

A REJECTED PORTRAIT BY LO P'ING:
PICTORIAL FOOTNOTE TO WALEY'S *YÜAN MEI*

by JAMES CAHILL

Of the many sharply-drawn details in Arthur Waley's literary portrait of the eighteenth-century poet Yüan Mei, one of the most entertaining concerns a much earlier portrayal of the same illustrious subject, executed in brush-strokes instead of words, by Yüan's contemporary Lo P'ing.¹ Mr. Waley gives us an abridged translation of a letter to Lo P'ing from Yüan Mei, who was sending the portrait back to the artist along with the letter, for reasons which he states at length. No one can have read this curious letter without wishing that he might see the painting, if only in reproduction—it must at least, one felt, have attributed to the poet some distinctive character, which is more than can be said for the bland and benevolent face looking out at us from the frontispiece to Mr. Waley's book, an anonymous portrait of Yüan at the age of fifty. Besides, there is a fascination in the conjunction of these two men, strong contenders for the titles of leading poet and painter of their age.

It is a pleasure, then, to be able to add a pictorial footnote to the book by introducing to its numerous readers, and to its author, the very picture (Pl. I). It is owned, appropriately, by a noted Japanese authority on Chinese painting, Professor Shūjirō Shimada of the Kyoto National Museum.² I say appropriately because it is by nature a scholar's painting, having associations which transcend its inherent value as an art work. It is painted in ink and colour (light blue for the robe, flesh tint for the face and hands, yellow and bluish for the chrysanthemum blossoms and leaves) on paper. It has been badly damaged, evidently by worms, but skilfully repaired and retouched.

In one way, at least, it surely fulfils the expectations aroused by the letter: it is not lacking in distinctive character. It presents the poet at the

¹ Arthur Waley, *Yüan Mei: eighteenth-century Chinese poet*. London, G. Allen & Unwin, 1956. The passage concerning Lo P'ing and his portrait is on pp. 119–20.

² I am indebted to Professor Shimada for photographs of the painting and permission to publish it, as well as for reading the manuscript of this paper and making valuable suggestions.

PLATE I

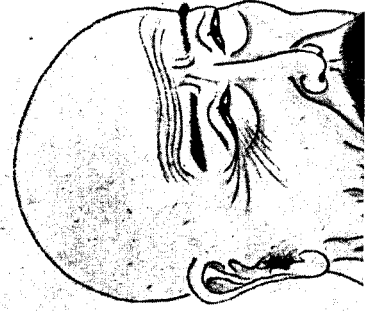
Lo P'ing: *Portrait of Yüan Mei*, Shimada
Shūjirō collection, Kyoto.

PLATE II

Lo P'ing: *Portrait of Yüan Mei*. Detail

PLATE III

Lo P'ing: *Two Ghosts*, Wên Fong collection,
Princeton, New Jersey

[illegible][illegible]

Opposite: Plate I and above a detail of the transcription

Plate II

age of sixty-five; but the passage of fifteen years can hardly account for its great dissimilarity to the anonymous portrait mentioned above. The one is idealized and innocuous; the other, Lo P'ing's, borders on the grotesque. Still, for all its oddness, the face is curiously non-committal; one can find in it what one chooses. Some will see the sensitivity, or at least the intensity, of the poet. Those who were repelled by the moral laxity of Mr. Waley's frankly-presented Yüan Mei will take delight in discerning the ravages of dissipation. Lo P'ing himself makes no simple judgements for us. The chrysanthemums held in the right hand may have been intended by the artist as an allusion to the numerous "flowers" plucked by Yüan Mei in his amorous adventures, but they could also refer to the poet T'ao Ch'ien (T'ao Yüan-ming), the most famous of chrysanthemum fanciers.

