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Beyond boundaries: Painting re-inscriptions in the fifteenth to seventeenth century China[1]

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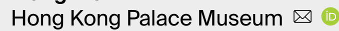

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ENG **Abstract.** This paper explores the widespread practice of adding multiple inscriptions to a single artwork at different times in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries China. Such practices became prominent when literati painters revisited artworks they had previously created or owned, or when paintings had accumulated a multitude of inscriptions over time. Within the realm of Chinese art discourse, this phenomenon is denoted as "re-inscriptions." By examining re-inscriptions written on extant paintings and embodied in individual anthologies, this paper demonstrates that these texts transcended the boundaries of art and touched upon the painters' own lives and the society in which they lived. On the one hand, literati painters engaged in a dialogue with their past selves through re-inscriptions, exploring themes of mortality, aging, and the passage of time – topics seldom addressed in traditional Chinese painting. On the other hand, they utilized re-inscriptions as a means of social interaction, with some re-inscriptions becoming formulaic, adaptable to various artworks to meet different social needs. Furthermore, when faced with pre-existing inscriptions on an artwork, artists added new ones for a conversation with their predecessors. Throughout this process, the accumulation of inscriptions transformed the artwork into a layered cultural narrative, and enabled the literati painters to shape a elite community that transcended the boundaries of time and space.
Keywords: painting re-inscriptions; China; literati painting; boundaries of time of space.

ES Más allá de las fronteras: Re-inscripciones pictóricas en China del siglo XV al XVII

Resumen. Este artículo explora la práctica generalizada de agregar múltiples inscripciones a una sola obra de arte en diferentes momentos durante los siglos XV al XVII en China. Tales prácticas se destacaron cuando pintores literarios volvían a visitar obras que habían creado o poseído anteriormente, o cuando las pinturas habían acumulado una multitud de inscripciones con el tiempo. Dentro del ámbito del discurso artístico chino, este fenómeno se denomina "re-inscripciones". Al examinar las re-inscripciones escritas en pinturas existentes y plasmadas en antologías individuales, este artículo demuestra que estos textos trascendieron los límites del arte y tocaron la vida de los pintores y la sociedad en la que vivían. Por un lado, los pintores literarios entablaron un diálogo con sus yo pasados a través de las re-inscripciones, explorando temas de mortalidad, envejecimiento y el paso del tiempo, tópicos raramente abordados en la pintura china tradicional. Por otro lado, utilizaron las re-inscripciones como medio de interacción social, con algunas re-inscripciones convirtiéndose en fórmulas, adaptables a diversas obras de arte para satisfacer diferentes necesidades sociales. Además, al enfrentarse con inscripciones preexistentes en una obra de arte, los artistas añadieron nuevas para entablar una conversación con sus predecesores. A lo largo de este proceso, la acumulación de inscripciones transformó la obra en una narrativa cultural estratificada, y permitió a los pintores literarios conformar una comunidad elitista que trascendió las fronteras del tiempo y del espacio.
Palabras clave: re-inscripciones pictóricas; China; pintura letrada; fronteras de tiempo y espacio.

Summary: I. Introduction. 2. Individual responses: Re-inscriptions by single artists. 2.1. Dialogue with self and mortality. 2.2. Negotiation with the present social demand. 3. Collective echoes: Multiple inscriptions on a single work. 3.1. Interactions transcending the boundary of time. 3.2. Representation of an elite community. 4. Conclusion. References.

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1. Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of Chinese painting compared to Western painting is the presence of a significant amount of text in some artworks. This feature was, however, historical and had continuously evolved throughout history (Zhang, 2005). Contrasted with the Western fine art tradition, which encompasses painting, sculpture, and architecture as its main branches (Vasari, 2007), Chinese notions delineate a distinction between practical crafts like sculpture and architecture, and more refined, spiritual, and creative activities. The latter activities are closer to what we understand today as “art”, and within this category, there are also hierarchies. Literature and calligraphy had held the utmost prestige from an early stage (Murck, 2015, pp. 460-461), with painting’s status not ascending until the eleventh century. Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), a prominent Northern Song scholar, played a pivotal role in elevating the status of painting by equating it with poetry. The escalating prominence of painting facilitated its integration with poetry and calligraphy, and this integration further encouraged the practice of adding inscriptions on paintings.

During the mid-to-late Ming dynasty (1400–1644), Chinese paintings saw an increased enthusiasm for inscriptions. These additions came from various contributors, including the artist at the time of creation, as well as subsequent owners and viewers. The multiple inscriptions on a painting could serve as evidence of the artwork’s journey through time, its reception, and its changing ownership. Thus, the perception of painting art and the relationship between text and image in the Chinese context significantly differs from that in the Western context. In China, texts are not considered a subsidiary element of the image or a distinct entity; instead, they are an integral component of the artwork itself. Contrarily, in the European West, once one-point perspective began to dominate Renaissance pictures, words written on the surface of illustrations or paintings became intrusive because they worked against the spatial effects, especially the illusion of depth (Schapiro, 1996, pp. 118–119).

The recurring inclusion of inscriptions within artworks became a defining characteristic of Chinese literati painting. The usage of the term “literati painting” in this paper needs further clarification. In addition to arguing that poetry and painting should be comparable, Su Shi and his peers also introduced the concept of “scholar-official painting” (*shidafu hua* 士大夫畫), emphasizing the artist’s personal erudition and self-expression, as opposed to lower-class artisans who preferred colourful and decorative paintings. Their proposition was in line with the social shift in tenth-century China, where the official class selected through civil service examinations from non-aristocratic backgrounds, including Su Shi himself, significantly expanded. When engaged in painting activities, these scholar-official artists were proud of their status as amateurs or dilettantes, not earning their means by painting, which afforded them to create personal and expressive artworks (Hearn, 2008, p. 4). The term *Shidafu hua* later evolved into *wenren hua* (文人畫) with less emphasis on the official identity, and this new term was widely translated as “literati painting” in English academia. By the early seventeenth century, Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636) further elucidated the concept of literati painting. Dong’s framework divided the tradition of Chinese painting into the Northern school (academic and professional painters) and Southern school (scholar-amateur painters). Trough this dichotomy, Dong attempted to distinguish between art (scholar-amateur painting) and craftsmanship (professional painting).

