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YANGCHOW AND ITS EIGHT ECCENTRICS

BY WILLIAM HENRY SCOTT · SAGUDA, PHILIPPINES

In 1948 the Yangchow Provincial Hospital took possession of the Wu Family Mansion, last of the great Yangchow estates to remain in private hands, an exchange which symbolized the completion of an economic decline which had taken place in actual fact many years before. For over a millenium Yangchow had enjoyed prosperity due to its favorable commercial position astride the Grand Canal and to its being one of the favored cogs in the machinery of the Imperial Government's salt monopoly. But with the opening of overseas trade in the nineteenth century and the reconcentration of commerce in the treaty ports, the great Yangchow salt merchants were no longer able to support their mansions, and by the 1850's nine out of ten were falling into decay. The flourishing art market which Hirth found in Yangchow in the 1890's is mute testimony to the breaking-up of the great estates. The final blow came in the twentieth century with the completion of the Nanking-Peking railroad, which completely bypassed Yangchow and left it, reminiscent and decadent within its proud walls, fondly dreaming of its long reputation for wealth and scholarship and hardly able to recognize the economic numbness creeping over it. One by one its mansions passed into the hands of government agencies for unpaid back taxes and its libraries into the hands of pawn-shops for unredeemed tickets. Its final poverty is indicated by the great twentieth-century emmigration which has spread the quaint Yangchow dialect throughout the entire Yangtze Valley on the lips of barbers, boatmen, rickshawpullers and prostitutes.

Yangchow got its start on the road to riches by favor of the controversial Emperor Yang-ti of the Sui Dynasty (581-618), who in the last decades of the sixth century built the Grand Canal — just so he could ride around in his Imperial barge full of houris, Confucian historians have been fond of hinting. Yangchow he made a third capital and in it

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built a luxuriant palace (where he was subsequently murdered) and from it he had an auxiliary canal planted with willow trees and turned into a veritable park all the way to Loyang. Although Yangchow was never again a political capital or an imperial playground, it remained for 1200 years a sort of commercial capital and a playground for such willow fanciers as were able to pay a good price to enjoy them. Tu Mu (803–852) evidently considered Yangchow a sort of T'ang Dynasty Coney Island when he wrote:

When the sky is bright on a moonlight night,
Yangchow enjoys two-thirds of the light.

The real flowering of Yangchow, however, took place during the reign of that Ch'ing Dynasty emperor best known as Ch'ien-lung (1736–1796). Ch'ien-lung brought China to a position of grandeur and prosperity enjoyed by no other contemporary kingdom, inspiring Voltaire to regard the Chinese as the best-governed people in the world. Not only by quickening that mercantile pulse that was felt so profitably at Yangchow, but also by his own personal visits to the Yangtze Valley did he provide opportunity for the wealthy salt merchants to expand their ego and lighten their purses in beautifying Yangchow for Imperial favor. No less than four 'temporary' residences were provided for him in the western suburbs, one of them located in Yangchow's proudest scenic attractions, the monasteries and temples of 'Ping-shan T'ang. Nearby, they built two special constructions for which permission was granted to use imperial yellow tiles: the graceful five-pavilioned Lotus-Flower Bridge reflecting its petal-like roofs in the mirror of the Little West Lake below, and a large white *chorten* or *dagoba* in bottle-shaped Tibetan style, presumably to remind the Emperor of his own lamaist North. Here, too, they collected an array of scholars and artists as a fitting local court for a literatus-emperor who made up in enthusiasm what he lacked in skill, having attached his signature to no less than 42,000 poems.

There are a number of contemporary descriptions of mid-eighteenth-century Yangchow life, and the following probably indulges no more than the usual Chinese literary license for exaggeration:

The Yangchow salt merchants strive to excel each other in extravagance, and on every occasion of a marriage or funeral they are liable to spend 10,000 *taels* on their halls, food, clothes and carriages. In a certain family, every time they invite guests, the ladies and gentlemen sit down together and the dining-room servants set a whole feast in front of them, from the vegetables and noodles to all kinds of plain and fancy dishes. If there's something they don't want to eat, they just shake their heads and the servants change it, bringing in a whole new feast.

