

Problems Concerning the Life of Wang Mien, Painter of Plum Blossoms

By Chu-ting Li

PREFACE

The following article grew out of a biography of Wang Mien first written for the Ming Biographical History Project, the result of which is being published by the Columbia University Press. It is an attempt to use the case of Wang Mien as a demonstration of the many problems surrounding the use of various records and documents concerning the life of an artist. As such, it is neither a translation of one particular biography nor a summary of a number of materials dealing with his life. Rather, it shows how one can attempt to use historical events and cultural traditions to interpret the life of a well-respected painter.

There is a considerable amount of material on the life of Wang Mien. Aside from some of the standard biographies mentioned in this article, there is also information from many other sources, such as local gazetteers, informal notes written by contemporaries and later writers, literary writings by friends and admirers, inscriptions by the artist himself on his own paintings or on other people's works, and colophons on his paintings by his friends and connoisseurs. In addition, there are more than twenty extant paintings attributed to him, and one volume of his poetry, *Chu-chai shih-chi* 竹齋詩集, in various editions, still available. These have been used by the author to write the biography of Wang Mien which will form part of a forthcoming book on biographies of Yuan painters.¹ The present article deals with one aspect of the methodology of using these materials.² No attempt is made here to discuss the problems concerning his paintings or his poetry, more thorough study of which will be made in the future.

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¹Research on Wang Mien has been a part of my Yuan Art History Project, which has been supported by the University of Kansas General Research Fund.

²Materials for this article have all been drawn from traditional Chinese sources on Wang Mien, of which the most important ones are: Hsü Hsien 徐顯, *Pei-shih chi-chuan* 稗史集傳 (Collected biographies from unofficial history), *Li-tai hsiao-shih* 歷代小史 (A short history of the dynasties) ed., 9b-11a; Sung Lien 宋濂, *Sung Hsueh-shih wen-chi* 宋學士文集 (Collected writings of Sung Lien), *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an* 四部叢刊 (Four Libraries Series) ed., 10/15a-16b; Hsü Mien 徐勉, *Pao Yueh lu* 保越錄 (Records on the defense of Yueh), *Ching-chia t'ang* ed., 16a-17b; Liu Chi 劉基, *Ch'eng-i-po wen-chi* 誠意伯文集 (Collected writings of Liu Chi), *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an* ed., 5/143-144; Ch'ien Ch'ien-i 錢謙益, *Lieh-ch'ao shih-chi hsiao-chuan* 歷朝詩集小傳 (Stories of poetry collections from various dynasties), Shanghai 1957, 16-17; Huang Tsung-hsi 黃宗羲, *Ming-i tai-fang lu* 明夷待訪錄 (Notes on Ming characters to be visited), Taipei 1956, 1; Chu I-tsun 朱彝尊, *Pao-shu-t'ing chi* 曝書亭集 (Collected writings from Pao-shu Pavilion), *Ssu-pu ts'ung-k'an* ed., 64/1a-2a; Wu Ching-tzu 吳敬梓, *Ju-lin wai-shih* 儒林外史 (Unofficial history of the literati), ch. 1; and Hung Jui 洪瑞, *Wang Mien* 王冕 (Story of Wang Mien), Shanghai 1962.

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Plate 78 PLUM BLOSSOMS, by Wang Mien.

IN THE HISTORY of Chinese painting, Wang Mien 王冕 (1287-1359) is known as the greatest painter of ink plum blossoms, at least as far as extant works are concerned. Living in the middle of the fourteenth century, he stood at a pivotal juncture in the history of plum painting, which gave him the opportunity to summarize all the previous developments and to influence many of the later painters of the same subject. Perhaps because of his important position in painting, but perhaps more so because of the events of his life, his biographies have been shrouded in some colorful legends and fiction. While in recent years there have been some Chinese publications dealing with this problem, some of the issues remain. In this article, an attempt is made to render some of the basic facts of his life from Chinese sources and to explore the significance and meaning behind some of his biographies.