However, as highlighted by scholars, the concept of literati painting is exceedingly intricate and problematic, and may sound strange to anyone not yet introduced to Chinese society and art history (Silbergeld, 2015, p. 474). Moreover, there are significant differences in painting styles among the group of literati painters. Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470-1524), for example, exhibits a markedly distinct style from that of Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470-1559), despite both being categorized within the category of literati painting. As literati painting remains the most frequently used term in current English-language scholarly works, for the sake of clarity and conciseness in this writing, this term is also adopted in this paper, despite its imperfections. When employing the term “literati painting” in this paper, it does not denote a uniform or universal artistic style. Instead, it primarily indicates that these works are created by individuals cultivated in the arts and literature, possessing a certain level of cultural refinement. Not all literati paintings feature inscriptions, but it is undeniable that artworks by professional painters rarely include conspicuous inscriptions.

Examining the motivations behind ancient Chinese literati inscribing words onto paintings has attracted growing interest within the field of Chinese art studies (Clunas, 1997; Zhang, 2005). This paper, however, focuses on an intriguing phenomenon in the fifteenth to seventeenth century China that painters inscribed multiple inscription on a single artwork at different times. This indicates that these painters often revisited their works and added inscriptions as afterthoughts. Such a practices became prominent when artists encountered paintings they had previously created or owned, or when paintings had accumulated a multitude of inscriptions over time. These revisitations prompted individuals to contemplate the interplay between their own existence and the evolving environment, eliciting a profound inclination to produce new inscriptions for these artworks. The act of composing new textual elements was referred to as *chongti* (重題), *zaiti* (再題), *youti* (又題), or *futi* (複題) in Chinese, all of which could only be tentatively translated into “inscribed again” or “re-inscribed”, and the result of the act as “re-inscription”.

There is a scarcity of research on this topic, with the esteemed Yuan artist Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254-1322) often being a focal point of study. Lu Sufen (2017) focuses on Zhao Mengfu’s re-inscriptions and argues that he was a crucial pioneer in the art history of China in terms of his extensive life experience and the articulation of his artistic ideas through re-inscriptions. De-nin D. Lee (2012), on the other hand, points out that Zhao Mengfu’s colophons enables a process of locating one’s affiliations in the time-space of an expanding web of social relationships expressed in the painting and the practice of writing on painting.

In the realm of Chinese art, it is important to recognize that painting inscriptions are not limited to those physically inscribed on paintings; they also include the literary texts within individuals’ collections

and anthologies. This latter category is often overlooked due to a divide between art historians and literary researchers. Such inscriptions serve as a reminder of the materiality of painting inscriptions: while they can exist as texts carried by paintings, they can also circulate independently, memorized, orally recited, or incorporated into anthologies for wider dissemination. This paper thus studies inscriptions both on extant paintings and within individual anthologies. It categorizes re-inscriptions from fifteenth to seventeenth-century China into two primary groups. The first comprises individual artists' reflections on themes such as the passage of time, mortality, and social connections. The second involves collaborative responses from multiple artists, focusing on topics such as the local elite community. In examining some representative examples of re-inscriptions, this paper sheds light on how re-inscriptions from the fifteenth to seventeenth-century in China negotiated the concept of self in society, depicted the dynamics of social interactions of that period, engaged with subjects from the past, and envisioned audiences in the future.

2. Individual responses: Re-inscriptions by single artists

2.1. Dialogue with self and mortality

For Chinese literati painting in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, a considerable portion of re-inscriptions involve a dialogue with the inscriber's own previous inscriptions left on the painting. For these inscribers, the passage of time and even mortality between the two inscriptions were often their primary concern. In contrast to ancient Greek sculptures, which often focused on the theme of mortality, Chinese literati paintings rarely overtly depict death. Nevertheless, a sense of mortality permeates these artworks, most notably conveyed through inscriptions. Inscriptions within Chinese literati paintings froze a moment of the artist's vitality, serving as a poignant reminder of their eventual passing for subsequent viewers. Li Liufang 李流芳 (1757-1629), for example, once re-inscribed an orchid painting originally created by a recently deceased friend. In this re-inscription entitled "Chongti Quanzhi hua lan重題荃之畫蘭" (Re-inscription on the painted orchid by Mr. Quanzhi), Li Liufang wrote: "At the time, you painted this artwork and I composed a poem. Now, as I open the painting, time has left its mark. 當時子畫我作詩，今日開看已陳跡." (Li, 1789, p. 1b) This re-inscription added a temporal dimension to the orchid painting, rendering the passage of time and mortality of life visible to anyone who contemplates the artwork and reads his lyric words.

Writing an responsive inscription to one's previous inscription also enabled an individual to engage in a dialogue with himself. Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427-1509), the celebrated literati painter hailing from Suzhou, provides with an example. A portrait capturing his likeness (Fig.1) has been a subject of repeated scrutiny in previous scholarly investigations (Lee, 2006, pp. 52-53), owing to its significance as a visual representation of this eminent Ming painting master. In the portrait, Shen Zhou wears a black scholar cap and a simple yet decent robe suitable for an educated man without any scholarly degree. This lifelike bust-length portrait is not from the hands of Shen Zhou, but from an anonymous professional portraitist. Such painters seldom appended inscriptions or signatures to their creations, and their names rarely featured in contemporary art historical writings. Nevertheless, the portrait was made for Shen Zhou's seventy-ninth (eighty *sui* in Chinese tradition) birthday.

Figure 1. Anonymous, *Portrait of Shen Zhou*, 1506, hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk, 71 x 52.5 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing (Accession Number: 新00016641).

