

An Initial Exploration Of Li Cheng's Cold Forest Landscape Paintings

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Abstract

The series of cold forest landscape paintings by Li Cheng in the Northern Song dynasty was unprecedented, setting a benchmark for successive generations of painters to admire and emulate. Why did Li Cheng choose the cold forest as the main theme for his paintings? The reasons behind this choice could be attributed to his upbringing, family background, and inner aspirations that were ultimately left unfulfilled, giving rise to a potential contradiction in his psyche. This paper aims to explore these reasons.

Keywords: Li Cheng, cold forest, distant and tranquil.

Introduction

Mr. Li Lincan has a paper titled "Preliminary Study on the Cold Forest Landscape Paintings," in which he mentions: "From this, it can be seen that among the connoisseurs of the Ming dynasty, some had already discerned that pine stones and cold forests were originally on par with landscape painting before the Yuan dynasty."^①

In his discourse, Mr. Li Lincan cites: "Zhang Zao, also known as Zhang Zao, courtesy name Wentong, was a native of Wu County. He held the position of Yuanwailang in the Ministry of Rites... He excelled in painting pine stones and landscapes... Currently, there are six paintings in the imperial collection: two pine stone paintings and two cold forest paintings."^②

He further states, "The two are placed side by side, with an equal number of works, indicating a parallel relationship between them." "Among the painters specializing in pine stones, Zhang Zao from the 8th century is the most well-known. Besides his 'Pine Stone Paintings,' he also has records of initiating the 'Cold Forest Paintings'." "The style of the Cold Forest genre reached its peak during the 10th century, as well as the 11th and 12th centuries, with Li Yingqiu being a prominent figure, similar in status to Zhang Zao in the Pine Stone genre." This suggests that Tang Dynasty artists excelled in depicting both pine stones and cold forests.

The depiction of cold forest in paintings had been done by earlier artists.

Li Cheng drew inspiration from Jing Hao and Guan Tong, as recorded in the "Xuanhe Huapu" (The Painting Manual of Xuanhe). It mentions that Guan Tong particularly enjoyed creating autumn mountains and cold forests. Although there are currently no extant "cold forest" series of paintings by Guan Tong, Li Cheng must have borrowed from and emulated his style.

Li Cheng's paintings of distant and tranquil cold forests were unprecedented. The atmosphere is free and unrestrained, with clear and spacious forests, vigorous brushwork, and exquisite ink techniques that are sublime and captivating. He stands alone in ancient and modern times, truly a master artist who inspires generations."

The excellence of depicting distant and ethereal forests began with Yingqiu.

Li Cheng's paintings of distant and tranquil cold forests were unprecedented." This article aims to provide an initial exploration of Li Cheng's series of paintings depicting distant and tranquil cold forests.



The painting "Reading Stele and Stone in the Hollow" is a lightly colored work on silk, measuring 126.3 cm x 104.9 cm. It is held in the collection of the Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts in Japan.

This painting has sparked controversy. Mr. Li Lincan believes that it is the closest work to an authentic piece by Li Cheng. Mr. Shang Aisong, on the other hand, is certain that this painting is an authentic work. After Mr. Zhu Puzhi visited Japan and saw this painting, he initially did not pay much attention to it, suspecting it might be a Ming Dynasty copy by Mr. Imamura Ryuichi. However, after being deeply moved and impressed, he realized that it was indeed an authentic work. He was

pleasantly surprised and regarded it as a precious treasure. In summary, it is widely acknowledged as the painting that closely resembles Li Cheng's style. It is considered a classic representative of Li Cheng's series of paintings depicting distant and tranquil cold forests.

What reasons led Li Cheng to choose the series of paintings depicting cold forests as the medium to express the vastness within his grasp and the mountains and valleys within his heart?

一、 Definition of Cold Forests:

The entry on 'Cold Forests' in the Buddhist Encyclopedia states: 'Cold Forests' refers to places where corpses are buried, designating a specific forest as a burial site. The dead bodies are left there to be devoured by birds and animals. In Sanskrit, it is called 'Shita' or 'Shitala,' referring to the cold and secluded nature of these forests. Moreover, when encountering the corpses lying horizontally, people may experience fear, causing their hair to stand on end and shivering due to the cold. Hence, the name 'Cold Forests.'

The "Shi Shi Yao Lan, Volume II" states: "Cold Forests refer to the places where corpses are abandoned in the Western Regions. According to the Vinaya texts, it is said that when encountering many corpses, one may experience fear, causing their hair to stand on end and shivering due to the cold. Hence, the name 'Cold Forests.'

When facing life and death, Confucius advocated the attitude of "being cautious in one's end, cherishing the memory of the distant past, and attributing virtue to the people." It is important to approach the departure of our ancestors with prudence and to remember their enduring virtues. It is necessary to face this with a sense of respect and awe, in order to cultivate the moral character of the people and make them loyal and upright individuals. Chinese Confucian culture has always advocated the benevolent heart of kindness, sincerity, and forgiveness. As Confucius said, "Only after experiencing the harshness of winter do we know that the pine and cypress are the last to fade." Confucius praised the spirit of the pine and cypress, which symbolizes the inner virtue of a noble person who is not swayed by wealth and remains steadfast in poverty. This represents a higher level of attainment. In Confucianism, little emphasis is placed on discussions of life and death; instead, there is a focus on the cultivation of character and the nurturing of aspirations. The goal is to become a knowledgeable and virtuous person who is of use to society, and it is hoped that such individuals can be found throughout the world, just like a forest of pine and cypress. In Sima Qian's "Letter to Ren'an," he mentioned the "forest of gentlemen," and in the "Records of the Grand Historian," there is the concept of the "Confucian forest," where individuals of noble character were listed, using the metaphor of trees

to represent gentlemen, and this metaphor has continued to be used in later generations.