It is customary for the Chinese, because of their respect for their painters and poets, to idealize and romanticize them into legendary or semi-legendary figures. Sometimes this is done by dramatizing certain colorful facts of their lives; sometimes it is achieved by twisting some event into a supernatural act. Thus Ku K'ai-chih 顧愷之 is noted for the many eccentric stories of his life, especially how he managed to raise one million cash for a temple, and Wu Tao-tzu 吳道子 is said to have had such a superb power of depicting realistic horror in hell scenes that the butchers were frightened into leaving their profession. However, there are also some other interesting stories about painters which were fabricated for certain definite purposes. Stories concerning Cheng Ssu-hsiao 鄭思肖's expression of loyalty to Sung (he never sat with his face toward the north; he painted the orchid without the ground) are

quite well known. In contrast, Chao Meng-fu 趙孟頫 is often depicted in various stories as betraying his own Sung imperial ancestry. One story, concerning how Chao was humiliated by his distant cousin, Chao Meng-chien 趙孟堅, has recently been proved totally wrong, for when Meng-chien died, Meng-fu was only a few years old, still under the Sung. In the case of Ni Tsan 倪瓚, again, recent research has found that many episodes of his life were given legendary treatment by later writers. Although his fastidious taste for cleanliness must have been based on some facts, his giving away of his fortune to his relatives and friends and living a wandering life in rivers and lakes has now been found to be the result of circumstances in late Yuan rather than of his own eccentricity. It is in this context that we can look upon some of the stories concerning Wang Mien's life.

TWO OF THE earliest biographies of Wang Mien are those by Hsü Hsien 徐顯 in his *Pei-shih chi-chuan* 稗史集傳 and by Sung Lien 宋濂 in his *Sung Hsueh-shih wen-chi* 宋學士文集, both written within a short period after Wang Mien's death. Of the two, Hsü's, which gave Wang's death date as 1359, was the earlier, while Sung's, which was written for the *Yuan-shih* 元史, must have been written around 1370. Both of these biographies were written from a strictly Confucian point of view, glorifying him as a great model of Confucian virtues. However, it is also interesting to see how they differ in their accounts of Wang's life.

Though there were some prominent officials in Wang Mien's family background, neither of these biographies mentioned it, but only indicated that he came from the family of a farmer. Hsü Hsien said only that "His father was a farmer, but Mien, though a farm boy, showed an interest in learning when young." Sung Lien, on the other hand, cited several vivid episodes of his early life to show the same idea. In one, when he was only seven or eight, he sat at the window of the village school to listen to the recitation of the classics by the pupils. He learned to memorize the classics, but completely forgot the water buffaloes he was supposed to be caring for, resulting in a beating from his father. In another, through the intercession of his mother, he was sent to a Buddhist temple to learn. During the nights, he often sat on the knees of the Buddhist statues to read by the lamp of the altar, often until day-break. Even though some of the statues showed ferocious and fearsome faces, he did not seem to care. No doubt, these stories were mentioned to dramatize his interest in learning, a Confucian virtue.

While Hsü only indicated Wang's thorough knowledge of the *Ch'un-ch'iu* 春秋 and other classics and his familiarity with ancient military texts in spite of his failure to place in the *chin-shih* examination, Sung especially told of how Han Hsing 韓性 (1266-1341), perhaps the greatest Confucian scholar in Chu-chi 諸暨 at that time, took an interest in Wang Mien. Later, after Han's death, all his pupils came to regard Wang as their teacher. Here, Sung Lien was trying to emphasize the importance of Wang's Confucian learning.

Both biographers wrote about Wang's eccentricity. Hsü Hsien said that he would wear a high-brimmed hat, a rain-coat made of green leaves and high wooden shoes, hold a wooden sword, and sing in the streets of K'uai-chi 會稽, or he would ride on a yellow ox reading the history of the Han dynasty. In Sung Lien's account, Wang once wore an ancient costume and walked behind his mother's ox-carriage as

a filial son. Again, there is a stronger emphasis on his Confucian virtue.

