Figure, Fiction and Figment in Eighteenth-century Chinese Painting

Richard Vinograd

An occasion such as the exhibition, *The Elegant Brush,* devoted to the art of a single period under the Qianlong Emperor, inevitably leads us to reconsider some of the terms and formulations with which the period has been characterized. We all recognize that general characterizations are part rhetorical formula, part stereotype, usually inadequate and often misleading; most often they fulfill the historian's need for a clarity that is seldom an attribute of the historical data under study. But we should not underestimate the power of such characterizations, perhaps most marked when they are submerged, to set the direction of our investigations and the terms of discourse which our interpretations will follow. It is perhaps the least studied fields which are most vulnerable to the tyranny of the formula; thus we are doubly grateful to the organizers of this exhibition and symposium for directing attention to a surprisingly neglected period.

There appear to have been a couple of major directions in the study of eighteenth-century painting. The first took the polarity between court circles and the independent masters of the southeast as its leading theme.[1] This is a useful and still valid approach, of course, but perhaps any kind of polar scheme tends to exaggerate the contrasts between extremes, and this is probably still more tempting when one side has such an intriguing label as the Eight Strange or Eccentric Masters with the other side overshadowed by the imperial presence. The court is perceived as a stronghold of artistic conservatism, and the southeastern schools in the Yangzhou area as a dialectical counterweight, with an emphasis on qualities such as free experimentation, spontaneity, individuality, humor and a boldness of approach verging on the uncontrolled. Disregarding the inadequacy of such stereotypes to account for the artistic situation at the time, it is of interest that the artistic qualities attributed to the Yangzhou masters can also be qualities of personality.[2] There is a tendency in this approach to focus on anecdotal or biographical studies that would confirm a certain kind

of personality, and to place the valuation of paintings on a standard related to the expression of a certain attitude. The danger is that it can lead us away from the complexities of particular paintings, or from paintings in general, and replaces a considered appraisal of quality and concern in painting with characterizations of painters.

A more recently popular direction in studies of the period has been toward an investigation of patronage, or, more broadly, of socio-economic factors in art.[3] This is in many ways a healthy corrective to some earlier approaches, and has some important strategic advantages. First, we can look at and interpret the entire period in consistent terms; clearly, imperial patronage is a central issue for court painting; on the other hand it is helpful to look at the art of the southeast not simply as the spontaneous creations of eccentric minds as has long been the practice, but in terms of a group or class of artists working under some common constraints and in parallel directions, responding to changing sources of sponsorship and altered markets. Second, such an approach allows us to incorporate new fields of data and broader ranges of investigation into our studies of art. Studies of economic distribution and power, the sociology of the merchant class, education and office-holding patterns among the merchant elite of the southeast can all be relevant to our explanations of artistic phenomena.[4] A patronage-centered approach does lead productively to new modes of art-historical explanation. Instead of spontaneous whimsy as the engine of artistic production, we are apt to consider relationships between such phenomena as the taste for extravagant gesture and ostentatious display among the newly wealthy merchants and a certain surface boldness and flashiness of style among the artists of the region and period. Or we might consider what seems to be an increased specialization in genre and style and possibly higher volume production by artists in the context of a freer market economy and a broader but more openly competitive patronage base for art. Patronage studies have been, and promise to be, so broadly useful that I would not make even a rhetorical pretense of arguing against them, although the focus of this paper lies in another direction.[5] I would only add a couple of qualifications. First, I would argue that the usefulness of this strategy is increased to the degree that the concept of patronage is expanded from a narrow focus on material kinds of exchange to include symbolic exchanges of all sorts between patron, artist and audience, exchanges of values, prestige and significance, as well as of harder forms of compensation. Second, a potential drawback of narrower kinds of patronage studies is that they tend to conceive of art in terms of product, of subject matter in terms of demand, and of styles as the

result of market pressures or the need for publicity. Most of all, in this light art is seen as a epiphenomenon of social or economic structure, something tossed up from the here-and-now (in this case, of course, the there-and-then) of contemporary events, whose potential significance is circumscribed by that origin. The danger, of course, is that the work of art will, just as in personality-centered approaches, be pushed into the background, seen as a more or less incidental by-product of a social event. The value and meanings proper to an artistic tradition with its own history of concerns, as well as those kinds of significance that cannot comfortably be seen as grounded in socio-economic motives, may well be overlooked.