Cold forest in the text ""Daoist Canon: The Treasury of Jade, Vermilion, Cold Forest, and Jade Trees" can be interpreted as follows: "Regarding the jade trees in the cold forest, it signifies that all living beings, having come into existence, will eventually face death. Thus, it is given the name 'cold forest' "Dongxuan Lingbao Ba Xian Wang Jiaojie Jing,"record:

Everywhere is filled with tranquility and emptiness, and everywhere is adaptable to one's will. One may be an emperor, a loyal giant, a virtuous person, a filial child, a Taoist, a national teacher, residing in the cold forest, practicing asceticism, reciting scriptures, cultivating virtue and merit. Or one may be a skilled general who achieves victory without fighting." ⑪ There is also the Cold Forest Academy, also known as the Hanlin Academy or the Cold Forest Institution. During the Zhongyuan Festival, temples hold rituals to offer salvation to the deceased souls. They construct a paper house inscribed with the words 'Cold Forest Academy,' providing a place for the wandering spirits of nobles, gentry, officials, and fallen soldiers to dwell during the ceremony.

Amidst the wilderness, the 'Cold Forest' is secluded and frigid, casting an atmosphere of desolation and decay. Confronted with the withering of life and corpses strewn between heaven and earth, humans feel so insignificant, helpless, and tiny. There may be a sense of twilight, sorrow, and desolation, with a feeling of helplessness. Human life has its limits, as it is said, 'Gathered, it is life; scattered, it is death.' Born from the earth and returning to the earth. Humans and all things in the world are interconnected, and in this desolate and clear emptiness, one cannot help but be touched by a sense of profound melancholy and contemplate the way of life and death.

The departure of ancestors prompts the remembrance of their enduring virtues. It also triggers contemplation on life: the meaning of "sacrificing oneself for righteousness" or "giving up one's life for a just cause" may reflect the Buddhist notion of embracing life and death, while the attitude of attaining enlightenment, transcendence, and tranquility within the Cold Forest leads to rebirth in a pure land. Ultimately, it leads to attaining great freedom and liberation.

The desolate Cold Forest resembles a person contemplating the vast earth within its midst, experiencing solitude and emptiness. The path of practice, characterized by adaptability and following one's heart, involves confronting the presence of corpses and the impermanence of life, evoking both fear and contemplation. It also entails deep thinking and ascetic practices within the Cold Forest's hermitage, leading to the realization of achieving merit, cultivating virtues, and expressing one's thoughts. This path also serves as a guarantee of "eternal life" for

Chinese literati. As Zhang Zai eloquently stated in the "Western Inscription," "When existing, I conform to circumstances; when gone, I rest in peace."

Indeed, this laid the groundwork and provided a spiritual vehicle for the subsequent poetic and artistic exploration of the Cold Forest theme by literati and scholars. The concept of the Cold Forest resonated deeply with their quest to understand the essence of life and served as a source of inspiration for their poetry and paintings. It became a symbol through which they could contemplate the transient nature of existence and seek their true inner selves. The Cold Forest motif thus became a rich and meaningful subject matter in the artistic expression of literati and scholars.

II. The Transition from Cold Forest Poetry to Cold Forest Painting

Lü Ji (261-303), a literary figure of the Western Jin Dynasty, wrote in his work 'Lament for the Departed': 'I walk through the cold forest, filled with desolation, gazing at the withered spring and pondering with thoughts.' The 'Book of Jin' records that 'Lament for the Departed' was written three years before Lü Ji's death (300 AD). What was the background for him to write such a piece?

Once I heard the elder recounting the passing of relatives and friends in their lifetime, some withered and gone, others few in number still remaining. At the age of forty, my esteemed relatives have mostly passed away, and my intimate friends are not even half left. Those with whom I once traveled together, feasted in the same room, now, after a decade, have all dispersed. Thus, my lamentation and sorrow can be understood."

At the age of forty, such lamentation! It reflects the mourning and nostalgia for old friends and relatives who have withered away. It also expresses the realization of the ever-changing nature of all things, the impermanence of life, the fleetingness of existence, and the swift passage of time. It is a lamentation for the ruthless nature of the universe, as well as the helplessness in the face of one's own aging and the endless melancholy and sorrow caused by the uncertainty of the future.

Lü Ji came from a prominent family in Wu. In 289, he went to Luoyang and, relying on his prestigious background, formed connections with the influential and powerful. However, he held firmly to his own beliefs, looked down upon the people of the Central Plains, and made many enemies. In that turbulent era, he immersed himself in the center of political turmoil. In the year 300, Sima Lun staged a coup, killed Empress Jia and assumed power. Lü Ji received recognition for his role in the execution of Jia Mi and was granted the title of Marquis of Guanzhong, serving as Sima Lun's aide-de-camp. Later, when Sima Lun sought to

usurp the throne, he appointed Lü Ji as a Palace Gentleman. In theory, this year should have been a year of great fame for him, as he was previously on friendly terms with Jia Mi. However, due to his involvement in Jia Mi's execution...In the first year of Yongning (301), Sima Lun was executed, and Lü Ji and eight others were handed over to the Court of Justice. Thanks to the intercession of Prince Chengdu Sima Ying and Prince Wu Sima Yan, Lü Ji managed to escape death. During the turmoil in the Central Plains, his good friends Gu Rong, Dai Yuan, and others advised him to retire to Jiangnan, but Lü Ji, relying on his talent and reputation, sought to rectify the troubled world and did not listen. In 303, he was ultimately killed due to being ostracized and implicated in calamities

