ESTEEMED LINK:

AN ARGUMENT FOR XUE SUSU AS LITERATI

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Xue Susu (1573-ca.1650) was a courtesan who lived in the final years of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). She was a multi-faceted artist, known for her painting, poetry and heroic personality. An active participant in literati culture for most of her life, Xue's body of work contains several outstanding paintings which demonstrate her grasp of the artistic concerns of literati painting practice at that time.

Modern scholarship of Chinese women artists is a growing field, and it is now unthinkable to exclude women in the broad category of Chinese painting. However, examinations of individual artists, have been limited. For example, Xue Susu has been the subject of articles by Tseng Yu-ho (Betty Ecke); she was featured in an encyclopedic exhibition of Chinese women painters titled *Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists 1300-1912*, and she is listed in several survey texts of Chinese art history.[1] These considerations of Xue Susu demonstrate that modern scholarship acknowledges her as a talented painter. However, Xue is usually only considered in aggregate with other women painters with the grouping, gender being the primary identifier for artistic identity. The problem at hand then becomes that the majority of Xue Susu's surviving work is dissimilar in stylistic choice to the general group of female painters of her era. The majority of surviving mid-to late-Ming women's paintings tended toward the use of stock stylistic forms divorced from their art historical antecedents. In contrast, Xue's selection of painting style was consciously and inextricably linked with artists of preceding eras. This conscious and deliberate appropriation of earlier painting styles was a common move for scholar-gentry painters of whom we as modern scholars now commonly refer to as literati. These painters had in common a shared background of similar education, from which they based their social identity. The term

1 Weidner, Marsha et al. *Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists, 1300–1912.* Indianapolis and Rizzoli, New York: Museum of Art, 1988. 82-88. (hereafter cited in text as *VFJT*); Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids," 197-208; Tseng "Women Painters of the Ming Dynasty," 249-259.; Sirén, *Chinese Painters*, *** ; Xin, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 246.

which they would have used when referring to themselves as a group would have been *wenren*, or cultured person. While Xue Susu could not have been, due to the circumstances of her birth, a member of the scholar-gentry, she did share with them a passion and accomplishment in similar cultural pursuits, enough for her also to be considered a *wenren*. In this paper I fully recognize that the term "literati", is a modern construct. When used in this paper, the term is meant to refer to the cultural identity that scholar-gentry as a group cultivated. For the reasons stated above, Xue Susu should be considered as a literati painter before any arbitrary gender designation in painting classification. To consider Xue solely within the category of female painters does not acknowledge that the stylistic choices that she made within her work are, as a whole, most similar to those made by her male literati contemporaries.

Xue Susu's handscroll, *Wild Orchids* (1601), (see figure 1), is evidence of her literati painting status and is the best example of the artist's thorough knowledge of late Ming literati artistic goals and concepts as well as deployment of appropriate painting technique, brush work and composition. To closely examine this piece it is useful to break down the painting both formally and figuratively in order to gain a firmer grasp of the stylistic and literary intent of the artist. This type of exercise clarifies why Xue Susu, as an artist, has a place in the Ming canon of Literati painters. The scroll begins in springtime, with clumps of orchids sprouting from rocky outcroppings and mossy banks, the double outline technique highlighting the profusion of leaves and blossoms. This first section is seemingly dominated by a sense of movement; the plants are rustling in a substantial breeze, and the overlapping leaves within the plants dazzle the eye of the viewer as the blossoms bend with the wind in a riotous pattern.

Throughout the painting, the precise depiction of the orchid plant, painted in *baimiao*, or "plain line", is juxtaposed with a looser description of the mossy outcropping of rocks that emerge from the water. Ink wash in various tonalities form the rocks and riverbank, while various *cun*, or texture strokes, in both the "hemp fiber" and "axe cut" style, model the surface area, giving them volume and depth. Within rock crevices and throughout the mounded banks moss is indicated with dense patches of inky foliage dots. Small clumps of grasses interspersed on the banks of the river and snugged up to rocks are painted with unhesitating lines in varied saturations of ink. The moss and rocks give the painting a depth of field. The water of the river is indicated primarily by the absence of ink, although random rocks in the water are surrounded by faint lines to indicate ripples, suggesting a lazily moving stream.

As the painting progresses, the leaves of the orchid are still, the gusts of springtime breeze noticeably absent in a sultry summer atmosphere. The intricate pattern of leaves and flowers is still present but in a more quiet rhythm. The stillness of the air is almost palpable as the leaves of the plant arc lazily over the stream, occasionally trailing their ends in the water. The orchid is sometimes seen as as an iconographic alternate to the lotus as the flower of summer, when it represents, like the lotus, romance, sensuality and fertility.[2] The plant is easily anthropomorphized in this section, transformed into a gathering of beautiful young women who have come to the streamside to enjoy a summer's day. The graceful leaves and exquisite blossoms appear to nod and sway companionably to each other, like gossiping ladies. The trailing leaves like trailing sleeves and the half hidden blossoms suggest a glimpse of an alluring face or a flash of an embroidered foot, adding an air of playful sensuality to the viewer's experience.

2 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 34.

Moving from summer into autumn, in the next section of the handscroll the focus becomes the rocky outcroppings of the riverbank and its assorted grasses, moss and fungi. The orchid plant serves as the background, or accent, to this autumnal section. A major focal area of the autumn section is the wide expanses of negative space, indicating water, which take up the fore, mid and back ground. This water gives the sense of a colder season since no plant grows at the rivers edge in contrast to the more verdant earlier portions of spring and summer. This section gives the viewer a sense of staccato movement, as the far riverbank secures the composition in the upper left corner in a series of vertical ink wash rocks. These bump the eye to a rocky intrusion in the stream where a spindly bunch of orchids extend with crisp leaves angling above the water.

The *Wild Orchids* handscroll ends with the winter season. The foreground of the second-to-last section of the scroll is entirely composed of flowing water, indicated by faint lines of diluted ink. Rising vertically from the left, the rocky bank of the stream is almost completely barren, save for grasses that cling in sporadic clumps. An orchid plant, now mostly leaves with a few blossoms, bends down and over the stream from the top edge of the scroll. Trailing leaves still painted in the precise double outline technique help to balance the solid ink wash of rocks, although the entire composition conveys a sense of imbalance, perhaps because of the reversal of positive and negative space. In the final portion of the painting, the scene is almost entirely comprised of the bank of the stream, with the stream itself relegated to a passing glimpse in the lower right hand corner. Snow has dusted the remaining plants as well as the bare rocky ground. As in previous segments, depth of field in this painting is not suggested by distant horizon lines, but by the artist's use of a more saturated ink in the crevices and undulations in the banks. The closed- up, shut-off feeling of this end section is fitting for a winter scene, complete with the suggestion to the viewer that, even during the death of the year, life continues, as evidenced by the well con-

cealed orchid flowers that still cling to the plant. This close study of limited elements in nature permits the viewer to invest in the scene, and elicits from them an emotional response as the scroll unrolls and simple plants assume complex and evocative qualities.

Wild Orchids, painted in 1601, is arguably Xue Susu's most famous piece and has been the subject of scholarly articles and is the most commonly featured painting whenever the artist is discussed.[3] This handscroll, painted in ink on paper, now resides in the collection of the Honolulu Academy of Arts. The subject of this painting is the seasonal procession of orchids growing in a stream side setting, beginning with spring and ending in a winter scene. This painting, at first consideration, is at once very familiar and, at the same time, refreshingly original. This is due to Xue Susu's combining of previous stylistic tropes of Bird-and-Flower paintings of preceding dynasties such as found in the complexity of leaf patternization in Zhao Mengjian's (1199-1267) *Narcissus* of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), (figure 2), as well as the appropriation of a traditional bamboo landscape composition where the conventional Chinese landscape is focused upon the bamboo plant growing in a natural setting, usually by a stream or other body of water. This can be observed in the Yuan dynasty (1279- 1368) painting by Guan Daosheng (1262-1319) *Bamboo Groves in Mists and Rain*, (figure 3), and the painting by Xia Chang (1388-1470) of the Ming *Bamboo under Spring Rain* (c.1460), (figure 4).[4] This kind of appropriation was known as *fang*, or creative imitation, and was an important facet of late Ming dynasty literati painting practice, where the selective use of old painting forms were translated by the literati artists to express their personal artistic aims.[5] Xue Susu manipulated the compositions of these older styles and appropriated it to her own study of wild orchid plants, putting them to use in

3 Sirén, *Chinese Painters*, 72-73 ; Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids," 197-208; Tseng "Women Painters of the Ming Dynasty," 249-259.
4 Robinson, *VFJT,* 83.
5 Cahill, *The Distant Mountains*, 126.

stimulating and unexpected ways that produced an original painting. This is the kind of artistic action which makes *Wild Orchids* and Xue Susu perfectly in line with literati painting practices of the Ming.[6]

The patternization of the orchid leaves in *Wild Orchids* are strikingly similar to a study painting of flower beds in *Narcissus* by Zhao Mengjian. Compositionally, however, Xue's painting makes more reference to the quasi-landscape style of bamboo handscroll paintings. This difference lies within the varied groundlines of each painting. The narcissus painting of Zhao Mengjian focuses entirely upon the precisely rendered description of the plant's leaves and flowers with the painting ending at the base of the plants. In *Wild Orchids,* the undulating groundline in the composition of the piece allows the viewer a respite from the complexity involved in the double outline brushstroke of the orchid plants' by describing a river landscape depicted in a more relaxed brush style. Xue Susu has successfully combined two approaches to Bird-and-Flower painting in this handscroll. While *Wild Orchids* does allow the viewer to closely consider the form of the orchid plant in a more mimetic style of nature study, the artist then combines this precise style of naturalistic description with a looser brush stroke with ink wash, simultaneously concealing and revealing her hand.

The main subject of this piece, the wild orchid, as a painting topic is said to find its origins in the no longer extant orchid painting's of the artist Mi Fu (1052-1107) of the Northern Song dynasty (906-1127).[7] Although its first mention is much earlier, iconographically, the orchid is used as a symbol of the "Superior Man" in literati culture, one whose virtuous reputation is said to precede

6 Nelson, "Late Ming Views on Yüan Painting" 210.
7 Robinson, *VFJT*, 83.

him like the fragrance of the orchid.[8] The Chinese customary belief that the beauty of the wild orchid does not fade when unnoticed, but thrives and continues to be fragrant even in seclusion. Since its first mention during the Warring States period by the poet official Qu Yuan, this characteristic of the orchid made it a natural symbol of a man's talent that flourishes regardless of recognition, (particularly imperial recognition).[9] For both men and women the orchid is also associated with the concept of refinement, elegance and beauty, as well as virtue and moral excellence. This kind of double association of beauty and morality made it quite common for a courtesan to take a name that somehow incorporated an allusion to this flower. The idea of a virtuous courtesan may seem incongruous at first, however, courtesans, especially high ranking courtesans, considered themselves chaste by virtue of their pure intentions and moral tenacity. [10] Through this it is possible to understand that women who occupied a morally ambiguous status in Neo-Confucian China could be able to regard themselves as morally upright people, despite their own lack of recognition (that is, Neo-Confucian social acceptance). This makes the courtesan's affinity towards the orchid as a subject in painting doubly comprehensible.