One quick, if somewhat indirect, way of suggesting some of the limits of the patronage-centered approach, while introducing some of the specific concerns of this paper, is to refer to recent studies of the eighteenth-century Chinese novel, particularly of Cao Xueqin's Qianlong period masterpiece, *The Dream of the Red Chamber.* In particular, two recent critical studies of that novel, by Andrew Plaks and Lucien Miller, have attempted to redress what they see as the limits of studies focused either on the identity and biography of the author, or on the novel as a mirror of eighteenth-century aristocratic society and political events. Plaks sees the novel as fundamentally concerned with archetypical patterns of thought and making use of an allegorical method.[6] Miller's study explores three interpenetrating modes in the fictional world of the novel: a realistic or mimetic mode, an allegorical mode focusing on myth, and the narrative mode of fictional devices and personae.[7] He sees the realistic concerns of the novel, with its subtle psychological characterizations and a rich evocation of the rarefied society of upper-class garden and boudoir, as only one coequal facet of the text. The other principal concerns are the author's complex manipulation of fictional devices, especially the complex masked personae of author, commentator and narrator, and beyond that a broad mythic framework for the story which deals with fundamental issues of reality and illusion, transcendant and sensual experience, and moral confusion and enlightenment.

There is, of course, no inherent reason why Qianlong period painting should directly parallel the concerns of even the most important of contemporary novels. It does seem to me, however, that critical approaches to literature of the time are very likely to touch on issues that are apposite for the sister art of painting. Moreover, these literary studies point to a certain set of intellectual concerns and a world view expressed in fiction that must at least be considered as a relevant

conceptual framework for eighteenth-century painting.[8] In fact, I see pointed parallels between themes and approaches in *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and those found in contemporary painting. I want to point out some dimensions of significance in eighteenth-century figure painting that go beyond the mimetic impulse or a response to patronage demands. One of these dimensions has to do with the painted figure as fiction, which may involve emphasis on a persona or on impersonating some historical or literary figure; elsewhere it may be manifested in the artist's preoccupation with presentation or point of view, or in the foregrounding of the problematic nature of the pictorial equivalent of narrative voice and tone. Another dimension has to do with the figure as figment, including paintings in which the asserted level of reality of the figure depicted is in doubt, or where the line between the perceptually present and the illusory or apparitional is blurred; others involve cases in which the painted figure is psychologically or ontologically absent from the everyday world of discourse and interaction, or paintings in which the whole representational enterprise is called into question.

I will discuss very briefly examples of three categories of figure painting that exemplify these concerns: portrait images, genre figures or anonymous contemporary types as opposed to identified individuals, and figures from the realms of literature, myth and religion.

We are accustomed to thinking of portraiture, perhaps especially Chinese portraiture, as the pictorial genre most straightforwardly involved with the here and now of physical appearance, and beyond that, with assertions of status or of social role through depictions of dress, surroundings, accouterments and the like.[9] In those concerns portraiture is linked closely with patronage (narrowly conceived), performing functions of commemoration and glorification. Above all, portraiture is conceived as a genre of painting that affirms a self-identity. I would like to begin with two portraits, rather conventional in stylistic terms, that throw into relief at the outset the potential ambiguities and internal contradictions that can lie beneath even seemingly placid pictorial surfaces in eighteenth-century figure painting. Both works have been discussed at length in other studies, so I will only touch upon them here. They embody the poles of eighteenth-century society and culture: one is a youthful portrait of the Emperor-to-be Qianlong posed as a Taoist priest, and painted in 1734 (Figure 1); the other is a portrait of perhaps the leading southern poet and man of letters of the time, Yuan Mei, painted by Luo Ping and carrying an inscription dated 1781 (Figure 2).[10] Qianlong represents all of the values

Figure 1. *Portrait of Qianlong as a Taoist Priest,* dated 1734.

