

Social Science

A Comparative Study of the Two Versions of *Wenji's Return to Han* by Juzhong Chen and Yu Zhang

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The story of the return of Wenji to the Han Empire originated from *The Book of Later Han: A Biography of Si Dong's Wife*, which is about the eventful life of Wenji Cai, the daughter of Yong Cai (a high-ranking official and renowned intellectual) in the late Eastern Han Dynasty. Wenji Cai was an accomplished lady but was unfortunately captured by the Xiongnu invaders in the turmoil of war. Cao Cao paid a colossal sum of money to the Xiongnu to have her return to Han after he unified northern China. Inspired by this story, later artists created a series of paintings on the subject. This subject matter was particularly popular at the junction of the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties, when the Emperors of the Northern Song Dynasty were kidnapped by the Jin regime (a regime north of the Song Empire), who are deemed somewhat comparable victims to Wenji Cai. Artists of the Southern Song Dynasty created many paintings based on the story of the return of Wenji to Han to represent the popular expectations for the emperors' release. Juzhong Chen was a court painter of the Southern Song Dynasty, and Yu Zhang was an official of the Jin Dynasty. This article is a comparative study of two versions of *Wenji's Return to Han*, respectively by Juzhong Chen and Yu Zhang, focusing on analyzing the similarities and differences of the two works regarding composition, the portrayal of figures, and painter's motives, using the methods of iconological and literature research in a bid to explore the impacts of the painters' times on their artistic efforts.

Keywords: *Wenji's Return to Han*; Juzhong Chen; Yu Zhang; Comparative Study

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Introduction

IN CHINESE painting, historical story painting is a genre that uses historical events or legendary stories as its subject matter. “The return of Wenji to Han” is a classical subject in the history of Chinese classic painting. *The Book of Later Han: A Biography of Si Dong’s Wife* gives an account of Wenji Cai’s eventful life in the later years of the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25-220): Yan Cai, whose courtesy name was Wenji, was the wife of Si Dong from Chenliu County and the daughter of Yong Cai from the same county. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, and skilled in debate as well as proficient in music. She had been married to Zhongdao Wei from Hedong County, who passed away young, leaving her childless. She had to return to her mother’s home after that. During the Xingping period (in the reign of Emperor Xiandi of the Eastern Han Dynasty), when the world was in the turmoil of war, Wenji was captured by the Xiongnu cavalry and became the wife of Prince Zuoxian of the Xiongnu. She lived in the Xiongnu for twelve years and gave birth to two sons. Cao Cao (the actual ruler of the later Eastern Han Dynasty) had been on good terms with Yong Cai. Much to his regret that Yong Cai had no heir, Cao Cao sent an envoy to the Xiongnu, persuading King Zuoxian into returning Wenji to Han by offering him a big amount of gold. Later, he arranged for her to marry Si Dong (Fan, 2000).

The story of “the return of Wenji to Han” underwent reinterpretation and creative adaptations over time and became popular subject matter in literature. Since the Han Dynasty, this subject has been recurrently used in artistic works, particularly during the Song Dynasty. In the Jingkang Incident (AD 1127), which marks the collapse of the Northern Song Dynasty, Emperors Huizong and Qinzong of Song, along with numerous imperial consorts, nobles, and officials, were held as hostages by the Jurchen forces. It was not until 1141 (the 11th year of the Shaoxing period in the reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Southern Song Dynasty) that a peace agreement between Song and Jin enabled the repatriation of Emperor Gaozong’s mother, Empress Dowager Wei, along with the remains and ashes of the deceased Emperor Huizong, Emperor Qinzong, and their consorts. This historical episode shares certain similarities with Wenji’s earlier experience of being detained by the Xiongnu.