While paintings by Xue Susu are extant in museums and in private collections, approximately seven in all, the total body of work by Xue Susu available for examination in this paper is limited to four. The seminal piece *Wild Orchids,* is unique in Xue Susu's oeuvre and serves as key evidence of Xue's literati sensibilities. Nevertheless, the tone, compositions, variations in brushwork, as well as selection of color palette that exist within the other selected paintings discussed in this paper, speak as a cohesive collection of an artist that was cognizant of her artistic prede-

8 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 35.
9 Qu Yuan's poem *Li Sao* "Encountering Sorrow"trans. David Hawkes in *The Songs of the South.*; Brook *The Troubled Empire*, 104.
10 Laing, *Flowering in the Shadows*, 91.

cessors and capable of adapting their style and appropriating it to her own paintings with a talent comparable to the literati paragons of her era.

Of these four paintings, two are handscrolls in ink on paper, including *Wild Orchids*, and the remaining two are smaller fan paintings in ink, and ink and color on gold paper. The use of these formats by the artist is significant, as a painting's size, configuration and surface material in the late Ming embodied determined social information about the artist and the owner of the piece. The handscroll had first been used for the display of calligraphic text, and,as such, handscroll painting was accorded a similarly high cultural status. This format is conducive to panoramic landscapes, narrative subjects and episodic figural themes.[11] The correct viewing of a handscroll is meant to be an exclusive experience between the audience and the work of art, with the viewer participating in conversation with the artist as the painting is rolled and unrolled in arm-length sections.[12] In choosing the long horizontal scroll, the artist was conveying to the audience the desire for the painting to be experienced in a specific setting, by a specific group, (by a member of the literati class privately, or among others of the same social status) in order to be properly appreciated and understood. Literati emphasized this exclusivity within their ranks by the insistence upon a member's possession of certain esoteric cultural knowledge (like the proper way to view a handscroll) in order to participate fully in the group's cultural practice.[13] The handscroll format is best suited for an intimate experience, a one-on-one interaction of contemplation and examination wherein the artist divulges creative expression to an informed audience.

11 Silbergeld, *Chinese Painting Style*, 12.
12 Vinograd, *Chinese Art and Culture*, 263.
13 Brook, *The Confusion of Pleasure*, 224.

The use of the fan as a surface for painting is also informative as a cultural object. The folding fan as painting format was widely used by literati and was also especially popular with gentry women and courtesan painters.[14] The fan as a material object is a compact and easily portable device that served multiple functions for both the literati and courtesan, albeit to slightly different ends. The small size of a fan as a painting surface enabled the artist to relatively quickly create a complete painting that would accomplish social goals. For the courtesan, the folding fan served as a prop in coquettery. When painted and given as a gift, the fan also became something of an advertisement for the courtesan. The use of a fan by a courtesan in assignation with a patron would cause him to associate the fan as intimately imbued with the courtesan's alluring persona. When given as a "gift" by the courtesan it would serve as a memento of the courtesan and of the time spent with her, a strategy that Xue Susu was known to have deployed on at least one occasion.[15] For the literati, this format's small size made it amenable to quickly fulfill social obligations that required a painting as response. Then, the fan painting by either literati or courtesan, when in the possession of the recipient, displayed and appreciated, became simultaneously an endorsement of the artist, as well as a demonstration of the recipient's culture and artistic erudition.

In keeping with the theme of evocative ink monochrome floral images seen in *Wild Orchids*, the second piece by Xue Susu to be considered, *Flowers*, (see figure 5), located in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, is a handscroll painted in ink on paper, created by the artist in 1615. As the title suggests, the painting is of sixteen different plants laid out in random sequence, irrespective of any traditional seasonal order, as if they were cuttings from a garden placed in a row.

14 Tseng, *Poetry on the Wind*, introduction: XXX.
15 Robinson, *VFJT*, p. 83. .
16 Robinson, *VFJT,* 84. The flowers are identified in the painting by Terese Tse Bartholomew, from right to left as follows: tree peony, magnolia, yellow hibiscus, camellia, herbaceous peony, gardenia, virburnum,lilly, chrysanthemum, hibiscus, camellia, magnolia, iris, Joesph's Coat with asters and the flowering plum. In, Terese Bartholomew, "The Hundred Flowers: Botanical Motifs in Chinese Art"

The flowers are depicted in a brush stroke known as *mogu*, which has been translated variously as the "boneless" or "buried outline" method, in which the images rely on tonal variations of ink wash to give the flora depth and volume rather than a visible outline.[17] In this particular painting, despite the lack of outline, the ink washes are deployed in a precise and deliberate manner Throughout the handscroll a delicate balance is maintained between the expressiveness of the varied ink tones by which the plants are rendered and a dedication to close observation, which becomes an almost loving depiction of the form of each plant. This painting technique is somewhat reminiscent of the impressionistic ink deployment techniques of earlier Ming dynasty artists such as Chen Chun (1453-1544) (figure 6) and Xu Wei (1521-1593) (Figure 7).[18] Impressionistic use of the *mogu* technique aside, Xue Susu, unlike Xu Wei and Chen Chun, maintained a calculating and precise control over her brushwork and ink tonalities. The emotion of this painting while covert, conveys a tension as the black ink is manipulated just enough to make the leaves and petals of each plant hum with vibrancy unexpectedly expressed in shades of gray. Compositionally, this handscroll is formed by elegantly progressing diagonals spaced evenly across the painting. Stable triangular mini compositions are constructed by the arrangement of each plant and tree branch, creating an order that balances the implied spontaneity of the *mogu* brush style.

The disregard of seasonal order in the placement of flower images within this handscroll is explained in the inscription of the painting written by Fan Yunlin (1558-1641), which states, "For the Flowers' Birthday, painted by Xue Sujun ."[19] This title is a reference to the Chinese folklore belief that the celebration of the "birthday" of all flowers occurred on the fifteenth day of the

17 Silbergeld, *Chinese Painting Style*, 25.
18 Robinson, *VFJT*, 84.
19 Ibid., 84.

second lunar month when the flower spirits presented themselves to the Jade Emperor.[20] The Birthday of the Flowers is traditionally viewed as a feminine celebration, and as the choice of subject matter for an undedicated painting, it is interesting to ponder for whom this handscroll may have been created. The colophon, also written by Fan Yunlin, extols Xue Susu's talent, favorably comparing her skills to those of her eminent artistic predecessors such as the literati painter par excellence, Shen Zhou (1427-1509), as well as Guan Daosheng, who is perhaps the most famous female painter in Chinese art history. The *mogu* brush technique deployed in ink monochrome is manipulated by Xue Susu into varied gradations of tonalities that mimic the spectrum of color found in real flowers. In *Flowers*, the artist is successful in translating the delicacy and transient beauty of flowers in bloom without the use of color and without exact form-likeness. This handscroll is another example of the artist's use of *fang,* creative imitation of earlier models, where she has utilized the *mogu* technique in a manner that alludes to the "splashed ink" paintings by "eccentric" artists of the Tang dynasty (618-907), as well as the later Ming individualist painters Chen Chun and Xu Wei mentioned above. The successful visual description of a variety of flowers in ink monochrome, depicted with a free hand and visible, expressive brushstroke, was known as *xieyi* or, "sketching the idea", a term used by literati art critics since the Yuan when promoting the expression of brushwork and the denigration of formal likeness.[21] The *Flowers* handscroll is imaginatively painted in *mogu* brushwork. Its depiction of the fanciful profusion of a multitude of flowers found in a Chinese garden in simultaneous blossom, with a subtle yet dynamic composition is evidence of what literati described as *xing*, which translates as "inspiration", where Xue Susu has translated the spring celebration of blossoming flowers into a visual commemoration of the holiday.[22] The terms *xieyi* and *xing* describe aims that literati art

20 Ibid., 85.
21 Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, 126-127.
22 Xin, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 2.; Cahill, *The Painter's Practice,* 16.; Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, 158.

theorists used in lauding successful works of their peers. That they are easily applicable in Xue Susu's work further demonstrates her grasp of literati aims in painting practice.

A third painting to be discussed, which is in the collection of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, is the fan painting *Chrysanthemums and Bamboo* (Figure 8), painted in ink on gold paper. This fan was painted in 1633 when Xue Susu was in her late sixties and no longer actively involved in the world of entertainment. Despite the smaller size of the piece and the flashiness of the gold paper, Xue Susu is able to successfully strike a refined emotional attitude of self sufficiency and self possession through her choice of subject matter, brushstroke and composition, without veering into sentimentality. She is able to do this through a combination of visual and poetic allusions, where she definitively assumes the role of the literatus by appropriating the role of the quintessential scholar-hermit, Tao Qian, also known as Tao Yuanming (365-427).

In the painting a leafy, thick blooming patch of chrysanthemums dominates the surface area of the fan with intermittently interspersed stalks of bamboo. On the far right of the piece Xue Susu has inscribed a poem in which she directly references one of Tao Qian's most famous poems, "Written While Drunk" and compares it to her own experience as a former entertainer now in her final years:

> One branch of soft golden hue, soon after the frost
> Half-open by the hedge in the pale evening sun.
> Why fuss again to face the Southern Hills, with wine-cup in hand?
> I'm sufficiently provided with dry food for the life of a recluse.[23]

The images of chrysanthemums and bamboo are illustrative of the quatrain, specifically, the "branch of soft golden hue" are the chrysanthemums, and the "...hedge in the pale evening sun"

23 Robinson, *VFJT*, 85. Trans. Irving Lo.

is signified by the stalks of bamboo. By comparing the poem by Xue Susu to that of Tao Qian's, the allusions within Xue's poem and painting it becomes clear that she has appropriated the role of Tao Qian and adapted it to her own circumstance.

> I built my house near where others dwell,
> and yet there is no clamor of carriages and horses
> You ask of me "How can this be so?"
> "When the heart is far, the place of itself is distant."
> I pluck chrysanthemums beneath the eastern hedge,
> and gaze afar towards the southern mountains.
> The mountain air is fine at the evening of the day,
> and flying birds return together homewards
> Within these things there is a hint of Truth,
> but when I start to tell it, I cannot find the words.[24]

While the chrysanthemum has several meanings within traditional Chinese culture, in the frame of the literati the chrysanthemum is associated with Tao Qian, specifically because of the poem transcribed above. Tao Qian was a poet-recluse who was revered by literati culture as a man who represented the cultural ideal of a scholar who rejected the frenetic pace of government service to pursue a life of reflection and contemplation. Tao Qian as a symbol for eremitism possesses disparate meanings according to who is adopting his role and how he is appropriated by one literatus may not necessarily be relevant to the manner in which another adopts his stance.[25] What remains constant, however, is the desire to remove oneself from worldly concerns and focus more upon personal introspection. Xue Susu in her verse directly references Tao Qian's own poetry. By doing so she has put herself in his place and assumed the pose of the recluse. While any literatus worth his salt would immediately recognize Xue Susu's allusion to Tao Qian in her painting of "golden" chrysanthemums by a bamboo "hedge", the inscription of the painting with a poem in which she adopts his reclusive attitude underscores the message that her choice to leave the world of entertainment was intentional.

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24 Minford and Lau, *An Anthology of Translations, Classical Chinese Literature Volume I*, 502. Trans. William Acker

25 Nelson, "Revisiting the Eastern Fence: Tao Qian's Chrysanthemums" 439.

Also depicted in this fan painting are several stalks of bamboo interspersed as a backdrop, as a fence, if you will, which frames the clustered chrysanthemum patch that grows beneath it. The bamboo, like the chrysanthemum, is perhaps as heavily laden with symbolism as this autumnally blooming flower, if not more so. Said to be the archetypal literati painting subject matter, the bamboo in literati culture is symbolic of a person who is humble and morally strong, a person who is "hollow hearted" like the joints of the bamboo plant. The ability of the bamboo to bend in strong wind without breaking is a trait admired and imitated by scholar-officials who are buffeted by the "winds" that can blow at court, as they seek to persevere in the face of inevitable adversity. When represented in paintings the bamboo can become a kind of portrait, in this case these slender calligraphically rendered stalks also become Xue Susu, as she perseveres to continue to lead her life on her own terms.