Figure 2. Luo Ping, *Portrait of Yuan Mei,* dated 1781. Collection unknown.

of ritual, authority and control of both state and culture; Yuan Mei was a humorist and sceptic and a free-living, unconventional soul.[11] What is remarkable is that both subjects raised in their inscriptions fundamental questions about their self-identities. The prince Bao inscribes the question: 'Who knows the true self of this youth' to accompany his role as a Taoist priest, and signs himself 'The Ever-Verdant Scholar.'[12] Yuan Mei raises a whole chain of cunningly offhanded questions, about the adequacy of his portrait and the nature of the self that is depicted in the portrait, that lead to ever more disturbing and fundamental analyses of selfhood and identity.[13] He concludes with a conceptual shrug: 'the picture can simultaneously be me and not me, it doesn't matter.' It is true enough that for the future Qianlong, the imperial function demanded a universe of roles to be assumed, many of which are documented in an array of portraits of Qianlong as everything from Buddha to bowman.[14] Thus, there is no special reason to assume that this image, as a Taoist priest, was a particularly sincere or revealing one. But the very bewilderment of roles that lay before him may have led the emperor-to-be to dwell for a moment on the elusiveness of a true identity, and there may thus have been a sincere penetration in his plaint. In a similar fashion, we can recognize that Yuan Mei might have been acting playful or even devious in his elaborate self-analysis and rhetorical self-destruction, while still raising pointed and profound questions about the reality of persons. At any rate, the congruence of these concerns, in images of figures that we should otherwise expect to be radically disparate in intellectual focus, should alert us to levels of significance in portraiture beyond the functional.

The next image I would like to consider has also been treated eloquently and at length in a published study by Wai-kam Ho; it is the *Literary Gathering in A Yangzhou Garden*, painted in 1743 by Fang Shishu and Ye Fanglin, and depicting the eminent Yangzhou patrons, the brothers Ma, and their guests.[15] It would seem that this work is a nearly perfect embodiment of the centrality of patronage factors in the figural art of eighteenth-century Yangzhou; not only do we see cultural patronage in action, so to speak, with the painting's commission and the scene of the Ma brothers' gatherings depicted in it, but the scroll also records both the participants and the social structure of their relationships, with the 'correct order for seniority by age and social standing,' all the minute calculus of status, reflected in the compositional placement of the figures.[16] I would only add to this interpretation by noting that even this most specific and realistic of group portraits has a shadowy sub-agenda connected to it. There is a certain inevitable

idealization involved with the reconstruction of the event after the fact by the painters.[17] Moreover, the cultural associations and prototypes for the gathering are numerous and recognized even by the participants. Associations with the early recluse-poet Tao Yuanming and with Du Fu of the Tang are recorded in the inscriptions by participants, and Wai-kam Ho suggests a pictorial prototype in an early Ming garden group portrait owned by the Ma brothers.[18] It seems likely that the shadow of the fictional *Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden* would lie over an image of artistic pursuits in a garden, and the stiff, audience-oriented portrayal of the participants in the Ma brothers' gathering picture certainly implies an awareness of posing in rather well-worn roles on a long-established stage.[19] Thus, although the primary focus of this image is certainly the participants as social figures, or even as figurations of society, they also appear as characters in cultural fictions.