The common ancestor portraits were produced for sacrificial and ceremonial purposes (Stuart & Rawski, 2001; Hornby, 2000), while this painting is different. The intended audience for a portrait of this kind remains

unknown. Was it intended for public exhibition, perhaps adorning a sitting room or other communal spaces, or was its purpose exclusively for private contemplation? Addressing these inquiries poses a formidable challenge. However, Shen Zhou's two meticulous inscriptions bear testament to his earnest engagement with his own likeness. The first inscription, executed in Shen Zhou's graceful and clean calligraphy and dated 1506, shortly after the painting's completion, resides directly above the subject's head:

> People find fault on his eyes tight-spaced, and also his forehead too narrow,
> I can neither judge its likeness, nor the distortions.
> Why bother about the facial appearance; [I am] only afraid of moral defect.
> Drifting along for eighty years, now death is in my neighbourhood.
> I, The old man Shitian, self-inscribed in the first year of the Zhengde Reign [1506]
> 人謂眼差小, 又説頤太窄。
> 我自不能知, 亦不知其失。
> 面目何足較, 但恐有失德。
> 苟且八十年, 今與死隔壁。
> 正德改元石田老人自題

This inscription sheds light on Shen Zhou's perception of his own image. While the first line of the poem acknowledges the portrait's perceived imperfections in the eyes of others, the second line conveys that Shen Zhou himself is unaware of them. The use of the pronoun *qi* 其, perhaps better translated into "*its*" than "*my*" (Vinograd, 1992, p. 28; Yao, 2013, pp. 11-12), distinctly suggests that Shen Zhou viewed his own image as something separate or foreign, almost as if he were one of those observers. However, Shen Zhou's poem does not explicitly address the tension between facial appearance and spirit, one of the most common dichotomy in Chinese art. Instead, it dichotomizes "facial appearance" and "moral integrity". Right in the third line, uncertainty arises regarding how others might judge his moral character as a Confucian. In Confucian thought, the cultivation of moral integrity is viewed as a lifelong process of self-perfection (Hegel, 1985). Shen Zhou kept a distance from the civil service system throughout his life, but he never lost his identity as a faithful upholder of Confucian principles and he obviously values internal merits over external elements.

This portrait vividly captured the subject's aged appearance, with his completely white hair, wrinkles, and age-related blemishes. Age was, as elucidated by Craig Clunas, a visible marker in ancient Chinese society (Clunas, 2007, p. 188). The portrait sitter's facial expression exuded tranquility and gentleness. However, when Shen Zhou wrote "death is in my neighbourhood", it is conceivable that he might not have been as serene as the subject depicted. Shen Zhou's late years endured the grief of losing many family members. Between 1477 and 1506, he mourned the passing of six younger relatives, including his father in 1477, his wife in 1486, and his mother in 1506. The tragic loss of his eldest son in 1502 likely left an indelible mark on Shen Zhou's psyche. In the end, Shen Zhou was not relieved and liberated by his commitment to Confucian doctrines. In the final line of the poem, an unmistakable sense of anxiety surfaces regarding the inevitability of aging and the transient nature of human existence, and he probably sensed the presence of mortality of his own life. And in some earlier years, mortality as a theme had already begun to emerge in Shen Zhou's art (Sturman, 2015).

Shen Zhou most likely retained ownership of his portrait. One year later, in 1507, he added another inscription to it. Strikingly different from the underlying anxiety evident in the 1506 inscription, the 1507 inscription adopted a more transcendent perspective. Positioned in the upper right corner and rendered in smaller characters, it reads:

> Like or unlike, true or not true;
> A shadow on the paper; a person outside the body.
> Life and death are a dream, a speck of dust between heaven and earth.
> Ups and downs, coming and going, I embrace my spring time.
> I, Shitian, inscribe again the next year.
> 似不似，真不真。
> 紙上影，身外人。
> 死生一夢，天地一塵。浮浮休休，吾懷自春。
> 越年石田又題

The visual impact of encountering a painting again might have been much stronger in Shen Zhou's time compared to our present era when mass-mediated visual culture and mechanical reproduction is omnipresent. In this re-inscription, Shen Zhou addressed the aged subject in the portrait as a "shadow", once again emphasizing its separateness and alien nature. The words of "dream" and "spring" allude Daoism concepts, with "dream" being a recurring motif in Zhuangzi's philosophy, and "spring" conveying a Daoist perspective on the nurturing relationship between humans and the natural world. In the Daoist classic, *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經), spring represents the time of sprouting (Unschuld, 2011). Just as death follows life, spring always follows winter. This Daoism inclination of Shen Zhou (Lee, 2006) may have provided Shen Zhou with solace in grappling with the somber aspects of life and the inevitability of death. By this re-inscription, executed in a smaller character size, Shen Zhou subverts his prior expressions of inner turmoil and achieves a sense of inner calm. Consequently, the second inscription is not merely an additional annotation to the first; rather, it serves as a source of consolation and even subversion by Shen Zhou in 1507, in contrast to his sentiments in 1506. This perhaps explains why Shen Zhou concluded his second inscription with "inscribe once again the following year." Shen Zhou's portrait vividly illustrates how painting inscriptions

engage in a dialogue with one another, where the new inscription does not always augment the old one with more information and details. Instead, it can serve as a subversion of the previous inscription.

2.2. Negotiation with the present social demand

The re-inscriptions by the Ming literati do not always echo with an old one in particular. Some emphasize the contemporary moment. An illustrative example is from the influential painter, calligrapher, and art scholar of the late Ming period, Dong Qichang. Dong Qichang's inscriptions are known for giving his views on painting theories or reflected on the techniques he employed. But the hanging scroll *The Poetic Idea of Lin Hejing* (*Lin Hejing shiyi tu* 林和靖詩意, housed in The Palace Museum, Beijing, Accession Number: 新00199749), shows another dimension of his concern. His initial inscription was written in 1614, which was a four-line poem that articulates the artistic concept of the painting. A second inscription, added on the upper left corner apart from the earlier one, states: "Both Ni Yunlin and Wang Shuming of the Yuan dynasty painted following this [Lin Hejing's] poetic idea, yet Huang Zijiu has not been acknowledged for it. I painted in Huang's style. Re-inscribed by Xuanzai, the third month of the *xinyou* year [1621]. 元時倪雲林、王叔明皆補此詩意，惟黃子久未之見，餘以黃法為此。玄宰重題，辛酉三月." Notably, this re-inscription diverges from the visual focus of the 1614 inscription and shifts its attention to the external world, providing insight into the artist's thoughts and motivations for creating the artwork.