In this historical context, “the return of Wenji to Han” became popular subject matter with painters residing in both the Southern Song and Jin territory. During the Jiatai period (1201-1204) in the reign of Emperor Ninzong, Juzhong Chen worked as a professional painter in the Southern Song palace (Xia, 1938) and created the painting *Wenji’s Return to Han*, which depicts the scene of Wenji bidding farewell to Prince Zuoxian of the Xiongnu. Yu Zhang, an official at the Zhiying Bureau (dedicated to providing supplies to the imperial family) in the Jin court, created his version of *Wenji’s Return to Han*, describing Wenji’s journey back to Han. Both the two versions manifest the impact of the times on the painters’ creation while also showcasing their respective artistic perspectives and emotional representation.

From today’s standpoint, paintings entitled *Wenji’s Return to Han* are the interpretations of the historical story by previous artists. Research into how ancient people viewed history from the iconological perspective has the potential to provide valua-

ble implications for contemporary studies in the field of art history. The purpose of this article is to explore the impacts of the dynamics of the Song and Jin Dynasties on the painters’ creations by comparing Chen’s and Zhang’s *Wenji’s Return to Han* in terms of composition, the portrayal of figures, and the painter’s motives.

Brief Descriptions of the Two Works

Wenji’s Return to Han by Juzhong Chen (**Figure 1**) is a hanging scroll executed in ink and color on silk, with a size of 147.4 cm in height and 107.7 cm in width. It is currently housed in the Taipei Palace Museum.

The background of the painting is desolate loess land dotted with sparse withered trees and short grasses, forming a bleak landscape beyond the Great Wall. On the left of the central section, Wenji and Prince Zuoxian sit facing each other, conducting a heartbreaking farewell ceremony. Wenji sits upright, her gaze resolutely fixed on the prince, while Prince Zuoxian turns slightly to gesture for a servant to serve a drink, his eyes lingering on her with profound affection. Behind Wenji are her two sons and three maids. The younger kid clings tightly to her waist, with the older one attempting to coax his younger brother into joining the maids. The maids are playing the roles as caregivers, looking after the children or organizing Wenji’s belongings, showcasing feminine delicacy and warmth. The male servants are carrying out more diverse duties. One is pouring wine for the prince, displaying his serving skills; others, armed with bows and quivers, are responsible for the security of central figures, demonstrating their qualities as strong nomadic warriors.

Figures in the foreground, ahead of the above central scene, are the emissary from Han and his retinue, accountable for escorting Wenji back to the Han territory. Some members of the retinue are holding ceremonial instruments, waiting for the completion of the farewell dinner to embark on their return journey. Together with them are several servants of the prince, also holding ceremonial items, exhibiting their gravity on this occasion. The presence of these servants intensifies the solemn atmosphere of the scene, signifying their respect for Han culture.

Near the lower left foreground is a group of horses laden with luggage (mounts for Han’s diplomatic corps), adding to the narrative of imminent departure. In the right of the upper portion of the painting, there is a group of persons in their Xiongnu attire accompanied by horses and a camel, representing the Xiongnu officials who are seeing Wenji off. Additionally, there are some male servants guarding supplies in the background, highlighting the high value on order and responsibility placed by the Xiongnu society. Though subordinate, their roles remain integral to the scene’s completeness.

Wenji’s Return to Han by Yu Zhang (**Figure 2**) is a handscroll painted in ink and color on silk, measuring 29 cm in height and 129 cm in width. It was acquired from a resident of Changchun City by the Jilin Provincial Museum in 1962.

The painting depicts a scene on Wenji’s journey back to Han, with a total of twelve human figures. On the right (beginning) end of the stroll, an official dressed in his Xiongnu attire is leading the entire team on a horse, holding a flag and being closely followed by a foal. Following the guide are the two attendants jointly leading the horse ridden by Wenji, the central