In *Chrysanthemums and Bamboo* Xue Susu utilized a similar kind of *mogu* style of brushwork found in the handscroll *Flowers*. The leaves of the chrysanthemums are painted in various tones of mottled wash that frame the light gray petals of the flowers. The gold flecks in the paper of the fan glow through the diluted ink, drawing attention to the golden autumnal hue of the blossoms described in Xue's poem. The delicate gray wash that makes up the petals and leaves of the chrysanthemum plant mute the ostentation of the gold background, making the otherwise gaudy choice of gold paper appropriate for the situation. The Bamboo is painted in almost hierarchical proportion to the chrysanthemums, its small size and delicate calligraphic description in the background of the composition highlights the primary role of the chrysanthemum in this piece.

From the examples of extant paintings of Xue Susu, the work of the literati scholar-amateur style favored by her clientele seems to have had more of an influence on her own oeuvre than that of the academic style of the professional artist and imperial court. This is not to say that all of her paintings are flowers done in the ink monochrome style favored by literati painters. Although the work is unavailable for examination, Xue Susu is known to have painted a portrait of the Bodhisattva Guanyin that was admired by Dong Qichang.[26] This figure painting combined with the last example of her available work discussed below, point to Xue's facility in a range of artistic genres and styles.

The last piece to be examined is another fan painting, titled *Cicada on a leaf* (Figure 9). Simply arranged, the composition of this piece is balanced around a cicada, painted in a glowing greenish blue in the middle of the fan. The insect hangs from a slender twig with yellowing leaves that arch in a graceful diagonal across the gold paper. A grouping of greener leaves anchors the scene on the right hand of the fan, giving a sense of stability to a tenuous, delicate moment in nature.

The cicada has been present in Chinese art history since its appearance on Shang and Zhou dynasty bronze vessels.[27] The particular iconographic meaning of the cicada for Xue Susu herself, however, is unknown. The cicada is emblematic of rebirth and resurrection as it emerges from the ground transformed from its pupal state into a winged insect, although never as brilliantly colored as depicted Xue Susu's painting. Perhaps more mundanely, Xue Susu could have painted this picture in order to make a visual pun upon the term "cicada curls," an expression

26 Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids", 207. This painting is either in an unpublished private collection, or is no longer extant.
27 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 93.

used to describe a hairstyle that she was noted to have worn when entertaining her patrons and clients.[28]

At first, this piece seems to be an anomalous work in her available oeuvre; however, it is in fact another example of her understanding of literati painting ideals, and it is, once examined, not dissimilar to the works discussed above. Briefly stated, this painting is, like Xue Susu's other known works, a closely observed nature study, but it is a departure stylistically from the other paintings studied in this paper. This piece displays a kind of brushwork and coloration that recalls the styles of earlier dynasties. Specifically, the artist is referencing the blue and green color scheme favored by Tang landscape artists. An example of the use of this color scheme is seen in the paintings of Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322) of the Yuan (1279-1368), specifically in the mountains painted in his album leaf *Landscape*, (Figure 10). Zhao was one of the first scholar-gentry artists to consciously utilize this color scheme of specific blue and green mineral pigments in order to evoke an archaistic reference. Zhao's popularity as an artist subsequently made the use of this blue and green combination a literati trope of Tang dynasty archaism. By this appropriation, Xue Susu visually proclaims her art historical erudition, which, according to Ming doyens, is another requisite of literati painting status.[29]

Conscious appropriation of earlier artistic styles has been a strategy used by literati painters since the Yuan dynasty.[30] This painting specifically evokes affiliation with styles seen in paintings of the Tang dynasty and of the Northern Song (969-1127). In *Cicada on a Leaf* the artist utilizes an academic brush technique that seeks a somewhat more mimetic representation of the natural

28 Qian, 770.
29 Cahill, "Some Thoughts on Chinese Painting History and Post History", 21.; Nelson, "Late Ming Views of Yüan Painting", 202.
30 Cahill, *Parting at the Shores*, 4.

world, while referencing an archaic color scheme reminiscent of the Tang dynasty landscape here put to innovative use in a Bird-and-Flower painting. The tightly controlled outline and colored ink wash are used in a representational manner to a naturalistic effect, and disguise the movement of the artist's hand and brush. Thus it becomes evident that Xue Susu was also trained in the academic painting style, which was heavily influenced by Northern Song painting practice. This painting is also suggestive of embroidery, in which startlingly realistic images were created with a needle and silk floss. Xue Susu is noted to have excelled in needlework, and it is apparent the exacting precision required in embroidery impacted her use of the academic style of painting. [31] Among other things, this painting is perhaps an interesting reversal of a practice by women that reproduced paintings in embroidery.

Normally too strict an adherence to the academic style of Bird-and-Flower painting would have been a detrimental comparison in the eyes of Ming literati. Due to its close association with artisan painters, the academic style was deemed too mechanical and craftsman like, seldom practiced by literati painters that considered themselves to be scholar-amateur artists. However, it was widely practiced by women of both gentry and courtesan status, who evidently had slightly more freedom in their stylistic choices. What prevents this painting from complete classification as an academic style painting is the artist's use of an archaic color reference. In this piece Xue Susu takes advantage of her gender, and combines her comprehension of art historical models with Ming ideations of gender appropriate painting practice to create an innovative artistic space for herself.

31 Robinson, *VFJT*, 86.

The artist's true intention when creating this painting is unknowable, but her comprehension and proficiency in various painting techniques is undeniable. Because Xue Susu grasped the literati inclination to reference earlier dynasties' painting styles she was able to manipulate her academic painting training in an innovative way that is completely in line with literati painting ideals.

Through these four examples it can be seen that Xue Susu's approach to painting is consistently historically aware, an important characteristic of literati painting practice. This choice by the artist to regularly and consciously reference her stylistic predecessors, and her ability to do so successfully, is evidence of her place as an active participant in literati painting culture. This new assertion does have the effect of separating her from the broader range of female painters. This separation is necessary because stylistically Xue Susu made decisions within her paintings that are not congruent with the general set of women's painters' work that is extant, more than four hundred years later.

When we look at paintings made by women during the late Ming dynasty through the transitional period to the early Qing (1644 -1911) we can make a few generalizations. We must be very aware that the pieces we are able to study now, in the twenty-first century, are more than likely only a fraction of what were created by women painters during the seventeenth century. Why some paintings survived, why others were lost in the interim centuries and why one kind of painting by women artists was valued enough to preserve over another is beyond the scope of this paper. Women were not restricted from painting in any given genre, and despite the gendered divisions that occurred throughout China's history, there is no specific genre that can be described as solely the domain of women painters. However, the most popular category of painting for women, by far, was the Bird-and-Flower genre. Certain compositions, style, and

brush techniques were also common enough within paintings by women artists of the late Imperial period so as to suggest a general similarity in the large majority of works by women painters which Xue Susu did not share.

In painting, unlike in Neo-Confucian social stratifications, the division of women's paintings into subcategories of "courtesan painting" and "gentry women painting" is unnecessary. The similarities found in the paintings by women of both social categories are large enough that one can arguably consider them of one genre. Often, on examination based solely upon formal analysis, a painting by a courtesan is indistinguishable from other paintings by female artists who belonged to other social classes.

In discussions of women's painting it is unlikely that a reader will come across any description of a female painter that contains the words "eccentric" or "heterodox". A very loose similarity does exist within the extant examples of women painters of the seventeenth century, but does so only as a general type of painting that sustained artistic styles rather than innovating them.[32] As far as is ascertainable from extant works by female artists of the Ming dynasty, female painters in seventeenth century China were simply not at the forefront of methodological debates of individualism and orthodoxy.[33] This is not because women painters were in any way inferior to their male counterparts, or that their existence is tangential to Chinese art history, but rather it is a case of a societal structure dictating the circulation and preservation of women's art and their writing. The social mores of Neo-Confucian ideas regarding female propriety made public recognition of artistic talent on the same level as an artists like Wen Zhengming (1470-1559) or Xu Wei un-

32 Weidner, *VFJT*. p. 62
33 Ibid.

likely and undesirable. This is to say, it was not inappropriate for a woman to paint, but it was more socially suspect if her work were to circulate as publicly as that of her male counterparts.

Despite what seems to be a limited range of what can be defined as the domain of women within painting practice, there does exist a certain style that appears in many paintings by female artists that serves to cull a large number of female painters from possibly being identified as literati artists. This "style", (really a common tendency in numerous female painters to select certain techniques, rather than a true artistic style) can be observed by the viewer as a reserved and precise manner that is frequently seen in works of female painters, either courtesan or gentry woman.

The propensity of women to utilize conservative, established brush styles and compositions in their paintings, while adhering to more orthodox models of past examples to inform their work, is attributable to the kinds of art to which they were exposed within their social circles. Popular styles that were regularly copied by male painters would eventually be transmitted by familial and social networks to women painters of all social classes. These models, such as the double curved leaf seen in many paintings of the late Ming, after so many repetitions, no matter how skillfully done, eventually became disunited from their original intent. The evocation of literati earlier masters as a matter of creative imitation, of the Yuan dynasty painter Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322), was lost. Originally, this double curved leaf descended from Zhao's use within his own painting of a directly translated calligraphic brushstroke. This is evidenced in his painting *Bamboo Rocks and Lonely Orchids* (undated) (Figure 11). Zhao Mengfu also wrote in regards to his theory of the apposite nature of calligraphic brushstrokes in paintings,

> Rocks in flying white (script), trees as in seal script;

> When painting bamboo, one applies the spreading-eight (late clerical) method.
> Those who understand this thoroughly
> Will realize that calligraphy and painting have always been the same.[34]

This idea was recognized and appropriated by Wen Zhengming in his own work, who, in one instance, transformed this calligraphic appropriation into a leaf form, seen in many of his works, but specifically in *Orchids and Bamboo and Rock* (undated) (Figure 12). The popularity of Wen as an artist propagated the use of double curved leaf by those who strove to paint in a similar manner for generation after generation disseminating into all manner of art circles, both professional and literati. By the final years of the Ming dynasty this double curved leaf while remaining a valid manner in which to describe a leaf was no longer imbued with any calligraphic brush manner. This model of a leaf form was transformed into an acceptable style, that is, devoid of any real reference or art historical substance. (Figures 13 & 14) The paintings by Xue Susu discussed in this paper are the opposite of style lacking substance. While the subject matter may be similar, her choices of style are loaded with clues that point to her perception of art historical precedents informing her work. The majority of Xue Susu's extant paintings fall within the Bird-and-Flower subject category. The manner in which she painted, however, in consideration of the brushwork and composition, are also influenced by other painting styles, including the Landscape genre as seen in her painting, *Wild Orchids*.

