

Social Expectations in the Artist's Image Construction and Art Interpretation in Ming and Qing China

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Abstract

Some of the renowned literati artists in Chinese art history possess distinctive images. As stated by Otto Kurz and Ernst Kris, it was society's attitude toward the artist, consisting of the comments and views by contemporaries and posterity, that constructs the image of that artist. This is especially noticeable in the anecdotes included in artists' biographies. Since Chinese literati, who were the authors of the writings that constructed the image of traditional Chinese artist, dominated art and social discourse, the artist's image was molded to meet their social expectations developed in different eras. These social expectations would also be reflected in subsequent art creations and the interpretation of the works. This paper explores the social expectations surrounding the construction and remolding of an artist's image in different times, with Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301-1374) and Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470-1523) as representative examples. These artists are well-known for their widely circulated anecdotes. This study delves into characteristic traits of certain periods in Chinese culture and history in order to reconsider the reasons behind the gradual construction of artists' images and their role in the analysis of actual art works.

Keywords: Chinese Artist's Image, Biographical Anecdotes, Social Expectations, Ming and Qing China

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Introduction

When comprehensively reviewing the depictions of artists in writings from Ming and Qing China, it is not hard to find out that many renowned literati artists possess strikingly distinctive images. Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301–1374), for instance, is characterized as lofty, aloof, and loyal, while Tang Yin is known for his unrestrained, romantic, and dissolute persona. These images are closely tied to the inheritance of their painting styles and the interpretation of their works. Ni Zan's landscape paintings were considered to exemplify his noble character. Tang Yin's 唐寅 (1470-1523) paintings of ladies were regarded as reflecting his debauched lifestyle and scandals involving courtesans. However, their images were constructed in a process in which the artists' self-presentation, their works and experiences, as well as the expectations and imaginations of later generations were all involved. The ways an artist was viewed by contemporaries and posterity defines "the image of the artist" (Kris and Kurz, 1934); in Chinese case, the volume of various writings created over history made the transformations of artists' images particularly complex.

During Ming and Qing dynasties, the popularity of *biji* (筆記 brush note) genre led to the production of various anecdotes about artists, becoming a crucial component in shaping their images. *Biji* is a type of text that was written by members of the elite, and it collects anecdotes on a wide variety of subjects as a way of illuminating characters (Clunas, 2004: 166-169). Since anecdotes are more vivid and colorful, they sometimes spread more widely and have a more profound impact than official texts and formal biographies. Additionally, with the intersection of elite and popular culture, some of these anecdotes were brought into popular texts, such as novels and dramas, thereby further shaping public perceptions of these artists.

Since much of this "construction of image" in China has been textual, one thing to keep in mind is that it was the literati who wrote the texts in which the "image" was formulated and circulated (Cahill, 1978 and Clunas, 2004). As Craig Clunas proposes, "A large quantity of what survives, whether as actual pictorial or written artifact (and in the Ming period words and images were often co-presences), or as printed text, was done for someone, and on a specific occasion (Clunas, 2004: 8)." The historical writings are also creations, and much like the choice of an artist's painting style, they also came out from certain social expectations. Therefore, James Cahill's theory of "corresponding expectations" about the artistic style can also be a feasible vehicle for elucidating the construction of the artist's image. Cahill suggests that artists who held certain positions in Chinese society were subject to corresponding expectations of their own and from all around them. Artists' choices of styles were influenced—and, in broad limits, even determined—by the sets of expectations that applied to their particular situations, even though they weren't always conscious of it (Cahill, 1978: 164-165). Artists' images in historical writings tend to conform to certain expectations of people who created them and those people's surroundings, in which politics, economic situations, and the cultural atmosphere of the time were all influential factors, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Ni Zan's Image

Ni Zan, who lived during the later Yuan dynasty and the beginning of the Ming dynasty, has been long recognized as one of the "Four Great Masters of Yuan Painting." Through the image construction during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Ni Zan became a cultural and historical icon of literati. Ni Zan's image as a lofty scholar and his simple, almost barren,

unpopulated landscapes have become intertwined in later discourses (Figure 1). This fixed association between Ni Zan's image and his painting style set up the expectations about personalities of artists who followed a similar painting style, as well as the interpretations of their works.