It would be hard to imagine a more extreme contrast in technique and presentation to the previous group portrait than appears in Jin Nong's *Self Portrait, Walking with a Staff* of 1759 (see below, Wu, 'Jin Nong,' Figure 7). All color and finished detail are dispensed with in this nearly minimalist portrait image, as well as the engagement with the audience, since Jin Nong portrays himself in profile. Also diminished, it would seem, is the whole realm of issues concerned with patronage since in a self-portrait we have not patron and artist, but a presentation of a self-image. In fact, the situation is a little more complex than that. A self-portraitist can be concerned with many of the same issues as a commissioner of a portrait image; whereas the economic factors may be absent, certainly motives of publicity, prestige and commemoration may still be very much alive in a self-portrait, and these are the factors of gain that a portrait commissioner is paying for. Even the withdrawal into the profile view shifts the audience engagement from the plane of visual eye-contact or confrontation to that of intellectual dialogue with the artist's inscription at the upper right, which he seems to walk toward and point to with his staff. The curiously distanced and impersonal rendering of himself in profile, along with an odd *tour de force* treatment in what approaches reduction to a single outline stroke, the kind of technical conceit we might expect in one of his plum paintings, but seemingly almost callous in a self-image, are both symptomatic of Jin Nong's transformation of this portrait from the category of a physical and social image to that of a conscious cultural fiction. While absorbing his identity into a brushline, Jin also associates himself with certain cultural forms pointed to in his inscription.[20] The text makes a claim, quite spurious in art-historical terms as Jin may well have been aware, for the near-uniqueness of the accompanying

self-portrait in Chinese painting, and his recounting of famous portraitists and portraits over time links him by association with some of the greatest names in the whole tradition. At the end of the text, Jin alludes to the more prosaic function of portraiture as a record of his appearance for a long-separated friend, but he asserts his status as a cultural type, showing, in his words, 'the air and appearance of a recluse.' What Jin does not acknowledge in his text is perhaps equally as interesting as what he asserts. The closest compositional parallels to his self-portrait come in late Song dynasty images of strolling poets, such as Liang Kai's famous image of Li Bo, with its profile presentation and drastic economy of technique.[21] Jin Nong's visual echo of this type may have intended an association through similarity even as the issue of indebtedness is evaded. Finally, this image belongs in the category of fictional figures not only because of the willful association with selected cultural types, but on the more general level of its conscious manipulation of presentation and technique.

What I would call a portrait figure as figment is exemplified by an image of the Chan master Tan by Luo Ping in 1763 (Figure 3). Luo portrays the monk seated in an outdoor setting, in a fashion reminiscent of Chan Buddhist priest or abbot portraits from as far back as the Song dynasty. Initially, then, the formal associations are with a category of portraiture that was primarily commemorative and realistic, with a well-defined religious function – the type known as *chinsō* – that suggest the more constraining aspects of patronage at work.[22] However, the artist's inscription and some features of the image raise some fundamental questions about the nature of the portrait subject, and the level or levels of reality that are presented. Luo Ping's inscription records an encounter with the monk in which the artist observes a similarity with the Chan eccentric figure, Budai, supposed to have been a reincarnation of the Buddha of the Future Maitreya, whereupon the monk Tan produces a cloth bag to complete the identification.[23] It is not completely clear, and perhaps cannot be in this realm, whether the artist intends a portrait of the monk in the guise of Budai, or instead and more radically, a manifestation of Budai in, or through, Monk Tan, as the inscription seems to suggest. At any rate, the painting presents a living Budai, leaning on his bag, bare-chested and with his belly exaggerated into a swelling hourglass shape. What is especially intriguing, and disturbing, is the linking of traditional Chan imagery (usually treated humorously) with the specificity and sense of confrontation implicit in the full-face portrait of an individual who meets our gaze with a piercing equanimity. Both genres of painting are distorted by the interpenetration.

Figure 3. Luo Ping, *Portrait of the Chan Master Tan*, dated 1763. Suzhou Museum.

Thus it appears that these eighteenth-century portraits differ not only in techniques and conventions of presentation, but more fundamentally in the underlying conceptions of the persons they represent.