Most colorful are the stories of how he treated some of the officials who came to pay him respect. As recorded by Hsü, Wang Yin 王良 (1278-1348), a native of the same district, came to see him after being appointed censor for the Chiang-che Province. Finding Mien in poor clothes and broken, toeless shoes, the official became concerned and left him a pair of straw-shoes and tried to induce him to accept an appointment as a civil servant. But Wang refused. In the same account, two officials, Shen-t'u Chiung 申屠騮 and Sung Tzu-chang 宋子章, made a special effort to befriend him and insisted that he take the position of a school instructor. Reluctantly he accepted. But when other officials did not show the same respect for him, he resigned, having served a little over a year. Sung mentioned an episode involving an official, Li Hsiao-kuang 李孝光 (1297-1348), who wanted to recommend him to be a civil servant. Wang was furious, saying, "I have fields to farm and I have books to read. How can I let myself be a slave standing in front of the court day and night?"

The most interesting story, mentioned by both accounts, is the one involving the Chief Secretary of the Court in Peking, T'ai Pu-hua 泰不華 (1304-1352), who had achieved fame for his administration as prefect of Shao-hsing 紹興, Wang Mien's home prefecture, in the early 1340's. Hsü's biography mentions that, while staying in T'ai's home, he was offered many positions by Han-lin scholars. But in response, he wrote a poem on a painting of plum-blossoms with these lines:

"The blossoms, all covered with ice to appear like jade,
Cannot be blown down by the barbarian flutes."

花團冰玉，羌笛吹不下來。

Those who saw this were said to be very nervous and frightened. They turned away from him. However, in Sung's version, Wang Mien, after turning down T'ai Pu-hua's attempt to offer him a job, told his host:

"How foolish you are! In less than ten years, all these people here will fight against each other like foxes and rabbits. What's this serving in the government good for?"

公誠愚人哉！不滿十年，此中狐兔游矣。何以祿仕爲。

Then he left immediately to return to the south.

Related to this is Wang Mien's prediction of the downfall of Yuan. Again the two versions are somewhat different. In Hsü's story, Wang, in his return to the south in 1348, passed through Suchou where he told the author of his biography:

"The Yellow River will flow to the north, and the whole world will be in great turmoil. I am retiring to live in the south, in order to fulfill my own wishes. I hope that you will take care of yourself."

黃河將此流，天下且大亂。吾亦南棲以遂志。子其勉之。

But in Sung Lien's account, Wang Mien, after returning to Yueh 越 (the K'uai-chi area), predicted that the whole world would be in great turmoil. At that time, since the country was still peaceful, people thought he was mad. Wang replied, "If I am not crazy, who should be crazy?" Thus he retired to Mt. Chiu-li 九里山, near K'uai-chi, where he planted vegetables and flowers, especially plum trees. There he lived the life of a hermit.

In these several accounts, both authors attempted to portray him as a person of noble character and great learning, worthy of holding high appointments in the government, but declining to take them. Both emphasized his foresight in predicting the collapse of Yuan. All these aspects were the highly revered qualities of a Confucian gentleman which were embodied in Wang Mien.

THE MOST INTERESTING accounts are those concerning Wang's death. There are several different versions, all worth comparing. Hsü Hsien's story, probably written not long after his death, goes as follows:

"In the year *chi-hai* (1359), when he was taking a nap, a group of rebels came into his home. He called out aloud, 'I am Wang Yuan-chang!' Greatly surprised, the rebels, respectful of his name, took him to the T'ien-chang Temple, where their Grand Marshal received him as the guest of honor, paid him respect, and asked for his advice. Mien said, 'Now as the whole country within the four seas is boiling up, you people do not seem to be able to bring peace and livelihood to the people, but are engaged in plundering and destroying. Thus there is nothing but destruction ahead! If you are righteous, who would not follow you? If you are not righteous, who would not become your enemies? Since the people of Yueh uphold righteousness, they should not be attacked. How could I let you fight against my father, my brothers, and my sons? If you choose to listen to me, you should reform and take the right path. If you do not want to listen to me, kill me now. I do not want to say anything more to you.' The Grand Marshal, paying him more respect, expressed his willingness to follow his instruction. The next day, Wang fell sick and could not get up again. In a few days he died. The soldiers prepared a coffin, dressed him, and buried him by the Orchid Pavilion in Shan-yin, with an inscription saying, 'Mr. Wang's Tomb.'"

