

# Painting in Situ: Su Shi's Mural Practices and Its Impact on Song Paintings

Haochen Bai<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The University of Chicago, US

Correspondence: Haochen Bai, The University of Chicago, US.

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## Abstract

Su Shi and his circle have long been credited as originators of the Chinese literati painting tradition and with the inception of distinct literati art practices, including painting on silk, paper, and walls. Literati mural painting, due to its fragility, exists only in Song accounts, colophons, and poems. Building on the pioneering research of Maggie Bickford, Susan Bush, and others, this paper synthesizes their interpretations, elucidates the distinctness of literati mural practices, and sheds new light on cross-medium connections in literati paintings. The paper opens by focusing on the concept, "transmediality," to study the parallel developments between two art practices in different mediums and the appropriation of medium-specificity, which is built on Richard Barnhart's, Martin Powers', and Richard Vinograd's various reflections on "citation" within Chinese art. Then the paper argues that the beginning of literati paintings in Su Shi's time grew out of the mutual influence between mural paintings and other art mediums. It thus extends James Cahill's analysis of "spontaneity" in Song mural paintings to a broader picture of Song literati painting. The paper also complicates Susan Bush's and other scholars' reflections on the social attributes of Song literati art and suggests that literati mural paintings became surrogates for other mediums in different social settings.

**Keywords:** Su Shi, mural paintings, literati paintings

## 1. Introduction

Su Shi and his circle have long been credited as the originators of the Chinese literati painting tradition and with the inception of distinct literati art practices, including painting on silk, paper, and walls. Previous scholars on Su Shi concentrated on literati painting theories and their innovations, delving into the philosophical and social dimensions of their visual forms and how his circle forged a new pictorial tradition. Other non-literati Song mural painting scholars focused on its ties to preceding dynasties, tracking their stylistic legacies and art-historical

references. My paper wants to synthesize those two groups of scholars by focusing on literati paintings' connections with murals and suggesting that literati paintings in Su Shi's time grew out of the mutual influence between mural paintings and other art mediums. Building on Richard Barnhart's, Martin Powers', and Richard Vinograd's various reflections on "citation" within Chinese art, I also introduce a concept called "transmediality" to study the cross-medium citations within literati painting and Chinese art. This new rhetoric serves as the conceptual framework for this essay,

emphasizing the fluidity of visual forms in premodern China rather than an independent stylistic revolution in one art genre.

## 2. “Transmediality”: An Entry Point

Chinese art history often involves the larger issue of “transmediality,” which refers to cross-medium references or appropriations. If an artwork embodies “transmediality” of another artwork of a different medium, it means that the artwork appropriates the medium-specificity or has explicit references to another artwork. The cross-medium references have several examples in East Asian art and have a variety of manifestations considering medium-specificity, subjects, literacy references, and functionality adoptions. In Japan, Ukiyo-e utilizes wooden carving to mimic the ink brushwork and adopts the colophons of previous ink paintings. In Korea, Munbangdo has references to paintings of flowers and fruits and presumably uses the format of album leaves. In premodern China, this borrowing and adoption of other art mediums prevailed, involving ceramics, mural paintings, scroll paintings, stone carvings, and so on. Most explicitly, the Chinese ceramics had images of Chinese paintings of various subject matters. The Epigraphic School of Chinese Calligraphy in the Ming and Qing dynasties shifted their attention from mimicking calligraphy on paper or silk to calligraphy on stone or metal. The print industry from the Song Dynasty onward developed its tastes based on previous art forms, deliberately adopting similar subject matters and visual languages. It is worth noting that the art forms deemed as “high art” (e.g., literati paintings) sometimes disguised their references to “low art” (e.g., mural paintings by craftsmen), which I will prove in the following sections of my essay by giving a close look at Su Shi and his circle. In contrast, those works of “low art” (e.g., ceramics in the Qing dynasty) made explicit or even extravagant references to the established masters of ink paintings (e.g., The Four Wongs in the Qing dynasty).

