

Khubilai's groom

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The art of Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322)—Song imperial descendant, literatus, and official at the court of Khubilai Khan—occurs at the intersection of private imagination and political power.¹ It transforms this space, one which had first been opened up by the great painter-officials of two centuries before: Song Di, Su Shi, Li Gonglin, Wen Tong, and Mi Fu. In the art of these already legendary figures had been fused the diverse abilities and knowledge particular to men of their class and position: the formal craft of the calligrapher, the knowledge of the connoisseur/collector, the self-expression of the poet, and the rhetorical skills of the courtier. Their heterogeneous and elitist art provided Zhao with both a history and a model. It allowed him to detach himself, as a painter active during the first decades of Mongol rule, from the alternative and more recent history of painting defined by the professional painters of the Southern Song court (1127–1279). The art of Ma Yuan, Ma Lin, Xia Gui, and Liu Songnian, to name only the most celebrated painters of the early thirteenth century, defined for their aristocratic patrons an environment of the imagination within which an elegant and oblique form of communication between patron and recipient was possible. It is unclear to what degree the painter was able personally to participate in, or escape from, his imposed circumstances; at any rate, the court painter's situation and art were entirely alien to Zhao's own social identity. Moreover, under the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), the romantic aestheticism of Southern Song painting was perceived as emblematic of a political culture that was deemed responsible for

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1. Like all students of Zhao Mengfu, I owe an immense debt to Chu-ting Li, who has explored Zhao's art in a number of notable publications. See in particular: *The Autumn Colors on the Ch'iao and Hua Mountains: A Landscape by Chao Meng-fu* (*Artibus Asiae Supplementum* XXI, Ascona, 1965); "The Freer Sheep and Goat and Chao Meng-fu's Horse Paintings," in *Artibus Asiae*, XXX, 4 (1968): 279–346; "Three Horses by Three Members of the Chao Family," forthcoming in Alfreda Murck, ed., *Words and Images* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990).

China's fall to the Mongols. By contrast, the art of the late eleventh century painter-officials preceded not only the fall of the diminished empire of the Southern Song to the Mongols in the mid-thirteenth century, but also the loss of the northern half of the original Northern Song empire to the Jurchen in 1126. Theirs was a double-sided art, comprising private paintings bearing witness to the personal cost of political vagaries alongside public works that, in retrospect, took on the character of unheeded warnings.

It was thus on the basis of a morally untainted precedent that Zhao developed an art adequate to his own needs in the period following his controversial decision to enter the Yuan government of the Mongols in 1287. Again one can make a distinction between private and public. The private function was compensatory, with painting one of the means by which Zhao preserved his "wilderness character" after he had abandoned the wilderness (metaphoric environment of recluses and all those excluded from government).² In its public aspect, however, painting was also a way of defending himself against criticism, even of assuming the responsibility of moral leadership. As early as the 1290s, Zhao was producing paintings which proclaimed the particular interpretation of Confucian responsibilities that led him to join the Yuan government in 1287.

This public, or outward-directed, function of painting corresponds to the realities of what was already, by 1296, an extraordinary political career.³ Although not the first or even the most sought-after member of the Song imperial family to serve the Mongols, Zhao Mengfu quickly turned out to be the most prominent, partly by virtue of his own talents, and partly through the particular favor that he found with Khubilai. When Zhao arrived at court in the spring of 1287, the Emperor had him sit in a more honoured position than

2. Thus, in a poem from 1288 entitled "Wrongly Leaving Retirement" (*Zui chu*), Zhao writes: "I sometimes amuse myself by painting, hoping to preserve my wilderness nature." Zhao Mengfu, *Zhao Wenmin gong Songxue zhai quanji*, juan 2, cited in Ren Daobin, *Zhao Songxue xinian* (Honolulu: Renmin chubanshe), 1984, p. 50.

3. The following summary of Zhao's political career is largely based on the source materials assembled in Ren, *ibid.*; and Chen Gaohua, ed., *Yuandai huajia shiliao* (Shanghai: renmin meishu chubanshe, 1980).

the far more superior Ye Li, a former Song (deputy) prime minister whom he had been particularly anxious to recruit. This is reported to have met with objections, on the grounds that a Song prince should not be allowed so close to the Yuan imperial presence. The objections went unheeded, and the incident anticipates other signs of imperial favor and protection over the following ten years. Thus, during the same spring Khubilai had to be restrained from appointing the new arrival to high rank. Four years later, in 1291, Zhao played a key role in the impeachment and execution of the most powerful figure in the Yuan government, Sangha: the move was successful in part because Zhao was willing to back up his attack with an explicit declaration of loyalty to Khubilai, which helped to convince the emperor that he could trust his Chinese officials. However, Zhao's fierce opposition to Sangha was undoubtedly intensified by the latter's involvement in the despoliation of the Southern Song tombs. It does not diminish one's sense of his courage to note that the incident thus allowed Zhao an unusual opportunity to express a double loyalty, both to Song and Yuan, to past and to present. And it deepens our understanding of what was at stake to know that Zhao's declaration followed, by less than a year, the execution of a prominent Song loyalist, Xie Fang, who had been courted by the same envoy who had successfully persuaded Zhao to collaborate. Despite his success in the Sangha affair, however, we then find Zhao himself interrupting his rapid rise at court, first requesting a leave of absence at the end of 1291, and then, in 1292, refusing a remarkable and unequivocal sign of imperial favor. According to his biography in the *Yuan History*:

The Emperor wanted to appoint Mengfu to the Secretariat, but he resolutely refused. He was then given the right to enter and leave the palace without restriction. . . . [Zhao] Mengfu thought privately that if he were to spend too much time at the Emperor's side, he would inevitably incur the jealousy of others, and so he strenuously requested a provincial appointment.⁴

The request was granted, and Zhao took up a post in Shandong province, where he stayed until the spring of 1295. During his Shandong tenure, Khubilai died and was succeeded in 1294 by his grandson, Temür. One of the first acts of the new emperor was to commission

4. Cited in Ren, *ibid.*, p. 60. A fuller and earlier account of this period of intimacy with Khubilai Khan may be found in Yang Zai's biography of Zhao Mengfu, reprinted in Chen, *ibid.*, pp. 34–42.

a history of Khubilai's reign, and Zhao was ordered to participate. Once again, however, he distanced himself from power, pleading illness and returning to his native Wuxing in 1295 without taking up his new duties. In the light of Zhao's subsequent court career, which fulfilled Khubilai's hopes, one tends to think of the two years of retirement initiated by this return to Wuxing as a calculated hiatus in his career. At the time, however, Zhao seems to have intended it to mark his definitive withdrawal from the world of the court.⁵ By the end of 1297 this attitude had changed under pressure from Beijing. In the first days of 1298, preparing to take up another local appointment in the north, he expressed his resignation to his fate with his customary dry irony: "This year I am going to quit, and become as free and unrestrained as a gull."⁶

It was thus at an unusual moment in his life, when he had deliberately turned his back on a court career that offered every sign of outstanding success, that Zhao painted the work now in the Crawford Collection, *Horse and Groom*, dated to February 10, 1296 (fig. 1).⁷ By his withdrawal from public life, he had achieved some distance from the inevitable charges of opportunism. At the same time, looking back on his personal history, he could legitimately feel that he had followed the example of his (post-1286) political hero, Jizi,^a uncle and adviser of Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang dynasty (c. 1700–1050 B.C.). (Alphabetical superscripts refer to Chinese characters given at the end of this article.) As Zhou's behaviour became increasingly irrational, violent, and disastrous, Jizi feigned madness to escape involvement. Nevertheless, during this period "in the wilderness" he declared himself unwilling to collaborate with any new dynasty that might be established. After the fall of the Shang, Jizi initially maintained his intransigence in the face of overtures from Emperor Wu of the new Zhou dynasty.

5. Years later, Zhao would write: "In the first year of Yuanzhen (1295), I resigned my post in Jinan and returned home to look after my father's grave. I planned to do this for the remainder of my life." Cited in Ren, *ibid.*, p. 79.

6. These words close a poem that was inscribed on a self-portrait. The painting, now lost, is known through an early nineteenth-century copy (fig. 22). See below, n. 35.

7. Zhao's painting is now mounted together with two others, by his son, Zhao Yong, and grandson, Zhao Lin, in a single composite handscroll. The scroll has most recently been discussed by Chu-ting Li in "Three Horses by Three Members of the Zhao Family." Earlier publications include: Xie Zhiliu, *Tang Wudai Song Yuan mingji* (Shanghai, 1957), pp. 95–97; and Laurence Sickman, ed., *Chinese Calligraphy and Paintings in the Collection of John M. Crawford, Jr.* (New York: Morgan Library, 1962), pp. 101–104.



Figure 1. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322). *Horse and Groom*, section one of the handscroll, *Three Horse Paintings by Three Members of the Chao Family*, ink and colours on paper, dated 1296. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, John M. Crawford, Jr., Collection.