In the first year of Yongkang (300 AD) in the Western Jin dynasty, Lü Ji was internally conflicted. Initially, when he arrived in Luoyang, his intention was to achieve great feats. "As I observe the people, they gradually age and approach the twilight years," expressing his helplessness towards the inevitability of aging. Yet he himself, in his relentless pursuit of fame and position, remained "unenlightened," which he considered "pitiful." "I release my burdened heart from worldly affairs and seek leisure to entertain my old age." Therefore, in the end, he desired to abandon worldly fame and official positions, cultivate a detached and clear mind, and enjoy his later years, forgetting the sorrow associated with death in his soul. He wanted to retire early to seek tranquility and happiness in his old age. However, Lü Ji did not fully embody the sentiment of "walking in the desolate forest with desolation," failing to heed the insights offered by his own life and remaining engrossed in the pursuit of accomplishments without self-reflection.

However, the appearance of "pine and cypress" and "cold forest" in this text also opened the door to the emergence of more subtle poems by literati and officials, using pine and cypress or empty forests as themes. It became a representative expression for showcasing noble character and laid the foundation for the development of the "cold forest" painting genre. It created an aesthetic framework that aligns with the unique characteristics of Chinese culture. While Lü Ji sought the essence of his heart while "walking in the cold forest," he also lost himself in delusion and confusion. The gains and losses of the two are difficult to discern, presenting an image of a scholar walking amidst infinite sadness, desolation, and solitude. In Xie Lingyun's "Ascending the Tower by the Pool," he writes, "To pursue wealth, one ends up in boundless seas; To lie sick, one faces the empty forest," using the desolate landscape as a metaphor for reflection and lamentation on the human world. In Ge Hong's "Baopuzi," it is recorded, "Beneath Mount Taihua, there are scattered white bones. When entering the mountains

without skill, there will inevitably be harm." This indirectly suggests that ancient mountains and rivers were not necessarily idyllic, contrary to the notion of "picturesque landscapes everywhere." In the vastness of nature and the universe, humans are very small, and we need to maintain a sense of awe and reverence. The "cold forest" has become an important theme for expressing emotions in literati poetry. Additionally, the flourishing of Zen Buddhism and the prevalent social trend of transcendence and detachment influenced the refined thoughts of scholars and officials, contributing to the popularity of praising the "cold forest" in poetry.

The poem "Passing by Li Yi's Residence" by Wang Wei during the Tang Dynasty can be translated as follows: "As a guest, I enter a deep lane, Where dogs bark beneath the cold forest."

Gu Yun wrote in his letter to Gu Dangong, "I, Gu Yun, hereby inform Gu Dangong. I have heard that the poetic circles of Sanwu are not lacking in talented families, and the Confucian scholars of the Jin Dynasty also possess ancestral virtues... As a distant branch of a small stream, I am but a single leaf in the cold forest. My learning comes from toiling in the fields, and my talent is as solid as carving ice. Therefore, I will follow my plan and venture to distant lands, observing the world as I go."

The cold forest gradually emerged as a distinct poetic subject, separate from the philosophical teachings of Daoism and Buddhism. It became a vessel for poets to recite, express their grief, contemplate life, and depict desolate landscapes. In its development, it evolved from the landscape paintings of leisurely contemplation and Daoist introspection that emerged during the Wei and Jin dynasties. As mentioned earlier, the depictions of pine and rock and the cold forest also gradually became independent themes in Tang Dynasty paintings, representing a distinct style and aesthetic pattern. In Wang Wei's "Essay on Landscape," he states, "In painting landscapes, the intention lies in the brushstroke... Ancient trees are often weathered and half-dead, while the cold forest stands sparsely, evoking a sense of desolation."

Indeed, the development of cold forest poetry to cold forest painting has become a representation of the lonely and desolate emotions of literati, a reflection of their longing for a simple and detached life, and an embodiment of subjective aesthetics. It has evolved into an objective artistic theme that carries their inner world and serves as a means of expression.

3.Li Cheng's View on the Cold Forest

The genre of painting depicting the Cold Forest did not flourish during the Tang and Five Dynasties periods. "However, in our current dynasty, Li Cheng emerged and, though he followed the style of Jing Hao, he surpassed the fame of Lan Ting. His mastery of brushwork left no equal.

Artists such as Fan Kuan, Guo Xi, and Wang Shen, though highly esteemed in their own right, were insufficient to grasp its profundity." Therefore, why did Li Cheng choose to paint the Cold Forest?

