

Cool Respite: How the Ancients Beat the Heat
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Further Reading: *Lotus Gathering* by Tang Yin

Chun-Yi Joyce Tsai

A Masterpiece in Three Arts

Designated a National Treasure in 2015, this extensive scroll, measuring over five meters long, brings together a painting of lotus gathering by Tang Yin, a cursive calligraphy on the same theme by Wen Peng, an added scene signed by Xiang Yuanbian, and various poems by the Qianlong Emperor. This single work unites painting, calligraphy, and poetry.

The lotus-gathering theme is layered in meaning. On the surface, it shows women at work in the waterways of Jiangnan; in literati culture, it could also evoke romantic longing, scholarly frustration, or nostalgia for a lost homeland. The scroll further records changing modes of collecting, viewing, and interpreting art from the mid-Ming period to the Qing dynasty by imperial and private owners.

(1) Tang Yin, *Lotus Gathering: A Lotus Pond in Pale Ink*

Tang Yin (1470–1524), one of the Four Masters of the Ming, was active in Suzhou. Painted in 1520, this work belongs to his late period. Boneless technique and dilute ink washes are set against broad reserves of blank paper, evoking a waterside scene at the turn of the season, when summer begins to give way to autumn.

In the foreground, a woman sculls a small boat through lotus plants, while a waterfowl settles on a sandbank in the background. These motifs recall lines from Wen Peng's *Lotus Gathering Song*, such as “rowing a light oar” and “wild ducks and geese in flight,” and reflect the spare, understated manner associated with the artist.

(2) Wen Peng, *Lotus Gathering Song: Expressing Longing through Cursive Script*

Wen Peng (1498–1573) was the eldest son of Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) who was also one of the Four Masters of the Ming. He was closely associated with Xiang

Yuanbian, who later came to own this scroll. Dated 1559, this piece of calligraphy, with its sweeping, unrestrained brushwork, transcribes a text by early Tang poet Wang Bo (active in the seventh century) and draws on the wild cursive style of the Tang master Huaisu (active during second half of eighth century).

The song uses the lotus as a metaphor for feminine beauty. The unbroken threads of the lotus root, which remain connected even when the root is cut, evoke enduring attachment between a woman in Jiangnan and her husband stationed on the distant frontier. The work is a fine example of Wen Peng's cursive style and reflects the deep literary and artistic traditions cultivated across generations within the Wu School's circle of scholarly families.

(3) Xiang Yuanbian's Added Scene: A Deliberate Visual Echo

Xiang Yuanbian (1525–1590) was among the foremost Ming dynasty collectors. As recorded in the colophon, Xiang first acquired Wen Peng's calligraphy and later Tang Yin's painting. The two were mounted into a single scroll and a small lotus pond scene was added. The addition mimicks Tang Yin's composition and thus creates a deliberate visual echo, presenting the collector not only as a custodian, but as an active agent shaping and extending the work.

(4) The Qianlong Emperor's Poems: An Imperial View of Jiangnan

Qianlong Emperor (1711–1799) revisited this scroll various times, inscribing poems in 1779, 1781, and 1791. He praised the work as a union of Tang's painting, Wen's calligraphy, and Xiang's added scene, calling the three works "three perfections." In the poem at the head of the scroll, he evokes the Aohan lotus, a variety cultivated at the imperial Mountain Resort at Chengde, linking the Jiangnan scene before him with the frontier landscapes of his own experience. This gesture is characteristic, bringing together the imperial collection, personal memory, and the empire's expansive territory.

(5) Seals and Provenance: From the Mountain Resort to the Forbidden City

The scroll is recorded in the *Shiqu baoji* catalogue under the section on the Mountain Resort at Chengde (in modern day Hebei Province), and bears a vermilion seal reading "Mountain Resort," confirming its former location at the Qing imperial retreat. More than just a seasonal refuge, the resort also served as a center of political, military, and diplomatic activity beyond the Forbidden City. In the early Republican period, the scroll was transferred from Chengde to the Baoyun Pavilion storage within the Forbidden City. A partial stamp in Western-style monogram at the beginning of the

scroll, and another reading “Baoyun Pavilion” at the end of it may have bore witness to this displacement.

References

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