“Transmediality” is built on previous scholarship on “citations” in Chinese art, including that of Richard Barnhart, Martin Powers, and Richard Vinograd. While Richard Barnhart’s generation of scholars sporadically exploited the potential of “citation” theories (a rhetorical expression of references in art), the “Art Historical Art of Song China” and “Art Historical Citation in Song Painting” workshop

and symposium on April 6-8, 2017 at the University of Michigan represent a new surge in academic interest in this topic and a cohesive scholars’ pursuit in formalizing the potential of this conceptual framework.

One major branch of the theories is “art-historical citations” in Chinese paintings, exploring how premodern painters adopted the visual languages of precedents in art history. Martin Powers dated the inception of this theory to an article by Richard Barnhart in 1976, making clear that although Barnhart analyzed art-historical use in Li Gonglin’s art, he did not name it “art-historical citation” or theorize it comprehensively.<sup>1</sup> Following this pioneering analysis, Martin Powers did a case study on Song paintings, formalized the theories, and complicated them by suggesting “art-historical citations” as a more skillful use of imitation.<sup>2</sup> Richard Vinograd contextualized this theory in a different way and focused on the participation of audiences when literati utilized art-historical citations and set barriers to art appreciation.<sup>3</sup>

Another branch of “citation” theories is “literacy citations” in Chinese art, which investigates how literary references took on a visual appearance in paintings. Martin Powers makes the “literacy citations” theory explicit in his articles about Li Gonglin and poet Tao Yuanming and claims that “literary theories of citation first flourished in Song times.”<sup>4</sup> Alfreda Murck narrowed down these theories and pointed out three literary metaphors: “trees, a gurgling stream, and the configuration of eight rocks.”<sup>5</sup> Richard Vinograd found concrete evidence of the use of poetic topics in Song’s court paintings and the

<sup>1</sup> Martin Powers, (2014, August 14). The Temporal Logic of Citation in Chinese Painting. *Art History*, 37(4), 744-63, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12113>, 748; Richard Barnhart, (1976). Li Kung-Lin’s Use of Past Styles. *Artists and Traditions: Uses of the Past in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christian Murck. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Powers, (2019, September 24). The Art-Historical Art of Song China: Citation and Historicism in Tao Yuanming Returning to Seclusion. *Ars Orientalis*, 49(20191029), <https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0049.003>, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Vinograd, (1988, March 1). Situation and Response in Traditional Chinese Scholar Painting. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46(3), 365-74, [https://doi.org/10.1111/1540\\_6245.jaac46.3.0365](https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245.jaac46.3.0365), 369.

<sup>4</sup> Powers, “The Art-Historical Art of Song China,” 22.

<sup>5</sup> Alfreda Murck, (2019, September 24). Su Shi and Zhao Lingrang: Brush Ideas of Wang Wei. *Ars Orientalis*, 49(20191029), <https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0049.002>, 3.

Painting Academy examination.<sup>1</sup>

Following the theories of preceding scholars, “transmediality” proposes another possibility besides “literacy citations” and “art-historical citations” and introduces the potential of “cross-medium citations” within Chinese art. Those three concepts indeed could overlap in certain circumstances: “cross-medium citations” could be “literacy citations” when a painting refers to a poem or calligraphy piece; it also could be “art-historical citations” when a scroll painting mimics mural paintings. Departing from this broad conceptual framework, my endeavor in this essay is detailed and focuses on a case study—making clear the cross-medium references in literati paintings in Su Shi’s time.

Previous mural paintings: Tang and Song

In this section, I will give a brief survey of mural practices preceding Wen Tong and Su Shi, characterize them, and point out two decisive figures — Sun Wei and Sun Zhiwei. They internalized previous practices, played with murals’ medium-specificity, and formalized their own artistic style, which paved the way for the inception of literati paintings.