He was, however, eventually won over by the Emperor's respectful behaviour toward him, and by his need for advice on government. Laying aside family and dynastic loyalty, therefore, he accepted enfeoffment as the Viscount of Ge, and is said to have subsequently presented Emperor Wu with *The Great Plan* (*Hongfan*),⁸ a guide to good government that has survived to the present day. In what came to be taken as a virtual canonization, Confucius later praised Jizi as one of "Three Perfectly Virtuous Ones," adding weight to the ideal that one should subordinate one's loyalty to the greater responsibility of ensuring the continuing good of the state.⁹ During his early years of service at court, Zhao wrote out the full text of Jizi's *The Great Plan*, concluding it with a painting in which Jizi was shown remonstrating with the Zhou ruler. His interest in this text seems to have continued after his retirement

in 1295, since in 1297 he completed an annotated edition of the *Book of Documents*, in which *The Great Plan* is found.⁹ It is to this imaginative world that the Crawford scroll, *Horse and Groom*, belongs.

Zhao's only textual addition to the painting is a simple and functional inscription:

On the tenth day of the first month of the second year of Yuanzhen (1296) I painted this picture of a man and a horse for the pure enjoyment of Surveillance Commissioner Feiqing. Zhao Mengfu of Wuxing.

Although Feiqing has not yet been identified, we know that his position was an important one (rank 3a), more than a full grade above Zhao Mengfu's own.¹⁰ At any one time there were only twenty-two or twenty-four Commissioners, two for each territorial jurisdiction of

8. See Deborah Del Gais Muller, "Li Kung-lin's *Chiu-ko t'u*: A Study of the *Nine Songs* Handscrolls in the Sung and Yüan Dynasties" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, May 1981), p. 152.

9. Zhao's interest in Jizi and *The Great Plan* was first pointed out by Chu-tsing Li in "The Freer Sheep and Goat and Chao Meng-fu's Horse Paintings," pp. 319–320.

10. See C. O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), p. 461.



Figure 2. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Horse and Groom*, diagram.

the empire. Part of their function is evident from the full name of the Commission: literally translated, it was "the office to conduct investigations to make government respectable." In a more philosophical vein, Zhao Mengfu once described the Commission as the state's recognition of its own imperfection.¹¹ It was directly subordinate to the Censorate, and the Commissioners were counted among the censorial officials of the government. Zhao's painting was destined, therefore, for an inspector of sorts, who upon unrolling the scroll would have found himself engaged, as do we today, in a scenario of inspection. A groom presents a pure white tribute horse whom all would have understood as a reference to the pearl of the Tang imperial stables, Night-Shining White. Feiqing himself, as the viewer, has his own historical persona to take on. The judging of horses was a well-established metaphor for a superior's ability to recognize scholarly or administrative talent. The metaphor was personified in Bole, legendary judge of horses and himself a

groom¹² (not this groom, however, who enjoys a very different relationship with the horse: see below). Given the hierarchical relationship between Zhao and Feiqing, there is thus an initial, conventional level on which we can take the painting as an image of exaggerated decorum, with or without some specific objective in mind.

"A picture of a man and a horse": Zhao's flat, anonymous title is partly explained by the cultural assumptions Zhao makes about his viewer. Nonetheless, it contrasts sharply with the immediate way in which the image addresses us. The fine-bearded groom looks directly out of the painting at the viewer, inviting reflection on the very *raison d'être* of the image. By what token are we so addressed? Why does the groom demand Feiqing's attention, and ours? Indeed, so intimate and specific is the involvement encouraged by the groom's gaze that I have come to

12. On this and the symbolism associated with horses, see Jerome Silbergeld, "In Praise of Government: Chao Yung's Painting *Noble Steeds* and Late Yuan Politics," in *Artibus Asiae*, XLVI, 3 (1985): 159–202.

11. Zhao Mengfu, *ibid.*, *juanwai ji*, 2B.



Figure 3. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Horse and Groom*, detail.

wonder whether the anonymity of the “man” of the title, and of his role as a groom, might not be more apparent than real—a function of our historical distance from the painting’s emergence into the world. The question raised by the groom’s gaze is confirmed by another aspect of the painting: the rhetorical weight that the figure is made to bear. The rhetoric I have in mind is a visual one, crucial to the meaning of the image, but by no means self-evident. Before attempting to identify the figure, therefore, I want to explore in some detail what I shall call the rhetoric of correctness or alignment.

Structural rhetoric: geometry

It is a curious feature of Zhao’s painting that he has systematically employed circles to structure his image. There are large arcs in the haunches, the belly, and mane of the horse; in the rein; and in the groom’s belt. There are smaller ones in the horse’s jowl and in the groom’s collar. The only full statement of a circle is also the smallest of these evocations: the horse’s eye.

But for the most part these are only, as I have said, evocations of circles, neither complete nor accurate. The horse’s belly, for example, is not a true arc: it changes direction around the horse’s sex. On the other hand, there are sections of the larger “evocations” that are more or less true arcs. In fact, one particular size of circle recurs in several places, as a simple diagram demonstrates (fig. 2). While some of these arcs may have found their way into the image by intuition, the intuition had to have some solid basis. At some point in the development of the painting, perhaps only in preliminary drawings, Zhao had recourse to a pair of compasses.

One effect of the circles is to set up a pattern of resonances and echoes across the picture surface. This provides a rhythmic structure based on the theme of the arc which is made more complex by the introduction of counterrhythms, shifts, and transformations. The arc of the rein is, at one end, transformed in a new direction by the shift into the movements of the bridle, while at the other end its energy is wound up by the loop and trailing end. The arc of the horse’s mane becomes part



Figure 4. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Horse and Groom*, reconstruction of the painting's original appearance.

of a larger arabesque. Further to the left, one's eye is led upward by the horse's belly only to be led down again by the haunches into a tail like a dry brush-tip which disperses the energy of the coil. On another level, the horse's eyelashes and the top of its mane, and the groom's beard and moustache, provide rhythmic ornamentation (fig. 3). The overall effect is analogous to a formal musical performance, on the *qin*,^c for example, to which Zhao devoted a short book. The ideal of *qin* performance, as stated by Liu Ji at the beginning of the thirteenth century, was to "banish the heterodox and restore correctness [zheng],^d and bring harmony to the heart-mind."¹³

The circles not only function rhythmically but also belong to a geometric structure. They are joined in this by a second geometric figure, the v-shapes that are found in the groom's beard, the folds of his coat, and his crossed wrists, as well as in the horse's mane and tapering legs. The primary axes, too, are strongly stated. The vertical is asserted by the erect posture of the man and the horse, while the horizontal is emphasized by the alignment of their feet. It would also be clear, if there were no collectors' seals on the painting, that the placement of the inscription has been carefully judged in relation to the groom (fig. 4). Once the inscription is added, there is the implication of a

13. Liu Ji, *Qin yi bian*, cited in Wenhuabu wenxue yishu yanjiuyuan, ed., *Zhongguo gudai yuelun xuanji* (Beijing, Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1981), p. 249.

rectangular composition within the rectangle of the frame. Moreover, the inscription also acts as a pendant to the upper half of the groom. The vertical of the man culminates in his round face; the inscription finishes with the square of the seal. If the right-left and down-up rules of Chinese reading have any sense in this pictorial context, the painting might be said to begin with the groom's face and end with the seal reading "Zi'ang of the Zhao family" — a clue, perhaps, to the identity of the groom?

Geometry and rhythm are thus harmonized to structure a surface continuum that is inhabited both by the image and by the inscription. I mean by this that the image is an example of the pictorial ecology that John Hay has shown to have been pioneered by Zhao's older contemporary and friend in the south, Qian Xuan. Space, in this ecology, is identified with surface, and surface identified with mind.¹⁴ The structure of the surface continuum is one of the ways in which, in *Horse and Groom*, pictorial craft and meaning are closely intertwined.

14. This drastically oversimplifies John Hay's thesis, which he has explored in a number of articles, including: "Poetic Space: Ch'ien Hsüan and the Association of Painting and Poetry," forthcoming in Alfreda Murck, ed., *ibid.*; and "Surface and the Chinese Painter: The Discovery of Surface," in *Archives of Asian Art*, 38 (1985): 95–123. In Zhao's painting, however, there is an interest in modeling that differentiates it from Qian's work, and relates it to the pictorial tradition of northern professional painters such as Wang Zhenpeng (fig. 17).

