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## Qi Baishi and the *Wenren* Tradition

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### Abstract

One of the best known painters of the 20th century, Qi Baishi came from a poor family and owed his education to scholars who had recognized his talent and determination. This article tries to answer the question of how much of the literati (*wenren*) tradition can be traced in Qi Baishi's works. Although they only form a small portion of his oeuvre, he made paintings which correspond to the literati topics; whether they also comply with the literati aesthetics is more ambiguous, however. Six paintings from the collection of the National Gallery in Prague were selected and analyzed in search of the answer.

**Keywords:** Qi Baishi, 20th century Chinese painting, *wenren* painting, Chen Shizeng

### Izveček:

Eden izmed najbolj znanih slikarjev 20. stoletja, Qi Baishi, izhaja iz revne družine in svojo izobrazbo dolguje učenjakom, ki so prepoznali njegov talent in odločnost. Pričujoč članek poskuša odgovoriti na vprašanje, koliko literarne (*wenren*) tradicije lahko zasledimo v Qi Baishijevih delih. Čeprav predstavljajo le majhen del njegovega opusa, je ustvaril slike, ki odgovarjajo literarni tematiki. Ali so tovrstna dela tudi v skladu z literarno estetiko, pa je nekoliko bolj vprašljivo. V iskanju odgovora je bilo izbranih in analiziranih šest del iz kolekcije Nacionalne galerije v Pragi.

**Ključne besede:** Qi Baishi, kitajsko slikarstvo 20. stoletja, slikarstvo *wenren*, Chen Shizeng

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## 1 Introduction

Qi Baishi 齊白石 (1864–1957), one of the few Chinese painters who accomplished a transformation of the traditional painting (*guohua* 國畫), undoubtedly is one of the best known and the most popular ones. He also enjoyed the highest official recognition after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, despite the traditional painting's decline in favor.

Qi Baishi became well known and popular in the distant Czech Republic thanks to a large collection of his paintings in the National Gallery in Prague. The core of this collection was amassed by Vojtěch Chytil (1896–1936),<sup>1</sup> a Czech painter who lived in Beijing from 1921 to 1926 and joined its art scene, organizing exhibitions and teaching oil painting at the Beijing Arts Academy.<sup>2</sup> Chytil was an ardent collector of Chinese and Tibetan art, and proved a pioneer by concentrating on the contemporary painting in *xieyi* (寫意) mode: “conveying ideas in free-hand brushwork”. Among the leading painters he met, befriended and bought paintings from while in Beijing, Qi Baishi was a prominent figure. Back in Czechoslovakia Chytil staged exhibitions of contemporary Chinese painting in 1928, 1930, and 1931, and these had a positive impact on the public. After 1949, when China hosted many Czechoslovakian experts and students, not a few of them—notably Josef Hejzlar<sup>3</sup>—made use of their awareness of the modern Chinese art and continued collecting. Although many Qi Baishi's paintings acquired by Czechs in China in the fifties have remained in private collections, a large portion was acquired by the Asian Art Department of the National Gallery, Prague.<sup>4</sup> There are approximately 150 pieces, including the significant Chytil collection which was not affected by the master's final over-production and occasional shallowness. This makes it one of the biggest collections of Qi Baishi's works outside China, not only in terms of size, but also quality. Finally, some of the paintings from this collection prompted this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Very little is known about Chytil's life. Recently, his hitherto unknown correspondence was presented by Čapková 2010; see also Pejčochová 2008, 24–29.

<sup>2</sup> *Beijing meishu xuexiao* 北京美術學校, the first national (state) art school in China, was founded in 1918 (Kao 1972, 335).

<sup>3</sup> He is the author of the widely circulated *Chinese Watercolours*, 1978, also published in German, and French.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the holdings in this collection, see Borota 1994.