In the Tang Dynasty, many famous painters engaged in mural practices, which were mentioned in Tang accounts. According to Zhang Yanyuan’s *Lidai Minghua Ji*, Chang’an’s Cien Temple has mural paintings by Wu Daozi, Wang Wei, Weichi Yiseng, and many other established painters.<sup>2</sup> The subject matter of mural paintings in temple settings not only includes religious figures (e.g., Bodhisattva, monks, heavenly figures, and Buddha) but also non-religious subjects (e.g., mountain, water, peony, bamboo, peacock, slim horses).<sup>3</sup> According to Zhang’s book, craftsmen were usually involved in applying colors to mural paintings,<sup>4</sup> alluding to labor divisions and collective works in mural practices. Zhang’s accounts present us with the general picture of Tang mural paintings, in which famous painters (e.g., Wu Daozi and Wang Wei) and craftsmen

are both involved in mural practices, and temple mural paintings flourished during that time.

Because Su Shi and Wen Tong were all born in Sichuan, I will introduce two important Sichuan-based muralists — Sun Wei and Sun Zhiwei — in order to characterize Sichuan mural practices.

Sun Wei was a late-Tang painter who was not originally from Sichuan, according to Huang Xiufu’s *Yizhou Minghua Lu* in the Song Dynasty.<sup>5</sup> In the first year of Guangming, the army of Huang Chao initiated a rebellion against the central government and broke through Chang’an, forcing the Tang emperor Xizong to flee to Sichuan. This turbulent political atmosphere evoked a feeling of uncertainty based on their own political stances and unpredictable violence conducted by the army of Huang Chao, which gave rise to population dynamics. According to Huang, Sun Wei was one of the painters who followed this migration, moving to Sichuan and leaving many mural paintings there.<sup>6</sup>

One distinct characteristic of Sun Wei’s murals is his innovation in depicting water not as peaceful but as wild and turbulent. Su Shi did see Sun Wei’s mural paintings and ascribed his accomplishments to his innovation in depicting water.

古今画水，多作平远细皱 [...] 唐广明中，处士孙位始出新意，画奔湍巨浪 [...] <sup>7</sup>

Water has always been portrayed as expansive and peaceful [...] In the Guanming year of the Tang dynasty, a recluse named Sun Wei started to innovate, depicting waters with huge waves [...]

Sun Wei’s second distinguishing feature is his depiction of ink on bamboo. Zhaojue Temple was located in Sichuan, where Sun Wei left ink on bamboo:

孙位者[...]昭觉寺休梦长老请画浮沤先生松石墨竹一堵。<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Richard Vinograd, (2019, September 24). Past, Present, and Future in the Imaginary of Song Painting. *Ars Orientalis* 49(20191029), <https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0049.005>, 72.

<sup>2</sup> Zhang Yanyuan, (2009). *Complete Translation of the Records of Famous Paintings through the Ages 历代名画记全译*. Guizhou: Guizhou People’s Publishing House 贵州: 贵州人民出版社, 171.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 171, 185, 196, 203.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>5</sup> Huang Xiufu, (2009). *The Record of Famous Paintings of Yizhou in Three Volumes 益州名画录 3 卷*. Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center 北京爱如生数字化技术研究中心, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Su Shi, (2009). *The Collected Works of Su Dongpo (Later 10 Volumes) 东坡集 40 卷后集 10 卷*. Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center 北京爱如生数字化技术研究中心, 1073.

<sup>8</sup> Huang Xiufu, *The Record of Famous Paintings of Yizhou 益州名画录*, 1.

Sun Wei [...] was invited by Monk Xiumeng to paint Mr. Fu Ou, pines, stones, and ink bamboo on a wall.

This account signifies that Sichuan's mural practices had already touched on the subject matter of ink bamboo, predating Wen Tong's ink bamboo practices on silk.