Apart from providing further artistic thoughts to the painting audience, another scenario prompting re-inscriptions involved a painter initially creating a work for someone, and subsequently, that individual returning the artwork for inscription several years later. Consequently, meeting the immediate social demand became a top priority for the painter. A case in point is the album titled *Landscape Imitating the Ancient Style for Jingtao* (*Zeng Jing Tao fanggu shanshui* 贈敬韜仿古山水, Fig.2) now preserved in The Palace Museum, Beijing (accession number: 新00010770), which Dong Qichang presented to a friend named Jingtao (Tian, 2020, p. 89-90). Of particular interest is the second leaf of the album, featuring a prior inscription by Dong in its lower left margin. This inscription simply states that the eight-leaf album was created in the third month of 1611. The subsequent inscription, executed in a very similar calligraphic style but positioned higher on the page, informs the readers that the album was "out of the brush of the *xinhai* year [1611]," and that "Jingtao presented it [the album] for re-inscription" in 1622. Neither of these inscriptions directly engages with visual aspects. Instead, they pivot towards the present moment, encompassing the contemporary circumstances, individuals involved, and prevailing demands. It is noteworthy that many of Dong Qichang's re-inscriptions on his own works are concise as such, bearing a restrained and deliberate style.

Figure 2. Dong Qichang, Second leaf of *Landscape Imitating the Ancient Style for Jingtao*, 1611, album, ink on paper, 30.7 x 28.3 cm, The Palace Museum, Beijing (Accession Number: 新00010770)

Wen Zhengming, however, provides a more intricate pattern of how cultural elites employed inscriptions for social purposes. One of his renowned works, titled *Green Shadow and Thatched Studio* (*Lüyin caotang tu* 綠陰草堂圖, Fig.3) (Chiang, 1981, p. 305), features his own inscription in the upper right corner. This inscription, composed in a tidy and meticulously crafted regular script, is signed as Wen Bi文壁, Wen Zhengming's former name used prior to 1511, and conveys a lyrical essence of the dawn landscape. In contrast, positioned in the opposite upper left corner of the painting, is his re-inscription, executed in a considerably more unrestrained semi-cursive script, which reads:

> This painting let me to look back twenty years ago.
> The painted hills and greens remain [as if] the same as in the past.
> The white hair man wielding his brush has a leisure pleasant.
> Do not say his intelligence is not as good as before.
> On the mid-autumn day of the Yiwei year [1535], Zhengming re-inscribed
> 尺楮相看二十年。林巒蒼翠故依然。
> 白頭點筆閒情在。莫道聰明不及前。
> 乙未中元徵明重題

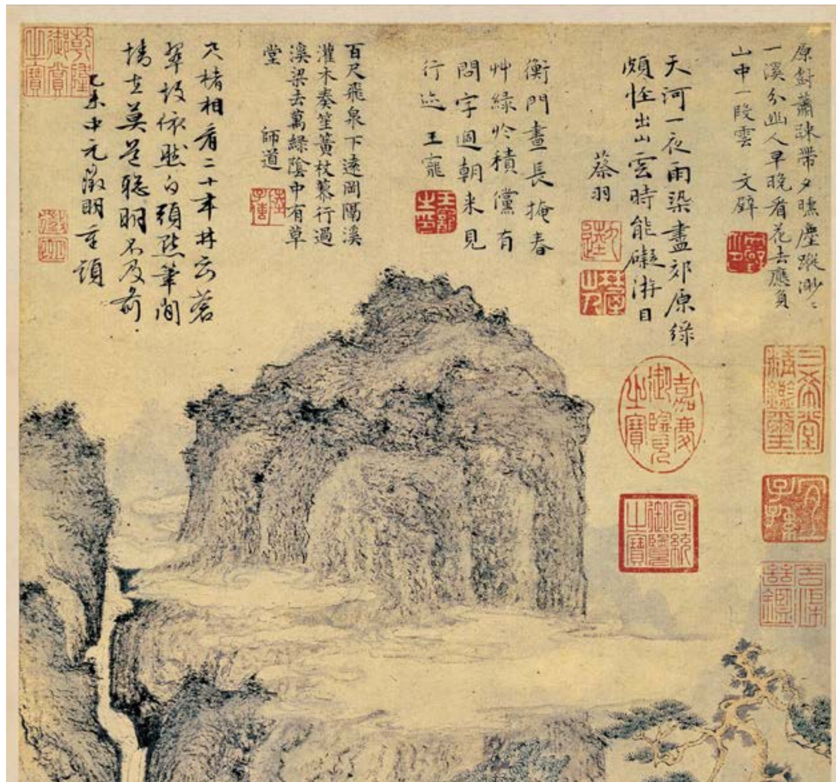

Figure 3. Wen Zhengming, *Green Shadow and Thatched Studio* (partial), ca. 1491, ink on paper, 58.2x29.3 cm, hand scroll, Palace Museum, Taipei (Accession Number: 故畫00050600000)

Wen Zhengming's re-inscription did not entail an earlier inscription but rather pertained to a prior circumstance of creating a painting. Unlike Dong Qichang, he accentuated the twenty-year time lapse in particular. Based on the year indicated in this poem, we can deduce that the painting was created around 1491, when Wen Zhengming was only twenty-one years old. The content of this re-inscription and the calligraphy strokes show his mental transition from youth to middle age.

Intriguingly, Wen Zhengming followed a consistent pattern of making re-inscriptions for paintings he had created years earlier. Some of these re-inscriptions can be identified on existing paintings, while the majority are documented in literary collections and writings on paintings. These records should be approached with caution, as not all of them originate from reliable sources. One of these records in particular, carries more credibility as it comes from Wen's own collection. It was added on a painting that Wen created for a Suzhou scholar named Huang Yun黃雲 (sobriquet name Yinglong 應龍), renowned for his literary accomplishments and interest in art collection (Qian, 1698/1983, p. 293; Du, n.d., p. 2b; Zhang Chou, n.d., p. 7b). Huang had affiliations with a group of Suzhou literati painters, including Shen Zhou. He hailed from Kunshan 昆山 County, the same as Wen's wife (Clunas, 2004, p. 65).

Wen's inscription on this painting consists of an eight-line poem, known as a regulated poem (*lü shi*律詩), which bears a striking resemblance to his inscription on *Green Shadow and Thatched Studio,* the first two couplets of which reads:

> This painting let me to look back sixteen years ago.
> Its remnant red and peeling white pigments remain [as if] the same as in the past.