Circles imply compasses, and in China are often paired with another measuring instrument—the carpenter's square. Similarly, Zhao's painting combines circles with straight-line figures. Compasses (*gui*)^e and square (*ju*)^f together form a metaphor for moral measurement roughly analogous to our expression "a moral compass." To have *guiju* is to respect the rules, to be "measured" in one's conduct, to have a sense of decorum. *Gui* also has an ancient meaning of admonishment, which only strengthens its moral force. In one poem Zhao Mengfu asks rhetorically of a deceased friend:

When incidents arise, who will provide advice?
When I go too far, who will admonish me?¹⁵

Ju, meanwhile, has the further meaning of a pattern or model, here applied by Zhao to great men whom he admires: "Model gentlemen like Ou(yang) Xiu and Su (Shi)."¹⁶ Like *guiju* in language, the geometry of circles and squares implies alignment in that overall order at once cosmological, ideological, and moral which was inherited by the Neo-Confucians from earlier Confucianism, and by the latter from the early thinking on government questions preserved in texts such as *The Great Plan*. On the visual side, while there is almost certainly no direct link, it is at least indirectly relevant that this intersection of Confucian moral geometry and the painter's craft is anticipated in one of the major pictorial styles of the Han dynasty. There, too, compass and square are emblematic of the particular (Confucian) order sought (fig. 5).¹⁷ To give the quality of their inner structure a name, Zhao's horse and groom are fully correct or aligned, *zheng*, the quality we have just met as an ideal of *qin* performance. *Zheng* plays a key role in *The Great Plan*, where it is explained that "the Royal Path is right [*zheng*] and straight," and that "all right [*zheng*] men, having a competency, will go on to be good."¹⁸

Horse and Groom is by no means the only example of Zhao's use of surface geometry to create a rhetorically resonant pictorial order. Consider, for example, *Man on Horseback*, which dates from the

15. Zhao Mengfu, *ibid.*, 9/1B.

16. *Ibid.*, 6/6B. Zhao's friend, Yu Ji, in his encomium to an imperially commissioned portrait, characterizes the subject in similar terms, describing him as *zhifang*, "straight and squared." *Daoyuan xueyuan lu*, juan 21, "Zhao Pingzhang huaxiang zan."

17. See Martin Powers, "Pictorial Art and Its Public in Early Imperial China," in *Art History*, VII, 2 (June 1984): 135–163.

18. Translation by James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. III, *The Shoo King or The Book of Historical Documents*, pp. 332, 330.

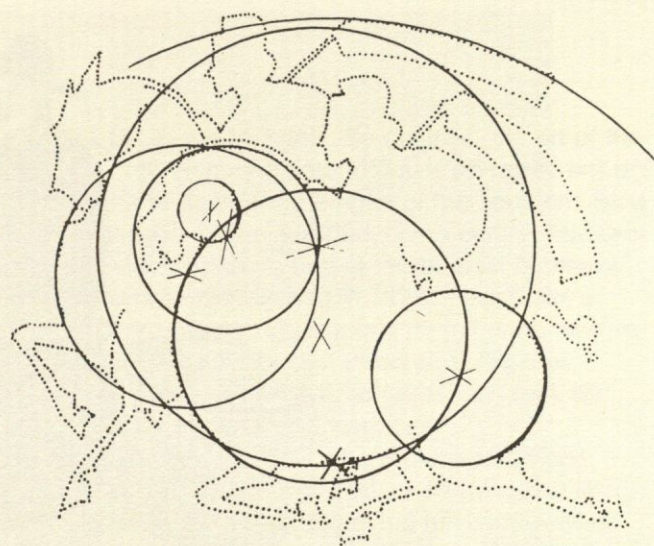


Figure 5. Drawing reconstructing some of the arcs used in designing two mounted escorts in a stone engraving from the Wu Shrines, Jiaxiang, Shandong, A.D. 147–167. Reproduced with permission from Martin Powers, "Pictorial Art and Its Public in Early Imperial China," in *Art History*, vol. 7, no. 2 (June 1984), figure 2.

same year (fig. 6). Here the key is the arc of the horse's mane and the straight line that Zhao has introduced into its neck. When both are extended until they meet, the midpoint of the arc may be seen to be around the center of the combined man-on-horseback motif (fig. 7). It is, in fact, the pivot of the image, which nestles in a circle drawn around this point. Other, secondary circles also have their interest. The arc of the horse's belly meets, in extension, the top of the rider's hat. His head is also doubly circumscribed by the circles implied by his collar and his left cheek (fig. 8). The man is intricately and beautifully aligned.

To these two horse paintings we may add a better-known work, *Sheep and Goat*, also a short handscroll (fig. 9). Chu-ting Li long ago pointed out that "the two different animals form one single composition, complementing each other, like the pictorial symbol of Tao so familiar to the Chinese."¹⁹ But the circle theme is also continued into the obvious contrast between the two animals. The backbone of the goat describes an arc that, in extension, encloses the intense, downbent eyes and the erect tail (fig. 10). Surely it is no coincidence that the upward-looking sheep is an agglomerate of

19. Li, "The Freer *Sheep and Goat* and Chao Meng-fu's Horse Paintings," p. 280.



Figure 6. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Man on Horseback*, handscroll, ink and colours on paper, dated 1298. Palace Museum, Beijing. Reproduced from *Zhao Mengfu Ren yi tu*.

failed arcs, a visual cacophony. The sheep has been rhetorically undermined, with important consequences for the interpretation of the image (see below). Indeed, in all these paintings the incorporation of circles and sometimes other geometric figures has implications for the intended moral status of the subject. In the case of *Horse and Groom* one wonders what kind of groom merited such a rhetorically favorable presentation?

While the ideological framework of these images is broadly Confucianist, Zhao's most direct source was probably one more closely associated with Buddhism and Daoism. The geometric structuring of compositions was fundamental to the iconic imagery of professional painters associated with the Yuan court, and was apparently a craft in which Zhao took a direct interest. His image of the Lord of the Yellow River, from a 1305 album illustrating the Nine Songs (fig. 11), can usefully be compared with the seated Buddha and bodhisattvas from the Guangsheng Temple murals painted after 1319 (fig. 12).²⁰ The drapery in Zhao's painting, although less

fussy and less directed toward patterning, activates much the same kind of rhythms across the painting surface. And the circles that are explicitly stated in the wall paintings as halos, contributing to an overall yantra diagram, also occur, albeit more discreetly, in Zhao's album leaf. A diagram shows that the figure has been drawn to conform to an invisible circle within which the Lord of the Yellow River neatly sits (fig. 13).²¹

One final possible source for Zhao's geometry should be mentioned briefly, although no concrete link can be established. The separation of north and south in the latter part of the Song had led to independent northern developments in the arts, of which Zhao became aware when he moved north in 1288. The same was true in other areas of culture, of which one of the most notable was mathematics, and the astronomy that depended upon it.²² Among the northern achievements was an

20. On the dating of these and related murals, see Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, "Zhu Haogu Reconsidered: A New Date for the ROM Painting and the Southern Shanxi Buddhist-Daoist Style," in *Artibus Asiae* XLVIII, 1/2 (1987): 5–38.

21. Nor did Zhao despise haloes, as can be seen from a painting in the Liaoning Provincial Museum of a haloed arhat in which compasses have again played their role. See *Chugoku no hakubutsukan* 3 (Kodansha and Wenwu chubanshe, 1982), pl. 101.

22. The facts presented below are drawn directly from two sources: Joseph Needham et al., *Science and Civilization in China*,



Figure 7. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Man on Horseback*, diagram.



advanced understanding of the properties of circles and spheres. Li Ye's *Sea Mirror of Circle Measurements* (1248) and *New Steps in Computation* (1259), and later Zhu Shijie's *Introduction to Mathematical Studies* (1299) and *Precious Mirror of the Four Elements* (1303), exemplify this direction of study on the theoretical side. No less important, however, were the developments in astronomy made possible by Mongol contact with Persia. As Morris Rossabi has explained, within ten years of the establishment of a new and important observatory in Azerbaijan, its discoveries were brought to China by the astronomer Jamal al-Din. "He brought along diagrams of an armillary sphere, sundials, an astrolabe, a terrestrial globe, and a celestial globe as gifts for the court."²³ The information was adapted by

vol. 3, *Mathematics and the Sciences of the Heavens and the Earth*, pp. 38–49, 367–382 (Cambridge University Press); and Morris Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 125–126.

23. Rossabi, *ibid.*

Figure 8. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Man on Horseback*, detail with diagram.



Figure 9. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Sheep and Goat*, handscroll, ink on paper, undated. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 31.2.

Guo Shoujing (1231–1316), who, beginning around 1276, undertook astronomical investigations for Khubilai's court which led him to the construction of astronomical instruments on the Persian model that can still be seen today (fig. 14). Guo's instruments, silhouetted against the sky, would have been one of the wonders of the capital; Zhao could not but have been aware of them. It thus seems relevant that from a purely visual point of view, these complex geometric constructions in which circles and arcs play the key role provide the closest parallel of all to the substructure of Zhao's painting. The connection, if admitted, is meaningful in two ways. The instruments were, first, an emblem of northern and Mongol culture; in this domain, southern China could not compare. Second, the function of these instruments was not, of course, disinterested scientific investigation, but the pursuit of a more accurate and thus more efficacious alignment of the calendar with the movements of the Heavens. This was in turn part of a larger attempt, in line with all previous dynasties, to align the Yuan political order with the order of the cosmos—precisely the aim of *The Great Plan*.

