

Xue Junyuan
Dr. R. L. Hammers
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The Scholar in the Study:

Wang Fu's Landscape as a Personal and Historical Space

The early Ming painter Wang Fu 王紱 (1362-1426) is one of the “late born Yuan masters” standing in the “interlude” between Yuan literati traditions and styles more distinctive of the Ming.¹ In fact, Wang Fu played a transitional role between the two. He was well aware of the cultural legacy from the former dynasty, but some of his landscape paintings show Ming characteristics both in style and in content. This essay discusses Wang Fu's *A Scholar's Retreat Amidst Autumn Trees* (date unknown; fig. 1) and its textual and intertextual complexity tied to the Ming artistic development and history. His stylistic variations on the Yuan model and personalisation of the subject matter both to some extent foreshadow later Ming artists. Also, as a space containing different cultural texts, Wang Fu's landscape invites a historical reading into its image, which is fundamentally rooted in the social context of the early Ming.

In a study on Wang Fu's painting style, art historian Kathlyn Liscomb suggests that while following Yuan masters, especially Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301-1374), Wang Fu also “contribut[ed] to the formation of a new, distinctively Ming style” developed by later artists like Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427-1509).² Although left unmentioned in Liscomb's study, *A Scholar's Retreat Amidst Autumn Trees* can well exemplify her argument. The landscape provides a placid view over a scholar's study located on an island. With a blank space

¹ Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1973), IV, 118.

² Kathlyn Liscomb, “Wang Fu's Contribution to the Formation of a New Painting Style in the Ming Dynasty,” *Artibus Asiae* 48, no. 1/2 (1987): 43, 76.

separating the foreground and the background, which are respectively dominated by vertical trees and horizontal mountains, the composition of the painting recalls Ni Zan's *Rongxi Studio* (1372; fig. 2). The painting also pays homage to Ni Zan with its overall tranquil mood and the calligraphic, expressive brushwork not aimed at meticulous, realistic depiction. However, Wang Fu's painting is livelier with bolder, more simplified rendition of ink. The rounded rocks are given wavy, moving contour lines as if growing diagonally towards upper left. The foreground trees are rendered in a more spontaneous manner while Ni Zan's branches seem to follow certain regular, repetitive pattern. The viewer can not only see more surface bound brushwork in Wang Fu's painting, but also strong contrast of light and dark tones. The loosely applied dark ink on the rocks and the sprightly foliage dots indicate that the painter had no intention to unify the picture with "subtle transformations" and "minor variations" in formal elements as Ni Zan did.³ Thus the Yuan "unity and equivalence of all things" is translated into a "more dynamic equilibrium" with richness in texture and a sense of spontaneity in brushwork.⁴

Wang Fu is also innovative in reworking the composition and spatial relationship. In *Retreat*, the island and the mountains are pushed further apart than in *Rongxi*, while the trees stretch energetically upward, almost dominating the picture. Although the spatial ambiguity is not so striking as in Ni Zan's painting, the illusion of depth in the picture is still somewhat disturbed by the elongated branch sticking into the blank space. It points vertically towards the mountains, as if trying to link the two physically separated realms together, pulling the distant mountains closer to the picture plane, and creating an impression of "reaching the

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

other shore.” This effect is reinforced by the foreground dots echoing the similar brushwork on the faraway mountains. Also, the rustic bridge in the lower left corner indicates that water flows underneath it to the front, which makes it harder to locate the daubs of rocks logically in space or in relation to the viewer. The images formed by loose brushstrokes thus return to ink marks floating on the surface, traces left by the artist’s easy, relaxed movements of the wrist.

As observed by Osvald Sirén and Liscomb, these stylistic variations made by Wang Fu, which give the painting a sense of naturalness and naivety, “seem to foreshadow some of Shen Zhou’s most spontaneous ink paintings.”⁵ Wang Fu’s attempt to develop a new, Ming style is also reflected in the subject matter of this painting. The Yuan inclination of making landscape as a means of personal expression rather than recording reality is mainly manifested through liberation of brushwork.⁶ However, Wang Fu’s painting has further personalised landscape by allowing a biographic reading into the image presented. The individualisation of the subject forms a second path that finally leads to the artistic accomplishments of Shen Zhou.

The most noticeable difference between *Retreat* and *Rongxi* is that while Ni Zan denies physical presence in his lonesome landscape, Wang Fu has included a scholarly figure in the study. This image is consistent with Wang Fu’s poem inscribed on the painting:

A fine evening visits the green mountains after a light autumn rain.
Trees are washed and amidst spare branches, the cool air rises.
Remember still those nights in the bygone days, alone in my study,
With a window of flickering lamplight as the only companion to the
sound of my reading.⁷

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45, 48. See also Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, IV, 154.

⁶ Liscomb, “Wang Fu’s Contribution,” 44.