The text of the inscription written at the top of the painting by Yüan Mei (Pl. 2) is virtually identical with that of the letter quoted by Waley from Yüan Mei's collected works, except that a signature and date are added to it. Its appearance on the painting raises a minor problem; it is clearly designated in Yüan's literary collection as a letter, not an inscription. Perhaps Yüan, when he wrote the inscription, kept a copy of it, which was later inserted into his works with a mistaken designation, the compiler supposing that the original had been in the form of a letter. Or perhaps there really was a letter, and Yüan Mei, seeing the picture again some time after he had returned it to the painter, copied this letter on to it as a record of the affair. It is impossible to say which hypothesis is correct; but the fact that the text reads more like an inscription than a letter supports the first.

Since Waley translates only about one-third of the original text, it may be worth while to insert here a rendering of the whole:

"Lo P'ing painted a portrait of me. At least, he himself maintains that it is me; but my family denies that it is, and these two views may seem impossible to reconcile. I, however, laugh and say:

"The sage has two selves: his unstubborn and selfless self is one self, and the self which differs from this self is another self. I also have two selves: the self which exists in the eyes of my family is one self, and the self which exists in Lo P'ing's painting is another self. It is hard to take a true view of oneself. I may not know what I look like; but does Lo P'ing know any better what his picture looks like? Is it, after all, the viewer who is mistaken, or the painter? Or perhaps my face really *is* like this, and the mistake was made by Heaven when I was created. Still another possibility: the me of the present life, to be sure, doesn't look like this; but what about the me of the past life, or the me of the future life? How can we know that *they* don't look like this? If they do, then Lo P'ing has discarded the near-at-hand and aimed at the further-off; he has combined days past with days to come, and painted the result. In that case, the picture can simultaneously be me and not me—it doesn't matter.'

"Nevertheless, my family continues to insist that it isn't me. If I keep it around the house, someone will inevitably take it by mistake for a sketch of the old man who helps with the cooking in the kitchen, or the pedlar who comes to the gate with lemonade, and tear it up or burn it. Lo P'ing, on the other hand, considers that it *does* resemble me. If I keep it at his place, it will surely attract admiration in the hearts of my friends, whose eyes will admire his painting. It will be honoured and treasured forever, along with his 'Fascination of Ghosts' picture and his portraits of Chin Nung and Ting Ching.³ This will make one of my two selves very happy. That is why, now that it is done, I am not venturing to keep it, but am sending it back to Lo P'ing to look after for me, so that everyone who knows me and knows Lo P'ing may be able to have a good look at it.

"Playfully written by the old man of the Sui-yüan, Tzū-tsai-tzū, on the twenty-third day of the tenth month of the *hsin-ch'ou* year of the Ch'ien-lung era [*i.e.* December 7, 1781]."⁴

Such is the elaborate excuse offered by Yüan Mei for returning the painting to Lo P'ing; but a later Chinese author who compiled a collection of anecdotes about the poet, Chiang Tun-fu, read into it a graceful refusal to accept the portrait:

"The Master asked Lo P'ing to paint his portrait; but then, when he saw that it didn't resemble him very much, he sent it back, with a letter in which he said: (the letter is quoted, much abridged). Such an action, if an ordinary person had taken it, would surely have led to a breaking-off of the friendship between the two. But it was the Master who said it, and Lo P'ing was appeased."⁵

Chiang Tun-fu is very likely right about Yüan's real motive. The accuracy of the portrait cannot be judged now, but it is, in any event, unflattering. It is probably a sketch from life, which would later have been redone as a finished painting, if the sitter had approved the sketch. But he did not, and it progressed no further. The face has the appearance of a life-drawing, not yet transmuted into a fully-realized work of art. The painter is probably more candid here than he would have been in a final version. He was trying for a likeness, which is not always agreeable to the subject; he may also have been indulging in good-humoured caricature. The body and robe are attached a bit awkwardly, as if the artist, after completing the head,

³ Ting Ching 丁敬, hao Kuei-lin 規林; see *Chung-kuo jen-ming ta-tz'ü-tien*, p. 6. Antiquarian, calligrapher and seal-carver. Chin Nung was Lo P'ing's teacher; see below.

