

A Study of the “Suzhou Fakes” Painter Huang Biao

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Abstract

Research on the subject of “Suzhou fakes (Suzhou pian)” in Chinese painting is still in its infancy. Much remains unclear as to the actual painters, workshops, time frame, and style related to these paintings. The present study focuses on the “Suzhou fakes” painter Huang Biao, who achieved renown in documentary sources for imitating the famous “Up the River on Qingming” handscroll. Among the painters who did “Suzhou fakes” but often deliberately concealed their true identity, Huang Biao stands out as a clear and rare example of an artist known for doing such work.

Unfortunately, however, many scholars have confused Huang Biao with a contemporary having a similar name, Wang Biao. They have widely taken the painting by Wang Biao to be the sole surviving work of Huang Biao’s own. As such, the present study breaks through the problem of lacking documentary and visual material related to Huang Biao. In addition to citing Huang Biao’s paintings of “The Nine Elders” and “Horseback Hunting on an Autumnal Plain” published in the catalogue to the special “Fineries of Forgery” exhibition at the National Palace Museum, other works of painting and calligraphy related to him are also discussed, including “Resisting Japanese Pirates,” “Grand Gathering of Elders,” “Kinship of the Three,” and “Latter Ode on the Lycium Chrysanthemum.” Taken together with the historical materials gathered by previous scholars from literary anthologies of the Ming and Qing dynasties, a firmer grasp can be achieved for a renewed approach to understanding the career and background of this painter of “Suzhou fakes” from the 1550s to the 1590s.

In the case of Huang Biao, we see that this painter of “Suzhou fakes” active in the middle to late sixteenth century originally was in the profession of making figure and portrait paintings. He also did copies for collectors of their works, at the same time also adding forged signatures meant to deceive others into believing them to be of ancient origin. The literati who maintained contact with Huang Biao were well aware of his forging painting and calligraphy but nonetheless kept his works. From the inscription that Huang Biao wrote for “The Nine Elders,” it shows that he saw his imitations of ancient works as interpretations for “reproducing and revival.” It demonstrates the complex

attitude of both connoisseurs and actual producers of art in the late Ming dynasty, in which they did not completely deny copying and forging ancient works.

Keywords: Huang Biao, Suzhou fakes, “The Nine Elders,” “Up the River During Qingming,” forgery

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)