Li Cheng, styled Chengxi, hailed from the royal family of the early Tang dynasty. During the turbulent period of the Five Dynasties, his family sought refuge in various places and eventually settled in Beihai, becoming residents of Yingqiu. Li Cheng's ancestors were known for their Confucian scholarship and governmental service. Despite the decline of his family's fortunes, Li Cheng himself remained dedicated to the pursuit of Confucianism and Daoism. He excelled in literary composition, displaying an extraordinary temperament and a bold ambition. Due to the mismatch between his talent and circumstances, he found solace in the realms of poetry, wine, and painting. His artistic creations were exquisite and refined, initially not intended for commercial purposes but purely for his own pleasure and amusement. Li Cheng was a descendant of the Tang imperial family. His grandfather, Li Ding, held the position of Guozi Jijiu (Imperial Sacrificial Official) and served as the Governor of Suzhou during the Tang Dynasty. His father was a magistrate in Qingzhou. Both his grandfather and father held official positions at the imperial court. During the tumultuous period of the Five Dynasties, Li Ding, as a descendant of the Tang imperial family, sought refuge in Yingqiu and settled there with his family. According to the research conducted by Mr. He Huijian in his "Brief Biography of Li Cheng," the approximate time when the Li family moved to Yingqiu was between the years 897 and 904 AD. Li Cheng himself was born around 919 AD and passed away around 967 AD, which means he grew up in Yingqiu. Yingqiu is located in present-day Linzi, Zibo, Shandong Province. Li Ge Fei (approximately 1045-1105 AD), a poet who lived a hundred years later, passed through Linzi and composed the following poem:

Passing through Linzi

For seven hundred years, drums and flutes resound,

The city gates of Linzi still stand tall and proud.

Now only farmers toil on this land,

Once adorned with riches from nine government ranks renowned.

It can be seen that the city gates of Linzi at that time still retained the grandeur of the past, maintaining the scale of the former Yingqiu. Li Cheng depicted it in his painting "Yingqiu Landscape": "For those who look upon the former capital, the sense of grandeur is enhanced... The landscape painting of Yingqiu captures the essence of its scenery, portraying the winding streams and mountains, the hidden houses among the woods, the swirling mists and clouds. Those who seek its depiction can truly understand its essence."

To the south of Linzi lies a mountainous region, while the north consists

of a flat plain. Standing at the former site of Yingqiu and looking to the south, one would be greeted with a vast and expansive panorama. The solitary forest stands amidst the twilight, revealing distant mountains stretching across the horizon, with layers of peaks and ridges. Though mostly composed of low hills, it lacks the grandeur of towering mountains and deep valleys. Yet, it possesses a serene and secluded beauty, rich in both masculine and feminine qualities. This is precisely the scene of a tranquil and expansive forest.