The next category of images to be considered comprises genre figures, presumably contemporary figures who are not individually identified and are therefore more conveniently associated with classes or types. The artist who chiefly specialized in genre figures in the eighteenth century was Huang Shen whose output reveals a diverse array of approaches and conceptions.[24] He painted a few more or less directly observed genre images, such as his *Blind Beggars*, that suggest a kind of social realism in their concerns, but there seems to have been much less of this type of painting than our view of eighteenth-century southeastern schools, with their acknowledgment of economic pressures on artists and their reflection of the strengthening of more popular levels of patronage, might lead us to expect.[25] Rather than a straightforward depiction of the contemporary environment or social reality, most of Huang Shen's genre figures seem overtly theatrical in the sense of presenting stock characters, little varied in essence from one to the next except for the accouterments that identify them alternately as fishermen, flower-bearing elders, immortals or literary paragons from the past.[26] They are consistently histrionic in style, with rough, powerful brushwork and splashy ink patches that rather stridently call attention to the technique, and quite overpower any distinguishing characterization of the figures. The issue of artistic sincerity is as difficult to avoid, given an acquaintance with a series of such figures, as it is adequately to assess. Most seem ready made and mass-produced, rather sentimental in their appeal. There is a certain tension between reading them as figures from the contemporary environment or as somewhat idealized types, with literary and art-historical associations. In either case the conspicuously uniform, somewhat coarse and sentimentalized treatment implies that these may have been rather cynical products, designed to provide a kind of instant cultural aura for sale.[27] On the other hand, they may have been meant as ironic or satirical pictorial comments on just such pretensions, on the distance between cultural ideals and an often besotted-looking reality. The ambiguity raised has to do with a voice, or authorial tone, and with the breakdown of the artist's and viewer's complicity in a representational fiction. Some, at least, of Huang Shen's genre figures involve pointed social satires, directed at issues like the commercialization of values and the reality of economic pressures and burdens that may lie behind his stock genre types. An early album attributed to Huang Shen, dated

1720, presents in a restrained style genre figures that are fictional or literary in the sense of exemplifying common wisdom, folk sayings or parables; these include the householder reduced to a beast of burden by family responsibilities, and the scholar who exemplifies the commercialization of cultural values by illustrating the power of those with money to command the services even of ghosts.[28] Some others of the Yangzhou genre figures, mythological figures or poets which have a suspiciously everyday quality about them as if they were courtesans or drinkers suddenly endowed with a higher identity, are reminiscent of some Wu school imagery of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as in Tang Yin's art. Here the reverberations call to mind analogies to artistic situations in which ideal values and concepts of artistic status were very much challenged by circumstances, and the tension between the ideal and the actual in artist's lives was paralleled by a confusion in the nature of depicted figures.[29] There seem to be two diametrically opposed tendencies coexisting somewhat tensely in eighteenth-century figure painting: one is toward a trivialization of formerly prestigious subjects, and the other toward a mythologizing of the everyday.

One other genre image that has some affinities with both the social realist and parable types, but with some extra dimensions of its own, is a painting of *Blind Beggars* by Cai Jia, active until the mid-eighteenth century (Figure 4).[30] It is rendered with an almost etherealized version of the plain outline manner that renders the figures, isolated against a plain background and seeming to hover in their diagonal arrangement, nearly insubstantial. The drawing manner achieves a special poignancy because the image is of figures who are blind. Moreover, the accompanying poem alludes to the relation of painting to perception in a fashion that suggests a consciousness of fundamental issues of representation, and points in turn to the elusive, figmentary quality of the figures depicted: 'With only beggar's instruments they go, a long journey. Six ears can hear the world but there is not even one eye to see it. Don't say this painting doesn't pay attention to them; this floating world is all confused and indistinct.'[31] The last line includes a Buddhist reference and implies the illusory quality of the phenomenal world; it may suggest a kind of blindness in painters that parallels that of the depicted beggars.[32]

The final category of figure paintings that I will discuss includes images that are explicitly literary, art-historical, or mythical/religious in their inspiration. These works can reveal an interest in the fictional or figmentary through their choice of theme. An example is Hua Yan's

Figure 4. Cai Jia, *Blind Beggars*. University Art Museum, Berkeley.