Expressive rhetoric: flavor

In exploring the significance of structure I have bypassed a much more familiar rhetorical aspect of the style of *Horse and Groom*: the effect of plainness and stillness, which is a large part of the painting's flavor

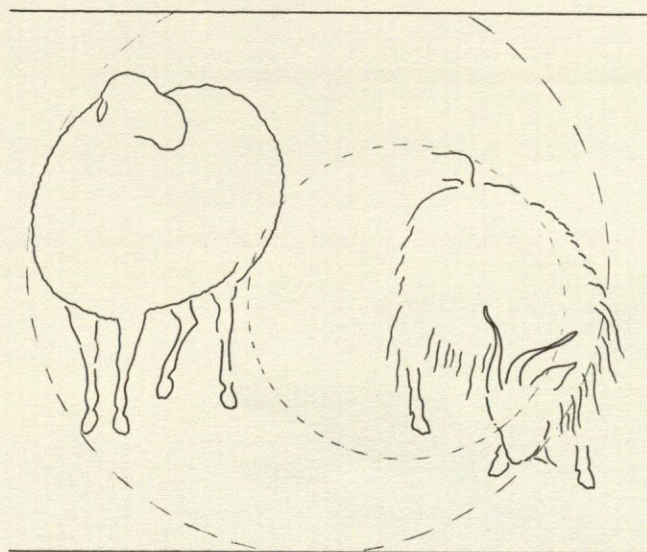


Figure 10. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), *Sheep and Goat*, diagram.

[wei⁸ or fengwei^h]. Zhao has rejected anything that might distract the viewer from the facts of the case. The technique is basically *baimiao*¹ outline drawing and light inkwash; where color enters the image it is only to be denied. The washed-out reddish grey of the groom's coat only distantly evokes a true red. The brushwork of the painting is unassertive. The calligraphy is small-scale and close to standard script. Both horse and groom stand still, are posed. The groom's hands take



Figure 11. Attributed to Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), "The Lord of the Yellow River," leaf from the album *Nine Songs*, ink on paper, dated 1305. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 13. Attributed to Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), "The Lord of the Yellow River," diagram.



Figure 12. Workshop of Zhu Haogu, *Paradise of Amitabha*, Main Hall, Guangsheng si Lower Monastery, Shanxi, after 1319. Courtesy of the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

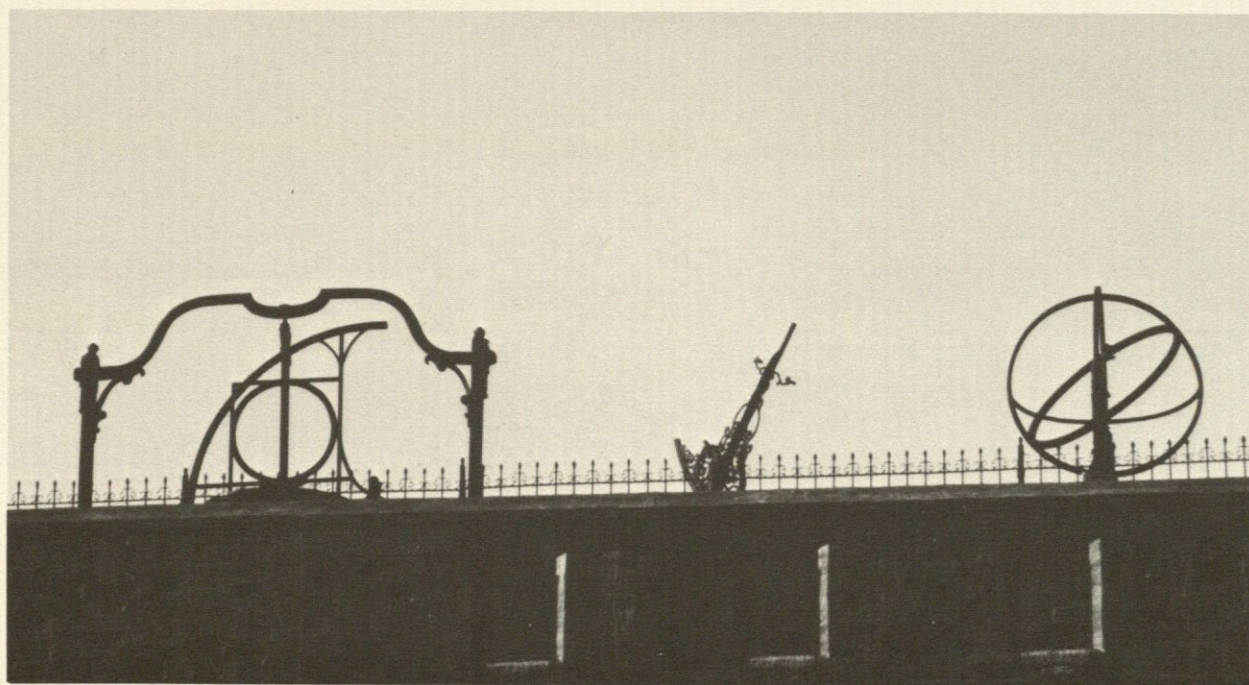


Figure 14. The astronomical observatory, Beijing. Photo by Morris Rossabi.

up a deliberate and fixed gesture. The groom's face, and for that matter the horse's head as well, have no particular expression. The horse has neither saddle nor other accoutrements, no special arrangement of its mane or tail, no special markings. There is no setting. The inscription is strictly functional, and the title, as we have seen, anonymous.

Seen in expressive terms, plainness and stillness bespeak restraint and self-control. With the experience of later literati painting behind us, we can and do refer these qualities back to the artist, and it is true that Zhao himself cites the same qualities in prose and poetry as indices of the fine character of the writer.²⁴ In this painting, however, the presence of the horse and groom is so strong that such qualities will not detach themselves from the painting's subject. They may refer back to the painter, but no more strongly than they express some inner reality of the horse and groom. This is particularly important for our understanding of the anonymous groom, who is thereby attributed the qualities of a *junzi*,²⁵ a superior gentleman.

Here it is worth citing the earliest of the colophons now attached to the scroll, that written by the scholar Shen Danian in 1403.²⁵ By then the painting had

already changed hands twice and the commentators were cut off from the original circumstances of Zhao's painting; nonetheless, Shen's response to the groom is illuminating:

When one sees him standing in attendance, looking [out], one has a sense of orderly hierarchical relationships and harmonious friendship. One knows then that even if the famous gentleman's [Zhao's] efforts of thought and expression took him into the smallest details of depiction, yet he set that depiction in proper alignment with the immanent order of Heaven and the heart-minds [*xin*]* of men. In the instant of unrolling the scroll I am taken over by a feeling of respect rising in the recesses of my heart.

Shen is struck by the groom's demeanour, which becomes the catalyst for thoughts of order, harmony, and respect. His commentary points the way back to *The Great Plan*, which has much to say on the question of demeanour. Its comments come in the context of a discussion of five aspects of behaviour relevant in the first instance to the sovereign, but implicitly to others as well:

first owner, Feiqing, or the second, Xie Boli, who added the two accompanying paintings by Zhao's son and grandson. The earliest colophons now on the scroll, including Shen Danian's, were written for a certain Wang Xihe.

24. Zhao Mengfu, *ibid.*, 6/6B; 8/11A.

25. There are no surviving colophons from the time of the

The first is called demeanour; the second, speech; the third, seeing; the fourth, hearing; and the fifth, thinking. The virtue of the demeanour is called respectfulness; of speech, accordance with reason; of seeing, clearness; of hearing, distinctness; and of thinking, perspicaciousness. The respectfulness becomes manifest in gravity; accordance with reason, in orderliness; the clearness, in wisdom; the distinctness, in deliberation; and the perspicaciousness, in sageness.²⁶ [my emphases]

There are, of course, other Confucian and pre-Confucian texts upon which one could draw for an exegesis of the significance of respectful demeanour. But *The Great Plan* is the one text that can be specifically associated with Zhao in this period. At the least it provides us with a general context for the painting's flavor, at best with a specific reference that may be partly explained by Zhao's own princely identity.

A gentleman groom—perhaps even a princely groom: the idea implies that someone—Zhao?—is playing a role. In matters of role-playing Zhao had an easily available reference point and source in the form of the theater. We can begin to make a comparison by considering the fictionality of the Crawford scroll as it is centered in the groom's gaze. Zhao's painting does something that Li Gonglin's *Five Tribute Horses* (fig. 20), for example, does not—it openly acknowledges the picture surface as the barrier between pictorial space and the space of the viewer. Granted, Southern Song and Yuan professional painting also acknowledge surface, but only partially. To paraphrase John Hay, the viewing experience oscillates between illusionistic understanding and the sensual appreciation of surface.²⁷ In Zhao's painting, however, the acknowledgment is total. The horse and groom exist *in* the surface, in the barrier itself. The suspension of disbelief that they encourage by their relative naturalism is constantly qualified. We are always being reminded that this is a fiction. And by introducing an unequivocal acknowledgment of the viewer in the form of the groom's gaze, Zhao has arranged for his horse and groom to explicitly admit to their own fictionality. They have an ambiguous status that carries with it the right to extend their fiction into our space. In this respect they resemble actors on the theater stage, who then as now periodically turned to the audience, addressing it directly, thus extending the on-stage fictional world

26. Legge, *ibid.*, pp. 326–327.

27. Hay, "Poetic Space: Ch'ien Hsüan and the Association of Painting and Poetry," p. 6.



Figure 15. Line drawing of carving on wall facing sarcophagus of Song Defang, tomb dated 1260. Reproduced from Stephen West, "Mongol Influence on the Development of Northern Drama," in John D. Langlois, Jr., ed., *China Under Mongol Rule*, p. 455.

to include those watching.²⁸ The device functions to involve the audience more fully, not so much by blurring distinctions between the real and the fictional as by facilitating passage between the two.