Those who are horse-lovers raise them by the hundreds, and spend on every horse dozens of *taels* daily. In the morning they are driven out beyond the city walls and in the evening they are brought back in again, and so dazzling and colorful a parade do they make that bystanders are quite bewildered. Those who fancy orchids, from the front gate right through to the innermost chambers, they have them spread out on every hand. There was one who had beautiful maidens carved out of wood and made to move mechanically and placed around in different rooms; when they would suddenly move about, guests who were lodged there would run out in fright. Those who first built in [the suburbs of] An-lu-ts'un did it lavishly, and those who came after tried to make their homes still more unusual.

One of them decided to spend 10,000 *taels* all at once, so he took all his guests and had all his money changed into gold leaf, and then they all went up on the Chin-shan Tower and threw the gold out to the breezes. Fluttering about, it was scattered far and wide and came down at last in the treetops where it couldn't be recovered. Another time somebody took 3,000 *taels* and bought up all the roly-polies in Soochow and set them floating in the canal, so many that they blocked it up from bank to bank.

Those who make a fetish of beauty hire only the most handsome and the most beautiful, from the gatekeeper to the kitchen scullion. Others, on the contrary, will only hire the ugly and misshapen, so that many,

looking into their mirrors and considering themselves too ordinary, disfigure themselves and rub their faces with catsup and the bake them in the bright sun. There's another who likes things big – he has chamber-pots of bronze five or six feet tall, so that when he wants to use them in the middle of the night, he has to get up and go to them.¹

Less ostentatious but more beautiful were the lovely country estates outside the city walls. The Grand Canal flows along two sides of the city of Yangchow, with a double set of moats on the others. From these waterways a whole network of little canals and lakes spreads out through the surrounding willow and bamboo groves like a rich green oil, offering inspiration and material for the skill of the landscape gardener. The canals themselves were daily day-long pageants of colorful boating, sparkling in the early morning sun with the flower boats carrying their brilliant loads to the city markets, and twinkling and tinkling in the dusk with the lanterns and lutes of the pleasure boats. Along both banks of each of these streams drooped those willows that were the pride of Yangchow, as carefully nursed and tended as babies as if to prevent any poet from repeating what Po Chü-i (772–846) had written a thousand years before:

Their seasons many, their years long,
The willows are sadly withered;
Now only the wind sighs gently there
And the rain pats softly down.
They stand by twos or stand by threes
Round the mouth of the River Pien,²
Old and dried, with broken leaves –
It's enough to break your heart!

Along with the country villas and flower gardens were the temples and monasteries. The Chinese scholar-artist, in the confines of his Con-

1. 'The Picture Boats of Yangchow' (*Yangchow Hua Fang Lu, chüan 6*).

2. One of the sources of the old Grand Canal.

fucian propriety, has always looked with longing on the life of the hermit or monk, and often styles himself 'mountain-man' in a wistful daydream of those sylvan fairylands peopled with *hsien*, or 'immortals'. Buddhist and Taoist monks alike have reciprocated by being ever ready to pour tea for some scholarly guest. The poet Chêng Pan-ch'iao said, 'From of old, famous scholars have always been able critics of tea waters and worthy monks have always loved to argue over tea'³. Indeed, close by Yangchow's foremost temple, the T'ien-ning Szû, there stood the Green Lotus Teahouse operated by the monks of Mount Liu-an. These monks kept their own tea fields, and manned their teahouse only in the autumn and winter, when excursionists in that neighborhood would buy a whole day's supply from them.

The most singular and most delightful part of Yangchow's green environs were the pleasure boats on which her many sojourners took their ease – oftentimes in an *uneasy* alliance of artist and merchant who realized that both talents and *taels* were necessary to the good life. These brilliantly decorated boats – called literally 'picture-boats' (*hua-fang*) – whose lineal descendants are the tea boats of modern Yangchow, were poled leisurely along while their passengers enjoyed a pleasant variety of amusements. Boats loaded with singers and musicians could be hired and lashed alongside to provide the desired intimacy between entertainer and entertained. There were Little Pine and Big Pine, two brothers armed with lute and castenets who during this period sang for their supper, and Chin T'ien-chang who made his living imitating bird songs for those whose delicately jaded ears hungered for aviary arias. So famous and so colorful did these picture-boats become that Li Tou took them for the title of his remarkable compendium of Yangchow fact and anecdote, *The Picture Boats of Yanchgow*.⁴ This, then, was the gently drifting world that produced that group of artists known as the Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow.

3. *Yangchow Hua Fang Lu*, chüan 11.

