Wang Su’s ‘Illustrations of the Begging Professions’

While a student in Göran Malmqvist’s graduate seminar in sinology in the early 1970s, I frequented the Stockholm City Auction looking for orientalia, especially affordable curios and artwork, a practice begun before the Institute for Oriental Languages and the City Auction both moved away from the vicinity of Odenplan. Objects fitting the description appeared only rarely among the huge oak armoires, period furniture, bricabrac, books, china and fascinating odd lots of all sorts that gained a new lease on life by changing hands via the auction block.

My patience was finally rewarded on one occasion in the winter of 1974 when I was able on my meager budget to acquire a late Qing handsscroll by the painter Wang Su 王素 (1794–1877), or Wang Xiaomei 王小梅 as he is more commonly known, which was offered as part of an estate sale. As I recall, I was accompanied to the auction that day by Göran Malmqvist, Sören Edgren, and Jan Wirgin, whose curiosity had been piqued by my description of the scroll and preliminary efforts at authentication. All agreed that the scroll was quite interesting and certainly worth acquiring, if not too expensive. In the event, I was able to outbid the competition and take possession of Wang Xiaomei’s ‘Illustrations of the Begging Professions’ (Jiaohuatu 教化圖) for a relatively modest sum. Afterward the four of us examined the 12 album-sized paintings in detail (see pl. 1–12), studied the colophons and poems following the rather unconventional illustrations, and began asking questions about the painter’s motivation in portraying beggars and street performers, and about the mutual relations among the five individuals identified with the scroll. At Göran’s encouragement I began studying the scroll in an effort to learn more about Wang Xiaomei and his motives, not an easy task since by the late Qing the Yangzhou 揚州 school of painting was thought to be past its prime and Wang Xiaomei has generally been
considered a minor painter. As a result, he has not been the subject of serious study until quite recently.

Though not an art historian, off and on over the years I returned to these questions, each time delving once again into the challenges posed by the scroll’s contents with the intention of eventually writing up the result. A timely visit to the painter’s hometown of Yangzhou in October, 1993 and the discovery of a little known recent monograph reassessing his significance have contributed much to my understanding and tied up a number of loose ends.\(^1\) Now, an essay on this topic seems a most appropriate contribution to a Festschrift dedicated to Göran Malmqvist, who was with me when I acquired the scroll and whose scholarly breadth and contagious enthusiasm as a teacher influenced me in choosing to pursue Chinese studies as a career. This then, briefly, is what I have been able to discover about Wang Xiaomei’s *jiaohua tu*.

*The jiaohua tu handscroll*

The handscroll itself is 22 cm high and well over 3 meters long with an outer wrapping of well-worn and faded green and lavender silk and core plugs of whitish jadeite. The title inscription *jiaohua tu* in small seal script at the beginning was done by the famous nineteenth century painter, calligrapher, and seal-carver, Wu Xizai 呉熙載 (Wu Tingyang 吳廷鳳, cognomen Rangzhi 諧之, 1799–1870), and bears his unmistakable signature and the two seals *Wu shi Rangzhi* 吳氏諧之 and *Xizai zhi yin* 熙載之印 (Fig. 1).\(^2\) Wu’s inscription

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1. Li Wancai 李萬才, *Wang Su 王素*, Peking: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1988. Li Wancai, who is Assistant Director of the Yangzhou Museum, graciously took time out from last minute preparations for an important exhibition in Japan to discuss Wang Su’s career and to present me with a copy of his richly illustrated monograph. I am especially grateful to Prof. Song Boyin 宋伯胤 of the Nanking Museum (Nanjing bowuyuan) for steering me in Li’s direction and for arranging for me to examine a selection of Wang Xiaomei’s works in the collection of the Nanking Museum together with Huang Ping 黄平, Assistant Research Fellow at the Museum, and to my good friend Prof. Xu Zhentao 徐振鶴 of the Purple Mountain Observatory in Nanking, who very kindly accompanied me on an excursion to Yangzhou and contributed helpful observations on the activities depicted in the handscroll.

Outstretched Leaves on his Bamboo Staff

is on paper framed by white silk and measures 46.3 by 19.7 cm. Immediately following is the first of 12 paintings depicting various begging professions done with a fine brush in ink and slight colour on tan silk, each measuring 26.2 by 19.7 cm and framed with white silk. At the left margin of the last painting is Wang Xiaomei’s signature 汪小梅 Wang Su 王素 and a single seal 小粟 (Fig. 2).  