歲己亥，君方晝卧，適外寇入。君大呼曰，「我王元章也。」寇大驚，重其名，與君至天章寺。其大帥置君上坐。再拜請事。君曰，「今四海鼎沸，爾不能進安生民，乃肆虜掠，滅亡無日矣。汝能為義，誰敢不服。汝為不義，誰則非敵。越人秉義，不可以犯。吾嘗教汝與君父兄弟相殺乎。汝能聽吾，即改過以從善。不能聽，即速殺我。我不與若更言也。」大帥復再拜，終願受教。明日，君疾遂不起。數日以卒。眾為之具棺，服斂之，葬山陰蘭亭之側，署曰王先生墓云。

There are several interesting points about this story. First, Hsü Hsien seems to have written this from very intimate knowledge, since his description is very specific, with dates and locations given. Thus, the whole account seems to be quite reliable.

Second, the rebel leader is mentioned here as Grand Marshal, without any name given. Third, most interesting of all, the whole point of view here is neither pro-Yuan nor pro-Ming, but one of the author's own, based totally on Confucian principles, which are reflected in his comments at the end of the biography.

In Sung Lien's biography, Wang's death is described in the following way:

"Having captured Wu-chou 婺州 (the present-day Chin-hua 金華, in Chekiang), the Emperor was preparing to invade Yueh-chou. Looking for someone to advise him, he found Mien and appointed him a military advisor in the general staff. But one night, he died of illness."

皇帝取婺州，將攻越。物色得冕。賓幕府，授以諮議參軍。一夕以病死。

Here, the whole story is like a summary report, not a first hand account as the previous one. But the author identified the leader as the Emperor. Because of this, his point of view was definitely that of Ming. In fact, Sung Lien was recruited into the service of the first Ming Emperor, Chu Yuan-chang 朱元璋, in 1358 just after the latter had captured Wu-chou, and when the Mongol government was losing hold of the southern part of the empire. Like Wang Mien, he was a Confucian scholar in the Chin-hua area. As a result, in his biography, he was showing respect for both the Emperor and Wang Mien.

A third source, also a contemporary account, is found in Hsü Mien 徐勉's *Pao Yueh lu* 保越錄, which shows the author to have been someone in the service of the Yuan government, for the title itself means the defense of Yueh-chou (K'uai-chi area) against the invading rebels under Chu Yuan-chang. It is a long narrative of the fighting. The section dealing with Wang Mien is as follows:

"A man of this prefecture, Wang Mien, *tzu* Yuan-chang, who was proud and arrogant, lived on Mt. Chiu-li. When the big army (rebels) arrived, all the people fled to the city, but Mien alone did not do so. Having captured him, the big army wanted to kill him. When Wang told them that he was familiar with military strategy and books on martial art, his life was spared. Some of the generals of the big army, such as Hsieh Chien 謝僉, set him free, accompanied him to Wu-chou, and took him to see T'ai-tsu. His Royal Highness the Emperor summoned him at the gate of the military camp. Mien memorialized the Emperor on his proposal to establish the number of officers and men for the campaign and the strategy and plan for the invasion. Greatly pleased, His Royal Highness immediately gave him an important appointment and ordered him to be at the head of the army to lead the men to attack Shao-hsing"

郡人王冕，字元章，負氣偃蹇，居九里山中。大軍至，民皆避兵入城。冕獨不入。大軍執而欲殺之。自言能輶略兵書，得不死。大軍將謝僉等資之，偕行至婺州，領見太祖。高皇帝召對於軍門。冕即奏請定官額，陳設攻取方略。上大悅，即命授以重任，命軍前督衆攻取紹興。

But in the following narrative, Wang Mien's plan did not succeed. The offensive was

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Plate 79 PLUM BLOSSOMS, by Wang Mien.

broken by the defenders. The last part of the story says:

“The big army, frightened, did not know what to do, retreating while fighting. Some soldiers climbed over the wall, only to die in the river. Our army followed them with attacks, capturing two generals, three heralds, and two horses. Wan-hu (Division Commander) Ho Ch'ing 何清's eyes were hit by flying arrows.

The big army, since its defeat on the right embankment which resulted in the loss of a great number of their men and horses, blamed Mien. From then on they did not seek his company any more.”

