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15 **PORTRAIT OF YEN HSIANG-SHIH** number seven of the One Hundred Meritorious Servitors (Palace workshops, 1760)

A hanging scroll in ink and colours on silk, with superscription on yellow paper.

Yen Hsiang-shih was a Ch'ing military leader of the eighteenth century, from Kao-t'ai in northern Kansu province. During the Yung-cheng period (1723-1735) he rose from the ranks to a position equivalent to that of Lieutenant Colonel. Eleuth tribesmen, who had sworn allegiance to the Ch'ien-lung emperor, planned a revolt, which Yen suppressed. He also destroyed the Hui (Mohammedan rebels') chieftain with a lightning attack on Ku-ch'e, in Sinkiang province. Fighting with zeal and vigour, he was wounded in action. Yen became Commander in Chief of Kansu province, and on his death was awarded the posthumous name Huan-su. He stands in three-quarters profile with hand on belt, his beard turning to grey. His hat has a peacock plume and the coral over gold hat button worn by second rank military officials. He wears a knee-length brown robe with blue lining under a belted jacket of fine chain mail, with a padded beige skirt and black boots. He carries at his back a bow and quiver, the cases both covered with shagreen, and on his right hand he wears a thumb ring. The facial details are spectacularly lifelike and expressive, in European style.

The superscription on yellow paper reads the same in Chinese and Manchu.

“General and Great Servitor, Commander in Chief of Kansu province Yen Hsiang-shih.

Approaching the gates of Ku-ch'e,

A rock manifested on his brow (he was hit on the forehead);

Like a mountain peak, he was unmoved;

All of those who saw put out their tongues (in astonishment).

He guarded the frontiers against a generation of the Ch'iang (Western tribes);

In vain they attacked — forcefully he beat them down.

His bold appearance and powerful body

Were enough to subdue West of the Pass.

In the spring of the *keng-ch'en* year of the Ch'ien-lung period (1760) your subjects Liu T'ung-hsün (1700-1773), Liu Lun (1711-1773) and Yü Min-chung (1714-1780) respectfully offer these words of praise, following the imperial order.”

With one large oval relief seal of the Ch'ien-lung emperor; “Ch'ien-lung yü-chien chih-pao”.

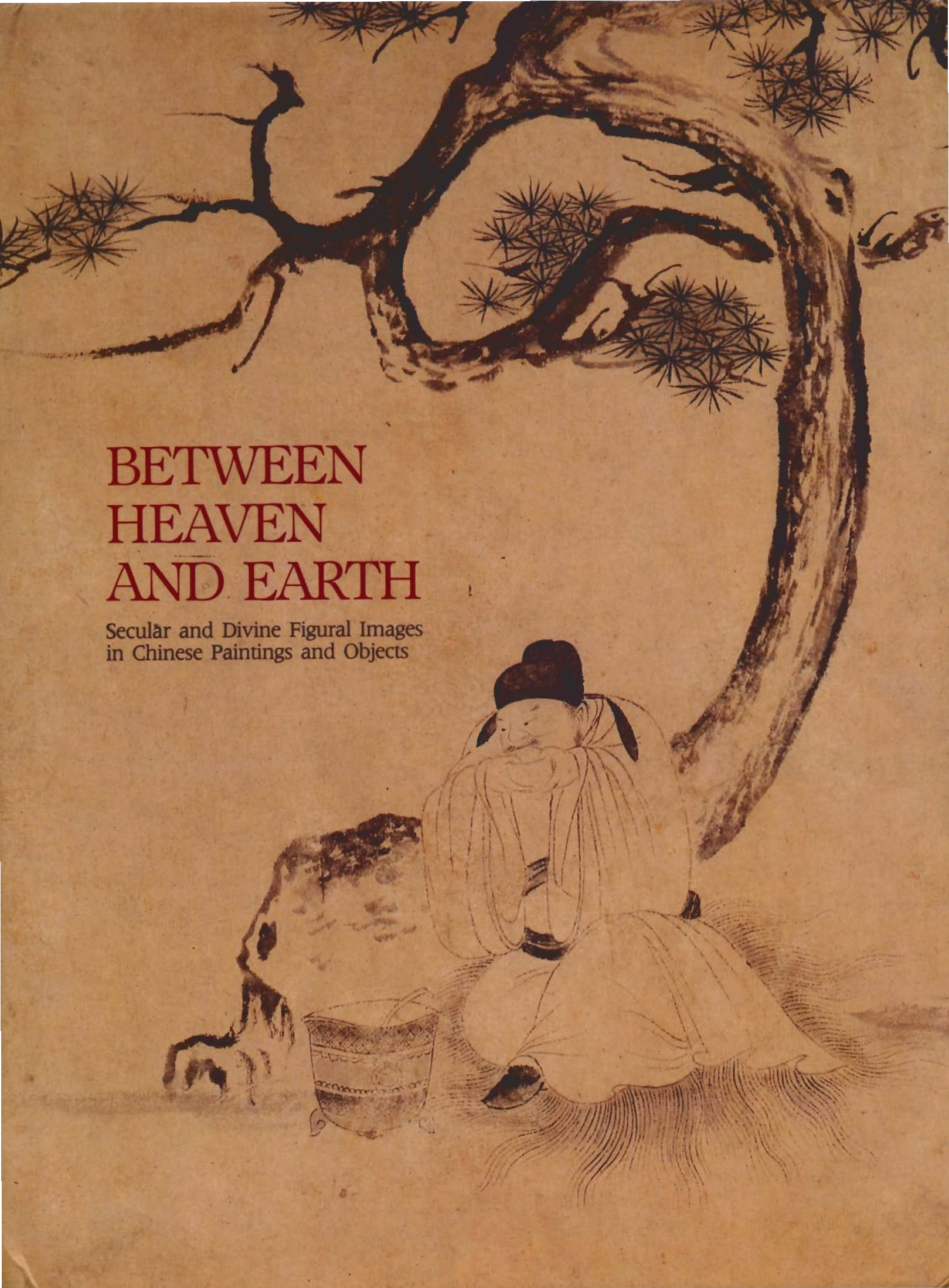
The original title slip, mounted on the outside of the scroll, reveals that this was number seven in the set of the One Hundred Meritorious Servitors, fifty generals and fifty civil officials or statesmen, who took part in the campaigns to suppress Ili and Chinese Turkestan. At the head of the celebrities were Fu-heng, who helped the emperor to direct the campaign, and Chao-hui, the Commander in Chief.