The analogy between Zhao's groom and the actor's appeal to the audience becomes more concrete when the system of theatrical roles in Yuan dynasty music drama is taken into account. Music drama was the cinema of its day, and *zaju* in particular was the entertainment highlight of the capital.²⁹ Both a line drawing of a ceramic relief datable to around 1260 (fig. 15) and a well-known painting from 1324 of a theater company on stage (fig. 16) include a central figure who is probably a *zhengmo*.³⁰ The *mo* was one of a limited number of role-types in *zaju*, and was reserved for male characters who were neither villains nor clowns. The *zhengmo*, as a special type of *mo*, was a starring role: whole plays were centered around him, and the roles in question were usually those of young or middle-aged men of fine moral qualities. Judging by the system of

28. This is perhaps the context in which to mention the curious position of the fingers of the groom's left hand, since, in modern times actors' hand movements have been governed by strict rules.

29. On *zaju* theater in this period, see J. I. Crump, *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980).



Figure 17. Wang Zhenpeng (active early fourteenth century), *Vimalakirti and the Single Doctrine*, handscroll, ink on silk, dated 1308, detail. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

role types as it survives today, albeit in a modified form, the character's ostensible social status would have been of less importance for gaining the sympathy of the audience than the role-type through which the actor expressed the character. A *zhengmo*, for example, had a certain right to the sympathy of the audience, but was not necessarily identifiable as such by his clothes, which were more an attribute of the character's present circumstances. He might, for example, appear as a prisoner of war, or be otherwise down on his luck. The audience, however, would have had no difficulty in recognizing him as a character with a right to their sympathy, since the actor called upon conventions of speech, singing, gesture, and movement—in short, a rhetoric—specific to the *zhengmo*. Since we are back to the same *zheng* as before, this too may be described as a rhetoric of alignment. Applying the terms of theater to Zhao's painting, therefore, a gentleman groom was indeed possible: the gentleman was in no danger of compromising his status and identity by playing the role of a groom as long as he retained the identifiable flavour or look of a man aligned.

A self-portrait?

The direct look also had a specific and well-established role in figure painting. An ancient convention of the handling of figure groups had one of the figures, usually a minor one such as a servant, look



Figure 16. Wall painting from the Mingying wang dian, Shuishen miao, Guangsheng si, Hongdong, Shanxi, dated 1326. Reproduced from Jin Weinuo, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji, Huihua bian 13: siguan bihua* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988), pl. 91.



Figure 18. *Homage of the First Principle*, west wall portion (?), probably from southern Shanxi or Northern Henan, detail. Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

out at the viewer. As in the theater, the purpose of the device was to engage us as participants in the actions represented; that is, it breaks down the imaginary wall marked by the picture surface, making our "external" participation as viewers a more involving one. In Zhao's time, professional painters not only continued to employ the device but expanded its use. Thus, the early Yuan court painter Wang Zhenpeng's *Vimalakirti and the Single Doctrine* offers several examples within a single short handscroll (fig. 17),³⁰ as does the wall painting *Homage to the First Principle* (fig. 18).³¹ Closer yet to Zhao's aesthetic world, the device can also be seen in the horse paintings of another painter-official at the Yuan court, Ren Renfa (1255–1328). His *Four*

30. This handscroll also demonstrates the links between the painter's craft and the craft of the actor. The central lohan's sleeve movements are still part of the vocabulary of stylized theatrical gesture today. Moreover, the same story is part of the traditional theatrical repertory under the title of *The Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers*. It seems possible, therefore, that the two central figures were inspired by theatrical performance.

31. On this and related wall paintings, see Steinhardt, *ibid.*

Grooms and Three Horses includes one outward-looking groom, singularly alert (fig. 19). The figure is based directly upon one of Li Gonglin's grooms in a handscroll that, as we have seen, Zhao Mengfu also knew well, *Five Tribute Horses* (fig. 20). A major change, however, is the direct gaze, which was perhaps required by Ren's re-use of the figure in a group context. Ren had, moreover, an encyclopaedic approach to representation in which he rang changes of posture, dress, and expression on a limited range of groom and horse types: the direct look was a necessary component in his overall vocabulary.³² Zhao's groom (and horse) are related to the same section of Li Gonglin's painting, and Zhao, like Ren, has introduced a direct look. In his case, however, the conventions of group painting cannot be invoked as an explanation,

32. Thus, the same groom appears in a second handscroll by Ren in the Fogg Museum, dated 1314; there, however, he has a quite different expression and stance to suit his rather dispirited animal. See Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting: Leading Masters and Principles*, vol. VI (London: Lund Humphries, 1958), pl. 38.

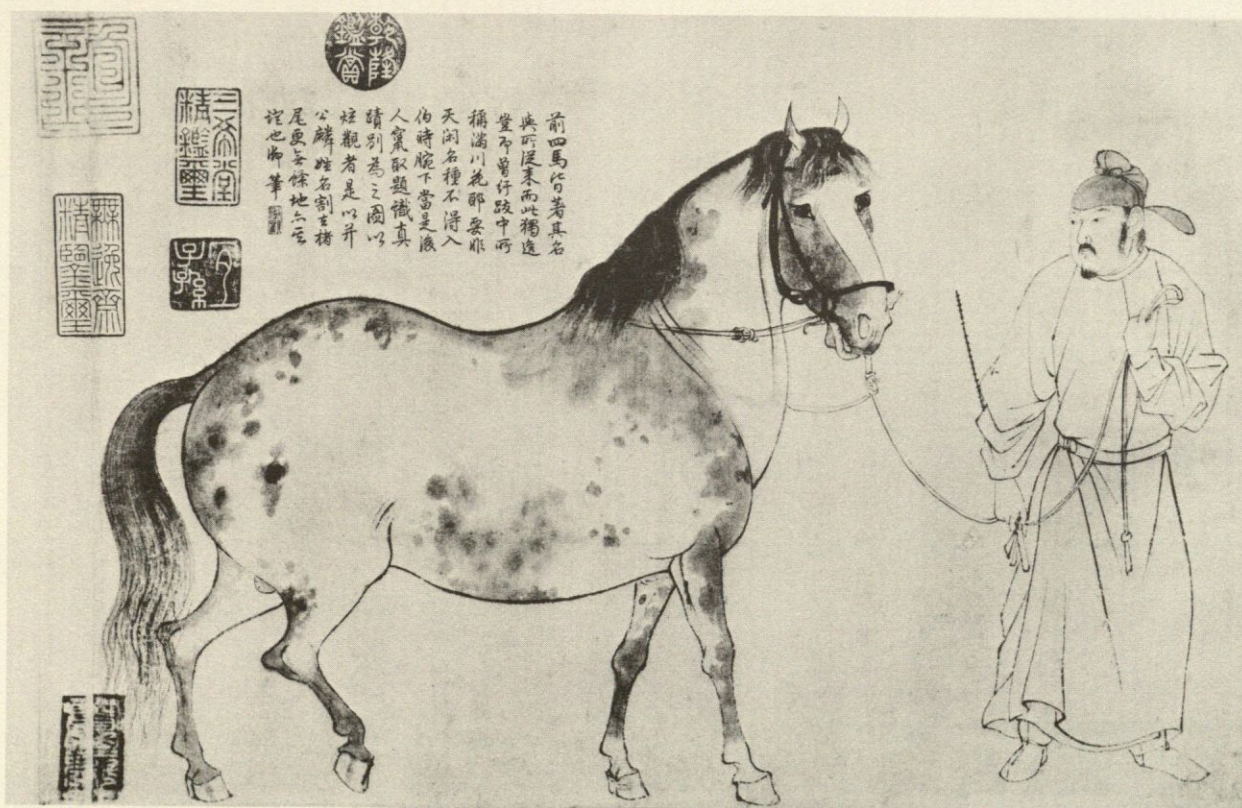


Figure 20. Li Gonglin (ca. 1049–1106), *Five Tribute Horses*, handscroll, section, whereabouts unknown. Photograph courtesy of Richard M. Barnhart.

since he has maintained the isolated portrait character of Li's original image, and did not share Ren's encyclopaedic approach.