4. Published in 1793; Li Tou visited Yangchow during the preceding two decades.

Although the Eight Eccentrics were produced by the Yangchow way of life, they were not themselves Yangchow products; that is, only one of them was actually born in Yangchow. The other seven were sojourners in Yangchow, romantic wanderers attracted by the artistic elegance of that city. And one of these seven, as a matter of fact, was even more famous as a sojourner of Nanking than of Yangchow. This was Li Fang-ying, the only one of the Eight to have his posthumous name-tablet placed in the Temple of Famous Officials.

Li Fang-ying, however, had only such an official career as would have been regarded with some scorn by the regular Chinese scholar-official, for he became only a *hsiu-ts'ai*, or first-degree graduate, and never made any higher mark in the examination system. But in 1723 he was promoted in recognition of his 'excellent merit' – probably rather plodding devotion to petty duties – and made magistrate of Ho-fei in Anhwei.⁵ In this post he won a reputation for benevolent government and the praise of both scholars and common people.

Li Fang-ying painted mainly pines, bamboos, plum blossoms and orchids, as well as various smaller things like fans and album-leaves. His brushwork was broad and sweeping and followed no hard and fast rules. His style was considered proud and unrestrained, i. e., he didn't respect the classic traditions. He often signed himself 'Master of the Borrowed Gardens' (*Ts'o Yüan Chu-jên*), for he left office without having lined his pockets and so was unable to establish any gardens of his own. On one of his paintings, the 'Ancient Tillers of the Fields' (*San Tai Kêng T'ien*), he inscribed the following verse:

Half tiller of the soil and half scholar –

In our family we have always had this tradition.

Even now I seem to hear them calling [my childhood name], 'Lung-chiao
Get up early and take the cow down to the meadow!'

5. His biography in *Ch'ing Hua-chia Shih Shih*, *chüan ping-shang*, lists him as Magistrate of Lanshan in Shantung.

Li Fang-ying retired, poor and aged and with no family to care for him, and spent his last years wearily buying his food and clothes with his brush. At least he had the satisfaction of being recognized by that romantic name of *hsien*, for there is the following reference to him in *Sui-yüan's Chats on Poetry*:

Li Fang-ying of T'ung-chou, after leaving office sojourned for a while in the Hsiang family gardens at Kiang-ning [southeast of Nanking], and every day he and Shên Pu-lo and I used to wander around looking at the famous mountains, and those who saw us would say, 'The three immortals have come out of their cave'⁶.

Lo P'ing, whose family had been commoners from Anhwei, was the one native of Yangchow among the Eight Eccentrics, and his home was just inside the prominent T'ien-ning Gate in the 'new' city wall (later than the eleventh century, that is). Although he won his fame by portrayals of the strange and supernatural, he was by nature gentle and sentimental and liked to call himself 'The Monk of the Flowery Temple' (*Hua-Szû Chih Tsêng*). His wife, 'White Lotus', was a lover of poetry, and there is a collection of poems he and a colleague dedicated to her. Two of his sons, moreover, were good painters in their own right – Lo Yün-shao and Lo Chieh-jên. One of the younger generation among the Eight Eccentrics and a disciple of the elder Chin Nung, he was born in 1733 and lived until the last year of the eighteenth century.

In painting plum blossoms, orchids and bamboos, Lo P'ing is considered to have captured a 'rhythmic vitality' (*chi'i yün*) that was both ancient and simple – an academic praise meaning that these paintings probably found a more ready market than the more vigorous and individualistic flowers of Li Fang-ying. But in his portraits and Buddhist images, he had a style of his own that was remarkable, for he seemed to enjoy an almost uncanny talent for capturing the feeling of ghosts and demons and the unusual. One of his paintings, 'Selling Cattle' (*Mai Niu*), is said

6. Yüan Tzû-ts'ai, *Sui-yüan Shih Hua*, chüan 7.

so to have touched the hearts of the wealthy that they would change their minds about selling their cattle to the butcher. If ever a Chinese artist won fame from a single theme, it was Lo P'ing and his many 'Ghosts Cavorting' (*Kuei Ch'ü*), a weird expanse of supernatural beings going through all sorts of antics that parodied everyday Chinese life. Even such brief biographies as those of only one or two lines are sure to mention this group of pictures with the name of Lo P'ing, and tell that it was raved about for generations and autographed by connoisseurs.