## 2 The Years of Learning

Qi Baishi grew up as the first-born child in a poor peasant family in Hunan.<sup>5</sup> Due to these difficult living conditions, he had to withdraw from school after mere two years of attendance and help his father in the fields. Drawing had attracted him since childhood. He was of course self-taught, first learning from “New Year” prints and later from a volume of the *Mustard Seed Garden* painting manual. He grew up too weak to labor in the fields, and so learned carpentry instead. As an apprentice, he switched to decorative wood-carving. He became a carpenter selling paintings on the side. When he approached the age of thirty, his talent attracted the attention of Hu Qinyuan 胡沁園 (b. 1914), a wealthy sponsor who enabled him to study classical poetry and painting. In the following five years, he not only acquired knowledge, but also befriended scholars who frequented his teacher’s house. He further learned seal-engraving and epigraphy. Thereafter, Qi Baishi made his living as a professional artist, producing portraits and paintings on auspicious topics. In 1902, he was invited to the city of Xi’an as a private tutor of painting. In the following years, he travelled extensively in China and saw some of her breathtaking mountain scenery. On occasion, he viewed private art collections, notably Guo Baosun’s 郭葆蓀 collection in Qinzhou 欽州, Guangxi. There he saw some paintings by Zhu Da 朱耷 (1625–1705) and Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593) which made a rather strong impression on him (Li 1977, 11). Rejecting his former style, with perseverance he elaborated on a particular new style in *xieyi* mode.

## 3 Changing the Mode

In 1917, he settled in Beijing, a recognized seal-carver but a controversial painter. Qi Baishi owed a great deal to the encouragement he received from Chen Shizeng 陳師曾/Hengke 衡恪 (1876–1923), a painter and scholar who influenced his art far more than anybody else. A native of Xiushui 修水, Jiangxi, Chen studied natural sciences (*bowuke* 博物科) in Japan and then taught at various institutions in southern China. The post at the ministry of education brought him to Beijing, where he stayed on as a professor at the Art Academy. Purely by chance, he had seen Qi Baishi’s seals in a shop at Liulichang 琉璃廠, and upon paying him a visit Chen learned that they shared the same progressive views on art. Thus, their

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<sup>5</sup> The biographical information is based on *Baishi laoren* 1987 [1962].

profound relationship began. According to Qi Baishi, Chen Shizeng was the only one to appreciate his works at the time.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he encouraged Baishi to go ahead and “change his mode” (*bian fa* 變法): the sharp combination of red blossoms and black ink leaves in Qi Baishi’s flower paintings from 1920 had then developed.

Furthermore, Chen Shizeng incorporated his friend’s flower paintings and landscape scenes into the Joint Exhibition of Chinese and Japanese Paintings that was held in Japan in 1922. The paintings in *da xieyi* style by both painters attracted considerable attention; Qi Baishi’s exhibits were all sold (Zhu 2003, 19, 22). Qi Baishi himself considered the impact of the successful exhibition in Japan the starting point for his gradual recognition at home (*Baishi laoren* 1987, 78). Finally, in 1927, he was invited to teach at the Beijing Arts Academy.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the established art circles of rather conservative Beijing, which went on producing landscapes of the orthodox style,<sup>8</sup> remained reserved. They could hardly accept the radical, free approaches to flower, landscape and figure painting presented by Chen Shizeng and the painters of his circle. Furthermore, Qi Baishi could be easily attacked because of his humble origins and spotty education (Li 1977, 47), and all he could do was stay away. “A hundred years from now,” he commented, “a fair judgment will be made as to who is a better painter, who knows more about poetry, and who is the loftier one” (*Baishi laoren* 1987, 160). At the other extreme, there were the intellectuals who denigrated traditional styles of painting, considering Western realism to be the true modern solution in arts. So it was that even though Qi Baishi’s work was eventually to mean so much in modernizing and reforming twentieth century Chinese culture, he did not mix with

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<sup>6</sup> “At that time, I followed the secluded path of Bada 八大, and people in Beijing did not like me; there simply was not a single person who would have understood my paintings, except Chen Shizeng.” (Zhu 2003, 19).

<sup>7</sup> The invitation came from the new president of the Academy, Lin Fengmian 林風眠 (1900–1991). See, for example, Zhang Huanmei (1992, 56). There is some controversy about this matter in literature. Oftentimes, Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 (1895–1953) alone is credited with appointing Qi Baishi, for example in Xu Beihong’s biography by his second wife Liao Jingwen 廖靜文 (Liao 1989, 106–109). Xu Beihong took charge of the institution in November 1928. It became in the meantime a college of Beijing University, and Qi Baishi’s position was elevated to a university professor (Zhang 1992, 57). That is probably why Qi Baishi feels indebted to Xu Beihong and in his memoirs remembers him rather than Lin Fengmian. Both Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong were specializing in Western style oil painting at that time.