Zhao's treatment of his groom is all the more striking given the rarity of outward-looking servant-figures in isolation. The reason for this, it seems to me, lies in the way that a direct look emphasizes the one-to-one relationship with the viewer. As Gu Kaizhi (ca. 345–ca. 406), the patriarch of figure painting and portraiture was said to have stated: "In real life a person never bows or stares when there is nothing in front of him."³³ The direct look was inappropriate when the viewer was hardly likely to be on the same social level as a servant. And yet there is a clear confrontation in Zhao's painting between the groom and the viewer. Given that



Figure 19. Ren Renfa (1255–1328), *Three Horses and Four Grooms*, handscroll, ink and colours on silk, detail. Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

33. Cited by Richard Barnhart in "Li Kung-lin's *Hsiao-ching t'u*: Illustrations of the *Classic of Filial Piety*" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1967), p. 78. Barnhart notes that "Li Kung-lin made it [this dictum] a keystone of his art."

the painting's primary intended viewer, Feiqing, was an official of extremely high rank, one is left to conclude once again that the groom's servant status is not to be taken at face value. On the other hand, if it is to be taken as a role to be read metaphorically, then we may hypothesize that the groom is Zhao's self-image. There are, after all, several ways in which Zhao would have considered himself to be subordinate: in relation to his hierarchical superior Feiqing; as an official in the service of the Emperor; and—a somewhat different case—as a member of the defeated Song imperial family now serving the Mongols.

If the groom is Zhao himself, of course, then we have to consider whether self-image implies physical resemblance: is this, in other words, a self-portrait? However, this question has its own special context in China, where portraiture seems usually to have accommodated verisimilitude to typology. The "real" face emerged through the filter of time-honored schemata that exteriorized an inner morality. Thus, self-portraiture as a subset of portraiture is closer to the more generalized phenomenon of self-image than one might at first expect. Now, self-portraits proper are rare in China, but we may be certain that the genre was practised (if not invented—I know of no earlier examples) by Zhao Mengfu. Two years after *Horse and Groom*, give or take a few days, Zhao painted a self-portrait that is known today both through a catalogue record by the great early seventeenth-century painter and connoisseur, Dong Qichang, and through a nineteenth-century copy (fig. 21).³⁴ Zhao appears there in Mongol dress, which makes it all the more interesting that the treatment of the figure is in many ways similar to that of a famous portrait of Khubilai himself (fig. 22). The strongly drawn nose, the lines that come down from the nostrils and the wrinkles at the corners of the eyes, the angular eyebrows, and the truncated body all suggest that the unusual idea of self-portraiture may have been stimulated by the Song prince's contact with Khubilai. The circle that frames the figure is undoubtedly a reference to the mirror that self-portraiture required: Zhao returns our gaze as

34. Dong Qichang, *Rongtai ji*. See also Lu Shihua, Wu Yue *suojian shuhua lu*, juan 2, cited in Ren Daobin, *ibid.*, p. 80. According to Ren, the Palace Museum, Beijing, reportedly has a version of the painting in its collection. Wang Gong's copy has been published in Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, *Later Chinese Painting and Calligraphy: 1800–1950*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1986), pp. 75–76.

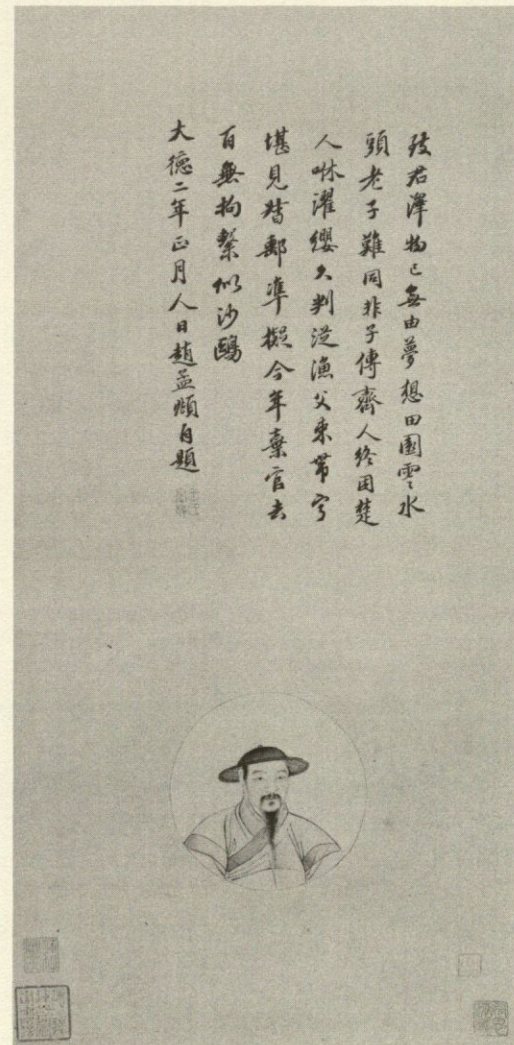


Figure 21. Wang Gong (active early nineteenth century), *Copy of a Self-Portrait of Zhao Mengfu*, hanging scroll, ink and colours on silk, undated. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Hatfield Ellsworth Collection.

he would have returned his own. For the moment, however, let us return the frame to its status as a simple circle, since this provides a link with *Horse and Groom* at the level of structure, just as the direct gaze links the two paintings at the level of presence. In fact, among the few other works by Zhao in which the circle plays such an important role are two where self-portraiture is also a possibility. Chu-ting Li has made this suggestion for *Man on Horseback* of 1296, introduced earlier

(fig. 6). Professor Li points out a resemblance with a later portrait by which Zhao is known, and draws attention to the correspondence between the man's appearance and Zhao's identity as a prominent public official.³⁵ To these points we may add the striking resemblance between the two men. They share the same round face, the same moustache and beard, and similar proportions for the face. The two paintings stand or fall together as self-portraits. Even more tentatively, the group can be expanded with Zhao's portrait of the Lord of the Yellow River, painted in 1305 (fig. 13), where a somewhat older man holds a whisk that might be interpreted as a reference to a painter's brush. In these four self-images/self-portraits, I would suggest, we can see Zhao exploring the complexities of his private and public identities.

A horse, a groom

Three of the paintings in question pair their human subject with an animal. In the Crawford painting, Zhao

35. Li, "Three Horses by Three Members of the Chao Family."



Figure 22. Artist unknown, *Portrait of Kubilai Khan*. Third leaf of an album of half-length portraits of the Yuan dynasty emperors. Reproduced from *Masterpieces of Chinese Portrait Painting in the National Palace Museum* (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1971), pl. 32.

sets up a parallel between horse and groom of such ingenuity that it is a delight to see him surmount the problems posed by the fact that one figure is an animal and the other a man, and that one is shown in profile and the other full face. Both man and horse stand perfectly still, and share the same noncommittal facial expression. The groom's direct gaze is echoed by the horse's eye with its perfectly centered pupil. His beard, meanwhile, is echoed by the horse's mane, while the two tufts in his cap are answered by the animal's pointed ears. Finally, by drawing the horse's rein as an arc, Zhao has turned this linking element into a powerful link on the level of surface design as well. I conclude that the horse is intended as the groom's double, which is not unexpected, given Zhao's model: Li Gonglin's *Five Tribute Horses*. In Li's handscroll the presence of each image crystallizes in the interaction of horse and groom (fig. 23). Through similarities of physiognomy and stance, Li identifies each groom with his animal, carrying the identification from the formal into the psychological realm, creating intimate theater. The same identification of man and animal is later pursued by Ren Renfa, who like Zhao was working from this great Song handscroll (figs. 19, 24).

In *Horse and Groom*, the doubling of man and horse expands the possibilities of self-image/self-portraiture, allowing Zhao to expose metaphorically the complexities of his situation. The iconography has more than one dimension. The first lies in the ancient analogy between talented officials and the fine stallions—thousand-league horses—of the royal stables. It is in the context of this iconography that Feiqing takes on the role of Bole, the great judge of horses. The Crawford painting shares this metaphoric world with *Man on Horseback*, although the Beijing scroll bears a very different message, fusing horse and rider in a single image of worldly ambition and success. Many years later, Zhao reflected on his early ambitions in a poem that also equates horse and rider:

In my youth I galloped through the country of Yan and Qi
[i.e., north China],
Riding a fine stallion as if I was mounted on a dragon;
The raw wind behind his ears, nostrils shooting fire,
I shouted at the rabbit as my arrow whistled after it.
Now in my old age a hundred sorrows collect;
I make my way slowly, leaning on a staff, and cannot
overexert myself.
In the middle of a scroll I come upon this painting [of a
rabbit] and my eyes brighten:



Figure 23. Li Gonglin (ca. 1049–1106), *Five Tribute Horses*, handscroll, section, whereabouts unknown. Photograph courtesy of Richard M. Barnhart.