However stiffly the Chinese academician may look down his nose at the unorthodox in his native art, the Chinese people have always had a fondness for the macabre and mysterious. The modern socialist Lu Hsün (1881-1936) deplored this characteristic, which he called 'a mind for stirring up ghosts', as he deplored practically every other characteristic of the Chinese. In 1933 he wrote:

In the records of painting in the Ch'ing period, much mention is made of Lo Liang-fêng's 'Ghosts Cavorting', which is supposed to capture on paper the real spirit of the supernatural. After the picture was reproduced and published by the Wên Ming Book Company, I found it to be little more than a few short-and-stocky or long-and-skinny or pot-bellied figures, and couldn't see that its interest at all equalled what had been written about it.⁷

Lo P'ing probably got his inclination toward the unnatural from his master Chin Nung, the naughtiest of this whole school of bad boys. A man of Ch'ien-t'ang, Chekiang, Chin Nung lived a wandering life as unorthodox as his paintings. He left his traces over 'half the Empire', but settled eventually in Yangchow, dying in 1764 at the age of 77. A scholarly calligrapher who developed a fairly dignified style of his own, half-way between the square 'official' *li* style and ordinary script, he made an extensive collection of inscriptions that totalled a thousand

7. 'The Complete Works of Lu Hsün' (*Lu Hsün Ch'üan Chi*), 1938, vol. 5, p. 213 (*Nan Ch'iang Pei T'iao Chi: Tao Kuei Hsin Chuan*).

chuan. Academic favor is indicated by the praise that his calligraphy captured the 'ancient flavor'. But when in 1736 he was awarded the honorary title 'Extensively Learned', he made no move to accept it. His frame of mind is indicated by one of the names he took, 'Wintry Heart' (*Tung Hsin*), and the way he used to sign his paintings: 'The Rice-Gruel Monk' (*Chu-fan Tséng*) or 'The Romantic of the Crooked River' (*Ch'ü-Chiang Wai-shih*).

Chin Nung didn't turn to painting until he was over fifty, and with typical abandon plunged right in with a vigorous brush, completely throwing off all the time-honored restraints. He did plum blossoms, bamboos and peach blossoms, and sometimes horses – in what he liked to call the style of the famous horse-painters Ts'ao Pa and Han Kan. But it was in his portraits of Buddhist saints that he indulged his most unbridled imagination, placing them in unworldly little caves and surrounding them with vegetation the likes of which never existed in this world. Though his leaves and other individual parts of trees and flowers might be orthodox in detail, they were combined in a completely unrealistic manner and shown in fantastic colors. This cavalier treatment of nature, always a subject of worshipful veneration by Chinese artists, he would dismiss lightly as 'symbolic', calling his dragon-nests the dens of Nâgas. Of his wild vegetation he commented, 'These are the sacred Patra-leaves'.⁸

Chin Nung in old age found that the vigorous romanticism of his youth left him without patrons or customers, and he was reduced to painting lamps for a living. These he prevailed upon his friend, the famous scholar Yüan Tzû-ts'ai, to sell in Nanking. But, judging from one of Yüan's letters to him, the lamps proved no more marketable than the paintings. After praising the magic qualities of his painted lamps, Yüan says:

The people of Chingling [Nanking] know only the taste of duck and salt fish and that's all. If even in broad daylight they don't know what a work of art is, how much less will they understand in the dark of the night!⁹

8. Frederick Hirth, *Notes from a Collector's Scrap-Book*, 1905, p. 38.

9. Yüan Tzû-ts'ai, *Hsiao Ts'ang Shan-fang Chih-tu*, chüan 1.

Huang Shên was a contemporary of Chin Nung – two of his pictures in the former Hirth collection are dated 1726 and 1746 – who was not completely disavowed by orthodox critics but whose real genius lay in an unorthodox speciality. He came from Ning-hua, Fukien, and travelled extensively throughout the lower Yangtze Valley, spending eight years in Yangchow and selling his pictures there. He was a master calligrapher in the running-hand style, and his landscapes as well as his birds and flowers were done with a free hand. He was respected as a portraitist, if one who let his brush run a bit wild, and critics praised the imposing strength of countenance in his likenesses. Though he went pretty deep into the excellence of the ancients – as they phrased it –, sometimes his brushwork contained flaws that detracted from the proper ‘tone’ (*yün*).

