

July Object of Month: prepared by Wendi Chen

**Chinese painting “The Singer Su Hsiao-hsiao (or Su Xiao-xiao)”
by Kang Tao (1746)
On view in G217**



Description of the painting:

Painting—Hanging scroll; ink and light colors on paper

Size: 65 ¼ x 29 15/16 in. (165.74 x 76.04 cm) (image)

Creation Place: China

Style: 18th century, Qing (Ch'ing) dynasty

Physical description: A young woman is seated on rocks with bamboo plants on her left and right. She is wearing long vest-like garment in grey with stylized floral designs and a skirt with design of cranes in octagons; she is also wearing peal hoop earring. The top one-third of the painting is covered with Chinese calligraphy.

This painting is a gift from Ruth and Bruce Dayton.

Here is the current gallery label: “The 18th century Yang-chou artist, K'ang T'ao, is best known for his rather generic paintings of "immortals" and beautiful women. In this case, however, he rose above the norm and produced a beautiful, technically refined, sympathetic

depiction of Su Hsiao-hsiao, a famous 5th century singing girl. She is shown sitting pensively on a large rock in a garden amid low clusters of frozen bamboo. The painting bears a 1746 poem by the painter, a colophon by the Hangzhou poet-painter, Ch'ien Tu (1763-1844), dated 1813 and two colophons written by the great literatus, Juan Yuan (1764-1849) on consecutive days in 1843. All four poetic colophons carry literary allusions and draw from ancient poetry. Kang's short poem reads:

She is not grieving for autumn now, nor moved by spring.

The silken fan back in its box, a new one's in his hand.

As fragrant breezes bring contentment, the "metal wind" now fades.

In this world, can anyone plumb the truth of her heart?

The aging beauty, Hsiao-hsiao, is not saddened by seasonal change or frozen bamboo, but rather because, like a fan put back in its box when no longer needed, she has been put aside by her lover for a new woman. But seated here, the pleasant spring breezes begin to replace the chilling winds of the season of metal (autumn), as her pure heart begins to heal.”

Questions and key points:

- **What do you see in this painting? How would you describe the lady in the painting?** (These questions lead to the discussion of the subject of the painting—Su Xiao-xiao, who lived a short life in the 5th century. She was believed to have died in 501. A very well-known courtesan from Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, Su has become a cultural and historical legend, immortalized by artists and writers. At the time when very few women were literate, Su was known for composing poems of quality. She was also a legendary beauty who lived a short and tragic life, which made her even more an inspiration for later writers and artists. To read more about her, I have included the Wikipedia article here. See p. 3)
- **The last line of the poem by the painter asks “In this world, can anyone plumb the truth of her heart?” Let’s try it. What do you think the lady in the painting is thinking or feeling? Or, what mood does the painting convey and how does the painter achieve the effect?** (Discuss her sitting posture, her facial expression, the subdued colors of her clothing, the solitude, and other symbols like cold rocks and bamboo plants. The painter seems to be interested in conveying a sympathetic view of Su Xiaoxiao, whose prime time is behind her, as she sits alone abandoned by her former pursuers. Like a fan, her season of usefulness is short and gone. She knows it. What she is wearing shows her resigned attitude, no longer trying to present herself as the young attractive object of pursuit for the vainglorious gentlemen. Yet, like bamboo, which can be bent (flexible) but not broken, she holds her own dignity.)
- **Do you know any famous female figures who share the similar fate with the singer Su Xiaoxiao? How does that say about our society?**

- **Not much is known about the painter and poet Kang Tao. From what you see in his painting and his poem, what kind of artist do you think he was?** (an independent thinker who selects a single female figure, a not so highly revered person in the Chinese society, for his painting; shows his sympathy towards the less unfortunate of the society; makes some social commentary through his art work)

Some interesting information about Su Xiaoxiao (The following is a Wikipedia article)

Su Xiaoxiao (蘇小小, died c. 501),^[1] also known as Su Xiaojun and sometimes by the appellation “Little Su”, was a famous [courtesan](#) and [poet](#) from Qiantang city (now [Hangzhou](#), [Zhejiang](#) province, [China](#)) in the [Southern Qi Dynasty](#) (479–502). She had a sister named Su Pannu.