There then follow five panels of calligraphy written on paper measuring 14.6 by 19.7 cm: three panels containing eleven five-word and seven-word poems written by one Wang Yan, and a fourth panel concluding with a twelfth poem, the date Tongzhi 10th year, 5th month, full moon (July 2, 1871), the inscription Xiaoting Wang Tan xi ti 小汀王萊戲題 (‘Inscribed in jest by Wang Yan of Xiaoting [Yangzhou]’), and a seal 王子之墨 (lit. ‘Wangs’ son’s ink’) (Fig. 3); a colophon on the left half of the fourth panel comprising a seven-word poem by the famous nineteenth century Yangzhou art historian and author of Yangzhou huayuan lu 楊州畫苑錄, Wang Yun 汪鋆 (Wang Yanshan 王璥[研山], 1816–?), dated jiayin qiu zhong 甲寅秋仲 (October 6, 1854) and bearing his signature and a seal Yanshan 研山 (Fig. 3); and lastly, a panel containing a colophon signed by one Lanpo 蘭坡 (Zhang Zhaocen 張肇cen) and bearing his seals 81 weng 八十一翁 and dushe bian zheng zunfa shufang(?) 談書辨證遵法疏方 and an unidentified collector’s seal Yizheng Zhang shi zhencang 儀徵張氏珍藏 (Collection of Mr Zhang of Yizheng) (Fig. 4).  


3 Maler- und Sammler-Stempel aus der Ming- und Ch’ing-Zeit, no. 41, pp. 53–54. The character mou 蘭 is the original form of mei 秣. Wang Xiaomei used the two interchangeably.  

4 Though Wang’s date of death is not known, the preface to Yangzhou hua yuan lu is dated 1883 when he would have been 67.  

5 Three seals carved for Wang Yun by Wu Xizai, Wang Yun, Yanshan, and shi’er yan zhai 十二砚齋 are illustrated in Zhongguo niyiin yuanshu, p. 129.  

6 Evidence uncovered to date points to the identification of Lanpo as the seal carver and calligrapher Zhang Zhaocen who, besides being a native of Yangzhou, was intimately associated with Yizheng. At various times Zhang traveled widely while serving two of Yizheng’s famous sons, Wu Wenrong 吳文隆 (1792–1854) and Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849), in their various postings and cultivating with his service as Ruan Yuan’s Chief Corresponding Secretary. While Ruan Yuan was governor—general of Guizhou and Yunnan during the period 1826–1835, Zhang carved the marble ‘pictures in stone’ completed during Ruan’s tenure there and which are no doubt to be found illustrated in Ruan’s Shi hua ji 石畫記. Zhang’s seal carvings are collected in his Shi gu zhai yinpu 石鼓齋印譜 which I have not been able to examine. Hence, although I have not been able to confirm this, it is possible that the collector’s seal on the handscroll is also Zhang Zhaocen’s, even though the colour of that imprint is different from his other two seals.
Fig. 1

Fig. 2

Poems 1–4

Poems 5–8
Rolled inside the scroll at the time of its acquisition was a single sheet of personalized stationery belonging to the noted Swedish China scholar Orvar Karlbeck, who contributed several articles to the Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in the 1930s. The stationery clearly dates from the period and reflects Karlbeck's recent change of address from Odengatan 58 to Sveavägen 94A in Stockholm. In a distinctive hand Karlbeck writes in Swedish: 'The paintings portray the 36 ways of begging. The writing following the 12 scenes describes some of these. The writing is in rhymed verse, the first of which goes like this....' This is followed by a transcription of the first seven-word poem and Karlbeck's excellent renderings into Swedish of the first eight of the poems. Evidently, sometime in the 1930s Karlbeck was asked by the Swedish (missionary?) owner of the handscroll to interpret its subject matter and Chinese text. Subsequently, the handscroll remained in the possession of its owner until his or her death in about 1973. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the handscroll was personally acquired in China, probably in the Yangzhou area, and brought back to Sweden by the owner, presumably during the 1930s.

_Wang Xiaomei, Wu Xizai, Wang Yan and Wang Yun_

Wang Xiaomei and Wu Xizai were almost exact contemporaries. Although slightly older, Wang outlived Wu Xizai by seven years, dying in 1877 at age 83. Wang was originally a native of Ganquan 甘泉 and Wu a native of Yizheng, a few kilometers to the northwest and west of Yangzhou, respectively. Both artists were prolific, continuing to express their talents with undiminished zeal until advanced age, in Wang's case until at least the year before he died. As a result, their once plentiful works are still readily available, especially in the Yangzhou area in southern Jiangsu.

