

Longevity

André Simon

To Hans Erni (*1909)

The art market in The Emperor's city of Xi'an is located within the south gate of the inner city walls. While walking through the market, one can see small alleyways on the right hand side of the street. There are many stores where one can bargain for artworks of all shapes and sizes. I entered one store, and between typical painted scrolls and silk paintings, the friendly shopkeeper showed me an old statue. He liked to bargain, but there was little room for negotiation in his prices. However, for a small number of copper coins, the shopkeeper eventually sold me an old bronze statue. The statue was of a horse, and it was very rusty. It seemed to me that the shopkeeper was pleased to get rid of this corroded and tarnished old thing, which must have been exposed to the atmosphere for some time. I brought the statue home and started to clean it. To clean it, I had to polish it vigorously, and to my great astonishment a tiny hole appeared in the horse's hind. From the hole I saw and removed a rice paper scroll written in classical Chinese. On this barely legible and partly indecipherable flimsy piece of paper, an unknown calligrapher describes Emperor HUANGDI.

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The Emperor sought longevity. He learned that there are many shades of colour. Some are temporary like the yellowish colour of day light; some are immortal like heavenly blue. Heavenly purple blue was said to protect all Emperors. This is the reason that this colour, known as Emperor's blue, adorned the palaces and many objects in it, as a colour of immortality, *The Emperor supposed that aged painters possess the secret of longevity*, so he decided to call all «bai nián» painters (older than hundred years). Several

painters appeared, and the oldest was chosen to explain all secrets concerning longevity.

In preparation, the vigorous painter Master Xú separately mixed colour pigments with the oil of perfumed plants, choosing diverse shades. He took essence of red berries for its brilliance like sunshine, essence of bamboo leaves for the colour of new grass, indigo for intense blue, and for heavenly purple blue he used a secret formula. Laying the colors side by side on a palette, he gently fused them, but refrained from mixing them together.

Afterwards, he took a pot of white of egg and

poured it over the freshly fused colours. The white of egg permitted the blending of the colours into a brilliant rainbow. Every time he needed a specific colour, he extracted it from this rainbow. The Emperor observed the painter attentively, and noticed that he inhaled the fumes of the colour essence oils deeply at regular intervals. The painter explained to the Emperor, that *regular inhalation of special fumes of the colour, such as essence of perfumed oils, lengthens life. Besides the inhalation of oils many dried substances of colour provenances like bamboo leaves (green) or goji*

fruits (red) are used in the preparation of delicious teas. In the preparing of such teas, the painter observed the resulting steam, which arose and hung about in peculiar spiral form. This transient apparition, an accidental beauty of nature, holds the painter tight in his paint, forever. In the same way a painting of his heavenly Emperor, painted in this precise instant, remains for eternity.

Author's notice:

Legend has it, that the Emperor Huangdi (2696–2598 BC) created the logograms used in the writing of Chinese and had published the first book on medicine, in which the prerequisites are health and longevity.



Danksagung

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