<sup>8</sup> The Orthodox school (*zhengpai* 正派) asserted landscape painting in the manner of the seventeenth century “four Wangs”. They in turn imitated Yuan 元 Dynasty (1278–1368) literati or *wenren* 文人 landscape painting.

the leading personages of progressive thought and literature who then lived in Beijing.



Photo 1: Qi Baishi in his studio with the housekeeper, Mr. Liu Jintao who mounted his paintings and Dr. Zdeněk Hrdlička, Beijing 1952. Photo by J. Potměšil. The photograph was kindly provided by Mrs. Hrdličková.

Qi Baishi is often categorized with other painters who reinvigorated the traditional vein of modern Chinese painting. The stylistic origin of their works lies in the tradition which began with the Yangzhou 揚州 school of painting in the 18th century, and was further developed by Zhao Zhiqian 趙之謙 (1829–1884) and Wu Changshi 吳昌碩 (1844–1927), both tied with Shanghai.<sup>9</sup> In Yangzhou, the rise of the *huaniao* (花鳥) or “flowers and birds” genre, executed in free style brushwork, can be explained by the demands of a new urban middle class who found them more intelligible and pleasing than the intellectually more demanding *wenren* 文人 tradition which was considered the true art. The latter were executed in ink; colours if any were subdued. A variety of brush techniques and abstracted forms conveyed the painter’s highly personal views of nature, with landscape as the dominant topic. Such paintings were a vehicle for Confucian self-cultivation, and self-presentation of the amateur-scholar artist. By the time of the Yangzhou school, however, the *wenren* landscape painting was running out of breath, partly

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<sup>9</sup> There is an indisputable link between Yangzhou painting and the Shanghai school, which in turn influenced Qi Baishi’s work.

because of the self-imposed restrictions on topic and style. Zhao Zhiqian and Wu Changshi came from literati families and were well-educated; they eventually succeeded in elevating the free style *huaniao* pictures to the realms of high art. Both artists, besides being noted seal-engravers, were also well versed in epigraphy and sigillography, and therefore painted using vigorous calligraphic brushwork. In addition, they painted in bright colours. As for subject matters, they specialized in flowers and other plants, but they went beyond the boundaries of flowers with propitious symbolism, and adopted new and unusual vegetation subjects. If their works are to be recognized as *wenren* painting, then one has to step away from its old definition, formulated several centuries earlier, and allow broader criteria.



Photo 2: Věna Hrdličková, Zdeněk Hrdlička, Qi Baishi. Beijing 1952. Photo by J. Potměšil. Mr. Hrdlička served as the Czechoslovak cultural attaché in Beijing and was the recipient of several paintings by Qi Baishi. The photograph was kindly provided by Mrs. Věna Hrdličková.

Zhao and Wu were responsible for influencing numerous early twentieth century masters such as Chen Shizeng, Qi Baishi, Chen Nian 陳年/Banding 半丁 (1877–1970), and Li Kuchan 李苦禪 (1898–1983).<sup>10</sup> Wu Changshi in particular inspired Qi Baishi's interest in epigraphy, and influenced him in the painting of wisteria, red plum blossoms, and other flowers. This group also includes Huang

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<sup>10</sup> Wu Changshi, Zhao Zhiqian and their followers are referred to as the Shanghai school. The artists named above, however, were all bound with Beijing, and referring to them as to Shanghai school—as in the case of the exhibition held on the occasion of the 20th International Congress of Chinese Studies, Prague 1968—is misleading.

Binhong 黃賓虹 (1865–1955), a traditional painter and important theoretician who was regarded as the greatest traditional painter in the South, while Qi Baishi was the greatest in the North.<sup>11</sup> The painter Chen Banding's choice of floral subject matter was similar to Qi Baishi's and in the thirties sold better than his, but both occasionally painted innovative landscapes some of which drew on the models in Chen Shizeng's painting. Another important innovator was Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983) who rivals Qi Baishi's fame in the parts of the world not under Communist China's influence. The list of reforming artists in the field of traditional Chinese painting does not end here.