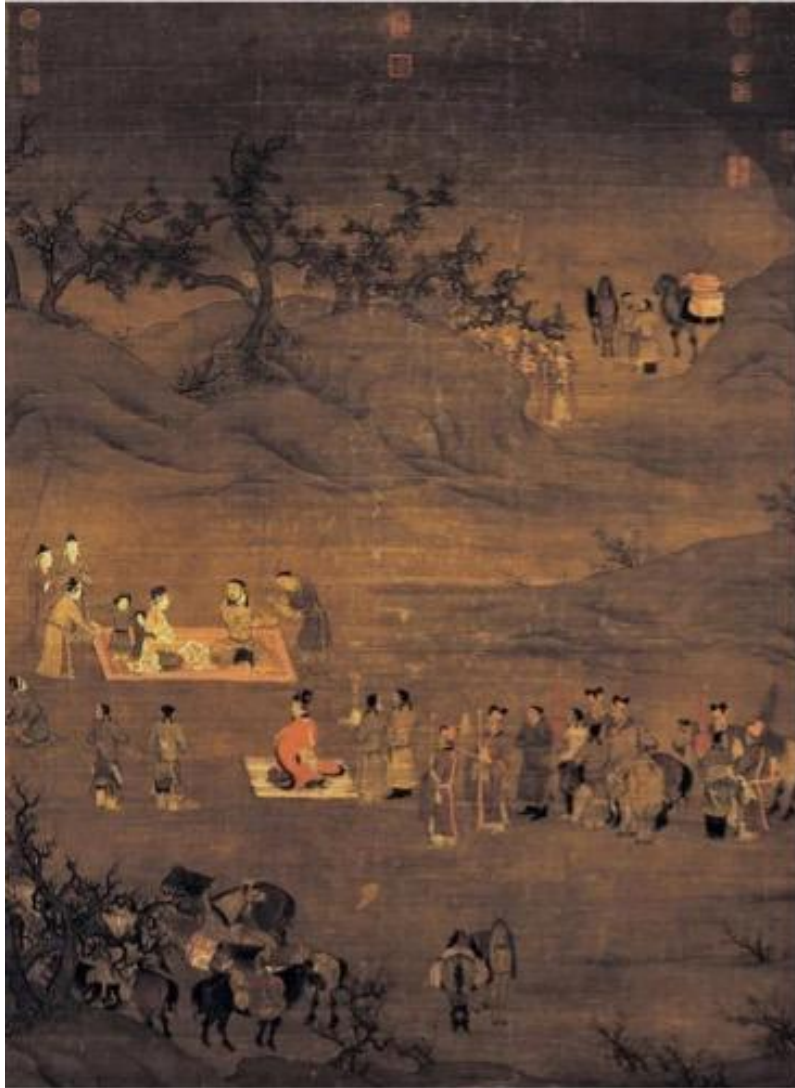


Figure 1. *Wenji's Return to Han* by Juzhong Chen of the Southern Song Dynasty (Chinese Ancient Painting and Calligraphy Identification Group, 1996)

figure of the painting. She wears an intricate and splendid Xiongnu costume with a fur hat and leather boots and sits upright on the horse, one hand resting on the saddle and the other tightly gripping the reins, and her gaze firmly fixed ahead.

Behind Wenji is a group of attendants led by two officials, a Han and a Xiongnu, who ride side by side. The Xiongnu official on the right is wrapped up with a fur hat and a long robe with tight sleeves, his waist adorned with shimmering ornaments and his face showing a look of concern. He is forcefully reining in his horse, which seems somewhat hesitant to move forward. Wearing a headscarf, the Han official on the left holds a round fan to shield against the wind and sand. Behind the two officials, five attendants on five horses follow closely. Among them, one attendant carries a piece of luggage with his hands, one bears a backpack, and another has a falcon perched on his shoulder. The horses are laden with soft blankets. At the end of the procession, a rider, in a fur hat and a narrow-sleeved long robe and with a bow and arrows at his waist, is moving steadily forward, holding

a falcon in his right hand and tightly gripping the reins with his left. A loyal hunting dog follows his horse closely.