Given their lifelong activity in the society and art world of Yangzhou the two would have known each other quite well. Wu's having written the title _fiaohua tu_ for the scroll indicates that the two were friends, of course, and although Wu Xizai now enjoys the greater reputation (reflected especially in the current prices of their works), contemporary accounts relate that the

For a discussion of Ruan Yuan's avid interest in the art of cutting coloured marbles to represent pictures, see Arthur W Hummel (ed.), _Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644–1912)_ , Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1943, p. 402. A brief entry on Zhang Zhaocen is found in Zhongwen da cidian 中文大辞典, vol. 3, no. 10026.1208, and a somewhat more informative notice in Guangxu jiangdu xian xu zhi, 25b: 6a–b. One problem with the identification of Lanpo with Zhang Zhaocen, however, may be that the seal _81 weng_ following Lanpo's colophon contradicts the age at death of 70 given for Zhang in Guangxu jiangdu xian xu zhi but a notation in the latter source suggests it may be unreliable in this regard.
two were in fact the closest of friends and enjoyed equal popularity. Wang and Wu it seems were in the habit of frequenting the Guanyin temple at Shipailou 石牌楼 in the ‘new town’ of Yangzhou and together with the then temple superior, the monk Hai Yun 海雲, they would spend hours exchanging and refining their views on art.

In his Wucheng huai jiu lu 燕城懷久錄, a contemporary, Dong Yu 董玉, writes that Wang Xiaomei ‘whose painting emulates Xin luo [Xin luo shan ren 新羅山人 = Hua Yan 華巖, 1682–?]’ 7 and is widely admired, formerly resided in the Guanyin temple. At that time the literati and local officialdom all felt that unless the painting was Wang’s and the calligraphy Wu’s there was no other to match them. If one were missing, the work was thought lacking.” 8 From Dong Yu’s account it is evident that Wang Xiaomei and Wu Xizai enjoyed considerable celebrity during their most active years, which presumably made it possible for them to earn a reasonably good living from their art. Neither Wu nor Wang held any official posts so both would have been dependent on their art for their livelihood. From Dong Yu’s account it is apparent that Wang at least was probably a committed Buddhist.

Wang Yun, author of the second colophon on the handscroll, in response to friends’ criticism of the non-chronological treatment of artists in his Yangzhou hua yuan lu of 1883, responded in his preface that when he began to compile the book he wrote each notice as the artist came to mind, the woodblocks then being carved as the manuscript progressed, so that his juxtaposition of biographical sketches of Wu Xizai and Wang Xiaomei probably also indicates that the two were closely associated in his mind. In fact, Wang Xiaomei, who was Wang Yun’s senior by 22 years, had been a close friend of Wang Yun’s father.

Wang Yun dedicated his Yangzhou hua yuan lu to the Yangzhou artists who lost their lives when the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) swept into the area in 1853. The repeated devastation of the surrounding countryside wrought by this upheaval must have been immense. In addition to devoting considerable space to an account of rebel activity in and around Yangzhou, the Guangxu (1875–1908) edition of the Jiangdu local gazetteer Guangxu Jiangdu xian xu zhi 光緒江都縣續志 contains a listing of Taiping casualties from all social classes and walks of life which goes on for some 80 pages. Yangzhou city itself withstood the Taipings for several years until the great

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7 Maler- und Sammler-Stempel aus der Ming- und Ch’ing-zeit, no. 320, p. 380. Hua Yan was one of the Yangzhou school painters known collectively as the Yangzhou ba guai.

8 Quoted in Li Wancai, op. cit., p. 34.
garrison at Jiangbei was routed and the city fell to the insurgents on October 9, 1858, but throughout this period living conditions in the surrounding area were severely disrupted, causing widespread suffering and hardship. Wang Xiaomei and his family were forced in all haste to flee Yangzhou for Yong’an 永安 city during the initial attack in 1853, not returning until 1864 by which time Wang was already 70. The artist’s ability to earn his livelihood and provide for his family must have suffered greatly during these later years spent as a refugee. Even if he was able to continue painting, the devastation of the local economy would have virtually destroyed the Yangzhou art market.