1760 was the year in which the series was installed (the title slip specifies that it was “established”) in the Tz'u-kuang ko, a palace in the imperial precinct on the west shore of the Central Lake (Chung-hai, in the Western Garden of the Palace). It was an old structure rebuilt and redesignated to house the set in that very year, and the Ch'ien-lung emperor then held state banquets and received foreigners there. A 1761 painting by the court painter Yao Wen-han depicting a New Year's banquet hosted by the emperor in the Tz'u-kuang ko is illustrated in “*Palastmuseum Peking: Schätze aus der Verbotenen Stadt*” as catalogue no. 30, colour pl. 34.

It has been suggested that the faces of this set of portraits were painted by Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shih-ning, 1688/9-1766), the famous Jesuit painter at the courts of the K'ang-hsi, Yung-cheng and Ch'ien-lung emperors, but there is to date no proof of this possibility. Castiglione spent much of the time between 1747 and 1759 helping the Ch'ien-lung emperor to realise his plans to build the Yüan-ming Yüan, but in 1760 he did collaborate in the same Tz'u-kuang ko project commemorating the Ili and Turkestan victories. On the walls of the Tz'u-kuang ko were sixteen large battle scenes, no longer extant, known as the *'P'ing-ting I-li Hui-pu chan-t'u'*, completed in 1766; of which Castiglione was responsible for two. The rest were the work of three other Jesuit artists: Ignace Sichelbart (1708-1780), Jean-Denis Attiret (1702-1768) and Jean-Damascene Salusti (d. 1781). The famous set of engravings taken from these wall paintings in the Tz'u-kuang ko were completed in Paris in 1774. One hundred sets were sent to Peking. The fact that Castiglione and other European painters were involved to some extent with the decoration of the Tz'u-kuang ko does not necessarily mean that they painted the faces of the set of the One Hundred Meritorious Servitors, as rumoured. Certainly, it does seem that the faces and the rest of the bodies were painted by different hands; and whoever painted the faces was well-schooled in the Castiglione manner of European use of chiaroscuro and such realistic details as the spots of light in the eyes to give them life. However, by 1760 the ateliers must have had Chinese painters capable of work as fine in the European portraiture manner, and until firm documentary evidence comes to light recording that Castiglione painted the faces of this set of portraits it remains a speculative suggestion.

Another portrait from the set, likewise a military official, was bought by the Metropolitan Museum, New York, at Sotheby Parke Bernet on June 3rd, 1986, for a total of US \$115,500. Depicting Hu-er-cha, an Imperial Bodyguard of the First Rank, it had been cut from its mount and so has lost the title slip with its number in the series. It is illustrated in *"Deities, Emperors, Ladies and Literati"* as no. 36, col. pl. XII, and bears the same date and a superscription by the same three courtiers as our example; it is fractionally larger, by some 4-5 centimetres. The emperor himself is said to have written the eulogies above the portraits of civil officials. Another somewhat comparable portrait was sold recently, at Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, in a Decorative Chinese Art sale of the April 23rd, 1987. That example, also dated 1760, was of a civil official, and the superscription was by the Ch'ien-lung emperor. The painting of both features and body was not at all as fine, revealing a considerable variety in the quality of the series. In addition, the painting was in poor condition and had unfortunately been glued to a board during the course of framing. As more portraits from the series come to light it may be possible to determine if all of the military portraits were superior to the civil, or if the early numbers or most important personages in each set were indeed painted by a more talented hand.

A London establishment recently sold another portrait, similar but not as fine, dated 1784. These later portraits, if there was in fact a complete series of them, differ primarily in the facial features, which do not use the same European techniques as the 1760 set. The likelihood is that the Ch'ien-lung emperor decided after another campaign (perhaps the defeat of the Hui rebels between 1781 and 1784) to repeat the celebratory set of paintings. There was a special bureau within the painting ateliers known as the Shih-ch'üan Wu-kung (Completion of Ten Military Campaigns) which produced at that time a series of very fine large-scale battle scenes (see my *"The Fight for Shih-feng Pao (1784)"* in *"The British Antique Dealers' Association Handbook"* 1987, pp. 24-29), probably based conceptually and even in terms of essential composition on the set of sixteen in the Tz'u-kuang ko; if the later *"Meritorious Servitor"* portraits were commissioned simultaneously from the same bureau it seems that on this occasion they must have had a far lower priority.

A traditional Chinese ink wash painting on aged paper. The scene depicts a man with a long, flowing white beard and a black scholar's cap, sitting in a meditative posture on a rock. He is wearing voluminous white robes. To his left, a large, gnarled pine tree trunk curves across the upper half of the frame, with several dark, spiky pine needles extending from its branches. In the foreground, a small, ornate, three-legged metal vessel sits on the ground. The background is a plain, light brownish-tan color, emphasizing the dark ink lines of the figure and tree.

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

Secular and Divine Figural Images
in Chinese Paintings and Objects