⁷ Wang Fu 王紱, “Inscription on A Scholar’s Retreat Amidst Autumn Trees,” trans. Wai-kam Ho, in *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collections of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and The Cleveland Museum of Art*,

The inscription also makes it clear that the painting is made on request by a friend named Gongyi. It is recorded both by Wang Fu's student Xia Chang 夏昶 (1388-1470) and later by Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559) that Wang Fu would only paint for like-minded people and refused to paint for material benefit.⁸ The landscape, with the figure possibly being Gongyi, is then an affirmation as well as portrayal of the receiver's moral character. The stylistic reference to Ni Zan might be a request from Gongyi, or a deliberate association made by Wang Fu between the receiver and the eminent Yuan master. On the other hand, with the two friends' congeniality implied through the act of painting, the landscape becomes a space where Wang Fu lodges his own personality. The figure in the painting then can also be read as Wang Fu himself. With the inscribed poem as a footnote, Wang Fu seems to use this painting to cherish a bygone past when Gongyi or himself studied alone late at night. This tendency of representing oneself and one's personal experience through a landscape might be, for the viewer, suggestive of Shen Zhou.

The individualised image of the scholar triggers further discussion set within a larger context. One may find that in Wang Fu's inscription, it is not mentioned whether there is a purpose for the depicted scholar's diligence. He might be studying for the civil examination, which had since the Tang dynasty been the only way for non-aristocratic intellectuals to become scholar-officials and attain high social standing and political power.⁹ His act of

with essays by Wai-kam Ho, Sherman E. Lee, Laurence Sickman and Marc F. Wilson (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980), 142.

⁸ Quoted in Liscomb, "Wang Fu's Contribution," 51. See also Xia Chang 夏昶, "Wang Fu zhuan" 王紱傳 ("A Biography of Wang Fu"), in *Wenyuange Siku Quanshu Dianzi ban [Neilianwang ban]* 文淵閣四庫全書電子版[內聯網版] (*The Electronic Version of the Wenyuange edition of the Treasure of the Imperial Library [Intranet version]*) (Hong Kong: Digital Heritage Publishing Ltd., 2007), <http://www.sikuquanshu.com>.

⁹ Peter K. Bol, "*This Culture of Ours: Intellectual Transitions in T'ang and Sung China*" (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 33-4. Also, I want to point out that the Chinese title of this painting, *Qiulin shushu* 秋林書舍, has no direct reference to the word "retreat" included in the English translation. Literally it means "the study amidst autumn trees." Thus my assumption would not contradict the title of this painting.

learning might also be only for self-cultivation, with no concern for officialdom. This absence of further explanation is accentuated as one encounters two other inscriptions that contradict each other in content. In the one by Han Yi 韓奕 (act. 2nd half 14th c.), the last two lines read, “the scholar who lives in leisure does not study in pursuit of office.”¹⁰ In the second inscription, however, Qian Ziliang (dates unknown) asserts, “One needs not mention the past decade’s travail, as long as his fame reaches the imperial city some day.”¹¹ Thus two entirely different readings of the painting coexist on its surface, forming a dialogue, and are interwoven together as part of its texture.

Such juxtaposition of two different attitudes towards learning is antedated by texts within Chinese literary tradition. For Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), for example, the study within an autumn landscape can be a space both for a process of striving for office and for a mode of living in retirement, only with the scholar’s inclination dependent upon his age, experience, and time.¹² If one considers Han Yi’s friendship with Wang Fu, Han’s interpretation of the image seems more justifiable. It is recorded in the biography of Wang Fu by Xia Chang that the two once lived together in seclusion in Mount Jiulong.¹³ Yet it was before Wang Fu became a calligrapher in the Wenyuan Pavilion in 1403 and started his thirteen years of civil service.¹⁴ In fact, Wang Fu obtained his *juren* degree at the age of fourteen and two years later, in 1378, entered office in Nanjing.¹⁵ However he soon encountered trouble and went

¹⁰ My translation. The original poem in Chinese: 林僻茅齋靜，秋清露氣寒。閒居讀書者，不為要求官。

¹¹ My translation. The original poem in Chinese: 碧樹霄寒露氣涼，青燈孤照讀書床。十年勤苦何須論，一日聲名達帝鄉。

¹² One can refer to Su Shi’s poem “Beginning of Autumn: A Poem to Send to [Tzu-yu (Ziyou)],” in *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry: From Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 306-7.

¹³ Xia Chang, “Wang Fu zhuan.”

¹⁴ James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty, 1368-1580* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978), 58.

¹⁵ *Juren* refers to a graduate recommended to the court at the provincial level. *Ibid.*

through an exile of at least twelve years.¹⁶ Judging from Wang Fu's life experience, we can assume that he had taken up both stances posed by Han Yi and Qian Ziliang in different phases of life, while his loftiness revealed in his act of painting was unchanged.

