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2018

## Three Inscriptions for Paintings by Yao Nai

Andrew Gudgel

*Independent Scholar*, [andrewgudgel@fastmail.com](mailto:andrewgudgel@fastmail.com)

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### Recommended Citation

Gudgel, Andrew (2018) "Three Inscriptions for Paintings by Yao Nai," *Transference*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 7. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol6/iss1/7>

Andrew Gudel  
Three Inscriptions for Paintings

Yao Nai  
題畫（三首）

I.

A slanting wind blows rain past the wooded knoll,  
Myriad clouds flow like water.  
Lean against the railing to once more see the depths among the peaks.  
It's dark, as if the horizon realized a boat was returning.

II.

The mist from the peaks presses on the drooping forest;  
The dry sound of yellow leaves follows the horse's hooves.  
A sudden shower would make touring the mountain even slower.  
The farmers' houses end well before the valley.

III.

Pale clouds roll among distant mountains,  
And the empty space representing the Yangtze is long.  
Autumn comes easy in Moling,  
Making not only the woods frosty.

## Commentary

Yao Nai (1731–1815) was born in Tongcheng in China’s Anhui Province. In 1763, he not only passed, but came first in the Qing Dynasty’s national-level examination. Yao served in several imperial government bureaux during his life; he was also one of the early members of the Tongcheng School of writing, which stressed natural, straightforward prose and maintaining harmony between theme and form.

These poems were originally written about—and possibly actually on—three different paintings. Literati often added their own inscriptions to artwork as a sign of friendship with the artist, or to display their personal taste in art and their poetic talents. As a result, a painting might accrue a number of inscriptions over decades or centuries as it passed through the hands of a chain of literati-collectors.

In the case of these three inscriptions, the poems have become separated from their paintings and therefore lack the context the accompanying visual images would have provided. This forced me to pay close attention to the emotional nuances of the words in my attempt to convey the overall image created by the poem.

In addition, each poem posed different problems to solve in the process of translating. For example, the returning boat in the last line of the first poem can only be assumed to be a ferry or river-boat that departed earlier in the day. This, in turn, implies that the poem is set in the late afternoon or early evening. Yet the last line also uses the word “as if” or “like” (如), which leaves open the question whether the darkness is actually caused by the depths mentioned in the line above or by the lateness of the hour. After several days of struggling, I decided to leave the translation equally ambiguous and let the reader decide.

The third line of the second poem provided another kind of challenge. It contains two common verbs, “to see” (看) and “travel/road” (行), both of which had possible alternative meanings within the text. Choosing between alternatives took several days of comparing translations until I found the one I felt best conveyed the sense of the line.

The last poem posed the most challenges of the three. The second line uses the term (空影), literally “empty image.” Though unstated, this implies that the river in the painting is represented by a blank, unpainted area of the silk or paper. Yao also displays a flash of humor here, in that the long negative image of the river is a play on the meaning of Yangtze: “Long River.”

Finally, the last line of the third poem contained the deceptively simple yet ambiguous construction (不獨為), which literally means “not only makes.” The problem is that the phrase can equally mean “makes not only.” Once again, it took several days of comparing alternatives before I finally settled on the latter.

Source text:

Yao, Nai 姚鼐. *Xibaoxuan shiwen ji* 惜抱軒詩文集 [*The Poetry and Prose of Xibao Studio*]. Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2008, pp. 578, 586.