Wang Yun relates that he met Wu Xizai and Wang Xiaomei in Taizhou 泰州, northeast of Yangzhou, during this period while all three were uprooted from their homes, and it was then that Wang Yun grew close to the two artist friends. In his biographical sketches of Wang Xiaomei and Wu Xizai, Wang Yun relates that he met Wu and Wang Xiaomei in Taizhou at the home of a Mr Yao 姚氏, which appears to have been a gathering place for Yangzhou artists and writers. Wang Yun, who was an avid collector of calligraphy and rubbings of ancient inscriptions, says that it was after the events of 1853 that he ‘served [Wu Xizai] as my master until the end of his days’.

Wang Yun’s own colophon on the Jiaohua tu is dated 1854, thus it is reasonable to conclude that the hands scroll was painted sometime in the early 1850s, quite possibly while the artist was himself homeless. Wang Yun’s colophon comprises a poem evoking the scene confronting travelers at the time: ‘Scattered along the byways they cry out their distress, and accompany their companions with importuning chants. These days who can fathom how grim is a life of poverty, and to incessantly suffer other’s disapproving glares.’

The final, undated appreciation added to the scroll by Lanpo (Zhang Zhaocen) reads: ‘Mr Wang Xiaomou has long been famous in Hanshang (i.e., Yangzhou). He is especially good at painting people. The long hands scroll by him “The 36 Begging Professions” is marvelous. It stands apart from his most accomplished lifework, so I use a few words to take note of it.’ Lanpo’s remarks underscore that the attention lavished by the artist on these exceptional portraits of beggars and street entertainers distinguishes these paintings from the kind of work for which Wang Xiaomei was and is best known – shiniu 卜女, or traditional paintings of beautiful women. This

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9 Yangzhou hua yuan lu, Yangzhou congke ed. in 4 juan, 1931, 2: 6b.
suggests that the *Jiaohua tu* would not have been painted for their commercial value, but were most likely painted to express the artist’s private observations about the subject, some of which may have been controversial. We shall return to this question again later, but it is useful to keep the painter’s self-revelatory intent in mind when reading the poems ‘written in jest’ by Wang Yan to accompany the paintings.

Establishing Wang Yan’s identity has been a most troublesome task. He does not appear in readily available sources, though not all avenues have been exhausted at this writing. He seems not to have made much of a name for himself as an artist or writer, although he was clearly a member of Wang Xiaomei’s intimate circle. In fact, there is an anthology of poetry compiled by one Li Zhaozeng 李肇增, *Huai hai qiu jia ji* 渔海秋笳集, published in 1860, which contains one *juan* of Wang Yan’s poetry, as well as that of a dozen others including, most notably, Wu Xizai and Wang Yun. ¹⁰ Interestingly, Wang Yan’s contribution to the anthology is entitled ‘Suffering Hardship’, and although I have not yet located a copy it is probably a safe bet that the poem dwells on the hardship experienced while fleeing the Taipings. Li Wancai 李萬才 of the Yangzhou Museum is of the opinion that Wang Yan was, if not Wang Xiaomei’s son, then a close younger relative, though I have not been able to confirm this. The placement of Wang Yan’s poems on the scroll, i.e., ahead of Wang Yun’s colophon despite their later date (1871 vs. 1854), suggests a pride of place conferred perhaps by blood relation, as perhaps does Wang Yan’s cryptic personal seal ‘Wangs’ son’s ink’. In any event, Wang Yan obviously thought himself in a position to give voice to the artist’s intent in painting the illustrations, at times making explicit in his poems such social comment as might have been thought rather daring in those repressive times.¹¹

¹⁰ See Zhongguo congshu zonglu 中國叢書綜錄, I, 919. The publisher of this anthology turns out to be none other than the same Mr Yao from Taizhou in whose home Wu Xizai and Wang Xiaomei were guests while refugees in the mid-1850s. In *Yangzhou hua yuan lu* (2. 6a) Mr Yao is called Yao shi Chi Yun Shan Guan 楊氏遲雲山館, but I have been unable to identify him further. Also of interest from the point of view of the chronology of our friends’ Taizhou exile is an inscription by Wang Yun dated 1856 on a leaf in Wu Xizai’s *Wu Rangzhi yinpu*; see Word as Image: The Art of Chinese Seal Engraving, p. 68, pl. 6A. It appears that the creative activity of everyone associated with the handscrew continued more or less unabated while they were thrown together in Taizhou during nearly a decade in exile.