⁴ I have translated from the inscription on the painting, checking it against the text printed in Yüan's collected works (*Sui-yüan ch'üan-chi* 隨園全集, Shanghai, Cho-i-t'ang, 1921) in the section devoted to his letters (*Hsiao-ts'ang shan-fang ch'ih-tu* 小倉山房尺牘) V/7b. This is the text used by Waley. I have made use of Waley's rendering, with slight changes, for the portions he translates.

⁵ Chiang Tun-fu 蔣敦復, *Sui-yüan i-shih* 隨園軼事, Shanghai, 1911, IV/2b.

had drawn the rest with less attention, intending to improve the posture and work out the drapery more carefully at his leisure. The fact that Lo P'ing neither signed the painting nor impressed his seal on it may be further evidence of its unfinished state, although it is true that formal portraits (this may have been considered as such) were ordinarily left unsigned.

The Chinese scholar-painters have always maintained that the painting reveals the man; let us look briefly into the known facts about Lo P'ing, to see what the man will reveal about the picture. He was born in 1733, at Yangchow in Kiangsu Province, and died in 1799.⁶ The whole of his life, excepting the time spent on a few trips, was spent in or around his birth-place. Yangchow was then a flourishing merchant city, a centre of the salt trade; it was also one of the main intellectual centres of the Chiang-nan region, that small area which was the locus of most of the vital movements in later Chinese art. The fourth of five sons, Lo P'ing was orphaned while a child, and was probably supported by his older brothers while he continued his studies. By the age of ten or eleven, he was attending literary gatherings held at the home of the mayor of the city, Ma Yüeh-kuan, where he was admired as a brilliant youth by the famous scholars assembled there. Among them were at least three painters—Wang Shih-shen, Chêng Hsieh, and Chin Nung—who were later to be numbered, with Lo P'ing himself, in the "Eight Strange Masters of Yangchow" (*Yang-chou pa-kuai*).

When he was in his early twenties, he became a disciple of the famous poet, calligrapher and painter, Chin Nung. Chin was then about seventy years old, and died around 1763,⁷ so that Lo P'ing's close association with him lasted not much more than seven years. Nevertheless, Chin Nung considered him to be his leading pupil and artistic heir.

It is a strange and somewhat paradoxical circumstance, symptomatic of the artistic climate of the age, that one of the most amateurish of amateur painters should have been the teacher of one who was eventually to earn his living with his brush, becoming (in a special sense) a professional. The truth is that Lo P'ing, as a painter of considerable technical facility, was largely self-taught. What he learned from his teacher, apart from some tricks of style which show up in his work, was the taste and attitude of the scholar-amateur. The literati society in which Lo P'ing moved had no use

⁶ Waley gives 1819 as the year of Lo P'ing's death, but all the Chinese sources agree on 1799. His last known dated work is from the previous year, 1798. For this brief biographical treatment of Lo P'ing, I have depended largely on Yawata Sekitarō 八幡關太郎, *Shina gajin kenkyū* 支那畫人研究, Tokyo, 2nd ed., 1943, pp. 307-86: "Ra Ryō-hō" (Lo Liang-feng, *i.e.* Lo P'ing). Yawata assembles information from Chinese sources and presents it in an informal, Waleyan manner, along with many quotations of poems.

⁷ There is some question about the date of Chin Nung's death. See Kuo Wei-ch'ü 郭味渠, *Sung Yüan Ming Ch'ing shu-hua chia nien-piao* 宋元明清書畫家年表, p. 374, where the sources for various dates are given.

for the careful, tame work of the true professionals; and we may not find it hard to see why when we look at the pictures, which still exist by the thousands. In order to succeed among the literati in the vocation of painting, then, one had to join them in treating it as an avocation. One had to avoid the appearance of skill (another aspect of the paradox: Lo P'ing learning to be awkward from Chin Nung). One insisted upon preserving a certain independence, a reluctance to be dominated by the wishes of the prospective recipient of the picture. One conformed to a fiction by which artist and patron exchanged gifts, with no vulgar payment defiling their relationship. This attitude had relaxed a bit by the time of Lo P'ing: others of the Yangchow school, including his teacher Chin Nung and Chêng Hsieh, had been more open about selling their calligraphy and paintings, and even attached fixed prices to their works—a practice which would have horrified earlier scholar-painters. Lo P'ing probably did the same; his classical learning, and his ability as calligrapher and poet, allowed him to retain his scholar-amateur status nonetheless. Finally, one had to cultivate a touch of eccentricity, if one had not already acquired it naturally. Lo P'ing, for example, went about in old clothes, and claimed to be able to see ghosts in broad daylight. It was this latter idiosyncrasy which was to bring him his greatest fame, as we shall see.