Huang Shên did his best work on human figures, and cultivated a particular speciality in this field – portraits of hoary old men. That peculiar combination of respect for the aged and respect for their slight roguishness which is so distinctly a Chinese characteristic has been caught by Huang Shên perhaps better than by any other artist, exerting no little influence on portraitists that followed him. His old worthies are stripped of any pompousness with a sympathy that leaves them dignified and attractive despite their gnarled antiquity. Huang Shên continued painting Buddhist and Taoist figures into his own old age, never slackening the vigor of his bold rough brush. It is perhaps not surprising that he was known for his filial piety in caring for his own aged mother.

Chêng Hsieh, or Chêng Pan-ch’iao, as he is best known, was thrice honored – as a poet, as a painter, and as a calligrapher. He was the most famous of the Eight Eccentrics in China and probably the only one ever heard of in America – through his delightful family letters partly translated into English by Lin Yutang.¹⁰ He was also the only one of the Eight

10. *My Country and My People*, pp. 37, 339; *The importance of Living*, p. 302; *The Wisdom of China and India*, pp. 1070–1082. A complete French translation of Chêng Pan-ch’iao’s family letters by Jean-Pierre Diény is to be found in vol. 2 of *M’langes publiés par l’Institut des Hautes Etudes chinoises*, Paris 1960, pp. 16–67, with his portrait and some samples of his painting and calligraphy.

who can be said to have made a success of his official career. Already accomplished as a scholar while still a young man, he won the degree of *chü-jên* in 1732 and *chin-shih* in 1736, became magistrate of Fan-hsien, Shantung, in 1742, and magistrate of Wei-hsien in 1746. Seven years later he retired to the quiet life of the gentleman-scholar, and died in 1765 at the age of 72. Yet he might best be summed up in Lin Yutang's words:

He was sniffed at by the Confucian scholars, which means that he was great. His ideas were strictly Confucian, but he was 'unusual'.¹¹

Perhaps nothing is more refreshingly 'unusual' about Chêng Pan-ch'iao than his refusal to take his own dignity too seriously. Chinese scholars have always maintained a polite fiction that anything so vulgar as money is unfit topic for the conversation of gentlemen. Chêng Pan-ch'iao's treatment of this tradition is delightful. When he was over 60, one of his friends, the monk Chu Kung, suggested that he be more frequently 'not at home' so as to lessen the frequent impositions on his skill as a painter and calligrapher. To this end, he wrote out and posted the following notice:

Big scrolls 6 *taels*, middle-sized scrolls 4 *taels*, small scrolls 2 *taels*; inscriptions 1 *tael* a pair; fans and album leaves 5 *cash*. The presentation of gifts and food is not so fine as silver coins, for what you give is not necessarily what I want. If you present cold hard cash, then my heart swells with joy and everything I write or paint is excellent. Gifts are vexatious and credit is still more unreliable. But I am old and tired and can't keep up these gentlemanly pleasant nothings.

There's more to painting bamboo than the bamboo's price — The paper costs 3,000 *cash* for a six-foot length. Honied talk of old friendships and past companions is only the autumn wind blowing past my ear.¹²

11. *The Wisdom of China and India*, p. 1069.

12. Ch'ên Tung-yüan, *Cháng Pan-ch'iao P'ing Chuan*, Shanghai, 1928, pp. 36-37.

If Chêng Pan-ch'iao's family letters are not evidence of the human compassion of a Chinese scholar-artist, even an eccentric one, certainly his official career is. For Chêng Pan-ch'iao left his last office for having irritated his superiors by unauthorized distribution of rice in a time of famine. The circumstances preceding his 'retirement' are set forth in their street-gossip version by a contemporary scholar-official, Fa K'un-hung.

In May of 1751, as I was returning home from the examinations, I passed through Wei-hsien, and was invited to dinner at a friend's house. Now, in Wei-hsien the commoners make much of merchants, and I talked to two or three of them at dinner. When the talk touched on Pan-ch'iao, I said, 'Yes, what about him?' They all replied, 'Magistrate Chêng's literary way of life perhaps leaves something to be desired in the execution of his official duties'. I said, 'Surely he doesn't neglect his duties for poems and wine?'

'No, but during the great famine of '46 and '47, when everybody was hungry and a bushel of rice cost thousands of *cash*, the Magistrate ordered lots of reconstruction [i. e., to provide work for the people] and repaired the city wall and dredged the moat. He caused the wealthy to set up soup-kitchens and called the hungry from far and near to come to them. Then he sealed up the granaries and used up half the stores of rice.