My painting gains value by your inscription. But I know my intelligence is not as good as before.
尺楮回看十六年，殘丹剝粉故依然.
得君品裁知增重，顧我聰明不及前. (Wen, n.d., p. 7b)

Evidently, encountering an old creation immediately drew the painter's attention to the passage of time and the physical changes the painting had undergone. It is followed by a brief note that states: "I painted a small painting for Mr. Huang Yinglong, but left it for an extended period without any poetic inscription. Huang added an inscription and then requested one from me. I provided several words. The painting was created in the *bingchen* year of the Hongzhi reign [1496], sixteen years ago, in the x*inwei* year of the Zhengde reign [1511]"(Wen Zhengming, n.d., p. 7b). Craig Clunas argued that this painting played an "agency" role in sustaining the long-standing relationship between Wen and Huang (Clunas, 2004, pp. 64-65). However, based on this inscription and the fact that Wen had no other records of presenting paintings to Huang Yun thereafter, it raises some skepticism about the extent to which Wen was willing to deepen his relationship with Huang. The composition of this inscription closely resembles the one found on *Green Shadow and Thatched Studio.* It appears that Wen Zhengming had a convenient poem-template for creating poetic re-inscriptions on paintings he had previously painted, with only a few key words substituted, such as the number of years and the representative visual elements. This template can be traced back to a date no later than the 1510s when Wen Zhengming was in his forties and continued to be used until the 1540s and 1550s during his later years. In some cases, he would add a note, like he did for *Summer Retreat in the Eastern Grove* (*Donglin bishu tujuan* 東林避暑圖卷, Fig.4), lamenting the decline of his intelligence and memory. On this painting, he left an re-inscription using his poetic template. He also added a short postscript following the poem, which lamented that "On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month of the *yihai* year [1515] I happened to pass by the Tianwang Temple. Examining it, there welled up feelings of sadness. It has been three years since I wrote it. Each day my powers fail. I doubt that I could do this again. Zhengming again inscribed. 乙亥九月廿又四日偶過天王寺覽之，不覺愴然，蓋拒書時三年矣。歲月於邁，聰明日衰，不知向後更能作此否。徵明重題。" (English translation quoted from Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.) This postscript not only allowed him to respond to social demands with poetry but also added a touch of human warmth.

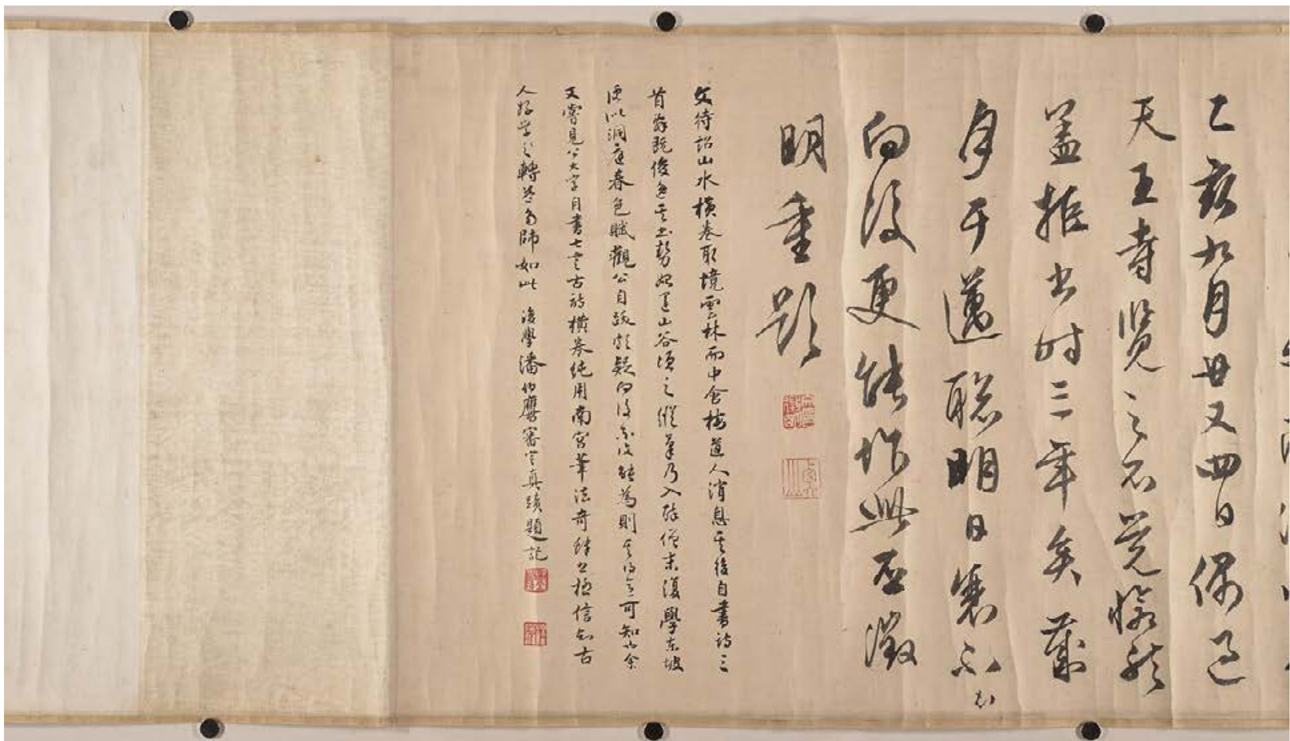

Figure 4. Wen Zhengming, *Summer Retreat in the Eastern Grove* (partial), 1515, handscroll, ink on paper, Image (colophon): 12 1/2 × 38 3/8 in. (31.8 × 97.5 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Accession Number: 1989.363.60)

Wen Zhengming's re-inscription template proved to be versatile, applicable to paintings on various themes and for different occasions. He even applied it to the renowned scenic spot "Drunk Man Spring" (*zuiweng quan* 醉翁泉) in Anhui Province, which he had first visited thirty years prior. His poem for revisiting the spot reads:

Looking back on Chuyang after thirty years, I revisit with white hair, recalling old adventures.
Only the water and stones seem unchanged, while I find myself less clever than before.
Around the courtyard, spring tides and western stream rain, two peaks, slanting sun, and the Drunk Man Spring.
I beg you, do not ask the guest of that time, under Kingdom Chu's moon and Wu's clouds, we remain silent together.