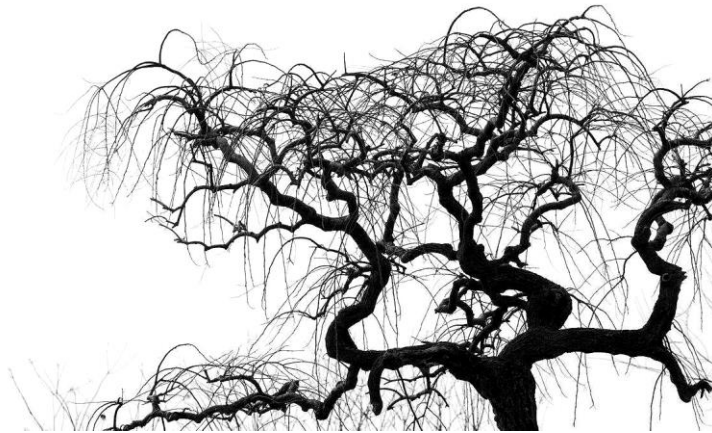


Figure 2-1

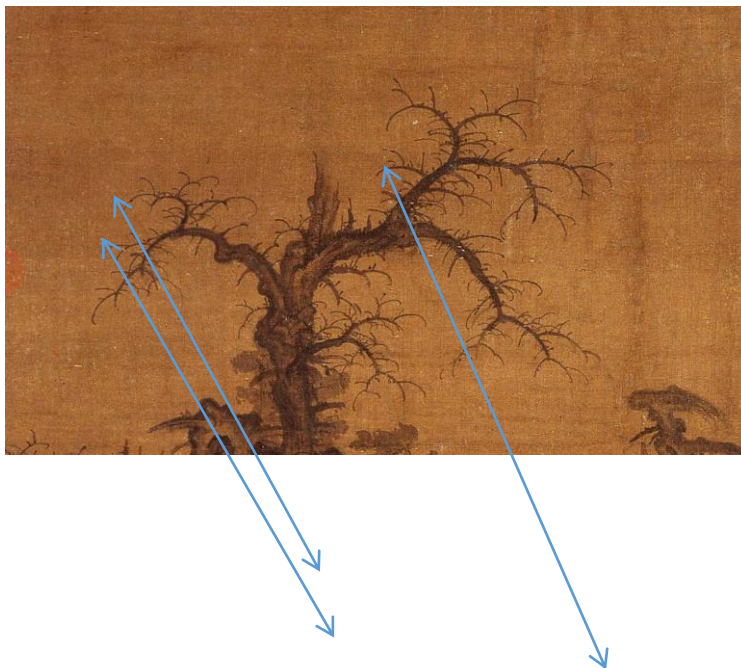




Figure 2-2

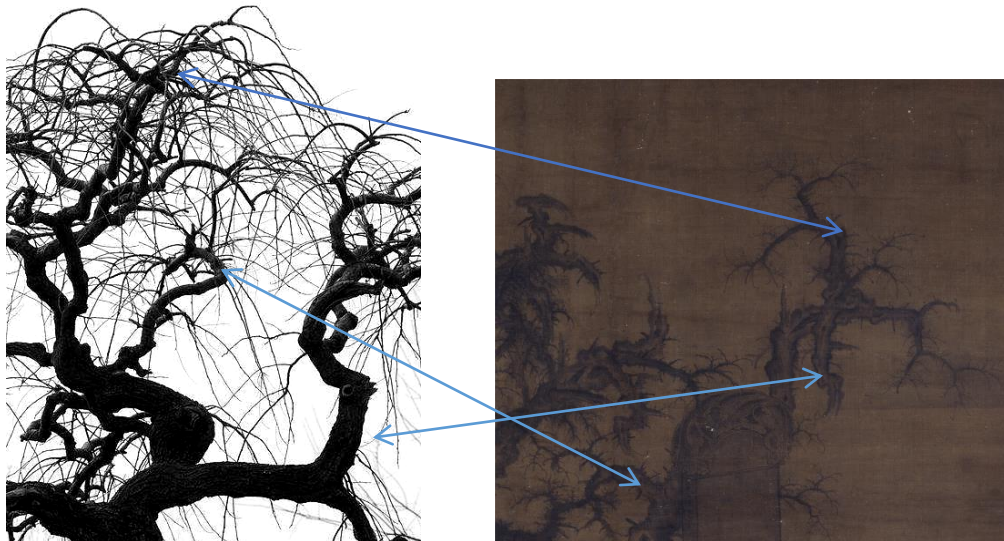


Figure 2-3

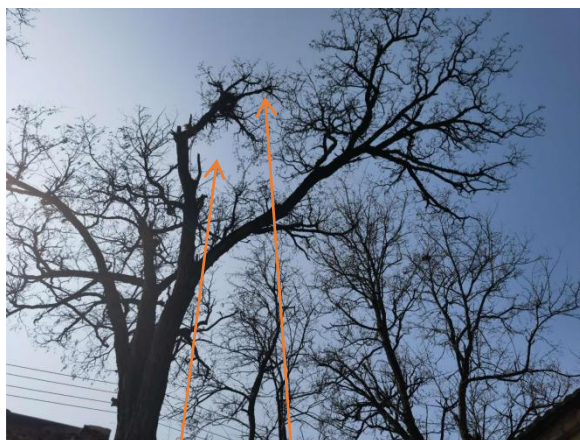




Figure 2-4



Figure 2-5



Figure 2-6

These trees, when compared to the trees depicted in "Reading Inscriptions on the Stele and Pit and Stone Painting," evoke a sense of wonder at the marvelous beauty of nature. I admire Li Cheng's comprehensive artistic ability to capture the essence of natural creation and depict it in his works. During my investigation, I discovered that these trees belong to the same genus, the deciduous trees of the Fabaceae family: the locust tree. The unique shape of the "dragon claw" locust tree and the symbolic significance of the "national" locust tree may have some connection with the original inspiration behind Li Cheng's series of cold forest paintings.

In Heluo Town, Gongyi City, Henan Province, there is a site called Shuanghuai Tree, which is believed to be related to the legendary figure Fu Xi.

In the Book of Rites, it is mentioned that "The officials in charge of the outer court of the state follow certain protocols... There are three huai trees in front, where the three high officials sit... The term 'huai' means 'embrace' or 'embrace the people.'"

In later times, the term "three huai trees" came to represent the positions of "Grand Preceptor" (太师), "Grand Tutor" (太傅), and "Grand Guardian" (太保), which were the three highest offices in the Zhou dynasty. Therefore, the huai tree became a metonym for high-ranking government positions and was also known as the "majestic tree." Later generations extensively planted national huai trees,

symbolizing the three high officials and expressing the people's admiration and political symbolism for officials who serve the public day and night.

In the "Classic of Mountains and Seas" (山海经), it is mentioned, "The Shou Mountain has many huai trees... In the valleys and mountains, there are many huai trees." Additionally, in the "Yanzi Chunqiu" (晏子春秋), it is recorded, "Duke Jing had a fondness for huai trees and ordered his officials to carefully guard them. He planted the trees throughout the county and issued a decree stating, 'Anyone who damages the huai trees shall be punished, and anyone who harms the huai trees shall be put to death.'" Duke Jing's love for huai trees was truly remarkable

During the Han and Wei-Jin periods, the city of Luoyang was adorned with huai trees. Wang Can, one of the "Seven Scholars of Jian'an," composed the "Huai Tree Fu" (槐树赋), which describes the unique qualities of the huai tree, saying, "It is the extraordinary tree in the central hall, endowed with the benevolent essence of nature. It surpasses the ordinary fields and is planted as the splendid radiance of the courtyard steps." Notable scholars such as Cao Zhi, Zhi Yu, and Wang Ji also wrote "Huai Tree Fu." Cao Pi wrote an introduction to his "Huai Fu" saying, "In the Wen Chang Hall, there is a magnificent huai tree. During the scorching summer, I often strolled beneath it and praised its beauty!... I envy the splendid magnificence of this noble tree, which is honored by the highest authority..." The huai tree symbolizes the dignity of the ruler and the clarity of political affairs. It was even transplanted into the palace gardens, as described in the lines, "Leaning against the magnificent hall of Wen Chang, they stand in rows at the grand gate."

The following is the translation of the passage you provided from Song Dynasty, written by Hong Mai in "Rongzhai Suibi - Er Di Hao Ming":

"In the era of Tang Zhenguan, there was a sudden occurrence of a white magpie building its nest on the front pagoda tree of the sleeping chamber. The nest was round and harmonious, resembling a waist drum. People around bowed and danced in celebration. Emperor Taizong said, 'I often laugh at the auspicious signs attributed to the Emperor of the Sui Dynasty. True auspiciousness lies in obtaining virtuous talents. What is there to celebrate in this?' He then ordered the destruction of the nest and released the magpie into the wild."

