



Xugu's colophone in an *Album of Flowers, Fruit, Birds and Fish* 花果鳥魚冊 painted for Ren Bonian, Winter of 1894. Ink on paper, 29.7 x 32.7 cm, collection of Yan Xuehua 顏雪花, Taiwan, published in Yan Xuehua, *Jiyue guangfeng* 霽月光風 (A paragon for the ages – The art of the monk Xugu), Taipei: Diancang yishu jiating, 2003, p48

# Introduction

**O**n the front page of *Shen Bao* 申報 for 17 December 1880, there appeared a prominent advertisement for *Shanshui zongtu* 山水總神圖 (Four Gods of the Land), a series of reproductions of the work of Ren Bonian 任伯年 (1840~1895) commissioned by this newspaper. *Shen Bao*, nationally distributed, was one of the very few Chinese-language papers read by a whole range of readers in the Qing empire. Because of the fame and success of Ren Bonian's art, the series continued to be in print and advertised for sale for the next four years right up to 14 January, 1884.

In June 1885, *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報 (*Dianshi Illustrated News*), the weekly supplement of *Shen Bao*, also published Ren Bonian's *Ketu huagao* 課徒畫稿 (*Sketches for Teaching Students*). These two publications meant that Ren was the first artist in Shanghai to have his work reproduced in lithograph and therefore appreciated by general readers nationwide.<sup>1</sup> In 1887, one hundred paintings of Ren Bonian were reproduced and published as a book, *Ren Bonian xiansheng zhenji huapu* 任伯年先生真跡畫譜 (*Manual of Authentic Paintings of Ren Bonian*), with a foreword by the respected scholar Yu Yue 俞樾 (1821~1907). Later in the same year, Chao Xun 巢勳 added twenty-two of Ren Bonian's paintings in the new edition of the *Jieziyuan huazhuan siji – Zengguang mingjia huapo* 芥子園畫傳四集 – 增廣名家畫譜 (*The Fourth Volume of the Mustard Seed Manual of Painting – Supplement to Painting Manuals of Contemporary Masters*). These advertisements and reproductions helped to spread Ren Bonian's name. They also offer some measure of the high regard and popularity in which Ren's art was held both in Shanghai and beyond.

Ren Yi (1840-1895), normally known as Ren Bonian, was born in Xiaoshan 蕭山, Zhejiang Province 浙江省. In his early life, he encountered many hardships, most notably, during the Taiping rebellion, and for 27 years he lived through the most troubled times in Shanghai's existence. Like many of his contemporaries, Ren's life was very much entangled with social and economic change in this international city, where new and old, local and foreign enterprises were gradually

being assembled. His paintings reflect this, often presenting a strong visual effect, as well as elements of novelty, popularity and diversity that attracted an ever greater audience. The contemporary monk-painter Xugu 虛谷 (1823-1896) wrote of Ren: 'Instead of following the old rules, his brushwork always performs new ideas. He is outstandingly talented.'<sup>2</sup> The twentieth-century revolutionary artist Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻 (1895-1953) considered Ren to be 'the One Chinese painter in these three hundred years after Qiu Ying.'<sup>3</sup> Ren's brilliance in painting techniques is one part of the story; however, my study also explores the artist as a key figure whose work revealed the conflicts and choices of many immigrant artists in an urban city. His art marked the first wave of the modern era of Chinese painting in a period when its culture generally has been considered to be in decline.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, China was under the influence of an unstable political climate, social reform and western stimuli. The treaty ports, especially Shanghai, were developing into modern cities with a strange, mixed cultural background. Many artists came to Shanghai to seek livelihood. In order to survive in the competitive art market, these painters no longer isolated themselves in their studios. When traditional painting had gradually lost its vitality by the end of the Qing, Shanghai painting moved away from the pure ink-play of the literati or the slavish imitation of past works, and through its wider range of subjects, reached a wider variety of people. The choice of subject matter of the Shanghai painters moved towards the taste of non-scholarly patrons. Apart from drawing on subjects inspired by popular legend, historical stories and scenes from life, Ren Bonian and his fellow artists also experimented with new techniques. Ren absorbed elements of folk art and woodcut prints, and applied western drawing techniques and imported pigments to his objects. By rescuing figure painting from the prescriptive canon of the literati amateurs, and by exploring the inexhaustible vitality of the real world, Ren's pictures had more visual immediacy and popular appeal. They satisfied the taste of new patrons and opened up a way to a new meaning of art in China.