In legal decisions he always favors the poor against the rich. When the salt merchants have some business and request an audience, he receives them unceremoniously and leans across his desk and cries out rudely, 'Well, what are you rich jackasses seeking? Can there be something you gentlemen aren't satisfied with?' Then he might order his retainers to kick them, or have them seized by the head, branded like criminals, and thrown out!'

To this I replied, 'But the Magistrate usually appreciates the talented and cherishes scholars; why does he behave like this?'

'He doesn't want to fall in with rich people's plans.'

I laughed and said, 'Well, you can't hate this worthy Magistrate for that'.

The merchants all looked at each other startled, and got up and left.¹³

Chêng Pan-ch'iao as a painter was a specialist in orchids, bamboos and rocks, which he called 'the three supremes'. His bamboos are especially effective, and while traditional to an extent that puts them in an entirely different category from Chin Nung's leaves, for instance, they are nonetheless executed with a crackling verve that identifies his brushwork with the rest of the Eight Eccentrics generally. Many of his paintings are reproduced in stone in Kiangsu temples, as well as numerous examples of his handwriting. For in China the writing of poems and names in public places is a perquisite of artists rather than of semiliterate back-house Boccaccios.

Chêng Pan-ch'iao made his first reputation as a calligrapher in the square *li* style, and later became noted for a mixture of the *li* and other schools. He eventually developed an unusual and eclectic hand all his own. The frontier between self-expression and heinous unorthodoxy in Chinese penmanship is a difficult line to survey, but certainly Chêng Pan-ch'iao's excursions into the impressionistic must lie in that borderland. His particular device was the separation of the various elements of each character, rendering some parts thick and black and others slender and wraith-like. (There seems to be a certain poetic irony in the fact that this style was studied to such perfection by a Taoist monk in a temple to the War God that the imitations could not be distinguished from the original.) In a less individualistic style, however, he published his complete poems written in his own hand, a work happily reproduced by photo-lithography in modern times.

Li Shan of Hsing-hua, a city close to Yangchow, was a very close friend of Chêng Pan-chiao's, whose last years were saddened by his

13. Quoted from Fa K'ung-hung's 'Literary Tales' (*Shu Shih*) in *Chung-Kuo Mai-Shu Shih*, p. 172, and *Chêng Pan-ch'iao P'ing Chuan*, pp. 24-25.

friend's death in the early 1760's not long after Pan-chiao's return to Yangchow. Li Shan passed his *chü-jên* examinations in 1711 and was given office as Magistrate of T'êng-hsien in Shantung. His government was straightforward and honest, so that he was cherished by the local people. However, like Chêng Pan-chi'ao, he, too, finally left office after a difference of opinion with his superiors. Afterwards he built a country home south of the city which he called 'Froth'. He had a great reputation for scholarship, and was an accomplished poet and writer of essays.

Li Shan's paintings were mainly birds and flowers, arranged entirely according to his own private canons. His brushwork was swift and covered his paintings from edge to edge with a sort of liquid quality. Of his work critics say, as they say of most of the Eight Eccentrics, 'he was bound by no hard and fast rules'. However, he is credited with having captured an especially natural spirit in his flowers. His work has distinctly an air its own and rarely coincides with conventional treatment of the same subject, and he may be considered to be the founder of a little school of his own. His calligraphic style is categorized as simple and ancient, however, and was executed with a free hand. His colophons on paintings, moreover, generally have something 'unusual' about them.

Li Shan twice failed in the higher examinations, and was reduced to selling off his family possessions. He was appointed Painter-in-Waiting to the Imperial Court, but his paintings turned out to be unwanted in court circles because of their complete freedom from traditional pattern. Chêng Pan-ch'iao has a poem in which he refers to 'growing old along with Li selling pictures in Yangchow'¹⁴, and Li Shan finally had no choice but to do just that. Nevertheless, he is supposed to have 'whistled and hummed to the end'¹⁵, an ability perhaps as useful as any other for the renegade artist in any age.

Kao Hsiang and Wang Shih-shên form another pair of devoted cronies among the Eight Eccentrics, and the former has left a painting entitled

14. 'Complete Works' (*Pan Ch'iao Chi*), *shih-ch'ao* 72.