While still a pupil of Chin Nung, he married a Miss Fang, whose literary name was Po-lien or White Lotus. She too was an accomplished poet and painter. In the years immediately following Chin Nung's death, Lo P'ing devoted himself to gathering and editing his late master's surviving literary works, since the compilation made by Chin Nung himself had been lost. The collection was finally printed in 1773. Two years earlier, Lo P'ing had travelled to the capital, Peking, in order to have the wood-blocks engraved for this publication. There he was greeted as Chin Nung's disciple and became acquainted with many noted men. Partly as a result of his success among the scholars and officials of the capital, he found on his return to Yangchow that he had become something of a celebrity himself.

He was both prolific and versatile as a painter, and depicted a wider variety of subjects than most Chinese artists. He did pictures of flowering plum, orchids, and bamboo; of figures, including portraits and Buddhist images; and of animals. These were all subjects for which Chin Nung had been famous, and in which Lo P'ing followed him—grotesque portraits, for example, had been a Chin Nung speciality. In addition, he did pleasant, although generally minor, landscapes, fairly close in style to those of another Yangchow artist, Hua Yen (1682–1765). But his greatest popularity in Yangchow was the result of one of those occasional caprices which convert a little-known figure, who happens to do something odd which catches the public fancy, into a well-known one. He became Yangchow's favourite painter of ghosts.

The genre was not unknown before—ghosts, demons, monsters, apparitions play a large part in the very earliest Chinese painting—but there had been few artists who specialized in them (Kung K'ai in the thirteenth century is one who comes to mind), and none with the special gift of Lo P'ing. Lo claimed to be endowed with a unique power of vision (connected in some mysterious way with the fact that the pupils of his eyes were jade green in colour) which enabled him to see ghosts and demons in broad daylight. This gave him an incalculable advantage over other artists: they were forced to paint their ghosts from imagination, while he simply drew them as he saw them. Such, at least, was the story he spread; and the Yangchow literati accepted his claim with straight faces. They took special delight in composing inscriptions for his ghost pictures. His most celebrated work, a handscroll entitled the *Kuei-ch'ü t'u* or "Fascination of Ghosts", bore colophons by many noted scholars.

One of those who contributed poems to Lo P'ing's ghost paintings was Yüan Mei. He had known Lo P'ing since 1765, as he wrote an inscription on a portrait by him in that year or a bit earlier.⁸ A later inscription by Yüan Mei, a poem written for one of the ghost pictures, is translated in part by Waley:

I am compiling a book of ghosts and wonders,
Giving it the title "What the Master did not speak of".
And now seeing this ghost picture of yours
I have learnt a lot that I did not know before.
I fancy today no one else exists
So well up in the subject as you and I.⁹

Yüan probably finished the draft of the book he speaks of, a collection of ghost stories, in the latter part of 1781, and the poem cannot have been composed much before that; it may well belong to the same year as the portrait. It reveals what was no doubt a strong factor in bringing Yüan Mei and Lo P'ing together (a circumstance which really requires no explanation, since Yüan seems to have known practically everyone of importance in Yangchow). In their broader beliefs they disagreed—Lo, following Chin Nung, professed a devout faith in Buddhism in addition to his orthodox adherence to Neo-Confucian doctrines,¹⁰ while Yüan remained throughout his life sceptical, saying that "all these tales about Buddha are mere senseless taradiddles" and ordering that no Buddhist ceremonies be performed

⁸ The portrait was of Ting Ching; cf. n. 3. See Yawata, *op. cit.*, pp. 329, 330 for a reference to it and a discussion of the date.