大軍惶怖不知所爲，且進且却，士卒有踰垣而赴水死者。我軍從而擊之，獲大將二人，先鋒三人，馬二匹。而萬戶何清中流矢傷目。大軍自右堰之敗，人馬散亡甚衆，頗咎王冕，由此疏之。

This account, apparently written by someone who was on the side of the defenders of Shao-hsing against the invading “big army” of Chu Yuan-chang, who later founded the Ming dynasty, shows another side of the story. In complete contrast to the other two biographies, this writer was neither sympathetic with Wang Mien, who betrayed his prefecture, nor with the Ming Emperor. However, probably because the book was copied in the Ming period, all the references to Chu Yuan-chang in the text have been changed to “the Emperor” or “His Royal Highness” by some editors. In general, the writer shows extremely low esteem for Wang Mien. That this account is far more detailed and specific than the other two seems to be a definite mark of authenticity.

Among these three accounts, two flattering to Wang Mien and one not, perhaps some conclusions can be drawn. All three, though very different, do share something in common. They all mention Wang's capture or invitation by the rebels, led by either the Grand Marshal or the Emperor. They all relate something about his admonitions or plans to the leader. Thus they seem to agree that Wang Mien must have had some contact with Chu Yuan-chang or some of his generals. Since the biography by Hsü Hsien states that Wang died in 1359, his contact with the rebels

must have taken place just before that. This seems to correspond with contemporary historical events. Late in 1358, Chu Yuan-chang's army did capture Wu-chou, and in the first month of 1359 they also took Chu-chi, which was Wang Mien's home district. Late that year, he also captured Ch'ü-chou 衢州 and Chu-chou 處州, both further south. In all these, Chu was fighting against other rebel groups, especially that of Chang Shih-ch'eng 張士誠 who, after a period of independence, made peace with the Yuan government during the late 1350's to become a nominal official of Yuan, though he still acted independently. In this context, the three accounts seem to represent three different points of view. The *Pao Yueh lu* took the position of the Yuan government; Hsü Hsien's biography was written from Wang Mien's point of view, without any sympathy for either Yuan or Ming; Sung Lien saw Wang Mien entirely from the Ming point of view.

DURING THE EARLY Ch'ing period, Wang Mien seemed to have enjoyed a new kind of popularity. At that time, with a new dynasty, Wang Mien could be seen in a more objective way. The earliest scholar to try to straighten out this problem was Ch'ien Ch'ien-i 錢謙益 (1582-1664). In his monumental work, the *Lieh-ch'ao shih-chi* 列朝詩集, he made use of all three sources mentioned above and concluded his biography of Wang Mien with this remark:

"The biographies and the narrative (the three sources cited above) differ from each other in their reports of what happened to Mien in the rebel army. What Hsü's biography referred to as the 'Grand Marshal' was Hu (Ta-hai) 胡大海, the Duke of Yueh. When the whole world's situation was still unsettled, accusations from opposing powers have come down in letters and records. Those who read them should do some investigation of the circumstances."

傳錄載冕軍前事多互異。徐傳所云：「大帥」者，即胡越公也。天下未定，敵國指斥之詞，流傳簡牘，習其讀者，或有考焉。

Next, a friend of Ch'ien Ch'ien-i, the great scholar Huang Tsung-hsi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695), who was a native of Yü-yao 餘姚, not far east of K'uai-chi, cited Wang Mien as a man with a great political philosophy whose work unfortunately did not survive in his own famous treatise, *Ming-i tai-fang lu* 明夷待訪錄. Written in 1662, this treatise was the embodiment of his own idea of kingship and the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. A philosopher in the tradition of Chu Hsi 朱熹, Huang did a great deal of research in Ming history and the history of philosophy. Thus it is not accidental that he took an interest in Wang Mien.

It was Chu I-tsun 朱彝尊 (1629-1709) who took the greatest interest in Wang Mien in the Ch'ing period. Appointed to the Han-lin Academy as an editor of the official history of the Ming dynasty, he wrote another biography of Wang Mien. Living more than three hundred years after Wang Mien's time, again he could be much more objective in his approach. He described the episode of Wang's contact with Chu Yuan-chang as follows:

"After (Ming) T'ai-tsu had captured Wu-chou, he sent Hu Ta-hai to

attack Shao-hsing. Hu stationed his army in Mt. Chiu-li. While all the inhabitants in that area fled, Mien was not shaken. Having captured him, the soldiers took him to see Hu Ta-hai. Asked by Ta-hai for advice, Mien said, "The people of Yueh uphold righteousness and should not be attacked. If you are righteous, who would not follow you? If you are not righteous, who would not become your enemy?" When T'ai-tsu heard about his name, he wanted to appoint Mien a military advisor, but Mien died."