Figure 1: Wind among the Trees on the Riverbank (*Jiangzhu fenglin tu* 江渚風林圖), 59.1 x 31.1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Under the rule of a non-native ethnic group during the Yuan dynasty, scholars found no path to advancement in official careers and thus turned to poetry and painting to express their sentiments. With the restoration of Han Chinese rule in the Ming dynasty, scholars were once again filled with zeal to serve the country. However, during the establishment and early years of the Ming dynasty, literati were largely undervalued, particularly in the Jiangnan region. The first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, is infamous for his general mistrust of intellectuals and for persecuting literati, in particular from the Suzhou of Jiangnan region, since many of them had joined the court of Zhang Shicheng, his opponent, after Zhang proclaimed Suzhou his capital in 1356 (Hay, 1995:2). Disheartened once more, scholars chose to distance themselves from state affairs, opting for seclusion and self-preservation. As Ni Zan, himself from the Jiangnan region, refused to serve both the Yuan dynasty and Zhang Shicheng on principle, and maintained a similar detachment after the establishment of the Ming dynasty. He dedicated himself entirely to the refined pursuits of poetry and painting, for which he is celebrated as a lofty, virtuous, and noble person. Ni Zan and his paintings stand as a symbol of moral and literati integrity. Ni Zan's image as a lofty recluse and his brief and reflective paintings resonated with the Ming literati's need to vent their feelings and express their sorrows and grievances, thus gaining appreciation and advocacy among them.

From the middle of the Ming Dynasty, Suzhou began to restore its previous splendor, the Ming state progressively lifted its restrictions on the Jiangnan region (a broad area of which Suzhou was a part), and the literati in this area experienced collective cultural, social, and economic prestige. They used Ni Zan as a legacy to represent the area's public claim to primacy or its recapture of local pride (Kim, 2019: 172-173).

His deeds and image gradually became legendary, with various historical narratives portraying him as a recluse aloof from worldly affairs, possessing refined tastes and a sublime soul. Here are some examples: he was a compulsive hand washer, always accompanied by a servant carrying a washbasin filled with water for him to wash his hands wherever he went. He had two special servants to serve in his studio who were required to clean it and his writing implements multiple times a day. If guests visited his home, every place they sat on and every utensil they touched had to be meticulously cleaned. Despite having his friends order spring water from distant mountains, Ni Zan only used the water from the first bucket to brew tea, as he believed the water in the back bucket had been contaminated by the servants' farts and so was only suitable for foot washing. The most famous one among numerous anecdotes is that Ni Zan asked his servants to wash the wutong trees (also known as the phoenix trees, paulownia trees, or Chinese parasol trees). This story had been popularized throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties in several versions. The basic plot revolves around a visitor to Ni Zan's residence who coughed and spat on the floor outside of his chamber. Ni Zan then instructed his servants to locate the spit inch by inch. The servants looked for the soiled spot for a long time but were unable to find it. Ni Zan began to search for himself and eventually found it near to the root of a wutong tree. He let the servants wash the tree immediately, and ended up washing the tree to death.¹ Such a search for purity in these anecdotes reflected Ni Zan's aspiration for spiritual cleanliness.