15. *Chung-Kuo Jên-Ming Ta Tz'û-tien*, p. 458.

'Wang Shih-shên Brewing Tea'. Kao Hsiang was a native of Kan-ch'üan, an ancient Yangchow suburb, and a master of landscape painting. Unfortunately, he is saddled with the rather unsatisfying reputation of association with a number of artists greater than he. His very style is reckoned as being half-way between those of Hung sên and the famous Shih T'ao, one of the 'two Stones' of Victoria Contag's *Die beiden Steine*. He often accompanied crusty old Chin Nung on his wanderings about Yangchow lakes and hills, and to this circumstance Chinese critics attribute the fact that their styles of painting plum blossoms are rather similar. Kao Hsiang was not only an excellent calligrapher, specializing in that subdivision of the *li* style known as the 'eightpart' writing, but was also a master seal-cutter. In his last years he lost the use of his right arm but learned to work just as well with his left. He also had a nephew, Kao Chia, who became a good flower painter and calligrapher in the 'eight-part' style.

Wang Shih-shên was another friend of Chin Nung's who seems to have benefitted by the elder artist's tutelage since one of his biographies says, 'He was good at painting and because he studied long under good masters his work was truly wonderful'¹⁶. Originally a man of Hsiu-ning, Anhwei, Wang Shih-shên made his home in Yangchow and frequently signed himself 'The Romantic East of the Creek' (*Chi Tung Wai-shih*). He is most famous for his paintings of plum blossoms, which he handled simply and in unusually light ink though with telling effect. As his critics put it, when he did plum blossoms, their 'air' (*ch'i*) was clear (*ch'ing*) and their 'spirit' (*shên*) was strong – that is to say, they had about them the real essence of plum blossoms and a powerful sense of natural vitality. Wang Shih-shên, too, like so many of his companions, was a skilled calligrapher in the *li* style.

The most interesting aspect of Wang Shih-shên's career for the westerner is that after he became blind in his old age, he kept right on taking commissions for both painting and calligraphy and was considered to

¹⁶. *Ch'ing Hua-chia Shih Shih*, *ping-shang*, p. 27.

have done even better work than before! It is a well-known fact that the Chinese artist visualizes his complete composition before ever wetting his brush. In the case of that cheerful school of black-ink manipulators who have shown such a remarkable ability to analyze their subjects in a few well-placed strokes, this capacity is almost obvious. To the western observer of the Oriental artist at work – transmitting his well-planned design into monochrome reality with an almost unbroken flow of lightning strokes placed with uncanny accuracy –, it must often seem that the painter could do the same without even looking at the paper. Here, in the case of Wang Shih-shên, is one who did.

The Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow were first so called by Chang Keng in his nineteenth-century 'Authentic Details of Ch'ing Painting' (*Kuo-ch'ao Hua Ch'êng Lu*, *chüan* 3), and are grouped together more because of a common artistic approach than a common technique. Kao Feng-han, a much more famous artist whose work shows up in any respectable collection of Ch'ing painting, was a contemporary sojourner of Yangchow who worked in their same general style yet is not reckoned among their number. In technique, the Eight all demonstrate to some more or less extent their membership in that unorthodox tradition which makes of brush strokes an actively analytic part of the picture rather than an outline for the areas being worked out. Chin Nung, to be sure, partakes very little of this technique, but then he is a sort of Grandma Moses whose identification with his seven younger colleagues stems wholly from his artistic outlook, indeed, from his whole philosophy of life.

It is a way of life, then – or, as the Chinese say, a 'style of flowing' –, which is the catalyst that unites these really individualistic artists into one group. The historian might write them off as typifying the particular time and place in which they lived. Yet they were never at one with that rich world of which they were physically a part. In a very real sense they were not even a part of that extravagant society which created those creature comforts they enjoyed, those little elegances that slaked their thirst for beautiful living. Surrounded by the wealthy but not wealthy,

they saw themselves as caught in a system of niggling scholarship in which their own minor efforts went unrewarded, and talented in a time when talent went unrecognized. Disillusioned but not bitter, frustrated but not angry, they made their mild protest by throwing off the artistic dictates of a world they considered unfair and undiscerning.