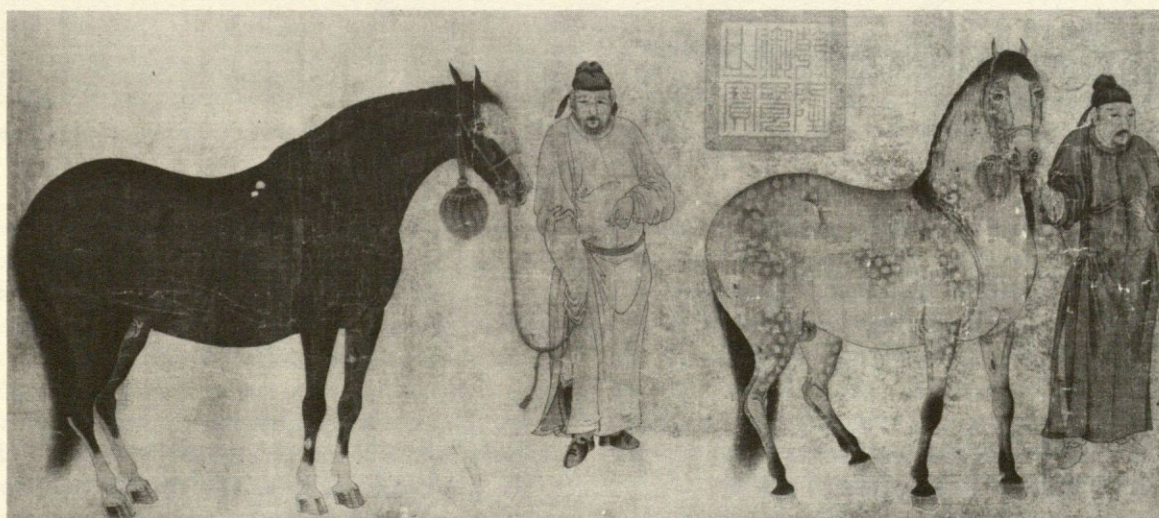


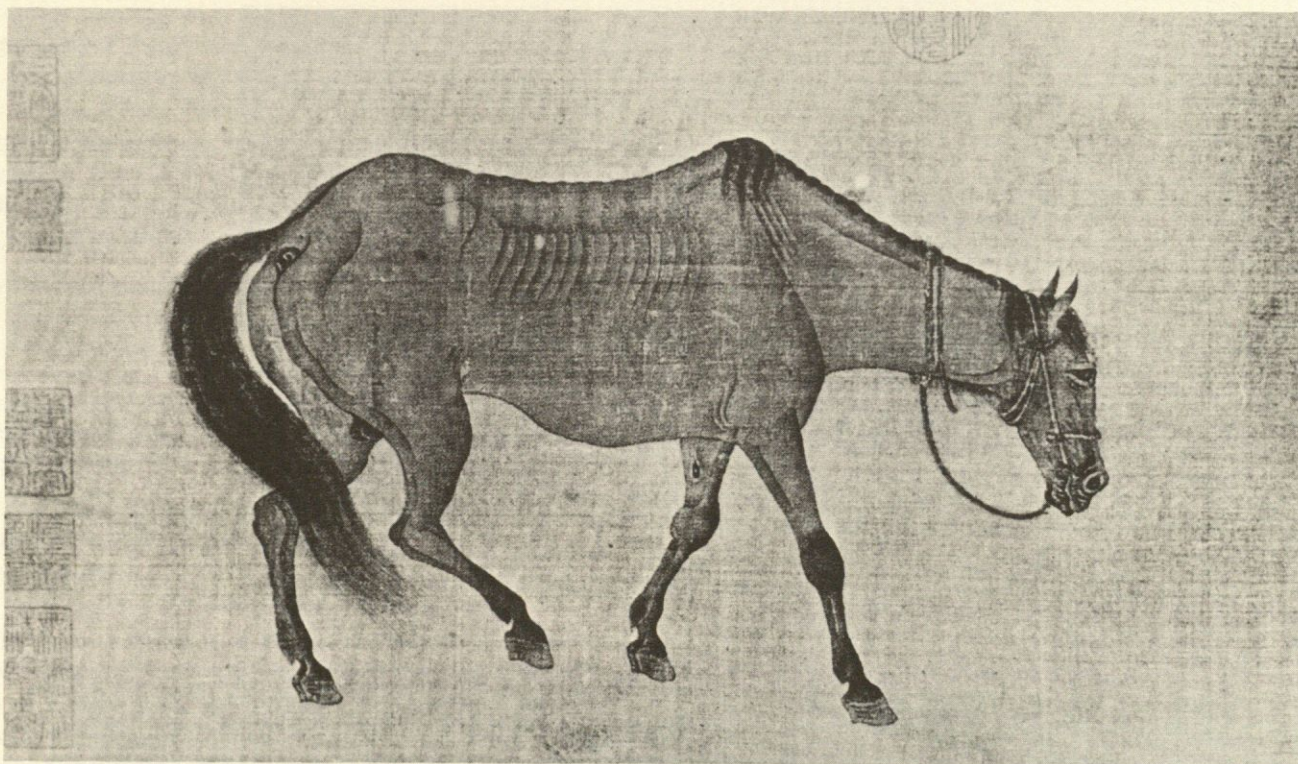
Figure 24. After Ren Renfa (1255–1328), *Imperial Steeds*, handscroll, ink and colours on silk, undated, detail. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gift of Galen L. Stone.

This thousand-league horse feels the autumn wind and his two ears prick up.³⁶

If the stately progress of the horse and rider in the Beijing scroll does not correspond to the mad gallop evoked in the poem, yet the fact that there is movement

36. Ren Daobin, ed., *Zhao Mengfu ji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1986), p. 58.

at all is perhaps more significant. It suggests that the scholar has found his purpose; we can relate such an image to Zhao's past successes and, eventually, to that part of his character which would lead him in 1298 to return to public service. What, then, of *Horse and Groom*, which is utterly without movement, offers a groom in place of an aristocratic rider, and separates



Figures 25a and 25b. Ren Renfa (1255–1328), *Fat and Lean Horses*, handscroll, ink and colours on silk, undated, detail. Palace Museum, Beijing.

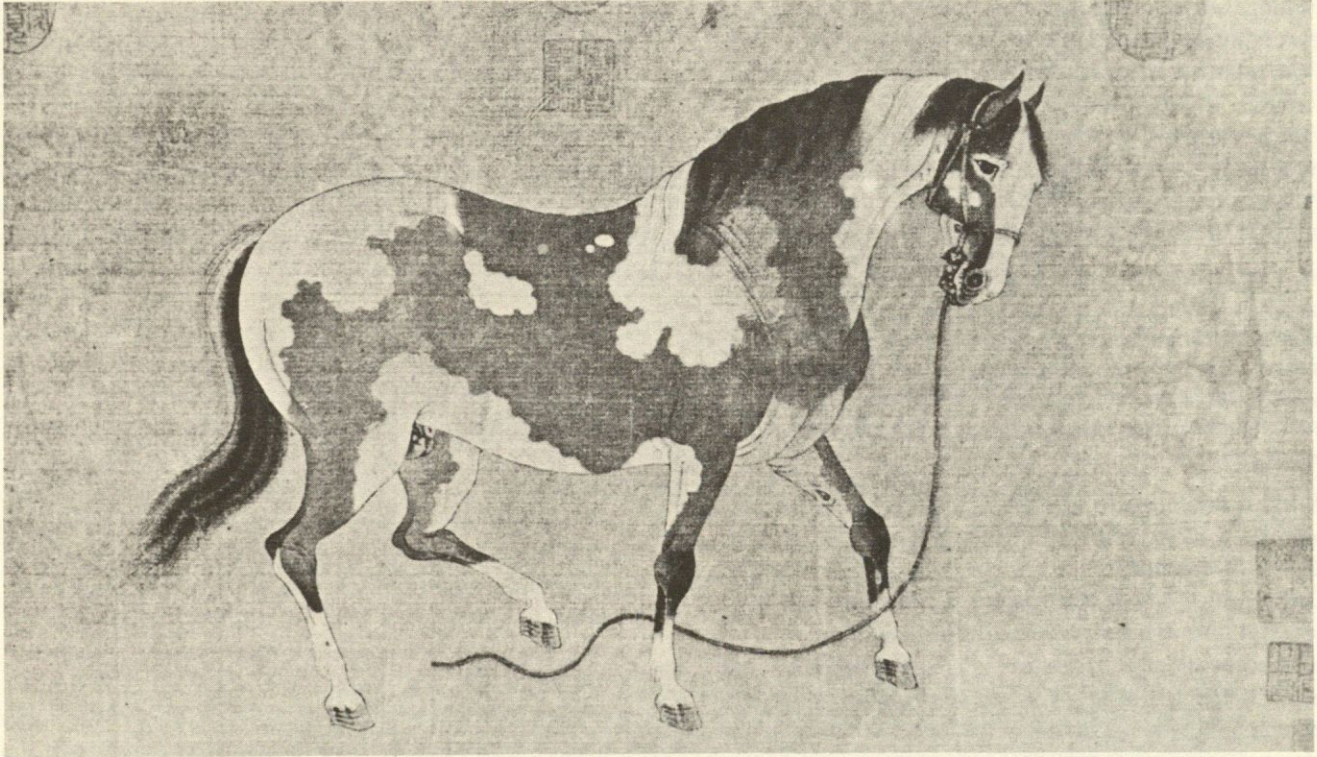
the man from the animal as much as it links the two? Given the fact that it uses an iconography of the Imperial stables, this painting too should be referred backward, I would suggest, to Zhao's days in office. Thus it seems significant that the lack of movement, first of all, is defined by constraint. The horse is aristocratic, an "honored guest," but is also unsaddled—a reminder of its lost freedom. (There may, moreover, be similar overtones of freedom in the horse's pure white color, since Zhao had previously painted such a stallion to illustrate a friend's decision not to enter public service).³⁷ The groom, meanwhile, is of low status, menial, but stands to attention, awaiting his orders. Finally, the ambiguous separation/attachment of horse and groom, centered in the calculated arc of the rein, suggests tensions between honor and servitude, and between the desire to regain his freedom and the responsibilities of public service. Indeed, Zhao's self-image has its own degree of bitterness. To be sure, the horse conveys well enough his status as an honored guest; but to have portrayed himself at the same time as a groom or *xiguan*,^o literally

"slave official," cuts so close to the bone as to expose all the profound ambiguity of the honor. The painting could be said, therefore, to help to explain Zhao's retirement in 1295.