While modern scholars stress the transmission of western art and its influence on twentieth-century Chinese painting, the flow of 'modernisation' and foreign influences actually began during the late nineteenth century, through the contacts of the Shanghai Painting School with Japan and the West. Two crucial issues here, fundamental to an understanding of Ren's art, are the degree to which traditional Chinese artists chose to adopt their new role as modern-day men in a changing society, and the extent to which they accepted or refused foreign conventions. The reaction of painters was often dual: to learn about western civilisation, while resisting foreign influences, both cultural and political.

To explain why reforms and a thorough westernisation in both politics and art did not occur in China in Ren Bonian's time, one needs to remember the rooted scholarly training, the conservatism, the pride in national identity, the lack of knowledge of the outer world of the Chinese, and the delicate situation of Chinese intellectuals residing in foreign districts. All of these factors influenced nineteenth-century Shanghai painters. With its direct exposure to foreign cultural trends in Shanghai – thus without leaving China – Ren Bonian's works, the portraits in particular, indeed reveal an affinity to western art. However, Ren and other Shanghai School painters did not move towards a thoroughgoing westernisation; they did not paint in oils, for example. One of the key points in my discussion, in this context, in order to understand Chinese artists' opinions of western painting and their thoughts about the contemporary situation, will be to consider the artistic development of multicultural Shanghai from the First Opium War (1839-1842) to

the First Sino-Japanese War (1894~1895) and to review how in comparison with Japanese artists Ren Bonian and his fellow Chinese artists negotiated between the two realms of traditional practice and foreign stimuli.

Using Ren Bonian as a key figure to address the unique situation of the impact of the Shanghai environment on Chinese art, this book poses three broad questions: what role did Ren Bonian's paintings play in the social relations of power in Shanghai, including those of class and gender; in what ways did foreign culture in Shanghai influence Ren's art; and how did the artist reflect on his life in the city through his work? Taken together, how do the answers to these questions help us to understand direction of art in China at that time and later?

While the study of Chinese painting before the nineteenth century has been driven by stylistic analysis, by cultural considerations, and by placing it in the context of contemporary society and literature, there remains a need to assemble facts and sources on the art and individual artists of late imperial China. The development of Chinese painting of the late Qing should not be concerned simply with painters and their art, but also with their thinking and artistic activities, both individual and collective, within the framework of their particular historical situations. With the intention of providing an understanding of the cultural life of the city, this book aims to offer a historical and social perspective on the world inhabited by painters such as Ren Bonian and his contemporaries. Paying attention both to art and history, the structure of the book follows the chronology of Ren's life. The first part presents a background for the further understanding of Ren Bonian through a biography and an overview of his circle in his early years. This section also explores the roots of and the inspirations for his artistic language in his early education. With his free, expressive, cheerful and inventive style and the popular subject matters in his painting, the work of Ren Bonian seemed to suit both men of letters and the general public. By looking into his development as an artist, I examine how Ren Bonian created a contemporary flavour that is often considered to be what defines the Shanghai School.

In the second part, taking three types of his figure painting as examples, I will integrate the intellectual life of Ren's circle and the popular entertainment in Shanghai with the subjects that Ren chose repeatedly to compose. My concerns include sexuality, popular literature and patronage, for all seem to have inspired Ren Bonian's choice of subject matter and visual vocabulary.