A Comparison of the Two Paintings

Scenes and Composition

The Book of the Later Han is the earliest literature that documents the story of Wenji Cai. Yet, in creating their works on this subject, later artists drew more information from Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute (allegedly written by Wenji herself), which is included in the Collection of Yuefu Poems edited by Maoqian Guo during the Northern Song Dynasty (Guo, 1998). Chen and Zhang drew on different scenes from Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute. Its thirteenth stanza reads:

*“Never thought I would survive and return,
Hold my Xiongnu-descent children, tears soaking my
clothes.
The Han envoy arrives on a galloping four-steed carriage.*



Figure 2. Wenji's Return to Han by Yu Zhang of the Jin Dynasty (Chen, 2011)

*My children cry, but who understands?
At this moment of parting forever,
Sorrow for my kids dims the sun's light.
If only I had wings to carry them with me,
Each step away, my feet grow heavier.
My soul fades, my shadow vanishes, yet love remains.
In the thirteenth stanza, the strings hasten, the tune turns
mournful,
My heart is broken, yet no one knows my pain."*

Based on this stanza, Chen's painting depicts the scene of Wenji Cai bidding farewell to Prince Zuoxian before her return to Han.

Zhang's version of *Wenji's Return to Han* is an illustration of the seventeenth stanza of Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute, which describes her journey back to Han:

*"When singing the seventeenth stanza, my heart and nose
ache,
The mountains and passes make the long road hard.
When I left, the leaves were dry, and I longed to go back
home.
White bones on the battlefield bear scars of swords and
arrows.
The wind and frost bite, even in spring and summer,
Men and horses starve, getting thinner and thinner.
Who knew I would ever return to Chang'an?
My sighs never stop; my tears flow freely."*

In terms of composition, Chen's *Wenji's Return to Han*, a vertical scroll (or hanging scroll), presents a layout of diagonal symmetry. In the middle of the picture, Wenji and Prince Zuoxian are positioned slightly to the left, diagonally corresponding to the Han envoy's team in the lower right. Furthermore, Wenji, facing to the right, and Prince Zuoxian, sitting sideways and facing forward, are subtly matched with the Han envoy, who faces to the left. This layout not only enriches the dimensions of the scene but also heightens its narrative resonance. Additionally, the horses and attendants in the upper right corner visually counterbalance the horses in the lower left, adding dynamism and tension to the scene.

By contrast, Zhang's *Wenji's Return to Han* is a handscroll, horizontally unfolding the scene from right to left, primarily in four segments. The first segment portrays a Xiongnu official leading the way with a flag, followed by a pony, which signals the onset of the journey. The second segment represents the core of the scene: Wenji riding on a horse guarded by two attendants. The third segment, consisting of seven attendants and horses, as

well as luggage, is also a chief part of the procession, visually balancing the three figures in the second segment. The final segment portrays a rider with a dog and an eagle at the end of the procession, corresponding to the first segment. This layout contributes to the harmony and unity of the painting, vividly recreating the historical scene of the return of Wenji to Han.

In addition, the two versions vary significantly in terms of the point of view. Being a large-size vertical scroll measuring 147 cm in height and 107 cm in width, Chen's painting gives a broad view of the scene. It seems that Chen has a bird's-eye view of the entire farewell ceremony, resulting in the inclusion of many details such as the relatively distant camel and Xiongnu attendants. At the same time, Chen's work does not strictly follow the principle of perspective, exhibiting the typical feature of "emphasizing figures over mountains" of Chinese painting.

Contrarily, Zhang's version focuses on the foreground of the scene. Due to the painting's limited height (29 cm), Zhang took a level point of view and neglected the background. The painting looks like a close-up shot, capturing a certain moment of Wenji and the retinue's journey to Han. The layout of human figures and animals is well-organized, and hair, clothing, and flags flutter in the wind, resulting in a balanced and vivid scene. With all the figures being in the same spatial depth, Zhang's work is more of a realistic style.

Portrayal of the Figures

The Image of Wenji

Unquestionably, Wenji is the focal point of portrayal in both Chen's and Zhang's works. The painters give a meticulous depiction of Wenji as the protagonist, with all other figures and things pivoted around her.