After such a legendary image of Ni Zan as a lofty scholar became ingrained in art history, his paintings inevitably acquired a morally charged layer of cultural imagination. They not only symbolized one's own spiritual purification, but also implied a sense of pride in choosing a lifestyle and value system of withdrawing from the hustle and bustle of the world (Yao Ruoyu, 2021:59). Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) also extolled the virtues of Ni Zan during the late Ming dynasty, saying that Ni Zan's character was superior to the other of the Four Great Masters of the Yuan. This viewpoint persisted into the Qing dynasty, spreading alongside the discourse on the Northern and Southern schools of painting. Washing wutong trees that originated from anecdotes about Ni Zan even became a classic allusion, a favored theme in poetry and painting for later scholars. It is regarded as a metaphor praising the purity, loftiness, and integrity of one's character. Dai Cang's 戴蒼 (?-?) *Wang Shizhen with a Qin-zither Having Wutong Trees Washed* (*Yuyang shanren baoqin xitong tu* 漁洋山人抱琴洗桐圖) (Figure 2), for example, places the main figure, Wang Shizhen 王士禎 (1634-1771), within a scene of washing the wutong tree, accompanied by a *guqin* (a Chinese zither), subtly invoking the allusion to Ni Zan to praise the subject's pure and lofty disposition, and broad-mindedness. Qing emperors also admired Ni Zan for his loftiness and invoked the topic of "Washing the wutong tree" in various fields. Some examples include Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors' seals of "Washing wutong trees hill studio 洗桐山房," Qianlong Emperor's poems originated from Ni Zan's anecdotes, and some implements and stationery that were decorated with carved scenes from this story (Figure 3).

¹ The detailed anecdotes about Ni Zan can be found in Ming scholar Gu Yuanqing's 顾元庆 (1487-1565) *Yunlin Yishi* 云林遗事, which was named after Ni Zan's style name, Yunlin.



Figure 2: Wang Shizhen with a Qin-zither Having Wutong Trees Washed (*Yuyang shanren baoqin xitong tu* 漁洋山人抱琴洗桐圖) Part, 31.5×126 cm



Figure 3: Lacquer box depicting the scene of “Washing the Wutong Tree” (*Tihong xitong baohe* 剔紅洗桐寶盒), National Palace Museum

Since the mid-Ming period, there has been a saying in the Jiangnan region that one’s refinement and taste could be distinguished by whether they owned a Ni Zan’s painting. Beyond mere collection, imitating Ni Zan’s style became highly popular among literati painters. Transmission and imitation have long been a necessary path for artists to learn painting in the past, and those who mastered the skills could go beyond copying. Artists from the Wu School enjoyed producing paintings in Ni Zan’s style. For example, Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427-1509) and Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559), two of the Four Masters of the Ming dynasty, had many works in this style. Dong Qichang and the other later Ming literati owned extensive collections of Ni Zan’s paintings and practiced a wealth of works inspired by Ni Zan. This trend continued into the Qing dynasty, with the renowned artists, such as “Four Wangs” and “Four Monks”, also following suit.

Additionally, as Ni Zan’s image served as a cultural symbol for Ming literati to reflect upon themselves, collecting his works and imitating his painting style embodied the social values of upholding moral integrity and refined taste, a sentiment that also permeated other social classes and became a fashionable trend. As Timothy Brook emphasized, the fashion setting is dominated by the established elite. The standards are set not by aspirants climbing from lower ranks but by those who have already attained and seek to protect their elite status (Brook, 2001: 218). Culturally significant items, such as antiques and paintings, which circulated only among a small number of individuals from the elites in the early Ming period, were brought in greater numbers into the morally vacant world of money with the commercial development and the emergence of wealthy merchants during the Ming and Qing dynasties (Brook, 2002: 223). Therefore, participation in cultural activities associated with the literati was a way for merchants to elevate their social status as they sought to become

part of the elite class. So when merchants collected Ni Zan's paintings or patronized artists who created works in his style, they sought to save themselves from an ill repute of a "philistine" with questionable morals; they escaped such a notoriety by sheltering under Ni Zan's reputation and luster (Kim, 2019: 186-189).

Tang Yin's Image

If Ni Zan's image symbolizes the ideal of the traditional scholar, Tang Yin's image represents the literati and the even general public that were influenced by New Thought. Tang Yin was a celebrated painter, poet, and scholar of the Ming dynasty, who was considered as one of the "Four Talents of Wu" in Ming literature and one of the "Four Masters of the Ming dynasty" in art history. In addition to his contributions to literature and art, he rose to prominence in popular culture through numerous extraordinary stories about him. Tang Yin's image, characterized by his free and unrestrained nature and romantic and dissolute life, has made him one of the most well-known historical figures in China. These features of his image deeply influenced the interpretation of his art, particularly with regards to the style of his landscape paintings and the content of his figure paintings, in subsequent generations and even today.