It should not pass unnoticed that except for Qi Baishi, all these artists mentioned came from families with a scholarly background and received solid education, thereby naturally entering the *wenren* circles. Qi Baishi had no such origin, and his opportunity to study came relatively late. Hence, we should all the more admire his originality, depth, and wisdom. The fact that he was able to rise so high without a proper education makes him even more remarkable and must have been astonishing then—just as it is today. Yet the unevenness of his background must have been perceived, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, when classical culture was still very much alive. It may have been another reason for the reserved attitudes mentioned earlier, and mutually, it may have caused Qi Baishi to stay secluded. On the other hand, it was in fact the traditional scholars who supported Qi Baishi's urge to learn when he was in his thirties, and with whose help he made the transformation from a carpenter to a scholar-artist. Qi Baishi's biographer notes:

At the age of 35, he met with Xia Wuyi 夏午誼,<sup>12</sup> and at 37, he became Wang Xiangqi's 王湘綺<sup>13</sup> student. The help of these friends affected Qi Baishi's whole life. No lesser men than Wang Xiangqi and Fan Fanshan 樊樊山<sup>14</sup> befriended him. They came from the mandarin class, held high opinions of themselves and were rather self-conceited. Yet they actively sought Qi Baishi's company, acting as teachers and friends. They gave him guidance in

<sup>11</sup> Huang Binhong (born in Zhejiang) actually lived in Beijing from 1937 till 1948, this being the period of some of his most interesting artistic output.

<sup>12</sup> Xia Wuyi was the patron who invited Qi Baishi to Xi'an in 1902, where Xia served as an official.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Xiangqi (1832–1915), scholar and politician, became Qi Baishi's literature teacher in 1899. He also took a keen interest in Qi Baishi's seals.

<sup>14</sup> Fan Fanshan (1846–1931), an accomplished poet, met Qi Baishi in 1902 in Xi'an; he played an important role in Qi Baishi's career, inviting him to Beijing in 1917.

learning, manners and arts, and carved a coarse stone into a rare jade. They indeed made an ingenious contribution to Qi Baishi's success (Li 1977, 10).<sup>15</sup>

## 4 Paintings with the Air of *Wenren* Tradition

### 4.1 Trees and Plants

As far as the choice of a subject goes, Qi Baishi was quite versatile, and his repertoire was broad. He is best remembered as a prolific painter of flowers and birds, plants and insects (*caochong* 草蟲), and various water creatures (shrimps, crabs, fish). Besides these, he created some new and unexpected themes as well. The following selection, however, is based on images of classical subject matters, in an attempt to place his works within, and confront him with, the *wenren* tradition. Among plants, *wenren* or literati-painters always favoured pine, bamboo, orchids, plum blossoms, and lotus. Consequently, whenever Qi Baishi chose one of them as his subject, he knowingly entered that tradition. Moreover, Qi Baishi sometimes directly referred to well-known scholars of the past in the inscription. “Bamboo in the Wind” (Fig. 1) shows a close-up view of three stems, their lush leaves being blown in one direction by the wind. The stems are not rooted and the leaves extend over the borders of the paper. This is far from the colorful and playful style generally attributed to Qi Baishi, primarily because it is monochrome, painted in two or more shades of ink. The leaves in the front are executed in wet, dark black brush strokes, echoed by leaves of a lighter, grey tone painted by dry brush in the second plane background. The rendering of the bamboo leaves is singular; they seem robust and untidy. The inscription is placed in the empty lower right-hand corner, its characters in the cursive *xingshu* 行書 lean in the same direction that the leaves are blown by the wind; the mutual correlation between painting and calligraphy is well demonstrated in this work. The text recalls Zheng Xie 鄭燮 (1693–1765), a celebrated bamboo painter and calligrapher active in Yangzhou, and Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1798), the leading poet of his day, who used to entertain guests in his garden Suiyuan 隨園 in Nanjing. Both men epitomize the non-conformist, progressive trends of literati culture in the eighteenth century. It needs to be emphasized, though, that Qi Baishi's rendering does not follow Zheng Xie's style of painting the bamboo, but seeks its own way.

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<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise stated, translations from Chinese are by the author.



The scroll was executed as early as 1924, however, Qi Baishi dwelled on the topic for many years: he painted a similar version when he was 87 years old (about 1948), with an inscription recalling “the literati of the past”.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 1: Qi Baishi. Bamboo in the Wind.  
Hanging scroll, ink on paper, height 137 cm, width 33.5 cm.  
Signed, dated 1924, seals 1. *Mujushi*, 2. *Laobai*.  
Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 644.