太祖既取婺州，遣胡大海攻紹興，屯兵九里山。居人奔竄，冕不為動。兵執之，與俱見大海。大海延問策。冕曰，「越人秉義，不可以犯。若為義，誰敢不服。若為非義，誰則非敵。」太祖聞其名，授以諮議參軍，而冕死矣。

In his final comment to the biography, Chu expressed the idea behind his rewriting of Wang's biography:

"During the late Yuan period, there were many cultivated people living in retirement, among whom was Wang Mien. But since the appearance of his biography by Sung Wen-hsien (Lien), all people have regarded him as a military advisor. But did he ever serve as military advisor for even one day? Reading Hsü Hsien's *Pei-shih chi chuan*, one came to realize that Mien died because he would not yield his will. Therefore, I have written another biography for the Archive of History in the hope that their editors could have a choice (for the official history)."

當元之季多逸民，冕其一也。自宋文憲傳出，世皆以參軍目之。冕亦何嘗一日參軍事哉！讀徐顯稗史集傳，冕蓋不降其志以死者也。因別為傳，上之史館，冀編纂者擇焉。

This comment actually contradicts the conclusions drawn from the three major sources of late Yuan and early Ming and also differs radically from Ch'ien Ch'ien-i's idea. Perhaps now in the Ch'ing period, Chu I-tsun, free from the obligation to flatter the Ming Emperor, was trying to depict him as a model literatus. Again it was the Confucian tradition that was behind this emphasis.

It is interesting to see that, perhaps because of the influence of Chu's biography, Wang Mien was fictionalized as the perfect model of the literati in the introductory chapter of the famous *Ju-lin wai-shih* 儒林外史 (Unofficial History of the Literati), a biting satire by Wu Ching-tzu 吳敬梓 (1701-1754). While using the biographical sources as his basis, Wu made many changes in his novel to depict Wang Mien as the great literatus. Again it is the last part dealing with Wang's relationship with the Ming Emperor that is most interesting. However, since it is too long to translate here, a summary of Wu's treatment is sufficient.

In the novel, Chu Yuan-chang is depicted as a great leader who, after defeating Fang Kuo-chen 方國珍 to gain control of Chekiang, made a special trip to visit Wang Mien in the latter's humble hut. During this visit, Chu became so respectful of Wang that they carried on their conversation until dusk, with Wang emphasizing the importance of righteousness as the ruling philosophy for the visitor (as mentioned

first in Hsü Hsien's biography). The story ends with Wang Mien, aware that the new emperor after establishing his own empire would invite him to serve in the government, quietly moving away to live in Mt. K'uai-chi for the rest of his life. This he did to preserve his integrity.

This final change in the attitude toward Wang Mien in the Ch'ing period seems to be very much in line with the outlook of both Chu I-tsun and Wu Ching-tzu. While they may have been somewhat affected by the loyalty toward Ming which persisted long into the Ch'ing period, their own unfortunate careers with the Ch'ing government and the official examination system probably made them look at Wang Mien differently, not so much as a man who was anxious to present his ideas of righteousness for action, but as one who found withdrawal from society as the best means to preserve his own integrity. It was still part of the Confucian tradition, though with some mixture of Taoism.

THIS MATTER OF the various points of view concerning Wang Mien's relationship with the first Ming emperor can be left to rest here except for the fact that it should be seen in another context, namely the strong Confucian tradition, especially of the Chu Hsi School. For the Chinese, the roots or native traditions are always very important in the consciousness of the leading men, especially the literati. K'uai-chi, or Yueh-chou, of which Wang Mien's native Chu-chi was a part, was an area filled with many glorious traditions from the ancient past. The great flood-controlling emperor of the legendary Hsia dynasty, Yü 禹, was supposed to have been buried here. During the early fifth century B.C., Kou-chien 勾踐, the Prince of the State of Yueh, spent years after a defeat by the Prince of Wu planning and training his men for his revenge. He finally succeeded and became the great cultural hero of perseverance and loyalty to an ideal. During the period of the Six Dynasties, the famous Lan-t'ing 蘭亭 (Orchid Pavilion) Gathering held by the great calligrapher Wang Hsi-chih 王羲之 (321-379) here became the great model for all literary gatherings of later periods, symbolic of the cultural brilliance and artistic achievement of this area.