¹¹ In his brief discussion of painting as a form of protest, Michael Sullivan notes that ‘painting was often called “silent poetry”, wu sheng shi, and thought of as a way of release of feelings that need not, or sometimes could not, be put into words’, leaving the articulation of the implied criticism to a later generation of sympathizers. For a few
Wang Xiaomei the Artist

Wang Xiaomei’s hometown of Yangzhou was an artists’ haven of long standing by the late eighteenth century, in large measure due to the economic boom experienced by the region along with the rise of the salt trade and proximity to the Grand Canal. Had it not been for this favorable location it is doubtful whether the city could have recovered from the almost total destruction visited upon it by vengeful Manchu troops in April, 1645.12

The Yangzhou School of painting which subsequently rose to preeminence and endured for some 200 years during the Qing dynasty is represented by well over 600 Yangzhou artists, calligraphers, and seal carvers, many of the first rank. Of these some fifteen different painters were grouped together over time in various configurations as the famous Yangzhou ha guai (揚州八怪 ‘Eight Yangzhou Eccentrics’), and one of these was the influential Hua Yan (1682–74) whose distinctive style Wang Xiaomei strove to emulate. In the view of Li Wancai, ‘Wang Xiaomei was a comprehensive artist of many talents who not only made contributions to traditional painting but also excelled at absorbing foreign influences. His paintings of women in the traditional style especially are complete in form and expression, stimulating in their radiance, full of vigor, and charmingly lifelike, at a stroke reversing the pale and lifeless condition of predecessors’ work. They are wonderful works of art which break through the limiting barriers of “scholarly painting” advocated by literati and officialdom.’13

Like other painters of his generation (i.e., active after the Jiaqing 嘉慶 reign period of 1796–1820), Wang Xiaomei was strongly affected by popular influences and by increasing exposure to artistic influences from abroad. It was during this time that new printing techniques, especially copperplate printing and collotype printing of books and paintings, began to afford painters unprecedented opportunities to disseminate their works and influence each other artistically. These developments were instrumental in causing artists to broaden their range of activity as well as their field of vision. The

famous examples, see his The Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry and Calligraphy, New York: George Braziller, 1974, pp. 30–34. If the Lanpo who appended the colophon to Wang Xiaomei’s Jiaohua tu is in fact Zhang Zhaocen as I suggest, Zhang’s enthusiastic endorsement of Wang’s painting would, of course, have extended to the implied ‘subtext’.

13 Li Wancai, op.cit., p. 34.
lifelike flavour of their art was enhanced, as was the approachability of the subject matter, making their paintings quite unlike the kind of purely imaginary and supernatural realms often depicted in the past. As a result of the dissemination of Western European art, Chinese painters’ knowledge of form, brightness, and colour was increased, and they experimented continually with new ways to increase the expressive potential of these elements. Not all were up to the task, however, as some produced a kind of bastardized Western–Chinese painting. Wang Xiaomei was one of the gifted few who was able selectively to absorb Western influences and successfully adapt them to the enrichment of traditional techniques.

By a comparatively early age Wang Xiaomei had demonstrated his complete mastery of virtually all subjects, from portrait painting, flowers, and birds, to animals, insects and fish. His technical skill was also multifaceted, as he was equally at home sketching with a fine brush as with a heavy brush. His most noteworthy characteristic was his practice of sketching women and other figures freehand on an otherwise blank sheet of paper using a fine brush. Like the majority of his contemporaries who also specialized in painting the human figure, Western influence prompted Wang Xiaomei to practice with sketches, some done from life. His paintings of people are accurate and true to life both in posture and expression and full of vitality as a result. By the early Daoguang 道光 period (1821–1850) when Wang Xiaomei was in his late twenties, his reputation was already solidly established in Yangzhou.

After the first half of the nineteenth century, painters increasingly began to portray society as they observed it around them, and Wang Xiaomei is noteworthy in this regard. Many of his smaller album paintings in particular deal with popular (i.e., minjian 民間) themes. And some of these works clearly reflect the artist’s critical stance vis-à-vis contemporary social conditions. One such painting, ‘Fighting over water’ Zheng shui tu 爭水圖, depicts a scene in which two burly, shoeless peasants at a waterwheel are prevented from coming to blows by bystanders, including the small son of one and an old man who, greatly agitated, places himself between them. Nearby a small dog yaps excitedly and a better dressed female passerby recoils in shock. The painting is gripping in its realism and viscerally conveys the desperate straits of the peasantry after years of warfare and drought. This painting and a fan painting of the trio, ghostcatcher Zhong Kui 鍾馗, sagely