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<sup>16</sup> Reproduced in Ho Kung-shang 1985, 96, ill. 119.



Fig.2. Qi Baishi. Winter.

Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, height 179 cm, width 47.2 cm.

Signed, undated, seals: 1. *Qi da*, 2. *Baishi weng*.

This is one of the four scrolls of a Four-Season set. The work draws on similar paintings by Wu Changshuo.

Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 645.

Just as in the above example, the scroll representing “Winter” (Fig. 2) is quite large. It is one of the “Four-Season” set (with plum blossoms as the symbol of “Spring”, yellow gourd standing for “Summer”, and bent grass—not the habitual

chrysanthemum—for “Autumn”). On the whole, each painting of the set emanates a serious, vigorous mood, and there are no birds or insects to enliven them as seen in many comparable examples of this subject matter. “Winter” depicts only a section of a bent trunk, with a couple of branches hanging down. Painted on a large scale, it is cut-off at the edges of the paper, it is impossible to imagine the whole tree. It is reminiscent of similar compositions by Zhao Zhiqian, and also those painted by Wu Changshi after him. The large scroll is filled with the mighty trunk and its heavy drooping branches which are hanging in disarray in front of the trunk. The strokes conveying the rough, reddish bark are juxtaposed with the long sharp needles. The inscription goes:

入江松影看龍翻

In the shade of a pine by the river  
I watched the dragons roll over.

Considering these two lines, we can imagine Qi Baishi within the surrounding scenery, somewhere near the pine, whose close-up he depicted on the scroll. In spite of its strength, the powerful pine represents only a part of the scene, a fragment of Nature.

This expressive, energetic manner was typical of Qi Baishi’s works, but was not the only one he practiced. Qi Baishi wanted and was able to express diverse sentiments, as proved, for example, by his elegant and delicate rendering of orchids (Fig. 3). Below the signature, he added: “swiftly sketched” (*yihui* 一揮), yet this small monochrome masterpiece proves his competence in adjusting the brush and technique well into his advanced years. One orchid wilted to the ground, the other seeming to recline over. The feeling of sadness is reinforced by the seal “Hall of the Lamenting Crow” (*Huiwu tang* 悔塢堂) carved in memory of his parents in 1935, after he visited their graves for the last time.<sup>17</sup> The inscribed title “A Message Sent Afar” (*Yaoyao yu yu* 遙遙與語) suggests a longing for someone who had left.

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<sup>17</sup> Qi Baishi’s parents died in 1926, four months apart. His second wife Hu Baozhu 胡寶珠 died in 1943, at the age of forty one.



Fig. 3. A Message Sent Afar.  
Ink on paper, height 55.5 cm, width 34.8 cm.  
Signed, dated 1948, seals: 1. *Baishi*, 2. *Huiwu tang*.  
Purchased in China, 1955. National Gallery, Prague, Vm 649.

#### 4.2 Landscapes

For literati (*wenren*), landscapes, not flowers, were the typical subject-matter. It was the other way round with Qi Baishi. His landscapes count for a relatively small portion of his oeuvre, although he turned to this subject quite regularly in his sixties and seventies (Tsao 1993, 243). Qi Baishi may have preferred the plant subjects for economic reasons, since he is known as someone who always considered the financial aspect of matters. In addition, landscapes are impregnated with a profundity which hampers producing them in great numbers: something he did when painting chickens, shrimps or frogs. While these “minor” subjects also sprung from a long, careful observation and intimate familiarity with the subject, landscape paintings are based on a different kind of observation and understanding. Works which carry a symbolic meaning or an allusion connected with scholar’s milieu do not present the depicted object as the ultimate goal; instead they suggest a realm of thought beyond the painting. Last but not least, like all painters of the Epigraphic school (*jinsi pai* 金石派), he confronted the problem of applying “engraving” brush-strokes to landscape (Tsao 1993, 330). In an inscription to a landscape painting, he reflected,

My landscapes do not win the praise of my contemporaries, nor do I ask for it. It is difficult to surpass the ancients when painting a landscape, so why bother to do so. If someone says that I am not capable of painting a landscape, I shall rejoice (Li 1977, 78).