I will then move on to discuss the creative overlap and tension between the impact of the Shanghai experience on Ren and his own artistic impulse and education. Aspects of Ren's style, inherited from previous masters and from popular book illustrations seen in his youth, were demonstrated in his portraits of his artist friends. However, these portraits also reflected the innovations brought to Shanghai by foreign stimuli: the influence of early photography; the flow of Japanese material culture; Western painting technique; and imported pigments. I shall be concerned with the relationship between the city and the artist, and with how both art and artist's development at the close of the nineteenth century were, by large, following the pace of social reform.

Finally, I shall probe the serious problem of the forgery of Ren's work, which began in his later years. I explore this issue from a new perspective by linking the forgery to the rapid growth of his fame brought by *Shen Bao* and other media through the reproductions of his painting. I conclude with Ren Bonian's last years of life, the memoirs from his friends and family members, and records of his family and health.

In addition to the main discussion on Ren Bonian's painting, a chronological list of Ren Bonian's seventy-three seals forms an appendix. It is hoped that these

charts and the seal index will be helpful in understanding Ren Bonian's customary use of seals, and also as useful tools for identifying forgeries of his painting.

From the beginning of my study on Ren Bonian, I battled with the fact that there are more than two thousand paintings under Ren Bonian's name, but no diary written by Ren Bonian has yet been discovered. Further, Ren Bonian seldom put down more than his signature, dedication and date on his painting. If a literati painter were to be defined by his command of the three perfections, 'poetry, calligraphy and painting,' Ren Bonian would fall out of this category. Where then can Ren Bonian be placed in the complicated system of traditional Chinese painting history?

The term *Hai Pai* originally meant Shanghai painters whose styles presented a mixture of aggressiveness and vulgarity in tone, and recent scholarship still put works by Ren Bonian and the Shanghai School artists into the category of 'market art' or 'commercial art.'<sup>4</sup> However, the narrative that Shanghai paintings built up beneath their pleasant visual presentation suggests neither that they were straightforwardly market art by definition nor that they aimed mainly to cater for the consumer's interest. My approach here is less about style than about understanding how the painter worked, why he painted as he did, and my interest lies in questions about what made his painting appealing to his audience and what was the message encoded in his work. Through the exploration of Ren Bonian's painting and the world he inhabited, the stories wrapped in the scrolls and the significant role played by a multicultural, metropolitan city in the development of Chinese painting of the modern period will, I hope, become apparent.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報, N° 47, June 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Xugu, the funeral scrolls for Ren Bonian, collection of Zhejiang Provincial Museum; cited in Wang Jingxian, 'Ren Bonian qiren qiyi 任伯年其人其藝' (Life and Art of Ren Bonian), *Ren Bonian zuopin ji* 任伯年作品集 (Collection of Works by Ren Bonian), Beijing, 1992, p15. See Xugu, *Album of Flowers, Fruit, Birds and Fish* 花果鳥魚冊, inscribed and painted in Winter of 1894. Fourteen leaves, ink and light colour on paper, 29.7 x 32.7 cm, collection of Yan Xuehua 顏雪花 in Taiwan, published in Yan Xuehua, *Jiyue guangfeng* 霽月光風 (A paragon for the ages – The art of the monk Xugu), Taipei: Diancang yishu jiating, 2003, p48.

<sup>3</sup> Xu Beihong, 'Ren Bonian Pingzhuan 任伯年評傳' (Biography of Ren Bonian, 1950), foreword of *Ren Bonian huaji* 任伯年畫集 (Paintings by Ren Bonian, 1840~1895), Singapore: Tan Tsze-Chor, 1953; republished in Duo Yun 朵雲, n° 3, May 1982, pp216~219 and in *Xu Beihong yishu wenji* 徐悲鴻藝術文集 (Collected Art Essays by Xu Beihong), edited by Xu Boyang 徐伯陽 and Jing Shan 金山, volume 2, Taipei, 1987, pp601-607.

<sup>4</sup> The term *Haipai* is discussed in Shan Guolin, 'Haipai gailun 海派概論,' *Yiyuan duoying* 藝苑掇英, n° 53, 1995, p13; Craig Clunas considers Shanghai School as market art, see *Art in China*, London: Oxford University Press, 1997, p199~201.