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14 Li Wancai, op.cit., p. 34.
15 One album of scroll paintings, Wang Xiaomou renwu ce shen pin 王小某人物冊神品, Shanghai: Shanghai wenming shuju, 1909, contains several notable examples of this genre.
Zhang Tianshi 張天師, and a judge, which bears a lengthy inscription by the artist, are discussed at length by Li Wancai.16

The inscription by the artist on this painting of ghostcatchers, a favorite subject of his, is most revealing. In it Wang Xiaomei deplores the current powerlessness of the two exorcists to rid society of its ghosts and demons which, rather than assuming easily recognizable subhuman forms as in times past, are no longer readily distinguishable from the rest of humanity. Nowadays they assume human shape but display demonic natures:

If you observe people today, each displays his own devilish devices... they have devilish names and demonic surnames, the better to cheat one another, devilish words and demonic speech, the better to confuse one another. Espying the smallest advantage, they use a devilish show and demonic knowledge to conspire to get it; encountering the smallest injury, they use their devilish heads and demonic brains to avoid it.... There are those who seek the heat and attach themselves to the influential, they are "worm-their-way-in" devils; there are those who make groundless accusations, they are "broad daylight" devils; there are those who trip up in front and fall down behind, they're the foolhardy devils. As for the rest, the so-called spiritual devils, jumping devils, gambling devils, carnal devils, ugly devils, greedy devils, sickly devils, rotten devils, I'll say no more....

As Li Wancai points out, in this humorous but pointed gem of an essay Wang Xiaomei holds up a mirror to the business as usual, 'feudal' society of his day, revealing its uglier aspects. 'Confronting the ugliness in society, Wang Su dared in his work to attack it forcefully, revealing his thinking to be that of an honest, progressive painter.'17

The Jiaohua tu: 'Illustrations of the Begging Professions'

On the most superficial level the punning title jiaohua tu translates as 'Illustrations of the Begging Professions', since jiaohuazi 教化子 colloquially referred to a beggar, one who earns his livelihood by inciting or urging (jiao 教/叫) others to change or modify their behavior (hua 化). At a deeper level, however, which Wang Xiaomei also must have had in mind, jiaohua means 'to bring enlightenment to the people through education', that is, to transform (hua) customs and habits of mind by teaching (jiao) civilized behavior. In this sense, jiaohua is roughly synonymous with the metaphorical expression

17 Li Wancai, op.cit., p. 40.
fenghua 風化 ‘transform like the wind’ used to liken the idealized Confucian ruler’s quasi-mystical influence on the people to that of the winds which were thought to bring about the seasonal transformations observable in the natural world.

Wang Xiaomei’s purpose is aptly served by this ambiguity of reference, since in theory the transforming influence of the Qing dynasty’s moral authority could be held directly responsible for the chaos, corruption, and impoverishment of the country during the declining years of the dynasty. Thus, for example, among the more traditional types of professional street entertainers and religious mendicants in the paintings several figures appear who seem to have recently joined the ranks of these denizens of the streets and alleyways. They do not appear to be mere bystanders. How they came to be there is made more explicit in a few cases in the appended verses by Wang Yan.  

Following are translations of Wang Yan’s 12 poems. Not all references to the paintings are readily identifiable; in some cases no figure in the paintings clearly matches the description. Proposed correlations with the paintings are indicated in parentheses.

1. (No. 1, seated figure on the right?)

Nevermind that once he was a mandarin,  
dishonorably arrogant, harsh, venal and corrupt.  
His ill-gotten gains amounted to millions,  
but now all that’s left to him is one square brick.

2. (No. 10)

The poor octogenarian, though healthy, is pitiable.  
Holding a jar and grasping a stick, he stands by the gate.  
Nevermind that he personally received the emperor’s beneficence,  
mandarin cap askew, he now begs for spare change.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of the vast subject of street entertainment and its practitioners. For a brief but most useful overview of the begging professions still represented in Peking in the 1930s, styles of begging (some of which are actually a form of extortion), guild structure and governance, etc., the reader is referred to Patricia Ebrey, Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook, pp. 396–400, ‘The Life of Beggars’.
3.

Completely hairless they live like monks,
disheveled, with braided vine leaves covering their bodies.
Today you wouldn’t think them descendants of Shen Nong,
butter rather savage predecessors of Fu Xi.