Since the founding of the Ming dynasty, the state had been run on Zhu Xi's 朱熹 (1130-1200) Neo-Confucian principles, imposing a heavy burden of morality and rationality on scholars' inner lives. By the mid-Ming period, orthodox Neo-Confucianism was being fiercely challenged by new economic relationships, increased productivity, and a consciousness awakening. Starting with Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472-1529) School of Mind, further expanded by the Taizhou School, these movements used the natural and genuine aspects of human nature to reject the determinism of moral principles (*tianli* 天理) and objectively demanded the removal of conventional constraints on human nature. This intellectual evolution continued to later period, in such elaborations as Li Zhi's 李贽 (1527-1602) "Theory of the Childlike Heart," Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 (1550-1616) "Doctrine of Emotions," and the Gong'an School's "Theory of Individuality and Spirit" (espoused by the Three Yuan brothers). These ideals, which called for equality, individual freedom, human liberation, and respect for normal human desires, gradually evolved into a widespread social trend. Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1619) of Gong'an School openly supported living a life dedicated to pursuing one's personal desires and unrestrictedly developing one's uniqueness. The free-spirited and liberating qualities embodied by Tang Yin, unbound by orthodox Confucian constraints, reflect the demand for human liberation at the time.²

Numerous anecdotes about Tang Yin illustrate his easy and free image: an unrestrained scholar and artist. One such story tells of a day when Tang Yin and his friends were drunk and found themselves out of money but still eager to continue their revelry. They took off their clothes and pawned them at a wine shop to get more food and drink, spending the evening in joyous indulgence. In his drunken state, Tang Yin painted several landscapes. The next morning, he sold the paintings, used the money to redeem the pawned clothes, and returned them to his friends. Another tale describes how Tang Yin and his friends, dressed as beggars, roamed the streets singing "Lotus Falling" to beg for money. They used the money to buy wine and drank merrily in an abandoned temple. Legend has it that Tang Yin also enjoyed using his talent and wit to prank pompous officials. Once, he and his friend Zhu

² For a comprehensive introduction to the new thought trends of the Ming dynasty see Qi Xubang, 1984.

Yunming 祝允明 (1462-1527) were wandering around Yangzhou. They spent all their money on wine and entertainment but were still not satisfied. They concocted a plan to disguise themselves as Taoist priests from the Xuanmiao Temple, seeking alms from the salt transport commissioner, a powerful official famous for great power and heavy taxation. When they arrived at the office in their priestly garb, the commissioner was furious and scolded them, “Don’t you know that the authority of the imperial censor is as cold and deadly as frost? What do mere Taoists think they are, daring to come to my office!” After the two “priests” proclaimed their friendly relations with the literati of Suzhou, the commissioner noticed a peculiar rock in the courtyard that resembled an ox and asked them to create a poem based on it. Without hesitation, they composed a seven-character regulated verse on the spot, impressing the commissioner with their quick wit and literary prowess. Their poem won over the commissioner, who ended up giving them money.