Well known for her intellectual talent and great beauty, Su Xiaoxiao pursued the values of love, beauty and humanity, as reflected in her writing and in popular stories. There are many stories attached to the life of Su Xiaoxiao, with no way of knowing the historical accuracy of any single story. One such story has her meeting a young scholar travelling in a state of dire poverty, hoping to reach the capital to sit the official examinations. She gave the scholar several nuggets of silver from her purse, but sadly he never returned to her after completing the examinations. In any event, it seems that she did not wish to be a man’s wife or mistress, preferring to share her beauty with the common people while showing a certain contempt for the wealthy.

In her late teens, Su Xiaoxiao developed a terminal illness, during which she took the view that heaven was giving her the special opportunity to leave a legacy of beauty in her memory through her death at a young age. She died at a mere 19 years of age. For more than a thousand years, her tomb was situated at the [Xilin Bridge](#) beside her beloved [West Lake](#).

Su Xiaoxiao’s life and poetry provided much inspiration for later Chinese writers and artists. She was the romantic heroine of [Tang dynasty](#) poets [Bai Juyi](#), [Li He](#), [Wen Tingyun](#), and [Ming dynasty](#) writer [Zhang Dai](#), also the heroine of the story “Romantic Trails of Xilin” in *Fine Stories of the West Lake*. A woodcut of unknown provenance was used to illustrate [porcelain objects](#) during the [Ming dynasty](#) and early [Qing dynasty](#). The woodcut was based on the short story “Dreaming of Qiantang”, which told of the scholar Sima Yu, who, while visiting Hangzhou, wrote a poem about a dream he had in which Su Xiaoxiao was brought by three gusts of wind to come and sing at his window. Su was also a frequent figure for portrayal in Chinese theater.



Su Xiaoxiao's rebuilt tomb

Su Xiaoxiao's tomb was destroyed during the [Cultural Revolution](#), but it was rebuilt in 2004, complete with a brand new pavilion decorated with twelve poetry posts handwritten by famous calligraphers. Su Xiaoxiao's tomb is now again a major tourist site in Hangzhou. Su Xiaoxiao is also the heroine of TV series *Loving Courtesan Su Xiaoxiao*.

Su Xiaoxiao's poem: This poem is variously known as "Song of the West Tomb", "Song of Xiling Lake", "Song of Su Xiaoxiao" (in a collection of [Music Bureau](#) poems) and "Song of the Same Heartbeat". It became very well known and inspired many future poets including those named above. In the original text, the poem is a quatrain composed of four lines of five words each.

妾乘油壁车，郎跨青骢马，何处结同心，西陵松柏下。

*I ride in a decorated carriage,
My darling rides a blue-white horse.
Where should we tie the knot for our heart?
Under the Xiling pine and cypress.*

From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Su_Xiaoxiao

The following is a poem written by a famous poet in Tang Dynasty:

Tomb of Su Xiaoxiao by Li He

*dewdrops on the orchids in the shadow
like weeping eyes*

*finding naught to which to betroth your heart
a haze of wild flowers unworthy of picking*

*the grass like a carpet
the pines like a canopy
the wind be your garment
the water be your jade*

*in a varnished carriage
waiting all night*

*cold emerald light of the candles
flickering in vain*

*under the trees of Xiling
the wind blows the falling rain*

Translated by Tommy W. K. Tao of Vancouver, Canada

Some famous Yangzhou contemporaries of Kang Tao--The Eight Eccentric Painters

The Eight Eccentric Painters of Yangzhou, with Zheng Banqiao as its representative, refers to the painters in the region of Yangzhou in the reigns of Kangxi and Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Their paintings have strong personal character, breaking away from the restraints of that time. The style of their paintings has influenced a lot of great painters of later generations, such as Zhao Zhiqian, Qi Baishi and Wu Changshuo. The eight painters were not only masters of poem, calligraphy and painting, but also good at seal cutting.