In Chinese painting similar subject matter was shared by all artists, regardless of gender or social status. Landscape paintings, the most highly valued of subject categories in Chinese art, as well as paintings of birds and flowers, and even figure paintings, both religious and secular, were all acceptable categories for women of all social classes to pursue. Generally, all painting genres were considered permissible for women to use. Women in China did not have to confront the

34 McCausland, *Zhao Mengfu:Calligraphy and Paintings For Khublai's China*. 271.

same problems encountered by female painters of Western Europe and the Americas. Because the study of the nude human figure as a subject for painting purposes was not something that members of either sex in Chinese imperial society would consider, a common problem that confronted women in the West was rendered moot.[35]

The category of Bird-and-Flower painting, although it was not as esteemed in the eyes of art critics as those works in the Landscape genre, was enormously popular in the late Ming period. This genre was especially favored by both gentry women and courtesan artists alike.[36] Women may have made use of this genre as a source of artistic expression for a number of reasons. Flowers of all kinds and other intimate studies of nature were easily available to them in their rooms or from manuals and inspiration was as close as the nearest garden. It could have also been the case, for both courtesans in training and young girls of gentry families, that the genre of Bird-and-Flower painting was a specialty of the teacher that taught them. Perhaps also, in the case of a female born into a family of professional artists, the specialty of the painting lineage may have been the Bird-and-Flower genre. As Marsha Weidner points out in her monograph in the exhibition catalogue for *Views From Jade Terrace*, women in imperial China seemingly readily accepted the trope of association of woman and flowers, or women as flowers. The garden, located in the domestic sphere, the realm of the Chinese woman, can be seen as a feminine space.[37] The deeply rooted iconographic history of flora and fauna within Chinese culture, both literary and popular, made it possible to find a flower or plant appropriate to symbolize whatever sentiment was desired. Iconographic association leads to one of the only distinction of preference between a courtesan and gentry woman's subject matter, the orchid.

35 Weidner, *VFJT*, 23.
36 Ibid., 24.
37 Weidner, *VFJT,* 23;Craig, *Fruitful Sites*, 206.

According to compilations of Chinese female artists, a little less than half of the courtesans listed, twenty-one out of forty-six, chose orchids as their specialty.[38] The reason for the frequent selection of the orchid as subject matter could be that, unlike the chrysanthemum and peony, it is a flower that is relatively easy to render with a minimum of uncomplicated calligraphic strokes. The orchid's popularity may also be due to its numerous iconographic associations, already mentioned as a symbol of purity and concealed or secluded beauty. An orchid painting given as a token of affection or remembrance to a patron or lover could be seen as the courtesan's use of this flower as a signifier of her own identity, as a rare thing of beauty, a memento reminding the client to treasure their experience as one would treasure discovering an exquisite blossom in an unexpected place, one well worth repeating.

Some of the qualities of women's painting at large, such as predilection for floral subject matter, do coincide with Xue's choices as a painter. However, what necessitates the distinction between Xue Susu as a female painter and most women painters of her era is the conscious choices of stylistic historical allusion she made within in her Bird-and-Flower paintings. What constituted a literati painter during the Ming dynasty was among other things, a comprehension of, and adherence to a compilation of theories based upon shared knowledge of the artistic past, which was then represented in their selections of specific styles.

Paintings created by literati artists of the Ming dynasty were designed to be limited to members of the scholar-gentry class. It was assumed by artists and critics (also of literati status) that these works of art could only be truly appreciated and understood by a viewer indoctrinated in literati

38 Laing, *Flowering in the Shadows*, 91.; Zhao, Zhongguo Mei Shu Da Ci Dian, 529 .

culture.[39] Thus, the intent of the creation and comprehension of literati paintings is to be inaccessible to all but the educated elite few. It may be surprising, then, to find, in the body of work of an artist of courtesan status, the voice and style of a true literatus. Xue Susu, through her paintings, not only mastered a wide range of brush techniques that keenly expressed her artistic intent, but her choice of subject matter and composition revealed her deep understanding of literati style of her time, which she consequently adopted as her own.

The art and artists that Xue Susu encountered through the relationships she cultivated during her career as a courtesan certainly affected her decisions as an artist. Active in the era succeeding "Wu school" founders Wen Zhengming and Shen Zhou(1427-1509), it would have been impossible for her not to have seen paintings, if not by their hand, then heavily influenced by their artistic practice. The elevation of the "Four great masters of the Yuan" [Ni Zan, (1301-1374), Huang Gongwang (1269-1354), Wang Meng (ca.1308-1385) and Wu Zhen (1280-1354)] as preeminent painters to be emulated by literati of the Ming had already been firmly established by her lifetime. Similarly, in the late imperial period in which Xue Susu lived and worked as an artist, clearly defined painting genres had been in existence for several centuries. These genre categories had developed out of centuries of artistic practice and theory, and carried with them iconographical and stylistic histories of preceding eras. A literati artist's decision to work in a particular painting style often served as an initial indicator informing the viewer of the personal identity the painter strove to present in their work.

Classification and subjective evaluation of artists and their paintings has existed in China since at least the Southern Qi (479-502) and, likely, even earlier. The Southern Qi theorist Xie He intro-

39 Cahill, "Some thoughts on the History and Post History of Chinese Painting.", 20.

duced his categorization of artists according to his "Six Principles," *liufa*, of painting, arguably beginning the convention in China of artistic criticism and commentary on painting practice.[40] Significant to this paper, the development of the Bird-and-Flower tradition into an important genre occurred during the Tang dynasty, in approximately the eighth century, where the depiction of animals, birds, and flora in paintings evolved in substance to become a major subject of painting. No longer purely an attempt at representing form-likeness, the painting of non-human subject matter was used to visually render similes and metaphors of the Tang imperial experience.[41]

The term "Bird-and-Flower painting" was first used at the end of the Northern Song dynasty (976-1127) with creation of the *Xuanhe painting catalogue*, or *Xuanhe Huapu*, a painting catalogue sponsored and overseen by the Emperor Huizong. The Northern Song precise, mimetic style of Bird-and-Flower painting was established in the imperial court painting academies. These careful and highly naturalistic life studies of birds, plants, flowers, and insects are from a time that valued form-likeness as the epitome of artistic expression. Extremely popular, even in later eras, the paintings of the Imperial Academy of the Northern Song set the standard for the "academic" style of painting in later Ming China.

The Song dynasty is also the era when the literati scholar began to engage in painting in earnest with the Emperor Huizong's emphasis on the mastery of *sanjue*, the "three perfections" of calligraphy, poetry, and painting, as the mark of a truly cultured person.[42] There was, from the literati's perspective, a distinct and studied separation between the artist that painted for a living and the literatus who painted in pursuit of cultural refinement. This insistence of difference by the

40 Wu, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 45.; Xie He's theories and categorizations of paintings were subsequently adopted by later Ming art theorists and adapted to fit seventeenth century painting genres.
41 Wu, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 79.
42 Barnhart, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 123.

literati was due to Confucian social stratification and an affected distaste for active engagement in commerce. Whether a literatus actually received compensation in exchange for paintings was not as important as the maintenance of the image and myth that literati were truly scholar-*amateur* painters in every sense of the word.[43]

The stylistic division of literati versus academic in Bird-and-Flower painting was not easily discerned until the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). It is during this time that the category of the Bird-and-Flower tradition expanded to include a style of painting that stands in contrast to Song imperial paintings that strove for faithful form-likeness. This expansion of category within the Bird-and-Flower tradition made room for a style of ink monochrome painting that disregarded technical refinement and close study of the subject matter. Tang Hou, an early Yuan art theorist and connoisseur, promoted the practice of *Xieyi*, or "sketching the idea," combined with the attainment of *Shiyi*, the "poetic idea," as important components of successful literati paintings. Typically, the monochrome ink style emphasized a visibility of brushwork, seeking to capture the essence of the subject matter through an abbreviated use of ink and a limited color palette.[44] The artists who worked in ink monochrome were mostly literati scholar-amateur painters who, indeed, did not possess the same skills in mimetic representation professional artists, but, instead, created work using techniques that were perfected through the study of calligraphy. The scholar-amateur painters who worked in the Bird-and-Flower tradition also often restricted themselves to a narrower range of subject matter, focusing on flora that were of special significance to literati culture.

43 Cahill, *The Painter's Practice*, 11.
44 Cahill, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, 189.; Bush *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, 126.

Drawing on examples of paintings from earlier dynasties, these concepts and definitions of genre were invaluable to painting practice in later imperial China. The foundations of artistic theory and canonization of particular painting styles were deeply significant as they informed artists of their theoretical and practical artistic heritage. As early as the Southern Song dynasty, artists derived inspiration and legitimacy from artistic precedents, both stylistic and theoretical.[45] Literati artists of the Ming, Xue Susu included, regularly drew upon the ideas and tropes promoted by earlier artists and theorists. This is *not* to say that Chinese painting practice was mired in traditionalism, or the faithful replication of old masters, but to point out that inspiration or *xing* in Ming literati painting was derived from the artistic precedent. Like the rest of China's traditional painting categories, Bird-and-Flower drew upon tropes common in painting practice for inspiration and legitimacy.[46] The successful literati artist of the Ming used this knowledge when making choices of style and subject matter to visually demonstrate his (or her) artistic erudition.

During the Ming, Bird-and-Flower painting could be essentially divided into two stylistic genres. The academic style, which looked to the Song dynasty for stylistic precedents as outlined in the *Xuanhe huapu*, adhered to a realistic observation of form-likeness to create a decorative painting with very formal qualities. The scholar-amateur style, by contrast, used the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) mode of ink monochrome painting for inspiration.[47] These two genres not only differed stylistically, they also contained social distinctions. The technical skill required to produce a painting in the academic style was closely associated with professional painters. Professionalism in painting smacked of commerce, and, thus, due to Neo-Confucian social stratification was ideally avoided by the members of the literati class.[48] The looser, more calligraphic manner of

45 Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting*, 98.
46 Cahill, *Distant Mountains*, 224.
47 Bickford, *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice*, 82.
48 Cahill, *The Painters Practice*, 118.

the literati style, conversely, displayed a mannered lack of academic training and therefore distanced itself from the more complex professional style, while still displaying a high degree of brush proficiency gained through the practice of calligraphy.

Despite the divisions in style and social distinction between the academic and scholar-amateur traditions, the Bird-and-Flower genre was unified in subject matter. The shared conventions of meaning in that subject matter also allow us to speak of both stylistic traditions as one genre. Described as "conceptual art purely based on symbolism," Bird-and-Flower painting of both stylistic genres often communicated in visual language sentiments and determined messages that would have been immediately recognized by the viewer.[49]

In the scholar-amateur tradition of literati paintings, certain plants and trees such as the bamboo, orchid, chrysanthemum, pine, and blossoming plum tree are continuously seen in Bird-and-Flower paintings of the scholar-amateur style as metaphoric tropes occurring throughout the Ming dynasty. Due to the centrality of these plants and flowers within the work of Xue Susu, it is useful to briefly elucidate their standard iconography within the literati context.

The bamboo plant was described above in Xue Susu's fan painting *Chrysanthemum and Bamboo.* It was often used as a self-portrait of a literati artist, due to its numerous associations with Confucian virtues. The hollow inner core of this plant is linked to the virtue of "hollow heartedness" (humility). The flexibility of the stems of the bamboo, which bend without breaking, even in the strongest wind, was said by literati to be akin to the talent to survive in difficult times.

49 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 11.

The orchid, specifically the cymbidium orchid, is the focus of Xue Susu's handscroll by the same name. First mentioned in the poem *Li Sao,* "Encountering Sorrow," by the tragic figure of the poet/statesman Qu Yuan of the Warring States period, it has since been represented in paintings and poetry as a reference to a "superior man, whose reputation precedes him like perfume."[50] Confucius also mentions the plant, saying, "The orchid originates in deep valleys, but its obscurity does not discourage it from exuding its own fragrance."[51] This has led to the association of the flower with the under-appreciated scholar, who continues to labor virtuously and in obscurity. Other associations of the orchid with female beauty and elegance have been previously discussed.