Wenji's attire in the two paintings is of the style of the northern peoples despite the marked variations. In Chen's painting, Wenji wears a floral pearl crown in the shape of a square-topped hat with two red shoulder-length ribbons at the back, adorned with gemstones along the edges of the crown and the decorative ribbons. Crowns of this type were also uncovered in the tombs of the Qi Kingdom in the Jin Dynasty, worn by the female occupants of the tombs. Only women of high-ranking social status were entitled to wear them. On top of its decorative features, the crown also served the practical purpose of providing warmth. Wenji is dressed in a white or light-colored, high-collared, narrow-sleeved robe embroidered with golden thread patterns and a dark brown skirt with golden floral motifs

and a golden banded hem. She also wears a red belt embroidered with golden patterns, from which hangs a crimson flap bag for carrying small items. This outfit is more ornate compared to Wenji's attire in Zhang's painting, with emphasized ceremonial value over practical value, catering to the farewell scenario.

In Zhang's painting, Wenji wears a fur hat with ear flaps, which serves the dual purpose of decoration and providing warmth. Alongside Wenji, several attendants also wear this type of fur hat, suggesting they can be worn by all, regardless of gender and social status. As to her garments, Wenji is dressed in a mink jacket with a waist wrap. The mink jacket is a short garment with a length that does not go beyond the waist and with sleeves not beyond the elbows, making it suitable dress for riding. This style was popular in the late Northern Song Dynasty. The waist wrap is a supplement used to wrap the chest and waist and secure the upper and lower garments. Unlike the belt worn by the Han people, a waist wrap used by the northern tribes was made of cloth, with minimal decoration, primarily serving to protect the wearer from wind and cold. Hence, Wenji's outfit in Zhang's painting is practical for the actual situations on her journey back to Han.

Interestingly, the two painters adopted the same approach in depicting Wenji's expression. Literary works, when addressing Wenji's departure from the Xiongnu, typically describe her as a woman experiencing deep grief over the changeability of the time and overwhelming sadness for the separation from her children. Unlike this literary image, Wenji in Chen's and Zhang's paintings showcases a calm look, which is to highlight her ability to remain composed in the face of dramatic life changes. In Chen's painting, Wenji is bidding farewell to Prince Zuoxian with proper etiquette, even with the presence of her beloved two children. At this moment, her dignified serenity contrasts sharply with Prince Zuoxian's sorrow and her children's unwillingness to part. In Zhang's work, Wenji rides on a horse, facing the biting cold wind with her composure. Holding the reins firmly and remaining upright with her feet on the stirrups, she is in stark contrast with those attendants with hunched shoulders, covered mouths, and squinted eyes. Wenji displays neither the eagerness to return to her home place nor the sadness of leaving her loved ones behind in the Xiongnu. Her calmness and resilience manifest her transcendent qualities as a talented and accomplished woman.

Secondary Figures

In Chen's painting, secondary figures are many. Among them, Prince Zuoxian, the Han envoy and his subordinates, and the Xiongnu attendants are the ones that the painter pays more attention to. Like Wenji, Prince Zuoxian is in a central position on the painting. He wears a square-topped black hat with ear flaps and two short ribbons hanging at the back, a typical headwear style of the Jurchen people that is entitled to all social strata (Yu, 1990). Prince Zuoxian is dressed in a round-collared, narrow-sleeved robe, which is a typical Jurchen style of garment. Most notably, Prince Zuoxian's attire features elaborate and intricate patterns. According to *History of Jin*, the patterns on the clothes indicate the official rank; larger patterns signal higher ranks (Tuitui, 1977). The large patterns on the clothes of Prince Zuoxian and Wenji point to their prominent status. Ap-