Personalised as the landscape is, it is not so specific to the extent that it signifies a single event of a single person, which Shen Zhou later established as a theme. Thus Wang Fu's image, with cultural intertexts discussed above, can also be "de-personalised" into a reflection of history. Although the painting's style is based on Yuan traditions, the open-ended discussion of its content is deeply rooted in the political situations during the first few decades of the Ming dynasty. Wang Fu's art developed at the time when an empire ruled by the Chinese was re-established. However, the early Ming intellectuals who aspired to serve the court were not in favourable circumstances to achieve better social standing given the emperors' suspicious attitude towards scholars when consolidating their rule. During the reign of the first emperor Ming Taizu (r. 1368-98), many officeholders suffered persecution.¹⁷ Wang Fu's misfortune was due to the execution of the prime minister in 1380, which implicated thousands of people in the capital.¹⁸ Nor could men of talent who stayed away from officialdom avoid such calamity. For example, in 1374, Taizu had a number of scholars in Suzhou who he suspected were still loyal to his dead rival Zhang Shicheng 張士誠 (1321-1367) put to death.¹⁹ Taizu was also reluctant to adopt the civil examinations for fear that the selection process would not be fully under his control.²⁰ But after its revival in 1384,

¹⁶ The length of Wang Fu's exile is still in dispute. Some scholars suggest that it lasted for twenty years, while Hou-mei Sung Ishida argues that it was from 1380 to 1392. See Liscomb, "Wang Fu's Contribution," 40-41.

¹⁷ For Taizu's literary inquisition and scholars' great distress caused, see Frederick W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 578-9.

¹⁸ Liscomb, "Wang Fu's Contribution," 40. For the Hu Weiyong case, see Mote, *Imperial China*, 572-3.

¹⁹ Mote, *Imperial China*, 573.

²⁰ Edward L. Dreyer, *Early Ming China: A Political History, 1355-1435* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 98.

the examination system turned out to be an efficacious tool for the emperor's unification of ideology.²¹ Thus what the intellectuals had to face was not only the emperor's distrust but also the underlying constraint of thought within the examination system. More and more scholars, including those who managed to gain office but later abandoned it, sought reclusion and showed detachment from the government.²²

Against this historical backdrop, the ambiguity that lies in Wang Fu's scholarly figure and the divergent interpretations it triggers correspond to the early Ming intellectuals' predicament. Scholars were willing to contribute to the Chinese government, but at the same time were disappointed, disillusioned, and driven back by the harsh political reality. Looking back to Wang Fu's biography and the two inscriptions, we might assume that the position of being flexible and at ease with different situations is the best solution. One may disengage oneself from officialdom when it is dangerous to be involved at court, but one can still hold an optimistic attitude towards entering the civil service as the situation might improve. The landscape, in the end, becomes a site for conversation and negotiation about the controversial role of scholars and their study.

The image of the scholar presented thus has multiple meanings. As a gift dedicated to his friend, the painting (with a style referring to Ni Zan) can reflect Gongyi's aesthetic preference and appreciation in expressive art. This token of friendship not only indicates the like-mindedness between the receiver and the painter, but associates them with the distinguished Yuan master and his great personality. It is also, at the same time, a pictorial space where Wang Fu's life experience can be traced and which allows a biographical reading

²¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

²² Cahill, *Parting*, 60.

into this landscape. Last but not least, personal as the work is, it is inevitably a production of historical time. With differing texts as annotations, the landscape directs to the early Ming intellectuals' aspiration and ideal shaped by that specific historical environment. The modifications on the Yuan style also seem to address the new situations Ming intellectuals had to face, which require more flexibility as well as fortitude of mind. "The other shore" the scholar wants to reach seems to be a transcendence beyond the dual opposition of civil service and life in retreat. The remote and undisturbed space within the landscape is not necessarily a realistic depiction, but rather a spiritual realm the scholar wishes to own in response to the uncertain reality.

The cultural significance contained in Wang Fu's *A Scholar's Retreat Amidst Autumn Trees* goes far beyond a continuation of Yuan traditions in style. Constructive to later artistic developments by offering what is stylistically "not Yuan," the painting exemplifies both formal and cultural specificities of the early Ming. The multiplicity of its textual meanings and interpretations provided by its subject matter is also a breakthrough. The landscape is not only personalised, but also historicised by different texts and intertexts, biographical, literary, and historical, interwoven into its image. Ultimately, it serves to address new artistic solutions for the new dynasty both to express the personal and to communicate the historical within a landscape.

(2099 words)

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Illustration



Fig. 1. Wang Fu, *A Scholar's Retreat Amidst Autumn Trees*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, Ming Dynasty, 58.1 × 26.7 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.



Fig. 2. Ni Zan, *Rongxi Studio*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 1372, 74.7 × 35.5 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.