The blossoming plum, actually *prunus mume*, while not represented in Xue's paintings discussed in this paper, is perhaps the most represented flower in literati painting. The tree blossoms in the late winter prior to other flowering trees and plants, and was, and is, a harbinger of the spring to come. As such, the plum represents hope in adversity, and the rewards of perseverance.[52] The plum blossom also represents the transient nature of beauty, due to the short time the tree is in full bloom.

Finally, the chrysanthemum: cultivated by the Chinese for more than 3,000 years and known as the "gentleman of flowers," is representative of intellectual accomplishment It evokes the famous fourth century scholar poet Tao Qian who wrote of renunciation and eremitism and, in the same poems, mentioned the pleasures of growing chrysanthemums. As the last flowering plant of the fall, the chrysanthemum is the quintessential symbol of the autumn season and, as such,

50 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 34.; Koehn, *Chinese Flower Symbolism,*12.
51 Ibid.
52 Bickford, *Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice,;* Welch, *Chinese Art*, 38.; Koehn, *Chinese Flower Symbolism*, 8.

evoked for the literati the melancholy feelings of that time of year as well as an image of old age .[53]

The reasons for the continual recycling of flora as subject matter are twofold: these plants were venerated as imbued with distinct meanings by historic, poetic, and literary convention particular to literati culture and, in addition, the plants listed above, with exception perhaps of the chrysanthemum, are relatively easy to depict with the skills learned during the practice of calligraphy. Certain flowers were left out of the scholar-amateur painting repertoire, such as the peony and the hibiscus, (both popular flowers in the academic style of Bird-and-Flower paintings); these were likely unrepresented due to their more plebeian iconography as metaphors for status and wealth. To successfully render these flowers' showy blossoms pleasingly required training in a painting manner that was considered to be vulgar by literati standards as it was "redolent of the marketplace."[54]

While the use of flowers as a female signifier was common, also common was the use of flowers and plants as the signifier of values and principles considered important to of the identity of the Chinese Neo-Confucian male. Historical figures, considered cultural heros to late Ming literati, were closely associated with flowers, such as Tao Qian and the chrysanthemum and Qu Yuan and the orchid.[55] These flowers, then, came to represent the principles and values that the literati held dear. Many noted literati artists for whom landscapes were their primary source of fame also created Bird-and-Flower paintings. Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming, as well as Lu Zhi, Chen Chun,

53 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 25.; Koehn, *Chinese Flower Symbolism*, Willams, *Chinese Flower Symbolism and Motifs*, 92.
54 Clunas, *Fruitful Sites*, 168-169.
55 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 34.; Koehn, *Chinese Flower Symbolism*, 12.

Xu Wei, and others, have within their own body of work numerous paintings that fall under the Bird-and-Flower subject category.

The placement of Xue Susu as an artist within the larger framework of Chinese painting is complex, and depends upon the source of the discussion. Contemporaries of Xue write about her work differently than do modern Western scholars of Chinese painting. However, no matter the milieu, all parties essentially rely on similar identifiers. Despite the streak of romanticism coloring much of Ming thought, literati of the late Ming era, such as the art theorist Dong Qichang (1555-1636) and Secretary in the Ministry of War, Fan Yunlin (1558-1641), ultimately based their opinions according to the rubric of intrinsic Confucian mores ingrained in Chinese society.[56] Under these circumstances Xue Susu's talent was seen as a surprising anomaly, remarkable given her gender. The references to her in colophons, biographies, or poetry regularly focus on gender as a primary determinant of artistic identity. Fan Yunlin, in his colophon written on Xue Susu's *Flowers*, comments that she was not just a pretty face, but the talent she displayed in this handscroll would truly surprise the past masters of the literati canon.[57]

The Ming dynasty witnessed a transition in literati painting that devised increasingly elaborate ways in which to evoke and manipulate old forms and styles of eras past.[58] As the dynasty progressed creative output from the literati class attained increasingly esoteric levels of historicizing sophistication. By the end of the Ming era, literati painters regularly utilized complex art-historical allusions in their work, readily comprehensible only to an elite educated class. These allusions stemmed from hundreds of years of literati artistic culture and required a shared knowledge

56 Robinson, *VJFT, 84*; Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 231.
57 Ko, *TOIC*, 268.
58 Cahill, "Some Thoughts on the History and Post History of Chinese Painting", 25.

base of painting practice as well as Confucian and Neo-Confucian scholarship.[59] This shared knowledge base constructed the literati identity and, in turn, the literati identity defined appropriate painting practice.

Successful participation within literati culture and navigation of the exclusive landscape of literati painting demanded adherence to unwritten, but nonetheless prescribed, rules and activities.[60] These aspects of literati constructed identity and cultural practice served to exclude those who either lacked the proper education and class status, or did not observe literati proprieties of monetary disapprobation and openly painted for remuneration. The inclination of scholar-gentry artists was to increasingly and introspectively mine variations of literati painting of prior dynasties to cultivate an abstruse air of exclusivity within their work. This was due in part to the social anxieties stemming from the destabilization of traditional social hierarchies. Such destabilization was the result of the transformation of the economy of the Ming empire.[61] A collective and abstract agreement on what was and what was not acceptable in literati painting helped, in part, to assuage these anxieties and reinforce class boundaries.

It would make sense, then, to assume that this type of artistic exclusivity, which defined the literati class, would automatically disregard and dismiss the painting of a person who did not meet all the criteria necessary for consideration as a literatus. However, during the Ming an exception was made for certain high ranking, exceptional courtesans, who, because of their particular station on the periphery of Chinese society, were able to transcend social boundaries and had access to the most intimate workings of elite culture. Because of the particular social circumstances of

59 Clunas, *Elegant Debts,* 59.
60 Ko, *Teachers of the inner Chambers*, 78.
61 Ibid., 32.

the Ming era, these women gained impressive educations and acquired voices of authority regarding the cultural accomplishments deemed necessary of literati.

The roles that courtesans played in literati culture were multivalent and, however ephemeral their status among literati elite may have been, when powerfully wielded, allowed them to create artwork of undeniable significance. Abstractly, the courtesan was often the medium through which a literatus reconstructed his own past, praised his own virtue and pondered his weakness and his destiny. Xue Susu assumed this role effectively as an artist within her paintings. However, within her work she is also the literatus giving herself a voice. She exploited the increasing social fluidity of late Ming society and acquired agency for herself within literati artistic circles with her artistic achievements gaining the respect and admiration of many famous Ming literati artists. Remarkably, she was able to adopt an elite stance without the affiliation with a stable male partner which was usually necessary to lessen the tenuous nature of courtesanship and to establish a receptive audience for her oeuvre. Ultimately, Xue was able to dually inhabit the artistic space of the literatus and the social space of the courtesan, using painting as the tool to give voice to her own past and celebrate her own virtues in a manner that was acceptable in both social spaces. Xue fully grasped the stylistic and compositional concerns of Ming literati painting. It is her innovative use of composition, brush style, and manipulation of tropes, that revealed her knowledge of her artistic predecessors, in a manner similar to that of literati artists, that secures her inclusion among that of her elite contemporaries.

As a courtesan, Xue Susu moved in social circles that encompassed a much larger range of society than those of a woman from a gentry family. In contrast, a typical woman of a literati or gentry family in late imperial China, according to Neo-Confucian social mores, would only have

close, regular contact with members of her own family. As artists, gentry women were similarly set apart. A gentry woman's exposure to painting styles, technique, and theory, in the case of most women, would have been limited as well. For a woman who took up the brush , the largest and most influential body of work that she would be privy to would be that of literati painters within her family, and she would be inclined to paint accordingly. A courtesan like Xue Susu, would be similarly influenced, but in a much broader scope. This is especially true in Xue's case since she was known to be well acquainted with men from families that possessed famous painting collections.[62] It is not, therefore, outlandish to say that an artist like herself would, given her talent and wider scope of influences, produce works of art that were simultaneously congruent with what was expected from a female painter as well as transcending into the realm of what is usually considered the artistic practice of the male literatus. As painting was considered one of the four accomplishments of any Literati gentleman of her era, Xue Susu would have been exposed to a wider variety of artistic styles from socializing with her patrons and their friends, subsequently creating relationships with painters and collectors of paintings which would in turn influence her own creative process.

The period during which Xue Susu was creatively active was in the Wu school's third generation of artistic practice.[63] Painters who were identified as Wu school artists were most often members of, or associated with the literati class and, as such, it is reasonable that this stylistic tradition would be the most influential upon Xue Susu's work as a painter. The influence of the Wu school in literati circles during this time was widespread even to the detriment of other styles of

62 Tseng, 207.

63 Bush, Susan. *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555-1636)*, (Boston, Harvard University Press, 1971) 153. A term coined to describe a style of literati artists who were active in the Yangtze river basin, formerly called Wu, now known as Suzhou, in an area somewhat analogous to the modern Jiangsu province.

painting.[64] However, the influence of Suzhou painters Wen Zhengming and his predecessor and master Shen Zhou was still a large part of southern China's scholar-amateur painting practice in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The style and painting aesthetics of these men had been filtered through at least three or four generations of artists by the time Xue Susu was painting actively.

The Wu school masters influence can be seen particularly in Xue Susu's description of rocks in the handscroll *Wild Orchids*. The lumpy, rounded quality of the embankments, boulders, and rocks find their inspiration from both Shen Zhou and Wen Zhengming's own Bird-and-Flower paintings where graded wet washes of ink form the mass of the stones, then are given volume by more saturated ink texture strokes of the hempfiber and axe-cut manner. (Figures 15- 18)

An accurate biography of a Ming dynasty (1368-1644) courtesan such as Xue Susu can be a cobbled together affair. Xue Susu existed within the liminal social space of courtesanship which, according to Neo-Confucian praxis, limited the locations where information about her would have been recorded for posterity. Her fame as an artist and courtesan provides information in the form of anecdotal reminiscences about her later years as a public persona but does not address early basic information such as the location and year of her birth. What is known is that Xue Susu was the fifth daughter in her family, born on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month in either Suzhou, in Jiangsu Province, or Jiaxing, located in Zhejiang.[65] The rest of her early biographical information is largely unrecorded, or presented as speculation in the wake of her fame

64 Cahill, James. *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Paintings of the Late Ming Dynasty (1570-1644)*,(New York, Weatherhill , 1982) 28.

65 Tseng, 200.

later in life. It can be surmised without too much hesitation that her early years, including procurement and training as a courtesan, followed a path similar to most courtesans of her time.[66]

What was a courtesan and what did this term mean in Ming dynasty China? A courtesan was a woman who was employed, usually not by her own choice but by the vagaries of fate, within the pleasure quarters and was paid to entertain men of a certain social class. While the courtesan existed at the top of a stratified system of traffic in women and her clients were culturally sophisticated men, she was still held under contract and ostensibly owned by a brothel like a common prostitute.[67] The courtesan was primarily distinguished by her training in various cultural pursuits attractive to her literati clientele. The idea was to engage the patron through the courtesan's cultural accomplishments as an enhancement to her sexual allure, ultimately satisfying needs both carnal and aesthetic.