回首滁陽三十年，白頭重讀紀遊篇。
只應水石都無恙，自顧聰明不及前。
繞廓春潮西澗雨，兩峰斜日醉翁泉。
憑君莫問當時客，楚月吳雲共默然。 (Wen Zhengming, 1537, p. 20a)

This template not only allowed Wen Zhengming to address the prevailing social demand but also provided a retrospective view of himself. It is intriguing to note that in 1509 and 1511, during his forties, his re-inscriptions suggest a decline in his intelligence. However, in 1535, during his sixties, as indicated by *Green Shadow and Thatched Studio,* his re-inscription asserts that his intelligence remains undiminished. To some extent, Wen Zhengming's re-inscriptions negotiate not only with painting collectors and those requesting inscriptions, but also with the relationship between his present self and his past self.

Wen Zhengming's template evidently left an impression on his pupil, Lu Zhi 陸治 (1496-1576). In 1564, Lu Zhi re-inscribed a work he had painted seventeen years earlier in 1548 (Fig.5). He wrote: "My ink flows through seventeen years. Now, with graying hair, I review it and feel a sense of melancholy. Days and nights pass like a blur, and today is no different from yesterday. I am embarrassed by my fading intelligence. 筆墨悠悠十七年, 白頭重閱已茫然. 蹉跎歲月渾如昨, 慚愧聰明不及前." Notably, Lu Zhi's poem bears a striking resemblance to Wen's 1511 poem, indicating a likely utilization of the latter's template.

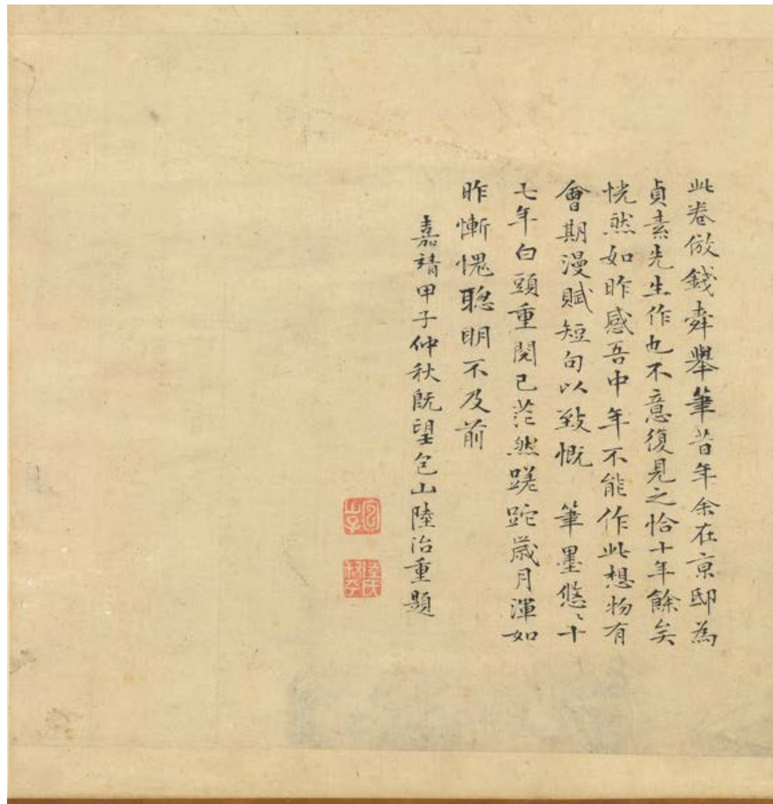

Figure 5. Lu Zhi, *Four Seasons Flowers* (Sishi huahui zhenji juan四時花卉真蹟卷) (partial), 1548, handscroll, ink and colour, 31.8 x 484 cm, Palace Museum, Taipei (Accession Number: 故畫001636).

The present demand of human beings encompassed not only social requisites, but, perhaps primarily, economic benefits. The situation of Huang Yun highlights an awareness of the monetary value associated with an inscribed work. Wen Zhengming was only 26 years old when he created the 1496 painting. His status in Suzhou artistic circles began to rise after Shen Zhou's death in 1509 (Clunas, 2004, p. 142). He was then increasingly recognized as a budding local novice without much particularity in art. A veteran collector and connoisseur, Huang Yun might have noticed this ascent, and developed a preoccupation for acquiring Wen's creations. As Huang actively sought and valued Wen's art, it is highly likely that Wen's re-inscription served as a method to authenticate one of his early works and augment its market worth. It is even more intriguing to observe that re-inscriptions played a role in the Ming art market. A late Ming painting catalogue known as *A Record of Precious Paintings* (*Bao hui lu* 寶繪錄) is renowned for documenting information and inscriptions of counterfeit paintings (Hong, 2004). Within this catalogue, there is an entry for an unnamed work attributed to Wen Zhengming. The initial inscription on this piece is evidently a parody of Wen Zhengming's inscription template and reads:

The piece of paper startles me, realizing that ten years have swiftly passed,
Yet the verdant rocks and the flow of jade-like waters remain the same.
Beside the morning window, I grasp the brush to re-inscribe this place,
I am embarrassed to find my intellect less acute than in the past.
片楮俄驚已十年, 翠巘流玉尚依然。
曉窗援筆重題處, 慚愧聰明不及前。 (Zhang, 2997, p. 150)

One can easily envision how a counterfeit painting purportedly by Wen Zhengming, featuring this inscription, might deceive less knowledgeable buyers in the art market. Furthermore, an inclusion of this inscription in a published catalogue would undoubtedly serve as an endorsement for the painting.

3. Collective echoes: Multiple inscriptions on a single work

3.1. Interactions transcending the boundary of time

As a painting passed through the hands of various literati, connoisseurs, or collectors, they might add their own inscriptions, turning the artwork into a historical document that recorded its provenance and the impressions it made on different viewers. Upon finding an old painting adorned with inscriptions from predecessors, literati artists often felt compelled to engage with these prior expressions through the act of re-inscription. In such circumstances, even though the inscribers do not sign with "re-inscription" or "inscribed again," their inscriptions clearly point to the existing texts on the painting. Therefore, this paper also considers it as a broad sense of "re-inscription."

Previous discussions regarding Chinese painting have predominantly centered on spatial composition, encompassing concepts of perspective and its distinctions from Western painting (Ogawa, 1996; Fong, 2003). Conversely, there has been few of discussions concerning time as a pivotal element within painting. Temporality, often conflated with the broader notion of "time", remains an underappreciated facet in the realm of Chinese painting. As Eugene Y. Wang (2022) proposes, visual designs are the formal apparatus that embody certain notions of time and manipulate time in early China. Within the literati painting of the Ming dynasty, there existed a profound emphasis on conveying the essence and change of time. This emphasis is evident in prevalent themes like "four seasons" (*sishi* 四時), which placed a significant importance on portraying the distinctiveness of each season.