In the case of Wang Mien, what is most interesting is the fact that, except in the case of *Pao Yueh lu*, which was a field narrative of the defence of the area from the Yuan point of view, all the other biographies from Yuan to Ch'ing were trying to glorify him as a Confucian sage. Although this is nothing very unusual in Chinese historical writing, there were some very special circumstances of that time that made this quite logical. The meeting between Wang Mien and Chu Yuan-chang or some of his generals took place at the most important juncture in Chu's long struggle for power. For up to 1358, although he was already building up a great power base, he remained somewhat of a "bandit hero" because of his own humble origin, lacking culture. But in that year, he captured Wu-chou (Chin-hua), which had been for two hundred years the Neo-Confucian center and undoubtedly the most important area of Confucian studies in the Yuan period. A whole stream of leading scholars, including the so-called "Four Gentlemen of Chin-hua," namely Ho Chi 何基 (1188-1268), Wang P'o 王柏 (1197-1274), Chin Li-hsiang 金履祥 (1232-1303), and Hsü Ch'ien 許謙 (1269-1337), carried on the philosophy of Chu Hsi into a flourishing development. In addition, during Wang Mien's time, there were the "Three Masters of ku-wen of Late Yuan," namely Liu Kuan 柳貫 (1270-1342), Huang Chin 黃潛 (1277-

1357), and Wu Lai 吳萊 (1297-1340). It was after the capture of Wu-chou that Chu Yuan-chang began to recruit a group of Confucian scholars to serve on his staff. Here he invited a group of thirteen scholars to take turns in giving lectures to him and his staff on the classics and history, to re-establish centers of studies in the prefectures, and to discuss government and political philosophy. Of this group the most famous was Sung Lien (1310-1381), a pupil of both Liu Kuan and Huang Chin, who became one of the most important advisors of Chu Yuan-chang during those years of struggle against the Yuan armies and other rebels. From then on, Chu, undoubtedly under the influence of Sung Lien and the other Confucian scholars, was transformed from a "bandit hero" to a Confucian leader, eventually gaining control of the empire. It was about the same time that another rebel leader, Chang Shih-ch'eng, who made his headquarters in Suchou, attempted to recruit the scholars and literary talents of that cultural city to his staff.

As mentioned above, Wang Mien at that time was living in the K'uai-chi area, which lay north of Wu-chou and was the next target in Chu Yuan-chang's campaign. When Wang was captured by Chu's army, his life was spared because he was a well-known scholar and poet. Eventually, there was also an attempt to try to recruit him into the service of the leader Chu Yuan-chang. Whether he tried to claim to be a military expert and to offer some strategy for the Chu army as a way to save himself, as the *Pao Yueh lu* indicates, or was asked for advice by either Chu Yuan-chang or Hu Ta-hai, as the other biographers mention, can never be ascertained. But there is reason to believe that both Hsü Hsien and Sung Lien, as Confucian scholars, might have colored Wang Mien's biography to make him appear as a noble upholder of righteousness. Clearly, this was Hsü Hsien's attempt. In the case of Sung Lien, who on the one hand had to show his loyalty to Chu Yuan-chang and on the other needed to extol some of the literati from his own area, he thus depicted Wang Mien coming into the service of the future emperor, just as he himself had done.

Wang Mien was also eulogized by another Confucian scholar of the Chin-hua School, Liu Chi 劉基 (1311-1375), who was also recruited by Chu Yuan-chang in Wu-chou at about the same time. Together with Sung Lien, Liu was one of the closest advisors on Chu's staff. Both of them helped the leader to develop the political and institutional foundations of the future Ming Empire. In his preface to the volume of collected poems of Wang Mien, Liu Chi told about how he first came to read his poems at K'uai-chi in 1354 and wrote that his poetry expressed "the feeling of loyalty to the ruler and of love of the people and the determination to eliminate the evil and to remove the corrupt", which were basically Confucian. Unlike these two scholars, Wang Mien seemed to have no luck and failed to impress the Emperor. However, to the eyes of some of the later writers his untimely death made him a more perfect example of a literatus in a world of turmoil, one who was not involved in the politics of the chaotic world but preserved his own personal integrity through withdrawal.