Locating Xue Susu as an artist within the gendered spaces in late Ming dynasty China, necessitates an explanation that clarifies her social status, its liminality, and her exploitation of it. A liminal position is a space that occurs at, or on, a boundary or threshold between circumscribed physical, emotional or social realms. Liminality exists as a buffer of sorts, a third, transitional space from one area to the other, often blurring distinctions of ideal norms in the process. For example the traditional idea of separate binary spaces of public/private that was used to describe gender roles in imperial China is misleading. The ideal norm of clearly delineated public/private gendered spaces does not serve the reality when reconstructing gendered interactions in seventeenth century China. The idea of liminal space applied to gender in Ming society, redefines, or

66 Cass, 46.
67 Ko, *TOIC*, 261.

redraws rather, the binary public/private concept of spheres of gendered social roles into nested circles. Better understood as "inner" and "outer" spheres with a liminal space between them, the permeable boundaries of which were negotiated by not only those women who existed beyond the ideal norm of Neo-Confucian female roles (like courtesans), but by women in general. Dorothy Ko in her book, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers,* neatly describes these nested circles as a continuum of social interaction, with the women who held the status of courtesan located on the outer edges of the liminal space of the nested circles of "inner" and "outer" spheres, as the courtesan's livelihood necessitated a great deal of public interaction with a wider range of people than other women who were not in the entertainment world.[68]

Courtesans, due to their career and lifestyles, did not conform to the orthodox Neo-Confucian definitions of female roles. They were required to interact and conduct their lives in a manner visible to the public, in a way that would have been unacceptable for a woman of any other class. This existence as a courtesan dictated certain restrictions as well allowed certain freedoms unique to this social status that provides us with a better frame in which to examine Xue Susu within the context of her life and art and subsequently informs us how, through her courtesan status, she was able to negotiate a space in the canon of Ming painting as a literati artist.

In certain ways, women of gentry status and those who were public entertainers followed the same path. Both sets of women were trained from an early age to serve the same kinds of men, one set out of filial obligation, the other for profit (not necessarily her own). They also shared similar cultural pastimes, all cultivated by the same group of privileged men.[69] The difference

68 Ko, *TOIC*, p.13.
69 Ibid., 257.

lies in the impermanence of the social position occupied by courtesans, their lack of place within the official kinship structure.[70] While barring major social upheaval and political unrest, both of which occurred during the Ming - Qing dynastic transition, a gentry woman generally retained gentry status for the entirety of her life. As such, a gentry woman raised in the "inner" circle of the domestic sphere would be able to rely upon her official family structure for support and assistance. A courtesan, raised as she was by a "foster mother" in a brothel, did not have the support of a kinship system on which to rely. A career in the entertainment world was brief, a courtesan was never a courtesan forever, no matter how beautiful or talented she may have been. The natural aging process would eventually render the charms of even the most alluring woman null in comparison to a fresh young face. The ability of Xue Susu to attract men, even men much younger than herself throughout her life was apparently enough of an incongruity as to warrant rumors of witchcraft. Her varied talents and charm made her captivating enough to engage patrons for much longer than was considered appropriate.[71]

> In spite of her long life, ingenious-minded Xue retained her glamorous reputation. After she passed away, fiction grew around her saying that she had possesses witchcraft by means of which she attached younger men to her. But this is a legend only. Studying her portrait one sees a fastidious woman, but without pretentions. It is more likely that, as a Daoist tradition has it, her high spiritual power had preserved her charm. Why should it not have been with her as with Xia Ji, whose beauty enchanted admirers without decline?[72]

It is remarkable that Xue Susu was comfortable enough, both financially and psychologically, to remain independent for so long. That she was autonomous until she was too old to care for herself was an anomaly for a woman of any kind during the late Ming period. While the adherence to the Neo-Confucian moral doctrine of *sancong*, translated by Dorothy Ko as "thrice following," also known as the "three obediences,", by most women of traditional imperial China

70 Ibid., 252.
71 Tseng, *Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids*, 206.
72 Ibid., 206.

may initially appear to a woman of modern Western upbringing as a cowed response by a victimized population to an oppressive and stifling set of social standards, it was a cultural norm that was accepted and affected women who lived within and without its periphery.[73] Lacking the social safety net that *sancong* provided, a woman was virtually without recourse in the larger world. The transitory existence of a courtesan who was without the protection that *sancong* provided would have been challenging for any woman. Normally, an aging courtesan would seek to arrange some sort of security for her old age by scheming to enter into a marriage with one of her patrons. While the status of the concubine was among the lowest in a traditional household, it still provided a former courtesan more stability in her later years than would remaining in the entertainment world with fading looks and popularity. The unique qualities Xue Susu possessed are apparent within the choices she made regarding her own autonomy as well as the artistic choices perceptible in her painting oeuvre.

Typically, the path of a courtesan began when a very young girl was sold into a brothel and raised there in preparation for life as an entertainer. The girl would be trained by madams of the brothels, often aged courtesans themselves whom the girl referred to as "foster mothers."[74] Young girls in training, in turn, were euphemistically called "thin horses," a name that is derived from a poem by the Tang poet Bo Juyi, who wrote about the futility of training a courtesan as compared to the incentive and gratification of caring and feeding an undernourished horse. A horse, when treated well, will most likely prove to be a reliable speedy conveyance, while a well trained courtesan will have left you once she has been trained.[75]

73 Ko *TOIC*, 165.; *sancong*, or "thrice following" defines a woman's role in traditional Chinese culture, where she is to, from birth, obey the decisions and commands of the primary male in her life. As a young girl she is to follow her father's and elder brother's instructions; when married she follows her husband; when her husband dies she follows her son.

74 Yü, *Feast of Mists and Flowers*, 37.

75 Ko, 261.

The "grooming" of these young girls included a curriculum in which four skills were emphasized: literacy and the composition of literature, musical proficiency (the *qin* was apparently seen as the most suitable instrument for a female entertainer), singing and dancing, as well as needlework.[76] These skills are extremely similar to what was taught to many girls from gentry families. However, the education of the courtesan-to-be was weighted more heavily towards the skills of entertainment, such as musical proficiency and dance training, than that of her more cloistered counterparts. A first-class courtesan would posses in her cultural arsenal not only the feminine skills noted above, but also accomplishments that would rival the most cultivated of gentleman, not lacking proficiency in any of the four literati arts: calligraphy, painting, the *qin* and chess.[77] The ultimate goal was to produce a courtesan who would be a suitable companion for the patrons of the entertainment district, one who was in harmony with the literate gentleman's idea of himself as a cultivated man, acting as a perfect complement to his discrimination, taste and erudition.[78]

Xue Susu was truly a talented and highly trained woman, whose remarkable attainment of skills important to Ming literati cultural practice set her on par with the most famous courtesans of the late imperial era. Xue excelled in the various pursuits important to members of the Literati class, Hu Yinglin (1150-102) writes she was a "goddess of the needle" and Fan Yunlin (1558-1641) notes her deportment and countenance clearly expressed that she was not just another "pretty

76 Ko, 265 quoting Liyü.
77 Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and her Orchids", 200.
78 Ko, *TOIC*, 255.

powdered (face)", but she was also an accomplished archer on horseback. [79] There are several anecdotes, as well as poems that describe her talent with a bow and arrow while astride a horse.[80]

> ...While she gallops on horseback she shoots two balls from the crossbow, making the first ball hit the second in the air...She puts one ball of two balls on the forehead of her maid, striking the first ball off with the second without making a scratch (on her maid)...she never misses one such shot in a hundred.[81]

Xue Susu's talent as a painter was also widely recorded during her lifetime. Acquiring a painted fan by Xue Susu caused one of her admirers to write that he treasured this "gift" as he would a "precious jade".[82] The late Ming art theorist Dong Qichang was moved by her rendering of the goddess Guanyin, so much so that he added the Lotus Sutra as an inscription to the piece.[83] Xue Susu's public image was an enticing mixture of the martial, *wu,* and the cultured, *wen*.[84] What appears at first as an incongruous blend of contradictions within a courtesan's persona is, in fact, a heady combination that surely enhanced her allure and subsequently, her fee.

The ways in which a courtesan could be come acquainted with a potential patron varied. Some courtesans were affiliated with private houses and were under contract to repay these brothels for the education they received with a percentage of their earnings. Some courtesans were officially recognized by the imperial government as entertainers. These women, known as *guanji*, "official courtesans", attended government functions to liven up the scene, literally to "urge the winecup" as well as to provide witty banter, the singing of songs, and the performance of dramatic pieces.[85] Determining the "official" status of a particular courtesan can be difficult, and it is uncertain if it

79 Ko, *TOIC*, p.268; Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids," p. 201.
80 Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids," p. 203.
81 Qian Qianyi *Lie chao shiji xiao zhuan*, p.770.
82 Ko, 268.
83 Robinson, *VJFT*, 83.
84 Ryor, "Regulating the Qi and the Xin". *Archives of Asian Art*, Vol. 54 (2004), 23-24.
85 Bossler, Beverly "Shifting Identities: Courtesans and Literati in Song China." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Jun., 2002), 9.

was possible for a courtesan to move or be moved, from one type of service as a contracted worker of a private brothel to another as a government sanctioned *guanji,* or vice versa, or even whether one might maintain both statuses at the same time. It is noted in one source that Xue Susu was herself registered at one time as a *guanji*, but how long she remained one is unclear.[86] In either case, Xue Susu and other courtesans relied on attracting and maintaining the attention of their patrons, regardless of their place of meeting.

The men that patronized courtesans of Xue Susu's rank would largely be members of the literati class of considerable wealth and influence. It was said by one of her contemporaries, Hu Yinglin, that she reserved her greatest admiration for men of letters.[87] While the entertainment districts of the southern regions of Ming dynasty China are commonly considered the playgrounds of the literati, it should be noted that men of military rank also partook in the sophisticated diversions that took place in the famed pleasure quarters of Suzhou and Nanjing. As a courtesan of high rank and forceful personality, Xue Susu's publicly lived life exposed her to a wide range of personalities, both in and out of government service. Xue Susu counted among her lovers several military men as well as famous literary figures of her day, including Zhang Fengyi, (1527-1613) a government minister, and Shen Defu (1578-1642), a well known author who compiled miscellanies of the period.[88]

Xue Susu, despite making her livelihood from the attentions of men, was recorded as refusing the paying company of men she believed were beneath her dignity.[89] Qian Qianyi wrote, " Xue Susu has a spirit that is heroic. She values herself highly, and does not receive common people,

86 Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids," 200.
87 Tseng, "Women Painters of the Ming Dynasty." *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 53, No. 1/2 (1993) 254.
88 Tseng, "Hsüeh Wu and Her Orchids," 206.
89 Tseng, "Women Painters of the Ming Dynasty" , 254

but only the learned and intelligent".[90] Because the training of a first class courtesan was extensive, the price of her company would have been considerable, thus making her unavailable to all except the most wealthy customer. However, even if a potential client had the money, the courtesan was able, to some degree, to decline the attentions of a wealthy but uncultured man. For a courtesan to refuse a wealthy client on the grounds of his lack of culture would have spoken volumes to his peers, and, perhaps, this exclusiveness ultimately heightened the allure of such a woman. There is an anecdote which tells that Xue Susu did refuse just this kind of boor, a wealthy government official known as Peng, despite his having spent lavishly to win her romantic attentions. She chose instead a General Li as her lover, who happened to be under the jurisdiction of the spurned official. As revenge for his costly rebuff, the government official arranged for Li to be assigned to the "barbarian regions" of southern China with the Man people in hopes of separating Xue Susu and her lover. Instead, Xue Susu followed the General and lived with him at his post where she gained further fame as a mounted archer and a remarkable beauty.[91]

There existed for the high ranking courtesan a certain autonomy unavailable to women of other, more orthodox, social status. Neo-Confucian mores dictated that, ideally, a woman of virtue, especially a virtuous gentry woman ,would have no need to have contact with men outside her own kinship system. Virtuous women were charged with guarding the morality of the "inner" domestic sphere that they occupied.[92] Courtesans, on the other hand, were raised in the "outer" public realm and who essentially had no official kinship system, certainly were not considered guardians of any kind of Neo-Confucian morality, and mixed regularly with men with

90 Cass quoting Qian Qianyi, 39.
91 Cass, 39; Tseng, 206; Qian, 770.
92 Mann, Cheng *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, 3.

whom they were not related. Because of this, the courtesan existed on the margins of Chinese society, at once creating an ambiguous space that was at once at the heart of Chinese culture yet, at the same time prevented, through her lack of domesticity, an automatic placement with other members of her sex in the inner domestic sphere. The courtesan's exceptional social status created a liminal space that made allowances for her charming femininity as well as her mastery of the arts of the literate gentleman.[93] Any competently trained courtesan would be exceedingly well versed in the cultural pursuits that captivated the Scholar-Official habitué of the pleasure district.