The practice of re-inscribing added a dynamic dimension to the painting, infusing it with the progression and fluidity of time. Few things exemplify the passage of time as vividly as adding a new inscription to engage in an interplay with an existing one. The presence of a previous inscription on a painting, particularly if authored by the inscribers themselves, frequently served as a catalyst for introspection regarding their past and their relationship with the passage of time. An example is found in the work titled *Pure and White Pavilion* (*Qingbai xuan tu* 清白軒圖, Fig.6), a hanging scroll created by the esteemed Suzhou artist Liu Jue 劉珏 (1410-1472). This painting serves as a commemoration of a banquet that took place within Liu Jue's pavilion during the summer of 1458, organized in honor of his retirement. After finishing the artwork, Liu Jue and several participants of the banquet added poems to the scroll. This piece can be classified under the category of "commemorative landscape painting" as suggested by Anne de Coursey Clapp, which constitutes a significant category in Ming-dynasty Chinese art. In this category, landscapes serve as disguised portraits, celebrating an individual along with his achievements, ambitions, and tastes (Clapp, 2012).

Figure 6. Liu Jue, *Pure and White Pavilion*, 1458, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 97.2x35.4 cm, Palace Museum, Taipei (Accession Number: 故畫00041600000)

In 1474, Shen Zhou happened upon the unrolled scroll and immediately noted a poetic inscription by his late friend, Liu Jue, who had passed away in 1472. Liu Jue's inscription served as an evocative reminder of his presence and prompted his friend to confront the passage of time and the transient nature of human existence. The fact that the words inscribed on the painting are also a form of calligraphy, subtly reinforcing this mental experience. Calligraphy of ancient Chinese literati, as observed by John Hay, possessed a quality where lively brushstrokes "captured the psycho-physical trace of one's body, invoking his or her essence through the collective image of the characters" (Hay, 2004, p. 313).

Shen Zhou added a poem of his own just below Liu Jue's inscription. The opening line reads: "The party participants who once enjoyed [the pleasure of] poetry and wine in the past now lost master Liu. The people are few; the pavilion is empty. 舊遊詩酒少劉公, 人已寥寥閣已空". This verse resonates with the earlier depiction of a joyous banquet in the pavilion but takes a saddening turn, underscoring that the festivities have concluded, and those who partook are no longer present. Beyond aligning the content of the inscription with the context of Liu's painting, Shen Zhou employs another literary technique to engage in a dialogue with Liu. His poetic inscription incorporates the rhyme *dong* 東, the same rhyme found in Liu Jue's poem. Shen Zhou even selects the very same rhyming words, namely *gong* 公, *kong* 空, and dong 東. Rhyming (*he* 和) was a common mode of social interaction among the educated elite during the Ming dynasty (Sturman, 2015). It not only represented a form of intellectual competition but also served as a means of emotional exchange. By employing the identical metrical rhyme in his re-inscription, Shen Zhou positions himself within a convivial gathering of friends, despite his initial absence. In this way, he transcends both time and space, becoming an integral part of Liu's brushwork in the image and the poem. Shen Zhou's inscription, adorning the painting surface, irrevocably alters the artwork's appearance, transforming it into more than just a depiction of the 1458 banquet: it now encapsulates a commemoration of a departed friend in the year 1472.

3.2. Representation of an elite community

Creating re-inscriptions, as the case of Liu Jue has indicated, was frequently accompanied by the representation of literati identity and an elite community. A painting by a Ming literati painter named Ma Yu 馬愈(1435-?) provides us a more complex example. The painting *Imitation after Miao Yi's A Mountain Path and Spinneys* (*Lin Miao Yi Shanjing zashu tu*山徑雜樹圖, Fig.7), as its title indicated, was painted after a painting by a Yuan painter named Miao Yi 繆佚 (Yu Yi, n.d., p. 140). The original *A Mountain Path and Spinneys* by Miao Yi was completed in 1349, and was extensively inscribed, including an inscription by the artist himself. These inscriptions primarily lauded Miao Yi's painting skill and echoed the content of the image. No later than 1417, Shen Zhou's grandfather, Shen Cheng 沈澄 (1376-1463), acquired Miao Yi's painting in Suzhou, and kept the painting in the Shen family collection.

Figure 7. Ma Yu, *Imitation after Miao Yi's A Mountain Path and Spinneys*, ca. 1466, handscroll, ink on paper, height 22.7, width unknown, The Palace Museum, Beijing (Accession Number: 新00146617).

A Mountain Path and Spinneys continued to grow in the 1410s to the 1420s by newly appended inscriptions, mostly by friends of the Shen family. These inscriptions shifted their attention significantly from the painter Miao Yi and his painted image to their predecessors on the scroll. Many of them noted that the painting was created six or seven decades ago, so the previous inscribers were all passed away. For instance, one inscriber lamented in a poem: "The elegance of a bygone era now lies in empty air, Alone I read the poems left in ink within the painting. 一代風流空已矣, 獨看遺墨畫中詩." Another inscriber praised, "We can do nothing but

admire our esteemed predecessors; their poetic sentiments and painted ideas have endured for a hundred years. 前輩風流空景慕，詩情畫意百年心."

> Liu Jue, instead of addressing the predecessors, turned to speak to the future. His poem expressed the idea that he might not be the last to inscribe on the scroll:
> What the ancients inscribed on painting had soon become aged,
> Today, I inscribe this painting again, presenting something new.
> Don't claim that the present people favour the ancient,
> For people in the future will also favour the present.
> 古人題畫邇成陳，今日重題又一新。
> 莫謂今人偏尚古，後來人複尚今人。

Following this poem, Liu Jue added a postscript, noted that by the time that he wielded his brush, the painting was already full of ancient and contemporary inscriptions that he filled the last remaining blank space.