According to *Xuanhe Huapu* of the Song Dynasty, Sun Zhiwei was born in Meiyang, Sichuan, and excelled at religious paintings, which were commonly seen in Sichuan temples.<sup>1</sup> As *Huapu* reveals, Sun Zhiwei's paintings were famous and precious among Sichuan audiences: "Sichuan people treasure [Sun Zhiwei's paintings] more. If they gain his paintings, they will wrap and preserve them in a meticulous way."<sup>2</sup>

One of the major characteristics of Sun Zhiwei's practices is his depiction of water. Su Shi saw his paintings as a continuation of Sun Wei's practices:

处士孙位始出新意，画奔湍巨浪[...]其后蜀人黄筌、孙知微皆得其笔法。<sup>3</sup>

A recluse, Sun Wei, started to innovate, depicting waters with huge waves[...] After that, Huang Quan and Sun Zhiwei from Sichuan all learned his brushwork.

The second distinguishing feature of Sun Zhiwei's mural art is its meticulous preparation. Su Shi claims that he sometimes works on a mural painting for years before beginning it:

始知微欲于大慈寺寿宁院壁作湖滩水石四堵，营度经岁，终不肯下笔。一日，苍皇入寺，索笔墨甚急，奋袂如风，须臾而成，作输泻跳蹙之势，汹汹欲崩屋也。<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning, Sun Zhiwei wanted to paint lakeshore, water, and stones on the four walls of Daci Temple's Shouning Court. Despite this, he spent years preparing it and never started painting. One day, he rushed into the temple, asked for brushes and ink immediately, waved his sleeves like winds, and finished painting in a quick manner. [The paintings] depict [water] as turbulent and wild, as if to destroy a house.

<sup>1</sup> Wang Qunli. (2012). *The Xuanhe Catalogue of Paintings 宣和画谱*. Zhejiang: Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House 浙江: 浙江人民美术出版社, 85.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Su Shi, *The Collected Works of Su Dongpo (Later 10 Volumes)* 东坡集 40 卷后集 10 卷, 1073.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 1073-4.

Su Shi's accounts above also betray the third characteristic of Sun Weizhi's murals — quickness and spontaneity. According to James Cahill, Tang Chinese painting could be done in both a quick and slow manner, and Wu Daozi was one representative of the quickness, particularly mural practices — finishing about 300 meters of mural paintings on the palace's walls in one day.<sup>5</sup> He then claims that while Tang art criticism favors both, later art criticism favors quickness and spontaneity over slowness.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Sun Zhiwei's mural practice follows the same trend as Wu Daozi, done in a quick and natural way. He finished painting quickly by waving his sleeves "like winds," attesting to his practice's fast speed. Correspondingly, this quickness negates hesitations and deliberate manipulations, leading to spontaneity and naturalness. The subject matter here was also noticeable: water and stone, which I will analyze in the following section.

### 3. Learning from Murals: Su Shi and His Circle

After summarizing the mural practices preceding Su Shi, I will elucidate in this section how those mural practices were theorized, internalized, and incorporated into art practices by Su Shi and his literati circle. During this process, cross-medium references became explicit, complicating literati paintings and their inception.

Su Shi's first obvious sign of mural influences is that he painted in the muralist's style. According to Mi Fu's *Huashi*:

吾自湖南从事过黄州，初见公，酒酣，曰：“君贴此纸壁上，观音纸也。”即起作两枝竹一枯树一怪石见与。<sup>7</sup>

I [Mi Fu] left Hunan and passed through Huangzhou for work; it was the first time I saw him [Su Shi], who was drunk. He said, "You pasted this Guanyin paper on the wall." Then, [he] stood up and depicted two bamboos, one withered tree, and one strange stone.