⁹ Waley, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁰ Lo P'ing is the author of a curious work, the *Wo-hsin lu* 我信錄, or "Account of Personal Beliefs" (in *Huai-pin tsa-tsu* 懷齋雜俎, 3). I have not gone through it thoroughly, but it appears to be a ponderous attempt to make a harmonious whole out of Confucianism, Ch'an Buddhism, and a diversity of demons and ghosts.

for his soul after his death.¹¹ But they had in common an enthusiasm for ghosts.

I have avoided saying that they believed in ghosts, because I am not at all convinced that they did. The question of whether pictures of ghosts are most likely to be painted, or stories about them written, by people who truly believe in them, is a debatable one; but in any case, both Lo and Yüan treat them with a playfulness which seems incompatible with any real conviction of their existence. Lo P'ing's ghosts (Pl. 3) are unmistakably people dressed in sheets; they seem to have been done in the same spirit as a leaf in one of his best-known albums, which illustrates a story about a man who "really saw" dragons.¹² The dragons in that picture, although they are drawn with admirable liveliness, are more funny than awesome. It is not the painting of a man who has seen dragons, or expects to see them, but of one to whom the idea of seeing dragons is entertaining. The same is true of his ghosts.

A decline in serious concern over larger questions of the supernatural may sometimes stimulate a not very profound interest in trivial ones, as people become bored with disbelief, and find it exciting to credit, or pretend to credit, ghosts and dragons, sea serpents and flying saucers. In England the age of the Gothic novel, forerunner of the modern ghost story, its apparitions inspiring more *frisson* than fear, was perhaps a natural product of the Age of Reason. Yüan Mei, as Waley says, "lived in an age when belief was crumbling",¹³ and gave his contemporaries agreeable goose-pimples with tales of ghosts.

Once we are aware of the implications of this fondness for ghosts which bound Yüan Mei and Lo P'ing together, we can broaden our view to recognize a stronger bond in the attitude which underlay their fondness: an inclination to treat lightly what had once been taken seriously. Theirs are the works of men who suspect that the great achievements of poetry and painting were all achieved long ago, so that nothing can any longer be done with the same straightforwardness and conviction as it had commanded when it was done for the first time. Their aim was no doubt sincere, but the fresh, direct approach to the world lay far behind, out of reach. Lo P'ing, like many other later Chinese artists, regularly overlays his works with stylistic references to earlier modes of painting, and could safely assume in his audience a sophistication which insured that his subtleties would not be lost on them. Some such reference might well have found its way into the final state of our portrait, if it had ever been finished. The element of playfulness in Yüan Mei's writings is familiar to readers of Waley's translations,

¹¹ Waley, *op. cit.*, pp. 82, 202.

¹² The album is in the Kawabata collection, Kamakura, and is dated 1774. See *Kokka*, 748, Pl. 2.

¹³ Waley, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

as the frequent occurrence of literary and historical allusions is to readers of the original writings. Both are certainly present in the "playfully written" inscription on the portrait, where they effectively serve to lighten the tone, and deflect the point, of what Yüan had to communicate. Converted into an occasion for learned allusions and facetious philosophizing, the potential cause of a contretemps lost its sting. The two men sat back to regard the event with a certain aesthetic admiration, having added another charming paragraph to the anecdotal history of the literati culture of Yangchow.

Lo P'ing's portrait of Yüan Mei, then, not only presents us with the artist and his sitter (in different ways), but also reveals a good deal about their intellectual environment. The great productive periods of Chinese civilization lay in the past, and the creative force which had inspired those periods was largely dissipated. What remained, however, was not inconsiderable. A taste, first of all, for the most delicate refinements of feeling. A perhaps excessive familiarity with what the past had produced, which encouraged poet and painter to indulge in complex plays upon earlier styles and motifs, even upon ideas and beliefs. A level of personal cultivation and civilized intercourse which permitted one temperamental artist to reject the work of another with such wit and elegance that the friendship between them was not disrupted. To all these the painting and its inscription attest.