4. (No. 10, second figure from right)

Wandering to and fro the poor aspiring student,
belly full of essays, his recitations emerge as sobs.
He failed the big test, so now his family’s in poverty.
He’s on his way to beg from well-to-do neighbors.

5. (No. 10, figure on the right)

Clacking his bamboo clappers, he tells of faraway places,
how cleverly he speaks his piece, not missing a beat.
Relying on just his tongue, poor but upright he wanders,
everywhere spinning his marvelous tales.

6. (No. 11, seated woman on the right)

The ill-fated beauty is down on her luck,
marrined to a pauper it’s hard to raise a family.
Seeking food, she takes in mending for the poor,
instead of embroidering flowers on better folk’s brocade.

7.

How lamentable the fickle ways of the world:
villains and rascals with their crafty looks,
Beggars and unruly types, their
japes and gibes are now in style.

8.

Try to civilize by teaching, yet people don’t improve;
it’s because they’re repaying a previous life’s debt of sin.
Strive instead for human kindness and generosity,
unpublicized good works themselves confer blessings.
9. (No. 2)

Not only do they noisily attract passersby,
they also look to a rich old man for a handout.
Each the master of a single talent or trick,
they roam everywhere throughout the land.

10. (No. 4?)

Their folk tunes arouse the public, so they sing old songs in dialect,
and the people just love the music.
You might say they're unschooled, but don’t say the scenes are ugly,
All belong to the mendicant professions.

11. (No. 5?)

Now a Taoist immortal, now again not; now a Buddha, and now again not;
descending dragons and crouching tigers, with steely pate and iron brow,
kit full of almsbowl, charms and clothes.
Their commands, calls and clanging sounds, drawn-out cries and curt shouts,
and songs to dance steps disorderly and confused.
Before them passersby gather in the street,
to be entreated for alms and begged for charity.
Just one gift, one charity, then there's food and drink;
there's no end to the mystery, human life is unfathomable.

12.

The boy with his tiny capital tries to eke out a living,
hawking flower seeds and live plants.
But the seeds are really sunflower seeds,
and the plants grew from peanuts!

Poems 3, 7, 8, and 12 do not describe any of the paintings. Numbers 3 and 12 are specific enough but do not correspond to any of the figures depicted, which could mean that one or more scenes have not survived. The import of no. 3 is, of course, that some members of society at least have degenerated to modes of existence predating Chinese civilization itself! Poem 7 laments the topsy-turvy state of affairs in which civilized behavior has been replaced by craven scheming and a general debasement of moral values, much as did Wang Xiaomei's acerbic inscription on his painting of ghostcatchers. Poem 8, on the other hand, strikes a distinctly Buddhist note, attributing the
ineducability of the people and their dissoluteness to karma, and instead of misguided attempts to teach values, advocates individual self-improvement and good works whose motive is not public recognition.

On the whole the paintings are noteworthy for their realism and for the attention to detail with which facial expressions (including those of the monkeys in no. 12) and the draping of clothing have been rendered. There is a certain gentility of expression in the youthful females portrayed in nos. 2, 4, 9, and 11 which is strongly reminiscent of Wang Xiaomei's best shinū painting. Similarly, the consummate skill with which the painter has created the fine texture and shading of the women's hair, especially in nos. 9 and 11, is characteristic of Wang Xiaomei and clearly reflects his mastery of exceptionally difficult brushwork techniques.\(^9\) Bright colour has been used sparingly and to good effect, as in the theatrical props protruding from the kit of the performer in no. 5, the cap of the old civil official in no. 10, and the fighting cock in no. 7, the latter being otherwise distinguished only by the oversized heads of the two central figures. The complexities of the characters are noteworthy for the subtle shading of fleshtones which run the gamut from the pale faces of the younger women, to the merest hint of colour in the face of the scholar in no. 3, to the ruddy visage and glossy pate of the monkey–keeper in no. 12. Postures and poses throughout are expressive and lifelike, and display the artist's well-attested attention to naturalness and anatomical correctness. Generally speaking, of Wang Xiaomei's paintings in a similar format which I have been able to examine, few if any have been executed with this degree of precision and detail, so that this series of character studies is unique not only for its subject matter.