By painting paper on the wall, Su Shi explicitly made paper paintings in a muralist's manner. The medium-specificity lies in its unique way of

<sup>5</sup> Gao Juhan, (2011). *Style and Concept 风格与观念*. China Academy of Art Press 中国美术学院出版社, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Mi Fu, (2009). *History of Painting 画史*. Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center 北京爱如生数字化技术研究中心, 9.

holding brushes—one's body then stood parallel with the painted materials and held brushes vertically to his body, all of which were the exact opposite of painting on desks or the ground. The same brushstroke done on the horizontal surface entails different body movements compared with the vertical one, which requires varied training and a transformation of artistic practices. This way of holding brushes was also labor-intensive and demanded more forces to keep the brush stable. On the other hand, by distancing one's wrist from the supporting device, the brush could move in a freer way and in a broader space. Therefore, by pasting paper on the wall, Su Shi appropriated the medium-specificity of murals and deployed the techniques of muralists, making his painting a "transmediality" of murals.

Su Shi's theory on water depiction is the second muralists' influence. Su Shi summarizes Sun Wei and Sun Zhiwei's water depiction as "活水" (literally "living water," meaning flowing water) in his essay:

唐广明中，处士孙位始出新意，画奔湍巨浪 [...]其后蜀人黄筌、孙知微皆得其笔法 [...]近岁成都人蒲永升，嗜酒放浪，性与画会，始作活水，得二孙本意。<sup>1</sup>

During the Tang dynasty's Guanming year, a recluse named Sun Wei began to innovate, depicting waters with massive waves [...] After that, Huang Quan and Sun Zhiwei from Sichuan all learned his brushwork [...] Recently, Pu Yongsheng from Chengdu, drinking wine and being uninhibited, started to depict flowing water once his inner self resonated with painting, which had the original techniques of the two Suns [Sun Wei and Sun Zhiwei].

In this paragraph, Su Shi brackets Sun Wei, Sun Zhiwei, and Pu Yongsheng as a new school of painting water and describes and theorizes it as a depiction of "flowing water" (活水). The first character here literally means "living," which forms a sharp contrast with his later comments on another school of painting water — "死水" (literally "dead water," meaning peaceful water):

古今画水，多作平远细皴，其善者不过能为波头起伏，使人至以手扪之，谓有湍隆，以为至妙矣。然其品格，特与印板水纸争工拙于毫厘

间耳[...]如往时董羽、近日常州戚氏画水，世或传宝之。如董、戚之流，可谓死水，未可与永升同年而语也。<sup>2</sup>

People usually depict water as expansive and peaceful, or at best as slightly undulating waves that invite touching. They thought such water was undulating and the best depiction. Despite this, there is only a minor difference between it and printed water paper [...] Dong Yu in the past and recently Mr. Qi from Changzhou painted water, which ordinary people treasured. However, the water, like Dong's and Qi's, was dead water, which could not be compared with Yongsheng's.

Su Shi creates a Sishui/Huoshui (死水/活水) dualism in this passage and praises the depiction of flowing water. His sentence, "at best as slightly undulating waves," betrays his personal taste in water painting: the more undulating the better. Su Shi's concept of water was the polar opposite of Mi Fu's and Mi School's concepts of mountain and water, which merits further study by scholars. However, most notably, the theory Su Shi summarized from Sun's mural practices had an impact on himself and his circle, as embodied in Huang Tingjing's poem:

题东坡水石

东坡墨戏，水活石润。<sup>3</sup>

Colophon on Su Shi's Water and Stone

Su Shi experimented with ink, resulting in flowing water and wet stone.

To begin, Su Shi used the same subject matter as Sun Zhiwei's Daci Temple mural painting—water and stone. And also, Huang's rhetoric of "water living" (水活) was the exact reference to Su Shi's Sishui/Huoshui (死水/活水) dualism, demonstrating that not only did Su Shi practice depicting flowing waters inspired by murals, but his "flowing water" theory also influenced his circle.

The third impact from muralists is about the understanding of Wen Tong's theory on spontaneity. Su Shi and Wen Tong were famous for their new theory on the spontaneity of painting, which was recounted in Su Shi's essay

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1073-4.

<sup>3</sup> Huang Tingjian, (2009). *The Supplementary Collection of Shangu 山谷别集*: 20 卷. Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center 北京爱如生数字化技术研究中心, 406.