parently, the Han envoy is the third most important figure in Chen's painting, who is even closer to the center of the painting than Wenji and Prince Zuoxian, with a size comparable to the latter's and significantly larger than other subordinate figures. Dressed in a Jinxian hat, leather belt, and crimson court robe, the Han envoy looks like a Southern Song official. In the Song Dynasty, only those high-ranking officials were allowed to wear Jinxian hats. According to *History of Song*, first- and second-rank officials wear them in court and ancestral worship ceremonies (Tuitui, 1977). The emphasis on the high status of the Han envoy, who is an imitation of a top-ranking official in the Song dynasty, is to highlight the reverence the Han Empire paid to Wenji. In the meantime, the headwear of the Han envoy's retinue is a copy of the two-beam hat worn by ordinary officials in the Song Dynasty. Like the Han envoy, his retinue also wears court uniforms with red embroideries of ribbon-like patterns. This group is positioned in the lower right of the painting, holding ceremonial items and observing the farewell ceremony while conversing with the Xiongnu attendants. In addition, the Xiongnu attendants are in uniforms of the Jurchen style. Male attendants uniformly wear black hats with ear flaps, akin to the Prince Zuoxian's hat. The two attendants in the lower left corner wear light-colored or grey boots and robes with slits up the sides, an imitation of the Jurchen style, which features long slits.

In Zhang's version of *Wenji's Return to Han*, Wenji's entourage is made up of three Han people and a larger number of Xiongnu attendants. Compared to the Xiongnu's leather and fur clothing for cold seasons, the Han people's clothes are mostly made of cloth, which are relatively less effective in keeping out the cold. To fight the biting cold wind, the three Han people use headbands to secure their hats and waist wraps to fasten their clothes. Among the Xiongnu team, the oldest member is leading the way, carrying a flag, and others are carrying luggage, following Wenji or serving as a guard at the end of the procession. They wear fur hats and long coats with narrow sleeves to keep themselves warm. Some of them expose shaved heads, typical of the nomadic people, because their fur hats have been blown off by the strong wind. This detail is to underline the harsh weather during the journey to Han.

Non-Human Components

Horses

Chen depicts the horses as meticulously as he does the human figures in the painting. Complete images of horses are present in the lower left corner and the right side of the painting. In addition to the various postures of the horses, standing or lying down, Chen also represents the details of the saddles, such as the embroidery with white goose patterns against a yellow background (the geese are surrounded by wave-like motifs as if they have just caught some fish and are emerging from the water). The words on the saddles and the brands on the horses' rumps are explicitly visible. In effect, branding the horses' rumps with words is a practice concerning horse management in the Jin Dynasty. There is a unique system for horse management in the Jin Empire: military horses are branded with marks indicating details such as birthday and service time. This practice also appears in an anonymous version of *Wenji's Return to Han* in a

Boston Museum. Peng (2003) observes that the brand on the horse's rump may carry other important information, such as the year and location of the horse farm. Considering the presence of brands on horses, some researchers speculate that Chen's version of *Wenji's Return to Han* could be an "espionage painting" in the Southern Song Dynasty, aimed at conveying military secrets about the Jin troops and their training. Another suspicious detail is the camel in the upper right corner of the painting, which is loaded with Wenji's belongings. The truth is that there were no deserts in the Jurchen territories and that the Jurchen did not use camels as vehicles, although they were nomads.

Zhang's depiction of horses shows his extraordinary skills in brushwork. Horses in his version of *Wenji's Return to Han* bear natural elegance, showing smooth movements. The flexible joints and limbs, manes and tails flying in the wind, and other details make the horses lifelike. The reins, saddles, and other gear complement each other perfectly.

Trees

Zhang's painting does not have any supplementary items, such as trees, in the background. We can cite two reasons for Zhang's neglect of the background. The first reason is geographical. Wenji's return journey from the Xiongnu to the Han territory, which, nowadays, would be from the Shaanxi-Gansu region to Handan in Hebei, primarily traverses the Loess Plateau. Along the journey, the strong winds and sandstorms could result in extremely low visibility, and few tall trees are visible in this desolate environment. The second reason concerns composition. The size of Zhang's painting is limited. When human figures, horses, and miscellaneous objects have taken the majority of the space, leaving the background blank is a legitimate choice.