Starting at Tang Yin’s time, a free-spirited personality became a common aspiration for many scholars. This was often expressed in a rebellious and uninhibited attitude toward life, along with a disdain for official honors and an obsession with personal fulfillment. Such a personality would inevitably clash with conventional morals, the established social order, and social norms. This conflict was particularly pronounced when the unruly nature of these scholars was suppressed or crushed by the imperial examination system or bureaucratic institutions (Chen Shuliang, 2019: 10). Their repressed emotions and dissatisfaction often found an outlet through unconventional and rebellious behaviors (which were attributed to them but which they might not necessarily carry out in real life). They believed society was absurd, and that the way they could get out of it and go past it would be to fight absurdity with absurdity (Chen Shuliang, 2019: 10). The renowned image of Tang Yin, perpetuated through various anecdotes and widely accepted across different texts, became a symbol and ideal for this free-spirited ethos. Thus, whether in response to the oppressive policies imposed on the Jiangnan region by the early Ming state or the later conflicts between local powers and authorities arising from the development of Jiangnan’s commerce and industry, Tang Yin’s image was crafted as a symbol of resistance in a free individual. This absurdity attached to Tang Yin’s image can be seen as a “philosophical breakthrough” by intellectual elites in response to new era transformations and survival crises (Xu Jianrong, 2004: 95).

Moreover, for literati in the late Ming and early Qing periods, Tang Yin’s image can offer a means of coping with the chaos and the unfulfilled aspirations they faced, similar to how scholars in the late Yuan and early Ming periods used Ni Zan’s image to express their sentiments. During the late Ming and early Qing, when scholars confronted the collapse of their nation and the helplessness of living under foreign rule, the free-spirited and unrestrained image of Tang Yin could provide a way distinct from their troubled reality. Tang Yin became an ideal symbol of their longing for freedom and detachment from the inner turmoil.

The constructed image of Tang Yin inevitably influenced the interpretation of his art. Over time, his original personality became increasingly obscured, while the constructed image grew more distinct. Starting from the mid-Ming period, there were rumors that after that scandal Tang made a living by selling paintings and sometimes asked Zhou Chen 周臣 (1460-1535) to ghost-paint for him. By the Qing dynasty, this narrative had gained widespread acceptance. In analyzing Tang Yin’s landscape paintings, some scholars argue that selling paintings for a living granted him a degree of personal independence. This independence allowed him to remain uninfluenced by the court and external pressures, enabling him to maintain his individuality and sustain his free-spirited lifestyle. Consequently,

Tang Yin shifted his painting style to the Southern Song academy style as it would sell better. Research on Tang Yin's landscape paintings also often uses this perspective as a direction for the identification of his works.³

Another prominent feature of Tang Yin's established image is his romantic and amorous nature, particularly his interactions with courtesans and his affairs with women in general. The thought trend towards pursuing personal freedom included the belief that everyone should have the right to follow their natural inclinations and fulfill various desires, with romantic and sexual relationships being a significant aspect of this. The Chinese term *ji* (妓) is often translated as "prostitute," but it more accurately means "artist" or "performer," akin to the Japanese term "geisha" (Cass, 1999: 28, and Wetzel, 2002: 647). For the literati group, such female "artists" or courtesans were valued not only for their beauty and sexual allure but also for their role as professional accompaniment. Unlike common prostitutes, they were highly educated and skilled in conversation, classical literature, poetry recitation and composition, dance, and musical performance (Wetzel, 2002: 647). In brothels or other private settings (sometimes invited by the hostess), courtesans provided an elegant ambiance that allowed literati to participate in public activities such as drinking and poetry contests. By the mid-to-late Ming dynasty, courtesan culture had reached its florescence in China, with courtesans becoming a significant force in the literary and artistic circles of the Jiangnan region. This cultural milieu allowed for a greater expression of individual desires and contributed to the romanticized image of Tang Yin, who allegedly frequented the courtesan establishments, as a symbol of personal freedom and artistic excellence.