<sup>1</sup> Su Shi, *The Collected Works of Su Dongpo (Later 10 Volumes)* 东坡集 40 卷后集 10 卷, 1073-4.

on his cousin Wen Tong's bamboo paintings:

故画竹必先得成竹于胸中，执笔熟视，乃见其所欲画者，急起从之，振笔直遂，以追其所见，如兔起鹘落，少纵则逝矣。与可之教予如此。

1

Therefore, painting bamboo entails “the complete bamboo in the breast”: holding brushes and closely looking at [blank paper] until the subject matter is visualized, [one should] take quick actions and depict it in a swift manner to copy [the mental image], as if the actions of moving rabbits and birds, [because] a short relaxation dissipates [the mental imagery]. This is Wen Tong's teaching to me.

Su Shi did absorb Wen Tong's teaching of spontaneity in his own practices, as related by Li Zhiyi:

次韵东坡所画郭功甫家壁竹木怪石诗

[...] 一杯未蘸笔已濡，此理分明来面壁。我尝傍观不见画，只见佛祖遭呵骂。[...] 汗流几案惨无光，忽然到眼如锋铍。急将两耳掩双手，河海震动雷电吼。<sup>2</sup>

Poem with the same rhythm: Su Shi's painting of bamboo, wood, and strange stones on Guo Gongfu's wall

[...] A cup of alcohol remained unfinished while brushes were dipped in ink, which would “meditate” in front of the wall. I [Li Zhiyi] witnessed [the painting process] but could not see the painting itself, only [hearing the loud sounds] as if the Buddha had been cursed. [...] [Su Shi's] sweat dripped on a desk, darkening its glaze, and his sudden movements were sharp like knives. I thus covered my ears with my hands immediately, [because he was] roaring like a turbulent sea and lightning.

Following Wen Tong's teaching on quickness and naturalness, Su Shi painted swiftly and sweated on the desk. Well immersed in the painting and aided by alcohol, he was uninhibited in every aspect and allowed himself to make loud sounds freely and to follow the movement of his art-making. The spontaneity was thus both visible in his paintings and also in his voice, creating a twofold rhythm intertwined

in the visual appearance.

Normally, Wen Tong is credited as the sole originator of spontaneity (*Xiongyou Chengzhu*, 胸有成竹) theories and the first to apply the prepared-and-done-quickly painting approach. However, as James Cahill points out above, Wu Daozi used this approach in his mural practices during the Tang dynasty. Also, as I mentioned, Sun Zhiwei also applied this approach, and his painting was seen by Wen Tong and commented on in a poem.<sup>3</sup> All of those suggest that Wen Tong was not the initiator of spontaneous painting practices, and mural practices predate them.

Literati mural practices: surrogates for social attributes

In previous sections, I have argued that literati paintings are the “transmediality” of mural practices, elucidating how mural practices shifted literati art and how their arts embodied cross-medium citations. However, Su Shi and his circle also dedicated themselves to mural practices, producing literati mural paintings. In this section, I argue that literati mural paintings are “transmediality” of poetry and calligraphy, appropriate their medium-specificities, and become surrogates for them in different social settings.

Previous scholars have already noticed the social attributes of Chinese paintings. Susan Bush suggests in her book dedicated to literati paintings that a Chinese painting was sometimes done at a social gathering as a way to express one's own personality while also showing one's historical circumstances.<sup>4</sup> Susan's analysis reveals a significant difference between these Chinese paintings and those created in the workshop: the paintings completed during social gatherings had their own social functions and corresponding social interactions. Art in such circumstances was meant to be interactive in varied respects, unlike some Tang mural paintings based on drafts and preexisting patterns. As I previously mentioned in Li Zhiyi's poem, Su Shi's art-making was surrounded by onlookers who were thrilled and immersed in

<sup>1</sup> Su Shi, *The Collected Works of Su Dongpo (Later 10 Volumes)* 东坡集40 卷后集10 卷, 1433.