Not just playthings for sale, courtesans were often active participants in the emerging reorganization of social culture of the upper levels of late Ming society. The way in which a courtesan could have found agency within this liminal social space was through the changing codes of belief that occurred as the seventeenth century progressed. By the later years of the Ming dynasty, the agricultural society that was the dream of the Hongwu emperor, its founder, had been supplanted by a mercantile economy. Rice had been replaced by silver as the means by which the economy traded. This money-based economy had transformed the cities of southern of China into urban centers of sophisticated culture. With large amounts of silver circulating through these cities, the entertainment trade with which high-end courtesans were associated flourished. Attitudes towards public leisure activities and conspicuous consumption changed and relaxed, partly due to innovative explications of traditional Confucian conventions.

93 Ko, *TOIC*, 258-259.

This economic change inspired a desire by followers of the Wang Yangmin Neo-Confucian school to reinterpret the Confucian canon.[94] No longer satisfied with mainstream scholastic interpretations, seen as limiting and obsolete in the late Ming, these men instead championed spontaneity and the intuitive expression of emotion.[95] Dorothy Ko calls this emerging ideology the "cult of *qing*" (*qing* is translated as feeling, passion or sentiment), where men and women celebrated emotionality as genuine virtue in contrast to the practice of orthodox ritual, the main focus of traditional Confucian ideology, which was considered by participants in this "cult" stifling and inhibiting.[96] The highly skilled and cultivated courtesan emerged as the perfect partner for the literatus who sought to apply this theory of *qing* and live by the reworking of traditional culture to suit it. Participation in the cult of *qing* required two players to be successful. It is argued that this pairing was one in which the male partner took the initiative, the female partner following, acting as merely a reflection for the actions of her partner.[97] However, it was together that these *jia'ou,* "mates in excellence," the courtesan together with the literatus, created an aesthetic paradise of coded behavior that signified their devotion to elevation of romance and romantic relationships to the highest art form, something Victoria Cass calls an "ecology of perfection."[98] An example of two partners in the "cult of *qing*" are the courtesan painter Dong Bai (1625-1554) and her literatus husband Mao Xiang (1611-1693) who wrote a loving memoir about Dong called *Yingmei an yiyu* "Reminiscences of the Convent of the Shadowy Plum Blossom". In it he recalls the intimate details of their conjugal bliss as an aesthetically perfect union between a *Caizi jiaren* "a talented man and a beautiful woman."[99] The intimate moments he described between himself and Dong Bai were not so much erotic as they were celebrating the creation of an aesthetically

94 Ko, 18.
95 Ibid.
96 Cass, 16.
97 Ko, 79.
98 Cass, 30.
99 Lo, *VJFT, 45.*

perfect moment, enjoyable only because both parties were aware of the esoteric intricacies involved.[100]

Frequent anecdotal evidence exists of courtesans, Xue Susu included, that belies the suggestion that these women were passive participants in these affairs. Heroic action was one trait highly admired by those indoctrinated in the cult of *qing*, and courtesans were celebrated when they took up the mantle of a *nüxia* or "female knight-errant" or stepped over social norms to pursue the men of their choice. An example exists in Kou Baimen (late seventeenth century) who was a courtesan cum concubine of Marshall Bao, a military commander who lived an opulent lifestyle. According to the story, the purchase of Kou Baimen as a concubine was just another symbol of Bao's wealth and status. At the collapse of the Ming dynasty, "...she purchased her own freedom from Bao, leaving with only a single servant to accompany her, from then on assuming the mantle of knight-errant ... and received her own guests as she pleased." [101] Quixotic deeds and the grand romantic gesture doomed to end badly were esteemed as evidence of *zhengqing* or "sincerity of heart", where perseverance despite the knowledge of inevitable tragedy were perversely relished. Xue Susu was one such courtesan who engaged in relationships with several leading intellectuals of her day and was known for her flamboyant romanticism. She was known to have repudiated a lover when he proved to be lacking in ambition and resolve. According to the story, Xue was involved at the time with one Yuan Baode, the son of a prominent military family from Songjian. When she offered to fund an expedition that Yuan would lead against the Japanese in Korea, he demurred, offering weak excuses and failed to respond to her urgings. Finally, she with great composure said

100 Cass, 31.
101 Cass, 37.

> Although you have elderly parents, you still linger here in idle recreation.
> Is this because of me? As I cannot emulate the Duchess of Qian and assist you in bringing glory to your family, I certainly cannot bear to let you offend against propriety. Even if some day you were to consume my flesh, that would still not be adequate as expiation for my offense. I should leave. [102]

With this pronouncement she rode off, leaving a letter with a servant concluding their love affair. [103]

Xue Susu's behavior towards her lovers serves as evidence that, according to her biography by Qian Qianyi, "Her spirit is heroic, and she loves originality...She married several times- all without success." [104] Xue was not one to settle down but had a more transient existence, moving as circumstance and romantic inclination inspired her.

Despite grand public personas and lavish lifestyles that expressed their artistic individuality, courtesans only rarely purchased their release from their contract with the brothels that owned them. Typically, a courtesan was freed from her contract with the brothel madam when she became a concubine, never a first wife, of one of her patrons. This was often exchanging one type of servitude for another, where the uncertainty of a life of courtesanship was traded for an entrance into the "inner" world of the female household. Here, a courtesan turned concubine could find greater financial stability, but would still be considered one of the lowest ranking members of the Ming family social strata. Although Xue Susu was wildly talented and celebrated for her accomplishments, the public performance of her personal life as an entertainer never led to the traditional route for a courtesan out of the life in the entertainment district. It is not clear how she separated herself from the financial obligations of a contract with a brothel or government re-

102 Barr, Allan H. "The Wanli Context of The 'Courtesan's Jewel Box' Story" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Jun., 1997): 107-141.; from Jiuyueji, ed. Wang Liqi, (Peking: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984).
103 Cass, 39.
104 Qian, 770.

gistry, whether she financed her own way out of her obligations or accepted the patronage of a man who would have purchased her contract in a romantic act of chivalry. Xue Susu never truly entered into concubinage, but rather lived with a succession of men on and off through out her life. When she was in her late thirties she was linked for a time with the dramatist Shen Defu, who was thirteen years her junior. As mentioned above, this difference in age, and her purported everlasting beauty combined with a captivating persona, sparked rumors of witchcraft cast to enthrall younger men.[105] In her fifties, for a short while donning the mantle of a recluse, she and a fellow former courtesan, Yang Jianzi (dates unknown), traveled extensively, visiting Buddhist temples and climbing mountains.[106] Although Xue Susu did return to "the dusty world," she remained a practicing vegetarian and Buddhist for the remainder of her life. Xue Susu is recorded as living until her seventies. When she died in 1635, she was living under the patronage of an admirer in Suzhou.[107]

Xue Susu was many things in her lifetime: an entertainer, a poet, a singer, a hermit, a lover, and most importantly for this paper, a painter. While there exists no record of what Xue Susu herself prized among her many talents, her extant paintings speak to a gift that made it possible for her to express herself visually in a way that surpasses both male and female painters of her era. Xue Susu's facility as a painter is evident in all her work, however, it is the handscroll *Wild Orchids*, that is the foremost example of the expression of her mastery of late Ming painting practice.

In the extant written records that describe Xue Susu, references to her talent as an artist are as numerous as those that extol her attractive features. Both men and women who moved in the

105 Tseng, 206.; Robinson, 83.
106 Tseng, "Women Painters of the Ming Dynasty," 254.
107 Qian, 770.

same circles in which she worked, almost immediately recognized that there was much more to her than her slender waist and tiny feet, and almost all remarked simultaneously of the bewitching combination of beauty and talent that she possessed.[108] Men who did not seek to engage her services as a courtesan, but were still able to obtain a painting by her considered themselves lucky. Women, who were friends with her, compared her talents and personality to great heroines of the past. What is interesting in these writings is how Xue Susu is remembered in written records, in colophons attached to her work as well as in bibliographic sketches. Events in her life, and personality traits deemed important enough to expand upon, as well as what is only briefly mentioned, provides clues as to how she may have been viewed by her contemporaries. A clearer idea of Xue Susu's place within the canon of Ming dynasty painting may then emerge.

Fan Yunlin, the husband of the poetess Xu Yuan, wrote about his first encounter with Xue Susu in a laudatory colophon on her *Flowers* handscroll. "... I obtained an orchid fan by her. It was like having obtained a precious jade; to this day I store it away as a treasure."[109] Fan Yunlin in this colophon compares Xue to many notable artists, finding similarities in her accomplishments to both male and female painters. He then writes that even a painter such as Shen Zhou would "hang out his tongue [in surprise]" at her talent. Fan's accolades continue when he poses the question of between Xue Susu and Guan Daosheng (1262-1319), "...who would be the younger sister [inferior] and who the elder [superior]."[110]

Xu Yuan(1560-1620), Fan Yunlin's wife, was also among her admirers, comparing her to numerous other famous female personalities throughout China's history, all of whom shared the name

108 Ko, *TOIC*, 268
109 Fan Yunling, trans. Irving Lo *VFJT* 84-85.
110 Ibid.; Guan Daosheng is arguably one of China's most famous female painters and wife to the Yuan master Zhao Mengfu.

Xue.[111] The remarkable talents of Xue Susu were apparently attractive to both sexes, and her intense friendships with women occurred through out her life.[112]

Dong Qichang, as noted above, was also seemingly enamored of Xue Susu. He was inspired enough by her painting to inscribe the *Heart Sutra* upon a painting of the goddess Guanyin as well as including the following colophon:

> As for landscapes, orchids and bamboo, she puts the brush to paper quickly and sweepingly. None lack the bearing that enters the divine... Skilled at orchids and bamboo...Even a skilled artist with good hands is not able to surpass her.

Dong Qichang's comments, although somewhat formulaic in its' praising words, does not first establish her gender as a definer of her painting skill, but appropriates the traditional ranking terms of levels of painting talent coined by Xie He of the Southern Qi and adapts them to Ming literati standards of taste. By doing so he has granted her a place among other literati painters without first identifying her liminal social status; he praises her utilizing a vocabulary shared by other literati.

Qian Qianyi(1582-1664), husband to another famous courtesan painter Liu Rushi(1618-1664), was another notable personality who thought highly of Xue Susu. Qian Qianyi saw fit to include her biography in his anthology of Ming poetry. Her entry is located in the back of the volume, in among the women's section that is reserved for those that did not fit neatly into Neo-Confucian societal spheres, namely courtesans, as well as Buddhist and Daoist nuns. The description by Qian Qianyi of Xue Susu in the brief biography reveals both admiration and pity. Her skill in Bird-and-Flower painting is one of the very first facts listed among her varied accomplishments. Also, Xue Susu's accomplishments as an archer as well as other aspects of remarkable life and

111 Ko, *TOIC*, 268.
112 Tseng, 254.

travels in Literati circles and in military camps in southwestern China are described. He goes on to bestow upon Xue Susu the epithet *jiaoshu* or "book reviser" a title given to high ranking courtesans who had proven themselves to be especially erudite, learned and accomplished.