In summary, the pagoda tree (huái shù) is known for its qualities of nobility, hardness, integrity, and broad shade. Planting pagoda trees has been a tradition in palaces and official buildings since ancient times. Therefore, the imperial palace is referred to as "Huai Chen," the court is called "Huai Ye," and the high-ranking ministers and officials are referred to as "Huai Zai," "Huai Yue," and "Huai Qing." These terms

praise the virtues and integrity of the officials, and those who are highly respected are also referred to as "Huai Wang." Furthermore, the pagoda tree has a historical connection with the imperial examination system (keju) and is also used as a valuable medicinal herb.

The pagoda tree is also known as the "ghost among trees." There is a saying that goes, "The character 'huai' (槐) has the ghost beside the wood; after death, one shall become a high-ranking official." In the city of Guangling, there was a man named Ge Rong who killed Guo, a fruit vendor. As a posthumous honor, Ge Rong was appointed as the Minister of Works (Sikong). Additionally, in front of government offices and courts, a type of tree called "②" (pronounced "ling") is planted. Its fruit resembles a "hanged ghost," serving as a warning to officials to handle cases with fairness and integrity, ensuring there are no wrongful judgments.

Furthermore, in folklore, the character "huai" combines the elements of "wood" and "ghost," representing Yin and wood. It is believed that ancient pagoda trees, older than a hundred years, possess spiritual qualities. Hence, pagoda trees are also referred to as "ghost trees" and are often planted in courtyards or wilderness. This brings to mind the background and experiences of Li Cheng mentioned earlier in the text.

He thinks of his royal lineage, he thinks of his ancestors. Does he still harbor nostalgia for the Tang Empire? Could this be what drives him to actively engage in society? Despite the changes in dynasties, he still possesses a noble and patriotic spirit. Perhaps he hopes that through his efforts, even if only a little, he can bring about some change. However, he ultimately belongs to those who have been disappointed in their official careers, never able to achieve their aspirations. Some may argue that Li Cheng has never held an official position, so how can he experience disappointment? But such an understanding would be a failure to truly grasp Li Cheng. So I wonder if Li Cheng, in his solitude, finds solace in the wild pagoda tree (Longzhao Huai)? In the past, the pagoda tree symbolized high-ranking officials and could be planted in the palace, accompanying the ruler... He could also be counted among the eminent ministers in the court, as a "Huai Zai." However, for Li Cheng, all of this is still a journey. Li Cheng's fame as a painter in the late Five Dynasties period has already spread far and wide. Although he does not consider painting to be his main profession, he merely seeks to express his profound sadness and the essence of his heart. The tree he paints is a withered pagoda tree, its leaves fallen, branches intertwined, exuding a sense of desolation. Perhaps he also hopes that one day he can become a "Huai Zai" or a "Huai Wang," without losing his sorrowful heart. As the Ming writer Tang Zhiqi said in "Wei Yan Hui Shi":

Li Yingqiu was a talented and learned individual, with lofty aspirations. However, despite repeated attempts, he failed to achieve success and remained unaccomplished. Therefore, he turned his focus to painting. His works often depicted cold forests within caves, where cliffs and rocks were prominently featured. This reflected his spirit of uplifting the noble-minded individuals who were in the wilderness, while other plants grew in abundance on level ground, representing the ambitions of petty individuals in their positions. This is the meaning behind the symbol "⑳".

Is this also the intended meaning?

Let's take a look at the "Reading the Inscription in the Stone Caves" painting. This painting reflects the style of the Qing dynasty, with a large slope depicted in the foreground. The foot of the slope is rich and rounded, while behind it, the old stones appear dense and sturdy. The massive stones gather strength and momentum, and the ink strokes are treasured like gold, displaying extraordinary elegance and smoothness. The old pagoda tree twists and turns, depicted with sharp and swirling brushwork, showcasing the grandeur of the ancient tree. Eight ancient trees of varying heights and positions are portrayed, leaning and swaying with a sense of emotion, resembling dragons and phoenixes in their movements, creating a sense of openness. The sparse and desolate forest embodies a sense of tranquility, abandonment, and solitude. The solitary stele stands hidden among the ancient trees, conveying a sense of desolation and cold stillness. A young boy stands by, with a refined appearance, leading a donkey. Above them, an elderly man (a scholar) wearing a straw hat shivers from the cold, looking up and gazing at the inscriptions on the ancient stele. What is he contemplating and reciting? It seems as if the words within the inscriptions amid the ancient trees are filled with a sense of cold melancholy, as if they are expressing their own experiences... Reflecting on the past, the grandeur and prosperity of history have turned to dust, leaving behind endless desolation, loneliness, and melancholy. The entire composition is tragic, filled with sentiment and grandeur. Some people say that Li Cheng's intention with this painting was to depict the Eastern Han scholar Cai Yong reading the Xi Ping Stone Classic or the story of Cao Cao and Yang Xiu visiting the Cao E Stele. Regardless, as Mr. Shi Man once said: "In other words, the imagery of reading inscriptions conveys the sentiment of scholars seeking and studying ancient steles to evoke a sense of antiquity." Just as Fan Kuan wrote in "Reading Li Cheng's 'Reading the Inscription in the Stone Caves'": "The crab claws hang high, the stele remains incomplete, the desolation and solitude fill the air. Looking back, the sunset glow on the mountains is unbearable." It reflects the style of Qing and an era that no longer exists. The brushwork conveys the essence, capturing vast landscapes within a

small space, depicting myriad details at the tip of the brush. The old pagoda tree and ancient trees are portrayed in a distant and panoramic manner, with bold and free brushwork, avoiding a dense mountain forest style. I believe this is the highest realm of the "Cold Forest" painting. Perhaps Li Cheng also anticipated a "withered tree encountering spring, having endured countless hardships and sorrows." Su Qin also often remembered the time when he sought official positions.