<sup>2</sup> Li Zhiyi, (2009). *The Collected Works of the Recluse of Guxi* 姑溪居士集. Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center 北京爱如生数字化技术研究中心, 758-9.

<sup>3</sup> See 孙知微画(文同作) in Zhuang Siheng 庄思恒, (2009). *The Revised Gazetteer of Guan County* (Guangxu Edition) (光绪) 增修灌县志. Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center 北京爱如生数字化技术研究中心, 1227.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Bush, (2012). *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-Ch'ang (1555-1636)*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press; London, 11.

the event. Thus, art became an unfolding performance with the rhythm of dipping ink and audience reactions, bringing playfulness to the gathering, usually with the aid of alcohol. Different from the previous mural paintings featured by collaborative works, literati paintings were often finished by the painter himself and could be seen as his original works. In a social setting, as Susan Bush claims above, such paintings that solely contributed to the painter himself could be treated as manifestations of one's own personality and individualism. Maggie Bickford complicated the understanding of the expression of personality by tracing its origins, stating that while poetry and calligraphy were considered means of expression and communication between like-minded people, the art of ink bamboo was introduced as a new way of communicating during the Song dynasty.<sup>1</sup> Maggie Bickford indicts a secret language embedded in literati paintings created in a social setting where close friends shared tacit knowledge, such as painters' secret stories, frequently used literary metaphors, political opinions, and favorite historical figures. In a sense, a few simple brushstrokes of ink imagery could be a puzzle involving literary citations, historical references, religious knowledge, and private communications. According to Richard Vinograd, while the complexity of references used in Chinese paintings suggests art historical erudition or stylistic accuracy, the true emphasis is on the audiences' ability to participate and recognize the references.<sup>2</sup> Vinograd not only drew attention to the display of art historical knowledge in art-historically referential paintings, but he also inspired a rethinking of the coding-and-decoding process in like-minded audiences among the literati. As a result, a painting created in a group has an inherent playfulness embedded in its form of puzzle, which invites any target audience to forge a response, such as colophons, poems, and paintings.

Adding on to the playfulness entailed by the social attributes of gathering paintings, the literati's mural practices' distinctness lies in their functionality as a gift. As Li Zhiyi's previous

poem reveals, Su Shi has already painted murals in public and at gatherings. However, Su Shi's own account betrays more information:

郭祥正家醉画竹石壁上郭作诗为谢且遗古铜剑二

[...]平生好诗仍好画，书墙浣壁长遭骂。

不嗔不骂喜有馀，世间谁复如君者。[...]<sup>3</sup>

[I, Su Shi,] drunkenly painted bamboos and stones on Guo Xiangzheng's home's wall; Guo gave back a poem and left two archaic bronze swords.

[...] [I, Su Shi,] always loved poems and paintings, leaving them on walls, [but I was] always sworn at.

[You, Guo Xiangzheng,] instead of being angry or cursing at me, were delighted; there could not be another person like you. [...]

In this poem, Su Shi was invited to his friend Guo Xiangzheng's house, where they drank alcohol and had a delightful gathering. As it reveals, graffiti was frequently unwelcome in private households because the walls were well preserved. Su Shi claimed to be uninhibited and was unable to restrain his expressive impulses, leaving graffiti (calligraphy or paintings) on other people's walls. However, Guo Xiangzheng treated them not as graffiti but as serious artworks and reciprocated with gifts. As the last line reveals, Su Shi was not just happy about the gifts, but also about Guo giving himself the self-esteem Su needs. This mutual respect laid the groundwork for true friendship, as well as a shelter from the vicissitude of political climates. Normally, literati would leave a poem or a piece of calligraphy on walls or other mediums as a gift and proof of friendship for a friend, but Su Shi innovated this idea by elevating mural paintings to the same status as poetry and calligraphy, galvanizing literati to use mural paintings as surrogates in gathering settings.