In the landscapes he painted, then, Qi Baishi did not try to imitate ancient masters. Instead, he usually depicted the places he remembered in a highly individual, unconventional style. “In landscapes, I use my own brush technique, and paint my home,” he proclaimed in an inscription (Li 1977, 78). Even though he knew and admired works by Zhu Da, Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), and Shitao 石濤 (1642–1715),<sup>18</sup> he was determined to paint landscapes in his own manner. “When I paint a landscape, I am just afraid it will resemble [those by] Zhu Da,” he wrote (Tsao 1993, 273). In the words of Jung Ying Tsao, “It was this adamant refusal to subordinate his creative impulses to the past that made him the target of criticism from prominent artists in Beijing who interpreted his independent spirit as a deplorable lack of good breeding and proper training” (Tsao 1993, 273, 275). Consequently, his landscapes were less popularized than his other, as a rule more whimsical paintings of plants, insects or shrimps. And in the view of contemporary connoisseurs, they were also the least comprehensible or acceptable of his oeuvre. Qi Baishi who, in the thirties, reached his artistic summit, was misunderstood in the most highly regarded types of Chinese painting subject matter (Lang 2002, 159).

The vigorous brushwork and simple shapes of peaks, practiced in Qi Baishi’s landscapes, clearly link him to Chen Shizeng. Two towering peaks painted in the back plane of the scroll reproduced in Fig. 4 are a prime example of this link. Although the inscribed text does not state it, the scene represents a view of the Borrowed Mountain (*Jieshan* 借山) where Qi Baishi leased a house in 1900, after he left his parental home and established himself as an independent artist. It was here that he set on the route culminating in “the change of mode in his feeble years” (*shuainian bianfa* 衰年變法). He painted this place many times, using different formats of painting (hanging scrolls, albums, etc.). Some versions were

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<sup>18</sup> As he himself admitted in an inscription quoted by Li (1977, 77). “In the *huaniao* painting,” he continued, “there are Xu Wei, Shitao, Zhu Da, and Li Shan 李鱓. All the other painters are mere artisans.”

inscribed with the same poem and bear the appropriate title *Jieshan yinguan tu* 借山吟館圖.<sup>19</sup>



Fig. 4: Qi Baishi. Poetry Studio by the Borrowed Mountain.  
Hanging scroll, ink and light colors on paper, height 137.5 cm, width 44.5 cm. Signed,  
dated 1930, seals: 1. *Azhi*, 2. *Mujushi*, 3. *Laobai*, 4. *Yiqie huahui wuneng jiaru*.  
Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 1445.

The Prague version of *Jieshan yinguan tu* is noteworthy for its inscriptions which recorded the difficulties of painting not only this particular scroll, but a landscape in general. Two lengthy inscriptions tell of Qi Baishi's determination to

<sup>19</sup> For example, the scroll reproduced in Yang 2005, 12.

maintain the high standards that he had set for himself when painting landscape scenery. The inscription by the lower right edge of the scroll goes:

此幅上畫之山偶用秃筆作點。酷似馬蹄跡。余恥之。復以濃墨改爲大米點。覺下半幅清秀上半幅重濁又惡之遂扯斷。留此畫竹法教我兒孫。

For the mountains on this painting, I happened to use a worn-out brush. They looked like prints left by hooves and I felt embarrassed. I prepared more ink and corrected the dots in Mi Fei's brush technique. But then I could see that the upper part of the painting was light, while the bottom part was heavy. Discontented, I ripped [the upper part] off, but preserved the [bottom part with] bamboos for the admonition of sons and grandsons.

It is “against the rules” to correct an ink painting, and it may come as a surprise that Qi Baishi humbly admitted it in the inscription. The second inscription, written on the upper part of the scroll, starts with the poem<sup>20</sup> and then expounds on the upper part of the scroll:

此幅上半幅之山已扯棄。用另帀以鄰國膠粘之補畫二山仍書原題二十八字。

I ripped off the original top of this painting with its mountains. I stuck [the remaining bottom part] to a piece of paper with a foreign-made glue. Then I once again painted the two peaks, and inscribed once more the twenty-eight characters of the original inscription.