The anecdotes about Tang Yin's romantic and amorous image can be found in both elite and popular literature. The narrative involving Tang Yin and his close friend, Wen Zhengming, who has been mentioned earlier, serves as a collision between the traditional elite literati archetype reminiscent of Ni Zan and the evolving elite literati image of the new thought trends. One anecdote narrates: one time, Tang Yin and his carefree companions were drinking and reveling on Shihu Lake. They had hidden courtesans on the boat and then invited Wen Zhengming to join them, without revealing their true intentions. As Wen Zhengming became half-drunk, Tang Yin began to sing loudly and summoned the courtesans to encourage Wen to drink more. Wen Zhengming was shocked and attempted to leave. When Tang Yin asked the courtesans to detain Wen Zhengming, he shouted and tried to escape by jumping into the water. Eventually, Wen Zhengming managed to hire a small boat and flee from the scene. In this narrative, Wen Zhengming embodies the traditional literati type akin to Ni Zan, reflecting respect for and concern over traditional rites and moral norms, attempting to escape such a setting in which a courtesan was involved. On the other hand, Tang Yin represents the elite literati image influenced by new thought trends as a personification of a free and unrestrained nature, and the scene of him enjoying himself in the company of courtesans reflects the pursuit of a liberated lifestyle championed by the intellectuals of the new era.

This collision is not only evident in literary portrayals but also extends to art interpretation and critique. Wen Zhengming and Tang Yin both painted ladies, a popular genre during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, when interpreting their artworks, the figures in Wen Zhengming's paintings are not associated with courtesans or erotic themes. Conversely, regardless of the style of Tang Yin's paintings, they are often intertwined with his interactions with courtesans or personal affairs with women. This situation even exists in some works where Tang Yin and Wen Zhengming depict similar scenes with a similar style, such as Wen

³ Studies in this direction can be seen: Cahill, 1978. Xie Zhiliu, 1957, and Wang Lianqi, 2017.

Zhengming's *A Lady and Bamboo* (*Xiuzhu shinü tu* 修竹仕女圖) (Figure 4) and Tang Yin's *Lady Ban holding a Round Fan* (*Banji tuanshan tu* 班姬團扇圖) (Figure 5).



Figure 4: A Lady with Bamboo (*Xiuzhu shinü tu* 修竹仕女圖), 33×77 cm



Figure 5: Lady Ban holding a Round Fan (*Banji tuanshan tu* 班姬團扇圖), 63.6 x 150.4 cm, National Palace Museum

Many anecdotes about Tang Yin provided materials for popular culture, which was continuously upgraded and widely disseminated. Of them, the romantic story about Tang Yin and a maid named Qiu Xiang is the most well-known narrative. It describes, in broad terms, that Tang Yin, deeply attracted by the beautiful maid Qiu Xiang, pursued her to her host's house by boat, even selling himself into servitude to reach her. Later, his talents were discovered by the host, leading to his eventual reunion with the beauty. As the new thought trends continued and commerce and handicrafts flourished, accompanied by the rise of citizens' social status, the demand for liberation manifested in both material and spiritual aspects of everyday life (Qi Xubang, 1984). Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646), the author of the novel featuring Tang Yin and Qiu Xiang, used "feeling education" to challenge Neo-Confucianism, catering to the inner needs of the public through popular novels. Anecdotes about Tang Yin transitioned from elite literati *biji* into popular novels and were subsequently adapted into various forms such as dramas and operas, thereby reaching a broader audience of every social class. Thus, Tang Yin's strongly influential and enduring image was gradually formed, significantly shaping the interpretation of his art. Wang Shimao 王世懋 (1536–1588), a prominent Ming scholar, once proposed that Tang Yin, who excelled in painting in all genres, was particularly skilled in portraying beauties, reflecting the multiple love affairs in his life. This can be considered one of the key factors in later interpretations of Tang Yin's paintings of women.

Conclusion

Traditional Chinese artist's image was constructed by the writings of literati. This image was the product of the literati's expectations, convictions, and beliefs in different historical periods. Given that literati dominated art and social discourse and controlled the media, their expected images of artists worked similarly in understanding the art. This study does not assert that external circumstances, the expectations from the literati's surroundings as presented here, is the sole determinant in the construction of an artist's image. The formation of the image of Chinese artists is complex, and the image itself is multifaceted, resulting from a combination of numerous factors. This paper merely offers a reasonable direction for studying this issue. As artists' works were accepted and passed on, the artists' images were continuously updated to align with evolving social expectations. This evolving expectation, in turn, is reflected in the interpretation of these artworks in different times and situations.

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