Besides gatherings, Su Shi also promoted literati mural paintings when visiting friends. Beginning with the Tang Dynasty, poems and calligraphy were frequently left on a friend's wall, as well as Japanese banana leaves and persimmon leaves.<sup>4</sup> This tradition had a twofold significance: to give a poetic gift and to make a

<sup>1</sup> Maggie Bickford, (1996). *Ink Plum: The Making of a Chinese Scholar-Painting Genre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 105.

<sup>2</sup> Vinograd, "Situation and Response in Traditional Chinese Scholar Painting," 7.

<sup>3</sup> Su Shi, *The Collected Works of Su Dongpo (Later 10 Volumes)* 东坡集40 卷后集10 卷, 666-7.

<sup>4</sup> See Dou Gong's "Seeking the Hidden Daoist but Failing to Meet Him" 窦巩《寻道者所隐不遇》.

notice. However, Su Shi created a new innovation:

东坡书壁

前辈访人不遇，皆不书壁。东坡作行记，不肯书牌，其特地，止书壁耳。候人未至，则扫墨竹。<sup>1</sup>

Su Shi writes on the walls

People before [Su Shi] did not write on walls when visiting someone who happened to be away from home. Su Shi made a notice, not on the wooden blocks [hanging on the wall], but on the walls themselves. If Su Shi was still waiting, he did ink bamboo.

Normally, when visiting one's home in a remote place in premodern times, the visitor could not estimate the waiting time. Therefore, the visitor could choose to stay or simply leave; in the latter case, giving notice became extremely important. As the account reveals, people before Su Shi prioritized the literary message and intended to make a notice. Su Shi did follow this tradition when he intended to leave, while altering the pictorial-literary hierarchy if he was still waiting. Leaving ink bamboo not only symbolizes his favor of this subject but also demonstrates his capability of making mural paintings. He was deviant from two art traditions: bringing mural painting out of domestic settings and elevating paintings to the realm of "high arts". His literati mural painting left on friends' walls was thus a gift, a surprise, and a secret language.

Wu Hung brings up the often-cited concept of "textual enclosure" in his book about Chinese screen, which he defines as a textual circle constituted by historical records, colophons, and modern writings, yielding and blocking off "an entrance to painting itself."<sup>2</sup> Following this pioneering thinking of an inner enclosure, my close look at the social attributes of literati paintings leans toward an outer circle—the "social enclosure." Unlike workshop artists, who disengaged themselves from social events during art-making and commissioning, literati painters were engaged in social settings of different kinds (done in gatherings, gifted to friends afterward, or left with a colophon by

friends). This intriguing social enclosure contrasts with the desolation and loneliness evoked by literati imagery (e.g., strange stones and withered trees), presenting a multifaceted artist persona.

#### 4. Conclusion

My research on mural paintings owes a great deal to previous scholarship, which frequently provided me with a new perspective on Chinese paintings and introduced distant literary figures in the history to me. The recent academic trend of reflections on materiality and medium-specificity were the initial inspirations for me to embark on this new research on identifying the distinctness of literati mural practices and their cross-medium references. On the other side, my essay also wants to provide a case study outside of the stylistic revolution discourse, addressing the complexity of subject-style relations in Chinese art.

As I stated above, this new research still has more puzzles to resolve, and about Mi Fu's water theory in particular. The personalization of ink bamboo in letter communication was dismissed by me considering the essay's space and could be further expanded into a paper. In a similar vein, I also deleted the parts about how Wen Tong painted bamboos like dragons as embodied in his poem and Huang Tingjian's poem and how the account around Su Shi also betrays three ways of extracting images from walls during the Song dynasty, which complicate the cross-medium citations and need further investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> Shi Huihong, (2009). *Night Talks in the Cold Studio 冷斋夜话*. Beijing Erudition Digital Technology Research Center 北京爱如生数字化技术研究中心, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Wu Hung, (1996). *The Double Screen*. University of Chicago Press, 30.

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