Indeed, Li Cheng was Li Cheng, a person who was upright, unrestrained, and possessed extraordinary temperament. As a descendant of the Tang imperial family, he couldn't help but witness the ephemeral nature of life: "helpless, flowers wither and fall...". Consequently, he enjoyed wine, was skilled in playing the qin, and excelled in composing poems and songs. Despite the fact that a person's talent can be suppressed and hindered by various setbacks and hardships, Li Cheng always had his own way of resolving them. For him, it was through painting, particularly painting the cold forests. The exact time when Li Cheng started painting cold forests cannot be determined, and it is known that his mastery of painting the cold forests was achieved step by step, building upon the foundation laid by his predecessors. Although Li Cheng never acknowledged himself as a painter during his lifetime, he said, "I am fundamentally a scholar. Though I have an interest in artistic pursuits, it is merely for my own pleasure. But why should I be confined to the realm of cosmetics and painting, and be associated with the painters of the imperial court?" However, "Everyone expresses their inner thoughts through their brushwork, just as Meng Jiao sings in his poetry, and Zhang Dian indulges in his wild grass script. There is no other way that suits them better." Nevertheless, life had to go on.

Facing a decline in his family's fortunes, Li Cheng had to accept this reality. The principles of self-cultivation, harmonious family life, good governance, and peace under heaven were deeply ingrained in him as someone who grew up in a family of Confucian scholars. Becoming an official was one of the few options he had to change his life, and it remained his dream. It is difficult to ascertain whether Li Cheng had any siblings or the source of their family's economic support. It is possible that Li Cheng had responsibilities in managing the household or that entering government service could help support the family financially. Historical texts always present a beautiful and understated account of events. Li Cheng's fellow townsman, Wang Pizhi from Yingqiu, mentioned in the "Mianshui Yantan Lu":

"Zhou, the Prime Minister, Wang Pu, maintained a friendly relationship with Li Cheng and invited him to the capital. He intended to recommend Li Cheng for an official position as a scholar-official. However, Wang Pu

passed away before this could happen. During the reign of Emperor Kangde, Chen Shou, the Grand Minister of Agriculture, invited Li Cheng to stay at the county study hall due to their past acquaintance. Li Cheng indulged in excessive drinking there and eventually died from alcohol-related causes.”^④

Li Cheng responded to the summons of Zhou, the Prime Minister's envoy Wang Pu, and went to the capital. It was intended that Li Cheng would be recommended as a scholar-official. Naturally, Li Cheng would not give up this opportunity. However, Wang Pu (906-959 AD, from Dongping, present-day Tai'an) passed away in 959. "Rice is expensive in Chang'an, and it is not easy to live a simple life." One can imagine how much grief and anguish Li Cheng felt at the news of Wang Pu's death. Could he manage to "not blame heaven, not resent others"? Did he also sigh, saying, "When the Dao is about to be achieved, the mandate is also present. When the Dao is about to be abandoned, the mandate is also present"? A man should have aspirations for learning at the age of fifteen, establish himself at thirty, and reach a state of maturity at forty. Wang Pu's death coincided with Li Cheng's fortieth birthday. Could he not look up to the sky and let out a long sigh? I believe his inner world must have been filled with sorrow and contradictions. He must have been gloomy, melancholic, and lonely. Did he, perhaps, drown his sorrows in alcohol, express his emotions through poetry and wine, and occasionally leave a painting of a cold forest on the walls of taverns, symbolizing his desolation and expressing his inner melancholy? "Since ancient times, the sages and worthies have all been lonely. Only those who drink leave their names." Did he also harbor ambitions like Li Bai? In the end, he was different from Li Bai. Li Bai, after all, had moments of glory, such as "Heaven is calling, but I won't board the ship." Li Bai accompanied the emperor and witnessed another side of politics within the ruling class, even though he did not fulfill his dream of benefiting the world. Li Cheng, on the other hand, never had that opportunity. How he longed for such a chance can only be imagined." As for Wei Rong, the Grand Minister of Agriculture during the Gande era, he invited Li Cheng to stay at the county study hall due to their hometown connection. He indulged in excessive drinking and ultimately died from alcohol-related causes." It is uncertain whether Wei Rong truly helped Li Cheng or became a source of sadness and despair for him.

Wei Rong, with the courtesy name Mingyuan, was born in Boxing, Qingzhou. He held the position of Minister of Agriculture and was appointed to govern Chenzhou, Shuzhou, and Huangzhou. He passed away in the sixth year of the Kaibao era at the age of sixty-nine.^⑤

Wei Rong (905-973), courtesy name Mingyuan, was born in Boxing,

Qingzhou. In the eyes of Emperor Taizu of the Song Dynasty, Wei Rong was a loyal minister. Wei Rong and Li Cheng were from the same hometown and belonged to the same Qingzhou Prefecture. Linqing and Boxing were adjacent to each other and both located in the flat plains, with a distance of about 40 kilometers between them. When Wei Rong extended an olive branch, Li Cheng undoubtedly felt filled with anticipation and hope in his heart. Li Cheng perhaps cherished this opportunity greatly, otherwise he would not have brought his whole family along.