The Eight Eccentrics were thus renegades rather than rebels, content to drift off into a never-never-land of sacred Pattra leaves and cavorting ghosts. Yet they made their negative resistance to the pressures of a society in which art could be purchased by the artless by never farming themselves out as living decorations for the lavish households of salt merchants. Though willing, and often needing, to accept the hospitality of other poets and artists whose conventionality had won them a steadier income, not one of the Eight was ever a protege in one of those great manors like the Wu Family Mansion.

On the other hand, the Eight Eccentrics were especially susceptible to that kind of embarrassment to which the Chinese artist seems predestined. As a Taoist recluse he hates the smugness of the official position he must often seek to earn a living, and as a Confucian citizen he deploras his art as a plaything unworthy of one whose real duty lies in serving his fellow men. Chêng Pan-ch'iao, the only one successful enough to feel the full pinch of this reasoning, gives us some insight into this spiritual conflict in his family letters. It is no doubt the contented artist we hear in the following carefree little verses :

I studied verse to no avail,
So I quit and studied writing.
I studied writing to no avail,
So I quit and studied art.
Now if I sell enough for a hundred *cash* a day
It can be considered making a living,
And keep me from abject poverty
In the elegant name of art.

Now I've escaped all appointments and meetings,
And begging for official favor.
The clear fresh air blows through my house,
And no horses or carriages crowd my gate.

But it was the Confucian scholar who wrote to his younger brother :

Calligraphy and painting are considered fine arts, but are also vulgar occupations. Is it not a vulgar thing for a man who cannot do some service to the country and improve the life of the people to occupy himself with pen and ink for the amusement of other people? ... Your stupid brother had no profession in youth, achieved nothing in middle age, and lives in poverty in old age. I have therefore been forced to earn a living by my writing brush, but in reality it may be regarded as a shame and a disgrace. I hope you will have some higher ambition and not fall into my footsteps¹⁷.

The 'way of life' of the Eight Eccentrics may be brought into sharper relief by comparison with their sapanese contemporaries who produced the great prints of the *ukiyo-e* school. Coincident with the flowering of Yangchow in the eighteenth century, there occurred that still more spectacular expansion of Nipponese culture – the *ukiyo*, or 'floating world', of pageantry and debauch. The colorful works of masters like Harunobu and Kiyonaga indicate nothing less than a wholehearted joy in the sparkle of costume and custom which inspired them. Glancing about them with loving awareness, these immortalizers of Tokugawa brilliance not for one moment stayed their hands to turn a critical Confucian eye upon the moral meaning of their surroundings. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast with those wistful Eight Eccentrics who turned their longing gaze outwards from the stark luxury of their time, and trailed their hands languidly over the side of the boat as they drifted along in that more literal floating world of Yangchow's western waterways.

17. Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of China and India*, p. 1081.

The Eight Eccentrics have received little affection from Chinese art critics. Deviation from tradition has always been regarded as something like a moral failing by the academician, or at least an admission of inability to meet conventional standards. The black-ink products of the Ch'an monasteries south of the Yangtze are relegated to the category of pictorial chit-chat, and the suggestion that Ch'an spirit has influenced the course of Chinese art history is answered with a gentlemanly sniff. (Similarly, Wang Shih-shên is lightly dismissed as a 'sort of finger-painter' and his remarkable efforts in a sightless old age as a stunt.) It has been a strange blind spot in the eye of the Chinese critic that the very same skill in controlled line he so venerates in calligraphy he fails to recognize in the forceful brushwork of masters like Liang K'ai and Mu Ch'i who have come to represent in more international view a typical Chinese triumph in the field of painting.

From another camp, abuse of a much less dignified nature is heaped upon the Eight. The 'modern' or revolutionary-minded Chinese patriot, far from accepting them as renegades, much less as rebels, has poured scorn on them as bourgeois of a unique capitalistic feudalism which took its bloated ease on the sweating backs of a peasant proletariat. The following quotation from 'A History of Chinese Fine Arts' (*Chung-Kuo Mei-Shu Shih*, p. 170) is a fair example:

They never made any positive resistance against the constraints of their times, but only sank spinelessly down into the slough of passive defeat; and a pretended attitude of being sick of the world and an assumed eccentricity became their real philosophy of life.

It is sincerely to be hoped that such petulant sentiments will not completely becloud Chinese memory of those poet-artist *hsien* and the engagingly naughty 'style of their flowing' – those enchanted Eight Eccentrics of Yangchow.

Sagada (Philippines), 24 July 1962