Ma Yu, a renowned scholar painter hailing from Jiading嘉定County not far from Suzhou, was a friend of the Shen family. Obtained a *jinshi* degree in 1464, he apparently belonged to the elite community. His father Ma Shi 馬軾 also enjoyed a reputation as a painter (Xu, 1991, p. 49). Around 1466, Ma Yu borrowed the painting from the Shen family and created a copy of it. He devoted two days to replicating its inscriptions, followed by an additional day for recreating the image. What makes his copy intriguing is that Ma Yu not only replicated the image part but also meticulously transcribed all of the Yuan dynasty inscriptions. As a talented calligrapher (Liu, 1988), he even managed to imitate different handwritings of these inscriptions. This practice deviates from the common approach among Ming painters, who typically refrained from transcribing previous inscriptions when copying or reproducing paintings from earlier periods. It suggests that Ma Yu considered these inscriptions from the past as integral components of the image itself, deserving preservation in his copied work.

It is interesting to note that Ma Yu's copy changed the painting format from a hanging scroll to a handscroll, giving the painting a possibility of further extending itself. In his own copy, Ma Yu appended a lengthy colophon, providing valuable insights into the history of the painting. He meticulously recorded probable previous owners of the artwork prior to Shen Cheng. Notably, Ma Yu remarked on the densely inscribed nature of the painting, to the extent that the inscriptions seemed to have spilled over the edges of the paper. His colophon further details the precise placement of each inscription on the original hanging scroll. Calculating the lifespan of the artwork based on the inscriptions' date information, Ma Yu determined that from the first fourteenth-century inscription to the first fifteenth-century one spanned sixty-nine years, while from the first fifteenth-century inscription to the present was forty-nine years. He expressed astonishment that the scroll had endured for nearly one hundred and twenty years, raising the question: "Who knows if there won't be anybody inscribing on it in the future?" Additionally, he pondered whether the future inscribers might outnumber the current ones, or vice versa.

The meticulously crafted imitation by Ma Yu was likely motivated by a desire to preserve the legacy of several generations within the local elite community, thereby connecting with the artistic tradition of Miao Yi. From a material culture perspective, it is intriguing to consider that once Ma Yu completed his brushwork, his copy coexisted with Miao Yi's original masterpiece in the Jiangnan region. Over the subsequent decades, the copy continued to accumulate inscriptions, resulting in a blend of writings from different time periods. During the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, a official painter named Zheng Shanfu 鄭善夫 (1485-1523) (Zhu, n.d., p. 61b; Goodrich & Fang, 1976, pp. 211-212), had access to the scroll. He did not let the opportunity of adding a new inscription slip. His poem emphasizes how the spirits of the deceased reside in an inscription: "Where is your settled place? The decaying brushstrokes are where your vivid spirits rest. 爾輩安身是何處, 素毫零落寄豐神." (Zheng, n.d., pp. 31b-32a) This lament arose from the recognition that many of the earlier inscribers have since passed away. Through his own inscription, Zheng Shanfu acknowledged the existence of those who came before him, while also asserting his own presence for the future readers.

The re-inscriptions participated in shaping the reception of the paintings, as they were open not only to the inscriber, but to all the audiences who are able of reading the inscription. In the case of the imitation by Ma Yu, it continued to survive and circulate, even after the mid-seventeenth-century dynastic change. In 1656, Wu Qizhen 吳其貞(1609-1678), an antique dealer, mentioned having seen a scroll that was likely Ma Yu's copy, still kept in Suzhou city but not by the Shen family any longer. (Wu, 2002, p. 30b) The transition in ownership of the painting from the Shen family to another individual, underscoring the dynamic nature of inscriptions and paintings in this ever-changing world. Some decades later, the renowned Qing scholar Weng Fanggang 翁方綱 (1733-1818) had the opportunity to view Ma Yu's copy and selected six rhymes from its poetic inscriptions to create his own responsive poems. These six poems were included in Weng's personal anthology, with careful annotations indicating the original poems to which they were responding. The last poem of the six sighs: "[Shen Zhou's] poem and [Ma Yu's] picture vie for comprehension, snow shifting from the Shen family to whose hands will it fall? 詩在畫前爭會得, 沈家今更落誰家." (Weng, 2002, p. 40) This poem line clearly expresses Weng Fanggang's consciousness that inscriptions and paintings are objects of dynamism in this floating world. They move from one place to another, and the moving is the quintessence that why these objects deserve people's cherish.

The inscriptions on Ma Yu's imitation work also found their way onto another painting. Fang Shishu 方士庶 (1692-1751), an eighteenth-century scholar, created an imitation of Ma Yu's imitation in 1749 but reverted to the original hanging scroll format (Fig.8). Fang Shishu transcribed some of the inscriptions onto his own copy, and

he noted that by the first half of the eighteenth century, Ma Yu's work had accumulated an impressive number of more than a hundred inscriptions. At that time, there were at least two versions of *A Mountain Path and Spinneys*: Ma Yu's imitation from 1466, and Fang Shishu's imitation from the eighteenth century (Duan Fang, ca. 1906-1911, pp. 1999b-2000a). Each version served as an independent repository for new inscriptions, ensuring the transmission of inscriptions to future generations. In this way, inscriptions can be seen as living bodies that grow and evolve over time, and the practice of making inscriptions on paintings facilitated the preservation of cultural memory.

Figure 8. Fang Shishu, *A Mountain Path and Spinneys*, 1749, hanging scroll, ink on paper, dimension unknown, Jilin Province Museum, Changchun.

4. Conclusion

The exploration of re-inscriptions from Chinese fifteenth to seventeenth century literati paintings has revealed a profound interplay between painters and themselves, the shifting socio-cultural context, and their predecessors. Through these re-inscriptions, artists not only engaged in a dynamic dialogue that transcended temporal and spatial boundaries, but also paid tribute to their artistic predecessors. The nuanced responses conveyed through these re-inscriptions became introspective reflection on human mortality, self-knowledge, personal social bonds, and the broader elite community. As such, they provide valuable insights into the intellectual and artistic exchanges that defined the literati culture in the middle and late Ming period.

Moreover, re-inscriptions transformed paintings into layered narratives, encapsulating the collective voices of literati communities across generations. They emerged as a dynamic form of artistic expression, transcending the boundary of individual creation. Therefore, they represent a collective endeavor to weave a tapestry of cultural memory, forging connections between artists, patrons, and communities across time. Reflecting on these re-inscriptions fosters a deeper appreciation for the intricate connotations embedded within Ming literati paintings and the enduring legacy of these artists in shaping the artistic landscape of their era.

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