illustration of the Northern Song writer Ouyang Xiu's *Sound of Autumn Ode*, in which the sound of autumn wind engenders in the narrator the auditory illusion of calamitous sounds, and then, when the sound is identified, a vivid meditation on the melancholy and transience of the human situation.[33] Hua Yan's somewhat askew composition and frail figures suggest the mental tumult of the narrator, but hardly convey the profundity of cosmic rhythms evoked in the original prose-poem. This kind of irresolute and ambiguous tone is echoed in an album leaf by Jin Nong, with an inscription identifying it as an attempt to imagine retrospectively the intent of an original by Ma Hezhi of the Southern Song that carried a poem by the Empress Yang Meizi, on the theme of *Conversation in an Autumn Grove*.[34] Jin concludes by asking rhetorically of his own effort to recapture the flavor of the original: 'Is this it? Or is it not? I can't know that myself.' Jin's questioning of the epistemological underpinnings of his dialogue with the past is perhaps echoed in his composition, in which one of the conversing figures has his face hidden by a tree trunk; a sense of incompleteness or uncertainty about the adequacy of the image is translated into a partial erasure of one of his painted figures.

In the realm of mythical and religious figures, we are even more forcibly struck by the ambiguous and at times nearly illusory status implied in some examples. A painting by Wang Shishen (Figure 5) probably represents the ascetic Buddha-to-be Sakyamuni meditating in the wilderness, chin resting on knees, in a pose characteristic of the iconographic type.[35] The accompanying poem is certainly Chan Buddhist in flavor, but the imagery also seems to suit the mood of the times:

> Like a reflection in a mirror, or the moon in the water; the cloud passing the mountain top – the lion emerges from his cavern.

The final reference is presumably to Sakyamuni as the Lion of the Sakya Clan, emerging from his mountain privations and austerities to return to the world. But this is a very insubstantial spiritual lion, quite unlike the emaciated, troubled, and all-too-humanly vulnerable figure in Liang Kai's famous version of the subject.[36] Wang Shishen's Sakyamuni remains in dreamy meditation, seeming to float above the rocky platform below him, at the same uncertain, mirage-like distance that the reflection of the moon floats in, or on, the water below, as the poetic images imply. There are a number of other related Buddhist and secular figures from the painting of the period.[37] The prominence of sleeping, dreaming, or meditating figures in the painting of the time reminds us of *The Dream of the Red Chamber:*

Figure 5. Wang Shishen, *Ascetic Sakyamuni Meditating.* Guangdong Museum.

> Thus the preface, with its stress on the origins of the novel in a dream-vision, and the hidden meaning of its affairs, points to the theme of complementary opposites, *zhenjia* ... 'the author relates that he once passed through a dream vision, and afterwards he hid the real affairs therein and composed this book, the stone record...' The passage points to a continual question in the novel, what is ultimately real? This line suggests that Ts'ao [Cao] takes what is 'real' in a dream-vision and hides that reality to create his work of fiction, or, conversely, that he uses a dream-vision to disguise the facts of 'real,' that is, conscious life. Whichever reading we adhere to, a neat ambiguity has been built which signifies the unity of dreams and reality, the unconscious and conscious experience, and of 'true' and 'false'...[38]

> That is, the spatial totality of the allegorical vision of the novel is of an order that includes both being and non-being within its scope, so that the apparent opposition of being and non-being emerges as an example of the sort of interpenetration of reality and illusion for which the dream is the nearest analogue in human experience.[39]