Rooted in the background of that time, the eight painters were Jin Nong, Huang Shen, Zheng Xie (Zheng Banqiao), Li Shan, Li Fangying, Wang Shishen, Gao Xiang and Luo Pin. Their paintings did not follow the old brushstroke conventions, making them look strange compared with other paintings of the time. In addition, these painters were proud and uncontrolled and had bold personalities; thus they were named the Eight Eccentric Painters. Their paintings were not fully understood by many people at that time and were considered eccentric. But they opened a new era in Chinese painting history and created new flower-and-bird painting methods.

Jin Nong (1687-1764), a native of Hangzhou, was the most famous of the eight eccentrics. He was talented in many fields and started to paint in his 50s. Living a poor life, he could draw figures, flowers and birds, landscapes, but was best at picturing plum blossoms. His paintings were carefully designed with simple shapes, and his best-known paintings are *Ink Plum Blossom* and *Moon and Flowers*. He also created a unique calligraphic style, which he called lacquer calligraphy.

Huang Shen (1687-1768) was a native of Ninghua, Fujian Province. His family was poor when he was young, and he studied Huai Su's calligraphic style. His paintings also show the Cursive script style in his rough sketches. He was best at figure painting. He preferred to draw religious figures or lower class people, and his representative works include *The Drunk Monk* and *Shepherd Su Wu*.

Li Shan (1686-1762) was a native of Xinghua, Jiangsu Province. He was interested in painting in his childhood and made a name for himself in painting circles at the age of only 16. He served as a county magistrate in Teng County of Shandong Province. His painting style was influenced by Xu Wei and Shi Tao, and he used light colors and adopted ink-splashing skills to capture an

unrestricted quality. His well-known paintings are *Autumn Sunflower and Pine, Orchid and Stone*, etc.

Li Fangying (1695-1755), a native of Nantong, Jiangsu Province, spent 20 years as a county magistrate. He was on good terms with Jin Nong and Zheng Xie, and was accomplished at painting pines, bamboos, plum blossoms and orchids. In his later years, he concentrated on painting plum blossoms. His best-known works are *Swimming Fish* and *Waving Bamboo in the Wind*.

Gao Xiang (1688-1753), a native of Yangzhou, lived a poor life but was very conceited. He admired Shi Tao very much and was good at painting landscapes, birds and flowers, especially plum blossoms.

Wang Shishen (1685-1759) was a native of Xiuning, Anhui Province. He lived in a poor family when he was young and then made a living in Yangzhou by selling paintings. He lived happily in spite of his poverty and carried out painting research. He was good at drawing plum blossoms too, and his best-known painting is *The Ink Plum Blossom*. He and Jin Nong, Gao Xiang and Luo Pin are known as the four great plum painters of the time.

Luo Pin (1733-1799), a native of Shexian County, Anhui Province, was a student of Jin Nong. He was the youngest among the Eight Eccentrics, but had rich knowledge and a unique painting style. He refused to serve the Qing government, and led a poor life by selling his paintings. He is known for his paintings *Ghost* and *Alcoholic Zhong Kui*.

Zheng Xie, commonly known as Zheng Banqiao, was a native of Xinghua, Jiangsu Province. He was the most successful candidate in the highest imperial examination and had served as a county magistrate in Shandong Province. He offended the higher officials by opening a shelter to help the poor, and had to resign. He then lived in Yangzhou, selling his paintings to earn a living. He was active and creative, and accomplished a great deal in poetry, calligraphy and painting. He was good at drawing bamboo, orchids and stones, and created a new calligraphy style by combining the regular, Cursive, official and seal scripts.

Most of the flower and bird paintings of the Eight Eccentric Painters were drawn in free sketches, and their paintings were unconventional, reflecting strong subjective moods. Their creative thinking is the valuable cultural heritage for us to study and hand down.

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From http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en_artqa/2003-09/24/content_39619.htm