expressively in ink in the literati style of *bai miao* (pure line). According to Jerome Silbergeld, Zhao was well aware of and had the choice to use either one of the two dominant styles of horse painting methods. Silbergeld wrote:

Put very generally, two alternative techniques were available, one relying on brightly colored pigment, heightened attention to natural detail, and painterly sophistication, the other relying primarily on ink, subtle modelling washes and plain-like draftmanship – a distinction that was in no way related to horse painting in particular. By Chao's [Zhao] time, the former would probably have been loosely associated with Tang archaism and the latter with Li Kung-lin's [Gonglin] more "scholarly" style

⁷ Li, 203-205. Chu-tsing Li made a detailed reference to Zhao's [Mengfu] interest in Han Kan's work. He also used Chou Mi's documentation as proof of Chao having bought the *Knights of Wu-ling* back to his hometown, Wu-hsing in 1295.

⁸ Li, 205.

⁹ Chou, Diana Yeongchau, *A Study and translation from the Chinese of Tang Hou's Huajian (Examination of Painting): Cultivating Taste in Yuan China, 1279-1368*. (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 67.

(although in fact both styles could be found in both Tang as well as Sung [Song], and although Li based his own style on a revival of the earlier masters.¹⁰

Another interpretation of *Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt* by the court audience could be that the painting is a representation of Zhao's expression of his loyalty to the Mongol Yuan dynasty. Executed in the luxuriant Tang style, the painting is brightly coloured, detailed and painterly. This archaic model of Tang court painting seems appropriate for a government official like Zhao. The calmness of the figure and its surroundings also helps to project a more peaceful image of the country in times of trouble.

There is never one reading of a painting and our eyes see what we want we see. Contrary to the positive view of the court, Song loyalists could subjectively interpret the painting as anti-Mongolian. The archaic style is a way for them to identify their nostalgic longings for a return to the former glory in the Tang era. Unlike Zhao, a majority of the Yuan literati refused to serve in the Yuan government because they remained loyal to the fallen Song dynasty.

Above are all plausible readings of *Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt* but they omitted two important elements. First, it is the poem inscription that accompanied the painting. Second, it is the reference to the catapult both in the title as well as in the painting. Zhao wrote at the upper left that this painting was executed in the fourth month, the seventh year of Yuan Chen 元正 (1347) but did not provide a title to it. Nai Xian gave the painting a title in his poem that he wrote on the upper right corner.¹¹ Nai was a Semuren, not a Han Chinese, who grew up in Zhejiang, near Ningpo. In the poem, he described the youth on horseback as a man of valor and of important status as he came from Chang'an, the capital of Tang. Then he turned to the catapult the youth holds in his hand and the golden balls in his pocket that he could use them at any time to kill freely. He made a plea to the young man not

¹⁰ Silbergeld, 168.

¹¹ Nai Xian, *Xu xiu edition of Treasures of the Imperial Library*, vol.1077. (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 1995), 308.

to launch his catapult carelessly and be respectful of the serene beauty of the forest. He cautioned that it would be immoral to destroy the nests that the birds build to lay eggs and shelter their young ones.

I read the catapult in Zhao's painting as an allegorical reference to the siege of Southern Song by the Yuan Mongols. Historically, Mongol ruler Khubilai Khan had been preparing for the invasion of Southern Song China for years. Before Khubilai could invade China, he needed to take two important fortified cities, Xiangyang and Fancheng, on the Han River in Northern Hubei. The crucial element that brought the defeat of the cities was the use of *hui-hui pao*, or "Muslim trebuchets" by the Mongols. The Chinese had long used such catapults, but the Muslim trebuchet was an improved and more powerful version.¹² The image (fig. 2) from the *Moko Shurai Ekotoba* shows the only surviving picture of a 13th century catapult shooting out a bursting bombshell.¹³ The siege of these two cities was an epic story in both Chinese and Mongol military history people remembered and to which could relate.

Zhao served the Mongol government almost till its fall. By late Yuan, Mongol rule suffered from internal rebellions and natural disasters. The court was weakened by factional conflicts and deeply divided over whether the Mongols should focus on China as the basis of Yuan power or further steppe military interests. To add to the woes, there were widespread famines, floods and plagues at this period of time. Minor social disturbances started to break out in the 1330s. By 1340s some cities were attacked by "rabble bandits."¹⁴ These bandits were in fact common people who were organised into potent forces by ambitious leaders due to worsening social conditions. Emperor Huizong 惠宗 or Toghon Temür (r.1333 – 1368) promoted Zhao to Department Administrator in Haining Hangzhou in 1347 (the same year

¹² Frederick Mote, *Imperial China, 900-1800*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), 462.

¹³ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 5 Part 7. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), 177.

¹⁴ Mote, 521.

the painting was executed).¹⁵ Emperor Huizong was the tenth and the last of the Yuan ruler. Zhao continued to rise in rank during his reign and was promoted twice in 1354 and 1356.¹⁶ However, it was a very difficult time for officials like Zhao to serve in a government that had by now lost its political control over the regional and local governments. The painting, together with Nai's inscription shows the artist's sympathetic view to the difficult lives that people experienced in late Yuan. While remaining deferent to the Yuan court in its decline, Zhao also shows his critical attitude towards the government that they should reform and take better care of its people.

¹⁵ Mote, 471.

¹⁶ Silbergeld, 174.



Fig. 1. Zhao Yong 趙雍, *Equestrian Holding a Catapult in a Hunt*, 1347, ink and color on paper, hanging scroll, Palace Museum, Beijing, China.



Fig. 2. The only surviving picture of a 13th century bursting bombshell, from the *Moko Shurai Ekotoba*.

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