Thus, the upper part shows the serene peaks, whereas the air of the lower part is easy and pleasant, depicting “Houses amidst Myriad Bamboos” (*Wan zhulin zhong wu shujian* 萬竹林中屋數間) as stated in the opening line of the poem (in the upper inscription). Qi Baishi combined the serene mountain setting with a contrasting, picturesque rural idyll and its irresistible charm of a bamboo grove, houses, and ducks. Once again, he used analogous, unexpected combinations in many other paintings, not only landscapes.

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<sup>20</sup> “Houses amidst myriad bamboos; Ducks in the pond in front of the doorway sit idle, like people do; As soon as lotuses stick out in spring, they dig out bamboo sprouts; They behold the layers of mountains behind their houses.”



Fig. 5: Qi Baishi. Red Sun above the Lake. Ink and colors on paper, height 151 cm, width 63.5 cm. Signed, undated, seal: *Baishi weng*. Formerly Vojtěch Chytil's collection, National Gallery, Prague, Vm 3038.

“Red Sun above the Lake” (Fig. 5), is an example of a painting which the public, familiar with Qi Baishi's flowers, insects and vegetables, would find highly unusual. Still, Qi Baishi painted several versions of the lake—most likely recalling lake Dongtinghu 洞庭湖 in his native province—some also with the impressive red solar disc setting, or perhaps rising.<sup>21</sup> Here, the grey, smudgy water surface, merging with the sky, covers the whole scroll, large by any standard. A rocky island rises in the centre: a low, smooth hill with a conical top, so characteristic of Qi Baishi's peaks. The water is depicted in dilute, blotted ink,

<sup>21</sup> See the same motive in the painting reproduced in Tsao (1993, 259), etc.



evenly applied with a wide brush. Qi Baishi seems to be experimenting here with the techniques of water depiction, and avoids the more habitual thin curved strokes representing individual ripples. Countless boats on their way back home are suggested by their sails only, this being a well established short-hand for evocating boats. The composition of this painting is unusual in many respects. The central rocky island breaks out of the flat water surfaces, much as the sun, a small red spot removed to the upper right corner, shines out of the prevailing greyish tone which gives the impression of a gloomy dusk, and imbues a nostalgic mood to the captured moment. The dot representing the sun, which is inconspicuous in comparison to the limitless waters of the lake, is nevertheless made quite provocative due to its bright red colour, but again it is subdued through the circular red light reflected on the adjacent sky. There is a sharp contrast between the two dominant colours. This is a monumental waterscape, one which does conform to common expectations. Painted sometime in the late twenties, it must have been intended for a progressively minded audience.

## 5 A Self-portrait

The last example once more turns to the flower subject. Painted in the late forties, it depicts a faded lotus (Fig. 6). This by itself is peculiar, since the habitual depiction of a lotus is its blossom in full prime and beauty. The lotus is a popular theme, not only because of its captivating beauty, but also because of the Buddhist connotation it generally bears. Examples of faded lotus pictures, on the other hand, are not too common. Nonetheless, they were painted by the artists of the Piling 毗陵 school in the late 13th and 14th centuries. In modern times, Qi Baishi introduced the theme again and often painted it in the last three decades of his life.<sup>22</sup> In Figure 6, the leaves are executed in light vermilion splashes. A few strokes in light ink painted over the splashes represent the veins. Three distinct stems in dark ink balance the composition. Two of them are vertical, but the third one was broken under the weight of an empty petula, and cuts the width of the picture which, on the whole, excites a strong sense of seclusion. The picture is entitled “A Silent and Upright Gentleman”. The Confucian term “gentleman” (*junzi* 君子) implies that the lotus in this painting hardly carries the Buddhist

<sup>22</sup> It was only after Qi Baishi introduced the faded lotus as a type of subject matter that other painters, e.g. Cui Zifan 崔子範, started to paint it.

symbolic meaning, rather, it stands for the old man Qi Baishi who identifies himself with the flower. Its withering away refers to his great age: he was well over eighty when he painted this leaf. It also stands for his just and upright personality, worthy of a Confucian gentleman.



Fig. 6: Qi Baishi. A Silent and Upright Gentleman. Album leaf, ink and colors on paper, height 34 cm, width 34.3 cm. Signed, undated, seal: *Jieshan weng*. The National Gallery, Prague, Vm 4331.

In this vein, it would by all means meet Chen Shizeng's definition of literati (i.e. *wenren*) painting in his article "The value of literati painting":

What is a *wenren* painting? It is a painting that has the characteristics and concept of a literary creation. It is not simply pictorial perfection, but has metaphysical suggestiveness beyond the painting...