This brings us, finally, to a consideration of ghost images in eighteenth-century painting. The most prominent subject is the ghost official Zhong Kui, the demon-queller, who is depicted in a variety of states. He leans pensively on a tree trunk, supervises a retinue in attendance at his sister's marriage, or slouches stuporously homeward, his drunken frame supported by ghost-helpers, in a formulation that combines the fashion for ghost figures with an interest in vague states of consciousness - sleeping, dreaming, meditation and intoxication (Figure 6).[40] The popularity of the subject is a case study in the difficulty of accounting for motivations for iconographic choice. Images of Zhong Kui were certainly occasional images, hung outside of doorways on festival days.[41] Thus we can't exclude the issue of patronage and market demands in their popularity, although the images discussed here should probably not be confused with the truly popular, mass-produced imagery of the professional workshops. We might also say that the popularity of Zhong Kui is a reflection of the literary taste for ghost stories in the eighteenth century, represented by the early eighteenth-century specialist in the genre, Pu Songling, and his story collection.[42] The third kind of motivation we could ascribe would have to do with the beliefs of the artists, their fascination with ghostly lore, or, more subtly, their awareness of the iconographic type as a vehicle for some critical or artistic statement. The more interesting and complex an image is the more difficult it becomes to separate ulterior and interior motives. This is equally true of the most famous and

Figure 6. Luo Ping, *Drunken Zhong Kui*, dated 1762. Palace Museum, Beijing.

important example of the ghost genre in eighteenth-century painting, Luo Ping's *Fascination of Ghosts* handscroll (Figure 7).[43] We cannot exclude a reflection of currently popular literature in the form of illustration of ghost tales as the motivation for the scroll, although simpler kinds of sponsorship would seem unlikely in view of the artist's long-term possession of the scroll. Moreover, the artist Luo Ping forthrightly maintained his special ability to perceive ghosts and to paint them; personal belief, verging on what we might call aberrant psychology, was certainly a factor in his choice of specialty.[44]

It is worth inquiring what kinds of contemporary cultural patterns and issues with which this admittedly quite exceptional scroll is connected. What is significant perhaps about ghost images is that issues of reality and illusion are moved from the mind of the artist or viewer to the being of the subject. It seems to me that the intellectual trends of the eighteenth century reach toward two seemingly quite different poles: one may be exemplified by the school of textual criticism, with its evidentiary and sceptical spirit; the other may be typified by *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, with its acceptance of the mythical and the illusory as coequal aspects of existence with mundane experience.[45] In another sense, however, both poles have to do with a disillusionment, intellectual for the textual critics, moral or spiritual for the characters and readers of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. The eighteenth century seems to have been a period of debunking and reexamination of old traditions, including, in the realm of art, the capsizing of the hierarchy of painting subjects and the demystifying of the status of the artist.[46] In the realm of social and cultural values we see a satire on the world of Confucian literati in the novel *The Scholars;* and in the intellectual realm we see a pursuit of sharply critical, that is philological, paleographic and connoisseurship, activities of all kinds.[47] We note that a major study of the Qianlong Emperor is concerned with the disparity between 'image and reality.'[48] Even the reality or knowability of the self and the adequacy of cultural images of it were called into question, as we saw in our first two portraits (Figures 1 and 2). It would be surprising in such a world not to find compensating activities and assertions. *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, even as it deals with spiritual disillusionment, finds refuge from the world of rationalist analysis in the sphere of allegory and myth, and in the sheer richness of its language, imagery and fictions. It may well be symptomatic that the major artist whose life most nearly coincided with the Qianlong reign period, Luo Ping (1733 - 99), was the author of a text not about art history, connoisseurship, technical secrets of painting, or even about painting theory, but of something called *Record of What I Believe* in which he deals

Figure 7. Luo Ping, *Fascination of Ghosts*, dated 1797, detail.
Xubaizhai Collection, Hong Kong.

with spiritual and epistemological matters: ghosts, demons, reincarnations, fate and the like.[49] Thus the importance of ghost subjects in his art, and more broadly in the figure painting of the time, might on the one hand reflect the accumulated ghosts of tradition and cultural practice that were under assault through satire or textual examination, or, on the other hand, might reveal an effort to preserve, in the face of disillusioning pursuits, a realm which by its very essence is proof against rationalist destruction, a realm of conflated identities and transformation with a dream-scale of time and activity, a realm analogous in some ways to the 'Grand View Garden' in the *Dream of the Red Chamber* in which the real and the illusory, the true and the false, mingle.[50]