In Chen's work, the slopes and trees play an important role in balancing the spatial arrangements of the picture. The trees are in various forms, interspersed among characters and animals to segregate the picture roughly into three main areas for Wenji and Prince Zuoxian's farewell, the escorting team ready for departure, and other attendants, respectively. In terms of brushstrokes, Chen pursues refined elegance in adjusting the depth of ink to portray the slopes; he employs the vertical strokes to establish the branches to give the trees a tenacious look. This handling adds solemnity and profundity to the scene.

The Painters' Identities and Purposes of their Creations

Personal Information

Scant has been the documentation of Chen's personal information in the history of Chinese painting. According to Xia (1938), Chen was a court painter during the Jiatai period, specializing in painting human figures and foreign horses, and could rival Zongdao Huang (a renowned painter in the Northern Song Dynasty) in composition and coloring. Despite having been a professional painter in the Southern Song court, Chen once made a mysterious trip to the Jin Empire, which was documented by Tao (1959) of the Yuan Dynasty. As per Tao's Notes Taken in the Rest from Farming in Nancun, Chen, in March of the Dingmao year of the Taihe period, traveled within the Jin territory alongside a Jin official who was heading to Shaanxi;

Chen was tasked with a special mission for this trip: to create a portrait of "Miss Cui: A Beauty of the Tang Dynasty." This account suggests Chen had a special experience in Jin, which explains his ability to produce paintings that feature the characteristics of the Jurchen ethnicity.

On the other hand, there is no official documentation of Zhang in the history of Chinese painting. The only piece of information showing his identity is from the inscription on his painting *Wenji's Return to Han*, which reads "By Yu Zhang from the Zhiying Bureau." The Zhiying Bureau was established in the first year of the Taihe period in the reign of Emperor Zhangzong of Jin (1201). This institution was responsible for manufacturing and mending utensils and furniture for the royal families as well as maintaining the decoration and furnishings of the palace rooms, with roles comparable to those of the Internal Affairs Office of the Qing Dynasty. It is evident that Zhang was not a professional painter like Chen but rather an official serving the internal affairs office of the Jin court.

The Purposes of the Paintings

Chen's masterpieces, such as *Wenji's Return to Han* and *Horse Herding by the Willow Pond*, suggest his familiarity with the customs, lifestyles, and cultures of both the Song and Jin societies. In his stay in the Jin territory, Chen diligently painted the natural landscapes and social scenarios of the northern regions. In the context of the decline in the genre of human figure and horse paintings in the Southern Song dynasty, Chen still produced high-quality paintings of this genre, which is strong evidence of the impact of his experience in the Jin territory on his creations. Regarding the genuine purpose of Chen's *Wenji's Return to Han*, there are primarily three propositions in the literature: an independent creation during his stay in Jin; an espionage painting commissioned by the Southern Song rulers to convey military information of Jin; and a work under the instruction of the Jin rulers to boost cultural exchanges between the northern and southern regions. No matter what Chen's real motive was, his experience in the northern regions enabled him to vividly depict diverse facets of the Jin society, including natural landscapes, social norms, clothing, livestock, and more. Unquestionably, his meticulous painting could fuel interest in cultural exchanges between ethnic groups, as well as facilitate the Southern Song rulers' understanding of the Jin society.

The lack of historical literature on Zhang and his *Wenji's Return to Han* is attributable to the absence of a specialized painting institution in the Jin dynasty. As an official at the Zhiying Bureau, Zhang could do the painting just out of his personal interest or on the advice of the Jin rulers. His intention of creating this work is pending further research.

Conclusion

While the event of the return of Wenji to Han took place in the Han Dynasty, it was accorded new meaning in the historical context of the conflict between Song and Jin and the attendant cultural integration. Cultural interaction between the southern and northern peoples became prevalent in the 12th and 13th centuries. In Chen's and Zhang's versions of *Wenji's Return to Han*, we can easily find the cultural elements of both Han nationality and northern nationalities. For the artists at the time of

Song-Jin co-existence, the story also served as a vehicle for representing the social circumstances and their own emotions. This study is an endeavor to highlight the artistic value of the

two works through comparison and to reveal the impacts of political and cultural dynamics on the creations as well. ■

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