A number of the better-dressed female figures with bound feet appear either holding implements (no. 4) or engaged in some humble activity (nos. 9, 11), a clear indication of their sudden fall into their present lowly status. The same is true of the two scholar figures and the octogenarian official and his wife (nos. 3, 10). Such characters seem clearly out of place among the utterly destitute cripples who can do nothing but beg, and whose pained expressions reflect the bitterness of their existence (nos. 1, 8). On the other hand, the better dressed street entertainers with their specialized skills and traditional performing arts appear self-assured and better equipped for their present occupations (nos. 2, 4, 5, 10, 12) for which they probably served long apprenticeships.

\(^9\) See Li Wancai, *op.cit.*, p. 37 for Li's discussion of this feature of a large hanging scroll portrait called 'Summer' in the Yangzhou Museum.
Outstretched Leaves on his Bamboo Staff

The incongruousness of the apparent newcomers in these character studies is probably intended as a not-so-subtle commentary on the times, and it reveals the sensitivity of this circle of Yangzhou artists in exile not merely to the plight of the desperately poor, but also to the plight of China in mid-nineteenth century. In the thinking of Wang Xiaomei and his like-minded friends, the upheavals which accompanied the Taiping Rebellion in Jiangsu may have seemed merely a precursor of what was in store for the country as a whole as the Qing dynasty continued its inexorable decline into decrepitude.
Captions

Fig. 1: Wu Xizai’s signature and seal

Fig. 2: Wang Su’s signature and seal

Fig. 3: Wang Yan’s and Wang Yun’s signature and seal

Fig. 4: Lanpo’s (Zhang Zhaocen) signature and seals; collector’s seal (lower left)

Plates:

No. 1: On the left a blind man with a trained dog holding a begging dish. About the man’s waist is a hollow bamboo drumming tube used for accompaniment. The figure on the right is perhaps the venal former official referred to in poem 1.

No. 2: Street entertainers, one on the left dancing and balancing a set of bowls on his head (dingwan 頂碗) while firecrackers tied to his queue explode. On the right an accompanist keeps time by rapping a dish (qiaodie 敲碟) with a chopstick (see also no. 4) and a female accompanist clacks bamboo clappers. Still another female with longstemmed pipe and two short strings of cash in her left hand looks on.

No. 3: Three beggars. The figure at right prepares a meal while the graduate of the county-level civil service examination (xiucai 秀才) wearing cap and patched clothing waits. Both are looking at the third figure on the left who is brandishing what appears to be a bottle while pointing toward his mouth as if begging a bite to eat.

No. 4: On the left a male figure plays the huqin 胡琴 while on the right three well-dressed female singers with bound feet look on. The taller of the two in the foreground has her arm around the shoulders of her daughter(?) in identical costume, while an older matron looks on. The woman in the center grasps a huagun 花棍 rhythm stick with embedded cymbals or copper cash used for accompaniment, while the younger woman holds another unidentified rhythm instrument in her left hand.
No. 5: The performer on the left in mid-step does a military dance while wielding a whip, while a ‘saucer-spinner’ performs on the right. In the kit of the latter are visible an assortment of other theatrical props.

No. 6: Buddhist mendicants engaged in various forms of self-mutilating (?) display. On the left, balancing lighted incense candles in incisions in the arm; on the right, suspending an incense burner (liuxingwan 流星碗) from the scalp; the figure in the middle recites sutras to the accompaniment of a small chime.

No. 7: Seated figures with two fighting cocks.

No. 8: On the left, the beggar eating from the rice bowl has a bad case of scabies. The figure in the middle is a snake charmer (shua she 耍蛇). The cripple on the right who has lost a foot is fanning himself with a large leaf.

No. 9: On the left is another blind musician/fortune-teller with huqin and a bamboo cane. On the right looking his way are a well-dressed woman with bound feet and a ratexterminator who sells poison.

No. 10: On the left an elderly couple leaning on staves, the woman seated with her basket of life’s necessities beside her. The old man wears his robe of office with mandarin square and the cap of a civil official. Standing in the middle is a young scholar with folded arms clapping a drum (yugu 魚鼓) to accompany his singing (daoqing 道情), and on the left is a storyteller keeping time with bamboo clappers.

No. 11: A pretty young woman with small baby at her feet sits on a stool and mends the shirt of a Buddhist mendicant whose percussion instrument (muyu 太魚) sits on the ground beside him.

No. 12: Performing monkeys with their master (at right) and his apprentice (on the left) who calls out as he drums up an audience. On the stand at right are theatrical masks worn by the monkeys during performances. The painter Wang Su’s signature and seal appear at left.