However, this first iconographic reading does not do justice to the high stakes involved for Zhao, a Song imperial descendant who had chosen to serve the victorious new dynasty, a dynasty not even Chinese. This, the nationalist issue, is addressed in the painting through a second dimension of its iconography. By taking Li Gonglin's (ca. 1049–1106) *Five Tribute Horses* as his model, Zhao had additionally tapped into a quite different tradition of horse painting from that of the thousand-league horse/talented official. The royal stables, as repositories of tribute and military strength, were the symbol of China's power in the world. If neglected, as happened in the late 1080s, they could become a powerful symbol of the court's psychological and military unpreparedness to meet the threat from the north. Li Gonglin's contemporary, Su Shi, commissioned from him a painting of three tribute horses which he interpreted in just these terms.³⁸ To

37. See Ren, *Zhao Mengfu xinian*, p. 47.

38. See his "Poem, with preface, on *Three Horses*," *Dongpo houji*, juan 9, cited in Chen Gaohua, ed., *Song Liao Jin huajia*



b

apply Su's interpretation to the *Five Tribute Horses* handscroll (figs. 20, 23) is to provide it with a plausible interpretative context in which the five ethnically distinct grooms would symbolize the diverse makeup of the imperial armies in a period of insufficient attention to defense. Li's horses and grooms are not all equally impressive, and part of Li's intent would seem to be an assessment of the differing degrees of competence, and perhaps loyalty, of the peoples of the empire. One can see the relevance of Su Shi's ideas to Zhao in the colophon that the Yuan painter wrote to *Five Tribute Horses*, where he laments that "the ruler was not interested in warfare."³⁹

Zhao's particular reference point within Li's scroll is the one Han Chinese groom and his horse, shown, not surprisingly, in a flattering light, exuding the confidence and strength of leadership (fig. 20). Relating this to

Zhao's own image, it is surely relevant that in the two centuries since Li's painting, history had twice given a dark resonance to its implicit warning. In the bitter characterization of a contemporary Song loyalist, Deng Mu: "The dog has turned and eaten its master." The central irony of Zhao's situation, and of this painting, lies in this transformation of circumstances; for, if Li Gonglin had painted horses offered in tribute from Central Asia to a Chinese ruler, the opposite would seem to be true for Zhao Mengfu, whose ancestor that Chinese ruler was. With no inscription to identify them as belonging to a specific earlier time, Zhao's horse and groom find their context in Zhao's own life and its intersection with the lives of the Mongol emperors, Khubilai and Temür. As we have seen, however, a deep awareness of the past infuses the image and enriches its significance. This is not only visible in the allusions to the great horse painters of the powerful dynasties of Northern Song and Tang.⁴⁰ Casting our

shiliao (Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1984), pp. 459–460. Su there responds to the neglect of tribute horses at the beginning of Zhezong's reign (1086–1101). Su was so struck by this that he asked Li Gonglin to paint for him a painting of three of the horses, and his somber commentary implicitly attributes to their neglect a deeper significance.

39. Ren Daobin, ed., *Zhao Mengfu ji*, p. 24.

40. Chu-tsing Li has suggested that *Horse and Groom*, like the almost contemporary *Man on Horseback* (fig. 6), alludes stylistically to the Tang painter Han Gan ("Three Horses by Three Members of the Chao Family"). Professor Li has cited texts by Zhao from around this time in support of the Han Gan connection, and there is further



Figure 23. Li Gonglin (ca. 1049–1106), *Five Tribute Horses*, handscroll, section, whereabouts unknown. Photograph courtesy of Richard M. Barnhart.



Figure 24. After Ren Renfa (1255–1328), *Imperial Steeds*, handscroll, ink and colours on silk, undated, detail. Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Gift of Galen L. Stone.

This thousand-league horse feels the autumn wind and his two ears prick up.³⁶

If the stately progress of the horse and rider in the Beijing scroll does not correspond to the mad gallop evoked in the poem, yet the fact that there is movement

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at all is perhaps more significant. It suggests that the scholar has found his purpose; we can relate such an image to Zhao's past successes and, eventually, to that part of his character which would lead him in 1298 to return to public service. What, then, of *Horse and Groom*, which is utterly without movement, offers a groom in place of an aristocratic rider, and separates

In my spare time away from official duties, I depicted these two horses, fat and lean. The fat one displays a marvelous bone structure and wears a rein, and he stands tall and erect. Although sated with hay and grain, this is better than stumbling along a course without direction. The lean one's hide and hair are peeling away; he gnaws on coarse grass and stands in the frost and wind. And yet, although he seems to be ending his life as an outcast, he doesn't have the burden of galloping all day for his evening feed. Contrasts of circumstances are typified by this. Some of the scholar-officials of the age are chaste and some are profligate, differing like the fat and lean horses. If one remains lean and yet fattens the whole nation, he will not be lacking in purity. But, on the contrary, if one seeks to fatten only oneself and emaciate the masses, how will he not bequeath a shameful reputation for corruption? So if you judge a horse only by its external appearance, you really will come to feel ashamed. Therefore, I have inscribed the end of this scroll to await those who will understand it.

I follow Jerome Silbergeld (whose translation this is) in taking Ren's painting to give equal honour to those who serve and those who do not, provided that their personal motives are of the highest.⁴⁵ The painter, as a serving official, must of course be identified with the fat horse; but his choice to serve is presented as a personal one, with no claim made for the moral high ground. He had, after all, spent many years in the position of the lean horse, not entering the Yuan government until 1299. The visual link between Ren's scroll and *Sheep and Goat* suggests that the same issues are in play in the latter painting, confirming the evidence of the Su Wu/Li Ling connection. Whereas Ren's image is a straightforward idealization of two competing choices, however, Zhao has given his painting a satirical edge. I argued earlier that the plump sheep has been rhetorically undermined by the drawing. If one adds to this the fact that in Yuan *zaju* theater *feiyang*^a—"fat sheep"—was a term of abuse applied to corrupt officials, and that Zhao's sheep looks upward, one may suggest that the animal represents an opportunistic and sycophantic official, with overtones of the infamous collaborator, Li Ling. The contrasting figure of the goat would then be connected with the admirable loyalists in the line of Su Wu who are evoked by Ren Renfa through his lean horse.

It seems unlikely that Zhao identified himself with either animal.⁴⁶ The sheep is, if only visually, an

LIST OF CHARACTERS

a	箕子	k	心
b	洪範	l	雜劇
c	琴	m	正末
d	正	n	末
e	規	o	美官
f	矩	p	羊
g	味	q	肥羊
h	風味	r	話頭
i	白描	s	公安
j	君子		

unlikely choice of symbol, while the goat is no more likely a candidate, given Zhao's commitment to an official career by this time. And if the goat is the more noble of the two animals, it could also be said that its intense contemplation of the ground and ostentatiously raised tail overplay the animal's dignity. These features of the painting and its context, puzzling at first, fall into place when we remember the symmetry of Ren Renfa's related image, and incorporate in our interpretation an awareness of Zhao's rhetoric of alignment. The circle in this painting encompasses two contrasting options, each pushed beyond viability; if its center has any meaning as a moral center, then Zhao's own stance falls between the two—a rejection of both careerist collaboration and self-flagellating loyalism or refusal to use one's talents in public life. One can read the painting, in other words, as a statement of his attachment to the middle path that we know to have been his political ideal. To read the painting in this way entails other consequences, of which the most notable is to reveal, once again, Zhao's awareness of the discourses used against him and his wry use of irony to recuperate them. Irrelevant criticism and unrealistic ideals are marginalized equally, echoing the more dangerous symmetry in which he had balanced his dual loyalties to the Song and to the Yuan a few years before.

45. Silbergeld, *ibid.*, p. 170, n. 26. C.f. James Cahill's interpretation in *Hills Beyond a River: Chinese Painting of the Yüan Dynasty, 1279–1368* (New York, Weatherhill, 1976), p. 155.

46. An assessment of the sheep more sympathetic than my own is

offered by Chu-tsing Li, who identifies Zhao with that animal: see "The Freer Sheep and Goat and Chao Meng-fu's Horse Paintings," p. 319. But c.f. Cahill, *ibid.*, p. 39.