Qian Qianyi explains without judgement Xue's numerous romantic entanglements throughout her life, subtly illuminating and elliptically describing the trail of men, both loved and rebuffed, that she left in her wake.[113] The only aspect of Xue's life that seems to warrant regret in Qianyi's opinion, is that Xue Susu never truly forsook the liminal space of a woman in public life to settle in the more private sphere of concubinage, as was the typical goal of every courtesan.[114] Her seeming disinterest in settling down as a partner (concubine) to a literatus is remarkable, and her decision/desire to remain independent unique enough to require comment from more than one contemporary.

Li Rihua (1565-1635), an artist and arbiter of late Ming dynasty literati taste, was also moved to comment on Xue Susu's seeming delinquency in fulfilling the Neo-Confucian role of *sancong*, or "thrice following," by entering into concubinage with one of her lovers/patrons.[115]

> However, a flower after many springs is old, man's sentiments cannot avoid having thoughts of the green shades of youth. A charming girl is unable to apply force [to change] the situation. Today, again she uses the method of painting to refinely sketch a Bodhisattva to pray for all loving couples under heaven to have descendants. This to her credit fills a big deficiency. Thus I happily praise her...[116]

This somewhat backhanded compliment is inscribed on a Bodhisattva fan painting of Xue Susu's that now resides in a Taiwanese private collection. Succinctly, elliptically, Li Rihua in his colophon delineates the cultural opinion held by the majority of the Chinese population during the

113 Qian *LCSJXZ,* p. 770.
114 H. Levy *Feast of Mist and Flowers* p.42.
115 Ko, *TOIC,*165.
116 Robinson, *VFJT*, 82. trans. Irving Lo.

late Ming dynasty regarding women, particularly women who find themselves on the margins of society. A woman is valued for her youthful beauty, then for her ability to reproduce. When looks inevitably fade and a woman has not fulfilled her role by marrying and producing children, there is not much to celebrate about her; any accomplishment she may have achieved is overshadowed by what she has not done. She is to be pitied as a courtesan who did not succeed in leaving her public life behind for that of a more socially acceptable place of concubinage. Xue Susu's insistence on self-reliance even caused her to be suspected of black magic[117]

Placing Xue Susu as an artist in a particular category for the purpose of art historical classification is as difficult as determining her exact birth date. This placement relies on subjective decisions of what is more crucial to her artistic identity, her gender as sole definer of her artistic style, or particular aspects of her oeuvre that point to a critical awareness of her own artistic heritage as a Chinese painter. In addition to her own cognizance of past styles and her innovation upon them, what must also be considered is the commentary of her contemporaries who recognized within her work a mastery of artistic expression that moves beyond the creation of simply a pleasing image in deference to Ming social mores. Throughout her life, in the circumstances and choices that she made, Xue Susu negotiated her own agency and an autonomous space as an artist. Xue Susu successfully fulfilled the role as a public entertainer, and gained fame and renown through her exploits that designated her as a true possessor of *qing*. Artistically, as a woman and as courtesan, she did follow some of the standards of artistic choice within her painting oeuvre typical to these gendered categories. However, she also created paintings that, while displaying established styles of brush technique and composition, did so in a unique manner, and, as such, negates categorization of her work as done in a "women's style" alone.

117 Robinson, *VJFT*, 83.

Xue Susu remained a public figure for most of her life. Even when she gave up a true "public life" as an active courtesan, and no longer received clients she did not choose to cross the threshold into the inner realm of the domestic sphere, and continued her life in the liminal space designated to women who existed on the margins of Neo-Confucian society.[118] It is crucial to note that Xue Susu, while having made a decision at some point in her life to remain within this liminal space by not entering into concubinage, she created her own history, and in doing so also expressed herself as a literati painter, especially in the Bird-and-Flower genre. Xue Susu's negotiation of her dual status as a literati painter and as a woman who lived in the public world of entertainment is evidenced by the majority of her body of work, particularly by the painting *Wild Orchids*. Xue Susu was able to negotiate and exploit boundaries to the benefit of her own artistic practice. *Wild Orchids*, in particular, presents a multi faceted approach to a courtesan trope, transforming the handscroll into an expression of her mastery of varied brush strokes, knowledge of the work of earlier masters combined with the innovative use of composition and style that moves her into the realm of literati painter.

118 Qian Qianyi *LCSJXZ*, 770.

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1.

2.

3.

Figure 1.
Xue Susu, *Wild Orchids,* 1601.

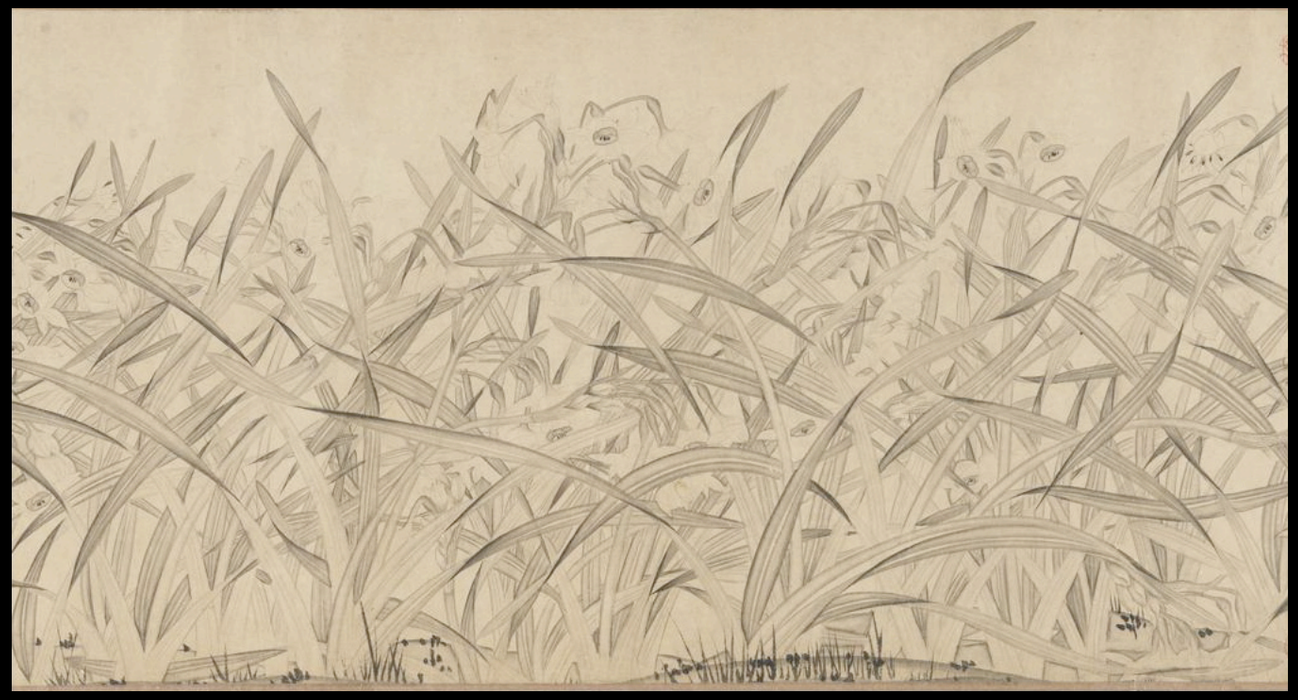

Figure 2
Zhao Mengjian
Narcissus (det.)
13th century

Figure 2 (det.)
Zhao Mengjian
Narcissus
13th century

Figure 1 (det.)
Xue Susu, *Wild Orchids*, , 1601.

Figure 3.
Guan Daosheng
Bamboo Grove in Mists and Rain (det.)
Yuan dynasty

Figure 1
(det.)
Xue Susu
Wild Orchids
1601

Figure 4
Xia Chang
Bamboo Under Spring Rain (det.)
c. 1460

11. 1 of 8

11. 2 of 8

11. 3 of 8

11. 4 of 8

11. 5 of 8

11. 6 of 8

Figure 5
Xue Susu
Flowers

Figure 5 (det.)
Flowers
Tree Peony, Magnolia

Figure 5 (det.)
Flowers
Chrysanthemum, Day Lily

Fig 7
(above) Xu Wei
Twelve Plants, Twelve Calligraphies
16th century (det.)

Figure 6
(above) Chen Chun
Mountains in Clouds
1535
(det.)

Figure 6 (det.)
Xue Susu
Flowers

Figure 8 (det.)
Xu Wei
Twelve Flowers, Twelve Calligraphies
16th century

Figure 6 (det.)
Flowers
Tree Peony, Magnolia

Figure 8
Xue Susu,
Chrysanthemum and Bamboo
1633

Xue Susu
Cicada on a Leaf

Figure 9 (det.)
Xue Susu
Cicada on a Leaf

Figure 10
Zhao Mengfu
Landscape
Yuan dynasty

Figure 11
Zhao Mengfu
Bamboo, Rocks and Lonely Orchids

Figure 13
Gu Mei
Lan Hua Tu
Ming dynasty

Figure 14
Mao Yuyuan
Orchids and Flowers
1651

Figure 12
Wen Zhengming
Orchid Bamboo and Rock
Ming dynasty

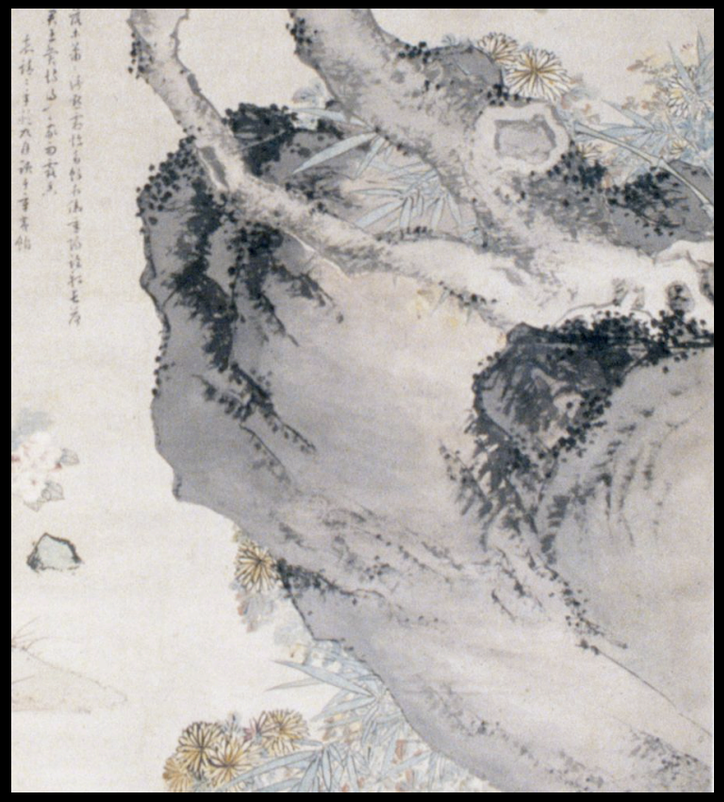

Figure 15
Shen Zhou
Acacia Trees and Chrysanthemum
(det.)
1468

Figure 16
Shen Zhou
Landscape, (det.)
Ming dynasty

Figure 17
Wen Zhengming
Landscape, (det.)
Ming dynasty

Figure 18
Wen Zhengming
Trees in a Valley, (det.)
1549

Xue Susu,
Wild Orchids,
Figure 1 (det.)
1601.