However, it seems that fate played a joke on him once again. The life in Chenzhou did not unfold as he had imagined. It is unclear what transpired between him and Wei Rong. Perhaps Wei Rong only provided him with a favorable living environment similar to that of a painter. In any case, Li Cheng ended up "indulging in drinking, and eventually died from it." In reality, drinking wine was to avoid drinking wine, and writing poetry was not merely for the sake of writing poetry. Just like Li Cheng, painting the cold forests was not merely for the sake of painting the cold forests. It was a quest to harmonize his inner emotional state with the principles and essence of the depicted objects, in order to express his inner life. Although his inner world was filled with exquisite thoughts, having experienced the solitude of winter and the impermanence of nature, Li Cheng ultimately did not transcend the worldly realm. He did not let go.

Through the above discussion of Li Cheng's "Cold Forest" painting series, can we also consider it in the following way? The painting of the "Cold Forest" series by Li Cheng excels in exploring objective scenery (such as the locust tree) that resonates with his subjective emotions. He endows them with spiritual significance, captures their distinctive features, contemplates them to evoke emotions, and employs the artist's unique artistic expression of "no attachment, sorrow is one with it" to objectively portray them, creating a profound and melancholic atmosphere. Words cannot fully convey the intended meaning, but through the depiction, the essence of the subject is expressed, achieving a harmonious unity of fleeting emotions and the truth of the subject matter, merging the "nature" and "emotion" in the artistic conception. At the same time, Li Cheng applies his brush with agility, transitioning the brush tip from roundness to sharpness. He uses delicate ink techniques to create a subtle misty effect. He cherishes ink like gold, never wasting a single stroke, without any unnecessary lines. His works are refreshing and harmonious, with meticulous ink rendering. Through the depiction of open and distant misty forests, serene and profound, desolate and detached landscapes, he expresses the pent-up emotions and the vast expanse of his heart. Influenced by Qi culture, Li Cheng reaches a unique aesthetic realm beyond the reach

of ordinary people, creating a distinctive atmosphere of desolation, serene forest veiled in mist, and decaying woods with a faint glow.

Li Cheng revealed what previous generations had not revealed, and in painting the "Cold Forest," he was also depicting himself. Faced with the power struggles and conflicts among rulers during the late Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, the wars and violence between fathers and sons, and uncles and nephews, how could one survive and fulfill their ambitions in such an environment? Li Cheng, unlike Confucian scholars who sought seclusion in the face of adversity, did not choose reluctant seclusion. In fact, scholars seek seclusion in order not to seek seclusion. And most of the hardships endured in the "Cold Forest" and the seclusion in the studio were to weather through the "Cold Forest": to establish achievements, cultivate virtues, and voice their opinions. The "Cold Forest" represents perpetual vitality and the exuberance of spring. As Lü Ji wrote in his "Lament for the Departed": "Strolling through the cold forest, aching and desolate, enjoying the spring and feeling pensive." Li Cheng's rational thinking ultimately did not outweigh his emotional thinking. He did not perceive the desolation and decline of the corpses lying amidst the cold forest, nor did he escape the cycle of life and death. Ultimately, he still aspired to achieve success and make a mark. Perhaps this is the unique cultural atmosphere that shapes the character of Chinese intellectuals! Li Cheng's paintings of the "Cold Forest" were unparalleled, making him a representative figure of his time and an enduring figure in the history of Chinese landscape painting. However, in the end, he did not spare himself or let go of his own desires. It was due to his son Li Jue and his grandson Li You that he was posthumously granted the position of Assistant at the Guanglu Monastery (sixth-rank official) and later the position of Prince's Groom (fifth-rank official).

Li Cheng's painting of the "Cold Forest," embracing the principles of the self and expressing them through his brushstrokes, encompasses not only himself but also the era in which he lived. It portrays the desolate individuals of that time. This perhaps explains why the "Cold Forest" formed a distinctive aesthetic category during the Five Dynasties and Northern Song Dynasty. "To grasp the essence of the object and seek its truth," as Jing Hao wrote, "a pine should be portrayed true to its essence, just as it truly appears." This truth is not merely about outward appearance but about "observing the object, understanding its principles" and "exploring principles and expressing nature," representing the natural unity of the painter's "essence" and "emotion" with the subject. It is their depiction of the natural contours and landscapes. Just as Guo Xi stated in "High Serenity in Forests and

Springs," "One must cultivate a broad and joyful mind, a pleasing understanding. When the heart is moved naturally, like oil blending with water, the laughter and tears of people, the slanting shadows of objects, are arranged naturally in the mind, and they are not consciously seen in the strokes." Li Cheng's painting of the "Cold Forest" reflects his inherent love for it, nurturing it in his heart, allowing it to accumulate over time, becoming a concentrated thought that is almost forgotten, merging with the subject. He achieved the perfect transformation from poetic descriptions of the "Cold Forest" to its painted representation. Perhaps this is the "Cold Forest" world that Li Cheng sought to depict, where one may find seclusion in the "Cold Forest," engage in studio ascetic practices, recite scriptures, pursue achievements, and cultivate virtues, or become a virtuous general who achieves victory without fighting. "Walking through the cold forest" embodies the spirit of the "Cold Forest" with an active and worldly perspective.

Annotation:

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