IT IS IN THE same context that we can see Wang Mien as a painter of plum blossoms in the Confucian tradition from the K'uai-chi area. Though he was born and raised in Chu-chi, he later, after his trip to Peking, retired to K'uai-chi and planted a thousand plum trees on Mt. Chiu-li. In the history of Chinese painting, K'uai-chi was for a long

time closely associated with paintings of plum blossoms, at least from the time of Monk Hua-kuang Chung-jen 華光仲仁 (late 11th century), who was the originator of the ink plum blossom tradition in connection with the literati painting development of Northern Sung. From this time this type of painting must have taken roots in K'uai-chi. Although the two most important followers of ink plum blossom painting in Southern Sung, Yang P'u-chih 楊補之 (1079-1169) and his nephew, T'ang Cheng-chung 湯正仲, were from Kiangsi, they may still have some links with K'uai-chi. T'ang was known to have spent some of his later years in Huang-yen 黃岩, in the southern part of Chekiang, not far from K'uai-chi.

It was during the Yuan period that plum blossom painting became a most exciting tradition in this area. The two most important plum painters in this period, Wu T'ai-su 吳太素 and Wang Mien, were both natives of this area. Wu, who was best known for his treatise on plum painting, the *Sung-chai mei p'u* 松齋梅譜, and whose surviving works are all in Japan, was from K'uai-chi, while Wang, though a native of Chu-chi, spent his last years in this area. Between the two, while Wu was more influential in theory, Wang was the more innovative as a painter, calligrapher, poet, and seal-carver, thus a standard literati artist, in addition to a Confucian scholar.

Wang Mien became the most influential painter of plum blossoms during the first half of the Ming period, when all of the famous plum painters were from the same area. Ch'en Lu 陳錄 (fl. ca. 1440), a native of K'uai-chi, was probably the closest follower. Liu Hsueh-hu 劉雪湖 (fl. first half of the sixteenth century), also a native of the same area, was another close follower. A third painter of this genre was Wang Ch'ien 王謙 (fl. ca. 1500), who came from Ch'ien-t'ang, slightly to the west. However, none of them seemed to have the same mastery of painting, calligraphy and poetry as Wang Mien, or could match his brilliance and innovation. It was only during the sixteenth century, that another native of K'uai-chi, Hsü Wei 徐渭 (1521-1593), introduced a different and freer type of ink painting of flowers and plants, thus putting an end to the persistent influence of Wang Mien.

Wang Mien was the master of plum blossom painting *par excellence*. By his command of the art of painting, calligraphy, and poetry, and by his combination of Confucian learning and personality, he elevated this type of painting to a high form of expression of the literati. Plum blossoms, as one of the three friends of winter with the pine and the bamboo, thus became symbolic of the perfect literati in China. This can best be seen in a painting, *A Branch of Plum Blossoms over Water*, executed in 1355, on which he wrote a long essay entitled "Biography of Mr. Mei", an allegorical account of the genealogy of the plum, which concludes in the following passage:

"Mr. Mei 梅 (Plum) was an elegant and noble man in the dusty world. Showing pure taste and refined manners, he had the style of the gentlemen of the past. How could worldly comforts corrupt him! It is no wonder that he is so much admired and loved by the people of the world!"

梅先生翩翩濁世之高士也。觀其清標雅韻，有古君子之風焉，彼華映綺麗，烏能辱之哉。以故天下人士，景愛慕仰，豈虛也耶。

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Plate 80 A BRANCH OF
PLUM BLOSSOMS OVER
WATER, by Wang Mien. Top
right: Biography of Mr. Mei.

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Plate 81 ORCHID SCROLL, by
Cheng Hsieh. The inscription:
*"How prosperous are the youths
of Black Costume (Lane). . . ."*