The essence of *wenren* painting should consist of, first, quality of personality, second, scholarly knowledge, third, artistic talent, fourth, intellect.<sup>23</sup> (Tseng 1988, 126)

Chen Shizeng considered it most important that such a painting conveyed spiritual aspirations, with the formal aspects being secondary. To express the spiritual content beyond a painting was more important than formal likeness. But above all, he put emphasis on the artist's self. Undoubtedly, he regarded himself as a *wenren*,

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<sup>23</sup> Translated by Tseng Yu-ho.

but one could still object to putting his work, and the works of artists close to him, to the category of *wenren hua*. Rather, they are paintings which contain the spirit of *wenren hua*. In the case of Qi Baishi, who above all was a professional painter, the denomination *wenren* in its classical sense is not quite befitting, either.<sup>24</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Whether or not certain paintings by Qi Baishi are connected with the *wenren* tradition may not be unanimously accepted, and even if we were to agree in some cases, it would still be difficult to estimate what proportion of Qi Baishi's oeuvre they comprise, since it is impossible (in the first place) to accurately state how many paintings by Qi Baishi definitely exist. Ever since China became more open and the market for Chinese paintings therefore became wider, an increasing number of paintings reputedly by this master have come to our notice; consequently, the increasing problems of their authentication have made any statistic difficult to establish.

The topic, mood and execution of the selected examples (Figs. 1 to 6) clearly show that as far as the choice of topics goes, some of Qi Baishi's works adhered to the *wenren* tradition. In terms of style, however, the revitalized manner of Chen Shizeng and his circle opened a new path, which to some extent ran parallel to "literati painting", but in several respects departed from it. Qi Baishi was also rooted in *wenren* tradition and carried its legacy, but once he had accomplished his transformation, in the early 1920s, his art burgeoned in his powerful individual manner. As the name of one of his studios reveals, "old winds [bring] new rain",<sup>25</sup> in other words, his output, albeit nurtured by old styles, was new.

Qi Baishi is a recognized painter of ordinary topics, but his creativity was not restricted to it, and also gleaned on the literati field. The much admired clarity and simplicity of Qi Baishi's art is no less becoming in his portrayals of various vegetation and birds than it is in landscapes: while they most distinctly reveal Qi Baishi's progressive taste in painting, they still have their place in the *wenren* tradition. For various reasons, he did not paint landscapes very often. The economic aspect has already been mentioned, and it also seems quite clear that Qi

<sup>24</sup> It is used on occasion. For example, the monograph by Jiang Xun (1978) is entitled "Qi Baishi: the last wondrous blossom of the *wenren hua*". See References.

<sup>25</sup> *Gufeng xinyu zhi zhai* 古風新雨之齋 (Wang and Li 1984, 47 note 1).

Baishi had a definite preference for joyful and playful topics that were reminiscent of his childhood and village life.

Finally, we should also note that Qi Baishi may have felt insecure and not quite comfortable with the elite scholarly society. After all, his uncertainty can be traced from the many memoirs and anecdotes which were told about him. When he was asked to teach at the Academy of Art in Beijing, for example, he declined three times. He was being difficult because he feared that students and colleagues would ridicule him on account of his background (Zhang 1992, 56; Liao 1989, 107). In contrast, the painter Huang Yongyu 黃永玉 pointed out the apparent affinity of mind and confidence Qi Baishi felt towards the disciple of his late years, the painter Li Keran 李可染 (1907–1989) who (like him) came from a very modest social rank (Lang 1995, 17).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Qi Baishi could have felt alienated from scholarly society and its preoccupations, in spite of his mastery of and ability with the scholars' mode of painting, and in spite of his appearances as a traditional dignified gentleman. In conclusion, it may not have been so much the world of letters keeping its distance from an outsider, but rather Qi Baishi keeping his distance from the *wenren* out of modesty and a certain uneasiness. Given the circumstances, this is quite understandable.

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<sup>26</sup> Li Keran's father was an illiterate vendor of dumplings (*baozi* 包子) who later opened a little restaurant. Li Keran learned to read from signs and posters on the street; his elementary education was belated. He too was a self-taught painter. His education, however, took a positive turn when he entered an art school at the age of sixteen. (ibid.)

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